

Buoyz 'n Da '*Hood*' — In Space!

'Pride & Persuasion'



by

Catherine Meadows

'Space. The Final Frontier. These are the voyages of the starship '*Hood*'. Its ongoing mission — to boldly go on whatever damn-fool enterprise Admiral Lowe sends it. *Ad*

infinitum — et ultra!

'Taking The 'Kirak''



The Klingon War of 2256 to seven was a series of military contests – involving the whole of Federation and Klingon space. After a series of initial defeats Federation naval power was weak. The big ships that had survived were overstretched, thus the UFP used smaller, fast ships, such as destroyers, to harass Klingon systems...

It was the Autumn of 2256. The war was not going well. Seated in the shuttlecraft's co-pilot's seat Commander Frederick Wentworth adjusted the scanner as the shuttle glided gently through the asteroid riddled space. He could just make out the lights adorning the enemy D5 in the gloom of the planet's nightside. It was a delightful night for murder and mayhem. A year after Anne had broken off their engagement, Freddie was still in the mood to dispatch some Klingons.

Suddenly, there was a 'beep' behind him. Wentworth turned, but his rebuke died on his tongue. Lieutenant Stokes, at the helm, was already admonishing the perpetrator. "Mind the noise!" was his harsh whisper. "The Klinks have as good a sensors as we have". Freddie had to trust that the crews in the other shuttles were silent as well. They had to be. Their lives depended on it. One mistake – one discovery – and they would all die.

Such were the risks of this feat of arms...

Wentworth's orders from Admiral Shrek at Starbase 12 were most precise. To scout and seek out the enemy, harass them if he could, and report back their location. It was about the only duty appropriate for Wentworth's

command. The *USS 'Baggins'* was a broken down, un-refitted *Saladin* class destroyer. Marvellous in its day, after ten years of service it was better fit for the breaker's yard than voyaging hundreds of light years from its launch on Mars. Wentworth cared not. Last year, in the aftermath of his betrayal and rejection by the woman he loved, he was desperate for employment. A newly minted 'Master and Commander', he should by rights have been like most of his Academy classmates – dead. But the Good Lord had been kind. Thus far the *'Baggins'* had survived. Wentworth felt his luck, and vowed to show the Federation he deserved it. Starfleet had given him the tool to advance his career and he was going to make the most of it.

Or go down trying...

The *'Kirak'* was a Klingon destroyer prowling this sector of space. In the last half-year it had taken several Federation merchant ships. With the war going so badly the situation was intolerable, the Admiral had said with habitual Andorian bluntness. It was a priority that the *'Kirak'* be found and either captured, or destroyed. Again, Lady Luck had been with Freddie Wentworth. On patrol the out-gunned *'Baggins'* had stumbled across the Klink raider. Luckily the *'Baggins'* had had the Gordian Nebula, and were able to flee under its cover. The Klinks had twice their crew and threw more energy. It would be suicide to attack the *'Kirak'* straight on. Yet Wentworth knew his chance was upon him. He was determined to take the Klink vessel. Dissecting their tech would be vital to the war effort. He was *not* going to give the glory to anyone else. He just had to figure out *how*. Carefully, using all his skill in astronavigation, the *'Baggins'* had shadowed the *'Kirak'*. Wentworth's expectation that the Klink's would not be over-confident was proved correct. He soon discovered the D5's hiding place: hidden from view by a ring system the Klingons could, in orbit, replenish deuterium at leisure, all the time keeping look out for any straggling UFP merchantman that might lose the safety of its convoy. At maximum sensor range Wentworth and his crew had quickly observed the enemy had made the first mistake of a warship at anchor – they thought they were *safe*. He'd planned to take advantage of that. Back in his tiny cabin aboard the *'Baggins'* he'd planned and schemed, aided by his able First Lieutenant, and good friend, Timino Harville. What they'd devised was audacious. If the *'Baggins'* couldn't beat the *'Kirak'* in the straight fight... they would *steal her*. The operation was known to ancient Earth seamen as a 'cutting-out expedition' – the object to take a ship whole and sail her away in an act of pure theft. To do so was extremely dangerous. It required that the attacking force sneak up on the unsuspecting enemy, overpower the guards, lock the rest of their crew away – and warp out before anyone knew. If Freddie could manage it, his successful crew would share in the accolades of gaining

intact enemy tech. Fail and they would be dead. Or prisoners. Which would be much, much worse...

To successfully complete an operation that required complete surprise, split-second timing, close-coordination and boldness, training, and luck. They also needed the target to be inattentive. Wentworth was counting on all of it. Even with minimum shield raised transporters were not an option, so the *'Baggins'* had slowly drawn close to the far side of the gas giant, and there launched all its shuttles. If they attacked too soon... they would remain an easy target for a counter attack – and a quarter of the crew had been assembled in the shuttles. Freddie planned to attack the Klinks by the stern, counting on their idling impulse engines helping to mask their signatures. He had Stokes and much of his phaser crews with him; Harville and the others would hit the Klinks' starboard side, while a party in the third shuttle would go to the sensors in the bow and blind the enemy. The *'Baggins'* had been left under the command of the Second Lieutenant, James Benwick. It was unusual for the captain of the ship to be involved in such an operation, but Wentworth would not send anyone else to do something so dangerous.

He wasn't called 'Fightin' Freddie' by his crew for nothing. Though they knew not the source of his inner rage...

Luck had remained with Wentworth. The planet's rings provided just enough EM 'noise' to cover them, yet without large enough particles to hinder their progress (another stroke of good fortune). The *'Kirak'* was also the only enemy ship on hand – so was likewise *alone*. The only anxiety was the reflected light. Would the stars and reflected moonlight give enough to alert the guards? They would soon learn their fate...

As the little flotilla drew close, they could hear the sounds of celebration from the Klinks' intership, the frequency of which had been discovered by their sister ship, Colin Darcy's *USS 'Pevensie'*. It was a truth, universally acknowledged, that Klingon crews tended to carouse when off-duty on their infamous blood wine, sagas and tall tales of daring do. These clearly has 'guests'. Wentworth did not know if their consorts were slaves, prossies, or spouses. Nor did he care. What he was depending on was they would *distract*. Wine, sex, and song had been the downfall of many a spacer, and he hoped tonight would be no exception.

The *'Kirak'* lay in orbit, positioned to warp out, useful in case of emergency, and this also played right into Wentworth's hands. They were open to space. 'Things are going too smoothly', he yet worried. 'What would go wrong? Everything is going too much to plan...'

*

Wentworth's shuttle *'Gamgee'* was now about a hundred metres away and his crew stood, phasers and cutters ready as the pilot allowed the craft's momentum to gently complete its journey. Wentworth, fingering his phaser, watched the Klingon's hull closely. Unsteady Klink voices could be heard on the com-hack. Wentworth's military mind was disgusted by the enemy's lack of professionalism, even though their sloppiness was to his advantage. A dim light glowed from the windows. Another moment, and he would be there...

"nuq 'oH Dochvam'e'? - What's that?" the Klinks' com crackled as the first Federation shuttle bumped into the enemy vessel. Wentworth, startled, hesitated. *"Hlq Hltlhej! - Bloody meteorite!"* complacency affected another enemy watchwoman.

Wentworth and his enterprising crew were now out of time. He gave a hand signal. They had all to move quickly – simultaneously - stealth be damned. Instantly Stokes and his team began to deploy, grapples, forcefield and cutters to board the enemy.

"yIHlv! yIHlv! vaj ghu'vam! – Attack! Attack! Sound the alarm!" the enemy intercom finally sounded alert. Abruptly the Klingon's cries ceased. Was Harville already in? At that instant Wentworth's hand grasped the side of the enemy as he and his team quickly burst in - his years of experience serving him well as they raced the corridors – phasing to kill any enemy that dared appear - crouched low to take in surroundings and present small targets. The enemy sounded 'Red Alert' (or whatever it was the Klinks called it). Confusion? The three-pronged attack was clearly working as Wentworth charged forward – a Klingon officer pulling his bat'leth like a swashbuckling action hero of yore. He was young, he was brave - and after a couple of passes of his blade he was dead - Wentworth's phaser making quick work as he sensed (more than saw) his crew dash past him. Phaser blasts barked at the waist as Harville's team assaulted the D5's small guard and took their bridge.

"Get them locked down below! The noise will raise their crew!" Freddie bellowed they needed to trap the enemy below, in their rec areas - or all would be lost.

"On it already, Skipper!" Harville triumphed as, from the bowels of the ship, came the sound of enemy disrupter fire, the issue still in the balance.

"Stokes - see to the drive!" Wentworth squawked. "The rest of you - follow me!" he and his team dashed to manually secure and lockdown the hatches and doors. "Quickly now!" a 'Redshirt' he didn't know and another man ran forward while the others joined the battle with the surviving Klinks. Losses on both sides, Wentworth prepared to join them when he heard a noise behind. A half-dressed Klingon male armed with a bat'leth emerged from behind a door.

“Look out, Cap’n!” someone cried. Wentworth did not hesitate. He drew the spare phaser stuck in his belt and fired directly into the Klink’s chest. The enemy fell in a heap as he disintegrated. Wentworth turned back to the fight, only to have Stokes grasp his arm.

“We have things in hand here, Captain”, he cried. “Miss Harville has secured the bridge and turned down the life support to knock ‘em out!”

“Right”, Freddie halted to catch his breath. He could feel the ship coming to life as Harville began to power-up and head towards the sanctuary of the ‘*Baggins*’ fire-support. “Bridge!” he made for the command centre, continued to worry it had all been far too easy...

A crewman he knew well – Radle - was there as he approached, standing over the body of a Klingon. “Hello, Cap’n!” he said good-naturally. “Can’t find the enemy skipper yet”, he cautioned.

“Good work, Radle. Signal the ‘*Baggins*’ to stand by on Red Alert”.

“Aye, aye, sir.”

Freddie glanced down at the body. “Who’s this, then?”

“This here’s the bugger that spied us. He was at the heads, he was. Bad luck”.

Wentworth did not know whether Radle meant the bad luck being spotted or bad luck on the dead Klingon. Not that it mattered now. “Here we go!” Radle suddenly cried out as the ‘*Kirak*’ moved ponderously to its rendezvous with the ‘*Baggins*’.

“Yeah...” Freddie raced back to the captured bridge. Harville nodded from the alien helm as he entered and the captured ship gained speed.

“Steady as she goes, Skipper!” she advised. “I spy the old ‘*Baggins*’ dead ahead!”

“Wait!” Ohering – the new Ensign just transferred from the ‘*Stark*’ shouted from the science station. “Someone’s activated a destruct sequence!”

“Their bloody captain!” Wentworth swore. “I’d rather die too than have my ship taken by aliens! Where’s it coming from?”

“Deck three!” Ohering confirmed.

“I’m on it!” Freddie tacitly left the bridge to Harville and raced below. Finding the Klingon captain’s cabin locked he didn’t need to order Stokes to blow the lock – he instantly did so and Freddie rushed inwards to find a hysterical, half-naked, dark-skinned Klingon female cradling the enemy captain, wounded by an earlier phaser blast.

“*tangqa' targhmey! nuq Daghaj? – Bastard human arsehole! What have you done!*” she shouted her angry denial of reality.

“We don’t have no time for this!” Wentworth pointed at the female; the precise nature of her insults lost upon his limited knowledge of Klingon.

“Stokes! Keep her away from me!” he sought the source of the destruct sequence – found what appeared to be the dying Klingon’s personal computer – raised his phaser – and fired.

“*Destruct sequence terminated, Captain*”, Harville’s laconic voice came from the bridge. “*The ship is ours. It would appear to be a local modification*”.

“Klingons like to take their enemies with ‘em”, Wentworth sighed.

“What am I to do with ‘er, sir?” Klingon woman was snarling uncontrollably at Stokes. For a savage instant Wentworth considered throwing her into space - taking revenge upon her gender for Anne Elliott’s perfidious betrayal. But his humanity and duty as a Starfleet officer instead kicked-in. He dismissed the thought in the next moment and shook his head. “Stun her!” he ordered.

Stokes promptly changed his phaser’s setting and gleefully fired...

“That did it, Skipper” Harville grinned as Freddie returned to the captured bridge. “They’ll never catch us now!”

“I believe you’re right, Number One”, he grinned. “Send a coded signal to Mr Benwick and to Starbase. We’re returning with our prize and prisoners with all dispatch”.

oOo

Three days later, at Starbase 12, Frederick Wentworth took his ease in his cabin aboard the *‘Baggins’*. The voyage home with their prize had been relatively uneventful. He’d left the *‘Kirak’* in Timona Harville’s capable hands and had returned to the *‘Baggins’* for the remainder of the voyage. Not only was it right and proper to do so, he’d also left Harville the problem of the late Klingon captain’s civilian lover. Wentworth had no use for such on his ship in any case; a resentful female gibbering in angry Klingon was something he would avoid at all costs. The enemy captain he’d buried in space with full honours, along with the other dead Klingons. Federation losses were comparably light - two dead and three wounded. It was always hard to bury a shipmate, and this occasion was no exception. However, Wentworth felt hardest for the dead Ensign Bathos. Barely more than a boy, he was struck down but a bat’leth just as his life was beginning. This was the evil of war.

Upon docking at Starbase a company of marines had been needed to transfer the angry prisoners off the *‘Kirak’*. Fifty-eight had been trapped below decks, and to keep them quiet, Wentworth had limited the amount of food, water and oxygen they received - just enough to keep them worried that he’d would simply space them, should they make trouble. Klingon ‘fake news’ about

Federation atrocities had here played into his hands. It had worked. The prisoners were docile, truculent and angry as they left the ship.

Needless to say Admiral Shrek was overjoyed with the seizure of the *'Kirak'*. It had been a thorn in the sector's side, and with its capture, the merchants and traders and could breathe a little easier. Vital cargoes coming in and goods shipped out had one less enemy threat. Wentworth had received permission to take the *'Kirak'* back to Starfleet headquarters on Earth. This was a great honour for him, and excellent news to the crew, as it meant that the *'Baggins'* would get some shore leave. For Wentworth, the *'Kirak'* would be his ticket to advancement; many a commander had been made post-captain for far less. *Captain Frederick Wentworth* - how well that sounded! He wondered whether Anne would be pleased when she heard the news - her haughty family impressed. Frederick Wentworth frowned, as all his resentful anger and wounded pride resurfaced. Anne Elliot - the only woman he had ever loved - had accepted his marriage proposal, only to betray and renounce him days later. All because of her godmother, Lady Russell. The *witch!* Anne had been convinced that *'Commander Wentworth'* was not good enough for her. She had been persuaded to give him up. Well, to hell with it! If *Commander* Wentworth was beneath her, then *she* was too low for *Captain* Wentworth!

'A-woo-ha!' sounded the intercom.

"Come!" Freddie assented.

The doors opened and in stepped his trusty Number One. "Brooding?" Timona knew him well.

"Not really", Freddie barefaced lied.

"Dr Crippen wouldn't recommend alcohol in these cases. But I would", she was laconic. "You need a break - or you will *break*".

"Noted", Freddie sighed.

"You don't like to *lose*", she observed. "Is that what it's all about?"

Freddie grinned. He wasn't sure how much skuttlebuck about Anne his First officer already knew.

"I'm a good listener. And I have a bottle of saurian brandy. We're as entitled to shore leave at starbase as much as any of the crew?"

"You're on", resigned to his fate Frederick Wentworth agreed to spend the remainder of the night drinking himself into a therapeutic stupor.

They made their way to the transporter room, to find a new Ensign on duty. "Miss..?" he eyes the Vulcan.

"Bennett", she responded with something approaching a blush. "Ensign Elizabeth Bennett, Sir", she continued. "I am Ensign Bathos' replacement".

"Miss Bennett is half human", Timona confided.

“Welcome to the *‘Baggins’*”, Freddie smiled the genial captain. “Two to beam to starbase”, he ordered.

“Don’t wait up”, Commander Harville smiled as they dematerialised...

SEVERAL YEARS LATER

‘Initial Situation...’



“First Officer’s log, *USS ‘Hood’*, stardate 33.00.10”, Commander Elizabeth Bennett dryly recorded. “It is a truth, universally acknowledged, that a starship having completed refit, must be in want of a Captain...”

She paused her log as the door of her quarters beeped. “Come!” she ordered - and with a swoosh of doors in stepped *‘Hood’s’* CMO, Dr Emma Shipman. “Beware of Romulans bringing gifts”, ‘Em’ set up a brace of wine glasses and poured them both prosecco.

“Alcohol?”, the half-Vulcanian Elizabeth raised a superior eyebrow. “How quaint”.

“Liking the log”, ignoring her Emma viewed the screen. “I get the joke”.

“I’m uncertain many others will”, having been burdened by her human father with the name of a fictional character, Elizabeth remained calm. “Unlike

many Vulcans humour *is* a concept I can grasp. And our new captain *is* Mr Darcy, is he not?"

"*Captain Darcy*", Emma corrected. "I wonder if he'll dive in the lake?"

"In space no one can hear you drown", Elizabeth retorted.

There was a pregnant pause. "I miss him too", Emma empathised. "We all do. All the crew".

"Captain Wentworth's death was unavoidable", Elizabeth was as unemotional as her mother.

"You got us back from the border?" the CMO consoled a psychological question.

"You proceed from a false assumption", Elizabeth raised another quizzical eyebrow. "I have no desire for the captaincy".

"Might have been nice to have had it offered, though?"

"An emotional response".

'*A-wheeha!*' sounded the intercom. "*Commander Bennett*", it was the communications officer, Lieutenant Chang. "*Signal from starbase. Captain Darcy is about to beam over...*"

"On my way", Elizabeth knocked back her prosecco and followed Dr Shipman towards '*Hood's*' transporter room...

Unable to move until transport was complete Colin Darcy took in the scene of his new command; as the beam coalesced and settled gently tugged at his uniform tunic.

"Welcome back, Captain", First Officer Bennett reported without a smile. "The '*Hood*' is ready. All systems and crew at optimum. We have new orders?"

"We do, Number One. Assemble the senior officers in the briefing room immediately. We warp out in two hours..."

"Gentles", Darcy began the briefing. "Our refit is complete. The crew replacements have been assigned... and we are ready to go. As is their want, Starfleet are giving us a shakedown cruise. Gaseous anomalies near the Romulan Neutral Zone. We catalogue them, and then return to base. Any questions?"

There were none.

"Good, so let's all work ourselves up to peak efficiency. I'll make no changes to routines until I'm familiar with the ship and its crew. That'll be all..."

The officers dispersed to their posts, ready to leave spacedock. Darcy paused, to consider. Freddie Wentworth had been a popular captain. Indeed, he'd also been Darcy's pal at Starfleet Academy. He would be a tough act to follow...

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“Captain on the bridge!” came the word as Colin stepped from the turbolift. “As you were!” he ordered as he took the centre seat. “Take us out Miss Thrice!” he ordered his new helm.

“Aye aye Captain!” glancing at *‘Hood’s’* navigator, the Andorian Ensign Shak Gondar, Karen ‘K’ Thrice hit the thrusters to manoeuvre *‘Hood’* out through spacedock.

“Engineering?” Darcy hit the intercom.

“*Sikara here*”, came the answer from the Japanese Chief Engineer.

“Prepare for warp”, as soon as we leave spacedock. Course – The Romulan Neutral Zone...”

oOo

Captain’s log, stardate 30.09.68. Two days into our shakedown cruise, and we have received a distress call from Outpost 37, on the edge of the Romulan Neutral Zone. An attack? As the nearest Starfleet vessel we are investigating. I have also had cause to reprimand - off-record - Lieutenant Thrice for constantly questioning orders...

“Red alert!” Captain Darcy ordered as the *‘Hood’* approached the still silent outpost. He didn’t like it, and his ‘sixth sense’ immediately recalled his days in his last command, as skipper of the destroyer *USS ‘Baggins’*.

His new crew responded with alacrity. “The Outpost appears intact and undamaged”, Commander Bennett reported.

“Still no response to hails”, Lt. Chang added to the conundrum. “There seems to be some kind of a dampening field in operation”.

“Probe, Sir?” Lt. Thrice suggested.

Had she learnt her lesson? “Good idea”, Darcy approved. “Launch probe!”

The probe shot away from the *‘Hood’*. “Telemetry reports a cloaked vessel, Captain”, Elizabeth’s subsequent report surprised no one. Indeed, a Romulan vessel suddenly dropped its cloak to expose itself. It was a D7, one of the types they had purchased from the Klingons – and Colin quickly reviewed in his mind Jim Kirk’s report of the ‘Enterprise incident’.

“Hail them!” he ordered – and a link was quickly established. “This is Captain Colin F. Darcy of the *USS ‘Hood’*. You are in violation of Neutral Zone Treaty and are technically committing an act of war. May I ask *why?*”

“*Captain Darcy*”, the image of a Romulan Commander appeared on screen. “Captain Wentworth was last known to be in command. I shall update our records accordingly. Please allow me to introduce myself. I am Commander

Sunak of the *IRS 'Yitmap'*. Consider this... *payback for your 'Enterprise's' incursion* – his attention was suddenly diverted as Elizabeth came into view. “Ah! A Vulcan First Officer! How charming!”

“Captain!” Ensign Gondar suddenly turned around – and made a cut gesture across this throat.

“Excuse us, Commander”, Colin addressed the screen. “Mute! Ensign?” seeing it was done he immediately questioned.

“Sir, given what we know of Romulan and Vulcans shared heritage... We must be cautious”.

“Indeed”, Elizabeth raised a quizzical eyebrow to agree. “Judging from Commander Sunak’s expression... I suspect his thoughts towards me are... less than *wholesome*”.

“Then we can use that against him. Good thinking Ensign”, Colin acknowledged Shak. “Take on the role of acting head of Security”, he rewarded.

“You are most gallant, Ensign”, Elizabeth likewise approved of the Andorian’s insight.

Hitherto mute, Dr Shipman now spoke. “Why not invite them over for drinks?” she caustically suggested.

“An intriguing suggestion, Captain”, Elizabeth agreed. “I suggest we also report back to Starfleet with all dispatch”.

“Lt. Chang – make it so”, Colin agreed. “Open a hailing frequency to the *'Yitmap'...*”

Captain’s log, supplemental. We have ascertained that the dampening field affecting Outpost 37 was caused by our Romulan adversaries extending their cloak around the asteroid it was built upon. I have invited their Commander Sunak over for tea, but I remain wary and suspicious. ‘You can’t trust the Romulans’, as Freddie Wentworth used to say... I have also ordered Dr Shipman and Commander Gondar beam over to Outpost 37 to check things out there, and confer with its commander, Lt. Minogue, and take readings on the Romulans improved cloaking device...

“Tea, Earl Grey, hot”, Captain Darcy offered their Romulan guest. “An earth delicacy”.

“Thank you”, the alien agreed with all alacrity.

If she was surprised the her new ‘skipper’ had passed the conn to Lt. Thrice... Elizabeth was yet struck by the level of attraction the Romulan clearly felt for her. If her Vulcan half was calm and logically detached... her human half yet

found him similarly... *intriguing*. ‘Snogworthy’, as they had it on the lower decks... ‘What’s he at?’ she also found his motives decidedly *perplexing*...

“You fly a Klingon ship?” Darcy opened. “You are allies?”

“We have a trade agreement”, Sunak replied with a dismissive shrug.

“Nothing more. And we have extensively modified it”.

“What do you trade?” Elizabeth asked – was suddenly conscious the design of her service uniform would not meet the approval of the 19th century lady novelist’s character, whose eponym she bore.

“I regret that information must remain... confidential”, Sunak grinned like a wolf.

‘*Ooh-wee-ah!*’ sounded the intercom. “*Bridge to Captain Darcy!*” It was Lt. Thrice. “*Romulan warbird decloaking – and hailing us! Their weapons are not powered, but they stand ready!*”

“Patch them through, please Lieutenant”, Colin quelled his concerns to appear unruffled. “Have Lt. Minogue power-up and stand-by also. Friends of yours?” he then instantly challenged Sunak.

“Indubitably”, he grinned a return at Elizabeth. “We have a standoff, do we not?”

‘Smug bastard’, thought Colin as – on screen – appeared the image of a female Romulan Commander. “*I am Commander Chavanek of the Warbird IRS ‘Hawk’s Talon’*”, she announced.

“Repatriated after the ‘*Enterprise*’ incident”, Colin mused what they all already knew.

“*I learned much about your Federation whilst in... custody*”, she responded with a smile.

“Perhaps you’d care to join us for tea?” Darcy promptly offered...

It is a truth, universally acknowledged, that outpost life can be harsh and mentally draining. Over on Number 37, Dr Emma Shipman was conscious of the agitated state of Lt. Minogue and his crew – held powerless by a Romulan cloak.

“That’s everything”, Ensign Gondar, meanwhile, finished collecting data from the outpost’s computer.

“We’ll need it!” Minogue exclaimed. “Buncha dingos!” he was disparaging of the Romulans in his native antipodean patois. “Can’t trust ‘em further than a koala’s backside”.

“Mm”, Emma considered his string of earthy outback metaphors. “You wish to board them?”

“No way Sheila!” he denied in fear and dismay.

“Let me give you a shot to get you through this...” she prepared a hypospray. “Now, this won’t hurt a bit...:

“You are aware of the old Tholian adage?” back on the *‘Hood’* Commander Chavanek continued her ‘pitch’.

“Let’s you and him fight?” Elizabeth began to discern her line of thinking.

“Precisely”, Sunak agreed – again leered inappropriately as he helped himself to not only more tea – but another slice of cake as well.

“Our Tal Shiar”, Liviana Chavanek continued, “a covert ops group much like your Section 31 – have reason to believe the Klingons ‘generously’” (she mimed the inverted commas), “traded ships of their design in order to... shall we say *engineer* incidents to which assigned blame could be... ambigued”.

“Makes sense”, Colin agreed. “You have proof of this?”

“On this data chip”, her eyes gestured Sunak pass it over – which he did to Elizabeth – making deliberate contact with her hand. A surge of pheromones assaulted her human half; made her again realise the deep loneliness incumbent of a spinster Starfleet officer...

“I will check it first for viruses”, rallying her sense of sensibility to duty she was publicly cautious.

“We have a saying”, Colin added as he engaged his guests. “Beware of Romulans bearing gifts”

“Most prudent”, Chavanek approved. “We have one too. ‘Fairtrade is all’. In return, Captain Darcy... could you provide us with the recipe of this delicious cake?”

oOo

“Romulan vessels returned to Neutral Zone”, Ensign Gondar reported on the bridge of the *‘Hood’*.

“I’ve requested a medical team be sent to go through all the outposts”, Dr Shipman reported. “Lt. Minogue has deep psychosis and paranoia that may cloud his judgement. I’ve given him some natural herbal remedies to help him relax. And told him to stay off the *‘Fosters’* for a while”.

“Course Captain?” Ensign Gondar requested.

“A return to our mission. Cataloguing gaseous anomalies?” Elizabeth suggested.

“I’m more concerned about Klingon dark ops”, Colin pursed his brow in thought. “Perhaps we should go poking around their border?”

“It is a truth, universally acknowledged, those who ‘poke’ Klingons frequently come off worse”, Elizabeth cautioned.

“Does the Romulan data check-out as virus free, Number One?” Nodding he understood Darcy next questioned her.

“It does Captain. I have forwarded it to Starfleet. It also contained some... personal information. For me”.

“For *you*, Commander?” Emma grinned like a Cheshire cat.

“For me, indeed”, Elizabeth arched her eyebrow uncomfortably.

“Commander Sunak’s ‘number’, as I believe they called it in the 20th century”.

“Entrapment!” with her extensive romantic experience Karen Thrice turned to grinningly suggest.

“But for whom?” Emma wondered.

Elizabeth sighed. “Commander Sunak suggested he wishes to, ‘enter into correspondence for the mutual good of our peoples’, unquote”, Elizabeth related her confidence.

“Vulcan-Romulan reunification stuff?” Colin wondered. “Vulcan separatists?”

“Possibly”, Elizabeth agreed.

“Ockham’s Razor”, Emma huffed in a medical way. “The philosophical notion that the simplest explanation is also the most likely. He just wants to snog you. End of”.

“You tease me, Doctor?” Elizabeth remained calm; quelled her human half.

“The opportunity for profitable espionage indeed exists”.

“On both sides”, Colin mused.

“I do not believe Commander Sunak’s intentions towards me are honourable”, Elizabeth sighed. “Were Starfleet to order me to act as a ‘honeytrap’ I would be obliged to resign my commission, rather than comply”.

“I’d do it”, Karen, meanwhile, impulsively grinned...

oOo

Captain’s log, stardate 30.09.68. We are en route to starbase for a clarification of orders. Admiral Austen and Section 31 are most anxious to exploit the Romulan contact Commander Sunak, and to prepare Lt. Thrice for a covert ‘honeytrap’ mission. She will be disguised as a Vulcan and inserted into Romulan space. Meanwhile, I am concerned at how freely Dr Shipman dispenses herbal medication to the crew, and the perils of increasing Klingon activity in our sector...

oOo

The human female had clearly been crying in the chapel. “*Life’s so unfair!*” she blubbed down the comm link. “*I broke with my Godmother Lady Russell*

over it. Forfeited my inheritance to Kellynch Hall! Freddie agreed to take me back – reinstate our engagement... and now... he's gone!"

"I am sorry Miss Elliott", if her human side was *touched*... Elizabeth Bennett's Vulcan half found this display of emotion... *trying*. "On the 'Hood' we all feel Captain Wentworth's loss".

"*You weren't about to marry him!*" the civilian selfishly blubbed.

"No", Elizabeth raised her eyebrow. "I was not. The captain's shuttle failed to provide telemetry as to why it exploded. As soon as the cause of the accident is ascertained I will be sure to inform you. My condolences. You must excuse me, duty calls. Bennett out", she broke the tiresome link to activate her door.

"Reckon we could be sisters?" Karen Thrice entered; already surgically altered to appear Vulcan.

"There are few blonde Vulcan's", Elizabeth reached for her tricorder, and scanned. "Our sensors are fooled", she (almost) amused. "You appear Vulcan".

"I even bleed green blood".

"Whether your disguise will fool the Romulans, Karen, remains to be seen. However, Dr Shipman's conversion work appears most precise".

'*Ooh-wee-ah!*' sounded the intercom. "*Commander Bennett and Lt. Thrice to the Transporter Room*".

"Acknowledged", Elizabeth gestured they should do.

"Looks like an ordinary civvie transport to me", Captain Darcy gestured at the screen. "Sneaky blighters those Section 31 'dark ops' chaps".

"Scans like one too", engineer Huraki Sikara observed as the doors opened to permit Commander Bennett and Lt. Thrice enter.

"Ready?" Colin addressed his almost magically transformed helmsperson.

"As I'll ever be", 'K' was habitually cocky as she stepped onto to transporter pad. "Energise!" she declared.

As is usual with a safe transport, the scene around Karen almost imperceptibly changed from the 'Hood's' transporter room, to the hanger of the 'freighter'. "*You!*" she declared her total shock as she materialised, the transport completed.

"Shuttle accidents occur all the time, Kaz", the male Section 31 operative chuckled and grinned at their old acquaintance renewed. "Here's your honeytrap vessel", he pointed towards a skilfully 'distressed' civilian shuttle. "We'll drop it in Romulan space, you inside. You've a loose brief. Find out the truth about any Klingon and Romulan plots to start a war. You can pose as a civilian, or Starfleet?"

“Civilian, Sir”, ‘K’ wished to lessen adverse repercussions for her friends on the ‘Hood’. “I suspect our Mr Sunak far less likely to permit himself be seduced by a Starfleet officer”.

“Your call”, the shadowy secret agent shrugged. “Either way, you will pose as a ‘hurt refugee’ from oppression, seeking succour”.

“In which case I guess we’ll see then how big a sucker Commander Sunak really is?”, ‘K’ quipped back - as the agent gentlemanly turned his back quickly changed into the impractically flirtatious and barely Vulcan civilian garments, provided by Section 31’s wardrobe department...

“Helm! Prepare to depart!” back on the bridge of the ‘Hood’ Colin Darcy took the centre seat. “Return us to... *cataloguing gaseous anomalies*... along the Klingon border”, he euphemised the patrol nature of their new mission by deploying the ‘Shatner comma’ for emphasis.

“Heavens!” Commander Bennett exclaimed as – on the viewscreen - the Section 31 vessel not only warped directly into Romulan space – but also *cloaked*.

“I guess Section 31 think they’re above the rules”, Emma Shipman sagely suggested. “The Federation don’t use cloaking devices. Go skulking around the galaxy”, she observed the paradox.

“They’d better not consider ‘K’ expendable”, Chang observed from her Communications station the concern for their shipmate they were all feeling...

oOo

Bath, Earth, Sector 001. Anne Elliott left the small chapel – only to be accosted by two Vulcans, a male and a female. “Miss Elliott?” the male spoke softly.

“Yes?” Anne confused – but before she could utter more was ‘nerve-pinched’ by the female – an ambulance pulling up to take them all away...

oOo

Space, inside the Romulan side of The Neutral Zone. “Prepared to be ejected into space”, the Section 31 commander advised. “We will be watching and following you all the way, using our cloak. I doubt the Rommies will be expecting *that*. The implant will enable us to monitor you. Upon receipt of your ‘safe word’ we’ll attempt to extract you”.

“I won’t need a safe-word”, ‘K’ brazened. “Though, maybe, the Romulans might”.

“You haven’t changed, Kaz”, the shadowy secret agent amused. “And, risk is indeed our business, is it not?”

“Got it!”, boarding the shuttle, ready to be set adrift to await her fate, Karen decided to make herself appear a more convincing ‘civilian in distress’. Butting her head three times on the dashboard console to draw blood, she casually emptied out the contents of the medical kit, drank the medicinal shot of JD, and felt her now spaceborne shuttle tumble as, from the effect of the ‘medicine’ and self-inflicted wound, she quickly fell unconscious...

“Bennett here”, back on the ‘Hood’ Elizabeth took another call from Earth.

“Evening all, Miss. Inspector Reg Unwin, Interpol here. Logs show you were the last person to speak to a certain Miss Anne Elliott?”

“I did speak to her”, Elizabeth confirmed, her logical mind working overtime. “I deduce, Inspector, from your use of the word ‘last’, that Miss Elliott is missing?”

“Quite so Miss”.

“I have no knowledge of her whereabouts, Inspector”, Elizabeth’s dark human side speculated what a joy it would be if the vacuous and unworthy female had been abducted and eaten by bears (or some other indigenous fauna). “Should she contact me again, I will inform you. Peradventure the balance of her mind was disturbed by the death of Captain Wentworth, and her inability to prove herself worthy of his hand by initially defying her family, to pledge her troth to him?”

“Thank you Miss. We are pursuing several lines of enquiry”.

“Guilt is a strong emotional motivator, Inspector?”

“Quite so, Miss”, the human ‘fuzz’ remained unmoved. “Thanks for your help, and mind how you go”, he rang off...

oOo

Captain’s log, supplemental. We are on patrol of the Klingon border. Both I and the crew remained concerned for Lt. Thrice, and her covert mission into Romulan space. Section 31 do not seem to play by any rules Starfleet understand and adhere to...

oOo

Karen came to groggily as she felt her shuttle move beneath her. ‘Tractored!’ she knew from the noise of straining metal and plastic. Looking out of the

porthole she saw she was being pulled into a Romulan docking bay – that in a theatrical sense she was now ‘on’.

With an audible ‘hiss’ her shuttle door opened – and inside stepped a female Romulan Sub-commander, armed with a levelled disrupter. “I am Sub-Commander Achille of the Romulan Star Empire”, she calmly stated. “You have trespassed into our space. We detected your life signs and have brought you aboard”. She grinned inscrutably. “For your own safety of course, *Vulcan*”.

“My name I know is K’Ren”, to play her part ‘K’ summoned all her inner Kiera Knightly. “I’m sorry, I’m having trouble remembering... the bang on my head...”

“Amnesia?” the Sub-Commander gestured a follow-up medic check her ‘prisoner’ over. “Are you a Federation citizen?”

“I *was*”, Karen saw an opening.

“Unconscious for six hours”, the medic advised.

“We will take you to our nearest starbase for processing and repatriation”, the Sub-Commander almost sneered. “Please, come to our Sick Bay for medical attention”.

“Sure...” ‘K’ agreed, as she stepped outside began to gather as much intelligence as she could. “Guards?” she wondered as they walked the corridors.

“We Romulans are a cautious people”, Achille haughtily responded.

“Can you at least tell me where I am?”

“You are aboard the *IRS ‘Yitmap’*”.

‘Bingo!’ thought ‘K’.

It was her target Sunak’s vessel...

“No Klingons?” Darcy mused at his First Officer as he paced his bridge.

“Starfleet reports Klingons starting to use cloaking devices”, Elizabeth advised a possible answer to the conundrum.

“Maybe we should too?” Dr Shipman was laconic. “Everyone else is”, as she observed her Captain move, noted (in an unprofessional non-medical way) the shapely contours of his rugged, masculine, body – felt past and forbidden passions rise within her bosom.

“Let’s tease them, then”, Darcy suggested. “Lt. Chang – broadcast on all frequencies the song ‘*Danger Zone*’, by Kenny Loggins. 12” extended mix”.

“Aye Sir”.

“Captain?” Elizabeth queried his unorthodox methodology.

“Let’s taunt them a bit”, Colin explained.

“Fascinating...” Elizabeth raised an eyebrow of tactical interest...

*

Back on the *'Yitmap'*... 'K' was relieved to at last be interviewed by her 'target', the ubiquitous Commander Sunak. "... so, I'm a refugee, you could say..." she took as her flirtatiously vulnerable model Dame Helen Mirren's portrayal of Theresa May in, *'Carry On Brexit'*.

"You seek political asylum?" if decidedly suspicious Sunak was yet kind; it obvious from his body-language her found 'K's' comely Vulcanoid physique *indecently* attractive.

"Oh yes please!" 'K' played him like a violin. "You must have heard how the Federation is mistreating we minority Vulcans?"

"I had not", Sunak mused. "But - forgive me asking K'Ren – how do I know I can trust you?"

"Logical", she replied. "Trust can come with time, can it not? You are most wise, Commander, to be so sceptical", she dangled her reluctance to enhance his 'thrill of the chase'.

"You must rest now", Sunak decided. "There is much we need to discuss. I will report to our High Command about the... *dissidents* you mention", he smiled. "Guards! See K'Ren has all she needs..."

"Captain!" Back on the *'Hood'* Commander Bennett reported. "We are being scanned by a Klingon outpost. They must have intercepted our transmission of Mr Loggins' magnum opus".

"There's a Klingon ship out there, I can feel it in my bones", Colin grinned.

"You're baiting them?" Dr Shipman suggested.

"Now broadcast some Bjork", Darcy ordered. "It's like Klingon opera. Let's bait them some more..."

"You are clearly a master baiter", Elizabeth observed – had to halt as she saw the bridge crew laugh aloud... then computed precisely what she had inadvertently said. "Humour, it is a difficult concept to grasp..." she saw Emma mock-curtsey to their captain.

"Anything yet from Lt. Thrice", the moment of amusement over Darcy gestured for calm.

"Nothing yet, Captain".

"Stand by to extract", he ordered. "The *USS 'Hood'* looks after its own..."

oOo

"Where... where *am I*?" Anne Elliott awoke on what appeared to be a Vulcan transport. "Who are you?"

"We can answer none of your questions at this time", responded a stern-looking Vulcan female.

“Are you... Vulcanexiteers?” Anne next wondered.

“Very astute... for a human”, the female smiled.

A *smiling Vulcan!* “You’re Romulans!” Anne alarmed - rocked against her restraints to see resistance was futile.

“We work for the reunification of the Vulcan and Romulan peoples”, the female administered a hypospray – and poor, abducted, Anne Elliott fell again unconscious...

oOo

Dinner aboard the *‘Yitmap’*. “So, K’Ren”, Commander Sunak smiled, “why are the Vulcans so unhappy with the Federation?”

“Some Vulcans”, she qualified. “We resent human... pride and prejudice”.

“Are you a Vulcanexiteer?”

“I could be... *persuaded*”, ‘K’ followed the Vulcan habit of raising an eyebrow to flirt.

“The reunification of our peoples?” Sunak reciprocated the gesture.

“Maybe in time. How are race-relations in the Romulan Empire?”

“Not an issue. We Romulans favour order and discipline. And there are many who would like to... *join again and dance...* with our Vulcan cousins”.

“Many of us are of the same mind”, K’Ren gently responded.

“We have heard it said the Federation prepares a war of aggression against the Klingon Empire?”

“I have not heard that, Commander. But I believe we do indeed have much... to *discuss*”.

“Leave us!” with a wave Sunak ordered his guards. “*‘The Spy Who Loved Me’*, peradventure?” he teased his guest.

“Roger Moore?” K’Ren punned in return...

oOo

With the night watch on duty, Colin Darcy decided to consult Dr Shipman, in her secondary role as ‘ship’s counsellor’. “So?” he checked, “The crew don’t yet like me?”

“The computer likes you, Darling?” the doctor was amused as she freely referenced - in private – their past *relationship*. “They’re still getting over the loss of Captain Wentworth”, she advised her old flame.

“True. I think Commander Bennett thinks I’m stupid?”

“I think she thinks *everyone* is stupid”, Emma grinned. “Ruled by passions barely suppressed under the *‘Hood’*”, she punned.

oOo

“Where am I?” powerless Anne again awoke.

“Welcome to Romulus, Miss Elliott”, spoke an alien officer. “Please, allow me to introduce myself. I am Commander Chavanek of the Warbird *IRS ‘Hawk’s Talon’*”, she announced. “Please, tell me, as his betrothed, what you know of Captain Frederick Wentworth..?”

oOo

“Status report!” racing back to the bridge of the *‘Hood’* Captain Darcy demanded.

“Klingon D7 Battlecruiser dead ahead”, Elizabeth calmly reported. “They have raised shields and are charging weapons”.

“Red alert! Shields up!” Colin ordered. “Stand by on main phaser banks!”.

“Klingons hailing us!” Lieutenant Chang reported.

“On screen!” Colin responded with alacrity.

“This is Captain Klaang of the *IKS ‘Grohl’*. Who are *you*?” an angry Klingon visage appeared. “Where’s Wentworth?”

“I am Captain Colin P. Darcy, and I killed him for his command”, Colin had been advised *never* to show weakness to Klingons.

“Did he rescue his captive woman from her family before he died?”

“If I may, Captain”, Elizabeth knew now she must diplomatically interject to avoid an *incident*. “Captain Klaang. Captain Darcy jests. Captain Wentworth died in a shuttle accident. He was indeed reconciled with Miss Elliott before the end”, she turned to Colin to explain. “Captain Klaang honoured us in a previous mission by fighting alongside us, against the Tling at Westeros”.

“Pity”, the Klingon grumped. “Wentworth would not then have gone to Stovor-kor to feast with his ancestors for dying in battle, not for such a terribly passive death”.

“Yes, yes, humour...” Colin quickly made light of his *faux-pas*. “We are on a peaceful mission cataloguing gaseous anomalies, along our common border. We mean you no harm, for we know Klingons hold honour dear. Unlike some of our neighbours... skulking around in cloaks?” he phished.

“Those Romulan *p’taks!*” Klaang seemed to agree. “They tell us you threaten us? As if you’d *dare!*”

“They say the same about you?” Elizabeth raised a quizzical eyebrow.

“Let’s you and him fight, eh?” Klaang agreed. “Romulans are without honour. If we invade you - you will see us coming - with colours blazing”.

“Commander Bennett!” Colin ordered a snap decision. “Send Captain Klaang all we know about the Romulan suggestions of invasion. As a gift of... cooperation”.

“*K’pla!*” the Klingon grinned. “We shall do likewise. Enjoy your cataloguing farts, Darcy. We shall be watching closely. Klaang *out!*”

The ‘*Hood*’ bridge crew looked at each other – the plot suddenly thickening...

oOo

Meanwhile, on the ‘*Yitmap*’ – with the departure of the Romulan guards – it was clear to ‘K’Ren’ that Commander Sunak would re-commence his *advance*.

“I would very much like to help you Vulcans exit the repressive Federation”, Sunak inclined towards his guest. “You know, you have beautiful eyes?”

Karen ‘blushed’ as much as a Vulcan could.

“I would further Romulan ambitions with our Vulcan *cousins*... as often as possible”, he continued. “‘Vulcexit’ is a cause close to my heart...”

“We’d appreciate that”, ‘K’ resolved to ‘play him’; yet to simultaneously appear both guarded and shrewd.

“I am a patient man”, Sunak persisted in his flirting. “I find... *anticipation* heightens the eventual... *experience*”, he then backed away slightly. “The ‘*Yitmap*’ is on course for Romulus, as we speak. I will become your advocate. Your *mentor*...”

‘Bingo’? “If reunification is achieved... I would then willingly show my... *gratitude*”, ‘K’ inveigled. “Up to and accepting your... *proposal*?”

Sunak thought about that. “Of course, my dear. Once our planets are reunited our personal union would indeed be... *highly symbolic*, would it not?”

“Our worlds together would be a terrible force to reckon with, would they not?” Karen flirted back.

“Indeed”, Commander Sunak began to now see a chance of political advancement... as well as chance to (eventually) ‘snog’ this adorable Vulcan female...

oOo

Anne Elliott awoke from her swoon – still on Romulus – still held by the Tal Shiar. “Let me go!” she protested. “I demand to see the Federation ambassador!”

“What if we were to tell you that your beloved Captain Wentworth is alive?” the female Romulan suggested. “We would like *you* to help persuade him to come to us. For his safety, of course”.

“Freddie? *Alive?*” (even the habitually naïve Anne was suspicious). “Why... why would you do *that?*”

“We owe him debt of gratitude”, the male Tal Shiar proffered. “For his action at the raid on Covid 21”, he reckoned this human female would be easy to induce into what the ‘Feds’ called ‘Stockholm Syndrome’...

oOo

Back on the ‘Hood’... Colin felt the need to once again confide in the leftfield thinking Dr Shipman.

“We’re low on rum”, Emma grumped as she swallowed half a glass. “We need to get more replicators on it. Morale on the lower decks will suffer otherwise”.

“Apologies, turbolift delays”, Commander Bennett now arrived in the briefing room. “I have contacted Section 31 as you requested, Captain”.

“Rum?” Emma offered her some.

“Thank you, no”, Elizabeth declined, “I need no such recreation”.

“What did they say?” Colin returned to business as he poured more of Dr Shipman’s Caribbean prescription.

“Nothing”, Elizabeth was clear. “They consider Miss Elliott’s disappearance a matter for the local police. She is but a missing person. I have, however, taken the liberty of re-analysing the telemetry from Captain Wentworth’s exploding shuttle...”

oOo

Much to ‘K’Ren’s’ surprise... Commander Sunak was as good as his word. She was indeed left *alone*. To *rest*...

With no tricorder or other device she checked her room for ‘bugs’ as best as she could. There was no spyware she could discern - indeed no power outlets, save the battery light provided. No coms...

It was clear the Romulans didn’t trust her. Well, the Romulans never trusted *anyone*... and the feeling was mutual. This left her with the unpleasant possibility that Sunak might indeed in *bona fide* in his offer about assisting reunification.

A whole new kettle of worms to expose?

Mulling these and other thoughts Karen Thrice set herself to rest and sleep as best she could...

oOo

“Nothing”, Elizabeth was clear. “They consider Miss Elliott’s disappearance a matter for the local police. She is but a missing person. I have, however, taken the liberty of re-analysing the telemetry from Captain Wentworth’s exploding shuttle”.

“Has Commander Sikara in engineering seen the data too?” agitated a fell conspiracy could be in progress, Colin began to restlessly pace.

“He has”, Elizabeth verified. “And he concurs. No organic material...”

“... ‘body parts’, to the layman...” Emma interjected.

“...was recovered from the wreckage”, Elizabeth continued. “There was also a significant quantum irregularity detected”.

“Suspicious”, Colin mused. “Delete all research logs from the main computer”, he rashly ordered. “We have a mystery here to solve Scooby Gang – and I want our investigation kept secret too. No report to Starfleet?”

“Not even to Section 31?” Emma intrigued.

“Officially they don’t exist”, Colin was wry. “Also, scan the ‘Hood’ for additional life signs”.

“Already completed”, as always Elizabeth Bennett was most precise. “There are no... stowaways...”

“Mm...” Captain Darcy suddenly galvanized. “In that case I’ve got a plan so cunning it makes a fox look like a first year Academy student on prom night...”

oOo

Karen Thrice awoke with a start as the door opened. As expected, there stood a grinning Commander Sunak. “We have arrived at Romulus, my dear”, he declared. “May I call you that?”

“I suppose”, ‘K’ played it maidenly cagey.

“We are to beam down now. I have arranged a meeting with the Praetor’s Under Secretary. Concerning reunification”.

“Let’s go”, no stranger to getting out of her depth Karen agreed...

Within minutes Karen surmised that the ‘Praetor’s Under Secretary’ worked for the Tal Shiar. She was shown into a room containing guards and a human female she recognised as her former captain’s ‘squeeze’, Anne Elliott.

“Are you a Vulcan?” the vacuous female asked.

“I am”, ‘K’ren’ affirmed – was relieved *not* to be recognised.

“Please, observe”, a high-ranking Romulan (presumably the Under Secretary) entered and sneered as – out in orbit a civilian-looking transport suddenly

decloaked – and a transporter activated – an agitated human male appearing in the room both knew well.

“Freddie!” Anne joyed to see her true love. “You’re alive! Like they said”.

“Captain Frederick Wentworth of Section 31 – in the name of the Praetor I arrest you for espionage”.

“Freddie!” Anne ran to embrace her beau.

“You fiends!” Wentworth knew they now had a lever to use upon him - at least didn’t *seem* to suspect the Vulcan was who she really *was*.

Apparently...

oOo

“What is it *now*, Human?” Captain Klaang saw the ugly visage appear on his screen. Have you run out of gas to take snaps of?”

“As you once fought beside my predecessor, Captain Wentworth, I have a proposal for you”, the Darcy human spoke. “That together we... investigate the Romulans attempt to ferment unnecessary between us. As a gesture of good faith and trust, I am prepared to send you Dr Shipman”, he gestured as a human female.

“Is there another Dr Shipman?” back on the bridge of the ‘Hood’ Emma was confused.

“He means you, Doc”, Lieutenant Gondar amused.

“Ha!” the on-screen Klingon amused. “A plan! Good. I will send you my Healer K’Tar. In fair exchange”.

“Is she good-looking?” Darcy jested. “We’ll be deep into Romulan space”.

“Captain!” Commander Bennett promptly challenged his anachronistic sexism...

“More honour to be gained in that by that than listing gas”, back on the ‘Grohl’ Klaang further mused upon the suggestion. “We have a trade agreement with the Romulans. We sell them ships. I will have my painters disguise my vessel. Yours will simulate battle damage. I will appear to be taking you as a prize to Romulus”.

“Excellent deception”, the human agreed. “They will see exactly what they want to see...”

“...Commander Bennett, have Atrill and Rickman in the paint shop stand by. Darcy out”.

The screen cleared. “Colin, I’m hurt and offended you consider me something to trade as a... hostage”, Dr Shipman complained – despite herself and her alcohol-dampened emotions, felt her repressed feelings for her skipper well-up.

“It’s because I so care about you it’s a good gesture of trust”, Colin charmed.

oOo

Karen Thrice breathed a huge sigh of relief. If her Section 31 ‘handler’ Wentworth was now discovered... he had (yet?) to betray her cover.

“You will tell us everything we wish to know”, the Praetor’s Under Secretary now rounded on the captive.

“Never!” Wentworth dramatically buckled his swash.

“We will torture your betrothed, the female Elliott”.

“I will never betray Starfleet!” Freddie refused. “Sorry Darling”, he apologised to Anne as she was taken away by the Tal Shiar – still demanding to see the Federation Ambassador.

“Prepare him!” the Under Secretary ordered Wentworth’s interrogation proceed.

“Under Secretary”, at this point Commander Sunak interjected. “Whilst you’re here, may I introduce Vulcanexiteer K’Ren”.

“I wish to help the cause of Vulcan-Romulan reunification”, ‘K’ now thought on her feet. “If you send me back to Vulcan... I’ll do what I can. Knowing we have the help of the Romulan people”.

“An interesting suggestion”, the Under Secretary now looked at her in that was many Romulan gentlemen do at ‘hot’ Vulcan ladies. “I shall leave you in the hands of Commander Sunak and the Tal Shiar”.

“I assure you, Under Secretary, I will exclusively *handle* our Vulcan guest”, Sunak spoke with more than a slight trace of inuendo.

“Humour?” ‘K’ amused. “It is a difficult concept to grasp...”

oOo

‘The Customer is always right’? “*Almost done with the camo job, Captain*”, out on the port nacelle, in space suits, Atrill and Rickman concluded the paint application – but metres of space away the ‘*Grohl*’ likewise transformed by a huge bird of prey painted onto its underside.

“You have a soft sick bay”, ‘guest’ Healer K’Tar reported to Captain Darcy on the ‘*Hood’s*’ bridge. “But your crew are only humans”, she playfully punched her new commander’s arm. This caused Commander Bennett to raise a

quizzical eyebrow; for such was the Klingon notion of flirtation. “You will report to me for a physical”, K’Tar next exercised her medical authority. “I’ll put you through your paces”.

“Commander Bennett”, Colin accepted with unseemly alacrity. “You have the bridge...”

oOo

“Humour?” ‘K’ amused. “It is a difficult concept to grasp”.

“Call you Vulcanexiteers, my dear”, Sunak encouraged her. “It will be a good way of proving your trustworthiness and honesty”, he looked at the Tal Shiar guards. “Will it not?”

“Of course”, put on the spot Karen went to a console and dialled up random numbers. As she hoped there was no response. “I’ll keep trying”, she apologised.

“You see?” Sunak explained to the Tal operatives. “We can trust her. I vouch for her with my life”.

“You just *did*”, the senior operative smirked. “Very well, Commander, see to it. I wish to oversee the Elliott female’s interrogation”.

“Alone at last”, Sunak leered at being left with the comely Vulcan in his charge...

oOo

Meanwhile, back on the ‘*Grohl*’... despite the inertial dampers Dr Emma Shipman felt at lurch and the impromptu ‘task force’ shot at warp, across the shared Neutral Zone, and into Romulan space.

“Grumpy lot?” she surveyed her Klingon medical crew.

“You say *human*”, a technician snarled in contempt.

Before the others could even begin laughing at the open challenge – Emma had moved to slug him across the face – followed by a booted kick to his most personal area. “Aggh!” he doubled in pain.

“Blood wine!” her dander up the ‘*Hood’s*’ seconded CMO ordered to assert herself. “A pint to each of us!”

“What is a ‘pint’, Healer?”

“An old Earth measure of my ancestors”, Emma exclaimed.

“*K’pla!*” one of the other medicos had already ‘googled’ the volume. “A worthy amount!”

“I can drink to that”, Emma was confident she’d achieved ascendancy over her new ‘crew’...

oOo

Section 31 training was most precise. Bound as he was... Freddie Wentworth accepted he wasn't getting out of here alive. If he felt sorry for Anne... well... at least his persistence in that area had been *vindicated*...

"I will not speak", he informed the Tal Shiar operatives as his distraught fiancée was brought in.

"We will torture her".

"There will be an answer, let it be", Wentworth reposted with scripture.

"Freddie!" Anne felt betrayed.

"Federation first, my love", if they were to die... he wanted her to believe he loved her, had not merely pursued her hand to prove a point.

"Take the human female away", the Tal Shiar had seen enough. "Schedule her for termination. I want no loose ends".

"No!" Miss Elliott protested in vain as she was removed to her fell fate.

"Truth serum", the chief operative ordered. It was quickly injected. Freddie fought it... but it was no use.

"Now", the interrogator began, "tell us what you know about the Vulcanexiteers?"

Section 31 indoctrination still in place... Wentworth began to delay by – literally – reciting the Wiki entry, even under the influence of drugs inculcated distraction techniques alive and kicking...

oOo

"...having gone dark, to the casual and over-confident Romulan observer the 'Hood' should appear to be the 'Grohl's' captive", Elizabeth Bennett had little faith the scheme would work as – in company with Ensign Gondar - she entered sick bay. "Pride and prejudice come before falls, do they not?"

To their surprise Captain Darcy's medical was still ongoing; his manly torso glistening with sweat from his work-out. As her human half *reacted*... Elizabeth's Vulcan side knew he was but flirting with Healer K'Tar (for it was a truth, universally acknowledged, she was of the required gender and possessed a pulse). She raised an eyebrow in inquiry – as both Gondar and K'tar laughed at her obvious embarrassment.

"We are coming up in Romulus, Captain", she duly reported. "Three warbirds as escort. Orbital insertion now. I am unsure whether our deception has been effective, as indeed is the 'Grohl'. In response to Romulan enquiries we have reported overloaded Chambers coils, resulting from the alleged engagement".

“Let’s get to the bridge”, Colin grinned the game was once again afoot...

oOo

“Shut up!” the Tal Shiar interrogator had clearly had enough of the human *ryakna’s* encyclopaedic recitation. “Let’s try something different. Who is K’Ren?”

“K’Ren is a Vulcan name given to females...”

“Is she a Vulcanexiteer?”

“No”, Wentworth was obliged by the narcotics to respond to a direct question. “She is undercover Starfleet”.

“Go!” the interrogator ordered – and the Tal Shiar burst in upon Commander Sunak to find him and the imposter K’Ren locked in a passionate embrace – and *dematerialising!*

“Honey trap!” they shouted their anger...

“*Got them, Captain!*” engineer Sikara reported from the transporter room.

“Put our Romulan guest in the brig!” Darcy gleed. “Have Lieutenant Thrice return to duty – as a human – asap. Have healer K’tar check them both our first”.

“Aye!” Huraki agreed.

“*Wentworth and Elliott are as good as dead, Sir*”, Karen also reported in. “*Section 31 compromised by the Rommies*”.

“Red alert! Shields up! Stand by on main phaser banks!” Colin ordered. “Message that intel to Starfleet!”

“I suggest you put this on, Captain”, after a polite cough Elizabeth passed him a fresh shirt; stilled her beating heart at his close physical presence. “*IKS ‘Grohl’* also going to battle alert...”

“*This is Sub-Commander Achille of the ‘Yitmap’*”, a smiling Romulan visage appeared on the viewscreen. “*Klingon and Federation vessels. Your deception has gone on long enough. You will surrender immediately*”.

“Romulans powering weapons!”

“You don’t say...” Colin mused.

“*Today is a good day to die, Romulan p’taks!*” Captain Klaang too now spoke. “*We are already inside your planetary defences. And you have but three Warbirds*”.

“*Let’s not be hasty about this dying thing*”, Dr Shipman too remarked.

“*K’Pla! Darcy*”, Klaang retorted his glee at the prospect of battle. “*As before with Wentworth we fight side by side to a glorious death - and to Sto-vor-kor!*”

oOo

Captain's log, supplemental. Above us the Romulus defence grid. If we attempt to warp away we will be destroyed. Below us – Romulus. Coming in to attack three angry Warbirds. At least we on the 'Hood' have Captain Klaang and the IKS 'Grohl' as staunch allies. If he is sanguine about a glorious death in battle... that is not the Federation way. Yet at least the Federation Council and the Klingon High Command know about the Romulans attempt to ferment war between us...

oOo

"Fresh message coming in from the planet Sir!" Lieutenant Chang suddenly galvanised as Karen Thrice returned to take her post on the bridge. "Sir!" Kim-Jong amazed. "It's *Captain Wentworth!*"

"Put him on – pipe through to Captain Klaang too!" Colin ordered.

"Darcy! Klaang! You pair of targ-snogging p'taks!" on screen amid flames a desperate looking Freddie Wentworth appeared, smiling in his resignation to his end amidst the sound of disrupter fire. *"Not sure how long we got – Anne's not Sector 31 trained. She's holding them off. Not much of a honeymoon, right?"*

"We were in the Brownies together, Captain", Elizabeth raised an eyebrow all was not, peradventure, *lost*.

"I've tricked them – got access to their computer", Wentworth continued. *"Fight as long as you can. I'll try and get the defence grid down for you! Wentworth over and out – for good!"*

"K'pla! Die well Wentworth – with your woman by your side!" Klaang cheered on the intercom. *"Tonight you feast in Sto-vor-kor!"*

"Their catering appears to be good there", Ensign Gondar was ironic.

"Romulans firing Captain!" 'K' reported.

They had indeed. Three plasma torpedoes burst forth towards the 'Hood' – but out of range dissipated. A warning shot? *"This is Sub-Commander Achille"*, the Romulan's visage came on screen. *"You will return Commander Sunak and submit to processing for repatriation"*.

Even though out of range... the response from the happenstance allies was a volley for fire from the 'Grohl'.

"We need to break up that enemy formation", Colin mused allowed. "Three to two are not good odds... Lieutenant Thrice! Take us around the limb of the planet, so they'll lose lock".

“Aye Sir”, ‘K’ agreed. “Captain -why – don’t we return Sunak to them - but in a shuttle rigged to explode?”

“And if we send it one way around Romulus, and go the other, that would split their force?” Elizabeth suggested to modify.

“Make it so!” Colin ordered. “Healer K’Tar”, he punched the intercom. “I need our Romulan hostage anaesthetised”.

“Easily done!” down in Sick Bay the Klingon accepted the mission – strode to the Brig and - muttering Klingon uncouths head-butted the unfortunate Sunak. “Not wasting drugs on him”, she justified to the horrified Federation guards...

“K’pla!” back on the ‘Hoods’s’ bridge Captain Klaang approved the shuttle plan over the intercom, the expendable ship heading for a fiery re-entry to Romulus, with the unconscious Commander Sunak inside. A working scam? As the ‘Hood’ and ‘Grohl’ doubled-back around Romulus the *IRS ‘Praetor’s Flail’* duly obliged, to attempt a rescue of the ‘valuable’ Commander Sunak. Indeed, as they dropped shields to transport back the skipper of the ‘Yitmap’... the rigged shuttle exploded. With no shields up the anti-matter bomb caused significant damage; if a rescue of Sunak effected the ‘Praetors’ Flail’ was removed from the battle...

“Two against two!” on the bridge of the ‘Grohl’ Captain Klaang exclaimed. “Let us hope Wentworth and his female get that planetary grid down – or we are deader than Debbie Gibson’s career”, he used a human homily for the benefit of Dr Shipman. “Close the range!” he ordered his helm with a toothy grin. “Today we live for the Empire – or feast in Sto-vor-kor!”

Indeed the advance to battle continued. Using their superior speed the allies closed the range - and exchanged fire with the Romulans – concentrating where possible on the ‘Hawk’s Talon’; by nature of doctrine and weaponry this ship firing on the ‘Grohl’, the ‘Yitmap’ on the ‘Hood’, out of arc for it’s photon torpedoes the latter defiantly loosing these at the ‘Yitmap’...

“Damage report!” Colin demanded.

“We appear, Captain, to have crippled the ‘Hawks’ Talon’”, Elizabeth calmly answered.

“Hit on our drive”, Engineer Sikara intercommed up. “We can make no more than these Rommies now!”

“Get it fixed, Huraki”, Darcy calmly ordered. “Now! I need maximum warp!”

“Sub-Commander!” aboard the *‘Yitmap’* the Centurion reported to Achille. “*‘Hawk’s Talon’* and *‘Praetor’s Flail’* report conducted repairs. The latter has retrieved Commander Sunak. He is beaten, but will live”.

“Then he will answer for his failings”, her mind on taking his ship – and he demoted to Sub-Commander - she considered her next move. “Cloak! Now!”

“Sub-Commander?”

“We have damaged the Federation vessel. We can afford a waiting game whilst temporally outnumbered. Reinforcements are on their way. These *ryakna* will not escape our wrath...”

Meanwhile, back on Romulus... “You’re a better shot that I remembered, my love”, Freddie Wentworth complimented true-love Anne Elliott on her markswomanship.

“We’ll talk about this later”, she deadpanned as another Romulan braved the corridor to her death. “You just get those defences down – or we’ll never escape from here!”

Loving her as he did Freddie hadn’t the heart to tell her escape would be impossible...

“Message from the planet”, Commander Gowran reported.

“On screen!” Klaang ordered.

“*This is Praetor Sibelius*”, a distinguished looking Romulan appeared.

“*Surrender and we will process and repatriate you*”.

“Today is a good day to die!” Klaang knew stalling tactics when he heard them. “*Dujllj yllo!*” he suggested the Romulan official place his suggestion inside his bottom.

“*‘Hood’* reports it’s drive repaired!” Second Docket gleed...

“*The Rommies PD grid is down!*” on the bridge of the *‘Hood’* Wentworth reported from the planet below. “*Get out now Colin! While you can! They’re trying to lock me out!*”

“Engage drive Miss Thrice! Get us out of here!” Darcy ordered – knew no words could comfort his old friend at his end. “Signal the *‘Grohl’* to follow!”

With all speed the allied ships sought to escape Romulus – heading past Remus shot up the *‘Hawk’s Talon’* some more, for good measure, leaving it leaking plasma like a Riesen courtesan on a Saturday night out in Poole Quay – then - as the *‘Grohl’* too fired - it began to break up...

“Freddie!” down on the planet Anne reported. “I can’t hold them off much longer!”

“Forgive me my love – but the Romulans are uber cruel to their prisoners”, taking his phaser Freddie shot his love to end her misery – then turned the weapon upon himself – dead together - like Romeo and Juliet in the movie with Leonardo da Vinci and Kate Winslet where the ship sinks-up in space the ‘Hood’ and the ‘Grohl’ warping past the reactivated Romulan/Reman defence grid in the nick of time...

oOo

Captain’s log, stardate 38.01.12. We have arrived at Starbase 12 for repairs and r & r. I consider our mission a success. We have bonded with the Klingons, which will lead I hope to better ties in the future, and have thwarted the Romulan attempt to start a war between us. Two Warbirds crippled and one destroyed sends a clear message. My dear friend – the ‘Hood’s’ former Captain Freddie Wentworth is dead. But then, legally, he already was. As for Anne Elliott, no doubt Section 31 will concoct some story for her family. Commander Bennett has suggested they report her run-off to join a classical rock band, as a way of further annoying Lady Russell...

“...and in recognition of action beyond the call of duty, I hereby award Lieutenant Commander Thrice the Federation Cluster!” Admiral Sir Peter Lowe smiled as – per Starfleet protocol - his (female) aide pinned the medal on ‘K’s’ not inconsiderable chest.

Everyone applauded. “I wonder what’s happened to Commander Sunak?” Elizabeth wondered.

“The mines of Remus I should imagine”, Colin grinned as the reception continued - noticed Commander Gowran and Ensign Gondar chat good-naturedly; unusual for Klingon and Andorian.

“This ‘Jack Daniels’ of yours is almost as good as Blood Wine!” slapping Darcy on the back Klaang swilled from his pint as Dr Shipman and Healer K’Tar compared notes, gestured at Elizabeth, who raised a quizzical eyebrow; trusted to their Hippocratic oaths.

“It seems, Captain, we have a mutual enemy”, the Admiral came over to schmooze Klaang.

“We have a trade agreement with the Romulans – but trust no one”, he carefully responded. “But you Feds acted with honour in this affair”, he took a further swig. “Wentworth and his female are now in Sot-vor-kor – and will be snogging much, no?” he grinned an intoxicated jest at Elizabeth’s maidenly sense of sensibility.

“I believe they will fit some in between the feasting and drinking”, she fought to maintain her Vulcan calm – wondered how quickly she could make a polite exit from the party.

Before the serious boasting and drinking commenced...

‘Prime Directive’

Duty Officer’s log, stardate 38.02.14. The ‘Hood’ remains at Starbase 12 undergoing repairs...

Taking the ‘night watch’ was one way for Lieutenant Thrice to increase her ‘duty hours’, as she moved to full commander grade. Dull, tedious, like a maths exam, it nevertheless had to be done. Tonight looked to be the same monotony when the relief coms officer spoke...

“Urgent message from Starbase Lieutenant!”

“Patch it through”, ‘K’ embraced rare excitement.

“*Blistering barnacles Darcy!*” it was a grumpy Admiral Lowe, employing a habitual colourful metaphor. “*What do you mean by sending a shuttle to the fourth planet?*”

“Captain Darcy isn’t here Sir”, ‘K’ knew Starbase 12 was in orbit around Trantos III; that the Prime Directive applied to Trantos IV, a planet with a roughly analogous medieval humanoid civilisation.

“*Oh... It’s you*”, the monocular Admiral looked again. “*The nice girl who thwarted the Romulans. Is Darcy drunk? Get him here*”.

“We’ll find out what’s happened and get back to your Admiral”, ‘K’ decided. “Track and trace...” she ordered the bridge crew.

“*Blistering barnacles!*” the Admiral exclaimed. “*Just stop that blasted shuttle, Thrice!*”

Karen quickly established that neither Captain Darcy nor Commander Bennett were on the ship – leaving her in command. Ouch!

“Maybe they’ve gone on some kind of secret mission?” ‘K’ sounded out the wisdom of Dr Shipman.

“There are good medical reasons why Bennett may not be feeling herself”, without breaking her Hippocratic oath Emma advised – forcing ‘K’ to raise a quizzical eyebrow as she prepared to report back to Admiral Lowe...

Colin knew he was dreaming. Yet knew he couldn't wake up. It was much like the sensation from his youth where he and his pals had taken obaltrisiliconate for 'recreational purposes'. He was at a wild Vulcan party. All the Vulcans were freely indulging in witty word play – puns and all – and were drinking alcohol and... telling jokes... If humour was a difficult concept for them to grasp... try as he might he couldn't wake up...

It was clear the '*Hood's*' logs had been tampered with. With the ship in dock a pursuit shuttle was quickly prepared...

"Blistering barnacles!" Admiral Sir Peter Lowe was insulted. "You can't tell me I'm *not* coming along, Lieutenant! Do you *know* how *boring* it is running a Starbase. First adventure I've had in years", he insisted. "Look – Lady Lowe has even made me some sandwiches! *And* put a kit-kat bar in"

"You can't take those down to the planet", Dr Shipman advised. "Chocolate would be cultural contamination".

"Let's get going", leaving Lieutenant Sikara to oversee repairs 'K' decided to pilot herself. The five crew were herself, Dr Shipman, the venerable Admiral Lowe, Ensign Gondar, and 'Redshirt' Ensign Dwight of Security, leaving two spaces for Darcy and Bennett upon return...

Colin Darcy's nightmare continued. He was now staggering through a icy desert, a huge hamster on his back, Klingon opera playing through headphones...

"Their shuttle appears to be working correctly", Gondar reported as they closed upon the fugitives. "premeditated. The logs were blanked".

"Life signs one human, one Vulcan", Dr Shipman confirmed its crew manifest.

"Hail them!" the Admiral ordered. "Blistering barnacles Darcy! Turn round now! You break the Prime Directive and you'll never sit in the centre seat again!"

The answer was static. "I did warn you there may be a good medical reason why Commander Bennett is doing this", Emma contributed.

They all looked at her – could *guess* what that might *be*. "Blistering barnacles! Ruddy women!" the grumpy Admiral expressed 20th century views...

Driven insane – seeing the other shuttle closing on her – Elizabeth Bennett ignored their hails. Hoping to lose them she swung around the fourth planet's moon, guessed they would wait for her to emerge. Instead, she doubled back –

in so doing gained a short lead as she headed for the planet, prepared her next move...

“*They’ve doubled back!*” the ‘*Hood*’ reported to the pursuit shuttle as it emerged from behind Trantos IV’s moon.

“I could have told you they’d do that”, Admiral Lowe grumped as ‘K’ set off again in renewed pursuit. “Standard tactic...”

‘Wham!’ an ion mine suddenly exploded – taking down the shuttle’s systems. “Blistering barnacles! Fix it – quickly!” Admiral Lowe exploded into a whole series of colourful metaphors that questioned the EPS power conduits’ parentage.

“It’ll take a while to reboot”, Gondar knew – knew too nothing could now stop his rogue skipper and First Officer reaching the planet...

O

The dreams continued for Colin Darcy. He was now wearing a costume of animal skin and simple woven cloth. He was woosy, *drugged*...

And then he realised he was no longer *dreaming*. His vision blurred he was in some kind of religious building... He was struggling awake... when a Vulcan nerve-pinch sent him again unconscious...

The shuttle systems back up, the rogue shuttle was traced to the planet, where it had been deliberately sunk into a lake - presumably to avoid cultural contamination.

“Premeditated. Park and hide”, ‘K’ joked.

“Blistering barnacles!” the Admiral exclaimed. “We have to go after them. Gondar! Take the shuttle back up. The indigs are humanoid – and you’re an Andorian. You’ll stick out like a gack pie at a Romulan wedding!”

“Aye Sir!” the Ensign agreed.

“Vulcan life signs that way”, Emma scanned. “We’ll need disguises?”

“We’ll requestion clothes from someone’s washing line”, ‘K’ suggested. “We did it as kids, all the time back home in Basingstoke...”

Colin saw he was now in an ancient tavern room as he came too. “Remember!” a voice he knew softly spoke. “Your thoughts to my thoughts, Captain”, powerful fingers gripped his forehead. “Our minds are merging, Captain...”

O

“Night falls quickly here”, ‘K’ observed as the landing party homed in upon the fugitives; approached some town walls.

“Halt! Who goes there! Friend or foe!” two red liveried guards challenged.

“Pretend to be an idiot”, Dr Shipman enjoyed advising a whisper at Admiral Lowe.

“We’re taking this confused elder back to his home”, ‘K’ advised.

“Strange accent?” the guard was suspicious. “You’re not from round here, are you?”

“We’re from the east – over the sea”, ‘K’ bluffed.

At this the second guard whistled – and the party were quickly taken prisoner – all their equipment confiscated – phasers, tricorders and communicators, no way now were they able to contact Gondar in the shuttle...

oOo

Dawn. Colin Darcy awoke. He felt like he’d been in a fight with a Borillian targegrade. Next to him was Commander Bennett, likewise clad in indig costume. “You must arrest me, Captain”, she insisted. “I will need to be disciplined. I have abducted and assaulted you”, she confessed. “It was my *Pon Farr*. The balance of my mind was disturbed”.

“What?” Colin’s body indeed felt it all rung true.

“I even arranged an indig marriage ceremony before the... er... *consummation*”.

“Golly!” Colin didn’t know what to say to *that*.

“The fever has now gone”, Elizabeth explained; felt overcome with guilt...

In the town jail the landing party were roused from slumber with some food; bland cereal in some kind of blue milk.

“Lord Tywin wants a word with you”, an evil looking red-liveried guard advised.

“Don’t think much of room service”, ‘K’ sighed.

“Do you *know* who I am?” Admiral Lowe took charge to bluff. “I am the Lord High Admiral of Gathnar! Take me to your leader! And *return* our devices!”

“Like I said”, the guard was contemptuous. “Our lord wants to see you...”

“We’re just traders”, Emma tried a different tack. “We’ve got dragons”.

By chance it was precisely the *wrong thing* to say. The guard looked pale.

Wondering how to deal with his enforced *situation*... Colin led Elizabeth down to breakfast in the tavern. “I’ve paid in currency”, she explained just how devious she’d been during her *fever*.

‘Elf, elf...’ seeing Elizabeth’s pointed ears the tavern whispered.

Maybe it was the residual effects of the obaltrisiliconate... but Colin still felt woosy. Yet still felt responsible for his ‘Number One’. “Yes!” he declared. “My spouse is an elf! What of it?”

The tavern fell silent – seemed amazed he had survived...

O

The landing party were brought before the imposing Lord Tywin, in his castle hall. “My alchemist here knows not what these are”, he pointed at their pile of devices, then at an old man, wearing a gold chain of office. “He can make nothing of them. You claim to be from the East and to have dragons?” the Lord was clearly concerned. “Tell me why I shouldn’t just kill you now?”

“I suggest you let us leave”, Admiral Lowe feared for an inadvertent breaking of the Prime Directive.

“I’m not that foolish”, Tywin reposted. “You are spies of the Dragon Queen?”

“Only we can show you how those things work”, ‘K’ interjected. “They are powerful magic from our land”.

“Elvish sorcery!” the accompanying Alchemist sneered mistrust.

“Not sorcery”, ‘K’ denied. “*Technology* from our land, far, far away...”

A murmur of disquiet went around the court – as a messenger rushed in.

“My Lord! The Dragon Queen and her host cometh!”

Commotion! “Raise the cry!” Tywin galvanised. “Cry havoc! Let slip the dogs of war!”

In the confusion the landing party rushed for their devices – Karen managing to grab and conceal a communicator down her bra before their equipment was reconfiscated, and they were taken back to their cells. Indeed, such was the confusion the party quickly overcame their guards in the corridor and – under cover of a city preparing for war - were able to escape into the countryside...

“Fools! Inbicides!” Lord Tywin raged. “You let them *escape!*” he trusted his alchemist would yet make something of the ‘magic boxes’ the strangers had left behind. “Bring me the elvish woman you mentioned!”

“Blistering barnacles! Well run, chaps!” Admiral Lowe used a cricketing metaphor as the landing party took cover in some bushes. “Thrice! Use that communicator to call in the shuttle”.

But even as the Admiral spoke there was a rustle and burly guards strode in to arrest them. “Then smell funny”, one exclaimed.

“Best take them to the Dragon Queen!” another suggested.

“I’ve got a bad feeling about this...” Emma grumped as they were again led away, prisoners of a different kind...

The tavern was all confusion. “Prime Directive”, Colin murmured to Elizabeth. “We keep out of it. Whatever it is...”

He spoke too soon. Three burly guards entered. “Lord Tywin wants to see you!” they arrested Darcy and Bennett...

“Bring me my dragons!” the Dragon Queen ordered – agreed the strangers did indeed smell ‘funny’. “Put them in chains!”

The party held back their nerves as three creatures about the size of humans approached. Smouldering fire they sniffed the air, and whimpered.

“They agree, my Queen”, an advisor was sycophantic.

“I am Doris Targaryen”, the queen questioned. “Stormborn, Mother of Dragons, She Who Must Be Obeyed, etc etc.... You are Lannister spies?”

“No, Majesty. We are strangers. Travellers from the East”, Admiral Lowe denied. “We are on a peaceful mission and mean you no harm”.

“We seek to rescue our friends held in the Lannister citadel”, ‘K’ added.

“Bring them!” the queen imperiously decreed. “The dragons won’t touch them. They may be useful as hostages...”

“Time for you to work your elvish magic for me!” with a cursory glance Lord Tywin girded his armour on as the captives were brought in.

“You will address your requests to me, not to my wife”, Colin elected to distract by machismo.

“You married an elf?” The Lord amused at this bravado. “You’re a brave man – even if you do smell funny. Very well, if your woman doesn’t use her magic to aid my army you both will die. Bring them!”

O

The armies deployed, like a fantasy medieval host, the Targaryens first. Admiral Lowe recognised this as a tactical error, but said nothing, the Prime Directive sacrosanct; in the distance the Lannister banners flashing red.

The battle began. The Dragon Queen advanced her elite ‘Unsullied’ spears to her centre, supported by archers behind. An error? They were heavily shot via Lannister crossbows; whose ‘knights’ began a flanking move and pikes advancing to ‘pin’ the weakened Unsullied; whose supporting archers were unable to fire into the melee. On the other flank Targaryen halberdiers bravely charged the Lannister knights – caused some damage but were pinned in a

combat they could not win long-term. As her Unsullied were wiped out and her army broke... the Dragon Queen made a desperate charge for Lord Lannister...

“We need to get out of here now”, Admiral Lowe suggested to ‘K’. “We can’t bluff any more”.

“Agreed...” she withdrew her secreted communicator - and signalled to Ensign Gondor. Within minutes his orbiting shuttle swooped in.

“You will free us now or my minions will wreak havoc!” the Admiral demanded of the awe-struck Dragon Queen.

“The battle is lost my Queen!” her advisor suggested. “You must retreat!”

“Yes...” Doris rationalised. “I still have my dragons...”

“You see!” Darcy informed Lord Tywin. “My wife’s magic is strong!”

“I have no need of *you*”, he dismissed. “This is my victory!”

Yet the screeching sound of the shuttle gave him pause for caution. “Release them!” he trusted his Alchemist to unlock the secrets of the trinkets captured earlier...

O

“Well done Gondar!” Darcy declared as he and Elizabeth joined the landing party in the shuttle; Karen piloting it up, up and away and back to space.

“Captain Colin F. Darcy!” Admiral Lowe boomed. “Under Starfleet regulation 97.2 I relieve you of your command, pending court martial. You and Commander Bennett are charged with being absent without leave, violating the Prime Directive, and stealing and trashing Starfleet equipment...”

“Captain Darcy is not to blame”, Elizabeth defended.

“Blistering barnacles woman!” Admiral Lowe was not amused. “Do you *know* how much paperwork you’ve caused! Save it for the court!”

“The Indigs still have some of our devices”, Emma reminded.

“And that shuttle is under the lake...”

“Hopefully they’ll blow themselves up”, the Admiral mused.

And Colin Darcy wondered if he’d ever sit in the ‘centre seat’ again...

'The Trials Of Life'

Duty Officer's log, stardate 38.24.32. The 'Hood' remains at Starbase 12, our repairs complete, departure delayed pending the court martials of Captain Darcy and Commander Bennet for inappropriately appropriating Starfleet property... and violating the prime Directive on Trantos IV...

The shuttle afforded Commander George Wickham a superb view of the three *Constitution* class starships clustered around Starbase 12; the '*Constellation*', the '*Lexington*' and the '*Hood*'. It still burned that he'd missed out on posting to the '*Bismarck*', but when life gives you lemons... you make lemonade. And don't the Klingons say, 'revenge is a dish best served cold'?

He'd been fully briefed. Admiral Lowe would be joined on the tribunal by Commadore Decker and Commodore Wesley. The evidence was damning against Bennet. And Darcy? The only way he'd get off was the blame her too. If that undermined his command, so much the better...

This was his chance to further his career...

"Beautiful, aren't they?" a civilian Vulcan maiden on the shuttle came across to join George at the viewing port. "My sister's First Officer on the '*Hood*'. I'm Lydia Bennet", she grinned.

"You're smiling", the Orion George was decidedly perplexed.

"I'm half human", she winked. "That's how I identify".

"I see", George sensed a honeytrap. "Commander George Wickham. I'd best inform you, Miss Bennet, that I'm the prosecutor in your sister's case".

"That won't last forever", she shrugged. "Look, I know it's crazy, but here's my number, call me, maybe? When this is all over, of course".

"You're very forward, Miss Bennet?" George was startled.

"My mother's people have a saying, '*milt no vatcj*'. 'The needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few'. Best I don't drop Big Sis in it any more, right?"

O

"Blistering barnacles Darcy!" Admiral Lowe was incandescent with rage. "A minor tiff from your academy days as a midshipman does *not* preclude who Starfleet chose to assign!"

"Commander Wickham was no gentleman to my sister, Sir", Colin argued his contempt. "He is no peer of mine. He is a mangle, flat-mouthed footlock!"

“Starfleet as *decided* Darcy!” Admiral Lowe slapped him down. “Begone Sir! Lest you further prejudice your case by your overweening pride!”

oOo

“The charges are”, Admiral Lowe read in front of the two Commodores, “being absent without leave, violating the Prime Directive, and stealing and trashing Starfleet equipment... I’d add desertion’ but the ‘Hood’ was technically in dock. Commander Wickham, you may begin the case for the prosecution”.

“Thank you, Admiral”, George grinned revenge was a dish best served cold. And – talking of Klingons... “I call as my first witness – via subspace link – Healer K’tar of the *IKS ‘Grohl’*”.

The video link began. “Healer K’tar”, George began, “I understand you reported your medical concerns to Dr Shipman before leaving the ‘Hood’”.

“*I did*”, the Klingon growled. “*I explained to Healer Shipman she was about to engage her Pon Farr. I told her – Bennet – that we Klingon females take the mates we desire – that her fire could only be quenched by knowledge of Captain Darcy*”.

The court winced at such explicitness. “Thank you Healer”, George cut the link. “I wish now to call Dr Emma Shipman!”

Emma duly took the stand and was sworn in. “Did you follow-up Healer K’tar’s report?” he questioned.

“Well”, Emma defended, “I didn’t have time”.

“Did you not inform Captain Darcy of Commander Bennet’s.... proclivities?” he continued.

“Hey!” Emma exclaimed. “Don’t we *all* have them? Don’t we all watch holos of Gary Barlow in his undies?”

“And there you have it!” Wickham pounced. “A ship in a shambles! A new command crew for *USS ‘Hood’* is clearly needed!”

“You’re twisting the facts!” ‘K’ bravely insisted.

“There are also mitigating circumstances!” Colin pleaded. “We’d just averted another Romulan war – *and* made friends with the Klingons!”

“Past service record is no excuse!” George pounced. “I next call to the witness stand Commander Elizabeth Bennet!”

Elizabeth duly took the stand. “Commander Bennet”, Wickham began. “can you tell us your version of events?”

“Of course”, despite the presence in the gallery of her naughty little sister she remained Vulcan cool. “The balance pf my mind was disturbed by *Pon Farr*. Captain Darcy had no active part in this. It was I who drugged and abducted

him via a stolen shuttle. It was I who took him – in my madness – to the planet – incapacitated him – and arranged a forced marriage and the subsequent exercise of my conjugal rights. In short, Commander, Admiral, Commodores, Captain Darcy is innocent. You must try me and me alone”.

At this assertion Wickham smiled. “Your loyalty to your captain is admirable, Commander. But as captain of the ‘*Hood*’ he is ultimately responsible for your actions”, he turned to the tribunal. “Is he not?”

“Blistering barnacles yes!” Admiral Lowe exclaimed.

“But there are mitigating circumstances”, Commodore Wesley suggested.

“He was drugged up to the eyeballs”, Matt Decker too reminded. “Not his self at all”.

“In my defence”, defending his First Officer, Colin suggested, “Commander Bennet made no advances to me before her *Pon Farr*. Moreover, she carefully hid the shuttle, so is not guilty of contaminating the planet and violating the Prime Directive... merely arranged... a honeymoon”.

“A defence or sorts”, Admiral Lowe agreed. “Probably true”.

“As they are the only witnesses, it cannot be proved”, Bob Wesley too was sanguine.

“I therefore call to the stand, Lieutenant Commander Thrice”, sensing possible victory on that charge Colin refused to be thwarted just yet.

“Lieutenant”, he began as ‘K’ took the stand, “concerning the loss of equipment that could have violated the Prime Directive... is it not true this resulted from your follow-up party?”

“Blistering barnacles! Are you suggesting I was negligent, Darcy?” Admiral Lowe boomed.

“No Sir”, he smiled.

“He’s got you there, Admiral”, Matt Decker suggested.

“We were captured by the Indigs”, ‘K’ clarified. “We were all culpable”.

“Not Captain Darcy and Commander Bennet?” Wickham now pressed.

“No Sir”, ‘K’ stared him down.

“Blistering barnacles!” Admiral Lowe ruled. “Very well, they didn’t violate the Prime Directive. But a shuttle was still stolen and ruined and they went AWOL!”

“Captain Darcy was drugged, Sirs”, Karen persisted. “He was not himself – nor was Commander Bennet – being under the influence of her *Pon Farr*. Herself. Either”.

Dr Shipman next found herself called to the stand. “And if *Pon Farr* is not resolved?” Commander Darcy pressed.

“Madness can result”, Emma was (slightly) over-dramatic. “The... happy couple are thereafter telepathically bonded. I would argue that not only is no one to blame... but you could argue Captain Darcy saved Commander Bennet’s life by going along with it”.

Going too well? “Yet you chose – after being informed of Commander Bennet’s Pon Farr by Healer K’Tar – *not* to action it?” he played the fateful log of the ‘Hood’s’ victory party.

“I didn’t recall it”, Emma B/Sd. “To be honest I was drunk to fit in with my Klingon hosts – so I was technically unwell at the time. *And* off-duty”.

“Blistering barnacles!” Admiral Lowe exclaimed. “Off duty! A Starfleet officer is on duty 24 hours a day!”

“I was confused”, Emma was laconic. “But I accept the reprimand. The ‘Hood’ was in dock for repairs. Many of the crew were on leave...”

O

The Tribunal retired to consider their verdicts. “It is our decision”, Admiral Lowe began as Colin and Elizabeth held their breath, “that Commander Bennet is guilty as charged. Captain Darcy is acquitted – he was merely foolish in allowing himself to be drugged by his first officer”.

“I’ll drink to that”, Emma whispered to herself.

“I’m not sure I follow all this Vulcan hocus pocus”, the Admiral continued, “but as punishment Commander Bennet is demoted in rank to Lieutenant Commander”.

“Commander Wickham”, Commodore Wesley now spoke. “You are hereby appointed as the ‘Hood’s’ new First Officer”.

“To oversee the completion of repairs”, Commodore Decker added.

“Court dismissed!” Admiral Lowe ordered.

“Reporting for duty, *Captain...*” Commander Wickham strode over to sneer.

“Carry on, *Commander*”, it was all Colin could do not to hit him as he thought of his poor, dishonoured, sister, back on Earth...

‘Gorn With The Wind’

First Officer’s log, stardate 38.36.07. Under my auspices the ‘Hood’ remains at Starbase 12, our repairs complete. It is my joy to see Colin Darcy suffer me as his First Officer, and though he and Lieutenant Bennet remain an ‘item’

following their alien wedding... I must yet be cautious. Shame about his sister, but it had to be done. His referring to me as 'Acting First Officer' is also a great source of amusement...

'Call her, maybe?'

"Hi!" George Wickham ignited his communicator. "I've been promoted First Officer of the '*Hood*'", he spoke with bravado. "I'll be running it in days. Come over and visit?"

"*I accept your invitation*", Lydia Bennet grinned.

"*Commander Wickham to the Briefing Room*", the intercom sounded.

"Gotta go", George leered at his communicator. "Catch you in ten".

Commander Wickham stepped into the briefing room. "I require you to report to Lieutenant Bennet to explore the extent of your duties, *Acting First Officer*", Colin Darcy smiled evilly.

"If I may speak freely, *Sir*", George glared back with equal sarcasm, "I intend to make my stamp on this ship. I won't mention your sister if you don't, *Sir*".

"You cad!" Colin retorted – let his anger vent. "Undermine me and I'll have you busted down to Ensign before you can say 'jilted'!"

Meanwhile, down in the transporter room...

"*You!*" Elizabeth exclaimed her shock in a most un-Vulcan way.

"Is this your new job, Sis?" as soon as she'd finished materialising Lydia preened back at her. "Pushing sliders? Guess it comes with demotion?"

"You've never *served*", Elizabeth retorted. "You only turn up when something goes wrong",

The doors opened with their habitual 'whoosh'. "Ah! My charming escort!" Lydia revelled her triumph over Big Sister.

"I'm here to take Lydia on a tour of the ship", George too vaunted his success.

"I believe the airlocks are secure", was the best response Elizabeth could manage under the trying circumstances.

O

"All hands, this is the Captain!" Colin ordered as soon as the '*Hood*' cleared Starbase 12. "We have new sealed orders, to be played now, so listen in", he glanced... considered it strange not to see Elizabeth at the science station – Wickham there instead – his presence a very mockery of a Starfleet uniform – poor Georgiana humiliated, back on Earth...

The viewscreen fired up. “*Top secret*”, Admiral Lowe appeared. “*You are to travel to these coordinates and rendezvous with a Gornish ship. You are then to conduct their ambassador to Earth for talks. Don’t cock it up!*”

Just then the turbolift doors opened – and in came Lieutenant Bennet – dragging a female with her. “We have a stowaway, Captain”, Elizabeth retained her Vulcan cool. “My naughty little sister”.

“Hi George”, Lydia pouted. “Are you pleased to see me – or is that a phaser in your pocket?”

“Lieutenant Bennet!” Colin Darcy fought to keep his cool. “Ensure our unwanted guest is confined to her quarters. Commander Wickham”, he added a wicked afterthought. “I’m making you responsible for ensuring she stays there...”

O

As the ‘*Hood*’ hurtled through space to its rendezvous... Chief Engineer Sikara was pleased. He was now a black-belt Origamii - much stronger than before in mind and body. He could add this ability to his skills in Llan-Bach; he a Druid Master of the arcane Welsh art of self-defence where, ‘to try is to do’...

O

Commander Wickham entered his quarters – and was instantly taken aback.

“You’re not very good at keeping me *confined*, are you?” Lydia Bennet smiled from underneath his bedclothes. “I got bored in my quarters, so broke out. Then, like Goldilocks, I got all sleepy”.

“Indeed”, George noted her ship-issued overalls lay on his cabin floor.

“They say Orion women drive men *mad*. It’s the pheromones. Maybe it’s also true of Orion *men*, like you?” she flirtatiously posited.

“Maybe one day you’ll find out, Miss Bennet”, picking up her overalls George passed them to her. “But now, I must return you to your quarters”.

“Spoilt sport”, realising he wasn’t to be easily seduced Lydia resigned herself to her fate and climbed out of his bed to redress.

“If your break out again I shall be forced to call a security alert”, George noted she sported strangely designed underwear; certainly not ‘*Primark*’ standard...

O

“...I though you should know, in private”, in the Briefing Room George fully disclosed the facts of the matter to a seething Captain Darcy. “It’s all those damn pheromones”.

“If I had my way she’d be on a shuttle back to Starbase...” Darcy was pensive.

“Permission to speak freely, Sir”, Wickham was candid.

“Granted”, Darcy looked at him like he was a Sylvaniaian portak.

“What did – or *did not* – happen between your sister and I is water under the bridge, Sir. I shall endeavour my utmost to earn your trust”.

“I mistrust you Wickham”, Colin’s family pride and prejudice were clear.

“You are, to my mind, duplicitous... Lieutenant Commander Bennet will continue as Science Officer. You will act as my Number One, my exec”.

“Sir”, George was punctilious...

O

The alien vessel was a ‘*Creotosaurus*’ class battledestroyer, the ‘*Ferocious*’.

“Wickham”, Colin ordered. “Attend to our guest in the Transporter Room”.

“With respect, Sir”, George replied, “I believe the highest-ranking officer should be there, as this is a diplomatic mission”.

Darcy thought carefully – and controlled his fury. “I take your point, exec”, he conceded the greater good. “Very well, you have the con. Lieutenant Gondar, you’re with me. Let’s demonstrate the Federation’s diversity. Lieutenant Thrice, please ensure Commander Wickham receives any and all such... *support* as he may need”, he then undermined his enforced deputy.

“Sir”, if accepting her watching brief Karen yet remained neutral.

“Stand by...” as Darcy left the bridge... a grinning George Wickham made himself comfortable in his centre seat...

As Elizabeth worked the controls two figures materialised – a Gorn and a human.

“We are betrayed! Romulans!” the Gorn exclaimed.

“No!” the human alarmed. “This female is a *Vulcan*. Part of the Federation!”

“Welcome Ambassador”, Colin purred his politest. “I am Captain Darcy, master and Commander of this vessel”.

“I am Schick”, the Gorn was cool.

“Federation Envoy McKinnon”, the human identified himself. “Shall we to the briefing Room?”

As he spoke the doors swooshed open – and in stepped Lydia Bennet with a limp security escort. “Hi Sis”, she acknowledged Elizabeth. “I was just taking my walk. I’m allowed *exercise*. Hi! I’ve never seen a Gorn before?” she sashayed

over to undiplomatically engage Ambassador Schick. "Aren't you *big!* I'm Lydia Bennet. I'm a civilian. I don't belong to Starfleet. Or flow their rules..."

"Security!" Darcy found this intolerable. "In future please confine my sister-in-law to the lower decks. Apologies for the intrusion, Ambassador", as Lydia and her escort departed he tried to make light.

"Every clutch of eggs has a runt", Schick's eyes narrowed on the Vulcan female, clearly this Captain Darcy's 'mate'.

'Talk to her', Colin silently mouthed at Elizabeth...

"This mission is top secret", safely in the Briefing Room Envoy McKinnon opened. "After the unfortunate *incident* on Cestus III and the intervention of the Metrons... the Gorns are seeking an alliance against the Romulans".

"They raid our colonies", Schick was blunt. "Attack our shipping. Use their cloaking device thingy so to do".

"I am to take you to Sector 001 - Earth - to talk with our Federation President", Colin clarified Admiral Lowe's orders.

"You have had recent success against them", Schick nodded. "Escaped their homeworld. Congratulations".

"Yes", Colin couldn't help but think of poor Freddie Wentworth's untimely death.

"Security?" McKinnon questioned. "You seem to have civilians running around, willy nilly?"

"All in hand, Envoy", Colin confirmed. "Does the Ambassador have any special... dietary requirements?"

"Gornish pasties", the Envoy handed over a replicator datachip.

"Gornish *style* pasties", Schick added. "By inter-galactic treaty they must be made on Gornar to be called 'Gornish pasties'".

"Of course", Colin conceded...

'*Oh weeh ha!*' sounded the intercom.

"Darcy here?" Colin answered.

"*Captain*", George was polite, "*we have detected a sensor shadow at extreme range*".

"On my way! Gentles..." Colin made his excuses and left for the bridge...

"...and I therefore suggest, Captain", George was smug, "a polaron burst to detect the shadow's warp signature – if any".

"Science Officer?" doubting Wickham, Colin checked with Elizabeth.

"It is a most viable plan", she agreed.

"Then make it so", Darcy ordered. "And next time, Wickham, use your initiative rather than interrupt a diplomatic meeting".

“Such illogic...” ‘K’ moved to whisper to Elizabeth as they prepared the burst. “What would Admiral Lowe say?”

“I should imagine, ‘Blistering barnacles!’” she whispered back an habitual raised eyebrow.

“Odds on it’s a Gornish ship checking up on us”, Karen whispered. “If I’m right we do shore leave together at ‘*Club Obsidian*’”.

“I accept your wager”, Elizabeth agreed. “But I refuse to contra-speculate due to the paucity of data... Polaron burst ready Captain”, she then more audibly reported. “We have modulated to avoid detecting the ‘*Hood’s*’ own warp signature”.

“Engage!” Colin ordered.

Within seconds the result was in. “No warp signature Captain, but our shadow is still with us”.

“Run a diagnostic and scan again”, Wickham ordered. Darcy looked at him quizzically. “You said to use my initiative, Sir”, he *didn’t* apologise.

Colin grunted his displeasure as the report came in. “Still no warp signature, Sir. It *could* be a quantum singularity?”

“Captain!” Karen realised she’d just lost her bet. “That could be a Romulan ship”.

“Orders, Captain?” Wickham was decidedly passive-aggressive.

“Let’s drop something nasty out of the back...” Darcy decided.

“Our unwanted passenger, peradventure?” back at the helm Karen whispered to Gondor.

“Engineer!” Darcy punched the intercom. “Can you make me a mine from a photon torpedo?”

“A *magnetic mine with a gravimetric trigger...*”, down in Engineering Huraki thought aloud. “Yes. Give me half an hour, Sir...”

O

“The Ambassador demands to know what’s going on”, the Envoy explained as Darcy re-entered the Briefing Room.

“We have a shadow. We’re being followed by another ship. Probably cloaked. A *cling-on*. Cling-on? Klingon? Get it?” Colin then had to explain his joke.

“The Gorns have no sense of humour”, McKinnon grumped.

“Bound to be hostile. We’re sending them a gift. Would you care to watch, Ambassador?”

Schick nodded he would. "Launch mine!" Darcy ordered as he activated the view screen. A minute passed. Then another. Then – suddenly – there was a huge implosion of a quantum singularity.

"*Our shadow is gone, Captain*", Wickham triumphantly reported from the bridge.

"You will make good allies", the ambassador approved. "You kill your enemies".

"Lieutenant Chang!" Colin ordered his coms officer. "Broadcast on all frequencies we have just conducted a routine weapons' test".

"*Aye Sir*".

"*Captain*", Wickham interjected. "*We have two more shadows just appeared. Warp signatures*".

"On my way! Gentles", Darcy made his excuses and left...

"I have taken the liberty of informing Starfleet", George vacated the centre seat as Darcy returned to the bridge. "Also, we have launched a probe to find out more about our shadows".

"Any ships nearby?" Colin had to (reluctantly) accept Wickham was performing his duties well.

"The *USS 'Bismarck'*", George recalled the ship to which he'd almost been assigned.

"Hail them. Helm! Drop us out of warp and continue at impulse. Let's see if our shadows to the same".

"*Aye Sir*", 'K' obliged.

"Shadow readings maintaining distance", Elizabeth reported.

"*'Bismarck' here*", the viewscreen erupted with the Nordic beauty of Captain Helga Von Schliecher. "*You have two sensor shadows. We can be with you in ten*".

"Thank you", Colin smiled. "I'd hate to be outnumbered..."

"...like I've done for twenty years I'm simply going to ignore you, Big Sister", Lydia Bennet verbally cocked a snoot.

"You must see what a difficult position your behaviour has put me in", Elizabeth challenged.

"Not as difficult - I'd wager - as the position you got Captain Darcy in on Trantos IV. When you... unilaterally ravished him".

"We're I not Vulcan, I'd strike you for that", Elizabeth controlled her emotions.

"You identify as Vulcan, I as human", Lydia flounced. "But we're both half and half, right?"

“We are soon to rendezvous with the ‘*Bismarck*’”, Elizabeth confirmed. “I am to suggest you be transferred there. Untidy as ever, I see, Sister?” she noted clothing and detritus strewn around the quarters.

Alien undergarments? How curious...

O

“¡*Percebes abrasadores!*”¹ exclaimed Lady Julia Lowe.

“What is it my dear!” her husband, Admiral Sir Peter, rushed to her side.

“Blistering barnacles!” he exclaimed at the inert and unconscious Vulcan female that had fallen out of his spouse’s extensive wardrobe on Starbase 12.

“*La chica poee!*” Lady Lowe exclaimed.

“Admiral Lowe here! Medical emergency! To my quarters!” he summoned aid. “Has the ‘*Bismarck*’ left yet?”

“*Yes Admiral*”.

“Order my shuttle and a warp booster sled!” he commanded. “My sixth sense senses dirty work at the crossroads...”

O

Meanwhile, back on Earth... a solitary figure stood alone at the sanatorium window, wearing the same yellowing wedding dress she’d worn on the day she’d been jilted at the altar; the day her mind had been forever ‘warped’...

“Time for your meds”, the nurse suggested.

“Where Lydia?” she demanded.

“Your sister-in-law is away visiting her sister on her starship, don’t you remember?” the kindly nurse tired inside of this repetitious conversation.

“No”, the patient replied. “She is *not*. I sense instead a disturbance in the aether. Lydia is not free to navigate”.

“Of course”, the nurse humoured.

“My fiancé is cutting it really fine”, her patient smiled and looked at her watch. “Our guests must be getting nervous”.

“They’re fine”, the nurse mollified as she administered the jab...

O

¹ ‘Blistering barnacles!’ – *Ed.*

“Captain!” back on the bridge of the ‘Hood’ Ensign Gondor reported. “These blips are moving away for the Velop system!”

“There is a federation colony there”, returning to her science station Elizabeth reported.

What to do? To follow or not to follow. “Lieutenant Thrice!” Colin Darcy suddenly galvanised. “Pursuit course! Wickham, request the Gornish ambassador come to the bridge...”

O

The medical facility on Starbase 12. “...I was walking the corridor when someone hit me from behind”, the half-human, half-Vulcan girl exclaimed. “Am... I keeping you from anything?”

“Not at all”, the kindly Lady Lowe replied in standard. “My husband, the Admiral, he has gone to save the day. Just like at Alpha IV”.

“Alpha IV?” the patient checked.

“It was 40 years ago. We was stormed to be liberated by Starfleet”, she reminisced. “I was but a young maiden then, fresh out from Santander. The Admiral – he was then a young Lieutenant. I was being accosted by Orions. But he rescued me”. She beamed. “We fell in love...”

“Golly!” Lydia Bennet exclaimed it was just like a holonovel...

O

“The delay to progressing to Earth annoys, Captain Darcy”, Ambassador Schick protested as Envoy McKinnon shrugged. “Nevertheless, your requirement to protect you citizens is commendable in potential allies”.

“Thank you, Ambassador”, Colin charmed. “If you’d like to go with Ensign Singh, she’ll show you our main phaser banks. I hope we won’t need them...”

Was the ambassador gone? “We’ve lost contact with the blips, Captain”, Karen duly reported.

“Another polaron burst?” Wickham suggested.

“This is your fault Wentworth!” Colin retorted.

The bridge crew all looked at him. “I mean, ‘Wickham’”, Colin corrected. Was he losing it? *Now - of all times?*

“Perhaps some rest, Captain?” George Wickham was ice-cold in his sarcasm.

“Lieutenant Chang!” Darcy ignored him. “Contact our colony on Velop IV. Standard hazard warning. Warp speed. Thrice - get us there”.

“‘Bismarck’ reports delayed in waiting for Admiral Lowe, Sir”, Kim-Jong reported and obeyed as the ‘Hood’s’ warp engines throbbed like Poole Quay

on a Saturday night. "They report our *guest* is probably not who she appears to be – but a Romulan spy".

Colin glared at Elizabeth. "I am Vulcan", she raised an eyebrow. "I have no emotions so merely saw what I expected to see – my naughty little sister".

As she finished - on screen fluttered the face of the colony's leader. "Governor Tarkin here", he reported. "What's the problem Captain Darcy?"

"Hopefully none", Colin felt the man's name rang a bell somewhere – something long ago and far, far away... "We have two unidentified blips heading your way. Be alert! Could be cloaked Romulans".

"Ah!" the Governor seemed perplexed. "We've just detected some blips around our class 'K' moon. Mining operation – we're hoping to find dilithium. For warp drives. Often gets confused with deuterium", he was overly explanatory. "Then we'll terraform it".

"Can we dispose of the moon?" Colin wondered aloud.

Again more raised eyebrows on the bridge. "It's very valuable?" the Governor confused.

"Dr Shipman to the bridge", Wickham quietly punched his intercom. Was his captain going mad?

Was *this* his chance for command?

The '*Bismarck*' warped in alongside the '*Hood*' to head together for Velop IV. "You need a holiday, Colin", on the bridge of the latter Emma Shipman scanned her skipper's biosigns.

"Blistering barnacles!", Admiral Lowe (meanwhile) harangued. "You've lost those blips Darcy! I bet a bottle of scotch those are Romulans!"

This was enough to make Colin insubordinately flip. "How dare you castigate me when I'm on a diplomatic mission! You should be flying a desk you bumbling old buffoon!"

"I'd relieve you if the situation weren't so dire!" Admiral Lowe's eye narrowed on screen. "Make sure you show our Gornish chums what we're made of if it comes to shooting".

"Colin..." Emma cautioned after a nod from both Karen and Elizabeth. "You're unwell. Let Wickham take command. Come to Sick Bay".

"Contact with blips re-established!" Ensign Gondar interrupted to report. "We're ordered to go starboard of the gas giant. Admiral Lowe has taken tactical control!"

"'*Bismarck*' moving to port of the planet", Elizabeth reported. "A classic pincer movement".

"Fire phasers!" Colin ordered.

“We’re out of range?”

“Warning shot”, he growled. “Chang! Hailing frequency. Order them to decloak!”

“Aye Sir”, Karen reluctantly complied as Ambassador Schick returned to the bridge. She expected protest and outrage from Admiral Lowe on the ‘*Bismarck*’... but there was none.

“Why you shoot if you can’t see?” the Ambassador questioned.

“Quantum singularities...” Darcy pointed to his read out. “Romulans...”

He was indeed correct. Two Romulan ships duly decloaked around the moon - a Bird of Prey Class light cruiser (the ‘*War Raven*’) and a Bird of Prey Dreadnought, the ‘*Praetor’s Wrath*’.

“It’s huge!” Lieutenant Chang remarked of the latter – inadvertently caused Dr Shipman to guffaw.

“*This is Admiral Sir Peter Lowe!*” the intercom crackled from the ‘*Bismarck*’.
“*You are illegally in Federation space - in breach of Neutral Zone treaty! Withdraw immediately!*”

“*This is Commander Contactus*”, a bearded Romulan next appeared on screen. “*We don’t like you. We know you’re conspiring with the Gorns to invade us*”.

“Untrue!” the Ambassador retorted. “I am on a trade mission”.

“*Withdraw or we open fire!*” Admiral Lowe imperatived.

“No!” the Romulan hissed his angry retort...

“Captain Von Schliecher!” on the bridge of the ‘*Bismarck*’ Admiral Lowe delegated. “Signal the ‘*Hood*’! Attack pattern alpha!”

“*Javel*”, she complied – both Federation ships firing photon torpedoes – the Romulan squadron replying in kind with plasma torps. “Intercepted, Admiral!” Helga reported the ‘*Bismarck*’s successful defensive measures – the ‘*Hood*’ not so fortunate as a brace of plasmas from the ‘*Praetor’s Wrath*’ smashed home to inflict considerable damage of the heavy cruiser...

“They’re concentrating their fire on us”, Elizabeth reported the obvious.

“Shields are down – we’re crippled!” Wickham assessed the damage.

“*You!*” Colin Darcy glared at him. “A chance to redeem yourself. Take the ambassador and his party in a shuttle – and our *faux* Bennet sister – and Lieutenant Bennet as escort and interrogator – and get to the ‘*Bismarck*’! We’ll hold them off!”

“Aye Captain!” George moved with alacrity.

“*Cases piling up down here in sickbay*”, Dr Shipman laconically reported up to the bridge.

“Acknowledged! Miss Thrice – take us closer – give Wickham a chance to save the ambassador!”

“Aye Captain...” ‘K’ manoeuvred as the shuttle ejected – simultaneously the ‘*War Raven*’ exploding under the full force of the ‘*Bismarck’s*’ broadside.

Not so the ‘*Praetor’s Wrath*’. As the ‘*Hood*’ fired all it had left at the Romulan dreadnought re-launched its much greater firepower...

“Hang on tight!” Wickham piloted the shuttle on vectored evasives.

“Our minds are merging... Your thoughts to my thoughts. My thoughts to your...” deciding the best way to extract information from her sibling impersonator... Elizabeth prepared to mind-meld; the spy covered by Envoy McKinnon’s phaser...

She was indeed a Romulan, so unable for long to resist the mind-meld. ‘Why are you here? – to destroy your alliance – which faction are you? – I am loyal to the Praetor – what are the weak points on the ‘*Wrath*’? - there are none – what are the access codes for its shields? – I do not know – who authorised your mission? – the Tal Shiar – Is this war?- no just destabilisation - what was your plan? – to seduce Wickham and control him I noted on the shuttle to Starbase your real sister felt attracted to him...’

“Coming up on ‘*Bismarck*!’” Wickham reported.

“You will be safe now”, breaking the meld Elizabeth reassured the Gorn ambassador. “She’s a spy”, she scathed, “almost as wild and wilful as my real sister...”

The salvo hit hard. The *USS ‘Hood’* was dead in space – a titanic wreck.

“Escape pods!” Captain Colin Darcy ordered as the ‘*Bismarck*’ fired. “I’ll remain”, with satisfaction he noted Wickham had got the Ambassador safely away – as death’s icy grip reached for him saw the Romulan dreadnought take damage – cloak and retreat...

“Well done Wickham! You’ve saved the ambassador!” Admiral Lowe congratulated as reports came in of collected escape pods from the ‘*Hood*’.

“And you Bennet – well done on finding out what the Rommies were up to. Sorry about your loss. Dead husband going down with his ship and all that. Nasty business, eh Wickham?”

But George was already gone...

“Captain’s log, final entry”, over on the ‘*Hood*’ Colin watched the emergency forcefield visibly begin to fail as bulkheads gave way under his vessel’s death

throes. “Commendations to Lieutenant Thrice and... though it galls me to say it... to Commander Wickham...”

The forcefield spluttered and died. As Colin Darcy prepared to breathe his last – a transporter beam suddenly plucked him. Gasping for air he materialised in the *‘Bismarck’s’* transporter room.

“I couldn’t let you die like that”, Commander Wickham grinned almost evilly. “I admire your sacrifice. Can we work together in the future?”

“Well see...” Colin grudgingly conceded. “But you *still* owe my sister. Nevertheless, Wickham... you have my professional respect”.

“Progress”, George grimaced he held the high ground...

O

“All’s well that ends well”, back of Earth Georgiana Darcy stared into the aether from behind the veil of her faded wedding dress. “We move towards the nexus of force. It is within and without us. Like thunder the dawn will come. He will return to me. For as it was in the beginning, so shall it be in the end, for there will be an answer, let it be, for in the end the love you take is equal to the love you make...”

“Best increase the dosage...” the watching doctor whispered to the nurse...

‘Prophet And Loss’

Captain’s personal log, stardate 38.42.09. The hulk of my once proud ship has been towed to Starbase 12 for full repairs and refit. I have been ordered to take shore leave to rest, and together with my bride, Elizabeth, will travel to Earth to visit my poor sister in hospital, and her extended family. It galls me that Admiral Lowe has ordered Wickham to oversee repairs, but he is First Officer, and I must accept that.

For now...

It was then I was hailed by my chief engineer...

The bulk of the super-dreadnought *‘King William V’* loomed large outside the viewing port. Just returned from the Xyclon border, the ship was being rotated back to Earth.

“...beyond starbase’s ability to fix”, Huraki opined. “More a case of rebuilding than refitting”.

“Blistering barnacles!” Admiral Lowe exclaimed. “Well, ‘there will be an answer, let it be’. Make it so”, he agreed – and departed.

“Make all the necessary arrangements, Sikara”, Colin ordered. “Wickham, inform the crew”.

“Captain...” they departed with alacrity.

If he was going to Earth anyway... overseeing the ‘Hood’s’ repairs would give him an excuse to get away should the Bennets’ domestic *travail* become too onerous...

Still at Starbase 12 - pending a return to Earth with her sister and her brother-in-law - Lydia Bennet stepped out of the shower into the apartment where she was staying, to fix a tea. Tightening her towel she knew Admiral Sir Peter and Lady Lowe were out, at a reception, for a visiting Gorn frigate.

Suddenly – as she dunked her teabag – the apartment door opened.

“Ma! Pa!” spoke a deep male voice. “Oh my goodness!” it unilaterally entered the kitchen – and immediately turned 180 degrees in embarrassment. “I... apologise... Miss Bennet”.

“Sorry, did I startle you?” his comments betrayed his identity.

Nearly two metres tall and built like brick outhouse; Lieutenant Glendower Lowe had inherited his father’s rugged Welsh physique... and his mother’s Iberian good looks. “Indeed. I had forgotten I’d been informed you were staying here. My error”, he again apologised.

“I honestly didn’t mean to *scare you*”, fixing her tea Lydia decided to tease the handsome Lieutenant.

“As I indicated, Miss Bennet, it was a regrettable memory lapse”.

Lydia considered this really *fun*. “You’re on the ‘King William V’, aren’t you?”

“I am indeed Miss Bennet”.

“Please”, Lydia purred. “Call me ‘Lydia’. Can I call you... ‘Glen’?”

“Of course Miss B... *Lydia*”.

“Must be fun being on a super-dreadnought?”

“It is often a challenge...”

“I had *no idea* when I arrived here - to support my sister during her court-martial - I’d have such an *adventure*. Can I make you some tea?”

“Please”, an officer and gentleman Glen continued to decline to turn around.

“I was impersonated by a Romulan spy, did you know? – Alexa - tea Earl Grey, hot”, Lydia activated the replicator. “When I arrived here I gave my number to Wickham. I had *no idea then* he was the same Orion who betrayed my chum Georgiana. Your tea”, she fetched it out. “Needless to say I’ve asked him to delete it”, she paused. “You’ll need to turn around *if I’m not to scald you*... Or shall I leave it here... and go and put some... *clothes on*?”

“That would be best”, Glen concerned his parents might return. “And I can tell you’re teasing me, Lydia? Most... un-Vulcan?”

“I’m only half-Vulcan. I identify as *Human*”, Lydia breathed coquettishly as she sashayed past the Lieutenant. “So, it looks like you’ll be seeing... *a lot more of me*... over the next few days?”

“Your mastery of 20th century sit-com idiom is remarkable”, still averting his gaze Glendower Lowe managed to have the last word...

Had he not been Vulcan... Captain Summak’s mood could have been described as ‘unhappy’. His ship had sustained damage in a battle with the incursive Xyclons... and now he was expected to ‘care’ for a damaged cruiser. This was not to say some of the crew of the ‘Hood’ were not *impressive*...

“All we need to do is get our engines up the specs before we depart”, Karen Thrice advised her own chief engineer. “We lock ‘Hoodie’ and the ‘KWV’ together by a tractor beam, and then by syncing the combined nacelles – our two and “*Big Willie’s*’ three – we can create and balance a combined warp bubble”.

“It should work”, Commander Cake, the ‘KWV’s’ chief engineer agreed – Sikara also enthusing.

“I will thank you, Miss Thrice, not to refer to my ship as “*Big Willie*””, if impressed by her logic and deduction... Captain Summak raised a quizzical eyebrow. “We Vulcan’s disapprove of puerile humour”.

‘Don’t knock it until you’ve tried it’, ‘K’ thought of quipping a gag about ‘big willie’ – but wisely didn’t say...

“You’ll need to tractor us?” Captain Darcy chipped-in. “Don’t you have those new Mk6 tractors?”

“Outsourced from the Duck-Tape Consortium”, Summak considered the use of private enterprise by Starfleet most illogical...

oOo

“I’m sorry – I’m rather busy”, Georgiana Darcy stared wide-eyed at the new doctor. “As you can see – as soon as my fiancé arrives I am to be married”.

“Of course Miss Darcy”, she mollified – saw from the readings the young woman’s Esper rating was accelerating – just like the incident on the ‘*Enterprise*’, back in 2264. Her trauma had truly turned her mind ‘on’.

Thank goodness she was contained within a secure hospital...

“I can see for miles and miles and miles. ‘Cos there’s magic in my eyes...” Georgiana cryptically observed. “I am she as you are we and we are one together...” her mind began to roam again out into spacetime...

oOo

Captain's personal log, stardate 38.52.07. The closer we get to our return to Earth, the more I sense a disturbance in the aether. Some nights I find sleep impossible... but luckily my dear wife Elizabeth is able to render me unconscious with a Vulcan nerve pinch. One consolation is that Wickham is also experiencing painful headaches...

"I've prescribed Commander Wickham drugs to help him sleep", Dr Shipman advised Captain Darcy. "A CT scan conducted by myself and 'Big Willie's' surgeon, Dr Crippin, confirm you're both suffering from sub-space disturbances on the brain".

"Cause?" Colin alarmed.

"Unknown. Maybe the antipathy between the two of you?" she was wise.

"He owes my House a debt of honour", Darcy insisted. "Thanks Emma. I'm sure it'll all pass..."

oOo

"Georgiana, this is Mr Tyler", the nurse calmly introduced.

"Congratulations on your impending nuptials", Ash Tyler of Section 31 decided the situation required careful handling. "We won't have long to wait. Your George will be here soon, I am certain".

"Yes", the patient foresaw. "I sense he rushes to me – faster than light".

"Why would he not?" Ash smiled indulgently. "You have special powers. Second sight?"

"I always have possessed such latent abilities, Mr Tyler. Yet my dear brother always denies what he calls my 'voodoo powers'. The suggestion makes him angry. Disturbs his aura".

Ash nodded. "Whilst you await your fiancé – perhaps you could help us?" he gestured at the waiting operatives of Section 31's Esper Division...

oOo

"Goodness Glen!" Lydia Bennet amused. "What a big one you have!"

"Technically it belongs to Starfleet", in his private moments Glendower too enjoyed the output of the phaser array he was charged with charging. And, after their recent battle against the Xyclons, having the 'Hood's' crew aboard for the transit to Earth was indeed proving... diverting.

“Glen! We need to re-calibrate the...” the doors wooshed open to admit a female officer.

“Rach!” he cheerily greeted. “My co-gunner, Rachel Green. Rach, this is Lydia Bennet. Captain Darcy’s sister-in-law”.

“Hi”, Rachel forced a smile. Green by name – green my nature. Her threat response level promptly moved up to ‘red alert’...

“Taken away!” Colin angrily roared at the terminal. “Is this because of her voodoo powers nonsense?” he was extremely vexed by his sister’s medical transfer.

“*Starfleet orders*”, the nurse smiled – pleased to no longer have the ‘problem’. “*She’s been transferred to the research hospital in Area 51*”.

“Preposterous!” Colin’s anger brewed. “Darcy out!”

At least he was on his way to Earth to ‘rescue’ his poor sister...

oOo

‘Shore leave’. The two bestest words in Standard. Hooking up with her old pilot instructor chum, Lieutenant Hacker, Karen Thrice spent her thirty-six hours playing WWII air combat sim games, getting drunk, and together cruising the bars and low dives of Poole Quay in search of, ‘suitable companionship...’

“Discharged?” Colin Darcy could barely contain his fury. Orphan that he was he felt responsible for Georgiana, his younger sister and sole sibling.

“As we said on your call, to Starfleet medical in Area 51”, the hospital administrator was all smiles and ‘reason’.

“I sense the hand of Section 31”, accompanying him Elizabeth suggested with a raised eyebrow. “Captain Wentworth, peradventure?”

“Freddie’s deader than Debbie Gibson’s career”, Colin knew.

“Then we must pursue. *After* you have met my parents”, Elizabeth insisted.

The irony of belonging to a gentleman’s club in London was not lost on George Wickham... as he sought to drown his sorrows and increasing headaches in alcohol (Dr Shipman’s medicinal potions having failed him). Few of the members spoke to him – effectively blackballed him because of his conduct. Bastards! They didn’t understand...

Would *they* want to end up married to a crazy woman?

Dutiful as always, the ‘*Hood’s*’ chief engineer, Lieutenant Commander Sikara, declined shore leave to oversee the ship’s refit and repair.

“Aye Laddie, it’s not the size of your nacelles, it’s what you do with them that counts”, observed the ‘Enterprise’s’ chief engineer, Montgomery Scott, here to lay the ground for his own vessel’s upgrade...

O

“Scotch?” the break the ice Mr Bennet offered his new son-in-law a drink. “I am cogniscent, Sir, of the circumstances of your wedding to my daughter. I trust you will be able to support her in a suitable manner?”

“Indeed Sir”, Colin explained. “I am in possession of an income in excess of 30,000 Credits a year”.

“Don’t feel too bad Old Boy”, Mr Bennet next soothed. “Same thing happened to me. Mrs Bennet bushwhacked me during her *Pon Farr*. First things I knew was we were in Las Vegas, being married by Elvis Presley”.

A pause? “Sir”, Colin now mentioned a matter of some delicacy. “I understand from Elizabeth you were once assigned to Section 31. My sister has been... *transferred*. From her civilian hospital. For Esper investigation, I believe? Could you..?”

Mr Bennet nodded sagely. “I’ll see what I can do. ‘It’s all about family...’” the Bennet patriarch then quoted a line of classic literature as - suddenly – there was a commotion to disturb the relative placidity for the Bennet household.

“Papa!” Lydia exclaimed. “I’ve brought a new friend home for tea! This is Glendower. He’s an Admiral’s son!”

“*Lieutenant Lowe?*” Colin shocked – as the Bennets’ conversed took the towering Welshman aside. “Scuttlebuck on ‘*Big Willie*’ suggested you were already *escorting* Lieutenant Green?”

“We’re on a break”, Glendower Lowe blushed to candidly advise.

“Get out – save yourself”, Mr Bennet too quietly advised as the Lieutenant was taken away to be plied with cakes and tea by his Vulcan spouse, who had somewhat ‘gone native’, living as she did in Earth’s England...

O

“I’ve called in some old favours”, Mr Bennet drew his son-in-law aside. “Area 51 will let you check-in on your sister. But I can’t speak for what will happen when you get there”.

“Can I go too, Papa?” Lydia (as usual) nosed in

“Stuff and nonsense Lydia!” once again poor Mr Bennet had ‘enjoyed’ enough of her shenanigans for one day. “You’re a civilian”.

“Oh well”, she smiled. “Peradventure I can show Glen around my Bath. Oh – silly me! I mean, ‘my city of Bath’. He’s already seen me in just a towel...”

Rather than looking shocked Mr Bennet sighed and retired to his study... his wife and daughter raising quizzical eyebrows.

“Lydia tells me your father is an Admiral?” Mrs Bennet alone began Glen’s ‘interrogation’...

oOo

“Do you have an appointment?” the receptionist was most officious as Colin, Elizabeth and Mr Bennet materialised outside Area 51.

“Do you know who I am?” Captain Darcy attempted to pull rank.

Ineffective? Mr Bennet soothed to make introductions and explanations. Shortly the black-clad Lieutenant Tyler and Captain Georgiou emerged to escort Colin and Elizabeth inside the secret base; confiscating all their communicators and equipment. Obligated to wait in reception Mr Bennet resigned himself to wait, pending return to his domestic maelstrom.

“My sister is well?” Colin questioned.

“You ask too many questions”, Captain Georgiou was acidic.

“She adjusts”, Lieutenant Tyler was more forthcoming as he showed Colin and Elizabeth into a ‘cell’, containing two white-coated scientists, and a nurse.

“Colin!” her eyes glowing with her increasing psionic powers... Georgiana exclaimed from behind her habitual wedding dress. “Where’s George? As his best man you’re *supposed* to ensure he isn’t late?”

“He’ll be here soon”, Colin placated – toyed at calling Wickham – in so doing instinctively reached for his confiscated communicator.

“Wouldn’t work anyway – dampening fields”, Tyler saw and advised; Captain Georgiou departing to continue preparation for her new posting to ‘Discovery’. “Safety. Here”, he passed over his own quantaphasic device.

“Commander Wickham!” Colin commanded. “Please beam now to the entrance of Area 51! He’s overseeing the ‘Hood’s’ refit”, he gently explained.

“Elizabeth!” Georgiana instead suddenly exclaimed. “You have married my brother? Here it comes, here it comes, here comes your 19th nervous breakdown”, she was again most assuredly *cryptic*...

Wondering what all the fuss was... George Wickham beamed down as ordered. He was, at least, heartened by the great strides being taken to the ‘Hood’s’ refit: his battered cruiser seemed to be receiving extraordinary priority from Starfleet Command.

Then came *trouble*. “You cad Sir!” Mr Bennet passed moral censure as Wickham materialised.

“Leave it out, Grandad!” George retorted – found himself escorted inside by Section 31 operatives; his personal equipment confiscated. Worse – as he approached his destination ‘cell’ – he felt an exponential increase in his headache. An esper spike? Indeed – thrown in by security he beheld the glowing eyes and fiery rage of his former fiancé: the poor maiden he’d so cruelly jilted at the altar; noticed too the Vulcan Elizabeth Bennet unaffected.

“You’re late! Late for our wedding!” Georgina angrily accosted him. “What must our guests be *thinking?*” her power raged as she blazed with superhuman esper abilities. Soon all the other humans too were writhing on the floor in pain. Even the power went off - as the emergency Red Alert sounded - Colin attempting to placate his crazed super-powered sibling. Realising what needed to be done Elizabeth didn’t hesitate. Unaffected she applied the Vulcan nerve pinch to her sister-in-law – who collapsed – the power grid returning.

With great alacrity the doctors moved to sedate Georgiana Darcy.

“You’ll have to teach me that”, pain dissipating Wickham quipped as redshirted security arrived; in the confusion he managing to secure a tricorder.

“Not possible”, Elizabeth was ice-cool. “But it has it’s uses when Colin snores in the dead of night”.

“You’re not need drugs!” Darcy protested on his sister’s behalf. “She’s just a kid!”

“Time you were on your way...” Lieutenant Tyler, however, was sinister...

oOo

“That’s the famous Pump Room – and that’s Jane Austen’s house. She’s not in”, Lydia Bennet was enjoying being seen around the city with then handsome Lieutenant Lowe; knew her chums would be so *jealous* in their romantic speculations: like Series 872 of ‘*Bridgerton*’ – only *real*...

Then – suddenly – Lieutenant Rachel Green emerged from behind a colonnade – phaser drawn. “Glen! She’s a Romulan spy! Check the logs!”

“Is that right?” Glendower checked.

“Of course not!” Lydia refuted. “I’m real and *loyal*”.

“Pah!” Rachel disagreed.

“You’re being jealous, Rach”, Glen reasoned. “She’s just showing me around. And, anyway, we’re on break!”

Two phaser blasts rang out. Glen and Lydia were – quite literally – *stunned*.

“Hello, hello, hello. What’s all this here then?” Wessex police hastily arrived...

oOo

Protest as they might Darcy and Elizabeth were ejected... and told to wait. "What happens now?" guarded by security with drawn phasers George Wickham feared the worst as Captain Georgiou returned.

"I'll have that", she demanded the return of Wickham's purloined tricorder. "In my Mirror Universe Wickham is a nasty, brutish, Orion pirate... but at least he doesn't jilt innocent maidens at the altar".

"Coward and sinner!" Wickham spat at her – but she merely laughed.

"Your fiancé is a valuable asset to Starfleet. You'll remain here to keep her sweet. In the meantime... you can think about what you've done..."

Outside. "I didn't think it'd go well", ex Section 31 himself Mr Bennet knew they weren't to be trifled with... as he departed to deal with daughter Lydia's latest *escapade*.

"Indeed Papa", Elizabeth agreed; Colin having already ordered Karen Thrice to take command of the '*Hood*' saw he was now calling Admiral Lowe.

"Blistering barnacles Darcy!" Sir Peter exclaimed. *"It's not within my jurisdiction! And I've a family crisis of my own. My son has been arrested for consorting with a Romulan spy. Mistaken identity! Lady Lowe is most displeased..."*

"Thank you Sir", Colin knew there was no hope of help there. "Return to the ship, my dear. He addressed Elizabeth. "Help 'K' get ready as much as we can... I'm off to take this to Starfleet Command..."

"Status?" Elizabeth checked as she beamed aboard the '*Hood*'.

"We're getting top priority", 'K' was suspicious. "Should be fully refitted in twenty-four?"

"War?"

Karen shrugged. "Doubt it. '*Big Willie*' is getting zilch..."

Materialising in San Francisco Colin wasn't at all surprised to find himself arrested – and immediately transported back to Area 51 – and thrown into cell with his First Officer.

"This is another fine mess you've gotten me into", he caustically remarked to Wickham...

"Where is my *fiancé*? Where is my *brother*? Where are our *guests*?" conscious again Georgiana Darcy demanded – sensed a dampening field inhibit her powers.

“You have powerful esper abilities”, Captain Georgiou explained. “We have a mission for you”.

“I want my George! I want my fiancé! I want to get married!” pulling herself off the medibed Miss Darcy raged against the machine.

“That can be arranged”, Phillipa amused. “After you complete the mission for us”.

“Before!” Georgiana blazed – the room vibrating and the utensils rattling as she (metaphorically) stamped her feet. “I’m dressed for it, after all!”

“Very well”, sensing advantage Georgiou determined it be quickly arranged...

“But Papa!” back in Bath Lydia Bennet protested.

“My mind is made up!” Mr Bennet insisted. “I forbid you to see any more Starfleet officers!”, he hoped by grounding her she’d elope with some unwitting young gentleman, and no longer be his responsibility...

Georgiana Darcy watched as Lieutenant Tyler dragged in Wickham and her brother, Colin, to act as witness and best man.

“By the power invested in my by Section 31 I pronounce you – Georgiana Darcy – and you George Wickham – husband and wife. Done!” captain Georgiou determined. “Now, to business. We’ve a mission for the ‘Hood’. We need a few changes in the Klingon High Council. You, *Mrs Wickham*, you’ll go with them on *honeymoon*... You may kiss the groom...”

‘Imperial Entanglements’

Captain’s personal log, stardate 38.51.07. All repairs complete the ‘Hood’ has departed for Qo’nos, the sinister Lieutenant Tyler of Section 31 and my confused esper sister aboard, now married to Wickham. Briefing? The machinations of the Klingon High Council are confusing indeed...

“Approaching Klingon border, Captain?” ‘K’ half asked, half reported.

“Full stop!” Darcy ordered “Broadcast some Klingon death-metal!”

At Coms Lieutenant Chang made it so. In mere seconds a Klingon D7 decloaked on their side of the border. “Is that you Klaang?” Colin hailed the image coming from *IKS ‘Grohl’*. “Your hair’s different?”

“I’ve had an upgrade, my old comrade in arms. As has my ship”, he referenced the cloaking device. “Enough frippery! Follow my vessel. Match

course and speed or by Grabthar's Hammer and the Sons of Warvan we shall be avenged for your treachery!"

"You heard our old friend", Colin jovially ordered 'K'.

"Could we to the transporter room, Captain?" Tyler now suggested.

"I don't know, could we?" he retorted a minor put-down. "Lt. Thrice, you have the con..."

Meanwhile, down in his quarters with his enforced bride, Commander Wickham found she was using her esper powers to invade his mind with domestic minutiae. It ached and burned as a litany of new kitchen floors, bin emptying days, pet tortoise runs and cleaning rotas dominated (along, of course, with constant admonishment for his lateness for their nuptials).

Slowly, surely, George Wickham knew she was driving him *insane*...

"...receiving guests", as was the norm at Section 31 Tyler circuitously explained. "Someone I know well".

"Whom may this be?" knowing the backstory of *USS 'Discovery's'* adventures Colin concerned.

His worst fears were realised. Materialising under spouse Elizabeth's expert fingers were Captain Klaang and... Chancellor L'Rell! "Greetings Madam Chancellor!" Darcy made the Klingon salute – his crew following suit.

"This is my old comrade in arms Darcy!" Klaang confirmed to his leader. "Brave and honourable! For a human..." he damned with faint praise

"Klaang!" Colin instantly grasped his arm – playfully head-butted.

The Klingon roared with laughter. "This Vulcan, Chancellor, is his *mate*", he referenced Elizabeth... who raised a quizzical eyebrow.

"I heard the tale", L'Rell playfully snarled. "We females must take by physical force the male of our choice", she then winked at Tyler. "But enough of Austenesque romance. In the original Klingon translation. You have a briefing room, Captain?"

"I think we have something appropriate", Colin confirmed...

Back in his quarters George Wickham was considering jumping out of the airlock. 'I'm bugged', he thought.

'I heard that', Georgiana's voice spoke in his head. 'Have you emptied the tea bags. You know I hate when there's more than two left...'

"I'm dying", Chancellor L'Rell candidly confided. "A mutation of Qu'vat virus. It's slowly turning me into jelly. There's no cure. When I die there will be

dangerous war of succession. The Houses will again squabble like younglings over rare football stickers”.

“We’re here to help”, Tyler interjected.

“Maybe replace the Chancellor with a changeling?” Colin suggested.

“None of us here want *anything* that’d benefit the Romulans”, Tyler added.

“In the end it’ll be between House Duras and House Worf”, Klaang got to the bottom line.

“You wish I act as your Arbiter of Succession?” Colin offered.

“Unacceptable!” L’Rell snarled. “Duras wants a new war with the Federation. Worf wants ‘peaceful coexistence’ – not more”.

“Well he’s my favourite”, Colin quipped.

“We will help you Chancellor”, Tyler promised. “We have a few tricks up our sleeve. It would help if Worf were to kill Duras?”

“If only it were that simple”, Klaang sighed. “I like problems I can shoot. The Duras family has many offspring”.

“You will help by turning the Duras faction on each other”, L’Rell determined. “It will be a picnic. A Durassic park...”

Meanwhile, on the bridge of the ‘*Grohl*’...

“Incoming from House Duras!” the coms officer reported.

“On screen!” Second Docket ordered.

“*You have captured a Federation ship*”, the Duras officer leered. “*You will hand it over to us for processing*” (they clearly wanted possession).

“Raise shields!” Docket contemptuously ordered. “This is our prize! *qeyllIS*²! Hail Captain Klaang!”

“Maybe if we found a way to frame House Duras as Federation puppets?” Colin next suggested.

“I like your thinking”, L’Rell approved. “Like Tyler, you’re cute for a human”.

“My wife thinks so”, Colin carefully blocked.

“Understood”, Klaang (meanwhile) was having a conversation in Klingon with the ‘*Grohl*’. “Duras ship”, he informed. “They want yours, Darcy”.

“They’ll never take us alive!” Colin affirmed.

“I fear for the Empire”, L’Rell added. “I want to see your secret weapon”.

“‘Secret weapon’?” Colin raised a quizzical eyebrow.

“She means your sister”, Tyler advised.

² It’s very rude when translated into Standard! (*Ed.*)

“She’s indisposed”, Colin blocked. “With her new groom”, he appealed to the Chancellor’s sense of sensibility.

“Her mind will do what you need, Chancellor”, Tyler, however, over-ruled.

“*Captain*”, Karen reported from the bridge. “*Duras Klingons arming weapons. I’ve raised shields*”.

“They must not know we’re aboard”, L’Rell knew that meant return to the ‘*Grohl*’ was temporarily impossible.

“You have their transponder prefix code?” Colin suggested.

“We use no such system for security”, Klaang snarled. “But, if we could get inside their *heads*”, he joked.

“Follow me...” Colin reluctantly led his party, with all due alacrity, to Wickham’s quarters...

“I’ve a splitting headache”, was George Wickham’s only comment as the crisis was quickly explained.

“I will help”, Georgiana was nevertheless ‘game’ – concentrated – her eyes glowing white, like an old-style special effect as she focused. “The ship is the *IKS ‘Modrick’*. I sense great hostility”.

“A Duras vessel”, Klaang informed what they’d already knew.

“Can you move an engine part with your mind to disable them, Sister dear?” Colin suggested.

“While she’s focusing on that my headache’s gone!” George exclaimed – realised there were indeed ‘limits’ to his spouse’s psychic powers.

“The grunge plate on the matter induction tube?” Klaang helpfully suggested. “Disable but not kill them”.

“Port nacelle?” Colin suggested. “That’s the sticky-out bit at the back”.

“I sit here every day looking at the sky. Ever wondering why I dream my dreams away”, Georgiana confirmed. “I can see it is my mind’s eye...”

“Engine malfunction!” on the bridge of the ‘*Modrick*’ there was concerned surprise from the engineering officer. “But... they were *checked!*”

“*qoH!*” Captain Duras shouted his anger – shot him with a disrupter as summary punishment. “Retreat! Signal the ‘*Grohl*’ we’ll be back!”

“*K’pla!*” back on the ‘*Hood*’ Klaang shouted his approval as the ‘*Modrick’s*’ port nacelle suddenly exploded.

“Tractor beam! Jam their transmissions!” Colin ordered his bridge crew via intercom. “Show them we’re *friends!*”

“Federation tractor beam!” the ‘*Modrick’s*’ Second reported.

“They’re in league together!” Captain Duras sensed dirty work at the crossroads. “Release log buoy! Then self-destruct. They must not know that we know! Today is a good day to die for the Empire – for our House – the rightful heirs to Qo’nos!”

“*K’pla!*” his crew embrace entry to Sto-vor-kor, to feast with their ancestors...

“They’ve blown themselves up, Captain”, as Darcy and the Klingons entered the bridge ‘K’ reported the ball of plasma afore the ‘*Hood’s*’ vidscreen.

“So I see. Dr Shipman! Report to Wickham’s quarters to check upon my sister’s health. Coms?”

“They made no outward transmission”, Kim-Jong confirmed...

oOo

“She’s as well as could be expected”, Dr Shipman grumpily reported Georgiana Wickham’s recovery from her psychic exertions. “I believe all this morally wrong”.

“Says the medic who prescribes herself jelly babies?”

“Captain Darcy”, Lieutenant Tyler chaired, “in order for the subterfuge to work you must pretend to be Klingon prisoners. We can trust Chancellor L’Rell and Captain Klaang”.

“Good idea”, as First Officer of the ‘*Hood*’ Wickham agreed.

“Very well”, Colin reluctantly agreed to go along with it.

“*K’pla!*” Klaang applauded. “For the trick to truly succeed you will need to have Klingons on your ship.

Going too far? “I shall inform Starfleet”, Colin accepted - but also decided to add a passcode to the ship’s systems in case of a double-cross; and use by the ‘Klinks’ as a Trojan horse. If the ship were to re-enter Federation space without his input. He’d get ‘K’ and Gondar to link it to the self-destruct system...

“Your acting as my prize will increase my prestige”, the Chancellor meanwhile confirmed. “You, Captain, and your Sister will remain safe. All will be well”.

“Make it so, Wickham...” Colin issued the necessary orders...

oOo

Captain’s log, stardate 38.72.06. My apprehensions continue as – feigning imprisonment – the ‘Hood’ is proceeding to Qo’nos in concert with the ‘Grohl’...

“My shuttle approaches”, Chancellor L’Rell preened. “The trick will be that I have only just arrived to have Klaang’s capture presented unto me. We also need to make you, Darcy, look like you’ve been overcome in battle”.

“I’ve read Shakespeare in the original Klingon”, Colin was sanguine. “I fear not being roughed-up a little”.

“*K’pla!* It will be a pleasure to wrestle with you”, Klaang gleed.

“But *not* as if Austen in the original Klingon”, the Chancellor amused as she and Tyler beamed over...

As the Chancellor L’Rell beamed over to her shuttle... Klaang and Darcy engaged in a ‘fight’ that not only looked suitably impressive... but was also slightly homo-erotic. Indeed, just as they finished, a D7 de-cloaked.

“Oh wow!” Karen Thrice exclaimed her glee. “Another one!” checking the number she hastily crossed it off in her *‘Observer’s Book Of Klingon Battlecruisers’*. “I collect the numbers”, she explained. “It’s the *IKS ‘Dragonslayer’*”.

“*Klaang!*” the screen burst into life. “*Hand that ship over to me!*”

“Over my dead body!” the venerable Klingon retorted. “It belongs to Chancellor L’Rell! Today is a good day to die! But not Tuesday – I’m busy then!”

“Yes he is”, playing his part Colin camped it up to appear to be subdued and in Klaang’s thrall.

“It’s Captain Worf”, Klaang quietly advised (no mean feat for him).

“Woof? A dog?”

“No, ‘Worf’. *House Worf*”.

“Ah!” Darcy recognised they were the lesser of two evils as Chancellor L’Rell too appeared on screen.

“Back off Worf!” she shrieked. “This enemy tech is mine for the Empire!”

“*Of course Chancellor!*” surprised she was present Worf indeed conceded.

“*We must take the ship apart – and use the mind-ripper on the Federation p’taks! Then they can go to Rura Penthe and mine us dilithium until the end of their worthless lives...*”

And then it suddenly got more complicated. More D7’s arrived. As ‘K’ frantically ticked-them off in her book Klaang again spoke quietly. “House Duras”, he informed.

“*We know of your treachery – your collaboration with the humans!*” an angry visage appeared. “*You are all in league with the Worfes! There can be no peace until we crush them in war!*”

“Lies!” Captain Worf countered. “'ach Hamlet, choparHa'chu"ej Qu'vam mInDu'IlijDaq naHHey je!”³ he spat the insult.

“Who is he?” Colin asked ‘K’ check her book.

“Captain *Rak* Duras...”

A gambit? “My old friend Rak!” Colin spoke to the Klingons. “I have been defeated by brave and noble Klaang – an officer loyal to his Empire!”

“*You insult me!*” Rak confused. “*I know no Federation ‘p’taks!*”

“But we’re old friends?” Colin denied; feigned confusion. “Remember Emily Johnson’s party of Cestus VI?”

“*This proves all Duras are traitors!*” Work now chimed in.

It looked like it was all about to kick-off. “*You will all be silent!*” Chancellor L’Rell insisted. “*This enemy ship is my prize – for the good of the Empire. Klaang! Kill any who resist! Discussion over!*”

All the screens cut. “Rig bioshielding to hide your life signs”, Klaang laughed heartily. “They will expect me to have slaughtered many. Follow the Chancellor’s shuttle!” he ordered ‘K’.

“Do it”, Colin confirmed her visual interrogative she comply.

“You’ll need a new book soon”, Gondor teased her.

oOo

The ‘*Hood*’ arrived at Qo’nos in time for tea. Nudging into orbit ‘K’ began ticking off names and numbers – thrilled how far ahead of her chums at the ship-spotters club she’d now be...

“The Great Houses are gathering”, Klaang informed. “Like the vulnerability of the Basingstoke Town back four, the Chancellor’s sickness is no longer a secret”, he casually broke fruit on his brow ridges.

“This is where your sister does her stuff, Darcy”, having returned to the ‘*Hood*’ Tyler now firmly spoke up. “She will kill the Duras leaders for peace. *Especially* the head of House, Task Duras”.

“She won’t do it under Duras. I mean, *duress*”, Colin knew. “What if I were to challenge Duras? Rather than Georgiana carry out the assassinations?” he considered his sister’s sense and sensibility, her pride and prejudice, her not being open to *persuasion*...

“No”, Tyler denied. “All must *die*. It is the only way. Leave a wolf alive and the pack survives”.

³ ‘Your mother was a hamster and your father smelt of elderberries!’ – (Ed.)

“I don’t want my disturbed sister weaponised. It’s morally repugnant. It goes against *everything* the Federation stands for”.

“Not possible”, Klaang shook his head. “Only her husband can fight for her honour. It is the *B’ah’t Qul*. Were Wickham to challenge, however, and win – he would become the head of House Duras...”

oOo

Thus it was done. “Unacceptable Chancellor!” Task Duras rejected the challenge out of hand. “Fighting a human is beneath me! This is but a trick of the Worf’s to dishonour my House! I reject the challenge of their human... *pawn!*”

“*He is not human, but an Orion*”, L’Rell reported. “*And I choose him to fight you*”, she added invective incentive. “*The winner will become my arbiter of succession. Or are you sacred?*”.

“Then I accept the challenge!” Task considered that challenge ‘honourable’ – refused to accept any loss of ‘face’...

oOo

The Great Hall of the Klingon High Council Inner Chamber was as silent as White Hart Lane when Spurs are winning. Chancellor L’Rell watched from a dais, accompanied by Worf, Asos Gandalf and – as ‘victor’ over the ‘Hood’ – Captain Klaang. In the cleared arena stood Task Duras with two supporters... opposite him Wickham, who had chosen as his two *lengs* Darcy and Elizabeth.

For his part... George Wickham knew range weapons were banned – that he would have to take on the looming Klingon with a just a razor-sharp *bat’leth*; in Klingon eyes only dishonourable *p’taks* using phasers, disrupters, bows or other range weapons on such hallowed ground...

The combat began. Within seconds Wickham as speared by the triumphant Duras - was badly cut up by a fell deathblow.

But then it was the Klingon’s turn to be shocked.

“He’s *alive!*” Task exclaimed his incredulity. “The Force is strong in this one!”

“Today is a bad day to die!” unnaturally sustained by his wife Georgiana’s psychic powers (at the expense of draining herself) George Wickham promptly shot back. Cheating? For him the ends *always* justified the means. “Game for a rematch?” he now lunged at Duras with his weapon.

“Rarrgh!” Duras roared his defiance. Indeed, as Wickham hoped, the Klingons had (thus far) failed to detect the use of psychic energy. However, as the duel continued – sustained by his supernatural spouse - he finally slew Task

Duras – only know it was all over one of the latter’s retainers finally not only detecting the energy input into his master’s adversary – he also showed the tricorder readings to Chancellor L’Rell.

“You dishonour our rites!” she promptly declared. “Guards! Take away these human *p’taks* who sully our rituals like wombats in Basingstoke”.

“It was not I who did this – but my spouse!” despite what the universal translator was saying... Wickham attempted to be disingenuous. “No man can be held responsible for his wife’s actions!” he remembered the parable of the credit card and the sale at ‘C&A’.

“Huraki! Get us out of here!” Captain Darcy flipped his communicator.

“*I cannot obtain a fix*”, the ‘Hood’s’ engineer duly responded with a negative.

Too late? Demanding revenge the Duras supporters (and others) began firing disrupters at the Federation citizens. As he fell unconscious some hope, however, remained for Colin Darcy. He noticed Klaang’s disrupter had ‘malfunctioned’. So, stunned, they were to be taken alive?

Luckily Elizabeth’s superior Vulcan physiology enable her to retain consciousness. “Wait!” she quickly thought on her feet as she staggered from the impact of the disrupter bolts. “My brother-in-law Wickham lived! By your law that makes him your Arbiter of Succession! Lord Worf! You are surely rightful heir?”

A chance to *cheat*? “I see no evidence of falsehood!” Worf suddenly changed tack and agreed. “I see only Duras excuses for their *weakness*! I accept the judgement!”

“Well, you would say that, wouldn’t you?” from the gallery the new Head of House Duras, Unter Duras, shouted defiance. “This is all a Federation plot to cause civil war between us!”

“In which case...” Chancellor L’Rell carped the diem – “I too nominate Worf my successor. He has no love for the Federation! But he also has no love for an unwinnable war! You will depart this place immediately!” she glared at Elizabeth and her inert comrades. “Klaang! Escort them back to their own space! If they return – they will die like squirrels at the Bloodstock festival”.

Universal translator issues? “Unacceptable!” Unter Duras again exclaimed. “I declare blood-feud on Commander George Wickham, his unnatural spouse, *and* the *USS ‘Hood’*! Sleep with one eye open Colin Darcy!” he (somewhat paradoxically) threatened the unconscious Federation captain...

oOo

Back at Earth changes were due. Colin was forced to accept his sister's psychic powers meant she could never again lead a 'normal' life; that she must return to Area 51 to perpetually 'assist Section 31 with their enquiries'...

"Is Area 51 a disco?" she asked as she willingly agreed.

"Not quite", cast again as indulgent elder brother, Colin explained. "You are to use your special powers for good".

"Yes!" Georgiana again went into one of her 'trances'. "I will use my powers to end worlds hunger. To reconcile the rat people and the lizard folk. To help the plastic surgery addiction group – for it is a shame to see so many new faces. For there will be an answer, let it be. But I will *never* give up my dear husband!"

"You won't have to", reconciled to Wickham's redemption Colin grinned. "He's to be posted there with you".

"And Admiral Lowe has re-promoted me back to First Officer", Elizabeth raised a smugly quizzical eyebrow. "So, all's well that ends well..."

Cue credits....

'Missing Link'

Captain's personal log, stardate 41.28.06. We are en route to Starbase 12. I have been summoned to sit on a court martial. Lieutenant Glendower Lowe is accused of murdering his former paramour, Lieutenant Rachael Green, who has 'disappeared'. Yet this is no open-and-shut case. He was at the time 'on a break' (sic)... with my wayward sister-in-law Lydia Bennett... sightseeing in Thailand...

The weather at Starbase 12 was appalling. There were solar flares of 1970s proportions. Despite this Captain Darcy, Dr Shipman, Commander Bennett and Ensign Gondar beamed over from the 'Hood'; leaving Lieutenant Thrice the ship's 'con'.

It was a rough beam-over. To Darcy's surprise he was hailed by a Roman style salute. Shaking, he silently ordered his compatriots silent; it apparent they were in a parallel 'mirror' universe of some kind. It was then Admiral Lowe arrived. "Blistering barnacles!" he exclaimed. "Show me all due respect or I'll have you keel hauled!"

"Sir..." mimicking the salute he's seen earlier Colin played for time. "Apologies, it was a rough beaming".

“It was”, scanning that the Admiral’s bodyguards had their phasers set to stun... Emma agreed, as Colin feigned a stumble.

“Blistering barnacles!” the Admiral exclaimed. “Get up man! This way!”

Bemused the party followed to a hanger area... to be greeted by a grinning Commander Wickham. “Darcy”, he sneered recognition.

“Good to see you”, Colin ‘pallied up’ – revelled in his knowledge of Wickham’s fate in his own universe... only for the ‘mirror Wickham’ to sneer back.

“Even in a parallel reality he’s ugly”, Elizabeth whispered as they followed on into the hanger.

“Hi Sis!” Elizabeth was forced to raise a quizzical eyebrow as – in the hanger – was her ‘sister’ Lydia - tied by her left hand to a counterpart Lieutenant Green’s left hand.

“Blistering barnacles!” exclaimed Admiral Lowe as his unfeasibly handsome son Glendower entered. “Let’s get this trial by combat over with. You can’t *both* marry my boy – so you can fight to the death for him. Ensure a fair fight Darcy”.

It was then Colin noticed a single katana on the floor – and made a snap decision. Kicking it he moved it so it was within the mirror Lydia’s grasp – and the fight began. As Lydia grabbed the katana... Rachel kicked it out of her hand - the pair trading wounds until... it was the ‘Starfleet’ Lieutenant who fell.

“She’s dead, Colin”, Emma scanned; noted ‘Lydia’ too was wounded.

“The half-Vulcan will do...” sighing Glendower Lowe picked up Lydia’s inert body to carry away to... whatever it was they did here to consummate a relationship.

“Blistering barnacles!” Admiral Lowe approved. “Good work Darcy!”

Elizabeth raised a quizzical eyebrow and suppressed her human emotions (in the full knowledge her sister in *any universe* would *not*).

“Now return to the ‘Hood’ and sort out Trackon IV”, Admiral Lowe ordered...

As the party returned to the Transporter Room they – led by Commander Bennett - took some surreptitious readings. The results were disquieting. “Energy fluctuations, Captain”, she reported to her husband. “The ‘bridge’ we crossed over – if that’s indeed what it was – has closed for now. But we are indeed on a parallel Starbase 12”.

“Which means I reckon our counterparts are on our ‘Hood’”, Emma hypothesised as they transported over to the *ISS ‘Hood’*.

“Convene in the Conference Room”, Colin ordered his landing party...

Meanwhile, back in the Prime universe, Karen Thrice was standing outside the brig of the *USS 'Hood'*. "I will not accept illegal orders from anyone", she surveyed the angry turncoats. "Section 31 have been contacted. Your behaviour is most perplexing".

"Bitch!" the 'replacement' Darcy hissed.

"I will certainly *not* do what you request, Captain", if slightly *titillated*... she yet refuted.

"Nor I that for you, Commander Bennett", Lieutenant Sikara likewise eschewed physical danger...

oOo

Discussions complete Colin had his party return to the bridge. "Ready us to warp to Trackon IV", he ordered the 'mirror Karen'; in this universe a comely brunette. "Engage!" he exchanged a glance with Gondar as he sat in his chair.

The plan was simple – Elizabeth was to work on a 'solution' to return them 'home'. He checked his orders. The *'Hood'* was to suppress a rebellion against the Terran Empire, and arrest the ringleaders...

"Options Miss Thrice?" he pumped the mirror Karen for information. "Should we carpet bomb them from orbit?"

"Starfleet wish minimal collateral damage to production facilities and slave labour, *Sir*", she inflected back a smile and a pout.

"We can always get more", Colin parried – saw Elizabeth raise a quizzical eyebrow at such 'flirting'. "Walk with me Gondar", he suggested to his Andorian navigator.

"We will be expected to use maximum force", Shak advised in the turbolift. "Also, in this universe, you are in a close personal relationship with Lieutenant Thrice. We cannot avoid getting involved. And in our 'Verse the colonists of Trackon IV are not rebels – but happy pastoralists... As Security Chief Karen must not suspect. You will need to... fulfil all your *duties*?"

"Golly!" Colin exclaimed...

O

The voyage continued. Prior to arrival at Trackon IV, Darcy convened a meeting of his landing party.

"Commander Bennett believes we can return via an artificial interphasial link", Emma Shipman explained.

"Assuming there are no untoward graviton anomalies", Elizabeth qualified. "I assume our counterparts in our universe have come to a similar conclusion?"

'A-wee-hoo!' sounded the intercom. "Coming up on Trackon IV, Captain", the counterpart Karen reported. "Rebel fighters approaching!"

"On our way!" Colin ordered...

"On screen!" reaching the bridge Colin ordered. There, before him, was a 'rebel' corvette trying to escape at warp 5, with three escorting fighters.

"Follow the corvette. Ignore the fighters", he ordered.

All well and good – but the rebel fighters turned to attack. "Karen! Evasives!" Colin ordered in the 'familiar' idiom of this universe... only to raise a quizzical eyebrow from Elizabeth as the fighters fired.

The 'Hood's' shields absorbed the two torpedo hits. "Shields down to 80%" Gondor reported.

Colin discerned the corvette was moving *away* from Trackon IV – towards the 'void' beyond Federa... 'Imperial' space. "Order the corvette to halt!" he directed. "Open a channel. Rebel corvette?" he interrogated. "What are you trying to achieve? Your fighters have discharged their weapons and abandoned you?"

"No response to your hails, Captain?" Lieutenant Chang reported.

"Insolence! Tractor them! Pull them in! Gondar! Shipman! Bennett! You're with me. We'll board them", Colin planned to let them 'escape' to save bloodshed. "Ms Thrice - you have the con!"

"Captain..." Karen gave him a look that would be wholly inappropriate on a Federation starship....

Materialising aboard the rebel corvette... Colin and his 'special landing party' found themselves instantly shot and stunned by rebel troopers. They were then approached by a young human female, dressed in a long white robe.

"Captain Darcy", she sneered. "Only you could be so bold. This legate's ship is on a diplomatic mission".

"Yes", despite his stun Colin (figuratively) thought upon his feet, "only *I* would indeed be so bold. Pleased to meet you, Madam. Please, identify yourself?"

"You *know* who I am", her snarl hinted at 'history'.

"Another convincing pickle. You see, I'm *not the* Colin Darcy you believe me to be. *I* don't want *you* to get caught. I and my party are here from... somewhere else – and we want to get home. I sympathise with your rebels. We will return to the 'Hood' and let you go".

"Ha!" the mysterious woman scoffed. "You think to trick me into an admission of guilt! What have you done with my escorting fighters?"

“They peeled off – you can verify”, despite his spouse’s presence Colin attempted to be Kirk-like charming.

“Put them in the brig!” the mystery VIP snapped.

“You realise the ‘Hood’s’ crew will be suspicious!” Colin protested. “I’m on your side – I want Trackon to be free!”

“Imperial trickery!”

“Then I’ll *have* to be the Colin Darcy you expect...”

O

Back on the *ISS ‘Hood’*... Lieutenant-Commander Karen Thrice was becoming restless as Commander Wickham entered the bridge. “No response from the Captain’s landing party”, she reported.

“Then I’m assuming command”, the Orion grinned evilly. “We’ll rescue the Captain. And if he should die?” he swivelled in the command chair to cow the bridge crew, “we all move up in rank”.

“What’s happening?” in the corvette’s brig Emma Shipman wondered.

“From the sound of it the ship is being boarded by our counterpart ‘Hood’s’ crew”, Elizabeth extrapolated.

“What’s that mean for us?” Gondar wondered.

“A good question...” Colin again tried to find a way out...

O

Given the ruthless nature of Terran Empire marines the Rebel crew were quickly overpowered... and the survivors taken prisoner, their vessel taken. Leaving Karen Thrice the con... Commander Wickham beamed over... and was most satisfied with the results.

“Your run of luck has come to an end, Princess”, he addressed the VIP captive. “You are my prisoner. My captain will deal with you. Where is he?”

The Princess refused to answer – Wickham (most ungentlemanly) slapped her. “Where is my Captain?” he again demanded... and the captive (most unladylikely) spat in his face.

“Last chance before I beam you into space as cold as your heart”, Wickham dragged the spit from his visage.

“Do it!” she taunted. “You can take my life but you can never take my freedom!”

“Have her transferred to the ‘Hood’s’ brig!” Wickham grinned evilly. “Watch her closely. She may prove... *amusing*...”

Captain Darcy and his party, meanwhile, were released from the corvette's brig. "A bit late now", he grumbled as he found Wickham. "Still, you've captured the VIP as I planned".

"I slapped her up a bit too", he bragged. "And I've turned it into a gif. I left your paramour Thrice the con. Released by your own crew, *Colin?*" he edge his voice with sarcasm. "How embarrassing".

"Are you telling Starfleet?"

"Too late – it's already all over the ship".

"You captured the Princess just as I planned", Colin quietly retorted.

Elizabeth raised a quizzical eyebrow. "Walk with me", reasserting his counterpart's authority Colin ordered Wickham follow him to the corvette's brig. "All '*Hood*' personnel return to the ship", he punched the wall com to order. "Put the rebel survivors in the hold".

"You have an *issue* with me, *Captain?*" squaring-up Wickham sneered.

"It appears you've been horribly wounded in the boarding action", Colin nonchalantly replied – and before the 'mirror' Wickham could react pushed him into the brig and activated the containing forcefield. Reacting Wickham drew his phaser and fired – but the blast simply ricocheted to almost hit him.

"Bastard *p'tak!*" George Wickham enraged.

"Quite possibly", moving to the control panel Colin arranged for some Klingon opera to be played. '*HeghwI' ghot Heghlu'chugh*'⁴, ran the lyrics as he next made his way to the corvette's bridge; set the controls for the heart of the sun...

"Darcy here! One to beam over! Commander Wickham has tragically succumbed to his wounds", Colin relished revenge in this universe...

"Course, *Captain?*" Karen grinned at Colin as he entered the bridge... again in a way that would have been most inappropriate on a Federation ship.

"Trackon IV. Our mission", he mused. "I'll run a short memorial service for Commander Wickham".

"Music, Captain?"

Colin smiled. "'*Here Comes The Sun*' by The Beatles", he amused. "Thrice, you're now First Officer".

"Thank you, *Sir*" Karen's voluminous bosom swelled with pride. "I assure you I'll be... *suitably grateful*".

⁴ 'Death, death, sweet death is all' (*Ed.*)

“Then go interrogate the Princess. Extract a confession. Gondar, Bennett, you’re with me. Mission debrief...”

“Report?” Colin sighed resignation they might indeed be marooned here; through this mirror darkly. “Can we restabilise the link and return home?”

“It appears to be easier in space”, Elizabeth calmly affirmed. “There are fewer graviton particles to interfere with the interphasal link. I calculate we can return in six hours. Or we may never get back”.

“Then let’s go for it”, Emma agreed.

oOo

Back in the Prime universe, meanwhile, Section 31 had arrived to take charge of proceedings; headed by the Vulcan, Captain Alfie. Always something of a law unto themselves – he forcibly mind-melded with the ‘prisoners’, to extract their secrets.

“What’s it all about, Alfie?” Karen tried to engage him in a friendly way.

“I can say no more than this is not an unknown phenomenon”, the Vulcan gave her a wuthering stare at such ‘familiarity’.

“What is it then?” Thrice persisted.

“It is *redacted*”, he calmly replied. “Section 31 will deal with this matter. Like an Adele tribute act... they are not who they appear to be”.

“Adele?”

“Hello from the other side”, the Vulcan was cryptic... and as the Section 31 team departed for the transporter room... Karen resolved to contact Georgina Wickham, to find out what had happened...

oOo

Likewise Karen Thrice’s ‘dark’ counterpart. Interrogating the Princess... she became concerned at Captain Darcy’s anomalous behaviour when informed he had tried to betray the Empire.

“All part of his plan to make me his First Officer”, she nevertheless laughed it off. “What are your Rebel plans?”

“The usual”, the Princess sneered. “Shopping. Coffee with friends”.

Such insolence moved Karen to strike her. “Dr Shipman to the brig”, she called. “And bring some truth serum”.

Emma duly arrived. “You know there are side-effects, Commander?” she warned. “Uncontrollable laughing and degradation of motor skills”.

“I care not if she’s drunk”, Thrice showed her ruthless side. “I want that information”.

“Aye Ma’am”, happy in both universes to administer drugs... Shipman obliged; her potion soon taking effect.

“Now Princess”, ‘K’ began again, “Who is the leader of the Rebel Alliance?”

“Me”, drunker than a barrel full of monkeys the Princess chortled.

“Where is the Rebel base?”

“Trackan IV”.

“How many of you are there?”

“400”, the Princess giggled.

“Names?” (out of the corner of her eye ‘K’ noted Shipman depart).

“Well there’s me, Dave, Lucy, Carol, Mike...”

“Enough!” Karen interjected. “What are the defences?”

“Shielded base. 30 fighters. A coffee machine...”

“Ships, Princess! *Ships!*”

“Two”.

“Size and class?”

“Dreadnoughts...”

“Khannnnn!” Karen roared her anger as she deduced who it must be.

“Captain Darcy!” she reported. “We’re gonna need a bigger boat! Call for back-up!”

There was no reply. “Where’s Captain Darcy?”

‘Captain Darcy is in the transporter room’, replied the computer...

“Now”, Elizabeth calmly activated the *ISS ‘Hood’s’* transporter – and stepped onto the pad. There was relief all round as she and the landing party re-materialised on their own, dear, *USS ‘Hood’*.

“Our counterparts?” Colin question Karen.

“Returned by Section 31”, she pointed out the now ubiquitous Captain Alfie.

“Just now. What happened?”

“No doubt I’ll tell you one day”, it is a truth, universally acknowledged in both universes, Captain Colin Darcy was able to play his cards close to his chest...

oOo

“Where’s Wickham?” back on his very own *ISS ‘Hood’*... the enraged Captain Colin Darcy demanded.

“Dead of wounds?” Karen confused. “You made me First Officer?”

Colin nodded. "Space the Rebels that survived", he ordered. "And get me Section 31. I've a report to make..."

oOo

"Lieutenant Green?" Elizabeth questioned as they returned to duty after their adventure through the looking glass. "*Was she murdered by my sister and Lieutenant Lowe?*"

"Not at all", 'K' amused. "She'd left Starfleet without handing in her notice and had retired to a convent. Lieutenant Lowe is innocent".

"Yet, despite being on a 'break', he feels responsible for her breakdown", Lydia too now arrived. "As a point of honour he has sundered all association with me, so as not to give *Rach* the satisfaction of being correct. Oh well, plenty more fish in the sea. That Captain Alfic is quite cute. I wonder if he does foot rubs?"

"Enough", Elizabeth felled her naughty little sister with a Vulcan nerve pinch. '*Oh wee oh*', sounded the intercom.

"Darcy here!" Colin took the call.

"*Blistering barnacles Darcy!*" (it was Admiral Lowe). "*Got a new mission for you. Head out to Trackon IV. Find out why the colonists are suddenly getting all stropky about paying their taxes on time*".

Colin and Elizabeth looked at each other in parallel surprise.

TWO YEARS LATER

'Fair Trade?'

Captain's personal log, stardate 43.27.05. We are again en route to Starbase 12. I have been summoned by Admiral Lowe. Whatever it is will be big and important... much like the Admiral himself..

"Blistering barnacles!" the Admiral Sir Peter Lowe was highly agitated. "If the Klinks and Rommies gang up on us... the Federation could be deader than Debbie Gibson's career!"

"Admiral Lowe is essentially correct", endorsed Commander La'an Noonien-Singh. "At the moment they have trade deal – nothing more. As we understand it the Romulans obtain conventional warp technology and the Klingons receive in exchange superior cloaking tech. Yet... mutual hostility and suspicion remain".

She pressed a button and in stepped a Klingon - none other than Unter of House Duras!

"Duras!" Colin recalled the Klingon had declared blood-feud against George Wickham, his own sister Georgia, *and* the *USS 'Hood'*.

"Darcy!" the Klingon declared with a patronising sneer. "I suspend our feud!"

"Captain Duras is here because he has a greater feud with the Romulan, Admiral Sunak", the Commander confided.

"Sunak?" Colin recalled. "He's still *alive*?"

"After the Praetor's fall the Romulans appointed Trzz", the Admiral explained. "She didn't last long. The new Praetor has surrounded himself with... loyal officers. Including Sunak – recalled from exile on Remus".

"I need a witness. One believable. One as hated as much by both Klingons and Romulans", Duras informed.

"A Federation ship?" Colin deduced.

"The galaxy must *know* it is *they* who fire the first shot! *They* must be seen to be the baddies! They have no honour!"

'That's rich – coming from you', thought Colin.

"And – save James T Kirk..." (Commander Noonien-Singh here felt her heart flutter like a heroine in a Catherine Meadows novel at a life that could have been in a parallel universe), "no one is more hated by both Klingon and Romulan than *you*, Captain Darcy".

"Observe proceedings Darcy", Admiral Lowe firmly ordered. "But don't get involved. Unless you have to, of course. Humanitarian aid, captain's discretion etc etc"

“But how do we know the Romulans will actually open fire?”

Duras smiled. “Leave that to *me*, human...”

‘Summak...’ Colin thought to himself.

oOo

“Parked on our side of the Neutral Zone”, Lieutenant-Commander ‘K’ Thrice brought the ‘*Hood*’ to a dead stop.

“Lieutenant Chang!” Colin ordered. “Relay our coordinates to Admiral Lowe. Inform him – Code Seven – that reports of Romulan and Klingon incursions are both false”.

“Captain?” Chang queried. “Both the Klingons and the Romulans have broken Code Seven?”

“Precisely”, Colin smiled... noted his half-Vulcan wife and Science Officer, Commander Elizabeth Bennett raise a quizzical eyebrow...

“Aye Captain!” Chang activated the coms system.

“Captain”, Elizabeth reported. “Sensors indicate non-Federation vessels approaching. Klingon *and* Romulan...”

“Yellow alert!” Colin ordered – noted his new security chief, Glendower Lowe, son of the infamous Admiral, activate all systems. “Captain!” the handsome security chief reported. “The lead Klingon D-7! It’s the ‘*Grohl*’! Captain Klaang’s ship!”

“Fascinating...” Elizabeth raised a further quizzical eyebrow.

“Merchant vessels present too...” Glendower reported. “On both sides...”

“Federation battlecruiser!” Lieutenant Klunge reported.

“Are they keeping to their side of the Neutral Zone?” Klaang casually dismissed.

“Yes, Captain”.

“They pay then no heed...”

“But it is the ‘*Hood*’!” she insisted. “The war criminal Dracy! Honour demands...”

“Time enough to settle accounts”, he interrupted and dismissed with a casual wave; then added a proverb. “Only a fool pursues a side-quest when there is bloodwine to be had!”

“Enemy... *Romulan* ships approaching!” came a new alert warning.

“On screen!” Klaang ordered.

“*My dear Captain Klaang*”, on the viewscreen came the smiling visage of Admiral Sunak, aboard the Romulan flagship, the Klingon designed ‘*K7*’.

“My dear Admiral Sunak”, Klaang suppressed his emotions. “You are ready to trade?”

“*Weapons powering!*” someone on the Romulan ship reported.

“Treachery!” Klaang exclaimed his immediate assumption...

“*Weapons powering!*” on the bridge of the ‘*Hood*’ Ensign Gondar reported.

“Yellow alert!” Colin ordered. “Whose?”

“Unable to determine, Captain”, at the science station Elizabeth relayed.

“I’ve got a bad feeling about this...” Colin pursed his lip. “Red alert! Shields up! Keep us our side of the Neutral Zone!”

“*Weapons powering!*” on the bridge of the ‘*K7*’ Sub-Commander Selak reported.

“Green alert!” Sunak ordered the coms cut. “*Whose?*” his eyes narrowed in dark hatred.

“Looks like the Klingons!”

“Plasma torpedo away!” the weapons officer reported her precipitous response...

“Romulan *p’taks!*” Klaang snarled as the ‘*Groh!*’s’ drone torpedoes lurched from the rack. “Battle alert! Today is a good day to die!”

“*Every day* is a good day to die!” Klunge agreed - both Klingon and Romulan ships raising shields faster than a Poole Quay tavern-wench re-hoisting her undergarments. “Fire all disrupters!”

‘*Wop!*’ as the energy discharged the battle became quickly a general *melee* - the hired merchantmen on both sides deciding discretion was the better part of valour, a scooted for safety... faster than a Poole Quar footpad hailed by the constabulary...

oOo

Half an hour later it was all over. “They were well-matched?” from the Federation’s side of the Neutral Zone Elizabeth surveyed the not inconsiderable wreckage.

“*Last shuttles and life pods away!*”, from down in Engineering Lieutenant-Commander Sikara reported.

“Any response to our hails?” Colin queried?

“Curt acknowledgements from both Klingon and Romulan commands of our rescue efforts”, Chang responded.

“Reiterate to both powers that their surviving personnel will be kept separate and repatriated”.

“We could render more humanitarian assistance were we cross into transporter range”, Elizabeth reiterated.

“No. Keep the ‘Hood’ our side”, Colin affirmed his decision... privately wondered if Duras had survived – let alone Klaang or Sunak. It was a dark secret he could *never* share with his crew... “Mr Lowe!” he hit his chair com to question. “Do we know yet who fired first?”

“Unable to determine”, from down in Astrometrics the Lieutenant Commander confirmed. “Hay and Swift are processing the data now...”

“Captain!” Chang reported. “Ship incoming! Sir!” she exclaimed. “It’s the ‘King William V’!”

“Our back-up”, Colin grinned wolfishly he’d thought ahead...

Stressful? Not only was the processed data to be shared with both the Klingons and Romulans... down in Astrometrics Ensign Thatcher Swift was finding it hard to focus upon her *task*. Working in close proximity with Lieutenant Matthew Hay was... *distracting* in the extreme...

“Whatever we find they’ll blame each other”, the data analyst (meanwhile) mused. “Spin history to their own ends... Sir?” Matt suddenly reported to Lieutenant Lowe. “Might I suggest we just give them both the raw data? Let them make of it what they may?”

“Well, yes, we’re doing *that*. This is for Starfleet. Commander Noonien-Singh”, Glen grunted dismissively. “If she’s not clandestine Section 31 my father wasn’t a Welsh prop-forward... and my mother a Spanish footballer...”

At that Hay laughed.

“Give me what you’ve got so far”, Glendower requested and – taking the datachip – headed for the bridge...

O

The huge bulk of the Federation super-dreadnought hung in the sky like a small moon. “Captain Klaang”, the Vulcan greeted. “I am Captain Summak of the *USS ‘King William V’*”.

“Big Willie!” Klaang laughed and gestured out of the ‘Hood’s’ porthole. “Yes, I *know* your crew’s nickname for your ship and how it *irritates* your sense of sensibility”.

“As a Vulcan I have no emotional reaction to my crew’s puerile humour”, Summak blocked. “We are merely here to provide you and the Romulan survivors with... *additional security*”.

Klaang laughed. "They fired first, you know? You can't trust the Rommies".

"Curious", Summak raised an eyebrow. "The ranking Romulan officer has already suggested it was *your* Empire who first discharged weapons?"

"You mean Sunak?" Klaang considered. "Is the green-blooded *p'tak* still alive?"

"As a Vulcan I cannot lie", Summak blocked again. "I can, however, decline to respond to your interrogative. Now, you will please accompany me to my vessel".

And as he spoke the '*Hood*' lurched violent and the Red Alert klaxon sounded...

The '*Hood*' lurched violently – and Red Alert sounded. Losing her footing with a momentary loss of gravity... Thatcher grasped to stay upright... and in doing so accidentally ripped the bodice of Lieutenant's Hay's shirt – leaving him like he was James T Kirk, fighting a Gorn.

"Oh God Sir! I'm so *sorry!*" she mortified as the gravity kicked-back in.

"*This is the Captain*", Darcy's voice came over the income. "*Looks like we've been hit by the drift of a Romulan nuclear mine, left over from the battle*".

"*The bulk of the 'King Willian V' may well have created a gravimetric anomaly*", Commander Bennett hypothesised. "*Damage appears minimal*".

"Not to my shirt", Lieutenant Hay now felt almost as embarrassed as the beetroot-faced Ensign.

And it was *then* Lieutenant Lowe came back into the compartment...

oOo

"A genuine accident?" Glendower amused as the '*Hood*' made it's way back to Starbase 12, ready for full repairs for the mine explosion.

"Yes Sir", having just repeated the true story, in his own quarters... Matthew confirmed. "Exactly as I reported".

"You can say what you want here, you know?" Glen empathised.

"I have no assault - sexual or otherwise - to report", Matt stiffly confirmed.

"In which case", the security chief closed up his tricorder, "open and shut case. We're done... See you next shift", he made to leave.

And Matthew Hay breathed a huge sigh of relief Lowe *wasn't* Section 31...

"*Seriously?*" co-opted onto the routine Security investigation... Karen Thrice grinned. She was enjoying a change of duty. "You expect me to believe *that?*" having ascertained the truth... she closed her tricorder.

"*But Lieutenant!*" Thatcher pleaded. "*It is the truth – it really is!*"

“Oh come on!” ‘K’ now teased. “You gotta admit he’s kinda *cute*? I put it to you – Ensign - that when the ship lurched - and the gravity went out... you used it as an *excuse* – an *opportunity* - to have a... quick look under the wrapper?”

“No!” Thatcher protested. “I am an officer - and a gentlewoman!”

‘K’ sighed. “You know he has no girlfriend, Ensign? You’re a lower decker? An *American*”, she waved around the bunk block. “I submit you simply... fancied your chances?”

“I had no knowledge of Lieutenant Hay’s personal circumstances”, the dark side of Thatcher Swift yet filed that pertinent ‘fact’ away. “And that’s a racist accusation”. And then she *alarmed*. “Why? Is Lieutenant Hay *pressing charges*?”

“No”, ‘K’ decided she’d teased enough... and to finally let her off the hook. “But... he was seen in the corridor, you know? Going to change his uniform. My guess is... it’s all over the ship by now?”

“Oh my Gods!” Thatcher alarmed.

“Yours?” as she got up to leave ‘K’ picked up an old-style ‘chick-lit’ novel, ‘*Bleak Expectations*’ by Charlotte Dickens.

“Er, yes...” Thatcher blushed.

“Chapter Twelve”, ‘K’ knew the book well. “Those jungle creepers...” she tutted. “Always ripping clothing there too, eh? *Coincidence*? Don’t leave town...” was her parting shot...

As the ‘*Hood’s*’ helmswoman left the bunkroom... Ensign Tama Sh'zaless entered. “How’d it go?” her Andorian antenna twitched?

“No charges. *Officially* they believe me. But...”

“*But?*”

“People will *know*... It’s embarrassing...”

“Come the next gossip it’ll be forgotten”, Tama reassured.

“I would not wish to lose Lieutenant Hay’s respect and regard”, Thatcher quelled her inner fears...

‘An Unexpected Opportunity’

Captain’s log, stardate 43.56.07. We are approaching Deep Space Station C3PO on the Klingon border. Once again, it appears we in the ‘Hood’ have a ‘shadow’, our old ‘friend’ the IKS ‘Grohl’. With conflict again brewing across the

Neutral Zone we shall need to be cautious to avoid any... 'Imperial entanglements'...

"My dear Captain Darcy", Klaang's grizzled visage appeared on the 'Hood's' viewscreen.

"My dear Captain Klaang", Colin smiled back.

"We claim shore rights. As per the criminally imposed Organian Treaty".

"Fair dos. As you say, Captain. Agreed by treaty. Have a nice day", sporting his best smile Colin logged-off.

"Captain?" his science officer (and spouse) the half-Vulcan Elizabeth Bennett queried the logic of this.

Colin shrugged. "That's why Starfleet have sent us here. Double *all* security patrols", he left for his ready room. "Lieutenant Chang... get me Admiral Lowe on a secure channel..."

oOo

The movie had been the original of '*Bridget Jones Diary*'... and the after-show bar was packed... with both Klingon *and* Federation crew.

Needless to say the atmosphere was tenser than an Arsenal supporter in an ethics examination.

"...you have not heard Helen Fielding until you have heard her in the original Klingon", one of the former crew loudly bragged. "How say you, Vulcan?" she then turned to provoke and *accost*.

As part of the 'Hood's' shore party Ensign Thatcher Swift tried to ignore the Klingon's loudness.

"I do not understand why - given their parental approval", accepting the challenge Ensign Suslak now used Vulcan logic to dissect the plot, "Darcy and Jones did not commit to a bond at commencement. Their courtship was most... illogical".

"That's humans for you", Tama Sh'zaless here teased Thatcher.

"There'd be no story otherwise", she defended the plot of love delayed.

And it was *then* the power conduit ruptured. As beings fled the bar the emergency forcefields fell into place. The evacuation was quite orderly, the Starfleet personnel ensuring the civilians and Klingon 'guests' were out first.

And then the forcefield failed – and air began to escape...

"Lupa?" one of the loud Klingon females checked.

"Too much bloodwine – she was..."

Realisation dawned - and they rushed back into the room – only to quickly fall unconscious; Klingon blood having less haemoglobin than many species.

“On me!” Thatcher heard herself suddenly take charge – as Tama and Suslak aided the would-be rescuers searched in the thin air for the unconscious Klingon. She found her as - mercifully – the forcefield held to a slow leak. Dragging the Klingon female Lupa by her boots Thatcher was alarmed to see the forcefield again partially fail; dizziness engulf...

oOo

“You’ll be Ok”, Dr Shipman saw her patient had come round. “Well done. No lives lost... No diplomatic incident”.

“Do we know what caused the explosion?” Thatcher suddenly recalled.

“Maintenance failure. Least, that’s the official story... It didn’t start a war. Patient’s awake”, she punched the intercom and reported directly to the captain, on the bridge...

“Am I in trouble, Sir?” Thatcher accepted the proffered chair.

“Far from it, Ensign”, Colin smiled. “You actually impressed the Klingons”.

“That’s no easy feat, Ensign”, ‘mentor’ Karen Thrice smiled approval of her *padawan*.

“The crewperson you rescued. No ordinary Klingon. Lupa. Sergeant Lupa. House Grilka”.

Thatcher’s eyes widened.

“As in *Chancellor Grilka*?”

Colin nodded. “His niece”.

“Their rank of ‘Sergeant’ equates with ‘Ensign’”, ‘K’ informed.

“She wants to meet you”, the Captain explained. “To thank you in person. Admiral Lowe has agreed. Diplomacy...”

“Of course, Sir”, Thatcher wondered if she was up to the task - noted Commander Bennett raise one of her habitual quizzical eyebrows...

“You are to be a diplomat – not a spy”, came the order. “But, do, please... keep your eyes open. The ‘maintenance failure’ could easily have been sabotage. And we all know who’d profit from a war between us and the Klingons”.

Nobody needed to actually say the word ‘Romulan’...

oOo

“Captain! Ship dropping out of warp!” Shak Gondar reported.

“Ours or theirs?” Colin alarmed as he swung in his chair.

“Kinda *both*, Sir”, Karen Thrice reported. “It’s the *USS ‘Lannister’*...”

“Wickham...” Colin recalled the *Hood’s* Orien (former) First Officer...

The Klingon transporter room was dark. All Klingon rooms were dark. Their eyes were different. As she materialised... Thatcher braced herself for her ‘away mission’ aboard the *IKS ‘Grohl’*...

“You are Thatcher Swift?” the beaming Klingon female greeted by baring her fangs.

“Yes”, Thatcher knew she dare not show fear. “Pleased to meet you again... Lupa. I trust you have recovered well?”

“I owe you a debt of honour”, the female proudly drew her dagger and cut her hand. “Blood oath! By Grabthar's hammer, by the suns of Worvan, should any wrong you my sister - you shall be avenged”.

Thatcher quelled her alarm. “Oh course... Thank you. That’s be *nice*...” understanding she raised her palm – had her quickly slashed hand clasp Lupa’s, to mingle *blood*...

“There are those who say the Federation are not to be trusted”, she snarled. “There are those who say we must *trust* in face of the Romulan threat. Now, I extend Klingon hospitality”, she gestured at the door.

“Of course”, Thatcher felt her heart leap in her mouth as to what that might possibly entail...

O

With such a heavy Starfleet (and Klingon) presence the usual low-life of the space station C3PO was decidedly absent of its usual smugglers and traders.

Yet tensions remained. ‘Hah! Hah!’ the *USS ‘Lannister’s’* Ensigns sniggered as the waiter slapped-back Jaqui Hawkins for being improperly familiar with his person.

“Yews keep your hands off me!” he demanded.

But Hawkins was having none of it. Again she moved to embrace him...

This - finally - was too much for Ensign Tama Sh'zaless. “The gentleman said to leave him alone!” she rose to her feet, the poor boy scuttling away.

Silence fell across the bar. “Says *whom*?” Hawkins stood up to her.

“You’re drunk...” the poor boy now safe from Hawkins’ unwanted advances... Tama attempted to diffuse. “Manners maketh person, right?”

“Well *you* wouldn’t *know* what to do with a male!” Hawkins now chose to escalate - her drunken companions shifting chairs, preparing to back her up.

“A lady, *Madam*, needs no instruction from a... *rake*”, Tama stood her ground - was gratified to see her chums too array by her side.

“Just like their Captain”, Jaqui Hawkins now jested. “*Useless!*”

Her companions laughed. “Everyone’s entitled to an opinion...” Ensign Suslak moved to prevent Tama reacting violently to such an insult to their beloved master and commander.

“*Our skipper* - Captain Wickham”, Hawkins again goaded, “he knows all about the Darcys. Used to serve on the ‘*Hood*’. Well, Cap’n Darcy’s sister at least... by all accounts!”

More laughter. “She’s not worth it...” Suslak again firmly suggested restraint.

“But then our ship - the ‘*Lannister*’”, Hawkins continued to provoke, “is a proper *man o’war*. Not like that garbage scowl the ‘*Hood*’!”

And it was then – illogical though it was - Ensign Suslak administered the Vulcan nerve-pinch... more punches following...

O

“They say humans cannot manage bloodwine?” the diplomatic niceties over Lupa amused after her third goblet.

“Well... maybe just another...” Thatcher felt her head swim – was thankful for Dr Shipman’s injection.

“You have a mate? Lupa now challenged.

“Er, no”, Thatcher immediately thought of her regulation-forbidden *inclination* for Lieutenant Hay. “You?”

“Males are all useless *p’taks*”, Lupa complained and dismissed. “They have no *honour*. They see me of a Noble House as but a chance to advance their miserable careers”.

“Oh that’s a shame”, Thatcher felt the bloodwine suddenly rush her sense of sensibility. “Is there nobody you *like*?”

“I am not like your fictional Bridget Jones. When I find a male worthy whom I find agreeable – I shall take him to husband! How do you humans *mate*?”

“Er, we *court*”, Thatcher explained. “It is a long process. Much like Bridget Jones, actually...”

And it was after the next bloodwine that she finally lost *track*...

oOo

“*Blistering barnacles!*” Admiral Sir Peter Lowe roared down the subspace. “*I will not have my officers brawling in taverns!*”

“*Ensigns, Sir...*” Wickham yet managed a smirk. Had they been in the same room Colin knew he would have struck him...

"You will be silent Sir!" the Admiral roared his disapproval. *"You - you too Darcy - you will discipline your motley crews! Cancel all further shore leave! Dismissed!"*

"Commander Bennett!" Colin signalled the bridge. *"Recall all our crew!"*
"Of course, Captain. Ensign Swift has also beamed back aboard. Doctor Shipman has taken her to sickbay..."

"On my way!" Colin moved with the utmost alacrity...

oOo

"As much as you can remember, Ensign".

"In truth I wasn't allowed to see much", Thatcher opined. *"Our Klingon friends are most... cautious".*

"Friends?"

"Why create enemies when you don't need to?"

"True. So what did you do?"

"Usual girl stuff", here Thatcher appealed to Karen. *"Lupa and I drank bloodwine... and discussed how beastly boys are – in all species".*

Karen laughed. *"If you think of anything else... let me know",* Colin too raised a smile.

'Oh-wee-ha!' sounded the intercom. *"Darcy here?"* Colin answered.

"Orders, Captain", Commander Bennett relayed. *"We are to proceed to the Tutin system. It appears our Klingon... friends... are claiming planet IV".*

"On my way – Darcy out!" he wondered if the *'Grohl'* would remain at Station C3PO... and hoped to God the *'Lannister'* wasn't coming with them...

oOo

It was a fairly grim 'captain's conference'. In the carrier *'Akagi'* Acting-Commodore Yamamoto was clear. *"Admiral Lowe's orders are most precise. We are to deny the Tutin system to the Klingons by all means necessary".*

"Understood", one-by-one the skippers signed off. On paper it was an impressive fleet. In addition to the *'Hood'* there were the *Constitution class* cruisers *'Excalibur', 'Victory'* and *'Bismarck'*. The carrier *'Akagi'* (of course) and the destroyers *'Drake', 'Skywalker'* and *'Baggins'*.

What the Klinks had was unknown... but Colin Darcy did not expect them to be *undergunned*...

On the bridge of the *IKS 'G'roth'* Koloth reclined in his seat. As a 'legend' he might have been expected to lead this fleet. No matter. Kringle was worthy and

– if it all went ‘wrong’ he – Koloth - would not be to blame. As well as his own D7 battlecruiser there were the D6’s ‘D’k’Tahg’, ‘Kut’luch’, the D7’s ‘Kahless’, ‘Voh’tahk’ and ‘Klothos’ – plus the carrier ‘Kannaga’. Klaang on the ‘Grohl’ had reported amongst their likely Federation adversaries would be the war-criminal Darcy of the ‘Hood’. Sobeit. ‘There will be an answer, let it be’.

Tutin IV was a strange new world that must be seized for the Empire...

Scans indicated the planet had much ice in close orbit – and with an orbiting nebula cloud. As the ‘G’roth’ dropped out of warp Koloth noted the carrier start to launch fighters.

“Captain! Federation battlecruisers! Including the *USS ‘Hood’!*”

“The war-criminal Darcy...” Koloth acknowledged Klaang’s intelligence had indeed been sound. “Follow directions and advance on the planet!” he noted some federation destroyers attempt to ‘sneak’ around the nebula cloud for a flank attack...

“This is Captain Kringe of the IKS ‘Kannaga’. Federation vessels. You will disengage and leave this system’.

“This is Commodore Yamamoto of the USS ‘Akagi’. By the spirits of my ancestors we do not accept you demand. My orders from our gallant Admiral Lowe are most precise. You will please withdraw”.

“Your bluffing!”

“You may test that assumption at your convenience!”

Koloth signed. With such beings bloody conflict was unavoidable. ‘There will be an answer, let it be’. ‘Today is a good day to die...’

The manoeuvring continued. “Orders Commodore?”

“Like my ancestors in World War II I prefer direct action”, Yamamoto swung excitedly in his chair. “Open fire!”

“We’re out of range Sir?”

“I wish to make a *point...*” he swung again...

As the ‘Klothos’ moved into orbit to formally claim the planet... Koloth ordered the ‘G’roth’ to close in on the war-criminal Darcy and his rustbucket ‘Hood’. The Federation battlecruisers were advancing in phalanx.

“*Baktag!*” someone exclaimed as a drone homed-in on the hated ‘Hood’... only to be intercepted by the alien’s point-defence...

In a battle Thatcher Swift’s ‘action station’ was to assist with repairs... Astrometrics being of limited use. And by now the action was becoming general - an ‘engage the enemy more closely’ moment.

“The ‘*Darke’s*’ bought it”, someone laconically reported as the hulk of the destroyed destroyer appeared on the vidscreen. “*Bismarck’s*’ been hit too...”

Suddenly there was loud ‘thump sound’. “We’re venting! Damage control!” someone shouted... but there was no panic as Thatcher and her team moved to help seal the breach...

‘Once more into the breach’? Lieutenant Hay grappled to control the forcefield and stop the vent – blood from falling superstructure coursing down his cheek as he and Lieutenant-Commander Glendower Lowe struggled to shore-up the bulkhead.

“We’re still moving towards the enemy...” someone alarmed as the ‘*Excalibur*’ exploded and the ‘*Victory*’ too hung dead in space...

“Bloody fool carrier officer will get us all killed...” they saw the ‘*Baggins*’, ‘*Skywalker*’ and ‘*Bismarck*’ also revert to so much space debris.

Nor did it seem that the Klingons were especially suffering in response.

“*This is Captain Darcy!*” sounded the intercom. “*Ensign Swift to the bridge immediately!*”

Despite himself Matthew Hay felt sudden concern for his young colleague...

“Captain?” Thatcher stepped onto the smashed bridge of the ‘*Hood*’.

“Ensign. Commodore Yamamoto has committed suicide - *hara-kiri*”, the ‘*Hood’s*’ skipper was grave as he informed. “We’ve got one chance left, Ensign. And you’re *it*. The Klingons owe you”.

“Your bloodoath”, Commander Bennett quietly elaborated. “It may be our only chance”.

“I see...” Thatcher knew their fate was in her hands. “I’ll do my best...”

“That’s all we can ask, Ensign. Transfer command now to Ensign Swift!”

“Aye aye Sir”, at Coms Lieutenant Chang confirmed the captain cede to Thatcher the centre-seat.

“Hail the Klingons...” nervously sitting she ordered.

“Channel open Captain!”

“Klingon commander!” Thatcher spoke to the viewscreen. “This is Ensign Thatcher Swift in command of the *USS’ Hood*’. We concede the planet to the Klingon Empire. I claim by rite of bloodoath to Lupa Grilka that you permit our surviving vessels depart”.

On screen the astonished Kringe hastily conferred (presumably with his captains). “*It is granted*”, he smiled the smirk of victory and humiliation. *The debt of House Grilka to you is now paid. In full. You have Five killsecs. No more*”.

oOo

Thatcher felt awkward in her dress uniform as she left the board of enquiry... but she was relieved her ordeal was over.

“You did well”, her Andorian ‘pal’ Tama Sh'zaless waved her antenna. “I think Admiral Brewer was impressed”.

“Well done in giving your evidence, Ensign”, a smiling Lieutenant Hay strode over. “Looks like Starfleet approve your unorthodoxly saving our bacon”.

“I hadn’t expected to call in my bloodoath so quickly”, Thatcher noticed Tama had beat a hasty retreat.

“Well it’s done now”, he smiled and walked off. Thatcher felt her maidenly bosom swell with forbidden desire. But Starfleet regulations are most precise. The difference in rank between them made any *romance* impossible.

If only she could win promotion...

“I have been reliably informed by Starfleet, Ensign”, Commander Bennett now came over, “that for your coolness under fire promotion is being considered”.

“Will Captain Darcy recommend me, Commander?” Thatcher’s heart skipped with a new hope.

“He will first need to read Lieutenant-Commander Lowe’s report”, Elizabeth raised a quizzical eyebrow. “And fathom the opinion of Lieutenant Hay...”

‘What fault is now in my stars?’ Thatcher thought...

‘Trouble In Astrometrics...’

Captain’s log, stardate 43.63.07. We are again approaching Starbase 12, following the ‘incident’ at Tutin IV. Repairs will be necessary during the board of enquiry. Starfleet are playing it down, but Commodore Yamamoto, it appears, grossly exceeded Admiral Lowe’s orders to be ‘firm’, but not ‘belligerent’...

Breezily entering Astrometrics with a skip in her step... Thatcher Swift decided to boldly go and take the initiative.

“Stripes on my arm now, *Matt*”, she teased Hay. “Lieutenant *too*. You no longer outrank *me*”.

“On the contrary *Thatch*”, he shot back a weary grin. “My commission is older... Push comes to shove... I still *do*”.

It was then the ship suddenly *lurched*. Thatcher found she had the presence of mind to (this time) avoid indecently colliding with Matthew...

'Oh wee ha!' sounded the intercom. "*All hands, this is the bridge. We have encountered a hitherto uncharted spatial anomaly*", it was the stoic half-Vulcan voice of Commander Bennett. "*Astrometrics, stand by to investigate...*"

"Looks like we're on..." Matthew amused. "Ok people, let's get it nailed down..."

Boldly entering Astrometrics... Thatcher Swift decided to take the initiative. "Stripes on my arm now, *Matt*", she teased Hay. "You no longer outrank me".

"On the contrary *Thatch*", he shot back. "My commission is older... I could still... *discipline you*", he ambiguously flirted.

It was then the ship lurched. Thatcher found she had the presence of mind to (accidentally on purpose) indecently collide with Matthew – grab at his powerful, desirable, masculine chest...

'Oh wee ha!' sounded the intercom. "*All hands, this is the bridge. We have encountered a hitherto uncharted spatial anomaly*", it was the stoic voice of Commander Darcy, the ship's First Officer. "*Astrometrics, stand by to investigate...*"

"Looks like we're on..." Matthew amused. "Ok people, let's get it nailed down..." he pushed Thatcher away – respect for authority *all* on the draconian ISS '*Hood*'...

O

"What just happened?" Colin asked his science officer, and spouse, Commander Bennett – but before she could respond a hail came up from Astrometrics.

"*Astrometrics here, Lieutenant Hay reporting. Just as we sent or graviton pulse one came in from... well... what I can only call the 'other side'*."

"A spacetime rift is indeed developing, Captain", Elizabeth raised a quizzical eyebrow as she duly reported...

"By Grabthar's hammer - by the suns of Worvan, what the ****ck** is *that!*" Ensign Gondor exclaimed.

"I know *just* what it is", Captain Bennett swung contemptuously in her chair; a most un-Vulcan smirk upon her lips. "Chang! Open a hailing frequency!"

"Open Captain!"

“This is Captain Elizabeth Bennett of the *ISS ‘Hood’* hailing unknown Constitution class vessel believed to be the *USS ‘Hood’*. Captain Colin P Darcy last known to be in command?”

“*This is Captain Darcy*”, a ‘bright mirror’ appeared on the viewscreen. “*It seems Captain, we have a shared problem? I suggest it is in our mutual interest to seal this breach between universes and return our respective... business?*”

“Affirmative. My thought exactly. I suggest we remain upon our respective vessels and have our Astrometrics departments liaise via a secure subspace link... the better to avoid further... *contamination?*”

“*Agreed. I’ll have my AM chief Lieutenant Hay contact your head of AM. Who is, please?*”

Elizabeth curled her lips into a most un-Vulcan smile. “As luck would have it... likewise Lieutenant Hay...”

oOo

“Ensign Perry!” Thatcher decided to pull her new rank against the skulking denizen of the lower deck. “Please return to your assignment in Quantum Mechanics. Captain Darcy has ordered *no* unauthorised personnel... the better in minimise contact with our mirror counterparts”.

“Oh come on Thatch, it’s only *me*”, Katie Perry attempted to inveigle. “I just wanna to take a sneak peak. You know, might see my doppelganger”.

Thatcher firmly shook her head. “Precisely *why* Captain Darcy has given the order. And it’s *Lieutenant Swift* to you, *Ensign*”, she was firm. “Please depart”.

Reluctantly Katie did so. ‘I know why you’re really here’, Thatcher more than suspected she too harboured *romantic desires* for Lieutenant Hay...

“Ensign Perry!” Thatcher decided to pull her new rank against the denizen of the lower deck. “Return to your assignment in Quantum Mechanics. Captain Bennett has ordered *no* unauthorised personnel... the better in minimise contact with our mirror counterparts”.

“Oh come on Thatch, it’s only *me*. I just wanna to take a sneak peak. Might getta see my doppelganger, huh?”

Thatcher firmly shook her head. “Precisely *why* Captain Bennett has given the order. And it’s *Lieutenant Swift* to you, *Ensign*. Depart. *Now...*”

Perry however... *resisted*. “I know your game, *Thatch*. You think just because you’ve made Lieutenant you can get in with Matt? Well... you die... we all advance in rank?”

Too much? A clear *threat*? “Badly played...” Thatcher quickly drew her dagger and held it to the Ensign’s face. “A cut here and now... and that pretty

face of yours will be gone. No one will question the disfiguring of a stroppey Ensign..."

"You're bluffing!"

"Americans never bluff..."

O

"Gotta ask?" Matt Hay smiled across subspace at his counterpart. "How d'you get that scar?"

"*Bar fight with some Nausicaans on Ryman VI*", his counterpart responded with amusement. "*You ready to begin?*"

"When you are".

"*Sync chronos to five*".

"Acknowledged... 4... 3... 2..."

"...2 ...1" everyone on the bridge of the '*Hood*' held their breath. "It's working, Captain", Commander Bennett reported.

"Like a wound in space being healed", Dr shipman was poetic.

"Quite so", Colin punched his chair intercom. "Astrometrics! Good work!"

"*I couldn't have done it without myself*", Lieutenant Hay reported back.

"*We'll continue to take readings for as long as we can...*"

"*...couldn't have done it without myself*", Lieutenant Hay reported back.

"*We'll continue to take readings for as long as we can...*"

"Did you notice much difference in your counterpart?" it now amused Elizabeth Bennett's human side to ask.

"*The mirror Hay had a rather nasty scar from a fight with some Nausicaans. Clearly they don't shoot first over there...*"

"No, I guess they *don't*..."

"Universal breach closed Captain", Commander Darcy reported.

"*Good. All decks report in...*"

"*Lieutenant Swift here*", came a hail. "*I've apprehended Ensign Perry attempting to reach the transporter room to transfer to the mirror universe!*"

"*You lying bitch!*"

"Agony booth!" Darcy immediately ordered. "Discipline and respect for the chain of command must be maintained", he had little time for guilt or innocence or justice... just the maintenance of order..."

O

A first time for everything? Nervously Thatcher entered the Lieutenant's mess... felt her heart skip as she saw Matt was there; eating his usual post work meal of alcohol-free beer; chocolates and buns.

"Hi Thatch!" looking up at her he smiled. "Welcome to the madhouse! You did well today".

"Gotta ask", Thatcher smiled. "Did you see my mirror counterpart? In your dealings?"

"Nope", he grinned, his facial scare crinkling. "Fancy a beer?" he passed one over. "Starbase 12 in three hours..."

"Thanks", Thatcher accepted a new hope of taming this rogue one...

And it was *then* Red Alert sounded....

"On screen!" Captain Darcy ordered.

"Blistering barnacles Darcy!" it was the grinning monocular continuance of Admiral Lowe. *"Ballons gone up over the Neutral Zone. More spatial anomalies! The Romulans are accusing us. They're using it as an excuse to occupy Tresco IV. Proceed there at maximum warp. List of the rest of your Task Force appended"*.

The Admiral's orders were most precise. "Mr Gondar! Set course of Tresco IV. Ms Thrice! Hit it – maximum warp!"

oOo

Appointed Task Force commander... Captain Darcy tried to relax in his command chair as the 'Hood' dropped out of warp; it's consorts the Constitution Class 'Excalibur', 'Mikasa', and the destroyers 'Drake', 'Rommel' and 'Napoleon'.

"The Romulan fleet appears to be in occupation already", Lieutenant-Commander Glendower Lowe observed.

"I suspect there's at least one cloaked ship as well", Karen Thrice suggested. "Sneaky ****ers, those Rommies!" she added in her casual idiom.

"Advise the fleet – and advance full sub-light", he order Lieutenant Chang – wanted to be where systems could feed maximum warp power into weapons...

"Romulans breaking orbit to engage", Elizabeth calmly reported.

"...tain Colin P. Darcy representing the United Federation of Planets. You are in our space, in breech of Neutral Zone treaty. Please withdraw immediately".

"Fire weapons – nearest enemy battlecruiser!" Sub-Commander Torpal had his answer prepared – the disrupters of his Klingon designed cruiser 'K2' smashing into the USS 'Excalibur' and through its shields...

*

The UFP's reply was devastating. The concentrated formation of Federation ships in close formation obliterated the 'K2'.

"'Excalibur's' bought a packet", standing by to act as repair crew Lieutenant Hay observed.

"Yeah..." Thatcher agreed – wondered what fate awaited the 'Hood'. "Look!" she suddenly exclaimed – as behind them the Romulan Warbird 'War Cry' suddenly decloaked....

"Withdraw?" the Centurion suggested.

"And be executed for failure?" Torpal knew they had no choice but to continue the action; as they watched the 'War Talon' crumpling and imploding in flame. "Fire all weapons! Target the enemy flagship!" he was pleased (at least) to see the 'War Cry's' ambush had succeeded in eliminating the Federation destroyer 'Rommel'; the battlecruiser 'Excalibur' too now crippled...

'Spaceman's wind'? As the forcefields clicked into place the 'Hood' lurched under a further salvo. It wasn't death *per se* that Thatcher Swift feared the most – but the thought that she might die without ever being certain whether or not Matthew returned the most ardent affection and deep regard that she felt for him...

"Look's like we're winning", he grinned at no one in his team in particular – if the loss of the 'Rommel' a cruel blow... the elimination of the 'War Cry' and 'K9' leaving the 'K7' the sole surviving Rommie...

"Cloak!" desperate to slip away by stealth Sub-Commander Chelk observed the enemy destroyer 'Drake' too was crippled – damage done ('even if the battle now an obvious defeat').

"Take it slow – let's get him", Darcy quietly ordered his squadron as they went into full 'cloak-hunter' mode, the better to play out their game of cat-and-mouse. "Remember – while he's cloaked he can't fire..."

"The 'Napoleon' reports contact", Elizabeth reported. "She's firing now".

In the end it was probably appropriate that it was the destroyer that avenged its sister ship 'Rommel' by delivering the *coup-de-grace*...

O

"Any more anomalies pop-up – I wanna know", back at Starbase 12 Captain Darcy congratulated his Astrometrics team on their work. "Remember – we

don't talk about it", he re-advised any contact with the so-called 'mirror universe' was redacted, under orders from Section 31.

With a smile he departed. Alone at last? In a swift move Matthew pulled Thatcher into his arms to declare his undying affection...

But it was just her mind playing tricks. "You Ok, Thatch?" he instead queried.

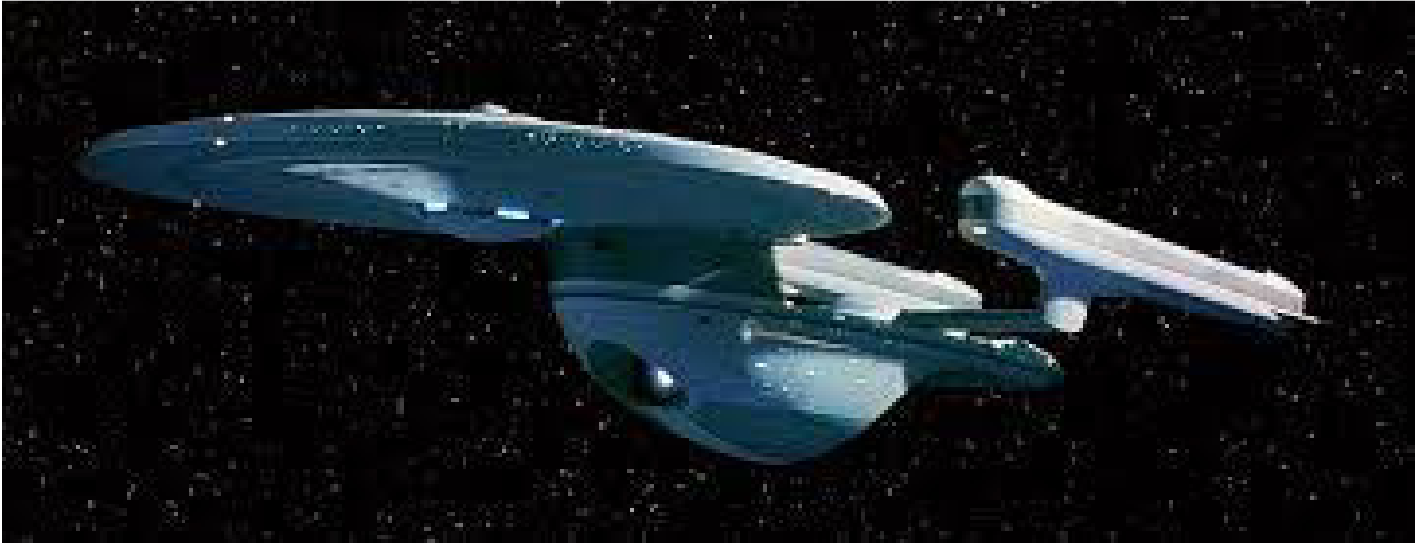
"Er, yes..."

"Someone's gotta remain on duty... You wanna take your shore leave on the Starbase first?"

"Er, whatever suits best", blushing she agreed... wondered what the next mission would bring...

MANY YEARS LATER

'The Land Of The Dancing Dead'



Captain's log, Stardate 83:89:78. 2286 by the old calendar. The 'Hood' is on manoeuvres in the Fasha sector, exercising with our new 'Klingon friends' (sic). Rumours persist of 'strange alien incursions' from a race know only as the Ferengi. Warlike? Who can be sure. What I do know is we must be ready for anything...

"Status report?" Captain Glendower Lowe eased himself into the command seat of the *USS 'Hood'* as his first officer, Commander Swift, vacated.

"Sensor blips", she reported. "Nothing more. The *'Grohl'* reports they must be Ferengi vessels".

"Mm..." the Captain guffawed – knew Kringe was itching for a fight. That was, after all, 'the Klingon way'. And his orders from Starfleet were most precise. Admiral Darcy had agreed the *'Hood'* and her consort be under Klingon command for 'diplomatic reasons'. He'd served with Darcy back on the old *'Hood'*... couldn't quite *trust* his former skipper's judgement...

"Captain Kringe is hailing us, Sir?" at coms Lieutenant Peters reported.

"On screen!" Glen requested.

"*Lowe*", the Klingon was perfunctory. "*They have crossed the border. We Klingons know how to deal with pirates and free-traders. Follow my lead! K'pla!*"

The image faded. "Red alert! Shields up!" the captain of the *'Hood'* ordered...

“You seem quite content for the Klingons to lead?” in the Captain’s ready-room Thatcher questioned.

“If it all goes wrong we can blame them”, Glen was sanguine.

“*About to drop out of warp, Captain*”, Lieutenant Peters reported.

“On our way!” Captain Lowe snapped the intercom and prepared to return to his bridge.

As if on cue the ‘*Hood*’ and its consorts – two further *Excelsior* class – the ‘*Andoria*’ and the ‘*Mars*’ dropped out of warp. Ahead of them the Klingons were already engaging the Ferengi. “Rash”, Thatcher observed...

“Message from the Ferengi, Sir”, Peters reported.

“On screen!”

“*Back off hoo-mans*”, a grinning Ferengi visage appeared. “*This system was ours two hundred years ago – and we are now taking it back. Our Gods say this is so*”.

“That old chestnut...” Glen saw there was no possibility of reply – that those who live by the sword must inevitably perish from it...

The fleets closed into combat – *IKS ‘Ravenclaw’* in the vanguard.

“Federation battlecruisers!” came the report.

“Better late than never”, Kringe amused from this flagship, the K’T’Inga class *IKS ‘Grohl’* (effectively a heavily refitted *D7*). “Attack shields! Red alert!” he ordered: he relishing battle with the squat and scrunched Ferengi *ptaks*.

Yet they were already scoring hits – their plan clearly to isolate his squadron before the Federation could intervene.

“Fire!” he did *not* want the ‘*Ravenclaw*’ to steal his thunder...

“Blistering barnacles! Those Ferengi ships are huge... Flank speed to close!” Captain Lowe ordered his squadron. If he displayed the gruff Welsh exterior of his father, he knew too he had inherited his mother’s fiery, Spanish, nature...

“A shuttle! A shuttle! My latinum for a shuttle!” Captain Bjork of the ‘*Trader*’ was desperate to survive as the fleets closed.

But it was not to be. Crumpled and venting air... his ship was as dead in space as Debbie Gibson’s career – then suddenly exploded as a final drone impacted; ended all chance of survival...

By now it was clear the allies were getting the best of it - the Ferengi doing their best to manoeuvre to the (weaker) rear shields of the ‘*Grohl*’ as-one by one – their ships went down for ‘salvage’.

But then the *'Hood'* too was hit – the Klingons mainly finishing the battle by pulverising the surviving Ferengi ships – the Federation squadron making short work of the *'Renegade'*...

“Looks like they got the *'Ravenclaw'*”, Thatcher observed the screen.

“Damage report!” as ship’s exec she demanded...

“*First officer!*” the intercom sounded. “*You’d better get down here...*”

“Go!” Glen instantly recognised Dr Braverman’s grave tone...

And it was then Thatcher Swift *knew*...

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“*K’pla!*” Captain Kringe grinned down the vidscreen.

“Yours is the victory, Captain”, Glendower was happy to concede the honour to the Klingon, and to get back to Starbase 12. To be frank, he was more concerned about his own casualties. He’d seen the report. He knew it would deeply affect his First Officer...

“It’s Matt, isn’t it?” Thatcher burst into Sick Bay.

“Lieutenant-Commander Hay is badly wounded, yes”, Dr Braverman confirmed with a heavy sigh.

“Can I see him?”

“We’ve put him in stasis. Until we get to Starbase. There’s a good chance he’ll make it. With their specialist care...”

Was she just being ‘kind’? Thatcher Swift knew not what to think...

TO BE CONTINUED...

