

BELOW DECKS: NIMROD

A *STAR TREK* STORY
BY BRENDAN ARCHER



Foreword

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This story is a political thriller containing M4M erotic elements and graphic scenes of an adult nature. It is not suitable for minors or those who are not legally permitted to access adult content in their jurisdiction.

Author's Notes

The events in this story take place in 2375, in the 24th Century, approximately four months after the events of Star Trek: Deep Space Nine finale episode 'What we Leave Behind', in a similar timeframe to the events of Star Trek: Insurrection.

Chapter 1



Stardate 52963.1 (2375)

Lieutenant Bransen Andrews was not having the night he'd planned.

He stood at the viewport of his quarters aboard the USS Canberra, fingers drumming restlessly against the side of his glass. The synthetic gin and tonic inside caught the dim lighting of the room, refracting sharp little flares against the transparent aluminum. When he set it down, the glass landed with a dull thunk, louder than intended, rattling the ice inside.

He ran his thumb along the smooth curve of the second gold pip on his collar—still new enough that it didn't feel real. Still new enough that some people hesitated before calling him "Lieutenant."

The reunion was happening right now: the remaining Excelsior-class ships of the ANZAC batch, all gathered at Starbase 21 for the first time in over a decade. A formal dinner in the grand hall. Officers in

dress whites, toasts, memorials, and war stories swapped across long white-clothed tables. The kind of night that made careers. The kind of night where a junior lieutenant could make an impression just by being in the room.

And Bransen wasn't in the room. He was stuck here.

Commander Vallona, the Canberra's Executive Officer, had delivered the news that afternoon with all the quiet certainty of Vulcan logic.

"You are assigned as duty officer tonight, Lieutenant. The schedule has been updated accordingly."

It hadn't even been a conversation. Just fact.

Bransen had nearly argued. Not because it made sense, but because it didn't feel fair. Commander Grankegh—the ship's Tellarite Chief Medical Officer—had been listed on the duty roster for weeks. But there was no point trying to win an emotional argument with a Vulcan. Vallona wasn't cruel, and she wasn't targeting him. She was simply executing her duty without indulgence. Stern, yes. But fair.

He'd bitten his tongue and left the ready room before he said something that would get him a formal reprimand.

Now, alone in his cabin, he paced.

The space was functional but lived-in: standard-issue bunk, desk and terminal, narrow wardrobe, a replicator with one corner just slightly scuffed from an old dropped tray. It was clean, organized, and unmistakably his. Three holos sat above his desk—his Academy graduation portrait, the war briefing team from Betazed, and a shot with his brother, leaning against a railing on Mars, laughing too hard to keep the camera steady.

His dress uniform lay on the bed, still untouched. The white jacket gleamed faintly in the dim cabin light, gold piping crisp, the collar folded sharp. He'd had it tailored—not for vanity, but for confidence. It hugged his torso in a way that made him feel like he'd earned the rank it bore.

He turned toward the mirror.

His naturally pale skin held a light bronze tone—one he'd cultivated since the Academy. Just enough to look healthy, fit, alive. He liked

how it softened the angles of his face, brought out the contrast in his dark hair and features. His maroon undershirt clung to a lean, defined build—shoulders shaped by reps in the ship's gym, waist tight, lines visible where his abs began to cut. Not bulky. Not even particularly big. But confident.

It had taken him years to get there. He still saw the lanky cadet from Cornwallis Colony in the mirror sometimes—narrow-chested, awkward in uniform, always feeling half a step behind. Now, though... now he liked the way people looked at him.

Or at least, he liked the ones who looked.

He sighed, turned from the mirror, and crossed to the viewport.

Beyond the glass, the lights of Starbase 21 gleamed like a floating city. Long docking pylons stretched out like arms, wrapping around starships from across the quadrant. His eyes swept the scene automatically, identifying hull silhouettes by instinct: the Nimrod—a brand-new Akira-class, still clean from shakedown; the Midway, a Galaxy-class behemoth with hull scars from nearly every Dominion front; and beyond them, the familiar blue glow of Excelsior-class nacelles—either the Adelaide or the Wellington.

There were only three ANZAC Excelsiors left.

The USS Canberra. The Adelaide. The Wellington.

Three others were gone.

The Melbourne, lost at Wolf 359. The Darwin, vanished with all hands in the Beta Quadrant. And the Newcastle, destroyed in the final battle of Cardassia just months ago. Bransen could still remember the casualty lists—whole crews wiped out in seconds.

His cousin, Ensign Myra Lorne, had served on the Newcastle. Communications. Bright. Enthusiastic. She'd sent him a message the day before her ship launched for what would be its final mission. He hadn't written back fast enough.

This reunion wasn't just about legacy. It was about grief. About honoring those who never came home.

And he was missing it.

He turned from the viewport and walked to the replicator.

"Refill-gin and tonic, same."

The drink materialized with a soft shimmer. He took it, sipped, and let the sting sit on his tongue.

His commbadge chirped.

"Gangway to Lieutenant Andrews."

He tapped it without hesitation. "Go ahead."

"Sir, Crewman Twefron here. We have a Lieutenant Ryn at the gangway-says he's joining the ship tonight. But he's scheduled for tomorrow."

Bransen blinked. Ryn... right. The ops transfer from the Nimrod.

"Understood. I'm on my way. Andrews out."

He set the drink aside, threw one last look at his dress whites, and headed for the gangway.

Deck 5 was hushed under night protocol. The gentle hum of systems and muted lighting made everything feel slower, more intimate. Bransen stepped into the corridor near the gangway and spotted Twefron-tall, bald, composed-standing with another officer in standard ops gold.

The officer turned as Bransen approached.

And Bransen stopped short.

Tobias Ryn was... something else.

Close to his own height. Blond. Toned. Jaw like a sculptor had fine-tuned it. His uniform fit like it had been cut for him personally-broad through the chest, trim through the waist, sleeves just snug enough to hint at biceps earned through more than basic PT. Trill spots traced along his temples and down his neck, disappearing beneath the collar.

Bransen had always had a weakness for Trill.

"Sir, this is Lieutenant Ryn," Twefron said.

Tobias extended a hand. "Tobias. Sorry for the early arrival. The Nimrod's shipping out sooner than planned. They didn't want me in the way."

Bransen shook his hand. Warm. Firm. Steady.

"Lieutenant Bransen Andrews. Welcome aboard. Your quarters are ready—come on, I'll take you."

Tobias hoisted a small standard-issue Starfleet duffel over one shoulder. "Appreciate it. Figured better to come aboard than find a room on the station."

They walked together in silence for a few moments. Bransen resisted the urge to look. He failed.

Tobias caught his glance. "So what do you do onboard when you're not shepherding around new Operations officers, Lieutenant?" he asked.

"I'm the Ship's Intelligence Officer, though I've only been onboard for three months myself; I'm still definitely a newbie around here compared to some. Captain Sihiri and some of the senior staff served through the whole of the war on this ship.'

"They must have been through some things together, that will really bond you." replied the Trill.

Deck 3 was quieter still, lights at 25%, like a ship on the edge of sleep. They stopped outside cabin 3B20.

"Here we are. Single occupancy. Modest, but functional."

Tobias stepped inside, gave the room a once-over. "Not bad. You nearby?"

"3B16. Just down the hall."

Tobias smiled—an easy, open grin that sent a flicker down Bransen's spine. "Good to know. Thanks, Lieutenant."

"Bransen, when we're off-duty."

"Even better."

There was a pause—soft, loaded.

"I'm headed to the gym, actually," Bransen said, nodding back down the corridor. "If you're not crashing right away."

"I hate working out alone," Tobias replied.

Bransen smiled. "Then maybe I'll see you there."



Back in his cabin, Bransen pulled his uniform off slowly. It felt heavier than usual.

He stood in the low light, bare skin reflecting soft shadows across the walls. His briefs hugged his hips, the tan line across his waist just barely visible beneath the hem. He admired his reflection for a moment—strong shoulders, flat stomach, the faint V of toned hips.

The image of Tobias flashed behind his eyes. That smile. Those spots. That body.

He lay back on the bunk, let one hand trail slowly across his abs—and then lower, following the path of heat and want gathering low in his stomach.

His other hand slid up to his chest, stroking lazily, as his hips gave a small involuntary roll.

Eyes closed, breath shallow, he imagined what it would feel like to press Tobias against the wall, to taste the skin between those spots, to see just how far down they really went—

The door chime rang.

“Shit,” he hissed, bolting upright.

He grabbed a towel, wiped quickly at the mess across his stomach and abs, smearing away the evidence of where that fantasy had been going. His face flushed as he yanked on gym shorts and a tank top, hoping the scent wasn’t still clinging to the air.

His pulse was still high when he opened the door.

Tobias stood there, calm and casual in a Starfleet Academy tank and shorts that looked like they’d been painted on.

“Hey,” he said. “You said you were heading to the gym. Thought I’d see if you wanted a workout buddy.”

Bransen blinked. “Uh—yeah. Sure. Just changing.”

Tobias gave him a knowing once-over. “Did I interrupt anything?”

Bransen stepped into the corridor, smiling despite himself. "Not at all."

Chapter 2



Stardate 52963.3 (2375)

They walked the corridor in silence for a few paces, the only sound their footfalls on the carpeted deck. Bransen's mind buzzed—not just from arousal, but from the sheer presence of Tobias. There was a

confidence about him, one that seemed utterly unbothered by anything around him. It was disarming in the best way.

The Canberra's gym was one of the few perks of serving aboard an older starship. Excelsior-class ships like hers had been designed before the age of holodecks, which meant they allocated real, physical space to crew training facilities. A year ago, the captain had approved a full modernization upgrade, and the result was something that felt more like a private spa on Risa than a Federation cruiser's fitness center.

As the doors parted, the lights came up gradually—soft golden overheads in the central zones, with cooler blue ambient light glowing from recessed panels in the ceiling and along the baseboards. A subtle scent diffused through the room—cool, clean eucalyptus over a base of ozone and something faintly woody.

The floor was a seamless synth-resin designed to respond to gravity shifts, and near the entrance, the welcome display pulsed gently in time with the ship's internal rhythm. Along one wall were free weights, programmable resistance rigs, and balance equipment. Another housed mat space and mirrored panels, useful for everything from yoga to kata. The cardio equipment lined the far side, complete with tread stations, upright gravity cycles, and the hydro-rowers—one of Bransen's favorite tools.

Even empty, the space felt alive. Like it was waiting to be used.

Tobias whistled low. "Damn. I was expecting metal benches and sonic showers."

"We're not animals," Bransen said, smirking as he peeled his tank off and tossed it onto a bench. "Captain wanted this place to be one of the best on any ship its age. It kind of is."

"I believe it," Tobias said, already wandering over to the cardio bay. "Everything still smell-factory fresh too. You sure we're not in a resort?"

Bransen rolled his eyes and punched his preferred settings into a nearby wall panel. "Cardio warm-up. First to 5K on the rowers?"

Tobias turned, eyebrow raised. "A race? Confident."

"You brought a challenge," Bransen replied, unable to stop the grin that was forming. "Let's make it interesting."

Tobias considered. "Loser buys breakfast."

"We don't pay for food."

"Loser replicates real breakfast. Or," he added with a smirk, "you join me at The Breakfast Club on the station. I hear they do actual eggs."

Bransen felt the grin deepen. "You trying to turn this into a date?"

Tobias's expression didn't change, but his tone dipped just slightly. "You'll know if I do."

They settled into adjacent rowers as the lighting shifted again—matching simulation parameters that Bransen had inputted.

The gym around them faded to black, and a projected horizon unfolded. The River Thames, pre-24th century: early morning mist rising over calm water, stone bridges spanning the channel, and flat sculling boats cutting the glassy surface in the distance. Bransen always chose it—it reminded him of early mornings during his Academy prep, rowing on the Cornwallis Reservoir.

The countdown initiated. A pulsing series of tones marked ten seconds.

Both officers leaned forward, gripping the hydro-resistance handles. Bransen watched Tobias's arms flex, then quickly turned forward.

3... 2... 1...

The tone sounded.

They launched into the motion simultaneously—legs driving first, bodies pulling back with practiced ease. Bransen felt the resistance immediately, the push and pull as the artificial fluid resisted his rhythm. The machine purred softly under him, hydraulics mimicking the tactile tension of water and muscle.

Tobias went out fast, his strokes sharp and quick, breath already audible by the first 250 meters. His form was solid-compact, efficient-and Bransen admired it even as he chose a steadier pace.

They pulled in parallel, Bransen watching the virtual HUD overlay tracking their progress. By 1,000 meters, Tobias had pulled ahead slightly. At 2K, Bransen began to close the gap, his longer strokes starting to pay off.

Neither of them spoke, but Bransen could hear Tobias's breath deepening. Sweat glistened on his neck, trailing down into the dip of his collarbone and disappearing beneath the edge of the tank top. Bransen forced himself to keep focus-on the race, on the rhythm-but it was getting harder.

He pushed.

3K. 4K. Final stretch.

He could feel the lactic acid building in his thighs, muscles beginning to shake slightly with exertion. Tobias matched him stroke for stroke, and they surged through the last 250 meters nearly in sync.

As the finish line beeped onscreen, both men collapsed into their consoles.

"Holy shit," Bransen gasped, dragging in a breath.

Tobias barked a laugh between panting. "You good?"

"Depends. What's your time?"

Tobias glanced at his readout. "Seventeen forty-three point five-oh."

Bransen groaned. "Seventeen forty-four point oh-two. You bastard."

"Half a second," Tobias said, falling dramatically onto the floor. "I earned that breakfast."

Bransen laughed and grabbed his towel, stepping off the machine. Tobias had peeled off his tank top and lay in a gleaming heap of muscled satisfaction. His torso rose and fell with each breath, and the shimmer of sweat across his skin made his spots look like liquid ink.

"You gonna just stand there?" Tobias said, grinning.

Bransen extended a hand. "Up."

Tobias took it—and pulled hard.

Bransen stumbled, tripped, and landed with a thud right on top of him, straddling the Trill's hips with a gasp.

They were nose to nose. Bransen's hands splayed on Tobias's chest. Tobias's hands rested on his thighs, then slid up his sides without apology.

"This feels familiar," Tobias murmured, eyes locked on his.

Bransen didn't reply. Couldn't. He bent down and kissed him.

It was intense, immediate.

Tobias met him with equal urgency—mouth open, tongue sliding against his in a wet, breathless rhythm. Hands roamed freely now, exploring firm bodies and bare skin. Bransen felt Tobias's grip tighten at his waist, pulling him closer, until their hips pressed together and friction sparked up through every nerve ending.

He ground down once. Then again.

Tobias groaned low in his throat and bit gently at Bransen's lower lip, tugging before diving back in.

They kissed for a long time—long enough that the lights dimmed slightly to simulate night cycle. The gym was completely silent except for their ragged breathing and the occasional shuffle of limbs.

Bransen's cock strained against the inside of his gym shorts, and he could feel Tobias, hot and hard beneath him. But they didn't cross the line.

Not yet.

Tobias finally broke the kiss, resting his forehead against Bransen's.

"If we keep going," he whispered, "we're not stopping."

Bransen smiled, still catching his breath. "Then we should stop. For now."

Tobias's eyes sparkled with amusement. "You always this restrained?"

"I try."

"Well," Tobias said, sitting up as Bransen climbed off of him, "good thing breakfast is just a few hours away."

Bransen stood, smoothing his shirt. "That was... nice."

Tobias grabbed his towel and slung it around his neck. "You're cute when you're flustered."

"I'm not flustered."

"You will be."

Bransen rolled his eyes, turned, and made for the door.

Behind him, Tobias's voice followed:

"See you at 0800, Lieutenant. And Bransen? Don't be late!"

Chapter 3



Stardate 52963.9 (2375)

The Breakfast Club was already bustling when Bransen stepped through the double doors.

Starbase 21's flagship brunch spot had become a favorite for off-duty personnel across the quadrant. Despite its 24th-century context-replicator-fed kitchen, environmental stabilization, and a zero-waste policy—it had been designed to evoke an early 21st-century Earth eatery. Warm light panels mimicked natural morning sun, soft jazz filtered through the air, and the smell of coffee—*real* coffee—cut through the synthetic sterility of the starbase.

He paused just inside the threshold, taking it all in: brick-textured walls, hanging plants in hydroponic loops, art that leaned just pretentious enough to pass for authenticity. Oversized mugs clinked,

waitstaff glided between tables, and behind the counter, a barista in a cobalt apron artfully torched the surface of a crème brûlée waffle.

Then he spotted Tobias.

The Trill sat in a corner booth overlooking the central docking ring, bathed in a golden halo from the viewport light. He wore a slate-gray button-down, sleeves rolled, the top two buttons undone to hint at collarbone and spots. His close-fit chinos emphasized his long legs, crossed at the ankle, one hand wrapped around a steaming mug, the other scrolling lazily through a PADD.

He looked like he belonged in a menswear campaign: *Relaxed Federation Weekend*.

Bransen felt suddenly underdressed. His own outfit—a crisp white T-shirt tucked into charcoal trousers with low-profile boots—felt sharp enough on the *Canberra*, but here? He tugged at the hem of his shirt and headed over.

Tobias looked up as he approached. That same smirk, all glint and teeth.

"You're five minutes late," he said, setting his mug down.

Bransen slid into the booth across from him. "I had to put my face back together. You made a mess of it last night."

"I aim to please."

They grinned at each other, the air between them warm and charged but easy. Bransen picked up the menu PADD and scrolled briefly. Classic Earth dishes filled the list—omelets, shakshuka, avocado toast, banana pancakes, waffles with real maple syrup.

"I thought this place would be all dehydrated algae and spelt foam," Bransen said.

"You wound me. This place is an institution. There's even a two-week waitlist for civilians."

"Lucky I know someone with connections," Bransen said.

Tobias lifted his mug. "To connections."

The food arrived quickly: Bransen's plate stacked with a protein omelet, roasted potatoes, and fresh-sliced pear; Tobias's with waffles dusted in powdered sugar, a side of bacon, and a second mug of that rich, oily coffee.

Conversation flowed easily as they ate.

Bransen talked about Cornwallis Colony—its windswept coastlines, the way the ocean smelled after rain, the cousin he'd lost on the *Newcastle*, and how growing up in the shadow of Starfleet installations made it feel inevitable that he'd wear the uniform.

Tobias shared stories of Trill. Not joined, but proud of his lineage. He'd studied linguistics before pivoting to operations. Something about starship systems made sense to him. Order from chaos. He talked about backpacking across Risa as a cadet—how he'd nearly gotten stranded in a jungle preserve after a bad transporter relay and a worse date.

When Bransen asked about family, Tobias paused just slightly—long enough that Bransen noticed, but not long enough to call it out.

"Parents are still on Trill," Tobias said. "One brother, medical track. We... don't talk much. How about you?"

Bransen nodded. "My parents died in a shuttle accident when I was 13, I moved from Cornwallis to live with my older brother on Mars. I hated everything about it at the time, but he really looked after me. But we haven't stayed close since I joined Starfleet." He looked off into the distance of the spacedock, thoughts clouding his face.

The moment passed, Tobias ordered a second round of coffee. Bransen asked about his opinion on shuttlecraft upgrades. Tobias countered by teasing Bransen about his taste in uniforms, saying he looked more like he was about to model in a recruitment poster than fly a mission. Bransen rolled his eyes, replying that at least someone should raise the average appearance of the crew. Tobias grinned and leaned in, his voice dropping, telling him he was doing a fine job of it already. Bransen felt the heat rise in his cheeks, laughing it off, and the two of them slipped into a rhythm of easy banter that hovered just shy of open flirting. The tone was light, playful, comfortable.

And then, the explosion.

It came without warning—a thunderous, concussive roar that cracked through the café's walls like a physical blow. The window beside them exploded inward in a spiderweb of fractures, the force of it rattling every table in the place. Bransen was already moving, reaching across the table as the shockwave threw them both sideways.

Screams echoed. The lights flickered. The air filled with acrid smoke and the scent of burning composites. Red emergency strobes activated across the restaurant, and from the corner of his eye, Bransen saw a waiter clutching a bleeding shoulder near the service entrance.

Even as the viewport shattered, emergency force fields snapped into place—shimmering walls of blue energy locking across the open gaps to preserve atmosphere. The containment held, but the cracks in the barrier glowed as pressure stressed the emitters.

Bransen coughed once, twice, and rolled upright, helping Tobias to his feet.

"You good?" he asked, breath tight.

Tobias nodded. His eyes were wide, his pulse visible in his neck—but he looked steady. Too steady.

They turned toward the shattered viewport.

Outside, chaos.

The USS *Nimrod* was in flames.

One of her warp nacelles had been completely sheared off. The missing structure left a gaping cavity in the hull, exposed plasma conduits leaking radiant blue fire into the vacuum. Emergency fields flickered around the damage, but they weren't holding. A stream of shuttles had already launched from the rear bay, and small firefighting drones darted through the space like bees.

Bransen froze. "What the *hell*—"

"It's sabotage," Tobias said. Quiet. Controlled.

Bransen snapped his head toward him. "What?"

Tobias blinked—once—and his expression shifted so subtly Bransen nearly missed it.

"I mean—it has to be," Tobias said. "That kind of explosion, in spacedock? Can't be an accident."

Bransen stared at him, a flicker of suspicion whispering across his thoughts. The way Tobias had said it. The way he hadn't looked surprised.

But then Tobias met his gaze again, and the moment passed.

"Let's get out of here," Bransen said.

The corridors of Starbase 21 had transformed. Red lights strobed. Emergency crew rushed in organized clusters. Smoke drifted through the air, despite atmospheric containment. Overhead announcements repeated evacuation instructions in Federation Standard, Klingon, and Bajoran.

Bransen and Tobias stuck close together, weaving past civilians and security. By the time they reached the auxiliary transport junction, a senior officer was already organizing muster points.

"All Starfleet personnel report to your ships immediately. Repeat: all Starfleet personnel report to your ships."

They exchanged a glance.

"Guess breakfast's over," Tobias said.

Bransen's heart was still hammering from the explosion. But another part of him—buried under years of protocol and training—was kicking into gear. Something had happened. Something big. And he had a feeling this wasn't the end of it.

They stepped into a transport pod and launched toward Docking Ring C.

The *Canberra's* shuttlebay was controlled chaos.

Dozens of crew were arriving by the minute—some from the station, others from nearby assignments. Deck officers shouted orders over the din. Cargo handlers rerouted pallets. Engineers rushed pre-launch checks.

Bransen and Tobias arrived side by side, just in time to hear the call:

"Senior staff to muster. All officers report to departmental leads."

Captain Livinia Sihiri stood at the center of the bay, tall and sharp in a black-and-red field uniform. Her tone was calm, clipped, unshakable.

"The USS *Canberra* is to depart immediately under emergency priority."

She paused as the room quieted.

"We are assuming command of the mission originally assigned to the *Nimrod*. Details are classified until further notice. Briefings will be issued in staggered tiers per security level."

Her gaze swept the assembled crew.

"This mission is critical to Federation security. You will conduct yourselves accordingly."

Bransen felt Tobias shift beside him.

He glanced over—just a flicker—and for the second time that day, saw something in Tobias's eyes that didn't quite fit. Anticipation? Recognition? A hint of *resignation*.

But then Tobias looked away, casual as ever, his hands at his sides.

Bransen frowned. He filed it away. He would think about it later.

"Lieutenant Andrews," Captain Sihiri called, her voice slicing through the noise. "You'll join the senior staff for the initial briefing. Intelligence presence is now a requirement."

Bransen blinked once, then nodded. "Yes, ma'am."

Tobias gave him a sideways glance. Curious. Impressed. Maybe something else.

Bransen didn't look back.



Chapter 4



Stardate 52964.2 (2375)

The *Canberra*'s observation lounge had never felt quite so full. The room reflected an elegant design, sleek paneling of brushed tritanium alloy, matte gunmetal floors softened by inset lighting, and floor-to-ceiling windows offering a panoramic view of the spacedock, one marred today by the damaged form of the *Nimrod*, still leaking plasma.

Embedded consoles lined the walls, while a wide, obsidian-topped table dominated the center of the room, flanked by high-backed chairs and subtle uplighting. Neutral tones kept the space professional, but the gentle slope of the walls and the slightly recessed ceiling gave it a quiet, almost serene calm—until today.

Bransen stood at the far end of the curved table, not quite in the spotlight but not in the shadows either. Junior enough to be unsure if he belonged, senior enough to know he couldn't slip away. He'd

conducted dozens of briefings during the Dominion War, but something about this felt different. The room, the tension, the silence before it all began—it was heavier. Like he was standing at the edge of something vast and unseen.

Around him sat the ship's senior staff: Commander Vallona, arms crossed in perpetual Vulcan reserve; Lieutenant Commander Rix, a lean Bolian with icy calm and eyes that missed nothing, the ship's tactical chief; Grankegh, their rumpled, hungover Tellarite CMO nursing a bulb of black coffee like it was life support; Major Ketris the ship's Bajoran Operations Officer; and now, seated beside Captain Sihiri at the head of the table, a new face. Tall. Blue-skinned. Injured.

The Andorian looked like someone who should've been in a medbay, not a briefing room. One of his antennae was bandaged, and he moved with the stiff economy of someone trying not to let pain show. A burn mark trailed down the left side of his jaw, just peeking from beneath a high-collared black jacket; he looked every inch the part of the diplomat, but his eyes were sharp, angry, alert.

Sihiri spoke first.

"Thank you all for assembling so quickly. The explosion on the **Nimrod** this morning was no accident. We believe it was a direct and deliberate attempt to prevent the ship from undertaking a highly-sensitive mission that *Canberra* will now be taking on. The *Nimrod* was en route to the Sirocco sector to facilitate peace negotiations between two neutral worlds—Kaesso and Vehl—whose decades-long war has recently threatened nearby Federation holdings. We'd remained neutral until now. The mandate was diplomatic first—tactical only if absolutely necessary. Miraculously, there were no casualties, and only minor injuries reported on the *Nimrod*, but have no doubt that this represents an escalation in a highly unstable situation and it will be our mission to contain it."

She turned toward Bransen.

"Lieutenant Andrews, bring the team up to speed."

Bransen nodded, stepping toward the holotable. A flick of his fingers summoned the star chart, shimmering with system overlays and tactical markers. His pulse thudded in his ears. Calm. Precise. He knew this drill. But this mission—it felt like a test. Something about the edges

of it felt blurred, indistinct. And beneath that: the gnawing sense that someone had already failed it.

"Three days ago," he began, "Federation diplomats, led by Envoy zh'Rhen, were facilitating advanced peace talks between Kaesso and Vehl-two Class-M planets with a shared history of war, trade, and colonization. Hostilities have flared periodically over the last fifty years, but in the past cycle, we saw a sharp rise in weapons transfers and destabilizing proxy raids."

He tapped a glowing node. "Starfleet Security intercepted increased Romulan signal traffic in this sector. Their ships haven't crossed into the system, but intelligence suggests they're monitoring the situation closely."

Bransen flicked to the next overlay. "Then the incident. Federation negotiators were taken hostage—claimed by a militant Kaesson splinter group known as the Kavesh Coalition. They've historically operated on the outskirts of Kaesso's government structure, but evidence suggests this attack wasn't sanctioned."

Commander Vallona leaned forward. "Are we confident they acted alone?"

Bransen hesitated. "No. There's evidence the Kavesh leadership may have been manipulated—potentially by Vehl intelligence or a third actor. The *Nimrod* was ordered to Kaesson to stabilize the situation and support Envoy zh'Rhen's diplomatic efforts."

Thav zh'Rhen's voice cut in—low but edged. "Which we would've done, had we not been sabotaged before leaving spacedock."

Vallona looked enquiringly at zh'Rhen. "You weren't with the negotiators when they were taken?" she asked, her voice neutral.

zh'Rhen's working antenna flared slightly, though his voice remained calm. "No. I was not. I had been summoned to a meeting with the Vehl, I was halfway back to Kaesso when the attack took place and diverted immediately back here. Those kr'nek attacked when there was nobody there to defend themselves!"

Dr. Grankegh cleared his throat loudly, squinting through bloodshot eyes. "You were barely out of ICU this morning, Envoy. Perhaps a little restraint?"

The Andorian flared his nostrils. "And perhaps if your staff had done a better job, I'd have two working antennae."

"You refused sedation!"

"Because I needed to be here!"

Sihiri held up a hand, the tension breaking as quickly as it had snapped into place. "Enough. Doctor, monitor the envoy's vitals remotely. If he collapses, you can have him back. Until then, he's staying."

Grankegh grumbled, but nodded. Thav zh'Rhen looked faintly amused.

"You'll coordinate directly with Commander Vallona and Lieutenant Rix on tactical readiness and crisis response. I want a security team briefed for planetary insertion within the hour."

Vallona inclined her head. "Understood."

Bransen continued. "We have telemetry fragments from the negotiation team's headquarters and a diplomatic cipher from the Kaesson embassy—encoded in a protocol used only in emergencies. We believe they attempted to transmit new coordinates before the explosion. We're attempting to reconstruct those now."

Thav zh'Rhen gave a terse nod. "They were trying to redirect me to a secure location. I had requested a shadow negotiation with non-state actors. It appears someone found out."

The room was quiet.

Sihiri closed the holodisplay. "This will not become another quadrant-wide crisis. We're assuming the *Nimrod's* mandate. We depart within the hour. Intelligence briefings remain top tier-need-to-know only. Department heads, be ready."

As the officers filed out, Bransen caught Vallona's eye. The Vulcan nodded, subtle but affirming. He didn't need a verbal cue—he knew now: he belonged at the table.



The corridor was quiet outside Tobias's quarters.

Bransen stood for a second, hand hovering near the chime. He wasn't sure why he'd come—he should've been coordinating with Ops or digging deeper into Vehl's orbital scans. But his feet had carried him here.

The door slid open.

Tobias stood barefoot, wearing only sleep pants and a loose tee, hair slightly tousled. If he was surprised, he didn't show it.

"Hey," Bransen said.

Tobias stepped aside. "Come in."

The room was dim, lit by soft white and orange ambient panels. Bransen stepped in, the scent of fresh soap and recycled air hitting him. He sat on the edge of the bunk, his mind still echoing with the captain's briefing. He could still feel the weight of it, the pieces that didn't add up. Something was wrong, even if he couldn't put his finger on it. Tobias watched him quietly.

"You alright?" he asked.

Bransen nodded, then shook his head. "Long day."

Tobias tilted his head. "You look like that briefing took it out of you. What's the mission?"

Bransen hesitated. "I can't say."

"Not even a hint?"

"It's classified, Tobias. I mean it."

Tobias took a step closer, his tone light but eyes curious. "Come on, we're on the same ship."

Bransen narrowed his gaze. "And I'm still an intelligence officer. You know how this works."

"Fine, fine," Tobias said, hands raised in mock surrender. "Just checking."

Bransen sighed, the edge of his frustration receding slightly. "Don't push it."

Tobias stepped into his space. "Then let me distract you."

"I don't know. I can't shake this feeling that something's off. This isn't just another mission. Something else is moving behind the curtain."

Tobias's expression darkened, but only briefly. "You're just rattled."

Bransen looked up at him. "Maybe. Or maybe you know something you're not telling me."

He paused. "Back on the station—when the window cracked, before we even knew what had happened—you said it didn't look like an accident. Almost immediately. Why?"

Tobias shifted, his gaze flickering. "Just a gut feeling."

"From what?" Bransen pressed. "There was no data yet, no sensor readings. You were certain. Too certain."

"I've seen enough to recognize the signs," Tobias said quietly.
"Sometimes instinct is all you've got."

Then, softer, with a wry edge: "When that viewport cracked... I thought we were both done for."

Their eyes met. The air changed.

Bransen moved first, cupping Tobias's face, fingers brushing over the line of his jaw. They kissed, slow and searching, lips parting like a question they were finally ready to ask.

Clothes were lost in stages. Tobias lifted Bransen's shirt over his head with deliberate slowness, fingertips brushing over his chest, savoring every inch. Bransen let his hands roam, sliding under the soft cotton of Tobias's tee, marveling at the tight, defined torso beneath. Tobias's skin was smooth and warm, his body lean but muscular, the ridges of his abdomen flexing under Bransen's touch.

They kissed again—deeper this time, mouths opening, tongues meeting. Bransen moaned softly into him, Tobias's hands sliding down, hooking into the waistband of Bransen's briefs, pulling pants and underwear off with practiced ease. Bransen pulled at the loose knot holding up Tobias's pants and they collapsed to the floor. Their erections brushed, bare and throbbing, as they fell back onto the bed.

Tobias was cut, thick and flushed, already slick with precum. Bransen was uncut, his foreskin pulling back naturally as Tobias ran his fingers along the length, gentle and admiring.

Bransen shifted, guiding Tobias onto his back and kissing down his chest—nipples, stomach, hips—until he reached his cock. He took the throbbing dick into his mouth with aching slowness, drawing a gasp from Tobias, who arched beneath him. He worked him expertly—tongue swirling, lips firm—savoring every reaction.

Tobias's hands gripped Bransen's shoulders, then his hair, voice ragged. "Fuck, Bransen..."

When Tobias finally tugged him up, their mouths met again, hot and urgent. Bransen straddled him, grinding their dicks together until

they were both panting. Tobias reached for the lube, fingers slicking quickly before circling Bransen's waiting hole.

The first finger slid in with ease, then a second, stretching him gently. Bransen clung to Tobias, breath stuttering against his neck.

"Please," Bransen whispered.

Tobias rolled him onto his back and pushed inside slowly, the stretch exquisite. Bransen gasped, grabbing for the sheets, filled so deeply it knocked the breath from him. Tobias began to move, slow at first—controlled, reverent—but the rhythm built with each thrust, urgency rising.

Soon it was frantic—Bransen on all fours, Tobias gripping his hips, slamming into him with desperate hunger. Then Bransen rode him, straddling him again, their mouths locked, their bodies slick with sweat. They lost themselves in each other.

Bransen came across Tobias's stomach, panting as his cum pooled in the Trill's defined abs. Tobias followed with a growl, pulling Bransen deep into a passionate, frantic kiss as he shot a huge load deep inside him. Bransen felt the warmth of Tobias' seed filling him, sexual, energizing and comforting.

They collapsed together, panting, clutching each other as though afraid to let go.

For a moment Tobias lay still, his chest rising and falling, then his expression flickered. Guilt, sharp and unguarded, crossed his face before he buried it under a half-smile. "Not bad for a distraction," he murmured, voice lighter than his eyes.

They lay tangled together, skin damp, breath uneven.

With a subtle vibration through the hull the *Canberra* eased away from its moorings inside the spacedock, inertial dampeners compensating for the subtle lurch as docking clamps released. Bransen's eyes drifted to the window—the massive bay doors of Starbase 21 loomed ahead, beginning their slow, majestic part to allow the ship to leave. Light from the interior of the station pooled like liquid silver against the gleaming hull as the ship glided forward under thruster power. Bransen could feel it beneath his skin, the hum of impulse engines engaging, the slight shift as they passed through the atmospheric containment field. Then, with the vast emptiness of space stretching open before

them, the impulse engines roared to life and propelled the *Canberra* into the stars.

As he drifted to sleep, Bransen's last view was the graceful arc of Starbase 21 slipping away behind them. The station looked like a jellyfish trailing light-glowing, massive, fading into nothing as the ship leapt to warp with a flare of blue light.

He fell asleep in Tobias's arms, full, sore, satisfied... and still wondering what truths had yet to surface.

Chapter 5



Stardate 52964.6 (2375)

The bridge of the *Canberra* was bathed in the muted light of deep space as the ship dropped out of warp with a shimmer of blue. The swirling distortion ahead collapsed into stars and the vibrant swirl of the Kaesso system. At the heart of it: Kaesso IV, a lush Class-M world wrapped in brilliant greens and blues, its atmosphere flickering slightly from the charged energy of shield satellites and orbital monitors.

Captain Sihiri stood at the center of the bridge, hands clasped behind her back. Her posture was relaxed but commanding, eyes fixed on the main viewscreen. Beside her stood Commander Vallona, impassive as always, and just behind them, Envoy zh'Rhen, still recovering from his injuries but alert and tense. Lieutenant Bransen Andrews was at the secondary intelligence console, quietly reviewing planetary scans. At

Ops, Tobias's fingers danced over his interface, efficient and controlled.

"We're being hailed," Tobias reported. "Kaessian government channel. Priority diplomatic encryption."

"On screen," Sihiri said.

The image shifted to reveal a woman seated behind a curved desk of deep green stone, framed by sweeping Kaessian architecture—high arches and glass panels etched with alien script. Her skin was a mottled amber, her eyes wide and bright, but her smile didn't reach them.

"Captain Sihiri," she began. "I am First Minister Taleth. On behalf of the Kaessian High Council, I welcome you to our system and offer deep regrets for the tragedy that has befallen your people. The incident involving the Federation delegates is being fully investigated, and we are committed to a swift resolution."

Sihiri inclined her head. "Minister Taleth, thank you for your message. I trust you understand the seriousness with which we approach the disappearance of Federation citizens."

"Of course," Taleth said smoothly. "We are eager to assist. We have reason to believe that rogue elements within the Kavesh Coalition acted without authorization. We are attempting to isolate their locations and will share intelligence."

Bransen leaned closer to his console, eyes narrowing. Something about Taleth—the cadence of her voice, the practiced regret—felt too polished.

Captain Sihiri gave a diplomatic nod. "Very well. We will initiate orbit of Kaesso IV and begin immediate preparations for a rescue operation. In the meantime, I propose a direct diplomatic engagement. I will transport down to your capital within the hour."

Taleth hesitated—just slightly—before replying. "That is acceptable. We will receive you in the Hall of Accord."

The screen blinked out. The bridge returned to its quiet hum, tension threading the air.

Sihiri turned. "Commander Vallona, begin prepping a hostage rescue team. Quietly. I want readiness in place, but no movement unless we confirm the hostages' location."

Vallona nodded crisply. "Understood."

Sihiri stepped off the command platform. "Lieutenant Andrews, you're with me. Envoy zh'Rhen, if you're cleared for duty...?"

"I'm standing, aren't I?" zh'Rhen replied, with a faint smirk.

"Lieutenant Commander Rix, you're also with us. Tactical presence may discourage theatrics."

Bransen rose from his station, heart quickening. Tobias glanced over, but neither spoke. The mission had begun.

As the Canberra slid into orbit, its sleek form casting a crescent shadow across Kaesso IV, four officers—Sihiri, Bransen, Rix, and zh'Rhen—stepped toward the transporter room—walking straight into uncertainty.

The transporter beam shimmered and resolved into the polished marble floor of the Hall of Accord—an expansive ceremonial chamber of crystalline arches and sunlight pouring through iridescent windows. Long vertical banners bearing Kaessian script fluttered from the rafters. The scent of something floral hung in the air.

First Minister Taleth awaited them on the dais, flanked by uniformed aides and a detachment of Kaessian honor guards. Her posture was formal, her smile polite but distant. Bransen scanned the space with trained eyes. Too many exits, too many blind corners.

"Captain Sihiri, welcome to Kaesso IV," Taleth said, descending two steps to meet them. "We are grateful for your swift arrival."

Sihiri extended her hand. "Our mission is clear, First Minister. Let's waste no time."

Taleth nodded and gestured beside her. "This is Deputy Minister Havarl, who oversees internal security. He will serve as liaison during your investigation."

Havarl stepped forward—a tall Kaessian male with sharp, calculated eyes and an expression too carefully neutral. His hands were clasped before him, his robes of deep teal and silver a contrast to his grim demeanor.

“A pleasure,” he said with practiced formality.

Bransen inclined his head, but the moment their eyes met, a faint itch of distrust crept up his spine. Havarl’s gaze held just a fraction too long, as though weighing him.

Sihiri kept her voice cordial. “We appreciate the cooperation, Deputy Minister.”

“As always,” Havarl replied. “We hope your presence here will lead to swift resolution.”

zh’Rhen stepped forward, his antennae flicking with diplomatic poise. “We look forward to cooperating fully with your teams, Deputy Minister. Transparency in these matters will help ensure a swift and peaceful resolution.”

Havarl only nodded, unfazed. “Of course.”

After the formal introductions, First Minister Taleth excused herself, citing pressing governmental matters. Havarl smoothly assumed the role of guide, leading the Federation team—Sihiri, Rix, Bransen, and zh’Rhen—through a set of arched corridors into a secure section of the complex. They passed guards in ceremonial armor, Kaessian clerks, and silent aides who watched them with curious eyes.

zh’Rhen remained close to Sihiri, quietly observing the security arrangements and making the occasional sardonic remark under his breath, which only Bransen seemed to appreciate. His gaze missed nothing, and once or twice, he jotted down notes on a datapad.

Eventually they reached a compact, high-security operations center. A central table projected a holographic map of the planet, with flickering markers indicating possible locations and signal traces. Officers moved quietly between terminals.

"This is our coordination hub for the search," Havarl explained. "Our intelligence teams are triangulating signal leads and cross-referencing with known Kavesh activity zones."

Sihiri gave a tight nod, her voice firm. "We've reviewed the attack timeline, and frankly, your internal security should have caught this. I trust you're sharing all sensor data with our ship's systems for independent analysis."

Havarl hesitated, then offered a thin smile. "Naturally."

As Sihiri leaned in to question him further, pressing for specifics, zh'Rhen added calmly, "It would be helpful if your analysts included timestamps and prior patrol reports. We may spot inconsistencies you've overlooked."

Bransen felt a tug at his elbow. Lieutenant Commander Rix had drifted closer, pretending to study one of the displays.

Rix spoke in a low voice, just for Bransen. "Keep your eyes open, Lieutenant. Something smells off. The captain's going to press Havarl—use the space to poke around. Quietly."

Bransen gave a subtle nod. The diplomat would handle the politics. He'd work the shadows.

He moved discreetly among the analysts and technicians, eventually finding a young Kaessian woman stationed at a console displaying audio logs and sensor readouts. Her posture was sharp, eyes alert, and she regarded Bransen cautiously until he offered a small, respectful nod.

"Lieutenant Bransen Andrews, Federation Intelligence," he said smoothly. "I understand you were present when the incident occurred?"

"I was monitoring the delegation's arrival at the Accord Pavilion," she replied. "Analyst Verel. I survived because I was overseeing security feeds from an adjacent control room."

Bransen's tone softened, a mix of professional and personal concern. "You were lucky. Or prepared."

Verel's jaw tightened. "We weren't prepared. That's the problem."

As she recounted the events—how the attackers bypassed their perimeter sensors, how they seemed to anticipate guard rotations and comm

blackout zones—Bransen's unease deepened. These were not the tactics of a disorganized militant group.

"They knew our protocols," Verel said, her voice low. "That's what doesn't make sense."

Bransen frowned. "You ever seen coordination like that from the Kavesh before?"

Verel shook her head. "Not even close. They're loud, angry, and dangerous in small bursts—but this? This was surgical. Coordinated. Like someone trained them."

Bransen glanced back at the displays, then lowered his voice slightly. "Anyone else involved in the investigation mention...outside influence?"

She hesitated, then said cautiously, "There've been whispers. The kind of whispers that don't make it into reports. Unmarked ships slipping in and out of orbit weeks before the attack. Strange encrypted comms we couldn't trace. Someone said the language signatures had... Romulan markers. But nothing confirmed."

Bransen's stomach twisted. "Romulans?"

Verel shrugged, almost apologetic. "Could be. But if it is, we're all in deeper than we thought."

Bransen's eyes drifted to Havarl again, still engaged with Sihiri and zh'Rhen across the room.

Before he could press further, a tone chirped from Sihiri's comm badge. Vallona's voice crackled through:

"Captain, we've received a communique from a party claiming to represent the Kavesh Coalition. It contains demands and a data burst."

Sihiri acknowledged curtly. "We'll return to the Canberra immediately."

The team turned to leave. But as Bransen passed one of the side consoles, something flickered at the edge of a screen: a line of text referencing the Nimrod... and a familiar name embedded in a metadata string..."Tobias Ryn".

He didn't stop walking—but his pulse quickened.

Something was wrong. And it was getting closer.

The transporter beam shimmered once again as the away team rematerialized aboard the Canberra. The moment the pattern resolved, Captain Sihiri tapped her comm badge.

"Senior staff to the observation lounge. Now."

Bransen fell into step behind her, mind still spinning from the text he'd seen. Tobias's name. The Nimrod. But there was no time to dwell—not yet.

In the observation lounge, the crew assembled quickly. Vallona stood near the viewport, arms crossed, while zh'Rhen leaned stiffly on the edge of the table. Rix took a post at the door, ever watchful. The lights dimmed slightly as the display activated, revealing a transmission recording.

A masked figure—clad in the patchwork uniform of the Kavesh—spoke in accented Federation Standard.

"Withdraw your vessels. Renounce interference in our affairs. Any further incursion will be considered an act of war. The hostages will not be harmed—so long as our sovereignty is respected."

The message cut out. Silence hung thick in its place.

Envoy zh'Rhen cleared his throat. "Their demands are clear. And strategically impossible."

"But we can't escalate," Sihiri said. "Not yet."

zh'Rhen nodded. "I'll take their demands to the Federation Council. It will buy us time to maneuver."

Sihiri gave a faint nod, then turned to Bransen. "Lieutenant, return to the intelligence office. Start reviewing everything we brought back from the surface. I want verification of that signal origin and cross-analysis of Havarl's data packet."

"Captain," Bransen said, pausing. "There's more. One of the analysts on the surface—Verel—shared some troubling intel. She mentioned encrypted communications with linguistic traces tied to Romulan

systems. And unmarked ships near orbit before the kidnapping. I think there's a chance the Kavesh had outside help."

Sihiri's eyes narrowed, her expression unreadable. "Romulans?"

"Unconfirmed. But the precision of the attack doesn't match the Kavesh's profile. It's too sophisticated."

She drew a slow breath, then nodded. "Good work. Dig deeper, Lieutenant. Quietly. This doesn't leave the inner circle until we know more."

"Yes, ma'am."

As the staff began to disperse, zh'Rhen stepped up beside Bransen, his voice low and urgent. "Lieutenant, a word."

They stepped into the corridor together.

"Be careful with this," the envoy said. "If the Romulans are involved, it means layers we haven't even scratched. Keep your security protocols tight. Nobody outside this room is to know, not even your closest friends."

Bransen gave a slow nod. "Understood."

zh'Rhen clapped a firm hand on his shoulder. "Good. Then go do what you do best."

Bransen left the lounge at a brisk walk., his mind already racing. He'd barely turned the corner near Deck 4 when he nearly collided with a familiar figure.

Tobias stood casually outside the entrance to the ship's Intelligence Office, arms folded across his chest, eyes fixed on Bransen.

"Funny place to be loitering," Bransen said, arching a brow.

Tobias gave a faint smile. "I figured you'd be headed this way. Thought you could use the company."

Chapter 6

Stardate 52964.9 (2375)

Bransen didn't reply right away.

Tobias stood there, arms folded like he belonged against the bulkhead, like nothing could possibly rattle him. But Bransen's thoughts were still back in the Kaessan operations center—on that flickering metadata, on the name he'd seen embedded in the logs.

"Tobias," he said finally, voice level. "You've got timing."

Tobias raised an eyebrow. "Good timing or bad?"

"Undetermined."

Bransen hesitated, searching his face for something—truth, maybe. "Do you know something about what happened on the surface you haven't told me?"

Tobias's smile faded, replaced by a neutral calm. "Why would you ask that?"

"Because this situation is off, something doesn't add up."

Tobias gave a tired sigh. "What is this really about?"

Bransen's throat tightened. "I don't know yet. That's the problem."

Tobias stepped closer, his voice dropping. "Then find out. I'll be here when you do."

The moment stretched—a breath between suspicion and desire—before Bransen stepped past him.

"Not now, Tobias."

And he stepped into the SIO alone.

The Intelligence Office was quiet, the walls pulsing faintly with energy as Bransen crossed to the analysis hub. The tension he carried melted into focus. He called in his team.

Chief Petty Officer Alynna Ward arrived within moments, eyes sharp behind decades of experience. She moved to her station, already tapping into the surface data sets.

"We're rebuilding the packet stream from the SOC sensors," she reported. "Something about that Kaessian security net doesn't make sense. They weren't just compromised—they were circumvented, surgically."

Bransen nodded. "Try to match the tactics to any known Romulan disruption patterns—indirect infiltration, falsified identities, or vector scrambling."

Ward hesitated, then leaned toward him slightly. "You think the Romulans are behind this?"

"I don't know. But they're on the edge of this somehow."

He paused. "Chief—I need you to run a comms trace. Discreetly. See if there's any encrypted communications originating from or routed through Tobias Ryn's console—anything directed toward Kaesso or Vehl. Don't flag it in the system. Just bring it to me directly."

Ward blinked, surprised, but said nothing. Her lips pressed into a thin line before she nodded once. "Understood, sir. I'll keep it quiet."

A moment later, the door slid open and both zh'Rhen and Rix entered, uniforms crisp, their expressions grim.

"Lieutenant," zh'Rhen greeted. "Captain said you were coordinating analysis. We'd like an update."

Bransen stood straighter. "Of course. We've been reviewing the sensor logs and the SOC metadata. There are packet structures that match Romulan encryption architecture—partial signature overlays. We're not ready to call it a link yet, but it's getting close."

He brought up the visuals on the central screen, walking them through the highlights—the coordinated breach, the suspect communication

relays, the inconsistencies in Kavesh movements. He left out one thing: Tobias.

zh'Rhen watched him closely, antennae slowly curling forward.

"You're holding something back, Lieutenant," he said quietly.

Bransen met his gaze. "Not intentionally, sir. I'll let you know the moment I have a full picture."

The Andorian didn't press. He simply nodded and glanced at the screen. Rix said nothing, folding his arms and absorbing everything.

The room felt heavier. But Bransen wasn't ready to say the thing gnawing at his core—not yet.

He needed proof.

Ward broke the silence a moment later. "Sir, we've also reconstructed part of the diplomatic cipher burst our people tried to send just before the attack. The coordinates embedded in the packet point to a site outside the capital—a subterranean facility tied to old planetary defense networks. It's shielded against standard scans, but if hostages were being moved, it's exactly the kind of place they'd vanish to."

Bransen absorbed that, the weight of it sinking in. This was actionable intelligence. The kind of lead that would force the captain's hand and take them back planetside.

Chapter 7



Stardate 52965.1 (2375)

The briefing room aboard the USS *Canberra* was silent as the image of the Kaesso IV surface rotated slowly above the conference table. The hologram cast soft blue light across the gathered officers, each of them locked in expressions that ranged from grim to thoughtful.

Captain Sihiri stood at the head of the table, hands folded behind her back. Her voice was even, but there was no mistaking the edge beneath it.

“As of 0600 this morning, the Kaessian Government reaffirmed the joint framework agreed yesterday: a Starfleet-led operation, in concert with Kaessian security, to locate and recover the abducted Federation diplomats. Envoy zh'Rhen has assured them of our cooperation. Our mission parameters are now formalized.”

She nodded to Major Ketris, who tapped the console. The hologram zoomed in on a cluster of urban structures surrounded by jagged ridgelines.

"This is Sector Twelve of the Kaessian capital. Intelligence suggests it may house the facility where the hostages are being held. Our scans have been inconclusive—local shielding is preventing detailed analysis—but we've confirmed anomalous power signatures consistent with Romulan field generators. These coordinates were embedded in the diplomatic cipher burst our people attempted to send before the attack."

A murmur rippled down the table.

Tobias leaned forward, frowning. "So the Romulan involvement isn't just theory anymore."

Chief Ward nodded. "We intercepted a low-band transmission three hours ago. Fragmented, but the modulation profile matches Romulan military encryption. Combined with the cipher coordinates, it's our best lead."

Bransen tried not to glance sideways at Tobias, but failed. The Trill's jaw was tense, his eyes locked on the projection. Something flickered behind them—fear, maybe. Or guilt.

Sihiri continued. "The First Minister has authorized a joint investigation, with Federation representatives taking the lead. We're to send a small team—non-threatening profile, diplomatic escort, minimal armament."

Ketris smirked faintly. "So we're going in blind with one hand tied behind our backs."

Sihiri raised an eyebrow. "Precisely."

Ketris leaned back in her chair, "Sounds like fun..."

Bransen glanced across the table at Vallona, whose hands were steeped in front of her. The Vulcan inclined her head slightly, a silent signal of preparedness. Of acceptance. She had served through worse, and knew it.

Sihiri turned to the far end of the table. "Envoy zh'Rhen, you'll lead the diplomatic component. You'll be accompanied by Lieutenant Ryn and Lieutenant Andrews. Chief Ward, you'll coordinate support from orbit.

Major Ketris and Lieutenant Commander Rix will remain on standby for tactical response."

"Any questions?" Sihiri asked.

No one spoke.

"Good. Gear up. You leave within the hour."

As the team beamed down it was heat hit them first-dry, stinging, laced with dust. The Kaessian sun hung low in the sky, casting long shadows across the fractured skyline. Buildings stood like broken teeth against the horizon, ancient stonework scarred by war and reconstruction.

Zh'Rhen adjusted the collar of his diplomatic jacket and stepped forward, boots crunching on shattered stone. "Charming," he muttered.

Bransen scanned the area with his tricorder. "Air's breathable, high particulate count. No immediate threats, but I wouldn't recommend extended exposure without filtration."

Tobias stood beside him, eyes scanning the rooftops. He looked composed, but Bransen could feel the tension in his posture.

They moved quickly toward the rendezvous point—a makeshift government liaison center assembled in the shell of an old judicial hall. Two Kaessian guards stood outside, their amber skin catching the light like burnished copper. Green eyes followed the Starfleet officers as they approached.

Inside, Havarl awaited them.

The Kaessian liaison looked every bit the diplomat now-clad in formal robes of state, posture crisp, voice smooth and reassuring. He welcomed them with open gestures, then after a moment suggested, "Envoy, Lieutenants—perhaps a quiet word, away from ears."

He guided zh'Rhen, Bransen, and Tobias into a side chamber. The heavy door slid shut, leaving the four of them in a dimmer, more intimate space. Havarl lowered his voice, adopting the careful cadence of someone confiding reluctantly.

"These are dangerous days," he said gravely. "And the rot may reach higher than anyone wants to admit. Sometimes I wonder if even the most senior hands guiding Kaesso can be trusted."

Bransen exchanged a quick glance with Zh'Rhen, who kept his expression carefully neutral. Tobias broke the silence first, his voice edged with hesitation. "You mean... Taleth?"

Havarl continued, eyes sharp. "Think about it—the timing, the precision. Who else could authorize the access codes used to breach the negotiation site? Taleth works with the Romulans. She stirs hostility against the Vehl to justify consolidating power. A military takeover cloaked in legitimacy. The evidence is all around us."

Zh'Rhen tilted his head. "And you have proof?"

Havarl spread his hands. "Not the kind you'd bring to the Council, no. But the signs are clear. My sources within the coalition whisper it openly. If we do nothing, Taleth will hand this sector to the Romulans piece by piece."

Bransen's gut twisted. The words were persuasive, delivered with conviction. And yet... something about the neatness of it all was too convenient. Too rehearsed.

Zh'Rhen's antennae dipped slightly, betraying his skepticism. "Then we will examine the evidence ourselves."

Bransen remained silent, but out of the corner of his eye he saw Tobias shift slightly. The Trill's gaze lingered on Havarl, his expression unreadable, as though weighing the diplomat's words with unusual intensity. Bransen felt his stomach twist tighter—the narrative fit too neatly, and Tobias's quiet focus on Havarl only deepened his unease.

Havarl inclined his head, feigning humility. "Of course. I only want what is best for Kaesso."

Zh'Rhen lingered a moment, then spoke deliberately. "We should remain on the surface tonight. A gesture of good faith, and an opportunity to observe matters firsthand." He glanced toward Bransen, then Tobias.

"I agree," Tobias added quickly. "If something shifts down here, we need to see it with our own eyes, not hear about it after the fact from orbit."

Bransen said nothing, but he saw the calculation in both their expressions. It was a sensible precaution—and another chance to keep Havarl within reach.

"Of course," Havarl answered with a measured smile, "I'll arrange for quarters to be made available to you."

Bransen studied him, trying to read past the polished diplomat's mask. He found nothing but calm conviction—and that troubled him more than if Havarl had looked away. Havarl accepted their decision to remain planetside with a little too much ease, his agreement smooth and ready, as though he had been counting on it all along.

That night, Bransen lay on the narrow cot in his quarters, staring at the ceiling. The room was clean, but spartan. A single light glowed faintly from the corner. Dust drifted in lazy spirals through the air. The room was clean, but spartan. A single light glowed faintly from the corner. Dust drifted in lazy spirals through the air.

The silence pressed in around him, but his thoughts were loud—the memory of Tobias's name surfacing in the SOC records wouldn't let him go. It haunted him, the unanswered question of loyalty. He wanted Tobias to let him in, to give him a reason to trust.

There was a knock at his door.

Tobias stood in the corridor, his expression unreadable, but his eyes betrayed something—restlessness, maybe. Or longing.

"Can I come in?" he asked quietly.

Bransen stepped aside without a word.

They sat together on the edge of the cot. For a long moment, neither spoke. The hum of a distant power relay pulsed through the walls.

"You okay?" Bransen asked.

Tobias nodded, then shook his head. "I don't know. Everything feels... like it could break."

Bransen looked at him, studying the planes of his face in the low light. "Then don't be alone in it."

Tobias exhaled, slow and unsteady. His hand brushed against Bransen's on the mattress—light at first, then deliberate. Their fingers laced.

"I shouldn't," Tobias murmured. "But I want to."

Bransen leaned in, forehead resting gently against Tobias's. "We don't have to fix anything tonight. Just... be here."

Their lips met, soft and tentative at first. The kiss deepened slowly—no hunger, just heat building beneath the surface. Bransen's hand slid up Tobias's back, fingertips tracing the ridge of spine beneath his shirt. Tobias responded with a quiet noise in his throat, pressing closer.

Clothes remained mostly in place, but hands explored freely. The warmth of skin beneath fabric. The tension in Tobias's shoulders melting under Bransen's touch. Their breath quickened, hips aligning almost instinctively, pressing close through their uniforms.

Bransen slid his palm across Tobias's thigh, lingering at the hem of his tunic. Tobias bit back a moan, burying his face against Bransen's neck. Nothing rushed. Nothing forced.

Just contact. Connection.

Their cocks pressed together through layers of cloth, a slow, teasing friction as they rocked in unison. The cot creaked softly under them, barely audible over the low murmur of the city beyond the walls.

Eventually, they settled—chests rising and falling in sync, sweat cooling against fabric and skin.

Tobias rested his head against Bransen's shoulder. After a moment he added, voice low, almost guilty, "I just... didn't want to be alone tonight. Not after everything."

"You don't have to be."

"This isn't over," Tobias whispered. "Any of it."

"I know," Bransen replied.

They lay back together, fully clothed but more exposed than they had ever been. Bransen's mind, however, refused to rest. The warmth of Tobias against him was real, steady—but so was the echo of Havarl's words. He turned them over in his head, wondering whether Tobias's comfort here was genuine... or calculated. The doubt lingered like a shadow between them, a reminder that trust was still a fragile thing.

And outside, unseen, unwelcome eyes watched. Quiet. Waiting.

Chapter 8



Stardate 52965.4 (2375)

The night on Kaesso IV was long, restless. By dawn the air was still heavy with grit and smoke from distant industrial zones. When the summons came from Havarl, the surface team rose together—Envoy zh'Rhen, Bransen, and Tobias. None of them had slept much. Each carried their own shadows.

The Kaessian liaison guided them to a waiting convoy: two militia skimmers, armored with hastily welded plates, engines whining in protest. Havarl spoke smoothly about cooperation and solidarity, but his words did little to soothe the tension in Bransen's chest. This wasn't a diplomatic visit anymore. It felt like a tactical operation dressed in ceremonial robes.

The convoy cut through the capital's ruins toward the outskirts where the old Ministry of Energy loomed. The structure rose like a scar against the skyline, fortified with durasteel plating and wrapped in Romulan-style signal mesh. Local Kaessian security forces joined them, their uniforms mismatched, weapons held a little too tightly. It was a show of strength, but one that looked fragile.

Bransen checked his phaser, eyes drifting to Tobias seated opposite him in the skimmer. The Trill looked calm, but there was a focus in his gaze, a readiness that felt more soldier than operations officer. Bransen couldn't shake the question gnawing at him: *Whose side are you really on?*

Zh'Rhen caught his eye from across the cabin. The envoy said nothing, but the twitch of his antennae told Bransen he felt it too.

The skimmers slowed. Dust rose in thick clouds around them. Orders came low and clipped: perimeter formation, advance by twos. The militia took point, Starfleet behind. Bransen's tricorder pinged faint biosigns inside the compound-blurred, indistinct, but human.

"Hostages?" Bransen whispered.

"Or bait," zh'Rhen muttered back.

They breached.

Explosive charges blew the outer doors inward, the militia flooding the entryway. Starfleet moved with precision behind them. Smoke and plasma fire filled the corridors. Bransen kept low, Tobias on his flank, zh'Rhen at the center directing the militia squads. For a moment, it felt like they were back in the war.

A flashbang detonated in the side hall. Shouts echoed. Bransen swung into the main chamber, phaser raised-only to find it empty.

The building was deserted. Signs of recent occupation were everywhere-scorched restraints, discarded medical kits, half-burned ration packs. A Federation datapad lay in the dirt, its casing blackened. But the hostages were gone.

"They were here," Bransen said tightly.

Ward's voice crackled over the comm from orbit, where she was monitoring. "Residual biosignatures confirm it. At least six Federation civilians. But nothing alive now."

Zh'Rhen paced the edge of the chamber, antennae bent forward in sharp focus. "They were moved—carefully, deliberately."

Tobias crouched near a power junction, running his fingers along a severed conduit. "This was no panicked evacuation. Someone rerouted the alarms. They knew exactly when we'd arrive."

Bransen frowned, eyes narrowing. "Because someone told them."

Ketris's voice cut in over comms—her team was inbound from orbit with reinforcements. Moments later, she and Chief Ward joined them on the ground, stepping through the blasted doorway. Ketris tossed aside a burned banner with the Kavesh insignia. "Stage dressing," she said flatly.

Ward bent to examine the pad Tobias had found. "It's encoded with Kaessian markings. If we can crack it, maybe we'll know where they took them."

Zh'Rhen folded his arms. "Or maybe we'll find only what they want us to see."

Bransen's boot struck something half-buried in ash. He bent and pulled free a scorched strip of fabric—an insignia patch, charred at the edges but unmistakable: the crest of the First Minister's ceremonial guard. He held it up, the emblem catching the flicker of emergency lights.

Tobias stared at the insignia, his brow furrowed. "An insignia from her guard, here? This supports Havarl's theory that Taleth is involved..."

Zh'Rhen's antennae angled sharply. "Or that whoever staged this wanted us to believe the First Minister herself is complicit."

Bransen turned the patch over in his hands, unease deepening. It was too neat, too on the nose. Another piece in a puzzle someone else wanted them to see.

The compound felt wrong. Too neat. Too rehearsed. Bransen moved among the wreckage, every instinct screaming that they had walked into a story someone else had written. His eyes found Tobias again, and the unease grew sharper. Tobias hadn't flinched once through the breach, hadn't questioned the emptiness. He looked almost as though he had expected it.

As the team assembled for transport back to the *Canberra*, Bransen's chest tightened. Desire and suspicion warred inside him, the memory of the previous night clashing against the cold calculus of the mission.

They were being played.
And the game was only beginning.

Chapter 9



Stardate 52966.8 (2375)

Tobias stepped into his quarters, letting the door seal shut behind him. The tension with Bransen had rattled him more than he cared to admit. He'd spent years keeping everything compartmentalized—emotion, duty, attraction—but now it was all bleeding together.

He crossed to his desk, fingers brushing the edge before he tapped a control panel hidden beneath the surface. A small transceiver slid from a concealed compartment. With practiced ease, he began initiating a complex series of signal reroutes, quantum encryption layers, and temporal masking protocols.

After several long seconds, a shadowed figure appeared on his monitor. The screen distorted the voice—genderless, staticky.

“Report.”

Tobias kept his voice low. "Something's wrong. Havarl isn't who we thought he was. The First Minister might be a puppet. We were supposed to prevent a Romulan alignment, but I think we've been played. We even found a ceremonial guard insignia at the site—someone wanted us to believe Taleth herself was involved."

A beat of silence.

"Andrews suspects you?"

Tobias hesitated. "He's asking questions. Looking at me differently. I don't know what he saw, but he's sharp. If he digs too deep—"

"Then you'll manage it. You've handled worse."

"This feels different. He's not just an analyst. He's..."

"A liability?"

Tobias's jaw tightened. He didn't answer.

"You will secure surface access. There's a contact on Kaesso IV awaiting rendezvous. Extraction of key intelligence is priority. Avoid Lieutenant Andrews. If he becomes a problem... resolve it."

The transmission cut before Tobias could reply.

He sat there, staring at the blank screen, pulse thundering in his ears. *Resolve it.*

Could he do it?

Tobias stared into the flickering screen, feeling the truth twist in his gut. He'd been played. The moment they asked him to "resolve" Bransen, something snapped inside him. No more. He had to stop it—whatever the cost.

He closed his eyes, Bransen's voice echoing in his mind. His touch. The connection they'd barely had time to explore.

He didn't know who he was really working for anymore.

Unbeknownst to Tobias, aboard the *Canberra* in the secure, low-lit Starfleet Intelligence Office, Chief Petty Officer Alynna Ward stared

at a flickering window of residual signal echoes. The encrypted packets were almost invisible—but not to her trained eyes.

She adjusted the spectrum analysis and narrowed the temporal lag.

Something had just been transmitted. Off-record. Unauthorized.

Her brow furrowed in concern. This wasn't a routine anomaly—it was deliberate, and deeply buried.

Ward leaned forward, her eyes scanning the signal burst again. She isolated the quantum signature, running it against a known database of illicit transmission types. It matched a partially obfuscated pattern used during the Dominion War—one she'd personally broken nearly two decades earlier.

Pulling up layered decryption protocols, she began stripping away the encryption. Whoever sent this thought they were good—no header data, masked origination tags, quantum smearing over a tight subspace band. But she was better.

She parsed the embedded fragments: *Kaesso... coordinates...* an embedded Starfleet authorization code, repurposed and falsified.

Her lips thinned.

Someone on board was talking to someone they absolutely shouldn't be.

She tagged the stream and began a silent trace, her fingers moving quickly across the console. Every keystroke precise, every decision drawn from twenty-five years of experience peeling back secrets layer by layer. Her work had saved lives before—and she knew, instinctively, it might again.

The moment Tobias stepped onto the transporter pad, he knew there was no going back.

His orders had been explicit: make contact with the militant leader, confirm Romulan involvement, extract intelligence. But orders from them were rarely straightforward, and never clean. He was no longer sure whose mission he was on—theirs, his own, or something darker he'd

stumbled into. As the transporter beam shimmered around him, he suppressed the tremble in his spine.

He rematerialized in a narrow alleyway, shielded from orbital sensors by Kaessian signal bafflers and an old Ferengi transport scrambler he'd rerouted into the site coordinates. The buildings around him were worn, metallic shells laced with graffiti and mildew. A sour chemical tang hung in the air. Somewhere in the distance, a drone buzzed over cracked cobblestones. He moved quickly, alert, signal dampeners active, tricorder offline.

This section of the Kaessian capital—called Draz Keta on the old maps—was technically uninhabitable according to Federation records. The official narrative claimed it had been condemned after a reactor breach. But Tobias knew better. It was a haven now: for the displaced, the disillusioned, and the dangerous.

He ducked under a rusted conduit and turned down a side alley. A half-collapsed bulkhead exposed the remains of what had once been a commercial plaza, now flooded with shadows and the low murmur of voices speaking in hushed Kaessian dialects. Tobias moved past scavengers, eyes avoiding his, and around a steaming grate that reeked of melted plastiform.

At a recessed doorway marked by a red, upside-down triangle, he paused and gave the coded knock: two, then one, then three. The door slid open with a reluctant hiss, revealing a narrow hallway lit by flickering emergency lights.

He stepped inside.



Bransen stood in the intelligence suite aboard the *Canberra*, pacing. Tobias's name blinked silently on the crew roster—"location unknown." No transporter logs. No clearance.

"Where is he?" he muttered, fingers flying over his console.

He cross-referenced access logs, dug into encrypted systems, bypassed routine clearance. There it was: a faint residual trace on an auxiliary transporter, masked beneath a cargo diagnostic.

Destination: Kaesso IV. Unregistered site.

His gut twisted.

Chief Petty Officer Alynna Ward entered from the back, carrying a datapad and an expression that matched his concern.

"I thought you'd want to see this," she said. "We've been scanning background comms traffic for anomalies. A tightband subspace packet burst came from the lower transporter bay—coinciding exactly with the masked signal you're looking at."

Bransen turned to her. "Encrypted?"

She nodded. "Layered quantum mask. Someone tried hard to hide it—but the temporal decay gave it away. I traced it to Tobias Ryn's console. It piggybacked off a cargo systems diagnostic."

Bransen's jaw clenched. "So he went to the surface. Alone. And didn't tell anyone."

Ward crossed her arms. "I've known liars. This doesn't feel like that. Feels like someone trying to do something they don't trust the system to handle."

Bransen exhaled sharply and stared at the console. "I need to tell someone."

Ward nodded once. "zh'Rhen's your best shot. Quiet channel. I'll keep watching the signal bands. If he pings anything from the surface, I'll know. And I'll make sure it stays between us."

Bransen gave her a grateful nod. "Thank you, Chief."

Ten minutes later, Bransen stood in the envoy's office, tension thrumming beneath his skin. zh'Rhen listened silently as Bransen laid it all out: the access logs, the unsanctioned beam-out, the connection to Tobias.

The Andorian's expression was unreadable at first. Then his antennae dipped slightly, and his voice softened.

"You care about him."

Bransen blinked. "Sir?"

zh'Rhen waved a hand. "Don't insult my intuition, Lieutenant. I don't need to know why. But I see it."

Bransen hesitated, then gave a tight nod. "He matters."

zh'Rhen stepped closer, dropping his voice. "We're in the middle of something rotten, and we don't have time for guilt or hesitation. But if he's in danger—if there's even a chance—then you follow it."

Bransen looked him in the eye. "I want permission to go to the surface. Quietly. Under diplomatic cover."

zh'Rhen studied him for a moment, then said more quietly, "What you're circling around has a name. Section 31. I've crossed their path before—diplomats sometimes do, when the Federation wants a hand shaken in public and a throat cut in private. They don't leave clean trails. And your Tobias... if he's mixed up with them, it won't be by choice."

Bransen felt a cold weight settle in his chest. The name wasn't unknown. Years ago, during his Bletchley Park training, his mentor had warned him in oblique terms about groups in the shadows. *Trust, but never too much. Some in Starfleet don't wear uniforms. They'll use your loyalty against you.* He had thought it a metaphor. Now it had a name.

He drew a breath. "Then I'll find him. And I'll bring him back."

zh'Rhen nodded once, antennae dipping low. "Go. I'll authorize a limited diplomatic survey. A Federation envoy following up on local contacts related to the hostage crisis. But you go in light. No backup. And you don't engage unless absolutely necessary."

Bransen's jaw tightened. "Understood."

Chapter 10



Stardate 52967.0 (2375)

Draz Keta was worse up close.

Bransen moved through the outer perimeter on foot, wearing Kaessian civilian garb and a dispersal field tuned to scatter visual and thermal scans. He carried only a light sidearm and a modified tricorder programmed to ping off residual Kaessian tech frequencies. It wasn't much.

But he had help.

Analyst Verel met him at the edge of the city, emerging from a rusted access tunnel wearing a civilian cloak and carrying a disruptor like someone who knew how to use it. The tension in her posture hadn't eased since their first meeting.

"I tracked a Federation-issue signal receiver into the central district," she said without preamble. "No local authorities know about it. Whoever he's meeting doesn't want an audience."

Bransen gave a tight nod. "Lead the way."

They moved through the streets like shadows. Verel navigated by instinct and intuition, steering clear of militia patrols and drone paths. They passed ruined buildings overtaken by wild flora, and crossed through a collapsed monorail tunnel where the bones of old transit cars lay crumbling beneath years of ash and rust.

After twenty minutes, she pointed to a squat building reinforced with durasteel plating and a local power generator humming faintly.

"That's the one. Federation signal's coming from inside. But the place is locked down. Shielded walls, anti-scan coating, manual entry only."

Bransen adjusted the grip on his phaser. "Then we knock."

He paused, turning to her.

"You've done more than enough," he said, voice calm but resolute. "This next part—I have to do alone."

Verel studied him a moment, then gave a curt nod. "Be careful."

Then she melted back into the shadows.

Bransen crossed the street alone.

Inside, Tobias stood before a long table covered in tactical maps and encrypted data slates. Across from him stood a Kaessian male clad in dark tactical armor with militant insignia sewn into his sleeves. His face was lean, hard—the face of someone who'd been fighting too long to remember how to stop.

"You're late," the man said.

"Had to take the scenic route, Joral" Tobias replied, though his tone was brittle. His eyes darted across the maps—their scrawled Romulan sigils, militia troop movements, handwritten notations. This was a coup laid bare, and he was standing in the middle of it.

Across from him, Joral, folded his scarred arms and studied Tobias with open suspicion.

The militant leader's stare was cutting. "We have the hostages. You'll get them back—but only once you take proof of Taleth's collusion to your Federation. Starfleet must openly support her removal, or the prisoners remain in our custody. That was our agreement with...them."

Tobias stiffened, voice strained. "I'm not here on their behalf. Not anymore. Section 31 told me Taleth was compromised, that if she wasn't stopped, the Romulans would swallow Kaesso whole. But I've seen the evidence you planted—the insignia, the cipher bursts. It all feels too perfect. Too staged."

The Kaessian leader slammed a fist onto the table. "Careful, Starfleet. Our deal was clear. When Taleth falls, the Kavesh take her place. We've bled for this city. Don't think we'll settle for scraps while Havarl plays diplomat."

Tobias looked away, conflicted. His voice was low, almost to himself. "I signed up to stop wars, not light them. Maybe Section 31 lied. Maybe you're lying. But none of this feels like peace."

The Kavesh leader sneered at him. "Naïve words, Starfleet. If you desire peace, you must prepare for war. That is the only lesson this city has learned."

The creak of rotted floorboards betrayed a presence in the shadows. The Kavesh warriors whirled toward the noise, weapons half-raised. Discovered, Bransen stepped out from behind a stack of crates, phaser drawn, face neutral, but focused.

The Kavesh made to rush the intruder, but Joral raised a hand to halt them.

"Back away from him." Bransen said, his voice calm and cold.

Tobias turned slowly. "Bransen—"

"Don't. Just don't. I know about the unauthorized beam-out. I know about the logs. And I know you were on the *Nimrod's* roster the day before it exploded. What I don't know is why."

Tobias's hands lifted slowly. "It's not what you think."

"Isn't it?" Bransen stepped forward, phaser locked on center mass.
"You lied to me. Over and over. I trusted you."

"I didn't blow up the *Nimrod*," Tobias said, voice shaking now. "I was supposed to be on that ship. Section 31 wanted me on this mission. They made sure I survived. I didn't know until afterward. I don't even know if it was them—or the Kavesh, or the Romulans. But somebody wanted the *Nimrod* out of the way."

A voice cut in from behind.

"He's telling the truth."

Bransen turned—and a blunt force struck the back of his neck.

He crumpled.

When his vision cleared, he was on his knees, phaser kicked away.
Tobias was kneeling beside him, hands raised.

Standing above them, disruptor in hand, was Havarl.

"I wondered how long it would take you to find this place," Havarl said, voice low, almost amused.

Bransen struggled to rise. "You're in on this."

Havarl tilted his head. "In on this? I planned every detail of this. My people need change now. I offered them that. I gave them a future, even if it meant dirtying my hands to do it."

Tobias stared at him, torn. "You were feeding intel to the militants?"

"Among other things," Havarl said. He paced slowly, deliberately, as if savoring the moment. "I constructed a narrative everyone could believe. We fed just enough misinformation to your covert friends to make them believe Taleth was the threat. They were so ready to believe in a conspiracy that did exactly what we needed them to do—diverted Starfleet's attention, escalated tensions, and gave us the perfect cover. The Federation's interference in Kaessian politics will prove that they can't be trusted, and my people will find unity with our new allies. The Federation won't have a leg to stand on without their moral high ground."

Joral stepped forward, bristling. "And when Taleth falls, our people take power. Don't think we'll wait politely while you negotiate with Romulans."

Havarl gave him a tight smile. "Yes. Of course. You'll have your city. But Kaesso needs more than flags and slogans—it needs order, and the Romulans will provide it."

Bransen watched Tobias carefully. The Trill's jaw was tight, his breathing uneven. He looked sick at Havarl's words, as though realizing how deeply he'd been used.

"Taleth wasn't even involved," Tobias muttered, more to himself than anyone. "She's just a figurehead."

"Exactly," Havarl said. "The real power is coming. I will unify Kaesso—under Romulan protection. And once the Federation realizes what's happened, it will be too late to respond."

Bransen let out a sharp, bitter laugh. "And you think the Romulans can be trusted? As soon as they've taken power, Havarl, you'll end up just like Taleth—discarded the moment you've outlived your usefulness."

He looked at Tobias again, eyes narrowing. "You're smart. Useful. But you were always a pawn. I needed you as the face of Starfleet interference—alive or dead, it made little difference. Surviving the *Nimrod* only made you more convenient. That blast cleared the field. Now the future is ours."

Bransen's heart clenched at the words, suspicion twisting into something darker. Who had destroyed the *Nimrod*? Was it Section 31? The Kavesh? The Romulans? Or all of them together?

Then Havarl looked down at him and over to Bransen's phaser laying on the ground. "Kill him."

Silence. Tobias didn't move.

Havarl raised an eyebrow. "If you're not with us, you're against us."

Tobias stared down at Bransen, his hand hovering at his side. The phaser lay within reach. His fingers trembled as he looked between Havarl, the militant leader, and Bransen.

A low rumble passed through the foundation—distant power surges or underground transport skimmers. Somewhere nearby, a child cried out, then fell silent. The city around them, broken and teeming with secrets, seemed to hold its breath.

Outside, the wind howled over broken stone.

Chapter 11



Stardate 52967.1 (2375)

Tobias's hand trembled as he stared down the length of his phaser. Bransen knelt before him, unmoving, eyes searching his face with a mixture of fear and something deeper—betrayal, maybe. Havarl stood behind Tobias, disruptor trained steadily at Bransen's back, his voice low and lethal.

"Now, Lieutenant," Havarl said. "Choose your side."

A beat.

Tobias's jaw clenched. He blinked once. Then twice. A tear slipped down his cheek, and Bransen saw it.

"Forgive me," Tobias whispered.

Then, without warning, his left thumb jabbed against a pressure switch on the inside of his sleeve cuff.

A concussive blast ripped through the far wall.

Flames and debris exploded outward as the charges Tobias had planted earlier detonated. The warehouse erupted into chaos. Bransen was thrown backward against a crate, vision tunneling. Tobias dived toward him, shielding him from falling debris, both of them landing hard behind a rusted supply stack.

Screams echoed. The militant guards scrambled, disoriented. Crates fell, lights flickered. Smoke choked the air.

Bransen coughed, eyes wide, ears ringing.
"You—" he gasped.

"I had a plan," Tobias said, pulling him up. "Get up, we don't have much time."

Disruptor fire erupted around them—green bolts sizzled overhead, carving black scars into the floor; the militants had regrouped, and they had the advantage.

Tobias shoved a hand phaser into Bransen's palm.
"Stay low. Follow me."

They darted from cover to cover, Tobias leading them through the maze of metal and fire. They ducked behind a loader as another blast struck close—sending a crate bursting apart in a rain of shattered polymer. One of the militants had taken a sniper perch on an overhead catwalk.

"Upper gantry!" Bransen called.

Tobias dropped to a knee and fired his phaser. The bolt struck the railing, forcing the sniper to scramble.

A second guard flanked left. Bransen caught the movement and swung around, firing low. His shot struck true—the guard screamed and fell.

More disruptor bolts slammed the ground around them.

"We're boxed in!" Bransen shouted.

"No," Tobias said, eyes darting. "We just need a window."

Another explosion rocked the far corner of the warehouse as a fuel cell ignited. A support beam collapsed, taking part of the upper floor with it. Sparks flew in every direction, and a haze of smoke and flame engulfed the space. The heat was rising fast.

"Tobias!" Bransen shouted over the roar. "We won't last much longer in here!"

"We keep moving!" Tobias shouted back. "Toward the rear—there's a maintenance door!"

They made a break for it, sprinting through the fire-wreathed chaos. A militant with a heavy disruptor cannon opened up from behind a stack of crates. Bolts sizzled past them, slamming into the walls with bone-rattling force. Tobias dove behind a scorched girder, pulling Bransen with him.

"We're pinned!" Bransen hissed. "We need suppressive fire or we're cooked!"

Another militant appeared in the smoke—too close. Bransen fired instinctively, hitting the figure center mass; the body dropped.

Their cover was beginning to burn.

Bransen risked a glance over the top—and immediately ducked as a blast nearly took his head off.

"They're closing in," he said grimly. "We're not getting out unless—"

The roar of a plasma bolt shattered a beam overhead. It fell with a shriek of torn metal, missing them by inches. Debris rained down. Tobias pressed them both flatter to the ground.

"Too close," he muttered.

"They're herding us," Bransen realized. "Trying to trap us in the back corner. We stay here, we die."

"We're not dying today," Tobias said through clenched teeth.

Bransen met his eyes. "We might not get another chance."

He leaned in, just for a moment, and pressed a fierce kiss to Tobias's lips. Smoke swirled around them, weapons fire echoing in the distance.

Then Bransen pulled back. "Let's move."

Across the warehouse, a plasma conduit ruptured spraying sparks and arcs of burning energy across the floor. The crackling, unstable lines hissed dangerously, filling the warehouse with the tang of ozone.

Suddenly, a shimmering sound—high and crystalline—cut through the smoke.

Transporter whine.

A beam of blue light spiraled down in the center of the chaos.

Bransen squinted through the haze.

"Tobias! Look!"

Figures emerged from the transporter beam—six in total. Lieutenant Commander Rix hit the ground in a combat crouch, phaser rifle ready. Behind him, Major Ketris, her blonde hair pulled tight and eyes blazing. Two security officers flanked them.

zh'Rhen materialized next, ducking low as he hit the deck. Chief Ward followed last, surprisingly spry as she swept the room with a compact sidearm.

"Starfleet Security!" Rix bellowed. "Take cover and suppress!"

Bransen and Tobias leapt from their position and sprinted toward the newcomers.

Another blast cracked near them.

Tobias shoved Bransen forward, just as Havarl emerged from the shadows, his disruptor raised.

"You ruined everything!" he roared, and fired.

The bolt streaked through the haze—aimed at Bransen.

Tobias twisted, throwing himself into the line of fire. The blast struck his shoulder, and he collapsed with a grunt of pain.

Bransen shouted in horror, dropping to his knees.
"Tobias!"

He turned to fire—but it was too late. Another figure moved past him.

Chief Ward.

She stepped forward calmly, sighting down her phaser. Ward moved like ice over broken glass—precise and deliberate. One squeeze of the trigger. The stun blast struck Havarl squarely in the chest, hurling him backward. He slammed into the exposed plasma conduit with a crack of shattering metal. Energy flared, white-hot, and the conduit erupted, engulfing him in a searing explosion of sparks and plasma fire.

Havarl's scream was swallowed by the blast.

The firefight fell silent.

Smoke still swirled. The sound of crackling fire and groaning metal filled the void.

Ketris helped Bransen haul Tobias up. Blood seeped through his uniform, but he was conscious—barely.

Ward holstered her phaser. "Extraction team en route. We've got you."

Bransen looked down at Tobias, breathless.
"You took a shot for me."

Tobias managed a weak smile. "Told you I'd be here when you figured it out."

zh'Rhen stepped up beside them, offering his hand.
"Let's get you out of here."

The transporter beam shimmered again.
And then they were gone.

Chapter 12



Stardate 52967.2 (2375)

Captain Sihiri stood at the center of her ready room, her arms folded, her dark brown eyes fixed on the three people before her. The walls were quiet, the stars outside the viewport hanging in silence.

Lieutenant Bransen Andrews sat straighter than usual, still carrying the tension of the day in his shoulders. Envoy zh'Rhen, ever composed, leaned with a casual grace into the corner of the couch, antennae angled with feigned curiosity. Commander Vallona stood near the replicator, a PADD in hand, impassive as a stone statue.

Sihiri paced slowly behind her desk. "Let me make sure I understand," she began. "You," she pointed at Andrews, "and you," now zh'Rhen, "decided to pursue an unsanctioned operation to extract a Starfleet officer suspected of consorting with hostile militants, while withholding critical mission information from your commanding officer?"

Bransen opened his mouth, then closed it. Vallona cleared her throat quietly but didn't look up.

zh'Rhen spoke first, his voice calm. "Captain, we were acting on intelligence too sensitive to risk broadcasting. At the time, compartmentalization was deemed essential to prevent exposure—"

"You deemed it essential," Sihiri said sharply. "You. Not Starfleet Command. Not me. I've commanded during the Dominion retreat from Betazed and a dozen brushfire wars since—but I still expect my officers to come to me before making unsanctioned field decisions."

zh'Rhen gave a diplomatic incline of the head. "In retrospect, perhaps a more formal disclosure should have been considered. But given the involvement of...other operatives within the Federation, I believed it prudent."

"Prudent," Sihiri echoed, then turned on Bransen. "And you, Lieutenant?"

Bransen swallowed. "Ma'am, Tobias—Lieutenant Ryn—was part of this mission from the beginning. I believed recovering him was key to stopping the Romulan influence and resolving the hostage crisis. It wasn't about protecting him. It was about uncovering the truth."

"And you uncovered it," Sihiri said, sighing. "Against orders, without backup, and nearly getting yourselves killed. I should be furious."

"You are furious," Vallona noted mildly.

Bransen barely suppressed a smirk as Sihiri's lips twitched at the corner. "Don't help."

She walked back around her desk and tapped the monitor. Images flashed briefly: the blown-out Kaessian warehouse, Havarl's Romulan-supplied files, and the Federation hostages being beamed out—shaken, but alive.

"Thanks to your recklessness," Sihiri continued, "we now know that Havarl orchestrated a false narrative implicating First Minister Taleth in a Romulan alliance. He fed that fiction to operatives within the Federation, who fed it to us. The Romulan link was real—signals, matériel, even advisors have been confirmed. But Havarl used that involvement as cover, leveraging their presence to sell his fiction

while orchestrating the rest himself. In short, we were nearly pawns in a coup d'état."

zh'Rhen gave a dry smile. "But we weren't. And thanks to Lieutenants Andrews and Ryn, the Federation has been saved from a conflict of its own making...well that is if this really was the work of Section 31."

Vallona finally looked up from her PADD. "Section 31 is not an officially recognized directorate. Its existence is denied by Starfleet Command."

Sihiri's expression tightened. "Denied, yes. But I have commanded long enough to know their fingerprints. Operations too neat, intelligence too convenient. This isn't the first time they've meddled in Federation policy."

"Regardless," Sihiri continued "Despite your subterfuge, you brought me results. The hostages were recovered intact. The Romulan link is now irrefutable, and the Kaessian government has formally withdrawn support from the Kavesh Coalition."

"And the Romulan embassy on Kaesso is suddenly very quiet," zh'Rhen added. "They'll regroup—but this sets them back."

Vallona's eyes narrowed slightly. "And the Nimrod?"

For a moment no one spoke. Sihiri's gaze hardened, her voice quieter. "That remains unresolved. The Kavesh boast of it. The Romulans are content to let the fear linger. And there's Section 31 in the shadows behind it. The truth is buried—and may never surface."

zh'Rhen inclined his head. "Which ensures it will haunt us long after Kaesso is stable."

Sihiri turned to him. "One thing, at least, your actions may have helped ensure. The First Minister sent a formal communiqué to the Federation Council. Personally thanked you Envoy, and you, Lieutenant. Said the quote, 'courageous initiative taken by your officers prevented a tragedy.'"

Bransen's eyes widened.

"I'm not recommending promotion," Sihiri said. "But I'm not pressing charges either. Just... don't do it again."

"Yes, ma'am," Bransen said quickly.

zh'Rhen smirked. "I'll do my best."

The room relaxed slightly. Vallona finally set down her PADD and gave a small, approving nod.

"Ma'am..., Bransen began, hesitantly, "what about Lieutenant Ryn? What happens to him now?"

"Ryn's involvement complicated this entire mission," Sihiri replied, her tone firm, "He disobeyed the orders of his Commanding Officer, engaged with a militant group attempting to overthrow the Kaesson government... however, his actions likely saved multiple lives. Starfleet Command has denied that he was operating under any direction other than his own"

Bransen tried to hide the way his throat tightened.

"They're going to scapegoat him..." he said quietly.

Sihiri paused for a moment, "I think they would like to, but any investigation would result in questions that certain people don't want asked or answered. That's why they have classified information on his involvement in this operation, and ordered no disciplinary action at this time."

Bransen breathed a sign of relief, "Ma'am, I'd like to see him."

Sihiri regarded him for a long moment. "That's between you and Doctor Grankegh. And between you and yourself, Lieutenant."

Bransen stood. "Understood."

"Dismissed," Sihiri said.

As Bransen exited, Vallona remained behind. zh'Rhen lingered at the doorway, glancing back at the Captain.

"You're right, you know," he said before he could leave. "It was reckless. But it was also right."

Then he left.

Chapter 13



Stardate 52968.1 (2375)

The USS Canberra sat once again in the mammoth internal dock of Starbase 21, the chaos of Kaesso was behind them, mostly.

Deck 7 was quiet.

Bransen worked the lat pulldown machine with methodical precision, sweat beading along his temple, shirt already clinging to his chest and back. He wore compression shorts and a sleeveless performance top—standard issue, but flattering on his lean frame. His naturally pale skin, bronzed just enough to suggest leisure and discipline, gleamed under the soft lights.

He caught his reflection in one of the mirrored walls—shoulders pumping, arms flexing, face set in quiet concentration. Not bulky, but sculpted. Just the way he liked it.

Across the room, Tobias was doing curls with a grav-bar, shirtless now, without any visible scar from the disruptor blast he'd taken on Kaesso. His torso moved in controlled, elegant motions—each rep showcasing the cut of his obliques, the curve of his lats. The dark trail of Trill spots ran from temple to toe, disappearing beneath the low waistband of his shorts in a way that was absolutely deliberate.

Bransen tried not to stare. Failed again.

"So," Tobias said between reps, "what did I miss while I was in sickbay?"

Bransen chuckled, switching to rows. "Wouldn't know. Vallona stuck me on duty."

"Vulcan logic strikes again."

"You think they'll let you stay?" Bransen asked quietly.

Tobias shrugged. "Don't know. But I'm not going anywhere unless they make me."

They were close now. Too close. Bransen could smell the sweat and soap on Tobias's skin. Clean, sharp, undeniably male.

"Don't take this the wrong way," Tobias said, leaning back on his elbows, "but for someone who just nearly got himself killed, you clean up pretty well."

Bransen arched an eyebrow. "You were looking?"

"Hard not to."

"Well", Bransen returned, "You look pretty good for a guy who just got shot."

The air between them charged. Bransen felt it in his stomach—heat, anticipation, a tightening that had nothing to do with exercise.

He stood. "Shower?"

Tobias didn't move. Just grinned. "Lead the way."



The Canberra's locker rooms were as sleek as the rest of the gym-rows of lockers, private sonic stalls, and a hydrowall running down the center of the room, shimmering with atomized steam. Bransen keyed into one of the private stalls, the door sliding open to reveal a sleek black-tiled chamber with a curved seat and temperature controls on the wall.

They stepped inside together.

No words now. Just motion.

Tobias pulled Bransen's shirt off with a single smooth motion, eyes raking over the bare skin beneath. "Gods, you're beautiful."

Bransen flushed, not from modesty but from the hunger in Tobias's gaze. He reached for Tobias's waistband, tugging his shorts down, watching as the Trill's cock sprang free-thick, cut, already hard, perfectly shaped. Tobias returned the favor, letting Bransen's own throbbing dick bounce into view.

Then they were kissing-deep, urgent, mouths locked, tongues tangling. Bransen moaned as Tobias pressed him against the stall wall, their cocks grinding together, slick and hot.

Hands roamed. Fingers traced the line of Bransen's spine, the curve of his ass, the sharp cut of his jaw. Tobias dropped to his knees, licking along Bransen's hipbone before taking his painfully hard cock into his mouth in one slow and skillful movement.

Bransen groaned, fingers threading through damp blond hair, hips rocking forward. It was too much and not enough.

He tugged Tobias back up, kissing him hard.

Their bodies moved together with practiced rhythm-two men not new to this, but newly charged by it.

Tobias pushed him onto the bench, straddling him. They kissed until they couldn't breathe, until Bransen felt drunk on sensation.

Tobias's hand wrapped around both their cocks, stroking slowly.

They didn't fuck. Not here. Not yet.

But they came close.

Bransen couldn't hold it in, with a moan he shot across Tobias's chest, and seconds later Tobias followed, gasping into Bransen's shoulder and spraying them both with a hot sticky load.

They stayed like that, tangled and breathless, steam curling around them.

Eventually, Bransen laughed. "We should probably shower."

Tobias grinned. "I thought we were."

They dressed slowly, exchanging little glances that said too much. Bransen's body ached in the best way, but something else stirred beneath it. A sense of connection, of possibility. He wasn't sure what it meant. Not yet.

Tobias slung his duffel over one shoulder as they left. "How do you feel about breakfast?"

Bransen blinked. "Now?"

"I know a place. Just dockside. Trust me."

Epilogue



Stardate 52968.2 (2375)

Tobias stirred in the dark, breath catching as he woke. Something had changed—a shift in the air. A presence.

He blinked at the ceiling, the dim starlight from spacedock filtering through the viewport in thin bands of silver and blue. Beside him, Bransen lay curled in sleep, one arm draped loosely across Tobias's bare waist, breath slow and steady. Peaceful. Vulnerable.

Carefully, Tobias eased Bransen's arm aside and sat up. The sheets whispered against his skin as he swung his legs over the edge of the bed, feet brushing the cool deck plating. He reached toward the lamp on the bedside table—

"Don't," said a voice from the dark. Calm. Familiar.

Tobias froze.

His eyes adjusted slowly, heart thudding. A figure sat at his desk, arms resting lightly on the edge, posture relaxed but deliberate. The silhouette was unmistakably Andorian—broad shoulders, sharp angles. A faint band of light from the spacedock revealed blue skin, the glint of a comm badge, and the thin bandage wrapped around one antenna.

Zh'Rhen.

"I wouldn't wake him," the envoy said softly. "He looks comfortable."

Tobias's pulse quickened, but he didn't move. "How did you get in?"

Zh'Rhen gestured vaguely toward the wall panel. "I still have diplomatic override codes. Not the kind of thing that gets rescinded just because you bend a few rules."

Tobias stood slowly, nude but past caring. "You broke into my quarters to offer decorating tips?"

"No," the Andorian said. "I came to deliver a warning."

Tobias's expression tightened. "I thought we were done with those."

Zh'Rhen tilted his head. "You did the right thing on Kaesso. That's why I'm here. But doing the right thing doesn't mean you're safe."

Silence fell between them. Outside, the distant lights of Starbase 21 blinked like cold stars.

Zh'Rhen's voice dropped further. "Whoever was giving you orders from Section 31—he's still out there. And now he knows where your loyalties lie."

Tobias's stomach clenched. He glanced back at Bransen, who murmured something softly in his sleep and shifted.

"You're off their leash," the Andorian continued. "And people like that don't like loose ends."

Tobias said nothing.

Zh'Rhen rose from the chair. "There's a data package coming to your quarters in the morning. Names, frequencies, last known locations. Some of it might help you. Some of it won't make sense until it's too late."

"What am I supposed to do with it?" Tobias asked.

Zh'Rhen met his eyes. "Stay alive. And keep him alive."

He moved to the door.

"That's going to be harder than you think," he added.

The doors whispered open.

"Wait," Tobias hissed. "Are you with them?"

Zh'Rhen didn't turn back. "I have been," he said softly—then disappeared into the corridor.

The doors closed behind him.

Tobias stood in the dark, heart racing, eyes drifting back to Bransen's sleeping form.

He didn't go back to sleep.

Not for a long time.



Timeline of Events

Timeline of important story points:

- 2347: Federation-Cardassian War breaks out, Petty Officer Alynna Ward is among the crew of the USS Rutledge that responds to the Cardassian attack on Setlik III.
- 2349: Bransen Andrews born on Cornwallis Colony.
- 2350: Tobias Rin born on Trill.
- 2355: Excelsior Class ANZAC Batch Commissioned; USS Canberra, USS Melbourne, USS Darwin, USS Newcastle, USS Adelaide, and USS Wellington.
- 2362: Bransen Andrews' parents die in a shuttle accident on Beta Cannae, Bransen moves from Cornwallis to Mars to live with his brother Aaron.
- 2364: USS Enterprise NCC-1701-D commissioned.
- 2366: Federation-Cardassian Armistice.
- 2367: USS Melbourne lost in the Battle of Wolf 359, Bransen Andrews enters Starfleet Academy.
- 2369: USS Darwin lost in the Beta Quadrant during a survey mission.
- 2370: Captain Benjamin Sisko makes first contact with the Jem'hadar, the USS Odyssey is destroyed in the Gamma Quadrant.
- 2371: Ensign Bransen Andrews graduates Starfleet Academy and commences Starfleet Intelligence training at Bletchley Park.
- 2372: Ensign Tobias Ryn graduates Starfleet Academy and joins the USS Thunderchild, Bransen Andrews is promoted to Lieutenant Junior Grade and assigned to Starfleet Intelligence in London.
- 2373: The Dominion War begins with the first Battle of Deep Space Nine, Federation forces withdraw from the Bajoran system, Tobias Ryn is promoted to Lieutenant Junior Grade and transfers to the USS Nimrod as Junior Operations Officer.
- 2375: Cardassian War ends with the signing of a peace accord, the USS Newcastle is lost in the Battle of Cardassia, Bransen Andrews is promoted to Lieutenant and joins the USS Canberra.

Character Compendium



Lieutenant Bransen Andrews



Role: Starfleet Intelligence Analyst

Species: Human

Homeworld: Cornwallis Colony

Appearance: Lean, toned build; naturally pale with a carefully maintained tan; typically dresses neatly even off-duty

Personality: Smart, methodical, and introspective, Bransen is known for his sharp analytical mind and cautious nature. He prefers facts over hunches and often keeps his emotions guarded. Loyal to Starfleet principles, he holds a strong personal sense of justice.

Skills: Cryptography, tactical analysis, and diplomatic protocols; excels at interpreting complex data and behavioral patterns.

Lieutenant Tobias Ryn



Role: Starfleet Operations Officer

Species: Trill (Unjoined)

Homeworld: Trill

Appearance: Athletic and graceful; dark hair with distinct Trill spots trailing from his temples down his body

Personality: Charismatic and guarded, Tobias uses charm and humor to deflect from deeper truths. A capable officer with an ambiguous past, he walks a fine line between confidence and secrecy.

Skills: Field operations, covert navigation, and infiltration techniques; highly adaptable under pressure.

Captain Livinia Sihiri



Role: Commanding Officer, USS *Canberra*

Species: Human

Appearance: Tall, composed, and commanding with sharp features and keen eyes

Personality: Firm but fair, Sihiri is a career officer who values discipline, loyalty, and results. She keeps her emotions in check and demands the same of her crew but respects initiative and courage when it serves the mission.

Skills: Starship command, strategic leadership, crisis management.

Commander Vallona



Role: Executive Officer, USS *Canberra*

Species: Vulcan

Appearance: Regal, with traditional Vulcan features; poised and precise in her movements

Personality: Logical and composed, Vallona embodies Vulcan restraint and discipline. She applies rational thinking in all things, but her service alongside emotional species has granted her insight into more nuanced leadership.

Skills: Command strategy, conflict resolution, starship systems management.

Envoy zh'Rhen



Role: Federation Diplomatic Envoy

Species: Andorian

Appearance: Elegant and sharply dressed; blue-skinned with expressive antennae

Personality: Suave and silver-tongued, zh'Rhen balances diplomacy with espionage savvy. Charismatic and disarming, he navigates tense political environments with ease but always keeps one eye on the bigger picture.

Skills: Diplomacy, intelligence-gathering, political manipulation.

Chief Petty Officer Alynna Ward



Role: Senior Signals Intelligence Specialist

Species: Human

Appearance: Compact, unassuming, with a commanding presence when at work

Personality: Quiet and intense, Ward is a veteran cryptographer with little patience for politics or inefficiency. She has a dry wit, immense experience, and a fierce commitment to her duty.

Skills: Decryption, subspace communications, threat detection.

Major Ketris



Role: Bajoran Militia Officer, Operations Lead

Species: Bajoran

Appearance: Athletic with blonde hair worn up; wears red Bajoran militia uniform

Personality: Resilient, warm, and irreverently funny, Ketris brings lightness to the bridge even during tense moments. She is widely respected for her leadership and is one of the most socially adept members of the senior staff.

Skills: Tactical coordination, logistics, interpersonal leadership.

Lieutenant Commander Rix

Role: Chief Tactical Officer

Species: Bolian

Appearance: Muscular and imposing; always alert

Personality: Disciplined and pragmatic, Rix is the Canberra's weapons expert and security enforcer. He's professional to a fault but loyal once trust is earned.

Skills: Tactical planning, weapons systems, close combat.