

Below Decks: Nimrod

A *Star Trek* Story



Brendan Archer

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To Moogie

Preface

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.

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. There would be a formal dinner in the grand hall filled with officers in dress whites, toasts, memorials, and war stories swapped across long white-clothed tables. It was the kind of night that made careers. The kind of night where a freshly-minted Lieutenant could make an impression just by being in the room.

But 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; a standard-issue bunk, desk and terminal, narrow wardrobe, and 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, a photo with his brother, leaning against a railing on Mars, laughing too hard to keep the camera steady, and a picture with his parents outside the cottage on Cornwallis that used to be home. Unlike many of his peers who had served on starships as Ensigns or Junior Grades, Bransen hadn't

shared a room since the Academy, and he was glad he didn't have to now.

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, and some days he still saw the lanky cadet from Cornwallis Colony in the mirror; narrow-chested, awkward in uniform, always feeling a half-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 a hull scarred from countless battles against the Dominion, and beyond them, the familiar blue glow of Excelsior-class nacelles, the *Adelaide* or the *Wellington*.

There were only three ANZAC Excelsiors left.

The *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*. She'd sent him a message the day before they left Deep Space Nine for what would be their 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, chilled.”

The drink materialized with a soft shimmer. He took it, sipped, and let the synthetic 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 Rynn at the gangway, he says he’s joining the ship tonight, but he’s scheduled for tomorrow.”

Bransen blinked. *Rynn... 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, grabbed his jacket, 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, a tall, bald, Deltan standing with another officer dressed in Ops gold.

The officer turned as Bransen approached.

And Bransen stopped short.

Tobias Rynn 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 phys. 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 Rynn,” Twefron said.

The Trill broke his reverie with an extended 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, I’ll show you there.”

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 most 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, letting 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, wiping 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. His blond curls were tamed under a blue baseball cap, turned backwards in a way that made Bransen bite his lip momentarily.

"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 in silence through the quiet corridors, 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 her 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. Cardio equipment lined the far side, complete with tread stations, upright gravity cycles, and the hydro-rowers, Bransen's personal favorite.

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 smells 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. "How about a little cardio warm-up... first to 5K on the rowers?"

Tobias turned, eyebrow raised. "A race? Someone's 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 the 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 same river, serene, mind unburdened.

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

They both leaned forward, gripping the hydro-resistance handles. Bransen watched Tobias's arms flex, momentarily distracted by veins over biceps, 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.

“What now, Lieutenant?,” 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, pulling on his shirt, Tobias's face almost nestled into his crotch. "That was... nice."

Standing, 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, with 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 diner mugs clinked, waitstaff glided between tables, and behind the counter, a green-skinned 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, admiring the sleek lines of the *USS Nimrod* in the berth next to them. He

smirked, thinking of the randomness of circumstances that had brought Tobias from that ship to sitting across from him now.

“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, and rugged inhabitants, the way the ocean smelled after rain and the way the mist lifted on a perfect summer day.

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. 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.

"My parents are still on Trill, both doctors." Tobias said. "We... don't talk much. I don't think I made all the choices they wanted from me. 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. We haven't really 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.

As the viewport next to them shattered, emergency force fields snapped into place; shimmering walls of blue energy locking across the open gaps to preserve atmosphere.

Bransen gasped once, twice, rolling upright as the pressure stabilized. He reached over to help Tobias to his feet.

“You good?” he asked, breath tight.

Tobias nodded, dusting fragments of glass out of his blond hair. His eyes were wide, his pulse visible in his neck, but he looked steady. Too steady.

They turned towards the shattered viewport.

Outside, chaos.

The *Nimrod* was in flames. One of her warp nacelles had been completely sheared off. The missing structure left a gaping cavity in her secondary 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 interior of the spacedock, 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, 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 alert lights strobed, emergency crews rushed in organized clusters and smoke drifted through the air, despite atmospheric containment. Across the comm, emergency orders and instructions overlapped.

Bransen and Tobias stuck close together, weaving past civilians and starbase personnel. By the time they reached the nearest transporter room, security teams were already directing people into ordered lines.

“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.

Finally, they stepped onto the transporter pad and vanished with a shimmer of light.

* * *

They materialized into the *Canberra's* main shuttlebay. The mammoth space was a scene of 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:

“Clear Lower Deck. All personnel report to Shuttle Bay One, repeat, all personnel report to Shuttle Bay One.”

Crew from every department filed into the space, the noise almost deafening until a loud call cut across the din.

“Captain on Deck!”

Captain Livinia Sihiri strode to the center of the bay, tall and sharp in her black and grey uniform. Beside her, Commander Vallona walked impassively.

The Captain paused as the room quieted. When she spoke, her tone was calm, clipped, unshakable.

“The *Canberra* is under orders to depart spacedock immediately. We are assuming command of the mission originally assigned to the *Nimrod*. All further details are

classified. Briefings will be issued in staggered tiers per clearance level.”

Her gaze swept the assembled crew.

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.

“This mission is critical to Federation security.” Sihiri continued. “I trust you all to conduct yourselves accordingly. Carry on.”

“Lieutenant Andrews,” Captain Sihiri called, her voice slicing through the noise as the crew dispersed. “You’ll join the senior staff for the mission briefing at 2100 hours.”

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)

Bransen's fingers found the edge of his PADD again, thumb brushing the corner in a rhythm he couldn't quite stop. The observation lounge stretched around him in its usual elegant sweep, but tonight the panoramic windows felt like a spotlight, the damaged *Nimrod* floating there like an accusation he couldn't ignore. He forced his hands to his sides, resisting the urge to check his notes one more time.

The mahogany table dominated the center of the room, its inset touchpanels dark for now, waiting. Senior staff filed past him toward their seats, their conversations muted, professional, but Bransen caught the tension in Commander Vallona's rigid posture, the way Lieutenant Commander

Rix's eyes swept the room twice before settling. Even the walls seemed to press closer tonight, their neutral tones doing nothing to soften what they all knew was coming.

Something about the edges of this situation felt wrong, like puzzle pieces that had been forced to fit together. There were too many unknowns, too many conflicting factors, and then there was Tobias. Bransen's chest tightened as thoughts of the Trill flooded back; his easy smile, the way he tasted when they kissed, the casual confidence as he sat in The Breakfast Club, the way he seemed completely unshaken when the *Nimrod* exploded in front of them...

Around the table sat the ship's senior staff; Commander Vallona, arms crossed in perpetual Vulcan reserve, Lieutenant Commander Rix, the ship's tactical chief, a lean Bolian with icy calm and eyes that missed nothing, Dr 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 Chief Engineer Lieutenant Commander Lefler.

Beside Captain Sihiri at the head of the table, sat a new face. A tall, blue-skinned Andorian who looked like someone who should've been in sickbay, 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.

The room quietened as Sihiri stood.

"The explosion on the *Nimrod* was not an accident."

She paused as the room absorbed the chilling words before continuing.

"We believe it was sabotage, intended to prevent a critical diplomatic mission. The *Nimrod* was en-route to the Sirocco sector to facilitate peace negotiations between two warring planets, Kaesso and Vehl. The Federation has remained uninvolved in the conflict, however recent escalations have threatened nearby Federation worlds and the Diplomatic Corps intervened to try and find a peaceful resolution. The *Nimrod's* mission was to support diplomatic efforts first and foremost, along with demonstrating a Starfleet presence to deter any threats to Federation worlds. 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; one that is now our mission to contain. Starfleet Command has ordered the *Canberra* to assume the *Nimrod's* mission, we will depart immediately."

She turned toward Bransen.

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

Bransen stepped forward with deliberate precision, activating the holotable with a practiced flick of his fingers. A star chart materialized, overlaid with tactical markers and intelligence assessments that he'd been analyzing for hours.

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

He tapped a glowing node, the display shifting smoothly to show signal intercepts and communication patterns. "Starfleet Intelligence 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, and possibly more."

Bransen flicked to the next overlay, displaying economic and political data streams. "The situation is complicated by internal political tensions on Kaesso itself. First Minister Taleth has been pursuing closer Federation ties, including preliminary discussions about associate membership and expanded trade agreements. However, our intelligence indicates growing isolationist sentiment among the Kaessian population."

A new display showed protest footage and polling data. "Anti-Federation sentiment on Kaesso has increased by thirty-seven percent over the past eighteen months. There have been significant demonstrations against what protesters call 'Federation cultural imperialism' and

economic dependence. The isolationist movement argues that closer Federation ties will erode Kaessian sovereignty."

Commander Vallona leaned forward slightly. "What is the basis for this opposition?"

Bransen consulted his notes. "Historical grievances play a significant role. During the last full-scale outbreak of hostilities between Kaesso and Vehl fifteen years ago, the Federation mediated a settlement, but Kaessian leadership believes those interventions systematically favored Vehl interests. They cite three separate incidents where Federation arbitrators awarded disputed mining rights and trade routes to Vehl."

He called up economic projections. "Currently, Kaesso depends on Federation trade routes for sixty-two percent of their export economy. Opposition groups argue this creates an unsustainable dependency that forces Kaesso to align their policies with Federation interests rather than their own."

zh'Rhen spoke up, his voice carrying the weight of recent trauma. "The opposition isn't entirely wrong about Federation influence. Taleth's government has made significant concessions to maintain our support."

"What kind of concessions?" Rix asked.

Bransen shifted the display again. "Preferential trade agreements that benefit Federation worlds, military cooperation agreements that some Kaessans view as occupation, and cultural exchange programs that critics

claim are designed to 'Federationize' their society. The opposition has successfully framed Taleth's policies as selling out Kaessian independence."

He flicked to the next overlay. "Three days ago, the Federation negotiation team were attacked and taken hostage during talks in the Kaessian capital. The *Nimrod* was ordered to Kaesso to stabilize the situation, support Envoy zh'Rhen's diplomatic efforts, and ensure the return of the negotiation team."

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, his voice rising. "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!"

He banged both fists on the table, wincing as pain shot through his shoulder.

Dr. Grankegh cleared his throat loudly, squinting through bloodshot eyes. "Envoy, please a little restraint. You're barely upright, you should still be in sickbay."

The Andorian flared his nostrils. "I should be right here, Doctor. There's no time to waste!"

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.

"The timing of this attack is particularly significant," Bransen continued, pulling up a timeline display. "It occurred just days before the Kaessian High Council was scheduled to vote on Taleth's proposal for formal Federation partnership talks. The attack has effectively derailed those negotiations and provided ammunition for opposition groups who argue that Federation involvement brings instability."

"Lieutenant," Sihiri continued, "What do we know about the opposition movement? Are there any groups who might have been behind the attack?"

Bransen consulted his PADD briefly, pulling the detailed profile he'd prepared. "A militant Kaessian splinter group known as the Kavesh Coalition have claimed responsibility for the attack. They've historically operated on the outskirts of Kaesso's government structure, but evidence suggests this attack wasn't sanctioned. The Kavesh Coalition emerged from the independence movement that opposed Kaesso's initial contact with the Federation twenty years

ago. They believe any external alliance compromises Kaessian autonomy."

"Their rhetoric focuses on 'pure Kaessian governance' and rejection of what they call 'soft colonization' by larger powers," Bransen continued. "Ironically, this puts them at odds with both Federation and Romulan influence, though recent intelligence suggests they may view the Romulans as the lesser of two evils."

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

Bransen paused, considering his answer. The data was clean enough, but something about the pattern felt orchestrated. Too neat. His instincts whispered warnings that he couldn't ignore. "No, Ma'am. The coordination required for this operation exceeds the Kavesh Coalition's established capabilities. Someone provided tactical support, intelligence, or both."

Rix leaned forward slightly, brow furrowed. "Coordinated strike, disciplined comms, hostages taken cleanly... that's not opportunistic. If they can pull that off once, they can do it again."

"Or they wanted it to look that way," zh'Rhen replied, voice level, antennae angling forward with faint irritation. "A demonstration, not a campaign. A faction trying to be taken seriously."

"Either way," Vallona said, cutting across them with quiet precision, "we are dealing with actors operating beyond their

expected capability. The distinction matters, but it is not yet clear."

The room settled into a brief, uneasy silence; competing interpretations hanging just long enough to take shape.

Sihiri didn't look at them.

"Lieutenant," she said instead, her gaze fixed on Bransen.

"What's your assessment?"

Bransen held her gaze steadily.

"The attack pattern indicates outside support," he said, his voice carrying quiet certainty. "The Kavesh have never demonstrated this level of operational sophistication. I am almost certain someone trained them and equipped them. Whether that support came from Vehl, the Romulans, or another actor remains unclear."

He paused, letting the weight of his next words settle. "My assessment is that we're looking at a manufactured crisis. The question is who's manufacturing it, and why. But the political dynamics are real, Captain. If we're not careful, we could find ourselves accidentally fulfilling the opposition's narrative about Federation overreach."

"That's a serious implication, Lieutenant." Rix injected.

Bransen met his gaze without flinching. "Yes, sir. But the alternative is accepting that a minor militant group suddenly developed the capability to conduct precision operations against Federation assets while perfectly timing their actions

for maximum political impact. I find that significantly less likely."

The room absorbed this, the implications rippling through the assembled officers.

Bransen continued, pulling up additional displays. "We are unfortunately working with limited intelligence on the attack itself; the negotiating team went dark as soon as it started, and the Kaessian government has been slow to provide comprehensive data. We do have an encrypted burst received by the Envoy's shuttle shortly before the incident. My team are working to decrypt it, but preliminary analysis suggests it may have been a warning or redirection attempt."

Thav zh'Rhen gave a terse nod. "They may have been trying to redirect me. It's possible that someone knew the attack was about to happen and wanted me clear of the target zone."

The room was quiet, digesting the implications. Bransen couldn't shake the unease he felt, and he knew the senior staff felt it too. The intelligence painted a picture, but something about the frame felt wrong. Too clean. Too convenient. Like someone had wanted them to reach exactly these conclusions.

"The stakes here extend beyond just recovering the hostages," Bransen concluded. "We're walking into a political powder keg where our very presence could be used to justify the kind of nationalist backlash that brings down a

pro-Federation government. We need to be prepared for the possibility that someone wants exactly that outcome."

"The political implications are significant," zh'Rhen added. "If Starfleet is seen as heavy-handed in our response, it validates every argument the opposition has made about Federation interference. We could inadvertently trigger exactly the kind of backlash that topples Taleth's government and could hand the system to the Romulans."

For a moment, the room was silent. Then Sihiri stood again, her gaze sweeping the assembled officers digesting what they had just heard.

"XO, liaise with Commander Rix on tactical readiness and crisis response. I want a security team briefed for planetary insertion by the time we arrive at Kaesso."

Vallona inclined her head. "Yes Ma'am."

"You have your orders. Prepare for departure stations in one hour. Dismissed."

As the assembled officers filed out, Bransen caught Envoy zh'Rhen eyeing him from across the room. The Andorian gave him the slightest of nods before leaving.

Bransen remained for a moment in the empty room, enjoying the silence as he processed the briefing. He glanced again at the *Nimrod*, and something cold settled in his stomach.

Someone was playing a deeper game. And they were very, very good at it.

"Ok, Bransen," he muttered to himself as he walked towards the door, "Let's do this."

* * *

The corridor outside the observation lounge was quiet, the ship still under the muted tension of departure preparations; crew moving with purpose, voices low, every footstep part of the larger machine coming awake around him.

He stepped into the turbolift and allowed himself a moment to lean back against the curved interior.

For the first time since the explosion, the adrenaline began to ebb, leaving something colder behind it. The briefing had helped. That was the strange part. Once the holotable came alive, once the fragments of politics and violence and signal intelligence arranged themselves into patterns he could interrogate, the uncertainty had lifted just enough for him to breathe. He knew how to do that. He knew how to stand in front of senior officers and turn incomplete information into assessment, not certainty, but something close enough to act on.

It was everything after that he did not know how to handle.

"Computer, Deck 3"

As the turbolift started to move, Tobias's voice came back to him, quiet and controlled in the shattered remains of The Breakfast Club.

It's sabotage.

Not fear. Not shock. Recognition.

The doors opened into the muted lighting of Deck Three, and he hated himself a little for how quickly his body made the decision before his mind caught up. He should have gone to the SIO. He should have gone to his quarters, pulled every scrap of available intelligence, and kept working until the pieces stopped shifting under his hands.

Instead, he found himself walking a different direction.

Not because he trusted Tobias.

Because he wanted to.

And because wanting, Bransen was beginning to realize, was not the same thing as trust.



Bransen stood for a second, hand hovering over the chime outside Tobias's quarters. His brain told him to walk down the hallway, back to his own waiting bed and the rest he so desperately needed. But something else, something between his chest and his groin held him in place.

He tapped the control.

A moment passed.

Then another.

Bransen almost turned away.

The door slid open.

Tobias stood barefoot in the dim light, wearing only loose sleep pants, hair tousled in a way that should not have looked so deliberate. If he was surprised to see Bransen, he hid it quickly.

"Hey," Bransen said.

Tobias stepped aside. "Come in."

The room was warm and low-lit, the standard quarters softened by personal touches not yet fully unpacked; a duffel half-open near the wardrobe, a PADD on the desk, a pair of boots placed neatly beneath the chair. The scent of fresh soap and recycled air hung close around him. Bransen stepped inside, and the door whispered shut behind him.

For a moment neither of them spoke.

Tobias watched him from near the door. "You all right?"

Bransen gave a short laugh without much humor. “Long day.”

“I heard there was a senior staff briefing.”

There it was. Gentle. Almost casual.

Bransen looked at him. “You heard?”

“People talk,” Tobias said, with an easy shrug. “Ships are small. Especially old ones.”

Bransen sat on the edge of the bunk, hands resting loosely between his knees. “They do.”

Tobias crossed the room slowly, not quite sitting beside him yet. “So what’s the mission?”

The question landed too cleanly.

Bransen held his gaze for a beat longer than politeness required. Tobias’s face remained open, curious, lightly amused, but his eyes were too still. Too attentive.

“You know I can’t tell you that.”

“Not even a hint?”

“No.”

Tobias smiled faintly. “That sounded very Starfleet Intelligence.”

“It was supposed to.”

The smile softened, but something behind it tightened. Not anger. Not quite disappointment. A recalculation, maybe.

Bransen saw it because he was looking for it, and because part of him hated that he was looking at all.

Tobias came closer. "I was only asking."

"I know."

"Do you?"

Bransen looked up at him. "I know you asked."

The silence that followed was small, but sharp.

Tobias lowered himself onto the bunk beside him. The mattress dipped beneath his weight, bringing them close enough that Bransen could feel the warmth of his bare shoulder through the narrow space between them.

"You don't have to do that with me," Tobias said quietly.

"Do what?"

"Interrogate every sentence."

Bransen's mouth tightened. "Occupational hazard."

"Is that what this is?"

Bransen turned his head. Tobias was close now, green eyes shadowed, the spots at his temples disappearing into the soft fall of his hair. He looked tired suddenly, or perhaps only less guarded.

"I don't know what this is," Bransen said.

Tobias absorbed that. For once, he did not answer immediately.

Then he reached up, fingers brushing lightly along Bransen's jaw. The touch was careful, almost tentative, and somehow that was worse than confidence. Bransen could have stepped back. He knew he could. He knew, with the cold clarity that had carried him through the briefing, that the safest thing in the room was distance.

He did not move.

Tobias leaned in and kissed him.

It was slower than the gym had been. Less triumphant. Less playful. A question rather than a claim. Bransen let it happen for one breath, then another, before his hand rose to the back of Tobias's neck and pulled him closer.

The kiss deepened.

Tobias made a quiet sound against his mouth, and the last of Bransen's discipline thinned into heat. Hands moved, first cautious, then hungry. Tobias unfastened Bransen's uniform jacket with deliberate care, pushing it from his shoulders and letting it fall beside the bunk. Bransen caught his wrist before he could pull away.

"Tell me something true," he said.

Tobias went still.

The room seemed to narrow around them.

"What?"

"Something true," Bransen repeated, softer now. "No briefing. No mission. No performance."

Tobias looked at him for a long moment, the usual quick answer nowhere to be found. When he finally spoke, his voice was low.

“I didn’t expect you.”

Bransen searched his face. “That’s not an answer.”

“It’s the only one I have.”

The honesty of it, or the shape of honesty, hit harder than denial would have. Bransen wanted to ask what it meant. He wanted to push, to pry, to force the pieces into place before desire made him stupid.

Instead, Tobias kissed him again.

This time there was desperation in it.

Bransen felt it in the way Tobias’s hands tightened at his waist, in the way his breath caught when Bransen pushed him back against the bed. Whatever else was hidden here, whatever games were being played beyond the walls of this room, this part did not feel clean enough to be planned. It was too rough at the edges. Too needy.

Or maybe that was what made it dangerous.

Bransen climbed over him, mouth trailing from his lips to his throat, feeling the pulse hammer beneath warm skin. Tobias arched up beneath him, fingers sliding under Bransen’s shirt, palms pressing hard against his back as though anchoring himself there. Bransen dragged the shirt up and

away, then bent again, kissing along the line of Tobias's collarbone, following the trail of spots down his chest.

Tobias whispered his name.

Not Lieutenant. Not Andrews.

Bransen.

That undid something in him.

* * *

The rest came quickly after that; fabric pushed aside, breath turning ragged, bodies fitting together with an urgency that felt less like seduction than surrender. Tobias's hands moved with skill, yes, but also with a barely contained tremor that Bransen could feel every time their fingers met. Bransen answered it with his own hunger, with teeth at Tobias's shoulder, with a hand fisted in the sheets, with the low, helpless sound he made when Tobias finally pulled him close enough that there was no space left between them.

Bransen shifted, his tongue tracing the enticing V line as his hands pulled down Tobias's lounge pants. Finally, teasing, he reached his waiting cock. He took it 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..."

For a while, there was no mission.

No *Nimrod*. No briefing. No Romulan shadows at the edge of the map.

Only Tobias beneath him, then above him, breath hot against his ear, body moving with his in the dim light of a ship already preparing to leave dock. Only the ache of want, the slick heat of skin, the frightening tenderness of a mouth pressed to his temple when the rhythm finally broke apart.

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 blindly into the open drawer beside the bunk, finding the small tube there with the practiced haste of someone who had been trying not to hope the night would go this far. Bransen felt Tobias's fingers slicking quickly before circling his 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, firmly, 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, almost 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 felt a tightening as Tobias stroked him, every tug a counterpoint to the thrusting of the bare dick deep inside him. He finally lost control, shooting across Tobias's stomach with a moan, 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.

When it was over, they lay tangled, damp and breathless, the room quiet except for the hum of the ship and the uneven pull of their breathing.

Tobias stared at the ceiling.

For a moment his face was unguarded.

Guilt crossed it so quickly Bransen might have missed it if he had not been watching for anything at all.

Then Tobias turned his head and gave him a half-smile. "Not bad for a distraction."

Bransen did not smile back.

“No,” he said quietly. “Not bad.”

The words sat between them, heavier than they should have been.

Tobias’s smile faded.

Bransen shifted onto his side, still close enough to feel the warmth of him, but no longer hidden inside it. “You looked at the *Nimrod* today like you already knew what had happened.”

Tobias closed his eyes.

“I was on that ship yesterday,” he said.

“I know.”

“Maybe I was thinking about that.”

“Were you?”

Tobias opened his eyes again, and there it was; not guilt this time, not exactly, but fear. Real fear. The kind that did not belong to a man caught in a lie so much as one trapped inside a truth he could not say aloud.

“Yes,” Tobias said.

Bransen waited.

Tobias swallowed. “And no.”

The admission was barely anything. It was also more than he had given before.

Bransen’s chest tightened. “Tobias...”

“Don’t,” Tobias whispered. “Please. Not tonight.”

Bransen studied him, hating how much he wanted to give him that. Hating, more, that he already had.

After a long moment, he lay back down.

Tobias turned toward him, cautious now, as though expecting him to pull away. Bransen did not. He let Tobias settle against him, let the Trill’s arm cross his waist, let the warmth return, though the comfort was no longer simple.

A subtle vibration passed through the hull.

The *Canberra* was moving.

Bransen looked toward the viewport as the docking clamps released somewhere far beyond the room, the ship easing away from Starbase 21 under thruster power. Light from the station washed silver across Tobias’s bare shoulder, catching in the faint sheen of sweat cooling on his skin.

For a few seconds, neither of them spoke.

Then Tobias murmured, almost too softly to hear, “I’m sorry.”

Bransen turned his head. “For what?”

Tobias did not answer.

Outside, the vast doors of Starbase 21 opened to the stars.

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 colors of the Kaesso system. At the heart of it, Kaesso IV. From orbit the planet glowed serene; bands of cloud sweeping over continents of amber and green. But the beauty was deceptive. Scans showed vast tracts still scarred from the planetary conflicts of the decades prior; the atmosphere shimmered with suspended particulates from half-ruined industrial belts. On the viewscreen it looked alive

and whole again, up close, the wounds still bled dust and heat.

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. Bransen sat at his intelligence console at the rear of the bridge, quietly reviewing the latest reports from his team in the SIO. At Ops, Tobias's fingers danced over his interface, efficient and controlled.

"We're being hailed," Tobias reported. "Kaessan 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 Kaessan architecture with 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 Kaessan 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. “First Minister, 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, it all felt a little 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 meeting in-person to discuss the details of the situation.”

Taleth hesitated, just slightly, before replying. “That is acceptable. We will receive you in the Hall of Accord in one hour.”

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

Sihiri turned. “Commander Vallona, begin prepping a hostage rescue operation. 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. “Commander, 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 Andrews, you’re also with us. I want your eyes and ears on the ground.”

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, the away team stepped onto the transporter pad, straight into uncertainty.

* * *

The transporter beam shimmered and resolved into the polished marble floor of the Hall of Accord; an expansive ceremonial chamber of gothic 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, but there was tension in the set of her shoulders, the careful way she held her smile. 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, though I confess the circumstances weigh heavily on us all."

Sihiri extended her hand. "Thank you, First Minister. I am confident that with your support, we can resolve this situation quickly and peacefully. These are my officers, Lieutenant Commander Rix, and Lieutenant Andrews. And I believe you already know Envoy zh'Rhen of the Diplomatic Corps."

Taleth nodded and gestured beside her. "This is Deputy Minister Havarl, who oversees internal security. He has been invaluable in maintaining stability during this crisis."

Havarl stepped forward; tall, with sharp eyes that seemed to take in everything at once, but his expression carried genuine concern rather than calculation. His dark military jacket bore the insignia of his office, pressed and formal, but his demeanor radiated the confidence of someone used to difficult conversations.

"An honor to work alongside Starfleet," he said, his tone carrying a warmth that felt practiced, but not false. "The First Minister has shown considerable courage in pursuing Federation partnership despite domestic opposition. Many on Kaesso question whether that partnership means anything when the moment turns dangerous. I believe this crisis gives her the opportunity to answer them."

Bransen caught the way Taleth's posture straightened slightly at Havarl's words.

"But we must be clear about our boundaries, Captain," Taleth continued. "Kaesso values Federation partnership, but we will always maintain our sovereignty. We seek cooperation and mutual support, not integration or dependency. Any action taken on our soil must be understood as support for this government, not a replacement for it."

She looked directly at Sihiri. "I hope the Federation understands this distinction as clearly as we do."

Sihiri kept her voice diplomatic. "We understand the political complexities, First Minister. The Federation values Kaesso's sovereignty in all our interactions."

"Of course," Havarl replied smoothly. "But sovereignty without security is meaningless. You must understand that our world has suffered through crises for the last century. We had barely unified after a millennia of conflict of our own when the Vehl began their campaign against us. And now the Kavesh re-ignite struggles at home. Our own security apparatus cannot sustain conflict on two fronts. Kaesso needs strong partnerships, Captain. The First Minister needs to be able to show her people that Federation support means something tangible."

"And what might such tangible support look like to you, Deputy Minister?" zh'Rhen asked diplomatically.

"Nothing beyond what the situation demands," Havarl replied. "But the situation does demand clarity. Kaesso has spent generations learning what happens when outside powers hesitate, bargain, or look away until the cost of action becomes unbearable. If Starfleet acts, it must act in open coordination with the First Minister's government. Not around her. Not above her. With her."

He looked briefly toward Taleth, then back to Sihiri.

"Our people must see that Federation partnership strengthens Kaessian authority rather than diminishing it. A timid response will make Taleth look abandoned. An uncontrolled response will make her look occupied. But a decisive, authorized operation could prove that she was right to seek your support."

Taleth leaned forward slightly. "The Deputy Minister speaks truly. There are voices in our council, voices in our streets, that question whether the Federation truly stands with its friends when the moment demands it."

She paused, glancing at Havarl, who gave her an encouraging nod.

"If we are to recover your people, Captain," Taleth continued, "Then we will need strong Starfleet support. The isolationist movement is small, but vocal. Havarl has assured me that his contacts among the highland clans, those most skeptical of Federation involvement, can be convinced if they see decisive action."

zh'Rhen stepped forward, his antennae angling with diplomatic poise. "First Minister, we're prepared to work within established frameworks to ensure the safety of Federation citizens and the stability of your government."

Havarl's expression grew more serious. "Envoy, I appreciate Starfleet's careful approach. Truly. But there are communities on this world that hear restraint as abandonment, and there are others who will call any Federation presence occupation no matter how carefully you tread. The First Minister is standing between both accusations."

He let that sit for a moment, his voice lowering.

"That is why the response must be unmistakably hers. Her authorization. Her security forces beside yours. Her government seen to be acting, not waiting to be rescued. If the Kavesh are allowed to define this moment, they will not merely take hostages, they will take the narrative."

Taleth nodded firmly. "Havarl's counsel has been essential during this crisis. His people, the highland communities, they've been the backbone of the isolationist movement for decades. If he can bring them into line behind Federation partnership, it changes everything."

Bransen felt a flicker of unease at the edges of his awareness. Havarl's argument was sound, which made it harder to dismiss. Every piece of it protected Taleth in theory; Kaessan authorization, joint command, visible sovereignty, Federation support carefully framed as

partnership. And yet the structure of it bothered him. If the operation succeeded, Taleth would owe her survival to Starfleet. If it failed, she would own the failure in full.

Either outcome could be made useful by someone with the right access and enough patience.

zh'Rhen's voice carried quiet caution. "We're committed to recovery of the hostages and restoration of stability. But we must be mindful that heavy-handed actions, however well-intentioned, can sometimes fuel the very opposition they're meant to discourage."

Havarl's expression grew more serious. "Envoy, respectfully, that's the kind of thinking that's allowed this crisis to escalate. The Kavesh struck because they believed the Federation would respond with restraint. They're counting on our hesitation. Sometimes, preventing larger violence requires decisive action in the moment."

Taleth placed a hand on Havarl's arm, not quite seeking reassurance, but accepting the force of his argument.

"The Deputy Minister understands the communities most likely to turn against us if this goes wrong," she said. "I do not always share his appetite for visible action, Captain, but I cannot ignore the political reality. If my government appears passive while Federation citizens are held on Kaessian soil, the opposition will use that silence as a weapon."

Havarl inclined his head, modestly enough that it almost seemed genuine.

Sihiri studied them both for a moment. "We'll move carefully, but we'll move decisively when the situation demands it. The safety of Federation citizens remains our priority."

"Exactly what we hoped to hear," Havarl said, inclining his head. "With your permission, I'll coordinate our intelligence efforts with your ship. We have resources, contacts, ways of gathering information that might prove invaluable."

As they prepared to move deeper into the compound, Bransen caught Taleth speaking quietly to Havarl near the archway.

"Are you certain about this approach?" Taleth asked, voice low but not quite low enough.

Havarl did not answer immediately. He glanced across the hall toward the Starfleet officers, then back to her.

"No one can be certain in a crisis like this," he said quietly. "But hesitation will be read as weakness, and weakness is the one thing your enemies know how to use."

Taleth's jaw tightened.

Havarl softened his voice. "This must be your decision, Minister. Your authority. Your invitation. If Starfleet acts without you, the opposition will call it occupation. If you act without Starfleet, the Kavesh will call your bluff. But if you stand with them, visibly, decisively, you may yet prove that partnership with the Federation gives Kaesso strength without surrender."

Taleth looked toward Sihiri, then back at him. "And if it goes wrong?"

Havarl held her gaze.

"Then it would have gone wrong because our enemies made peace impossible," he said. "Not because you lacked the courage to try."

Taleth straightened, nodding. "Then we move forward," she said, before striding back through the grand hall.

Bransen watched the exchange, unable to decide whether he had just overheard loyalty under strain, or a man carefully placing a crown of thorns on Taleth's head. Havarl had not ordered her to do anything. That was what made it effective. He had simply narrowed the path until the only way forward looked like the one he wanted her to choose.

* * *

Havarl smoothly assumed the role of guide, leading the team through a set of arched corridors into a secure section of the complex. They passed guards in ceremonial armor, Kaessan 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 PADD.

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. Kaessan analysts in a variety of working dress 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. 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, then felt the sense of eyes on him. He spotted a young Kaessian woman stationed at a console displaying audio logs and sensor readouts in the corner of the room. Her posture was sharp, eyes alert, and she regarded Bransen cautiously before giving the slightest nod towards her station.

Bransen moved casually towards the console where she sat.

"Lieutenant Bransen Andrews, Starfleet Intelligence," he said smoothly.

"Verel." She replied, calmly. "Senior Analyst."

"Pleased to meet you, Verel." Bransen continued. "My team are trying to piece together a detailed timeline of the attack on our diplomatic party, any help you can give me would be greatly appreciated."

"Of course, happy to help. It all happened so quickly."

"You were here when the incident occurred?"

"I was monitoring the delegation's arrival at the Accord Pavilion," she replied. "I survived because I was overseeing security feeds from an adjacent control room. The Kavesh killed four security officers and three of our negotiators in the attack."

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 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. "The Star Empire has been on our doorstep for centuries, but they've never made

overt moves in this sector; we're pretty firmly within Federation space even though Kaesso isn't a Federation world."

She paused, lowering her voice further. "But there's something else. The attack on your starship is completely out of character for any of the groups involved here; the Vehl, The Kavesh, neither of them should have been able to pull that off. Either it wasn't them, or someone helped them."

Bransen's pulse quickened. "The same actors?"

"It's possible," Verel said carefully. "The sophistication, the timing, the way both operations were designed to maximize political impact rather than military damage. Someone wanted your starship disabled, not destroyed. Someone wanted your diplomats taken, not killed."

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

"There's something else." Verel continued, lowering her voice to a whisper, "I have been following some... strange communications between the Capitol and someone offworld."

"Strange how?" Bransen whispered, "Surely your government is communicating offworld all the time?"

"Yes, but this is different. This was hidden, encrypted, masked, routed. Every possible trick you could use to hide. And it came from within Federation space, deep within."

"Can you show me?" Bransen asked.

Verel looked around cautiously, then tapped her console. Bransen scrutinized the display of comm data. The patterns were unique, yet there were familiar threads.

"Hmm," Bransen squinted at the screen. "There are Federation relay markers there, this definitely came through, or from somewhere inside Federation space. May I?" he gestured at the terminal.

"Go ahead."

Bransen pulled out his tricorder and tapped the display, comparing various signal patterns and link traces. He flagged a signal and pulled it into the main display.

"This one here," he pointed at the display. "The subspace propagation delay is much shorter than the rest, and the relay-hop count is lower. This didn't go through any relays, it was direct."

"That means it came from somewhere close by." Verel pulled a packet from the signal thread and scrutinized the headers.

"Definitely," Bransen agreed. "If it didn't go through any relays then it came from a source close enough for direct realtime comms."

He tapped his tricorder again, and the comms thread appeared on it.

"Let me try cross-referencing with... Oh." He paused.

"What is it?" Verel enquired with a whisper.

"It has the Canberra's relay node identifier. It came from the ship."

"And it was sent two hours ago." Verel noted, "That's right when..."

"When the Canberra arrived in orbit." Bransen finished the thought.

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

"Captain, we are receiving a priority message from a group claiming to have custody of our diplomatic team, they are demanding to speak with you."

"Understood XO." Sihiri replied, her expression tightening. "We're returning immediately."

As Bransen moved to leave, Verel pressed a small data chip into his hand.

"I couldn't decrypt any of it, but maybe you'll have more luck."

"Thank you, Verel."

As the away team gathered for transport, Bransen couldn't shake the knots in his stomach.

Something was wrong. And it was getting closer.



CHAPTER 6



Stardate 52964.9 (2375)

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.

“All senior staff report to the observation lounge.”

Bransen fell into step behind her, still unable to shake the sense that something was eluding him.

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. Bransen moved to a terminal on one side of the room and logged in to the intelligence network. The lights dimmed slightly as the display activated.

A Kaessian face appeared on the screen. Sharp featured, scars on his face and worn military garb told of a life of combat. Bransen couldn't help but think of the contrast to the polished appearances of Taleth and Havarl. When he spoke, his voice was harsh with the accent of the Kaessian highlands but carrying the authority of command.

"Federation vessel, this is Colonel Joral of the Kavesh Coalition. Your presence here is a violation of Kaessian sovereignty, you will withdraw immediately."

Bransen typed the name into his search program, pulling up a profile of the Kavesh leader.

Sihiri stepped forward. "Colonel Joral, this is Captain Sihiri. The Federation is here at the invitation of the Kaessian government. We seek only the peaceful resolution of the current crisis."

A bitter laugh crackled through the comm. "Kaessian government? You mean the puppet regime that sold our sovereignty for Federation credits? Taleth's administration has no authority to invite foreign powers into our space."

zh'Rhen moved closer to Sihiri, his voice low. "Captain, this is more sophisticated than we expected. The Kavesh were supposed to be a fringe militant group."

Joral's voice continued, harder now. "The Kavesh Coalition speaks for the true Kaesso; the workers who built this world with their hands, the communities that survived wars and famines while politicians traded our future away. We will not stand by and watch our homeworld become another Federation protectorate."

"Colonel," Sihiri said, "the Federation has no intention of occupying Kaesso or undermining your sovereignty. Our only concern is the safe return of Federation citizens who were taken against their will."

"Citizens who came here to corrupt our leaders and divide our people," Joral spat. "Your diplomats weren't negotiating, Captain, they were buying. Offering trade agreements and security partnerships in exchange for military bases and mining rights. We've seen this pattern on a dozen worlds."

The accusation hung in the air. zh'Rhen's antennae twitched with controlled anger.

"The Federation negotiations were conducted in good faith," the envoy said firmly. "We offered partnership, not subjugation."

"Partnership," Joral repeated with disgust. "The same word the Federation used when it 'mediated' our conflicts with Vehl fifteen years ago. The same word they used when they awarded our mining rights to Vehl corporations and handed our trade routes to Federation worlds. Your partnership has cost us our economic independence and our dignity."

Sihiri kept her voice level. "Colonel, the past cannot be changed, but we can work toward a future that serves all Kaessian interests."

"Can we?" Joral's tone grew colder. "Tell me, Captain, when Kaesso becomes a Federation member world, how many of our young people will leave for Federation universities and never return? How many of our traditions will be deemed 'incompatible' with Federation values? How long before Kaessian becomes just another world in the Federation's cultural empire?"

The questions struck deeper than military threats. Bransen saw zh'Rhen's expression tighten; these weren't the ravings of extremists, but the fears of a people who had watched other worlds lose their identity to galactic powers.

"The Kavesh Coalition exists because someone must speak for those who refuse to surrender their heritage," Joral continued. "We are not terrorists, Captain. We are patriots. And we will not allow our world to disappear into your Federation's embrace."

A pause crackled over the comm channel.

"You will leave Kaessian space," Joral said, his voice final. "The hostages will not be harmed, but neither will they be returned until the Federation abandons its designs on our world."

The transmission cut out.

Silence settled over the bridge like a weight. Sihiri stood motionless for a moment, processing what they had just heard.

"Thoughts people?" She inquired of the room

"Captain," Bransen said quietly, "that wasn't the message of a fringe militant group. That was a political manifesto."

zh'Rhen nodded grimly. "And unfortunately, Joral's grievances aren't entirely fabricated. The Federation's previous interventions in this sector provided for some short-term concessions to the Vehl by Kaesso in return for long-term Federation support that was somewhat curtailed by the war with the Dominion."

"That sounds like a situation ripe for exploitation by outside influences." Rix mused.

"Lieutenant," Sihiri continued. "What do we know about this Joral?"

Bransen handed a PADD to the Captain, and pulled up Joral's file on the main display.

"Colonel Inictin Joral. Formerly of the Kaessian Military and a veteran of the last two conflicts with the Vehl. We don't have much on him, but we do know that he left the military in protest after the last accords and was one of the founders of the Kavesh."

"So he's a true believer, then? How likely is it that he will negotiate or compromise?" Rix asked.

"I would say it's highly unlikely he would compromise on anything that he perceives to infringe on Kaessian independence." Bransen replied.

"Thank you, Lieutenant." Sihiri looked thoughtful. "Joral's demands are clearly unacceptable, we may have to move forward with tactical options. Commander Rix, where are we with the planning?"

"Ready to go on your order, Ma'am. There will be some tweaks for exact location, but we have a range of options that should meet all of the likely scenarios."

"Very well. Envoy, can you work the diplomatic angle? At worst, you might buy us some time, we still need to work out where the Kavesh are holding our people." Sihiri continued.

"Yes, Captain." zh'Rhen looked almost amused. "I will take Joral's demands to the Diplomatic Service, that is likely to buy us several days at least."

Vallona glanced up from her console. "Captain, should I inform First Minister Taleth of this development?"

"Do it," Sihiri ordered. "She needs to know that her domestic opposition is more organized than she indicated."

She turned to Bransen. "Lieutenant, return to the intelligence office. Start reviewing everything we have on the Kavesh Coalition and Colonel Joral. I want us prepared in case they decide to escalate."

“Yes, Ma'am,” Bransen said, pausing. “There’s more. I talked to one of the analysts on the surface, there are a lot of indicators of outside influence on the situation.”

Sihiri’s eyes narrowed, her expression unreadable. “Romulans?”

For a moment, Bransen's mind flashed back to the signal trace, to the *Canberra's* relay ID.

“I'll need to have my team analyze it further to be sure, but they are the most likely suspects. The precision of the attack on the Capitol doesn't match the Kavesh's profile, it's too sophisticated; either they developed their capabilities overnight or they had help.”

If Sihiri sensed his hesitation, she didn't show it. She drew a slow breath, then nodded. “Good work. Dig deeper, Lieutenant. Quietly. This doesn't leave this 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 as he took the turbolift to deck six. By the time he stepped out, the ship had become all muted urgency around him; crew moving quickly but not running, status panels cycling through yellow-coded readiness, voices dropping as officers passed one another with the private gravity of people who knew a crisis had found them.

The Intelligence Office doors were just ahead when he saw Tobias.

The Trill stood outside them, arms folded loosely across his chest, one shoulder resting against the bulkhead as though he had every right to be there. He looked calm. Too calm, maybe. Or perhaps Bransen had simply forgotten how to look at him without searching for fracture lines.

Tobias straightened when he saw him. "Hey."

Bransen slowed. "Funny place to wait."

"I figured you'd be headed this way." Tobias's smile came easily, but it did not quite reach his eyes. "Thought you might need company."

The word landed strangely. Company. Comfort. Cover.

Bransen stopped a few paces from him. "You've got timing."

“Good timing?”

“Undetermined.”

Tobias studied him, the smile fading by degrees.

“Something happened down there.”

“A lot happened down there.”

“That’s not what I meant.”

Bransen held his gaze. He thought of Verel’s data chip tucked securely inside his jacket. He thought of the signal trace, the Canberra’s relay node identifier, the timestamp matching their arrival in orbit. He thought of Tobias in The Breakfast Club, saying sabotage before anyone else had found the word.

For one reckless second, he wanted to tell him everything just to see what his face did.

Instead, he said, “Do you know something about this mission you haven’t told me?”

Tobias went still.

It was subtle. Barely anything. A breath held half a second too long, a tightening in the jaw, the smallest shift in weight as if his body had chosen retreat before his pride could stop it.

“Why would you ask me that?”

“Because every time I get close to an answer, you’re standing somewhere nearby.”

“That’s not fair.”

“No,” Bransen said quietly. “It isn’t.”

The honesty of that seemed to catch Tobias more than the accusation had.

He stepped closer, lowering his voice. “Bransen, whatever you think is happening...”

“What?”

Tobias stopped.

Bransen waited.

The corridor seemed to narrow around them, the low pulse of the ship’s systems filling the silence where an answer should have been.

Finally, Tobias shook his head. “Just be careful.”

Bransen gave a short, humorless breath. “That sounds almost like a warning.”

“It’s not.”

“Then what is it?”

Tobias looked at him then, and for a moment the mask slipped. There was fear there. Real fear. Not of Bransen, not exactly, but of something standing just behind the conversation, something neither of them was naming.

“It’s me asking you not to get hurt,” Tobias said.

Bransen wanted to believe him.

That was the problem.

“Not now, Tobias.”

He stepped past him.

Tobias did not try to stop him this time. “Bransen.”

He paused at the doors.

“If you find whatever you’re looking for,” Tobias said softly, “make sure you know what it costs before you pick it up.”

Bransen looked back once, then entered 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 as he called in his team.

Chief Petty Officer Alynna Ward arrived within moments, eyes sharp behind decades of experience. She moved to her station without fuss, already tapping into the surface data sets before Bransen had finished transferring Verel’s files.

“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, grateful for the familiar shape of work. “Try to match the tactics to any known Romulan disruption

patterns; indirect infiltration, falsified identities, vector scrambling, anything that points to training rather than improvisation.”

Ward’s fingers paused briefly over the console. “You think the Romulans are behind this?”

“I think they’re on the edge of it.”

“That isn’t the same answer.”

“No,” Bransen said. “It isn’t.”

Ward glanced back at him then, properly this time. “What else?”

Bransen looked toward the closed doors.

For a moment, he saw Tobias standing in the corridor again, green eyes shadowed, voice low enough that the warning felt almost intimate.

Make sure you know what it costs before you pick it up.

Bransen hated how well the words had landed.

He drew a slow breath. “Chief... I need you to run a comms trace. Discreetly.”

Ward’s expression did not change, but something in the room seemed to tighten.

“On whom?”

Bransen made himself say it. “Lieutenant Rynn.”

Ward turned fully from the console.

Neither of them spoke for a beat.

“Originating from his console?” she asked.

“Or routed through it. Anything directed toward Kaesso, Vehl, or any unregistered relay within local range. Don’t flag it in the system. Don’t push it through standard security monitoring. Bring it to me directly.”

Ward’s eyes narrowed, not with suspicion, but with the careful restraint of someone who understood exactly how dangerous the request was.

“Sir,” she said slowly, “you are asking me to investigate a fellow officer without opening a formal security case.”

“I know what I’m asking.”

“And if I find something?”

Bransen looked at the Romulan overlays crawling across the display, then back at her.

“Then we decide what it means before anyone else decides for us.”

Ward held his gaze for a long moment. Whatever she saw there must have been enough, because she turned back to her console with a small, grim nod.

“Understood,” she said. “I’ll keep it quiet.”

* * *

Several hours later, the Intelligence Office had taken on the particular fatigue of serious work.

It was not chaos, not exactly. Bransen did not allow chaos in his shop. But every flat surface had acquired evidence of effort; empty coffee mugs clustered beside active terminals, PADDs arranged in overlapping stacks, styluses abandoned beside half-sketched signal trees, an uneaten protein bar sitting unwrapped near Ward's console where she had clearly forgotten it existed. The air carried the faint bitterness of replicated coffee, warm circuitry, and too many people staring too long at too much data.

No one had found the answer.

That was the frustrating part. Intelligence rarely announced itself as revelation. It accumulated. A bad timestamp here. A routing inconsistency there. A cipher fragment that looked Romulan until it didn't, then looked Kaessian until Ward stripped away another layer and swore softly under her breath. Three hours of work had produced twelve viable theories, eight dead ends, two probable links, and one headache Bransen could feel settling behind his right eye.

He rolled his shoulders, wincing as a knot pulled sharply beneath his collar.

"Take five," he called without looking up.

No one argued.

Around the room, analysts leaned back from their stations with the weary obedience of people too professional to admit they were grateful. A junior specialist rubbed both eyes with the heels of his hands. Ward stood, stretched

once, and immediately sat down again as if standing had been an indulgence she could not justify.

Bransen stepped into his office and let the door slide half shut behind him.

It was barely more than a narrow compartment set off from the main analysis floor, but he had made it his. The desk was immaculate in the way his public workspace always was; active PADDs aligned by priority, secure terminal locked to the current case file, stylus placed horizontally at the lower edge of the screen. A single holoframe sat on the desk, displaying a photo of his parents and brother on a vacation to a planet whose name he barely remembered, though the feeling of that day had stayed with him.

The room told the truth about him in ways he rarely did aloud.

Order, because disorder made him restless. Memory, because forgetting felt like betrayal. Fitness bands looped neatly over the back of one chair, a clean towel folded beside them from a workout he had not had time to take. A half-finished mug of tea sat cooling near the terminal, chosen over coffee after the first two had made his pulse feel too sharp.

Balanced, his Academy instructors had called him. Disciplined without being rigid. Analytical without losing touch with the human terrain beneath the analysis.

Bransen wondered what they would call him now, investigating the man whose name still lived under his skin like heat.

He exhaled, slow and controlled, then braced both hands on the edge of the desk and looked again at the wall display.

Kaesso stared back at him in layers.

Political networks. Signal routes. Hostage timelines. Kavesh claims. Taleth's public authorizations. Havarl's private access. Verel's chip sat in a secure reader beside the terminal, its contents partially decrypted into a lattice of broken metadata and ugly implications. Ward had been right about the surface security grid. It had not failed. It had been guided around itself, bypassed with the kind of intimate knowledge that came from either deep local access or outside training, probably both.

His mind kept circling the same absence; not evidence, not exactly, but the shape evidence sometimes left behind when someone had been careful.

Not clean.

Not damning.

Just wrong enough that Bransen could not look away.

A soft chime sounded from the main office.

"Sir," Ward called through the half-open door. "Envoy zh'Rhen and Commander Rix are here."

Bransen straightened, rolled his shoulders once more, and forced the personal part of himself back behind the professional mask.

“Send them in.”

* * *

zh'Rhen entered first, moving with the careful economy of someone still pretending his injuries were less serious than they were. Rix followed a step behind, arms folded, blue face unreadable but eyes already moving across every active display.

“Lieutenant,” zh'Rhen said. “Captain Sihiri said you were coordinating analysis. I assume the coffee graveyard outside means progress.”

“Progress,” Bransen said, “is generous.”

Rix glanced toward the main display. “That bad?”

“That complicated.”

Bransen keyed the office wall, transferring the core overlays from his desk to the larger display. Kaesso unfolded in front of them; the capital, the Accord Pavilion, the suspected Kavesh corridors, and the half-reconstructed routing map of the attack.

“We’ve been reviewing the Kaessian sensor logs and SOC metadata,” Bransen said. “There are packet structures that match Romulan encryption architecture, including partial

signature overlays, but nothing clean enough to call attribution. Whoever built this wanted us to see Romulan fingerprints, but not enough of them to prove anything.”

zh'Rhen's antennae angled forward. “A useful ambiguity.”

“Exactly,” Bransen said. “Enough to make everyone nervous. Enough to push Taleth toward Federation support. Enough to make the Kavesh look either compromised or empowered, depending on who's telling the story.”

Rix stepped closer, studying the breach map. “And the actual attack?”

“Too disciplined for the Kavesh profile we had on file. Guard rotations anticipated. Comms blackout zones exploited. Perimeter sensors bypassed rather than jammed. That last piece matters.”

“Because jamming announces itself,” Rix said.

Bransen nodded. “Bypassing suggests access. Or training by someone who had access.”

zh'Rhen glanced at him. “You believe Havarl is involved.”

“I believe Havarl benefits no matter which interpretation takes hold,” Bransen said carefully. “If Starfleet acts under Taleth's authority and succeeds, she looks dependent. If we act and fail, she owns the failure. If we refuse to act, she looks abandoned. Every branch weakens her unless she controls the narrative perfectly, and right now everyone else seems to be writing it for her.”

Rix's jaw tightened. “That's a hell of a trap.”

"It's a political trap first," Bransen said. "Operational second."

"And the Romulans?" zh'Rhen asked.

"Present, probably. Driving it, possibly. But I'm less convinced they're the only hand on the board."

The Andorian watched him closely.

Bransen could feel the withheld information sitting in the room like a fourth person.

zh'Rhen's voice lowered. "You're holding something back, Lieutenant."

Bransen met his gaze. "There are some threads with... low certainty."

"Threads the implications for the mission..?"

"No, Sir," Bransen said. "Not right now."

The Andorian did not press. His eyes scanned Bransen as if he had caught the shape of the silence even without knowing its contents.

"When uncertainty becomes evidence," zh'Rhen said, "bring it to someone before it becomes a weapon."

Bransen gave a short nod. "Understood."

Rix said nothing, but his gaze lingered on Bransen for half a second longer than usual.

From the outer office, Ward's voice cut through the moment.

"Sir, I've got something."

Bransen stepped back through the half-open door, zh'Rhen and Rix following.

Ward stood at the central table, one hand braced against the edge, the other moving through a reconstructed burst packet with precise, economical gestures. Her eyes were tired, but bright in the way they became when the work finally gave something back.

"We've reconstructed part of the diplomatic cipher burst our people tried to send just before the attack," she said. "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 stepped closer to the display.

The coordinates resolved over a topographical map of the Kaessan capital, then dropped beneath it, sinking through layers of old infrastructure, sealed tunnels, collapsed transit routes, and forgotten defense grids. A place designed to disappear beneath official maps. A place where people could be held, moved, or killed without the sky ever seeing them.

"This is enough to brief the Captain," Rix said.

"It is enough to plan," zh'Rhen corrected. "Not enough to understand."

“Good job, Lieutenant. Send this to my team in TacOps and stand by for mission support.”

Rix took a final glance at the map, his eyes catching for half a second on one of Ward’s minor routing annotations. “And keep the raw packet reconstruction out of the general tactical package. Command needs the location and risk profile, not every ghost in the signal path.”

Bransen looked at the annotation. It was probably noise; a fractional relay irregularity buried beneath three layers of corrupted Kaessian metadata.

Probably.

“Understood,” he said.

Rix gave him a small nod. “Good. Envoy, shall we?”

“Lead the way.”

Bransen barely heard them as they left the SIO, door closing gently behind them with a hiss.

On a secondary panel near Ward’s station, the discreet trace had begun to build its first quiet framework around Tobias Rynn’s access history; nothing damning yet, nothing clean enough to name, just fragments of timing and routing waiting to be assembled into something that might ruin them both.

Two trails now.

One leading beneath the capital.

One leading back through the man Bransen wanted desperately not to suspect.

Ward looked up at him, her expression grave.

“Orders, Sir?”

Bransen stared at the map until the old defense grid blurred into the memory of Tobias’s face outside the SIO.

“Prepare the hostage-site package for the Commander Rix and the Captain,” he said. His voice sounded steadier than he felt. “And keep the other trace running.”

Ward nodded once.

On the main display, the subterranean coordinates pulsed like a heartbeat beneath Kaesso IV.

On the secondary panel, Tobias’s name waited in silence.

Bransen folded his arms, feeling the shape of the trap tighten around him.

Whatever came next, he was going back down there.

And so, he suspected, was Tobias.

CHAPTER 7



Stardate 52965.1 (2375)

By 0600 hours, the hostage rescue had stopped being a rescue and become something far more dangerous.

Bransen stood in the observation lounge with both hands braced against the edge of the conference table, watching Kaesso IV turn slowly above the holoprojector. The planet looked almost peaceful from orbit, cloud bands sweeping over amber continents and glittering coastal shelves, but the overlays stripped the illusion away layer by layer. Red zones for Kavesh influence. Blue markers for confirmed

government control. Amber for disputed districts. Grey for the places nobody wanted to admit existed; condemned infrastructure, collapsed transit systems, pre-unification defense grids, and the kind of old subterranean facilities that survived every war because no one trusted anyone enough to destroy them completely.

The coordinates Ward had recovered sat beneath the capital like a buried wound.

Sector Twelve.

Old planetary defense network. Shielded. Partially collapsed. Still drawing power.

A perfect place to hide hostages.

Or bait.

Around the table, the senior staff had assembled in the brittle quiet that came after too little sleep and too much information. Captain Sihiri stood at the head of the room, expression controlled, but her fingers rested against the back of her chair with just enough pressure to whiten the knuckles. Commander Vallona reviewed the latest authorization from the Kaessian High Council on a PADD, impassive even by Vulcan standards. Rix had taken up position near the tactical display, arms folded, blue face set in a stillness Bransen had learned to read as concern rather than calm. Major Ketris sat beside the operations panel, one boot tucked beneath her chair, blonde hair tied back, eyes sharp despite the faint shadows beneath them.

Envoy zh'Rhen stood apart from the table, as if proximity to the hologram might make him do something undiplomatic.

His bandaged antenna twitched once.

"Let me be clear before we start," Sihiri said. "This is not a raid."

No one spoke.

The captain let the silence hold long enough to make the point.

"We are operating on Kaessian soil, under authorization from First Minister Taleth's government, in response to the unlawful detention of Federation diplomatic personnel. That authorization gives us legal access. It does not give us political immunity. If this operation looks like Starfleet imposing force on a non-member world, Colonel Joral gets exactly the story he wants."

"And if we do nothing," Rix said, "Havarl gets his story instead. Taleth looks weak, the Kavesh look untouchable, and the Federation looks like a friend that only shows up for speeches."

"Precisely," Vallona said.

Bransen glanced at her. There was no approval in the word. Only fact.

Sihiri touched a control, and the hologram tightened around the capital. The Hall of Accord appeared in miniature, then the suspected route from the diplomatic attack site to the old

defense complex. Lines of movement branched and died across the map, each one marked by probability estimates Ward's team had built out of partial signals, damaged timestamps, and guesses dressed carefully enough to be useful.

"This operation has three constraints," Sihiri continued. "First, Federation lives are at risk, and recovering them remains our priority. Second, Kaessian sovereignty must be visibly respected at every stage. Third, we proceed under the assumption that any action we take may be observed, distorted, and used against Taleth's government before we are back aboard this ship."

Ketris gave a low whistle. "So, rescue the hostages, don't start a civil war, and assume someone already wrote the headline."

"That is a colorful but broadly accurate summary," Vallona said.

zh'Rhen's mouth twitched. "I may use it in my report."

Bransen did not smile.

His mind drifted back to the SIO, where a restricted trace continued to build in silence beneath his authorization. Nothing clean. Nothing he could take to Sihiri without turning suspicion into procedure. But enough to keep Tobias Rynn's name sitting in the corner of his vision like a bruise he could not stop pressing.

He had not slept.

Not really.

Every time he closed his eyes, he saw Tobias waiting outside the SIO, standing too casually beside a door he had no reason to approach. Heard the warning in his voice, felt the weight of what Ward had agreed to do. The professional part of Bransen understood the necessity. The rest of him hated it.

Sihiri turned toward him.

“Lieutenant Andrews. Walk us through the intelligence.”

Bransen straightened, the room settling around him as it had in the first briefing, though this time the uncertainty did not lift. It sharpened.

“Yes, ma’am.”

He brought the recovered cipher burst to the center of the display. The image fractured, rebuilt, and resolved into a layered map of the old defense grid beneath Sector Twelve.

“The coordinates were embedded in a diplomatic emergency burst transmitted during the initial attack. It was damaged, partially encrypted, and routed through compromised Kaessian infrastructure before it died. Ward’s team reconstructed enough to confirm that the sender was attempting to identify a secondary holding site, not the original abduction point.”

Rix leaned closer. “Could be stale.”

“It could,” Bransen said. “But the power signatures we’re seeing now match recent occupation. Low draw, intermittent, shielded from standard orbital scans. Someone is using that facility, and they are trying very hard not to look like they are using it.”

“Hostages?” Ketris asked.

Bransen hesitated.

“That is the best-case scenario.”

“And worst case?” Sihiri asked.

“That the hostages were moved through the site to make us follow. Or that the site has been prepared for us specifically.”

The room absorbed that.

zh’Rhen stepped closer to the table. “Prepared by the Kavesh?”

“Possibly,” Bransen said. “But the tradecraft is inconsistent. The Kavesh claim ideological ownership of the crisis, but the operational pattern keeps pointing to outside discipline. Romulan encryption architecture appears in the noise, but too visibly. Kaessan internal access was used, but too selectively. Every trail is real enough to follow and dirty enough to compromise whoever follows it.”

Rix’s eyes narrowed. “That sounds intentional.”

“It feels intentional,” Bransen said. “Someone is building a crisis where every actor can be blamed for the next escalation.”

Sihiri looked toward the planet.

“Then we do not escalate.”

“No,” zh’Rhen said quietly. “We disappoint whoever expects us to.”

Vallona set down her PADD. “First Minister Taleth has formally authorized a joint investigative mission. Her language is precise. Starfleet may assist in locating and recovering the hostages, but command visibility remains Kaessian.”

“Meaning,” Ketris said, “we are invited just enough to be blamed if it goes wrong.”

“Also accurate,” Vallona said.

Sihiri turned back to the table. “Then we go small. No tactical insertion profile. No orbital overwatch that can be framed as intimidation. No security platoon unless the situation changes. We send a diplomatic-investigative team with enough capability to survive contact, but not enough visible force to become the story.”

Bransen felt the shape of the assignment before she said it.

“Envoy zh’Rhen, you will lead the diplomatic component. Major Ketris, you will represent operational liaison and coordinate with Kaessian infrastructure teams. Lieutenant Andrews, you will handle intelligence collection on site. Chief Ward will remain aboard and maintain signal analysis from the SIO. Commander Rix, tactical standby only.”

Rix did not look pleased, but he nodded. "Understood."

The assignments settled across the table, neat on the surface, fragile beneath it. For one breath, Bransen almost believed the shape of the mission would hold.

Tobias shifted at the far end of the room.

Bransen felt it before he looked. A small movement. A breath drawn too deliberately. The moment before a man steps into a space he knows he should avoid.

"Captain," Tobias said. "Request permission to join the away team."

Bransen's pulse kicked once, hard.

The room went still. Zh'Rhen's antennae angled toward Tobias in a subtle arc of surprise.

Sihiri folded her arms. "Major Ketris is covering Operations support for this mission, Lieutenant."

"I know, ma'am," Tobias said, composed but intent. "But Kaessan infrastructure is unstable. Their power grid, comms relays, and local shielding all deviate from Federation standard. If our objective is to trace the signal path that masked hostage movements, you'll want someone who has spent the last forty-eight hours mapping their systems. With all due respect to the Major, that's me, I've been working that problem set since we arrived in orbit."

Zh'Rhen glanced toward Bransen. For a brief moment their eyes met; a flicker of unspoken concern passed between them.

Sihiri nodded once and turned to Ketris. "Major, any objections?"

Ketris leaned back, appraising Tobias with the calm pragmatism of a seasoned militia officer. "None, Captain. Lieutenant Rynn is far more in the weeds on Kaessian infrastructure than I am right now."

Sihiri returned her attention to Tobias. "Very well, Lieutenant. You're added to the team. But this remains a diplomatic mission. You follow Envoy zh'Rhen's lead, and if I sense any deviation, you return to the ship immediately."

Tobias inclined his head. "Understood."

Bransen wasn't sure whether what he felt next was relief... or something closer to dread.

* * *

When the team beamed down, the heat hit them first; dry, stinging, and laced with dust.

The Kaessian sun hung low over the capital, casting long shadows across a skyline that seemed unable to decide whether it was ancient, modern, or merely surviving. Tall civic towers rose beside half-collapsed arcades. Transparent walkways crossed streets still scarred by bombardment. Banners bearing Taleth's seal hung from

government buildings, but several had been defaced during the night; black handprints smeared over the sigil, Kavesh slogans daubed beneath them in jagged script.

Bransen saw them before anyone pointed them out.

NO FOREIGN HANDS.

TALETH SOLD THE SKY.

STARFLEET GO HOME.

Ketris's eyes moved across the graffiti with a soldier's practicality. "They work fast."

"Or they knew where the cameras would look," Bransen said.

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

Tobias stood beside Bransen, tricorder already in hand. He looked composed, but the posture was too deliberate; shoulders set, jaw still, eyes moving from rooftop to rooftop as if he had been briefed on where danger might appear. Bransen wanted to ask him how he knew to look there.

He did not.

The official receiving party waited at the edge of the square, beneath the broken colonnade of what had once been a judicial hall. Havarl stood at its center, flanked by Kaessian security officers in polished black field armor and two aides carrying recording devices. Behind them, across a low

barricade, a cluster of local officials, security observers, and what looked very much like press correspondents had gathered under the watch of Taleth's guards.

zh'Rhen stopped.

His antennae angled forward.

"Deputy Minister," he said, voice mild in a way Bransen was already learning meant danger. "This seems more populated than a discreet liaison point."

Havarl approached with open hands and the grave expression of a man carrying burdens on behalf of everyone else.

"Envoy, Lieutenants, Major. I apologize for the visibility, but the First Minister insisted that this operation remain transparent. There are factions on Kaesso who would call any private coordination with Starfleet a conspiracy. We cannot afford secrecy to become another weapon against her."

Bransen watched him say it.

Every word was reasonable. Every word closed another door.

Ketris glanced toward the observers. "And the recording devices?"

"Official record," Havarl said. "Restricted distribution."

"That is rarely as reassuring as people intend it to be," zh'Rhen replied.

A faint smile touched Havarl's mouth. "No. But neither is refusing oversight while armed foreign officers move through our capital."

There it was, Bransen thought. The frame. Not rescue, not investigation, not partnership.

Armed foreign officers.

Havarl turned slightly, allowing one of the recording devices a clear view of the Starfleet insignia on their chests before he lowered his voice.

"The First Minister's office has authorized a joint inspection of the Sector Twelve site at first light. Her seal, her orders, her security personnel in the lead. Starfleet will provide specialist support only."

"As agreed," zh'Rhen said.

"Yes," Havarl replied. "As agreed."

But the pause after it was too smooth.

Bransen looked past him to the gathered observers. Some watched with open resentment. Others with fear. A few with the avid focus of people who knew history sometimes happened in public squares and wanted to be able to say they had stood close enough to see it.

On a nearby wall display, Taleth appeared in a live government statement. Her face was calm, formal, beautifully lit.

At my authorization, Kaessian security forces
will conduct a joint recovery operation with
Federation support...

The audio was low, half-drowned by wind and street noise,
but the words carried.

At my authorization.

Federation support.

Joint recovery operation.

Bransen felt the trap settle another fraction tighter.

“Useful phrasing,” he said quietly.

Havarl’s eyes flicked to him. “Necessary phrasing,
Lieutenant. Leadership requires ownership.”

“Even of outcomes no one controls?”

Havarl held his gaze for half a second too long. “Especially
those.”

Tobias shifted beside him.

Bransen noticed.

So did zh’Rhen.

* * *

Taleth received them in a temporary command chamber
above the square, its windows polarized against the glare
and the crowd noise below.

She looked less polished than she had in the Hall of Accord. Still formal, still controlled, but the skin beneath her bright green eyes had darkened with fatigue, and the delicate silver chain of office around her throat sat slightly askew, as though she had put it on in haste and refused to let anyone adjust it.

“The situation is deteriorating,” she said without preamble. “Joral’s transmission is everywhere. The opposition claims I invited Starfleet here to suppress Kaessian patriots. The Council is demanding visible action.”

“And so you intend to give them visible action,” zh’Rhen said.

Taleth’s eyes flashed. “I intend to recover your people.”

“Those two things are not always the same.”

For the first time, her composure cracked.

“No,” she said. “They are not. But if I do nothing, I am a coward. If I act alone, I fail. If I ask for Federation help, I am a puppet. If I refuse Federation help, I have endangered foreign diplomats under my protection.” She looked from zh’Rhen to Ketris, then to Bransen. “Tell me, Envoy, Lieutenant, Major, where exactly is the honorable path through that?”

No one answered immediately.

Bransen felt a flicker of sympathy despite himself.

Havarl stood behind her, silent, hands folded, face arranged into concern.

Taleth drew herself upright again. “The operation proceeds at first light. Kaessian security will lead. Starfleet will advise and provide technical support. No heavy weapons. No visible orbital coordination. No breach unless my field commander confirms probable hostage presence.”

“That is a careful structure,” Ketris said.

“It is the only structure I have left,” Taleth replied.

Havarl lowered his head slightly. “And it will show the people that their government acts with strength and restraint.”

Taleth looked at him. Something uncertain crossed her face, there and gone.

“Yes,” she said. “That is the hope.”

Bransen heard the word hope and disliked how small it sounded.

* * *

Havarl did not guide them into the side chamber until Taleth had departed.

The door closed with a heavy sound, sealing out the crowd noise and the low murmur of aides. The room was dimmer than the command chamber, lit by a band of amber glass along one wall. For a moment no one spoke.

Then Havarl looked at zh'Rhen.

“I need to say something I cannot say in front of the First Minister.”

zh'Rhen's expression did not change. “That is rarely a promising beginning.”

“No,” Havarl said. “It is not.”

He looked genuinely tired then, or performed it well enough that the difference hardly mattered.

“The access codes used at the negotiation site were not merely stolen. They were current. Restricted to the First Minister's ceremonial guard, her senior security staff, and a narrow circle of Council officials.”

Ketris's posture changed. Just slightly. “That does not mean Taleth authorized anything.”

“I did not say it did.”

“But you want us to think it.”

Havarl turned to her, and for the first time his warmth cooled. “Major, I want you to understand the danger. If someone close to Taleth is compromised, then every action she authorizes may already be anticipated. Every route. Every security plan. Every public statement.”

Bransen watched Tobias.

The Trill's attention had sharpened at the mention of access codes. Not surprise. Recognition.

Bransen filed it away and hated how instinctive that had become.

zh'Rhen folded his arms. "And your recommendation?"

"Remain on the surface tonight," Havarl said. "Observe directly. Limit transmissions to your ship. At first light, we move before the compromised parties can adjust."

"And if your own office is compromised?" Bransen asked.

Havarl looked at him. "Then I suppose you will discover that too."

It was a neat answer.

Too neat.

CHAPTER 8



Stardate 52965.1 (2375)

They were given quarters in the eastern wing of the judicial hall, a reconstructed section of the old building where the walls had been patched with smooth composite panels that did not quite match the ancient stone around them. Kaessian guards were posted at both ends of the corridor. Officially, for their protection. Unofficially, Bransen suspected, for everyone else's reassurance.

From the narrow balcony outside his room, he could see the square below.

The crowd had not dispersed.

It had changed.

As dusk fell, the officials and observers were gone, replaced by clusters of civilians gathered beneath portable light rigs and security drones. Some held candles. Others held signs. A few chanted Joral's name in low, rolling waves that rose and fell like weather.

Across the square, one of Taleth's banners caught fire.

Security moved quickly to extinguish it, but not before half the crowd had seen.

Not before the recording drones had.

Bransen stood, tricorder idle in his hand, and watched the story write itself.

Federation officers on Kaessian soil.

Taleth's guards protecting them.

Kavesh slogans burning under the windows.

A rescue operation at dawn.

He could almost hear the headline Ketris had joked about in the observation lounge, no longer funny now that someone else had clearly written it.

He sighed and crossed back over to the small bunk in the corner of the room where his Starfleet-issue tactical gear lay ready for the morning. The sight of it was jarring, at once

both too militant and too insubstantial for what might lay ahead.

He tucked the tricorder into the front pocket of the black vest and headed out of the dimly-lit room.

As he reached the end of the corridor, a black-armored Kaessian guard stood in his way, eyeing him quizzically.

"Can I help you, Sir?"

The question was both polite and interrogatory.

"I'm going outside for some fresh air, unless that's not permitted?"

The guard regarded him for a moment.

"Of course, but you should stay close Sir, no knowing what might happen out there, especially wearing that uniform of yours." He replied.

"Thank you, I'll keep that in mind." Bransen said, keeping the calmest tone he could muster.

* * *

As Bransen walked through the deserted courtyard of the Judicial Hall a sound caught him.

Low voices in the courtyard below, carried on the still night air. Bransen slowed, angling for cover behind a crumbling pillar.

Two figures stood near the archway leading out into the service lane. Havarl, cloak pulled close, spoke with that

same calm intensity. Facing him, Tobias leaned against the stone balustrade, arms folded tight across his chest.

Most of the words were lost to distance and wind.

Then Havarl's voice rose, sharp enough to cut through the dark.

"Just remember why you're here Lieutenant!" Havarl spat.

Tobias answered, lower, too low for Bransen to catch.

Havarl stepped closer.

Bransen's breath caught as Havarl pressed a small datapad into Tobias's hand.

"What's this for?" Tobias asked.

A patrol drone passed overhead, its engine whine drowning whatever Havarl said next. When the sound faded, the Kaissan was already adjusting his cloak.

"You know what you need to do," he said tersely.

Then he moved off into the shadows, disappearing down the service lane with the unhurried confidence of someone who belonged wherever he walked.

Tobias lingered, shoulders tense. Bransen started down the stair, boots careful on the stone, but not careful enough; the faint scrape echoed too loudly. Tobias's head snapped up.

"Bransen." He forced a smile, quick, too casual. "Couldn't sleep either?"

Bransen stopped a few paces short. “Looked like more than a midnight stroll. What did he want?”

Tobias’s smile came too quickly. “To posture. To warn. To remind me that every Kaessian official with a title thinks Starfleet officers are either saviors or threats.”

“In a dark courtyard, after curfew?”

Tobias’s smile thinned. “You know how diplomats are. Everything’s a performance. He wanted to impress on me how serious he is.”

Bransen studied him in the dim light. Tobias’s body language was relaxed, but his eyes, bright, alert, betrayed something else.

“Funny,” Bransen said softly. “Looked more like a negotiation.”

Tobias shook his head, brushing past him toward the stair. “You’re reading ghosts into shadows. Save it for the mission.”

Bransen caught his arm as he passed. “I’m not imagining this, Tobias. If there’s something you’re not telling me;”

Tobias pulled free, gentle but firm. “There isn’t. Not tonight.”

He climbed the stair without another word, his footsteps fading into the corridor.

Bransen stayed in the courtyard, the night air heavy around him. The few words he'd overheard looped in his mind, refusing to settle; "Why are you here Tobias?" he murmured to himself. He wanted to believe Tobias. He wanted to trust him. But the image of him speaking quietly with Havarl under curfew-dark lamps would not leave.

* * *

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 silence pressed in around him, but his thoughts were loud and the memory of Tobias's service number 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.

"What's going on, Tobias?" Bransen asked.

"You need to be careful tomorrow," Tobias said.

Bransen looked at him. "I thought that was my line."

"I mean it."

"With Havarl?"

"With everything." Tobias's fingers tightened around his. "If the evidence looks obvious, don't trust it."

Bransen went still.

Outside, somewhere in the square, the chant rose again; low, rhythmic, angry.

"What evidence?"

Tobias closed his eyes.

The answer did not come.

"Tobias."

"I don't know," he whispered. "Not enough. Just... obvious evidence is usually meant to be found."

Bransen stared at him, heart beating harder now. "That sounds like something you know."

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. "That's not an answer, Tobias." He said, gently, "You have to let me in."

Tobias exhaled, slow and unsteady.

“I shouldn’t,” he murmured. “But I want to.”

Tobias opened his eyes then, and the fear in them was real enough to hurt. His hand brushed against Bransen’s on the mattress, light at first, then deliberate. Their fingers laced.

Bransen tried to resist, all too briefly. Tobias leaned in, forehead resting gently against his own. “Just be here with me, here and now.”

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.

CHAPTER 9



Stardate 52965.4 (2375)

Dawn did not break over Kaesso so much as seep through the dust.

By first light, the square outside the judicial hall had become a theatre.

Kaessian security skimmers waited in two precise lines beneath Taleth's seal, engines whining softly, armor plates catching the thin amber glow of morning. Officers moved between them with clipped urgency, checking weapons, scanners, restraint fields, casualty packs. Their uniforms did not match as cleanly as Starfleet's; some wore polished black tactical armor, others older field jackets with clan markings still visible beneath government insignia, and a

few carried themselves with the brittle alertness of people who knew half the crowd hated them.

Behind the barricades, civilians watched.

Too many civilians.

Bransen noticed the recording drones first. Three of them, small and dark, hovering above the eastern colonnade with their lenses fixed on the convoy. Official recorders, perhaps. News drones, perhaps. Something else, almost certainly.

“This was supposed to be discreet,” Ketris said, voice low.

Havarl appeared beside the lead skimmer dressed in black tactical garb, the insignia of his office fastened high at his throat. He looked grim, purposeful, almost heroic in the morning light.

“The First Minister insisted on transparency,” he said. “The people must see their government act.”

zh'Rhen's antennae tilted toward the drones. “How fortunate for the people that the cameras arrived before we did.”

Havarl did not rise to it. “Secrecy would serve Joral better than us.”

“Would it?” Bransen asked.

Havarl's eyes moved to him, then away.

At the top of the judicial steps, Taleth stood beneath a hanging banner, flanked by her ceremonial guard. She did not approach the convoy. She simply raised one hand in

formal authorization, the gesture captured by every hovering lens.

The crowd murmured.

Bransen understood then.

Taleth was not leading the operation. She was blessing it.

That was worse.

If the operation succeeded, she would be accused of needing Starfleet to rescue her authority. If it failed, the failure would have her face on it before the day was out.

Tobias stood beside him, pale beneath the dust already settling on his skin.

Bransen leaned close enough that only he could hear. “Still think obvious evidence should be trusted?”

Tobias did not look at him.

“No,” he said. “I don’t.”

* * *

The convoy moved through the capital with deliberate restraint.

Too deliberate.

The lead skimmer kept its speed low enough for onlookers to gather at intersections. Taleth’s seal flashed across each vehicle’s side panel in alternating amber and green. Starfleet officers sat visible in the second transport, not

hidden, not paraded exactly, but framed. Bransen could feel the eyes on them through the armored glass.

Graffiti followed them through the city.

FEDERATION HANDS. KAESSAN BLOOD.

TALETH HIDES BEHIND ALIENS.

NO PROTECTORATE.

Ketris sat opposite Bransen, one hand resting near her phaser, eyes scanning rooftops and windows with the calm intensity of someone who had learned the hard way that crowds were never just crowds.

“This route is inefficient,” she said.

Tobias looked up from his tricorder. “By about twelve minutes.”

Havarl, seated near the forward partition, turned slightly. “The direct roads pass through unstable districts.”

“So does this one,” Ketris replied.

“Yes,” Havarl said. “But this one remains under government control.”

Bransen looked out at the faces pressed behind the barricades, at the recording drone pacing them from above, at the young Kaessian boy who raised two fingers to his brow in a mock salute as the Starfleet insignia passed.

Government control, he thought, had many definitions.

Ward's voice came softly through Bransen's earpiece from orbit. "Andrews, I'm seeing intermittent local broadcast spikes along your route. Low power. Hard to isolate."

"News?"

"Maybe. Or relay beacons. Someone's bouncing short-range footage around faster than the government can suppress it."

Bransen glanced toward Havarl.

"Understood," he said. "Keep logging it."

Tobias's eyes flicked toward him.

Bransen pretended not to notice.

* * *

The old Ministry of Energy loomed at the edge of Sector Twelve like a monument to every war Kaesso had survived and refused to remember properly.

Its outer shell had been reinforced with durasteel plating. Romulan-style signal mesh clung to the upper levels in ugly, geometric bands. Half the windows had been sealed from within. The rest were black, reflecting the convoy as it arrived.

Kaessan security deployed first.

That had been the agreement.

Starfleet would support. Kaesso would lead. Taleth's government would be seen to act.

Then Havarl gave the order, and everything became louder than it needed to be.

A breaching charge slammed against the outer doors. Ketris's head snapped toward him.

"Deputy Minister," she said sharply. "We agreed on manual entry unless fired upon."

Havarl did not look at her. "My field commander reports probable armed resistance."

"From where?"

The charge detonated before he answered.

The outer doors blew inward in a burst of smoke, fire, and shattered composite. The sound rolled across the empty district and came back from every broken wall.

Somewhere behind them, a recording drone rose higher.

zh'Rhen swore in Andorian.

Kaessian security surged forward, weapons raised, black armor flashing beneath Taleth's seal. Starfleet followed because not following would be worse; because hostages might be inside, because hesitation would be recorded, because every clean option had vanished with the door.

Bransen felt the shape of the humiliation even as he moved.

Not occupation.

Not exactly.

But close enough for anyone who wanted the image.

* * *

The main chamber was empty.

Not abandoned. Empty.

There was a difference.

Bransen felt it before the tricorder confirmed it. Heat in the restraints. Medical packs opened within the hour. Half-drunk water bulbs still wet at the mouth. A blanket folded too neatly beside a scorched wall. Six portable biobeds, all recently occupied, all vacant.

“They were here,” he said.

Ward’s voice came through his earpiece, taut and quiet. “Residual biosignatures confirm at least six Federation civilians. Less than two hours old.”

Ketris swept her tricorder across the entryway. “No heat signatures. No movement on any band.”

“Whoever moved them knew we were coming,” Tobias said.

His voice was flat.

Too flat.

Bransen turned toward him.

Tobias crouched near a power junction, fingers hovering above a severed conduit. “The alarms were rerouted.

Internal sensors looped. External scan dampeners lowered just enough to let us detect power draw from orbit.” He swallowed. “We were meant to find this place.”

Ketris looked at Havarl. “Your people had operational control.”

“My people followed Taleth’s authorization,” Havarl said.

zh’Rhen’s antennae snapped toward him. “Careful.”

Then one of the Kaessian officers called out from the far end of the chamber.

“Deputy Minister!”

Everyone turned.

The officer had opened a sealed evidence locker built into the wall. Inside were bloodied restraints, Federation medical tags, and a formal access cylinder bearing the crest of the First Minister’s ceremonial guard.

The room went silent.

Too silent.

Bransen stepped closer, feeling dread gather at the base of his spine.

The access cylinder was clean. Too clean. Its seal unscarred, its surface unmarred by ash or dust, placed inside the locker as if waiting to be found by someone who needed a symbol more than evidence.

Beside it lay a Starfleet-issue field stabilizer.

Ketris stared at it. "That's not from our kit."

"No," Tobias said softly. "But it looks enough like one."

Bransen glanced at him.

Enough like one.

Havarl's expression hardened with something that looked like grief, if one did not know how carefully grief could be worn.

"This is worse than I feared," he said.

"No," zh'Rhen said. "It is exactly as convenient as I feared."

* * *

Havarl stepped into the center of the chamber with the awful calm of a man who had been waiting for history to give him his cue.

"This is the proof we needed," he said, gesturing toward the access cylinder and the Starfleet stabilizer. "Taleth's own guard. Federation equipment. A concealed holding site under government authorization."

Ketris's voice was cold. "That is not proof. That is placement."

"To you, perhaps," Havarl said. "To the people watching, it will be something else."

zh'Rhen moved closer. "You arranged the feed."

"I preserved transparency."

“You staged a humiliation.”

Havarl’s eyes flashed. “No, Envoy. Taleth humiliated herself when she invited foreign power into Kaessian bloodshed and expected her people to call it leadership.”

Bransen saw Tobias flinch.

Havarl turned, not to zh’Rhen now, but to Tobias.

“You see it, don’t you, Lieutenant? You know how this looks from orbit. From the street. From the homes of families who have spent generations being told that Federation partnership would save them.”

Tobias said nothing.

His silence was worse than an answer.

Havarl looked back to the chamber. “The First Minister must resign. Starfleet must acknowledge that her office has been compromised and support an emergency unity council until the hostages are recovered.”

“And if we refuse?” Ketris asked.

“Then you will be seen protecting her,” Havarl said. “Protecting this.”

He gestured around the chamber.

The vanished hostages. The staged evidence. The armed breach under her seal. The Federation standing at the center of it all, insisting everyone else misunderstand what they can see with their own eyes.

zh'Rhen stepped forward, his voice like a blade. "Starfleet does not orchestrate regime change on the basis of burned cloth, planted equipment, and theatrical outrage. If you want Federation support, it will be through truth, not manufactured crisis."

Havarl's smile did not falter, though his eyes hardened.

"Truth is what survives the first broadcast, Envoy."

Outside, the crowd noise grew louder.

* * *

The recall order came three minutes later.

Not from Sihiri.

From Vallona.

"Surface team, return to the Canberra immediately. Two armed vessels have broken from low-orbit concealment and are moving toward intercept range. Their transponders identify them as Kavesh."

Havarl looked genuinely surprised for the first time.

Or pretended to.

Bransen could no longer tell the difference.

zh'Rhen tapped his commbadge, antennae rigid. "Captain, be advised, the surface site was staged and the images are already in civilian circulation. Anything those ships do next will be framed as response to Federation complicity."

There was a pause, just long enough for the words to land across orbit.

Then Sihiri's voice came back, clipped and controlled.

"Understood. Beam up now."

Tobias looked at Bransen.

For one strange, terrible second, neither of them moved. The roar outside swelled, the chant changing shape as the broadcast spread through the city. Bransen could not make out every word, but he heard enough.

Taleth.

Starfleet.

Blood.

Then the transporter beam took them.

The last thing Bransen saw before Kaesso dissolved in blue light was Havarl standing in the ruined chamber beneath Taleth's seal, his face turned toward the recording drone as if he were not watching them leave at all, but giving the planet a martyr's image to remember.

CHAPTER 10



Stardate 52965.4 (2375)

As the team stepped onto the bridge Bransen felt a new tension in the air. Yellow alert lights flashed in a steady pulse, and around the room personnel talked in hushed voices, preparing the ship for what might come next.

The main viewscreen showed two lean vessels, angular and scarred, clearly converted from civilian hulls. Improvised armor plating covered their forward sections, and weapon emplacements jutted from their hulls like mechanical growths. They moved with the predatory grace of hunters who knew their territory.

"They're powering weapons," Rix reported from tactical.
"And they're hailing us."

"On screen," Sihiri ordered.

The familiar face of Colonel Joral appeared on screen, his posture now more aggressive.

"Captain Sihiri. Your officers stood inside a government black site beneath Taleth's seal while Federation equipment lay beside restraints used on your own diplomats. You call this rescue. We call it occupation, collusion, and proof. You will withdraw from this system immediately and inform your Federation that further interference in Kaessian affairs will not be tolerated."

Sihiri stepped forward. "Colonel Joral, I have no intention of leaving until the hostages are safely back aboard my ship. Release them immediately and the *Canberra* will have no reason to remain here. We can let our respective leaders work out the rest."

Joral sneered, "You must think me very naive, Captain. Your ship is impressive, but it is but a fraction of the Federation presence on our world. No. The Federation will withdraw all claims on this system and leave. Then our guests will be free to return."

A pause crackled over the comm channel.

"You have one hour to clear Kaessian space," Joral said, his voice final. "After that, we will remove you ourselves."

The transmission ended, leaving the menacing view of the two Kaessian vessels on the viewscreen.

Sihiri turned to Rix, "Tactical assessment?"

Rix studied the display. "The vessels are armed with military-grade weapons systems. Not as powerful as our own, but sufficient to inflict significant damage."

Vallona moved to stand behind Rix, "Captain, their approach vectors suggest an awareness of Excelsior-class capabilities; they maneuvered through the gap between our long and short-range sensors precisely to mask their approach."

The tactical display showed the two Kavesh vessels holding position, patient as predators. They had made their demands. Now they waited to see if the Federation would test their resolve.

* * *

An hour later, Vallona's voice cut through the bridge chatter.

"Captain, still no response from the surface. All government channels are being jammed."

Sihiri's jaw tightened. "Of course they are."

At his intelligence station, Bransen pulled up the tactical display, overlaying the Kavesh vessel positions with the data they'd gathered from the surface. Something about their approach vectors bothered him. Too precise. Too coordinated for a militant group that supposedly operated "on the outskirts" of organized resistance.

"Captain," he called, "those ships evaded our sensors pretty comprehensively. This isn't improvised harassment; it's a calculated military operation."

Tobias glanced over from the secondary ops console, meeting Bransen's eyes for just a moment. Something flickered there; acknowledgment, maybe. Or guilt.

Then the proximity alarms began to sound.

"Kavesh vessels are moving to attack positions," Ketris reported from the Ops station. "They're powering weapons."

"Incoming transmission," Vallona announced.

Joral's face filled the screen again, his expression hard with resolve.

"Your hour is up, Captain. Withdraw, or face the consequences."

"Colonel, this is unnecessary. We can resolve this without violence."

"The time for words is past."

The screen went dark again.

"Captain," Rix said, his voice tight with concentration, "they're locking weapons on us."

Sihiri moved to the command chair, her decision made. "Red Alert. All hands to battle stations."

The klaxon sounded, and the bridge lighting shifted to the red of combat. Emergency bulkheads sealed automatically.

In the distance, Bransen could hear the sound of feet running through corridors as the crew moved to their assigned positions.

"Evasive maneuvers," Sihiri ordered. "Maintain defensive posture, but do not fire unless fired upon."

The *Canberra* began to move, her massive bulk responding to the helm with surprising grace. On the viewscreen, the two Kavesh vessels separated, moving to flank the Starfleet ship.

"They're trying to box us in," Rix observed.

Then the first disruptor bolts lanced out from the lead Kavesh vessel, striking the *Canberra's* shields in brilliant flares of energy.

"Shields holding at ninety-two percent," Ketris reported from Ops.

More weapons fire followed, the two vessels coordinating their attack to maximize damage. The *Canberra* shuddered under the impacts.

"Return fire," Sihiri ordered. "Disable their weapons systems if possible."

Rix's fingers danced across his tactical console. Twin beams of orange phaser energy reached out, striking the lead vessel. Its shields flared and held, but the ship staggered under the impact.

"Minor damage to their shields," Rix reported. "But they're still fully operational."

The battle intensified. The Kavesh vessels pressed their attack, using their superior maneuverability to stay ahead of the *Canberra's* heavier weapons. Disruptor fire raked the Starfleet ship's shields, each impact sending vibrations through the hull.

"Shields down to seventy-eight percent," Ketris called out.

Bransen monitored the tactical situation from his intelligence station, but part of his attention was on Tobias at the secondary ops console. Something in the Trill's movements, the way he worked his console, felt off. Too precise. Too anticipatory.

Another barrage struck home, and the bridge lights flickered.

"Shields at sixty-one percent," Ketris reported. "We're taking damage to the outer hull."

"Focus fire on the lead vessel," Sihiri ordered. "Disable their engines."

The *Canberra's* phasers lanced out again, this time targeting the propulsion systems of the nearer Kavesh ship. The beams struck true, and the vessel's engine emissions flickered.

"Their port engine is offline," Rix confirmed.

But the damaged ship didn't retreat. Instead, both vessels pressed their attack with renewed fury, as if the damage had only made them more desperate.

"Shields at forty-three percent," Ketris reported, strain audible in her voice. "Hull breaches on deck twelve. Emergency teams responding."

The *Canberra* shuddered under another concentrated barrage. Sparks flew from an overloaded console near the turbolift.

"Captain," Tobias called out from the secondary ops station, his voice urgent. "I think I can disable their weapons systems. I've been analyzing their power signatures; there's a vulnerability in their plasma conduits."

Sihiri turned toward him, weighing the option against their dwindling shields. Another impact rocked the ship.

"Do it," she ordered.

Tobias's fingers flew across his console, accessing targeting systems and power distribution networks. Bransen watched him work; he was efficient, determined, but there was something too practiced about his movements.

"Targeting their primary plasma conduits," Tobias reported. "Initiating feedback pulse."

A modified phaser beam lanced out from the *Canberra*, striking the second Kavesh vessel. For a moment, their weapons fire ceased.

"It's working," Rix said. "Their weapons are powering down."

Sihiri let out half a sigh, close to relief. "Good work Lieutenant Ry..."

"Captain!" Ketris interrupted. "I'm reading a massive overload in their main reactor, the pulse is causing a chain reaction..."

Massive explosions erupted across the vessel's hull, venting superheated gas into space. Secondary explosions rippled through the ship's structure as the overload cascaded through their power grid.

Within seconds, the entire vessel disappeared in a brilliant flash of destructive energy.

Silence fell over the bridge like a weight.

"Dear God," zh'Rhen whispered.

On the viewscreen, debris tumbled through space where the Kavesh ship had been. Plasma and debris ripped through the hull of the lead ship.

"I'm reading massive casualties on the remaining ship," Tobias reported, his voice trembling with shock. "They're venting atmosphere, critical hull breaches on multiple decks."

Bransen stared at Tobias. The Trill caught his gaze for a second before turning away.

"Captain," Vallona intoned, her usual even tone betraying just a hint of surprise, of shock, "Colonel Joral is hailing us."

"On screen."

Joral's face appeared on screen, his armor scorched, blood trickling from a gash across his forehead. Behind him, smoke filled his damaged bridge.

"Captain Sihiri," he said, his voice thick with pain and rage. "My people will never forget this butchery. The Federation will answer for what you have done here."

The transmission cut out.

Sihiri turned to Vallona. "Get me a secure channel to Starfleet Command in my Ready Room. They need to know what just happened here."

"Yes, Captain."

As Sihiri turned towards her Ready Room, she stopped and looked pointedly at Tobias. "Lieutenant Rynn. You're relieved of bridge duty until further notice. I want a full report of what went wrong on my desk in one hour, understood?"

Tobias stood from the secondary ops console, answering without looking up.

"Aye, Ma'am."

Bransen watched Tobias as he secured his station and walked towards the turbolift, head down, hands still shaking. He hadn't just been monitoring the battle. He had known exactly how to end it.

* * *

Bransen slipped away from his intelligence station as the bridge crew focused on damage reports and casualty counts. The turbolift doors were closing when he reached them, Tobias visible inside, shoulders rigid with tension.

"Hold the lift," Bransen called.

Tobias's hand shot out to stop the doors. His face was carefully neutral, but something flickered behind his eyes when he saw Bransen step inside.

"Deck Three," Tobias instructed the computer as the doors sealed shut.

"Computer, hold turbolift." Bransen ordered as the lift began to move.

The car stopped between decks with a soft hum. They stood in the dim emergency lighting, the weight of what had just happened hanging between them like a live wire.

"What the fuck Tobias?" Bransen said quietly.

Tobias didn't look at him. "I didn't know that was going to happen?"

"Oh, well I'm glad you didn't actually intend to destroy a ship with 300 people onboard, and risk our ship, and our mission; that makes me feel much better!" Bransen spat back.

"I had no idea that beam would overload their reactor," Tobias locked eyes with Bransen, full of intensity. "I swear it, Bransen"

"Oh, I believe you, Tobias." Bransen replied, voice measured and even. "I believe you had absolutely no idea what that beam was going to do whatsoever."

"What does that even mean?"

"Knowing exactly how to target their plasma conduits. Pretty specific knowledge for an operations officer who's been aboard three days."

"I analyzed their power signatures during the battle, you saw me do it."

"I saw you access systems like you already knew what you were looking for." Bransen stepped closer. "How did you know their vulnerability, Tobias?"

Tobias's jaw tightened. "Lucky guess."

"Bollocks!" The word came out harder than Bransen intended. "Hundreds of people just died because of your 'lucky guess.' The least you can do is tell me the truth."

For a moment, Tobias looked like he might break. His shoulders sagged, and he turned away, pressing his palm against the turbolift wall. "You don't understand what you're asking."

"Then help me understand."

Tobias was silent for a long moment, the only sound the quiet hum of the stopped lift. When he spoke, his voice was barely above a whisper.

"Some things... once you know them, you can't unknow them. And some people... once they have you, they don't let go."

Bransen felt something cold settle in his chest. "What people?"

Tobias looked at him then, and Bransen saw something desperate in his eyes. Fear, maybe. Or guilt.

"I can't tell you that," Tobias said. "But I can tell you this; you need to stay away from me. Whatever you think you know, whatever you suspect, just... leave it alone."

"Is that a threat?"

"Of course not." Tobias straightened, some of his composure returning. "I care about you, Bransen. More than I should. More than is safe. So please, for both our sakes, let this go."

Bransen studied his face, searching for any sign of deception. He found only pain and something that looked like genuine fear.

"I can't do that," Bransen said finally.

Tobias nodded, as if he'd expected that answer. "I know."

He reached for the turbolift controls. "Computer, resume."

The lift began moving again. When the doors opened on Deck 3, Tobias stepped out without looking back.

"Tobias," Bransen called after him.

The Trill stopped in the corridor, half-turned.

"Whatever you're mixed up in," Bransen said, "there's still time to make it right."

Tobias gave him a sad smile. "I hope you're right."

Then he walked away, leaving Bransen alone in the turbolift with more questions than answers and a growing certainty that everything was about to get much worse.



CHAPTER 11



Stardate 52966.8 (2375)

Tobias sat on the edge of his bunk, head in his hands. The explosion replayed behind his closed eyes; the brilliant flash, the debris field where a ship full of people had been, Joral's blood-streaked face screaming accusations across the comm.

His hands were shaking. He couldn't make them stop.

He stood abruptly, crossing to his desk. His fingers brushed the edge before he tapped the hidden control panel. The transceiver slid from its concealed compartment, and he began the familiar sequence of signal reroutes and encryption layers. But this time, his movements were jerky, desperate.

After several long seconds, the shadowed figure appeared on his monitor. The same distortion, the same deliberate anonymity.

"Report," the Handler said.

"Report?" Tobias's voice cracked slightly. "A ship full of people is dead because of what I did."

A pause, measuring and cold.

"The operation proceeded within acceptable parameters," the Handler replied.

Tobias felt something ice-cold settle in his stomach. "Acceptable?"

"A hostile combatant vessel was neutralized during an active engagement with a Federation starship."

Tobias stared at the screen, waiting for something human to appear in the distorted silhouette. Nothing did.

"He told me the beam would disable their weapons."

"It did."

The simplicity of it almost made Tobias sick.

"And the reactor overload?"

"The feedback cascade was a known possibility."

"You knew," he said.

"We understood the risk."

Tobias shot to his feet, hands clenched so tightly his knuckles ached. "Those were people."

"Those were combatants participating in an operation designed to force Federation withdrawal, destabilize a friendly government, and open the sector to Romulan influence."

"You used me to murder them."

"You acted to protect your ship."

"Don't do that." Tobias's voice cracked. "Don't make this sound clean."

The Handler paused, as if considering whether the distinction mattered.

"Clean is rarely available, Lieutenant. Useful often is."

"You are serving the Federation. Sometimes that requires difficult choices."

The casual tone, the complete lack of remorse, made Tobias want to put his fist through the screen.

"And dealing with Havarl, is that a *difficult* choice?" he asked pointedly.

"Havarl is a variable we will manage in the long term."

"You can't possibly think he's a better bet for Federation interests in this sector than Taleth?" Tobias asked, incredulously. "He's selling out Taleth, he's sold out the Kavesh, what makes you think he wouldn't sell us out just as easily."

"Taleth is a patriot, a true leader of her people. She is principled, but weak; she will continue to keep the Federation at arms-length until the moment everything collapses around her and the Romulans take control of the sector. We cannot allow that to happen. Havarl is ambitious, he will do whatever he needs to maintain power; but that is something we can manage."

"You knew he betrayed Joral."

"We knew he had reasons to make Joral expendable."

"Joral doesn't know," he said quietly.

"That is not relevant to your assignment."

For a moment Tobias could not speak.

The brilliance of it, the cruelty of it, the sheer layered obscenity of people moving other people toward death and calling it stability, all of it pressed against his ribs until he could barely breathe.

"How is the situation with Captain Sihiri and her senior staff?"

Tobias blinked at the deflection. "She doesn't suspect I'm working outside of her command. But she's furious about the Kaessian ship. She relieved me of bridge duty while they investigate."

The Handler's tone remained clinical. "It will be determined a tragic accident, not incompetence on your part."

"You sound very certain of that."

"For good reason, this outcome was anticipated and prepared for."

Tobias felt his face flash with heat at the callousness.

"And Lieutenant Andrews?" the Handler continued, almost casually.

The question came with a subtle shift in tone that made Tobias's chest tighten.

"He's smart, he'll follow where the intelligence leads him."

"That's what we anticipated," the Handler replied, neutrally, "You were selected for this mission for a reason. Ensure the success of the Kaesso operation, and that your new... friend, follows the right trail."

Tobias's jaw tightened. "You sent me to do this, because of him..?"

The Handler said nothing.

That was answer enough.

"You knew I'd get close to him."

"We knew Lieutenant Andrews was talented, attractive, ambitious, and lonely enough aboard that ship to respond to the right pressure."

Tobias felt heat rise behind his eyes. "Don't."

"You are part of this operation because you can reach places formal channels could not."

"You mean him."

"Among others."

"You used him."

"No," the Handler said. "You did."

Silence stretched, heavy with implication.

"How much does he know?" The Handler asked.

"Nothing," Tobias said quickly. "He doesn't know anything."

"I find that unlikely. Andrews is a remarkably strong, if inexperienced, intelligence officer, trained in pattern recognition, and you've been operating under significant stress. Has he asked questions? Pushed for information he shouldn't have?"

Tobias's throat tightened. "He's just doing his job."

"That's not what I asked, Lieutenant."

The silence stretched between them, heavy with threat.

"He's... observant," Tobias admitted finally. "But he doesn't know specifics."

"Observant enough to be a problem?"

"No," Tobias said firmly. "I can handle it."

"See that you do. Because if Lieutenant Andrews becomes a liability to this operation, you will need to deal with it."

"No." Tobias's voice was steel now. "I won't hurt him. I won't lie to him anymore. I'm done."

The Handler's tone didn't change, but something darker crept into it. "You don't get to be done, Lieutenant. And if you won't handle the Andrews problem, we'll find someone who will."

The transmission cut out.

Tobias stood there in the dark, pulse thundering in his ears. They would kill Bransen. They would eliminate him just like they'd eliminated the Kavesh ship, and they'd find a way to make it look justified.

He couldn't let that happen.

His hands moved without conscious thought, pulling on civilian clothes, checking his personal sidearm. He paused at the door, looking back at his quarters one last time. Maybe, just maybe he could still stop this.

* * *

Four decks below, in the *Canberra's* Intelligence Office, Chief Petty Officer Alynna Ward stared at a flickering window of residual signal echoes and felt the last remnants of exhaustion leave her body.

Not because the work was done.

Because something had finally moved.

The office around her had settled into post-crisis quiet; not peace, never that, but the brittle hush that came after too many people had spent too many hours pretending

adrenaline was discipline. The junior analysts had been rotated out. The half-empty coffee mugs remained. One of the wall displays still held the Kaessian broadcast map, frozen at the moment the staged images from Sector Twelve had begun propagating through civilian relay channels. Another tracked the debris field left by the destroyed Kavesh ship, each fragment tagged and catalogued by tactical telemetry she had no desire to look at for longer than necessary.

Ward ignored all of it.

Her attention was on a narrow ripple in the subspace noise, a distortion so small that most automated filters had already dismissed it as post-battle interference from shield harmonics and damaged relay buoys. That was what made her suspicious. Machines liked clean categories. People who wanted to hide liked them even more.

She adjusted the spectrum analysis and narrowed the temporal lag.

The signal did not vanish.

It folded.

Ward's fingers stilled over the controls.

"Well," she murmured, "that's rude."

She opened a private buffer and locked the terminal under her own authorization. Then she locked it again under Bransen's compartment, because if this was what she thought it was, she wanted a record of who had touched it

and who had not. The Dominion had taught her that. Cardassian ciphers had taught her more. The first rule of ugly intelligence was not to know everything; it was to know exactly how much truth could survive contact with people who would rather bury it.

Someone, somewhere on the ship, had communicated off-record.

Not a stray packet. Not an engineering diagnostic. Not a local relay handshake mistaken for a subspace burst.

A conversation.

Unauthorized. Masked. Buried under the electronic equivalent of five different people coughing at once.

Ward leaned forward, narrowing the spectrum until the rest of the room seemed to fall away.

Whoever had built the packet had not relied on one cipher. That would have been too clean. Too attributable. Instead, the signal was a nest of old ghosts; Starfleet Intelligence compression from the Dominion War, Vulcan diplomatic masking so rarely used outside secure consular traffic that half the current generation probably thought it was theoretical, Maquis-style relay fragmentation, and a noise generator that looked uncomfortably close to a Tholian diplomatic screen. None of it belonged together.

Which meant someone had assembled it precisely because no one would know where to point afterward.

Ward sat back slowly.

She had seen that kind of arrogance before. Not the same signature. Not the same hand. But the same philosophy. Layers built not merely to conceal, but to humiliate anyone who tried to assign blame. A trail made of other people's fingerprints.

She could not break it cleanly.

Not in minutes. Perhaps not in hours.

But she did not need clean.

She isolated the carrier resonance, stripped the masking down to pressure and cadence, then rebuilt the audio from fragments; not a conversation, not yet, but enough voice, enough tone, enough intent.

The first voice emerged through static, low and distorted, blurred almost beyond recognition.

Then the second came through.

Tobias Rynn.

Ward went very still.

She let the fragment play once.

Then again.

She did not allow herself a reaction until the third playback, when the shape of it settled into certainty. Tobias sounded shaken, angry, cornered. The other voice did not. That was the part that tightened something behind Ward's ribs. It had the calm of a person giving instructions from a room that

would never smell of smoke, never shake under weapons fire, never have to scrub blood out of its carpet.

She tagged the fragment, then ran the vocal resonance against shipboard recordings from the last forty-eight hours. Tobias matched with ugly confidence. The second speaker returned nothing. Not “unknown.” Not “insufficient sample.” Nothing. As if the voice had been built to refuse comparison. Ward’s mouth tightened.

She opened the trace Bransen had asked her to keep running, the one around Tobias’s console, then overlaid the new burst. The connection was there. Not direct enough for court martial, not clean enough for a captain’s log, but there in the timing, the routing, the way the packet had slipped through authorization gaps no line officer should have known existed.

Then the content resolved one phrase more clearly than the rest.

“...if Lieutenant Andrews becomes a liability to this operation...”

Ward stopped the playback.

For a long moment she simply looked at the waveform.

Bransen’s name sat inside the signal like a blade.

She thought, briefly, of Bletchley Park.

Not the museum rooms the Academy cadets liked to romanticize, all polished plaques and ancient codebreaking

mythology, but the secure lower levels beneath them, where Starfleet Intelligence trained bright young officers to distrust clean answers. Ward had taught there for two years, pulled off active fleet rotation because someone at Command had decided her talent for breaking Cardassian ciphers might be transferable to teaching baby Ensigns how not to get themselves killed by bad assumptions.

Most of them had irritated her.

Not because they were stupid. They were not. They were polished, ambitious, and very sure that a commission made their instincts sharper than everyone else's. They called her Chief with their mouths and civilian specialist with their eyes.

Bransen Andrews had been different.

Fresh-faced then, too slim for his uniform, with grief still tucked neatly behind discipline and a habit of asking questions as though the answer mattered more than the hierarchy of the person giving it. He had stayed late after her sessions, not to flatter her, not to prove himself, but because he wanted to understand why a transmission pattern that looked random could still feel wrong. He had listened. Properly listened.

Ward had noticed.

She had been pleased, though she would have swallowed plasma fire before saying so aloud, when she learned he had found his way to the *Canberra*. Three months aboard had changed him; rank settled better on his shoulders now,

and confidence had replaced some of that Academy-raw hunger. But the important part remained. He still knew how to listen to the shape of a thing before forcing it to become an answer.

Which was why this would hurt him.

She tapped her commbadge.

“Ward to Andrews. Sir, there’s something you need to see down here right away.”

* * *

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

The mission had seemed straightforward when he was first approached; monitor the Nimrod's mission to Kaesso, investigate Romulan ties to the Kaessian government, and ensure that whoever was working with them was exposed. The orders came without a name, just an authorization code higher than he'd ever seen before. He'd actually been excited by the prospect of a covert mission.

When the Nimrod had docked at Starbase 21 and his transfer to the Canberra came through, it was unexpected; he had assumed the mission was no longer his, and that his meeting Bransen was a happy consolation. But the explosion on the Nimrod had thrown him into turmoil, he was no longer sure whose mission he was on; theirs, his own, or something darker he'd stumbled into.

The Handler had made one mistake.

He had let Tobias hear certainty.

Not suspicion. Not pressure. Certainty. The kind that came from someone who knew where the next piece would fall because he had already placed it there.

Tobias did not know whether Joral had the hostages. He did not know whether Havarl had betrayed the Kavesh, or the Romulans, or all of them at once. But he knew the next answer was not aboard the *Canberra*.

It was down there.

And if he waited for orders, someone else would write the ending before he reached the first line.

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 entered the Intelligence Office breathless; he had nearly collided with two crewmen in the corridor and only half-remembered apologizing. For half a second, Ward saw the ensign again, too young and too earnest in a Bletchley Park seminar room, asking why a clean answer made her more suspicious than a messy one.

Then he was Lieutenant Andrews again, her department head, pale and tense and trying not to show how much fear had followed him through the door.

Ward was waiting at the central console, shoulders squared, expression held in the flat professional neutrality that told him she was choosing every visible reaction with care.

That frightened him more than panic would have.

“What did you find?” he asked.

Ward did not answer immediately. She touched a control, and the display shifted to a narrow spectrum window, all sharp lines and broken intervals. “A tightband subspace burst, quantum-masked and layered under post-battle interference. It originated from Lieutenant Rynn’s console approximately twelve minutes after he was relieved of duty.”

Bransen felt his stomach drop. “A burst to where?”

“That is the first problem.” Ward enlarged part of the routing map. “It does not resolve to a normal destination. It bounces against itself, then exits through a masked carrier that appears local until you strip away the first three layers.”

“And after that?”

“After that it looks like Starfleet Intelligence.”

Bransen stared at her.

Ward’s eyes did not soften. “Which means it almost certainly is not. Or it is, but not in a way anyone will admit to.”

The hum of the SIO seemed suddenly louder.

“Did you listen to it?”

“Enough,” Ward said. “Not the full exchange. Fragments, tone, pressure. Whoever he was speaking to has resources. And they were giving orders.”

Bransen swallowed. “Orders to do what?”

Ward hesitated. That was unlike her, and the hesitation itself told him enough to make his pulse quicken.

She removed a small earpiece from the console recess and offered it to him. “You should listen for yourself.”

Bransen took it.

For one absurd second, he did not put it in. His hand hovered near his ear, the small device suddenly heavier than it had any right to be. He thought of Tobias in the turbolift, face pale in emergency light, saying some people, once they have you, they do not let go. He thought of Tobias in bed, whispering that he was sorry before Bransen even knew what apology he was being handed.

Then he set the earpiece in place.

Static breathed against his ear.

Tobias came through first; strained, ragged at the edges.

"...he's just doing his job..."

The recording broke apart, then reassembled.

The second voice answered, smooth beneath the distortion.

"...if Lieutenant Andrews becomes a liability to this operation, you will need to deal with it."

Bransen closed his eyes.

The words did not strike all at once. They entered carefully, like cold water rising around his ribs. He heard the threat, yes, but worse than that, he heard Tobias's silence afterward. Not agreement. Not refusal. A silence shaped by fear.

Ward stopped the playback.

Bransen removed the earpiece and handed it back to her. "I need to tell someone."

Ward did not contradict him. She simply leaned back against the console, arms folding with practiced restraint.

"If you take this to the Captain, it becomes official," she said. "She won't be able to ignore a Starfleet officer going rogue. There will be a landing party, security alerts, command-channel traffic, requests to Kaessian authorities. The relationship with Kaesso will be jeopardized before anyone has decided what this actually means."

"It means Tobias is compromised."

“It means Tobias spoke to someone who wanted you neutralized if you became inconvenient. That is not the same thing.”

Bransen looked at her sharply.

Ward held his gaze. “I am not defending him, sir. I am defining the evidence.”

That landed.

Bransen looked toward the door, toward the decks above them, toward the bridge where Captain Sihiri had every right to know that one of her officers had been compromised.

That was the problem with command. Once truth entered the chain, it became action.

And action, here, was exactly what the trap had been built to provoke.

“That might be exactly what someone is counting on,” Bransen said. “What about Vallona?”

Ward’s mouth tightened.

“You know she’s even more by-the-book than the Captain.”

“She would be right to be.”

“Yes,” Ward said. “She would.”

For a moment neither of them spoke.

Bransen’s hands flexed once at his sides. He could feel the trap closing around them; a problem that became worse the moment it was spoken aloud. He had spent years learning

that information wanted movement. Reports, briefings, escalations, authorizations. The system existed to turn knowledge into response.

But this response had already been anticipated.

“And if whoever he’s talking to is watching our command channels,” Ward added, low, “then you hand them exactly what they want. Panic. Reaction. A clean narrative.”

Bransen exhaled slowly. “So what do we do?”

Ward tapped the spectrum display on her console. “We keep it compartmentalized. We go to someone who can move without triggering an official response.”

“zh’Rhen,” Bransen said.

Ward gave a single nod. “Diplomatic override. Discretion. He’ll understand what it means to move quietly.”

Bransen glanced down at the console again. “And Tobias?”

Ward’s eyes narrowed as a new waveform spiked across her display.

“I think only you can work that one out.”

A sharp chirp cut through the office; the kind of alert Ward normally kept muted.

She turned back to the console, fingers moving quickly.

“Auxiliary transporter bay,” she said, voice flattening into pure focus. “Diagnostic traffic just lit up. Someone is initiating an unauthorized transport to the surface... and trying very hard to avoid being detected.”

Bransen's pulse jumped. "Tobias?"

"Almost certainly."

"Can you stop it?"

"Yes."

The answer came so fast that Bransen looked at her.

Ward did not look back. "I can lock the transporter pad, trigger a security alert, and put half the ship between him and whatever he thinks he's doing. I can also make sure Captain Sihiri knows within thirty seconds."

The silence that followed was terrible.

Bransen heard what she was really asking.

Do you want me to?

He thought of Tobias's voice in the fragment. He thought of the Handler's threat. He thought of Havarl, Taleth, Joral, the Kavesh ship breaking apart in flame, and the way every official response so far had arrived one step after someone else had written its meaning.

"No," Bransen said.

Ward's fingers hovered over the controls.

Then she nodded once, accepting the decision without approving it.

"He's beaming down now."

For a heartbeat they simply stared at each other, the knowledge hanging between them; the argument about what to do collapsing into urgency.

Ward's jaw tightened. "If we're going to stop this from becoming official, we do it before anyone else notices that pattern. Go. I'll keep watching the bands. If he pings anything from the surface, I'll see it. And I'll make sure it stays between us."

Bransen nodded once, already moving.

"Chief."

She looked up.

"If this goes wrong..."

"It already has," Ward said. "Go make sure it doesn't get worse."

* * *



Five minutes later, Bransen stood in the envoy's temporary office, tension thrumming beneath his skin.

The room had been assigned to zh'Rhen when the *Canberra* first assumed the mission; a narrow diplomatic workspace tucked beside one of the secondary briefing rooms, still too sterile to feel occupied, though the Andorian had already made it feel less like Starfleet by sheer force of presence. His black jacket hung over the back of a chair. A half-drunk cup of something pale and steaming sat untouched beside a PADD full of diplomatic traffic. On the wall display, Kaesso's capital rotated slowly beneath layers of political overlays, protest routes, restricted districts, government checkpoints, and the old scars of wars no one in the room had started but everyone was now inheriting.

zh'Rhen listened without interrupting.

That was the first thing Bransen noticed. Not patience exactly. Discipline. The envoy stood near the desk with his arms folded, bandaged antenna angled forward, face unreadable as Bransen laid it out: the unauthorized communication, Ward's partial reconstruction, the threat against him, Tobias's connection to Havarl, the sudden transporter activity, the surface coordinates.

When Bransen finished, the silence felt worse than questions.

zh'Rhen crossed to the desk and picked up the cooling cup, then seemed to remember he did not want it and set it down again.

"Play it," he said.

Bransen hesitated. "Sir?"

"The fragment. Play it."

Bransen took the earpiece from his pocket and connected it to the room's secure terminal. Ward had stripped the file down to the smallest useful segment, buffered inside a false diplomatic memo so thoroughly that Bransen suspected she had been doing this kind of thing longer than he had been alive.

Static filled the room.

Tobias's voice emerged first, strained and low.

"...he's just doing his job..."

The second voice followed, smooth beneath distortion.

"If Lieutenant Andrews becomes a liability to this operation, you will need to deal with it."

The file ended.

zh'Rhen did not move.

Bransen watched him closely. "Do you recognize the voice?"

"No."

The answer came too quickly.

Bransen felt his jaw tighten.

zh'Rhen's eyes shifted to him. "Do not mistake speed for dishonesty, Lieutenant. I do not recognize the voice. I recognize the posture."

"The posture?"

"The shape of the threat. The cleanliness of the language. The way it avoids saying kill while making sure everyone in the conversation understands that kill remains available." zh'Rhen's mouth tightened. "Diplomacy teaches you many unpleasant things. One of them is that murder sounds much more civilized when spoken by people who call it contingency."

Bransen felt the cold in his chest deepen.

"I need to go after him," he said.

"Yes," zh'Rhen replied.

The immediate agreement caught him off guard. "You think so?"

"I think if Lieutenant Rynn intended to disappear cleanly, he would have done it without leaving Ward enough of a trail to follow. Either he wants to be found, or part of him wants to be stopped before he does something he cannot walk back."

Bransen absorbed that, hating how much hope the words gave him.

zh'Rhen studied him for a moment, then his voice softened.

"You care about him."

Bransen blinked. "Sir?"

"Do not insult my intuition, Lieutenant. I do not need to know the details. I see enough."

Bransen hesitated. He felt heat rise in his face despite everything, absurd and human in the middle of crisis.

"Yeah," he said at last. "I suppose I do."

"Good."

That surprised him more than the observation had.

zh'Rhen stepped closer. "Care is not the problem. Care tells you what you are willing to risk. The problem is when care convinces you that risk is the same thing as judgment."

Bransen looked away.

The words landed because they were fair.

"I know what this looks like," he said. "I know I'm compromised."

“Yes.”

Bransen looked back sharply.

zh'Rhen did not soften it. “You are. So am I. So is Captain Sihiri. So is Taleth. So is every person in this system who has been handed only enough truth to make the wrong decision confidently. The question is not whether you are compromised, Lieutenant. The question is whether you know how.”

For a moment, Bransen could not answer.

Then he said, “Tobias doesn't want to be in this deep.”

“No,” zh'Rhen said. “I suspect he does not.”

“I need to find him and hear it for myself. Someone, something bigger is behind all this, and I don't think it's just the Romulans.”

zh'Rhen's expression changed then; not dramatically, but enough. His antennae lowered by a fraction, and the old anger behind his eyes sharpened into something colder.

“What you are circling around has a name,” he said.

Bransen held his gaze. “Section 31.”

The words seemed to draw warmth from the room.

zh'Rhen did not look surprised that Bransen knew them.

“You have heard it.”

“Rumors. Warnings. Nothing official.”

“Nothing about them is official.”

Bransen swallowed. 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 did not wear uniforms. They would use your loyalty against you.

zh'Rhen's voice dropped lower. "I have crossed their path before. Diplomats sometimes do, when the Federation wants a hand shaken in public and a throat cut in private. They do not leave clean trails. They leave outcomes, and people grateful enough, frightened enough, or compromised enough not to ask how those outcomes arrived."

"And Tobias?"

"If he is mixed up with them, it will not be by choice. Not in the way people mean when they say choice."

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

zh'Rhen's antennae angled toward him. "You may not be able to do both."

The sentence landed quietly.

Bransen said nothing.

"Understand me," zh'Rhen continued. "If Rynn has gone to ground in Draz Keta, he is not walking into a misunderstanding. He is walking into the next chamber of the trap. Havarl, Joral, whoever is speaking through that signal, they will all want something from him. They may want something from you. A confession. A body. A Starfleet

officer firing first in the wrong room. A dead envoy would be useful too, though I would prefer not to provide one.”

Despite himself, Bransen gave a short, humorless breath.

zh'Rhen's mouth twitched, then went serious again.

“If I take this to Sihiri, she will act correctly. Security teams. Diplomatic alerts. Transport locks. Contact with Taleth's office. Every visible measure required of a captain protecting her ship and crew. And within minutes, whoever built this will have the reaction they expected.”

“So we don't give it to them.”

“No,” zh'Rhen said. “We give them something smaller. Quieter. Harder to use.”

He crossed to the terminal and began entering authorization codes. Bransen saw the interface shift from Starfleet standard to diplomatic classification, UFP seals appearing in silver along the margins.

“I will file a limited diplomatic movement authorization under my own seal,” zh'Rhen said. “Follow-up contact with a local source connected to the hostage crisis. Narrow duration. No tactical footprint. No shipwide alert.”

“That sounds like a lie.”

“It is a diplomatic classification,” zh'Rhen replied. “The difference is usually whether anyone survives long enough to object.”

Bransen almost smiled. Almost.

zh'Rhen looked at him over the terminal.

"You go light. Civilian cover. Masked equipment. No visible backup."

"No backup?"

"No visible backup," zh'Rhen corrected. "Do not insult me by assuming I intend to be helpless."

Bransen's eyebrows lifted.

"I will keep Ward on the bands," zh'Rhen continued. "If you transmit, we listen. If you vanish, we infer. If you fire first, I will deny authorizing anything beyond a diplomatic survey and then find a way to be very disappointed in you."

"That's comforting."

"It was not intended to be."

Bransen's jaw tightened. "Understood."

zh'Rhen finished the authorization, then paused before sending it.

"One more thing, Lieutenant."

Bransen looked up.

"If you find him, do not decide too quickly what he is."

Bransen said nothing.

The Andorian's expression softened by a fraction. "People who are used as instruments often still cut. That does not make them innocent. It also does not make them the hand holding the blade."

The words struck harder than Bransen expected.

He nodded once.

zh'Rhen sent the authorization. "Go."

CHAPTER 12



Stardate 52967.0 (2375)

Draz Keta was worse up close.

Bransen moved through the outer perimeter on foot, shrouded in dark Kaessian civilian garb that blended with the environment and the people around him. He carried only a light sidearm and a modified tricorder programmed to mask any Federation signatures his equipment might give off. It wasn't much.

But it was enough, if no one looked too closely.

The district had once been part of the old capital's industrial spine, built low and dense beneath elevated transit lines

that no longer ran. Now the streets sagged between ruined structures, their upper floors sealed with warped metal shutters, their lower levels spilling cables, steam, and shadow. Graffiti crawled across every wall; Kavesh slogans, old clan marks, crude drawings of Taleth with Federation hands around her throat. Somewhere nearby, a generator coughed unevenly, its pulse rattling through the pavement like a weak heart refusing to stop.

Draz Keta had been condemned after a reactor breach, according to official records.

Official records, Bransen was learning, had a talent for describing the part of a truth nobody in power found inconvenient.

Analyst Verel met him at the edge of the district, 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. If anything, the night had sharpened it.

"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. "How many inside?"

"Hard to say. Shielded walls, local dampening, old infrastructure. The district eats scans." She glanced down the street, eyes moving with quick, practiced caution. "But the receiver moved with one biosignature. Trill. Alone."

Tobias.

The name settled somewhere behind Bransen's ribs, heavy and hot.

"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, crossed beneath a collapsed monorail where the bones of old transit cars lay crumbling beneath years of ash and rust, then cut through a market corridor that had clearly been abandoned in daylight and repurposed by night. Bransen saw makeshift beds inside empty vendor stalls. Cooking units hidden beneath sheets of scored metal. Children's drawings chalked against a wall beneath a slogan calling for blood.

Not a dead district, then.

A forgotten one.

After twenty minutes, Verel stopped beside a cracked support column and pointed across a narrow street.

The building opposite them was squat and ugly, reinforced with durasteel plating and patched with newer shielding mesh that did not match the rest of the structure. A local power generator hummed faintly behind a gated alcove. No visible guards. No lights in the upper windows. Too much quiet.

“That’s the one,” she said. “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 beneath the civilian cloak. “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 for a moment, her bright green eyes narrowed beneath the edge of her hood.

“You Starfleet people say that like it makes sense.”

“It rarely does.”

That almost earned him a smile.

Almost.

“Good luck, Lieutenant,” she said.

Then she melted back into the shadows.

Bransen crossed the street alone.

* * *

Inside, Tobias stood before a long table covered in tactical maps, encrypted slates, and old Kaessian military overlays. Across from him stood Joral, clad in dark tactical armor with militant insignia sewn into the sleeves. His face was lean

and hard, the face of a man who had been fighting too long to remember how to stop.

The room smelled of hot metal, stale air, and damp stone. Maps of the capital covered one wall; troop movements, protest routes, broadcast relays, escape paths. A coup laid bare in ink, light, and anger.

Joral's expression hardened the moment Tobias stepped into the light.

"You are a long way from your ship, Starfleet."

"I needed to talk to you before Havarl did."

The name changed the room.

Not much.

Enough.

Joral folded his arms. Around the chamber, Kavesh fighters stood near the walls, weapons low but ready. Some of them were younger than Tobias expected.

That made it worse.

"Havarl warned me Starfleet would try something desperate," Joral said. "I expected more than one frightened operations officer."

"I'm not here for Starfleet."

"No?" Joral's eyes narrowed. "Then what are you here for?"

"To tell you Havarl sold you out."

A low murmur passed through the fighters along the wall. Joral silenced it with a look.

“You have thirty seconds to make me believe I should not have you shot.”

Tobias drew a slow breath.

“He knew your ships would move on the *Canberra* after the raid,” he said. “He knew you would posture first, because he knew you needed the image before the fight. Kavesh ships standing up to Starfleet. Patriots refusing to blink. That was the point, wasn’t it?”

Joral’s expression did not change, but Tobias saw the first flicker of attention behind his eyes.

“You know nothing about us.”

“I know what Havarl counted on,” Tobias said. “He counted on your pride. Your discipline. Your need to make Starfleet look like occupiers before you made them look like killers.”

Joral stepped closer. “Careful.”

“He gave me your ships.”

The room went still.

Tobias felt the weight of every weapon in the chamber shift toward him.

“Say that again,” Joral said.

“Havarl gave me the method Starfleet used to disable your weapons,” Tobias said. “Not during the battle. Before. In the

courtyard, the night before the raid. He put the answer in my hand and let me think it was a way to avoid bloodshed.”

Joral stared at him.

Tobias forced himself to continue.

“I used it because it looked like restraint. A precision disablement. A clean option.”

“You lie.”

“See for yourself.” Tobias said calmly as he reached slowly toward the inside seam of his civilian jacket.

Weapons rose.

Tobias froze. “Not a weapon.”

Joral’s stare did not move. “Then what?”

“Proof.”

The word moved through the room with more force than a shout.

Tobias withdrew a small data chip, dull grey, barely larger than his thumbnail. He held it between two fingers.

Joral did not move.

Tobias’s voice lowered.

“He handed Starfleet the key to disable your ship.”

A few of the Kavesh fighters exchanged glances.

Joral’s eyes remained fixed on him. “And you used it.”

Tobias flinched.

“Yes.”

The answer cost him. Bransen, hidden in the shadows, heard it in his voice.

Joral’s mouth twisted. “How convenient. Havarl gives you a key, and Starfleet turns it in the lock. Now you come here asking me to blame the man who gave it to you, not the hand that used it.”

Tobias held out the chip.

“I’m asking you to ask why he gave it to me.”

For a moment, no one breathed.

Then the creak of rotted floorboards betrayed movement in the shadows.

The Kavesh fighters whirled, weapons half-raised.

Bransen stepped out from behind a stack of crates, phaser drawn, face neutral but focused.

“Back away from him,” Bransen said.

Tobias turned slowly.

“Bransen...”

“Don’t.” Bransen did not look away from Joral. “Just don’t.”

The Kavesh made to rush him, but Bransen raised his phaser straight at Joral. The militant leader halted them with one hand.

Tobias’s hand closed around the chip again.

The moment broke.

Joral saw it.

So did Tobias.

Something like fury crossed Tobias's face; not at Bransen, not entirely, but at the timing, the inevitability, the way every honest thing in this mission seemed to arrive one breath too late.

Bransen's eyes flicked to Tobias, and the room shifted. For one breath there was only the two of them, and all the lies standing between them like glass.

"I know about the unauthorized beam-out," Bransen said. "I know about the logs. I know about the hidden comms. And I know you were on the *Nimrod's* roster the day before it exploded." His voice tightened. "What I don't know is why."

Tobias lifted his hands slowly, the chip still caught between two fingers. "It's not what you think."

"Isn't it?" Bransen stepped forward, phaser still trained on Joral. "You lied to me. Over and over. I trusted you."

"I had nothing to do with the *Nimrod*," Tobias said, voice shaking. "I swear that. I was supposed to be on that ship. The people behind all this wanted me on this mission, but I didn't know the shape of it. Not then. When my transfer to the *Canberra* came through, I thought the assignment had changed."

He stopped.

"I thought meeting you was the one part of this that wasn't planned."

Bransen's expression flickered.

Anger. Pain. Hope.

All of it gone almost before Tobias could hold it.

"Then why run?" Bransen asked.

"Because staying meant letting someone else decide what I was."

"And coming here was better?"

"No," Tobias said. "But it was mine."

That landed between them.

Joral watched, suspicion turning, recalibrating.

Tobias took a breath and looked back at him.

"I came here because you need to know what Havarl did."

A voice cut in from behind them.

"He already knows enough."

Bransen turned.

Too late.

Something blunt and hard struck the back of his neck. Pain flashed white through his skull, and the floor rushed up to meet him.

He crumpled.

* * *

When his vision cleared, Bransen was on his knees, phaser kicked away. Tobias knelt beside him, hands raised, face pale with fury and fear.

The data chip was gone from Tobias's hand.

For one disorienting second, Bransen did not know where it had gone.

Then he saw it.

On the floor, half beneath the edge of the table, close enough for Joral to see, not close enough for him to reach without making a choice.

Havarl stood above them, disruptor in hand.

Bransen forced himself upright despite the nausea rolling through him. "Of course it's you."

Havarl barely looked at him. "Secure them."

Two Kavesh fighters moved at once, binding Bransen's wrists and forcing Tobias down beside him.

Joral watched Havarl. "Why is he here?"

"Because Starfleet cannot help itself," Havarl said. "It sends diplomats, then advisers, then intelligence officers, then ships. Always in that order. Always insisting it came only to help."

Bransen gave a short, bitter laugh. “Almost convincing.”

Havarl’s eyes finally met his.

“Almost is usually enough.”

Bransen’s gaze flicked to the chip beneath the table, then back to Havarl.

“Taleth carries the authorization,” he said. “Joral carries the outrage. Starfleet carries the blood. And you step in as the only man who warned everyone this would happen.”

Havarl looked at him with something almost like admiration.

“There he is,” he said. “The intelligence officer.”

Joral’s gaze snapped between them.

Havarl continued, unhurried. “Taleth’s government was already dying. I merely ensured the world saw it happen in language it understood.”

“You staged the raid,” Tobias said.

Havarl’s eyes cooled. “I revealed what people were ready to believe.”

“You gave me the way to... defeat those ships.”

Havarl’s expression cooled.

The room went very quiet.

Joral stared at him.

“Havarl.”

Only the name.

For the first time, Havarl's control slipped by a fraction. "Your ship attacked a Federation cruiser during an active engagement."

"My people died."

"Your people chose martyrdom the moment they challenged Starfleet."

"You gave them the weapon," Joral said.

"I gave Starfleet a choice," Havarl replied. "They made it."

Tobias's voice sharpened. "You knew."

Havarl looked at him. "Knew what?"

"That it could cascade. And that we'd never have used it if we'd known."

A pause.

Small.

Almost nothing.

But everyone in the room felt it.

Joral moved closer. "Did you know?"

Havarl's eyes did not leave Tobias.

"I knew what was possible."

That was enough.

Not proof. Not confession.

Enough.

Joral's fighters shifted along the walls, uncertainty passing between them like current through water.

Havarl looked at them with sudden contempt. "Do not look wounded. The Kavesh wanted revolution. Revolution requires sacrifice."

Joral's expression hardened. "You said Taleth would fall and the Kavesh would take the city."

"And you will have your moment," Havarl said impatiently. "Your banners. Your slogans. Your uprising in the streets. But Kaesso needs more than anger once the shouting ends. It needs order. It needs protection. It needs someone capable of governing beyond grievance."

Joral stared at him. "You said the Kavesh would take power."

"I said Taleth would fall."

The precision of it landed like a blade.

Bransen saw the fracture widen and leaned into it.

"And what comes after Taleth?" he said. "You think Havarl is clearing the way for the Kavesh? He's clearing the way for himself."

Havarl's eyes narrowed. "Careful."

Bransen ignored him.

"You think the Romulans will treat the Kavesh as partners?" he said to Joral. "They will use your dead as proof Kaesso is unstable, use Havarl as the reasonable alternative, and use

your movement as the excuse to put an intelligence office inside every ministry you still think belongs to you.”

Joral’s mouth tightened.

“The Romulans,” he said.

There was disgust in it now.

Not enough.

But some.

Havarl turned sharply toward him. “The Romulans understand strength. They understand borders. They understand enemies. That is more than the Federation ever offered us.”

“The Kavesh did not fight to trade one master for another,” Joral said.

“No,” Havarl replied, low and poisonous. “The Kavesh fought because men like you believe anger is the same thing as power.”

The insult struck harder than a blow.

Tobias shifted beside Bransen, voice rough.

“He needed your anger,” he said. “Your ships. Your dead. He needed Starfleet to bloody its hands, and he needed you to make sure the planet saw it happen.”

Havarl swung the disruptor toward him.

“That is enough.”

Tobias did not look away from Joral.

“Ask him why your ship was expendable.”

The words landed.

Joral stared at Havarl, something terrible beginning to wake behind his eyes.

Havarl’s face hardened fully now, the mask gone.

“Because it was.”

Silence.

Even the generators seemed to dim.

“One ship,” Havarl said. “One crew. One necessary sacrifice in a crisis your own movement began.”

Joral’s hand moved toward the disruptor at his belt.

Havarl noticed.

So did everyone else.

“Do not be foolish, Joral,” Havarl said softly.

Joral froze.

Not from obedience.

From calculation.

His eyes shifted, just once, to the data chip beneath the edge of the table.

Havarl saw it.

So did everyone else.

The chip was dull grey against the dust, almost nothing to look at, and yet the room seemed to bend around it.

For the first time, Bransen thought he saw something like uncertainty cross the Deputy Minister's face. Not fear, not quite, but calculation moving too quickly beneath the skin.

"Enough," Havarl said.

No one answered.

Joral's eyes remained on the chip.

Tobias's voice was hoarse. "If I'm lying, it proves nothing."

Havarl turned the disruptor toward him. "You have said enough, Lieutenant."

"Then let him see it."

The room tightened.

A few of the Kavesh fighters shifted where they stood, their weapons still trained on Bransen and Tobias, but their attention moving now; to Joral, to Havarl, to the chip on the floor between them.

That was the problem with proof, Bransen thought. Sometimes it did not need to be opened. Sometimes it only needed to exist.

Joral took one step toward it.

"Do not," Havarl said.

It was not a warning.

It was an order.

Joral stopped.

Slowly, he looked back at Havarl.

The silence changed shape.

Joral looked back at the chip.

There it was, Bransen realized.

Doubt, finally strong enough to become action.

Joral crouched.

Havarl fired.

CHAPTER 13



Stardate 52967.1 (2375)

The disruptor bolt struck Joral high in the chest and threw him backward into the table.

For half a second, no one moved.

Then the Kavesh began to shout.

Not in fear.

In fury.

The room came apart.

A young fighter near the eastern wall fired first, not at Bransen, not at Tobias, but at Havarl. The bolt went wide, striking the edge of the old tactical display and sending shards of amber glass across the table. Havarl ducked with the quick instinct of a man who had expected violence his whole life, then returned fire with brutal precision.

The fighter dropped before his second shot left the weapon.

That was all it took.

Disruptor fire erupted across the chamber. Kavesh turned on Kavesh, some moving toward Joral's fallen body, others shouting orders Bransen could not understand, their loyalties fracturing faster than language could hold them. Havarl's personal guard, hidden among the militants until that moment, opened fire from the far side of the room. Green bolts carved through smoke and dust, slamming into crates, walls, support beams, people.

Bransen threw himself sideways as a blast struck the floor where his knees had been.

His wrists were still bound behind him.

"Tobias!"

The Trill was already moving.

He lunged low, shoulder-first, knocking Bransen behind the cover of an overturned storage rack. A bolt flashed above them close enough to heat the air. Tobias hit the ground hard beside him, breath driven from his lungs, then rolled

onto one knee and reached for the ropes around Bransen's wrists.

"Hold still."

"Not exactly my plan to fidget."

"Good," Tobias said, voice tight. "Keep not doing that."

Bransen's hands came free.

He flexed his fingers, pain sparking through his wrists, and looked toward Joral.

The Kavesh leader lay on his back near the table, motionless, smoke curling from the burn across his armor. Two of his fighters tried to reach him, only to be pinned down by Havarl's guards. The data chip had skittered beneath the table, lost somewhere in the shadows, no longer the center of the room because the room itself had become the confession.

Havarl had fired.

Everyone had seen it.

"Phaser," Bransen said.

Tobias shoved one into his hand.

Bransen looked at it, then at him.

Tobias's mouth tightened. "I came prepared."

"Of course you did."

"There's a time for that argument."

"Later, then."

“If we live.”

Bransen glanced over the rack. A Havarl loyalist was advancing from the left, weapon raised. Bransen fired once, clean and low. The man dropped hard, stunned before he hit the floor.

“We’re living,” Bransen said.

Tobias gave him a look that might have been gratitude if there had been room for anything that gentle.

* * *

They moved.

The chamber had become a maze of smoke, broken light, and crossing fire. Bransen kept low, sliding behind a stack of old power-cell casings as two disruptor bolts cracked overhead. Tobias moved beside him, not ahead now, not behind, but with him; a rhythm neither of them had earned, but both of them needed.

Across the room, Havarl had retreated behind a reinforced pillar, firing in short, controlled bursts while shouting commands to men who were beginning to realize he no longer commanded the room.

“Where are the hostages?” Bransen shouted.

Tobias pointed toward a sealed interior hatch beyond the table. “Back section. I saw the route on Joral’s map.”

“You were going to rescue them?”

"I was going to stop Havarl first."

"Ambitious."

"Stupid, maybe."

"Both can be true."

A blast struck the casings beside them. One split open with a shriek of stressed metal, venting pale vapor across the floor. Bransen grabbed Tobias by the back of his jacket and pulled him down as the vapor ignited in a brief blue flare.

Tobias coughed, eyes watering. "Thanks."

"Don't thank me yet."

Bransen tapped his masked tricorder, fingers searching through the smoke for a clean signal. The device chirped once, then again, fighting the dampening field that wrapped the building like a fist.

He found nothing.

Only static, interference, blocked bands, dead relays.

"Come on," he muttered.

Another bolt hit the wall above him.

He ducked, then drove a tight-beam pulse through the lowest band the tricorder could manage. The display flashed red almost instantly.

Bransen stared at it for one beat too long.

Tobias saw his face.

“No signal?”

“Nothing useful.”

“That’s bad.”

“That’s your tactical assessment?”

“It’s concise.”

A disruptor bolt tore through the rack beside them, showering them in fragments of heated metal. Bransen pulled Tobias with him as they rolled behind a fallen beam.

The firefight shifted around them, closing in. Havarl’s loyalists were better trained than the Kavesh, calmer under pressure, ruthless in their targeting. One by one, the fighters who had turned on Havarl were pushed back, pinned down, or silenced. The first eruption of rage had given way to something uglier; attrition, confusion, the slow collapse of people who had discovered betrayal and were dying before they could decide what to do with it.

Bransen fired twice, forcing a guard behind cover, then checked the phaser charge.

Low.

Tobias checked his own.

Lower.

They looked at each other.

Neither said it.

The room said it for them.

They were not getting out.

A heavy blast struck the wall near the sealed hatch. The impact blew dust from the frame and sent a pulse of screams through the room beyond.

The hostages.

Bransen's jaw tightened.

"We need that hatch open."

"We can't even cross the room."

"We have to."

Tobias looked toward the hatch, then back at him. Smoke moved around his face, softening the hard lines of fear and resolve.

"You always this optimistic?"

"No."

"That's reassuring."

"I'm trying something new."

Tobias's smile flickered, brief and heartbreaking.

Then the ceiling above them groaned.

A support beam, already weakened by weapons fire, sagged under its own weight. The metal screamed. Bransen looked up just as it tore loose.

"Move!"

They threw themselves forward as the beam crashed down behind them, crushing the cover they had occupied a second before. Bransen found himself flat atop Tobias, their noses almost touching, and for a brief moment his mind flashed back to the Canberra gym and the kiss that sparked everything.

For one reckless second, the pain, the fear, and the anger fell behind the need to feel alive, and Bransen pressed his lips to Tobias.

Tobias found his kiss and for a moment everything around them seemed to pause.

"What was that for?" Tobias asked, blinking through grit and smoke.

"Just in case we don't get a chance again." Bransen replied, half a smile on his face.

He pushed himself up.

Across the chamber, Havarl was moving.

Not toward the hostages. Not toward Joral. Toward a rear service door half-hidden behind hanging cable and old utility plating. In one hand, he held his disruptor. In the other, a compact transmitter glowed.

Bransen saw it.

So did Tobias.

"He's running," Tobias said.

"No," Bransen replied, rising. "He's calling someone."

“Bransen, wait.”

But waiting meant letting Havarl vanish into whatever extraction route he had prepared, letting him carry the last clean version of the lie out of the room, letting him reach whoever was waiting beyond Kaesso with enough deniability to make all of this smoke and blood look like someone else’s failure.

Bransen could not let him go.

He broke from cover.

Tobias swore and followed.

Bransen fired once as he crossed the open floor. The phaser beam struck the wall near Havarl’s shoulder, close enough to make him flinch, then stuttered as the power cell finally gave out. Havarl turned, eyes blazing, fury cutting through the smoke with terrible clarity.

“You still think you can stop this?” Havarl shouted.

Bransen kept moving. “I think I already have.”

Havarl raised his disruptor.

The shot came faster than thought.

Bransen saw the barrel align with his chest. Saw Havarl’s finger tighten. Saw the green light gather.

Then Tobias was there.

He hit Bransen from the side, hard enough to knock him off balance, and the disruptor bolt struck Tobias high in the shoulder instead.

The force spun him sideways.

He hit the ground with a sound Bransen felt more than heard.

“Tobias!”

Bransen dropped beside him, world narrowing to the burn on Tobias’s shoulder, to the blood already darkening the fabric of his shirt, to the pale shock flooding his face beneath the dust and sweat.

Tobias’s eyes fluttered open.

“Still here,” he managed.

Bransen laughed once, broken and furious. “Don’t make that a line.”

“Wasn’t planning to.”

Havarl stepped closer.

The firefight still raged behind him, but here, in this pocket of smoke and burning light, everything seemed to slow. Bransen reached for the phaser Tobias had dropped, but it had skidded too far away, lost beneath broken plating. Tobias tried to move and gasped, body folding around the wound.

Havarl stood over them, disruptor steady in his hand.

“Touching,” he said.

Bransen shifted, putting himself between Havarl and Tobias, though there was no cover left, no weapon, no plan.

Havarl looked almost disappointed. “Do you know what you have done, Lieutenant? Do you have any idea how small your interference is compared to what this world needs?”

Bransen’s breath came hard. “You mean what you need.”

“What I need is irrelevant.”

“No,” Bransen said. “That was your mistake. It was always about you.”

“Then let this be about me.”

Bransen held his gaze.

Tobias’s hand found his wrist. Weak. Desperate.

The disruptor fired.

Havarl’s body jerked, shoulders snapping rigid, eyes widening in shock. For one suspended second, he remained upright, disruptor still pointed at Bransen, the certainty on his face cracking into something almost childlike.

Surprise.

He collapsed, hitting the floor hard, a smoking wound in his back. The transmitter skittered from his hand and spun into the dust.

Joral stood behind him.

Barely.

Blood darkened the front of his armor, spreading from the wound on his chest in a black, wet bloom. One hand gripped the edge of the table for balance. The other held a disruptor, its barrel still smoking. His face had gone grey with shock, but his eyes were clear.

* * *

For a moment, no one moved.

Then Joral drew a breath that sounded like broken glass.

“Cease fire.”

His voice was not loud.

It did not need to be.

The Kavesh heard him.

One by one, the weapons faltered.

A fighter near the west wall lowered his disruptor first, then another. Havarl’s remaining loyalists hesitated, suddenly aware that the man who had commanded them was dead on the floor and the man he had tried to kill was still standing.

“Cease fire!” Joral roared, and this time the room obeyed.

The last shots died into smoke.

Silence came down in pieces.

Not complete silence. Nothing that merciful. Fires still cracked along the walls. Wounded men groaned.

Somewhere, a damaged relay screamed in a high electronic whine. But the fighting had stopped.

Joral took one step forward.

Then his knees buckled.

Two Kavesh fighters caught him before he hit the floor.

Across the chamber, blue-white transporter light shimmered into being.

Six figures materialized together in the clearest space Ward could give them, just beyond the shattered edge of the chamber.

Rix stood at the front, phaser rifle raised, Ketris beside him with her own weapon already sweeping the nearest fighters. Two Starfleet security officers flanked them, while zh'Rhen and Ward resolved a pace behind, both armed, both taking in the room with very different kinds of fury.

The Kavesh reacted by instinct.

Weapons rose.

So did Starfleet's.

"No!" Bransen shouted.

His voice cracked through the ruined chamber with enough force to stop the moment before it became another massacre.

Rix's eyes cut to him, rifle still trained. "Andrews?"

Bransen raised one hand, the other still pressed against Tobias's wound. "Don't fire. Everything is under control."

"This... is under control?," Ketris said, incredulously as her eyes swept the scene of chaos around them.

"It's contained enough," Bransen said. "Havarl is dead."

Rix slowly lowered his phaser rifle.

Smoke curled between them, and for one long second the whole room balanced on fingers, triggers, breath.

Bransen looked at Joral.

The Kavesh leader's face was ashen, his body held upright only by the men supporting him, but he understood.

He lifted one shaking hand.

"Weapons down," he said.

A few fighters hesitated.

"All of you," Joral said.

Slowly, they lowered their disruptors.

Rix, jaw tight, then nodded to the away team who followed suit.

zh'Rhen looked from Joral to Havarl's body, then to Bransen. His antennae angled forward in the faintest approving nod.

Ward crossed to him and Tobias, holstering her phaser as she dropped to one knee. Her eyes went to Tobias's shoulder first, then to Bransen's face.

“Sir,” she said, scanning the wound with her tricorder. “You sent a terrible signal.”

Bransen stared at her. “You saw it?”

“Of course I did.”

Tobias grimaced. “Chief.”

“Sir, respectfully, do not speak.”

Tobias managed a half-laugh through the pain, “Aye, aye Chief.”

Rix moved toward Joral, rifle angled low but ready. “Colonel Joral, you require medical attention.”

Joral’s mouth twisted through pain. “From Starfleet?”

The question landed harder than accusation.

No one answered immediately.

Bransen looked at him, then at the wounded men around the room; Kavesh, Starfleet and Havarl’s loyalists alike, all of them breathing the same smoke, standing in the wreckage of someone else’s certainty.

“Yes,” Bransen said. “From Starfleet.”

Joral’s eyes shifted to him.

“You expect me to accept mercy from the people who destroyed my ship?”

“No,” zh'Rhen moved slowly towards him, phaser now holstered by his side. “But you need to survive to tell your

people why they died... and who was behind it." His eyes drifted towards Havarl.

The room quieted around that.

Joral looked toward Havarl's body. Then toward the sealed hatch.

For the first time, something like exhaustion overtook the rage.

"The hostages," he said wearily.

Rix looked down. "What?"

Joral lifted a hand, pointing toward the sealed interior hatch. "Through there."

His face tightened, not with pride, not with remorse exactly, but something harder to name.

"They were never to be harmed," he said.

"That was wise," zh'Rhen said. "And perhaps the first reason there may still be a way out of this."

Joral did not answer.

Rix signaled to the two security officers. "You two, go secure the hostages."

Ketris joined them, working the old locking panel while one security officer covered the room. The mechanism resisted at first, grinding against damaged emergency power, then released with a heavy metallic groan.

The door opened.

The room beyond was dim, shielded, and crowded with frightened faces.

Federation civilians.

Diplomatic staff.

Alive.

For one breath, no one spoke.

Then an older human woman with blood dried at her temple stepped forward, saw zh'Rhen, and nearly collapsed with relief.

"Envoy."

zh'Rhen crossed the floor before anyone could stop him. His diplomatic mask held for three steps, then cracked.

"You are safe now," he said, voice rougher than Bransen had ever heard it. "All of you."

Behind him, Ketris looked away for one brief second, jaw tight.

Ward touched her commbadge. "Ward to *Canberra*. We have the hostages. Multiple wounded, including Lieutenant Rynn and Colonel Joral. Stand by for transport directly to sickbay."

Sihiri's voice came back at once, clipped with relief and fury in equal measure.

"Confirmed. Locking on."

Joral looked up sharply. "No."

Rix turned back to him.

Joral's breathing was ragged, but his eyes still burned. "I will not be paraded aboard a Federation ship as your prisoner."

"No," Bransen said before Rix could answer. "You'll be treated as a wounded man who kept the hostages alive and killed the person who betrayed your movement."

Joral stared at him.

Bransen held his gaze.

"And then," Bransen continued, "you can decide whether there's something better for your people than more of... this."

The words hung in the smoke.

Joral's fighters watched him.

Starfleet watched him.

Even zh'Rhen, standing with one hand on the arm of a rescued diplomat, went still.

Joral looked again toward Havarl.

Then to his own people.

Something passed through his face that was not surrender. Not forgiveness. Not peace.

Possibility, perhaps.

A narrow, bitter thing, but real.

At last, Joral gave a single nod.

Bransen barely heard the rest.

Tobias's breathing had gone shallow beneath his hand.

"Stay with me," Bransen said.

"I'm trying."

"Try harder."

Tobias managed the faintest smile. "Bossy."

"You have no idea."

"Oh, I do."

Bransen bent closer, forehead nearly touching his. "Do not make me forgive you while you're bleeding out on a warehouse floor."

Tobias's eyes softened, pain and shame and something like hope moving through them.

Across the room, Joral sat slumped between two of his fighters, one hand pressed to his wound, eyes fixed on Havarl's body. He looked less like a victor than a man who had arrived too late at the truth and found it waiting among bodies.

Bransen met his gaze.

Joral held it for a moment.

Then looked away.

Rix's voice cut through the chamber. "Rix to Canberra, sixteen to transport directly to sickbay. Energize."

Blue light gathered around the rescued diplomats, around Tobias, around Joral, around Bransen and the officers closest to them. The chamber blurred into smoke and broken stone.

The last thing Bransen saw before the transporter took them was Havarl lying face-down in the dust of Draz Keta, the data chip still unopened beneath the table.

Proof, untouched.

Truth, delivered anyway.

CHAPTER 14



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.

Bransen sat straighter than usual, still carrying the tension of the day in his shoulders. zh'Rhen, ever composed, leaned casually into the corner of the couch, antennae angled with feigned curiosity. Commander Vallona stood near the replicator, a PADD in hand, impassive as a 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 starships for a decade, I understand very well the need for rapid field decision-making; but I still expect my officers to come to me before making unsanctioned 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 Rynn, 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 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 have undeniable proof that Havarl orchestrated an attempt to overthrow the Kaessian government. He used the threat of Romulan interference to draw in Starfleet, the threat of Starfleet interference to win support with his people, and then let our own actions confirm everything he was saying. In short, we were very nearly pawns in a coup d'état."

zh'Rhen gave a dry smile. "But we weren't. And thanks to Lieutenants Andrews and Rynn, 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 unharmed, Havarl's coup has failed, and Colonel Joral might just be ready to come back to the negotiating table."

"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. "I don't know that we'll ever quite get to the bottom of that; the Romulans, the Kavesh, one of Havarl's operatives, hell, maybe even Section 31 themselves. Nobody is claiming responsibility."

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

Sihiri turned to him. "Stability that your actions may, at least in the short term, 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, wearily. "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 Rynn? What happens to him now?"

"Rynn'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 Kaessian 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 all information on his involvement in this operation, and ordered no disciplinary action at this time."

Bransen breathed a sigh of relief, “Ma’am, I’d like to see him.”

Sihiri regarded him for a long moment. “That’s between the two of you, 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.

* * *

Bransen stepped inside the turbolift, his thoughts already turning toward Sickbay. The doors closed with a hiss, stopping as a blue hand slid between them.

“Lieutenant.”

Bransen looked up as the doors parted again. zh’Rhen slipped inside. The hum deepened, as the car began to move.

“For what it’s worth,” zh’Rhen said mildly, “I would not recommend visiting Lieutenant Rynn without a clear head.”

Bransen frowned. “Then why stop me?”

zh'Rhen studied him for a moment, antennae angling slightly.

"Computer. Halt turbolift." he instructed.

The car came to a halt between decks.

"Because what you've just walked out of does not end in that ready room."

He reached into the inner pocket of his jacket and produced a small isolinear chip, dull and unremarkable. He held it between two fingers.

"Section 31," zh'Rhen said quietly. "Officially, they do not exist. Unofficially, they are efficient, amoral, and very good at convincing themselves that the Federation's principles are luxuries it cannot afford."

Bransen's jaw tightened. "You mentioned them in there."

"I mentioned shadows," zh'Rhen replied. "This is substance." He placed the chip in Bransen's hand. "Data, names, fragments of operations that never happened. Some of it will make sense now. Some of it won't. Not yet."

Bransen closed his fingers around it. "Why give this to me?"

"Because you are now visible to them," zh'Rhen said. "Both of you are. Lieutenant Rynn was useful; that made him expendable. You are inconvenient; that makes you dangerous. Section 31 does not like variables it cannot predict."

Bransen swallowed. "So what do I do?"

zh'Rhen's expression softened, just a fraction. "You do what you cannot help but do. You question. You doubt. And you protect your people."

The turbolift hummed back to life as zh'Rhen resumed their descent.

The car halted and the doors opened. Bransen hesitated. "You said 'was.'"

zh'Rhen paused at the doors. "Lieutenant?"

"You said Rynn was useful to them," Bransen said. "Past tense."

A faint smile touched zh'Rhen's lips. "That depends on what choices he makes next."

zh'Rhen stepped out.

"Envoy..." Bransen said, hesitating, "One more thing."

zh'Rhen looked back.

"Are you with them?" Bransen said carefully.

zh'Rhen considered him for a long moment. "No," he said finally. "But I have learned that with Section 31, distance is rarely the same thing as innocence."

Bransen held his gaze.

"Keep your leverage, Lieutenant. And keep your people closer than they expect."

* * *

The *Canberra* felt stiller than usual as Bransen made his way toward Sickbay. The ship was never truly quiet, but this was something else, a hush born of aftermath, of questions deferred rather than answered. He slowed as he reached the doors, one hand resting briefly against the cool bulkhead as if grounding himself.

Inside, Tobias lay in one of the private recovery rooms. A dermal regenerator sat idle on a nearby tray, its soft hum long since faded. His shoulder was wrapped in a light bandage; his uniform had been replaced with a medical gown. He looked vulnerable like this, absent of rank, of context, of certainty. Bransen lingered in the doorway longer than he meant to.

“You just going to stand there?” Tobias murmured, eyes still closed.

Bransen let out a quiet breath and stepped inside. “You’re awake.”

“Unfortunately.” Tobias cracked one eye open. “Doctor says I’m supposed to rest. Apparently nearly getting vaporized is bad for you.”

Bransen didn’t smile.

Tobias noticed immediately. He shifted, wincing slightly as he did. “That bad, huh?”

Bransen sat on the edge of the bed, hands clasped loosely between his knees. “You took a disruptor blast meant for me.”

Tobias shrugged. "Seemed like the right thing to do at the time."

"That's not what I meant." Bransen looked up then, really looked at him. "I need to understand something, Tobias. And I need you to be honest with me."

Tobias's expression tightened, the faint levity draining away. "All right."

"How much of this was real?" Bransen asked quietly. "Us. The nights. The way you looked at me. How much of that was you, and how much of it was... someone else pulling strings?"

Silence settled between them, heavy and uncomfortable.

Tobias stared at the ceiling for a long moment. When he spoke again, his voice was lower, stripped of its usual ease. "I was never told to make you trust me. I was told to be close. Useful. That line gets blurry faster than you'd think."

Bransen's jaw clenched. "That doesn't answer the question."

Tobias turned his head to look at him. "Because I don't know how to answer it, Bransen. I cared. I still do. But I can't pretend I wasn't compartmentalizing. Telling myself I was in control. That I wasn't letting it matter more than it should."

"But you were?"

"Yes." The word came without hesitation. "I was."

Bransen looked away, pain flickering across his face. "I've spent the last two days wondering if every instinct I trusted was wrong. If I was just another variable being managed."

"You weren't," Tobias said firmly. "I made choices. Some of them were bad. Some of them I regret more than I can say. But I didn't fake what mattered to me."

Bransen studied him, searching for any sign of deflection, of half-truths. He found only exhaustion and something dangerously close to fear.

"Do you understand what you did to me?" Bransen asked. "What that kind of doubt does to someone whose job is built on reading intent?"

Tobias swallowed. "Yes."

"And you still didn't tell me."

"I was afraid," Tobias admitted. "Afraid that if I did, I'd lose the one thing that felt real. And afraid that if I didn't, I'd deserve to."

The words hung there, raw and unpolished.

Bransen let out a slow breath. "I don't know if I can trust you the way I did."

Tobias' expression melted from fear to despair.

"But..." Bransen met his eyes again. "That doesn't mean I'm walking away."

Tobias's breath caught. "It doesn't?"

“No.” Bransen hesitated, then reached out, resting his hand lightly over Tobias’s. “But it means we start again. Carefully. No omissions. No shadows.”

Tobias closed his fingers around Bransen’s hand, careful, almost reverent. “I can do that. I want to.”

Bransen nodded once. “Good. Because if I ever feel like I’m being handled again...”

“You won’t,” Tobias said quietly. “Not by me.”

They sat there in silence for a while after that, the tension easing but not vanishing, replaced by something more fragile and more honest.

Tobias finally spoke. “For what it’s worth, choosing you was the first decision I made that felt like mine.”

Bransen squeezed his hand gently. “Let’s make sure the next ones are too.”

For the first time since Kaesso, Tobias allowed himself a small, genuine smile.

CHAPTER 15

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, and the ship had started to return to life as normal.

Deck Seven 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, the faint pink sheen of regenerated skin high on his shoulder the only visible trace of the disruptor blast he had taken on Kaesso; for a split second, a sharp memory of blood and smoke flickered through Bransen's mind before desire reasserted itself. 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 made him bite his lip.

Bransen tried, and failed, not to stare.

Tobias finished his set and wandered over, casually, almost too casually, before running a hand across Bransen's back.

"Grankegh cleared you for that?" Bransen asked casually.

"He cleared me for light exercise."

"That looked like curls."

"Emotionally light."

Bransen chuckled, switching to rows.

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

"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 changing rooms were as sleek as the rest of the *Canberra's* gym; rows of lockers, private sonic stalls, and a hydrowall running down the center, 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.

The door sealed behind them, and for a moment neither moved.

The heat was there, immediate and obvious, but so was the memory of everything they had agreed not to hide from anymore.

Tobias's hand rested at Bransen's waist. "Tell me if this is too soon."

Bransen looked at him, at the uncertainty beneath the want, and felt something in his chest loosen.

"It is," he said. Then, before Tobias could pull back, he added, "But I still want it."

Tobias's breath caught.

"No shadows?" he asked.

"No shadows," Bransen said. "Just us."

Tobias pulled Bransen's shirt off in a single smooth motion, eyes raking over the bare skin beneath. "Fuck, Bransen, 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. Tobias returned the favor, enjoying the slap as Bransen's own hard dick sprang free.

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

Hands roamed. Tobias's 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, skillful movement.

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

He tugged Tobias back up, kissing him hard.

Their bodies moved together; neither new to this, but newly charged by it.

Tobias pushed Bransen 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; he moaned, shooting his cum across Tobias's chest. 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; not promises, not yet, but an unspoken agreement to take things carefully, honestly, this time. 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."

Bransen looked at him.

Tobias seemed to realize what he had said a second too late.

He nodded. "I know."

"Good," Bransen said. "Then breakfast."



Epilogue

Stardate 52968.2 (2375)

Tobias stirred in the dark, breath catching as he woke. Something had changed; a shift in the air, a pressure he could feel rather than hear.

He blinked at the ceiling, the dim light 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.

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 the small desk by the viewport, legs crossed, posture relaxed in a way that was anything but casual. No uniform. No insignia. Just a silhouette cut from shadow.

"I wouldn't wake him," the Handler said quietly. "He looks comfortable."

Tobias exhaled through his nose. "You're bold," he said. "Showing up here."

A faint smile, heard rather than seen. “You passed your first field test. I’d say that earns a visit.”

Tobias stood, unconcerned with his nakedness, every muscle tight. “You ordered me to kill him.”

The Handler regarded him for a long moment. “I ordered you to *consider* removing an asset that might compromise the mission.”

“That’s not how it felt,” Tobias said, voice low. “You told me if he became a liability, I was to eliminate him.”

“Yes,” the Handler replied evenly. “And you didn’t.”

Silence stretched between them. Outside, the distant lights of Starbase 21 drifted past like cold stars.

“That was a test,” Tobias said.

“It was,” the Handler agreed. “One you passed.”

Tobias shook his head once, a short, sharp motion. “You wanted to see if I’d choose the mission over him.”

“I wanted to see if you understood the difference,” the Handler said. “Blind obedience is easy. Judgment under pressure is not. You chose to protect the mission *and* preserve the asset.”

“He’s not an asset,” Tobias snapped.

The Handler’s tone didn’t change. “Not to you.”

Tobias glanced back at the bed. Bransen shifted slightly, brow creasing for a moment before smoothing again. Tobias

felt a familiar tightening in his chest; fear, anger, something dangerously close to resolve.

"You used him," Tobias said. "You used *me*."

"Yes," the Handler said simply. "And the result was a failed Romulan-backed coup, a stabilized sector, and a Federation spared the burden of knowing how close it came to choosing the wrong intervention. From our perspective, Lieutenant, the operation was a success."

"Success," Tobias said, the word almost breaking in his mouth. "Kaesso was almost handed to the Romulans because of your interference."

"That's precisely why we put people like you on the ground," the Handler said, untroubled. "So consequential mistakes don't happen. So history doesn't turn on good intentions and bad timing."

Tobias let out a short, humorless laugh. "You're already writing the after-action report."

"We always do."

Another pause.

"You're not done with me," Tobias said.

"No," the Handler replied. "You've demonstrated exactly why you were selected. You got close. You influenced outcomes. You resisted an order when it mattered. That combination is rare."

Tobias turned back fully. "And if I refuse next time?"

The Handler rose smoothly from the chair. "Oh, I'm not too concerned about that, Lieutenant. You wouldn't have demonstrated your level of aptitude for this work if you didn't have an innate desire for it."

He moved toward the door.

"One more thing," Tobias said.

The Handler paused.

"He's special," Tobias said quietly, nodding toward the sleeping Bransen. "He's not like you, or me. I won't hurt him, and I won't lie to him. I'll let it all burn down before I do that to him again."

For the first time, the Handler smiled fully. "Good," he said. "I find our people perform best when they have something to fight for."

The doors whispered open for him without hesitation. The Handler slipped into the corridor and was gone.

Tobias stood alone in the dark for a long moment. Then he crossed back to the bed and lay down beside Bransen, careful not to wake him, one arm curling protectively around his waist.

He knew this wasn't over.

The End

