

Plague Bound

By Ross Manuel

1.

Reena Blackford massaged a knot in her right shoulder as she keyed the access code to her quarters, thankful that her shift in the armoury of the USS *Kokoda* was finally over. As the door opened, she was confronted by a wall of upbeat music emanating from the refresher unit of her shared accommodation. While as a Lieutenant on larger Starfleet vessels she would have been assigned a private sleeping berth, the age and tonnage of the venerable Mercury Class Frigate meant that she had to share a billet.

Accompanying the upbeat music was the clearly noticeable sound of someone singing along, underpinned by the regular thrum of the sonic shower, Reena smiled, she could recognise the voice of her bunkmate, the Medical Science officer Lieutenant Jacinta Tryne anywhere. Taking a step inside the cabin, the door automatically closed once she crossed the sensor.

“Sin, I’m home,” she called smiling as she unclasped the front of her blue service tunic, she wasn’t surprised when Jacinta didn’t reply, instead only continuing to sing.

Moving to her personal workstation, she glanced at a holoframe on its surface that portrayed a pair of ladies at a formal function. One was Reena, her auburn hair up in an absurd hairstyle and a form-fitting azure dress whose slit up the side still made her blush. She was standing arm-in-arm with a woman that could have easily passed for her twin, where it not for the woman’s dark brown hair pulled back into a sharp style that fully showed off the twin lines of intricate brown marks that

started at her temples and ran down both sides of her body, encased in a gold one-shoulder dress with mesh panelling down the sides of her abdomen.

The two women had been amazed by the physical similarities they shared despite having over half of the Federation between their birthplaces (and the fact that Reena was a year younger than Jacinta), the two immediately became close friends, much to the annoyance of their superiors, with the Terran Reena becoming a confidant to the elusive Trill. Reena helped the other woman come to terms with the fact that she was only a handful of the defiantly neutral Trill in Starfleet.

Activating her workstation, Reena left her tunic undone and checked if she had received any correspondence since she ended her shift. The sonic shower deactivated, the noticeable thrum leaving the ambience, leaving the music still playing.

Before Reena could instruct the computer to lower the volume, Jacinta emerged from the refresher unit, clad only in her underwear, dancing along to the tunes, completely oblivious to her surroundings. The security officer looked up at Jacinta and watched the performance, marvelling at the fact that while the two women managed to spend identical periods of time in the *Kokoda's* cramped gym, Jacinta managed to get the better outcomes. She was about to comment about her bunkmate's unorthodox dance style when Jacinta finally turned to face Reena.

The security officer gasped audibly as she caught sight of the fist-sized undulating bulge that sat at the top of the medical science officer's abdomen.

"Sin!" Reena exclaimed, this remark finally informing Jacinta that she was in fact no longer alone.

The Trill officer froze, her eyes wide, as the undulating bulge appeared to shrink back into her abdomen, giving her the same overall appearance of a Terran woman, save for the twin sets of markings down either side of her body.

“Er, hi Reena,” she managed to squeeze out as her normal skin tone gained a noticeable pallor.

“Don’t hi me, Sin, you going to explain what is going on?” Reena asked standing, and taking an unsteady step towards her colleague, “And just what that thing in your stomach is.”

Before Jacinta could explain, the *Kokoda*’s intership sounded the bosuns whistle, “Attention all stations, Yellow Alert, all crews to their stations. Lieutenant’s Blackford and Tryne report to the shuttle bay.”

Reena shared a look with Jacinta that screamed ‘*This is not over*’ and pressed the intercom panel next to the door of their quarters to acknowledge the order as Jacinta scrambled to put on a uniform. The Armoury officer crossed her arms as Jacinta pulled on her tunic, and made an effort to not meet Reena’s gaze.

“What was that?” Reena asked as the two headed briskly towards the nearby turbolift.

Jacinta zipped up her blue sciences tunic and secured the triangular collar before finally meeting her gaze. “It’s a private thing for my people, and it’s not something we talk about with outsiders,” she brushed past Reena and stepped into the waiting lift car.

Reena sighed and joined her in the turbolift and instructed it to take them to the rear of the *Kokoda*’s small saucer section. “Oh come on, Sin, do you really think that is going to fly with me? You know me, I will find out.”

Jacinta paused, her expression appearing as if she was having an argument with herself before she let out a defeated sigh. Looking up, she met Reena’s gaze. “Fine, when all this is over, I will tell you what is going on, but I assure you, you are not going to want to hear it.”

The Armoury Officer shrugged, “I’ve been your bunkmate for over a year; there is nothing you could tell me now that I couldn’t handle.”

Jacinta smiled, as the lift car slowed as they neared their destination. "Don't say I didn't warn you."

The two women exited the turbolift and briskly moved down the curved corridor passing groups of Starfleet personnel moving to their assigned battle stations as display panels spaced evenly along the bulkheads pulsed in a pale yellow hue. At the end of the corridor sat the double doors leading to the expansive multistorey shuttle bay. Stepping inside, the two women paused at the sight of four Starfleet officers, each had the same bronze panels on their blue uniforms as Reena, marking them as part of the *Kokoda's* security contingent. Jacinta shared a troubled look with her bunkmate before Reena sped up to join her colleagues as the doors slid shut.

"Henderson? What's going on?" she asked as the two women stepped into the small circle at the rear of one of the *Kokoda's* two shuttlecraft.

Petty Officer Jason Henderson turned to his superior and shrugged. "Don't know what to tell you, ma'am, Commander Krieger ordered a security detail to the shuttle bay, I was hoping that you knew something."

Reena shook her head, "Sorry Jason, I was off duty, I know as much as you."

Behind them, the double doors opened, even before the doors had fully opened an officer entered, the gold panelling on his uniform denoted him as one of the *Kokoda's* command officers. Lieutenant Commander Johannes Krieger, the ship's First Officer and Chief Navigator, entered the shuttle bay and approached the group. Entering the small circle, he activated a holographic display beside him, showing the image of a planetary system before it focused on a grainy, brownish planet courtesy of the *Kokoda's* long-range sensors.

"Listen up ladies, we are currently en route to assist the USS *Animus*, a Katana class Frigate that was surveying the nearby Tressis Expanse. They deployed a landing party to the third planet in the system and have apparently come under fire,

a scattering field has been erected around the planet, preventing transporters, and with their only operational shuttle down on the surface; they need the *Kokoda* to come to the rescue, when I left the bridge, we were three hours out from reaching their last reported location.”

Jacinta turned to Commander Krieger, noting that she was the only silver panelled science officer in the group. “Do we have word on the status of the landing party?”

Krieger nodded before he deactivated the display. “The *Animus* has reported that their landing party has come under attack by an experienced, determined opponent and are requiring extraction, I am correct in assuming, Lieutenant, that you are rated in field medicine?”

She nodded. “That is correct, sir, all members of the Trill Expeditionary Force are rated in battlefield medicine.”

Krieger inclined his head in acknowledgement. “Excellent, while the *Animus* hasn’t reported any casualties amongst their landing party, I would expect that by the time we arrive that will have changed.” He turned to the rest of the team. “Lieutenant Blackford, I want the landing party equipped for combat. We will be launching the minute the *Kokoda* drops out of warp. The details we have received are sketchy, and I’m not entirely sure what we are heading into, so I want everyone to keep their wits to them. Dismissed, we all have a lot of work to do.”

The landing party stiffened to attention before they broke up to prepare.

Three figures crouched as they ran down a colonnaded balcony, ducking from cover to cover as they traded fire with the heavily armed attackers in the courtyard below them. The heavy thump of disruptor fire was answered by the high pitched whine of phasers as the trio took refuge behind a thick stone parapet

affording them a small measure of protection from the incoming fire.

The trio's lone woman, her green skin and short dark hair a clear indicator to her alien heritage, sat on the stone flooring as she glanced down to the tricorder she held in her hand, while the other tightly clutched a Federation phaser.

"Do I need to point out just how screwed we are right?" she called over the cacophony of noise as she continued to duck as bolts of green energy zipped over her head.

Her companion to the right held up his free hand while holding their communicator up to their mouth with the other. "Say again, *Animus*."

A tinny voice came from the device's speaker as it attempted to break through the ambient scattering field. "Captain, we are still unable to pierce the scattering field or to activate the *Night Hawk*'s remote access chip. We have, however, been able to make contact with the *Kokoda*, they are en route, ETA three hours."

Captain Azrael Morganth shook his head, the six-person infiltration team that he had led down to this planet had been steadily whittled down to just himself, Ensign Leda, and Petty Officer Juan Gutierrez. "I presume that they haven't been told anything?"

There was a burst of static before the *Animus*' executive officer responded. "That is correct sir, they don't know our mission or the presence of the Novos Foundation on the surface."

Azrael turned to Leda, who was still scrutinizing her tricorder, and now seemed to be ignoring the firefight erupting around her. "Speaking of which, Leda, how far is our destination?"

Leda looked up and met her captain's gaze, her yellow eyes glinted with the joy of the hunt. "Not far, but there is also no way we are going to get there on our own, I'm picking up way

too many biosigns between us and the target. We aren't exactly flush with supplies right now."

The captain nodded as Gutierrez continued to trade fire from his phaser rifle with their attackers below. "And they won't be content with staying down there either. So we wait for the *Kokoda* to bring the cavalry. Ex, pass onto their captain that we require the utmost haste from them. Morganth out." He turned to the remains of his landing party as he returned his communicator to a pouch on his equipment vest. "Leda, options?"

She brought up the blueprints of the facility on her tricorder and studied them. "There is a junction down that corridor." She made a stabbing motion with two fingers. "It leads to an access hatch to the facilities maintenance tunnels, they appear to crisscross the facility. While there are sensor nodes scattered throughout them, if we knock enough out, they won't have any idea where we are hiding."

"But won't they just follow us in ma'am?" Gutierrez asked, pausing his fire long enough to slip a fresh sarium krellide power pack into the stock of his phaser rifle before resuming his harassing fire of the guards below.

"Not easily," Leda replied as she blind fired her own phaser down into the courtyard, and immediately withdrew her hand as a torrent of green bolts responded. "Those corridors are designed for their servitors, too small for a fully armoured Templar, they'll have to shed all that sacred power armour to follow us."

"You do realise that that whole sacred armour thing is a myth right?" Azrael commented, causing Leda to stick out her tongue cheekily.

"Details, it will buy us more time regardless, either way, we can't stay here, that wall has gotten a lot shorter since we've stopped here," Leda replied.

The captain turned to Gutierrez before unslinging his own phaser rifle. "Petty Officer, how many stun grenades do you have left?"

He did a quick mental calculation before responding. "Two sir."

Azrael smiled. "Excellent, prime them both, on my count, toss them over the side." He shuffled so he was facing them both. "Then we run for the access hatch."

The two remaining members of his landing party nodded as Gutierrez removed the two cylinders from a pouch on his belt and unscrewed the caps at one end of each device. He handed one of the weapons to Azrael as Leda rose to a crouch. Once all three were ready Azrael mouthed a silent countdown, before tossing the two grenades over the side of the parapet. Even before the startled exclamations of "Grenade" could reach them from the floor below the Starfleeters rose and ran headlong down the corridor and deeper into the facility with Leda leading the way at a full sprint, leaving her two human companions in her dust as she tore down the passageway.

By the time Azrael and Gutierrez rounded the corner that led to the access hatchway, Leda was cautiously leaning against the adjacent wall next to a waist-high opening that was only just large enough to allow the landing party entry one at a time. Leda turned her head towards the two men, keeping her phaser pointed down the corridor and gave them an expression that clearly read 'what kept you?' the two men took up crouching positions either side of her, keeping their rifles raised and pointed towards the scores of Templar that roamed the facility.

"I popped the seal. You know, for a facility this secure, their service conduits are pretty vulnerable," she remarked as she kept a wary eye on the approaching corridor. "We have a window before the sensor node registers the intrusion. It's not large, but we'll be long gone before it resets."

Azrael nodded. "Inside," he ordered before he slung his phaser rifle over his shoulder and gestured for the hatch.

Gutierrez turned back towards Leda, "After you ma'am, we'll cover you." he offered and immediately received an incredulous look from the green-skinned officer.

"I don't think you quite grasp what you've suggested, Petty Officer," she replied before placing a hand on her bare thigh. "Skirt remember."

Before Gutierrez could say anything Azrael glanced over his shoulder. "Petty Officer, get in the damn hole." Gutierrez slung his own rifle and took hold of the upper side of the hatch and pulled himself inside.

The captain stood and approached Leda, who gave him a coy smile and a raised eyebrow.

"Excellent work, Ensign, your skills continue to amaze me."

Leda's smile widened to a full grin and she gave the captain a mock curtsy. "Why thank you, captain."

He pointed towards her chest, giving her a knowing smile. "You're badge is crooked."

She returned his smile and adjusted the black and silver service badge on her short-sleeved tunic. "I must have overlooked that."

A bolt of supercharged disruptor fire impacted with the opposite wall, sending a spray of sparks down across the corridor. All ceremony gone from their interaction, Leda clambered into the access hatch as Azrael fired off staccato of phaser shots towards the source of the fire before diving in behind her, motioning for the two remaining members of his landing party to continue crawling on all fours deeper into the facility. Leda allowed Azrael to awkwardly crawl passed her and with the heel of her boot, struck a toggle jutting from the interior of the hatchway, causing the doorway behind them to slam shut with a heavy thud.

Gutierrez withdrew an emergency beacon and activated it, the white light cast harsh shadows as it bounced off insulation cables and EPS transfer conduits. They continued in a straight

line down the narrow passageway, barely wide enough to allow them to crawl on all fours. After what felt like an hour Gutierrez finally emerged into a well-lit, larger transit junction, connecting a number of different service corridors and an access hatch in both the ceiling and floor. It was at this point that they realised that Servitors, small two-foot-tall robotic maintenance and supply robots watched them from recessed alcoves. Leda brushed a Servitor with the toe of her boot, it let out an electronic warble and continued on its way, disappearing into a conduit near their feet.

Azrael regarded the remains of his landing party as they leant between conduits and tried to keep out of the way of the tiny robots as they caught their breath. “We need to put as much distance between us and that access hatchway. I’m not confident that the Templars won’t try to flush us out, or that these things won’t stay quiet. Gutierrez, you’re on point, Leda, check the blueprints, try and find us a place to hide out until the *Kokoda* arrives.”

They both nodded and started policing the area, Leda pulled out her tricorder, and Gutierrez withdrew his rifle. After several minutes of terrifying silence, Leda pointed to an access corridor below them and nodded. “Our best option will be to head deeper into the facility, there isn’t anything suitable on the surface that we can use to avoid capture.”

Azrael gave a curt nod before taking a hold of a closed access hatch and pried it open, “Then let’s move out, we’ll take turns resting once we reach the centre.” The pair nodded before following him.

2.

Commander Lenore Abernathy, the veteran mistress of the USS *Kokoda* had to resist the urge to query her helm officer, Ensign Bannon on their ETA to the *Animus*' reported location for the third time this past hour, she could clearly see the mission clock count down the closer they got to their destination. Instead, she sat in silence, hoping that the aura of confidence that she liked to project when on the bridge overshadowed the growing concern that she felt about what was happening at their destination as her bridge crew continued their duties in keeping the *Kokoda* operational as its twenty-year-old engines were taxed to maximum. While the *Animus*' executive officer had been disturbingly cagey when it came to explaining just what had happened to warrant their mayday call, he had requested that the *Kokoda* make the best speed to render that assistance.

Lenore had been in Starfleet long enough to know that space was a dangerous domain, filled with wonders both miraculous and profane and that there were still places in the galaxy that a starship could simply disappear. While it was not something that Starfleet actively promoted in the Academy brochure, it was an inherent risk all of its members agreed to whenever they donned the uniform.

Pressing the intercom button on the armrest of her command chair, she keyed a channel to the shuttle bay. "Commander Krieger, what is your status?" she asked as she saw the mission timer tick down below the hour mark.

"We are good to go, ma'am. We're on track to depart as soon as we are within range," Krieger replied. Behind him the cacophony of an operational shuttle bay made an effort to drown out his words.

Lenore smiled, she knew that her first officer-cum-navigator was competent so she felt a little foolish to ask him if

his landing party was ready. However, she also had to say something to shift this feeling of unease.

“Excellent news, Commander, we are forty-five minutes out so prep your team. Good luck down there, bridge out. Ensign Bannon, prepare to take us out of warp on my mark. I want us to cut the line as close as we can,” she ordered, locking her command chair in place facing forward.

“Aye ma’am,” Bannon replied as he placed a hand on the warp speed control yoke.

“Engineering, how are we doing down there?” Lenora asked, gazing out at the streaking starscape that passed before the bridge's front viewscreen.

“We are pushing redlines, Captain. Thankfully, you gave us a heads up this time. You have to remember, Captain, this old girl is past her prime. She's not the sprinter she once was,” reported the *Kokoda's* exasperated Chief Engineer.

Lenore placed a loving hand on the scuffed armrest of her command chair. “I'll take that under advisement, Mister Kelly, but I suspect there is still a lot of fight in her, especially with you and your team taking such loving care of her.”

There was a brief pause before Engineer Kelly replied, “You always know the right thing to say, Captain. She'll get us there, but I'll need to take some of the safety interlocks offline when we drop out of warp to purge the buffers.”

“Understood, Engineering. Hopefully, we can give you that time when we arrive. Helm, approach time?”

Bannon looked over to the mission clock, his hand tensely holding the control yolk in the forward position. “Ten seconds, ma’am. We are crossing the terminus of the Tressis System.”

Lenore took a breath and released it on a slow count of ten, looking straight at the viewscreen, she nodded. “Take us out of warp. Shuttle bay, prepare to launch the landing party.”

In an instant, the wide viewscreen that took up the entirety of the front of the *Kokoda's* bridge reverted to the dark

void of real space. In front of the ship, slightly off to port, in orbit of a brown world was a starship, its twin nacelles sitting beneath its elongated saucer in a design reminiscent of the venerable Walker Class, but roughly one-third the size. Lenore immediately presumed that this starship was the *Animus*.

From the intercom speaker on her armrest, she heard the shuttle bay deck officer report. "Landing party is away! The launch was successful. Repressurising the hold."

The Captain smiled and turned to her communications officer at a station to her left. "Mister Landry, send a message to the *Milne Bay*. Wish them luck, and then open a channel to the *Animus*. I hope their first officer is more communicative now that we have arrived."

There was a brief pause before a tall, athletic-looking man with a slew of short cut brown hair appeared on the viewscreen. Lenore was immediately drawn to the black and silver service badge with three silver pips inlaid on this man's blue and gold tunic. She had to force herself from recoiling at the realisation that the sharp-pointed tips at the base of the badge was very different from the stylised delta of the standard Starfleet service badge.

"I am Commander Sharpe. Thank you, Commander Abernathy, for your prompt arrival. We have also detected the launch of your shuttle, and while we regrettably cannot disclose what has transpired on the planet, we do thank your assistance in this matter."

Lenore rose from her command chair and approached the hologram that stood at the front of her bridge. "Always to help out another member of the fleet, Commander. Though I must ask, what is Office of Naval Intelligence doing this far out in the frontier?"

Commander Sharpe almost appeared to laugh, though Lenore suspected that that chiselled face had not found anything humorous in decades. "Come now Commander, do you honestly think that even if that wasn't classified, I'd be in a position to tell

you? Please remain on station, and refrain from scanning either the *Animus* or the planet's surface as there is an ONI operation currently in progress down on there." The commander turned away, only to look back over his shoulder. "I'm certain that you understand Commander."

Before Lenore could respond the commander vanished from her bridge in a dissolution of pixels. She looked around her bridge, at the equal parts confused and concerned expressions of her senior bridge crew and sighed. "My Academy instructor always warned me about getting involved in the affairs of ONI, but those badges were not standard issue. There is something else going on here," she remarked before returning to her command chair. "Everyone keep their eyes peeled, I don't want to be kept unawares when this inevitably hits the fan."

The *Kokoda's* sleek shuttle, the *Milne Bay*, streaked through the upper atmosphere of Tressis Three, its trajectory buffeted by the heat dissipation of re-entry. Jacinta looked over to Reena who sat in the jump seat opposite hers in the middle of the shuttle's rear section as Commander Krieger slipped his arms out of his harness and approached the front of the small craft. While Jacinta had been an infrequent participant in landing parties since joining the crew of the *Kokoda*, she couldn't help but feel a rush of excitement and dread as she waited for the shuttle to reach the surface. The young Trill officer closed her eyes. Since joining Starfleet she had been able to avoid transporters and to bypass mandatory physicals to hide her little secret: that she was one of only a handful of Trill who was capable of carrying one of the long-lived symbionts. Even sharing a room with Reena, while a challenge, had been nothing more than a slight inconvenience, she had banked on the relative unknowns of the Trill species to hide the Tryne symbiont, only changing in the refresher, or citing cultural or

non-existent religious reasons for her sometimes obscure actions or recollections all for the great secret of her very species to be jeopardised because she had developed a fondness of Takarian Electro-synth music. In response to her reflection, the symbiont warmed slightly, as their shared memories reminded her of the importance of keeping the secret.

Jacinta opened her eyes and her gaze immediately locked on Reena's who was staring at her with a confused expression. "What?" Jacinta asked, finally remembering her voice.

"You're smiling, you okay?" Reena replied, as she blindly felt around her black equipment vest, checking that pouches and flaps were properly secured as the shuttle shook slightly as gravimetric pressures occasionally overpowered the shuttle's inertial dampeners.

Jacinta raised a hand and pressed the tips of her fingers against her cheek to confirm that she was, in fact, smiling. "It's nothing, just remembering something."

The armoury officer raised an eyebrow, "Well don't forget you and I are going to have a talk when we get back to the *Kokoda*," she replied as Commander Krieger returned to the crew compartment.

"Okay listen up," he said. "We've made contact with the landing party; they are holed up near the environmental control facility, but as the only viable landing field is right next to their own shuttle, we are going to have to make our way to them on foot. We are wheels down in five so make final checks. T'Fryr, Gordon, you're on point. No doubt whoever attacked the *Animus*' landing party has picked up our arrival so expect an unfriendly welcoming committee."

The two security officers, the tall blue-skinned Andorian and the ruddy-faced, dark-skinned Human both nodded and slipped out of their harnesses and moved to the rear of the shuttle. Krieger then turned to Jacinta. "They have also given us a frequency to track their location. Key your tricorder to the beta-

three encryption matrix and you should pick up their transponder.”

Jacinta removed her tricorder from her own equipment vest and entered in the correct sequence. In response, a faint blip appeared on the device's screen with a strength indicator below it. “I have them, sir. It's faint, but I have locked onto their transponder. We'll be able to track the signal strength to their location.”

Krieger smiled tightly as he drew his hand phaser from its holster on his belt. “Glad to hear that, Lieutenant.”

“Touch down in five,” called the pilot from the front of the shuttle. “Get in position.”

Without another word the remaining four members of the landing party slipped off their restraints and took up positions at the rear of the shuttle, with Reena and the four security officers in front, leaving Krieger and Jacinta in the rear. With a silent thud the shuttle touched down, T'Fryr and Gordon at once brought their rifles to their shoulders, shared a silent word before Gordon struck the door release with the ball of his fist. The rear hatch fell to the ground with the sound of releasing bolts and a heavy clash and the two officers ran down the ramp and out into the courtyard. Without waiting for invitation, Reena and the two remaining officers did the same, fanning out into the expanse as T'Fryr and Gordon proceeded towards two imposing looking heavy metal doorways that led into the facility. Krieger and Jacinta followed, with the Trill woman holding her own phaser in one hand and her tricorder in the other. For a second the seven-member landing party looked around the courtyard with a feeling of anxious trepidation, as they scanned the periphery for - nothing.

As the security officers patrolled around the courtyard, moving between the two shuttles as they kept an eye out for ambushes, Jacinta returned her phaser to its holster and brought up the tracking software on her tricorder trying to

familiarise herself with their surroundings, to see which corridor led them to the downed party.

“Lieutenant Tryne, your presence please,” Krieger ordered with a solemn tone from the front of the *Animus*’ shuttle. Pocketing her tricorder, Jacinta turned on a boot and headed towards him, the crunch of her approach on the loose crushed stone courtyard the only sound she heard as she rounded the curved front of the shuttle, and stopped the instant she saw the humanoid body slumped against the landing skid of the *Animus*’ shuttle. She unslung the field pack she was wearing and was about to remove the medical kit she was carrying when she was caught off guard by something as their black equipment vest was open and the blue uniform underneath was dark with blood.

Jacinta took a breath and crouched beside the wounded officer, and using her preference for a hands-on approach to medicine, placed two fingers at the side of the officer’s neck, futilely searching for a pulse before nodding in confirmation to her own initial prediction. “Dead, sir,” she reported before drawing her tricorder to record the incident.

Krieger swore in his native German before running a hand over his face, “Collect his service badge. There had to be a reason why the *Animus*’ landing party didn’t properly secure their dead officer,” he commented as Petty Officer Henderson crouched beside Jacinta as they took the officer by the shoulders and shifted the dead officer so that they were lying flat on the flagstones. Reaching down, the Trill medical science officer plucked the officer’s service badge from the front of their equipment vest and stood, clutching the small device as the Petty Officer prepared the body for stowage aboard the *Milne Bay*. Uncurling her fingers from around the device, she presented it to Commander Krieger, and stopped, her eyes wide as instead of a standard arrowhead styled service badge in either gold, bronze or silver, this badge was broader with two winged protrusions and sharp talon-like points at the base of its black and silver coloured surface.

“Commander? I’ve never seen this style of badge before, what branch was he from?” Jacinta asked as she handed the device to Krieger who turned it over repeatedly in the palm of his hand, noting that the badge was bereft of any identifying markings on its reverse side.

“Lieutenant, this is a variant of the badge used by those of the Office of Naval Intelligence. The fact that you have never encountered a black badge before now should speak volumes to your good fortune, but sadly, Lieutenant, everyone eventually meets the black badges. To have one of these on the surface tells me that the *Animus*’ original mission here was not simply reconnaissance.”

Krieger looked around to see the other members of his landing party had abandoned their patrols and had crowded around him. He acknowledged each in turn. “There is something very wrong about this mission, keep your eyes peeled and weapons ready, I fear we have stumbled onto something we will probably be denying later on.”

The landing party nodded, the rustle of equipment vests the only auditory acknowledgement to his instructions as Krieger placed the dead officer’s badge into a pouch on his belt. “Lieutenant Tryne, which way?”

Jacinta withdrew her tricorder once more and panned the device in a half-circle in front of her before she scrutinised the readings. “That way, sir.”

Krieger nodded to Reena who turned to the security detail. “Henderson, Gordon, you’re on point. T’Fryr and Xern you’re on flank guard. Let’s do this by the numbers. We’ve stumbled onto an Intel op, let’s not try and overstay our welcome,” she ordered to a collective ‘yes ma’am’ from the security detail as they formed up around Krieger and Jacinta.

With eyes continuing to search their surroundings, Jacinta stepped off and headed towards the northernmost doorway with the landing party moving around her. She approached the control panel and immediately noticed the

Starfleet issue 'Skeleton Key' security override device hardwired into the door's control mechanism. Smiling at their fortune, she crouched before the device and frowned, the device's preloaded invasion software was already activated, but it was actively locking the door next to it. She looked over to Krieger, looking for direction who simply nodded. Jacinta shrugged and deactivated the preloaded invasion software. The status display on the Skeleton Key flashed from amber to red, then green as the door's physical security bolts retracted. Gordon pressed a shoulder against the heavy metal door, taking its weight and pushed against it, which to his surprise slid cleanly and quickly across the flagstones, he lost his hold of the door, and it slammed against the stone wall behind it.

Cursing, Petty Officer Gordon unslung his rifle and gave Jacinta a sheepish look. Jacinta shook her head, trying to hide the grin that crept onto her face while still trying to maintain the appropriate officer level of disapproval. Thankfully the only light within the corridor appeared to be from ancient-looking braziers with flickering light sources that served to elongate shadows, giving the facility and appearance that would not have been out of place on medieval Earth.

"Move out," Krieger ordered as Henderson and T'Fry stepped through the doorway, rifles at their shoulders and quickly moved down the corridor. They scanned the passageway, checking alcoves and hatchways, in search for any sign of the *Animus* landing party or their mysterious attackers. They paused at an intersection, crouching at the corners as the landing party fell in behind them. Jacinta studied her tricorder, panned it along each of the three corridors in front of them and checked the frequency strength after each pass. She did the mental calculations and pointed to the corridor to her left.

"That one, then down two levels," she reported and returned her tricorder back to her vest. Krieger stood beside her as the security detail rose from their crouched positions, taking up flank positions around the three officers.

“I don't like this, there are too many unknowns here. Who are these people that attacked the *Animus* landing party? And where are they? Will they offer us the same treatment or will they be open to talking with us to secure the release of the others?”

Krieger's response came from a bolt of green disruptor fire striking the stone archway above him from the opposite corridor that sent the entire landing party scattering towards the presumed safety of stone archways. Immediately eliciting calls of contact as more bolts of disruptor fire zeroed in on the landing party from the protection of the shadows.

“This is not an ideal location,” Reena called over the din and with a series of quick hand gestures, she reorganised the detail into a more defensive position. “Commander, follow the signal, we'll cover you. Xern, T'Fryr, go with them,” she ordered as she squeezed off a succession of quick phaser pulses towards the opposite wall, sending sparks as electrical conduits were hit with the covering fire.

Krieger paused only for an instant before turning to Jacinta. “Lieutenant, stay on my hip. Blackford, as soon as we are clear, I want you to disengage and make back to the shuttle; I suspect we may need the air support.”

Jacinta didn't get to hear Reena's reply as Krieger grabbed her by the forearm and dragged her behind her, she stole a glance over her shoulder towards Reena who smiled back at her, before the three remaining security officers intensified their fire down the corridor, as the Tellarite Chief Petty Officer Dvorter glov Xern led the now split landing party deeper into the facility at a dead run. Turning her attention back to the task at hand, Jacinta forced herself to push the dread she felt at the knowledge that that may have been the last time she saw her friend and started running down the corridor.

The doors to the Operations Centre opened to admit an imposing-looking man in an ornately tailored outfit styled in a cut popular in the previous century. Spaced evenly around him, along the exterior walls of the room were tall, armoured figures manning consoles as a low warble of alert klaxons served to remind him that the installation, *his* installation was under attack.

Approaching the centre of the room, he regarded those around him, each working silently to achieve their combined objective. "Report Commander Mather."

The lone figure standing on a large rectangular podium in a ring of consoles turned to face the new arrival. While he was surrounded by computer terminals, he did not appear to be interacting with them. "Lord Davenport, the situation has developed since your last arrival. A second Starfleet vessel has appeared on a vector opposite the first vessel and has landed a shore party. At present we are trying to parse their transponder codes. We have been able to track their shore party, by appearances, they have split off into two separate groups since our patrol was sent to intercept them. One group is heading deeper into the facility, while the other appears to be returning to their landing craft. At present we are still unable to determine the overall status of the first landing party, though we have confirmed that they have not been taken by our forces."

Lord Tiberius Davenport regarded the Commander with a dispassionate stare while he flicked some collected dust from the lapel of his jacket. "I presume that you have informed the Committee of your failure."

The commander appeared to swallow before nodding, Davenport could tell that before he spoke that the news he had was going to be bad.

"We appraised the Committee of the arrival of the first Starfleet vessel, and they reported that they had dispatched a suitable counter to deal with it." The commander paused, choosing his words very carefully. "Regrettably, sir, when we informed the Committee of the arrival of the second Starfleet

vessel, we were informed that the Novos Foundation does not have the assets available in the sector capable of dealing with both vessels with the degree of success that would prevent either from departing to inform their Command of our activities here.”

Davenport remained unreceptive. “And naturally they recalled the first vessel.”

Mather nodded reluctantly. “That is correct, sir. The Committee was concerned about revealing the strength of our assets in the region with the possibility of one or both vessels escaping. They have informed us that a sanitation team is on standby should we cease transmitting. Regrettably, it appears we are alone in this venture.”

Davenport clenched his hands to fists, before forcing himself to breathe and open his hands, it would do him no favours to become violent at this juncture. “The arrival of this second vessel is certainly an unexpected obstacle in our plans, it is not common for Starfleet vessels to be so well supported. This is also complicated by the fact that you and your ilk seem physically incapable of locating the remains of a decimated landing party who have been running around unchecked in my installation for four hours. No doubt this second vessel has been sent to retrieve them.”

He turned and surveyed the highly dedicated soldiers that he had at his command, there were few chances that he could truly flex his military muscles. “Track the new landing party, I want them detained and interrogated. As for the first party.” He paused and took a step towards Commander Mather. “Deploy our newest acquisitions to deal with them.”

Mather nodded and carried out his lord and master’s orders as Davenport approached another mute soldier manning a console to his left. “Have all of our research and experiments loaded onto my personal vessel. We cannot wait for further guidance from the Committee, we must act on our own. It will

only be a matter of time before our interlopers breach the lower levels if they have not already.”

“Understood, sir,” the soldier's electronic vocoder replied as they returned to their task.

A heavy thudding behind Davenport caused him to turn to face the three newcomers that entered the Operations Centre. He noted their blue uniforms, replete with bronze panelling as they robotically came to attention at the opposite end of the room.

He regarded the three, two humans and an abnormally pale, blue-skinned Andorian shen, transparent tubing sticking out from their bloodstained tunics at their neck and waists, pumping brackish red (blue in the case of the Andorian) liquid around obscure bulges set at the joints of their arms and legs. They were gaunt, with pallid, vacant expressions from sunken eyes and drooping faces. They barely seemed to even register Davenport standing in front of them.

The Lord regarded them individually with morbid curiosity, though overall, he didn't appear completely satisfied. “Not perfect, but for four hours work, it'll do.” He turned to see each of the soldiers under his command, each with the same tubing and joint actuators shielded by reinforced power armour and faces obscured by helmets.

Returning to his original position in front of the new trio, he clasped his hands behind his back. “Go, hunt down your former colleagues, and bring me your superior officers.”

They struggled to come to a barely passable imitation of attention before they turned and trudged out of the room.

3.

Commander Krieger led what remained of his landing party down flagstone covered corridors, the heavy slapping of boots echoed through the ancient-looking structure. Jacinta remained on his hip, one hand tightly held her phaser while the other held the strap of her tricorder keeping the device at just below eye level as she continued to track the *Animus*' landing party by way of their encrypted transponder.

"They are on the move, slowly, but they are two levels below us, heading east," she reported leading the three other members of her team down nondescript corridor after nondescript corridor.

"How do we get down?" asked the porcine Xern as the group continued moving at a fast jog.

Jacinta scrutinised her tricorder, at the schematic that was slowly forming as the device's tiny sensor tried to determine its own location within the facility, filling in the blank spaces between them and their target. "There appears to be a machinist's lab fifty meters from our location with a service ladder to the lower levels."

Krieger nodded as they rounded the corner, headed in the direction Jacinta had indicated and immediately came across a quad of tall figures, their identities obscured by a set of ornately patterned body armour and full-face helmets. Both groups responded almost simultaneously, with the Starfleeters scattering for cover as the quad raised their left forearms, revealing a menacing-looking energy weapon where the hand should reside. They fired into the void left by the landing party, deadly green bolts of disruptor fire splashed against flagstones and walls. The landing party responded with amber pulses of fire from their phasers, which, to their horror, appeared to simply wash over the quads body armour leaving them unfazed.

"Their armour appears to have energy-absorbing properties," Jacinta reported, checking the readouts from her tricorder as the landing party continued to pour fire into their steadily approaching assailants.

"Switch to maximum stun," Krieger ordered as he manipulated the power control on the side of his phaser rifle. Taking aim with the weapon, he gingerly pulled back on the trigger, taking full advantage on the rifles increased power reserves, loosing a piercing beam of crimson energy at his closest opponent. The beam struck home, hitting square in the chest. The blast staggered their attacker, the aftereffect crackled like lightning across their chest plate, however, it didn't appear to slow them down as they were soon able to recover. Three more beams struck their assailants to near-identical effect.

"Keep firing," Krieger yelled as he scanned their surroundings, unwilling to give the order to shift their phasers from stun to the more devastating 'kill' setting. He looked for a way out, as the first of the quad broke through their defence and grabbed Jacinta by the left bicep.

The Trill officer winced as she felt something scrape her through her uniform, holding her phaser sideways, she struck upwards with it, hitting her attacker underneath the chin towards a bulge in their neck. This sudden move sent them tumbling backwards, momentarily loosening their grip on her arm, allowing Jacinta to wrest her arm free and get back to the safety of the rest of the landing party.

Her tricorder beeped a warning and she stole a glance at its small illuminated screen, the tiny device's rudimentary pathfinding software had collected enough sensor data to find an alternative route to the *Animus'* landing party. Stepping away from her attackers, she called: "I've found another way."

Krieger nodded, stood and signalled the others. "Move out, fall in behind Lieutenant Tryne."

Turning on a boot heel, Jacinta took off at a steady jog, zigzagging to avoid disruptor fire as she led the team towards a

closed bulkhead door a moderate distance from their encounter. As she moved, she became increasingly aware of the tingling feeling she had in her bicep. Dismissing the sensation as simply a pulled muscle, she crouched as low as her frame would allow next to the doors automated control surface, prying its outer case off, she was surprised to see a rather modern-looking duotronic computer system. Finding an appropriate port amongst the sea of cables, she withdrew a cable from the base of her tricorder and orientating it to the port, connected her machine to the door.

The remaining members of the landing party crowded around her, providing her cover with their very bodies as she worked.

“Report, Lieutenant,” Krieger ordered over his shoulder as the Commander kept a wary eye on the corridor that they had come through, and for their mysterious attackers. They had managed to evade them, but everyone in the party knew that that would only be temporary.

“I’m trying sir, this thing wasn’t exactly designed for what I’m trying to do with it,” she replied through gritted teeth as she tried to use the tricorders intuitive translation matrix to force the door controls to respond to her queries. She had been surprised at how similar this facility’s computer systems were to Federation standard, and how her tricorder only had to account for the language set.

She continued to toggle the display on her tricorder, as it completed simple handshake protocols with this apparent alien system. This revelation surprised her, logging this piece of information for future study she began the slow task of turning the security icons on the face of her tricorder from red to green.

The doors beside her hissed before parting. “There, open.”

T’Fryr and Xern stepped forward took hold of each side of the door and muscled them open, to the protestations of the door’s own servos. Once the gap was wide enough, Jacinta

unhooked her tricorder and slipped through the gap to get to work, prying the access panel off the controls on the reverse side. She was followed promptly by Krieger who stood opposite T'Fryr and held the door open for the Andorian to slip inside, taking up a position to keep the door open for Xern, whose porcine form squeezed between the rapidly closing doors. Both Krieger and T'Fryr let go of the doors, and they quickly slammed shut once more. Jacinta worked the controls and the doors hissed before unseen bolts engaged, securing the doors in place.

Disconnecting her tricorder, and returning its small toolkit to a compartment in the base, Jacinta drew her phaser and fired at the bundles of circuitry, slagging control boards and frying wires, rendering the door inoperative.

"I hope we don't have to come back through this way," T'Fryr remarked sardonically as Krieger turned to Jacinta.

The Trill officer gestured to a gaping void in the centre of the machine shop's work area. "There is a service ladder inside the hole, it'll be two levels down before it ends in what appears to be a storeroom."

Krieger gave her a grim smile. "Very good, Lieutenant. Everyone into the hole," he ordered as he withdrew his communicator from a pouch in his vest. "Krieger to *Kokoda*."

The speaker emitted an ear-splitting squawk before the clearly identifiable voice of Commander Abernathy came through. "We can barely hear you, Commander."

Krieger gave his landing party a lopsided grin as they made their way down into the shaft. "Likewise, ma'am. We've come under attack by an unknown assailant, presumably the same attackers that ambushed the *Animus* team. We've been forced to split up with half the party with me, the other half under the command of Lieutenant Blackford. I ordered her to take her team back to the shuttles. As of yet, we have not been in a position to re-establish contact since disengaging."

There was a noticeable pause before Abernathy replied. "They have also not made contact with us, and we are still reporting the *Milne Bay* on the surface."

Jacinta felt her heart sink as she heard the exchange between the *Kokoda's* Command Officers as she continued to climb down the access ladder to the lower decks. She had few people in Starfleet that she considered friends, and her human doppelganger was at the very top of that small list. She hoped that the armoury officer was safe as she continued to climb.

"Say, Lieutenant," Xern asked from his position on the ladder above Jacinta and below Krieger. "Out of curiosity, what do you think this shaft is used for?"

The Trill smiled, appreciative of the unintended distraction as she leaned away from the ladder to see past Xern and Krieger. The shaft continued for several levels above them before it was swallowed up by the void of its own creation. She had also secretly wondered what the purpose of this anachronistic device with its segmented protrusions along the shaft's inner walls were in what she presumed to be an ancient structure, though, unlike the Tellarite security officer, Jacinta had the luxury of a tricorder that was constantly scanning their surroundings.

"If I had to guess, by appearance, I would say this is a rudimentary anti-gravity elevator, used to transport supplies down from the surface to the warehouse pens below," she replied as T'Fryr stepped off the ladder and onto a service crossbeam that sat between two separate ladders. He stepped out of the way as Jacinta quickly followed, warily rubbing her left bicep.

"Problem, Lieutenant?" the harsh timbre of the Andorian's voice seemed to be amplified by their claustrophobic surrounds.

Jacinta frowned as she rotated her left arm slowly, trying to determine the extent of her injury. "I think I've pulled a muscle when that thing grabbed me, but I should be fine," she replied

looking over the lip of the crossbeam at the void beneath them, unlike the space above, she could faintly see the outline of storage crates and cargo dollies on the deck beneath them.

The Andorian officer regarded her with a concerned eye, his antennas shifting ever so slightly as he tried to read the situation before he swung over the side of the crossbeam and took hold of the ladder attached to it, Jacinta looked over to Xern who had joined her on the crossbeam, smiled then followed T'Fryr.

Leda looked down at her tricorder, the small blue blip belonging to a tricorder that had been actively tracking them inch ever closer as she maintained her position nestled between coolant pipes in a makeshift hammock suspended above the floor in the facility's maintenance section. She had managed to tap into the installation's security subsystems, and while masking the presence of her own landing party, succeeded in diverting a lot of the Novos Foundation's patrols away from the *Kokoda's*.

She looked around her surroundings, to the clearly post-industrial era machinery that was littered around them, and the black, polished deck panelling that would have been welcome aboard any modern Starfleet ship of the line or top tier research facility.

"I tell ya, this citadel was not made by the Novos Foundation. There is a clear two hundred year difference between the surface layer and the levels we are standing on," she exclaimed as she deftly disconnected her tricorder from the sea of cables that ran around her.

"Ensign, while you were sating your archaeological cravings, were you able to break into the Foundation's encrypted files?" Azrael called as Leda swung her legs over the side of her hammock. Locking her knees around a narrow, vertical pipe,

and with the deft grace of a gymnast, she slid off the cables and made her way down the pipe to the floor.

Making a show of the landing, Leda turned to the remains of her landing party. "When you get to live as long as I do, you pick up odd interests." She winked at the captain before she withdrew her tricorder that she had tucked into the waistband of her skirt. She checked her stocking-clad legs as she brought up the required data and gave her captain a mischievous grin. "Didn't even get a run."

The Captain gave her an impressed smile before he folded his arms over his chest. "Well?"

Leda pursed her lips before she read off the device's small screen. "I did some digging, it appears that the Foundation has isolated their research onto physical media, there is no trace of it on their main computer." She gestured to the bundles of cables connected to the facility's data centre on the level above them. "I was, however, able to narrow down the location to the *Kokoda's* landing party, they are a deck above us, twelve compartments west."

Azrael smiled appreciatively before looking over to Gutierrez who was keeping a watch on the hatchway leading out into a utility corridor, his attention so focused that he was unaware of the whole situation. '*His loss*' Azrael thought as the green-skinned Ensign straightened her regulation-short service uniform that had become dishevelled in her descent.

"Shall we?" he asked as Leda retrieved her discarded equipment vest and phaser from a pile of cables on the floor, she slipped the vest over her shoulders before nodding. The pair of officers rejoined Gutierrez at the door, and with a pat on the back, Leda stepped passed the Petty Officer and headed into the corridor.

"If my calculations are correct, they should be emerging from a lift shaft into a warehouse on this level. The issue is, there are forty-two warehouses on this level," Leda reported as

she led the landing party down unmarked corridors, following her own blue blip on her map of the facility.

At that point, Azrael's communicator chirruped. Removing the device, the Captain flipped open its protective grill with a flick of his wrist. "Go ahead."

"Captain, we've detected burst transmission from the facility, while they are encrypted, they were targeted towards known Novos assets. Be warned, sir, they could be trying to shift their research off-world." The metallic sounding voice while distorted, clearly belonged to Commander Sharpe.

Azrael's expression became grim. "Understood, Commander. Keep us apprised. If you detect any further movement out there, you have full rights to use your discretion."

"Understood, sir. *Animus* out."

Closing his communicator, Azrael returned it to a pouch in his vest, Gutierrez tightened the grip on his phaser rifle, and Leda properly secured her own vest. "Well we know what is at stake now people. Our priorities are in this order: intercept the *Kokoda* landing party and secure or destroy any intelligence in this facility's secured sections. All other concerns are secondary."

The two remaining members of his party nodded grimly before Leda took point once more, headed for where she assumed the other landing party would emerge at a brisk jog.

Jacinta slipped through the tight gap created by the disengaged warehouse door that was being pried open by Krieger and Xern, depositing her onto another bare corridor, this one, unlike the others they had seen in the facility, was a sterile black panelled covering, not the aged flagstones of the surface.

Taking a moment to assess her surroundings, she once again set to work to override counter-incursion protocols from resealing the door and sounding an alarm. As she worked, the

rest of the landing party made their way through the gap and the doors slammed shut once more.

Standing, she brushed dust off of her blue trousers and turned towards the rest of the party. "The *Animus* party is down that corridor," she reported as she could faintly hear a heavy thudding approach them. '*Here we go again,*' she thought as Krieger started down the corridor she had indicated, the rest of the landing party following suit, their expressions failed to hide the mix of grim concern and exhaustion that they all felt.

Jacinta fell into step between Xern and T'Fryr as they headed off as a brisk walk, with T'Fryr regularly turning backwards, keeping an eye on the path they had come for their approaching assailants. Checking over her own shoulder, she gingerly squeezed her bicep as the pain appeared to spread outward from the initial scrape to encompass her entire bicep from shoulder to elbow.

T'Fryr saw her and sped up to walk beside her. "It wasn't just a muscle twinge was it ma'am?" he asked.

She frowned. "I'm beginning to think. When we get a chance, I'll have a proper look at it."

The Andorian regarded her suspiciously before falling back to his 'Tail-End Charlie' position. Jacinta checked her tricorder and reconfirmed their course, ever reminded of the heavy thudding that seemed to reverberate from the metal deck plates and tried to push the pain she felt from her mind, in response the symbiont tried to help her by releasing endorphins, which only served to ebb the feeling.

"They should be approximately two hundred metres ahead of us," she reported.

"Contact!" T'Fryr called before drawing his rifle to his shoulder.

Behind them, at a four-way intersection, a pair of quads approached the warehouse they had emerged from. It took only a moment for the eight figures to register their presence at the

other end of the corridor and the bolts of disruptor fire to fill the space between them.

The landing party broke into a run, with T'Fryr and Xern regularly turning back to trade fire with their attackers.

"We need to keep moving," Jacinta called, unwilling to look back for fear of losing speed as she continued to run.

"How much further?" Krieger replied as they approached another intersection.

Jacinta allowed herself a moment to check her tricorder's display as she tightly clutched it in her hand. "Their reading has gone intermittent. I'm not certain, but I think they are on the move."

As if to answer Krieger's question, a trio of blue-uniformed Starfleet officers came charging around the corner ahead of them, their weapons at the ready. The two human men who formed the majority reached the *Kokoda's* landing party first and moved past Jacinta and Krieger to take up firing positions beside T'Fryr and Xern. Bolts of dark red energy erupted from heavily modified phaser rifles, striking their armoured attackers, leaving sparks and electrical arcing to spread out from visible breaches to armour plates. The first quad started to stagger under the unrelenting fire but did not stop their advance.

The third member of the *Animus* landing party, an Orion woman with short, curly hair stopped in front of Krieger and Jacinta.

"Commander Krieger?" she asked. Krieger, nodded. "Ensign Leda, come with me, the Captain will join us as soon as he despatches your followers."

Before either of them could respond, Leda turned on a boot and started running back down the corridor.

Krieger shared a look with Jacinta and ducked instinctively as an errant bolt of disruptor fire struck the ceiling above them, showering the pair in sparks and insulation. Standing, he looked over to both his officers and the *Animus* members starting to take down their armoured attackers before

following after Leda. Jacinta, her mind still trying to process the suddenness of the *Animus*' arrival stood dumbfounded for a second before her brain registered what was going on around her.

"There is a skirt variant to the uniform?" she exclaimed in disbelief as she also started running.

Leda led the pair down the curved corridor for roughly a hundred meters before skidding to a halt, from this distance the sound of the firefight had devolved into a faint twang of weapons fire. She palmed a control to a nondescript door that slid aside and waved the two officers inside.

The space on the opposite side of the door was little more than a storage closet, with stacks of transfer cables lining the walls, and bundles of cables dangling in bunches from the ceiling. Even with the clutter, the room had the appearance of a Starfleet forward operations base, with small monitors and display screens hardwired into the bundles, showing sensor data in what appeared to be real-time.

Jacinta and Krieger both stood in a pillar of faint light in the centre of the room, as Leda resecured the door.

"Ensign, can you explain to us just what is going on down here?" Krieger asked as she stepped away from the door and approached them, a coy smile crept across dark coloured lips.

"Sadly, Commander, I don't have the liberty to explain. Only Captain Morganth has the clearance to disclose that information," she replied as she gave both officers the once over, winking at Jacinta as she returned to a display screen behind the two Starfleet officers. "All I can tell you is that we are going nowhere until we shut off that scattering field."

Jacinta was immediately aware of this Orion woman's black service badge, identical to the one worn by the dead Starfleet officer at the *Animus*' shuttle, save for the single silver pip on its burnished surface. While Leda had holstered her phaser, its presence in a quick-draw holster on the front of her

vest gave no illusions that she was not afraid to use it again. Jacinta forced herself to holster her own weapon. The comments made by Commander Krieger once they landed left her with a feeling of unease with all these black badges. In the two hours that the *Kokoda* landing party had been on the surface of this unnamed world, she had been fired upon, seen dead Starfleet personnel, and now interacted with more members of the Office of Naval Intelligence than she had ever even seen in her entire Starfleet career.

Krieger regarded the area that they now occupied, taking note of the number of deactivated displays, discarded and drained sarium krellide power packs sat alongside a pair of empty field ration wrappers. Giving the space the same eye he would if inspecting the quarters of one of the lower ranks, he returned his attention to Leda.

“You look like you’ve been down here for a while,” he commented.

Leda gave him a knowing smile. “Only as long as it took for the *Kokoda* to get here, but we have been on the planet for close to five hours by this point,” she replied leaning against a collection of cables that seemed to flow around her.

Krieger looked at her with suspicion. “How have you been able to survive down here for that long considering everything that we have seen?”

Before Leda could answer the question, there was a noticeable, repeated knocking pattern on the compartment door. An instant later, it opened, and T’Fryr and Xern entered, both with wary expressions and followed by the two remaining members of the *Animus* landing party. The last to enter turned to his colleague and handed him his phaser rifle.

“Gutierrez, check the rifles,” he ordered before looking over to Leda. “We have enough chipsets to upgrade the *Kokoda*’s rifles?”

Leda appeared to do a mental calculation. "I think we do, we'll have to cannibalise one of the type twos to do it, but we should be able to get all rifles up to spec."

The male officer's appearance was silhouetted by the low light, but it was obvious that he was smiling. "Excellent, Gutierrez get it done."

Krieger cleared his throat after Gutierrez acknowledged the order and set to work field stripping the allocated number of phaser rifles. The unnamed officer turned and regarded him before stepping into the pillar of light. Jacinta had to restrain herself from gasping at the four silver pips sitting on a black service badge that clearly adorned this officer's well fitted blue and gold uniform.

He looked through Krieger with piercing ice-blue eyes, and a faint scowl tried to force its way through a finely manicured beard. The apparent disdain appeared only for an instant before his expression warmed and he nodded towards the Commander.

"Commander Krieger, I am Captain Morganth. You've already met Ensign Leda, and that is Petty Officer Gutierrez," he remarked and gave the first officer a curt smile. "Welcome to Tressis Three."

Krieger clicked his boots together in a formal acknowledgement of the officer in front of him.

"Thank you, Captain." His expression became troubled as he appeared to perform a mental headcount, something that the captain clearly noticed. "Your message reported that you were involved in a survey mission when you were ambushed and you required extraction."

Morganth turned and approached one of the deactivated displays, sliding a thumb across its activation controls. It thrummed to life, showing what appeared to be detailed scans of the planet's surface and the installation they now took refuge in. "Commander that that was only a partial truth. Yes, we were on a survey mission of this system, but it was not for the Vulcan

Science Institute. While you will appreciate, Commander, of the delicate nature of our predicament that there is a great deal that I cannot and will not tell you about why we are on the surface. What I will tell you is that we require the assistance of your landing party in fulfilling our mission.”

Krieger stood square footed in front of the captain. “While I can understand your situation sir, and I am fully prepared to assist the Office of Naval Intelligence in this matter, I do require a little more information than your simple request for assistance.” He looked around the room and made a visible notice of looking at both members of the Captain’s team.

Morganth released a slow breath before he nodded. “I’ll buy that, Commander, you do have that right, but time is also not on our side, and my people have suffered to get us to this position.”

The Captain manipulated the display he activated to show a specific series of sensor scans.

“ONI has been on the trail of zealous extremists with some dangerously powerful technology for six months, and our investigations have brought us to this installation where we believe they are constructing a weapon of indeterminate origin that, judging from the chatter that we have intercepted, could cause devastation on a sector scale.” He looked over to Jacinta who had stopped her rumination when she realised that she was the focus of his attention.

“Lieutenant, I presume that you are a science officer?” he asked.

Jacinta came to attention at his inquiry, “Medical Science, sir, I am in the process of attaining my doctorate via distance study.”

Morganth nodded, smiling as if that had been the best news he had received. “Excellent, Lieutenant that will come in handy with the current phase of our mission.”

Leda stepped forward and handed the Trill officer a PADD. “This particular group of people believe that the chaotic

nature of sentient life is a plague on the galaxy that needs to be dealt with.” She gave a look that belied how ridiculous she believed it to be. “And as such they have a particular fondness for multi-species neurolytic agitators, which specifically target supposed ‘free will’ sections of the brain, leaving their victims mindless zombies.”

Jacinta took the PADD and studied the information it contained. “That is horrible. What is the Federation doing to stop this?”

Morganth looked up at her and frowned. “That is why we are here, Lieutenant. We are the Federation’s response.” Standing straight, he clasped his hands behind his back. “This is also where we require your assistance, Commander Krieger. At present we have two objectives and not enough personnel to accomplish them.” Leda took the cue and moved to the display and activated the relevant information.

“Our primary objective is to locate and destroy any materials used in the creation of these neurolytic compounds and capture any scientists, if possible. To that end, we also need to disable the scattering field around the planet that is preventing a security force from beaming down to deal with the installation.”

Krieger nodded slowly, weighing up each of the pieces of information he had received. “Understood, Captain. What would you have my team do?”

Morganth regarded the commander. “I’ll lead the team to go after the research data. There are protocols that we need to adhere to, to ensure that none of the toxins breach containment. To that end I want to bring the Lieutenant and one of your security officers with me - their expertise will be invaluable.”

Leda took another step, positioning herself within the centre of the briefing. “I have had sporadic access to this installation’s main computer and I have discovered that there is an underlying command frequency that is coordinating all of the guards who we’ve both had the displeasure of dealing with. If we disable the source of those protocols it should make our job

easier. Thankfully my spelunking through their data has suggested that it is located in the same vicinity as the scattering field. Knock both of those out and it shall make our job so much easier.”

Morganth placed a hand on the green-skinned woman’s shoulder then turned to Krieger. “We also have a task for the rest of your landing party.”

The Commander stiffened. “That may prove difficult, sir, as we have lost contact with the other half of our landing party.”

Morganth nodded. “We’ve noticed the dampening field throughout the facility as well, but we have been able to track their movements. They are currently holding station back at the shuttles. Like you, they have been trying to get back in contact with your ship, but the dispersion field that was placed over the landing zone when we arrived appears to be blocking all external communications. It also prevented us from activating our shuttle’s remote access chip.”

Krieger clasped his hands behind his back. “Then what would you have them do?” he asked as the remaining members of the landing party started prepping their gear.

“Firstly we need to get a message to them and we already have a plan in place to do that. After that, I want them to secure the installation’s launch bay - we need to prevent any trace of this weapon, if they have completed it, from leaving the planet,” Morganth replied, all emotion leaving his voice as Leda and Gutierrez started to break down their makeshift camp. “I wish we had more time for you to formulate a plan or to rest following all you’ve encountered reaching us, but before we linked up, Leda discovered that the occupants of this facility have moved all research data they have already compiled off of their main computer, which could mean they are preparing to get it off-world, and we cannot allow that to happen.”

The Commander, to his credit, stiffened slightly before nodding. “Understood, Captain, my team is ready when you are to move.”

Morganth gave him a curt nod of acknowledgement as Leda approached and handed Krieger one of the modified phaser rifles.

“Come on, Commander, we have dispersion fields to take out,” she remarked as is it was as simple as getting a coffee from a food synthesiser.

Krieger took a breath and nodded. “Okay, let’s go.”

4.

Reena Blackford sat on the upper hull of the *Milne Bay* resting her chin on an open palm, her boredom difficult to hide from the rest of her security detail as they milled around the two shuttles.

Since returning to their impromptu landing site, they discovered to their dismay that something was preventing the *Milne Bay's* tiny reactor from energising, and while they couldn't access the *Animus'* shuttle for some reason, Reena suspected the same was also the case for it. She looked down at her communicator, sitting open on the outer hull of the shuttle beside her, red notification lights informed her that the device had still been unsuccessful in establishing an outside connection to either the *Kokoda* or the rest of the landing party.

"What's going on?" she asked no one in particular. As they had fought a hasty retreat back to the shuttles, she had attempted to use the *Milne Bay* to either collect reinforcements or to provide air support for the rest of the team. When they discovered that the craft was powerless, and they were effectively stuck on their landing zone with no way of knowing the location or fate of the rest of the landing party, Reena felt as powerless as the shuttle she now sat on.

"Hastings, any luck?" she called, leaning over the side of the shuttle to address the pair of legs sticking out from an auxiliary hatch on the underside of the shuttle.

"Negative ma'am," came the *Milne Bay's* shuttle pilot's muffled reply, before he crawled out of the hatch. "I've tried everything that I can think of up to and including hitting the damn thing and something is preventing the reactor to re-energise, and the reserve capacitors lack the charge to transmit a message with enough power to punch through the ambient interference."

Reena sighed before sliding off the slope of the shuttle's upper hull, landing on her feet. "So we are still stuck," she remarked.

The pilot nodded reluctantly. "It appears so, ma'am."

"Dammit," Reena replied before one of her security detail approached, a grim ashen look to his face.

"Ma'am, we've stowed the second body we discovered. Like the first one, she has no identification on her service badge," he reported, handing her the unique black service badge that he had collected from the body before storing the remains in the *Milne Bay's* cargo module.

"Thank you, Perkins, I'll record this discovery in my after-action report," Reena replied choosing to omit the: "if we ever get off this rock."

Petty Officer Perkins nodded before heading back to the makeshift perimeter. Reena looked past him to the Starfleet Skeleton Key device that was still attached to the one operational external door to the courtyard, thankful that it was the only piece of Federation technology that still worked, not that it seemed to matter as their mysterious attackers seemed disinterested in forcing the lock open. This apparent ignorance on the part of their assailants unnerved Reena more than she ever dared to let on, especially to the men under her command.

"Just what is going on?" she murmured, unable to shift the feeling of helplessness being stuck in this courtyard while her colleagues were in uncertain danger.

A sequential beeping echoed through the landing zone caught everyone's attention, Reena looked at Perkins and Hastings who both shrugged until Petty Officer Gordon approached the Skeleton Key. "Ma'am, I think it's the Skeleton Key."

Reena frowned and approached the device, the rest of her team joined her, wary hands resting on the grips of holstered phasers.

“Are they trying to break in?” she asked, forcing the concern she felt from her mind while also mentally preparing herself for an ambush.

Hastings crouched next to the device and studied its inputs, frowning he looked back at Reena. “I don’t think so ma’am. The unit does operate on a Starfleet carrier signal, I think someone is trying to get in contact with us.”

Reena matched his frown. This was more than a little convenient, but even that concern failed to overshadow the sense of hope she felt at the revelation. “Who would know to use the key in this way?”

Hastings tilted his head slightly, mulling over the question. “I mean Commander Krieger might know that the key has a receiver, Lieutenant Tryne would definitely know *how* to do this, but if I was a betting man, and considering who we have recovered from their team, I would put my money that we are being contacted by whoever is left of the *Animus* party.”

The lieutenant nodded in agreement. “I wouldn’t bet against those odds, Mister Hastings, but what is it saying?”

The pilot shrugged before he removed his communicator. “Can’t say, ma’am, it *is* a recursive pattern akin to Morse code, I’m hoping that the communicator’s universal translator is smart enough to parse it into something intelligible.”

Prying open the back casing of the small device, Hastings tinkered with circuit pathways and altered frequencies until the device’s tiny speaker started to speak in a low monotone voice individual consonants as the universal translator parsed each word. The message appeared to repeat itself, and the communicator repeated the message into coherent sentences.

“*Kokoda* shuttle OIC. *Kokoda* XO linked up with remains of *Animus* party. All well. Orders follow. *Kokoda* security to seize installation hangar bay. Coordinates transmitted on sub frequency. Use of maximum phaser power authorised. *Animus* CO authorisation code transmitted.”

Reena looked at Hastings, then to the rest of the security detail. The authorisation to allow phasers to be set to the maximum or 'kill' setting troubled them all. Taking a breath, she addressed them. "Well, we have our orders. Gordon, did you get those coordinates?"

Crewman Gordon inspected the thin data slate he had removed from his own equipment vest and studied the data. "They appear to be three levels below us at the opposite end of the facility."

Reena nodded, noting the large expanse of empty space between their current location and the blue blip that signified their destination.

"Well, we have a job to do, and we've gotten confirmation that the Commander and the rest of his team are okay. Helendez, dispense the last of the equipment from the shuttle. I want us mobile in five."

"Aye ma'am," her team replied as a unit, as they, with deliberate care, withdrew their phasers and rifles, and pressed down on power activator switches, watching tiny indicators as a mark slowly crept up the display, turning from green to a more ominous red, before coming to a stop at the very end of the meter. Then with that same deliberate care, they returned their weapons to holsters or rifle slings.

As ordered, five minutes later, the security detail returned to the door, having collected rations, power packs and medical supplies from the shuttle's emergency survival kit. Reena held her rifle akimbo as Hastings worked to unlock the door.

"Okay people, let's keep this nice and clean," she reminded as the pilot deactivated the locking mechanism. Gordon took hold of the door a second time and with greater care, slowly opened the door, peering around its edge to see an empty corridor in both directions. Pushing the door fully open, he drew his rifle to his shoulder and filed out, the rest of the team

close behind him. Reena turned to Hastings. "Hold the fort," she told him. Hastings held up his phaser and nodded.

"I'll try and get the shuttle running," he replied as he pulled the door closed behind them, a faint hiss revealed that it was once again sealed.

Reena turned to the four members of her team. Two, Gordon and the Vulcan, Tvoul, were crouched on either side of the compartment to her left, while Helendez and the tall Caitian K'Sor faced the opposite direction.

"Okay Crewman, lead us out," she ordered, tapping Helendez and K'Sor on the shoulders, Gordon pointed down the direction he was facing, Reena led the rest of the detail towards him. Tvoul and Gordon stood when they approached and headed off at a brisk pace.

Lord Davenport burst into the Operations Centre, alarmed by his sudden and abrupt summons.

"Report Commander Maher."

Turning to face him, Commander Maher bore the same impassive expression he and all the other attendants of the facility bore.

"My Lord, we have detected three distinct Starfleet groupings within the facility. We have not yet been able to ascertain their objectives, but we have extrapolated possibilities based on known patterns."

Davenport looked unimpressed by the declaration. "Well?"

Maher blinked twice as if trying to process the question before responding. "We predict, with some degree of certainty, that the Starfleet teams are attempting to subvert Committee operations within this facility."

Davenport scowled, he had already come to that conclusion when the first Starfleet ship entered stationary orbit

above the planet and confirmed it when the second vessel arrived.

"I determined that threat myself. Where are they presently?"

Maher acknowledged the annoyance of his superiors with a vacant stare as the visor he wore flashed with lines of text as he accessed the required information.

"We are reporting energy discharges on three nonspecific vectors. One is fighting out of the courtyard their landing craft are situated in, another is by waste reclamation, and the third is near the deuterium storage tanks. We have sent forces out to deal with them, though we appear to have lost the tactical advantage we previously held. It seems the Starfleet personnel have adapted their weapons to kill our Templars."

Davenport's frown deepened and he placed a comforting hand on the disruptor that he had reluctantly taken to carrying.

"They are no doubt after the weapon. Deploy all remaining reserves and prepare my vessel for immediate departure."

"At once, my Lord."

Commander Krieger followed close on the heels of the *Animus*' Orion intelligence officer, who apparently seemed quite adept at keeping one eye trained on her tricorder and the other on the passageway in front of them.

"How much further?" he asked in a hushed tone, unsure if they were completely free from their mysterious attackers.

Leda skimmed her tricorder after making another apparently random turn.

"Not far, I've been leading us on a circuitous route towards the Operations Centre, in order to draw out their reserves," she replied before placing her tricorder against the

controls of a nearby door. The device beeped twice and the panel inlaid next to the door turned green. To Krieger's surprise, the door slid aside.

"How did you do that?" he exclaimed.

Leda smiled as she stopped on the opposite side of the doorway. "I could say it's a state secret, but in all truthfulness, I've had complete access to the facility's main computer for about three hours now. I've been masking our signatures to their internal sensors and creating ghosts to draw away their guards. Though I can't override automated energy discharge detectors, I have been able to ghost some false readings to throw them off our trail." Her grin was genuine as she closed the door behind the team. "While I was uplinked to their computer systems, I downloaded a master key to my tricorder."

"That is definitely going to come in handy," Krieger commented as she briskly walked through the room, which by all appearances, was a chemical research laboratory. In the dim light he had come to expect, he saw Leda come to a complete stop, and a bolt of ruby red phaser fire leapt from her phaser and into the void in front of her. The next sound the Commander heard was the soft squishy sound of a humanoid body hitting the ground.

Leda cautiously looked around the room, before, satisfied there were no other threats, she continued towards their destination.

Krieger cast a wary eye at the body as he passed it. "How did you see that?"

The Orion laughed before turning back to face him. "I have excellent eyesight, Commander, we should keep moving - that shot might have alerted them to our presence."

Nodding, Krieger followed the short, green-skinned officer through compartments, down dimly lit corridors and utilitarian service access ways until she stopped at a nondescript bulkhead. While he had been thankful that their interactions with the implacable attackers had been infrequent, part of him was

uncomfortable with the whole situation, especially considering he had no idea who they were, or why they attacked.

“Ensign, who is them? Who owns this installation?”

Leda paused before running her tricorder over an unlabelled container, it was obvious that she was mulling over the question. Shrugging she turned towards him.

“We have been tracking suspicious shipments coming into and out of this facility to various questionable operators for about a month before we determined this was a staging ground for that belligerent group Captain Morganth mentioned.” Leda turned and continued to walk down the corridor. “When we detected the manufacture of the neurolytic agitator ONI sent us in to get a closer look. Initially, the facility administrator, Tiberius Davenport, seemed jovial and helpful when we dropped out of warp, but once we made planetfall we were ambushed by these cybernetic guards they have, separating us from our shuttle in the process.”

She paused as if wondering if she should continue. Looking over her shoulder, Krieger could see a clearly conflicted expression on her emerald features. “When I gained access to their main computer I was able to determine that this facility is a biochemical conglomerate with direct ties to the Novos Foundation.”

Krieger took a step back in surprise, nearly bumping into Gutierrez who was behind him, who to his credit appeared completely aware of what was going on. “But the Novos Foundation is the largest philanthropic organisation in the quadrant. How could they be involved in something like this?”

Leda nodded but continued walking. “At this point, we are unable to determine what, if any, involvement the Novos Foundation has in this matter, but that at this point is not a major concern. The only thing that matters is ensuring that this bioweapon is prevented from being used against the sentients in the Federation.”

The commander nodded reluctantly. "Very well, though I suspect that when we are done, I shall be having a long chat with Captain Morganth."

This remark elicited a shrug from the Orion. "You are well within your rights to request an explanation, though I question whether you will actually get a..." she trailed off when she saw something move in front of them.

"What is it, Ensign?" Krieger whispered as she stood, almost frozen as a shuffling form made its way down the corridor in front of them. He tightened his grip on his phaser rifle as the form stepped into the light of an overhead panel

The figure shuffled at an awkward, mechanical gait through the corridor, their blue uniform was torn and spattered in large patches of dried red blood. Clear tubing jutted out at odd angles around their body, the red liquid flowed through it in a rhythmic pattern. Their dark skin had a noticeably washed-out look to it as they stiffly looked about the room.

"That is Petty Officer Arthur Marquis. He was an engineer aboard the *Animus*. He was killed not long after we landed on the planet. We, unfortunately, could not retrieve his body," Gutierrez remarked solemnly, though Leda appeared to be visibly affected by what happened.

"What did they do to him?"

At that point, Marquis appeared to notice the interlopers in the corridor ahead of him. With his head cocked to one side, he turned to face them, mouth opening and closing in a failed attempt to speak. Leda looked crestfallen as he regarded them with hollow eyes and a vacant expression. Marquis' left hand twitched before he pointed it at them, the clear bulge on his forearm visible through a tear in his tunic sleeve ended in a disruptor emitter.

Leda shook her head, and repeatedly mouthed the word "no" as she reluctantly raised her own weapon and pointed it at him.

A single bolt of green energy shot out from Marquis' weapon, narrowly missing the Starfleet team before Leda fired. The single bolt from her phaser struck him square in the chest. Marquis staggered slightly and his blue uniform singed where the bolt struck but didn't stop him. Leda closed her eyes and pressed back on the trigger, three more bolts from her phaser struck the same area as the first, finally dropping the former Starfleet Officer.

Krieger looked at her, concerned as she knelt beside Marquis' still smoking body.

"I knew his family, hell I got him onto the *Animus*." She placed a hand on Marquis' chest, right above the burn mark from her phaser. "I'm so sorry Artie."

Leda wiped her eyes with the back of her hand and stood, her free hand grabbing the black delta that sat on his chest. She turned towards the other members of her team with a look that sent a chill down Krieger's back. "We still have a job to do." Slipping the badge into a pocket on her vest and withdrew her tricorder in the same movement. She studied it for a moment, then pointed over her shoulder. "We are three compartments away from the Command Centre. We should get the lead out."

Krieger blinked at the sudden sharpness to her voice and took a step towards her. "Ensign, you have my condolences, if you need a moment, we can..."

The look Leda gave silenced him. "That will come later, we have a job to do."

As if to end the conversation, she turned on a boot heel and headed off at a quick jog with the rest of the team close behind her.

Commander Maher tilted his head slightly, as the haptic sensors attached to his fingers twitched as a new report

manifested on his sensor hood. It joined the growing list of negative reports from the Sentinel Templars Lord Davenport had despatched to investigate the whereabouts of the Starfleet interlopers. A new alert appeared on his sensor hood: the central computer had reported that a Sentinel had failed to register at an automated check-in, then another, then another. This could only mean that the Sentinel Templars, his brethren, were being taken offline by their Starfleet invaders. Maher lacked the emotion to grieve at the news as the Committee had not deemed it necessary to have Operations Commanders capable of emotion.

Maher's logic processor noticed the lack of correlation between the deactivating Sentinels and the reports of Starfleet personnel and took a fraction of a second to determine that there had to be a fault in one or more of the reporting systems. In that instant, it initiated a subsystem reset of his sensory processors. As his sensor hood went dark, his auditory receivers detected a pair of heavy thuds on the opposite side of the door leading to the room. With his logic processors offline, he was not able to extrapolate the proper reaction as that sound was followed by sparks appearing along the seam between the double doors. The Templars that manned the outer ring of consoles turned towards the noise, and while lacking the logic processing capacity of Maher, their enhanced threat assessment subroutines pinged the commotion at the rear of the operations centre as a threat, each submitted a threat assessment to Maher who stood motionless at his station in the centre of the room as his own systems reinitialised.

Leda crouched beside a pair of doors at the end of a featureless corridor, as the *Kokoda's* Tellarite security technician Xern worked a portable cutting laser down the seam of the doors. She looked to Krieger who was crouched facing her on the opposite side of the door, then to Gutierrez who was facing back down the corridor they came, his rifle pointed towards the opposite end before she looked to the pair of guards lying

crumpled at their feet each sporting numerous phaser burns to their chests and abdomens.

“We’ll need to get inside quick. This area is the one place that didn’t have a direct connection to the server when I hacked in, so I can’t tell you what will be inside, but I can guarantee that the command frequency is coming from inside. If we disrupt it, it should force these *things* into some sort of default mode,” she reported as Xern unrolled a small rectangle of plasticised explosive from a pouch on his pack, and placed preportioned segments against both doors then at equidistant points to create a rectangle. Xern turned towards the two officers and nodded.

Krieger quickly checked the power level on his rifle before looking back at Leda, and in a whispered tone, he stated. “We go in three.”

With a raised hand, he performed a silent countdown before he nodded to Xern. Micro-detonations within the plastic explosive activated in sequence, blowing the door inwards and creating a sizeable hole within. Before the doors settled on the deck panels, Krieger and Leda rushed into the room with Xern close behind them. Gutierrez was the last into the room, keeping a constant vigil of the corridor through the now smouldering doorway.

Crimson pulses lanced out from Krieger and Xern, catching three of the cybernetic guards still at their posts. In an instant, the remaining guards sprang into action, leaving their stations and took cover behind an inner bank of monitors that formed a partition along the outer edge of the operations centre. From this position of cover, they traded fire with the Starfleeters, driving them to take cover behind the mirrored consoles on the opposite side.

Leda poked the receiver of her tricorder over the lip of the console she had taken refuge behind as the others continued to fire.

“Where are you hiding?” she murmured, studying the display for the elusive command protocol. After several passes over the room, the tiny device pinged in triumph and showed a frequency strength gauge, pointing to a figure surrounded by a ring of consoles and wearing a sensor hood. “That’s the source, the one at the end of the room,” she called.

Krieger looked over to her as a bolt of disruptor fire split the space between them. “Go get them, Ensign. We’ll cover you.”

Leda rose to a crouch as Krieger and Gutierrez intensified their fire. Bolts of crimson energy peppered the opposite side of the room, forcing the guards to keep their heads down as Leda leapt over the console and charged. She managed to make it halfway across the room before her quarry must have determined her intent and the guards focused their attention on her, forcing Leda to start ducking and weaving as she closed the distance, her target appeared transfixed in place, the only movement being his fingers that furiously moved by his sides.

When she was close enough, Leda leapt at the statuesque being, using her momentum to send them both crashing to the floor, an audible sound of things breaking seemed to overpower the noise created by the weapons fire.

For an instant, the guards seemed to lose focus, their fire became less intense, less coordinated as they stopped receiving instructions. Krieger turned to the rest of his team, gave a quick nod before he stood from cover, and using the momentary disorganisation, to disable two more of the guards in rapid succession. The remaining guards quickly succumbed to the more coordinated Starfleet team.

Once the firing subsided, Krieger cautiously stepped out from behind the console as Xern and Gutierrez started policing the bodies, with Gutierrez apparently searching for intelligence. Krieger turned towards Leda at the front of the room and stood shocked as she sat on her quarry’s chest pinning them to the

deck. He approached her, and to his horror, he found the two of them in a slowly increasing pool of dark red liquid and a clear thick viscous looking lubricant, all of which seemed to be coming from a series of deep wounds on her target's abdomen.

Leda held up the sensor hood to the light that she had evidently ripped from his head and was inspecting it intently, occasionally reaching inside its cover and removing viscera with such a dispassionate curiosity that it made Krieger uncomfortable,

"Ensign," he murmured as she withdrew a knife from the top of her boot and used it to dislodge what was clearly brain or connective tissue from within the helmet, inspecting each strand with the curiosity of a pathologist before discarding it. He immediately noticed that the blade was already stained red even before she removed it from her boot, it wasn't difficult for him to realise just where her quarry's mysterious wounds came from.

"All of this installation's command functions originated from this unit, so if I can remove." she paused as she reached into the helmet, felt around for a moment, made a triumphant sound then extracted a clear membranous node roughly the size of a tricorder's sensor probe and held it up to the light. "If I can remove this, the 'motherbrain', I can directly access their command subroutines and I'll be able to figure out just what they are doing here."

Krieger looked at her with suspicion as Leda pried the back off of her tricorder and started to connect cables to seemingly random locations within the clear node. "You've done this before."

Leda raised an eyebrow but didn't look up from her task. "I'm a girl with a very specific set of skills; hacking into cybernetic zombies just happens to be one of them."

Pressing a series of commands on her tricorder, the node appeared to light up in a spectrum of colours, which corresponded with lines of text to appear on her device's screen.

“The scattering field is controlled through that console over there.”

The *Kokoda's* executive officer frowned at her non-answer before moving towards the indicated console as Leda remained straddled across the dead body, intently studying her tricorder. Standing in front of the interface, he was surprised to see all of the display screens showed readouts in Federation Standard, but suppressed that urge when he remembered just who operated the installation. Accessing the required command pathways, he shut down the fields that had been plaguing both landing parties since arriving on this otherwise inhospitable planet.

“I’ve shut down both the dampening and the scattering field,” he reported grimly as Leda stood, wiping gore from her legs and uniform while holding the sensor hood under one arm with her tricorder poking out from inside.

The ensign removed her communicator and flipped it open with a flick of her wrist. “Captain Morganth, we’ve achieved our objectives, the scattering field has been disabled.”

5.

“Glad to hear it, Ensign. Inform Commander Sharpe of our progress and request that Lieutenant’s Bozosky and Thorys and their teams are beamed down,” Morganth replied as he led his small team down unnervingly empty corridors.

“Understood, sir, I’ve also disabled the command module, which should allow us a tad more breathing room,” Leda reported, sounding rather proud of herself at her achievement.

“Excellent news, Leda, keep me apprised of the situation. Morganth out.” The Captain returned his communicator to its pouch on his belt and turned to face the two *Kokoda* officers that accompanied him. “We should hurry, it won’t take them long to realise what we have done and they will try to shift any evidence of their activities off-world.”

Both Jacinta and T’Fryr nodded but offered no comment, which seemed to please the captain as he turned back down the corridor. Without any ceremony, he headed off at a brisk jog.

T’Fryr looked over to Jacinta briefly and raised a bushy white eyebrow as she appeared to hold her left arm close to her side, and only seemed to use it sparingly. “Ma’am, are you alright?”

Jacinta winced slightly as she moved her arm to point out that it was still working. “I think it’s getting worse. I can barely move my arm now, and I’m starting to lose feeling in my fingers.”

The captain fell back so that he was beside the two. “Lieutenant, are you alright?”

Jacinta blanched slightly at the realisation that he had heard her. “I can’t really move my arm, sir, one of the guards grabbed me soon after we landed, and I’ve progressively lost feeling in it since then.”

Morganth suddenly turned very serious. "Where did they grab you?"

Jacinta's eyes widened at the serious concern evident in the Captain's voice before she pointed to her bicep, looking down she was surprised to see that her useless hand was covered in blood. Out of nowhere, Morganth produced a thin knife and carefully placed it against her arm, then proceeded to slice open her uniform downwards at the point she indicated. He frowned while moving the fabric aside. The skin underneath was mottled and swollen with a seeping wound that showed no sign of stopping.

He withdrew a device roughly the size of a stylus and placed it over the wound, the device beeped twice before a reading appeared on its small display screen. Frowning once more, he returned the device to its pouch. "You're joined aren't you?" he asked quietly.

The momentary shock of being discovered was overtaken by denial as she looked at him sceptically. "I have no idea what you are talking about."

Morganth looked dubious at this obvious lie. "Lieutenant, I'm in ONI. We are well aware of your specie's dark little secret but don't worry we won't out you to your colleagues. Now answer the question."

Jacinta refused to meet his gaze and only nodded once in acknowledgement which seemed to lighten Morganth's mood. "While we are unaware of the bio-physiology of your symbiotic relationship, it is possible that the creature in your abdomen is slowing the spread of the infection, but we shouldn't delay any further. The sooner we complete our objective, the sooner we can find a cure."

T'Fryr, who had to make it an effort to not pay attention to the conversation, turned to face them.

"Wait, you're seriously planning on withholding treatment for her?" he asked with an ice that would have made his arctic homeworld of Andoria seem tropical by comparison.

Jacinta was legitimately concerned that the Petty Officer was going to physically harm the captain and took a step to place herself between the two men, though she doubted in her present physical condition that she would be able to do anything to stop him.

Morganth sighed and shook his head. "Mister T'Fryr, we cannot withhold what we do not have." He withdrew a small metallic case from a pouch on his belt and held it in front of him. "During the course of our dealings with this group, we had developed a countermeasure to the neurolytic toxins employed by their cybernetic guards. However, once we landed on this planet, we discovered that the guards here secrete a unique string of the toxin with protein markers completely different from those we've encountered. As a result, I watched the rest of my team die one after another."

Jacinta covered her mouth with her working hand, and it took the wind out of the Andorian's metaphorical sails. "We found one of your officers in the landing bay, I'm sorry sir."

Morganth's veneer seemed to harden once more. "Petty Officer Shawn Noble, I sent him back to the shuttle to try and get it operational, it is unfortunate that he did not survive." He took a breath before looking back at the two officers. "As this toxin appears to be indigenous to this facility, there has to be a counteragent located within the bio lab that created it for the benefit for the researchers. We have already wasted enough time. Once we secure the facility, we will search for the cure for you, Lieutenant."

This appeared to placate T'Fryr who nodded then rechecked the power setting on his phaser rifle. Morganth turned back down the corridor. "If there is nothing more, we need to get moving."

Falling into step behind Morganth once more, the two officers headed off down corridors that had suddenly gained a stark white colour.

Jacinta wrinkled her nose as her sensitive Trill senses picked up a barely noticeable scent. "I smell antiseptic."

"Then we are getting close," Morganth replied, "I just hope we aren't too late."

Jacinta looked at her tricorder, choosing to favour it instead of her phaser that now resided within a useless holster on her left hip. Studying the map that Leda had given her, she noted that their destination was ahead of them, she indicated to the corresponding doorway at the end of the corridor.

Once the trio had stacked up beside it, Morganth turned to them. "Lieutenant, as soon as we are inside, I want you to find a working terminal and download any and all data that you can get from their databases, I don't care if it's encrypted or not, I want as much as your tricorder will hold." When she nodded, he turned to T'Fryr. "While she's doing that, we will be securing anyone that is inside."

Indicating to the locking mechanism, he nodded at Jacinta. "All yours Lieutenant."

Jacinta precariously perched her tricorder on her knee as she dug the nails of her good hand into the casing around the door controls and pried it open. She had become quite adept at picking the locks on the doors of this facility, and each time her tricorder became increasingly better at it. After a minute of tapping on her tricorder, the door control flashed green and the door slid aside.

Morganth and T'Fryr were through the opening and into the lab as Jacinta disconnected her tricorder from the alien control system. Packing away her collection of liberated cables she slipped into the lab behind them. The room looked like any biological research facility Jacinta herself would have worked in during her studies prior to joining Starfleet with a scattering of work stations and scientific equipment used in the manufacture of vaccines that would make any top of the line research lab envious. Though even to a novice, it was clear that this facility was being used for a far more nefarious purpose.

At the far end of the room, four technicians cowered under the menacing guard of Captain Morganth who appeared to be interrogating them with short terse questions at the point of his phaser rifle, while T'Fryr poked through storage containers and checked manifests.

Jacinta was shocked at the forcefulness of Morganth's questioning as she moved to her assigned task. Sitting in front of a working terminal she placed her tricorder on the workstation's data transfer plate and started accessing the unit's memory files. For an instant, the laurel draped logo of the Novos Foundation appeared before coalescing into the file directory. A large blue 'Directory Empty' notification blinked on the screen. Frowning, Jacinta moved to another workstation only to find the same result.

"Ah, sir, we have a problem," she called momentarily interrupting his interrogation.

Morganth turned to face her though his rifle remained pointed at his captives.

"Sir the file directories are empty, both network and local drives, there is nothing here."

"Dammit," Morganth exclaimed, turning back to the still cowering technicians. "Where is the data?"

When they didn't immediately respond, he struck the closest technician with the flat side of his rifle, then demanded the question be answered, much to the horror of the *Kokoda* officers.

"Captain, that is completely out of line," Jacinta exclaimed, the disgust clearly evident in her voice.

Morganth regarded her dispassionately. "Lieutenant, let me remind you, that even with the *Kokoda's* assistance, this is strictly an ONI operation, and we don't exactly have the luxury of time." Turning back to the technicians, he threatened to strike them again. A woman whose lab coat bore additional markings stood to face the captain.

“You’re too late, the research is already on its way off-world.”

The captain swore before turning to Jacinta. “Who is in charge of the remaining *Kokoda* security?”

Jacinta blinked at the forcefulness of the Captain’s request. “Assuming nothing has happened, Lieutenant Reena Blackford.”

In a single movement, Morganth withdrew and opened his communicator. Pressing the controls on the small device he waited for a small click before a wary sounding Reena responded.

“This is Lieutenant Blackford.”

“I am Captain Morganth of the *Animus*, Lieutenant have you secured the hangar bay as ordered?” his tone was severe.

“Yes, sir, my team has secured the main entrance to the bay, but there is a forcefield around one of the small attack ships which we have been unsuccessful in gaining access.”

Morganth growled. “Have the other craft been disabled?”

“Yes, sir,” Reena replied. “Sir, all the support craft here bear the markings of the Novos Foundation.”

“There is a greater conspiracy here than you are aware of Lieutenant, I want you to do all possible to prevent any craft from departing. You are to hold that bay at all costs.”

“Understood sir.”

Tiberius Davenport was on edge as he swiftly moved through empty corridors towards his destination and potential escape. While the facility he operated had always been far too large for the number of staff he commanded, he suddenly felt very alone. Even with the quad of Sentinel Templars flanking him, he was convinced he was the last sentient member of the Foundation on the surface. He cursed the efficiency of the two

Starfleet vessels in undermining his operations, even with all of the obstacles he had placed in their way. He already knew that Starfleet had taken the Operations Centre, as his guards had lost their synchronised, coordinated movements, which only served to sour his mood.

Looking down, he tightened his grip on the duotronic storage device that contained all of his research on the Ghostwitch virus. Even though the Committee had refrained from letting him relocate before now, he wasn't about to let all of his hard work and research fall into the hands of these chaotic sentients.

"Curse you, Starfleet," he hissed as he turned down the corridor that eventually led to the hangar bay.

Ahead of him, he could see a pair of blue-uniformed Starfleet officers, standing guard over the entrance to the bay, and a quad of Sentinels dead at their feet.

"Curse you, Starfleet," he repeated, stopping he turned to his quad. "Create a distraction," he ordered. They stiffened then continued down the corridor at a brisk pace. Grabbing the last Sentinel by the arm he pulled the other way. "You're coming with me."

Doubling back on the route they had taken, Davenport led his sole remaining bodyguard to a maintenance hatch. Cycling it open, he climbed inside with the Sentinel awkwardly trying to climb into the space behind him. The Sentinel paused before removing their ornately detailed chest plate, dropping it to the floor before it joined Davenport inside. Crawling for what felt like miles, precariously cradling the storage container in the crook of an arm, he pushed open a hatch leading to a machinist's shop that serviced the hangar bay, hoping the entire time that there wouldn't be anyone on the opposite side to greet him. Reaching into his jacket, he removed a device as long as his finger and held it tightly as he peered out into the room and was greeted by the sound of weapons fire coming from the opposite end of the hangar, and concerned calls from the

Starfleet personnel. This filled him with a sense of smug satisfaction which was only tempered by the fact that he only counted five Starfleet personnel taking cover behind equipment stacks within the cavernous room. He skulked around partially deconstructed ship components. What he saw in front of him confirmed his suspicions that he was the last sentient left alive, and when he got off this lifeless rock he was going to make these Starfleeters paid for what they'd done to interfere in his plans. Pressing the button at the end of the device, he stepped out onto the hangar deck.

Reena stood near a row of cargo shuttles that sat idle along the long edge of the hangar bay, each one with a pile of cabling and scorched circuitry beside it, as the Caitian, K'Sor, continued to try and gain access to the shielded attack ship, while the remaining three members of her security detail traded fire with an equal number of the facility's cybernetic guards. Reena was well aware at how tenuous a hold she had on the hangar bay, especially after failing to locate a control tower to lock down the subterranean tunnel that led to the surface. She knew that her team was going to be on the defensive until they were able to get some relief from one of the other landing parties. Scattered around her were a dozen bodies, representing every single defender within the hangar who had chosen to fight instead of surrender, requiring her team to root out each of them.

"How's it going K'Sor?" she asked, keeping an eye on the pitched battle taking place at the front of the room.

The Caitian looked down at the assortment of technology cobbled together from components salvaged from the disabled shuttles and growled. "I am making little progress. Regrettably, this ship is using a frequency completely foreign to the others here, and without physical access to the ship I doubt

that I will be able to parse it correctly,” K’Sor replied in that purring feline voice unique to her species.

“Well, do what you can. We need to secure it like the others,” Reena replied patting her on the shoulder, refraining from touching any of the calico fur that the Caitian sported.

K’Sor nodded before she continued working, pausing only to gaze over to the line of shuttles.

“What did the Captain say about those?” she asked before returning to her task.

Reena regarded the pair of stylised logos of entwined serpents superimposed over a blue circle and frowned. “Captain Morganth didn’t disclose anything, but I suspect that there is a larger problem here than what we have told, and I sincerely doubt that we will be told the whole story,” she replied, dismissing the questions that she had about why there were shuttles for the galaxy’s largest relief organisation parked alongside mysterious attack ships.

K’Sor muttered something in her native tongue before slapping the collection of components with a paw. “It’s no use ma’am, this system is nothing like anything I’ve encountered before.”

Reena frowned and was about to concede defeat until she saw Henderson take three disruptor bolts square to the chest. She had to force herself from going to his aid as he hit the ground, smoke wafting from his numerous wounds in his chest plate.

Tvoul grabbed him by the loop at the back of his equipment vest and dragged him to safety, in that instant a bolt of disruptor fire splashed across the forcefield behind her singeing the air in front of her face. She tightened the grip on her rifle as both women took cover behind the vehicle they had been trying to break into, putting it between them at the incoming fire.

Peering into the darkness of the machine shop, she could faintly make out figures moving about behind the cover of

storage crates before another bolt of disruptor fire lashed out, hitting the forcefield in front of them.

"We're being flanked," she called, opening her communicator.

"Ensign Leda, here."

Reena ducked as a series of bolts of fire struck the shield. "Ensign, it's Lieutenant Blackford. We could use some help down here, we are in danger of being overrun."

"Understood, Lieutenant. We'll see if we can get some help out to you. Hold on as long as you can. Leda out."

Reena looked to K'Sor. "That's going to be easier said than done," she remarked before noticing more movement in the dim light. Taking careful aim, she pressed down on the firing stud, sending a bolt of crimson phaser fire into the darkness. It struck a container, sending sparks shooting into the air, forcing the form she saw to dive to cover.

Davenport swore as he dove behind a crate, which caused him to drop his storage case, it skittered across the deck, spilling its contents. Cursing again, he scrambled across the ground, blindly feeling for the now scattered data cards. After a minute of frantic searching, he collected all of the cards he could find and stuffed them back into the container. Sitting with his back pressed against a supply crate, he checked the small control device in his hand and smiled as it flashed green as the remaining Sentinels responded to his request for assistance. When they arrived, he would have his revenge.

Jacinta limped from one workstation to another, each move becoming increasingly more difficult as the neurotoxin continued to make its way through her system. Each display

continued to show the same empty directories, every data slate sat unused.

“Captain, they have scrubbed this place pretty well, there is nothing here,” she said, try as she might, it was hard to keep her resignation hidden in her voice.

Morganth frowned, then turned to the technicians who were now under the guard of Lieutenant Bozosky and his team, each an impassive mask of cool collectedness.

“Where are your resources of the anti-toxin?” he demanded. Taking a step towards the group, the technician that he had struck recoiled at his words but as a group, they remained silent. He turned to Bozosky. “Take them up to the ship, and impress upon them the benefits of their assistance.” The expression he bore sent an icy chill down Jacinta’s spine as she tried, and failed, to push herself out of the chair she had sat in.

The brown-haired lieutenant nodded, then rounded up the scientists. In an instant, the prisoners and their guard disappeared into a flash of yellow light.

The captain then turned to Jacinta. “I would not worry, Lieutenant, they will comply.”

“Their compliance is not what is worrying me, Captain,” she replied, regarding the officer standing in front of her as his communicator beeped.

Morganth whipped out his communicator and opened its front grill. “Morganth here.”

Jacinta could hear it was the voice of one of the *Animus*’ officers, Ensign Leda, though judging by the tone, the situation was not going well.

“Captain, we’ve gotten a report from the force holding the hangar bay, they are reporting that the Sentinel Templars have regrouped and are pressing their attack. Lieutenant Blackford is reporting that they are at risk of being overrun. They are requesting any available assistance.”

Jacinta jolted upright at the report that her bunkmate and best friend was under threat of being overrun on this unidentified compound on a planet that was supposed to be uninhabited. She forced herself to stand as Morganth spoke with one of Bozosky's men in rapid hushed tones, formulating the proper response to this new threat. "We have to do something," she said, taking a step before her legs collapsed underneath her, sending her unceremoniously to the floor. She cursed at the realisation that her body was succumbing to the neurolytic toxin and there wasn't anything she could do about it.

Morganth and the security contingent turned at the sound of breaking glass and found the *Kokoda's* Science Officer on the ground in a mess of broken scientific equipment. Rushing over to her, Morganth crouched beside her.

"Stay still, Lieutenant, it seems that your symbiont is losing the fight at keeping you alive." He opened his communicator and activated a control. "*Animus*, this is the Captain. Prepare to beam Lieutenant Tryne aboard. Have Doctor Tymos prepare the standard antitoxin treatment. Hopefully, it can give us more time to synthesise a proper cure."

"Understood, Captain," replied a harsh sounding male voice before the channel closed.

"The *Kokoda*," Jacinta murmured absently as she found it surprisingly hard to breathe.

"With all respect to your ship, Lieutenant, we have been dealing with this threat for a number of years now, we have developed a number of ways of counteracting their toxins."

Jacinta didn't have a chance to plead the case to return herself to her own ship as she felt the tingling sensation of a transporter beam embrace her, her normal fear of someone discovering the existence of her symbiont momentarily quelled as she was brought aboard the *Animus*.

Morganth stood as the lieutenant disappeared in a flash of yellow light and regarded the security officers around him.

"T'Fryr, where is your head?"

The Andorian officer looked to the spot where Jacinta had been lying before looking back to Morganth. "I'm fine, sir."

The captain nodded. "Very good, Mister Hollinsky, ready your men. We have a team of scared bronzers who haven't encountered Sentinels before, that we'll need to rescue." Morganth approached the door before turning to regard the Starfleet personnel under his command. "Break out the last of the charge packs! We're moving out."

Reena ducked behind an exposed engine cowling as a spray of disruptor fire peppered against the small craft the Starfleet team had taken cover behind. She did a quick scan around the room and saw the three unmoving forms belonging to members of her landing team lying slumped along the deck. It was of little comfort to her that those three security officers had each counted for five of their cybernetic attackers, as she knew that their sacrifice was not going to be enough. They had been steadily pushed back from their positions at the perimeter of the hangar bay to their hastily prepared redoubt wedged between disabled support craft.

Behind her, with their back pressed up against the wall, Petty Officer Gordon was busy jabbing at the controls of his communicator. "Say again, *Kokoda*, we have come under heavy hostile fire and requesting emergency beam out."

The pregnant pause that followed spoke volumes as Reena frowned before Commander Abernathy replied, her tone clearly crestfallen.

"I'm sorry, Chief Maroney is having difficulty isolating your signatures from the surrounding background radiation. We are liaising with the *Animus* to try and get some localised support. Hold out as long as you can. Help is on the way."

Gordon was noticeably disappointed with the news before he responded. "Understood, ma'am."

Reena tightened the grip on her rifle and fired a pulse of amber energy into the approaching mass of hostile soldiers, wishing there was an avenue that would allow her to escape with her remaining officers. She saw movement to her left beyond the angled frame of the mysterious spacecraft that sat on the middle of the deck, its energy shield sizzled as it absorbed errant shots from both sides. The longer she looked in that direction, she could see figures moving between storage containers heading towards them.

“They’re trying to flank us again,” she called, shifting her position and blind firing a volley into the darkness at the opposing end. The very human-sounding howl of pain gave her a momentary pause, as none of the other soldiers had made a sound as they fell. She returned to regard the remains of her detail, each, like her bore wounds from their engagements and she knew that not all were visible.

“Hold tight everyone, help is on the way. We just need to keep them from these ships.” Her words swallowed up by the din of battle, in response the remaining Starfleeters continued to fire, before individually swapping out discharged powerpacks. Reena did the same and quietly wished that some of her landing party were still alive when that help arrived.

Devenport reeled as he clutched his right arm, one of the Starfleet security officers had scored a lucky glancing blow, clipping his shoulder on its way to the bulkhead behind him.

He gritted his teeth to the pain coursing through his body as a pair of Sentinels stood over him with cold, vacant expressions.

“Don’t just stand there, help me,” he snapped through those gritted teeth. In response the Sentinels awkwardly grabbed him and with the care of a wounded Targ lifted the Facility Administer to his feet. The scream that left Davenport’s

mouth as a Sentinel grabbed him by his wounded shoulder was almost immediately drowned out by the high pitched whine of phaser fire coming from the corridor at the other end of the hangar.

“Time’s up,” he muttered as he took his control wand in his good hand while he feebly reached for the once again discarded duotronic storage case. Inspecting the case, he checked the status indicators on the control wand and smiled grimly that all the lights shone green, telling him that his craft was ready for launch.

Taking a second, he assessed the situation the best he could before looking back to his remaining guards and muttered. “Die well.” Simultaneously he depressed a large button at the top of the control wand. In an instant, the two Sentinels in front of him and the other cybernetic soldiers already engaged with the Starfleet personnel stiffened as they as charged as one body towards the waiting auxiliary craft.

The Last Man Contingency overrode what remained of their tactical protocols and self-preservational subroutines, turning these cybernetic soldiers into meatshields, compelled to do whatever was necessary to allow the last surviving member of the Novos Foundation the ability to escape. Davenport hadn’t initially triggered this failsafe because he genuinely felt as if these hive-minded soldiers deserved a certain level of dignity in death, even if he knew that he needed to get his research off-world.

The sudden cries of alarm from the Starfleet officers were all the indication he needed that the protocol had worked. With effort, he crept along the storage bins, the storage case tucked into the crook of his injured arm as he slowly made his way towards his ship. Covered by the bulk of the shuttle, he crossed the distance unnoticed until he reached the ramp. He took a final moment to witness the carnage he had wrought before deactivating the energy shield that had protected his personal yacht and climbed aboard.

Captain Morganth looked over to the line of Sentinels to the personal craft that sat on its own in the centre of the flight deck as a crackle echoed through the bay as its shield deactivated and a figure ascended the ramp.

“Damn it,” he breathed as he raised his rifle and scowled as the figure disappeared before he could line up the shot. He drew his commbadge from his belt and had it to his lips as the ramp closed.

“*Animus* this is Morganth. We have an unsecured launch in progress, prep for star side intercept,” he ordered as his crewmembers steadily dispatched the more numerous Sentinels.

“Understood, we are adjusting our course now.”

By the point that the ramp had fully closed an audible thrum started to echo through the cavernous hangar.

“We’re too late,” Morganth called as the craft lifted off the deck and nosed towards the launch tube. “*Animus*, they’re launching.” In an instant, the craft disappeared up the launch tube.

With the control ship gone, the surviving Sentinels reverted to their default programming which reactivated the self-preservational protocols and returned tactical decisions to their movements. By that point, however, the Starfleet personnel had created a crossfire which made short work of the stragglers.

As his team moved across the room, Azrael approached the beleaguered *Kokoda* security personnel. He noted that they looked rather worse for wear. The only officer present stumbled across to him, ashen as grime and small cuts marked a face that looks surprisingly like the *Kokoda*’s Trill science officer that had been accompanying him.

She must have recognised the expression he bore, and smiled weakly through a haunted expression. “We’re not related, well as far as we can tell.” The smile disappeared as she looked over to the space previously occupied by the Novos Shuttle. “We failed to secure them all.”

Azrael placed a hand on her shoulder, his hard expression softening. "All things considered, Lieutenant, I would say that you did more than your share this day. Go, tend to your people, we'll take care of it from here."

Reena didn't smile as her gaze fell on the black service badge the officer before her wore. "Understood, sir,"

At that point, Azrael's communicator beeped, stepping away from Reena, he flipped it open. "Go ahead."

"Captain, its Victor, we tracked the Novos Shuttle from where they departed the installation and prepared for a star side intercept as per your orders. What we didn't expect was the pilot jumping to warp while still within the atmosphere."

Azrael frowned. "That shouldn't even be possible."

"Sir, where it not for the fact that I saw it happen, I would agree with you. They have done a number on the atmosphere though we have been able to plot their exit course."

"Excellent, plot a pursuit course and engage at maximum warp as soon as myself and Ensign Leda are beamed aboard, Morganth out." Pressing a button on his communicator, he opened a secondary channel. "Thorys it's the Captain. I want your team to take command of the scene here and oversee the collection of evidence. I'm leaving the *Night Hawk* here for you."

"Understood," replied the Andorian security officer.

Morganth switched back to his primary channel, "*Animus*, two to beam up."

Epilogue

"She's awake."

Jacinta stirred at the unknown male voice and slowly opened her eyes. The harsh overhead lights caused her to wince as her vision adjusted to the environment. She immediately heard a steady beeping coming from overhead. After a moment, her vision finally cleared to see a pair of figures at her feet. One was dressed in the white garb of a Starfleet

Doctor, while the other wore a standard issue blue Starfleet uniform that complimented their green skin. She noticed the black badges the two officers wore.

“Excellent, thank you, Doctor, I’ll inform the Captain.”

“What happened?” Jacinta asked groggily.

“You collapsed, but thankfully we were able to convince the scientists to synthesize the antidote for you.”

In a moment of clarity, Jacinta reached for the small bulge in her abdomen, completely ignoring the risks of discovery. The green skinned officer smiled and approached, it was at that point that Jacinta remembered her name.

Leda placed a hand on Jacinta’s shoulder. “Your symbiont is fine, we tracked its vitals through the whole process. It was unaffected by the neurotoxin.”

Jacinta let out a relieved breath. “Thank you,” she murmured before looking around sickbay. “This isn’t the *Kokoda*.”

Leda’s smile widened as she sat on the edge of the biobed. “While I’m certain that the *Kokoda* is a fine ship, it hasn’t been dealing with the Novos Foundation like we have.”

The green skinned officer slid off the bed and clasped her hands behind her back. “Lieutenant Tryne, welcome to the USS *Animus*.”