

# ARCTURUS



MIDDLE DECKS

*A Bravo Fleet Story*



# Arcturus: Middle Decks

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By CrimsonTactic

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*Fleet Captain's Log, Stardate 2401.4*

*Following our successful defense of Farpoint Station during the Battle of Deneb, we have resumed our search for the Farpoint Cnidarians. Fourth Fleet Intelligence is convinced that the thought-maker technology taken by the Dominion remains a threat, as it was not accounted for when the Lost Fleet left our space. The most logical course of action to locate the Dominion is to locate their quarry, though that is no small task. We have set a course for the general area where we believe the Cnidarian we encountered was headed, but without understanding this species' life cycle or motivations, it could take months to find it. I have ordered interdisciplinary teams to study every aspect of all of the available data on the Farpoint Cnidarians.*

# Chapter I: Back on the Trail

While incredibly understanding for truly understanding cultures, linguistic anthropology did not often get a lot of attention or resources on a starship. Lieutenant Tristan Hawthorne was occasionally called in to help make sure the universal translator was functioning correctly during tricky first-contact missions, but his real work was analyzing what alien languages revealed about their cultures. Whether a culture had one word for snow or twenty was a good indication of what type of climate it originated in, for instance. For that, all he really needed was database access and his trusty PADD, so it was a comparative treat to be using one of the cetacean ops collaboration labs for his latest project. Lieutenant Eirell was watching from the massive tank, her large body resembling that of a whale's.

Hawthorne was studying a projection of one of the creatures hanging over the central display table, looking very much like an aquatic jellyfish (hence the name), though substantially more massive than any such creature. They had no actual evidence that there was any evolutionary connection there, but he'd brought cetacean ops into the project to get more than just a humanoid perspective into his analysis. The rest of his team consisted of Lieutenants Junior Grade Matthew Belvedere, from communication, Lewis Gardner, from nursing, and Corvol Taom, from xenobiology, which provided diversity in discipline but not in experience.

“The reports of the *Enterprise* describe empathic and telepathic communication. It is possible that any telepaths aboard *Arcturus* will be able to communicate with these creatures,” Lieutenant Eirell said in her slow, synthetic voice

broadcast through the transparent aluminum wall of the tank through the computer.

“Correct, but communication is not the issue. If we understand how they communicate, we might be able to figure out where they are headed,” Hawthorne explained for what felt like the nineteenth time. “Language follows habitat.”

The projection in front of them changed from a pale purple to blue. It was an incredibly subtle color change for Hawthorne’s human eyes, but his earlier analysis had suggested that it would look like a rainbow to someone with more sensitivity to the ultraviolet end of the visual spectrum.

“In every culture that I am aware of, verbal, visual, tactile, or manual communications strategies developed before telepathy. Even if these light patterns are now vestigial, I would bet that they evolved to communicate well in the cnidarians’ natural habitat,” Hawthorne continued.

“Well, from a technical perspective, UV radiation is more energetic than other forms of light and is better able to penetrate fluid media,” Lieutenant Belvedere offered from his seat across the table. “You wouldn’t need to go out of the visual spectrum to communicate in open space.”

“Open space isn’t very hospitable as a place to raise your young, either,” Lieutenant Toam, their xenobiologist, pointed out. “They must come from somewhere with massive amounts of energy to reproduce.”



“Or matter—we don’t know what they ‘eat,’” Nurse Gardner pointed out.

Hawthorne raised an eyebrow; in the few hours they’d been working together, Gardner hadn’t offered any contributions that weren’t borderline sexual harassment to other members of the group. He turned off to the side to think about that and caught the reflection of the projection on the tank wall; its colors looked off from the projection itself.

“We’re looking at this simulation from the Enterprise’s perspective, but they clearly weren’t born in orbit of Deneb IV. What if we overlaid different environmental conditions until we found the environment that yielded the most information from this form of communication?” Hawthorne suggested. “Ambassador Spock did something similar when he realized the origin of the Cetacean Probe in the 2280s.”

“Without a linguistic frame of reference, how can you determine what constitutes information and what constitutes static?” Eirell asked through the tank.

“The universal translator has visual communications algorithms. It should be able to help narrow that down,” Belvedere supplied. “I think it’s a good idea, Tristan,” the communications officer said with a smile.

Hawthorne gave him a small smile in return, before getting flustered and looking down at his notes. He didn’t do well with praise.

“Computer, prepare simultaneous simulations of interstellar phenomena, planetary atmospheres, and stellar formations as lenses through which we can view the original scans of the cnidarians,” Hawthorne ordered. “Filter out any results where visual communication within the UV spectrum would be impossible.”

“*Working,*” the computer reported.

The computer began projecting dozens of boxes on the tank wall so that both the aquatic and non-aquatic scientists could see what was being done. It labeled them by environment type, ranging from asteroid fields to nebulae to gas giant atmospheres. Each box contained a view of the simulation they had been running, though with its colors in various degrees of difference from the original. The boxes got smaller and smaller as the computer pulled in more data, representing the sheer range of environments one could find in the galaxy.

“Filters ready,” the computer said. “Eleven hundred possible environmental conditions support UV-based visual communication.”

“That’s... a lot of locations,” Gardner noted with a whistle.

“We should narrow the search to locations where UV communication isn’t just possible, but necessary,” Belvedere suggested. “Since it requires more energy to conduct, it’s likely that this species evolved in an area where there was significant background energy that they needed to cut through.”

“I concur. You don’t scream when a whisper will do,” Eirell noted.

“Computer, narrow the search parameters to environmental conditions where the UV spectrum would be the optimal form of visual communication,” Hawthorne clarified.

“Two-hundred twenty-three results,” the computer reported.

“Aggregate those results into general classifications,” Hawthorne ordered.

“*Six results,*” the computer reported, pulling all of the possible scenarios into six types of nebulae.

“Now we’re getting somewhere,” Hawthorne said with a sigh. “Alright, let’s work on building a test scenario for the computer to extrapolate the linguistic potential here.”

With their filters ready, Hawthorne and his team took another hour to pull together the data from all of the scans on record of the Farpoint Cnidarians to develop a robust simulation. If the creatures used color to make meaning, they’d brought together everything they could possibly find that might be their vocabulary. Once it was ready, Hawthorne projected all six filters next to one another, overlaid with their best guess of the perception of the cnidarians themselves.

Five of the scenarios played out more or less the same way, but the sixth was wonderous: in the conditions of a stellar nebula, the cnidarian pulsed and sparkled with a myriad of colors in patterns that were imperceptible without the UV filter.

“I really want it to be that one,” Gardner said, pointing to the display of light.

“Well, the universal translator says that there’s at least 50 percent more linguistic information in that environment than in deep space. Twenty percent more than in the other scenarios,” Belvedere reported, looking up from his PADD. “It seems like a good place to start.”

“Computer, how many stellar nurseries are within one-hundred light-years of this vessel?”

“Sixteen,” the computer reported.

“And how many are within 45 degrees of our present course.”

“Six.”

Now *that* was promising.

“Hawthorne to Armstrong.”

“Go ahead, Lieutenant.”

“My team believes that the Farpoint Cnidarians evolved in stellar nurseries. There are six of them in our path,” Hawthorne reported.

“Excellent work. The xenobiology team suspects that the creatures feed on energetic hydrogen from stellar nurseries and brown dwarfs—when they can’t get their tentacles on a warp core, like with the Rubidoux,” Commander Armstrong replied.

“I’ll brief the captain. Keep studying that data in the meantime.”

The thing with linguistic anthropology was that there was very rarely a single correct, unambiguous answer. It was difficult to prove causality in any social science, in particular, since this study intersected with evolutionary biology. But hearing that there was another scientific perspective that pointed to stellar nurseries had Hawthorne’s entire team in good spirits. As they were digging into more of the data, the computer chirped.

“Lieutenants Hawthorne, Belvedere, Taom, and Gardner, report to the deck eight pilots’ briefing room for away duty,” the computer ordered.



The pilots’ briefing room on deck eight of *Arcturus* was packed with officers pulled straight from the middle of the ship’s chain of command—twenty-four assistant and deputy department heads in the lieutenant grades that Tristan Hawthorne recognized from various staff meetings and team-building exercises. Lieutenant Hawthorne was sitting amidst his team in the front row of the theater-style seats, taking detailed notes on his PADD while Staff Captain Alesser detailed their mission.

It wasn’t overly complicated: they were going to be working in six four-person, multi-discipline teams to locate a pod (or swarm, technically, if collective nouns for jellyfish held) of Farpoint Cnidarians that command believed were still vulnerable even after the end of the Lost Fleet Crisis. While the

Dominion ship identified as the one carrying stolen thought makers had left with the others, Fourth Fleet Intelligence was not satisfied that the thought makers were onboard when it did. They likely still had a proxy within the Deneb Sector to continue their mission of enslaving these creatures—which could become powerful warships, thanks to their ability to manipulate matter and energy. They would be starting in the six stellar nurseries identified by Hawthorne’s team.

“Your orders are to perform reconnaissance *only*. If you locate the target, report it to Arcturus immediately, and then avoid detection until we can get there,” Alesser said at the conclusion of his briefing. “You’re our first wave on the runabouts—additional teams are going to be sent out on the shuttles. Assignments are now on your PADDs. Report to your ships. Dismissed,” he said.

Hawthorne’s notes were covered with a manifest. It automatically highlighted the row with his name. He was aboard the Flyer-class runabout *Seginus Flyer* with Lieutenants Ezra Andretti, Adrian Fox, and...

“This has to be a joke,” he muttered when he read Lieutenant Paulo Costa’s name, who was listed as both pilot and mission commander.

Hawthorne and Costa had a long history of not getting along, going back to their Starfleet Academy days. In particular, any away mission they were assigned to together ended up being a disaster. Aboard the old *Arcturus*, they’d been sent together on a shuttle mission to transport a container of terraforming emulsion from an ancient hidden cache to

Starbase Bravo, but an ion storm managed to damage their shuttle and nearly ended up with them being terraformed themselves. Together when they were posted the *Opportunity*, Hawthorne had misidentified a lifeform reading as being sentient, and Costa was so eager to check it out that he charged into an uncharted cave network—and ended up pulling Hawthorne down a 50-meter shaft in the process.

Given their history, assigning Hawthorne and Costa together *had* to be a mistake. Hawthorne leaped out of his seat to catch the first officer before he left the briefing room.

“Staff Captain, can I have a word?” Hawthorne said.

“What is it, Lieutenant Hawthorne?” Alesser replied, turning around with a slight smirk on his face that suggested he knew exactly what Hawthorne was going to say. “We’re on a tight schedule.”

“I’d like to switch to one of the other teams,” Hawthorne said.

“Why?”

“My performance—” Hawthorne started before he had the breath knocked out of him when someone clapped him on the shoulder and put his arm around him. He knew instantly that it was Costa, and he turned around to see the apishly grinning face of his rival. “—would be improved without working with Lieutenant Costa,” he finished.

Hawthorne sidled away from him, brushing his arm off, disgusted with himself for actually liking the gesture. Costa

was even more infuriating because he had the audacity to be incredibly attractive.

“C’mon, Tristan. No need to be so... yourself... about this,” the pilot teased. “I do agree with him, though, sir. He’s a menace to society.”

“And yet the two of you always seem to pull it off in the end,” Alesser replied, shaking his head at the two lieutenants. “Along with Lieutenants Fox and Andretti—who I am sure are equally thrilled to be jammed in a runabout with the two of you for this assignment—you have the skillsets necessary for the job.”

“But—,” both of them started, but the first officer held up his hand.

“And furthermore, lieutenant commander promotions are on the horizon. Showing that you can act like professionals and not teenagers would go a long way towards demonstrating your readiness,” Alesser said.

Hawthorne was speechless; his professional advancement depended on his ability to successfully complete a mission with Paulo Costa. He was sunk.

“Get it done, boys,” the first officer said before leaving the two of them there.

“How bad could it be?” Costa asked with his trademark grin.



Hawthorne ignored Costa and left the briefing room. He crossed the hallway into the locker room, where others were already shedding their duty uniforms for form-fitting exoprene flight suits prescribed by the mission briefing. Everyone's name was already on a locker, and Hawthorne hoped to get changed and onto the runabout before Costa. He was only halfway through pulling on his blue-yoked jumpsuit when Costa came up to the adjacent locker.

"I have a proposal for you, buddy," Costa said after pulling off his uniform jacket and turtleneck with one tug and crumpling it up in a ball at the back of the locker. It didn't matter; the computer would send it to the laundry *anyway*, but the casualness still galled Hawthorne. Hawthorne swallowed involuntarily at the glimpse he got of Costa's abs. "You can hate me all you want in private, but in public, we're going to be best friends."

Hawthorne scoffed. "No one will believe that, Paulo."

"I am handsome, charming, and, all around, a very likable guy," Costa countered. "You're uptight, British, and blond. Opposites attract. Best friends tease each other all the time. It's very believable."

"How about we start by staying out of each other's way and acting like professionals," Hawthorne suggested.

"That might be enough, but I have no intention of not getting that promotion. We have to go all out, T.," Costa replied. He reached over to fasten Hawthorne's jumpsuit for

him, which made the other lieutenant's nostrils flare with interest. "Truce?"

"Fine. Truce. You're infuriating," Hawthorne muttered.

Costa grinned and clapped him on the shoulder before turning back to his locker.

"I have one request, though."

"Seems fair."

"My name is Tristan, not 'buddy,' or 'champ' or 'T.,' and I'd appreciate it if you'd use it," Hawthorne said, his posture straightening as he pulled himself to his full height.

"Oh. Yeah. Totally reasonable. I didn't realize it bothered you. I wasn't actually trying to mess with you," Costa replied, sounding sheepish for the first time in Hawthorne's memory. It almost sounded genuine, and for a moment, Hawthorne thought about retracting his request. "You've got it, Tristan," he said.

"Paulo," Hawthorne replied, with a curt nod as he left the locker room, so in his head about Costa that he brushed by Lieutenants Fox and Andretti who'd arrived to change as well.

Hawthorne didn't stop walking until he found the stairs down from the briefing room in the center of the shuttlebay tower to the deck, where the ship's four *New Atlantic* and *Flyer*-class runabouts were being prepped for take-off. The *Seginus Flyer* had barely cleared the elevator shaft and lowered its boarding ramp before the science officer charged up the gangway to take his seat at the science station in

the cockpit. It was going to be a long trip—literally and metaphorically—and he was eager to get it over with as soon as possible. Pretending to like Paulo Costa would take every ounce of his meager reserves of patience, if past were prologue.

## Chapter II: Crew Dynamic

Cadet Paulo Costa had spent the majority of his life in Chicago on Earth, other than occasional trips up to Spacedock with his fathers. For the prior two years, he'd been at Starfleet Academy's flagship campus in San Francisco, which had been something of an adjustment for his Midwest sensibilities—Lake Michigan was for all practical purposes an inland sea, but living on its shores was completely different from living on the banks of the Pacific Ocean—but Mellstoxx III was an entirely new world with strange smells, sights, and textures to experience. After a grueling en-route training cruise aboard the starship *Ramilles*, he had just a few hours to explore before his entire cohort was expected to report in for their inspection at the beginning of their service with Cadet Squadron Bravo.

Costa knew about half of the cadets he'd travelled with well, but he decided to strike off on his own. The Mellstoxx III campus was situated on a wide plain that abutted an amethyst sea on one side and the foothills of mountains on the other three sides, which gave it perfect natural boundaries that kept it separate enough from the rest of the Betazoid colony that the cadets would stay contained. Naturally, Costa headed up straight into the hills. It wasn't long before the paved pathways of the Academy campus became less and less paved and he stumbled onto one of the obstacle courses used to test physical fitness. After flight training, running and jumping through courses like that were probably Costa's favorite part of the academy curriculum because it gave him a chance to show off.

As luck would have it, he'd have a chance to show off right then and there.

“Hey! Can you help us?” came a shout from the top of one of the wooden towers that comprised the obstacle course.

Costa jogged over and saw four Andorians on the top of the fifteen-meter structure. Unlike the rest of the wooden structures in the area, it seemed like it was more for observing the rest of the area and not meant to be something that cadets would interact with, let alone climb.

“Are you okay?” Costa shouted up to them.

“We’re fine, but we can’t get down. The ladder fell off and we don’t have any safety equipment to climb down,” one of the Andorians, a man, replied.

Glancing around, Costa saw the remains of a metal ladder that had not only fallen off of the tower but slid down into a training trench. It still looked more or less intact.

“I see it. Hold on!”

Without waiting for a response, Costa charged down into the trench, scrambling down over the embankment and getting his boots and uniform dirty in the process. He found the ladder, which he quickly noticed seemed to be cut rather than simply broken; the connection points were cleanly separated from whatever had held them onto the tower. There wasn’t time to think about that, though. He grabbed it and it was a struggle, even with the light-weight alloy it was made of, given its length. He managed to manhandle it up over the bank without bending it and got it up to where the Andorians were waiting.

“I’ll hold it from here,” Costa volunteered, once the ladder had made contact with the top of the tower.

The Andorians proceeded down one by one, providing more stability with their combined grip on the ladder as they did so. The show of cooperation gave Costa a slight tingle in his heart, as it meant that he was participating in one of the truest beliefs of Starfleet: that we are stronger together. Not wanting to confuse others, they took the ladder back down and laid it next to the tower when all four Andorians had been rescued.

“Thanks for the assist, Cadet—?”

“Cadet Paulo Costa. Just transferred today from Earth. I’m starting my third year,” Costa replied.

“Our Andorian names are complicated, so I go by ‘D,’ and he’s ‘C,’ and the two ladies are ‘A,’ and ‘B,’” one of the Andorian men said, with a grin. “We’re all fourth years. And before you ask, no, we’re not a bonded quadrad. We’re just good friends,” he teased, with a wink.

“I wasn’t gonna ask, but that’s good to know,” Costa replied, biting his lip slightly. He pointed to the ladder. “That didn’t fall off. It was sheered off.”

“The Human is right,” ‘B,’ said, scanning it with her tricorder. “Plasma cutters.”

The five of them looked up to the top of the tower and saw two small cylinders near to where the ladder was supposed to join with the observation platform.

“Makes sense,” ‘D,’ said. “They sent us up here to suggest revisions to the course. So, they cut off the ladder to make us figure out how to get back down. That was the real test.”

“So, did I just help you cheat?!” Costa asked.

“Doubtful. We inspired a younger cadet and spurred him into action. That was our solution,” ‘D,’ replied, with a chuckle. “Thanks for the help. Want to walk with us back to campus?”

Costa walked, talked, and flirted with (all four) of the Andorians on their way back to the Academy. By the time they passed into the main campus, it was nearly time for the inspection. He said his good-byes (and exchanged a few comms frequencies) and then jogged off to the parade field where the rest of his fellow third-years were waiting for him. He was regaling his friends with his story of triumphant rescue when he noticed someone he’d never seen before out of the corner of his eye.

This creature had tawny blond hair coiffed perfectly and ocean-blue eyes that shone even from ten meters away. Patrician cheekbones and pouty lips completed the package of someone that Costa immediately regretted not knowing much earlier in his life. He was drop-dead gorgeous. The pout turned into more of a snarl without warning, though, and the blond cadet marched up to their Vulcan squadron leader and said something that Costa couldn’t hear before tromping back to his spot with a glare. Costa interpreted it as just a coincidence—or maybe a reaction to his staring—and went about his business.



Once the inspection proceeded, Costa quickly found himself under the appraisal of the Vulcan captain, Solek.

“Cadet, your boots are scuffed and your uniform is dirty. Remain here after the other cadets are dismissed,” Solek said, not waiting for Costa’s explanation before passing on.

A few minutes later, Costa heard, “Cadet Hawthorne, your uniform is immaculate. Your collegiality uses something to be desired. Remain here after the other cadets are dismissed.”

Once the other cadets were dismissed, it was just Solek, Costa, and Hawthorne. The Vulcan made a motion with his hands and the two cadets moved to stand at attention right next to one another.

“Cadet Costa, you are in a state of undress and will run ten laps around the parade field as disciplinary calisthenics,” the captain said. “Cadet Hawthorne, you have subjected your fellow cadet to punishment for an offense that neither impacted you nor required a report. You will run five laps around the parade field as disciplinary calisthenics,” he added. “Dismissed.”

Costa and Hawthorne looked at each other in shock, before starting out on a run along the perimeter of the parade field. Ten laps would be something like nine thousand meters or nearly ten kilometers. It wasn’t exactly a fun run, but it was a little bit short of a death march. Costa considered himself to be in excellent shape, so he was a little surprised that Hawthorne could keep up with him. What kept him running at top speed, though, was the knowledge that this blond cadet had tried to

get him disciplined for absolutely no reason. The two of them didn't know each other, and yet Hawthorne had violated the basic tenant of Academy life that cadets should stick together—in Starfleet, we are stronger together.

Both cadets were gasping for breath when they finished their punishment, collapsing at Captain Solek's feet. The Vulcan complimented them on their times before leaving.

“Costa, I'm—,” Hawthorne started.

“A blond, British *pendejo*,” Costa spat before leaving his fellow cadet there to languish on the field.

In the eight years since that moment, they had not only managed to end up on the same starships, but their teachers and commanding officers had felt it appropriate to continue to push Costa and Hawthorne into the same assignments. They always got the task done, but there was usually some sort of disaster or blow-up along the way. Costa had never been able to figure out in the intervening time what exactly he had done to deserve the scorn he got from Hawthorne.



*Stardate 2401.4*

Costa had always liked the Delta-class runabouts, because they put the pilot front and center in the nose. The ones in use aboard the *Arcturus* retained the physical yoke controls on the steering column but replaced the other Captain Proton-inspired baubles from Tom Paris's original design with standard holographic interfaces. Even in an era of real-time haptic

feedback, he liked the way it made him feel like he was really in control of the craft.

“Attention all hands, this is your captain speaking. Welcome aboard the *Seginus Flyer* for our non-stop service to the Deneb Zeta Seven Stellar Nursery. Our flight time will be approximately 26 hours, 43 minutes at a comfortable cruising speed of Warp 7,” Costa started, tapping the all-call button so that Hawthorne and Fox could hear him from the aft compartment. He’d spent a lot of time on the holodeck, and particularly loved old simulations of airliners on Earth. “In preparation for departure, please take your seats and ensure that your tray tables are in their up and locked positions. Prepare the cabin for departure.”

“*Aye-aye, captain, sir,*” came Hawthorne’s immediate and sarcastic response.

As Costa was completing the last pre-flight checks, the rear hatch to the flight deck opened, and he turned around to catch a glimpse of Hawthorne taking the forward science station and Fox slipping into the aft engineering station. Andretti had been there the whole time at the tactical/operations station, giving them a full house.

“Mister Hawthorne, if you would be so kind, please secure our departure clearance,” Costa ordered, liking the tiny bit of authority his role gave him over his rival.

“Tower, this is Flyer 2. Requesting departure clearance,” Hawthorne said.

“Clearance granted, Flyer 2. Proceed on departure vector two and maintain impulse power until you have ten kilometers of aft clearance from Arcturus,” the flight control officer on the other end of the line ordered.

“Vector two for ten clicks, confirmed,” Costa replied.

“Happy hunting. Arcturus out.”

“Alright, boys. Let’s find us some space jellyfish,” the pilot announced.

Costa engaged the anti-grav systems, which let the *Seginus Flyer* float above the hanger deck. They were positioned front-and-center behind the massive forcefield that kept the atmosphere within the shuttle bay, in the larger middle division of the ship’s hanger. With a slight nudge to the controls, the thrusters kicked in, and they zoomed aft. Once they’d cleared the forcefield, he engaged the impulse drive, and they sailed between the mothership’s long, gleaming blue nacelles. It didn’t take long for them to clear ten kilometers.

“We’re at a safe distance for warp,” Andretti reported.

“Executing,” Costa announced, to borrow Fleet Captain Lancaster’s ‘warp word.’

Reaching over to the throttle, Costa jumped the *Seginus Flyer* to warp seven, causing the stars to streak past the craft’s large forward viewport. With a few more taps, he locked in the autopilot for their easy cruise to the Deneb Zeta Seven Stellar Nursery.

Hawthorne cleared his throat, and Costa turned in his chair to look at the blond over his shoulder.

“I did just want to mention that the term ‘jellyfish’ is not anatomically or taxonomically appropriate to describe Farpoint Cnidarians. There is no link we’ve established between their evolution and aquatic creatures like jellyfish. More correctly, they should be called Farpoint Cnidarianoids, but that name is even less transparent than the one that was selected,” the scientist noted.

Costa avoided rolling his eyes just barely. “I’ll keep that in mind.”

“It’s just... if we think of them like jellyfish, we may expect them to *behave* like jellyfish, and that would be a mistake,” Hawthorne clarified; there was something almost desperate in his blue eyes that Costa interpreted as him attempting to signal that he wasn’t correcting just for its own sake.

“That’s... a good point,” Costa replied, though he still thought that Hawthorne’s absurdly perfect and square jawline was quite punchable. “Maybe we should all review the file during our trip.”

“I’ve already read it,” Andretti said, simply. “I’m surprised you haven’t.”

“Yeah, I was familiarizing myself with the flight plan,” Costa replied. He hadn’t interacted much with Andretti, but he seemed like a killjoy. “We have thirteen hours to kill and the

ship's on autopilot. I'm going to the back to have some lunch and read the dossier. The rest of you are welcome to join me."

"So, all jellyfish are cnidarians but not all cnidarians are jellyfish?" Costa asked, peering over his mostly-eaten empanadas to where Hawthorne was sitting across the table with a grilled cheese sandwich.

The *Segnius Flyer*'s aft mission module had a table that rose from under a thin cover in the floor to provide the crew with space to eat and study. When they were ready to go to bed, they'd have to spread camping mattresses out on the deck plating, though. There was a module with bunks they could have swapped in, but evidently, the command staff were willing to sacrifice crew comfort to get the runabouts launched as soon as possible.

It was about an hour after their departure, and all four of the lieutenants were gathered in the aft compartment. Costa and Hawthorne were sitting across from each other, as were Fox and Andretti. While Costa and Hawthorne had replicated meals, Andretti was reading a book on his PADD, and Fox had set up a holographic terminal to work on some sort of coding project. Costa could hear the strains of Klingon acid punk through the other lieutenant's audio earbuds, and he was occasionally puffing on a vape pen containing Orion snake leaf.

"Correct," Hawthorne replied, glancing up at Costa. "Just like all Humans are vertebrates but not all vertebrates are Humans."

Costa nodded. “So, if they’re animals... Aren’t you a linguist?” he asked.

“For the thousandth time, Paulo, I am a *linguistic anthropologist*,” Hawthorne replied, a little sharply, before glancing between the two other lieutenants he was supposed to pretend to be nice in front of. He took a breath. “They resemble animals, but their behavior and telepathic ability suggests that the Farpoint Cnidarians aren’t just sapient, they’re fully self-aware and communicative. There’s every reason to believe they have some form of society, which is why I’m here.”

“So, if we find them, will you be able to talk to them?”

“Maybe,” Hawthorne replied, blushing slightly.

“Maybe?!” Costa asked. “That’s not very reassuring.”

“It’s all just theory until we put it into practice. The number of encounters with these creatures is in the single digits, after all. It’s not like we have a massive data set to go on,” Hawthorne replied, glaring across the table at him.

Costa nodded. “Right. And you’re here in case they don’t like what we have to say,” he said, looking at Andretti, a tactical officer.

“Sure, if you want to be reductive,” Andretti replied, putting his PADD down. “What’s more likely than a miscommunication is running into whatever ship has the thought-makers we have been tracking, though,” he clarified.

“Can’t quite figure out why he’s here, though,” the tactical officer said, nodding over to Lieutenant Fox.

Fox glanced up. He took a deep hit of his vape pen before exhaling a cloud of the acrid vapor across the table. “I can hear you. I’m here because I developed the algorithm we’re going to use to counter the thought-maker signal. I’m a computer genius,” he said.

“Do you have to do that in here?” Hawthorne asked.

“I’m allowed to,” Fox said, doing it again. “It’s a free country.”

Hawthorne started coughing, and Costa felt a strange sense of protectiveness over the blond lieutenant in his gut. It was a feeling like ‘only I get to bully him!’ He grappled with that for a moment before remembering their stratagem: they had to pretend to like each other in the interests of a smooth mission. Hawthorne started to scoff.

“I’m sure Tristan didn’t mean to intrude on your civil liberties,” Costa said before Hawthorne could escalate. “We’ve all got to get along in this tiny box for at least a day.”

Fox rolled his eyes. “It helps me think.”

“Well, it clearly doesn’t help him think,” Costa replied.

“Fine. I’ll keep my delinquent vapors out of your boyfriend’s face,” Fox conceded. He grabbed his pen and dialed the temperature down so that they could all see it at the



table. “It doesn’t work as well, but you won’t be able to see it or smell it.”

“Thank you,” Hawthorne said. “And I’m not his boyfriend,” he added, snatching up his plate and recycling it before moving back to the forward component.

Costa watched Hawthorne leave and felt a pang of guilt.

“I thought that stuff was supposed to mellow you out,” Costa noted.

“It does for some people,” Fox said with a shrug. “This is why they keep me in the computer ops center, though. I don’t go on away missions or talk to people.”

“Yeah, I got that part,” Costa replied. “I’m going forward.”

Costa recycled his lunch and then returned to the forward section of the runabout where he found Hawthorne back at the science station. In the time he’d known him, he’d never thought of Hawthorne as someone who was able to conceal his emotions with great ease—the frown he had was unmistakable. It couldn’t be easy for him to seem to be constantly walking into situations where he came across as the bad guy and Lieutenant Fox had been out of line.

“He’s just... socially stunted,” Costa said, leaning on the side of the console.

“I thought you’d be happy that your data set proving I am insufferable was expanding,” Hawthorne quipped. “Though, I

think he believed that you do not, in fact, hate me, so that was some excellent acting.”

“I don’t *hate* you,” Costa replied, his voice softening.

“Please do not patronize me. I need to make sure every single sensor cluster is calibrated correctly,” Hawthorne said sharply.

In that moment, the small well of sympathy he’d built up for Hawthorne evaporated. Costa let out a silent exhale through his nose before leaving the science station and going back down to the flight controls. It was going to be a very, very long mission if this dynamic kept up.

## Chapter III: Narrowing In

Redundant star system surveys were one of the many exciting tasks passed on to the aging exploratory cruiser Arcturus throughout the latter few decades of her service. The old Ambassador-class vessel had seen a lot in her day, but by the time Tristan Hawthorne was serving on her, she was in her twilight days. As a linguistic anthropologist, much of his time was spent analyzing findings forwarded from other ships on more exciting assignments than his own. Imagine his surprise, then, to be called for an away mission.

They beamed down to a barely habitable Class L moon orbiting a gas giant last surveyed in the era of Those Old Scientists like Pike, Kirk, and Spock. It was a rough trek in breathing gear through a cave system that had gone unstudied last time, but after several hours of spelunking, they found an ancient cache that matched the material signature of a Generation Ship recovered by the starships Cerritos and Merced over a decade prior.

While they had a partial language map for the race that left the cache behind, it was Hawthorne's work that led them to uncover a cylinder of the mysterious terraforming emulsion which had nearly led to the destruction of the Merced.

“The cylinder is stable enough to transport to the ship, Commander,” Hawthorne reported to their team leader, Larus Alesser. “We should get it back to a starbase, though. I don't think we have the equipment onboard to keep it in stasis, let alone study it.”

“We’ll get you a pilot, then, Ensign,” Alesser replied.

“Me?!” Hawthorne exclaimed.

“You discovered the sample. You should be the one to keep the chain of custody back to Starbase Bravo.”

Mollified by that thought, Hawthorne beamed with the container of terraforming emulsion back to the Arcturus, where engineering quickly outfitted one of their equally ancient Type 7 shuttles for the courier run. Just as Hawthorne was locking everything down, someone charged up the boarding ramp, and he looked up to see Ensign Paulo Costa.

“You,” the two of them said together. “Unbelievable,” they added, still in sync.

“I’m ready to go whenever you are,” Hawthorne said.

“Good—let’s get this over with, blondie,” Costa said.

It was a two-day trip from where the Arcturus was conducting her survey back to Starbase Bravo. The two ensigns spent that trip in stony silence, which was preferable to the bickering that they constantly did back in their Academy days. Though they had known each other for over three years by that point and barbs had been traded by both sides equally, Hawthorne knew that he was responsible for starting the feud in the first place and it was painful that he couldn’t figure out some stratagem to end it once and for all. Anytime he thought too hard about that, though, Costa did something to earn a new wave of his ire.

To save on acrimony, Hawthorne spent the majority of their trip in the aft compartment, monitoring the containment field that held the terraforming emulsion in near-stasis for the journey. They were just barely halfway through their two day journey when Hawthorne was knocked to the floor as the red alert lights turned on and he felt the shuttle being pulled out of warp. The containment field generator was sparking and Hawthorne had to drag himself back to the control panel, where he was able to separate the field's power supply from the shuttle's and engage a self-contained battery backup. Whatever was going on had ionized the propulsion system.

“Get up here!” Costa shouted over the comm.

“What’s going on?” Hawthorne asked, having to brace himself on whatever he could grab to move up to the cockpit and slide into the seat next to Costa’s.

“We’ve been clipped by the edge of an ion storm,” Costa explained. “How’s the cargo?”

“I separated the containment field from the shuttle’s systems so it’s stable. I’m fine, too,” Hawthorne snapped. “Communications are down.”

“So is almost everything else. I’m trying to level us out with manual control,” Costa said.

Alarms continued to blare and Hawthorne tapped into the remote sensors in the aft compartment. His eyebrows raised immediately when he saw spiking levels in the containment field. He’d averted catastrophe by separating the power

systems, but there was now no longer sufficient power to keep the field intact for very long.

“We’re losing containment. I need to seal the aft compartment and flood it with parizene gas, or we’re going to be terraformed in about 3 minutes,” Hawthorne said, struggling to his feet to go to the bulkhead.

“I’ll do what I can to stabilize the shuttle,” Costa said while Hawthorne worked.

Hawthorne found the emergency override and established a forcefield between the two sections of the shuttle. Just as Costa brought the shuttle to station-keeping, Hawthorne activated the emergency gas dispersal valve. His heart was pounding as he flounced back into the co-pilot’s station.

“Good work,” they said at the same time.

Genuinely impressed by Costa’s talents, Hawthorne allowed himself to chuckle.

“Well, good job saving us. But without comms or engines, we’re pretty much stuck here,” Hawthorne noted.

“I guess we’re about to figure out how well you were paying attention in basic engineering, T.,” Costa said. “Considering most of the engineering supplies are on the other side of that door, I guess we’ll have to make do with what’s up here.”

It took the two ensigns several hours to make the necessary repairs to limp close enough to Starbase Bravo for their

emergency transponder to be picked up. They were swooped up by one of the frigates guarding the Mellstoxx sector within minutes and delivered to home base. The deck officer barely batted an eye at their story before loading them into a brand-new Type-12 shuttle and sending them back toward the Arcturus.

The begrudging sense of respect they developed for one another during that mission evaporated as soon as they were back home. Second Officer Alesser was the one who had the responsibility for taking their report, and they were in his office for about 20 seconds before the finger-pointing started.

“If he’d been in the cockpit, I could have had some advance warning of the storm,” Costa accused.

“If I had been in the cockpit, I wouldn’t have had a chance to separate the containment field before it was ionized!” Hawthorne replied.

The bickering spiraled as if there wasn’t a senior officer present at all.

“Enough!” Alesser shouted. “I was about to say that I’d entered commendations in both of your jackets, but clearly you also need a note about your people skills. Dismissed!”

The two ensigns scrambled out of the second officer’s office.

“Stay away from me!” they exclaimed.

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By 2401, Hawthorne and Costa had long since stopped speaking in unison in moments of stress, but the bickering hadn't stopped. Because of the patronage of various officers, they seemed to end up on the same ship and in close quarters more often than not. Hawthorne took their situation as proof that God definitely existed and she was as cruel as they came.

Thankfully, the eleven hours after lunch continued without incident or much in the way of conversation. Andretti would occasionally make small talk and almost seemed sweet, but Hawthorne got the sense that their fellow lieutenant was bored by their assignment. Fox kept to himself in the aft compartment, likely continuing to get blazed out of his mind on snake leaf—at least to whatever level of stimulation he was permitted by the regulations.

“Eyes front. We’re about to drop out of warp,” Costa said from his station on the lower level.

Fox was barely in his seat bringing with him the stench of an Orion flea market before Hawthorne had something much more interesting to focus on: the streaking stars in front of the runabout were replaced with the spiraling illuminated clouds of a stellar nursery.

“Beginning search pattern,” Costa said.

“Sensors ready,” Hawthorne confirmed.

Based on the simulations they had run, Hawthorne could tell they were in the right place to find Cnidarians based on the

way their color patterns would look in this environment. They'd be able to stand out to one another like blazing bonfires against white snow.

“No threats in the area,” Andretti reported. “Though, obviously, we have limited visibility into the nebula.”

“We'll be careful, then,” Costa said.

In other contexts, localizing Farpoint Cnidarians to any given area would make them easy to find because of their energy patterns, but the stellar nursery had enormous amounts of background energy, and they were about to search through hundreds of thousands of cubic kilometers for a comparative needle in a haystack.

They went through the standard search pattern for hours before it was Fox of all people who spoke up.

“I'm reading a signal that looks like the one put out by the Ferengi thought makers,” Fox said.

“We've found them, then. We should signal the Arcturus immediately,” Andretti said.

“All we've found so far is a signal. It could be a decoy,” Hawthorne reminded him.

“Agreed. We need to see something before we call in the cavalry. Send me the coordinates, Fox.”

“Done.”

“Let’s go find us some space cnidarianoids,” Costa said, turning around to wink at Hawthorne in a way that made the scientist feel some very confused sensations, as it proved the mindless himbo had actually been listening to what he was saying earlier.

“I recommend we minimize our power signature, at least,” Andretti said.

“Do it.”

Slowly but surely, the Segnius Flyer navigated through the stellar nursery to the coordinates that Fox had picked up. The immense amount of matter and energy in the region made it difficult to keep the craft on course without expending so much power that they’d either risk draining their fuel cells or giving away their position. Hawthorne had to admit that Costa was demonstrating a tremendous amount of skill in keeping their approach stealthy, though he wouldn’t have said that out loud. As they came around a dense gas pocket, Hawthorne gasped.

“That’s definitely a Farpoint Cnidarian,” he said. “But... Something is very wrong,” he said.

In front of them, there was the tell-tale shape of a Farpoint Cnidarian, but it was glowing red, as well as pulsing green in an almost random set of patterns across its ‘skin.’ Hawthorne couldn’t identify the nature of the pulses, but it was nothing like the creature’s natural language. There was little time to study it, though, as something even more ominous was just on the edges of their view: a ship.

“Threat vessel detected of unknown configuration. It has substantial armaments,” Andretti replied.

“It has the thought makers. I’m sure of it,” Fox confirmed.

On his own screen, Hawthorne reviewed the passive sensor logs detailing the four-winged, claw-like craft. It resembled some Son’a designs he’d seen before, but this was clearly something novel. Isolytic weapons, plasma torpedoes, and a dozen other things he couldn’t identify.

“We need backup,” Hawthorne said, his heart pounding. “Though, I’m not sure even the Arcturus could take this thing out.”

“What’s it doing?” Costa asked.

“It’s controlling the Cnidarian,” Andretti said.

The question was too obvious, so Hawthorne looked back at his sensors and refocused them on the cnidarian. The creature was making something or lots of somethings. Components for something huge were pouring out of an aperture on its lower surface.

“It’s building something,” Hawthorne clarified.

“Yeah. We need to signal home. Hold tight,” Costa replied before doing a swift loop and heading them straight out of the nebula to summon help.

As they moved out of the nebula, Hawthorne could not help but feel that the green lights they had seen were familiar

somehow. They didn't call to mind anything linguistic that he could think of, but they were a clue that was tugging at something just beneath his conscious mind's ability to access. He hoped that the smarter minds left back aboard the Arcturus would be able to solve it—or at the very least free that creature from its obvious servitude.

## Chapter IV: Tête-à-Tête

With three years of active Starfleet service under his belt, Lieutenant J.G. Tristan Hawthorne was hitting his stride as Head of Linguistics aboard a deep space explorer, the *Opportunity*, commanded by Commodore Elizabeth Hayden. His training in linguistic anthropology was geared towards understanding things about cultures through their language, so it was a fulfilling challenge to interact with actual aliens in live negotiations. They'd just finished a challenging first contact mission with a species that used simultaneous verbal and manual communication, and the lieutenant was finishing his notes in the *Opportunity's* linguistics lab. In the corner of his mind, he heard the door to the lab open, but he didn't look up.

"I would have thought you'd be celebrating your success in the bar tonight," came the distinctive voice of Commodore Hayden.

Hawthorne was startled, and he leaped out of his chair to come to a respectful pose for his commanding officer.

"At ease, Lieutenant," she said with a kind smile. "I appreciate your diligence, but you've earned some downtime."

"Thank you, ma'am," Hawthorne replied. "I'm not very good at parties, and it's quiet down here now, so it seemed like a good time to finish annotating my notes."

Hayden nodded and went to lean against one of the analysis tables, crossing her arms as she looked at Hawthorne.

“You may already know this, but I was a science officer in another life. A botanist,” Hayden said. “I was impressed with your performance during the negotiations. You used the evidence we had available to us to navigate a tricky communication task without much time to develop a theory or run through simulations.”

“Thank you, ma’am. It was... invigorating, as my work is usually more second or third-hand analysis,” Hawthorne said, unsure why the Commodore had come down to see him. “I did know that about you—that you were a scientist. I’ve seen some of your papers in the database.”

“Where do you see yourself in ten years, Mr. Hawthorne?” Hayden asked.

Hawthorne froze. He didn’t know how to answer that question. He liked being a science officer, and he wanted to be a *really good* science officer, but his ambitions were predominantly intellectual, not professional. In ten years, he’d be in his mid-thirties, which seemed so far away.

“Ideally, I’d like to continue to serve on a starship like this one. I’d hope that in ten years, I’d at least be a senior officer,” Hawthorne said, realizing that he lacked any confidence as he said that.

“It wasn’t meant to be a trick question,” Hayden said, smiling again. “I see a lot of potential in you. But I wanted to give you some advice: if you want to stay competitive with your peers, you must come out of the lab more often. Go on away missions. And, yes, socialize. Your commanding officers



need to see your leadership potential, not just your technical acumen,” the commodore said.

Hawthorne’s heart sunk a little bit. He rarely went on away missions because there was often no field work suitable for a linguistic anthropologist to do. He kept to himself and focused on his studies.

“Yes, ma’am,” he said.

“I’m putting you on one of the survey teams for our upcoming mission to the Zeta Asteropes system as a thank you for your good work during the negotiations,” Hayden said. “I want to give you a chance to show Commander Lancaster what you can do.”

“I... thank you, ma’am,” Hawthorne said. He didn’t know why she was looking out for him, but a smile spread across his face as he thought about the chance to stand out from the crowd. He cleared his throat. “And, um, perhaps I’ll put a pin in these notes for the evening.”

“Officer thinking, Mr. Hawthorne. Carry on,” Hayden said, returning the smile and leaving Hawthorne alone in the lab.

Two weeks later, Hawthorne had his utility belt, phaser, and tricorder ready and a full-on scientific sample kit slung over his shoulder. He walked up the boarding ramp of the Type-11 shuttle his team would use for the mission to Zeta Asteropes and stowed his gear in the cargo compartment. He walked into the cockpit and was floored to see, once again, Lieutenant J.G. Paulo Costa sitting in the pilot’s seat.

“You,” they said in unison, scowling at one another.



*Stardate 2401.4*

Three years on and six years into their service together, Hawthorne and Costa now found themselves in a similar situation: together on a small vessel for a mission. However, this mission was much more important than a simple planetary survey. After pulling out of the nebula to inform the *Arcturus* that they had located the Farpoint Cnidarian and an unknown alien vessel within the planetary nursery, the *Seginus Flyer* had been sent back inside to monitor the situation until the mothership could arrive.

With nearly all of their systems turned off, they were unlikely to be detected, but it still made it impossible for Hawthorne to sleep. He was staring up from a field mattress to the ceiling of the aft compartment in a row with the other three men assigned to the team. While they rested, the computer was recording everything the cnidarian did. Hawthorne wondered what their chances of success were: the alien vessel controlling the creature looked incredibly tough, and the creature itself would be a tremendous threat on its own.

In any case, a sense of impending dread wasn't all that was keeping Hawthorne awake. Their team dynamic was strange. Lieutenant Fox seemed to drift between being bored by their assignment and resentful of being taken away from his computer session, all while hunkering down with his snake leaf vape and his portable computer; Hawthorne was glad that he

was fully asleep and thus not annoying anyone. Meanwhile, Lieutenant Andretti seemed nice enough but also very closed off and, frankly, boring—not someone Hawthorne really could hold a conversation with.

That left Paulo Costa. They were still bickering, but it was actually somewhat entertaining. With Fox, he got the sense that his fellow lieutenant was actually either socially inept or trying to cause offense, which made Costa's teasing seem a lot more pleasant by comparison. Hawthorne rolled over on his side and saw Costa's bare torso faintly lit by the blue glow of the computer equipment in the room. His stomach was rising and falling gently, and Hawthorne felt frustrated that someone so annoying could also be so ripped.

Knowing he'd never be able to sleep, Hawthorne slipped off his mattress and quietly stepped across the aft compartment to enter the cockpit. It was colder in there because of the large viewports, so he buried his hands inside the pocket of his science division blue hoodie. Walking down to the flight deck, he found Costa's red-trimmed field uniform draped over the back of the seat. He slipped into the seat and pulled his knees up to his chest to curl up comfortably.

“Computer, status update,” he said, glancing at the displays around the flight controls.

“The situation is unchanged,” the computer replied.

From their position, Hawthorne couldn't see the cnidarian or the alien vessel. The runabout had stopped just at the edge of its passive sensor range so they could minimize their chances

of being discovered. Now, with most systems offline, they were waiting in the cold and the dark. As Hawthorne got comfortable, he inadvertently rubbed his face on Costa's jacket. It was artificial leather and shouldn't have a scent, but it smelled warm and woody from whatever scent the pilot had been wearing—not unpleasant at all. One of the burdens of being attracted to men was that sometimes the most attractive ones were also the most infuriating; having a crush on Costa was one of Hawthorne's greatest frustrations with himself.

As Hawthorne was brooding about life's little ironies, he drifted off. He was nearly asleep in the pilot's seat when he heard the aft hatch slide open, bringing him back to being fully awake. He turned around in the chair to see Costa moving across the forward compartment to stand at the top of the ramp down into the cockpit with his hands on the two railings, blocking Hawthorne's possible escape route and leaving him feeling like he'd got his hand caught in the cookie jar.

"I wasn't touching anything," Hawthorne blurted out.

Costa chuckled. "I didn't say you were. I just noticed you were gone and came out to check on you," he said, coming all the way down the ramp to sit on the jumpseat at the secondary console next to the helm; their knees were almost touching. Costa hadn't bothered to grab his shirt on his way out of the aft compartment. "Not *everything* I say to you is an accusation."

"I... You're right," Hawthorne managed. "Your concern is noted. I couldn't sleep, so I came out here to ask the computer for a status update. Nothing's changed out there."

“I can usually sleep through anything, but missions keep me too amped up,” Costa offered. “I’m not great at waiting for things to happen.”

“Paulo, I am absolutely *shocked* to hear that you’re impatient—it’s not like you’ve ever pulled me into an unexplored cave on New Java,” Hawthorne quipped.

Costa rolled his eyes. “That was *one time* and you need to let it go.”

## Chapter V: Détente

The shuttle ride from the *Opportunity* down to the surface of New Java went smoothly. After some initial squabbling, Hawthorne and Costa had settled into a more professional tenor and set to work on their survey mission to the ocean world. While Hawthorne's specialty was social sciences, he was still a fully-trained science officer and found the prospect of a biological survey very stimulating. The island they'd landed on had nothing evident on the surface other than some algae, but after twenty minutes or so, Hawthorne's tricorder began to pick up signs of much more complex life coming from a cave near the center of the island.

"I think there may be sentient life here," Hawthorne told Costa. The pilot's face lit up, and he charged into the cave entrance in defiance of protocol requiring a more thorough preliminary analysis. "Wait!" Hawthorne shouted, running after him.

"We're going to be the team that finds something," Costa replied, stopping short of a drop-off.

Costa wheeled around to grin at Hawthorne, but that turned into a face of shock as he lost his footing. They lunged for each other, and Hawthorne ended up slipping off the shaft's sheer edge just inside the mouth of the cave. Wrapped in Costa's arms, the sensation of falling seemed to go on forever before the two of them landed with a bounce on some squishy, glowing fungus in a chamber deep beneath the surface. Hawthorne was winded, but he could feel that nothing was broken.

“Are you okay?” Hawthorne asked.

“Yeah, yeah. I’m fine,” Costa said as the two of them disentangled from one another.

“Moron! This is why we are supposed to do a thorough scan first!” Hawthorne exclaimed, his concern vanishing when he knew neither of them were injured.

“You’d think the giant hole would have been the first thing you noticed in your scans,” Costa shot back. “I thought you said there was sentient life in here. All I see is this fungus.”

Hawthorne unfolded his tricorder and took a scan of the fungus. It had exactly the same readings as he was picking up on the surface, but as he studied them more closely, he realized that he’d misinterpreted the data. The only life he was picking up was the glowing fungus that had broken their fall.

“I may have made a mistake,” Hawthorne admitted. “But you’re still the reason we’re down here!”

“Stop panicking,” Costa snapped. He tapped his combadge. “Costa to *Opportunity*.”

The badge responded with the error sound.

“Comms are out,” Costa said, sheepishly.

“Yes, you nitwit, because the rocks here are seeped in the same radiation that keeps our transporters from getting a lock. That is why I am panicking!” Hawthorne shouted. He scanned



the chamber again and then pointed at the hole. “That is the only way in or out of here.”

Costa stepped closer to Hawthorne and put his hands firmly right above Hawthorne’s elbows. “Relax, princess. We’re going to figure a way out of this, and then you can yell your pretty little lungs out once this is over. Agreed?”

Hawthorne nodded. “Agreed,” he said, almost embarrassed at how readily he complied with Costa’s order.

The two of them could hear faint shouting from up above, but couldn’t make out distinct voices thanks to the depth of the shaft and the poor acoustics. Hawthorne hoped that the rest of their team would be smart enough not to also fall down. After some bickering, they settled on a plan to use their phasers to cut a crude staircase into the sides of the shaft. It took an hour and a half to clamber back up to the surface, barely speaking and carefully supporting each other in essentially an extended side-hug. They collapsed exhausted and drenched in sweat on the rocky floor of the cave entrance just as they heard another shuttle landing.

“We are so fucked,” Costa muttered, looking up.

Hawthorne followed his gaze to the highly polished boots of Commander Michael Lancaster, then the first officer of the *Opportunity*, and even more of a martinet than he was as a fleet captain. Lancaster had repelling gear and a full security team, as well as a scowl.

“Are either of you injured?”

“No, sir,” the two lieutenants replied, scrambling to their feet.

“From what your team said, you ran in here like first-year cadets. Explain,” Lancaster said.

The two lieutenants went back and forth, interrupting one another and jostling for some way of making the story not seem like it was their fault.

“I thought I detected sentient life—”

“—And I didn’t want to lose that signal—”

“—So he ran in here—”

“—But he didn’t scan the cave—”

“—So Costa ended up pulling me down with him—”

“—And then Hawthorne’s sentient life turned out to be glowing fungus.”

Lancaster held up his hand. “Enough. I’m extremely disappointed in both of you. You’ve wasted a lot of people’s time,” the commander said, with obvious disdain. “We’ve been able to cut through the transporter interference with pattern enhancers. Beam back to the ship and I’ll finish this myself.”

Yet again, the two lieutenants had managed to let their animus towards one another land them in hot water with a first officer. The two of them fumed in silence as they walked to the beam-out point, and managed to avoid each other for the rest of their tour on the *Opportunity*. Hawthorne was absolutely

shocked to find out the next year that they'd both been posted to *Arcturus*. That moment on New Java was always at the forefront of Hawthorne's mind when he saw Costa after that, mostly because it had been his *own* failure that had led Costa to act impulsively.

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*Stardate 2401.4*

"I..." Hawthorne faltered, shaken out of his reverie when Costa clicked his tongue. "I never apologized to you for that. I don't even know why I brought it up just now."

Costa laughed, shaking his head in exasperation.

"Well, you brought it up because it lives rent-free in your head, even three years later," he pointed out. "You look at me and can't see past that, or whatever it was at the Academy that made you hate me. You've decided that I'm whatever monster you decided I was, and that was it. No chance for a second shot with you."

"Those are two separate, distinct incidents: I did try, multiple times, to apologize to you for my behavior on Mellstoxx III. You wouldn't hear it," Hawthorne said, his heart twisting into knots at the thought of any aspect of what Costa had said being true.

"Yeah, well, I was angry with you for a long time. You had no reason to report me, and the captain was a Vulcan—he would have noticed my uniform without you saying anything," Costa said. "All out of a desire to suck up."

“No. *No*. That’s not what it was about,” Hawthorne said, leaning closer to him. “It’s because I *knew* that you would get away with it. It wouldn’t have been fair.”

“Guys like me? Pilots? You knew nothing about me.”

Hawthorne rolled his eyes.

“I knew you were tall—”

“We’re the same height.”

“—Handsome—”

“Says Mr. Alabaster Skin, Patrician Nose, and Square Jaw.”

“—And popular,” Hawthorne concluded, battling to get his list in with Costa’s interruptions.

“You think I’m handsome?” they asked in unison.

“I like men, and I have eyes,” Hawthorne muttered. “So, obviously.”

“Back at you,” Costa said, blushing slightly. The thrill of accidentally admitting his attraction and the unusual sight of Paulo Costa being caught off-guard were nearly distracting enough for Hawthorne to lose sight of the purpose of their conversation, but Costa kept talking. “Let me get this straight... you thought I was *so hot* that you decided to try to sabotage my career?”

“That is not how I would put it,” Hawthorne replied. “I made an impulsive decision because you reminded me of a

thousand other men I'd seen skate by in high school while I'd been forced to work hard."

Costa exhaled and put his hands behind his neck, leaning back in the jumpseat. The rhythm of their banter took a turn as he was clearly seething from that comment.

"Well, that's some bullshit. I've had to work for *everything* I've gotten in Starfleet. Did you know I have an actual learning disability, but I still fly starships?" he snapped. "Meanwhile, you're some fucking prince, I'm guessing. You definitely act like one—looking down on the rest of us because everything comes so easily to you."

Hawthorne cleared his throat.

"I didn't know that. And that is also not what I meant. I'm just saying that's how I perceived you at the time. You're obviously quite good at what you do, and I know that now," he tried to explain. He frowned. "I've had to work just as hard as you have, Paulo. Do you think it's easy to keep up with the rest of our class when I've never even been *on* the bridge of this ship?"

Costa's expression softened from a scowl into a frown, which then morphed slowly into a smirk.

"So, just to put it in terms my tiny walnut brain can grasp: the reason you're a jerk to me is because you want my dick so bad that you've got to performatively treat me like shit to cope with having a hardon for a peasant as if we were middle

schoolers and not officers in the most elite space service in the history of civilization?” the pilot asked.

Hawthorne, for once, was left stunned into momentary speechlessness.

“Yes,” the scientist agreed simply. He looked at his hands for a few moments and then up into Costa’s amber eyes. “That is an *infuriatingly* apposite quip, Paulo.”

“And ‘apposite’ means...?” Costa asked, his ignorance sounding credible to Hawthorne for only a split second. “Just kidding—I know it means ‘seductive.’” he added with a wink.

Hawthorne rolled his eyes because of how Costa seemed to be deflecting from their serious conversation with humor but then pinched the bridge of his nose to drive his feeling of irritation away so that he could get back to his point.

“Paulo, I’m sorry I’ve treated you poorly. There’s no excuse,” Hawthorne said. “You’re absolutely right—I’ve been acting like a child.”

“I forgive you, Tristan,” Costa said without hesitation.

“Just like that?”

“A tiny part of me wants to string you along a little, but it takes two to tango, and I know there have been moments where I’ve earned some of—a lot of—the negative feelings you’ve had for me over the years,” the pilot admitted. Of all of the things Hawthorne had thought about Costa over the years, he’d never perceived him to have an ounce of guile or deceit, so he

had every reason to take in that olive branch as genuine. “I’m sorry I never gave you a second chance at the Academy. Letting one moment define a relationship is immature. Can we start over?”

“Agreed,” Hawthorne said, a sense of lightness and relief washing over him.

“Good. I can’t promise I won’t stop teasing you, though. I’ve honestly been pushing your buttons on purpose because you are so beautiful when you’re mad, Your Grace,” Costa added, smirking.

Hawthorne laughed, rolling his eyes at the ridiculousness of that comment. He was still waiting for the other shoe to drop, as he’d built up the dislike the two felt for one another so strongly and concretely in his mind that there was no way Costa could really be so sanguine with all cards now on the table. The scientist cleared his throat and feigned seriousness, deciding to lean into being teased for a change.

“Actually, my lineage has claims to several dukedoms that would have traditionally borne with them the title of ‘your grace,’ but only in terms of agnatic-cognatic primogeniture, and as the younger son, I would have to murder my brother and father for your barb to be accurate,” he said. Costa started to interject, but Hawthorne held up his hand. “However, matrilineally, I am descended from one of the original families that settled Hysperia and still holds princely rank for all dynasts, though my branch of the family doesn’t use that title. If my membership in Starfleet didn’t automatically disqualify me from hereditary titles, and if we were on Hysperian soil, it

would be appropriate to address me as ‘your highness,’ so I must *insist* if you are going to tease me about my heritage that you do it correctly,” he finished.

“As you wish, Your Highness,” Costa replied, affecting a near-perfect impression of Hawthorne’s posh English accent.

“No!” Hawthorne said though he couldn’t stop himself from laughing again. “There is a line, Paulo. You may *not* do the accent.”

“Fair enough,” Costa replied, eyes glimmering with the reflection of the stellar nursery beyond the viewports. He slid a little closer to Hawthorne. “I’m shocked that you just willingly gave me a new button to press, though.”

“I don’t *always* hate it when you’re a pest, Paulo.”

Hawthorne felt his cheeks reddening, so he turned away from Costa towards the expanse of swirling dust beyond the nose of their vessel. While he scrambled to think of something else to say, Costa cupped his cheek in his hand and pulled him back. The touch was warm and unexpected. Before Hawthorne could parse that gesture and fully put it into context, Costa closed the distance between them and planted a kiss on his lips. It was the type of kiss that would have registered as a temporal distortion, for the way Hawthorne was lost in the moment there as the feelings he had for Costa finally came into full resolution. Costa pulled back, and Hawthorne found himself automatically leaning forward to try to catch his lips again.

“Was that okay?” Costa asked.



“Yesverymuch,” Hawthorne managed, his words tumbling out in a jumble of half-formed syllables. “Why did you do that, though? Until a minute ago, we could barely even be civil to one another.”

“Well, we’re starting over, right?”

“Yes, but that’s not an actual answer.”

The pilot smirked, rubbing his thumb along Hawthorne’s cheekbone. That glimmer in his eyes was back, and he took a few moments to compose a reply.

“You seemed like you needed it, and I wanted it. Want *you*, Tristan,” Costa started, which pushed Hawthorne from feeling a slight heat on his skin to fully blushing. “We have no idea what’s going to happen tomorrow. Our bosses have a plan, but no one’s ever had to deal with a situation like this before. So, *carpe diem*, right?”

Their tête-à-tête had driven the mission and what was likely to be a fierce battle out of Hawthorne’s mind entirely. Costa was absolutely right—while all indications were that *Arcturus* would be able to neutralize the threats they faced, this could be the one and only night the two of them might have together.

“I cannot impeach that logic,” Hawthorne agreed. He kissed him back, finding the vulnerability of finally succumbing to his attraction both exciting and terrifying. They broke apart after a few moments. “It’s *infuriating* how good you are at that,” the scientist whispered.

“Yeah? You’re really going to hate me when I’m through with you, then,” Costa said with a glint of fire in his eyes.

The two young men lunged at each other again, hands all over one another in complete disregard for the setting they found themselves in. Costa’s skin was white-hot and unexpectedly soft over his considerable muscles—Hawthorne had no remaining ability to play coy at his sheer lust for his long-time rival, ending up straddling the other man’s thigh as the two of them were finally able to transmute their animus into something productive.

Neither of their brains was in control as Costa pulled Hawthorne’s sweatshirt off and sent it flying over the science station. Now on an equal sartorial footing, Hawthorne was momentarily self-conscious at his slimmer, paler physique laid bare for Costa’s inspection, but that impulse vanished when the other man started kissing the base of his neck and his exposed collarbone. The kisses evolved into Costa’s canines pressing carefully but firmly into Hawthorne’s skin, causing him to grip the pilot’s dark hair to dissuade him from stopping.

Hawthorne let out a gasp of surprise when Costa put a hand in the center of his chest and pushed him into the center seat, the red leather feeling both cold and luxurious on his back.

“What--?”

“Computer, retract the steering column,” Costa ordered, smirking as he swiveled the chair around so that Hawthorne was facing forward. He slipped into the space vacated by the flight yoke between Hawthorne’s legs and the nose of the

runabout. “Still okay?” he asked after kissing him on the lips again.

“Still very okay. But, P-Paulo, maybe we should slow down,” Hawthorne said haltingly. Parts of his rational mind were starting to return to focus, and the risks of being caught and/or moving too quickly and botching an already complex relationship began to set off alarm bells in his head. But he wanted Costa. Desperately. “Or, rather, I think I should clarify that I am not usually this easy,” he hedged.

“We can take this as slowly as you’d like,” Costa said, reassuring through his immediate deference to Hawthorne’s anxieties. “I definitely don’t think that you’re easy, though—considering it’s taken over eight years of torturing each other and ourselves to get this far,” he added, smirking at him.

“Fair point,” Hawthorne agreed. He reached out to caress Costa’s cheek. “This may sound trite, but I’m realizing now that I’ve always felt a sense of trust in you, even though I’ve often found you absolutely infuriating. You’re a very genuine person, even if you are also a menace.”

Costa kissed Hawthorne’s neck, then slid lower to kiss the center of his chest before locking eyes.

“To clarify: are you saying ‘I trust you. Please keep going, Paulo, you amazing stud,’ or ‘I trust you to respect my boundaries, Paulo, and I’d like to cool it and possibly resume our carnal relations at a later date’?” he asked.

“The former,” Hawthorne replied, trying to conceal his amusement at Costa’s self-aggrandizing phraseology.

“Say it, then,” Costa insisted.

The audacity of the request was simply stunning, and Hawthorne found his mouth reflectively tightening into a pout. He hated that he *liked* Costa’s audacity, as this was an instance of alpha male bravado where he actually thought that this man could put his money where his mouth was, so to speak. There was a beat not of hesitation but defiance, and that only made Costa smirk.

“*Americans,*” Hawthorne muttered, rolling his eyes theatrically. “I trust you. Please keep going, Paulo, you amazing stud.”

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A while later, it was late enough at night or early enough in the morning that the two lieutenants were risking being discovered by their crewmates. Hawthorne had a hard time caring about that, though, as the high he’d gotten from Costa was not coming down. Hashing things out had certainly helped defeat his insomnia, though.

“You are the most annoying man in the universe, Paulo Costa,” the scientist noted, Playing with Costa’s dark hair while the two of them were entangled together in the pilot’s seat. “How *dare* you be as talented as you are arrogant?” he teased with mock outrage.

“Yeah?” Costa replied, brushing his thumb along Hawthorne’s bottom lip as he stared at him intensely. “I have to say... A+ on your end, too. No notes. You’re as stunning as you are stuck-up.”

“We would say ‘top marks,’ dear,” Hawthorne replied, though the compliment made his heart race. “I suppose it’s good that we now know a foolproof way to shut each other up for half an hour, too. If this does turn out to be a temporary détente, anyway,” he hedged again.

“Nah... Don’t get me wrong, I’m never going to forget the time I finally got to see your o-face or look at this chair the same way again, but I didn’t make nice just to get you naked,” Costa demurred. “I don’t want this to be a blip.”

“Good. Excellent. I feel the same way,” Hawthorne replied. He chuckled nervously. “Does this make us friends now?”

“No, I have many, many unspeakable things that I still want to do to you that I don’t do with friends,” Costa replied, intriguing Hawthorne somewhat with his vagueness. “There’s too much heat between us. Maybe that’ll cool off, but as of right now, I think we have two options: to be enemies or lovers.”

“Yet again, a succinct, if vulgar, analysis of our situation,” Hawthorne agreed, now grinning ear-to-ear. “I would submit one correction, though: I’ve never considered you to be my enemy. Just my rival.”

Costa chuckled. “It’s not always annoying how precise you are. Rival is more apposite, yeah,” he said. “I, um, think it would be simpler if we didn’t let Fox and Andretti in on... this. I just have a feeling they’d find some way to use it against us.”

“Indeed,” Hawthorne said. “They may start asking impertinent questions like ‘Which surfaces in the command module are safe to touch?’ or ‘Why weren’t we invited?’ and I simply do not wish to deal with that,” he added, mimicking a fairly standard American accent for his imaginations of their colleagues’ sentiments and eliciting a laugh from Costa.

“Hey, wait. Why do you get to do my accent, but I don’t get to do yours?” Costa asked.

“Well, that’s a complex issue, darling, but mainly it boils down to life not being fair,” Hawthorne said, taking pains to belabor the pronunciation of the word ‘issue’ with absolutely the most perfect received pronunciation as he could muster. “I wasn’t even mimicking you, though. Your accent’s a little different, though. Lower. Slower. More costal. And, like, super freakin’ dope, dude. Mad gains and a sick cut, bro,” the blond continued, slipping into a near-perfect rendition of Costa’s Los Angeles accent—at least in his own mind—complete with a flex of his smaller but still toned biceps at the end.

“You are the worst. You’re crazy. I do not sound like that,” Costa replied, though he laughed anyway. “No one’s ever called me ‘darling’ before.”

“Oh. Did... I call you that... Aloud?”

“Yup. You did.”

“Hoisted by my own petard,” Hawthorne muttered, blushing.

“I like it. A lot of people have called me a lot of things, but that’s a first,” Costa said, smiling. “Your Highness,” he added, that smile turning back into a smirk.

## Chapter VI: Liberation



After their unexpected diplomatic overtures on the flight deck, Costa and Hawthorne slipped quietly back into the rear compartment. Costa's heart was racing at how quickly everything he knew about Tristan Hawthorne had changed. Among other things, he felt a pang of regret that they hadn't been able to have a heart-to-heart earlier, as there was so much wasted time between them. The more he thought about their situation, the more he realized that lust had driven a lot of his interactions with the other man, and to accuse him of any sort of adolescent behavior was an obvious case of a man living in a glass house and throwing stones.

When Costa lay down on his field mattress, he'd faced the bulkhead away from Hawthorne. He turned around to get one more glimpse of the scientist's handsome face, but in the few moments they'd been in the room, Hawthorne had gone from an insomniac to being so fast asleep that he was open-mouth drooling on his pillow.

"Wish I had my holocamera," Costa muttered to himself, but that moment of endearing vulnerability and realness was already burned into his memory.

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When Costa awoke, the other three lieutenants were already starting to pack their things up and return the aft compartment to its normal use as a day room. While no one said anything, Andretti was clearly annoyed that he'd slept in later than the rest of them—though, Costa never could tell what exactly Andretti was thinking, as he had one of those faces that just seemed perpetually moody.

“Sorry, guys,” Costa said, hopping up to roll away his bedding.

Once Costa had packed away his things, he stepped over to where Hawthorne was standing by the replicator. He was surprised when the blond handed him a steaming cup of coffee.

“I made an extra cup on accident,” Hawthorne explained, though that hardly seemed credible.

“Someone woke up on the right side of the floor today,” Costa teased, though that was much milder than he would have done the day before.

It took everything the pilot had not to greet Hawthorne with a kiss. He could see a glint in his blue eyes that signaled a similar feeling. Costa settled for a wink before the four of them settled in for a quick breakfast. Unusually, Fox wasn’t trying to cram in an extra coding session and actually seemed to be trying genuinely to make nice.

“I can get in my own little world sometimes. I’m sorry I was rude to you, Hawthorne,” Fox offered, in between bites of quiche Lorraine. “So, yeah.”

Hawthorne offered him a polite smile, which instantly made Costa jealous, as he knew what followed when one apologized to Tristan Hawthorne.

“I appreciate that. Thank you, Fox. I have been accused in the past of being stuck up, conceited, difficult, fragile, and a whole host of other things—mostly by our dear colleague Costa—” Hawthorne started, grinning across the table towards

Costa. “So, I’m sure I earned some rudeness. Did you sleep well, or were you visited by the spirits of Christmases Past, Present, and Future who compelled you to turn over a new leaf?” he teased.

Costa chuckled at how on fire Hawthorne was that morning but disguised it by taking a drink of his coffee. Andretti arched an eyebrow at him from the PADD he was reading.

“Nah, nothing Dickensian. I think it’s a side effect of the ‘Leaf, but I don’t dream,” Fox replied, laughing. Costa did not expect the computer scientist to get that literary reference, as he barely did himself. “Huh. So, saying ‘sorry’ just... works? I should try that more often.”

“Saying sorry is the best. They say it can lead to... great things...,” Costa interjected, though he failed to assemble a sage-seeming quote in the time allotted. He winked at Hawthorne. “Isn’t that right, Tristan... err... *Hawthorne*,” he added, correcting himself awkwardly as they seemed to be all in on surnames that morning.

“Oh, quite,” Hawthorne agreed, blushing noticeably, then looking down to move his uneaten eggs around his plate. “Did you have an acceptable night’s sleep, Costa?”

The pilot chuckled, licking his bottom lip and looking directly into the science officer’s cerulean eyes. “I honestly didn’t get that much sleep, but I still woke up feeling so ready for this mission,” he said.

Andretti scoffed.

“Something wrong?” Costa asked.

“I don’t know. Why were you two in the command module from 0200 to 0500?” Andretti asked.

“What do you mean?” Costa bluffed.

“I’m the designated security officer on this mission, so it’s my responsibility to review the security log. This says very clearly that the command module hatch was opened four distinct times last night, twice by you two near 0200 and then again separately around 0500,” Andretti replied, sliding the PADD over to where Costa could see the log entries.

“Ah. That. I couldn’t sleep, so I went forward to review the sensor logs,” Hawthorne volunteered.

“And I went to check on him. Then we talked. About the mission,” Costa explained.

“For three hours?” Andretti pressed.

“What does it matter?” Costa asked. “Were we supposed to get our hall passes signed?”

“I don’t actually care what you two were really doing, but I did have some strange dreams last night. Lots of animal sounds in the night,” Andretti said ominously. “Whatever. I am going to get on with our systems diagnostics,” he said, grabbing the remains of his breakfast and recycling his dishes before leaving the aft compartment.

“What a narc,” Fox noted with a grin. He munched on a piece of toast and seemed oblivious to the truth of the situation hanging in the space over the table—at least for a moment. “Even so... how about I make you a deal? I’ll put a privacy block on the cockpit data recorder that only a captain or above would be able to override, and you let me vape in perpetuity throughout the universe at whatever temperature settings I want,” the chain-vaping tech nerd offered.

“Done,” Hawthorne said immediately.

“Sick,” Fox replied, grabbing a PADD from the edge of the table. Seven taps later, or at least that’s how fast it seemed, he was done. “Didn’t even save myself a copy,” he said with a wink. “Happy Frontier Day, boys.”

Fox left his dishes on the table and grabbed his equipment on his way out of the aft compartment to his station forward.

“Don’t worry. I’ll take care of it,” Hawthorne said with false cheer as Fox stepped through the door. His smile fell as soon as the hatch slid closed. “Did we just get blackmailed?”

“Low key,” Costa agreed.

Hawthorne laughed. “Low key,” he repeated, in Costa’s accent. “Certainly a *quid pro quo*, in any case. I guess we’re not cut out to have a secretive affair.”

“Well, wasn’t our whole plan to get everyone to believe we were friends?” Costa reminded him. “I mean, it would have been *great* to know about the cockpit recorder being on when

the ship is shut down, but we didn't do anything wrong. So, what could Andretti put us on report for?"

Hawthorne's smile grew wider as the wheels behind his eyes worked through that suggestion. Before he could say anything, though, the alert klaxon began to sound.

*"Arcturus sending new orders. Prepare for imminent arrival,"* the computer reported.

Both lieutenants scrambled to their feet. As they headed towards the command module, Hawthorne surprised Costa by throwing his arms around his neck and kissing him deeply on the lips.

"I just want you to know that last night was so amazing, Paulo," Hawthorne said, which made Costa's heart skip a beat. "Now, try not to fly us into anything so we can make tonight just as good," he said before leading the way into the command module.

Costa was back up front and in the pilot's seat for less than two minutes before his jaw dropped at the sight of an *Odyssey*-class starship entering a stellar nursery at near-warp speeds, its shields crackling with energy as it pushed away the gas and streamed in at full speed towards the captured cnidarian and unusual alien ship keeping it hostage.

A new set of orders flashed across Costa's screen.

*"Enter formation with support craft and provide fire support,"* it said.

The starships *Antares*, *Apollo*, and *Achilles* were hot on *Arcturus*'s heels, charging in behind the flagship in a wedge formation. All four capital ships' deflectors began to glow violet as Costa joined the runabouts and fighters behind their motherships.

"Your counter-signal?" Hawthorne asked.

"Yup. Should sever the creature from the thought-makers," Fox replied.

"*Should?*" Andretti asked, concern evident in his voice.

"Relax. I'm a genius," Fox said.

From where Costa was sitting, he had the best view of the battle of any of the four of them. At first, it seemed like the signal was working, as the cnidarian began to shift color from green to blue, but just as quickly as it'd started, the effect started to reverse, and the creature began to grow like an emerald.

"That's not right," Fox said. "This signal... It's a Borg signal. I'm positive."

"Are you saying that thing is *assimilated?*?" Costa exclaimed.

"I honestly have no idea," Fox replied.

"Woah. I am detecting *massive* energy readings about two AUs out. Dozens of cnidarians are converging on our position," Hawthorne said.

“Are they hostile?” Andretti asked from the tactical station.

“Unknown.”

“Their energy signature is different from the Borg one,” Fox offered. “My program *is* interfering with the thought makers, but the signal strength is too low.”

Costa thought about that for a moment before grabbing the control yokes and upping their speed. “If those cnidarians are hostile, we’re fucked. If they’re not, they’re walking into a trap. We need to tell them that our signal is what’s gonna save their friend,” he declared. “Tristan, can you get them that message?”

“I... That’s not been tested,” Hawthorne said from the science station above Costa’s shoulder. The pilot turned around and managed to catch Hawthorne’s eyes. “Understanding basic concepts and syntax is one thing, but this is a highly technical situation. There’s no way to know—”

“You can do this. *Seginus Flyer* to *Arcturus*. We believe that increasing the signal strength of our counter-signal will be effective. The unassimilated cnidarians can be saved if they help us boost the signal. Requesting permission to send them that message.”

“*This is Lancaster. How do you plan on transmitting your message?*” came an immediate response from the fleet captain.

“Hawthorne here, sir. We can use the illumination beacons and remodulate our shields to mimic the aliens’ bioluminescent



language. We should be able to ask them to help us boost the signal,” the science officer replied.

“Sir, if there are anywhere near as many of these cnidarians out there as we think there are, the capital ships will be vulnerable,” Andretti interjected. “We can confirm their intentions by relaying their visual responses back to you, even if we can’t communicate.”

Costa was annoyed that Andretti butted in, but he wasn’t wrong. If their plan didn’t work, the larger vessels needed warning to be able to flee.

*“Do it and come back alive. We just need enough time to destroy the control ship. That’s a direct order. Lancaster out,”* the fleet captain responded.

“Hold on,” Costa said, breaking out of formation to bypass the immediate battlefield to take them out to the approaching cnidarians.

As the *Seginus Flyer* left the immediate vicinity of the seemingly assimilated cnidarian, Costa saw the starships of Arcturus Squadron engage the alien vessel controlling the entrapped creature. A barrage of quantum torpedoes was rebuffed by the claw-like starship controlling the cnidarian. There was no time to worry about that, though, as the runabout zoomed away from the battle towards the oncoming cnidarians.

“What message are you going to send them?” Andretti asked.

“Still working on that,” Hawthorne replied. “It has to be something simple... I’ve got it. ‘Make our voice stronger. Save friend,’ is the most complex I can get with what we know.”

Moments later, the cnidarians started to come into view. They were massive, glowing bright blue against the backdrop of the swirling stellar nursery. Costa was shocked to see so many of these marvelous life forms in one place. Miracles of both evolution and beauty, he couldn’t imagine what their lives must be like spent totally in space.

“I’m reading slight variations in their bioluminescence,” Hawthorne said. “The computer thinks they’re saying ‘stranger.’ I’m sending the message through the visual beacons.”

The shields in front of the *Segnius Flyer* shifted color imperceptibly to Costa, but he knew that there was a light show going on in the ultraviolet ranges. Though he knew what was intended to happen, he was still shocked when he saw the creatures change color in response, going from blue to violet.

“Understanding. Ally,” Hawthorne translated.

Before their eyes, the cnidarians transformed their bodies into massive saucer-shaped vessels matching what the *Enterprise* had seen at Farpoint Station all those decades prior. The creatures moved past the runabout with a speed and urgency seemingly at odds with their vast size.

“*Arcturus*, we think they got the message,” Costa reported, bringing their craft around to follow the cnidarians.

The combined signal power of dozens of Farpoint cnidarians, along with the Starfleet vessels, produced a signal so strong that it was able to block the control signal emanating through the thought makers. The captured cnidarian shifted color and began to glow as it shed its alien additions. All of the vessels began firing on the claw-like alien vessel, and before the *Segnius Flyer* was even back in weapons range, it exploded in a spectacular fireball. The now-free cnidarian's colors were changing rapidly as it and its brethren were reunited.

“What are they saying?” Costa asked.

“It’s exactly the same pattern the *Enterprise* recorded—they are tremendously grateful for our assistance,” Hawthorne replied. “I hate to say it, Paulo, but we actually managed to go on a mission and *succeed*.”



An hour or so later, in fresh, crisp duty uniforms, Costa, Hawthorne, Fox, and Andretti were all gathered at the table in Fleet Captain Lancaster’s office. They had barely had time to write preliminary reports on their experiences, and the captain was pouring over them with great interest. Lancaster was Costa’s personal idol despite them being on opposite ends of the personality spectrum. He was young for his rank, ambitious, and respected as a master of starship operations—everything Costa wanted for his own career.

“Excellent work, lieutenants,” he said in a rare moment of praise. Costa nearly passed out from a sincere compliment from his commanding officer. “Captain Alesser was a little

skeptical when I moved Costa and Hawthorne onto the same team, but I thought you two were overdue for a win,” the captain said, glancing over at the first officer, who offered a shrug.

Costa’s jaw dropped. “You did that? Er... Sir?” he asked.

“Yes, and before you ask an impertinent follow-up question, I did it because I wanted the person who cracked the cnidarians language with our best technologist and the highest-rated tactical officer and pilot together on this,” Lancaster clarified.

Alesser cleared his throat. “The reason I didn’t put you two together is because of your well-known animus, but... I’m happy to be proven wrong,” the Ardanan man said. “It looks like dangling promotions in front of you was a good enough motivator after all.”

“So, did one of us earn the promotion?” Andretti asked.

“Final determinations will be made soon,” Lancaster replied, giving no hints at all about the outcome. “I just wanted to bring you up here to say well done. I want your final reports by the end of tomorrow. You’re dismissed.”

Fox and Andretti went through the rear exit from the ready room towards the turbolift vestibule while Lancaster and Alesser were talking amongst themselves, so Costa took the opportunity to push Hawthorne towards the forward entrance. Something Hawthorne had said the night before about never having been on the bridge of the *Arcturus* resonated with him.

Commander Odea glanced up from the command chair but then went back to her PADD when it didn't turn out to be the captain taking over the deck. Hawthorne had a clear sense of awe on his face. They went along the side of the bridge towards the aft side, keeping as slow a pace as they could without looking touristy. It was only 20 or 30 seconds before they ended up on the other side of the bridge and exited into the other vestibule.

“Thank you, Paulo,” Hawthorne said, kissing him in the turbolift. “What now?”

“We make up for lost time.”