

<div class="markdown prose w-full break-words dark:prose-invert light">

With her children in tow, Órlaith descended the gangway toward the Sojourner's airlock, where two ensigns stood on guard. They leaned at their post, their attention divided between the approaching family and a trio of engineers pushing an anti-grav cart out of the ship. The cart emitted a soft hum, piled high with equipment and parts. By the looks of it, these parts had been defective, with the slight scent of scorched electronics wafting off of one of the crates.

“Can you meet me at BJ’s later tonight?” asked one of the engineers. He was lanky, his lieutenant pips catching the overhead light. His shaved head and a thin goatee added to his casual air as he glanced at his companion. His unremarkable brown eyes darted about, taking in the family coming on board.

The second engineer, a striking young woman with high cheekbones and bright amber eyes the color of honey, barely acknowledged him. Her deep brown hair, tied back into a flowing ponytail, framed her symmetrical face. She sidestepped the cart with practiced ease, pausing only to address Órlaith. “Excuse us,” she said politely, her tone brisk.

Órlaith moved aside with her children, pressing them closer to the bulkhead. The woman’s gaze lingered briefly—not on her but on Ethan, who stood calmly at her side. There was a hint of interest in her look, subtle but unmistakable. Ethan, however, met it with nothing more than a polite, fleeting smile. Ethan could have gotten any woman he wanted, but he only had eyes for his wife, Trinity.

The woman gave the faintest shrug before falling back in step with her companion. “I’ve got things to do tonight, Paul,” she finally replied, her voice light but final.

Órlaith smirked as the pair disappeared down the gangway. Classic blow-off, she thought, amused. It was a line she’d used often enough herself, though rarely with such efficiency. Her gaze shifted to Ethan, who remained impassive, his expression betraying neither amusement nor annoyance. If the exchange had affected him, it didn’t show.

“You could have had a date,” Órlaith teased, leaning closer to Ethan with a playful glint in her eye.

“Ha ha,” Ethan replied dryly, his lips quirking into a faint smile. “There are few people in this universe I’m afraid of, but Trinity is one of them.”

Órlaith chuckled softly, her amusement tinged with genuine agreement. “We both know your ‘fear’ has nothing to do with her temper—it’s because she could mop the floor with you if she wanted to.”

Ethan grunted, his expression remaining impassive. He neither confirmed nor denied her jab, which widened Órlaith's smirk.

As they approached the airlock, one of the ensigns stepped forward. He was a fresh-faced human with short, kinky hair that reminded Órlaith of Velcro, his striking dark chocolate skin gleaming under the corridor lights. His companion, an Andorian with pale blue skin and drooping antennae, barely acknowledged them, exuding an air of detached boredom.

"Orders?" the human ensign asked, his tone crisp and professional. However, there was a flicker of curiosity in his gaze as it shifted between Órlaith and Ethan and then to the three kids who, for whatever reason, had chosen this opportunity to be quiet and behave.

I'll take even the minor victories as they come, Órlaith thought.

Ethan reached into the inner pocket of his duster and pulled out a PADD, handing it over. The ensign studied it carefully, his eyes darting between the screen, Ethan, and Órlaith. At last, he tapped his combadge.

"Ensign Olumide to Captain Tarkin," he announced. "Your passengers have arrived."

<hr />

Kirin sat in her ready room reviewing the latest status reports from around the ship when her combadge chimed with a message from Ensign Olumide.

Tapping it, she responded, "Excellent, Ensign. Please escort them to Conference room one. I will be there momentarily."

She turned to her computer and opened a channel to her XO, "Thanen, our guests have arrived. Meet us in Conference room one in 5 minutes if you can."

After a pause, her XO responded, "Right away."

Before she stood and made her way to the bridge he opened a final communication channel, "Commander Hayden, if you could report to the conference room Captain Murphy has arrived."

A minute later she stepped onto the turbo lift. Glancing back she called to Ensign Tycon, "Ensign Tycon, please rejoin me in the conference room one, we have some guests who will need to be shown to their quarters."

"Yes ma'am," responded Dese with an unexpected degree of excitement before she jumped from her seat and ran onto the turbolift.

Kirin cocked an eye at her as the door closed, "You seem rather excited to show our guests to their quarters?"

</div>

Dese grinned slightly, "Well, I um, I had read about Captain Órlaith's piloting skills so I was sort of hoping to catch her if possible."

"Ah, that is fair. I am sure she will be happy to speak to you at some point." As Kirin finished speaking as the doors slid open and they stepped out onto Deck 4 and straight into the main briefing room beside the lift to find Thanen leaning back in one of the chairs.

"Kirin, Dese," he said with a nod. "I assume our guest will be her momentarily?"

"Yes, once they arrive, we will have a quick debrief with Captain Órlaith, Commander Hayden and Commander Talon while Dese shows Captain Órlaith's kids to their quarters," Kirin remarked as she moved to look out the large window at the activity outside the ship.

<div class="flex-shrink-0 flex flex-col relative items-end">

<div>

<div class="pt-0">

<div class="gizmo-bot-avatar flex h-8 w-8 items-center justify-center overflow-hidden rounded-full">

<div class="relative p-1 rounded-sm flex items-center justify-center bg-token-main-surface-primary text-token-text-primary h-8 w-8"></div>

</div>

</div>

</div>

</div>

<div class="group/conversation-turn relative flex w-full min-w-0 flex-col agent-turn">

<div class="flex-col gap-1 md:gap-3">

<div class="flex max-w-full flex-col flex-grow">

<div class="min-h-8 text-message flex w-full flex-col items-end gap-2 whitespace-normal break-words text-start [.text-message+&];mt-5" dir="auto"

data-message-author-role="assistant"

data-message-id="9017d597-d1cf-46b2-846e-9e0679e4e56a"

data-message-model-slug="gpt-4o">

<div class="flex w-full flex-col gap-1 empty:hidden first:pt-[3px]">

<div class="markdown prose w-full break-words dark:prose-invert light">

<hr />

Ethan was the first to stride into the briefing room, his polished boots tapping sharply against the floor. Órlaith followed measuredly while an out-of-breath ensign hurried behind them. He was supposed to escort them, not the other way around. His face was a mix of emotions, one Órlaith

read as annoyance. *Get used to it, kid. Senior officers operate on their schedules,*
She thought.

Scooting around the assembled officers, Olumide stepped forward and snapped to attention, addressing Tarkin. "Your guests, ma'am."

Ethan removed his hat in a fluid motion and offered Tarkin a deep bow, the faintest flicker of a smile on his face. "It is a pleasure to meet you, ma'am," he said, his voice warm.

Órlaith rolled her, keeping her face otherwise neutral. That bow of his. Was it genuine courtesy or just another layer of his old-fashioned theatre? Then again, who was she to judge? He embodied those antiquated ideals so naturally that playacting seemed too shallow a word for it. At what point does a performance stop being a facade and start being...you?

Kirin cast an appraising eye over Commander Talon, not hiding it at all, as a genuine smile crossed her face, "Welcome aboard the *Sojourner* Commander Talon. I have to say I have to say it has been a while since someone bowed to me." She turned and looked over at Órlaith and her smile broadened, "Captian Murphy it is a pleasure to see you again. Welcome."

She turned back to Ensign Olumide, "Thank you for showing our guests here; you're dismissed." The young ensign nodded and left the room, heading back to the airlock to continue his work.

Turning back to her visitors, she gestured to the other officers in the room, "May I introduce Commander Thanen Th'zalnar, my XO, and Ensign Dese Tycon. She will escort your children to your quarters if that is okay with you, and we can get down to business."

"Of course. I appreciate that," Órlaith said.

Before Dese could respond and ask the children to accompany her, the door opened, and Commander Hayden entered.

Erin glanced around the room, and her gaze fell on Tarken, "You have quite the little ship captain. Going from an Excelsior and an Intrepid your ship is like stepping into the future."

Thanen let out a deep laugh at that, though normally quiet, when it comes to the ship he will happily engage in any discussion, "I felt the same way when we moved here from the *Daradax*. She is a solid ship for sure, built on the lessons learned from the Intrepid."

Kirin glanced over at her XO and chief engineer and smiled. He was very much the rock that held much of the ship together. Though he would happily disappear for days in the bowels of the ship, tinkering when something needed to be done, it was sorted before she was often even aware of it. "As Thanen said, she is a great ship, though I wouldn't call her little. But I guess when you compare her to a capital ship such as the *Odyssey* or new Andromeda class, she is on the smaller side - wouldn't change it for the world, though."

Órlatih and Erin exchanged a knowing glance at the mention of the Andromeda class, resentment passing between them. Although the introduction of Starfleet's latest ship line had been hailed as a leap forward in technology and exploration, for them, it had upended their lives like a life raft in a tempest.

With their former crew scattered across the fleet, they would have to start fresh aboard the Sentinel, learning to work with a new crew and establishing trust again. Erin exhaled quietly, pushing down the irritation, while Órlatih's fingers curled slightly before she forced them to relax. They had to move on. Starfleet didn't wait for sentiment, and brooding over what was lost wouldn't change their orders. Reassignment was a fact of life unless you had a last name like Riker, Kim, or LaForge and the pull to shape your destiny.

Órlatih straightened slightly. Enough of that. She forced a smile. "It's a fine ship."

A silence settled over the officers, and Ethan cleared his throat. Glancing around the room, he said, "Now that we've all had a chance to get acquainted, perhaps it's time to discuss why we're here."

Kirin cocked an eyebrow at that and glanced at Thanen before gesturing to Dese, who was standing silently by the door to take the children. Once the door closed, she looked back to Ethan, "So I take it we are not just the shuttle service then?"

</div>

</div>

</div>

</div>

</div>

</div>

<div class="markdown prose w-full break-words dark:prose-invert light">

Ethan met her gaze, his voice flat. "No."

Órlatih and Erin exchanged glances and took their seats at the long conference table. The glossy surface reflected the dim overhead lighting as Órlatih folded her hands in front of her. She had been briefed already but hadn't had a chance to discuss it with her executive officer yet.

"Ah, well then, I guess this will be more exciting than expected," Kirin said as she glanced over at Thanen before taking her seat.

Ethan remained standing. He reached over the table and entered his security codes into the keypad embedded in the table. A soft chime sounded, and a burst of static crackled through the speakers. A voice followed—garbled and distorted, in unintelligible words. It sounded humanoid, but the language was unknown.

Ethan straightened, his expression unreadable as his gaze moved from one officer to the next. “This message was broadcast toward Earth two weeks ago,” he said. “We still haven’t translated it.”

Kirin listened to the message before leaning back in the chair. “So we have an unknown message, has command been able to track it back to its source? Is this to be an investigate and possible first-contact mission then?”

“That’s where Starfleet Command and Starfleet Intelligence don’t agree,” Ethan replied, his tone edged with tension. He tapped a few commands into the console, and the holographic projector in the center of the table flickered to life.

A red dwarf star materialized, its dim glow casting long shadows across the room. An ancient-looking ring orbiting the star slowly siphoned plasma from its fiery surface. Suddenly, an explosion of energy burst from the center of the ring, swirling into a mesmerizing blue-and-purple wormhole. A sleek, cigar-shaped craft emerged from the event horizon, its hull gleaming under the flickering light.

“The Daystrom Institute has classified this as a probe,” Ethan said, calm but edged with a sense of trepidation. “We need a threat assessment.”

Kirin looked at the display for a moment, and she had a vague sense of recognition in her mind. Before she should recall, Thanen spoke up, “Granted, it is not the best image, but that looks very similar to the probe that arrived at Earth in the late 2200s. Or have I missed the mark on that?”

</div>

Ethan’s gaze remained fixed on the screen. “We haven’t confirmed that,” he said, his tone firm but measured. “You know as well as I do—technology follows function more often than form. Without a closer sensor scan, we can’t be sure. And even then, I’m not convinced we’d get a definitive answer. Every ship that encountered that probe in 2286 was disabled. And for all we know, this might not even be from the same civilization.”

“So, an unknown probe, a mysterious message and a relic of an unknown civilization that creates wormholes. Do I have the gist of it? Have to say I, for one, am intrigued,” Kirin said with a smile. “We can be ready to depart within 8 hours.”

Ethan chuckled. “Spoken like a true Starfleet officer. But yes, that about sums it up.”

Órlatih smirked, though something in her eyes betrayed the lightness she was trying to convey. “A sentiment my cynical brother no doubt doesn’t share.”

She exhaled, shaking her head. "An unknown probe with unclear intentions showing an interest in Earth? Fantastic. Just what I wanted on my New Year's bingo card."</p>

<p data-start="177" data-end="491">Kirin glanced at her and smiled, "All we can do is play the hand, well bingo card as you put it, we are dealt and this one could be fascinating indeed." She paused for a moment and shrugged, "Though we can always help it along in the direction we want."</p>

<p data-start="177" data-end="491">Thanen rolled his eyes and glanced at Kirin sideways, "You barely even play cards..."</p>

<p data-start="177" data-end="491">She laughed and shrugged, "Just keeping with the metaphor Órlaith established."</p>

<div class="markdown prose w-full break-words dark:prose-invert light">

"Well," she said with a grim smirk. "You don't want to play this bingo game. All the slots are disasters."

Looking back to Ethan Kirin continued, "Is there anything else we need to know about this region of space or items we should requisition from the starbase? We should be able to fabricate any equipment we need onboard once we arrive at this gate."

"It's an uncharted region," Ethan said, shaking his head. "Long-range scans don't show much, aside from the planets' erratic orbits—looks like a brown dwarf and its star are locked in a gravitational tug-of-war. Navigation shouldn't be a problem, but we'll need to keep it in mind."

Kirin just nodded, "Ok, we are getting a full reload of armaments as it is but will request some additional sensor platforms. We can set up several around the gateway to study it and relay info back once we complete the mission."

<p data-start="330" data-end="448">"Let's hope it doesn't come to that," Órlaith muttered.

"We're not exactly bringing warships to the table here."</p>

<p data-start="450" data-end="588">Ethan smirked. "I'd still take you two in the center seat of these ships over any captain on a Defiant, an Akira, or even an Odyssey."</p>

<p data-start="590" data-end="855">Órlaith and Erin exchanged unimpressed looks, seeing right through his attempt at levity. This wasn't just an anomaly, and there was intelligence behind it. There were too many unknowns. And the weight of it settled in Órlaith's stomach like lead, heavy and impossible to digest.</p>

<p data-start="590" data-end="855">"I appreciate the sentiment. But it's always good to be prepared. That said I am sure we are up for the task at hand," Kirin remarked though a similar concern weighted on her.</p>

</div>

<p data-start="590" data-end="855">She looked around at everyone before continuing, "If there isn't anything else Commander we have your quarters all set and I have a ship to prepare."</p>

Ethan gave a single nod, a shadow of a smile crossing his lips. "Then I reckon we'd best get to it." He tipped his hat to the Orion woman. "Ma'am."

Órlaith exhaled, straightening in her seat before standing. Erin mirrored her captain's movement. "Agreed. The sooner we're underway, the better."

<div class="markdown prose w-full break-words dark:prose-invert light">

The three officers exchanged final nods with Kirin, a sense of silent understanding passing between them. The weight of their new assignments hung in the air, and each felt the gravity of what lay ahead. They turned in unison, their movements synchronized by years of camaraderie and shared purpose. The soft hiss of the doors echoed in the otherwise silent observation lounge as they opened, and the officers stepped out into the corridor leaving Kirin and her staff behind.

</div>