

# The Tellarite Connection

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*By H. S. Rivney*

“I think we’re headed in the right direction,” Admiral Archer said. He and his landing party stopped at the edge of the town to assess the view. He’d left their shuttle pod well camouflaged behind them in the trees. A kilometer ahead of them near the coast a pair of cement steam towers jutted into the sky, an anomaly against the foreground of thatched rooflines in front of them.

“How long has it been, sir, since you were here?” asked Ensign Cutler.

“Twelve years. Nothing’s changed much out here; looks like a few more buildings, still using the oil lamps, but it’s hard to miss those reactor towers.”

“Sir, do you think the Tellarites are actually breaking the accords?” Archer looked at Lieutenant Edwards over his shoulder while they kept walking.

“That’s what we’re going to find out. The Vulcans’ report indicated Tellarites, and with a Tellarite ship up there in orbit of the large moon, I’d say it’s a good bet.”

“Sir...” Edwards began.

“And don’t call me ‘sir’ while we’re here.”

“Aye, sir. Admiral. I mean...”

“Jon, call me Jon while we’re here. It’s a first name basis culture.” Archer touched him on the shoulder. He wasn’t sure he’d ever called a commanding officer by their first name but the appearance of informality was critical on this mission. Akaal was the first planet of pre-industrial peoples Enterprise had ever encountered. To his knowledge only one Akaali knew about Earthlings. Tellarites, however, were an entirely new problem.

“The Vulcans’ report said this was a *thorium* reactor, not uranium?” Edwards asked. Archer nodded. “How does a fission reactor go up without anyone noticing?”

“I’m sure they noticed,” Archer said, “but they probably have no idea it came from another world.” Jamal Edwards nodded. Their mission was to uncover the corruption of this population and resolve whatever contamination they could. The evolution of the Akaali society had been undoubtedly perverted by such an aberration as a nuclear reactor; the question now was the cause and extent of the damage. “It’s hiding in plain sight.”

The three officers, dressed like the local people in somewhat medieval attire, and with small cosmetic ridges applied on their foreheads, strolled into the town without so much as a second glance from the community. Finding a specific building out of dozens that all looked alike wasn’t as easy as Archer had hoped it would be. The damp morning air hung in the pathways between the homes and shops; controlled bonfires in iron casks hosted gatherings of three or four chatting Akaalis. At the end of one lane a library lit by electricity buzzed with activity.

The trio exchanged glances and headed inside. Just inside the doors a wall sized hand drawn map of the coastal area helped them orient to the village. Archer found the home he was looking for and fixed its position in relation to the library.

“This one is the apothecary’s, if I remember,” Archer said and tapped a spot on the map.

“And she was your contact on that first mission?” Beth Cutler asked the admiral. He nodded.

“Should we see what kind of data we can find about the reactor in here?” Jamal asked.

“Good idea,” Archer replied. “Jamal, you look for information on the thorium, and, Beth, you dig up what kind of radiation sickness or issues they might be having. I’ll look for references to the reactor technology. Meet back in twenty minutes at that table,” he instructed.

Archer looked among the bookshelves, but nothing even remotely appeared helpful. Shadowed by the frustration, his mind ventured to Riaan. He hoped she would remember him, if he could find her. He’d become quite fond of her in the short time they’d spent together. As it turned out, aliens had been responsible for contaminating the water table with an anti-matter reactor making

hundreds of Akaalis sick. At least the Vulcan's investigation from their survey last month didn't indicate a plague had broken out, just electricity.

"So what did you find?" Archer asked his team of two.

"I didn't find any evidence of radiation sickness or illness attributed to the reactor," Beth explained, opening two books across the table. "I found books on anatomy, and basic medicine, but it's all mechanical and organic. No references to antibiotics or advanced surgical techniques, only natural cures like sulfur for an open wound, and, I hate to think about it, sutures for closing incisions," she winced. Archer smiled at his medic's aversion to their primitive technology.

"And the thorium?"

"Well...um, Jon..." Jamul began haltingly, looking at the company in earshot, "there are a few manuscripts on that. I didn't have time to translate them fully." He put his hands on a stack of geology books and then opened one. "Monazite sand is abundant here, especially this eastern continent. The sands are mined for thorium, and the process isn't difficult, not like uranium or even dilithium. But, thorium isn't stand-alone 'radioactive'; it's fertile, not fissile."

"Yes, good work," Archer said. "I can't find anything here on the reactor specifically, but I studied the Vulcans' report the last couple of days. A thorium reactor is like a uranium fuel reactor, but because the thorium can't burn alone like uranium it has to be hit with a stream of neutrons. There's a short decay process, then fission. If you turn off the neutrons, the process stops. You can't do that with a uranium reaction. If the reaction gets too hot with thorium, the molten salts around the core are drained off, and the process also stops."

"So it can't meltdown?" Beth asked. Jamul offered a brief answer.

"It can, but the process is so quick the radiation damage is nominal. This all works at normal atmospheric pressure. And most important, thorium can't reasonably be made into weapons like uranium."

"There is still some radioactive waste. And, now we're left with a new question," Archer said. "If they aren't making weapons, why did Tellarites put up a fission reactor here, in plain sight? These people weren't ready for electricity."

“Sir-Jon, so why did Earth use uranium reactors if thorium was safer?” Beth asked. The two men looked at each other and then back at her.

“Weapons and politics,” Archer replied. “Uranium was used in weapons first, Second World War, *then* as a power source. Governments didn’t put up research money for science, just wars. Luckily we jumped to renewables in time.”

Once they digested the information the best that the translation scanner could do for them, they left the library with more questions than they’d answered. Archer took a last look at the map before they left to look for Riaan.

“This is a quaint town,” Beth remarked. “It’s like going back centuries in time.” Archer preferred to stay silent on the subject of time travel regardless of the situation so he pretended not to hear her observation.

“What are those?” Jamul asked, indicating an odd animal harnessed to a merchandise cart.

“Didn’t see *those* the last time I was here,” Archer said. The animal appeared to be a griffon, but more primordial. “Apparently, an Akaali beast of burden,” he stated. Without missing a step Archer and Jamul kept walking when Beth suddenly screamed out! They spun around and found her sitting in the street, her hand bleeding copiously on the ground.

Admiral Archer leaped five paces back to reach her, noticing a crowd of Akaalis gather around them. Jamul picked her up off the dirt and the two of them pulled her to the side away from the animal.

“The potten bit her,” a woman told them. “It shouldn’t be harmful, he’s an old brute,” the woman said stopping only briefly. The animal snorted like a bull, its grey fur short on the head, long on the tail, and non-existent on the scaly feet. Archer tore a strip of cloth from the hood from the cloak he wore and wrapped her hand with it tightly, looking around for a clue as to what he could do for his medic. No one seemed concerned other than a man and boy that came running up to them.

“Is she allergic to pottens?” the man asked. He and the boy hovered over Beth.

“I don’t know, what do you mean?” Archer asked. The big man removed the fabric and pointed out the fang puncture to Archer.

“The poison,” the young boy said. “Some people die. Mother can help,” he said.

“Let’s get her home,” the man insisted, easily taking Beth in his arms and heading off, the dark haired boy trotting behind him. With no other choice, Archer and Jamul followed them.

“I’m Kellaam, this is Jaakub,” the large man said to them. People moved out of the way as the group hurried toward, of all places, the apothecary’s home. Archer’s concern for Beth hindered his recognition of their immediate surroundings. He was all the more surprised when Kellaam and Jaakub took the party exactly where he had planned on going.

“Mother!” Jaakub yelled slamming open the door to the cottage.

“Riaan, we need you!” Kellaam called, bringing Ensign Cutler into the first room and setting her on a firm sofa. She’d barely said thank you when a slender woman with dark hair hurried in from another room. “Daaner’s old Potten bit her,” Kellaam told his wife.

The party of six gathered in the single room. Jamul melded into the background, Kellaam and Jaakub hovered nearby, Riaan examined Beth’s hand, and Archer could only stand by, helpless, and stare at Riaan while she took care of his ensign. She had scarcely changed since he’d left Akaal; her eyes were still as deep and sable, her hair long, dark and wavy, her lips still full, and cerise.

Riaan only paid any attention to Beth. No one spoke for a full minute while she concentrated, cleaning the bite and bandaging Beth’s hand. Jonathan looked from Kellaam to Jaakub, then back to Riaan, and realized how long it had actually been since he last saw her. Riaan was a mother, and a wife.

“Is she going to be okay?” Jonathan asked. Riaan turned to him.

“It’s too early to tell,” she said quietly. “How do you feel?” she asked the ensign. “And what is your name?”

“Beth,” she answered. “Besides my hand being on fire, I feel like I may revisit my breakfast,” she muttered, mostly in English, putting her other hand to her stomach.

“Yes, you’re allergic to potten toxin. I have something for that. It’s not uncommon, many people are allergic.” Riaan spoke to the men in the office. “You all can leave, we don’t need anything else.”

Archer wanted an excuse to stay, but for the wrong reason. Kellaam nodded at him, and gathered Jaakub and Lieutenant Edwards, herding them all out of the medical room which had once been Riaan’s entire dwelling. Another few rooms had been added to the small home, still probably less than 100 square meters. The room the boys waited in appeared to be a kitchen.

“I didn’t even catch your names,” Kellaam said. He pulled out some chairs inviting them to sit. “Are you new in town? I don’t recognize you; Either Riaan or I know just about everyone.”

“Jon, and Jamal,” Archer offered. “We’re from the southern continent.”

“Are you here on business? It’s a long trip just to come pet a potten,” the man laughed.

“We came looking for work, at the reactor, actually,” Archer told him.

“That’s where I work! What do you do?”

“Jamal is a geologist,” Archer said. “I’m an engineer, Beth is a medic. Maybe I should check on her.”

“Don’t. Medicine is women’s work. Isn’t it always true that the doctor is the one that gets hurt?” the man chuckled. “I think there might be places for you two.” Kellaam used the fireplace in the kitchen to heat a copper vessel of water. He took dried leaves from a jar placed them in a basket.

“What do you do at the reactor, Kellaam?” Archer asked. He watched the man preparing the tea, glanced at Jamul, then back at Kellaam. He was not accustomed to other men telling him what he could and couldn’t do. He tried not to think about his officer or Riaan in the other room.

“I’m a chemical technician,” he told them. “I measure the radioactivity levels, watch the monitors, instrumentation.” Archer’s brain went into high gear. Kellam was the person who

could answer a lot of questions and he'd landed right in his lap. He and Jamul exchanged glances. "You both like silver bark tea?" Archer nodded despite having no clue whatsoever.

Riaan poked her head into the kitchen; they all turned to see. She looked twice at Jonathan, then at Kellaam, Jamul, and back at Jonathan.

"Beth is going to have to stay here a while until I'm certain the antidote will take effect, a few hours," she said. "Oh, tea! Bring me a cup? None for Beth." She darted out again.

"Allow me," Jonathan insisted, taking his and hijacking Jamul's cup for Riaan quickly into the other room. He probably should have stayed to talk to Kellam about the reactor, but Riaan was...distracting.

"Here you are," Jonathan said quietly, holding out the cup. "How's Beth?"

"Thank you. Your daughter's going to be fine, but she needs to sleep while the antidote circulates in her bloodstream." Jonathan considered for a moment that he was technically old enough to be Ensign Cutler's father. "I know you from someplace," Riaan said, "but I can't remember where." Jonathan stood quietly, drank his tea, and just looked at her stunning face, her petite nose and fine cheekbones. "We've met before?" He nodded.

"You probably don't recognize me without a translator in my hand," he finally said, and took one more step closer to her. Her face suddenly brightened and she set her cup down.

"Jon. Jon?" He smiled in agreement. She reached for his face, stood on her toes to kiss him quickly and stood back. "I...I never thought I'd see you again! It's been so long, so much has changed. Why are you here? You brought your family to Akaal?" Jonathan was hypnotized by her, again. He searched for his voice, and reason.

"The reactor, it's not supposed to be here. And Beth's not my daughter." He finished the tea in his cup and set it down.

"Still keeping secrets?"

"Not from you. But what about *your* family?" he asked. Riaan smiled.

"You and Kellaam will have a lot to talk about. But don't talk about space ships."

“Is she going to be okay?” Jamul said, coming into the room joining the admiral. Kellaam and Jaakub followed.

“He’s worried about his sister,” Kellaam explained. The admiral bit his tongue, but let the story slide. He glanced at Riaan and with an imperceptible grin; she covered the young woman with a blanket.

“She’ll be okay. Let’s let her sleep, why don’t you all come in the hearth room and we’ll get acquainted,” Riaan said carefully, nodding and herding the group back into the kitchen. Jonathan tried to set his mind straight about the reactor and their mission but he kept...drifting.

Unwilling to explain their situation to Kellaam, Archer kept the conversation above the table and about working at the reactor. Two hours passed quickly and the officers left the home for their shuttle craft. Archer called Discovery with a brief update: they were to report to the reactor the next morning looking for work. Rations and bunks had to suffice for that night.

Jonathan, Jamul, and Beth met Kellaam at the house; Beth stayed with Riaan to educate her on their mission. Her hand was still bandaged and she’d not cared for dinner rations or breakfast, so was in no condition to start employment at a nuclear reactor. Jon and Jamul would remain under guise. The three men walked the twenty or so minutes to reach the big towers in the sky where Kellaam introduced the two to the director Marrandi, who sent Jamul to Geology immediately.

“From what you tell me, I think you’re qualified to be a reactor operator, Jon,” Marrandi said. “But not until you get a certification from University. Until then, I’ll have Kellaam put you in Instrumentation - Control. You both fall under Tuart’s supervision, so let’s start out there.”

“So follow me, Jon” Kellam barked and cuffed the admiral on the shoulder. After a short hike, Archer discovered what he had gotten himself into. He was in his element. The overwhelming number of floor to ceiling monitors, buttons, banks of terminals, cacophony of noise and assorted flashing lights felt like coming home: the bridge of a starship. The only things missing were his custom captain’s chair and a view screen of passing stars. He felt immediately comfortable and subconsciously stood a couple centimeters taller. This was it – the place he needed to be to answer those questions. The small staff exchanged single names and simple titles, Tuart, the supervisor, and Yaara, the current shift operator.

“Now if you get bored I can maybe put you down at the reactor, hmm? Always something happening down there!” Kellam laughed and leaned sideways to knock Archer off balance just enough to make one misstep. Archer shook his head slowly as Kellaam walked off, then got to work.

A computer terminal hummed quietly in one corner of the room but didn't display its business on the view screen. Two large windows, instead of a view screen, offered a view of the cooling towers and the great plumes of steam that rose to the sky. A bank of monitors displayed live images from several different places within the facility.

Archer found the first evidence that afternoon. Several components were marked with a language that wasn't Akaali at all; he recognized the Tellarite characters from the United Federation of Planets Charter and Accords signed by, among others, Tellarites. The two alphabets of Akaalis and Tellarites were as different as Cyrillic and Cuneiform.

“Tuart,” Archer said to the overseer. “This appears to be two different kinds of writing. I can only read one of them.”

“Oh, yes, we have a translation matrix for those,” he told Archer. “That's the language of the machinists. You'll see it a lot. They come from the western continent, don't speak or write Wolg. I'm told they're not good linguists, the Tells, although they're obviously good machinists.”

Some Akaalis must be working with Tellarites. But why build a nuclear reactor for a pre-industrial civilization? The need didn't drive the technology. Without a second thought this appeared to be a gross violation of the Federation Accords.

“Yes, um, yes, it'd be interesting to visit them one day. Does anyone go to the western continent? How does the machinery get here?”

“You ask a lot of questions!” Tuart said. At that moment, Jonathan couldn't help but think that running a nuclear reactor was simple compared to reading Wolg and Tellarite.

“Well, the whole economy seems to revolve around this electricity plant. It's very different from the last time I was in the city, many years ago,” Archer said, racking his brain to calculate a dozen earth years to Akaali years. “It was maybe 8-9 annuals.”

“You came from the southern continent back then, yes? How did you travel?”

*Well, I took a shuttle pod from my warp five starship in orbit,* Archer thought dryly.

“I came on a ship,” Archer offered, always avoiding an outright lie if he could.

“That’s how we trade here, too, with the western continent. Say, do you think you can handle the room for a few minutes until Yaara returns?” Tuart asked.

“Of course. Take your time.”

Finally alone in the control office, Archer sat amidst blue, green, red, and yellow glowing buttons, screens, and dials. A vague hum, a kind of white noise was ever present in the room that made him feel comfortable. He took advantage of the moment and rifled through a file cabinet. Something blinked; Archer looked at it, tapped a few icons on one of the computer monitors, then went back to the file cabinet.

“You alone, Jon?” the operator said when she entered the room.

“Tuart will be right back. Say, Yaara, how long have you been working here?” Archer asked.

“I studied for a year at the University and came here when it opened, six years ago. How did you end up here, in the control room?”

“I came here from the south, looking for work, and here I am. I’m, uh, friends with Kellaam’s family,” he added.

“I think you’re the only person to start in the control room that didn’t go to University first.”

“I’m a quick study,” Archer replied. “I’ll be getting certified soon.”

“Tea?” Tuart asked, walking in with a tray. Jonathan hailed the interruption.

“Tuart,” Yaara said, “Jon says he’s from the Southern Continent.”

“You’re too tall to be from Southern Continent,” Tuart said and sat down in front of the monitors.

“I said I’m from the south,” he corrected.

“We get visitors from the west and south all the time. Apparently they are interested in our by-products,” Tuart said offhandedly. Archer’s interest peaked.

“By-products...of electricity?”

“Of thorium. Actually, I think it’s the thulium, a metal mined with the thorium stones. Someone comes to the office here from the Southern Continent every moon cycle. They download just the thulium files, and we don’t see them again until the next cycle. Not that there’s anything wrong with that, it’s just odd.”

“What do they want with thulium?” Archer thought hard about the element but didn’t remember if he’d paid attention to its characteristics before.

“I looked it up a few months ago.” Tuart explained. “It’s quite rare. It’s used in the new colored lights, in new medicine, and a new kind of light they call lasers. It seems to have a lot of uses but all of it mined here goes to the Southern Continent.” Tuart inched a little closer as if someone other than the three of them might hear his next words. “There’s another by-product that doesn’t make sense, even to me, and I’m pretty educated about this new technology we’re messing with.”

“Go on.”

“Gamma photon collectors are attached to the reactor.”

“Gamma photons!?”

“People come and take the collectors, then leave new ones, supposedly empty. But no one writes it down like the Thulium. I value my job here, so I don’t say anything to Marrandi. But it’s curious. Do you know about these photons, Jon?”

“Besides that they can kill you? What would *anyone* want with gamma-photons?” Jonathan asked.

“Nobody knows. The thulium, okay, I can see for the new light inventions.” Tuart mused.

“The people who collect always go in wearing personal protection gear, head to toe,” Yaara added. The three exchanged glances of curiosity.

All of a sudden from nowhere a brilliant white flash of searing light filled the space and blinded the people in the control office, immediately followed by a ground shaking rumble that knocked them to the floor. The concussion threw Archer halfway under a counter and a chair pinned him there. Tuart and Yaara screamed, the fire klaxon blared with a deafening whooping shriek, and the room fell dark as night. Archer struggled to climb to his feet, deafened and nearly blinded, not quite fully cognizant but acting on instinct. Window glass flew in like chunks of hail and icicles everywhere in the explosion; a shard cut his head like a laser, and dark red blood spilled down his face.

In the open field between the control room and the reactor dome vivid orange flames soared as high as the steam stacks, and heavy black smoke rolled and billowed from the gaping hole of what used to be the containment dome. The flames seared at the edges of the shattered windows, and by orange firelight Archer made it to his feet, grabbed Tuart with one hand and dragged him away from the window. He leapt on an unconscious Yarra to smother a flame that had caught her dress ablaze then pulled here away from the broken windows.

“The reactor!” Tuart shouted as loud as possible. Shut it down, shut it down!!” Tuart stumbled and fell again. “I’ll close the compartments!” Archer staggered a few steps to the back wall where the neutron bombardment was controlled. He didn’t know if it was operating or not, but he grabbed the hot metal handle bar and pulled it downward with all of his strength until the red light above it shut off.

Charred smoke shrouded everything from view. The monitors ran briefly on battery until steam driven generators kicked in. Wrapping some of his tunic around his nose and mouth Archer stumbled towards Tuart through the black air. He crouched near the monitor console, laboring to reach the last safety button that flashed orange. The doors would shut and seal off the oxygen to help stop the fire. Tuart’s reach was just short. Archer was about to slam his fist on the last button. While feeling for a split second the raw blisters on his palms, he hesitated, coughing from the acrid air; through ashes and smoke he watched in horror on the monitors as Kellaam sprinted across a long hall towards one of the doors.

“No, dammit! Kellaam, get out!” but Kellaam couldn’t hear, of course. Archer instinctively reached to grab the monitor as if it might help. Kellaam tripped and fell several meters from the door; flames shot into the room. “Get up!” he shouted. Kellaam didn’t move again.

“Jon, shut the doors!” Tuart yelled above the klaxon. Archer’s body shook.

“Kellaam’s in there!”

“Shut the doors, now!!” Archer clenched his jaws and pounded the button. With his eyes closed, he couldn’t see the monitor turn dark. A moment later, crunching across glass, he helped Tuart and Yaara along the corridor to find doors that opened to the outside. He gathered other workers along the way, shouting for them to follow, and herding them ahead and out, pulling some, pushing others; Admiral Jonathan Archer lead under any circumstance.

Archer maintained a static calmness that the handful of people he ushered responded to. He tuned out the shouts and screams and instead focused on explosions and the metal structure groaning and squealing around them. Sweat ran across the cut, burning his skin before it trickled into his eye. Lights in the corridors flashed and backlit alphabet characters that Archer couldn’t easily read. He had to assume the word was EXIT. The door flung open and the group almost fell out of the hallway into the bright daylight.

“Come on, this way, get away from the building!” Archer yelled at the others, and he carried Yaara away from the walls. Tuart followed up behind. Flames soared above them licking up trees. Small explosions shot fireballs into the sky that rained down chunks of debris on people running in every direction. Archer watched around him as panicked Akaalis ran primarily away from the fire towards the city. He set Yaara on the grass 100 meters from the center of the fire and grabbed Tuart by the arm.

“Tuart, stay here with Yaara. I’m going to find out what in hell happened,” Archer shouted above the din, screams and shouts, suddenly joined by clanging bells from the town center. He put his hand on his head and found red liquid on his fingers. Part of the cosmetic surgery was damaged, now blood covered his hand, and his head started to bleed all over again. Damn! “Triage!” he yelled at a couple of citizens that stood in shock, trying to make sense of the frenzy. “Over here! If you’re hurt, go there,” he shouted, running to the small group and ushering them

towards a group of other people who appeared injured. "If you can walk, over there," he said and ran to another person who was covered in ashes and dirt. He smeared the blood from his hand onto his clothes to get rid of it. Everyone around him was talking at once. He took a man's arm and helped him to the group with Tuart and Yaara. Tuart took Archer's lead and began to triage people into groups.

Archer jumped in to help as many as he could. People wandered aimlessly, bleeding, crying, or out of control. He looked for Lieutenant Edwards, not sure where 'geology' was, or had been and therefore not sure where to even start looking for him. A young woman in a daze walked towards Jonathan but collapsed on all fours and began to cry. He went to her, picked her up and carried her away from the center of the field. At the far end of the meadow he saw a few people on the ground. He watched a standing woman crumple and fall over one of those on the ground, then pulled the victim's cloak over its body. He set the girl down and sent her towards Tuart's group.

"I'm going to find Jamul," he yelled across the lea at Tuart. Yarra had come around and was sitting up; she waved. Jonathan looked hard at the disorder surrounding the field, the fire, the reactor buildings, people running and standing, looking and crying. Behind him the fire still raged orange and black against the violet sky. Towards the city, he saw several people running toward the reactor complex. One of them was Ensign Cutler. One of them was Riaan.

"Admiral," the ensign called, ignoring the order for casual communication. She waved her arms, running with Riaan towards him up the grassy slope. Akaalis in uniforms, apparently patrols, constables, and fire troops, also ran towards the wreckage and victims. Jonathan hurried down the knoll to meet Beth and Riaan.

"What happened?!"

"Fire, a bomb, I don't know," Jonathan said, holding Riaan by the arm and pulling Beth close to him. "I can't find Jamul," he said.

Riaan's eyes were wide, terrified, and as she tried to catch her breath she pleaded with Jonathan. "Where's Kellaam?" He just couldn't bring himself to tell her. He just shook his head, knowing he was only putting off the inevitable.

"He must be here somewhere," Beth said, "Let's go."

“No, I should help,” Riaan said. “He’ll turn up.” Riaan glanced quickly at Jonathan “Jon, you’re hurt!” she said, reaching for his face.

“Never mind me, just go help,” he told her. The two women jogged up the hill towards the groups of people on the ground. Jonathan watched them, wondering what awaited her at the other end of the field. He didn’t want to be the one to tell her what had happened, what he’d done. He also knew he’d had no other choice. He had to prevent that fire from spreading and harming or killing even more people; that didn’t make the decision to slam that door shut and condemn Riaan’s husband, a confrere, to death, any easier. Whether it was one man or one hundred, being tasked with the choice of who lived and who died ground against Jonathan Archer’s heart, his soul, his humanity every time it happened. And it would undoubtedly happen again in the future.

Jonathan marveled at the speed at which the community came out despite the danger to lives and limbs. He counted dozens of clusters of people spread out on the field between the town center and the reactor. Some carried injured, some rolled barrels, others brought blankets, baskets, and containers of food. Tents sprouted at the city end of the meadow, away from the remains of the reactor. The Akaali people seemed well suited to caring for their own, even in an emergency such as this. He spotted Marrandi among those directing first responders.

“Jon!” Jamul waved and shouted as he limped towards the admiral.

“Are you alright?” Jonathan asked, catching up to the lieutenant. He shoved his shoulder under Jamul to take some weight off the man’s leg. “Was afraid you might be in there.” Jonathan nodded at the mutilated building.

“What in hell happened? This wasn’t supposed to happen!”

“Let me get you to Riaan and Beth. They’re working first aid over there,” Jonathan said. “I don’t think this is a meltdown,” he told Jamul as they wove through the crowd. “And I’m going to find out just exactly what happened.” Admiral Archer’s communicator chirped in his pocket.

“Admiral, what’s going on down there? Tellarites’ coms are pinging and we’re getting a ship on long range sensors.” Archer hesitated, digesting the data amid the frenzy around him.

“There’s a fire at the reactor; electricity’s out. The landing party’s fine; stay in orbit. I’ll contact you as soon as I can, Archer out.” He saw Riaan walking in the distance at the far end of the field. Behind her it appeared as if the fire was finally diminishing, the smoke changing from black to light gray. He signaled the lieutenant. “Jamul, we’re going to be separated a lot today. Let’s all meet at the apothecary’s at dusk. Tell anyone else in our, uh, group, if you see them.” He tucked the communicator in his pocket and walked slowly towards Riaan. He met her gaze when she looked up.

“I can’t find him, Jon, I can’t find Kellaam anywhere.” Her voice was about to break in hopelessness. A few dozen meters ahead were the fatalities covered in Akaalis’ cloaks. He steered her away from that zone.

“Riaan, wait,” he said as quietly as practical given the tumult. “Kellam...” Captain Archer had done it before; so had Admiral Archer. He’d given the same bad news to at least three dozen families in his career. It personally tortured him every time; never once had it been casual, simple, or easy. It was his most hated duty as captain, and now. He held her gently by the wrist to keep her from running up the hill. “Kellam was ... trapped when the fire suppression system initiated. The doors locked him in.”

“Is he alright?!” Her eyes beseeched him. Archer steeled himself and drew a deep breath.

“He was killed, Riaan. I’m so sorry. I’m ... I’m so sorry.” The image of Kellam on the monitor running for the door, falling, laying still, was forever seared in his mind.

Riaan turned to stone. She looked at the ground, the sky, the smoldering reactor, and then at Jonathan. When she finally took a breath, her eyes overflowed and a wave of grief overtook her. She collapsed to the grass, unable to get up; Jonathan sat down with her, holding her head to his chest as if he could empathically take some of her pain upon himself. No one seemed to notice the two amid the madness. People simply hurried past, shouting or pretending not to notice. They sat together while the chaos swept around them like a tornado. Riaan wept. When there were no more tears to cry, Jonathan helped her up they slowly walked home.

When they arrived she was transparent, fragile, and empty. Without words she almost collapsed on the same sofa Ensign Cutler had taken, almost asleep from emotional exhaustion. He looked around and found a pottens-wool blanket, covered her gently, and swept a strand of hair off her

face. He sat in an adjacent chair and watched her restless sleep. He didn't have the luxury to come unglued. The room was not brightly lit, and the sunlight coming in would not last a long time. Her home had changed after a decade, still filled with interesting projects, books, and charm, but touches of Kellaam and Jaakub breathed on the shelves: delicate wood carvings of animals, pottery made by young hands, some drawings on the walls.

Admiral Archer didn't have many opportunities for field assignments and missions, but his experience on this planet in the early years of deep space exploration, and knowledge of Tellarites, meant he was the most logical candidate to return in the face of this crisis.

Not a minute had passed before Jaakub flew in the door. Jonathan jumped up to quiet him before he could disturb Riaan's sleep.

"What happened out there, Jon? Everyone's running around and there's a big white cloud of smoke in the air!"

"A fire," he said simply. "There was a fire and your mother was helping with the injured, so let her sleep. I have to get to my...home," he told the boy. "Will you be okay? Take care of her? I'll be back in an hour."

"May I come with you?" he asked gently. Archer shook his head. "Stay here until your mother wakes up. Understand?" The boy nodded, looking down at the floor. "I'll be back before dark." He gave the boy a friendly cuff on the shoulder, then left quickly. It wasn't too difficult to locate the shuttle at the edge of the woods and only took twenty minutes to get there. Something scuffled in the grass while he unlocked the pod. Too spent to be startled, he simply looked toward the noise then back at the shuttle.

"You know, Jaakub," Jonathan began, "your mother's not going to be happy about this. What are you doing here?" The boy stood up, caught red handed.

"I just wanted to see where you lived. This is the *strangest* house I've ever seen."

"I don't exactly live here. Come on," he said, opening the hatch and climbing inside. Darkness gave way to small, colorful lights and monitor screens. The boy's eyes couldn't get any wider.

"Jon, what does all this do?"

“Hold on, Jaakub. Go ahead and look but don’t touch anything. I have to power up the transceiver.” He sighed. “I’ll explain in a minute.” Archer worked quietly while his new young friend culturally contaminated himself among the buttons, switches, displays and assorted alien technology.

In an attempt to reduce the impact of technology on Jaakub, Archer composed a message for Discovery using the keyboard and transmitted it without fanfare. He looked at the boy. Now he had dragged two people into the investigation that he shouldn’t have. Jaakub accepted Archer’s nutshell explanations with less stress than he expected, much like his mother hadn’t been shocked when he’d revealed his origins. He wasn’t so sure he’d have accepted aliens on Earth with the curiosity Jaakub had.

“We should get going.” Archer closed the monitor and picked up a phase pistol, shoved it in the waistband of his trousers, and then draped his tunic over the grip. A green light strobed on the console and an alarm bell tolled in unison. “I don’t believe it.” He stepped back to the console and pressed a few buttons.

“What is it?” Archer heard Jaakub but just tapped some data into his communicator.

“I’ll be damned,” he mumbled. “Finally, some answers. You better go back home.”

“Why? I want to go with you. Are you meeting my dad?” Archer furrowed his brows.

“Never mind. Let’s go; we’ve got a stop before we go back.”

“Where are we going?”

“Come on, it’s not far. I’ll tell you on the way.”

They covered 2 kilometers to the south, through dense grass and shrubs. Jaakub climbed a tree and picked a couple of ripe wild fruits to fuel their trek. Jonathan insisted Jaakub hold the communicator to lead them in the direction it indicated. Soon the Akaali sun cast long shadows and the light dimmed just a little.

“When I was your age my planet didn’t have the ability to go this deep into space either. But it was my father who designed the engine that we finally used to come out here.” Archer

thought for a moment about his next words. “He died when I was about your age,” he said carefully, hoping to lay a little support before Jaakub’s world crashed. If anyone, he knew exactly how the boy was going to feel. They walked in silence for a while, Archer letting Jaakub lead the way while he double checked over the boy’s shoulder. A hundred meters further Archer could make out a rounded structure that looked as if it were made of pewter. It was larger than the Starfleet shuttle, and well hidden.

“There it is,” Archer said, bending down behind a thick bush. The shuttle wasn’t crashed. It had set down with purpose, crushing a dozen trees to ensure that it was surrounded in the forest and not easily seen. The pair crouched low in the grass, using the long shadows as camouflage to creep closer to the space craft. Archer didn’t recognize it, but he knew it wasn’t Tellarite, Vulcan, or even Andorian.

“AAAAAAHHHHHHH!” screamed Jaakub’s high pitched voice. Archer snapped to look where the boy pointed, while also nabbing him tight and clamping his hand over the boy’s mouth. “He’s *green!*” Jaakub hissed when Archer finally relaxed his grip. “He’s green!”

“He’s an Orion, a space pirate. Stay here, be quiet, and don’t move a muscle.”

Archer stayed low, moving from tree to tree closer and closer to the Orion shuttle. He looked back to confirm Jaakub was still in place. Looking forward, he saw two Orion men going in and out of their relatively large shuttle. Archer crept around the back of the craft. He heard them talking but the words made no sense to the UT at that distance. They headed for the stern forcing Archer a few steps toward the bow. Looking behind to make sure the two Orions didn’t follow him, he turned around and came face to chest with a third green brute. He wore a silver spike in his cheek.

“Hello,” Archer stammered, and before the man could react Archer slugged him with a blow in the stomach and an uppercut to his chin, which stunned him, but he was still standing! In one swift move he spun to his side and kicked the giant in the belly, which was just enough to knock him to the ground. Surprised, but grateful, he dashed around the front and into the open shuttle.

Archer pushed on an interior door, crept inside, and fumbled for a light control; he looked around. On both sides of the cargo bay large plastic boxes were stacked floor to ceiling.

Grabbing the closest box he flipped the latches and the lid opened: crystals, pink, almost glowing crystals. He turned to the other stack and opened another box: also crystals that differed only in color being dull orange to black.

“Dilithium crystals,” he whispered. “There’s no dilithium on this planet. What are Orions doing here with boxes and boxes of dilithium crystals?” He grabbed a pink one and a black one, stuffed one in each pocket, and turned around.

“Who are you?” a deep voice rumbled.

Archer’s first instinct was to run, but after a split second he realized they didn’t know who he was. They must have thought he was an Akaali.

“Sorry, just never seen anything like this before, I’ll be on my way.” The alien put his hands on Archer’s shoulders and pinned him up against the interior bulkhead. “Uh—“

“Therad, come here, Rhasab is sick,” the third Orion called to the one holding Archer. He dropped his prisoner with a shove to the floor for good measure and joined his associate outside at the bow where Archer had felled the first Orion. Knowing serendipity when it happened, he grabbed his phase pistol, climbed to his feet, leapt out of the shuttle and ran like hell.

“Hey, you stop!” shouted one of the pirates. Archer glanced over his shoulder but didn’t stop running. A phase shot streaked by him hitting a tree with a buzz of plasma, a shower of sparks, and a small flame. He took quick aim and shot back a couple of times.

*Damn that was stupid! Akaalis with phase pistols?* Another shot flew by him; he randomly returned fire. *Jaakub.* He skidded to a stop and turned around, ducking in the brush and woodland for cover, circling back through the trees. The boy’s eyes were wide open and he was frozen to the spot.

“Let’s go!” Jonathan grabbed the boy’s hand and snatched him up from the nest. “We have to get back to the shuttle.” In twenty minutes they were safely inside the shuttle with no sign that the Orions had followed them. Archer called Lieutenant Edwards.

“Orions? Are the Tellarites and Orions in on this thing together?”

“It wouldn’t surprise me. Are you at Riaan’s yet? I can’t get back to the town until tomorrow.”

“That’s okay, Admiral. Cutler saw the Tellarites in the reactor complex. She said they were all wearing biohazard suits, hiding in plain sight. One came into the infirmary by mistake.”

“What about thulium?”

“I think it’s just a lucky find for them. Maybe that’s what the Orions want? I heard the word trilitium being tossed about. Probably about the bomb.”

“Good work, Jamal, and tell Beth too.” Archer didn’t often call his subordinates by their informal names, except perhaps his bridge crew, but as he’d worked with them over the last several weeks it felt comfortable enough. They, however, still reverted to ‘Admiral’ not just in private but since the fire. “I think we’re about to find out what the Tellarites are doing at the reactor, and why Orions are on the planet. Archer out.” He turned to Jaakub. “We should go, it’s getting dark.”

The evening was eerily quiet. Without Kellaam’s booming voice the house seemed downright empty. The small group of two Akaalis and three Earthlings tried to keep the conversation light but everything led back to the reactor, electricity, and Kellaam’s absence. Riaan and Jaakub took to their beds leaving the officers in the big room with pillows and blankets. Ensign Cutler slept on the sofa, and the men made do on the floor, which was still preferable to sleeping in the shuttle pod. Lieutenant Edwards fell asleep quickly, but Admiral Archer was too tired to sleep. He spent an hour trying to make sense of the day. And then it was morning.

“Seems like we’ve done this before, Gentlemen,” Archer said, walking slowly around a long table. Seated at the table were two Orions and three Tellarites. Marrandi sat at the head of the table. Lieutenant Edwards and Ensign Cutler sat at the other end. “It’s time to settle this.”

“I’ll tell you what happened,” said Therad. “We had an agreement with these Tellarites for the photons and the thulium. They’ve been taking the thulium for themselves and keeping the profit!”

“You dropped a trilitium charge on our reactor!”

“How else are we to get your attention? You didn’t think we’d stand for your cheating on our agreement?!” Therad, the Orion Archer had confronted earlier, stood up, looming over everyone else in the room. “We don’t take kindly to dishonesty.”

“That is the *only* thing you brutes understand!” bawled Hag Tanch, the chosen contact for the Tellarite conglomerate. “All you think about is your women and your money.”

“And what else *is* there to think about, you trolls? You have no manners!” Therad said with conviction.

“You two are waging your war on my planet,” Marrandi snarled. “You have killed dozens of our people, ruined our town--“

“Your people are enjoying a new technology for a marginal price!” the Tellarite said. “We’ve given you a wonderful source of electricity, jobs; your world is better than ever!”

“And who financed those reactors?” Therad boomed.

“Who had the technology for those reactors? Thorium, not uranium,” Hag Tanch retorted.

“STOP!” Archer roared. “Just stop. How the two of you got mixed up in this together is beyond me. You’ve ruined a civilization with your greed.” He shook his head, unable to believe his own ears.

“Neither of you were invited here. You manipulated our townspeople into thinking this technology came from our own scholars,” Marrandi said.

“And you believed it,” the Tellarite jeered.

“What about our thulium? We have buyers that are screaming for what you promised us. Are you selling to our buyers?” Therad said menacingly, leaning across the table.

“Let’s talk photons,” Archer said.

“There was no problem with the photons,” Therad stated. “But that’s all we were getting. The agreement was for photons *and* thulium.”

“Thulium – for lasers, medicine, I get it.” Archer’s head hurt. “But what is hell are you using photons for?” Archer insisted.

The Tellarites and Orions looked at each other in collusion, hesitating.

“We recrystallize dilithium with photons. It’s bringing a tremendous profit without the expense and dangers of mining it. It’s a...*recycling* program, Admiral.” Therad spoke with sarcastic conviction, but Archer wasn’t amused.

“You can’t recrystallize them.” Archer looked at Edwards, who shook his head.

“I beg to differ, sir,” Therad smiled. “Maybe Starfleet thinks they are unsuitable, but Starfleet isn’t the only buyer in the galaxy; Klingons, Romulans, those who aren’t part of your Federation...” Archer took an exasperated breath.

“You built old fission reactors under guise on this planet,” Archer said to the Tellarites, “to create electricity using thorium to get photons with a byproduct of thulium.” Then he turned to the Orions. “And you financed them because you could gather photons to recrystallize dilithium to sell,” and again to the Tellarites “but *you* kept the thulium...?” Archer sat down at the table, his head in his hands, a fury rising. “I lost a damn fine friend in this bombing. Families have been destroyed. And all for what? Money?!” He slammed his fist on the table. “Someone better explain how this whole damn fiasco developed before I wring someone’s fat neck!”

“Starfleet has no jurisdiction here, Admiral. I’m not sure why you care.” Therad said.

“Indulge me.”

“Tellarites use nuclear power on Tellar. We’ve been buying photons from them for years. We didn’t like having to travel 70 light years to get them; it was eating our profit.”

“We have been looking for a new thorium source,” the other Tellarite chimed in. “A Malurian trader told us we could find it on this planet.” Then Hag Tanch cut in.

“Reactors on this planet would give these people electricity, and provide photons to the Orions.”

“But they also found thulium!” The Orion glared at the Tellarite.

“Thulium wasn’t part of the original agreement,” Hag Tanch shot back.

“Admiral,” the Orion interrupted, “we claimed the mining rights. All of them.”

“No, they belong to us. You only agreed to partner the reactors for photons.”

“You’re both wrong,” Marrandi stated. “You flat out lied to us,” she directed at Hag Tanch.

“You are stealing our natural resources,” she said to the Orion. “And Jon, I don’t even know where you fit into all this.”

“I was here 12 years ago, in this city. A Malurian’s anti-matter reactor was dumping toxins into the water supply. My team,” he paused, waving at Cutler and Edwards, “others at the time, removed it and set your population back on its normal evolution.” He stood up again and started to pace back and forth. “We are allies with Vulcan. They were supposed to come by, covertly, and make sure other aliens weren’t exploiting your people. We’ve been tangled up in a war with Romulans for quite some time so resources for first contacts weren’t available.”

“Why?” Marrandi asked plainly.

“We feel we have an obligation to form a peaceful coalition in this part of space, since we are out here exploring. We don’t mess with cultures and we don’t want to see them messed with. That’s a whole different story but suffice to say no one came to check on Akaal until just a short time ago. That’s why I came here. To find out what happened and try to fix the contamination.”

“We’ve been happy with electricity, up until last week,” Marrandi muttered.

“We are entitled to the fruits of our investments,” the Tellarite insisted, standing up.

“We had an agreement and you breached it,” Therad said, also standing up.

“Stop it. Sit down. I don’t know how photons can be so valuable as to warrant hijacking this planet, its resources, its people.” He paused and took a deep breath. “This is simple from my point of view,” Admiral Archer said calmly. “Tellarites, you repair and replace the reactors and get electricity back on line. Akaalis mine thorium for the reactor, sell excess to the Tellarites, and produce electricity which generates photons. The thulium goes to the *Akaalis*. Orions, you buy

photons from Tellarites and buy thulium from Akaalis. The genie is out of the bottle. I don't like it, but Akaal can't return to its pre-industrial state." Silence.

"Our conglomerate can probably work with those conditions," Hag Tanch admitted. He sat down.

"I think that would work well," Marrandi said, also sitting down.

"I cannot speak for my consortium. Harrad-Sar buys shattered and spent dilithium, we pick it up, then our photons. So few civilizations use fission reactors, and appropriate conditions on the planets are equally difficult to find."

Harrad-Sar. That was a name Archer hadn't heard in a while. He turned to his crew, Edwards and Cutler. He pushed his brows together and closed his eyes.

"What's it going to take for me to get off this planet and back to my own?"

"You should talk to Harrad-Sar. He's a privateer."

"We've met. He and I are not on particularly diplomatic terms," Archer replied.

"Jon," Marrandi began, "Admiral," she corrected. "This is a start. We have negotiators of our own who can work out the details. I don't see any reason for your people to have to fight our battles. We let them in. It was our own taste of technology that led us down this path. You're welcome to stay, but we know it's our responsibility."

"I have a ship in orbit. For our part, from Starfleet, I'll have a large supply of nitrium brought down. You can encase the damaged reactor in it. It will help reduce any radiation sickness."

"Radiation sickness?" Marrandi asked. The Tellarites exchanged glances. The Orions acted innocent and wouldn't make eye contact. Archer shot Cutler an operative look.

"I've been in the infirmary for 6 days," Cutler offered. "There's a lack of shielding, and dosimeters would be a standard issue at any such kind of facility on Earth." Cutler looked at the Tellarites.

“I suggest you find a way to recrystallize your dilithium on Akaal instead of hauling gamma photons all over the quadrant. An accident with radioactive materials in orbit could be lethal.” Edwards added. The Orions glanced at each other.

“At some point, if you decide to become space faring, I’m sure the new Federation would be interested in your membership. Your civilization demonstrates a promising future.” Admiral Archer looked at his small delegation and realized his task was almost over. “There’s one last thing.” He turned to the Tellarites. “As members of the Federation, this is a violation of the agreed to accords. You can expect repercussions for your actions.” Now he could hand the reins to Marrandi and walk away.

“Will you three be staying on Akaal? We could use your expertise at the controls.”

“No, we have other duties on our own world. We could, however, send engineers and technicians if you request it.” Marrandi nodded. The officers left the meeting and decided to return to Riann’s before returning to Discovery. The air was cool and the smoke had cleared after three days. The triage areas were gone. Without electricity, the small village simply reverted to its former ways and means, and looked like it did a decade earlier except for the charred skeletal remains of the reactor. As they walked away, it shrank until it was out of sight.

“Jon, do you think my father could still be alive? Maybe he’s just trapped in the building. Or he got out and he’s lost.” Jonathan and Jaakub sat in the garden outside of his home watching birds and bugs go by.

“That’s a tough one, Jaakub. The damage was pretty bad. I’m not holding out much hope for that.” Jonathan’s guilt over his perceived betrayal of Kellaam crept up on him. He looked down at the boy who wouldn’t look at him, but instead stared at a beetle scurrying in the dirt. Jonathan remembered some moments in his own life, his own family, his own father.

“I think my father was important, too, like yours,” Jaakub said quietly. Jonathan wrapped his arm around the boy’s shoulders, and with a bittersweet smile he nodded.

“Your father saved a lot of lives, Jaakub. A lot more people would have died in that fire if not for him. He’s a hero; he was an honorable man. As you grow up, and miss him some days, remember that.”

“Your crew’s amazing,” Riaan said as Jonathan entered the hearth room, warmed by the fire, while outside Jamul and Beth played some simple Akaali ball game with Jaakub. “Too bad they aren’t your kids. You would make a good father, Jon. Jaakub’s told me he really likes you.”

“Well, we have a common denominator.” Jonathan shifted uncomfortably and looked down at the floor, then finished his tea in a final long drink. “He’s a smart boy, he’ll be okay. Maybe he’ll be the first Akaali astronaut.” He looked up at Riaan, her eyes still dull with pain. He took her hand gently, holding it from across the table.

“You need to let me fix that,” she said focusing on Jonathan’s head wound.

“It’s not as bad as you probably think,” he grinned, scratching off the loose appliance, making him appear half human. Riaan sat back just enough to validate her surprise to Jonathan. “You didn’t forget, did you?”

“No, I ... I just never thought you didn’t look like us! Well, let me fix it anyway.” She gathered some items from the primary room and came back with a single focus in her eyes. Her hands were especially gentle with the task. “It’s too late to suture this,” she told him.

“With a needle and thread?!” he asked, pulling away from her and grabbing her hand.

“You’re funny, Jon, with what else? A nail and sinew?”

“With a dermal regenerator ... never mind. It’s not the first scar, it won’t be the last.” She cleaned up what she could, put some kind of powder on it, and called it done.

“Before you leave let me make you all something to eat.”

“No need,” he said gently.

“Yes, the need is mine. I need to keep my mind on something else right now,” she told him.

“You know, Jaakub would really love to see your star ship; do you think he could?”

“Of course, both of you come.” A tiny glimmer of life had reappeared in her sable brown eyes. Jonathan Archer wondered if it was her vulnerability or was it something else entirely, but he just wanted to hold her close, assure her that she will be fine with time. He stood up, leaned against the wall then pulled her to him and did just that.

Jaakub was fascinated by Discovery, and couldn't stop staring out the windows down at Akaal. The admiral, the apothecary, and the boy stood at the port view windows. Dressed in his Starfleet duty attire, Jonathan leaned against the sill as he always did.

"I wish things had turned out differently," Jonathan told her quietly, leaning close to her face. Even while mourning her aura summoned him and his guilt surfaced. "But I'm afraid I have to say goodbye, again." He put a tender kiss on her cheekbone.

"I hope it's not another ten years between visits," Riaan said. "Jaakub will be ready to join your Starfleet long before then."

*"Admiral Archer please report to the ready room,"* someone on the bridge requested.

"Admiral, you have an incoming transmission from Starfleet Command," the captain advised him as soon as he entered the ready room; he left Archer alone. When Jonathan was finished with his com, he left the ready room through the bridge.

"Captain, you can prepare to leave orbit in an hour," and he entered the turbolift.

"Aye, Admiral."

Jonathan returned to his guests at the window a couple decks below. Riaan smiled when he came in, but Jaakub was still transfixed to the window. The mess was empty but for half a dozen crew at the other end.

"Well, I've said my good byes," he told her. Riaan raised her brows in curiosity. "I'm going to stay on Akaal until the science team returns, about a large moon from now. Starfleet thinks, and so do I, that I should stay and protect our interests, not leave you alone with the Orions and the Tellarites." Jonathan and Riaan stared at each other for a few moments; Riaan smiled, and nodded just a little.