

The Strange Case of Starship Iris

[Report One: Violet Liu](#)

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AGENT

The Strange Case of Starship Iris, Report Three: In The Deep.

Note: this is an ongoing investigation. All agents reviewing this case should begin with Report One: Violet Liu and proceed chronologically. In accordance with regulation, a brief summary follows.

ARKADY

Ship's log, First Mate Arkady Patel. Right now I am sitting literally five feet away as Violet Liu pretends to record an audio diary about me [...] When is she gonna remember we saved her goddamn life?

BRIAN

Brian Jeeter. Ship translator and cook, kind of.

VIOLET

Before, were you trying to imply that what happened on the Iris wasn't an accident?

CONNORS

So, in one or two days we will be soaring as she flies through checkpoint Osiris, Ryedell style!

BRIAN

There's no way he wasn't trying to tell us something.

GRATUITOUSLY PLEASANT FEMALE VOICE

Termination sequence commencing in—five minutes.

KREJJH

Captain Tripathi!

SANA

Krejjh, how do you feel about outrunning an explosion?

KREJJH

Oh, I'd file it under—"lifelong dream."

BRIAN

I found the key to the code just before we lost the Iris, and now I've got Alvy's message. His real message.

BRIAN

(Heavily) Violet Liu, I think you owe us an explanation.

AGENT

Transmission three, begin.

SANA

Alright, everyone needs to calm down. Brian, Violet—

BRIAN

Is that even your real name?

VIOLET

Please, I have no idea what he's talking about!

BRIAN

I'm telling you, Captain, I don't know *who* we bailed out of the Iris, but she is not who she says she is.

SANA

(Authoritative) Violet, Brian, both of you, quiet. We are gonna de-escalate, and we are gonna talk through this before anyone does anything stupid. Arkady—

ARKADY

Don't worry, Captain, if this devolves into fisticuffs, I'm fully prepared to knock out one or both of them.

SANA

Violet, I promise you'll get a chance to speak for yourself, but first we need to understand what you're being accused of. Brian?

BRIAN

You know that transmission Alvy sent two weeks ago? He said the ship was headed through Checkpoint Osiris, Ryedell style, but there is no Checkpoint Osiris. The thing is, it turns out there should've been. It would've been checkpoint oh-ten. Ryedell style was our old inside joke, it meant "one less." So, nine.

ARKADY

Checkpoint O-9?

BRIAN

Nine's not the message. It's the key. It's a very, very easy cipher but you kind of need our dumb joke to solve it. Here's what happens if you take the recording and isolate every nine words:

CONNORS

No—line—safe. Mission's—designed—to—eliminate—us—but—wrong—violet. Find—right—one.
She—knows.

BRIAN

A random coincidence on that scale is—well, it's unlikely. They killed him, and everyone else in that jump pod on purpose. And here he is, warning us about the "wrong Violet." I don't see any way around it. This woman's an imposter.

(FX: incoming comm message noise)

KREJJH

Folks, this is your pilot speaking. Here with your daily flying conditions. If you look out the viewscreen—

SANA

Krejjh.

KREJJH

Uh, is this a bad time?

BRIAN

It's not a *great* time.

KREJJH

Captain Tripathi, you wanted updates on anything weird for as long as we're in the deep.

SANA

Krejjh, is it an emergency?

KREJJH

Gonna go with...“not yet.”

SANA

Define “yet.”

KREJJH

Picking it up on long-range only. Some kind of smudge. Could be debris, could be a blip.

VIOLET

A what?

BRIAN

(Pointedly) A false signal.

SANA

How long until we get a clear view?

KREJJH

I'd say—half an hour? Until then, might as well embrace the mystery. You know what they say, white-knuckled suspense is the spice of life!

SANA

Back burner for now, but Krejjh, let us know when you know more.

KREJJH

Roger dodger. Krejjh out.

ARKADY

Me, on the other hand, I'm ready to be done with all this goddamn suspense.

BRIAN

Something's up, okay? Something's up and it points back to her.

SANA

Something *is* up, but it's a little early to say what.

BRIAN

What other explanation is there?

ARKADY

The first time me and Violet talked, she said there was another Violet Liu, another scientist who went to the same school. Double checked it while Liu Alpha here was on her way over, and the doppelganger is real.

VIOLET

(Distantly) I used to get her grades sometimes, by accident. I guess it's not—out of the question that I could've gotten her summons, too.

SANA

I do have to say, from my dealings with IGR bureaucracy, that is one hundred percent their style.

ARKADY

A screaming mess, doomed to collapse under the weight of its own collective bullshit, bile and vomit?

SANA

I was gonna say "vaguely racist," but sure. That too.

VIOLET

Besides, Brian, I'm the one who told you about Checkpoint Osiris. Why would I help you crack a code if I knew it was probably gonna implicate me?

BRIAN

Unless you knew we would've figured it out eventually—

VIOLET

If you hadn't found out about Osiris already, you weren't going to. It's not on the system. The IGR doesn't publicize their mistakes.

SANA

Then how do you know about it?

VIOLET

I lived near O-11 for a few years.

BRIAN

Alvy might've mentioned it at some point? (Not really sure) I dunno, we worked a lot of long nights.

ARKADY

More to the point, remember that exploding spaceship we just outran? A real agent would've either volunteered the failsafes and saved her own skin, or given us bad codes and gotten us all blown up.

BRIAN

(his argument is losing steam) What if she was counting on us to outrun it? Gives her a decent cover.

ARKADY

They're not trained to take leaps of faith like that. Shit, Jeeter, you think *I'm* a professional paranoid, you should meet some of those people. Not saying I trust her a hundred percent, but for now, all evidence suggests we're dealing with the genuine article.

VIOLET

(Definitely wasn't expecting Arkady to come to her aid) I—thank you, Arkady. That's. Thanks.

ARKADY

Besides, an actual spy would try to gain our trust. You know, by acting charming and likeable.

SANA

Arkady, in her defense, she's had a very weird day.

BRIAN

(exhaustion kind of hitting him all at once) Who hasn't, man.

SANA

Brian, this is out of character for you. When's the last time you slept?

BRIAN

Yesterday.

SANA

For how long?

BRIAN

I didn't *log it in my diary*.

ARKADY

Should we ask Krejhh?

BRIAN

It was more than an hour.

SANA

How much more? (pause) Look, you've barely gotten a chance to grieve for your friend, and that's hard.

BRIAN

I just—I keep thinking—if they were gonna take him out, there's so many easier ways, faster ways. They could've faked a car accident, faked a gas leak—

ARKADY

Faked a home burglary, faked a mugging, faked a suicide. Poisoned him and made it seem like an accident. Hell, you can induce what looks like an aneurysm if you really know what you're—

SANA

(Reproachful) Arkady.

ARKADY

I'm trying to help.

SANA

The point's been made. And I assume they had their reasons. For one thing, let's remember that Alvy wasn't the only target. It doesn't matter how well you stage a death, if five people drop dead at the same time, that raises some questions. And then there's the issue of those samples.

BRIAN

What samples?

ARKADY

The ones Violet almost died protecting. Man, Liu, you're lucky I'm not an "I told you so" kind of girl.

VIOLET

You didn't tell me so. The person you were pretending to be—

ARKADY

How are you still mad about that? It was *days* ago!

SANA

To be fair, Violet's only been out of cryo for what, an hour? Speaking of which. Brian. You need rest. Sleep deprivation just lays the groundwork for Cabral-Crespo Syndrome.

BRIAN

You're not my real mom.

SANA

You're right, Brian, I'm not your mom. I'm your captain, and I'm your crewmate. And that means I am depending on you to take care of yourself so you can do your part to keep us safe. (Weighty) Look, you know how tenuous it can get in the deep. You know how much more life is worth out here. That includes yours. We need a translator, Brian. We need a translator and we need a guy who has our back. We do not need a martyr. (A beat, and then, lighter) Also, I'm the boss, and you have to do what I say.

BRIAN

Yeah...

ARKADY

Let it go, Jeeter. We answered the call, made the trip. It's nobody's fault we got there late. And we went how many parsecs out of our way in the process?

SANA

Hey, we're not that far off course. We agreed to unload and restock out in Jemison.

ARKADY

Yeah, how does our contact on Telemachus feel about that?

SANA

Campbell's a little annoyed, but it'll be fine.

ARKADY

Well, speaking as the one who's gonna have to deal with it if your pal starts feeling a little jilted and then a little shooty—

SANA

C'mon, that's not Campbell.

ARKADY

I don't protect us by fostering a bunch of warm cuddly feelings about humanity, okay?

SANA

There's realistic caution, and then there's—Brian, are you *swaying* right now? Go lie down.

BRIAN

I just—I need to know what happened. *Why* it happened.

SANA

Look, Brian, it wasn't for nothing. We rescued a human being. We recovered Alvy's effects, and someday we can turn them over to his family.

BRIAN

How much of his stuff did you guys get? Can I take a look? There could be clues, or--

SANA

In theory that's possible, but you're not gonna figure it out in the next ten minutes. Especially not like this. Get some rest, okay? Get some rest and you can come at this with your whole mind.

ARKADY

On the way to Jemison. So we can do our jobs.

SANA

On the way to Jemison. We've got what, five days? Brian, get some rest and tomorrow once we're both done with all our work, I will help you go through everything.

BRIAN

(Finally allowing the exhaustion to really hit him) Yeah. Okay.

SANA

You're off duty for at least three hours.

BRIAN

Mm-hmm

ARKADY

We'll try not to, you know, *desperately* need help from a linguist until then.

FX

Shuffling footsteps, door

ARKADY

Captain, I think you said something about moonshine?

SANA

That is an excellent point. (FX: more footsteps) I'll be right back.

FX

Door again

ARKADY

Okay, Liu, Out with it.

VIOLET

What?

ARKADY

Something you wanna ask? That twitchy question-face is making me nervous. Spit it out.

VIOLET

(cautious) You said that you're smugglers?

ARKADY

Yep.

VIOLET

I get that it's maybe none of my business, but given that, I mean, it's looking like I'm gonna be stuck here a while, I think I'd like to know—uh. See, it really is, it really is none of my business so maybe I shouldn't—

ARKADY

You wanna know what it is we smuggle.

VIOLET

Um. Yes.

ARKADY

You started out assuming the worst, but now you're confused because Captain Tripathi doesn't strike you as your standard cut-throat arms dealer. Don't let the dimples fool you, that is a woman who knows how to get the job done.

VIOLET

So what is it that you move?

ARKADY

Banned and restricted materials.

VIOLET

We both know that covers a lot of ground right now.

ARKADY

It really does, huh?

VIOLET

So what do you—

ARKADY

Pornography.

VIOLET

Uh.

ARKADY

Mostly pornography.

VIOLET

...oh. Oh, well, I guess that's better than—guns...

ARKADY

You *guess*? Each to their own, but wow, they wind you guys tight, huh?

FX

Door

SANA

A bottle AND cups! We are gonna drink like *royalty*. What's—oh, I know *that* very specific look. Arkady, you've got to stop telling people we're pornographers.

ARKADY

Why?

SANA

Well, chiefly because it's not true.

ARKADY
Difference of opinion.

VIOLET
I don't get it, do you smuggle—erotica, or—

ARKADY
(laughs) Erotical!

SANA
If you want to move something across space without bankrupting yourself, it needs to have some value, which means usually it's gotta be either very rare or very illegal. Now, we've got some ethical lines that we don't cross—

ARKADY
You have lines—

SANA
There's a lot of variety in our cargo, but the big ones are drugs, birth control, tea—

ARKADY
Rich people will pay anything for some Earl Grey, it is *mindblowing*.

VIOLET
When you say "drugs"—

SANA
Some medicine, some booze, some hallucinogens.

VIOLET
"Medicine"—are they placebos, or are we talking working treatments?

SANA
As far as we know, they work. We build our reputation on having the good stuff.

VIOLET
But you're not doctors.

SANA
No, we're not doctors.

ARKADY
See, *I* thought you'd be in our faces about the birth control.

VIOLET
No. I. The year after college, I worked as a paramedic, out by O-11. Rough area. I met a lot of young mothers. A lot of *very* young mothers. It was—I know we need to repopulate after the war, I mean, as a

civilization, it's our duty to try to get back to even—half of where we were. But keeping people in the dark about their own bodies—

ARKADY

You know your government can legally have us put to death if we're found moving this stuff, right?

VIOLET

Yes. (Pause.) So, I assume that's what you meant by "pornography"? "Obscene materials?"

SANA

Well, point of fact, I can't say we've never shipped actual smut, but Arkady's talking about our other main cargo, which is political screeds.

ARKADY

Which is to say, porn.

SANA

See, Arkady's got this joke where—

ARKADY

(Veering back into a very well-worn argument) Not a joke. If we're talking cheap, depraved thrills, it doesn't get much more pornographic than—

SANA

Hope?

ARKADY

Selling yourself on the notion that you've got the power to change your own stars. Pure fantasy.

VIOLET

Well, you did.

ARKADY

What?

VIOLET

I mean, right or wrong, I doubt you came out of the womb an intergalactic criminal—

ARKADY

All things being equal, if I had any say in my destiny, I sure as shit wouldn't be playing cat and mouse with the IGR, out in the goddamn deep.

VIOLET

You guys keep using that phrase, "in the deep", is that a particular place, or—?

SANA

You know how there's parts of space that are all charted and explored? The stations, the settled planets, the main routes.

VIOLET

Yeah?

SANA

The deep is everything else.

ARKADY

(solemn) The deep is where the weird shit happens.

SANA

I still think a lot of that is oversold.

ARKADY

I dunno, I met a guy in Triton quad—

SANA

(They've had this debate multiple times, too) Oh come on, the Triton quad guy?

ARKADY

—who said he was in the deep on a fuel run and the whole crew saw, like, a giant jellyfish or a squid, floating through the—

SANA

Arkady, didn't that conversation end with you *kicking him in the stomach*?

ARKADY

Well yeah, you don't insult the home planet of a girl who's been heavily drinking.

SANA

I'm just saying—none of that cast a shadow on his credibility?

VIOLET

Besides, a squid or a jellyfish obviously couldn't exist out here. I mean, temperatures aside, food aside, their whole approach to movement wouldn't work in a vacuum.

SANA

Thank you.

VIOLET

(Wry) Unless it was, you know, a ghost squid.

ARKADY

(Also amused) A *ghost squid*, Sana. And this from a woman of science, so you know it's got legs.

(FX: Incoming comm message noise)

KREJJH

(Still not really worried) Hi again, crew. Pilot speaking. Update on that smudge.

SANA

Krejhh, what are we looking at?

KREJJH

Still couldn't say. It's about the size of a small station but I can't get a good read. It keeps changing.

SANA

Like it's not stable?

KREJJH

Like it's not solid. I don't think it's a ship or an asteroid or debris. Honestly, looks more like—weather.

SANA

But that doesn't make sense.

KREJJH

Yeah, bottom line? Fellas, I would love a second opinion.

SANA

We can do you one better, Krejhh. An expert is on her way. Violet, do you wanna—

VIOLET

I'm not a—space meteorologist.

ARKADY

You're a scientist.

VIOLET

I'm a *biologist*. Saying it's all science is like saying that a trial lawyer would make a great freestyle rapper because they both say words for a living. There's—silos of domain knowledge, they're pretty separate.

KREJJH

"Weather" might not be right. It's more like, this one big traveling cloud.

SANA

Could it be the remnants of an explosion?

KREJJH

Captain Tripathi, I really can't overstate how much this thing looks like it's moving on its own.

SANA

How far is it now?

KREJJH

I'd say we'll reach it in about twenty minutes. Could be nothing but—

ARKADY

But it's spooky as hell, got it.

VIOLET

Okay, so I'm just gonna go ahead and say what we're all thinking right now: *how are the particles staying together in a void?*

ARKADY

Yeah, nobody was thinking that but you.

VIOLET

(Resigned) I should probably go take a look.

KREJJH

Be my guest.

ARKADY

C'mon, cockpit's this way. The captain and me will walk you there.

FX

Footsteps as Violet, Arkady, and Sana head for the cockpit.

VIOLET

Hey, Krejjh, speaking of explosions, while I'm at it, thanks for saving our lives when my ship self-destructed.

KREJJH

No need to thank me. Just doing my job.

VIOLET

Well, it's a cool job.

KREJJH

It is, right? And I'm *amazing* at it.

ARKADY

Everyone's job is to keep us from dying, some of us are just louder about it than others.

SANA

Krejjh, if we need to, what are the odds you can outmaneuver whatever this is?

KREJJH

Low, captain. We burned too much of our fuel reserves dodging that blast.

ARKADY

Alright, Violet, cockpit's through here, lemme get the code—

FX

(Beep beep beep beep, door opens)

VIOLET and ARKADY
Aughh!!!

KREJJH
(casual and friendly) Hey, First Mate Patel. Hullo science officer Liu, nice to finally meet you.

ARKADY
Brian, what are you doing on the floor, *I almost shot you*.

BRIAN
(groggy) Your first instinct seeing a sleeping guy is to reach for your *gun*?

ARKADY
Hell of a place to take a nap.

BRIAN
I've had worse.

SANA
Brian, that is not a good reason to do *anything*. You've got a room with a bed in it.

BRIAN
Too quiet in there.

ARKADY
Liu, you okay?

VIOLET
(clearly terrified) *What...*

BRIAN
Aw shit, you know what we forgot to do?

ARKADY
I've got an inkling, yeah.

BRIAN
Sorry, Krejjh.

SANA
Okay, next meeting we need to talk about how to prevent these little breakdowns in communication.

VIOLET
(terrified) *Why—*

ARKADY

(resigned) Here we go...

VIOLET

(absolutely about to lose her shit) *Why is there an ALIEN in the cockpit?*

SANA

Look, Violet I understand why seeing someone like Krejjh must be alarming. Space warfare being what it is, maybe you've never even heard of a Dwarnian who wasn't trying to kill us. You know, most of them didn't even support the war?

KREJJH

'Course, I did fight in it. (Pause, and then, a little weakly) But I'm not fighting in it *right now*.

BRIAN

The war's been over for two years. Krejjh, if you had to guess, how often do you feel the urge to destroy all humans?

KREJJH

Sometimes, in the middle of the night, when you steal all the covers. (Audibly wanting a high five) Earthling sarcasm! How was that? That was good, right? Did I nail it? I nailed it, right?

BRIAN

That was really good.

KREJJH

Aww, Crewman Jeeter! Are you just being nice?

BRIAN

(amused) No, I mean it. That was great.

SANA

Guys, can we focus? Priority right now is making sure our only scientist doesn't pass out. Violet, I promise you can trust every one of us in this room. Krejjh has flown with us for a year and a half—

ARKADY

Hasn't murdered one of us yet. I don't know what you've been told about Dwarnians, but they can't smell your fear. They don't have super-strength. They can't...

KREJJH

Was there a rumor we could read minds?

ARKADY

They *cannot* read your mind. Krejjh isn't even that smart. (pause) You're safe, or whatever. I mean, you're not safe, space is inherently dangerous but—

VIOLET

They nearly wiped us out. All of us, humankind, off the map.

KREJJH

We did decide not to.

VIOLET

Only because we won the war! And now you all expect me to believe that they're totally harmless?

SANA

They're not good or bad. Some of them tried to conquer us, they couldn't, they gave up.

ARKADY

Not like there aren't evil humans. I'd say, across the board, the only real difference between us and them is the numbers, the purple skin and, I don't know, some cultural stuff, like I've never met a Dwarnian who didn't find the whole gender binary thing really frickin' funny.

KREJJH

(laughing) (Human impression) "Pardon me, sir or madam, but I simply *must* know what gender you are! There's *two whole options*, and I can't really explain why but somehow it's *very* important!" (laughs)

BRIAN

(Also amused) Man, tell me about it.

VIOLET

Hang on. Brian, I just had to *beg* you to trust me. And somehow, when you're dealing with a *space alien* who has *literally killed humans*, it's all water under the bridge?

BRIAN

That's different. Krejhh and I have known each other for two years. (a pause) (solemnly) And we're in love.

ARKADY

(HEAVY sarcasm) Oh great, awesome, let's *definitely* get into this right now.

VIOLET

...*what*.

KREJJH

We're—what's the word I like. Spowz...zizz. (Krejhh says "spouses" really weirdly) Future spaowzz— (Krejhh needs help.) Crewman Jeeter!

BRIAN

We're engaged.

KREJJH

(like a favorite sports team just won) Yeah!

VIOLET

There is no place *in the universe* where that's legal.

BRIAN

It's illegal to get married. It's not illegal to be engaged.

KREJJH

(kind of dreamily) I think we both keep hoping someday we're gonna find some lawless nightmare of a planet with a bribable priest.

BRIAN

Or a rabbi.

KREJJH

Or a very corrupt justice of the peace.

VIOLET

(very freaked out) I just—what in the—

SANA

I know this must be a lot to unpack, but there's just the five of us on this ship and the only way this works is if we trust that we all want to survive, and we understand that our only option is to put aside our differences and work together, so we can—

VIOLET

No, I mean. On the screen. Did the cloud just. Eat a piece of space debris?

BRIAN

What?

VIOLET

Rewind. Uh, is that possible, to go back?

ARKADY

Okay, out of the way, pulling it up right—huh.

KREJJH

Looks like—it did.

SANA

Doesn't seem to leave anything behind.

KREJJH

It's moving a little faster now, right?

BRIAN

What kind of cloud eats metal?

VIOLET

(slowly) I don't think that's a cloud.

SANA

Then what is it?

VIOLET

I think it's a swarm. Pull up the footage again. Rewind a little more. Okay, see how the far edges kind of buzz in all directions, and then one part of it reaches the metal—and then that edge gets thicker, and then the whole body of the thing lurches after?

SANA

Yeah.

VIOLET

See, this is just a guess, but—that looks an awful lot like emergent behavior to me.

ARKADY

What are you talking about.

SANA

Violet, a little background?

VIOLET

You know how an ant colony or a bee colony is capable of complex behavior, even though one ant on its own is pretty stupid? Emergence is order arising organically from the bottom up.

So, a bunch of ants randomly scatter in all directions. The first ant to find food puts down a chemical trail. It's weak at first, but a couple of nearby ants follow that trail, discover the food, put down trails of their own. And in a pretty short time, that multiplies until your picnic's ruined. You with me so far?

SANA

I think so.

VIOLET

A free-standing, free-moving cloud can't exist in a void. It violates basic physics; there's nothing to hold it together. I think if we could zoom in far enough, we'd see that what looks like a gas to us is actually a big group of very small independently functioning agents. A swarm.

BRIAN

A swarm of what? Ants in tiny space suits?

KREJJH

Trying to magnify but we're still way too far to get anything. (Pause) And my money's on bees. *Space bees.* (Krejjh may or may not know what bees are)

VIOLET

Look, I don't know anything about technology, but—very small robots?

ARKADY

Nanotech, you mean.

SANA

I'm not saying it's impossible, but we're probably decades away from something that powerful.

KREJJH

You are.

BRIAN

Krejjh?

KREJJH

About a thousand years ago, Dwarnians were visited by another civilization, from very far away. We call them the Vree-Chel-Noke. Their tech was so beyond us, we thought it was magic. There's stories that they could control clouds, make 'em do anything. Clouds for communicating, clouds for medicine, clouds for vaporizing all their trash.

BRIAN

Vaporizing metal?

SANA

It's pretty effective as waste disposal. If the bots can use trash as fuel, that's a never-ending energy source. So, we contact a member of the Vree-Chel-Noke.

KREJJH

Oh, no, Captain Tripathi, they're all dead. They vanished about a century after they showed up. Nobody knows why. We've got a few old recordings of theirs, and that's it.

SANA

But if their tech is out here—

KREJJH

Nah, man. Scanners aren't picking up anything else. My guess is we're looking at a waste disposal cloud that went rogue a long time ago.

SANA

And survived out here for thousands of years?

KREJJH

Why not? Plenty of space debris to keep it going.

BRIAN

An ancient signal from a ghost, bouncing around space forever. It's kind of beautiful.

VIOLET

(startled) What was that??

KREJJH

Something just hit the screen of the magnifying camera, like a microscopic grain of—uh-oh. Not saying that's definitely alien nanotech, but it does look like alien nanotech.

ARKADY

They hit us? Through our shields? How is that possible?

SANA

We don't know what that stuff is made out of.

BRIAN

What are the odds they read us as food?

KREJJH

I'm sure at some point they were taught not to eat moving ships, but they've been feral for so long—

SANA

Krejhh, how long until it bears down on us?

KREJJH

Hard to say. It's moving a lot faster since it ate.

ARKADY

Captain, even when it gets in range, pulse fields only affect organic life.

SANA

Particle beams?

ARKADY

Should fry any robotics, but precision weaponry's a longshot against something this dispersed. There's nothing to aim for, and no guarantee taking out part of it will even hurt the rest.

SANA

Keep thinking, there must be something we can throw at it.

ARKADY

Anybody else feeling a little nostalgic for the war?

KREJJH

Speak for yourself, First Mate Patel.

BRIAN

Captain, not sure what this means, but the cloud is giving off electromagnetic energy that's awfully consistent with radio waves.

ARKADY

What the hell.

SANA

Can we find the frequency?

BRIAN

Gimme a sec, uh.

ARKADY

Let me try.

FX

(Typing sounds. Silence, then weird, staticky, chittering, which transitions into the voice of the alien robot swarm)

ALIEN ROBOT SWARM RADIO

Byalla?

SANA

What the...

KREJJH

(A little weirded out) It's saying hello. "Byalla," that's one of like, ten Vre Chel Nokean words I remember from school.

ARKADY

Ten?

KREJJH

(The closest we've heard to them actually freaking out so far) *Sorry, fellas, we studied it for a few years but it was really, really boring.*

SANA

Okay, everyone, stay calm and think.

KREJJH

Captain. Uh, it probably bears mentioning.

ALIEN ROBOT SWARM RADIO

Byalla? Byalla?

KREJJH

I've heard the old transmissions, and Vre Chel Nokeans don't sound like that.

ARKADY

Then who's talking?

KREJJH

I think it's the swarm.

SANA

Is that possible?

BRIAN

I don't know, I could see some really advanced AI picking up the language of its creators, but--these guys?

VIOLET

(Having the start of a new thought) How advanced are we talking?

ARKADY

What do you mean.

VIOLET

Keep in mind this is—firmly in “hypothesis” territory—

SANA

I think we'd all welcome a hypothesis right now, Violet.

VIOLET

Something I didn't mention before. Emergence is also how a lot of neuron signaling works in the human brain, on the level of thoughts being, like, electricity. So when we talk about a swarm that must be—billions of tiny robots, with some ability to learn and thus adapt, over unlimited time—

SANA

You're saying they might've—grown a sort of collective consciousness?

VIOLET

I'm hypothesizing.

ARKADY

It's heading in our direction. It has to know we're here.

SANA

We can't hide, and we don't have the fuel to run. I think we should respond.

KREJJH

Captain?

SANA

Krejjh, do you know enough words to say we're not a threat?

KREJJH

(Resolute) Pass me the mic.

SANA

In the meantime, let's have those particle beams ready to go.

ARKADY

Got it.

BRIAN

It's okay, Krejhh. It's okay.

KREJJH

Yeah.

(FX: typing sounds)

ARKADY

Aaand we're live.

KREJJH

Byalla? (Straining to remember) Sh-ned jve-ra. (pause, a little embarrassed.) That's all I got.

SANA

Do it again.

KREJJH

(A little more confident) Byalla, sh-ned jve-ra.

ARKADY

Particle beams ready if we need 'em.

ALIEN ROBOT SWARM RADIO

Thasia korkvanchad jre-gesh?

ARKADY

Holy shit.

ALIEN ROBOT SWARM RADIO

Craddock jre-gesh?

SANA (talking over the robot swarm as it continues to play)

Krejhh, do you understand any of this?

ALIEN ROBOT SWARM RADIO

Yava tella nakvach frun croy? Reshfur croyba frun nak.

KREJJH

I think "nak" means "we"? I think. I *think*.

ALIEN ROBOT SWARM RADIO

Reefshoke nakbyad. Hamchand croykaba frun nak, kavun byeshta nak.

KREJJH

(Weakly) Sh-ned jve-ra.

ALIEN ROBOT SWARM RADIO

Brucks k'wachfochnak, frun croy, ybeckrin geshwen grunka voke. (Pause) Sh-ned jve-sha. Clafur towe.

KREJJH

Clafur towe.

(FX: Static)

BRIAN

They disconnected. Krejjh, how much of that did you get?

KREJJH

Uh. The last part was definitely "goodbye."

SANA

It's coming right at us.

ARKADY

Shit, the particle beam's jammed. Both of them. Just how smart are these things?

VIOLET

What's happening?

KREJJH

That haze in the window, as far as you can see? That's the swarm. Viewscreen shows it's got us on all sides.

VIOLET

So we wait to be eaten?

SANA

Stay calm. It hasn't eaten us yet. Don't give me that look, Arkady, you know you and I have been through worse.

ARKADY

(weak chuckle)

KREJJH

Crewman Jeeter, am I hurting your hand?

BRIAN

My hand's fine, Krejjh. I've got you.

ARKADY

(muttering to herself) *Yea though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death--*

VIOLET

Arkady, what are you doing?

ARKADY

Hedging my bets. (muttering, fairly freaked out) *I will fear no evil: For thou art with me--*

SANA

Is it—on the viewscreen, it seems like—is it letting us go?

KREJJH

...Looks like it. ...Yeah, it's passing us.

(There is a general sigh of relief)

VIOLET

Does anybody else feel like the contents of their lungs just boiled and then froze?

BRIAN

Krejhh, what'd you say to it?

KREJJH

Keep in mind, I *do not* speak Vre-Chel-Noke.

SANA

Okay.

KREJJH

Uh, "Sh-ned jve-ra" means "I love you."

ARKADY

...Krejhh, did you just save us from a feral robot cloud by flirting with it?

KREJJH

Sh-ned jve-ra is love and awe, it's what a child says to a parent.

ARKADY

Maybe where you're from.

BRIAN

Uh guys, can we take a moment to process this? We just made contact with speakers of a *long-lost alien language*.

VIOLET

Uh, and an entirely new form of consciousness.

BRIAN

Oh my god, I can't believe it. I got that whole exchange on tape, Krejhh, what are the odds we can find a Dwarnian a little more conversant in Vre Chel Noke—

KREJJH

So, any Dwarnian. Any at all.

SANA

Hey, the important thing is that it worked. I'm proud of you guys. That was a real team effort, all around. Arkady, Brian, Krejjh, Violet.

ARKADY

I'll give you this, Liu, you don't crack under pressure.

VIOLET

I'm getting very tired of feeling like I'm about to die.

SANA

It has been excessive today, even for us.

VIOLET

The more I think about it, the more alarming it is that you don't have a doctor in your crew.

ARKADY

This may shock you, but most qualified medics are not jumping for the chance to run around with a gang of smugglers.

KREJJH

Well, they are *missing out*. Captain Tripathi, is that a bottle of moonshine you've got? And cups! Hot dog, what a forward-thinking captain! What a clever and good-looking crew! Someone give me an earth high five! Someone give me that *bottle*!

VIOLET

I can't believe I'm out here because of a clerical error.

SANA

Yeah, that is exceptionally rough.

(FX: liquid pouring into five cups)

KREJJH

Moonshine for everyone! Moonshine for being alive!

ARKADY

Can't argue with that.

KREJJH

And *fellas*, can we take a moment to admire that *view*?

SANA

It really is something.

VIOLET

Huh. (pause) It's weird, if you stay out of the cockpit, you start feeling more like you're underwater or something. Close quarters, no windows. You can forget you're even in the sky, when really it's—there's only sky out here.

BRIAN

Yeah.

VIOLET

Alvy used to sneak off during his shift to look at the stars. I always thought he was just being lazy, but now, I mean, he knew he was going to die. Maybe it was—comforting, or— (A beat) Sorry, Brian, I didn't mean to—

BRIAN

You're fine. You're fine. Just—what a way to go out.

ARKADY

What a way to murder someone. Cowardly.

BRIAN

They didn't just want him dead, you know? They wanted him to disappear. You don't get to—erase a person like that. Somebody needs to find out what happened and why, Captain.

SANA

I know. (Pause) We've got five days until Jemison, and after that, our next pickup and drop-off is—

KREJJH

Rosalind. Out in the Payne-Gaposchkin system.

SANA

How long of a trip are we looking at?

KREJJH

Depends how hard we burn. Two weeks?

SANA

We agreed as a crew to go off course and intercept the Iris, try to help Brian's friend. And it's true, we're not detectives. Nobody on this ship is under obligation to help. But our job has a lot of downtime built in. If anyone wants to use some of their downtime to poke at this—well, worst case scenario, it passes the time.

ARKADY

Worst case scenario, the IGR takes notice. That's what we call asking for trouble.

SANA

Sure, but: best case scenario, we make some trouble for the IGR. And I know you're a fan of that.

ARKADY

(Has to admit this) I am.

SANA

They want this to stay buried. If we can unbury it without going out of our way...

ARKADY

Famous last words, Sana.

VIOLET

(Deep breath) Speaking of last words. You guys need a medic on this ship. That's pretty much non-negotiable.

SANA

We have seen some close brushes lately.

VIOLET

I said I was a paramedic out on O-11, right? The thing is, I was good. I was really good. I know I can be a basketcase, but sometimes when other people panic, it's easier for me to keep it together. Not sure why. And I'm a hard worker. Self-sufficient. Stubborn, but—I like learning new things.

SANA

(Wry) Are you applying for a job?

VIOLET

(Serious) You realize that I can't go back, right? I'm legally dead. If I show up again, I have to explain how I survived, at which point they'll know I know they were trying to kill me. At which point—

ARKADY

They'll kill you.

SANA

We'll have to—put it to a vote, but it's hard to deny it'd be nice to have a paramedic around. If only so we know what to do the next time Krejjh swallows a penny on a dare.

KREJJH

One time!

ARKADY

Liu, you don't believe in our politics. You don't believe in the things we're doing.

VIOLET

As far as I can tell, neither do you, Arkady. And the fact remains. (Determined) You need a medic, and I can't go back. (Pause) I didn't really know Alvy that well. Or at all. But he knew they were gonna kill him out here, and he still found the time to be nice to me. He was nice to me, and he died, and I want to know why.

BRIAN

Are you gonna be cool about Krejjh? You know, the brave and talented pilot who saved your life?

KREJJH

(Eating this up) Crewman Jeeter!

VIOLET

(This is hard for her to say.) You've survived in the deep a lot longer than me. And you all clearly trust—? Krejjh, what word do you prefer?

KREJJH

Pilot.

BRIAN

Uh, she means pronouns, Krejjh.

KREJJH

Aha. None of 'em feel, like, great? Let's go with "them."

VIOLET

You all clearly trust them. And they've saved my life, twice. Arkady, you're right: I don't agree with everything you guys have ever done. But I am gonna help you get to the bottom of this. And in the very likely event one of you gets busted up in the process, I am gonna put you back together, okay?

SANA

All in favor?

BRIAN

Yeah.

ARKADY

Might as well.

KREJJH

Sounds good to me.

SANA

Then I guess it's unanimous. A toast! To Alvy Connors.

BRIAN

To Alvy Connors.

SANA

To my courageous and smart crew.

ARKADY

To our captain. I guess she's alright.

SANA

To Violet Liu. Y'know, on the bright side, Violet, I promise you we know how to keep a secret.

(FX: glasses clinking)

ALL
Cheers!

AGENT
End of transmission three.

For the purposes of cross-referencing, please note the Violet Liu aboard the Rumor is referred elsewhere in these files as Cindy Chu. Please note she is now considered a fugitive from justice.

Arkady Patel has been found to operate under a variety of aliases, including Kay Grisham, Ishani Kanetkar, and Sister Teresa Margaret.

Confirmed that the so-called “Captain” Sana Tripathi did not graduate from any accredited officer school. Confirmed that she was involved in the mechanic’s union uprising on Cresswin Landing, ultimately fleeing capture on a faked passport under the name Rukhmani Desai.

Documentation for Brian Jeeter remains elusive. See attached file, “Jamie Price.”

All apparent evidence suggests that this “Krejhh” is, in fact, a Dwarnian. As such, it will be—difficult to locate any ID. Elsewhere in these files, Krejhh is referred to as Brittony LeFever.

This report has been transcribed by Ensign Best. If you need to review a written version, please access procyonpodcasts.com. That’s p-r-o-c-y-o-n podcasts dot com.

This is Agent Park, codename Apollo, thanking you for reviewing this report. Additional thanks to Agent Bauman and Agent Cross, and to the specialists at Procyon for their assistance.

Evidence also suggests the crew of the Rumor has encountered a wild swarm of the VCN nanocloud. Due to this discovery, and their stated intention to unearth the details of the Craddock Purge, as well as Operation Sentry, The Case of Starship Iris is now considered to be a priority four. My thanks to General Jahansooz for expediting this matter. With the addition of new personnel, and the capability to scan and skip through periods of silence, we should soon be monitoring the Rumor in something close to real-time.

Long live the Republic.