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STAR TREK THE FOUR YEARS WAR

A NOVEL BY
STEPHEN FENDER



STAR TREK

THE FOUR YEARS WAR

Volume I

A novel by

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Edited by

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Having said that, have fun!

Chapter 1

Stardate 3801.15

April 2250

Incoming subspace communication . . .

FROM: The Office of the Commanding Officer, Starfleet Public Relations,
Commodore Joselyn Czernovski, San Francisco, Earth

TO: All Commanding Officers, Colonial Operations Command
All Commanding Officers, Galaxy Exploration Command
All Commanding Officers, Military Operations Command
All Commanding Officers, Starbases and Space Stations

VIA: (1) The Office of the Commanding Officer, Starfleet Command, Fleet
Admiral Matthew D. Luxa, San Francisco, Earth
(2) The Office of the Commanding Officer, Starfleet Intelligence,
Commodore Michael J. Lai, San Francisco, Earth

SUBJ: OFFICIAL RELEASE OF STARFLEET INTELLIGENCE
OBSERVATIONS REGARDING THE KLINGON
EMPIRE

1. It has come to the attention of Starfleet Intelligence that an increasing number of reports are being transmitted to them via stations and starships near the Federation-Klingon border with regard to supposed or confirmed Klingon movements in that area. In response to several alarming reports, and also to quell any unsubstantiated concerns among other fleet operations, Starfleet Intelligence now feels such transmissions will require their specific observance. While the

nature of these movements continues to remain unclear, please be assured that at this time, there is no concrete threat facing us from the Klingon Empire.

2. In recent months Starfleet Command has made a high priority of strictly monitoring the status of any ship, be it hostile or otherwise, along the Klingon-Federation border. At this time, there is insufficient evidence of observable patterns to the regularity of any threat forces inside the area. Intelligence will continue to monitor the situation.

3. As of this stardate, a buffer zone of neutrality now exists along the Federation-Klingon border. It shall extend the full length of the border of known Klingon space, extending along Orion space, ending near the Federation planet of Precippe. The width of this zone will be roughly two parsecs. The Klingon government has been notified via subspace of the establishment of this zone, but no official acknowledgement has been received by them.

4. Under no circumstances should any starship commander bring their vessel into this neutral zone, nor should they travel closely to it, lest they provoke the Klingons into actions or hostilities which may jeopardize Federation lives or property.

5. Starfleet Command, working in close cooperation with Starfleet Intelligence, is continuing to monitor the Federation borders, and is investigating anything that may be considered out of the ordinary for this zone of space.

6. Starbase commanding officers, as well as starship captains, are henceforth ordered to investigate any such irregularities or occurrences—as long as such investigations are performed within the guidelines as set forth by the Federation Council, and as long as such investigations do not jeopardize the lives and property of those set forth in stipulation three (3).

7. The results of any such investigation made by any starbase or starship operating with regard to those threat forces—or perceived threat forces—near the neutral zone should be immediately transmitted to Starfleet Intelligence once any initial debriefing has occurred within the respective chains of command, and only as long as such debriefings include command-level representatives of Starfleet Security.

8. Detailed instructions for the transmission and encryption of data sent to Starfleet Intelligence will be provided shortly. Until that time, all commanders are advised to keep any and all data referencing the above transmissions stored in their

local computer systems. Representatives from either Starfleet Security or Starfleet Intelligence will retrieve the data in person.

June 2250

Stardate 3806.05

“Having fun watching the paint dry?” The voice was soft, but there was more than a hint of amusement in her tone.

“Yes, actually, I am.” Dr. Jeff Richards never once looked up from his microscope to formally acknowledge the voice asking the question. After all, he didn’t need to. He could pick out the melodious sounds of his wife, Julie, in a room filled with jabbering scientists having a dozen different conversations at once.

In fact, it was that very same voice that had initially attracted him to her. She’d been lecturing at a science conference on the topic of algae—or more specifically, the molecular composition of several different species of it and how they worked in unison to help form breathable air during terraforming operations. A rather dry subject to Jeff, it wasn’t the topic that had piqued his interest in her. He’d simply been walking by the auditorium that sunny afternoon at Starfleet Academy, quietly on his way to present a discourse to his quantum physics class, when “the voice” had mesmerized him, stopping him dead in his tracks. Of course, it also helped that the voice was attached to a beautiful and intelligent woman. Missing his own class, Jeff had found himself drawn into her lecture like a moth to a flame.

After the initial rituals associated with any newly dating couple, they had quickly fallen deeply in love with one another. When Jeff had received orders to Archanis IV four years ago, Julie was overjoyed. She’d been aching to leave her instructor post at the academy and get back into the field—“back out into some *real* research,” as she’d called it. It was their drive to find something new, something that had never before been seen, a discovery that could help countless worlds and millions of

people, that had driven the two scientists all their respective careers. A chance to get off Earth and onto the virgin soil of a new world was a dream come true for them.

They quickly discovered that Archanis IV was a choice location for them both. Jeff was assigned the task of developing a new form of Thermocoat—a type of heat-resistant paint that adorned all Starfleet’s vessels. Julie was given the assignment of studying how various plants and algae were affected in zero and near-zero gravity conditions. The pressure domes that encircled the small research outpost were quite comfortable, and the interior climate of the habitat models could easily be changed to allow Jeff to study the effects on his various Thermocoat compounds, while other domes could just as easily be adapted for Julie’s work.

“This new form of paint is just about ready,” Jeff said, not bothering to look up from his microscope. “It’s almost to the point of total cohesion with the duranium.”

“You know I love it when you talk all technical,” came the voice.

Jeff couldn’t help but smile. He turned away from the microscope to see his wife standing in the open doorway. She was grinning from ear to ear, and Jeff couldn’t help but offer a sheepish smile in return. Julie had the uncanny ability to turn the brilliant Dr. Jeffrey Richards into a warm pile of . . . well, Thermocoat.

“What’s on your mind, hon?” he inquired. “Or did you just come down here to ask me what I want for dinner? If that’s the case, I’d like your famous beef stew with an extra helping of carrots.”

Julie entered the room as the door swished shut behind her. She walked over to her husband, rubbing the palms of her hands together as if she were nervous.

Jeff caught the concerned look on her face. “What’s wrong?”

She seemed to hesitate for a few moments, looking down at her feet and shuffling a bit. “What do you think about becoming parents?”

Jeff blinked once, then twice, then a few more times. He was shocked. With their busy schedules, they hadn’t talked about children for some time. “Wow. Are you . . . pregnant?” He was thankful he was still sitting. He needed a very large glass of water that—to his recollection—was nowhere in sight.

“No, silly,” she said with a smile. “Not yet, at least.” Stepping to his side, she ran her fingers through his slightly graying hair.

“So you want me to be the father of your children?” he asked, staring at her ever-widening smile. When she gave a slight nod, he broke out in laughter as he got up from his chair. Taking hold of his lovely wife, he whisked her off her feet, spinning her around several times before putting her down.

“Well,” she started, “I don’t know about children in the plural, but I think at least *one* new doctor in the family would be nice.”

“You think he . . . or she will take after their boring scientist parents? I mean, what if they decide to become rebellious and do something like join Starfleet and become the captain of some great *interplanetary* vessel?” he asked, ending his question by bringing his hand to his forehead in a grandiose salute.

“I’m sure we’d still be proud either way,” she laughed, her arms around his neck, her lips inches from his.

He kissed her softly, not with a kiss of passion, but with one of unrelenting love for this wonderful woman who captivated him so.

“Don’t forget about your paint, dear,” Julie said, her eyes darting past her husband to the microscope on his desk.

“It’ll dry on its own whether I’m watching or not. In fact, maybe we can start working on that family plan right now?”

“That’s precisely what I had in mind, *Mister*,” she said with an impish grin.

July 2250

Stardate 3807.26

The *Hermes*-class scout USS *Bohr* glided along effortlessly through the vastness of space. Like most vessels in Starfleet’s inventory, she was adorned with the distinctive saucer-shaped section as her primary hull. At the rear of the saucer, on the ventral side, a thin neck extended down and aft for several decks. Attached to that was the ship’s single, tubular warp nacelle, providing power to the small vessel’s many systems. And with only two laser banks, she was by no means a

serious threat. She was a simple yet graceful craft, capable of medium-range scouting and scientific missions. Those duties could take the little vessel into uncharted territories, possibly leading to first contact with an advanced civilization and—if the cards were just right—put her name in the history books for all time.

However, while the fame of the *Bohr* was assured, fate had set things in motion that would instill that distinction under far more nefarious reasons than her crew was currently privy to.

The routine of their current patrol seemed to be getting on the nerves of just about every crewman on board. What had they done to deserve this? Was it something the captain had said or done that had upset some admiral on some starbase in such and such a quadrant? Why were they out in the hind end of space, far removed from anything remotely exciting, running up and down along a border that never seemed to have action in the right place at the *Bohr*'s time? The *Bohr* was never where she wanted to be, only where the brass told her to go. Such was life in Starfleet sometimes.

“Captain on the bridge.”

The doors to the turbolift hissed shut behind Captain Northon as he entered the circular command area of the ship. He glided slowly to the command chair, which was not an easy feat for him, considering the journey was only a few meters and he had quite long legs. Upon reaching the chair, he had a second thought about sitting in it. He gave it a good looking over—as if he'd never seen it before and was doubtful of its sturdiness. He swiveled it slightly on its axis, then ran his hand along the stained cherry armrest of the thing. He tried to imagine the wood not ending in a series of blinking lights and switches, each of those toggles of technology in turn leading to more work for the tired skipper of a small vessel with nothing better to do in the backwoods of Federation space. At last he steadied the chair and sat down, but took caution in doing so . . . as if the cushions themselves were covered in hot coals.

Though only a few moments had passed since Northon had entered the bridge, the captain knew his crew expected him to say something. Not that he had anything profound to say—or anything to say at all, really. Protocol did, however, demand that *something* be said. He had entered the bridge, and his crew was trained to give

him updates when he did so, whether he wanted to hear them or not. He had duties to perform and, regardless of the pointlessness of it all, sometimes he did feel a need to keep the traditions alive. *For the crew's sake*, he would remind himself. *To keep morale up*.

Captain Edward Northon of Earth, commanding officer of one of the most powerful scout vessels in the vast region of nothing he found himself in; mighty king of a sand dune in the middle of a desert with no oases for three sectors.

Fantastic, he mused. "Status report, Mr. Sanders."

Lieutenant Junior Grade Mike Sanders didn't so much as turn away from the mesmerizing, blinking lights of the helm station before him. "On course for waypoint three, sir. Estimating arrival in 1.5 hours, present speed."

Per their most recent order from Starbase 5, there was a series of five waypoints that the *Bohr* had to patrol over the course of the next few months. Once a particular point was reached, they would scan the area, catalog the results, and then set course for the next. While most of their journey would be well within Federation space, two points were near the Klingon border, which was why Starbase 5 had specifically overlapped them with other Federation scouts. The *Bohr* had been running up and down the border of Federation space just outside the Klingon Empire for two months now. To the captain and most of the crew, it felt as if they had been out here for three times that amount.

Unfortunately, unless Northon or the other vessel commanders changed their schedules, it could be anyone's guess as to whether the *Bohr* and the other scouts would visually see each other when they reached the same patrol point in space. Captain Northon thought of it as Christmas when this happened, which hadn't in the last thirty days. *At least it'd give us something to look at*.

The captain turned to Bob Retnold, the slightly overweight science officer. *Might want the doc to check up on this one. If we get into close hand-to-hand combat at some point, this guy is going to be more of an anchor than an asset*. Northon then laughed at the thought of getting into any combat at all, let alone one that would require hand-to-hand skills.

"Mr. Retnold, what are the sensors telling us this fine morning?" The captain tried to keep an overwhelming sense of boredom out his voice.

“Nothing . . . at least, nothing out of the ordinary, Captain.”

“Well, give me all the details of what you would consider *ordinary*. While I’m sure we’ve all heard this song before, I also know it’s been quite some time since we’ve heard it, so let’s go over all the numbers and—for *heaven’s sake*—let’s pretend this is exciting, people.”

The red-shirted chief engineer, leaning on the communications officer’s console behind the captain, let out a muffled laugh. Lieutenant Commander Burrows was a good engineer, but would have made a far better boxer. Tall, bulky, and with fists that could strangle the life out of a tree trunk, Burrows had missed his true calling in life, the captain had often thought. Nonetheless, the laugh was what the captain was aiming for.

At least someone’s in decent spirits.

Retnold exchanged a glance with Burrows, shared a faint smile, and then turned back to his instruments. “Short-range scanners show nothing out of place, Skipper. There are fifteen particles of space dust per cubic meter. There are no abnormal gravitation fluctuations. There are also no vessels in the immediate area. Long-range sensors show . . .” The science officer’s voice trailed off as he leaned into his computer. “What the hell?”

“What is it?” the captain asked, his curiosity piqued.

Retnold was moving his hands over his station, just as a skilled chef would work a deli counter.

He might not be in the best shape, but he certainly knew his equipment. “Well, Lieutenant?” the captain asked. “Report.”

“Sir, we . . . we have three ships heading toward us—possibly on an intercept course. Sensors show that they are traveling at warp three. Assuming we stay on our present course, time to intercept should be approximately forty-five minutes.”

We’re not scheduled to rendezvous with any other Federation vessel for the next two weeks. “Project their origin of departure.”

It didn’t take Retnold long to calculate. “They’re coming in from Klingon space.”

The captain looked at large view screen ahead. Though it only showed the occasional star streaking by at low speed, he knew better than to trust the vast

emptiness. There was something out there looking for the *Bohr* . . . tracking it . . . stalking it. “Can you get a positive scan of the vessels?”

“Not yet, sir,” Retnold said while working his console. “They’re still too far away. Sensors do report, however, that there are three vessels; hull types and specifications are unknown. They are definitely on a direct course from outside Federation space.”

Captain Northon began stroking his chin. It wasn’t something he did very often. However, the last thing he wanted to do was to let the crew know his stomach was doing cartwheels. He had to remain in control. This was what all his years of command training came down to. This was the moment the *Bohr* had been waiting for. This was their moment to shine and to impress.

“People, I’m not about to become a sitting duck for some trigger-happy Klingons looking for an easy kill, so let’s not wait for them to intercept us. Plot a direct course to intercept the intruders at the location where they will cross into Federation space. Communications Officer, send a high-priority message to Commodore Balkwill, Starbase 5. Give them our precise location and inform them that we are heading off our assigned patrol area to investigate a possible Klingon intrusion into Federation space. Helmsman, plot a course to the neutral zone and engage at warp four. Mr. Burrows, I’ll need you down in engineering. If things get tight, we may need to get out of this situation quickly.”

“Aye, sir!” came the chorus of replies from the bridge officers. They went to their tasks like skilled bees hovering around a beehive, each with their own purpose and mission. They knew their jobs and knew them well. The *Bohr* was no match for three Klingon vessels of any designation, but he hoped his presence would be enough to scare them back into Klingon space. *Besides, Dan Balkwill isn’t one to sit on his hands about this. The Commodore will have a cruiser squadron out here before we know it.* Nodding to his bridge crew, Northon leaned back in his command chair, a look of confidence on his formerly worried face. *Now, let’s just see why these Klingon dogs are sniffing around my neighborhood.*

Chapter 2

January 2251

Stardate 3901.11

“Captain’s log: supplemental. After two weeks of surveillance and study, we’ve completed our initial scans of the recently discovered quasar that lies ten parsecs from the Rigel system. Due to the interference caused by the phenomenon, the *Invincible* has been out of communication range with Starfleet Command for the last five days. I am pleased to report that the officers, crew, and the attached scientific observers have all worked flawlessly together and our mission was a complete success.”

Stretched out on his bed, Captain Ellis Coombs tossed his personal data recorder to the table. Unfortunately, his aim was slightly off, and recorder bounced off the metal tabletop and landed squarely on the floor. Giving the device a look of disapproval and muttering to himself in frustration, he resigned himself to picking up the recorder at another time. Putting his head back down to his ever-so-soft pillow, he was looking forward to getting some much-needed sleep.

It seemed that the *Anton*-class light cruiser and her crew had been on near-constant duty since the beginning of this mission almost two months ago. There was always a fire to put out between his personnel somewhere. If the attached scientists weren’t arguing over who would use such and such sensors suite first, his crew was busy constantly aiming and adjusting those same fine-point sensors to give the picky scientists all the readings they were hoping for. In the end, however, it had all been ironed out. The mission was a complete success, and the scientific observers were, at this moment, probably down in the galley toasting champagne to their own successes. Ellis had neither been invited to such festivities, nor did he care to attend them. His bed was his reward, and a good night’s sleep was the only thing he wished to imbibe at the moment. He rubbed his eyes, stretched out his arms, and

then placed his hands behind his head, fully intent on counting nebulas until he dozed off.

Then it happened—that accursed perfunctory beep from his console that told the captain that there would be no rest for him in the next few minutes. Reaching to his beside, Ellis pressed the blinking white button with a groan. The officer on the other end didn't wait for the captain's acknowledgment.

"Captain Coombs, there's a Priority One communication coming in for you." The communications officer's words, although spoken softly, did nothing to underscore the importance of what she had said. *Priority One*. There would be no rest for the captain for quite some time.

Coombs raised himself from his bed and, after a heavy sigh, moved slowly over to the computer terminal a few meters from his bedside. With a quick push of the intercom button below the monitor, the image of the female ensign at the communication console appeared on the small screen. "Thank you, Ensign. Put it through to my quarters."

"Aye, sir." And with that, her image faded and was replaced by that of an older gentleman—one whom Ellis Coombs knew quite well. The face that stared back at Coombs was that of Commodore Dan Balkwill, commanding officer of Starbase 5. The commodore began to speak before Coombs could even acknowledge that he was receiving the transmission.

"Good evening, Captain. I hope I'm not catching you at a bad time."

Coombs looked down his uniform, half expecting himself to be shirtless. He was so exhausted that he hadn't even taken it off before he had gone to bed. "No, sir. It's no bother at all. I was just finishing my log entries for the day."

"I see," the commodore said in an unconvinced tone. "Are we on a secure channel?"

Coombs pressed a second control below the computer monitor, which emitted the traditional sound that indicated the channel had become encrypted. "It is now, sir."

"Good. Ellis, we have something of a . . . *situation*, and I need your help to resolve it."

"Situation, sir?" Coombs, more alert with each passing second, straightened his wrinkled tunic. Starship captains were taught to fear the Priority One

communication—or at the very least, accept that when they received one, there would always be a huge responsibility behind it.

“Yes,” Balkwill continued, “and the word ‘situation’ is probably an understatement. Sector Intelligence has just informed me that a large force of Klingon ships is moving toward Federation space near your location.”

Klingons? “That’s a bit unusual sir, seeing as we haven’t heard much from them in quite some time.” The *Invincible* was already close to Klingon space, almost too close for Coombs’s liking, but the reclusive Klingons had kept to themselves for the past few years without so much as a peep.

After a brief pause, Commodore Balkwill nodded. “You mean . . . you haven’t heard?” he began, his eyes searching Coombs’s for a glimmer of recollection. “It hit the civilian communication networks three days ago.”

Ellis shook his head. “I’m sorry, sir. The *Invincible* has been out of communication range for several days due to spatial interference. Our communications officer is still sifting through all the message traffic that piled up during our silence.” But then something more terrifying—a feeling of coldness—came over Coombs. “What’s happened, sir?”

Commodore Balkwill let out a soft sigh, then looked around—as if to see whether anyone was watching over his shoulder. “Last month, our research complex on Archanis IV was attacked.”

“*Attacked*, sir?” Coombs was beside himself. “By Klingons?”

The volume of the commodore’s voice went even lower, which Coombs immediately understood to mean there was an underlying severity to the already-high priority of his message. “Honestly, Ellis, Starfleet Command doesn’t know. Starfleet Intelligence thinks so—although they’ve put up an information freeze since someone leaked the information to the civilian broadcast networks.”

“I see,” Coombs responded. “Casualties, sir?”

Balkwill let out an extended exhale . . . as if the weight of the words he was about to say were on his chest like a ton of bricks. “All one hundred fifteen personnel attached to the outpost.”

Coombs went wide-eyed. “My God . . .”

“No one was spared,” Balkwill continued, shaking his head in disgust. “Women . . . children . . . even their pets. It was a total *massacre*, Captain.”

“What does the Federation plan to do about this?” Coombs quickly countered.

“That’s just the thing, Ellis. We can’t do anything about it—yet. The Federation Council doesn’t have all the information it needs to formulate any kind of official statement for these events—let alone dictate how we should handle the Klingons themselves. All we know for sure is that there’s strong proof the Klingons are responsible.”

“And you think this Klingon fleet that’s approaching this sector is the beginning of an invasion force? Is that what you’re saying?”

“Captain, I hate to repeat myself, but Starfleet Command’s official answer is ‘we don’t know.’” The commodore then leaned in closer to the screen to emphasize his next words. “If you want my personal opinion on this, Ellis, I’d say the Klingons are out to try some new weapons they’ve developed and are looking to pick a fight. Between you, me, and the bulkhead, it’s a fight I don’t think the Federation can win—at least not right now, anyway. I think the real reason why no one in the Federation Council is ready to act is because they’re going to sit on their hands until officers out in the field can get more solid intelligence.”

Coombs nodded, his awareness of the pending assignment complete. “I see, sir. What are your orders, Commodore?”

Balkwill leaned back in his chair and assumed a more official stance. “Take the *Invincible* to the Rigel system and see if those fine-tuned long-range sensors of yours can give us some insight as to the composition of this Klingon force. We need as much intelligence as you can get, Captain Coombs. I don’t want anything dismissed or overlooked.”

All those scientists down in the sensor labs were about to be back on duty. *I hope they’re sober.* “Of course, sir. You can count on us.”

“I knew I could, Ellis,” the gray-haired commodore said, the corners of his lips curling up to a partial smile. “Watch your back out there, Captain. I’d hate to see you scratch that nice new ship of yours. Starbase 5 out.”

March 2251

Stardate 3903.07

Starfleet Headquarters, San Francisco, Earth

The weather had turned—and it hadn't been for the better. What had been forecast as a beautiful spring day had, without warning, turned into what seemed like a fitting day for late November.

Captain Robert April looked out across the wide open waters of San Francisco Bay, gazing at the swells in the icy gray water as they slowly became white-capped crests. As he leaned against the well-polished wooden guardrail, he could hear the waves lapping softly at the concrete pilings below him. In one of the few brief moments of silence he'd enjoyed in the last few weeks, Robert pondered whether the technicians at Starfleet Engineering would ever get this new weather modification net up and running correctly.

After a few more minutes at the rail, April took in a deep breath and exhaled slowly. Maybe he'd been breathing the recirculated air aboard the *Enterprise* for too long. With her first five-year mission under her belt—and a stellar performance by ship and crew to boot—it felt good to finally be home. Resigning himself to his fate, he pushed away from the view. “Well,” he muttered quietly, “here goes.”

Captain April strode slowly from the pier and across a small grass field. By the time he had reached the main entrance to Starfleet Command headquarters, his stride had become even and his posture was confident. After exchanging pleasantries with the secretary of the commander in chief of Starfleet, Robert was directed to a conference room on the third floor. As he walked down the long corridor to his destination, he wondered if anyone was ever going to change the drab colors of the inner walls of the place. Monochromatic shades of gray had never impressed upon him the importance of this building. *Perhaps something in a tan or beige?*

As soon as Robert approached the wood-grained doors to the conference room, they characteristically swooshed open, then abruptly shut behind him. Admiral Matthew D. Luxa, Starfleet commander in chief, was seated at the head of a long table, flanked on either side by several high-ranking officials. Some of the faces were familiar to April—some were not. They were all wearing their respective formal branch uniforms, each decked out with enough “fruit salad” on their chests to feed a small colony. April had never been one for awards or accolades, and neither required nor bragged about the decorations he’d received. All he required was out there . . . in the star-filled sky high above the Earth.

“Ah yes, Robert,” Commander in Chief Luxa began affably, “thank you for coming on such short notice.” The admiral then gestured to an empty seat opposite him. “Please, won’t you sit?”

“Thank you, Admiral.”

Robert pulled up his chair and, without hesitation, Admiral Luxa began the scheduled briefing. His voice was soft, but the inflection was unmistakable. Luxa was someone who had a most commanding presence, with a voice that said “listen to me as if your life depended on it,” even when he was only talking about the status of something as mundane as the kind of coffee the synthesizers were producing.

“Captain April, most of the introductions have already been made, but let me go around the table once more. I believe you know Commodore Lai from Starfleet Intelligence,” Luxa said as he gestured to the man sitting on his left. Commodore Michael J. Lai was a tall man, almost lanky, with silvery hair and soft blue eyes. April had met him some years ago, when Lai was in command of the cruiser *Ambassador*. April had always thought fondly of Lai, but never felt fondly about the things that were purported to go on in Starfleet Intelligence at times. *Too many unanswered questions when it came to those people*, April had often said to himself.

“To his left is General Carter Groetz, Starfleet Marines,” Luxa continued.

April’s eyes moved to Groetz. He had heard of the man—or, more specifically, Robert had heard of his tactics. Some of them had even become required reading at Starfleet Academy. The general was a brilliant tactician, with an eye for decorating his office in exotic antiques, or so it was said. It was rumored that he boasted the finest collection of late seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century human furniture

in existence, not to mention an impressive library of texts covering many of the historic military figures of the past two centuries.

“And to the general’s left is Commander Bethany McAllister, Starfleet Special Forces.”

With a nod to the general, Robert’s gaze fell to the female officer beside him. Commander Bethany McAllister, Luxa had said, from Starfleet Special Forces Command, no less. She was slight of build, with seemingly long brown hair that had been pulled up into a tight bun on the top of her scalp. Although she wore the red dress uniform skirt that was typical of women officers these days, April knew she was not just any everyday yeoman from whom someone could request a cup of coffee. Her green eyes sparkled with intensity—almost with as much shine as the glint from the gold Special Forces insignia that was on her tunic, which itself sat just above an impressive array of ribbons and medals.

“Captain,” she said, adding a slight inclination of her head as she and Robert locked eyes.

“A pleasure, Commander.” He returned the nod graciously.

“All right,” Luxa continued, “now that we’ve gotten all the formalities out of the way and all the players are on the field, let’s get down to business. Commodore Lai, if you please?”

“Of course, sir.” Lai stood up and moved to a large view screen on the wall. “As you all know, this briefing is classified top secret. What is said in this chamber must never be repeated to anyone outside this room—including speaking to those members you see seated before you.” With that, he withdrew a data cartridge from within his pocket and inserted it into a slot below the screen. He pressed a blue button and instantly a map of the Klingon Empire—and its relation to Federation space—appeared on the screen.

“Starfleet Intelligence has been monitoring the Klingon Empire with increased interest over the past twelve months. We have noticed a dramatic increase in their shipbuilding efforts, as well as noting several new classes of cruisers and destroyers rolling off the Klingon assembly lines.” Lai pressed another button near the screen and the image changed once again to show the diagram of a new Klingon cruiser. It had a bulbous bridge, which was connected to a secondary hull by a long, thin neck.

Extending down and aft from the secondary hull—on what could almost be described as outstretched wings—were the two warp nacelles. It was similar to a D-6, April considered, but more graceful.

“Intelligence is calling this ship a D-7. She has forward-firing energy torpedoes, disruptors, and extensive primary and secondary shielding.”

“A battle cruiser,” Luxa summarized for the assembly.

April could see where this was going. The information that he had been summoned to relay was going to directly tie in with the revelation of the Klingon’s new arsenal of weapons.

Lai continued as he turned back to the screen. “This is one of several new designs, most of which we are only now becoming aware.”

Robert, in a moment of impatience, said aloud, “This has something to do with Archanis, doesn’t it?”

Commodore Lai turned—as did the rest of the officers at the table, all eyes locked on April as if he had just dropped a bomb in the center of the room. After a brief silence, General Groetz cleared his throat, but Fleet Admiral Luxa was the first to speak.

“Since the proverbial cat is out of the bag, let’s have the meat and potatoes of your report, Commodore Lai.”

Lai again pushed a button near the screen and a diagram of the Archanis system appeared. “On stardate 3806.20, the scientific research station at Archanis IV was completely destroyed. All personnel were killed and all the computer systems were summarily stripped of their data. Starfleet Intelligence believes that this was the work of Klingons. Their motive: possibly testing out the feasibility of their new weapon systems and vessels.”

Robert was the first to respond. “And we plan on sending out a counterstrike force to meet this threat, correct?”

Again there was silence that Admiral Luxa had to break. “Captain April, please listen to the rest of the briefing. All your questions will soon be answered. Commodore Lai, if you will continue, please.”

Lai brought up another diagram. In the center of the screen was the neutral zone which buffered space between the Federation and the Klingon Empire. Lai

motioned to the southwest quadrant of the map. “Some months ago a federation starship, the cruiser USS *Invincible*, located a large fleet of Klingon vessels heading directly toward the neutral zone. This group has since been assigned the code name Group-U. About the same time, another starship, the light cruiser *Sutherland*—herself on a routine patrol of the neutral zone several parsecs from the *Invincible*—identified a second large group of Klingon vessels, also presumably heading for the neutral zone. We have given this second fleet the code name of Group-R.”

“An invasion force,” General Groetz quietly exclaimed, almost too soft for anyone to hear.

“We estimate the total of both forces to be in excess of two hundred fifty vessels, not including auxiliary ships,” Lai finished.

Admiral Luxa took that cue to begin his segment of the briefing. “We’re moving all available starships and personnel from their normal patrol areas in order to counter these new threats. The majority of our forces will be sent to Starbase 23, with Starbases 27 and 10 picking up the remainder of our fleets. Commander McAllister, you will command the Special Forces detachment at Starbase 23. You’ve been given the rank of captain for the duration of this assignment, and you will report directly to General Groetz. This is effective immediately.”

“Yes, sir,” came the curt reply from McAllister.

Luxa continued, “Starfleet Command hasn’t ascertained the true purpose of these fleets. All we do know is that the Klingon groups will each reach the neutral zone before we have amassed a sizeable counterforce. If the Klingons should choose to violate the neutral zone for any reason, we will be at a state of war with them, whether we’re ready for them or not. I don’t think I need to remind anyone in this room of the fact that we are not equipped to sustain a prolonged campaign at this time. War with the Klingons—though it may become eventual—must be postponed as long as possible.”

Leaning toward the admiral, Robert April spoke up. “Sir, I can have the *Enterprise* back out in space and on the front lines within a month. The *Constitution* should be coming home within the next thirty days, and we could probably turn her around just as quickly.”

“I understand, Captain—and thank you. I’ve authorized putting some haste into the construction of some additional cruiser classes, as well. We’ll need to get both the *Enterprise* and *Constitution* spaceworthy and ready for defensive maneuvers immediately.”

“And Archanis IV?” Robert asked. “How do we respond to that at this time?”

The room fell silent, all eyes turning toward Admiral Luxa. “As I said, we cannot afford a conflict with the Klingons at this juncture. All it would take is one trigger-happy helmsman to set off a catastrophe. We need to keep control over this situation, people. Until we can get more forces in the area, the incident at Archanis IV will—regrettably—have to be shelved for the moment.”

“Admiral, that’s *outrageous!*” April spat. “All those innocent people killed, all those lives lost—”

Luxa glared at April. “Taking into consideration the millions of lives that are stake, Captain, it’ll be a small price to pay.” The utterance of his rank from Luxa held the definite tone of superior officer over an inferior one. “Captain April, you are commanded to take whatever actions you see fit and necessary to expedite the completion of the *Constitution*-class ships currently under construction. The completion of these projects is of the utmost priority right now. In addition to your new responsibility—and based in no small way on your exemplary performance during the last five years as master of the *Enterprise*—you are hereby promoted to the rank of commodore.” Looking down at the table, his eyes returned to April after a moment. “Rest assured, Robert, that there will be a time for avenging the deaths of innocents later.”

April tightened his jaw, wishing he could lash out and be the voice for all those who’d died on Archanis. He loathed the thought of war, but in the face of aggression, he knew that the Federation needed to show some force of resistance to the Klingons—lest the destruction that occurred on Archanis be replicated on other border worlds. The Klingons needed to know that the Federation wasn’t going to take this lying down. In the end, however, Robert saw the futility of making his argument at present. He would not win this battle, especially since it seemed he was now being pushed from the command chair to behind a desk. He resigned himself to

his new fate, one in which he would take the utmost pride, although he hoped it would not come at the expense of other innocent lives.

In the end, the newly christened commodore simply nodded in understanding.
“Yes, sir.”

Chapter 3

July 2251

Stardate 3907.19

Commodore April sat quietly behind his computer terminal, having just finished reading through a recent applicant's paperwork for admission to Starfleet Academy when his door chime rang. "Enter," he said without turning away from the screen. The door slid open at April's verbal command, and Captain Christopher Pike confidently strode in. April glanced up from his screen just in time for Pike to stop a few steps from his delicately carved desk.

"Captain Pike. Reporting as ordered, Commodore."

Smiling, April stood and walked out from behind his desk, extending a hand to the starship captain in the process. "It's been too long, Chris."

Pike reached for April's hand as a smile spread across his face. "It's good to see you, too, sir."

April admired the young captain; Pike had a strong build with a stature that was tall and upright—the very pinnacle of Starfleet's strength, embodied by this one man.

"Please," April began after letting go of Pike's hand and motioning to an empty chair. "Have a seat, old friend."

Pike pulled the chair closer to April's desk as the commodore returned to his seat.

"Officer evaluations?" Chris asked, motioning to the active terminal on the commodore's desk.

"Of a sort. I'm endorsing an application to Starfleet Academy for . . . another old friend."

"Anyone I know?" Pike asked. He had known April for years, had even served with him as executive officer five years ago. If April knew him, Pike was likely to as well.

Robert was still gazing at his screen as he responded. “Ever heard of George Kirk?”

The captain’s eyes shifted to the ceiling for a moment as he recalled the face from his memory. “Disappeared on a mission last year, right? It was near the planet Hellspawn, I believe. He’s a commander.”

“Very good, Chris. But he’s not missing anymore. It seems that he popped up about six months ago. It’s all still rather classified,” April said, waving his hand dismissively with his usual British nonchalance. “The reason I mention George is that the endorsement letter is for his son, James.” With that, April turned the screen so Pike could review it.

After scanning the file, Pike looked at April. “Well, based on the information here, the kid seems pretty sharp. Great aptitude results, too. Ever met him?”

Robert smiled and turned the monitor back toward him. After moment he nodded softly. “Yes, we’ve met.” He turned the monitor off. “But this isn’t why I called you here, Chris. I understand the *Yorktown* just completed a two-year survey of border worlds near Romulan space?”

Pike folded his hands together and placed them in his lap at the mention of his ship. “Yes, sir. We successfully surveyed over sixteen new worlds and twenty-seven new star systems. I believe almost a dozen of those systems have an enormous amount of resources to help bolster the Federation.”

April’s smile broadened. “That’s amazing, Chris. I was reviewing a small sampling of your mission logs over the last few days; it was some extraordinary work you and your crew did out there. Of course, I wouldn’t expect anything less from a former first officer of mine.”

Pike couldn’t help but chuckle at the mention of his previous position. He took a moment to glance over April’s shoulder through the transparent aluminum view port on the starbase’s wall. There, hanging in space like a graceful trophy adorning the wall of a prize hunter, was one of the finest ships in the whole fleet: the *Enterprise*. “She looks great, sir. Tell me, does she still have that peculiar little shudder when increasing from warp three to warp four?” The captain jerked his hand in front of his face, simulating the warp bump.

It was Robert's turn to chuckle as he, too, turned to glance out his view port. "Yeah," he said slowly. "Never could figure that one out."

"I must have tried to get *Yorktown* to do that a dozen times. I never could quite duplicate it."

April turned back to Captain Pike. "It's just one of those oddities, Chris. Every starship has her quirks. There's never been an engineer in Starfleet who could work out every bug in every system."

"In my opinion, sir, it's those same quirks that give each starship a personality of her own. It's her way of saying 'I'm unique. I'm special.' It's the voice of the thing . . . if someone could call it that."

Robert snorted though his nose as he nodded slowly. "Only hopelessly romantic starship captains like you and I, Chris, would say something like that."

With that, Pike's smile faded. He leaned toward April's desk, and a hush came over the younger captain's voice. "I heard they've taken you out of the center seat, Robert." His gaze fell briefly to his lap and then returned to stare into April's eyes. "I was sorry to hear that we were losing the finest captain in the fleet to a shiny desk with a good view." It then dawned on Christopher that Commodore April's hand had been absently fumbling an orange computer cartridge.

April took in a deep breath and then let it out slowly. "Even the dinosaurs had their moment, Captain. Once, millions of years ago, they roamed Earth from sea to sea. They were the titans of their day. Now . . . they are just dust and bones: memories of a bygone era. It's the way of things."

Pike straightened back into his chair, a look of almost defiance on his face. "It's a damn crime, that's what it is. Starfleet needs good captains. Heaven knows—what with this Klingon threat—that we need all the help we can get out there." Pike waved his hand over his shoulder for emphasis. "This is no time to strike out our best players."

April, now fumbling the data cartridge with both hands, leaned back and looked at the cartridge thoughtfully. "I realize that, Chris. That's why I called you here." April then tossed the cartridge in his direction. Pike caught the data disk without even thinking before it was two feet from him. "Reflexes like a cat. Some things never change, old friend," April said with a grin.

Pike examined the disk, turning the blank cartridge over in his hand. “What’s this?”

Robert smiled as he got up from his desk and headed over to a wall synthesizer. After a moment, he reached inside and withdrew two glasses filled with a clear, golden mixture. He handed one to Pike, then sat on the edge of his desk in front of him. “Someone once said, ‘Politics is the art of preventing people from taking part in affairs which properly concern them.’ Now, I’ve had a lot of debate with Starfleet Command over the past few weeks and, as much as I detest politics, this is one decision that I didn’t want anyone else to make but myself.” And with that he raised his glass in a toast.

Raising an eyebrow, Pike clinked his glass to April’s. “As much as I enjoy a good brandy, I’d like to know what we’re drinking to, Commodore.”

Robert smiled warmly. “As I recall, you recently submitted a request to transfer to—shall we say—more *adventurous* ports of call—ones that would take you nearer . . . more *interesting* parts of space.” April was baiting him, and he could tell that Chris knew it. “Now, do you want the transfer or not?”

Pike’s eyes went wide with excitement. “Not to put too fine a point on it, but hell yes, I do. I can’t stand planetary exploration. If I see one more geological survey I’ll go insane.”

“And the *Yorktown*?” April asked.

Pike’s head wagged. “I’ve been told she’ll need a complete refit, sir. But, she’ll be as good as new in six months, give or take.”

April made a *tsk-tsk* sound with his lips. “Much too long for us to wait, Captain. As you said yourself, Starfleet needs good captains, *especially* now.” Robert’s otherwise thoughtful face turned utterly cheerful as it took on a broad smile. “So please, raise your glass, Captain. We are drinking to that very decision I just spoke of a moment ago. We are drinking to you, Chris. We are drinking to the former first officer of mine who has come home.” He looked into Pike’s eyes and, raising the glass to his lips, said, “To Christopher Pike: the newest captain of the starship *Enterprise*.”

Pike was astonished—so much so that he almost spit out his drink. Though he’d hoped for a new command, he’d never ever dreamed he would be back aboard his

old ship—much less in command of it. He took the drink, finally able to swallow it. “When I do report on board?”

April took the empty glass from Pike’s hand without dropping the intense stare they now shared with each other. “*Immediately.*”

“And when do we get underway, sir?” Pike asked, now resuming his role as a Starfleet captain.

“Again, Chris, immediately. Your orders are on the data cartridge in your hand. Top secret: captain’s eyes only—that kind of thing. The *Enterprise* is fully stocked, fully armed, and is awaiting her new captain as we speak.”

Pike got up from his chair, standing straight at attention. “Thank you, sir. We’ll be underway within the hour.”

Commodore April got up and met Pike in another firm handshake. “You’ve done well, Captain. You’ve earned this honor. The flagship of the Federation is yours.” Releasing his hand, he patted Pike’s shoulder. “You know, I was there when she was built . . . helped design her, and she was our home for many years. We learned her ways, her words, and her temperament. All I ask is that you treat her right. Do that and she’ll always get you home.”

“Of course I will, sir. Count on it.”

“Very well, Captain. You are dismissed.” And with that, April felt as if he’d just given his only daughter away in marriage. Of course, he trusted Chris implicitly. He would even go as far as to say he admired him and had seen something of himself in Pike. *Enterprise* just wouldn’t be the same with anyone less than perfect in command, and Commodore April knew instantly that he had made the right decision in selecting Christopher Pike to replace him. He knew—in his heart—that when the time came for Chris Pike to make that same decision, the captain would do no less.

As Pike left April’s office, the commodore turned back to his monitor and flipped the screen back on. “Well now,” he said to the screen, “let’s just see what Jim Kirk can offer Starfleet.” And with a simple push of a button, he forwarded James T. Kirk’s endorsed application to the commandant of Starfleet Academy.

September 2251

Stardate 3909.11

Incoming subspace communication . . .

FROM: The Office of the Commanding Officer, Starfleet Intelligence, Commodore
Michael J. Lai, Starbase 23

TO: All Commanding Officers, Galaxy Exploration Command
All Commanding Officers, Military Operations Command

VIA: The Office of the Commanding Officer, Starfleet Command, Fleet Admiral
Matthew D. Luxa, San Francisco, Earth

SUBJ: OBSERVATIONS REGARDING KLINGON FLEET MOVEMENTS

REFERENCE(S):

- (A) Communication received, USS *Sutherland*, NCC-1835
- (B) Communication received, USS *Invincible*, NCC-1802

1. Per reference (A), Klingon fleet, codenamed Group-R, has significantly altered its course. This fleet, consisting of approximately one hundred twenty-six vessels, is now holding stationary eight parsecs from the Federation-Klingon neutral zone border, one parsec from Starbase 27. Their speed has since reduced from warp six to sublight.

2. Per reference (B), Klingon fleet, codenamed Group-U, has significantly altered its course. This fleet, consisting of approximately one hundred eighty-three vessels, is now heading toward the area of space informally denoted as the Triangle. Current location is fifteen parsecs from Starbase 5. Their speed has decreased from warp six to sublight velocity.

3. Starfleet Intelligence is still gathering data on these fleets and their respective movements. As of this time, no significant threat force has entered Federation space.

4. Starbase 15 is nearing completion. Once this is achieved, Starfleet will have a major shipbuilding facility within striking distance of the neutral zone. Until such time, it is strongly advised that all commanding officers take any actions necessary to safeguard the state of non-aggression that currently exists between the Federation and the Klingon Empire.

5. Starship USS *Enterprise*, NCC-1701, under the command of Captain Christopher Pike, is placed in fleet command of all units operating in and near space of Starbase 5.

6. Starship USS *Hood*, NCC-1703, under the command of Captain [Michaela Harrari](#), is placed in overall fleet command of all units operating in and near space of Starbase 5.

7. All commanding officers are authorized to use any means necessary to transmit any pertinent or vital information in these areas to their respective fleet commanders immediately.

The *Sawyer*-class clipper, USS *Gulliver*, glided slowly from her berth at Starbase 14. She might have been one of the smallest ships in the fleet, but what she lacked in size she more than made up for in speed; what she lacked in armament, she made up for in agility. She was a simple design. The majority of the ship's superstructure was contained in an elongated and cylindrical primary hull. Where she was tapered at the aft end, the forward end was completely taken up by her navigational deflector. Jutting gracefully from the sides of the primary hull at ninety-degree angles were her main propulsion units, the linear-style warp drive engines.

The ship was small by Starfleet standards: only ninety-three meters at her longest and eighteen meters high. She mounted light lasers and a single accelerator cannon, but she was more than comfortable for the fifty-five crewmembers who called her home.

Once such crewman was Lieutenant Alicia Pettant, the ship's helmsman. Alicia had dreamed of entering Starfleet as a little girl growing up in the sprawling spaceport near Seattle, Washington, on Earth. She had spent long, rainy nights poring over the latest news feeds from the outer rim of Federation space, and many summer nights watching the shuttles take off from the nearby spaceport at Boeing Field as they headed off for destinations that were—to her—as yet unknown. All she knew was that she wanted to be a part of it, part of the great exploration and adventure that Starfleet had to offer.

Unfortunately, the current mission the *Gulliver* found itself on was neither adventurous nor even exploratory. The *Gulliver* had been ordered to Axanar, the seventh planet in the Delta Orcas system, for sociological evaluations. The Axanarian star, Epsilon Eridani, was quite visible from the surface of the Earth, as the system was only 19.5 light-years distant. Alicia knew of it, and had often gazed upon it when the cloudy skies over Seattle had given way to make visible the stars bright enough to shine through. Now there was no more wondering at what it might look like. She and the rest of the crew would be there in just under six hours.

Captain Araxis, an Edosian, sat in his command chair and surveyed the bridge. He had one hand on the armrest of his chair, another on a computer pad, and a third grasping a cup of coffee with the ship's logo emblazoned on it. It was always quite a spectacle to see the captain not only mentally multitasking, but doing it physically as well. He had just completed updating his log, and handed the computer pad and stylus back to his yeoman. "Lieutenant Pettant, status report," he said in his high-pitched voice, the pronunciation crisp and precise.

"On course, Captain. We will arrive at Axanar in five hours, forty-seven minutes at our present speed of warp five."

"Thank you," Araxis replied. He sipped at his coffee and gazed at the stars streaming past on the forward view screen.

Alicia took the moment to speak up. "Captain, what do you think we should expect from Axanar?"

"I'm not sure, Lieutenant. That's why we were ordered there. Starfleet believes we may be able to get them to join the Federation. Scientific research has concluded that their bodies produce a biochemical substance known as triglobulin. This

substance is a key ingredient to making several types of medicines and vaccines used by Federation doctors.”

“Not to mention it’s quite a powerful aphrodisiac,” came the response from the science officer’s station.

Captain Araxis glanced in Commander Lindberger’s direction, then back at the view screen. “It seems to have that effect as well, Commander, yes.”

Alicia took little notice of the distraction caused by Lindberger. “And the Federation wants to make them a member so soon? I’ve been told that they’re still in a state of sociological upheaval. They don’t even have warp drive yet.”

Araxis, his attention not wavering from his coffee or the view screen, nodded. “Indeed. They have no warp drive as of yet. But we require their triglobulin to make medicines that Starfleet believes will be sorely needed in the next few months. While it may not be possible to offer them full membership in the Federation, we may be able to make them a protectorate and begin trade relations with them.”

“Because of the Klingons?” Alicia asked.

At the mention of the word, Captain Araxis shifted his three legs in the command chair. “We are here because we were ordered to be, Lieutenant. This is not a mission on war; it is one of peaceful relations for a substance that is needed by the Federation. We will have no more talk of the Klingons. Is that clear?”

Alicia could hear the sternness of his command. She could, however, almost detect an undertone of fear. *No—perhaps that wasn’t the right word.* She knew her captain would not fear conflict. In fact, she would think he would be intrigued by it. But he *was* an Edosian. Once they were given orders, they did not lend themselves to interpreting those orders for the benefit of the crew’s speculations. The *Gulliver* had a job to do, and the captain would see that they did it. All other concerns would be secondary until they became facts.

“Yes, sir,” Lieutenant Pettant said briskly, and turned back to her station. “Quite clear.”

Chapter 4

October 2251

Stardate 3910.16

"Captain's log: supplemental. The *Xenophon* has just completed an extended shore leave, and I am pleased to report that the crew is well rested and again ready for duty. It's been a long three months of continuous patrols, and we are now heading coreward at warp four."

Captain Kelvar Leonard Garth signed off from his log entry and handed the recorder back to his yeoman. A Vulcan by birth, she was not unattractive by any stretch of the word. Tall and thin, not to mention disquietingly silent, she always seemed to sneak up on Garth without his knowledge. He had—on more than one attempt—asked her to walk with more pronounced footfalls, to which she had replied, "It would be illogical to act in a manner contrary to the way my own body operates." With that same quietness, she departed from his side.

Upright in the command chair of his *Marklin*-class destroyer, Garth looked at the stars in wonder. To be more precise, he looked through them. He wished he was back among the stars of his home system, and often had a passing fantasy that he was on his way back to Izar. But as quickly as the dream had appeared, he would push it aside. Such flights of fancy were not the stuff of starship captains. He reminded himself sternly that shore leave was over, and it was time to get back to work.

Garth looked from the view screen to his engineering officer, seated to his right at his duty station. As usual, Tim Knight was hard at work. Garth could see that Knight was making some slight adjustments to the matter-antimatter reactant mixture, fine-tuning the tandem engines to maximize their performance. To be sure, the *Xenophon* was only a small destroyer, but she was all they had, and to Commander Knight she was as graceful and as beautiful as any cruiser in the fleet.

The captain smiled to himself. He had an amazingly well-trained crew. He trusted

his life to them, and over the past several years they hadn't let him down once. He had saved Knight's life as well as the lives of several other members of the crew, and some few had done the same for him. Garth trusted them implicitly and they, in true Starfleet fashion, returned that trust to their captain. *Yes. They would give their all for their ship. I am proud of each of them.* "Mr. Knight? Status of the warp drive?"

Knight, his attention not drawn from the adjustments he was making, didn't even hesitate to respond to the captain's inquiry. "Almost got it, sir." And with one more button pressed, he finished his modifications. "There. Perfect . . . absolutely perfect."

"And what exactly is *perfect*?"

Knight sat back in his chair, obviously pleased with himself, and not hesitating to show it on his face with a wide grin. "The engines are now perfectly balanced. We now have maximum efficiency at all speeds and in all power modes."

Garth let out a small laugh. "I'll bet you thought about making those adjustments for the last two days of leave, didn't you?"

Knight looked at his captain with an expression of mock shock. "The last *two* days? More like the whole time we were planetside. I couldn't wait to get back up here to make these alterations."

"Engineer, you were supposed to be resting, not thinking about working."

Knight chuckled. "Sir, I'll wager anyone on this ship that an engineer gets his best rest after peering through a stack of technical journals and mentally making a thousand adjustments, all the while taking in the sun and sand on Pinnacle Beach."

"Mr. Knight, you would probably be the most relaxed person in a room full of cascading warp core failures," Garth remarked with a smile.

Knight unfolded his arms from behind his head and gestured his thumb at his chest. "No warp core is getting within ten micro-joules over operating specs while I'm on watch."

Garth gave the engineer a half-bow of his head and turned his attention back to the forward viewer. "Have no fear, Mister. I believe you."

For the next ten minutes the bridge was its usual calm. No one seemed to make a sound. Garth could discern the soft vibrations of the deck plates under his feet,

telling him his ship was cruising at faster-than-light travel. The soft beeping from the stations surrounding him was a constant source of calm for him. He found their sounds methodical and had often—in quieter times like this—tried to listen for patterns in their rhythmic noises. It was the science officer who broke that contemplative silence.

“Captain, something on sensors.”

Garth turned to his left to face the science station. Lieutenant Commander Lloyd Duggins was hunched over his terminal looking into the long-range sensor scanner. “Specify?”

After Commander Duggins made some minor adjustments to the sensors, he turned his head over his shoulder to face the captain. “It appears to be a vessel, sir. It matches no known Federation design.”

“Are they on an intercept course?”

Lloyd moved back to the sensor readout. “No, sir,” came the reply after he’d studied the readings a moment longer. “They apparently do not detect us yet.”

“Can you decipher their course?”

Duggins, still looking at the scanner, nodded slowly. “It appears they’re headed for the Delta Orcas system, sir. Their current course will take them to within three hours of the planet Axanar, assuming they do not alter their course.”

Garth looked away from the science officer and back to the view screen. “Are we close enough for communication?”

The communications officer spoke up. “No, sir. They are just out of range.”

“Very well. Helmsman, alter course to intercept. We are supposed to be alone out here. I’d like to know who that is.”

As soon as the captain had finished his sentence Lieutenant Commander Duggins spoke up. “Correction, sir. It appears we’ve been spotted. The unidentified target has altered course to intercept us. Estimate time to visual range in . . . five minutes, as long as we both maintain our current speeds.”

Garth smiled despite the caution he was feeling. “It seems our friend has a bit of curiosity in him.”

“Captain!” Lloyd exclaimed. “Scan now coming in loud and clear from the long-range sensors. That intercept course change nailed the lock I was trying to get on the

intruder."

"What do we have, Mister?" Garth said impatiently.

Duggins snapped his head toward the captain. "One Klingon D-4 light cruiser."

"Klingons?" the captain repeated in astonishment. "This far into Federation space? Impossible." The *Xenophon* was only two weeks distant at warp five from the heart of the Federation. *How the hell did a Klingon ship get this close to our core worlds without being detected?*

Lieutenant Commander Duggins turned back to his scanners and continued his update. "They're here, all right, and looking for a fight, by the results from my scans. Their shields are up, and their weapons are fully charged."

Garth popped out of his command chair and stood between the helm and navigation officer's console. "Slow to sublight. Shields up. Charge lasers!"

Duggins noted that the *Xenophon* slowed to impulse power just as the Klingon vessel did the same. "Confirmed, sir! She's a D-4. Its range is two thousand kilometers. She looks like she's maneuvering for an attack posture."

"On screen!"

The D-4 loomed large on the screen. She was as graceful as she was deadly. She looked much like her big sister, the D-7 class heavy cruiser the crew had recently become familiar with, but was much thinner all around. However, though she lacked the size of her contemporary, she made for more than a match for the small *Marklin*-class destroyer. The D-4 was thirty thousand metric tons heavier than the *Xenophon*, and while that made little difference in space, it meant she had more hardpoints to carry larger and longer-reaching weapons. She had five disruptor banks to the *Xenophon*'s four laser banks. And although she had no accelerator cannons like the *Marklin*-class, the D-4 had a disrupter bank to cover her aft, exactly where the *Xenophon* was dangerously vulnerable.

However, to Garth, the weapons didn't matter as much as maneuverability and defense. The *Xenophon* had stronger shields and was—as far as Starfleet Intelligence could say in their data charts—faster, and could take more punches. Garth instantly wanted to press those advantages.

"The Klingons will be in weapons range in thirty seconds," Duggins said from his station.

“Give me full impulse power,” Garth said, leaning his hands on the navigator’s chair back. “Take us around her to port!”

“Aye, sir!” the helmsman responded.

The *Xenophon* lurched from one-quarter impulse to full speed just as the D-4 opened fire. The enemy’s disruptors struck a glancing blow on the ship’s starboard shields as the *Xenophon* zoomed past the Klingon light cruiser. The Klingons didn’t even bother to fire their aft weaponry. By the time she could get a lock, the *Xenophon* was out of range and turning slowly to starboard.

“Sir,” started the helmsman, “hit to our starboard shields.”

“Starboard shields at sixty-five percent, Captain,” Knight said from the engineering console.

Garth looked to Commander Duggins. “Position of attacking vessel?”

Lloyd scanned his instruments. “She’s on our stern and coming around to port, Captain. Distance is fifteen hundred kilometers. She’s at full impulse. We will be in her weapons range . . . in thirty seconds.”

Garth had to think fast. “Continue our turn to starboard, but decrease to one-quarter impulse. That should bring us to bear before that Klingon can get a clear shot.”

“Aye!” the helmsman said.

As soon as the *Xenophon* decelerated in her turn, the radius tightened due to the lack of inertia provided at full impulse. She was now aimed directly at the D-4—who was still in mid-turn.

“Fire all forward lasers!”

Broken yellow beams spewed from the forward hull of the *Xenophon*. Two of the three shots struck the Klingon cruiser amidships before the *Xenophon* sailed over and past her target.

“Direct hit!” Duggins yelled. “Her shields are down to forty percent, sir.”

Garth barely had a chance to catch his breath before the bridge rocked with a hit. The Klingon cruiser had taken her own tight turn and had quickly come up on the *Xenophon*’s stern.

“Aft shields down fifteen percent!” Knight said. There was another hit on the *Xenophon*. “Now down by twenty-six percent!”

Garth seated himself back in his command chair and braced himself against his armrest. “Helm—zigzag! Don’t give him our tail to shoot at. Alternate between port and starboard turns.”

There was yet another hit on the *Xenophon*, but this one markedly less severe. “It’s working, sir.”

“But not for long,” Knight added. “Our shields are failing all over the ship at this point. Captain, we may just be prolonging the inevitable.”

“We need to get out of this position. Turn around and get behind her!” Garth said to anyone who would listen.

“Captain,” the helmsman said, “I have an idea.”

After listening to the lieutenant’s plan and getting a cautionary approval from the chief engineer, Garth was ready to implement the attack.

“Set all power to aft shields! Take it from life support if you have to. Set a course as steady as she’ll muster . . . full impulse.”

Fighting against the failing controls, the helmsman soon had the *Xenophon* sailing as straight as an arrow.

“Distance to Klingon target?” Garth asked.

Duggins checked the scanners. “Two thousand kilometers and slowly increasing, Captain.”

“Very well. When we reach twenty-five hundred kilometers I want to drop to one-quarter impulse and perform a one-hundred-degree high-energy turn to port, dropping ten thousand meters in the process. Is everyone ready?”

“Aye!” came the singsong voice of everyone on the bridge in unison.

“Do it!”

Immediately the ship lurched forward, then hard to port as she fell through the stars on her own z-axis. The Klingon ship sailed over the *Xenophon* without scoring a single hit on the small Federation vessel.

“Engage full impulse!”

The *Xenophon* lurched forward again, rocketing to a distance of five thousand kilometers before the Klingon even knew what had happened.

“All right,” Garth began, “now it’s time to show them whose space they’re in. Come about, helmsman.”

The destroyer quickly came to at half impulse. The Klingon—as Garth had surmised—had done the same. They were now forty-five hundred kilometers apart and heading straight at one another.

“All power to forward shields. Channel power from all other laser banks to the forward emitters. We only need two shots for this to work, but we need to throw him everything we’ve got.”

As the two ships sailed closer to one another, Garth could feel the sweat on his brow begin to thicken.

“Weapons officer, wait until the last possible moment.”

As the D-4 loomed ever larger on the screen, it looked as though it would crash right into the *Xenophon*.

“Now!”

The *Xenophon* turned to starboard just as the Klingon opened fire. All the Klingon’s shots missed, but the laser fire from Garth’s vessel did not. Just as the *Xenophon* passed the D-4, Garth exclaimed, “All engines full reverse! Hard to port!” And with that, the *Xenophon* entered what was commonly known as a Cochrane Deceleration Maneuver. It put an enormous amount of strain on the hull as the ship went from nearly half the speed of light to an almost dead stop in a fraction of a second. A moment later, the stern of the Klingon cruiser filled the view screen.

“Now! Fire everything! Lasers and accelerator cannons!”

Laser blasts lanced out from the *Xenophon*’s upper banks and struck the Klingon ship dead center. Her shields flickered once, and then faded completely away. Two warhead-tipped accelerator cannons followed quickly behind the lasers, striking the hull of the Klingon and opening up fissures in her superstructure.

“Her aft shields are down!” the science officer shouted. “Aft disruptors destroyed!”

Garth leaned forward in his command chair. “Target their port nacelle and fire lasers again.”

Two more bursts shot out from the *Xenophon* and neatly severed the warp engine of the Klingon’s vessel. Due to the Klingon’s inertia before the loss of her engine, she began to list and spin in a slow end-over-end tumble.

“We got her, sir!” Duggins exclaimed triumphantly.

Garth leaned back in his chair, taking a breath for what he felt was the first time.

“Damage, Mr. Knight?”

“Some slight shield buckling. Minor hull damage on deck five. Nothing major, sir.”

Garth exhaled slowly. “And the Klingon?”

“Total systems failure, sir. She’s dead in space.”

“Very well. Communications officer, open a channel to the vessel,” Garth began. The words were barely out of his mouth before the Klingon ship exploded in a ball of flame and debris. The view screen on the *Xenophon* went white as snow, flickered several times, then revealed the empty blackness of space where the Klingon cruiser had been a moment before.

“What happened?” Garth asked as he turned to the science officer.

“It must have been a self-destruct order, sir,” Duggins said from his console. “We didn’t hurt them badly enough to do that kind of damage. Most of her internal systems were intact right up until the moment of the explosion.”

Garth mulled the encounter over in his mind. Out loud, and to no one in particular, he said, “A vessel that size wouldn’t have come this far on its own. There have to be more in the area.” He began rubbing his chin while keeping his gaze fixed on the forward viewer. “Mr. Duggins? What is the nearest system to our current position?”

Lloyd checked his sensors. “It’s Axanar, sir, about eight parsecs away. At warp seven, we’d arrive in the Delta Orcas system in one week, four days.”

“Then that’s where we’ll start looking. Communications officer, send a coded message to Starfleet Command about our confrontation with the Klingon vessel. Advise them we are heading to Axanar to investigate the possibilities of other enemy intruders in the vicinity.”

“Yes, sir. Coding your message now.”

“Mr. Knight,” Garth said “your engines are as good as your word. Well done.”

Knight clasped his hands behind his head and leaned back in his chair, assuming the position he’d had before the attack had begun. “Like I said, sir. Absolutely perfect.”

Garth smiled at his engineer. “Indeed.”

Two Weeks Later

The chief engineer's voice came confidently through the speaker on the captain's armrest. "We have it in sight now, sir."

"Good. Can you get a positive lock on it with the transporter?"

"Yes, sir."

"Very well. Beam it directly to cargo area two. I'll be there shortly."

Captain William Blackwell left the side of his chair and ran to the waiting turbolift. As the lift came to a halt on deck five, he sprinted out the doors a moment after they had opened. He jogged down the corridors of the newly commissioned USS *Bonhomme Richard*—namesake of her class; a less advanced and more cost effective version of the *Constitution*-class she visually mirrored. Blackwell came to a stop at the twin blue doors leading to the main cargo storage area. Catching his breath, he walked into the hold a moment later.

The compartment was empty, save for a few crates of emergency medical supplies that the ship was scheduled to deliver in the coming week. The supplies had been neatly stacked against the far bulkhead to make room for the object now taking center stage in the middle of the hold.

What was once shiny duranium was now marred with a black film and grease smudges. It was cylindrical, about half a meter tall and half as round. The top was capped with a small translucent communications dome and the bottom had tripod legs jutting at regular angles to keep the object upright. Directly in the center, barely visible through the charred outer casing, were the remains of the logo of the United Federation of Planets.

The chief engineer was going over the object with his tricorder as Captain Blackwell approached it. "The recorder buoy is intact, despite the appearance of the outer shell, Captain. All internal systems appear to be functioning normally."

Blackwell folded his arms across his chest. Almost every officer in the fleet knew what this device represented: the last call from a ship that was destroyed or—at the

very least—was so disabled that its internal communications systems were rendered useless. "How soon until we can figure out which ship it's from?"

The chief engineer flipped his tricorder closed with a quick snap. "We should be able to download this to the ship's computer and find out right away, sir."

"Then let's not waste any time. I don't like this at all, Chief."

"Yes, sir."

They walked over to the cargo bay's computer terminal. The chief engineer pulled the data cartridge out of the tricorder and plugged it into the access port on the terminal. "Computer," the engineer ordered, "play back the message recorded in the storage drive."

"Working," came the synthetic female voice of the computer, followed by a series of clicks and beeps as the computer accessed the data. After a few tense moments the computer began its readout. "Ship's recorder log, Starship USS *Gulliver*, NCC-2295. Last entry by Lieutenant Commander David Jonas, Chief Engineer. Do you wish to hear the last recorded voice entry?"

William stepped closer to the computer terminal. "Yes." He'd never met the captain of the *Gulliver*, but he'd heard of the ship. Blackwell was anxious to know what had happened to her. From the computer terminal came some static and popping sounds, indicating that some portions of the audio had been destroyed. After a few seconds, however, a male voice came through the speaker.

"Stardate . . . USS *Gull* . . . attacked by squadron of Klingon vessels . . . number of vessels attacking . . . is six. Some types are unknown. There was no warning . . . ships opened fire . . . no time to respond. Bridge crew . . . wiped out in first salvo. I assumed command from auxiliary control . . . Sensors are down. There's no way to know if . . . Klingons present in the system. To any Federation starship who receives this, send a message to . . . base 5. Send a fleet to Axanar. Send a fleet to . . ."

There was what sounded like a large explosion, and the message cut out.

Captain Blackwell was staring at the computer terminal, almost speechless. Axanar, while out of the way for their current assignment, was still close enough to warrant a visit. Sharing a concerned stare with his chief engineer, he walked briskly over to the wall terminal and pressed the intercom button. "Bridge, this is the captain. Set a course for the planet Axanar. Maximum warp."

"Yes, sir. Right away."

Blackwell turned to face the recorder buoy, and all that was left of a Federation starship. Her crew had given their lives for the Federation. Blackwell decided it was time for Starfleet to repay that honor. "So . . . now we know. *Klingons*," he said, then turned back to the chief, his eyes burning with anger. "They want a fight? Well, they've got one coming. I need everything you've got, Chief, and I need it yesterday."

The engineer nodded sharply. "Consider it done, Captain."

Chapter 5

November 2251

Stardate 3911.14

"Sir, incoming message from the *Bonhomme Richard*."

Garth was near Lloyd Duggins's science station when the communications officer's voice sounded. He walked over to the communication station and placed a hand on the communications officer's shoulder. "Let's hear it, Lieutenant."

The young woman turned to look up to Garth with doe eyes. "The message is coded, sir; captain's eyes only."

"I'll take it in my quarters. Mr. Duggins, you have the bridge."

Garth exited the turbolift on deck four and jogged to his quarters. Usually it was unsightly for crewmembers to see the captain running down the corridors of his ship, but these were difficult times, and any news from other vessels or stations could be extremely valuable in the next few hours. Once Garth had entered his quarters, he jumped into his chair and called the communications officer's station on his terminal. "Okay. Let's have it."

"Switching now, sir." And with that, the lovely image of the communications officer faded out and was instantly replaced by the face of Captain William Blackwell.

"Greetings, Captain Garth," Blackwell started. "It's been a few months since we've seen each other."

Garth remembered the last time he'd been in the company of the *Bonhomme Richard*. They'd been performing joint exercises near Romulan space about six months ago, searching for a hijacked freighter. It had turned out to be Orion pirates who had commandeered the freighter, killed the crew, and then were attempting to sell off the cargo at a small spaceport on the outskirts of Federation space. Blackwell and Garth had coordinated their efforts to capture the criminals and deliver them to Starfleet Security.

"It's good to see you again, William," Garth said in response. "What do you have for me, Captain?"

"Four days ago we picked up an extremely damaged recorder buoy from the USS *Gulliver*. The *Gulliver* was supposed to be on a routine scientific mission to the planet Axanar in the Delta Orcas system."

Garth's eyes widened and his mouth opened slowly. "Delta Orcas, did you say?"

Blackwell nodded. "Truthfully, you look more shocked than I thought you would at getting this bit of news, considering I know the *Xenophon* is already en route there."

"Yes. We ran into a Klingon cruiser some days ago. I speculated that Delta Orcas was either her destination or their point of departure. We were going to investigate. What has happened?"

"It appears the *Gulliver* ran into some trouble near Axanar. We weren't a hundred percent sure of that fact until an hour ago when we finished downloading the logs and pieced the damaged data back together."

"Then the *Gulliver* has been destroyed?" Garth asked, although he already knew the answer.

"It has, Captain, with all hands. The sensor logs from the *Gulliver* show a Klingon task force currently in orbit around Axanar."

Garth had anticipated as much. "How many ships?"

"Nine, from what we can make out from the damaged logs. We're not sure if that includes the single vessel you disabled or not. We've transmitted the *Gulliver*'s logs to Starfleet Command, and I've set our own course to Axanar."

Excellent. I could use an experienced commander at my side, not to mention the firepower of a command cruiser. "When will you arrive?"

Blackwell reached behind his head and scratched at his black hair. "That seems to be the clincher, Captain. We were two parsecs farther from Delta Orcas than yourself when we found out what had happened to the *Gulliver*. I've got the *Bonhomme Richard*'s engines at full power, but we're still going to be eight hours away when you arrive. I've sent a Priority One communication to Starbase 5, and I've been told there's a Federation scout squadron about the same distance as you are from Axanar right now."

"Yes," Garth said, remembering the squadron. "It's Captain Boranson's group. They were on training maneuvers near Corida, the last I had heard. There are a lot of green personnel in that squadron."

Judging by the expression on Blackwell's face, William shared the opinion. "Green or not, Captain Garth, it's all we have right now. The rest of our forces in the adjacent sectors are amassed near the reported positions of the two large Klingon fleets in the neutral zone."

Garth let the implications of it all fall into place. It didn't take him long to form a reasonable hypothesis as to how this had happened. The Klingon fleets, whether they intended to attack or not, had served a vital purpose: they had effectively divided the Federation's vast forces, separating them from one end of the neutral zone to the other. This had the result of leaving an almost open invitation for a small number of Klingon ships to get within striking distance of the core Federation worlds. "You're the senior officer, Captain Blackwell. What are your orders, sir?"

"Simple: take command of Boranson's group and get it—and yourself—into the Delta Orcas system. Find out what those devils are up to, but try and avoid a confrontation until help can arrive. You're a hell of a tactician, Garth, but I'm not convinced that a group of scout ships can handle the heavy cruisers that are in this Klingon task force. Once the *Bonhomme Richard* arrives on the scene . . . well . . . we can figure out our next move at that time."

"Understood. I'll hold the squadron together until you get there."

Blackwell managed a smile. "Good luck, Captain. Blackwell out."

So, Garth thought as Blackwell's image faded, *Axanar it is*. Garth could feel a pit forming in his stomach. A pit that told him no matter what he did in the next few hours, he was going to be in combat again. Thankfully he had already prepped his crew for the action he hoped would never have come.

November 2251

Office of the President of the United Federation of Planets, Thomas Vanderbilt IV,
Paris, France

Starfleet Commander in Chief Luxa, as well as Commodore Robert April and a handful of other high-ranking Starfleet personnel, was sitting uncomfortably in the reception area of the office of the president of the United Federation of Planets. They were all silent, occasionally looking at one another, then away from each other. There wasn't anything more that needed to be said among them, considering all the meetings that had taken place between the various officers over the course of the last several weeks. They had planned, counter-planned, and re-formed strategies in reaction to the Klingons' bold moves. After compiling all the mission reports that had been heading in from space near Axanar, coupled with the destruction of the *Gulliver*, the choices they had were extremely limited without support of the Federation Council. The president had called an emergency session with the heads of Starfleet and—based on that briefing—would present his proposals to the delegations of representatives from the other member worlds.

A side door opened and in walked two men flanking a small, delicate woman. April looked at her. She couldn't have been more than twenty-five years old, with shoulder-length red hair the color of fire. She was striking and had an air of command about her. "The president will see you all now. If you will follow me, please?" Then she turned and walked back through the door she had come. The other two men, probably Federation security officers, waited until the Starfleet personnel had followed the young woman before taking up positions at the rear of the group as the doors closed behind them.

As they entered the main office, they saw President Thomas Vanderbilt seated at his computer. Acknowledging the officers, he got up from behind his beautifully ornate antique desk and walked toward them.

"Mr. President," Luxa said, his hand outstretched.

The president took it in a firm handshake. "I wish the circumstances were less

dire, Admiral. However, it is good to see you. And you as well, Commodore April. Thank you all for being here. Please, be seated.” He turned and motioned them to the empty couches, arranged in the form of a loose square, off to the center of the room. Once everyone had a place, the president placed himself in a large wing-back chair in one of the corners of the square. “Status report, Admiral Luxa,” he began. “We have precious little time.”

Luxa knew it as well, and he wasted none of it. “Captain Garth will be arriving in the Delta Orcas system in less than forty-eight hours, sir. We have two squadrons of scouts and destroyers ready to link up with him when he arrives. The *Bonhomme Richard* will arrive in less than fifty-six hours at its current speeds. Captain Garth has been given operational command of all units until that happens.”

“I see,” President Vanderbilt replied. “And what do we know of the Klingon forces in that area?”

“Long-range sensors indicate a nine-ship task force orbiting the planet Axanar. Intelligence believes this force must have left Klingon space some months ago.”

“And their purpose in Federation space?”

Luxa held President Vanderbilt’s gaze. “We still don’t know, sir.”

Vanderbilt looked from officer to officer, resting his eyes on April. “Is this a fight we can win, Commodore?”

April looked at Luxa, then back to the president. “I don’t believe so, sir. At least, not with the ships Garth has at his disposal.”

“Then ordering them to engage the Klingons would be a waste of resources and manpower,” the president said in disgust. “What am I supposed to tell the council? How can I tell them that we let an entire Klingon task force slip through our fingers?”

Luxa spoke up in his defense. “We were totally unprepared for this, sir.”

Vanderbilt stood from his chair and stepped to the large windows at the back of his office. “*Unprepared*,” he all but spat under his breath.

After a brief silence, Robert April spoke up. “Sir, Starfleet Intelligence has learned that a Klingon admiral by the name of Korhetza is leading the force in Axanar.”

The president kept his gaze out the window. “And what do we know about him,

this . . . *Korhetza*?”

April was about to speak, but Luxa interrupted. “He’s a successful tactician, and quite a diplomat in the Klingon High Council, sir. We can only infer from his partially complete military record that he’s won almost every engagement he’s ever fought.”

“And this is why he has command of this . . . *invasion* force?”

“We believe so, sir,” the CIC continued. “However, his record also shows a high degree of loyalty to his men. He won’t take them on a suicide mission. If we can lead him to believe that a major Federation offensive is mounting against him, he might be persuaded to leave Axanar without a fight.”

Vanderbilt exhaled through his nose sharply. “A ruse, then?”

“It’s all we have at this point, Mr. President,” Luxa finished.

Vanderbilt paced to the seated men and back to his window a few times, finally resting his hands on the back of the chair he’d vacated moments before. “I will go to the Federation Council and ask that a subspace message be transmitted to *Korhetza*. We will give him one standard month to vacate the Delta Orcas system.”

“Are we going to threaten him with war, sir?” April asked, looking at Luxa to see if the admiral would cut him off again. It didn’t happen, much to Robert’s surprise.

“We are buying time at this point, gentlemen,” President Vanderbilt said. “We need to give Garth some breathing room if things get ugly—as I strongly believe they will. Transmit a subspace message to Captain Garth, Admiral Luxa. Advise him to hold position outside the Delta Orcas system and await further orders.”

“He’s just supposed to wait there?” April asked, almost in shock. “He’ll be a sitting duck.”

“Garth is a highly skilled Starfleet captain. Order him to monitor the Klingon forces and report on any movements or actions they make. Once Captain Blackwell arrives on the scene, order him to do the same.” The president then looked at April. “This is not the time for rashness, Commodore. I’m sure you are aware of that?”

April looked to Luxa, who was wearing a look of disapproval on his face that was unmistakable. “Yes, sir. *Quite* aware.”

“Very well, then. Admiral Luxa, send the subspace message to Garth right away.”

“Yes, sir. He should receive it an hour or so before he enters Delta Orcas.”

“Barring any unforeseen difficulties,” April added, almost under his breath.

The president looked to April, then to Luxa. “Quite right,” he acknowledged quietly. “Our prayers are with him and his squadron. This could be the dawn of a very dark time, people. We must be patient and act accordingly. The future of the Federation may well depend on our actions in the next forty-eight hours. Remember this. That will be all, gentlemen.”

December 2251

Stardate 3912.05

Glowering, Imperial Klingon Admiral Korhetza looked out his command cruiser’s forward view port and surveyed the planet Axanar with utter contempt. It was an unimpressive blue-green world, only half the diameter of his beloved homeworld. He detested Axanar’s coolness, its airy breezes, and its almost year-round moderate temperatures. He had loathed the idea of going planetside, so he’d ordered his most senior commander to take on that responsibility. He wished for the warmth and high humidity of Kronos, but understood full well the emperor’s orders that brought him to this place.

In truth, he *did* relish the idea of being so far into Federation space. He had hoped—even if it went against the orders he had been given—to engage a Federation captain in combat before he had arrived at Axanar. He wanted to test the strength of the vessels he would soon be fighting against in full force—but it was not to be. The diversion, so carefully set up by the Klingon High Council, had worked perfectly. The large fleets that were put into position near the neutral zone had done their jobs and successfully eliminated any threat Korhetza might have encountered when he crossed the zone himself. The journey to Axanar had been uneventful—having been no more taxing on him than any other routine patrol he might have been ordered to undertake in Klingon space.

He had arrived at Axanar, successfully landed three Marine battalions, and had

secured the entire planet without having to kill more than a few hundred civilians. “Weaklings,” he said quietly to the view screen, referring as much to the inhabitants of Axanar as to the Federation forces he dreamed of engaging.

The emperor—being fully persuaded by the ruling families in the High Council—had ordered the invasion force to the Delta Orcas system. Korhetza’s forces were ordered to secure Axanar and begin construction of a military supply base, as well as a planetside shipyard. With the first objective complete, he had then ordered his field commanders to begin on the latter.

This was the time for war, Korhetza mused. Six years ago, he would have thought the turn of events that had transpired in the last twenty-four months unthinkable. Then again, such turns often happened when people were afraid of losing their grip on their power. Such had been the case with the emperor.

For quite some time, the empire had focused its attentions elsewhere. The emperor had favored expansion of the empire over an outright confrontation with the Federation. Whereas some families in the High Council thought that the empire should be advancing *toward* the Federation’s sphere of influence, the emperor had fought for—and won—the ability to expand the empire *away* from the Federation borders. The emperor had felt this a more “economical” move.

Unfortunately, the event had not turned out as well as had been planned. On the far side of their own territory, facing a new threat they had never before encountered, they were forced to reluctantly withdraw those expansion efforts. For several years after the conflict with the invaders, the families of the High Council began to grow in strength. There was talk in the Council about the cowardice of the emperor to expand the frontiers more northward, into Federation space. The Council had felt that a series of quick, bold strikes could defeat the weaker Federation. Once that was completed, the empire could turn its attention to the Romulan Star Empire, and then to the unclaimed space bordering the three empires, known as the Triangle.

There had been some debate among the families about the empire’s ability to wage a prolonged campaign against the Federation. The emperor—now with a newfound sense of *honor*—had assured the families that any war waged against the Earthers would last no longer than two years. He had instituted a massive shipbuilding program, which had the desired effect of calming the dissension in the

upper rank of the High Council.

It was Korhetza himself who had approached the emperor with the formulated plan to invade Axanar. It was felt that the building of a naval complex and supply port at that location would add confusion to the Federation's forces and—with the majority of the Klingon forces engaged at the Federation borders making picketing attacks—enough time could be bought for a secondary task force to reach Axanar and support the first. This chain of Klingon forces—now stretching some fifteen parsecs into Federation space—would be used as a corridor to attack the Federation from within.

The emperor had rallied behind this plan, but it wasn't as though he really had a choice. If he refused, it was highly likely that he would have become the victim of some unfortunate accident, the accident itself being orchestrated by those in the Council.

The emperor was a *fool*, and Korhetza knew it. If the admiral's invasion plan succeeded, it would give him the leverage he needed to make the final step he required to ascend toward the throne. If the plan failed, the emperor would be the one to take the blame, and Korhetza would still advance to the throne. It was a win-win situation the admiral relished. Soon the Federation would be at its knees, and then the Romulans would follow suit. The Klingon Empire's frontiers would have been expanded and—gleaming in the triumph of it all—Korhetza would be standing victorious. All he had to do was wait for his support squadron to arrive at Axanar.

This second group had been dispatched eleven months after Korhetza had departed the Klingon starbase at Ruwan. They were expected at Axanar shortly—and it was just in time. Although Korhetza's forces had ample supplies to last them another six months, the admiral also knew he could not avoid detection by Federation forces that long. He was simply too far from home to survive without support. However, he also knew in his heart that he had judged the Federation correctly. They were too weak and too ill-equipped to resist two full attack squadrons of the empire's finest warriors. The only apparent concern he had at the moment was the failure of his long-range scout, a D-4 light cruiser, to check in on time. She hadn't been heard from in three days, but it didn't bother Korhetza excessively. The commander of that ship was known to take his own excursions

from time to time, so the long silence the admiral now found between himself and that vessel was not surprising.

Axanar would be Korhetza's base of operations from the coming conflict, and a stepping stone for him to take control of the Klingon Empire. Korhetza had just been informed that the new base hospital and research labs were officially up and running. With this single installation, Korhetza had the means to begin some of the scientific experiments he had been planning for some time. There were several rare plants on Axanar—some which could possibly be converted for use as biological weapons. There was also a thought—in the back of Korhetza's mind—that he could use the Axanarian people themselves for some useful purpose other than slave labor. In the end, there were simply so many possibilities that Korhetza almost bubbled over with self-satisfaction.

He would succeed. He had to.

A pair of gleaming D-7 heavy cruisers slowly drifted past his observation window. Their bridge command modules, connected to the ship's gracefully sweeping secondary hull by a long thin neck, were filled with the best warriors the empire could muster. The vessels were the most advanced ships in the fleet—designed to take on the so-called *Constitution*-class ships the Federation had tried so hard to keep a secret from the empire. The one thing the emperor apparently *did* know how to do was create disinformation. Korhetza had been assured by the emperor himself, as well as several of the top intelligence officers, that the Federation was almost twelve months behind in their ability to prepare a force strong enough to resist the Klingon Empire.

In the end, the admiral clasped his hands behind his back and surveyed the small Axanarian homeworld with a new sense of pride. *What was once theirs is now mine! Soon . . . there will be more.*

Chapter 6

January 2252

Stardate 4001.12

The *Xenophon* had been stationary on the outer fringes of the Delta Orcas system for some time. The long-range sensors had picked up the most distant planetoid, a Class-J gas giant, and Captain Garth had ordered it to be placed on the main screen.

It was a turbulent planetoid, a swirling sphere of green and yellow gases that whipped about the uppermost layers of the densely packed atmosphere. It reminded Garth of the trans-vids he'd seen of the planet Jupiter in the Sol system—with the exception of the large spiraling storm that had been present on Jupiter for centuries.

Delta Orcas VI was enormous, even on a galactic scale, but due to the extreme range the *Xenophon*, the planetoid was nothing but a small glowing disk in a field of pinpoints of distant stars. Garth had chosen this precise spot for a rendezvous with Boranson's destroyer group—a group that would be arriving at these coordinates any moment.

As if to placate Garth's curiosity as to the precise time of arrival of the squadron, the communications officer on the *Xenophon* chimed in from behind him. "Sir, message coming in from the squadron commander."

"At last," Garth said, his voice tinged with excitement. "Put it on visual, Lieutenant."

The view screen switched from the planetoid to the face of a young man. Although his tunic was the golden color of command—and he was seated in the command chair—it was not Captain Boranson.

"Greetings, Captain Garth. This is Commander Vaughan Rittenhouse of the destroyer USS *Persephone*."

"We were expecting Captain Boranson, Commander. Has something happened?" Garth asked. The silver-gray eyes of Rittenhouse glared back at Garth, and Garth felt himself slightly uneasy. He didn't care much for surprises.

“Captain Boranson has come down with a rare virus he picked up on Rigel VII. I’ve been placed in temporary command of the group until the ship’s doctor clears him for duty.”

“I see. I trust you are aware of the current situation, Commander Rittenhouse?”

“Yes, sir. *Very* aware. I understand our squadron has been placed under your direct command for the duration of this mission. I think you’ll find each of these ships comes with an impressive array of the finest officers in the fleet. I’ve been proud to serve with them, as I’m sure you’ll be as well, Captain.”

Garth shifted in his seat. “I’m sure they will perform adequately, Commander. Stand by to receive your full mission briefing via subspace. Also, please forward it to your ship commanders. I’d like to get underway as soon as possible.”

“Yes, sir. I’ll take care of it. And, if I may, sir, it’s an honor to be serving under you. I’ve heard quite a bit of chatter on subspace about your fight with the Klingons, and I’m anxious to see you in action.”

“I’m hoping to *avoid* action, Commander Rittenhouse. But if it should befall us, I hope you won’t be too disappointed.”

“Somehow I don’t think that’ll be likely, Captain Garth. Rittenhouse out.”

Rittenhouse looked over his shoulder to his communications officer. She was a striking beauty of a woman, tall, with thick brown hair that hung lazily about her shoulders. Her skin was a soft white, almost ivory in color. Her deep blue eyes, the color of the Great Pools at Denarius, could sooth a man’s soul without her having to even say a word. Her beauty was matched by her sharp wit and keen intellect. Surely, she was the finest woman in the known universe. That’s probably why Vaughan Rittenhouse had married her.

“Did we receive the information from the *Xenophon*, Clarisa?”

She typed at her controls briefly, and then turned to her husband. “Just now, sir.”

“Good,” he said, rising from his chair and stepping over to her. He put his hands to his hips in a grandiose display. “I want a meeting with the entire senior staff in twenty minutes,” he said aloud, turning his gaze from one bridge station to another.

His crew was accustomed to this kind of behavior. The helmsman even offered a brief chuckle at the captain's unnecessary bravado. Everyone seemed to know that, beneath his rough exterior, Commander Rittenhouse turned into a gallon of goo whenever he got within a meter of his wife. He usually made such loud announcements only to cover up his feelings of boyishness whenever he could smell his wife's perfume—and the bridge crew all knew it.

As he gazed around the bridge once more, checking to see that each of his officers was doing his duty—as well as making sure the coast was clear—he was satisfied that he could momentarily breach protocol. He leaned over to his wife, kissing her softly on her lips, and spoke in a hushed whisper.

“See you soon, love,” he said, grinning from ear to ear.

She raised her hand to her brow in a mock salute. “I’ll be there shortly sir,” she replied, adding a mischievous tone to the “sir.”

Rittenhouse smiled and left the bridge. Once the turbolift doors were securely shut, no less than three stifled laughs came from various bridge stations. Clarisa didn't show the slightest bit of embarrassment. “As you *were*, people,” she mustered in her most serious tone, attempting to hide her own growing smile.

“Yes, *Mother*,” came the voice of the chief engineer. That was all it took for the entire bridge to erupt in a fit of laughter.

It's good for the crew to be in such a lighthearted mood—especially now, she thought. With the Klingon threat more dangerous than ever, I hope this won't be the last time we hear that sound.

“That's all we have at this point, people,” Rittenhouse was saying, coming to the end of his briefing. “We've been ordered to wait the Klingons out.”

“Sir, are we expecting to have any more reinforcements in the system soon?” the helmsman asked. He was a young human male, perhaps twenty-two years old. His boyish features betrayed his innocence.

“The *Bonhomme Richard* will arrive within the hour. That's it, so far. She's a tough ship with a good captain at her controls,” Rittenhouse replied, followed by a brief silence. “Any questions?”

He looked around the room. All eyes were on him, without a single question from his shipmates as to their intentions in the Delta Orcas system. “All right, then. Return—” Before Rittenhouse could complete his sentence, there was the unwelcomed sound of red alert being sounded throughout the ship. It was followed by his wife’s voice calling out through the ship’s intercom.

“Red alert. Captain to the bridge. Repeat: red alert. Captain Rittenhouse to the bridge.”

Although Rittenhouse was only a commander, his position as commanding officer granted him the title of captain. It was an old seafaring tradition from centuries before, and it was that same sense of tradition that Rittenhouse enjoyed. All hands in the briefing room leapt up simultaneously and headed for the nearest turbolifts. Some went up to the bridge, others to engineering, and the doctor hurriedly reported to sickbay.

On the bridge of the *Xenophon*, Garth was sitting at the edge of his command chair when he was summoned by his communications officer. “Sir, I have Commander Rittenhouse on visual.”

“Go ahead,” Garth replied. Rittenhouse’s image flashed on the main screen a moment later.

“Rittenhouse here. What’s the emergency, Captain Garth?”

“Commander, our long-range sensors have detected two additional squadrons of D-4 cruisers. There are also numerous contacts with what appear to be cargo freighters and assault ships of various configurations heading this way.”

Rittenhouse was instantly on edge. “From in-system?”

“Negative. They are heading in from outside the system. My science officer suggests that this task force is a support group for the units already at Axanar.”

“My God,” Vaughan muttered. “Orders, sir?”

“Simple and to the point: we cannot let this group enter the Delta Orcas system—to say nothing about getting to Axanar itself.”

Rittenhouse was quick to nod his approval. “Agreed. What’s your plan?”

“We are outmanned and outgunned on every front, Commander. We must use superior tactics to win this confrontation.”

“Again, we are in agreement, Captain Garth.”

Garth turned to his communications officer. “Put Captain Bridgemon of the destroyer *Gettysburg* on split-screen with myself and Commander Rittenhouse.” A moment later, the forward view screen split into two separate channels, one for Rittenhouse and the other for Commander Ron Bridgemon.

“Gentlemen, we will divide our group into three separate commands. Commander Rittenhouse, you will lead the *Persephone*, the *Morgan City*, and the *Borga*. Commander Bridgemon, you will take the *Gettysburg*, the *Austerlitz*, and the *Midway*. I will command the *Xenophon*, the *Thelenth*, the *Agincourt*, and the *Makusia*. For fear that our visual communications may be monitored, I’ll have the encrypted tactical plan transmitted to your ships in the next few minutes. Good luck, gentlemen. Garth, out.”

There was no time for questions from his field commanders. No time for second guesses or “what if” scenarios. The time for all that was past. Whatever happened in the next few moments would be a huge gamble—but Garth saw no alternative. Not since the Earth-Romulan war had such large-scale spacefaring enemies assaulted one another. It had been so long since then, and so many new advances in ships and weapons had come about since that time. Garth just hoped that the gods of chance and favor were on his side.

Pressing the shipwide intercom button on his armrest, Garth leaned toward the speaker. “All hands, this is the captain. Battle stations. Repeat: battle stations. This is no drill.”

It was only minutes into the conflict, and already Garth’s plan was developing as he’d foreseen. The Federation forces were badly outnumbered, and Garth was playing a desperate hit-and-run defensive with his small squadron.

Garth had formed his group of four destroyers in the tried and true trailing-U formation. He had positioned the *Xenophon* directly abeam with the *Agincourt*.

Starboard of the *Agincourt*—and ahead of her by some five hundred kilometers—was the *Makusia*. Opposite her, five hundred kilometers to port and forward of the *Xenophon*, was the *Thelenth*.

Garth took his formation and swarmed over their first target, a Klingon D-4 cruiser that had strayed from its pack. The Federation starships forced the Klingon cruiser into the opening of their U, then proceeded to pounce with all weapons simultaneously. The Klingon ship—unaware and only concentrating her firepower on the *Makusia*—didn't see the combined firepower of the three other vessels until it was too late. In seconds, the Klingon ship exploded in a violent ball of gas and debris.

One down . . . a dozen more to go.

Garth swung his squadron in a wide turn to starboard and came upon two small bulk freighters. Whether Garth's communications were being monitored or not, he took no chances. All attack patterns were being relayed via subspace on a coded basis, fed directly into each ship's computer as soon as Garth had executed them on the *Xenophon*. Each of the captains had the option of overriding the computer-controlled course changes, but as long as the Klingons were losing more ships than the Federation, those captains saw no need for such action. Garth controlled the maneuvers and the individual captains controlled their weapons.

It was working too well.

The two freighters were incinerated in moments, their weaker shields and light armaments no match for the destructive combined firepower of four destroyers. After the devastating pass, Garth made another turn—this time to port—and attempted to engage two cruisers. Instantly Garth knew he had bitten off more than he could chew.

One of the D-4s made a high-energy turn, almost spinning on its own axis, and made a flanking maneuver toward Garth's team. The *Thelenth* had a glitch in its computer systems, and was unable to match the battle group's maneuvers in time. The D-4 let loose with full disruptors and raked the tiny destroyer across its saucer-shaped hull. Her shields flared under the impact, and Garth could see on the view screen that somewhere along skin of the *Thelenth* there was a hull breach. Her external lights flickered for a moment, and then went silent.

Garth knew he had precious little time to rescue the surviving crew of the *Theleth* before she became the target of multiple Klingon warships. He wheeled in his command chair toward his communications officer and shouted, “Now!”

“Transmitting!” came the hurried reply.

“Sensors!” Garth shouted, turning back to the viewer.

Lloyd peered into the sensor display, watching the movement of every ship—both Klingon and Federation alike. “Two enemy cruisers are moving toward the *Theleth*,” he informed his captain. “They’ll be in weapons range in two minutes.”

“Signal the rest of the squadron to move in. I’m not sure if this is going to work, and we need to be ready—”

Duggins snapped in, “Sir, the Klingons are changing course!”

“Heading?”

“Moving away at three-quarters impulse. Looks like they are re-forming.”

“It’s working!” Garth exclaimed. He had gambled, and the Federation ships were holding their own. He had given strict orders to Captain Bridgemon’s group. They were to get as far out of sensor range as possible—while still being battle-ready if the situation arose. Garth—knowing that several of Starfleet’s communication protocols had already been breached by Klingon Intelligence—ordered Bridgemon to perform a massive subspace counterintelligence mission. Having launched two subspace relay buoys, Bridgemon’s destroyer was successfully simulating the broadcast traffic of a dozen Federation cruisers.

The effect was instantaneous. The Klingons—thinking they were outnumbered and outmatched—broke off their attack on the small destroyer squadron and were re-forming to combat the much larger threat they now perceived was going to enter the system at any moment.

The *Xenophon* and the *Agincourt* sped toward the *Theleth*, beaming all survivors on board in a single pass, then joined with the rest of their group in a wide three-hundred-sixty-degree turn. Garth could see four of the remaining D-4s lining abreast of one another, moving in the direction of the simulated Federation fleet—and away from his group.

“Attack speed!” he belted to his helmsman.

The *Xenophon*, the *Agincourt*, and the *Makusia* streamed toward the heavy

cruisers with all the power the impulse engines would give them. As the starships moved within a thousand kilometers, two of the D-4s attempted to pull away from their formation to turn and face Garth. It was to no avail.

Seemingly from nowhere, Rittenhouse's squadron pounced down the z-axis and performed a flawless flanking maneuver in V-formation. They blasted holes in all four Klingon cruisers before sailing past the lumbering Klingons and off into open space.

Garth's squadron flew over the now thoroughly confused Klingons at three hundred meters, shooting their own lasers into the now-smoking vessels. Three of the four cruisers exploded—the fourth so badly damaged that all power was lost and she floated out of control.

As if on cue, Commander Ron Bridgemon's squadron now moved in from outside the system. Within moments, the *Midway* leapt from the formation and fired a volley of accelerated cannon rounds at an incoming Klingon cruiser.

Garth jumped from his command chair when he saw the lone Federation destroyer take on the heavily armed cruiser all on its own. "What the *hell* is he doing?" Garth yelled at the view screen. He watched as the *Midway*'s rounds hit home, watched as the little Federation destroyer flew under the Klingon and started turning, then saw as the Klingon's rear disruptor became active. The green beam of energy streaked from the aft end of the cruiser, striking the *Midway* dead center.

As the *Midway* continued her slow turn, she passed right into the direction of another Klingon cruiser and a destroyer. The onslaught of weapons against the *Midway* was more than she could bear. First the salvo of three torpedoes from the Klingon destroyer took out the *Midway*'s shields, and then the cruiser moved in. The ensuing disruptor blasts blew elephant-sized holes in her bridge and saucer section, then dissected her warp nacelle with equal efficiency. The *Midway* careened to starboard as the Klingons continued to make Swiss cheese out of her hull. A moment later, the *Midway* was blown from existence.

Garth clutched his fist, his knuckles digging into his sides. *What was that fool thinking? This is no time for heroics!*

As Garth was watching the *Midway* disintegrate, Bridgemon had brought the *Larson*-class destroyer *Gettysburg* and the *Austerlitz* into weapons range of the

offending destroyer. The Klingon didn't even see it coming as both Federation ships opened up with full lasers and cannons simultaneously, turning the Klingon destroyer into a burning hulk. Once the destroyer was out of action, Garth and Bridgemon coordinated on taking out the cruiser that had destroyed the *Midway*.

The *Gettysburg* took two torpedoes to her aft shields, the *Xenophon* taking one herself in her forward shields, from two Klingons that had snuck up from behind them. But Rittenhouse was right where he needed to be when Garth required him. The *Persephone*'s lasers lit up the shields of the first of the D-4s, while the heavy destroyers *Morgan City* and the *Borga* attacked the other.

The initial D-4 that Garth had his eyes on had opened fire on the *Agincourt*. The Klingon's powerful disruptors took out the tiny destroyer's shields in an instant. Garth swung the *Xenophon* around to defend his wing mate, opening up with his own lasers in an instant. The D-4 managed to fire two torpedoes before it exploded, one intended for Garth and the other for the *Agincourt*.

Garth got lucky—the Klingon torpedo streaked over his port beam. The *Agincourt*, however, wasn't as fortunate. The weapon struck her warp pylon and neatly severed the engine from the hull. With her primary power generator now gone, the *Agincourt*'s systems switched over to battery backup. Her hull lights went dim, but not out. Her momentum was her own enemy now. She drifted at one-quarter impulse into the path of three Klingon freighters that were attempting to flee the system under maneuvering thrusters.

The *Agincourt* was just too quick for her own good. The starboard side of her primary hull smashed into one of the freighters, causing the crippled Federation destroyer to cartwheel sideways into another freighter, the ensuing explosion destroying all three ships in the process.

But there was no time to grieve. Rittenhouse had his hands full with another Klingon warship. As Garth brought the *Xenophon* around as another ship came into sensor contact.

"Sir!" Lloyd Duggins yelled from the science station. "Ship coming in at maximum warp. It's the *Bonhomme Richard*!"

The Federation cruiser warped right into the middle of the fray. She moved in at an extreme angle and found herself instantly flanked by two Klingon transports

ships loaded with assault troops. The *Bonhomme Richard* let her lasers reach out from both port and starboard banks—making little work of the two less-heavily armed Klingon vessels. With the freighters smoldering behind her, the *Bonhomme Richard* moved closer to the *Xenophon*.

“Sir, communication coming in from the *Bonhomme Richard*.”

“On screen,” Garth said, settling back into his command chair after what felt like days.

After a moment of white and blue static, Captain William Blackwell’s face appeared on the *Xenophon*’s view screen. He sat confidently in his chair and his words flowed out as comfortably as if he had just come in from a stroll along a beach. “Greetings, Captain Garth. I hope I’m not too late.”

Garth could feel a single bead of sweat drip from his forehead. He absently wiped his brow with the back of his hand as he spoke. “On the contrary, *Captain*, you’re right on time.”

Chapter 7

The *Bonhomme Richard* had arrived—and not a moment too soon. Aboard the *Persephone*, Commander Vaughan Rittenhouse had his hands more than full. His ship, along with the destroyer *Morgan City*, was engaged with two Klingon cruisers. The small destroyers were outgunned three to one, but the smaller Federation ships had an ace up their sleeves. They could outmaneuver their larger opponents, and that made things just about equal in Rittenhouse's eyes—or so he had hoped.

One of the Klingon D-7s caught the *Morgan City* off guard and sent two torpedoes into her stern, causing the destroyer's aft shields to buckle. Rittenhouse, engaged with another cruiser, could do very little to assist his comrade. That is, until Blackwell had shown up with the cruiser *Bonhomme Richard*.

The command cruiser rose up a thousand meters on its z-axis, then pivoted to port on her thrusters until she was facing a D-4 that was accosting the *Loknar*-class *Morgan City*. Blackwell watched as a disruptor blast from the Klingon ship lanced out and struck the warp nacelle of the *Morgan City*, causing her shields to glow a bright white before settling back into invisibility.

The *Bonhomme Richard* brought her weapons to bear, firing a salvo from her dual accelerator cannons at the Klingon. One missed, the other struck the center of the long neck that joined the bridge section to the secondary hull. The Klingon's shields flared, but didn't go out entirely. Blackwell fired his lasers, but the Klingon ship was too quick. It glided upward as Blackwell's blasts fell away.

Garth, seeing his opportunity, led the *Xenophon* in, firing several salvos from his lasers that finished off the Klingon's shields. Rittenhouse maneuvered the *Persephone*, and with a clean burst of laser fire, neatly severed the Klingon's neck in two. The enemy's bridge slid slowly away from its body as the remainder of the ship limped on its own course toward oblivion.

Only a single D-4 and two destroyers remained, as well as a freighter that was quickly speeding its way into the system.

Blackwell had the remaining Klingon cruiser on his sensors. She was aft of the *Bonhomme Richard* and moving into an attack posture. Blackwell knew he couldn't

maneuver the *Richard* away in time, and tried desperately to get the Klingon off his vulnerable stern. He set the ship on a violent zigzag pattern that left more than one member of his bridge crew feeling slightly queasy.

Garth, in pursuit of the escaping Klingon freighter, signaled to Rittenhouse.

“Vaughan, that freighter must *not* be allowed to contact Axanar for reinforcements. Help Blackwell while I take the *Borga* to assist me.” On the *Xenophon*’s main viewer, Garth could see that Rittenhouse’s face was covered with grime. Garth saw a bundle of cables dangling behind him from some overhead console that had shattered.

“I’ll do what I can, Captain,” Rittenhouse replied, “but my ship is a mess. Shields are down to thirty percent and the accelerator cannon is offline. The *Gettysburg* is in about the same shape.”

“Do what you can, Commander. I won’t be long,” Garth finished, signing off on the viewer.

Rittenhouse watched his own viewer as the *Xenophon* and the *Borga* peeled out of the fray and took off toward the escaping freighter.

Vaughan Rittenhouse surveyed his bridge. His helmsman was in sickbay, having sustained injuries when his console overloaded. The bridge was a mess of loose wires, dangling conduits, bulkhead fragments, and shattered display screens. He looked to his wife, Clarisa, who had dutifully been manning the communications station. *How did she manage to still look as radiant as ever in the midst of all this chaos?*

“Clarisa, signal the rest of the fleet. I’m taking command in Garth’s absence. Advise all ships to fire on the enemy destroyers at will.”

“Yes, sir. Sending your message now.”

Moments later Rittenhouse watched as the *Gettysburg* and the *Austerlitz* zoomed into his view, both firing lasers at one of the two remaining Klingon destroyers.

“Locate the other destroyer, Mr. White,” Rittenhouse said to his science officer.

Rittenhouse settled into his command chair. A moment later, White spoke up from his console. “Sir, I don’t know how . . . but she’s gotten behind us!”

“*What?*” Rittenhouse screamed in the direction of White.

“She’s two thousand meters away and closing. She’s firing, sir!”

“Brace for impact!” Rittenhouse shouted. A moment later the view screen went bright white as the entire ship shuddered violently from the impact of multiple weapons. The *Persephone* lurched sharply to port—then to starboard. There was an explosion on the bridge somewhere behind Rittenhouse. It blew him out of his chair and straight into the back of the navigator’s seat. Both men fell to the floor in a heap.

Rittenhouse pulled himself to his knees. His head was ringing like a church bell. Although his equilibrium was still in shock, he somehow managed to assist his navigator to the same position, then helped the officer back into his chair. Vaughan leaned over the helm console as he steadied himself.

“Clarisa, damage report.”

The bridge was eerily silent. No response.

Rittenhouse spoke as he turned. “Clarisa, damage—”

The explosion. It had come from the communications console. Clarisa’s broken body was strewn at an unnatural angle over the upper guard rail. Half her tunic was burnt black with soot, the other coated in blood.

“*Clarisa!*” Vaughan shouted. He slapped the shipwide intercom button on his command chair, hoping anyone on the ship with medical experience would hear his plea and come at once. “Medical team to the bridge! Emergency!”

The *Xenophon* and the *Borga* slipped easily behind the escaping Klingon freighter. She was a slow beast of a machine—and she looked it. Whereas the D-7 cruiser was a graceful design—or as graceful as the Klingons could make a ship—the G-8 cargo freighter was exactly the opposite. Where its warrior sister had a sleek secondary body, the G-8 had a fat stomach extending down and aft that accounted for two-thirds of her length. Her two warp nacelles, protruding slightly forward of her bulbous cargo hold, were barely powerful enough to maintain a maximum speed of warp three. She looked like a fat cockroach—and Garth wanted to squash it.

The captain quickly implemented his plan. He had the *Borga* swing wide and come around to the front of the freighter, while Garth took the *Xenophon* toward its

stern. On cue, both Federation ships opened fire with lasers at half strength. Even with the power cycled down, it only took two shots each to completely disable the enemy's defensive systems. Garth wanted this one alive.

"Transporter room, this is the captain. Energize," he said into his armrest speaker. He was taking a big gamble. Garth had assembled a makeshift boarding party consisting of his best security guards, led by his chief of security. If the Klingon captain got twitchy and decided to self-destruct his ship, there was nothing Garth would be able to do to get his people back in time.

Minutes ticked by as Garth silently waited for a communication from Lieutenant Shane Heath. Heath had a keen sense for security. He handled people well, handled conflict even better, and weapons better than both of those two combined. Garth had learned to trust the man implicitly. The captain knew that Heath would go far with his career—if he returned from this little outing.

Within in ten minutes of beaming aboard, Garth received the signal he'd been waiting for.

"This is Garth. Go ahead."

"Captain, this is Heath. The bridge is secure. All hostile forces have been incapacitated. Internal sensors show no further resistance. We have transferred our flag."

"Excellent, Lieutenant," Garth congratulated the younger officer. "Casualty report? Is the Klingon captain still alive?"

"No casualties on our team, sir. The Klingon captain is alive. He was fuming mad at the idea of Starfleet personnel beaming onto his ship. We had to . . . give him a little nap."

Garth smirked at the thought of the Klingon captain lying in a stunned heap. "Understood, Mr. Heath. Can you pilot the ship?"

"Yes, sir. The controls seem straightforward. I've got a whiz kid here who thinks he's a helmsman. I'll give him a shot at the conn. Your orders, sir?"

"Take the ship out of the battle zone and get it to the nearest starbase. I don't want it damaged in any way. We need to find out more about the Klingons, and I'm sure the cargo holds of that ship will give us quite a few answers."

"Not to mention the computer systems," Heath replied over his communicator.

“You read my mind, Lieutenant. Your orders are understood, then?” Garth asked.

“Yes, sir. Getting underway now.”

“Excellent. I’ll send the *Makusia* over to give you cover during your journey,” Garth finished, signing off the channel and setting a course back to the battlefield.

The doctor leaned over the broken body, shaking his head in disbelief at the extent of the communications officer’s wounds. “I’ve stabilized her for now, but I don’t know if there is much we can do.”

Rittenhouse looked into the blood-smeared face of his wife. He tenderly moved a stray lock of hair away from her closed eye, and then ran a finger down her cheek. He was lost in thought. So many memories were flooding his mind, so many kisses and hugs, and love letters, and unspoken compliments, and—

“Captain,” the doctor whispered softly, but there was enough urgency in his voice to break Vaughan out of his self-induced trance. “You deal with the Klingons. We’ll take the lieutenant down to sick bay. I’ll notify you of any change in her condition.”

Vaughan nodded, then stood to his feet. “That . . . won’t be necessary, Doctor. I’ll be down as soon as I can. These Klingons are my top priority now.”

The doctor—as well as the rest of the remaining bridge crew—knew the captain was pushing down more emotion than he could bear. If the situation with the Klingons didn’t pan out soon in their favor, the captain could easily snap under the pressure.

“Captain, really . . . it’s no—”

Vaughan cut him off sharply, more sharply than anyone on the bridge had ever heard before from their skipper. “You have your orders, *Doctor*. Take your patient off the bridge. We’re in the middle of a conflict here!”

The doctor scowled at the captain and then acquiesced to his request. Within moments, he and Clarisa were gone.

The captain moved into his chair once again, doing his best to hide the fear he had of the loss of his wife. He decided, at that moment, to channel that fear into rage.

Rage at the Klingons. Turning to the helmsman, the captain decided his next task was clear.

“Lieutenant White, where is that Klingon *bastard*?”

“He passed over our starboard side and is heading away at full impulse.”

“Pursuit course,” Rittenhouse said calmly.

“Sir,” said the chief engineer cautiously from his station, “impulse power is sketchy at best. I can give you quarter—maybe half—impulse—but not full.”

Rittenhouse almost exploded at his chief, but managed to bite the inside of his cheek hard enough to keep his mouth from opening. He looked to his helmsman and said, “Plot an intercept course and proceed at maximum speed, helmsman. I don’t care what speed that is, *just do it!*”

“Aye, sir.”

For her own part, the *Bonhomme Richard* was faring as poorly as the *Persephone*. The Klingon cruiser that Captain Blackwell initially had his sights on was taking potshots at his ship’s unprotected stern, slowly knocking her rear shields down ten percent with each hit. At this rate, his aft quadrant would be vulnerable in less than a minute.

That guy’s a good shot, Blackwell mused. *Where is my damn backup?*

As if to answer his silent prayers, Commander Ron Bridgemon brought the *Gettysburg* into the fray like a divine wind. The small destroyer swooped between the two ships, deflecting a blast meant for the *Bonhomme Richard*, then proceeded to deal her own retribution. A burst of laser fire streamed from her upper and lower banks simultaneously. Both struck home, one to the Klingon’s bridge structure, the other to her port warp pylon.

Now Bridgemon had his ship parked directly in the Klingon’s path in a game of interstellar chicken. The Klingon shifted in its course and broke off her pursuit of the *Richard*, narrowly avoiding a collision with the *Gettysburg* in the process.

The *Morgan City* and the *Austerlitz* were the next to strike. As the D-4 peeled away from its collision course, it managed to stray right into the path of two more

Federation destroyers. The *Morgan City* fired accelerator cannons, the *Austerlitz* with her lasers.

The Klingon fired its own weapons, all aimed at the *Morgan City*. The Federation destroyer lurched under the impact of full disruptors. The captain of the *Austerlitz*, Commander Juan Menendez, watched his view screen as the *Morgan City*'s impulse engines flared a bright red.

His science officer confirmed his suspicions. "They are running hot, Captain. Fusion reactor breach imminent, sir!"

Menendez's thick Spanish accent rang out through the bridge. "Get us out here! Now!"

The *Austerlitz* banked sharply away from the *Morgan City*—and not a moment too soon. The destroyer's fusion reactors began to bulge one by one as they attempted in vain to restrain the catastrophic reactions going on inside them. The superstructure aft of the bridge began to buckle. Then the reactors exploded in a deadly chain, cracking open the *Morgan City*'s saucer hull like an egg. Menendez's science officer reported mournfully that all hands had been lost.

Its bridge smashed by the onslaught of the two Federation ships, the wounded Klingon destroyer glided away, probably being controlled from its auxiliary bridge.

"Bring all weapons to bear on *that* target," he said.

The *Bonhomme Richard* had recovered from her ordeal quickly. Captain Blackwell, having dispatched the Klingon destroyer, swung his cruiser around in time to see Menendez bring the *Austerlitz* around to the stern of a D-4. The Klingon activated its rear disruptor, but the shot went wild and missed Menendez completely. The *Austerlitz* then opened fire with lasers, sending the already-stricken Klingon cruiser reeling stern-first into an oblique angle.

Blackwell took that as his signal and—ordering full impulse—quickly overtook the limping Klingon cruiser and rained laser fire on it just as the *Bonhomme Richard* flew over the Klingon's smoldering hull at barely one hundred meters. The Klingon, however, had managed to get a lucky strike on the *Bonhomme Richard*'s already-

failing aft shields. The rear tip of Blackwell's port warp nacelle lit up like a bottle rocket, causing a stream of plasma to be ejected rearward. For a moment, it looked as if the *Bonhomme Richard* had an old-style rocket strapped to its pylon instead of a warp drive unit. Within minutes, Blackwell had managed to extinguish the blaze.

Garth, meanwhile, had formed into a trailing-V formation with the *Xenophon* in the center, flanked on either side by the *Borga* and the *Gettysburg*. They honed in on the single remaining destroyer, taking multiple high-speed passes and dealing nearly point-blank laser and torpedo strikes each time. Within moments, the remaining Klingon ship winked out of existence.

With all the Klingons now destroyed, Garth ordered the remaining Federation starships to regroup at their initial staging point before the battle had begun. It was time to lick their wounds.

The results were promising—but the toll had been staggering. Eight Klingon cruisers had been destroyed or disabled. Add to this number two assault craft, three destroyers, and four freighters destroyed, with one additional freighter being captured.

On the Federation side, the *Larson*-class destroyers *Midway* and *Agincourt* were lost, as well as the *Loknar*-class frigate *Morgan City*. Four hundred sixty-six people between the three vessels were dead. The destroyers *Thelenth* and *Persephone* were badly damaged, with an untold number of casualties on each. The cruiser *Bonhomme Richard* was warp incapable. The *Xenophon*, likewise, had to make do with only impulse drive.

The captains of the various Federation ships had agreed to meet on the *Bonhomme Richard* to review the after-action reports. With the briefing now over, the respective captains exited the room one by one until only Garth and Rittenhouse remained.

Garth, seated at the head of the long table, folded his hands together and leaned his chin into them. He knew something was on Rittenhouse's mind. After a moment of deliberation, Garth spoke. "They try to train us for everything," he began, "but there are just some things you can't learn from a textbook or a simulation."

Rittenhouse nodded slowly, then broke the gaze he had on Garth and looked at the smooth tabletop.

“I’ve lost people under my command before, Captain. I know the routine.”

Garth dropped his hands to the tabletop. “There is nothing routine about losing people under us, Commander. It’s an—“

“An occupational hazard,” Rittenhouse interjected, softly cutting off Garth.

Garth could see that Vaughan’s stare was completely blank, as if the captain were lost in another world—or another time.

After a long silence between the two men, Garth stood and rounded the table, then rested a hand on Rittenhouse’s shoulder. “Take some time, Commander. We’ll get through this.”

Rittenhouse looked up from the table and met Garth’s eyes. Vaughan had to force himself to smile. He felt it was the only way to get Garth to leave him alone. In truth, it seemed the only way to get everyone to leave him alone. When Rittenhouse was finally the solitary person in the briefing room he stood and walked to the port view port.

He saw the *Persephone*, her hull pitted and scorched from the recent combat. He looked at the bridge of his ship, the rear portion of which was discolored to an almost light-devouring blackness by the disruptor impact that had killed his wife.

They’ll pay for what they did. The thought was so loud in his head that if someone were standing too close they might actually perceive it. His anger, simmering during the after-action meeting, was now at full boil and in danger of bubbling over. *I swear it.*

February 2252

Stardate 4002.01

Incoming subspace communication . . . PRIORITY ONE . . .

FROM: The Office of the Commander in Chief, Starfleet Command, Fleet Admiral
Matthew D. Luxa, San Francisco, Earth

TO: All Commanding Officers, All Commands

SUBJ: STATUS OF RELATIONS WITH THE KLINGON EMPIRE

REFERENCES:

(A) Federation Council Ultimatum to Klingon Forces occupying planet Axanar, November 2251

(B) Federation response to further invading Klingon forces near the Delta Orcas system, Stardate 4001.12

(C) Official Response from Klingon Forces occupying Axanar, signed Klingon Admiral Korhetza, Stardate 4001.29

1. Per reference (A), Klingon forces were required to vacate Federation space upon receipt of that communication. No alternatives suggested by Federation Council at that time.

2. Per reference (B), it is evident to the Federation Council that the occupation of the Planet Axanar was not an isolated event, and that it denotes a serious act of defiance against the Federation by Klingon forces.

3. Per the stipulations outline in reference (C), Starfleet Intelligence postulates that Admiral Korhetza, commander of the Klingon invasion forces in the Delta Orcas system, is unaware of the conflict on stardate 4001.12 near the Delta Orcas system between Starfleet and Klingon vessels. Reference (C) is quoted as follows:

“ . . . An alliance now exists between the powerful Klingon Empire and its honorable servitor, the natives of the world known as Axanar. By the insulting condition in the terms of your own weakness-infested Federation Council’s ‘ultimatum,’ a state of war is now in effect between the Klingon Empire and the United Federation of Planets.”

4. By order of the Federation president, Thomas Vanderbilt IV, and ratified by a full agreement from the Federation Council, a state of war now exists between the United Federation of Planets and the Klingon Empire. All Klingon ships should be considered extremely dangerous, and engaged when practical.

5. All commanding officers are required to submit daily updates and reports to their respective fleet coordinators as time and distance will allow.

6. Further information to follow shortly.

Chapter 8

February 2252

Stardate 4002.08

As ordered, the *Xenophon* had been holding station just outside the Delta Orcas system. It'd been nearly a month since Garth's initial conflict with the Klingon reinforcement squadron that had been sent to Axanar—and a full week since he had received the Klingons' formal declaration of war against the Federation. Starfleet Command had wasted no time in sending out their own response to the Klingons.

The Federation would fight.

In the meantime, Commander Vaughan Rittenhouse and the damaged *Persephone* had been ordered to return to Starbase 14. Aboard the *Bonhomme Richard*, Captain Blackwell had taken the destroyer *Thelenth* under tow, and was proceeding with Rittenhouse with all due haste. Once their ships were repaired and their respective captains debriefed, Garth had high hopes that they would return to the front lines to render assistance to the rest of the fleet.

Meanwhile, Garth's forces had been reinforced with several starships and destroyers. The *Constitution*-class cruiser USS *Potemkin* had joined the flotilla, as well as the *Anton*-class cruisers *Invicta*, *Guardian*, and *Sutherland*. An additional squadron of destroyers was also rushed into the Delta Orcas systems. With the addition of these three ships—the *Larson*-class *Pharsalus* and *Anzio*, and the *Detroyat*-class destroyer *San Miguel*—augmenting the existing destroyer squadron, Garth had a fully formed battle fleet that was ready for action.

With the departure of Captain Blackwell, Garth—now holding the official title of fleet captain—had overall command authority over the entire fleet. He was seated on the bridge of the *Xenophon*, waiting for the final status reports to come in from his units before issuing the command to proceed to Axanar. Garth was hopeful that, with this enormous show of force at his side, he would be able to easily outmaneuver the Klingons and achieve a quick victory. If the Klingon

reinforcement squadron he'd encountered a month ago was any indication of the training and resourcefulness of all the Klingon forces, it would prove to be a quick battle. However, he'd learned long ago to never underestimate his opponents.

"Sir, incoming communication from the *Potemkin*," Ensign Marc Steinijans announced from his communication station.

"On screen, Ensign." The starfield being displayed on the view screen was replaced by the rounded face of the *Potemkin*'s captain, Brian Webber. His hair was dark brown and slicked back over his scalp. His face was adorned by a thick handlebar mustache that extended from below his nose to the centers of his cheeks, where the tips then curled up into tight circles. It wasn't exactly regulation, but with visual contact between Starfleet and its commanding officers sparse at times, it wasn't unusual for a captain and his crew to indulge in some playful bending of the uniform regulations from time to time.

Webber's deep blue eyes gleamed from under burly eyebrows. "Fleet Captain Garth, we're ready to get underway," he began formally. "All preparations have been made. The ship is standing by for your orders, sir."

"Superb, Captain," Garth said, then motioned to Steinijans. "Open a channel to the fleet."

"Ready, sir."

"All ships, stand by to receive official battle orders and communication protocols."

Garth glanced over his shoulder to Steinijans and gave the communication officer a sharp nod. Steinijans replied by initiating the data transfer to all ships in the fleet. A moment later Steinijans's voice sounded.

"All ships have responded, sir. Battle plans received and acknowledged."

"Very good. Plot a course for Axanar and engage at maximum impulse."

Admiral Korhetza had been pacing the bridge of his command ship for what had seemed like hours. The bridge was uncharacteristically silent—save for the occasional beeps and blips coming from the various terminals surrounding the

command deck. It was so unnervingly silent that Korhetza could hear the bottom of his heavy cloak sweeping along the deck as he turned back and forth. *Where are my reinforcements? They should have been here by now. Are they not aware that our supplies grow thin?*

The admiral stopped to look out the large view port. Below him spun the planet Axanar. True, he *had* succeeded in setting up a makeshift base on the planet's surface. The planet also contained all the raw material he required to construct a large surface installation, but Korhetza required the heavy mining and construction equipment that was being ferried in by his support squadron. Without them, it could be months until the full potential of the base could be realized—if ever. Even the simple task of farming enough food for his forces was proving problematic. It had been easy enough to *persuade* the surviving Axanarians to assist the Klingons, but the people proved to be slow and inefficient when it came to providing for the basic needs of an entire Klingon battle group.

In a lower orbit beneath his command ship, Korhetza could see several heavy cruisers plodding along on their respective courses around the planet. Korhetza wondered to himself what was going on in the minds of those captains. Were they as frustrated as he over the current situation? The raw food stores on all the ships were running at dangerously low levels. If they were not resupplied quickly, the admiral projected the replicators would run dry in less than two weeks.

“Sir!” a voice boomed from behind the admiral. “Long-range sensors detect several ships, closing fast.”

Korhetza stepped over to the scanning station and stood behind his officer. “Our supply convoy?”

“It appears so, but it is difficult to tell with certainty at such long range. However, it is definitely a large group of starships—and they are proceeding precisely on the classified vector we had assigned to the convoy.”

The admiral had set up the predefined vector several months prior to their departure from Klingon space. It was the surest way to determine which ships entering the system were friendly or not before they could get close enough for a sensor scan.

“Then it must be them,” Korhetza said, turning and walking back to the forward view port. “At last,” he said under his breath, then exhaled a shallow sigh of relief. “Inform the fleet that our comrades are approaching.”

“Yes, my lord. Transmitting now.”

Garth had coordinated his battle plan to induce the maximum amount of damage to the Klingons, which—he hoped—would also afford for as few casualties to the Federation forces as possible. He had broken his fleet into three groups that now formed a vertical crescent shape that would attack the enemy from three directions.

The first squadron—consisting of the destroyers *San Miguel*, *Anzio*, and *Pharsalus*—would attack from the top of the crescent. The second squadron—consisting of the cruisers *Invicta*, *Sutherland*, *Guardian*, and led by the heavy cruiser *Potemkin*—would engage from the center. The third group—comprising the destroyers *Gettysburg*, *Borga*, and *Austerlitz*—would form the lower part of the crescent. Garth, on board the *Xenophon*—using maximum sensor coverage throughout the area—would coordinate the attack at a distance, and would be in a position to back up any individual ship that required it.

Garth had the tactical display up on the *Xenophon*’s view screen. Axanar looked like a great red ball on the upper right portion of the screen and—on the lower left—Garth saw his forces moving in. Orbiting Axanar was a pair of D-7 heavy cruisers, followed by a single D-9 light cruiser. In what seemed like a patrol formation—and at the closest position to the Federation forces—Garth noted three D-9s in a trailing V-formation, with D-7 cruisers on their flanks. On the opposite side of Axanar, at extreme sensor range, Garth noted a squadron of four D-4 light cruisers making their way lazily around the planet. The squadron of four would be in attack position in less than twelve minutes. *That makes twelve Klingon ships to my ten*, Garth thought to himself. *Good odds for any warrior worth his salt.*

As soon as his formations were close enough to Axanar for the Klingon sensors to accurately scan and identify the Federation ships, the battle commenced. The two D-7s nearest Axanar broke out of orbit and set an intercept course for the *Anzio*’s

group of destroyers. Meanwhile, the mixed group of D-4s and D-7s shifted in their patrol course and headed for the *Potemkin's* group at full speed. The squadron of destroyers at the bottom of the crescent—led by Captain Ron Bridgemon's *Gettysburg*—had blessedly gone unnoticed for the moment.

From that point on, it was interstellar chaos at its finest.

The mixed Klingon patrol squadrons two D-7s—as well as one of the D-9s—broke formation and sped toward the *Gettysburg's* group, leaving two D-9s to the *Potemkin's* squadron. Garth coordinated the quickly unfolding situation as best he could. He ordered the *Potemkin* to take the *Invicta* and reinforce the *Gettysburg's* group. This left the *Sutherland* and the *Guardian* to face one light cruiser each. Garth had his communications officer patch him into the light cruisers.

“Captain Chambers,” Garth said to the *Sutherland's* commander, “take the *Sutherland* and the *Guardian* and engage the closest D-7 to your position.”

A moment later, Captain Carl Chambers' voice came back through the speaker. “Understood, sir. We should intercept them in quadrant 11-6.”

“Understood,” Garth closed, then looked back to the tactical display.

The upper part of the crescent formation was deep into their attacking run. The *San Miguel* and the *Anzio* double-teamed one D-7, while the destroyer *Pharsalus* engaged in single combat with the other heavy cruiser. A slower D-9 was quickly closing in to further widen the odds of the little destroyer winning the match. The *San Miguel* and the *Anzio*, both dealing equal laser strikes, completely destroyed the larger D-7 cruiser in a matter of minutes.

Elsewhere, the *Gettysburg*—now backed up with the *Invicta* on her starboard side—managed to completely annihilate the D-7 Garth had ordered them to engage. When the *Potemkin* swung in to help mop up, it was now four Federation ships against the remaining D-7 cruiser and a D-4 destroyer.

Seeing that the *Potemkin* had the situation under control, the *Austerlitz* and *Borga* were ordered by Garth to begin a large leeward swing to starboard, coming around the entire conflict zone, and form into an attack run on the squadron of D-4s that would be emerging from the dark side of Axanar any minute now.

The *Anzio* and the *San Miguel*, after destroying their respective targets, regrouped to help out the outmatched *Pharsalus*. Unfortunately, they were moments too late.

With the combined firepower of a heavy cruiser and a destroyer, the small Federation destroyer was greatly outgunned, and the Klingons wasted no time in pressing their advantage. They began hitting the *Pharsalus* with wave after wave of disruptor blasts.

From his vantage point on the *Xenophon*, Garth tried in vain to coordinate a strategy that would save the Federation destroyer, but he knew in his gut that the *Pharsalus* was doomed. As if by providence, the *Pharsalus* exploded in an incredible ball of light as her antimatter containment vessel was breached. Garth noted with exasperation as the small blinking icon on his screen—once representing the destroyer—faded out of sight.

The *Sutherland* and the *Guardian*, however, had been enormously successful, both managing to incapacitate their targets.

“Signal coming in from the *Sutherland*, Captain Garth.”

“At my chair, Lieutenant.”

“Captain Garth, this is Chambers. Target destroyed. Request permission to reinforce the *Anzio* in quadrant 10-2.”

“Approved, Captain. Be advised of heavy fighting in that area.”

“Understood, sir. Chambers out.”

The *Sutherland* quickly headed to her new position. The light cruiser *Guardian* altered course to assist the *Potemkin* in the lower portion of the tactical display. When the *Guardian* was within five hundred kilometers of the *Potemkin*, Garth heard Captain Webber come over the tactical communications network.

“*Guardian*, we require no further support. Space is getting pretty tight over here. Suggest you make fast to assist the *Sutherland*.”

Garth watched as the *Guardian* altered her heading in an instant, swinging to port to intercept the *Sutherland*.

The *Borga* and the *Austerlitz*, in the meantime, had worked their way up half the combat zone and were preparing to outflank the D-4 squadron that was just coming around Axanar.

The *Potemkin* had the D-9 directly in her sights. Webber opened up with two rounds from her accelerator cannons, quickly disabling the forward shields on the

small Klingon destroyer. Captain Bridgemon's *Gettysburg* was close behind, firing lasers at almost point-blank range into the bridge section of the enemy vessel. Half the ship exploded in seconds, leaving the secondary hull a smoking hulk that drifted away from the combat zone.

By that time, the *Sutherland* had linked up with the *Anzio*'s group. The *Sutherland*'s lasers sprang to life and flared against the shields of a D-9, but her range was too far, and the enemy's shields flared but held fast. The enemy destroyer swung around and fired full disruptors at the *Sutherland*, causing her own shields to flicker and fail on the starboard side. Captain Chambers—not known for cowardice—abruptly turned his ship to face the attacker. Nose to nose, at less than an eighth impulse speed, the two ships fired everything they had at their disposal. The *Sutherland* lurched to port as the Klingon's disruptors hit home. The Klingon's shields failed and left her wide open for another attack. It was just in time, too. The *Guardian* headed down the z-axis at half-impulse and fired with full lasers, incinerating the Klingon destroyer in moments.

"Well done, *Guardian*," Garth heard Chambers exclaim on the open channel.

The squadron of four D-4s that had previously been on the far side of Axanar was now in weapons range and moving quickly into an attack position. The *San Miguel* faced off with an equally armed opponent. Garth, seeing that the *San Miguel* was about to be flanked, sent out urgent orders to get assistance to her blind spot. The *Anzio* swung to port to assist, but she wasn't fast enough, and the *Anzio*'s skipper watched helplessly as an enemy destroyer emerged from the blind spot and pounced on the *San Miguel*. First the *San Miguel*'s shields collapsed, then two of the Klingon destroyers began to work in unison, slicing long lines of white-hot metal into the saucer section of the *San Miguel*. Half the ship's primary hull exploded in seconds, sending debris vaulting into the *Anzio*'s shields.

Elsewhere, the arrival of the *Borga* and *Austerlitz* at the upper portion of the crescent met with a similar fate. Two Klingon destroyers broke from their formation and both centered their weapons on the *Austerlitz*. The first destroyer opened up with torpedoes, the second with torpedoes and disruptors. The Federation ship couldn't stand the pummeling and she disintegrated in moments.

With the destruction of the *Austerlitz*, the *Borga* began taking fire almost instantly. With shields failing, Garth sent her captain the order to make a hasty retreat to the far side of Axanar. Unfortunately, there just wasn't enough time. Now that the two Klingon destroyers had the *Borga* in their sights, they weren't about to give the Federation destroyer a chance. They began pummeling the *Borga* as she attempted to flee the zone. Her warp pylon crumbled, then her impulse drive was rendered useless. She glided free of the zone on her own inertia, and Garth's sensors told him that life signs had dropped to zero on the small destroyer.

From somewhere behind the explosion that had engulfed the *Austerlitz*, the *Potemkin* ran into the fray, now covered on her port side by the *Guardian* and by the *Gettysburg* on her starboard.

"Captain Bridgemon," Garth barked into the speaker at his side, "flank the nearest destroyer. *Anzio*, take the other."

There were now only two Klingon ships remaining of the initial twelve. Conversely, Garth had only five ships left to his command, not counting the *Xenophon*. The *Guardian* moved into position beside the *Potemkin*, and with the *Sutherland*, focused their combined firepower on one destroyer, leaving the remaining D-4 to the *Anzio* and the *Gettysburg*. Garth set a course to intercept the *Potemkin* at full impulse.

"Webber, I'm bringing the *Xenophon* in at full impulse to assist," Garth said, then nodded to his helmsman to get underway.

"Understood," the *Potemkin*'s captain replied. "Looking forward to the company."

The *Potemkin* fired with bursts from her forward lasers—two missing, one striking the Klingon amidships. The *Sutherland* and the *Guardian* took turns making laser runs against the remaining Klingon destroyer. Once the enemy's shields were down, the *Xenophon* came in with lightning efficiency, beaming a security complement to the crippled destroyer. Captain Webber followed suit from the *Potemkin*, and the two captains captured the enemy vessel in a matter of moments.

The *Anzio* and the *Gettysburg* began running a crisscross pattern over the remaining enemy cruiser, alternating with laser fire and accelerator cannon strikes until the enemy vessel was little more than floating pile of scrap metal.

After the ensuing euphoria and adrenalin rush of combat had died down to a tenable level, Garth assessed the damage to his fleet. The *Potemkin* was moderately damaged—and both the *Sutherland* and the *Anzio* had suffered from some minor hull buckling. With the exception of those vessels that hadn't made it out of the conflict, the remainder of his fleet was able to maintain full combat readiness. Garth's expeditionary team of security guards—led once again by the intrepid Lieutenant Shane Heath—had beamed over to capture the Klingon destroyer, taken command, and had since rendezvoused with the *Xenophon*.

Communications officer Marc Steinijans spoke up from his console. "Captain Garth, I have Lieutenant Heath on audio."

"On speakers, Lieutenant."

"Captain Garth, this is Heath."

"Well done, Lieutenant . . . or should I say, *Captain*?"

Heath chuckled lightly. "It's all the same to me, Skipper. We're calling in to report on our findings."

"Go ahead, Shane. What is your status?"

"The ship's an awful mess, sir. Life support is barely functioning, computers are sketchy at best, and the warp drive is offline. We'll need to beam over some engineers if we'll want to get her to a starbase in one piece."

"Understood, Lieutenant. Did you find any survivors?"

"Yes, sir. Three Klingons. Two of them are junior officers from what we can tell, and a third . . . well—"

Garth heard the hesitation in Heath's voice. "Well, what is it, man?"

"Well, sir, it seems we've managed to secure Admiral Korhetza himself."

Garth's eyes went wide. It took him a moment to process what he had just heard. He leaned forward in his command chair, his eyes darting around the bridge of the *Xenophon*. The attention of everyone on the bridge was focused on their captain.

"Are you sure?" Garth asked, almost breathless.

“Yes, sir. I’m fairly certain. Granted, I’m only basing this on the trans-vids we’ve received on his general appearance. The prisoner himself is now unconscious, but was lucid when we first boarded the ship. He identified himself as Admiral Korhetza of the Imperial Fleet before passing out from wounds he sustained when the destroyer was damaged. We’ve stabilized his condition, but I don’t know how much longer he’ll be alive if we don’t get him some proper care.”

“Understood. I’ll have two men beam over to take the junior officers off your hands and bring them aboard the *Xenophon*. However, we’ll have to transport Admiral Korhetza to Starbase 23 immediately.”

“Of course, sir. I’ll stand by for the additional personnel. Heath out.”

“Steinijans, get me Captain Webber on the *Potemkin* right away.”

“I’ve already got him,” the lieutenant said with a grin. Seconds later, Webber’s face appeared on the *Xenophon*’s view screen.

“Webber here, Fleet Captain.”

Garth leaned back in his chair, a look of satisfaction on his face. “First, let me express my gratitude to you and your crew, Captain Webber. Exceedingly fine job you did out here today.”

Webber nodded, and while his mood was a somber one, he forced a smile. “All things considered, Captain Garth. We lost a lot of good people today.”

“And they will not be forgotten, Captain. Believe that.”

Webber nodded once more. “We’ve managed to repair most of our damaged warp drive. I believe we’ll be able to get underway within the hour.”

“I’m sure Starfleet Command will be curious to know how well the new *Constitutions* handle a fight.”

“No doubt,” Webber agreed. “To be honest, I wasn’t quite sure myself. Now I only wish we had more of them. Based on the battle today, we could sure use them. Those Klingons are playing for keeps.”

“Agreed. However, I’ve got a little present for you, one I think may prove just as useful in the coming weeks.”

Webber’s eyebrows raised quickly, his curiosity piqued. “How so?”

“I’ll be transferring a prisoner over shortly, one I think Commodore Lai at Starbase 23 would very much like to get his hands on. I want you to bring him there personally, Captain.”

Webber narrowed his eyes, then nodded. “Of course, sir. Someone of importance, I gather.”

Garth smiled widely. “None other than the Klingon admiral himself.”

To this, Webber returned a genuine smile. “Nicely done, Captain Garth. I’ll make arrangements in the brig.”

“I trust you won’t make them *too* comfortable, Captain.”

Webber nodded. “I’ll see what I can do to make that happen. Webber out.”

Chapter 9

March 2252

Stardate 4003.17

Incoming subspace communication . . . PRIORITY ONE . . .

FROM: The Office of the Commanding Officer, Starfleet Intelligence, Commodore
Michael J. Lai, San Francisco, Earth

TO: All Commanding Officers, Galaxy Exploration Command
All Commanding Officers, Military Operations Command
All Commanding Officers, Merchant Marine Command

SUBJ: PRIORITY SITUATION REPORT

REFERENCES:

- (A) Federation Action Report from Delta Orcas System, February 2252
- (B) High Profile Prisoner of War, Admiral Korhetza personnel data file

1. Per reference (A), Klingon forces in the Delta Orcas system, operating on and around the interdicted world of Axanar, have been destroyed or routed. All Klingon ground forces in that system have surrendered.

2. The planet Axanar is now under full protection and administration of the United Federation of Planets, pursuant to the Articles of the Federation, chapter nine, and is under the protection of Starfleet Command, pursuant to the aforementioned Articles of the Federation, chapter eight.

3. Per reference (B), Admiral Korhetza, the mastermind of the Axanar invasion force, has been captured and placed under arrest, formally charged as a prisoner of

war, and is being held at Starbase 23 until such time as the Federation Council sees fit to transfer the prisoner to a more suitable location.

4. Admiral Korhetza has given no information, either helpful or detrimental, as to the war effort being waged against the Federation.

5. It is expected by all parties in the Federation Council that, even with the arrest of the admiral, the war effort itself is far from over. Although the admiral was instrumental in the beginning stages of this conflict, it is further understood that the Klingon Empire has been building up to this conflict for some time now, and has little to no intention of ceasing hostilities at this time. Starfleet Intelligence has come into information that leads us to believe that a new admiral has been placed in overall command of the invasion forces. No other reliable data has come forward concerning this.

6. With the Klingon war machine now in full swing, Starfleet Intelligence believes further hostilities against persons/planets under Federation jurisdiction near the Klingon neutral zone will increase, rather than decrease.

7. All area commanders are required to furnish updates on all hostile actions, whether real or perceived, as soon as the information is on hand.

8. Further communications to follow shortly.

April 2252

Stardate 4004.18

“Governor Kempinger, I simply *cannot* afford the reduction in manpower and equipment at this time. A starship and two light cruisers will simply *have* to suffice. Commodore Albares, Starbase 27 out.”

And with that, the communications channel switched off. Governor Sebastian Kempinger was speechless. He had recently sent a request to the Federation officials at Starbase 27—the nearest outpost to their colony on Andromeda. *This was supposed to suffice as their official response? Unbelievable.*

The planet Andromeda was so named because—as viewed from Earth—the planet sat precisely in the center of what was known as the constellation Andromeda. The colony had been established twenty years ago, and had since become a thriving metropolis populated by no less than two hundred thousand residents representing at least a half-dozen different species. The planet was roughly fifteen parsecs from Starbase 27—and almost as far from the Klingon neutral zone. Archanis was only eight parsecs due east by the Galactic Coordinate System.

Far too close for comfort, the governor often thought. The colony was ripe for the picking to any Klingon ships that might venture into Federation space at this point. With Starfleet's resources strained dangerously thin, it would be some time until a major Federation task force could be assembled to defend the colony. Hence, the reason for the governor's request to Starbase 27 to send reinforcements.

The heavy cruiser *Icarus*, having been on patrol duty near the system during the past week, was ordered to augment the colony's already-assigned squadron of two light cruisers—the *Mohawk* and the *Pinnacle*. While the three ships might have scared off any Klingon forces stupid enough to venture close to the colony before the outbreak of the war, it seemed as if the small fleet of Federation starships would be woefully ill-equipped to handle any confrontation now—should the Klingons decide to force a major conflict in the system.

Governor Kempinger, however, was sure that such a confrontation was imminent. He had heard from various sources within the colony that the Klingons had finished construction of a new shipyard near the Ruwan system, which sat just across the border in Klingon space. The T'Vam system lay directly between Andromeda and the Klingons, but Kempinger knew firsthand that T'Vam carried nothing of value and was completely uninhabited. There were no materials for the Klingons to seize, and no population for them to enslave or massacre as they had on Archanis. No, Andromeda would be the Klingons' first choice—and Kempinger knew it. That his request for reinforcements had been flatly denied had outraged the governor to no end.

Kempinger sat back in his padded chair and looked out the large southern window that faced the courtyard of the central administrative complex. He could see a man and a woman pushing a stroller down a gleaming white walkway, flanked on either

side by meticulously cut grass and the occasional marble sculpture. The inhabitants of the colony had taken to the name Andromeda with a passion, and had used it as a guide for their construction efforts. The colony looked like a modern-day Greece, complete with pillars of white marble adorning all major metropolitan buildings. Governor Kempinger watched as the young couple walked down the path without so much as a care in the universe. The weather today was perfect for such a stroll. *Was it also perfect for death?*

Kempinger needed to quiet his mind. All the stories filtering into the governor's office about Klingon raiding parties running up and down the borders were starting to get to him. He needed reassurance on a regular basis that everything was all right, lest he go insane thinking of the what-ifs of the universe. He decided to check in on the *Icarus* . . . just to be sure.

"Captain, there is a message coming in from the planet surface. It's Governor Kempinger . . . *again*."

Captain Michael Taylor, seated in the command chair in the center of the bridge, brought his right hand to his forehead and rubbed it absently. "Again, Ensign? This is the fifth time in the last two hours," he sighed, not even bothering to turn to the communications officer seated to his left.

"Yes, sir. Shall I advise him to signal later?"

Taylor had almost said yes. He wanted to—badly. It was getting to be too much to answer every call from the governor, and the calls themselves had started to become more frequent. Taylor had half-joked to his communications officer about constructing a generic message to send to the governor each time he called, but then dismissed the idea just as quickly. It just wouldn't due to address a planetary official in that manner—even if it suited the situation. This was something that would have to be addressed face to face.

"Is it audio only, or is there a video image?" Taylor asked, hoping for the former.

"Audio and visual, sir," came the reply from the ensign.

“Very well,” he said, waving a dismissive hand at the viewer. “Put it on the main screen.”

The image on the screen changed from a view of the planet below to the interior of Governor Sebastian Kempinger’s office. The governor, a human male of fifty, stood motionless in the center of the room.

“Yes, Governor. What can I do for you?” the captain asked in his most professional tone.

Kempinger looked away briefly, then back to the captain. “I was just calling to check in. To make sure . . . that everything was all right,” he said nervously.

Taylor gave his most reassuring smile. If he could persuade the governor that everything was indeed all right, perhaps the man would stop calling at regular intervals and disrupting his starship. “Everything is fine, Governor.”

“Hum. No *unusual* sensor contact?”

“No, sir.”

“No spatial disturbances?”

“No, sir.”

“No intercepted communications?”

“No, sir. In fact, there is *nothing* new to report since our last communication thirty minutes ago.” Taylor was trying not to let the annoyance he felt seep into their conversation. He only hoped that it was working.

“I understand, Captain, but one can never be too vigilant, you know,” Kempinger said, smiling a nervous grin.

“Of course, Governor. Believe me—if anything out of the ordinary happens—you will be the first to know about it.”

“Thank you, Captain. The residents of Andromeda are all counting on you and your vessels to defend us. We know you won’t let us down.”

“The thought never crossed my mind, Governor. We have some sensor and communication diagnostics to perform over the next hour or so. If you need anything, please feel free to contact Commander Adams on board the *Pinnacle*.”

“Of course, Captain Taylor. Andromeda station out.” And with that, the governor’s image faded from the viewer and was replaced by the vista of the planetoid once again.

“Communications Officer, send Commander Adams my regards. I can’t take any more of Governor Kempinger right now. We need a break.”

“Yes, sir. Sending your message now.”

Finally, Taylor thought to himself as he eased back into his command chair. *Some peace and quiet.*

An hour later, Governor Kempinger found himself crawling out from the rubble that used to be his office. The whole planet itself seemed to shake violently with each burst of Klingon disruptor fire. Just as he moved out from beneath his table, he could feel another rumble in the building, yet this one was far less severe than the one that had shaken his walls almost to the ground moments ago. He stumbled across the shattered remains of his workplace and made it to the doorway.

Kempinger tried in vain to slide the doors open manually. There must have been some major structural damage to the foundations of the building, as the doors appeared to be welded shut. After a few more attempts ended in futility, he began searching his office for his communicator. It was standard procedure for each member of the colony to carry one—he’d just forgotten where he had put it. After all, he hadn’t required it in a long time.

He found a small wooden box on the floor underneath a toppled bookcase. He opened the container and—just where he had left it months ago—there sat his standard issue Starfleet communicator. He tried to flip his wrist to open the communicator, but found that the bones in his right arm were shattered. He fell to the floor in agony, clutching his wounded arm with his left hand as his communicator toppled helplessly to the floor. He reached out to the fallen device and used his mouth to hold the base as he applied his remaining good hand to open it.

“This is Governor Sebastian Kempinger to the USS *Icarus*. Respond, please!” he pleaded into the device, not even sure if it was functioning. He regarded the communicator for a moment, then placed it on the floor and dialed in the Starfleet

emergency frequency. He reached for the device and then felt another harsh rumble in the building.

“Repeat: this is Governor Kempinger calling *any* orbiting Federation starship. Please respond!”

His request was only met with static. *Where are you? Help us!* He couldn’t get the words out of his mouth. He could taste blood on his lips. He licked his wounds as he tried setting the communicator on a wide band search. *Hopefully this won’t raise any Klingons as well.* “This is Governor Kempinger. Please . . . respond.”

After another burst of static, a male voice came over the communications signal. “This is Commander Adams of the USS *Pinnacle*. Go ahead, Governor.”

“Commander Adams, where is Captain Taylor? Where is the *Icarus*?” Kempinger managed to stutter between a series of violent coughs erupting from his lungs.

“Governor, the *Icarus* has been destroyed. So has the *Mohawk*. The Klingons—” There was a burst of static and then the communicator went silent.

“Adams . . . Adams! Respond!” Sebastian shouted, the pain in his chest increasing with each outburst.

There was a loud burst of static in the communicator, followed by several loud pops. Adams’s voice then resumed. “Repeat . . . the Klingons came out of nowhere. We are vastly outnumbered. Don’t think we can hold them off much long—” then another burst of static.

Kempinger fumbled at his communicator, trying to increase the signal strength to the orbiting starship.

“Adams, repeat. Did you say Klingons?” Kempinger was frantic. As he waited for the *Pinnacle*’s next transmission, the colony’s air-raid sirens finally came online. *A little late*, Kempinger thought.

The communicator’s speaker again burst to life. “Affirmative. Multiple hostile contacts coming in from everywhere. It looks like an entire fleet . . . possibly an invasion force . . . Must have been hiding behind some moon or nearby star . . . Too many for us to handle. Our warp engines are offline . . . weapons system failing . . . we’ll try to hold them off for—” A loud explosion, then silence once again. This time Kempinger could see that the channel had been severed.

They're all gone . . . all of them . . . and no one is coming to save us. Damn you, Commodore Albares, for not taking me seriously! I'm now the governor of a dead world. All those people, all those lives . . . lost . . . because of your failure!

The room started shaking again, this time more violently than before. Kempinger could hear the structure of the building giving way. He quickly picked himself up off the floor and looked to his window. A large support structure had fallen from the roof above. If he could manage to break through the window, he might be able to use the fallen beam as a slide and get out of administrative center before it collapsed entirely.

He went back to the fallen bookcase and searched for another box. He found it lying on the floor not far from the one that had held his communicator. He opened it and withdrew his standard type-two laser. Setting the beam to a narrow field he used his uninjured hand to aim it at the transparent aluminum of the window and fired several short bursts, awkwardly carving out an exit in the process.

He picked up his fallen chair with his good arm and gave it a solid heave toward the window. The cut transparency gave way as the chair collided with it, causing both objects to hit the fallen beam and slide down to the courtyard two stories below.

Successful test. Well, here goes. Governor Kempinger could feel the building start to give way as he propped himself in the window ledge. With one swing he was sliding feet first down the steel beam. Just before he reached the bottom of the beam he noticed that a rather large mass of twisted metal—not to mention his old chair—were pointed directly on his course. He rolled off the beam at the last minute, hitting the grass and tumbling down a small embankment, ending up facedown in a small stream.

He picked himself up, not sure if he should be clutching the broken wrist he'd received in his office or the bruised knees he had just gotten. He steadied himself on the embankment and sat down, his feet still sloshing about in the water. He could see bolts of green energy coming down from the sky and impacting some of the rooftops about a kilometer away. The fragile wooden and plaster structures were no match for the Klingon disruptors. The buildings shattered like so many matchstick houses each time the Klingons scored a successful hit—which seemed to be every

time they fired. In the distance, Kempinger could see the people scurrying about, trying in vain to find adequate shelter from the orbital onslaught to which they were being subjected.

Just then a blast came streaking out of the sky and struck the top of the administrative building where—only minutes before—Kempinger’s office had been located. The walls burst outward as the ceiling caved in on itself. Sebastian, having no better alternative, tucked his arms over his head and rolled the rest of the way down the steep, grassy slope toward what used to be the water treatment plant at the base of the hill. It was just in time, too. The rest of the administrative building collapsed in a heap of rubble and dust just as the governor made his improvised escape.

Every bone in Sebastian’s body ached. He felt as if he had just been pulled apart at every joint and then thrown back together haphazardly. How long had he been unconscious? He had no idea. Perhaps a minute . . . perhaps an hour. He had no perception of time at the moment. The thing that had awoken him was the air-raided sirens. They had been silenced just as the administrative building was destroyed. Somehow they had managed to come back online again. Perhaps there were other survivors in the ruins as well. The governor needed to know.

He got to his feet and began limping through the streets. The shooting had stopped, and he felt exceedingly grateful for it. He rounded a corner while making his way to the colony hospital a few blocks away. After navigating around some roadblocks created by fallen debris, he finally made his way to the entrance of the Aceso Medical Center—so named by the colonists, who themselves had found humor in naming conventional structures after ancient Greek gods and goddesses.

As fate would have it, there was a doctor on call in the structure. The building itself had taken at least one direct hit, and the south wing was completely demolished. There were several wounded colonists in the ward, their bodies in various states of trauma. The doctor, upon seeing the governor stumble in,

immediately went to his side. He helped him to a nearby medical bed and, after laying Kempinger down, began his medical scans.

“A few broken bones and some bruised ribs, Governor, but I think you’ll pull through.”

The governor looked at the medic. He was a young man, probably in his mid-twenties. If it weren’t for the expert way he handled his medical scanner—and the bone-knitting laser—the governor would never have thought this young man to be a surgeon.

“Thank you, Doctor,” Sebastian said. The pain in his wrist was almost completely gone within moments. “I don’t recall seeing you here before.”

The doctor smiled as he waved his medical scanner over the governor’s legs. “Are you telling me you remember *every* face on this planet?”

Kempinger smiled. “I review all the records of personnel assigned to this planet. I don’t recall ever seeing your face in those files, Doctor.”

The doctor smiled back, not saying anything.

“It is *Doctor* . . . isn’t it?” the governor asked in a skeptical tone.

“Oh yes, I’m *very* much a doctor. I’m just not assigned to this colony. I beamed down from the *Icarus* a few days ago.”

“So . . . you were part of her crew, then?”

“Well . . . not exactly,” the young man said, his accented drawl vaguely familiar to Kempinger. “I’m on my way back to Earth. I was on Dramia II.”

The governor remembered the Dramia system from the news reports. “Ah, yes. The . . . epidemic, right?”

“Mass inoculations,” the doctor nodded. “I headed the program and, once we were finished, I was supposed to get back home to see my wife.”

The governor coughed slightly as he raised himself to rest on his elbows. “I received a communication from Commander Adams on board the *Pinnacle*. All the orbiting starships were destroyed in the battle.”

The doctor raised an eyebrow, then flipped his scanners back toward the governor’s body. “I’m sorry to hear that, Governor. There were a lot of good people on those ships.” The doctor’s voice trailed off, then began again. “Some I would like to have stayed in contact with after this mission.”

“I understand,” the governor replied. “Do you think the Klingons will be back?”

“Honestly, who could understand the mind of a Klingon?” The doctor scowled, visibly distraught. “They’re a menace to everything civilized people hold dear. I’d like nothing more than to see each and every last one of them endure the same kind of suffering they’ve inflicted on the people of Andromeda.” His voice trailed off again, only to come back a moment later. “I don’t think they’ll be back, Governor. Their primary targets would probably have been the destruction of the starships and the colony. From the looks of it, I’d say their mission was a complete success.”

“Is the hospital’s subspace communicator still operational?”

The doctor stopped scanning his patient and glared at him. “How do I know? I’m a doctor, not a tour guide. I don’t even know where the blasted thing is. I’ve been busy treating these people . . . or what’s left of them, anyway.”

Sebastian let out a long sigh. “I understand, Doctor. I think I’m well enough to search through this mess to try and locate it.”

“Normally for a patient in your condition I’d try to keep you in bed as long as possible, but under the circumstances I think we need to get some aid here immediately. That damn transmitter is the only way I know to do it. I think I heard one of the orderlies say it was in the north wing, second floor. Just don’t take my word for it. It’s not like I live here.”

“I guess I’ll have to see for myself. Thank you, Doctor,” Kempinger said, getting up from the table and heading out for the door. Kempinger turned as he reached the entryway and regarded the dark-haired young man who had helped him. The doctor had already moved to another patient, one with a badly wounded leg and a laceration on his scalp.

“I say, young man . . . um, *Doctor?*”

“Yes?” he replied with an almost impatient tone, yet was still focused on his current patient.

“Do you have a name? Starfleet will want to know who the medical point of contact here is.”

“Sure do. Name’s McCoy. Leonard McCoy.”

The governor nodded, committing the name to memory. “Very well, Dr. McCoy. I’ll get help coming as soon as I can. And thank you.”

Chapter 10

May 2252

Stardate 4005.03

My beloved K'Tanna,

The indications are very strong that we shall move in a few days—perhaps tomorrow. We are deep in enemy territory, and our casualties have been many. No doubt you have heard of the fall of the Federation fleet at Genmark. While it was our squadron that dealt the death blows to the weakling Earthers, they have exacted a heavy loss on our personnel. Should I be unable to write you again, I feel compelled to write lines that may fall under your eye when I shall be no more.

Our movements may be one of a few days' duration, and full of glory—and it may be one of severe conflict and death to me. Not my will, but that for the good of the empire be done. If it is necessary that I should fall on the battlefield for my emperor, I am ready. I have no misgivings about—or lack of confidence in—the cause in which I am engaged, and my courage does not halt or falter. I know how strongly Klingon expansion now leans upon the triumph of the military, and how great a debt we owe to those who went before us through their blood and suffering. And I am willing—perfectly willing—to lay down all my pleasures in this life, to help maintain the Klingon Empire, and to repay that debt.

But, my mate, when I know that with my own joys I lay down nearly all of yours, and replace them in this life with cares and sorrows—when, after having eaten for long years the bitter fruit of orphanage myself, I must offer it as the only sustenance to my children—is it weak or dishonorable while the banner of my purpose floats calmly and proudly in the breeze, that my unbounded love for you, my beloved, and our children should struggle in fierce, though useless, contest with my love of duty to the empire?

I cannot describe to you my feelings on this calm night, when four hundred proud warriors are sleeping around me, many of them enjoying the last, perhaps, before that of death—and I, suspicious that death is creeping behind me with his fatal knife, am communing with Kahless, my soul, and thee.

I have sought most closely and diligently, and often in my breast, for a wrong motive in thus hazarding the happiness of those I loved, and I could not find one. A pure love of my empire and of its principles I have often advocated before the people and "the name of honor that I love more than I fear death" have called upon me, and I have obeyed without question.

K'Tanna, my love for you is deathless; it seems to bind me to you with mighty cables that nothing but Gre'Thor could break; and yet my love for the empire comes over me like a strong wind and bears me irresistibly on with all these chains to the battlefield.

The memories of the fleeting moments I have spent with you come preying upon me at night, and I feel most gratified to you that I have enjoyed them for so long. Hard it is, for me to give them up and burn to ashes the hopes of the future years we might still have lived and loved together, and seen our sons grow up around us to become honorable warriors. I have, I know, but few and small claims upon providence, but something whispers to me—it calls me to my fate. If I do not return, my dear K'Tanna, never forget how much I love you, and when my last breath escapes me on the battlefield, it will whisper your name as I enter the gates of Sto'Vo'Kor.

Forgive my many faults, and the many pains I have caused you. How thoughtless and foolish I have oftentimes been! How gladly would I wash out with my blood every little spot upon your happiness, and struggle with all the misfortune of this universe, to shield you and our children from harm. But I cannot. I must watch you from Sto'Vo'Kor and hover near you while you buffet the storms of your life, and wait with devoted patience till we meet to part no more.

But, K'Tanna, if the dead can come back to this universe and flit unseen around those they've loved, I shall always be near you; in the most garish day and in the darkest night—amidst your happiest scenes and gloomiest hours—always,

always. And if there be a soft breeze upon your cheek, it shall be my breath; or when the cool air fans your throbbing temples, it shall be my spirit passing by.

K'Tanna, do not mourn me dead. Only think that I am gone and wait for thee, for we shall meet again in the next world.

As for my sons, they will grow as I have done, and never know a father's love and care. Kranak is too young to remember me long, and my dark-eyed Kang will keep my teachings with him among the memories of his adolescence. K'Tanna, I have unlimited confidence in your maternal care and your development of their character. Tell my mother I call to Kahless. K'Tanna, I wait in the afterlife for you. Come to me, and therein lead my sons also.

Colonel Korraath,
Commander, 127th Cruiser Squadron

June 2252

“Captain's log: stardate 4006.28. This morning, the *Yamato* linked up with our escorts, the destroyer USS *Buena Vista* and the light cruiser USS *Perseus*. By early afternoon, we'd completed several battle readiness exercises. I am pleased to report that both of our escorts scored extremely high. Both commanding officers, Commander Hirschman of the *Buena Vista* and Captain Allaire of the *Perseus*, are to be commended on the efficiency of their vessels in a crisis situation, albeit simulated ones. I'm pleased to have such well-trained officers at the ready—should we need them.

On a more personal note: Chief Engineer Jepsen is back at his post and performing admirably, considering his recent loss. Navigator Lieutenant Visuete is in sickbay due to a recent illness of an unknown type. However, Dr. Peralto tells me it's nothing serious—probably just a mild stomach flu. Also of note: Ensign Elena Mosty is now the proud mother of a bouncing baby boy. After careful consideration, she has decided *against* the name Brendon, much to the chagrin of her commanding officer, and has elected to name her son Sterling.

The *Yamato* and our escorts, having arrived in the Zeta Gellius system, are now on course for the fourth planet, Lea, at full impulse power. I have to admit that I have some reservations about taking such a small force into this sector. With the destruction of the outpost on Andromeda, and the decimation of the Federation fleet at Genmark, this area of space is now devoid of any assistance we may need if we happen to run into trouble. I sit on the bridge, uncomfortably knowing that the Klingons could be hiding almost anywhere in the thirty-six square parsecs of empty space that now surround us. Starfleet Intelligence is quick to assure me that we have nothing to fear—that the Klingons are planning a large action far to our galactic north—probably near the planet Lycly Dun or the Topax system. I wish that information was, in itself, enough to steady my nerves.”

Captain Brendon Goodyear, seated comfortably in his quarters, signed off from his personal log and headed for the bridge of the *Yamato*. Upon arrival, he slid into the command chair and touched the white control on the right armrest that would open a two-way channel to the chief engineer. “Bridge to engineering.”

“Engineering here.” It was the voice of Chief Engineer Jepsen.

Captain Goodyear pursed his lips as he looked down at the speaker on the armrest. It was good for Jepsen to be back at his station, Goodyear decided. The captain needed his most competent officers at their assigned posts for the next several hours. As soon as their ships reached Lea in the Zeta Gellius system, they were supposed to be reinforced with another Federation squadron. Until then, however, they would have to make do with what they had, which meant everyone had to be on full alert status. “Status of the engines, Commander?”

The low tone of the engineer’s voice came back over the speaker almost immediately. “Operating at near one hundred percent efficiency, sir.”

“How close are we to achieving full efficiency?”

“About three more percent, Captain. I have Specialist McGuinness pulling double duty down here. We’re working as fast as we can.”

“Understood. Keep me informed, Commander. I want to be notified immediately each time the engine efficiency is increased by half a percent.”

“Yes, sir. Every half-percent. Jepsen out.”

Goodyear pushed the small button on his armrest again and closed the channel, then turned in his chair to face his science officer. Lieutenant Commander Tongue was one of his most competent officers. Even as a human, his skill at the science station was matched by few others in the fleet, including Vulcans. “Sensor scan, Mr. Tongue. What’s out there?”

Richard, who was monitoring computer usage at that moment, got up from his chair and peered into the sensor scanner. The blue light bathed his eyes as he glanced over the short-range scans of the sector. “Nothing in the immediate area, Captain.”

“Nothing?” Goodyear asked, a hint of skepticism in his voice.

“Nothing *out of the ordinary*, sir,” Tongue said as he turned away from the scanner to face his captain. “Unless you account for a class-three comet that is four thousand kilometers off our starboard beam.”

“And you don’t find that unexpected, Mr. Tongue?”

Tongue clasped his hands behind his back in a very Vulcan-like gesture. “No, sir. Not at all. The comet is known as Stellar Artifact 1447. Its course has been observed as going through this region of space precisely every 22.6 years. We should consider it an expected object.”

Goodyear stifled a laugh, but smiled nonetheless. “I see. Thank you.”

“Of course, sir,” Tongue said, then returned to his task of monitoring the main computer’s storage banks.

Goodyear looked to the forward view screen and the expanse of stars slowly moving past the ship as she sped along her course to the Zeta Gellius system. *Nice and quiet. Let’s keep it that way.*

Colonel Korraath peered into the scanner at the science officer’s station. The science officer, a young warrior who had come up through the ranks a little too quickly, had relinquished his post only moments before at the request of the squadron commander.

“Lieutenant—” Korrath growled, looking up from the scanner and leveling his gaze on the ship’s helmsman, “you have done well. The entire squadron appears to be fully immersed in the comet’s tail. The Federation ships show no sign of detection. You are to be commended.”

The lieutenant gave his commanding officer a curt nod. “It is my honor to serve, Colonel.”

“*Indeed*,” Korrath said in a lowered voice, as much to himself as to the officer he addressed. He stood up straight and moved toward the aft end of the bridge. “Warriors,” he began, as those Klingons not fully immersed in their duties turned in unison to face their commander, “the time to strike is near. Ready all departments for the coming engagement. Send a coded message to the squadron commanders: we move out in two minutes. Set all disruptors to ready condition. Qapla’!” He then finished by beating a closed fist against his chest.

“Qapla’!” the officers responded in unison.

Fleet Captain Brendon T. Goodyear placed his hands on the food tray and slid it out of the replicator slot in the wall. He’d been looking forward to this meal for some time . . . and his growling belly agreed with him. After passing up several officers who had dutifully offered him a seat at their table, he found a quiet seat near one of the starboard observation windows. It was one of his favorite seats on the ship, as he much preferred to dine with the crew instead of being only with his senior staff—or eating alone in his quarters.

He sipped at his coffee, noting with disapproval that it tasted much more bitter than usual. He licked his lips and scrutinized his cup. *Must be a replicator malfunction. I’ll have to remember to get Jepsen to look into this. Can’t have the Capitan going without a decent cup of coffee now, can we?* He drank again as he glanced out the tall window, the class-three comet that Richard had mentioned earlier clearly visible. Goodyear had advised his helm to plot a course correction that would take them parallel to it. It was a good diversion, and it certainly got the

crew's mind off the monotony of their current mission. It also helped that the comet was "going their way," as Goodyear had mentioned to Tongue.

Brendon watched as the *Yamato* kept pace with the comet, its soft white tail trailing the nearly three-kilometer-sized ball of ice for at least a quarter of a parsec. It was beautiful and it was mysterious. Goodyear pondered the comet's unknown beginnings, where it had originated from, and what was to be its end. He set his coffee down and, having retrieved his ham sandwich, gave the comet one last cursory glance before consuming his lunch.

What he saw caused him to do an immediate double take.

What was once just the soft tail of the comet in the view port was now a background to several Klingon cruisers heading in at high impulse, aimed directly at the *Yamato*.

Goodyear's mouth gaped open as he dropped his sandwich to the plate. "Red alert . . ." he said, coughing back some of the coffee that had welled back up in his throat. After a loud cough he rose to his feet, knocking his table off balance and sending his lunch crashing to the floor. The inhabitants of the mess hall—some thirty crewmen—looked at their captain, stunned. "Red alert," he screamed to them. "All hands to battle stations! Now, people! *On the double!*"

At the same moment, the alert klaxon sounded throughout the *Yamato*'s interior. Goodyear rushed from the mess hall and crowded into the nearest turbolift, his command to take him to the bridge overriding anyone else's request to go to a different level. He stepped out a moment later onto the bridge just as the first enemy disruptor bolts slammed against the shields.

Korrath sat at the edge of his command chair. He had just opened a channel to the captains of the twelve D-4s of the 127th Cruiser Squadron.

"Groups One and Two, target the smaller vessels. Full disruptors! Destroy them. I will attack the Earther cruiser myself."

With that, nine cruisers sped away from the flagship and began firing—almost simultaneously—on the destroyer *Buena Vista*. The Klingon ships neatly

surrounded the small destroyer from almost every angle, dividing the Federation formation in a mass of chaos.

The view screen on the *Yamato* lit up as the combined Klingon disruptor fire instantly crippled the *Buena Vista*'s shields. It took only a brief second for the enemy fire to lance out again and strike her unprotected hull. She was holed through almost a half-dozen times before she crumpled—then exploded—under the combined onslaught. The *Yamato*, still gaining speed, was woefully unprepared for the engagement.

“All power to the shields. Hard to starboard!” Goodyear yelled.

Korrath, seizing his opportunity for a strike, wasted no time.

“Target the cruiser's engineering section. All forward weapons, fire!”

The green disruptor beams shot out from the forward banks of the lead D-4, striking mercilessly against the shields of the *Yamato*.

“Their shields are holding,” the tactical officer on the Klingon ship said aloud to Korrath.

“Then we shall hit them *again!* No mercy to the weaklings!”

Two more D-4s from Korrath's group moved into a flanking position and alternated striking the *Yamato* with disruptor and torpedo blasts. In seconds the Starfleet vessel's shields had fallen.

Korrath moved his cruiser into firing range again and the white-hot disruptors of his flagship lanced out and struck the *Yamato* precisely where his first barrage had targeted.

The hull plating of the Federation vessel buckled under the Klingons' weapon fire. A large gash in the gleaming white metal of the cruiser began to open in her side, spilling out her contents into the coldness of space.

Korrath's ship peeled away from the wounded Federation cruiser as another Klingon vessel moved in for a clear shot. This time the target was the starboard warp pylon. However, the Klingon gunner was not nearly as accurate as the squadron commander had been. Instead of hitting the warp engine pylon, the engine cap itself was struck. The transparent Bussard collector exploded, sending shards of white-hot transparent aluminum in every direction.

The Federation cruiser *Perseus*—on the other hand—was being pursued by no less than four Klingon cruisers. Its captain was doing a skillful job of keeping the ship just outside the Klingons' weapons range, but the cost of those maneuvers rendered her unable to defend against the damage her comrades were suffering. It mattered little to Korrath, because he knew she wouldn't fare long in the coming battle.

"Colonel Korrath," the weapons officer stated from his post. "One Federation destroyer has been eliminated. The heavy cruiser is disabled and is losing power. The remaining vessel is out of weapons range, but it should only be a matter of time before our forces catch up to it and destroy it."

Korrath pondered this for a moment. This had been too easy, he thought to himself. The Federation forces had put up almost no fight. The escaping Starfleet commander was a *coward* to leave his comrades in the heat of battle. There was no honor in pursuing and killing them, nor was there any to be gained in dealing the death blow to a wounded vessel that had no hope of striking back.

"Communications officer, order all ships to regroup," Korrath said, not taking his eyes from the *Yamato* as it poured its innards into space.

The weapons officer leapt from his station and glared at his captain. "Permit me to destroy them while we have the advantage, *Colonel!*"

Korrath slowly stood up from his command chair and began staring down the junior officer. "You will mind your place, *Lieutenant!*" he growled ominously. That was all the reminder the junior officer needed. Korrath watched as the younger Klingon slunk back down into the tactical station. "There is no further honor to be gained in this engagement. We have dealt them a mighty blow. We shall leave them as they are . . . their nightmares of this battle will haunt them for

weeks to come. We have instilled fear in their hearts—and it is a fear they will never forget. We shall move on to more glorious targets. “

The tactical officer, having deemed Korrath’s statement sufficient, nodded his head slowly. “Understood, my lord.”

Korrath walked to the weapons officer and placed a firm hand on the junior officer’s shoulder. “We will search for more illustrious goals, young one. These weaklings are no longer a threat to anyone.”

“Yes, sir. Our victory is complete,” the young Klingon said, a devilish smile playing across his face.

Korrath tightened his grip on the Klingon’s shoulder. “And you have done *well*. I will remember you in my report.”

The younger Klingon beamed with pride. It was a high honor to be mentioned by name in the captain’s log. It would go on his permanent record with the Imperial Navy and was sure to lead to a rapid promotion. He turned from Korrath and looked at the damaged Federation cruiser limping off their view screen.

After a moment Korrath looked to the screen himself. “They will be slaves to fear tonight.”

Chapter 11

July 2252

Office of the Commander, Intelligence and War Planning, Commodore Don Albares, Starbase 27, Klingon Sector.

Stardate 4007.04

“Captain Chambers, please come in,” Commodore Albares said, motioning to the captain who stood in the open doorway.

Carl Chambers walked briskly through the door and entered the briefing room. He immediately noticed that the rear wall of the office was adorned with two large display screens. The screen on the right showed all major systems within a ten-parsec radius of the starbase, the other screen showing a much more close-up view of five parsecs, and each contained detailed information on the Federation ships in those sectors.

“Happy Independence Day, by the way. Please, Captain . . . have a seat,” Don said. Chambers noticed another man already seated at the long briefing table in the center of the room. When the man rose from his chair, Chambers noticed the thick gold braids ringing the cuffs of the officer’s uniform sleeve. He walked over to within an arm’s distance of Captain Chambers.

“Captain Chambers, I’m Commodore Lai, Starfleet Intelligence,” Lai began and extended a hand to Carl.

“Yes, sir. I know who you are. It’s a pleasure to meet you.” After a brief but firm shake, the three men seated themselves at the briefing room table.

Lai gestured a hand toward the starbase commander. “I take it you already know Commodore Albares?”

Chambers shot Albares a sidelong glance. Yes, he knew the man. He also knew that Albares could very well be the one person responsible for the massacre at Andromeda. It was all over the communications network. Albares had—at his

disposal—far more ships than he’d needed at the moment. Klingon actions had been centered far away from Tabulon at the time of the Battle of Andromeda. It wouldn’t have been any inconvenience for him to at least send a cruiser . . . or even a destroyer . . . to assist the small Federation colony. Instead—as the rumors held—Albares had hoarded as many ships as he could to bolster his own personal sense of safety. Chambers secretly hoped that this meeting between the three officers was a prelude to a general inquiry on Albares . . . one in which Chambers would be all too happy to include himself, if only to get all the facts out onto the table.

“Yes, sir. I know of him,” Chambers replied, and left the explanation at that.

The intelligence commodore nodded sharply. “Good; I’ll get right to the point, then. Long-range sensors have picked up a Klingon convoy six parsecs from here. They appear to be on a course that will take them near the Xamdab system.”

“Xamdab?” Chambers asked.

“Xamdab II, to be precise, Captain,” Albares corrected.

Chambers shot him another sideways glance, then looked to Lai again. “I’m afraid I’m not too familiar with that system, Commodore.”

Lai leaned back in his chair. “It’s not what’s in there that’s important, Captain. The Xamdab system was—before the war started—under consideration for the establishment of a Federation mining complex. We’d sent some survey teams there, but they didn’t stay long enough to do any real investigations of the systems.”

“Are the survey teams in danger?” Chambers asked as he leaned forward in his chair.

Commodore Lai held his hands out, as if to calm Chambers’ sense of urgency. “No, no. Not at all. There hasn’t been any official Federation presence in the system for some time.”

“Official? What about . . .?” Chambers asked curiously, letting his words trail off and hoping the commodore knew the unspoken end of his sentence.

Lai let out a soft chuckle. “I know what you’re getting at, Captain. No, nothing *unofficial*, either. Certainly nothing to garner the attention of Starfleet Intelligence.”

“Then I’m afraid I don’t understand at all, sir.”

Lai got up from his chair and passed to the large view screen on the left. He punched in a few commands and a close-up view of the Xamdab system came into

focus. “Starfleet Intelligence believes the Klingons are going to try and set up a supply base—possibly even a starbase—in the Xamdab system. Specifically, here—” Lai pointed to the planet identified as Xamdab II. “It’s a bit of a rock, really. Class-L: minimal water and resources . . . no indigenous life-forms . . . sparse plant vegetation.”

Carl was beginning to see the picture. “And you think that’s what the enemy convoy is doing? You think they are transporting materials to the planet to construct this base?”

Lai nodded approvingly. “Precisely, Captain. We at Intelligence feel that is their intention.” Sitting back down, Lai leaned back in his chair casually. “That’s where the *Sutherland* comes in. I already have Captain Robert Symons in the Selka system—about two parsecs from Xamdab. I want you to take the *Sutherland*, as well as the destroyer *Thermopylae*, and link up with Symons to coordinate an attack on the convoy. We need the finely tuned sensors of the *Sutherland* to help take down those Klingon supply ships.”

Carl knew that the *Thermopylae* was part of the flotilla assigned to Starbase 23. Symons had made news for himself when he disabled, and subsequently captured, a Klingon cruiser that had strayed too close to the starbase about a month ago. Chambers again looked at Albares, his gaze on the commodore unflinching even as he continued to speak to Lai. “Are you sure Commodore Albares can *afford* to be without one of his ships?”

Apparently, Lai either didn’t get the implication that Chambers was trying to make—or he simply chose to ignore it. “Commodore Albares currently has enough ships at his disposal to ward off any attack within three parsecs of this station. One more ship would make very little difference here, but it could make an *enormous* amount of difference in another sector.”

“Hence Xamdab,” Chambers said, deadpan.

“Correct,” replied Lai. “I’ll need you to get underway as soon as possible, Carl. I’ve taken the liberty of informing the captain of the *Thermopylae* to expect a communication from you within the hour, and that you will be outlining the forthcoming mission objectives to him at that time.”

With a nod, Carl stood up from the briefing table, and a second later Lai and Albares did the same.

“Yes, sir. We’ll get underway within the hour. The *Sutherland* should be finalizing her supply replenishment as we speak.”

“Excellent,” Lai said with a reassuring smile. “The *Thermopylae* is fully manned and stocked. You’ll find her captain is competent and his ship is run as tight as they come. At warp seven you should arrive in the Xamdab system in just under twelve days, which should be two days ahead of the Klingons at their present speed. We’ll be awaiting the after-action report once this raid is done with. Good luck, Captain,” Lai said, shaking Captain Chambers’ hand once more.

“Thank you, Commodore,” Chambers said without bothering to extend any formality to Albares, then left the office in search of the nearest turbolift back to the shuttle bay.

“Captain’s log: stardate 4007.16. We have just rendezvoused with the last remnant of our task force. Captain Chambers of the *Sutherland*, as well as Commander Rom Walton of the destroyer *Thermopylae*, have introduced themselves to the rest of the fleet. I’ve assigned Captain Chambers to cover the long-range sensor scans while we are on approach to the Xamdab system. Commander Walton will use his destroyer to cover our rear guard.

We’ve just received our final intelligence report on the Klingon convoy we are to engage. Intelligence believes the Klingon freighters are of the older G-4 class. I hope this proves accurate—the G-4s are well known for being unarmed and easy targets. Unfortunately, this also means that the Klingons could have some heavier ships in their convoy as a protective screen.

Task Force 12, as we are known by Starfleet Command, is composed mostly of destroyers, with the *Exeter* and the *Sutherland* being the only two cruisers. The *Exeter* will take the lead in the engagement, as I feel it’s my responsibility as the group commander to do so. We’ve heard disquieting rumors that Starfleet Command is considering decommissioning the *Exeter*. While I have my

reservations about leaving my home for the last five years, I hear her name is going to be passed on to a ship in the new *Constitution*-class. If we should fail in this engagement with the Klingons, then may the same spirit and strength that have guided the *Exeter* thus far fly swiftly to her new namesake. My next log entry will dictate whether or not we will be at the commissioning ceremony.”

Captain Symons got up from his command chair on the bridge of the *Tikopai*-class USS *Exeter*, relinquishing command to the helmsman for the time being. He slipped quietly into the turbolift and, after a moment, it deposited him on deck six. The captain headed straight for the arboretum, his home away from the bridge.

He found the peace and quiet of this place highly appealing. The smell of the flowers and fresh plants, the synthesized sounds of birds of various species chirping in the background, the feel of the small patch of soft grass—one that he’d insisted be installed on board—under his feet . . . it all came together and calmed his nerves like nothing else he had found in the universe.

Robert took several long breaths, inhaling the sweet air through his mouth and exhaling slowly through his nose. After all, it was just what the doctor had ordered last month when the captain’s physical fitness report indicated that the man was under an enormous amount of stress. It was to be expected, the doctor had assured him, as invariably all commanding officers and their crews would feel such strains in times of war. Still, the doctor had advised the captain to “stop and smell the roses” from time to time. That the captain had taken the doctor literally hadn’t mattered much to the ship’s physician, just so long as it had the desired effect on Symons.

Robert began clenching his toes into fists, feeling the moisture on the blades of grass begin to tickle the sides of his toes. Just as he found his own personal spot of peace he was immediately pulled from it by the ship’s intercom.

“Captain Symons—come in, please,” the communications officer said through the wall-mounted speaker.

Reluctantly, Robert walked over to the intercom and pressed the respond button. “Yes, Lieutenant. What is it?”

“Sir, the *Sutherland* has indicated a positive sensor lock on the Klingon convoy.”

“Thank you. Pipe me over to the navigator’s console.”

“Yes, sir. Transferring now.”

After a brief pause the helmsman’s voice came over the speaker. “Rozier here, sir.”

“Mr. Rozier, time to intercept enemy forces?”

“According to current sensor readings from the *Sutherland*, it looks like we have about ten minutes until the *Exeter* makes visual contact with the Klingons. The *Thermopylae*—being the farthest ship in the task force—will have visual contact in fifteen minutes.”

Symons let out an inaudible sigh. *Ten minutes*, he thought wistfully. He had hoped for a little more warning. “Very good, Lieutenant. Advise communications to keep an open channel to the *Thermopylae*. I don’t want her being out of the loop once we engage the Klingons. A five-minute lag could mean life or death to us . . . or to her.”

“Understood, sir.”

“I’ll be returning to the bridge shortly.” The captain looked over at his discarded boots lying in the grass. He hoped in his heart that he would be able to return to this place when the battle was over. Looking up to the synthetic sunlight, he closed his eyes as he whispered a soft, “God be with us all.”

“All lasers, fire!”

The side of the Klingon freighter opened up like a tin can, ripping the small vessel in half and venting its contents into the vacuum of space.

“Direct hit, sir! That makes twelve so far!”

Symons leaned back in his command chair. *This is almost too easy*, he thought to himself. Sure enough, the convoy had its share of armed escorts, but they were easily dispatched in the first few minutes of combat. Truth be told, Symons was surprised to see that such a large convoy of supply transports—numbering around twenty-four—had been so lightly guarded. There had only been three D-4 light cruisers to defend the entire flotilla.

The rest of the convoy was made entirely of G-4 transports. The small Klingon freighters, reminiscent of Terran catfish—with long proboscis-like protrusions

coming off the forward hull and oriented backward—were both lightly armed and armored. Their lumbering speeds had made them easy prey to the faster Federation warships. It had been a huge blessing to Robert and the rest of Task Force 12.

“This reminds me of the Marianas Turkey Shoot back in World War II of old Earth history,” Robert said to his weapons officer.

“Turkey shoot, sir?” the young ensign replied. “I thought killing turkeys was illegal on Earth.”

Robert laughed. “Remind me to give you a history lesson when we’re finished here, Ensign.”

The younger man turned in his seat to face his instruments. “Yes, sir,” he droned.

Greg Rozier spoke up from the helm. “Captain, the *Sutherland* is now along our starboard beam and gaining speed.”

“Very good, Lieutenant. Let’s let them take a few Klingons out themselves. We can’t hoard all the good fortune to ourselves.”

Greg smiled, slowing the ship by one-quarter impulse. “Yes, sir. Understood.” Rozier hadn’t seen his captain in such good spirits in quite some time.

“Captain, the *Exeter* is slowing.”

“Symons is giving us the right-of-way,” Chambers said gleefully. “Ahead, one-half impulse.”

Chambers watched on the view screen as the *Sutherland* slipped slowly past the *Exeter*.

“Sir, target coming into range.”

Chambers stepped up behind his weapons officer. “Target their engines. Accelerator cannons only.”

“Aye, sir. Cannons loaded and ready.”

“Fire.”

The two warheads sped out from the forward hull of the *Sutherland* and found their intended target a second later. The G-4’s aft took the brunt of the damage. However, one of the proboscis-like antennas had been sheared off in the exchange

and floated into the eternity of space. The engines were smashed beyond recognition.

“They are listing to port, sir.”

“Sensor scan,” Chambers said to his science officer.

“Life support is failing. Internal gravity is compromised.”

“Can we get a lock on the survivors?”

The science officer made a few adjustments to his instruments. “Affirmative, Captain. There are approximately a dozen life-forms on board.”

The captain hit the button on the armrest of his chair that linked his post directly to the transporter room. “Transporter room—lock on and beam the survivors directly to a holding cell.”

“Aye, sir,” came the female reply. “All survivors have been beamed aboard.”

“Communications, signal Captain Symons that we have taken prisoners into custody.”

“Yes, sir. Encoding your transmission now.”

“Weapons officer, target the Klingon freighter and destroy it.”

“Already targeted, sir. Firing lasers.”

The energy beams projected out the upper saucer section of the *Sutherland* and struck home on the Klingon ship, which exploded a brief second later.

“Sir,” the communications officer said hurriedly. “Captain Symons sends his compliments, but is now requesting that all Federation ships now move to capture as many freighters as possible. Destroy the ships only when absolutely necessary.”

“Acknowledge that order, Lieutenant,” Chambers said, satisfied with the amount of destruction the task force had dealt to the Klingons thus far.

“Bring us alongside our next target. Weapons officer, disable the shields.”

“Aye, sir.”

“Communications officer, get me ship’s security.”

The ensign tapped lightly at her controls. “Security Chief Spurr standing by, Captain.”

Chambers stepped up behind the communications officer. “Commander Spurr, form a boarding party. All hands are to be armed with lasers set on stun. I want full

tricorder scans the moment the beam-down site is secure. I don't want you to run into any unexpected trouble over there."

"Understood, sir. We'll be in the transporter room in two minutes."

"Excellent, Commander. Good hunting."

"Thank you, sir."

Lieutenant Commander Robert Spurr, a tall, burly man in his early forties, materialized with the rest of his team of five on the damaged Klingon freighter. The first thing he noticed about the Klingon ship was the musty quality of the air—it was almost acidic. Two of the members of the landing party began sweeping the area with their tricorders.

"All clear, Chief," the two men said, almost in unison.

"All right, men . . . check that your lasers are on stun. Any other setting might set off a chain reaction in one of these busted pipes leading to God knows where. I don't want any accidents in here—and I certainly don't want this thing blowing up from underneath us. I want you to split up into teams of two; report every five minutes. It shouldn't take us long to search the belly of this whale to see what she's swallowed."

The rest of the team gave their silent acknowledgement of the lieutenant commander's order and split up. Spurr headed directly to the upper cargo holds with the tall and lanky Ensign Matthew Dempsey close at his heels. They had just rounded a corner when they came upon the sealed door of the upper hold.

"Dempsey, what can you make of this locking mechanism?" Spurr asked over the hiss of a pipe that was venting steam nearby.

Dempsey stepped close to the panel, waving his tricorder slightly in its direction. "Honestly, Chief, it looks like junk. It'd be easier to shoot it with our laser than it would be to try our luck at breaking into it."

Spurr scanned the door with his dark eyes. "What's beyond it?" he asked with a nod of his head.

Dempsey looked at his tricorder. “Indeterminate. There is heavy shielding inside the compartment.”

“That explains why the brass wanted to catch a few of these things intact. The sensors on the *Sutherland* probably aren’t doing any better than your tricorder.”

“Probably not.”

Robert looked at the door, then down the passageway they had just come from. “I’d rather not stay here any longer than we have to. Let’s get this thing open.” He withdrew his laser, then stepped back to a firing position.

Matthew looked to his tricorder once more, verifying the readings he had obtained from the lock actuator. “I’d suggest a low yield setting, just above stun by a setting of two, sir.”

After Spurr had set his weapon, he aimed and fired a short burst at the lock, which neatly melted into a pile on the floor. A moment later the door to the cargo compartment slid open with barely a whisper. Dempsey waved his tricorder at the open door, then read the reading aloud. “Nothing overtly dangerous in there. No explosive devices that I can detect.”

“So—no booby-traps?” Spurr asked with a smile. “All right, let’s go take a look.”

As they stepped through the doorway, Spurr and Dempsey immediately noticed they were on a gantry overlooking the main cargo hold three decks below them. The metal grating under their feet groaned with each of their steps, making Spurr feel all the more uneasy.

“It’s as black as pitch down there. I can’t see a meter in front of my laser,” Dempsey said.

Spurr noticed a flashing light on the gantry ahead of them. As the two officer approached it, he hoped that it was the emergency light switch. “Well, here goes nothing.” He pressed the switch, and immediately the entire hold was bathed in the soft white glow of the freighter’s emergency lighting system.

Dempsey let out a long whistle as he looked down to the lower hold. “Sweet Sally O’Malley! Would you take a look at those!”

Robert looked down at the sleek forms that were lined up neatly in the lower hold. They were arranged three wide from one side of the freighter to the other, and in rows of seven.

“Some sort of shuttlecraft?” Dempsey spoke, not taking his eyes off the craft below.

“Not shuttlecraft at all,” Spurr surmised. “Look at those weapon hard-points . . . and the angled deflector grid. And check out the way the nose sweeps back and angles into the ventral pylons. Looks like they may even have aft disruptor banks.”

“Well, if they’re not shuttle craft, then what the heck are they?” Dempsey asked incredulously.

“Fighters. Interceptors. Gunboats. Landing craft. You name it—it’s probably down there.”

Dempsey looked unconvinced. “How do you know so much about these?”

“Planetary Defense Strategies and Tactics,” the lieutenant commander replied with a grin. “You obviously haven’t been keeping up with your training requirements, I see.”

Dempsey’s face turned as red as his tunic.

“This is an invasion force,” Spurr said dryly.

“From the looks of it, I’d say they mean serious business.”

Spurr grimaced. “At least now Starfleet Command will get a good firsthand look at these things. We need to scan everything we can with our tricorders and get this information back to Captain Chambers immediately.”

Stardate 4007.10

Incoming subspace communication . . .

FROM: The Office of the Commanding Officer, Starfleet Public Relations,
Commodore Joselyn Czernovski, San Francisco, Earth

TO: All Commanding Officers, Colonial Operations Command
All Commanding Officers, Galaxy Exploration Command
All Commanding Officers, Military Operations Command
All Commanding Officers, Starbases and Space Stations

VIA: (1) The Office of the Commanding Officer, Starfleet Command, Fleet Admiral Matthew D. Luxa, San Francisco, Earth

SUBJ: FEDERATION NEWS AND EVENTS (UNCLASSIFIED)

1. On stardate 4007.01, the Starfleet shipyards in orbit of the planet Salazaar. completed construction of their 100th vessel, the *Loknar*-class frigate USS *Dublin*. All Federation officials and Starfleet officers are invited to attend the celebration on stardate 4007.30. Anyone wishing to attend should contact Lieutenant Donna Casimov, Salazaar Shipyards, subspace channel 27.

2. On stardate 4005.11, the civilian freighter SS *Spirit of Aldebaran* disappeared while en route from the planet Aldebaran to the Tasaforma system near the Klingon border. Anyone with information regarding the disappearance should contact Limited Liabilities, LLC, on Aldebaran. Point of contact is John J. Hasenpfeffer, Chief of Operations.

3. Starfleet Command would like to announce the graduation of Starfleet Academy Class of 2252. Starfleet Commander In Chief Matthew D. Luxa officiated, as well as presented the commencement speech. All interested parties can download the archived version by contacting their nearest starbase and requesting the latest data packet from Starfleet Academy, San Francisco, Earth.

Chapter 12

July 2252

Stardate 4007.26

Office of the Commander, *Constitution*-class Design Team, Starbase One, Earth

Commodore Robert April sat at his desk, looking down at his computer and reading the day's reports from the front lines of the war. He had preprogrammed the message retrieval software on the computer to automatically flag messages with the words *Constitution*, *Potemkin*, *Hood*, *Enterprise*, and *Constellation* as priority messages so they would be viewed first when the terminal was started.

Robert was glad to have had the foresight to do so. There seemed to be an endless stream of messages coming in from all forward-deployed starships and starbases along the disputed areas. He would have had to wade through hundreds of seemingly meaningless communications about updates, supplies, crew casualties and the like, just to get to the information he knew was so vital to the Federation's efforts in this war.

He had known—deep in his heart and soul—that the *Constitution*-class heavy cruiser was the key to a total victory over the Klingons in this war. They were the mightiest, fastest, and most sophisticated and powerful machines ever designed by man. The destruction they could dole out was only equaled by the sense of peace and security they could engender. They could chart untold numbers of planets, venture out into space almost indefinitely, and they required only half the resources to maintain as a squadron of destroyers.

Now . . . if only I can convince the Federation Council to authorize me to build more.

That request was far easier said than done. Along with the might of the *Constitution*—the namesake of her class—came a hefty sum of credits required to build her. And, as each subsequent ship was built—*Constellation*, *Enterprise*,

Potemkin, *Hood*, and the very nearly complete *Intrepid*—the expenses only rose exponentially. Trying to squeeze more funds from the upper echelon was harder than trying to squeeze blood from a stone.

No—it was more like squeezing blood from a diamond, April had mused so often before when thinking of the Federation’s newest heavy cruiser.

Then there were the damage reports to go through. All of them involved the *Potemkin*, damaged near Axanar, but it could have represented any of the ships. And with each report came the attached communications and memos April loathed so much. The ones from the upper echelons of Starfleet Command that said the *Constitution*-class was “too expensive to be on the front lines,” or “too sophisticated for their crew to handle,” and likewise had “too much power for their captains to currently control and nurture.”

Rubbish! Pure, unadulterated rubbish!

At last report, the *Enterprise* was nearing the edge of Federation space on the top secret mission on which April had placed Captain Pike. But that was at last report—which was three weeks ago. For quite some time, up to that point at least, Robert had been receiving regular updates from Chris Pike on the performance of the ship and its crew. Robert could tell almost immediately that Pike was brimming with pride about his new command. *And why shouldn't he be? The Enterprise is a fine ship, and a credit to her name and heritage.*

Then, far more abruptly than even Robert had expected, the communications from Captain Pike had stopped. *Had she run into foul play? Was Christopher all right? Was the ship damaged?* Of course, Robert knew better than to play to his fears. He hadn’t gotten to where he was by worrying about the “what-ifs” of the universe. If there was a way to get a communication though to him, he knew Christopher would figure it out. He had chosen his successor well, and would trust in that decision to his dying day.

Captain Harrari, on the other hand, seemed to be having quite a bit of trouble with the *Hood*. Actually, from what Robert could glean from the message reports, Harrari herself seemed to be the one to blame for some of the *Hood*’s deficiencies. It seemed to Robert that Michaela was a bit of a single-minded gal. Once she learned to do something, she did it exactly the same over and over again to

perfection. Unfortunately, with the design of the *Constitution*-class being far different than any other designs in Starfleet—mostly as far as technology was concerned—Harrari was having a hard time adapting to the new systems. Robert assumed it was growing pains, and that theory was rewarded by that fact that Harrari's frustrations with the *Hood*'s systems seemed to be coming less frequently. In fact, a message that April was reading at that moment actually included *praise* for the *Hood*'s performance in recent weeks.

As he finished the morning's messages, Robert retrieved his coffee cup from the warming pad it had been placed on near the side of his terminal. He looked out the large view port—into the vast open spaces of the interior of Starbase 1—and out to the hull of the *Intrepid*. The last of her outer skin was being applied today, and the finishing touches to her warp pylons were scheduled for late next week. After that, it would take about a month to finish her interior spaces and outfit her with the basic necessities required for a shakedown cruise. Then it would be time. Robert would assume command of the *Intrepid* during her shakedown cruise to ensure that each one of her systems operated exactly as designed. He preferred it that way. He knew these ships better than any single man or woman in the fleet. Thankfully, Starfleet Command had agreed with him.

He felt an enormous amount of pride to be in command of the *Constitution* design team, but something still tugged at his heart that he couldn't quite define. He wasn't sure if it was because of his time spent away from real space-service, or the fact that a great portion of this assignment had him landlocked behind a desk. He had promised himself more time to meditate on the subject—to root out the cause of the discomfort—once the *Intrepid* was complete.

As the commodore gazed wistfully at the *Intrepid*, his intercom buzzed. "Yes, Lynn. What is it?" he said to his secretary with the customary softness of his British mannerisms.

Lynn's voice was chipper and upbeat. At least, it always seemed that way to Robert. It was an absolute delight to work so closely with someone who was as passionate and agreeable with her work as Robert himself was. "Sir, Fleet Admiral Luxa is requesting a meeting with you at fifteen hundred hours today. He says it is quite urgent."

What does the commander of Starfleet want with me now? I hope this isn't an emergency budget session or some other faff. Well, at least if I'm in San Francisco already, I could probably swing by the Academy and see how young Jimmy is doing.

"Yes—of course, Lynn. Please tell the admiral I will be there."

April looked at his desktop chronometer. It was ten minutes to two. "Ah, just in time for low tea," he said to himself and smiled, rubbing his hands together and walking toward the shelf that contained his great-grandmother's vintage tea set.

The shuttlecraft swung in a wide arc over the San Francisco Presidio. Robert could feel the hum of her micro-fusion engines as the craft easily slipped over the icy cold waters of San Francisco Bay that separated Starfleet Command Headquarters and Starfleet Academy. Through the forward port, Robert could see the Golden Gate Bridge in all her splendor, her red spires jutting into the soft blue skies above. Looking down at a folder in his arms, he compared the bridge to the depiction of the *Constitution*-class design team logo. *Good likeness.*

It had been too long since he had been to the Academy, Robert reminded himself. *It's imperative, now more than ever, that I get to see it one more time.* His meeting with the commander of Starfleet, less than an hour ago and still fresh in his mind, hadn't gone at all like he had imagined. Right now, Robert could use a friendly face to cheer him up.

April had taken the liberty of sending a formal communications to the headmaster of the Academy, informing him that the commodore would be visiting one of the cadets. While it was usually frowned upon to have acquaintances simply "drop in" on cadets during their studies, the commandant was an old friend of Robert's, so it only required the cashing in on a single favor to make it happen. Robert knew it was a trade worth more than gold at this point.

The shuttlecraft came about as it entered the airspace directly over the Academy's parade grounds. Robert looked out the side port and smiled as he saw, on one side of the field, a group of cadets marching in unison. They would march straight as an arrow for several dozen meters and then, like a flock of birds, change course as a

unit and begin to seamlessly march in another direction. It was a team-building exercise that Robert approved of.

On the other side of the field, opposite the marching cadets, another group of midshipmen were busy playing a game of some sort that Robert couldn't make out in time as the shuttle sped past them. It had something to do with an ovoid ball being thrown and the receiver running down the field with it, but its meaning escaped Robert at the moment. He had other, more pressing, matters on his mind.

The commodore's craft came about and dropped quietly onto the shuttle landing pad near the east wing of the cadets' barracks. As the doors slid open, Robert stepped out of the craft and was immediately washed in the warmth of the sunlight. He looked to the sky, closing his eyes and feeling every sensation the moment afforded him. *Somehow the air always smelled different here at the Academy. It's fresh—clean and untainted by time. Or bureaucracy.*

Commodore April opened his eyes and leveled them at the cadet barracks. As he walked toward the building he took extra care to make the journey last as long as possible. Unfortunately, the total distance was only about thirty meters, but Robert was determined to make those thirty meters stretch out to an eternity.

Who knows when I'll be able to do this again—if ever?

Robert stepped through the doors and was immediately hailed with a chorus of "attention on deck!" as the cadet nearest the door instantly recognized the commodore by his command uniform. In unison every cadet in the hall who was within an earshot of the order immediately jumped from whatever they were doing and stood at the attention position, waiting for Robert to release them from their self-induced paralysis.

"At ease, cadets," Robert said as he smiled and held his hands up, palms out in a gesture of goodwill. "Who is the senior cadet present?" he asked, his hands dropping down and slapping together as he looked from one fresh face to another.

From somewhere behind him, Robert heard the shuffling of running feet. Then there was a crash . . . followed by a skip in the beat of the footsteps until they regained their original gait. "Commodore . . . sir! I guess I'm the senior cadet present at the moment, sir . . . umm . . . Commodore."

Robert turned to face the young man. He was human, about six feet tall, with a decidedly mischievous look about him. “That’s two ‘Commodores’ and two ‘sirs’ all in the same sentence. Impressive, Cadet, if not entirely grammatically correct,” he said to the young man, failing to hide a smile.

The young cadet smiled broadly in return. “Well, sir, if you’re going to do something right . . . you might as well do it twice as well.”

Robert let out a snort as he laughed at the cadet’s brashness. “What’s your name, young man?”

“First Year Cadet Mitchell, sir. Gary Mitchell.” Mitchell ended the introduction with a sharp salute and a wide smile. The former gesture had been out of fashion for some time, the latter completely out of regulation. That he could be so cocky endeared him to April instantly.

Robert motioned with his hand for Mitchell to come within a whisper’s distance, which Mitchell did reluctantly. “Well, First Year Cadet Gary Mitchell, could you tell me where I could find Cadet James Kirk?”

“Oh . . . you’re looking for Jimmy, sir?” Gary whispered back with a devilish grin.

“Precisely, young man. Can you tell me . . . when was the last time you saw him?”

Gary looked from side to side, as if checking to see if anyone was listening. “Alone or . . . engaged?”

“Engaged? —Oh. I see,” Robert said, smiling to himself as he remembering his own rambunctious years at the Academy. “Alone, Mr. Mitchell.”

“To be honest, sir . . . I don’t remember him being one or the other for too long, if you know what I mean,” Gary said with a leer, then stopped himself. As if he’d just become aware he was speaking to a flag officer, the color drained from Mitchell’s face as he coughed and stood back at attention.

April leaned back in and whispered, “It’s all right, Cadet. Quite . . . understandable. Do you think you can page him and have him meet me in the Academy Park in ten minutes?”

“Second Year Cadet Kirk and I are roommates . . . of a sort. I’m sure he’s up in his room studying right now, Commodore. That guy is something of a wiz, you know? He breezed right through his first year and moved on to his second before

the rest of his own class had time to catch up,” Gary said, hoping that was a convincing explanation for April. “He’s utterly devoted,” Mitchell said, then rolled his eyes slightly. “Much to his discredit sometimes.”

“Yes, yes. I’m sure he is,” Robert returned and winked knowingly at Mitchell.

Robert was just finished admiring the fresh roses that had come into bloom when he heard the unmistakable footfalls of a cadet in training approach him. He looked up and saw that the steps belonged to his old friend, young James Kirk. Robert stood as Kirk approached. “Jimmy, my boy. How are you?” Robert asked, holding a hand out to Kirk.

James took the commodore’s hand and gave it a firm shake. “I’m well, sir. It’s good to see you.”

Robert beamed at Kirk with pride. “It’s good to see you too, James. You look marvelous in the uniform, just as I knew you would.”

Kirk smiled and looked at the flowers, then glanced back at April. “Yeah, well . . . you and my dad both made a pretty convincing argument to get me into it.”

April pursed his lips as a look of seriousness crossed his face. “You still think about that mission, my boy?”

Kirk let his guard down as the same look of seriousness crossed his face. “All the time, sir.”

After a moment of awkward silence, April decided to inject some joy back into this meeting. “Well, let’s not talk about the past, shall we? Let’s talk about the present . . . and the future.”

They strode through the Academy’s botanical garden as they talked. Actually, April did most of the listening as James went on and on about his time at Starfleet Academy. He talked about his close friends, like Gary Mitchell, and about his foes—one being a particularly nasty-sounding sod named Finnegan. Nonetheless, Robert was delighted that James was having the time of his life. James had done quite a bit of growing up in the last year. He was a budding sophomore now, with

aspirations of graduating early and becoming a starship captain someday—and maybe even more.

“But enough about me,” Kirk said dismissively as they rounded a large hedge. “What about you, sir?”

Robert smiled, not taking his gaze from his feet as they walked. “Oh, there’s not much to say, really.”

“You’re being modest, sir. I understand the *Intrepid* is almost ready for her trial runs.”

“Oh—you heard that, did you?” Robert said, dropping his voice.

“That’s quite an accomplishment, sir. You set the bar with the *Constitution*, and it seems you keep raising it with each ship. I hear the engineers are scrambling to keep up with your ideas.”

“Yes, well. It seems like they’ll have a much easier time to catch up with them now.”

Confused, Kirk gave the commodore a quizzical look. “What do you mean?”

Robert sucked in a deep breath and let it out slowly. “You know, I came here to keep you in the loop, James. It wouldn’t do for you not to be one of the first to hear . . . it just wouldn’t do.”

Curious and frustrated at Robert’s aloofness, James wished he would just say what was on his mind. “Wouldn’t do? Do what? Know what?”

“The future, James. To know the future,” Robert finally said, bringing their walk to a halt. “The *Constitution* design team is being handed over to someone else.”

Kirk almost fell over, right there in the walkway. It felt just like the time Finnegan had been waiting around a corner to deal out a sucker punch to his midsection that had left him gasping for air. “They . . . replaced you?”

“Replaced, my dear boy? You make it sound as if I’m a defective replicator that needs to be put out to pasture.” April laughed at his own comment.

“Robert, that’s not what I meant—and this isn’t funny.”

Robert smirked. *Young Jim . . . so much like his father, George.* “Truthfully, I’ve been trying to find the humor in it myself . . . but I can’t seem to come up with any.”

“Did they give you a reason?”

“Do they *need* to?” Robert said softly, looking into Jim’s eyes. *No, they don’t need to.* Rank had its privileges. When the admiral tells the commodore to go, he goes. No questions asked or expected. James seemed to understand as he nodded in agreement. *Good man.* “I’ve been giving the higher-ups a little too much flack lately. I’m sure that’s part of it.”

“Flack? For what?”

“They’re being too soft on the Klingons, Jim.”

“The war . . .” Kirk said as he dropped Robert’s gaze.

“I’m going to be frank with you, James. I think you deserve to know what’s going on up there,” he said, nodding toward the open sky. “We’re taking a beating on almost every front, my boy, and Starfleet Command is taking it far too lightly. If there is one thing I know, it’s that any sign of weakness on our part is an open-door invitation for the Klingons to pounce. They see it as a dishonorable trait. Thus, they batter us even harder to force us to capitulate.”

James smiled at the thought of Robert standing in front of the Federation Council and telling them straight and to the point that Starfleet needed to kick the Klingons in their backsides—or the Klingons would do the same to the Federation.

“So, where is Starfleet sending you now?”

Robert stopped and smiled, then placed a hand on Kirk’s shoulder. “They are not sending me anywhere. I’ve decided not to let them—not anymore, at least.”

“What do you mean?”

“In a way, I guess you *could* call it a retirement.”

“Retirement? But you have so many good years left to you. Starfleet needs you to—”

“Starfleet is done with me, James. The Federation, on the other hand, needs all the help it can get right now. They need good mediators and negotiators near the front lines of the war effort. That’s where I’m going.”

“In what capacity . . . if not with Starfleet?”

“No, not with Starfleet. Not *officially*, anyway. The Federation Council has asked me to become an ambassador of sorts.”

“Ambassador ‘of sorts’? Robert, either you are or you aren’t one.”

“I am one, James. I’m a roving representation of the Federation’s goodwill and peace toward all beings,” Robert said, raising his hands in a mock gesture of grandness.

Kirk let out a laugh. “Well, Starfleet is losing a hell of an officer, sir.”

“Thank you, James. It seems like it’s getting a good one when I see how happy you are here. I always knew it’d be a perfect fit. The service, I mean.”

“And who are they getting to replace you at R&D?” Jim asked, honestly curious.

“A captain by the name of Rittenhouse. Seems he was with Garth at Axanar.”

“We were just studying those battles last week. I don’t remember the name Rittenhouse, though.”

“His ship was damaged and he had to be towed to starbase. Lost his wife in the engagement, I hear. Apparently he’s been champing at the bit to design some new offensive weapons for Starfleet Command.”

“What do you think he’ll do with the *Constitution* design team?”

Robert knew what Jim was thinking. “I’m sure Captain Rittenhouse has nothing but the best intentions for the team. I think his dreams, however, are focused on a different platform . . . possibly an entirely new hull design. We’ll see how it all pans out.”

Kirk dismissed the idea of anyone taking over for April. The *Constitution* design was, after all, his baby. The class would forever be linked to Robert April, regardless of whoever stepped in to stand on his shoulders. Jim raised a worried glance to Robert. “Have you told Dad yet?”

Robert looked at him incredulously. “James Kirk, I wanted you to be *one* of the first people to know about my change of occupation, but I didn’t say you were *the* first to know. George was first person I spoke with. You were the second.”

Kirk nodded. “Thanks. I . . . I appreciate it. Do you have time for lunch?”

April smiled. James would be all right, and Starfleet—when left in the hands like cadets such as he—would also be fine. Placing a gentle hand on Jim’s shoulder, April once again began their stroll. “As long as I’m buying, James, and as long as it includes a round of the bar’s most esteemed bitter. It’s time you heard some old Academy stories from a seasoned vet.”

Thinking to a nasty upcoming test in biochemistry, James mentally tossed the study material aside. "You're on, sir. Lead the way."

July 2252

Stardate 4007.30

FROM: The Office of the Commanding Officer, Starfleet Intelligence Detachment,
Captain Shalya Singh, Starbase 5

TO: All Commanding Officers, Colonial Operations Command
All Commanding Officers, Galaxy Exploration Command
All Commanding Officers, Military Operations Command
All Commanding Officers, Starbases and Space Stations

VIA: (1) The Office of the Commanding Officer, Starbase 5, Commodore Dan
Balkwill

(2) The Office of the Commanding Officer, Starfleet Intelligence, Commodore
Michael J. Lai, San Francisco, Earth

SUBJ: VESSEL DISAPPEARANCES NEAR DISPUTED FEDERATION
TERRITORY

1. It has come to the attention of Starfleet Intelligence that an inordinate number of vessels are disappearing at an alarming rate near the disputed area of the Federation-Klingon borders.

2. These disappearances cannot be accounted for during recorded periods of hostility between the before-mentioned governments.

3. It is quite possible that the disappearance of these vessels is due to actions by the Klingon Empire. It is also quite reasonable to assume this is the work of Orion pirates, or possibly another unidentified outside influence.

4. At this time, it is not believed to be the work of Romulans, as many have begun to speculate. There is no appreciable evidence at all that allows for the possibility of Romulan incursions into or around Federation space at this time, nor are they believed to be in either conflict or coercion with the Klingon Empire.

5. Starfleet Intelligence is working diligently to gather as much data on these disappearances as possible.

6. Commanding officers are advised to take all necessary precautions to safeguard the lives of their crews and the Federation property with which they have been entrusted. They are further advised to continue to make regular routine reports to their respective superiors, and to do so as frequently as they desire.

7. Further information will follow shortly.

Chapter 13

August 2252

Stardate 4008.10

The *Saladin*-class light destroyer USS *Scipio* guided slowly out of orbit around Delta IV. She had just completed the last leg of her five-week mission to deposit the new Federation ambassador to the Deltan people's homeworld. The captain of the *Scipio*, Commander Sarpk, was eager to get his crew back home. The ship had taken the shortest route possible from Starbase 20, which was fourteen light-years distant, but the journey had still taken over forty days at warp six.

The Delta system itself was located in an isolated expanse of Federation space and was precariously close to the Romulan neutral zone that had been established almost a century before. Though the Federation had had no direct contact with the Romulans since the time of that dreadful conflict, it still left even the most hardened of starship captains on edge when traveling this close to their space.

That war had been a long, bloody, and costly conflict for both sides. The Federation's resources had been strained so thin that even the destruction of one of their vessels had left the entire fleet in a critical position. It had taken every ounce of leverage from over a dozen diplomats and mediators on both sides to quell the conflict. Still, every starship captain traveling this close to the border was afforded every ounce of intelligence on the state of affairs within the Romulan Empire—at least, as much as was known by Starfleet Intelligence.

Both the Federation and the Romulans had set up a series of outposts along their respective sides of the neutral zone in order to monitor the movements of their former enemy's fleets. Where the Federation could not afford to place a station, the engineers at Starfleet Research and Development had come up with a series of sensor-laden satellites to augment the outposts between which they lay. It was unknown if the Romulans had taken the same precautions, but it was assumed that they had.

As the *Scipio* reached the outermost fringes of the Delta system, Captain Sarpk looked over the final list of readiness reports from the chief engineer. The ship appeared to be in perfect working order. Every supply they had taken on at Delta IV had been catalogued and stowed—or made available to whichever department needed the particular supply. Sarpk was silently glad that the medical department was fully stocked for any contingency, should the need arise. Even the ship's blood banks were full, thanks to the generous crewmen on board who regularly stood outside sickbay to give whatever donations they could.

Sarpk handed his stylus to the waiting yeoman when his science officer, Lieutenant Commander John Rezendes, sounded from his side. "Captain, I have a sensor reading, bearing mark-2-point-4."

"Origin, Mr. Rezendes?"

"Scanning now, sir," he said, peering into the sensor hood. "It appears to be a relayed sensor report from our nearest automated satellite."

"Satellite? To which satellite are you referring, Commander?"

"One of our automated drone detection satellites near the Romulan neutral zone, sir."

Sarpk was instantly on the alert. He felt his heart almost skip a beat. *Romulans*. "Is it verified as accurate?" he asked. There had been several false leads reported by the automated drones in the last few months. Starfleet Command had noticed—upon performing diagnostics on the satellites—that they had been tampered with . . . probably by some ingenious Romulan technician trying to provoke a conflict.

Rezendes nodded. "Scans verified as accurate, Captain. The signal corresponds to the coded frequency set up by Starfleet Intelligence two months ago."

"Download the sensor data and relay the information to the library computer for analysis," Sarpk said as he turned in his command chair to face Rezendes.

The science officer huddled over his sensor display, then sat quietly at his terminal as he punched in the correct sequence that would make the data available to the captain. "Information downloaded, sir. The computer has compiled the report."

"On audio, Commander."

The computer's unmistakable female voice came softly over the bridge speakers of the *Scipio* a moment later. "Scan complete. Detection Satellite D-R-5-6-1, reporting. Sensor contact with Romulan vessel in unclaimed space between Federation and Romulan territories. Sensor scan type: warp-trained spectral analysis. Vessel class is identified as *Graceful Flyer*. Exact Romulan classification of vessel: unknown. Vessel course: 351-mark-7-point-2."

Rezendes flipped a switch on the science station's computer terminal and shut the audio speakers off. "The message repeats itself at this point, Captain."

"Romulans . . ." Sarpk said softly, turning his gaze to the forward view screen. "What is the intelligence report on that particular type of vessel, Commander?"

Rezendes flipped a switch on his library computer and studied the readout. "Vessel class: *Graceful Flyer*. Crew complement, about one hundred thirty personnel. Maximum speed . . . presumed to be warp seven. Light weapons armaments and shields. In brief, Captain, Intelligence is reporting this class as a courier, or possibly a heavy scout-type vessel."

"But not a warship," Sarpk responded, as much a question as it was a statement.

"Highly unlikely, sir." John then looked at the stars filling the main viewer before looking back to his captain. "Do you really think they would send such an overtly hostile vessel against us?"

"They would if they were looking for a fight," Sarpk replied.

"And if they're not?" Rezendes asked curiously.

"Then they could be spies, possibly on an intelligence-gathering mission of their own."

Rezendes looked to the view screen again, watching the stars stream by the *Scipio*, looking for answers that weren't in the computer. "If the Romulans decided to pick a fight, now *would* be a good time to do it, sir," he began. "With most of our ships deployed near Klingon space, it would be just like the Romulans to attack our flank when we weren't prepared."

Sarpk pondered this for a moment before speaking again. "What about the possibility that the Romulans would join us in our fight against the Klingons?"

Rezendes looked at his captain thoughtfully. "At last report, the Klingons and the Romulans weren't on amicable terms with one another. If the reports from Starfleet

Intelligence are correct, it's unlikely . . . but *possible*, that they've formed trade agreements."

"Weapons trading?"

"Perhaps trading in whole vessels as well, Captain," Rezendes said, then added, "We just don't have enough facts at this point, sir."

"Well, let's get some, then," Sarpk said sternly. "Plot the course of the *Flyer*. Where is she heading?"

Rezendes went back to work at the computer, entered in all the available data and allowed the computer to correlate the information. When the computer had completed its work, he turned and replied, "Looks like she's heading toward the Triangle, sir. Warp six."

"That doesn't give us much time. It's been a while since a Federation vessel has been close enough to a Romulan ship to gather truly useful information. Starfleet Intelligence might be pretty happy about this little encounter, wouldn't you agree, Mr. Rezendes?"

"Agreed." Rezendes nodded. "It's a unique opportunity, sir."

"Then let's take advantage of it. Helm, lay in a parallel course with the Romulan ship. Stay as far out of their range as possible, however. I don't want them alerted to our intentions."

"Aye, sir. Plotting course," the helmsman rang in.

"Signal yellow alert. Ahead warp six."

October 2252

Stardate 4010.07

The *Larson*-class destroyer USS *Eylau* slowly drifted to starboard as she came about, heading for the Lycly Dun system at half impulse power. Captain Donald Fitzgerald had been ordered to separate his ship and two others from the squadron by the group commander, Captain th'Zarath on board the *Frankfurt*, and to

investigate the outer planets of that system. The remainder of the group—two light cruisers and a frigate—remained on course for the void of space lying between Lycly Dun and the Sinbad system.

Fitzgerald, along with his destroyer and frigate escorts, made their way across the half-parsec distance of space at a cautious rate. The Zeta Gellius system, in which a Klingon victory had earned a sizable amount of subspace chatter for the last few weeks, was only three parsecs from their current location—and Klingon forces had been scanned as close as two parsecs off Fitzgerald's present course.

On board the flagship *Frankfurt*, the Andorian Captain Shelerib th'Zarath was also keenly aware of the enemy forces in the area, but felt that Captain Fitzgerald and his escorts could handle anything that should come their way. If not, th'Zarath and his ships were only a few minutes away at warp two.

The *Eylau*'s sensors confirmed what Fitzgerald had already known about this system before the ship even entered the edge of it. The Lycly Dun system contained four planets and a G-type main-sequence star, similar to the Terran star Sol in both size and temperature.

The farthest planet out, and the first encountered by Fitzgerald's squadron, was named Lycly Quas. It was a beautiful green gas giant, with a turbulent atmosphere composed entirely of methane. After a cursory scan of the planet and its five small moons, the *Eylau* continued on its way at half impulse to the interior planets of the system.

The next planet Fitzgerald and his ships encountered was Lycly Tri, one of the two habitable planets in the system—the other being Lycly Un, which was much closer to the star. Lycly Tri was a small icy planet classified as a Type-P. Though the surface was habitable using specially outfitted weather gear or heated domes, it was not looked upon as thoughtfully as Lycly Un when it came time to set up a Federation colony. The one thing that Lycly Tri had going for it was its enormous dilithium deposits, which were buried several kilometers beneath its ice-encrusted surface. The Federation was currently hard at work devising advanced mining operations that could get to the extremely rare mineral used in warp drive propulsion, but had yet to come up with a reliable method of extraction at this point.

"Helm," Fitzgerald began, "plot a course for Lycly Bi and engage at full impulse."

“Aye, sir.”

The blue-skinned Captain th’Zarath was leaning against the bulkhead of the chief engineer’s console on the bridge. He had just engaged the man in a debate about warp-time dilation physics when the communications officer’s voice sounded on the bridge of the *Anton*-class light cruiser *Frankfurt*.

“Captain, urgent communication from Captain Fitzgerald coming in on the Priority One channel. He says his group is under attack.”

th’Zarath leapt from the engineer’s side and ran to the communications officer’s terminal on the opposite side of the bridge, his two antennae twitching with anticipation. “Put me through to him.”

“Aye, sir,” she said, tapping at the switches that engaged the two-way communications channel. “I’ve got Fitzgerald, sir.”

“This is Captain th’Zarath here. Go ahead, *Eylau*.”

There was a burst of static from the bridge’s overhead speakers before Captain Fitzgerald’s voice came to life through bursts of radio interference. “Repeat . . . we are under attack . . . came out from behind the moon at Lycly . . . four Klingon D-16 light cruise . . . frigate *Alondra* destroyed . . . destroyer *Thebes* heavily damaged . . . we are . . . life support and main power . . . send assistance immediately . . .”

The channel closed abruptly. “That’s it, sir,” the young man said as he turned to th’Zarath. “All communications have been jammed at the source.”

“Order all ships to follow us in.” th’Zarath then swiveled to face the helm station. “Navigator, plot a course to intercept the *Eylau* at her last reported position. Warp five.”

As soon as the *Frankfurt* entered the system she went immediately to red alert, raising her shields and arming all weapons. The battle zone was full of debris from

the damaged or destroyed Federation starships, as well as the burning hulks of two Klingon light cruisers.

The *Frankfurt* dropped to one-quarter impulse, sidestepping a large chunk of the remains of the Federation frigate *Alondra*. The saucer section of the frigate had taken several direct hits, and what was once the smooth surface of the upper hull was now a mess of bent and twisted hull plates at irregular angles in four different areas—as well as a large portion of the forward saucer that was completely missing. Both of the warp drive units had been severed from the secondary hull and had probably exploded, owing to the fact that they were nowhere in sight.

th'Zarath could see the *Eylau* listing heavily to port and spinning out of the system. The destroyer *Thebes*, however, was gone. th'Zarath's sensors didn't register the ship anywhere in the system. She'd likely been completely obliterated.

Seconds later the *Frankfurt* began taking fire, her internals rattling the crew from their stations as the shields registered the impacts of the Klingon's disruptor beams.

Captain th'Zarath managed to steady himself in his command chair, gripping the armrests with all his strength to do so. "Evasive pattern beta-six! Return fire!"

The *Frankfurt* suddenly dipped forward and lurched ahead at full impulse, narrowly avoiding the impact of several more disrupter blasts. At almost point-blank range to one of the Klingon cruisers, she opened fire with her forward laser banks.

"One hit and one miss, sir!" the weapons officer shouted.

"Their shields are at eighty-five percent, Captain," came the voice of the science officer, Michael Hoffman. "Our power is dropping rapidly."

With the chief engineer off the bridge, th'Zarath swiveled his command chair to face Commander Hoffman at the science console. "Explanation?"

"The first hit we took disrupted the warp intermix chamber. Warp drive is offline. We're operating on emergency reactors, sir."

"Weapons status?"

Hoffman quickly looked to the computers for the information. "Lasers at thirty percent and dropping. We won't have them online much longer."

The *Frankfurt* took another hit to her ventral shields, causing the ship to lunge down suddenly. th'Zarath—unprepared for the jolt—came sprawling out of his chair and onto the cold deck behind the helm console.

“Damage reports coming in from all over the ship!” Ensign Carrie Heyen said from the communications station.

“Structural integrity failing on decks four, five, six, and nine,” Hoffman injected, his face obscured by the blue light of the science station’s scanner hood.

Regaining his footing, the Andorian captain stepped up to the communications station. “Heyen, get me the *Repulse*.”

The female human at the communications station worked feverishly at her controls. “Unable to raise the *Repulse*, sir.”

“Are the channels being jammed?”

“No, sir. All I’m getting is static.”

“Sir,” Commander Hoffman added from the science station, “it looks as if the *Repulse* has been heavily damaged.”

“Then get me the frigate, Ensign. Hail the *Lactra*.”

The communications officer began to sweat. She was too young . . . too inexperienced for something like this to happen to her—and for her to be able to cope like a well-trained Starfleet officer. After another moment at her controls, Carrie Heyen signaled the captain with a nod of her head. “Channel open, sir. I have Captain Mooney of the *Lactra* wishing to establish visual contact.”

th'Zarath rested a hand on her shoulder and gave Heyen a weary smile. “On screen, Ensign.”

The image of the damaged *Repulse* on the view screen faded and was replaced by the bridge of the *Lactra*.

“*Frankfurt*, this is the *Lactra*. Are you receiving?” the dark-skinned Captain Mooney asked.

From the looks of her bridge, Captain Shelerib th'Zarath surmised that the *Lactra* had sustained fairly heavy damage. Several terminals were arcing and sparking behind the captain, and there was a thick haze of smoke engulfing the compartment. Thomas Mooney’s face was smeared with dried blood from a gash on his forehead. His tunic was stained from his neck to his chest in sweat and grime.

“Acknowledged, Captain Mooney. This is th’Zarath.”

“You’ve got to get out of here! *We’ve* got to get out of here! These Klingons mean business and they aren’t taking ‘no’ for an answer. I’ve lost half my crew already. Sensors are showing the Klingons are regrouping—coming in for a second wave of attacks.”

th’Zarath nodded. “We’re swinging around right now, Captain. We’ll be at your position in sixty seconds.”

“That’s too long to wait!” Mooney shouted. “They’re almost on top of us now!”

th’Zarath looked to Hoffman, who returned his gaze with a look of deep regret. “Sorry, sir. There’s no way. The fusion generators will blow if we nudge them anywhere near full impulse.”

th’Zarath looked to Mooney with resignation. “Take evasive maneuvers, Captain. We’ll be there shortly.”

“Affirmative. Taking evasive—” On the view screen, the bridge of the *Lactra* lit up with a blinding white light. Everyone on the bridge of the *Frankfurt*—th’Zarath included—had to shield their eyes with their hands. A few seconds later the light faded. th’Zarath looked back to the view screen filled with nothing but stars.

“Report, Commander Hoffman.”

“Sensors show the *Lactra* took a direct hit to her bridge, Captain.”

th’Zarath’s throat dried up. “Survivors?” He asked the question with a rasp in his voice.

Michael Hoffman put his face near his science scanner and adjusted the controls. “Hard to tell at this distance, sir. We’ll be in range in thirty seconds.”

“And the Klingons?”

“Two enemy vessels are still operating under their own power, sir. One is adrift and the other appears to have been destroyed.”

th’Zarath looked at the view screen as the stars swung past the ship. *Is this it? Is this the last time I’ll swim between the stars? What was the line from that old Earth poem . . . ‘Rage. Rage against the dying of the light’ . . . What good would it do? Two Klingon cruisers at even half their normal power output are more than a match for a glorified research ship at full power . . . and we don’t even have a quarter of that power available. Think. Think, Captain! Figure it out! Rage!*

“Do we still have transporters?” th’Zarath yelled to anyone who was listening.

Hoffman looked up from his console. “Yes, sir. They’re the only part of the ship that’s still got full power . . . but I’ll be damned if I know why.”

“And we all may very well be if this doesn’t work,” th’Zarath said, rubbing his hands on his pants to get rid of the increased sweat from his palms. *Rage!* “Helmsman, plot a return course and put us on a collision bearing with the *Eylau*. Prepare to engage the tractor beam.”

“Collision bearing, sir?”

“You heard the order, Mister. And I mean *now*.”

Halfway to the stricken *Lactra*, the *Anton*-class cruiser *Frankfurt* turned sharply on her course. At that same moment, the two remaining Klingon D-16s sped up and trailed her stern tightly.

“Time to impact with the *Eylau*?”

“Thirty-five seconds at present speed,” the helmsman said, his voice somber.

Well, here goes. “Take us to full impulse,” th’Zarath said sternly. He looked to Hoffman, who shot him a sharp look of disapproval. The captain simply nodded his head as if to say *we’ll take this up later . . . if we survive*.

“Time to impact now ten seconds,” the helmsman called out.

Shelerib th’Zarath’s blue hand came down, slamming the intercom switch on his armrest. He didn’t even care that the entire ship could hear his next words; he just needed to make sure someone on deck five heard and obeyed.

“Transporter room, beam *all* the life signs off the *Eylau* now! I don’t care if it’s a cat who stowed away in engineering! I want that ship devoid of life in *five seconds*. Use every pad—every transporter room if you have to.”

“Aye, sir,” came the reply, although th’Zarath didn’t even bother to see which department or crewman had made it.

The helmsman counted down the seconds until impact. “Five . . . four . . . three . . . two . . .”

“Helm, take us above the *Eylau* at fifty meters. Once we are clear, engage the tractor beam and swing the *Eylau* directly astern.”

The *Frankfurt* lurched as she attempted to grab the listing destroyer while at full impulse. The ship felt like it was dragging itself to a halt under the strain as the impulse engines whined in displeasure.

“The *Eylau* is directly astern, Captain,” the helmsman reported.

“And the Klingons?”

“One thousand kilometers and closing rapidly,” Hoffman shouted.

“Navigator, on my order I want you to come to a complete stop and release the *Eylau* from the tractor beam.”

“Aye, sir,” the helmsman said, seeing in his mind’s eye where the captain was going. If the *Frankfurt* stopped, then the *Eylau* would also be forced into an abrupt stop. If she was directly astern of the *Frankfurt*—and the Klingons were close enough—they would run right into her. Unfortunately, the *Eylau* was only five hundred meters away. This left less than optimal room for an escape.

“Eight hundred meters, Captain,” Hoffman said.

Rage!

“Emergency stop! Disengage tractor beam, then reengage the impulse drive!”

The *Frankfurt* fell to a complete stop in less than five seconds. Everyone on the bridge—except for the captain and the helmsman—were thrown forward and out of their seats. Then the ship lurched again, this time accelerating to half the speed of light in the same amount of time it had taken to stop. This sent the bridge crew reeling backward.

There was a shudder . . . a deathly vibration coming through the hull. Then the reverberations slowed and all th’Zarath could hear was the groan of the impulse drives as if they were about to explode.

Hoffman was back at his station. “The Klingon vessels rammed into the *Eylau*, sir. They are both damaged, but intact.”

th’Zarath wiped the sweat from his brow with the back of his sleeve. “Are they pursuing?”

“Negative, sir,” Commander Hoffman said with a sigh of relief. “Looks like they’re licking their wounds.”

“Ensign Heyen, try to raise Starfleet Command. Relay our current status—as well as the status of the other vessels in the task force. Advise them that we have lost

control of the Lycly Dun system to the Klingons. Request they send a warp-tug along our present heading to pick us up.”

Heyen looked to her captain, her normally bright eyes looking downcast at the thought of reporting the loss of their comrades. “Aye, sir. Transmitting now.”

“Helm, lay in a course for Starbase 23 at half impulse,” th’Zarath said.

Hoffman looked at the captain disapprovingly. “Two of the fusion reactors are dead. It’ll be the better part of two months if a tug doesn’t show up.”

This is going to be a long trip. Nodding to himself, th’Zarath turned to Hoffman. “You’ve got the bridge, Commander. I’m going to find out how badly the rest of our systems have been hit. Helm, steady as she goes.”

Chapter 14

October 2252

Stardate 4010.19

Colonel Korrath sat on the bridge of the *Kradec*, poised in the command chair as he pondered his next moves carefully. Since their overwhelming victory at Lea, the 127th Imperial Cruiser Squadron had traveled nearly fifteen light-years, and now stood within striking distance of the planet Janni IV.

The population of the Janni system—roughly 3.8 million humanoids—resided entirely on Janni IV. The first three planets in the system were not considered military targets. Two were gas giants, while the third was a ball of rock and ice completely inhospitable to both Klingons and humans alike. Janni IV, however, contained abundant animal and plant life that was native only to this system. The Klingons cared little for the flora, except for the odd medicinal uses they may have provided. The animal life, Korrath had found out, was entirely edible and would make for excellent feasts for his weary warriors.

There were fattened bovine-like animals that had three horns protruding from their foreheads, and there were giant flightless birds that appeared to have scales instead of feathers. There were reptiles in the planet's wetland areas, and predatory feline animals in the rocky terrain of the equatorial mountains.

Yes, this planet will provide food for a great many warriors in the fleet. Not just our own . . . but enough for several strike groups. All that needs to be done is to subdue the native population centers.

The inhabitants of Janni IV were an interesting lot. They appeared to be a hybrid of Earthers, Vulcans, and Caitians. While their general facial appearance was human, they had elongated pointed ears and eyebrows that were easily twice as pronounced as a typical Vulcanoid. From head to toe, their entire bodies were coated in a thin layer of fur, which came in a spectrum of colors and patterns with little rhyme or reason.

The economy of the planet seemed to be based on valuable goods that were bartered or traded to one another. Another interesting fact that Korrath had learned from his science officer was that Janni IV had an extensive black market weapons trade. Whether this was done under the guise of Federation direction or behind the Federation's back, it mattered very little.

This is where Korrath would infiltrate and take control of the planet. He just had to meet the right person at the right time and offer the right service. Korrath's science team had studied the weapons platforms of the planet and had deemed them of sufficient strength to inflict moderate damage to the Klingon ships in orbit—if the inhabitants were angered into doing so. With the loss of their supply fleet at Xamdab, Korrath could ill afford to have one of his ships put out of commission by surface-to-space weaponry. *No . . . that will not do at all. This will have to be done with the cunning of a snake.*

Korrath and his military advisors had come up with a well-rounded plan, one that would ensure the safest margin for his troops while simultaneously managing to secure as much of the planet's resources and weapons as possible—all the while keeping as many of the inhabitants alive and out of danger. After all, what good would it do to conquer the planet and not be able to make use of all its infinite resources? Better to subjugate the people into the empire and use them as a glorified slave-labor force. Korrath had only to find the seat of power for the planet and take it by force.

But first he needed allies.

Major Valshon Craddock, leader of the People's Army of the Western Continent, was just such a person. Craddock had been discovered during the initial scouting mission that Captain B'Rol of the *Honor Blade* had begun shortly after the 127th Squadron had entered orbit. Craddock was an opportunist by nature. He would exploit the weak and powerless to further his political gains, and had enough of the affluent inhabitants of Janni under his belt to ensure that his people would never suffer from hunger or homelessness, all the while touting the superiority of his forces over those of any other continent. Unfortunately, his aspirations were limited to only the continent on which he found himself and his people. He was also—and not by coincidence—the largest trader on the planet's black market. Unfortunately,

Craddock's "army" was ill equipped to make the long journey across the great ocean that separated his forces from the other major political party on the planet, the Unified Janni Society. This was to be the area that Korrath would firmly wedge himself and his task force into. After all—who needed sea transports when he had a fleet of Klingon ships willing to beam their army anywhere they needed to go?

Valshon Craddock was truly a Romulan among other Janni, and Korrath despised him for his lack of honor and courage, but Korrath also never missed an opportunity to compliment the man or breathe the proverbial smoke into his hindquarters. In return for the assistance of the Klingons, Craddock had offered Korrath the resources of the entire planet—so long as the Klingon forces dealt no death to his own people, nor would they lay waste to the cities of the UJS. Korrath had agreed with a wide smile of finely sharp teeth and the promise of power and freedom for Valshon's people. *Keep your friends close, but keep your enemies closer*, as the ancient Klingon proverb stated. Yes, this Craddock was just the idealistic stooge Korrath was looking for.

In preparation for the attack on the UJS, Korrath had returned to the *Kradec* and scheduled a meeting with the fellow commanding officers of the 127th group. This was to be a large operation, and therefore extensive areas of responsibility would have to be delegated. The division of an entire planet into the hands of only four hundred Klingons was a task not to be handled lightly—or by incompetents. Colonel Korrath entered the briefing room, noting that Captain B'Rol was seated close to the commander's own chair.

"Colonel!" the officers in the room all shouted in unison as they jumped to their feet.

Korrath looked at each of their faces, noting with admiration the determination on each of their expressions. "Be seated," he said and began his briefing.

No less than half an hour later, the meeting was concluded. Korrath was glad to see that each of his field commanders was already prepared for the coming engagement. There were fewer preparations to be made than he had anticipated, and he was eager to get the operation underway as soon as possible.

Craddock had been contacted by B'Rol, and arrangements were made to beam Valshon's forces aboard several of the Klingon cruisers. Once most of his officers

had arrived, they would then be furnished with modified Klingon disruptors and given a brief series of lessons in modern Klingon ground attack strategies. The weapons the Klingons disbursed were limited in power to only a few shots each, although Korrath was extremely careful not to divulge this fact to Cradduck. Korrath wanted to assure Cradduck's army that they would attain victory, but was mindful of letting powerful weapons fall into the hands of the very people he was about to subdue.

Within three hours, Valshon's army—nearly a thousand strong—was equipped with the modified weapons and were ready to beam back down to the planet's surface. Cradduck had provided Colonel Korrath with the coordinates of the Unified Janni Society's primary headquarters, which Captain B'Rol and the *Kradec*'s science officer had confirmed. The plan called for a swift show of force on the part of the People's Army, who would capture the fortress of the UJS within an estimated timeframe of about an hour. Korrath had allowed for an additional hour, to make up for inconsistent intelligence reports from Valshon's lieutenants as to the exact number of UJS officers who might be present in the capital building at any given time.

It was estimated that the citadel surrounding the capital contained a further six to seven hundred armed and trained personnel. Cradduck's forces would take care of the ground operations, while their new Klingon allies would wait in orbit to destroy any aircraft over the citadel. If it became necessary for Korrath to commit any of the Klingons to actual combat, it would only show a weakness on the side of Valshon's forces. This would, in turn, allow Korrath a form of leverage against Cradduck, and would make turning him and his men into slaves all the easier. As a precaution to this measure, Korrath had put two hundred of his best Marines on standby aboard the *Kradec*, with a further three hundred on the warship *Bringer of Sorrow*.

Korrath was now on the bridge of the *Kradec*. He'd had a three-dimensional projector table installed in the rear of the bridge so he could watch the battle in all its glory. The table would project a near-perfect topographical rendition of the citadel, with the information constantly being updated by the finely tuned short-range sensors on the *Kradec*. He stood at the head of that table now, leaving his first officer in command of the ship's operation while Korrath himself monitored the

forces below at the holotable. *The stage is set . . . all players to their parts, and so we let the game begin.*

Korrath reached for his personal communicator and touched its activator button. “Major Craddock, are your forces ready?”

Craddock had been waiting with a contingent of his personal guards in the assault transporter room of the Klingon command ship. He tapped at the Klingon communicator in his hand, “My men are ready, my lord.”

“Excellent. We will commence transporter operations now. *Success, Major.*”

“And to you as well, Colonel,” Valshon said, and then signed off the channel.

Korrath gave his second-in-command the signal to begin the operation with the wave of his hand. The lieutenant nodded in acknowledgement and hit the intercom to the transporter room controller, which in turn would be repeated on all the ships in the 127th group simultaneously. “All operators commence attack. Beam all forces to their designated areas immediately!”

Korrath looked at the holotable with growing fascination. It had been too long since he had witnessed firsthand the power of ground forces that were under his direct command. He realized now that he had longed for this moment, had thirsted for it for longer than he could remember. He watched the projection as it panned in to focus its detail on a particular group of Valshon’s men outside the capitol building. The screen then zoomed out and focused its view on another group who was busy laying siege to one of the citadel’s outer walls.

The UJS capitol building had been shielded from attack—and thus was an inaccessible target for the Klingon transporters. Korrath had made do with this fact, beaming three battalions of Craddock’s men right outside the building’s front door. Korrath had provided them with a ramming probe that would lay waste to the shields protecting the building, but it came at a cost. The ram itself would take almost an hour to smash a hole large enough for Valshon’s troops to enter the building.

Craddock's forces were also engaged with taking down the citadel's central communications network. Thankfully, the tower was far less guarded than the capitol building had been, so the final securing of planetary communications was expected any minute now. Korrath had watched as Valshon's forces swept from street to street, killing or stunning anyone and anything that got in their way. Thankfully they had yet to discover just how limited their weapons firepower would be. Korrath speculated that—at this rate—Craddock's weapons would be depleted just as the capitol building's shields were breached.

So much the better.

Suddenly a large explosion lit up the holotable. Korrath reeled back from the table as the projection illuminated the entire bridge of the *Kradec* for a brief instant. He immediately turned to the *Honor Blade*'s captain, who was onscreen. "B'Rol! What has happened in grid 14-Alpha?"

B'Rol moved to his own science station and accessed the ship's scanner readout. "It appears that Craddock's forces have detonated the citadel's weapons arsenal."

"Does it appear to be a deliberate tactic on Valshon's part?"

B'Rol stepped away from the computer and returned to the command chair as he answered the commander. "No, sir. It appears the building was sabotaged from within."

Korrath grunted to himself, returning his gaze to the table. He could see a large crater that engulfed several city blocks. "This may work in our favor, Captain. The less weapons that are accessible to Craddock's forces, the better. My *compliments* go out to the UJS for this explosion," he laughed, which B'Rol echoed.

The communications officer came from the opposite side of the bridge. "Colonel Korrath, message from the surface. It's Craddock."

"Put it on audio, Lieutenant."

A moment later the bridge's speakers projected the sounds of the battle that was being waged on the surface of Janni. There were several explosions heard in the distance, as well as multiple disruptor blasts and people screaming. It was the sound of freedom dying.

"Lord Korrath, this is Craddock. The capitol building has been secured. The governor is now a prisoner of the People's Army."

Korrath laughed lightly to himself. “*Correction*, Major: he is a prisoner of the Klingon Empire. The governor is simply . . . in your custody, for the moment.”

There was a silence on the communications channel. Korrath knew that Valshon was choosing his next words, but it had yet to be heard whether they would be wise ones or not. “Yes, my lord. He is *your* prisoner,” Craddock said with more than a slight hint of disdain in his voice.

“Then my compliments to you and your forces, Major. You have done well—and will be rewarded well.”

“Thank you, Colonel.”

“What is the status of your remaining forces?” Korrath asked, paying little attention to the man’s words.

“Our forces have had an overwhelming victory here, sir. The capitol is secure, the communications tower has been taken, and the banking sector has been shut down. The UJS is making a stand at the power generation complex, but we should have them in custody within the next two hours.”

Korrath licked his lips and sneered into the ship’s intercom. “We monitored a large explosion a few moments ago, Major. Is there anything you’d like to tell me?” There was another long silence on Valshon’s part.

“There was an accident in the weapons depot. My men had to destroy the building. We were afraid that the weapons would be used against you and your forces, Colonel Korrath. We decided to destroy them instead of allowing them to fall into . . . the wrong hands.”

Korrath looked to his view screen at B’Rol, who wore a devilish smile on his face. “Of course you did, *Major*. You have again done well. Thank you for looking out for my men in this . . . endeavor.”

“Of course, my lord,” Valshon said graciously.

“Prepare to have the governor beamed aboard the *Kradec* for interrogation. Contact me again when the power grid is secure. We will continue to monitor your progress from orbit.”

“Interrogation? To what end, Colonel? He is the leader of his people and he is being detained here on Janni. He has no secrets that I cannot get from him.”

“Every man has his secrets. From what I have seen, the people of Janni have ineffectual means of extracting those secrets. Klingon methods are more precise, and the facts they reveal are less *questionable*.” Korrath let the last word sink into Valshon’s tiny brain.

“Forgive me, my lord. I didn’t mean to suggest—”

Korrath cut into Cradduck’s sentence. “Ignorance is easy to forgive, Major. *Failure* is *not*. Contact me in one hour . . . and I *expect* you to report that the power station is under your control.”

“It will be as you command, Colonel.”

“Korrath out,” the colonel snapped, then motioned to his communications officer to close the channel.

“So he says he destroyed the weapons depot?” B’Rol asked in disgust. “It was not that way! Our scans definitely showed that the explosion was triggered remotely from within the governor’s office in the capitol building *before* Valshon had taken his prisoner.”

Korrath reached a hand toward the view screen, as if to place it on B’Rol’s shoulder in reassurance. “Worry not, my friend. I gave this Cradduck too much credit when I compared him to a Romulan. He thinks and acts more like those soft-bellied humans. That makes dealing with him all the less pleasurable,” he finished, then bared his teeth in a menacing smile. Captain B’Rol understood the implications.

“Yes, my lord. It does.”

“Then we understand each other, B’Rol. Once the power station is secure, I want you to beam down with our Marine contingent from the *Kradec*, and the *Honor Blade*, as well as the squad from the *Bringer of Sorrow*. I want you to occupy the power station and the communications tower. Those are the *real* seats of power for this citadel. We will re-form this city into a base of operations for the fleet. The flag of the 127th will fly proudly from the capitol building as a sign to all the people on this pitiful world of who is in actual control of this situation.”

“And what of Cradduck? If we receive any resistance, my lord?”

“Then you may deal with it in any way you see fit, *Admiral*.”

“Admiral?” B’Rol asked curiously.

“I received your notification of promotion from the High Council this morning, but I was waiting until the right moment to disclose it to you. If you had in any way failed me during this battle . . . well . . . let us just say that you would be receiving this promotion posthumously.”

B’Rol understood the implications of this all too well. He would not fail his commander. “Qapla’!” he said as he brought a clenched fist to his chest.

“Qapla’, Admiral B’Rol. May you win all your battles,” Korrath said, returning the salute. “Now, follow your orders. First take the power station, then the communications tower. Then, my friend, the planet will be ours.”

Chapter 15

October 2252

Stardate 4010.29

Office of the Commanding Officer, Starbase 5, Commodore Dan Balkwill, Rigel Sector

Commodore Dan Balkwill paced impatiently in his office. His assistant had recently brought another pot of fresh coffee, the third in the last hour. She'd reminded the commodore in a rueful way that she might need to call the station's supply clerk for a replacement carpet if the commodore persisted in his relentless pacing. Balkwill, having barely noticed her presence, simply thanked her and with a wave of his hand sent her back to her desk outside the walls of his office.

Balkwill assumed she simply didn't understand the reason behind his nervousness. He couldn't fault her for it. Not many people grasped the larger picture of the war effort as it was presently unfolding, so it was understood that even fewer people could comprehend the fine threads that wove those seemingly disconnected events into the picture that most people knew. Balkwill hadn't been at the forefront of that knowledge curve for some time. That is, until the events that recently transpired near the Laxala system unfolded barely a month ago.

In a situation where everything had almost come to be routine, the most noxious thorn rose up to throw the entire Federation into near shambles. At least, that was the news only the top brass at Starfleet Command—and now Balkwill—had come to know.

On stardate 4010.20, a convoy of Orion merchant ships had left the planet Laxala, bound for the Federation manufacturing facility in the Alphosa system some nine sectors away. The ships were carrying foodstuffs, textiles, water, and liquid refrigerant tanks in small quantities. The largest good they were ferrying, however, was one of the most vital and sought-after commodities in the known universe:

partially refined dilithium crystals, the main component in faster-than-light warp drive engines.

It was these crystals that the Federation needed badly. The Klingons had caught the Federation in a perilous state, and whether the Klingons were aware of that fact or not was irrelevant. The Federation simply did not have enough warp-capable ships to fight off the Klingons during a protracted war. The situation existed—and would continue to exist—until the Federation could get more starships out of their shipyards and onto the front lines where they were sorely needed.

There were, of course, plenty of ships to be had. There were dozens upon dozens, all in different configurations: cruisers, destroyers, scouts, battle cruisers . . . the classes were all represented in the half-dozen shipyards that Starfleet had poised within striking distance of the Klingon invasion. However, these ships were all but meaningless. They could travel sublight, but that would mean months to get them to the front lines. And, once there, they would be almost useless. The dilithium that fed their engines also fed their mighty weapons and computer control systems, not to mention all the power generation requirements for things as complex as life support and gravity control to something as simple as boiling a pot of water.

The Federation needed the dilithium provided by the miners in the Rigel colonies—and the colonies were under direct control of the Orion cartels. The Federation knew it. They had always known it. Starfleet had been all but ordered to turn a blind eye to the Orion syndicates. It was, after all, the Orions who helped make their mighty ships move and fight. Why would the Federation risk all that just to stem a few pirates or the occasional smuggling operation in an otherwise backwater portion of Federation space? Until Starfleet could return to its previous role of exploration and find a suitable planet for its own dilithium mining, the Orions were far more of an asset than a liability.

When it came to the Orion culture, government itself was the least desirable way to manage their people. For an Orion, it was all about the money. This was not to say that they were mercenaries in any capacity. Rather, it was quite the opposite. It was a universal fact that Orion opportunism was legendary. If there was a profit to be made in any venture, an Orion would find it—no matter how unorthodox or strange the means. Their taste for luxury, it was said, was so unfettered that it

embarrassed less self-conscious races. They simply lived as well as their means allowed them. This also meant that by pooling the resources of several strong Orion families together, by marriage for example, one large family could—and had—come to rule over an entire planet.

Their government, if one could call it that, was responsible for only the most mundane tasks that any self-respecting Orion would never find himself doing, or for that matter be caught by any other self-respecting Orion in the course of such duties. Such jobs were, by default, designed for slaves. Only other Orions—the poorer “greens”—were slaves, and as far as anyone in the Federation knew, those slaves were only traded within the boundaries of Orion space to other wealthy and powerful “ruddy” Orion traders. Nevertheless, Starfleet was quick to enforce human rights violations everywhere in Federation space, as well as within an “undetermined” distance from the Orion homeworld of Rigel VIII. Arrests were infrequent. Charges were filed even less frequently. In the last eight months there had been a total of two citations filed for offenses that—before the war with the Klingons—would have warranted immediate arrest and detention of the Orion crews and the impounding of their vessels. The Federation was simply that desperate for dilithium.

Then there was the Laxala Incident.

Incident, Balkwill had said to himself as he continued his pacing. *It's a damn catastrophe, that's what it is!*

After the Orion privateers had departed their borders, they quickly entered Federation space. Being that Starbase 5 itself was only eighteen light-years distant, it was common practice to have a scouting vessel near that system at the time the incident took place.

Commodore Balkwill replayed the timeline of events repeatedly in his mind. It always came back to the same thing. *Could I have done anything differently? Did I have the time to?* The answer always came back the same on both questions: no.

The *Mission*-class scouting vessel, USS *Hawking*, had picked up a Klingon destroyer squadron on long-range sensors within minutes of the enemy forces entering the system. The Klingons were heading into the Videtu system at high

speed and, from the *Hawking*'s report, they didn't stop in Videtu as they continued toward Laxala—some three light-years distant.

Commodore Balkwill had ordered the captain of the *Hawking* to take up a position near Laxala to confirm the exact number of Klingon vessels in the area, and then to transmit that information back to Starbase 5 as soon as possible.

An hour after its initial contact with the Klingons, the *Hawking* was just outside the Laxala system when they registered a large explosion on their scanners. The captain then ordered the *Hawking* to close within visual range of the scans. What he reported back—and what Balkwill had watched a dozen times over on the video display terminal in his office—was exactly the reason for his pacing.

As the *Hawking* entered visual range, it scanned a single Orion ship approaching one of the two Klingon destroyers. As the cargo ship neared the Klingon destroyer, the Klingon lowered their shields. The reason for this was still a mystery, but the outcome seemed very clear. Within seconds of the Klingon lowering his shields, the Orion vessel exploded in a brilliant ball of white flame and shrapnel. The blast wave destroyed the nearby Klingon vessel and severely damaged the remaining one.

The *Hawking* then made a dash into the Laxala system. Upon the discovery that the lingering Klingon vessel was no threat, the remaining Orion vessels turned one hundred eighty degrees and set a course back to Orion space. The captain of the *Hawking* had opened a communications channel to the vessels in the Orion flotilla, and the official transcript of the conversation he'd held with the Orions was now sitting on Commodore Balkwill's desk in paper hard copy. There was only one line that Commodore Balkwill had committed to memory: "All future deliveries of dilithium are on hold until this situation is resolved."

That was four weeks ago. Four weeks without a single delivery of the badly needed dilithium.

What do they mean by "situation"? Are they talking about the war?

Dan knew his answer would come soon. The Orion syndicate had advised Starfleet Command to expect a reply to the Laxala Incident—as it was being called—at precisely thirteen hundred hours today, which was five minutes from now.

Balkwill sat back in his desk chair and turned on the communications terminal. It showed the stylized emblem of the United Federation of Planets, with the seal of the president of the Federation directly next to it. There was a counter on the bottom of the screen, counting down the minutes until the video would automatically switch over to a live feed at Starfleet Command. Due to his position as commanding officer of the starbase closest to the Orion sector of space, Commodore Dan Balkwill had finally made it onto the list of people who were in the know about the backdrop of the war, and it made him feel sick to his stomach.

Ignorance is bliss . . . or rather, it used to be.

The doors to the commodore's office slid open with a swooshing sound and Captain Shalya Singh of Starfleet Intelligence walked briskly into the room.

"Have a seat, Captain," Balkwill said, motioning the captain to sit in the chair beside him.

Balkwill's computer terminal chimed, indicating that a transmission was about to be received. Balkwill set his cup of coffee on the desk in anticipation of the message that was to be delivered. The UFP insignias on the screen faded out, to be replaced by the seal of the office of the President of the United Federation of Planets, Thomas Vanderbilt. The president, a distant relative of the first president of the Federation, stared unblinking at the camera as he began to speak.

"This message is classified as top secret. The information provided here is not to be discussed outside your respective chain of command without prior authorization from this office, as well as the Office of the Chief of Operations at Starfleet Command. We are now switching to a live video transmission from the Orion homeworld, Rigel sector."

The image faded, replaced by that of a ruddy Orion sitting behind an opulently decorated golden desk, his large hands folded together on top of its glossy surface. Behind the red Orion was a curtain of shimmering purple material, onto which the symbol of the Botchek Planetary Congress—the wealthiest and most influential family in the Orion syndicates—was emblazoned. His voice was low and steady as he began to speak.

"I am Markan the Wise, Chief Rhadamanen of the Botchek Planetary Congress, and Tahedri of the family Quantoos."

Balkwill knew the Orion terms well. Rhadamanen was the title given to the chief executive officer of an Orion corporation, while the title Tahedri meant that he was the eldest male member of his family, and thus its patriarch. The Orion continued speaking as Balkwill and Singh exchanged a worried glance.

“On stardate 4010.20 an Orion merchant fleet was delivering supplies to the Federation processing facility on the planet Alphosa. This convoy was intercepted by a squadron of Klingon warships while in disputed Federation space. The revenue that the Orion people were to receive from this cargo was to be extensive. Rather than allow his merchandise, and thus the livelihood of his corporation, to be stolen by the Klingon forces, the captain of the freighter *Swiftends* self-destructed his vessel. The resulting explosion destroyed one Klingon vessel and severely damaged the other. The Orion people make no apologies for this action. Quite the opposite, in fact. The captain of that vessel is now highly honored in the memories of his family, in those of his employer, and certainly in those of his people. From this point on, you should consider this when any force of the Klingon Empire, the United Federation of Planets, or any of their respective allies attempt to subvert our operations.”

“Therefore, any future harassment of the Orion people in the business of transporting dilithium will be considered a sacrilegious attack on our way of life. This material is not to be captured, diverted, or destroyed until after it reaches its declared destination and has been paid for. To this end, the dilithium mining complex on Rigel XII has been outfitted with enough antimatter to completely obliterate the entire planet—which we fully intend to carry out—if any future shipments are tampered with by anyone, anywhere.”

“Both races need dilithium crystals sorely for their war efforts, and we Orions are not unaware of this fact. All shipments of dilithium to both the Klingon Empire and the United Federation of Planets will resume immediately. However, be warned: consider the full weight of this message during your war. We will not tolerate any further hostilities toward our people. This transmission ends now.”

The screen on the terminal went black. Balkwill had half expected to see the president return to address his respective audience, but he did not. The president

was likely reviewing the information with the other high-ranking officers who were undoubtedly watching the transmission beside him.

After a long pause, Captain Singh was the first to speak. “Well, at least our shipments will resume. That’s one bit of good news.”

“Yes,” Commodore Balkwill countered, “but so are the shipments to the Klingons. I was hoping the Orions would use this incident to fully ally themselves with the Federation.”

Singh shook his head. “No, that wouldn’t be the Orion way of doing things.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, it just that Orions are driven by one thing, and one thing only: the almighty credit—or emeralds, or gold, or whatever precious commodity you can think of,” Singh said as he waved his hand dismissively in the air. “They see no *profit* in sticking with one side or the other. Really, there’s more profit in selling the dilithium to both sides, rather than just one. In fact, I’d fully expect the Federation to see a drastic increase in the final bills we receive from the Orion syndicate.”

Dan pondered this for a moment and let out an exhausted sigh. “You’re probably right, but it still rubs me the wrong way.”

“This whole war is rubbing everyone the wrong way,” the intelligence captain shot back.

Dan sighed again, this time in resignation. “Any news on the advanced weapons development?”

Singh poured himself a cup of coffee. “Some, but not much. This new phased weaponry requires an enormous amount of energy and, until now, our reserves of dilithium were being used entirely by the frontline vessels fighting the war. There simply haven’t been enough reserves to get the materials into the lab to use in experiments.”

“And now?”

Singh stroked his hand through his thick red beard. “Well, even *with* the crystals, we still need a viable computer control design—not to mention new targeting sensors. It’s all so damn theoretical at this point, Dan. I’ve read the reports over and over again, from phased energy to photon torpedoes, until I felt as if I were going to

go blind from staring at them so much. I just *can't* see any of these new systems coming online in less than twelve months.”

“Well, let’s just hope you’re wrong. The Klingons have a decisive advantage over us in the sheer number of ships at their disposal. Until we can get more units to the front lines, we’re just plain outnumbered. And Shalya, I don’t care for the thought of spending a few months in a Klingon gulag to then be tortured and executed shortly thereafter.”

Captain Singh looked at the commodore, but not with surprise or fear. His expression was that of sorrowful approval. “Do you really think it will come to that?”

Commodore Balkwill got up from his desk to glare out the large view port that looked into the vastness of space. “I don’t know,” he said, exasperated. “I just . . . *don’t know.*”

Message Classification: TOP SECRET: CAPTAIN’S EYES ONLY

FROM: The Office of the Commanding Officer, Starfleet Intelligence, Commodore Michael J. Lai, and Starbase 23

TO: Commanding Officer, USS *Baton Rouge*, Tom Boucher

SUBJ: CONSTRUCTION PROJECT: THRANSTOR

ENCLOSURE(S): Blueprints. Classification: TOP SECRET

1. Captain Boucher, Starfleet Intelligence is aware of your orders to ferry equipment and supplies necessary for the construction of shipyards near Thranstor, in the Gamma Diso system. Intelligence is also aware of the difficulties of such an endeavor.

2. Enclosed in this correspondence are the classified designs for a new class of starship, one that Starfleet Intelligence feels will be of vital use to the Federation in our ongoing war effort against the Klingons.

3. Starfleet Intelligence further feels that Thranstor, both isolated from nearby Federation worlds and far from the front lines of the war, will be an ideal place for the construction of these highly classified vessels.

4. Construction on these ships is to begin immediately, once the shipyard is certified as fully functional.

5. Should you require any additional resources not covered through other chains of requisition, all correspondence should be forwarded directly to this office for immediate review and approval.

6. Starfleet Intelligence cannot stress enough the severity of the classification of this project. Should any member of your team cause you the slightest amount of hesitation in the course of his or her duties, you are to immediately requisition this office for a replacement officer of equal or greater proficiency.

7. We are dispatching three (3) additional cargo ships from Starbase 14 that will rendezvous with you when you arrive at Thranstor. They are carrying classified equipment and building materials to help expedite the process of constructing the shipyards that have been previously ordered.

8. Due to the unusual nature of this request, Starfleet Intelligence has placed this entire project under our own strict supervision. It should be further understood that civilian contractors or firms will not be involved in this project.

9. Godspeed to you, Captain. I look forward to reading your progress reports after you have begun construction.

Chapter 16

November 2252

Stardate 4011.14

The only thing he remembered about that morning was that it was dark. The sun had yet to break the plane of the distant horizon, and already Heath and the rest of the 7th Marine Expeditionary Force were being called awake by the sound of reveille being piped through the barracks speakers. He looked at his desktop chronometer in dismay. It was 0500. Lieutenant Shane Heath instantly regretted staying up the night before to squeeze in one last poker game with the rest of the battalion commanders. He grunted in disgust as he buried his face in his pillow, then reached over without looking to flick on the light beside his bunk.

Heath had been transferred—at his own request—to the Starfleet Marines as part of an officer exchange program that had been set up some months before. His request had been quickly sent up through the chain of command and was—in no small way—expedited by Captain Garth, his former commanding officer on board the *Xenophon*. Heath had the firsthand experience with the Klingons that the Starfleet Marine Corps sought when training its new officers, and once his transfer had been approved, he was rushed to the front lines to form up with the 7th Marine Expeditionary Unit—or the Lucky 7th, as they called themselves—on Nozseca VIII.

His rank and status had remained the same, while only his title had changed. Though he was still a lieutenant, Shane now found himself in command of two hundred personnel of the Ground Combat Element, or GCE, of the 7th. It had taken Shane some time to learn the nomenclature of how the Marines organized their people and equipment, being that it was so vastly different than how Starfleet itself was organized. Once he had become properly acclimated, however, he began to see how disorganized Starfleet itself could be at times. In short, Shane Heath had found his niche and was ultimately happy to be where he was.

The morning routine had been the same for the last two months: arise at 0500, eat breakfast with the other officers, and then arrive for officers' call at 0700, where the colonel would detail the plan of the day for the rest of the Lucky 7th's officers. It would then be up to those officers to, in turn, divvy out the various responsibilities to their respective companies.

Today, however, was going to be different. Where Heath would normally see Colonel Thomas sitting during the morning briefing, there sat the base commander, the blue-skinned and extremely stout Andorian, General Shruth. The equally impressive Thomas was seated at the general's right.

Colonel Thomas rose from his seat to greet his subordinates. "Come in and be seated quickly, people. We have a lot of material to go over this morning."

The officers acknowledged the statement for what it was: an order, not a request. They silently obeyed and were quickly seated in their chairs around the briefing room's circular table. General Shruth rose from his chair without introduction from the colonel, not that he needed such formality on such a small base. There were only about three thousand Marines total in the camp, out of which the 7th was the largest unit. In fact, the camp itself really didn't require an officer of Shruth's rank at all, except for the fact that Nozseca VIII was so unnervingly close to Klingon expansion in this sector. It was this singular fact that necessitated the presence of a flag officer at the camp at all times.

Andorians themselves were, by nature, a warrior race. As a species they had a genetic disposition toward violence. Once that nature had been properly channeled, however, they made brilliant strategists and tacticians. These traits gave rise to their starship designs being legendary for their offensive and defensive capabilities. As officers of the line they excelled as leaders, most notably during hostile engagements.

Shruth's reputation held that he was by no means an exception to these rules. As he stood up slowly from his chair, the two antennae that protruded from the close crop of hair on his scalp began to twitch, sending vital sensory information to his brain—much like that of a Terran bat.

"I received a Priority One subspace message from Fleet Marine General Carter Groetz late last night. Long-range sensors from a Federation starship in the sector

have detected a large Klingon invasion force heading toward this system.” He let the words sink in, allowing a brief moment for everyone around the table to exchange worried glances with one another before he continued. He motioned toward the large computer screen that was behind him.

“Computer, display information file Zed One-Eight-Five: tactical information on the Nozseca system.”

The screen image brightened into life, showing the eleven planets of the Nozseca system and their regular orbits around the primary yellow star of the system. A group of bright red dots flashed in the top left corner of the screen, on the far end of the orbit of the eleventh planet. Shruth withdrew a long metal rod from beneath the screen and motioned to the blips.

“This is the estimated location of the Klingons. It was obtained at approximately 0200 hours by the *Portsmouth*-class light destroyer, *Aloha*.”

The *Aloha*, as well as a mixed group of other light and heavy destroyers and the Marines’ own assault ship, the *Boxer*, were stationed permanently in the Nozseca system to provide spaceborne cover for the Marines stationed planetside. It was hoped that the presence of the destroyer squadron would be a deterrent for the Klingons to enter the system; it now appeared that the tactic was not working. The small red blips on the screen inched ever closer to the orbit of the eleventh planet, intersected with it, and then were barely on the other side before the general began speaking again.

“The Klingon group is comprised of mostly heavy landing ships, defended by a squadron of cruisers and an additional squadron of light destroyers.” The general pushed a blinking blue button on the right side of the screen and the image zoomed into a close range scan of the Klingon vessels, showing a detailed schematic of the different Klingon warships. One was the D-7 *Bringer of Destruction*-class heavy cruiser, another was the D-16 *Swiftwind*-class destroyer, and below the two was the large T-2 *Mover*-class assault ship, which itself was a full fifty meters longer than the destroyers that protected it.

“We are estimating their total strength is in excess of six thousand warriors, with about five thousand of those committed to actual ground combat operations.” He again let the words sink in as his antennae scanned the Marine officers seemingly

one at a time. “The *Movers* can transport down their full complement of eight hundred troops, support vehicles, and heavy tanks in about seven minutes. I don’t need to tell you people how vastly outnumbered that makes us down here. I’m counting on each of you to give two hundred percent, because that’s what it’ll take to *almost* even the odds.”

Outnumbered is an understatement, Heath thought to himself. The 7th had its own share of heavy antigravity tanks as well, but the Federation AGVT-10s were few in number. Heath could think of no more than twenty of them that were fully operational at the moment. That put the Klingon heavy cavalry numbers at something like ten-to-one odds over the defending Fleet Marine forces, and that was before Shane calculated the odds of the enemy troop combat units. He decided that doing so would only worsen his mood.

“It is very likely that none of us will survive the encounter,” the general said with little remorse in his voice. “The Klingons aren’t known for taking prisoners and I, for one, don’t relish the idea of it anyway. However, should any of you be captured, Colonel Thomas and I have decided a little ‘disinformation’ dissemination would be in order. Each of you officers will be supplied with falsified command documents and manipulated ranks.”

With that, Colonel Thomas stepped up from his chair, handing each of the fifteen officers present a colored computer cartridge. “You will find all your disinformation on these cartridges,” the colonel said as he handed them out. “Study it well. It may save your life or the life of someone you may or may not know. Our hope is that it will throw the Klingons in this sector for a loop and help to disguise Starfleet’s true plans for the war.” Thomas then returned to his seat at the general’s side.

Heath, looking at the name printed on the front of his cartridge, smiled. *‘Colonel Ronald Givers, of Starfleet Intelligence.’ That’s a nice little promotion, even if it’s not factual.*

Shruth sat forward in his chair, hands folded in front of himself in composure. *This guy is a rock*, Heath thought in wonder. “We need everything tight at as a drum, people. I want full weapons inventory on my desk in fifteen minutes. All transport shuttles and assault fighters are to be placed on a five-minute readiness alert within the next thirty minutes. Stow every conceivable combustible in

approved containers, move all construction equipment indoors, and reinforce as many of the structures as you can. Lieutenant Heath, we need a recon patrol assembled in the hangar as soon as possible.”

Shane sat back in his chair—cool as a cucumber on the outside, yet shaking like a leaf on the inside. “Aye, General. I’ll have a team there in ten minutes.”

“Excellent. Let’s get going, people. We don’t have much time.”

Ten minutes later, on time and as promised, Heath had a security detail waiting in the shuttle hangar. The building was an immense concrete and plasti-steel rectangular structure with large bay doors on either end. Inside the hangar there was a bustle of activity. Heath had to station his detail on the far end of the building in order to stay clear of the Marines who were currently readying the assault shuttles.

The shuttles themselves looked no different than the standard Starfleet ones stationed aboard fleet ships. They had long, flat sides of gray steel. The front end was angled out slightly and was inset with three transparent aluminum view ports that could be closed and shielded from the inside. The rear end was entirely dedicated to a ramp that could be lowered in seconds. Unlike the standard Starfleet shuttles, however, the assault shuttles carried no micro-warp engines, thus they were incapable of leaving the planet’s atmosphere. Their primary drive units were a set of thrusters on the port and starboard side that pushed the shuttle as it hovered about two feet from the surface. They were also twice as long as the standard shuttle. These modifications allowed the Marines to load a full complement of troops in the shuttles, as well as various equipment items or small vehicles they might need for a particular mission.

The 7th had four such shuttles, as well as three specially modified ones that the Marines had outfitted for their own purpose. This included—in two of the modified assault craft—cutting rectangular holes in each side of the shuttle just ahead of the thrusters, to allow Marines to defend the shuttles from incoming ground attacks with pivoting laser cannons.

Heath surveyed his squad with admiration. To his right was his senior enlisted officer, Sergeant Kipling. Kipling acted as a go-between for the officers and the enlisted personnel of the unit. He had served in the Corps for almost six years, and was as good as any officer out in the field. His presence and his demeanor demanded respect, and it was given to him freely by all those who served under him.

In formation and facing Heath and Kipling was their handpicked reconnaissance unit. There was Williams, the best sniper in the whole 7th. Next to him was Lance Corporal Kalfor, the large and imposing Andorian manning the rapid-fire laser rifle, and Zinsak the Caitian, whose martial arts skills were unequaled. Behind them stood Tech Sergeant Brians, the squad's communications officer, and Parsons, computer specialist and sensor operator. Next to Parsons was the Tellarite, Private Throm, heavy weapons specialist who was armed with the squad's antimatter grenade launcher. Directly behind them stood a group of three security officers who would provide additional cover, should the need arise.

Each of the Marines was outfitted in the same fashion. They had a standard-issue laser sidearm holstered to their sides, their uniforms all the same matching drab brown and green camouflage. Their faces had been painted in various patterns of the same manner of camouflage to better blend the visible portions of their bodies with the natural environment of Nozseca VIII's lush vegetation near the camp. After a cursory inspection, verifying that each member of the squad was properly outfitted, Lieutenant Heath addressed the small assembly.

"Good morning, men. By now you all know that the Klingon forces are quickly approaching this planet. We've been ordered to recon out about three kilometers from the camp near the western perimeter. Command has decided that this is the most likely spot for the Klingon assault forces to form a beachhead. We'll be taking two shuttles out with us, one for transport and the other for cover. Our call sign for this mission is Weasel, and our aerial cover will be known as Eagle Eye. Should we encounter any enemy forces entering the area we are instructed to observe and *not* to engage them unless we are first fired upon. General Shruth needs all the information we can gather on the troop strength of the enemy forces. We need to be light on our feet, people. There is a strong possibility that we will need to make an

immediate evacuation of the ridge, so keep your communicators open on coded frequency beta-6. Any questions?”

As Heath had expected, there were none. Each of his troops was well trained and each trusted Heath’s leadership and decisions with their lives.

“All right. Prepare for dust off in five minutes. Get your gear stowed and strap yourselves in tight.”

Fifteen minutes later, the shuttles were streaming across the green valley just outside the camp. As the assault shuttles hovered a few feet above the green grass, the blades were gently pushed aside by the low proximity of the thrusters on the shuttles’ rear quarters. Heath, in the lead shuttle and sitting in the copilot’s seat, gazed out the forward view port at their surroundings. On the port and starboard sides of the shuttles, some two kilometers distant, were lush green forests full of the tallest trees Heath had ever seen. They resembled Terran pines, but the colors were off. Where pine trees had thick brown trunks and long green needle-like leaves, these trees had trunks of dark orange with bright yellow needles. The smallest of them couldn’t have been less than forty meters tall. At first glance, Heath was amazed by their height and contrasting beauty to the green field the shuttles were in. At a second glance he thought that they would make excellent cover for any ground forces that found themselves among them—be they Federation or Klingon. *Best to stay clear of those—if we can*, he thought to himself. In front of the shuttles, the great western ridge loomed up from the gently sloping field. The mountains were almost small enough to be classified as hills, but they would still provide an excellent field of vision into the valley that lay on the other side—precisely where the Klingon forces were expected to land and make their initial push.

The shuttles came up to the slope of the rise and began to ascend rapidly. Heath could immediately feel the pressure difference in his body as the shuttles gained altitude. He felt his ears pop, then heard similar grunting from the rest of the squad seated in the rear of the shuttle. A small green light on Heath’s status board began to flash in rapid sequence, telling the lieutenant that the Marines were about to arrive at their destination. Heath flipped the switch, which caused a red light to flash in the hold area of the shuttle—thus alerting the rest of the Marines that the shuttle was about to set down.

The shuttle landed with a soft thud and the rear ramp immediately lowered. The Marines filed out in pairs, each one taking up a predefined position outside the shuttle. This was the practiced drill: to secure the landing site before proceeding with the mission. Once the team had completely evacuated the shuttle, the rear hatch rose quickly and the craft lifted gently off the surface, hovering over the rocky terrain of its mountain landing spot, and then moved off to its cover position.

Heath flipped open his communicator. "Eagle Eye, copy?"

"Eagle Eye copies, Weasel," the observation pilot quickly responded.

"Anything on sensors?"

"Negative, sir. Weasel is clean."

"Affirmative. Maintain surveillance. Keep your scanners tight and all communication channels open. We may pick up a stray Klingon transmission if we're lucky."

"Eagle Eye copies. Out," the pilot affirmed before signing off the channel.

Heath turned to his squad. They each looked to him, waiting for the next order, looking like a group of cheetahs waiting to pounce on a helpless gazelle. This was what the years and months of training had led up to, and Heath was pleased to have these fine Marines with him. "Squad, take up assigned positions. Check in time is 1005 hours, mark."

Each of the Marines checked their wrist chronometers. *Five minutes*. They all moved out, weapons drawn, in varying directions from the center of their makeshift camp, where Heath would stay and coordinate their efforts. As soon as the final Marine, the Andorian Kalfor, had checked in, there was a call on Heath's communicator. Heath flipped it open.

"This is Weasel One, go ahead," Heath called into the communicator. It was Parsons who answered.

"This is Weasel Six. I'm picking up something on the tricorder."

"Specify."

"Looks like multiple transporter beams, Lieutenant. Massive amounts of energy."

"Location?"

"It seems to be coming from the valley, sir. Just where we thought they'd land."

Heath stepped over a small hill and produced a pair of laser binoculars from his side pouch. He aimed them down into the valley and set the magnification to full. As his field of view came into focus, Heath visually verified what Parsons' sensors were telling him. The Klingons were beaming down massive amounts of troops—whole battalions—one after another. Heath's communicator chirped again. It was from the Marine base, and the sequence of chirps that immediately followed the first signal indicated that the transmission was coming from General Shruth himself.

“Weasel One here,” Shane said softly.

“Weasel One, this is Delta One. Sensors are picking up landing craft coming down in your area.”

Heath didn't need his binoculars to behold this revelation. Overhead—from above the clouds—came the whirring sounds of shuttle engines. Then, like an apple falling from a tree, the Klingon landing craft emerged from the low clouds and landed softly in the field. Each one looked to be capable of hauling a whole squad of hover tanks in their engorged bellies. “Yes, sir. We've got them on visual. We're beginning our scans of the area.” Heath then signaled his team on their communicators. “All right people, stay frosty.”

Chapter 17

November 2252

Stardate 4011.14

Eleven parsecs from the Nozseca system, at the same moment that Lieutenant Heath was witnessing the arrival of the Klingon ground forces, Captain Sean Allaire of the *Anton*-class light cruiser USS *Perseus* was sipping gingerly at his cup of tea on the bridge of his ship. In the past five months, the *Perseus* had seen her share of action along the ever-expanding borders of the Klingon Empire, and Allaire was enjoying this brief respite between scuffles.

Truth be told, he was amazed to be alive at this point.

At the height of the engagement at Lea, the *Perseus* had been pursued by no less than three Klingon cruisers. Allaire had the engineering staff working double-time just to keep ahead of the enemy forces. Despite the fact that his vessel had been undamaged, there had still been an explosion in engineering. A plasma shunt had overloaded, the outcome of one of the engineers not paying close enough attention to any one of a dozen different dials he was responsible for monitoring. As a result, one of the magnetic bottles that contained the antimatter for the ship's warp drive had almost ruptured due to a containment field loss. Warp drive power was immediately cut down by twenty percent and the ship had lurched forward, sending the entire crew sprawling to the deck.

The science officer had been quick to report that the Klingons would be on them in moments at their present speed. As if to reinforce the officer's projections, a torpedo had streaked past the ship, narrowly avoiding the warp nacelle in the process.

Allaire had ordered evasive maneuvers—he would not give up the ship without a fight. He turned the ship in a wide arching turn to port at full impulse and brought his weapons to bear on the Klingons' last known position, but they were gone. For whatever reason, the Klingons had halted their pursuit and had plotted a course back

to the Zeta Gellius system. Allaire was not about to question the motives of a race he could not even begin to understand. Fearing the outcome of looking a gift horse in the mouth, the *Perseus* again turned one hundred eighty degrees and maneuvered back on their original escape vector.

Allaire wondered about the loss of life at Lea. There had been reports shortly after the battle that indicated that the Klingons—after obliterating one destroyer and heavily damaging the lead cruiser—had decided to leave the crippled starship as it was and continued on in their search of more illustrious targets. Some of the subspace messages had even suggested that this same roving Klingon squadron had made it all the way to Janni IV. Allaire, however, was not interested in vague speculations or unsubstantiated rumors. As unhealthy as it was for a commanding officer of a starship to have such feeling, Allaire wanted nothing more than pure revenge for the death that the Klingons had dealt out to the Federation forces.

After limping along in space for nearly two weeks, the *Perseus* received a subspace message from the *Heston*-class battle cruiser USS *Statham*. The message indicated that the ship was part of a new task force assigned to this sector, and that Starfleet Command had ordered all ships in the immediate vicinity to link up with the *Statham*, which would then act as the command vessel for the group. Allaire had responded to the request and had informed the *Statham* of the *Perseus*'s condition, upon which the commanding officer of the battle cruiser squadron—Rear Admiral Gabriel Dane—had informed Allaire that a tender was already assigned to the task force. The *Statham* would take the *Perseus* under tow to the rendezvous point for the task group, and the destroyer would undergo any needed repairs at that time.

At first sight of the *Statham*, Allaire was taken aback by her sheer size. She was every bit as majestic as the new *Constitution*-class cruisers coming out of the shipyards. In fact, the *Heston*-class shared many of the same systems with the slightly smaller cruiser she was based on. Where the two classes shared the essentially unchanged saucer-shaped primary hull, the *Heston*-class had a reshaped secondary hull. The shuttle bay was positioned above the primary deflector dish on the front of the hull, and a secondary deflector was placed on the aft end of the hull. This allowed for better protection and sensor capabilities on the otherwise unprotected stern of the ship. The *Statham*'s warp pylons were also slightly shorter

than her *Constitution* cousins. This arrangement placed the warp nacelles below the centerline of the primary saucer, instead of slightly above it. Also, where the *Constitution*-class was geared toward interstellar exploration and scientific study, the *Heston*-class did away with almost all the science spaces to make room for improved weapons and targeting systems—not to mention the more advanced computers and personnel those systems required. The addition of these systems reclassified her from that of a standard heavy cruiser to the designation battle cruiser, the first type of such vessels to receive this classification in the history of Starfleet.

Once the *Statham* had arrived at the rendezvous point with the *Perseus* in tow, a destroyer tender immediately pulled alongside the crippled destroyer. The USS *Egypt* extended a retractable air lock that connected to the *Perseus*'s air lock on the secondary hull. This better facilitated the transit of the work parties need to effect all the required repairs to the *Perseus*'s damaged warp propulsion systems, as well as loading a fresh supply of weapons for the defensive systems and perishables for the crew.

As the repairs had progressed aboard the *Perseus*, Commander Sean Allaire was debriefed by Admiral Dane on board the *Statham* and introduced to the other ship captains in the small fleet. Along with the *Statham* and the *Egypt*, the Federation forces also counted one *Baton Rouge*-class escort cruiser, the USS *Saladin*; two *Anton*-class light cruisers, the USS *Pinafore* and the USS *Amsterdam*; two *Loknar*-class frigates, the USS *Los Angeles* and the USS *Mordensia*; and one additional *Larson*-class destroyer, the USS *Waterloo*. The commanding officer of the *Waterloo*, Captain Thijs ter Horst, had been a classmate of Allaire at Starfleet Academy. The other officers he had either never heard of or had known only by reputation. After all the introductions and informal pleasantries had been exchanged, Dane called the briefing to order.

Rear Admiral Dane was a tall human of Scandinavian descent. His hair, peppered gray and thin, was pulled back tightly over his scalp. His presence was commanding and his voice was strong. It became immediately apparent to all that Dane was the kind of person who talked with his hands, using almost wild gestures at times when

describing the overall situation in the sector in which the Federation task force now found themselves.

“As you can see from the tactical displays in front of you, the situation we are now facing is critical. Even with all our combined strengths, we are still a small fish in a very large pond.”

On a large computer screen placed on the wall, there appeared a series of blue dots, which represented Starfleet vessels in the immediate area. It then zoomed out to encompass the entire sector. The starship captains looked in astonishment as the blue blips became smaller and smaller, then became surrounded on almost all sides by red triangles representing Klingon forces in the area. As the map stopped its motion, Dane began speaking again. “What you are seeing now represents the entire sector, or one hundred square parsecs. As you can also see, we are very nearly surrounded on three sides by enemy forces.”

It was true. The only area that contained more Federation ships than Klingon ones was on the top section of the sector map. Unfortunately, there were almost no starbases or Federation member worlds in that area. It would be easy pickings for the Klingons if—or when—they chose to begin pushing toward the Federation’s core again.

“Our orders are to proceed to this point: it’s been designated GR-1.” As if on command, a small point on the top portion of the sector map began flashing yellow.

One of the officers, the captain of the *Amsterdam*, spoke up. “GR-1, sir?”

“Yes, Captain. It stands for Ground Retake-One, and we are part of the operation of the same name. We’ve been ordered to form the spearhead of a new offensive in this sector. Fleet Command is sending additional forces to reinforce our position as we begin to push those Klingon hellions back to that godforsaken piece of space that hatched them.”

This statement brought a round of smiles from all the officers in the briefing room, as well as a none-too-subtle “*whoop*” from the captain of the *Los Angeles*.

“All the additional details of the mission have been encoded and will be sent directly to you all once you report back to your respective vessels. All of you will form into a V-formation, with the *Statham* taking the lead. If there is anything out

there to fight, I'm taking my command prerogative and firing first. The rest of you can join in the fun from there. That is all, gentlemen. Dismissed."

The officers all rose from their chairs at once. Dane left the briefing room, followed by the young female yeoman who had been assigned to record the minutes of the briefing. After all the remaining commanding officers had exited the room to return to their vessels, Captain ter Horst remained behind to talk with Allaire. The two captains stood straight and tall on opposite sides of the briefing room table, each wondering who would be the first to speak.

After an uncomfortably long silence, Thijs thought it was time to take the initiative. This conversation had been a long time in coming, and though he felt noticeably uncomfortable being in the same room with Allaire, ter Horst also felt relieved to finally be getting it out of the way. They had a job to do right now, and despite their personal feelings toward each other, neither could afford to let those negative emotions cloud their judgment.

"It's been a long time, Sean," Thijs said slowly.

"Almost ten years now," Allaire nodded without emotion.

There was another long silence in the room. What could Thijs possibly say to take down any barriers that stood between the two? The captain had no idea how high those walls had become until he'd suddenly been thrust into this situation with Allaire. His thoughts turned to his ship and his crew. He needed to return to the *Waterloo* within the hour to begin preparations for getting underway. This stonewalling between the two officers needed to be put to rest once and for all, one way or another.

"About Mary—I'm sorry I couldn't be there." The words tasted bitter in his mouth. Even though it was the truth, Thijs couldn't begin to bear the thought of seeing Sean and Mary together, even during those last few months when ter Horst knew the frail woman needed all the help and comfort she could get.

Captain Allaire shifted uncomfortably, taking in a deep breath and exhaling slowly. *What was Thijs expecting? That all could be forgiven?* Mary was not a wedge that should have been used to drive the two officers—two close friends—apart. But she *had* been used, and Sean and Thijs were both responsible for doing it. Sean had hoped this moment would never have come, but he also knew that

somewhere—deep in the recesses of his psyche—he needed closure on this matter to completely move on after Mary’s death.

“She—” Sean said as an image of his dead wife flashed into his memory, filling his heart with pain, sorrow, love, and happiness all at once. The emotional onslaught—one he hadn’t felt since that day at the hospital—was almost too much for him to bear. He managed to pull his Starfleet officer visage back over his emotions and continue to speak. “She asked for you . . . on that last day,” he said, looking down to his feet for a brief second.

Thijs stood there. No words. No emotion. Unsure of what to say or where to begin. “I wanted to be there—for both of you. I just—”

“You just couldn’t . . . or you just didn’t have the courage, is that right?” Sean shot back, too quickly and with far more spitefulness than he’d intended. Or had he?

Thijs’s expression changed then, not to one of anger, but to one of sorrow and remorse. His dark eyes fell to the deck. “It was a little of both, I suppose.”

Sean placed his hands on the seatback in front of him, bracing himself. “Some of her last words were for both of us. Really . . . I think they were for all *three* of us.” Sean then took another breath. “You should have been there, damn it. You were my best friend . . . we were *all* best friends . . . and you *should* have been there, Thijs—regardless of what’d happened in the past.”

“Even though I almost destroyed your relationship by what I did?”

Sean stepped back from the chair and rounded the table, coming face to face with Captain ter Horst. Thijs thought Sean was going to rush him, to strike out with all the pent-up rage that he knew Allaire was harboring. Instead he stopped to just within striking distance.

“What you did—what both of you did—actually brought Mary and me closer together, if you can believe that. I won’t lie to you . . . there was a lot of devastation in the wake of that night . . . but Mary and I worked through it. It took a few years, but we worked through it. I thought about sending a subspace message to you . . . to try and . . . well, it just never happened.”

“And then she got sick . . .”

“Yes. There was nothing I could do. There was nothing *anyone* could have done. She just needed someone to be there, you know?”

“I understand.”

Sean looked at his old friend. “There are some things that time erased, some things that silence erased, and there are some things that can *never* be erased, no matter how hard either one of us tries.”

“You’re right, of course,” Thijs said. It was his turn to look down to his feet in shame.

Sean fought against every emotion in his entire being and reached out to place a gentle hand on his old friend’s shoulder. “Mary wouldn’t want this thing between us to go on any longer. It’s time to heal old wounds, Thijs.”

Ter Horst looked up to see his old friend smiling an uneasy smile. He reached up and patted Sean’s hand. “We’ll try and work it out—somehow.”

“I think she’d really have liked that,” Sean said, fighting back the tears that he knew would stream from his eyes the moment he returned to his personal cabin on the *Perseus*.

Sean Allaire pulled his uniform tunic over his head and once again became the official commanding officer of the *Perseus*. Once he had gotten back aboard his ship, he’d gone straight for his quarters, informing his first officer via the intercom system in the ship’s transporter room that there would be a formal briefing fifteen minutes after his arrival. He needed the extra time to take a shower—to scrub off the feelings that had washed over him while he was aboard the *Statham*. Some feelings—as he had described to Ter Horst—were impossible to eradicate completely. However, he felt he had regained all the composure his position as captain dictated and he was ready and willing to return to duty.

He left his quarters, striding quickly through the small maze of interconnecting corridors that would lead him to the nearest express turbolift back to the bridge—the one place on the *Perseus* that he truly felt was like home. It was in that place where he made a difference, where everyone counted on him to guide the ship home safely and back to the loved ones they had left behind those many months ago. To say that Allaire was jealous of those crewmembers who had spouses to go home to

would be an understatement, but this ship was his home now. This was where he was needed. The *Perseus* was now his first love, although he would never fully admit it to himself—if only to honor the memory of his wife.

Allaire had asked his first officer, Lieutenant Commander Westergard, to gather all the department heads in the briefing room to go over the minutes obtained from the command briefing on the *Statham*. Once the meeting was finished, Allaire and Westergard returned to the bridge. Sean settled into the command chair, the soft and forgiving leather crumpling slightly under his weight. Allaire watched as Westergard took up his position at the helm console.

Allaire tapped the controls on the armchair of his seat that would link his transmitter directly to the control panel in engineering where the chief would undoubtedly be sitting. “Engine room, this is the captain.”

“Engine room here, sir,” came the voice of Sharon Florian, the *Perseus*’s chief engineer. She had been serving on the *Perseus* only a short time, but her performance had been amazing thus far. Before being stationed on the *Perseus*, she’d made a name for herself at Starbase 9, where her skills in engineering and power generation systems had become something of local legend. Allaire hadn’t had the time to go over all the stories he had heard about her, but if they were anything like the skill she had shown thus far, they were stories to be believed for sure.

“We’ll be going to warp speed soon, Chief. Is everything ready?” Allaire asked.

“Ready and waiting for your order, sir.”

“Very good,” Allaire said, then signed off the channel. “Mr. Westergard, lay in the new course heading. Once the *Statham* jumps into warp I want to be right behind her.”

“Already laid in, Captain.”

On the view screen the *Statham* suddenly jumped into warp. The automated control on the helm of the *Perseus*, having been signaled a microsecond beforehand about the *Statham*’s intentions, performed a thousand calculations in that following microsecond and leapt into warp with the rest of the task force.

Chapter 18

November 2252

Stardate 4011.14

The war had at last come to the idyllic planet of Nozseca VIII. This was not at all what Heath had wanted—or expected—when he'd joined the 7th Marine Expeditionary Forces those many months ago. From their vantage point high atop the ridge, Heath's reconnaissance team witnessed the Klingon forces amassing in the field below—and it all at once seemed surreal to him. He knew what the briefings and training missions had outlined, he knew what the fleet communications had told him and what the intelligence reports had to say, but it was all numbers and statistics up to this moment. There, in the field below, was the real thing: wave after wave of Klingon ground forces lining up in their ranks. Behind them were a squadron of attack shuttles and behind those were the groups of Klingon hover tanks.

Heath crouched low, lying on his belly with his laser-binoculars held tightly to his eyes. The sun was already beating down mercilessly on the Starfleet Marines, and Heath knew that any sudden movement on his team's part could give away their position to the sensor sweeps he knew the Klingons were already performing on the area. Heath could hear the rustling of shrubs to his right and turned slowly to see who the interloper was. It was the Andorian lance corporal—Kalfor.

"What is it, Corporal?" Heath asked as he turned back to watch the Klingon forces continue to form into battalions.

"What do we do now, sir?" the Andorian asked, sounding more anxious than nervous.

"We wait for orders from HQ and continue our reconnaissance mission, Corporal," Heath said, as if he were stating the obvious answer the corporal should have known.

Kalfor followed Heath's gaze into the field below. The transporter beams had tapered off to a slow trickle. This was either all the forces the Klingons had to commit—or this was just the first wave. Either way it made little difference. It was probably all they would need to get the job done.

“What do you think happened to the starships in orbit, sir? I mean—what happened to *our* ships?”

It was a fair enough question, but the answer seemed just as obvious as the last one he had given the younger Marine. “Either they were destroyed, run off—or they are currently engaged with the enemy ships. Regardless, they don't seem to have made much of an impact so far, no matter how you look at the situation.”

There was another brush of movement to Heath's left. It was Tech Sergeant Brians.

“Sir, incoming communication from headquarters. It's General Shruth,” Brians said, handing over the encrypted short-range communicator. The communicator was essentially the same as the high frequency fleet-issued model, except this one tied directly into a backpack-mounted encryption unit that Brians carried in his pack. There was also a high frequency repeater tucked in the pack as well, which allowed for a greater range than any standard issue communicator could have ever hoped to achieve. Heath grabbed the unit and—flipping it open—placed it to his ear.

“This is Weasel-One. Go ahead, base.”

“Weasel leader, we have enemy forces attempting to form on our flank. We need you to return to base camp immediately. Do whatever you need to do to ensure the safe arrival of your team.”

What could we possibly do? The Klingons will probably pick us off from orbit the second we make a move. “Aye, sir,” was all Heath could muster. He was about to hand the communicator back to Brians when another signal from the handset got his attention. “This is Heath; go ahead.”

“Lieutenant, this is Eagle Eye. I hear you could use a distraction, sir?”

“Say again, Eagle Eye?” Heath asked, although he was sure he'd heard the communication the first time.

“This is Eagle Eye. Weasel, prepare for dust-off.”

Heath didn't really know what to expect, but he knew that the pilot in the shuttle was one of the best on the base. If he had a plan to get the squad out, then Heath would follow it through. There really wasn't much of a choice at this point. Heath signaled the rest of his team to form up, then had Brians signal the transport shuttle.

As the primary transport came in to land, Heath was sure the Klingon sensors were picking it up. And, as if Eagle Eye was reading Heath's mind, the second shuttle came in low and fast, and then swooped over the Marines' position, descending into the valley where the Klingons were forming. Descending into the valley of death.

Heath picked up his communicator and screamed to the shuttle. "Eagle Eye! This is Weasel-One . . . abort. I say again, *abort!*"

"Negative sir, I cannot comply. Get back to base—and good luck, Lieutenant."

As Heath's team scrambled into their landing craft, he turned and rushed back to the ridge. He saw Eagle Eye streaming into the valley from the ridge side, its forward laser cannons firing in multiple directions all at once. The front lines of the Klingon forces were sent scattering in every direction as the attack shuttle made a suicide run on the center of the formation. The Marine shuttle very nearly succeeded in breaking the Klingon formation in two before an enterprising squad of Klingons trained their heavy missile launchers on it. They unleashed a small salvo of warheads that instantly blew the attacking shuttlecraft into fragments.

"Sir!" someone yelled from behind Heath. "Sir, we have to *go!*" Heath turned from the sight of the smoldering wreckage that—only a moment before—had been their aerial support. Moments later, the landing craft holding Heath's squad lurched forward and sped back toward the base.

On their way back to the main camp, as the shuttle sped over the same lush field it had crossed only a short time ago, Heath ordered the shuttle's pilot to begin a mine-laying operation. The shuttles had been retrofitted with a limited supply of laser mines for just such an event. The mines, when triggered by an unsuspecting enemy agent, would send out high bursts of laser energy in a wide arch that covered several

square meters. They were extremely difficult to diffuse, and Heath had hoped they would slow down any advancing Klingon force. Unfortunately, there were simply too few mines to cover the whole field in such a short time. Instead, Heath simply laid them in what he assumed would be the most direct route the Klingon forces would take on their way to the Marines' camp.

Once Heath's team was safely back at the base, he immediately bolted from the shuttle hangar to the command building where General Shruth and Colonel Thomas were waiting. After a quick salute, Heath was admitted into the war planning room.

"There's no need to report, Lieutenant Heath," Shruth said formally, not bothering to look up from the status display table. Heath could see that the image on the holotable portrayed the Marines' camp in the center of the topography, with the enemy forces virtually surrounding the base.

"What are our options, sir?" Heath asked, as much to Shruth as to Thomas.

"We've ordered antimatter grenade launchers to be placed on every square meter of available roof space," Thomas said.

"And the surface-to-air torpedo launchers are being armed at this very moment," Shruth added. "I'll need you and your team to protect the main gate to the camp, Lieutenant."

Heath knew it was a suicide order. It was not the first, nor would it be the last during this day. "Of course, General."

Shruth looked up from the table. "Arm each one of your men with pulsed laser rifles and anything else you can throw at them, Lieutenant. I want a *high* enemy body count out there."

"Yes, sir. I understand," Heath said, saluting both officers and leaving to re-form his team near the camp's main entrance.

Within minutes of his team arriving at the forward gate, Heath could hear the air raid sirens going off all over the base. He looked from tower to tower, from rooftop to rooftop, and saw that a team of heavy laser grenade teams had capped each of them. He turned his attention to the ridge where he and his team had been stationed

a short time ago, and saw that the tops were now being crested by Klingon soldiers . . . hundreds of them . . . thousands of them. Following the first battalions were the hover tanks. They were slow and lumbering rectangular shapes of rust-red metal, with large turreted tops that swung from side to side in slow arcs.

Behind the tanks were assault craft, not very different in shape and function than the one the Marines had at their own disposal. Each carried about twenty armed infantrymen—siege teams the Klingons would use once the Starfleet camp walls were breached. All the other troops in the front lines of the Klingon forces were the grunts. They were the regular infantry: the cannon fodder.

Heath ordered his men to take up their assigned positions. Williams, his team sniper, took up position on the highest point of the main gate tower, about thirty meters up. Heath looked up at the tower just in time to see the lance corporal squeeze off a few rounds from his highly focused laser rifle. The intended targets were too far distant to be seen with the naked eye, but Heath was sure that Williams had scored a few hits. Williams had never been known as a power waster.

As soon as Williams's victims had hit the deck, the Klingons responded by launching their own mortar attack on the base. Heath could feel the concussive impacts all around him as the Klingons tried to gauge accurate azimuth and elevation readings to ensure maximum damage with their rounds. So far, Heath didn't think the Klingons had hit anything of value. That was until one of the shuttle hangars erupted in a ball of flame at the far end of the base, the ensuing fireball radiating immense heat even at a distance of four hundred meters.

The Klingons never stopped marching toward the camp. They were close now, only about five hundred meters. The Starfleet mortars were firing almost nonstop at this point. There were now explosions everywhere on the once-beautiful field in front of the camp. Some were from the impact of the antimatter grenades and some were from the laser mines that Heath had laid earlier. Heath heard a whooshing sound overhead and turned to see the base's surface-mounted projectile launchers firing barrages into the midday sky, their intended targets in low orbit high above the battlefield. Heath hoped that more than a few of those torpedoes found their mark.

Heath saw Kalfor out of his peripheral vision. The Andorian had taken up a firing position on the opposite side of the camp gate from him. Kalfor had switched his laser rifle over to short burst mode. While this decreased the punch of each blast, it allowed for better consumption of power and more rate of discharge. Heath could see the effect that the Andorian's fire was having as line after line of Klingon troops fell to the ground. Heath could hear Throm, the Tellarite private, scream some unknown obscenities as he fired salvo after salvo from his antimatter grenade launcher. Heath fired off a few more rounds from his hand laser, taking out two more Klingon foot soldiers, and then looked back to Kalfor.

"Corporal, what's your status?" Heath asked, yelling over the cacophony of war to the lance corporal who was only about three meters away.

"Running low on power, sir," Kalfor replied in between firing rounds.

At that moment a Klingon missile found its target, striking the wall beside Kalfor, obliterating both the wall and the Andorian in the same moment, and flinging Heath onto his backside.

For Heath, everything began moving in a sort of slow motion. His hearing had gone and he could feel bits of rubble rain down onto his helmet and body as he tried to stumble to his feet. Out of nowhere, Parsons, the sensor officer, rushed to the captain's side. He was saying something, his lips moving but not emitting any sound. It didn't take long for Heath to figure out the word that Parsons was—in fact—screaming at the top of his lungs.

"Move!"

Parsons grabbed him by the elbow and dragged the lieutenant to his feet just as the sound began to return to Heath's ears. Heath could discern an enemy missile scream overhead and make its impact elsewhere on the base.

"Marine, where are we going?" Heath stammered as he regained his balance.

"We need to fall back to the command center, sir. We need to protect the general."

Heath turned and saw the gate that he and Kalfor had been protecting had turned into an unrecognizable pile of debris and twisted metal. The lieutenant looked toward the tower where Williams had been positioned, but the tower was now completely gone.

A Klingon tank punched through a relatively undamaged portion of the wall, sending bits of cement and plasti-steel chunks in a hundred different directions. At its present speed it would take only a few seconds before the tank landed right on top of Heath. He withdrew his sidearm and, along with Parsons, fired round after round into the vehicle without results. Suddenly there was an explosion just ahead of the tank that sent it spiraling out of control, flipping it over and back on its own path. Heath and Parsons looked at one another, then turned to face the sound of laughter behind them. It was Throm—his grenade launcher still smoking from the round it had just fired.

“Sorry, sir,” the Tellarite shouted through fits of hysteria. “I should have said, *‘fire in the hole’* first.”

“Got any more rounds, Private?” Heath asked.

“Yes, sir, I do. Five more,” Throm responded as he picked himself up.

“Good. See if you can take out any more of those tanks.”

“And thanks!” Parsons yelled as the Tellarite took off to find more targets of opportunity.

“Come on,” Heath said as the two officers ran toward the damaged command building. As they neared the main entrance, there was a barrage of disrupter fire that sent the two Marines sprawling for cover. Heath jumped behind a ruined wall while Parsons took up position behind an overturned personnel carrier.

Heath leaned his head out to try to locate the Klingons, but as soon as he peered out there was another blast of disrupter fire. “Sniper,” he yelled. “Parsons, maintain cover!”

“That’s the best order I’ve gotten all day, sir!” Parsons yelled back.

There seemed to be silence in the immediate area. It was almost as if time was standing still. Heath looked from side to side of his position, looking to see if he could get out of his predicament and crawl to another vantage point. It was not looking good. His pocket began beeping and he realized all at once that he had forgotten which pouch he had placed his communicator in. Heath fumbled with his rifle, then finally sat it down on the ground and withdrew the communicator from his right front pouch.

“Heath here,” he said softly—as if, were his voice any louder, it would give away his position.

“Sir, this is Zinsak. I have your sniper in my sights. Stand by.”

After a tense moment there were the sounds of a struggle, then the unmistakable dull thud as a body hit the ground. Zinsak appeared from behind an alcove with no weapon in his hands. Not that he really needed one. He was trained in more forms of martial arts than anyone Heath had ever known. “I don’t think you’ll be hearing from the sniper any more, sir,” Zinsak said with a smile.

Heath, Zinsak, and Parsons made their way into the command building uncontested. There were bodies of fallen Marines everywhere and the sounds of death and destruction rang out from all over the base. Heath could hear explosions and the exchanges of laser and disrupter fire seemingly coming from every direction.

They entered the war room and found Shruth still leaning over the status table. Colonel Thomas was either dead or unconscious against the far wall.

“What are your orders, sir?” Heath asked as the remainder of his team came to attention in the general’s presence.

“I’ve set the base’s automated-destruct sequence to be activated on my next command,” Shruth inclined his head to a computer terminal on the wall. One solitary red light flashed in slow sequence. “One of us will need to press that button.”

“And then?” Zinsak asked.

“The furnace cooling valves will shut off, Corporal. Fifteen seconds later everything within twenty kilometers of this base will be leveled,” Shruth said in a matter-of-fact tone. “We need to draw as many of those Klingon devils into the destruction radius as possible. I’ve set the rooftop torpedo launchers to full automatic. They’ll keep firing until they run out of ammunition. Sensor reports indicate that we’ve already disabled two of their orbiting destroyers.”

Heath looked at his men, then back to General Shruth. “We understand, sir.”

The building began to a slow rhythmic rumble, and then started to quake dangerously. Heath, whether consciously or not, ran to the window to see what was

happening. There, in the courtyard of the command building, were three hover tanks with cannons pointed directly at their position.

“Take cover!” Heath yelled as he pivoted on his heel.

There was an explosion, and everything went black.

“General Martok, we’ve found something.”

The assault commander turned to the voice. “Yes, what is it?”

The Klingon officer climbed over a piece of rubble that had once been a door and handed a computer display to his commanding officer. “Sir, it appears that they had the base wired for a self-destruct.”

Martok looked into the computer, then to the shattered remains of the interior of the command center, scoffing at the destruction. “These pitiful fools can’t even kill *themselves* correctly. It’s no wonder we have advanced so far into their territory.”

“Yes, my lord,” the Klingon guard sneered.

“*Disgusting*,” the general replied. “These weaklings beg for death. They have no honor.”

“Sir,” sounded another soldier from behind the general, “we’ve found a survivor.”

Martok turned to his subordinate. “*Ah*. It appears that this day may not have been entirely wasted. I have been anxious to try out some of the new interrogation methods devised by our scientists. Where is he?”

“He’s outside, my lord. It appears he may have been thrown free of the explosion that killed his comrades. He is in need of medical attention.”

The general, flanked by his aides, descended the two flights of stairs that brought them down to ground level and then exited into the destroyed courtyard. There, huddled around by Klingon ground troops, was the broken body of Lieutenant Shane Heath.

“He’s alive?” the general asked, not averting his gaze from the fallen Marine.

The Klingon physician stood up from the wounded Marine. “*Barely*, my lord. His identity card.” The doctor produced the card and handed it to the general.

The general took the computer cartridge and slid it into the reader provided by another of his aides. “Well, what do we have here? It looks like a Federation officer. Colonel Ronald Givers, of Starfleet Intelligence.”

“Is he someone of great importance, sir?” the general’s aide asked.

“It would seem so,” Martok replied, handing the card reader back to his aide. “Healer, attend to his wounds and have him beamed aboard my ship. His knowledge may be of use to us.”

“Yes, my lord,” the physician replied, and then injected Heath with a red substance from his hypo spray. A moment later the two beamed up to the command ship.

“My lord, your orders?” the general’s first aide asked.

“Find any computer terminal—operational or not—and strip as much information from it as you can.” Looking down, he kicked over the corpse of a fallen Andorian—a flag officer, by the looks of his tattered uniform. “Once that is complete, we will destroy this installation from orbit. Our comrades are already establishing our own fortification several hundred kilometers from here. It amazes me that the Federation knows so *little* of ground warfare. This site is completely ill-suited for a base of operations.” Martok spat on the ground near the remains of another Starfleet Marine. “The smell alone of their decaying flesh is enough to turn even a warrior’s stomach sour. The stench pollutes my nostrils and I wish to disintegrate it. These bodies are not even worthy of a warrior’s funeral.”

“I have my orders and I will obey, my lord.”

“See that you do. Report to me *anything* you find here. I am returning to the ship to see if our prisoner has anything redeeming to say about the waste of life and resources Starfleet displayed here today.”

Chapter 19

November 2252

Stardate 4011.15

As ordered, the ships of Task Force 3 had arranged themselves into a diamond formation, with the USS *Statham* in the lead. Aft of the *Statham*, on the port and starboard sides respectively, were the *Larson*-class destroyers with the heavy cruiser USS *Saladin* tucked neatly between them. The *Anton*-class cruisers had taken up the far points of the diamond formation, and the *Loknar*-class frigates had taken up station in the rear of the formation. The task force had just dropped out of warp and headed toward their intended destination, codenamed GR-1.

Commander Sean Allaire—despite his best intentions—still couldn’t get the unintentional meeting between himself and Captain Thijs ter Horst out of his mind. Was he feeling anger? Was it frustration? Or was it simply the reminder of the loss of his wife—something he hadn’t really dealt with since her passing? He wasn’t sure, nor did he think he would ever truly be sure.

Rear Admiral Dane, on board the *Statham*, had relayed a subspace distress call from the Marine encampment on Nozseca about thirty minutes prior to the task force arriving at GR-1. Dane had advised the group of Federation starships that they were too far away to render any assistance to the Marines. Allaire had asked his communications officer to send another message to the *Statham*, asking for the status of the Marines on Nozseca.

Sean was sitting in his command chair, fingers strumming absentmindedly on his armrest, when the reply came through to the *Perseus*. “Commander Allaire, call coming in from the *Statham*. It’s Admiral Dane,” the young ensign said from the communications station.

“Onscreen, please.”

On the view screen was the image of the *Statham*, just to the starboard-forward quarter of the *Perseus* by five hundred kilometers. The image of the impressive

Heston-class cruiser wavered on the screen, fading out to be replaced by the face of Rear Admiral Gabriel Dane. He was a middle-aged man in his late forties, his light brown hair showing bits of the salt-and-pepper gray that came with midlife in most humans. Allaire had recently become aware that Dane had turned down a promotion to the rank of vice admiral. Sean assumed Dane's decision probably had something to do with the fact that such a promotion would take him out of the front lines and put him behind a desk somewhere. After reviewing Dane's record, Allaire was glad to have such a seasoned and well-disciplined officer commanding the attack group.

"Captain Allaire, what is your status?" the rear admiral asked.

"All ship's functions are at nearly one hundred percent, sir. Our chief engineer is adjusting the last of our concerns right now."

"Is there something wrong with the engines?" Dane asked.

"No sir. He's doing some fine-tuning on the port laser banks. Nothing serious; he's just trying to squeeze a little more power from the emitters."

"Good to hear it, Sean. I have to say, I was pretty happy to get you into this group. We have a lot of fine officers here—not to mention a pretty impressive display of force."

"Agreed, sir, but as for the reason I called . . ." Sean let his words trail off and Dane picked up on the hesitation after only a moment.

"The Marines on Nozseca?"

"Yes, sir."

The admiral took a deep breath. "There's still no word. At last report they were being overrun by Klingon ground forces. The base was pretty small. I know General Shruth personally, and I'm sure he's put up the best fight that anyone could have asked from him, maybe even more—but as far as there being any survivors . . . well, we still haven't heard anything yet."

"I understand, sir."

"We have half our communications system dedicated to any calls that might come in from the base. If we hear anything from them, I'll make the decision at that time whether we can turn around and render them any assistance."

"Of course, sir."

“Right now we need to focus the rest of our resources here at GR-1,” the admiral reiterated. “My science officer seems to think that there may be a major Klingon strike force in the area. Once we’ve established whether or not that’s true, I’ll make sure to contact the task force immediately and disseminate battle orders.”

“Yes, sir. Thank you for keeping us in the loop.”

“No problem, Captain. We’re all on edge. Just don’t let other conflicts discourage you from our task here.”

“Understood, Admiral.”

Dane smiled. “Let’s see if we can find some Klingons and settle a few scores, aye?”

“It’d be a pleasure, sir,” Sean said as the channel signed off, the image of Dane fading back to that of the *Statham*.

“Sir, we have a sensor contact.”

“Range?” Captain Thijs ter Horst requested.

“Ten-thousand kilometers and closing fast, sir!”

“Hail the *Statham*. I want to verify everyone is seeing this.”

Rear Admiral Dane had ordered the *Waterloo* ahead of the task force to scout a nearby sector of space that was assumed to be devoid of anything interesting. Captain ter Horst had taken the change of pace with delight. The task force had been in their current position for almost three hours now. Each of the ships had conducted an exhaustive sensor sweep of the area and had reported to Dane their findings—or lack thereof. Dane had then ordered the *Waterloo* to proceed to the next sector on the task force’s current vector, and had then commanded the *Mordensia* to perform the same scan on the sector adjacent to the remainder of their forces.

Commander Wishart, on board the *Mordensia*, had reported nothing of interest in his sector. However, as soon as the *Waterloo* had entered the sector just ahead of the rest of the task force, her sensors had sprung to life with new contacts.

On the bridge of the *Waterloo*, the image of the streaming star field was replaced with the image of Rear Admiral Dane. “Report, Captain ter Horst.”

“Exact figures are coming in now, sir,” Thijs said to the task group commander, and then turned to his science officer.

Lieutenant Commander Overson was from Alpha Centauri, the planet of choice for Zephram Cochrane’s first faster-than-light experiments more than a century ago. In the preceding years, it’d become a major member of the Federation, having produced some of the finest scientific and command personnel in Starfleet—Vulcan notwithstanding.

“Report, Mr. Overson,” Thijs asked of his science officer.

“Multiple sensor contacts, sir. Sensors are showing no less than three D-7 heavy cruisers and two D-16 destroyers. However, at this range there could very well be more.”

“Specify,” Captain ter Horst asked, prodding the science officer for further details.

“It’s quite possible that the Klingons are cruising in such a tight formation that our ship’s sensors are unable to distinguish one vessel from another. If that is the case, we could be looking at twice as many craft as the long-range sensors are currently reporting. And sir—”

“Yes, Mr. Overson.”

Overson turned from the sensor hood of his console to look at his captain. “They appear to be on an intercept course with us.”

Captain ter Horst turned his attention back to Rear Admiral Dane’s image on the main viewer. “Did you read that, Admiral?”

“I heard it, Captain. We’re proceeding to your coordinates at warp factor three. We should be there in less than ten minutes. Keep your distance from the Klingons, Thijs. Reverse course if you have to. Keep the range between you and the Klingons to no less than two thousand kilometers. Your ship just won’t stand the pounding if they’re allowed to get any closer, and we are going to need the combined strength of the entire task force to deal with the enemy.”

Ter Horst felt as if any minute he would break into a cold sweat. “Understood, sir. We’ll maintain an open communication channel with you, as well as a sensor bearing on the enemy contacts.”

The admiral's finger hovered over a switch on the armrest of his chair. "We'll be there shortly, Captain. Dane out." Ter Horst saw Dane push the communications button on his armrest just as the channel was closed.

"Helmsman," Thijs began, "I want the forward view screen on maximum magnification. If our sensors can't tell us what we need to know, then maybe our good old-fashioned eyes *will*."

"Yes, sir," the officer reported, then switched the viewer to full magnification. Even now the Klingon ships were a barely visible blotch on the screen, almost indistinguishable from the star field that they seemingly hovered in.

Ter Horst knew that the image would get a lot cleaner in the next few minutes as the Klingons closed the distance between the ships. He only hoped it wouldn't be too late for the *Waterloo* by the time that happened.

By the time the rest of the Federation task force had arrived, the Klingons had closed to a considerably shorter distance with the *Waterloo*. The small *Larson*-class destroyer was speeding away from the Klingons at full power, but the faster enemy ships were closing in quickly. As Admiral Dane's sensors had confirmed, the *Waterloo* was just outside the weapons range of the lead Klingon vessels—two D-16 *Swiftwind* destroyers. However, if the more heavily armed Klingon heavy cruisers decided to take over the chase, the *Waterloo* would be done for. The Federation ship was already well within the cone of fire for the D-7s. The only thing holding the faster D-7s back was the fact that their comrades in the *Swiftwind* were directly in their line of fire.

Dane decided to even the odds before the situation became untenable. He quickly ordered the remainder of the task force to form up with the *Waterloo*. As the Federation destroyer sped up to the group, Dane ordered that a hole be opened in the port side of the formation. The *Waterloo* sped over the starboard side of the task force at full impulse, passing over and between the *Perseus* and the light cruiser *Pinafore*. She then made a tight turn to port and formed up with the group in between the heavy cruiser *Saladin* and the light cruiser *Amsterdam*.

As soon as the *Waterloo* was in position, the *Statham* received the communication it had been waiting for: the *Mordensia* had entered the sector and would be linking up with the rest of the task force in less than two minutes. Once all the Federation forces were back into their original diamond formation the Klingons began to slow to one-quarter impulse.

On the bridge of the *Waterloo*, Captain ter Horst looked at his science officer.

“What are they doing?”

“Unknown, sir,” Overson said. After looking at the forward view screen for a moment, he turned his attention back to the hood of his sensor readout computer.

“The rest of our forces are slowing as well.”

Ter Horst shot the order to the helmsman. “Helm, reduce speed to one-quarter impulse.”

On the bridge of the old battle cruiser *Statham*, Admiral Dane was also gazing at the image of the Klingon ships on the view screen. There they were—larger than life itself and less than two thousand kilometers off the bow. It almost looked as if the Klingon ships were hanging motionless in space, but then there was movement.

The two *Swiftwinds* rapidly changed course, heading away from one another at their current speed of less than half-impulse. When they were sufficiently far enough apart, the heavier Klingon cruisers moved to the front of the pack—but not *quite* the front. Instead, all the Klingon ships moved simultaneously to re-form their positions. Soon Dane was staring a straight line of Klingons—the three D-7s in the middle and capped at either end by a *Swiftwind* destroyer.

Dane had to move quickly. Although the Klingons were outnumbered eight to five, the current position of the enemy craft put all their weapons to bear on five of the Federation starships, with the three remaining friendly ships tucked in behind the ones in front of them. He needed to push the odds in favor of the Starfleet crews. He ordered the Federation ships to form an abreast formation. He would meet the Klingons head-on in only a few seconds.

Just as the two *Loknar*-class frigates were coming out from behind the task force and around their respective sides of the deflating diamond formation, the Klingons opened fire with everything they had.

The Klingons were quite selective in their targets. Dane had thought that all their weapons would bear down on the heaviest Federation ship first, and then they would take out the smaller ships one by one. Instead, the Klingons again broke formation and attacked individual targets. It was a brilliant diversionary tactic, as the one Klingon vessel Dane had locked his weapons on suddenly changed its heading and dove after the *Saladin*. However, the other two Klingon heavy cruisers had put the *Statham* and the *Waterloo* in their sights, each taking their own predefined target.

True to his word, Dane ordered the *Statham* to open fire with full lasers, and thus signaled the rest of the Federation forces to do the same. The *Statham*'s beams lanced out from the front of the primary hull and struck the Klingon cruiser on the forward bridge section. The science officer in turn reported that the lasers had caused almost no damage to the ship, but the Klingon's shields were fluctuating. Seizing the opportunity before it was too late, he ordered the accelerator cannons fired as quickly as possible.

The *Perseus*, on the periphery of the battle, had taken a direct hit from two torpedoes as the offending Klingon cruiser sailed triumphantly under her after its first run. Captain Allaire had been thrown free of his command chair and landed knee first into the hard steel deck behind the helmsman's station. Wincing in pain, he'd managed to stagger uneasily back into the command chair and reassert his control over the situation.

"Damage report!" he barked, not taking his eyes from the view screen.

Lieutenant Commander Sharon Florian spoke up from the engineering station to the left of the captain's command chair. "Heavy damage to the starboard warp pylon, sir. We're going to be without warp power for a few days."

Unlike her larger cousins in the fleet, the *Perseus* had only one warp nacelle that was supported on high by two swept back pylons that sprang up from either side of her elongated saucer section. The damage to either of the pylons was bad news. The

starboard pylon held the primary plasma conduits for the antimatter stream that—once injected into the warp nacelle—caused the formation of the stable warp field that allowed the ship to travel at incredible velocities. The port pylon, however, contained the backup conduit that could be switched over to in emergencies. The idea of having a backup was extremely sound, but the execution of such a switch from one pylon to the other had one major drawback: it would take a full day's work to reroute all the necessary circuits and relays.

"I'm sure this old gal has a lot of fight left in her," Allaire said to his engineer, a smile sneaking its way onto his face. "Try and route as much power as you can into weapons and shields. We'll worry about how to get home later."

"Aye, sir," the engineer responded.

As the *Perseus* turned to once again face her opponent, the *Anton*-class light cruiser *Pinafore* came into Allaire's view and unleashed a round from her cannons at the Klingon destroyer. The impact sent the Klingon destroyer off its present course, as if it had been smacked across its bow by a giant unseen hand.

Nice shooting, Pinafore. You've just earned your pay for the week.

Minutes later, to the port side of the *Pinafore*, the *Saladin* and the recently arrived *Mordensia* were taking turns pounding a Klingon heavy cruiser. The Klingon definitely seemed to be on the losing end of the scuffle. Soon its shields were failing and its weapons fire became erratic. The captain of the frigate *Mordensia*, Commander Wishart, sent a hail to the Klingon cruiser to stand down and prepare to be boarded. After a tense moment the communications officer on the *Mordensia* had reported that the Klingon commander was surrendering his ship, and that his crew should be allowed to live.

"We don't kill our prisoners, Commander. You will be treated well. Prepare to lower your shields so my men can beam aboard."

The *Mordensia* moved to within transporter range of the afflicted Klingon ship, with the *Saladin* providing cover—in case any other Klingon vessels decided to take advantage of the unprotected Starfleet frigate. As the *Mordensia* closed to within five hundred meters of the Klingon ship, the D-7's shields went down. Wishart then

ordered his shields to be lowered, but not before requesting that the *Saladin* lock its remaining weapons on the crippled Klingons, just in case.

The *Mordensia* inched closer to the Klingons. There was almost no sign of life from the Klingon ship. In the transporter room, the *Mordensia*'s security personnel waited, fully armed and ready for anything. The call came over the intercom from the bridge. It was the captain.

“Activate transporters.”

As soon as the crewmembers had completely dematerialized from the *Mordensia*'s transporter chamber, the crippled Klingon cruiser opened fire on the small frigate with full disruptors. The green bolts of lightning seemed to flash out from every forward inch of the Klingon destroyer all at once. The first blasts destroyed the bridge, sending bodies and chunks of molten metal flying about in the icy vacuum of space. The second volley impacted with the starboard warp nacelle cap. The pulsating red cap exploded as the primary matter-antimatter injectors inside the nacelle were twisted into irregular shapes, causing the highly tuned plasma stream to burst out uncontrollably.

The *Saladin* didn't have time to react. From the initial onslaught of the Klingon weapons to the now-uncontrollable antimatter explosion that was about to occur; only a fraction of a minute had elapsed. Captain Brian Kreuzinger ordered the *Saladin* to quickly reverse its course, but it was too late. The *Mordensia* exploded in a violent ball of blue-white flame, sending the *Saladin* sailing to starboard as her entire hull threatened to rattle itself to pieces.

The *Statham*, to the port of the explosion of the *Mordensia*, was unharmed by the violent end to the Federation frigate. In fact, it had fared very well against the Klingon heavy cruiser that had picked a fight with the larger and more powerful Federation battle cruiser. The Klingon ship had turned a full one hundred eighty degrees, looking to escape the fight at its fastest possible speed. Unfortunately, for the Klingons it simply was not fast enough. Admiral Dane's first priorities were to take out the Klingons' warp engines. They had partially succeeded in that endeavor—destroying one nacelle completely in the first exchange of fire between the two ships. Now the Klingons, leaking plasma and losing power, were trying to extricate themselves at half-impulse power.

Dane brought the *Statham* on top of the Klingons quickly. The captain waited until not one, but all the *Statham*'s forward weapons could be trained on the Klingon ship before he opened fire. When the Federation battle cruiser was well within the acceptable range, Dane ordered a barrage of all batteries simultaneously. The laser blasts shot out from the lower saucer section while a volley of rounds from the accelerator cannons sailed toward their intended target. First the lasers struck home, causing a large explosion to erupt on the aft end of the Klingon ship. Whatever was left after that was obliterated by the detonation of the high-energy warheads. After a flash of light, the Klingon ship was gone; the total amount of debris remaining wouldn't have fit inside the admiral's personal luggage.

On board the *Waterloo*, Captain Thijs ter Horst witnessed the destruction of the Klingon vessel by the *Statham*.

"Send Admiral Dane my compliments," the captain said to his communications officer.

"Right away, sir."

"Sir, I think I have something on long range sensors, but it's a little fuzzy," Lieutenant Overson interrupted.

"Explain *fuzzy*," ter Horst said, not at all amused with his science officer's lack of terminology.

"Honestly, sir, I'm not sure. Would it be possible to divert some power to the sensor array? We could be seeing friendly reinforcements."

Ter Horst thought it over for a minute. They would be in weapons range of another Klingon ship in less than two minutes.

"Very well, but make it quick. I want that power redirected to the lasers in sixty seconds."

"Aye, sir," Overson replied, his fingers adjusting the controls at his science station before his captain had even finished his sentence.

The *Waterloo* turned sharply in the direction of the sensor contact and—at the same moment—became the target of choice for another Klingon heavy cruiser.

"Sir, there's a Klingon ship entering the area," the helmsman said.

"Sir, I've almost got it," Overson replied. "Give me ten seconds."

As the seconds ticked down—and the Klingon cruiser got to within range of the *Waterloo*'s weapons—ter Horst could feel the sweat on the back of his neck stick to his uniform tunic.

“Overson, what do you have? We have Klingons on our tail. I need to divert all power to the shields or we’re going be done for!” ter Horst demanded.

Just then, the contacts on the long-range sensors came into complete focus for one brief moment before power was redirected back to the shields. Overson felt his heart stop as he looked to his captain, the words coming out in a hushed whisper.

“*Oh no . . .*”

Chapter 20

Things had just deteriorated—and now there was little doubt as to how this conflict would turn out if the Federation forces did not make the proper decisions at critical junctures.

As the sensors on the *Waterloo* had shown, there were indeed reinforcements entering the system. However, they were not Starfleet craft that had shown up on the long-range sensor report. It was, in fact, additional Klingon vessels that were entering the system and somehow had gone undetected up to this point. To say that Captain ter Horst was frustrated with this new information would have been a universal understatement.

“Can you tell me the *exact* composition of the new sensor contacts, Mr. Overson?”

“Yes, sir. The sensors have just finished a complete scan of the sector,” Overson replied, then left his station to stand by his captain’s side.

Captain ter Horst lowered his voice as he spoke to his science officer. “What do you have?”

Overson looked his captain in the eye, his expression not betraying the hopelessness that he now felt over their current situation. “Five more D-7 cruisers, sir. They’re coming in from three different vectors.”

“So we have Klingons in front of us *and* behind us as well?” ter Horst asked.

Overson gave a short nod of his head in affirmation. “One of the cruisers also looks like it’s coming in from our starboard flank, sir.”

“We’re surrounded, then?”

“And quite effectively, sir.”

There was little time to waste, so none could be spared to save any of the bridge crew from the shocking news that was probably already floating throughout the task force. “Communication officer, open a channel to the *Statham* immediately. I want to speak to the admiral right now!”

On board the *Statham*, the image of Captain ter Horst flashed on the view screen.

“Sir, sensors are showing additional Klingon warships moving in on our position rapidly.”

Admiral Dane had just received the same information from his own science officer. “I understand, Captain. It looks like we’ve been led into a trap. The five ships we initially encountered must have been a ploy to lure us further into the sector.”

“Yes, sir. And it looks like they just closed the trap door behind us,” ter Horst said in resignation.

“Captain, stand by for further orders,” Dane said, then signed off the communication channel. “Communications officer, open a channel to the entire task force.”

“Channel open, sir.”

“Task Force 3, this is Admiral Dane. Klingon warships have surrounded the entire group. Disregard formational orders and fire at will at any target of opportunity. I want to inflict as much damage as we can and try to escape. If you can manage to punch a hole in the Klingon defenses, you are ordered to escape on any vector and at any speed you can muster. Good luck to you all. Dane out.”

The *Statham*, not wasting any time with strategies, continued to open fire on the D-7 that was right off her bow. She let loose with a spread of torpedoes that impacted with the forward superstructure of the Klingon cruiser, causing the metal bubble-like structure to crush like wet cardboard.

The *Waterloo* came in to support her wing mate, firing another spread of torpedoes at the secondary hull of the stricken Klingon and blasting the vessel’s warp nacelles with laser fire. The enemy cruiser cracked into large chunks— atmosphere and debris raining out from inside the tears in the hull.

Meanwhile, the light cruiser *Amsterdam* and the frigate *Los Angeles* alternated their fire on a Klingon destroyer they had in their sights. The Klingon ship, seemingly unconcerned with the smaller Federation frigate, had concentrated all her weapons fire on the *Amsterdam*. The Klingon fired its disruptors, causing the *Amsterdam*’s shields to flare as the shield generators worked quickly to compensate for the power surges they were now under. The unmolested *Los Angeles*, taking her

time, lined up and fired her lasers at the port warp nacelle of the Klingon ship. The first shot missed, but the second hit home, causing the running lights on the Klingon ships to flicker.

What neither of the Federation ships noticed was that one of the reinforcing Klingon cruisers had moved into perfect position behind the *Amsterdam*. The Klingon destroyer, just off the light cruiser's bow, turned and fired her disruptors at the same moment that the enemy cruiser to the rear fired its disruptors as well. The result was a tremendous explosion as the *Amsterdam*'s shields and warp containment seemed to give out all at once. Due to the proximity the *Los Angeles* found herself in, she was pelted by debris from the exploding Federation starship.

As frequently happened on the ancient oceans of Earth—when the seagoing navy was the ruler of the waves—ships in the fog of war could sometimes stray dangerously close to one another. The captain of the *Los Angeles* had to make a split-second decision to move his ship away from the fireball that had, moments before, been the USS *Amsterdam*. Unfortunately, the captain failed to check his sensor readout in that half second before his decision was made. The *Los Angeles* turned right into the course of the *Waterloo*, which was only a thousand meters away on her starboard side.

“Sir, *collision warning*,” Overson shouted. Before Captain ter Horst could even warn the crew to brace for impact, the *Los Angeles*'s saucer slammed into contact with the single warp nacelle of the *Waterloo*. The impact sheared off the last dozen meters of the nacelle in the first instant, and then the resulting plasma that was now being ejected from the destroyed containment cap scorched a line of destruction across the upper hull of the *Los Angeles* as she continued on her course over the *Waterloo*'s stern.

The *Los Angeles*, moving at almost one-quarter impulse, had no time to order another correction before the direction of the vessel brought the bridge to bear at the same point in space that the now-destroyed warp nacelle of the *Waterloo* was spewing forth death. The immensely hot stream of plasma destroyed the bridge deflector in a split second, and then shattered the dome cap that sat atop the bridge

module. The resulting loss of pressure caused every crewmember on the bridge to be ejected into space before they even knew what had hit them.

The *Los Angeles*, all systems now dead or dying, continued on her course uncontrolled, adrift and away from the battle, a line of black death etched across her saucer.

The *Waterloo*, now losing power rapidly, was trying to recover from the impact she had just received. Captain Thijs ter Horst picked himself up off the deck and immediately noticed that his helmsman and navigators were unconscious or dead. He looked toward the science station and was relieved to see that Commander Overson was still there, trying to make sense of everything the sensors were telling him.

“Mr. Overson, I’m taking the helm,” ter Horst said as he leapt to the console.

“It won’t do any good, sir. All warp and impulse propulsion is down. Reaction control thrusters are at one-third power and falling rapidly. It must be a leak in the solid fuel lines on deck four.”

Ter Horst punched up the intercom for the engineering section. “Engineer, we need power to the weapons systems. Everything you can muster,” he said, but there was no response. “Engineering deck, please report,” the captain said frantically, then looked at Overson. “Are internal communications down?”

“Negative, sir. However, I am not getting any life sign readings in engineering. In fact, all of deck eight is totally without life support power.”

“Cause?” ter Horst asked, although it was more out of habit than anything else. In a few minutes it wouldn’t really matter how or why it had happened.

“We impacted with another vessel. There’s major structural damage, sir,” Overson said as he peered into the blue-lighted sensor readout at his station. “Two Klingon vessels are now approaching, sir. One destroyer and one cruiser coming in fast.”

On board the *Perseus*, Captain Sean Allaire had his hands full. With the *Mordensia* destroyed, there were now four Klingon heavy cruisers against Allaire’s small destroyer, the heavy cruiser *Saladin*, and the light cruiser *Pinafore*.

“Sir, there’s an incoming communication from the *Waterloo*. Priority Urgent.”

“Put it on the screen,” Allaire ordered. Sean could see that the bridge of the *Waterloo* was in shambles. Arcs and sparks from a half dozen consoles were flashing at random intervals behind the soot-stained image of Captain ter Horst.

“I don’t have much time, Sean,” ter Horst began, blood seeping from a wound in his forehead. “The Klingons are almost on top of us. Just wanted to say—I’m sorry.”

“We’ll be there in a few seconds, Thijs. Let me just—”

“Don’t bother, Sean,” Thijs said with a wry smile. “Looks like you got your hands full, anyway. I’ll tell Mary you said hello. I’m sure she’d like—” There was a brilliant explosion behind him, then the image on the view screen faded and was replaced by an empty star field.

“ter Horst . . . *Thijs!*” Sean yelled into the communication speaker on his armrest.

“No use, sir,” Commander Westergard said dejectedly. “The *Waterloo* has been destroyed.”

“Sir! Message coming in from Captain Ekero. The *Pinafore* has managed to escape,” the *Statham*’s communications officer rang out.

“That’s one piece of good news. What about the rest of the force?” Admiral Dane asked, wiping a fresh bead of sweat from his brow.

“The *Mordensia*, the *Waterloo*, and the *Amsterdam* have all been destroyed. The *Los Angeles* is drifting with minimal power, sir,” the science officer reported.

“We need to regroup. Communications, order the remaining ships to form a perimeter around the *Los Angeles*. I want to be able to beam out any survivors before we escape the system ourselves.”

“Aye, sir. Sending orders now.”

“He can’t be *serious?*” Captain Kreuzinger said aloud. “We’re surrounded by Klingons! We’ll be lucky to get of this alive ourselves—much less help anyone else.”

The USS *Saladin* made her way through the battle lines with all the grace of a cement brick through a puddle of molasses. The *Baton Rouge*-class of starships was the last of the old battlewagons, and thus had to make use of non-dilithium-powered

warp drive. This severely limited her weapons power and the overall effectiveness of the ship in an extended hostile engagement. Captain Kreuzinger, on the other hand, was doing his best to show the rest of the task force that this old girl still had a lot of fight left in her—despite her age.

She had already dispatched one Klingon heavy cruiser and was now moving on to another. As the enemy target lined up inside Kreuzinger's proverbial sights, he let loose with full particle cannons—the main offensive weapon that had preceded the modern photon torpedo. As the cannon erupted from the front of the *Saladin*, the Klingon ship's shields began to glow brightly as her shield generators were quickly overloaded. This was the main purpose of the particle cannon—to disable the ship's shields in one massive barrage and then pick apart the enemy craft with lasers.

Unfortunately, in the last decade it appeared that the Klingons had updated their shield generators. Brian Kreuzinger found that his weapons had to remain on target far longer than he had anticipated. Just as the Klingons' shields began to fail, another enemy vessel targeted the *Saladin* and opened fire. The two pylons holding the *Saladin*'s starboard warp nacelle to the ship were sliced through from fore to aft, which caused the warp nacelle itself to float away effortlessly from the secondary hull of the ship.

"Sir, shields are down on the target vessel, but there are three more ships approaching fast!" the science officer shouted.

"Weapons Officer, open fire with all lasers on the primary target," Kreuzinger yelled. "Orient the starboard accelerator cannon on the flanking D-7 and fire when the targeting computer has the proper solution."

The officers responded quickly. The *Saladin* lifted her bow gracefully, firing her ventral lasers at the Klingon that was directly in their path. The Federation battle cruiser then veered slowly to starboard and trained its accelerator cannon on the next target.

As the *Saladin* slowly came around in her turn, Kreuzinger now saw on the view screen that his ship was in perfect firing position for three of the Klingon heavy cruisers.

"Kobayashi Maru," Kreuzinger muttered to himself.

Commander Allaire turned the *Perseus* hard to port and found himself staring at the same three-ship squadron of D-7s that the *Saladin* now found herself engaged with. He ordered a communications channel to be opened with the *Statham*, who herself was only two thousand meters astern of the small destroyer.

“Admiral Dane, respectfully request your assistance with the forces that the *Saladin* is now engaged with.”

Dane’s face appeared on the main viewers, covered in sweat that had also stained the neckline of his uniform tunic. “What about the *Los Angeles*? We need to get those survivors to safety.”

Sean shook his head. “Sir, there won’t be any survivors unless we can turn the tide of this engagement. We need to hit the Klingons here before we can turn our attention to our wounded shipmates.”

Rear Admiral Gabriel Dane, a man of few words, seemed to ponder the uneasy outcome of the engagement for a brief moment. “Very well, Captain. Take the target on the port side of the *Saladin* and we will take the one on her bow. With any luck, we’ll be able to draw their fire long enough for the old cruiser to extricate herself through the opening.”

The *Perseus* went to work immediately. Allaire ordered all forward weapons trained on the flanking Klingon cruiser. Dane, meanwhile, rushed up and took station on the starboard side of the *Perseus*, firing alternating patterns of lasers and photon torpedoes at the most forward Klingon heavy cruisers.

Allaire could see that Dane’s gamble had paid off instantly. The flanking D-7 turned to the *Perseus*, while the *Saladin* and the battle cruiser *Statham* fired on the lead D-7, causing the Klingon ship to move off course—and a hole to open between the two.

“Captain Kreuzinger, you are ordered to flee the system at your maximum speed,” Dane told the *Saladin*’s captain.

“This is against my express wishes to remain, Admiral,” Kreuzinger replied sternly.

“Brian, if I make it out of here alive I’ll make sure to note it in my log. Now get the *Saladin* out of this sector *now* or you’ll never make it!”

“Understood. I’ll get underway now, but not before I leave a little ‘going away present’ for our friends out there.”

Kreuzinger had the helmsman engage full impulse power and got the battle cruiser moving at her safest possible speed. As she neared the Klingon cruiser, she fired another spread from her accelerator cannon, severing the bridge section and causing it to fall away from the main hull in an impressive explosion of debris and light. The *Saladin* then sailed unmolested from the battle zone and out into space.

Dane watched for a moment as the old ship fled the system, one warp nacelle missing, with her impulse engines running red hot and leaving a wake of residual plasma in her trail.

“Take care, old friend,” Dane said to the image, then turned his ship back to face the remaining Klingon cruisers.

Sean Allaire had just released the last of his cannon rounds at the enemy cruiser he found locked into his firing computer. The enemy commander must have had a hell of a helmsman, because the last two volleys from the *Perseus* missed entirely.

“Status of the Klingon cruiser,” Allaire asked of anyone who was listening.

Lieutenant Dobbins, the ship’s junior science officer, was the first to speak up. He had been called to the bridge only moments before to replace the ship’s official science officer, Lieutenant Commander Meadows, who had been injured at his post. “The Klingon vessel is moderately damaged. Their shields are at twenty percent of normal output. Life signs are sporadic.”

“Then let’s not waste any time. Helmsman, plot your best pursuit course. I want to get right on his tail.”

“Aye, sir. Executing course change.”

The *Perseus* came about hard—much harder than the captain had been anticipating. Everyone on the bridge had to grab ahold of something to keep from falling from their chairs during the tight maneuver. However, once it was complete, the *Perseus* was right on the stern of the crippled Klingon cruiser and gaining.

“Weapons officer, target all weapons and fire, point-blank pattern!”

The laser shot out from the upper hull of the *Perseus* and impacted with the Klingon ship in a shower of sparks. The rear of the vessel lurched up, causing the

ship to lose attitude control and begin a forward tumble. Two more shots of laser fire lanced out from the *Perseus*, putting an end to another Klingon warship.

“Great shooting, Lieutenant. Remind me to put you in for a—”

Allaire’s words were cut short as an impact registered against the *Perseus*, and then another. Allaire, along with a few of his crew, fell from his chair as the disruptor hits registered across the *Perseus*’s hull. Before Sean could get back to his feet there was another jolt that sent him tumbling toward the aft stairs that led to the upper deck of the bridge.

“Multiple impacts, sir!” Dobbins yelled. “Damage to decks four, five, and seven. There’s a massive hull breach on deck eight.”

“We’re not going to last much longer out here in the boonies!” Allaire said as he got back to his feet. “Helm, bring us closer to the *Statham*. We’ll need their cover.” He hit the intercom button on his chair. “Florian, we need more power to the shields!”

“I’ll see what I can do down here, sir. The engine room is a huge mess right now. We’re doing everything we can to contain a coolant leak at this point,” the chief engineer replied.

Admiral Dane moved the *Statham* into position to protect the incoming *Perseus*, but the situation looked hopeless. There were five Klingon heavy cruisers still in the area, and only two Federation ships left to fight them. Of those, only the *Statham* was relatively untouched.

“Admiral Dane, we’re in pretty bad shape over here,” Allaire said over the secure communications channel.

“We’ll do our best to protect your flank, Sean, but the Klingons are coming in for the kill. Sensors are showing that the remaining enemy cruisers are surrounding us at this point.”

Sean swallowed hard, and then wiped his brow with his sleeve. Only when he looked at his shirt did he realize that it was probably as soiled as the rest of his uniform was, and that wiping his brow probably made the mess on his face worse than it already was.

“I guess there’s no point in hoping for a last-minute rescue, is there, Gabe?”

There was a soft, quick laugh from the other side of the channel. “Guess not.”

“Well, if we’re going to go out then I’m going to try and take as many of them as I can,” Allaire said, straightening his tunic and dusting off some of the bits of debris that had accumulated on the armrest of his chair.

“I understand, Sean. I’ll hold them off for as long as I can while you get ready,” Dane said.

“Thanks,” Allaire said, smiling at the image of the admiral on the view screen. He signed off the channel and looked at his science officer. “Mr. Dobbins, prepare to execute Starfleet Order two-zero-zero-five.”

“When, sir?”

“On my signal,” Allaire said, then turned his attention back to the view screen.

The *Statham* aimed its forward batteries at the nearest Klingon ship. The lasers streaked out from the hull and impacted with the enemy cruiser, but not before the enemy vessel’s comrades could pounce on the Federation battle cruiser. From three different sides the Klingons began showering the *Statham* with heavy green disruptor fire. The *Statham*’s lasers streamed in a half dozen directions simultaneously. Almost all of them scored hits on one Klingon ship or another.

A fourth Klingon cruiser—on the port side of the *Statham*—fired a salvo of torpedoes that knocked out the large cruiser’s shields on that side. The *Perseus* limped in to try to form a buffer between the oncoming Klingon ship and the opening in the shields, but the little Federation destroyer was barely able to get into position in time before the Klingon ship took advantage of the situation. There was a blast of disruptor fire, intended for the wounded *Statham*, which struck the *Perseus* broadside.

The fifth and final Klingon D-7 was now in firing position. It fired its photon torpedoes and took out the aft shields of the *Statham*, while three others took out the starboard shields. Allaire—his left arm bloodied and his head throbbing from a concussion— saw on the view screen that the *Statham* had stopped firing its weapons.

“Her fire control computers must be down. It won’t be long now . . .”

Sean looked over to Dobbins, the only member of his bridge crew who was not dead or incapacitated. “Activate the self-destruct system,” Allaire said softly.

“Sir—the self-destruct system is offline.”

Allaire looked to his static-filled view screen. In a brief moment of clarity he watched as two of the Klingon vessels moved into attack position—preparing to deal their deathblows on the final two dying Federation starships. “All available power to impulse control. Ramming speed!”

My dearest Mary . . . I'll see you soon.

Epilogue

December 2252

Stardate 4012.24

Office of the President, United Federation of Planets, Thomas Vanderbilt IV

The snow had been falling gently for almost two hours now. Even with the advances in Earth's weather modification net, the technicians were still asked—on occasion—to let Mother Nature have her way with the planet's climate. It was felt that the planet was designed a certain way, and to constantly interfere with the Earth's natural cycle of weather patterns could be detrimental to the population. Of course, there were times when things like hurricanes, flooding, and windstorms would ravage the unsuspecting population of the Earth. However, being that it was Christmas Eve, the technicians who monitored the weather were told to shut down the system to give the inhabitants a white Christmas, something that hadn't happened in quite a few years.

Thomas Vanderbilt sat in his chair, the same one once occupied by the last several presidents of the United States of America before the last World War, and gazed out one of the large windows in his office at the vista before him. In the background, the Eiffel Tower sprang up from the white blanket that surrounded the city of Paris like a giant spire pointing to the heavens. He had been thinking of the events of the past few months, about the advances the Klingons had made into Federation territory, and the skirmishes and battles that—at this very moment—could be waging right now in some distant sector of Federation space.

The intercom on his desk began to beep softly, letting him know that his receptionist wished to speak to him. Thomas knew what the young woman at the front desk was going to say, and he had been looking forward to the forthcoming conversation since earlier that evening. He turned in his chair and pressed the button that would signal the receptionist that he was about to speak. "Yes, what is it?"

“Sir, the commander of Starfleet is here to see you.”

The president nodded slowly to himself. “Very good. Send him in.”

The large wooden doors, emblazoned with the logo of the Federation of Planets on each, gently slid into their alcoves as Admiral Matthew D. Luxa entered the office.

“Mr. President,” Luxa said as he strode to the great antique desk of the president.

“Matthew, it’s good to see you. Thank you for coming so quickly. Please, have a seat.”

“Thank you, sir,” Luxa said as he slid into the padded leather chair in front of the desk. “It was really no trouble at all.”

“It’s Christmas Eve, Admiral. I’m sure you would much rather be spending time with your family. How is Susan, by the way?”

Matthew was glad to be on almost-informal terms with the president. They had known each other for many years, since well before either of them had acquired major positions of influence in Federation affairs. “She’s well, sir. Joseph is on leave from Starfleet Academy and is taking care of things while I’m here.”

“Excellent. I understand he’s graduating after the next semester.”

“Yes, sir. That’s correct. He’s made the Dean’s List three years running,” Luxa said with obvious pride.

“Has he made any decision about where he would like to go for his first posting?” Vanderbilt asked.

“There’s been some . . . disagreement between us on that point.”

“Oh? How so?”

“To be honest, sir, given the current situation with the war, I’ve asked that he join me at Starfleet Command as an assistant.”

Vanderbilt could already see where this was going. “I see. And he’s requested a frontline assignment, is that it?”

“Yes, he has—and in no short order. It’s entirely against my better judgment, but he’s not a kid anymore. He’s more than able to make his own decisions now and I’ve promised to stand by them. I’ve made some calls and pulled in a few favors. The *Constitution* will be back in port shortly for refit. Joseph will be assigned to that vessel.”

“Well, it could have been worse. The *Constitution*-class has met with every expectation we’ve had and surpassed them. It’s been Commodore April’s shining achievement.”

Luxa nodded solemnly, the name of his old friend bringing up the memory of their last heated encounter at Starfleet headquarters. He wished things could have gone differently—much differently. “Speaking of Robert, have you heard from him, sir?”

“At last report he was overseeing the final construction phase at Starbase 15. Since then, we’ve heard very little from that sector,” the president replied quietly, then sighed as he turned back to the snow falling outside his window.

“On that note, sir, I have my formal briefing ready.”

“Let’s have it, Matthew,” Thomas replied, resigning himself to the news—good or bad—that he was about to receive.

Admiral Luxa opened his briefcase and withdrew his electronic stylus that contained all the notes he had prepared for his briefing to the president. He pressed the initializing button and the screen lit up with the paragraphs of statistics he would need for the review.

“At this point, sir, it’s simple numbers. The Klingons have more ships than we do. In the last several months, we’ve met defeat time and time again. At over three-quarters of the engagements, the Klingons have forced three-to-one numerical odds of their ships over ours—and sometimes as many as five to one.”

“Yes, yes,” the president said with resignation. “The Federation Council has been debating that issue for the last several weeks. Half of them suggest that these lopsided odds were due to a lack of intelligence gathering on our part, while the other half blames the bureaucracy that emerged after the war with the Romulans for the lack of funds for starship construction.”

Admiral Luxa had likewise heard these arguments. Matthew tended to believe that both parties were partially right in their assumptions. The severe lack of starships on the part of the Federation was the major hindrance in their war effort against the Klingons. After the Romulan war, the politicians had thought having fewer, larger, more mission-capable ships was the best deterrent to any aggressor that would challenge the Federation. Unfortunately, they were now seeing the flaw in that decision, and were only now rushing to complete the construction of any shipyard

that was capable of producing a greater number of smaller ships at a much faster rate of production.

“Yes, sir. However, even with our lack of available ships, we *have* managed to slow the progress of the Klingons’ advancement into our territory. While the Klingons have more starships at their disposal than we currently do, Starfleet Intelligence believes they are lacking in overall tactical experience to command such large forces. Intelligence has discovered—in engagements where the numbers of opposing ships are close to being even—we have bested the Klingons in almost every encounter.”

“That’s good to hear, Admiral. It’s a credit to your leadership and guidance that our forces are so well trained.”

“Thank you, sir. Our fleet captains have made some . . . out-of-the-box tactics from time to time . . . but it appears that our forces were mostly prepared for the conflicts. To mention just one instance I would cite the battle that took place in the Rebonet system just ten days ago, sir.”

The president had just recently been made aware of the skirmish that had taken place near Rebonet. A large Federation convoy under the command of Commodore Jarv Maxwell was en route from the Deuteronomy system to a frontline repair facility when a small task force of Klingon cruisers and gunboats discovered the Federation convoy. The Klingons, not observing any close support for the small Federation group, moved in for the kill, only to discover that the Klingon forces themselves were the ones being baited. The starship *Stockholm* and a cover squadron of *Baton Rouge*-class cruisers destroyed or captured all eight Klingon vessels.

“And what about the reports of the Romulan government at this time?”

“As of this stardate, activity along the Romulan neutral zone has been relatively light. There has been no detection of Romulan vessels inside the neutral zone for months. Nevertheless, the situation at the border can only be described as tense and uneasy.”

“Explain, Admiral,” Thomas asked as he steepled his fingers on top of his immaculate desk.

“Well, sir, what I mean is that many starships which would normally be on Romulan patrols have been redeployed to active service against units of the Klingon Empire along the front lines. This means the area of space that each remaining Federation patrol ship has to cover near Romulan space has increased by more than sixty percent. If any additional ships are withdrawn from their patrol duties and reassigned to combat duty, it will be impossible to assure adequate warning against any Romulan incursion at this point. The border outposts themselves are not heavily defended, so they can’t be regarded as a sufficient warning, compared to what a starship would be.”

The president considered this information for a moment. “An increase of sixty percent? That’s far too much for those crews to handle for the duration of the war. We need more ships in those areas quickly, lest we fall prey to a Romulan invasion force that is just *waiting* to take advantage of the situation. And you and I know both know they would be.”

“My thoughts exactly, Mr. President. It seems highly likely that the Romulans will side with either our forces or the Klingon Empire before the war is over. Moreover, even if the Romulans don’t form an official alliance with either power, it is still highly likely they will side with one party just to have an excuse to test any new weapons systems they have developed. In such an event, there might not be any *official* declaration from the Romulan government until *after* they’ve made successful territory gains into Federation or Klingon space.”

The president leaned back in his chair, a cold chill running up his spine. “That’s a terrible thought, Admiral, and one I don’t even want to entertain at this point.” His mind went back to the indomitable Robert April. “Once ship construction at Starbase 15 is in full swing, I want four squadrons of Federation vessels to resume patrolling the area of space near the Romulan neutral zone, just to be safe.”

“Yes, sir. I’ll make the arrangements with the base commander immediately.”

“Is there anything else to report, Admiral?” Vanderbilt asked, hesitant to hear any further bad news, but knowing already that it was coming.

“Yes, sir. I do have one final thing to report.”

“Go on, Admiral,” the president invited.

“Sir, there has been a dramatic increase in the losses of private and commercial vessels. Although those numbers are highest near the front lines of the war, the numbers have also shown a steady rise near the Romulan and Tholian borders.”

The president raised his hand to his face, stroking his chin as he pondered this for a moment. “What kind of losses are we looking at, Matthew?”

“Starfleet Command still does not have exact numbers, sir. Nevertheless, from the numbers and statistics we currently have at our disposal, we are seeing that roughly one to two percent of the commercial and private vessels currently operating in Federation space are failing to reach their destinations. Starfleet Intelligence is still piecing together information on this, so we have no real hard suspects at this time.”

This was indeed unsettling news, to say the least. That meant that, for every one thousand cargo ships ferrying much-needed war supplies to frontline units in Federation territory, a handful were never heard from again. In addition, at any given time, there was a recorded five hundred ships of varying classes and designations shuttling such cargo on any given day near the front lines of the war itself—to say nothing of the thousands that routinely patrolled the greater sphere of Federation space.

“So, what you’re saying is that it could be due to Klingons, Romulans, Tholians, or just about anyone else?”

“To be completely candid with you, sir, preliminary evidence is pointing to the Orions. We simply do *not* have enough evidence at this point to file any kind of formal complaint against them—or to even make a blanket statement concerning the disappearances to any other government entity. Of course, I don’t need to remind you of the Laxala Incident.”

Vanderbilt nodded slowly. “So, our hands are tied, then?”

Luxa looked at the president. “For now. However, I would also like to point out that we have a new class of starship getting ready to roll off the assembly lines at one of our classified construction facilities.”

“Oh?” the president replied with renewed curiosity.

“Yes, sir. We are calling it the *Santee*-class. It will fill the role of an escort carrier nicely, ferrying specially designed shuttle fighters separated into small attack

squadrons. This should afford our convoys *some* protection against small craft attacks by the Klingons.”

“And this project was started before the war began?”

“No, sir. We’ve actually had to make do with the limited supplies we have on stock at the moment. This new class of ships is based on the hulls of some neutronic fuel carriers that had yet to be completed. Starfleet engineers were able to rework the blueprints, fashioning a makeshift carrier from the unused hulls by using some design cues from the *Bonhomme Richard* and *Achernar* classes.

“And when will this new class be ready, Admiral?”

Luxa pursed his lips before speaking. “The *Santee* herself will be ready for trial runs in a month, and should be ready for full active duty a month after that—barring any unforeseen difficulties. The *Vella Gulf* will be along not far behind. The remainder of the class will follow a few months later.”

“So, we could be looking at almost five months for the entire group to be on the front lines?”

“I’d say that’s a . . . *conservative* estimate, Mr. President.”

Vanderbilt let out an exasperated sigh. “Based on all these findings, it seems our losses across the board have increased exponentially over the last year and we have very little to show for it, Admiral,” he said, his words failing to hide the overall fatigue he felt.

“Yes, sir. It appears that way. I wish I had better news to report.”

President Vanderbilt stood from his chair and turned once again to the large window behind his desk. The snow was falling more rapidly now. The details of the trees and shrubs at ground level had begun to dissolve as a soft blanket of fresh snow had now covered almost every horizontal surface uniformly.

“Thank you, Matthew, for your report. Now please, go home and spend some time with your family. I have . . . some things to think about,” the president said, not quite turning from the view.

“Yes, sir,” Admiral Luxa said to his old friend despondently. “I’m sorry the news couldn’t have been better.”

To this, the president fully turned and, with a smile, looked at his friend. “I understand. Thank you. Merry Christmas, Matthew. Please give Susan and the children my best.”

“I’ll do that, sir,” Luxa said as he stood up, then moved toward the door. “And Merry Christmas, sir,” he said as he turned one final time and left the office.

Vanderbilt looked out the window, trying to focus his thoughts beyond the silver clouds to the stars above . . . and still farther beyond them, to the intrepid officers and crews keeping their way of life safe. “Merry Christmas to you all,” he offered, to Luxa as well as to the heavens.