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# *STAR TREK* **THE FOUR YEARS WAR**

A NOVEL BY  
**STEPHEN FENDER**







# ***STAR TREK***

## **THE FOUR YEARS WAR**

### **Volume II**

A novel by

**Stephen Fender**

Edited by

**Lynda Dietz**

Published by

***JRP***

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# **Star Trek: The Four Years War, Vol. 2**

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not shutting my project down.



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LLAP!





# Chapter 1

Stardate 4101.01

January 2253

Incoming subspace communication . . .

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

TO: (1) All Commanding Officers, Galaxy Exploration Command  
(2) All Commanding Officers, Military Operations Command

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

SUBJ: VESSEL DISAPPEARANCES NEAR CONTESTED FEDERATION  
TERRITORY

Due to the numerous unexplained disappearances of both private and commercial vessels operating near space that is currently being contested by Federation and Klingon forces, the following regulations and restrictions are now established as of this stardate:

1. A Zone of Transport Escort now exists. This new zone will stretch from the planet of New Paris to the New Daran system, and will extend from those points to the prewar boundaries of Federation-Klingon space.
2. Under no circumstances will any merchant or civilian vessel enter this area, unless such vessels are deployed in a convoy, and only when those convoys are under the direct protection of Starfleet Command or Federation Security.

3. All convoys, before departing their assigned ports of call, must first log all planned routes of travel with Federation Security personnel at the nearest established starbase or outpost in relation to the convoy's point of origin.

4. All designated convoys must immediately check in with Federation Security personnel upon their arrival at the intended destination.

5. All convoys will be escorted by the appropriate number of Starfleet vessels required to protect all assets of said convoy. The number of Starfleet vessels present in the convoy will be dictated by the overall size of the convoy, value of the goods being transported, the amount of enemy resistance assumed or known to exist along the lines of transport, and other such factors that will arise on a case-by-case basis between the vessel masters and Federation Security forces. It should be understood that all such vessels will be sailing under a flag of war for the time being.

6. In addition to the Starfleet vessels escorting such convoys, Federation Marine detachments will also be posted on any escorted vessel while it is en route to its intended destination. The ratio of Marines to civilians that will be assigned to such vessels will be determined by the size of the vessel, the value of the goods being transported, and other such factors that will arise on a case-by-case basis, as determined by Federation Security personnel attached to the convoy.

7. No deviation or unauthorized departure from preapproved routes of travel will be tolerated under any circumstance by Federation Security forces or Starfleet Command. Any such deviations or departures will be punishable by seizure of cargo, personnel, vessels, and/or forfeiture of trade certifications belonging to all involved offenders.

8. All cargo masters and civilian captains are notified to adjust their travel and transportation timelines in order to accommodate these new restrictions. Starfleet Command, operating under strict orders from the Federation Council, makes no financial guarantees on any goods or personnel being transported within this zone. Starfleet Command will take all required precautions while escorting civilian vessels. Also, any such conflicts that may arise from forces deemed unfriendly toward Federation forces or civilian convoys they are protecting cannot be anticipated with a high degree of certainty. Vessel masters and their associated

corporations should now consider themselves aware of these facts and plan accordingly.

9. More detailed instructions for the transportation of goods, services, and personnel inside this newly established zone will be transmitted shortly.

\* \* \*

Stardate 4101.06

January 2253

The passenger shuttle SS *Hotaru* banked leisurely to starboard as she came about to her new course. It was truly beautiful out here in space, the vessel's captain mused. *Even more so now that we've gotten away from the busy space lanes of the inner sphere of the Federation.*

Deep space afforded him the peace and quiet he had longed to attain for so many years while his family had lived on Earth. While the *Hotaru* was nowhere near the deep space he yearned for at the moment, the vessel was still away from the surface of the planet and sailing gracefully in the soundless void of near-planetoid space. That was good enough for him.

The planet Ganjitsu, spinning slowly below the small shuttle, was the third spatial body in the Minos Drakkus system, which consisted of ten planets of various classifications. The system, according to the popular galactic coordinate system of the time, lay exactly between the Syrenya and Ayirn systems, thus putting Ganjitsu approximately three parsecs from the Federation-Klingon neutral zone at any given point in her orbital rotation around her sun.

Ganjitsu, originally settled by conservationists several decades earlier, was governed by strict laws restricting the number of settlers on the surface at any given time, as well as provisional guarantees that the planet would never be overdeveloped. The temperature was usually warm and dry, and several varieties of evergreen trees and shrubs that had been transplanted from Earth were now thriving in the temperate climate. The waters of the planet's three large oceans were usually

cool, and several wide rivers forged their way through the lush forests of the planet. Thus, to most of the colonists, living on Ganjitsu was akin to recreational camping on Earth in a great many respects.

In order for someone to get from colony to colony on the planet's surface, the residents preferred to use the standard Starfleet skimmers—they were nonpolluting, lightweight, and required very little storage space. If, on the other hand, one was required to leave the surface and venture into space, there were two *Mission*-class scout ships leased to each of the twelve colonies that were spread evenly along the surface of the nearly virgin planet.

Although the *Hotaru* was nothing more than a glorified shuttlecraft to most, to the helmsman-in-training who now sat at her controls, she was the most beautiful thing in the known galaxy. To him, the vessel's angular sides and gradually sweeping forward hull gave the vessel an extremely graceful look. The *Hotaru* could cruise at a sustained speed of warp factor three, and could attain a maximum warp factor of five in emergency situations for short durations. The *Hotaru* had no offensive weapons to speak of, and only a low-powered deflector shield to stop interstellar debris from penetrating the hull while the scout was under warp or impulse power.

She had departed the planet Ganjitsu only twenty minutes before. Her mission: taking her passengers on a routine tour of the solar system. Truth be told, there were no paying passengers aboard the scout vessel at the moment. There was only the captain—who also served as the navigator—and the young helmsman at his side. The vessel had been reserved by the captain two months earlier, ever since the pilot in question had turned 16 and was now legally allowed to hold the official certification of civilian helmsman.

With the last switch flipped, the *Hotaru's* captain finished entering in the last of the required navigational settings, putting the ship in its optimum position for entering warp speed. When the final sequence was entered, he slowly turned to his helmsman and—with a slight nod of his head—gave the young man the indication he had been waiting for. The young helmsman returned his captain's nod of approval with a wide smile that spread across his face from ear to ear.

“Course plotted for the eighth planet in the system and standing by, sir,” the young man said as calmly as he could muster. The excitement that was welling

inside him was in serious danger of bursting from his pores if he tried to contain it any longer.

“Very good. Navigational systems are online and the engines are at optimum power output,” the captain replied.

“Orders, sir?” the helmsman asked, already knowing the next words that would come from the captain's lips.

The captain looked over to his trainee. He was proud of this young man and all he had accomplished in such a short amount of time. He would make an excellent pilot someday, and the captain was glad to be at his side to help usher him into the larger universe he was about to enter. “Very well. Set speed to warp one and engage.”

“Aye, sir.” His finger hovered above the final control that would launch the small vessel past that very same barrier that had held mankind back for centuries. He wasn't just sending this ship to its future destination; he was, in fact, sending his own life on a new course. He looked at the captain, whose expression was a mirror of the one the helmsman had displayed only a moment before.

The trainee then turned his gaze and fixed it on the front view port and pressed the final control. The ship immediately began to hum, and something loose on the deck aft of the cabin rattled for one brief picosecond before the vessel jumped into warp space—an exclamation of joy filling the helmsman's mind.

An hour later, the *Hotaru* found herself in high orbit of the eighth planet of the Minos Drakkus system. The instructor had taken the last hour to familiarize his trainee with the intricacies of maintaining and departing a standardized orbit from a planetary body. Now that the young man seemed to have a firm grasp on the fundamentals—not to mention a few of the more advanced maneuvers—the duo was ready to depart the gaseous planet and return to Ganjitsu.

The eight planet of the Minos Drakkus system—known as Whirlwind—was a turbulent yellow and green giant of a planet. It measured some 70,000 kilometers at its equatorial radius. Its length of day was roughly thirteen and a half hours as it raced around the primary star of the system at a leisurely pace of one rotation per forty standard Earth years.

The SS *Hotaru*, having just emerged from the dark side of Whirlwind, was bathed in the soft light of the distant G-Type main sequence star. There were small droplets of ice crystals on the forward view port of the cargo shuttle that were only now beginning to melt from the distant radiation from the star—despite the nearly fourteen million miles that separated the two bodies.

“That was an excellent turn,” the captain said to the helmsman as he completed his final maneuver. “Now please lay in a course back along our original flight path.”

“Yes, sir. Inputting the coordinates now.”

“Don't forget to account for stellar drift, fluctuations in gravity wells, the mass of—”

“The mass of the planet in relation to the warp field dynamics of the vessel at near-perfect angles to our trajectory? Yes, sir. I'm well aware of all that,” the helmsman replied with an air of petulance.

The captain let out a slight chortle. “Oh, are you?”

“Yes, sir. I am. If the captain would care to look at the course I've laid in, he'll see that it is—in fact—far more optimum than the original course we took to get here in the first place.”

The captain smiled broadly at the brashness of the young man's tone, then dismissed the suggestion with a wave of his hand. “No, no. That won't be necessary.”

“Of course, sir,” the trainee replied, turning back to his instruments as he prepared the ship for warp speed.

“You've gotten pretty cocky over the last few months, you know?” The captain folded his arms across his chest as he leaned back into his chair.

“Well, it's a credit to all your superb training, sir.”

“Don't blow smoke up my exhaust port, son. You're good . . . damn good. In fact, you may even teach those guys at Starfleet Academy a few things.”

The helmsman's smile faded as he turned to his instructor. “Do you really think I have what it takes? I mean . . . well, I'm just not sure—”

“Of course you do,” the captain offered reassuringly, his hands up in a calming gesture. “I don't even know why you worry about it. You're as good as gold.”

The young man laughed halfheartedly. “That's comforting. You know, gold isn't worth what it used to be.”

The captain chuckled. “Don't be a smart—”

Without warning, the *Hotaru* lurched to port abruptly as it registered an impact on its starboard side. The once-docile stars on the forward view port fell instantly away under the sharp movement.

“What was that?” the helmsman screamed.

The captain was busily inputting commands on his console beside the trainee. “Sensors are reporting that another vessel has entered the system. They're firing on us.”

“Who are they?” the trainee asked cautiously. “Pirates?”

The captain didn't have time to respond before the ensuing jolt knocked both men forward into their respective consoles. Fortunately they were still wearing their atmospheric reentry harnesses. It might have pinched a rib or two, but the thick nylon belts stopped them from going face-first into their controls.

“Are you okay, son?”

“I'm fine, sir,” the trainee replied, dabbing at sweat that had formed on his forehead. “Who is shooting at us?”

The captain's thin eyes were wide with terror. “Klingons, that's who.”

“Klingons?” the helmsman repeated breathlessly, turning his attention to the forward view port.

After channeling some emergency power to the ship's computer, the captain managed to bring the short-range sensors online. “Confirmed. There is a single Klingon destroyer just off our stern.”

“We can outrun them.”

“No, we can't,” the captain replied disconsolately as he looked aft before turning his attention to his copilot. “That last shot took out the navigational deflector. It'd be suicide to maneuver anywhere at this point. The smallest amount of space dust could penetrate the hull and cause catastrophic damage to the ship's systems—not to mention killing us both in the process.”

The immense Klingon destroyer glided slowly over the top of the now-crippled *Hotaru*. The captain and his helmsman watched in awe as the large vessel sailed



over their forward view port, so close in fact that they could count the rivets on the destroyer's lower hull plates. The Klingon vessel, the hull colored the traditional mottled green paint scheme of the empire, slowly came to a halt just ahead of the unarmed scout vessel.

By a steady blinking light on the control panel, the captain of the *Hotaru* was notified that the Klingon commander was requesting that an audio communication channel be opened. He hesitantly reached his finger to the toggle and switched it on.

"This is the Klingon destroyer, *K'Frathla*," the Klingon's deep voice came booming over the *Hotaru's* intercom. "You are ordered to stand down and prepare to be boarded."

"They want us . . . as prisoners?" the helmsman asked in a quivering voice.

"I don't think they mean to take us as prisoners," the captain said evenly as he looked around the tight cockpit of the *Hotaru*. "They probably just want the ship. We're civilians. They'll just as likely kill us the moment they board us." Mustering his courage, the captain gave his reply to the Klingons. "We are a civilian vessel. We are unarmed."

"I do not care whether you are armed or not!" the angry Klingon spat back. "You are an enemy of the Klingon Empire, and you will submit to my commands!"

"My son is aboard. Please, do not shoot!"

The Klingon laughed ominously. "Then you are a fool for bringing him into contested space. His death will be on your conscience, not mine."

"So . . . this is it?" the helmsman asked, unable to firmly push down the lump in his throat. "I never even got to see San Francisco."

"I'm sorry, son. This is my own fault," the captain offered sadly, placing a gentle hand on the younger man's shoulder.

The Klingon's guttural voice came back over the speaker. "Repeat: this is the Klingon destroyer, *K'Frathla*. Lower your screens and prepare to be boarded . . . or we *will* destroy you."

The captain, looking at the helmsman one last time, reached for the control that would lower the remnant of the deflector screen. There was so much he hadn't told his son . . . so much more they had left to explore and discuss . . . so much—

Another explosion rocked the *Hotaru*, this time sending the little craft rolling backward and causing the Klingon vessel to veer out of their field of view.

*This is the end*, the captain thought mournfully.

The helmsman had somehow managed to regain attitude control of the vessel. He quickly oriented the nose of the scout to face the Klingon head-on once again. If they were going to die, then they would die like men.

As the shuttle nosed itself over, both the captain and the helmsman's jaw both dropped in unison. The Klingon destroyer—or what was left of it—was a smoking, burning heap of metal. The two men turned slowly to one another, each silently asking the other the same question, and then returned their gaze to the ruined Klingon vessel.

Suddenly a warhead streaked from some unknown location behind the *Hotaru*, hitting the crippled Klingon ship in its bulbous bridge section and sending the stricken craft into a slow, flat spin. The Klingon was definitely out for the count, and the two men on the *Hotaru* breathed a quick sigh of relief. A moment later another voice came over the *Hotaru's* intercom, this one markedly different than the Klingon voice they'd heard before. It was softer . . . more disciplined. And it was a woman. Both the captain and the helmsman recognized it instantly.

“SS *Hotaru*, this is Captain Patricia Hayes of the Federation destroyer *Aerfen*. Please respond immediately.”

*Of all the people in the galaxy who had to come to my rescue, why did it have to be her?* The captain cleared his throat and touched the small blinking yellow control on the console that would initiate a ship-to-ship communication channel. “This is . . . err . . . the captain of the *Hotaru*. Thank you for your assistance, Captain Hayes. We are indeed very grateful to you and your crew for saving us.”

There was silence on the part of the *Aerfen's* captain, but then her voice came back softly over the speaker, and she was anything but delighted. “Saraoni . . . is that you?”

“Well . . . umm . . . yes, ma'am. It's me,” he replied nervously, his voice cracking near the end.

“Oh, brother,” Patricia replied, exasperated. “You've *got* to be kidding me.”

Saraoni slunk down in his seat, as if the simple maneuver would shield him from the verbal onslaught he knew he was about to receive.

“*Hotaru*, our sensors are showing an additional life sign on your vessel,” Hayes’s annoyed tone continued. “And I can only imagine who you’ve got in there with you.”

“Good afternoon, Captain Hayes,” the helmsman said, trying to sound as chipper as possible given the fact that five minutes ago he thought he was going to die. Then again, he might still die out there—if Captain Hayes had anything to do with it.

“Good afternoon, indeed,” Hayes’s otherwise soothing voice said with asperity. “Do you two have any idea how much trouble you could be in right now?”

Saraoni chimed in, pulling himself closer to the intercom speaker. “Well, Captain Hayes . . . you see . . . this was just a training flight. I didn’t think it would. . . be necessary to log—”

“You didn’t think it was necessary to log it in with Starfleet Security, is that it, Saraoni?” Hayes asked, cutting off her old friend. “Now, you both know that the adjacent sectors are literally crawling with Klingons, don’t you?”

“Yes, sir. I do. But—”

Patricia continued, unfazed. “And you *know* that everyone, merchant and civilian alike, is required to be escorted by Starfleet anytime their vessels are inside the new transportation zone, don’t you?” Hayes sounded more like an angry mother than a tested Starfleet captain.

Saraoni could only hang his head in shame. “Yes, Captain. I know.”

“Ahem,” Hayes muttered.

“Yes, ma’am,” Hikaru Sulu replied from the copilot’s seat with the same tone of embarrassment as his father.

Captain Hayes let out an unintelligible “ugh” sound before she continued. “You two could have been killed . . . probably *would* have been killed if the *Aerfen* hadn’t been on the far side of Whirlwind on a survey mission.”

“Yes, Captain,” Saraoni and the helmsman both said somberly.

“I’m sure you both know what that would have meant, right? It means I would have been the one to deliver the bad news to Shimizu. Do you have any idea what she’d say . . . what she’d do . . . if I had to tell her that her beloved husband and her

only son had been the victims of Klingon aggression because they were so excited—and when I say excited, feel free to substitute the word ‘stupid’—that they failed to log their flight plan with Federation Security?”

“She'd probably say we deserved it,” the helmsman replied before he could filter his thought. He quickly kicked himself for his choice of words.

There was the slightest sound of muffled laughter on the other end of the channel, but it was definitely not from Hayes. “Can it, Hikaru! You could both be in plenty of trouble as it is. You certainly don't need any smart remarks compounding your already overwhelming problems.” Patricia seemed to withdraw for a moment, and when she came back online a few moments later, there was a definite softness in her tone. “Fortunately, you both seem to have the gift for gab. Whatever you were talking about with the Klingons, it seemed to have distracted them long enough for our presence to go unnoticed.”

“But,” Hikaru asked, more excited than nervous, “how did you get so close to us without him detecting the *Aerfen* at all?”

Patricia let out a slow, frustrated sigh. “We used the planet's high gravitation field to mask our warp signature until we could get within weapons range.”

“That's amazing!” Hikaru exclaimed. “To get a shot—I mean . . . to get a shot like that, with 100 percent accuracy, you'd have to have gotten within . . . what? A thousand meters? And he didn't detect you at all? Wow. Maybe you can teach me that maneuver sometime?”

“You're on thin ice here, Mister Sulu. Don't push your luck,” Patricia chuckled. “A stunt like this could get you knocked out of the Academy entrance program altogether. And, after being out here for the last two years, I know how much you're looking forward to going back to San Francisco.”

“Yes, sir,” Hikaru replied dejectedly.

“And just for your information, I got to within 750 meters before I fired. I wasn't going to take any chances.”

“Wow . . .” both of the Sulu men said in slow unison.

Patricia's voice was almost chipper now, but was still laced with a thin edge of annoyance. “Just keep your wits about you a little while longer, okay Hikaru? And

Saraoni, I'm not going to mention this to the Federation authorities . . . this time. Just don't be foolish enough to pull a stunt like this again."

"Yes, ma'am," the two men replied together, more good-humored than they'd a moment before.

"Okay, you two. Stand by while we engage our tractor beam," Hayes said, then turned her voice down a notch. "We both need to get out of here, and fast—before any more Klingons show up looking for their friends."

## Chapter 2

Stardate 4102.17

February 2253

“Captain to the bridge. Repeat: Captain Phillips, please report to the bridge.”

There was nothing Kevin Phillips despised more than being called to duty while he was engaged in a conversation with a beautiful woman. He’d looked forward to this date for the last week, and to say that he was annoyed to call an end to it so abruptly would have been a galactic understatement. The captain and the woman in question were now in the turbolift and on their way to the bridge. The destroyer USS *Portsmouth* had been out of spacedock for almost two months now, on a voyage of exploration some 500 years after her namesake plied the oceans of Kevin’s homeworld in a similar fashion. The ship had taken on several new crewmembers at the Federation outpost on Fenbly VII, while others had been transferred off.

One such crewman who’d departed the ship was the chief medical officer, Dr. Guy Maltos. Maltos had contracted a rare viral strain of Deltonian flu while conducting a routine medical examination of a wounded Deltonian on his homeworld. Though the disease was not considered life-threatening in its current stage, it was highly likely that it could become fatal if it wasn’t treated in short order. Phillips, depressed at the thought of losing his old friend, immediately decided to transfer the doctor off the ship at Fenbly. Dr. Maltos was sure to get the medical help he needed and, in the meantime, Phillips had called on Starfleet Command to send him a new CMO.

Enter Dr. Hollie Cort of Earth, the woman now standing beside the captain in the turbolift. She’d been the former chief medical officer of the light cruiser *Cowpens* and, as far as Captain Phillips was concerned, had a fairly bland service record. Once she’d beamed aboard the *Portsmouth* from Fenbly, Cort had immediately made her way to the captain’s quarters to introduce herself to her new commanding

officer. Any such apprehensions Kevin had had regarding her service record quickly faded as he gazed in a near-speechless state at the lovely new doctor.

In truth, Captain Phillips was having a difficult time determining what exactly was inexorably drawing him to the new medical officer in the first place. She was quite beautiful—that much he could tell the moment she had appeared at his cabin. She was also quite intelligent—that much he'd discerned from the conversation they were currently having in the turbolift on the various xenobiological differences between the assorted humanoid species that dominated this sector of space.

The doors to the turbolift opened all too suddenly as it arrived at the top deck of the *Portsmouth*. Captain Phillips strode swiftly to the communications station, while the new doctor glided over to converse with the ship's science officer, Lieutenant Commander Walter Lutsch, a former colleague of hers from Starbase 2.

Phillips approached the lanky Lieutenant Pernesky with a slightly worried look on his face. "Your request seemed rather urgent, Lieutenant. What is it?" Kevin asked the gold-shirted man at the communications station.

"Sir, the 11th Strike Squadron is approaching the designated rendezvous coordinates. Commander Komack is hailing us from the *Altair*."

Kevin rubbed his hands together as the muscles in his back relaxed. *Thank God it's not Klingons*, he mused as the tension slowly ebbed away. He looked to the science station and noted with satisfaction that, as soon as his eyes fell on the stunning new medical officer, she glanced up from her conversation with Lieutenant Commander Lutsch and allowed a slight smile to tug at the corners of her full lips. He returned the expression and looked back to Lieutenant Pernesky. "Open a visual channel to Commander Komack, please."

"Yes, sir. Right away."

Kevin moved into the command chair in the center of the bridge and waited as the visual image of Komack wavered before him. The 11th Strike Squadron was right on time. There had been multiple reports of Klingon movements in this sector over the last few days, and Starfleet had wasted little time combining the efforts of multiple squadrons in order to clear out as many of the enemy vessels as possible, especially given their currently strained resources.

Phillips's group consisted of a pair of *Loknar*-class frigates: the *Rome* and *Halk*. Six hours ago they had linked up with another squadron, which was made up of the heavy destroyer *Breckenridge* and her two frigates—the *London* and the *Trantis*. Komack's squadron—with the cruiser *Altair*, and the frigates *Berlin*, and *Salos*—was the last piece of the puzzle.

The starfield image on the main viewer wavered one last time before being replaced by the sharp image of Commander James Komack. His dark hair, pulled back loosely, framed his already somber face with even more pronounced seriousness. His gray eyes pierced across space at his old friend on board the *Portsmouth*.

"USS *Altair*, we are receiving your transmission," Kevin began.

"Greetings, Captain Phillips. I trust we're not too late?" Komack asked.

"On the contrary, Commander Komack, I think you've gotten to the party before our honored guests have arrived."

Komack nodded smartly. "Glad to hear it, Captain. The 11th Strike Squadron is now at your disposal, sir. I only hope that we haven't traveled the last fifteen light-years to escort a few freighters across open space."

"Understood. It's good to see you, James. It's been a few months since we've had visual contact. Not since—"

Komack cleared his throat abruptly. "Not since that little . . . *encounter* on Muraski, right?"

Komack had gotten Phillips out of a pretty tight spot on the planet during their last encounter, for which Kevin would probably be in James's debt forever. Kevin wanted to bring up the point that it was in fact not entirely his fault that the woman behind the altercation was an ambassador, and that he had been totally unaware of that fact in the few moments leading up to the unfortunate encounter that had taken place, but he decided against saying anything about it to Komack at this time. "Well, I was certainly glad you were there to render assistance, James. Starfleet owes you a huge debt."

"Don't mention it. *Please*," Komack offered, bowing his head slightly and holding his hands up in a gesture of surrender.



“And so I won't,” Kevin replied, the friendly smile he'd been wearing fading from his face. It was time to get back to the job at hand. “Stand by to receive operational orders regarding our first sector assignment.”

“Oh?” Komack asked curiously. “And where would that be, exactly?”

“Altimus Sector,” Phillips said as he was handed an electronic stylus from a waiting yeoman.

*Altimus*? “Interesting. There isn't much there,” Komack replied in derision at the mention of the name.

“We'll start with Quadrant 1-10 and move into the sector on a spiral pattern. The first system we should come into contact with is Nostveg.”

Komack shook his head from side to side slowly and chuckled. “Nostveg. You really are trying to kill us with boredom, aren't you Kevin?”

“I'm sure we can scare up a few asteroids for you to shoot at, Commander,” Phillips fired back sarcastically.

“Don't do us any favors, sir,” Komack replied, deadpan. He recalled with distaste the last asteroid-clearing mission he and his squadron had been placed on. A stray asteroid—unnoticed by the sensor officer on the *Altair* until the last moment—had pummeled the side of the cruiser at nearly one-quarter impulse power. The impact had simultaneously taken out the transporter systems and three of the impulse reactors. It was all Komack could do to limp back to the nearest dry dock for repairs. “We're ready to receive the operational orders, sir.”

Kevin turned his head and nodded to science officer Lutsch, who had since finished his conversation with the lovely Dr. Cort. “Transmitting,” the lieutenant commander replied to his gaze.

Phillips shifted his left leg over his right and straightened his uniform tunic. “Be prepared to get underway within the hour, Commander Komack.”

“*Altair* copies, sir.”

Kevin waved his finger to his forehead in a mock salute. “*Portsmouth*, out.” When the channel was closed he scanned the bridge and, not finding his intended target, locked his gaze with Lieutenant Commander Lutsch once more. “Where is Dr. Cort?”

"I believe she said she had to get back to sickbay, sir. Said something about a lab analysis she had forgotten about."

"Well," Kevin began, paused, and then slapped his hands together as he quietly looked around the bridge for a brief moment. "Well, Mr. Lutsch. That is just where I intended to go. Please take command of the ship in my absence. I believe I'm scheduled for my physical in the next few minutes."

Lutsch, his almond-colored eyes squinting with confusion, cocked his head slightly. "I wasn't aware of any such appointment, sir. As first officer I should—"

"As first officer you should have been notified immediately, of course," Kevin interrupted quickly. "After all, it is standard procedure that the first officer be informed *any time* the captain has a pending appointment. I completely agree. In fact, I'll let the new doctor know right now that she made a serious breach of protocol by not informing you directly. We can't have that kind of rampant unprofessionalism go unchecked now, can we?"

And before Lutsch could begin to formulate any sort of protest, the captain had ejected himself from the command chair and was inside the turbolift. Destination: sickbay.

\* \* \*

"... and so I said to the Joridian, 'Why not? I've already got you on six charges of conspiracy.'" Kevin said, holding up the appropriate number of fingers, then uncurled a seventh while heartily chortling, "Why not make it one more?"

Dr. Cort, sitting casually behind her desk in the *Portsmouth's* sickbay, let out a loud laugh. Trying to catch her breath afterward, she let out a stifled snort as she attempted to continue her conversation with Phillips. "And what did he say to that?"

Kevin clasped his hands together and leaned his backside on the side of her desk closest to her. "What could he say? He was caught red-handed."

Hollie held her hands to her lips, stifling the last bit of laughter, then placed them demurely into her lap. "That's quite a story, Captain."

“If you stay out in deep space long enough, you're bound to see just about anything.” He tried to flash his most dashing smile at the red-haired siren, hoping that he wasn't being too forward with his new acquaintance.

The flirtatious look she returned nearly melted the captain right where he stood. “Of that I have no doubts, Captain.”

Kevin stood up and straightened his tunic. “Please, call me Kevin. ‘Captain’ is so . . . so damn *formal*.”

There was a mischievous look on her face. “I wasn't aware that we were on informal terms, sir.”

Phillips smirked. “Then why don't we agree to be on them?” *Too fast, you idiot. Too fast! Slow down! Engines, full reverse!*

Dr. Cort lowered her voice to a barely audible whisper, although both officers were aware that sickbay was completely empty at this time. “Are you sure that's wise, sir? I mean . . . Kevin?”

“Why not? I'm the captain, and you are my chief medical officer. We are going to be working very closely together while we're both assigned to this vessel, which I hope will be for a very long time to come. I think it's wise for senior officers to get to know one another. It helps build trust.”

Hollie seemed to come out a self-imposed shell as she stood and extended her hand to the captain. “I really do have to agree with you. I often felt very . . . sequestered during my previous assignment. The captain of the *Cowpens* didn't seem to want anything to do with me—unless one of the crew was injured, of course. Then, it was ‘yes, sir’ and ‘right away, sir’ and ‘I'll get him or her back to duty as soon as I can, sir.’” She smiled and relaxed her posture. “It was all very disquieting.”

Kevin released her feather-soft hand. “Then I hope your tour here will allow all your talents to shine through marvelously. And by the way, please don't feel like a stranger on my bridge. You are welcome anytime.”

Hollie's blue eyes sparkled even brighter and she grinned from ear to ear. Seeing that this news seemed to elate her, Kevin pressed his advantage and continued to dole out luxuries on her. “I understand you minored in psychology while you were

at Starfleet Medical. I think that might come in handy from time to time in dealing with new cultures.”

“You mean . . . you’re going to include me in the routine happenings of the ship?” she asked excitedly.

“Of course. In fact, I’m sure you’ll be just as valuable on landing parties as you will be on the ship.”

Dr. Cort let out an audible giggle as she looked wide-eyed at the handsome captain, for which she quickly kicked herself inside. *You’re acting like a love-struck schoolgirl. Relax or you’ll have to give yourself a tranquilizer.* “You’re kidding. You’re going to let me accompany you on landing parties . . . even though they may not immediately require my medical expertise?”

“Absolutely,” Captain Phillips replied with a grin. “Don’t tell me you’ve never gotten to go planetside before?”

She rolled her sapphire eyes. “Well, of course I did, but only when it was necessary for me to be there. I was never asked to go on first contact missions of any kind, if that’s what you’re implying.” Hollie then let out a soft sigh and, smiling, shook her head slowly from side to side. “Captain, if you’re trying to woo me into remaining on board here for a long time, then you are succeeding mightily.”

“That’s what I wanted to hear, Hollie. In fact, how about we grab something to eat for dinner? I’m sure we have a lot we could discuss, beginning with finishing that conversation we started on xenobiology.” Kevin offered her a hand as he inclined his head toward the doorway.

Commander Lutsch’s voice sprang from the wall-mounted speaker. “Captain Phillips, please report to the bridge.”

*Oh, dear Lord. Not again. Not twice in as many hours.* Kevin walked to the wall communications terminal and, pressing the blinking button, acknowledged the request. “We aren’t due to get underway for another twenty minutes, Commander. What’s the problem?”

“Sir, long-range sensors have picked up a Klingon task force nearing the Nostveg system. Their speed is warp factor three.”

Kevin looked at Hollie, who wore a deeply worried expression on her face. Whether it was done subconsciously or not, she slowly walked the three steps it took to be at his side.

“Captain, I hate to admit it . . . but I'm frightened. I've never been in a combat situation like this before.”

Kevin reached out a hand and placed it gently on her shoulder. “Everything will be okay, Hollie. We can handle anything the Klingons can throw at us.” It was as if his words alone were enough to abate her fears. Her once-stiff posture returned to the semblance of calm she had held a few moments before, and Kevin could feel the muscles of her shoulder relax under his palm. “Why don't you accompany me to the bridge and see for yourself?”

She reached up to her shoulder and placed her hand gingerly over his, smiling peacefully at the captain in the process. “I'd like that . . . Kevin.”

Captain Phillips and Dr. Cort arrived on the bridge and immediately exited the turbolift. The captain stepped over to the science officer's side as Hollie slowly moved to the side of the command chair.

“Lieutenant Commander Lutsch, report.”

Lutsch removed his eyes from the sensor's hood and turned to face his captain.

“Long-range sensors are definitely picking up enemy activity near Nostveg.”

“Helmsman,” Phillips turned to the officer at the helm, “if we set a course for Nostveg at maximum warp, how long until we would arrive in the system?”

Lieutenant Bobbi Lau turned her head to face the captain, her long, dark hair swaying slightly with the quick motion. “Approximately four hours and twenty-eight minutes at warp factor six, sir.”

Kevin turned his attention back to Lutsch. “Can you give me an exact number of the enemy vessels in the system?”

Lutsch looked briefly to his instruments, then turned his gaze back to the captain. “Not at this range. We'll need to be within one parsec to get that kind of information, sir.”

Phillips stepped down to the command deck and stood behind the helmsman. “Lieutenant Lau, get me into that parsec.”

“Aye aye, Captain.”

“Mr. Pernesky?”

“Yes, sir?” the dimple-faced young man at communications asked.

“Hail the lead starships of each of our squadrons and inform them to follow us in.”

“Aye, sir.”

Phillips turned from the science station and thrust himself into the command chair. He saw the seriousness of Hollie’s expression as she stood by his left side.

Up to this point, the doctor had been silent as she stood near the command chair. But if the captain was truly serious with his offer that Dr. Cort should feel free to speak her mind, then by God she would. “You’re not seriously entertaining the idea of picking a fight with the Klingons?” she asked far more softly than she thought she would.

He regarded her for a moment before he turned his attention to the forward viewer in total seriousness. “In fact I am, Doctor.”

She stepped from the side of the chair and into Phillips’s direct view. “But . . . you don’t even know how many enemy ships are in that sector. There could be dozens—or *more*.”

Kevin pursed his lips, shook his head from side to side, and then shrugged his shoulders. “Maybe there are, and maybe it’s simply a convoy of helpless freighters that are just ripe for the picking.”

Dr. Cort looked unconvinced. “But you don’t *know* that. It’s a big risk, if you ask me.” She let the seriousness of her words sink in, hoping that she hadn’t overstepped her bounds.

Kevin whipped his head in her direction and glared at her, far more irritated than he intended to be, but she had pushed a button and she was about to get a response. “Yes, Doctor . . . it’s a risk, but these are the risks we need to take. And—if you ask me—we need to start taking them more often. The Federation isn’t going to win this war if we’re always on the defensive.” He then waved his hand tersely at the forward viewer. “We need to be more proactive if we hope to succeed in confrontations out here.” Phillips had intended to say as much to his bridge crew for some time. They needed to know why they were out here and that their captain

wasn't going to back down from any fight they were presented with. The crew, he felt, needed that center of courage right now—as did many of the Starfleet crews manning the hundreds of vessels in the war zone.

Hollie silently glared back at him for a long moment. “Then it sounds like my services will be more suited for *sickbay* than the bridge. If you will excuse me, *Captain*.” Turning slowly, she stepped into the waiting turbolift.

As the doors closed behind her, Kevin inwardly hoped he hadn't hurt her feelings too severely. Though he fully understood that wounded spirits were nowhere near as important as the lives of Federation citizens, he silently prayed he would live long enough to make it up to her.

Pernesky chimed in from the communications stations, breaking the deafening silence on the bridge in the wake of Dr. Cort's departure. “The fleet is standing by, sir.”

“Helmsman, ahead warp factor six.”

\* \* \*

“Sir, we're approaching the Nostveg system,” the ship's helmsman stated.

Commander James Komack, seated in the command chair of the *Altair*, uncrossed his legs and leaned toward the main viewer.

“Sensor readings, Commander Magoon,” he asked the science officer. “What's in the system?”

Lieutenant Commander Tabitha Magoon, her face buried in the sensor readout, one hand busily accessing the ship's library computer and fine-tuning the long-range sensors with the other, attempted to get a clear picture of the enemy presence in the Nostveg system. “We are just coming into extreme sensor range now, sir. Sensors are showing multiple enemy contacts.”

“Can you give me exact numbers and hull types?” Komack asked impatiently.

“One moment, sir,” she replied, inputting some final figures into the ship's library computer. “Information is being correlated within the computer, sir. It should have an accurate reading in a moment.”

Komack turned his attention away from the forward viewer and looked toward the science station. The ship's computer was working feverishly—taking all the available sensor data, astrometric information, speed of the Federation task force, and other such highly detailed data into account in order to produce the most accurate reading available.

Magoon, her long blonde hair spilling over the hood of the sensor scanner, began reading off the information. “Confirmed, sir. Multiple enemy contacts. I’m reading five squadrons of Klingon destroyers, all D-16 type.”

“Five squadrons?”

“Yes, sir,” she said flatly. “Each squadron seems to consist of three vessels.”

“That makes a total of fifteen ships against the nine of our task force,” Komack said aloud to himself as he slowly turned back to the forward view screen. “Have they scanned us yet, Commander?”

“No, sir. We’re still outside the sensor cone of the D-16s. Thankfully, the Klingons don’t have anything larger in the system than destroyers or we would have been detected already.”

“Then we have the element of surprise,” Komack said, more of a statement than a question.

“I’d say that’s a logical assumption, sir.”

Five squadrons of D-16s was a formidable force, but the odds that the nine Federation vessels would be victorious were just about even. What their six Starfleet frigates lacked in available firepower, Captain Phillips’s remaining three heavy cruisers more than made up for it. How did that old Irish blessing go? *A world of wishes at your command. God and his angels close to hand.* The Federation task force couldn’t have wished for a better situation, and—hopefully—God was close at hand to help them win the day.

“Communications officer, open a channel to the *Portsmouth*. I want to talk to Captain Phillips right away.”

\* \* \*

“So your sensors are telling you the same thing as mine?” Komack asked.



Phillips nodded across the communications channel. “They are, Commander. What did you have in mind?”

Komack smiled broadly, then leaned in his chair toward the screen as if to make his statement more poignant. “How about a blitz, Captain?”

Phillips’s dark eyes narrowed as he inclined his head. “A blitz, did you say?”

“Yes, Captain. A blitz. I say we don’t waste any time in doling out some chaos to those Klingons in there.”

Kevin chuckled in disbelief. “You just want to rush right in . . . all guns blazing?”

Komack nodded sternly. “Let’s throw them into confusion with a quick strike from the *Portsmouth*, the *Altair*, and the *Breckenridge*—then call in the frigates to mop up the pieces.”

Phillips considered the plan for a moment. Komack watched as the *Portsmouth*’s captain turned to his science officer. The officer offered a slow nod of his head with raised eyebrows, saying, “It could work, sir.”

Apparently that was all Phillips needed to know. “Then, Commander Komack, let’s not waste any time. I’ll send out the battle orders to the frigates. Please contact the *Breckenridge* and inform them we’ll move into the Nostveg system in five minutes.”

“Our sensors are showing that the Klingons are orbiting Nostveg III,” Komack offered.

Kevin turned to his science officer once again, indicating that he should speak loud enough for both starship captains to hear. “Mr. Lutsch, what do we know about that planet?”

“Nostveg III is a Type-N planetoid. It has an extremely high surface temperature due to massive amounts of carbon dioxide and corrosive sulfides in the air. The surface is quite barren. Its close proximity to the Nostveg star would make it extremely prone to both delta and gamma radiation bombardments.”

“Could we use that to our advantage?” Kevin asked, sitting on the edge of his seat.

“Possibly.” Lutsch nodded. “The radiation could shield us from the Klingons’ sensors for an additional few minutes.”

Komack chimed in at the revelation. “How many minutes, Commander?”

On the *Altair*'s view screen, Lutsch shrugged his shoulders slowly, looking from Komack to Phillips. "Five . . . perhaps a few more."

Kevin turned his attention back to Komack. "I don't think we'll need more than that, wouldn't you say, James?"

"That should be more than enough time to inflict some real damage, Captain."

Phillips grinned from ear to ear. "Then let's not dawdle. Helmsman, ahead full impulse. Navigator, raise shields and arm all weapons."

"Good hunting, Captain Phillips," Komack offered.

"And you as well, Commander."

## Chapter 3

The nine Federation starships quickly organized themselves into the blitz pattern that Commander Komack had suggested. The plan was to launch a three-tier attack against the Klingons. This plan would have each of the individual squadrons dividing out from the main body and attacking different targets in three overlapping waves, and from multiple vectors.

The first wave would consist of Phillips's squadron, led by the *Portsmouth*, flanked on either side in a trailing-V formation by the frigates *Rome* and *Halk*. The second wave, with the frigates *London* and *Trantis* arranged similarly, would be led by Captain Jared Bronson on board the *Breckenridge*. The third and final wave would see Komack's *Altair* taking the lead, flanked by the ubiquitous *Loknar*-class frigates *Berlin* and the *Salos*.

As soon as the Starfleet vessels arrived at the prearranged coordinates just outside the sensor range of the Klingons near Nostveg III, it was apparent to all the Federation vessel commanders that Klingon tacticians had very little in common with their Federation counterparts. The fifteen Klingon vessels, all D-16 type *Swiftwind* destroyers, were arranged in a haphazard fashion around the equator of the turbulent yellow planetoid. The first group of Klingons that had been located on the short-range sensors, two squadrons of three ships each, were leaving orbit and heading out from the planet in a spiral pattern that would put them at a forty-five-degree angle to the current course of one of the Federation attack groups. Another trio of ships was on a vector that would take it across the bow of the first two groups that had been spotted, assuming none of the enemy commanders changed course to avoid the ensuing collision. Finally, the last two squadrons of six destroyers were on the far side of Nostveg III, and were packed so tightly together that it left very little room for any type of emergency maneuvers, should the Klingons get into any trouble.

And, as it was, trouble had found them all—and it was about to swoop in on them in a blur of gleaming white Starfleet Thermocoat and wave upon wave of laser barrages. The initial group of six D-16s would be the first to fall victim to

Komack's squadron. The radiation that science officer Lutsch on board the *Portsmouth* had wanted to use as a buffer between the two opposing forces was working perfectly, and the Klingons didn't detect the Federation vessels until it was too late for them. When the location of each Klingon vessel had been locked into the ship's computers, and each of their individual courses had been estimated, the Federation fleet split up and began their individual runs.

However, much to the surprise of the Captain Phillips on the *Portsmouth*, only two of the six D-16s that were farthest away from the impending battle zone noticed his ships moving into an attack position. The four remaining Klingon vessels continued lazily along their previous flight path at one-quarter impulse. A moment after the two cruisers had passed over the four, as if some divine epiphany had struck the commanders of those vessels, the four stragglers turned and increased speed to follow the others.

Phillips ordered the *Portsmouth* to get ahead of her frigate escorts by over two full ship lengths—or just over 600 meters. Just as the Klingons, now in a trailing-V formation of their own, were about to be rewarded with a trio of Federation starships entering into their weapons range, they watched in shock as they realized a moment too late that they were already inside the weapons range of the Federation destroyer. The *Portsmouth* reached out across nearly 3,000 meters of space, firing with full lasers until she had gained another 500 meters, then began to fire her accelerator cannons at the flanking Klingon destroyers. Her beams and missiles streaked out to both port and starboard and registered impacts, then she continued on past the two stricken *Swiftwinds* in search of another target. Not far behind the *Portsmouth* were the frigates *Rome* and *Halk*, each taking aim at one of the damaged destroyers that now lay directly ahead of them. In moments, after a barrage of heavy laser and torpedo fire from the small but vicious Starfleet vessels, the two Klingon ships were little more than twisted, floating heaps of scrap metal. Komack then took to focusing his combined firepower against the sole surviving Klingon D-16.

Meanwhile, the remaining three Klingon destroyers that had made up the initial formation of six turned to face off against the second Federation group in an attempt

to even the odds. And just as the Federation commanders had planned, they were quickly intercepted by the unseen second tier of the Federation blitz—with the destroyer *Breckenridge* in the lead and all forward batteries blazing. The frigate *Trantis*, in an unplanned but devastating maneuver, had also targeted the same D-16 that had presented itself to the *Breckenridge*. The *Loknar*-class *Trantis* was firing its red-hot dorsal lasers in a nearly continuous stream at roughly 500 meters' distance from her target, pouring every ounce of available energy into the bursts. The beams hit the Klingon destroyer in the center of the long, thin neck that connected the bulbous bridge module to the sweeping secondary hull. Thus, as a result of the combined firepower from both the *Breckenridge* and the *Trantis*, the Klingons' shields in that area failed almost instantly. In the next moment, a volley of fusion-tipped accelerated warheads streamed out from the *Breckenridge*, and the ensuing explosion severed the Klingon ship in two. This had the effect of sending the remaining two Klingon vessels in the squadron into confusion as they attempted to turn away from the bisected destroyer that now floated dangerously close to their vessels.

The *Breckenridge*, having set her lasers to half power, swiftly took down the port shields on the D-16 that was now directly abeam of her. Captain Bronson had made a vow to himself and to his crew to take the Klingon ship in one piece—if it were possible.

Captain Bronson, his small black eyes fixed on the image of the crippled Klingon vessel on the viewer, addressed the communications officer without breaking eye contact with his victim. "Ensign Goda, get me the *London* on a secure channel."

Lenna Goda, the youngest member of the *Breckenridge*'s bridge crew, ran her long brown fingers over the communications terminal like a concert pianist. A second later, with her hand firmly on her earpiece, she announced, "Captain, I have Commander Victoriano standing by."

Bronson looked at the armrest on his chair and, noting that the ship-to-ship channel had been fed to his speaker, flipped the blinking communications toggle on the panel. "Commander Victoriano, this is Captain Bronson."

"Go ahead, Captain. We're receiving you loud and clear." Victoriano's voice was calm and collected.

“Commander, I want to capture that vessel if we can manage it. Do you think you could provide cover for us while I beam over a security detachment?”

“I don't think that will be a problem, sir.”

Jared could tell that the commander on the other side of the channel, separated in space by less than 1,000 meters, was smiling broadly at the receipt of this new tactic. “Excellent, Commander Victoriano. Bring the remainder of the enemy’s shields down with half-power lasers, but keep your eyes on the lookout and your cannons at the ready, just in case we run into any trouble.”

“Understood, Captain.”

“*Breckenridge* out.” Bronson flipped the switch that would close the channel. He entered another command into the chair’s controls, and a moment later he was connected with the chief security officer. “Lieutenant Wenskovitch, this is the captain. I need a fully armed security detachment in the transporter room immediately.”

Wenskovitch, the fresh-faced junior lieutenant who had recently been promoted to security chief after the departure of the last head of security, was eager to impress his captain and thankful for this new assignment. He liked that fact that, rather than take orders while in a landing party, he now had the responsibility of giving them. It was just the way he liked it. “A boarding party?” he asked in response to the captain’s query, although he already knew the answer. *Your powers of observation aren't going to win you any prizes for that one*, he thought as he silently kicked himself.

“That's correct, Lieutenant. The safety of your team is paramount, but your number one priority is the capture of that ship and anything inside it, and that includes prisoners. We need that vessel in one piece.”

“Aye, sir. We'll be in the transporter room in two minutes.”

“Excellent. I'll signal you from the bridge when we're ready to have you transported over. Bronson out.”

Once the captain had signed off, Wenskovitch grabbed a handful of his best men and headed briskly for the ship’s armory.

The *London*, having aimed her underpowered weapons at key points along the Klingon's hull, expertly took down the remainder of the enemy shields with only three short bursts from her forward lasers, while the Klingon's inept return fire missed each and every time.

Commander Victoriano, knowing that it was now or never, quickly swiveled his command chair to face the communications station. "Communications, hail the *Breckenridge* and inform them we have them covered, and that they may begin boarding operations at their leisure."

"With pleasure, sir."

Seconds later Lieutenant John Wenskovitch, with his party of three male and two female security officers, beamed aboard the stricken Klingon destroyer, materializing inside a large void near the aft end of the vessel. The chief engineer on the *Breckenridge* had determined ahead of time that engineering, not the bridge, would be the best place to start the takeover of the ship. If any Klingon on the bridge had ordered a self-destruct of the vessel, the order would have to be transmitted down here to initiate the detonation. And if the bridge had been destroyed or damaged in any way, the Starfleet officers could simply take command of the ship via auxiliary control—and the initial scans from the *Breckenridge* had told Wenskovitch that such a compartment was likely to be near the ship's engine room.

The landing party gazed around at the various pieces of equipment that were surrounding them—or at least, everything they could see through the dimly lit confines of the space. There was a small stack of crates near one wall and computer terminals on two others. The bulkheads, overhead, and the deck all seemed to be colored the same rust brown. In the darkness of the space it was difficult at times to note where one wall would end and another would begin. Overhead, from some unseen alcoves, small spot lights had been installed to light the floor below, while others were pointed toward the computers on the bulkheads. In the rear of the compartment was the warp intermix chamber. It looked, for all accounts, like a fusion of typical Klingon technology mixed haphazardly with an overtly Federation

design, although Wenskovitch fully understood that all warp engines—regardless of which species had ultimately developed it—all seemed to look somewhat alike.

As one of the Starfleet security men, a young human ensign named Sullenger, strode to within a few meters of one of the computers, a violent bolt of green energy lanced out from a catwalk above the Federation officers, striking the bulkhead just behind him and bathing the landing party in a shower of white sparks. Sullenger, a man who had distinguished himself on board the *Breckenridge* as something of an amateur boxer, took ample use of his training in that sport, quickly sidestepping the beam the moment before it would have struck his shoulder. His leap took him directly into the path of Ensign Katie Reger, and the two young officers fell to the deck in a blur of arms and legs before they quickly recovered and rolled to their feet, laser pistols drawn and pointed to the gloom of the overhead.

“Take cover!” Wenskovitch shouted as his team quickly dove to find the most ample cover they could find. “Shoot to stun, but kill if you have to!”

\* \* \*

Outside the skirmish waging inside the Klingon destroyer, about ten kilometers from the *Breckenridge*’s hull, the ships of the final tier of the three-pronged Federation offensive pattern intercepted one of the two remaining complete squadrons of Klingon vessels. Unlike the first two Starfleet waves, however, each of the Federation vessels squared off against a single Klingon destroyer. The Klingons, on the other hand, seemed to have a different idea altogether.

Two of the Klingon destroyers, firing alternating patterns of disruptor and laser canon barrages, took down the shields of the first Federation vessel to come into their weapons range, the small frigate *Berlin*. The *Berlin*, try as she might, simply could not maneuver fast enough to avoid the multiple impacts she was being subjected to.

On the bridge of the light cruiser *Altair*, Commander Komack watched as the *Berlin*’s skipper attempted a bold move to position his frigate out of the line of fire of another volley of enemy torpedoes. The *Berlin* was trying to move up on her Z-



axis, but she wasn't fast enough. Green disruptor beams sprang from the D-16s that were on both her port and starboard sides. The port warp nacelle of the *Berlin* suddenly exploded under the onslaught, leaving only the forward half of itself still attached to the pylon, which was now twisted upward at an irregular angle after the destruction.

Seeing that the *Berlin* was quickly dying, Komack ordered the *Altair* and *Salos* to take aim at the Klingon destroyer closest to the fading Federation frigate. The two untouched Starfleet vessels made little work of the Klingon vessel in the ensuing firefight. The *Salos* unleashed an unending burst from her forward laser cannons, followed by quick bursts from an experimental rapid-fire laser turret that had been installed under her primary hull during their last layup. The *Altair* fired three accelerator projectiles, all of which struck the Klingon's upper secondary hull dead center. The Klingon's shields folded quickly, and the *Salos* fired again with her turret, holing almost every square inch of the destroyer's hull. The Klingon ship vented atmosphere and personnel from its gaping wounds as it caught fire and noiselessly listed out of the combat zone.

The *Rome* hadn't fared any better than the *Berlin*. Although the three Klingon destroyers the Federation forces had engaged had all been destroyed, the toll the Klingons had exacted on the Starfleet ships hadn't gone undetected. The *Rome* had strayed too close to her target during her initial confrontation, and the frigate had been caught in a surprise suicide run by a Klingon commander. The enemy destroyer had engaged her at full ramming speed, which the *Rome's* shields were fully unprepared to handle. The captain of the *Rome*, Commander Henry Thatcher, had ordered his helmsman to take the *Rome* into a steep Z-dive in an attempt to avoid the forthcoming collision, but the *Rome's* eventual movement had come a moment too late. The Klingon destroyer's suicide run barely avoided smashing into the forward portion of the frigate's saucer section, missing the *Rome's* translucent bridge dome by a mere two meters. However, the enemy vessel's plunge smashed it into both of the *Rome's* upswept warp pylons, severing them neatly from the frigate as the Klingon vessel continued its dive toward the *Rome's* stern.

On board the *Portsmouth*, Captain Phillips could only watch helplessly as the warp nacelles floated effortlessly away from the *Rome*. *Is there something disturbingly poetic in this? Is this how Honorius felt when the Roman Empire began to crumble around him?* “Communications, try to raise the *Rome*,” he said hurriedly, not averting his eyes from the forward screen.

“Communications with the *Rome* are down, sir,” Pernesky replied.

Kevin turned his chair a few more degrees to face the science officer. “Life signs?”

Lieutenant Commander Lutsch scrutinized the readouts that the short-range sensors were giving him. “Sporadic, sir. I’m unable to calculate exact numbers. It could be due to radiation leakage from the crippled Klingon destroyer, or from the damaged plasma conduits on the *Rome* herself. However, I can tell you that main power, as well as auxiliary power, is down. Their life support is currently functioning on battery power only, but stable for the moment.”

“Then we’ll need to take care of the Klingon vessels we can, and come back for the *Rome*’s crew later. Communications officer, raise Commander Bassett on the *Halk*. Tell him we are proceeding toward Nostveg III and that we will require his immediate assistance.”

Meanwhile, back in the engineering section of the crippled Klingon destroyer, Lieutenant John Wenskovitch and his boarding party had just dispatched the last of the Klingon crewmen in a brief but intense firefight.

“What now, Lieutenant?” Ensign Dennis Sullenger asked. His normally bright and chipper face was smudged with some grime he had picked up while he had taken cover in a dark corner of the engine room. His green eyes pierced through the darkness that overshadowed his complexion. “Do we disable her warp drive?”

John Wenskovitch, his laser pistol held in the ready position at his side, looked around the space for their next avenue. Several of the wall-mounted terminals had been blasted out during the weapons exchange with the Klingon crew. John only hoped that none of the damaged computers were absolutely critical to the drive systems of the ship. He sighed heavily as he surveyed the damage. “No, we need to

take this ship as intact as possible. The impulse and warp systems need to remain operable. In fact, disabling them shouldn't even be considered as a last resort. I want to give this ship to Captain Bronson just as we found it."

Ensign Tessa Westewood, who had been standing near one of the blown-out computer terminals, her long hair flowing in a soft breeze created by the ship's atmospheric recycler near her head, looked to Sullenger and let out a soft chuckle. "Well, we've already ruined that, I'd say."

John smirked at her. "Let's just agree that this terminal was in this condition when we found it, Tess."

"How about we start with life support?" Sullenger piped in from Wenskovitch's left side.

Wenskovitch looked around the room, then to one of the two doors that led out of the compartment. "Door number one or door number two?" he asked aloud.

Clayton Hagerman, a recent addition to the *Breckenridge's* crew, waved his tricorder slowly around the space. He hesitantly walked to the door on the far side of the room, and after a series of *bleeps* from his instrument, looked over to Wenskovitch and inclined his head toward the hatch. "In there, Lieutenant."

Sullenger looked at the closed door and then apprehensively to Clayton. "I suppose you know how to operate Klingon computer systems, too? I mean . . . I'd just hate for someone to accidentally shut off the life support systems in this space—if you know what I mean."

Hagerman gingerly patted the tricorder at this side. "My knowledge of computer systems operation ends with this little thing."

John Wenskovitch smiled and looked to the last member of the boarding party. The dark-skinned Ensign Theodore Geib was busily scanning the catwalk above the space, keeping a watchful eye out for any Klingons who might enter the space from above. "Theodore, front and center."

Geib took one final glance at the overhead and then walked to the lieutenant's side. "Yes, sir?"

"You have a skill rating of fifty-two in computer operations, don't you?"

"Yes, sir. Federation computer systems. But I don't think—"

Wenskovitch patted the young ensign on the shoulder. "I have full confidence in your ability to analyze these Klingon computers."

Geib looked as if he were about to protest. "But, sir. It's an entirely different kind of—"

"Are you saying that a bright young man such as yourself is too scared to figure out how to navigate the computer systems of an old piece of junk like this?" He emphasized his statement by waving his pistol around the room in a quick sweep.

Theodore straightened, as if he were insulted by the lieutenant's remarks. "I'll take that as an official challenge, sir."

Wenskovitch looked at Sullenger. "There. You see? I wouldn't worry about it, Dennis," he said, then placed a firm hand on Sullenger's shoulder as he turned his attention toward the ensign. "Ensign Geib here is an expert at Klingon computers."

Geib stepped cautiously toward the door in front of him, with the rest of the landing party close on his heels. It opened with a loud grind, and the team found themselves in a room that was square, perhaps four meters on each side. The farthest wall, opposite the door they had just come through, held a small view screen. The left and right walls were lined with computer control terminals and various readout displays. The center of the room held the only piece of furniture in the space—a chair vaguely similar to the command chairs found on starship bridges.

Geib finally holstered his laser pistol and activated the tricorder that had been slung across his right shoulder as the team slowly moved toward the computer controls on the right side of the room. He waved it one final time at a series of flashing lights that were placed just above a series of four silver toggle switches. "I think . . . yes . . . this should activate that view screen," he said as he closed his tricorder and slung it back to his hip. He held his fingers to the center two toggles and then, saying a silent prayer as the rest of the team took a collective gasp, flipped the switches down.

Without warning, an extremely bright light in the overhead flashed from green to red several times, and was then followed by a loud buzzing alarm. The flashing lights stopped on red, bathing the team in an eerie magenta glow. Then the entire compartment went completely dark.

“Oh, yes,” Sullenger said flatly from somewhere behind John Wenskovitch. “I’m not worried at all, Lieutenant.”

The *Breckenridge*’s wing mates—the *London* and the *Trantis*—had finally dispatched their target and linked up with the *Portsmouth* and the *Halk*. The four starships now sped toward Nostveg III at full impulse. Of the fifteen Klingon destroyers that had been in the sector prior to the engagement, only six of the vessels were now at normal operating efficiency—and three of those were still on the far side of the planet.

Two of the three Klingon vessels closest to the battle swung out of their orbit and attempted to intercept the four Federation vessels now approaching them. The third vessel, for some unknown reason, continued lazily in its orbit around Nostveg III for some time. The *Altair* and the *Salos*, having disabled an additional destroyer en route, were now well on their way to the far side of Nostveg III to intercept the remaining three stragglers.

The two Klingon destroyers sped toward the *London* and the *Trantis*. It was two on two, a fight to the death. One *Swiftwind* engaged the *London* while the other, performing a high-speed axial rotation to starboard, slipped tightly between the two frigates and continued on her course to face off with the *Breckenridge*, now holding a stationary position just forward of the Klingon destroyer that was holding her boarding party.

Captain Bronson was waiting for them.

Before the Federation cruiser was inside the weapons range of the D-16, the *Breckenridge* fired a spread of accelerator projectiles in the enemy destroyer’s direction. All three of them missed, but Captain Bronson got the distinct impression that the Klingon commander had gotten the message loud and clear, as the enemy vessel sped past the Federation light cruiser without firing another round. The Klingon ship again altered its course and tried to come alongside the *Breckenridge* in an attempted broadside run. As soon as the *Breckenridge* was in weapons range of the destroyer, the Klingon began firing all starboard weapons at the port side of the ship. The *Breckenridge*, likewise, began firing her ventral lasers at the Klingon. The Klingon’s weapons were, for the most part, ineffective until they reached a

weak spot in the *Breckenridge's* shields just forward of the vessel's shuttlecraft hangar. The clamshell doors of the hangar instantly bulged outward as internal detonations rocked the aft end of the ship, then the doors exploded outward into a half-dozen fragments.

The *Trantis*, after receiving an emergency distress signal from the *Breckenridge*, performed a high-energy turn and rushed back to the destroyer's aid. As the Klingon destroyer was still gliding past the port side of the *Breckenridge*, the *Trantis* came in fast—all forward weapons blazing. She crossed over the top of the Klingon destroyer, first letting loose with her projectiles and then with lasers. The D-16 continued on her course for another half-minute before all her external lights blinked three times and went dead.

On board the *Breckenridge*, the bridge crew erupted in a nearly unanimous roar of cheers.

"All power is down, sir," Science officer Dishman said excitedly to Captain Jared Bronson. "Life support has failed."

"Very good, Commander," Captain Bronson said with his usual calmness. "Ensign Goda, send my compliments to Commander Vanmeter on the *Trantis*."

The lithe woman beamed with pride. "Aye, sir."

Bronson then nodded to the image of the Klingon vessel which held his landing party. "And, once you're finished with that, please try to raise Lieutenant Wenskovitch on board our friend over there and find out what's keeping him."

\* \* \*

With the battle over and the victory solidly going to the Federation forces, it was time for Phillips's fleet to lick their wounds.

"That's excellent news, gentlemen," Komack was saying to the split-image of Fleet Captain Phillips and Captain Bronson on the view screen on board the *Altair*. "I know Starfleet Intelligence will enjoy getting their hands on some more Klingon technology."

“My thoughts exactly, James,” Kevin agreed. “To be honest, I’m surprised we caught them with their pants down so easily. The final report just came in from our landing party. They’ve managed to secure the last D-16 and are preparing to get underway to our location now.”

Komack tilted his head in confusion. “And they’re towing the D-16 here?”

“Not at all, sir. They are actually bringing her here under her own power.”

Komack’s confusion turned into bewilderment as a smile spread across his face. “That would be just like you, Phillips. You’ve got to be the luckiest son of a bitch I know. Of the four Klingon ships that we can officially claim to have captured today, you’re the only one who manages to get one that can still sail under her own power.”

“Indeed,” Bronson chimed in. “An impressive feat, Fleet Captain. Not bad for your first fleet command.”

Phillips nodded. “As much to the credit of everyone else involved, too. We’ve just received a communiqué from Starbase 14: they’re dispatching a repair tender and tugs to pick up the *Rome* and the remains of the *Berlin*, not to mention the Klingon ships and personnel we’ve captured. I’d say it’s been a pretty good day, gentlemen, all things considered.”

James Komack regarded the images of the *Rome* and the *Berlin* in his mind, and his mood swung quickly from relief to sorrow. Half their respective crews were either dead or dying. “I agree,” Komack replied heavily as he leaned back into his command chair, the thick leather crackling under the pressure. “. . . all things considered.”

As if reading his mind across space, Phillips lowered his voice. “The *Portsmouth*’s shuttle bay has been converted into a makeshift hospital ward, and we’re currently overflowing with what remains of the crews of those ships. We lost a lot of good people out there today, but we’ve saved quite a few, not to mention the fact that we’ve secured the system. Starfleet Command will want a full debriefing on this. Please transport over as soon as possible so we can compare notes.”

## Chapter 4

Stardate 4102.20

February 2253

“Are we ready to beam down the rest of the Marine contingent to the planet’s surface?”

“Aye, Captain. They’re standing by in transporter rooms two and three for beam out.”

Captain Neal Starcher was standing on the bridge of the Marine fast transport *Landover*, failing to maintain his patience while waiting to fulfill his primary objective in the sector. The *Landover*, a *Liberty*-class transport, along with its escort of three Starfleet frigates, had been ordered to the planet Joia IV as precautionary measure against a possible Klingon incursion into the system. The *Landover* was tasked with beaming its complement of 1,500 Marines—as well as their associated equipment—down to the surface in order to garrison the planet, should the Klingons decide to attempt to take the planet by force. And would it be the blood-thirsty Imperial race warriors, or the somewhat tamer fusion-race ones? He much preferred the fusions, if he had a choice in the matter. Some said it was experiments in DNA manipulation that had caused the warriors drastic change in appearance from the normally ridged and more menacing looking Imperial officers. Some said it was a curse, and still others said a plague. Whatever it was, the fusions were far less prone to rash and dangerous decisions, and also far more cunning and suspicious than their ridge-headed relatives. As he pondered the fate of his people, Starcher was preparing to beam down the remainder of the Marine forces, the majority of which had already been transported to the surface within the last two hours.

Captain Starcher began to pace the upper deck of the bridge while he waited for the signal from the planet that would indicate that beaming operations were complete. This was the most vulnerable time for a starship. The *Landover*’s shields



were down and all available power was being channeled into the transporter systems and the impulse engines.

*This is taking too long*, Starcher thought as he rubbed away the perspiration on his palms. *Why couldn't Federation Research and Development work on making a more efficient transporter for this task? A standard transporter pad, even a larger cargo pad, is simply not efficient enough for all this equipment to go down at one time. Someone needs to hurry up and build a better mousetrap.*

Starcher then ran a hand through his coffee-colored hair, his gray eyes scanning over the various terminals in the bridge, not really looking at any of them. The *Landover* had served entirely on the front lines in one capacity or another since the onset of the war with the Klingons, but this particular mission had one unique difference that had separated it from all the others Starcher had undertaken.

For the last four months, the *Landover* had been transporting goods and supplies to the starships, combat units, and starbases operating near the boundaries of Federation-Klingon space. The mission that Starcher now found himself on was the first time the *Landover* was tasked with garrisoning an entire planet all by itself, as well as being the first time that such a large force of Federation soldiers and equipment were on board.

Joia IV, four parsecs from the Federation-held Rebonet system, was a striking green and blue Class-M planet in a system composed of mostly ice-covered rocks. The system's star, a white main sequence type, bathed Joia with an almost pure white light, which was vastly unlike the yellow star of Starcher's home planet of Earth. When Neal had traveled down to the planet on the one and only expedition he had made since the Marine contingent had arrived, he'd had the distinct impression that he was walking around an immense doctor's office. Every color was shifted slightly toward the blue spectrum, and everything seemed just a little off-hue for his liking. He had beamed back up to the *Landover* a short time later with a mild headache, which the ship's surgeon had put down as "Lightwave Interactive Particle Syndrome," a title he had proudly coined himself. The doctor had bubbled over with joy when he realized that there was the prospect of publishing a paper on it in the Starfleet Medical Journal. Captain Starcher had only rolled his eyes at the good

doctor's self-indulgence and, after taking a mild sedative, returned to the bridge to oversee the last of the transporter operations.

The *Landover's* escort for this mission, the 16th Strike Squadron, was made up of the Starfleet frigates *Cygni Minor*, *Houston*, and *Garros*. The commanding officer of the *Houston*, a headstrong man named Thomas Allen, had ordered the 16th to take up tactical positions surrounding the *Landover* during the first phases of the operation. Starcher, however, still had his reservations about their mission, even with the warships surrounding his massively unimposing transport. The *Landover* had only two banks of light laser emitters, no accelerator cannons, and certainly none of advanced photon torpedo systems still undergoing trial runs far from the front lines. Every ounce of space inside the ship was dedicated, in one way or another, to storage and transport. She was big, she was bulky, and she was slow. To put it succinctly, she was a prime target for capture or destruction.

Captain Starcher watched as the *Garros* came into view on the forward screen for a brief instant. As all *Loknar*-class frigates went, she was a tough little ship. The *Loknars* had been a saving grace for the Federation during the war, especially in the last several months. Because they were inexpensive to build and easy to maintain, the Starfleet shipyards could produce them in nearly a quarter of the time it took to build and test a single command cruiser. The frigates had endeared themselves to their crews for their strength and reliability, and to say that they were loved by their officers and enlisted personnel alike would have been an accurate statement. Starcher was glad to have three of the little “fork-tailed devils” at his side.

According to the Starfleet Intelligence reports, the Joia system was well within a secured area of Federation space. As of stardate 4101.26, there hadn't been any appreciable Klingon forces detected within a four-parsec radius of the system—and Starcher was now beginning to wonder why. True, Joia was well situated within Federation boundaries and any Klingon attack on the sector would be madness, but there was also quite a bit the Klingons could gain by taking the system. The Joia system was within striking distance of three additional Federation sectors, two of which contained Starfleet dry docks and other ship maintenance facilities. These factors alone had necessitated the presence of a planet that could be set up as a defensive platform, and the planet that had ultimately been chosen was Joia IV. The

4th Marine Regiment was to be the first in a series of three regiments that would form a secure perimeter around what was to become the future Starbase 28. The Federation needed to maintain control of this system at any cost.

As the last of the enlisted personnel and equipment of the 4th was transported to the surface, the Caitian communications officer's voice sang out across the bridge. "Captain Starcher, Major Medcalf is reporting that the last of the enlisted detachment has beamed down to the surface and the area is now secure."

Neal felt as if a great weight had just been lifted from his burdened shoulders. *Main mission objective accomplished, old boy. Well done.*

Lieutenant Nannie Greve, seeing the look of relief wash over her captain's facial appearance, continued her message from the surface. "Major Medcalf is now requesting that he and the rest of the officers of the 4th be allowed to transport back to the *Landover* to go over the final mission briefing with Colonel Larusso."

Starcher reflected on the message for a moment. He hadn't had much interaction with Major Medcalf, but Neal had found a great deal of comfort in the company of Colonel Richard Larusso. Larusso, born on the planet Omegon, had come from a military family that could trace its lineage all the way back to the Lappaxian Pergenium Conflict, which took place in the same year King Henry the VI was born on Earth. During one of the many conversations that Starcher and Larusso had taken to having late into the evenings in the officers' mess, Larusso had disclosed his penchant for hand-rolled cigars, for which Starcher had also professed a desire. Larusso had mentioned that he had acquired a small supply of Andorian Brush Weeds—an immensely rare find this far away from the Andorian homeworld—and even something of a rarity on the normally ice-covered Andorian homeworld itself. It was said that the brush weed produced the finest cigar in the entire Alpha Quadrant, or at least what percentage of the quadrant had been explored up to this point. The two men had agreed to share in the delicacy of Larusso's treat the moment the mission had been labeled a complete success.

Captain Starcher placed his hands behind his back and walked to within a few meters of the communications officer. "Very well, Lieutenant. Permission granted. Please advise the colonel that his officers will be beamed aboard shortly. I believe you'll find him in the ship's maintenance hangar," he said, quickly pressing the

button on his command chair that would link him to the transporter room. “Transporter chief, this is the captain. Stand by to beam the officers of the 4th Regiment back to the ship. Their coordinates should be arriving momentarily.”

“Aye, sir. Standing by,” the young man answered.

\* \* \*

Commander Thomas Allen grabbed for the cool metallic handrail and pulled himself from the swimming pool on the recreation deck of the USS *Houston*. A moment later he was joined by his first officer, Lieutenant Commander Sutcliffe. Sutcliffe, dripping wet, put his hands to his knees as he bent forward and gasped for air.

“I think that's your best lap yet, Kent,” Allen said as if he had just come in from a fresh spring walk, then offered his old friend a towel.

“Thanks,” Kent replied through gasps of air. “Maybe one of these days I'll actually beat you for once.”

“Oh, come now, Kent. I said you were getting better—not that you were becoming great.”

The two officers looked at one another, and after a short silence, they both broke out in a roar of laughter.

“Kent, old boy, you've been trying your hardest to beat me since we were at the Academy together.”

Sutcliffe finally managed to haul himself completely upright and stuffed one end of his towel into his ear and wiggled it back and forth briskly. “Yeah, and someday I will.”

Commander Allen's expression held serious doubt. “I'm not holding my breath, old buddy.”

“That's good. You know, I wouldn't want to be responsible for the captain passing out when something important was about to happen,” Kent retorted, smiling broadly.

“Now, you wouldn't be referring to anything in particular would you, Lieutenant Commander?”

Sutcliffe shrugged. “If by ‘particular’ you think I’m referring to that little bar on New Aberdeen, then I would say yes, sir. I am.”

Allen’s expression changed to exasperation as his arms fell to his sides. “Come on, Kent. I can’t believe you’re never going to let me live that one down.”

Kent was unmoved by his captain’s statement as he completed drying himself off.

“Besides,” Allen continued innocently as he dried his long legs, “it was a totally honest mistake, anyway.”

“Mistake?” Sutcliffe almost threw his towel to the deck in exasperation. “Mistake my a—”

The sound of the recreation deck intercom cut off the slowly escalating banter between the two officers. “Captain Allen, please respond.”

Allen, now dry, wrapped himself in his towel and walked away from his first officer and toward the wall-mounted speaker a few meters away.

“Allen here. What is it, Tom?”

The voice of the ensign at the communications console was laced with trepidation. “Sir, sensors are picking up Klingon vessels entering the system.”

“Tom, patch me over to Lieutenant Wexler.”

“I’m already here, sir,” she said from her console.

“Beth, do you have a verified course and distance?”

“Partially, sir. The Klingons are at an extreme range, but headed right for this position at full impulse. Time to intercept is fifteen minutes, sir.”

*Damn. This is not what I was looking forward to when I woke up this morning. I guess Intelligence got this one right. Chalk one up for them.* “Commander Sutcliffe and I will be up shortly. Allen out.”

Ten minutes later, after both men had cleaned and changed back into their gold duty uniforms, Commander Allen was confidently seated on the bridge while Sutcliffe, although totally dry from their race in the ship’s pool, absently tried to get some lingering water out of his ear while seated at the navigator’s console.

“Lieutenant Wexler, what are the current sensor readings? The Klingons should be here any minute.”

Beth's face moved into the sensor readout display. "Long-range sensors are still reading two D-16 *Swiftwind* destroyers. But sir?"

"What is it, Beth?" he asked as he turned to face his science officer.

The tone of Wexler's voice betrayed her confusion. "Sir, it looks as if they've just changed course. Instead of an intercept vector, they're now on a slightly altered course that will take them close—but not close enough—for an attack run against the planet. I don't get it, sir. Why come so close and then veer off?"

Thomas smiled at Beth. "Maybe they had more brains than brawn?"

"Sir?"

"They may just be a scouting group, Lieutenant. They could be scanning the system and returning that information to their fleet."

Kent turned to his commander. "Then we probably shouldn't let them do any reporting."

"I think we can afford to head them off at the pass, wouldn't you say?"

Sutcliffe considered the implications of his captain's suggestion. Typically, Starfleet commanders were ordered not to overtly attack any vessel, even enemy ones, when they were not themselves being attacked. Starfleet rules of combat stated that such vessel commanders must, at all times, safeguard the men, women, and equipment under their care, and that any flagrant misuse of those responsibilities would be met with the gravest of consequences. Of course, the decision to employ such engagements—like the one Allen was now contemplating—were often left up to the captain of the vessel, judged on a case-by-case basis, and offered a wide amount of legal breathing room. "I agree, sir." Kent then inclined his head toward the image on the forward viewer. "Do you think the *Landover* will be all right by herself? I mean . . . maybe we should just take one of the other frigates along with us. I'm not too keen on the idea of leaving her here alone."

"We're only going to be gone for a few minutes, Kent. And the Klingons are moving away from this position, yes?" He asked the latter as he turned to face Beth, who nodded her affirmation at him. Thomas then returned his eyes to Ken. "Not to mention the fact that three frigates easily outclass two piece-of-junk Klingon destroyers."

*Then why do I have such a bad feeling about this?* Sutcliffe was still unconvinced. “All the more reason to leave one ship behind, sir. Maybe the *Garros*? She has the least experienced captain of us all.”

“Nonsense, Lieutenant Commander Sutcliffe. Her captain’s inexperience is all the more reason she should join us in the chase.”

Sutcliffe mulled over his captain’s wishes. He resigned himself to the fact that this argument, like the one down in the ship’s pool, was lost to his commander. “I suppose you’re right, sir.”

“Of course I’m right. That’s why I’m the captain,” Allen said as he puffed his chest toward the helmsman. “Kent, lay in a course to intercept the Klingons on their new vector.” He then turned to his communications officer. “Tom, hail the *Landover* and advise them that we are investigating the Klingon ships entering the system and that the squadron will return shortly.”

\* \* \*

No sooner had the squadron departed the system when suddenly—and without any warning—the *Landover*’s sensors began informing her crew that something was amiss. Captain Starcher rushed to the bridge within minutes of getting the summons he had received while relaxing in his cabin.

“Elsa, what do you have?”

Elsa Laatsch, the tall, dark-haired Cygnian woman peered her bright yellow eyes into the library computer sensor hood. “Sir, we have multiple Klingon contacts on both long-range and short-range scanners.”

Starcher was suddenly gripped with terror. “Are you sure you’re not picking up the enemy destroyers that our frigates are investigating?”

Still looking into the sensor computer, she shook her head briskly. “Negative, sir. These are definitely new contacts.”

Neal licked his lips as his mouth went dry. “Can you positively identify the vessel types?”

Her long, brown fingers caressed the sensor adjustment controls with the utmost haste. “The vessels the long-range sensors are picking up have been identified as troop transports. Exact composition is estimated at five vessels.”

Captain Starcher’s palms began to sweat once more. Five troop transports would hold a combined total of some eight or nine thousand troops and supplies. He tried desperately to get the next words out of his mouth without choking on them. “And the vessels that are on short-range sensors?”

Elsa turned her head quickly to the captain. “Six heavy cruisers: D-7 type,” she said despairingly.

Starcher instantly knew he had little time to waste. “Communications officer, put out a general distress call to any Federation starships in the area, and notify Commander Allen to break off his pursuit and return here immediately! Tell him it’s a direct order. Then patch me in to the Marines down on the surface.” He hit the control on his armrest that would open the shipwide intercom. “Attention, all hands. Klingons have entered the system. We are raising shields and arming weapons. All hands to battle stations!”

“Captain, I have the Marine camp on the surface for you,” Elsa said a moment later.

Starcher leaned toward the speaker on his chair. “This is Captain Starcher. Whom am I addressing?”

“This is Master Sergeant Nick Fajardo, sir.” It was the sound of a young man’s voice.

“Are you the senior officer present, Master Sergeant?” Starcher asked, hoping there was at least one commissioned officer on the whole of Joia IV.

After a moment the master sergeant came back online. “Yes, sir. I am. All the line officers beamed aboard the *Landover* ten minutes ago.”

*Damn, that’s right.* Starcher tried to clear his throat. “Master Sergeant, we’ve located a Klingon assault force in the system. They have a half-dozen landing ships and enough cruisers in their arsenal to obliterate the entire Marine camp in seconds. We cannot beam you back to the ship at this time.”

“Understood, sir. What are your orders?”



*What could I possibly tell him to do? I'm not qualified to order ground forces into action.* “Stand by, Sergeant.”

“Captain Starcher,” Laatsch called from the science station, “the Klingon cruisers have increased speed. They are entering weapons range!”

Neal yelled into the armrest speaker. “Fajardo, just get your men out of there! Break up, split apart, divide and conquer.” He kept throwing out analogies, hoping the grunts on the surface would comprehend his meaning.

\* \* \*

On the surface of Joia IV, Nick Fajardo looked at several of his Marine comrades who had gathered around him as he held his communicator aloft. They could hear the shouts of the bridge officers on board the *Landover* through the communicator's speaker. Some of the voices were clear and crisp while others were obscure and muffled. Fajardo then heard the sound of an explosion, followed by the captain shouting an indistinguishable order, which itself was followed by yet another more powerful explosion that silenced the communications channel.

Gunnery Sergeant Tim D’Allaird, tall and bulky, emerged from the crowd of Marines that had surrounded Fajardo. “What's happening, Master Sergeant?”

Fajardo attempted to open another communications channel to the *Landover* and—failing that—he closed the communicator and placed it back in his utility pocket. “Looks like the *Landover* got into some trouble,” he began slowly. “I don't think she made it.”

D’Allaird nodded his head slowly. “Klingons?”

Fajardo nodded. “I'd say so.”

“And what about the frigates? Did the bastards get them, too?”

Fajardo shrugged his shoulders apprehensively. “I didn't get that information from Captain Starcher, but my gut feeling is that they were either destroyed or incapacitated.”

“So . . . we're on our own down here?” D’Allaird asked.

Fajardo pulled his sidearm out of its holster and, twisting the barrel of the pistol from stun to disintegrate, placed it back in its holster. "We've been in situations like this before, Gunny."

Tim's face turned sour. "I'd have to disagree with you, Master Sergeant. We've got no support . . . no backup . . . and no damn officers to lead us."

"All true," Fajardo acknowledged to his second in command.

D'Allaird threw his hands up in frustration. "Well, what are we going to do about it?"

"For one thing, I am assuming tactical command of the 4th as of this moment."

"Based on what authority, Fajardo?" D'Allaird spat angrily.

"The last communication we received from the *Landover*, for starters. These Marines will vouch for the change of command orders from Starcher," Fajardo said, motioning to the core group of grunts who had initially surrounded him during his communication with the ill-fated starship. "Secondly, I'm the ranking non-commissioned officer present. Those two facts give me the authority, Gunnery Sergeant."

D'Allaird looked to the various Marines, hoping for a challenge from any other Marines present. None came. "So . . . what are your orders, sir?" There was more than a hint of disdain in his voice.

"Simple. I don't plan on going out the same way the 7th did on Nozseca."

D'Allaird slipped his hands defiantly into his pockets, his dark green eyes narrowing. "And that means what, exactly?"

"We'll need to split up and cover as much ground as possible. The 7th was too centralized on Nozseca; they were too easy to pick off from high orbit. We need to thin out our command as much as possible and make it difficult for the Klingons to track us down."

"And how will we maintain communications with everyone if we're spread out across the entire surface? Our communicators are only line-of-sight devices, so there won't be any way to make a coordinated attack against those Klingons," D'Allaird said, jerking his head toward the sky.

"I was thinking of something a little less organized, but equally as effective as a combined assault. In fact, it might be even more effective."

Another Marine, Sergeant Plattner, came forward. "You're talking about guerilla warfare?"

"Exactly," Nick acknowledged.

Plattner's freckled face nodded slowly in agreement. "We'll have to keep communications to a minimum, then."

"Agreed. Each squad will be given a predesignated coded frequency for their communicators. This will allow for limited, but verifiable, communications between friendly units that may be in close proximity to one another. All other long-distance communications will cease immediately. They are far too easy for the orbiting Klingon vessels to detect and track."

"And what about all the equipment?" D'Allaird asked angrily, one hand held up in a fist and the other waving in the direction of the makeshift camp the Marines had set up.

"We'll need to dismantle the camp immediately. That is our number one priority right now. Lance Corporal Levonson?" Fajardo called into the crowd.

The fair-skinned corporal from the planet Altair strode forward and saluted Fajardo with practiced ease. "Yes, sir?"

"Corporal, assign a detail to dismantle everything in the camp."

"Yes, sir," Levonson replied without question, pointing a finger at a handful of men and then rushing to his task.

"Sergeant Kubat?" Fajardo said, addressing the extremely bulky Andorian to his right.

"Yes, sir?" Kubat asked and saluted, his antennae twitching slightly with the gesture.

"Muster the 2nd Platoon and have them divide every supply, every weapon, everything that is mobile into five groups."

"Five?" D'Allaird asked in shocked disbelief, but Fajardo kept his gaze locked on Kubat.

"You heard the order, Sergeant. Five."

"That will leave everyone a little thin, sir," Plattner added, voicing a concern that everyone was probably thinking.

"I understand. In any case, I need you to locate Sergeants Santiago and Voris. Have them report to me immediately."

"Yes, sir!" Plattner saluted, then dashed off to find the requested Marines.

Fajardo turned to face D'Allaird. "And as for you, Gunnery Sergeant D'Allaird, I need to speak with you . . . alone. *Now.*"

\* \* \*

"All right, Tim. I'm not going to argue with you about this anymore. Frankly, it's a waste of time that we don't have right now. There are almost 2,000 Marines out there waiting for my orders," Fajardo said, motioning to the open doorway in the command room with a nod of his head. "What am I supposed to tell them? Am I supposed to tell them, 'Sorry, every commissioned officer in this unit has been killed and, oh, by the way, we have no reinforcements coming'? What would that do for morale?"

D'Allaird sat defiantly on the corner of the commander's desk, staring eye to eye with Fajardo. "At least it would show that you were man enough to be honest with them. Most of those kids out there are fresh out of training, and not too far removed from the farms they grew up on. They need honesty—now more than ever!"

There was a knock at the door, and Fajardo was silently thankful for it. Any more of this bickering and he would have to knock D'Allaird right on his bottom, regulations be damned. "Yes," he asked, "what is it?"

It was Sergeant Plattner with Staff Sergeant Santiago and Sergeant Voris in tow. "The men you requested, sir," Plattner said with another salute. He turned quickly to leave, but Fajardo caught him a split second before he left the room.

"Not too fast, Plattner. I need you here as well."

"Yes, sir?"

Fajardo began addressing his senior staff. "Gentlemen, as you know, we don't have a lot of time. The Klingons will be all over this camp like flies on sugar in the next few hours. Preliminary scans of all orbiting starships indicate a strong offensive presence, but very little in the way of troop carriers."

“That's good, right?” Voris asked in his thick South American accent. “What I mean, sir, is that proves the Klingons don't have a significant landing force up there, correct?”

“So far, that's correct. It also doesn't mean, however, that they aren't expecting one to arrive here. The last communication from the *Landover* stated that some transports were spotted on their long-range sensors. They could be here in less than three hours, or they could be up there right now. We just don't know. We might be able to handle a few thousand troops one on one, but if the Klingons up the odds, we will be in for one hell of a fight.”

“More like a slaughter,” D’Allaird huffed, folding his arms across his chest.

“That's the spirit, Gunny!” Santiago said, taking D’Allaird's comment to be a positive one.

D’Allaird backhanded Santiago’s shoulder. “No, fool. I mean it'll be *our* slaughter!”

“Everyone, please,” Fajardo said, holding his hands in the air to try to bring the meeting back to order. “We need to split up our forces and get out of this zone as fast as possible. All the mobile transports and assault craft are prepped and ready. Once we've divided all the weapons and supplies into separate battalions, those supplies can then be separated into each of your squads as you see fit.”

Fajardo looked to each of the men present, making sure each was listening intently. “Gunnery Sergeant D’Allaird, you will take command of 1st Battalion. Staff Sergeant Santiago, you will take 2nd Battalion. I'll take the 3rd. The 4th Battalion will be split into two companies, Alpha and Bravo. Plattner, you will take Alpha Company, Voris will take Bravo. Is all of that understood?”

“Yes, sir.” The chorus of replies came from the five men.

“Good. Everyone get their supplies and head out on a different vector. I want the camp cleared out by 0930. The 3rd Battalion will be heading north. Each of you all can decide for yourselves which directions to take from here; just don't follow us. Try to maintain contact with each other, but remember that the priority here is to inflict as much damage as we can while we can. Good luck people. Dismissed.”

## Chapter 5

Stardate 4103.15

March 2253

Incoming subspace communication . . .

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

TO: All Commanding Officers, All Commands, Alpha Quadrant

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: STATE OF AFFAIRS BETWEEN THE FEDERATION AND THE  
KLINGON EMPIRE

1. On stardate 4102.27 the Federation *Sawyer*-class scout vessels were officially removed from the list of active vessels serving with Starfleet Command. There are a great many factors that contributed to the vessels being stricken from Starfleet, with the prevalent ones being (1) a lack of overall shielding and defensive capabilities and (2) a low survivability in forward-deployed areas, where scout vessels are sorely needed at this time. Starfleet Command cannot, in good conscience, guarantee the safety of personnel on board these vessels, should they stray too far from a protective screen of more powerful starships. The USS *Sawyer*, namesake for her class, was commissioned on stardate 3201.05, and served proudly with both the Galaxy Exploration arm of Starfleet Command as well as Military Operations Command. The ex-*Sawyer*-class starships will be held in reserve basins throughout

Federation space, well away from the front lines of combat, should the need arise to utilize the hulls for more cost-effective purposes. A variant of the *Nelson*-class scout will now perform the tasks associated with these once-distinguished vessels.

2. On stardate 4103.01, Starfleet Marine regiments, composed of the 2nd, 8th, and 13th battalions, were rushed to the planet Sinbad IV to ward off a pending attack by Klingon ground forces intent on seizing that system. As the Klingons' transport escorts entered the system, they were immediately targeted by a fast-moving squadron of Starfleet frigates. Once the Klingon transports had unloaded their payload of combat personnel to the planet's surface, the now-empty vessels were engaged by the frigates, which were completely successful in driving the Klingon convoy from the system. With the Klingon ground troops now wholly unsupported from orbiting enemy starships, the land-based Starfleet Marines—with assistance of the 3rd Strike Squadron, led by the frigate USS *Helios*, killed, wounded, or otherwise captured a total of 30,000 Klingon ground troops, including one elite Klingon Imperial Guard battalion, with all their support equipment and weapons.

3. As of stardate 4103.01, Starfleet Intelligence has reported a dramatic decrease in the number of civilian and merchant vessels lost near contested Federation space. This decrease is due to several factors, namely the overall effectiveness of the Zone of Transport Escort, the diligence of commanding officers of forward-deployed Federation starships, and the support of the civilian and merchant crews operating in conjunction with the before-mentioned Federation entities. Be advised that this new data in no way countermands any previous restrictions made to civilian or merchant vessels, and any future reports of reductions in losses will in no way diminish Starfleet's enforcement of any and all prior policies regarding the Zone of Transport Escort.

4. On stardate 4103.06, the *Constitution*-class heavy cruiser USS *Potemkin* set a Federation speed record, having achieved a sustained emergency velocity of warp factor eight point seven while attempting to engage a Klingon heavy cruiser that had strayed to within five parsecs of Starbase 10 near the area of space known as the Triangle. Captain Brian Webber and his crew should be commended for their lone destruction of this enemy vessel, since the *Potemkin*'s escorts of frigates and destroyers were quickly outpaced by the high speeds achieved by the impressive

heavy cruiser. Be advised that commanding officers should *not* take it upon themselves to attempt such high speed maneuvers at any time, unless such maneuvers have been sanctioned by the Starfleet Board of Engineers. Further, any sanctioned maneuvers will be well within the safety limits of the vessels for which those commanding officers have been charged with being responsible.

5. On stardate 4008.10, the Federation starship USS *Hera*—operating alone just outside the Delta star system—confirmed a positive long-range sensor scan of a Romulan *Graceful Flyer*-class scout vessel in the Federation-Romulan neutral zone. After several months of tracking the Romulan vessel, the *Hera* reported that at no time did the Romulan ship attempt to enter Federation-held space or make any overtly hostile actions against the *Hera* herself. The *Graceful Flyer* was consistently tracked until it reentered Romulan space two parsecs from the rim of the Triangle. As of stardate 4103.01, there is no appreciable evidence of further Romulan incursions into the neutral zone or any other overt Romulan intrusions into Federation space itself. Starfleet Intelligence will continue to monitor the border.

6. Further information will be disseminated shortly.

\* \* \*

Stardate 4104.04

April 2253

“Success, my lord!” The Klingon officer’s voice resounded over the ship’s intercom. The excitement in his voice was unmistakable. Perhaps this was just the news that Squadron Captain M’lara Torin had been waiting for. The IKV *Pujbe’Hegh*, a slightly modified version of the standard Klingon D-16 destroyer, was stationed with a squadron of similar vessels just inside the Delgon system, itself nearly thirteen parsecs away from their home territory and deep into Federation-held space.

On the bridge of the *Pujbe’Hegh*, the muscular Captain Torin stood with arms folded as she looked out into the void of space at the area the Earthers called the



Delgon Expanse. M'lara cared little for names, and when a subordinate had hastily asked if the area should be renamed after M'lara herself, the captain simply smiled, thought about it for a moment, and then sent the offending officer staggering across the bridge with a lightning-fast backhand to the face.

"If I were to bestow honors upon myself," she spat at the officer, "then those honors would mean nothing." Regaining her composure, she signaled to the communications officer with a wave of her hand, indicating that she wished to speak to the chief engineer. After an audible *bleep*, the channel was open and Captain Torin began to speak. "Lieutenant Commander Golrek, this is the captain. I hope, for your own sake, that this is not another supposed success that will only lead to further failure on your part."

"No, mistress. The other attempts were unsuccessful because—" Golrek started, but was cut off by M'lara.

"I tire of your excuses as much as I tire of your bungling of this mission! The Imperial Admiralty has positioned this squadron in a place of the utmost importance to the empire's efforts in this sector, and it is a responsibility that I hold very dear to me. We are here for the glory of the empire, not to demonstrate how completely ineffectual our crews can be!"

There was a pause on the other end of the communication channel, and M'lara secretly hoped that as Golrek chose his next words, they would be chosen wisely. "I hear and I obey."

Captain Torin took in a heavy breath and let it out slowly. "Then obey me! What news do you have to report?"

"Mistress, the new weapons system is online and functioning at ninety-five percent."

"Ninety-five percent? Why not 100 percent? Is that due to your incompetence as well?"

"No, ma'am," Golrek cried helplessly into the intercom. "The engines themselves are our biggest hindrance. We cannot maintain full battle readiness and also supply the necessary energy to the new weapons system simultaneously."

"But the new mine-laying system is online and ready for deployment, correct?" M'lara snarled impatiently.

“Yes, Mistress. The system is . . . is ready to be deployed. All safety precautions have been taken. There will be no further mishaps.”

M'lara growled at the intercom speaker and then abruptly closed the channel. Not three days ago, Golrek had also reported that the system was online and functioning within specifications. However, once the IKV *K'Engka*, sister ship to the *Pujbe'Hegh*, had begun to deploy the mines in a test pattern, one of the first to be deployed suddenly exploded prematurely. The shock wave from the blast detonated the adjacent mine, and so on, all the way back to the modified shuttle bay on the *K'Engka*. The entire payload of experimental weapons self-destructed, incinerating the ship completely. There were now only eight ships left from the initial nine that had departed the Imperial starbase at Stogar nearly six months ago for this mission. M'lara Torin was not about to repeat this failure. The admiralty would surely have her command—if not her head—served to them for dinner if she were to lose any more men or materials on this highly classified mission.

The achievement of that mission, however, was going to be far more difficult than the strategists in the Klingon High Council had originally planned. The development of the new gravetic mines had been done under the strictest of security classifications—not to mention one of the largest disinformation networks ever established in the empire's history—but the technology and its associated science were still frighteningly new to the Klingons, and the scientific fields were far from being the Klingons' strongest disciplines.

Once the weapon itself had been developed, the choice of starships that could have deployed it effectively had been limited to the D-16 alone. The *Swiftwinds* were produced in the greatest numbers of any Klingon design, so a selection of them could be easily made available for the necessary modification required for the new mine-laying equipment. The same could not be said for the D-7, nor D-9 cruisers. Their firepower and speed were sorely needed during the initial push to gain a foothold into Federation territory. In the end, the High Council had slated nine vessels to undergo the conversion to the new specifications laid down by the research arm of the Imperial navy.

The system had never been tested—at least to battle-ready effectiveness—before Captain Torin and her modified ships left the defensive shipyards at Stogar. There'd

been a rush to train new personnel in the operation of the largely unproven weapon, itself now taking the place of the aft-firing photon torpedo launcher on the destroyer. Captain Torin distrusted new officers in general, and for her to see so many new faces on the bridge—*her* bridge—left a sour taste in her mouth. Knowing that the High Council had positioned some of these men—fusions, no less—to act as official observers for the new weapon system made her all the more uncomfortable.

M'lara had a long history of doing the Council's bidding when it was asked of her—when it was advantageous for her to do so. Unquestioned allegiance to the Council was nearly impossible to find. Each commander gave their allegiance to whomever served their career best at any given time. In fact, a commander could quickly move from one side of a conflict to the other in the course of an hour . . . or within the span of just a few minutes. It had happened in the past more times than M'lara cared to remember. Currently, the High Council had her favor, and she had found favor in their eyes. Her ship was hers to do with as she pleased, and it pleased her very much to delve out pain to the Earthers and their weak conglomerate of fools, even if there was a lack of trust between some of the officers on her own bridge. *A small price to pay for glory.*

Fortunately there was still Lieutenant Commander Golrek, who had served faithfully—albeit rather plainly—with Captain Torin for the last three years as chief engineer. It was good to have someone to take her frustrations out upon, and Captain M'lara Torin had some sense of security knowing that Golrek wouldn't run back to the Council crying like a baby because his hand—or his face, for that matter—had just gotten slapped. Golrek, although no one would ever hear Captain Torin say the words aloud, was admired by his captain for his technical prowess under stressful situations. M'lara could always count on Golrek to do the impossible when the situation had called for it. At least, that was until the events had unfolded that led to the destruction of the *K'Engka*.

M'lara, remembering with indifference that the observers from the High Council were watching intently, reestablished the intercom channel to the engineering section. “This had better work, Commander, or the part of your anatomy that you

hold most precious will adorn my wall—and I do not mean that ugly thing that sits atop your shoulders!”

There was a brief silence on the other end of the channel. “We are ready to begin laying down a preliminary pattern, Mistress. If all goes well, the remaining ships will be able to finish laying out the entire field in less than three hours.”

M’lara leaned close to the intercom speaker, her thick leathery uniform squeaking under the pressure of her slow movements. “Very well, Commander Golrek. Inform the *Su’Helik* to begin mine-laying operations while we observe from a distance. Let us hope that everything does indeed go well. In the meantime, I would suggest you make peace with Kahless, Golrek. If anything fails this time—anything at all—you will be standing before him before you can blink. Bridge out!”

\* \* \*

On the bridge of the *Achernar*-class command cruiser *Galina*, Captain Herbert Solow’s green eyes surveyed the small task force that was under his direct command. Solow felt a profound sense of admiration for his new task. He’d only been promoted to captain a month earlier, after what Starfleet Command was calling “an exceptional show of bravery on the part of the first officer of the USS *Kaga* during a crisis situation.” In truth, Solow rarely required accolades or awards. He had expressed—during the ensuing board of inquiry that had followed the incident involving the *Kaga*’s former captain—that he had simply done his duty as any other Starfleet officer would have done in a similar situation. The brass at Starfleet Command, however, had felt otherwise. They had expressed that, due to Solow’s quick thinking and outstanding leadership, he alone had been able to assume command and circumvent the destruction of not only his ship, but also those of the two additional Starfleet destroyers in the squadron.

The former captain of the *Kaga*, Scott Benak, had been in engineering when the sneak attack by the enemy had transpired. The Klingons had neatly surrounded the squadron in what the admirals on the ensuing board of inquiry had cited as “. . . a flagrant disregard on Captain Benak’s part to adequately safeguard the lives of Federation personnel and property under his command.” Solow knew in his heart

that there wasn't much the captain could have done differently in the situation. True, Benak could have performed a more in-depth sensor scan of the area, or could have sent one of the destroyers to scout ahead of the rest of the squadron, but each time Solow played out the chain of events that would have followed each of those scenarios, the results were always the same: the destruction of at least one, if not all the Starfleet vessels in the group. Had Captain Benak survived the encounter, he would have no doubt voiced these concerns to the board as well.

Unfortunately, Captain Benak had been killed—as was the *Kaga*'s chief engineer—when the starboard power conduit ruptured during the battle, filling the entire engineering space of the ship with a lethal dose of gamma radiation. This event had led Solow, a junior commander, to take overall command of the squadron. After successfully luring the attacking enemy forces into a nearby nebula, he and his starships were able to extricate themselves from the sector without suffering any further damage. After the battle, Starfleet was quick to offer Solow a field promotion to captain and give him overall responsibility for this new squadron of all heavy cruisers. The *Kaga* was repaired and remanded at Starbase 10, while Captain Herbert Solow was given command of the *Achernar*-class USS *Galina*—a twelve-month-old cruiser—fresh into the fleet after successfully completing her trial runs at Utopia Planetia.

On the main view screen of the *Galina*, Solow could see the freshly painted hull of the *Kaga*, as well as the heavy cruiser *Jupiter*, both hanging motionless ahead of his ship. A total of ten *Achernar* cruisers made up the 47th Strike Squadron. They were all strikingly similar to the *Constitution*-class heavy cruisers, of which the *Achernars* were considered a subclass variant. Unlike the *Constitutions*, however, the *Achernars* had both upper and lower laser banks, as well as supplemental accelerator cannons. The *Achernars* were definitely the more heavily armed version of this widely used hull design. Another striking difference was the addition of multiple tiers of command and control spaces that were built inside the vessels. Used by fleet commanders, these spaces provided a complete tactical control and analysis platform that could take into account the nuances of every ship assigned to a squadron, then formulate strategies and disseminate them to the group nearly

simultaneously. Solow was brimming with pride at having so many of them presently under his control.

Herbert swiveled in his command chair and looked to his science officer, Lieutenant Commander Patricia Jaderborg. She was tall, well built, and not entirely unattractive. Her chocolate-colored hair, sprinkled with random streaks of cream, was arranged into a well-groomed mane near the top of her head. At almost two meters, Jaderborg was considered somewhat tall for someone from the Deneva colony, but that hadn't seemed to stop the stares at her wasp-waisted figure as she sauntered through the ship's corridors. She was highly intelligent, but with an air of innocence, and Solow assumed that Jaderborg had no idea of the effect she was having on the male members of his crew. "Commander Jaderborg?" he asked softly.

She slowly turned her head from the science scanner and looked to her captain. "Yes, sir?"

"Commander, I still haven't had a chance to meet everyone in the various departments since I checked on board, let alone go over all the personnel files for the crew. Who would you say is your most competent officer in the science department?"

Jaderborg looked away from the captain's gaze for a moment while recalling all the faces in her department. "That would be Lieutenant Spock, sir."

Solow's expression turned sour. "Spock? What kind of a person names their son Spock?"

Patricia looked on in amusement. "I would say the Vulcan kind, sir."

Solow's dark eyes rolled at the mention of the Vulcan species. "Oh, brother. We have one of those genius Vulcans on board, don't we?"

The Denevian science officer let out a soft laugh. "Yes, sir. In fact, we have several."

Herbert shot her a dubious sideways glance. "Define the word 'several.'"

"We have approximately thirty-two Vulcans on board, Captain. Of those, thirty-one of them are in the science department."

"Thirty-one, aye? What happened to number thirty-two?"

"Ensign Stelendos is in the engineering department."

"Perfect," Solow said, exhaling slowly, and rubbing his face with his hands.

“Is that a problem, sir? I'm sure we can transfer Ensign Stelendos if—”

“No, no.” He removed his hands from his face and gave a slight wave in her direction. “It's just that . . . well . . . I've found that Vulcans have no sense of *Menschkeit*, that's all.”

Patricia looked to him in confusion. “No sense of . . . what, sir?”

“*Menschkeit*,” Solow said, looking up at her. He saw that her look of confusion was unchanged and knew instantly he would have to go further in his explanation. “You know . . . it's something between human men . . . it's about honor, and character . . . loyalty, camaraderie, and—” He stopped talking, seeing that his explanation wasn't having the intended effect on the lieutenant commander. In fact, it seemed to make her even more bewildered. “It's untranslatable. That's why it's Yiddish.”

“Yiddish, sir?” The “d” sound rolled across her lips like a soft purr. “I'm afraid I'm unfamiliar with that species.”

Herbert smiled and chuckled kindly. “It's not a species, my dear Commander. It's a language.”

“Sir,” she began in all seriousness, “Lieutenant Cavitt is the communications officer. He's the one most familiar with languages, not I.”

Solow's chuckles turned into a short burst of full laughter, but it quickly died down once he noticed that Jaderborg's scowl had not faded in the slightest. “Yiddish is one of the languages of the Jewish people of Earth.”

Her scowl faded to be replaced by a smile that tugged at the corners of her mouth. “That seems a little . . . out of regulation, sir.”

“Trust me. It's kosher.”

“It's what?”

“Forget it,” he said, smiling back and waving his hand dismissively. “How about you get that Mr. Spork up to the bridge for me.”

Now it was Jaderborg's turn to laugh. “It's Spock, sir. Lieutenant *Spock*.”

“It is? Oh . . . What did I say?”

“You said Spork, sir,” she whispered softly, though she had put her fur-coated hand to her mouth in an attempt to stifle her mirth, making it difficult for Herbert to discern.

Captain Solow straightened at her side as he attempted to compose his best command posture, though he still wore a faint smile on his face. “Well, whatever his name is, get him up on here on the double, Lieutenant Commander.”

\* \* \*

Within minutes, the turbolift doors to the bridge opened and Lieutenant Spock of Vulcan strode onto the command deck to stand just behind Captain Solow.

“You wished to see me, sir,” Spock began formally. His voice was calm, its pitch low and sure.

Solow turned in his chair to face the Vulcan. The lieutenant’s angular face, tinted green due to the high concentrations of copper in his blood, was crowned by the cropped black hair that all male Vulcans seemed to possess. “Yes, Lieutenant Spock. You come highly recommended by Commander Jaderborg.”

Spock slowly turned his face to the science officer, who only returned a blank stare, then returned his gaze to Captain Solow. “Recommended for what, sir?”

“I’ve been looking over your performance reports for the last several months while you’ve been attached to the astrophysics department. I’m impressed,” Solow said flatly and with no emotion. Spock continued to stare into the distance, saying nothing. Spock had the look of a living statue, breathing imperceptibly as he stood motionless. “I understand you’ve never served a bridge watch before, either. Is that correct?”

“Quite correct, Captain,” Spock replied.

“And you’ve never requested one before; is that also correct?”

“It is, sir.” Spock finally moved, clasping his hands behind his back. Solow took the movement as either a sign that the Vulcan was bored with this line of questioning, or that Spock was simply settling in for a long question-and-answer session with his captain.

“And may I ask why that is, Mr. Spock?” Solow asked as he crossed his arms, his eyebrows rising on his forehead.

“The bridge is comprised of the senior staff, sir,” Spock replied, as if his statement was something the captain had never before considered. “The lead officers from



each department are here. I am a junior science technician. Such a request by me would be . . . inappropriate.” He said the last word as he looked at Solow’s face for the first time.

“But you are qualified to utilize the various computers and equipment on the bridge, correct?” Solow asked as he waved his hand around the bridge.

“Yes, sir. I hold a level five computer clearance.”

Solow thought there was an almost imperceptible air of arrogance in the Vulcan’s tone as he stated his clearance level. “I see. Well, based on your performance reports . . . and the fact that I am in need of a sensor subsystem checkout officer on the bridge,” he said, motioning with an open hand to the vacant station directly next to the science officer’s post. “You are hereby transferred from astrophysics, Lieutenant Spock.”

Spock looked from the captain to the empty chair at the navigation subsystems station on the far side of the bridge. He nodded his head in slow approval without returning his gaze to the captain.

Solow smiled, thinking this was probably the best indication that he would get that the Vulcan was in shock. “Please take your station.”

“Yes, sir,” Spock said in the same flat monotone, his gaze still fixed on the empty chair at his new post.

Captain Solow looked to Jaderborg. When their eyes met he made a slight nod with his head in the direction of Spock. Patricia’s green eyes moved to Spock as the Vulcan glided swiftly across the bridge, then she flashed them back to her captain, smiling and nodding her head in silent agreement.

## Chapter 6

The Delgon Expanse, a growing nebula named for a scientist from Selka who had charted its outer rim some twenty years ago, had been sitting motionless on the view screen of the *Galina* for almost an hour. On the bridge, Captain Solow was awaiting the final sensor report for their next destination, an uninhabited system on the edge of the expanse that had been assigned the designation Delgon-R. Solow had tasked junior science officer Spock to coordinate his efforts with Lieutenant Commander Jaderborg and the ship's helmsman in order to get an accurate portrayal of what the *Galina* and the rest of the cruiser squadron would find once they entered the expanse. It was hoped that, with all three of these experts doing the job, Solow would get more than enough astrometric data about the expanse.

The expanse was just that: a large stretch of nebula, dominated by pockets of volatile gasses, ionic storms, asteroids and planetary debris, and the occasional gravity well. Though it was a hazard to navigate on the inside, from the outside looking in it was a beautiful sight to behold. The expanse—with a total volume encompassing roughly 200 light-years—stretched from the Federation colony on Rebonet nearly all the way to Orion-controlled space several sectors away. At the heart of the Delgon Expanse was said to be a pair of quantum singularities orbiting one another, although no manned ship had ever dared enter that far into the void.

From the vantage point of the *Galina*, four light-years from the edge of the expanse, the entirety of the area was a vision of beauty. The gases and fragmentary debris, in conjunction with the heat signature of the singularities, gave the whole area a beautiful violet glow—with pockets of orange and red cloudlike bursts, some thousands of meters wide, thrown in haphazardly for good measure. It reminded Solow of images of the Trifid Nebula he had seen in history books, back from a time when that famous nebula had yet to be explored.

Now on the edge of the Delgon Expanse, Captain Solow was more than eager to get into this area of space and investigate the Delgon-R system. Solow and his ten-vessel cruiser squadron would be the first to see it in person, the first to take active samples, and the first to send actual reports back to Starfleet Command. The spirit

of discovery and exploration was a huge morale boost to the tired and worn-down crews of the *Achernar*-class cruisers, and they were thankful for their new assignment. This was, after all, why most had joined Starfleet in the first place.

Captain Solow turned to the stoic Vulcan officer at the navigation subsystems board. Lieutenant Spock, his face buried in the sensor readout hood, turned his left hand slowly to adjust the focus of the long-range sensors, while his right hand busily entered information into the ship's main computer for future analysis. The *Galina*'s helmsman, the dark-skinned Lieutenant Amboise of the planet Antares, had already plotted the ship's course using the last variables he had received from Mr. Spock, and was now waiting on the final computations for those same figures. Even Commander Jaderborg, who by all rights should have been the foremost expert on the ship's sensors and their operation, found herself with nothing to do as the Vulcan junior officer took effective control over the ship's next movements.

The next words out of Spock's mouth would dictate whether the ship would fly into an asteroid, an explosive gas pocket, a stellar fragment, or who knows what else—or that nothing would happen to them at all. Solow wasn't sure if he should be thankful that he had called this junior officer into the bridge team or not. While it was admirable that Spock was performing the best calculations he could manage, Solow also knew there were reports of Klingons in the general area, and that his squadron couldn't simply remain motionless in open space much longer. That was precisely when his lack of patience in Vulcan perfection broke down.

"Mr. Spock," the captain began as he broke the deafening silence on the bridge, "how are those figures coming along?"

Spock, not bothering to look up from his instruments, answered almost lazily, as if he were performing a routine and boring scan of open space. "Figures will be in shortly, Captain."

Herbert cleared his throat. "You said that an hour ago, Lieutenant."

"Indeed," Spock replied. "And if I may say so, sir, the computer is now an hour closer to outputting its final calculations."

Several of the bridge officers, most notably Jaderborg, had to stifle their laughter at the Vulcan's remarks. Solow looked around the bridge and, as he did, the noises coming from each officer stopped as soon as his eyes would fall on them, until his

gaze clamped to the back of Spock's head. "Are you trying to be funny, Lieutenant?" he asked, obviously irritated.

Spock looked up from the sensor screen and turned briskly, clasping his hands behind his back and before addressed his captain. "No, sir. Not at all. In fact, I—"

"Don't bother trying to explain, Mr. Spock," Solow said in annoyance and held his palms up to the Vulcan. "Just get your rear end back to those long-range sensors. I want answers, Mister. I'd like to get out of this position as soon as possible, and we can't do that because we are all waiting on *your* answers."

Spock briefly considered his captain's words. "To be more precise, Captain, we are waiting on the computer's response to my—"

"One more interruption, Spock, and you'll be out there polishing the deflector dish with a toothbrush! I don't care what you have to do to get the computer to spit out that data any faster. Sing it a song, tell it a story, give it a hug and promise to tuck it in tonight. Just get me some answers fast, Mister."

Spock, both eyebrows now fully raised, thought about responding to the illogic of the captain's statement, but the illogic of making such a statement to an already agitated superior officer would have been far removed from protocol. Spock simply turned slowly and looked back into the blue glow of the sensor hood.

Solow pivoted in his chair to face Jaderborg, who was rubbing her temples with tips of her fingers. Solow absently began to do the same.

*Vulcans!*

\* \* \*

Forty-five minutes later, the *Galina* and the rest of the squadron were well on their way into the Delgon Expanse. The tremendous amounts of ionized gasses made it difficult to physically see anything more than 100 meters in front of the ships. Though the long-range sensors had yet to detect any enemy vessels in the area, once the Starfleet vessels entered the expanse, the signal strength of the sensors was cut in half by the radiation interference from the nebula itself. Even the short-range sensors were barely adequate to keep the cruisers from colliding with one another as

they traversed the area, their individually blinking running lights all but useless in the murk of the expanse.

“Commander Jaderborg,” Solow began, his gaze fixed on the swirling nebula that filled the view screen, “what are our readings of the immediate area?”

“Nothing out of the ordinary for Sector-J. All readings are within predefined specifications for this area.”

Solow folded his arms across his chest. *There must be something interesting inside this soup.* “Very well. Helmsman, lay in a course for Sector-K, full impulse power.”

“Aye, sir. Engaging impulse drive,” Lieutenant Amboise replied, his tone deadpan.

No sooner had Lieutenant Amboise finished speaking than Lieutenant Spock looked up from his sensor station. “Captain, I find this very curious.”

Captain Solow, not in the mood for Vulcan effrontery, looked to the junior science officer almost distastefully. “What’s curious, Mr. Spock?”

“Sir, the navigational sensors are picking up an unusually strong reading from starboard.”

Solow crossed one leg over the other and began to rub his chin pensively. *Maybe he actually found something interesting.* “What kind of readings, Lieutenant?”

Spock furrowed his brow. “It’s difficult to tell at this range, sir. However, I find it highly unlikely that the sensors are reporting any kind of natural phenomena.”

“By natural, you mean anything that is *supposed* to be in this godforsaken wasteland?”

Spock looked away from Solow and to the forward view screen. The ship was just now passing a fat, puffy ion cloud as it continued on its patrol to the innards of the expanse. Soon the screen was once again filled with the overall yellow swirling inner mass of the expanse. “While the term ‘wasteland’ may not accurately describe this region of space, I believe your definition of my statement is accurate, sir.”

“Klingons?” Klingons were actually the last thing he wanted to encounter in here, but with the Vulcan’s revelation that the emissions were not natural, the possibilities became very narrow that it could be anything else but enemy contacts.

Spock turned back to Solow and nodded. "There are a great many possibilities, Captain."

Herbert turned to Patricia. "Are the readings verified, Commander Jaderborg?"

"The readings are verified, but obscured by a highly intensified radiation pocket nearby. However, I concur with Lieutenant Spock that this is not a natural phenomenon. We won't know more about it until we get closer."

"Can you put it on the screen?"

Jaderborg turned to the science station and flipped a series of toggle switches, transferring the ship's sensor data to the main viewer where, hopefully, there would be enough information to create a three-dimensional image. A moment later the forward view screen wavered and re-formed into a brilliant swirling mass of green and orange gas, surrounded by a yellow aura of swirling dust.

"What are we looking at, Mr. Spock?"

"Our current charts of the nebula identify this as Sector-Q, sir. That is, of course, assuming our position data is correct."

Solow turned to the helmsman. "Distance to that disturbance, Mr. Amboise?"

"Just shy of half a parsec, sir."

*That's well within our patrol area.* "Set a course for the disturbance, half impulse. I want to get the source of those emissions identified as soon as possible. We have a lot more ground to cover in the expanse before our mission is done, and I don't want to waste time chasing ghosts."

"They have taken the bait!" Science officer Kudol said from his station on the bridge of the IKV *Pujbe'Hegh*. Putting the data up on the main view screen, the bridge crew watched as the Federation fleet began to move closer into the expanse.

"Excellent," Captain Torin hissed, staring at the nine Federation ships. "This is almost too easy. Are we still undetected by their sensors?"

"Yes, Mistress," Kudol said through a smile of razor-sharp teeth.

"Very good. Order all hands to prepare for combat. Make all weapons batteries ready. We will strike the Federation fools within moments!"

"Sir," Lieutenant Amboise stated, "we're arriving at the coordinates."

“Intensify all forward scanners into that disturbance,” Solow said, moving his gaze from the viewer to Jaderborg.

A moment later she read her report aloud. “Sir, I still can't get an exact reading. There may be too much radiation interference from the nebula.”

“Spock?” Solow asked as he turned to the Vulcan.

Spock's eyes were instantly in his sensor display. “I am attempting to triangulate both the long- and short-range sensors, as well as the information from the navigational deflector, sir. I find it highly illogical that our information should be so conflicted the closer we come to the disturbance.”

Less than a minute later Spock again spoke up. “Sir, there is a Klingon cruiser at coordinates mark-point-7. Distance is 0.5 light-years. They appear to be attacking a small vessel, possibly a merchant or scout-class ship.”

Solow was on his feet instantly. “Helm, take us directly to that position, full impulse. Communications officer, advise the rest of the squadron to follow us in.”

“Aye, sir,” came the chorus of replies as the orders were received and executed.

As soon as the *Galina* was oriented in the correct direction, the impulse engines were engaged at full power. A split second later there was a violent trembling throughout the ship, followed abruptly by another, more violent jolt. The second one caused Jaderborg to be thrown from her station, Lieutenant Cavitt was slammed forward into the communications console, and Captain Solow had to grip the armrests of his chair with all his strength to maintain his position.

“Report!” Solow yelled to anyone on the bridge who could give him an update.

“We seem to have struck something, Captain,” Spock said almost casually.

“Set the view to full astern!”

On the forward view screen Solow could see the cruisers *Pilar* and *Tangent* speeding into the sector behind the *Galina*. The two ships were immediately rocked with explosions around the forward portions of their primary hulls.

“What's happening?”

Spock was the first to speak. “If sensors are reading correctly, Captain, it would appear that we have entered a highly populated mine field of some type.”

“Order all ships to withdraw at maximum speed!”

"It may already be too late, sir," Jaderborg replied. "All the vessels are now firmly entrenched in the field."

"Mr. Cavitt, get me the—" Solow started, but Spock cut him off.

"Sir, explosion to port!"

Things were quickly going from bad to worse. "On screen!"

On the forward screen Solow could see two Federation cruisers floating dangerously close to one another. One—the *Tholus*—had struck another of the mines and was now slowly veering into the course of the *Kaga*. The *Kaga* had also apparently struck a mine and was now dead in space.

"Communications officer, raise Captain Hopwood on the *Kaga*!"

"Too late," Spock announced just as the *Tholus* drifted sideways into the *Kaga*. The secondary hull of the *Tholus* contacted the port warp nacelle of the *Kaga*, shearing it off its pylon completely and causing extensive damage to both vessels. The running lights of the *Kaga* blinked out as the *Tholus* continued on her sideways drift into yet another mine. This time, with the shields of the *Tholus* down, the mine did an extraordinary amount of damage. The ensuing explosion blew a twenty-meter chunk out the starboard side of her saucer.

"Cavitt," Solow said to his communications officer, "try to raise either the *Tholus* or the *Kaga*. Order everyone to a full stop!"

Lieutenant Cavitt's fingers danced across his station in a vain attempt to contact the two damaged vessels. "Sir, I'm not getting any response from the *Kaga*. All her internal systems appear to be down."

"What about the *Tholus*?" Solow said as he watched the two stricken cruisers on the screen dance slowly around one another.

Cavitt placed a hand to the communications receiver in his ear, as if to amplify the sound coming from it. "I'm receiving something sir . . . it sounds like . . ."

"Their warp core is going critical," Spock announced from his station.

Solow jumped from his chair as Jaderborg finally made it securely back into her own. "How long?" he asked her.

"Readings show the core will reach supercritical condition in less than two minutes," Patricia replied.

"Can we beam aboard and stop it?" In his heart, he already knew the answer.



“Negative,” Spock confirmed Solow’s interpretation. “The *Tholus* is heavily damaged in her engineering and auxiliary control spaces. Also, due to the high radiation of the surrounding gas pockets, our own transporters would be unable to function with any degree of safety. I would advise—”

Solow turned an angry stare to the Vulcan. “I’m well aware that you think the ‘logical’ thing to do would be to maneuver away from the ships, but I’m not about to just sit by and watch the 300 people on the *Tholus* perish, not to mention what that kind of damage that explosion will do to the *Kaga*.”

“In her current state of repair, she would most likely be destroyed as well,” Spock said calmly, countering his captain with a cold gaze. “With all due respect, Captain, we have no hope of retrieving any of those crewmen. Logically, our only chance is to attempt to extricate ourselves and as many other vessels as we can before we are all destroyed.”

Solow pursed his lips, thinking of something he could say to change the variables in their current situation.

Spock stood up from his station and walked slowly to his captain, either unaware or unaffected by the fact that his close proximity to Solow was causing the normally jovial captain visible discomfort. “Sir,” Spock began in a whisper, “this mine field is obviously the work of Klingons. We have, as you humans would say, trapped ourselves in the spider’s web. If we remain here, we will either be destroyed by the Klingons who placed this field here, by the mines themselves, or as the result of the destruction of our own vessels. It is only a matter of time, sir. Our sensors have located all the mines within a half parsec of our location. It will be possible, on minimal thrusters, to navigate away from this space if we leave now.”

Solow clenched his fists and looked at the forward screen. He felt the urge to pound on the handrail of his command chair, disregarding the utter futility of the outburst.

“Captain,” Spock said with a raised voice, “we have sixty seconds.”

Solow slapped his thighs with his fists in frustration. “Mr. Amboise, coordinate with Mr. Spock. Get us out of here at the safest possible speed.”

Spock quickly turned, grabbing the nearest handrail and vaulting himself into his chair. “Mr. Amboise, I will feed the coordinates of the mines into the navigational subprocessor. Your maneuvers will have to be exact.”

“Ready,” Amboise replied, his fingers poised over his controls in anticipation.

“There are three mines bearing mark-point-2 and two more at mark-point-6. We will plot a course between them,” Spock said as his eyes, bathed in the blue light of the sensor readout, remained locked inside the sensor hood.

The *Galina* moved away from the two stricken Federation cruisers and threaded herself between the two mines with the skill of a fine tailor. When the first hurdle was passed, Spock calmly spoke up from the navigation substation. “There is now a mine directly ahead.”

Amboise quickly dipped the saucer of the *Galina* below the mine's position and sailed harmlessly under it.

“Sir, the warp core of the *Tholus* is going critical!” Jaderborg shouted.

“Spock, are we far enough away?” Solow shouted.

“Difficult to ascertain, Captain.”

“Reverse angle on the screen!”

The image on the forward viewer changed to show the *Tholus*, having floated half a kilometer from the *Kaga*. A moment later the entire ship exploded in a violent ball of white and blue plasma. Everyone on the bridge of the *Galina*, save for Spock, had to shield their eyes from the blinding light of the massive energy release. As soon as the light began to fade it was replaced by another explosion only a moment later, and again the bridge was bathed in a blinding flash.

“Sir, the *Tholus* and the *Kaga* have both been destroyed,” Patricia said mournfully.

After a moment of silence on the bridge Spock was the first to speak. “Captain, by all accounts we should have been partially enveloped in the shock wave from the destruction of the two vessels. In fact, there was almost no shock wave at all.”

Solow sat back in his chair, both exhausted and emotionally drained. “Explanation?”

Spock raised his left eyebrow. “I have none, sir.”

Suddenly everyone on the bridge was pulled forward as if the ship had suddenly gone into full reverse power.

“Sir!” Amboise shouted. “We are being pulled back toward our previous coordinates.”

*The Klingons!* “Tractor beam?” Solow asked.

“Negative, sir. The effects are similar to a gravity distortion of some type,” Amboise replied.

“That’s impossible, Lieutenant,” Jaderborg scowled. “We aren’t anywhere near a planetary mass or a stellar body. Even the core of the Delgon Expanse is too far away to have this kind of an effect on the ship.”

Spock buried his face in his scanners again. After a few moments of adjustments he looked back to his captain. “Sir, these are more than just simple mines. They appear to be gravity inducing.”

Solow shot the junior science officer a glance. “Gravetic mines?”

“Yes, sir.”

Captain Solow contemplated the implications. “I’ve heard of gravetic mines, but I thought they were impossible to construct. The science required would be—”

“The theory behind the mechanism is sound, sir,” Spock interjected. “But the Federation withdrew further funding on the research several years ago. It was postulated that the weapon was far too barbaric for any form of practical use.”

“Is there any way to counteract the devices?” Solow asked as the *Galina* continued on her rearward course.

Spock’s eyes moved to the forward viewer. “Any form of heavy particle reaction causes the intensity of their gravetic field to increase.”

Solow rubbed his chin absentmindedly. “So . . . when one mine explodes, it releases a gravity field that pulls the ship closer to a neighboring mine, and—”

“And the process continues indefinitely until our ship is totally destroyed,” Spock replied flatly.

“And the explosion of the *Kaga* and the *Tholus* was strong enough to ignite several of the mines simultaneously,” the captain said in understanding. “The ensuing gravity field was so powerful that it not only extinguished the warp core shockwave, it actually pulled us back off course.”

Spock nodded at the assessment. "Precisely, Captain."

"And you say that any form of heavy particle reaction will cause the mines to be attracted to the ship's hull?"

"Yes, sir."

"And what would that look like, Mr. Spock?" Jaderborg asked.

"The fusion reactors in the impulse drive will excite the mines to our location, as well as any type of laser burst. I would also speculate that the formation of a warp field would likewise draw them to our position."

The captain was getting too tired to deal with this. "So, anything we try to do to escape will also cause us to be further tangled in this *spider's web*, as you called it." The bridge crew was silent as the captain pondered the next step. "Mr. Amboise, bring us to a full stop."

"Aye, sir. Full stop," the helmsman replied, bringing the ship to a dead stop by using the smallest possible bursts from the maneuvering thrusters as he could in order to avoid the attraction of another mine. "Full stop achieved, Captain. We're no longer being pulled back."

Solow walked up to the navigation subsystems board and sat on the edge. He folded his arms across his chest as he looked down at the Vulcan. "Well, Mr. Spock?"

Spock cocked his head toward the captain, and then dropped it slightly. "Yes, sir?"

"You seem to be the expert here, Mister. So . . . how do we get out?"

Spock steepled his fingers for a moment as a torrent of possibilities ran through his mind. He held his fingers to his lips for a full minute, then leaned back slightly in his chair. "Sir, it may be possible to use a warhead to extricate ourselves."

"They're magnetically accelerated." Solow nodded in approval.

"And therefore wouldn't attract a mine when launched. If we could fire a spread of warheads near our point of entry, it may be possible that the resulting explosions will open a gap wide enough for us to escape."

"That's a huge gamble, lieutenant," the ship's chief engineer spoke up from his console. "It might make a big hole for us to leave, but the gap would be surrounded by an enormous gravity well. If we try to go through it—"

“We’d be crushed like a grape,” Solow finished.

“There is, however, a possibility for survival,” Spock replied calmly. “If all the remaining cruisers in our squadron form up very close to us, which my calculations suggest is a maximum of fifty meters distance, the overlapping effect of our combined shields should allow us a safe passage through the opening.”

“And how great is this possibility?” the chief engineer asked in disbelief.

Spock looked at his computer for a split second and then back to Solow. “It has never been done, but the equations are sound.”

Solow smiled at the Vulcan, who only returned a blank expression. “We don’t seem to have much of a choice. Prepare to feed all our sensor information about the mines’ locations to the rest of the squadron. Mr. Cavitt, raise the rest of the squadron on subspace. I want them to maneuver to our position on control thrusters only. When everyone is within fifty meters of us, we will execute Mr. Spock’s plan.”

## Chapter 7

Stardate 4104.09

April 2253

Office of the President of the United Federation of Planets, Paris, Earth

President Thomas Vanderbilt sat at his desk going through the morning reports. Lately, there seemed to be more information than he could possibly go through in a single sitting. As president, he was used to receiving updates from Colonial Operations Command, trade negotiations between various planets, new Federation member applications, successful and unsuccessful first contact missions, various diplomatic issues, and other such things that befitted a man in his position as president. However, since the beginning of the hostilities with the Klingon Empire, he was now privy to all the casualty reports, declination of Federation territory, war communications, losses and victories during battles, and supply and vessel transfers of all types.

While it was completely possible—and permissible—to allow others in the chain of command to handle some of the less glorious portions of his administration, Thomas felt a great sense of satisfaction in knowing everything that was happening on the front lines as it happened—or at least as much as he could glean from the reports that had to travel the great distances from the front lines back to Starfleet Headquarters on Earth. With the recent increase in Klingon activities, the number of reports seemed to have doubled in the last two months.

As far as Starfleet Intelligence could discern, the Federation was currently holding their own against the invading Klingon forces. For every planetary system that was lost to the enemy, another one was either recaptured or was taken directly from the hands of the empire. And for every Starfleet vessel that was either damaged or destroyed beyond repair, the intrepid commanders in Starfleet were taking out choice targets of their own. In fact, Starfleet appeared to be capturing more enemy

vessels than the Klingons had been in the last six months. The wealth of knowledge that Starfleet Intelligence had obtained from those exploits was—by all accounts—the reason for the current stalemate, but it still wasn't enough to turn the tide, and Thomas knew it. President Vanderbilt had made a personal note to form a committee, charged with seeking out the best and brightest engineering and technical minds in Starfleet, placing them in a position where they could extract as much information from the captured enemy technology as possible, and then turning that information into useful tactical data.

*There has to be a way to break this deadlock.*

It was widely reported that the Klingons still outnumbered their Starfleet counterparts by a margin of nearly three to one on almost every front. Starfleet captains, however, seemed to have gotten their feet firmly wet with regard to battle tactics and fleet maneuvers, which the Klingons appeared to sorely lack. Thomas was now waiting on the final reports to come in from Fleet Admiral Matthew D. Luxa and the recently promoted commander of Starfleet Intelligence, Rear Admiral Michael J. Lai.

Thomas ran his hands through a crop of silvery hair in the brief respite between official meetings he was holding with various heads of state. It was never wise to let anyone see you sweat—and this was especially true if you were the distinguished leader of the United Federation of Planets. In truth, Thomas was exhausted, both physically and mentally. He had found that sleep, whenever the time was afforded him to catch up on such a luxury, often evaded him like an Orion pirate in a dense asteroid field. When he closed his eyes during those respites, he found himself longing for the lush green valleys and endless pink skies of his home planet, Deneva. He remembered with fondness the rich herbal teas his grandmother would make for him after a long day of toiling on his parent's farm under the warmth of the primary star of the Beta Darius system. His current supply of that tea was now running out, and President Vanderbilt had found an almost-palatable replacement in a human refreshment called coffee. He had found the taste entirely too bitter for his liking at first, but he had also discovered its wonderful ability to allow him to appear in full command of his faculties and ready to take on any challenges he was faced with, should the need arise to quickly do so. A fresh hot cup was waiting for

his hand as the last of his memories faded behind the next message that began to scroll across his desktop terminal.

The president sipped at the steaming cup as his receptionist signaled from the waiting room that the heads of Starfleet had arrived. Without responding verbally to her signal, Thomas reached a tired finger to the admittance button and pressed the flashing yellow beacon on his desk that would automatically open his office doors to the two men who were waiting to speak to him. The admirals walked briskly into the room before the beautiful oak doors had finished parting and stood at attention in front of the president's desk.

Vanderbilt waved a hand frivolously at two plush chairs that had been placed in front of his desk. "Please, gentlemen. Let's not stand on too much formality. Be seated."

"Thank you, Mr. President," Admiral Luxa replied with a curt nod of his closely cropped gray hair.

Thomas's bright blue eyes turned quickly to the head of Starfleet Intelligence. "Rear Admiral Lai, congratulations on your recent promotion."

Michael Lai's lips formed into a thin line that curled at the ends into a half smile. "Thank you, sir."

"Your intelligence during this conflict is serving us exceedingly well. You're to be commended on your efforts."

"Thank you, sir. I only wish we could be using it to gain some real footing in this war."

Fleet Admiral Luxa's eyes went to Lai in a sideways glance. "It's better than losing it, Admiral."

"Very true," President Vanderbilt added. "Along those lines, I have to say that the reports coming in from the Triangle are the most promising of all the intelligence I've seen lately."

Lai was slightly shocked by the president's statement. *He really has his finger on the pulse of things around here. I didn't even know that information was on his desk yet.* "You mean . . . the reports coming in from the *Enterprise*, sir?"

"To put it succinctly, yes," the president said with a quick nod. "Captain Pike is one of our best and brightest officers, and the *Enterprise* is performing



exceptionally well under his command. The intelligence he's gathered from our operatives in that region is cause enough for praise on multiple fronts. I also understand he's formed several new contacts in the area as well."

"Yes, sir. Captain Pike has used these new sources to form dozens of new leads in the area. His investigation has been"—Michael looked for the right words from Luxa, but was only given a blank stare in response—"... thorough. We're preparing to dispatch another vessel to relieve him."

"To relieve him?" Thomas asked in confusion. "But they're doing so well."

"Yes, Mr. President," Luxa quickly injected. "The *Enterprise* has been on station for over eighteen months. Starfleet Command feels it's time for her to come home. Captain Pike needs a formal debriefing, and the ship itself is scheduled to undergo a brief dry-dock period before we can send her back out."

Lai took this as his cue to begin speaking again. "We have a deep cover team ready to pick up where the *Enterprise* is leaving off. The ship we're sending in is heavily disguised as a merchant freighter. We feel that they'll be able to perform even more successful covert operations than a Federation heavy cruiser, to say nothing about the information they'll be able to retrieve from Romulan space."

President Vanderbilt steepled his fingers on his desk and contemplated the weight of their words. "And *Enterprise* will remain near the front lines after her refit, yes?"

"Yes, sir. In a manner of speaking, that is," Lai continued cautiously.

"Please explain."

Lai shifted uncomfortably in his chair. "Although this information is exceedingly preliminary, Starfleet Intelligence is beginning to believe that the *Constitution*-class starships aren't ready to be placed fully under the auspices of Military Operations Command."

The president's eyebrows went up in surprise. "That's definitely news to me, Admiral. What's this information based on?"

Fleet Admiral Luxa stepped in efficiently. "Sir, again . . . it's all very preliminary at this point. We're still gathering all the data from our units on the front lines. We have several *Constitution*-class ships currently near the war zone, but not directly in it. They're performing within specifications, and we have no immediate plans to recall the class at this time. Rest assured, sir, that if and when the time comes to

make a decision of this magnitude, you'll already have all the answers to the questions that are probably on your mind right now."

Admiral Lai piped in before the president could voice another concern. "However, once the *Enterprise* is ready and her new personnel have checked aboard, she'll be stationed near the Rigel system."

Thomas looked at his fingers, nodded slowly, and spoke without looking at the men. "Indeed. Rigel is probably the most important sector we can protect from further Klingon incursions." He lifted his head and looked to Luxa. "We're still on shaky ground with the Orions, and the last thing we need is a repeat of incidents like Laxala that will hamper our dilithium shipments." The president folded his hands into his lap as he continued. "Speaking of Pike's personnel transfers, I understand that the brilliant young science officer who led our forces safely out of the Delgon Expanse has requested a transfer to Galaxy Exploration Command."

"Well . . . it wasn't *entirely* safely," Luxa said, furrowing his brows. "We lost two cruisers in the engagement, with a handful more being severely damaged."

Vanderbilt nodded, nearly cutting the admiral off when he began to speak. "Nonetheless, Admiral, we need inventive young people like this serving at the top positions in the fleet near critical locations inside Federation territory. And it would seem to me that the Rigel system is our most crucial asset at this time."

"Yes, sir," Luxa said flatly.

"I'd like to see this Lieutenant Spock transferred to the *Enterprise* as soon as the ship returns to port."

"I believe he's a lieutenant junior-grade, Mr. President," Lai corrected him, but instantly regretted the comment.

"Not anymore, Admiral," Vanderbilt replied sharply. "It seems to me that keeping him at his current post would be a tremendous waste of his abilities. As I've been looking over this young man's Starfleet record, I think he'd be an excellent choice for the lead science officer position on the ship. Of course, I will respect Captain Pike's judgment in this matter. You will please handle all the details of the transfer, Admiral Luxa."

"Absolutely, sir," Luxa replied with a nod, entering the information into an electronic pad in his lap.

“And Admiral Lai, I'd like to see the official deposition of Captain Pike myself as soon as it becomes available. In fact, I'd like to view the debriefing live, if possible. See if we can set up a secure subspace communications link from Starbase 10 directly back here to Earth.”

*The president also knows about the experimental long-range subspace repeaters? He'd have to, in order to make a request like that. Someone in Intelligence is going to have to learn to keep his mouth shut.* “Of course, sir. I'll take care of it personally.”

“Very good. What else do you gentlemen have to report?”

For the next hour the two Starfleet admirals conferred with President Vanderbilt about the state of affairs between the Federation and the Klingon forces. They updated him on the most recent subspace communications they'd each received, the personnel and property losses, and the overall battle plans for the next phase of the engagement. Although Vanderbilt was aware of a great number of these details, there were tidbits of knowledge that he could only learn from asking the admiralty directly.

“Sir,” Lai began casually, “there is one final note to report. Starfleet Intelligence has sufficient evidence to suspect that the Klingons are going to force a major engagement somewhere near Starbase 23 in the next several weeks.”

President Vanderbilt's eyes narrowed. “Based on the Intelligence reports you've given me, this doesn't come as a big surprise. I had hoped this was going to be another false alarm by the Klingons, but it seems now that they are really looking for a fight. This is your final assessment as well, Admiral?” Thomas asked, turning to Luxa.

Luxa looked at Lai, and then back to the president. “It is, sir. We have several squadrons of cruisers, destroyers, and frigates converging on our area of space five parsecs from Starbase 23. We've dubbed this staging area Sector 23-H.”

“How many ships will be there once the fleet is assembled?” the president asked, propping his fingers to his chin in contemplation.

“If all goes well between the various commands, we will be looking at a combined fleet total of 225 starships of varying classes. We've assigned them the designation of the 11th Strategic Squadron.”

“And who has been placed in overall command of the 11th?”

“Rear Admiral Pelletier, sir,” Luxa replied.

“Jacques Pelletier? The commandant of Starfleet Academy?” Thomas asked in near astonishment.

“The same,” Lai said with a smile. “He transferred back into the fleet last year after his tour at the academy was complete.”

“Well,” President Vanderbilt replied with a chuckle, “based on what I’ve heard of his reputation, I’d say it looks like those Klingons will be in for one hell of a fight. What kind of resistance is Admiral Pelletier looking to face in that sector?”

Lai looked to Luxa, pursed his lips, and then glanced back at the president. “From what Starfleet Intelligence has learned, the numbers look to be almost even, with the Klingons holding a slight advantage. They will have roughly 290 ships at their disposal. However, Intelligence has learned that a vast majority of those ships will be destroyers and light cruisers.”

“I think Admiral Pelletier will be able to control the situation adequately, sir,” Luxa said with a slight nod as he folded one of his legs over the other. “Our combined forces will be made mostly of both heavy and light cruisers, with a smattering of destroyers and frigates to augment them.”

“I see,” President Vanderbilt said as he nodded in approval. “Keep me posted on anything either of you men hears about this engagement. I want to be privy to the information as soon as it comes in and not a moment later. This signifies a major push by the Klingons to get a key foothold in our territory, and I don’t want to waste this opportunity to push them back—and hard.”

“Yes, sir,” the two admirals said in unison. The three men sat quietly for a half minute.

“Excellent.” The president moved from behind his desk to refill his empty coffee mug. “If there’s nothing more, gentlemen, you are dismissed.”

\* \* \*

Stardate 4105.10

May 2253

Dearest Emily,

I was certainly glad when I got that letter from you this evening. It took nearly six days for it to reach me here by subspace, but of course it had to come by way of a relay station near Findesa, and the word is that the communication staff has to go through every letter line by line to make sure they don't contain any classified material.

I'll try to answer some of the questions you asked me in your last message in the order you asked them, if I'm able. I think I told you in my last communication what kind of work I'm doing now on the ship. I don't know why they move me so much. A job with the science department in Starfleet is just like any other job I held outside the service, except that we get state-of-the-art equipment here and no one bats an eyelash about requisitioning for anything else we might need. You see, the science department here on the *Marathon* takes up almost the entire deck, and they have more than three dozen officers and specialists, then there are all the science staff heads and then, finally, the senior science officer himself.

No. I have never as of yet been to a starbase, and it looks as though I may not get on one for a long time to come. The senior officer in charge here says we'll be out in space for at least another month. But you can never tell what will happen.

I've made friends everywhere I've been stationed on the ship. There are some mighty fine people in Starfleet. I even met a guy from Berkley. He says he's known my dad ever since Pops was just a kid. His name is Charley Bradley. I really wanted to get to know him better, but then we were sent to different departments on the ship. As such, I've now lost all my old friends to personnel shuffling. I was sent to deflector control a week ago. I've made a few new friends here and everything is a lot better now, but they can't take the place of my old friends in the life sciences department.

You asked about our living conditions. Well, we eat in a large dining hall which looks like it's as long as a city block. We all line up at the replicator bins in single file and, as you pass along them, you help yourself to whatever the ship's stores

have programmed in at that moment. It's just cafeteria-style dining, much like the atmospheric station on Marcos II was those many months ago. When you're done getting what you want you sit down anywhere and, well, you know what comes next. We sleep in two-man staterooms, where we each share one computer terminal and a sonic shower. There is a nice gymnasium and I've heard rumors of a bowling alley on deck nine. I'm going to look into that one tomorrow. Lights are out at 2130 for most of the crew in order to conserve power.

No, I haven't heard from Uncle Joe in a long time. I've written him twice since I was stationed aboard ship, but haven't heard from him since. Do you know what's going on?

No, I don't have a gold stripe on my sleeve yet. Even though I'm one step up from an ensign, I'm still considered a junior lieutenant. Someday soon I hope to have that solid gold braid around my cuffs. I'm sure it'll be here in due time. Thanks for the congratulatory words, though. It warms my heart to know how proud you are of me.

I am really glad your folks are moving into town, and I am sorry you can't go swimming next Sunday. I've gone swimming several times in the ship's pool, but it's just not the same as those beautiful warm oceans on Marcos. It'll be nice to have your folks closer, and I'm glad you won't be so lonely. I hope you do learn to pilot that new skimmer your parents bought! How exciting for you. I can't imagine my girl not knowing how to pilot her way to the grocery store. With all the credits I've been putting aside, I'm sure we can buy one of our own when I get back.

I just noticed something on the last letter you sent. You said that this is the third letter that I've received since I have been on board, and the other was a card? No, that isn't right at all. This is the second one, two letters and one card. I'll check the message logs in the ship's computer and verify it, but I'm sure I'm right. I'd hate to think I missed a message from you.

We linked up with the *Tangent* yesterday. That's Jason Bradford's ship, remember? Man, I haven't seen that guy since we were both cadets at the Academy. I hear he's made full lieutenant and has a pretty important position on his ship. Then again, he's on a cruiser and I'm only on a destroyer. That being said, there are a lot more opportunities to get ahead when you have a full captain in command and not a run-of-the-mill commander like we do.

Say, I had quite a time the other night. We had an accident in deflector control. One of the backup conduits overheated and melted, causing the secondary systems to go into full power mode. There were only two guys down there, as I was off duty at the time. The first man was okay, but the second got some serious burns on his arms from trying to secure the ruptured panel. They took him to sickbay and I was told recently that he'll be out of commission for a while. I feel bad for the guy, but it also vaulted me into his position as second officer in charge of deflector control. While the title may sound impressive, it really isn't that big of a deal. I still have a senior officer over me, and he has the science officer over him. Maybe now there's a chance Commander Moss will notice me, but I'm not holding my breath. It'd be nice to go on a landing party sometime, or even get asked into a meeting with the senior staff, but I think those are probably just pipe dreams at the moment.

There isn't much else going on right now. We know we are gearing up for something big, but everyone is being really hush-hush about the whole thing. I've been told to stand by (get ready for the inevitable) to do double shifts in deflector control, and I've been asked to make some special modifications to the long-range sensors in anticipation. I suppose I could write more about it, but I know it'd just be censored out of this communication by the time you get it. As it is, you may not get this message in its entirety.

I hope to hear back from you soon. I know it will take at least six days for this message to get to you, and just as long to get back if you respond as soon as you receive it. Please remember that I don't expect you to. I know you're busy, and I hate asking more of you than you can give right now. Just know that your words, whether they come in message format or in a prerecorded message (which I love the most) all mean the world to me. They help me through the rough times and the long hours of boredom.

I promise to write more next time.

All My Love,  
Jarrod

\* \* \*

Stardate 4105.12

May 2253

Captain Pike leveled his eyes at the image of Starbase 10 looming on the view screen. The large central disk, bulky enough to hold a dozen starships, was surrounded by a ring of six spherical docking bays, each of which were capable of swallowing two *Constitution*-class vessels with plenty of space to spare. The top of the central disk was allocated to a complex of navigational and communications arrays, with the lower half of the dock used for parts replication and tooling.

“Starbase 10, you have control,” Pike said as the enormous outer doors of the docking sphere opened to display their contents, a single *Bonhomme Richard*-class command cruiser looking worse for the wear. From *Enterprise*’s vantage point, Pike could tell her impulse deck was smashed, the port warp nacelle was completely missing, and the hangar bay clamshell doors were torn from their tracks and dangling below the secondary hull.

“Roger, *Enterprise*. Control established. Welcome to Starbase 10,” the surprisingly soothing voice of the female dock controller said.

“*Enterprise* confirms, Starbase,” Captain Pike replied into the speaker in the armrest of his chair as he leaned into the soft leather of the chair.

The USS *Enterprise* glided through the great space doors as they slid into their respective alcoves on either side of Starbase 10's outermost docking pod. As the starship passed slowly by a large rectangular outcropping inside the sphere, a structure that served as some of the station’s administrative and communications office spaces, several onlookers gathered at the large transparent aluminum windows that looked out into the dock at the majestic starship *Enterprise*, and watched intently as she passed by.

In the last several months, not a day had gone by when some starship, destroyer, frigate, or support craft wasn’t entering or leaving one of the outer spacedock structures. Sometimes the vessels would come in for just a few days, taking on supplies and new crewmembers, only to leave just as quickly to head back out to the



front lines of the war or—hopefully—more propitious ports of call. Sometimes the ships coming in would just barely make it in under their own power, with streaking black lines across their hulls denoting the furious battles they had encountered, while other ships—or hulks—that were seemingly devoid of life would be slowly towed in by any number of the station’s assigned tug ships, as if they were in a funeral procession. Pike wondered to himself just how the *Enterprise*’s dock-mate had made it here. Where did she fall on that list?

The *Enterprise* herself currently represented a mix of the two former descriptions. Though she was fully capable of performing her own docking maneuvers, she was by no means as pristine as the day she had sailed from her construction piers hovering in space high over San Francisco Bay. Several of the onlookers at the starbase’s windows, both Starfleet and civilian alike, pointed at the large vessel across the hundred or so meters of open space that separated them from the starship. They spoke in hushed whispers about the impact damage the *Enterprise* had on the underside of her primary and secondary hulls. The occasional child would ask his parents the meaning of the discolored plates that covered damage on her warp pylons or her ventral neck structure. “Battle damage,” the parents would whisper. “Those plates are only temporary. They are just like the bandages mommy puts on your cuts. The ship will be as good as new soon.”

As the great starship came to a slow halt inside the dock beside the battered cruiser, a large cylindrical gantry extended from the station and connected with the docking hatch on the port side of the *Enterprise*’s primary hull, followed by two smaller transparent ones that joined with the ship’s secondary hull. Within minutes, the onlookers at the large windows could see people and equipment moving back and forth to the weary starship, giving the appearance that the vessel was receiving a monolithic transfusion of life-regenerating materials as the dock workers fastidiously began the much-needed repairs.

As the ship’s systems began to power down, the colors slowly faded from the glowing red caps of the warp nacelles, getting dimmer by the second until the caps were almost as gray as the nacelles themselves. Some of the interior lights in the hull went dark and a few others went on. Finally, the blinking red, green, and white

running lights that denoted a ship in the service of Starfleet winked in unison one final time before they were silently extinguished.

## Chapter 8

Stardate 4105.21

May 2253

Sector 23-H

The area of space surrounding the ships was almost completely devoid of anything remarkable. Sector 23-H was six parsecs to the galactic northeast of Starbase 23. Here, where there had once been a thriving planetary system, there was now almost nothing left in the immediate vicinity. That system, dubbed NGC 1108-BE fifteen years ago when it was first charted, contained only a single planetary body. It was a large moon that several consecutive archeological surveys had concluded contained humanoid life some 2,000 standard years ago. At one time, the moon had been a Class-M planet, the final planet in a system containing three gas giants and a G-Type star.

It was still unknown to the Federation scientists whether or not its inhabitants had known that their sun was going to swell and engulf the inner planets, but recent evidence had pointed to that fact. The remnants of that star, now a swirling and glowing mass of stellar debris, had coagulated into a dense gaseous cluster that now bathed the dead world with a soft yellow light. The planet was now little more than a rock, with an atmosphere so thin it required life-support masks to be worn by any expedition wishing to traverse its barren surface. There was no vegetation, and all signs of technology and industry now lay dormant beneath half a kilometer of dust and rock. There were a great many unanswered questions here, and they were questions that would have to remain unanswered, at least for the duration of the war.

The only thing for certain about the system was why the Klingons had chosen this sector to wage the single largest fleet engagement since their war with the Federation had begun. Sector 23-H was on the far edge of what was widely believed to be the overall strategic push of the Klingon Empire into Federation space. The

Klingon forces in the area, which were comprised of a major remnant of Admiral Kone's fleet that had departed the Klingon-held system of H'Rez almost 12 months before, were slowly and destructively pushing their way deeper and deeper into Federation-held territory—exactng a high degree of chaos in the process.

Starfleet's Rear Admiral Jacques Pelletier, situated deep within the innards of his flagship—the *Heston*-class battle cruiser *Tracy*—leaned over the computer status table in the ship's command and control compartment as he studied the currently unfolding battle. A tactical map of the sector was displayed, with each ship accounted for by a separate symbol. There were stars for battle cruisers, triangles for cruisers, circles for destroyers, squares for frigates, and smaller squares for any type of support craft or shuttle. The Federation markers were in blue and the Klingons were in red, with the lifeless planetoid hanging well behind the Klingons' line.

Admiral Pelletier looked at the screen with a sense of apprehension as the Federation forces, made up mostly of *Detroyat*-class destroyers, *Achernar*-class medium cruisers, and *Tikopai*-class light cruisers, seemed to be holding their own against the Klingon hordes, themselves made up of a large number of D-16 destroyers and L-6 frigates. Around Pelletier, on each of the four walls of the command center, were other screens showing various tactical, sensor, and damage reports to a variety of control officers who themselves would relay voice communications from the admiral to the rest of the fleet. Thus, there were dozens of voices to be heard in the room at any given moment as men and women moved back and forth from station to station while they coordinated their ongoing attack.

The *Tracy* shuddered lightly, and Pelletier instinctively grabbed the brushed aluminum sides of the table with both hands to steady himself. The last enemy shot that had been intended for the old battle cruiser hadn't struck, but it had gotten pretty close. A flicker of the overhead lights caught Jacques's attention and he glanced upward as their intensity wavered for a split second, and then returned to their normal luminescence. Of the over 200 Federation ships that were now squaring off with a nearly equal number of Klingon targets, only a small percentage of the Starfleet ships could be designated to provide cover for the fleet commander's ship. Pelletier moved his eyes back to the table and focused on the symbol that

represented the *Tracy*, then quickly scanned for the triangle that represented the lead ship that was designated as their protective screen. He reached his finger out quickly and touched the glowing triangle of a command cruiser that was quickly approaching the *Tracy*'s position. "Captain Blackwell, report your status," Pelletier said, not averting his eyes from the triangle that represented the cruiser *Bonhomme Richard*.

A moment later, Captain William Blackwell's confident voice came over the speakers that lined the compartment. "Blackwell here, Admiral. One of the Klingon frigates managed to get off a shot at the *Tracy*. Sorry about that, sir."

Pelletier had specifically asked for William Blackwell to take command of the screen for the *Tracy*. He'd wanted someone who was cool under pressure and knew how to operate in tight quarters under heavy attack. In a perfect world, Pelletier would have wanted Fleet Captain Garth at his side, but Garth was entangled in another sector at the moment, and Blackwell was available and eager. It also went without saying that Pelletier liked Blackwell, both professionally and personally. The two men had a deep understanding of what it would take to fight this war and come out victorious, a conviction they had shared many times in the officers' mess in the evenings leading up to this engagement.

"I trust you won't let him get off another shot, Captain," Pelletier said to the triangle on the screen, noticing with satisfaction that the *Bonhomme Richard* had swung around in a tight semicircle and had gotten directly astern of the offending Klingon frigate. Seconds later the red square that represented the L-6B frigate dissolved completely from view, which was followed by a soft shudder in the *Tracy*'s outer hull.

"I don't think he'll be bothering us anymore, Admiral," Blackwell said triumphantly.

"Excellent, Captain. Well done. Please coordinate with the *Mirfak*, the *Bellatrix*, and the *Portsmouth*. I want a tight formation around the *Tracy* at all times."

There was a brief crackle of static through the speakers which was immediately followed by Blackwell's voice again. "Understood, Admiral."

“Remember, Captain, if anything happens to the *Tracy*, all command functions will immediately be transferred to Captain Goodyear on the *Yamato*. You will be required to move to his position upon confirmation of the command change.”

“Yes, sir. I understand perfectly.”

\* \* \*

On the bridge of the destroyer USS *Bonita*, the ship’s commanding officer—Lieutenant Commander Max Ormond—watched the visual display in front of him with a sense of utter astonishment. There, directly abeam of the *Bonita*, was the *Constitution*-class cruiser USS *Potemkin*. Commander Ormond watched in silence as Captain Brian Webber used the *Potemkin*’s awesome destructive power to quickly dissect two Klingon cruisers while simultaneously managing to fend off no less than three frigates. Truly, Ormond thought, the *Constitutions* deserve their titles as “the queens of Starfleet.” Although the starship was a beauty to behold, Ormond knew he could spare little time relishing in the victories of his shipmates. He had to score some victories of his own.

The Klingon and Federation forces were buzzing like fireflies around one another. One Starfleet vessel would score a hit for the friendly forces, only to be destroyed a moment later by another Klingon ship they’d failed to detect. The offending Klingon would, in turn, be destroyed by another Starfleet ship . . . or a team of them, and the cycle would repeat. The *Bonita*, her forward lasers blazing in ever-widening arcs, was just another of those fireflies in icy-cold darkness of space.

After watching the victories of the cruiser, the *Bonita*’s science officer immediately reported that an enemy D-7 and a D-16 had both acquired a weapons lock on the small *Apache*-class Federation destroyer. The *Bonita*, one of twenty-six similar vessels built a decade earlier, was designed with the most sophisticated computer and defensive systems known to Federation science at that time. Since then, however, those vessels had been lagging behind the technology curve of other ships in similar classes. Starfleet Tactical had found very little they could do to augment the *Apache*-class’s already insufficient weapons, as the hull design didn’t leave a great deal of support structure for the newer weapons and computer control

systems they would require to operate. Lieutenant Commander Ormond and his fellow destroyer commanders would have to make good with what they had—and they proudly tried to do so.

Ormond, upon receiving the news that he was being targeted, tried vainly to move the *Bonita* into a more tactically advantageous position away from the oncoming Klingon attackers. The *Apaches* were not known for their strong offensive capabilities when faced one on one with an opponent, let alone when they were ganged up on. The strength of the small Federation destroyer came in their numbers, usually when three of the vessels were employed together against a single foe. Unfortunately, the *Bonita* was all alone in her current engagement.

“Communications officer,” Ormond began steadily. “Try to raise the tactical coordinator on the *Tracy*. See if they can dispatch assistance to our location.”

Ensign Canary tried desperately at his controls. His long slender fingers, twice the length of normal humans, glided over the communication controls with practiced efficiency, but in the end it proved futile. “It’s no good, sir. Either the communications are being jammed or the *Tracy* is being overwhelmed with calls. Either way, I can’t get through to them,” he finished in frustration.

Ormond tried to form a calm façade over the inner trembling of his body. He wanted his crew to think he was in complete control of the situation. The *Bonita* was his first command, his first test as a commanding officer, and he didn’t want to fail the crew or himself the first time out the gates. “It looks like we’ll have to handle these ones by ourselves, people. What are the exact positions of the enemy vessels?”

The science officer, Lieutenant Chantfield, read the readings directly from his display without looking up. “The D-7 is bearing 143-mark-point-2. The D-16 is bearing mark-point-5.”

Ormond straightened his tunic with a tug of its bottom hem. “Bring forward lasers to bear on the D-16. Helm, take us in to within 200 meters.”

“We might not last long at close range, sir,” Chantfield offered.

“We’ll last longer against them than we would against that D-7,” Ormond said as he waved his golden-brown hand at the forward viewer.

Chantfield looked to the forward view screen as the image of the D-16 grew steadily larger. He nodded slightly at the image and looked to his captain. "I hope you're right, sir."

Ormond, dismissing the science officer's comments for the time being, shouted to the weapons officer. "I want the aft missile launchers standing by, as well. If we're lucky, we can catch the D-7 off guard while we give the D-16 a onceover."

"We'll be in weapons range of the D-16 in . . . five seconds."

"Make every shot count, Mister Belon," Ormond said to the weapons officer as the two men stared at the view screen.

Just as the D-16 came into weapons range, it suddenly dipped forward and shot ahead at half impulse. The lasers blasts from the *Bonita* streamed through empty space above the frigate, missing the enemy ship entirely.

"A miss, sir!" Chantfield exclaimed.

"Fire the aft missile launchers," Ormond shouted. "Try to get a piece of him!"

The circular aft launch door of the *Bonita* slid open and, a moment later, the purple fusion glow of an antimatter missile streamed out from behind the ship. The missile, a simple automated drone, was as fast as any Klingon ship at combat speed. Unlike a photon torpedo, however, a drone missile would actively seek its target out once it had established a positive lock. Unfortunately, the range was limited, and Ormond prayed that it reached its target before it ran out of solid fuel. Max and the rest of the bridge crew watched on the viewer as the missile streaked downward and found its target, exploding against the D-16's shields.

"Their aft shields are down to forty-five percent, Captain," Chantfield said proudly.

Ormond failed to suppress his own elation. "Helm, Z-minus 1200 meters! I want to finish that guy!"

"Sir," Chatfield said with an air of surprise and confusion, "the D-7 . . . it's no longer on our port."

Ormond jumped from his chair in surprise, his reflexes activating before his mind fully comprehended the meaning of the words. His legs vaulted him to the railing behind the science station. "Where is he?"

"Above us, sir. A thousand kilometers and closing rapidly."



“He's executing a Delta-Z!” Helmsman Belon yelled.

The D-7, its front arsenal now pointed directly at the top of the *Bonita*, opened fire without a moment's hesitation. First, long lines of green disruptor energy sped out from either side of the Klingon's bridge module, followed quickly by two blasts from its forward accelerator cannon. The single warp nacelle of the *Bonita*, held aloft on a solitary pylon, crumpled under the onslaught. The spinning red ramscoop cap exploded in a shower of sparks and pelted the primary hull with white-hot transparent aluminum shards.

On the bridge, the communications station erupted in a ball of flames. Ensign Canary was ejected from his chair and shot against the bridge railing, causing a spray of blood to instantly pelt Lieutenant Commander Ormond's back. The *Bonita* was shuddering and creaking, sounds that none of her crew had ever heard the small destroyer make. It sounded as if she were breaking apart at the seams. The lights flickered, and then went out completely, only to be replaced a few seconds later by the dim glow of the red emergency lights.

Ormond looked down at the lifeless form of Ensign Canary, then to the stunned but coherent form of Lieutenant Belon at the helm. “Helmsman, get us out of here!”

Belon's left hand was smashed, two of his fingers bent down at an unnatural angle. The ensign hadn't realized it until he tried to input the new course with the defective digits. When the controls failed to respond, he tucked his wounded hand close to his chest. “The helm isn't responding sir.”

“All power is at minimum, sir,” Chantfield said, holding his left palm to a large gash on his forehead.

“Shields?” Ormond asked breathlessly. “Weapons?”

There was a silence on the bridge for what seemed like an eternity. “All down, sir,” Chantfield said sorrowfully.

Ormond licked his lips and tasted the saltiness of fresh blood. He stepped over to his chair and punched the intercom button and connected the bridge to engineering.

“Chief Engineer Yonker. Stand by to—”

The bridge erupted in another violent shake, causing everyone standing to be thrown to the deck.

In the combat center of the *Tracy*, Rear Admiral Pelletier watched as a small circle that represented the USS *Bonita* dissolved into a computer-generated mist, just as so many other Federation ships had in the last several minutes. Despite the valiant efforts of the Starfleet crews, the battle was slowly turning in favor of the Klingon forces. Some of the Federation's strongest ships were now either out of commission or were running dangerously low on hard weapons. The *Exeter* and the *Tikopai*-class cruiser *Bellatrix* were severely damaged and had been ordered out of the system—under the protests from both of their commanding officers. The *Achernar*-class cruiser *Jassan* had been destroyed minutes ago in an antimatter explosion that had not only taken out two squadrons of attacking Klingon destroyers, but had also managed to wipe out two Starfleet cruisers and a handful of frigates in the immediate area.

The destroyers *Portsmouth* and *Cambodia* were now making attack runs around the *Tracy*, weaving and bobbing around the slower-moving heavy cruisers of both fleets in the process. However, the *Cambodia*'s helmsman wasn't as skilled as the men on the *Portsmouth*. After turning tightly around the hulks of several D-7s that were burning uncontrollably, it ran headlong into a Klingon frigate that was attempting to get out of the way of a careening *Larson*-class destroyer that was spinning end over end. Both the *Cambodia* and the Klingon frigate exploded in a violent ball of light and debris in the ensuing collision, taking out the nearby powerless frigate, as well as anyone who might have been alive on the vessel.

The Klingons appeared to be regrouping, pushing the Federation forces back against the dead planetary body in the system that was now at their stern. Admiral Pelletier knew that the Starfleet officers were about to have a noose put around their necks and he tried desperately to search the status table in front of him for answers to the problem. Just then a communication came in from Captain Blackwell.

“Admiral, this is Captain Blackwell on the *Bonhomme Richard*. I just lost the *Rutherford* and the *Mirfak*. I'll need two more cruisers on my wing to protect the *Tracy*, sir. Permission to call up the *Potemkin* and the—”

Pelletier reached for the blinking icon that represented the *Bonhomme Richard* and gave it a firm tap, effectively ending Blackwell's statement so he could begin

speaking. "Permission denied, Captain. All the vessels . . . repeat, *all* the Federation vessels are engaged and can't be spared at this time."

"Things are going to get really tight in here unless we can get some breathing room, Admiral," Blackwell said through the intercom. Pelletier looked up at the faces of the officers that surrounded him in the combat center of the *Tracy*. It seemed Blackwell's statement was on their hearts and minds as well. After all, they knew the situation just as well as Admiral Pelletier did, although he was probably the only one with the entire picture clearly formed in his mind.

As Pelletier looked back to the status board, and the growing ratio of Klingon ships to Federation vessels, another Starfleet icon began to blink in an alternating pattern of yellow and blue. It was the *Yamato* requesting communications.

"Captain Blackwell, please stand by. I'm receiving an urgent call from the *Yamato*," and with that, Pelletier touched the triangle that represented the *Yamato*, thus changing the blinking triangle to a solid yellow. "This is Admiral Pelletier. Go ahead, *Yamato*."

"Admiral, this is Captain Goodyear. Request we withdraw to the prearranged coordinates and regroup for another attack."

"And lose this sector, Captain?" Pelletier replied, irritated by Goodyear's suggestion. "I'm not about to give it up to the Klingons. We can still win this one."

There was a long pause from Brendon Goodyear. "With all due respect, sir, I feel that we've already lost this sector to the enemy. If we stay here much longer they'll do irreparable damage to the fleet. I'd hate to sacrifice people and equipment here for a dead planet and nebula."

Pelletier slammed his fist hard against the edge of the table. "It's not what's *in* this system that concerns the Klingons, Captain. It's the sector itself! If the Klingons manage to form a staging ground here, they'll have access to—"

One of the men who had been monitoring the communications network in the command center walked up quickly behind the admiral. "Admiral Pelletier?"

Pelletier, his fist still clenched on the table top, slowly turned to face the man speaking to him from behind his left shoulder. It was Lieutenant Commander Moldenhauer, an older officer who had made a name for himself as the former

commanding officer of a research ship. “Yes, Commander?” Jacques asked, placing his bruised fist into the palm of his other hand and rubbing it absentmindedly.

Moldenhauer's ice-blue eyes peered into the admiral's as the commander dropped his tone to a soft whisper. “Sir, top secret communiqué just in from Captain Falcone on the cruiser *Thanatos*.”

Pelletier didn't need to be told twice what that meant. The *Thanatos* was supposed to be guarding the Falgor system. Only two parsecs from Sector 23-H, Falgor was to be the location that Federation forces would evacuate to in the event the 11th Strategic Squadron would need to regroup. Pelletier licked his lips as his eyes darted quickly around the room, seeing if anyone else was listening to their hushed conversation.

“Message?”

“Yes, sir. It seems that Captain Falcone and his squadron were ambushed by a Klingon frigate about twenty minutes ago.”

“Ambushed . . . by a single frigate? That's nothing I would consider top secret, Commander,” Pelletier said, still tending to his bruised fist.

“Yes, sir. Only . . . it seems that this single Klingon frigate destroyed two of our destroyers.”

“What? Impossible!”

Moldenhauer continued, unfazed. “The *Thanatos* barely made it out to get us this message. They suggest sending the fleet to Klef instead.”

Things had suddenly gone from bad to worse. “Klef?” he spat in disgust. “That's almost nine parsecs from here!”

“Yes, sir.” The lieutenant commander nodded slowly.

Jacques shook his head as he looked back to the interactive table in the center of the room. “That's almost twenty-seven light-years away, Commander. It'll be nothing short of a *miracle* if we can all make it there in one piece.”

“Yes, sir,” Moldenhauer replied dejectedly. Pelletier, however, could see very little choice in the matter and it enraged him. Instead of giving up two parsecs to the Klingons by evacuating to Falgor, he was now forced to withdraw the entire 11th Strategic Squadron—or what was left of it—to the Federation-held world of Klef, giving up three and a half times that much area in the process. Pelletier looked to

Moldenhauer and dismissed him with a nod of his head. He looked back to the status board and to the blinking triangle that represented the paused communication channel with the *Bonhomme Richard*. He reached for the icon, pulled his finger back slightly as his throat became dry, then closed his eyes tightly and finally depressed the image.

“Captain Blackwell,” Pelletier began as he cleared his throat, “I’m signaling the fleet that we are withdrawing to . . . that we are withdrawing from this sector for the time being. The *Tracy* will forward all required course information directly into the fleet’s individual navigational computers and this should be executed immediately.”

“Yes, sir.” The tone in his voice was anything but elated. “What about the vessels that are without warp power, sir? How will they rendezvous with us?”

Pelletier rubbed his face from top to bottom with his left palm as he leaned closer to the table. “However they can, Captain. However they can.”

“Respectfully, sir, I request to stay behind and help to evacuate some of the personnel. The *Bonhomme Richard* has more than enough room for—”

“Denied, Captain.”

“But . . . sir!” William’s tone had changed from one of resignation to one of outright astonishment.

“No buts, William. Prepare to evacuate Sector 23-H. I’ll assign two destroyers to link up with you to provide cover for the *Tracy* during our departure,” Pelletier said with finality, closing the channel and then standing upright to straighten his gold tunic. He looked to the left bulkhead, where Moldenhauer had gathered with several other technicians as they peered into another tactical display. “Commander Moldenhauer, please advise the fleet to make all preparations for getting underway and transmit the coordinates for the rendezvous point to all ships immediately. Priority One. Then get the *Marathon* on the line. I need to speak to Commander Moss right away.”

Moldenhauer turned to face Rear Admiral Pelletier. He gave a stoic nod and turned to his team to relay the order.

*Whatever it takes, Pelletier told himself, no matter how long it takes, I will come back to retake this sector!*

## Chapter 9

Stardate 4105.22

May 2253

“You wanted to see me, Doctor?” Commander Moss asked impatiently. “I hope it’s important. We’ve got a lot of damage left to repair in the next few hours.”

Dr. Clinton Perera, chief medical officer of the destroyer USS *Marathon*, looked up from behind his computer terminal at the face of Commander John Moss, whose body was leaning against the open doorway into the CMO’s private office in sickbay. With a jerk of his head toward an empty chair, Perera motioned Moss to join him at his desk.

Commander Moss lumbered to the doctor’s L-shaped metal desk and sat down, crossing one leg over the other in the process. Dr. Perera sat with one hand to his chin and the other resting on a stack of multicolored computer memory cartridges. His deep brown eyes were focused on his computer screen, which Moss could not currently see because it was oriented away from his position. To John, sickbay always held a slightly acidic scent that would waft over him as he entered the space. As he sat and looked at the doctor, John wondered how the doctor wasn’t affected by the unusual odor.

“I’m exhausted,” Moss sighed.

“I’ve got just the thing for it,” Perera smiled meekly. “In fact, we’ll both help ourselves in a few minutes. I think by then we’ll both need it.”

Moss gave the doctor a concerned stare. “Oh?”

“I was just going over the final casualty reports, John.”

“You could have forwarded them to me on the bridge,” Moss replied with a tinge of honest annoyance in his voice. Perera had served with Moss for the last three years and they had formed a professional but loose friendship. However, Commander Moss disliked being called away from the bridge in a crisis situation, even if the crisis itself had been averted for the time being. There was simply no

telling when and if the Klingons were going to strike again, and Moss wanted to be on the bridge the moment any news of that nature came in. Though his first officer was an extremely competent man, a confrontation with an enemy vessel was something he would never feel justified to delegate to a subordinate.

Dr. Perera looked away from his computer and into his captain's eyes, but his complexion had an air of distance—as if he were pondering the implications of the atrocities he'd witnessed in the last three hours. Moss could see the doctor's already thin face grow longer, more somber. It was one thing for a doctor to tend to the dead and the dying during times of peace, but it was quite another thing altogether when those dead and dying came from war.

"I'm sorry, Clinton," Commander Moss offered apologetically. "You're right, of course. This is probably something I should hear from you in person, in the privacy of your office, and not on the bridge for everyone to hear."

Perera feigned a smile. He wasn't in the mood to feel any better about the news he was about to give his captain. "Don't mention it, John. We're all on edge here."

Moss tried to relax as the adrenaline rush from the last few hours of combat began to ebb away. "What do you have to report, Doc?"

The doctor reached for the cube-shaped computer monitor and spun it to face Moss. "It's all there."

Moss looked at the screen and saw far fewer figures than he had expected. On the monitor, the casualties were listed by order of trauma. The dead crewmembers, totaling fifty, had their names and causes of death marked in red. There were eight seriously wounded crewmen marked in orange text, with the remaining crewmen on the roster listed in blue, indicating that they would be returning to duty shortly. Moss read through the names of the dead and the critically injured, attempting to picture each crewmember's face in his mind's eye. When he got to the final injured crewman his memory drew a complete blank. Try as he might, Moss simply couldn't put a face to the name. He looked at Perera with a puzzled expression on his face. "Lieutenant Frahm?"

Dr. Perera closed his eyes and nodded slowly. "Jarrod M. Frahm: deflector control, junior lieutenant."

Moss still couldn't picture the man. *Frahm? Frahm? Was he tall? Thin? Did he have a heavy vibrato voice or did he emit the sounds of a squeaky mouse? Blond? Brunette? Human? Alpha Centaurian?* Commander John Moss simply couldn't remember.

"I take it by the look on your face that you don't recall him?" the doctor asked cautiously.

John shook his head and frowned. "Not off the top of my head, no. Deflector control, did you say?"

"I did," Perera said. "And if I can direct your attention to the cause of his trauma . . ." The doctor pointed his finger at the third column on the small screen.

John's face skewed in confusion. "One of the plasma conduits ruptured."

Dr. Perera's tone immediately changed from cordial to irritated. "Exactly. The same conduit that ruptured two weeks ago and severely burned—"

The image of the accident immediately jumped into Moss's mind. "Lieutenant Menkowski. Yes, I remember it well."

Perera leaned back in his chair, folding his arms across his chest. "I don't mean to tell you how to do your job, John, but whoever you have in engineering who's supposed to be tending to these repairs needs to have his, her, or *its* head examined."

John angled his head slightly to the left. "Are you saying there is more to this situation than this single incident?"

"I'm sure of it. Not only could this poor boy lose the use of his left hand over a minor repair that should have been performed properly two weeks ago, one of my own biobeds shut down unexpectedly in the middle of surgery on another crewman an hour ago. Granted, the backup power kicked in a few seconds later, but—"

"And you were able to save that particular crewman?" John interrupted.

Perera's face became a scowl. "I did, but that's not the point, Captain! The point is that these simple mechanical failures—were they to happen during a crisis situation—could cause lives to be needlessly wasted. They may have already. I'm only able to work with what I have here, and I'm not a detective. I don't know about you, but I wouldn't want that on my conscience."



John pursed his lips as the weight of the doctor's words settled into his mind. Doctor Perera was right, of course. He'd have to check with the chief engineer on these reports. "Someone will be held accountable, Doc. I assure you."

Perera's scowl faded as he reached up and rubbed his face with the palm of his hand, finally resting his arms back across his chest. "Perhaps you shouldn't just tell *me*, John."

"What do you mean?"

"The boy . . . Lieutenant Frahm," Perera said in a soft voice, as if the volume of his words shouldn't be heard beyond the sealed doors of the compartment. "I'm sure he'd like to hear it from his captain that something is going to be done around here, and that these *accidents* won't happen again." The doctor could see by the look on the commander's face that Moss was mulling the proposition over. "Frahm has a girlfriend back home, you know. He told me all about it during his initial surgery. They're supposed to get married when he gets back to the research station on Marcos."

It was Moss's turn to wear a sour expression. "I have over 260 men and women under my command, Doctor. Most—if not all of them—have *someone* waiting at home . . . a father, a mother, a husband . . . a wife, children. I have to turn that realization off when I step into this uniform. And by the way, so do *you*. They signed the same papers you and I did when we joined Starfleet. They took the same oath, and knew what they were getting into just like the both of us—"

"Don't give me that tired line of bull, John." Perera could feel the anger welling inside him, but instead of raising his voice he lowered it to a dark whisper. "This is a real person we're talking about here, with *real* dreams and *real* hopes for the future. He's not just somebody you can reduce to a number somewhere between crewman number six and crewman number eight. And if you want my personal opinion—"

John narrowed his eyes. "I don't, but I know you're going to give it to me anyway."

Dr. Perera took a deep breath and let it out slowly, angered that he'd been interrupted. It didn't matter to him in the least that this man seated before him was the captain of the ship. "In my opinion, this boy needs to know that his captain

remembers his face and something about his background. He's a living, breathing person who has a soul and a conviction about what he's doing here . . . and it would be nice if the captain could remember that, even if he can't remember his name."

Commander Moss straightened in his chair. In truth, his mind had been made up the instant the doctor had finished speaking. Moss's voice dropped from irritation to one of resignation. "You're right, of course. Where is he now?"

"He's in the ward. Bed number one," Perera said, swallowing his anger and trying hard to smile again. "First one on the left. You can't miss him."

\* \* \*

Commander John Moss rounded the corner that would bring him into the medical ward of sickbay with Dr. Perera close on his heels. There were six biobeds in the ward, all occupied by crewmen who wore colored tunics representing every department on the *Marathon*. Some of them were being attended to by the on-duty nurses, while others appeared to be blissfully sleeping—and probably sedated, by the looks of some of their injuries. To his left, precisely where Dr. Perera said he would be, was Lieutenant Jarrod M. Frahm of deflector control.

He was a young man of not more than twenty-three years old, lying on his back, with a reflective green sheet pulled up nearly to his chest. Frahm's tunic had been removed prior to surgery and John could see the young man's bare chest rise and fall rhythmically, indicating he was relaxing somewhat peacefully. His intense eyes were open and fixed on a distant point on the overhead.

As Commander Moss moved closer to the bed, the young man was stirred from whatever he was daydreaming about and attempted to pull himself up to a seated position. John was quick to raise both of his hands, palms out, attempting to stop the boy from doing anything that could aggravate his injuries. "That's not necessary, Lieutenant Frahm."

From somewhere behind him, Moss heard Clinton clear his throat. Moss turned to face him, admonishing the doctor silently with his glare. Moss approached the bed and was now within a foot of the injured crewman. "How are you feeling, Jarrod?"

The young man wore a look of shock on his boyish face upon hearing Commander Moss speak his first name. His eyes went wide and a large smile crept slowly across his face.

"I'm doing well, sir. Dr. Perera's patched me up pretty good."

"I heard about the explosion in deflector control, Lieutenant. You must have done some pretty good work down there. We didn't have a single hiccup in the defensive screens during the entire battle."

If it were possible, Frahm's smile grew even wider. "I did my best, sir . . . what anyone would have done in my place, I guess."

Moss returned a genuine smile. He could see a much younger Lieutenant Junior Grade John Moss in the young man's face. "But nobody else did, Jarrod. *You did*. Fantastic job."

"Thank you, sir," he said as he leaned back down on the bed, his tone carrying an immeasurable sense of pride. "It was pretty amazing, wasn't it?"

John let out a soft laugh. "Let's not get too far ahead of ourselves, son. We don't need your ego inflating too much. Sickbay isn't big enough for it and all these other patients at the same time."

Frahm smiled faded after a moment and was replaced with an expression of concern. "Is everyone else in control okay? We had three other—"

"Everyone else made it out in time, Jarrod," Perera replied softly, stepping closer to the two men. "Like the commander said, it was all thanks to you."

"And . . . if I may, sir?" Jarrod asked without further hesitation. "Any other casualties? Any damage to the ship?"

Moss was taken aback at the question. This young lieutenant, Jarrod M. Frahm, gave all indications that he really couldn't care less about himself or his own injuries. His first thoughts were of his crew and his ship. Frahm wasn't at all concerned with protocol or rules at this point either, seeing as it was highly irregular for a junior officer to ask one's captain for a damage report. Commander Moss was equally shocked when he opened his own mouth and spouted off the casualty reports and the ship's damage estimates to the injured junior officer.

Frahm nodded somberly as the captain finished speaking. He looked to the doctor, hopeful apprehension on his face. “So, when can I get back to duty, Doc? This bed is killing my backside . . . and I could sure use a shower.”

Moss looked to the doctor as well, pondering the same question. For some reason that Moss couldn't quite explain, he wanted—*no, that isn't the right word. I need Lieutenant Frahm back as his post*, he thought. *This young man gives me every indication that he is a valuable member of this crew. How could I have not noticed him before?*

Dr. Perera looked at the captain and then back down at Frahm. “We need to talk about that, son.” His voice was laced with the heavy gravity of a situation that Commander Moss didn't yet fully comprehend.

Frahm could see the look of concern pass over the doctor's countenance. “Is something wrong, Doc? I tell ya, I'm itching to get out of this cast you put me in.” As if to emphasize his statement, he withdrew his left arm from under the covers. Moss could see the man's entire left forearm was covered in a silvery medical cast. Frahm's fingers, of which only three were fully visible, looked purple and swollen under the hardened medical bandage.

“Well,” Perera began cautiously, “the plasma burns you've sustained caused some major damage to the surrounding tissue of your left hand.”

Frahm shrugged and held his cast up once more for his own inspection. “Yeah, that much I figured.”

“But you may *not* be aware of the extent of the damage, Lieutenant,” he replied far more curtly than he intended.

Moss turned to stand beside the doctor. “How bad is it, Clinton?”

Perera continued to look at Frahm for another moment, then looked to the same point in the overhead that Frahm had been staring at, as if he were looking for a better explanation than what he was about to give the two officers. “There is severe damage to both the dermal and subdermal layers of the skin. There is also extensive nerve damage and some bone scarring.”

“English, Doc,” Frahm said anxiously. “I'm a big boy. I can take it.”

Dr. Perera looked at Moss, but realized he was about to start speaking about the lieutenant in the third person. He decided to direct his statement to the young man in

the bed. “Even when you're fully stabilized and healed, you'll still be looking at a sixty percent loss of the use of your left hand,” Perera said with finality, as if he felt the weight of the words settle from his mind to Frahm’s ears.

“Sixty percent?” Frahm repeated breathlessly. He seemed to recover quickly and smiled again, although the doctor and the captain both knew it was a forced gesture. “Well, that isn't so bad. After all,” he said as he raised his right hand. “God did give me a spare, you know.”

Perera’s gaze dropped momentarily to the metallic biobed sheet, then he turned his head in the direction of the captain. “I think you'd be better off explaining the implications of my statement, Captain.”

In that instant Moss was reminded what the Starfleet regulations had to say on the matter, and he was obligated to quote them to Lieutenant Frahm . . . whether any of the officers present in sickbay liked it or not. “Starfleet regulations state,” Moss said, but then found that he had to clear his throat and hold back a wave of emotion that enfolded him suddenly. “The regulations state . . . and I quote, 'Any officer who has, in the line of duty, and despite the nature of the incident, lost more than fifty percent of the use of an essential part of his structure . . . in a time of war, regardless of race, species, or gender, will be deemed unable to adequately discharge the duties for which he or she may or may not have been placed.'”

Frahm's face twisted in a look of sadness and he looked gravely back to his sheet covering. “I don't know if I want the English translation of that one.”

“It means that you'll be relieved of duty, Lieutenant,” Perera said with equal seriousness. “Permanently.”

Jarrold’s head fell flat against the pillow and his eyes returned to the nondescript point in the overhead. “A medical discharge.”

This was the most critical moment in the young man’s entire career up to this point, and both Commander Moss and Dr. Perera knew it. They both understood that they would have to act quickly, before their words began to point the way for this young man’s emotions to begin the long, dangerous downward spiral into resentment and depression. “It means you'll be going home, son,” Moss said, instantly hating the taste of the words in his mouth.

Frahm bolted back up on his elbow faster than either the doctor or the commander would have thought possible. "But . . . sir . . . I don't *want* to go home!"

"Take it easy, son," Perera said, reaching out for the tan skin of Frahm's shoulder as he tried to calm the boy's quickly agitated state.

Frahm jerked away from the doctor's grasp. "I don't want to take it easy! There must be something you can do, Doc!"

"I understand you have a girl waiting back on Marcos for you, Jarrod," Moss spoke up, trying to calm the agitated young man. "Wouldn't you like to get back to her?"

The young man looked back at his captain distastefully. "And do what?"

Moss feigned a smile. "Marry her, of course."

Jarrod shook his head slowly at first, but then began to jerk it quickly. "No. No! Not like this. Not like some helpless . . ." In his state, he couldn't quite find the right word for his condition, and instead held his left arm aloft once more for the captain's inspection. "How am I going to get a ring on this finger? No, sir. If it's all the same to you, I don't want to go through life not knowing what I could have become. You say I got a girl, Captain? Well, that girl and I have a future . . . and that future has a lot to do with Starfleet. We're hoping to get assigned to Colonial Operations Command after the war. You know . . . to start a family out near Tellar or something. You know . . . go someplace with research facilities where she and I can make a *real* difference in the Federation. How am I supposed to do that now . . . with this?"

The silence in sickbay was deafening. What could Commander Moss say? Of course, he could say he was sorry for a stupid accident that should never have occurred, and sorry that the future of a crewman was now in shambles for something that could have been easily avoided. John knew that an apology, even if it were the most sincere one he possibly could muster, would still be an empty string of words. Fortunately, Dr. Perera was the first to speak.

"Well . . . there is one possibility."

Moss turned to face the doctor in confusion. If there existed a chance to help this young man, Moss realized that he wanted desperately to explore it.

"A possibility?" Frahm's eyes went wide. "Will I be able to stay in the fleet?"

Perera pursed his lips and a hint of a shrug crossed his shoulders. “I believe so, but only time will tell.”

Lieutenant Frahm’s hands rose from his lap and he motioned for the doctor to keep the information flowing. “Well, spit it out, Doc! I’m like the Vulcan here.”

Both Perera and Moss’s eyes squinted in unison as they looked to one another in confusion. Frahm picked up on it instantly.

“You know, the *Vulcan*? You two never heard that joke before?”

Perera smiled softly, delighted that Frahm’s mood had changed for the better. “Afraid not.” Commander Moss likewise shook his head.

Frahm appeared delighted to recount the joke. “Oh, that’s an old one. See, there is this Tellarite with a huge snout and he’s sitting with this human in a bar on Pollux. After a heated discussion, the human gets up and walks away all angry-like. The human’s buddy, a fairly somber-looking Vulcan, sits down a moment later and calmly says to the Tellarite, ‘I don’t nose what you told my buddy over there, but I’m all ears.’”

Dr. Perera let out a muffled snort of laughter. Frahm smiled in return. “So, you see . . . I’m like the Vulcan. I’m all ears.”

“As am I,” Moss asked, no less excited but far more calmly than Frahm.

Perera could see the hope that glimmered in the other men’s eyes. “Now, I don’t want either of you to get your hopes up. There is a new procedure; it’s very radical, but also very promising. It’s been successfully performed on the first batch of wounded Marines coming back from the front lines.”

“Yes?” Moss asked.

Perera took a deep breath. “A biomechatronic transplant.”

“But, those aren’t new, Doctor,” Moss injected. “That science has been around since the early 21st century.”

Perera stood up slightly taller, as if he were behind a podium and addressing a class of raw Starfleet Medical students. “You know your history, Captain. That’s true, but not like this new form. To put it in its proper perspective, it makes those early attempts look like tinker toys.”

“Explain,” Moss said, to which Frahm nodded slowly.

“Well, early biomechatronic transplants were designed so that the nerves in your body, carrying signals from your brain, would tell the devices how to operate. In most cases, it approximated human movement by somewhere in the neighborhood of seventy-five percent.”

“That's a lot better than the sixty percent you quoted me a few minutes ago,” Frahm said with a smile.

“That's true,” Perera agreed, “but most of the human nerve endings ended up rejecting the electrical and mechanical linkages to their respective artificial counterparts in the prosthetics. It was discovered after decades of further research that the human brain needed some form of acknowledgement for the signals it sends out. Without those acknowledgement signals, the nerve endings attached to the prosthetics simply wither away, and there's a substantial loss of movement. The damage becomes irreversible. So the science was all but abandoned until a few years ago.”

“What happened to change it?” Moss asked, intrigued.

“I won't bore you with all the details, but in the 2130s a brilliant scientist named Arik Soong developed a method of simulating nerve endings inside a prosthetic device. In theory, with regard to Lieutenant Frahm here, the prosthetic hand would do more than look and act real. It would feel real, too. It would be nearly indistinguishable to him or to anyone else, for that matter.”

Moss nodded slowly. “I've heard of Soong. Didn't he go insane or something?”

Dr. Perera shrugged. “That's the rumor. Regardless, he gave up on all his bioresearch a few years later and devoted himself to creating completely artificial life. As far as I know, that research is dead in the water. But in the last few years, some of the top minds at Starfleet Medical pieced together enough of Soong's early research to make biomechatronics a practical science. They're calling it bionics and, as I said, it's already been used successfully on combat veterans coming in from the front lines. I haven't heard of anything as complex as a hand or a foot being replicated, but everything from fingers, to ears, to . . . well, you get the idea. It's all been done.”

Frahm's smile grew larger by the second. “And . . . what kind of mobility will I be looking at?”



The doctor held out a hand to silence the young man. “As I said, nothing this complicated has *ever* been done before. And, of course, it would mean a complete amputation of your hand, wrist . . . maybe even a portion of your forearm.”

Jarrold shrugged off the doctor’s words as if they hadn’t even been spoken. “Like I said, how much mobility? Give me the conservative estimate, Doc.”

Perera sighed heavily, then pondered over all the material he’d read coming in from Starfleet Medical, along with his own vast knowledge of human anatomy, and then threw in some trigonometry and geometry into his calculations for good measure—not to mention some good old-fashioned educated guesswork. “If the operation were a complete and total success, I’d say you’ll have about ninety-five percent mobility.”

“And it would feel like a real hand?” Jarrod asked in stunned disbelief.

“Feel, look, and operate. In fact, it might even be better in some respects than the one you were born with. Of course, I wouldn’t use that as a reason to *volunteer* for this kind of operation. And it would *have* to be completely voluntary. Again, it’s all highly theoretical until the operation is sanctioned by Starfleet Medical and, of course, myself and Commander Moss.”

Frahm looked at Commander Moss. “Sir, I want to feel my wedding ring on my finger. I want to hold my girl’s hand and feel its warmth. And . . . and I want to stay on board for as long as it takes to win this war and get back to Marcos.”

Moss nodded slowly. He reached out and put a soothing hand to Jarrod’s shoulder. “Rest easy, son. You’ve earned it. The doctor and I will talk it over and we’ll see what kind of options we can come up with.”

“Thank you, sir. Thank you both,” Frahm said as he leaned his head back on the pillow, exhausted from the highs and lows of their conversation.

Dr. Perera reached for a hypospray and gave Jarrod a mild sedative that put him to sleep within seconds. He and Commander Moss exchanged worried glances, then turned together and left the ward. When they were back inside Perera’s office, the doctor turned a concerned face to his captain. “So?”

John nodded, his eyes distant. “Can you perform the operation here?”

“Me? No way. I’m not qualified, but I’d be a liar if I said I wasn’t interested in being a part of the procedure.”

John nodded again. "Where, then?"

"The only place outside of Starfleet Medical Headquarters where it can be done is Starbase 23."

"That's a few days' distance at maximum speed," Moss said, as much to the doctor as to himself.

"I'd suggest we get underway as soon as possible."

John looked at Perera curiously. "Why? Is he in immediate danger?"

Clinton Perera smiled. "Him? No. But I think the nurses and I will be once Jarrod hears we're going to attempt the surgery. You saw how elated he was in there. It'll take everything I've got in this hypo to keep him sedated."

## Chapter 10

Stardate 4106.09

June 2253

On the bridge of the *Coventry*-class frigate *Molens*, Captain Staplek of the planet Vulcan slowly paced behind his command chair. Although the captain was far too disciplined to ever admit that he felt fear about his current assignment, he did have an undeniable sense of uneasiness about him. It was so prevalent, in fact, that the entire bridge crew could feel it. It prowled the bridge like a tiger stalking its prey, as if, were they to look up at any given time, they could see it lurking near their individual stations. If any of the officers on the bridge—or the entire ship, for that matter—had one word on their minds to describe their current position, that word would be “anxious.”

The *Molens*—along with the frigate USS *Tryla* and an *Achernar*-class cruiser, the USS *Ramses*—were on patrol duty near the Lasur Funop system, directly between Starbase 22 and Starbase 23, and only six parsecs from the remains of the abandoned Archanis IV research outpost, the site of the massacre that had been the catalyst for this entire war. The three vessels of the 22nd Strike Squadron were far too close to the Klingon neutral zone for anyone’s liking, Staplek included. The captain well understood the feelings of trepidation that the men and women under his command felt, even though his own outward appearance would never betray his own feelings on the matter. That was until he realized he was still pacing.

As everyone in the quadrant knew, Vulcans were well known for their pacifism and general disdain for anything combat related. Only when the overwhelming mating urges brought upon by pon farr surfaced in them did they ever feel a general need to be aggressive. Staplek’s time had come and gone last year, and he had taken great pains to ensure that as few crewmen were aware of that fact as possible. Captain Staplek was normally the picture of command presence on the bridge of the frigate he had successfully command for the last three years. That was until his

recent orders from Starfleet Command had brought him within throwing distance of the Klingon Empire. *It is quite logical*, he thought, *to be cautious in situations such as this. But it is also quite illogical to be concerned about events that have not yet begun to unfold before you.* Yes, that sounded right.

He began a practiced form of meditation there on the bridge, and within moments his body was more at peace with his surroundings. He found that he had even stopped pacing and was now facing the communications officer. The young woman turned from her station and looked to her captain, waiting with patience for a command from the Vulcan who now stood within half a meter and was hovering over her station.

Staplek clasped his hands loosely behind his back as he addressed the young woman. “Lieutenant, please send a request to the *Tryla* and the *Ramses* requesting a status update on the condition of their vessels.”

The young woman, Sophia Baden, had been recently promoted to full lieutenant at the request of the captain. He had found her work to be “sufficiently commendable,” which to Sophia’s ears meant that the Vulcan thought very highly of her abilities. Starfleet Command, it seemed, had agreed with the captain, and the promotion had been rushed through the chain of command with the utmost efficiency. She had seemingly gone from a communications analyst to the primary bridge communications officer overnight. The last thing she wanted to do now was endanger her position and disappoint her commanding officer.

“Is there anything specific you’d like me to send to either of the ships, sir?” she asked with all the confidence she could muster—which to her surprise was considerable.

“Indeed, Lieutenant,” Staplek said with a series of short nods. “Curious. You have never made such a request before when I’ve asked you to contact other vessels. While I agree that there is more to my query than the initial request, I would like to know how you have come to the conclusion that I required it.”

Sophia’s pale cheeks reddened, which didn’t go unnoticed by the captain. He had embarrassed her, and it was something he would have to consider the next time he engaged in such conversation with her. Though his tenure on board the *Molens* had put him in contact with a great number of humans, he was still unaccustomed to

many of the nuances their emotional immaturity brought about. He filed the thought away in his mind, deciding to bring the topic up with the young woman the next time the two of them were off duty.

Her deep blue eyes were fixed on the Vulcan. “To be honest, sir, it just . . . seemed like there was something more you needed to say after your request.”

Staplek nodded again. “A wise observation, Lieutenant. I see that my choice in bridge personnel has not been an illogical one,” he said. “For a moment, I thought your Starfleet record was inaccurate.”

Sophia could almost swear that the very corners of his mouth twitched upward into a smile for a brief second. However, she would have never embarrassed the captain by offering her own genuine delight at his statement. “Oh,” she asked, her head tilted back in genuine curiosity. “How is that, sir?”

“When looking over your records, I failed to notice a high degree of extrasensory perception.”

She narrowed her eyes and removed a stray lock of blonde hair that had fallen in front of her face. “Extrasensory perception, sir?”

Staplek cast his black eyes to the deck for a moment as if he was searching for the correct answer—and one that would do no further embarrassment to the young officer. “I believe you humans call it ‘mind reading.’”

She had never known the captain to make a joke before, and this was certainly one worthy of the Vulcan history books. “Yes, sir. Of course.” She nodded approvingly. “What further information do you require from the rest of the group?”

“At last report, the *Ramses* was experiencing a minor power fluctuation in their port warp nacelle. I wish to know the outcome of the diagnostics they have performed, as well as any repairs they feel may be necessary to correct the problem. Also, the first officer of the *Tryla* had reported to sickbay due to an adverse reaction to something he was served in the ship's galley. I wish to know how he is . . . feeling.”

Sophia entered the squadron hailing frequency into the computer and relayed Captain Staplek's requests to the two ships. When she finished she signed off the channel and turned back to the captain, who was still hovering silently over her

station. Sophia took it as an invitation to strike up a conversation. *I hope I don't stick my foot in my mouth.* "About the first officer on the *Tryla*, sir?"

He looked at her as if she had a second head growing from her shoulder. "Yes, Lieutenant?"

*Open mouth, insert size six boot. Oh well. I might as well go through with it.* "Well sir, this may be a bit out of protocol, but I was wondering . . . is he—"

"You wish to know the reason for my request about his health?" Staplek asked before Sophia could finish her sentence.

She dropped her gaze coyly. "Yes, sir."

"You are wondering if my request was personal, or if it was obligated by his status as first officer."

Her shoulders drooped. "In a manner of speaking, yes, sir."

Staplek took in a deep breath, slowly exhaled it through his hooked nose, and looked to the main view screen. The stars were beautiful out here, but he longed for the familiar constellations as seen from the surface of his homeworld. "In this case, Lieutenant, it is some of both. As first officer, Commander Shuster has the responsibility of assuming command of the *Tryla* if anything should befall her captain. If we are engaged in a combat situation, he will be required to be on the bridge at all times. If there is a change in the command structure of the *Tryla* due to his illness, I wish to be informed on who will assume his position." He then turned his attention from the slowly drifting starfield onscreen back to the not-unattractive blue eyes of the communications officer. "As far as the personal portion of my message, let us say that he and I are old acquaintances."

Sophia got the distinct impression that the captain had almost used the word "friend" to describe his relationship with the *Tryla*'s first officer. After all, the look on Captain Staplek's face was one of general concern for someone for whom he had formed a level of respect. She knew the look well, because she had gotten it from the captain from time to time about her own well-being.

Sophia had been a hard-charger ever since she had left the Academy two years before. She had done nothing but concentrate on her duties as an officer since the day she'd left school, passing up opportunities to form new friends and "companionship bonds," as the captain would say, along the way. Staplek felt that

every good officer should not be “strictly by the book” in all situations, and that Starfleet Academy did its best to produce officers who were very even-keeled when it came to having both professional and personal relationships—and that Sophia “would do well to remember that.” His concern for her was genuine, and she knew and respected it, but it still wasn't easy for her to accept and follow the recommendation.

There was also something in the captain's words that she couldn't quite put a finger on. He had almost hinted at the fact that she was quite attractive or, at the very least, was attractive to him. She had giddily wondered briefly, after that conversation, about the shipwide scandal that would ensue if a junior lieutenant was to be the apple of the captain's eye—and a *Vulcan captain*, at that! In the end, however, she had dropped the foolish notions, chalking her own feelings up to nervousness in the presence of a senior officer. Staplek, likewise, had made his own decision that no further discussion on her personal acquaintances was warranted, since Sophia was—by all accounts—turning into a fine officer, regardless of her social status on the ship.

A series of small beeps came across the communications receiver in her ear, indicating that one of the ships in the squadron was attempting to communicate with the *Molens*. “Sir, there is an incoming message from the *Tryla*. They are requesting visual communications.”

“Very good, Lieutenant.” Staplek unclasped his hands and returned to the command chair. “Open the channel and put the *Tryla* on the viewer, please.”

A moment later the starfield image wavered, then re-formed to show the bridge of the *Tryla*, with Commander Lance Pelish seated in his command chair. Pelish, a human of forty-one years of age, looked much younger than his years showed. “Greetings, Captain Staplek,” Pelish said with a quick nod of his head.

“And to you as well, Captain Pelish,” Staplek said with the same quick nod. “It has been some time since you last reported in, Captain.”

Pelish shifted in his seat. Staplek wasn't sure if Commander Pelish had become uneasy over the statement the Vulcan had just made, but he got the distinct impression that he had. In Staplek's experience with humans, such a gesture was usually a sign that the particular human was nervous or, at the very least, slightly

uncomfortable. *How is it that I can know so much about humans, yet still fail to understand their nuances time and again? I must endeavor to try harder.*

"I didn't want to send an official report unless my status had changed." Pelish's words were not spoken as confidently as Staplek had hoped.

"And you are saying, then, that it has not?"

"The ship is operating at nearly 105 percent efficiency, as my last report stipulated, sir," Pelish replied flatly.

"Then may I query about the status of Commander Shuster?"

"The commander had to undergo some minor surgery, but—"

"Captain Pelish," Staplek said curtly, and then stood up from his command chair, "such an action should have been reported to me immediately."

Pelish's head cocked back slightly at the obvious tone change in the Vulcan's voice. "I didn't feel—" he began apologetically, but Staplek cut him off.

"Captain Pelish, your feelings on the matter are irrelevant. Anything that affects the command roster on your ship should be reported to your superior officer, immediately. That means me, Commander. It is illogical for you to withhold that information based solely on your feelings on the matter."

On the bridge of the *Tryla*, Pelish pursed his lips. His first instinct was to lash back at the pointy-eared Vulcan, but the professionalism he had learned in his many years in Starfleet compelled him to formulate a different strategy. Besides, Pelish knew what the real heart of the matter was, and he sympathized with the Vulcan. He knew—as did most—that Vulcans were not totally devoid of emotions and feelings. Staplek was mostly upset because Pelish had failed to report that the Vulcan's friend was undergoing a routine surgery. *At least I hope that's what it is*, he thought. "You're right of course, Captain. I should have informed you."

Staplek slowly sat back into his chair and regained his composure. He closed his eyes momentarily as he regained his mental focus and then steepled his fingers against his gold command tunic. "There is no need for all that, Captain. I . . . understand your motives regarding this matter, however unorthodox they might have been."

Lance Pelish smiled, as much to himself as to the stoic Vulcan on the screen. Staplek had managed to save Pelish some embarrassment, and Pelish knew he



would have to return the favor at some point. “Commander Shuster should be returning to duty within the next six hours, Captain Staplek.”

“Then I trust that his surgery went well.”

“It did,” Pelish said with a nod. “I can send you over the complete report on the surgery.”

Staplek eyes turned from the screen and focused on something distant, something beyond the confines of the bridge of the frigate *Molens*, before he replied. He nodded softly and then set his gaze back on the storm-cloud-gray eyes of Pelish's image. “That would be acceptable, Captain.”

\* \* \*

“Did you finally get that sensor problem fixed yet?” the captain nearly yelled into the communications microphone on the armrest of his command chair.

The voice of the chief engineer crackled back over the speaker, “Almost got it, sir. Give me a minute to lock it down.”

Commander Steven Butler was leaning over the armrest of his command chair, his face close to the speaker on the chair. The *Ramses* was his first official command since he had left the executive officer position on board the *Detroyat*-class destroyer *Elizabeth* three months ago. Though it was perfectly normal for a new commanding officer to have some unspoken reservations about his new crew, Butler currently had more pressing concerns on his mind than how he felt about them. He did, after all, have a Vulcan captain in overall command of the squadron to worry about. If Steven ever wanted to make it to the rank of captain himself, he'd do well to try and impress the Vulcan as much as he could. He was fairly certain that his performance thus far had been fine—almost exemplary—and it would have garnished him a fine Officer Efficiency Rating from the Vulcan.

That was until the sensor problem on the *Ramses* had reared its ugly head, of course. What had started as a minor glitch in one of the forward sensor palettes had become something of a gremlin which was now running rampant through the entire computer processor system. How was he going to explain to Captain Staplek that—not only was the problem not fixed—it had only barely been isolated? The last thing

Steven wanted to do was look incompetent in the face of the group commander, second only to having his crew look equally inept. Steven's mind saw the horror of his OE Rating being flushed down the toilet in an agonizingly slowly spiral.

The chief engineer had, after an hour and a half of diagnosis, narrowed the problem down to something in the deflector control main computer subprocessor. Lieutenant Commander Chuck Weinhard had assured Commander Butler that everything on the bridge was functioning well within specifications, and the connections that linked the science station and helm console to the main computers on deck seven were also in perfect order. "The problem has to be in deflector control," he'd said before jogging into the bridge's single turbolift and down to deck six. Now, thirty minutes later, Chuck was stating that he needed an additional minute. To Commander Butler, however, it felt like time without end. He couldn't delay his report to Captain Staplek any longer and silently offered a prayer that the engineering chief would get everything in order in the next sixty seconds.

"All right, sir," the chief's voice rang uneasily through the speaker. "Try the long-range sensors one more time."

"Lieutenant," the captain said as he quickly turned to the science officer, "orient the long-range sensors at coordinates 322-mark-7 and set them to full power. Tell me if that blasted ghost image is still there."

The young woman turned in her chair, her short black hair following her head's movement by a fraction of a second, and efficiently began inputting the commands into the main computer. A moment later she smiled to herself and triumphantly turned to face the captain. "The image is now gone, sir."

Steven pushed the switch on the arms of his chair to reconnect his intercom with deflector control. "Well done. It looks like you got that bug off our windshield."

"I'm sorry," the young man replied. "Off our what, Skipper?"

Steven sniggered as he looked down to the speaker. "Never mind, Chief. Good job on getting that taken care of. Report back to engineering when you're done tidying up deflector control."

"Sir," Lieutenant Ming asked from the science station, diverting Commander Butler's attention from his conversation with the chief engineer. "I have another signal coming in from the long-range sensors."

Steven's eyebrows furrowed. "I thought you said that spectral image was gone, Lieutenant."

She worked her controls frantically, and just when she thought she had a positive lock on it, it disappeared. "It is gone, sir. I'm no longer reading the phantom anomaly to our port side, but I *am* picking up a signal directly abeam of our current heading."

Commander Butler pondered this. "I'm sure if it was something dangerous, the *Molens* would have picked it up as well."

"That may be true, sir," Ming said with concern, "but with all the tinkering and adjusting we did to try and isolate the sensor ghost, I believe we've unintentionally boosted the accuracy of the long-range sensors by a factor of 1.5."

"So . . ." Steven let the word draw out for a few seconds as he got up from his chair and walked to stand beside the young woman. "Has the resolution also increased, or just the range?"

Ming's thin eyelids went wide for a moment, revealing the pupilless black of her irises. "I believe both, sir."

"If that's the case, then get me an exact reading on what's out there," he replied nervously.

Ming went to work bringing up the requested data for the captain. A moment later the computer compiled what he was looking for. "Sensor signal coming back now, sir."

"What do we have, Lieutenant?"

Moving to the sensor readout, she peered into the display. Her head almost instantly jerked back in shock. "What the hell?"

Steven held his hands up in the direction of the science officer. "Well, speak up, Ming. What's out there?"

She turned from the sensor display, looked off in the distance behind Commander Butler and then moved her eyes to his. "Sensors are picking up two Klingon heavy cruisers."

Steven jerked his head back and his eyes went wide in shock. He glanced at her skeptically, wondering how sure the woman was of the readings she was getting. "Are the readings . . . verified?"

“Sir, I can tell you that not only are there two cruisers out there, but that their shields are down and they are proceeding at one-quarter impulse.”

It took only a moment for the words to register in Steven’s mind. *They don’t know we’re here.* “How far away? I mean . . . distance to target?” He swallowed hard.

Kristin shook her head in disbelief. “Sir, I don’t know how this is possible, but the computer is stating that the ships are nearly a sector away.”

Steven stood up straight, relaxing somewhat when he heard the news. “Then it has to be a mistake, Lieutenant. No Federation sensors are this accurate at that distance.”

“I would tend to agree, sir, but . . . don’t you think we should still report it . . . to Captain Staplek?”

Steven considered this, and it weighed on him heavily. “And if we’re wrong . . . if this is another glitch—”

“It’s your call, sir,” she said, then returned her eyes to the sensor and began confirming the information that was being displayed. There, shining brightly on her display, was the distinctive outline of two Klingon medium cruisers, traveling at one-quarter impulse power and blissfully unaware that they would soon be under the scrutiny of a trio of hungry Starfleet frigates.

\* \* \*

“Sir,” Sophia Baden’s high-pitched voice came from behind the captain, “there’s a Priority One message coming in from the *Ramses*.”

“Lieutenant,” the captain said, turning in his chair to face the communications officer and pondering his next words for a brief instant. “I’ll take the *Ramses* message in my quarters. Please send the first officer’s medical report from the *Tryla* down as soon as you receive it.”

*He’s taking a Priority One message . . . in his quarters? That’s odd.* She shook the thought away as quickly as it had appeared. “Yes, sir.”

“Lieutenant Commander Trebon,” Staplek said to the tall, dark-skinned female first officer. “Please assume command in my absence. I will return shortly.”

Ariel Trebon, her long black hair curled tightly above her head, stood up from the auxiliary environmental control substation where she had been monitoring some changes that were being made to the life-support systems in engineering. The Cygnian woman nodded curtly at her captain, as was her usual custom when receiving his orders. She was an immensely strong woman and one of few words. However, her strength was only equaled by her wisdom. When Trebon chose to verbalize her thoughts, everyone would go silent and listen.

Staplek vacated the command seat and walked briskly toward the aft turbolift. Lieutenant Commander Trebon stepped onto the command deck as the Vulcan departed, turned the captain's seat as she approached it, and glided into its cool, welcoming softness. As the sound of the leather scrunching under her backside subsided, Ariel was overcome with a need to look at Sophia. Perhaps it was her slight empathic nature, or perhaps it was the fact that she sympathized with the young communications officer. Ariel herself was still a fairly new addition to the crew of the *Molens*, and she too wanted to make a favorable impression on the stoic captain. Her bright eyes followed Sophia's gaze until it landed on the empty turbolift alcove. Sophia wore an expression on her face, but the Cygnian woman was hard-pressed to decipher it. Lieutenant Baden averted her gaze from the last place Staplek had stood, then immediately locked with Commander Trebon's lime green eyes. The two women shared a brief but uncomfortable smile before they returned to their duties.

## Chapter 11

Staplek had seated himself at the computer terminal behind the irregularly shaped desk in the lounge area of his personal quarters. He folded his hands and placed them on the cold tabletop before him, leaning back into the padding of the chair as the image of Commander Butler appeared on the screen. "This is Captain Staplek. I'm sorry for the delay, Commander Butler. I was detained. I understand that you now wish to have a secure visual channel open. It is done. Please go ahead with your message."

"Captain Staplek, my science officer has picked up several Klingon ships in the sector directly ahead of us."

Staplek remained motionless. "The sensors on the *Molens* show nothing, Commander," he replied calmly. "Are you sure that your equipment is functioning normally?"

"Quite sure, sir."

"I understand that your systems were reporting several irregularities over the last 3.4 hours. Could this be another of those anomalies?"

"As I said, Captain, I'm quite sure this is for real."

"That statement is illogical, Commander. Whether the sensor signals you are receiving are that of Klingon vessels or if they are the result of an unforeseen malfunction in your equipment, it is 'real' either way."

Steven pursed his lips tightly as he fought down the urge to lash out at the inaction of the Vulcan captain. Butler had taken the chance of sending out the Priority One communication, despite the fact that Staplek had taken his own sweet time in responding to it. Steven had also seen fit to verify his sensor contacts and had informed the squadron commander of his findings . . . all per Starfleet regulations. *What in blazes is he waiting for?* "So, Captain Staplek? What are we going to do about it?"

Staplek unclasped his fingers and placed his palms flat against one another, then brought his index fingers to his lips as he considered the situation. "We will weigh all the facts, Commander, and then we will act accordingly. Please send my science

officer all the information you have obtained on these contacts. I will analyze the information on the *Molens* and, if it is warranted, formulate a plan of action.”

Butler let out an exasperated sigh. “It may be too late to act, sir, once you've fully analyzed all the information. The Klingons don't know—”

“The Klingons may or may not even be there, Commander. We do not know. Who is to say that, if there are in fact Klingons present, you haven't underestimated their numbers? I am not willing to take this entire squadron into a possible conflict when there is an excessive amount of unknown variables in the equation.”

“But we've been ordered to remove any threat, real or perceived, on this patrol route. I don't dispute my science officer's report, Captain.”

“But, I do, Commander. Please transmit the required information to the *Molens* immediately. Captain Staplek, out.”

The image of the Vulcan captain disappeared from the screen on the bridge of the cruiser *Ramses*, and it wasn't a moment too soon. Butler slapped his right armrest in frustration. “Damned arrogant son of a—” he began under his breath, but then stopped himself before he'd say something he might later regret. Everyone on the bridge had been watching the exchange of words between the two officers, and it simply wouldn't do to insult another commanding officer in plain view of so many other crewmen—no matter how much the Vulcan deserved it.

Steven looked over to Kristin Ming, who had been seated calmly at the science officer's station during his exchange with Staplek. He stood up from his chair, walked over and leaned against the hand rail that separated the bridge's upper and lower decks. “Don't worry, Kristin,” he began in a soft tone, “I'm sure it's nothing personal. I have every confidence in your abilities.”

Lieutenant Ming, her black hair and matching eyes sparkling in the glow of the bridge's overhead lighting, smiled at her commanding officer in response. “Thank you, sir.”

“Of course, Lieutenant. Now let's get that sensor information over to the *Molens* so we can get on with our mission. Hopefully Staplek can sift through the data before the Klingons realize we're here.”

“Telemetry information is coming up now, Captain.”

Staplek turned toward the voice that had just spoken and faced Lieutenant Commander Kenton Stegmann, the *Molens*’s extremely adept science officer. “Very well, Commander,” Staplek said flatly. “What has the ship’s computer ascertained?”

Stegmann reached across the gloss-black surface of the ship’s library computer and pressed the command function that would bring the captain’s requested information up on the display. “Sir, the ship’s computer has verified the sensor readings from the *Ramses*. There are two Klingon heavy cruisers directly ahead of us, right in the center of the Lasur Funop system.”

Staplek didn’t need to ask if there might have been an error in the *Molens*’s own sensors. Once the “glitch” that had miraculously boosted the *Ramses*’ sensors had been isolated, Captain Staplek had ordered his own chief engineer to duplicate those same settings on the *Molens*, as well as the *Tryla*, thus giving his entire squadron a decisive tactical advantage over anything that was at Lasur Funop. It now seemed as though that advantage would need to be pressed.

“Bring up the tactical display on the main viewer, Mr. Stegmann.”

The image of the passing stars being displayed on the main viewer wavered briefly in a three-dimensional haze and was replaced by a top-down view of the five planets of the Lasur Funop system. The primary star, a blue-white Class-B star named Lasur, dominated the center of the display on the screen. The first two planets were gas giants of various sizes, one comprised mostly of methane, while the other of mostly helium. The third planet, Lasur Funop, was the only Class-M planet in the system. With a population of two million Tellarites, the planet was used by three different sectors of their government for various mining and trading concerns.

Captain Staplek studied the image of the red and white glowing world of Lasur Funop for a long moment, taking into account all the available facts before deducing the proper strategy for the coming battle.

“So,” Ariel Trebon said as she studied the image and folded her arms across her chest. “What are our options, sir?”



Staplek then turned to her. “We have several options available to us, Commander. First, we can open a hailing frequency to the Klingons and order them to leave the system.”

She scoffed and half smiled. “Something tells me they wouldn’t listen.”

“Indeed, it is highly unlikely they would. This leads us to our second option,” he said as he slid into the command chair. “We can send a Priority One signal to Starfleet Command and request assistance with the Klingons.”

The helmsman and the navigator, both human males in their mid-twenties, turned to one another, a grave look of apprehension on their faces. Staplek noticed the look without hesitation. “Mr. Shinkle,” he asked of the helmsman, “you wish to say something?”

Ted Shinkle, junior lieutenant, swallowed hard as he formulated the right words in his brain before he had a chance to spit them out all at once and trip over them. “Begging your pardon, sir, but I think . . . that is, I believe the three ships in our squadron are evenly matched to face off against two Klingons.”

“Two heavily armed and quite dangerous D-7 heavy cruisers to be exact, Lieutenant.”

Shinkle casually shrugged. “It’s a fair fight, sir, either way we look at it, sir. The numbers don’t lie.”

“Indeed, they do not,” Staplek nodded, “but we need more than numerical equality with our adversaries. We need superiority.”

“If we see them and they can’t see us,” the ship’s helmsman piped in, “then I’d say we have the numerical advantage.”

“Correction, Lieutenant: we have the *tactical* advantage,” Staplek said as he regarded the young officer. “But you are essentially without error in your analysis.”

“Since the floor is open and everyone seems to be throwing out their own advice, I wonder if I might have a say in it?” came the voice of the chief engineer from behind the captain.

“By all means, Mr. Preston.”

The round engineer, his dark hair cut unusually short and flat atop the crown of his head, looked squarely at the captain. “It all comes down to this: those Klingon

devils may be bigger and have longer teeth, but our ships are more maneuverable. There's no doubt about it."

"And I had none, I assure you," Staplek added. He turned in his chair to face Ariel Trebon. "Compiling all the information that's been presented here, Commander, what do you suggest we do?"

As she stood next to the captain she could feel the eyes of each of the officers on bridge boring into her. Her bright eyes moved away from the captain and she looked at each of the officers present, each of them silently screaming their own courses of action at her. It didn't take her long to formulate her own plan, and she knew it was the only one that met all the requirements of the advice of her fellow officers.

"I suggest we go to yellow alert. We should put all our defensive systems online, and keep our offensive systems on hot standby."

Staplek's raised eyebrow fell. "Standby? For what purpose?"

"We need to funnel as much power into the propulsion systems as we can. The weapons will take away from that power. We need to use our speed to our advantage, and press that advantage as long as we can."

"You're suggesting a hit and run strategy, then?" Preston asked in dismay.

"No. A hit and destroy one, Chief," she corrected. "Captain, I say we warp into the system, immediately drop to sublight when we're within weapons range of the Klingons, then open fire with everything we have."

"Even at full power, their shields wouldn't last long against that kind of attack," the helmsman added approvingly.

Staplek nodded his own approval at the plan. "But the calculations would have to be more than exact, Commander. They would have to be—"

"Perfect," Sophia Baden chimed in meekly, then blushed slightly when she felt the gazes of the entire bridge fall on her.

Trebon looked to Staplek. "I don't think that will be a problem for us, sir."

He looked back to the view screen at the tactical image of the Lasur system. Due to the nature of the orbits of the two gas giants, Staplek surmised that if he could thread the 22nd Strike Squadron between the two bodies, he could avoid detection until the last possible second. His black eyes shifted left and met Lieutenant

Commander Ariel Trebon's unflinching stare. "A logical plan, Commander. Well done. Let us proceed."

\* \* \*

On the forward view screen of the *Tryla*, the planet Lasur Funop inched ever closer. Although Captain Staplek's squadron was still some distance away, the enhanced long-range sensors made obtaining a high-resolution image of the planetoid all the easier. The green and yellow world turned slowly in all its splendor and beauty, but Commander Lance Pelish knew that on the far side of it waited a dangerous Klingon threat that the Federation forces were about to engage. He only hoped—as did the rest of the squadron—that the Klingons still hadn't noticed their presence.

Pelish wasn't at all content about this plan. There was something tugging at the corners of his consciousness that told him over and over that Vulcans—pacifist by nature—were ill-suited to form battle strategies, let alone command starships. There were some races that were disposed to the duty of command. Vulcans, in his mind, were not. They were far more suited to scientific endeavors. He felt it simply wasn't in their character to lead—that the black-and-white logic of their disposition made important decisions far more one-sided than they really were.

Besides, he had his own personal reasons for not trusting Captain Staplek. Though Pelish was never one to give himself to vague or unsubstantiated rumors, he had only to reference the message he had personally received from Starfleet Intelligence two weeks ago. He'd stored its contents away in his mental filing cabinet, then completely destroyed all the physical and electronic traces of the message—just as he had been ordered by Admiral Lai. He had relegated himself to doing as he had been instructed: he would follow Staplek's orders and try not to create waves that could possibly give away his covert observations of the Vulcan.

Pelish had eagerly accepted the task he had been assigned from Intelligence. He had seen it as one step closer to getting out of the command chair of this starship and into a more politically forward posting. He looked down at the shimmering gold braids on the cuff of his uniform tunic and rubbed them softly, mentally wishing

they would melt together to form into the thick single braid that would denote his rank as commodore—something he was convinced would be bestowed upon him once this mission was complete. He looked once again to Lasur Funop and imagined, low in its atmosphere, a gleaming starbase full of power and prestige, a beacon of authority in this sector, with himself seated as its commanding officer.

“Sir,” the lieutenant spoke up from the communications station, “Captain Staplek is signaling. He's requesting that we prepare to get underway in the next few moments.”

Pelish, his eyes still leveled in a half-daydream state at the image of the swirling planet before him, leaned back in his chair reflectively. “Signal him that we are standing by, Lieutenant. Helmsman, signal yellow alert. Raise all defensive screens and stand by to arm lasers and the accelerator cannon.”

“Aye, sir,” both of the officers replied in unison.

On the bridge of the *Tryla*, the men and women of Starfleet prepared themselves, both mentally and physically, for the coming engagement. They checked and rechecked their equipment, made preparations for emergency procedures they hoped they would never have to initiate, and said silent prayers in hopes they would make it out of the conflict in one piece.

\* \* \*

Just as the plan had been rehearsed in computer simulations, the 22nd Strike Squadron formed into a V-formation, with the *Molens* in the lead and the *Ramses* and the *Tryla* on her port and starboard sides, respectively. When Pelish and Butler had signaled that they were ready, Staplek gave the order to engage their engines, and all three vessels jumped to warp one in unison.

The *Coventry*-class frigates, their twin warp nacelles swept up and away from the tops of their saucer sections, and the *Achernar*-class cruiser swooped into the Lasur system with lightning efficiency. Within seconds of reaching warp velocity, the vessels were already in the system and nearing Lasur Funop. The Federation forces had targeted the southern polar regions of planet for their point of insertion and, just in case their calculations were off, they would have sailed under the planet at a

respectable distance. As they neared the southern pole, the vessels immediately switched their warp drive systems completely off, then channeled all available power into both their offensive and defensive systems simultaneously. Using a high-powered burst from the impulse drive, the three ships pulled up gracefully in unison, like a flock of birds gliding up from the surface of the ocean, on the far side of the Lasur Funop.

The Klingons, caught completely off guard, were now directly above the Federation forces. The *Molens*, pointed directly at the belly of the lead D-7, fired a devastating burst of laser power from her forward batteries. A hole was punched clean through the Klingon's port warp pylon. The *Ramses* and the *Tryla*, having opted for accelerator cannons, attacked the port D-7 and effectively knocked out its defensive screens in a single pass. With the Starfleet vessels fast approaching their targets, the *Molens* let out one final burst of laser fire, striking the lead D-7 once again in the wounded pylon and pulverizing its warp nacelle. The Federation vessels then sailed triumphantly past the Klingons as if the enemy ships had been standing still.

On the bridge of the *Tryla*, Commander Pelish was ecstatic. The current success of this engagement only assured him of a future promotion. All he had to do now was seal it in blood. "Communications officer, send a message to Captain Staplek. Inform him we are turning around for a second run."

The woman turned her head to face her captain. "Sir, there's already a message coming in from the *Molens*. We are being ordered to reduce laser power and to provide cover for the *Ramses* while she beams over a boarding party to the lead Klingon vessel."

Pelish was beside himself. "What? And give Steven Butler all the credit? Reply to Captain Staplek that we will form our *own* boarding party and attempt to take the Klingon vessel we've disabled. Advise him that he will have to provide cover for us." And with that, Pelish leapt from the command chair and rushed to the turbolift doors, not bothering to wait for a reply from Captain Staplek.

On his way to the transporter room, Pelish stopped by the ship's armory, outfitting himself with two hand lasers and grabbing a fully armed security detail of four men

and one engineer from the nearby lounge. The team made their way down to the main transporter room in time for the bridge to hail the captain over the shipwide intercom. Pelish reached for the white push button that would initiate the link to the bridge.

“Yes, this is the captain. What is it?”

“Sir, Captain Staplek is still requesting that we provide cover to the *Ramses* and to immediately stand down our boarding operations.”

Commander Pelish nearly scoffed at the intercom speaker. *When the dust of this all settles*, he thought, *I will be regarded as the hero of this encounter. No one will care that I’ve disobeyed orders. Besides, who’s to say that the orders were received, anyway?* Starfleet Intelligence would be behind him, there was no doubt in his mind of that, and so would anyone else who would care to listen when he told them what the communications from Intelligence had told him about the so-called Captain Staplek.

“Disregard the communications from the *Molens*, Lieutenant. In fact, you may disregard all further communications from the *Molens* until I signal you personally. Send another request to security to form a second boarding party. They’re to transport over directly behind us once the landing area is secure.”

There was a distinct uneasiness in the communications officer’s voice as she replied. “Yes, sir. I understand.”

Pelish twisted the barrels of his pistols from stun to disintegrate, then he and his team stepped up to the transporter platform and signaled the chief to beam them over without delay.

\* \* \*

“Sir,” Science officer Stegmann called in disbelief from his station, “Commander Pelish has beamed over to the Klingon vessel with a landing party.”

*Fool! It will be his own undoing.* “Lieutenant Baden, please note in the ship’s log that formal charges are going to be filed against Commander Pelish for disregarding my order in this matter. Note that, as of this moment, I am relieving him as captain

of the *Tryla* until such time as a board of inquiry can be established. Commander Shuster will be placed in temporary command of the vessel.”

“There appears to be a power surge in the enemy vessel’s secondary hull.”

“What kind of surge, Commander?”

“Massive power buildup in their fusion reactors. I’d say they are building up to a detonation, sir.”

Staplek slapped the intercom button on his command chair. “Transporter room! Beam Commander Pelish out—”

His words were cut short as the Klingon vessel exploded in a powerful ball of orange flame and debris. The high-speed fragments pummeled the *Tryla*, tearing a six-meter-wide gash in her starboard warp pylon. The remaining Klingon D-7, without any internal power of her own, drifted slowly away as the shockwave pushed the helpless vessel to port—directly in the path of the nearby *Ramses*. Staplek noted that Commander Butler, quick on his feet, adjusted his ship along her z-axis and let the Klingon ship drift slowly under her. Staplek watched with admiration as the *Ramses* quickly grabbed the powerless Klingon vessel with a well-aimed tractor beam.

“Is the remaining Klingon vessel showing any signs of a power buildup?”

“No sir. She’s totally dead in the water. Life signs are minimal. If we want to get any of the survivors out of there alive, we need to pull them out now before their life-support systems fail altogether.”

Staplek stared blankly at the forward viewer, seemingly oblivious to Stegmann’s statement. He didn’t trust the Klingons and had good reasons to hold fast to that mindset for the foreseeable future. This had been his first confrontation with the enemy and, while they had proven themselves resourceful, the Klingons were nowhere near as ferocious as other commanders had led him to believe. These enemies could be defeated, and knowing that fact allowed a great calm to come over him. “Survivors? Yes, of course.” He stepped back to the command chair and seated himself comfortably. “Navigator, bring us in closer to the Klingon vessel. Engineer Preston, prepare to transport over to the Klingon vessel with a security detail and an engineering party. Lieutenant Baden, notify the *Ramses* to assist the *Tryla*. Once that is complete, have the two vessels rendezvous with us to complete the

evacuation of the Klingon vessel. The *Molens* will take the enemy vessel in tow to Starbase 10, barring any unforeseen difficulties.”



## Chapter 12

Stardate 4107.22

July 2253

Office of the Commanding Officer, Starfleet Intelligence, Rear Admiral Michael J. Lai, Starbase 23

The doors to the admiral's office swished open and, after a brief moment, in strode the officer Lai had been waiting to see for nearly two months. Her shoulder-length dark hair had been pulled back loosely behind her head, and now barely fluttered across the top of her straight shoulders. Her stride was perfectly timed and her swagger was almost nonexistent. Lai could see self-confidence exude from nearly every pore on her soft, angular face. After precisely six paces she was in front of the admiral's desk, directly between an open chair and a young lieutenant sitting in another chair on her opposite side. The newly promoted rear admiral stood up and extended a hand to the young-looking woman.

"Commander McAllister," Lai said with more warmth than he'd intended, "it's a pleasure to finally meet you in person. Welcome to Starbase 23."

Commander Bethany McAllister's emerald green eyes sparkled in the overhead light as she reached for the admiral's hand and gave it a firm shake. "Thank you, sir. It's a privilege to be here."

Once the admiral had released her hand, he motioned toward the lieutenant who was seated to Bethany's right. "This is Lieutenant Montgomery Scott, Starfleet Corps of Engineering. Mr. Scott, this is Commander Bethany McAllister, Starfleet Special Forces."

Bethany turned her eyes to Scott, and he to hers. Scott was instantly taken by her beauty, but tried in vain not to let it show through to his exterior. Her skin was like ivory, unblemished and perfect. She had large green eyes, not too deeply set, and a small, pointed nose. Scott placed his hands on the armrests of his chair and snapped

himself up to a standing position. "Commander McAllister," he said as he offered her his hand, his voice heavy with his Scottish ancestry. "It's a pleasure to meet ye, lass." Bethany gave Scott an equally firm handshake and then nodded slowly before taking a seat.

"I'm sorry for bringing you both here on such short notice," Lai began as he and Scott seated themselves. "But I believe that this situation calls for the very best officers in your respective disciplines, and I've been assured by some exceedingly influential people that you two *are* the very best."

Scott gave Admiral Lai a quizzical expression, and then glanced at McAllister. "I'm afraid I'm not followin' ye, sir."

Michael J. Lai, a human of about fifty Earth years, leaned back into his chair. His sapphire-colored eyes focused on his coffee cup as he gingerly reached for it. "Mr. Scott, I believe you know Dr. Jonathan Whirley?"

"Aye, sir. I do. Commander Whirley and I did some research together for—"

Lai quickly raised a hand to silence the lieutenant. "For a project that has only recently become classified, Mr. Scott. I'm sorry, but we can't discuss that particular research at this time. Suffice it to say, Dr. Whirley had nothing but praise for you and your accomplishments during the experimental stage of your project. He's made more than a few remarks as to your engineering prowess."

To this, Scott smiled like a Cheshire cat, the corners of his mouth nearly touching the bottom of his ears. "Well, that's mighty kind a' him to say. But, if you're lookin' for someone with *real* engineering skill, might I suggest you pull Whirley himself in on this. He's much more suited—"

"We currently have the doctor on a different assignment. Again, Mr. Scott, I've looked through your records, and I've spoken to a score of your fellow officers. I really do believe you are the best candidate to head up this program."

Scott turned his head, halfway between looking at the admiral and facing Bethany on his left. "And what exactly would that be, sir?"

"And with all due respect, Admiral," Bethany injected before Lai had a chance to answer Scott's question, "I'd like to know why I'm here as well. The communication I received at fleet headquarters was extremely . . . cryptic."

Lai nodded curtly. “As well it should have been. I'll get right to the point.” As he pressed a button on his desk, a large picture of a rolling countryside that had been hanging on the far wall behind him slid upward to reveal a nearly equal-sized computer screen. An image on the computer shimmered into solidity, and Scott instantly recognized it as the schematic for a Klingon D-4 *Predator*-class cruiser. “We've only managed to capture a small number of these vessels intact, and of those only a single vessel has yielded any information about the movements of the Klingon forces into Federation space. Each and every time our starship captains get close enough to these things to beam over a landing party, the Klingons self-destruct their ships. We've lost scores of personnel, equipment, and time trying to get our hands on some worthwhile Klingon technology.”

“And exactly how do I fit in, sir?” Scott asked as he kept his gaze fixed on the Klingon schematic. She was a beauty of a ship. That much was certain. But she was also as deadly as they come, armed to teeth and packing a punch that could send even the most veteran starship captain into a panic.

Lai pulled down on his tunic to straighten out some of the wrinkles. “I need you to study some of the captured Klingon ships in our inventory, and I want you to figure out how to circumvent their self-destruct systems.”

Scott chuckled in disbelief as he looked at the admiral. “That's a pretty tall order, sir. It'd be easier if ye asked me to rig the thing to shoot soap bubbles out the disruptor banks. At least I can do that.”

Lai smiled, remembering a story he had been told by one of Scott's former colleagues. Apparently there had been some truth to that tale. “Are you saying that you can't do it?”

Scott licked his lips, turning his eyes back to the electronic schematic on the wall. “All I'm saying, sir, is that it's designed not ta' be done.”

“I think you'll find, Mr. Scott, that Klingons tend do things a lot differently than you or I,” the admiral said with a hint of frustration.

Bethany leaned forward in her chair. “I'll agree with you on that point, Admiral.” Then she turned her deceptively deep eyes to Montgomery. “I've personally been in charge of commandeering one of these ships, Mr. Scott. I've seen firsthand what you've probably surmised by studying their blueprints. There is little rhyme or

reason to their designs. There may actually be a way to circumvent the self-destruct system. Besides, any of the other half-dozen things you could discern from their systems in the process may give us an advantage in the war.”

Lai leaned back in his chair and bounced forward and back slightly. “Hence the reason you are here as well, Commander McAllister. I want you to shadow Mr. Scott. I’d like you to be a living notebook of everything he discovers. I understand you have one of the most acute photographic memories in all of Starfleet Command?”

“Yes, sir. That’s correct.”

“Then use that to our advantage, Commander. Take very few physical notes. The more information we can keep locked in your mind, the less chance that information can be intercepted by—”

“Klingons,” Scott said dryly.

“By *anyone*, Lieutenant Scott,” Lai corrected. “Your advanced technical training, coupled with Commander McAllister’s Special Forces skills, should be enough to safeguard any edge you can give us.” He turned his attention to the young woman at Scott’s left. “You’ll then take that information back to Special Forces Command and disseminate it to your subordinates.”

“And what about me, sir?” Scott asked. “What happens to me when this is all done? I was supposed to head out to the fleet after my stint as an Academy instructor. I’m hoping to be a chief engineer someday.”

“And I’m quite sure you will be, Mr. Scott. I’ve been authorized by Starfleet Intelligence Command that—once this assignment is complete—you’ll be given free choice for your next duty assignment.”

Scott’s eyes went wide. “Ye mean . . . I could get assigned to one of the new *Constitution*-class ships?”

The admiral’s smile went from slight to broad. “There is a universe of opportunities available to you, Mr. Scott. Or rather—there *will* be. In fact, I believe there are a few *Constitutions* at Starbase 10 right now that are looking for qualified engineering staff members. Also, the *Farragut* is nearing her trial runs near Earth right now, and will be most certainly be looking to fill numerous vacancies in her

engineering department. I could put in a good word for you . . . keep a spot open until you're done here?"

From the tone in the admiral's voice, Scott was sure that Lai had already intended to place such a call. "Yes, sir. That'd be just fine with me," he beamed. "So where do I sign up?"

"There's no need for that, Mr. Scott," Lai offered with a dismissive gesture of his hand. "It's already been taken care of. Why don't you and Commander McAllister go over some of the preliminary findings that Starfleet Intelligence has gathered? I'll call down to the shipyards and let the dock master know that you two are to have full access to any Klingon vessel in our inventory."

"And how many ships would that be, sir?" Scott asked.

"We have two D-4s that are mostly intact, a fairly well-maintained G-8, and one badly damaged D-7."

"And how many personnel will be assigned to our detail, Admiral?" Bethany asked hesitantly.

"There are no more personnel. You are a detail of exactly two officers, and you will report all your findings directly to me."

Montgomery looked at Bethany, his smile still stretched across his boyish face. "It seems, lass, that we'll have our work cut out for us."

Bethany let out a slow sigh, shifting her eyes from Scott to Admiral Lai. "It seems so."

"Why don't we head down to the officers' lounge and grab a nip, Commander?" Scott offered. "Then we can head down to the docks and see what these Klingon ships have tae tell us?"

Bethany mulled the offer over in her mind for a moment. She nodded slowly at Scott and flashed him what could loosely be called a smile. Scott took it as a good omen, and the two officers stood to face the admiral before they excused themselves.

As the two walked through door to the admiral's office, they were passed by another human male—a captain at that—and he seemed to be in a terrible hurry to speak to the Intelligence commander. Montgomery and Bethany looked curiously at

one another, then continued their stride into the corridor. As the doors swished shut behind them, Scott let out an audible sigh of relief.

“Are you all right, Lieutenant Scott?” Bethany asked cautiously.

“Oh . . . I'm fine, Commander,” Scott replied as he rubbed his temple.

“You don't seem fine.”

Montgomery kept his eyes fixed on the end of the corridor some twenty meters away. “To be honest, it's just that—no matter how well the meetings can go—I always seem to have this allergic reaction when I sit down in a senior officer's stateroom. I get a huge headache and I feel as if I'm trapped in a room with no escape route.”

She found herself trying to stifle her laughter. “Yes. I get that feeling sometimes myself.”

“But . . . you're Special Forces, lass,” Scott said as he stopped in his tracks and looked at the attractive officer. “You're probably stuck in whole auditoriums full of higher-ups at times.”

Bethany nodded. “And believe me, the headaches increase exponentially as more brass gets slung at you.”

It was Scott's turn to laugh. He then took the liberty of shifting the conversation from work to pleasure to see where it got him. “So, I take it by yer last name that you've got some Scotland in you?”

“Yes. My grandfather was from Dornoch. That's in—”

“Ye don't need to tell me, lass. Dornoch is in the Highlands.” He brimmed with pride as he spoke of his homeland. “Beautiful country.”

Her smile went flat. “I haven't been there since I was a little girl,” she replied more awkwardly than she realized. She mentally changed gears as the thought of her grandparents, long since passed away, flashed briefly through her mind. “I don't need to ask you where you're from, Lieutenant. I know the Scott name originates farther south in Scotland. You're a Lowlander.”

Scott winced as if in pain.

The expression wasn't lost on Bethany, and she reactively reached out a slender hand and placed it on Montgomery's shoulder. “What? Did I say something wrong?”

“Lass, ye *have* been away from home for too long, haven't ye? We Scotts consider ourselves Borders, not Lowlanders. We do have our pride to consider, y'know?”

She grinned. “Every Scotsman's got their pride, Lieutenant. Even their women.” Bethany stood up straight, chest out, shoulders back in mock defiance.

Scott couldn't put his finger on exactly what he was thinking, but he was quite sure that his first impression of the dark-haired woman was a favorable one. He snapped his heels together, stood at attention, and then extended his hand grandly outward. “Lieutenant Montgomery Scott, of the Clan of Scott, at yer service, Commander McAllister.”

Bethany, always the definition of straitlaced, looked to see if they were alone in the corridor. She quickly placed her fingers lightly along the seam of her uniform skirt and gave Scott a small curtsy. “Commander Bethany McAllister, of the family McAllister,” she said in her best Scottish accent. Not only was she surprised by how easily it rolled off her tongue, but Scott was also amazed how perfectly it fit her. If there had been anything missing from her attractiveness up to this moment, it was precisely in place now. “It's a privilege tae be working with ye, Lieutenant. And please, call me Bethany,” she finished with a brilliant smile.

Scott briefly toyed with the idea of reaching for her hand and giving it a gentlemanly kiss, but decided it would have been far too informal. At least, at this juncture. Instead he simply beamed. “Only if ye'll call me Scotty, lass.”

\* \* \*

At the same moment that Scotty and Bethany were having their informal conversation in the passageway, Commodore Dan Balkwill was making himself comfortable in the chair that had previously been occupied by Montgomery Scott inside Rear Admiral Lai's office.

“Sorry I kept you waiting for so long, Dan,” Lai said as he refreshed his cup of coffee. “My last meeting went a little long.”

“It's no problem at all, Admiral.”

“Of course it is, Commodore. You came all the way out here from Starbase 5 to go over these figures.” He motioned to an electronic stylus that Balkwill had placed

on his desk a moment before. "The least I could have done was to be ready for you. At least accept my apologies."

Balkwill smiled warmly. "Fine, Mike. If it'll make you happy, I'll accept your apology."

"It will make me happy, dammit. I'm just glad I didn't have to make it an order."

Dan crossed his legs as he got comfortable in the plush leather chair. "As if I would have followed it," he replied acerbically.

"Watch it, Commodore," Lai said as he absently stirred some cream into his beverage, chuckling at his former first officer. "These walls have ears, you know?"

"Well, maybe you can stuff some cotton balls in them for a few minutes while we go over these reports?"

Lai didn't need a rookie Intelligence officer's code book to get the message Balkwill was trying to convey. He silently walked to a wall computer and pressed a sequence of blinking yellow keys on the terminal. Next to the computer an alcove slid open, in which Lai then reached and withdrew a small silver and black device that looked for all purposes like the familiar silver tube shape of a universal translator. He held it up in Balkwill's direction and then, getting a concerned stare from the captain, flipped a switch on the side of the device and then placed it on the desktop between them.

"Our conversation is now totally secure, Commodore."

Dan was obviously nervous. "Honestly, sir—I was only kidding. I hate that thing," he nodded toward the device. "I always have. Ever since we discovered it on—"

"—on a planet whose name is now catalogued as Ultra Top Secret. And regardless of the nature of our respective clearances, it will *not* be discussed at this time," Lai said, a note of seriousness overshadowing his usually jovial voice.

Dan shifted in his chair. "I guess . . . I just wish, that is, that it had been destroyed or lost when the ship—"

"Really, Commodore. There is precious little to be gained in rehashing old stories of encounters long past," Lai said as he gave his former first officer a dismissive wave of his hand. "We need to focus on the present. And in that present, I need you to give me a full report." Lai could see that Dan was troubled by the revelation that



the “silencer,” as Lai had called it so long ago, was still in one piece and apparently functioning normally. Lai opened the side drawer of his desk and placed the silver tube into it, then closed it gently. “There, Commodore. Out of sight, out of mind. Now, please . . . your report.”

Dan licked his lips, suddenly feeling overwhelmingly parched. He decided to press on with his report despite what he had just witnessed. “We haven't gotten anything out of the Klingon prisoners we've been interrogating.”

Lai furrowed his brow in disbelief. “Nothing at all?”

Commodore Balkwill shrugged his shoulders. “Mostly just family names, ranks, and obvious lies about what their specific missions were when Starfleet forces were able to catch them. The only one who seems open to the possibility is a former frigate captain. He says he'll be willing to speak to Starfleet Intelligence, provided we abide by the terms of the Seldonis IV convention of 2248 . . . and provide him with a neutral representative.”

“Neutral representative?” Lai spat back, almost choking on his rapidly cooling coffee. “And have those Klingon bastards provided any *neutral representatives* when our men and women have been taken prisoner?”

Balkwill was taken aback by Admiral Lai's quick turn of emotion. “Not to my knowledge, sir.”

“It wasn't a question, man!”

“Yes, sir,” Dan said soberly as he sat motionless in his chair.

There was a thick silence that hung in the air between the two officers, one that threatened to snuff out all the friendliness that this meeting should have afforded the two old friends. Commodore Balkwill, his azure eyes leveling back to his stylus, decided to press on with his formal report.

After going over a few more testimonies taken by various Klingon prisoners, Lai was beginning to see that the Klingons were putting up far more resistance to standard interrogation methods than he would have thought possible. He decided to file that information away and see what he could come up with at a later time. “And what've you learned about what happened at Falgor?” Lai asked. “We lost three ships to a single Klingon frigate. How do we explain that?”

Balkwill opened his polished silver briefcase at his side and withdrew a printed hardcopy summary report of the action at Falgor, as originally dictated by Commander Paul Prulhiere, commanding officer of the USS *Proxima*.

Admiral Lai took the paper and read the report to himself in silence.

“On stardate 4105.21, two *Larson*-class destroyers and a *Loknar*-class frigate of the 10th Strike Squadron were severely bludgeoned by a single Klingon L-6 frigate. The following is my official report:

The destroyer *Eylau* and the *Anton*-class cruiser *Reliant* were patrolling the outer fringes of the Falgor system, left behind with the frigate *Proxima* when the main body of the 5th Fleet withdrew to re-form and ready itself for the inevitable Klingon thrust into Sector 23-H. The two vessels encountered the L-6 frigate as it entered the area, readied themselves for combat, and dispatched a message to the *Proxima* requesting assistance. The *Proxima* was currently on the far side of the system monitoring the leeward side of the proposed staging grounds. Commander Paul Scollon of the *Reliant* called for the Klingon vessel to surrender, as per Starfleet regulations, as the enemy vessel silently approached. The L-6 quickly responded by firing on the *Eylau*, damaging its impulse drive system with the first salvo. The *Reliant* closed to extreme range of the Klingon frigate and opened fire, but the damage done to it by Commander Scollon was negligible.

While the Klingon ship was concentrating its attention on the incoming *Reliant*, the *Eylau* managed to damage one of the Klingon's warp engines with a burst of laser fire, causing the L-6 to turn on the *Eylau* with a withering barrage of disruptor fire, destroying the *Eylau*'s warp drive controls and causing the vessel to go dead in space. Once again, the *Reliant* fired to minimal effect, and the L-6 renewed its fire on the *Reliant*, which was no match for the Klingon frigate, either in terms of firepower or range. The frigate received one damaging blow after another, all from extreme range for its weapons.

When the L-6 eventually closed for the kill, it was frustrated by the arrival of the *Proxima*. Approaching the Klingon from the rear, the *Proxima* closed the gap between the two vessels rapidly and delivered a devastating blow to the engineering

section of the Klingon, only to be surprised by the Klingon's aft-firing disruptors. The ensuing blast burrowed into the primary hull near the bridge of *Proxima* and forced Commander Prulhiere to withdraw. Fortunately for the Federation vessels, the moderately damaged L-6 decided to withdraw, leaving the *Eylau* damaged beyond repair, the *Reliant* severely damaged, and the *Proxima* lightly damaged."

Lai all but tossed the report back to the gleaming desktop. "And this is the final report, Commodore?"

"Yes, sir. That's the report that we are considering submitting to Starfleet Command."

Rear Admiral Lai brought his hands together and rubbed them through his salt and pepper hair. "This war is getting too expensive, Commodore. And that's not just in manpower. We can't afford to lose three starships to one Klingon frigate again, even if two of them managed to limp back from the engagement. Do you have any idea what that would do to fleet morale?"

"I have a pretty good idea, sir."

Lai stood up from behind his desk and walked to a nearby view port that looked into the vast expanse of the base's dock facility. Several hundred meters from his office, an *Achernar*-class cruiser was being guided into its dock space by finely tuned tractor beams. Astern of the cruiser were two *Hermes*-class scout vessels that were currently waiting personnel replacements before they could resume their patrols of the nearby star systems. "We need to move our most precious assets away from the front lines, Commodore. The loss of any of these ships—or of their crews—could cause a severe public relations nightmare for the Federation Council, not to mention the taxpayers. We need as many supporters in the council as we can in order to continue to sustain our covert Intelligence activities." He turned to face Commodore Balkwill, his face drawn in concern. "If we don't, we could witness our support in this war fall away like autumn leaves in the breeze."

Balkwill nodded slowly. "I understand, sir. What would you suggest?"

Lai licked his lips and folded his thick arms across his chest as he contemplated his next move. "Simple. We're going to remove all the *Constitution*-class ships from the front lines immediately."

The look of shock on Balkwill's face was undeniable. "But sir, those are our strongest ships."

"And the most newsworthy, the most expensive, not to mention the most complex. Could you imagine, Commodore, the harm that could be caused if one of those ships were to be lost in the line of duty? Or worse—what if one were captured? Think of the repercussions of that. What do you think the Klingons could learn from that technology? They'd have access to our most advanced weapons and fire control systems, not to mention data storage and scientific instrumentation designs and specifications."

Commodore Balkwill sighed in resignation. "I agree, sir. That's a terrible prospect. But . . . how are you going to convince the Federation Council to go along with it? They'll want those heavy cruisers on the front lines and not plying the space lanes of the inner sphere." *And I'd like them out there fighting as well.*

Lai shrugged his shoulders. "It's easy enough to say that the ships simply haven't had enough space time under their belts. These are fantastically new and experimental systems, Commodore. Perhaps the vessels need to undergo more trials before they are ready for deep space?" Lai leaned onto his desk with his fists and looked at Balkwill through squinted blue eyes. "I'm sure *you* can think of something, Commodore. After all, you're the main point of contact near the frontlines. The council will take seriously whatever you have to recommend."

Dan inhaled deeply and then let it out slowly. "I'm sure I can muster up something."

"Then let's make it happen as soon as possible, Dan. I'll send a message to Starfleet Command within the hour. Once these ships have been rotated off the line, we can consider alternatives for their replacements, as well as what our next moves will be for our Intelligence operatives in the immediate area."

# Chapter 13

Stardate 4108.05

August 2253

Incoming Subspace Message . . .

Classification: CONFIDENTIAL

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

TO: All Starship and Starbase Commanding Officers, All Commands

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

As of stardate 4108.01, all commanding officers are advised of the following:

1. All *Constitution*-class vessels are hereby withdrawn from active duty in forward-deployed areas both in and around the disputed region of space near the Klingon expansion into Federation territory. These vessels will be redesignated from their current roles as Active Combat Units (ACU) to their prewar intended roles as Exploration Units (EU). This change is effective immediately. Forward-deployed commanders are instructed not to rely on these vessels for any support in military engagements, even when said vessels may be operating in or near combat areas. Forward commanders should familiarize themselves with all other available options before requesting service or assistance from these heavy cruisers. Exceptions may be made on case-by-case basis, but only when such options are the only one available to safeguard the lives and property of Federation citizens, and

even then such requests will require the full investigation of Starfleet Intelligence once the matter is concluded. No other exceptions will be tolerated. This change is in effect for *Constitution*-class vessels and their crews only, and will not be applied to any other vessels designated as cruiser or heavy cruiser at this time.

2. The *Bode*-class scout vessels, originally laid down in 2236, are now officially withdrawn from active service. With the increased output from Starfleet shipyards with respect to the *Hermes* and *Nelson*-class scout vessels, and due to the problematic maintenance requirements of the *Bode*-class, the less-capable scout is no longer deemed a viable forward-deployable unit. All remaining units will be assigned to the Ready Reserve (RR) fleet at Morena and, thus, will still remain on the Starfleet charter for the duration of the war. These units will be kept in a Ready-1 (R1) status and, should it be deemed necessary by Starfleet Command, will be able to redeploy to the active duty fleet within a brief predetermined amount of time. Starfleet Command wishes to extend a fair amount of gratitude to the commanders and the crews of the fifty-one *Bode*-class scouts that, for a short time, were the only vessels of their type in Federation space and were an enormous asset to the war efforts in this sector.

3. Preliminary tests of the new phased weaponry deployment systems are well underway. Several starships have been slated as predeployment test beds for this new system, including the cruisers USS *Anton* and the USS *Exeter*. Starfleet Research and Development (SR&D), working closely with Starfleet Tactical Testing Division, has high hopes that this new system will be available for frontline duty within the next twelve months.

4. On stardate 4104.01, the light cruiser USS *Pinafore* disappeared without a trace for a period of nearly three weeks. A search was immediately ordered by Starfleet Command. The *Pinafore* had last been reported in a remote area of space several sectors from the front lines of the war in a region of vastly unexplored territory between the Al Nath system and Thranstor. After two weeks of searching, and with resources dangerously thin, the search was officially called off on stardate 4104.15. Exactly one week later, the Federation listening post on Ovlon II was hailed by a vessel claiming to be the missing *Pinafore*. When the vessel arrived at Ovlon two solar days later, it was met by the Federation heavy cruiser *Hood* and the light

cruiser *Cowpens*. During the debriefing of the *Pinafore*'s commanding officer, Captain Je'Wali Ekero, it was discovered that the entire crew of the *Pinafore* had no idea that they had gone missing. Further investigation by the commanding officer of the *Hood* showed that the chronometers on the *Pinafore* were precisely nineteen solar days behind those of the nearest Federation stardate marker buoy. Starfleet Intelligence is investigating the matter further, and it is advised that any Federation vessel operating in this area should maintain constant audio and/or visual contact with Starfleet representatives on both Ovlon II and Thrantor.

\* \* \*

September 2253

“Captain’s log: stardate 4108.16. The *Bonhomme Richard*, having rotated off the front lines for the time being, is underway from Starbase 14 and on her way to the planet Niobe at warp factor four. We’ve been ordered to transport the Andorian diplomat Tal’ak back to his home planet, where the Federation has high hopes that he’ll be able to convince his government to allow for the construction of a new shipyard for both building and maintaining combat vessels for Starfleet Command. Tal’ak, who has a long and distinguished career in the Federation Council, has made quite an impression on the crew thus far, considering we only departed the starbase two hours ago. Bearing in mind his former rank of admiral, I’m not at all surprised by his nearly instantaneous melding with my crew. He has requested—and I have enthusiastically granted—to lead a makeshift symposium on Federation law for the crew of the *Bonhomme Richard*, which will begin at approximately noontime today. It’s been quite a long time since I was a student back at the Academy, but this is a once-in-a-career opportunity for many of us on board. How many more times will we be able to say that we were able to have a direct question-and-answer session with one of the Federation’s finest statesman?”

William Blackwell signed off his personal log and stepped out from behind his computer. He walked slowly over to the full-length mirror that he had hung near his cabin door and gave his dress uniform one final inspection. He absently adjusted the

triangular-shaped ribbons that adorned the left breast of the jacket and—resigning himself to the fact that he wasn't going to look any better—exited his cabin and headed for the nearest turbolift.

When the captain finally reached the shuttle bay, the space was jam-packed with both officers and enlisted men who represented every department on the cruiser. When all had been said and done, the hangar deck was the only space on the ship large enough to accommodate this many members of Blackwell's crew all at once. Everyone on board who was not on duty was asked—not ordered—to attend the symposium, and it looked as if no one was passing up the honor to hear Tal'ak speak. While William smiled absently over the fact that his crew wasn't wasting this opportunity, he also felt that he may have lost the best seat in the house, as he'd earlier that day declined his yeomen's request to save him a seat at the front of the crowd. While there were a great many luxuries that came along with being the captain, William was just as quick to refuse half of them for his crew's sake. He didn't require the pomp of “rank has its privileges,” and his crew had come to admire him even more for it. After looking at the crowd of finely dressed officers, however, William was beginning to have second thoughts about what he'd told his yeoman.

As he scanned the room for an open seat—trying hard to look casual in doing so—he was almost instantly flagged down by his first officer, Commander Eu'Gene Baker. Baker had served with Blackwell for nearly three years now, and had proven to be an invaluable officer when it came to making sure the captain had his finger on the pulse of the crew. Eu'Gene, regardless of his rank and position, always seemed to be the life of every party he found himself in. The crew gravitated toward his jovial countenance and his unequaled sense of fairness, and Blackwell would have been one of the first to point out that Baker would make an excellent starship captain someday. In fact, with the war dragging on as it was, Blackwell half expected to see just such a promotion message come across his desk one morning.

William both loathed and loved the idea all at once, although he could never be sure of which at any given time. As Captain Blackwell looked to Baker's tall frame, he wondered to himself how the man had managed to squeeze himself into the small space afforded him by the rows of crewmembers who were all but stacked on top of



one another. There was an open seat next to Eu'Gene, and though William found the offer hard to resist, he was still slightly annoyed with his first officer. When William locked eyes with him, Baker's large hazel eyes twinkled with that same air of mischievousness that Blackwell had come to expect from him.

"I know you said not to save you a seat, Will, but you were talking to your yeoman at the time, so I figured—"

"You figured it wouldn't be a breach of protocol to disobey the captain?" Blackwell asked as sternly as he could muster.

Eu'Gene only narrowed his eyes as he offered William a mischievous look. Blackwell glanced around the room once more, hoping that Eu'Gene's obvious disregard for his orders wasn't apparent to everyone—which it probably was—then gingerly squeezed himself neatly into the offered seat. William took the opportunity to lean over and whisper, "You know, I could put you down for a commendation for this, as well as disobeying my orders. So . . . since it would even itself out in the end anyway, I'm not going to say anything."

Eu'Gene reeled back in mock distress. "Not even a 'Hey, thanks Eu'Gene. That was mighty kind of you'?"

Blackwell gave Eu'Gene a sideways glance, then shook his head.

"Okay. I'll remember that the next time you need me to save your butt on some godforsaken—"

The lights in the room began to dim, and Blackwell put his finger to his lips and let out a shushing sound. "We'll talk about this later, Commander."

As the lights dimmed to half their normal luminescence, a single spotlight mounted high in the hangar control room shone down brightly on the makeshift stage that had been erected just forward of the clamshell doors that protected the inside of the bay from space. Placed on the center of the stage was a four-foot-tall titanium podium with the blue emblem of Starfleet command emblazoned upon its front. The podium itself was reserved for special occasions that could oftentimes be held on starships while underway, although in the last few years of the war there hadn't been much need for it, and Blackwell had been at a total loss as to where it was stowed on his ship. He had sent his helmsman on a hunt for the missing piece of furniture and, after an exhaustive search, the young lieutenant had found it at the

last moment lying in the corner of a closet in the auxiliary control room. How it got there was anyone's guess. Regardless, it was dusted off and polished just in time for the Andorian representative to give his lecture.

From somewhere off to the port side of the hangar, Tal'ak appeared wearing his formal diplomatic uniform, which could loosely be called a sparkly set of coveralls that was capped with a knee length cape. Its silvery metallic surface, broken up by large patches of similarly sparkling aqua-blue and white material, caught the spotlight in a hundred different directions at once, giving the ambassador an angelic glow as he walked to the podium and expertly took command of the crowd seated before him.

"Good morning," he began. His voice was low and controlled—the effect of years of training and expertise in the diplomatic corps. "I wish to express my gratitude to Captain Blackwell for allowing me this time to speak to you all, and I thank each and every one of you for taking the time from your personal schedules to listen to what I have to say. On Andor, we take such lulls in combat to further improve on our training and tactical analysis of combat units. However, as a diplomat, I am well aware that humans—and I'm told that nearly ninety percent of the crew of the *Bonhomme Richard* are human—require a respite between engagements to reflect and learn from their experiences, and to honor those who may have fallen in combat. In these, we are not very different from one another. While I would wish to see more of my countrymen amongst your crew, I am nonetheless proud to be in the company of fellow warriors such as yourselves. Having said that, I wish to begin this symposium with a brief moment of silence for those crewmen who will never return."

From somewhere behind William, a crewman shouted into the hangar, the sound echoing off every vertical surface. "Attention on deck!" The entire assembly quickly rose to its feet, heads bowed as they recalled the memories of family, loved ones, friends, or shipmates who would never return to their home soil. The moment pushed on from seconds to minutes. Somewhere in the silent distance a woman began to sob. When the noises in the hall subsided to utter silence, Tal'ak spoke once more, his voice slightly choked. "Thank you all. Please be seated."

As the crew seated themselves, William gave a cursory glance around the room to see if he could spot who had been crying. *Perhaps there's something the ship's chaplain can do for the crewman.*

Out of the corner of his eye, some ten rows in front of him, William saw her. She was too far away for him to get a solid look at her, but noticed by the color of her uniform tunic that she was in the science department. There was no way he could have vaulted to her without drawing excessive attention to his movements, and he was silently grateful to see Lieutenant Janice Nellum, the ship's one and only ecologist, slide up next to the sobbing woman and place a careful arm around the woman's waist. Nellum then silently escorted her from the hangar bay.

When the last of the crewmen had found a seat, Tal'ak began to speak once again. "Let us begin where we should: with Starfleet's role in this campaign, as interpreted by Federation law. I will begin by reading from the Articles of the Federation, as they were established in 2087. Chapter 8, Articles 52 through 54: Starfleet Command." Tal'ak briefly looked up from the podium and saw that all eyes were firmly fixed on him, then continued reading. "Given the need for a common defense, Starfleet Command is hereby created to coordinate the armed forces of the Federation, subject to the control of the Federation Council. The force shall consist of contributions of personnel from the original member worlds. A central training center will be established to supply the ongoing needs of the fleet. Further expansion of the fleet will be consistent with the needs of the Federation, and will include considerations for exploration and scientific inquiry as well as the maintenance of a strong military presence."

Tal'ak continued speaking on the Articles of the Federation for another forty minutes, expounding on things that most of Blackwell's crew—himself included—hadn't heard since their academy days back on Earth. William thought it both enjoyable and refreshing. It was good for him to be reminded of the things that he and his crew, not to mention the whole of Starfleet, were defending and making such great sacrifices for during this conflict with the Klingons. William's thoughts once again turned to the young woman who had been escorted out of the hangar earlier. It wasn't until Commander Baker—with a fine sense of when his captain's

mind had taken leave of his body—tapped Blackwell on his shoulder did the captain come around to focusing on Tal'ak's words once more.

“As all of you should know, Starfleet is a vast organization. Currently there are over 6,000 capital ships of varying classes on the official register, and there are nearly twice as many auxiliary and support vessels to add to those. No single government entity could handle the bureaucracy needed to oversee such a fleet. Hence, in the years preceding the current conflict with the Klingons, there were far too many voices that could allocate resources and materials to sectors that may or may not have had ample need for them. In fact, due to scientific and explorative concerns that were quoted Chapter 8, the size of the fleet—with respect to purely aggressive vessels—has been severely limited. Various treaty stipulations mandated that the number of our military forces would have to fall significantly behind our other, more benign endeavors. It should be noted that there were a great many opponents of Starfleet in the Federation Council in the years leading up to this current conflict.”

The antennae on the crown of the Andorian's head were steady and unmoving, as if he was used to having the weight of an entire fleet on his shoulders. Blackwell could hear the whispers of his crewmates as Tal'ak let his words sink into them.

“Because you all have been near the front lines for some time now, there are probably a great many rumors you are curious about that have been whispered in the halls of both the Federation Council and Starfleet Command. I will attempt to expound on those as best I can at this time. To begin, we are currently on our way to Niobe, my home planet. Some of you have been there, some have heard of it, and I'm sure that for some of you this is a new adventure. With respects to the latter, I want you to know that I somewhat share this sentiment. Although this is my home, I am something of a stranger here, as today I am obligated not to act as an Andorian, but instead must operate as a duly appointed officer of the Federation. The Federation Council has seen fit to silence the detractors of its past and move forward with an expansion of Starfleet—the likes of which few may ever see again in their lifetimes.” His voice began to steadily rise in amplitude. “I am going to Niobe to request that the Federation be allowed to build one of the largest and most strategically valuable starship construction and support facilities the Federation has

ever known. We will use this platform as a base of operations to launch the most advanced warships Starfleet has ever wielded, and we will use them to end this conflict once and for all.”

Whether Tal'ak expected it or not, the entire assembly applauded and cheered vigorously. Tal'ak raised his hands slowly and the crowd again became silent.

“While I have nothing but admiration for the shipbuilders of other worlds, I would be remiss if I failed to mention that Andorians—as it is well known—have the most experience in building strictly combat-ready vessels for the fleet. I have already been assured by the Andorian ambassador to the Federation Council that we will have the full cooperation of the finest Andorian shipbuilders in all of Federation space. Whereas there was once a staunch imposition on the overall size of the fleet, we are now going to see a dramatic increase in the number of fully qualified combatants coming out of the shipyards. Andorian designers have, on their drawing boards this moment, the blueprints for whole new classes of vessels that will, once put into action, decisively turn the tide of this war in our favor.”

There was another round of applause from the crowd, this time with the crew rising to their feet in support of Tal'ak's proposal. The former-admiral-turned-ambassador held up his hands to quiet the crew, which was finally accomplished after nearly two full minutes of rousing applause and cheering from the crew.

“I would now like to take this opportunity to take some questions from you, and I shall do my best to answer them as adequately I can.”

Blackwell noted with satisfaction that a great many hands were raised nearly simultaneously. The ambassador took each one in turn, answering each question with the ease of a trained politician. Many of the questions centered on the state of affairs concerning the new starship designs that Tal'ak had mentioned in his speech. He would reply, often, that the nature of the answer was classified and that he could not discuss specifics. He would, nonetheless, entice the crew with what little details he was able to offer that would satisfy their curiosities. He was disposed to compare things such as proposed speeds, armaments, and crew complements in relation to vessel classes that were already known to the crew. His choice of words, such as “faster than,” “more maneuverable than,” “stronger shields than,” and “more scientific capabilities than” were more than enough to get the crowd whispering to

one another in jubilant excitement. Even Blackwell himself found that he was encapsulated in their anticipation.

After the last remaining crewman had asked her question, the ambassador clasped his hands behind his back and closed the event with hearty gratitude, reminding the officers that—as long as Captain Blackwell approved—they were free to remain in the hangar and discuss the implications of the news they had just received. The ambassador himself, not widely known for wanting to remain behind to mingle, had previously requested a private meeting between the captain and his senior staff once the symposium had concluded.

Blackwell, along with Commander Baker, Chief Engineer Gonzales, and the ship's physician, Dr. Phillip Sumner, were now in briefing room three listening to Tal'ak expound on some of the details he was unable to provide to the rest of the crew.

"I have to say, Ambassador, that I'm extremely pleased to hear about the expansion in the fleet," Blackwell said with a grateful smile.

"Indeed, Captain. And while this growth will come at a great cost to the citizens of the Federation, the cost of not doing so would be far greater."

"You mean . . . because the Klingons are winning the war?" Dr. Sumner asked cautiously. The room fell deathly silent. The doctor's silvery hair reflected a myriad of colors under the ship's overhead lighting as he waited for a word from Tal'ak.

"Not precisely, Doctor. What I mean to say is that Starfleet Intelligence has discovered some disquieting . . . rumors. Rumors that strongly suggest that the Klingons are quickly nearing the completion of a new class of ships, one that many have concluded is actually a new breed of heavy battle cruisers. They are easily twice as powerful as anything we've come up against so far. This alone could give them a significant advantage in this conflict, since Starfleet has no such vessels in their arsenal."

The chief engineer, Hans Gonzales, shifted in his seat and fully turned to face the ambassador. "Are there any specifications on this unknown ship, Ambassador?"

Tal'ak folded his cobalt blue hands together on the conference table and regarded the engineer for a moment, then looked at each of the men as he spoke. "The best

estimates I've been given suggest that this new ship is on par with—or possibly even stronger than—the *Constitution*-class.”

The men in the room exchanged worried glares, and with just cause. The *Constitutions* were, by far, the strongest ships in Starfleet. To think that the Klingons could produce something that could surpass it was unthinkable. As if to reinforce this, Commander Baker chimed in. “And that's our most powerful vessel.”

“Precisely, Commander. And, as you all know by now, Starfleet Command has removed those vessels from frontline service. So, although I've been authorized by the Federation Council to increase the size of the fleet to counter this possible threat, I feel it may already be too late. Starfleet Intelligence is refusing to reinstate the *Constitutions* as combat units, despite these disquieting reports.”

Tal'ak's tone indicated he was as displeased about that fact as Blackwell himself was.

“The Andorians will build new cruisers,” he continued, “new destroyers, and scores of new frigates to help push the Klingons back into their own space to help counter the threat.”

“But,” Blackwell injected, “there are no new designs for Federation heavy cruisers or battle cruisers?”

Tal'ak shook his head slowly. “Alas, no, Captain. We need to focus those resources into increasing the *size* of the fleet at this time. However, there is a strong likelihood that we will also begin an upgrade program to bring existing hulls up to more advanced specifications to counter any new threat the Klingons can throw at us.”

“So,” the doctor said, “the question is, who will be first to finish the race?”

“There is no question about it at this point, Doctor,” Tal'ak said emphatically. “*They* will. And unless the Federation can pick up the pace and change tactics, we will be lagging dangerously behind. Perhaps too far behind to make a substantial difference.”

## Chapter 14

Stardate 4109.02

September 2253

Federation Starship Construction Yards, Thranstor

High above the beautiful beaches and tropical warmth of the planet Thranstor IV, Captain Tom Boucher, former commanding officer of the USS *Baton Rouge*, was leaning over the construction yard's status table when his aide entered the room. At least, he assumed it was his aide who had entered. No one else on the team but she would've been working at this time of night. The captain didn't even hear her as she approached him from behind carrying the latest tests results from the USS *Vella Gulf*, the second *Santee*-class carrier being built in the dry dock just outside the main station's administrative complex. Tom was currently far too engrossed in the first ship of the class, the *Santee* herself, to worry about the still-uncompleted *Vella Gulf* and whatever problems she currently faced.

As the aide came in, she immediately noticed that Tom's attention was currently elsewhere, and decided to first see what it was that was so preoccupying him before she began her oral report. She looked over his shoulder at the schematic he was studying.

The *Santee*-class, planned as a stopgap measure that would ultimately lead to a larger fleet carrier design, was intended from the onset to be a conventional light fighter carrier. With most of the raw materials at Starfleet's disposal going into the production of frontline destroyers and cruisers, Boucher's secretive carrier program had to make do with materials that were already on hand. After much debate, the design team had finally settled on the use of existing Class-1 saucer section primary hulls already being produced in sufficient quantities for the *Bonhomme Richard*-class cruisers. Those sections would be mated to a heavily modified secondary hull originally built for a fleet of neutronic fuel carriers. These fuel carriers had been



pulled from the shipyards prior to their final fitting out, transported under secrecy inside the long tubes held by a small fleet of Starfleet Intelligence-operated *Kepler*-class transports, arriving at Thranstor three months ago.

The fuel carrier hulls were thoroughly inspected, gutted, and rebuilt internally to handle fighter and shuttlecraft operations. The internal volume was split into two separate levels, one above the other, to help facilitate the simultaneous launch and recovery of fighter and shuttles in a combat situation. A traditional clamshell-style hangar door was used for the fighter launching area above. One deck below was another angular door, slightly larger than the one above it, for the retrieval of launched craft.

However, the former neutronic carrier hulls were never intended to carry warp nacelles, as they lacked any of the required hard points for the attachment of the nacelles, to say nothing about a lack of spaces to accommodate the plasma conduits. As such, the only solution to the problem was to elongate the impulse control section of the saucer module and then to add the nacelles to that point. The resulting structure not only added the vessel's required speed, but also allowed for the entire assembly to be ejected in the event of a catastrophic warp drive failure. It was this very T-shaped section that Captain Boucher seemed to be examining with great concern.

"Do you see it?" Boucher asked without giving his assistant further notice that he was aware of her presence.

The half-Vulcan woman's eyes traced down the long warp nacelles, then to the connecting pylons, then to the impulse control section. Her keen black eyes then traced back along the path they had taken, ending at the warp nacelle caps. "I'm afraid I do not, sir."

Tom stood up from the table, crossed his arms over his chest and inclined his head at the diagram. "Really, Lieutenant. It's right there."

The dark-haired Vulcan looked at the schematic once again, this time more diligently. She leaned her thin face closer to the table, as if her eyes were absorbing every inch of the plans in minute detail and then calculating each variable in her mental computer. After a few intense moments she withdrew from the table. Her

eyes betrayed the conflict that was in her thoughts. “I’m afraid I still do not see what you are referring to, sir. I see no flaw in the design.”

“You have to think four-dimensionally, my dear Lieutenant Lina Zerep.”

Her left eyebrow rose, but then immediately dropped. “By four-dimensionally you mean the addition of time to the standard three-dimensional model of space?”

“Exactly. We must add *time* to the ship.”

“In what respects, sir?”

Tom smiled and waved his hand at the schematic. “These plans take into account everything we know about physics, metallurgy, power distribution, and warp field dynamics, but they do *not* take into account the *future*.”

“I’m afraid I am still at a loss, sir.” This time it was Lina Zerep’s turn to fold her arms defiantly. She disliked not knowing what was on Tom’s mind. The two officers had worked very closely with one another since the construction of the shipyards had been completed, and even closer since they had begun to construct the new carriers. Boucher and Lina Zerep had worked jointly with the designs that had been provided to them by Starfleet Intelligence almost a year ago, but she still found it difficult at times to understand his predilection for illogical conversations.

Tom decided to switch tactics, something he’d had marginal success with when it came to the half-human Zerep. “The standard beam weapon we have installed on the *Santee* is the laser, correct?”

“Of course, sir.”

Tom cleared his throat and gave the young woman a stern glare.

Almost imperceptibly, which would have been completely invisible to anyone else but him, she rolled her eyes. “Tom,” she muttered under her breath, as per a previous agreement to call the captain by his first name when the two were alone.

Boucher smiled at the minor victory. “Much better.”

Lina Zerep ignored the mocking tone of his voice and continued her analysis. “Nine laser cannons in groups of three, positioned at—”

“Yes, yes. I know where they are.” He waved a dismissive hand at the rest of her statement. “What I’m saying, is that this conduit here”—he reached out with his left hand and placed a finger on a section of plasma conduit near the starboard warp pylon, then traced his fingers from that point along the hull back to the main

engineering section—“is too small for the new *phased* weaponry that's currently on the drawing boards.”

She gave his statement its due consideration. “Are you suggesting that we change the design of the ship to fit an untested and uncertain future weapon system?”

Tom shrugged his broad shoulders. “I'm suggesting that the new weapon system is sound. I've looked over all the data, and I'm convinced it'll work. What I want to do is be able to swap out components in the *Santees* with the shortest amount of down time in dry dock.” He selected and enlarged three sections of the hull on the screen, two on the primary and one on the secondary hull. The highlighted sections enlarged to fill the entire table. “If we change out the plasma fittings here, here, and here . . . then add some larger diameter conduit here and here, we can allow for the addition of the new systems without it having a major impact on the structure of the ships.”

It took her only a brief moment to calculate the supplementary materials that would be necessary. “The additions you are suggesting will require approximately 300 additional cubic feet of untreated waveguide conduit per vessel.”

“Is that going to be a problem?” Tom asked in his most playful voice. He had the distinct impression that it annoyed her when he did so, and he enjoyed every minute of it.

“I don't believe so.”

Tom slapped his hands together. “Good. Then let's work it into the plans.”

Lina Zerep nodded slowly, then remained motionless for a moment.

He picked up on her hesitation. “Is there anything else, my dear?”

She pressed her lips together, looking down at the unread status report from Captain Williams of the soon-to-be-commissioned *Vella Gulf* in her hand, then back to Tom's eyes.

“Oh, yes,” Tom said in mock surprise. “I was thinking we could discuss it over dinner tonight.”

She tipped her head back slowly. “You've been late for our last three engagements. Logically I should decline your request in order to teach you a lesson in punctuality.”

Tom narrowed his eyes and turned his head slightly. “I could . . . make it an order.”

“But I don't believe you will.”

“And I believe you're right. How does seven sound?”

Lina Zerep gave Captain Boucher's well-built frame a quick inspection from head to toe. At least, that's what he thought she was doing. She could have just as easily been checking the deck plates for warpage. She placed the report tablet in front of him on the tabletop, moving past him in a silent blur as she headed for the exit. “I will . . . consider it.”

\* \* \*

Stardate 4109.08

September 2253

“Captain's log: supplemental. We have arrived at the planet Videtu and are preparing to send down our landing party, which will consist of myself, First Officer Pierce, our assigned scientific detail, and their respective security detachment. This will leave Engineer Pratt as the sole remaining senior officer on board the *Empress*. I've been assured by both Starfleet Command and Starfleet Intelligence that there is little to no credible Klingon threat in the immediate area, so I feel fully confident in leaving this small detachment of command personnel behind on the ship.

I have to admit, I'm personally looking forward to going planetside to investigate the discovery made by the Deltan Science Conservatory that was reported to Starfleet Command last week. All the initial reports I've examined have an enormous lack of detail on the Artifact—as it is now being called. Hopefully the three scientific researchers we picked up on Starbase 16 will be able to shed further light on the significance of the finding.”

Lieutenant Commander Esther Kim Doubleday pushed the circular white button on her desktop terminal and shut off the log entry recorder. She rubbed her dark

eyes with her palms and, blinking a few times to regain focus in her vision, stepped up from behind her desk and moved over to the large storage locker beside her bunk. The crew quarters on an *Achernar*-class vessel could be described as cramped at best and, in the three paces it took Doubleday to make the transition from one side of the room to the other, she found that she was more than delighted at the thought of being able to get off the ship and stretch her legs—even if it was only going to be for a short while.

The Artifact—as it had been described by the local Deltan science delegation—was beyond their comprehension. Esther knew it wasn't due to the Deltans' ignorance that the item had yet to be fully catalogued; it was simply that the Deltans lacked the sophisticated instrumentation afforded to a Federation vessel such as the *Empress*. It mattered little to Esther what she and her landing party would find—just so long as she was able to breathe the fresh air of a terrestrial body and feel its fluttering breeze gently brush the sides of her face once more. She and her crew had been packed together in their ship for nearly two months now, with only a brief respite at Starbase 6 to pick up the scientific detail and outfit the cruiser with a more advanced sensor suite. Everyone on the landing party was more than happy to go ashore—even if the planet had little in the way of shore leave facilities. Lieutenant Winifred Pratt, the ship's chief engineer, had been the only department head to decline the invitation to join the landing party and had insisted on staying on board until the rest of the command crew had had their fill of leave. That'd been fine with Doubleday, and Esther assured Winifred that she would be asked to come down soon.

Esther pulled her long, dark hair into a loose ponytail behind her head, then withdrew her standard-issue gold utility jacket and put it on slowly, careful not to slam her wrist into the wall of her cramped cabin as she had done more than once before. She inspected herself in the full-length mirror that hung on the starboard cabin wall and pulled a few stray strands of hair away from her face. When she was satisfied that she looked as proper as any Starfleet captain should, she reported to the ship's store to retrieve her sidearm and communicator. By the time Esther reached the ship's single transporter room on the mid-deck, the rest of the landing party had already assembled.

“Everyone is a few minutes early,” she said approvingly, glancing down at her wrist chronometer in the process.

Lieutenant Vincent Pierce, the ship’s first officer and science officer, smiled at her statement. “We’re all itching to get out of this tin can for a while, ma’am.” He noticed the look of consternation on Doubleday’s face and his tone changed immediately. “No disrespect to the ship intended, Captain.”

Doubleday gave the young man another moment of solid glare before her face cracked in a half smile. “I don’t think she’ll mind the comment, Lieutenant. And to be perfectly honest, I’m a little eager to get out of here myself. Just remember, the Deltans are pretty . . . eccentric . . . with regards to their emotions.”

Pierce exchanged a joyful glance with the dark-skinned chief of security, Ensign Greg Jenkins. “Yes, ma’am. We are *well* aware.”

Esther rolled her eyes in frustration. “We’re here for one thing, and for one thing only, Mr. Pierce. The Artifact is our only concern. If the Deltans wish to afford us some of their hospitality, I’ll still need to clear a shore leave request with Starfleet Command. And there is no way they’ll approve such a request if our mission is anything but complete. Got it, Mister?”

Vincent’s joviality faded and he stood at perfect attention. “Yes, ma’am. Perfectly clear.”

Esther wasn’t sure if the ship’s self-titled practical joker was being serious in his tone or not. However, the fact that he *did* acknowledge her order was all the reassurance she needed. The lieutenant and the rest of the landing party would keep their wits about them—at least, until the mission was over. Lieutenant Commander Doubleday received a silent nod from each crewman and each of the three accompanying scientists as she looked at them. When she was satisfied that they were ready, she had the transporter technician beam them to the surface.

The six members of the *Empress*’s landing party materialized just outside a vegetation-encrusted atrium on a small hill overlooking one of the planet’s major trade centers. Esther noticed that the trade center, measuring nearly five square kilometers, was a bustle of activity even from their vantage point ten kilometers away. Scores of shuttles and transports could be seen taking off and landing,

ferrying cargo to outlying settlements and orbital processing stations. The planet Videtu, roughly half the diameter of Earth and with nearly the same weather patterns and climate, had just entered its spring months. The weather outside was warm and inviting, and Lieutenant Commander Doubleday wasn't the only member of the party to notice. She glanced over at Lieutenant Pierce and saw him stretching out his arms in jubilation. *If he was a cat he'd be purring.*

Within seconds of beam down, the party was met by a small delegation of Deltan scientists. They had silently emerged from the far side of the hill that was adjacent to the crew. As they rounded to formation, they began the small walk down a grass-covered slope that would put them face to face with the landing party. Esther took the initiative to meet the delegation halfway. She approached the lead member of the group, a tall, bald male of perhaps sixty Earth years old.

"I'm Captain Doubleday of the Federation vessel *Empress*," she offered, careful not to offer a hand in greeting.

Surprisingly, the man extended his own. "We have prepared ourselves for your visit, Captain. I assure you, you will not be inconvenienced."

Esther slowly took the man's hand, as if it were a live wire in danger of sending a lethal shock through her entire body. The Deltan people were well known throughout the Federation for their mastery of humanoid sensual encounters. It was said that simply touching a Deltan was sure to send any untrained human into an instant blissful paralysis. While Doubleday felt no shock of pleasure, there was an unusual sense of calmness and security that washed over her as she gripped the man's hand. It was as if she had just met a seasoned Federation diplomat who was absolutely comfortable in his own skin and equally adept at putting people at ease. The first thought that popped into her head, as unscientific as it was, was to call this absolute stranger "Grandpa," for that is exactly what she sensed when they touched.

Whether the stranger was reading her thoughts or not, Esther wasn't sure. He simply smiled at her in return and shook her hand. "There, Captain. No harm has been done. I am Wain, Chief Scientific Coordinator for the Deltan Science Consortium on Videtu. You may simply call me Chief Wain. Thank you all for coming so quickly."

Doubleday slowly released the man's hand, then absently rubbed her hands together before she spoke, as if she were waking up from a dream. "It's our pleasure, Chief Wain."

Wain looked past Doubleday to the rest of her party. "I wish to speak to you all in great detail. But first, let us get out of the sun. I have an office set up nearby. I want to show you all a small selection of the items we have discovered thus far, and then I will show you and your scientists the Artifact itself." His final words were said with a tone of reverence.

"Of course, Chief Wain. I'm sure my team is equally eager to examine everything you've discovered."

The landing party from the *Empress* followed Chief Wain into a large prefabricated structure that had been erected on the north side of the hill. The high vaulted ceiling of the tent-like structure, white in color and translucent, gently fluttered in the afternoon breeze as Esther and her team studied the items that Chief Wain was now showing them.

On one of the half-dozen metal tables that had been arranged into two rows of three, there were large fragments of semi-metallic components. Dr. Anna Wade, chief archeologist from the team that had been transported from Starbase 6, was busy analyzing the pieces with her tricorder while her assistant, Dr. Theras Ithryp, was looking over a stack of small, palm-sized cubes that had been stacked nearby.

"Dr. Ithryp, could you please come over here?" Anna asked, not moving her eyes from the material she was studying.

Ithryp replaced one of the cubes he was manipulating and stepped over beside Anna. "What is it, Anna?"

"I'm not entirely sure." There was an expression of definite confusion on her face as she held one of the metallic fragments up to the ceiling, attempting to let the filtered sunlight shine through the object's surface. Her dark hair spilled over her shoulders and down her back as she held the object skyward. "There appears to be some sort of material embedded in this fragment, but the tricorder is unable to determine its exact composition."



Ithryp, his antennae waving almost imperceptibly as if with the outside breeze, took the fragment from Dr. Wade's small hand, held it up to the sunlight and nodded in agreement. "There's definitely something in there. And the tricorder isn't giving you any information on it at all? That's strange that we can see it with our eyes and yet the computer can't scan it."

Anna looked back to him with condescending eyes. "There are literally hundreds of things that can be observed with the naked eye that are unscannable by standard instrumentation, Dr. Ithryp," she offered in her usual matter-of-fact tone.

"What about the surface of the object?" he asked.

"That's the other thing I wanted to talk to you about." She took the sample from Ithryp's hand and placed it back on the table about a meter from the remaining pile of objects. "Chief Wain, I have an unusual request."

"Yes, Dr. Wade?"

"Would you mind if I introduced a high amount of energy into this artifact?"

His brow furrowed. "Will it destroy the sample?"

"I don't believe so. The composition of the external structure shouldn't be altered by the energy."

"But you said your instrument was unable to scan this object. How can you make that determination?"

"The tricorder is able to identify some of the particles in this object. Of the ones that it is able to identify, I don't believe that inducing an energy field into it will adversely alter it at all."

"Very well," he offered hesitantly. "I am trusting on your expertise in this matter."

"Thank you, Chief Wain. Captain Doubleday," Anna called across the room, "could you please come over here?"

Doubleday, who up to that moment had been examining another object on a far-off table, stepped up beside Dr. Wade. "Yes, Dr. Wade. What is it?"

"I need you to fire a short burst of energy from your sidearm at this object," she said, nodding in the direction of the apple-shaped chunk of pearlescent material on the tabletop. "A setting of level three with a burst duration of five seconds should be adequate."

Esther looked questionably to Chief Wain, who only nodded his approval. She withdrew her pistol and, twisting its barrel to change the weapons setting from stun to low-output level three, aimed it at the object on the table. “Everyone, please stand back.”

She pulled the trigger, white energy emitting from the tip of the pistol in a tightly confined point directly at the center of the object. The surface immediately began to glow, increasing in intensity with each passing second. At the point where Esther thought she would need to shield her eyes from the light that was being emitted, Dr. Wade signaled the commander to cease firing by placing a gentle hand on her shoulder. The doctor immediately held her tricorder up and, pointing it at the glowing object, began adjusting the sensor output of her computer.

Everyone's eyes were on the glowing object. After a full minute of scans by Dr. Wade, Theras was the first to speak. “What happens now?”

Anna was fine-tuning her tricorder as a look of disappointment crossed her face. The glow of the object began to fade with each passing wave of her tricorder. *Why is it doing that?* Dr. Wade lowered the tricorder, the device continuing in its diagnostic of the unknown material. “I thought this would work. I guess I was wrong.”

Suddenly the object began to vibrate rhythmically as the light it was emitting began to fluctuate, increasing and decreasing in luminescence in slow bursts, which quickly increased in duration until it was a strobe light casting stark shadows on the white walls. Everyone near the table began to step back slowly, all except for Dr. Wade—who was smiling uncontrollably. As the light bursts approached the point where they would coalesce, the object let out one final burst of light, then the entire space went completely dark, save for what little light was coming through the plastic roof of the building.

“Emergency lights,” Chief Wain called out.

As the small floodlights mounted high in the ceiling came on, everyone's attention returned to the tabletop where the pearlescent chunk of irregular material had been sitting a moment before. In its place was a cube of gleaming dark material, with what appeared to be wires and small conduits extending from its smooth sides and melding directly with the surface of the metal tabletop.

As Dr. Theras Ithryp leaned in close to give the new object a closer visual inspection, he jumped back in surprise as a small blue glow began to pulse from the center of the new structure. “What the hell is it, Dr. Wade?”

Anna placed her palms on the desk top and moved closer to the object, smiling widely. The blue light from the object cast a soothing glow across her alabaster face, increasing in brightness as she moved closer to it. “If my theory is correct, it’s Vegan.”

“Vegan,” Esther Doubleday asked cautiously, her laser still pointed at the object. “As in . . .”

“The Vegan Tyranny,” Chief Wain finished, his arms folded across his chest and a look of utter satisfaction on his face.

## Chapter 15

Dr. Anna Wade continued to study the newly re-formed object that was now firmly embedded in the metal surface of the table top. The device continued to pulse steadily with an inner blue light that reflected off the workbench.

“What is it?” Doubleday asked, her weapon raised and ready to vaporize the object in an instant if it proved to be harmful.

Dr. Theras Ithryp waved his tricorder as close as he dared get to the cube. “The tricorder is registering a form of energy I’ve never seen before.”

“It’s Vegan. It has to be,” Anna said softly as she leaned closer to the device.

“Don’t get too close, Doctor,” Commander Doubleday said as she put a hand to Dr. Wade’s shoulder and drew her sharply away from the device. “We don’t know what it’ll do if you touch it.”

“I’m quite sure it’s harmless, Commander.” She casually shrugged Doubleday’s hand away and resumed her visual examination.

“It appears to be trying to interface directly with the surface of the table,” Ithryp offered in confusion as he tried to adjust his tricorder to get as much information as he could glean from the alien artifact. The pitch of the tricorder began to waver, dropping with each second. When the Andorian stepped back from the side of the table, the tricorder’s pitch reverted back to normal. “Why would it do that?”

Dr. Wade only shook her head. “Most historical researchers believe the Vegans had mastered the field of technology a thousand years before human beings ever took to the stars. It’s thought that they became so closely linked to their technology that they eventually became a race of wholly cybernetic beings.”

“I’ve heard of them,” Vincent Pierce added, stepping up from behind the group. “But aren’t they extinct now?”

“As far as historians and researchers are concerned, Lieutenant, they are.” Anna looked at Lieutenant Pierce, then back to the object. “Their civilization began to decline in the early twentieth century of recorded Earth history. By the time of Zefram Cochrane’s first contact with the Vulcans in 2063, the Vegan species had ceased to exist. No one knows why, but rumors abound as to their disappearance.”

“And who, exactly, *was* the Vegan Tyranny, then?” Doubleday asked as she finally lowered her weapon. This time it was Chief Science Coordinator Wain who spoke up.

“The Tyranny was said to be the powerful military arm of the Vegan society. At one time, they were not at all dissimilar to Starfleet’s relationship to the Federation. At some point, the military began a slow takeover of the government. It’s postulated that, within a relatively short span of time, the Tyranny’s influence allowed them to take control of the entire Vegan population. The entire species was later dedicated entirely to territorial and technological conquest.”

Esther looked from Anna to Chief Wain. “You seem to be something of an expert on this, Chief Wain.”

He only smiled and nodded his large bald head slightly. “I’m by no means an expert here, Commander. The cultural history of this sector is a hobby of mine, and there are rumors that the Vegans once ventured out this far.”

Something in the Chief’s tone gave her pause, but she pressed on despite the reservation tugging at the edge of her consciousness. “And it’s your belief that everything here originates from them?”

“It was not just their race that disappeared, Commander. Their entire culture nearly vanished from existence in the span of just a few decades. There is almost no evidence that they existed at all, except for the stories Andorians tell to their children at bedtime.” She then looked to Ithryp, who was nodding slowly.

“I do recall some of them myself, but I always thought they were more of a fairy tale.”

Anna clapped her palms together, her eyes going wide in elation, and turned to face Chief Wain. “Andorian historical records indicate that they had contact with the Vegan Tyranny about eighty years prior to the race’s disappearance. There was supposedly a great a war between the two that raged on and off again for nearly a full decade. The Andorians claim it was their victory in this war that stopped the Vegan Tyranny from regaining a foothold in the Alpha Quadrant, and it led to the ultimate demise of the Vegans as a species.”

“But how could a race vanish so quickly?” Doubleday asked in disbelief, her grip on her laser pistol tightening as she continued to point it at the object on the table.

“As I said, they were fully integrated with their technology. It's widely believed that a mutant strain of choriomeningitis decimated the entire Vegan race. It destroyed them and all their technology in one fell swoop.”

Security officer Jenkins's dark face neared the group, his hand ready to draw his own weapon at a moment's notice. “How could a virus do that, Dr. Wade?”

“Once it formed—or was initially contracted—the disease spread exceedingly quickly throughout the entire Vegan collective. Since they were a species of interconnected beings, and had little or no desire to become disconnected from their hive mentality, it was only a matter of time before the entire population, spanning hundreds of conquered worlds, was completely gone. It's hypothesized that the virus directly targeted the areas of interface between their organic and inorganic components, destroying the bonds at a cellular or atomic level. Their organic components would have become completely disassociated and their mechanical systems would have deteriorated rapidly as a result, due the lack of structure provided by those same organic forms.”

Assistant archeologist Milly Rollins, small and thin, floated around to the opposite side of the table. “So why is it that you think Chief Wain has found some Vegan technology here? Wouldn't that technology have deteriorated hundreds of years ago?”

“Not necessarily,” Wain offered. “Some Vegan artifacts have been recovered from a small handful of planets around the Vegans' purported homeworld near Triacus. These components were mostly considered entirely inorganic in design and were thus spared from the ravages caused by the disease.”

Jenkins's bulky form rounded the table and he stood next to Rollins. “But Triacus is over a dozen parsecs from here.”

“Very true, young man,” Wain continued. “However, there has always been strong evidence to support the fact that the Vegans were totally capable of constructing outposts this far outside their system.” Wain raised his hands and motioned toward the ceiling. “It was only a matter of time until someone stumbled across one.”

“And you think that’s what we have here?” Doubleday waved her laser pistol at some of the items placed on the metal tables. “We have the remains of a Vegan outpost?”

Wain smiled and, for some reason she couldn’t fathom, a cold chill ran up Lieutenant Commander Doubleday’s spine. “I think it is more than a simple outpost, Commander Doubleday. *Much more.*”

Esther cocked her head. “What do you mean?”

Anna realized it hadn’t been luck or good fortune that had allowed her to be posted to this mission. She was one of the few scientists in the Federation who had ever had contact with a suspected Vegan artifact. Years ago, she had performed deep research on the Vegan culture for a thesis paper she was writing for the Federation Science Bureau. Since then the information had been stored, unused and uncalled for, in the back of her mind. Little did she know that twenty years later, that speech, given to the top archeological minds of the Federation, would have allowed her access to the wealth of discovery now poised on her doorstep.

“He means the Artifact,” Anna offered breathlessly.

Wain nodded his head slowly. “Indeed I do, Dr. Wade.”

“So . . . which table is it on?” Vincent Pierce asked. “Let’s get a gander at this thing already.”

Chief Wain licked his lips and looked nervously at Commander Doubleday and then to Dr. Wade. “It was far too . . . *large* . . . to be moved from its current location. We feared that to transport the Artifact would have been detrimental to the integrity of the structure.”

“Which structure?” Doubleday asked as she stepped closer to Wain.

Chief Wain looked to the few Deltan colleagues who were assembled in the room before he spoke again, his tone leveled into a near whisper. “The hillside you’re standing on, Commander.”

\* \* \*

Chief Administrator Wain escorted the landing party outside the research tent. In single file they rounded the small hill and were now standing directly adjacent to

their initial beam down site. Dr. Ithryp, along with assistant archeologist Rollins, were positioned at the front of the formation, both flanking Dr. Wade. Behind them stood the crew of the *Empress*—save for Lieutenant Commander Doubleday, who was near the crest of the hill with Chief Wain standing a few meters to her left. As Chief Wain turned to face the surface of the hill, he reached into his flowing robe and withdrew a palm-sized device. He pointed it at the base of the hill and, a moment later, a rectangular hatch that was longer than it was wide began to flip open from the side of the grassy rise. Once it was fully open, the area below the hatch folded down into perfectly aligned steps that led down into a dark chamber.

“This portal was discovered quite by accident three weeks ago.” He looked at Doubleday, standing with her pistol drawn and aimed at the dark passage. “It leads to a central chamber that branches out into two smaller areas, and one additional compartment that houses the Artifact.” He began to descend the staircase with Commander Doubleday close behind him, her laser pistol set at full stun. The rest of the landing party followed shortly behind.

There were dozens of steps that had unfolded into the innards of the hillside. Near the end of the staircase, the hard artificial surface of the steps changed to a soft wood.

“The surface of this tunnel is exceptionally smooth and can be quite treacherous with all the condensation in here,” Wain said. “We had to construct the steps that we’re now traversing from local materials. For some unknown reason, the last fifty meters of the staircase was completely missing.”

Dr. Rollins reached out her slender white hand and ran it gently along the surface of the tunnel wall. “These are very similar to the ancient tunnels discovered in Ecuador on Earth in the twentieth century. They’re also similar to the ones discovered by the Albireo Expedition of 2219.”

Theras brushed his blue fingers along the tunnel walls as well. “But the tunnels discovered in those expeditions were cut at perfect ninety-degree angles. This tunnel is perfectly cylindrical.” He removed his fingers from the wall and flipped open his tricorder. “My tricorder isn’t measuring any variance in diameter from our initial point of entry to our current position. How is that possible, Dr. Wade?”



She spoke up from in front of him, not bothering to turn around. “It shouldn't be, Dr. Ithryp. No tunnels dug this deep have ever been discovered to be so perfectly constructed. Please keep recording everything so we can fully analyze it later.”

The team traveled down the long shaft for another twenty meters before finally reaching the base. There, erected at regular intervals along perimeter of the space, were floodlights being fed from portable battery units. Esther could see that the floor was not covered with dirt or debris as she assumed it would have been, but was instead a smoothly polished surface that reflected the lights being shone in the compartment. Dr. Wade could see two passageways, one on either side of the large room they were in, and a great door on the wall opposite the bottom of the staircase.

“The two openings you see contained all the items we recovered and brought to the surface,” Chief Wain began, and then motioned to the nearly ten-meter-tall closed door. “This door leads to the Artifact.”

Commander Doubleday approached the door, expecting a door of such immense size to make an enormous amount of noise when it opened. When she was standing approximately three meters away, she was startled to see the single door split into three portions, one upper and two sides. The sides split into unseen alcoves and the top half folded up into a crevice in the compartment's ceiling. She crouched down to a tactical position and aimed her pistol at dark void in front of her.

“Commander Doubleday, I assure you that no one is in there,” Chief Wain stated.

Ignoring Wain's comment, she called to her first officer without turning around to face him. “Vincent, I want full tricorder scans of everything in here.” She switched on her handheld flashlight and walked toward the opening.

“Your flashlight may prove useless after only a short time,” Wain said quickly as he jogged up behind her. “There is some form of energy field in there that depletes active electrical devices after a few minutes of continuous operation. That is why we have no portable lights set up in that compartment.”

As the team filed into the chamber, Doubleday could see that the floor was no longer a continuously polished surface, but was in fact semi-transparent. Below the floor she could see at least three more levels below her and just as many above. Within a few meters of entering the space the team made contact with a waist-high

guardrail that stopped them from falling into a seemingly endless abyss of darkness that was beyond it.

“The Artifact,” Wain said slowly, holding his arms up toward the unseen object like it was a deity.

Esther asked Dr. Wade to join her at her side, and the two women requested that their respective teams converge all the flashlight beams into what they assumed was the center of the room beyond the guardrail. The beams converged one by one until they were overlapping on the side of the target. There, stretching down into some unimaginable distance, was an enormous cylindrical structure with thousands of tubes and conduits of various diameters running in a haphazard pattern across its nearly fifty-meter-wide surface. In between the tubes, the team could see their lights glinting off the metal skeletal structure of the thing, shimmering with the same pearlescent properties they had observed in the small object in the research tent only thirty minutes before. The top of the Artifact, obscured by more darkness, was undoubtedly very near—or more probably *was*—the top of the hill they had initially beamed down onto.

Anna slowly sidestepped to Esther, not breaking her gaze on the object. “Whatever you do, I wouldn’t shoot your laser at it.”

\* \* \*

“What is it?” Commander Doubleday asked Anna as they both stared at the immense object in disbelief.

Anna shook her head slowly, stunned at the overall size of the thing. “I have no idea. But it looks dormant.”

“It looks like trouble if you ask me,” Vincent said from behind the two women. “We should call this in to the ship, Captain. We may need a bigger sensor suite.”

“Can the *Empress* handle this alone?” Anna asked sideways to Esther.

“Our sensor package is for general planetary survey or for short-range scans of solar systems. Even if the sensors were powerful enough to penetrate the surface of the planet, we’d need several science labs just to analyze all the data.” She reached

into her belt and flipped open the gold cover of her communicator. “Commander Doubleday to *Empress*.”

There was a burst of static from the speaker on the device, followed by a series of electrical popping noises.

“This thing might be interfering with communications, ma'am,” Vincent said as he waved his tricorder at the Artifact. “Whatever it's made of, it seems to be absorbing the signal from the communicators. In fact, I doubt my tricorder scans are entirely accurate. The object seems to be scrambling everything.”

Esther closed her communicator and replaced it at her side. “Get to the surface, Lieutenant, and see if you can raise the ship from there.”

“Aye, Captain.” Vincent shouldered his tricorder and jogged back up the stairway to the surface.

After nearly five minutes of running, Pierce had finally made it to the top of the steep staircase and into the open air of the grassy knoll. As soon as he emerged from the structure, his communicator began signaling him that the ship was requesting communications.

“This is Lieutenant Pierce. Go ahead, *Empress*.”

The angry voice of engineer Winifred Pratt came through the speaker. “Where have you been, Lieutenant?”

“We were in a cave near our beam down location. All communications were cut off. What's your status?”

“My status? My *status* is that our position has been compromised!”

A lump formed in Vincent's throat. “Explain.”

“Two Klingon L-9 frigates have entered the system and are holding a geosynchronous orbit directly above your position.”

*Think fast, Vincent. What would Esther do?* “Where is the *Empress* now?”

“I've moved the ship to the far side of the planet. I'm keeping a sensor lock on the Klingons. If they hadn't detected you before, you can bet they see you now that you're out in the open.”

Vincent looked to the beautiful blue sky. “Understood, Wini.”

“Vince, I think we’ve overstayed our welcome.”

Vincent turned to head back into the structure. “I need to get the captain back up to the surface so we can beam out. We’ll hail you again in less than ten minutes.”

“Make it fast, Lieutenant. I don’t know how much longer it’ll be until the Klingons can manage to get a lock on the ship. I’m keeping the *Empress* in a tight orbit to obscure her sensor profile, but we don’t have the fuel to maintain our current course much longer.”

“We’ll be on our way shortly. Pierce out.”

“I can’t even begin to imagine what this thing could be used for,” Anna was saying to Chief Wain.

“We believe it is some form of communications array that the Vegans used to keep in contact with their distant homeworld.”

“A sort of subspace amplifier?” Jenkins asked as he holstered his pistol.

Chief Wain gave the Artifact a nod without turning to the security officer.

“If that’s true, it’d be far more advanced than anything the Federation has ever developed,” Esther remarked as she stepped up to the duo. That was when Vincent burst through the door and ran toward his captain.

“Esther! We’ve got visitors.”

Overcome with surprise, she quickly turned on her heels to face Lieutenant Pierce. Unfortunately, she had forgotten to lower her laser pistol before she had done so. “Klingons?”

Vincent’s hands immediately raised in surrender. “Yes ma’am,” he said with a nod of his sweat-covered face. “Two frigates, directly over our position. And please don’t shoot the messenger.”

Doubleday gave an apologetic look to Pierce as she lowered her weapon, which was when he likewise lowered his hands. “Where is the *Empress*?”

Vincent was still catching his breath, wheezing out his reply. “She’s on the far side of the planet, monitoring the Klingons’ position. We need to get out of here.”

“Agreed,” she said with a nod as she placed a gentle hand on the lieutenant’s shoulder.

He met her eyes and, seeing the look of concern on her face, smiled in return. "I'll be okay . . . just a little out of shape."

The corners of her mouth tugged upward, then she turned to address the entire group. "Everyone, I need your attention. There are Klingon ships in low orbit, and it's highly likely they've ascertained our position. It's unsafe for us to remain here. We need to get back to the surface now!"

"But . . . what about the Artifact?" Wain asked incredulously as the Federation personnel quickly retreated to the doorway.

Esther craned her head over her shoulder to speak to him. "You can bring it with you if you'd like, but I'm getting my people out of here."

Chief Wain took one last look at the dark, monolithic device, then turned and ran to catch up with the *Empress's* landing party.

\* \* \*

Once on the surface, Doubleday withdrew her communicator and opened a channel to the *Empress*.

"This is the captain. Prepare to beam us up, Winifred."

Lieutenant Pratt's voice came over the speaker. "We're still too far away, Captain. We won't be at your position for another five minutes, and even then we'll still have the Klingons to deal with."

"Can the *Empress* do anything?" Milly Rollins asked, fear and uncertainty framing each syllable.

Vincent shook his head. "No, she only has medium lasers in her forward battery. It wouldn't even come close to doing damage to a Klingon warship, let alone two."

"So we're all dead. Is . . . is that what you're saying?" The tears began to well in Dr. Rollins's young eyes, then slowly dripped down her cheeks.

Esther turned to face the woman, then to Peirce in a silent order to calm the doctor's nerves before she had a panic attack. Holding the communicator near her mouth, Esther tried to formulate a plan. "Winifred, you'll have to get the ship out of here. Once you're clear of the planet you'll need to send a Priority One message to the *Franklin*. She was reported in this sector two days ago. She may be nearby."

“But Captain, you'll be killed!”

“Don't worry about that. Just get that ship out of here. The safety of the crew is your primary concern right now,” she said as she closed the communicator. She loathed the thought of dying here and, for the first time in weeks, she longed to be back on the bridge of her cramped research ship. A series of beeps from her communicator pulled Doubleday's attention from the dread she was now feeling in the pit of her stomach. She hesitantly flipped open the small device. “I told you to get the ship out of here, Lieutenant. That's an order!”

“But Captain, the Klingons are preparing to fire on your position!” Winifred screamed into the communicator, helpless to assist her friends.

Esther turned to face Chief Wain and the rest of the party. “Everyone! Move away from the hill and take cover!” Each of the assembled team scattered in a half-dozen different directions. Most found shelter in a small forest of trees that had sprung up around the base of the hill. Vincent dashed behind a large boulder near the south foothill of the mound.

The party heard the distant sound of thunder, then the beautiful blue sky was pierced by a violent burst of green disruptor energy as it ripped down from the heavens. It impacted squarely with the top of the mound, shearing off twenty feet of grass and overgrowth. What was left was a shiny pearlescent dome that capped an otherwise perfectly serene hillside. Esther had to wonder what the Klingon strategy was. Their targeting system was almost as good as the Federation's. They were perfectly capable of targeting the life-forms on the planet . . . so why aim for the hill? The colony was only ten kilometers away. It didn't make any sense.

“This can't be good,” Anna said from behind the same tree where Esther had hidden.

Another beam of energy shot down from space, impacting the now-uncovered dome with full force. However, where Anna and Esther would have both assumed the blast would have incinerated the cap, the pearlescent material seemed to be absorbing the blast. The duration of this shot was easily twice as long as the first. When the Klingon must have felt he had given his all for the target, the bright green beam began to fade. Just as the disruptor bolt faded from view completely, the ground covering the entire area began to shake and tremble.

“I couldn't agree more,” Doubleday yelled back over the din as she looked at Dr. Wade.

Suddenly there was a tremendous shock which threw the entire party, and probably anyone within a three kilometer area, right to their backsides. Esther and Anna scrambled to their feet in time to hear the loud grinding of some unseen mechanical process, following by the hiss of bright pink gas as it was vented near the cap of the uncovered dome. As the landing party watched in disbelief, the entire top of the dome split into six equal segments that fanned out from one another and, a moment later, the Artifact began to slowly rise from the now-open hilltop. The mechanism required to perform such a feat must have been immense and, judging by the groaning and wailing coming from the Artifact and from inside the hilltop, it hadn't performed this operation in a very long time. When its height had reached nearly 100 meters, the Artifact began to pivot on some unseen axis and oriented itself to the direction of the Klingon disruptor blasts.

All at once Doubleday knew what was about to happen, and she was utterly powerless to stop it. “Everyone get down and cover your eyes and ears!”

Chief Wain, however, was struck with awe at the sight of the device rising into the midday sky. He watched as the middle of the device began to glow bright green. There was a crackle of energy near the tip, with blue bolts of lightning arcing and sparking in a hundred different directions all at once. Several long tubes on the rear of the device began to glow faintly red. Wain was struck by the sheer beauty of the thing. Then, for a moment, the entire device looked as if it had simply shut itself down. The crackling energy dissipated into the air, the glowing portions began to fade, and Wain took a silent deep breath of relief. He put his face on the ground, said a silent prayer, and then looked back at the device.

“It shut itself off,” he said quietly, but as soon as he finished speaking, the Artifact let loose with what by all accounts looked like small-scale, extremely bright star. The shockwave from the projectile blew Wain from where he was lying and caused him to roll into the small forest of trees several meters away from Commander Doubleday and Dr. Wade.

The thunderclap from the rocketing projectile was deafening, and everyone in the party had their ears ringing from the sensory onslaught. Doubleday staggered to

Wain's position, her equilibrium completely off balance. "It's not a communication relay, Chief Wain," she screamed over the ringing in her head. "It's an enormous weapons platform!"

The thunderclap began to subside just as the ringing in Doubleday's ears began to die down. She looked around for her crew and the rest of the scientific detail. "Is everyone all right?"

Vincent's head poked up from behind the massive stone he was behind. "Everyone can relax. I'm good," he yelled back boastfully.

Esther rolled her eyes and placed her hands to her knees as she steadied herself, smiling when she knew Vincent couldn't directly see her face. "Then get your rear end over here, Lieutenant!"

"Yes, ma'am." He began to stagger over to Esther's position, occasionally stumbling along the way. He got halfway to her position before the Artifact fired another shot with no additional warning. The ensuing shockwave blew Vincent off his feet and flung his body past Esther and Anna, into the base of a nearby tree.



## Chapter 16

“Vincent!” Esther cried as she and Dr. Wade ran hastily toward the large pile of brush that had engulfed the lieutenant. The two women cleared aside several small branches and found Vincent sprawled on his back with his left arm draped over his eyes. He was grunting and moaning as Anna began to scan him with her tricorder.

“Lieutenant Pierce,” Esther said softly as she knelt down beside him. “Vincent? Are you okay?”

Vincent uncovered his eyes and began rubbing his temples. “Did anyone get the license plate number of that truck?” he asked wearily.

Commander Doubleday looked to Anna helplessly. “Is he going to be okay?”

“You know,” he began, glassy-eyed and with a quiver to his voice, “for a lieutenant commander, you’re *really* pretty.”

Anna flipped the instrument closed and looked at Esther. “I think so. The tricorder isn’t registering any major damage. He’ll probably have some general bruising and a mild headache for a while.”

Vincent groaned as he tried to lift his head. “You call this mild? It feels like I just got smacked in the face with a two-by-four.” He suddenly felt nauseous and his skin became sticky and cold.

Esther laid a steady hand on his forehead and pushed him back down. “Don’t try to get up just yet, Lieutenant. Take a minute to catch your breath. You’re in shock.”

Vincent acquiesced as he felt his stomach contents well up into his throat. “That sounds like a good plan to me.” Once his head was back down on top of the soft ferns, he immediately began to feel better.

Doubleday turned her attention from Vincent to the Artifact. It was silent now, with no indication that it was still active. In fact, if she didn’t know any better, she’d think it was waiting for another command. “I’ve never seen anything like that.”

Anna turned her head to look past the edge of the forest. “It’s obviously some kind of planetary defense platform.”

“I’m sure of it. But, the size—”

“If it is Vegan in origin, it would be the single largest piece of evidence the Federation has ever discovered.” Anna rose to her feet and brushed off her slacks.

Esther worried that Dr. Wade might rush toward the Artifact to begin an analysis of the space cannon up close, but was silently pleased when the doctor decided to limit her observations to a discreet distance inside the cover of the forest. Anna placed her hands on her hips as she regarded the hulking structure. “Do you think we are in any danger, Captain?” she asked, turning and giving Esther a quizzical look.

When Esther followed the doctor’s gaze, she realized its curious meaning: she’d been absently stroking Vincent’s forehead. *Of all the times and places to be reminded that I like having this guy around.* “If it is some form of planetary offensive weaponry, then I would say that we are safe. However I don’t think the *Empress* . . .” Her sentence was cut off by a signal coming through her communicator. “This is Doubleday. Go ahead.”

“Captain! Oh, thank God you’re all right!” It was the worried voice of Winifred Pratt.

Esther looked at Vincent, her hand still lightly touching the lieutenant, who was in turn giving her a warm smile. “We’re a little worse for wear down here, Lieutenant, but we’re alive. What’s the status of the Klingons?”

“I’ve got nothing on sensors. They just . . . *vanished.*”

Esther furrowed her brow. “Vanished? There’s no debris at all?”

“If there is any, then it isn’t any larger than a grapefruit.”

Esther looked to the sky in the direction the Artifact had lobbed its projectiles. “Did you get any reading on the weapon that was discharged?”

“Some. It was a form of plasma-energy combination, but I can’t give you any more specifics than that. There just wasn’t enough time from the moment I detected the blasts until they impacted with the Klingon frigates. I could probably get a better scan if you could get that thing to fire another salvo.”

“The next time that things fires, the target will probably be you—or any other ship that enters orbit above our location.”

“That’s comforting,” Winifred said dryly.

Chief Director Wain lumbered up behind Anna and Esther. "It's possible that the Artifact was simply responding to the fact that it was threatened by the Klingons. We must use the *Empress's* sensors to perform a detailed analysis of the device while it is still out in the open."

"Chief Wain, until we know more about this device, I'm not about to put my ship in a position where it could be destroyed."

Wain was obviously angered by her statement. "You have no evidence that it is overtly hostile! It may have just been defending itself! This opportunity must *not* be ignored."

Moving from Vincent's side, she narrowed her eyes and stood toe to toe with the Deltan scientist. "And we don't have evidence that its intentions are benign," she replied sharply. "The Klingons may have simply activated the device, and now it's waiting for another target to come into range. In fact, we don't even know *what* its range is. As long as the *Empress* is in orbit, she's a potential target, and until I can prove otherwise I will treat the situation as such."

Chief Wain took a single step backward, putting some distance between himself and the Starfleet commander. "Meaning what, exactly?"

"We have to shut this thing down," she said, inclining her head toward the dark, monolithic cannon. "And we have to verify unequivocally that it is completely powerless before I will allow the *Empress* to come any closer."

Chief Wain crossed his arms over his chest. "And how do we do that, Captain? We aren't even sure how it works. We don't even know what turned it on in the first place. "

"The course of action is obvious. Dr. Wade and I will reenter the structure and attempt to deactivate the weapon."

"But . . . you don't know what you're doing!" he cried in frustration. "You could permanently damage the Artifact. This is a monumental find and we are required to treat it with reverence."

"What would you suggest, Chief Wain?" Esther shot back in equal frustration. "This thing is a weapon, and not even you could argue that fact. It's a defense system that we know has the power to pulverize any orbiting starship it feels is a

danger to itself. It's hazardous, it's alien, and—if it were to fall into the wrong hands—it could prove lethal to the Federation.”

A look of near-terror crossed Wain’s face. “You're suggesting that there may be more Klingons in the area?”

“It's a distinct possibility, Chief Wain. It's been my experience that Klingon vessels this far inside Federation space never travel far from their respective fleets. We need to neutralize the Artifact *now*.”

Chief Wain could see that his argument, no matter how strenuously he objected, would be defeated. “Very well, Captain. But, be warned: if anything irreversible happens to this object, I will personally hold you, Starfleet, and the Federation Science Council *fully* responsible.”

She felt the overwhelming urge to dismiss his empty threats with a wave of her hand, but instead held her actions at bay. “I'll note it in my log,” she finally replied, withdrawing her weapon and setting it to vaporize. She looked down at Vincent, who had since propped himself up on his elbows. “If you’re done napping, be a dear and make sure no one else enters the Artifact behind us.”

Vincent patted his waistband, momentarily forgetting which side he had holstered his pistol on. He was relieved when he felt its smooth handle under the left hem of his tunic. He slipped the weapon from his side and set it to stun. “Yes, ma'am.”

Esther flipped open her communicator. “*Empress*, this is the captain. Dr. Wade and I are going to reenter the device and attempt to shut it down. Send a signal to the rest of the landing party and have them converge on Lieutenant Pierce's location.” She looked to Anna and saw on her soft face the same doubts that she herself had about being able to deactivate the weapon system.

“I hope you know what you're doing, ma'am,” Winifred replied cautiously.

“So do I.” She closed the communicator and motioned Dr. Wade to follow her as she strode off in the direction of the Artifact.

\* \* \*

Traveling once more down the steep stairwell that led into the inner workings of the Artifact was far more perilous than it'd been less than thirty minutes before.

While the shape of the space hadn't changed in any way, the nature of what Doubleday and Wade were doing there had changed drastically. Where the walls had initially been lit with makeshift work lights strewn at regular intervals, the passageway down to the lower levels was now lit from within itself, with brightened conduits running in a crisscross pattern all along the length of the overhead and reflecting off the brightly polished walls where dark, obsidian-like panels had once been. When Esther and Anna reached the bottom of the stairs, they were further amazed at what they saw.

The door leading to the Artifact's housing that they had initially gone through was now firmly closed, with no apparent entry point on the solid wall they were now confronted with. On either side of them, in what were once barely lit empty chambers, there were now rows of computer-like devices and machinery humming and buzzing with small electrostatic discharges. The duo approached the room on the right and—seeing no way of getting more than a meter into the opening—turned to the compartment that was on the left.

When they entered the space, they were greeted with the compartment lights brightening in response to their entry. A row of computer screens on the far wall was displaying what could only be described as lines of data and graphics that bore little resemblance to anything either of the women had seen before.

“The Klingon disruptor blasts must have caused a massive regeneration cycle in the entire Artifact,” Anna said as she looked around the room in wonder. “All this equipment looks brand new.”

Even as Anna spoke, Doubleday could see that the room was still reconfiguring itself. From some unseen location behind one of the panels of displays, a series of small, thin conduits appeared like rubber snakes, only to slither in the air for a few moments as they searched for someplace to attach themselves. A second later they connected themselves to a port underneath a dark screen and went motionless. Then the monitor glowed to life as yet another computer came online. Esther walked to within a meter of the conduits and waived her tricorder at them.

“These are monofilament waveguide conduits. They’re transporting power from one part of the computer to the other. My guess would be that the Artifact stored up

some of the energy from the initial blasts from the Klingons and is now tapping that power to remain operational.”

“Where is it storing the power?”

Anna shook her head slowly. “It’s hard to get an accurate reading. The tricorder signals are getting bounced around in here. It looks like some form of battery storage about 200 meters below us.

“Batteries? So will it eventually deplete itself?” Esther asked in exasperation.

“My readings indicate that if the weapon doesn’t discharge it could probably maintain its current level of readiness for an extremely long time.”

“How long?”

“Weeks . . . maybe longer.” She all but smacked her tricorder, as if the action would clear up the sensor glitches the device was encountering. “I just can’t tell. We’d need the *Empress*’s sensors for a more detailed analysis.”

“I’m afraid I don’t feel like waiting that long, Doctor. And bringing the ship closer is still far from a viable option.”

Anna nodded in understanding. “I admit, while I’m impressed with the technology and the thrill of discovery, I think I’d rather examine this thing if it were powerless and we were high in orbit above this place.”

Esther smiled at the doctor. “I’m glad you don’t feel as strongly about this as Chief Wain.”

“His heart is in the right place, Commander, but his motives are skewed. I’ve seen it happen before when a small person thinks they’ve come into something bigger than themselves. The problem is that it really *is* bigger than they think, and they can’t handle the fame that they’re sure the find will bring them.”

Esther nodded sympathetically. “There must be a way to interface with this computer, but I don’t see any input device. No keys, no microphones, not even a good old-fashioned off switch. Let’s take a look and see what we can find. I’ll take one side of the room and you take the other, Anna. Just don’t touch anything.”

The women walked to within an arm’s reach of the walls, studying the layouts of each panel. Aside from the small conduits that were sending power to the individual systems, the computer terminals seemed to be displays only, with no sign of any buttons, switches, levers, or anything else either of them could loosely identify as an

input device. When Dr. Wade had navigated half the diameter of the room, a shiny irregularity caught her eye.

“Esther, come over and have a look at this.”

Commander Doubleday stopped her visual inspection of a computer screen that was displaying some form of data analysis. “What did you find?”

“I’m not sure. It looks like some type of lever or control stick.”

A pair of meter-tall display screens, one above the other, dominated this part of the wall. There, jutting from a small strip between the screens was an O-shaped handle, affixed to the control panel by a short bolt. The most outward portion of the “O” had a grip-like structure to it, with five slightly curving indents in its surface.

“You said the Vegans were nearly identical to humans in their original organic forms. It would make sense that the construction of such a handle would be consistent with those forms,” Doubleday said as she regarded the device.

“Yes. They eventually evolved to become cybernetic organisms. It’s still highly conceivable that they could interface with their machines using a handle like this using their former biological components.”

“So, you’re saying that they didn’t require traditional keypads,” Esther nodded approvingly. “Very efficient.”

Anna reached out her hand to grab the control stick, and was neatly slapped away by Doubleday. “What are you doing?”

Anna rubbed her hand, more shocked that the captain had stopped her than how she had done it. “This is the only control we see. One of us needs to see what it does.”

Esther’s eyes were wide. “It could fire the weapon.”

Dr. Wade shook her head slowly. “The thing seems to be able to do that just fine on its own. I’m guessing it’s some form of manual override.”

Doubleday was unmoved. “And what *exactly* are you basing that hypothesis on, Doctor?”

Anna shrugged her shoulders and looked around the room, holding her hands up in resignation. “Is desperation a good enough reason?”

Esther’s shoulders slumped and she tilted her head slightly to the right. Although Anna’s reason was near comical, Esther had to agree to with it. There didn’t seem to

be anything else the two women could do in the room at the moment, and Doubleday needed to shut the Artifact down as soon as possible. She quickly looked around the space once more, hoping for a better alternative. Finding none, she resigned herself to the only option available. "Okay. Fine. But I'll pull you away forcibly if I think you're in any danger."

"That's fine by me," Anna said nervously, and then held her hand up toward the handle. As she got to within an inch of it, a small electric discharge sprang out from the handle and contacted her palm, causing her to pull back instinctively.

"Are you okay? Did you get hurt?"

"No," Anna said as she rubbed her palm. "It didn't hurt at all. I was just . . . surprised."

Esther nodded in slow approval, her pistol held ready to vaporize the entire wall if anything dangerous were to happen to Dr. Wade. Anna cautiously moved her hand closer to the control once again. Another small burst of electricity lanced out and touched her hand, followed by another, and another. More and more tiny lightning bolts of blue and green energy exited the handle device the closer she got. Seeing that Dr. Wade wasn't in any immediate danger or pain, Esther let her guard down slightly.

Anna then reached out and firmly grasped the handle with her right hand. Two small alcoves suddenly opened on either side of the handle, and tube-like umbilicals slithered out from behind them and connected themselves to Anna's wrist and forearm. She winced in pain at the initial contact.

Esther closed the distance and put an arm around Anna and was about to pull her from the terminal when Dr. Wade regained her composure. "It's okay, Captain," she offered through short breaths. "I'm . . . okay."

"You don't look okay," Esther said as she looked at the tubes now firmly affixed to the doctor's skin. "You're not in any pain?" The skin around the contacts quickly reddened and became slightly inflamed, but there didn't seem to be any other serious physical damage. "These connections have tapped directly into your respiration and central nervous system," she said as she waved her tricorder over the connections.

"Yeah," Anna said, smiling down a fit of utter terror. "It tickles a little."



“Is there anything else?”

“I'm not sure. It's like my whole body is . . . is one with the computer. I can . . . *feel* . . . all the electricity going into the screen.”

Doubleday stared at the monitor above the handle. The image that was being displayed was a series of red, blue, and yellow triangular forms that were moving from the top to the bottom of the screen. When the characters reached halfway down, they would reorient themselves, then continue down until they reached the bottom, only to drop off the screen as new characters appeared at the top.

“Can you interface with the computer at all? Do you have access? Were you right?” Esther wasn't sure which question she wanted Anna to answer.

“I . . . I think so,” Anna said. Her eyes narrowed and she bit her lower lip, as if she were concentrating on a fixed portion of the monitor. The yellow triangular shapes stopped their revolutions on the screen, and then began to shift themselves into a completely circular pattern. Within seconds Anna had managed to form all the triangles into a makeshift happy face on the screen.

“That's the friendliest thing I've seen since we got here,” Esther said as she exhaled joyfully. “What kind of access do you have?”

Anna winced slightly as she shuffled her feet nervously. “It's hard to describe. It's . . . not like a traditional computer, where you would expect to find a directory structure or some human way of organizing data.” She closed her eyes as a flood of sensory information washed over her. She reeled back as her nervous system was temporarily overloaded, pinpricks of pain shooting through her arm and up to her neck. She nearly keeled over until Doubleday put an arm around her slim waist and helped her back to her feet, her arm still firmly attached to the computer.

“Anna?”

Dr. Wade's voice was distant. “I'm still here, Esther. It's just . . . a lot of information.”

“Is any of it useful?” To say she was more than a little worried about Dr. Wade would have been an understatement.

Anna closed her eyes and concentrated once more. The colored triangle icons disappeared and were replaced as a schematic of the Artifact, outlined in green lines against a black backdrop, appeared on the screen. A small area, near the base of the

device, began to flash in a steady green pulse. "I believe . . . this is the control reactor assembly."

"It's a power controller?"

Anna shook her head as if she were in a trance state, her eyes still shut tightly.

"No. I would call this the . . . targeting system controller."

Esther studied the diagram before she turned back to Anna. "Can you shut it down?"

". . . Yes. No."

"You can or you can't?"

Anna seemed to briefly be in pain, her words struggling to come out her dry throat. "Yes, I can shut it down." She went silent for a moment, then the expression on her face turned from fear to one of outright rage. "No, *we* cannot!" she shouted, then swung her free hand out and struck Esther across the face, sending the lieutenant commander back several paces.

Esther, in shock at the doctor's quick movement, held a soft hand to her quickly reddening cheek. "Who are . . . we?"

"I am . . . Dr. Anna Wade," Anna began as her breathing became heavy. Then her voice changed, and it sounded as if a hundred voices were coming out of her all at once. "*We are . . . the Vegan Tyranny.*"

Esther walked to within arm's reach of Dr. Wade again, more afraid of what was happening to Anna than the fact that the doctor could easily lash out again. "Anna . . . listen to me . . . this is too dangerous. You need to disconnect yourself. We can find another way to deactivate this thing."

Dr. Wade shook her head from side to side. "I'm . . . I'm still here, Captain. The computer is trying to assert its programming on me. It's trying to bring me . . . into its collective. It thinks I'm Vegan, but . . . because I am human . . . with . . . different thought patterns . . . it's confused."

"You said you could shut it down."

Anna slowly nodded her head, and then began to shake it quickly from side to side. "No!" she screamed in pain, then the multiple voices returned. "*You must . . . obey!*"

Esther could see that Anna was fighting an unseen enemy, and it looked as if the doctor was losing. "What's happening? Anna, listen to the sound of my voice. Tell me what to do," Esther pleaded.

"Captain . . . I have the access to shut it down, but the program is fighting me . . . it is . . . *it is against our will. We will not comply. Interloper! Intruder! Must . . . destroy . . . intruder.*"

That was the final thing Esther needed to hear. "Anna, I'm going to disconnect you—"

"*No!*" the voice that was a mix of Anna Wade and a synthesized chorus of voices boomed throughout the room. Anna turned to Esther, and behind her normally soft and kind eyes burned a deep and unbridled anger. "*You must not!*"

Lieutenant Commander Doubleday jumped back, narrowly avoiding another physical attack from Dr. Wade's free arm, and set her pistol on a tight beam. She aimed it at the connection point between the handle and the computer and fired, but the point of impact only glowed with a small green glow. Nothing had happened. She fired once again with the same results.

Dr. Wade, or whatever was now controlling her mouth, laughed ominously. "*We are . . . absorbing the power of your weapon, Captain.*"

Esther leaned in and all but yelled at Dr. Wade. "Dr. Wade. Anna! Disconnect yourself. That is an order."

Anna's head jerked slightly, her shut eyes clamped tighter together, and her lips cracked open. This time it was her single voice that came out. "The *Empress* has been targeted. I . . . I can't disconnect. I have to . . . stay connected . . . to keep the weapon from firing. I will . . . I will . . ."

Anna repeated her statement several times. Doubleday was alerted to the sound of her tricorder. The device had been programmed to alert her to any sudden rise in energy output by the Artifact. She held up the device and scanned the room. "Anna, there's a power buildup in the control reactor."

"The weapon has targeted the *Empress*. Its range is . . . I am . . . stopping the discharge cycle. The reactor . . . is going to go critical."

"How long?" Esther asked, feeling a wave of helplessness wash over her.

Anna winced in pain again. "*Interloper!*"

The voices screamed all around Doubleday, almost deafening her. Esther could see that Anna was shaking now, as if a deep cold had chilled her to the bones. Throwing caution to the wind, Esther reached up and placed a hand against Dr. Wade's brow. She was burning up. "Anna, we have to go now," she began, feeling her eyes beginning to well up.

"Yes. Now. Go now. You must . . . *go now*."

Esther shook her head slowly, tears coming down now. "No way. Not without you."

"*We . . . we cannot go with you. I . . . cannot go with you. I will . . . I will . . . stay.*"

There was a thunderous sound from outside the control room. "Anna . . .?" There was no longer any sign of response from Dr. Wade. It seemed she was now fully concentrating all her efforts on stopping the Artifact from firing. Esther wiped the tears from her face and ran a sympathetic hand down the back of Dr. Wade's hair. "Thank you," she offered apologetically, then turned and ran from the room.

As she passed the great door that led to the Artifact, she noted that a large bulge had appeared in its perfectly polished surface. Then, without warning, an explosion was heard beyond the door and a large chunk of the device slammed against the inner door, creating another dent some six meters tall at the base. Esther needed no further evidence as to what was about to happen. She ran up the horizontal shaft to the surface as fast as she could, tears still streaming down her face.

As she broke free at the base of the mound, she made her way to where Vincent and the rest of the landing party had assembled near the edge of the forest. She tripped over a small boulder that she hadn't noticed in her rush to get back to the group and twisted her ankle in the process. Vincent and the others rushed to the commander's side and helped her back to her feet, nearly pulling her to where the rest of the team had assembled.

"Esther! Where is Dr. Wade?"

Ignoring his question, Esther flipped open her communicator as soon as she had sat down in the middle of the group. "*Empress*, are you there?" The ground around the entire hill was now beginning to shake violently.

Winifred's voice came joyfully over the speaker. "Right here, Skipper."

"Get us out of here, Lieutenant. *Now!*"

"Yes, ma'am. I'm just coming into orbit above your position."

Esther, with Vincent's arm blissfully around her waist, looked at him in sadness, then turned one final time to gaze at the Artifact. Large swaths of grass surrounding the weapon began to bulge up and then sink down into craters of all sizes. There was a faint buzzing sound, which steadily grew in pitch and frequency until the entire landing party had to shield their ears. Green and blue static discharges were occurring at increasing intervals along the entire surface of the device just as Doubleday and her people felt the familiar tingle of a transporter beam wrapping around them.

"What have you done?" Chief Wain yelled to the commander.

Esther felt Vincent's arms tighten around her waist as she fought down another surge of sorrow. She felt the momentary paralysis begin take hold of her—the first telltale sign that she was about to be transported from the surface. Her voice dropped to barely a whisper. "She did what had to be done."

# Chapter 17

Stardate 4110.15

October 2253

Stardate 4110.16

Incoming Subspace Message . . .

Classification: TOP SECRET

FROM: Commander Phillip Harris, Commanding Officer,  
Starfleet Tactical Testing Division, Andor

TO: Commander Darren Keith, Commanding Officer,  
Starfleet Procurement, Starbase 6

REF: Photon Torpedo Development, Cycle 21-505, SD 4109.19

1. Per the above REF, the Research and Development staff at Loraxial Corporation (LRxl), located on the planet Andor, have finished their preliminary designs for the new photon torpedo weapons system.

2. A prototype land-based system has been constructed and successfully tested under the auspices of Starfleet Command, Starfleet Intelligence, Starfleet Security, and Starfleet Research and Development on the third moon of Andor, known as Trelka. Tests were carried out in zero gravity, as well as in artificially induced gravity up to 10 times that of standard. All tests results were positive.

3. Based on the findings of the above, and in conjunction with the approval of Starfleet Command, Loraxial Corporation is submitting to you their official request

for a Starfleet vessel of suitable size to be utilized in field testing of their latest shipboard weapons platform.

4. As head of Starfleet Intelligence for this project, and operating as CEO of Loraxial Corporation, my recommendation is for a light cruiser, possibly of the *Anton*-class. Of course, I will leave the ultimate decision as to which exact vessel up to you, Commander.

5. Please forward your response directly to me no later than stardate 4111.01.

\* \* \*

Stardate 4110.18

October 2253

Administrator Vardan's office was decorated exactly as Rear Admiral Miles Synclair had thought it would be. Against the far left corner of the room was a triangular table, with three standard issue high-backed Federation chairs placed around it. In the center of the table was a triangular, three-sided computer monitor, with one of the displays showing the current sensor readings of the Jevol system. On the right side of the room was Vardan's desk, and to the right of that was a large display showing the current agricultural output of the colony. Behind the desk was a large transparent aluminum window that overlooked a field of green grass occupied by a herd of a variation of the Terran bovine.

In the twenty minutes Synclair had been in the administrator's office, Vardan's tone had changed from cordial to downright defensive.

"I'm not saying that Starfleet Intelligence is incorrect, Admiral Synclair. I'm simply saying there is no credible Klingon threat here," Vardan said, attempting to placate the nervous Starfleet officer who was pacing in his office.

"I understand that, Chief Administrator," Synclair replied evenly. "There may be no threat, but that may change at a moment's notice. We must remain vigilant at all times."

Miles Synclair had been in the Jevol system for nearly three days now, and there was very little to show for the impressive array of starships that accompanied the

7th Squadron as they patrolled the system. Synclair had, upon his arrival, immediately set out to secure the eight-planet system in as little time as possible. With over 150 ships at his disposal, it had only taken forty-eight hours to not only secure the entire system, but to also set up routine patrols on the fringes of the last planet's eccentric orbit. While Synclair was more pleased with himself than with his obedient junior commanders, he couldn't help but feel overly anxious to fight a battle that didn't look like it was coming at all.

At last report—which was only an hour old—the *Saladin*-class destroyer *Tamerlane*, positioned on the very outskirts of the system, had reported no unusual sensor contacts within a parsec of Jevol. Synclair had then requested an impromptu meeting with Chief Administrator Vardan, the head of the local planetary government on Jevol.

Vardan, a human male of fifty-two, seemed more uneasy about the Federation's presence in the system than with the perceived Klingon threat he was being told they might face. His gray hair was disheveled, his skin was deeply tanned from long hours spent outside tending to the farmlands, and his broad shoulders were pushed back as if he were in a defensive posture. His dark eyes looked like two large cups of coffee as he beamed them at the rear admiral from Starfleet who had commandeered his entire solar system.

Admiral Synclair had run a thorough background check into the entire administrative department on Jevol before he had arrived, and aside from a few minor infractions by Starfleet Security, found no evidence that anyone responsible for the operation of Jevol's government would cause a problem for him . . . should the need arise for Synclair to assume total operational control of the system. Though Synclair could understand the administrator's nervousness, he also found it unpalatable. Synclair thought the man weak and insecure, and that Vardan had no place running the administrative duties of an entire planet.

This was a system of farmers, led by a farmer. If it hadn't been for the fact that they contained warp-capable surface-to-space vessels, or the occasional computer terminal placed meticulously on a random desk, Synclair was sure that this culture had no place in a modern Federation. He had been told by Vardan that a number of the planet's major manufacturing systems and food processing equipment had been



moved underground in order to maintain a certain level of aesthetic beauty to the planet's otherwise virgin surface. Synclair had disagreed, saying that an advanced culture should display their achievements for all to see, and that anything less could be perceived by outsiders as dubious.

If it hadn't been for a perceived Klingon threat to this system, Synclair was quite sure that he would never return to this forgotten corner of the Alpha Quadrant ever again.

Vardan studied the admiral with apprehension. Miles Synclair, round in all the wrong places for his close-fitting gold uniform, gave Vardan the distinct impression that the rear admiral's short stature had much to do with his demeanor. He came across as someone with too much power and not enough internal assuredness to wield it properly. However, Vardan conceded that his impression of Synclair was still in its initial phase, although the admiral's current demeanor gave little credence that the relationship between the two men could be kept professional.

Nevertheless, Vardan still didn't want or need the Federation swarming about his system. If there were Klingons near Jevol, the presence of such a large number of Starfleet vessels would only serve to aggravate them into a conflict. And if the Starfleet captains got trigger happy, it could lead to a conflict that otherwise might have been avoidable through more *diplomatic* channels.

Besides, Vardan had his own reasons for not wanting Starfleet officers mucking about his affairs. Starfleet commanders were notorious for passing themselves off as amateur detectives. If they were to catch wind of his more unscrupulous affairs, it wouldn't look good for his customers, and even worse for himself. Vardan decided to change tactics on Synclair and see where it got him. The Jevolians were partially telepathic and had managed to keep that fact from the Federation for nearly ten years. Vardan decided he would press that advantage against Synclair.

"You forget that I have *also* been in constant contact with your government. I have full confidence in Starfleet Intelligence's reports, Admiral Synclair," Vardan said, although he honestly felt exactly the opposite. Concentrating his thoughts, he directed a subliminal suggestion at the weak-willed officer, all the while maintaining a casual conversation with the man. "Perhaps . . . if you took some of your starships farther out of the system . . . toward the Heuristic system?" Vardan

increased the pressure on the frontal lobe of his own brain, pushing out his consciousness toward the Starfleet admiral. Slowly Synclair stopped his incessant pacing and turned to face Vardan. The chief administrator could see on the admiral's face that he was considering the idea. "If the Klingons are coming in from Lea or Janni, then Heuristic *might* be a more apt location for their *engagement*."

"Heuristic?" Synclair replied, as if he had just heard the name for the first time. Miles had to admit that Heuristic would seem like a more ideal candidate for a planned invasion of this sector. The system contained two Class-M planets, one nearly twice the diameter of Earth and the other slightly smaller. The larger of the two, Trini, had no intelligent life to speak of. The smaller planet, Arietis, had a population of amphibian humanoids numbering close to three billion. They would be easy prey to the Klingons, should the enemy choose to attack them. The other planets in the system included two rocky planets of mainly iron, silicate, and nickel, a single small asteroid that could barely be classified as such, and an icy moon on the outskirts of the system that mainly consisted of frozen methane. In short, there was ample habitable space and more than enough materials in the Heuristic system for the Klingons to construct orbital shipyards in this sector—possibly even starbases. However, Synclair still had the small stack of Starfleet Intelligence reports to contend with. Those same reports told him that Jevol was the intended target for the Klingons, and they made no mention of any other systems whatsoever.

Vardan could see that Miles was mulling the thought over in his mind and decided to push a little further while still maintaining a cautious foothold on the outskirts of Synclair's mind, lest he be discovered. "Far be it from me to suggest that you countermand your orders, Admiral. I merely suggest a probable alternative to your current situation. One that may be . . . more *beneficial* to you and *your fleet*."

Miles shook his head, as if waking up from a daydream. "I can't disobey orders, Mr. Vardan. We've been ordered to remain here, regardless of my thoughts on the matter." Miles turned from Vardan and looked out to the field of grass and cows. "But . . ."

Vardan could see now that his argument was winning over the round admiral's judgment on the matter. He smiled inwardly at his own shrewdness. "Perhaps, sir, you could dispatch a portion of your ships, yes? I'm sure *Starfleet* would look

*favorably* on any such action. After all, you have an enormous responsibility to all the systems in this sector, not just our tiny little corner.”

After a long moment Synclair nodded slowly, his voice low and distant. “Yes, I have a responsibility to the Federation.” He turned to face Vardan. “It’d be prudent if I sent a detachment out to Heuristic to . . . *investigate*. Wouldn’t it?”

This time Vardan didn’t attempt to hide a grin. “Yes, Admiral. Quite prudent—and wise, I might add.”

Synclair pushed his shoulders back, causing his already tight uniform to strain against his protruding stomach. “You’re the administrator of this system, Mr. Vardan, and thus my command *does* fall under your jurisdiction. Besides, you are the ranking expert on this sector, not I. I will place my confidence in your request.” Synclair unclasped his hands from behind his back and reached for his communicator. With a confident flip of his wrist he opened the device, which responded with its preprogrammed series of chirps. “*Baton Rouge*, this is Rear Admiral Synclair. Stand by to bring me aboard. We’ve received new orders. And raise Commander Winters on the *Tamerlane*. I want to speak to him as soon as I get aboard.”

Once Synclair had beamed back to his ship, Vardan quickly turned to his computer terminal. Opening the channel to the last person he’d spoken to before Synclair’s presence had so rudely interrupted their conversation, Administrator Vardan was greeted by the sight of an Orion pirate on the screen. “It is done. I believe we will be able to finish the transfer immediately.”

The red-skinned Orion on the screen sneered in delight.

\* \* \*

“You’re killing me!” Lieutenant Commander Favere exclaimed.

Lieutenant Junior Grade Dupree only smiled sheepishly at the remark, not sure how to respond to his senior officer. “I’ve practiced a lot, sir.”

“I’ve practiced quite a bit myself, but I’ve never seen accuracy like that,” Favere said with astonishment as he continued to marvel at the fallen targets. “Are you sure you didn’t rig the game?”

Dupree holstered his sidearm and shot a glance toward Favere, insulted at the notion that he had cheated in some way. Sam Dupree was the type of person who prided himself on both his honesty and his skill, and when that pride was being challenged, he felt a gauntlet had been thrown—and to hell with whoever's rank was superior to his own. Nevertheless, Dupree knew instantly that Favere was merely kidding in his statement and decided against taking the commander's accusation seriously. He chuckled to himself as he unbuckled the ancient-looking weapon from around his waist. "You're just upset that I beat you at your own game."

Favere regarded the line of fallen targets once more, then began to unfasten his own weapon. "Well, there's one thing for sure: your family would never have gone hungry in the Old West."

"Well, that's not really my timeframe, sir," Dupree smirked as wrapped up his weapon with the thin leather strip that had been previously tied around his thigh and placed it in a storage box near his feet.

John Favere waved a dismissive hand in the air. "I know, I know. You have some bizarre fascination with that old Earth gangster era from . . . what was it? Oh yeah, the Great Impression."

Dupree let out a chortle. "*Depression*. The Great Depression, sir."

Favere shrugged his shoulders. "Depression-Impression. It's all the same kind of concavity to me."

"You need to broaden your horizons, man. Get your head out of those books about the Wild West and get into the modern age."

"Modern?" Favere shot back—in honesty as much as mockery—at the implied insult to his favorite period of Earth history. "I'll have you know that more people in the 23rd century ride horses than drive those filthy automobiles." When Dupree gave him a look of disapproval, Favere only continued. "And what about the alcohol? Who in their right mind would want to outlaw a beautiful thing like that?"

"A president by the name of Wilson," Dupree said wryly. "I believe he was a lawyer."

Favere took the jab at his major in Starfleet Academy—Federation Law. "Touché," he said and nodded curtly, his dark brown hair shifting slightly. "Well, we aren't all like that, you know."

Sam withdrew a towel that had been bundled near the storage box and wiped off his hands. "Be careful, John. You're practically baiting me into spitting out a few lawyer jokes I've had stashed in the back of my mind for just this occasion."

"You just can't help rubbing it in that you beat me at my own game here."

Sam's green eyes sparkled. "You know what? You're a sore loser, John." As he wiped the sweat from his brow, he said, "I still can't believe the captain agreed to let you set up a shooting gallery down here."

Favere had to agree. When he had approached the destroyer *Tamerlane's* captain several days ago and broached the idea, John was almost sure Commander Winters was going to shoot him down "with both barrels," as the old saying went. However, unbeknownst to Favere, Commander Winters was something of an amateur marksman himself, having taken Archaic Marksmanship as an elective during his own academy days. After a brief debate with the captain over which firearm was more accurate, the revolver or the semi-automatic, the *Tamerlane's* captain had agreed to allow Favere to set up the range, albeit with one major restriction: the weapons were not allowed to fire traditional rounds.

That is, the projectiles were not allowed to be held in tightly packed cartridges of gunpowder. So, he'd asked one of the ship's engineers to build two small weapons using a magnetic accelerator to launch the projectile at the correct velocity. Both safe and quiet, the guns launched small polymer pellets at the targets with pinpoint accuracy. In a nod to the firearms of old Earth, the engineer had even fashioned the weapons to have the appearance of the six-shooters of over four centuries ago. A signup sheet was immediately produced and placed in the ship's galley on F-deck. Commander Favere had heard a rumor that a similar list was being passed around the bridge, but he had yet to see any of the department heads make it down to the aft end of G-deck where the range had been placed.

When Dupree had overheard what Favere had set up, he was the first one in line to challenge the self-titled master marksman of the *Tamerlane* to a shoot-off. The game was simple: a series of six circular targets, painted in alternating colors of red and white concentric circles, were placed at a distance of ten meters from the shooter and about a quarter meter apart. The shooter then had to knock down all the

targets, without missing a single shot, in the least amount of time. The loser, decided by the ship's immensely accurate internal clock, would be disposed to do whatever he and the winner had previously agreed to.

Now that Favere had been squarely beaten by five tenths of a second, he was now at the whim of the junior lieutenant to do what had been previously asked of him. John was now anxiously waiting for Sam to dictate the time and place to perform his deed.

Favere impatience got the better of him as he waited. "So, I suppose you'll want me to do it in some place like engineering or some such official space?"

Dupree raised his head to the ceiling as he pretended to ponder Favere's question, although he had already made up his mind before the shooting match had even begun. "No, I don't think it needs to be so formal, John. I was thinking the ship's galley."

"The mess hall?" Favere was beside himself.

"Yeah. Say about 1630 tonight?"

Favere rolled his hazel eyes as his hands fell to his sides. "Oh, God. Dinner time?"

Dupree was brimming with amusement at the lieutenant commander's predicament. "Yep, with the majority of the first watch present and accounted for."

Favere was instantly regretting the challenge that he had made to Dupree. John had been so confident that he was going to win that he'd allowed Dupree to make any request he wanted, regardless of how embarrassing that request might be. Now he was hoping Dupree wouldn't hold him to it—which, unfortunately, the junior lieutenant from computer control seemed adamant to do.

Favere had all but resigned himself to his fate. "I don't suppose there's anything I could do to get out of this?"

"Like what, exactly? Are you prepared for me to make an even more ridiculous request of you? I'll have you know that I have a few more—"

Favere cut him off before he could say anything else. "Please, no. I don't want to hear it. While I can't imagine it could be any worse than this, I'd hate to have anything else you say change my personal opinion of how truly devious you really can be."

Dupree gave Favere his best impression of innocence. "*Moi*, Commandant?"

“You know, you're going to make one hell of a captain someday,” John offered sarcastically.

“Captain? I’ll have you know that I'm hoping to make fleet admiral before I'm thirty-five.”

John smiled broadly. “Oh, and I should add *delusional* to your list of accolades.”

“And what about you, old bean?” Dupree asked with a laugh. “I'm sure the admiralty is on the edge of their seats, waiting to give you an entire fleet of your own.”

Favere returned the laugh, as much to himself as to the remark from his friend. True, there had been a rumor circulating around that Favere was on the fast track to a change of assignments on the ship. While being the Damage Control Officer on a destroyer was an admirable position that had afforded Favere complete run of the ship, it wasn't where he really wanted to be. As the scuttlebutt suggested, the ship's chief engineer was said to be departing soon, and the captain was eyeballing Favere to take over the job. Should such a position become available, Favere would gladly accept it with open arms. Not that he wanted to stay in engineering for the rest of his career, but a change in assignment would very likely signal his much-sought-after promotion to full commander, and likewise get him one step further to the coveted command chair that his eyes often fell on whenever he stood watch on the bridge.

“All I want is that center seat. Give me that and I'll be a happy camper for the rest of my tour in the fleet. The admiralty can keep their stars and bars.” His eyes then fell upon the starboard bulkhead and the view port that was filled with the gleaming pinpoints of light from distant suns. “I have all the stars I want out here.”

Dupree clasped his hands together and held them to his cheek. “I had no idea you could be so romantic.” He laughed.

Favere jabbed a finger lightly into Sam's shoulder. “Shut it, Lieutenant. I have to get back to my quarters and shower before the big show, apparently.”

\* \* \*

Lieutenant Commander Favere stopped outside the light blue doors that led into the ship's single galley. He had been five minutes early and was now trying to

postpone the inevitable. However, when Favere saw Commander Winters walking toward the galley, he knew that his delayed entrance would be forthcoming.

“I can't wait to see what you've got planned, Mr. Favere,” the commander said joyfully, his usually somber eyes full of merriment. “Lieutenant Dupree was quite adamant that I should attend this little meeting you've called to order.”

“I called—?” Favere repeated in shock, but then silenced himself. *Dupree, you snake.*

“Yes, I was very surprised. Then again, that's the kind of initiative I expect from my senior officers,” Winters remarked just before he walked through the doors into the galley. The crew immediately stood at attention, and Winters asked that they relax back into their chairs.

When Favere—slow on the heels of his captain—entered the room a moment later, he could hear the hushed snickering and the whispering of comments between the crew. He looked around at the large rectangular compartment, its steel gray walls and bright blue crossbeams interconnecting at even angles, and the round tables filled with animated crewmen. He swallowed hard, walked confidently to the front of the eating space, and addressed the fifty or so officers and crewmen who were present. He saw Winters, sitting in his gold command tunic with his legs crossed and hands placed in his lap, waiting eagerly for what was to come next. Then Favere saw Dupree out of the corner of his eye. *What's in his lap?*

When Favere and Dupree locked eyes, the junior lieutenant stood up and neatly skipped to Favere's side, handing him the most ridiculous-looking hat Favere had ever seen. It was tall and semi-circular, black in color, with outrageous looking tips extending both forward and aft. Jutting from the top, like a red homing beacon, was an enormous feather.

“I thought this would get you more into character,” Dupree said quietly, a boyish smile crossing his face before he strode confidently back to his chair.

Favere regarded the ridiculous accoutrement for a moment and then placed it on his head, much to the snickering delight of the entire crew—Commander Winters included. He cleared his throat, slung a silent curse in Dupree's direction, then clenched his left hand into a fist and placed it against his chest.



“Ladies and gentlemen of the Starfleet destroyer *Tamerlane*. I, Lieutenant Commander John Favere, Damage Control Officer, will now give you the major general's song from—” the crew was having a hard time stifling their hilarity. Dupree, for all the strength in him, looked as if he were about to burst out laughing from his chair. His face was beet red and both of his hands were over his mouth, clamping in the delight that struggled to escape. Favere regained his composure and cleared his throat to silence the crew once more. “. . . the major general's song from the 1879 Earth opera 'The Pirates of Penzance.'”

On cue, the lights in the mess hall dimmed a moment later and, from somewhere Favere couldn't see, a spotlight appeared and silhouetted his shape against the rear bulkhead. *Well, here goes . . .*

“I . . . am the very model of a modern major general, I've information vegetable, animal, and mineral. I know the kings of England, and I quote the fights historical, from Marathon to Waterloo, in order categorical; I'm very well acquainted, too, with matters mathematical, I understand equations, both the simple and—”

The rest of the song was cut off by the all-too-familiar klaxon of red alert being sounded throughout the ship. Commander Winters jumped to his feet and ordered the crew to their battle stations. Each of the crew looked stunned, but only for an instant before each of them rushed out of the room from one of three exits available to them. Favere altogether forgot he was wearing his hat as he bolted from the front of the compartment and out of the mess hall. Destination: Damage Control Central.

## Chapter 18

“Repeat: all hands to battle stations. This is not a drill. All department heads are to provide muster reports to the bridge immediately.” The voice of the communications officer sounded on every deck and through every intercom inside the massive vessel.

Admiral Jacques Pelletier, situated deep inside the command center of the cruiser USS *South Dakota*, stood with arms folded across his broad chest as he surveyed the trio of two-meter-wide view screens placed before him on the far wall, each of them glowing softly with various tactical displays of the Ogolo system.

Pelletier had watched pensively as the flashing red glyphs that represented Klingon vessels had appeared near the farthest point in the orbit of the last planet in the system. Thanks to the efforts of the crews aboard the destroyer *Charles Carroll* and the *Anton*-class cruiser *Sutherland*, Pelletier had successfully deployed the entire arsenal of intrusion-detection satellites at his disposal only thirty minutes before the Klingons had arrived—and now it seemed as if that tactic was going to buy him some much-needed time.

In the entirety of his career, Jacques had never seen such a conglomeration of vessels in one sector, let alone one star system. Although he had nearly 230 vessels at his disposal, he watched impassively as a nearly equal force of Klingon warships fast approached his position. The estimated time of arrival had been calculated, and Pelletier watched several seconds tick down on the clock that was poised above the centermost status monitor.

The last thing Pelletier had wanted was for the Klingons to engage his forces near the only inhabited planet in the system. Far below the *South Dakota*, on Ogolo II, a single platoon of Marines had been reinforced with several others from two of the newest vessels to enter Starfleet, the namesake of the *Santee*-class herself, as well as the *Vella Gulf*. The two carriers were the talk of the entire 11th Squadron, large and beautiful vessels, each holding five squadrons of the latest in Starfleet attack shuttlecraft while simultaneously carrying the combined firepower of a medium cruiser.

As such, Jacques had ordered the half-Deltan Captain Marcus Williams to take the *Vella Gulf* and thirty additional vessels to form a defensive blockade around Ogolo VII, with the Tellarite Commodore Dozier, on board the *Santee*, using another twenty starships to form a concave shield in front of Williams. With his first officer placed in temporary command of the *South Dakota*'s movements, Pelletier had the remaining vessels of the 11th Strategic Squadron placed in reserve around Ogolo II and III.

It now looked as if Pelletier would need more vessels than even his reserves could offer, and he wondered to himself how many young men and women would die today to defend a small planet in a lonely corner of Federation space. He momentarily averted his eyes from the tactical display monitor to focus on the group of command personnel and specialists behind him.

The Command and Control room on the *South Dakota* was easily the largest compartment on the ship, nearly twice the overall size of engineering and about three times larger than the ship's bridge. Behind Pelletier stood three fleet captains, each of them responsible for coordinating the three groups of the 11th Squadron. Although Pelletier was in overall command of the fleet, it was the job of the individual fleet captains to issue the commands that Jacques required the individual groups to follow. To do this, each fleet captain had a dedicated communications officer seated behind him. Thus, at the height of the engagement, the *South Dakota* alone could handle the combined communications from all commanders and dispatch any required tactical information to them in a timely and efficient matter.

Jacques's head quickly swiveled back around to stare at the tactical display just as the red glyphs of the Klingons intersected with the blue glyphs of Commodore Dozier's battle formation. Within moments, the battle communications began to file into the command compartment of the *South Dakota*.

\* \* \*

The hangar bay of the USS *Santee* was a bustle of activity. The immense space, nearly eighty meters long and flooded with the soft white light from the distant overhead, was a manmade cavity of the latest design. The sides of the bay were

lined with alcoves of fighters waiting to launch, each pointed at forty-five degrees toward the large clamshell doors that protected the bay from space. Currently, there were twenty such shuttles readying for launch, with another twenty shuttles and supplementary craft stored in a nearly identical hangar directly below this main deck. In the center of the hangar were two rectangular elevators, outlined with stripes of alternating black and yellow bands, which could be used to quickly retrieve craft from the hangar below or to move returning fighters into the storage bays for rearmament and redeployment.

Lieutenant Commander Jason Genser exited from the turbolift that led directly to the hangar from the pilots' briefing room in the primary hull. Upon his arrival in the hangar, the commanding officer of the 101st Fighter Squadron was nearly toppled over by an ensign rushing to one of the waiting fighters, a stylus in one hand and a communicator in the other. The ensign, one whom Genser had seen in passing, was shouting something obscure into the communicator. In an effort to stem the ensuing collision of the two officers, the ensign had quickly sidestepped the lieutenant commander at the last minute, offering a quick "excuse me, sir" as the younger man quickly carried on with fighter preparations without missing a step. Jason, momentarily frozen in his tracks, could only watch as the young ensign angrily flipped the communicator closed, pocketed it in his green work coveralls, then began pointing and shouting something unintelligible at the enlisted man who was straddling the top of fighter number seven.

The fighters themselves were sleek and beautiful. They had an overall shape of a teardrop that had been placed on its side. At the bulbous front of the craft were two contoured view ports. At the tapered aft end of the fighter, jutting on either side, were small wing-like structures that gave the craft better handling during atmospheric flight and also doubled as the housing for the small laser batteries. Slung under these structures were the tubular engines, capable of propelling the vessel at warp factor one for an extremely short duration. All the vessel's thrust during tight combat came from the fusion-powered impulse engines built into the back of the craft, themselves accounting for nearly three-quarters of the fighter's overall weight.

The fighters were nimble in atmospheric confines, and quite deadly in space. At least, everyone hoped they were deadly. With this being their first mission, there wasn't a single pilot in the entire fleet who had pitted one of the attack shuttles against an enemy of equal value . . . or any enemy at all, for that matter. This was to be their first taste of real action outside the simulations and battle exercises of Thranstor, in the Gamma Diso system.

Commander Genser approached his assigned craft, one with a large black number "1" painted on its dorsal sides, when the crew chief exited the small hatch on the port side after he'd just finished his preflight check.

The chief, a senior enlisted man with peppery hair, rubbed his thick sweaty hands on his dark green coveralls as he holstered a chrome micro-spanner in his breast pocket. "She's all ready for you, sir. Everything checks out 100 percent."

"Thanks, Chief," Genser offered with a nod and a brief handshake before entering the craft. He had to duck his head slightly as he entered the fighter, careful not to bump his head as he'd done a half-dozen times when he'd first learned to pilot it. He climbed into the cockpit and, seeing that his weapons officer had already arrived, gave him a quick smile. "All ready for this, Sven?"

"As ready as I'll ever be," Lieutenant Junior Grade Sven Proboszcz replied. Sven flipped the toggles that put the fighter's laser into standby mode. "Weapons are charged and ready, Skipper."

"Very good. Let's do this just like back at Thranstor. No difference, okay?" Genser said, referring to his tactical officer's keen eye and deadly accurate shooting of targets on the test course those many weeks ago. *Or was it a lifetime ago?*

"Well, there's a *little* difference," Sven replied as he flipped a series of switches on the overhead console. "The practice targets, even the ones that fired back, weren't designed to *kill* us."

Genser smirked. "True. But the Klingons have to catch us first, Proboszcz, my boy." He switched on the navigational computers to his right. Once the computer had reported that all systems were green, he reached to the overhead and pressed the button to place the antigravity generator in standby mode as the two men prepared to launch. "Patch me through to the rest of the squadron."

Proboszcz reached out and rotated a dial on his forward console as he tuned the fighter's subspace transmitter to the correct frequency. He then flipped a single control in the panel in front of him. "You're on, sir."

"Gentlemen, this is Lieutenant Commander Genser. I'll keep this short and sweet. Once I've cleared the hangar, I want everyone in the 101st to come out and form up on my wing into a trailing-U formation. The rest of the squadrons will form up on their prearranged vectors accordingly and wait for the order to attack. The Klingons aren't expecting an assault from small fighters, so we have the advantage here. Just stay tight and remember your training. Everyone switch to coded frequency Bravo-9 and confirm."

A small screen folded out from the side of the control panel on Sven's right. On it were a series of lights that indicated the status of each of the six fighters in Genser's squadron. When each of the lights had changed from yellow to green, Proboszcz gave Jason a nod. "Everyone's checked in, sir."

Genser turned from Proboszcz's gaze and looked out the view port at the row of fighters waiting to launch. After a brief moment of silence he said, "Signal the bridge that the 101st is ready to depart."

"Aye, sir," Proboszcz replied.

Minutes later, the entire squadron was in their prearranged U-formation, cruising just aft of the *Santee* by 500 meters. Genser did one final check on the navigational sensor array, and then asked Sven to switch on the laser battery.

With a series of flicks to the weapons console, Proboszcz had the guns online. "Ready, sir."

"How is the targeting computer?" Genser asked as he turned to the weapons officer.

Proboszcz turned to his right and, glancing down at the console, gave a slight nod of approval.

"Good. Let's run one final check on the—" Jason's comment was interrupted by a beep from the communications console. The yellow status light that was methodically blinking told Genser that it was the fighter control officer on board the

*Santee* calling in to let them know the position of the Klingon vessels. Jason reached up and pushed the button. “This is Genser. Go ahead, sir.”

The bass voice of the Andorian flight control officer, Commander Nibalm, came over their headsets loud and clear. “Commander, the Klingons are coming in hot and fast. ETA: five minutes. Stand by to engage the enemy.”

“Did our primary target change?” Jason asked hesitantly. The fleet wasn't supposed to engage the Klingons for another ten minutes. In hindsight, however, he should have expected such an overly aggressive move by the enemy. Once the Klingons had located the Federation fleet, the enemy had three choices: turn back, continue on course, or rush in and fight. It seemed they had chosen the latter.

“Negative, Lieutenant. Your primary target is still the centermost heavy cruisers. Commodore Dozier is still convinced that the Klingon fleet commander is on that vessel.”

“That doesn't sound much like a Klingon leader,” Proboszcz said with a sideways smirk.

Jason chuckled. “On the contrary, that sounds *exactly* like a Klingon commander: send in the cannon fodder first, followed by the heavy guns; keep back while the smaller ships take the blows.”

Sven let out a *harrumph* and nodded his head slowly. “I suppose you're right.”

There was a long silence between the two. All that either of them could hear was the rhythmic sound of the thrusters as they easily kept the little fighter in place behind the carrier and hidden from the sensor scans of the Klingons. The yellow communications light began to flash once more on the control panel. As Jason reached for it he could hear Sven sucking in his breath, waiting for the forthcoming jump to full impulse power.

“Genser here. Go ahead, *Santee*.”

“This is Commander Nibalm. The Klingons' vessels are in visual range. Short-range sensors are picking up a massive buildup in their forward weapons arrays, Commander. Prepare to engage.”

There was more than a twinge of pride in the Andorian's voice. Jason knew that Nibalm would've much rather been out here facing the enemy than sitting behind a

computer terminal. He looked over to Sven, who peered at the center of his side console at the sensor display.

“Confirmed, sir. All vessels appear to be arming their forward batteries.”

“Commander Nibalm, what does their formation look like?”

“They are in a staggered formation, roughly ten vessels high and about twenty wide at their waist. You should be able to maneuver into the center of the cluster with no problems. Enter in from the Z-axis. There seems to be less resistance that way.”

“Understood. Just give me the word,” Genser said, gripping the shuttle's control handle with one hand, his index finger on the other poised above the thrust control switch.

“Stand by,” Nibalm replied distractedly, probably conferring with Admiral Pelletier on board the battle cruiser *South Dakota* at that moment.

Lieutenant Commander Genser gave his weapons officer a sideways glance. “Signal the rest of the squadron, Sven. We're getting ready to go.”

Commander Niblam's voice came back over the speaker. “Engage thrusters in five . . . four . . . three . . . two . . . one. Mark.”

Pressing the impulse igniter, the lead fighter of the 101<sup>st</sup> rocketed to full impulse power. The rest of the 101<sup>st</sup> was tight on Genser's tail, all their engines firing off in a computer-controlled sequence directly after their commanding officer.

When the Klingon ships became discernible out their forward view ports, Jason heard Sven let out a deep gasp. There were hundreds of vessels, all painted in the same green and gray tones, representing nearly every hull design in the Klingon arsenal. There were light and heavy cruisers, destroyers of three different hull types, troop and equipment transports, and a few types Jason had never laid eyes on. He quickly turned on his sensor recorder. If they made it back from this mission alive, the information the 101st was now obtaining would be invaluable to the tacticians at Starfleet Command.

The Klingon heavy cruisers in the lead opened fire on their equally matched Starfleet opponents with disrupters and warheads streaking past the nimble fighters of the 101st. A half-second later, from nearly every ship on the front line of the



Federation forces, lances of yellow laser bolts sprang out and punctured the front line of the Klingon forces. Jason could see that a pair of D-7s in the forefront of the formation was instantly holed through by what must have been the combined firepower of five or six Starfleet vessels. They crumbled under the laser onslaught and drifted slowly out of formation, only to be replaced in an instant by mirror copies.

Seconds later, the fighters of the 101st, 102nd, 207th, and 91st fighter squadrons were winding their way perilously through the maze of Klingon warships. With Proboszcz at the weapons controls, Genser was doing a masterful job at swooping around the lumbering capital ships until a D-4 made an abrupt turn to starboard, putting its bridge section directly in line with his fighter. With reflexes like a cat, Genser slammed the fighter hard forward, narrowly avoiding the massive Klingon warship, only to find his fighter rushing toward the top of a heavy cruiser a few hundred meters away.

“We’re gonna die, we’re gonna die!” Proboszcz muttered and instinctively held his hands to his eyes in a vain attempt to cover his face from debris he was sure was going to come flying through the forward view port at any moment.

Genser switched the communications channel on and signaled quickly to the rest of the wing. “Attack pattern Beta-2!” Genser brought his nimble fighter round to port, neatly missing the cruiser by centimeters, and then ducked under the warp nacelle of another cruiser before coming to a clearing in the battle formation. He looked to Sven, who was only now removing his arm from the front of his face. “Get a hold of yourself, man,” Jason offered with a smile. “I’ve got this under control. That’s why I’m the pilot and you’re the—”

“Watch out!” Sven screamed at the view port. A second later the fighter’s laser cannons came online and disintegrated a piece of debris that had nearly cleaved the fighter—and its crew—in two. Both men looked at one another in shock, and then Sven smiled from ear to ear. “You may be the high and mighty pilot, sir, but I just saved our asses.”

“You’ll get no argument from me,” Genser said with a slow nod, and then craned his neck to get a better look out the transparent aluminum view port. “It seems, for

the moment, that the larger ships are more concerned with fighting their counterparts and are completely ignoring the fighters.”

“Agreed, Skipper,” Sven said, and then his attention was drawn from the view port to the communication terminal. “Sir, we’ve lost two fighters, but the rest are all present and accounted for.”

“Good, because we need to get going.”

Sven looked at the short-range sensors, smiling with approval. “Sensors are showing that we’re right where we need to be.”

“Now that’s a stroke of luck I wasn’t counting on,” Genser said with honest surprise. “Where is the primary target?”

Proboszcz flicked a switch on his console and verified the range to target. “Just to our stern, sir.”

Genser flipped the switch on his control stick that would initiate the communications channel. “All fighters prepare for attack pattern Delta-4,” he said, giving the order for an all-out, straightforward attack on the Klingon cruiser. He licked his lips, looked to Proboszcz, and then turned his small fighter 180 degrees to face it out with the ferocious D-7 heavy cruiser.

## Chapter 19

Stardate 4111.02

November 2253

The binary stars of the Klef system, a pair of nearly identical red dwarfs, had been rotating around themselves for 5.2 billion years without much cause for concern. Empires had formed and collapsed, whole species had evolved from microbes to sentient life, only to destroy themselves and their cultures later. Still, the twins of Klef kept burning and turning, supplying warmth to the only Class-M planet in the system.

None of the planets in the Klef system had ever formed any meaningful sentient life of their own in the more than five billion years of its existence. The diameter of Klef II was 1.6 times that of Earth, with a combined land mass some five times that of the Terran homeworld. A vast ocean bisected the two continents of the surface, giving the planet a warm ring of water around its equator. Above and below the two planetary poles were the small landmass caps of the planet, each teeming with vegetation and swamps near the coastal regions, with mountainous expanses separating the warmer equatorial climates from the frigid snow-covered polar regions.

It was on the northern continent named Pandalar that the Tellarites had set up their small mining facility. Klef II was rich in iron, silicon, aluminum, gold, and silver—in short, a wealth of materials which were required for the construction of badly needed starships and computer systems. The Tellarites had made extensive use of these materials in the decades they'd been mining Klef, and they often boasted that one-quarter of Starfleet was made of Klef materials. The loss of this planet to the Klingons would be deadly to the Tellarite economy, to say nothing of the danger to the Federation.

And, after five billion years of relative peace, the Klingons—and war—had finally come knocking on the doorstep of Klef.

General Keedera, supreme commander of the 5th Klingon Expeditionary Fleet, with 255 vessels at his disposal, was poised in the perfect position to take possession of Klef. The pitiful forces of the Federation were also here; his scouts had told him as much when the fleet had entered the Klef system almost an hour before. It was no surprise. There was simply no way he could have penetrated this far into Federation space without being detected.

However, stealth had not been a concern as he'd blazed a trail of wanton destruction from one star system to the next before finally arriving at this point in space. To him, Klef was just one more stepping stone to be crushed under his heel while he dispensed the emperor's ultimate plan of increasing the boundaries of the Klingon Empire. Keedera couldn't care less how many races he had subjugated, how many he had personally enslaved, or how many beings he'd ultimately tortured or killed. All that mattered to him was the honor that was bestowed upon him by the emperor and the glory that came from battle after victorious battle. His mighty fleet had bested the Federation before, and he was confident that he could do so again. That the Federation had mustered a fleet equal in strength to that of his own was inconsequential. In Keedera's mind, there would need to be nearly twice the number of Starfleet vessels in this system to even the odds of the conflict that was currently waging.

It would be a good fight, and Keedera was confident that the Federation would give it their best attempt, but ultimately their efforts would be wasted and they would be defeated as so many already had been. He'd momentarily toyed with the idea of sending out a message to the Earther commander, telling him that the Klingons would let them live if they would only recognize the futility of their efforts and leave the system before senseless death came in the form of the icy cold grasp of space. He set the amusing thought aside.

The general—a fusion-race officer with over forty years of battle-hardened experience under his heavy leather belt—regarded the small blue-green world one last time from the bridge of his *Riskadh*-class command cruiser *Night Stalker* before committing his second wave of cruisers into the battle that had been underway for nearly thirty minutes.

The command center of the *Night Stalker* was solemnly quiet, and it would remain so for the duration of the battle. Keedera had just seen to that. A junior officer, known for his occasional clumsiness, had dropped a metal stylus to the deck as it slipped from his sweaty hands. Before he could turn to offer an apology to the general, Keedera had his disruptor out of his holster and the offending junior officer was quickly dispatched in a shimmer of green death.

The dark compartment, fifty meters square and dominated by a large tactical display table in the center of the room, was lit only by a series of flood lights that the general had ordered to half their normal illumination. General Keedera enjoyed the silence and the ambiance, as he felt that it allowed for fewer distractions while he concentrated on the task at hand. He clasped his hands behind his back as he studied the tactical table from one side to the other.

The Imperial forces were neither gaining nor losing ground in the conflict, and though the general refused to entertain the idea of defeat, the thought of holding a stalemate with the inferior Earthers was starting to aggravate him to the core of his heavily armored chest.

“Communications officer,” Keedera shouted, his deep voice reverberating off the walls of the bridge. “Get me Commodore Kamato on subspace, now!”

“Aye, sir!” the officer shouted in response.

Commodore Kamato, the oldest of the navy’s battle commanders, second only to Keedera himself in the fleet chain of command, was the commander of the 12th Assault Flotilla. Kamato’s family formed the backbone of the Dok’Marr line—a lineage of proud and honorable Imperial-race warriors that stretched nearly all the way back to Kahless himself. Kamato’s father had served as Keedera’s commanding officer on board the *Sword of Truth* many years ago, and the general had since achieved a seat of great importance on the High Council. Kamato’s father, General Wreok, was deemed too frail to make the journey into Federation space. Had he gone, he was warned by his physician that it would have been his last, as his health would have not been able to endure the hardship such a voyage from the homeworld would entail. Instead, Keedera had been chosen to lead the fleet into victory and the general’s son was placed as his second in command.

Keedera, however, was not so foolish to allow that fact to slip from his mind each moment he was still breathing. Kamato was honorable . . . for the most part. He would do as he was ordered, and that was all that Keedera truly required of him at this point. If, on the other hand, Keedera were to let his guard down for a moment, he was sure Kamato would press his advantage. It was quite a long way back to Klingon space, and a very short distance to the nearest air lock. The last thing Keedera wanted or needed was to be the victim of an unfortunate accident. If that were to happen, if Kamato was somehow in a position to assume total control of the fleet, it could possibly spell doom for the entire Klingon effort in this sector. The High Council may not have shared this opinion, but to Keedera, it was a fact.

A moment after he had made the initial order, the communications officer spoke up. "General, I have Commodore Kamato for you."

Supreme Commander Keedera clasped his hands behind his back and strode silently to the communications station. His boot heels hardly made a sound, which was quite a feat considering the sheer bulk of the man. His long imperial robe made a soft swishing sound across the grated deck of the command level, the only sound that the rest of the bridge crew heard from his movement.

"Commodore Kamato, this is General Keedera speaking. I assume your forces are ready to engage the enemy?"

Kamato's forces were to remain in reserve status, and should only be called upon if the need or opportunity for their particular talents arose.

Keedera had never once challenged a ruling by the Council, no matter how foolish or ill-advised it might have seemed at the time. This instance was no exception, and Keedera had no misconceptions as to why Kamato was being *coddled*, as the supreme commander so often said in his mind about the junior leader.

The commodore came over the speaker, his voice full of confidence. "Yes, Lord Keedera. My forces are ready for the coming battle. It will be glorious."

Keedera looked down at the speaker in front of the communications officer and, for the first time in his life, honestly felt like spitting into the device. Keedera had no appreciation for Kamato's style of tactics. In fact, it held no real style at all. Kamato would merely take in the vast bulk of his forces, strike with everything they had, and take no prisoners or capture any vessels. Every target was a target of

choice, from medical frigates to escape pods. Keedera had even heard rumors that Kamato's own ships would be fired upon by their comrades if they were to get in the way of a killing blow.

There was no honor in that, but there *was* victory. And it was a decisive victory that Keedera now needed. As the ancient proverb went, “*When a show of teeth is not enough, then bite—but bite deep.*”

During the last hour, Keedera and his opponent—a Starfleet admiral of some skill, by his reckoning—had gone toe to toe in the largest fleet action Keedera had ever been a part of. He considered that his counterpart was also similarly awed by the sheer number of combatants, as neither side had a decisive edge over the other. Had either commander been more experienced than the other, the battle would more than likely have been over by now. Now it was time to pull in the reserves, the wild card Keedera had held up his heavily studded gauntlet for the last thirty minutes. It was time to see what the new class of heavy cruisers could do.

“Commodore Kamato, you will take the 12th Assault Flotilla to the heart of the Earther's defenses. You are to strike fear in them—a fear they have never known. We will use these new weapons with all their might and power and we will crush the enemy decisively. Is that understood?”

Kamato sneered back over the speaker. “Understood, my lord.”

“Then go. Go to your *fate*, Commodore.”

“And you to yours, General. To your success!”

The inflection in Kamato's voice caused a slight sneer to form on Keedera's lips. “Toh-pah,” he said in insult to the commodore after the channel had closed.

\* \* \*

“Rear Admiral Welch, I'm picking up some odd movement from within the Klingon forces.”

The admiral had been glaring into the tactical displays in the command center for the last thirty minutes, trying to get a foothold on this sector and grab some sort of advantage from the Klingons. Welch had sent her ships into battle—had sent whole squadrons in—and now those people and vessels simply no longer existed,

destroyed in minutes by the enemy. She watched the *Achernar*-class cruiser *Prince William* get the jump on a D-4 and pound it into space dust, only to be double-teamed by a pair of D-7s and get blown into nothingness. Hundreds of Starfleet officers, maybe thousands of them, fine men and women from dozens of species, were now dead.

“What kind of movements?” Welch yelled. “Your vagueness will only serve to get more people killed.”

“I’m putting the communications up on the main screen, ma’am,” the young officer said.

A moment later the center tactical image in the command center wavered, as if covered by a thin film of gaseous haze. A second later the image changed to mimic the forward view of the *Bonhomme Richard*-class medium cruiser *Manark*, under the command of Fleet Captain Frederick Davis. “Repeat: Admiral Welch, are you receiving our signal?” Davis’s voice echoed in the command center of the admiral’s flagship, the *Bonhomme Richard*-class command cruiser *Tenara*.

Welch waved her hand at the central view screen dismissively, as if trying to wipe the image into clarity faster. “Yes, yes. We are receiving you. Captain Davis, what are we seeing here?” she asked as she watched the Federation destroyer *Anzio* score a hit against a Klingon cruiser. Davis’s voice began to narrate what the admiral was seeing on her viewer, his voice coming through the all the speakers in the command center of the *Tenara* at once.

“Admiral, what you’re seeing on the screen is the remainder of my cruiser detachment,” Davis said hurriedly. “We’ve sustained heavy casualties, but we’ve been giving the Klingons as good as we’ve got. A moment ago it looked like the Klingons were going to re-form into another battle line, but then they suddenly began to withdraw unexpectedly. There’s now a large hole in their defensive screen.”

Welch walked from the large tactical displays to stand behind one of the fleet communications officers. “Captain, can you put that hole on the viewer?”

“Yes, ma’am. Switching now.” The image on the viewer again wavered, then began to slowly re-solidify. There, outlined by nearly two dozen Klingon warships, was Davis’s “hole,” as he had put it. This was indeed an unusual tactic for the



Klingons, as they usually held a very tight formation during close combat. To open up such a large gap in their field was to allow their enemy to escape. It could just have easily been a trap. Either way, Welch was not about to commit her forces to finding out the answer.

“They may be trying to break up and escape, Admiral,” Davis said, although his tone reflected his condemnation of this tactic. “My sensors on the *Manark* are showing that we gave the enemy a pretty good pasting here, considering our own losses.”

Welch considered Captain Davis’s words for a moment. The numbers of starships on both sides seemed to be slowly dwindling, with no clear victor in the battle. Perhaps Starfleet had managed to fend the Klingons off, causing them to find a safe hiding spot while they licked their wounds? *And maybe Vulcans were the best comedians in the Federation.*

“Fleet Captain Davis, I want you to continue to monitor this development for the next few minutes. If you feel it is warranted, I want you to—”

Davis interrupted the admiral before he could finish. “Ma’am, something is moving to fill in the hole from the other side. Whatever it is, my sensors are telling me it's big!”

“Davis, magnify your screen.” The centermost tactical monitor on the *Tenara* suddenly zoomed toward the blackness of the hole, and a large form began to take shape . . . then another . . . and finally a third. “Enhance that image, Fleet Captain Davis. We can’t make out anything.”

“Trying, ma’am,” Davis’s voice replied nervously. “The Klingons have thrown up some form of jamming net. We can’t get a clear picture without moving in a little closer.”

Welch exhaled her breath slowly. “Send in two destroyers to get a better look, but maintain caution, Fleet Captain.”

“Aye, sir.”

Seconds later, the distinct flashing blue symbols of two Starfleet destroyers became visible on Welch’s large tactical display monitor. They were the wedge-shaped *Larson*-class destroyers *Alpha Trion* and *Rana*. They moved toward the pocket in space from either side of the *Manark*, their orange fusion engines burning

brightly against the backdrop of space. In the distance, on the periphery of the opening the Klingons had created, war continued to rage on as destroyer engaged cruiser, cruiser battled cruiser, and frigates fought transports.

“Admiral,” Davis said after a moment, “the destroyers are nearing the Klingon position. I’m putting the relayed image up on your screen.”

What were once three greenish outlines on the screen slowly came into focus. Welch, standing behind the communications terminal with folded arms, glared at the increasing size of the shapes. They were ships, but like nothing that she or anyone else in the fleet had ever seen. They had the same basic bridge pod and connection neck as a D-7, but their hulls were longer—about fifty meters or so. The secondary hulls were enormous, constituting over three-quarters of their total length. They had a gradual slope on the sides, which came to separate points that were aft of the bridge pod on the port and starboard sides, as if two large triangles had been welded together at their base. Under the base of these structures, on the aft end, were the warp nacelles which sloped slightly inward at their connection points, allowing the large upper hull to shield them from a top-down attack.

Welch had only a moment to contemplate the ramifications of this discovery. “Davis, get those destroyers out of there!”

Then, with no warning whatsoever, the large Klingon ships opened fire on the smaller destroyer escorts. The *Larsons*, designed a decade earlier and more suited to patrol duties or convoy escort, were ill-equipped to handle large fleet engagements and were not expected to last very long. This was proved true when all six of the lead Klingon’s forward disruptors came online, shot out in a brilliant hail of energy, and disintegrated the destroyer in a single shot. The second Klingon cruiser wasted as little time in dispatching the *Rana* in the same fashion. Nearly 200 Starfleet officers in total were vaporized in less than ten seconds. The third Klingon, in the rear of the staggered formation, moved to the front of the line—presumably to quench his own taste for blood.

Rear Admiral Welch was beside herself as she looked at the newest, exceedingly deadly weapon in the Klingon Imperial Navy. “Davis, regroup the remainder of your forces at point Beta-2. You’ll need to destroy those new vessels before engaging any further targets.”

“Understood, ma’am.”

Welch’s screen began to shift from the view of the Klingon heavy cruisers to a field of less-crowded stars as the *Manark* oriented itself at Beta-2, the predefined rendezvous point for her ships.

“Communications officer, get me Fleet Captain Sneeringer,” Welch said hastily. “Have him form up the remainder of his forces with Davis at Beta-2 and then coordinate an attack on those battlewagons.”

\* \* \*

Fleet Captain Christopher Sneeringer, commanding the *Bonhomme Richard*-class cruiser *Ambassador*, leaned forward in his command chair as he studied Frederick Davis's face on his view screen. Davis, a young man at thirty-three, seemed to have put on a few years in the last hour. His face was smudged with grease and grime, his gold uniform tunic was stained with sweat and blood, and his dark brown hair was a disheveled mess. Still, Fred had the undeniable command presence that few officers in Starfleet had ever attained. He was, at the moment, leaning back into his command chair as if he were lounging in his backyard and sipping on iced tea.

“What can I do for you, Fleet Captain? I'm a little busy here,” Fred said with his usual cocky smile.

“Well, it seems that I've been ordered to render any assistance you may need.” Sneeringer’s dark eyes sparkled.

“I never thought I'd live to see the day when a fleet captain came to assist another fleet captain in combat,” Davis replied in a chuckle to his old friend. The image of Sneeringer on the bridge of the *Ambassador* buffeted from side to side, as if the ship had either taken a hit or was rocked by a very close call.

“Between you and me, after this war is over, I'm done with this uniform, Fred,” Christopher laughed nervously. “I'm going back to teaching biochemistry to grade school students who've probably never even seen a Klingon ship before.”

“What? And give up your commission?” Davis eyed Sneeringer sideways and smirked. This was an old debate between the two, one that had been slowly raging

for the better half of four years. It usually ended with Sneeringer saying he would resign “in two weeks” which, of course, had yet to happen.

“Are you saying you wouldn't be interested in a slightly used pair of commodore braids for those uniform cuffs of yours, Fleet Captain Davis?”

Davis absently thumbed the left cuff of his uniform with his right hand. “I'm sure what I'm owed will come to me in time, and the last thing I'd want is to wear anything that might someday belong to you. Some boots are just too large to fill. I'm sure that goes for cuff braids as well.”

Fleet Captain Sneeringer nodded. “Then let's go get those new braids for you. I hear there is an angry trio of heavy cruisers around here with new paint jobs on them. Why don't we go in there and see if we can't scuff them up a bit?”

Davis's left eyebrow went up. “Did you have anything specific in mind, sir, or should I just guess?”

Christopher Sneeringer leaned his muscular frame back into his command chair, smiled, and then mirrored Davis's pose precisely. This time it was the *Manark's* turn to shift abruptly as a disrupter blast passed closely by and struck a destroyer off her port bow. “Do you remember that old Academy drinking song, Captain?”

Davis's hand was now firmly gripping his armrest as he waited for another jolt to rock his ship. “We had quite a few in my day, Chris. Which one are you referring to?”

“I'm sure you did, but it always amazed me that—no matter how many classes would come and go—and how many songs they all adopted, there was only one song that always stuck to the campus like a Tiberian bat. It was like the second fight song of the Academy. I'm sure you would remember something like that, Captain.”

The look on Davis's face was first of confusion, then humor, then understanding. “I believe I do remember it now, sir. It was called Down from Saturn and . . . Up Uranus.” Several officers on the bridge of the *Manark* chortled at the remembrance of the song.

Sneeringer laughed heartily. “That's the one, Captain! And that is exactly what I intend to do to our friends out there,” he said as he inclined his head over his left shoulder. “We will come in from a steep positive-Z angle. I'm talking about being completely perpendicular to their course.” He was using his hands to simulate the

opposing forces. “We hit them with everything we've got and give them as little a target as possible. Then, we send the other half of our forces screaming up from the negative-Z and do the same.” He then slammed his fist into his palm in a loud clap that echoed throughout both bridges.

Davis admired the boldness of the commodore's plan immensely. It was exactly his own style. “Sounds good to me, sir. Where do you want us to be stationed? First or second attack run?”

“I want you with me, Fleet Captain, on the first run. I've relayed the plan to the rest of the group. Our first target is coming into sight right below us. On my signal we will attack. Switch back to visual and let's get down there and do some real damage.”

Davis, flicking his index finger away from his forehead, did exactly as Sneeringer suggested. The video image of the fleet captain was replaced by the downward view of a pair of the new Klingon heavy cruisers. They were beautifully deadly, immensely powerful, and—no matter what—they had to be stopped.

The most rearward Klingon cruiser had targeted a *Heston*-class cruiser *Brando*. With one barrage of its six forward disrupters it had blown the saucer module free of the secondary hull, which was now a burning mass of twisted metal. The Klingon battle cruiser then unleashed four torpedoes simultaneously, blowing the saucer into burning fragments no larger than the *Manark*'s helm console.

“Ready to engage full impulse power at your command,” the *Manark*'s helmsman said over his shoulder.

A red button on the armrest of Davis's chair began to flash, and he realized that Sneeringer was transmitting his signal. “Helm officer, full impulse! Weapons officer, target that forward cruiser. I want a full barrage—all weapons, tight dispersal—and throw the kitchen sink at them as well!”

“Aye, sir!” the men replied proudly.

The *Manark*, with a dozen cruisers and destroyers tight on her stern, swooped down from the proverbial heavens to attack the devils in their own backyard.

# Epilogue

Stardate 4111.13

November 2253

Incoming subspace communication . . .

Classification: CONFIDENTIAL

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

TO: All Commanding Officers, Galaxy Exploration and Military  
Operations Commands

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

1. On or about stardate 4110.29, the Federation starship USS *Endeavor*, NCC-1001, failed to report to Sector Command in the Theta Eridani system. Subsequent searches have failed to ascertain the exact disposition of the vessel and her crew. Any and all vessels traveling near the last known coordinates of the *Endeavor*, regardless of their respective branch of service or planetary affiliation, that discover any information that could possibly lead to the recovery of the vessel, should report such findings immediately to the Office of Starfleet Intelligence, Theta Eridani sector, Starbase 14.

2. Several new Klingon warships have been identified on front lines of the war effort. What little information Starfleet Intelligence has been able to gather is listed below:

(A.) A slightly modified version of the D-4 cruiser was identified on stardate 4110.01. This vessel appears to be more maneuverable than the previous variant (now classified as a D-4D), and contains slightly greater firepower. Starfleet Intelligence has classified this new vessel as the D-4E variant.

(B.) On stardates 4109.25 and 4109.30, a smaller variant of the widely produced D-7 cruiser was positively identified near the New Daran and Klethor systems, respectively. Due to the close proximity of the two systems, Starfleet Intelligence is unsure whether this is the same vessel, or the first batch of new breed of vessels. This vessel has been assigned the designation D-8. The vessel seems to be less armed and armored than the D-7, but this could also indicate that the vessel is more maneuverable. The identification of the vessel in this specific area leads credence to the stipulation that the Klingons have a major construction facility somewhere in an adjacent sector of space, possibly in the Karag or Ruwan systems. If any such vessel matching this description is encountered, Starfleet captains are advised not to engage the enemy, regardless of whether or not said commanding officers feel that the ensuing conflict would come out in their favor. They are hereby ordered to gather as much intelligence about the vessel as possible and transmit this data to the nearest Starfleet Intelligence installation or office. No exceptions.

(C.) In a recent series of engagements with Federation forces near Klef, Ogolo, and Jevol, Starfleet officers positively identified a new Klingon heavy battle cruiser design. This has been given the designation D-10. It's much larger, more heavily armed, and much more heavily armored than any vessel Starfleet has previously encountered from any race in the past. The vessels contain up to six forward-firing disruptors (possibly more) and appear to have multiple forward-firing torpedo tubes. It is also probable that the Klingons have incorporated a rear-firing disruptor or projectile system as well. All Starfleet commanders should be aware that this information has not been substantiated, but should still, nonetheless, be strongly considered when vessels of this type are engaged. Starfleet captains are requested to gather as much information on this type as is feasible, and to submit that information to Starfleet Intelligence as soon as possible.

3. Due to the influx of requests made by fleet and group commanders that the *Constitution*-class starships should be designated as combat units to counter any of

the new threats listed in this communication, as well as previously known threats to the Federation, the Office of the Commanding Officer, Starfleet Intelligence, has stated the following:

“Although we feel they [*Constitution-class*] as a whole would, indeed, provide Starfleet Command with the heavy firepower that may be lacking in some forward areas, we cannot assure that the performance of said vessels will meet with the field commander’s expectations. Starfleet Command is dedicated to the safety of all our member worlds and, should we feel that these [*Constitution-class*] will be able to fully meet the needs of our members in the continuing war effort, I will personally release these vessels to serve, once again, with Military Operations Command. Until then, they [*Constitution-class*] will remain a research platform only, serving with both Galaxy Exploration Command and Colonial Operations Command until such time as the vessel can be fully certified for use in all other fields of operation.”

4. The Office of Planetary Affairs has released the list of following planetary systems which, as of stardate 4200.01, the Federation will officially begin trade relations: Dundas, Harpie, Zardos, Jido, Tarsus, Efro, New Daran, Pathos, and the planet Formality. All Federation-licensed civilian and merchant vessels will receive updated star charts and planetary information regarding these systems at their next minor computer overhaul, and at no cost to the vessel owners and/or operators.

5. On stardate 4109.30, Galaxy Exploration Command launched a series of long-range probes to scan the spinward edge of the Gamma Quadrant. It is hoped that this quadrant will contain vast amounts of new materials and minerals, as well as a host of beneficial species, that will help the Federation prosper well into the next century. The probes, launched at high warp velocity, should arrive in the Gamma Quadrant in roughly twenty-seven years. On stardate 4105.10, Starfleet Communications Headquarters reported that it had lost contact with the probe designated “Friendship-1.” Friendship-1, launched by the United Earth Space Probe Agency in 2067, was designed to seek out new, intelligent life in the Delta Quadrant. The last reported position of the probe showed that it was still on course for the heart of the quadrant when the transmission unexpectedly stopped. The probe was designed to continually broadcast a modified homing beacon in the event that the probe was discovered by one of the races it had sought out. However, no



such signal has been detected. Due to the extreme range of the probe, Starfleet Communications Command has strong doubts that the mission can be salvaged. However, due to the historical significance of this mission, Starfleet Communications Command will continue to monitor all subspace frequencies for the probe's transmissions.

6. On stardate 4110.15, the Vulcan science survey vessel *Criterion* was reported lost by the Vulcan Science Academy. The vessel was on a research mission near the Romulan neutral zone. While Starfleet Intelligence believes that Romulans may be responsible for disappearance, no credible evidence has yet been discovered to corroborate this theory. All Starfleet commanders traveling near the area last reported by the *Criterion* should be wary of any and all vessels in the vicinity, as Romulans may be attempting to mask their intentions under the guise of trader captains or merchants.

7. As of stardate 4106.30, the twenty-seven *Surya*-class frigates are now assigned to the Starfleet Reserve Force. These vessels will serve as instruction platforms for Starfleet Academy students, as well as training platforms for Starfleet Marine and Special Forces command operations. The *Constitution*-class starship USS *Potemkin* has also been reclassified as a training vessel as of this stardate.

8. The Federation Museum at Memory Alpha has announced the opening of a new exhibit, focused on the early days of exploration of the Alpha Quadrant. To commemorate the 100-year anniversary of the Battle of Cheron, the NX-Class exploration vessel *Enterprise*, the oldest vessel still holding a commission in Starfleet, will now be fully opened to visitors. Previously, only several key areas of the ship were accessible during brief tours that were held throughout the year. After nearly a decade of meticulous restoration work, the museum is now proud to announce that the ship has been completely restored to her fully operational status and is displayed as she appeared in her 2156 livery. The vessel, as well as several Romulan ships captured during the Earth-Romulan war of 2156-2160, will be open year-round starting on stardate 4112.24. The ship will also be available to all Starfleet personnel for commissioning, enlistment, reenlistment, or the retirement services for active duty personnel. Requests for such a reservation should be

forwarded to the Office of Public Affairs, Memory Alpha, no later than thirty stellar days prior to the event commencing.

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Stardate 4111.18

November 2253

Admiral Jacques Pelletier, seated calmly on the bridge of the USS *South Dakota*, watched with a deep sigh of satisfaction as his ship entered the mooring ways of one of the Federation's dry docks in low orbit above the planet Thranstor. It had been a long voyage from Klef, where Pelletier had linked up with the remnants of 9th Group—once commanded by Rear Admiral Welch—and Jacques was glad to be back in Federation-controlled space.

Vice Admiral Fleegman had been tragically lost when his starship—the *Franklin*—had been destroyed by a new Klingon heavy cruiser in the Battle of Klef. Rear Admiral Welch was still alive, though injured and unable to command for an as-yet-undetermined time; unfortunately, her ship, the *Tenara*, had also been destroyed along with the *Franklin* at Klef. They and their crews were to be honored at a ceremony on the starbase tomorrow morning. With the death of Fleegman and the necessary removal of Welch, Pelletier had been given a temporary field promotion to the rank of Vice Admiral and placed in command of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Fleet, or what was left of it—much to the dismay of Rear Admiral Miles Synclair—an officer whom Pelletier knew to have more than a few delusions of grandeur and who'd had his eye on a fleet command post for some time.

Of the 718 ships that had officially formed the 3<sup>rd</sup> Fleet, over half of them would never return home. Those that did carried the scars of war—some that could be repaired, and others that could not. Those ships that could not be salvaged would never again see a commission in Starfleet. Their duty done, they would be recycled and scrapped to make way for newer and more capable vessels, one of which—the

medium cruiser *Antietam*, was being finished out in a dry dock directly adjacent to the *South Dakota*'s new berth.

Rear Admiral Synclair, with the remaining ninety-two ships of the 7th Strategic Squadron, had been ordered to proceed to Fenbly VII to undergo their own repairs. For Synclair, it could have been much worse, if not for the quick thinking of the destroyer *Tamerlane*. The small destroyer had sent out an emergency broadcast to the entire fleet—countermanding, on their own initiative, an order for communications silence by Synclair himself. Synclair, having split his forces between his assigned post of Jevol and the unauthorized planet at Heuristic, had managed to act quickly enough to regroup his forces and post a defensive position at Jevol. However, even with his forces acting quickly, he had no better luck at stemming the flow of Klingons deeper into Federation territory than any of the other squadrons had. While the bulk of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Fleet had slowed the Klingons' advances, they still advanced—just at a much slower pace.

Vice Admiral Pelletier held one hand to his chin, the other strumming the buttons on his command chair as he envisioned the upcoming meeting he would have with Admiral Beltran and Fleet Admiral Luxa at Starbase 14. In seventy-two hours, Pelletier was going to be on a high-speed scout vessel heading back to the starbase to apprise the major heads of Starfleet as to the losses that had mounted over the last few months. Pelletier had every confidence that the Starfleet could hold the line that had been forged near most of the Klingons' advances into Federation space.

There was, however, a great unknown when it came to the enemy's advances into more coreward areas of Federation space. There, some intelligence reports suggested that the remnants of the strike force that had attacked Jevol would push up to Elek, about three light-years distant. Others stated that some Klingon forces would attempt to attack Sire Yopat, or possibly Fenbly, where Synclair was now licking his wounds. Pelletier knew it was almost a certainty that the Klingons would push toward Thranstor at this point. The shipyards made a most attractive target, and Pelletier was convinced that the Klingons knew where they were. Due to his meeting with the heads of Starfleet, it was likely that Pelletier wouldn't return in time to help defend Thranstor, should any attack come in the next few months. He was sure, however, that he was going to return at some point.

The simple fact was that the Federation fleet, as a whole, had met the Klingons punch for punch. They'd destroyed, disabled, or captured as many Klingon warships as the Klingons had done against the Starfleet forces. But even after hitting the Klingons with everything they had, it had only served to stop them momentarily. The Klingons would stay put for a while. With the 7th, 9th and 11th Squadron's resources dwindling, Pelletier had been forced to return to purely Federation-held territory to repair and rearm before attacking again, ordering just enough ships to remain in the system to ward off any minor pushes the Klingons might make in the near future. The majority of the Klingons had been pressed back to the Topax system, where Fleet Intelligence was reporting the Klingons had set up orbital repair facilities.

There was now a makeshift neutral zone, extending from Klef to Jevel, with remnants of the two opposing fleets squaring off against one another. In any event, Pelletier was sure that the Klingons wouldn't stay put while Starfleet repaired and rearmed itself. Indeed, it was foolish to believe they would. Even now as the *South Dakota* —probably on her last official mission for Starfleet—limped into her final docking position under half-thruster power, Pelletier was making a mental list of all the types of vessels he would demand that Starfleet Command send to defend Thranstor, as well as some of the nearby sectors, within the next month.

With a slight jolt of the vessel, the navigation officer spoke up. "Sir, we just lost the last starboard thruster."

Pelletier offered a smile, as much to himself as to his old ship. He could see in his mind's eye the long lines of burnt hull plating in the *South Dakota*'s saucer section, the cracked warp nacelle on her port side, and the hangar bay gaping open—its doors having been blown away and every shuttle on board sucked out into space during her last battle. The *South Dakota* was tired . . . both looking and feeling her age. Her laser emitters were nearly burnt out, her complement of accelerator rounds was empty, and almost a fifth of her crew was either dead or in sickbay. For the last few weeks she had been the good and faithful servant she had always been in life as she ferried the rest of her crew home safely. Now, with her last mission over, she somehow knew it was her time to die. Jacques patted the armrest of the command

chair lovingly and then slid his hand down its length. “I’m sure the inertia will get us to where we need to go, Lieutenant.”

The *South Dakota*, with no external propulsion systems on or functioning, slowly glided into the gaping maw of the orbital repair dock sphere. The light from the dock splashed around her hull, emphasizing even more damage than Pelletier was aware of. As the docking tractor took hold of the *South Dakota*, she came to slow stop. The main gangway hatches were extended into the primary and secondary hulls, and Pelletier ordered all crewmen not on duty to report planetside for some much earned rest, relaxation, and reflection. He released the intercom button under his finger, feeling a wave of sadness come over him. This was probably the last order he would give as a commander of a Starfleet vessel, and very likely the last such order that would ever be given on the *South Dakota*. He absently stroked the button, wondering briefly if it would ever light up again under the touch of another commanding officer, or if it would be recycled like the rest of the ship and make its way to a new warship—possibly one even carrying on the namesake of her predecessor. Pelletier found a peaceful solace in that belief.

He gingerly raised his hand from the control panel, then abruptly swiveled his command chair and made his way toward the only remaining operational turbolift on the entire ship, giving the ship’s dedication plaque one final examination.

“On the wings of fortune, I have carried on with diligence,” Pelletier read the plaque aloud, then turned to the burnt and broken bridge behind him. “Thanks, old girl.” When the lift doors opened, Pelletier tucked himself inside for the long journey to the transporter room.