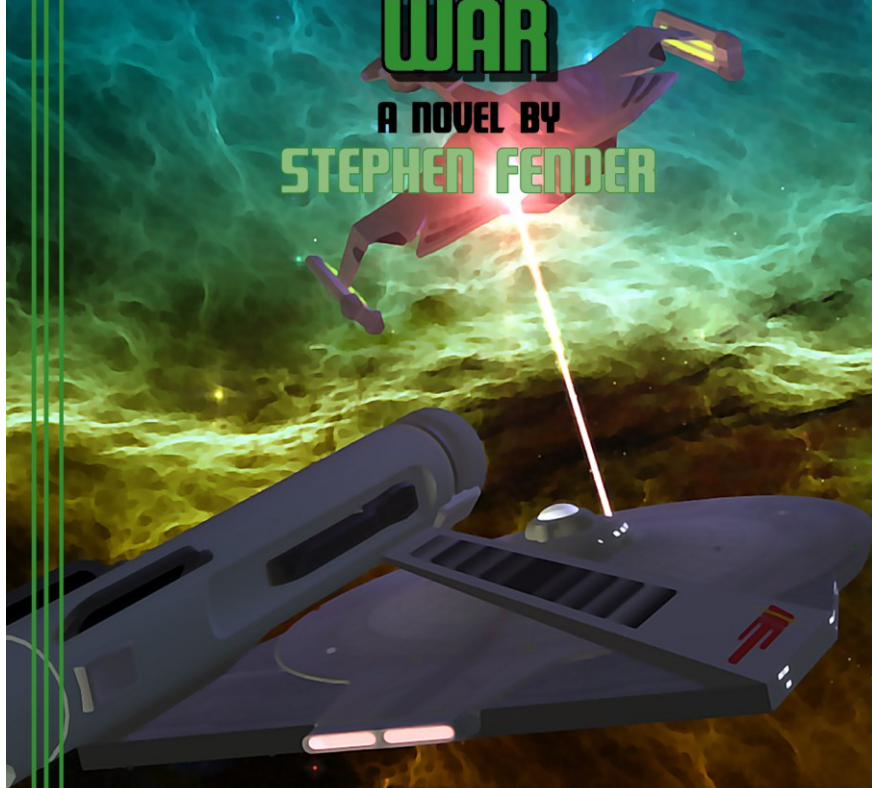


#3

# *STAR TREK* THE FOUR YEARS WAR

A NOVEL BY  
STEPHEN FENDER





# ***STAR TREK***

## **THE FOUR YEARS WAR**

### **Volume III**

A novel by

**Stephen Fender**

Edited by

**Lynda Dietz**

Published by

***JRP***

**Jolly Rogers Productions**

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*Star Trek: The Four Years War, Vol. III*



# **Star Trek: The Four Years War, Vol. 3**

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LLAP!





# Chapter 1

Stardate 4201.03

January 2254

The swirling and turbulent upper atmosphere of the green planet loomed large on the forward view screen. The super-hurricane, the largest reported on the planet in the nearly five years since the world's discovery, spiraled slowly across the lower half of the western continent of Minis. It'd been a long time since anyone on the USS *Farragut* had seen a hurricane in action. With the weather modification net on Earth—as well as a number of other worlds—now working almost flawlessly, inclement weather such as this was a thing of the past. The beauty and the destructive power of the weather system was enough to humble any being, and the crew manning the bridge stations on the Federation cruiser in the early hours of the morning were all silently glad to be in a warm and secure place.

All of them, that was, except for James T. Kirk.

Now on his third training cruise since he'd entered Starfleet Academy, James was looking forward to something more than just simple planetary exploration. The war with the Klingons was rolling into its third year, and many of Jim's contemporaries at the academy had graduated and were immediately assigned to vessels of war on or near the front lines. Occasionally, James would receive letters of correspondence from them, telling him of the battles they'd fought or the exciting landing parties that they'd been members of. That was what James wanted; that was why he had joined the fleet. Not to study turbulent ecosystems, but to defend the Federation against aggressors, both big and small. The fleet *needed* him, and yet he was stuck in the middle of nowhere, powerless to do anything about it.

If there was a word to describe his predicament, it was “small.” James Kirk, small and unimportant, locked away in a research cruiser far and away from the battle lines drawn against the Klingons. Never mind that he currently occupied the

captain's chair—it wasn't his, and he knew it. Something in him *knew* that although the ship was technically his while the captain was away, her heart belonged to another man. He was borrowing her for a single shift, and he tried not to caress the command chair lovingly, knowing that he'd have to vacate it the moment Captain Garrovick made his way up here from his quarters.

And Stephen Garrovick was a good captain—as good as James had ever served under. He had a way with his people. Firm, yet fair. He was tolerant of the mistakes made by junior officers, but only to a point. Gary Mitchell had discovered that during their last cadet cruise. Fortunately, Garrovick had managed to get past Mitchell's indiscretions, and had even requested the young man come back on board his ship for this cruise. Gary was delighted, but then again, he had no idea that Garrovick had secretly convened with Kirk on the matter beforehand. After careful consideration, James had been ordered to be a clandestine supervisor to the energetic and brash Mitchell. Jim didn't like the idea of babysitting, but he was glad to both be on board with his close friend from the academy and to have been singled out by the captain for an assignment. If Kirk played his cards right, he'd probably even get a mention or two in the captain's log, which would forever etch his name into the history of Starfleet.

He only hoped that the log entry was something more exciting than standing the 0200 bridge watch, looking over a hurricane from a safe distance of 700 miles.

The gray turbolift doors behind Kirk swished open and Captain Garrovick, tall and well built, entered the bridge and headed straight for the command chair in the center of the room.

James spun to see him, then quickly moved to vacate the captain's chair. With an upturned hand offered in Jim's direction, the captain stopped Kirk's movements in mid-action.

"That won't be necessary, Mr. Kirk."

"Sir?" James asked in confusion. *Why would the captain not want his seat? Was it something I did? Is this a test?*

Stephen smiled comfortably. "Report, Mr. Kirk."

"Not too much to tell, I'm afraid." He nodded toward the view screen. Garrovick's eyes followed Jim's.

“The Category 4 hurricane we picked up yesterday?” Garrovick asked, already knowing the answer.

James nodded slowly, staring at Stephen as the captain seemed captivated by the storm system. “Now a Category 6, sir.”

“Amazing, isn’t it, James?”

“Yes, sir. Quite.” It was an honest answer, even if Jim wished he were somewhere else.

Stephen turned to Gary Mitchell, now sitting at the science station. “How much longer is this going to be around, Mr. Mitchell?”

Gary nervously entered the requested calculations into the ship’s main computer. He missed a few buttons, silently cursing to himself as he quickly corrected his errors.

Garrovick looked at Jim and the two shared a silent smile, then turned his attention back to Mitchell before their impromptu sidebar was noticed.

“It will pass over the eastern coast of the continent in approximately five hours, sir. It will have cleared the entire continent in about fifteen.”

“‘About,’ Mr. Mitchell? I’m sure you can be more exact than that, Cadet.”

There seemed to be a sheen of sweat on Gary’s forehead as he rechecked his numbers. “Ah, yes . . . yes, sir. Uh, 15.31 hours to be exact, sir. That is assuming the hurricane doesn’t deviate from its current heading.”

“Excellent, Mr. Mitchell,” Garrovick then turned to James. “I’ll need a landing party in the transporter room in seven hours. I understand you’re due to be relieved here on the bridge in less than an hour?”

James nodded sharply. “Yes, sir.”

“Very good,” Captain Garrovick said, his tone pleased. “I’ll take the center seat until your relief arrives. Get down to your quarters and get a few hours’ rest. I’ll see you in the transporter room at 1100 hours.”

Jim was beaming. *Finally*, he thought. *A chance to get off the ship!* “Yes, sir!”

Garrovick then turned his attention to the nervous cadet at the science station. “You too, Mr. Mitchell. I’ve already signaled for your relief to come up early. As soon as Ensign Trin gets here, get down to your quarters for a few hours’ rest.”

Mitchell shot Kirk a sideways glance, smiling mischievously in the process. It didn’t go unnoticed by the captain.

“And I *do* mean rest, Cadet Mitchell,” Stephen said sternly to the cadet at the science station. “No lollygagging . . . and *definitely* no shenanigans.”

A smile still plastered across his handsome face, Gary’s eyes shifted to his captain. “Shenanigans, sir? Me?”

The captain’s gaze was unflinching. “I don’t need to tell you how important landing party assignments are to your cadet performance reviews, do I?”

Gary’s smile quickly faded and was replaced by the somber expression of a well-trained cadet. “Of course not, sir.”

Garrovick nodded slowly. “Then we have an understanding on this matter?”

“Yes, sir. Absolutely.”

“Good. Then I’ll expect nothing less than perfection, Mr. Mitchell. That goes for you, too, James. Starfleet expects it, and I see no reason for either of you to believe that I am any different.”

\* \* \*

Exactly seven hours later, Cadets Kirk and Mitchell were waiting in the *Farragut*’s transporter room for the rest of the landing party to arrive. Though they’d been a few minutes early to their appointment, everyone else seemed to be running a little late. At ten minutes after 1100 hours, Captain Garrovick, a security officer, and an ensign whom both Kirk and Mitchell had known from Starfleet Academy entered the transporter room. When the ensign looked at Jim and Gary, he all but sneered in their direction as he walked past them and took his place on the translucent transporter pad.

When the three officers and two cadets were situated on the pads, the captain flicked his index finger away from his forehead, giving the transporter chief an unspoken command to beam them down to the surface.

Neither James nor Gary were strangers to transporter operations. As the familiar force field took hold of their bodies, they awaited the slight tingling sensation that would signal dematerialization. Three seconds later, they were on the tropical surface of Minis.

James's first impression was that he was in some forgotten rainforest from Earth's past. The team was surrounded by enormously tall trees, with thick blue trunks that measured—in some of the larger variants—nearly ten meters in diameter. The tops of the trees, stretching hundreds of meters in the air, were covered in thick green leaves that capped the forest in a near-unbroken canopy. Many of the leaves had fallen during the hurricane and now littered the damp forest floor. There also seemed to be fern-like plants, some as large as a small hover car, sprawled out haphazardly as far as the eye could see. Before the landing party was a pair of large trees that must have fallen during the storm. Their thick yellow mossy coats were in stark contrast to the dark blue of their internal fibrous structure. The air smelled crisp and surprisingly clean, reminding James of the after-storm conditions back home in Iowa.

Captain Garrovick, with his personal security guard at his side, turned and stepped up to Kirk and Mitchell. "I suppose you're both wondering what we're doing here."

Mitchell was still taking in the sights as Kirk looked at his captain. "The thought did cross my mind, sir."

"This planet is supposed to be littered with dilithium, or so a recent survey team told the Federation Science Council. You both know how important that is to the war effort."

The mention of the dilithium ripped Gary out of whatever daydream he'd been having and his attention snapped back to Garrovick. Both he and Kirk nodded with understanding.

"Starfleet Command wanted to waste as little time as possible in sending out a starship to investigate. Luckily for us, the *Farragut* was the closest ship in range." Garrovick reached out a hand and delicately stroked the fern at his feet. The stalk of

the bush seemed to react to his presence, coiling in on itself slowly as it shied away from his fingertips. “Remarkable, isn’t it? The survey team mentioned these plants, and a host of other life-forms on this planet that we’ve never seen before. I couldn’t wait to come down here and see it for myself.” He looked back to Jim and Gary. “Not to mention, this is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for a pair of raw cadets. You get to experience a virgin planet on the eve of industrialization.”

The captain’s last remark held a tone Jim knew all too well, and there were echoes of Kirk’s father’s voice in his captain’s statement. “Sir?” Jim asked, hoping it wasn’t too presumptuous to query his captain for a more detailed explanation.

“Progress, James,” Stephen said as he continued to stroke the plant. “It’s the cornerstone of our civilization—not to mention all the major members of the Federation.” The captain leaned down and picked up a handful of small stones from the ground, each instantly becoming warmer in his palm. When they were nearly too hot to hold, he tossed them back on the forest floor where they quickly returned to their inherent ambient temperature. “Progress, Jim. And war. Progress will wipe clear whole sections of this wondrous forest to make way for a dilithium mining station, and the longer the war rages on, the more dilithium will be required to fight it. That means even more deforestation of this astonishing environment . . . one that the Federation is willing to . . . *remove* . . . in the name of victory.”

“I’m still not sure I follow you, sir.”

The ensign from the transporter room scoffed in Kirk’s direction. Kirk met the ensign’s gaze, remembering all too well when the officer had been an upperclassman of disrepute.

Garrovick turned a disapproving gaze toward the young man before he looked back to Jim. He knelt down by the forest floor, motioning Jim and Gary to follow suit. He lowered his voice to the two young cadets. “Ensign Drake doesn’t get it either,” he said, tossing his head briefly sideways to indicate he was talking about the ensign. “His family seems to be bred for this war. That’s why he’s a good officer for the current campaign. He’s just . . . well, not a good fit for . . . ships of exploration, if you catch my meaning.”

“I think I do, sir,” James replied, although he wasn’t quite sure why he’d done so.

“I’m sure you do, Jim. I’m sure both of you do.” Garrovick reached out a hand to the fern-like plant, its tendrils ringing themselves around the captain’s gentle fingers. It seemed that the plant had found a friend in the captain. “Men like me . . . well, we weren’t meant for this war. I’m an explorer and a scientist first and foremost, gentlemen. Now, don’t get me wrong—when push comes to shove, I’ll toss down to fight with the best of them. In fact, I’ve been known to throw the first punch a time or two.”

Gary and Jim smiled, but it was Kirk who really understood. “But that’s not really the point, is it, sir?”

“Of course it isn’t, James. That’s why I wanted *you* down here. You’re not like Drake, and I suspect you never will be, but that’s not to say that temptation won’t get the best of you. You need to learn to temper your anger and your frustrations, and not rush into things with a foolhardy attitude. And when it does come down to a fight, you need to understand full well what and whom you’re fighting for and against. That’s the mark of not only a good warrior, but a good captain.”

“You don’t need to worry about Cadet Kirk here, sir,” Gary snickered. “He’s as good with his fists as any boxer I’ve ever seen.”

The captain smiled. “Oh, I know he can fight, Mr. Mitchell. And I know he can think. What I’m anxious to see is if the cadet can do them both at the same time.”

“You’re talking about the Kobayashi Maru test, aren’t you sir?” James said, smiling wryly.

The captain feigned surprise. “Am I?”

“It sure sounds like you are, sir.”

“Now, Mr. Kirk, you know that no one is allowed to discuss that with you. That includes anyone outside of Starfleet Academy as well.”

Jim pursed his lips and inclined his head in acknowledgement. “So I’ve been told.”

“I know this is your last deep space assignment before you take the test, and I just want you to be prepared for it. You’re at the top of your class at command school. That’s a prestigious position to hold, James. I just want you to know that, no matter

what happens, you're going to be an asset to Starfleet Command as long as you keep up the good work and maintain the proper perspective."

James thought back to what he had felt on the bridge of the *Farragut*. He thought of his former classmates, and the adventures they might have been having near the front lines. Was that really what he wanted? Captain Garrovick was quite an impressive officer, and he certainly had the respect of everyone on board the ship. He'd been in his share of battles, and had emerged victorious from all of them. Yet here he was, insisting that fighting was not the end-all of Starfleet service. Perhaps it was something that James should consider, if he wanted to make a career of Starfleet. "Yes, sir. I'll try."

"That's all I want to see and hear," Stephen said warmly, then looked up at Mitchell. "From *both* of you." Releasing the fern he'd been stroking, the captain stood and motioned for Ensign Drake to come closer. As the ensign approached, he withdrew a tricorder from around his shoulder and offered it to the captain. Stephen waved the device up and down, then began turning side to side to allow the instrument to get a full sensor sweep of the area. When he brought the device's screen back to his eyes for inspection, he smiled joyfully. "There's a series of structures, just over that rise." He pointed to a small hill that lay just beyond the periphery of the forest. "They're definitely not natural in origin."

"I thought this planet was supposed to be devoid of complex life-forms, sir?" Gary asked.

Stephen nodded. "It is, Mr. Mitchell. I can't tell from this distance, but my guess is that these ruins are from some previous inhabitant of the planet."

"Human?" Kirk asked, and then inwardly kicked himself for making the statement. Only a plebe would assume that every planet in the galaxy contained bipedal humanoid life.

If the captain caught Jim's embarrassment or not, he never let it show. He simply answered Kirk as if James had asked a completely logical question. "We won't know until we get closer. Something in these trees is obscuring the tricorder's readings." He closed the tricorder and handed it back to Drake. "The structures aren't far from here, only about a kilometer or so on the other side of the rise. Let's get going." He turned from the men and led the way to the base of the hill.



Twenty minutes later, the landing party had come down the far side of the hill. In front of them was a large edifice carved into the side of a smaller earthen mound. The large symmetrical blocks used to construct the entryway reminded James of the ancient Mayan ruins of Earth, which he didn't hesitate to point out to the captain.

"That's a very astute observation, Cadet," Garrovick replied. "It also bears a resemblance to the ruins at Tikal, in Mexico, and the Vontoro citadel on Beta Frapton."

"Show-off," Gary leaned close to whisper into Jim's ear.

"What was that, Mr. Mitchell?" the captain asked.

Garrovick's remark caught Gary by surprise. *Man, the old guy really has some good ears! He must be part Vulcan.* "Oh, I was just telling Cadet Kirk how much I admired his knowledge of historical structures, sir."

The captain continued to scan the structure, not bothering to turn and look at Mitchell as he responded. "Knowledge is power, Mr. Mitchell. You'd be wise to remember that."

"Yes, sir. I'll do that."

If anyone knew Gary Mitchell's nuances and quirks, it was James Kirk. Jim could tell by the tone of Gary's voice that the captain's words had gone in one ear and directly out the other. He looked at Mitchell and shook his head disapprovingly, to which Mitchell only shrugged his shoulders and smiled. Jim rolled his eyes at the gesture and turned his attention back to the structure. "Do we investigate, sir?"

Garrovick smiled broadly and turned to the cadet. "You bet your sweet bonnet we do. In fact, why don't you two lead the way?"

"Us?" Mitchell replied nervously.

Ensign Drake sniggered. "You aren't afraid of the dark, are you, *Cadet?*"

Gary's eyes grew cold as he stepped closer to Drake, who was standing near the imposingly large entryway. "Not on your life, *Ensign.*"

Drake puffed his chest. "I prefer 'sir,' Cadet."

James instinctively tightened the muscles in his legs, ready to pounce on Drake the moment he raised a fist to his best friend.

Gary's response was to simply smile, keeping his eyes fixed on the arrogant junior officer. "Like I said, not on your life, *Ensign*."

Drake took a menacing step closer to Gary, but Garrovick was quick to intervene before the ensign had a chance to take another. "Enough of that, the both of you. Cadet Kirk, you lead the way. We'll be right behind you."

James shifted his eyes from Drake to the captain. Garrovick, always the commanding presence, didn't need to stand between Drake and Mitchell to keep the two apart. Besides, Jim knew full well that Mitchell could handle himself in a fight if it came down to it. "Yes, sir," he said after locking eyes with Drake. Withdrawing his laser sidearm, he gingerly twisted its barrel, setting the weapon to stun. *You can never be too cautious*, his small arms instructor had always said in class.

James had barely gotten to within a foot of the door before he was suddenly flat on his face and in the mud. It had happened so suddenly he didn't know what had occurred. He quickly turned and looked to see what he'd stumbled over in his journey across the dirt, expecting to see a small branch or rock that he'd overlooked. The only thing that greeted him was Drake's manically smiling face. Looking down the length of the ensign's uniform, Kirk noted the tip of Drake's boot was covered in a thin film of the same mud that now caked the left side of his face.

"You need to learn to be more careful, *Cadet*. Maybe you should go back home where it's safe."

The captain, who'd been discussing something with Gary up to that moment, was quick to silence Drake. "Cadet Kirk, if you're all right, then please lead on. Ensign Drake, please walk with me. I believe we need to have a little chat."

As Gary came up to Jim's side, he helped him to his feet, then offered him the sleeve from the utility jacket he'd just removed. "Don't pay him too much mind, Jim old boy. I'm sure he'll wash out of the fleet before we get commissioned."

James took the offered garment and cleaned off his face. Seeing that Garrovick was in the midst of dressing down the ensign did little to quash the anger welling up inside him. "One can always hope."

## Chapter 2

Stardate 4202.10

February 2254

Fleet Captain Eugene Alex, former commanding officer of the *Anton*-class cruiser USS *Parsis*, finally felt as if he were at home in his new command. He had assumed control of the 4<sup>th</sup> Squadron only three weeks before, commanding the group from his new flagship, the *Loknar*-class frigate USS *Justice*. His group, consisting of three *Loknar*-class frigates and four *Detroyat*-class heavy destroyers, were patrolling an area of space three sectors coreward from the former boundaries between the Federation and the Klingon Empire. In the last twelve months, the front lines of the Klingons' push into Federation space had brought them dangerously close to this sector, and Alex was determined to hold those few meager parsecs of space to the very last man.

In the last few days, he'd ordered a series of intensive battle drills for the squadron. Each man, woman, and transgender species from every race had been pushed to their limits as they honed their individual and team skills for the engagement Alex was convinced was coming. With the last efficiency report in hand, Alex leaned back in his chair and smiled, confident that the numbers were exactly where he wanted them to be. Each ship was operating at peak efficiency, and each member of the Starfleet crews that manned them were at their very best, just the way Eugene liked it.

The fleet captain watched the stars slowly drift past the forward view screen as the black leather padding of his command chair crinkled under the shifting of his weight. He noticed a presence at his right side and turned to see who it was.

"Ah, Lieutenant Dudas. Thank you," he said to the yeoman at his side. She cradled a cup of tea in her hand, a blend from Alex's native land back on Earth. He gingerly took the cup offered to him and dismissed the young woman with a nod.

He sipped at the beverage, reveling in the sweetness as the warm liquid crossed his palate. *Perfect*, he thought as he brought the cup to his lap. *Everything is perfect*. He turned his attention to his Andorian science officer, Commander Davek Eashen. “Science Officer, report status.”

Eashen, his blue skin looking even more vibrant under the soft lights above his station, turned in his chair to face his captain. “Sensors report nothing out of the ordinary, sir.”

“Excellent. Helmsman, status.”

Lieutenant Anthony Richards of Alpha Centauri turned to his captain. “On course, sir. We’ll meet up with the *Baton Rouge* in less than three hours, present speed.”

“Very good.” On board the *Baton Rouge* was the 7<sup>th</sup> Squadron commander, Rear Admiral Miles Synclair. Eugene was more than excited to be hosting the admiral for a tour of inspection of his battle squadron. The admiral was sure to find everything in shipshape. This would undoubtedly lead to a favorable report to Starfleet Command, bringing Eugene even more accolades than he was afforded when he’d been promoted to fleet captain six months ago. Yes, rank had its privileges, and Captain Alex was very much looking forward to the privilege that a promotion to the admiralty would bring him, to say nothing of the delight of getting him away from this accursed war zone.

Eugene had heard rumors that Synclair’s star was on the downswing. After the incident at Klef last year, Synclair had been ordered even closer to the front lines, not the most desirable place for the commander of a squadron consisting of over 200 ships. To place a commander directly in harm’s way reflected one of two things: Starfleet Command’s utmost confidence in his abilities, or their extreme displeasure with the same. If Synclair wanted to prove that he was a capable commander, there would be no better place for him to do it. Thus, it was said he’d accepted his new orders with both a welcoming smile and curses in his heart.

And if he failed to live up to Starfleet Command’s expectations, so much the better. There were a dozen fleet captains itching to take his place, and Eugene Alex planned on being at the forefront of that lot. Alex held the rank of commodore in everything but title, and the leap from his current post to the admiralty was easily

within his reach. All he needed to do was play his cards right—and if anything, Eugene Alex was an exceptional card player.

He reached for his warm tea, sipping it lightly as he fathomed the forthcoming meeting with Miles Synclair.

Approximately seven hours later, the light cruiser *Baton Rouge*, namesake of her class, was in sight of Alex's long-range sensors. The fleet captain had chosen the Delta Dorado system for the inspection, and had the entire squadron resting "at anchor," so to speak, near the outer edge of the system. Alex wasted little time dispatching the frigate *Chicago* to intercept the admiral's cruiser and to escort it to their location. The *Chicago*'s captain, a Tellarite commander named Ertik, was Eugene's immediate successor in the squadron, as well as a trusted and respected warrior. It was only fitting for Alex to send his best officer to meet with the admiral, and he was satisfied that he'd done so.

Thirty minutes later the *Baton Rouge* was snugly alongside the *Justice*, with the remainder of the 4<sup>th</sup> Squadron formed around their commander's starship in a tight, circular formation. They were all holding station, with each commanding officer awaiting the admiral's inspection of their respective vessels.

Fleet Captain Alex was in the transporter room to receive the admiral the moment he sent the signal. When Rear Admiral Miles Synclair materialized onto the transporter pad, Eugene was taken aback by the sheer size of the man. Clearly, the admiral was a trifle too thick around his secondary hull, and Eugene silently vowed that—once he became a member of the admiralty—no such fate would befall him. He subconsciously sucked in his gut as he approached the admiral with an outstretched hand.

"Admiral Synclair, it's a pleasure to receive you, sir."

The admiral embraced his hand in a firm shake. "Thank you, Captain Alex. It's good to finally be aboard a different vessel for a change. I was beginning to feel like the *Baton Rouge* was a second skin to me."

*Considering your girth I don't doubt it*, Eugene thought wryly. The captain then gestured toward his first officer. "This is my first officer, Commander Daniel Ohana."

The two officers exchanged pleasantries before Alex spoke up again. "Would you care for any refreshments, Admiral?"

Synclair waved his pudgy hand dismissively. "That won't be necessary, Captain. I'd like to get this inspection done with as soon as possible."

Eugene discerned a tone of impatience in the admiral's voice. "Is there anything I should be aware of, sir? If there's a more pressing matter for you to attend to, I could—"

"Captain, if there is anything you need to know, rest assured that I will inform you of it directly."

Eugene definitely did not mistake the admiral's tone for anything other than what it implied: condescension. This was not going at all like Eugene had imagined, and he tried to regain control of the situation. He stretched his arm toward the room's only doorway. "If the Admiral would kindly follow me, we can begin the tour in the engineering spaces."

"Yes, yes. Fine. Let's just get on with it, shall we?"

After a brief tour of the engine room, cut short by the admiral's obvious impatience, Eugene decided to venture toward the shuttle bay. Once there, he offered up the ship's newest shuttlecraft for the admiral's inspection. It was one of the new Class-F models, far smoother and less cluttered than the previous model. Its smooth sides were emblazoned with the *Justice's* hull numbers, followed by the numeral "1" to indicate that it was also the captain's personal craft.

When Synclair caught sight of the vessel's name, he all but scoffed. "*The Dar'an?*"

Eugene beamed with pride. "Yes, Admiral. Named after Rear Admiral Dar'an of Izar, whom I believe you knew. It commemorates his personal sacrifice at—"

Miles huffed, obviously agitated at the craft's designation. "It's a silly name for a shuttlecraft," he shot back acerbically, then turned sharply to the captain. "Now . . . *now* I believe I've seen everything, Captain. I'm ready to move on." And with that

he turned and stormed out of the shuttle bay. Eugene was quickly on his heels as the admiral made a beeline for the nearest turbolift.

The air was thick in the lift ride to the bridge. Eugene was finding it hard to breathe, thinking that perhaps Synclair's large lungs had created a minor vacuum in the small space. The lift slowed to a halt as Fleet Captain Alex saw his chances of impressing the admiral fading with each passing second. When the lift doors opened, Eugene could feel a marked wave of fresh air enter into the cramped car.

"Admiral on the bridge!" Commander Davek Eashen announced in his most authoritative voice. All hands immediately stood at attention as Synclair exited the lift onto the upper level of the command deck.

His eyes shifted to each crewman at each station, taking in the sights and sounds of a new bridge for the first time in nearly two months. Though all the command decks in Starfleet Command took on a familiar circular shape, each class had a slightly different arrangement of the bridge stations. On the *Baton Rouge*, for example, the science officer was directly behind the captain. Here on the *Justice*, the science station was just to the right of the main view screen. The lack of standardization annoyed Synclair, and he had vowed to reorganize it all when he became a vice admiral and in charge of Starship Research and Design, a promotion he was sure was coming in the very near future.

Eugene stepped free from the lift and waved a hand toward the engineering station, just to the right of the turbolift. "This is our chief engineer, Lieutenant Commander—"

"Sir." It was the communications officer, Lieutenant Michael Bradford, who had spoken up.

Eugene and Synclair both turned to him, each sharing a look of surprise that such a junior officer would interrupt the captain in the middle of his sentence. Bradford slunk back slightly in his chair under the weight of their collective gazes.

"Yes, Lieutenant? You have something *important* to say?" Eugene asked sternly.

"Yes, sir. That is, I do . . . sir."

Synclair rolled his eyes in obvious displeasure. “You have a communications officer with a stammer, Captain. Hardly acceptable for a bridge officer, don’t you think?”

Eugene’s face began to turn red. Bradford was quite a capable officer, one he was glad to have on his team. However, he had given Sinclair the ammunition to cause the captain embarrassment, and Eugene was sure to have a talk with him in private after this was all over with. “Come now, Lieutenant. What do you have to say?”

“Well, sir . . . we seem to be . . . rather, we’re definitely receiving a distress call, Captain.” He seemed to have regained his grasp on his professionalism the moment before he finished speaking.

Eugene gaped at him for a moment, then slowly slid his eyes to Sinclair, who now seemed to have a fine bead of sweat taped to his wide forehead. Eugene swallowed, realizing that this was his moment to shine and impress the pompous and ill-mannered admiral. “Who’s it coming from, Lieutenant?”

“It’s hard to make out, sir. I think it could be a merchant vessel.”

“Do we have a visual signal?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Put it on the screen, Lieutenant.”

The stationary image of stars on the screen wavered briefly and was slowly replaced with the image of a male humanoid in obvious distress. His face was smudged with grease, his short hair disheveled, and his brown shirt had a sizeable tear near his left bicep. His eyes were sunken, probably due to a lack of sleep.

“This is Captain Eugene Alex of the Federation starship *Justice*. With whom am I speaking?”

The man swallowed hard, then wiped his lips with the back of his dirty forearm. “Stillman . . . Captain Frank Stillman, of the trader *Marcus Centauri*.”

“You sent out a Priority One communication, Captain Stillman. What can we do for you?”

Stillman looked at a loss for words for a moment, then began slowly. “We . . . we were attacked . . . by Klingons.”

“Are they still in the area?”



“Negative. That is, I don’t think so. Our long-range sensors are down, but our short-range sensors don’t show anything out there.”

“Are you alone?”

“Negative. There are three vessels in our group. We . . . we were on course to the Zalvhros colony when we were attacked without provocation. Our warp drive is down, and our supplies are limited. We didn’t expect to be stranded out here. Can you assist us, *Justice*?”

“Commander Eashen, what is their position?” Eugene asked sideways.

“Half a parsec from here, sir. Near the furthest planetoid in this system.”

Alex could hear the desperation in Stillman’s voice. There was urgency to the merchant captain’s request, and Eugene could fully understand why. If the Klingons were still in the vicinity, then the merchants wouldn’t stand a chance. That the Klingons hadn’t initially destroyed them was a huge stroke of favor on their part. This was his chance to shine in front of the admiral and he would take it. “Captain Stillman, we’ll set a course for your location and be there shortly.”

“Captain?” Admiral Synclair spoke up abruptly. This was the last place that Miles wanted to be, but there was very little he could do about it. The thought had crossed his mind to request that the captain beam him back over to the *Baton Rouge* immediately, but he knew that it was out of the question. He was now the ranking officer on the ship, and if Starfleet Command got wind that he had requested a hasty exit in the intervening moments before the starship came to the rescue of a stranded vessel, his chances for a swift promotion would melt like snow in a desert. Besides, if he acted quickly enough, he might be able to wrestle this moment of glory from Alex’s hands and come out of it a hero.

Eugene turned to face Synclair. “Yes, Admiral?”

Synclair wrapped his heavy arms behind his back and thrust out his chest, which still failed to stick out farther than his gut. “Captain, please set a course for the trader convoy and engage at maximum speed. We need to rescue those people before the Klingons decide to come back.”

Synclair was stating the obvious, and Alex knew it. Of course he would have to set a course for them, and he'd already made his mind up about getting there as fast as possible. Sinclair had simply taken his prerogative as the senior officer to make the statement before Eugene got a chance to, thus giving Sinclair the credit in the log entry for ordering the rescue.

*So be it*, Eugene thought. There would be other chances to shine during this mission. "Yes, sir. We'll take two of the frigates in with us and—"

"You will do nothing of the sort, Captain," Sinclair interrupted. "We will take the entire squadron in with us."

*Okay, that's a bad idea, and you should know it, Admiral.* "Sir, might I suggest . . . if we leave a small number of—"

"No, Captain Alex, you may *not* suggest. You will follow my orders and that will be all."

Eugene could see the situation quickly slipping from his control. "Sir, Starfleet regulations on this matter are quite clear. If we are going to—"

"Captain, there is a stranded group of freighters out there just waiting to be rescued! While you're sitting here jabbering, the Klingons could be heading back in this direction for another attack run. We don't have time for this. Get this battle squadron moving, or you'll find yourself relieved of command. Do I make myself clear?"

Eugene straightened in his chair, then turned quickly to the communications officer. "Lieutenant Bradford, signal the group that we are moving out."

Synclair walked up behind the communications officer. "And advise the squadron commanders to keep a tight formation around us at all times. I don't feel as safe on board this vessel as I did on the *Baton Rouge*."

The remark was a slap in the face to Eugene Alex and his entire crew. Michael Bradford looked to his captain for his consent to send out the admiral's request, to which he simply responded with a short nod.

Eugene placed a firm hand on his shoulder, a friendly—albeit non-professional—gesture to help calm the nerves of the young man at communications. "Once you're finished, send a signal to all departments that we're getting underway. I want status reports from each of them in the next five minutes."

He smiled, his former lack of self-confidence now a thing of the past. “Yes, sir. Right away.”

Seven minutes after the squadron had gotten underway, they were at the rendezvous point for the freighters. Just as Captain Stillman had stated, three *Antares*-class freighters were there patiently for them just on the far side of Giso VIII, a large reddish-pink gas giant.

The freighters themselves were nothing spectacular. Their angular sides gave them a very utilitarian look, not unlike the shuttle craft in the *Justice*’s hangar bay. They each had dual warp nacelles, scaled-down versions which were Federation in origin, positioned back on the angular craft’s centerline. Their beauty and speed lacking, their only saving grace was their ability to haul enormous amounts of cargo long distances, and they had endeared themselves to most of the brass in the admiralty of the Merchant Marine Command for it.

The *Justice* and her squadron slowly came to within visual range of the freighters on impulse power, with every starship’s sensors set on a continuous and overlapping sweep of the system. Seated squarely in his command chair, Eugene could see the lines of battle scars streaked across each of the freighters’ otherwise pristine hulls. He ordered a communications channel opened to Captain Stillman, and was greeted with a slightly cleaner-looking merchant captain.

“Oh, thank God you’re here, Captain Alex. We were beginning to worry.”

“No need for that. Do you have injured that you need tending to?”

“Yes, quite a few. We were only scheduled to be out for a short while, and we had to increase cargo capacity for the shipment . . . so we eliminated half our raw organic compounds. We’re running low on supplies.”

Admiral Synclair sidestepped the fleet captain, inserting himself between Eugene and the main view screen. “That’s quite all right, Captain Stillman. This is Rear Admiral Miles Synclair, commander of this entire squadron. We’ll have you and your crew beamed over to our ships while we send an engineering detail to your vessels to tender repairs.”

“Wow. Thank you, Admiral. I have to say, I’m not used to such good-natured hospitality from Starfleet officers. I’ll definitely be sending a positive report to your superiors for this.”

Eugene could only roll his eyes and try hard not to bring his palm to his face in mortification.

“Say nothing of it, Captain,” Synclair replied, as if he alone were bringing these stranded merchants the gift of salvation. “Just give us your coordinates and we’ll lower our shields to begin the process.”

“Of course, Admiral,” Stillman replied with a toothy grin. “We’ll send them right away.”

## Chapter 3

Fleet Captain Alex brought the *Justice* closer to the SS *Marcus Centauri*, preparing to beam over the wounded personnel first before moving on to anyone else. The 4<sup>th</sup> Squadron had surrounded the trio of freighters, with Commander Ertik and the frigate *Chicago* tending to the SS *Constance Centauri*, and Commander Sofan and the destroyer *Maryland* assisting the SS *Nomma Centauri*. The five remaining Starfleet vessels, three destroyers and two frigates, held station just beyond transporter range of the vessels.

On the bridge of the *Maryland*, the Deltan captain Sofan sat motionless in his command chair as he watched his ship inch ever closer to the *Nomma Centauri*. Although space was infinitely large, transporter operations between ships were always a finicky operation. The vessels had to be within a relatively small range of one another, a gap made even smaller due to the limited transporters aboard the freighters. The closeness of the vessels brought forth a recent, very troubling memory for Sofan.

Sofan had experienced his share of collisions in space while he was the executive officer on the *Maryland* only four months prior. The captain at that time, Commander Wilcox, had vastly misjudged the distance between the *Maryland* and another *Detroyat*-class destroyer while they were performing battle-readiness maneuvers near the Alphosa star system. When the *Maryland* had attempted to perform an emergency turn to starboard to avoid a stray meteorite, her starboard warp nacelle came into contact with the other destroyer's port nacelle. Wilcox had acted quickly, but not quickly enough. He'd managed to maneuver the *Maryland* out of the path of the destroyer—avoiding certain destruction—but the damage had already been done. The ensuing board of inquiry had found him negligent in his duties as a commander, which had the unfortunate outcome of stripping him of his command. He'd been reassigned to a Federation listening post out on arid Cestus III, a backwater planet that was far removed from anything that would ever advance

his career. Sofan, having already advanced to the rank of commander by that time, was the logical choice to take control of the *Maryland*.

Now, as the destroyer came within a few hundred meters of the *Nomma Centauri*, Sofan was as alert as he'd ever been in his entire life.

"We're now within transporter range, sir," Chief Engineer Lassiter announced.

Sofan, his eyes unwavering from the angular freighter on the forward view screen, acknowledged Lassiter with a sharp nod of his head. "Thank you. Prepare to begin transporter operations, Chief. Helmsman, full stop."

"Answering full stop, sir."

The ship, already crawling on maneuvering thrusters, slowed to a stop within seconds.

"Navigator, lower the shields."

"Aye, sir. Shields are down."

"Communications Officer, hail the *Nomma Centauri*. Advise them that we're ready to begin transporting their personnel aboard at their convenience."

"Aye, sir."

The captain briefly turned his attention to the Caitian science officer at his right. "Commander T'Creedy, what are the sensors telling you about that freighter?"

T'Creedy's green eyes, sharply contrasted against his jet black fur, turned away from the science monitor and to his captain. "Nothing out of the ordinary, sir."

"What do the library computers tell you about its history?"

"Not much, I'm afraid," T'Creedy all but purred. "It's been registered to a small trading consortium for the last six months, ferrying cargo of various natures to small outposts and colonies in this sector."

"And before that?"

"Unknown. However, this particular class of vessel is relatively new. It's possible that its construction was completed shortly before its current assignment."

Sofan turned back to the forward view screen. "Starfleet Security should have a record of the vessel's registration in their database. See if you can—"

T'Creedy's attention was pulled from his captain instantly by a proximity alarm on his console. His paws ran quickly over the switches on his computer as he accessed all relevant sensor data. "Proximity warning, Captain!"

Sofan looked out at the *Nomma Centauri*, floating as motionless as the *Maryland*.  
“Not from them?”

“Negative. But it *is* a short-range sensor contact.”

*Could it be one of the other ships in the 4<sup>th</sup> getting too close?* Sofan had to ask himself. “From where?”

“Port side, aft. Range: 5,000 kilometers and closing rapidly, sir.”

“Another freighter we missed?”

“Negative, sir. The signature registers as a Klingon warship.”

Commander Sofan whipped his head around to face the science officer. “What?”

The half-second movement gave T’Creedy the time he needed to confirm his readings. “Several Klingon ships, sir. They’re closing in on our position rapidly!”

Sofan looked out at the freighter looming off the bow. “This is a trap!”

He didn’t have time to order the shields be raised before the first disruptor blasts struck the unprotected hull of the *Maryland*.

As soon as the Klingon vessels had been detected, Fleet Captain Alex had ordered the shields up, but the Klingons had already made a successful first strike on the helpless Federation vessel. The communications station had erupted in a ball of flame immediately after the initial impact, killing Lieutenant Bradford instantly. The helmsman had also been injured when he was thrown from his station, but after stumbling for a few moments he was back at his post and trying to give the *Justice* some maneuvering room.

That was when the freighters opened fire.

A pair of small compartments had opened in the side of the *Marcus Centauri*’s forward hull, and two disruptor turrets immediately emerged. They began spraying the *Justice* with a hail of laser bolts, most of them striking the underside of her saucer-shaped primary hull as she tried to turn and extricate herself from the area. The lower sensor dome was shattered in the exchange, leaving the ship without both the long- and short-range sensors she needed to fight.

Rear Admiral Miles Synclair, standing behind Alex's chair, was too stricken with fear to issue orders. His hand firmly grasping the back of the command chair, he was trying hard to keep himself from vomiting his lunch after seeing the fragmented remains of the communications officer behind him. Synclair's skin had turned a sickly white and he was coated in sweat.

At last sensor report, there were no less than three D-10 battle cruisers in the Klingons' arsenal, and a score of D-6 light cruisers. They easily had the 4<sup>th</sup> squadron outmatched, and both Admiral Synclair and Fleet Captain Alex knew it. Their only chance was to escape.

Alex, firmly entrenched in the command chair, began disseminating orders. "Helm, get us out of here! Best possible speed!"

The hull took another pounding. Alex knew for certain that the Klingon weapon of choice this time had been a torpedo. The violent jolt upward caused two of the bridge crew to lose their footing, tossing them to the deck in a heap of arms and legs. His command chair now freely able to pivot, Alex knew one of the fallen had been Synclair. "Commander Ohana, see to the admiral."

Synclair was sobbing openly, clutching his fists to his chest in the fetal position behind the captain's chair, repeating, "I don't want to die!" several times before Alex ordered him to be silent.

"Shut him up or get him off the bridge! I don't care which, Ohana; just do it!"

On board the *Chicago*, the Tellarite Commander Ertik was fully engaged in the battle and was savoring each minute.

"Bring all weapons to bear on the closest Klingon!"

"But sir! That's a D-10. We'd never stand—"

"We're going to give him a fight he'll never forget! Fire a series of the new photon torpedoes directly at the bridge. That should get his attention."

The young officer turned quickly back to his controls and entered the firing pattern into the weapons computer. "Torpedoes ready, sir!"

"Fire now!"



A trio of blue-white torpedoes streamed out of the destroyer, flying toward the Klingon battle cruiser with unbelievable speed. Two of them impacted against their target; the third veered off and flew out into open space.

“Negligible damage to the Klingons, sir,” the science officer responded instantly. “They’re swinging around for an attack run.”

“Helm, stay on their tail. I don’t want to look down their throats.”

The science officer chimed in again. “Sir, two more contacts to port! Cruisers, sir. They’re firing!”

“Brace for impact!”

The pair of D-6s descended on the small destroyer that had opened fire on their comrade. They fired first with disruptors, then followed up with a barrage of torpedoes. The *Chicago*’s shields didn’t last long under the onslaught. In less than fifteen seconds, the Starfleet vessel was completely pulverized.

Two *Loknars*—the *Nova* and the *Quest*—had managed to disable one of the D-6 cruisers with a fast strike over its dorsal side. The came about in a line-abreast formation, taking aim at one of the D-10 battle cruisers. Thinking they could disable the Klingon’s impulse drive, they came down on the larger ship from a high Z-axis, firing with full lasers at the aft end of the enemy’s hull. The beams struck the Klingon multiple times with little to no effect. They kept firing until the very last second, pulled up hard, and sailed over the Klingon with only a few meters to spare. The *Nova* performed a high turn to starboard, making sure to protect its stern from any incoming fire the D-10 might unleash. The *Quest* had turned to port, but quickly found itself in the line of fire of another D-6. When it turned back to starboard to avoid an incoming torpedo, it was directly in the sight of the battle cruiser.

The D-10, its enormous gray hull shimmering in the reflected sunlight of the Giso system, brought all its forward-firing weapons to bear on the small Federation frigate. The disruptor beams on either side of the bridge module fired first, followed quickly by the beams in the port and starboard forward stanchions. The combined firepower quickly disintegrated the *Quest*’s shields. Moments later, a pair of

torpedoes sprang out from the cruiser, one striking the port warp pylon and the other hitting the frigate amidships. Fragments of the hull were ejected into space as a gaping hole was opened just aft of the bridge. The *Quest* lurched down, then twisted to port at an odd angle. It was clear that she'd lost her steering controls and was now adrift, helpless to defend herself against another barrage from the battle cruiser. When the *Nova* came back around to help defend its stricken comrade, the *Quest* was nowhere to be seen, with only an expanding sphere of debris where the frigate's last known position had been.

Admiral Klutuk, son of Tuka, watched impassively from the command deck of the Imperial battle cruiser *T'Torka* as the last remnant of the Federation squadron was incapacitated. His flagship, one of only a handful of D-10 starships in service with the imperial fleet, had fought well against the miniscule defense of the Earthers, although his taste for conquest was far from quenched.

His aide was at his side, rattling on about the battle that was over nearly as quickly as it had begun. "And sir, the *Vor'Nass* has secured the lead battle cruiser!" he exhaled at last. This was something that did pique the admiral's curiosity.

"Was the fleet commander captured as well?" Klutuk asked, leveling his black eyes at the young aide.

"It does not appear so."

Klutuk nodded heavily. "Then he has died in combat," he replied mournfully. "A fitting end for a warrior."

"That is not known either, my lord."

"How can that be?" the admiral barked. "Either he is alive or he is not!"

"We received a signal from Captain Su'Ho only minutes ago. His boarding party found no such person on board the ship."

"And we *are* sure of our reports, yes? This *Baton Rouge* is the flagship of Admiral Miles Synclair, is it not?"

"It is, my lord."

"Then we must find the admiral at once," he said tersely. "He has valuable information in his possession. Of that I am sure."

“It is possible he took residence on one of the smaller vessels prior to the battle, sir.”

Klutuk turned to the aide. At just over two meters tall, he towered over the smaller Imperial-bred officer. The admiral’s fist was clenched at his side, his frustration welling up against the aide who was—after all—not to be blamed for this error. He sighed heavily before returning his tone to a manageable level. “A commander would *never* leave his flagship. Its purpose serves him, and the two would be lost without one another.”

“Yes, my lord. But, how else can it be explained?”

*How indeed?* Admiral Klutuk nodded his head, then brought his hand to his short beard and began to stroke it absently as he considered the alternatives. “He must be hiding on the cruiser.”

The aide took a step back in shock as if the words spoken by Klutuk had offended him. “A commander who hides from the face of his adversary? Unthinkable!”

“In our way of thinking, it would never be so. But these are *humans*. And humans are as much like us as we are like the Romulans . . . or the peace-loving Vulcans. No, this Earther commander has no spine. I can taste his fear from here. It wafts across my bridge like the foulest stench imaginable.”

“You are sure he is alive, my lord?”

Klutuk nodded solemnly once more. “Something of him remains. I *know* it. We must find him, if only to bring him the death he must now surely long for.”

“Yes, Admiral.”

Klutuk turned back to the large display screen at the front of the bridge. On it, two D-6s were bringing the *Baton Rouge*—or what was left of her—alongside the *T’Torka* for the admiral’s personal inspection. Behind them, another D-10 had a frigate held fast in her tractor beam. The frigate had fared worse than the cruiser, and with both of the warp nacelles gone and some buckling to a majority of the outer hull plating, Klutuk held little hope of salvaging anything useful from the small ship.

“That frigate there,” he said, pointing a long, bony finger at the image on the screen. “Ragga, what is its designation?”

“It is the *Justice*, my lord. *Loknar*-class,” the aide replied, coming to stand next to his commander before the large screen.

“Survivors?” he asked sternly, his finger still jutting toward the sorry-looking vessel.

“A handful, sir. No more than thirty remain from a crew of nearly a hundred.”

Klutuk finally lowered his hands, a razor-sharp smile creeping across his face. “Excellent. Bring them aboard the *T'Torka* immediately. I wish to question them personally.”

“Is there something specific you wish to learn from them, my lord? Surely no one on such a small ship has access to the best-laid plans of Starfleet Command.”

Admiral Klutuk continued to study the small ship as if it were the most precious of jewels. As the heavy cruiser towed the *Justice* steadily closer to the *T'Torka*, Klutuk licked his lips slowly. “You forget, Lieutenant, that our supply chain runs thin. Our forces have stretched themselves to the limit to get this far into Federation space. At every turn it seems that the Federation rushes in to cut us off at our tail. Once they have done that, we will be vulnerable.” He walked to the view screen, then placed a heavily gloved hand against the image of the *Justice* and stroked it like an adored beast. “We must have all the information we can tear from their personnel and their computers.” He slowly lowered his hand after a moment, then turned abruptly to the young aide. “You understand your orders, then?”

“I do, my lord.”

“Then see to the frigate personally. I will deal with this Federation cruiser. But be warned, if even the smallest of stones is left unturned, if even the slightest amount of data escapes your scrutiny, I will hold you personally responsible for the transgression. You will die, at my own hands, slowly and with much pain.”

The lieutenant stood motionless; the only sign that he comprehended the admiral’s order was a slight, sharp nod of his head.

The admiral halfheartedly smirked. “Success, my son.” Then he turned to regard the Starfleet frigate moving ever closer to their position.

The lieutenant smashed his balled fist against his left breast. “Qapla’, Father! It will be done.”

Two hours later, with the Federation frigate secure, Ragga beamed aboard the *Baton Rouge* in search of his father. The *Baton Rouge* was the third Earther starship he’d been able to visit. The first was an aging scout vessel that had been captured by his father early last year. The second had been the far more recent capture of the *Justice*. From what little was left undamaged inside the Federation heavy frigate, Ragga was not impressed with the general appearance of Starfleet vessels.

He was told that his father was in the engine room of the great ship. After a fruitless attempt to find the Starfleet commander of the battle group, Admiral Klutuk had concentrated his efforts on discovering what secrets this vessel might hold. With the remainder of the *Baton Rouge*’s crew held in captivity on a D-10 that was already on its way to a garrison in the Morales system, Admiral Klutuk was free to do as he wished on the former Starfleet vessel.

Ragga found his father in the chief engineer’s office, leaning over a schematic diagram of the warp propulsion system. “Admiral, I come bearing good news.”

Klutuk was unmoved. “You could have transmitted it to me here. I am quite busy.”

“But sir, I have located the Federation battle group commander.”

Klutuk shot a look of utter surprise to his son. “He is alive?”

“He is wounded, but he will live.”

“And you are sure it’s Admiral Synclair?”

“Transvids have confirmed a positive match, sir.”

Klutuk was suddenly at a loss as to what his next move should be. He had become so enamored with the *Baton Rouge* that he now found himself in a quandary as to what to do with the prize admiral. “Location?”

“I found him on board the *Justice*. He had barricaded himself inside his cabin and had quite a sizeable cache of weapons at his disposal.”

“How did you extricate him?”

“I cut a small opening in the bulkhead, then used the new experimental gas to force him out.”

The gas his son had spoken of was a recently devised biological weapon that was to be used on large-scale Federation planetary assault forces. Diluted, it made a potent deterrent, rendering the targets unable to control many of their bodily functions within seconds of exposure. Klutuk approved of his son’s methods.

“A fitting way to capture a coward. You have done well, my son.”

“Thank you, my lord. The Starfleet admiral is currently on board the *Kav’Nus* and awaiting your interrogation.”

Klutuk stood and clasped his hands to his son’s shoulders. “You will take over here for me, then.”

“Sir?”

“The *Baton Rouge* is yours, my son. As my reward to you for bringing me the prisoner, you alone will take credit for this particular spoil. It will be noted in my personal communication to the High Council.” Klutuk waved his hand around the engineer’s office as he spoke.

“I would be honored to assume command here, my lord.” Ragga beamed with pride.

“We must get underway soon. Make ready to tow the *Baton Rouge* and the *Justice* to our base in the Morales system. I will join you on the *T’Torka* after I’ve had a little . . . *conversation* with this *Earther* admiral.”

“It will be as you say, my lord.”

## Chapter 4

Stardate 4202.21

February 2254

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

Admiral Luxa ran a hand through his hair as he inspected his scalp in the mirror that hung in the bathroom adjacent to his office. In the last few months, he'd noticed the subtle change in the color. Where he once saw fleeting strands of auburn, the hair color of his youth, he now only saw random stands of the silver-gray color his hair had assumed prior to the war with the Klingons. Now capped with a crown of salt and pepper, and the fact that his arthritis had begun to flare up again, he was both looking and feeling his age.

*I should be enjoying myself, he thought. I should be out giving lectures to academy graduates, or meeting new council members at some lavish party on some distant planet in the far reaches of Federation space. Instead I'm here, deciding the fate of thousands of men and women while the lives of billions hang in the balance. It's all because of those accursed Klingons. Why couldn't they have just left well enough alone? Lord knows they certainly have enough space of their own to explore and conquer.*

He sighed heavily, giving his dress uniform one final inspection before departing the quiet of his office for the Federation presidential residence in Paris.

President Thomas Vanderbilt was now deep into his third term, and rapidly approaching the time where he would face reelection. Although the president had requested Luxa's presence for a formal briefing on the war effort, the fleet admiral felt secure in the knowledge that the president was merely looking for good news that he could distribute to his constituents. Luxa tolerated politics to a point. It was,

after all, in the nature of his job. But it was only to a point. There was a war to win, and whether Vanderbilt was president or not at the end of it presently mattered very little to Matthew Luxa. As commander in chief of Starfleet, Luxa's own tenure in that position wouldn't be up until six months after the general election. He had almost two more years to contribute to Starfleet before his retirement, and he was determined to make them count for something.

As his private shuttle departed the landing pad on the roof of Starfleet Command headquarters, Luxa managed to glance up into the beautiful blue sky on that fine winter's morning. The rain storms of the last few days had passed, giving everything below the shuttle a sprinkling of water. Without a single cloud in the sky, he focused his eyes past the distant horizon. His mind's eye took him up through the layers of atmosphere and out into the great star-filled heavens. Farther out his mind took him, until at last he was at the front lines of the war nearly a hundred light-years distant from Earth. Fixated on a starship with no particular name, his mind then turned back toward its home. Earth was too far away to be seen by the naked eye. Even the blazing inferno of the Terran sun was a pinpoint of light amongst thousands of others. Still, his mind sought it out and found it, reveling in how small and seemingly insignificant it was. It was this thought that he tried to remind himself every moment he was awake: that even someone so small, on something so far removed from the death and destruction of the war, could prove pivotal. Everyone in Starfleet was striving to make a difference, and Admiral Matthew D. Luxa would be no different.

As the shuttle soared out over San Francisco Bay, Luxa leaned back in his plush chair, knowing full well that most other officers in the fleet weren't afforded such luxury. Was this perhaps something he should change? Every man, woman, and being from every race in Starfleet should be as well treated as their commander in chief. At least, that's what Matthew felt when he realized that somewhere, out in the distance, a man was lying prone on a moderately comfortable bed, not knowing that in less than twenty-four hours . . . perhaps even less . . . that his ship would be in the midst of a huge battle he might not walk away from. Still, the desires of wanting to



lavish his people with luxuries was second to the message he was about to give the president. There would be time enough for other requests later.

The shuttle had now reached the upper atmosphere, and small pinpoint lights of stars were slowly becoming visible through an ever-darkening haze of blue sky. Moments later the shuttle arched over, never achieving orbit before it descended toward the western European continent. Quickly the view port was filled with France, Great Britain passing quickly beneath as the shuttle descended nearly straight down toward the English Channel. Soon he was over Paris, with the presidential estate only minutes away.

Luxa watched as the shuttle soared past the Eiffel Tower, still the same majestic spire that it had been for the last several hundred years. He thought back to only a short time ago when the shuttle had ascended into the sky past the Golden Gate bridge, and was silently happy that these few monuments to mankind had been spared the ravages of the Earth following the great Eugenics War and the tyrannies of men like Kahn Noonian Singh and Colonel Green.

As the shuttle lightly touched down on the lawn of the presidential estate, a small cadre of officials came out to greet the Starfleet commander. One of them was Rear Admiral Michael J. Lai, commander of Starfleet Intelligence. As Luxa departed the shuttle's portside hatch, Michael Lai was the first to greet his old friend with a welcoming handshake.

"It's good to see you again, Admiral Luxa," he said with a warm smile.

Matthew smiled back with genuine elation. "And you as well, Admiral Lai." It'd been some months since the two had last seen one another. Lai had recently arrived from a gathering of the top Intelligence officers on the planet Argelius. It had taken him weeks to get to Earth, and both he and Luxa were happy to be in one another's company once again.

Rear Admiral Lai outstretched his hand toward the presidential estate. "The president is waiting, sir."

"Very good."

As Luxa began to take the few steps that would bring him to the president's office, Lai quickly jumped a step behind him and whispered into his ear. "Just don't leave without me. As soon as we're done here, I'm hopping back on the shuttle with you and heading back to San Francisco."

"Come now, Lai. Are you trying to tell me you've got a hot date lined up?"

Lai couldn't help but laugh at the joke, considering that it was Luxa himself who had introduced him to his wife. "You could say that. Sarah called just before you arrived. She's made her world-famous bread pudding for dessert tonight. She said I could bring a friend home, if he was so inclined to join us."

Luxa smiled. "Glad to see that you brought Sarah back with you from Starbase 23."

"Are you kidding?" Lai chuckled. "She'd never pass up an opportunity to get some shopping done here in Paris."

As the two men neared the great oak doors that would lead them into the president's foyer, Admiral Luxa crooked his head back over his shoulder for an instant. "I wouldn't miss her bread pudding for the world."

\* \* \*

"So, is there anything else you'd like to add to your formal report, gentlemen?"

Luxa, Lai, and President Vanderbilt had been in their meeting for nearly an hour. They'd gone through every after-action report for all major incidents involving the Klingons over the last several months, as well as a few minor ones. Their reports showed that, although the strides were small, Starfleet was beginning to make some noticeable dents in the Klingons' push into Federation space.

Admiral Lai now felt it was time to tell the president about the research projects that Starfleet Intelligence had been working on.

"We've been making staggering progress on the new phased weaponry systems, sir."

"Ah, yes," Thomas said with instant recognition, "the new weaponry that's going to help us turn the tide decidedly in our favor."

Lai nodded. "We're hoping so, sir. Large-scale prototyping and testing has already been completed with a great deal of success. Federation R&D, in

conjunction with Starfleet Tactical, is now miniaturizing and refining the weapon to fit it aboard several test starships.”

“When can we expect fleet deployment of the weapon?”

“The best estimates point to three to four months before we can begin rotating ships off the front lines to outfit them, sir.”

“Excellent, Admiral. I’d like to see the reports from the prototypes as soon as possible.”

“Of course, sir. We’ve also been working on a more advanced photon torpedo as well. I’ve had a team of specialists analyzing several captured Klingon vessels over the last six months. We’ve found that, in some areas, their shielding is simply too powerful for our current Mark-I torpedoes, to say nothing about the fact that it renders our accelerator cannons completely useless.”

“Are we looking at the same timeframe for deployment of these new torpedoes as we are with the phasers?”

It was Luxa’s turn to chime in. “No, sir. In fact, with your approval, we can begin rotating ships into their nearest starbases and begin outfitting them before the month’s end. We’ve already got several torpedo shipments sent out to Starbases 23, 27, and 12.”

“So, what you’re telling me, Admiral Luxa, is that we’re making positive strides in the war on nearly every front?” the president asked just as the briefing between the three men was coming to a close.

“Yes, sir”

President Vanderbilt rapped his bony fingers on his desk in a moment of silence before he spoke again. “Then perhaps one of you can tell me about that debacle at Giso last month,” he shot back with obvious annoyance.

Rear Admiral Lai had known this was going to come up and, having fully prepared himself for the question, took the center stage. “Rear Admiral Synclair made an unscheduled, unwarranted inspection of the 4<sup>th</sup> Squadron, sir. We had no idea what he was doing until the incident took place. He was supposed to be heading back toward the relative safety of the inner sphere.”

“*Incident?*” the president spat back. “It’s a public relations *nightmare*, gentlemen. An entire battle squadron was lost with all hands. Not to mention the fact that a highly decorated flag officer was killed in the line of duty. It puts a *serious* mark on your current positive report of the situation.”

“He could well have been captured, sir. We don’t know.”

“That thought does *not* inspire me, Admiral Lai.”

“Yes, sir. Nonetheless, we’ve had to work double-time to change some of our procedures, not to mention all our communications and cryptographic codes. If the Klingons captured one or any of the ships in the 4<sup>th</sup>, whatever information they manage to pull from the personnel or the computers will be useless to them by now.”

“*Nonetheless*, we need to make up for this . . . this *error* in judgment on the part of Synclair.”

Both Luxa and Lai exchanged glances, neither knowing what the president was getting at and wondering if the other did.

“How do you propose to do that, sir?” Luxa asked.

“By doing something I’ve been considering for many weeks now, and something that the destruction of the 4<sup>th</sup> has given me a foothold in the Federation Council to use as leverage. Invasion.”

“I’m sorry, sir,” Lai asked incredulously. “Did you say invasion?”

“Indeed I did, Admiral. And I know just the place.”

Luxa felt compelled to speak. “Sir, please forgive me, but I’m not sure that’s a practical idea at this juncture.”

“Nonsense, Admiral. It’s the perfect response to the destruction of our forces. It’s high time we struck back against the Klingons instead of simply trying to push them out of our space. And with the addition of the new photon torpedoes, we will send a clear message to the Klingon High Command that we, too, can make territorial gains.”

Both Luxa and Lai, knowing they were at the mercy of their ultimate commander, silently decided to listen to what the president proposed.

“And what it is you suggest, Mr. President?” Luxa asked cautiously.

“Simple. We will gather up a ground force of our finest Marine battalions and take the Klingon garrison at Rudgor III.”

Lai was beside himself. Rudgor was an immense outpost, fortified by a fleet of enemy vessels, with the planet itself home to thousands of highly trained Klingon ground forces. “Rudgor, sir?”

“Precisely. Its position right on their side of the border makes it an ideal target, not to mention its close proximity to the Archanis IV research facility. Our forces will leave from Starbase 23 under total secrecy in the fastest transports and heavy cruisers we can muster. Using some of our new high-speed assault vessels, we can beam the entire Marine contingent down in less than an hour, and take the planet before the Klingons know what hit them.”

“This will require a monumental amount of intelligence to undertake, sir,” Lai said doubtfully.

“All the better for both of you gentlemen to begin planning immediately.”

“I’m sure we can formulate a strategy that would see our forces on Rudgor in three months.”

“Unacceptable, Admiral Lai. I want them there, on Rudgor, in less than thirty days.”

“But, sir—” Luxa started, and was silenced.

“I want the flag of the Federation flying on *that* planet in thirty days, gentlemen. Make it happen. I don’t care how you do it. Just get it done.”

With that, the president dismissed the officers to their respective duties. There would be no pudding for either of them tonight.

\* \* \*

Stardate 4203.19

April 2254

“Marine, you *will* secure that load and get a move on, double time! Do you understand? I mean now, soldier. Now!”

“Yes, Colonel! Right away.”

The younger officer scurried away from the colonel’s presence, making it to the rear of the Starfleet landing craft in a record three strides. He immediately lifted the half-fallen supply crate back onto its shelf, then re-secured the detached hold-down strap that had come loose during the rather bumpy descent through the planet’s thick, hazy atmosphere.

Colonel Michael Kulaga, his ancestry rich in Germanic heritage, stood tall and proud in the center of the shuttle as he watched his supply officer follow the order. True, there had been enlisted men present who could have easily done the job for the captain, but Colonel Kulaga believed that it was the responsibility of the *officers* to ensure that the duties assigned to their subordinates were carried out to the letter. If the subordinates failed to do so, it was up to the officers to accomplish the task—whether they liked it or not.

Seeing that the supply officer had firmly taken a hold of the situation, Michael removed the brown and red camouflaged hat covering his short, thick black hair, giving his scalp a firm brush in the process. He turned and looked out the small view port on the front of the assault shuttle, watching the drab rust-red peaks of Rudgor’s tallest mountain range rush up to meet the quickly descending craft. Most of the Marine ground forces had already landed well ahead of the colonel. They had captured the Klingon garrison after a brief but intense firefight, and the colonel was now going to survey the captured base.

All things considered, he was quite proud of every man and woman in the 5<sup>th</sup> Marine Regiment that day. Even the supply officer, whom he was usually at odds with, was particularly helpful in making sure that the maximum amount of supplies and weaponry had been available to the invading Marines.

The day had started with their arrival at the planet. The flotilla of assault craft, shuttle carriers, heavy cruisers, and heavy destroyers that made up the 77<sup>th</sup> Assault Squadron had met surprisingly little resistance when they arrived at Rudgor, despite Starfleet Intelligence’s theories to the contrary. There’d only been a handful of K-17 escorts in high orbit above the planet, with two squadrons of K-3 gunboats slightly

closer to the planet, as well as two D-7 cruisers on the far side of the planet. They'd all been easily dispatched, with only the loss of one heavy cruiser and a destroyer to the Klingon forces.

The landing of the Marines had been a different story. While most of the Marines had been transported to the surface, some of their large equipment had to be taken down via assault shuttles launched from the *Santee*-class carrier *Vella Gulf*. But due to poor Starfleet Intelligence reports, three of the shuttles had been lost to a squad of Klingons that had been stationed at aerial turrets near the same mountains Colonel Kulaga's shuttle was traveling over now. Several tons of sensitive communications equipment, not to mention the evening's meals, had been lost in the exchange. Due to the small amount of shuttles available to make such a journey, the colonel was now forced to ride in a ship full of consumables.

It had been a small price to pay, considering the overall ease with which they had secured the Klingon base. Vice Admiral Fenton had secured all the approaches to the planet and, with that, victory had decidedly been theirs. Michael only hoped they could keep a hold of the planet. He knew that the Klingons would've dispatched a message to their superiors—he would surely have done so in their place—and those same superiors were probably amassing a fleet to retake the planet even now.

As the landing craft neared the designated makeshift landing pad that had been hastily erected by the embarked construction battalion, Kulaga couldn't help but ponder the possibility of a ground battle against the Klingons. The enemy would almost certainly try to begin their attack with an orbital bombardment. The Marines had seen fit to transport a number of surface-to-space photon torpedo launchers, as well as a small battery of portable laser cannons for just such an attempt.

However, Kulaga also had confidence in the abilities of Vice Admiral Fenton and the rest of the 77<sup>th</sup> Assault Squadron to keep them safe. Tony Fenton, on his flagship, the USS *Langley*, had full tactical command of over two dozen starships, each with enough power and experience to ensure that any Klingon vessel foolish enough to enter the Rudgor system wouldn't forget the encounter. The colonel had

seen their tactics firsthand when they had arrived at the planet, and the relative ease with which the Starfleet forces had dispatched the Klingons already waiting in orbit. If Vice Admiral Fenton could maintain the same resolve with any future forces that might try to retake the planet, those Klingons would surely be in for the fight of their lives.

Michael smiled to himself with satisfaction as the craft slowly touched down on the landing pad at the Marine camp. The aft hatch slowly opened, and in wafted the heat wave of the oppressive atmosphere. His first thought was for his men and women, wondering how they were coping with the harsh heat. Seeing to their proper hydration would be his first duty, and he stopped the earliest junior officer he saw with a grab to his arm as he attempted to dash past the colonel.



## Chapter 5

Stardate 4203.23

March 2254

5<sup>th</sup> Starfleet Marine Expeditionary Base, Camp Garth, Rudgor III

“Send in the second squad to reinforce the 16<sup>th</sup> Battalion. I want those laser cannons on the south ridge in five minutes or you’re all fired!” Colonel Kulaga screamed into his communicator. Another Klingon gunboat appeared over the horizon, hanging seemingly motionless over the purple hue of the distant mountains. Small by Federation standards, what the gunboat lacked in size and armament, it made up for in speed—not to mention its ability to make the atmospheric transit from space with relative ease. The small craft, manned by no more than five or six, slowly began to turn on its axis as it scanned the area looking for a target. When it had acquired it, beams of green disrupter energy sprang out from its main turret toward the ground.

Just as the colonel had predicted, the Klingons had returned to Rudgor III to reclaim their lost planet. Their assault forces had arrived in the system barely an hour before. To the delight of the Starfleet vessel captains, the Klingons had decided—for whatever reason—not to bring any of the new heavy battle cruisers with them for the conflict. That decision alone probably saved the lives of countless Starfleet officers, to say nothing of the fact that it made the Federation blockade all the more manageable. As it was, Vice Admiral Fenton on board the *Langley* still had a difficult time routing the bulk of the Klingon fleet away from the planet. The Klingons had arrived with five medium cruisers, ten light cruisers and nearly as many destroyers—not to mention the five landing ships containing nearly 3,000 troops.

With the majority of the twenty-eight ships of the 77<sup>th</sup> Assault Squadron engaged against the bulk of the Klingon forces, four of the enemy transports had broken through the thinly stretched Federation defenses, managing to land their complement of troops and supplies before several Starfleet destroyers swooped down on them and blew them from the stars. The loss of the Klingon transports, having served their purpose, probably meant very little to the Klingon commanders, but it was quite a morale boost to the Starfleet captains. Within thirty minutes, the Starfleet captains, under the supremely capable hands of Vice Admiral Anthony Fenton, had destroyed or routed all the enemy cruisers, and a majority of the destroyers, without suffering a single loss to their numbers. To Colonel Kulaga, it seemed that the battle-tested captains of Starfleet Command were beginning to show their mettle after all. On the surface, however, Federation victory was still far from assured.

From his vantage point, Colonel Kulaga had no visual on the intended victims of the energy burst from the distant gunboat, but knew from the position of the craft that it was more than likely the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> Heavy Infantry Divisions near the front line. He'd sent the Marine hover tank squadrons out there to shore up the defenses on the eastern side of the ever-expanding battlefield. The colonel watched from relative safety, high upon an outcropping overlooking the wide valley below. Down below, the bulk of his forces were managing to keep the Klingons at bay, neither of the two opposing forces gaining or losing ground in the battle.

Michael heard the distant sound of thunder as a warm breeze fluttered across his face. He turned his laser binoculars toward the direction of the noise and was greeted by two plumes of fire on the southeastern horizon. The columns of black and brown smoke, capped by angry, fire-filled mushroom heads, were rising high above the desolate landscape. Knowing that the 5<sup>th</sup> Marine Regiment had no heavy equipment in the area, Michael surmised that the Starfleet forces must have downed one or two of the enemy gunboats. His speculation was confirmed a few moments later when his communications officer reported that a squad from the 10<sup>th</sup> Mechanized Artillery Division had managed to neutralize two Klingon vessels with well-placed laser grenade strikes.

The remainder of the friendly ground forces—consisting mostly of the mobile infantry—was in the valley below. Kulaga was watching them now as each squad seemed to scurry from one small bit of cover to another, finding the best angle of attack for their respective targets, then moving back to their initial positions to pick out another group of Klingon combatants to take aim at. Thankfully there were no other Klingons in orbit that could produce more troops. The 5<sup>th</sup> Regiment seemed evenly matched at this point, and any further interloping by the Klingons could have easily swung the balance in their favor.

There was, however, the matter of three small Klingon craft that had landed on the surface some distance away. Preliminary scans from the orbiting Federation starships had yielded little facts as to their contents, and were only sure of one thing: each contained no other life-forms than the two pilots it took to fly the craft into the atmosphere. If the craft contained equipment or weaponry for the invading Klingons, it didn't seem to matter to the Klingon forces that were already engaged in combat. Not a single Klingon had attempted to get within 200 meters of the three small vessels that were clustered neatly around one another. Kulaga suspected it was some sort of trap, used by the Klingons to lure the Federation forces away from the Klingon ground troops and put their flank at risk. The little ships could easily be set up as enormous bombs, so Kulaga refused the chance to investigate them more closely time and again. He'd even ordered his assault shuttles to keep a safe distance, but also to maintain a tight sensor lock on them at all times . . . just in case.

The colonel continued to watch as large groups of his people exchanged small arms fire with a deeply entrenched squad of Klingons several hundred meters from their position. Both the Klingons and the Marines seemed to have backed themselves into a corner, and Kulaga tried to formulate a plan to get his people out safely.

\* \* \*

“General Mek’Tor?” Major Tamog addressed his commanding officer with a quick salute.

“Yes, Major. What is it?”

“My lord, our forces are pinned down in Sector 9.”

General Mek’Tor of the house Valdyr—tall by even Klingon standards—towered over the large table that had been set up in his command tent as he studied a computer-generated map of the battlefield. The Federation forces, represented by bright yellow triangles, were holding their positions on nearly every front against the glowing red trefoils that represented the remainder of the 9<sup>th</sup> Klingon Assault Detachment—a unit made up entirely of fusion-race warriors. Mek’Tor quickly discerned that these Earthers were quite a troublesome group of invaders. *No*, he thought to himself, *these are not simply Earthers. These are more than the ragtag leftover slop of the pitiful Starfleet that we’d faced before. These were trained combatants who were now holding a line—and doing it well—against some of the best troops of the Klingon Empire.* An abnormal chill ran up his heavily armored spine, although he would be loath to admit it to anyone, even to himself. For the first time in the war for which the Klingon emperor had put all his hope and prestige on the line, Mek’Tor actually felt as if he were facing an equal opponent. *These are warriors.*

He studied the map for a few more seconds, not finding an easy answer to the problem at hand. For now, there was no way to force the Federation invaders into a compromising position. General Mek’Tor had, in fact, tried twice already, and failed each time, losing precious men and equipment in the process. He was being forced to watch and wait, playing a very dangerous game with his Federation counterpart, watching for the Starfleet warriors to make a vital mistake. When it happened, he would exploit it, and he would crush them all. *It will be glorious*, he thought as he smiled wickedly. *Then I will have this Federation commander head on my wall as a testament of the battle won here today.*

“My lord?” Major Tamog asked again, both impatient for an answer and fearful that, if he was too insistent, his general would have him quickly dispatched with a knife to his throat.

Mek'Tor continued to study the map without giving his subordinate the satisfaction of a glance in his direction. "Patience, Major. We must have patience."

"But sir, is that wise? Our men—"

The general snapped his head in the major's direction. "These are *my* men, Major. Best you keep that on the tip of your tongue when you speak to me, or you will cease to have a tongue to speak with!"

Tamog knew instantly that he'd overstepped his authority. That he was still alive to take his next breath showed that his words were not as foolish as they could have been. He bowed his head, taking two steps back from the general in the process, giving honor to his superior and displaying his role as a subordinate. "Of course, my lord."

Mek'Tor sighed heavily, then returned his cold stare back to the computer map. "The time has not yet come to make a hasty decision, Major. This Federation commander is a shrewd warrior. He blocks our every advance as we block his. He makes no attempt to push his line, and nor do we. We are waiting, he and I. When the time is right, I will strike. When I do, I will bite . . . and will bite deeply."

Tamog sneered in the general's direction. "Yes, General."

"In the meantime, we will shore up our defenses on the eastern side of the battlefield. Authorize the flanking regiment to begin launching disruptor mortars at the enemy."

At that range it was too close, and Tamog knew it. The mortars were lethal, shredding weapons that did an enormous amount of damage for a diameter of several meters. However, they were more finicky than reliable, occasionally misfiring or landing well short of their targets. With the proximity of the Klingon and Federation forces, an accident was inevitable. *Why would the general authorize such an attack? Surely he wasn't desperate to swing the tide of the engagement, considering the speech he'd just given?* "Should I advise the men to set proximity fuses on the rounds, sir?"

Mek'Tor heard the concern in Tamog's voice, but gave it little mind. An attack with mortars was risky, to say the least, but something needed to change. He hadn't

heard from his flagship in over an hour, and he feared that they'd been dispatched by some fortunate Starfleet captain. It was a loathsome thought.

Perhaps, he'd often mused to himself, it might have been a weakness of the Klingon people—to blindly fight until the death was, regrettably, not enough sometimes. There was more to war than winning. However, to speak such words to the High Council, let alone to one's immediate superiors, was to pronounce one's own death sentence. Like Major Tamog, Mek'Tor was the servant to a master. In the presence of Brigadier General Roktas, Mek'Tor was sure to cower to his superior's weight.

And here was Tamog, awaiting his commander's orders, just as Roktas was waiting impatiently on the homeworld for a positive report from Mek'Tor. General Mek'Tor, more than any other time in his life, now felt that all eyes were on him, and that he alone would be responsible for the success of this mission. Yes, it was time to act. This battle could not be left to chance; he saw that now.

"No proximity fuses. The mortars are to be armed the moment they leave the barrels. I want you to see to the bombardment *personally*, Major. Set the weapons to maximum yield and continue firing until you run out of ammunition or I order you to stop. Is that understood?"

"Yes, my lord!"

\* \* \*

"Colonel Kulaga, the Klingons are bombarding our troops to the east with light artillery."

As Major Edgeworth finished speaking, Kulaga turned his binoculars east to focus on the troops there. He could see the photon rounds being lobbed high into the air, some striking the ground near his platoon's position, others exploding in midair well before they reached their intended target. *This was a risky move by the Klingon commander*, he thought for a moment before another thought invaded his mind. *No . . . this is impatience. The Klingon commander knows full well how unreliable his weapons are.*

As if to prove his point, as he watched closely, a mortar round exploded behind the Klingons' line, scattering the mortar crew to pieces and leaving a smattering of pink Klingon blood throughout the area. *This is it! This is the sign I've been waiting for.*

"Major Edgeworth, tell the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> Platoons to converge on that motor position."

"To aid our troops, sir?"

"Negative. I want them to rush the Klingons."

"But, they'll be wiped out by the mortars, sir."

Michael agreed with a stoic nod. "It's possible, but I'm not counting on it. The Klingons are doing more damage to themselves than we are at this point, and I want to provoke them into continuing along their current line of logic. We'll let those bastards swing the odds into our favor for us."

"Yes, sir. I'll have the orders transmitted immediately."

"Before you do that, I want you to reroute the 10<sup>th</sup> Mechanized Infantry to lead the attack on the mortar entrenchments. Have the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> close behind them for cover."

"The hover tanks won't last long against those photon rounds, sir."

"It's a better alternative than sending in our troops alone. We can't provide them any air cover at this point, due to the enemy disruptor emplacements on the midline ridge. The tanks will be a safer option."

"Because the mortar entrenchment is below their line of fire," Edgeworth nodded.

"Exactly," Michael said with satisfaction before turning away from the battle to face Major Edgeworth. He looked at the officer as if seeing him for the first time. At twenty-nine, John O. Edgeworth was the youngest major in the Starfleet Marines. He'd risen through the ranks of Starfleet quickly to become a commander and, once the official Marine Academy was established, immediately requested a transfer from the fleet. "What was your specialty in Starfleet again?"

"I started in navigation, sir. Then I moved to head up ship's security on the *Lexington* when I made major."

“And your first command was the . . .?”

“The *Bainbridge*, sir. *Loknar*-class. My first and only command before I transferred to the corps.”

“Ah, yes. Very good. Tough little ships, those *Loknars*.”

“Yes, sir,” Edgeworth said with the utmost pride.

“My brother’s the executive officer on the *Cairo*.”

Edgeworth’s face lit up. “I’ve heard of her, sir. One of the finest crews in the fleet, I hear.”

“So it’s been said. You and I will have to chat about those frigates when we’re done down here.”

Edgeworth nodded, knowing full well by the tone of the colonel’s voice that Kulaga had his doubts as to whether any of them would survive the encounter.

“Yes, sir. I’d like that.”

“Good. Then I won’t keep you from your duties, Major. Make the arrangements for the assault to begin immediately.”

Edgeworth snapped a quick salute, bringing his right hand abruptly to the brim of his cap and then lowering it just as smartly. “Right away, sir.”

\* \* \*

“What in *blazes* are those idiot Earthers doing? That’s pure madness!” General Mek’Tor spat out a torrent of Klingon curses at the audacity of the Starfleet Marines who were storming the Klingon mortar positions. The Federation hover tanks had come in first. At twelve meters long and almost half as wide, the angular tanks with their large-caliber turrets came in blazing. But even as large as they were, the sleek beasts moved with lightning efficiency as they powered full throttle through the Klingon line, scattering the Klingons in a dozen different directions.

The Klingon officers had barely enough time to launch a counterattack, which itself was only marginally effective. Most of their photon rounds had either missed the tanks entirely or weren’t nearly concentrated enough to cause the Starfleet Marines any significant damage. The Earthers had come with their accelerator cannons blasting round after round into anything that moved. Two whole Klingon



squads had been obliterated before the tanks powered over the trenches, and they continued on firing on anyone and anything in the area well after they were past.

The Earther Marines had swarmed in behind their tanks, huddling above the long trenches that held dozens of Klingons, only to mow their targets down in moments. Then another troop of Marines had come in, jumping into the trenches with reckless abandon to take out what little remained of the devastated Klingon battalion.

General Mek'Tor, watching from his distant perch, knew he had very little time before the backbone of the Klingon force was broken in two. He hastily grabbed his communicator and opened a channel to his executive officer.

“Major Tamog, report status!”

It took several more attempts to raise the major before he finally came online. “Federation Marines have completely overrun our position. I’ve moved the battle line to quadrant 14 in an attempt to hold them off. We are making very little progress, sir.”

“Repeat. You said 14?”

A burst of static shot through the communication before Tamog came online once again. “Affirmative, sir.”

“Are the modified freighters in sight?” Mek'Tor inquired with a concerned tone. There was one chance to win this battle, but it could cost him dearly. Indeed, it could cost him his very life, if not at the hands of the High Council, then by his own hands. He was about to discover if he would be the instrument of his own demise . . . not a promising prospect for a Klingon.

“They are, my lord. They appear undamaged and unmolested.”

“Good. Take five of your best men and man the freighters immediately. When you are over the bulk of the target area you will release the chlorotheragen.”

“Sir, I *must* protest! Our own men will be killed!”

“They will die as *Klingons*, Major! That is something you will not be able to look forward to if you fail me! Understood?”

There was a short pause on the communications channel. Another explosion caught Mek'Tor's attention, and he turned to see a plume of smoke rise near one of

the freighters. Raising his binoculars to his eyes he could see that the ships were undamaged by the shot that had left a five-meter crater near their position.

“It is understood, General. We will take off immediately.”

Two minutes later the heavily modified transports were in the air and hovering toward the center of the battlefield. One of the Federation hover tanks took aim at the lead transport and fired several rounds, taking out the craft’s shields and damaging its maneuvering thrusters. It sputtered and crashed a moment later—but not without releasing its colorless toxic agent. Mek’Tor thought little of this. Soon, everyone within the designated target area would die a most horrible death, including his own men.

*It is a small price to pay. Victory will be mine!*

## Chapter 6

Stardate 4204.05

April 2254

Captain Christopher Pike sat stoically in the command chair on the bridge of the starship *Enterprise*. For the past hour, the *Enterprise* had been the victim of some unseen and unknown force that was pelting the ship with wave after wave of spatial distortion. Though the waves were far from dangerous—harmlessly washing over the *Enterprise*'s shields as the ship sailed through them—they did pose a significant risk to navigation in the area.

Truth be told, this was the last thing Christopher wanted to deal with at the moment. The *Enterprise* was currently on course to the Vega colony, which had been established on the planet Ing some three years ago. Although it had started out as a trading post—the first one merchants often came into contact with once they left the Orion sphere and entered Federation space—it had quickly turned into a military outpost with the onset of the Klingon war. The Starfleet Corps of Engineers had quickly established a small military installation, complete with shuttle bays and maintenance hangars, as well as barracks for the over 2,000 Starfleet personnel and Marines who were stationed there. They were to be the first line of defense, in the event the Orions decided to side with the Klingons, who—it was speculated—might invade their space in the coming weeks.

However, once the Laxala Incident had taken place, an Orion-Klingon merger was quickly forgotten, and both the Federation and Klingons turned their attentions from Orion affairs, making sure to keep their respective dilithium shipments flowing regularly in the process. It still served the Federation's interests to keep the stationed manned, and the small outpost that was barely a light-year from Orion space had grown steadily in the last several months.

This fact was not ignored by the Klingons. Knowing that they could not invade Orion space and jeopardize their own dilithium shipments, they decided the next best thing was to take up position just outside the nearly nineteen-light-year-wide sphere to “keep watch on the untrustworthy traders.” With their shipyards at Veska in full swing, the Klingons wanted to control a system on the direct opposite side of the sphere from the Klingon border. This was Vega system, and the target planet was Ing.

The Klingon attack had been merciless. Three squadrons of D-7s, reinforced by D-10 battle cruisers and D-16 destroyers, began laying waste to the surface of the planet before the Starfleet personnel could muster an effective counterattack. The Klingons had used some kind of biogenic weapon, something Starfleet had only recently become aware of. The pain and suffering the aerosol agent caused was beyond comprehension. It promised a slow, painfully agonizing death to anyone who was not inside a Class-II rated shelter—and the Vega colony was sorely lacking in them. If it hadn’t been for the 43<sup>rd</sup> Squadron, on patrol only a sector away, the entire colony would have been taken in only a few short hours. As it was, Fleet Captain Hector Busch, on board his flagship, the USS *India*, had managed to rout the Klingons for the time being. Unfortunately, with over half of his thirty-two ships in hot pursuit of the Klingons, he simply didn’t have the resources to assist the wounded who were still on the planet.

This is where Pike and the *Enterprise* came in.

Once Busch had learned that the *Enterprise* was in the area, he quickly corralled them into helping the survivors. Pike had raised an eyebrow to the request, reminding the fleet captain that *Constitution*-class starships were still expressly forbidden from engaging military targets. Busch had merely sidestepped the issue, calling it “a technicality best left to the bureaucrats to squabble over.” Pike couldn’t have agreed more. He wanted to fight as much as any man in the fleet, but his hands were tied. He was in command of the one of the strongest ships in the fleet, yet he and his crew were relegated to the sidelines for the immediate duration. Besides, Fleet Captain Busch *did* mention that more Klingon forces may return to finish off the Vega colony while the 43<sup>rd</sup> was still in pursuit, and if Pike were to engage some of the enemy in the process, so much the better. Without admitting as much openly,

there was little doubt that Hector and Pike were of the same mind on the subject: Could *Enterprise* live up to her specifications?

So with encoded orders in hand, Pike had eagerly set a course for the Vega colony. Besides, a rescue operation with the possibility of combat was a far better prospect than the hand he'd been dealt lately. The order to proceed to Vega colony was a decision that was made above his pay grade, unlike the incident on Rigel VII that was still fresh in his memories and in his nightmares.

As the image of his personal yeoman's shattered body came to forefront of his mind, he quickly realized that, while on the bridge, his attention needed to be focused on the here and now.

As he watched the main view screen, waiting for the next flicker that would indicate the *Enterprise* was passing through another distortion wave, one of the newest members of his crew approached his seat from behind. Pike had ordered a full diagnostic of the sensors, making sure that these waves weren't some new form of Klingon trickery. Spock, the new junior science officer, had handled the request personally. Now it was time to see if he'd discovered anything.

"Check the circuit, please," Spock said flatly over Chris's left shoulder as the Vulcan took up position behind the captain's chair.

The ship's helmsman flicked at several switches on the console before him. All the status lights immediately turned from yellow to green. "All operating, sir."

"Can't be the screen, then," came the reply from the ship's first officer—or, as Pike liked to call her, Number One.

Once again, the main viewer became distorted, as if a wall of rainwater had suddenly obscured whatever the viewer was attempting to display. A moment later the image returned to its original crispness.

Spock had returned to the science station, peering into the short-range sensor display. "Definitely something out there, Captain. Heading this way."

Pike looked back to the screen, trying to get a visual fix on something the sensors were sure was there. Then it was there again, the image of his young, attractive yeoman, dead on the ground before his feet. As soon as he pushed the image aside

another came in to take its place. This time the image was real, right there before him on the view screen. Was it a ship? It was certainly moving fast enough. The spectral image of a Klingon cruiser flashed across his mind, disruptors blazing and raking the hull of the *Enterprise* with reckless abandon. The object on the viewer began to take shape, its pockmarked exterior spinning wildly in space as it neared the hull of the ship. It was a meteorite.

As if on cue, the helmsman spoke up in response to Mr. Spock's statement. "Could it be these meteoroids?"

*Strange*, Captain Pike thought to himself. *We weren't supposed to pass this close to any meteor showers. Better make sure to catalogue this for navigational reference.* Chris watched as the small planetary debris—some as small as a grapefruit, others as large as a small house—passed the *Enterprise* without so much as a bump in the hull. Lieutenant Jose Tyler was doing a masterful job at the helm, and Pike would have to compliment him on it the next time they found themselves in the wardroom together.

"No," Number One replied. "it's something else. There's something else out there."

Another burst distorted the image on the main view screen. Chris was starting to get nervous. *What the devil is out there?* Captain Pike was about to order the ship to yellow alert when, in automatic in response to a perceived threat, the bridge klaxon began to sound rhythmically. The triangular warning light on the front of Lieutenant Tyler's station began to pulse its red light.

"Coming at us at the speed of light. Collision course," Tyler stated as he continued to watch his instruments.

The image on the forward viewer began to waver again. Now the waves were coming more frequently, nearly overlapping one another as the unknown object moved closer to the ship. Tyler, knowing that he didn't require the captain's permission to perform the normal duties expected of a helmsman, aimed the ship's main navigational deflector directly at the target. At nearly full intensity he sent several large bursts from the ship's particle deflector directly at the object, hoping to either obliterate it or move it out of the path of the ship. The adjustments had no effect on the incoming target.

“Meteorite beam has not deflected it, Captain.”

The first officer turned to face her captain, her shoulder-length black hair moving ever so slightly with the spin. “Evasive maneuvers, sir?” she asked calmly.

Pike leveled his ice-blue eyes at the main view screen, now a constant blur of interference. Whatever it was that was coming at them, it wasn’t intelligent life as they knew it. If it were, it would have turned long ago to avoid the collision. It was also too small to do any real damage to the ship. In fact, the short-range sensors were still not registering anything. Chris decided to call the unknown object’s bluff. “Steady as we go.” He turned his head to the Vulcan science officer, hoping to get an answer to the riddle that was heading toward them.

Spock, in response, rose an eyebrow in the direction of the captain and turned back to his instruments. “It’s a radio wave, sir,” the Vulcan said after double-checking his instruments. “We’re passing through an old-style distress signal.”

*Now that’s more like it*, Pike thought. *Maybe this Vulcan will be worth something after all.* Christopher thought back to his history lessons on early space exploration, remembering quite vividly how old-style distress signals operated. He never thought he’d actually hear one, though . . . much less see its effects. “They were keyed to cause interference and attract attention their way.”

Spock turned his attention back to the long-range scanners. He tapped into the ship’s library computers, then cross-linked his terminal to the communications console to decode the message. “A ship in trouble making a forced landing, sir.” The statement got the attention of everyone on the bridge. “That’s it; I have no other message.”

Lieutenant Tyler accessed the information from the science console, then oriented the navigational computer in the direction of the transmission’s source. “I have a fix. It’s coming from the Talos star group.”

Number One turned to face Tyler, a look of confusion on her otherwise stoic face. “We’ve no ships or earth colonies that far out.”

Spock continued to read off information from the library computer. “Their call letters check with a survey expedition, SS *Columbia*. Disappeared in that region approximately eighteen years ago.”

Jose kept his eyes fixed on wavering image on the view screen. “It’d take that long for a radio beam to travel that far from there to here.”

“Records show the Talos group has never been explored,” Spock turned from Pike back to his computer. “Solar system similar to Earth . . . but with eleven planets. Planet number four seems to be . . . Class-M.” He turned back to Pike, knowing that this bit of information should have perked the captain’s interest. “Oxygen atmosphere.”

Number One turned in her seat to face her captain. “Then they could still be alive . . . even after eighteen years?”

It was a long shot, but not beyond the realm of possibility. There were a thousand variables that would have to be taken into account. Pike had never known of castaways to have survived so long on an alien planet. Then again, if they *were* a survey team, they should’ve had the proper survival equipment to keep them alive. Another possibility—and the most likely one—was that it was an automated message, continuously broadcast by a solar-powered transmitter from a team of intrepid explorers who were long since dead. “If they survived the crash,” he finally agreed.

Spock could hear the uncertainty in Pike’s voice, and he knew the course of action the captain was going to take before he voiced his question. “We aren’t going to go? To be certain?”

Christopher had a bad feeling about this, but he couldn’t ascertain why. It easily could be a trap. After all, Klingons had been known to use tactics like this before to lure in an unsuspecting starship. And, knowing that some of the stragglers from the Vega colony attack could still be in the area, it gave all the more credence to that theory. *Still, strange enough that no one else had ever heard the broadcast before. Surely there have been merchants, traders, and military vessels from both Starfleet and the Klingon Empire flying very near to the Enterprise’s current location in the last several months. Shouldn’t one of them have heard the message as well?* In the



end, Chris was unconvinced this was a genuine distress call. He needed more proof before he was going to commit his starship away from their assigned task.

“Not without any indication of survivors, no.” There were several worried looks across the bridge. It was standard procedure to respond to any distress call. In fact, it was a standing order by Starfleet Command. However, Chris also knew that the official order was subject to the captain’s interpretation and, what with the number of false distress calls being put out by the Klingons lately, he wasn’t about to risk another incident like what happened on Rigel VII. “Continue on to the Vega colony, take care of our own sick and injured first.” Suddenly feeling a headache coming on, he turned to his trusted first officer. “You have the helm. Maintain present course.” As he rose from his chair and headed for the turbolift he caught a glimpse of Number One getting into the captain’s chair before the doors closed behind him.

\* \* \*

As soon as Christopher entered his cabin he went straight for the communicator lying on his desk. The ship’s internal communication system had been experiencing some minor hiccups lately, and he didn’t want to chance the idea that his innocent broadcast would be accidentally sent throughout the entire ship. *I’ll have to talk to Captain April about that the next time I get a few minutes to code a message.* He flipped it open and turned it to the chief medical officer’s personal office, knowing ahead of time that’s exactly where Dr. Boyce would be.

“Drop by my office,” he said. Not waiting for a reply he tossed the communicator back on the desk and eyed his bed. He turned as he approached it, turning and neatly flipping sideways before landing straight onto its welcoming surface. Just as he began to relax, his cabin door abruptly opened. It was both a good and bad thing, he often thought, that the CMO’s office was right down the passageway from his quarters.

Dr. Philip Boyce, or Phil as he liked to be called by his friends, walked confidently into the room carrying a large brown medical bag, which he sat squarely

in an empty chair opposite the captain's bed. Pike watched as the doctor, a man quite advanced in both physical age and Starfleet tenure, began to fiddle with the bag's contents, his motions otherwise obscured by his lean body.

"What's that? I didn't say anything was wrong with me."

Phil paid Chris little mind as he continued to withdraw items from the case. "I . . . ah . . . understand we picked up a distress signal."

*Phil, the gossip king if there ever was one.* It didn't surprise the captain at all that the good doctor was aware of the happenings on the bridge from only a few minutes ago. "That's right," Pike said, getting up from the bed and moving toward the bookcase alcove beside it. He withdrew the latest fuel consumption report and gave it a glance, not really bothering to focus on the contents. "Unless we get anything more positive on it, it seems to me the condition of our own crew takes precedence. I'd like to log the ship's doctor's opinion, too."

Boyce stopped what he was doing long enough to regard the captain's statement. "Oh, I concur with yours, definitely."

Chris was still looking at the long list of numbers on the chart as he spoke to the doctor. "I'm glad that you do. Because we're going to stop first at Vega colony and replace anyone who needs hospitalization. We can also—" Chris stopped as he heard the distinctive sound of something hitting the bottom of an empty glass. "What the devil are you putting in there? Ice?"

With a glass in hand, Phil turned and offered it to the captain with a smile. "Who wants a warm martini?"

Chris looked at the drink pensively before regarding the doctor's smiling countenance. "What makes you think I need one?"

Phil only shrugged and, chuckling, turned to grab the drink he'd made for himself. "Sometimes . . . a man will tell his bartender things he'd . . . never tell his doctor." Phil raised his glass in a toast to the captain and took the empty seat next to the one atop which he'd set his medical bag. "What's been on your mind, Chris? The fight on Rigel VII?"

His frustrations coming to a head, Chris tossed the fuel report onto the bed. He appreciated Phil's no-nonsense approach to conversation, and being one of the few men on board he could confide in, Chris let it out. "Shouldn't it be? My own

yeoman and two others dead. Seven others injured.”

“Was there anything you could have personally done to prevent it?”

Chris took a drink and then set the glass aside. “Oh, I should have smelled trouble when I saw the swords and the armor. Instead I let myself get trapped inside that deserted fortress and attacked by one of their warriors.”

Boyce took a drink for himself and then regarded the captain. “Chris you set standards for yourself no one can meet. You treat everyone on board like a human being *except* yourself. And now you’re tired and—”

Chris’s eyes narrowed as he cut off the doctor’s sentence. “You bet I’m tired. You *bet*.” He leaned back on the soft pillows of his bed and looked at the doctor. “I’m *tired* of being responsible for 203 lives and . . . which mission is too *risky* and which *isn’t*. And who’s going on the landing party and who doesn’t. And who lives”—he cast his eyes to the slowly melting ice in his martini—“and who dies. No . . . I’ve had it, Phil.”

The doctor’s voice was tinged with sympathy. “To the point of finally taking my advice and taking rest leave?”

“To the point of considering resigning.” There. He’d said it. The one thought resounding in his mind since . . . since . . . ?

“And do what?” Boyce asked with disbelief.

“Well, for one thing, go home.” His tone was far from convincing, either to himself or Phil. “Nice little town with . . . fifty miles of parkland around it. Remember I told you I had two horses? We used to take some food out and ride all day.”

Phil gingerly sipped at his drink. “Oh. That sounds exciting. Ride out with a picnic lunch . . . every day.”

The sarcasm of his tone wasn’t lost on the captain. “I said that’s *one* place I might go.” Now even he felt as if he were defending his decision. “I . . . I might go into business on Regulus or something . . . or in the Orion colonies.”

Phil nearly spat out his drink at Chris’s suggestion. “*You*, an Orion trader, dealing in green animal women? Slaves and—”

“The point is that *this* isn’t the only life available. There’s a whole galaxy of things to choose from.”

Boyce exhaled slowly. Chris was confused and more disturbed by what had happened on Rigel than he was letting on. He just needed time to sort it all out. Boyce was convinced of it. “Not for you. A man either . . . lives life as it happens to him, meets it head on and licks it, or he . . . turns his back on it and begins to wither away.”

Chris could only smile at his old friend. “Now you’re beginning to talk like a doctor . . . bartender.”

“Take your choice. We both get the same two types of customers: the living, and the dying.” Phil downed the rest of his drink in time for the ship’s intercom to chime in.

*I guess the engineers got that damn thing fixed, finally*, Chris thought. A second later the image of Lieutenant Spock appeared on the monitor besides Chris’s bed. “Mr. Spock here. We’re intercepting a follow-up message, sir. There are definitely crash survivors on Talos.” The image then faded as quickly as it had appeared.

Pike looked at his drink and then back to Phil.

“Now what?” the doctor asked.

Chris knew what Phil was getting at, and there was little doubt as to what he should do next. The last thing he was going to do was turn a blind eye to the problem at hand. “You’re welcome to stay and have another drink. I’ve got to get to the bridge.”

“To wither away?”

Chris smiled and patted Phil’s shoulder gently as he walked past him. “To live life as it happens, bartender.”

# Chapter 7

Stardate 4205.01

May 2254

Incoming subspace communication . . .

FROM: The Office of the Commanding Officer, Starfleet Public Relations,  
Admiral (selectee) 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,  
Rear Admiral Michael J. Lai, San Francisco, Earth

SUBJ: STATE OF AFFAIRS BETWEEN THE FEDERATION AND THE  
KLINGON EMPIRE

1. As of this stardate, the secretary of Starfleet, in conjunction with the Federation Council, has decreed that the following addition to Starfleet's list of general orders is now in effect:

General Order 7: No Starfleet vessel shall visit the planet Talos IV under any circumstances, emergency or otherwise. This order supersedes General Order 6 (relating to answering calls of distress by Federation or non-Federation members within Federation-controlled space). Any transgression of this general order is punishable by death.

2. On stardate 4203.11, the 21<sup>st</sup> Squadron, consisting of the *Detroyat*-class destroyers USS *Jezar*, USS *Laffer*, and the USS *Long Beach*, were on routine patrol near Rahli V when all communication with the squadron was mysteriously lost. Due

to their proximity to the Romulan neutral zone, foul play has not been ruled out as a possibility for their disappearance. Starfleet Intelligence is continuing the search for the missing vessels, and any such sighting should immediately be transmitted on a Priority One channel to the nearest starbase or military operations command center.

3. The commanding officer of Starfleet Research and Design, on behalf of the commander in chief of Starfleet Command, wishes to congratulate the commanders and crews of the command cruiser USS *South Dakota*, the light cruiser USS *Anton*, and the destroyer USS *Duluth* and the personnel of Starfleet Tactical Testing. Outfitted with the new phased weaponry prototypes, these fine vessels have served with distinction and have furthered the fighting capabilities of Starfleet Command. More news on their exploits and performance reviews will be forthcoming.

4. The Prentares Council of Elders has issued the following decoration: The Prentares Ribbon. This stylized badge is characterized by the Prentarian lamb surrounded by a green wreath, with the inscription "High Protector" below. It is awarded to military personnel or civilians who have saved the life of a Federation civilian through peaceful means. The first recipient of this award is Dr. Mendar R. Tolfosian of the planet Thasus IV. Dr. Tolfosian successfully quelled a brief uprising on Thasus, saving the lives of a dozen Federation scientists stationed on the planet for observational purposes. More information on this encounter can be found on the Federation data network, keyword: Tolfosian.

5. The Confederation of Tellar has proposed the Grankite Order of Honor award, issued by special order of the commandant of Starfleet Academy to cadets who, during their tour of study at Starfleet Academy, demonstrate selfless heroism in support of the United Federation of Planets and Starfleet Command. It takes the form of a small red, blue, and gold triangle surrounded by Tellarite white laurel leaves. The decoration is named in honor of Grankess Lorr, the Tellarite cadet who is the first recipient.

6. The tenth planet to be officially sold by the United Federation of Planets to a civilian and/or corporation took place on stardate 4204.21. The planet is now officially registered in the Federation Navigational Database as Flint's World. Many worlds are discovered throughout the Federation that have little to no scientific or militaristic value to them. As such, these planets are occasionally listed for sale, and

bids may be placed at the Office of Federation Colonial Operations closest to the aforementioned planet.

7. Several members worlds, most notably planets near the outer rim, have experienced delays in the subspace transfer of credits between their planets, especially when said planets are within close proximity to one another. The Federation Economic Council has sent out several communications to local financial institutions in the area, telling the regional bankers that such delays have become more commonplace as more and more subspace frequency bands are dedicated to war-fighting elements near contested space. Any Starfleet vessel or starbase commander, should they be confronted by a worried patron about the security of their respective funds, are advised to direct such individuals to their local Federation Economic delegation or to the nearest Federation Trade and Commerce office.

8. More information to follow shortly.

\* \* \*

Stardate 4205.09

May 2254

Office of the Commanding Officer, Starbase 23, Commodore Ronald Jarvis,  
Archanis Sector

Commodore Jarvis rose in his chair to meet the officers now striding into his office. "Fleet Captain Blackwell," he began, offering his hand to the first officer through the door, "congratulations on your recent promotion."

William reached out a slender hand and grasped at the commodore's. "Thank you, sir. It came as a bit of a shock to me."

“Yes, I’m sure it did. However, I’m not a bit surprised, if I do say so myself. Your record, both before and during this conflict, has been exemplary.”

William smiled broadly. “It’s that way only because I have the pleasure of serving with the best people in the fleet, Commodore.”

“Your modesty precedes you, Fleet Captain.” Commodore Jarvis turned to the other three men who’d entered the office on the heels of Captain Blackwell. “And speaking of serving in good company, it’s a pleasure to see you gentlemen as well.”

A round of thanks came from Captains Litho, Richter, and Bêtise. William looked at his core group of captains, the commanders of the three squadrons—the 50<sup>th</sup>, 52<sup>nd</sup>, and the 53<sup>rd</sup>—that made up the nucleus of Blackwell’s new command, and he smiled on them with pride. They were some of the best starship captains in the fleet, and William was glad to have them at his side for the coming engagement.

The Andorian Captain Litho had made something of a name for himself during the Battle of Lasur Funop, singlehandedly disabling two Klingon cruisers and eradicating a destroyer, and all from a lowly destroyer that Starfleet Command had recently called “dangerously obsolete.” Afterward, Starfleet Command was quick to offer him the field promotion to captain and assign him to a new light cruiser bearing the same name as his recently decommissioned ship, the USS *Thomas Gage*.

Captain Richter, a tested veteran of the Battle of Ogolo, was now in command of the fleet escort carrier USS *Kalinin Bay*. During that battle he’d served as the fighter wing commander, successfully coordinating the attack of dozens of fighters as aggressors against multiple targets. His efforts not only led to the destruction of a number of enemy starships, but he’d also managed to use the carrier’s own formidable weaponry to save three smaller destroyers that were swarmed upon by much more heavily armed opponents.

Finally there was Captain Philippe Bêtise. Bêtise had assumed command of the often spoken-about USS *Leverage* when her commanding officer suffered a severe mental breakdown. The *Leverage* had been reported missing on stardate 4104.01 and then mysteriously reappeared nearly three weeks later with her internal chronometers exactly nineteen days behind the nearest starbase. The crew had been unable to explain this discrepancy, stating that the passage of time—for them, at



least—felt perfectly normal. The entire crew had been rotated off the ship for psychological examinations. As it was, only Captain Arthur Mason had suffered any ill effects. The crew was then reassigned to the ship and command was turned over to the executive officer, Commander Bêtise, with the added bonus of a promotion to seal his new title. After several successful hit-and-run attacks against Klingon forces in the Muraski sector, he was ordered to rush the *Leverage* back to the front lines, which he did in record time, linking up with the rest of the fleet only just that morning.

Now, with all the key commanders present, Commodore Jarvis got right down to business. He ordered his yeoman to dim the lights and engage the large view screen that hung on the far wall in his office. As an image of the sector came into view, he rose from his chair and highlighted an area to the left of the Archanis sector. “Gentlemen, as you know, this is the Genmark sector, our neighbor to the east. As you can also see, it’s nearly ninety percent controlled by the Klingons. Starfleet Intelligence has been sending me regular reports on the enemy’s movements in that sector, and they feel that now is the time to begin a full-scale invasion to retake our space.”

There was a brief pause in the commodore’s report, and the French Captain Bêtise took the opportunity to interject. “You are saying, then, that we will be the first of many waves?”

“That’s correct, Captain.” He looked to the young woman at the far side of the briefing room. “Next slide, please.” A magnified image of the Genmark sector came into view. The region was mostly devoid of planetary systems, save for Keese and Lycly. There were a few stray gas giants and several small asteroid fields, but nothing of major importance. Separating the Genmark sector from the Archanis was a misshapen red line—the boundary of Klingon expansion thus far into this part of the Alpha Quadrant. On the far side of the sector, closest to Archanis, a series of three small, blue triangles appeared and began to flash in unison. “These symbols represent the three tiers of the fleet,” he began. The assembled officers watched as the triangles slid from the Federation side to the Klingon-controlled space, dragging

with them the red line and, thus, shrinking Klingon-controlled space. The movement of the triangles stopped at Genmark, near the center of the sector. “We want the fleet to get into the sector, do as much damage as possible along the way, and take out the Klingon garrison on Genmark. Once you’ve secured the planet, I’ll send in more forces to back you up.”

Captain Richter, his gray eyes thinning like the wisps of brown hair that capped his head, addressed the commodore. “Who’s in command of that backup, sir?”

“Fleet Captain Derik Marvin.”

Captain Litho grunted in approval, the antennae on the crown of his head twitching slightly as he nodded. “Good man, Captain Marvin.” The other captains, including Commodore Jarvis, turned to the normally silent Andorian. It was nearly unheard of for an Andorian to offer praise to anyone outside their own race, let alone a human one at that. Litho merely looked at each of them quickly and smiled a brilliantly white set of teeth. “For a *human*, that is.”

William, along with the other men, couldn’t help but smile in return. He was glad to have someone with such an impeccable record as Marvin to back him up. “What kind of resistance should we be looking at once we penetrate the sector, Commodore?”

“Intelligence reports show that there’s a bustle of enemy activity in the adjacent sectors, so we can infer that Genmark should be no different.”

Captain Richter leaned forward onto his elbows. “That’s not exactly a precise number.”

“And I have none,” Jarvis replied with regret as he looked at each of their concerned faces. “I wish I did. I know what you’re thinking, and I share your concern. I don’t like the thought of you going in there blindly, but we don’t have a choice. Starfleet Intelligence wants to start carving away at the Klingons’ grasp of our territory, and your fleet will form the edge of that knife. You’ve got the best mix of ships in the fleet: cruisers, carriers, destroyers, and frigates of nearly every make and model.”

“You’ve also got the best people,” Litho added with pride.

Bêtise shot Litho a sideways glance and chuckled. “You’re just saying that because most of the personnel under your command are Andorians.”

“Is that a problem, Philippe?”

“No, mon Capitaine,” Bêtise said, then bowed his head softly. “Just an astute observation.”

“I speak for all my people, Captain Bêtise. I would die for each of them.”

*Spoken like a true Andorian*, William mused. *Yes, these were fine officers.*

Commodore Jarvis looked to William. “How soon can you be underway, Fleet Captain Blackwell?”

“The *Bonhomme Richard* is taking in the last of our supplies from the starbase now. The rest of the cruisers, carriers, and frigates are ready to move. Once the destroyers rotate in for weapons and organic transfers, we’ll be ready to get underway. I’d say we could depart Starbase 23 in less than five hours.”

Jarvis smiled broadly. “Then I won’t keep you a minute longer.” Once he stood up, the rest of the assembled captains did the same. “Get your fleet ready to move and notify me as soon as you’re prepared. Dismissed.”

\* \* \*

“Captain on the bridge!”

On the bridge of the *Bonhomme Richard*, Commander Eu’Gene Baker slipped out of the command chair as Fleet Captain William Blackwell exited the turbolift.

William strode confidently onto the bridge and took the center seat from his first officer. “Mr. Caplin, position report.”

The bronze-skinned helmsman turned in his chair to face the captain. “Approximately five light-years from Starbase 23, sir.”

“On the edge of the Archanis sector, then?”

“Yes, sir. We’ll cross into Genmark sector in T-minus five minutes and thirty seconds at present speed.”

William turned to his first officer, who had resumed his post at the science station. “Sensor report, Mr. Baker.”

“Nothing unusual to report at this time.”

Blackwell pushed the control on his chair that linked his personal intercom with engineering. “Engineering, this is the captain. Report, Mr. Ethridge.”

The normally jolly engineer came back within seconds. “Engines are running at peak efficiency, sir. Full power is at your disposal.”

A bemused smile crept across William’s face. “You’ve, ah, fixed that minor power fluctuation then, I assume?”

“Yes, sir,” Ethridge replied with a hint of joviality to his words. “It won’t be bothering you again.”

“That’s good to know. But please, the next time the hot water is inadvertently shut off to my quarters, I’d like to know *before* I jump in the shower.”

Ethridge chuckled softly. “Aye, sir. I’ll keep you posted.”

“Thank you.” William shut off the channel and looked to the navigator. “Weapons status, Lieutenant Morrow.”

The dark-skinned, smooth-voiced Lieutenant Aaron Morrow craned his neck around to the captain. “All weapons are on standby, sir. Accelerator cannons are primed and charged; laser battery crews are at the ready. We can have weapons at your disposal within five seconds of your command, sir.”

“Excellent work, Lieutenant,” William said formally, then stepped from his chair and placed a kind hand on Morrow’s shoulder. “And here you had doubts as to whether you’d be a satisfactory department head.”

The lieutenant smiled broadly. “Well, I did have a few reservations, but I wouldn’t say I had *doubts*, sir.”

“Keep it up, Aaron. Someday maybe you’ll be the one ordering the fleet around.”

“One can always dream, sir.”

“Well said. Mr. Caplin, maintain course and speed. Science station, I want a continuous full scan of the area; wide beam, full dispersal.”

Nothing had come of the fleet’s foray into the Genmark sector for the first hour and a half of their penetration mission. Due to the proliferation of Klingon forces in nearby sectors, this came as something of a minor shock to William and the rest of his commanders. If the Klingons were as serious about protecting this area as they’d been when they’d pilfered it nearly two years ago, he should have been detected by

now. If the fleet had been detected, then what were the Klingons waiting for? And if Blackwell had managed to come in under their noses, then where the devil were they?

As William was about to have the science officer tighten his sensor beams, Baker spoke up from his station. "Sir, I have multiple contacts on the long-range sensors. Bearing 225-mark-318."

William caught his breath in anticipation. "Specifications, Commander? Are they warships?"

Eu'Gene tightened the sensor's beam just enough to get the captain the information he wanted without alerting the Klingons to their probing. "I'm reading twelve large vessels and three smaller ones, all moving in a leisurely manner away from this sector and deeper into Klingon-held territory."

"Assault transports?"

"Negative, sir. Life sign readings of the largest vessels suggest they're cargo transports. I'm also reading three D-10 heavy cruisers and four D-16 destroyers."

William leaned forward in his chair as the revelation took hold. "A supply convoy?"

Commander Baker turned his head to his friend and nodded. "It looks that way, sir, and it's a big one. They could be hauling up to two million metric tons of supplies in those things"

Blackwell licked his lips in anticipation. "Any other contacts in the area?"

"No, sir. No other vessels within a parsec of our current position."

"Then we'll need to act quickly," he said with a smile. "Communications officer, send coded messages to Captains Bêtise, Litho, and Richter. I'm sure they already have the enemy vessels on their monitors. Advise them that the fleet will commence attack in five minutes, and they may choose targets at their own discretion. Then send a coded message to the command cruiser *Sheridan*. Instruct Captain Damrow to keep the entire area under surveillance during the attack. I don't want to get caught with our britches down."

"Aye, sir."

Just as Fleet Captain Blackwell had ordered, the nineteen ships in his fleet struck quickly at the nearly helpless Klingon convoy. Their first order of business was to disable the three D-10 battle cruisers, by far the deadliest ships in the Klingons' arsenal. Taking out the destroyers was considered a secondary objective, but if the opportunity presented itself, they were not to be denied laser or photon torpedo fire. The Starfleet vessels were ordered in at flank speed in an attempt to surprise the enemy.

Captain Richter, on board the *Santee*-class fleet carrier *Kalinin Bay*, had been tasked with destroying the first battle cruiser that came into range. The enemy convoy was in a staggered line formation, with a heavy cruiser on each side for protection. The D-10 that Richter had singled out was hovering just above the convoy at 1,000 kilometers. The Klingon vessel, being the lumbering beast it was, couldn't pivot fast enough to engage the oncoming Federation attackers head to head. As the freighters below it tried to scurry away like cockroaches under a bright light, the D-10 was pummeled by laser fire from nearly 3,000 kilometers.

Due to the extreme range of the Federation craft, the first salvos were relatively ineffective. The Klingon's shields were drained, but the craft remained undamaged. By the time Richter had three cruisers in range to fire with their accelerator cannons, the D-10 had completed its turn and brought its weapons to bear on the Federation forces. An all-cruiser Federation squadron scattered as disruptor beams lanced out, missing each one entirely. They quickly regrouped, each firing over thirty rounds of concentrated cannon fire into the lone Klingon warship. Its shields failed quickly as it tried in vain to exact damage of its own. Large sections of the unprotected hull blew apart under the onslaught, and within minutes the cruiser was no more.

In a similar fashion, Captain Bêtise had taken the six starships of the 53<sup>rd</sup> Squadron and disabled another Klingon cruiser, its warp engines now smashed beyond the capability to generate power.

Captain Litho, not one to be left out a good fight, brought the *Thomas Gage* and the rest of the 50<sup>th</sup>'s weapons to bear on the remaining Klingon battlewagon. Knowing that his seven starships were more than a match for the lone D-10, he

subdivided his forces, ordering three medium cruisers to engage the Klingon battle cruiser while earmarking his four destroyers to take out “all targets of opportunity.”

While Litho and his three cruiser escorts pounded the D-10 into submission, destroyers from Captain Richter’s squadron—as well as the two destroyers from William Blackwell’s squadron—fired at anything that didn’t have a Federation recognition signature. Freighters and destroyers alike were targeted, and each received their due attention.

Fleet Captain Blackwell, assisting his fleet the best he could, slalomed the *Bonhomme Richard* through the Klingon and Federation vessels, weaving through the battle ground as if he were a needle mending a garment. Never once expending more than two shots on a single target, Lieutenant Aaron Morrow’s laser fire was spot-on each time.

Once the major combatants had been destroyed or disabled, Blackwell ordered the fleet to regroup and engage the freighters. When he was queried by his commanders whether they should be commandeering any of the supplies in the Klingon convoy, William had asserted his orders from Starfleet Command. “Destroy all targets of opportunity while maintaining the safety of your crews and your ships. No exceptions.”

## Chapter 8

Stardate 4206.13

June 2254

Imperial Klingon Orbital Repair Facility, Pantor system

His quarters were blissfully cold, so much so that the sight of his breath escaping past his lips, barely perceptible in the still air, was a joy to behold. Unusual for a Klingon to admire such inhospitable surroundings, Supreme Fleet Commander Admiral Kamato longed for it, embracing it as if it were his destiny to do so. Since he'd assumed command of the 5<sup>th</sup> Expeditionary Force after the untimely death of Admiral Klag, he found that solitude was more of an ally than a foe, and that the icy cold blackness of space was the only constant in the universe. He had all but extinguished every trace of light in his small cabin, allowing the vista beyond the single, large view port to illuminate the austere compartment. He'd placed his large, overstuffed chair—the only luxury he allowed himself in his cabin—near the two-meter-tall view port, allowing him an unobstructed view of the scene unfolding around his imperial battle cruiser, *Kra'Dor*.

Beyond the confines of his battle cruiser, dozens of vessels representing nearly as many classes were being outfitted or repaired in the space high above the swamp-like planet of Pantor V. Orbital dry docks, over two dozen of them, were scattered about like children's toys, no one on the same plane or positioned with the same orientation as another. Each rectangular lattice was large enough for a battle cruiser—or several well-positioned destroyers. Small repair craft, personnel shuttles, and cargo tugs swarmed around and in between each dock, giving Kamato the impression he was living inside a veritable insect hive.

He watched as a D-7 slid out from its berthing a few kilometers away. The graceful, powerful cruiser, with its impulse engines glowing an angry red, moved gracefully out of the imposing dock structure, only to be replaced by an identical cruiser a moment later. This newcomer, with dark lines streaked across the upper



portions of its hull, was missing its port warp nacelle. The bridge pod, jutting from the secondary hull, seemed to have taken a blow as well, with a large portion of the starboard bridge wing collapsed and the internal lights in that portion completely extinguished.

Opposite the damaged D-7, a battle cruiser—not unlike Kamato’s own D-10—was moving into position outboard an already-occupied dock. Despite the fact that this class was less than a year old, the vessel gave the appearance of one that had seen many years of deep space service. The once-pristine light gray hull was lightly pitted and scarred with a hastily repaired patchwork of panels. The starboard side forward disruptor cannon and the forward ten meters of the surrounding superstructure were smashed and bent inward—no doubt the result of a collision of some type. Kamato watched as the intensity of the main impulse engines fluttered--a sure sign of internal power fluctuations in the vessel. As it came to a slow halt, his attention was turned to the planet below.

Pantor V had been one of the first conquests of the Klingon Empire when they began their push into Federation space two and a half years before. Situated eighteen light-years from the Klingon military stronghold at Ruwan, and half as far to the former Klingon-Federation neutral zone, it was deemed the ideal place to construct the Imperial repair yards. The planet itself was little more than a disgusting wasteland of marsh. Two small oceans, rich in sodium and pyrite and layered in a thick, red algae marred the otherwise smooth green appearance from high orbit. The survey team of scientists, sent down by the Klingon fleet that had originally secured the planet, had found little in the way of remarkable geology, other than a very small percentage of dilithium and precious gems that were buried too far beneath the surface muck to make any attempt at excavation profitable. Admiral Kamato watched the clumps of beige and white clouds which hovered near the planet’s surface, casting harsh shadows on hundreds of square kilometers of swamp.

There was a rattle at his side, the sound of metal reverberating against a loose panel, and he knew immediately his precious air conditioning had once again shut

down. The small unit, not normally designed to keep such a low temperature for so long, was on the verge of dying. Kamato rose from his chair and gave the small unit a kick with his heavy boot, causing the compressor to momentarily whine and pop back to life. Soon he could once again feel the cool breeze blow past his face.

He took the moment to look at the desktop chronometer and, seeing that his period of relaxation was nearing its end, he decided to turn his attentions to the daily reports. Flipping on his computer, he ran a preprogrammed search query designed to fetch messages containing special words or strings of words. Due to the specific phrasing of the messages, it'd been over a month since one had vied for his utmost attention. Now, of the over-300 messages he'd received in the last twelve hours, only three of them were returned by the search program. Whatever news they held, it was of the utmost importance. Kamato immediately took notice, and whatever calmness he'd acquired while meditating in his chamber quickly faded as he loaded the messages on the viewer.

The subterfuge with which the coded material was hidden inside the contents of an otherwise innocent-looking dilithium consumption report was worthy of a Romulan. Kamato entered in the decryption cypher, then ran the message through half a dozen filters to coax the embedded text to life. The original message, once four screens long, was compressed into a single three-sentence paragraph. The words were direct, and the message it contained was grave: Emperor Karhammur had lost the confidence of several key High Council members.

The implications of this were far-reaching. Kamato, never one to read too deeply into a single message, deciphered the remaining two communiqués in an attempt to piece together the rest of the intended announcement. When the three pieces were translated and laid out before him, the admiral's true mission was quite clear.

With the loss of several high-ranking Klingon commanders in the war against the supposedly weaker Federation, not to mention the loss of the ships and personnel under their charge, the High Council was becoming weary of the emperor's ability to successfully win the current campaign. What had started as a lofty goal of expansion and conquest for the empire was quickly turning into a catastrophe as defeat began piling up against the Klingons. The Council was beginning to feel that new leadership would infuse the empire with what it needed most: victory.

And, per the communications he'd received from Internal Intelligence, it seemed they had already chosen their new leader. It would be Kamato himself.

While the thought of ruling the empire was tempting, one did not simply achieve the position by it being handed over to him. There would be a power struggle, if not an all-out rebellion. Many Klingons loyal to the current emperor would need to be shuffled away from positions of influence, possibly silenced altogether. It also remained to be seen how much of the Imperial Fleet was still loyal to the current ruler, and how many would follow Kamato. And without the aid of the fleet, Kamato's aspirations were the faintest of pipedreams.

There were several officers directly under his command who would follow Kamato to the gates of Sto'Vo'Kor. Of that there was no question. What was in question, however, was the loyalty of several of his key officers on board the *Kra'Dor*, namely the first officer and the security chief—both of whom were fusion race warriors. The first officer, Captain Tanag, was both brave and ruthless; admirable qualities for both a first officer and saboteur alike. While Kamato had never been given reason to question his loyalties before, Kamato was also well aware that Tanag's brother held the undivided attention of several members of the High Council, and that his closest cousin was the commander of the 11<sup>th</sup> Cruiser Assault Squadron—a formidable group of warriors. It would be well to keep Tanag on his side or, at the very least, in his pocket. Kamato decided to send a message back to his Intelligence operatives, requesting anything he could use against the captain as leverage to secure his future loyalty.

The security chief, on the other hand, was a different matter entirely. In most respects, it was a minor miracle that Lieutenant Colonel B'Tal had lasted as long as had in the empire, much less attained such an honorable rank. B'Tal was something of a conniving, fat little targ, commanding respect from everyone at every turn. His security force—fiercely loyal to him and made up entirely of fusions—had each proven themselves deadly in hand-to-hand combat. In fact, Kamato couldn't think of a single Marine on board who would not follow B'Tal if given the choice between the junior colonel and the admiral himself. After all, rank meant very little

when compared to glory. Unfortunately, B'Tal had made no qualms about aligning himself with the house of Maltok, a powerful line that had stood by the emperor for decades.

If Kamato wished to rise to the throne, he would not be able to do it without raising the suspicions of B'Tal, nor could he simply kill the man without likewise revealing his personal ambitions. Perhaps it was best, Kamato pondered, to extricate himself from the situation and move his operations closer to the homeworld. Surely he had earned enough accolades for himself in the current push into Federation space. He must have, for there was no other reason the Council would be asking him to assume its leadership. Besides, Grand Admiral Kamato was under the distinct impression that Captain Tanag had his eyes set on the admiral's command chair. Surely, Tanag would need to play a deadly game for that plan to come to fruition, but there was also the high probability that B'Tal would join in the coup. In that event, the odds were in favor of the admiral succumbing to a highly questionable "accident," just as his own predecessor, Admiral Klag, had done.

"No, that will simply not do." Kamato's deep voice emanated from his throat as he spoke to the empty room. *There are preparations to be made, but things must proceed slowly. No suspicions must be raised until the time of my own choosing.* He looked beyond the large view port once more to the fleet he'd commanded to so many victories. A leader's place was with his warriors, and he would miss the glory of their battles together. But now was not the time for regrets. Now was the time he must return to his home soil and reclaim the faith that the people had lost in their present leader. Now was the time to remake their name, and let the universe know what it truly meant to fear the Klingon Empire.

He inhaled deeply with satisfaction in his heritage, his massive chest bulging out, his uniform straining to hold in its bulk. He nodded proudly to the ships of his fleet, the best salute that a leader could offer his men, resolute over his next move. He turned briskly, the long folds of his blood-red cape twirling behind him as he made his way to the comm panel on the starboard bulkhead.

"Captain Tanag," Kamato said in his most commanding voice over the shipwide intercom. "Report to my cabin immediately."

Less than a minute later Tanag was standing inside the admiral's doorway. *Tanag must have been nearby, waiting for some opportunity to strike against me. I have not underestimated your treachery, Captain.*

"My lord," Tanag said with a sharp salute. "You wished to see me?"

Kamato strode quickly to stare down Tanag, which was easily done, considering the quarter-meter height difference between the two men. They were nearly toe to toe when Kamato produced a computer reader he'd been holding behind his back.

"Orders, sir?" Tanag asked with confusion.

"Of the sort, *Captain*."

Tanag read over the brief message once, then twice more to be sure he'd gotten the message interpreted correctly. "You are leaving, sir?"

Kamato nodded slowly.

"Sir, I must say it has been an honor to serve with you. I will not—"

"You may dismiss with that rubbish, Captain!" Kamato said, grabbing the captain by the breast of his heavy tunic and hauling him to his toes. "Do not toy with me, Tanag. We both know perfectly well that you are more interested in your promotion to the admiralty than in my imminent departure."

The instant fear that had laced Tanag's eyes was replaced by a loathsome calm. He smiled widely, his razor-sharp teeth inches from the admiral's face. "To say nothing about earning the command of the entire fleet in the process, my lord."

Kamato sneered, pulling Tanag clear of his feet as the two locked eyes. His sneer slowly faded to a smile, which was augmented by the beginnings of a laugh. It rolled out slowly, becoming a full roar as he put Tanag back on his feet. Soon the two warriors were laughing heartily at one another as Kamato brought his heavy hands to the captain's shoulders. Kamato quickly produced two large ales, handing one to Tanag, then the two slammed their drinks together in a Klingon salute.

"Well done, *Admiral* Tanag!" Kamato howled, then gulped down the thick drink.

"Thank you, sir."

"I know you will make me proud in your efforts against the weakling Earthers."

Tanag downed his drink. “I will make them tremble in the bedclothes that they call uniforms!”

Kamato sneered again. “See that you do, Admiral. See that you do.”

“And what of you, sir?”

“I will travel back to the homeworld. The Council has requested that I give them a firsthand update of our victories and our losses. I must account for the deeds of my men.”

“And your rank?”

“I have been promoted to Thought Admiral, effective immediately.”

Tanag’s expression of joy faded. In the entirety of his career in the IKS, no one had ever achieved such a high rank. Kamato was now considered a master tactician, skilled beyond all others in the Klingon Empire. His exploits would now be sung in songs, and his tales told to all would-be warriors in the empire. His status of legend was assured. Tanag bowed his head deeply in respect. “I am honored to be in your presence, my lord.”

“Enough of all that, Admiral,” Kamato said, hefting Tanag back to an upright position. “We have much to do, but first, we must inform the fleet of the change.”

“There will be much rejoicing in the fleet tonight, my lord!”

Kamato couldn’t help but sneer at Tanag. “Yes. Yes there shall.” *And soon, very soon, there will be much more.*

\* \* \*

Stardate 4207.18

July 2254

“I don’t know how much more of this I can take,” the captain said through labored breaths. “Whose idea was it to climb this mountain, anyway?”

The target of the captain’s question, Lieutenant Commander Amanda DeSoto, took two farther steps up the hill before turning around to respond. “Don’t look at me, sir. I said this was a poor plan from the start.”

As Captain Michael Blanchard took a final stride to stand next to his first officer, Lieutenant Franklin Jones, whose red security tunic was plastered to his back with sweat, grunted as he struggled up the last few steps of the thin, dusty trail. “I told you, the magnetic properties of the rocks in these mountains made transporter operations hazardous.” There was a pause in his voice before he caught the lack of respect that his tone carried. “Sorry, sir.”

Michael withdrew a silver water container from his backpack and took a healthy swig of the delicious, life-giving liquid. “No pun intended, Lieutenant, but don’t sweat it. This damn repressive heat has us all on edge.” The captain then tossed the half-empty bottle at the junior officer, who eagerly finished off its contents.

DeSoto found a comfortable rock to sit down on, her long, muscular legs stretched out before her. “You can say that again, Skipper.” She wiped a thick bead of perspiration from her forehead. “Who would want to live on a planet like this?”

“No one so far,” the captain responded quickly. “That’s why the Federation hasn’t gotten around to colonizing it yet.”

Jones sipped the last of the water from the container, then tossed it into his own bag. “The Klingons seem to like it.”

“They can have it, too.” Amanda sighed as she stretched her arms over her head. “God, what I wouldn’t give for a nice cold sonic shower.”

Captain Blanchard ran a hand through his dark, wet hair. “No, they can’t have it. Unless they want to tug Webirty all the way back to Klingon space, they need to get the hell off the Federation’s property.” He then shot a glance to his first officer. “And if you’d like a long shower, my dear, then you’ll have to help me finish this mission. The *Vindicator* is up there waiting for our signal.”

“You know I love it when you take charge,” she smiled at him.

“That’s what the captain does.”

“I recall you saying that on our wedding night.”

“Oh, do you?” Michael said with bemused shock. “You’re not considering mutiny, are you?”

She smiled broadly. “Will it get me thrown in the brig?”

He licked his lips, but not from dehydration. “It might.”

Jones let out a cough from behind the two. “If you both don’t mind, I’m going to go throw up now.”

“What’s the matter, Jones? Never heard a married couple spar with one another?”

“It’s all in good fun,” Amanda said, defending her husband’s statement.

“Begging the captain’s pardon, but it’s not the route that your conversation is taking that’s making me ill—although I must say I’d rather not be privy to your romantic quarrels. The fact is that this heat is really getting to my stomach, and I honestly think I’m about to lose my lunch.”

Both the captain and Amanda began to agree as they noticed Lieutenant Jones’s skin turn a mottled shade of green. Amanda quickly reached into her side pouch and withdrew a medical hypo, swiftly plunging it into the lieutenant’s forearm. The pink of his skin tone slowly returned to normal. “There,” she said with best bedside manner. “All better?”

Jones absently rubbed his arm. “Yeah, for now.”

“Good,” Captain Blanchard said with a slap on the lieutenant’s arm. “You know, Lieutenant, I never had a son.”

“Oh, no. And now you’re going to tell me that I’m the closest thing you’ll ever get to having one, right?”

Michael let out a hearty laugh. “Far from it. In fact, seeing how squeamish you are under this heat, I was going to say I hope I have a whole brood of daughters.”

“Michael!” his wife scolded him gently.

“That’s ‘Captain’ or ‘Sir’ to you, my dear.”

She withdrew another bottle of water and splashed some against his face. “Then it’s going to be ‘Lieutenant Commander DeSoto’ to you, sir.”

The captain sighed heavily as he looked to the two exhausted officers under his care. “Fine, fine. Sorry about that, Jones. No hard feelings.”

“None taken, sir,” the young man said with exhaustion.

“There,” Michael said as he turned to his wife. “All better?”

Amanda only rolled her eyes. “Why on Earth did I ever agree to marry you?”

“I don’t know. In fact, I still don’t know why you don’t go by Blanchard instead of DeSoto.”



“Having one Blanchard on board is excitement enough for the crew, believe me.”

Jones let out a chuckle before the captain could respond.

“Very funny, Amanda,” the captain replied dryly. “Well, we aren’t going to get anything done just sitting around. The *Vindicator*’s sensors reported the Klingon camp was just over that rise before the solar flare hit.” Michael pointed to the grouping of rocky outcropping about half a kilometer distant.

“How long is the flare supposed to last?” Jones asked.

“There’s no telling,” Amanda remarked. “It could be anywhere from an hour to a day. We’re lucky to have communications with them.”

Jones shrugged. “True, but without sensors we have no idea what we’ll be facing when we get to the camp.”

“That’s why you’re here, Lieutenant,” Michael said as he grandly put his hands to his hips. “One lone security chief against a whole platoon of Klingon Marines. Sounds exciting, doesn’t it?”

“Sounds like suicide.”

“You’ll do fine, Jones. In fact, I think I can muster up Amanda’s old cheerleading uniform from her Academy days if you need the pep rally.”

His wife shot him a doubtful look. “And you’ll be the one wearing it, *Captain*.”

Michael bowed his head slightly in her direction. “Par for the course, my dear. So, how about it, Jones? You feel well enough to continue?”

The security chief stood up and stretched his arms before him. “Yes, sir. I think so. That hypo is really kicking in now.”

“Good. Then let’s get moving. We’ve only got a few more hours of daylight left, and with the tricorders not working, we’re going to need as much visual information as we can gather.”

## Chapter 9

The trio of Starfleet officers—Captain Blanchard, Commander DeSoto, and the young Lieutenant Jones—crested what they hoped was their final hill. With their water supply now running dangerously low, they needed to find the Klingon stronghold—and fast. The captain’s normally jovial countenance had faded under the blazing heat of the twin suns high above Webirty, becoming less humorous with each labored step up the final mountain side. When he finally reached the top, with his two companions close behind, Blanchard nearly collapsed out of sheer exhaustion and dehydration.

Stepping to the side of the ledge, his eyes scanned as far as the horizon, but there was nothing but more mountains. “The *Vindicator*’s scanners must have been mistaken. There’s nothing here,” he labored.

Amanda’s dark brown eyes locked on her husband’s. “I’m not sure if I’m sorry about that.”

“Meaning what?” Lieutenant Jones asked.

“Meaning that if there’re no Klingons around, we can contact the ship without fear our signal would be intercepted.”

Captain Blanchard couldn’t agree more. Besides, it was high time the landing party discovered if the radiation storm had passed the ship by now. He reached behind his back, snaking his hand under the sticky hem of his uniform tunic, and withdrew the translucent communicator. As his eyes continued to scan the horizon, he was about to flip the device open when a distant reflection caught his attention.

Jones caught the captain narrowing his eyes at something in the valley below. “What is it, Captain?”

Michael shook his head slowly. “I’m not entirely sure.”

Amanda crouched down next to her husband to get a look at what he’d seen. It didn’t take long for the glint to reach her position. “Whatever it is, it’s manmade.”

“How do you know that?”

“Because I read the geological report on Webirty before we beamed down. There are no naturally reflective materials on the entire planet.”

“Know-it-all,” the captain said as he nudged his wife with his knee. “How much water do we have left?”

“About three liters,” Jones replied after he checked their inventory.

“All right, then. One liter each. Make it last. If those are Klingons down there, we’re not going to be able to waltz right in and ask them to use their drinking fountain.”

Amanda smiled to herself, then looked up at her husband. “And why not?”

\* \* \*

Amanda rushed to the imposingly large door and began beating on it with her fists, screaming at the top of her lungs. “Help! Help! Please, if anyone is in there, I need help!”

After several tense moments of silence the doors began to part. In an instant, four Klingon guards rushed out and surrounded her.

“Oh, thank God there’s someone in there,” she said as her eyes moved from one Klingon to the next until they fell on the highest ranking officer. The front of Amanda’s uniform, strategically ripped to reveal enough of her anatomy to give the Klingons a good enough show, was partially bunched up and held to her chest. “Thank the merciful gods of the universe, the ocean, and all that dwell on the land,” she continued as she approached the officer. As she neared him she fell to her feet and reached out for his shiny boot, caressing it as a child would a treasured stuffed animal. “You are my saviors!”

“What is it?” she heard one of the Klingons ask.

“It looks like an Earther female,” another said.

“She sounds as if she’s gone mad,” came from another.

“Mad? No . . . at least, I don’t think so,” Amanda said, still groveling at the feet of the ranking officer. “What I am is thankful. Thankful you’re here to rescue me.”

“Rescue you from what?” the leader spat. “There is nothing for you to fear here, except for us.” He reached down and clamped his hands around her shoulders, then hauled her to her feet.

“Oh, no,” she said, wide-eyed. “I don’t fear you as much as I do that lunatic out there.” She inclined her head over her shoulder.

“Lunatic?” the leader asked in confusion.

“Yes, a Starfleet officer. He’s insane. Off his rocker. A few cycles short of a full impulse term, if you catch my drift.”

“Starfleet? Here?” she heard the murmurs from the Klingons behind her.

“You have seen this *human*, have you?” another asked.

“Of course I have, you idiot. He was almost upon me when I came across your camp. He’s been following me for days, asking me for water, food, magazines, chewing gum. He even offered me a rock, trying to convince me it was a cheeseburger. A few hours ago he caught up to me and tried to force himself on me, doing this to my uniform. He’s a complete nut job. I’m scared for my life.”

The leader looked her over, noting for the first time her Starfleet insignia. “And you are Starfleet as well?”

“I was, but I’m through with that bunch of cowards and saboteurs. They fight like . . . like . . . well, they are just a bunch of balloon chasers.”

“Balloon chasers? I have no idea what that means.”

Amanda smiled. “Oh, it’s the worst insult one human can give another human, I assure you. It’s *very* bad.”

“Then you will not mind telling me the Federation’s plans in this sector?”

“Oh, of course not. I’ll tell you their plans, draw you maps, give you communications protocols, and I’ll even throw in my grandmother’s chocolate chip cookie recipe. Just send your men and kill that Federation officer!”

The leader gave her a disapproving look, but then nodded slowly. “I’ve heard stories of the barbarities of Earth men. That they should stoop so low as to force themselves on their own women is sickening. This man has no honor, and he’ll be dealt with.” He nodded to his three officers, telling them without words to carry out the assignment of tracking down and killing the human.

“You’re not going to send more men out to kill him?” she asked, pushing out a stream of very convincing tears. The dress of her uniform, ripped at just the right angle, was showing more leg than a cabaret show on Rigel VII.

“You needn’t worry,” he said with compassion, offering her a coarse hand. “They will take care of this Starfleet officer. Besides, we are short-staffed here. Allow me to take you inside and get you something to eat. We have much to . . . *discuss*.”

Amanda brushed back her tears and grinned from ear to ear. “Oh, thank the gods of catfish and riverbeds. You are so very kind.”

“I am Major Tren,” he said. “And you are?”

“Um, Amanda,” she said as she offered a ridiculous bow.

“Yes, Amanda. Of course. You have . . . many strange gods that you worship. Catfish and riverbeds?”

She almost burst out laughing at hearing the words repeated back to her. It was easily the most obscure line of gibberish she’d ever spouted. To see that it was working was nothing short of a miracle. She slowly intertwined her arm with his. “My dear Tren. I will tell you all about it over a glass of ale.”

“My thoughts exactly.”

\* \* \*

Captain Blanchard watched from above as the three Klingon sentries cautiously rounded a series of large boulders. He’d chosen his location wisely, knowing that the Klingons would have to come down this narrow path as they searched for “the captain.” He’d scaled a series of rocks, finally coming to rest above the Klingons’ point of entry into the craggy maze. With Lieutenant Jones at a point directly opposite his own, all the Starfleet officers had to do was sit and wait.

It hadn’t taken long for the Klingons to come. Michael could see their dark eyes searching for him. The Klingons were walking slowly, careful not to disturb any of the underbrush while they stalked their prey. Michael watched as Franklin Jones got up on his haunches and took aim at the leader of the pack. When the lieutenant

looked to his captain for an order to fire, Blanchard gave him a signal to hold fire for a few moments longer. As the Klingons came into a clearing, the captain gave Jones the signal, and the two officers laid down a blanket of laser fire. Set on stun, the shots collapsed the three Klingons into a heap in seconds.

After disarming and tying up their unconscious prisoners, the two Federation officers quickly made their way back to the Klingon compound in search of Amanda, slowing as they neared the intimidating entrance door.

“What do we do now, sir?”

“I’m not sure,” Michael said as he scanned the doorway and the surrounding material. It looked hastily erected, and he doubted it would take long to crack it open with a few well-placed laser shots.

Jones pointed his laser at the door. “I could slice a hole through it.”

“No, that might endanger Amanda. We don’t know what—” his words were cut off by the sound of the heavy door being unlatched from within. “Quick. Take cover!” The two men dashed behind the most suitable rocks they could find. It wasn’t until Michael noticed that it was Amanda opening the door did he relax his guard.

“Do you plan on playing outside all day?” she asked in her most motherly tone. “Dinner is ready, and it’s time to come inside.”

Michael placed his pistol back into its holster as he neared his wife. “What happened to your friend?”

She smiled playfully. “I’m afraid the good major can’t seem to hold his liquor.”

“How many more of them are there?” Jones asked, his eyes scanning the inside of the compound as the trio made their way through the door.

“I don’t know, but there can’t be that many. I haven’t seen a single person walking around here since I stunned Tren.”

“So, either we’ve disabled them all, or there’s an entire garrison of men eating their lunch in the galley.”

“We could check out every building,” Amanda said, still trying to hold up the tattered remains of her uniform.

“That’d take too much time,” the captain replied as his eyes scanned each of the buildings around them. “All we need to do is get to the computer center. It’ll house

the mainframe and the subspace transmitter array. I don't suppose your friend provided you with a map of this place?"

Amanda shook her head. He looked at his wife, and the dangerous amount of skin her tattered uniform betrayed. He desperately wanted to cover her with something. While she didn't seem all that concerned with modesty at this point, he didn't want to give Lieutenant Jones more of a show than he'd already gotten. After all, some things were for the captain's eyes only. Besides, they need to get out of the open. Deciding that one building looked just as good as the next, Michael selected one near the center of the small fortress and motioned his officers inside.

\* \* \*

Much to everyone's delight, the room they'd entered was vacant. Captain Blanchard's first impression was that they were in some sort of laboratory. There were two rows of long, silvery tables with various rocks and soil samples strewn about them with little organization. Most of the larger boulders, about the size of watermelons, had been cracked neatly in half, displaying their beautiful multicolored crystalline cores. There were various instruments in the space as well, and Amanda was quick to point out that the nature of the laboratory was entirely geological in nature.

Lieutenant Jones reached out for a palm-sized chunk of rust-red rock and examined the deep purple crystal at its core. "It looks like a geode. My dad had a few of these lying around the house when I was a kid."

Michael looked to his science officer for a more accurate description. Amanda picked up the other half of the globular stone and held it closely to her eyes. "I'll bet your father never had ones like these," she said with veiled wonder.

Michael walked up behind his wife, careful not to disturb her while she studied the stone. "What do you mean?"

"These are dilithium nodules."

"Dilithium nodules?" Jones asked in disbelief. "Never heard of it."

“That’s because they are extremely rare, Lieutenant. Normally, on a dilithium-rich planet, you only need to burrow down about a hundred meters or so and you’ll strike a good vein. These nodules, however, are formed far deeper.”

“How much deeper?” the captain asked, captivated at the geological find.

“Several kilometers, at the very least. Even then, you’re not guaranteed to find them. Of the hundred or so mining operations going on inside the Federation’s borders, I’ve only heard of nodules being discovered on three planets, and they never reported finding ones of such large sizes.”

“What’s the significance of a nodule over regular dilithium?”

“The crystals are far more pure, meaning they have less inclusions.”

“Inclusions?” Jones asked, holding the rock close to his eyes.

“Internal flaws,” she smiled. “Crystals like these would greatly improve the performance of the standard warp engine. But, as I said, no one has ever found ones so large. And, as you know, you can’t just glue a bunch of small ones together. The Klingons have stumbled onto something really rare here.”

This mission had suddenly become more tenuous. “Do you think the Klingons are aware of that fact?” Michael asked.

Amanda’s eyes scanned the lab once more. “It’s hard to say. With this equipment, it’s possible, but they’d have to have a pretty well-trained geologist on their staff. My guess is they probably sent samples back to another location to get properly tested, possibly an off-world lab.”

“Which is why there aren’t battle cruisers in orbit right now defending this tiny outpost.” Michael said as his mind whirled with this new information.

“And all the more reason for us to get back to the *Vindicator* as soon as possible,” Amanda replied.

“Agreed. Jones, this is probably the most sophisticated lab they have in the area. There has to be a computer tie-in somewhere. See if you can tap in and download the data with your new little toy.” He flipped open his communicator. “Blanchard to *Vindicator*.”

“*Vindicator*, Lieutenant Commander James.” It was the deep voice of the chief engineer.

“Mr. James, has that magnetic storm fully passed the ship yet?”



“Yes, sir. About thirty minutes ago. I’m glad you called in, Skipper. We were starting to get a little worried.”

“Commander James, stand by to bring us up on my next signal.”

“Aye, sir. Transporters are locked onto your signal and standing by.”

“And, if you wouldn’t mind, could you make sure to bring down a utility jacket for Commander DeSoto? She’s seems to have developed a slight uniform malfunction.”

Nathaniel James chuckled softly over the channel. “Yes, sir. I’ll see to it.”

The “new toy” the captain had referred to earlier was a new high-speed data transfer device, designed and built by a fleet engineer who was currently dismantling and rebuilding Klingon technology far from the front lines of the war. Coded to the same modulation as the Klingons’ computer, one simply had to plug the device into the computer port and switch it on, within minutes gaining access to most of the ship’s basic information. However, if three of the small devices were hooked together in parallel, one could easily download the entire ship’s library.

Jones reached into his pack, withdrawing the only two transfer devices he had, and snapped them together. A moment later he found the computer port. He plugged the device in and switched on the only button on the device. A small light on its base rapidly flashed from green to red, showing that a data transfer was in progress.

“Downloading data now, Captain.”

“Very well. You have three minutes to get whatever data you can, then we’re going home.”

“Mind if I bring a few souvenirs?” Amanda asked kindly.

“And I thought you hated this vacation.” He smiled broadly. “Now you want to bring back mementos of your time here?”

“Very funny.”

\* \* \*

No sooner had the trio beamed back aboard the *Vindicator* when the red alert klaxon began to sound throughout the ship. Captain Blanchard, disregarding the need for a shower and shave—not to mention changing into a clean uniform—went directly to the bridge. When Amanda attempted to follow, the captain pulled rank, telling her that she'd be welcomed back at her post only if she replaced the tattered set of rags she was calling a uniform.

When Blanchard set foot on the top deck of the light cruiser *Vindicator*, he knew he'd finally come home. He turned to the dark-skinned communications officer, who was beaming at him from the science console. "Lieutenant Kilpatrick, report."

"Klingon squadron entering the system."

"Composition?"

"Three cruisers, three destroyers, sir."

"Where is the rest of the 63<sup>rd</sup> Squadron?"

"They linked up with us an hour ago."

Michael nodded with approval. "That gives us two medium cruisers and two heavy destroyers. Where are the rest of our forces?"

"Commander King's frigates are on the far side of Webirty III."

As the lieutenant had finished speaking, Lieutenant Commander DeSoto, once again dressed in a pristine uniform, strode confidently onto the bridge.

"DeSoto, relieve the lieutenant at the science station and bring up the tactical plot on the main view screen."

"Aye." She glided to her station and deftly entered the commands into the ship's computer.

On the forward screen, the image of the planet Webirty faded and was replaced by a top-down tactical map of the system. In the center, a small blip near the planet indicated the *Vindicator*'s current position, with the rest of his squadron forming a protective screen around them. At the edge of the system was a group of three red triangles—Klingon ships—heading in on an intercept course. Midway between the two forces was Webirty III, an icy rock hardly large enough to be classified a planet. On the far side of it was Commander King's trio of *Loknar*-class frigates.

"Have the Klingons spotted Commander King's forces yet?"

“I don’t think so, sir,” Amanda replied as she checked her sensors once more. “Indications are that the Klingons are bringing all their forces to bear on us.”

“Communications, get me Commander King on a secure channel.”

“He’s standing by, sir.”

The tactical image on the viewer was replaced by the visage of Commander Garrison King.

“*Oriskany* standing by, Captain,” King was quick to chime in.

Pushing all pleasantries aside for the time being, Captain Blanchard got down to business. “Commander, do you have those Klingon contacts on your sensors?”

“Affirmative, *Vindicator*. They seem to have their sights set on you. Do you need us to come in?”

“Not at the moment, no.”

Garrison smirked. “Gonna take them on all by yourself, sir?”

Michael smiled back. “I hadn’t planned on it. But I do want you to slow your orbit.”

“Slow down, sir?”

“That’s right. Once the Klingons are well past Webirty II, I want to kick in your impulse as full speed and come in behind them. Coordinate your sensor readings with ours. The longer you can delay your arrival at our position, the more time the Klingons have to feel confident they’ll win the engagement.”

“And the less likely they’ll be to disengage,” King nodded.

“Exactly. I want to take out as many of those ships as we can.”

“Understood. We’re slowing our orbit now.”

“We’ll keep the Klingons occupied until you arrive. *Vindicator* out.”

## Chapter 10

Stardate 4208.17

August 2254

Twenty minutes later, on board the USS *Oriskany*, Commander Garrison King executed a flawless rear flanking attack on the far more powerful Klingon cruiser squadron. With the squadron's rear quarter wholly unprotected, the *Oriskany*—along with the frigates *Ingraham* and *Ashaton*—concentrated their combined firepower on a single D-7 cruiser, obliterating the vessel in seconds. The trio of *Loknar*-class frigates then split up, each taking aim at targets of opportunity.

First was a D-6 that had previously been targeted by the medium cruiser USS *Knell*. Captain Edward Bell had managed to disable the destroyer's warp drive, but the impulse systems were still fully intact, allowing the vessel to maintain full sublight maneuverability. However, the Klingon's reprieve was only temporary, as the *Ashaton* once again showed her mettle by slicing long lines of laser fire into the Klingon's unprotected upper hull. The impulse drive module was holed through several times, and the lumbering Klingon destroyer became little more than a slow-moving target for the Federation forces.

In the meantime, the Federation cruisers of the 26<sup>th</sup> Strike Squadron wasted little time in dispatching some destruction of their own. The *Anton*-class light cruisers *Frankfurt* and *Purdy* destroyed one D-7, while the light cruiser *Nicholas* managed to immobilize a heavy cruiser on its own. The *Frankfurt* then turned, this time assisting the *Oriskany* and the *Knell*, in eliminating the remainder of the Klingon destroyers.

Stardate 4208.20

“. . . This after-action report, copied from the actual report filed to Starfleet Command, is provided as a training aid to future cadets. It should be noted that

these engagements are not the typical blah blah blah . . .” the cadet finished with a roll of his eyes before he looked excitedly to third-year cadet Gary Mitchell. “Isn’t that amazing?”

“You really like reading those reports, don’t you, Jim?” Mitchell said with a hint of boredom.

“I find them fascinating, that’s all.” Jim Kirk had no idea why he felt the need to defend his feelings on the matter, but brushed the sentiment aside for the moment. “It’s important to know what we’re going to face when we get out there permanently.”

Mitchell threw his head back over the plush lounge chair and gazed at the ceiling. “We’ve already been out there, permanency notwithstanding, and I have yet to even see any Klingons on the long-range sensors, let alone fight one.”

“The *Farragut* isn’t supposed to go near the combat zone while it’s assigned to Training Command. You know that, Gary.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Mitchell groaned. “I just joined the fleet to have some fun, you know? Not to go on pointless training cruises . . . or lounge around here all day while you’re out with your pretty blonde friend, little miss what’s-her-name.”

“Her name’s Carol.”

“I’m still kicking myself for introducing her to you. You’re really crazy about her, aren’t you?”

Kirk smirked. “Let’s just say I’m pretty partial to her company.”

Gary picked his head up off the back of the chair, popping himself out in a fluid motion to land on one knee in front of Kirk. When Kirk didn’t flinch, Gary rested a hand near Jim’s leg. “You’re not thinking of going soft on me, are you, old pal?”

Jim cocked his head back in shock. “Soft? What do you mean by that?”

“Oh, Jim. Poor old love-struck-like-a-fool Jim Kirk. Girls make you soft, man. They make you do things, things you don’t want to do. They make you become things you don’t ever want to be.”

“Like honest?”

“Oh, and that’s just for starters, Lieutenant Kirk,” Gary said, standing and waving his arms grandly. “Pretty soon you’re pushing around a stroller full of a pair of twin baby Kirks, complaining about your long hours sitting behind a desk while all she can do is talk about how bad her day was planting . . . *turnips* or some such nonsense. Then, before you know it, you’re *writing* the long-haired stuff instead of just reading it.”

“Gee, you’re not bitter about women at all, are you?”

“I’m just pointing out facts, Jim.”

“Facts, huh? And I’m sure those facts stem from your profound knowledge of the female psyche, right?”

“Of course they do. Didn’t you know I was psychic?”

Kirk smiled wryly. “Well, if you’re such a skilled mind reader, tell me what I’m thinking right now.”

Gary flamboyantly waved his arms at his sides, and then brought his index fingers to his temples. He closed his eyes and moaned softly. Jim watched the lines in Mitchell’s forehead furrow as the younger man feigned concentration. Suddenly Mitchell’s eyes popped open and a devious smile played across his face. “You’re thinking of the Kobayashi Maru, aren’t you?”

Kirk tried to hide his surprise. It was, after all, exactly what he’d been thinking about. However, Gary also knew that Kirk had a re-test of the fateful simulator coming up the day after tomorrow. Kirk had made no attempts in the past week to hide the fact that the test was stressing him out, especially since he’d failed it twice already. Still, Jim decided to placate Mitchell and see how far his young friend would take the charade.

“Very good, *Cadet*.” He made sure to emphasize the word, knowing it would grate against Mitchell’s nerves. After all, now that he was a lieutenant and in command school, Jim Kirk was well within his boundaries to refer to Gary as such. “But that’s too obvious. Try again.”

Mitchell closed his eyes, this time bringing his fingers to his temples without the grandiose waving of his arms. Gone too was the exaggerated moan, while the furrowed lines in his brow came back once more. “You’re not sure you can pass it a

third time. You're afraid that if you fail it once more, they'll kick you out of command school."

"Still too obvious, Mr. Mitchell."

Gary, unfazed by Kirk's remarks, continued. "You're . . . terrified of a computer beating you. You know in your heart that there's no way a computer can take into account every nuance of human thought and emotion. There is more to commanding a starship than simply following a program. To let one stand as judgment over you is insulting. You want . . . you want something. You want to prove to them that they're wrong."

Kirk was intrigued. Something Mitchell said had, surprisingly, struck a chord. "To prove that who is wrong?" he baited.

Mitchell smiled without opening his eyes. Something in the way he did it gave Kirk a chill. "Everyone who gains by you failing."

"And how do I do that?"

Gary chuckled, his eyes still closed. Gone now were the furrowed lines on his brow. His fingers no longer touched his temples, his arms flat at his sides. Only his head, tilted leisurely back over his shoulders, gave Kirk any indication that Mitchell was still playing the role of a psychic. "You already know what needs to be done, Jim. If you're looking for a second opinion, then I'd say go for it."

"I'm not sure that's what I needed."

Gary's eyes slid open. "Well, maybe not, but you *will* need an extra pair of hands to get it done."

How Gary Mitchell had come by the information was beyond Jim's comprehension. Considering Mitchell was on the cusp of being proven right, there was little sense in James arguing with him. "It's risky."

Mitchell continued to beam with self-satisfaction. "That comes with the uniform, Lieutenant James T. Kirk. You of all people taught me that."

The corner of Kirk's mouth twitched up. "Have anyone in mind for the job?"

"In fact, I do. And he just so happens to have access to the computer control room."

\* \* \*

Illuminated by the distant star of the Delta Niam system, a gleaming *Heston*-class heavy cruiser led a motley formation of thirty-five vessels toward the Federation-held planet of Zalvhros. Twenty-two of those ships made up the whole of the 19<sup>th</sup> Squadron, with the remainder being either freighters or repair ships from other commands.

And it was those freighters that were worth more than their weight in gold. Carrying supplies and raw materials—not to mention a few hundred scientific and military personnel—they were being ferried to the planet to shore up its defensive capabilities. Starfleet Command, acting under information gathered by operatives from Starfleet Intelligence, had become aware that the Klingons were making several major pushes into this region of space, seemingly targeting the material-rich population metropolis on Argelius only one sector away. It was decided to bolster the presence of both Marines and fleet units around the Zalvhros system, which would lie directly in the Klingons' path to their presumed target.

Fleet Captain Brady Waldron, in command of the heavy cruiser USS *Gable*, was charged with the overall protection of the convoy. Waldron was considered by most to be an outsider, having yet to fight a single engagement in the war. While the remainder of the 19<sup>th</sup> had seen their share of action—to say nothing about the multiple battle stars received by both the veterans of USS *Breckenridge* and the USS *Galina*—the *Gable* had spent the first eighteen months of the war in the shipyard completing a twenty-month refit program. As compared to the rest of the *Heston*-class, she was the most sophisticated and most up to date. As far as the rest of the fleet went, she was an aging design; a throwback to an earlier era of peace and exploration when ships were designed to fight targets half as powerful as the Klingons they were currently facing.

For the past nine months, Waldron had supervised the refit of his ship, and before that, had been in command of a medium cruiser far removed from the front lines, patrolling the area of space between Earth and Alpha Centauri—arguably the safest and most boring handful of sectors in known space. So when it came time for



promotions, his number came up like most anyone else in the fleet. His rank of fleet captain freshly bestowed, Waldron had been ordered to take command of the newly formed 19<sup>th</sup>, and to escort a convoy safely to the Delta Niam system. Considering the 19<sup>th</sup> would be traveling from a coreward starbase and supply depot orbiting Regulus, enemy resistance was expected to be all but nonexistent. This had sat well with Commodore Serald, commander of the Strategic Group that contained the 19<sup>th</sup>, and it'd sat well with Waldron, who'd been secretly harboring fears of his own that he wouldn't be able to match the combat accolades of some of the contemporaries under his command.

As it was, Waldron was glad to have such competent commanders directly under him. In charge of the three squadrons under his command were Captain Richards of the cruiser USS *Gallant*, Captain Green of the starship *Xerxes*, and Captain Tlustos of the medium cruiser *King Richard*. All had battle experience in one form or another under their belts, and all had come out of those experiences with nary a scratch on the hulls of their vessels. It'd given Waldron a sense of security knowing the past actions of the men under him, and it helped him sleep better at night knowing that he had such forces to fall back on for council if the situation required it.

Fleet Captain Waldron leaned back in the soft padding of the command chair, gazing at the beautiful shape of the *Achernar*-class *King Richard* as she maintained her position on the forward-starboard side of the *Gable*. Sighing heavily, he turned his attention to his Andorian science officer, Commander Zenner.

"Mr. Zenner, sensor report, please."

As the blue-skinned man turned to face his commander, the antennae atop his otherwise bald head twitched slightly before he responded.

"Nothing on long-range scanners, sir. Nothing in the immediate area."

"Very good. Helmsman, what is our ETA at Delta Niam?"

The attractive, auburn-haired lieutenant turned her head quickly, her wild mane billowing a second behind. "Estimated time of arrival is 1900 hours at our present speed."

“That gives us a little over two hours,” Waldron said to no one in particular. He was conscious of his own nervous habit of talking to himself, and he was failing miserably in his attempts to curb it.

“Yes, sir,” the helmsman replied, unsure if she needed to or not.

“Communications officer, send out a fleetwide broadcast. We’ll be increasing to warp five.”

“Yes, sir,” the Edosian at the communications console replied.

“ETA now one hour, four minutes,” the young helmsman replied without missing a beat.

Brady Waldron brought a hand to his face and rubbed his chin absently. “I’m going down to the wardroom to get a bite to eat,” he muttered, then looked to the science officer. “Commander Zenner?”

“Yes, Captain?”

“Commander, you have the conn. I’ll be back in thirty minutes.”

“Of course, sir.”

The lieutenant commander sitting at the navigator’s console turned to face Waldron just as he was stepping out of the command chair. “Mind if I join you, Skipper?”

Brady smiled weakly. “Of course, Mr. DeStefano.”

And with that, Fleet Captain Waldron nearly bolted from the command deck and into the turbolift, and it took several bounding steps for Larry DeStefano to keep up.

“Okay, it’s just you and me now, Brady. Why don’t you tell me what’s bothering you?”

Fleet Captain Waldron and Lieutenant Commander Larry DeStefano had found a comfortable—and blessedly empty—area of the spacious wardroom to sit and have an early dinner. Finished with their respective meals, the captain had produced a bottle of brandy, which the officers now sipped at gingerly.

Waldron had known DeStefano for years. In fact, he was one of the few people on the *Gable* that Waldron could say he trusted implicitly. During an encounter on Tagen IV, back when Waldron was a commander and DeStefano a senior lieutenant, the junior officer had taken an arrow to the back to save his department head from a

band of pursuing tribesmen. Even now, years later and light-years from that dark, moonless world, the two men still had no idea why they'd been so hotly chased by the clan of warriors.

In fact, the two of them had an ongoing contest—to see who could make up the most fantastical reason for their would-be trailers. It always ended with the two men in near-hysterics, but not today. Today the game wouldn't be played. There was something on Waldron's mind, and Larry DeStefano was determined to see what it was.

Fleet Captain Waldron took a deep breath before speaking into his glass. "Just nerves, I guess."

"About what? The fleet?"

Brady ran his hand through his peppered gray hair, then stroked his thin mustache. "No, not the fleet. We've got some fine ships, and even finer captains out there."

But DeStefano wasn't giving up. "Okay, so what is it, then? You jumped out of that command chair like it was coated in molten lava. I've never seen you act like that before."

Waldron turned his blue eyes coldly to DeStefano. "Maybe because I've never been put in a position like this before, Larry."

"Whoa there, pal. Put on the brakes," DeStefano said, throwing his hands up in surrender. "I'm not the enemy here."

"No, you're not," Waldron dismissed the comment, then went back to his brandy. "Those damn Klingons are."

"Is that what's bothering you? Klingons?"

"Shouldn't it? Shouldn't it be bothering all of us?"

DeStefano shrugged cautiously. "It does. I mean, it bothers me, and I can tell it's obviously bugging the hell out of you. But we're holding the line with them. And pretty soon—"

"Pretty soon what?" Waldron interrupted. "Huh? We go on the offensive?"

"That's right."

Waldron let out a disgusted breath. “You need to read some of the communiqués that I get from Starfleet Command. That’d change that optimistic view of yours real quick.”

DeStefano sipped at his own brandy once more. “This war is going to quickly swing in our favor. I can feel it.”

“I wish I had your confidence.”

That was when it dawned on Larry. “So, what’s really worrying you is how you’ll perform if we get into combat.”

It wasn’t a question, and Brady didn’t take it as one. “Between you, me, and the bulkhead, I’d say that’s about right.”

“Because of the ship?”

It was true: the upgraded *Gable* was largely untested. However, being intimately aware of everything that had been improved on the heavy cruiser during her overhaul, Waldron wasn’t as worried about the ship as he was about her personnel . . . or her captain.

“It’s more like me, Larry. I’m worried about how I’ll be able to manage all these people if we run into a crisis situation. Commanding a single starship is one thing. Hell, even a squadron of three ships is relatively easy to deal with. But I’ve got a whole fleet now. There are dozens of starships and thousands of people relying on me to make the right decisions.”

DeStefano leaned back in his chair, taking a long look out one of the few view ports afforded this compartment. The stars were sparse in this quadrant, and the port was predominantly filled with the blackness of infinity stretched out on all sides of the fleet. As if by reading his thoughts, a *Larson*-class destroyer—the USS *Montclair*—glided across the window and broke up the otherwise bleak visage.

“You’ve got nothing to worry about, Brady. You’ve been doing this a long time. Besides, Starfleet Command would have never given you this command if they didn’t feel you were ready.”

“I wish I could say you were right,” Waldron said, taking a look out the view port to the *Montclair*, now appearing motionless despite the fact that the entire fleet was now traveling at warp five. “I just want to be done with this escort to Zelvros. Once we’re back in the heart of the Federation, the better I’ll feel.”

“I’m not sure the crew shares that sentiment.”

“Meaning what?”

DeStefano craned his head toward a table of junior officers some distance away. “These new kids are itching for some combat. Some of them won’t shut up about it. They’ve got some romantic notion that it’s all fun and games out there.”

“War has a peculiar way of humbling people. As soon as some of their former classmates or loved ones die, their perspective will rapidly change.”

“Maybe. But, until then, you’ve got a bunch of wet-behind-the-ears kids hoping to prove themselves to someone . . . anyone.”

“You mean me?”

“More than likely,” Larry agreed with a slight nod of his head. “And, having said that, there’s been some grumblings from the lower decks that we’ve been assigned cake-duty out here; that we’re purposely being held back from actual combat.”

Waldron watched as the *Montclair* swept beyond the view from the wardroom. “It’s just the duty we pulled. We’re no different than any other command in the fleet.”

“Well, these kids feel like they paid the price for admission. They want to see the show.”

“You know, that’s the part of the job I hate the most.”

DeStefano smiled. “Well, for better or worse, you’re stuck with it for now until you make admiral.”

“Well, then the junior officers will simply be replaced by captains trying to kiss my backside.”

The slightly younger lieutenant commander smiled broadly. “It’s a no-win situation for sure.”

“In any case, it’s my job to make sure everyone—these kids included—make it out of this war alive.”

Larry DeStefano’s expression turned serious. “If you’re getting at what I think you’re getting at, then you can just stow that crap right now. If we get ordered into combat, I know you’ll do everything in your power to make sure we come out on

top. If I have to pound that into the JOs, then don't think for a moment I won't hesitate to do so."

Waldron smiled. "Now who's on the defensive?"

"Okay, okay," DeStefano said as he reeled back quickly. "You got me there. Let's just put this all behind us for right now and enjoy what little respite we have before we reach Zalvhros."

"Yes, and all the excitement we're expecting there when we drop off a convoy of troop transports."

The sarcasm wasn't lost on the helmsman. "Hey, you never know."

# Chapter 11

Back on the bridge, Fleet Captain Waldron turned away from the beautiful, mysterious world of Zalvhros to face his communications officer. "Lieutenant Threld, open a channel to Captain Tlustos on the *King Richard*."

The stout, blue-skinned Andorian looked stoically at his captain before acknowledging the request. Moments later the image of Tlustos appeared on the main view screen.

Captain Reinhard Tlustos, the assumed second in command of the 19th Battle Force, leaned back comfortably in his command chair as the two men gazed at one another. "*King Richard* here, sir."

Waldron looked at the man whom he secretly thought should actually be in command of this mission. True, Fleet Captain Waldron outranked Tlustos by his time in the service, but there was a disparity between the two when it came to overall experience. Tlustos, with a fleetwide reputation for being cool under fire—even in the direst of circumstances—had more than his share of Klingon silhouettes painted in the galley of his *Achernar*-class command cruiser. It came as no surprise to most that Tlustos had graduated from Starfleet in the same class as Fleet Captain Garth, and that the two were very close friends to this day, playing long, drawn-out games of chess over subspace—even when the time between their respective moves could be weeks or months. His dark hair, cut fashionably short, caught the glint of the overhead light of his bridge as his soft green eyes spoke volumes of the supreme internal confidence he had in himself and in his ship.

"Captain Tlustos," Waldron began, "we're approaching point Zed-Alpha-9. Stand by to deploy the 95th Battle Squadron to the far side of the planet."

Tlustos nodded calmly. "Yes, sir. Everything is ready. I'd like to deploy the *Gilgamesh* to the far side of the system as well, sir."

Waldron didn't need to ask why, and he silently kicked himself for not thinking of it sooner. Of course, the outer edge of the system would need starships scanning out into deep space, looking for any aggressors that might come looking for a fight. He

attempted to nod back to Tlustos with the same confidence, but he knew he had fallen somewhat short with his more jerky movements. "Yes. Yes, of course, Captain. I'll also be sending out the *Sutherland* and the *Wellington* to do the same. That should give us a wide enough field of view outside the system, while still maintaining an acceptable level of protection around the planet."

"Yes, sir." Tlustos said with another slow nod.

Brady wasn't sure if Tlustos actually approved of his plan or not. He thought for a moment that he might actually ask the more experienced captain what he thought of the arrangement, but then remembering Tlustos also had a history of speaking his mind to his superiors, decided to shelve the question for another time. If Reinhard didn't like the plan, Brady was sure he wouldn't have had to ask.

"\* \* \*"

On the bridge of the *Anton*-class light cruiser USS *Sutherland*, all was as it should be. The rhythmic sounds of the ship's engines, gently vibrating the deck plates under each crewman's feet, was a gentle reminder that each and every man, woman, and being on board was part of a larger body that they all called home. And a beautiful home it was.

The *Sutherland* was the newest of her class of research cruisers to join the fleet. Every display screen gleamed, every system was operating at 100 percent efficiency, and every crewman's heart seemed to be filled with pride. This mission was her first real test after she'd completed her trials near the shipyards at Morena where she'd been constructed, and Captain Carl Chambers was eager to show the brass at Starfleet Command what his vessel could do.

His long, lean form swiveled away from the streaming stars displayed on the main view screen to face Lieutenant Commander Balor, his Vulcan science officer. The Vulcan, also tall and lanky, was hunched over the ship's library computer as he correlated the most recent sensor data with the astrogation information provided by the last survey vessels to pass through this system.

"Sensor report, Mr. Balor?" Chambers asked.

Balor turned and faced his captain. "The computer has not yet finished processing the data, Captain. I estimate that we will not have a complete report for an additional 17.35 minutes."



"Seventeen point three-five minutes," Chambers repeated slowly.

"Yes, sir."

Chambers then swiveled his chair to face the chief engineer's station on the opposite side of the bridge. "Engine status, Mr. Parker?"

The older human male turned in his seat to face the much younger captain. "Warp and impulse engines are at peak operating efficiency, sir."

"Weapon status?"

Parker looked at him dubiously. "Not that you'll need them, sir, but they're fully operational."

Chambers' dark skin crinkled as he smiled broadly. "Just because we're out on sensor patrol, it doesn't mean we won't find any trouble. In fact, more often than not, it's the patrols that get into a scuffle before the fleets do. We must be vigilant."

"Aye, sir," the engineer smiled back. "That being said, if you need me, I think I'll retire to the engine room. Specialist McNab is running some tests on the phase inducers, and I'd like to see how he's coming along."

Captain Chambers nodded with approval, and soon the engineer was replaced by his relief, a young Andorian female lieutenant named T'Kora.

\* \* \*

The young communications officer on board the USS *Wellington*, a fresh-faced ensign not far removed from Starfleet Academy turned abruptly in his chair to face the captain. The young man tried—but failed utterly—to keep his voice from cracking as he addressed the far superior officer.

"Captain, an emergency distress call is coming in from the cruiser *Sutherland*. They are asking for immediate assistance."

Martin L. Collins, a career-minded officer, considered by many to be in on the next round of selectees for the rank of commodore, calmly turned in his command chair to face the young man. He couldn't help but smile at the tone in the ensign's voice as he recalled the first time he'd relayed an official communication to the "old man." Captain Collins only hoped that the display hadn't embarrassed the otherwise exemplary young officer. "Can you establish a channel, Ensign Gross?"

The ensign shook his head sharply before responding, his words precise and well formed. "Negative, sir. It's a repeating general subspace distress call."

Martin nodded. "Put it on audio, please."

"Aye," the young man said, then deftly tied the channel into the overhead speakers.

A fluctuating wave of audio interference momentarily poured throughout the bridge, followed by a series of static pops before a voice overtook the noise. "To all Federation-registered vessels. This is the Starfleet cruiser *Sutherland*, attached to the 75th Battle Squadron under Fleet Captain Richards, Zalvhros sector. Our warp drive is down, and impulse reactors are offline. Life support is functioning on reserve power only. In an effort to conserve rapidly depleting power, we cannot establish visual communications at this time. We have several injured crewmen on board, some in critical condition. We request immediate assistance. This is a Priority One distress call."

Ensign Gross silenced the audio at that point. "The message then repeats itself, Captain."

"Hmm," Martin remarked, turning his eyes to the science officer's station next to Gross's. "Dave?"

Lieutenant Commander David Turner nodded and turned to the captain. "We're too far away for a detailed scan. At last report, the *Sutherland* was on the far edge of the system, about half a parsec from our current location."

"How long ago?"

"About six hours ago, sir," Turner replied.

Martin nodded calmly. There was no need to alert the bridge crew to something that, at the moment, didn't warrant such a reaction. "Helm, take us to the last known location of the *Sutherland*. Full impulse." He placed a steady hand on the helmsman's shoulder as he spoke, then turned back to the science officer. "Dave, I want you to keep those sensors scanning on their widest possible pattern. If the *Sutherland* is lost out there somewhere, I want to find her as quickly as possible."

"Of course, Captain."

"\* \* \*"

"I've located the *Sutherland*, sir. She appears to be without power and adrift."

Martin walked up the two steps leading from the lower command deck to the upper bridge stations to stand just behind Lieutenant Commander Turner. "What's her position, Dave?"

The science officer adjusted the long-range sensors to get a better fix on the starship. "About 100,000 kilometers off our starboard bow, sir."

"Posture?"

Turner shook his head slowly. "Definitely adrift, sir. She's got a slow tumble on all axes. Power is minimal."

"Life-support systems?"

Turner's eyes went momentarily wide, as if the sensor readings had surprised him. "Barely."

Martin L. Collins turned to the main view screen and the streaming stars beyond. "Can you get a visual?"

"Yes, sir."

The image on the forward view screen wavered and was replaced by the listing image of the Federation starship. Martin and the bridge crew of the *Wellington* gazed in momentary silence at the stricken *Anton*-class light cruiser. The Bussard caps of the nacelles that protruded down and aft from the rear superstructure were a dark, lifeless amber. Only a handful of windows were lit from within, and every running light—even the emergency ones—were completely out. However, there didn't seem to be a single spot of damage to the exterior of the cruiser—a fact that was quickly reinforced by the short-range sensor report.

Martin turned to his science officer once more. "Opinion, Mr. Turner?"

Turner's hands played across the science console's controls as if he were a master pianist. Try as he might, however, he seemed to get more and more frustrated with the readings that were being presented to him. With a defeated shrug he turned to face Martin. "Total system failure of unknown origin."

Captain Collins frowned as he leaned forward in the command chair. "Not even a vague speculation?"

Commander Turner inclined his bulbous nose at the main viewer before turning back to face the captain. "Insufficient data at this time, sir."

Martin nodded and leaned back in the chair, already knowing the answer to the question he was about to raise. "Opinion, Commander?"

"Recommend we form a boarding party immediately, sir. There may be wounded over there who need emergency assistance."

"I concur. In fact, I'll lead the team myself. I want you there with me, though. Ensign Gross?"

"Yes . . . yes, sir?" The young man's voice cracked again.

"Care to join the party?"

The grin on the young man's face stretched from ear to ear. "Yes, sir."

"Very good. Call down to sickbay and have the chief medical officer meet us in the transporter room in five minutes, then call down and request the assistant chief engineer do the same."

"Aye, captain."

Captain Collins swiveled the chair to face the helmsman. "Lieutenant Busey, take the conn in my absence."

The normally silent man bowed his head slowly. "Aye, sir," he said, his deep voice bouncing off every surface on the bridge.

"\* \* \*"

The landing party wasted little time in beaming over to the stricken *Sutherland*. As soon as they materialized on deck four, they were greeted by a handful of officers armed with flashlights and tricorders.

"Who goes there?" one of the *Sutherland*'s officers called out.

"Captain Collins, USS *Wellington*," Captain Collins said, holding a hand up to block the beams of light that were pointed at his eyes. "We're here to render assistance."

One of the beams moved away from Captain Collins's face and a young woman—not more than twenty-five—approached confidently and outstretched her hand. "Lieutenant Commander Jennifer Shelby, acting first officer."

Martin shook it quickly. "Where's the captain, Commander?"

"On the bridge, sir. That is, I think he is. We haven't been able to make it that far. All turbolifts are down, and none of the doors have power."

Captain Collins looked at Shelby and her assembled officers—two human security men, a Bolian engineer, and an Edosian female medical officer. Their uniforms, while not torn, were nonetheless smudged with dirt and grime, probably from having to crawl through seldom-used Jefferies tubes to get from deck to deck.

"You're the acting executive officer?" Commander Turner asked.

"Yes, sir," Shelby replied. "Commander Earlene Oswald, the ship's XO, was killed when she tumbled down a turbolift shaft about two hours ago." The memory of the incident, still fresh in the young woman's mind, was obviously very troubling to her.

"I see," Martin replied sympathetically. "Are any of you hurt?"

"No, sir. Not really. We're all fine. Just a few bumps and bruises, but we could all benefit from a shower and a change of uniforms." She smiled meekly, and Martin took it as a good omen.

"Until we can restore power to the *Sutherland*, I'd like to have you beamed over to the *Wellington* for the time being. It'll help conserve oxygen for the crew members still trapped on board, and you'll be able to clean up and get something to eat."

She seemed hesitant to leave her ship, but she also looked as if she were about to collapse from exhaustion. "Of course, sir. I understand."

Martin flipped open his communicator, and a moment later the *Sutherland* crewmembers were safely beamed aboard his ship. He turned to face Commander Turner, who was standing uneasily next to Ensign Gross. "Let's split up and see who else we can find. Take engineer Lemieux and Mr. Gross and move down and aft toward engineering." The captain then turned to face the diminutive chief medical officer, Lillian Amlie, her golden hair—passed down from her Norwegian heritage—shimmering even in the low light of the corridor. "Doctor, you're with me. We need to get to the bridge."

She smiled faintly and nodded. "Yes, sir."

They'd barely made it twenty feet down the corridor before the captain's communicator chirped. With one hand Martin reached for the doctor's shoulder to stop her movements, then flipped the communicator open with the other. "Martin here. Go ahead, *Wellington*."

"Busey here, sir. Enemy cruisers coming in at a high rate of speed."

Dr. Amlie turned abruptly to face her captain. "Did he say enemy cruisers?"

Honestly, even Captain Collins had a hard time believing what he'd just heard.

"Repeat, Busey. Did you say enemy cruisers?"

"Yes, sir. A whole lot of them, too. They'll be on us in less than sixty seconds."

*Where did they come from, and how did they get here so quickly?* No matter. There wasn't enough time to beam back aboard, nor was Busey the best choice for command in a crisis situation. He was too young, too inexperienced, not to mention the fact that he'd barely passed command school. He was, however, an excellent marksman with the phasers—one of the best Martin had ever seen. Impulsively, the captain spat out the first thing that came to his mind. "Lieutenant Busey, turn the ship over to Lieutenant Commander Shelby. She just beamed aboard from the *Sutherland*. Have her form a defensive position around us."

If Busey was in shock—or even agitated that he'd been removed from command—it didn't show in his voice. It was as calm and steady as ever. "Yes, sir. Right away."

"Good. Get those phasers ready to fire the moment the Klingons are in range."

"Aye, sir!"

## Chapter 12

"Red alert. Red alert. All hands to battle stations. This is not a drill. Repeat, this is not a drill. Commander Shelby to the bridge. Repeat, Commander Shelby to the bridge."

The alert reverberated throughout sickbay, and Jennifer Shelby bolted instantly from the side of the Bolian engineer who was having a sprained wrist tended to by one of the *Wellington's* nurses. She reached up a finger to the wall-mounted intercom panel, and cursed the fact that a layer of grime was caked beneath the tip of her nail. She hadn't had time to clean up, much less get something to eat after she'd beamed on board less than ten minutes ago. Now she was being summoned to the bridge, of all places. She was tired, dirty, and hungry. She'd watched as her good friend, Earlene Oswald, plummeted to her death just beyond her reach only a few hours before. She wanted to collapse from exhaustion and cry all at the same time, and she'd had it with taking orders for the time being—especially when they came from a crew that wasn't even her own.

"Bridge, this is Shelby. I'm a little busy down here. Can't this wait?"

"Commander, two squadrons of Klingon cruisers are approaching our position on an apparent intercept course."

Her first response, given her current state, was to tell the bridge to go pound sand. Instead she rolled her eyes, then leaned her forehead against the bulkhead in sickbay. "I don't see what that has to do with me. I'm sure you have more than enough staff up there to handle this."

"Lieutenant Commander Shelby, you've been placed in command of the *Wellington* by Captain Collins. He just signaled the change of command personally."

She yanked her head free of the wall and looked at the speaker incredulously. "You've got to be kidding."

"No, ma'am. Until Martin returns, you're in command, so I suggest you get your ass up here and command," the voice replied with a hint of agitation.

Jennifer turned to face the blue-skinned Bolian, Ensign Mek, who had accompanied her from the *Sutherland*, to see him smiling and waving her on. "I'll be fine, ma'am . . . I mean, *Captain*."

She nodded curtly, licked her lips, and then dashed through the sickbay doors in search of the nearest lift to the bridge, her untied blonde hair fluttering like a wild mane behind her, all traces of hunger and fatigue forgotten.

"\* \* \*"

Jennifer nearly leapt through the lift doors when it arrived on the bridge a few seconds later. She sprinted down to the lower deck at the same instant that a dark-skinned lieutenant vacated it and moved to the helm console. She had no idea what any of their names were, nor any of their personal strengths and weaknesses. In the end, it didn't really matter. She knew the names of their positions, and what jobs they had to do. All that she required was that they do them well.

It wasn't that long ago, she mused, that she was sitting in the navigator's seat on the bridge of the *Sutherland*. She, like most of the bridge crew, had been going through the motions as the ship patrolled the outer fringes of the system. She'd excused herself to go to the galley to get a bite to eat for lunch. Earlene was there, having just come off her watch on the bridge. The two women sat and chatted for nearly a half an hour, Earlene talking about her husband and son back on Mars, and Jennifer musing about the fiancé who was currently brokering a deal in the Triangle before he returned to Federation space for their wedding on Earth in three months.

Then the power had gone out. In the confusion to get to the bridge to make heads or tails of what had happened, Earlene had fallen down the turboshaft. It was purely an accident and, had Jennifer been the first to the doorway, it would have been her body at the bottom of the chasm. Jennifer could still hear Earlene's scream. In that one instant she had been made first officer—and now, a few hours later, found herself captain of a cruiser, one not unlike the *Sutherland* herself, with a horde of Klingon warships approaching on an attack vector.

*In war*, she recalled someone saying, *things can change that quickly*.

"Who's in charge up here?" she called out to everyone at once.

"I am," the dark-skinned man called from the helm. "Lieutenant Busey."



"Congratulations, Mr. Busey. I've just added 'Executive Officer' to your Starfleet record. I need a ship's weapons report now."

"Aye, Captain. All lasers are charged and ready; accelerator cannons are primed and loaded. Phased energy beams are at your command."

"You have directed phased weapons on board?" she asked with a mixture of shock and elation.

"Yes, ma'am. We were retrofitted last month at starbase. It's still experimental, but we've had good results so far."

"Well, they're about to go from experimental to frontline service-ready," she smirked. "Navigational status?"

"Warp engines are at optimal power output. Impulse fusion reactors one through six are operating at optimum efficiency. Reaction thrusters are at your command."

"Sensors?" She swiveled in her chair to face the science console, only to be confronted with an officer from the engineering department. A cough from behind her instantly reminded her that all bridge layouts were not the same. On the *Wellington*, the science station was on the port side of the bridge. She covered her embarrassment with an abrupt turn of her chair. She was now facing the familiar blue shirt of a young Andorian female.

"Lieutenant Ta'leea Lateal, ma'am. All sensors are operating within specifications."

"Distance of the Klingons?"

"One hundred thousand kilometers and closing rapidly."

"Number and type of enemy targets."

"Multiple heavy cruisers and destroyers, and several gunboats of various armaments."

She turned to what she hoped was the communications station. "Communications officer, send a coded distress call to Fleet Captain Waldron, USS *Gable*. Tell them the Klingons are invading the Zalvhros sector at this location and that we require immediate assistance."

The young man at the station nodded sharply and turned back to the communications console.

"Put the Klingons on the forward viewer."

The image of the drifting *Sutherland* was replaced by a swarm of Klingons heading in their direction.

"I want all lasers directed at the lead D-7's secondary hull, followed by a burst from the phased lasers."

Busey turned cocked a head over his shoulder. "They're not lasers, per se. It's more of a linear directed beam of highly focused—"

"Lieutenant, can you tell the difference between 'lasers' and 'phasers' when I'm giving you a direct battle order?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Good, then that's what I'll call them for now. Aim the phasers at the Klingon's warp nacelles."

"Yes, ma'am. Accelerator cannons?"

"Target the command module, but hold fire until I give the order."

Lieutenant Lateal spoke up from the science console. "Fifteen thousand kilometers and closing rapidly."

"Are their weapons charged?"

The Andorian's antennae twitched on the top of her head. "Yes, ma'am. Forward disruptors are fully primed."

Jennifer was gripping the armrest tightly, her hair falling wildly over her shoulders. She didn't have time to pin it up, and prayed silently it wouldn't get in the way. *One of these days I'm going to cut it all off*, she admonished herself. *I feel like Rapunzel in a Starfleet uniform*. "Lieutenant Busey, make every shot count."

"I intend to."

"\* \* \*"

Moments later the Klingons were on top of them—or more aptly, all around them. At the last minute, the lead D-7 had pulled up sharply and sailed over the top of the *Wellington* at full impulse power. The two combatants exchanged a brief stream of fire—laser from the *Wellington* striking the Klingon's secondary hull, the disruptors of the Klingon striking the defenseless *Sutherland* in her primary hull—then it was over. The remainder of the Klingon vessels didn't fire a single shot as the entire group sped past the two Starfleet cruisers.

On the bridge of the *Wellington*, Shelby felt a wave of mixed emotions: shock over the Klingons all but ignoring them, then frustration that she wasn't able to see what the new phasers were capable of doing to a frontline enemy cruiser. Suddenly realizing that the situation could have turned out far worse than it had, she thanked the stars that she and the rest of the crew were still alive.

"Damage report?" she asked, more out of obligation than necessity.

"None, captain." Lieutenant Lateal said from the science station.

"What about the *Sutherland*?"

"Minor hull damage to the primary hull near impulse control, but nothing major—not even a near breach."

Shelby's shoulders slumped as the exhilaration of near combat began to wear off. "Thank heaven for small miracles." She fell back into the command chair, all but sliding into a very un-ladylike posture. She brought the palm of her hand to her face as she rubbed a bead of sweat from her brow. "Okay, I give up. Can anyone here tell me what the hell just happened?"

The bridge was silent, save for the occasional beeping and bleeping of the computer terminals. Jennifer realized that the rest of the crew was similarly at a loss for words, so she went back to the task at hand. She looked over to the young Andorian woman at the science console, who was looking back at her and smiling faintly. "What is the projected course for the Klingons, Ta'leea?"

"They're heading in-system, Captain."

"Straight toward our fleet?"

Ta'leea shrugged. "Or the planet. I can't be sure. Either way, I don't think our forces are going to have it as easy as we did."

Jennifer cast her eyes to the deck for a moment and nodded. "They're looking for a fight, just not with a puny little research cruiser like us."

"It would seem so," the science officer confirmed.

Shelby weighed her options carefully, her eyes darting from side to side as various scenarios played out in her mind. Just as a plan began to formulate, a call came from the communications station.

"Ma'am, I have Captain Collins on the line."

*Saved at last!* "Put him through."

"Commander Shelby, what is your status?" Martin asked excitedly.

"Minor damage, sir, but nothing serious of note. No injuries."

"And the Klingons?"

"Gone, sir. They've headed in-system."

"I'm sending you my coordinates. Have the transporter room bring me back in five minutes."

"Yes, sir." When the channel was closed she had time enough for a short sigh of relief before the communications officer again spoke up. "Ma'am, I have Fleet Captain Waldron on a secure video channel."

Jennifer straightened her posture, fixing her hair loosely behind her ears and pulling free some of the creases of her uniform in the process. "Onscreen."

Waldron, a human male in his early fifties, appeared on the screen. Thick lines were creased across his wide forehead as he scowled back at Shelby. "Where is Martin?"

She coughed once to clear her voice, then once more for good measure. "Captain Collins is on board the *Sutherland*, sir. He'll be beaming back shortly."

"And who might you be, young lady?"

"Lieutenant Commander Jennifer Shelby, sir. I was the executive officer on board the *Sutherland*. After I beamed aboard the *Wellington* I was given command by Martin in his absence."

Waldron cocked his head back, then shook it quickly from side to side, the jowls of his cheeks fluttering in the movement. "I'm not going to pretend to make sense of what's going on between your ships out there, Commander. There isn't time."

"The Klingons?" she asked, then kicked herself over the obviousness of the answer.

"They'll be here any minute. I need you to regroup the 9th Strike Squadron and get to our position immediately."

"The 9th, sir?"

Waldron continued as if his patience was wearing thin. "When Martin turned over his command to you, Commander Shelby, he also turned over effective control of his Strike Squadron. Or do you need to brush up on your regulations?"

Yes, she did. It had never even occurred to her. "No, sir. Of course not."

"Good. Set course and engage at maximum speed immediately."

"But, sir. If I may? Martin is—"

"—is out of my direct communication range," Waldron finished. "Therefore, I'm ordering you, his relief, to do your duty. Am I making myself clear, *Captain* Shelby?"

*This must be the fastest promotion in fleet history: from captain to squadron commander in fewer than thirty minutes. Mom and dad will be so proud . . . if I don't muck it up and die in the process.* She was about to order the helmsman to plot a course for the fleet when another truth hit her: she was going to abandon the *Wellington's* captain on the *Sutherland*. She looked around the bridge for any sign of reluctance on the crew's face. What she saw was grim determination, the unwavering eyes of well-trained officers who knew their jobs and were ready to die for the fundamental freedoms they'd joined Starfleet to preserve. She licked her lips, and when her eyes finally fell back on Ta'leea, she and the Andorian shared a meaningful nod.

Jennifer gripped the armrest of her chair and swiveled quickly, her eyes burning a hole through the view screen. "Helm, take us to the fleet. Maximum impulse."

"\* \* \*"

On the bridge of the heavy cruiser *Gable*, Fleet Captain Waldron watched as the fierce battle waged on just ahead of the ship. What had started as a run-of-the-mill escort mission had quickly escalated into an all-out battle for supremacy.

On the forward view screen, a duo of Klingon D-7 cruisers had engaged a Federation heavy cruiser, reducing it to nothing more than floating debris with a few well-placed shots. Not long after, the same two enemy cruisers were pounced on by no less than four *Saladin*-class destroyers.

"Sir," his science officer called out. "Another ship is coming into the local sector. It's the *Wellington*."

*Good girl.* "Put in on the main viewer, Commander."

Waldron watched as the *Wellington*, streaming in from beyond Zalvhros at extreme speed, began alternating phaser and accelerator cannon rounds at anything that got in her way. Two Klingon frigates, unaware of the *Wellington*'s presence until it was too late, were holed through with several concussive rounds before they neatly exploded.

"Commander Zenner, I want you to make a note of this: if we can all make it out of this conflict alive, Lieutenant Commander Shelby's field promotion to captain will become permanent."

The antennae atop his bald head twitched. "Of course, sir."

"Give me a status report, Commander."

"The fleet is performing exceedingly well, Captain. We've destroyed or disabled nearly half the Klingon forces."

"Casualties?"

"Five starships and two destroyers have been destroyed. The cruiser *Luna* has been disabled. All other vessels are currently engaged in combat. I'm projecting exact personnel numbers now."

Waldron dismissed the science officer with a wave of his hand. "That's not important right now. Where is the heaviest concentration of Klingon warships?"

"Coordinates 332-mark-14. There are approximately four D-7 class heavy cruisers engaged with as many Federation starships."

"Superb. Lieutenant Commander DeStefano, let's get in there and swing the odds in our favor."

DeStefano turned and gave his commanding officer a wide smile. "Maximum impulse?"

"And more, if the chief engineer can manage."

"Yes, sir!"

"Weapons officer, charge up those new photon torpedo launchers. I know we haven't had a chance to break them in, so I think it's time to see what these things can do in actual combat."

"Already done, sir. I have both forward launchers prepped and ready," the young Caitian called from beside Larry DeStefano.

"Take aim at the lead Klingon cruiser once we're within range and give those bastards both barrels!"

# Chapter 13

Stardate 4208.22

August 2254

Incoming subspace communication . . .

FROM: The Office of the Commanding Officer, Starfleet Public Relations,  
Admiral (selectee) Joselyn Czernovski, San Francisco, Earth

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

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,  
Rear Admiral Michael J. Lai, San Francisco, Earth

SUBJ: OFFICIAL INFORMATION RELEASE FOR FORWARD-DEPLOYED  
UNITS AND RESPECTIVE COMMANDERS

1. Latest release from Starfleet Research and Development: per Fleet Captain Vaughan Rittenhouse, new phaser energy weapons have been successfully tested during fleet combat maneuvers, and have been found to have a 90% increase in effectiveness against enemy targets over previous weaponry. A field replacement upgrade program has begun, and all starships will begin upgrading at their next starbase rotation. It should be noted that frontline combat units will receive all necessary upgrades prior to any other command in the fleet, and no exceptions will be made to this except under severe circumstances.



2. In addition to new phased energy weapons, a prototype projectile system—referred to hereafter as a photonic (or photon) torpedo system—has been successfully tested during the Federation’s most recent fleet engagement in the Zalvhros system. The system was a complete success, and showed awesome destructive power against enemy shielding. Likewise, resultant hull damage to enemy vessels was well above Starfleet R&D expectations. Rapid deployment to frontline units is expected over the next several months.

3. The no-win scenario, otherwise known as the Kobayashi Maru test at Starfleet Academy, has been beaten. The details of the precise scenario are considered classified, as the cadet’s method was “questionable, yet highly resourceful.” Commanders wishing a more detailed report should contact the Commandant of Starfleet Academy personally.

4. The following is considered UNCLASSIFIED information, and can, at your own discretion, be disseminated to all personnel under your direct command:

(A) The planet Ichen IV has been admitted into the Federation as an associate member. The Ichen homeworld, lush in vegetation and sparsely populated, will be a welcome reprieve for weary crew along the spinward section of Federation space. All Starfleet commanders are welcomed to take advantage of the abundant shore leave opportunities, assuming prior arrangements have been made with the Ichen planetary governing body.

(B) The Federation Medal of Merit, one of the highest awards available to civilians in the Federation, has been awarded to Dr. Jama Ya’booba (PhD). Dr. Ya’booba is heralded as a master of clinical psychology, and his efforts at aiding those veterans returning from the front lines with a smooth transition back into normal society are now considered required reading for all aspiring Starfleet psychologists. Dr. Ya’booba, from the planet Tau Taufoo, is currently a resident professor of applied alien psychology at Starfleet Academy.

(C) *A Dead Tree Grows on Rigel X*, a 300-page anthology of pre-war poetry by a Klingon free trader called Krankes, is now available on the Federation information network. Finally unclassified after three months of translation, it was

found to contain no real information on the Klingon mind or of Klingon culture. It is, however, an interesting read into the mind of one particular Klingon on his ideals of “perfect love, when the heart is still beating in my hand.” Starfleet officers are advised not to follow any of the advice given in the text, as doing so would almost invariably lead to a summary court-martial.

(D) The planet Achnonomo was recently charted by a Starfleet science vessel while on a survey mission near the Gamma Charlie nebula. Although there is no sentient life on the planet, a large deposit of Flame Gems, gold, silver, and other precious metals was discovered. Unfortunately, these materials lay deep underground, and the entire surface is covered in a layer of gelatinous material several kilometers thick. Starfleet R&D is hard at work devising a way of removing large sections of the thick, greenish material, but has yet to discover any viable methods or removal or eradication of the mucus-like substance.

\* \* \*

4209.01

September 2254

On the bridge of the IKV *Cru'Tok*, Captain Mruk paced quietly as his officers looked to him for instructions. He'd just received a direct communication from the High Council, and it was stewing in his stomach like a handful of spoiled gagh. Initially, the 7<sup>th</sup> Imperial Cruiser Squadron was to lay siege to a small Federation outpost at Fenbly VII. Defenses were said to be light, but the revelation of the presence of Starfleet warships in the immediate area whet Mruk's appetite for combat and glory. Now he was being told to alter course for a desolate region of Federation space, and a useless little world called Sult. Instead of glory and honor, the 7<sup>th</sup> was being ordered to Sult as a diversionary tactic, masking a much larger formation that would strike at the Starfleet forces threatening the already-thin Klingon supply lines running deep into Federation space. While this was still well within

their mission objectives, the thought of not encountering a worthy adversary was threatening to send Mruk into a frenzy.

Mruk stopped his movements when he arrived at his command chair. Like the rest of the ship, it gleamed with the bright sheen of a newly constructed surface. The ships of the 7<sup>th</sup>, the newly commissioned K-23 class, were a radical departure from traditional Klingon designs. Though they retained the nacelles of more contemporary designs, the angular, flattened surfaces of the hull were a radical parting of ways from rounded, more graceful warships. The ships were purpose-built, designed to evoke confusion in an enemy who had become accustomed to Klingon shipbuilding habits. Even the crews were trained in their own unique version of the Klingon battle language, useful in further confusing the enemy—should their communication channels be intercepted.

Mruk had thought Fenbly an ideal target for the K-23's first slew of victims, but it was not to be. His anger finally getting the upper hand on his struggling consciousness, the captain slammed a gloved palm atop the armrest of his chair. This enticed a series of muted grunts from several of the bridge officers.

"What are our orders, Captain?" the executive officer asked, cautions of his tone, yet sternly convicted in his words. To be overtly passive on either of those fronts could—and likely would—be detrimental to his continued health.

Mruk's hand, still planted firmly on the armrest, clenched into a fist. He inhaled deeply, fighting the urge to withdraw his pistol and shoot someone—anyone—over the rage in his heart. "They have been altered," he finally grumbled.

Another round of grunts came from the officers, their tone signifying their mutual dissatisfaction.

The captain sympathized with them. They were a good crew, as good as any he had ever commanded before in his fifteen years of loyal service. Still, like him, they were merely tools for the empire. He had never allowed that fact to spoil his heart, and he would not do so now. If the empire required it of him, Mruk would see the mission accomplished.

“We have been ordered to the Sult system. Our forces operating near the Topax nebula will take our place in the offensive against Fenbly.”

The first officer stuck out his chest, his eyes locking on the captain’s. “Resistance in the Sult system?”

“Of what benefit would that information be to you, Commander?” the captain asked angrily.

The commander’s eyes never wavered. To do so would be an invitation for death. “I speak for the crew when I say we are ready for battle. We are ready to put the full might of the 7<sup>th</sup> against their forces.”

“Are you so ready for battle that you can taste the blood of your enemies on your lips before it has been spilled?”

The first officer sneered. “I am, my lord.” This elicited a loud series of praising grunts from the bridge crew.

“Then I will tell you that the Sult system is a great unknown to our Intelligence officers. They do not know what resistance, if any, we will face. Perhaps there is no glory to be had in this mission at all. Has that thought not occurred to you?” Mruk tested.

“To do the bidding of the emperor is glory enough for any Klingon,” the commander balked. “Let others take the scraps of our table,” he said in reference to Fenbly. “Our glory is to sail into the unknown, with eyes open and d’k tahgs drawn. We will plant our flag on the worlds of the Federation, and crush all we come across under the heels of our boots.”

Mruk nodded quietly, pleased that his first officer had passed his silent test. “Yes, Commander. We shall do all those things, and do them for the glory of the empire!” He stepped up to the commander, grasped his shoulders, and butted foreheads with him. Although expecting it, the commander wasn’t capable of withstanding the brunt of the gesture. He stumbled back, but didn’t lose his footing. This time the bridge was alive with the men shouting words of praise and glory.

\* \* \*

“Captain’s log: stardate 4209.12. After an extended shore leave at Outpost 16, the *Titan*—along with the heavy cruiser *Essex* and the frigate *Mexas*—are heading toward the Sult system at warp three. We’ve been told by Starfleet Intelligence that no Klingons have been spotted in the outlying systems. Still . . . caution, it seems, is the ever-present word of the day. I’ve ordered ships of the 18<sup>th</sup> Strike Squadron to proceed under yellow alert until we’ve arrived in the system. ETA, fifteen minutes.”

Captain Mariano Di Murro leaned back in the command chair, pleased that his newest assignment was operating splendidly. It’d been only three weeks since he was assigned as tactical commander of the 18<sup>th</sup> SS, and it was a distinction that he’d carried with pride ever since. The youngest Spaniard to ever hold such a position in the fleet, Di Murro’s parents on Earth were more than proud to tell everyone in his small hometown of Cuenca the news of his promotion. Mariano had received word that a parade had been held in his honor, that the crowds had lined the streets of the village built on the side of a precipitous gorge. He missed his home, often boasting to the bridge crew that they hadn’t lived until they had danced in the city where the earth meets the sky. Someday soon, he often told them, the ship would return to Earth, and he would treat the entirety of them to the hospitality of his native people.

But until then, there was a war to fight, and Mariano Di Murro vowed to himself to make sure everyone under his command returned alive and unharmed to whatever place they called home.

“Captain, there’s a signal coming in from the colony on Sult III,” the communications officer said loudly. “Priority One.”

Di Murro turned to him, ordered the information put on the main viewer, and then turned to face it. The passing stars on the screen wavered, then faded to show the smudged face of a blue-skinned Andorian. The man’s antennae were rotating wildly above his head. Behind him, a console looked to have burst into flames but had since been extinguished.

“Approaching Federation starship, this is Governor Twillis, prefect of Sult III.”

“This is Captain Di Murro of the starship *Titan*. Go ahead, sir,” Di Murro said.

“Captain, you must come quickly! We’re under attack.”

“By whom? Klingons?”

“We’re not sure, Captain. We don’t think so. We’ve never encountered ships like this before. They could be Orions. You must help us! Please!”

Di Murro turned to his science officer, a dark-skinned woman from Andor. “Long-range sensors?”

She shook her head. “Unable to verify, sir. We’re still too far away.”

“Helm, increase to warp six!”

“Aye, sir. Warp six. ETA, three minutes.”

The image of the Andorian wavered, then came back clearly. “They’re firing again! *Titan*, please hur—” the words were cut off as the image went blank.

Di Murro turned to the science officer, who was reading something from her scope.

“Sensors are indicating three vessels orbiting the third planet,” she said. “Heavy weapons discharge across multiple continents.”

“Are they Orions?” Di Murro asked. The pirate clans had never been known to openly bombard Federation worlds before, but that didn’t mean they weren’t turning over a new leaf.

She continued to look into her scope, the blue light casting an otherworldly glow on her face. “If they are, it’s a configuration we’ve never encountered. We’re close enough for visual.”

“Put it on the screen. Helm, drop to impulse. Communications, order the squadron to red alert.”

There was a series of confirmations as the view screen changed to show the pink-white world of Sult III. In orbit, Di Murro could clearly see two of the three aforementioned vessels, each one taking aimed shots at the surface below. They were angular, squat, and about the same length as his *Conventry*-class vessel. “Communications, try to open a channel to the intruders.”

“Already tried, sir. I’m getting no response.”

“Weapons, target the lead vessel.”

“Got them, sir,” the young male ensign reported.

“Fire phasers, Cunningham.”

Di Murro watched as a burst of blue-white energy from the newly installed phasers shot out from the *Titan* and impacted with the lead vessel. A second burst shot out with another direct hit. The third missed entirely.

“Sorry, sir,” Cunningham called out. “Problem with the targeting matrix.”

Di Murro had heard of such problems with the new energy weapons being deployed to the fleet. Powerful and energy efficient, the new technology was still far from infallible.

“We got their attention,” the science officer called out. “They’re turning to intercept.”

“Weapons officer, intensify forward shields. Helm, prepare for evasive action.”

As soon as the last syllable was out his mouth, a photon torpedo sprang out from the enemy ship and smacked clearly into the primary hull’s shields. The effect was instantaneous, jarring everyone on the bridge of the *Titan*, causing each to grip their station consoles tightly.

“Forward shields down to eighty-five percent,” Cunningham said.

“Give them another blast from the phasers!” Di Murro ordered.

Three more shots were fired, this time scoring three glancing blows. *Better than nothing.*

“The enemy’s shields are weakened, but holding,” the science officer said. “The *Essex* and the *Mexas* are engaging the second enemy vessel.”

“What about the third one you reported earlier?” the captain asked.

“It’s on the far side of the planet, sir, but it’s altered course. They’ll be in weapons range in eight minutes.”

“Communications, order the *Essex* and the *Mexas* to give that ship everything in their arsenal. These bastards are tough, but we’re tougher!”

“Aye, sir!”

Another blast from the enemy vessel, this time in the form of red-orange plasma bolts, hit the single warp nacelle of the *Titan*. Not as well protected as the primary hull, the port shields in that area were knocked down fifty percent with the single volley.

“Ventral shields have taken a direct hit!” the science officer shouted. “One more in that area and we’ll lose them for sure.”

“Keep the enemy vessel centered on our bow!” the captain yelled. “Continue to reinforce the forward deflectors. What is the damage from our last strike?”

“Their dorsal defenses are down to thirty percent. Weapons seem unaffected.”

“Who the hell are you?” Di Murro cursed under his breath.

“Sir,” the communications officer interjected. “I believe I’m intercepting a communication from the enemy vessel.”

Di Murro raised a finger above his head and twirled his wrist, letting the communications officer know that he wanted the audio piped through the overhead. The sounds emitted were completely foreign to him. “That’s not Klingon,” he said to the young man.

She shook her head. “Nor is it Orion. It’s . . . not like anything I’ve heard before.”

“Still nothing from the library computers on our friends out there, Commander Liisa?”

The science officer shook her head. “Negative, sir. It is a totally alien design.”

“More torpedoes coming in,” the weapons officer shouted.

“Brace for impact!” Di Murro said, pivoting his chair forward in time to see the weapons register against the forward shields. The entire ship shook violently, pitching to starboard and throwing half the bridge crew from their stations. “Damage report?”

“Reports coming in from all decks,” the communications officer, one of the few still at her station, shouted. “Multiple casualties on decks three, four, five, and seven.”

“Alert sickbay.”

On the forward view screen, the alien vessel hung almost motionless just ahead of the *Titan*. To her stern and just above, Di Murro could see multiple hits being taken by the second enemy ship. The *Mexas* and the *Essex* were doing a fine job, and Di Murro watched as their final stroke paid off. With a volley of torpedoes fired from both Starfleet vessels, the second vessel exploded in a fiery ball of metal and gases. *Well done!*



“Captain,” the science officer reported, “the third enemy vessel will be in firing range of the *Titan* in thirty seconds.”

*No time to worry about that now.* “Continual phaser fire on our target, all available banks. Keep firing until the banks are depleted or melted. I don’t care which! Let’s see what these new phasers can *really* handle.”

“Aye, Captain,” Ensign Lark Cunningham replied, then fired as soon as the first pair of banks had recharged. The aim was true. The beams coalesced at a singular point on the enemy ship’s forward shields. The vessel’s defenses flared to life for an instant, then vanished entirely.

“Enemy’s forward shields are down!”

“Fire photon torpedoes!”

Di Murro watched as an angry yellow charge rocketed out the primary hull of the *Titan*. It found its mark, blowing a sizeable chunk out of the enemy’s forward hull.

“Direct hit!” Cunningham yelled.

“The vessel is losing primary power,” the science officer said after reading her instruments.

“So, they can give it, but not take it,” Di Murro said to himself. “Communications, try to open another channel. Let’s see if they’re in the mood to talk now.”

She worked her controls for a second, trying every frequency she could imagine. “Still no response, Captain.”

“The third vessel has fired on the *Mexas*, sir.”

Di Murro spun in his chair to face the science officer. “Damage?”

“Negligible. The *Essex* is returning fire.” There was a pause as she adjusted her instruments once more. “Multiple direct hits with phaser fire. The enemy is firing again . . . the *Mexas* has taken a direct hit. Her forward shields are down.”

On the *Titan*’s view screen, Di Murro watched his own target with guarded anticipation. *What was the enemy vessel waiting for?* “Communications?”

“Still nothing, sir.”

“She’s just . . . sitting there,” came the voice of the helmsman. “It’s giving me the creeps.”

The captain couldn't agree more. "Helm, back us away, one-quarter impulse."

Just as the ship began to respond to the change in course, the enemy vessel opened fire once more. The disruptor blast pummeled the Starfleet vessel, sending everyone on the bridge sprawling. Thankfully, the jolt had thrown the weapons officer free of his terminal just before it exploded in a shower of sparks. As Di Murro turned to face the view screen once more, the image winked out completely.

"Main power is down," a crewman called from the engineering station. "Emergency fusion generators have kicked in, but that last blast took out two of them. We'll be on batteries in less than an hour."

*If we last that long*, the captain mused. "Sensors? Anything?"

"Long-range sensors are offline." The science officer coughed as she returned to her station. "Short-range sensor imagery has been halved."

Di Murro looked at the shattered remains of the weapons console, then to the weapons officer. "You're not out of a job, Mister. Get down to phaser control, see if anything down there is still operational."

The young officer nodded. "Manual targeting control, sir?"

Di Murro nodded slowly.

"But . . . sir," Ensign Cunningham stammered, "with all due respect, I'm not qualified to—"

"Someone down there is! That's why the forward-thinking people at Starfleet R&D removed one of my gymnasiums, to make an auxiliary space that's manned at all times during battle conditions. Now, stop stammering, get down there, and take command, Ensign!"

This gave the officer a renewed faith. "Aye, sir." He disappeared into the turbolift.

"Helm, get us out of here. We need to find the higher ground."

"Sir," the science officer called out. "The third enemy vessel is closing with the *Mexas*."

"Communications, order the *Essex* in to protect that ship," he said, knowing full well that the *Essex* required the same—if not more—support.

"Aye."

"Then send out an emergency fleet broadcast. We need assistance here."

Cassiopeia Liisa looked back into her sensor display just as the lovely sound of the phaser coils energizing reverberated through the hull. Ensign Cunningham had evidently taken the captain's words to heart.

"Registering hits on the enemy vessel, Captain," Commander Liisa said. "Two hits, two misses."

"Damage?"

"Substantial. Their life support is failing."

"What's our position?"

"We seem to be outside their firing range. They've changed heading and are targeting the *Essex*."

"Tell Commander Hirst to concentrate all his weapons on the enemy's bow. That's their weakest point right now."

The communications officer went to the task as ordered. A moment later, she turned to face her captain. "Sir, I've got Captain Arphy of the *Mexas* on the line. They're sending out a general distress call."

Di Murro looked to Commander Liisa, who only shook her head slowly. It told him everything he needed to know: there was no one in the immediate area, at least not in the limited swath of the short-range sensors. As he nodded in return, the *Titan* shook once more, softly, and Di Murro recognized it as the after-effects of firing a photon torpedo. The ship shuddered twice more before Di Murro glanced back to Liisa.

"Torpedoes away, Captain. All three have impacted with our former target. The enemy ship is adrift and without power."

"And the third vessel?"

"The *Essex* has swung to her stern and is firing . . . multiple direct hits with phasers . . . photon torpedoes away . . . both have missed."

Di Murro was on the edge of his seat during the play-by-play coming rapidly from Liisa.

"The enemy vessel is now at full impulse, changing course to take another strike at the *Mexas*. The *Essex* has performed a high energy turn to cut off the enemy

vessel . . . *Essex* has fired photon torpedoes . . . three direct hits. The intruder has lost primary power.”

Di Murro sighed a heavy breath. One enemy vessel destroyed, two drifting without power. And he didn’t even know the full status of his own squadron. *Who are these attackers?* “Transporters?” he asked of the engineer on the bridge.

The young man smiled weakly. “Maybe in about a week I could give you one pad.”

Di Murro returned the smile. “Understood, but don’t let that stop you from getting down there and trying to put one together.”

“Yes, sir,” he said, and then left his station on the bridge.

“Open a channel to the *Essex*. I want them to send over a boarding party, armed to the teeth. I want answers, and those bastards over there are going to give them to me.”

When the last word was uttered, the *Titan* pitched violently to port. By the time anyone realized what had happened, the ship was holding a twenty-degree list. *The artificial gravity generators are on their last leg. No other reason to have a list in space.*

“Our former target has self-destructed, sir,” the science officer called out.

“Then the *Essex* isn’t safe, either. Order them to pull back to a safe distance.”

“She’s already done so, Captain,” Liisa said.

Di Murro and the crew of the *Titan* didn’t have to wait long. A few moments later, the third enemy vessel to enter the fight self-destructed. Di Murro looked around the remains of the bridge, silently grateful that his ship was still together.

“Captain, I’ve got Commander Hirst of the *Essex* on the channel. He says that he’s been contacted by two cruiser squadrons operating nearby. They are en route and will be here in five hours.”

“Good,” Di Murro acknowledged, and then turned to the science officer. “These unknown aliens could prove a thorn in our side with our current conflict with the Klingons.”

“But this may just be an isolated incident.”

“And it may not. We can’t chance it, not when we’re finally making some ground in this war.” He then turned to the communications officer. “Advise Commander

Hirst on the *Essex* to send a message to Starbase 20. I'd like additional support beyond two cruiser squadrons routed to this sector."

"Aye, Captain. Transmitting now."

## Chapter 14

October 2254

“Captain’s log: stardate 4210.17. After a successful survey mission, the *Eagle* is heading under full impulse into the Draco Omega 371 star system. Under orders from the Federation Science Council, we’re intent on establishing communications with Federation Deep Research Station 39, in orbit of the third planet of the system. The station is something of a mystery to me, as it’s only given the designation ‘Twilight Base’ on the star charts. Science officer Lovar is unable to give me any further information on it, stating that most of the files are under the auspices of independent research teams, and that the material is only accessible by going directly through the individual corporations that lease parts of the station. Twilight Base is far removed from the nearest subspace communications relay, so any such request would takes weeks to get a response. However, considering the station is nowhere near the front lines in the war against the Klingons, I suspect nothing out of the ordinary will come from our visit.”

Captain Searls of the planet Izar closed his personal log, handing the stylus to the waiting yeoman in exchange for a hot cup of coffee. As she quietly departed the side of the command chair, the captain fixed his green eyes on the stars streaming past the main view screen. The *Eagle*, the latest *Achernar*-class medium cruiser to come out of the Starfleet shipyards at Morena, was operating at peak efficiency. Searls had only recently begun his tour as her commanding officer, having taken over the reins from the shipyard master himself when the ship was commissioned into the fleet less than a month ago. She was a grand ship, easily the largest and most powerful he’d commanded in his fifteen years in Starfleet—without a doubt a step up from the aging *Heston*-class he’d been aboard for the last three years and which had been only recently decommissioned.

He pivoted his chair, turning to Lovar, the lean and highly capable Vulcan science officer. “Lieutenant Commander Lovar, sensor report please.”

The request, effectively drawing his attention from the ship’s impressive library computer, caused the Vulcan to turn his onyx-colored eyes to his captain. “Passing

the fifth planet now, Captain. We've entered into extreme sensor range of Research Station 39."

"Anything unusual to report?"

The Vulcan's right eyebrow arched. "Nothing I would define in such a way. However, there is a magnetic storm passing near the station at this time."

"You don't find that at all unusual, Mr. Lovar?"

"Hardly, Captain. Storms of this nature are not unusual in this region of space."

Scearls's eyebrow arched to match the Vulcan's. "Specify."

"The Draco Omega star entered into a fluctuating phase some 10,000 years ago. Since that time, pulses of highly localized magnetic interference have been erupting at regular intervals of exactly 32.6 solar days."

"And the cycle is about to start again?"

"Negative. The cycle has already begun. We are now experiencing its aftereffects. The storm near FDR-39 is such an effect."

Scearls nodded, then turned back to the main viewer. "What effects will this storm have on the ship?"

"Negligible," the Vulcan began as he crossed his arms over his chest. "Offensive and defensive capabilities will be unaffected. However, sensors and communications will be disturbed."

"To what degree?"

The Vulcan scowled, evidently perturbed by either the request or the information he was about to dispense. "The *Eagle* contains several sensor suites, some of which have only recently begun deployment to fleet units. Though I'm able to ascertain the storm's effect on well-tested systems, I am at a loss as to how they will influence the new equipment."

"Sensors in general?"

"Proximity to the storm is the limiting factor. In brief, we can see the station, but it is unlikely that they can currently see us."

"Communications?"

"At this range, possible disruption of visual, but not likely to impact audio."

“Transporters?”

“It depends on a great many factors, Captain.”

Scearls nodded, then turned to the Vulcan. “Worst case scenario?”

Lovar nodded, the computer-like brain processing all the available data before coming up with the requested plot. “If we come into direct contact with the storm and the *Eagle* becomes completely enveloped, transporter operation would be dubious at best. Anyone attempting to leave or beam aboard this ship would face a ninety-six percent chance of their pattern becoming completely disassociated.”

“That’d sure ruin *my* day,” the voice of Chief Engineer Michael Rabb said dryly from his console on the opposite side of the bridge, eliciting a series of muted laughter from the rest of the bridge watch, Scearls included.

“Agreed,” Scearls nodded with a smirk. “Opinions, Mr. Lovar.”

The Vulcan’s eyebrow dropped, a sure sign he was about to say something that should be considered gospel by everyone within earshot. “Regulations are quite specific at this point, Captain.”

“Indeed they are, Commander,” Scearls said with a nod, then turned to the ensign at the communications console. “Open a channel to FDR-39, please.”

“I’ll try, sir,” she said with a doubtful expression. “As Mr. Lovar indicated, that storm out there is playing havoc with the communication transceivers.”

Scearls turned to his engineer. “Anything you can do about that, Mike?”

Rabb gave the captain a sympathetic look. “Doubtful. That thing out there’s a mess of radiation covering a half-dozen spectrums. It’d be a miracle if comms will get through.”

Scearls shook his head in disappointment. “We’ve got one of the most advanced ships in the fleet under our control, and yet we still can’t break through a simple magnetic storm.”

“Nothing simple about it,” Rabb chuckled. “If we were to equate a radiation storm to a typical rainstorm on a class-M world, that thing out by FDR-39 would be classified a Category 1 hurricane.”

The captain puffed his cheeks as he contemplated his options. “Can we boost the transceiver signal by funneling it in a tight beam through the navigational deflector?”



Rabb lifted his chin high, rubbing his throat as he weighed the possibility. “The systems are compatible, but I don’t think it’s been done quite like that before. You’re basically talking about boring a hole through subspace.”

“How long?”

The chief engineer wagged his head. “Fifteen minutes . . . maybe twenty, tops.”

“Lovar, how long until the storm reaches the station?”

“Twenty-eight minutes.”

“That’s cutting it close,” Searls nodded, then turned to the communications officer. “Any luck, ensign?”

“Negative,” she said, her fingers still splayed over her console.

“All right, boys and girls. There’s your answer. Mike, see what you can do with the deflector. Mr. Lovar, give the engineer a hand. Let me know the moment you’ve got something.”

As promised, twenty minutes later, Rabb and Lovar stepped back onto the bridge from their excursion down to deflector control.

“Are we ready to try and hail the station?” the captain asked the two men as they parted ways and moved to their respective stations.

“We’ve boosted the transceiver as much as possible, but I’m not making any promises,” Michael said as he slipped back into his chair.

“Promises are unnecessary, Engineer,” Lovar injected. “Statistics will dictate our success or failure.”

Searls and Rabb shared a smile before the captain pivoted the chair to face the science officer. “And they are?”

“There is an eighty-seven percent chance we will be able to open a channel with FDR-39. However, there is a high probability that the signal will be greatly degraded.”

Searls nodded. “Good enough for me.” He then turned to the ensign at communications. “Let’s get that channel open, shall we?”

The young woman worked her controls, and when the captain saw a smile creep across her face, he knew that Rabb and Lovar had succeeded. “I’ve got the station, sir. Audio *and* visual.”

Scearls pivoted to glance at both the engineer and the science officer. “As good as your word, gentlemen.” He then turned to the forward screen. “Let’s see it, ensign.”

The image of passing stars on the screen was replaced by a burst of static. The image wavered, then shapes began to form in the mire of colors. A moment later, the hazy image of a young Starfleet engineer appeared, crisp one moment, static-lined the next.

“This is Federation Deep Research Station 39, Lieutenant Ben Ames speaking.”

“This is Captain Scearls on board the Federation starship *Eagle*. We’re receiving you, Ames, but there’s some interference.”

“Understood, *Eagle*. There’s a magnetic storm nearby. It’s causing us a little bit of trouble.”

The man’s voice held a strong French accent, one that Scearls had become intimately familiar with after he’d met his wife. The captain nodded to the wavering image, unsure how long the channel would remain open. “Understood, Ames. We came at the bequest of the Federation Science Council to check up on you. It’s been some time since you last reported in.”

The lieutenant smiled kindly. “FDR 39 acknowledges, *Eagle*. I assumed you were just passing through. No one ever stops here. No disrespect, sir, but if it wasn’t for the ‘old man’ raising Cain with the science boys, we’d have no excitement at all! You folks in Galaxy Exploration Command get all the interesting jobs, while all we do is sit on our fa—”

Suddenly, Ames was cut off midsentence. One instant the lieutenant was speaking, the next there was nothing but a thinly veiled static coming over the bridge speakers. Although the visual channel was still somewhat pixilated, it was clear that where Ben Ames had once been sitting, there was nothing but an empty chair. It was obvious the image was still being relayed and not frozen in time—several monitors that were behind Ames’ chair were still feeding information across the screens.

“Ames?” Captain Searls began cautiously, wondering where the young man had wandered off to so quickly. Repeating twice more and getting no reply, the captain turned to his communications officer. “Are they still receiving, ensign?”

She nodded. “Affirmative, sir. Channel is unstable, but still open.”

“Lovar?”

The Vulcan’s face was hovering over his sensor display in an instant. “Curious, sir. Nothing unusual to report.” He then turned and gave Searls a look of intrigue. “Interesting. There was no hint of alarm in the lieutenant’s voice to indicate something was amiss on the station. That he should simply wander away from an open communication channel is highly illogical.”

But he hadn’t wandered away. Searls was sure of it. One moment Ames was there, speaking to him in a casual conversation, the next he was simply gone. The computer could easily replay the time index to verify it, but Searls knew it was pointless to do so. He trusted his eyes, and his eyes told him something was wrong on FDR 39. With the magnetic storm on the horizon and closing rapidly, there was little time to act.

“Distance to FDR 39 at maximum warp?”

“Five minutes,” the helmsman replied.

“Time until the magnetic storm reaches the station?”

“Eight minutes, ten seconds,” Lovar responded.

With no time to waste, Captain Searls ordered the *Eagle* in.

On the forward view screen, the research station spun slowly. The station was built in a large X-shape, with circular laboratories at the end of each arm and a dome-capped central complex in the middle.

“Sensor readings, Mr. Lovar.”

“The approaching magnetic storm is scattering our sensor beams. There is no way to ascertain precisely what is inside the station.”

“Communications?”

“Still nothing, sir. Interference is increasing.”

The captain turned to Lieutenant Commander Rabb. "Transporters, Mike?"

"We'll have them for the next few minutes, but after that . . ."

Scearls then faced Lovar. "Once the storm gets here, how long until it passes?"

"If course and speed are unchanged, three hours and fourteen minutes."

"Understood. Download as much data as you can find about the station to a tricorder. I want you in the transporter room with me. You too, Mike," he said as he nodded to the engineer. Pressing the intercom button on his command chair, he quickly began speaking. "Chief Medical Officer, I need you in transporter room two immediately." He then stood quickly from the chair and stepped to the communications officer. "Call down to security and have an officer meet us in transporter room two. Have him grab communicators and enough of those new hand phasers for everyone. Helmsman, you have the conn," he finished just before entering into the turbolift.

As soon as the landing party materialized on the station, it was apparent that Ames wasn't the only person missing. The team, having previously locked onto the station's transporter beacon, had materialized in FDR 39's transporter room on deck two of the central core. There was no personnel to greet them, neither was there anyone in the intersection near where the transporter room was located.

Flipping open his communicator, Scearls was intent on giving the *Eagle* a report. "No signs of any of the station's personnel. What's your status?"

"Magnetic storm approaching quickly. Communication . . . going . . . possible when storm . . ." the captain heard the communications officer respond, but the channel quickly filled with static before it was silenced.

"The storm should now be directly overhead," Lovar said from behind Scearls. "Communications will like be reestablished in several hours once it has abated."

"What about inside the station itself?"

"We're shielded in here," Lieutenant Commander Rabb replied as he looked around the deserted passageway. "Communicators and the station's intercom system should work fine."

"What's the layout, Mr. Lovar?"

Lovar held up his tricorder as he accessed the information. “We are currently on level two of the central station complex. The doors to our right lead to the communication center, where Lieutenant Ames’ communication originated. Beside it are the chief engineer’s office and the security office. The doors to our left lead to the station manager and assistant manager’s offices, as well as to a central passageway.”

The captain nodded, looking to the doors on the right. “Mike, check out the engineer’s office. Ensign Esposito, the security station. Mr. Lovar and Dr. Hennig will come with me to the communications center. Keep a channel open. I don’t want any surprises.”

With the team effectively divided, Searls and his two officers slipped into the station’s communications office. Inside, the room was sparsely decorated, with only a map of the quadrant hanging in a silver frame on the far wall. In the center of the left wall was the communications console. Stepping around, the three examined it.

“The channel to the *Eagle* is still broadcasting,” Lovar said as he looked over the settings. He reached down and lifted a communications microphone that was dangling under the console, then held it up silently for the captain’s inspection. It didn’t pass Searls’s attention that the console chair was still pushed halfway in.

He nodded slowly at the microphone. “Go ahead and turn it off. We don’t want to confuse the *Eagle* when our own communications are reestablished.”

As Lovar moved into the seat, Dr. Hennig called Searls over to the opposite side of the room. “Find something, Leigh?”

“Not sure,” the doctor said as she looked down at the nearby tabletop.

The captain followed the doctor’s gaze to a nearly full coffee cup. The two of them shared a gaze, and Searls wrapped a cautious hand around the white mug. “Still warm.”

“How long has it been since you last heard from the station?”

“Less than ten minutes,” Searls said as he gingerly removed his hand from the cup. “Ames must have gotten this just before the *Eagle* started talking to him.”

“Something interesting, Captain?” Lovar asked, mildly startling both the captain and the doctor.

*Damn sneaky Vulcans*, he thought in good humor. “No, just odd.”

The Vulcan looked impassively at the cup, then back to the captain. “Communications channel closed, as ordered.”

“Find anything else?”

“No indications of malice. It’s as if the console was simply abandoned.”

Scearls nodded, giving the compartment one final look. In the upper left corner of the room, he noticed a rather poorly concealed security camera. “Let’s go see if Rabb or Esposito found anything.”

Out in the passageway, the captain nearly collided with Michael Rabb as he exited the chief engineer’s office.

“Anything, Mike?”

Rabb shook his head. “Not a thing. Everything in the station’s power core seems to be in specs. Any other notes or logs are probably locked inside his desk.”

Moving into the security officer, Scearls saw Ensign Esposito sitting behind a computer terminal. “Find something, Ensign?”

Esposito’s blue eyes were scanning something on the monitor. “I’m going through the security logs, sir. There isn’t much here. Seems that everyone on board was pretty pleasant to work with. No altercations between the crews, no unauthorized entries into secure areas, and no one has ever been held in the station’s brig. However, I did come across a memo from one of the civilian scientists.”

“What kind of memo?”

Esposito brought up the letter in question, then summarized its lengthy contents. “It’s from a Dr. Ejaw Daeli. He works for a company called Tachyon Micromechanicals. It seems that he had a disagreement with the station manager, one Commander Alvarez, about Starfleet personnel constantly intruding on his work. He was threatening to lock all the security doors in the area if the station manager ever came down unannounced.”

“No solicitors,” Dr. Hennig chuckled. “That’d be one way to keep them out.”

“Lovar, what do we know about Tachyon Micromechanicals?”

“They are a research and development corporation established some fifteen years ago. Their stock is currently fluctuating in the galactic market. That is all.”

“That’s all you’ve come up with?” Rabb asked in disbelief.

“As I said, Engineer, that is all there is. Any other data on the company is listed as classified information.”

“Classified by whom?” Searls asked.

“Unknown. However, if we gain access to their laboratories, it’s entirely feasible I will be able to deduce the nature of their current research.”

“Any alerts in the station?” the captain asked.

Esposito shook his head. “Whatever happened, it happened to everyone at the same moment. No one had a chance to set an alarm.”

“I noticed a security camera in the communications room. Can you access the recording that took place about twenty minutes ago?”

“Yes, sir.” A moment later, the ensign had the recording playing back on the screen. The room was empty, but a moment later Lieutenant Ames entered the picture holding a cup of coffee. Setting the cup down precisely where the doctor had found it, Ames moved to the communications console.

“This must have been when the *Eagle* hailed,” Dr. Hennig said.

On the screen, the men watched as Ben Ames opened the channel, then saw the face of Captain Searls on the small communications screen above the console. A few seconds into the conversation, Lieutenant Ames vanished completely. One moment he was there; the next, he was gone.

“There,” the captain shouted. “Can you replay that and slow it down?”

Esposito played back the recording at half speed. Ames vanished just as quickly as before. Twice more he replayed it, each time slowing the playback. Each time Ames vanished without a trace of how it happened.

“What about life readings? Any intruders present?” the captain asked.

“Negative. No life signs other than present company,” Lovar replied, looking into his tricorder.

“Confirmed,” Esposito said with defeat. “The security cameras also act as life-reading sensors. They’re not picking up anything in the station.”

“This is a research station,” Captain Searls said, as much to himself as the rest of the team. “Are there any security barriers in effect?”

“There are a few of them activated near three of the four research labs on the far ends of the station’s arms.”

The captain nodded. “Any of them near the Tachyon Micromechanicals lab?”

“Yes, sir. Several, in fact.”

“Looks like Commander Alvarez called Dr. Daeli’s bluff,” Dr. Hennig said.

Searls pursed his lips. “It would seem so.” Just as he began to ponder his next moves, the overhead lights in the security office dimmed for a moment before returning to normal levels. “What’s that?”

Lozar held his tricorder aloft. “Power readings appear normal. However, power usage in the station is showing unusual patterns.”

“Can you be more specific?”

Lozar shook his head, scowling in typical Vulcan emotionless frustration. “Patterns are unrecognizable. However, the drain on all systems is evident.”

“Can you at least locate the direction of the source?”

“Most probable origin is the east arm of the station, where the Tachyon Micromechanicals lab is located.”

“Looks like somebody forgot to turn the oven off,” Rabb said. “We should get in there and shut down whatever is causing the drain. Unchecked, it could lead to any other number of problems.”

“Agreed,” the captain nodded. “Besides, I’d like to know what got Dr. Daeli so worked up that he locked out Commander Alvarez. Esposito, can you disable the security locks in the east arm?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Good. Get it done.”

As soon as the security locks were overridden, the landing party made their way into the main station’s corridor. A few moments later they came to a four-way intersection, with a single turbolift in the center.



“This is the central lift,” Lovar said. “Each of the corridors leads off to a different research arm.”

“Which way is the Tachyon Micromechanics lab?” Searls asked.

Lovar looked at his tricorder and the map of the station. “The one directly ahead.”

As the team rounded the turbolift, a loud clang came from the compartment on their right, effectively stopping the landing party in their tracks.

“Lovar?” Michael Rabb asked.

“The station mess hall and dining area,” he said as he nodded to a pair of closed doors.

“Someone may be in there that the station’s sensors didn’t see,” Dr. Hennig said as she dashed for the doors.

“Wait!” Searls yelled, but it was too late. Hennig was through the door before anyone could stop her. Rushing up behind the doctor, the captain and the rest nearly collided with her, as she had stopped only a few paces into the galley.

The entire compartment was in shambles. All the tables had been overturned, with platters and plates shattered all over the floor. A large pile of organic material that had once been food was piled up next to blob-like creatures that were gorging themselves on the replicated meals. The beings were translucent, emitting a soft orange glow as they fed on whatever the computer would replicate that appealed to them. Anything else was tossed aside. Too engrossed in what they were doing, the two meter-tall aliens failed to notice the Starfleet officers who had just rushed in.

“What in the name of . . .” Dr. Hennig asked, but was almost speechless. “What is it?”

Lovar held up his tricorder. “A life-form of some kind, Doctor. They are not entirely organic, but neither are they completely energy. Some form of transmuted state of the two. They appear to be feeding.”

Rabb looked in revulsion to the discarded food on the floor. “Looks like they’re meat eaters.”

Lovar pointed the tricorder at the pile of slop. “Plant and vegetable remains, Captain. Lieutenant Commander Rabb may be correct.”

Scearls and the rest watched as a growth began to form on the side of one of the blobs. The growth became elongated, eventually forming into a rudimentary arm, complete with fingers. It then used the growth to continue to request that the dispenser to make more meals. When the replicator failed to respond with a selection to the alien's liking, the new growth formed into a fist, neatly smashing it into the bulkhead with a thunderous clang.

"Whatever it is, it isn't friendly," Dr. Hennig said.

The captain was quick to agree. If they didn't do something quickly, the intruder was likely to target them next. And, if meat was the order of the day, the crew of the *Eagle* could easily be the next course on the menu.

"Ensign Esposito, phaser on stun," Scearls said.

"Unlikely to affect the creature," Lovar said. "I suggest a medium intensity burst of no less than three seconds."

Scearls withdrew his own weapon, and both he and Esposito adjusted them accordingly. "On three. One, two, three."

The combined beams converged on the nearest alien. Not only did they not have the desired effect, they actually appeared to pass directly through the intruder. However, it certainly got the creature's attention. It quickly pivoted, aiming a gaping maw at the landing party, glowing an even brighter shade of orange, and emitting a groaning, clicking noise.

"I think we made it mad," Rabb yelled from behind the captain.

That was when a beam of highly focused energy leapt from the creature's mouth, straight in Scearls's direction.

## Chapter 15

A firm hand on Searls's shoulder pulled him clear of the directed energy blast from the creature a moment before it hit the floor where he'd once stood. Turning his face up to see his rescuer, he was glad to see it was the quick-acting Ensign Esposito.

"If you were gunning for an early promotion, Mr. Esposito, you've succeeded," the captain snorted.

"Let's talk about that later," Rabb said from behind the men. "I think our friend here is pretty ticked off."

Searls and Esposito looked in unison to the imposing blob, which had begun to slowly advance on their position, with the second alien not far behind.

"Move!" the captain shouted, quickly getting to his feet and dashing out of the galley with the rest of the landing party right behind him. A moment after they were out in the passageway, the creatures began beating on the bulkheads from within.

"You could just use the door!" Dr. Hennig shouted. "No sense in making all that infernal racket and destroying Federation property."

"Doctor," Lovar began calmly, "these creatures are entirely alien. They may not even have a concept of what a door is, or even how to use it. Their current display supports that hypothesis."

The lights in the hallway dimmed once more, then their brightness returned, although not as quickly as before.

"Whatever's causing that power drain is getting worse," Rabb said as he examined the overhead. "We need to shut it down before the station's power core containment field goes off line."

Searls reluctantly agreed. "Let's get going to the lab, then."

"What about our friends in there?" Esposito said, pointing his phaser at the thudding sound.

The bulkhead, for now, seemed to be holding the aliens in. If, however, they stumbled across the sensors in the door, they'd march right out into the corridor.

“We can’t worry about them right now. We need to stabilize the station, or we may all die . . . our friends included.” Getting to his feet, the captain and the team headed directly for the Tachyon Micromechanics lab at the end of the east arm of the station.

When they were halfway down the corridor, after having passed a small airlock, Searls turned to Lovar. “How did you know the creatures wouldn’t be affected by the stun setting?”

“In taking a reading of their core structure, it occurred to me that a stun setting would have no effect.”

“And why is that?” Dr. Hennig asked.

“Quite simply, they appear to have no central nervous system.”

“So they don’t feel anything?” Esposito asked.

“Not in the traditional sense. However, it’s obvious that they know when they are being attacked by energy weapons. This denotes some form of cognizance.”

“Possibly a basic defense mechanism,” Searls said, to which Lovar nodded in agreement.

“Very likely.”

“But can they be killed?” Rabb asked.

“Again, a possibility. However, I speculate that only the disintegration setting on our phasers would be adequate for such an outcome, and only under a prolonged blast. Considering what we’ve witnessed, I doubt that we would be able to do an appreciable amount of damage before the creatures could retaliate.”

A moment later, the landing party was at the outer door to the lab. The company logo of Tachyon Micromechanics—a series of five multicolored overlapping circles on a field of gray—was painted on their surface, directly above a hastily handwritten “Authorized Personnel Only.”

“Looks like Dr. Daeli was *very* serious about trespassers,” Dr. Hennig said.

Searls nodded. “But what business could Commander Alvarez have here? These research labs are dedicated to civilian research. Why should he have been so concerned as to constantly come down here to bother Daeli?”

“Perhaps the power drain has something to do with it,” Lovar said to the captain as the large double doors slid into their alcoves.

Entering the circular lab, the team found themselves surrounded by computer consoles, save for the upper right portion of the compartment, which was a flattened, raised area. Stepping first to the slightly raised platform, Captain Searls and the team noticed that the large panels on the floor—perhaps three square meters of them—were glowing softly from within. There was a humming noise coming from under the floor, causing a slight vibration under their feet.

“What do you make of this, Commander?” Searls asked his science officer.

“It appears to be some kind of transporter system, but I’m unfamiliar with the design,” Lovar said. “There appear to be safety panels covering the actual mechanism.”

“And for good reason,” the chief engineer said from a nearby console.

“What’d you find, Mike?” the captain asked as he joined the engineer behind the panel. Many of the indicator lights were on, and while some of the controls looked familiar, most were completely foreign to him.

“I’d definitely say it’s a transporter system, but not like anything I’ve ever seen before, and I’ve seen some pretty advanced systems in my time. My best guess is that it’s a mix of Federation and Klingon technology.”

Searls pondered this. He’d heard of Federation scientists reverse-engineering captured Klingon technology. Now he was beginning to understand why. “Is this what’s causing the power drain?”

Rabb nodded as he continued to study the controls. “Oh, without a doubt. This thing is tapped directly into the station’s power core. If it takes that much energy to operate, then it’s a beast.”

Dr. Hennig stepped toward one of the monitors near the console. “What’s this thing say? It’s blinking and beeping like there’s no tomorrow.”

Rabb gave the screen a puzzled look, then pivoted it toward her. “It’s a transporter buffer,” he said in disbelief after a moment. “A whopper of one, too. This is the problem right here,” he said as he pointed a finger to a blinking line on the display.

“What is it?”

“There’s an enormous number of patterns in the buffer. I mean, unbelievably large.”

“How large?” Hennig asked.

“Large enough to account for the entire complement of the station. That’s how large.”

Scearls looked at the engineer dubiously. “How is that even possible? A transporter can’t hold that many patterns. Maybe ten at most, and that’s on the largest units we have. You’re talking over a hundred people.”

“One hundred sixteen, if these numbers are correct,” Rabb said as continued to read the display. “And they’re fully intact . . . not a single out-of-place molecule in the lot of them.”

“Then let’s not waste any more time,” Scearls said. “We need to rematerialize the station personnel before one or more of those aliens show up looking for a fight. If they damage the equipment in here—”

“That’s just it,” Rabb quickly interrupted. “I can’t begin to tell you how half this stuff works. Don’t get me wrong, I know my way around transporters like the best of them, but this is *way* out of my league. I could just as easily kill those people as bring them back.”

“Damn,” Scearls cursed under his breath.

“Besides,” Rabb continued, “the power drain on the station is only partially related to the pattern buffer’s regeneration subroutine.”

“Explain.”

“Well, the buffer seems to be continually self-diagnosing, which is why the patterns are still intact. I mean, these people could theoretically be held in stasis for . . . well, *ever*. But, that’s not the root cause of the drain on the station, it’s only a symptom. There’s a damaged power relay located on the north arm of the station. With the relay down, power isn’t being directed to the pattern buffer like it should be. The buffer is now pulling power directly from the core, which is causing the fluctuations. Without repairing the relay, we’ll never get enough consistent power to reactivate the transporter and bring these people back . . . assuming we can figure out how to work this equipment at all.”

Scearls nodded. “Well, if what you say is true, as long as we repair the relay, the station personnel can stay in the buffer long enough for a Federation science and engineering team to get out here to rematerialize them. Problem is, can we get to the relay without attracting the attention of the alien intruders?”

“You’re just going to leave them in there?” the doctor asked incredulously.

“What would you have me do, Leigh? I won’t risk doing more harm than good, and right now the best we can do is keep the patterns stable.” He then turned to Rabb. “What do you need, Mike?”

“Well, an environmental suit, for starters. The relay is located in an area of the station that became depressurized by a hull breach.”

In the northern arm of the station, the landing party walked up to the large double-doors that were stenciled with the words “Material Fabrications Laboratory.” They still had yet to encounter one or more of the alien intruders, and that was fine by them. From a nearby locker, Commander Rabb had removed an environmental suit and was nearly finished donning it.

“The blown power relay is beyond a door on the far side of the lab. That compartment has become depressurized, which means that once I get into the lab itself, someone will need to get to engineering and depressurize the fabrication shop. It’ll be the only way for me to repair the relay and the blown outer hull,” Rabb was telling the captain. “Once those two things are done, we can pressurize the lab, power up the relay, and see what we can figure out about that experimental transporter.”

Captain Scearls nodded, then turned to the security officer. “Mr. Esposito, you’ll stay here and keep an eye out for any of those aliens. Mr. Lovar and Dr. Hennig will accompany me to the engineering section on sublevel three.”

Sublevel three was blessedly deserted. As soon as they’d exited the turbolift, Lovar informed Captain Scearls that the main pressure controls were in a compartment just to side of the lift. Entering the compartment, the captain and the

other two men noted a door on their immediate right, which Lovar said was the backup battery room. To the right was the main engineering console.

Flipping his communicator open, Searls opened a channel to Lieutenant Commander Rabb. "Mike, are you ready?"

"As ready as I'll ever be," the engineer called back. "I'm near the inner door leading to the relay control room."

Upon hearing this, Lovar moved to the engineering console and began flipping switches. Looking up to the main status board hanging above the console, he called a section in question to the captain's attention. "The hull breach is large enough for Rabb to fit through, but just barely."

"What do I use to patch the hole?" Rabb asked through the communicator.

Lovar looked back to the monitor. "Once you exit the breach, there is a cache of emergency repair panels ten meters to the left on the outer dorsal section of the station's arm. A welder should also be present."

"Understood," Rabb replied. "The outer door has been closed. I'm ready for you to depressurize the main compartment."

Lovar moved his hands across the console. "I've sealed the outer door. Depressurization commencing."

Searls watched as the pressure in the fabrication room dropped quickly to space-normal. "How you doing in there, Mike?"

"As well as can be expected. It's been a long time since my last zero-g operations training seminar."

"The artificial gravity of the station should keep you firmly affixed to the outer skin, as well as to the deck plates inside the relay control room," Lovar said matter-of-factly.

A moment later, Rabb responded. "I'm reading space-normal vacuum in the lab."

"Concur," Searls acknowledged.

"I'm moving into the relay control room."

"Tell us what you see."

There was a brief pause before Michael spoke again. "I can see the relay, and the outer hull breach. It seems that when the hull was blown open, a piece of shrapnel



became embedded in the relay. If I can remove it, I should be able to repair the damage in just a few minutes.”

“There is currently no power running to that section of the station,” Lovar said. “The risk of electrical injury is non-existent.” The lights in the engineering office dimmed, this time staying for a full minute before coming back online. “I suggest the utmost level of promptness on your repairs, Commander. Power fluctuation levels are becoming critical.”

Rabb grunted, probably during the process of removing the foreign object from the relay. “I’m going as fast as I can. These environmental suits don’t make things easy.”

“It’s possible that the damage done to the relay caused a temporary short to the experimental transporter,” Lovar said succinctly. “When the power spiked, the transporter system activated on a wide band, taking every life-form aboard simultaneously and storing them in the buffer.”

“Next time,” Rabb said with a grunt, “tell them to use the damn airlocks instead of blowing holes in the station. It’s a lot less messy.”

As Searls and the rest waited for Rabb’s next response, there was a loud thud against the bulkhead in the engineering space. Searls, drawing his weapon in response, turned to Lovar, who was holding his tricorder aloft.

“It appears we’ve been located by the intruders.”

Searls’s communicator chirped. “Go ahead.”

“Captain, it’s Esposito,” the nervous voice came back. “I’m outside the fabrication lab. Two of those goo-goons are slinking their way down the passageway toward my location.”

The thudding on the bulkhead increased, but it didn’t appear to be causing any damage to the wall . . . yet. “We’ve got some outside our compartment as well. If they get too close, try to warn them off. I need you to avoid excessively agitating them. If they fire their energy weapons, it could damage the door into the lab. I don’t need to tell you what a rapid depressurization would do to you and rest of the station.”

“Understood.”

In the hallway outside the fabrication lab, Esposito quickly opened the door to the environmental suit locker and hid behind it, the only other cover in the entire area being a small fern someone had potted in a corner. The creatures, each glowing with a light orange hue, slowly crept toward his location.

“*Warn them off*, he says,” Esposito muttered as he checked the charge on his palm-sized phaser. “*Don’t make them fire at you*, he says. I’d sure like to know how to do that.”

The creatures were now less than twenty yards away. Turning to his left, Esposito quickly shuffled the potted plant from its resting place. Stepping directly into the alien’s field of vision for a moment, he called upon his teenage years of soccer practice and kicked the fern toward the advancing creatures. Like a hockey puck, the flat base of the pot scooted along the deck until it impacted squarely with the forward most alien. The creature slowed briefly as it completely absorbed the plant, then quickly spat both it and the pot out from its rear.

“Not big on salad, eh?” Esposito muttered as he looked for something more appealing, then fixed his eyes on something in the environmental suit locker. “How about something a little spicier?”

Pulling out the laser welder and its power pack, he quickly chucked the tool toward the alien who was now less than ten yards away. It clattered to the deck a few feet from the aliens. Taking aim, he fired his phaser directly at the power pack. The overload was instantaneous. The welder exploded neatly before the alien had a chance to envelop it, but the effect was no less desirable. Reeling as if in pain from the brief but intense fireball, both of the gooey blobs quickly retreated the way they’d come until they were out of sight.

“Captain, it’s Esposito. I managed to scare off the creatures, but I don’t know how long they’ll be gone.”

The captain’s voice came back quickly. “How did you manage it?”

“I overloaded a laser welder. The explosion spooked them.”

In the engineering control room, Lovar gave the information a raised eyebrow.  
“Interesting.”

Scearls turned to the science officer, then spoke back into his communicator.  
“Stand by, Esposito.” Flipping the device closed, he placed it back onto his belt.  
“An idea, Mr. Lovar?”

“A theory, Captain.”

“Well, let’s have it,” Dr. Hennig said impatiently, the thudding on the walls beyond the compartment still consistent.

“It would appear that the creatures encountered by Ensign Esposito were attracted to the coldness of the depressurized lab near his position. Further, when the ensign detonated the welder, the creatures were repulsed.”

“You’re suggesting they’re temperature sensitive?”

“I am. Perhaps if we adjust the environmental controls accordingly, and provide the aliens a clear path to escape, they may leave the station without doing additional damage.”

A chirp from the captain’s communicator drew Scearls’s attention. “This is Scearls.”

“This is Rabb. I’ve got the relay repaired. I’m moving on to the hull breach.”

“Negative, Commander,” Scearls said quickly.

“Say again?”

“Can the relay be powered on while the compartment is still in a vacuum?”

“Of course.”

“Do you think you can make that hull breach a little bigger?”

“Say again, you want to make it *bigger*?”

Lovar nodded his head slowly. “An additional meter on either side should be adequate, Captain.”

“Did you get that, Mike?”

“I got it, I just don’t believe it.”

Scearls smirked. "Just get it done. Let me know when you're finished." Closing the channel, Scearls looked to Lovar. "Can you increase the temperature *outside* this compartment to, say, ninety-three degrees Celsius?"

The Vulcan nodded. "Quite easily from this console, Captain."

"Do it. Now."

The Vulcan's fingers went to work on the console. "Temperature now twenty-three degrees and rising. Twenty-four . . . thirty . . ."

The hammering on the wall began to lessen.

"Now passing forty degrees . . . sixty . . ."

The pounding was less than half its original intensity and frequency.

"Now passing eighty . . ."

One final thud.

"Ninety degrees Celsius, Captain."

No further sounds came from outside the engineering compartment.

"Bring it up an additional ten degrees, just to be sure."

The science officer did as requested. After several minutes of silence, the captain ordered the temperature returned to normal. A few minutes later, the three men stepped cautiously out into the corridor with phasers drawn. The area was deserted.

"Seems you have a solid theory, Mr. Lovar," the captain said.

"Nearer to fact, I would say, Captain."

"Who cares what it is?" Dr. Hennig said with agitation. "What are we going to *do* with it?"

Stepping back into the control room, Scearls opened a channel to Michael Rabb. "Commander, we're going to be herding some of our friends your way. Stand by to receive them."

"And do *what* with them, exactly?" the commander replied with irritation.

"Hopefully nothing. Stand by." Scearls then flipped the channel over to Ensign Esposito. "Mr. Esposito."

"Here, Captain."

"Esposito, I need you to get into an environmental suit. Your location is about to get uncomfortably cold."

"Yes, sir. Doing so now."

Scearls closed the communicator and turned to Lovar. "I need you to start adjusting the temperature throughout the entire station. Make a path of cold for the aliens to follow. Increase the temperature in all other areas . . . push the creatures toward Esposito and Rabb."

Two hours later, once Captain Scearls was satisfied that all the aliens had been herded into the passageway outside the fabrication lab, Ensign Esposito beat a hasty retreat, sealing off the rest of the station from the frigid corridor.

"They're locked in, sir," Esposito's voice came over the communicator.

"Excellent. Stand by." He then turned to Lovar. "I want you to quickly depressurize the passageway. Once that's done, open the doors to the fabrication lab. Hopefully the aliens will be drawn in."

"Captain, I believe I have a way to ensure it."

"Go ahead."

"There are ventilation ducts in all areas of the station. If we can feed a flammable gas into the ducts in that area, then ignite it, it should push the aliens into the lab. Once inside, we can pressurize the passageway and adjust the temperature accordingly."

"How do we ignite the gas?" the captain asked.

"And what gas do we use?" Dr. Hennig countered.

"The north arm of the station contains the station's hydrogen storage tanks. As for an ignition source, we can overload any number of light fixtures in the passageway by increasing the amperage to the power coils."

Scearls nodded in approval. "The fuel for the reactor core: Is there enough left in the tanks to do the trick?"

Lovar nodded. "More than adequate."

"Depressurize the passageway and begin venting in hydrogen."

"If you're not careful," Hennig said to Lovar, "you're liable to blow us all up. You're essentially turning a sealed compartment into a tinderbox."

“I will endeavor to moderate the amount of gas in the compartment. However, a sufficient amount of it will be required to overcome the loss of pressure *and* make a proper heating source.”

“I don’t think we need to fry the aliens to a crisp, Commander,” Searls replied. “We just need to give them a mild burn.”

The Vulcan nodded. “Understood. I’ll make the calculations now.”

Ten minutes later, Lovar was increasing the amperage to several of the light fixtures in the passageway. On the monitor, Searls and Hennig watched as the aliens bumped and thudded around the sealed passageway. A moment later, the first of the lights overloaded, quickly igniting the gas in a tremendous fireball. The stream of hydrogen still pouring from the vents was now a very rudimentary blowtorch.

“Open the inner door to the lab,” Searls told Lovar before flipping open his own communicator. “Commander Rabb, you’re about to have company. There are twelve aliens coming into the lab, and they should be exiting through the enlarged hull breach in the relay control room. Once the last one of them is through, I need you to seal the hole behind them. Make sure none of them come into contact with the relay itself on their way.”

“Understood.”

Fortunately, everything went exactly as hoped. The aliens lumbered their way through the fabrication lab and into the relay control room. Rabb, situated in a corner and well away from the initial hull breach, counted as each blob bobbed and slipped out of the station. When the last of them had exited, he quickly sealed the breach.

“All sealed, Captain.”

Grateful for their good fortune, Searls turned to Lovar. “Cut off the flow of gas to the corridor, then pressurize and raise the temperature across the station back to normal.”

“Aye.”

Once the station seal was confirmed and back at its normal temperature, the reassembled landing party made their way back to the Tachyon Micromechanics

lab. With everything operating in specification, Rabb and Lovar were able to access Dr. Daeli's technical journals on the prototype transporter. Twenty minutes later, Rabb reported he felt comfortable operating the machine, but felt that they should only rematerialize one pattern at a time . . . just in case he or Lovar's calculations were wrong.

With over a hundred patterns in the buffer, and each rematerialization taking over two minutes, it was promising to be a long afternoon.

Dr. Ejaw Daeli slowly materialized on the pad, the fiftieth person to do so in the last hour. He wearily strode to Captain Searls and Lovar, who were standing behind the console and monitoring each individual transport operation.

"Might I ask what you two are doing here?" the frustrated Tellarite asked, pointing a meaty finger first at Searls and then at Lovar. "And why in the name of Solopk you are fiddling with my equipment? And what I am doing here, instead of being where I should be?"

Lovar raised an eyebrow. "And where, precisely, would that be?"

The Tellarite scowled at the impudence of the Vulcan. "In my office, of course. I was just there a moment ago. Now, stop dawdling. This is a restricted area. Tell me exactly what you are doing here! I would like your pathetic explanation fully documented in my report to the Federation Council."

Searls looked to Lovar, gave the commander a small smile, and then turned back to the enraged Tellarite with a gleam in his eyes. "That might take a little time to explain, Doctor."

## Chapter 16

November 2254

Stardate 4211.14

On the bridge of the *Coventry*-class frigate USS *Seattle*, Captain Leland Hetrick watched as the last of the colonists' transport ships slowly entered the upper atmosphere of Gamma Delinos. The *Seattle*, part of the Federation task force that was ordered to safeguard the arrival of the Colonial Operations Command fleet, had, like all her sister ships, done an admirable job. Hetrick was proud of his people, and more than delighted that they hadn't encountered any Klingon opposition. Not that they wouldn't do a fine job if the ship were to enter combat, it was just that—prior to the acceptance of their current assignment—the *Seattle* had been attached for a short duration to Starfleet Intelligence, and a difficult job it'd been.

The *Seattle*—an older frigate that had, at one time in the past, been slated for decommissioning, had recently found a new life, one that Hetrick was at first hesitant to accept. Over the last six months, the entire *Coventry*-class had been recalled by Starfleet to be upgraded to carry an all new breed of personnel—highly trained Starfleet Special Forces insertion teams. Used for a variety of missions, the teams consisted of no fewer than twenty personnel, all their associated—highly classified—equipment, plus a small contingent of administrative clerks. When the *Seattle* had been called to aid in the capture of a Klingon starbase a month ago, her Special Forces team was put to its first test. They'd passed with flying colors, capturing the base without a single casualty . . . save for a few Klingons. The intelligence gathered from the station would prove invaluable in the war effort, and the captain knew that Fleet Intelligence would waste little time in doing it.

Of course, that was part and parcel for Captain Hetrick. After all, he was an Intelligence man himself, having served in that department with distinction for well over fifteen years. His training allowed him to effectively operate the Special Forces Team, and his years of service in the fleet allowed him to command his vessel



equally well. So, while boarding an unsuspecting Klingon starbase and capturing it out from under the Klingon dogs was exciting enough duty, Hetrick was silently grateful for their currently less-than-thrilling duty of convoy escort.

Leaning back in his chair, Leland watched as the Colonial transport slipped beneath a layer of clouds and out of sight. The thrill of discovery awaited those intrepid few who were about to tame the beautiful green and blue world below, and Hetrick smiled with no small amount of friendly jealousy for the adventurous spirit of the Colonial Ops personnel. Of course, he was exactly where both he and the fleet needed him, but retirement was always an option that loomed around every D-7 or Klingon station they encountered, and Hetrick was well into making plans for life after Starfleet . . . life after the war.

Swiveling his command chair to the left, the captain's gaze fell on his chief engineer, who was busy monitoring some recent changes made to the starboard fusion reactor. "Commander Creveling, please take the conn."

"Sir?" the engineer asked, obviously distressed to have his attentions drawn elsewhere.

"I've got something to attend to, Commander. I'll be returning shortly." And with that, Hetrick stepped out of the chair and into the waiting turbolift.

In his quarters, Captain Hetrick moved swiftly to his private computer terminal, inserting a red computer cartridge he'd recently removed from his wall safe.

"Voice print identification," the computer's perfunctory female voice asked without delay.

"Hetrick. Captain Leland J. Authorization Gamma-6-2-4-Enable."

"Working." There was a short delay while the computer processed the request, long enough for Hetrick to nurse a cup of tea. "Access granted."

Leland pressed one of the buttons beneath the monitor and spoke again. "Open encrypted file Beta-4 and display summary, please."

On the screen, the image of a stylized ancient helmet adorned with golden wings appeared. Underneath, the words "Project Mercury" was printed in bold lettering.

Mercury, the descendant of the now defunct Project Omnibus, was supposed to pick up where the latter dropped off. Almost a decade ago, Omnibus had been designed from the onset to monitor Klingon political activity, and provide the forewarning that Starfleet Intelligence would need in the event the Klingons ever decided to invade Federation territory. When two large-scale Klingon fleets managed to slip through the cracks—thus heralding the war the Federation was now entwined in—the project was deemed a failure. However, with an enormous amount of viable intelligence gathered, the project transmuted into Mercury, which was now tasked with strictly monitoring only Klingon fleet movements.

On the screen, Captain Hetrick scanned through line after line of reported enemy vessel sightings and encounters. Several engagements against Starfleet vessels, both large and small, caught his attention, and he took time to read through each report, scrutinizing even the smallest details in hopes that such information would prove useful.

The Sult system, only a handful of parsecs distant from the Gamma Delinos system, had been attacked by Klingons. While the engagement had culminated in a Federation victory, it was widely purported that enemy warships had escaped the encounter. If that were the case, it was possible that some of their forces could be in neighboring systems waiting to strike at any moment.

Reaching the bottom of the report list, Hetrick switched off the computer just as his personal intercom sounded.

“Hetrick here.”

It was the Andorian communications officer. “Sir, I’ve got an urgent message coming in from Starbase 23. Captain’s eyes only.”

A subspace call from Starbase 23 would take nearly three days to get to the Gamma Delinos system. That mean that whatever Rear Admiral Lai was requesting—and there was little doubt it was him—was already a few days old. “Understood, Lieutenant. Pipe it directly to the terminal in my stateroom.”

His computer beeped a moment later, and the image of Michael Lai appeared on the screen. Although it was slight, the admiral’s usually calm demeanor seemed shaken. This had the effect of putting Hetrick on an even higher state of alert as the recording began to play.

“Captain Hetrick, this is a secure message from Starbase 23. Under no circumstances are you to discuss this broadcast with anyone other than myself. If it becomes necessary to disseminate some of this to your crew, I’m sure you will use your best judgment as to what should be told to them while maintaining an equilibrium with your responsibilities to Starfleet Intelligence.”

*Here it comes. Another classified mission.*

“On stardate 4211.09, the Starfleet *Aakenn*-class cargo vessel SS *Pallus Centauri* failed to make her scheduled delivery at Starbase 9. On stardate 4211.10, a Starfleet vessel received an automated distress call from the *Pallus*. However, when the captain accessed his ship’s computers as to the specification of the cargo vessel, he was alerted to the fact that the ship was sailing under classified orders from Starfleet Intelligence. The captain contacted me directly, and now I’m contacting you. I believe that your specialized skills are what’s needed here, Captain Hetrick.

“Your orders are to proceed to the *Pallus Centauri*’s last known coordinates just outside the Elek system. The inhabitants of the Elek system, the Thesians, are not aligned with the Federation. They control three closely clustered star systems in that area, so you’ll have your work cut out for you in locating the *Pallus*. You’re authorized to exceed warp speed limitations for the duration of the mission. I want you to ascertain the fate of the *Pallus*. Her cargo is both extremely hazardous and of the utmost importance to Federation scientists. You’ve been authorized to violate Thesian space and use any means necessary to recover the *Pallus Centauri*. If the situation warrants it, you are further authorized to destroy the ship to prevent her from falling into enemy hands. I’ve attached an encrypted document to this communication outlining the *Pallus*’s cargo.

“You’ll detach from your current assignment immediately. I’ve taken the liberty of forwarding a sanitized copy of your orders to Commodore Freitas on board your fleet’s flagship, the *Cygnus*. He knows you’re responding to a distress call, but that’s all. Secrecy is of the utmost importance in this mission, Captain. Trust no one. The coordinates for the *Pallus Centauri*’s last reported location are included in the attached document. Get underway immediately. Rear Admiral Lai, out.”

As the image of Lai faded from the screen, Captain Hetrick retrieved his cup of tea. It was cold. By the time he'd gone to the replicator to get another, the encrypted document Lai had mentioned was being displayed on the screen. Scanning through the first few lines, Hetrick all but dropped his tea when he discovered what the *Pallus Centauri*'s primary cargo was.

"My God."

\* \* \*

Ten minutes later, Captain Hetrick was entering the bridge of the *Seattle*. As he rushed through the turbolift doors, he immediately moved to down the three steps toward the helm console.

"Lieutenant Buse, plot a course for the Elek system. Maximum warp."

From his console, the chief engineer pivoted toward the captain. "I can give you warp eight, sir. Anything else would be pushing it."

Hetrick nodded to Commander Dayne Creveling. "I understand, chief, but we're going to have to push her."

The *Seattle*'s science officer, a six-foot-tall Cygnian, looked to his captain with concern behind his lime-green eyes. "Problem, sir?"

"Something like that," Hetrick muttered as he slipped into the command chair. "Starfleet's received a distress call from a Federation freighter in the Elek system. We've been ordered to investigate."

"Vessel type and designation?" he asked, his light brown tail twitching behind him.

"Aakenn-class. SS *Pallus Centauri*, to be exact."

"Course plotted for the Elek system, sir," Raimi Buse said. "Ready to engage engines."

"Full ahead." Hetrick then turned back to his science officer, Lieutenant Commander Christian Laroche. "Give me the full computer readout on the *Pallus Centauri*, please."

Requesting the information from the *Seattle*'s library computer, Laroche turned back to the captain a moment later as an image of the cargo vessel appeared on the

monitor above him. The vessel was generally ovoid in shape, with the bridge forward on the hull, and a single cylindrical warp nacelle slung below the centerline of the main structure on two pylons. “SS *Pallus Centauri*. *Aakenn*-class cargo vessel, Starfleet Merchant Command serial number MCC-21914. Length: 190 meters, width 100, height of 60. Cargo capacity of 109,000 metric tons. Fourteenth in her class, the vessel is currently assigned to the Conestoga Terraforming Group, A.G.”

“Armaments?” Hetrick asked, already knowing the answers to these questions, but wanting his crew to know it as well.

“Two Type-4 laser batteries, port and starboard forward. Deflector shields only.”

“Crew complement?”

Laroche’s green eyes never left the captain’s. “Crew of sixty-four. No passengers reported during last manifest filing. Six standard shuttlecraft on board.”

Hetrick nodded. “Not enough room in those to evacuate the entire crew.”

Laroche shook his head. “Negative. However, there is an ample number of three-man lifeboats attached.”

“Of course,” the captain said with a smile. “Data on Conestoga Terraforming Corporation.”

“Conestoga Terraforming is the front organization for Starfleet Intelligence operating near the Triangle.”

Hetrick was pleased. His command crew, made up of mostly Intelligence officers, were performing admirably. Besides, it was a relief not to have to keep secrets from his bridge personnel. “Anything further on Conestoga, Commander?”

He smiled, a gesture Hetrick was pleased to see more often in the last several weeks. “I’m afraid not, sir. Above my pay grade, you understand.”

“I do,” he said with a slight nod. “They handle special, often sensitive projects. The kind Intelligence doesn’t like to tell the brass at Starfleet Command about.”

“Black Ops,” Creveling said with a chortle. “Not really my cup of tea.”

“Nor mine,” Hetrick agreed. “However, it seems we’re going to have to clean up their mess. The ship was last reported near the Elek system a few days ago.

Commander Laroche, care to enlighten us as to what we can expect from the natives?”

Christian turned back to his computer for only the briefest of moments before he had the data available. “The Elek system contains nine planets, of which only one—Elek V—is habitable. It is home to the Thesian culture. Some scientist believe that the race is a distant offshoot of the Caitians, as the two share many of the same traits. However, Thesians are more likely to be aggressive or confrontational. Approximately 200 years ago they left their star system, colonizing two others nearby. Since that time they have expanded their borders very little, apparently content with their foothold in the Alpha Quadrant. They are not affiliated with the Federation at this time, although they have been approached twice in the last fifteen years by representatives of the diplomatic corps.”

“Offensive capabilities?” Hetrick asked.

“Minimal. The Thesians have a small navy, equipped with escorts and gunships. Since they have no access to advanced phaser or photon torpedo weaponry, they are limited to medium and light lasers, quite possibly accelerator cannons as well.”

“So they don’t pose an immediate threat?”

Laroche bobbed his head. “We could handle a few of them, but if they swarm us, we could be in trouble.”

“Understood,” he said, then turned his eyes to Lieutenant Buse. “Time to the Elek system?”

“One hour, forty-three minutes at present speed.”

“Very well. Commander Laroche, you have the conn. I’ll be in engineering.” Stepping up from the chair, Hetrick and Creveling quickly made their way to the turbolift without another word.

\* \* \*

“I could have made these adjustments by myself,” Creveling had just fished saying in jest. “I certainly don’t need you to nursemaid me.”

Captain Hetrick, his gloved hands hovering over the glowing power conduit, smiled warmly. “Every captain should know how to perform the most basic tasks aboard his starship.”

Dayne Creveling shook his head in disbelief. “Adjusting the warp plasma regulators isn’t exactly my idea of routine maintenance. I just wish we were at a starbase and not under full power. I tell you, I hate testing out experimental equipment.”

“The engines picked a fine time to start acting up,” Hetrick agreed with a nod. “I’m not entirely convinced that channeling phaser power *through* the engines is such a bright idea myself, but we’re stuck with these modifications until we can make it back to Starbase 5.” Grabbing a nearby tricorder, Hetrick aimed it at the conduit and read out the readings. “Now reading 8.7 Cochranes and rising.”

“Good. I’ll lock down the field and stabilize at nine.”

“That should give us . . . what? A ten percent increase in phaser power output?”

“Just about,” Creveling agreed as he made his final adjustments. “Good enough for government work. However, I wouldn’t tax the weapon systems too much. I’m not sure the OEM relays could handle it.”

“Captain Hetrick, please respond,” came Laroche’s voice from the wall intercom.

“I’ll keep that in mind,” Hetrick replied to Creveling as he removed his gloves and moved over to the speaker. “This is Hetrick.”

“Sir, we’re approaching the outermost Thesian-controlled system.”

“Anything on sensors?”

“Not at present, but there’s a lot of background radiation from the system’s star.”

Creveling closed the cover to the power conduit and stepped toward the captain. “It could be interfering with sensors.”

“Laroche, start filtering out some of the radiation. I’ll be back on the bridge shortly.” Hetrick then turned to Creveling. “Stay here and keep an eye on the engines.”

Dayne nodded. “I’ll call Lieutenant Ravilli in as well. He’s the only other one with clearance to baby these new pieces of equipment.”

\* \* \*

Entering the bridge of the *Seattle*, Captain Hetrick was greeted by the sight of a muddy gas giant planet spinning slowly on the forward viewer.

“Elek VII, Captain,” Christian Laroche said from the science station.

“How close are we to the *Pallus Centauri*’s last known position?”

“We’re coming up on it now, sir,” Lieutenant Buse said from the helm.

“Laroche?” Hetrick said as he turned from the screen.

“Finalizing sensor adjustments now, sir.” As he peered into his sensor readout, Laroche’s green eyes seemed strained.

“Something, Commander?”

“I’m not reading any debris, but there seems to be evidence of a massive fusion release.”

“Indicative of an explosion?” Hetrick asked.

Laroche shook his head, his flowing hair fluttering slightly. “More like heavy impulse interactions.”

Hetrick looked to the view screen and the planetoid beyond. “Speculations?”

Raimi turned to face the captain. “If the freighter was caught in a tractor beam, a sustained full-impulse burn would make a signature like that.”

“But no debris?” the captain asked as he turned to the science officer.

“Negative, sir.”

“What do we know about Thesian impulse designs?”

“They use a design similar to Federation specifications, but at a greatly reduced magnitude and with different fuel. The field I’m registering was definitely made by a Federation-designed system.”

Hetrick nodded. “Then they were captured . . . towed from here to some other place.”

“A very likely possibility,” Laroche agreed as he turned to look at Hetrick.

“Based on the intensity of the fusion cloud, can you get an accurate bearing on which direction the freighter might have been oriented?”



“Already done. The *Pallus Centauri* was likely facing away from the Elek system at the time.”

“Which means she was towed farther into the system.”

“In all likelihood.”

Hetrick pondered the information for a moment. Stepping up toward the screen, he sighed as he examined the brown world on the display more closely. “What about the Thesians’ sensor capabilities? How close could we get to their planet while still avoiding detection?”

“Considerably close, I would estimate,” Laroche said. “Easily within range of all our sensors.”

“Transporter range as well?”

Laroche contemplated the information at hand. “Elek III has three small moons orbiting the planet. One of them is very near its Roche limit, holding an elliptical orbit of 21,000 kilometers from the planet itself during its closest orbital phase.”

“That would put it just inside transporter range,” Hetrick said under his breath. “But can we use that, and for how long?”

“If we held station just beyond the far side of the moon, we could maintain transporter range for just under thirty-seven minutes. After that time, we would have to wait until the following rotation cycle, which would occur approximately 16.5 hours later.”

“Which gives the Thesians more than enough time to send out their ships and locate the *Seattle*.”

“Precisely,” Laroche agreed.

“And we still don’t know exactly where the *Pallus Centauri* is.” Stepping away from the screen, Hetrick slid back into the command chair. “Lieutenant Buse, I want you to leapfrog into the system. Use each of the planets as a shield, covering us from anything we might come across in the system itself. Commander Laroche, I want you to send out the sensors in the widest possible pattern. See if you can locate the *Pallus Centauri*, or anything large enough to house it.”

“A space station?” he asked.

Hetrick shook his head. "Something tells me the Thesians won't have anything so grandiose. Perhaps a dry dock, or a large container vessel. If they were bold enough to hijack a Federation vessel, my guess is that they've hidden it somewhere. Their systems are still well within Federation space. They couldn't just leave the ship out in the open for everyone to see."

"Understood. I'll begin scanning now."

"Course plotted for the next planet, sir," Buse said with a nod.

"Half-impulse, Lieutenant. Steady as she goes. Weapons officer, sound yellow alert."

Amy Beer, the half-Deltan lieutenant who'd only recently joined the *Seattle*, nodded her head. "Aye, sir. Sounding yellow alert."

\* \* \*

An hour later, and with three planets of the Elek system behind them and little to show for their efforts, the *Coventry*-class *Seattle* was quickly approaching the fourth planet of the system. Lieutenant Commander Laroche, poised over his science console, was studying the readouts of the planet's toxic atmosphere when the communications officer said something that diverted his attention.

"Captain," Ensign Margaret Gerisch spoke up from her station, "I think I may have something."

Hetrick spun to his left to face the olive-skinned woman. "Yes, Ensign."

"Sir, I'm receiving a signal from the third planet in the system."

Hetrick and Laroche shared a cautious glance before he looked back to the communications office. "Have we been detected?"

The young woman held the transceiver to her ear tightly, as if she was straining to hear what was being broadcast more clearly. "It doesn't appear so, sir. It's a transmission directed out of the system. It's on a high-frequency subspace band."

Christian nodded. "Still within their level of technological advancement."

Hetrick pursed his lips, then looked back to Gerisch. "To one of the Thesians' neighboring systems?"

"No, sir. It's oriented away from the systems . . . out to open space."

“Can you make anything of it?”

“I’m processing it through the language banks. The Thesian language is a known dialect, but it’s still going to take the computer a moment to construct a proper syntax.”

“Commander?” Hetrick asked to Laroche.

“Whoever is out there on the receiving end, they’re too far away to get an accurate sensor lock on.”

“Keep trying. I want to know who they’re talking to.”

“Sir,” Gerisch piped in, “I’ve got the translation.”

“On audio, Ensign.”

After a brief moment, the speakers in the *Seattle*’s overhead popped to life. The words were spoken using the default Federation linguistic system, but the tone had been set low to more closely approximate the speaker’s natural voice. “Repeat, this is High Consul Awai of the Thesian Alliance calling Captain K’llein. We are awaiting your response on this frequency.”

When there was a pause in the communication, Hetrick turned to Laroche, who gave him a puzzled look.

“Captain K’llein,” the High Consul continued, “please respond. We’re eager to unload the merchandise you’ve requested.”

“There’s a response coming in,” Gerisch said as he relayed the new transmission to the overhead.

“Awai, this is Captain K’llein,” a gruff female voice responded. “We are still outside the Elek system, but will arrive shortly.”

“Excellent, Captain. I’ve heard of Klingon punctuality. I see you will live up to that reputation well.”

At the mention of Klingons, Captain Hetrick turned a worried glance to Laroche, while all others on the bridge gave their undivided attention to Margaret Gerisch.

“Our arrival should never have been in question,” the female Klingon continued. “What *is* in question is the status of the Federation vessel.”

So, Hetrick mused, *they have the Pallus Centauri. Question is, how much information are the Thesians willing to give out over subspace? Thank God our people at Starfleet Intelligence managed to crack into some of the Klingons' communications protocols a few weeks ago.*

"The ship is undamaged, Captain," Awai replied. "We've disabled the navigation transponder to avoid detection. However, the fusion tanks are empty, and the vessel will require tractoring into Klingon space."

K'llein grunted in disapproval. "The Federation captain put up no resistance, then? I expected nothing less from those cowering dogs."

"The ship is otherwise fully functional," Awai said. "The crew is being held on board. I trust you will need them alive for interrogation?"

"What we do with them is *our* business, and is not your concern," K'llein sneered.

"Of course, Captain."

"And your people have not pilfered anything from the vessel, I trust? It would be most unfortunate for you if I were to discover that the Federation computers have been tampered with in any way."

"All is as we found it. Even the cargo holds have not been opened."

*At least the Thesians don't know what the Pallus Centauri is carrying,* Hetrick thought. *Now, what about the Klingons?*

"I care little for worthless cargo, unless the bowels of the vessel contain something I deem of value. However, the Klingon Empire will not pay any more than our previously agreed price, regardless of what I find when I take possession. Our primary concern is the computer systems. Everything else is secondary."

*Seems they know as little about the Pallus as the Thesians do. So much the better, but that's not going to make our job any easier.*

"As you wish, Captain K'llein. When will you be arriving?"

"We are on course to arrive at your coordinates in approximately one hour. The Federation vessel will be ready for us at that time, or you will find yourself with more to worry about than haggling for pitiful credits."

"It will be ready, Captain. High Consul Awai out."

## Chapter 17

With the communications now ended, Captain Hetrick turned to Commander Laroche at the science console. “So there we have it. The Thesians have the ship and her crew, and they’re apparently going to sell them en masse to the Klingons unless we can get in there before the Klingons arrive.”

The Cygnian man nodded in understanding. “Standard procedure would dictate we hail the Thesians and demand they return the stolen vessel.”

“There’s nothing standard about this, Commander. The *Pallus Centauri* is carrying top secret Federation research technology. It’s a minor miracle the Thesians haven’t discovered it. However, if they do go poking around the cargo holds, they’re just as likely to kill themselves along with anyone within several hundred thousand kilometers of their location, including anyone on their planet.”

Laroche’s green eyes went wide. “And what is their cargo, exactly?”

As much as Hetrick wanted to tell him, the information was still on a need-to-know basis, and right now he didn’t need that piece of evidence. However, if the *Seattle* came into a dangerous situation, he’d tell him or anyone else who needed to know the data—regulations be damned.

“It’s highly volatile, Commander. Regardless, our orders on this matter are quite clear. We are to do whatever is necessary to retake the vessel and as many Federation citizens as possible. The highest priority is the ship, with the crew a secondary goal. Only as a last resort can we destroy the *Pallus Centauri*, but given the nature of her cargo, I don’t want to begin to contemplate that alternative if we don’t have to.”

Satisfied, Laroche nodded somberly. “Then the only other alternative is for an armed team to transport over and retake the ship from within.”

“And we’ve got less than an hour to do it. Are there any Thesian ships in the immediate area?”

“There are three corvettes in a tight orbit around Elek III. I’m also detecting a large mass between them.”

“High Consul Awai said they disabled the navigation transponder, so that must be the *Pallus*.”

“Likely, but we won’t know for certain until we get closer. The short-range sensors should be able to determine if the mass is the *Pallus Centauri* once we’re behind the closest moon.”

“It’s our best guess, and I’m willing to check it out. Lieutenant Buse, set a course for the far side of the moon and engage at full impulse. Beer, charge the phasers and put the photon torpedoes in standby.”

Ten minutes later, obscured by the tiny moon of Elek III, the *Seattle*’s finely tuned short-range sensors indicated that the three Thesian vessels were indeed surrounding the helpless SS *Pallus Centauri*.

“We’re in transporter range of the *Pallus Centauri* now, Captain,” Laroche said from his console.

Pressing the button on his armrest, Captain Hetrick linked his intercom with the transporter room. “Major Shuford, is your team ready?”

Dave Shuford, the senior officer in charge of the Starfleet Special Forces team, was ready for the call. “Ready, Captain. I’ve got five of my best people with me. We’re ready to go on your signal.”

“Advise they beam into the *Pallus Centauri*’s galley, sir,” Laroche added. “Sensors show no life-forms present in that area.”

“Did you get that, Shuford?”

“We’re on our way,” the major responded. “We’ll signal again in fifteen minutes.”

“Good luck, Major.”

Seconds later, Laroche turned to the captain. “Transport successful.”

*Fifteen minutes. Either they secure the ship, or we do an emergency beam out and detonate the vessel from a safe distance. I wish to hell we could just beam that infernal cargo off the Pallus ourselves. Why did that stuff have to be so . . . unpredictably volatile?* “Understood.”

“Captain, I’m receiving another communication from the surface,” Ensign Gerisch snapped out. “A tracking station on the third moon picked up our transporter signal. The High Consul is asking for one of the Thesian ships to investigate.”

“Laroche?”

“Confirmed, Captain. One of the corvettes is breaking orbit and heading to our location.”

“Time to intercept?”

“Six minutes, forty-five seconds.”

\* \* \*

They beamed into utter darkness and silence. Major Shuford quickly turned on a small light, flashing it around the compartment to see his entire team standing nearby. Each heavily armed, his team wore the latest in non-reflective Starfleet body armor. Capable of withstanding two direct disruptor blasts, the uniforms still had plenty of mobility for the wearer. A revived descendant of the Starfleet MACO teams of a hundred years ago, the new teams were made up of the elite of Starfleet security officers and Marines. Carrying stun batons and grenades as well as new phaser rifles and pistols, in addition to as being trained in both Terran and Andorian forms of mixed martial arts, each member was a highly trained force to be reckoned with.

Using only hand gestures, Dave Shuford ordered two of his people to each of the three exits in the galley. With pistols drawn, each door was opened, checked for intruders, and then sealed off from the rest of the ship using pocket welders. The final door, leading into the *Pallus*’s main thoroughfare, was left to Shuford himself. When the area was secure and there was no threat of them being ambushed from behind, and it was determined that there were no life readings immediately behind it, the major opened the final door.

The passageway was fully lit, and caused each of the team members to squint slightly as their eyes were assaulted. Like most Federation vessels, the walls were at ninety degrees to one another, painted in a dull gray with thick bands of color on the floors and doors to denote which deck the crew was on. Fanning out to fill the

twenty-yard hallway, Shuford looked at his first officer. “Nathanial, what do you have for me?”

First Lieutenant Nathanial, the well-built Andorian, looked down at his military-grade tricorder. The amber screen quickly showed the officer what he need to know. “Multiple life-forms present. There’s a large cluster of them two decks below and forward of our location. They’re inside a small compartment, with two more outside, armed.”

“That’ll be the guards keeping watch over the prisoners,” Shuford nodded as he spoke.

Nathanial aimed his instrument toward a seam in the upper portion of a far-off bulkhead. “One more on the bridge, also armed. Another in the transporter room.”

“Anything else?”

Nathanial panned the tricorder around the compartment, covering it from top to bottom. “Negative. Only scanning four hostiles.”

“They’re not expecting Starfleet guests.”

“You mean Starfleet’s *finest*,” Sergeant Kevin Gong whispered loud enough for anyone to hear, causing each to chuckle lightly.

“Oorah.” Major Shuford acknowledged the younger man with a nod. “We’re going to take everyone out simultaneously. That should decrease the chances of someone sending out a call for help. Nathanial, I want you and Gong to retake the bridge. Sergeant Brown, you and Corporal Hammond take the transporter room. Corporal Dern and I will secure the hostages. Stun grenades only, zero body count unless it becomes absolutely necessary. Understood?”

Each gave a quick, silent nod to the major.

“I want this wrapped up in five minutes, people. Let’s get it done.”

\* \* \*

On the bridge of the *Seattle*, Captain Hetrick quickly ordered the ship out of hiding from behind the small moon. Within seconds, the *Coventry*-class frigate was nose to nose with the less-powerful Thesian corvette.



“Phasers locked on their engineering section,” Amy Beer said from the weapons station.

“Considering they’re about a decade behind on the technology curve, a single well-placed shot should do it,” Hetrick said. “Fire when ready.”

The phaser burst caused the small Starfleet vessel to lightly shudder as it sprang out of the banks. The two beams impacted on a single point in the Thesian’s hull, setting their defensive screens ablaze a moment before they failed completely.

“Shields are down, but the ship is undamaged,” Commander Laroche said from the science console.

“What happened?”

But it was Ensign Gerisch at the communications console who spoke up. “I’ve got Mr. Creveling calling up from engineering, sir. He says two of the phaser relays overloaded during discharge. Phaser power has been reduced to one-half.”

*This is why I hate testing new systems in the field. Starfleet R&D is going to get an earful over this.* “Beer, give them another burst.”

“Banks are still charging, sir. It’s going to be about ten seconds.”

“The Thesians are returning fire,” Laroche offered calmly. “However, their laser fire will have little effect on our shields.” As if to reinforce his statement, the *Seattle* shuddered softly as multiple beams impacted against her powerful defensive screens.

“Target has changed position,” Beer said. “I’ve reacquired a lock. Phasers firing.”

Hetrick watched on the main viewer as the yellow beams reached out and once again struck the small vessel.

“Their sublight drive is down,” Laroche said. “However, the remaining two Thesian vessels are leaving orbit on an intercept course.”

“I’m reading another message from the surface,” Gerisch said. “It’s High Consul Awai. He’s trying to raise the Klingons.”

“How far away?” Hetrick asked Laroche.

“If their speed is constant, I speculate thirty minutes. If they increase to maximum warp, it could be less than twenty.”

“Then we’ll need to end this quickly. Weapons, target the nearest Thesian vessel and fire when you get a clear shot.”

“Aye, sir.”

On the screen, the second and third Thesian vessels were coming into firing range. Before the *Seattle* had a chance to fire, both vessels discharged their lasers simultaneously. The combined onslaught shook the *Seattle* violently.

“Shields down to ninety percent,” Laroche said.

“Message coming in from three more Thesian vessels,” Gerisch announced. “They’re en route and should be here in minutes.”

Laroche turned to Hetrick. “The combined firepower of all those vessels will quickly begin to weaken our defenses.”

“Phasers charged. Photon torpedoes standing by.”

*We’re about to get in over our heads. We need to even the odds!* Hetrick quickly turned to the screen. “Fire torpedoes at the nearest target.”

Three blue-white bursts sprang from the *Seattle*. The first took down the Thesian’s screens, while the second and third obliterated the vessel.

“The vessel has been destroyed,” Christian remarked. “The third vessel is opening fire. The three additional Thesian vessels are nearing extreme weapons range.”

“Quickly, open a channel to Major Shuford.”

A split-second later, Shuford’s voice came over the bridge speakers. “Shuford here, Captain.”

“Status, Major?”

“Good timing on your part, sir. We just finished retaking the vessel. All hostages are freed, and the Thesian prisoners are under lock and key.”

“Not so good timing, Major,” Hetrick said, almost with a laugh. “We’ve got four Thesian vessels on the hunt for us, and a Klingon warship on its way with an ETA of less than twenty minutes.”

The response was even and measured. “Orders, sir?”

“We need to get the *Pallus Centauri* out of this system as soon as possible.”

“The fusion reactors are dry as a bone, Captain. She’s not going anywhere fast.”

“Maneuvering thrusters?”

“Enough to break orbit, but not nearly enough to outrun a Klingon warship.”

“Weapons?”

“The ship has only minimal lasers. I can get a few shots in a pinch if you need them.”

Hetrick smiled. “We’ll need them, all right. Get the *Pallus* out of orbit and head toward our location. Fire on any target that becomes available.”

“Understood. Shuford out.”

Moments later the *Pallus Centauri* was underway. Captain Hetrick gave a silent nod to the image of the bulky *Aakenn*-class freighter as she moved across the forward view screen. Apparently Major Shuford’s talents at controlling a starship were as impressive as his skills at antiterrorism.

The Thesian corvette, now firing with all weapons, wasn’t much of a threat to the *Seattle*. That was until the other three enemy vessels came into range. With all four vessels’ attentions now focused on the frigate, the Thesians were too busy to notice the lumbering freighter inch closer with each passing second.

The *Seattle* shook as three Thesian vessels opened fire simultaneously, albeit at different areas of the ship. The shields were draining slowly, but still holding. *They just have to last a few more seconds.*

“The *Pallus Centauri* is now in weapons range of the Thesian vessels,” Laroche said as he peered into his monitor.

Hetrick watched as two Thesians filled the forward screen, with the unseen Federation freighter closing in behind them. Just then, the *Pallus* fired two rounds from each of her lasers. On par with the Thesian weapons, the freighter’s barrage pelted the two vessels, causing their screens to flare. A moment later, they broke off their attack on the *Seattle*.

Laroche’s voice sounded triumphantly from the science console. “The enemy vessels are regrouping.”

*No time to waste.* “Helm, point us back toward the vessels. Beer, send out a few more torpedoes. Target each vessel separately.”

As the *Seattle* pivoted, the *Pallus Centauri* came slowly alongside. Once she was facing the targets, the frigate fired three torpedoes, each striking individual targets as Captain Hetrick had ordered.

“Shields are down on two of the targets. The third still has screens, but they are only at thirty percent and falling rapidly.”

“Excellent shot, Beer,” Hetrick commended.

“Forward phasers are charged, sir. Do I continue to fire?”

“Laroche?”

“The enemy vessels appear to be breaking off.”

*Finally, some good news.* “Negative. Let’s get out of here while the getting is good. Rig for towing,” he said to the helmsman, then turned to Gerisch. “Get me Major Shuford.”

“He’s already on the line, sir.”

“Major, we’ve scared off the Thesians for the time being, but I fear they’re regrouping while waiting for their Klingon friends. We’re going to get a tractor beam on the *Pallus Centauri* and get out of here as fast as we can.”

“Understood,” the Major’s voice replied through the speakers. “I’ve got a man stationed down in engineering trying to coax the fusion reactors into responding.”

Hetrick looked as the speaker in his armrest quizzically. “I thought you said the freighter was without fuel.”

There was a brief chuckle before Shuford came back online. “He’s trying to be inventive. I’ve given him a little latitude.”

“Try not to let him tinker too much with the ship’s systems, but anything you can do would be appreciated.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Rigged for towing,” Buse said from the helm console.

“Activate tractor beam. Take us to full impulse power on a heading away from the planet and toward Federation space.”

“We could be heading straight toward the Klingons,” Laroche said. “I still can’t get a bearing on their vessel.”

“Fortunately, there’re a lot of ways into this system,” Hetrick responded. “We’re picking one of a hundred. It’d be a wild stroke of luck if the Klingons were coming in on the same vector.”

“We’ve secured the *Pallus Centauri*, sir,” Buse said. “We’re nearly at full impulse, but the freighter is just too heavy for us to reach maximum speed and still keep a good lock on her.”

“Laroche, are the Thesians pursuing?”

“Negative, sir.”

“Beer, decrease power to the phasers, and then set the alert condition to yellow. That should give us enough extra power to make full impulse.” He then turned back to Laroche. “Are we still in transporter range of the planet?”

“Affirmative, but only for a few more minutes.”

“Shuford, do you have transporters?”

“Aye, sir. You need us back on board the *Seattle*?”

“Negative. I’d like you to transport your Thesian prisoners back to the planet. No sense in taking along the extra baggage.”

There was a brief pause before Major Shuford came back online. “Understood. Where would you like me to drop them off?”

Hetrick turned to his communications officer. “Can you triangulate the location of High Consul Awai’s office from his last transmission?”

“Easily, sir.” She began pressing commands into her console. “I’ve got it, sir.”

“Major Shuford, you’ll be receiving a set of coordinates shortly. Beam the prisoners there.”

“Yes, sir.”

“And Major?”

“Yes, sir?”

“If you wouldn’t mind, I’d like you to plant a little calling card on one of the prisoners.”

“Calling card?”

“Yes. I’d like High Consul Awai to know *exactly* who was responsible for stealing back his spoils. I think one of your Special Forces uniform insignias should do nicely, wouldn’t you agree?”

“Yes, sir,” the Major replied emphatically. “I’ll use mine personally.”

“Good. I’ll make sure to pin a new one on you myself as soon as you’re back aboard.”

Forty-five minutes later, the *Seattle*, with the *Pallus Centauri* in tow, was safely outside the Elek system and in Federation space.

“Communications, open a channel to the nearest starbase. Have them send out a retrieval vessel to meet us along our current course.”

“Yes, sir. Sending now.”

“Still no sign of pursuit?” Hetrick asked Laroche, although he already knew the answer.

“Negative, sir. It’s strange, really.”

“Why is that, Commander?”

“Well, just before leaving the system, when we were finally able to detect that the approaching vessel was a D-10 . . .”

“What about it?” Hetrick asked, almost smiling.

“We would have been in their sensor range as well. The Klingons would have known that the *Seattle* was no match for them.”

Hetrick tilted his head slowly and smirked. “I suppose so.”

“So why not pursue us?”

“My guess is that Captain K’llein was more upset with High Consul Awai than she was about chasing after a measly frigate and a down-and-out freighter. That little calling card I had Shuford leave should have cemented that notion.”

The Cygnian man seemed to ponder this a moment before speaking again. “Do you think we’ll hear from the Thesians again?”

“It’s doubtful. If anything, I would think they’ll be clamoring for Federation membership after the Klingons get done with them.”

“Highly unlikely for us to join with them,” Raimi Buse said with a chuckle.

Hetrick smiled. "Stranger things have happened, Lieutenant. And besides, if the Federation can gain another ally against the Klingons . . . well, who's to say?"

"Sir," Gerisch said from behind the captain. "Major Shuford is on the line. He says his makeshift engineer was able to coax some power into the impulse engines. The *Pallus* can get underway under her own power at three-quarters impulse if we care to release our tractor."

"Better late than never," Hetrick chuckled. "Advise the good major that we'll be releasing the tractor beam shortly. And, please don't forget to send over my congratulations on his temporary promotion."

"Sir?"

"Well, if he wants to command the *Pallus Centauri* under her own power, he'd better get used to the title of 'captain.'" When Hetrick caught the disapproving gaze of Laroche, he smiled warmly. "After all, Commander Laroche . . . it *is* tradition. Wouldn't you agree?"

\* \* \*

November 2254

Stardate 4211.22

Incoming subspace communication . . .

FROM: The Office of the Commanding Officer, Starfleet Public Relations,  
Admiral (selectee) Joselyn Czernovski, San Francisco, Earth

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

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,  
Rear Admiral Michael J. Lai, San Francisco, Earth

SUBJ: OFFICIAL INFORMATION RELEASE FOR FORWARD-DEPLOYED  
UNITS AND RESPECTIVE COMMANDERS

The following information is considered UNCLASSIFIED, and may be distributed to all hands, stations and vessels, as their respective commanders see fit.

1. The Office of the Commanding Officer, Starfleet Reserve and Inactive Fleet, wishes to announce the opening of the new reserve fleet basin at Qualor II. With its location close to the front lines of the current conflict against the Klingons, commanders of vessels operating in nearby areas are advised that many additional parts for older vessels are available for requisition at Surplus Depot Z15. It is hoped that this new source of procurement will ease the burden on the Starfleet Merchant Marine Commands otherwise responsible for delivering parts and supplies to forward-deployed units. For a full list of available parts or vessels housed at the Z15 facility, contact the local Zakdorn quartermaster, Ruavu Tintissi, who will be more than pleased to assist you.

2. The Commandant of Starfleet Academy is pleased to announce that the Golden Sun award in wrestling has been awarded to Senior Cadet Clark Terell of Victoria, British Columbia. The Golden Sun, given to those athletes whose performance exceeds all others in the annual Federation Olympics, is a symbol of the highest order, sought after by many, won by only a few. For more information on the ongoing games, please contact your nearest starbase communications center.

3. Renowned medical archeologist, Dr. Richard Korby, has completed his translations of medical records found in ruins on the former Orion world of Bijeb. Dr. Korby's work, already required reading at Starfleet Academy, has already begun to transform immunology techniques throughout the core words of the Federation, and is sure to have a profound impact on the way Federation scientists from all



member worlds study the immune systems of all known life-forms. Dr. Korby's work will be honored at a dinner gala on the planet Vargus, stardate 4212.10. Those wishing to attend this momentous occasion should make arrangements with Junior Adjunct Ma'Gren, Vargan Diplomatic Corps, as early as possible. Seating is limited.

4. On stardate 4210.31, the *Aakenn*-class VI freighter SS *Mundy* was found adrift near Starbase 21. The vessel's onboard life-support systems were functioning normally, but there were no crewmembers aboard. The bridge area showed signs of a struggle, but nearly all computer files had been lost and there was no recorded data to reveal what had happened. The last entry in the captain's log, from about four months earlier, made no mention of an emergency or other possible danger. When the cargo area was breached, it was found to contain millions of small, fluffy creatures—since given the scientific nomenclature *Polygeminus grex*—living on food produced by the synthesizer that had somehow been left on. The ship was found near the Delorna system, and its course would have put it in close proximity to the Iota Geminorum system at approximately the same stardate as the final entry in the ship's log. However, due to the system's close proximity to the Klingon Empire, no such attempt has been made to search that system for signs of survivors. Anyone with information on the *Mundy*, her crew, or creatures fitting the Federation databanks' description of *Polygeminus grex* should contact their nearest Starfleet Intelligence representative immediately. NOTE: *Polygeminus grex* has also gained the somewhat undignified non-scientific alias of "Tribble," and such a term may not yield much data during in-depth searches of the aforementioned databanks.

# Chapter 18

December 2254

Stardate 4212.02

Ready to transmit: Priority One Subspace Communication

FROM: Rear Admiral Ian Weiger, Commanding Officer, USS *Formidable*,  
Thranstor, Gamma Diso System

TO: All Commanding Officers, Military Operations Command,  
Federation Sector 15-J through 23-B

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,  
Rear Admiral Michael J. Lai, Starbase 23

SUBJ: ESTABLISHMENT OF 15<sup>TH</sup> BATTLE SQUADRON, AND PERSUANT  
INSTRUCTIONS TO ALL COMMANDING OFFICERS NOW  
FALLING UNDER THAT FORMATION

The following information is considered TOP SECRET, and may be distributed only to vessel commanders in the aforementioned Federation sectors. Vessel commanders must use discretion if and when it becomes necessary to relay the information contained in this communiqué to their subordinates.

1. In accordance with precedent set down by the commander, Starfleet Command, and based on information supplied directly from the commander, Starfleet Intelligence, the 15<sup>th</sup> Starfleet Battle Squadron is now formed.

2. The area of operation for the 15<sup>th</sup> Battle Squadron is the Gamma Diso system. More specifically, the Federation shipyards in orbit above the fifth planet of that system, known as Thranstor.

3. The formation of this squadron is in response to numerous credible sources of evidence leading Starfleet Intelligence to fully expect that a major Klingon advance is about to begin in that system.

4. Starfleet Command cannot afford to lose their hold on that sector, as it would put the Klingons within striking distance of the core of the United Federation of Planets. Earth, Vulcan, Tellar Prime, and a host of others are well within two days' travel of Thranstor.

5. All Starfleet commanders operating in Sectors 15-J through 23-B are now under the umbrella of the 15<sup>th</sup> Battle Squadron, and are hereby ordered to proceed to Thranstor at maximum speed. Warp speed limitations for all vessels are immediately suspended. Vessel commanders who are unable to comply will immediately reply to this message via subspace and present their reasons to Rear Admiral Weiger, 15<sup>th</sup> Battle Squadron Commander, personally.

6. No other delays will be authorized.

7. All shore leave activities underway for those vessels will immediately cease.

8. The Klingon forces are projected to be only four days away at maximum warp, amassing their numbers in the nearby Foram Canara system. All Federation commanders near that area are ordered to stay clear of the enemy units, thus taking the most direct route to Thranstor while simultaneously avoiding falling within sensor range of the Klingons.

9. Secrecy is of the utmost importance. No retransmittal of these orders is authorized, and doing so will constitute a maximum penalty as set forth by Starfleet Command and Starfleet Intelligence per the Articles of Starfleet Command.

Rear Admiral Weiger looked down at the computer screen one final time, his finger hovering over the control that would send out his request to the far corners of this sector. He scanned the lines of text, making sure nothing was overlooked, then pressed the transmit button. Once done, he pivoted in his chair to look out the wide view port afforded him. Several starships had already gathered around the

*Formidable*, and now many more would soon be on the way. Weiger only hoped it would be enough.

Off in the distance, only a few days from completion, was the Starfleet cruiser *Bellatrix*, nestled safely in the dry dock cocoon she'd called home since arriving for repairs last year. Beside her was the light carrier *Vella Gulf*, fully outfitted for the coming engagement. Three more cruisers were slated to arrive in the next hour, followed by a squadron of destroyers—those that were close enough for Weiger to relay his orders to directly without need of subspace message traffic. Once all the other captains in the nearby sectors had arrived, it would give the 15<sup>th</sup> a combined force of some 100 starships and other vessels. At best guess, an even match for the Klingons coming in from the Foram Canara system.

Rubbing his face, he sipped at a quickly cooling cup of tea before setting it on the tabletop beside him.

\* \* \*

“Captain’s log: stardate 4212.03. The *Port Royal* has just arrived in the Thranstor system, and I must say I’m more than impressed by what we’ve seen so far. I’ve never seen such a collection of starships gathered in one place in my entire career. There are already over seventy vessels near the planet, with more coming in every hour. Several smaller squadrons of destroyers—what Rear Admiral Weiger has described as ‘hunter-killers’—are scouting the perimeter of the system in the hopes they will be able to act as an early warning system. I must admit, seeing whole assemblies of cruisers, destroyers, and frigates of nearly every class present, I wonder if the Klingons would dare risk a fight. The sheer awesomeness of the power in orbit above Thranstor is enough to give any man pause, and I’m no exception. I just hope the Klingons are as awestruck.”

Handing the stylus to his yeoman, Fleet Captain Vernon L. Vincent’s gaze on the forward view screen shifted from one starship to another. There was little doubt in his mind that if the Klingons should choose to engage Starfleet here, this would be a decisive battle in the war. But would the Federation be the victor, or would that honor go to the enemy now knocking at their back door? If so, Vernon had doubts

the Federation could muster such numbers again on such short notice. The ships of the newly formed 15<sup>th</sup> Battle Squadron were the most skilled, the most battle-hardened in all the fleet. To lose even half of them would be devastating for Starfleet, to say nothing about the morale of those in the Federation.

“Another starship coming in,” Commander Todd said from the science console.

Vincent moved his eyes away from the screen long enough to capture the commander’s gaze. “And this one, Richard?”

“The *Bunker Hill*, sir. Command cruiser.”

*Bunker Hill*. That was Chasin Durbin’s ship. Fine battle record, to say nothing about the accolades bestowed on his astrological teams prior to the war. In a different time, she’d be something of a celebrity amongst some of these other vessels. Still, Vernon was pleased to have her here, and he counted himself fortunate to be the welcoming committee for such a prestigious vessel.

“Lieutenant Sansom, open a channel to the *Bunker Hill*, please.”

Deborah Sansom, her long brown hair curled tightly on her crown, nodded sharply. “Aye, sir. Channel open.”

“*Bunker Hill*, this is Fleet Captain Vernon on the *Port Royal*. Welcome to Thranstor.”

The image on the view screen changed to show the immaculate bridge of the other cruiser, and a young human male sitting in the command chair. Chasin Durbin, something of a prodigy, looked confidently back at Vernon with calm hazel eyes.

“This is Captain Durbin on the *Bunker Hill*. Thanks for the red carpet treatment, Fleet Captain.”

“Don’t mention it, Captain. It’s good to have you here.”

Durbin half-smiled, turned to his left, then back to Vernon. “We almost didn’t make it. Had a ruptured power conduit on the lower decks. Luckily we were able to lock it down in time to make the rendezvous.”

“Anything that’s going to affect your battle readiness, Captain?”

Now Durbin fully smiled. “If by that you mean is there anything Rear Admiral Weiger should know, then I’d say no. If push comes to shove, you won’t see our combat efficiency drop one percent.”

Vernon found himself smiling back. “You afraid Weiger will pull you from combat duty?”

“More like I’m afraid of the Wrath of Weiger. And you can bet your stabilizers I am. If I believed half the scuttlebutt I hear about him, I’d stay well away from his bad side if I were you.”

“Understood,” Vernon chuckled. He’d had his own taste of the rear admiral’s lack of patience since arriving eight hours ago. That he’d pulled welcoming committee duty far from the shipyards was nothing less than a godsend.

“Any word on the Klingons yet?”

Vernon’s smile faded, then he shook his head. “No. Not yet.”

“But they’re still out there at Foram Canara?”

Vernon nodded slowly. “I have no reason to believe otherwise. We’ve got a destroyer out there right now keeping an eye on them.”

“From a safe distance, I hope,” Durbin replied, but it was what he wasn’t saying that rang true in Vernon’s ears: *Better them than me*.

“Safe enough, Captain. Until we hear from them, our orders are to stay put. Speaking of which, I’ve got your parking assignment here. I’ll need you to put the *Bunker Hill* near dry dock seven.”

Durbin nodded. “Understood.”

“Captain,” Commander Todd spoke up from the science station. “There’s another vessel coming in along the same trajectory as the *Bunker Hill*.”

“You hear that?” Vernon asked to Durbin’s image.

Chasin nodded. “We’re moving off now, Fleet Captain. *Bunker Hill* out.”

Vernon watched as the beautiful cruiser swept clear of the screen and was replaced by a *Tikopai*-class vessel—something of a hybrid of a command cruiser and a frigate.

“It’s the *Hornet*, sir,” Lieutenant Erich Tauschmann said from the helm. “I’d recognize those lines anywhere.”

Fleet Captain Vernon nodded, then turned to the young woman at communications. “Lieutenant Sansom, you know the drill by now. Open a channel, please.”

\* \* \*

Foram Canara: it was like the Sahara of space. Nothing for nearly a sector in every direction, save for a burnt-out star and few lifeless frozen planetoids, one of which—millennia ago—was surprisingly similar to Earth. Perhaps this was a glimpse at Earth’s distant future? While Captain Lord wished he had more time to reflect on it, the looming presence of the Klingon fleet just on the edge of sensor range quickly pushed any thoughts of scientific explorations from his mind.

The *Loknar*-class frigate USS *Tolstoy* had been in a stationary position for well over five hours. With all systems—save for life support and long-range sensors—tuned to their absolute minimum power levels, and using the radiation from a nearby nebula to mask their silhouette, the frigate had maintained an uneasy level of anonymity. Everyone on the ship, from the lower decks to the bridge, was on high alert. As soon as the Klingons made any move that would indicate their intentions, the *Tolstoy* was ordered to get the news back to Thranstor as quickly as possible using any means possible. However, with their warp core powered down, and the fusion reactors nearly as cold as space, any attempt to leave the system was going to take time—time that Captain Steven Lord wasn’t sure the small frigate would have.

Turning to his science officer, Lord could see that the Vulcan was engrossed in the readings he was observing. “Mr. T’Perry? Anything yet?”

Lieutenant Commander T’Perry, having served alongside Lord for the last five years, didn’t flinch as he responded. “Negative, Captain. The majority of the Klingon forces are still stationary.”

What were they waiting for? The last enemy ship to enter the system had done so almost a full day ago, and there hadn’t been so much as a peep out of them since. Over 100 vessels representing every class in their arsenal: surely it was a force to be

reckoned with, designed to evoke nothing but sheer terror into any system in which they chose to deploy the fleet. Question was, what was their intended target?

“Where are the battle cruisers?” Lord asked as he looked at the grainy long-range image of the immense flotilla.

“Twelve of the thirteen D-10s are in the center of the mass. The final one is hanging motionless just outside the core group.”

“That must be the flagship,” Lord mused, to which he saw T’Perry nod slowly.

“A likely possibility.”

“Communications,” he began, turning toward the Deltan-human hybrid Lieutenant Bardie, “are you picking up any chatter on subspace?”

Ivar Bardie turned to face the captain, his hairless eyebrows furrowing. “I’m not getting much, Captain. Mostly just routine ship-to-ship communications about battles being fought and glory.”

Lieutenant Roderick Collins at the navigation console *harrumphed*. “It’s like they couldn’t care less about what they’re about to do.”

“Not that we know what that is,” replied Lieutenant Rob Beck beside him at the helm.

Collins chuckled. “Maybe Bardie should ask.”

“I can’t make heads or tails of their dialect,” Bardie replied with a smile. “Everything I get is thanks to the computer, and it’s far from 100 percent accurate. They could be talking about chicken soup for all I know.”

“Or the coordinates for their upcoming attack,” Lord acknowledged.

“Maybe they’re just on training maneuvers?” Beck asked, which quickly received a round of disbelieving stares from around the bridge. “Right,” he said coyly as he turned back to the helm. “Probably not.”

“Captain, there is movement in the Klingon fleet,” T’Perry said as he continued to stare into his monitor.

The smile that Steven was wearing quickly faded. “What kind of movement?”

“Several of the cruisers are reorganizing themselves, splitting into smaller formations.”

“They may be getting ready to move out.”



“Long-range sensors are detecting a new series of warp signatures coming in from outside the system.”

“Divert everything to those coordinates,” Lord replied quickly. “I want to know who’s coming to dinner.”

T’Perry made a series of adjustments on the computer before speaking again. “They’re just coming out of warp now. They appear to be . . . heavy transports. I count nine such vessels being escorted by two squadrons of frigates.”

*Nine transports. That would mean about 18,000 troops and equipment. This wasn’t just going to be a fleet engagement. This is going to be an invasion and possible occupation.* “Any further movement on the Klingon battle cruisers?”

T’Perry nodded. “The presumed flagship is being surrounded by D-7 cruisers in all quadrants. The other D-10s have broken formation, and are moving to a position near the outer fridges of the fleet.”

“Disposition of their movements, Commander? Where are they heading?”

“The transports and a number of cruisers are orienting themselves to head out of the system on a bearing of 227-mark-14.”

*Two-two-seven. At this distance, assuming they keep on course, that’ll take them pretty far from Thrantor.* “And the rest? What about the battle cruisers?”

“They have changed course to a heading of 209-mark-2.”

*That puts them on a direct course for Thrantor and our fleet. Now we know. But why split up the fleet?* He asked as much to T’Perry.

“Possibly a diversionary tactic, Captain. Logic suggests that the entire fleet would be needed to secure the planet.”

“And the Klingons are well known for their logic, right?” Collins asked Beck with a sly smile.

The helmsman grinned back at the navigator. “Not really a strong point of theirs, Rod.”

“Nonetheless gentlemen, I agree with T’Perry,” Steven said from the command chair. “We’ve seen everything we needed to here. It’s time to get underway

ourselves.” Pressing the intercom on his armrest, the captain linked his speaker to the engine room. “Mr. Becker, it’s time to leave.”

“It’s about bloody time,” Commander Tom Becker’s thick Irish voice replied testily. “I hate not having a thing to do down here except sweep and resweep the passageways.”

“I thought the Irish saying went that the new broom sweeps clean, but the old broom knows the corners. You must know those corners well by now, Commander.”

“We’ve worn the bristles out of ‘em, sir. Just glad to get back to *real* work.”

“Get those impulse engines warmed up, but do it as slowly as possible. We’re going to move farther toward the nebula to mask our plasma, but once we get up to speed, our cover is going to be blown whether we like it or not. With any luck, we’ll have a lot more space between us and the Klingons before we have to jump to warp.”

“When you’re lucky enough to have an Irishman aboard, sir, you’re lucky enough. I’ll have the engines ready when you need them. Becker out.”

Closing the channel, Captain Lord turned to Lieutenant Beck. “Helmsman, lay in a course deeper into the nebula. Full power to the maneuvering thrusters until the impulse engines are back to seventy percent, then punch it up to three-quarters impulse.”

Smiling, Rob Beck nodded and turned back to his duties, just as elated as Tom Becker to have something to do. “Aye, sir!”

\* \* \*

Stardate 4212.04

Captain Durbin looked down at the speaker built into the armrest of his chair with disdain. “I thought you said you had that power conduit issue locked down.” The *Bunker Hill*’s impulse drive was down to half its normal operating efficiency, which would never do in normal circumstances, let alone if they were to get into combat.

“We did, sir,” the voice of Chief Engineer Olivier Mondor replied with more than a hint of frustration. “The rigging we installed should have held, but something went wrong. We’re working as fast as we can to correct it.”

Chasin sighed, knowing his people were working as fast as they could. “Can you give me an ETA, chief?”

“Better part of thirty minutes until you have full impulse capabilities again. Until then, don’t overtax the fusion generators or the whole system could go belly-up.”

“Captain Durbin,” the voice of the communications officer, Seth Straughan, came from behind Chasin. “Fleetwide message coming in from the frigate *Tolstoy*.”

Nodding without turning to face the young man, Durbin looked down to the microphone on his chair. “Just get it done as quickly as possible, Olivier. I have a feeling thirty minutes is going to be too long.”

“Aye, sir.”

When the channel was closed, Captain Durbin turned to Straughan. The light-skinned Alpha Centaurian—a nearly identical species to humans—looked back at Durbin with worry in his cool blue eyes. “Fleetwide, did you say?”

Straughan nodded. “Yes, sir. The signal is directed at the *Formidable*, but it’s definitely on a wide band.”

*They need to talk to Rear Admiral Weiger now, but anyone within earshot will do. It must be the Klingons. There’s no other reason.* “Can you put it on the overhead?”

“Yes, sir.” A moment later, the hurried voice of the *Tolstoy*’s commander came over the *Bunker Hill*’s speakers.

“Repeat, this is Captain Steven Lord aboard . . . *Tolstoy*. Klingons are advancing on Thranstor. They are on a direct course. Fleet numbers . . . 100 vessels. They’re cruising at maximum speed . . . should arrive at the planet in . . . than five hours. Their forces are divided . . . two groups. Unknown when the second . . . will arrive.”

Straughan then discontinued the transmission through the overhead. “The message repeats at that point. The transmission was very weak. I’m surprised we got as much of it as we did.”

*Five hours. The Tolstoy must have been at extreme communications range when she sent that. That means that the transmission is already two hours old, maybe more. "Anything from Rear Admiral Weiger or the Formidable?"*

Straughan held the transceiver tightly to his ear. "Something coming in right now, sir. Priority signal from the admiral himself. He's requesting all ships open channels."

"Do it, and put it on the overhead."

"To all vessels in the 15<sup>th</sup> Battle Squadron. Klingon forces are heading toward Thranstor at maximum warp. We have precious little time before they arrive. It appears that the Klingons have a slight numerical superiority over our forces, but let me be clear: they are superior in numbers only. There are no finer captains and crews in all the universe, and surely Starfleet Command, than are present here and now. I have supreme faith that you will all see the day through, and that you will give what is required of you, not because it is what Starfleet requires, but because it is the just and right thing to do. All commanders are ordered to red alert immediately. Fleet captains have been apprised of the situation, and will subdividing your forces into manageable squadrons. Prepare to receive individual battle orders from them. Good luck to you all, and Godspeed in these desperate times. Rear Admiral Weiger, out."

As soon as the transmission ended, Straughan switched the communications channel to another frequency. "Sir, I've got Fleet Captain Davis on the line. He says he's got our formation orders."

Chasin nodded slowly, still processing Admiral Weiger's message. "Acknowledge the orders, then feed them into the ship's computer."

Less than a minute later, Lieutenant Commander Brad Bauder at the science station turned to the captain. "Orders have been fed into the main computer, Captain."

"Go ahead, Commander. Let's hear them."

"We've been ordered to form up with the *Eastwood*, *Titan*, and several other starships in Sector 21502. Fleet Captain Davis will order the *Manark* to spearhead our forces."

“Very well. Lieutenant Commander Harlan, please set a course for those coordinates and engage at half impulse.” He then turned to Bauder. “You get down to engineering and see what you can do to help out Commander Mondor with that power conduit.”

“Yes, sir,” Bauder said with a sharp nod, then left the bridge in a flurry.

“Mr. Blocksom, please take the science console.”

The navigator, Ron Blocksom of Deneva, spun in his chair and vaulted up the steps leading to the science station.

\* \* \*

The ship was rattling itself apart at the seams, and everything in the captain’s experience told him that the ship couldn’t handle much more of the continued strain.

“Are we going to make it?”

“Questionable,” came T’Perry’s voice over the moaning of the ship’s hull all around them.

“Mr. Becker,” Captain Lord called into the overhead, “what’s your status?”

“We’ve exceeded maximum operating temperature on the coolant system. The inner casings are starting to deteriorate. We need to slow down.”

“If we do, those three Klingon cruisers on our tail are going to pounce on us in a heartbeat.”

“We either take our chances with them, or blow up for sure,” the Irish engineer shouted back. “It’s your call, Steven.”

“Beck, what’s our distance to Thranstor?”

“We’re less than a parsec away. We’ll be in sensor range of our fleet in less than eight minutes.”

“T’Perry?”

“The Klingons have increased their speed to warp 4.7. They are gaining.”

*And we’ve reached our maximum limit.* “Weapons officer, status?”

Lieutenant Collins held his fingers poised over the controls. “As soon as we drop out of warp, I’ll divert power to the phasers and photon controls. There isn’t much I can do until then.”

The vibrations in the hull were getting more pronounced with each passing moment. Lieutenant Bardie at the communications console was reading the damage reports as fast as they were coming in. There was a structural failure near engineering, and Steven ordered a team down to shore up the surrounding passageway. Just as Lord felt he was going to be shaken clear of his command seat, T’Perry sounded out with words that were music to the captain’s ears.

“We’re entering the fringes of the Gamma Diso system, Captain. There are two Federation vessels on long-range sensors. They’ve set an intercept course with us. ETA is two minutes.”

“Mr. Beck, we’ve come to the end of our rope. Drop to sublight speed and turn to face the Klingons. Lieutenant Collins, get those weapon systems online now!”

## Chapter 19

On the outskirts of the Gamma Diso system, the frigate *Tolstoy* was happy to get any help she could. With three Klingon cruisers bearing down on her at full speed, she was more than outmatched. Thankfully, Rear Admiral Weiger had the forethought to release some of the 15<sup>th</sup> Battle Squadron to the far reaches of the system. It was two of those ships, the starships *Frankfurt* and *Anzio*, that were now coming to her aid.

“The *Frankfurt* is coming around to our port side, Captain,” T’Perry said, having just returned from helping chief engineer Becker with the last of his repairs. “The *Anzio* is on our starboard.”

“All phasers charged and ready, sir,” Roderick Collins said from the navigator’s seat.

“The Klingons?” Captain Lord asked the Vulcan.

“They have slowed to one-quarter impulse and are assuming a line-abreast formation.”

“They mean to take us on one at a time,” Steven mused aloud. “So be it. Collins, lock phasers on the central D-7, and don’t bother waiting for them to open fire.”

“Already locked, sir. Firing!”

In unison, the three Starfleet vessels fired streams of phasers at the incoming enemy vessels. The *Tolstoy*’s target was hit dead center. The Klingon’s shields flared, but held. Still, it’d shaken the commander enough to maneuver his ship out of formation with the others. The *Anzio*’s phasers likewise hit their target, and were quickly followed by a torpedo strike. The Klingon’s forward shields were down, and T’Perry noted moderate damage to the bridge module. The *Frankfurt*’s shots missed entirely, due in full to the Klingon wisely pulling the ship hard up and away from the blast.

The *Tolstoy*’s target kept her course true, bearing down on the less-powerful frigate at full speed. Green bolts of disruptive energy shot out from her bridge wings, both hitting the frigate in her saucer and sending the bridge crew sprawling

across the deck. Only T’Perry was able to maintain his position behind the science console.

“Direct hit. Damage to decks three and four. Shields severely weakened in our forward array.”

“Fire torpedoes!” Captain Lord shouted over the commotion and shuddering of his vessel.

“Torpedoes away!” Collins replied just before the blue-white streaks were visible on the main viewer. One impacted squarely with the D-7’s secondary hull, the other glanced off the shields near the stern impulse module and sped off into space.

“More damage on the Klingon vessel. Her upper shields are down to fifty percent. Impulse generators fluctuating.”

Lord nodded at T’Perry’s status report. “What about our forces?”

“It appears the *Anzio* has destroyed her target. She is swinging around to assist the *Frankfurt*.”

On the view screen, the D-7 swung clear to the right to be replaced by the *Anzio* coming in from the left. “Bardie, make sure to send my compliments to Captain Agramin when you get a chance,” Lord said as he nodded to the image of the *Anzio*. “Keep tracking our target, Collins. Mr. Beck, I want you to keep us on her stern. Give Collins every opportunity to pick that D-7 apart piece by piece.”

“That’s not going to be too difficult. Seems like the D-7’s already lumbering.”

“Good.”

“Sir, call coming up from engineering,” Bardie said from behind Lord.

“What is it, Tom?” Lord asked as he pressed the control on the armrest.

“Fusion generators are slowly overheating. We can’t keep this chase up much longer.”

“As long as Collins keeps that aim of his true, I don’t think that’ll be a problem.”

“Good,” Becker replied in elation. “It’s going to be a mess down here trying to get this ship back to a starbase when this is over.”

“Luck’s on our side; didn’t you say something like that earlier?”

“Aye. That I did.”

“Then keep those Irish fingers crossed and get back to making sure we stay alive for the next five minutes.”



There was a chuckle as the engineer responded. "I can promise four, but that's about it."

"You hear that, Collins?" Lord asked the navigator with a nod.

Another burst of phaser fire reached out and struck the wounded Klingon, hitting her port warp nacelle and eliciting a shower of sparks. "All I need is two, sir."

\* \* \*

Moments after the *Tolstoy* and her escorts were engaging the D-7s in the outer reaches of Gamma Diso, the first wave of Klingon warships from the invading fleet dropped out of warp a half-million kilometers from Thranstor. Deep in the bowels of the *Formidable*, the new enemy contacts lit up Rear Admiral Weiger's tabletop status board like a Christmas tree.

"Enemy forces entering the system, Admiral," one of the sensor operators chimed in.

"Composition?" Weiger asked.

"Approximately twenty-one cruisers and fifteen destroyers are on a direct course for the planet Thranstor, sir," the young woman replied in her unusually high-pitched voice.

"That's far less than the *Tolstoy* was reporting," he murmured to himself. "The Klingons must have subdivided their group."

"The enemy will be in transporter range of the planet in ten minutes at their current speed," another of the officers said from across the compartment.

Weiger looked up to the multiple screens that adorned the walls surrounding him. On a few he could see the lumbering forms of the Klingon warships. On others he could see the Starfleet vessels poised and ready to strike. On a single monitor on the starboard bulkhead was the planet Thranstor, an otherwise unremarkable Class-M world that the two powers were about to fight a life or death battle over. But fight he would, and die if necessary.

“Hail Fleet Captains Goodyear and Sneeringer. Order their forces to head off the enemy in sectors 8 and 9. Then get Fleet Captain Vincent on the line. I have a feeling those enemy battle cruisers the *Tolstoy* reported aren’t far behind, and we’re going to need his ships to respond quickly.”

“Yes, Admiral.”

\* \* \*

On the view screen of the *Port Royal*, Fleet Captain Vernon L. Vincent watched as tiny explosions lit up the space several hundred thousand kilometers from his group’s position. Each explosion—the result of Goodyear and Sneeringer’s forces battling the Klingons—left a knot in Vincent’s stomach. He wanted desperately to alter course to render assistance, but Rear Admiral Weiger’s orders had been very clear: he was to stay put in Sector 18 for the time being.

“Commander Todd,” he asked, turning to his science officer. “How are our forces doing?”

Todd nodded into the blue light of his sensor hood. “Admirable so far. Several Klingon vessels have been disabled, but so have a number of starships. The odds are still very much even.”

“And we’re sitting out here,” Lieutenant Erich Tauschmann said from the helm console. “Let’s get in there and swing those numbers in our favor.”

The chief engineer, Richard Gable, nodded his head in agreement. “What are we doing out here, anyway?”

“Following orders, Richard,” Vernon replied, just as eager to help out the battling starships, but powerless to do so.

“Sir,” Deborah Sansom said from the communications console, “there’s a message coming in from Admiral Weiger. Long-range scouts have picked up a second wave of Klingon forces. Composition is frigates and battle cruisers. They are heading in from outside the system and should be near our present location within minutes.”

“Acknowledge the order, Deb, then send a message to our ships in the squadron. Advise them of the admiral’s message, and tell them to stand by to repel invaders.” Looking down at the young ensign at the helm, Vincent wondered how the young man was going to cope. The *Port Royal* was his first deep space assignment out of

Starfleet academy, and though he'd proven himself a capable officer, Vincent couldn't help but be concerned about him. Stepping from the command chair, he rounded the right side of the console to stand at the young man's side.

"You ready for this, Harry?" Vernon asked kindly, but not so loud that he was heard by other bridge officers.

Ensign Harry Schurr looked up at the captain. There was a determination in the young man's eyes, one that Vincent approved of. Still, his voice wavered a bit as it responded. "Yes. Yes, sir."

"Things could get really ugly really fast. If you need—" but Vincent was surprised to hear the normally reserved ensign cut off his commanding officer midsentence.

"You'll have to pry me out of this chair kicking and screaming, sir, if that's what you're getting at. I've got no intention of going anywhere until this is all over."

Looking away for a moment, then back to the ensign, Vincent smiled. "The thought never crossed my mind, Ensign. Put the phasers in standby and load the torpedo tubes. I have a feeling the Klingons will be expecting a welcoming party, so let's not disappoint them."

"With pleasure, Captain," Schurr beamed in response.

\* \* \*

"Concentrate all fire on the lead D-7!" Captain Durbin yelled to Ronald Blocksom at the weapons station.

The *Bunker Hill*, swooping around the remains of a Federation frigate, was alternating phaser and torpedo barrages at any enemy vessel within striking distance. But now, Chasin Durbin wanted to take out a target and help swing the odds in Starfleet's favor. He'd watched as this particular D-7 had disabled not one, but three Federation starships in only a few minutes. Her captain was someone who needed to be silenced, and the *Bunker Hill* was poised to do just that.

Swinging in a wide turn to starboard, Lieutenant Commander Harlan brought the Starfleet cruiser about and put her bow at a right angle to the enemy vessel. Looking

like any other Klingon cruiser on their view screen, the bridge crew of the *Bunker Hill* knew this particular vessel would give no quarter.

With her attention drawn elsewhere, the D-7 didn't see the Federation cruiser until it was too late. The forward phaser banks sprang to life, and the *Bunker Hill* scored a direct hit against the enemy's port side.

"The D-7's port shields are down to seventy-five percent," Commander Brad Bauder reported from the science station.

"She knows we're here now, Skipper," Blocksom said from the weapons console. "She's increased to full impulse and maneuvering out of phaser range."

"Keep on her, Mr. Harlan," Chasin said to the helm officer. "Blocksom, torpedoes."

"Trying to get a lock," the lieutenant said in frustration. "She's got a hell of a helmsman, though."

"So do we, Lieutenant. Forget the lock, just fire where you think she'll be."

"But, sir," Ronald began to protest, "without the computer lock, how do I know—"

"To blazes with the computer! Never trust one to do what your own senses are perfectly capable of doing. I want that target destroyed now or you're fired."

Seeing the resolve burning behind his captain's eyes, Ronald Blocksom nodded and turned back to his controls. "Aye, sir!"

Watching the targeting computer, the D-7 swung in and out of the shot-range sensor's ability to lock onto her. Rapid changes in speed and course were playing havoc with Blocksom's computer, and his first two attempts to manually fire the torpedoes both resulted in near misses. "Keep her steady," Ronald quipped to Jeffrey Harlan at the helm.

"Tell that to them," Harlan said as he nodded to the stern view of the D-7 on the view screen. "I've got to hand it to their helmsman. Either he's drunk, or he's one of the best I've ever seen. I can't keep up with some of his maneuvers."

"I'll not have any of my crew complimenting a Klingon while I'm in command, gentlemen," Chasin admonished from the command chair. "It's neither skill nor competence that's keeping him out of our reach. It's desperation. He's scared, and with good reason. I've got no intention of letting him get away, so if we need to

keep at it until our fusion engines blow, then so be it. But I *will* have that target disabled!”

“That might be sooner than you think,” Olivier Mondor said from the engineering console. “Reactors three and five are nearing their breaking point, sir.”

“Channel coolant from the warp engines to the fusion reactor control room.”

“Already done, sir. It’s the only thing that’s kept them from going critical at this point.”

That was when Chasin turned to the screen to see one of Blocksom’s torpedoes score a direct hit against the Klingon’s impulse drive module at the rear of the vessel.

“Got her, sir!” Ronald exclaimed from the weapons station.

“She’s reducing speed,” Bauder injected as he watched the sensor readout. “Damage to her impulse drive.”

“Throttle down our speed to match.”

“Gladly,” Harlan said with relief.

“Heat levels falling on the fusion reactors, but slowly,” the chief engineer said.

“Olivier, get down to engineering. See if you can’t figure out a way to keep them in one piece. I have a feeling this battle is far from over.”

As soon as Mondor had left the bridge, the Klingon vessel on the screen performed a high-energy turn to port, bringing her forward disruptors to bear directly on the *Bunker Hill*. Without hesitation, the enemy vessel opened fire. Jeffrey Harlan had little time to maneuver the ship out of the way before the console to his right exploded in a shower of sparks and flames.

\* \* \*

On the status screen, Rear Admiral Ian Weiger watched as the Federation and Klingon forces traded blows across the entire Gamma Diso system. The heaviest concentrations were near the sixth and eighth planets—blessedly far enough away from Thranstor itself to pose a serious threat to the shipyards.

“Sir,” one of the communications officers in the *Formidable*’s CIC shouted, “Fleet Captain Sneeringer is reporting that the Klingon forces in his sector have all but been destroyed.”

“And Fleet Captain Goodyear?” Weiger asked, quickly turning to face the young woman.

“I’m currently unable to hail the *Yamato*, sir.”

Turning to the nearest tactical officer, Weiger pointed to the large screen that dominated the forward bulkhead. “What was the last recorded position of the *Yamato*?”

The screen, which was showing a topographical view of the entire Gamma Diso system, was subdivided into smaller square quadrants. The tactical officer highlighted several of the squares in the lower portion of the screen near Gamma Diso VI. “Roughly there, sir. She was moving at flank speed at that time, so she could be in any one of these areas.”

Weiger nodded. “Her navigation beacon?”

“There’s a lot of interference near the planet, sir. We’re having a hard time reading many of the ships out there.”

“Detach the *King Richard* from Thranstor. Tell Captain Tlustos that I need intelligence from that area. Have him get out there, deploy sensor probes, and get back here with—”

“Sir, new enemy contacts approaching!”

Weiger turned to the science officer at the far side of the room. “Specify!”

“A large group of enemy warships are coming in on course 117-mark-2.”

*They’re trying to flank us. If they get close, we’ll be surrounded. This must be the second group the Tolstoy had mentioned.* “How many ships?”

“Twenty-eight medium cruisers, nine light cruisers, nine transports.”

“Belay those orders to the *King Richard*,” Weiger yelled to the communications officer. “Order her to intercept the new contacts. Then advise Fleet Captain Sneeringer to change course and intercept as well.”

“Aye, sir.”

“Fleet dispatch,” Weiger said as he turned to the commander responsible for relaying movements to the individual squadrons. “Get Commodore Dent’s cruiser

squadron out to engage those heavy battle cruisers near Gamma Diso VI. If the *Eastwood* and her cruisers can get us any information on Fleet Captain Goodyear and the *Yamato* in the process, so much the better.”

“Right way, sir.”

\* \* \*

Swinging out from behind two D-7s, the immense D-10 battle cruiser opened fire with all forward weapons simultaneously. The *Port Royal*, although too distanced to take the full brunt of the weapons fire, shook violently as the blasts registered across her hull.

In the command chair, Fleet Captain Vincent was nursing a battered hand, the result of a piece of the overhead falling on the command chair during their last weapons exchange with the D-10. Looking down at the blood-soaked remnants of his tunic that he’d wrapped around it, he wondered if he’d ever get a chance to use it again. Beside him, science officer Richard Todd was either unconscious or dead, his console having exploded at the same time Vernon suffered his own injury. With no power to the bridge turbolift, the medical teams were having to make their way to the bridge via Jefferies tubes and crawlspaces. And with casualty reports coming in from all over the ship, it was anyone’s guess when the doctors would be there.

“Helm, get us out of here! Full impulse!” Vincent shouted above the shaking.

“Trying, sir,” Tauschmann yelled back from the helm. “She’s getting sluggish.”

“Captain, I’ve got chief engineer Gable on the line,” Deborah said from behind Vincent. “There’s a fire in auxiliary control.”

“Put him through to my chair.” A moment later, the light on Vincent’s chair lit up. “Gable, report.”

“Fire in auxiliary control, sir. Suppression systems are not functioning. I sent in a team of some of my best men about five minutes ago, but the emergency bulkheads came down like a steel trap. The men were trapped in that section with almost none of their equipment.”

There was no time to cut them out, and Vernon knew it. The fire would have to wait—hopefully burning itself out in the process. “Richard, I need you in

engineering. We've got a D-10 out there that wants us for lunch. We're going to need every ounce of power to stay out of his cone of fire."

"Yes, sir," Gable responded, but not without a twinge of regret at leaving his engineers trapped behind near auxiliary control. "I'll do what I can."

Closing the channel, Captain Vincent winced as a wave of pain washed over him. The shock of his injury was beginning to wear off, and the throbbing in his hand was becoming unbearable. Taking a deep breath, Vincent had a single moment before the ship shuddered violently once more. The D-10 had scored another hit. Turning to his right, the captain caught the duty engineer's gaze. "Damage report," he winced through gritted teeth.

"Structural damage to the port warp nacelle, Captain. We're losing power from that engine. Must be a breach in the plasma conduit. There's nothing I can do."

"Cut off the flow to that module. It's not going to do us any good at this point. Besides, it might keep the starboard engine running a little while longer if we've got the power to shunt over to it."

"Aye, sir. Making the necessary changes now."

Vernon then looked to the environmental control officer who'd taken the place of the fallen Commander Todd at the science station. "Lieutenant Desalvo, where's the Klingon?"

"Directly astern, sir," Junior Lieutenant Emilio Desalvo said. "Looks like she's powering up for another disrupter barrage."

"Ensign Schurr, divert more power to the aft shields."

"Aye," the weapons officer quickly complied.

"Another ship coming in, sir," Desalvo exclaimed. "It's the *Eastwood*!"

Vincent almost jumped out of his chair at the name of the *Heston*-class heavy cruiser that was coming to their assistance. "On screen!"

Captain Vernon watched as the old but beautiful ship quickly filled the static-lined view screen. No sooner had the *Eastwood* come into view than she sailed over the bridge of the *Port Royal* with only a few dozen meters to spare, then unleashed a spread of torpedoes and phaser fire at the incoming D-10. Likewise, the D-10 fired her forward arsenal of disruptor beams. But the death blow—intended for the crippled *Port Royal*—instead impacted against the undamaged USS *Eastwood*.



“The *Eastwood* took the hit, sir,” Desalvo chimed triumphantly. “Her shields are damaged, but holding steady.”

“Good man, Dent,” Vincent said to the image of the commodore’s flagship. “What about the D-10?”

“Her forward shields have completely failed under the *Eastwood*’s attack. Major internal damage to her forward disruptor cannons and the bridge module. She’s veering off, Skipper.”

“Lieutenant Sansom, if you can manage it, get a message to Commodore Dent. Tell him I owe him a drink for the assist.” Turning to face her, Vincent caught a warm smile on her weary face.

“Message just coming in from the *Eastwood*, sir. Commodore Dent says you owe him one. Should I transmit your message anyway?”

Despite the pain in his hand, Vincent managed a half-smile himself. “Send that *Port Royal* acknowledges.”

“Sir,” Desalvo said from the science console, “we’ve got a systems failure in the starboard power coupling.”

“From the battle damage?”

“Negative, sir. The fire in auxiliary control has moved out from there and spread to the starboard pylon.”

*Fantastic. If the starboard engine goes, we’re going to be a sitting duck.* He was about to issue an order to reroute damage control parties to combat the blaze when the *Port Royal* suddenly lurched down, throwing him and some of the other officers to the deck. Thankfully he’d landed on his good hand, and was able to roll to a kneeling position. “What happened?”

Desalvo looked to the assistant engineer, who nodded solemnly. “There’s a D-7 moving in on us from above. We registered torpedo hits on the aft end of the primary hull and the impulse control system.”

Fleet Captain Vernon then looked to the engineer.

“We’ve lost impulse power,” the engineer said, which was quickly confirmed by Erich Tauschmann in the navigator’s seat. “Life support is failing.”

“Backup batteries?”

“We’ve got them for a few minutes, but they’re on deck six.”

*Six. The same as auxiliary control. And the batteries are on the starboard side. Oh . . . God. The fire! If the fire reaches the battery control room . . .* “Quickly, jettison the hatch in battery control! Get those powder kegs off my ship!”

“Can’t, sir,” the engineer quickly replied. “The hatch was damaged in the fight with the D-10.”

Slamming his fist on the intercom, Vincent frantically tried to reach the engineering section. “Gable! Do you read me? We’ve *got* to jettison the batteries. If we don’t we’re all dead! Gable? *Richard!*”

“No response on any decks below six, Captain,” Deborah Sansom said from communications.

Without thinking, Vernon went into autopilot. His ship was in danger of destroying itself, and he needed to do something about it fast. Leaping over the helm console, he frantically tried to open the emergency hatch that led to deck two. After pulling on it for several seconds, the hatch gave way, and a plume of black smoke quickly enveloped the bridge. Reactively slamming the hatch shut, he ordered the emergency ventilation system turned on. When the smoke cleared, all eyes were on him. They were trapped on the bridge, with a ship about to explode from the inside out, and he was the only thing that stood between them and certain death.

There was only one thing left to do. Turning to the communications officer, Fleet Captain Vernon clutched at his wounded hand and took in a deep, slightly acidic breath. “Deb, get ahold of Commodore Dent. Tell him we’re in trouble, and that we’re abandoning ship. We need an emergency beam out.” He then slowly walked back to his command chair, likely for the last time in his career. Pressing the intercom button, he opened a channel through the entire ship. “All hands, this is the captain. Abandon ship. Repeat: all hands, abandon ship. Hangar bay, make ready the shuttles for immediate departure. All crew unable to report to the hangar, make your way to the nearest life pods immediately. Abandon ship. Repeat: abandon ship.”

## Chapter 20

Captain Lord spun in his command chair to face the Vulcan at the science console. “T’Perry, status?”

“The last of the D-7s have been destroyed in this sector. However, there’s still a moderate concentration of enemy vessels near the inner planets.”

“Set a course in-system,” Lord said as he turned to Rob Beck at navigation. “Best possible speed.”

“Aye, sir. Changing course to 218-mark-7, engaging at three-quarters impulse.”

“We’ve almost extinguished our supply of photon torpedoes,” Roderick Collins said from the helm.

“Phasers?”

“We’ve got three out of four banks still operating at ninety percent, sir. The fourth emitter is damaged.”

“T’Perry, we’re not going to do much good against a battle cruiser. Find us a smaller cruiser or frigate to engage.”

T’Perry’s left eyebrow rose. “The choices are many, sir.”

“Just find the closest one.”

Nodding, he turned back to his instruments for a brief moment before looking back to Beck. “Navigator, set course 211-mark-3. There’s a D-4 destroyer that has detached from the main group and is heading directly for Thrantor.”

“Changing course, sir.”

“What’s her status?” Lord asked.

“She is lightly damaged, but still operating at nearly eighty percent efficiency.”

“The odds are even,” Lord said softly.

The Vulcan raised the eyebrow again. “On the contrary, we hold a slight advantage.”

“Explanation, Mr. T’Perry?”

When the Vulcan was silent, many of the officers on the bridge, including Steven Lord, turned to face him. His eyes met each of theirs as he nodded his head slowly.

When he finally locked eyes with the captain, Lord could almost perceive the Vulcan smiling. “None required, sir.”

Lord smiled back at the stoic face. “Understood.”

“We’re coming into weapons range now, sir,” Beck said. “The D-4 is running hot. My guess is she’s on to us.”

“Increase speed. Overtake her, Lieutenant.”

“We’re already at maximum speed. She’s keeping her distance, but just barely.”

“Collins, you feeling lucky?” Lord asked the young man at the weapons console.

“I’d better be. A hit at this distance would be the wildest stroke of luck.”

“If we’re to believe Mr. Becker in engineering, we’ve already got all the luck we need with his Irish heritage.”

“Yes, sir,” the lieutenant replied, but his voice carried a hint of uncertainty. “I’ve got the D-4 in sight, sir. Standing by on tubes one and two.”

“Fire when ready, Mr. Collins.”

Without hesitation, the ship shuddered slightly as the two photon torpedoes raced out of the *Loknar*-class frigate’s forward hull. The bridge crew was in rapture as they watched the swirling masses of energy speed farther and farther away. When they were nearly out of sight, there was an explosion, which was quickly followed by another more destructive one.

“The enemy vessel has been destroyed,” T’Perry remarked in his usual calmness.

Unable to restrain himself, Collins rose two clenched fists over his head. “Yes! That’s what I’m talking about!”

“Admirable aim, Lieutenant,” T’Perry said, “but I fail to see the relevance of your statement. Your words did nothing to increase the chances of your success.”

“A human idiom, Commander,” Lord said with a chuckle. “One that I happen to agree with at the moment. However, I’m sure the lieutenant won’t let it go to his head, isn’t that right, Mr. Collins?”

“Yes, sir,” the young man beamed, then turned to his left to see Beck smiling at him from the navigator’s seat.

When Collins returned the smile, Beck leaned over and slapped Collins gently on the shoulder. “Good job, Rod. What say we make a bet you can’t do that again?”

“Just give me a target, Beck my boy, and I’ll show you how it’s done.”

Lord smiled at the bravado of the younger man, then looked to T’Perry. “You heard the man, Commander. Find us another target. I’d like to know exactly how I’m going to fill out this particular commendation request.”

\* \* \*

“Fleet Captain Vincent, this is Commodore Dent on the *Eastwood*.”

Vernon looked to the overhead, which was still filled with a haze from his earlier attempt to exit the bridge. “Go ahead, sir. We’re receiving.”

“Captain, we’ve locked onto as many life-forms aboard the *Port Royal* as we can find, but there’s an enormous amount of radiation spilling out of the damaged nacelles. It’s difficult to discern if anyone is still alive in your engineering section.”

Vincent thoughts went to the chief engineer, Gable, and his intrepid team of technicians. However, there wasn’t time to dwell on them. In the last few minutes, the fire below decks had traversed two more compartments, and was now licking at the battery control room doors. They need to get off the ship, and fast.

“Understood, Commodore. There’s nothing we can do for those people, if they’re still alive at all.” He turned, seeing the pained expressions on each of his people’s faces. From beside him, Commander Richard Todd groaned softly as he tried to raise himself to a sitting position.

“Did I miss anything, Vern?”

Vernon tried to smile, but the pain in his hand was worsening. The blood had started to flow anew, and he was sure that he’d lose consciousness if he didn’t receive immediate medical attention. However, he was not about to be the first person beamed off the ship—his injuries be damned.

“Commodore, beam everyone from below the bridge off first. We’ll stay until the last possible minute.”

“Understood,” Dent replied. There was a pause before he spoke again. “Vernon, you’re not thinking of doing some damn fool thing like staying behind, are you? If so, you can stow that rubbish right now.”

“You get my people out, Jamie, and I’ll guarantee you that I’ll be aboard the *Eastwood* before you know it. I’ve got a date with your chief medical officer, and I’m not about to be late for it.”

“Very well. We’re commencing transport right now. We’ll beam the bridge crew out in sixty seconds.”

“Standing by, sir.” Not bothering to close the channel, Fleet Captain Vincent looked around to his people. Tauschmann and Schurr were battered and grimy, but still all right and at their posts. Deborah Sansom, her long hair now a disheveled mess but still a lovely sight, had her fingers poised over the communications console as she continued to receive battle reports. Commander Todd had stood, not ready to relieve the stressed Emilio Desalvo, but nonetheless poised exactly where he’d trained his whole career to be: at the science console. He finally turned to the engineer’s station and the junior engineer there. The last thoughts he had were of his chief engineer, Richard Gable, before the *Eastwood*’s confinement beam took hold and the bridge crew of the *Port Royal* was beamed to safety.

\* \* \*

“Admiral Weiger, message coming in from the *Eastwood*.”

Ian Weiger looked over to the communications officer and nodded. “Go ahead, Lieutenant.”

“Commodore Dent has taken on the survivors of the USS *Port Royal*. He’s also made contact with Fleet Captain Goodyear. He reports the *Yamato* is still in the fight, and they’re requesting assistance to mop up the remaining heavy cruisers in their area.”

Weiger smiled in approval. “Good news on both fronts. Send my regards to the commodore.”

“Aye, sir.”

“Admiral,” the lead tactical officer said from one of the science and sensor stations, “the 22<sup>nd</sup> and 44<sup>th</sup> Cruiser Squadrons can be dispatched to assist Commodore Dent at any time. They’ve taken heavy casualties, but they’ve managed to destroy the last of the Klingon assault ships intent on taking Thrantor.”

“Superior, Commander. Get them out to Dent’s location immediately.” Turning to the large status screen, Weiger approved of what he was seeing. The majority of the

Klingon frigates and destroyers had been disabled, as well as half the D-7 cruisers and a small number of D-10 battle cruisers. The odds had swung well into Starfleet's favor, and they now enjoyed a three-to-one ratio over the Klingons in all sections of the Gamma Diso system. However, a large number of Federation starships had ended up much like the *Port Royal*—or worse. Fifteen cruisers had been lost. Add to that thirteen frigates and a smattering of destroyers. Thousands were dead on both sides, and there was still much more to be had before the day was over. Of that there was no doubt.

He watched as three D-10s began to round Gamma Diso III on an attack run against the four *Achernar*-class cruisers of the 13<sup>th</sup> Tactical Squadron. The larger, more powerful D-10s easily outclassed the cruisers, and Weiger wanted to make sure that the damage they wanted to inflict would be negated.

"Communications, hail Captain Durbin on the *Bunker Hill* and Captain Hetrick on the *Seattle*. Advise them to set course immediately for Gamma Diso III to back up the 13<sup>th</sup>."

"Aye, sir," she said. "Transmitting now."

\* \* \*

As the D-10 battle cruiser filled the screen, Lieutenant Ronald Blocksom at the weapons console instinctively reared his head back. "How close you intend to get to that thing?" he asked sideways to the *Bunker Hill*'s navigator.

"As close as I can get away with, Ron," Lieutenant Jeffrey Harlan said slyly.

"Mr. Blocksom, target their warp nacelles," Captain Chasin Durbin said as he leaned forward in the command chair. "I want them to feel it."

"Oh, they're going to feel it, all right. If we don't slow down, old Jeff here is going to park us right up their backside."

"Range to target?" Durbin asked to his science officer, Lieutenant Commander Bauder.

"Three thousand kilometers and closing rapidly."

"Blocksom, fire all weapons when we're within fifteen hundred. Then I'll need you to pull us out quick, Jeffrey."

Harlan nodded sharply. "Aye, sir. Gladly."

The D-10 filled the wide view screen from one side to the other. Just when Durbin thought he could count the rivets in her hull plates, Blocksom spoke up.

"Firing torpedoes and phasers, Captain!"

The weapons fire was instantaneous and completely effective. The photon torpedoes impacted with the warp nacelles, destroying one and disabling the other. Likewise, the phaser fire traced angry white-hot lines into the secondary hull, cutting the already wounded ship open like a practiced surgeon. At half-impulse, the attack run lasted only a few seconds, but those seconds had counted, and the crew of the *Bunker Hill* had made sure of it. The Federation cruiser quickly sped past the disabled vessel a moment later, leaving a trail of destruction in her wake.

"Status of the D-10?"

"Adrift," Bauder said from the science station. "She's venting life support. Primary and secondary power is offline."

"Survivors?"

"A small number of them in the bridge. A few more in the secondary hull."

"Enough to fill the brig?" Chasin asked wryly.

Brad turned and smiled before looking back to the sensors. "Oh, I think we'll still have a little room left—if you plan on picking off a few more ships in the meantime, that is."

"One is more than enough," Captain Durbin acknowledged, then pressed the intercom button on his chair. "Security, this is the captain. I need a ten-man team to transporter room three. We're taking on a few guests. See that they get escorted to the brig."

"With pleasure, sir," the security chief responded.

"Where's the *Seattle*?" Chasin asked.

"She's on our starboard beam," Harlan said from navigation.

"And the D-10 that Rear Admiral Weiger believes is the enemy flagship?"

"Port-forward," Bauder said from the science console. "About 400,000 kilometers."

"Lieutenant Straughan, hail Captain Hetrick on the *Seattle*. We're going after that ship, and we're going to need his help if we want to capture her in one piece."



“Sir?” Seth Straughan asked, hoping for clarification as to what he’d just heard.

“I plan on taking that ship and as many hostages as possible, Lieutenant. Make sure Captain Hetrick is aware of that fact. He’s ordered to disable, not destroy that D-10.”

“Aye, sir. I’ll send the request.”

\* \* \*

On board the USS *Tolstoy*, the entire crew swayed from side to side as Lieutenant Rob Beck slalomed the cruiser around a battlefield of debris and weapons fire. The fighting near the core planets of the Gamma Diso system was at its thickest, and the mass of Federation and Klingon vessels was easing its way toward the planet Thranstor with each maneuver.

Gazing at the forward view screen, Captain Steven Lord watched as three L-6 *Defender*-class Klingon frigates swarmed down on two *Larson*-class Federation destroyers with impunity. The smaller destroyers, otherwise engaged with a D-7 cruiser, were completely unprepared for the attack. The L-6s, shaped like great hunting birds with their wings stretched forward, rained down green disrupter fire like a spring storm. The blasts perforated the destroyers a dozen times over, sending out debris and flaming duranium and tritanium in a hundred different directions. In seconds, the Starfleet destroyers were no more.

“Engage those frigates!” Lord barked to both men at the helm and navigation consoles.

“I’ve got phasers locked on the leading L-9,” Lieutenant Collins replied.

“We’ll be in range in thirty seconds,” Lieutenant Beck said a second later.

“Sir,” Bardie piped up from the communications console, “I’ve got Commander Becker on the line from engineering.”

Lord quickly pressed the intercom button on his chair. “Go ahead, Tom.”

“Captain, the fusion reactors can’t take any more stress. You’re going to have to shut them down.”

“We’re in the middle of combat right now, Engineer. I don’t see it as a possibility.”

“You’re going to have to make it one, sir. The ship simply can’t take it. I’ve pushed these things as far as they’ll go. I’ve sung it songs, petted it, and coddled them until I was blue in the face. They’re simply not designed for this. If we keep this up for another five minutes, there’ll be no turning back.”

“Phasers firing,” Collins said just before the blue lines traced through the open space to strike the lead L-9. The frigate’s response was immediate, quickly changing course away from the main battlefield.

“Direct hit to their secondary hull,” T’Perry said from the science console.

“Three minutes,” Becker reminded Lord.

“Three minutes, understood. Bridge out.” Lord quickly pressed the intercom closed, positive that he didn’t want Becker to hear the next words that were about to come out of his mouth. “Mr. Collins, Mr. Beck, I have no intention of disengaging from that frigate until you’ve cleanly disable or destroyed her. You have three minutes, so I suggest you make your respective maneuvers count.”

The helmsman and the navigator gave each other a grave look, then went back to the task at hand, each taking a heavy breath in turn. First, Beck turned the ship sharply to port in an attempt to get on the stern of the L-9. The maneuver, done at only one-half impulse, was only partially successful. The L-9, wary of the cruiser now on its tail, turned to starboard at one-quarter. Even though the Klingon was slower, the reduced speed meant she could take a sharper corner, and when the Tolstoy fired her phasers, they were a half-second too late.

“You’ll need to do better, Collins,” Captain Lord admonished. “Beck, reduce speed. Get on her tail again.”

“Aye, sir,” both men replied with frustration. Quickly dropping to one-quarter impulse, the L-9 again came into view.

“The frigate has deployed mines, Captain,” T’Perry said loudly.

“Evasive!”

Beck quickly brought the bow up and over the mine that was far too small to see visually. The maneuver caused the gap between the Tolstoy and L-9 to widen even further, which was when the Defender increased to full impulse. Lord and his people had only a moment to react.

“Firing photon torpedoes!” Collins cried out.

The *Tolstoy* shuddered as the hull registered the projectiles being launched. Three bursts of light sped from the cruiser into open space. The first missed as the L-9 again turned to starboard, but Collins had guessed correctly, and the following two struck—one against the bridge bubble, the second against the starboard nacelle.

“Two hits, sir,” T’Perry confirmed. “Damage to their starboard shield generators and their warp drive. The frigate is reducing speed.”

“Well done, gentlemen,” Lord praised both Collins and Beck.

“Chief Engineer Becker on the line again, sir,” Ivar Bardie said from behind Lord.

Knowing that he was about to get an earful, Lord reluctantly opened the intercom channel once again. “Yes, Tom,” he began almost cheerily, “what can I do for you?”

“Well, it’s nice to know you’re having such a fine day up there,” the Irishman said with obvious annoyance. “I thought I’d just let ya know that the starboard fusion reactor has melted into a warm puddle of goo, and the port one isn’t far behind. If it’s not too much of an inconvenience, perhaps ya might think of slowin’ down a wee bit?”

“Why, Commander, you’ve read my mind,” Lord said with a smile and closed the channel. “Bardie, hail Captain Choi on board the *Leoxa*. Tell him there’s a frigate nearby that could benefit from his attention.” He then turned to Beck. “Rob, back us down to one-quarter sublight. Set a direct course to the shipyards.”

“Recommend a course of 330-mark-1,” T’Perry said. “There appears to be little in the way of resistance in that direction.”

“Little, but not a zero percent chance, Mr. T’Perry?” Steven asked, his left eyebrow high on his forehead.

T’Perry pursed his lips before nodding. “There may be targets of opportunity along the way. Surely enough to keep Mr. Collins occupied until we reach the shipyards, sir.”

Steven nodded in approval. “Excellent thinking, Commander. Mr. Collins would do well to continue to use that impeccable aim he seems to have acquired. Mr.

Beck, set a course along T’Perry’s recommended path. Mr. Collins, keep those phasers firing at anything that comes into range.”

\* \* \*

Outside main engineering, the passageway was a fiery tunnel of death. The ship’s suppression systems were still offline, which meant that the blaze had to be fought using traditional methods and chemicals. The calls to the bridge had gone unanswered, as had the ones to many other parts of the *Port Royal*.

Where the hell was everyone, anyway? Every crewman they came across in the course of trying to extinguish the blaze had been dead for some time. Not a single living or wounded crewman could be found. Yet here Richard Gable and his small engineering team were: dingy, but otherwise unharmed. They weren’t registering anything on their tricorders; no fatal radiation leakage, no large number of hull breaches. So where was everyone, and where was the captain?

Likely, he was still on the bridge. There was still no power to the turbolifts. Thankfully, Gable and his men has stabilized the life-support system, but that was only a temporary measure. His instruments had recorded that the ship’s batteries were overheating, which meant that securing them would be his first priority. Now, a few scant meters from the control room door, Gable and his people were held back by the raging inferno in the passageway.

“Any ideas, chief?” one of his assistants asked.

“I’ve got one, but I don’t think you’re going to like it.”

“Anything’s better than being roasted alive by that blaze . . . or blown to bits when the batteries explode.”

“We’ll have to blow the airlocks and emergency bulkheads.”

The assistant nodded. It was a last-ditch effort, but one he and all engineers had been trained for at Starfleet Academy. In rapid succession, a path of hatches and airlocks would be open; a direct path from the fire to the vacuum of space outside. All internal doors would have to be opened around the fire in order to make sure every blaze in every compartment was extinguished. The worst part, however, was that Gable was unable to confirm this course of action with Fleet Captain Vincent or any other member of the senior staff.

The engineering assistant, clad in his protective environmental suit, turned to Gable. “We’ll have to get back to engineering to blow the bulkheads.”

“Let’s go. These suits aren’t going to protect us much longer against these fires.”

Back in engineering, Gable stepped beside the master control board just inside the compartment. Looking up at the status board, he could see that a number of the power controls to the upper decks had been severed. Rerouting them as best he could, he was able to get power to a handful of the turbolifts. If anyone were alive on the bridge, at least now they’d be able to get to the transporter rooms if needed.

Gable then went to work sealing off corridors. Making a path from the fire to the nearest set of airlocks, he silently prayed that no one was in the corridors as he began opening the maze. Starting with the bulkheads closest to the fire, he watched as the status board indicated the emergency bulkhead indicators turn from red to green. When one final hatch separated the blaze from the cold airlessness of space, he opened a shipwide intercom channel.

“Attention: all hands. This is Chief Engineer Gable. The only way to stop the spread of the fire aboard the ship is to open one of the external airlocks. The airlock will remain open until the fire has been extinguished. If you’re in a compartment and the door is sealed shut, this is for your own protection. All others, find suitable shelter. Outer airlock door will open in thirty seconds.”

He repeated the message once more, and then held his finger over the airlock control switch. “Johnson, watch that temperature gauge. You’ll know the fire is out when it drops below 100 degrees near the battery storage compartment.”

“Aye, sir,” the assistant engineer called from his console.

Silently counting, Gable pressed the airlock control button when he reached thirty. The ship heaved violently as the air inside every unsealed compartment in the *Port Royal* was ejected instantaneously into space.

The air was thick with the acidic haze of smoke as the turbolift doors opened. What greeted him was something he’d never thought he’d see: an empty bridge. Not

a single crewman was present, not even a fallen comrade. The computers were still on and functioning, so where had everyone gone? Gable made his way to the communications console, checking the last frequency dialed in as his team of five engineers—presumably the only persons still alive on the ship—made their way to the various bridge stations.

Seeing that the channel was still locked on the cruiser *Eastwood*, Chief Engineer Gable put the subspace receiver in his ear and began speaking.

“This is Chief Engineer Richard Gable aboard the USS *Port Royal*. *Eastwood*, are you receiving?”

The voice that came back a moment later seemed astonished. “This is who?”

“Commander Gable on board the *Port Royal*. Do you know the whereabouts of Captain Vincent or the crew of the ship?”

A moment later, the voice was replaced by a sterner, more commanding one. “*Port Royal*, this is Commodore Dent. We were led to believe that the ship was adrift with no survivors aboard.”

“Captain Vincent?” Richard asked, unsure he wanted to know the answer.

“Captain Vincent and a number of the crew are here aboard the *Eastwood*, Commander. Which, incidentally, is where *you* should be as well.”

“We were locked in the lower decks, sir. And Captain Vincent left a little matter of a burning passageway for us to contend with.”

“Am I to understand that you’re once again underway?” the commodore asked hesitantly.

Gable looked to the two men sitting at the helm and navigation console. They both responded with silent, sharp nods.

“I wouldn’t say we’re combat ready, sir, but we’re certainly running under our own power once again.”

“Well done, Commander. I’ll relay the good news to Captain Vincent. In the meantime, I’ll get some ships to tow you into Thranstor for repairs. I’m sure—”

“Begging your pardon, Commodore, but we’ve just spent the most difficult time of our careers getting this ship up and running under minimal impulse, and I’ll be damned if I’m going to be towed into dock. We’ll manage just fine on our own.”

There was a pause, followed by a brief chuckle. “Understood, Commander. However, we’ve got the ships to spare. At least allow them to escort you in.”

“Then the battle is over?”

“And I thought you said you weren’t combat ready,” Commodore Dent jested. “Now it seems you’re itching for a fight.”

“We’ve got two phaser banks at half power, and while that’s not much, it’s enough if you need us in a pinch.”

“Admirable, but unnecessary, Commander. The last of our cruiser squadrons is mopping up now. You’ll be happy to know that we’ve secured their flagship, and have taken her under tow to Thranstor as well.”

Gable smiled warmly at the thought of a shower and a good meal. “Just make sure the port master doesn’t park us anywhere near that flagship. I’ve got a team of engineers aboard the *Port Royal* that wouldn’t mind a fist-to-face conversation with the devil that put us in the shape we’re in right now.”

Dent chuckled back. “I’ll make no promises, but I’ll see what I can do. The *Seattle* and the *Manark* should be coming alongside the *Port Royal* any minute. Again, well done, Commander Gable. *Eastwood* out.”

# Epilogue

December 2254

Stardate 4212.15

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

President Vanderbilt, watching the snow once again blanket the view beyond his expansive windows, waited patiently for the call he knew was coming. His aide had informed him that a call would be coming in from Rear Admiral Lai of Starfleet Intelligence shortly, once the admiral had completed conferring with the chief of Starfleet, Admiral Luxa, in San Francisco. After having gone through the logs of the last few engagements between the Federation and Klingon forces, Thomas was doubtful Lai had anything negative to report, but the war was still far from over. As if to belay his concerns, the desktop terminal behind him chimed that a call was coming in.

Turning the monitor so it was facing him, the president could see the call was coming in from Starbase 23. Pressing the button below the screen, he watched as the image of Rear Admiral Lai quickly materialized into view.

“Admiral Lai. It’s good to see you.”

“Mr. President,” Lai said evenly with a nod. “I’m glad I’ve got good news to report.”

Vanderbilt nodded. “I’ve been reading through the after-action reports from Thranstor. Your intelligence served us extremely well.”

“Thank you, sir. The outcome was just as much—if not more—credit to the officers of the fleet who were directly involved. Intelligence is only words and numbers. It’s the actions of the fleet that prove if it’s any good.”

“Of course. However, commendations are still in order, for both yourself and your people. You deserve them.”



Lai only nodded. “I wish everyone could have made it out with such good fortune. Starfleet lost a number of good vessels in the engagement. I understand from Admiral Luxa that those people will be difficult to replace.”

“How much impact will it have on future operations?”

“Difficult to say, sir. It does seem that we’ve stemmed the tide of Klingons into Federation space for the time being. That, coupled with their losses in several other sectors, seems to have momentarily demoralized the enemy.”

“And what of the Klingon admiral who was taken prisoner?”

“Very little to report on that exact front, sir. The admiral is being understandably tight-lipped. However, my people have assured me that information will be forthcoming. On a related note, our operatives in the Klingon Empire have reported a major coup in the Klingon High Command directly related to Thranstor.”

This piqued Vanderbilt’s interest. Anything that could shake the High Council to its foundations was sure to be good news. “How so?”

“It seems that the orchestrator of the Thranstor Operation, as the Klingons call it, was a grand admiral named Kamato. Kamato was seen as the successor to the current Klingon emperor. However, with the defeat at Thranstor and other battles, Kamato was ousted from power.”

“With how Klingons view such defeats, I doubt that the Federation will have to worry about this Kamato any longer.”

“I wish I could say for certain. In fact, before Kamato could be brought to trial, it seems he and a number of fleet commanders fled Klingon space toward the Triangle. Intelligence agents in that area verified that a small fleet of Klingon warships crossed the border into that region two days ago, but we’ve not heard anything from them since that time. And with the bulk of the Klingons still actively engaged in the current war with us, it’s doubtful they have the resources to send anyone into the Triangle to capture the so-called defector.”

“I’d hate to think this is a ploy by the Klingons to create a second offensive into Federation space, Admiral,” Vanderbilt said with understandable concern.

“I think Kamato is going to lay low for as long as possible—at least until after the war with the Federation has come to a conclusion. The High Council is not one to easily forgive and forget, and even a military action against the Federation by Kamato and his forces wouldn’t be enough to regain the honor he’s lost in the empire’s eyes. Our best bet is to keep tabs on his movements, but continue to focus on our main objective—the threats coming in from Klingon space itself.”

“Understood,” Thomas nodded. “Do we know who is going to take up Kamato’s mantle in the empire?”

“We believe so, sir. His name is K’hober. He was a fleet admiral before assuming the new rank of thought admiral. We don’t know much else about him, other than he’s been extremely successful in every engagement he’s fought in. And something else that’s more than a little surprising—he’s a fusion.”

Thomas’s eyes went wide. “A fusion race in such a high position? That’s incredible.”

“I’ll send over everything we have via subspace shortly, Mr. President. Frankly, it shocked the hell out of us, too.”

Vanderbilt nodded slowly. “I look forward to reading it, Admiral.”

“I’ll send a new team into the Triangle to keep an eye on Kamato. In the meantime, we have several other operations already underway, both on the front lines as well as within the empire itself, that have produced some valuable information on their current strategies for the upcoming months.”

“You and your team have been hard at work,” the president said admiringly. “Do you have time to discuss any of it?”

Lai nodded. “Of course, sir. I’ve already gone over most of it with Admiral Luxa, and he’s currently forming strategies with Military Operations Command to thwart some of these new threats. Suffice it to say, I think we’ve definitely got the Klingons on the run, sir, and I believe it’s a trend we can look forward to continuing.”

Vanderbilt fought back a smile. *Finally, the end of this accursed war could be in sight.* Nodding, he reached for a nearby cup of tea. “Please, go ahead with your report, Admiral.”

