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THE FOUR YEARS WAR

Volume IV

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Stephen Fender

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Lynda Dietz

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Contact: Stephen@StephenFender.com

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LLAP!

Chapter 1

January 2255

Stardate 4301.20

The Argelius Approaches—a beautiful respite in a violent plasma storm that stretched for nearly three parsecs in every direction. Little more than natural ruptures in the immense Argelian Nebula, the Approaches were a conduit that led directly to the only habitable planet in the system. Narrowest in the middle and open wide at either end, it was the only way for anyone outside the system to get to the mineral-rich planet, and the only way out into open space. A dangerous bottleneck, easily capped off by a waiting flotilla of Federation starships, it was almost a complete mystery why the Klingons had suddenly taken an interest in the hard-to-hold planetary system inside the nebula.

However, “almost” was the key word. In the last several weeks, Vice Admiral Max Zukof, the stout and deep-voiced Russian commander of the 19th Defense Squadron, had taken a keen interest in the message traffic being relayed from Starfleet Intelligence concerning the Klingons’ movements inside Federation space. Since their defeat at Thrantor—not to mention the decisive victory Starfleet scored during the Battle of Sire Yopat two weeks ago—the Klingons’ activities could be defined by some as desperate. In fact, as Zukof attempted to put the pieces together himself, he found himself agreeing with that assessment more each day.

The latest report as of stardate 4301.05 was showing that the influx of Klingon forces into Federation space had all but come to a halt. In fact, a handful of the enemy squadrons currently engaging the Federation had been either surrounded or forced to flee to other systems closer to Klingon-held territory. The scuttlebutt was that the Federation had succeeded in cutting off a majority of the Klingons’ supply lines into Federation space, and the invaders were becoming increasingly frantic for raw materials to feed their never-ending war machine. And Argelius, rich in metals

and dilithium, was seen as a potential target. Thus, Zukof and his forces had been ordered to blockade the only entrance to the system.

On the view screen of the *Bonhomme Richard*-class USS *George Patton*, Max Zukof watched the undulating mass that was the Argelius Nebula from the comfort of the central command chair. Standing to his right, Commander Doug Eckhoff looked on with wonder.

"It's amazing, isn't it," Eckhoff said as he nodded to the turbulent, glowing mass swirling around the wide opening to the Argelius system.

"What's that, Commander?" Zukof said in his Russian dialect.

"That an aperture so small could remain open for so long in all this mess."

"Small is relative, Mr. Eckhoff," the admiral said as he, too, examined the outer fringes of the Approaches. "That opening is over 1200 meters wide."

"True, but it narrows to only a few hundred near the center," the ship's science officer agreed. "That the nebula wouldn't just absorb it . . . it's quite—"

"Fascinating?"

Eckhoff smiled and turned to face the admiral. "If I were a Vulcan, I might agree with that. I think I'll just say that it's quite remarkable and leave it at that."

Zukof smiled with understanding. "There's a lot of gravitational force in there, Commander. You of all people should be aware of that."

"What science officer in the fleet isn't? We've all studied this phenomenon in the textbooks at one point or another in our careers."

"But how many of them actually get to experience it as you are right now, yes?"

The commander beamed at the nebula on the screen. "Exactly my point, Admiral. I know a dozen officers who'd give anything to be where we are right now. To see this . . . to study it."

Zukof grunted in approval. First and foremost, the admiral fancied himself an explorer. The strange forces at work in the Approaches—although studied by many—confounded all of them. Space, it seemed, would keep her secrets of this area to herself for the time being. Zukof wished he had the time to turn the *Patton*'s powerful sensors at the nebula and see what his ship could glean from it, but that was not to be. Not now. And if the Klingons *were* intent on taking this area, not anytime soon.

“Sir, message coming in from the *Gettysburg*,” a Hispanic-accented voice came from behind the admiral.

Zukof turned to face Lieutenant Citlalmina Serrano, the slightly overweight, jovial communications officer. Although she could stand to spend more time in the ship’s gymnasium, it never impeded her performance on landing party missions. “Very good. Put Captain Bridgemon through immediately.”

The screen faded to show Ron Bridgemon in the command chair of the *Larson*-class destroyer that was just pulling alongside the *George Patton*. “Greetings, Admiral Zukof.”

“Likewise, Captain. Thank you for making the long journey so quickly.”

Bridgemon raised a hand and nodded. “Don’t mention it, Admiral. *Gettysburg* is more than happy to assist in the blockade. Besides, mandatory shore leave was getting a little tedious.”

“I know you’re bending regulations by being here,” Zukof said, referring to the recent order by the commander of Starfleet that all crews be ordered to partake in mandatory rest between engagements. “It’s appreciated, Captain. I trust you and your crew are well rested, then?”

“We’re more than ready to handle anything the Klingons can throw our way, sir.”

“Excellent. I’d like the *Gettysburg* in quadrant 4-J. That should allow you to provide excellent cover for two cruisers in adjacent areas, as well as an excellent field of vision for your long-range sensors. Please align them along a heading of 42-mark-3.”

“Understood, sir,” Captain Bridgemon acknowledged. “We’ll get underway now. *Gettysburg* out.”

The image of Bridgemon faded, to be replaced by the Argelius Nebula once more.

“Two more ships coming in now, Admiral,” Commander Eckhoff said from the science console. “The *Proxima* and the *Tolstoy*.”

With the addition of the two starships, Zukof’s fleet of fifty-seven vessels was now complete, and well before the Klingons arrived. “Very good. Lieutenant Serrano, hail the *Proxima*. I’d like to speak to Captain K’reen.”

* * *

On board the *Loknar*-class frigate USS *Proxima*, Ensign Jonathan Thompson placed a hand to his earpiece receiver as the ship was hailed. “Captain K’reen, there’s a message coming in from the *George Patton*. It’s Vice Admiral Zukof.”

K’reen, the Vulcan captain of the *Proxima*, had taken over the ship from Paul Prulhiere when the latter was promoted to commodore and assigned to Starbase 10 five months ago. Since then, the science-minded captain had taken it upon himself to train the ship’s science officer, Commander Dewitte Baisch, in how to properly relay data to his Vulcan captain. Although Baisch initially seemed happy with the offer, it’d quickly turned into a monotonous routine, and the science officer was glad to have K’reen’s attention diverted elsewhere for the time being.

K’reen, with typical Vulcan stoicism, moved out from looking over Dewitte’s shoulder to face the view screen. “On screen, please.”

The image of the *Patton* was replaced by the silver-haired vice admiral. “Greetings, Captain. It’s been too long.”

K’reen, Max Zukof’s former aide at Outpost 5, had served with the admiral when he’d held the rank of lieutenant commander. Zukof, a newly promoted captain at the time, had worked closely with the Vulcan as the two were tasked by Starfleet Intelligence to covertly monitor activity in Romulan space. When Operation Burgundy was deemed a complete failure, each had been reassigned to other duties. Now, light-years away from Romulan space, the two looked upon each other for the first time in two years. K’reen nodded slowly to Zukof, the two of them the only ones in their respective crews to know of the highly classified nature of their past association.

“I was glad to hear the *Proxima* would be joining us for the mission,” Zukof said with a smile, but his voice held more emotions than K’reen could count.

“The request from Starfleet to join the Defense Squadron was irrefutable, Admiral.”

Zukof looked skeptical. “Are you saying you would have turned down the mission if given the opportunity, Captain?”

The *Proxima* bridge crew watched as their captain's face was a blank. "In fact, I would have. The *Proxima* was scheduled for an overhaul at Starbase 12. The ship is in desperate need of maintenance, and our raw organic materials are quickly being depleted to unacceptable levels."

"I understand, Captain," Zukof offered apologetically. "I'll see to it personally that reparations are made to your ship and crew once this is all finished."

"And do you know, sir, when this will indeed be finished?"

"I do not," Zukof said, his temperament losing all sense of sociability. "You'll know it before I do."

"Oh?" the Vulcan asked with an arched eyebrow.

"I want the *Proxima* at the forefront of our forces. She's a fast ship, no doubt thanks to your vigilance with your engineering department. I need her speed."

"As a scout, I presume."

"You presume correctly, Captain. Take the *Proxima* out to one light-year past the farthest edge of the Argelius Nebula. Keep your long-range sensors on a wide beam. As soon as you pick something up, get it back to us ASAP."

"Understood, Admiral."

Zukof stopped K'ren before the captain could close the channel. "One more thing, Captain K'ren."

"Yes?"

"If we both make it out of this alive, I'd like you to beam over to the *Patton* for dinner. I have some things of interest I'd like to discuss with you concerning our . . . past associates."

K'ren's smile conveyed that he fully comprehended the meaning of the statement. "Understood. *Proxima* out."

When Zukof's image faded from the viewer, Commander Baisch turned to face the captain from the science console. "Anything I should know about, sir?"

"Nothing that could possibly concern you, Commander," the captain replied in a very un-Vulcan perturbed tone.

Reaching for the stylus at his side, the captain entered a long series of notes that Baisch couldn't make out. When he'd finished, he stepped up to the science console and handed the computer tablet to the commander. "Now, if you'll please make these modifications to the long-range sensor array, I believe it will give us the information the admiral has requested."

Dewitte looked over the figures, recognizing some, furrowing his brow at others. "It's going to take some time to make these changes, sir."

"Approximately one hour, forty-seven minutes, based on your aptitude with the equipment and my estimation of your skill level. This is precisely the time it will take us to reach the coordinates provided by the admiral if we leave now at a speed of warp two." He said the latter as he turned to face the ship's helmsman.

"Course already laid in, sir," John Villanueva said from the navigator's seat.

"Very well. Engage at warp two. Mr. Baisch, I suggest you get to those modifications. The sensors will not adjust themselves."

Dewitte and Villanueva, along with the weapons officer, Lieutenant Endima Kitarju, shared a passing glance, each wondering why their normally somber captain had become so emotive. "I'll need to get to sensor control, sir."

"I presumed as much, Commander. You are dismissed."

"Honestly, I don't even know what's gotten into that guy." Commander Baisch, firmly frustrated with Captain K'ren's attitude, had just finished venting to the ship's chief engineer, Lieutenant Commander Darren Frank Keith.

Keith, an old salt of Starfleet who'd worked his way up from the enlisted ranks, shook his etched face as he huffed a laugh. "You've got to relax, kid, or you're going to blow a plasma conduit."

"Relax," the man says," Dewitte muttered from underneath the main sensor control computer terminal. "Blow a plasma conduit," he says." With the last of the adjustments nearly done, Baisch hauled his torso out of the computer and jumped to his feet. "Tell that to the old man up there," he retorted to Keith, an auto-neutralization spanner in his right hand waving toward the overhead.

"Be careful where you wave that thing," Keith laughed. "It's the only one I've got, and if you break it, we're going to be up the nebula without a paddle."

Dissatisfied, Dewitte turned and placed the tool in the box at the engineer's side. "I tell you, Chief, I've just about had it with our Vulcan captain."

"Vulcans are notoriously hard to work with, De," Keith said in his most affable tone. "But he's the captain, and you'd be well advised to lead by example."

"And just what's that supposed to mean?" Baisch said as he balled his fists and put them on his hips.

Darren leaned back against a console near the wall, looking as if he'd light an old-fashioned pipe if he'd had one. "This is your first tour as executive officer. Those people on the bridge—not to mention the entire ship—are going to look to you for guidance. You need to stop berating the captain and just live with it." When he could see the words weren't having the desired effect of calming Dewitte's attitude, Keith smiled widely. "Besides, he's only here for eighteen months. After that, you'll have someone else to complain about."

"Or I'll be captain myself," the commander muttered.

"Only if you keep your head in the game and your record clean, my boy. If you can do that, I'll be glad to call you captain."

Unconvinced, Dewitte turned back to the main computer. "Let's bring the new sensor modifications online. I'm willing to bet we're going to be in position in the next few minutes."

Keith turned to face the computer opposite Baisch and, flipping a series of toggles, craned his head to the right. "Primary and secondary palettes online, sir."

"Confirmed," Dewitte said as the status lights of his console changed of their own accord. Making one final adjustment, he switched on the intercom channel to the bridge. "Sensor control to bridge. This is Baisch. The requested modifications are online."

"You're 2.7 minutes behind schedule, Commander," K'ren's voice came over the speaker. Rolling his eyes, Dewitte turned momentarily to the chief engineer, who was giving the ship's exec an expectant look.

“Apologies, Captain,” Baisch said with all the fortitude he could muster, wishing he could just explain that he and Keith had run into a slight snag with one of the ship’s computers a half hour earlier. “I’ll do better next time.”

“Of that there is no question.”

Perplexed over whether the captain’s statement was a compliment or an insult, Dewitte once again looked to Keith, who simply shrugged his shoulders.

“Please report to the bridge, Commander,” the captain’s even voice said. “I would like you to begin making use of your adjustments.”

“Understood.” When he’d closed the channel, Dewitte inquired whether Keith would accompany him to the bridge.

“I get the luxury of having someplace else to be other than the bridge, sir,” Darren Keith replied cheekily.

“You’re just going to slink off to engineering and leave babysitting the captain to me?”

Keith patted Dewitte on the shoulder. “You’re the executive officer, De. That’s your job.”

* * *

Admiral Max Zukof, in the privacy of the admiral’s personal stateroom aboard the *George Patton*, brought the small heating element closer to his goal, effortlessly lighting the cigar dangling from his lips. It wasn’t something he did often, but in moments of deep contemplation such as the one he was currently facing, he relaxed his own personal regulations and gave in to the old habit that refused to die. Besides, rank had its privileges, and what good was a box of fine Andorian tobacco doing him sitting on his desktop? Taking a long, sweet inhalation, he turned to the few officers he’d asked to be there: the ship’s executive officer, Commander Doug Eckhoff, the ship’s engineer, Commander Lawrence Nelson, and Lieutenant Commander Shane Rose, the ship’s navigator and weapons officer.

Nelson and Rose were in one corner of the room, each nursing a glass of Saurian brandy. Eckhoff was standing to the admiral’s right, gazing pensively at the star field beyond. “See anything out there?” Max asked his first officer.

“Not nearly as much as I’d like,” Eckhoff said as he took a drink of his own.

Zukof nodded, then turned his gaze to the stars once more. “They’re out there, Doug. And they’re coming this way.”

“I just wish they’d hurry up and get it over with,” came the reply from the ship’s engineer.

The admiral turned, giving Nelson a passing glance before returning to the stars. “Are you so anxious for a confrontation, Commander?” he asked in his deep Russian-accented voice, taking another long pull from the cigar.

“Don’t get me wrong, sir. I’d be just as happy if they never showed up. I just hate the waiting.”

“You can say that again,” Rose droned.

“Still nothing from Starfleet Intelligence?” Eckhoff asked, already knowing the answer was no.

Zukof simply shook his head slowly. “Not a word. That’s what’s truly bothering me. That a confrontation with the Klingons here is inevitable . . . I have no doubt. I just wish I knew how many of their forces we’ll be dealing with. This lack of information makes planning an effective counterstrategy tenuous at best.” He then turned to the assembled officers. “I have no doubts that you will all do your very best in the coming engagement. I hand-picked each of you for this assignment because I feel that you are the most competent officers to handle the difficulties associated with fleet maneuvers. You’ve all been in similar situations multiple times, and your performance records in those engagements has been stellar. However, there are members of this crew—to say nothing of our fleet—who will be in combat for the first time. I’m relying on each of you to help these personnel through what I’m sure will be a difficult time.”

With pride-laced stares, each of the men nodded wordlessly to the vice admiral.

“I will be on the bridge from the first moment to the last, gentlemen. Nothing short of death will extricate me from that command chair. I know that each of you feels the same about your respective posts. I’m counting on that. We all need that fortitude if we are to survive this war.”

The chime of the intercom on the far wall drew all eyes to it. Setting his cigar aside, Max Zukof moved to it and opened the call. "This Admiral Zukof."

It was Lieutenant Serrano at comms. "Admiral, we've just received word from our long-range scout. The *Proxima* reports that Klingon ships are entering the area."

"Have they reported the combined strength of the enemy forces?"

"Captain K'ren has reported contact with approximately fifty-two vessels, but due to the extreme range of the contact, he cautions that there could be more."

"Understood. I'll be up to the bridge shortly." Sighing, he slowly turned to see each of the officers staring at him. "Any further debate on if or when the Klingons would arrive is now settled. Return to your posts immediately." After each man had left the room, Zukof moved over to the still-burning cigar. Inhaling one final deep breath, he extinguished it. Giving the peaceful stars one final glance, he left his cabin and made his way to the bridge.

"Admiral on the bridge!"

Zukof began issuing orders as he exited the turbolift alcove. "Lieutenant Stringer, what is our current heading?"

"It's 210-mark-5, sir."

"Mr. Eckhoff, bearing on the Klingons."

"At 245-mark-0. They're on an intercept course."

"Helm, bring us around to face the Klingons."

"Aye," Stringer said as his fingers moved over the controls.

"Serrano, any more news from the *Proxima*?"

"Yes, sir. She'll be at our location in four minutes, present speed."

"Have her come alongside the *Patton*," Zukof said over his shoulder. "Then send a request out to the *Reliant*. I want Captain Scollon nearby as well."

"Yes, sir. I'll hail them now."

"Mr. Eckhoff, are we still registering fifty enemy vessels?"

Doug peered into the sensor hood, scrutinizing the data the long-range sensors were reporting. "Negative. It seems that, initially, some of the vessels were formed so closely with one another it was confusing the sensors. I'm now reading sixty-one vessels, sir."

“Can you determine hull types?”

“Approximately thirty-five cruisers, ten battle cruisers, nine frigates, four destroyers, and three troop transports.”

Fifty-seven Starfleet vessels to sixty-one Klingon combatants. And we outgun them in all areas except battle cruisers. This is going to be a hell of a scuffle. “Hail Fleet Captain Davis on the *Manark*. Tell him to advance his squadron to the head of the fleet. Mr. Eckhoff, distance of the Klingon fleet?”

“Forty-nine million kilometers and closing at one-half impulse.”

Zukof quickly did the calculations in his head. “That’ll put them here in less than ten minutes. Communications, send to all hands on all ships: red alert. Repeat, red alert. Man all defensive stations and deploy to their prearranged vectors. Stand by to repel enemy forces.”

Chapter 2

Captain K'ren spun in the command chair to face the communications officer. "Lieutenant Thompson, hail the *George Patton*. Tell them we have acknowledged their signal and will be commencing our attack shortly."

Jonathan Thompson nodded to his Vulcan captain. "Aye, sir."

Pressing the intercom button on the command chair, K'ren began speaking. "Commander Keith, status of the impulse drive and reaction control thruster systems."

"RCS is online and in standby, sir," the chief replied quickly. "Impulse power available in all power modes at 100 percent operational efficiency."

"Have a team of engineers stand by the emergency plasma conduit in the starboard nacelle. If we incur excessive damage to that area, we will need to reroute power quickly."

"Aye, sir. I'll get a team over there right away. Keith out."

"Three minutes to intercept," Dewitte Baisch called from the science console.

"Composition of the forces we will be engaging, Commander."

"There are three D-7 cruisers heading straight for our formation, sir. Forward disruptor banks appear to be armed, but I'm getting odd readings from their power emissions."

"The word 'odd' is not nearly descriptive enough, Commander. Please be more specific."

Baisch turned from the sensor readout display to face the captain. "That's just it, sir. I can't think of a better term for it. It's almost as if the vessels were damaged in a previous engagement." Turning back to the display, he shook his head in wonder. "They're definitely not operating at 100 percent, sir. Forward shield strength is erratic, disruptor power is at ninety percent, and something else . . ." His words trailed off as he fine-tuned the short-range sensors. "It seems that the hulls of some of the vessels have been hastily repaired. Definitely not their finest work, either. Uneven hull plating in key areas along both their dorsal and ventral sides." He then turned back to Captain K'ren. "It's like that for a lot of the enemy vessels. It's . . . well . . . odd, sir."

K'ren arched an eyebrow. "It seems that the reports of the Klingons being in desperate need of supplies has turned out to be true. That will definitely be to our advantage, wouldn't you agree?"

For the first time in his recollection, Dewitte smiled at the captain. "I would, sir."

"Then we will not waste this opportunity. It's very likely that the rest of the fleet has deduced this as well, but we must nonetheless report it. Communications?"

"Yes, sir?" Thompson asked.

"Send a coded message to both Vice Admiral Zukof on the *George Patton*, as well as to our squadron commander, Captain Scollon, on the *Reliant*. Inform them of our discoveries. Advise them that we will attempt to take advantage of the Klingons at their weakest points."

"Yes, sir. I'll send it right away."

With their ships leading the defense of the Approaches, once the communication was received from the *Proxima*, Captain Paul Scollon on board the *Reliant* wasted little time in taking advantage.

"Distance to the nearest target?" the captain asked as he turned to the science officer.

Commander Bud Keegan, having correctly anticipated the request, was already looking to his captain. "The lead D-7 will be in torpedo range in thirty seconds."

"Lisa, target the enemy vessel. When they're in range, fire two torpedoes."

"Aye," came the sharp reply from Lieutenant Lyons at the weapons station.

Seconds seemed to stretch into minutes as the Klingons steadily drew closer. On the view screen, the bulbous bow of the D-7 nearly filled the view before the deck beneath Captain Scollon's feet vibrated softly.

"Torpedoes away!" Lyons called out.

"Decrease magnification," Scollon called out. Just as the image panned back, the two torpedoes from the *Reliant*, as well as two others from a nearby vessel, impacted squarely against the single target. The D-7 immediately lurched down as the forward bridge was hit, then twisted to port as the secondary hull was hit. The

final impact elicited an explosion near the enemy's stern and, a moment later, the vessel vanished from the screen.

"Target destroyed," Commander Keegan called out.

"Lisa, target the next cruiser and fire." However, before Lyons could acknowledge the order, the *Reliant* was pushed violently to port as multiple impacts registered.

"We're being flanked by a destroyer!" Keegan called out.

"Helm, evasive starboard!"

Lieutenant T'Sienna, the young Vulcan woman who'd only just reported on board the *Reliant* two weeks prior, was quick to act. Her highly skilled fingers raced across the console, sending the *Anton*-class light cruiser hard to starboard and down, narrowly avoiding two more disruptor strikes aimed at the *Reliant*'s bridge. Though the action had saved them from one strike, the bridge crew watched as the view screen was filled with a D-10 battle cruiser bearing down on their position.

Lisa Lyons didn't wait for the order. Seeing the lights on her status board a beautiful green, she fired two bursts from the forward phasers at the incoming vessel. One missed, one struck the starboard disruptor pylon.

"Damage to their forward shield," Keegan said as he peered into the sensor hood.

Captain Scollon watched as the D-10 returned fire with both her disruptors and torpedoes. The *Reliant*, however, was not the intended target. The blasts rocketed over the saucer of the cruiser and hit the frigate *Proxima* broadside.

Lieutenant John Villanueva took the full brunt of the blast as the helm console exploded before him. Flailing, his body was thrown clear of the high-backed chair and his limp form crumpled in a heap to the left of Captain K'ren's command chair.

With a quick call to sickbay to report the emergency, K'ren leaned down toward the lieutenant's still, smoldering form.

A split second later, Ensign Tapia, who'd been standing near the environmental control console, was at the captain's side. She watched as K'ren held his fingers to the lieutenant's face, momentarily forgetting the captain's Vulcan heritage. "Sir?" K'ren's eyes closed, and for the briefest of moments, she watched as a pained expression washed over his face.

“He is alive, but badly hurt.”

Looking at the man’s blood-soaked tunic, it was impossible to believe. But, when she saw Villanueva’s chest rise and fall slowly, she found herself whispering a silent prayer of thanks.

“I will induce a pain-relieving meld with him. It should keep him stable until the medics arrive.”

From the other side of the bridge, Commander Dewitte Baisch watched the exchange for a moment before his attention was drawn back to the sensors. “Captain, the D-10 has passed us. However, we’re straying even farther into the Klingon fleet.” Dewitte watched as K’reen nodded, then locked eyes with Ensign Tapia and said something to her, too quietly for him to discern over the red alert klaxon. What shocked Baisch the most was when the normally emotionless K’reen reached a reassuring hand out and gently grasped the ensign’s shoulder. Through tear-filled eyes, she gave an understanding smile, and K’reen stood and returned to the command chair.

As he turned to face Dewitte, the two men shared the briefest of glances, Dewitte nodding in silent understanding. “Damage report, Commander?”

“Impulse power down to fifty percent. Maneuvering thrusters down to twenty. Minor hull damage to the primary hull, G section.”

“Weapons?”

“Photon torpedoes offline. Phasers holding at ninety percent.”

“Find the nearest enemy vessel and fire main phasers,” K’reen called down to Lieutenant Kitarju.

“Targeting a D-4 off the port quarter, sir. Firing phasers.”

Baisch watched in the sensor hood as the D-4, blissfully unaware of the *Proxima*’s presence and engaged with another Federation frigate, took three direct hits to her port side before she veered away from her intended victim. “The D-4’s shields are down, but main power is steady. She’s moving outside the combat area.”

“Phaser bank power down to fifteen percent,” Kitarju sounded.

Pressing the intercom button, K'ren quickly opened a channel to Darren Keith in engineering. "Engineering, there is a power falloff to the phasers. Explain."

"Two power relays have blown on deck six," Keith called back with frustration. "Until I can bypass them, phaser charging will be severely hampered."

"Endima?" K'ren said, calling out to the weapons officer by her first name and earning another surprised glance from Baisch.

"Phasers now at nineteen percent, sir."

"Bring the engines up to three-quarters impulse. Concentrate the phasers at the D-4 and fire once again just as we pass over them."

Taking use of the emergency helm controls on her console for the first time in her short career, Lieutenant Kitarju programmed the flight sequence with her left hand as her right was inputting the firing solution into the phaser emitters. "Ready, sir."

"Execute!"

On the bridge of the cruiser *George Patton*, Vice Admiral Zukof watched as the *Proxima* sailed over the D-4 she'd been attacking with less than twenty meters to spare. Just as the saucer cleared the Klingon vessel, the phaser banks on the ventral side sprayed the upper hull of the D-6. With the D-6's shields in shambles, the *Proxima* left a wake of destruction that quickly put the enemy vessel out of commission.

"The *Proxima* is leaving the area, sir," Commander Eckhoff said from the science console.

"Captain K'ren sends his apologies, Admiral," Citlalmina Serrano said from the communications console. "His weapons systems are offline, although he states that the situation is only a temporary one."

"Acknowledged, Lieutenant. Order him to bring the *Proxima* to the rear of our forces. Once he's back up to par, he's more than welcome to rejoin the front line."

"Aye, sir."

The *Bonhomme Richard*-class *Patton* again fired a spread of torpedoes, the second in the last few minutes. Intended for a nearby battle cruiser, they were intercepted by an enemy destroyer that had come between the two.

“Damage to the D-4, Captain,” Eckhoff said. “The battle cruiser is continuing to fire at the destroyer *O’Sullivan*.”

The *O’Sullivan*, one of the oldest destroyers in the group, was woefully outmatched by the powerful D-10. She’d been wrangled away from her squadron mates, and was now easy picking for the bullying Klingon capital ship. Intent on evening the odds, Zukof was far from giving up.

“Lieutenant Rose,” Zukof called to the weapons officer, “disregard the enemy destroyer! Continue to fire on the D-10. We need to get the *O’Sullivan* out of harm’s way.”

“Yes, sir,” Shane Rose said, just as two more photon torpedoes streaked toward the enemy battle cruiser. With no other screening vessels in range, the two warheads struck the D-10 with devastating accuracy. The first made a sizeable dent in the starboard flank of the secondary hull. The second torpedo hit the connecting structure which attached the secondary hull to the elongated neck assembly. With the D-10 at maximum range, the strike blew fragments of the structure clear, but the spine was still not broken. Zukof intended to change that oversight.

“Lieutenant Stringer, bring us in closer to the target. Phaser range.”

Eckhoff turned from the science console. “Sir, she’s picked up speed. Now moving at one-quarter impulse away from us.”

“Stringer, bring us around to her stern, but watch for her aft firing weapons!”

Martin Stringer, palms glistening with sweat, did as he was ordered. With just enough room to maneuver, he brought the *Patton* up and around another Federation cruiser that’d been pummeled beyond repair. The D-10, weary of the cruiser coming around on its stern, fired a single aft torpedo, but the weapon impacted the already dead cruiser nearby, separating its primary and secondary hulls, doing no damage to the *Patton* as she continued on her turn.

“Rose, target their rear weapons. Fire torpedoes when ready!”

Shane Rose’s aim was true. The *Patton*’s torpedo hit the aft end of the larger vessel, sending out a plume of fire and debris that was short-lived in the cold vacuum of space.

“Aft weapons offline, sir,” Eckhoff called out.

“Shane, target the neck connection ring, full phasers! Fire only when you’ve got a clear shot. Stringer, maintain course and speed. Bring us over the target. We’re only going to get one shot at this.”

The *Patton* raced up behind the D-10, and without her rear-firing weapons, she was a sitting duck for the coming attack. Just as the *Patton*’s saucer crossed over the secondary hull, Lieutenant Rose’s lock with the phasers was solidified, and he instantly fired. The shot was perfectly timed as the phasers impacted the already-damaged support structure, and a moment later, the neck was cleanly separated from the main body. The *Patton* continued on course for another moment before turning to port.

“All power to their bridge is down, and life support has failed,” Doug Eckhoff cried triumphantly. “The secondary hull is damaged, but continuing to fire . . . probably from auxiliary control.”

“Then we’ll need to swing around again and finish her off,” Zukof nodded. “Stringer, prepare to—” but the words were cut off as the *Patton* was pummeled by a jarring hit to her port side. Zukof, Stringer, and Serrano were each thrown from their consoles and tumbled to the cold, unforgiving deck.

“We’ve registered an impact!” Eckhoff shouted, but when he turned to see the admiral and several members of the crew on the deck, he ducked beneath the bridge railings and slid to Zukof’s side.

“I’m . . . all right, Commander,” Max muttered as Doug helped him to his feet. “What hit us?”

“Debris from a nearby explosion, sir.”

Zukof looked at the other fallen members of his crew, themselves now standing on shaky legs. “One of ours?”

Eckhoff shook his head as he looked to the forward view screen. “No, sir. An enemy frigate. She was coming in below us, but must have been hit in her warp core by weapons fire. The explosion took out most of the ship, but the inertia carried the debris into our ventral shields.”

Nodding, Zukof looked around himself. “Is everyone all right?” he asked, and was answered with uneasy acknowledgements. Stepping to the side of his chair, he opened a channel to engineering. “Mr. Nelson, damage report?”

“Sir, this is chief engineer’s mate Lieutenant Peterson. Chief Nelson was severely wounded a few moments ago.” Peterson’s voice was distant, carrying an ominous tone as he continued. “I’ve called for a medical team but . . . I’m not sure there’s anything that can be done for him.”

Nelson was an old friend of the admiral’s, and no one was more aware of that fact than Doug Eckhoff. The three had served together for some time, and the thought of rushing from his console to see his old friend—possibly for the last time—crossed his mind more than once in that instant. However, he knew his place was on the bridge. Though Zukof would feel the same, the idea of having them both present at the moment was not paramount. Eckhoff looked to the scanners once more to verify what he already knew. “Sir, the battle is beginning to thin. The *Patton* is out of danger for the moment. The port power coupling is damaged, and our ventral shields are down. I suggest we take a small breather to get some minor repairs done.”

Zukof seemed distant as he responded. “Our forces?”

“Holding, sir.”

“Lieutenant Serrano, hail the *Antietam*. Advise Commodore Hippensteel to assume temporary command of the fleet in our absence. Commander Eckhoff, please take the conn. Organize damage control parties and begin effecting repairs. I’ll be down in engineering.”

Wishing he could join the admiral, Commander Eckhoff dipped his head sympathetically. “Aye, sir.”

“Captain, there’s a call coming in from the *George Patton*. They’re in need of repairs and moving away from the combat area. They’re advising us to take command of the fleet.”

Fleet Captain Daniel Hippensteel acknowledged the communications officer without turning to look at her. The heavy cruiser *Antietam*, along with the old *Heston*-class cruiser USS *Lancaster*, was too busy defending their sector to do anything else. Currently the two cruisers had a D-10 in their sights, one captained by a particularly skilled commander, and neither of the Federation captains was ready to give way. Between the two of them, the *Lancaster* had produced the most damage, but the old *Heston*-class ship had been ill prepared for a Klingon destroyer that had broadsided it a few minutes ago. Now limping on impulse power only and pinched between the two enemy vessels, the old cruiser was alternating from one target to the other, while the *Antietam* held squarely onto the D-10.

“We need to swing this skirmish into our favor,” Daniel said from the command chair. “Commander Grafius, what do you have up your sleeve?”

Lieutenant Commander Will Grafius looked at the ship’s computer, shaking his head in disbelief. “Our complement of torpedoes is dwindling—not to mention the guidance computer is fried—and the last hit we took knocked our phasers down to fifty percent efficiency. It’s just not enough to get through the armor on that battle cruiser. Damage control parties are still fighting the fire on deck eleven. We should be trying to figure out a way of extricating ourselves so we can take on some repairs of our own.”

But Fleet Captain Hippensteel, now in overall command of the fleet, was having none of it. “Don’t tell me what we *don’t* have, Commander. Tell me what we do.”

Grafius waved his hand around the battered, smoke-tinged bridge. “We’ve got life support,” he said with obvious frustration. “Gravity controls. Tractor beams. Environmental system. That’s about it.”

Daniel looked around the bridge as well, nodding at the burnt-out engineering console. Then, something that Grafius had said made a tickle in his mind. The tickle quickly turned into a full-blown itch as the captain formulated a plan. “Tractor beams!”

“Sir?”

“How much power can you divert to them?”

Grafius all but shrugged, wondering where the captain was going with this. “All the power you need, sir. But what for? If anything, *we’re* going to be the ones who need towing in a few minutes.”

Hippensteel looked at the science officer as a smirk played across his lips. “Not a tow, Commander: a push.”

“Sir?”

But Daniel disregarded the question. “Weapons officer, target the enemy destroyer. We should have enough torpedoes left to disable them or, at the very least, scare them off.”

“Aye, sir!” A second later, the last of the *Antietam*’s torpedoes sped toward the D-4. Two impacted, but with the targeting computers down, the third missed by only a few meters. However, the damage to the enemy vessels had been done. Combined with a phaser barrage from the *Lancaster*, the Klingon destroyer quickly increased speed and moved away from the now-lone D-10.

“The D-4 is escaping, sir,” Grafius said. “And we’re out of torpedoes.”

“I’ll take the bad with the good, Commander. Besides, I have a feeling we’re not going to need the firepower for what I’ve got in mind.” Stealing a long glance at the turbulent Argelian Nebula filling the view screen, he then spun his chair toward the communications console. “Hail Fleet Captain Seaford on the *Lancaster*. Let him know we’re maneuvering to push the D-10 into the nebula. If he’s got the spare power, I’m sure we could use it.”

“Aye.”

“Navigator, take us to within two kilometers of the D-10. When we’re within range, lock on the tractor beam and engage the impulse drive.”

“It’s going to put an enormous strain on the engines, sir,” Grafius said from the science console after giving a cursory glance to the on-duty engineering officer.

“Let it. I’m not letting this target out of my sights.”

A moment later, the navigator spoke up from his console. “Tractor beam engaged. We’ve got him, sir.” Just as soon as he’d finished speaking, the *Antietam* began to shake violently.

“The Klingons are attempting to break free from the beam,” Grafius said while looking into his monitor.

“Distance to the nebula?”

“Ten thousand kilometers and closing slowly. At this rate, the Klingons will break free two minutes before we arrive.”

“More power to the impulse engines.”

Grafius shook his head. “None available. We’re using everything we have to keep a hold of him.”

“The *Lancaster*?”

“Closing. She has locked on her tractor beams as well. Distance to nebula perimeter now 8,000 kilometers and closing rapidly.”

Daniel nodded. “We don’t need to push her all the way in, just get her close enough for her hull to come into contact with the gravimetric distortions.”

“The Klingon vessel is firing on the *Lancaster*. She’s taken a direct disrupter blast to her forward shields. They are down to thirty percent.”

“Helm, distance to the nebula?”

“Two thousand kilometers and closing rapidly.”

Grafius adjusted his scanners to compensate for increased distortion from the nebula. “We’re nearing a gravimetric pocket, Captain. Advise caution.”

“Navigator, steer us toward that pocket. Best possible speed,” Hippensteel said loudly over the increasing vibrations in the hull.

“The Klingon is firing again at the *Lancaster* . . . her shields are down. One more hit and she’ll lose tractor beam control.”

“Distance to the pocket?”

“Two hundred fifty kilometers. Impact in fifteen seconds.”

“Navigator, plot a course away from the nebula. As soon as the Klingon vessel hits that pocket, I want to get out of here as fast as possible.”

“Aye, sir.”

“Impact with the gravitational pocket . . . now.”

On the view screen, Daniel and the rest of the crew watched as the mighty D-10, an example of the strongest of the Klingon fleet, was instantly crushed as it passed through the outer rim of the gravimetric pocket. A split second later, the navigator

executed his escape maneuver. Using all available power, the impulse drive went into full reverse as the reaction control thrusters pushed the *Antietam* to port. A split second later, when Daniel realized they were still alive, he exhaled a long-held breath.

“We skirted the edge of the distortion,” Grafius said with an equally heavy sigh. “Minor damage to the secondary hull, but no casualties reported.”

“The *Lancaster*?”

Grafius smiled. “She turned to starboard at the same moment we turned to port.”

Thank God. I hope I never have to do anything like that ever again. “Excellent. Hail Fleet Captain Seaford and send him my compliments.” He then turned to Will Grafius. “Commander, locate the bulk of our forces. I don’t relish sitting on the sidelines, but we’re out of torpedoes for the moment. If we have to support them with phasers, I want to be able to rush in at a moment’s notice.”

At the same moment the *Antietam* and the *Lancaster* were facing the D-10, Vice Admiral Zukof was entering the engineering level of the *George Patton*. The passageway outside main engineering, normally kept pristine by Lieutenant Commander Nelson, was now a mess of charred bulkheads and dangling conduits. As he rounded the final corner, Max could see that the frame surrounding the entrance to main engineering had buckled, and technicians had resorted to using phaser welders to cut away the doors. Cautiously stepping inside, he saw a team of technicians hunched over a form on the floor. As he approached them, one of the crewmen noticed and snapped to attention.

“Admiral on deck!”

The young man, no more than twenty-three, was caked in filth and dried blood, the blood likely not his own. As the rest of the men acknowledged Zukof, one crewman remained crouched near the fallen form of Lawrence Nelson—the ship’s chief medical officer, Dr. Jan Rodich. Kneeling beside the doctor, Zukof could see that Rodich was hard at work tending to the chief engineer; a protoplaser in one hand, a thumb-sized medical scanner in the other. Nelson, Zukof could see, was

conscious, moaning as Rodich attempted to seal the deadly gash in the chief engineer's midsection. Looking farther down the body, Zukof sucked in a quick breath when he reached Nelson's legs—or lack thereof. They'd both been completely severed below the knees.

"Doc?" Zukof croaked.

Rodich's attention to his duties was unwavering as he answered. "The bleeding from his legs has been stopped, thanks to the quick actions of the engineers here. However, Nelson has lost a lot of blood. In fact, he's still losing it. Massive internal injuries. He can't be moved—"

"Transporters?" Zukof snapped, as much to Rodich as to the nearby engineering team.

"The power to the pattern buffers is fluctuating," one of the engineers said, "to say nothing of the internal sensor malfunctions. The results of any internal beaming would likely be worse than . . ."

"Understood, crewman," Zukof said, his tone downcast.

"Max . . ." It was the labored, distant voice of Nelson.

Zukof leaned closer to his fallen friend, reaching for and gently grasping his hand.

"I'm here, Lawrence."

"Tell . . . tell the doc . . . not to worry about me. There's more important crewmen to . . . to worry about."

Zukof looked into Rodich's eyes, silently imploring the doctor to produce a miracle that wasn't standard issue. Rodich, his gray eyes filled with sorrow, only shook his head.

"I need you back at your post, Mister," Max said as he fought to form his lips into a smile. "Who else is going to put this ship back together?"

Nelson's grip on the admiral's hand tightened as a wave of pain wracked his body. "You tell him, Max. You make it an order. I need . . . I need to hear you say it to the doc."

Zukof fought back the water that was welling in his eyes. As much as it pained him to realize it, this was the dying request from an old friend. The look he now shared with Rodich confirmed as much. "Doctor," he said, his voice choking for a

split second. “You will . . . attend to other crewmen.” Even though he knew the doctor would do no such thing, the words were like acid coming out of his mouth.

“Thanks, Skipper,” Nelson said from the cold floor. His grip slacked, then tightened once more as he winced in pain. A moment later, the grip went limp.

Rodich ceremoniously waved the medical scanner over Nelson’s body, though Zukof already knew the diagnosis. “I’m sorry, sir. He’s dead.”

Chapter 3

The *Lancaster*, having assisted the *Antietam* with destroying the D-10, was now swinging widely to starboard as she came about the battlefield. On the forward view screen, Fleet Captain Morgan Seaford watched as a pair of D-7s, who'd previously been firing on a *Saladin*-class destroyer, were flanked by three Federation frigates. The tide of the battle was decisively swinging in favor of Starfleet, and it brought a reserved smile to his face.

"Communications, hail Commodore Hippensteel on the *Antietam*. Inform him we're heading in to assist those frigates."

"Aye, sir."

"Navigator, plot an intercept course. Weapons officer, load a spread of torpedoes."

"Yes, sir," came the replies from both men.

When the *Lancaster* was in range, three torpedoes streamed out, two hitting the lead D-7, the other striking the second cruiser amidships.

"Shields on both enemy ships have failed, sir," the science officer called out. "The *Antietam* is coming around our starboard flank."

"Helm, bring us about. Let's give the commodore some breathing room."

The *Lancaster* swung once again, narrowly avoiding two decrepit Klingon frigates in the process. As soon as she was clear, the *Antietam* fired full phasers on the lead D-7. The blasts ripped open the secondary hull, spilling the vessel's contents into space. Not wasting any time, the cruiser fired on the second Klingon, pulverizing the bridge with a single well-placed shot before veering away herself.

Fleet Captain Seaford watched the exchange with satisfaction. Just as he was about to turn to his science officer to inquire about their next target, the old cruiser shook with a thunderous jolt, knocking the science officer and the communications officer to the deck.

"Damage report!" Seaford shouted to the engineer at his left.

"Something hit us, sir! Damage to the port nacelle."

"Enemy fire?"

As the science officer got to his feet, he peered into his display. “Negative. It appears to be a gravetic mine.”

“They’re peppering the area,” Seaford shouted. “We need to stop them. This area is littered with warships. It could cause an enormous amount of damage to our forces.”

“But sir,” the helmsman asked, “won’t they also damage themselves?”

Seaford pushed a strand of fallen hair away from his eyes. “I don’t think they care too much about that, Lieutenant. This is an act of desperation.”

“Sir, I’ve detected the mine-laying ship,” the science officer said. “It’s a D-6, bearing 332-mark-5.”

“Distance to that target?”

“Too far for either phasers or photon torpedoes.”

“Who’s in that area?”

The science officer studied his readout for a moment before responding. “The *Reliant* and the *Condor*. However, the *Condor* is severely damaged. Her crew is being evacuated to the *Reliant*.”

“Communications, order Captain Scollon to break off his rescue operation for the time being. Advise him to destroy that D-6!”

“Aye!”

“Sir,” the science officer shouted, “there’s another vessel heading toward the D-6. It’s the destroyer *Ford*.”

Seaford nodded. “She must have figured out the same thing we did.”

“She’s also been heavily damaged. Life support is minimal, and her weapons appear to be offline.”

“Then what is she intending to do?” Seaford asked in confusion. “Life signs?”

The science officer adjusted the short-range scans toward the smaller vessel. “Negligible. No more than a handful at best.”

“Is she adrift?”

“Negative. The destroyer is maneuvering around several other vessels . . . and is increasing speed.”

That was when it dawned on Seaford. “Get me the *Ford* now!” he barked to the communications officer.

“Communications are down on their vessel, sir.”

“On screen, full magnification!”

On the view screen, Seaford and the rest of the bridge crew watched as the D-6 ejected two more mines into space from her aft launcher. When the vessel was in the center of the screen, just as it was about to release a third, the *Ford* came rushing up to her stern. In quick succession, the small Federation destroyer impacted with one mine after another in a deadly chain that ripped open her saucer section. Undeterred, and with momentum working in her favor, the now-wrecked hulk plunged into the stern of the D-6. The impact against the mine launcher must have set off the remaining mines inside the Klingon ship. After a brief but blinding flash of light, both vessels were disintegrated.

Seaford and the crew watched the empty area of space for a moment longer before he turned to the communications officer. “Please log that the *Ford* and her crew have perished. Note that they should receive Starfleet’s highest commendation for their sacrifice.”

“Yes, sir,” she said softly.

“Sir, the *Reliant* is continuing her rescue operations,” the science officer said.

Seaford sighing heavily. “The rest of our forces?”

“There are only a handful of Klingon vessels still functioning. It appears they are regrouping, attempting to flee the system.”

“That’s what the mine layer was doing,” Seaford said he once again looked at the monitor. “It was covering their escape.”

“Should we pursue the enemy vessels?” the helmsman said.

As much as he wanted to avenge the loss of life on the *Ford*, there was still a matter of protocol. “No. Communications, hail the *George Patton*. Find out Vice Admiral Zukof’s status, and what his intentions are. Advise them we will remain here until told otherwise.”

Stardate 4301.21

His ship temporarily repaired, Vice Admiral Max Zukof had the cruiser *George Patton* back in action and underway. However, with no additional Klingons in the area, his next task was clear: it was time to lick their wounds. Deciding that discretion was the better part of valor and that the Klingons should not be pursued, and after collecting preliminary status reports from his commodores and fleet captains, he'd called the senior officers together for a meeting on board the *Patton*.

The last of the officers to arrive was Commodore Hippensteel and his good friend, Fleet Captain Seaford. The two, dressed in full parade uniform, strode confidently into the main briefing room on Vice Admiral Zukof's flagship.

"Gentlemen," Zukof said as he extended a hand to each of them. "It's good to have you aboard. Excellent performances from both you and your crews."

"Thank you, sir," they each said in return, then took empty seats at the table before them.

Zukof took his place at a podium set up at the head of the table. "As you are all aware by now, the Klingons have fled the region. For the time being, the Argelian Approaches are secure. However, the damage to our forces has been extensive. Although we managed to destroy or disable the bulk of the Klingon fleet, we lost twenty of our own forces in the process. Each has been noted, and should be remembered by all the officers seated here, as well as your respective crews. Each of those captains not with us gave their all to maintain the freedom and security of the Federation, and they will be honored for it. A moment of silence, please."

As a yeoman on the far side of the room rang a single bell, each of the officers bowed their heads. After several minutes had passed, Zukof took a deep breath before continuing. "In the shadow of our losses, I would like to bring to light some of the more . . . interesting outcomes from this battle. I've gone over all the battle reports," he said, then leveled his eyes at Hippensteel and Seaford, "and I must say that I've never before seen two captains work together with such smashing success."

Both Daniel and Morgan chuckled at the intended pun before straightening.

Zukof shared a faint smile with them before continuing. "I'm sure Starfleet Command will be interested in discussing the matter with you both further. In the meantime, once word of that little maneuver gets out, I'm sure you'll have cadets at the Academy screaming to learn it for themselves. While you're on your way to Starbase 5, I suggest you two think of a name for it."

Daniel and Morgan looked at one another in surprise. Seaford deferred to Hippensteel, since it was the commodore's place to ask the question on both of their minds. "Starbase 5, sir?"

Zukof pursed his lips and nodded. "For Fleet Captain Seaford, it's more to do with the ship than with her captain."

"She's in rough shape, sir," Morgan began, "but I think we can keep her in this sector a while longer."

"That's just it, Morgan. She's being taken out of the fight. Emergency dispatch from Starfleet Command. All *Heston*-class vessels are hereby decommissioned, or will be shortly. The *Lancaster*'s fate, it seems, has been handed to us."

"Why weren't we notified sooner?" Morgan nearly spat, then regained his composure.

"As I said, it was an emergency communication that I just received this morning. Starfleet Research and Development has found a critical flaw in the design of the ship. It wasn't detected until now, that being the conflict with the Klingons. I'll forward the message to you myself once we are concluded here. Basically it boils down to a complete and utter failure of the warp drive containment system. You're sitting—not to put too fine a point on it—on top of a bomb that could wipe out half the ships in the fleet."

Morgan's face lost its color, which Zukof didn't fail to notice.

"Fear not, Captain. As long as the ship is taken out of combat, I have no doubts you will make the trip to Starbase 5 without incident. However, that's also one of the reasons why the *Antietam* will be going with you."

"Seems like I'll be your date to the homecoming dance," Hippensteel joked to his friend, eliciting a laugh from Seaford.

"Looks like."

After the brief exchange, Daniel looked to Zukof. “You said that was one of the reasons, sir. What’s the other?”

“Your presence is being requested by the newly promoted Rear Admiral Balkwill. It seems that he’s in need of a commander to lead his forces in that area, and I’ve fully endorsed you to assume that position.”

Commodore Hippensteel was silent for a moment as he looked around to the admiring looks of his peers. “Thank you, sir,” he finally said. “I’m not sure what to say.”

“Say nothing of it, Commodore. You’ve earned this promotion,” Zukof beamed. “Or should I say, Rear Admiral.”

The utterance of the new rank was rewarded with a round of applause from everyone present.

“I’ll do my best to make you all proud,” Hippensteel said, and then turned to Fleet Captain Seaford. “And I’ve got it on good authority you’re going to need a new command shortly. I’m sure that a newly promoted rear admiral can do something to make sure that happens as swiftly as possible.”

“I wouldn’t expect anything less, Admiral,” Morgan beamed.

“I want you all to know how proud I already am of all of you,” Zukof said to the assembly. “You’ve all done remarkably well in the most difficult of circumstances. I can promise you this is only the beginning of the commendations that are going to be handed out for this engagement. The Approaches, Argelius, and her riches are secure from the clutches of the Klingon Empire, now and for the foreseeable future, thanks to your hard work and the sacrifices of our people. In the coming hours, I’d like each of you to make a full inventory of the damage to your vessels, and of their supplies. Make all reports ready for me by 0700 tomorrow. After that, we can best decide where our priorities lie. I’ve sent out a dispatch to Starfleet Command to send an additional squadron to track the Klingons who escaped this system. But until we’re back on our feet, and with the exception of those vessels which I’ve already mentioned, the bulk of our forces will remain here.” He then turned to Commodores Acevedo and Walton, whom he’d strategically sat side by side. “I’ll

need you two to remain behind for a moment. The rest of you are dismissed. Good luck on your repairs and, if you can find the time, relax for a few moments. You have all certainly earned it.”

Stardate 4302.28

February 2255

Incoming subspace communication . . .

FROM: The Office of the Commanding Officer, Starfleet Public Relations,
Rear Admiral Joselyn Czernovski

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,
Vice Admiral Michael J. Lai, San Francisco, Earth

SUBJ: OFFICIAL INFORMATION RELEASE FOR FORWARD-
DEPLOYED UNITS AND RESPECTIVE COMMANDERS

1. On stardate 4302.02, the 14th and 49th Battle Squadrons, under the overall command of Commodore Troy J. Acevedo, engaged numerically inferior Klingon forces near the Vola system. Commodore Acevedo's forces, consisting of both *Bonhomme Richard*- and *Achernar*-class cruisers, successfully routed the Klingons in what is now being called the Battle for Sector 12-J. Of the sixteen enemy combatants engaged in the conflict, only three D-7 cruisers escaped. Due to

moderate casualties sustained during combat, Commodore Acevedo was unable to order a pursuit. The Klingons were last detected by long-range sensor scans from Starbase 12. The Klingons' general direction was back toward Klingon-held territory in the Rhinate system. Starfleet commanders in that area are advised to closely monitor their sensor reports for these vessels.

2. From stardates 4302.09 to 4302.11, the Battle of Rex Ducat was fought. Klingon forces, having hidden in the Orion-held space near the planet in the Volgas system, launched a successful surprise attack on the Federation convoy bringing much-needed medical supplies to the Laxala system. Many of the freighters were destroyed, with a small number of them being captured by the Klingons. The convoy's protective screen of *Anton*-class light cruisers and *Saladin*-class destroyers was unable to thwart the heavy cruisers and battle cruisers of the Klingon armada. After-action reports from the *Invincible*—the sole surviving cruiser from the screen—shows that two of the *Saladins*, the *Palmdale* and the *Ingersoll*—were very likely captured by the Klingons preceding the retreat order by Fleet Captain Ellis Coombs of the *Reliant*. Starfleet commanders in the vicinity of Rex Ducat or the Volgas system should take note of this, and the Klingons may attempt to use these captured ships to lure unsuspecting vessels into dangerous encounters.

3. On stardate 4302.19, the 1st Battle Fleet, dispatched from Starbase 5 and under the command of the newly promoted Commodore Morgan Seaford, destroyed both the Klingon shipyards and starbase in the Tirehe system. While attempting to engage the Federation forces, one squadron of Klingon D-7s was recorded as going into combat stern-first. While this initially befuddled the on-scene commanders, later scans revealed that the Klingon vessels were suffering from having their forward shields damaged in previous engagements, and they were attempting to keep their most protected areas turned toward the Federation attackers. This lone example of desperation tactics appears to underscore the information being compiled by Starfleet Intelligence that the Klingons are sorely in need of resources for their repair facilities. They may also be experiencing personnel shortages,

especially in key areas of command and control, but this is only speculation until Starfleet Intelligence can gather more data on the matter.

* * *

Stardate 4303.09

March 2255

Seated in the large conference room aboard his flagship, the battle cruiser *Blood Angel*, Admiral Do'val waited impatiently for the Imperial trefoil on the compartment's large viewer to be replaced by the expected message from the High Council. To his left, seated along the length of the table, were General Mor'tah of the Imperial Marines, and Captain Mog of the House of Hurric, one of two squadron commanders present. The other, seated on his right, was Captain K'neH'A', captain of the IKV *Gre'Thor*. She was as cunning as she was beautiful, and Do'val was proud of her accomplishments in recent engagements. If she continued to please him in their next endeavor, he entertained the idea of perhaps making further advances upon her. However, for the time being, such frivolous campaigns would have to wait. Her attention, drawn elsewhere for the moment, was diverted to the admiral for the briefest of seconds before a call came in over the intercom.

"Admiral Do'val. The transmission from the High Council has been initiated," the disembodied voice said gruffly. "I am switching now."

The three-colored Imperial symbol on the man-sized monitor faded and was replaced by the inner chambers of the High Council on Qo'noS. There, framed by the glowing embers of torches hung on the wall behind him, sat Governor K'Raal, the many medals and accolades adorning his flowing robes catching the firelight in a dozen places. Behind K'Raal, between the torches, was a larger trefoil of blood red, underscored by a replica of the Sword of Kahless—said to be made only a few months before the original was lost to the plundering by the accursed Hur'q several centuries ago. Do'val knew the room well, as he'd been called to it many times. It was the personal office of the emperor. That K'Raal was seated there raised stares from the officers around the conference table.

“Do not be alarmed by my surroundings, Admiral Do’val,” K’Raal sneered. “Emperor Karhammur is still in power on Qo’noS. He is merely away on . . . *personal* business.” K’Raal smiled a deadly grin and leaned back, obviously enjoying the comfort of their leader’s chair.

“I trust that is why I am receiving a transmission from you, then, *Governor*.” The inflection behind his spoken title had the effect on K’Raal that Do’val had intended. The governor’s smile faded as he narrowed his eyes at the admiral.

“It is within my powers to do so, Admiral Do’val, as you should be well aware.”

Wordlessly, wisely, Do’val bowed his head.

“I bear new orders for your fleet from the Council. Are you prepared to execute them?”

Do’val’s head dipped. “We stand ready to serve the empire, Governor, and we are honored. What would the Council have of me?”

“As you know, many of our forces of late have faced a number of defeats at the hands of the Earthers. This has not gone unnoticed by the Council.”

“The Earthers’ fleets grow in strength each passing week, while ours continue to weaken,” Do’val said spitefully. “Our forces are in need of parts to repair their damaged vessels. The Federation, in a show of cunning worthy of a Romulan, performed a sneak attack on our outpost in the Klethor system three days ago. Our mining operations there have ground to a complete halt due to damaged processing equipment.”

“I am aware of your shortcomings, Admiral,” K’Raal shot back acerbically. “So as commander of your fleet, I expect better results from your next assignment.”

“And what would that be?”

“You are ordered to move your forces closer to Klingon space and, in the process, take the Federation world of T’Vam.”

Do’val knew the world. It was an Earther-populated trading center, with only a small amount of materials the Klingon Empire needed to continue their campaign against the Federation. Yet, it *did* have materials that were sorely needed, not to mention repair facilities for smaller vessels up to light-cruiser classes. However,

those shipyards were said to be guarded by Starfleet, and those vessel commanders would likely be more than ready to repel invaders. But the system was close to Klingon space, and that allowed for the possibility of friendly reinforcements if the situation warranted it.

Still, Do'val's information was two months out of date. There was always the possibility they could be walking directly into a massacre, one that the empire might not be able to recuperate from. His fleet of seventy ships was the second largest in Federation space behind Fleet Admiral Klutuk's. But at last report, Klutuk was headed for the Oco system or thereabouts. That put him several weeks away, and unable to render any assistance if needed. All their other forces were spread thin—dangerously so—throughout Earther-dominated territory. A victory was needed, not only to secure supplies, but to boost the ever-growing dissention in the ranks.

“What has Imperial Intelligence to say of this target?” the admiral asked.

“A scout vessel was dispatched a week ago, returning their information only a few hours ago. The planet is guarded by five Federation vessels—three starships and two smaller vessels. There are several others in adjacent sectors, but they are too far away to be of any use to them if you can secure the planet quickly.”

General Mor'tah, after receiving a silent nod of approval from the admiral, spoke up. “We have four Marine battalions at our disposal, Governor. But I fear we will need more if Starfleet sends in reinforcements to the planet. We can secure the planet, but holding it will be difficult if the Federation decides that an orbital bombardment is preferable to a sustained ground confrontation.”

Governor K'Raal sneered in disgust. “The Federation is far too sympathetic to their member worlds to allow such devastation to the planet itself. You would be well advised to remember who you are dealing with, General. It may benefit you in your war planning.”

Do'val watched as Mor'tah inhaled deeply, probably with thoughts of encompassing the governor's neck with two powerful hands. If that were so, Do'val approved.

“Of course, Governor,” Mor'tah finally said.

“Besides,” K'Raal continued, “we have three transports full of chlorotheragen at a nearby depot. They will join you in your efforts at T'Vam. If it becomes necessary,

you will douse the entire planet with the gas, then strip it of all resources. You will make the planet useless to the Federation before Starfleet even knows what's happening. It will deter any Earthers from rushing to the defense of a dead world."

Or so you hope, Governor, Do'val mused. Earthers are not known for their lack of compassion for their fallen comrades. It may benefit you to take that under advisement in your planning!

"What of our forces in the Spike system?" Do'val asked.

"If you are curious as to whether they will be made available to render assistance to you, Admiral, then I will tell you that they are not. Although they managed to repel the Federation in their latest encounter, more than half their ships were lost in the battle. Several squadron commanders have returned to Ruwan for repairs. Once repairs are completed, they will return to Spike to maintain our hold on that location. And, before you ask it, three more squadrons are being dispatched from Kolm-an to strike the Federation world Namezk. Once that is accomplished—assuming you have succeeded in your efforts to take T'Vam—we will be able to launch a two-pronged offensive at the Federation stronghold at Tabulon. However, until then, your current fleet, in addition to the chlorotheragen carriers, is all the forces you will have."

Tabulon . . . otherwise known as Starbase 27 to the Federation—one of their most heavily protected sectors. Taking it would be an enormous victory for the empire, and would serve as a powerful weapon to demoralize the Earthers—who were sure to be reveling in their current successes. Of course, recognizing that any premature request for assistance would lessen his prestige in the Council's eyes, Admiral Do'val nodded and smiled. "I was merely curious who else I would have to share the glory of this conquest with, Governor," he said slyly. "That none will be needed pleases me."

Whether K'Raal believed him or not, it didn't materialize on the governor's face. "Then your orders are understood?"

"Yes, Governor. They are."

“Then I leave you to your fleet. May you win all your battles, Admiral Do’val.”
And with that, the channel was closed.

Chapter 4

Stardate 4303.11

“Commander’s battle log: tenth entry this cycle. Our forces are now within striking distance of the Federation world of T’Vam. We have moved cautiously, yet inexorably toward the system. The Klingon Empire, in our push to capture territory held by the Earthers, has been more difficult than the High Council would lead most to believe. As such, the resources of this otherwise insignificant world have made it a jewel amongst the vast sea of stars afforded to us. Our forces must not fail in this endeavor, for I am convinced that success in our overall campaign may well hinge upon the outcome of this assault.

My fleet commanders are poised to begin their first strike, which will coincide with dawn on the capital city of T’Vam approximately one stellar hour from now. But first, we must deal with the Starfleet vessels in orbit. Though our fleet is more than a match for the five vessels in scanning range, I still have my misgivings. The report from Governor K’Raal—relayed to him from Klingon Intelligence—had stated that few to no Federation vessels were in range to assist their forces at T’Vam should they come under attack. However, I have roundly put those same reports to the fire. There are *indeed* Starfleet vessels in the immediate area—a small flotilla, in fact—that may present a problem to our forces if they arrive at an inopportune time. We must strike quickly if we wish to ensure a victory. However, if we fail, and there is but one of us to survive the day, rest assured it will be me, and I will personally wrap my fingers around the throat of the Intelligence officers who failed to notice the foes on our periphery.

Then I will take that same message to Governor K’Raal.”

Switching off the recorder, Admiral Do’val gently placed the cylindrical device in a reinforced safe in his stateroom aboard the *Blood Angel*. Deciding that the mission was too critical to fail, he had ordered Fleet Captain Mog to personally assume

command of his D-10 battle cruiser. Mog would ensure that the vessel performed as expected, while Do'val would coordinate the entire attack from the confines of the protected war room in the belly of the ship. Once the battle was complete, he would order General Mor'tah to begin the ground assault, again overseeing the entire operation from the *Blood Angel*. Only when victory was assured would he venture out of this compartment. And if defeat should befall them, then this place would likely be his tomb.

Turning his chair, he looked beyond the compartment's single, angled view port on the underside of the *Blood Angel*, surveying the harsh landscape of the large moon that stood between them and victory. Nearly the size of Qo'noS, the long-dead world was littered with thousands of craters from millennia of meteor strikes. Its mottled red and orange colors reminded Do'val of the fierce storm clouds that had often encircled the coastal province of his youth on the homeworld.

Lifting himself from his chair, he stepped over to the large holographic table that dominated the space. Lining the walls where the bulkheads met the overhead were arrays of monitors showing everything from the status of the *Blood Angel's* life-support systems to the transporter status of the troop carriers at the rear of the fleet. The table, with a glowing representation of T'Vam at one end, showed with exacting measurements the location of each of Do'val's fifty-three vessels, with each of those vessel icons able to relay critical information at the push of a finger. The admiral required such information, as he felt there was never enough of it at critical moments.

He watched in silence as the squadron commanders arrayed their vessels into their prearranged coordinates. It was the beautiful K'neH'A' who had suggested that the fleet position itself behind T'Vam's farthest moon to shield their approach to the planet. It was working handsomely. The Starfleet vessels were still on the far side of the planet, and blissfully unaware that they were about to meet their end.

The entire assault would be three-pronged: first, the alluring Captain K'neH'A' and the *Gre'Thor* would lead the attack against the Federation vessels farthest from the planet—three Starfleet cruisers. Her six-ship squadron would be more than a match for the Earthers. Nevertheless, Do'val wanted the victory to be more than decisive. He wanted it rapid.

That's when Captain Mog would lead an entire flotilla of battle cruisers—the *Blood Angel* in the lead—against the cruisers, assuming K'neH'A's initial attack left any survivors. He would then divide his forces, some continuing on to destroy the small number of Federation destroyers near the planet at the same moment that a detachment, again led by the *Blood Angel*, would take the shipyards high in orbit over T'Vam.

Once the space around the planet was secure, General Mor'tah would be allowed to begin the ground assault operations. Aided by orbital bombardments from Mog and K'neH'A', General Mor'tah's somewhat small contingent of 5,000 warriors would be able to quickly capture the two small population settlements.

But first, the Federation cruisers must be dealt with. When he noticed that K'neH'A's flagship had inserted itself at the front of the first wave, Admiral Do'val reached for the icon and tapped his finger against it. A direct communications channel was immediately opened.

"Captain K'neH'A', are you ready to begin your attack?"

Her voice, simultaneously brusque and soothing, carried the conviction in her heart. "We are ready, my lord."

"The Federation cruisers still have not detected your fleet's movements. You are to be commended, Captain."

"My honor is to serve, Admiral," she cooed.

"Then go. Serve your leader and be victorious. And should you perish, die well!"

"Qapla', my lord!"

As he raised his finger, the channel was instantly closed. Do'val watched as the three D-7s of the 6th Cruiser Attack Wing sped away from the main body of the fleet and toward the unsuspecting Starfleet cruisers.

On the bridge of the *Gre'Thor*, Captain K'neH'A' sat with her obsidian eyes locked on the hexagonal screen at the front of the rectangular compartment. The D-7 battle cruiser had been her home for the last year—a gift from the emperor himself as a reward for the successful capture of several Federation starships in a

single engagement. Prior to that, she'd cut her teeth commanding a destroyer in some of the fiercest fighting in the Klingons' current campaign—and had lost a great many comrades in those missions. Now, with a far more powerful and well-defended vessel under her boot heels, she hoped that such loss would be a thing of the past. After all, she needed everyone under her to perform at their peak levels if she was to ensure all the glory that an assignment such as this held.

"We are approaching apogee with the planet T'Vam, mistress," the scanning officer said from the console on the far left of the bridge.

Her hands, all but the tips of her fingers covered by heavy gauntlets, caressed the edges of the command chair armrests. Raising the right to her face, she stroked at her smooth chin, the leather of her uniform creaking making the loudest noise in the compartment. "Distance to Federation vessels?" she asked casually as she continued to study the tactical map on the screen.

"Fifteen thousand kellicams and closing," the first officer said. Disregarding her contemplative mood—always a most dangerous endeavor—the officer cautioned a suggestion. "Should we intercept?"

"You presume we should simply rush in and destroy them?" she asked calmly, not turning her eyes from the screen.

"To crush them is our duty, mistress." This received a round of approving grunts from the rest of the bridge crew. K'neH'A' had heard this from the men before. This would be yet another lesson for them to learn.

"It is not enough to simply destroy your enemies," she began as she stood slowly from the chair and rounded it, coming toe to toe with her taller and bulkier first officer. "You must also understand them, Commander. And in all my encounters with the humans, I believe that is something I can now do with great patience."

Nodding, as much in submission as in understanding, he took a wise step backward and bowed. "Of course, Captain."

Smirking, K'neH'A' stepped away as well, her left hand slipping away from the hilt of the knife she'd been ready to draw the moment she felt her authority was to be challenged. Moving close to the main view screen, she reached out to the images representing the Federation cruisers on the far side of the planet, stroking the shapes

lovingly. “They will rush into the fight the moment they detect us. We need not waste the fuel to take the battle to them.”

“And what of our orders?” the first officer asked.

Captain K’neH’A’ smiled to herself, her hand instantly back on the hilt of her blade. In a single, swift move, she’d slipped it from its sheath and sent it flying across the bridge. The blade skirted past the first officer—close enough to slice into his right sleeve and draw a bead of pink blood—before embedding itself into the steel of the bulkhead behind him. “You will concern yourself with *my* orders, Commander, or next time my intentions will not be to simply silence your insubordinate questions!”

The first officer—completely disregarding his superficial wound—bowed his head. “Yes, Captain.”

K’neH’A’ sneered in contempt, then moved to sit in the central command chair. “Helm, maintain course and speed.”

“The Federation vessels have entered scanning range,” the weapons officer stated.

Back at his post, the first officer read out the sensor report. “The three Federation cruisers have increased speed. They are now on an intercept course with us. Their offensive and defensive systems are online.”

“Raise our shields,” the captain said without turning from the forward screen. “Do not attempt to arm weapons at this time.” When her request went unanswered, she turned to see the first officer staring at her in disbelief. “Did you fail to hear my order?”

“No, mistress.” Shaking his head, he looked away to his controls. “Shields have been raised. Weapon systems are still offline.”

“And the remainder of our forces?”

“Awaiting your command, Captain.”

Smiling, she turned from the screen and looked at the insubordinate officer. “As soon as the Federation vessels are within range, we will cut off their escape route. Advise the rest of the squadron to be ready.”

The first officer grunted to the communications officer, who sharply turned to his duties.

Waiting until the last possible minute, K'neH'A' barked out the order to the helm officer. "Now. One-hundred-eighty-degree turn to starboard. Take us back on our original heading."

The *Gre'Thor*, along with her two escorts, quickly pivoted just as the Federation cruisers opened fire. The Starfleet torpedoes sailed past the Klingon vessels without a single hit. However, the Federation vessels were close on their heels. Dangerously close. *Gloriously close*, K'neH'A' mused.

"Concentrate all power to the stern shields," she ordered. "The Earthers may get lucky. I wish to take as little damage as possible. And hail our forces on the far side of the moon. Tell them that we come bringing guests."

As she spoke, the *Gre'Thor* shook as the ship took a direct hit.

"Torpedo strike to our aft shields. They are holding. No damage."

"Good, Commander Klen'daH. See that it stays that way. Increase to flank speed. Take us around the far side of the moon. Release the jamming probes. I don't want these Earthers to warn the rest of the ships in this system."

As soon as the *Gre'Thor* had crested the planet with three communications jamming probes in its wake—the Federation vessels quickly followed the trail. However, when they realized that they were now staring down the barrel of an entire Klingon attack fleet, they wisely attempted to change their tactics and beat a hasty retreat. But it was far too late for that. At full impulse speed, they flew right into the weapon ranges of the lead squadron of D-10 battle cruisers.

The more powerful Klingon ships wasted little time pressing their advantage. Dozens of bolts of green disruptor fire rained across open space, striking each of the Starfleet vessels multiple times. When a cruiser attempted to turn again, its underbelly was struck by torpedoes from D-4 and D-6 squadrons coming up from the z-axis. It was over in seconds. The three Federation vessels, once the distinguished peacekeepers of his systems, were nothing more than twisted tombs of death.

Klen'daH looked at his scanners with joy. "No life readings on the enemy vessels, Captain."

“Excellent. We will leave the scraps to the vultures of our fleet. Plot a course for the remaining Federation vessels in this sector quickly.”

On the bridge of the *Saladin*-class destroyer USS *El Cid*, all was as it should be. Captain Roderick Collins, one of the few people in the crew to have worked his way from the junior enlisted ranks to his current position, was looking over the day’s reports and smiling as he came to the final entry. “Well, it seems Ensign Jones finally had that baby of hers.”

To his left, Commander Steve Firestine, the ship’s executive officer and navigator, sipped at his cup of coffee and smiled. “I heard she was in labor for the better part of the night.”

Collins smiled, remembering his own wife’s troubles with not one, but both his own boys. Now, with both of them well on their way to graduating the Academy with honors, he wished he could still hold them as they were when they were newly born. “I trust you’re giving her a few days to recuperate.”

Firestine wagged his head. “Well, the doc did say she could return to duty tomorrow.”

Captain Collins waved away the exec’s words with a wave. “I know all about modern medicine, Steve. However, duty or not duty, she has a right—and my blessing—to spend a few well-earned days with her baby . . .?”

Firestine was quick to pick up on the captain’s query. “A boy, sir.”

Collins beamed. “Yes. Excellent. Be sure the ensign receives my compliments.”

Firestine sipped his coffee once more then chuckled. “I’ll do that.”

“Speaking of which, we’re supposed to link up with the *Dresden* this morning, yes?”

Firestine nodded at the mention of the lead cruiser in their group. “Yes, sir. Supply transfers. Honestly, they’re running a little late. They were supposed to be at these coordinates twenty minutes ago.”

“That’s odd,” Collins mused, giving the main viewer a perplexed look. “She’s not known for being tardy.”

“I was just about to call them.”

“Good idea,” Collins agreed. “When you get them on the channel, remind them that—” but the last of his words were cut short by the sound of the science officer’s voice.

“Captain, three vessels closing on an intercept course.”

“You sound surprised, Mr. Miles,” Firestine said as he turned to look at him. “Sounds like our ships have finally decided to join us.”

But Lieutenant John Miles’ voice was far from convinced. “Sir, they’re not Federation craft. Sensors indicate three Klingon cruisers.”

Roderick shared a concerned glance with Steve. “Where is the *Indiana*?”

“Our starboard quarter, sir,” Miles replied as he read off the destroyer’s position. “She can see the Klingons as clearly as we can. She’s raised shields and armed her weapons.”

Collins nodded to Firestine, who quickly slipped into the vacant chair behind the weapons console. “Shields up, sir. Phasers charging.”

“Long-range scan, Mr. Miles. Are these the only hostiles in the area?”

“Sensors are showing no other Klingons in the system, but neither are they showing the location of our cruiser detachment.”

“They could have been destroyed by these ones,” Steve said, nodding toward the quickly approaching Klingon vessels on the main viewer. “Three cruisers on three is a pretty even fight.”

“Damage to the Klingon vessels, Mr. Miles?” Captain Collins asked. “Any sign of a recent battle?”

John peered into the scope, but shook his head. “No apparent damage to the vessels, sir. At least nothing to indicate they’ve seen combat in the last few hours.”

“Time to intercept?”

Miles checked his instruments one final time. “Three minutes, twenty seconds.”

“Communications, send an emergency distress call to any and all Federation vessels in nearby sectors. Tell them that Klingon forces have invaded the T’Vam system, and that we require assistance.”

“The signal is being jammed, sir,” the young woman said in obvious frustration.

“John?”

The science officer was studying his instruments intently as he replied. “Jamming satellites have been deployed by the Klingons, sir. The only way to get a signal out is to get as far away from their location as possible.”

“Effective range of the jamming devices?”

In a very Vulcan-like gesture, Lieutenant Miles raised an eyebrow before answering. “Several hundred kilometers, at least. And there are multiple, overlapping devices to contend with.”

Turning to the dark-skinned communications officer, Collins knew there was precious little time to waste. “Can you raise the *Indiana*?”

“I’ve got her now, sir, but the signal is very weak. We may lose it at any moment.”

“Order her to the far side of T’Vam. Have her link up with the orbital shipyards. Together they may be able to get an emergency signal out to Starfleet.”

“But what about us?” Firestine asked, both under his breath and in disbelief. “The *Indiana* is our only cover.”

“Two destroyers are no match for three fully operational Klingon cruisers, Commander. I’m not about to sacrifice hundreds of lives for a no-win scenario,” Captain Collins responded in his quietest, yet most commanding tone. “Speaking of which, I need to beam Ensign Jones and her baby off the ship as soon as possible. She may have signed up for this kind of danger, but her child hasn’t. Get security to handle it quickly before the *Indiana* is out of range.”

Nodding, Firestine went to his assigned task.

“Klingons will be in weapons range in sixty seconds,” Miles called out from the science console just as Captain Collins stepped back into the command chair.

“Lower the shields long enough to transport the ensign and her child to the *Indiana*, then get them back up.”

“Mistress! One of the Federation starships appears to be retreating. The other has lowered its shields.”

What game can they be playing? Captain K'neH'A' steepled her fingers to her chin as she watched the first destroyer quickly speed away from the second. "Are we within weapons range of the first target?"

"Almost."

But K'neH'A' was impatient. "Fire a spread of torpedoes at the closest destroyer!"

Abruptly, the *Gre'Thor* lurched as two torpedoes streaked away into the darkness. A half-minute later, Commander Klen'daH yelled from his console "Impact!"

"Well done, gunnery officer," the captain cooed. "Damage report, Commander Klen'daH."

"Only one of our weapons impacted with the Earther vessel, and they managed to raise their shields before the warhead struck. Damage to their forward shields is minimal."

"Have they altered course?"

"Negative. They are still on course to intercept us."

K'neH'A' approved of this Earther captain. While he couldn't possibly hope for a victory in the coming engagement, he—unlike the captain of the quickly retreating destroyer—had guile.

"Allow the Earther captain to come closer," she sneered. "Put our other two cruisers slightly ahead of us, but order them not to fire. When I give the order, we will swing out from behind our forces and disable their warp drive."

"We are not going to destroy them?" Klen'daH asked.

"No. I want this Earther commander myself. If he is to die, it will be at my hand and my hand alone. Stand by to beam over boarding parties. I trust it will not take long to dismantle their shields."

Chapter 5

Stepping through the rust-colored hatch, Admiral Do'val was greeted with a stench he had not been privy to in some time. The compartment was small, only few meters on each side, and lit by a sickly glow from behind a grated panel in the overhead. In the center of the room, with Captain K'neH'A' on one side and a security officer on the other, was a Federation officer. He was seated in a chair, shackled to it by his wrists. His pink face showed signs of bruising, and a fresh cut above his left eye and near the right corner of his mouth oozed with the inefficient red blood of humanity. His dark hair was disheveled, and he was breathing heavily, as if he'd just run a marathon.

"And what do we have here," Do'val asked calmly as he stepped into the spotlight, then looked to Captain K'neH'A'. "Have you found a new pet?"

"A prisoner, my lord," she said with a gracious bow. "One of many from the disabled Starfleet vessel."

Do'val leaned closer to the human, coming nearly eye to eye with the man. The Earther, despite his obvious discomfort at his wounds, kept a steady gaze into the admiral's eyes. *Commendable*.

"I'm not a believer in carrying excessive baggage, Captain K'neH'A'," the admiral admonished. "Prisoners waste resources. I assume he and his people are of *some* redeeming value?"

K'neH'A' shrugged, flashing her commander a devilish smile. "I can say little of the other prisoners at this time, Admiral. This," she scoffed distastefully at her captor, "is the captain of the Federation vessel." She noted that this seemed to perk the admiral's interest. He stepped back a pace as his eyes widened.

"Is he now?" Do'val clasped his hands behind his back, looking squarely into the Earther's eyes. "And, does this captain have a name . . . or shall I continue to address him as Earther?"

The Federation officer's eyes narrowed. "Captain Roderick Collins, USS *El Cid*. Service number 572-312."

Do'val smiled. "Dash 312, did you say?"

Captain K'neH'A', obviously unsatisfied with the answer, backhanded the Federation officer's shoulder, eliciting a grunt from the human. "That is all I've been able to get out of him. He refuses to talk."

Do'val chuckled. "And you expected something more, my dear Captain K'neH'A'? This human is a Starfleet captain, if we are to believe what little comes from his mouth. Like us, they are more than adequately trained to resist more *casual* forms of questioning." The smile on Do'val face quickly faded as he once again leaned toward Collins. "But, my dear Captain, rest assured . . . you *can* be broken," he said in an ominous whisper. "I have done so myself to a great number of your contemporaries. You shall be no different."

"Talk is cheap, ridge for brains," Collins spat back.

"We shall see, Captain Collins." The admiral tilted his head to look at K'neH'A'. "And his ship?"

"Adrift at the moment. My men are attempting to return maneuvering power to it as we speak."

"Keep your filthy paws off my ship, Klingon bast—" but Collins's words were cut short when the admiral's heavy gauntlet was rapped against the side of his face.

"Captain, Captain," Do'val began playfully, then made a *tsk-tsk* sound. "Such language, and in front of women, no less."

"She's no lady. She's a Klingon."

Do'val's eyes fell squarely on K'neH'A', examining her quickly from head to toe and back. "And a fine example of one, I assure you."

Roderick licked at a fresh trickle of blood coming from the left side of his mouth as he felt the side of his face begin to swell. "Whatever you say, Jack."

Do'val turned his attention back to Collins. "You have spirit, Captain. However misplaced it might be, I admire it."

Although Collins had more to say on the matter, he decided that rather than risking another strike to his already-battered body, he'd conserve what little strength he had remaining for the more intense questioning session he was sure to undergo in the next few hours. Perhaps he could use the time to get some information on his people. "You're the admiral in charge of this invasion force?" he asked of Do'val.

Glaring down at him, Do'val nodded slowly.

"My people?"

"Many of your crew are injured. Many more are dead. They were fortunate to have been spared your fate."

How many that meant, Collins knew he wouldn't be able to get from the Klingons. It was likely they didn't have access to the ship's roster. At least, not yet. Thankfully, based on recommendations from Starfleet Intelligence three months ago, all Federation starship computers were now encrypted with three layers of security. While it hadn't been proven that the Klingons had since been able to crack into any computer system they pilfered, the simple fact remained that the longer the Klingon technicians spent poring over the *El Cid*, the sooner they'd come across something helpful. It was simply a matter of time.

"And the other Federation starship?"

"Cowards, like the rest of you Earthers." Captain K'neH'A' snorted distastefully. "They escaped the system under high warp before we had a chance to destroy them."

The Indiana escaped. That's one bit of good news. "And the shipyards?"

K'neH'A' reached down and grabbed a handful of Collins's tattered tunic, pulling his back away from the chair. "*You* are the one being questioned, Captain. Not us!"

Admiral Do'val put a heavy hand on her shoulder. "Patience, my dear. In time, the captain will tell us everything we need to know. There is no use in harming him further."

Unsatisfied, but acquiescing to her superior, Captain K'neH'A' released Collins with a shove. "As you wish, my lord."

Do'val turned, looked over her shoulder, and then jerked his hand toward the captain. There was a screeching of metal, and Collins watched the admiral step sideways as a seat was provided for him. Throwing the folds of his cloak behind him, Do'val slowly sank into the chair scarcely two feet from Collins' own.

"So," Do'val leered, his eyes narrowing as a slick smile spread across his dark face. "What shall we talk about?"

“The station.”

Do’val snickered. “You really do have a one-track mind, Captain. But no matter. Our people beamed over to the station a short while ago. Though they found the equipment quaint, it will no doubt serve us well. As for the personnel . . .”

“Yes?” Collins asked, hoping to not sound too desperate.

Do’val shrugged as he leaned back, then put one leg over the other casually. “None have yet been found. That allows for three possibilities: they are hiding, they have beamed down to the surface, or they managed to escape with the other Starfleet vessel. If, in the course of our investigation, we discover that either of the first two has happened, I have no doubts the personnel will be executed on the spot as soon as they’re located.”

That means that either the Klingons haven’t bothered to scan the planet T’Vam for life-forms—a very unlikely possibility—or they have, and didn’t find anything. There were only a few hundred colonists down there, but easily more than the Indiana could handle by herself if she tried to evacuate them. The real question is, where are they? The personal shelters—built by the Starfleet Corps of Engineers deep into the sides of granite mountains—were more than capable of withstanding a prolonged orbital campaign, but they were far from scan-proof. The Klingons should know exactly how many people are down there.

“I rather like the idea that they, too, have escaped far beyond your reach,” Collins said with a half-smile.

Do’val seemed to be weighing his answers as he examined Roderick’s bruised face. “We will know soon enough, Captain. I have an entire legion of troops preparing to assault the surface installations as we speak. However, if you were to perhaps answer a few of my questions . . . I could be persuaded to stay the execution of more innocent people.”

“Such as?” Collins asked, his mouth becoming more dry with each passing second.

“We can begin with the Federation’s strength for this sector,” Do’val smiled. “From there, we can talk about neighboring sectors. After that, perhaps we will discuss the deprivations of your people on the planet.”

Collins *harrumphed*. “Once you find them, of course.”

Do'val sneered back. "Of course."

Before Collins could think of his next words, the admiral's attention was pulled away by the request of a junior officer. "Yes," Do'val barked.

"Admiral, message coming in from Captain Mog."

Do'val turned back to Collins and smiled, baring his sharp teeth. "The commander of my forces investigating your space station. I imagine they have located your people and are requesting orders to begin executing them."

Collins doubted it, but would humor the Klingon admiral—for the time being. He put on the most convincing concerned expression he could, hoping it would placate the Klingon's need to elicit such a reaction. When Do'val sneered with satisfaction and turned away, Collins knew he'd succeeded.

"Yes, Captain Mog," Do'val said into the provided handset as he turned back to Collins. "Please, speak in the Earther language. It would please me to see our captive's reaction and getting the news firsthand."

"Yes, my lord."

"I trust, then, that you've found what you were looking for?"

There was a marked pause before Mog continued. "In a manner of speaking, my lord."

Collins watched as the smarmy smile on Do'val face faded almost imperceptibly.

"What have you to report, then?"

"There are faint Terran life sign readings on the far side of the engineering section, sir. However, a security bulkhead bars our path."

"Then you will force it, Captain, and be quick about it!"

"Forgive me, Admiral, but that is the very reason why I have contacted you. It seems that the door can only be opened by voice command. They are magnetically sealed. All other attempts to cut through them have failed."

Engineering? That'd be the last place anyone on the station would be hiding, Collins thought to himself. *Thankfully, the Klingons have no idea why it's sealed. If they did, they'd get as far away from that compartment as possible.*

That was when Admiral Do'val caught Captain Collins's eyes again. Narrowing his gaze, Do'val stepped away from the wall speaker and strode toward the captain. Heavy boots thudded on the floor as he did so, the only sound in the compartment. "I trust you know the way to open that hatch?" he asked of Collins.

Roderick, still playing the part of the concerned Starfleet officer, nodded shakily.

"If you would be so kind," Do'val said as graciously as any Klingon could muster. "It will go well for those barricaded inside, I assure you."

Collins didn't believe him for an instant, not that it mattered. His only concern was how far away the station was from the Klingon vessel he was on. Was it right outside, or on the far side of T'Vam? There was only one way to find out. Swallowing, Collins licked his lips once more. "I have your word that the prisoners will be treated humanely?"

Do'val's head bobbed, but he said nothing.

"Blue-7-2-1-Alpha-6 . . . initiate."

Do'val smiled. "Well done, Captain. I believe that you and I will have many more productive conversations." Turning, he repeated the words into the wall speaker for Captain Mog to hear. "Once you are through, shut down the main reactor."

"Yes, my lord!" Mog replied, then signed off the channel.

Do'val stepped back to the unoccupied chair opposite Collins, obviously satisfied with himself. "Now Captain," he began as he started to sit, "we can begin to discuss the Federation's—" but his words were silenced as the entire vessel was tossed sideways. Captain K'neH'A' and Admiral Do'val were tossed to the deck, and Collins's chair toppled over, slamming the captain's shoulder into the unforgiving deck with a dull thud.

"What has happened?" Do'val barked into the intercom as he got back to his feet.

"The Federation station has self-destructed!" a voice shouted back. "Our systems are heavily damaged!"

That much was obvious to Roderick Collins, who was smiling from the deck. The entire ship was shaking violently, threatening to come apart at the seams.

"Compensate!"

"We can't, Admiral!" the officer's voice once again sounded. "Thrusters and impulse controls are down. We're being pulled into the planet's gravitation well."

Do'val turned and seethed at Collins. "You! You have done this to us!"

"On the contrary," Collins replied from the floor. "That's a taste of a little trick we picked up from the Klingons. A nice little booby trap, complete with false life sign readings provided by a low-yield scanner."

Do'val, wide-eyed and furious, turned back to the speaker. "Order the nearest ship to tractor us before we hit the atmosphere!"

"Every ship in a ten-kilometer radius was vaporized in the explosion. Many others are damaged!"

"I will be up there shortly!" Do'val then turned and approached Collins. Withdrawing his dagger, and with every intention of killing the Earther, he stopped over the captain's form and looked on him with a mixture of disgust and fury. However, in the moment before he plunged the knife into the Earther's heart, a thought crossed his mind, one that reminded him that no matter the circumstances, the human was unable to fight back. Bound to his chair, there would be no honor in the death. Besides, Collins had used the cunning worth of a Klingon to thwart Do'val's plans at capturing the orbital station and ship yards. Those acts alone demanded Collins die warrior's death. Sheathing the knife, he glowered down at the fallen human. "If I cannot stop our descent, you will die in a fiery ball as we plummet to the surface."

Collins, despite all the pain of his injuries, managed a chuckle as fresh blood began to ooze from his lips. "Die *poorly*, Admiral."

His eyes burning with rage, Do'val turned to K'neH'A'. "Watch him closely, my dear. If we survive this encounter, he will die at my hands."

Reaching down with one hand, K'neH'A' pulled Collins back to an upright position. "Yes, my lord."

* * *

Stardate 4303.15

March 2255

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

“Admiral Luxa, President Vanderbilt’s shuttle has just landed,” the melodic female voice came through the speaker on Matthew’s desk. Reaching for the leftmost yellow button, Luxa pressed it gently as he leaned forward.

“Thank you, Emily. Please, do me a favor and put on a fresh pot of tea for the president,” the commander of Starfleet said kindly, knowing Vanderbilt’s predilection for non-synthesized beverages.

“Of course, sir,” the young woman replied before Luxa closed the call. To his left, the cube-shaped computer terminal began to chime pleasantly. Reaching up, he opened the channel to Starbase 23. The screen brightened to show the gray-haired commander of Starfleet Intelligence. “Michael, it’s good to see you again.”

Michael J. Lai smiled back, his eyes holding a twinkle for the first time in Luxa’s recollection. “You too, Matthew. Am I late?”

The joke—for that’s what Matthew knew it to be—was laughable. Lai was never late. Matthew found himself chuckling at the remark. “No, no. Of course not. The president’s shuttle just set down.”

“Very good.”

“You know something, I think you have too many sets of eyes, Michael. You know just a little too much of what’s going on for your own good. That’s why you’re never tardy.”

Lai smiled warmly. “I like to think it’s because I have a well-oiled chronometer,” he said, brandishing his right wrist and examining his silver wristwatch—a gift from Luxa himself last Christmas.

“Fair enough,” the fleet admiral responded just as the doors to his office swooshed open. Expecting only Vanderbilt to pass through them, Luxa was surprised to see that the Federation president was followed by a Vulcan diplomat. Presuming the Vulcan was someone of great importance, Luxa first looked at Vanderbilt, then to the newcomer.

“This is Ambassador Sarek of Vulcan,” President Vanderbilt said formally. “Ambassador, this is Fleet Admiral Matthew D. Luxa.”

Luxa was more than aware of Vulcan customs. After all, his only son had recently become engaged to one while serving near the front lines. While Matthew had his reservations about the pairing, he was nonetheless very happy for his offspring. He’d taken it upon himself as of late to learn many of their customs—of which there were more than a few. This impromptu meeting was to be his first test, and he silently prayed he would avoid embarrassing the president in the process. Holding his hand up in the traditional Vulcan salute, Luxa stood as upright as a raw cadet. “Peace and long life, Ambassador Sarek.”

Sarek regarded him silently for a moment—or, as Luxa would later recall, inspected him—then gracefully withdrew his hand from the folds of his robe and returned the gesture. “Live long and prosper, Admiral Luxa.”

“Can I get either of you gentlemen anything?” he asked, then looked to Vanderbilt. “Emily will have tea ready in a moment.”

“Very good,” Vanderbilt nodded.

“I do not require anything, Admiral,” Sarek said formally. “But the offer is appreciated.”

“If you gentlemen will have a seat, I’ve got communications with Admiral Lai of Starfleet Intelligence linked up for the meeting.”

Vanderbilt and Sarek took seats at the far end of the desk. Luxa shifted his chair, then turned the monitor so that everyone could easily see one another. Introductions, Sarek had said of Lai, were ‘unnecessary,’ as the two had met some months ago on Starbase 23.

“I’m anxious to hear your report, Admiral Lai,” Vanderbilt said to the Intelligence officer.

“To put it bluntly, sir, we’re making some serious headway in our efforts against the Klingons. We’ve bested them in nearly every encounter over the last several months.”

Vanderbilt had suspected as much, but hearing the news directly from the head of Intelligence was music to his ears.

“After we secured the Argelius Approaches,” Lai continued confidently, “I believe we effectively sealed their fate. Since then, the Klingons have been scouring the territory they’ve captured, desperate for raw materials to keep their ships combat ready.”

“The results?” Vanderbilt asked, which Luxa answered.

“Mixed, sir. Many of the systems the Klingons conquered early in the war were not well-seeded with precious materials, as luck or fate would have it.”

“I doubt the inhabitants of those worlds feel such divine providence, Admiral,” Sarek said evenly.

Knowing that it was—for lack of a better word—*illogical* to argue with a Vulcan, let alone an ambassador, Luxa let the comment slip. “After the Battle of Sector 12-J, the Klingons began moving away from their push coreward.”

“This was further reinforced by our victories at the Battles of Rex Ducat and Tirehe,” Lai continued from the screen. “In effect, their wedge-shaped invasion of our sector is being flattened—but also widened—along the former Federation-Klingon neutral zone.”

“Are you suggesting they may be attempting to move the location of the entire zone more into our space?” Vanderbilt asked.

“It’s beginning to look that way, sir,” Lai acknowledged with a nod.

Sarek also seemed to approve of the idea. “Logical, if one takes into the account the mind of a Klingon. They are opportunists, but not overly foolish. This could signal both an end to hostilities, as well as a difficult series of negotiations in the future. If they acquire a vast amount of territory along the length of the zone, the Federation may well accede that space to them in an effort to end the violence.”

“I take it you approve of that, Ambassador?” Lai asked.

Sarek sat silently for a moment before speaking again. “No, Admiral Lai. I do not. As well, I do not believe that other founding members in the Federation assembly feel that way either. To give in to the Klingons—at this juncture—would be imprudent. It will show a weakness on the part of the Federation, one that I believe the Klingons would well try to take advantage of in the future.”

“I’m in agreement with the ambassador on this, gentlemen,” Vanderbilt said. “We must push the Klingons as far out of Federation space as possible, and reclaim our pilfered systems along the way. Anything less would be interpreted as a show of weakness by the Klingons—assuming we can ever get them to the negotiation table.”

“And what of T’Vam?” Sarek said after a moment. “They are rich in resources, surely enough to bolster the Klingon advance in that area.”

On the screen, Lai nodded. “As you all know, we received a distress call from the starship *Indiana* a few weeks ago. We quickly sent in a small fleet to render assistance to the planet. To our surprise, it really wasn’t that necessary.”

“What do you mean?” Vanderbilt asked in confusion.

“The captain of the destroyer *El Cid* was taken prisoner by the Klingons shortly after they arrived. We found him, as well as a handful of other Federation officers, stranded on the surface. Seems that the *El Cid*’s skipper managed to disable a large portion of the Klingon fleet before our forces arrived. Our shipyards in the system were destroyed, as well as all our cruisers in the system. However, the Klingon victory was short-lived. It’s likely they beamed off a small portion of raw materials before fleeing the system. I’ll have the whole report of Captain Collins’s imprisonment and escape forwarded to you, sir.” Lai smiled as he said it to both Vanderbilt and Luxa. “It’s worthy of a read. Although at times unconventional, it got the job done.”

“And the colonists?” Sarek asked.

“Alive, but a little worse for wear.”

“Chlorotheragen?” the Vulcan asked quietly.

“The Klingons tried, but the antidote worked perfectly,” Lai replied.

Sarek’s eyes closed, almost as if he were grateful at the news.

“An antidote?” Luxa asked.

Sarek nodded slowly. “Devised by my people at the Vulcan Science Academy some time ago, and distributed by special Vulcan courier ships over the last month

to all Federation planets in the war zone—at least, as many as they could get to undetected.”

Luxa was beside himself. “Your people have had an antidote and you’re just now making Starfleet aware of it?”

“I was aware of it,” Vanderbilt countered, “and I agreed with Vulcan Intelligence that it should be kept a secret as long as possible. This was an ace in our sleeve, Admiral—one the Klingons weren’t counting on. If they knew of the antidote, they may have tried to develop something more powerful. Now that they’ve run out of resources, they’ve also run out of time.”

Luxa was less upset that the president had kept him the dark than that Admiral Lai had done it. Matthew knew that before the day was out, he’d make sure to inquire about it.

“As for our next encounter,” Lai continued, “we’re expecting the Klingons to make another push for more resources, somewhere in Sector 23. We’re getting a fleet together now.”

Chapter 6

Stardate 4303.30

All around the light cruiser *Polaris*, dozens upon dozens of Starfleet's finest starships were at rest, as if anchored to invisible piers jutting from the central flagship, the *Achernar* cruiser *Gallant*. Flying the flag of newly promoted Commodore Barbara Sach, the *Gallant* was preparing to get underway, a signal to the rest of the fleet commanders that they should do the same. As the deck plates beneath Captain Shanayda's feet began to show the vibrations of the engines coming to life, he gave himself this small moment to reflect on what was about to transpire.

The 8th Battle Fleet, in which the *Polaris* was one of ten *Tikopai*-class frigates, was made up of an assortment of every vessel in Starfleet's arsenal. From their mooring on the outer fringes of the formation, Shanayda and his bridge officers were treated to a wide-angled shot on the view screen that captured most of the fleet in all its splendor—and its destructive power. Lined abreast, as if they were cadets about to be inspected, a row of *Achernar*- and *Bonhomme Richard*-class cruisers stood ready to get underway. Even the namesake of the class, the ubiquitous *Bonhomme Richard* herself, was counted amongst their ranks—each strikingly similar to one another, yet each as unique as the crews that manned them.

From the helm console, Ensign Gene Kendrick tried to grasp everything in his periphery at once. There was simply too much to see, and while his eyes were darting from one vessel to another, he couldn't count their numbers.

"It's quite a sight to behold, isn't it?" Captain Shanayda said as he stepped up behind the ensign, placing a firm yet yielding hand on the younger man's shoulder.

"Yes, sir," Kendrick agreed with a deep sigh. "I've never seen anything like it."

Shanayda, collected but equally awestruck at the sight, could well understand that. "Not many have, including myself. But Starfleet has decidedly shifted from

defensive to offensive mode, and this fleet represents a major attempt to take back some of our lost territory.”

“Do you think we’ll be able to, sir?” Kendrick asked, his voice thinly laced with apprehension.

Shanayda smiled down to the young man. “Take heart, son. Mind your training, and be alert for rapid changes in orders. Do that and, no matter what, you’ll be fine.”

“Sir, chief engineer Bac’tol on the line,” the fair-skinned communications officer said from behind the two.

“At my chair, please,” Shanayda said as he took a seat, then pressed the intercom button. “Yes, Commander?” he asked.

The deep voice of the chief engineer—one of the few Vulcans in all of Starfleet to hold such a post—came back smoothly. “Engines are at maximum operating efficiency, Captain. Impulse and thruster controls are at your command.”

“Superior, Commander. Defensive systems?”

“Phaser control reports all banks ready for primary charge. Photon torpedoes check green. I have taken the liberty of priming the forward launchers.”

“Thoughtful, Mr. Bac’tol.”

In his mind, Shanayda saw Bac’tol raising an eyebrow in the ensuing pause before the Vulcan spoke again. “I felt it sensible.”

“Of course,” the captain said with a faint smile. “Damage control parties?”

“Mustered at their assigned posts, Captain. I’ve also taken the liberty of assigning a second detail to both deflector control and the primary drive system sub-control stations.”

“Very good. We’ll be getting underway shortly. Will you be joining us on the bridge?”

“With your permission, Captain, I will remain in engineering for the duration of the confrontation.”

In truth, Shanayda expected nothing less. If one was bold enough to say it aloud, Bac’tol was enamored with the ship’s engines. However, given the Vulcan’s brooding nature and uncharacteristic bulk, such a thing was never said. Besides,

engineering was where the Vulcan would be at his best, advising repair teams and overseeing every minute detail of the operations of the engines.

“Understood, Commander. Stand by to depart the system.”

A few dozen meters off the *Polaris*’s port beam, another Vulcan officer—a contemporary of Bac’tol at Starfleet Academy—was making final adjustments to the already fine-tuned sensors of the *Heston*-class battle cruiser *Bogart*. The *Bogart*’s captain, Todd Cooper, watched with fascination as Commander S’laron’s eyes stared into the blue glow of the sensor hood.

Over the last few months, the old battle cruiser had begun to show her age. Although she’d come out on top in the last few engagements with Klingon forces, it was only due to assistance by more capable, modern vessels—and the dedication by crewmen such as S’laron to keep the older, nearly antiquated systems operating beyond their peak efficiency. The *Bogart* was likely the oldest vessel in the assembled fleet, not nearly as maneuverable or graceful as many others. But what she lacked in those areas, she more than made up in firepower—something even the “new gals” with their fresh Thermocoat paintjobs still drying couldn’t say. With newly installed aft-firing torpedoes, and Gatling-like phasers that could fire 360 degrees on both the ventral and dorsal sides—to say nothing of the dual-layer shields that would be put to the test for the first time—it was no wonder why she was to be tasked with leading the charge into Sector 23-D.

Turning his eyes from the science officer, Captain Cooper looked at the stylus in his hand for the third time in the last ten minutes. On it, Starbase 23 and the four adjoining sectors were displayed in all their grandeur. The planet Surokos, at the southern edge of Sector 23-A, was where the 8th Battle Fleet was moored. The Federation desperately needed to push the Klingons out of this area. The Klingons were staging their forces in the Aplithin system, which fell at the relative “northern” end of Sector 23-D—easily within a few days’ travel of Starbase 23. The invaders had already taken Mandrak VI three weeks ago, replenishing their supplies and

taking the entire system hostage. Now, poised to capture the only Federation starbase in this area, it was time to deal with the Klingons here once and for all.

“How are those adjustments coming along, Commander?” Captain Cooper asked, knowing that any minute now the *Bogart* would be getting her orders to get underway.

S’laron nodded into the blue light. “They are completed, sir.”

Cooper had tasked the Vulcan with increasing the resolution of the long-range sensors, something that many newer ships came with as standard. However, Cooper was sure that the *Bogart* could still out-reach those new pups. He’d given S’laron the job, which the science officer had nearly bubbled over with annoying calmness to accept. Now they were about to see the fruits of the last three hours of labor put to the test.

The ship’s navigator, Lieutenant Commander Greg Rozier, spoke up from his console. “Sir, it looks like the fleet is getting underway.” The lieutenant was anxious but reserved as everyone watched a small number of vessels on the screen begin to shift position.

Rozier, a recent transfer from the USS *Exeter*, was performing admirably in his new position as third in command. The *Exeter*, God rest her duranium hull, was now in pieces—scattered about the Nivalm system with a half-dozen other Federation vessels. Taken in by a surprise Klingon raid, the Starfleet crews gave more than they got, but not without suffering some tragic losses. Rozier and a handful of others had made it to a shuttle in time to see the *Exeter* be blown from space a few moments later. Greg’s actions in the crisis—and the resultant accolades he’d received for the rescue of several crewmen—endearred him to Cooper when the captain was looking for new officers to fill the ranks of the *Bogart*. In his heart, Cooper knew there was a first-rate captain just under the surface of this man’s tunic, and he was determined to challenge Rozier to perform at his peak to bring it out. “Maintain position for the moment, Greg. Let’s wait to hear the order from Commodore Sach herself.”

“Aye.”

“Message coming in from the *Gallant*, sir,” the communications officer said a split second later. “We are advised to take our position at the head of the fleet and stand by to enter warp.”

“Send our acknowledgement, Lieutenant.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Mr. Rozier,” Cooper said, getting the attention of the navigator just as he lifted a hand toward the screen. “You heard the lady. Ahead full.”

Rozier smiled as he turned to his duties. “Aye, sir. Coming about on course 113-mark-6 at full impulse.”

His eyes on his sensors, Lieutenant Commander James Webb turned and faced his captain. “Sir, the *Bogart* is getting underway.”

Fleet Captain Hunter Schoumacher, commander of the *Tikopai*-class USS *Antares* as well as the entire 15th Cruiser Squadron, nodded briskly. “That’s our signal to get underway. Helm, put us just off the stern of the *Bogart*. Match their course and speed.” He then turned to his communications officer. “Lieutenant, hail the *Binar* and the *Kuala Lumpur*. Inform them to take up their prearranged vectors behind us.”

“Yes, sir,” the officer said, then went to work calling the other two light cruisers.

As the light cruiser *Antares* came about, the stern of the *Bogart* came into view on the forward screen. Sharing the general shape with the *Constitution*- and *Achernar*-class, the only major difference externally was that the warp engines were placed parallel with the secondary hull instead of angled away from it. Internally, Fleet Captain Schoumacher knew the differences were more pronounced.

“The *Binar* and the *Kuala Lumpur* have acknowledged,” the communications officer said.

“They’re coming into position now, sir,” Webb said from the science console. “The *Binar* is portside, aft. The *Kuala Lumpur* is starboard-aft.”

With the *Bogart* in the lead, the cruisers behind it completed the spear-tipped first wave of the assault that was about to take place. The pieces were set. All that was needed was the order from Commodore Sach on the *Gallant*.

The only thing that gave Schoumacher pause was the lack of intelligence on the Klingon presence in the system. It was widely known that there were numerous enemy ships in 23-D, but the exact composition was unclear. Conflicting reports stated multiple cruisers, battle cruisers, frigates and, in the case of one report, nothing but a large fleet of freighters. No one had ventured far enough toward the system to be detected by the Klingons, which meant the Klingons were similarly beyond the range of the Federation sensors. Commodore Sach hoped that the *Bogart* and her escorts would resolve that deficiency.

What was known was what Sector 23-D contained. Bisecting it from corner to corner, the former Federation-Klingon neutral zone took up a large portion of it, leaving small wedges for the opposing forces. The agricultural world of Mensae, and the non-aligned world of Daros, were on the Federation side.

The Kinza D’elma system, otherwise known by the Klingons as “the path to Sto’Vo’Kor,” was on the other. A violent, volcanically active system, with a pair of white-hot stars at its center, was clearly visible in the night sky all the way back on Earth. It was also the site of a major Klingon starbase and training facility—one that had been a primary target for the Starfleet war planners on Starbase 23 for months. If the 8th Battle Fleet could push the enemy back into Klingon territory, it made a future attack on Kinza D’elma well within reach. If Starfleet failed, it would put Starbase 23 directly in the Klingons’ path of advancement.

Sucking in a slow breath, Fleet Captain Schoumacher leaned back in his chair, the weight of the coming engagement filling the air around him.

“Signal coming in from Commodore Sach on the *Gallant*,” the communications officer sounded.

Hunter let out the breath slowly.

“The *Bogart* has been ordered to proceed into Sector 23-D.”

“Understood,” Hunter agreed. “Lock our navigational and astrometric systems into their computer systems. We’ll automatically enter warp on their mark.”

The helmsman and navigator looked to one another after making the necessary entries. As they turned toward the forward screen, the *Bogart* leapt into warp. A microsecond later, the cruisers of the 15th were right behind her.

* * *

Stardate 4304.08

After three days of continuous warp operations, the ships of the 15th Cruiser Squadron slowed to sublight. The remainder of the 8th Battle Fleet had jumped into warp an hour after Captain Cooper had engaged the *Bogart's* engines. The latest subspace communication from Commodore Sach, which Cooper had received no less than two hours before, showed that the rest of the fleet was still precisely one hour behind him. That gave him sixty minutes to scan the area in preparation for their arrival . . . sixty minutes in which they would be vulnerable to any number of scenarios they could find themselves in.

Thankfully, the outskirts of the Aplithin system were devoid of enemy activity. *Could it be that the Klingons aren't here at all?* If they were, it was unheard of for a Starfleet vessel to get so close without being scanned. The Klingons usually had a small number of D-4s or D-6s on the periphery of their formations or—at the very least—patrolling the outer planets of conquered systems. That Cooper had found none gave him pause where he should have felt elation. The Klingons were, if nothing else, becoming more and more predictable with each encounter. Anything out of the ordinary was reason for concern.

Of course, the enemy could be just about anywhere in the system. Aplithin: fifteen spatial bodies—many of which were capable of sheltering a large number of enemy vessels—not to mention masking their signatures with the latent radiation that abounded there. A great number of the planetoids were entirely rocky with no atmospheres, but rich in mineral deposits. There were two Jovian moons, each far too inhospitable for life to flourish or to allow any kind of quick-mining operation to be at all lucrative. An even larger gas giant and a smaller gas dwarf were both more than adequate to supply vital materials to a desperate enough fleet captain. But

the real gem was Mensae, the only class-M world in the system, and the one that Captain Cooper had up on the *Bogart*'s forward view screen at the moment.

Remarkably similar in many respects to Earth, it gave the captain a sense of homesickness he hadn't felt in some time. Slightly cooler at night, and a bit warmer during the day, the planet was one Cooper wished he had the time to take his crew down to for some much-needed shore leave. Currently, much of the planet's blue water and nearly half of its landmass was covered by billowy white clouds. The polar caps, accounting for less than two percent of the surface, were coated in thick layers of water ice, and nearly indistinguishable from the clouds high above them. But it was the high peaks of the western ridges that called to Todd Cooper. Recalling adolescent memories of attempting to scale the monolithic Mont Blanc, Cooper found his sense of adventure reawakened as he stared down at Mensae's inviting snowy summits. He could almost feel the crags and crevices under his fingertips, the rush of the crisp air invading his lungs with each breath as he free-climbed to views accessible only to the surest of hearts. The reward, he knew, would be worth the momentary discomfort. His mind strained to hear the soft waves of wind that would flow over his body as he hugged the cliffs, but it was the sound of the science officer's voice that roused him from his momentary daydream.

"Captain, something on long-range sensors," S'laron said in his usual monotone.

Cooper reluctantly turned from the viewer just as the western ridge disappeared behind the rim of the rotating world. He could see the Vulcan still peering into his sensor display. "Yes, Commander?"

"There appear to several mining vessels in orbit around the sixth planet in the system."

The gas giant. Nearly twice the size of Jupiter, and with enough materials floating in its gaseous atmosphere to supply the needs of several fleets of ships. "Can you get a more detailed scan?"

"Compiling available data now, sir," S'laron said as he pressed a series of brightly colored controls. "The vessels are orbiting the planet dangerously close, using collection beams to mine the material directly from the atmosphere."

"Can you tell what they're collecting?"

“Various precious gases, as well as trace dilithium materials. I’ve also located three more mining vessels near the inner iron-core worlds. They appear to be collecting ores. A flotilla of cargo ships is ferrying between the mining vessels, possibly amassing the collected materials for transport to another location.”

“But are they Klingon?” Cooper asked, as much to himself as the science officer. The Vulcan nodded.

“Undoubtedly. Specifications are consistent with known Klingon types.”

“Crew complement of the vessels?”

“Only a handful on the cargo freighters—perhaps no more than four or five each. The mining vessels are fully automated.”

“We’re close enough to the old neutral zone,” Lieutenant Commander Mark “Crash” Donnelly said from the helm. “They could’ve made it all the way from Klingon space on their own.”

All things being equal, Captain Cooper would agree. However, things were not equal. The Klingons were getting more desperate with each passing week. They needed these raw materials, and would do anything to protect them. “Not this time, Crash. There *are* warships nearby. Problem is, we need to find them before they find us.”

“What about probes?” the helmsman asked, turning his eyes to the science officer. S’laron directed his answer at the captain.

“Easily detectable, not only by the cargo ships, but by anything else in the system.”

“Agreed,” Cooper acknowledged. However, caught between a rock and a hard place, he still needed answers. “Where’s the highest concentration of radiation in the system?”

“Between the fifth and sixth planets, sir. There’s a radiation belt that encompasses the two.”

“And the fourth planet?”

The Vulcan raised an eyebrow as he, too, turned his attention to the class-M world still spinning slowly on the view screen. “Mensae is too far distant from the radiation to be affected.”

“But also positioned directly between the minerals of the gas giants and the ore-rich worlds of the inner moons.”

S’laron’s head dipped approvingly. “Precisely between them, to be exact.”

Todd brought a finger to his chin, stroking it absently as he pondered the idea forming in his mind. “Let’s assume that the Klingons are somewhere between Mensae and the sub-Jovian planet. Could they hide themselves from our sensors?”

S’laron’s eyes darted to the overhead as his computer-like mind calculated the variables. “Possibly, but only for short durations. The orbits of the two bodies are similar, but not perfectly synchronized. Any vessel hiding near the radiation belt would become visible every 15.4 hours, and would continue to be visible for another six.”

“Unless they changed positions,” Donnelly was quick to point out.

Intrigued, both S’laron and Cooper looked to the helmsman. “But to where?” Cooper asked.

“If it were me, I’d wait until the last possible minute, then move as close to the central star as possible. That would give some obscurities to passing sensors.”

“Not enough to completely shield a large force, Commander,” S’laron noted, but Todd Cooper was quick to counter.

“But certainly enough to make those same sensors appear as if they were seeing anomalies.”

S’laron wagged his head almost imperceptibly. “The Klingons would need to be very close to the central star to mask long-range Federation scans.”

“How close?”

“Dangerously so. If we are to believe all the reports coming in from Starfleet Intelligence as to the state of the various Klingons fleets, then their vessels would likely not be operating at peak efficiency. They would not be able to maintain the orbit indefinitely.”

Cooper smirked. “They don’t need to. They’ve got the radiation belt to crawl back to every few hours.”

“Such a maneuver would have to be done quickly to avoid detection.”

Donnelly chuckled. “But that’s assuming there’s a Federation starship is in the area *and* scanning.”

Cooper nodded. “We’re here now, and I intend to keep our scanners peeled.” He then turned from the forward view screen to face S’laron. “When would the next transition be?”

“If there is a Klingon force in the radiation belt, it would become mutually visible to all in less than one hour, assuming we do not change our position.”

“Mutually visible?” Donnelly asked.

“The same radiation that prevents us from currently locating the Klingons is preventing them from seeing us, Commander,” the Vulcan said as he crossed his arms in front of his chest. “In forty-seven minutes, we will be detected.”

“And so will they,” Cooper said. “In fact, I have a feeling we’ll see them first. There’s a good chance they won’t be looking in this exact direction when they emerge from the belt.”

“There will be a *small* window of opportunity for our forces to obtain a tactical advantage.”

“How small?”

S’laron leaned back into his chair, then folded his arms across his chest casually. “Let us assume that the Klingons will—as Commander Donnelly states—‘wait until the last moment’ to set a course for the central star. If they depart the farthest edge of the radiation belt at maximum impulse, they will become visible to our scanners approximately six minutes before they reach the central star. If, however, we fail to intercept them in time, they might use the radiation from the star to again mask their signatures—thus negating any advantage we might have.”

Cooper then turned to Donnelly at the helm. “But can we intercept them in time?”

Mark turned to his console, sighing in disapproval as he swiped a hand slowly across the surface. “I don’t think so, sir. She’s got teeth and claws to spare, but the *Bogart*’s just too cumbersome. We wouldn’t be able to get the impulse engines up to speed in time.”

“What about the *Polaris*?” Cooper asked S’laron.

“Only four of our seven vessels have the necessary speed to intercept the Klingons. The *Polaris* is one of them. However, they could be severely outnumbered.”

“They just have to keep them occupied long enough for our reinforcements to arrive. Besides, the rest of the 15th won’t be far behind them.”

S’laron nodded. “The *Antares* will be detected by the Klingon cargo vessels as soon as she enters the system. However, they are unarmed and pose no threat.”

“We’ll take care of the ore freighters and the mining craft,” Cooper said. “Communications, hail Fleet Captain Shanayda on board the *Polaris*—Priority One.”

Chapter 7

On the bridge of the *Polaris*, Captain Shanayda and the rest had been waiting patiently for nearly an hour. Like the *Bogart* and the rest of the ships in the 15th Cruiser Squadron, they had kept a continual eye on the Klingon mining ships and ore freighters passing throughout the system. There seemed to be very little rhyme or reason to their movements over that time, except to transfer what little material the mining vessels could obtain over to the waiting freighters. The freighters themselves held almost stationary positions, as if they were waiting for more than just cargo to be ferried to them. The rest of the 8th Battle Fleet would arrive soon, but to what end? If there were a major Klingon force hiding in this system, it had yet to be located. However, if Captain Cooper's science officer's calculations were correct, the 15th Cruiser Squadron would find out within the next few minutes.

Shanayda had ordered his science officer to maintain a close watch on the radiation belt surrounding the fifth and sixth gaseous planets. They'd been ordered to proceed into the system at maximum speed and attack as soon as they detected anything. At the helm, Ensign Gene Kendrick waited for the order, his fingers poised over the controls. When the science officer spoke up a moment later, Kendrick flinched, nearly sending the vessel rocketing into the Aplithin system.

"Detecting something in the radiation belt, Captain," the Edosian officer said in a clipped, high-pitched voice.

As he looked to the chronometer between the helm and navigation console, Captain Shanayda's head wagged. *Right on time, it seems.* "What do you have?"

"A large radiation surge. Indicative of a large formation of vessels getting underway."

"How large?" the captain asked.

"Vessels are emerging from the radiation belt now, sir. Scanners showing forty Klingon vessels, with classes ranging from frigate to battle cruiser."

"Heading?"

"Toward the central star, maximum impulse."

They're making their run. No time to waste. “Kendrick, intercept! Maximum impulse!”

“Aye!”

“Weapons officer, arm phasers and photon torpedoes. Wait until we’re just out of their weapons range before raising our shields,” Shanayda barked, then opened a channel to chief engineer Bac’tol. “I want as much power to the impulse engines as you can muster.”

“Understood,” the Vulcan replied calmly, then closed the channel.

“We’re undoubtedly visible to the Klingons, but they have not altered course,” the science officer said.

“They’re intent on trying to use the star’s radiation to confuse our sensors,” Shanayda countered.

“Firing range in thirty seconds,” Kendrick said.

“Target the nearest vessel and fire a salvo of torpedoes as soon as you have a lock.”

“Aye, sir!”

Three minutes after the *Polaris* and her three escorts had opened fire on the Klingon fleet, the heavy cruiser *Bogart* was on the scene with the rest of the cruiser squadron. On the main view screen, Captain Cooper watched as the light cruiser *Antares* used her perfectly targeted phasers to rip open the top of a Klingon destroyer. A second later, the vessel exploded in a shimmer of light. The Federation forces were vastly outnumbered, but they seemed to be holding their own in the confusion near the fourth planet in the system. Captain Cooper wondered about the inhabitants of the planet below and what they would make of the strange lights flashing in the night sky high above them.

“How long until the rest of the 8th gets here?” Cooper asked as he turned to S’laron at the science console.

“Eight minutes until they have to drop to sublight to enter the system. They will arrive at this location approximately three minutes later.”

With her awesome array of weaponry, Cooper only hoped that the *Bogart* could keep the majority of the Klingons occupied until then. “How many targets are in the immediate area?”

“Two D-7 cruisers off the port bow, with a D-10 battle cruiser off the starboard.”

“Rozier, keep us as steady as you can,” Cooper said to the navigator. “Weapons officer, target all three vessels—torpedoes to the cruisers, phasers to the D-10. Reduce magnification on the viewer.”

“Locked, captain,” the young man said.

“Fire!”

On the screen, Cooper watched three torpedoes speed off to the port side as two beams of phaser fire streaked off to starboard. Faster than the propelled weapons, the phasers struck first. The D-10’s green-tinted shields flared for a moment before becoming invisible once again. Then the torpedoes struck the D-7s. The first two struck the closest, both hitting the enemy’s starboard warp pylon. The vessel’s shields, already damaged or offline for whatever reason, were completely down, and the nacelle shattered into several large chunks. The final torpedo hit the farthest D-7 in the stern, causing the shields to brighten for a split second.

“One D-7 is down,” S’laron reported. “The other has damage to her stern shields. The shields of the D-10 are down to eighty-five percent. No other damage to report. The battle cruiser is turning to engage us.”

Well, that got their attention, all right. “Target all weapons at that battle cruiser. Continual fire until it’s disabled or destroyed.”

“Sir, another cruiser’s coming around to our stern!” S’laron shouted a moment before the *Bogart* shuddered under the impact of multiple disruptor blasts.

Cooper found himself having to shout over the creaking of the hull under the strain. “Evasive maneuvers! Fire the stern torpedoes!”

Seated in the command chair of the cruiser *Antares*, Fleet Captain Hunter Schoumacher watched as the *Bogart* was hounded by no less than three Klingon vessels, with a battle cruiser quickly bearing down to make four. Unfortunately, the

Antares was engaged in her own scuffle with two frigates and couldn't detach to help. "Communications, get the cruiser *Maelstrom* on the line. Have them intercept that D-10 before it comes around!"

The ensign at the communications station nodded as he replayed the information. "*Maelstrom* is on her way. Ten seconds."

On the screen, Schoumacher watched as the Federation light cruiser came into view, swooping down and over the *Bogart* with only a few meters to spare. Alternating phaser fire, the *Maelstrom* successfully hit all three attacking Klingon vessels before firing torpedoes at the D-10. The two projectiles hit the battle cruiser amidships, causing it to veer off and away from the *Bogart*. Cooper clenched his hand in victory, and was about to ask his communications officer to hail the *Maelstrom*'s captain when two more enemy battle cruisers caught the starship in a deadly crossfire. With the combined firepower of their disruptor cannons and torpedoes, the Klingons dissected the starship in a matter of seconds.

The two Klingon frigates taking potshots at him reminded Hunter that he didn't have the luxury of mourning the dead. *How much longer until the rest of the fleet arrives? A minute? Three? Will any of us survive that long?* The *Antares* shook as a disruptor beam bounced off the ever-weakening shields. On the view screen, the captain watched as an enemy frigate passed just ahead of the ship. "Target that vessel and fire everything!"

As if by providence, Lieutenant Commander Donnelly had already target the vessel. As soon as Schoumacher uttered the order, Donnelly splayed his fingers across half his console. Three phaser banks and the photon launcher discharged, draining enough energy to momentarily dim the bridge lights for the briefest of seconds. Everything struck the target simultaneously and the Klingon vessel shattered into an expanding fireball.

"We're entering weapons range now, Commodore!"

Leaning forward in the command chair on the bridge of the *Gallant*, 8th Battle Fleet commander Barbara Sach watched the fracas just ahead of her forces. In between the mass of gray-green Klingon ships, she could see the *Bogart* trying desperately to ward off no less than five enemy vessels—and doing an admirable

job of it. Phaser fire was streaking out of the cruiser in every direction, and the occasional bursts from the forward and stern torpedo tubes told Sach that Captain Cooper wasn't about to give up.

"Lieutenant, get us as close to the *Bogart* as you can," she said to the *Gallant's* navigator, Matthew Lee. "Weapons officer, target the flanking D-7 and fire phasers. Get him away from the cruiser."

"Message coming in from the *Eagle*, ma'am," the communications officer sounded. "Captain Searls and his ships are in position."

Sach had ordered Searls to take his cruiser and a handful of frigates to flank the bulk of the Klingon forces. They were now directly perpendicular with the Klingons and ready to strike.

"Phaser fire strike, Commodore," the weapons officer shouted. "We got one of the D-7s to disengage from the *Bogart*."

"Communications, order Searls to begin his run," she said, scrutinizing the main view screen and eyeballing a damaged D-10 that was just ahead of the *Bogart*. "Target that battle cruiser and fire phasers."

The *Gallant*, with the similarly shaped command cruiser *Bonhomme Richard*, opened fire on the faltering D-10. The Klingon battle cruiser's wide secondary hull took the brunt of the ensuing damage. The *Bonhomme Richard*, under the vigilant command of Fleet Captain William Blackwell, pummeled the Klingon's two disrupter cannon emplacements on either side of the hull. The *Gallant*, wasting little time, broke the proverbial back of the warship. Using three well-placed phaser shots, she separated the long neck just behind the bridge module. The cruiser's lights winked out, all power lost.

Continuing on, the *Bonhomme Richard* found a pair of D-7s harassing the Federation destroyer *Scipio*. The odds were quickly swinging in Starfleet's favor, and the idea of capturing some enemy vessels was paramount on William's mind. But Blackwell had his orders for Commodore Sach: no prisoners. Every enemy target was to be destroyed.

“Lieutenant Caplin, target the closest D-7 and fire torpedoes.”

“Their shields are already down,” Commander Eu’Gene Baker said from the science console.

William didn’t turn to face his executive officer. “We have our orders, Commander.”

Blackwell watched as the torpedoes—which he usually reserved for busting enemy shields—streaked down toward the already wounded vessel. The two charges struck the rear impulse module on the dorsal side of the secondary hull, sending up a shower of sparks and debris and causing a jet of plasma to trail behind the nearly powerless vessel.

“Phasers locked,” Lieutenant Caplin said.

William inhaled slowly. He knew what he had to do, but something in him was reluctant to do it. The Federation, by all accounts, was on the upswing in this war. To him, now was the time to begin showing some restraint when dealing with the enemy. After all, hadn’t there been times in the not-too-distant past when many in Starfleet were clamoring for the same treatment from the Klingons? Was the Federation now so different? But that was a debate best left to historians or commanders who had the ability to make changes in policy. Blackwell, and many others like him, were weapons of war . . . for the moment. So, while his personal logs would indicate his disagreement with the actions he was about to take, he would nonetheless obey his orders, just as he always had.

“Target the engineering section and fire phasers.”

Caplin acknowledged. Phasers were fired. Another warship exploded.

“Two more targets to our stern, sir. Destroyers,” Baker said, sensing the frustration Blackwell was feeling. The two had been friends for a long time, and they held the same reservations about their current actions.

“Lieutenant Morrow,” Blackwell said to the dark-skinned navigator, “bring us about. Put our torpedoes to bear on those targets.”

After destroying two more small frigates, the *Gallant* came about high above the mass of warships fighting below it. Commodore Sach watched as the *Bonhomme Richard* took out another target, then observed the single-nacelle destroyer *Scipio*—

aided by the *Achernar*-class cruiser *Eagle*—destroy another. There was an order to this, one that Barbara approved of. The Federation would take no chances with these enemies—they would all be destroyed, just as her own past had those years ago on Archanis. Even now, the last image of her late husband filled her mind—one that haunted her in her darkest hours. Daniel’s body, twisted and broken, on the floor of his lab on that distant world . . . the first casualty of the senseless destructiveness of the Klingon war machine. Now, years of single-minded dedication had put her in a position to exact the revenge she wanted, and she would waste none of it.

“Communications, order the *Polaris* and the *Antares* to attack the retreating enemy frigates to the north. They mustn’t be allowed to escape the system.”

“Aye.”

“The *Debon* has reached the coordinates of the enemy mining freighters,” Commander Walaardt said from the science console.

“Communications, order them to destroy the targets.”

Sach didn’t see Walaardt place a firm hand on the comm officer’s shoulder, belaying the ensign’s given order for a moment. “Shouldn’t we try to take them alive, ma’am? After all, they’re unarmed.”

Barbara didn’t turn around to face him. Her tone was even and measured. “We will destroy them all, Commander. No exceptions.”

Without further protest, Walaardt and Ensign Nicole Rooney locked eyes. The commander nodded and removed his hand, giving the ensign permission to continue with her given order. Stepping back to his console, Walaardt panned the short-range sensors in a wide arc around the *Gallant*. What he saw took his breath away. “Captain! Enemy battle cruiser approaching!”

“What?” Barbara asked in shock. “How did they get so close?”

“Unknown. They just . . . appeared out of nowhere directly above our position. They’re bearing down at us at one-quarter impulse!”

“Lee,” the commodore called to the navigator, “get us out of here!”

But it was too late. The D-10 battle cruiser—flagship of the now-decimated fleet—was giving no quarter. The point-like disruptor cannons opened fire simultaneously, streams of green energy rippling down and impacting at a single point on the *Gallant*'s hull. The cruiser's shields flared, but the short range and the intensity of the Klingon bolts proved too much. The upper saucer section was washed in sparks and debris as the impulse drive module exploded. Secondary explosions caused by damaged fusion reactors completed the job begun by the disruptors, and the primary and secondary hulls of the *Gallant* tumbled apart like leaves in the wind.

"The *Gallant* has been destroyed!" the *Antares*'s communication officer sounded.

Fleet Captain Schoumacher's next course of action was obvious. "Send to all ships: we're assuming command of the fleet. Helm, bring us out of the combat zone, full impulse!" Thankfully, due to only a few enemy vessels remaining, the trip took only a few seconds. Soon the *Antares* was near the beautiful blue-white class-M world, watching from a discreet distance as the Federation forces mopped up the remainder of the once-powerful Klingon fleet. "Communications, get me Fleet Captain Blackwell."

"Audio and visual patched in to the *Bonhomme Richard*, sir," the ensign replied.

On the screen, the distant view of the battle was replaced by the bridge of the command cruiser. Blackwell, his slowly graying hair slightly disheveled, looked sternly back at Schoumacher. "Captain."

"The *Gallant*'s been destroyed, and I've assumed command of the fleet. You're the senior starship captain, so you're to be my eyes and ears."

"Yes, sir," William said with a nod.

"Status, Captain?"

"We've sustained minor damage, but it's not impacting our ability to fight. Others aren't so lucky. The *Polaris* lost an engine, the *Eagle* is totally without warp power, and the *Debon* is a burning hulk."

Hunter sighed in frustration, having known the *Debon*'s captain—Arik Hitt—for a number of years. "Survivors on the *Debon*?"

"Unknown."

“Are you in a position to check?”

Blackwell looked right—presumably to his executive officer for confirmation. He nodded as he turned his head back toward Schoumacher. “I think so, sir. The combat zone is shrinking pretty rapidly at this point, and it seems we’re suddenly on the outskirts of it.”

“How many enemy vessels are there?” Schoumacher asked, turning to see Commander Webb under the science console and fixing an overheated computer board. “Our long-range scanners aren’t what they used to be.”

“One battle cruiser, two cruisers, a destroyer, and a few frigates. There are also a few mining freighters that the *Debon* didn’t get to tackle floating around the sixth and seventh planets.”

Hunter licked at his dry lips. “And our forces?”

Blackwell leaned back in his chair as he read a stylus that was handed to him. “We’ve lost five starships, three destroyers, and a frigate. We’ve got mild to moderate damage across ten more ships, and the reports are still coming in. The last few Klingon ships out here aren’t giving up so easily.”

“Be that as it may, Captain, we need to finish this.” In a brief flash of insight, something popped into Hunter’s mind. “Are you in a position to capture any of the enemy vessels?”

“Sir?” Blackwell asked in surprise. “That’d countermand Commodore Sach’s previous order.”

“I’m well aware of that, Fleet Captain,” Schoumacher said with a crooked smile.

Blackwell couldn’t help but chuckle. “Yes, sir. I think we can lasso up a Klingon or two. My security teams have become quite adept at it.”

“I believe the starship *Sheridan* has a contingent of commandoes on board for just such an occasion. Coordinate with Captain Boynton and make it happen, William.”

Blackwell smiled with a newfound sense of purpose. “Aye, sir.”

* * *

Stardate 4304.10

April 2255

Incoming subspace communication . . .

FROM: The Office of the Commanding Officer, Starfleet Public Relations,
Admiral Joselyn Czernovski

TO: All Commanding Officers, Starships and Starbases, All Commands

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,
Admiral Michael J. Lai, San Francisco, Earth

SUBJ: OFFICAL INFORMATION RELEASE FOR FORWARD-DEPLOYED
UNITS AND RESPECTIVE COMMANDERS

1. On stardate 4303.28, the 8th Battle Fleet, then under the command of Commodore Barbara Sach, engaged superior Klingon forces near the Aplithin system inside Federation space. This encounter, officially labeled the Battle for Sector 23-D, was a resounding success. A large number of enemy combatants were destroyed and a small number captured, with negligible losses in Starfleet manpower and equipment. Unfortunately, Commodore Sach did not live through the engagement to witness the final victory. However, in the midst of remembering the many valiant lives that were given on that day, we must also stop to congratulate commodores (selectees) Hunter Schoumacher of the USS *Antares* and William Blackwell of the USS *Bonhomme Richard*. Their leadership and service during the entire conflict minimized the loss of lives of Federation citizens and Starfleet officers, while simultaneously furthering our victories in the ongoing war against the Klingons.

2. On stardate 4304.01, a Klingon convoy was detected near the Orion-controlled world of Pens. Since the Laxala Incident, no Klingon forces in Orion space had dared venture close to any of their dilithium-rich worlds. However, due to the empire's recent losses, Starfleet Intelligence had ample evidence to suspect that such a raid by the Klingons was inevitable. In order to safeguard our continued supply of dilithium from the Orions, the 57th Cruiser Interception Squadron was dispatched from Starbase 10 to investigate the Klingons' movements. When the 57th arrived, they found several Klingon warships pilfering dilithium from a well-documented Orion-controlled mine. The Klingons, having killed the Orions before the Starfleet squadron arrived, were easily dispatched by the numerically superior Federation forces. The Orion government, in a fashion typical of their people, has not extended any gratitude for Starfleet's efforts in the conflict. However, that there has been no reprimand from the Orions either is indicative of their appreciation, and dilithium shipments from their territory have—without apparent reason—become more frequent.

3. On stardate 4304.05, Starfleet vessels of the 2nd Cruiser Flotilla—along with elements from the 45th and 99th Destroyer Squadrons, intercepted a Klingon raiding party near the Oco system. As with other recent encounters, the Klingons were attempting to poach supplies. This time, the intended target was a Federation convoy of *Cochrane*-class transports. Unfortunately, the Klingons were either unaware or unconcerned about the four Starfleet destroyers escorting the ten transports. One D-4 was able to attach a tractor beam to one of the freighters and pull it off course, beam a security team over, and take the vessel by force. Unfortunately for the Klingons, the vessels contained prefabricated materials for the construction of colonial farms. There were several excavators and other pieces of heavy construction equipment on board, but nothing that Starfleet Intelligence feels will be of any value to the Klingons at this time—unless they decide to take up agriculture as a means of warfighting, which is highly dubious. No other transports in the convoy were affected, and the Starfleet commanders were able to ward off the remaining Klingons.

4. Researchers at the Vulcan Science Academy have perfected an antidote to the Klingon nerve gas chlorotheragen. This potent gas, which affects both the respiratory and nervous systems, is both fast-acting and highly lethal. Colorless, odorless, and tasteless, it could be introduced into any number of environments, including (but not limited to) water supplies, livestock, and crops, and can survive on Class-J through Class-N planetoids. The antidote, once introduced, is self-replicating, destroying any vestige of the chlorotheragen across the entire planet within six hours. All Starfleet vessels will be outfitted with specialized probes that, when launched at a planet via the photon torpedo or accelerator cannon, will inoculate an entire planet. Starfleet medical specialists will also be outfitted with quantities of antidotes for smaller scale deployments.

5. On 4304.05, a cargo vessel was intercepted near Space Outpost 8 by a Starfleet vessel during on routine patrol near the Romulan neutral zone. Bearing unofficial markings, the vessel was searched, with the hold found to be empty. When questioned, the ship's captain, one Cyrano Jones, informed the Starfleet personnel that his cargo had been transferred to Outpost 8 some weeks ago. When asked of the nature of the cargo, Mr. Jones stated that it was alcoholic in nature, originating from Romulan space, but that the fluid had other uses as well, such as a cleaning solvent and coolant. With nothing to hold him on, the vessel commander released Mr. Jones, and the Federation starship continued on to Space Outpost 8. Upon their arrival at the outpost, they found the station to be completely inoperable. Evidently, the station master had taken Mr. Jones's advice to heart concerning the cooling properties of the liquid, and had injected the fusion reactors and plasma conduits with the blue liquid. Instead of acting as a coolant, however, the liquid acted like a corrosive when mixed with the already-volatile fluids in the reaction chamber. The resulting damage left the entire station's core unsalvageable. Due to the design of the older stations, there is no direct replacement for the core modules, and a new station will need to be towed into place. In fact, not only had Mr. Jones visited a number of space stations along the neutral zone peddling his "miracle fluid," but those same stations regularly serviced Starfleet vessels—many of them warships. It is still unclear how many vessels have been affected by the blue chemical, but one confirmed case—the USS *Sean King*—suffered a partial core breach, shutting down

all major shipboard functions until the vessel could be towed to a repair facility. Mr. Jones was apprehended on stardate 4304.09, but no traces of the blue Romulan fluid could be located aboard his ship, nor was there any record of such cargo in the ship's computer. Though he did not deny possessing the material, he professed to know nothing of its ill effects. After an exhaustive cross-examination by Starfleet Security and Starfleet Intelligence, it was determined that Cyrano Jones was not a Romulan spy, nor did he act with any premeditated malice toward Starfleet or its property. He was released shortly after. However, as of this stardate, all blue fluids denoted as "Romulan Ale," "Romulan Coolant," or any substance meeting this description is now considered an illegal substance within Federation space. The havoc even a small amount of this fluid can have on electro-mechanical systems cannot be overstated, to say nothing of its effects on the nervous and respiratory systems of a number of Federation culture races when imbibed as a beverage.

6. For the latest news and updates, please contact your local command representatives, and have them forward an official request to their nearest starbase.

Chapter 8

Stardate 4305.01

May 2255

“Captain HoD! Another message coming in from the *V’GoH*. It’s Admiral Kla’noR this time.”

The flagship of the 2nd Imperial Fleet and HoD’s personal chariot, the *Honor of Kahless*, had been awaiting new orders for the past week. Captain HoD snorted as the communications officer—a rather pitiful Klingon himself—finished relaying the information. “*Admiral*” Kla’noR. The title was just that. Up until a month ago, Kla’noR had been nothing more than a governor, placed as a figurehead of the High Council on a world not too distant from HoD’s current position. Unfortunately, many of the seasoned commanders were now either dead or captured, and the Council was reluctantly forced to pull from the navy’s pool of reserve officers to fill the gaps. Kla’noR was just such a gap filler. Having served faithfully—albeit rather plainly—for several decades, an injury sustained outside of combat had forced his retirement. Now, with a new commission and a misguided sense of purpose, Kla’noR had been issuing disjointed, sometimes counterproductive orders for nearly a month. If his latest scheme fared as badly as the last, then HoD, as the senior squadron commander, would be forced to deal with him.

The thought brought a smile to the captain’s face. “Well, then by all means, put the *admiral* on the screen.”

The glowing Imperial trefoil on the forward screen was instantly replaced by Kla’noR. He had no ridges on his head—a sure sign to anyone that he was an inferior fusion-race officer. His wiry, silvery hair sprang from his scalp like a willow tree, and shook in a hundred directions with even the slightest movement of his large head. Kla’noR’s white beard, cut thin, traced his irregular jawline like a path winding through a swamp of pockmarks and wrinkles. On his uniform were more medals and ribbons than HoD had ever seen in his life. *Surely they must weigh down the admiral’s already impressive bulk.*

“Captain HoD, good of you to finally open a channel with the *V’GoH*,” Kla’noR said with obvious perturbation.

“With all due respect, *Admiral*, this is the flagship of the fleet. I do not answer to minions or junior officers.” It was true enough, even if it was a personal preference and not one born of protocol.

“When the requests come from *my* people, I hope in the future you will reconsider that stance, Captain.”

“As long as that future is filled with glorious victories, Admiral.” The message to Kla’noR was clear, and HoD could see it had the desired impact by the expression on the admiral’s human-like face. Fusions, genetically engineered to better interact with the majority of races in the Alpha Quadrant, were—for the most part—capable warriors when compared to Imperial-race Klingons. More dexterous in class-M environments, they made for excellent Marines—of which they formed the vast majority in the Imperial Corps. However, due to their genetic splicing, HoD had always believed that they lacked the fortitude that was afforded only to the Imperial race. Nor did the captain feel that fusions were truly capable leaders. Perhaps someday his prejudice would get the better of him, but until a fusion could best him in hand-to-hand combat or tactical skill, HoD would care little for their purported talents as fleet commanders.

Kla’noR looked across space at HoD, whatever frustration welling up inside him quickly subdued and released only as a scowl that was worthy of a true Klingon. *Admirable*, HoD thought. “Then I have good news for you, Captain. You’ve been ordered to undertake a mission of supreme tactical importance to us.”

Hardly, I wager. “Oh, and what would that be . . . sir?”

“There is a Federation defense outpost in the Biwywb system. Over the next several weeks, a number of Klingon strike groups will be moving through that location. The High Council has ordered the outpost destroyed, along with any Federation starships in the vicinity.”

Captain HoD knew of the system. The 2nd Imperial Fleet was only two parsecs from there, but the captain had thought it too well-fortified a target to attack—even

with the might of a hundred-plus warships behind him. Their supplies, while adequate to engage a small Starfleet flotilla—or possibly a minor orbital bombardment—weren't in sufficient quantity to give HoD a sense of assured victory against a fully operational starbase. Still, the thought of such a glorious target so close to his forces whet his appetite. It frustrated him to no end that there was little he could do about it. Now he was being ordered to, not for his glory, but for that of the admiral. *Admiral*. The word was bitter even when spoken in the privacy of HoD's own mind. Should he be victorious, it would no doubt elevate Kla'noR's standing in the High Council. Captain HoD began to formulate a plan to avoid just such a manifestation when Kla'noR spoke again.

"I take it by your silence that you do not agree?"

HoD smiled a toothy grin. "On the contrary, sir, it will be an honor." Before Kla'noR could respond, HoD continued. "Perhaps the admiral would care to accompany us into battle?"

Kla'noR narrowed his eyes, but said nothing for a moment.

HoD knew he'd just put the admiral into a difficult position. It wasn't unheard of for a squadron commander to invite one's superior into battle, but it was quite rare. In fact, it was the usual custom that the admiral should lead the assault personally. HoD, however, knew that the last thing Kla'noR wanted was to directly put his life on the line . . . even if it were for the glory of the empire. The captain had taken the liberty of cutting off the admiral's escape route, and he took momentary pleasure in watching the fusion race officer squirm.

"Our distance to your forces is considerable, Captain. The High Council's orders . . ."

Oh, no you don't! "Must be followed to the letter, Admiral. You are the superior officer, sir. Your presence is required. The glory that will befall us will befall us *all*." HoD heard a series of grunts of approval, not just from his men, but from the men on the bridge of the admiral's ship. Like HoD, the officers of the *V'GoH* would demand that they be allowed into the attack. To do less would be a dishonor to them. Despite the fact Kla'noR was surrounded by fusions, HoD found himself praising their willingness to enter battle, even if that praise lasted less than a microsecond. "We will await your arrival, Admiral."

Kla'noR grunted, his eyes burning with anger as he pounded a closed fist against his chest. "It will be done. Ready your forces for my arrival. We attack in two days."

HoD nodded slowly. "It will be as you wish, my lord." When the channel was closed, the captain turned to the pathetic communications officer. There were rumors that he was an agent of Kla'noR, sent to spy on HoD and report to the admiral all his doings. Intent on getting to the bottom of those tales, HoD had one duty to perform before that could transpire. "Open a secure channel to the *Icy Death* in my quarters. I wish to speak to Captain Katt now!"

With a nod, the officer did as he was told. Stepping past him, HoD pondered how easy it would be to withdraw his dagger and slit the younger officer's throat. However, now was not the time. He needed to speak to his mate about the coming engagement, and of his plans to take care of the worthless Kla'noR once and for all.

* * *

The heavy metal doors to the captain's cabin opened with a hiss, admitting HoD to the space before clanking closed behind him. Reaching for the tall-backed chair behind his barren desk, he slipped into its warm embrace as he spun his personal computer monitor to face him. On it, the image of his mate materialized into view.

"Captain Katt," he began formally, "it's good to see you again."

There was a twinkle in her eyes, one that many men had come to fear, but one that HoD had come to respect and admire. "And you as well, Captain HoD."

"You are secure?"

"I am alone, and the channel is secure."

"We've received new orders from Admiral Kla'noR. They come via the High Council themselves."

"Kla'noR," she spat with distaste, mirroring HoD's own impression of the half-Klingon admiral. "A dog if ever there was one. What errand of importance could the High Council possibly have him run?"

There was talk in many circles that even those in the High Council had little trust of the fusions. While their detractors were few, their voices were loud. The Council, made up of entirely Imperial-bred warriors, was ever vigilant of usurpers. Many fusions, Kla'noR aside, had amassed impressive records in the war, many raising to prominent ranks on their own merit. This alone demanded a watchful eye. Soon they could pose a real threat to the stability of the Council . . . possibly even the throne of the emperor himself.

“We are to attack the Federation starbase at Biwywb,” HoD said calmly.

Katt’s eyes went wide, darting from side to side as she processed the information. HoD knew from experience that his lover was waging future battles in her mind, pitting the Imperial fleet’s might against the base and starships present in that system. She was a brilliant tactician, the best HoD had ever seen. As he watched her mind work, he knew had chosen his mate well. It was a trait he admired a great deal in her, and he waited patiently for her to complete her thoughts.

“May I speak openly?” she asked, not as a junior officer, but as a subservient would to her master.

HoD closed his eyes softly and nodded. “Of course, my pet.”

“We are outmatched, my lord. If we had only the starbase to contend with, I would not hesitate. But at last report from my scouts, there were fifteen starships at the station, many fully combat ready. They guard the station as a mother targ does her cubs. To get between them would be suicide.”

HoD knew her scout commanders—knew that they were reliable to a fault. He approved of the news. “Then we must draw them away from the station and deal with them individually.”

“And how would we do that?”

HoD smiled. “I’ve convinced the admiral that he should lead the assault on the station.”

Katt looked at him in shock. “The fusion will lead the attack? He . . . will be in command of Imperial warriors?”

HoD held a calming hand up. “He is the only one who will believe he is in command, my pet. I have plans for the good admiral, and I believe he will play directly into them.”

“Plans?” she asked in almost disbelief. “Such as, my lord?”

HoD leaned back, resting his fingers under his chin. “We will use a human tactic, one that I believe will produce favorable results for all parties concerned. Are you ready for this?”

For as long as he could remember, Katt had insinuated that HoD should take a more proactive stance to assure his ascension into the admiralty of the Imperial navy. After he’d been placed in command of the 2nd fleet, the two were convinced it would happen soon. However, once Admiral Kla’noR had taken over—and with several defeats behind them—it looked as if a promotion would be beyond his reach. Thus, future aspirations the two had for consolidating more power—possibly even a seat on the Council itself—would be all but impossible. Now, however, HoD was ready to make his move, and he wanted his mate at his side if and when things got difficult, as they surely would.

Nodding, she stared back into his eyes. “I am ready, my lord.”

“Excellent,” HoD said approvingly. “Kla’noR will be here in two days. We have that long to prepare.”

* * *

Stardate 4305.04

May 2255

The graceful and deadly battle cruiser that was the Imperial Klingon Vessel *V’GoH* passed over the lead warship without as much as a sound. On the bridge of the heavy cruiser *Honor of Kahless*, Captain HoD watched the transit of the ship impassively, arms folded across his wide chest as he stood in front of the command chair. Admiral Kla’noR’s impressive D-10 came to a slow halt precisely 1,000 kellicams off the port bow of HoD’s flagship, asserting itself as the new leader of the 2nd Imperial Klingon fleet. To HoD and his overall plans, it mattered very little.

“Sir,” the new communications officer called from his station. “Message coming in from the *V’GoH*.”

HoD looked to the newest member of the bridge crew. The last member of the crew to assume that position had been removed, sent down to engineering where he could keep an ever-vigilant watch on the waste disposal subsystems tank—which frequently had been internally fouling. If he’d been a spy sent by Kla’noR, killing him would only arouse suspicion. Reassigning him to the lower decks, however, HoD had effectively taken care of two problems at once: HoD was no longer being watched, and in the last twenty-four hours, the waste tank hadn’t clogged once. Perhaps the crewman was a natural in that environment.

“On screen.” And with that, Admiral Kla’noR and his wiry mop of hair popped into view.

“Are you prepared to get underway, Captain HoD?”

“We are ready, Admiral. I have also taken the liberty of sending in a small scout craft ahead of our invasion force.”

Kla’noR eyed the captain warily. “Under what authority? I gave no such order.”

HoD bowed his head, as any superior would expect of him. “It was done only as a precaution, Admiral, so you would know how best to deploy your forces.”

“Your breach could have cost us this campaign, Captain.”

Although no such scout vessel existed, HoD knew he had to act as if one did. “But they did not, my lord. And they have transmitted data I think you will find most valuable.”

“Such as?”

“The starbase is protected only by a single Starfleet vessel. The remainder of the Federation forces are near the outer perimeter of the Biwywb system.”

Kla’noR continued to eye the captain with suspicion. “Your people are sure of this, then?”

HoD nodded. “It is confirmed, Admiral.” *And now, to seal his fate.* “Of course, as lead vessel, the glory of leading the attack against the station will be yours.”

Kla’noR, his concern quickly replaced by the thought of a decisive victory, smiled widely at the thought. “We will wait until the last possible minute to drop from warp and surprise the Earthers.”

To maintain warp speeds while inside the solar system was tricky, but HoD knew his people could do it. Besides, it was just as he wanted. “A bold plan,” he said, playing on the animosity he knew Kla’noR would expect from him. “Perhaps some of our forces should be kept in reserves, held back while the warships take apart the station.” There was no glory to be found in doing so, and HoD knew that Kla’noR knew that. The admiral agreed.

“Then *you* will command those reserve forces, Captain HoD. See to it that no Federation starship attacks our flank.”

Perfect. “I must protest,” HoD barked in mock anger. “I will not be relegated to the sidelines!”

“You will do as you’re told, Captain. Now prepare to get underway!”

Fighting back the urge to smile viciously, HoD only bobbed his head sharply. “Yes, *sir.*”

* * *

As soon as the fifty vessels of the 2nd Imperial Fleet warped into the Biwywb system, the attack began. The Federation outpost, one of the ubiquitous K-type stations that Starfleet enjoyed littering the universe with, was plainly visible orbiting the only habitable planet in the system. Its three arms, stretching out equidistantly from the conical central core, spun lazily as it rotated unencumbered around the planet.

Half the force, commanded by HoD, was to remain behind, positioned near a medium-sized rocky world devoid of life. The remainder dropped out of warp a split second later, putting the Earther station squarely in the admiral’s weapon range. However, much to Captain HoD’s horror, the station was indeed sparsely guarded. In fact, it was even less protected than his falsified report to Kla’noR had mentioned. Attached to one arm of the station was a Starfleet frigate, obviously battle damaged in some prior engagement and missing one of its warp nacelles.

Another vessel—a command cruiser based on the long-range scanners—was fully combat ready, but certainly no match for the might of two dozen Klingon warships.

Wide-eyed, Captain HoD gawked into the tactical display presented on the main view screen. *Where were the Federation forces that Captain Katt had mentioned? Where was this “mighty” Federation fleet that was supposed to be the downfall of Admiral Kla’noR—not to mention the earmark of HoD’s own ascension to the admiralty? Katt’s scouts were meticulous, their data irrefutable in the past. What could have possibly happened?* Then the idea struck him in his gut, as if a powerful warrior had impaled him with a bat’leth and was now laughing at his bleeding form.

He had been betrayed, and by his consort, no less. Even now, on the tactical display aboard the *Honor of Kahless*, HoD watched as her ship, the *Icy Death*, swooped toward the station and began alternating disruptor blasts at the already wounded Earther frigate.

And, as good as his word, Admiral Kla’noR and the *V’GoH* would be the first to strike the pitifully protected station. The *V’GoH*’s powerful forward disruptor cannons opened fire, green beams of death splashing against the starbase’s powerful shields and giving the outpost a momentary blue aura.

Surely the Earthers would have more sense than to leave a station such as this so helpless. Where are they? It was then that HoD actually realized he was silently wishing for the Federation to arrive in greater numbers, not so he would have a glorious target to attack, but so they would kill Kla’noR and his attacking forces . . . Captain Katt included. Besides, it would save HoD from wasting much-needed resources to do the job himself. The answer to that prayer, if one could call it that, was not long in coming.

“Captain HoD!” the sensor officer shouted, “enemy vessels approaching!”

Finally, the Earthers come! “Verify!” HoD shouted in glee.

“Confirmed, my lord! Two squadrons of Federation cruisers. They are heading toward the station!”

Two squadrons. Some nine or ten vessels, likely. Still not enough to win the day, but perhaps enough to kill a few traitorous pieces of baktag!

“Do we move in to assist?” the weapons officer asked from his station.

HoD glared at the screen, watching nervously as the Federation vessels dropped warp and transitioned to full impulse speed. At their distance, they would be in weapons range of Admiral Kla'noR's forces in three minutes. "We will do nothing until called upon by the *V'GoH*. We are to be kept in reserve, and there we shall stay until it is advantageous for us not to do so."

Chapter 9

“Admiral Kla’noR, Federation warships approaching!”

On the forward screen, Kla’noR watched as the helpless Starfleet frigate attached to one of the three arms of the outpost exploded, taking a large portion of the disc-shaped docking facility with it. As the fireball subsided, Kla’noR could see that a large, blackened hole had been punched into the end of the arm. Atop the small saucer, all power to the conical habitation module had gone out, leaving the windows dark and lifeless. Seemingly disregarding his first officer’s statement, Kla’noR inquired of the remaining Starfleet cruiser.

“It was engaged with the *Death Stroke* and the *Ho’GuH*, as well as three others. It has since been disabled, as per your standing orders.”

“Prisoners?”

“Captain Wugh of the *Ho’GuH* is beaming them aboard his ship now,” the junior sensor officer said. “He reports 100 survivors from an original complement of 320.”

“The vessel commander?”

“Dead,” the officer replied flatly. “The bridge was destroyed in the altercation. All personnel killed.”

Kla’noR had wanted them alive. The intelligence he could have pried from the captain’s mind would have proven valuable to the empire’s efforts in this sector. While some useful information may still be sifted from the survivors or the damaged computer systems, the real prize had been lost. “Once the remainder of the hostages has been transported aboard, order the executive officer of the *Ho’GuH* to assume command and have him place the captain in the agonizer booth for a duration of one full cycle for his incompetence. If Captain Wugh resists, he is to be terminated.”

“Yes, my lord,” the junior officer snapped.

Casually, as if there was little to be gained from the effort, Kla’noR turned his attention to the incoming Starfleet vessels. “Now, show me these so-called reinforcements the Earthers have employed.”

The tactical display on the screen zoomed out, placing the class-M world of the far right of the screen. Entering in from the top left were the white silhouettes of several Starfleet warships. Between them were the besieged outpost and half of Kla'noR's forces. On the verge of securing the station, Kla'noR was unwilling to give up his trophy. "Order Captain Katt and her squadron to subdue the incoming Federation warships. We will continue to deal with the station ourselves."

"And what of Captain HoD's forces?" the first officer asked from the weapons console, taking the liberty of allowing the view on the screen to pan out even farther. Captain HoD's three squadrons were now clearly visible in orbit around the fourth planet, still well inside the sensor shadow of the incoming Starfleet vessels.

Kla'noR smiled to himself as he pondered the tactical image before him. HoD had wanted him killed, but those plans had been thwarted, thanks to the information received from Captain Katt long before the 2nd Imperial Fleet had entered the Biwywb system. Kla'noR watched as her D-7, the *Icy Death*, disabled one of the Federation destroyers, and was now engaging a more powerful cruiser. She was as impressive as she was cunning. Though Kla'noR knew that the woman had aspirations of being his lover, he would have none of it. She was a tool, one that he would put to good use until it had become obsolete. Besides, she was of the Imperial race. The idea of him, a powerful fusion, taking her as his own was most . . . distasteful. True, she was a Klingon, just as he, but conditioning and long-standing traditions dictated that there would forever be segregation between the Imperials and the fusions, just as there would always be between his people and the other Klingon fusion races. And soon, Kla'noR knew full well, the fusions would rise up into the ranks of the Council, and he planned on being one of them. The Imperials would serve his purposes then, just as he watched them serve him now. Sneering one final time, he dismissed the first officer's words with a wave of his hand. "Let them rot."

The first officer, Lieutenant Commander Kor, caught the admiral's eyes and smiled with deep satisfaction. "With pleasure, sir."

Kor was quickly becoming an indispensable officer aboard the *V'GoH*. Already he'd squelched one mutinous uprising against the admiral, and his skills with the D-10's weaponry were unmatched. Soon, Kla'noR knew, a command of his own would be offered to him. But that offer would not come from the High Council; it would come from the admiral himself. However, it would not come without stipulations attached, ones that Kla'noR already felt Kor would have no reservations against. Still, a watchful gaze directed at the lieutenant commander was warranted. "What is the status of the space station?"

"One arm is without power. The remaining two are fully functional, as is the central core. One of the station's four-phaser cannons was taken offline with the destruction of the frigate. The station's shields have been restored, but are quickly fading."

"On screen." The orange glow of the tactical map was quickly replaced by the visual of the damaged space station floating high above the green world below. Between it and the planet, Kla'noR watched as two D-7 cruisers swung into an attack posture. Two of the station's phaser cannons sprang to life, converging on the closest attacker and destroying it in an instant. The second cruiser unleashed two blasts from its forward disruptor banks, the bolts pelting the thick energy barrier surrounding the outpost just before the vessel moved off-screen.

"Order the battle cruisers *Mo'Ros* and *Kethas* to begin laying siege to the shields. I tire of this battle. Remind them that I want to take this station as undamaged as possible. Failure to heed those instructions will result in their deaths at my hands!"

"Yes, my lord."

Pressing the intercom control on the armrest of his chair, Kla'noR opened a channel directly to the attached Marine commander. Colonel Kargan was an Imperial of some distinction, and one of the few Klingons unaffected by the augment virus of some decades ago that the admiral was glad to have on board. "Colonel Kargan, the outpost's shields will be down shortly. Are you prepared to beam over to the station?"

"I have three platoons in the transporter room awaiting your signal, Admiral," the colonel barked back in a low rumble. "Two more and standing by."

“Advise your men that I want prisoners, Colonel. Most specifically, the station administrator and his communications staff. Failure to produce them when I arrive will earn you my wrath.”

“Of course, Admiral.”

Kla’noR closed the channel, then watched as the IKV *Kethas* opened fire with both disruptor cannons. Even at an extreme range, the thick lines of energy pummeled the orbital station’s shields. In an attempt to defend itself, the station trained its only available phaser cannon on the D-10. However, as soon as the blast was fired, it was intercepted by one of the numerous frigates in Kla’noR’s fleet that had swooped in between the station and the battle cruiser. The frigate was incinerated in a flash of white light and expanding debris. *An honorable death for any warrior.* This was followed by the *Kethas* firing three torpedoes at the station, successfully penetrating the shields in that area and destroying the phaser turret.

“Only two phaser cannons are still operating on the station, my lord,” Kor said from the weapons console.

“Navigator, bring the ship to the far side of the station!” Kla’noR then slammed his fist on the intercom button. “Colonel Kargan, stand by to beam over to the station on my next signal.”

“Yes, sir,” the colonel quickly replied. A moment later, with the *V’GoH* directly aside the perforated shields, Colonel Kargan beamed himself and his ninety Marines over.

Several hundred thousand kilometers from the station, Captain Katt and her squadrons were facing off against the slightly numerically superior Federation reinforcements that’d just entered the system. Seated confidently on the bridge of the *Icy Death*, Katt watched the tactical display with marked excitement. Her force of nine D-7s had been ordered to intercept the ten vessels, and she knew she’d find great pleasure in defeating them.

The lead Federation starship, an *Achernar*-class cruiser, was on a direct intercept course with her vessel. Behind it was a *Larson*-class destroyer. Flanking the

destroyer were two additional cruisers. Two other squadrons, each containing a light cruiser and two frigates, were each both trailing and flanking the lead force. Still, the entire formation was tightly compacted, and would make for easy prey. In response, Katt had fanned out her three squadrons, all the D-7s now nearly abreast of one another, with hers slightly ahead and in the center. The Starfleet squadron commander was in the lead, she was sure of it, and she would face him head-on.

Katt's scanners told her the Federation ships were at maximum speed, but the D-7s held a slight edge over the slower enemy vessels that were forced to keep pace with their lone destroyer. Katt took full advantage of that fact, and fired full disruptors as soon as the lead target was at maximum range. Anticipating her attack, the cruiser had skillfully managed to evade the weapons fire. The D-7s directly on either side of her fired on her target, and each time the cruiser was able to escape.

With the range closing quickly, the Starfleet forces split up, trying to circumvent the Klingons standing between them and their outpost. The lead cruiser and its squadron had turned to port, the other two forces turning to starboard.

Perhaps seeking retribution, the lead enemy cruiser and the destroyer opened fire on the *Icy Death*, the other warships taking Klingon targets as they were presented to them. Katt braced herself as the helmsman rotated the D-7 to port to avoid both the torpedoes from the cruiser and the phaser fire from the destroyer. The maneuver, while it saved her ship from the impact, had turned her forward-firing disruptors away from her prize.

Slamming her palm on the intercom, she opened a channel to her closest wing mate. "Captain Klogh, attack my target! Full disruptors!" She loathed the idea of the kill going to one of her compatriots, but she could not afford to let this particular target slip past her. If the Federation commander was killed by one other than herself, she knew she could figure out a way to let the credit go to her. Failure, on the other hand, was harder to pass along.

On the tactical display, she watched as Klogh's cruiser swung in a tight turn to starboard, bringing all his forward weapons to bear on both the enemy cruiser and destroyer. Disruptor bolts lanced out, each striking the Federation ships in turn. Their shields flared, but held. Now, with opposing speed and maneuvers, only one Federation starship—a fork-tailed frigate—was still inside the weapons cone of one

of her starships. The Earther fired first, striking the D-7 before it, too, sailed out of range.

But Katt was not ready to let them pass so easily. “Helm, hard about! We must keep the fighting away from the station while it is being boarded!”

Each of her vessels turned into different vectors, some more slowly than others in order to avoid collisions. The *Icy Death* turned to port, dipping under a cruiser that was coming around to starboard. As soon as she’d cleared the vessels, and with the lead cruiser still out of range, Katt opened fire on the *Larson*-class ship. Both of her torpedoes were true, and they succeeded in knocking out the destroyer’s shields. Captain Klogh’s cruiser, now in hot pursuit of the lead Earther warship, again fired disruptors with equal success. However, the cruiser’s strong shields held.

“Captain Katt,” the communications officer yelled out, “message coming in from Admiral Kla’noR.”

“Yes,” she bellowed impatiently, eager to continue the battle.

“He reports that the Federation station’s defenses have fallen and that all ships are beaming over Marines now.”

The Marine complement of three D-10 battle cruisers was more than twice the total personnel assigned to one of the Federation outposts. In moments, she knew the station would be theirs. Smiling, she also knew that the Federation starship commanders would be aware of these events as well. Would they continue to sacrifice themselves for this cause? Surely there was no way they could win, not with the might of the warships already at the station and her own forces . . . to say nothing of Captain HoD’s squadrons still covertly hidden in the sensor shadow of the fourth planet. The question was, what would the Earthers do?

It didn’t take long to get the answer. On the tactical display, Katt watched as the nine Federation starships quickly turned to port in unison while still several hundred thousand kellicams from the outpost. They were going to try to escape the system while they could. *The cowards*. She would see to it they died quickly.

The faster D-7s pounced on the Federation ships as soon as they were again in range. Both Katt and Klogh opened fire on the lead Starfleet vessel, firing two

torpedoes each. All four warheads struck the target, which was too busy trying to increase speed and not paying attention to her attackers. Not only were the shields completely decimated, but one of the torpedoes struck the then-unprotected hull of the stern, smashing in the doors to the vessel's hangar bay in a brilliant shower of flaming metal.

Elsewhere, several other Federation cruisers were pelted with weapons fire as they attempted to flee. The lone destroyer had been hit multiple times, and her shields were down as well. Katt briefly toyed with the idea of capturing the vessels, but quickly decided against it. This time, there would be no prisoners taken. She had her gunner take aim at the leader once more, intent on obliterating him.

But that was when the *Larson* swooped to protect the unguarded stern of their leader, denying Katt the glory of the kill. Intended for the cruiser, her torpedoes struck the upper hull of the destroyer, dissecting a fifteen-meter portion of the saucer's rim. As the damaged vessels continued on course, Katt could see the Federation cruiser had performed a tight turn to starboard. While such a maneuver would have placed an enormous amount of strain on her target's hull, it nonetheless the desired effect, taking it beyond her arc of fire. Enraged, she slammed her fist down on her console, shattering two of the controls in the process.

However, more of her squadron was bearing down on the Federation vessels, none of which were damage-free. Their slowing speed was going to make them even tastier targets. Only one Federation frigate lagged behind the others, now effectively cut off from the rest by three Klingon warships in pursuit of the larger mass. Taking aim, it fired bursts of phaser fire and torpedoes, taking down the shields of one D-7 and damaging the impulse section of another. Retribution was swift as two more Klingon cruisers pounced on the helpless vessel, destroying it in seconds as their disruptor bolts converged on the frigate's bridge and engineering sections.

On her screen, Katt watched as Captain Klogh's cruiser came slowly starboard, putting the lead enemy cruiser squarely in its sights. The distance to the target was great, but Klogh had chanced it, sending two torpedoes streaking toward the escaping craft. One missed, one hit. Katt noted that the impact was well placed. After a brilliant explosion, the cruiser shattered into lifeless chunks of metal.

Only four Federation vessels now remained, and only two stood any chance of escaping the system in one piece. One of the frigates, on the verge of being overwhelmed, tried to ensure his comrades would survive. It pivoted hard to port on thrusters, then opened fire with all phasers and torpedoes at anything in its sights. Two Klingon vessels were hit, but a third managed to avoid the blasts. It likewise fired torpedoes of its own, severing both of the frigate's warp nacelles. A third D-7 came down from a positive Z-angle and blanketed the dorsal side of the defenseless Earther frigate. All life was extinguished in seconds as the ruined hull cracked in two.

On the screen, Katt watched as another cruiser was demolished, the orange icon dissolving from her screen under the combined firepower of two of her captains. Only two vessels remained, both outside her weapons range. It mattered little. While the individual victories would go to her captains, the glory of the battle itself would be heaped upon her as her leadership skills were lauded. She could see Captain HoD's forces still poised on the far side of the fifth planet. She imagined HoD quaking with anticipation as the Earthers had entered the system, and now enraged as the glory of combat went to another. Surely, this would elevate her far above HoD in Admiral Kla'noR's eyes. The question now would be what to do about HoD.

Her mind was at work concocting a new scheme as four of her vessels, with Captain Klogh in the lead, opened fire on the Earther vessels. With four torpedoes away, Katt nibbled at her bottom lip as she watched the warhead traverse from one side of her tactical display to the other. Captain Klogh, as always, had correctly anticipated the Earthers' attempted evasion tactic. Turning to port, the Federation frigate avoided one missile, only to be struck a moment later by three others. It slowed to a halt, impulse drive and hull lighting dimming to black. Now, with disruptors at full intensity, Klogh took the kill for himself.

"The final Federation vessel is out of range, Captain," her sensor officer shouted as Katt watched the *Achernar*-class vessel reach the near edge of the system. "Do we pursue?"

She pondered it for a moment, stroking her narrow chin, then smiled to herself. “No, but tell Captain HoD he is more than welcome to take up the chase. I tire of this engagement.”

“Yes, mistress.”

“Helm, set a course back to the orbital station. I trust Admiral Kla’noR will want a full report, and I intend on delivering it *personally*.”

As the *Icy Death* came about, Katt took a last glance at the tactical display, watching with pleasure as HoD dispatched two of his fast frigates to pursue the remaining Federation cruiser. As soon as the Earther vessel had cleared the system, it entered warp. Not long after, HoD’s forces did the same. She relished the idea that HoD, always the opportunist, gladly gobbled at her table scraps.

Perhaps he’d still be useful in the new order. After all, it was only a matter of time until the fusions came to power. She was not the first to realize it, but she would be one of the first to make sure she was in the best position to receive it. If this war continued at the same pace it had been for the last year, it wouldn’t be long until the emperor was deposed. Then Kla’noR and those like him would come to power. If they didn’t seize that opportunity, they were fools, and Katt and other loyal Imperials like her would do it themselves. Perhaps it would even plunge the empire into civil war, but that mattered little to Katt and her contemporaries. All that mattered to her was personal honor and glory, and right now those came via the strong and well-backed hands of Admiral Kla’noR. Delighted to deliver the news of the Federation’s defeat here today, she filled the bridge with the sounds of her full belly laugh at the thought of HoD’s vessels pursuing the lone surviving Starfleet cruiser into oblivion.

Chapter 10

Stardate 4305.10

May 2255

“Commander’s mission log: stardate unchanged. The invasion of Karag is now in full swing, but you’d almost never know it. I’m sitting aboard the *Kuala Lumpur*, getting ready to depart for my transport after our final briefing with Vice Admiral YiZhong Tan, and I’m surrounded by men and women walking the corridors of the flagship as if this were an everyday occurrence. There isn’t a hint of concern on their faces as each of them goes about their practiced routines, but I know in their hearts they must be feeling it, just as I am. But the after-action briefing I just received from one of my commanders has given me a glimmer of hope that this whole thing might just work.

Starfleet Intelligence had hoped to catch the Klingons on Karag by surprise. To that end, a series of commando raids had been planned along our fleet’s projected course. The objective of the raids was to either capture or silence the Klingon listening station’s subspace relay posts in the area, each fully capable of detecting our fleet’s location and heading.

I’d assigned the most critical of these assaults to one of our best, the 17th Marine Strike Team. Using a captured Klingon freighter for cover, we’d approached the Klingon listening post, claiming to be a routine supply and replenishment run. We knew the Klingons, desperate for supplies, wouldn’t say no to the offer, even though our translation of the Klingon language was more than a little rusty.

However, problems with the freighter’s impulse drive, coupled with inaccurate intelligence, delayed the mission for nearly thirty minutes. It didn’t surprise me—what with the finicky nature of Klingon junk—and I’m not holding the freighter’s prep team responsible in the least. Intelligence, on the other hand, will have to be addressed. Time was of the essence, as our fleet was rapidly approaching the sensor

range of the station. When the 17th finally began their assault, they met some pretty stiff resistance from the station's crew. In the end, it took more than fifteen minutes to secure the command center. The 17th technicians were able to prevent the station's automated systems from reporting the passage of our fleet, with only seconds to spare. It was another twenty minutes before the station's engineering and crew quarters were secure.

Even though the 17th sustained sixty percent casualties, their mission was a success. The fleet's secrecy remained intact. That meant our ground assault was a go, assuming we could punch past the Klingon blockade surrounding the planet.

But we have to get there first. Admiral Tan and General Keener think they've got a solid plan, one that has a high probability of success. After hearing it for myself, I tend to agree, so long as we catch the Klingons by complete surprise. If we don't, it's going to be one hell of a battle to get to the surface of the planet. Even if we do manage to get through, there are more than 30,000 Klingons down there waiting for us. That means that almost all our forces will need to get planetside, and while I have supreme confidence in the Marines under my command to get down there, I can't say that I've got a lot of faith in Starfleet Command to get us to the drop point safely, even with a battleship leading the way."

Leaning back in his chair, Colonel David Shuford brought a finger to his chin, reading the last lines of the log he'd just dictated and wondering if he should omit them. His reservations, which would quickly become part of the official Starfleet archive once he saved the file, were more than founded. During the last ground assault in which he and his entire battalion had been assigned, more than half his men had been wiped out by orbital fire from a friendly cruiser. The order to do so had been born of confusion, as was often the case in the fog of war and combat, and the captain of the vessel had simply been following those orders. Colonel Shuford knew that, but he didn't have to like it. The ensuing board of inquiry had acquitted the vessel commander, but condemned both the fleet commander and the Intelligence officers responsible for allowing that order to bubble to the surface.

Still, no matter what justice or injustice the courts could delve out, the fact remained that many of Shuford's people had perished. He was now operating with far more green Marines than he'd like to—nearly 15,000 of them—and that always

invited hazards. Thankfully, with the last debacle swept under the rug, there were to be no further orbital bombardments from Federation craft unless absolutely necessary, and only then with the full approval of the ground commander, the colonel himself. However uneasy he felt about the deadly weapons in the skies high above him, David knew he would need to remain focused on the ground under his feet.

“Colonel Shuford,” a voice called out from the intercom on his desk. The colonel recognized it as his sergeant major, Nick Fajardo.

“Go ahead, Nick.”

“Sir, we’ve just landed in the *Kuala Lumpur*’s shuttle bay. We’re ready to take you back to the *Iwo Jima* as soon as you’re ready.”

“Very good, Major.” The colonel took one long glance around the sparsely decorated room, checking one final time to see that he’d collected the last of his belongings. Nodding silently to the plush bed that he’d called home for the last two weeks, he looked forward to being back amongst the Marines of the 9th Battalion. “I’m on my way. Immediate dust-off on my arrival.”

“Of course, sir.”

Closing the communication channel, Shuford grabbed the small bag at the foot of his bed, pressed the computer’s submit button for his log entry, then headed out into the cruiser’s passageway.

“Admiral Tan, Colonel Shuford’s shuttle is away.”

With his hands on either side of the display for support, YiZhong Tan’s eyes never left the large status table in the middle of the *Kuala Lumpur*’s combat information center. As his dark, Asian eyes scanned the table and devoured each minute detail, he nodded, his only indication that he’d heard the voice of his aide.

Tan could see the colonel’s shuttle, a white silhouette against the blackness of space as it cleared the stern of his flagship. It glided slowly to port, moving between a destroyer and a pair of cruisers on its way to the lead *Aakenn*-class transport that was huddled with the rest in the middle of Tan’s formation. Each of the transports, a

floating city unto itself, carried enough Marines and destructive firepower to lay siege to a small nation. Over 3,000 Marines each, plus all their associated equipment, and Tan had been ordered to escort eight of them to Karag. In his heart, however, he doubted it would be enough.

Karag, one of the last remaining Klingon-controlled planets in this sector, was crawling with the enemy. Conquered near the outbreak of the war and established as a resupply and shore leave facility, the planet held roughly 25,000-30,000 Klingons at any given time—not including any ships that would surely be in orbit. And there *were* ships there. The information from his long-range scout was being translated as fast as it could be downloaded into the *Kuala Lumpur*'s computer. At the edge of the map on Tan's status table, he could see the outlines of multiple enemy vessels render near the planet as the table caught up with the sensor data. One after another appeared, each glowing a sickly orange, until at last Tan could count sixteen of them. Most were a considerable distance apart, rotating around the world at varying orbits. That would make things more difficult. However, Tan was sure his fleet could inflict more than enough damage to open a window for the Marines to safely drop to the surface. With no other patrols this far out, the Klingons were reliant on their listening posts to alert them to incoming danger, and Tan had just made sure the last of those were silent. Now it was time to attack.

"Commander Olmstead," Tan called out to the senior communications liaison. "Signal the fleet that we're getting underway."

"Aye, sir," Olmstead returned from across the compartment.

Tan looked up at the three large display monitors that dominated the forward bulkhead, each showing various ranges of the battle group's sensors. On the far left was his fleet of warships. On the right was the Klingon fleet and Karag. Very shortly, they would both be on the same screen. Tan's people had their orders: engage every target of opportunity, and do the utmost to protect the Marine transport in the process.

"All units report ready, sir," Olmstead spoke a moment later.

Reaching down to the intercom control, Tan opened a link to the *Kuala Lumpur*'s bridge. "Captain Varman. This is Tan."

Captain Vijay Varman of the planet Izar was ready, his voice confident. “Go ahead, Admiral.”

“Captain, you may enter warp when ready. Commence attack as soon as we’re within weapons range.”

The streaming stars filled the forward viewer for only a brief moment before the USS *Stockholm* dropped out of warp. As it did, the planet Karag quickly filled the screen. So fast was the transition that Captain George Lukach and his bridge crew instinctively flinched. The red planet now filled the entire viewable area, but there was no time to catch his breath. The Klingons were out there, and Lukach would do as he’d been ordered to.

“Commander Aleksic, report!”

Kay Aleksic, the towering, emerald-eyed Cygnian woman, already had her eyes trained into the short-range sensors when she heard the captain’s order. “We’ve dropped out of warp as programmed. We’re 100,000 kilometers from the planetoid. The rest of our forces have also dropped out of warp and are nearby.”

“Enemy vessels in the area?”

“Eighteen Klingon warships in orbit around Karag. It appears they’ve spotted us, too. Two squadrons of D-7s and a trio of D-4s are heading out on an intercept course. They’ll be on top of us in sixty seconds.”

“We’ve got our orders, people. Let’s get in there and punch a hole for our Marines to get through. Helm, bring us in line with the lead enemy attackers. Weapons officer, sound red alert. Raise shields and arm all weapons.”

As the alert klaxon sounded aboard the *Coventry*-class frigate, Captain Lukach leaned forward in his chair in anticipation. Small, dark spots appeared between the *Stockholm* and the planet, quickly growing in size until the all-too-familiar lines of Klingon vessels took shape.

“Enemy vessels show signs of recently repaired battle damage, sir,” Aleksic amended. “However, the D-7s appear to be fully combat ready.”

“And the D-4s?”

“One of the vessel’s shields are at seventy percent and holding. All others are fully operational.”

“Verify the sensor link with the *Kuala Lumpur*. I want to make sure Vice Admiral Tan is seeing everything we are.”

Kay Aleksic entered the request into the computer. “Link is verified.”

“Target coming into range,” the lieutenant said from the weapons console.

Gripping his armrest, the captain narrowed his eyes at the looming D-7. “Fire torpedoes!”

On the status table, Vice Admiral Tan watched as the first chimes of the battle resounded. The two torpedoes streaked out of the *Stockholm*, both impacting against the lead D-7 and sending the Klingon vessel rearing off course. The return fire from another D-7 had the same effect on the Starfleet frigate.

“Order the *Reliant* and her escorts to intercept the D-4s in Sector 7,” Tan said to the tactical coordinator standing beside him, then pressed his finger on the icon representing the USS *Marathon*. “Captain Moss, take the *Saladin* with you and attack the flanking D-7 squadron. Lure them away from the bulk of their forces. That should provide a window for the Marine transports to begin their run.”

Moss acknowledged the order, and Tan watched the *Larson*-class *Marathon* and the *Saladin* peel away from the Federation fleet. The *Marathon* was the first to strike, easily taking down the already wounded Klingon frigate’s shields with several well-placed phaser strikes. Quick on her heels, the *Saladin* fired two torpedoes, destroying the lead D-4 in a flash of brilliance. The tactic had the desired effect. As the two Federation vessels both peeled to starboard, the remaining D-4s turned to pursue, opening a large gap in the defending Klingon forces. However, two more squadrons of D-7s on the far side of the planet—along with the sole D-10 battle cruiser in the system—quickly changed course and would be on them in a few minutes. Vice Admiral Tan would take the chance given him.

“Major Seefus,” Tan said to the Marine liaison officer at the far side of the table. “Order Colonel Shuford to begin his run for the planet. Tell him we’ll protect the transports as best we can, but we can make no assurances that all his forces will get through. Several powerful warships are approaching, and if we can’t fend off the

smaller cruisers in time, the transports are going to be sitting ducks. Inventive piloting will be required on the part of the colonel's helmsman."

Seefus, a career Starfleet security officer before switching to the Marine Corps two years ago, understood full well Vice Admiral Tan's statement. He'd seen his share of ship-to-ship combat in those first few years, one of the many reasons Shuford had selected him to be the colonel's direct communications contact on the admiral's flagship. Nodding, the major seated himself in the nearest console to relay the orders.

Stowed deep in the belly of the transport ship SS *Laden*, the ten-meter-long command vehicle holding Colonel Shuford and his senior staff sat quietly as the half-dozen officers inside waited for the word that they would be going down to the surface. In the silence, they could have heard a pin drop. Shuford had purposely ordered that the sensor link to the bridge be kept off, as there was no sense in letting his people worry about whether or not the battle was going well far outside the duranium skin of the transport. If all went well, they would be on the surface shortly. If not, they'd be dead in a nanosecond. All it would take was a stray disruptor blast and the command carrier would be incinerated.

"Signal coming in from the flagship, Colonel," Nick Fajardo said from the communications station in the regiment's command vehicle.

Shuford's head bobbed, then he flicked his hand over his head—a signal to pipe the call into the personnel carriers overhead. In the cramped, technology-filled transport, only one speaker was required for all to hear the message.

"Colonel Shuford, this is Major Seefus. You are a go for ground insertion. Your ships will be in transporter range of the planet in two minutes. Stand by for beam out."

"Understood, Major," Shuford replied calmly.

"Good hunting, sir. Wish I was there with you."

“Understood, Major. Just keep an eagle eye on us from above. Our sensors are going to take a few minutes to calibrate once we reach the ground. I want to keep things as orderly as possible. The fewer surprises, the better.”

“Copy that, Colonel. Seefus out.”

When the channel was closed, Shuford reached out and turned on the vehicle’s interior red lighting, then signaled to the rest of the craft in his command that they should do the same.

In the hold of the SS *Laden*, 200-plus hover tanks were poised, the three-officer crews inside ready to switch on their vehicles the moment the transporters released them. Farther aft in the cavernous hold, scores of thirty-man armored personnel carriers did the same, the drivers’ fingers held softly against the hover controls. Even farther aft, 400 Marines were divided into manageable platoons, each of them fully armed with the latest blast armor and phaser rifles and waiting for their turn at the large cargo transporters. In the equally large hangars below, 200 shuttles waited to begin their descent. In the front were the two-man interceptors, battle-tested from carriers like the *Santee* and the *Vella Gulf*, their scores of pilots and gunners trained by those intrepid few who’d cut their teeth on the then-untested technology. In the rear were the assault and landing craft, each laden with supplies, artillery, and enough materials for constructing temporary shelters for the entire battalion. Everyone was ready.

Two minutes later, the lights in the shuttle hangars went green. The ground assault would now commence. When the single door at the front of the hangar rolled completely into its alcove, the first two squadrons took to flight—the 10th Marine Assault Squadron, or the Wasps, as they’d christened themselves.

In the cockpit of the lead shuttle, Major Marco Boersma and his weapons officer, Captain Michael Liss, were equally stunned by what they saw when the shuttle was clear of the *Laden*’s hangar. The path outside the transport was not as clear as they’d been led to believe. Even a D-4, small by Starfleet standards, loomed larger than life as it veered off after being struck by a ship-mounted phaser blast from an unseen vessel behind the shuttle. Turning to his left, Boersma could see two other *Aakenn* transports likewise unloading fighters and logistic shuttles. Based on the

different swaths of colors painted in bands on each of the transports, he knew the closest of them to be the SS *Pendergrass*.

A river of shuttles was flowing out the lower holds as Boersma smiled on. Then came a flash of green light as disruptor blasts converged on the transport. The older design only allowed for a single phaser emplacement, which was only trained for a forward field of fire. The Klingons—two of them, from what Marco could see—were coming in at an oblique angle. Their disruptor and photon rounds were devastating. Shot after shot pelted the *Pendergrass*, and Marco watched as an explosion ripped through the lower hangar decks, spilling fire and debris from the open bay as if the transport were an angry technological dragon's head. Secondary explosions rippled across the freighter's hull, boils appearing across the hull and popping moments later, spilling man and machine alike into the coldness of space. A D-7 came in this time, its accurate fire finally breaking the *Pendergrass*'s back and bisecting the flaming hulk. All lights immediately went out, and Boersma knew that with them, all life had been lost.

Where the hell is Starfleet? We're going to get massacred out here.

Answering his silent plea before he'd finished forming it, two Federation heavy cruisers came rushing in. Too late to save the *Pendergrass*, they nonetheless exacted revenge for the decimated vessel. Each alternating torpedo fire, they made short work of the D-7 that was relishing its short-lived victory over the transport. First the Klingon's warp nacelles exploded, then the neck was separated from the secondary hull as the latter exploded—the closeness of the blast sending Marco's shuttle skidding to port.

"What the—" Liss exclaimed from the gunner's station.

"The *Pendergrass* is down," Marco said as he quickly regained control of the craft.

"The Fleeties?" Liss asked with a worried expression.

Marco shook his head, checking the short-range scope to make sure the rest of the Wasps were nearby. All were present and accounted for. "I'm sure they're doing their best, but it sure as heck needs to be better if we want to survive this battle."

Liss didn't ask for a further explanation as the swirling mass of the planet Karag swung back into their view. "Sensors locked on the target LZ, boss."

I just hope the landing zone is less hectic than this. Chancing another look outside, Marco watched as a Starfleet destroyer took aim and fired at Klingon destroyer, only to get fired upon by an incoming ship of enormous size. He'd seen the transvids of the D-10, but the sheer magnitude of the thing almost caused his jaw to drop. As the battle cruiser eclipsed the Karag sun, its twin disruptor cannons opened fire, one missing, the other punching a ten-meter-wide hole in the destroyer's saucer section.

"Where are the rest of our forces?"

Liss looked into the sensor scope, then increased the range to cover the entire battle area. "The other transports have launched all fighters and shuttles. Transporter operations commencing on all the freighters."

Good. All we need is a few more minutes to get everyone down on the surface. After that, Starfleet can worry about themselves. "Let's get down to the surface. I have a feeling the battalion's going to need all the cover it can get."

Chapter 11

Once the majority of the 9th Starfleet Marine Battalion was on the surface of the planet, Colonel David Shuford ordered his personal transport beamed to the surface. The armored personnel carrier, or APC as the Marines called them, lifted from the deck of the SS *Laden* on four moveable thrusters built into corners of the craft. The angular, disruptor-proof carrier positioned itself directly over the center of the cargo transporter, then shut down the engines. On signal, a hatch on the upper portion of the APC opened, and a single Marine took station at the rotating phaser cannon. A moment after transport began, the colonel was on the surface of Karag.

Flipping open the slatted visor shielding the window, Shuford quickly took in his surroundings. The landing zone was in the center of a valley, flanked on either side by the steep slopes of mottled red hills. Every so often, a monolithic outcropping of rock spurted from the sides of the hills, and it gave Shuford the impression that an enormous hand was buried beneath the ground, ready to reach out from its tomb at any moment to crush the Federation liberators. Bisecting the valley was a shallow river, one that his sensors showed consisted of passably drinkable water. Looking up to the tops of the rises only a few hundred yards away, Shuford could see several armed Marines stationed atop each of them, protecting the gathering forces below.

There were more transporter beams, drawing the colonel's view back to the front of the APC. Several more landing craft had materialized, as well as a platoon of angular hover tanks. The tanks, using identical thrusters as the APC, weren't all that dissimilar to their counterparts from 200 years before, right down to the centrally mounted cannon capable of 360 degrees of movement, with a range of accuracy of their photonic rounds of six kilometers. Shuford was grateful to have them, knowing that their speed and range would prove the pivotal role in the conflict. But first he needed to know where to place them.

"Open the secure channel to General Keener."

A screen on the right side of the colonel's console slid open as the image of the white-haired Andorian appeared. "General Keener here. Good to see you, David."

“Yes, sir. Glad to be planetside with you.”

Keener smirked as his eyes narrowed. “This place is what you humans would call a dust ball. Take caution, Colonel. Three of our tanks have already suffered internal damage due to particle infiltration. I’ve ordered more powerful atmospheric filters sent down from the transports, but I’m not sure when they’ll arrive.”

“The transports are taking a beating up there.”

“I know of the *Pendergrass*, Colonel. For what it’s worth, I’m sorry about the loss of the 3rd battalion. Not only were they sorely needed, I know of your friendship with Colonel Barrows.”

Shuford nodded. He and Mike Barrows had been friends since their Academy days. Throughout the war with the Klingons, each had served on a different front, but kept in almost constant contact via subspace. This was to be their first engagement alongside one another, and each had wished each other well just before the battle had commenced. Upon hearing of the death of the *Pendergrass* and of the Marines there, Shuford’s first thoughts were of Mike’s teenage daughter, Tonia, and the message he would someday have to deliver to her. “Thank you, sir. But we’ve got other things to worry about right now,” Shuford said, hardly missing a beat.

The Andorian general dipped his head, the two antennae twitching lightly with the movement. “1st Battalion is here with me now. We’re ten kilometers north of your position, Colonel. Our first target will be the enemy garrison located approximately two kilometers west of us. With the 3rd lost, I’ll need you to get your forces up here double-time to reinforce our position.”

The garrison in question was stationed in a mountainside fortress, protected on all but one side by outcroppings such as those surrounding his current position. Sensors from the orbiting starships were reporting over 2,000 Imperial Klingon warriors in the complex, as well as photon and disruptor cannon emplacements in the surrounding hills. It was also likely the approaches were fortified with mines and other booby traps. It wouldn’t be like a Klingon to do otherwise. “Of course, General. We’ll get our gear squared away and be there as quickly as we can.”

“Make it fast, Colonel Shuford. I’ve no doubts that our landings have already been reported to the planetary forces. My long-range scouts have already engaged a squad of roving fusions about a kilometer east of here. At last report the squad had

the Klingons on the run, but that was ten minutes ago, and I haven't heard from them since."

Fusions serving alongside Imperials? While not unheard of, the sight of it was quite rare. Usually the two kept to themselves, not ever bothering to work alongside one another. That they were doing so now—likely with more than a few protests between the two races—further signified the desperate tactics the Klingons would likely employ against the Starfleet Marines. "I'll start sending up units now. Shuford out."

Opening the side hatch on the transport, David slipped out of the command APC, his boots throwing up a cloud red powder as he hit the forgiving surface. It was like jumping into quicksand, and it took him a moment to catch his balance.

A group of nearby junior officers spotted the commanding officer approaching and snapped a quick salute. "Sir!" they called out in unison.

"Gentlemen," Shuford said, pointing to the row of nearby hover tanks, "I need these units moved north to General Keener's position on the double. Who's in command of this platoon?"

One of the team stepped forward, saluting again as he neared the colonel. "I am, sir. First Lieutenant Scott Luke."

"Are you fully manned, Lieutenant?"

Luke nodded sharply. "Yes, sir. The last of my team just beamed down. While waiting, we took the liberty of stocking up on food and water rations. All the LVTs are fully armed and ready for action, sir," Luke said as he hooked a thumb in the direction of the closest tank.

Shuford respected men who were ready when needed. That was, after all, the essential motto of the corps. Looking at the tank, Shuford saw on the side a hastily painted vintage locomotive with a Klingon trefoil placed on its boiler. A sign painted in front of the train read "to hell," with larger text under the train reading "One Way Ticket." Eyeing 1st Lieutenant Luke, Shuford could see the unmistakable glimmer of pride in the younger man's eyes. "Then get moving. You have your orders, Lieutenant."

Luke snapped a salute. “Yes, sir.”

“And good hunting.” As Shuford turned to walk away, he threw one last piece of advice over his shoulder. “And Lieutenant . . . try and add a few more trefoils to that paint job, will you? I think we owe it to the people of the 3rd Battalion.”

“Yes, sir!”

* * *

Picking himself up off the deck, Captain Brian Kreuzinger hobbled over to help the *Saladin*’s navigator back into his chair. When Lieutenant Mushel was back at his station, Kreuzinger took a quick look around the bridge, surprised that no one else had taken a fall. The Klingon torpedo had been dangerously close to striking the bridge, and had it not been for a quick drop on their z-axis by Mushel, it was likely that everyone on the bridge would now be sucking vacuum. As it was, the damage report that was relayed from chief engineer Tyler Thomas was damning enough. The saucer had taken a direct hit in section ten, and with the power to the shields in that area already cut down to twenty-five percent, there was little hope that anyone in sickbay had survived the ensuing hull breach. Kreuzinger had nonetheless tried to contact the ship’s chief surgeon, but was told that all internal communications in that section were down.

On the static-filled view screen, Kreuzinger watched as their attacker, a lone D-4 *Predator* light cruiser, came around for another attack. The air on the bridge was filled with an acrid smoke, and the stinging sensation was irritating the captain’s eyes. However, he didn’t have the time to let it affect his duty. “Phasers?” Kreuzinger asked the weapons officer.

“Only one bank is operational, and the other is offline. Photon torpedoes are online, but we’ve only got access to five of them. The tube conveyor is down, so the rest of the warheads are useless.”

“Lock torpedoes on that D-4 and fire before she comes around!”

As ordered, two torpedoes shot out of the destroyer, each striking the D-4 just as she came around to square off with the *Saladin*. Rocked by the impacts, the D-4 continued her turn and sped past the wounded Starfleet vessel without firing.

“Sensors?”

The science officer turned a bruised face to the captain. She's been too close to the sensor hood during the last impact, and she'd no doubt gone face-first into the display. "We're out of the combat zone for the moment, sir. However, the rest of the fleet is mixed up in heavy fighting with the Klingon blockade."

"Communications, anything from Vice Admiral Tan or the flagship?"

"No, sir," the lieutenant replied.

Brian nodded and turned back to his science officer. "How many Klingons are left?"

"Two squadrons of D-16 destroyers, as well as a handful of D-4 and D-7 cruisers. And, of course, that D-10 battle cruiser is still wreaking havoc on our ships."

"Where's the *Stockholm*?"

Looking down to her sensors, she came back with a reply a moment later. "She's in Sector 5, bearing 332-mark-7. Distance is 200 kilometers. She and the *Osiris* are engaged with a D-7."

"Then let's not waste any time. I want to get in there and render any assistance we can. Helm, lay in an intercept course."

"What about the medical staff?" the science officer asked. "Who's going to tend to the wounded?"

"Pull anyone you can from the science department who isn't otherwise assigned to a vital system. Have them form a makeshift sickbay on deck five in the wardroom." He then turned to communications. "Advise all hands where the new medical ward is, Lieutenant."

"Aye, sir."

"We're nearing the *Stockholm*'s position," Tim Mushel said from the navigator's console. "The D-7's firing . . . her torpedoes have struck the *Osiris*."

"Shields down on the *Osiris*, Captain," the science officer reported. "She won't be able to withstand another attack."

"Lock phasers and torpedoes on the D-7 and fire!"

"Sir, we don't have the power to—" Lieutenant Commander Thomas began from the engineering console, but was silenced by a hard look from the captain.

“I don’t care where you pull the power from, Tyler, but I want all weapons fire concentrated on that enemy cruiser now!”

“Captain, the *Saladin* is entering the combat zone!”

Captain George Lukach turned in surprise to face Commander Kay Aleksic. “She’s undamaged?”

“She’s suffered severe damage to her primary hull, but she’s operating at seventy percent power,” Kay said without turning from her console. “She’s firing phasers and torpedoes at the D-7.”

Lukach waited a handful of seconds before the impact results came in. *The Saladin must be at extreme range*, he thought as his fists clenched and unclenched.

“Direct hits on all, sir!” Kay shouted. “The D-7 is changing course, moving away from the *Osiris*.”

But there was no time to celebrate the minor victory. “Sensor scan of the destroyer?”

“There’s damage to the *Osiris*’s primary hull and the connecting dorsal. Life support is operating on battery power. Other miscellaneous systems are either offline or functioning erratically. I’d suggest we beam over as many survivors as we can, sir. If the fluctuations remain constant, power current to the antimatter magnetic bottles is likely to become unstable.”

“A core breach,” Lukach said with a nod. He turned to the ship’s engineer, Commander Tim Knight, who until recently had served under Fleet Captain Garth on the *Xenophon*. “Do we have the power, Tim?”

Knight kept his body turned toward the console but his eyes were fixed on the captain. “Aye, we do, but not much to spare if things get messy.”

“Then get down to the transporter room and see to the evacuation personally, Commander.” As Knight leapt from his station and headed for the turbolift, George moved out of the command chair and stepped to the right of the helmsman. “Bring us to within transporter range of the *Osiris*.”

“Aye.”

“Sir,” the communications officer said from her console. “Message coming in from Vice Admiral Tan—fleetwide broadcast.”

“Yes?”

“The fleet’s being ordered to regroup in Sector 30-Alpha. Best possible speed. Message repeats.”

“Should I change course?” the helmsman asked.

The captain turned, laying a hand on the lieutenant’s shoulder. “We’re going to get as many people as we can off the *Osiris* without endangering ourselves. We’ll break off the rescue attempt only when I’m satisfied that there’s nothing else we can do. Until then, my orders stand. Bring us along the *Osiris*.”

The lieutenant nodded, his eyes filled with pride at what they were about to attempt—even in the face of defying their new orders. “Yes, sir.”

* * *

The ride through the upper atmosphere had been serene, almost beautiful. For the briefest of moments, it was hard for Major Marco Boersma to believe that he and the rest of the 10th Squadron were going into a combat zone. The pink clouds—like cotton candy floating lazily in the sky—were all around his shuttle. However, unlike the harmless puffs of moisture he would have found on his home planet of Izar, these clouds were laced with highly combustible material. A phaser strike or torpedo explosion in just the wrong place and it would be like a depth charge going off, buckling even the tough armor plating of his assault shuttle.

To his right, Captain Michael Liss whistled an unfamiliar tune, an uncontrollable habit of his when he was nervous. Boersma would have normally put a stop to it many weeks ago when the two were assigned together, but the Major had found the Captain to be a natural at the shuttle's weapons, aside from the fact that the man was an above-average officer in both bearing and intellect. If whistling while Liss worked was his only flaw, then Marco would gladly live with the otherwise minor contravention.

"Sure is pretty out there," Liss said, stopping the tune long enough to make the remark before beginning another. This time Marco recognized it as a show tune from an antiquated motion picture he'd seen many times as a child. The movie—as his father had called it—was about a magical nanny, set in London about the turn of the 19th century. While the particulars of the film currently escaped his memory, Marco had the vivid recollection of a supernatural carpetbag capable of holding anything the dark-haired caretaker could fit into it, including a free-standing floor lamp and other such oddities. As he looked out the forward view ports, the major wondered what secrets the pink clouds held, or what they were going to find behind them as they broke through.

"How much more of this is there?" Captain Liss asked, waving his hand at the blanket of pink cotton stretched out before them.

Marco looked down at the controls, then instinctively gripped the controls tightly. "Just a few more seconds. Are the phasers charged?"

Liss flipped two toggles, one for each of the craft's weapons. A moment later, the lights beside them changed from red to green. "Phasers online."

"Keep your eyes peeled on the targeting scanners. Once we breach the clouds, we could be coming into a mess down there."

"You think so?" Liss asked skeptically. "I don't know. Seems pretty calm out here. No turbulence at all, let alone any kind of—" But his words were silenced as the fighter was jolted violently starboard. One of the nearby clouds had ignited, and Major Boersma knew exactly what had happened. Just before he could say as much, a photon torpedo streaked up from the clouds, narrowly missing the shuttle before striking another pink target. The cloud exploded with a ferocity that was unexpected, given its size, but Marco was able to keep the shuttle on course.

That was when the shuttle broke the cloud barrier. There, stretched out in the valley ahead of them, were thousands of Klingon warriors. The ground was sprinkled with artillery launchers, tanks, and mortars, all with their sights seemingly set on the descending Marines. But as the communications channels became clear, it was obvious that it wasn't just the shuttles the Klingons were attacking. The 8th Battalion, commanded by the only Vulcan in the entire corps, was attempting to pound the Klingons into submission with their own mechanized units. The shuttles had happened into the middle of a mêlée, and it was one that Marco knew he would need to help swing in the Federation's favor.

"Where are the rest of our fighters? Where are the rest of the Wasps?" he asked Liss as he quickly turned the craft to avoid an incoming missile.

"They're right behind us," Liss said, verifying the information in the sensor scope. As he watched, Wasp-3 took a direct hit. The starboard weapons pylon sheared off and the craft immediately went side-first into a trio of Klingon tanks hovering just above the ground. The explosion threw everyone within 500 yards to their feet and vaporized everything within a 300-foot radius. "We just lost Rollins and Parker."

Marco didn't have time to grieve. "Get a bead on Colonel Sarpock's command frequency. I want to provide as much cover for him and the 8th as possible. Ask them where the best place for that would be."

"Aye."

"In the meantime, I'm going swing the squadron around for an attack run. There's certainly no lack of targets out there, and anything we can take out will make everyone's lives easier."

"Anything special you want me to lock on to?"

"See if you can find a concentration of tanks or heavy artillery positions. That might indicate where the Klingon commander is."

Liss nodded, then scrutinized the reading on the sensor scope. After a moment, he found what he thought was the biggest conglomeration of artillery. "Bearing 322-mark-6. Fifteen heavy tanks and a gaggle of support vehicles."

“That’s our target. Send out the signal to all fighters and have them follow us in. But if targets of opportunity come up, don’t hesitate to level them.” He heard Liss acknowledge the order as he banked the fighter to port. Looking down, he could see whole regiments of Marines moving toward the front lines of the battle, phaser bolts lancing out across the rugged terrain. If he didn’t hear anything from Sarpock or his staff soon, Marco would have to take matters into his own hands.

* * *

Deep inside the *Kuala Lumpur*, Vice Admiral YiZhong Tan leaned over the large holotable with mixed emotions. The Klingons were holding their ground against superior Federation forces, mostly due to the D-10 battle cruiser that seemed to be everywhere at once. Tan knew that if he could silence that one vessel, the remaining Klingon cruisers and destroyers would be little match for what was left of his own fleet. A warning indicator in the upper left quadrant of the table drew his attention, and Tan watched as the destroyer *Osiris* exploded—the result of an unavoidable warp core breach. The massive explosion also engulfed a nearby D-16. With its shields already down, it had little hope of surviving the shock-wave, and with a smirk Tan watched as it, too, blew apart.

“Was the *Saladin* able to rescue any of the *Osiris*’s crew before she went up?” Tan asked the nearby Commander Olmstead in a hushed voice.

Olmstead nodded slowly. “Some, but not all. Half . . . perhaps a few more.”

Tan grunted, then turned his eyes to the table. The *Saladin* had stayed until the last possible moment, then exited the combat area at full impulse to joined the fleet in Sector 30-Alpha. The combat area was now laid out like a triangle, with the Federation and Klingon forces in their own corners and the planet Karag in the third. Tan’s forces were nearly between the planet and the Klingons, and he needed to keep it that way.

“If those Klingons get into a tight orbit it could spell disaster for our forces down there,” Tan said as he nodded toward the dimensional image of the red planet.

“First and foremost, sir, we’ll need to take out that D-10,” Olmstead reiterated. “If that one ship gets through, it’s more than capable of launching a bombardment. The

D-7s could do it as well, but they'd need to coordinate their attack, and I have a feeling we could keep them too busy to do that."

Tan nodded, thankful that he and the commander were on the same page. "Agreed. There's only one problem I can see with that."

"What's that?" Olmstead asked as he continued to scan the board, looking for the least damaged Federation starship to lead the attack.

"Our best captain is here . . . up on the bridge of the *Kuala Lumpur*, and we're by far the least damaged vessel. That means we draw the short straw, Commander."

Taking in a deep breath, Olmstead had to agree. While the other cruisers and destroyers would need to gang-up on the D-10, the *Kuala Lumpur* was the only one capable of taking on the battle cruiser one on one. Besides, there was no way more than three Federation vessels could have been delegated the task without the Klingons overtaking the rest. "Looks to be that way, Admiral."

"Major Seefus," Tan called over his shoulder. "What is the latest word from General Keener and his forces?"

"They're in combat now, sir. The Klingons still outnumber them, but it appears we've got more heavy artillery than they do. I'm getting some reports of Klingon equipment failures . . . tanks and other vehicles breaking down under heavy strain. Not consistent by any means, but certainly a good omen."

"Understood. Inform the general that the *Kuala Lumpur* will be leading a new attack against the Klingons personally. If he doesn't hear from us within the hour, then he never will. His orders, at that point, are to be carried out as he sees fit."

Chapter 12

On the bridge of the light cruiser *Kuala Lumpur*, Captain Vijay Varman was silent as the order he'd just received sunk in. Nestled in the center of the ship, Vice Admiral Tan had just told Varman to take on the D-10 battle cruiser that was harassing the Federation fleet. Varman—a career-minded officer with visions of someday becoming an admiral—knew better than to question the order, no matter how absurd it sounded. It mattered little that his ship was the only one in the fleet that hadn't sustained any damage. In a protracted battle, there was simply no way he could best a battle cruiser all on his own. The D-10's shields were too powerful, its firing arcs too numerous, and the disruptor cannons it wielded could take down the *Kuala Lumpur*'s own shields with one well-placed shot. But Varman had his orders, and he would carry them out to the last crewman standing. The bridge crew knew it as well, and each of them, having heard the same order he'd just been given, looked to him expectantly.

“Commander Rowley,” Captain Varman asked as he turned to his science officer. “Where is the D-10 now?”

Ever since Vice Admiral Tan had spoken the words through the captain's intercom, Steven Rowley had dedicated his full attention to the short-range sensors and the status of the D-10 displayed on them. He didn't turn from that duty as he relayed the information. “Astern of us, Captain. She's taking fire from the cruiser *King Richard*, but her shields are holding.”

“And the *Richard*?”

“Shields are down to thirty percent. Warp drive power down to minimal levels. Torpedoes are offline, and phaser power has been cut in half. Moderate structural damage to the secondary hull.”

It's no wonder the D-10's shields aren't affected by the phaser fire. Captain Tlustos might as well roll down a window and throw rocks at it. “Communications, send a signal to the *King Richard*. Inform Captain Tlustos we're coming to render assistance.”

“Aye,” the Caitian female replied.

“Helm, lay in an intercept course to the enemy battle cruiser. Full impulse.”

At that speed, it took only a moment for the *Kuala Lumpur* to close with the target vessel. On the view screen, Captain Varman watched as the *Achernar*-class *King Richard*, battered and bruised, continued to fire on the target, the ineffectual beams causing the D-10's shields to flare but hold. But then it was the D-10's turn. Captain Varman watched as the Klingon fired both of its powerful disruptor cannons. Skillfully, using every bit of available power, the *King Richard* barely dodged the blasts.

And now that Varman was in range, he was going to take every opportunity to get the *King Richard* out of harm's way. Moving in at full impulse, he ordered a photon torpedo strike. The single warhead, intended to attract the Klingon's attention, struck solidly against the battle cruiser's shields.

“The Klingon's shields are down to sixty percent,” Rowley cried out. “The *King Richard* has slowed.”

“Message coming in from the *King Richard*, sir,” the communications officer began. “Captain Tlustos sends his regards, and wishes to continue his attack.”

Varman wanted the damaged cruiser out of the area, but knowing the orders from Admiral Tan were not open to interpretation, he'd have to take the offered assistance. “Approved, Lieutenant. But I want him out of here if he sustains any more damage.” Not more than a second later, Varman watched as the *King Richard* fired both phasers and a torpedo at the enemy vessel. The phasers missed, but the warhead struck the secondary hull, knocking the shields down another thirty percent.

It seemed to Varman that the commander of the D-10 could care little that his shields were quickly fading. Still inclined toward the *King Richard*, the two disruptor cannons once again fired, converging on the same point on the *King Richard*'s secondary hull. The combined blast knocked out the cruiser's shields and tore a gash in the hull twenty meters long.

Quickly closing the distance, Varman ordered two more torpedoes fired. One was a clean miss, the other striking the secondary hull once again.

“Her shields are down!” Rowley reported.

But before Varman could take advantage, the D-10 took off at full impulse in the direction of the *King Richard*. The two were now head-on with one another. The Klingon fired, but skillful piloting on the part of Captain Tlustos’s helmsman avoided the destructive blast. The Federation cruiser sailed under the oncoming D-10 and made a wide turn to port and headed toward the *Kuala Lumpur* at half-impulse.

Passing the *King Richard* at one-quarter impulse, Varman was far from finished with the enemy battle cruiser. “Fire phasers, point blank!” But the D-10 was quicker. It began a turn starboard, and the phasers blasted past the stern of the larger vessel.

“Sensors showing that the Klingons have regained some of their shields, sir.”

“Then we’ll just have to knock ‘em down again. As soon as the banks are charged, fire another round of the phasers.”

Attempting to both fire and turn to follow the D-10 at the same time, the phasers once again missed.

“Mr. Rowley, status of the *King Richard*?”

“Her deflectors are back online, but only barely sir. I don’t think she’ll last much longer if the D-10 continues to harass her.” On the screen, Varman watched as the *King Richard* turned to port at the same moment the Klingon finished her shallow starboard turn. The Klingon was now in a perfect firing position to strike at the cruiser’s port side.

“Helm, get us in there! We’ve got to block—” but Varman’s words were too late. The D-10 again fired its powerful disruptor cannons, knocking down the *King Richard*’s shields once more and damaging the secondary hull further. This time, large pieces of hull plating could be seen floating away from the stricken cruiser. Whether by fate or luck, the *King Richard* was able to continue in her turn whilst the Klingon moved away from her.

The *Kuala Lumpur* was coming back into firing range as she approached the Klingon’s stern. At only a few hundred yards, she fired a torpedo that missed by only a few scant meters. The D-10 then took a sharp turn to port. The Klingon

commander obsessively charged at the *King Richard* once more, two torpedoes streaking out and hitting the cruiser on the unprotected port side.

“Massive damage to the *King Richard*,” Rowley said as he looked into the short-range sensor report. “Life support is down. Gravity controls are down. Impulse power is—”

“Stow it, Mister,” Captain Varman shouted angrily. “Helm, get us in there before it’s too late. We’ve got to rescue whoever’s left on board.”

Limping more on inertia than her own power, the *King Richard* was a mess of blackened hull plates and ruptured power conduits. The D-10 came around her stern slowly, lining up for the perfect killing strike. In vain, Varman ordered more torpedoes fired. Both struck the D-10, but the battle cruiser’s attention would not be diverted. There was a moment of utter stillness as he watched both the D-10 and the *King Richard* hang motionless in space. Then the Klingon again fired its powerful disruptor cannons. One beam struck the port nacelle, the other hit the impulse deck on the aft end of the saucer. The result was an instantaneous explosion on the primary hull that quickly engulfed the rest of the vessel. In a moment, the *King Richard* was gone.

Varman’s fist slammed down on the armrest of his chair in disgust. “Fire torpedoes!” The torpedoes instantly went out from the light cruiser, each hitting the stern of the D-10 and bringing her shields down. But the range was too great, and it gave the Klingon time to come around. The *Kuala Lumpur* was to be its new obsession, and Varman held no reservations that he and his people would make it out alive if something didn’t change soon. All too quickly the *Kuala* was inside the firing arc of the battle cruiser, and the Klingon wasted little time in firing its port and starboard disruptors. Less powerful than the cannons, the damage they inflicted was still considerable. In a blinding flash, the *Kuala Lumpur*’s shields were cut in half.

Coming nose to nose with the D-10 was not an option, as the forward batteries of the D-10 would turn the smaller light cruiser into so much Swiss cheese. Ordering full impulse, Varman took the *Kuala Lumpur* past the D-10 on a port-to-port pass.

Denied their target, Commander Rowley watched in horror as the D-10 performed a high-energy turn to starboard. Putting an enormous amount of strain on its hull, the Klingon vessel turned in an exceedingly short amount of space. Now they were on the cruiser's stern and closing rapidly. "Incoming torpedo!"

Varman and the rest of the bridge crew braced themselves a moment before the weapon impacted. The jolt sent the environmental control officer spinning to his feet, and threw the communications officer into the upper guardrail.

"Shields down!" Rowley shouted over the commotion. "Impulse reactors offline!"

"Helm, hard to port! Get us out of his cone of fire!"

"Aye!"

"Message coming in from Admiral Tan in CIC," the felinoid communications officer growled.

What now? "Yes, Admiral," Varman said with exhaustion.

"Captain, reinforcements are coming into the system now. Can you hold us together for another five minutes?"

"We'll be lucky to last three, sir," he said, then looked to Rowley.

"That high-energy turn did a number on his hull," the science officer said. "I doubt he'll do another any time soon. We might have the time."

Varman nodded. "How many ships are coming to our aid, Admiral?" he asked, thankful to have more numbers on their side.

"Just one, Captain."

Varman and Rowley looked at one another in amazement. "I'm sorry, sir. Did you say just *one*?"

"I did, but I think it's the only one we'll need. The *Heston*-class battle cruiser *Marvin* just warped in to the system, and she's got that pesky D-10 at the top of her priority list. Keep the Klingons occupied for another two minutes and then let the *Marvin* swing the battle decidedly into our favor."

* * *

First Lieutenant Scott Luke had done just as he'd promised Colonel Shuford. That, and then some. If he survived the day, he'd be able to paint no less than ten

Klingon trefoils on the side of his battered but fully operational hover tank. His platoon, as well as five others, were doing an admirable job of pushing back the Klingon forces that, in the last hour, hadn't made a significant advancement anywhere within 200 square kilometers.

Sitting in the command station in the tank, he looked through the laser scope at the similarly armed and armored Klingon tank that was half a kilometer away and hovering toward his position. As he'd done a half-dozen times in the last twenty minutes, Luke held his finger softly against the trigger. He watched as the angular, rust-red enemy tank fired a single green disruptor round. A moment later, his own tank reverberated softly as the impact of the shell registered. The Klingon was a poor gunner—just as so many of the others were. Luke speculated that the Klingons were rushing crews to the front lines as fast as they could be trained, and that inexperience was their current downfall.

Inhaling a shallow breath, Scott pressed the trigger as soon as the target was firmly locked into the computer. His tank shuddered softly as the antimatter round was expelled. A second later, he watched as the Klingon tank exploded in a hail of sparks and flaming metal. *One more trefoil to paint.*

"Sir," his navigator, Sergeant Nathaniel Davis, called out from his station just behind his commander. "There's a call coming in from General Keener."

Without turning, Luke held his hand aloft and twirled his finger, a sign for the sergeant to put the call on the overhead speaker. With a beep, the channel was open. "This is Luke. Go ahead, sir."

"Masterful work out there, 1st Lieutenant. It appears the Klingons in this sector are in full retreat."

"That's good news, sir," Luke said with a soft exhale. In all honesty, he was looking forward to a brief respite. Not that the arid weather of Karag would be any different, but getting out of his tank and stretching his legs would be a welcome change from the hot air circulating in his vehicle, given that his circulation pump had gone out twenty minutes before.

“We’ve gotten reports from our orbiting fleet that the last of the Klingon warships has bugged out and fled the system. That means that the Klingons down here on the surface are ripe for the picking.”

“No reinforcements on the long-range sensors?”

“Not that the flagship can see. Of course, that’s all fleet stuff. I can only give you what’s been given to me.”

“Of course, sir,” Luke said with a smile, knowing that the general had already afforded the junior officer more latitude than he was normally entitled. “Orders, sir?”

“Colonel Shuford and the rest of the 9th Battalion will be here within the hour. Once they link up with us, we’ll push out from here into the valley beyond the northern ridgeline. That’s where the fleet’s sensors are *assuming* the Klingons are amassing most of their remaining defenses in this area.”

“Assuming, sir?”

“There’s a severe storm in the upper atmosphere above our location that’s playing hell with their sensors. They can’t get a positive count as to how many enemy units will come across when we get over the ridge, but they’re speculating it will be quite substantial. Of course, the presence of the storm also means that the fleet can’t blanket the area with phaser fire from orbit, which in my opinion is just fine with me.”

“Understood, sir.”

“I’ll need you and your people on point, Scott. I don’t want any surprises when we crest that hill, so I’m counting on you to relay to us some viable tactical data we can use to end this battle once and for all with a minimal loss of manpower and equipment. I’ll also be sending a recon team with you. They’re light on their feet, and crack shots with their phasers. If things get harried up there, I want the best of our heavy artillery and light infantry to take care of it efficiently.”

Filled with momentary pride, Luke was pleased that he’d made such a favorable impression on the general in such a short amount of time. Of course, the fact that Luke himself had pummeled three Klingon tanks that were harassing the general’s APC an hour ago likely had something to do with it. “Who’s in charge of the recon unit?”

“Captain West.”

“Patrick West?” Luke replied, as much to himself as to the general.

“You know him?”

“We were at the Academy together. I watched him win the football championship against Andor almost singlehandedly.”

“Well, then you know how good he is on his feet. And he demands even better performance from his team. Like I said, I want the best up on that ridgeline. Give them all the cover they need, Lieutenant. I’m counting on that intel to plan the final battle.”

“Yes, sir.

“West is already en route. If you leave now at full speed, you’ll link up with him just before he begins his ascent. He’s not going to wait for you to show up, so I suggest you depart immediately.”

No time to get out and stretch my legs now. Guess I better hunker down for another long ride. “Roger that, sir.” Closing the channel, he turned his head to face Sergeant Davis. “Status?”

“Minimal damage to the forward armor plating, but nothing serious. We’ve got thirty rounds of high explosive left, about twenty tracers, and a handful of mines. The rest of the platoon is roughly equivalent.”

“Then we’d better make every shot count.”

Davis smirked as he loaded another antimatter round for the captain. “Like you’d do otherwise.”

* * *

Stardate 4305.12

May 2255

“This is not only the strangest assignment I’ve ever been given, it’s also the smelliest.” With that, the captain, Thaalev th'Shendri, closed his personal log entry. At least, the Andorian officer hoped that he’d closed it. Looking around the cramped quarters of the Klingon vessel he was aboard, Thaalev began to have doubts that he was in the captain’s stateroom at all. Why they couldn’t have at least installed more Federation computer systems on board was beyond him. Commanding a captured Klingon vessel on an assault was one thing, but having to deal with substandard equipment was quite another. And although he’d been assured that the disruptors were fully functional, he knew they weren’t nearly as powerful as Starfleet phasers.

“Captain th'Shendri,” a female voice came booming over his personal intercom. “Messaging coming in from Admiral Lai.”

Were Klingons deaf as well? “Go ahead and patch him through to my terminal, Lieutenant.” A moment later, Michael Lai of Starfleet Intelligence appeared on the hexagonal screen.

“Finished settling into your new command, Captain?” Lai asked with a crooked smile.

th'Shendri took a concerned look around the room. “I’m still waiting for the overhead to cave in at any moment, sir, if that’s what you mean.”

“I’ve been assured that those vessels are in top operating condition. Still, I know it’s not the command you were hoping for when the *Lexington* became available.”

The antennae on th'Shendri’s head twitched at the mention of the heavy cruiser. Yes, he’d hoped to be commanding her. In fact, two months ago he’d been all but assured the center seat of the *Constitution*-class vessel. But the war planners at Starfleet Command had come up with a bold plan to strike at the Klingons when they were at their weakest, and Captain th'Shendri’s name was at the top of the list to head up the next offensive action. The *Lexington* could wait, but there was still a measure of frustration over the situation. He’d gone from one extreme to the other—the prospective captain of the most advanced vessel in the fleet to commanding an overworked, nearly obsolete Klingon cruiser.

“I understand, Admiral,” he said with all the professionalism he could muster, although he had to admit to himself the stench *was* getting to him.

“Are your other ships ready?”

“We are, sir. I just hope we’re able to fool the Klingons long enough to get close to them. Each of these captured vessels came from a different combat area. If the Klingons get wind of something, it won’t bode well for us.”

“I understand, Captain. However, the Klingons are so desperate for supplies, we feel that they’ll accept any help they can get. The four Klingon freighters you’ll be escorting are full of materials we believe they sorely need. Once you get those freighters close to the Klingon outpost, you’ll need to maneuver out of there as quickly as possible. From there on out all you’ll have to do is wait for the cavalry.”

“And where will the fleet be?”

“Admiral Jasiha Welch will have separated the fleet into the individual attack squadrons long before you reach the planet Grank. With over 200 vessels at his disposal, he’ll have his fleet captains making most of the decisions autonomously. He’ll still maintain overall command.”

“And his flagship?”

Lai chuckled. “Vice Admiral Welch has been ordered to stay out of the fight, but he’s as headstrong as any vessel commander I’ve ever met. After he recovered from his injuries—and his subsequent assignment to Starbase 14 for the duration of his recovery—he’s more than eager to give the Klingons a little payback for what they did to his people near Klef, to say nothing about retribution for the loss of the *Tenara*.”

th'Shendri nodded. “I cannot say that I blame him, Admiral.”

“To answer your question, he’s transferred his flag to the *Heston*-class battle cruiser I’ve placed at his disposal, the USS *Marvin*.”

“And our long-range scouts in the area?”

“As of stardate 4305.01, the *Marathon* reported that just under 200 enemy vessels were amassed in the Grank system. However, Captain Moss has cautioned that there is no telling where most of the ships will be located in the system itself. We *do* know that the two Z-4 defense outposts will be heavily guarded. Expect several cruiser squadrons to be docked there, along with battleships. Again, your mission is

not to engage the station or the ships there unless it becomes necessary for you to do so. Your goal is to deliver the cargo vessels and then evacuate the area.”

“Not that we’d stand a chance against the stations if we had to slug it out with them.”

“Those Z-4s are as tough as they come, and even a whole squadron of starships would have a tough time getting through their shields. Of course, that’s where you and your team come in.”

“With a handful of aging D-7s and D-16s . . .” th'Shendri said as he shook his head, then smiled. “Of course, the absurdity of it all is why we volunteered for this assignment, isn’t it?”

“I’m glad you did, Captain. I’m glad *all* your people did. We can’t do this without all of you acting in concert. Besides, I’m quite sure the *Lexington* will be waiting for you when you get back. In fact, I’ll make sure she is.”

“I’ll hold you to that, Admiral. We’re ready to get underway now, sir.”

“Then good luck, Captain th'Shendri.”

“Thank you, sir. th'Shendri out.”

Chapter 13

Stardate 4305.20

May 2255

Incoming subspace communication . . .

FROM: The Office of the Commanding Officer, Starfleet Public Relations,
Admiral Joselyn Czernovski

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,
Admiral Michael J. Lai, San Francisco, Earth

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

1. On stardate 4305.11, the command pod of a Klingon D-10 battle cruiser was found floating in space just outside the Oco system. Discovered by the Federation battle cruiser *Marvin*, the pod was all that remained of the command vessel of the 6th Imperial Klingon Fleet warship *Kal'Torna*. Although badly damaged, cursory scans of the derelict by the *Marvin* indicated minimal power with partial life support functionality. Due to the fact that the Federation had yet to capture one of these vessels, the idea of taking the jettisoned pod back to Starfleet Intelligence was more than the *Marvin*'s captain could pass up. A security team was quickly beamed over to investigate. They were surprised to find several Klingon officers alive in the hulk. Malnourished and needing immediate medical attention, the survivors were brought

back to the *Marvin* without incident. After a meal and an extended rest, the Klingons were more than eager to cooperate with the Intelligence officer stationed on board the Federation battle cruiser. Based on their combined recounting of events, and with drift and distance taken into account, it appeared that the IKV *Kal'Torna* was damaged during the battle that took place in the Oco system on stardate 4301.19, and had been adrift ever since. Abandoned by their retreating forces and left for dead, the crew of fifty had dwindled since that time to a scant fifteen survivors.

Both the officers and the D-10 command pod were taken to Starbase 10 for processing by Starfleet Intelligence operatives at that location.

2. On stardate 4304.28, while on a routine patrol of the Thirat system, the *Saladin*-class destroyer *Aramis* intercepted a lone K-17D scout vessel on an apparent course to the Grank system, located in Orion-controlled space. As soon as the *Aramis* closed to within weapons range, the Klingon vessel unexpectedly attempted to open a communications channel to the Federation vessel. With shields raised and weapons armed, the Starfleet captain opened the channel. The commander of the Klingon vessels asked to speak “immediately with the highest-ranking officer in Starfleet,” and then went on to say they were fully prepared to be boarded, and that they would offer no resistance to Federation security forces. Unsure of whether it was ploy, the *Aramis* boarded the smaller vessel with a full contingent of Marines. Quickly seizing control of the vessel, the *Aramis* took the scout in tow before contacting Rear Admiral Lai of Starfleet Intelligence, who was on a nearby command cruiser and en route to Starbase 23. With the crew of the scout vessel evacuated to the *Aramis*, Admiral Michael J. Lai arrived on scene on stardate 4302.22. At that time, the commander of the Klingon vessel introduced himself as none other than Thought Admiral K’hober, the supreme commander of the Klingon forces now invading Federation territory. DNA and voice print analysis were able to confirm the admiral’s identity.

The conversation that followed is now considered top secret, and any Starfleet commander wishing to obtain a coded transcript of it should contact the commander, Starfleet Intelligence, Rear Admiral Lai, directly at Starbase 23.

3. Stardate 4303.01 marked the 100th anniversary commemorating the activation of Starbase 3. This base was the focal point of command and control operations during the Earth-Romulan wars. Without this installation or the leadership behind it, that war could have turned out very differently for everyone in the Federation. A gala of festivities will commence at Starbase 3 from now until stardate 4306.25. At that time, the orbital base will be officially decommissioned and replaced by a new facility that is currently en route from the Pollux system. Any starship captain in the immediate area not otherwise engaged is encouraged to escort the Merchant Marine tug USMS *Azadi*, which is currently transporting the station. Interested commanders are asked to submit their intentions to the commander, Starbase 3, Commodore Jerold Sanders, on or before stardate 4306.20.

4. Between stardates 4301.01 and 4304.31, a total of ten Starfleet Merchant Marine vessels have disappeared in the area of open space between the Muraski and Scalas systems. A normal route of transit for such vessels, the disappearances are now being investigated by Starfleet Security. Armed only with minimal weapons geared toward defensive maneuvers, Merchant Marine vessels are ill-equipped to perform extensive combat operations. Starfleet Command has thus ordered that any future travel by the Merchant Marines in that area will now be undertaken as flotilla formations consisting of no less than one Federation warship for every two cargo or auxiliary vessels. As the investigation is ongoing, any sensor data that can be provided by Federation vessels in that area should be transmitted to Starfleet Command with the utmost urgency.

5. Taking place around stardate 4305.10, the Klingon garrison on the captured world of Karag was defeated by less than superior Federation forces. Starfleet vessels successfully eradicated the small Klingon fleet in orbit, while several battalions of fleet Marines swept over the Klingon outpost on the surface. Casualties for the Federation Marines were light. Over 15,000 Klingons were captured in the engagement. With such a large force now in custody, it was decided that a temporary penal colony for the prisoners would be set up on that world. The Klingons—represented by both Imperial and fusion races—were malnourished to

the point of exhaustion. Much of their equipment had failed or was in the process of failing as the Federation Marines converged on their stronghold. There is now no longer any doubt that the Klingon menace, once such a grave threat to the security of the Federation, is well past the tipping point and on their way to defeat. If the warriors present on Karag are indicative of the overall strength of the empire in this area, it is very likely that the end of this long and terrible conflict has already begun.

6. Stardate 4304.15 marked the first time captured enemy vessels were used in an offensive capacity against the Klingons. Three squadrons of captured cruisers and destroyers guarding several transports were used to infiltrate the Grank system. Known to contain two Klingon outposts, Grank was also the regrouping point for the bulk of the Klingon fleet. Mistaking the new arrivals for a sorely needed supply convoy, the Klingons welcomed the covert Starfleet forces with open arms. Within moments of their arrival at the nearest station, two of the captured transports exploded, their cargo of tricobolt igniting a fireball that consumed one entire Klingon outpost as well as several nearby vessels. Not long after, using a diverse combination of tactics, 200 starships of the 12th Fleet moved in for a multi-flanking attack against a nearly identical number of ill-prepared enemy vessels. Kugor, the single remaining flag officer present in the enemy forces, attempted in vain to rally his troops, often berating them openly over subspace. Many Klingon ships fled the area without firing a single weapon. Others performed brutal, often suicidal attacks on the Starfleet forces. After nearly six hours of unrelenting combat, Rear Admiral Esteve Freitas and the 12th Fleet were able to subdue Kugor's forces, managing to capture the remaining Klingon outpost before it could self-destruct. For this and many other heroic acts during this bloody conflict, Starfleet created the Grankite Order of Tactics commendation, with Admiral Freitas being the first of many recipients.

7. On stardate 4305.13, in what is now known as Operation Argus Redoubt, several Federation squadrons of cruisers, frigates, and destroyers invaded the main Klingon stronghold inside Federation space in the Kolm-an system. Expecting to face off against numerous heavy warships and battle cruisers, the Starfleet forces instead found themselves squaring off with only two squadrons of monitors, as well as a hundred gunboats. The Federation fleet carrier *Vella Gulf*, along with sister

ships *Chenango* and *Mindoro*, easily dispatched the gunboats by the superior tactics displayed by their respective fighter pilots. Admiral Ian Weiger's flagship, the USS *Formidable*, along with ships such as the *Anzio*, *Gettysburg*, and the *Reliant*, destroyed or drove off the Klingon monitors with little effort, then made little work of the remaining gunboats. With the liberation of Kolm-an, the Klingons' foothold in Federation space has been effectively expunged.

8. Stardate 4305.19. At the behest of the captured Admiral K'hober, a dialogue was opened between the Federation Council and the Klingon Empire for the purpose of pursuing the possibility of establishing a formal truce between the two powers. With Klingon strength at an all-time low, and with Federation production of warships at their highest levels in two years, Starfleet Intelligence now feels that such a truce would be welcomed by the Klingons at this time. Several delegates have been chosen from the Federation Council to investigate the probability that the two powers can come to some form of mutual agreement.

9. As of this stardate, however, the Federation and the Klingons are still at a state of war. All commanders are advised to make regular updates to their nearest superiors, and be on constant alert for a cessation in hostilities—should the Federation diplomats come to some form of agreement with the Klingon High Council. Until this comes to pass—if ever—Starfleet commanders are ordered to continue to pursue and attack Klingon targets of opportunity inside established Federation boundaries.

Chapter 14

Stardate 4306.01

June 2255

“Captain’s log: supplemental. With the ship now fully staffed we’re preparing to get underway. I have to admit, I’m excited to see what the *Republic* can do. The *Farragut* was a good ship, easily the best I’ve ever served on. But she’s been relegated to Starfleet Academy for training cruises for the foreseeable future, and with my duty on her finished, it’s high time I get back out into space. With the war against the Klingons all but over, I’m understandably curious what Starfleet has in store for our first assignment. The new section added to the primary hull passed every test the engineers could throw at it. I still don’t see the need to have a secondary shuttle bay and berthing facilities, but when the admiralty tells you to go into the yards, I’ve learned not to question those decisions. That being said, the *Republic*’s phasers would have served us well on the front lines in the war. My prayer now is that she serves us just as admirably in peace.”

Signing off his log, Captain Stephen Garrovick handed the stylus to the waiting yeoman at his side. On the main viewer, the lattice-like structure of the dry dock filled the rim of the screen. In each of the top corners, the shipyard lights bathed the primary hull in a diffused light. Beyond them were the stars and the great unexplored parts of the galaxy. And, in the navigator’s position, Stephen smiled at the young man who was itching to discover it.

“Are we ready to get underway, James?”

“All mooring lines retracted. The main gangway is pulling back now. Thrusters at station keeping,” Lieutenant James T. Kirk said before turning his head to look over his shoulder. “She’s ready, sir.”

Kirk had been one of Stephen’s best pupils . . . possibly the best he’d ever instructed. Kirk’s quick rise to lieutenant was proof of that. Garrovick saw a kindred spirit in young James Kirk, one he wasn’t willing to say farewell to when their time at Starfleet Academy had come to an end. At his request, and Kirk’s obvious

approval, Stephen had hand-picked the young man to serve as his navigator. Even more of a surprise to Kirk was when Garrovick had assigned Kirk the position of Operations Officer, placing Kirk squarely at 4th in command of the command cruiser.

And Kirk had performed admirably in the last few months while the *Republic* was being fitted out with her new structural additions, ones that had been placed just aft of the bridge atop the saucer section and extending aft all the way to the impulse deck. But now it was time to get Kirk and the *Republic* out into space and on her way, and Stephen found himself almost giddy at the thought of seeing how both ship and crew were going to work out.

Kirk was one of the only officers on board he knew well. Many were newly christened ensigns straight from the Academy, smattered with a few hard-charging junior officers and a limited number of battle-tested department heads. The challenge of getting to know them all was—like getting to know his new ship—going to take some time. Even now, the name of the junior grade lieutenant sitting beside Kirk eluded him. They’d met only briefly, and it wasn’t until the young man felt the captain’s eyes on the back of his head that he turned . . . and all at once the name came to Garrovick.

“Mr. Balkwill?” the captain asked as he read the junior lieutenant’s vexed expression.

Dan Balkwill—Danny to most everyone on board—looked from Stephen to the communications officer behind him, then back to the captain in confusion. “Did you say something, sir?”

“Lieutenant?”

Danny smiled sheepishly. “Well, sir, it’s just that . . . I mean, did you ever get that feeling you were being watched, sir?”

“All the time, Lieutenant. After all, I’m the captain. It comes with the job title.”

Balkwill pursed his lips, unsure if the captain was making a joke or not. He simply didn’t know the old man well enough to tell. All he had to go on was Kirk, and he and Jim were still ironing out the kinks of their working relationship . . . which was

slowly turning into a budding friendship. But it wasn't without its difficulties. Danny was far more outgoing, with Kirk coming off as cold, almost distant at times. Balkwill had chalked it up to being such a dedicated officer, content that they'd likely work out something between them.

Turning from the captain, Balkwill caught Kirk's eye. The lieutenant didn't so much smile as he smirked, then looked briefly down to the navigator's console, which Dan took as a signal to return to his own duties. "Sorry, sir," Balkwill offered to Garrovick. "It's probably nothing."

Garrovick smiled, hoping to avoid any further embarrassment on the lieutenant's part. "Systems status, navigator?"

"All systems ready, sir. Standing by to input the new course as soon as we leave the orbital facility."

"Impulse and reaction control systems?"

Balkwill looked to his instruments and, satisfied with the output monitors, shot a nod in the direction of the engineer's console on the far left of the bridge. The on-duty engineer, Lieutenant Junior Grade Zane Deimos, returned the nod, then looked to the captain.

"All drive systems, including warp power, are at full standby, sir," Zane responded.

"Power output, Lieutenant Deimos?"

"Nearing peak efficiency, sir. I'd say this horse is ready to leave the starting gates."

Garrovick then turned to Lieutenant Ben Finney at the science officer's station. Finney, who'd come aboard the *Republic* with Kirk, was one of the few junior instructors that Garrovick had taken a strong liking to while they'd served together at the Academy. Finney's casual but thorough manner of instruction complemented Stephen's similar style of command, and the two had worked hard to craft not only James Kirk, but many of the future James Kirks of Starfleet Command as well. With a number of those newly christened officers now aboard the *Republic*, Garrovick was glad to have the familiar face of Ben Finney around. "Ben?"

"All sensors operational, sir," Finney said as he turned his blue eyes to the captain. "Library computer online and at your disposal."

“Very good. We should have the new science officer aboard in the next few days, Ben. I wouldn’t get too comfortable in that cushy chair if I were you.”

Finney smiled, his golden hair catching the overhead lights as he turned to the captain. “Are you kidding? I’m ready to go back down to engineering as soon as you want to send me.”

“Still bucking for that promotion to assistant chief engineer?”

“You saying it’s not mine already?” Finney asked with an air of self-assurance.

Stephen smiled warmly. “As you were, Lieutenant.” Seeing that the rest of the bridge was in order, Garrovick stood from the command chair and walked to the right of James Kirk. “Mr. Kirk, if you wouldn’t mind giving everyone the order to get underway.”

Danny turned to Kirk, and for the first time saw a look of utter surprise on the lieutenant’s face.

“Me, sir?” Kirk asked.

“Yes, James,” Garrovick replied warmly. “You. It’s something of a tradition for a junior officer to get the ship underway after a long docking period. It’s about good fortune for the upcoming voyage. Or so I’ve heard, at least.” When Kirk looked at him skeptically, Stephen placed a firm hand on the junior officer’s shoulder. “Okay, so maybe it’s not a tradition, but let’s break some new ground and see where it takes us.”

Smiling, Kirk nodded. “Aye, sir.” Turning to his duties, James opened the ship-wide intercom. “All hands, this is the bridge. Stand by to get underway. Department heads make reports to the bridge at regular intervals. Duty sections three and four, remain at station keeping. All others officers not on duty are advised to man the starboard view ports. The suns are just appearing over the horizon of Janus IV now, and the light show they put on in the Denorius nebula has been said to be one of the most beautiful in the quadrant.” Pausing, Kirk wondered if he’d gone too far with his words to the crew. Seeing the gleam in Garrovick’s eyes instantly told him otherwise. “Take it in, people. It may be a long time before we’re back in these parts. Bridge out.”

“Well said, James,” Stephen said. “Now, if you two gentlemen would care to get us underway. One-quarter impulse until we clear the dock, then bring her up to one-half until we’re clear of the Janus system.”

Kirk turned to Danny, smiled, and then did as the captain had requested. A split second later the impulse drives kicked in, and the bridge crew was momentarily pulled back into their seats with the sudden inertia. Moments later, Starbase 14 quickly fell astern of the *Republic* as she made her way out of the system.

Twenty minutes into their journey, the *Republic* was well clear of the Janus system and on course to the Niobe system when Garrovick’s attention was drawn to the voice of the only Andorian officer on the ship.

“Captain, I’m receiving a Priority One communication,” Lieutenant Helissa at the communications console said in surprise.

Garrovick was equally stunned. There were more than enough starships in the immediate area. *Why would anyone need the Republic, and why now? Maybe the Klingons are having second thoughts about the peace proposal. If that’s true, then we’ve got little time to waste.* “Go ahead with the message,” he said after a moment.

Turning back to her station, the blue-skinned Andorian officer read the message as it appeared on her screen. “To the captain, USS *Republic*, via the commander in chief, Starfleet, Fleet Admiral Matthew D. Luxa. You and your crew are hereby detached from all official duties and ordered to report to Starbase 5 immediately for new orders. No deviation from this course will be sanctioned. You are authorized to exceed warp speed limitations for the duration of your voyage. Signed, Rear Admiral Balkwill, commander, Starbase 5.”

At the mention of his father’s name, Danny turned to see that Captain Garrovick was already looking in the young man’s direction. But the captain didn’t say anything. He simply looked at the junior officer passively for a moment, then turned back to the communications officer. “Send an acknowledgement, Lieutenant.” Standing and then stepping down to the lower level of the bridge, the captain moved to the navigator’s side, but addressed the helmsman. “Mr. Kirk, lay in a course to Starbase 5. Maximum available speed.”

“Aye, sir.”

Garrovick then tilted his head down to Danny. "Lieutenant?"

"I'm as puzzled by it as you are, sir."

"When was the last time you saw your father?"

Balkwill had to think about it for a moment, which silently told Garrovick that it'd been far too long. "About a year, I guess. Maybe a little more."

Garrovick recalled some of the more pertinent information from the lieutenant's personnel record. "When your mother passed away," he said, keeping his voice down.

"That's right, sir," Balkwill said with an impressed tone, but then his eyes became distant. "I guess you have to memorize all the officers' records, though."

Garrovick placed his hand gently on the younger man's shoulder. "No, not all of them. Just the records of the officers that I entrust with the most responsibilities."

Balkwill took the compliment with a genuine smile. "Thank you, sir."

"You two get along well?"

Balkwill's head wagged. "As good as any father and son do, considering our rank and positions in the fleet."

Beside him, Kirk looked quietly in Balkwill's direction. His father, too, was a senior officer in the fleet. When James caught Garrovick's momentary gaze, Kirk nodded. "Course laid in for Starbase 5, Captain."

"ETA, Mr. Kirk?"

"At maximum warp, a little over ten hours."

"Zane?" the captain then asked of the young engineer.

Deimos turned from the engineering console. "Not a problem, sir. These new engines are things of beauty. They could do ten hours standing on their heads."

"I'll bet chief engineer Harris would agree. Very well, let's be on our way, people. I'm not a fan of being in the dark, but it seems Admiral Balkwill wants it to stay that way for the time being. The sooner we get there, the sooner we can figure out what's going on, and why it's so important the *Republic* be there."

* * *

Precisely ten hours, fifteen minutes later, the *Republic* dropped out of warp just outside the system containing Starbase 5. Filled with barren, lifeless worlds, the trip to the massive outpost from the outskirts of the system was a deathly silent one. A hundred thousand kilometers from the station, Garrovick ordered the viewer set to normal magnification. Kirk complied, but the disc-shaped structure floating above the Class-L world still filled the entire central portion of the screen.

“Sir, we’re receiving a message from the station’s communication center,” the communications officer said. “We’re being directed to docking bay number 4. Once we are inside, Starfleet Security will be there to escort you and your party to the admiral’s briefing room.”

The hush-hush nature of this assignment was threatening to tear at Garrovick’s nerves. Now they were being ushered to the far corner of the station, there to be met by armed escorts. Resigned to his current fate, Stephen could do little else but continue to acknowledge the scant instructions he was receiving. “Understood, Lieutenant. Mr. Kirk, make for docking bay number 4 as directed.”

“Aye, sir.”

On the screen, the station began a slow spin as the Federation cruiser circled around to its far side. Once in position, Kirk lined the starship on the approach vector for the ball-shaped docking facility—one of six such structures strung together around the periphery of the central flattened sphere of the station. Each docking bay was roughly 300 meters in diameter, large enough to hold a starship and two smaller vessels if they were stacked neatly enough. When the two large outer doors opened, Garrovick wasn’t surprised to see that the entire bay was empty. Not even a shuttlecraft could be seen darting about, nor were there any smaller support vessels or robot maintenance vehicles scurrying about with cargo or materials. It was eerily quiet, and with only half the overhead lights on, docking area 4 looked for all intents and purposes like a ghost town. At least there wouldn’t be any navigational hazards to contend with.

“Mr. Kirk, slow to maneuvering thrusters. Take us in nice and slow.”

“Yes, sir. Initiating docking procedures.”

Garrovick found himself chuckling. “Anyone else feel like we’ve done this dance recently?”

Balkwill, Kirk, and Deimos each laughed softly in reply. Finney was looking at the station skeptically, and Lieutenant Helissa at communications wore a blank expression, her antennae twitching as she continued to listen for instructions from the dock master that never came. The rest of the bridge crew members went about their duties as normal, as if this were just another day in Starfleet. *But was it?* Garrovick didn’t think so. Something very odd was going on, and he hoped that the meeting with Admiral Balkwill would shed some much-needed light on it. Stephen hated mysteries, and he hoped the veil of this one would be lifted soon.

“Slowing to docking speed,” Kirk said from his console.

“Shut the thrusters down, Jim. Our inertia should carry us the rest of the way.”

Just as Kirk did, the station’s tractor beam took hold of the vessel, gently guiding it the rest of the way into the station. A moment later, the internal gangplank was extended, and the ship was secured from flight.

“Outer doors closing,” Finney said from the science console. “Looks like we’ll be staying for a little while.”

But something in the captain’s heart told him otherwise. *No. They’re just trying to keep prying eyes from knowing we’re here.* But he didn’t say as much. When he looked to Kirk, James was giving the captain a concerned look. *Of course, if anyone was going to know his captain’s thoughts on the matter, it’d be Jim. Good lad. Keep your wits about you, and you’ll be well on your way to your own command someday. But for now, it looks as though we’re all going to have to do as we’re told.*

“Admiral Balkwill didn’t say exactly who I should bring along with me, so I’m going to keep to the smallest party possible,” Garrovick said as he stood from the command chair and addressed the officers. “Kirk, I want you and Mr. Balkwill with me. Finney, you’ve got the ship until I return.”

“Yes, sir,” Ben said stepping down from the science station and slipping into the command chair. He then turned to Kirk, the two sharing a smile.

“Call down to engineering. I’d like Commander Harris there as well.”

Helissa nodded, her antennae following a half-second later. "Yes, sir."

Ten minutes later, Garrovick, Kirk, Lieutenant Junior Grade Balkwill, and the ship's chief engineer, Commander Phill Harris, were walking through the main connecting gangplank on their way into the station.

"Any idea what's going on, Stephen?" Harris asked.

"I wish I could say. I've been in the dark since we left Starbase 14."

"Well, just between you and me, I'm kind of excited about all this."

Garrovick laughed at the brash commander. "Oh?"

"When you've been stuck behind a desk as long as I have, anything out of the ordinary is exciting."

Garrovick could understand that. After all, up until recently, Harris had been leading one of the Research and Development teams for Starfleet Tactical working on new shipboard weapon systems. In fact, his team had done the majority of testing on the photon torpedo systems now employed on nearly every starship in the fleet. True, Phill had made a number of exercise cruises on the USS *Anton* during his tenure, but those had been few and far between long sessions huddled around drafting tables and computer simulations through all hours of the night. Still, Garrovick was delighted to have one of the premier engineers on board the *Republic*, and knew that Phill would perform his job well.

As the doors leading from the connecting gangway to the station were swept aside, Garrovick and his people were greeted by two Starfleet officers, each holding phaser rifles and looking more serious than protocol would normally demand. Their uniforms were the typical black and gray of Starfleet Security, but something about them told Garrovick that these men weren't the run-of-the-mill security team. In fact, they carried themselves more like Marines. Each of them scanned the party from the *Republic*, likely comparing the faces to images they'd seen from the official record. Satisfied, the two men parted and allowed Garrovick and his team to enter the station's docking air lock.

"If you'll follow us, Captain," the tall, dark-skinned officer said in a deep voice.

Moving quickly through a maze of connected passageways, Garrovick was stunned to find all of them deserted, as if the path had been cleared ahead of time. Every door was closed, probably locked by the station security to prevent curious

seekers from entering the team's path to their meeting with Admiral Balkwill. And, with every twist and turn, Garrovick continued to ask himself the same question: *Why?*

At last they came to a sealed security door. The dark-skinned officer withdrew a badge, waved it over a scanner, and then stepped aside, allowing Garrovick and his people to enter the well-lit compartment. Once inside, the doors were closed, leaving Garrovick and his team without their escorts. Emblazoned in the foyer carpet was the logo of Starbase 5, and Garrovick knew they had been ushered into Admiral Balkwill's private office. After a moment, the admiral appeared from a side door.

"Captain Garrovick," he said with an extended hand that Stephen took formally.

"Admiral Balkwill. A pleasure."

"Thank you for coming so quickly, Captain."

"I had little choice in the matter, sir. Priority One . . . authorized to exceed warp speed limitations . . . with words like that, I'm in no position to dawdle."

"The reasons for all that will be made clear very shortly, Captain."

Garrovick nodded, then turned to his team. "This is Commander Harris, my chief engineer. Beside him is Lieutenant Kirk, ship's helmsman. And I believe you know our navigator, sir."

The admiral looked to each as he was introduced, then extended a hand to the younger Balkwill. "It's good to see you, son."

Danny took it, shook it firmly, then moved back to stand with his shipmates. "You too, sir."

"I'm glad you're here. I'm glad all of you are here. However, time is of the essence. Please, if you'll come with me, I've got a briefing room ready to receive you."

Balkwill then turned and headed for the door he'd come through. Quick on his heels, Garrovick followed, but stopped dead in his tracks the moment he was through the opening. His mouth slacked as he stared at the sight before him. There,

standing at attention at the end of the long briefing room table, were three fully armed and very dangerous-looking Klingons.

Chapter 15

Slowly filing into the briefing room behind Garrovick, the rest of the team from the *Republic* was equally stunned at the sight of the Klingons inside the starbase commander's office. Danny watched as his father rounded the table, then stood calmly behind one of the empty chairs and motioned for the assembled officers to do the same.

As they did, Garrovick noticed a woman sitting in the chair opposite the Klingons. She was human, perhaps in her early forties, with curly blonde hair that just brushed the tops of her shoulders. Her blue eyes, like pools of frozen water, looked back at Garrovick with confidence. She glided from her chair, shimmering blue and white robes flowing around her athletic frame. There was a gleam of something shiny just above her right breast. Chancing a look, Garrovick saw a badge emblazoned with the logo of the Federation Assembly.

But Admiral Balkwill waved a hand in the direction of the central Klingon officer. "Captain Garrovick, may I present Fleet Admiral K'hober of the Klingon Empire."

Though they were close enough to exchange courtesies, neither man extended a hand to one another. Garrovick knew the name from the intelligence reports he'd received from Starfleet Intelligence some time ago. Garrovick was surprised to see that, contrary to the multitude of reports from Starfleet Intelligence, K'hober was not an Imperial race Klingon, but was in fact a fusion, and looking decidedly more human than his two compatriots. He wondered why that fact had been omitted from Lai's official report, but it was quickly overshadowed by an even more important question: Why was K'hober here and not on Starbase 23—or better yet, a Federation penal colony?

Garrovick stared at the Klingon for a long moment, then turned back to Balkwill in silence.

"The officer to his left is General Mek'Tor of the Imperial Marines," Balkwill said as he waved a hand in the general's direction. "The one to Admiral K'hober's right is Admiral Klutuk of the 23rd Imperial Squadron."

Garrovick and the team from the *Republic* gave each Klingon a glance, then all looked back to Admiral Balkwill. All of them except Stephen, whose eyes had somehow found the attractive woman's once more.

"This is Ambassador Jennifer Norpin of the Federation Assembly," Balkwill offered. "She's here as representative of the Federation Council, and comes with the authority of the president of the Federation himself."

Garrovick took the opportunity to bow slightly, then extended a hand to her. She reached out and found his, then smiled. "Ambassador Norpin," Stephen said without shaking her hand. "Captain Stephen Garrovick."

The ambassador's smile faded as she released his hand. "I know who you are, Captain. In fact, I know a great deal about many of you."

"Oh?" Stephen asked.

"Yes. In fact, I'm the one responsible for choosing you for this assignment."

"Then you have me at a disadvantage, Ambassador."

Jennifer chuckled lightly, but Garrovick was left uncertain if it was a well-practiced maneuver of general diplomacy, or if it was genuine emotional response. "One that I hope is only temporary, Captain."

Garrovick's smile finally faded, but he kept his eyes on her. "I'd be grateful if someone could tell me exactly *what* that assignment is, and what these . . ."—his words trailed off as he looked at the Klingons—"these *officers* are doing here."

Ambassador Norpin looked to Admiral Balkwill expectantly, at which the admiral motioned everyone to take a seat. "Captain Garrovick," Balkwill started, "as you know, the Federation and the Klingon Empire are currently in negotiations over the cessation of hostilities between our two governments. They have been for some time. What you may not know is that those talks are very nearly completed, and that a peace accord is in the final phases of being drafted."

Unseen by anyone, Commander Harris's eyes darted to the Klingons, but the rest were still fixed on Admiral Balkwill.

"Yes, sir," Garrovick said with a nod.

"Ambassador Norpin has been instrumental in the vast majority of the negotiations which have been taking place on Starbase 23. Quite simply, without her, we would not be where we are today."

Garrovick looked at the ambassador briefly, then back to the admiral. “And exactly where is that, sir?”

“On the brink of putting all this behind us, Captain. At least, as much as we can without doing any further damage.”

“And what exactly does the *Republic* have to do with all this?” Stephen asked, then turned back to the attractive woman across from him. “It sounds as if the ambassador has the situation well under control.”

“I wish that were the case, Captain,” she said hesitantly, casting her eyes to the tabletop.

“Meaning?” Stephen asked thoughtfully, but it was Admiral Balkwill who answered.

“A threat has arisen that could adversely affect the upcoming peace conference, and quite frankly, the *Republic* has been assigned to deal with it. Failure to mollify the threat, and do it quickly, could result in a complete breakdown in the peace talks . . . which would invariably lead to the resumption of hostilities between the Federation and the Klingon Empire. Everything that Ambassador Norpin and the council has worked toward will be thrown out the window, and millions of lives would once again be at risk.”

Garrovick nodded, then looked to the ambassador, knowing that the admiral had effectively turned the briefing over to her. “I think that the advantage you’ve held over me is about to be nullified.”

She bowed her head slightly. “While much of the Klingon society and culture remains something of an enigma to us, certain facts have recently come to light with the assistance of Admiral K’hober and his aides. The most important of these deal with the way the Klingon society functions with regard to the relationship between the fusion race and those of full-blood Imperials.” There was a grunt from one of the Klingons, and she slowly turned to K’hober. “Admiral, as I’ve said in the past, the Federation recognizes that both fusions and Imperials are both fully Klingon by race, and the fact that I make the distinction of Imperials as full-blooded warriors

has only to do with that fact that they are not affected by the augment virus in their blood. There is no dishonor implied.”

K’hober simply glared, as did the two Imperials flanking him. “The High Council recognizes the Federation’s attempts to humanize the condition affecting the majority of our people, and we choose not to take offense at their ignorance.”

Stephen almost chuckled. If that was the best equivalent to “thank you” a Klingon could muster, then Jennifer Norpin must have been one of the most patient people in the galaxy to have worked out a viable treaty with them. Indeed, she must have been expecting such an answer from the Klingon, as Jennifer bowed graciously and then turned back to Garrovick.

“This relationship between the two factions has long been governed by two leaders with nearly equal powers who—when acting as a unified voice—effectively rule the empire. One of them, Emperor Karhammur, is a full-blood Imperial. The other, in charge of the Imperial Klingon Fleet, is a fusion.”

“K’hober?” Garrovick asked as he turned to the Klingon, who met his question with a silent glare.

“Precisely,” Jennifer agreed, bringing the captain’s attention back to her. “Both of these men are answerable to the Klingon High Council, the overall voice of the Klingon Empire. The High Council has been divided into two major factions with regard to the Federation, and the two leaders have been split in their views as well.

“Admiral K’hober and one faction of the High Council favor a negotiated settlement with the Federation; the other favors continued expansion into Federation territory—meaning continued warfare with us. However, their goals are remarkably similar—freedom for the Klingon Empire to expand unchecked by outside powers is paramount to all. Only the methods and the direction of that expansion between the two differs.”

“And the Admiral?” Stephen asked, nodding to the central Klingon.

“K’hober and his followers disagree that a continued war with the Federation would be advantageous for their people. In fact, it threatens to eradicate the Klingons as a species. They feel that, if the war is not stopped now, the Federation may soon invade Klingon territory. The current failures by the emperor have left the empire on the brink of economic collapse, and a well-planned series of large-scale

fleet actions could easily decimate a large portion of their empire. In that event, acting out of sheer desperation, the Klingons would rather die fighting than give up what is rightfully theirs.

“Acting under the authority of the Federation Council, I have assured Admiral K’hober that that the Federation is not in the habit of invading neighboring territories, and that we would favor a diplomatic solution before even considering any form of offensive strategies. Both Admiral K’hober and I feel that, for the good of both governments and the lives of our people, continued hostilities should immediately cease.”

“And what about the other faction?” Garrovick asked her with marked concern. “What about the emperor and his followers?”

But it was Admiral K’hober who spoke. “It was he who ordered the attack against Axanar that began this entire debacle, and he did so against my express wishes. The emperor has since led the empire into one defeat after another, with promises of honor and glory to my people that have never materialized. Even General Mek’Tor, who orchestrated several attacks for the emperor . . . including the one against the Archanis IV station, has seen the folly of that leadership. However, the emperor had managed to sway a few key leaders on the Council with his rhetoric. They felt that continued pressure on the Federation would soon bring them to their knees.”

At the mention of Archanis, Garrovick noticed that Commander Harris—who up to that point had starred impassively at Admiral Balkwill, was now glaring at K’hober, his fist clenched at his side but out of sight of everyone else. “You speak in the past tense, Admiral,” Stephen said flatly. “Has something changed?”

K’hober nodded, then stood to face a tall window looking out into space. “Tensions between the fusions, as you call them, and the Imperials had come to a head. The High Council has since fractured, much to the dismay of many of my people. The emperor has left the home world with the support of nearly a third of our navy, and has ordered continued military operations against the Federation. He will lead the attacks himself, and in doing so, show my people that his is the better way. However, his actions will almost certainly backfire, and I fear they will push

the empire well past its breaking point.” He then turned to face Garrovick, his hands clasped behind his back. “So, Captain, you see our plight. Not only must we avoid further conflicts with the Federation, we must also ensure that the Klingon Empire does not erupt into a full-blown civil war—both of which would surely spill into Federation territory and cause more needless death and destruction for both sides.”

“But what does that have to do with the *Republic*?” Stephen asked, turning from K’hober to Ambassador Norpin; however, it was Admiral Balkwill who spoke.

“The peace conference between our governments is going to take place on the planet Axanar in less than a week. Admiral K’hober is convinced that forces loyal to the emperor are going to attempt to sabotage it. You, Captain Garrovick, are going to make sure that doesn’t happen.”

“Me?” Stephen asked, aghast. “If the emperor has that many ships at his disposal . . . what can one starship do except get massacred?”

“Quite right,” Admiral Klutuk said. “Half the ships under the emperor’s command have come from my battle group. They are trained well.”

“Your mission is not to engage the emperor’s forces directly, unless you have to,” Balkwill said.

Garrovick gave the admiral a puzzled look, wondering what fantastical thing he would say next. It wasn’t long in coming.

“The newly established Klingon government, effectively under the leadership of Admiral K’hober, is unwilling to allow an outright attack on the emperor’s base of operations without first offering a chance of submission, and under their code of honor and conduct it is important that members of the Klingon High Council present this chance directly. It would be dishonorable to permit Emperor Karhummur and his followers to be faced with submitting to what they call, ‘aliens from the Federation.’ The High Council will allow Federation action only on the condition that they are permitted to deliver a personal message urging that submission. The Federation Council has accepted this, deferring a summons of the nearest Starfleet battle force until the attempt has been made. Starfleet Intelligence feels—and Admiral K’hober is in full agreement—that what is needed is the capitulation of the emperor’s lead military advisor, Admiral Korrath. To do so

would cause enough dissention in the emperor's forces to stall or—at best—eradicate any possibility of further invasions by the emperor's forces.”

“However, the efforts have suffered a setback,” Ambassador Norpin added. “The courier shuttle sent from the Klingon homeworld containing the delegates selected from the High Council is a week overdue. This is the second such vessel sent out from Klingon space, the first one suffering a catastrophic warp core meltdown three days into its journey.”

“Starfleet can't afford to wait much longer, Captain,” Balkwill added. “Word of renewed attacks on Federation merchant shipping is coming in from the area of space near the emperor's stronghold. If something isn't done soon, it'll be necessary to reactivate a portion of the 12th Fleet to deal with the problem, treaty or no treaty. To do so could easily solidify enough distrust and suspicion to cause the Klingons to repudiate all the negations and renew the war.”

Garrovick nodded, beginning to understand his role in all this. “Our options?”

“Admiral K'hober has accepted an alternative,” Jennifer said. “Embassy representatives are to be transported on their mission of peace aboard a Federation vessel, the *Republic*. The ship will carry one of the Klingon ambassadors and a small retinue, along with a Federation diplomatic representative who will serve as liaison.”

It was all beginning to make sense. “Those recent modifications to the primary hull of the *Republic*?” Stephen said as he turned to Balkwill.

“Berthing and dining areas for the Klingons, as well as for the storage of one their shuttlecraft. The Klingon officers are to be kept completely isolated from the rest of your crew, Captain. No one must know they are on board. To do so could compromise the secrecy of this mission. That's why you weren't summoned here until after you left spacedock. The fewer people who knew you were coming here, the better. Your ultimate destination will be Admiral Korraath's base of operations near the Federation frontier. Once the Klingon ambassador has dispatched his message from the High Council, the *Republic* is free to act at her discretion, though

the advice of the Klingon delegate and the Federation liaison must be consulted when possible.”

“And the Klingon ambassador?”

“General Mek’Tor will act as the voice of the Council,” K’hober said of the officers sitting beside him. “There are several officers who’ve been transported to this station who will accompany him as his aides.”

Garrovick nodded. “And the Federation liaison?”

Balkwill’s eyes turned to Ambassador Norpin.

Stephen’s gaze followed. “You can’t be serious.”

“And why not, Captain?” Norpin asked in defiance.

“Begging the ambassador’s pardon, but isn’t that a little risky, Admiral? If she’s as important to the peace process as you say she is, then this whole thing could easily fall apart if she’s injured or killed.”

“Then I guess you’d better make sure that doesn’t happen, *Captain*,” Jennifer shot back acerbically.

“My hands are tied on this, Stephen,” Balkwill offered apologetically. “She’s got the backing of the president on this, as she’s operating with the full authority of the Federation Assembly. Either one of those things is well above my pay grade and, when combined, are well above anyone else’s in the Federation. Ambassador Norpin goes. End of story.”

Garrovick studied the reactions of his crew at the news just given to them. Each of them seemed to reflect on it calmly, with the exception of Commander Phill Harris. Garrovick saw that what was once an irritated stare at K’hober was now a menacing scowl. Stephen committed himself to asking the commander what was so infuriating once he was given a chance—not that Garrovick didn’t feel a twinge of it himself. “Anything else?” Garrovick asked, hoping to draw the meeting to a close so he could confer privately with his people.

Admiral Balkwill shook his head. “The *Republic*’s library computer will be updated with all relevant information on the Klingons that’s been made available to us during Ambassador Norpin’s diplomatic efforts and Admiral K’hober’s own sources. I’m sure the ambassador herself will be a wealth of information and will be able to answer any question that may arise. But, a word of advice, Captain: tread

cautiously. The Klingons, I've come to feel, are a proud race with a high regard for honor, obligations, and responsibilities of the individual. A false step could destroy the hard-won gains of months at the conference table, and it could lead to an even bloodier war than the one we're only now trying to emerge from. This, above all other considerations, must not come to pass."

"Understood, sir."

"Then I won't keep you from your mission any longer. Good luck, Captain."

* * *

Once back on board the *Republic*, Garrovick dismissed his officers to their duties with the exception of Commander Harris, whom he ushered into a nearby conference room.

"Okay, Phill. Spill it."

"Sir?" the chief engineer asked, still obviously shaken over their encounter with the Klingons.

"I've got no room for pretenses on this ship, Phill," Stephen said with a dismissive wave of his hand. "I don't want to make it an order, but I will if I have to. Now, tell me what all that was about on the station."

Harris balled his fists, then turned and took measured steps away from the captain. Moving back and forth several times, he finally managed to speak. "It's that Klingon, sir."

"I'll need more than that, Commander."

"General Mek'Tor," Phill spat. "The one responsible for the massacre at Archanis. How can he be allowed free access to this ship?"

"Believe me, I share your concern," Stephen said, trying to be understanding. "They won't be allowed to move around the ship outside of the new module that was added at Starbase 14. You heard the admiral's instructions."

“That’s not the point,” Harris dismissed the captain. “The point is that that . . . that filthy, murdering *monster* is going to be on our ship, afforded full immunity for his crimes while also given the privileges of an ambassador!”

“We have no proof that he attacked the colony *personally*, Commander,” Garrovick defended, but knew the words were more than empty.

“He ordered it! He might as well have pulled the trigger himself.”

“Phill,” Stephen began in a calmer tone, trying to get the commander to do the same, “there’s going to be a lot of animosity toward the Klingons—now more than ever. With peace on the horizon, there are going to be a lot of voices on *both* sides wanting more blood to be spilled to answer for the crimes of the past. We can’t give into that kind of hate, no matter how justified it might be to do so.”

“Easy talk. You didn’t lose . . . anyone you loved at Archanis . . .” Phill stammered, nearly on the edge of an emotional breakdown. “You didn’t lose your wife! You haven’t dedicated the last few years of your life to making sure each of those filthy bastards got exactly what they deserved. You didn’t find an ounce of satisfaction each time one of the weapon systems you designed killed more of those . . .” His words trailed off as he gripped the back of a nearby chair tightly. “They’re animals, sir,” he said, having collected some of his rage. “Nothing more. To give that so-called general any more than *nothing* is more than he’ll ever deserve.”

“Damn it, Phill, I can’t do this without you,” Stephen implored. “You’re one of the top engineers in the fleet. That’s why I asked for you here. Remember what you said when you first got on board? You said you’d go to the end of the universe and back if it meant keeping this ship going, to make sure that our crewmates always came home. Remember?”

Still fuming, Harris nodded silently.

“Well, now I need more, Phill, because it’s not going to be just the 400 people on board the *Republic* who need to get home. It’s going to be the hundreds . . . thousands of Starfleet officers who could very well die if we don’t stop this war once and for all before it starts again. It’s the civilians on a hundred worlds who won’t wake up to a sunrise, but will instead wake up to the sounds of disruptor fire . . . being vaporized without ever seeing the face of their enemy. Everyone who’s died so far . . . all of them . . . it’ll all be for *nothing* if we couldn’t stop this thing

when we had a chance! I'm not asking you to forgive . . . I'm not even asking you to forget, because God knows I never will. But what I *am* asking is: that for a moment in time, you belay that anger to get this one last mission . . . this one last chance for a lasting peace to take root and grow . . . that you can put aside the hatred and the loss and remember that, above all else, you're a Starfleet officer—and with the same devotion you gave to make sure we've gotten this far, you finish the work you started and make sure this ends without anyone having to die needlessly.” Garrovick then outstretched his hand, practically begging his chief engineer to reach for it. “What do you say, Commander? Can you do that? Will you help me end this thing once and for all . . . because I can't do it alone, and I don't want to have to try without you.”

Taking a series of deep breaths, Harris released his grip on the chair. Stepping to the captain, he regarded the opened hand present to him. He raised his fist, the anger and adrenalin in him causing it to shake almost uncontrollably. Slowly he unclenched it enough to grab Garrovick's hand with more force than either expected.

Chapter 16

Not long after his meeting with Phill Harris, Stephen had received a call from Lieutenant Helissa on the bridge. She'd informed him that General Mek'Tor—now assuming the title of “ambassador”—was ready to be taken aboard the *Republic*. Garrovick then sent requests to a small number of selected officers on board to don their dress uniforms and present themselves in the secondary hangar bay in ten minutes. Though Balkwill had stated that he wanted as few people aboard the ship to know about the Klingons' presence as possible, he didn't specify how many “a few” defined. And Garrovick needed some of his people to know, as much for the safety of his own people as that of the Klingons in the new habitat module.

That new addition, applied to the hull at Starbase 23, was built on top of the saucer and extended from the rear of deck 2 all the way stern to main engineering, and wasn't very practical as far as Garrovick was concerned. He hated the idea of an air lock so close to the bridge, and would be glad if Starfleet kindly removed the bulbous addition once this mission was over. The section closest to the unmodified portion of the *Republic* was dedicated to quarters for the traveling Klingon diplomats. The rooms were deemed comfortable by any definition of the term, and Garrovick almost wished his own quarters were so lavishly decorated. A connecting corridor bisected the row of staterooms, ending in a door that led to an air lock capable of holding a dozen or so personnel. Beyond the air lock was the new hangar, capable of holding two of the new type-7 shuttles side by side.

Inside the air lock with his senior staff, Captain Garrovick watched via a small monitor as the outer bay doors opened to admit the incoming shuttle. Just inside the shuttle bay, two suited Marines stood with phaser rifles slung, their magnetic boots holding them down in the weightlessness. The Klingon shuttle was markedly utilitarian in design, with little thought given to aesthetically pleasing contours. The dark green hull of the wedge-shaped craft held a satin sheen, neither absorbing nor completely reflecting the overhead lights as the shuttle slowly crept forward to its intended landing spot. As it touched down softly, the hangar's outer doors were quickly closed and the bay pressurized.

Captain Garrovick, along with Ben Finney, Phill Harris, James Kirk, Danny Balkwill, and the ship's doctor, Scott Wayne Burnworth, stood at attention in their uncomfortable dress uniforms. They were arranged line abreast to the side of a long blue carpet that had been extended from the air lock to the doors of the shuttlecraft. At the end of the carpet closest to the shuttle, two armed security guards, also in full dress attire, flanked the symbol of the United Federation of Planets embroidered into the four-foot-wide runner. Even with their hands clasped behind their backs, Garrovick knew that if required, they could have the phasers at their sides drawn in an instant.

As the doors to the shuttle slid open, Ambassador Mek'Tor stepped down to the hangar deck forcefully, as if gauging the strength of the deck plates beneath his feet. He gave the entirety of the space an admiring glance before stepping forward to Garrovick. The Imperial Klingon Marine stopped and turned as he neared the captain, nearly coming toe to toe with him.

Garrovick could smell the distinct, pungent odor wafting from the Klingon and tried not to let it affect him. "Ambassador Mek'Tor," the captain said as he bowed his head.

"Captain Garrovick," the Klingon sneered, then gave the hangar one more visual inspection. "I must say, Captain, that I am most impressed with the cleanliness of your vessel. I've been aboard several captured starships, but none have ever been presented in such pristine condition. I commend your janitorial staff. I look forward to seeing the rest of your vessel."

Out of sight of Garrovick, but noticed by Kirk and Balkwill, Commander Harris clenched the muscles in his jaw tightly.

"I'm glad it meets with your approval," Stephen offered diplomatically. "Of course, I've not been authorized from my government to give any such tour of the vessel."

Mek'Tor, now joined by seven aides—five fusions and two Imperial officers—looked down on Garrovick impassively. "I was told that we would be afforded full

diplomatic courtesies while on board, Captain. Such a tour is permissible under those conditions.”

“Those tours are permissible to those diplomatic members representing worlds that have existing accords with the Federation, Mr. Ambassador. Until the treaty between our governments is secured, I’m afraid my hands are tied.”

Mek’Tor’s eyes stared down at Garrovick in contempt just before he *harrumphed*. “We will see what Ambassador Norpin has to say about that, Captain. Where is she? I was told she would also be present at this meeting.”

Garrovick grated at not only the Klingon’s interest in the ambassador, but in surprise at the emotion such an admission brought up in him. “My crew and I are here to welcome you aboard the *Republic*, Mr. Ambassador,” Garrovick said as he waved a hand toward his officers, who still stood at attention. “Ambassador Norpin is not a member of our assigned crew, and is thus not required to be present when you’re welcomed aboard. Of course, had I been notified that you wanted her present, I would have made such a request of her *personally*.”

Mek’Tor appeared unconvinced, but let subject drop. “Very well. You will show us to our quarters, then.” It was not a question.

“Delighted, Ambassador.”

* * *

With the delegation safely aboard, Captain Garrovick spent the next thirty minutes going over the mission data provided by Admiral Balkwill. As Balkwill had said, there wasn’t much to go on, which made Stephen all the more uneasy about their mission. Admiral Korrath, their intended contact, had positioned himself in the Saragoffan system on the planet Toria, dangerously close to Klingon-controlled space and far removed from Federation assistance. What was even more surprising was that Korrath had apparently accepted an invitation from Ambassador Mek’Tor for the upcoming meeting, further specifying that the vast majority of his battle forces would not interfere with the *Republic*’s diplomatic mission. Of course, Garrovick would be one of the first to admit he knew little of Klingon honor and tradition, but he found himself beginning to respect it on equal terms. Still, the

general lack of information of the mission gave rise to far more questions than it answered, and Stephen found himself grateful that it would give him a chance to talk to Ambassador Jennifer Norpin about it at length.

Turning to Lieutenant Helissa, he asked the communications officer to patch his chair intercom with the ambassador's stateroom.

"Ambassador Norpin here."

"This is Captain Garrovick. I've just completed reviewing the information given to me concerning our assignment and I've got a few questions that I'd like answered," he said formally, perhaps too much so. After a pause, he softened his tone. "Would you be available to discuss it this afternoon, perhaps over lunch?"

"Alone . . . or will your senior staff be present?" she asked somewhat playfully, then paused and added, "To make sure I have the proper notes ready, of course."

"No, I think a private briefing will be fine, Ambassador. If there's anything my crew needs to know, I'm fully capable of relaying it to them."

Soft laughter echoed through the speaker. "That would be fine, Captain."

Garrovick watched as Lieutenants Kirk and Balkwill turned and exchanged a mischievous glance with one another, with Kirk mouthing the word "fine," to which Balkwill had a difficult time containing his laughter.

"Understood," Garrovick replied, regaining his command presence on the bridge. "I'll be there at 1230 hours, then."

"Looking forward to it, Captain," the ambassador replied and then closed the channel.

Garrovick silently stood, intent on taking a shower before the semi-impromptu meeting took place. He leaned between the helm and navigator stations, causing both Kirk and Balkwill to turn in surprise to stare at the captain. "As you were, gentlemen." As he stepped up to the turbolift, Stephen turned to see both Kirk and Balkwill staring at the main viewer blankly, all evidence of their prior indiscretion replaced by proper officer training. Smiling, Stephen let out a laugh just as the doors closed.

How had he pulled this duty? He should have been down in engineering, monitoring the engines and making sure the noxious odor of those filthy Klingons sleeping above his fusion reactors didn't adversely affect the operations of the ship. But here Commander Phill Harris was, the only engineer on duty with the clearance to enter the Klingon module bolted to the saucer section. The ambassador's staff had reported that the environmental controls were acting erroneously, and that it'd become far too chilly in Ambassador Mek'Tor's quarters for his liking. While Harris was more than happy to eject the module and show the Klingons what the definition of cold really was, he had a greater duty to obey the orders of Captain Garrovick and do whatever he could—no matter how uncomfortable—to make sure the visitors were at ease.

Still, they were Klingons, and caution was demanded. Besides, the captain never said anything about going into the module unarmed. So, with his personal type-1 phaser on his belt, Harris was just now extracting himself from the lone Jefferies tube in the module. At the foot of the steps, in a hallway that had been empty a few moments ago, two Klingon officers now stood—one Imperial and one fusion. The fusion, his oily skin shining under the overhead lights—stood the same height as Harris. The Imperial one was about a quarter meter taller than Phill, and from the cut of his leathery uniform, much bulkier. It was the fusion who spoke.

"How go the repairs, engineer?" he asked, the tips of his thin mustache trembling as he spoke.

Harris looked to the Imperial warrior, then back to the fusion. "We have names, you know. We're not all position and serial numbers. And, while we're at it, it's rude to sneak up on someone unannounced."

The fusion sneered, but with more curiosity than malice. "You imply that our intent was deception."

"Wasn't it?"

"You confuse me with a Romulan, *Earther*. To do so under ordinary circumstances would be to invite satisfaction on my part."

"Well, you're not on a Klingon vessel. You're on a Federation starship, and that means you play by our rules, *Klingon*."

The Klingon grinned widely. “Yes, for the moment, that is the case, but I—” The Klingon was silenced by a single word shouted in Klingonese. Harris didn’t know the word, but understood the inflection behind it—and the fact that it was spoken by Ambassador Mek’Tor. Phill’s body, already on alert with the two Klingons nearby, went rigid as he watched the man who’d ordered the execution of his wife step closer.

“Are these men bothering you, Commander?” Mek’Tor asked, waving a hand between the two Klingons who were now standing silently at attention.

“I’ve never met a Klingon I couldn’t handle,” Harris said after a moment, his eyes boring into the ambassador’s.

Mek’Tor regarded the Starfleet officer for a moment, then raised a hand. “You two men are dismissed. I will speak to you regarding this later.” Each beat his own chest in a salute, then exited the corridor. “You are here to fix the fluctuations in the environmental controls?”

“Against my better judgment.”

Mek’Tor studied Harris for a long moment. “You were present on the starbase during the briefing, yes?”

“I was.”

Mek’Tor nodded. “Forgive me for not noticing earlier, Commander. Earthers . . . *humans* . . . look very much like one another.” The apology was said in the most sincere tone Harris had ever heard from a Klingon, which made him loathe the ambassador even more.

“You’ll get no penance from me, *General*.”

The ambassador pursed his lips. “I recall you being quite agitated during the briefing when it was mentioned that I planned the attack of the Archanis outpost. Was I incorrect in that assumption?”

Phill could feel his face turn red with anger. “That attack killed my wife. It killed over a hundred innocent scientists.”

Mek’Tor’s demeanor was casual, as if the two were conversing about the weather. “I was not present during the battle, but I do understand the personnel on the station

did not die without putting up a fight. In doing so, they died with honor, Commander.”

“Honor?” Harris spat. “There was nothing honorable about their deaths! It was senseless . . . meaningless . . .”

“To die with honor is the most any warrior could ask for, Commander. You should consider that as you remember your fallen comrades.”

At the far end of the corridor, Captain Garrovick and Ambassador Norpin were exiting the turbolift in time to hear Phill Harris begin to shout at the top of his lungs.

“They weren’t warriors! They were civilians . . . they were scientists. They had no offensive capabilities to defend themselves. You just . . . wiped them out!”

Stephen and Jennifer took off in a sprint toward the two men. Garrovick watched as Harris reached around his back in the move traditionally indicating he was about to draw his phaser on the Klingon. But Harris fumbled, unable to get a grip on the weapon as Garrovick appeared at his side.

“Gentlemen, is there a problem?”

Mek’Tor regarded Harris for a long moment, the commander’s breathing rapid and his face still a deep red. “The commander was addressing a concern with the environmental controls. I believe he was just about to inform me that the repairs were complete.”

Garrovick looked to the Klingon ambassador dubiously, then shifted the same stare to Harris. “Commander?”

Harris’s breathing was quickly coming under control, the shade of his face going to pink. “Yes, sir. I was here fixing the environmental controls.”

“And I trust everything is now in order?”

Harris kept his eyes on Mek’Tor for a long moment before looking to Garrovick. “Yes, sir. For the time being.”

“Then I suggest you get to engineering, Commander. I need a diagnostic on the dilithium bottles as soon as possible. Also, I believe that Dr. Burnworth has you scheduled for a routine physical later today.”

“Sir?” Harris asked in surprise.

“I didn’t stutter, Commander.”

Harris's eyes darted to the Klingon for a fraction of a second. "Yes, Captain." He then turned and walked defiantly down the corridor Garrovick and Ambassador Norpin had come down. When he was out of earshot, Garrovick turned to Mek'Tor.

"Anything you'd like to add to Commander Harris's statement?"

The Klingon shrugged nonchalantly. "I see no reason to, Captain."

"Good," Garrovick snapped, then took a deep breath before continuing. "I'd like to avoid making any unnecessary log entries that could adversely affect what we have to accomplish here, Ambassador. From what Ambassador Norpin tells me, this is going to be a historic occasion for both our peoples. I'd like history to reflect that, as I'm sure you do."

Mek'Tor grinned. "Of course, Captain."

Garrovick was unsure how to respond to the gesture, so he looked to Jennifer, who smiled and nodded in return. "I'd like to call on you later, Ambassador, to discuss the upcoming mission."

"As would I, Ambassador," Jennifer added formally.

Mek'Tor bowed graciously in her direction. "Ambassador Norpin, it would be a great honor to host you for dinner this evening." He then stood and tilted his head toward Garrovick. "And you are welcome to attend as well, Captain. Nineteen thirty hours, then?"

"We'll be there," Garrovick replied, and ushered Ambassador Norpin out of the Klingon module.

Three hours later, Captain Garrovick, Ambassador Norpin, Lieutenant Balkwill, and Lieutenant Michael Waack from ship's security were inside the Klingon Module, as it'd become known to the crew. Waack, a friend of Danny Balkwill from Starfleet Academy, was there at the behest of Captain Garrovick. With the heated altercation between Commander Harris and Ambassador Mek'Tor still fresh in his memory, Stephen wasn't going to take any chances. If Ambassador Norpin was going to be anywhere near the Klingons, then so was ship's security. It was that simple.

As he pressed the door chime, the doors to the ambassador's quarters parted. Inside, the Federation representatives were met by an oily fusion officer with a wiry mustache who introduced himself as Garol, and Garrovick recognized him as one of the Klingons Phill Harris had been speaking to earlier that afternoon. Showing them into the ambassador's chambers, Garol was then dismissed to his duties by Mek'Tor. Lieutenant Waack was the only one to watch the fusion leave, but when he silently looked to see if the captain wanted the aide followed, Garrovick's attention was focused on the Klingon ambassador.

"Ambassador, thank you for having us."

"Not at all, Captain. It pleases me to have you here. If the Klingon Empire and the Federation are going to agree to be at peace, we must also agree that we need to get used to seeing each other in . . . less militaristic surroundings."

"We'd like nothing more, Ambassador," Jennifer said, bowing her head slightly in the diplomatic dance she and Mek'Tor had no doubt been doing over the last few months.

"A toast, then," Mek'Tor said, produced several tall goblets of a maroon liquid. When the humans took the glasses cautiously, he chuckled lightly. "Blood wine, Captain. Not at all toxic to your biochemistry, or so I've been told."

Garrovick had tasted it once before in a far-flung outpost while commanding one of the *Farragut's* cadet cruises. He didn't think he'd ever acquire the taste, which was more like bile and less like anything else remotely palatable. However, he took the glass offered to him with a smile. When all the others had glasses in their hands, they raised them in a toast.

"To our success," the Klingon ambassador began, but all were stopped just short of clinking their glasses by a humming sound coming from all around them. The pitch continued to increase until the whine was almost ear-splitting.

"Phaser on overload!" Lieutenant Waack announced, frantically searching for the weapon.

Garrovick knew it as well, and his eyes darted around the compartment until they fell on Jennifer Norpin, who looked absolutely terrified. "Balkwill! See to the ambassador's safety! Get her into the corridor. Now!"

Danny's cat-like reflexes came into play. He pivoted, placed a firm arm around Jennifer's waist, and led the ambassador from the compartment all in the same instant.

James Kirk was on the starboard side of the room, checking the pot of a blue plant without finding anything. As the pitch of the weapon became deafening, he turned to see Lieutenant Waack rip a light panel from the port wall and reach inside. A second later, the weapon was disarmed. "Michael?" he asked, his adrenaline still pumping furiously and allowing him to jump over a couch in a single bound to end up at the security officer's side.

"Sure enough. Phaser on overload," Waack said as he examined the weapon. "Question is, why are we still here to talk about it?"

"Explain," Ambassador Mek'Tor bellowed.

Waack looked first to Garrovick. Getting a silent nod of approval, he turned back to the Klingon. "Well, sir . . . you see, overload is for emergency situations. Like if you wanted to use the weapon as a grenade. The typical discharge sequence only takes a few seconds. But this one," he said, holding the now inert weapon aloft for emphasis, "took almost a full minute."

"That means it was intentionally delayed," Kirk said, looking at Garrovick.

"But why would someone do such a thing?" Mek'Tor asked.

Quickly surmising that this incident could easily destabilize the peace talks, Garrovick knew he needed to act quickly to make the situation as transparent as possible. "Whose phaser is it?"

Waack turned the weapon over, then looked at an engraving scribbled on the underside. "It's Commander Harris's, sir."

To Garrovick's surprise, Ambassador Mek'Tor began laughing aloud. "Your Commander Harris has no honor, Captain. A true warrior does not plant devices to be found and disarmed, especially so easily. And, even if we had all perished, his victory would not have attained him any honor."

"How's that?" Waack asked, not really understanding what was going on.

“Commander Harris would have to both be present and die in the explosion. To give one’s own life to see an enemy vanquished is an honorable way to enter the afterlife.”

“We’re not enemies, Ambassador,” Garrovick said, taking Harris’s phaser from the security officer. “And I truly hope to keep it that way.”

“You may do with your man as you see fit, Captain,” Mek’Tor continued to chuckle as he dismissed the captain with a wave. “His efforts have been found wanting.”

“Perhaps you should train your assassins better,” a surly voice came from the doorway. It was Garol. “I came as soon as I could, Ambassador.”

“It’s not been proven that Commander Harris has done anything wrong,” Garrovick said.

Mek’Tor seemed to pay Garrovick little mind as Garol continued to speak. “We must speak concerning this, Ambassador. Protocol demands it.”

Mek’Tor nodded. “We must remember that these are Earthers, Garol, and that they are not accustomed to our ways.”

“Meaning what?” Kirk asked.

“That is for us to decide, *Starfleet*,” Garol said to Kirk. “This is just like the Federation. You would lure us into your starship with arms opened wide in supplication, only to destroy us the moment we are outside the range of your precious starbase.”

“That’s not true,” Garrovick defended.

“So says the Federation warlord! We will not be subdued, nor will we be trampled under your boot heels. We are warriors, Garrovick of *Starfleet*.”

“We will confer concerning these events,” Mek’Tor said calmly with a raised hand that quickly silenced Garol.

Stephen was about to say something in rebuttal when the alert klaxon began to sound throughout the ship. *Now what?*

“Captain to the bridge,” Ben Finney’s voice came over the intercom. “Repeat: Captain to the bridge.”

Garrovick stepped to the nearest wall speaker and punched the button. “What’s going on, Ben?”

“Distress call coming in from a nearby vessel, sir. They say they’re under attack, and it sounds like it’s Klingons.”

Chapter 17

Captain Garrovick was on the bridge within moments of Finney's call. As soon as the fact was stated that the distress call was coming from a Klingon vessel, he'd requested Ambassador Mek'Tor to be present as well—Admiral Balkwill's recommendations thrown out the window for the sake of time. The ensuing stares from the bridge crew at the presence of Klingon officer and one of his aides standing amongst them was not lost on Stephen. However, they now had a job to do, and he'd have no gawking on his watch—protocol be damned.

"Lieutenant Helissa, can you repeat the message for us to hear?"

The Andorian woman pressed the control and a moment later the bridge speakers were alive with the static indicative of a long-range transmission. "Vessel in distress. Vessel in distress . . ." the computerized voice said, first in Klingonese and then in Galactic standard. It repeated several more times before it was interrupted by a new signal, which Helissa remarked was far more faint and subject to intermittent fading. "Courier shuttle *Tal'oK* under attack. Shields are down; power readings near zero. Attacking vessel . . . closing . . . for attack run. Need assistance . . . loyal Klingon vessel or Federation starship, respond . . . in the name of peace." The signal faded quickly, and all attempts by Helissa to reacquire it proved futile.

"I'm sorry, sir. The transmitter was just too weak on their end."

"The *Tal'oK* is our overdue courier ship," Ambassador Mek'Tor said angrily.

"Bearing on the signal?" Garrovick asked Finney, who was still standing near the science officer's station.

"Bearing of 115-mark-2, sir. Not far off our present course."

"Distance?"

"The distress call originated in the Ries system, a non-aligned star system with no habitable planets. It's about thirty minutes away at warp six. There was a minor battle that took place there about two years ago, but it's been relatively quiet since then, with neither the Klingons nor the Federation laying claim to it."

“Captain Garrovick,” Ambassador Mek’Tor began formally, “I demand that you provide assistance to our ship immediately. Honor demands that aid be rendered. Besides, interstellar law on this matter—”

“—is quite clear,” Stephen said evenly. “And I’ve no intention of disregarding it or your countrymen, Ambassador. Mr. Kirk, lay in an intercept course and engage at warp six.”

“Aye, sir.”

“Mr. Balkwill, maintain yellow alert. Charge main phasers and prepare to repel warships.” As soon as the stars on the main view screen flashed into warp speed, Garrovick turned to the Klingon ambassador. “Who would be attacking your ship, Ambassador?”

“Likely the emperor’s separatist faction. However, I do not rule out the possibility of Orion mercenaries.”

“Defensive capabilities of the shuttle?”

The Ambassador grunted in dissatisfaction. “The courier ship is not well armed.”

“And it was traveling alone . . . without escort?”

“We do not coddle our warships as you do, Captain Garrovick,” Mek’Tor said sternly, then turned his gaze to the forward screen. “Besides, with both manpower and equipment running low, none would have been available for such a task.”

“Mr. Finney, do we have anything on the courier vessel itself?”

“The library computer is translating the data now, sir. It should be ready by the time we intercept the vessel.”

“Anything you can tell me, Ambassador?”

Mek’Tor was impassive. “It is a scout vessel. Nothing more.”

Sensing the conversation was over until the *Republic* entered the Ries system, Garrovick decided to keep his attention focused on his crewmen, letting each of them do as they’d been trained to do. If they had anything further to report, he knew they’d give it to him in an instant.

Precisely thirty minutes later, the modified heavy cruiser *Republic* dropped out of warp at the edge of the desolate Ries system. Garrovick ordered the long-range sensors on a continuous sweep of the area as the starship moved toward where the Klingon courier was last recorded. Although Finney had nothing to report on the matter, Garrovick wasn't taking any chances. After passing the fifth planet, Finney informed the captain that he'd located the courier—apparently adrift—near an asteroid field that'd likely been a large iron-core world a millennia ago. Bringing the ship to red alert, Garrovick ordered a detailed short-range scan of both the vessel and the field.

“No targets within sensor range, Captain.”

“Bring the courier on the main screen.”

The image magnified to show the triangular-shaped wedge of the *Tal'ok*. There was no question that combat had occurred. The telltale streaks made by concentrated disruptor fire were streaked across several portions of the hull. All power seemed to be out.

“Ben?”

“Hull integrity seems to be intact, sir. Life support is functioning, but at extremely low levels. Main power is offline.”

“Lieutenant Helissa?”

“No answers to continued hails on any frequency, Captain.”

“Ambassadors, I'm being placed in a very difficult position,” Garrovick said to both Mek'Tor and Jennifer Norpin, who had been standing quietly by his side. “I'm going to have to beam a party over to that vessel to find out what's happened. I'd like to avoid any confusion that might arise from that action. We are not at war, but neither are we at peace, and a Federation captain boarding a Klingon vessel unannounced may cause . . . friction.”

Mek'Tor nodded. “The precaution is wise, Captain. It may be beneficial if some of my people join your party. Beyond that, there is little I can do to guarantee the safety of your crew.”

“I'd like to go as well, Captain.”

Stunned, Garrovick almost laughed at Ambassador Norpin's request. “On what grounds?”

“I am the foremost expert on Klingon culture aboard this ship, Captain. Also, the ambassador and his staff who were aboard the courier have been in contact with me for some time concerning the peace conference on Axanar. They know me, Captain, and I know them. That’s an asset you can’t pass up.”

“Is that a fact?”

“Besides, I’m the ranking Federation officer on this ship. I go where I please.”

Garrovick smirked. “Pulling rank, Miss Norpin?”

She collected herself before continuing. “I don’t want to . . . but I will.”

“No need for that, I think,” he said with a nod, then stood from the command chair to address the bridge. “Lieutenant Deimos, I’ll need an engineer to assess any damage over there. Mr. Balkwill, you’ll head up a three-man security detachment. Lieutenant Helissa, call down to Dr. Burnworth and have him meet us in transporter room one. Lieutenant Kirk, the ship is yours until I return.”

“Sir,” Helissa began, “Dr. Burnworth is reporting that he’s still in the middle of Commander Harris’s annual checkup. He’d like to know if Dr. Canard can take his place in the landing party.”

“Request denied, Lieutenant. Tell the doctor to release Commander Harris and have him report to engineering.” When Garrovick caught Ben Finney’s gaze, he knew now was not the time to address why a junior lieutenant was given command over a senior one. “Ben, keep an eye on those sensors, and maintain a lock on us and Ambassador Mek’Tor’s people at all times. I’ll be counting on you to have the transporters get us out of there at the first sign of trouble.”

“I’ll coordinate with Commander Harris in engineering.”

“You’ll take care of it yourself, Ben,” Garrovick said sternly, drawing a concerned gaze from Kirk and one of confusion from junior engineer Zane Deimos. “That’s an order, Lieutenant.”

“Yes, sir,” Finney said flatly, then smiled. “Of course.”

But before Garrovick could step into the waiting turbolift, he was stopped by Mek’Tor’s hand clamping securely around his arm. “Captain, a moment of your time.”

“And only one moment, Ambassador.”

“This medical appointment that Commander Harris was involved in?”

“Yes?”

“How long does it take?”

“On the order of several hours.”

Mek'Tor nodded. “Then although you found his phaser on overload in my cabin, it could not possibly have been the commander that placed it there.”

Stephen nodded in agreement. “Quite right, Ambassador. Someone on board is trying to cover their tracks, though, and doing a poor job of it. However, we’ve got more important things to deal with, like your countrymen over in that shuttle.” With a nod of his head toward the viewer, Garrovick succeeded in drawing the same movement from the Ambassador.

“Agreed, Captain.”

“But make no mistake, Ambassador. I intend to get to the bottom of this one way or another. There is a saboteur aboard my ship playing games, and I don’t like the rules he’s playing by.”

It took two transporter cycles to get everyone over to the derelict Klingon vessel. The first to arrive were Balkwill, one of his security men, Lieutenant Deimos, Dr. Burnworth, the Klingon diplomatic aide Garol, and one of the Klingon security officers. The second party, consisting of Captain Garrovick, Ambassadors Norpin and Mek'Tor, and the second *Republic* security officer, materialized a minute after the first group.

Garrovick found himself in a dimly lit compartment of unknown size. There was a haze of smoke all around him and his people that bore a significant aroma of a shipboard fire. Shining his palm-sized flashlight around the compartment, he was glad to see the Jennifer hadn’t strayed from his side, and that his security officer was also nearby. “Where are we?”

“The transporter room,” Garol said. “Level One.”

“What else is on this deck?” Lieutenant Balkwill asked as he swept both his phaser and his flashlight around the haze, still unable to see more than five feet in front of himself.

“The cargo storage area, as well as crew berthing spaces and the dining compartment. There is a lift in the forward section that will bring us up to the command deck.”

“Commander Garol,” Ambassador Mek’Tor said formally, “you will lead the way. Lieutenant Balkwill will shadow your every movement,” he said, then turned to Garrovick. “With your permission of course, Captain.”

Stephen nodded. “Of course, Ambassador.”

Less than ten paces into the compartment, Zane Deimos came across the body of an Imperial Klingon sprawled on the floor. Dr. Burnworth knelt down, spending only a minute to verify what his eyes already told him. “He’s dead, Captain.”

“Cause?”

“Disruptor hit to the chest area. All his vital organs have been destroyed.”

Garrovick turned to Mek’Tor, but the ambassador continued to stare forward into the haze, unfazed by the body before him. “Let’s keep moving.”

Three more bodies were discovered before the landing party made it to the lift. Each was killed in a similar manner. In two cases, the dead were fusion race warriors, and each was still clutching their weapons. The last body was likely an Imperial race—based on his uniform—but it was difficult to tell visually, as his head was nowhere to be seen.

“Must have been one hell of a fight,” Danny Balkwill muttered to Deimos as the two approached the lift.

Zane, clutching his weapon tightly, nodded in agreement. “And not a fight they won, it seems.”

When they neared the doors to the aft lift, they failed to open. Deimos was quick to open a nearby panel and gain access to the lift’s controls. Bypassing the power caused the doors to spring open. “It’s a miracle they didn’t do more damage to the interior.”

Garol, standing beside Deimos, had jumped back when the doors had opened. “You know our power systems well enough to bypass them so quickly?”

Holstering his multi-purpose tool, Deimos smiled to the Klingon. “Not at all, really. But physics are universal, so there’d have to be some similarity in design.”

“But, you could have fried the circuitry, or done some other irreparable damage. You gamble with things you do not understand, *Earther*.”

Junior Lieutenant Deimos had apparently had enough of Garol’s voice. “I got it working, didn’t I? Besides, I don’t see you doing anything helpful.”

“Gentlemen,” Garrovick said, rushing up stepping between them and into the lift. “That’s quite enough of that. We’re on borrowed time. Let’s go.”

Zane muttered an archaic slur that the captain hadn’t heard since his last bar fight on Flavion IV. Garrovick had to give Deimos credit due to the fact that it was an appropriate approximation of the Klingon’s odor. Still, Stephen was glad the Klingon didn’t understand the anatomical reference.

There was a brief silence in the cramped lift, after which everyone was deposited on the main control deck.

The command center was blessedly free from smoke and stench, but bodies were still lying everywhere. It seemed no one was spared. The layout of the bridge, surprisingly similar to Federation design, gave Garrovick a small modicum of comfort.

“Deimos, see what you can do about restoring primary power. The air is getting a little thin in here.”

When the engineer hurried to his duties, Stephen stepped over to Jennifer Norpin. “You okay?”

She inhaled deeply, then let it out slowly as she looked at the bodies. “They’re all dead?”

Garrovick turned to see Dr. Burnworth scanning the Klingon slumped over in the command chair. The doctor looked at Garrovick, shook his head, and then moved to the next body.

“It looks that way.”

“This is going to put Axanar in serious jeopardy unless we do something to correct it, Stephen. We need to find whoever did this and put a stop to them, or Ambassador Mek’Tor and his staff could be next. In that event, we might as well

gear up for a very long and bloody conflict, because if he dies, the peace conference will fall apart like a house of cards.”

“Things are that perilous?” Garrovick asked.

Jennifer nodded, her cool blue eyes staring into his. “Perhaps even more. We need to stop these raids.”

“Ambassador,” Commander Garol said, not bothering to mask the tone of his voice. “This is obviously another attempt by the Federation to destroy the negotiations with our people.”

“For what purpose?” Balkwill shot back from the other side of the bridge.

“You wish to bring us to our knees so that you may dictate your terms to us. You fear the diplomatic process because you may have to give up some of your precious Federation space to satisfy our right to expand the Klingon frontiers.”

“You are so full of it,” Deimos said from the auxiliary control station just as the overhead lights came back on. “We’re here to help.”

“I am unconvinced!” Garol shot back, then turned to the ambassador. “Sir, perhaps we have rushed into peace too quickly. These . . . *people* . . . do not seem to care about things like honor or loyalty. See how their junior officers are allowed to mock others while their commander stands by and does nothing.”

“On the contrary, Commander Garol, I *am* doing something.”

“Really?” the fusion said sarcastically. “And what is that?”

“I’m agreeing with my engineer.”

“Stephen,” Jennifer said, lowering her voice to a harsh whisper. “You’re not helping right now.”

“Ambassador Mek’Tor,” Garrovick said, slowly stepping around Jennifer to face the Klingon. “Your people have scientific instruments just as ours do. Surely *they* don’t lie. What do *they* tell you happened here?”

Mek’Tor stared at Garrovick for a long moment, then turned to the nearest Klingon officer. “Report.”

“Weapon discharge patterns and resultant structural damage are consistent with type-one disruptor technology.”

“That proves nothing!” Garol shouted.

“It proves the Federation is not responsible for this.”

“You could be using stolen weapons.”

But before Garrovick could answer, Ambassador Mek'Tor silenced him with a raised hand. “I believe Captain Garrovick on this, Garol. This is not the work of Starfleet. This was a deliberate assassination by the emperor’s people. Our duty here is to stop the fighting before it escalates, and to do that we must—” But the ambassador was silenced by Garrovick’s emergency signal sounding on his communicator.

“This is Garrovick,” he said, quickly flipping the device open.

“Kirk here, sir. Klingon warship approaching fast! Her weapons are armed and she’ll be in firing range in less than a minute.”

* * *

“Sir, I’m going to drop the shields and bring you back!”

“There’s no time, Kirk. You’re going to have to fend off the attacker. I can’t ask you to take the ship out of harm’s way. The ambassadors on the courier are too important for you to abandon, no matter what your training might say.”

“Leaving you behind is the last thing on my mind, sir.”

“Draw the enemy warship away from the *Tal’oK*, Jim. Buy us enough time to get this heap up and running and we’ll join in the attack.”

“Understood.”

Garrovick slapped the communicator closed, then looked the concerned faces of the people around him.

“This thing’s a mess,” Deimos declared as he waved his arms around the bridge.

“What am I supposed to do?”

“You’re going to get us some maneuverability, and then you’re going to get the weapons system going. And you’re going to do it with the help of any human or Klingon not already doing something else to make those things happen.”

“The courier’s single disruptor would be no match for a warship’s shields,” Mek’Tor said as he leaned over the upper bridge railing and stared down at Garrovick. “We will not last long.”

“We’re not going to sit here and wait for death to come knocking on our door, Ambassador. Not while we have a fighting chance. One half-powered disruptor and two thrusters are more than we have now, and if I have to use every spare joule of power to maximize our chances for survival, then you can bet your ridges I’m going to do it.”

Mek’Tor’s head bent to nod as a slow grumble was birthed in his throat. Soon he was laughing aloud, then beat his right fist against his chest. “If today we die, then we shall die on the field of battle as brothers in arms, Captain Garrovick.” He then turned his head sharply enough for his long tresses of hair to flutter around his face. “You!” he shouted to one of the Klingon security officers. “See to it that the shields and weapons systems are fully operational. Assist Lieutenant Deimos as if your life and honor depend on it, for they surely do.” He then turned to the second Klingon. “You will begin repairing the damage to the thruster and impulse drive systems. I want status reports every five minutes, or I will personally throw you out the air lock myself.” He then turned to Garol. “And as for you, Commander, you will man the weapons systems personally. See to it that we inflict the maximum amount of damage possible, given our limited armament.”

Each of the Klingons grunted, beating his chest and crying out guttural screams.

“I hope this is a good thing,” Garrovick said, unable to mask a smile as he looked around the bridge.

Jennifer did the same. “I believe this is a very, *very* good thing.”

In the command chair on the *Republic*’s bridge, Lieutenant Jim Kirk pivoted to face the forward view screen. Coming out from behind a rather large asteroid was a single D-16 *Swiftwind* class destroyer. Looking every bit the predecessor of the venerable D-7 cruiser, the D-16 lacked its superior shielding and armament—namely missing the forward firing photon torpedo. It mattered little that Ben Finney

had reported the D-16 was in pristine condition and ready for the battle. The ratio of weapons and available power between the Federation cruiser and the enemy destroyer put the incoming Klingon squarely on the losing end of this conflict. The only question was how long the fight would last and how much damage could Kirk avoid taking. After all, James wanted to give the *Republic* back to Garrovick in the same condition he'd accepted it.

"Communications, are you getting anything from the Klingon vessel?"

"Negative, Captain," Helissa said as she, too, turned to look at the incoming vessel on the monitor.

"Jim, she's preparing to fire!" Ben said from the science console.

"Hard top port!" Kirk yelled, but it was a moment too late. The disruptor blast pummeled the upper side of the saucer, knocking most of the crew to their feet. "Return fire! Torpedoes and phasers!"

The torpedoes missed by several kilometers, but the faster and more accurate phasers found their mark. The D-16's shields were visible for a moment as their power flared. The destroyer then turned and headed back into the asteroid field.

"Enemy shields weakened, but holding, Jim," Finney said from the science station.

"They're going to try and make another surprise run at us. Keep the scanners peeled, Ben. I want a weapons lock the moment you pick up a spoonful of duranium."

"No, no, no! *This* power conduit feeds only in one direction! If you use *that* one, you'll blow us to kingdom come the moment we try to fire the weapons."

Captain Garrovick watched as Lieutenant Deimos tried in vain a second time to explain to a battle-hardened Imperial Klingon security officer the delicate art of starship engineering. The Klingon, far more patient than Stephen had ever seen an Academy cadet in a similar situation, simply pursed his lips and grunted with a nod of his head.

"Yes," the officer grumbled as he stroked his bearded chin in contemplation, "that would not suit our purpose at all."

“You can say that again,” Zane sighed as he placed his hands on the edge of the console and looked down at the mess of shattered buttons and cracked displays.

“That would *not* suit our purpose at all,” the Klingon replied, mimicking Deimos and leaning over the console as well.

Shaking his head at the Klingon, Deimos looked to Garrovick, who only smiled and shook his head in return. Turning back to the damaged console, Zane reached into an opening that had once held a diagnostic screen. Placing the electrolytic splint around a mass of cables, he pulled out enough slack in the crimping wire to give him enough margin for safety.

“What are you doing now?” the Klingon asked with honest curiosity.

“Half the wires in the bundle aren’t receiving power any more. So, I’m taking the whole wad of them and synching them together as tightly as I can. That should distribute enough juice into them to get this console back online.”

“You’ve done this before.”

Placing a foot on the edge of the console for leverage, Zane grabbed the crimping handle with both hands. “No, but I’ve seen it done in transvids.” With that, he yanked backward as hard as he could. The overhead lights above the console exploded in a shower of sparks, and the hole he’d previously had his hand in belched blue fire and smoke for a full ten seconds before it extinguished itself. Picking himself off the deck, he put his hands to his hips as he stared at the still-inactive console. Grunting, he pulled his left leg back and swiftly kicked the side of the computer. The machine sprang to life, the two remaining screens and half the keypad lighting up.

A second later, Garrovick felt the deck plates beneath his feet begin to tremble slightly.

“Fusion reactors online!” one of the Klingon officers shouted.

“Zane?” Garrovick asked, trying not to sound astonished.

“We’ve got enough fuel for a few hours of impulse,” Deimos said as he looked to the flickering screens. “Thruster control is going to be sluggish, but I think we can move her.”

“Sensors?”

“All we’ve got right now is targeting sensors and the navigational deflector. Both the long-range and short-range palettes are toast.”

Garrovick turned to Garol. “Can you get a lock on the enemy vessel?”

Garol shifted his eyes to Ambassador Mek’Tor and then back to Garrovick. “Yes . . . *sir*.”

“Then do it, and put whatever you can on the screen. I want to find out what the hell is going on out there.”

As soon as the D-16 came out from behind a moon-sized chunk of rock, the *Republic* was ready for her. As luck or providence would have it, Kirk had his cruiser aimed nearly head-on with the Klingon. Not waiting to look this gift horse in the mouth, James ordered both phasers and photon torpedoes fired. The two torpedoes struck the forward half of the *Swiftwind* before she could open fire, and the phasers rippled across the now-unprotected bow as if they were opening a can of tuna. An angry, hot line of destruction was carved into the Klingon just before it veered out of weapons range.

“We’re getting a signal from the *Tal’oK*,” Finney said. “Looks like she’s got minimal power again.”

“What about the D-16?”

Finney stared into the blue of the short-range sensor monitor for a moment before speaking. “Looks like she’s heading out the system, Jim,” he said with smile as he turned toward Kirk. “I think you scared her off.”

“I think *we* did, Ben. Good job on those sensors.”

“Don’t mention it, *Captain*,” he said, and then leaned down so only Kirk could hear him. “And don’t let that title get your head, Jimmy. There’s no way I’m letting you take the center seat before I get there.”

Smirking, Kirk nodded. “The thought never crossed my mind, Ben. Communications officer, hail the *Tal’oK* and inform Captain Garrovick and party that the enemy vessel has fled the system and that we can beam them back to the *Republic* as soon as they’re ready.”

“Aye, *sir*.”

Chapter 18

Back on board the *Republic*, Captain Garrovick immediately called a staff meeting, bringing both his senior officers and the Klingon delegation together in the Klingon module. With everyone seated around the large, circular table, Garrovick quickly brought the meeting to order.

“First, I’d like to congratulate Lieutenant Kirk for his efforts during the confrontation with the Klingons. His actions not only ensured our safety, but those of everyone on board the ship. I’d like it so noted in the official record.” The recording computer at the end of the table emitted a series of beeps, followed by its synthetic acknowledgement of Garrovick’s request. “Now, what do we know about the attacking vessel?” he asked, opening the conversation to anyone who had information on the subject.

“She’s long gone now, sir,” Lieutenant Finney said from the left of the captain. “She headed out of the system on a course of 331. As soon as she entered warp, she dropped off the long-range sensors.”

“Anything in that direction?”

Finney shook his head. “The only thing in that direction is Klingon space.”

“And the vessel itself? Any distinguishing marks on the hull?”

“Not a thing, sir,” Finney replied.

“Then it was very likely a separatist vessel,” Ambassador Mek’Tor, which received a nod from Garol and the other Klingon aides. “That, or a rogue pirate vessel, but I find that highly unlikely. They do not operate this far from the Triangle, certainly not this close to Klingon space.”

Garol then spoke up from the ambassador’s side. “From the information gathered by Klingon Intelligence, I believe that this is the only long-range vessel the emperor would send to eliminate the courier. His forces are not infinite, and he would not risk losing more than one of them in an engagement. That your officer was able to deal with the traitor so efficiently is a testament to the training of your crew, Captain Garrovick. You are to be commended.”

Surprised at the unexpected compliment from the usually antagonistic Klingon, Garrovick was unsure how to respond. Nodding once, he looked to his junior engineer. "Status of the Klingon courier," he asked of Deimos.

Zane activated the three-sided computer placed at the center of the table. An orthographic image of the *Tal'ok* appeared, with several key areas highlighted in red. "Impulse drive and limited defensive systems operational. Life support is stable. Weapon systems operational, but at half-power. Sensors are still down. Warp drive is still down."

"Salvageable?"

The junior engineer then looked to chief engineer Harris. "Sir?"

Phill held his hands up and smiled. "I've only studied the report *you* provided, Zane. You're the one with the hands-on experience over there." That Phill was smiling in the presence of a Klingon was a good sign, and Garrovick made sure to remember it.

Pleased, Zane was more than happy to give the captain the good news. "I think she's worth saving, sir. There's no reason to leave her adrift."

"Repair time estimate?"

"Twenty-four hours, but that would be considerably reduced with help from the Klingons."

"Far too long," Garrovick said, knowing that time was of the essence.

"But there is a benefit to be gained here, Captain," Commander Garol said, then turned to the ambassador. "Sir, we must notify the delegates on Axanar of the current events, and that elements of the emperor's forces may be acting nearby. I would like to request that I be allowed to continue on with two security officers to deliver that message." He then turned to Garrovick. "If what your officer said is true, then I will do what I can to ensure the courier is operational within the next twelve hours."

Garrovick turned to Ambassador Mek'Tor, who was quietly considering Garol's plan. When Ambassador Norpin spoke, all eyes turned to her.

"I agree with Garol," she said. "The ambassadors on Axanar should be informed, and only an in-person meeting will suffice for most of them." She then turned to Garrovick. "Many delegates know of computer and communications tampering, and

with such an important thing as galactic peace on the line, no simple subspace communication will do. That was the purpose of those courier vessels in the first place; to deliver the ultimatum to the separatists and return the answer—in person—to the representatives on Axanar.” She then turned to Mek’Tor. “The courier must be repaired and allowed to convey what we know so far, Ambassador, if only to assure the delegates waiting for our arrival to know why we have been delayed.”

Stroking his chin, Mek’Tor nodded slowly. “Yes. I believe you are correct, Ambassador. It will be done.” He then turned to Garol. “Commander, you will take two men with you of your choosing. Beam over to the *Tal’oK* and begin making repairs immediately.”

Garrovick then turned to Harris. “Phill, I want you there, too. Bring Deimos and anyone else you think can get the job done.”

Harris turned to Garol. Each stared at one another for a silent moment before Garol bowed his head slowly. “Aye, Captain.”

“Once the courier is underway, we’ll continue on to the Saragoffan system at maximum warp. With any luck, we’ll be able to deliver the ambassador’s message to the forces on Toria and link back up with the *Tal’oK* before you reach Axanar. I for one would like to deliver the good news myself, just as I’m sure Ambassadors Mek’Tor and Norpin would. That’s all, ladies and gentlemen. Time to get to work.”

As good as his word, Commander Harris and Lieutenant Deimos—with the help of the more-than-compliant Garol and his own men—had the *Tal’oK*’s warp drive and sensors functioning in less than ten hours. Speed would be limited to a maximum of warp five, and though there were still minor repairs to be made, Garol was convinced he could complete them with the Klingons on board and make it to Axanar. With little fanfare, the courier was sent on its way, with Garrovick ordering the *Republic* back on course for Toria.

* * *

Three days later, the *Republic* arrived in the eerily quiet Saragoffan system. Several detailed sensor scans had been performed without a single one registering any Klingon vessels in the system. If it hadn't been for the communication received from the planet Toria less than twenty minutes before, Garrovick would have assumed the system was completely devoid of life. A quick conversation between Ambassador Mek'Tor and the communications officer on the station was all the convincing it took to put aside any apprehension on the Klingons' part about entering orbit above the planet. Once there, Finney performed a routine scan of the installation, finding a single courier ship parked alongside the base. The same as the model that was now heading toward Axanar with Commander Garol at the controls, this craft was in pristine condition, with every indication that it'd been there for several days.

Garrovick was eager to get the ambassador's party down and their message delivered. But an atmospheric storm that was working in conjunction with the dilithium-rich landscape surrounding the compound made transporters all but useless—at least for the next few hours. Upon hearing this, Ambassador Mek'Tor and his aides were ready, positioning themselves in the Klingon module's shuttle bay while they awaited the captain and Ambassador Norpin to arrive. Protocol demanded that the two be on the surface when the message was delivered, no matter how troubled Garrovick was about doing so. Still, the captain wasn't about to take any chances. Leaving the ship under the watchful care of Commander Harris, Captain Garrovick and Jennifer Norpin, along with James Kirk, Danny Balkwill, and two well-armed security officers—Junior Lieutenants Michael Waack and Robert Riddle—funneled into the shuttle hangar for what Stephen hoped would be an extremely short assignment. The side door to the wedge-shaped shuttle slid apart as the landing party neared, and the entire team stepped inside.

Inside, Ambassador Mek'Tor and his retinue were seated and waiting. Garrovick, surprised at the spaciousness of the craft, was told by Mek'Tor that the shuttle was actually a converted troop carrier. The seats were plush, and the landing party found themselves far more comfortable than they'd imagined they would have been in a Klingon craft. Of course, that it was an ambassadorial transport likely had something to do with the accoutrements, considering how Klingons usually felt

about such trivialities. Two of Mek'Tor's people were behind the controls, and with the approval of Garrovick, the craft departed the Klingon module and headed down into Toria's atmosphere.

Setting the shuttle down next to the Klingon courier ship, Mek'Tor's security team was the first to exit the craft, followed quickly by Lieutenants Riddle and Waack. Sensing no immediate danger, Riddle waved the rest of the party out of the shuttle. Once outside, the only thing that could be heard was the sound of the wind gently whipping around the stylized pyramid-shaped buildings. That no one was there to greet them sent a chill up Garrovick's back. Unconsciously, both Jim Kirk and Robert Riddle drew their palm-sized phasers at the same moment and moved to flank Captain Garrovick and Ambassador Norpin.

"Ambassador Mek'Tor, I'm not sure—" But his words were silenced as the door on the large temple before them opened, and a group of robed Klingons glided out from inside.

Mek'Tor held up a hand for Garrovick to be silent. "Their robes signify them as the honor guard of Admiral Korraht. Despite his allegiance to the emperor, he was once a good friend. For him to even imply that we are enemies would be a great dishonor to what we are all doing here. Caution is unwarranted, Captain Garrovick."

Unconvinced, Stephen and the rest watched as the seven robed Klingons slowly came toward them, then stopped a few paces away. The leader pulled back his robe to reveal the face of an Imperial warrior, a large scar running down the length of the left side of his face and neck. He locked eyes with Ambassador Mek'Tor, then bowed his head slowly.

"Ambassador," the Klingon said in a gravelly voice, no doubt the result of damage to his vocal cords.

Mek'Tor bowed in return, then looked to each of the admiral's guards. "I am Ambassador Mek'Tor, and I speak on behalf of Fleet Admiral K'hober and the legitimate members of the Klingon High Council. I have a message for—" But his words were silenced as the robed man quickly withdrew a disruptor rifle and began firing, which was followed by the rest of the Klingons doing the same. Mek'Tor

was the first to fall, and though both Kirk and Riddle had each stunned one of their attackers, there were more Klingons waiting in the upper balconies of the temple. In seconds, the entire landing party had been rendered unconscious.

“Repeat, this is Commander Harris calling Captain Garrovick. Respond, Captain.”

After a moment, Phill turned a silent gaze down to Lieutenant Helissa.

“All instruments say they’re receiving you, sir. They’re just not responding.”

Pursing his lips, Phill turned to the view screen and the spinning planet Toria displayed on it. “Then what the hell is going on?”

“Trouble, sir.” It was Finney’s voice.

“What’s up, Ben?”

“Defensive shields have just gone up around the outpost. Electronic jamming is now in effect.”

“Concur, sir,” Helissa said, drawing Harris’s attention to her. “All communications with the surface are down.”

“Something on long-range scanners, sir!” Ben said again from the science console.

“Now what?”

“Klingon vessel . . . strike that . . . *two* Klingon warships . . . D-16 destroyers! They’re on an intercept course with us.”

The blood drained from Harris’s face. *We’ve been set up all along.* “Distance?”

“They’re on the far side of the system, but coming in at full impulse. ETA at our position is thirty-eight minutes, twenty-two seconds.” Ben then turned from the sensor hood. “Just enough time for us to break orbit and put some distance between us and them.”

“And leave the captain,” Phill scoffed. “You’re out of your mind, Finney.”

“We’ve lost contact with him, Phill! We need to protect the ship and the crew!”

“I’ve no intention of leaving this system until I’ve got confirmation that the captain and the landing party has been killed. Until then, we’re going to do whatever is necessary to give the captain *and* our people all the time they need to get done what we came here to do. Is that clear, Mister?”

“Yes, *sir.*” Finney narrowed his eyes before turning back to his console.

Phill nodded, then reached for the intercom switch on the command chair. “Red alert. All hands, red alert. Helm, raise shields and arm all weapons.”

“Aye, sir!” the relief lieutenant said. “Shields coming up, phasers charging. Photon torpedo launchers priming.”

“Ben, I want a full tactical analysis of those vessels. Report any abnormality you can find. We need an edge, Lieutenant, and we need it fast!”

There was something cold and unforgiving pressing against his face. Opening his eyes as he slowly became aware of his surroundings, James Kirk realized that he was lying prone on the floor. Lifting his head slowly, he could see Junior Lieutenants Waack and Riddle also face down on the floor, both unmoving. Bringing his arms around, Kirk hefted himself up, despite the ringing in his head and an overwhelming sense of nausea.

“We were stunned, James,” Kirk heard Captain Garrovick say from behind him. Turning, Kirk saw Garrovick cradling the limp form of Ambassador Norpin, her head lying in his lap.

“The ambassador,” Kirk said as he knelt beside his captain. “Is she . . .”

“She’s alive, James. However, she’s got a pretty serious concussion,” Garrovick said as he smoothed strands of blonde hair away from her face to reveal a deep purple blotch on her hairline. “Probably happened when she hit the ground.”

Kirk swiveled, checking to see who else was present in the dimly lit compartment. Waack and Riddle were beginning to stir, and in the far corner he could see Danny Balkwill tending to Ambassador Mek’Tor. Kneeling beside Mek’Tor was a Klingon fusion Kirk had never seen before. The ambassador’s original entourage of Klingons was nowhere to be seen.

“Ambassador, your people?”

Mek’Tor stood, holding a hand to his forehead as he tried to will away his headache. “Likely taken away for questioning. They will not be returning.”

“Are you sure?”

The unknown Klingon fusion stood, gripping Mek'Tor's arm tightly. It was a gesture of support, not of detention. He looked first to Mek'Tor and, getting a nod of approval, turned to Kirk. "I'm sure of it, Lieutenant. The same thing happened to my officers."

"Your officers? Just who are you, *exactly*?"

"Lieutenant, this is Admiral Korrath," Ambassador Mek'Tor said.

Alarmed at the mention of the admiral's name, Kirk stiffened. "But, aren't you—"

"One of the dissenters?" the admiral finished, the last word spoken with derision. "In the eyes of Earthers, it might appear that way. But Klingons are not humans. Your xenophobic notions are far too black and white for what has transpired in our empire over the last several months, and would take far too long for me to explain, not that you would even be able to fully grasp it after the enlightenment."

"And what are you doing in here, Admiral?" Garrovick said from the floor. "Aren't you supposed to be on the other side of that locked door and leading this revolt?"

"Whatever role I had in this campaign was eradicated two days ago when I was thrown in here by my own men."

"A mutiny?" Lieutenant Riddle asked as he slowly rose to his feet and helped Michael Waack to do the same.

"Nothing as dishonorable as that. No, I was incarcerated by the orchestrator of events that are only now unfolding."

"Emperor Karhammur," Kirk said with a nod.

"The emperor . . . or I should say, the *former* emperor, is dead. Assassinated shortly before I was placed under arrest."

Apparently Mek'Tor had received this information while Kirk was still unconscious. The ambassador didn't seem at all surprised by the admiral's admission. "Do you know who did this?"

Korrath looked at Mek'Tor. "By name, I do not. But I do know that it was someone close to the ambassador. Possibly an officer in his party. That is one reason why I believe none of them are present now."

"For what purpose?" Kirk asked the admiral, becoming more confused with each passing moment.

“Because, after much deliberation, I began to feel as Ambassador Mek’Tor has all along: that peace . . . even a brief time . . . *must* be established in order to rebuild our empire. But such a change of heart does not come without peril. I began with caution at first, alerting my most trusted squadron commanders that it was better to live and fight another day than to die without honor facing an enemy that we had no chance of defeating. I swayed many of them, and they in turn swayed others. Three days ago, nearly the entire fleet at the emperor’s disposal abandoned him, turning and retreating toward Klingon space at high warp en masse. I was one of the last, at the emperor’s side until the last moment.”

Narrowing his eyes, Kirk turned to face the admiral fully. Danny was now at Kirk’s side, and Waack and Riddle were stepping toward them. “You did it. *You* killed the emperor.”

“I had every intention of doing so, had he not wished to return to Klingon space to answer for his failures. To return with me would have meant facing the High Council, who would have surely put him to death for his errors. However, that death would have been honorable.”

“So . . . he didn’t want to go, so you killed him,” Lieutenant Waack said.

“And his men turned on you and threw you in here,” Lieutenant Riddle snorted. “Nice.”

Korrath shook his head, laughing through his nose. “*Humans*. Always so quick to come up with solutions to problems you do not understand. No, I did not kill him. His murder was carried out by one of his trusted aides, but I believe it was only because of orders that the aide was given by someone in Ambassador Mek’Tor’s party.”

“Why do you say that?” Garrovick asked.

“A transmission was sent from this location to a Klingon courier vessel en route to the planet Axanar just prior to the assassination. The response received was coded with the diplomatic credentials of Ambassador Mek’Tor’s party.” He then turned to Mek’Tor. “Since he is here, there is no way he could have sent such a signal

himself. And if Mek'Tor ordered the killing of Emperor Karhammur remotely, then he would still be part of the conspiracy, and not incarnated as we are."

A growl began to well in Mek'Tor's throat. "*Garol*. I knew that swine had ambitions to lead, but I had no idea he would be so deceitful."

"If that's true," Balkwill said, "then we've got to get out here, and fast."

Kirk nodded in agreement and turned to Captain Garrovick. "If *Garol* is the traitor, he could well be planning an attack on the peace conference at Axanar."

"If he is successful in disturbing the conference, then those Klingons wishing to still fight will do so," Korrath said. "They will see *Garol* as a hero, and will flock to his side."

"And this war will keep going, and so will the death and destruction," Kirk agreed.

"And those of us on Toria who know the truth will soon be silenced," Korrath replied. "That we have not been so already is proof that *Garol*'s plan has not come to its ultimate fruition. Until it does, we are bargaining chips . . . should he be caught."

Looking down, Garrovick saw Ambassador Norpin was smiling up at him. "How long have you been awake?"

Reaching up wearily, she stroked the side of his face. "Long enough to know we need to get the hell out of here and warn the diplomatic teams on Axanar about *Garol*."

"Agreed," he said, stroking her face in return, then looking to Korrath. "This is your base, Admiral. How do we do it?"

Korrath motioned to the only door in the compartment. "It is half a meter thick, and the walls and ceiling are well over a meter thick. This is the weapons storage locker, designed to protect the rest of the compound in case of accidental torpedo detonation from inside. It's also shielded, which means no orbiting starship can beam us out, nor can anything burst through it. The station's reactor core is fed from a nearby volcano, which means a nearly unlimited supply of power can be funneled into the station's shield system if necessary. And we have no weapons of any kind. Even if we did, they would not be able to get us beyond the room's shields." In a

tone of defeat unheard of for a Klingon, he cast his eyes to the barren floor and then to Captain Garrovick. “I feel that all may be lost, Captain.”

“Don’t tell me what can’t be done, Finney,” Commander Harris was saying to the science officer. “Tell me what we *can* do. We need to get the captain and his team out, and fast.”

“It looks like the storm over the compound is clearing, so we should be able to beam down a squad of Marines in the next few minutes, but I don’t see much point. Nothing they have in their arsenal would make a dent in the base’s shields.”

“Then we’ll have to use our own phasers,” Harris said matter-of-factly.

“The Klingon’s shields are at a power level above the output of our phasers, sir. There’s no way we could break through.”

“Not if we set them to overload. We’ll have more than enough power to punch a hole in those shields and get our people out.”

“But that could do more damage than good. Setting them to overload negates the possibility of firing them with any level of high accuracy, aside from the fact that it could very well damage the structure inside. We don’t even know where Captain Garrovick and the landing party is.”

“All we need is one short burst to overpower the shield generators. Once they’re down, even if only for a few seconds, we can beam in the Marines and effect a rescue.”

Finney was far from convinced. “And if you’re wrong, you could kill the captain, or irreparably damage the phaser banks. With those two Klingon destroyers getting closer, I don’t think you—”

But Harris had had enough of Ben Finney and his arguments. “That’s enough, Lieutenant. I’ve made my decision. Don’t forget that I’m partially responsible for designing the weapons on this and countless other starships. I may not know everything, but I know enough to know that it’ll work. Now, work with the helmsman to make necessary targeting calculations while I get down to phaser

control and set up the banks.” Leaping from the chair, Phill stepped into the turbolift before Finney could offer a rebuttal.

Chapter 19

“Transporter room, have the Marines beamed down to the surface?” Harris asked into the intercom at his chair the moment he’d returned to the bridge.

“Yes, sir,” Lieutenant Fling reported. “The last of the two teams just materialized on the planet.”

“Tony, I need you to keep a constant lock on them. The storm down there could swell back up at any moment, and we may need to get our people out quick.”

“I’ve got ’em, sir. Don’t give it a second thought.”

“Understood. Bridge out.” He then turned to Ben Finney at the science console. “Ben?”

Finney grumbled, still irritated over their previous encounter. “Targeting scanners are locked on what I believe to be the shield generators for the outpost. But, again, I’m not 100 percent certain about that.”

Disregarding Finney’s frustration, Phill turned to the junior officer seated before him. “Helm?”

“Overload phasers charging, sir. Maximum energy release in ten seconds.”

“ETA of the incoming Klingon warships?”

“Eleven minutes, forty-five seconds until we are in range of their torpedoes. A few seconds later their disruptors will come to bear.”

“We need to keep the shields down until the last possible moment. I want them back up when the Klingons are ten seconds from our location, and not a moment before. Is that understood?” he asked the officers on the bridge. Everyone nodded, their fingers poised over their controls. “Good.”

“Phasers firing . . . now!”

Deep in the bowels of the Klingon outpost, Garrovick and everyone in the weapons storage compartment was shaken to their core. Not enough to throw them to their feet, it nevertheless caused Junior Lieutenant Balkwill to instinctively reach out and grab for a handhold, only then realizing it was Admiral Korraath’s tunic. A

second later, when the shaking stopped, Danny gingerly released the admiral and absently brushed down the momentary wrinkles.

“Sorry, sir.”

Korrath grumbled deeply, then stopped the lieutenant’s fussing with a wave of his hand. “Think nothing of it, Lieutenant.”

“Earthquake?” Jennifer asked, now on her knees beside Captain Garrovick. Just as he was about to respond, another more violent jolt erupted. This time, Kirk and Lieutenant Waack went down. Balkwill had the good sense to kneel. Korrath and Mek’Tor were rocks, weathering the vibrations with ease.

“No,” Garrovick said with glee when the shaking stopped. “It’s the *Republic*! She’s trying to burrow through the deflector shields.”

“Impossible!” Korrath barked. “No Federation ship has such power.”

Standing, Garrovick smiled and helped Lieutenant Waack to his feet, giving the young officer a pat on the back in jubilation. “You don’t know Commander Harris very well, Admiral.”

“Feels like they’re leveling the outpost,” Robert Riddle said as Garrovick helped ambassador Norpin to her feet.

“I think we’re going to get out of here in no time.”

“We’ll still need to get beyond that door, Captain,” Mek’Tor said as he pointed at their only escape route. “Shields or no, we cannot be beamed out of this location.”

“The shields are down!” Finney exclaimed. “Moderate damage to some of the structures. A small number of buildings have collapsed, and several highways—”

“Never mind all that,” Commander Harris said, cutting off the science officer. “Scan for human life signs. Report anything you find to the Marines down below.”

Scowling, Finney put his face back toward the scanners. The atmospheric distortions were increasing, making any detailed scan all but impossible. Still, he was registering an extremely faint human biosignal in the lower levels of the largest structure, not far from where the captain and the landing party had set their shuttle down. “Think I’ve got something, sir. Very weak, but it’s human.”

“Relay it to the Marine commander.”

Unconsciously, Lieutenant Kirk had begun pacing the small room. If the *Republic* was trying to get them out, they were sure taking their time in doing it. Just then a dull thud from beyond the thick door commanded everyone's attention. Not long after, another was heard. A moment later, the door swung inward, a torrent of smoke billowing in through the opening. Garrovick quickly stepped around Ambassador Norpin, shielding her from whatever was about to come rushing in. Kirk, Balkwill, and Waack moved to the inner doorframe, ready to pounce on the intruders if need be. Riddle moved to the back of the room, putting himself between Ambassador Norpin and anyone coming in the now-open door.

That was when two heavily armed Starfleet Marines dashed in, their phaser rifles sweeping around the room as they secured the area. Each seemed to scan the faces of the hostages, with one Marine taking a defensive stance in front of Admiral Korrath before yelling, "Clear!" which was quickly followed by the same shout from the other Marine. A second later, two more men came in, each of their faces covered by dark masks, one carrying a rifle and the other a hand phaser. The taller of the two men, the one holding the phaser, turned to Garrovick and saluted.

"Captain Garrovick, its Major Edgeworth, sir. We're here to get you out." John O. Edgeworth was the young commander of the insertion team deployed on the *Republic*. Even in his short time about the ship, the Marine commander had formed a fast friendship with Garrovick.

"Well, done, Major."

"Sir, we took out several targets in the passageway outside, but the compound is still crawling with hostiles," he said, then reached into a side pocket and handed Garrovick a palm phaser. The other three Marines did the same, giving weapons to Kirk, Balkwill, Waack, and Riddle. None were handed to the Klingons or Ambassador Norpin.

"Understood," Garrovick said. "How many men do you have with you?"

Edgeworth looked to his three subordinates. "These, plus two more outside the door, sir. We came down with ten, but these hostiles are deadly accurate. Snipers took out almost half my team before we got down this far."

Garrovick sighed as he processed what he would do next. “Kirk, you and Balkwill take point with the Major’s men outside. Lieutenants Waack and Riddle, form a perimeter with these other men around our group. Admiral Korrath, you and the ambassadors will be in the center of the security wheel.” When everyone was in position, the former hostages moved out into the smoke-filled passageway.

The corridor was several dozen meters long, with closed doors lining both sides. Kirk and Balkwill scanned them as they moved slowly toward the end, phasers at the ready for anything that might pop out. “Keep your eyes peeled, Danny.”

Balkwill nodded, using his free hand to wipe sweat out of his eyes. “You know, Kirk, I haven’t had a chance to tell you how much I admire you.”

“How’s that?” Kirk asked, nearing an open door and quickly scanning inside the room.

“There’s a lot of officers just like me who try hard to be the kind of one you are. High marks at the Academy, you’ve done time on more starships than most lieutenant commanders I know, you’re fourth in command of a *Constitution*-class vessel, you pass the Kobayashi Maru . . . and that’s a story I’d *really* like to hear . . . and you’re not even thirty.” Balkwill then laughed nervously as he continued to scan the darkened hallway. “And look at yourself now. Cool as a cucumber.”

“Is that what you think?”

“You saying I’m wrong?”

The two men neared the end of the corridor, which then branched into a T-shaped intersection. The two Marines quickly dashed around Kirk and Balkwill as they stayed behind for a moment. Crouching, Kirk looked across at Balkwill. “To be honest, Danny . . . I’m scared out of my mind.”

Balkwill chuckled again. “What keeps you so composed, man?”

Kirk looked back down the passageway at Garrovick and the rest of the party nearing their position. “He does,” he said, nodding toward the captain, then looking at each of the humans and Klingons alike. “They all do. They expect to get out of here, and they’re counting on us to make sure that happens. I can let myself down, and I’ll suck it up and move on. But I refuse to let down someone who’s expecting me to save their life . . . to come through for them when it counts. If I fail, there’ll be no taking it on the chin. They’ll be dead . . . and it’ll be my fault.”

“Mine too?” Balkwill asked, not really a question, but not really a statement either.

Kirk smirked and then tapped his phaser to his own heart. “This is where you’re going to find that answer, Danny. Not on the braid on my sleeve, and not the one the captain’s or anyone else’s. Being a model officer is more than studying, and it’s more than technical knowledge. If you can’t find it in here to do the right thing when the situation calls for it, no matter the cost, then it’s your burden to bear.”

Balkwill smiled, his expression less nervous than before. “I think I understand.”

“Nobody is going to be a better or worse Lieutenant Danny Balkwill than you are, and since you’re the only one with that job, it’s up to you to make the most of it.”

Balkwill turned, seeing Captain Garrovick standing closely to Ambassador Norpin—with her obviously frightened. On the other side of the captain was Lieutenant Waack, the newly promoted junior grade lieutenant. He held his phaser confidently, but there was fear in the young man’s eyes. The Klingons, Mek’Tor and Korrath, were as defiant as any Klingon, but without being armed, they were as helpless as the wounded Ambassador Norpin—perhaps even more so. Nodding, he turned back to Kirk. “Then I guess we best get these people up to the surface, Mr. Kirk.”

“Exactly my thinking, Mr. Balkwill. Let’s go.”

Standing, the two walked into the corridor. The passageway to the left sloped upward, the one to the right level with the one they were on. It took Kirk a moment to see through the haze that the Marines had gone up to the left. “This way,” he said, waving his phaser up the corridor.

He and Danny quickly stepped up to where the Marines were waiting. Before them was the opening of a large open courtyard. Square in shape, the 100-yard expanse was lined with the rooftops of walkway coverings. In the open, grassy field, Kirk and Balkwill could see that the rain had started falling.

“This is where most of the snipers were,” one of the Marines said to Kirk.

“Tricorder readings?” Kirk responded.

“Inconclusive,” the Marine said as his eyes scanned the rooftops. “This storm is muddling the readings.”

“And, if it’s that bad, it’s probably why the *Republic* hasn’t beamed us up yet,” Kirk said.

The Marine nodded silently.

“Where do we go from here?”

The other Marine pointed his weapon toward the other side of the field. “There’s a doorway opposite where we’re standing. About fifty meters beyond that corridor is the entrance to the compound where your shuttle is parked.”

Kirk’s head bobbed in acknowledgement. “So, we need to make it to that corridor.”

That was when Major Edgeworth came up behind them. “We’ll need to go as a group. A staggered line will be too easy to pick off. Everyone surround the ambassadors and take a different angle. We’ll act as a moveable phalanx.”

Moving into a circle, they quickly darted out into the field. It wasn’t until they got half way across that green blasts of disruptor fire began pelting the orange grass around them. Sod was blown into the air, mixing with the rain and turning to mud before splattering on the landing party.

“Two targets!” Edgeworth shouted. “North rooftop and southwest rooftop!”

Edgeworth took out the first Klingon sniper in seconds. The second was more mobile, continuing to fire on the team until a blast hit the upper arm of Korraath. The admiral winced in pain, but continued to move forward. They were just nearing the destination when one of the Marines was hit dead center, the blast burning deeply into his tunic as he crumpled on the grass with a scream of agony.

“Tom!” the other Marine called out, but Major Edgeworth was quick to grab the corporal and toss him toward the open doorway.

“He’s gone! Get these people out of here, Marine!”

Kirk raised his phaser and fired. He barely missed the sniper, but the Klingon had been fazed. For a few seconds, he’d stopped firing—likely changing positions. Kirk and Balkwill could hear the Klingon running from rooftop to rooftop, but by then it was too late. The landing party had made it to safety the passageway. Dashing down

its length, they quickly neared the large outer door they'd seen when the Klingon shuttle had first touched down.

Kirk and Major Edgeworth were in the lead, and the two opened the heavy doors and stepped out into the rain, planting themselves against the walls of the structure. The shuttle was there, but it was a burned-out mess of scrap. The *Republic* phasers had done an admirable job of destroying it while attempting to take down the base's shields. *Par for the course*, Kirk thought, but then caught sight of the Klingon courier vessel parked nearby.

"Admiral Korrath, can you fly that thing?"

Korrath looked at the ship and nodded. "It's my personal ship, Lieutenant."

"Then let's go!"

The party moved out with Kirk, Balkwill, Riddle, and the Marines panning around the upper levels of the structures. Disruptor fire again rained down on them, this time from multiple locations. One of the other Marines was hit once, then twice more before he hit the ground, dead. The crack aim of Robert Riddle Jr. vaporized two Klingons who were waiting near the admiral's shuttle.

"Nice shots, son," Garrovick said as he plastered himself and Jennifer against the shuttle hull. When a third Imperial Klingon appeared from around the nose of the craft, Riddle shot him down as well. "Wherever you learned to shoot, I'd like to know—I'll make sure it's added to the Starfleet Academy curriculum *personally*."

"Duck hunting, sir, on my family's property back in South Carolina. And, while my parents might enjoy the company, I'm afraid my mother would raise Cain about having to feed a few hundred cadets—to say nothing about how angry she gets when people walk in with muddy boots." The captain turned to the young lieutenant and they shared a smile. "Trust me, sir. I've been on the losing end of that paddle more than a few times. In truth, I'd rather be here than in that situation ever again."

Then Korrath was there, cradling his arm as blood dripped out of his wound. After he entered a series of commands, the side door to the courier opened. Garrovick made sure to get Ambassador Norpin in first, followed quickly by Ambassador

Mek'Tor and Admiral Korrath. Captain Garrovick watched—unsure of whether it was Major Edgeworth or not—as one of the other Marines was gunned down.

“Sir,” Lieutenant Riddle said forcefully, “you need to get inside, Captain.”

Garrovick was about to protest with a disruptor blast hit his right calf. He collapsed instantly as he cradled the wounded limb.

“Stephen!” Kirk shouted, then rushed to his captain’s side.

“Damn it, Jim! That smarts,” Garrovick winced through gritted teeth.

“Robert, get the captain on board the shuttle!”

“Aye, Lieutenant.” Riddle then pulled Garrovick’s arm over his own shoulder, hefted him up, and quickly dragged him inside the protection of the courier.

Turning, Kirk could see the final Marine and Danny Balkwill approaching the craft. They were only twenty yards away when the Marine was hit, the disruptor blast going in one side of his chest and exiting the other. James knew the man had died instantly. But Balkwill was just as quick to return fire. The Klingon, likely gloating in his victory atop one of the structures, was vaporized in a shimmer of light. Then Balkwill was at the shuttle with Kirk, his back to the shuttle while Kirk propped himself up on his right shoulder for a moment.

“Inside, Danny,”

“Yes, sir!” Balkwill gave his friend a mock salute, but when he caught the glint of something over Kirk’s shoulder, his body moved on autopilot, pulling Kirk aside. The disruptor blast from the Klingon that was meant for Kirk’s back missed by scant centimeters and hit Danny, center mass. Kirk, still in movement, rolled to the right with the toss and had his weapon aimed right at the Klingon. With the press of a button, the Imperial warrior was vaporized. Not bothering to check Danny’s vitals, Kirk hefted the unmoving lieutenant in a fireman’s lift and dashed into the shuttle, the doors closing securely behind him.

Inside the shuttle, Korrath was at the controls with Captain Garrovick sitting beside him in the copilot’s chair. As soon as the doors were sealed behind Kirk, Korrath initiated the launch sequence. Although the Klingons outside continued to fire their disruptors at the courier vessel, the small arms did no damage to duranium hull of the vessel. As the vessel lifted free of the soggy ground, Korrath didn’t miss

the opportunity to fire several rounds from the shuttle disruptors into the compound. Several walls exploded, and one entire building collapsed under the onslaught before the thrusters were ignited and the shuttle soared into the air.

“Danny,” Kirk said softly, cradling his friend’s head in his lap at the back of the craft. A spot of blood had appeared at the corner of Balkwill’s mouth, turning into a trickle as it ran down his cheek toward the deck. Jennifer Norpin was kneeling at Kirk’s side, as was Ambassador Mek’Tor, with Lieutenants Riddle and Waack standing close to do whatever they could for their fallen comrade. “Danny,” Kirk said more forcefully, causing the injured man’s eyes to widen.

“J . . . Jim. Did . . . we make it?” he labored, his lungs obviously damaged by the viciousness of the Klingon weapon.

“We made it, Danny,” Kirk said with a smile. “We’re back in space. And we couldn’t have done it without you.”

“Guess I . . . didn’t make such a bad officer . . . after all, huh?” Balkwill asked, his body shuddering as it was wracked in spasms of pain.

Kirk felt his eyes begin to water. “No, you didn’t. You’re one of the best, Danny. You always had it in you. And you proved it today.”

“You think . . . my dad . . . be proud?” Danny said, ending it with a cough of more blood.

Kirk smiled, trying to keep Balkwill awake. “You can find out for yourself. We’ll be back at Starbase 5 before you know it.” He looked to Ambassador Norpin, who only shook her head and looked sadly toward Ambassador Mek’Tor.

“We have nothing on board to treat your comrade, Lieutenant,” the ambassador said solemnly. “We will be in transporter range of your starship in a few minutes. Perhaps . . .”

Kirk looked down at Balkwill, who had closed his eyes. “Danny. Danny!”

The lieutenant’s eyes cracked open, but only enough for Kirk to know that he was being looked at. “Jim.” But the voice was distant, fading.

“Danny, you’re going to be just fine. We need you on the *Republic*, buddy. Who’s going to help me keep a straight course?”

“Think . . . think you got that part handled just fine, Jim. Sorry . . . I couldn’t do . . . more . . .” The lieutenant’s body shuddered once more, then went completely limp.

“Danny . . .” Kirk sighed, knowing his friend was gone.

A comforting hand encircled his shoulder, and Kirk turned to see the cool blue eyes of Jennifer Norpin. “I’m sorry, Lieutenant. He was a good man.”

Kirk nodded, then drew his eyes back to Danny. “Yes. Yes, he was.”

Mok’Tar also reached out and placed a firm hand on Kirk’s other shoulder. “Though this may mean little to you, Lieutenant, your man . . . Lieutenant Balkwill, he has died a warrior’s death. Saving the life of a senior officer at the cost of one’s own guarantees a place in Sto’Vo’Kor. His sacrifice is to be honored . . . and remembered. We shall drink to his sacrifice tonight.”

Kirk could see in the Klingon’s eyes that the word “remember” extended to the Klingons as well—or, at the very least, this singular Klingon. It didn’t bring him any comfort, but he gave his appreciation to the ambassador, regardless. After all, Mek’Tor was correct in one thing: Danny Balkwill was a hero, and James T. Kirk would make sure somebody knew about it.

Chapter 20

Once the shuttle was secured in the *Republic*'s secondary bay, Garrovick wasted little time in bolting for the bridge. James Kirk was quick on his heels, barely making it to the turbolift in time for the doors to close behind him. Ambassador Norpin, remaining in the Klingon module with Ambassador Mek'Tor and Admiral Korrath, was tasked with devising a way to restore any damage to the peace conference that the traitorous Garol might enact. The sound of the red alert klaxon, which began sounding the moment the hangar bay was pressurized, was a dull sound in the background of the lift as it took its few seconds' journey to the bridge.

"I'm sorry about Danny," Garrovick said as he looked at Kirk.

"Let's just make sure it wasn't in vain, sir."

Before Stephen could respond, the lift doors opened and deposited the two on the *Republic*'s bridge. Phill Harris vacated the command chair, moving over to the engineering console to the captain's right. Kirk took his spot at the navigator's seat, looking to the relief lieutenant at the helm with momentary regret.

"Jim, where's Danny?" Ensign Dominic Merz asked. "I was only supposed to be his temporary relief."

Kirk wasn't sure how to respond, not wanting to cloud Merz's judgment with the revelation that his friend was now dead. "You're going to be his relief for a short while longer, Dom." He left it at that as he turned to his own instruments.

"Status?" Garrovick said as he slipped into the command chair.

Finney turned, leaning over the red guardrail and looking down at the captain. "Two Klingon destroyers coming toward us at high speed. ETA is less than two minutes."

"Kirk, get us out of orbit. Merz, defensive status?"

"Main phasers are offline. Torpedoes are charged and ready. Shields are up."

Hearing his main weapons were down, Garrovick turned a worried look to Ben Finney.

“Commander Harris ordered phasers be set to overload in order to break through the shields of the Klingon base,” Finney said with a nod in Harris’s direction. “We were good for two shots before the emitters burned themselves out.” The tone of Finney’s voice betrayed his disagreement with the plan that Harris had enacted. However, if the *Republic* had failed to act as it did, Garrovick knew he and his people likely would have been dead. Deciding to save the commendations and explanations for later, Stephen nodded in acknowledgement.

“We’ve broken out of orbit,” Kirk sighed. “Heading, sir?”

“Set a course for Axanar, Lieutenant. Maximum available speed.”

“I can give you warp seven,” Harris said from the engineering console, “maybe warp eight in a pinch.”

“Then give me that pinch, Commander. We need to get there before the Klingon courier does.”

“Courier, sir?” Finney asked in confusion.

“Course plotted and laid in,” Kirk said from the navigator’s seat.

“Engage engines, Mr. Kirk. Let’s put some distance between us and those Klingon destroyers.”

A moment later, the stars on the forward screen began to shimmer as the *Republic* entered warp. After a brilliant flash of light, the stars began to blissfully stream by. Knowing that Klingon destroyers were far slower than the *Republic*, Garrovick let out a momentary sigh of relief. Looking down at his uniform, he realized it was a stained, soiled mess. So was Kirk’s. “How long until we get to Axanar?”

“At our current speed, we should be there in just under four days,” Finney said.

“And when will the *Tal’ok* arrive at Axanar?”

Finney looked at Garrovick curiously, then gave the same look to Kirk before answering. “Roughly the same time, if she hasn’t changed her speed. If she was able to increase to warp six, she’ll be there a few hours before we will. If not, she’ll likely be there not long after we arrive.”

“She’s got a heck of a head start, but we’re faster,” Garrovick said in approval. “But we won’t know until we get there, because any subspace transmission we send to Axanar will take two full days to reach there and two more to get back. However, we still need to warn them.” He then turned to the Andorian woman at the

communications console. “Lieutenant Helissa, I need you to locate the nearest Starfleet vessel to Axanar. Scan every invitation and subspace request sent over the past two weeks. Find out who’s been ordered there and compile a list.” He then turned back to Finney. “Ben, I want you to keep an eye on those Klingons following us. Give me all the data you can on the specifications of those vessels.” Reaching down to his armrest, Garrovick opened up the shipwide intercom.

“Attention all hands, this is the captain speaking. We’re currently on course to the planet Axanar at high warp, and are being pursued by two Klingon destroyers. Our intention is to avoid combat at all costs, but if it should become unavoidable, all hands are hereby ordered to remain at a state of full battle readiness. Department heads, please compile readiness and status reports and have them ready for a staff meeting in conference room two in exactly two hours. I think it’s time everyone knew what we’re up against . . . and the possible cost to the Federation if we should fail. That is all.” Turning to Finney, Garrovick stepped out of the command chair. “Ben, you have the conn. Phill, I’ll need you in engineering. I’m going to take a shower.” He then looked down at James. “Lieutenant Kirk?”

“Yes, sir?”

“You look like hell, son.”

Smiling, Kirk leaned back. “Yes, sir. That I do.”

“Helissa, get Mr. Kirk’s relief back up here. I’ll need the lieutenant presentable for that staff meeting.”

* * *

The *Republic* dropped out of warp at the edge of the Delta Orcas system, pivoted slightly, and then moved toward the planet Axanar at full impulse. Within moments, Lieutenant Helissa informed Garrovick that a Priority One communication was coming in from the starship commander Stephen had called upon over two days before. Taking a measured breath, Garrovick ordered that visual communications be opened. On the screen, the confident green eyes of the Izarian officer smiled back at him.

“Fleet Captain Garth, it’s good to finally meet you in person, sir.”

“And you as well, Captain Garrovick. But we’ve little time for pleasantries.”

“The courier *Tal’ok*?” Garrovick asked without further preamble.

Garth nodded. “She arrived a short time ago. I stalled the vessel for as long as I could, but the fact that it was a Klingon courier with full diplomatic authority gave me limited options in the matter.”

“I’m sorry, Captain,” Stephen said honestly. “We had a slight navigation malfunction which caused us a minor delay in getting here. I had hoped to be here before the *Tal’ok* arrived.”

Garth bobbed his head in understanding. “These things happen, Captain. As it is, the *Tal’ok* was authorized to dock at the nearby orbital station. I beamed over a security team to keep a covert eye on Garol and his people. For the moment, all is as it should be. What concerns me now is the Klingon destroyers that are in pursuit of the *Republic*.”

“Due to our delay, they were able to catch up to us rather quickly. They even managed to pick up a cruiser along the way. The three vessels should be entering the system at any moment.”

“Then we will be ready for them. The *Xenophon* will be at your location shortly. The destroyers *Scipio* and *Tamerlane* will provide additional support, but that is all that can be diverted from Axanar. The remainder of our forces *must* remain at the planet unless it becomes absolutely necessary for them to assist us.”

Garrovick smiled. “I have a feeling the Klingons are going to get more than they bargained for when they arrive.”

“Let’s hope that brains will prevail over brawn and that they will choose *not* to fight a losing battle.”

“Agreed.”

Garth smirked. “Due to the importance of your passengers, the *Republic* has been ordered to the orbital station to allow them to disembark. Ambassadors Mek’Tor and Norpin’s presence is required on the surface, as diplomatic talks are under threat of breaking down at any moment—thus our need to keep any fighting well away from the planet until the negotiations are completed.”

“And Garol and his people?”

Garth shrugged almost imperceptibly. “As of fifteen minutes ago, he was still on the orbital station. If you and your people should happen to run into him, so much the better. I’ll send instructions to my security team there that they are to follow your orders until the *Xenophon* returns.”

“Thank you, Captain Garth.”

“Of course, Captain Garrovick. Now, you have diplomats to deliver, and I have a squadron of Klingon separatist destroyers to deal with. I look forward to meeting you face to face when this is all over.”

“As do I, Captain Garth. *Republic* out.”

On the view screen, Garrovick watched as the aging destroyer *Xenophon* passed the incoming *Republic* on her starboard side. A moment later, the two Federation destroyers followed suit. Within minutes, the orbiting station that had recently been placed in orbit over Axanar came into view.

“Sir.” It was Finney. “Separatist vessels have entered the Delta Orcas system. Fleet Captain Garth’s forces are intercepting.”

“Let’s pray that Garth and his people can take care of them quickly. Helissa, raise the station and request docking instructions.”

Minutes later, the *Republic* was attached to one of the outer docking clamps on the station. Grabbing Kirk and a few others, Garrovick rushed from the bridge to the Klingon module, where Ambassadors Norpin and Mek’Tor were waiting with Admiral Korrath.

“Ambassadors, you’re needed down on the surface at once. I’ve been told that the negotiations are in danger of dissolving at any moment.”

Jennifer gave both Mek’Tor and Korrath a concerned look. “Then it’s as bad as we feared.” She turned to the captain. “We’re ready to go, Stephen.”

“Federation Security is waiting inside the station to escort you down to the surface.” He then reached for her hand and gripped it softly. “I wish I could be there when you get down to the surface, but we’ve got other things to attend to on the station.”

She smiled warmly. "It's best if we arrive without you. Besides, with so many diplomats waiting, it might be uncomfortable for you in the conference hall."

Stephen released her hand, then motioned toward the doorway. "If you'll follow me, please."

They jogged through the ship's passageways, the crewmen inside making way as the dozen officers and diplomats made their way to the main gangway hatch. Nearing the door, Jennifer rested one hand on Garrovick's shoulder before they went through. "From here on out, it's going to have to be Ambassador Norpin. At least until after we've resolved the situation down on Axanar . . . if we can."

Slipping her hand off, Stephen kissed the back of it softly. "If anyone can, it'll be you." He then looked to Mek'Tor and Korraht. "It'll be all of you. I can't believe I'm saying this to Klingons, but I'm trusting Ambassador Norpin—indeed the entire peace process—to the both of you. The very security of our peoples will rely on what you three accomplish down there."

Mek'Tor, in a surpassingly human gesture, held a hand out to Garrovick, which the captain took in a firm grasp. "If only for the good of the Klingon Empire itself, I will do my best, Captain. That is all I can offer. Nothing more."

"It'll have to do, Ambassador."

One the doors were opened, it was amazing to see the transformation on Jennifer Norpin's face. The sweet, glowing visage turned to the resolute statue of a trained diplomat. Gone was the inviting smile, replaced by the cold lines of someone carrying the weight of the Federation on her shoulders. Still, knowing that she did it with such grace and dignity made Stephen appreciate her even more. There to greet them was an entire lineup of Federation and Klingon security officers. The Starfleet ones were wearing their dress uniforms, their phasers the only outward indication of their true intentions. The Klingons, wearing the typical black and gray uniforms Garrovick had always known, were also adorned with deep blue sashes extending from shoulder to hip. The opposite hip held holstered disruptors.

"If you'll come with us, ambassadors," one of the officers began, "I'll show you to the transporter room. Please hurry."

There was one last, furtive glance between Jennifer and Stephen, then she was gone in a flurry of flowing robes and security officers.

“Now what, sir?” Kirk asked from behind the captain.

Stephen turned sharply on his heel to face the Lieutenant. “We do what we’ve been doing, James. We see to the security of the United Federation of Planets. I see no more fundamental application of that duty than the apprehension of Garol and his men.”

“And if he resists?”

“There’s a time for diplomacy, James, and then there’s a time for action. The diplomats we just delivered are doing their part, and now we need to do ours. I’m not planning on getting into a spitting contest with Garol; I’m going to take him down with all the force that is necessary. His diplomatic credentials have just been revoked, and I plan on being the one to punch his card personally.” Reaching under the back of his tunic he withdrew his communicator. Twisting it to the correct frequency, he opened a channel to Fleet Captain Garth’s men aboard the station. “This is Captain Garrovick to security detail. Come in, please.”

“Security,” the whispered male voice came back. “Lieutenant Peters here.”

“Lieutenant, do you still have the Klingon Garol in your sights?”

“Yes, sir. But I think he’s preparing to beam down to the surface. I’ve got a man close to him who’s been relaying information. We’re getting indications that he’s about to head for the transporter room.”

“Understood, Peters,” Garrovick said with a lowered voice. “Where are you now?”

“Second level, promenade. Garol and his people are in a Klingon bar on the same level across a catwalk from my location. I’ve got one man in the bar disguised as a Klingon, one more outside the establishment pretending to be a window shopper, and two more on the level below.”

“Where’s the transporter room nearest your location?”

“Unknown, sir.”

Keeping the channel open, Stephen turned to Kirk, who was holding a tricorder. “James?”

Looking at the screen, Kirk scanned through the station's blueprints in relation to where it sounded like Peters was. "About 200 yards east of the bar, one level down from Peters' location. The next closest one is where Ambassador Norpin and the rest are heading now, which is on the opposite side of the station."

"Too far for Garol to consider. If he's in a bar, it's likely we still have the element of surprise." Looking to his men, he selected Lieutenants Waack, Riddle, and Deimos to accompany himself and Kirk to the promenade. The rest he sent to the transporter room to wait for the traitor. "We'll funnel him your way," Garrovick told the second team. "When Garol gets there, make sure he stays there."

Separating, Stephen and his team bisected the station at a run. After traversing one final doorway, they reached the next compartment, which led into an open, circular area surrounding the entire upper portion of the outpost. High above, the overhead was covered in sheets of transparent aluminum, giving an almost unobstructed view of the stars. Below them was the upper level of the promenade. Filing out of the corridor, Garrovick looked to Kirk, who was pointing up and to the right.

"Up there, sir. Three shops down should be the bar. At least, what's what the station map says."

"Very well. Riddle, I need you and Lieutenant Waack to remain here. Conceal yourself, but be on the ready. I plan on flushing Garol down this way, and I want you two to make sure he's funneled down to the transporter room."

"You want him in the transporter room?" Robert asked quizzically.

Garrovick smiled and patted the lieutenant on the shoulder. "Yep. I want Garol to think he's actually going to succeed. It'll make the victory so much sweeter when we pull the carpet out from under him."

At that, Kirk smiled at the deviousness of Garrovick's plan. He made note to remember it for future reference.

"Kirk, Deimos . . . you're with me."

The three officers made it up to the second level using a lift farther down the promenade. Backtracking, Garrovick plastered himself to the wall when he caught sight of Garol still inside the bar. Following suit, Kirk took a quick glance for himself, then hid out of sight.

"Now what?" Zane asked as he cradled his palm-sized phaser.

Garrovick looked across the catwalk and saw someone else looking back at him. He mouthed the word “Peters,” which was answered with a single nod. Garrovick pointed first to himself, then his two men, indicating they would be the ones going inside. Lieutenant Peters tapped his phasers, then pointed to his eyes, signifying that he would cover the *Republic* officers as they did so. Stephen nodded, then quickly gestured with his hands, showing the security officer that he planned on flushing Garol out of the bar, but that his movement shouldn’t be hindered. Reluctantly, Peters acquiesced. Garrovick then turned to his men. “Ready for our grand entrance?”

“Phasers on stun?” Kirk asked

Hearing a rousing sound of drunken grunts and war cries from inside the bar, Stephen turned to Kirk. “Use your best judgment, men. Something tells me that phasers and disruptors are still the order of the day until the peace accord is finally signed.”

“I don’t think there any humans in there,” Zane said with a cocky smile. “Do you think they’ll mind us barging in?”

Checking the setting on his own weapon, Garrovick shrugged. “I don’t think I *care* if they mind. Let’s go.”

Stepping out of their cover, the three men stepped up to the swinging metal doors of the bar. Hearing a rather archaic slur about the mating preferences of humans with regards to a preferences of invertebrates, Stephen smiled, then kicked the doors open with more flair than seemed necessary—but the effect was instantaneous. The bar was filled with both Imperials and fusions alike, and true to Deimos’s statement, there wasn’t a non-Klingon in the bar. All eyes were on Garrovick and his party, and all tongues were silent.

Garrovick took one long step into the room, mirrored by Kirk and Deimos. Stephen suddenly felt a wave of nostalgia wash over him—as if he’d just entered a bar scene straight out of Earth’s ancient Wild West.

“This is Klingon soil,” the barkeep shouted from across the room. “Earthers are not welcome here.” This was followed by muted grunts from nearly all the other patrons.

Garrovick’s eyes scanned the room. When he caught Garol’s, he could see something in the man that he’d never in his life seen in a Klingon before: fear. “Well, that’s good, because I came looking for a Klingon,” Stephen replied, addressing the entire room.

One particularly surly Imperial stepped out from behind a nearby table. At two meters, he was a full head taller than Stephen. “You wish to challenge a Klingon warrior before the peace mongers below make it a crime to do so? If that is so, then I will accept that challenge, little Starfleet Earther.” With that, he pulled out an impressively lethal-looking dagger from his belt.

Lieutenants Waack and Riddle appeared in the doorway, gripping their phasers tightly, but a raised hand from Zane Deimos kept them from making any other moves. Kirk transferred his weight to the balls of his feet, ready to pounce at a moment’s notice. Garrovick, however, was the pillar of calm. He looked to the drawn knife with a mixture of curiosity and pity. “I don’t think so. There’s no honor in it for me.”

The Klingon laughed, which was followed by a short round from the others. “What does a human know of honor?”

“I know that mine was insulted,” Garrovick shouted at the warrior, which succeeded in once again silencing the room. “And by the warrior code, I demand satisfaction.”

The Klingon made an impressive display of twirling his knife before bringing it toward Garrovick’s face, then slowly lowering it as the Klingon leered at the captain. “Then your life is not mine to take. Who is that you wish to challenge?” he asked, spreading his arms wide. “Who amongst the empire’s finest and bravest of warriors will you ask to be the instrument of your death? For surely you do not think you could possibly beat any of us in single combat.” This received a round of whooping applause from the Klingons, enough to nearly deafen Garrovick and his men.

Garrovick nodded, trying to look each of the Klingons in the eye—all except Garol. “It’s true,” he shouted, bringing the room to order once again. “You are all warriors. The bravest . . . the *finest*. The *most* honorable. You have fought well, and many of your comrades have died.” He then lowered his voice and smiled. “And died *well*.” This received a series of grunts of approval from some few Klingons. “It’s also true that representatives of both our people are below on Axanar, vying for a lasting peace between our people. Now, if you believe them, the peace will last a thousand years. And perhaps it will.” More grunts, which Garrovick allowed to silence before he continued. “But if it doesn’t, then it will be a war for *that* day. A war for *that* time. A war for our brothers and sisters, a war for our children . . . or their children. Or perhaps beyond that. But it will not be *our* war. We’ve both fought against one another, and we’ve done our duty. As warriors, we still have more to give, but there is more to gain than to continuing to fight in a burning house. The timbers around both our peoples are splintering, and no one is more aware of that than you and I: we, the warriors of the front lines, the instruments of policy.” This received another round of grunts, with some Klingons looking to one another and nodding. “But there is one amongst your numbers who believes the house is not burning, that the flames that lick at his feet are not real. And he will lead those who follow him into dishonor to fight for that house . . . to fight for that dead cause that will bring no satisfaction. He speaks of the way of the warrior, but I have seen his acts of deception firsthand as he tried to not only murder me and my people, but honorable Klingons who wish nothing more than to live to fight another day and retain their honor, just as all of you will do, long after the diplomats below are finished!” Garrovick then leveled his eyes directly at Garol. “And while he speaks with the words of a Klingon, he lies with the tongue of a *Romulan*.”

Garol sneered at Garrovick. Yet, one by one, the Klingons turned their gazes from the Starfleet officers to Garol. Some looked at others, some muttered curses, other made whispers in Klingonese that Garrovick hoped were causing the dissention he intended. Nodding in approval, he turned his back to Garol in one swift movement,

in what was the single greatest leap of faith Stephen Garrovick had ever made. Turning his head toward Kirk and Deimos, he said softly, "Let's go."

Kirk and the others each looked to Stephen in astonishment.

"Begging your pardon, sir," Lieutenant Riddle began, "but shouldn't we arrest—"

But Garrovick inclined his head toward the saloon-style doors. When the party had taken one step, Garol shouted over the grumbling.

"You turn your back on me, Earther! You will die—"

"What? Without honor?" Garrovick asked over his shoulder, not giving Garol the satisfaction of looking the Klingon in the eyes as he addressed him. "You who are without honor dare to try to claim that you can take mine? I'm afraid not. In fact, I'm fairly certain your tenure on this station has come to something of an end. If I were you, I'd think about making plans for new accommodations . . . and fast. After all, Klingons aren't known for their love of traitors. Or murderers." Taking several measured steps, Stephen and his team exited the bar without further incident.

Minutes later, they'd met up with security chief Peters and his people down in a secluded area of the promenade's lower level. They waited in silence for a few minutes before they noticed Garol depart the bar alone and head to the nearest lift.

"Stay focused, men," Garrovick smiled. "Let's follow him to the transporter room."

"How do you know that's where he's heading, sir?" Robert Riddle asked.

"His ship was impounded the moment we set foot on the station," he then held his wrist up and looked at his chronometer. "But he didn't find out about that fact until sixty seconds ago. His only choice now is to get to the surface and try to hitch a ride on one of the diplomatic shuttles."

Once leaving the promenade, Garol made a beeline for the transporter room, disregarding the stares of the people as he bolted down the passageways. Looking at his electronic map, he could see that his destination was near. Stopping before entering the room, he checked his pockets, finding his diplomatic credentials in the breast pocket of his uniform. Taking a series of deep breaths to create a façade of calmness and authority, he stepped forward into the room.

Before he'd made two full steps, he came face to face with a Starfleet officer. But it wasn't just any officer. It was the *Republic's* chief engineer.

"Remember me?" Commander Phill Harris said with a devilish grin on his face. The Klingon's eyes narrowed as he began to groan. "Yeah, I hoped you did." Harris then reached back a clenched fist and swung with all his might, hitting the Klingon square in the jaw and knocking him out of the transporter room and against the far bulkhead. Garol looked at him in what could almost be astonishment, then fell to the floor, unconscious. A minute later, Garrovick and his party sauntered up the passageway.

"I see you gave Garol my message," Stephen said approvingly.

"Well, it was a mutual message, sir. I wanted to make sure our friend here understood that."

"I'll be sure to ask him when he wakes up."

"Orders, sir?" Harris asked, smiling down at the unconscious Garol like a prizefighter who'd just won the belt for his class.

"I need you, Deimos, and Riddle to take this piece of space trash down to the brig. Then meet me on the promenade. I believe I owe you a drink, Commander. In fact, I think you all deserve one. I know I certainly do."

Harris snapped Garrovick a well-practiced salute. "Yes, sir!"

Epilogue

Stardate 4306.13

Standing confidently behind a metallic podium emblazoned with the emblems of both the United Federation of Planets and the Klingon Empire, Federation Ambassador Jennifer Norpin looked out to the hundreds of diplomats and attendees. Her silver and white robes, glowing brightly under the spotlight on the otherwise darkened stage, gave her an ethereal glow. It was one that Stephen Garrovick approved of. Sitting near the back of the crowd, the senior officers of the USS *Republic* watched the closing ceremonies of the Axanar Peace Conference with a mixture of awe and relief.

“And, with the signing of this treaty, let us now begin the process of rebuilding,” the ambassador said, her eyes looking to everyone all at once. Even Stephen felt their penetrating authority pass over him, and he unconsciously smiled back in return. “Let us take these much-needed first steps in making sure that our respective people are returned to their homes, that they may begin the healing process. And let us take the time to remember the brave souls who have given their all for the benefit of our governments. They, the ones who could not be present physically, are the honored guests of this ceremony, present in our thoughts and our memories. It is to them that we dedicate these proceedings, in the hopes that in the future, it will not simply be a time to set down our weapons, but will be a time of extending our hands in brotherhood—that we finish what we began here today, and that the United Federation of Planets and the Klingon Empire will come together not as past enemies, but as true allies in this universe. I wish to thank the delegation from the Klingon High Council for their tireless work in this conference, as well as the Federation representatives from both member and associate worlds. It is with the greatest of satisfaction that I, Ambassador Jennifer Elise Norpin, acting on full authority of the president of the United Federation of Planets—Thomas Vanderbilt IV, and with the undisputed backing of the Federation Council, do hereby close this conference. And with that, the ongoing quarrel between the United Federation of

Planets and the Klingon Empire has finally come to a close. May it remain that way evermore. Thank you.”

With that, the crowd soared to their feet with resounding applause. One of the last to stand, Garrovick looked to Lieutenant James Kirk at his left, himself still seated. Kirk seemed lost in thought, and when Garrovick nudged the junior officer with his shoulder Kirk was roused from it. The two shared a smile, and when Garrovick extended a hand, James gladly took it, shaking it firmly before the two rose to their feet and joined in the roaring applause.

Stephen took in the lovely Federation ambassador at the stage, her warm smile filling the auditorium as the Klingon delegates stood at her side. Although he was one of the few officers on board the station who knew that there was to be a private award ceremony later—one that Jennifer herself would preside over—he felt the slightest sting of pain in his heart. After this mission, he knew he’d likely never see her again. Far too busy with making sure the new treaty went into full effect, Jennifer was sure to have her scope of authority increased—to say nothing of the fame this moment would shower upon her. She was a part of the history of the Federation—indeed, of the entire galaxy—but it was a galaxy that was still vastly uncharted and unexplored. That was where Stephen Garrovick and his ship needed to be. Whereas Jennifer Norpin was quickly becoming a shining star, it would be one never orbited by the likes of Garrovick. *Still, there was nothing wrong with asking her to dinner one last time before the Republic departed Axanar. No harm in that at all.*

Satisfied at that singular possibility, Stephen clapped on with the rest of dignitaries until his palms began to sting.

An hour after the applause had stopped, Lieutenant James Kirk and a handful of other officers were in a small chamber near the auditorium where they had been asked to wait. Not nearly as impressively decorated as the dignitaries’ meeting hall, there were still enough streamers adorning the walls of the modestly sized room to signify that this place had held a significance during the peace conference. But now,

with the negotiations and the conference officially over, the room somehow felt devoid of spirit and purpose. It was almost a sense of abandonment, like what the Olympic villages of the past must have felt like weeks after the iconic games had ended.

Thankfully, James wasn't alone in his discomfort. Also in dress uniform, Lieutenants Michael Waack, Zane Deimos, and Robert Riddle were there, as well as Phill Harris and a few other officers Kirk had never seen before. There was a dining table set up on the far side of the room, and several of the unknown officers, obviously from the same command, based on the arrowhead-like insignia on their uniforms, had huddled there.

"What do you make of them?" James asked as Lieutenant Waack appeared at his side, a plate full of finger foods cradled in one hand.

"Some of the senior officers from the *Xenophon*," Deimos replied before popping a handful of blue soft-shelled snails into his mouth.

Kirk fought the urge to wince. "How can you eat that stuff?"

"They're delicious, Jim," Waack likewise added and offered a plate to James, who declined with a repulsed look.

"*Xenophon*, you say? That's Fleet Captain Garth's ship."

Waack nodded, and that was when Riddle and Harris came up, holding enough drinks for the four of them. Kirk took his and sipped at it slowly. It was sweet and smooth, cold without being chilled.

"What's the scuttlebutt?" Robert asked.

Kirk shook his head. "Not sure. Seems that only the *Republic* and the *Xenophon* are represented."

"But no captain from either ship?" Harris asked as he craned his head around to examine the room.

"Last I heard," Deimos began quietly as if he were conveying classified gossip, "was that Fleet Captain Garth was still in the station's infirmary."

Kirk nodded. "I heard that, too."

"What happened there?" Waack asked Kirk with concern.

“One of those Klingon ships Garth and his people went after got off a lucky shot to the *Xenophon* just before the battle ended. I heard the explosion banged up the bridge pretty bad. Garth was the most seriously injured.”

Waack, finishing the last of his snails, put his plate down on a nearby table. “I hear he’s touch and go . . . they say he might not make it.”

Robert Riddle took a sip of his blue drink and smiled. “You know what I say, Michael? I say you’re full of—”

“Attention on deck!” one of the unknown crewmen shouted from across the room. Instinctively, each of the officers present stood bolt upright.

“As you were,” Kirk heard the familiar voice of Stephen Garrovick say. Relaxing his posture, Kirk turned to see the captain escorting the lovely Ambassador Norpin toward the head of the room. Behind them was one of the Federation diplomatic aides recently assigned to Norpin, carrying a tray with an unfurled flag of the Federation draped over it. “If you officers will please line up according to your rank and vessel, we have a small award ceremony to perform.”

“Award ceremony?” Riddle asked quietly to Kirk. “Did you happen to know anything about—”

Kirk shook his head, and looked to Harris, who did the same. “No. I had no idea. Come on. Let’s form up.” When the dozen or so officers were arranged in a proper inspection line and standing at attention, Ambassador Norpin and Captain Garrovick stepped to the middle to address them all simultaneously.

“This ceremony is to commemorate the deeds done by the few who have allowed the events of today to come to fruition,” Norpin began. “Without your efforts, I’m quite certain none of us would be standing here today on the eve of peace. I would like to extend my personal gratitude to you all, and hope that this award will—in some small measure—accurately convey the deepest appreciation of the entire United Federation of Planets.” Turning to face the aide, Captain Garrovick removed the flag covering the tray. Under it was a small stack of transparent containers. Lifting the first container, Ambassador Norpin opened it and withdrew a gleaming silver medal connected to a blue and white neck ribbon.

“This is the Palm Leaf of Axanar, created by special dispensation of the Federation Council to memorialize your efforts toward this peace conference. The leaf of the palm, which grows in only one location on the planet Axanar, is considered sacred by the population of the planet. Harvested only once per year, it is known for its remarkable healing and rejuvenating properties, as well as its bright colors and alluring scent. Unable to grow on any other planet in the Federation, the upturned Axanarian Palm leaf and the fruit it bears is truly a unique specimen amongst all the worlds of the Federation, just as you officers are. The president of the Federation, Thomas Vanderbilt IV, as well as the commander of Starfleet, Fleet Admiral Matthew D. Luxa, send their congratulations on a job very well done by you all.”

Moving down the line of officers, Ambassador Norpin donned each of them with the award, which was followed by a hearty handshake and some laudatory words from Captain Garrovick. When the last decoration was conferred, the ambassador again thanked the crewmen present, then departed the room quietly, leaving Captain Garrovick behind to speak to his people. Kirk made note of the two awards left on the tray that was now sitting on a side table.

“At ease,” he said with authority. “Commander Duggins, compliments on your recent promotion,” he said, reaching out to shake one of the *Xenophon* officers’ hands.

“Thank you, sir.”

“I understand you’ve been offered a command of your own, Lloyd—two, in fact. Any idea where you’ll want to go?”

“Yes, sir. I’ve just accepted the posting to the *Cowpens*.”

“Cruiser, aye?” Garrovick asked with a smile.

“With the war over, she’s been given a research assignment. Purely scientific in nature. That sounded just about perfect over my other choice, which would have put me on patrol duty near Romulan space.”

“Excellent news, Commander. Send me a subspace when you check on board.”

Duggins then looked to his fellow officers before he spoke with a concerned look. “And Captain Garth?”

“He’s a sturdy officer, Lloyd,” Stephen said. “One of the strongest I’ve ever seen. Many men would have succumbed to those kinds of injuries long ago. Kelvar is hanging in there, but the doctors still can’t say for certain when he’ll come out of the coma.” Stepping to the tray, Garrovick grabbed one of the two remaining medals and handed it to Duggins. “This is for him. I’m hoping you’ll be able to hand it to him personally.”

“My orders don’t have me reporting to the *Cowpens* for a few weeks, and the *Xenophon* will need some pretty drastic repairs. We’ll be at Axanar for some time.”

“I’ve heard she made the decommission list.”

Duggins nodded slowly. “Yeah. We heard, too. But it’s not official until we get the actual orders.”

“Until Fleet Captain Garth recovers and you’ve been properly relieved, you’re in command of the *Xenophon*, Lloyd. I know she’s in excellent hands, no matter her fate.”

“Thank you, sir,” Duggins said, then shook Stephen’s hand before he and his people departed. Stepping to his own men, Garrovick breathed a sigh of relief. “Gentlemen, exceptional work over the last few days. I couldn’t have done this without you. I want you to know that you’ve all earned an extended shore leave anywhere you want to go in this sector. And that’s not from Starfleet Command. This is strictly from me, and completely off the books. Go where you like, and take as long as you need to get yourselves rested.”

“What about you, sir?” Riddle asked.

“And what about the *Republic*?” Zane Deimos asked as quickly.

“We’ll get by,” Stephen said with a wink. “*Republic* needs to call on Starbase 5 for our own repairs, and I’ve got something to deliver to Admiral Balkwill.” He motioned toward the remaining medal on the tray.

“Danny?” Kirk asked in a downcast tone, which drew similar looks from the other officers.

“Posthumously, unfortunately. It’ll need to be delivered to his father.”

Kirk nodded, then looked to Robert, Phill, Deimos, Waack, and finally back to Garrovick. "Sir, with your permission, I want to request a stay on my leave. That is, I'd like to accompany you to Starbase 5. I want to be there when you present that to Admiral Balkwill."

Garrovick mulled the idea over in his mind. "Jim, normally that's the duty of a commanding officer. It's a very serious obligation."

"Yes, sir," Kirk said sternly. "I'm very aware of that."

Stephen pondered it for moment, pursing his lips as the scenario played out in his mind. "In this case, I'll make the exception. After all, it was your life he saved. I think it'd be only fitting if you were the one to present this to his father. Danny was your friend, and I think that carries more weight than any captain might wield."

"Thank you, sir."

Nodding, Stephen addressed his officers. "The *Republic* will be departing in forty-eight hours for Starbase 5. Until then, you're all off duty. The time is yours, gentlemen. Make the most of it." And with that, he turned to leave the space.

"What about you, sir?" Phill Harris asked. "Up for a drink?"

"Sorry, Phill. I've got a dinner engagement, and I don't plan on taking a single minute of it for granted."

As the doors closed behind him, Zane leaned toward Michael Waack. "Where do you think he's headed?"

"Sounds like a hot date, if you ask me."

"What about you, Jim?" Robert asked. "Any plans?"

Kirk found himself smiling for what felt the first time in days. "I say we find the nearest bar and drink a toast to Danny Balkwill. My treat."

"Nonsense, Lieutenant," Harris said as he put a hand on Jim's shoulder. "I outrank you. That means the drinks are on me."

With a smile, Kirk nodded. "Yes, sir." Stepping over to the tray, Kirk retrieved Danny's medal and slipped it into his pocket. "I'll escort our honored guest myself. Let's go."

And with a renewed sense of optimism, the officers of the USS *Republic* departed the hall, eager to get their first taste of peace in four years.