



A KICKSTARTER FUNDED ORIGINAL SERIES  
BY THE FANS, FOR THE FANS

# STAR TREK

## THE ROMULAN WAR

# 1

WRITTEN BY STEPHEN FENDER & EDITED BY LYNDA DIETZ  
BASED ON THE TELEVISION  
SERIES CREATED BY GENE RODDENBERRY

# ***STAR TREK***

## **THE ROMULAN WAR**

### **Volume I**

A novel by

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Edited by

**Lynda Dietz**

Published by

***JRP***

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# Star Trek: The Romulan War, Volume 1

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# Chapter 1

February 2151

Stardate 15102.5

The moment the shuttle's landing pads made contact with the surface of Romulus, a side hatch slid open, allowing an unwelcome wave of heat to bathe the lone occupant standing in the now-open doorway. Admiral Jeldan, recently promoted to supreme commander of the Romulan Navy, winced at the uncomfortable onrush, but displayed no other displeasure at both having been pulled from his command ship, now in low orbit above the capital city of D'Sivas, nor the litany of responsibilities his new post entailed. His dislike of politics was second only to his general loathing of politicians, an entire assembly of which waited his pending arrival. But it was not the way of a Romulan to refuse to serve when they were called to do so, especially when the new praetor was the one making the request. And like any honorable Romulan, Jeldan had accepted his situation with all the respect the council and the senate deserved. All that was required of him now was the formality of the official ceremony. His uniform, decorated with a multitude of awards representing a lifetime of service in the Romulan Empire, had never felt as heavy as it did this blistering day.

Stepping down from the shuttle, the fleet admiral was greeted by no less than twenty centurions lining the pathway between the craft and the entrance to the stadium-like Imperial Hall. As if acting with one mind, the procession raised their right fists to their left breasts in salute, arms held at perfect angles to the sweltering surface beneath their feet. Returning the salute, the admiral sidestepped to the officer on his right—his most valued and trusted first officer.

"Subcommander Nilor, it is pleasing to see you here at this event."

Nilor's eyes, continuing to stare off into the distance, did not meet the admiral's. "My commander sent for me."

"It was not an order, my old friend. It was a request."

"When it comes from the supreme admiral of the fleet, there is no difference between the two."

If Nilor had been the only officer present, Jeldan would have offered his lifelong friend a warm smile, and perhaps even a gentle hand would have been placed on his shoulder as a sign of deep friendship. But this was not the case, and the two officers who'd committed their lives to the service of the empire knew their places well. "Of course, Subcommander," Jeldan replied. "You will accompany me to the Imperial Hall?"

Nilor offered a second salute, followed by a sharp nod. "Sir."

Leaving the honor guard behind, the two officers made their way toward the great doors of the Imperial Senate. On each of the immense wooden surfaces were engraved reliefs of the two great heroes of Romulan culture—the grand statesman L'Deus on the left, with the legendary female explorer S'Tanet on the right. To the left of the doors stood the twelve-meter-tall statue of L'Deus himself, in one hand holding the Great Paper known as the D'Vatta—the document which centuries ago banded together the founding city-states into the Romulan Empire—and his other hand held aloft, pointing the way to the Road to the Stars and the destiny of the Romulan people: the Romulan Way.

Admiral Jeldan, like countless others who had passed this monolith, stopped to regard the words inscribed beneath the ancient statue.

*"We must join together or fail. We cannot reach our home, our destiny, by fighting amongst ourselves. We are one. We must be one. Let us act as one. To act any other way is to deny our children their right to the stars that are theirs."*

From childhood, it was the duty of all Romulans to memorize the inscription, and Jeldan had been no exception. The words were etched into the very core of his soul as if they had been there since his conception. They were as much a part of him as any of his physical body. Bestowing the statue a final moment of silent respect, he turned back to the great doors and the carving of S'Tanet—the first Romulan to leave their homeworld and set foot on another, that of

their sister planet, Remus. It was she who'd placed the first paving stones on the road to the stars, the route that would lead them to the destiny set before them by those who had planted their race on Romulus centuries ago—their Great Brothers.

And it had been a calling to the stars that the admiral had fully embraced, taking the words of L'Deus and the courage of S'Tanet with him into each conquest he'd claimed for the Romulan Empire. *How many worlds had it been? Twenty? Thirty?* Jeldan had lost count. And now he would be tasked with overseeing the future construction of that ethereal road, never again to be the explorer or the conqueror, never again to taste the sweet air of alien worlds, or revel in the glories of a new adversary. Those were to be the accolades of other commanders. The new praetor would surely see to that.

In a brief flash, the memories of the worlds he'd integrated into the empire raced through his mind. Too rapid to take in all at once, he tried to slow down the memories of the past, hoping with futility that in this brief moment he could somehow alter the events that had brought him here. But all too swiftly the doors to the Imperial Senate slid slowly open, inexorably drawing the admiral and his first officer inside like some great sea creature about feed. Taking in a deep breath to clear his mind, Jeldan turned and nodded somberly to Subcommander Nilor at his side. "It is time."

Much to the fleet admiral's delight, the promotion ceremony was pleasantly short. After a brief speech by Praetor D'Varu, in which was recounted the admiral's long list of achievements, Admiral Jeldan had replied by pledging a renewed loyalty to the Romulan people. After a brief round of applause, the assembled senators from throughout the empire took advantage of the moment and began to discuss the affairs of their people.

To Jeldan, however, each discussion was little more than self-serving arguments thrown back and forth across the circular room while Praetor D'Varu looked on quietly from his throne, his black eyes fixing sternly on each representative as they took their turn to speak.

Praetor D'Varu had come to power only a short time ago, during a coup that Admiral Jeldan had become aware of two months prior to this day. The preceding regime had become—in many Romulans'

eyes—weak and complacent with regard to the expansion of the empire. Resources, scarce on Romulus and only slightly more abundant on Remus, were in high demand by the people. Food shortages in several major provinces had led to small revolts that, while quickly and quietly quelled, had said much more than the former praetor had wanted heard: his policies were ineffectual, meaning his days in office were numbered.

The overthrow had come quickly during a particularly cold night. Though Admiral Jeldan was unaware of the minor details of it, he knew of several powerful senators who had backed D'Varu—the now-former grand senator of the city-state Kanassarum—considered by many to be the right hand of the former praetor himself. Many voices in the old council had been forever silenced that night, in what was now quietly described as the Coming of the New Dawn. And, as swiftly as D'Varu had taken control, he had summoned Jeldan and a large portion of the Romulan Navy back to the homeworld. As for himself, Jeldan knew almost nothing of the new praetor except that he favored expansionism. Nor did Jeldan understand why he had been chosen among his peers for this highly coveted position. But Jeldan was a loyal officer. It was not his place to question their leader, whoever that might be today or tomorrow. His life was to serve the people, and serve he would.

“For far too long have those on Romulus been hoarding supplies, and you, Senator Sebib, are no exception!”

Those heated words, launched at Senator Sebib of Porta from the senator representing the farming community of Adrennan on Remus, drew Jeldan from his musings. Whether this was a quip at Sebib's abnormal girth or not, the effect was the same. Sebib's round face turned sour as he scowled at the Reman.

“How dare you accuse the province of Porta of hoarding! If anyone here is guilty of needlessly stockpiling goods, it is you! Indeed, your own vast storage compartments of dilithium and platinum are well documented!”

But the Reman senator, whose name eluded Jeldan, was unfazed. “And we have made those deposits open to all who are in need.”

"But only when such generosity suits the timing of *your* choosing," an unseen senator shouted in response, garnering a round of grunts from several others in the council.

"Senators, please," Praetor D'Varu implored calmly as he stepped down from his dais. *When had he stood up?* The quarreling senators, equally embarrassed at their failure to notice that the praetor had risen from his throne, quickly silenced and sat. When all was quiet, D'Varu's voice lowered even further. "Now, that's much better, I think."

Jeldan watched as the tall, muscular Romulan glided much more effortlessly than his bulk should have allowed. When he'd reached the circular floor of the chamber, Praetor D'Varu turned, taking in each of the hundred faces of the Imperial Senate bearing down on him with silent regard. His eyes locked with Jeldan's and, for a moment, the admiral could almost feel the leader of the Romulan people touching his mind, sifting it, as if scanning it for signs of disloyalty. But the moment faded as the praetor's gaze moved inexorably to his next target.

"The time for these debates has come to an end. It is time that we close the book on the old ways, and usher in a new era for the Romulan Empire. Long have we been squabbling amongst ourselves for the meager resources we contain. Long have we had to make do with the scraps left to us by the former administration, and long have we endured those deprivations. And I tell you now . . . I will stand for this no longer."

In his periphery, Jeldan could see dozens of senators nod in agreement. Others were motionless, hanging on what D'Varu would say next. Others appeared to be taking mental notes—both those who would later praise the leader's words, and those who would later dissect them and redefine every subtle nuance for their own political gains.

"I will bring purpose back to the people," D'Varu continued. "I will make sure that the hungry are fed, that the needs for shelter are met, that those dying in the streets and in our colonies far and wide have the resources with which to combat the most basic of ailments that are—even as we speak—bringing our brothers and sisters to their knees with infirmity. We will once again be the mighty empire

envisioned by our Great Brothers, and the Road to the Stars will be paved in wonders beyond your wildest dreams.”

To this, even more senators nodded, and when a few began to applaud, they were quickly joined by many more, until almost the entire assembly was on their feet . . . Jeldan included. Minutes later, when the noise had quieted, they once again took their seats. But in that brief moment of silence punctuated only by the fluttering of heavy diplomatic robes, one voice was heard across the vast hall.

“And how, Praetor, will you accomplish such a monumental feat?”

Jeldan and the others turned their attention toward the voice. Jeldan knew the face well, as the two had spoken on many occasions in the past. It was Grand Senator Orris of Bisciae, the capital of Remus and the headquarters of the Romulan Imperial Navy.

“Senator Orris,” Praetor D’Varu said with satisfaction, “I thought you of all people might want to know that very thing. After all, you were highly vocal in your . . . *opinions* of the previous administration.”

Orris, perhaps twice D’Varu’s age, had been a grand senator for the last two decades, and a regional senator for many years before that. Though not the most senior member of the council, his opinions were often shared by many in the navy, so they tended to carry far more weight than those of many of his contemporaries.

“I am a proud servant of the people, Praetor,” Orris said with a subtle bow of his head. “As such, I know they have many weights upon them that are not easily lifted.”

“And you doubt my sincerity?” D’Varu’s tone lacked menace, but the connotation behind the words could hardly be described as anything but.

“I merely wish a more detailed explanation of your proposal, Praetor. No disrespect intended, of course.”

D’Varu smiled, as a sea serpent might before it devoured its prey. “And you shall have it, Senator.” He then did another turn about the assembly. “You all shall. I have every intention of expanding our borders, and thus our holdings in this quadrant.”

“And where will we go?” Orris asked.

“Coreward, of course,” the praetor replied as if the answer should have been obvious to all. “Reports have recently come in from Tal

Shiar operatives indicating that the Klingon menace is threatening our holdings in that area. We will not stand for this. So not only will we secure our installations there, we will continue with a colonization effort into that region and beyond."

*The Tal Shiar.* Admiral Jeldan had heard of them as well. The new "internal intelligence division" set up by D'Varu not long after he'd assumed control. It was a highly secretive group, made up of several internal and external civilian and military organizations prior to the Coming of the New Dawn. Now coalesced under one umbrella, the Tal Shiar was the all-seeing, all-knowing intelligence arm of the new government. That they had found something so quickly gave them much credit, but trust was earned, not given away, and Jeldan had yet to trust any spy he'd ever come in contact with.

"Surely we don't have enough forces to wage a prolonged campaign against the Klingons," another senator objected.

Indeed they didn't, Jeldan mused. The Romulan fleet, like much of the empire, was low on manpower and materials. In order to enact the praetor's new initiatives, a great many vessels would need to be shifted from other, less vital areas. Workable, it nonetheless would leave a great deal of their holdings unprotected.

"We cannot sit idly by while our most distant forces are harassed, ladies and gentlemen," D'Varu again offered reassuringly. "Nor can we continue with our expansion toward the outer rim. We've all but exhausted our efforts in that direction with very little to show for our troubles. No . . . If the Klingons are in a position to intimidate our outlying systems, then they are in possession of resources we must have. And have them we will."

"Then we will move to vote on the measure," Senator Orris announced from across the room, gathering several voices of approval.

But Jeldan already knew such debate would be futile. In fact, the admiral had been contacted no less than a month ago, ordered to divert several of his most powerful warships coreward. At the time, he'd had no idea why such a move was necessary, but the order had come from the new praetor himself. D'Varu, it seemed, would not wait for popular opinion on his initiatives before he acted. A vote in the negative would be quickly vetoed, overpowered by the weight of



the praetor's power—or the skillful use of some outdated clause written into their laws decades or centuries ago.

"There will be no vote, senators," D'Varu replied calmly. "The answer is obvious. We must attack. I have already diverted a small taskforce of warships to shore up our border installations, namely the planet Cheron. Once their mission is complete, several colonial ships will depart from there and they, in turn, will allow us to take root on newly conquered worlds . . . another stepping stone on our Road to the Stars, all thanks to Klingon aggressiveness." Supremely satisfied with his plans, the praetor stepped back to the dais and sat on his throne. "All we need do now is sit back and await our commanders' success reports."

\* \* \*

May 2151

Stardate 15105.17

"We're ready to begin the transporter cycle, Commander. Where should we put the debris?"

Subcommander Tisil, her tall, lean form hunched over the engineering display, paid little attention to the centurion at her side. Her thoughts were elsewhere: on the strange vessel she and a fellow warbird commander had just destroyed, and on the small amount of damage their warbird had incurred in the process. The starboard nacelle was damaged, as was the accompanying engine module. Both were still operational, but at reduced power. The other Romulan vessel—perched 100 kilometers off Tisil's starboard beam—was undamaged.

"Commander?" the centurion repeated, albeit more cautiously this time. It was unwise to interrupt the subcommander when her attentions were in a different place, as the last centurion who'd been reduced a step in rank for doing so would agree.

"Yes, Centurion," Tisil said as she continued to stare into the scope, adjusting a small dial on the side to better bring the digital image into

focus. "You were heard. Put the fragments in the shuttlebay. See to it personally that they are not disturbed in any way. I will attend them shortly."

"Yes, Commander," the young officer replied with a sharp salute, and then was gone.

The more Tisil looked at the image, the more puzzled she became. Over the last several weeks, her group had been tracking the unknown target as it haphazardly made its way back and forth between several star systems in adjacent sectors. It would leave one for another, perhaps go to a third, sometimes double back and sometimes do nothing. In her many years as a ship commander, and in her handful of dealings with the Klingons, she'd never seen such behavior before.

Puzzling.

It'd been quite a feat of subterfuge to get close enough to the strange vessel for a visual scan. Hiding behind a small moon had been Tisil's idea, one that she was quite proud of. Not only did it protect her vessel from the target's scanners, it allowed her to choose the moment where she would come out of hiding to perform her own examinations. The second warbird acted as bait, drawing the strange vessel off course at one point and giving Tisil the opportunity she needed to get a detailed scan without being detected. It was those reports she was going over now.

Even at extreme range, she could not say for certain that it was a Klingon ship. Unless their long-hated stellar neighbors had drastically changed their manufacturing techniques in recent years—which she was almost certain they had not—the design was completely foreign to her. The forward half of the ship was disc-shaped and raised slightly in the center. Flanking this raised area, two long protuberances jutted aft, the ends of those holding what was likely the pylons for the vessel's warp drive. Whoever had designed and commissioned such a vessel had placed little to no thought of space warfare behind it—a fact proven when the strange vessel attempted to engage what should have been an obviously superior opponent.

The battle had lasted only a few minutes. It had started with the target straying too close to the other warbird. Since she had no intentions of letting the enemy report back to the Klingon high

command, Tisil had authorized the patrolling warbird's captain to open fire on the delicate little vessel. The first plasma bolts had damaged both its shields and power core simultaneously. The little ship fought back—bravely, Tisil recalled, but still in utter futility. The stranger was squarely outclassed on all fronts.

Signaling the other warbird, Tisil had conveyed her intentions to destroy the target herself. After all, the mission *was* hers to command, and it would not look well on her record to let another take the glory of the kill. The other warbird had done well in damaging the vessel, and Tisil had every intention of giving its commander proper recognition in her log entry to fleet command.

As Tisil moved her warship closer, the wounded vessel let out what was to be its final cry of anger. A spray of laser blasts struck Tisil's shields, and some form of magnetically accelerated rounds were fired. It'd been those final two which had damaged her vessel to its current state. Wanting to waste no more time on the hapless vessel, she'd ordered a full barrage of plasma cannons and particle beams. The target vessel broke apart in seconds, exploding moments later in a somewhat lackluster detonation. Not long after, she'd ordered debris taken aboard for study.

Flipping down the sensor screen, Subcommander Tisil slipped from the bridge and down the three flights of steps that would take her to the shuttle deck. Entering through the small air lock, she was greeted by the centurion she'd ordered there a few minutes before. Several large sections, perhaps eight or nine meters in length and half as high, were being positioned in a grid that had been set up on the bay floor. Each grid had a number associated with it, undoubtedly to be used to catalog the pieces they now contained. Some pieces were cylindrical, others were masses of twisted cabling and metal. In the far corner, a section of interior corridor was noted, complete with what looked like a nonfunctioning computer access terminal. Surely it would be a prize worthy of some recognition.

"Centurion," Tisil said to young officer, "have you seen anything of major interest being brought in?"

"I believe so, Commander. Come and look at this."

The two stepped around several sections of conduit and burned and blackened hull plating, ending up on the far side of the debris field. The centurion stopped at the side of a large piece of exterior hull plating with some form of markings made on its surface.

"Serial numbers?" Tisil asked as she ran a delicate but powerful hand over the scorched and warped surface.

"We believe so, Commander. Possibly the hull identification number."

Tisil hummed in contemplation as she continued rubbing the surface of the symbols, trying to fathom their meaning. "Klingons aren't known to make such identification openly." The first was a series of three lines, two vertical and one diagonal, connecting the top of the first to the bottom of the second. The second symbol consisted of two opposing diagonal lines crossing over one another. There was a small horizontal line next, followed by an ovoid, and then another ovoid . . . except that the lower left portion of the final ovoid had been cut out and moved so it could be joined to the other side of the shape, practically bisecting it.

*Curious.* "We will need to get these fragments back to our outpost in the Milos system," Tisil said, rubbing the fragment one final time before turning back to the centurion. "You will see to it that each of these specimens is properly scanned and catalogued prior to our arrival. I will want to upload these into the base computer for further analysis."

"Yes, Commander," the centurion said with a raised salute.

"Then I will leave you to it." As she turned abruptly, the sounds of her thick-heeled boots tapping the metal deck were the only noise in the cavernous compartment.

## Chapter 2

August 2151

Stardate 15108.10

United Earth Space Probe Agency Headquarters, San Francisco, Earth

"Admiral Walton?" the female voice chimed through the desktop intercom, breaking Rom from his study of the ship schematics he was poring over.

"Yes, Ruth," he replied before taking a sip of his morning tea.

"Sir, Commodore Hirst has arrived and is waiting to see you."

"Send him in, please." A moment later, the dark-haired commodore stepped into the fleet commander's office. His uniform, like Rom's, was of the new design—black pants and boots, black fitted jacket with command emblem patches on each shoulder, and golden undershirt. Walton had approved the change only a month before, removing the outmoded jumpsuits and similar types from use in favor of the more comfortable and professional attire. The admiral's jacket, which he'd removed for the sake of casualness, was draped on the chair behind him. As Commodore Hirst entered, however, Walton stood and slipped it back on.

"Martin," the admiral said, offering his friend a hand when it was free. "It's good to see you back in San Francisco."

Hirst took the hand and shook it. "Thank you, sir. It's good to be home again."

"And how are things progressing in Paris?"

Hirst smiled weakly, then reached to scratch an itch at the base of his neck. "As well as could be expected, sir. There's more delegates and ambassadors there than you can shake a stick at. I've never seen so many aliens in one place in my life. You wouldn't believe the logistical nightmare it's been trying to ensure everyone's safety. To

be honest, I was happy to be called back to headquarters, even if it's only for a few days."

Walton smiled, then offered the commodore a chair on the opposite side of the desk. Gliding back into his own, he reached for his tea once more. "Still, there isn't a better officer I could think of to head up our new fleet intelligence arm."

"For now," Martin said with another smile. "Assuming everything that the diplomats are working toward comes together without a hitch."

"Yes," Walton smiled thinly. "The *Federation*."

The sarcasm of the admiral's tone wasn't lost on the commodore. "You don't approve, sir?"

Walton sat in silent contemplation for a moment, but then dismissed the thoughts with a wave of his hand. "Oh, I like it just fine, Marty. It's just that . . . well, it's hard enough to protect Terran assets as it is. The United Earth government is already pressed for resources, and now we're going to introduce our technology and internal organizations to a litany of new cultures for practically the first time. We'll be melding our culture with theirs on worlds light-years away." He then laughed at the irony of Martin's earlier statement. "If you think logistics are bad now, wait until you have to submit a requisition for personnel or supplies to an Andorian two parsecs away. Those people are sticklers for the most minute details."

Commodore Hirst smiled as he contemplated the idea. "Well, it's going to happen sooner than most would like. Once they're finished here on Earth, the delegation will move to the conference on the planet Babel. After that, it'll all be done. I have to say, I'm grateful for it. We could use the help out in the border regions."

Babel—the code name for the still highly classified location of the conference. Even many in fleet command didn't know its true name. The two men present knew it, and even after their years of service and friendship, Hirst was determined to keep it that way. Admiral Walton smiled with approval. "By that I assume you've read the latest revision from the delegates?"

Martin nodded. "If we can consolidate all the respective members' starfaring fleets into a single entity, we'd be able to increase our

scientific capabilities tenfold. And that's just from the Vulcan perspective."

"They have the knowledge and we have the ships," Walton said as he gazed into his lukewarm cup.

"And then there's the Alpha Centaurians and their shipbuilding capabilities."

"And," Walton countered, "the Andorians with their advanced weapon technology."

Hirst furrowed his brow, then leaned back into his chair. "The idea of heavily arming starships has never been a palatable one to me. But we need our captains to be able to defend themselves if necessary."

"And that offensive technology would be available to all the founding members, and anyone else the council wants to let join."

Hirst could read between the lines. "You think one of the founders could turn on us . . . use that new technology against us?"

Walton gave a slight shrug. "The only ones that *really* concern me, Marty, are the Orions. Ever since the plague on Pluto, there's been a lot of opposition in fleet command about the Orions joining the new coalition."

"Even after two years?"

"Over 200 people were killed, Commodore," Walton said as he gazed into Hirst's eyes. "An entire research station had to be abandoned . . . years of research lost . . . not to mention the combined experience of the scientists who died. All because an Orion trader thought he'd be sneaky and bring an unchecked trinket to the station without first going through decontamination. And the results were catastrophic." Sighing, he turned to look out the window to the sprawling park below. "Many in the admiralty believe this kind of mentality to be rampant amongst the Orions. As such, they have no place in the new government."

"I take it you're one of them?"

A wordless nod. "But that's not for the Space Probe Agency to decide. The politicians make the policy, Commodore. We just follow it." He swiveled his chair back in Hirst's direction. "But until that happens and we're all one big fleet, it's our job . . . yours and mine . . . to ensure the protection of United Earth assets and personnel both

here and abroad. Period. That means keeping a watchful eye on not only the Orions, but the Andorians . . . the Tellarites . . . and anyone else foolhardy enough to try something stupid and risk the lives of Earth citizens."

"Absolutely, sir."

Walton smiled, stood, and moved over to the large window overlooking the length of Golden Gate Park lying several stories below. "Now, I know you've been up to your neck in diplomatic affairs, Marty, so I'm sure you wouldn't mind putting all that nonsense aside for a few minutes. I really need to know what's going on out in the frontier."

"Yes, sir," Hirst said, thankful the conversation was moving away from politics. "But I'm afraid I don't have much. Reports are taking a long time to filter down. In fact, you may know just as much as I do at this point."

Walton nodded toward the view. "Let's hear it anyway, Marty."

Reaching into his jacket, the commodore withdrew a small computer tablet and switched it on, a list of bullet points appearing on the screen. The commodore wished it was shorter, and specifically without the very last item. "A week ago we lost two more transports out near the frontier."

"That makes five so far in the last month."

"Yes, sir. We still don't know who to hold accountable at this point. No trace of the missing vessels has been found."

"Orions?" the admiral asked over his shoulder.

Hirst shrugged at the implication. "Possibly. That would at least explain why we've been unable to locate any debris."

"You think they're hijacking the freighters for their cargo, then?"

"It's a very distinct possibility. But we have no hard facts."

"Hmm," Rom murmured and then turned back to the window. "And the council wants to make them members of the new Federation as well."

"Yes, sir. Not the greatest idea I've heard, but if we can get them to accept the new laws and regulations, it'd be a heck of lot easier to police their activities."



"I have my doubts, Commodore, that they will both accept our laws and willingly subject themselves to any authority other than their own cartels."

"Yes, sir."

"Anything else?"

"We've also lost contact with one of our smaller settlements a few sectors from where the transports were last seen."

"Who?"

"Research Outpost Gamma, Kaph-42 system."

"Kaph-42," Walton said, an eyebrow cocked in surprise. "Pretty far from Orion space. How long have they been out of contact?"

"A little over a week since their last report. Not alarming, but definitely unusual. Add to the fact we've lost several ships in adjacent sectors and you can see my concern. Due to their distance from the nearest outpost, I've dispatched a frigate to investigate. She's not the most heavily armed, but certainly the fastest one available. We should hear something within the next few days."

"And our other supply ships in the area have been unmolested?"

"So far, but I think we should play it safe. I'd like to assign warships to help protect our assets in the Kaph area during runs that will take them close to the edge of controlled space. Aside from protection, they've got the best sensors for detecting and reporting anything they come in contact with."

"Cruisers?" Walton asked with a raised eyebrow.

Hirst nodded as he rocked gently in the forgiving chair. "*Daedalus* class, at least. Certainly not the . . ." he paused, but then continued cautiously. "Well, not the *NX* class, anyway."

News of the shortcomings of those experimental ships had steadily increased as of late, and Admiral Walton himself had begun to have serious misgivings about their future in the fleet. To be sure, some of their technology was quite ingenious, with the warp five engine being the most promising. But their design did have numerous inherent flaws, ones that were now beginning to rear up the farther they were pushed into unexplored territories. A few had been damaged in what should have been very minor scuffles, with all of them requiring

lengthy yard periods of repairs due to their complexity. And then there was the *Avenger*.

"Of course you're right, Marty." Walton nodded. "It seems we can no longer afford the luxury of such experimental projects continuing to sap our currently strained resources."

"Yes, sir. For now, until we can get more ships and personnel, I'd propose we move the *NX*s into a reserve capacity, away from the outer system and closer to Earth or Vulcan space. We've got more than enough *Daedalus*-class ships in our inventory we could reactivate, and their large size gives them the ability to be upgraded with more powerful sensors and a greater array of defensive capabilities."

"It may be better to simply decommission the *NX* as a group," he said pensively. "But I won't be hasty. Let's start by simply reassigning them. And how soon could the upgraded *Daedalus* ships be ready?"

"The most conservative estimates are six months, with a few showing ten to twelve months, given our current facilities. However, if we were to pull some strings with the Andorians and use their superior shipyards, we could cut those estimates in half."

"I'll put in a call to the president's office and see what I can do before they depart for Babel. I know it's short notice, but I think she'll agree with your proposal, given our current situation on the frontier. For now, we can upgrade the ships already in reserve at the Proxima yards." He then turned again to the view of the park below. "Is there anything else?"

Hirst looked to his notes, wishing he had better news. "As of yesterday, we've still not heard anything from the *Avenger*, sir."

"That's put her several weeks overdue," the admiral replied quietly.

"Yes, sir. I'm sorry. We're doing everything we can."

Walton nodded. "I know you are, Marty. I know," he said over his shoulder, then turned back to the view. His thoughts were first of his oldest niece—the captain of the *NX*-class ship, Erika Donaldson—but were just as quickly replaced by that of her mother Jennifer, his eldest sister. He knew he'd have to relay the same news to her. "Erika is a more than capable commander," he said after a long silence, "but things like this happen in space. There are so many great unknowns out there."

"Yes, sir," Commodore Hirst offered apologetically. "We've got two more cruisers in the area, with three more vessels at Outpost 4. I could ..."

"No, Commodore. That won't be necessary. Our fleet is already spread thin as it is. To commit more vessels to the search would have little effect. Who's currently leading the search effort?"

"The cruiser *Sao Paulo*, sir. Captain Brian Webber's ship."

Walton knew the ship, but not the man. He made a mental note to look up his service record later. "He has your full confidence?"

"Yes, sir. That and more. If the *Avenger* is out there, Webber will find it."

\* \* \*

December 2151

Stardate 15112.26

"Captain's log: unchanged. The *Sao Paulo* remains on course to Sector 21-J, and there's still no sign of the *Avenger* or her crew. We're passing near what appears to be a subspace disturbance which is causing inconsistencies in our sensor reports. However, due to those malfunctions, we can't determine the exact nature of the disturbance or how long our systems will be affected. First Officer Tlustos reported a sensor contact with an unknown vessel approximately half a parsec from our location, but the sensor image quickly faded, only to return a few moments later. Is it the *Avenger*, or just the disturbance out there playing tricks on our equipment? All attempts at communication with the object have met with no reply."

Captain Brian Webber leaned back in his chair, first glancing at the stars streaming past on the main view screen, then over to his second in command, Lieutenant Commander Reinhard Tlustos manning the science station. "Status of the unknown vessel?"

"It's just sitting there," the science officer responded as he continued to look to the readout display. "Still nothing more definitive than that."

"Communications?" Webber asked as he turned fully to his left.

Lieutenant Dan Balkwill was looking up at the subspace monitor above his console while simultaneously turning the gain knob on his panel, too engrossed in what he was doing to respond to Webber's request.

"Lieutenant Balkwill?" the captain asked a bit louder, so much so that both the helm and navigation officers turned in unison toward the communications station.

"I think . . . I think I'm getting something."

Webber felt the muscles in his legs tighten, as if they knew before he did that he was going to leap from the chair. Stepping over to the metal railing encircling the bridge's upper level, he gripped it gently, his body on full alert. "Is it the *Avenger*?"

But Balkwill was back to studying the display. Webber looked up at the screen above the science console, and seeing a number of high frequency signals converge, surmised that the lieutenant was having difficulty punching a hole through the disturbance off their starboard quarter. Snapping his fingers, Webber didn't need to turn to know that he'd gotten his first officer's attention. "Tlustos, can you increase transmitter power?"

"Negative, sir. The circuits are already at their maximum capacity. Any more amperage and the relays will fuse for sure."

*Damn.* The *Sao Paulo* was one of the newest *Hercules*-class ships in the fleet, an enlarged and improved sister ship to the older *NX* class of vessels. She contained all her predecessor's benefits with none of their weaknesses, and even with her advanced sensor palette, was still unable to open a communication channel through a simple spatial disturbance. *Come on! Let it be the Avenger.*

"Something coming in now, sir," Balkwill said as he cupped a hand over the receiver in his ear. "A message . . ."

"Specifics?" Webber asked as he gripped the railing tighter.

"An emergency . . .?" Balkwill said quietly, almost to himself. "Something about an explosion."

Webber now had his chest against the railing, as if the proximity to Balkwill alone would cause the message to leap into his own ear.

"Confirmed!" Balkwill shouted, then turned to the captain. "United Earth vessel is under attack, sir! They're sending out a general distress call."

"Mr. Eckhoff," Webber barked as he snapped his head toward the helmsman. "Set a course for that vessel. Warp five!"

"No way we can go to maximum speed with that anomaly so close," Chief Engineer Jason Genser said from the station beside the main viewer. "It's already playing havoc with the warp coils. A warp envelope of that magnitude will throw the engines completely off balance."

"And then we'll be the ones send out the distress signal," Webber said in frustration. "Recommended speed?"

Jason didn't even bat an eyelash. "Warp three, and not a microjoule more."

"Can we divert power to the defensive systems?"

"Negative. Not without further reducing our speed."

The thought of racing into combat with an unknown enemy while both the shields and weapons were offline was far from appealing. But he needed to get his squadron of ships there, and quickly, before the *Avenger* or whatever vessel was out there was destroyed. "Balkwill, hail Captain Thompson on the *Invictus*. Inform him you've picked up a United Earth distress signal. Advise him to take a defensive position 500 kilometers above and astern of us and follow us in."

"Aye, sir."

"Helm, get us there. Warp three."

The closer the *Sao Paulo* got to the unnamed vessel in distress, the more pronounced the subspace distortion was becoming. What had begun as minor fluctuations in the ship's internal systems was now manifesting itself in waves of disturbance that were rocking the cruiser like it was a bottle adrift on the ocean. The frigate *Invictus* was still astern, but had fallen farther back, the victim of a rather pronounced wave that caused her to momentarily reduce speed to warp two. Whatever was out there waiting for Webber and his crew, he'd now have to face it alone for at least twenty minutes.

"Dan, anything more from the Earth vessel?"

"Negative, sir. All communications are down."

"A result of the spatial interference?" Captain Webber asked, daring to hope against the odds.

"Yes, sir. I believe so."

"Commander Tlustos, distance to target?"

"At present speed we'll arrive in two minutes."

"Recommend dropping to impulse, Captain," Genser called from the front of the bridge. "We're getting dangerously close to a warp imbalance."

Balling his fist, Brian let it softly land on the armrest of his command chair. "Understood. Helm, comply and drop to sublight velocity."

The ship lurched, rocking Webber and the rest slowly forward as the inertial dampeners acted quickly—but not rapidly enough—to compensate for the drastic reduction in speed.

"Can we divert power to defensive systems yet?"

"Aye," Genser said, then turn to nod at the helm officer.

"Charging laser capacitors now, sir," Doug Eckhoff said as he quickly pressed at the controls before him.

"Shields, Lieutenant?"

Lieutenant Eckhoff rapidly pressed the same sequence of controls twice in frustration. "Defensive screens are operating at only sixty percent, sir."

"Must be an overload somewhere," Genser said as he stepped out of his chair and headed for the port side turbo elevator. "Permission to leave the bridge, sir?"

"Do what you need to in order to get those screens up to maximum, Chief," the captain said, then dismissed the engineer with a thumb hooked toward the turbo elevator doors.

"Sensors clearing up slightly, sir."

Webber turned to Commander Tlustos, stepping from his chair and bounding to the upper level of the bridge. "What can you see?"

"Definitely an Earth-type vessel out there, sir. Two of them, in fact," the science officer said while peering into his display.

*Two? But the Avenger was supposed to be on patrol by herself.* "I need you to be more specific, Commander. I want type, hull designations, complements, status of life support, and what they served for lunch this afternoon, and I want it all now."

"Coming into visual range now."

"On screen."

"Switching," the science officer said, reached for a control, and turned to look at the enlarged image on the view screen.

Although at extreme range, the silhouettes of two Earth-type vessels were clearly visible on the monitor. Webber could see the long, cylindrical central hull, and the two warp pylons jutting from either side of it. Forward of the central hull, a command bubble was attached via a stubby neck. *Not the Avenger, but definitely a United Earth vessel. Possibly a transport.*

"Hull identification shows the closest vessel to be the *SS Amaretto*," Tlustos offered.

"And the distant one?"

"The *SS Pride of Jupiter*, Captain."

"What do the library computers have on them?"

Reinhard slipped back into his chair, switched on the two small monitors to his right, and entered the requested query into the keyboard. In the time it took to retrieve the information, the *Sao Paulo* had closed enough distance to get a crisp picture of the *Amaretto* on the screen. One of the warp nacelles had been ripped in two, and there were burnt and twisted hull plates along both port and starboard sides of the central hull.

"Database shows that the *Amaretto* and the *Pride of Jupiter*, both *Watt*-class commercial freighters, are owned and operated by the Leeper-Fell Universal Corporation of Earth. They're a logistics company, handling everything from foodstuffs to top-level government contracts dealing with the shipment of high-technology items."

The *Watt* class: a twenty-year-old design that was incapable of being upgraded beyond their second-generation warp propulsion system. Capable of carrying over 80,000 metric tons of cargo, they were often found in large numbers running between local star systems. That they had strayed so far from anything habitable was disturbing. "What are they doing out here on the frontier?" Webber asked the wrecked image of the vessel on the viewer, as much to his first officer as to himself.

"I can't say. Our ship's database doesn't have the specifics, and we're too far distant from the nearest Earth outpost to query the United Earth Information Net."

"Not that I could get through this subspace interference if I wanted to," Balkwill said from the communications station. "Sensors may work well enough, but communications are solidly out."

Chief Engineer Genser's voice came through the speakers over Webber's chair. "Bridge, this is engineering."

"Go ahead, Chief."

"Defensive screens should be up to 100 percent now."

"Lieutenant Eckhoff?"

The young helm officer looked briefly at his control, then turned and nodded. "Confirmed, sir."

"Well done, Chief. Care to tell me what the problem was?"

"Maybe later. I haven't got all the answers yet myself. I'll give you a full briefing when I do."

Webber studied the image of the damaged *Amaretto* for a moment longer, contemplating his next move. "Is there enough available power for a transporter beam?"

"Yes, but you'll have to lower the shields," Genser replied hesitantly. "And since I'm not sure exactly which circuits caused the prior malfunction, we may very well not get them back."

"Life signs?" Webber asked in a subdued voice to his first officer.

"Possibly."

Nodding, Webber turned back to the main viewer. "We'll have to chance it, Chief."

"Understood."

"Meet me in the transporter room in five minutes."

"Yes, sir," Genser replied before signing off.

"Dan, call down to ship's security. I want two officers in the transporter room, fully equipped for hostile action. And get the ship's doctor as well. When you're done, try and get a message over to the *Invictus* and tell them what's going on. Tie two cups to a string if you have to, but get Captain Thompson up to speed."

"Aye."

"You think whoever did this is still on board?" Tlustos asked from the science station.



"I don't know. But we need to do more than just sit around and wait for these subspace distortions to get worse. I want you to keep a close eye on those sensors. If there're any hostile vessels hiding out there, they may come back to finish what they started." He then turned to the helmsman. "Mr. Eckhoff, the ship is yours."

"Yes, sir."

## Chapter 3

When the boarding party from the *Sao Paulo* had finished the transporter materialization process, they'd breathed a collective sigh of relief. The transporter—not widely used for biological transport—was far from a trusted piece of equipment. Accidents during the beaming process were not uncommon, sometimes with benign results—sometimes disastrous. And with the subspace distortions beyond the hull growing worse, Captain Webber knew he was tempting fate by using the device.

"Is everyone all right?"

The party looked over themselves, then one another, each giving the captain a nod in turn. The ship's doctor, Lieutenant Commander Lisa Lyons, was the last to give her confirmation. She ran an unsteady hand through her dark hair before giving the captain a weak smile. A groaning sound from the overhead drew all eyes toward it, and it was then that Webber and his team noticed the state of the vessel.

They had materialized several compartments aft of the command center, in the central connecting structure located one deck above the engine room that joined the port and starboard cargo modules. Although gravity and life support were still functioning, a deep inhale from Webber confirmed that the air was thin. This was confirmed by Dr. Lyons a moment later.

"Moderate concentrations of carbon monoxide and carbon dioxide," she said while looking at her humming, beeping tricorder. "There's also trace particles of vaporized plastisteel and molybdenum."

"That's suggestive of a hull rupture nearby," Chief Engineer Genser said from behind the team. "I'll know more if I can get to the engine room."

Captain Webber agreed. "Go, but take a security officer with you."

"Captain, I wouldn't suggest we stay in this environment long," the doctor said before Genser turned to leave. "If the air quality gets much worse we could begin suffering from asphyxiation."

"Understood. Jason, make it quick. Take a few minutes and see if you can stabilize the life-support system while you're down there. If

you can't, get as much data as you can on the integrity of the vessel and meet us in the control room in ten minutes."

"Aye, sir," the engineer replied, then headed down an aft passageway with his security escort in tow.

"Any life readings, Doctor?"

Lisa looked to her palm-sized instrument once more, waving it around the dimly lit corridor in a full circle. "Strong readings in this direction," she said as she pointed the device down the path toward the vessel's control room.

"Berthing areas are in that direction as well, sir," the remaining security officer said.

"Let's go. We don't have much time."

Making their way down the corridor, the vessel continued to creak and moan in a slow, agonized fashion. Along the way, the team noted a number of half-open doors, each one an opening into a darkened compartment. One of them, the crew lounge, contained a number of bodies placed on top of the dining tables.

"They must have used this compartment for a makeshift infirmary," the doctor offered while examining a dead Tellarite.

"As I recall, this class has no sickbay," Webber said as he stood near another body—that of a dead human. The man's chest had been severely burned, the result of what looked like a console explosion.

Looking around the compartment once more, the doctor holstered her tricorder. "They all appear to have died as a result of severe trauma—consistent with the damage we've seen to the vessel."

Leaving the lounge, they made their way to the *Amaretto's* control center on the port side of the ship. The security officer entered first, his laser pistol at the ready. Giving the compartment a quick inspection, he motioned for the captain and the doctor to enter. The control center was shaped like a quadrilateral, with two joined consoles on the angles on the port side bulkhead, and two more on the aft bulkhead to the team's left. Incapacitated crewmen were manning three of the stations, with the forwardmost consoles a mess of burnt optics and blown-out monitors. On the forward wall hung a row of static-filled monitors above a transparent view port that took

up the majority of the wall. Two large cracks extended from the lower left corner as they raced one another to the top right.

"That view port isn't going to hold out," Webber said as he nodded toward the damaged window.

"These two are dead," the doctor said of the crewmen at the aft stations, then moved quickly to the remaining person. "This one's alive, but unconscious."

Looking over the slumped form at the console, Webber surmised that it was the *Amaretto's* helmsman. "Can you do anything for him here?"

Withdrawing her medical kit, Lisa held the gun-like hypo sprayer to the wounded man's shoulder and administered a sedative. "I can stabilize him, but we'll need to get him back to the *Sao Paulo* right away if there's going to be any chance of survival."

"Captain," the voice of Jason Genser called out a moment before he stepped through the open doorway. "Every main relay is fused, and the auxiliary controls are a pile of junk. Whatever damaged this vessel, it seems to have taken all the systems offline at the same moment."

"Did you find any more crewmen alive down there, Chief?"

"No, sir, but I did notice something odd."

"What is it?"

"It's the cargo holds. I made a cursory inspection on our way back up. They're still fully loaded."

"Maybe whoever did this didn't have time to unload the contents of the holds."

But Genser was unconvinced. "Everything I've found indicates this vessel was without power for nearly forty minutes before we arrived. That's more than enough time to get someone over here to plunder the holds. From the state of the magnetic locks on the containers, not one of them has been tampered with."

"You're suggesting that whoever did this wasn't after the cargo?"

Jason nodded. "It looks like that way, sir."

Lisa scanned the crewman, seeing with approval the sedative she'd administered had begun to take effect. "Then why attack a freighter? It doesn't make any sense."

"I agree, but we can't stay here to find out. We've got to get back to the *Sao Paulo* before the *Amaretto* breaks up entirely." Webber then turned to the cracked view port, deducing that the damage appeared to have gotten steadily worse in the last few moments. "Let's get out of here. Jason, grab the injured crewman. Security, I want you to secure the door to the control center once we're all out."

Back in the passageway, the two security officers pried the door to the control center closed, then quickly welded it shut with finely tuned beams from their sidearms. Unclipping his communicator, Webber attempted to raise the *Sao Paulo*, but was met with static. Trying in vain to tune the device, he was met with failure time and again. A series of structural groans from somewhere in the distance drew his attention from the device. There was a brief moment of silence, then the floor under their feet shuddered violently, threatening to knock them to the deck. Turning his head toward the control room, Webber and Genser could see that the recently welded door had begun to bow inward. *The view port must have given way.*

"That weld isn't going to hold for very long. Options, people!"

"The cargo pods," Genser replied quickly. "The starboard one is undamaged. They've got independent emergency life-support systems that function on battery power if they become detached from the vessel during crises."

"How long will that give us?" Dr. Lyons asked nervously from the captain's side.

"Longer than this ship is going to. Jason, lead the way."

Two minutes later the boarding team and the still-unconscious crewman from the control room were huddled in the already-cramped cargo hold. Containers were stacked up to the overhead in most places, but an elongated crate with nothing above it had provided just enough space for the team to curl up on. At the door controls, Genser sealed the hatch and turned on the cargo pod's emergency life support.

A T-shaped handle slowly slid from an alcove on the side of the panel, which Genser gripped with one hand, turning his head to speak over his shoulder. "Ready to detach, sir."

Putting a steadying arm around Dr. Lyons, Webber noted that the two security officers were holding fast to the unconscious man between them. "Do it, Chief. Detach!"

As he pulled down hard on the handle, the pod's artificial gravity was slow in response to the new configuration, and the team was tossed hard to forward as the small thrusters in the pod's docking clamps pushed it away from the dying *Amaretto*.

The bridge officers on the *Sao Paulo* watched the unfolding scene before them in horror. Without warning, the *Amaretto* cracked into a half-dozen pieces, spewing sparks and lesser pieces of debris in a hundred directions at the same moment. The fragments twisted and turned about one another, leisurely distancing themselves from one another in the process.

"My god," Lieutenant Doug Eckhoff breathed from the central command chair. "Are there any life signs in the wreckage?" he hurriedly asked the science officer.

"I still can't be certain," Tlustos said from his console. "However, there's only one large fragment that's still registering power readings."

"Large enough to hold survivors?"

Reinhard turned back to the small monitor, scanning the readouts intently. "It looks like it's one of the cargo modules."

"Transporters?" Eckhoff asked.

"Negative. The spatial disturbance outside would scatter any beam at this point. Besides, the object itself is too big for even the cargo transporter."

Eckhoff pivoted his chair toward the ship's executive officer. "Will it fit in the shuttlebay?"

"It should, but just barely. However, because the debris is in free flight, there's no way for the *Sao Paulo*'s computer to guide it into the bay."

Eckhoff nodded, then looked to the tumbling fragment on the screen. "Then we'll have to do it manually."

"Meaning what?" Tlustos chuckled. "You just going to back up and scoop it into the bay or something?"

Doug nodded. "That's exactly what I'm going to do."

"How?"

"Get us into position about 200 meters ahead of it. Depressurize the bay and guide the ship astern nice and slow. We envelope the thing," he said, using his hands to symbolize the doors. He then clapped them shut. "Then we close the doors and slowly pressurize the compartment. Easy."

"If that debris hits the side of the ship in the process, we won't be able to pressurize the bay or even close the doors. Not to mention the fact that that pod is already damaged, and is likely extremely fragile. It could all be for nothing."

"I'm willing to take that chance. If even one of our people is on that thing, we need to do everything in our power to get them back on board." Stepping up from the command chair, Eckhoff slipped into the helm console on the starboard side of the bridge. "I'll do the maneuvering myself. Just get the bay ready to take in the cargo module."

"Okay," Tlustos said with a shake of his head, "but for the record, I think this is a bad idea."

"If it doesn't work out you have my permission to tell me 'I told you so' until the cows come home."

Once the shuttlebay was pressurized, Lieutenant Eckhoff and the security team that'd been poised beyond the air lock rushed toward the cargo module. Opening the door, they were surprised to find the *Sao Paulo's* captain and the rest of the boarding team waiting inside. With assistance offered by one of the security officers, Dr. Lyons was the first out. Eckhoff noted that she appeared to be in shock.

"How . . . how did we get back on board?" she asked while standing unsteadily.

"With some ingenuity and some luck, Doctor," Doug said with a crooked smile.

"Well done, Lieutenant," Captain Webber said as he pulled himself out of the cargo container. "The ride in was a little bumpy, though."

Eckhoff nodded toward the aft end of the shuttlebay. Webber turned as well, noting a large gash in the starboard bulkhead.

"Sorry, sir. I didn't mean to scratch the paint. A wave of distortion hit us the moment after the ship enveloped the cargo pod."

Webber couldn't help but offer a similar smirk in return. "I'll make sure the service doesn't deduct it from your pay."

"Thank you, sir," Eckhoff replied with relief.

"We've got an injured crewman from the *Amaretto* in there. Let's get him to sickbay on the double."

"Aye, sir." Snapping his head around, Eckhoff motioned toward the emergency stretcher hanging on the forward bulkhead, which two of the armed security officers were quick to acquire. Minutes later, the group was rushing down the *Sao Paulo's* corridors toward the medical compartment.

Ten minutes later, Dr. Lyons ushered the captain and the first officer into the emergency ward. Brian noted that while the color had returned to the injured man's face, the scowl he wore told him that the man was still in pain. "How is he?"

Removing her latex gloves, Lisa moved over to the bed's readout display. "He's stable, but there were a number of internal injuries. I've repaired the most severe ones, but he's going to need the services of a full hospital to get everything back to working order."

Webber nodded to the readings on the medical status display—only a few of which he understood. "Can he talk?"

Sighing, she looked to the patient worriedly. "Please keep it brief. He needs to get his rest."

"Did you get his name?"

Shaking her head slowly, she stepped back to give the captain more room.

Webber braced himself against the side of the bed, leaning to within whispering distance to the patient. "My name is Captain Brian Webber. Do you understand?" The man nodded slowly, as if the simple act took great concentration. "You're on the United Earth spaceship *Sao Paulo*. We picked up your vessel's distress call. Do you understand?" Again he nodded. "Can you tell me your name?"

The man's eyes cracked open, but he didn't look in Webber's direction. "First . . . First Mate Castillo," he said in a cracked voice.

"Mr. Castillo, do you know who did this to you?"



With effort, he shook his head. "No . . . no warning. Came out . . . from nowhere."

"Who? Who came out of nowhere?"

Castillo continued to shake his head, his eyes closed once more as he relived the battle in his mind. "Never . . . never seen the vessel before. Ship's library . . . no data."

"Do you remember anything from the sensors?"

More head shaking. "Computers . . . knocked out with the first blast. All drives went dead. Some . . . kind of EMP pulse. No data after that."

"Did you get a look at it?"

This time there was a nod. "Saw it . . . for a second. When it turned for . . . second attack run."

"What did you see?" Webber asked, but the man was quickly losing consciousness. Placing a hand on Castillo's shoulder, the captain roused him to momentary cognizance. "What did you see?"

"Big . . . big bird."

"Bird?" First Officer Tlustos asked in quiet confusion. "In space?"

"A bird, did you say?" Webber asked Castillo once more. "Are you sure of what you saw?"

There was a weak nod, then the man slipped into unconsciousness.

"I think that's all for now, Captain," Lisa said as she moved to Webber's side. "He needs some rest. I'll let you know if his condition changes."

Nodding, the captain motioned for Tlustos to follow him into the doctor's private office.

"A bird," Reinhard said, leaning on the doctor's desk with arms folded across his chest. "That's crazy."

Webber agreed. "Crazy or not, that's all we've got right now."

"He could be delusional, Brian."

Webber considered it a distinct possibility. "Nevertheless, we've got to report it. Scan the other vessel . . . *Pride of Jupiter*. Try to link up with its computer. We need any and all data on what happened here, and fast. I don't want to—"

"Bridge calling sickbay," Lieutenant Eckhoff's voice came through the intercom. "Captain, respond please."

"Bridge, this is Webber," he said as he opened the channel. "Report, Lieutenant."

"Sir, unknown vessel at extreme range. Closing slowly."

"Maybe whoever did this is coming back for seconds," Tlustos offered.

Webber nodded. "Full alert, Lieutenant Eckhoff. Sound general quarters, and verify all weapons are at battle readiness."

"Aye, sir."

Seconds later, rhythmic klaxons began ringing throughout every deck of the ship. Rushing from sickbay, Webber and Tlustos made haste toward the closest turbo elevator to the bridge. Arriving seconds later, the two moved over to the sensor console, Webber peering over Tlustos's shoulder as the science officer verified the sensor contact.

"Where is the contact now?"

"Bearing 220-mark-3."

"Anything on the type?"

"Negative," the science officer said while scanning the oddly shaped image on his screen. "Vessel conforms to no known type."

"Sir," Dan Balkwill said from the communications station. "I've established communications with the *Invictus*. Captain Thompson is requesting an update."

"Send to *Invictus*: stand fast in your current position. We're leaving the area to intercept what we believe to be the vessel responsible for this attack."

"Aye, sir. Sending."

"Helm, plot an intercept course and set the engines to full sublight speed. I've got a few questions to ask that vessel out there."

"Aye."

"Vessel is turning, sir," Tlustos said. "It appears to have detected us and is moving away."

"Eckhoff, get us there."

"We're moving, sir, but it's going to take us a minute or two to get up to speed."

"The vessel was already at one-quarter light speed when they began to maneuver away from us," Tlustos said. "It may already be too late to catch them."

"I'm not giving up that easily," Webber said as he sat in the command chair. "Take her to the absolute limit, Doug. Squeeze everything out of the impulse drive that you can." The *Sao Paulo* had already been shaking unsteadily as she accelerated. Now it had grown into a full-fledged shudder that hummed throughout the entire vessel.

"Target vessel still moving away from us," Tlustos called out over the din.

"Fast little sucker," Eckhoff cursed under his breath.

"Distance?" the captain called out.

"A thousand kilometers and increasing," the science officer replied.

"Balkwill, how are communications?"

"Clearing up, sir, the farther we get from the center of the spatial distortions."

"Open a channel to that vessel, all bands and frequencies. Identify us to them, and order them to cut all power to their drive engines."

"Aye."

"You really think they'll listen, sir?" Eckhoff asked.

"I don't plan on giving up pursuit anytime soon, Lieutenant."

"No response from our hails, Captain."

"Bridge, this is Chief Engineer Genser," a voice called out through the intercom.

"Go ahead, Chief."

"Sir, things are starting to get a little warm down here. You think we might slow down for second to catch our breath?"

"Keep things together as long as you can, Chief. Bridge out," Webber said before quickly punching the channel closed. *No time for petty complaints.*

"Sir," Tlustos called out with concern. "We're fast approaching an asteroid field. Composition is mainly iron and magnesium, as well as cesium and a handful of other radioactive isotopes."

"He's looking for a place to hide out," Webber said with a nod the view screen.

"And he's going to get there a full forty-five seconds before we will," Tlustos replied evenly.

*More than enough time for him to hide from our sensors. Damn.*

"Should we continue pursuit?" Eckhoff asked over his shoulder without turning from the viewer.

"Negative," Webber finally huffed in defeat. "We've already taxed the impulse drive. We need to get back to the *Invictus* and report to UESPA headquarters about this."

"We've got some viable sensor data on the contact, Skipper," Eckhoff said. "It's not much, but it's better than nothing."

"At least this wasn't a *complete* waste of time," Webber countered optimistically. "Very well. Helm, break off pursuit and set a course back to the *Invictus*. Mr. Tlustos, I want you to run everything you have on that vessel through the ship's computer. Have it ready for a department head briefing in one hour."

# Chapter 4

January 2152

Stardate 15202.01

On the bridge of the *Ajax*-class destroyer *George Washington*, Captain Theresa Vincent sat in her command chair with legs crossed as she read from the tablet in her hand. Her message, addressed to the entire crew, was offered with the usual authority with which she always spoke.

"... and to these ends to practice benevolent tolerance and live together in peace with one another as good neighbors, and to unite our strength to maintain intergalactic peace and security, and to ensure by the acceptance of principles and the institution of methods that armed force shall not be used except in the common defense, and to employ intergalactic machinery for the promotion of the economic and social advancement of all intelligent life-forms, have resolved to combine our efforts to accomplish these aims. Accordingly, the respective social systems, through representatives assembled on the planet Babel, who have exhibited their full powers to be in good and due form, have agreed to the present Charter, and do hereby establish an interplanetary organization to be known as the United Federation of Planets. So signed as of this stardate, the founding members of this delegation."

She allowed the message to sink into the minds of her crew before continuing. "The nineteen chapters of the Articles of the Federation are available to all hands as of this morning. It's imperative that everyone become familiar with them, as they are now the guiding principles on which our new combined government is based. This is not simply a peace treaty between the founding members; it's a declaration of cooperation between all the member worlds—an outline of understanding to which all our respective races will be accountable. Many changes will be taking place over the coming months and years. No doubt some of you will have questions or

concerns, especially those of you who've operated under the United Earth protocols for a long time, such as myself. I suggest you take up whatever study you need to in order to get the answers you seek. If failing to find them, you will still be held to the standards set forth in these articles, and whatever criticisms or denigrations you might have will be left in your quarters when you're on duty, because the UESPA is putting our forces under the spotlight immediately. We've been ordered to link up with an Andorian flotilla approximately three parsecs from here and conduct collaboration sorties. A squadron of Alpha Centaurian corvettes will also be involved. United Earth fleet command has their doubts as to the ability of all forces to work together peaceably, and our mission is to prove them wrong. I'll be counting on each and every one of you to give your all. We're not just enforcing policy here, ladies and gentlemen—we're *creating* it. That is all."

Closing the intercom, Theresa handed the computer tablet to a waiting yeoman at her side, then turned to her helmsman, the recently promoted Lieutenant Steven Stone. "What's our ETA with the Andorian ships, Mr. Stone?"

"We're on track to link up with them in seventeen hours, forty-seven minutes, ma'am."

"Very good. Commander Rozier," she asked as she turned to her science officer, "what's the status of our forces?"

"Unchanged, Captain. The destroyers *Scythe* and *Enmity* are still astern of us and holding. The United Earth light cruiser *Hammer* is still on course to link up with us at 1330 standard time this afternoon, well before we reach the rendezvous coordinates relayed to us by Commander Ral'za of the Andorian fleet."

"And the modifications to the ship's firing computers?"

"Underway. They should be completed before we link up with the *Hammer*."

Theresa nodded. The thought of a live fire exercise was enough to set any captain on edge, and adding the untested variable of foreign fleets into the mix was even worse. There was no way to reduce the power to the ship's armament, so every shot fired had the ability to inflict severe damage on any vessel that was struck. Modifications to the ship's firing computers and the sensors were ordered, which

would in effect fool the computers of both the attacking and attacked vessels into believing that a salvo fired close to a goal was in fact striking the intended target. "Ensure that they are, Greg. See to it personally if you have to."

"Yes, ma'am," Rozier acknowledged. "Permission to leave the bridge, then? For the moment, I'll be of better use in sensor control."

"Approved. Navigator?" she asked, turning to Ensign Wright. "Please assume the science station in Commander Rozier's absence."

Ricky Wright, six months out of the United Earth Space Academy, looked quickly to the vacated science station, then to his captain. "Ma'am?"

Theresa cocked an eyebrow. "You are qualified, aren't you?"

"Yes, ma'am," Wright replied nervously. He'd only recently completed his qualifications to assume the post, and thought it would have been at least several more days until he was asked to stand that station as a relief. Then again, the captain had a reputation for ensuring that every qualified officer was given a chance to shine, no matter how much experience they'd documented in a particular assignment. Ricky saw the corner of her mouth turn slightly upward, the most anyone ever saw the captain smile.

"Then I mean now, Mister."

"Aye, sir."

"I've got the starship *Hammer* on audio, Captain," Ensign Koval said from the communications station."

"Starship *Hammer*, this is the UESPA destroyer *George Washington*. Permission to come alongside."

On the *Washington's* view screen, Captain Vincent watched as the *Daedalus*-class cruiser *Hammer* swung into view. Her ball-shaped forward hull, a distinctive attribute of the class, looked oddly out of place with Vincent's group of newly designed hulls. But the old *Daedalus* class, recently reactivated, had already begun to prove themselves capable additions to the fleet. Sturdier built than the newer ships, they could accept more structural and internal changes than their proverbial offspring, as was evident by the latest in warp nacelles that were atop the pylons jutting from the *Hammer's* cigar-shaped engineering section. Theresa guessed that those nacelles

were likewise attached the new Mark-III warp core. If that was the case, the nearly twenty-year-old *Hammer* would be able to run circles around the *George Washington* less than half her age. And the scuttlebutt was that even more changes to the *Daedalus* class were coming.

"Roger, *George Washington*," the *Hammer's* communications officer's voice came back over the intercom. "Permission to come alongside granted. Captain Lundberg sends his compliments."

"Understood," Theresa replied. "Advise Captain Lundberg I'll be transporting over shortly for a mission briefing."

"Confirmed, Captain Vincent. He'll be in the transporter room when you arrive."

"Roger that, *Hammer*. *George Washington* out." Stepping out of the command chair, she lightly touched Lieutenant Stone on the shoulder to get his attention. "Steven, please take command in my absence. Commander Rozier is still down in sensor control, and Chief Engineer Huitt is in sickbay."

"Anything serious?" the helmsman asked.

"No," she chuckled lightly. "Just a case of a little too much shore leave on OSDO 2."

Steven smiled in return. He'd had more than a little fun himself when the *George Washington* had pulled into the Outer System Defense Outpost a few days before. The ship had been on constant patrol for quite a few weeks prior, and many of the crew found even the Spartan facilities of large asteroid-based OSDO 2 a welcome reprieve to the narrow corridors of the ship. Some had taken their leave a little too far, though, and it seemed Commander Luke Huitt had been one of them. "Yes, ma'am."

Materializing in one of the transporter rooms of the *Hammer*, Theresa was saddened to see that Captain Ulf Lundberg was not there as she'd been promised. Instead, a Vulcan female commander was there to greet her. She was attractive—in a Vulcan sort of way. Standing at parade rest, the commander nodded sharply once as soon as Captain Vincent stepped down from the platform.

"Captain Lundberg sends his regrets. He was called to engineering. I am Commander Stolik, the first officer."



A stitch of jealousy weaved its way through Theresa's mind, but was quickly squelched. The once-ardent relationship between herself and Captain Lundberg had been dormant for some time, and both she and Ulf had long since promised to put their respective duties before their personal feelings for one another, especially after he'd been promoted and transferred from the *George Washington* to his first command—the *Hammer*. "Commander," she replied with a simple nod.

"If you will follow me, Captain, I will show you to the briefing room."

Without another word spoken between them, the two women made their way down the long corridors of the *Hammer* toward the briefing room. Theresa was amazed at how antiquated the *Daedalus*-class vessel was to her own. Embedded in nearly every bulkhead she passed was a computer terminal or other monitoring device, used in everything from damage control to life support to computer database access. Each had a single function to reduce confusion, the ship having been built at a time when internal redundancy was a considered a hindrance to normal operations. How much had changed in the last twenty years. In truth, many of the old-style terminals were powered down, their functions now taken over by the central computer bank installed during the overhaul that saw the addition of the new warp core. Still, walking the corridors of the old ship was like going to a museum, and it impressed Theresa that fleet command thought highly enough of the old class to keep them in service—despite their almost-antiquated status. All too soon, Commander Stolik came to an abrupt halt before the closed doorway to the briefing room.

"I will inform the captain you've arrived. Please wait here."

*I bet you will.* "Thank you, Commander."

Stepping into the briefing room, Theresa was once again reminded of the age of the vessel. Although the long conference table and its associated computer were of the latest design, a pair of nearly decade-old computer screens still hung on the aft bulkhead. On the forward bulkhead, flanked by a flag of the United Earth Space Probe Agency on one side and the official colors of the *Hammer* on the other, was the freshly painted logo of the newly established United

Federation of Planets—a blue circle, separated into quadrants, filled with the white dots of stars, the whole bracketed by silver olive branches. *Simple. Elegant.* She made a mental note to decorate one of her own conference rooms accordingly.

"Nice, isn't it?" a familiar voice called out from behind her.

Not wishing to betray the fact that she'd been startled, Theresa simply shrugged without turning from the emblem. "If you like that sort of thing," she said with indifference.

"I just had the ship's boatswain paint it on this morning," Captain Lundberg said as he stepped up beside Theresa to admire the artwork. "I'm glad he had it done before you got here."

"And I thought this was all set up for some dignitary coming on board."

"You're worth ten diplomats and a handful of admirals any day."

"Flattery, Captain?" she asked with a smile, still not affording Ulf a glance. "That's a little out of protocol."

He signed, crossing his arms over his chest. "I'm learning that, as a captain, I get a little more freedom of choice without having the associated guilt."

"Well, you should still feel guilty about not meeting me in the transporter room and sending your first officer to greet me."

Now standing at her side, Ulf smiled as he leaned sideways to give Theresa a friendly nudge. "We're having a problem with our impulse guidance computer. In fact, it was Commander Stolik who discovered the malfunction in the subprocessor array."

"And *you* just happen to be a former chief engineer," she chided. "Convenient."

"Meaning?"

"Oh, nothing," she sighed. "Just that it appears that the apple doesn't fall far from the tree."

"Oh, really?" Ulf replied with a chuckle. "Well, just because *you* seduced your first officer, it doesn't mean that I—"

"I seduced?" she said, turning to aim a menacing scowl at the captain. "I seduced? As I recall, it was you who was responsible for your own fair share of—"

"Of?" he said with the same dashing smile that always brought her frustrations up another notch. After all, she'd never formulated a

proper defense for it. In the end, she could only laugh, both at him and herself.

"Still the same man I fell in love with, I see. What a shame. I was hoping that getting a command of your own would somehow season you. I can see I was mistaken."

"Oh, I'm seasoned, all right," Ulf replied with a slight bow of his head. "Unfortunately, that seasoning seems to have come with a little spice mixed in."

"Of course."

Ulf reached out to his side and took Theresa's hand in his own. "I've missed you."

She felt her resolve giving way as the old emotions came to the surface. "I've missed you, too. I wish . . . I wish things could have been different."

"I think they were pretty good . . . while they lasted."

"That's the problem. They didn't last. I stayed with the *Washington* and you got the *Hammer*. And then fleet command sent you a hundred parsecs away."

"It wasn't a hundred parsecs."

Releasing his hand, Theresa turned to fully embrace him as her eyes began to water. "It might as well have been. They can teach you everything in fleet command school about being an officer . . . about being a leader. But they never teach you what to do when things like this happen."

"Shhh," Ulf consoled as he stroked her hair lightly, then kissed the crown of her head. "It's okay. We're here together."

"And for how long? As soon as these joint maneuvers are over, you'll be back out there, and so will I, going different directions again. The same old story."

"Maybe. Neither of us knows that for sure."

Balling her fists as she pulled back, she lightly smacked them on his chest. "God, you're so damn optimistic sometimes. It's really annoying."

He locked eyes with her, then kissed her gently. "We still have ten hours until we meet up with the Andorian and Alpha Centauri forces."

Please say that you can stay for a little while. I'd like to show you around the ship . . . maybe get an early dinner."

Smiling, she nodded. "Everything is ready on the *Washington* and the other ships. Once the *Hammer* is up to speed, we can begin the maneuvers. I don't want to keep you from—"

"You aren't," he promised. "Professionally speaking, I think you'll be proud of the crew I've got here. I've taken what you taught me on the *George Washington* and applied it here, and with amazing results . . . just like I always tried to give to you."

Sniffing away the last of her emotions, she nodded. "As long as that doesn't extend to Commander Stolik, then I'm sure we'll be able to work together nicely."

Laughing, he then leaned down and kissed her again. "Come on, Captain. I've got one heck of a ship to show you."

"Captain, we're arriving at the designated coordinates."

"Thank you, Mr. Rozier," Captain Vincent said, stepping down from the upper level of the bridge after exiting the turbo elevator. Ulf had given her a whirlwind tour of the *Hammer* and, after grabbing the promised meal, she'd rushed back to the *George Washington*. She was still trying to catch her breath. "I trust everything is ready for us to begin the fleet maneuvers?"

"Yes, ma'am." Rozier beamed with pride. "All sensor and computer targeting systems are functioning within specifications for the exercise."

"And the Andorians?"

"At the opposite end of the system from our current location and heading toward us at one-quarter sublight speed."

"Not in a very big hurry, are they?" Ensign Wright murmured from the helm.

"It's not the Andorian way, Ensign," Theresa replied. "Some say that they've perfected the art of interstellar tactics. If they're not in a hurry, you can be sure it's because they know something we don't."

"You think this is part of the exercise?" Steven Stone asked from the navigator's seat.

*Was it?* She'd received no indication something like this would happen from fleet headquarters, and in her precious few hours with

Ulf on board the *Hammer*, he'd said nothing about it to her. *Was it a ploy to test our readiness?* There was no way to be certain. Still, everything in the rule book told her to trust in the training she'd received, and not to guess the motives of aliens who hadn't had such intensive instruction—regardless if they were now allies. Raising shields at this point could be considered adversarial by the Andorians, but there was no in-between for the *George Washington*. Either she was in full-defensive mode or she was completely passive—open for an attack that might not ever come. "Keep the screens down, Mr. Wright. The same with the lasers."

"Yes, ma'am."

"But charge up the magnetronic coils. I want the accelerator cannons online . . . *just* in case."

"Captain," Ensign Koval began from the communications station, "I'm getting a message from the Andorian flagship. It's Commander Ral'za."

"On the overhead, please."

Flipping the required switches, Ensign Koval gave her captain a nod. "Go ahead, ma'am."

"Greetings, Commander," Theresa said to the image of the Andorian ship now on the main view screen. "This is Captain Vincent of the United Earth Space Probe Agency vessel *George Washington*."

"Your punctuality is appreciated, Captain," the gruff voice responded. "Please stand by to begin the exercises."

"They're not wasting any time, are they?" Rozier said from the science station.

"Commander Ral'za, I thought we could begin by having a brief meeting aboard our vessel, perhaps with the other starship commanders, to go over the list of maneuvers we'll be performing." There was a pause in the communication, and Theresa wondered if she'd said something wrong. *Maybe the universal translator misunderstood? It certainly wouldn't be the first time.*

"That would cause unnecessary delays, Captain Vincent," Ral'za finally replied, a hint of annoyance in his voice. "Our people fully understand their duties and what is required of them. It was your responsibility to ensure the same was true for yours, as it is also the

same for the Alpha Centaurians. If there are deficiencies in performance, it will not be due to us."

"Greg?" she quietly asked her first officer.

"We have the full schedule of maneuvers, Captain," he replied from the science station. "All vessels in our group have acknowledged receipt of it and have transmitted their understanding. Assuming the Andorian and Alpha Centauri vessels do not deviate from it, I believe we're ready to begin."

On the forward screen, all five ships of the Andorian squadron were now coming into view. They all appeared to be of the same class, and exemplified a typical Andorian design. Each had tapered forward hulls, and an elongated central section with wing-like structures protruding near the stern. Theresa had always felt they looked more like star fighters than frigates.

"Alpha Centauri vessels now on approach, Captain," Rozier said as he looked once more into his scanner.

Having worked with the Alpha Centaurians on several occasions, Theresa was familiar with the *Zoenamy*-class corvettes as they sped into view. At just under 108 meters, the little ships looked more like small garden shovels, with their scoop-like forward hull taking up the bulk of the ship, and the two warp nacelles protruding aft from what would have been the shovel's handle. The five vessels quickly moved into position alongside the Andorian squadron.

"Message coming in from the lead Alpha Centauri vessel."

"Let's hear it, Sonia," the captain said to her communications officer.

"United Earth Vessel, prepare to move into position to begin the day's schedule."

*Not even an introduction?* "This is the starship *George Washington*. All United Earth vessels are standing by."

Commander Ral'za's voice came broke into the open channel. "We will take the lead in the maneuvers. All forces prepare to begin phase one."

Ensign Koval turned to her captain, wordlessly implying that she hadn't given Ral'za access to their channel. But Theresa dismissed it with a shake of her head.

"Don't worry about it, Sonia. The Alpha Centauri vessel probably patched them in. I'm sure it won't be the last surprise we encounter today."

"Yes, ma'am," the ensign replied coyly.

Patching the command chair to the engineering section, Captain Vernon got an immediate reply from the chief engineer. "Yes, ma'am?"

"Commander Huitt, is everything ready down there?"

"Yes, ma'am. Impulse engines are at your command, and I've got redundant damage control parties standing by to repair any simulated damage we receive."

"Understood. Vincent out."

## Chapter 5

Stardate 15208.25

August 2152

“Commander, we approach the Nel’drema system.”

Leaning against the side of the small forward view port, the commander of U-19 003 looked at the stars impassively. *So many secrets, so many countless mysteries. Would that one them contains the riches necessary to ensure the sustained growth of the Romulan Empire. Yet we’ve not come across a single planet with resources enough to sustain even a single squadron. Months of exploration have produced nothing. New systems and new worlds charted, yes, but very little to show for it.* Even the thought of coming across a habitable planet—even one that didn’t possess the riches of raw material—would have pleased him. *At least it would be something for the Colonial Division to exploit,* the commander mused. The months of searching were taking their toll on both his psyche and the ship’s morale, and he knew something must change soon or else he’d face the wrath of his superiors. Failure, he knew, was not an option. Pushing his shoulder away from the frame, Commander D’tain straightened his dark metallic tunic and walked the few steps that would lead him to the three-sided command console in the center of the bridge.

“Slow to one-quarter speed, Centurion,” he said lethargically.

“Yes, Commander,” his first officer, R’land, replied from the navigation section of the console.

Nodding sharply, he turned to the sensor officer. “Sensor scan, T’jar.”

The trinum at the sensor console gazed into the screen dominating his portion of the console. “Four worlds present, Commander. Three have natural satellites; the one closest to the central star does not. There appears to be a large debris field between the fourth and fifth planet.”

“A natural occurrence?”



"Yes, Commander," T'jar said with a sharp nod to D'tain. "The density of the fragments suggests that two planetoids came into contact with one another millennia ago."

"I see," D'tain said, his few words laced with sorrow. The presence of the asteroid belt was an ominous one, usually indicative that no other habitable planets would be present in the system. If there were, their own gravity would have long ago pulled in asteroidal debris, the resultant impact devastating their surfaces. "Nevertheless, perform a full sensor scan, both of the asteroid field and the remaining planets. Perhaps there is still something to be gained here for the empire."

The trinum saluted dutifully, then went about his assigned task. D'tain returned his gaze to the forward view port, the orange star of the Nel'drema system bathing 003's command center in its warming glow. *How much like the sun of Romulus it is. Perhaps, eons ago, a planet as beautiful as our own once called this system home. Perhaps their people would have welcomed us as allies against the invaders now knocking at our doorsteps. Surely they would have seen that the Romulan way was the better.* Any further thoughts on the matter were put aside when T'jar spoke up.

"Sir, sensor readings coming back from planet number four."

"Specify," D'tain replied impatiently, frustrated to be stirred so quickly from his momentary daydream.

"Planetary reading is as follows: type is habitable; acceptable oxygen and temperature variations to support complex life-forms. Gravity is somewhat higher than normal, but well within tolerances."

*Finally. A success.* The corners of D'tain's lips threatened to turn into a smile, but he fought back the emotion with practiced military bearing. Yet the junior officer's voice was not laced at all with delight. In fact, it was quite alarmed. "T'jar, if that is so, then why is there hesitation in your voice?"

"There are warships in orbit around the northern pole."

Suddenly on alert, the commander went wide-eyed. "Crosscheck with the computer!"

"Already done, Commander. Sensors and computer records agree that the vessels in orbit match those of typical invader forces."

*The invaders. And so close to long-established trade lanes. They must not be allowed to go farther into Romulan territory from here. To do so might betray the location of our supply base in this sector.* "Helmsman, reduce all forward momentum!"

R'land complied, instantly bringing U-003 to a dead halt.

"T'jar, have the invaders scanned us?"

"It does not appear so, Commander. They remain in orbit around the planet."

"Composition of their forces? Perform a low-level scan to mask your intentions, and leave no detail unmentioned!"

"Scanning," T'jar said, his fingers moving at the same moment as his lips. "I should remind the commander that such a scan will take several minutes to complete."

D'tain stepped quietly behind T'jar. "One is not afforded the title of commander without first having stood the post you now occupy for a time longer than you have been breathing, Trinum," he said ominously. "If you wish to remind me of anything else in the future, it would be wise for you to remember those words, lest you find yourself reduced in rank and positioned down in the lower decks."

A shudder ran through the trinum's body. The lower decks, manned by those unfit to hold a post of respect, were a banishment from which many never recovered. While the Romulan way dictated that even the lowest of soldiers commanded respect for doing his duty to strengthen and grow the empire, it was a complete humiliation to be purposely sent to work in a place only suited for slaves and conscripts. And T'jar knew that Commander D'tain would not hesitate to make good on his words. The trinum had already witnessed it twice during the last few months of their voyage. The terrifying thought lasted only a moment before he straightened. "Yes, Commander."

"Report?"

"Two armed warships that appear to be escorting an unarmed merchant vessel."

"Life readings on the planet?"

"A small camp directly below the orbiting starships. Possibly a small colony, but due to our great distance from the planet, the readings are not certain."

D'tain nodded, then turned back to the orange sun dominating the screen. "More like a mining operation. They have found something of use to them there and now are intent on stripping the planet of it."

"A planet in Romulan space?" T'jar asked in astonishment. "Surely not even the invaders could be so bold."

"The proof is there for you to see, trinum! And it's all the provocation we need to destroy them."

The communications officer on the far side of the control room stood up abruptly. "I will send a message to Sector Command and inform them—"

"You will do no such thing!" D'tain barked as he turned toward the centurion. "We will not further betray our location in this system. The element of surprise is still on our side, and I'm intent on squeezing every drop of blood from it that I can." He then turned to the third officer stationed at the central console. "Weapons officer, arm all forward batteries. Helmsman, prepare to engage the engines at full speed. We will strike fast and obliterate them before they know what hit them! For the glory of the empire!"

"Captain's log: stardate 15209.15. The *Vostok* and the United Earth destroyer *Kristen* have escorted the United Earth colonial transport *Cumberland* to the planet Rendova IV. On orders from the new Federation Council, we're evacuating the agricultural team assigned to this planet. With the dramatic increase in pirate activity in the adjacent sectors, the council feels that the lives of the fifty-two personnel attached to the science team are in danger, and I agree completely. A team from the *Kristen* has beamed to the surface in order to begin the relocation process while the *Vostok* remains in orbit. Scans of the area around the planet are negative, and we expect the transport of the scientific team from the surface to commence in the next hour." Captain Chris Hunt released the recorder button on the armrest of his chair, then leaned back to admire the beautiful blue-green world spinning peacefully on the forward view screen.

"Message coming in from the surface," Lieutenant Steven Butler announced from the communications station. "It's Captain Talbot."

"On the overhead, please, Mr. Butler." A moment later, the voice of Don Talbot came through the speaker over the captain's chair.

"Repeat, this is Captain Talbot calling from the surface."

"Go ahead, Don," Hunt said with a smile. "What's the situation?"

"Looking good down here. In fact, I think we can begin the transporter operations ahead of schedule."

"I know I'll be glad to get out of here."

"I'm sure the *Cumberland's* skipper is thinking the same thing. I'm surprised UE headquarters had the nerve to send a defenseless vessel all the way out here."

Chris could hardly disagree. The two United Earth vessels had linked up with the transport only the day before, four weeks after it had departed Outpost 6. That it had made it so far without being harassed was nothing short of a miracle, all things considered. "Sensors are still clear up here. Let's get this over with. I'll be happy to get the lot of us back into the heart of Federation space."

"Federation," Talbot repeated with a chuckle. "Did you ever think you'd see the day?"

"The Federation I can deal with," Chris replied with equal amusement. "It's *Starfleet* that's got me on edge. All these races, working together under the same banner, with the same set of rules."

"And on the same ships," Talbot finished. "And no matter what our qualms with it might be, we both know it needs to happen. Especially after what happened to the *George Washington*."

Hunt nodded silently. He'd read the after-action report as well. During joint exercises some weeks ago, a guidance malfunction aboard an Alpha Centaurian vessel had caused its weapons arc to cross into the path of the United Earth vessel. The unprotected cruiser was practically eviscerated before colliding with the starship *Hammer*. As of that report, the *Hammer's* captain was still in critical condition. Of course, the Alpha Centaurians were quick to blame the Andorians, who they believed were being unnecessarily aggressive during the exercise and had inadvertently caused the rapid course change that had damaged the Alpha Centaurian's computers. In turn, the United Earth fleet captain, Theresa Vincent, had been quick to blame the Alpha Centaurians for not following protocols they argued they'd never received. It had become a huge debacle, one that the

Federation Council was quick to act upon. Under the provisions set forth in the Articles of the Federation, the new combined fleet—designated Starfleet—was now quickly being assembled. There was even talk of a new joint training center, some kind of fleet academy. In truth, there was very little harm in it, and much to be gained by a joint space service. The only question was, would it work? As with all things, Chris knew that only time would tell.

"I hear you, Don. Let's just focus on the mission and get those scientists from the surface ASAP. We can worry about Starfleet later."

Before Captain Talbot could answer, the *Vostok's* science officer piped in. "Sir, I've got a sensor contact moving into the system on an apparent intercept course."

"Trouble, Captain?" Talbot asked, his voice on high alert.

"Stand by, Don." Captain Hunt leapt from the command chair to the railing near the science console on the port side of the bridge. "What do you have, Mr. Baggio?"

Lieutenant Commander Vincent Baggio spun back to look into the sensor readout to verify his readings. "One vessel of unknown configuration, sir. She's heading in at high impulse. Estimated time to intercept is forty-five seconds."

*Forty-five seconds? How did it stay hidden for so long? Sure we should have—*

"Correction," Baggio continued without turning from the screen. "The vessel matches the general description of pirates who have been operating in adjacent sectors."

"I'll beam back to my ship," Talbot said through the intercom, but the suggestion was countermanded by Hunt.

"Negative, Don. There's no time. The *Kristen* needs to get her shields up now, or it'll be too late!"

"Understood, Captain. Talbot out."

"Red alert. Shields up. Arm all defensive batteries."

"The vessel is entering weapons range," Baggio said.

"Helm, put us between the intruder and the *Cumberland*."

As the *Ajax*-class destroyer began to move into position, the intruder vessel became visible on the main screen. It was a huge,

green thing, with forward-swept wing-like nacelles with luminous green caps. And it was fast, deadly so. It quickly attained a positive z-axis, then angled down, as if it were a predatory bird about to swoop down for the kill. And swoop it did. The first salvo of lasers from the *Vostok* missed the target completely as it leapt toward the *Cumberland*. Shots from the *Kristen* were equally ineffective. By the time the *Vostok* had turned 180 degrees, the unprotected colonial transport was a twisted wreck of a thing. The single volley from the intruder had penetrated the *Cumberland's* exterior in no less than four places, disintegrating the single warp nacelle and opening the top four decks of the tube-shaped hull to space.

"Life readings on the *Cumberland*?" Chris said in shock.

"Barely registering. Main life support is out. Main power is offline. Hull ruptures in sixty percent of the compartments."

"She didn't have time to get her shields up."

"I'm not sure it would have mattered, sir," Baggio said with concern. "Whatever weapons that alien ship has, they're more than a match for anything in our inventory. A few choice shots and she'll have us and the *Kristen* for lunch."

"I don't plan on letting that happen, Mr. Baggio. Where is the enemy vessel now?"

"Coming around in a wide arc, presumably for another attack run. The *Kristen* is moving into position to fire on the intruder."

"Let's see it."

The image of the wrecked *Cumberland* was replaced with the enemy vessel, bearing down on the *Cumberland* once more from the top right corner. Moments later the *Kristen* sped into view from the top left and immediately fired on the intruder with her upper lasers. The barrage lasted only a second, and the enemy vessel's shields gave off a faint greenish glow as they absorbed the blasts. The *Kristen* then pulled up slightly, and Captain Hunt understood that she was about to fire her fission missiles. But before she could get a shot off, the enemy vessel lashed out with projectiles of her own. Bright orange and blue bolts sprang from her curved forward hull and impacted squarely against the underside of the *Kristen's* saucer, sending the Federation vessel veering off.

Now it was the *Vostok's* turn, but the intruder was coming in too fast. Sensing his captain's orders, Lieutenant Richard Todd turned from the helm to face him. "Forward lasers online and charged!"

"Hold, Lieutenant," Captain Hunt exclaimed. "Fire fission missiles!"

"Sir," Todd said in astonishment, "at that range the blast could—"

"Fire now!" the captain barked, sending the lieutenant spinning in his chair to face his station once more.

"Missiles away!" Todd said just as the *Vostok's* hull shuddered under the force of the launch.

Chris watched as the two bright lights of the engines sped quickly toward the target that was rapidly filling the view screen. Just as he thought the intruder was going to open fire, both of his missiles impacted—one on the forward edge of the intruder's hull, the other against the starboard nacelle. Again the enemy target's shields flared angrily, and still there was no damage apparent. Thankfully the enemy vessel banked away from the *Vostok* before it could fire again.

"Mr. Baggio, anything on the status of the enemy vessel?"

But Vincent shook his head as he looked into his screen. "Sir, I can't make head or tails of this sensor data. According to our computers, that ship shouldn't be able to do what it's doing. In fact, it shouldn't be spaceworthy at all. Nothing I'm getting back from the sensors makes any sense," he fished in frustration.

"Something the enemy vessel is doing, perhaps? Some kind of jamming?"

"Whatever it is, it's very effective. I can't get around it."

"It's your job to get around it, Commander. That's an order."

"Sir!" Todd called from the helm. "It's the *Kristen*. She's taking another attack posture."

On the screen, Captain Hunt watched as the *Kristen* tried the same maneuver the enemy vessel had performed on the unprotected *Cumberland*. Coming in from a high angle, she swooped toward the attacker, firing both lasers and fission missiles. This time there was a noticeable change in the intruder's status as her shield flared brightly and then fizzled.

"Are her shields down?" Hunt asked as he turned to Baggio, who only tossed his hands into the air in defeat.

"Sir, I honestly can't tell. I'm working on it, but between the firing data and the sensor analysis, the computers are just plain overloaded."

Turning back to the main screen, Ellis watched as the *Kristen* continued over the target vessel and cut off the intruder by crossing the enemy vessel's path, forcing the craft to break away, but not before getting a salvo off at the Federation destroyer. The enemy commander's aim was impeccable, the bolts of green energy proving too much for the *Kristen*'s aft shields.

"Her generators are overloaded, sir," Baggio called out.

"Helm, get the target back into our firing arc!"

As the *Vostok* pulled hard to starboard, the enemy vessel appeared on the left edge of the screen. It was angled directly at the planet.

"What's she doing?" Chris asked himself quietly, but the answer came swiftly. Four more bolts of green hellish energy lanced out of the vessel and sped down through the atmosphere.

"She's fired on the science station!" Baggio cried out as the blasts reached the surface. "Registering massive explosions on the surface!"

"Is the target in range?"

Lieutenant Todd's eyes were glued to the tactical display. "In three . . . two . . . one . . ."

"Fire missiles!"

The *Vostok* shuddered once more as two more fission missiles rocketed away. Appearing on the view screen a second later, one missed entirely, with the other striking what Chris assumed to be the impulse drive deck. The explosion let out a shower of debris and sparks that quickly expanded away from the vessel.

"Baggio, please tell me you have something."

"Power readings, if you want to call them that, are dropping on the enemy vessel."

"Lasers locked on target, sir," Lieutenant Todd said with his finger poised above the firing control.

"Communications, try to hail the enemy vessel. I'd like to talk to—" but the rest of his words fell silent as the enemy vessel exploded into a cloud of expanding gas and particles. Shielding his eyes from the brilliant flash, it took a full five seconds for the inferno to die out.



When it was safe to look, nothing but the planet beyond and the mortally wounded *Cumberland* could be seen.

"We must have had a lucky hit," Todd said in confusion. "The damage to their ship didn't seem that severe."

Chris wasn't buying it. He wanted to investigate the matter thoroughly. However, there were more pressing things to attend to. But who to contact first? His thoughts went to the commander of the *Kristen*, Captain Talbot, down on the surface of Rendova IV. "Communications, get me the *Kristen* if you're able. We need to start picking up the pieces of this disaster. Have them beam a medical team over to the *Cumberland* immediately; full medical contingent. Advise them we'll be beaming a similar team down to the surface of the planet to assess whatever damage the intruder inflicted . . . and see if there are any survivors. I'll be leading it personally."

Lieutenant Butler nodded his head slowly. "Yes, sir. I'll send the message now."

## Chapter 6

Stardate 15211.16

"Captain's log: supplemental. The 24<sup>th</sup> Tactical Anti-Piracy Group has been on patrol for nearly two months now, but unfortunately we've got very little to show for it. The latest communications from the newly established Starfleet Command are showing an increase in attacks against merchant shipping in nearby sectors, but we've had little success in tracking down the pirates . . . if, in fact, that's what they are. Space is, by definition, very large. Even with the sensors of a half-dozen vessels working in concert, we still can't scan every square inch of the quadrant. Pirate vessels could be hiding just about anywhere, and the only way I can think to find them is to spread our resources even thinner than they already are. To say that I'm nervous about this would be an understatement. Tactical reports coming in from the fleet are alarming, showing a disadvantage in our forces at each engagement. The *Torsk*- and *Powhatan*-class vessels, of which our group is primarily composed, have been bested at each confrontation. I can only hope that, with the formation of Starfleet, we'll start to see some of the powerful Andorian- and Tellarite-designed starships trickle down into UESPA hands. Until then, we're going to have to make do with what we've got, and if these pirate attacks increase, we may end up suffering greatly for it."

Discarding the recorder on the bedside table, Commander Paul Janssens gazed at the overhead in exhaustion. Despite the forgiving foam mattress of the bed, the ever-present rhythmic pulsations of the *Torsk*-class *Seawolf*'s engines continued to pulse throughout his body like a gentle massage, vibrating him into blissful oblivion. Glancing across the small cabin to his desk chronometer, he saw how dreadfully early it still was. If he slept now, he'd be a wreck by the time his shift on the bridge came up. Rubbing his eyes, he slipped from the comfort of his bed, thankful that the thin carpet recently installed in the ship contained heating elements. Retrieving his lukewarm coffee from his desktop, he reached out to the computer monitor and pivoted it toward him.

Displayed were the latest reports from the *Seawolf's* long-range sensors. The various graphs and charts showed nothing out of the ordinary for the last hour. Accessing the engineering data, Janssens was presented with a top-down view of the ship. The elongated bubble-like forward hull had the main power conduits superimposed over it, glowing with energy as they fed the *Seawolf's* various junction boxes. Astern of the primary hull was the tubular engineering section and the two warp nacelles rising from it. Noticing a deviation, Captain Janssens was surprised to see a handful of significant fluctuations in the warp core. Reaching out for the intercom, he stopped himself the moment before his finger reached the screen. *Better just to stretch my legs and get down to engineering to see what's going on.*

Stepping out from his quarters, Paul skipped the turbo elevator and took the nearest staircase down three flights to the engineering level. Passing several crewmen on his short journey, he offered a warm smile to each. Coming to the long corridor leading to engineering, Janssens stopped briefly to admire the large windows that looked out on the botanical section one level below. Used mainly for growing fresh vegetables for the ship's galley, the twenty-meter-long compartment was a favorite respite for the crew. With a small patch of blue-green grass and a handful of well-manicured trees to sit under, even the captain had found himself there more than a time or two since their long anti-piracy patrol had begun. Smiling down at the ensign who was curled up under one such tree with a book, Paul turned and headed for engineering.

As the doors opened, the captain was greeted first by the ship's monstrous engine. Taking up the entire thirty-meter width of the ship and extending nearly the same distance to the stern, the pulsating warp four engine was a sight that never ceased to awe him. The mushroom-like central housing glowed with an inner pink and blue brilliance as matter and antimatter collided in controlled chaos. Computer consoles surrounded the thing, with larger ones on the port and starboard sides of the compartment. Paul knew that every one of them was needed.

The "old" V4 engines, as they were now being called, were the most complicated piece of engineering in the UESPA inventory. New ships,

using the improved warp five version pioneered by the venerable *NX*-class cruisers, were nearly twice as reliable as this design. It took a team of fifteen to keep the *V4* going, and looking around the room, it seemed that the chief engineer had called up the second shift early. Spotting the chief in the far corner of the room, Captain Janssens weaved his way through a slew of crewmen to get to her side.

"Problem, Terri?"

Commander Terri Connor turned her head sharply toward the captain, her black hair following a split second behind. "Problem, Captain?" she asked, bright-eyed and smiling. "No problem at all."

"I noticed a minor power fluctuation when I was looking at the status report in my quarters a few minutes ago."

"Oh?" she asked innocently, then frowned at her terminal. "I'm not aware of any fluctuation now." She then looked over the captain's shoulder to a far-off technician. "Bob!" she yelled over the din of the engine, causing the captain to flinch involuntarily.

"Yeah?" a voice called back.

"You know anything about a fluctuation?"

"A what?"

"A fluct-u-a-tion!" she sounded back.

"Nope," the tech called back.

She then looked back to the captain with a shrug. "Bob's got nothing on a fluctuation," she said, getting a chuckle from the captain in return.

"Is Lieutenant Jesperson in charge of engineering or are you?"

Smiling, she moved away from the console with the captain in tow. "Sorry, sir. It's just that I got a subspace message from the chief engineer on the *Manark*. He was able to push her engines to warp 4.4. And, considering that I'm in my last few weeks aboard before I take over the executive officer position on the *Alcantara*, I just thought—"

"You just thought you could one-up him, is that it?"

"Something like that." She nodded in defeat. "I was tuning the intermix ratio, trying to squeeze a few more ounces of power into the warp coils. It didn't work out like I expected, and we experienced some minor fluctuations. I've got it all sorted out."

Nodding as they neared the main entrance hatch, Captain Janssens chuckled. "You've done a fine job here, Terri. No one will ever

question that. That's why I recommended you to move on to the *Alcantara*."

"I know, Paul. It's just . . . well, the chief engineer of the *Manark* and I went to engineering school together. We kind of had this little competition thing going ever since, and sometimes . . . well . . . his smugness chafes my core, if you know what I mean."

Janssens was about to agree when he heard his name announced over the shipwide intercom. Stepping to the side of the main door, he pressed a button that would link him to the bridge. "Captain here. What is it?"

"Graves here, sir. We've got something on the long-range sensors. Could be alien."

Janssens nodded at the voice of his science officer. "Keep a lock on the contact, Commander. I'll be right up." He turned, still smiling at the chief engineer. "Keep at those engines, Terri. If you can coddle a few more decimals out of them, I'm sure we'll use them."

Grinning in relief, she offered a mock salute. "Aye, sir!"

Stepping through the doorway, Janssens looked back over his shoulder before the doors closed. "And if you get any more chafing, make sure to see the ship's doctor before you try to cure it yourself, Commander."

Back on the bridge of the *Seawolf*, Commander Janssens moved swiftly to the science console. The bridge, unlike the newer circular designs, harkened back to an older era of ships. The forward half of the bridge, including the large view screen at the center, was arched. However, the back half—which included the science and damage control stations, was distinctly angular. Stepping up to the science station, Paul leaned over to study the readouts. "What do you have, Mr. Graves?"

Denver Graves reached across the terminal and flipped a series of switches, then indicated to the sensor scope protruding from the console. "See for yourself, sir."

Leaning in, Janssens could make out the faint outline of what looked like a freighter. "Andorian?"

Graves nodded. "Seems so, but her course is erratic."

"Where?"

"Sector 67-B."

"Helm?" the captain asked, glancing toward the combination helm-navigation console.

"About ten minutes at maximum speed," the Lieutenant Jennifer Hestigan replied.

"We *are* the nearest ship, sir," Graves said under his breath. "The next closest vessel is the cruiser *Kestrel*, but she's still twenty minutes away at maximum speed."

"Communications?"

"Not at this range, sir," Graves sighed.

Janssens quickly contemplated his options. "You say her course is erratic?"

Graves cocked an eyebrow. "If you're asking me, sir, I'd say she's in some kind of trouble."

The captain smiled widely. "You'd say anything to break up the monotony of stellar mapping."

"Well, I'll take a stray Andorian over nothing any day. Maybe we can get some excitement out of it?"

Looking to the readings once more, Janssens wasn't sure. True, it did seem as if the Andorians were pushing their engines hard, but they were far from red-lining their core. "Maybe they're just in a hurry to get their shipment of food delivered before it spoils. We're halfway between 'no' and 'where' out here. They'd need to push hard to make it to the closest outpost."

"We're not going to check it out? It's still a Federation vessel, even if it's not Starfleet."

"With our luck they've been out here so long they don't even know about the Federation. If they *are* Andorians, they're likely armed to the gills. I, for one, would hate to scratch the *Seawolf's* paint over nothing." Turning to Denver, Paul could see the distress in the man's eyes. "Very well. But let's proceed cautiously, Commander."

Graves's spirits lifted instantly. "Yes, sir. Finally, a chance to do some real sensor analysis."

"Communications, hail the *Kestrel* and the *Minerva*. Have them meet us in Sector 67-B in thirty minutes. Helm, bring us about and set a course for Sector 67-B and engage to warp factor four."

"Aye, sir!" the young woman replied.

Precisely on schedule, the *Seawolf* transitioned to half-impulse as she entered Sector 67-B.

"Sir, we're within communications range."

Nodding to Graves, Janssens turned to his communications officer. "Open a channel to the Andorian freighter, Ensign D'upres."

"Channel open, sir. Audio only."

Paul nodded, then turned to address the view screen. "Andorian freighter, this is the United Earth vessel *Seawolf*. Are you receiving?" A moment later, a burst of static came across the speakers.

"They may be attempting to use their universal translator, sir," D'upres said.

When the speakers were silent, Janssens repeated his message. Finally, after another burst, a message came through in perfect Galactic standard.

"United Earth warship, this is Commander Annault of the Andorian Imperial Vessel *Toraass Ch'zilrat*. We are being pursued by an unidentified craft. Please assist us!"

Concerned, Janssens turned to Graves at the science station. After confirming his readings, Graves shook his head. "Commander Annault, this is Captain Janssens. Our scanners indicate that there are no other vessels in the vicinity."

"Are you calling me a liar?" the voice shot back angrily.

"No, sir," Janssens replied in his most diplomatic tone. "I'm simply telling you what our sensors indicate. You are amongst friends, Commander. Reduce speed and come alongside our ship."

"I will do no such thing, Terran! Not while that vessel is out there! We departed Sector 67-G three days ago . . . four vessels and one military frigate for escort. We are all that is left after those accursed aliens had their way with us! You may do as you please, but we will not stop . . . not while that vessel is still out there."

"Denver, Sector 67-G?"

"Scanners unable to penetrate that far, sir. However, it *is* in the direction the freighter traveled from. Distance is about three AUs."

"The *Kestrel* and *Minerva*?"

"Should be here in less than ten minutes, Captain."

Janssens nodded. "And the Andorians can't exceed full impulse. Communications, send to the commanders of the *Kestrel* and *Minerva*. Order them to escort the Andorian vessel back to safety. If the Andorian captain resists, have them lock on with a tractor beam."

"Can we do that, Captain?" Graves asked.

"All civilian ships are to be escorted at all times, as per the Federation Council's latest decree," Janssens said with a shrug. "We're simply following orders."

Graves considered this for a moment, then nodded in agreement.

"*Kestrel* and *Minerva* confirm, sir," the communications officer stated.

"Very well. Miss Hestigan, if you will, please. Set course for Sector 67-G. Warp three."

"Aye, sir," Jennifer replied. "ETA to Sector 67-G is thirty-two minutes."

"We're within scanning range of Sector 67-G, Captain."

"Understood, Mr. Graves. Begin scanning. Helm, slow to one-quarter impulse speed."

"Aye, sir. Slowing to one-quarter."

"Graves, anything on the sensors?"

"Yes, sir. I have a positive contact, bearing 113-mark-27."

"One of the Andorian starships Captain Annault mentioned?"

Graves shook his head. "Negative, Captain. Vessel does not conform to any known specifications."

"Have they spotted us?"

"It doesn't appear so, sir. They're heading away from us, but at only one-quarter impulse."

"Should I hail them?" the communications officer asked.

"Negative," Janssens was quick to correct. "Doing so would alert them to our presence, and they'll likely hightail it out of here. Our orders on the sightings of pirate vessels are quite clear: maintain surveillance and, if possible, interrogate. That's exactly what I intend to do. Lieutenant Hestigan, I want to move to intercept as cautiously as possible. Try and stay out of their sensor cone."

"I'll do my best, sir," Jennifer replied as she began to input the figures.



"Sir, the starships *Tripoli* and *Danube* are close by in Sector 67-F," Graves offered. "If we can contact them in the next few minutes, we may be able to surround the vessel before it has a chance to escape."

The two destroyers, the final part of Janssens anti-piracy group, had been dispatched nearly a week before on a routine patrol. Pleased that they were within range, the captain nodded in agreement. "Let's do it. Calculate appropriate vectors and send them to a data file. Communications, hail our ships and transmit our intentions and the course vectors provided by Commander Graves."

"Aye, sir."

Three minutes later, Graves spoke up from his computer. "I have the *Tripoli* and the *Danube* on short-range sensors, sir. They're in position to move toward the alien vessel."

"I've got them on short-range subspace, sir," the young female ensign replied from communications. "They're waiting on word from you."

"Very well. Have the *Tripoli* and the *Danube* flank the vessel. Take us in at full impulse and bring us directly abeam of the alien's bow."

As the *Seawolf* raced forward, the stars on the view screen shifted. All at once the unknown vessel came into view. It was a great green mass, looking much like an immense ocean-going squid. Four tentacle-like structures extended aft. On the sides of the forward section, triangular wing structures were visible. Extending from the tip of one wing to the other was what appeared to be a giant orange bird painted on the hull. Then the *Torsk*-class *Tripoli* and the *Powhatan*-class *Danube* swung into view, blocking the rear quarters of the vessel and cutting off any escape route.

*We've got him!* "Communications, open a channel to the alien vessel. All languages."

"The channel is open."

"Alien vessel, this is Captain Paul Janssens of the United Earth space vessel *Seawolf*. You have entered Federation space. Respond please." After a tense moment, the captain turned to the communications officer. "Is he receiving?"

"I can't say for certain, sir, but I don't see why not."

A bit more forcefully, Janssens repeated his message. Still, there was no response.

"Mr. Denver?"

"I can't make heads or tails of that thing," the science officer said with a nod to the screen. "Beats me what makes her go."

Turing to the viewer, Janssens watched as the silent vessel suddenly let out violent blast of energy from her central hull. Nearly the same diameter as the ship itself, the beam impacted squarely with the *Tripoli* and knocked her off station.

"Enemy vessel, you have fired on a Federation starship. Power down your weapons or we will be forced to return fire!" Janssens pleaded.

Another blast of energy sprang from the enemy vessel. This time the target was the *Seawolf* herself. The cruiser's shields took the brunt of the blast, but not without damage. Sparks erupted from the damage control console as the *Seawolf* lurched under the force of the impact.

"Damage to shield generators three and six!" Lieutenant Commander Graves shouted from the science console.

"Hestigan, prepare to return fire!"

"Accelerator cannons charged, lasers coming online. Missiles locked!"

"Target those structures dangling astern of the ship. Fire a barrage from the accelerator cannon!"

"Locked, sir. Firing!"

On the screen, four fusion missiles sped away from the *Seawolf* toward her target. Each bright red mass struck home, the third one severing one of the protruding structures from the ship and severely damaging another. The alien, now sputtering jets of blue plasma from its damaged engines, listed to port as the vessels external lights began to dim.

"Communications, hail the vessel. Advise them to stand down and prepare to be boarded."

There was a long pause before the young woman replied. "No response, sir, on any channel."

"Power readings from the alien vessel are fluctuating," Denver offered.

Turning to face the officer, Captain Janssens was forced to fan a cloud of smoke from his face. He glanced at the destroyed damage control panel nearby, but was pleased when he noticed that the technician usually stationed there was unharmed. "Weapons status?"

"Must be offline, sir. Otherwise she would have returned fire."

Looking back to the main viewer, Janssens could see the lights of the vessel fading even more. *Internal power must be shot to hell. But the vessel is nearly the same mass as the Seawolf, and that meant she could easily hold just as many officers and crew. To risk beaming over a team to capture the vessel would be madness.* "Rig for towing. Let's drag this thing back to Defense Outpost 2 and see what they can make of her."

Denver nodded, but looked at his controls in confusion. "Sir, reading an odd energy signal from the alien vessel."

"Can you be more specific?"

Narrowing his eyes, Graves tried to cross-check the data. Then, all at once, his eyes went wide in terror. "Possible buildup to an explosion, sir. Recommend we get to a safe distance immediately!"

"Helm, move us away! Maximum—" but his words were cut short by a tremendous explosion that temporally overpowered the optical capabilities of the main view screen. In space beyond the *Seawolf*, the force of the blast knocked the surrounding Federation starships out of position, sending most of their crews spiraling to their decks. After regaining his footing, Janssens looked back to the now-normal view screen. On it, the alien vessel had disintegrated, leaving only a cloud of gases and debris.

"We didn't hit it that hard," Jennifer said in frustration.

"Denver?"

"All indications are that the alien initiated some sort of self-destruct."

*Damn.* "Probably to risk being captured."

"What now, sir?" Jennifer asked, turning from her station. As she did, the captain noticed a small cut on her forehead.

"Call up your relief, Lieutenant, then get yourself to sickbay."

Wearily, she nodded. "Aye, sir."

"Lieutenant Commander Denver?" the captain asked of his first officer.

"We've got some pretty solid sensor data," Denver said as he stepped up behind the command chair. "That's something almost no one has gotten on these . . . well, whatever they are."

"What they are is *dangerous*, Commander," Janssens said more angrily than he intended. "We might have bested them today, but we'll be licking our wounds until we can get back to Outpost 2, as will the *Tripoli*."

"Yes, sir."

Janssens smiled weakly. "Sorry, Denver," he offered quietly as he stepped to the science station. "I didn't mean to bark. I just wanted today to turn out differently—for all parties concerned, that's all."

The lieutenant commander nodded in understanding. "Of course, Captain."

"Keep your eyes on the sensors. Make sure there aren't any more unfriendly vessels in the area. Communications, before your relief arrives, hail the *Tripoli*. Advise them we're standing by to assist. Then hail the *Kestrel* and the *Minerva*. Have them meet us here in Sector 67-G. We've got a lot of material to report."

# Chapter 7

Stardate 15211.30

Starfleet Intelligence Headquarters, Starbase 1, Earth

The doors to the dimly lit compartment swept open, and a solitary Starfleet admiral strode confidently into the seldom-used secure conference room in a classified corner of the still-uncompleted starbase. The three men already seated at the long table that dominated the center of the room stood in respect, but the admiral directed them to remain seated. Though the assembled men were all career officers in the fleet, they'd been advised to attend the briefing in civilian attire—not at all an unusual request, considering their chosen profession.

"Good day," the admiral began as he seated himself. "I trust you all know who I am."

"Yes, sir," one of them said, and the other two nodded. "You're Martin Hirst, head of United Earth Intelligence. Congratulations on your recent promotion to vice admiral, sir."

"It's Starfleet Intelligence now, Lieutenant Commander Firestine," Hirst replied. "And thank you. I assume you all want to know why I've called you here. I'll begin by saying that I've had to pull in a number of favors to get the three of you in the same room together, so be assured that I've done my due diligence in making sure I have the very best people chosen for the assignment I'm about to give you. It goes without saying that what I'm about to tell you is in the strictest of confidence, and will not be disclosed to or acknowledged by anyone outside this room for the foreseeable future . . . possibly ever. Is that understood?"

A round of nods from the three men followed.

"Good. I'm also aware that, due to the nature of your individual assignments and past affiliations, you may not be intimately familiar with one another and your respective . . . *talents*. I'll begin by stating

that, as of right now, I'm invoking Section II, Article 14 of the Starfleet charter."

Each man turned his eyes to the others in silent understanding of the admiral's statement.

Hirst nodded in approval. "We'll start with a brief introduction, which should help simplify this meeting and any questions you may have." He then turned to the first officer. "Lieutenant Commander Steven Firestine, you specialize in intelligence procedures. Aptitudes include vessel piloting, bribery, and forgery." He then looked to the one opposite Firestine. "Lieutenant Commander Jacques Pelletier. Specialties include clandestine operations, demolitions, and metallurgy." Getting a silent nod from Pelletier, Hirst turned his attention to the Andorian operative at the far end of the table. "Lieutenant Chand Ghei. Specialty: terminator. Advanced weapons training; also highly skilled in surveillance, stealth, disguise, and interrogation."

Ghei replied only with a sharp nod.

"There's no need for me to go over the various awards and decorations you've each received, the text of which contains virtually every award in our inventory. Suffice it to say, I know that I can count on each of you to give his all during the coming operation."

"And what would that be, *sir*?" the stone-faced Pelletier asked slowly, his documented disdain for high-ranking officers all too apparent in his tone.

"For the past year—possibly longer, the Federation has been systematically attacked by forces still unknown to us. Numerous military and civilian lives have been lost, and Starfleet Intelligence still has next to nothing on our adversaries. Due in no small part to the underlying bureaucracy of the newly combined government, we need more hard data on the enemy before the Federation Council can move forward with plans to build up Starfleet's strength. Your mission will be to get that intel."

The unspoken word was obvious to all. *War*. The Federation was willing to declare its first war against a new enemy, and it was going to wield the newly created Starfleet to do it. *Ambitious*. But for the moment, it seemed that their proverbial hands were tied. *Understandable*.

“What are the specifics, sir?” Firestine asked as he leaned back into his chair.

The admiral stood and stepped toward a large monitor on the far wall of the otherwise-unadorned room. When switched on, the screen showed a map of the far edge of Federation space. Hirst pointed to a glowing dot near the upper right corner. “First, you will head here—the planet codenamed Babel. As it was the site of the signing of the Articles of the Federation not long ago, it’s still teeming with delegates and spectators from every corner of the Federation. Starfleet Intelligence has a front organization on the planet, but I’m afraid their intelligence-gathering abilities are somewhat limited. I want you and your team to set up a covert operation there as well. You’ll pose as merchants, operating a small cargo transportation agency responsible for ferrying your wares throughout the sector. You’ll need to establish yourself, gain the trust of the locals, and glean as much information as you can from them. This should not be considered a short-term operation.” He then pointed to a small dot farther away from the inner sphere of the Federation, closer to unexplored territory. “This is the Raman system. A handful of merchant vessels have disappeared in that sector over the last two months. The only Class-M planet in the system has a small spaceport. Intelligence feels that the planet may soon come under attack, but because they are not a member world, they fall outside Starfleet’s jurisdiction. The Ramans are a proud, rather stubborn group of people. Considering the wealth of raw materials their planet has to offer, the Federation wants the Raman system under its umbrella. The best way to convince them to join the Federation is to stop any attack before it begins, and to make sure the people of Raman are aware that the Federation was the one that saved them. You shouldn’t find any lack of merchants or traders who go between Raman and Babel, and they’ll likely be your best source of information. Remember to stay on alert at all times. We still don’t know the face of our enemy, but someone out there must. Any questions?”

“Authorized equipment?” Lieutenant Ghei asked.

"Anything you need. Starbase 1 is fully outfitted with everything in Starfleet Intelligence's inventory, and a few things that aren't—thanks to Agent Ghei and our friends in the Andorian Corps of Enforcers—plus a few *misplaced* database entries."

"Transportation?" Firestine asked.

"There's a specially outfitted *Mauretania*-class transport that's been made available to the team. She's been beaten and battered in all the right places, and while she may not look like much, her engines and impulse reactors have been upgraded, so she can keep pace with pretty much anything in Starfleet's arsenal. She's also been armed with two laser cannons concealed inside the hull, and her defensive screens have been upgraded to Mark II specifications."

"So," Jacques laughed derisively, "we can take about two well-placed shots before we disintegrate."

"Better that than the alternative, Commander," Hirst snapped. "Or do you prefer being a complete sitting duck for whatever is out there?"

"No disrespect, *Admiral-sir*, but I prefer to choose my own transportation. I'm the only judge I trust."

"This isn't an optional assignment, Mr. Pelletier, so your accommodations are non-negotiable."

"*Perfect*," Jacques replied before slumping back into his seat.

Firestine shot Pelletier a look of disapproval. He'd worked with hard cases in the past, but he had the distinct impression that this one was going to try his every nerve. Steven considered himself a by-the-book operative, one who knew well the black-and-white world of an intelligence operative. Jacques Pelletier evidently lived and breathed in the gray area between them, and Steven had a feeling that at some point during this mission the two were going to be at odds. "When do we leave, sir?"

"Immediately. Your shuttle is prepped for flight as we speak." Hirst slipped a computer tablet across the desktop toward Firestine. "Directions to a storage compartment here on the starbase. In there, you'll find all the equipment you need. There's a cargo transporter inside, with the coordinates of the shuttle already encrypted into the controls. Space on the transport is somewhat limited, so choose wisely."



Steven nodded. "Understood."

"The codename for this operation will be Project Roundtable. The location of your contact on Babel is also encrypted into that tablet. Mention only as much to them when you meet them. You encoded aliases are on board your transport in a sealed locker. Lieutenant Commander Firestine, you'll take command of the team."

The last remark got a subtle eye roll from Pelletier.

"Yes, sir."

"That's all then, gentlemen. Good luck. You're all dismissed."

"So," Jacques Pelletier began smugly as he leaned back into the chair in the ship's lounge opposite Agent Ghei, "you specialize in terminations?"

Firestine, sitting at the controls with his back to the two men, shook his head. The three had been on course to the planet Babel for four days and hadn't spoken more than a handful of words to one another since their departure. That Pelletier had developed a sudden need to be chatty was fine; it was just the subject matter that had bothered Steven. *Of all the things he could have asked Ghei.* Firestine turned the pilots and looked to Chand, who up to that point had been sharpening the blade of an imposing-looking weapon.

"And you ask questions for which you already know the answer," Chand had replied without missing a single stroke of the blade he ran along the length of the stone.

Pelletier smiled widely. "Just curious to know more. I've never met a terminator before."

"I am an agent, just as yourself. That singular specialty does not define me."

"But it does, Chand, my boy," Jacques said with satisfaction. "It does, indeed."

"Leave him be," Firestine said, suddenly feeling embarrassed that he felt the need to defend the man.

"I don't think I'm going to," Jacques snapped, the smile disappearing as quickly as it had appeared. "I said it before and I'll say it again: I work alone. It's better for me, and it's better for the mission. But since I've been thrust into this assignment with you people, I want

to know who and what I'm working with. And that means I've got a few questions for you, too, Mr. *commander-of-the-team*."

"I've got nothing to hide."

"Everybody's got something to hide," Pelletier said, his smile returning as a devilish grin. "Especially people like us."

"I'm not sure you and I fit into the same category," Steven replied.

"Oh, I think we do. Sure, we have different skill sets, but deep down we're all made of the same thing . . . all based on the same mold. That's why they call us for these missions. We do the things they can't do for political or personal reasons. We do the dirty work so they can stay clean and pretty while we justify what we do in the name of duty. At least, I'm sure that's how you sleep at night."

It was Steven's turn to smile. "I sleep just fine, Commander."

"I'll bet you do," Jacques sneered, then turned his attention back to their Andorian teammate. "And how about you, Chand? How do you sleep?"

Ghei swiped the blade down the length of the dark stone once more, then set it gingerly aside on the tabletop. "We all have our respective skills, Agent Pelletier. I am quite sure I take mine no more or less seriously than you do yours." His tone was one of finality, and both Jacques and Steven knew that little more would be spoken on the subject.

"And you specialize in demolitions," Firestine asked Pelletier. "I'm sure you've retired more than a few targets yourself."

But Pelletier dismissed Steven's comments with a wave of his hand. "Collateral damages. Ghei here is the real deal, though." The comment was almost prideful. "I've always wanted that little accolade on my list of skills."

"It takes a great deal of mental discipline to perform such feats, Agent Pelletier," Ghei replied calmly. "Discipline I can see that you are lacking."

"Oooh," Pelletier jeered. "Old Chand here's got a tongue as sharp as that blade. What do you think, Steve-o? Still think I should leave him alone?"

Firestine shook his head in disappointment, then folded his arms across his chest. "How did you ever manage to get into the agency in the first place, Jacques?"

Ghei smirked, the first real display of emotion that either Firestine or Pelletier had noted. "A question I am also curious to see answered."

Jacques seemed to enjoy being under the spotlight. "Well, like Chand here, I've got a knack you could say—a talent the agency was looking for. I didn't spend too much time in the Fleet Marines before someone took notice."

"Your lack of discipline and respect for authority should have hindered your ability to become accepted in the agency," Ghei said, lifting the knife from the stone as he continued to sharpen his blade.

"I guess it doesn't bother them because I'm good at what I do."

"I don't care how good you are, Jacques," Steven said sternly. "It bothers *me*, and while I'm in command of this mission, you'll follow my orders whether you agree with them or not."

"Not if those orders could get me killed, I won't."

"I'm not going to let that happen. You have my word on that."

"Don't even think about saying 'trust me,' because that's not going to cut it."

"The only time I'd ask you to trust me is if I felt I could put the same faith in you, which I can't. That goes for Chand as well. But you said it yourself: we've all got the same basic training buried deep down. I'm relying on that to keep this team together and alive. Anything else you can contribute will be an asset, but if you become a liability, don't think for one second you won't be cut loose."

"Goes for me, too," Jacques said with a shrug. Chand was silent, but Steven could tell the Andorian was thinking the same thing.

"If it helps any, don't think of it as just an operation. We're doing something here that's meaningful to millions, possibly billions of lives. Just do what you do best, following orders in the process, and we can be done and go our separate ways."

Pelletier let out an exasperated breath. "Suits me just fine."

Ghei nodded sharply. "Agreed."

"Good. Now, since we've established a common dialogue, I think it's time to go over the data Admiral Hirst provided us." Steven produced three computer tablets, placed one in front of himself, and then handed the other two to the men. "Let's start with our aliases. Get

familiar with them, as they'll be exclusively used twenty-four hours a day once we reach Babel."

"Babel has a twenty-eight-hour day," Ghei replied, deadpan, as he looked to the tablet.

Steven looked up and caught Chand's eyes. A second later the two began to laugh, joined by Jacques a few seconds later.

Steven peered over the vacant pilot's chair, rubbing the sleep from his eyes as the shuttle dropped out of warp. Pressing the intercom button, he roused Agents Ghei and Pelletier from their sleep. "We've dropped out of warp at the edge of the Wolf 424 system, gentlemen. Look alive."

"Just five more minutes," Jacques' tired voice replied.

"Negative. I need all hands on deck for the landing. We'll be at Babel in just under ten minutes."

"Yeah, yeah. I'm coming."

The sound of the doors opening behind him caught Steven's attention. It was Chand, fully dressed and looking alert. "That was fast."

Chand slipped into the flight engineer's seat at the aft end of the compartment. "I do not require much sleep. I've been up for the last hour, meditating."

"I see." Steven rubbed his chin slowly, then stepped over to the brewing coffee pot beside Chand's console. "Care for a cup?"

"I do not drink coffee," Chand replied as he began inputting figures into the ship's engines. "It alters my true perception of things."

"Well, right now my senses need some altering." Steven chuckled as he sipped his cup. The odor—and taste—were far from palatable. "Wish we had room for a protein synthesizer on the ship. At least I could scrounge up some cream and sugar for this tar."

"They had one installed on a cruiser that I was on during my previous assignment. As you humans would say, it was not much to write home about."

The doors opened again to admit Jacques to the command deck. Eyeing the coffee, he quickly grabbed a cup and took a hefty sip.

"Careful, Jacques," Steven began to warn the man, "that's stuff's pretty—"

But Pelletier let out a blissful sigh after moving the cup from his mouth. "This stuff is delicious. Did you make this?" He looked down at Chand, who replied by hooking a thumb in Firestine's direction. Jacques hefted his cup toward Steven in a salute. "Compliments to the chef."

"How can you possibly enjoy this?" Steven asked as he took another dread-filled sip.

Jacques smiled. "Tastes just like the way Mom used to make it."

"Now I am beginning to understand why you are the way you are," Chand chided without turning around.

"My mother was an amazing cook, thank you *very much*."

Steven nodded down to the engineer's console. "Chand's not much of a coffee connoisseur."

Jacques grunted with dissatisfaction. "Figures. They should have made *that* part of the Federation charter; all member races are expected to appreciate the warming love provided by a delicious cup of java."

"My people would not have signed."

"Well, it would have been their loss, then," Jacques said as he hefted himself into the copilot's seat.

A beeping sound from the forward console indicated that the shuttle had come within sensor range of the planet Babel. "They're going to be looking for our intentions," Steven said to Jacques.

Pelletier had just finished strapping himself into the chair. "Yeah, yeah," he said, flipping his hand over his shoulder as he looked over the controls, searching for the hailing button.

"Top right. The blinky blue one."

"Blinky blue one . . ." Pelletier repeated twice under his breath as he searched the panel before locating it. "Ah ha." He examined and pressed it. "Babel station, this is the trader ship SS . . ." he turned to Steven, hoping that Firestine had changed the ship's name in the last hour. When Firestine silently motioned from him to continue speaking, Jacques cringed before uttering the name. "*Daffodil*. Requesting permission to land."

"Stand by, *Daffodil*," a voice repeated, causing Jacques to roll his eyes.

When the channel was muted, he turned to Steven. "*Daffodil*? Really? You couldn't think of something . . . I don't know . . . more *respectable*?"

"We don't need respectable. We need covert. Nothing more harmless and chipper than a daffodil."

"But *Daffodil*? Why couldn't it have been *Poison Ivy* . . . or *Venus Fly Trap* . . . or even *Rose*? At least those have thorns."

"Next time you lead a mission you can name the ship whatever you want."

Jacques snorted, but then was informed that the landing officer on Babel wished to speak to him again. "I'll call my ship the *Sword of Death*," he mumbled before opening the channel. "This is the *Daffodil*," he said with all the sarcasm he could muster.

"*Daffodil*, this is Babel landing control. Your identification codes are approved. You are authorized to land on landing pad zero-three-two. Confirm?"

"Confirmed. Landing pad zero-three-two."

"Understood, *Daffodil*. Welcome to Babel. We hope your time here is a pleasant one."

"Thanks, control," he said, then turned to Steven. "And you have yourself a *chipper* day."

# Chapter 8

Stardate 15306.22

June 2153

"I've almost got it, Chief," said the muffled voice from the technician underneath the console.

"Just hurry it up, will you?" the space station's chief engineer replied impatiently. "I'd like to get down to the party before last call."

There was a clicking sound from under the console, followed by the technician shuffling his legs. "Why? Afraid they'll run out ale?"

Checking the readout on the environmental controls once more and seeing no change, the chief engineer shook his head. "I just don't want to miss any of the fun. It's not every day they commission a new base."

"I see," the technician drawled mockingly. "In other words, you just want to rub elbows with all the fleet officers up there. Maybe then you'll get that transfer to a starship you've been hoping for."

The chief laughed. "Something like that. Now, don't get me wrong . . . I enjoy shore duty as much as anyone in the fleet. I just think I've been here a little longer than I need to be, and I'd like to make senior chief before I retire. There's not much of a chance of doing that while attached to an outpost, even one as advanced as this one. Besides, we've got eleven ships' worth of personnel here for the ceremony and some shore leave. That means eleven ships' worth of officers looking for a good time."

"And you just happen to have the roulette tables to accommodate them," the tech chuckled, his head and shoulders still buried in the open access panel. "And Delta VII just happens to be far enough away from Starfleet Command for you to get away with it. You're an old space dog, Chief."

"If I can line my pockets with a few credits, I'll be a well-off space dog. And if you can get us out of here in short order, I may even consider tossing a few your way."

The technician below the console slipped out, closing the access panel before hefting himself to his feet. Wiping his hands on his coveralls, he pulled a diagnostic scanner from his pocket and waved it over the exposed circuitry of the control panel's surface. "Any change in the readings?"

"Nothing," the chief station engineer huffed as he looked at the display once more. "Temperature is still dropping on level six. It's going to start snowing in there if we don't get this fixed soon."

The technician laughed. "That'd certainly ruin those chances of you getting a promotion."

"That it would. So let's make sure we do this right."

"Not to worry, Chief," the tech replied confidently. "These new K-type stations may seem pretty complicated, but underneath they still operate like anything else in Starfleet's inventory."

"So say the engineers who certified it. I'm still not certain that Tellarite technology meshes all that well with Terran designs."

"You worry too much, Chief," the tech joked, then closed the open control panel. Once it was secure, the control panel surface glowed to life. "Much better."

After the tech had inputted a series of commands into the station's computer, the chief noted the environmental control display was showing new readings. "Well now, things are looking up. The temperature on level six is returning to normal."

"Easy as pie, Chief."

"What'd you do down there?" the chief asked as he nodded to the access hatch under the control panel.

"I rerouted some of the circuit paths. Nothing too serious."

"It's not going to overload anything, is it?"

"Not a chance. I scavenged some power from a few of the nonessential systems. Besides, like I said, the circuit pathways in these new stations can handle the increase in load."

Leaning over the console, the chief inspected the tech's handiwork. Checking the readouts, the engineer could see that the circuits were indeed holding steady. The temperature readings were almost back to normal, and all other systems were operating within specs. "Not too shabby, my boy. Good work."

"You'll sign off on the repair, then?"



The chief engineer nodded. "Looks good. All done here?"

The tech looked over the environmental controls once more before nodding. "All done. Now, let's get out of here. I'd like to get my hands on some of those credits you mentioned."

"Right this way," the chief said with a smile as he waved grandly at the doorway. Just as the door closed behind them, in the far corner of the control room, a single red indicator reading "circuit fault" began to flash steadily.

"I think this game is rigged," Commander Michael Connor, executive officer of the USS *Neptune* said in disgust as he tossed a palm full of golden credits onto the felt tabletop.

Sitting on the barstool beside him, the ship's captain, the otherwise human-looking Nicholas Shanayda of the planet Alpha Centauri B, nodded in agreement. "If I lose any more I'll have to dip into my retirement savings to pay the bill." Just then, a jubilant eruption came from a table behind the two. Turning in unison, the two officers from the *Neptune* watched as the entire command crew from the Andorian starship *Thal'savari* won yet another round of credits from the craps table. In fact, there were smiles from nearly every officer sitting at the dozens of tables throughout the room.

To Captain Shanayda, it appeared that in the last hour, the entire gambling hall had been taken over by the command crews from the eleven starships of the 15<sup>th</sup> Tactical Squadron. Not a single table had an empty seat, and everyone present had some amount of gold braid on the cuffs of their sleeves. Indeed, on a card table opposite the two *Neptune* officers, the squadron commander, Commodore Han, was busy keeping the ear of the outpost's commander, Commodore Carr. Several empty drinking glasses flanked the two flag officers who seemed to be enjoying patting one another on the back.

"I think I've had about as much shore leave as I can handle, Nick," Connor said as he slipped out of his chair. "Permission to save what's left of my insignificant earnings, sir?"

The captain smiled weakly. "Heading back to the *Neptune*?"

"Yes, sir. I've got some crew evaluations to go over."

Shanayda frowned. "But the efficiency reports aren't due until next week."

Another burst of laughter came from a far-off table, and Commander Connor wagged his head in the table's general direction. "I could do with a little more peace and quiet."

"I hear you," the captain smiled. Quickly sipping down the rest of his drink, he collected his own meager pile of winnings from the table. "In fact, I'll tag along. I'm sure the torque sensors need aligning."

Stepping down from the *Neptune's* transporter pad, Captain Shanayda and Commander Connor were greeted with a tired smile from the console operator, the ship's chief engineer, Commander Redden.

"How'd you pull the late watch, Jon?" Connor asked the chief as the two men leaned over the console.

"Just lucky I guess," the engineer said slowly, then yawned.

"I thought you were supposed to be up on the bridge," Captain Shanayda said with a tired frown.

"I was, sir. I needed a break from the monotony. A walk down to the transporter room for a few minutes seems to have done the trick. I left Lieutenant Frahm in temporary command."

Jarrold Frahm, the ship's helmsman, was more than capable of standing the watch. Still, the captain felt the desire to check in on the young junior officer. "I'll head up to the bridge and make sure the command chair isn't gathering dust."

"Yes, sir." Chief Engineer Jonathan Redden smiled. "I've got someone from engineering on their way here now to relieve me. There's a few things to double-check myself. With most of the crew down on the station, it'll be nice not to have to step over anyone in the crawlspaces."

"Understood, Chief." Leaving the transporter room, the captain was surprised to have Connor trailing him to the turbo elevator. "Weren't you going to finish those crew evaluations?"

Inside the lift, Michael slumped against one of the walls in exhaustion. "I am. I just left some of the files near my computer. Might as well get them while I'm still cognizant."

Seconds later, the elevator deposited them on the *Hercules*-class cruiser's command deck.

"Captain on the bridge," the fresh-faced Lieutenant Frahm called out from the helm console to the nearly empty bridge. The only other officer on duty was the third-shift communications officer, an ensign whose name currently eluded the captain. Shanayda chalked it up to exhaustion, vowing silently to recall the name before he retired to his cabin. The captain nodded, first to the ensign, then to Frahm. On the main view screen, the glistening new K-type station spun slowly on its axis. Surrounding the station were the cruisers, destroyers, and frigates of the 15<sup>th</sup> Squadron. Far below them, the rocky and somewhat barren Class-L world of Delta VII was plainly visible.

"Status, Lieutenant Frahm?"

"All quiet, sir. The ship's at station keeping. We've got fifty crewmen on watch, fifty-two relief officers off duty, and the rest down on the station."

From behind, Captain Shanayda heard Commander Connor chuckle. "We've got more personnel sleeping than any other ship out there has on board them," the commander said. When the captain turned to his science officer, Connor pointed toward the short-range scanners. "And those numbers are confirmed," he finished with a smile.

Chuckling to himself, Captain Shanayda turned back to the view screen in time to see every light aboard the space station wink out for a brief moment before turning back on. *Did that really just happen?* Squinting, Shanayda rubbed his eyes and stared for a long moment at the screen. All was quiet for a full minute, and then the lights flickered again. This time, they were out for a full five seconds. "What the hell?" Turning to Connor, the captain could see that the science officer was already adjusting the sensors.

"There's a fluctuation in the station's power core," Michael said while peering into his scanner.

"Dangerous?"

Connor shook his head. "I don't think so. It's only affecting nonessential systems."

"Communications," the captain said as he turned his attention back to the main screen. "Hail the station. Let them know we're monitoring their situation."

"Communications with the station are down, sir."

"Like I said, many of the nonessential systems are being affected," Connor chimed in. "Communications, lights, some sensor arrays . . . but life support and gravity controls are still at 100 percent."

Shanayda sighed, then shook his head. "I don't like it. Try and raise Commodore Carr on his personal communicator."

"The station's shields just went up," Connor said.

"A malfunction?"

Connor nodded. "And now they're down again."

"Interference on all channels, sir," the ensign at the communications console called out.

"There's a radiation buildup in one of the power generators," Commander Connor said. "It's going to blow."

On the view screen, Captain Shanayda watched as a small explosion rippled across the lower section of the space station. A split -second later, all the station's lights went dead.

"All nonessential systems on the station are now totally offline," Connor said in disappointment. "However, the shields have come back online and are steady."

"It's a failsafe measure built into the design," Shanayda huffed. "It stops any attacking forces from exploiting the station if they come under fire."

"And the shields can only be lowered from either auxiliary control or the command deck, both of which cannot be accessed by the now-inoperative turbo elevators," Connor said, fighting back a yawn. "It's going to take a few minutes for repair crews to get to them via the crawlspaces."

But Captain Shanayda had newfound sense of vitality. "Until that happens, we've got a whole fleet worth of personnel trapped over there."

"And the damaged reactor is venting radiation. It's not life-threatening, but it's going to play havoc with communications for the time being."

"Ensign de Wolf," the captain said, remembering the communications officer in a moment of clarity. "See what you can do. Send out a general message to all ships in the squadron. I want everyone's attention, and I want it right now."

An hour after the station's power had gone completely offline, the situation had not improved. All communications with the station were still down, and only two of the orbiting starships had managed to cut through the radiation to reach the *Neptune*. The other vessels were holding station, waiting on a breakthrough that would see their crews returned to them safely. And, as fate would have it, it was that moment when the situation turned from bad to worse.

"Sir," Michael Connor exclaimed from the science console, "I'm tracking numerous unidentified vessels entering the system at high speed!"

"Starfleet vessels?" Captain Shanayda asked, knowing that it wasn't likely. The 15<sup>th</sup> Squadron was the only group of Federation vessels operating in this sector. Still, there was a glimmer of hope it was a passing merchant fleet.

"Negative, sir. The vessels aren't broadcasting any identification codes."

That was typical of only a few races, including the Orions. However, Delta VII was too far distant from the Orion trade routes for it to be them, let alone any of the other species that quickly raced through Shanayda's mind. In the end, there was little choice of who was coming in.

*The invaders. But Starfleet thought we were too far distant from their area of attacks to be in any danger. I guess they were wrong.* "Communications, send out a message to our frigates. Advise them to go to red alert status."

"I've lost contact with them again, sir. They've strayed too close to the station, and the radiation is jamming our signals."

"Hopefully they're tracking the incoming vessels as well. Lieutenant Frahm, arm the weapons and raise the shields. I think we're about to have a fight on our hands."

"Aye, sir! Laser batteries charging . . . shields coming online."

"Intruders have increased to flanking speed," Commander Connor called out from the science console. "Only three of our own vessels have moved into defensive positions."

"Frahm, plot an intercept course and engage at full sublight speed. Maybe we can intercept the targets and buy our people some time."

"Course plotted, sir. Impulse reactors powering up."

The deck beneath the captain's feet began to vibrate as the reactors were taxed to their limit to get the ship up to full speed.

"We'll intercept the incoming vessels in five seconds," Connor said, still gazing into his monitors. "There are approximately twenty contacts, sir. Varying hull designs, but several match the general description of known pirate vessels that have attacked Federation vessels in the past."

"On screen."

The forward screen was filled with a fleet of green vessels. Some looked like great birds, with wings swept high, their tips glowing a sickly green. Others looked like giant green mushrooms, their bulbous ends pointed forward like enormous battering rams.

"Try to hail them. Warn them off."

"Buildup in the enemy vessels," Connor countered. "Looks like they're powering up their weapons."

"We're within firing range, sir," Frahm called out.

But before Shanayda could order the weapons officer to fire, the mushroom-like vessels opened up with a barrage of their own. Lances of yellow laser fire reached out across space from four of them at once. Three struck the *Neptune* simultaneously, rocking the cruiser off course and sending Shanayda and Connor tumbling from their chairs. Lieutenant Frahm and Ensign de Wolf held fast, but had to grip their consoles with all their strength to do so.

"Return fire!" Shanayda called over the sound of the engineering console exploding.

"Firing lasers!" Frahm exclaimed. The beams, visible on the main viewer a second later, struck one of the bird-like vessels. Easily the same mass as the *Neptune*, the target's shields flared green as they absorbed the blast.

"No damage to the target," Michael Connor yelled from the science station. Then the *Neptune* was struck again. This time it was de Wolf

who was tossed aside like a rag doll. He tumbled down the steps to the bridge's lower deck, ending up at Captain Shanayda's feet.

"Fusion missiles have impacted with the engineering section," Connor yelled.

Nicholas turned to see the science officer nursing a cut over his right eye. But this was not the time to mend wounds. "Continue to return fire!" he yelled down to Frahm, then pressed the intercom button on his command chair. "Engineering, this is the bridge. Redden, divert all power to the shields! We're not going to last much longer under this kind of an attack!" Shanayda watched as two rounds from the accelerator cannons raced away from the *Neptune*. Both struck one of the mushroom-shaped ships before it raced past the stricken Starfleet cruiser.

"I'll do what I can," the chief engineer's voice said helplessly. "I've got a lot of dead and dying people down here."

"Vessels are moving away," Connor said in surprise.

"Are they coming around for another attack?" Captain Shanayda asked quickly, trying to catch his breath as he jumped back into the command chair.

"Negative. They're continuing on to Delta VII."

"They don't want us. They want the station! Helm, pursuit course . . . maximum speed!"

"Impulse reactors heavily damaged, sir," Jarrod said as he tried to coax the *Neptune* into doing as he was ordered. "Anything more than half-sublight and we'll blow them for sure."

"Get us there, helm. I don't care how you do it."

"They've reached the station," Connor called out. "They've engaged our vessels."

"Can we get a visual?"

"I'll try and tap into the station's visual sensors. However, the radiation present will distort the images."

"Let's see it."

The main screen flickered for a moment, then the image of two Andorian cruisers came into view. Shanayda recognized one as being Commodore Han's flagship. Suddenly two enemy vessels came into visual range. They slowed momentarily, each firing several volleys of

lasers at the Federation ships. The flagship, evidently unaware of the unfolding situation, was caught with her shields down. The blasts ripped open the forward hull, and the ensuing explosion sent whatever was left of the once-proud ship toward the space station. Bouncing off the station's superior shields, the hulk careened into a nearby Starfleet frigate. In seconds, both were little more than expanding piles of flaming debris.

"The enemy fleet is concentrating their fire on our vessels," Connor called out. "They seem to be ignoring the station."

"And our people?"

"Four cruisers and a frigate destroyed, with two destroyers without main power. Only the attack transport *Tolstoy* and the light cruiser *Arkansas* are currently returning fire."

"Time to intercept?"

"A full minute," Frahm said, his fingers moving across the helm console. "I've even got the control thrusters running at maximum. It's not much, but it's pushing us a little faster."

On the screen, Shanayda and the rest watched as another Federation starship disintegrated under the combined fire of no less than four enemy vessels.

"The *Arkansas* has exploded," Commander Connor yelled.

"Come on . . ." Shanayda said quietly through gritted teeth, trying to will the *Neptune* to go faster.

"Enemy vessels are moving off."

"What?"

Michael, looking dumbfounded, turned to the captain. "They're . . . they're just moving off, continuing on course out of the system. I don't get it."

Shanayda tried to collect his thoughts. "It must have been a hit-and-run attack."

"They easily outnumbered us, though," Connor replied. "Why not finish the job?"

"You're complaining?" the captain asked in disbelief, watching as Ensign de Wolf pulled himself back into the communications station

"Not at all, sir. It's just . . . puzzling."

Tasting fresh blood on his lips, Shanayda wiped at his face with his sleeve. "No argument there."



"Sir, I'm receiving communications," de Wolf's shaken voice said. The captain dabbed the last of the blood from the small wound. "Patch us through to the station."

"Sir, it's not from the station. It's from them . . . the intruders."

"Come again?"

"Ship-to-ship communications. They're . . . talking to one another."

"Probably congratulating themselves," Michael groaned, holding onto his side. "I think that fall to the deck must have broken a rib."

"De Wolf, record everything you're hearing in the ship's computer! With any luck, maybe we can finally get to the bottom of who these people are. Then call down to sickbay . . . get someone up here to attend to the commander."

"Aye, sir," the ensign replied, turning back to his console.

"We're arriving back at Delta VII, sir."

"Slow to maneuvering thrusters, helm," Captain Shanayda said with exhaustion as he eased slowly back into his chair. The view screen was filled with the debris of damaged starships. Behind it all, the powerless station in orbit of Delta VII looked untouched. "De Wolf, keep recording the enemy broadcasts, but open a channel to anyone of our units capable of receiving. Tell them we're standing by to assist."

## Chapter 9

Stardate 15308.01

Office of the President, United Federation of Planets, Rissa F. Lyn,  
Paris, Earth

"Madam President, the commander of Starfleet and his staff are here to see you."

Rissa Lyn, of the planet Alpha Centauri B, looked out the tall windows of her office and surveyed the peacefulness of fall in Paris. The trees lining the avenues Pierre Loti and Anatole France had turned into a spectrum of colors ranging from yellow to orange. The grass of the serene park surrounding the tower, while still a crisp green, was starting to become littered with the fallen leaves as light gusts of wind blew them free of the tall branches above. As the trees swayed, it reminded her of times in her youth when she would spend long hours of the day beneath similar foliage on Alpha Centauri reading fables of bygone eras. Now, with the weight of the worlds of the Federation on her middle-aged shoulders, she could only exhale a mournful sigh for the simpler times that had passed away so long ago. Turning away from the peaceful scene, she smiled warmly as the commander in chief of Starfleet and his entourage entered her office.

"Admiral Walton," she said to the gray-haired man who looked far older than his years. "Thank you taking the time to see me."

"Of course, Madam President," he said, taking her hand in a light embrace before turning to his associates. "I believe you know Admiral Hirst from Starfleet Intelligence."

"Yes, indeed. It's agreeable to see you again, Admiral."

Martin delicately bowed his head. "Madam President."

Turning to the tall, bright-eyed female officer of the group, Fleet Admiral Walton presented his final companion. "This is Rear Admiral Grooms of Alpha Centauri, commander of the First Combined Fleet. I've asked her here as a representative of our forces along the spinward section of Federation space."

Rissa smiled at the fellow native from her home planet. First touching the tips of her right fingers to her forehead, the president then presented the hand, palm up, to the admiral. "Greetings, Admiral Grooms."

In response to the traditional Alpha Centauri greeting, Grooms mimicked the gesture, placing her hand, downturned palm, over the president's. "It is an honor, Madam President, to meet you."

Turning to the final member of the Admirals group, a middle-aged human stepped forward. "I'm Fleet Captain Vargas of Starfleet Intelligence, madam President. I'll be heading up Admiral Grooms' information network."

Spinning slowly, President Lyn extended an arm to a circle of waiting chairs. "Please, make yourselves comfortable."

Once everyone had seated themselves, Rissa stepped into high-backed chair, resting her elbows on the armrests as her ceremonial robes flowed over the edges. "Again, I apologize for summoning you all the way here to Paris, Admiral Walton. But once I received your message that you had something to report on the invaders threatening our border worlds, I thought it only proper to hear of it in person."

"Of course, ma'am," Walton nodded. "I thought you might."

"Then please begin."

"As you know, subsequent to the battle that took place at Delta VII in October, the starship *Neptune* was able to capture several minutes of radio transmissions between ships in the enemy fleet. We've also had two other starships submit recordings of similarly coded transmissions in the last month."

"I do," Rissa said with a nod at the pause. "Go on."

Walton looked at Martin Hirst and nodded before continuing. "As you also know, Starfleet Intelligence has operatives working near the planet Babel as we speak, gathering data on the intruders from a civilian standpoint."

"I am."

Walton looked briefly to Hirst again. "Approximately two weeks ago, our operatives on Babel came into contact with a civilian salvage captain claiming to have come into possession of several components

of alien technology. Upon further investigation by our covert team, these artifacts were found to have originated from the remains of a vessel that was found adrift several parsecs from the planet in unclaimed space. Though it was much too fragile to be towed to a safe haven, our operative team nonetheless was able to recover several pieces of alien technology from what we believe was a small warship. As no Federation vessel was listed as operating in that area over the last several months, we don't know how the vessel came to be where it was and in the condition it was in. Regardless, several key components were removed and secretly brought back to our intelligence offices on Babel."

"Please, continue."

"In short, Madam President, we were able to repair some of the components from the warship to a functioning state. Most importantly was a partially functioning communications console. One we fed the coded transmissions received from the *Neptune* through it, we sent the compiled data over to the linguistic specialists at the Vulcan Science Academy."

Intrigued, Rissa leaned forward, afraid that she might miss something if she was too far away. "And what did the Science Academy have to report?"

Hirst saw the excitement on her face, and was disappointed that he didn't have more to report. "Not much, I'm afraid. The exact text of the transmissions was still heavily garbled. Using ancient texts from a half-dozen worlds as a reference, the Vulcans were able to put together only a few vital pieces of information, chiefly the name of the aliens' race—the Romulans."

"The Romulans?" she all but whispered. "I've never heard of them."

"Nor have many others, apparently," Admiral Walton began. "The only reason we have is because of what little data we've gathered in the last few months. We believe the Romulan military serves someone called the praetor. We're not sure if this is a person, a deity, or something in between. It does appear that, whoever or whatever it is, the Romulans hold them in extremely high regard. We also believe they are in possession of a vast amount of territory just beyond the southeastern border of Federation space, possibly as large as or larger than the Federation."

"And their intentions are what . . . invasion?"

Hirst nodded. "That seems to be the case, but we can't say for sure. All we know is that the Romulans strike fast, at seemingly random targets, and then disappear before we can gather much data."

"And their attacks are becoming more bold," Admiral Grooms said, her soft voice laced with unmistakable resolve. "Delta VII is well away from the edge of Federation space in that quadrant. We've had a presence there for nearly five years, and haven't come into contact with vessels like that before. That means the Romulans are traveling much farther into Federation space than simply crossing the borders."

"And if they continue to have the success they had at Delta," Fleet Captain Vargas added, "there's no reason for them to halt that advance."

Sighing, Rissa slipped from her chair and headed back to the tall windows of her office and colorful trees. Where once she'd seen the oranges and yellows of the leaves, all she saw now was red . . . the red of blood. "And you think these skirmishes are a prelude to a full-scale invasion?" she asked without turning from the view.

"We believe so," Walton replied. "Starfleet feels the Romulans are testing the waters, trying to figure out where we're weakest."

"And what do you propose to do about it?" she asked.

"To put it bluntly, Madam President, we need to make the water less comfortable. With your approval, Admiral Grooms will take the First Combined Fleet and deploy them near the established border of Federation space. We're confident that a show of extreme force will calm the Romulans' taste for conquest."

Rissa turned, nodding as she contemplated the plan. "And suppose it backfires on us, Admiral. What if, instead, we provoke these Romulans into a much bloodier conflict? I need not remind you all of the delicate web that binds our new Federation together. To plunge us all into war so quickly after our conception is . . . is unimaginable. What kind of pattern would that weave for other, non-member worlds to witness? I believe I speak for all the Federation when I say that we did not form this alliance to become dictators waging war in the name of peace throughout the galaxy."

"We're simply talking about setting up a defensive border, Madam President," Walton said calmly.

"And how many of those thinly-veiled borders have caused the oppressed to lash out? Too many, I think. No, Admiral. I believe now is not the time for defensive measure, not when we have yet to try a more diplomatic approach. We know their name, and that might be the first step in forming a peace with the Romulans."

"With all due respect, Madam President, I'm not sure the Romulans are interested in peace," Admiral Hirst said. "From all the data Starfleet Intelligence has gathered, there is a definite pattern of conquest to their attacks."

"From very *limited* data, as you've stated," Rissa countered. Pursing her lips, she glided back to her chair. "Admiral Walton, I would not for one second discount your opinions of these invaders. In fact, I believe Starfleet would be well advised to strengthen our forces *inside* Federation space. Whether we face invasion or not, the primary duty of Starfleet is to explore the unknown, and there is so much unknown out there in the vastness of space. So for the immediate future, I would like to increase the security afforded to our member worlds. This will have the effect of calming frayed nerves over the recent attacks, and serve to assure the members of the Federation that their safety and security is of paramount importance to this administration. I would also not be opposed to the tightening of restrictions on merchant shipping in and around the systems near our borders, and by that I mean *all* our borders. To simply impose restrictions on a single sector or quadrant could cause undue concern for many. I wish to avoid that."

"Yes, ma'am," Walton said, partially satisfied that he could at least fortify some of the installations currently under threat of Romulan incursions. He could also begin the construction of new starships and outposts, something he agreed with the president was sorely needed in all areas of Federation space. *If some extras happened to be funneled toward the Federation border near what was likely Romulan space, so much the better. We could still be prepared without overtly looking the part.*

Rissa nodded. "Very well. I will take this information to the Federation Council. I have no doubts that a committee will be formed,

the primary goal of which will be the normalization of relations with the Romulan people. I'm quite sure anything Admirals Hirst or Grooms could provide would be invaluable in the council's efforts toward that goal."

"Yes, ma'am," Hirst and Grooms said in unison, with Wil Vargas nodding in silence.

"I believe the first step in our endeavors toward a peaceful solution would be to present a clear yet positive message to the Romulan people, one that should be delivered in the most unobtrusive of ways with the least likely possibility of being misconstrued," the president continued. "Admiral Walton, how would you suggest we do that?"

"Warp probes would best fit those requirements, I believe. They're unmanned, unarmed, and fast."

Admiral Grooms nodded in agreement. "We could launch them from our forward-deployed units toward what we believe is Romulan space. But, being that we don't know the exact borders of their space, or the location of any of their star systems, we'd need to launch several dozen of them to make sure the message is received in a timely fashion."

"I'll get in contact with our covert team on Babel," Admiral Hirst added. "Perhaps they can provide us with a handful of bearings for the probes. That would significantly reduce the margin of error."

President Lyn nodded in agreement. "Then it seems we have a working plan. How long until the probes can be deployed, Admiral Walton?"

Walton mulled the contributing factors over in his mind for a handful of seconds. "My initial estimate would be no less than a month. That gives everyone involved time to program the probes' onboard linguistic databases, course and speed data, and to transport them to our outlying starships and outposts for launch."

Rissa nodded. "The Federation Council will likely take the same amount of time to formulate what should be done with regard to diplomatic ventures. Of course, they'll wait on the data the probes return before they make a final decision. This is all very good. Let's proceed immediately." As she rose from her chair, the assembled

officers did the same. "I'd like your initial report on these matters within a week, Admiral Walton."

Reaching out to grasp her hand, Rom took it in a gentle shake. "You'll have it, Madam President."

\* \* \*

Incoming subspace communication . . .

Priority: UNCLASSIFIED

Stardate 15310.16

FROM: The Office of the Commander In Chief, Starfleet, Fleet Admiral Rom Walton

TO: All Commanders, Starships and Starbase, Starfleet

SUBJ: ZONE OF TRANSPORT ESCORT

Reference: (A) Mobilization of all Starfleet forces in response to the establishment of Fleet Alert Status level 2; stardate 15310.01

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

1. A Zone of Transport Escort now exists. This new zone will range from the planet Ectair to Starbase 10 system, and will cover all areas of space, Federation, neutral, or other, galactically east of that border.

2. Under no circumstances will any merchant or civilian vessel enter this area, unless such vessels are deployed in a convoy, and only when those convoys are under the direct protection of Starfleet Command or forces operating under their direct control.

3. All convoys, before departing their assigned ports of call, must first log all planned routes of travel with Federation Security personnel at the nearest established Federation starbase or outpost



in relation to the convoy's point of origin. In extreme cases, said merchant vessels may also report to Federation starships of the class of "medium cruiser" or higher, as such vessels are commonly deployed with high-ranking Starfleet officers and their staff. This will be done on a case-by-case basis as the situation dictates, and should not be used when other means of flight logging are available.

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

5. All convoys will be escorted by the appropriate number of Starfleet vessels required to protect all assets of said convoy. The number of Starfleet vessels present in the convoy will be dictated by the overall size of the convoy, value of the goods being transported, the amount of resistance assumed or known to exist along the lines of transport, and other such factors that will arise on a case-by-case basis between the vessel masters and Federation Security forces. It should be understood that all Starfleet vessels assigned to convoy duty will be operating under "high alert" conditions, as outlined in Reference (A).

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

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

8. All cargo masters and civilian captains are notified to adjust their travel and transportation timelines in order to accommodate these new restrictions. Starfleet Command, operating under strict orders

from the Federation Council, makes no financial guarantees on any goods or personnel being transported within this zone. Starfleet Command will take all required precautions while escorting civilian vessels. Also, any such conflicts that may arise from forces deemed unfriendly toward Federation forces or civilian convoys they are protecting cannot be anticipated with a high degree of certainty. Vessel masters and their associated corporations should now consider themselves aware of these facts and plan accordingly.

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

\* \* \*

Stardate 15401.02

Steeping onto the bridge, Captain Ellis Coombs surveyed the chaos around him with pride. The bridge crew—as well as a number of technicians—were scurrying about as they made their final preparations before moving the newly christened *Enterprise* out of the orbital repair and reconditioning facility.

When Coombs and a small contingent of officers had first beamed aboard her three months before, the ship was in a sorry state of repair. After nearly ten years of storage in a backwater basin near Regulus, the old girl—named *Shenandoah* at that time—was in dire need of attention. An older design, harkening back to the days of space travel before the *NX* class and its predecessors defined the “new” look of starship dynamics, the *Shenandoah* was a bulbous, immense cylindrical shape, not at all much different from the sea-going submarines of a century ago. Now, after three months of laborious work by Starfleet engineers from a half-dozen races, despite however old her exterior might still look, her innards were of the latest design. New computer cores had been installed, and every access point and screen was replaced. Every stateroom had been brought up to current Starfleet standards, and all rec-rooms had been both enlarged and outfitted with the latest in leisure activities. Mechanically, the navigation deflector and the sensor palettes had

been upgraded, and four arrays of new laser banks and an accelerator cannon was installed. The two antiquated warp nacelles she was originally equipped with had recently been replaced by four nacelles of the newest design, and with the new Type III warp core feeding them, it afforded the ship nearly ten times the power she'd had in a previous life. And there was the experimental Type IV laser turret installed on her ventral side, giving her 360 degrees of fire from the two high-powered emitters.

And this new *Enterprise*—along with the handful of other *Yorktown*-class ships being recommissioned—would need it. They were to be a new breed of space fighter carriers, forward-deployed in small, self-sustaining task groups, part of Starfleet's new mobilization effort. The *Enterprise* would be the first, followed by the *Lexington*, and several months from now, the *Oriskany*. Even the *Yorktown* herself would join her sisters. Starfleet hadn't had the time to commission whole new classes, and with the other member races devoid of capital ships, the old *Yorktown* class—much like the smaller *Daedalus* class—had been resurrected from the dead for just that purpose.

And now she had her crew. Captain Coombs looked at them, young and old—representing not only a dozen Federation races but, he was sure, the very best Starfleet had to offer. Each was busy at their station, making sure everything was in order before they fired up the impulse engines for the first time in nearly three months. But this was no simple test to see if they worked. This time the *Enterprise* was getting underway, the first time in over a decade, and the pride-filled crew was going to make sure it went off without a hitch.

*Damn good people.*

"Captain," the voice of the ship's first officer, Commander Chris Pinkerton, said from the starboard side of the circular command center. "We're nearly ready."

Coombs held up a hand. "As you were, Chris. I'm in no great hurry. The *Lexington* won't be in position to enter the dock for another day. We've got time."

"Of course, sir." The commander smiled, then turn to regard the bridge as if it were the first time. "I think she's going to turn out all right, sir," he said with approval.

"You've got a knack for understatement, Commander. Tell me, has there been any word from Starfleet Tactical?"

Pinkerton nodded. "Yes. Just this morning, in fact. They've assured us our new fighter wing will be ready as soon as we are. The pilots are doing well, as far as I can see from their efficiency reports. I'll have them sent down to your quarters."

"Excellent. And Commander Chambers?"

Chris smiled. "Carl's down in engineering. I think he's still ogling the new warp core."

Captain Coombs nodded slowly. "I have half a mind to join him."

"I'll keep everything in order here until you get back, sir."

Coombs patted the first officer on the shoulder, too quickly for anyone else present to notice—not that it mattered. The bond between the two had been nearly instantaneous since they'd first met a year before. Then again, so had Coombs's relationship with a great number of the *Enterprise's* officers—and Chief Engineer Carl Chambers had been no different. "I'm sure you will, Chris." With that, Ellis made his way to the starboard turbo elevator.

# Chapter 10

Stardate 15406.15

June 2154

"Captain's log: supplemental. We've arrived at the edge of system B-117 ahead of schedule and have reduced speed on our way to Outer System Defense Outpost 5. The frigate *Yarnton* is on her way out to greet us, and she'll be a welcome sight. We haven't laid eyes on another Starfleet vessel since we departed the inner core of Federation worlds two weeks ago, and the thought of comingling with another crew has everyone on board the *Ajax* more animated than usual. I have to admit, I'm feeling it a bit myself."

"Captain Durbin," Commander Garrett announced from the tactical station. "Federation starship approaching. It's the *Yarnton*."

"Understood," Chasin said. "Communications officer, open a channel."

"Channel open, sir," Lieutenant Cordeiro replied. "I've got Captain Shrena."

"Put her through." The image on the main viewer changed from the boxy, *Degbaxis*-class Tellarite frigate to the vessel's control room. Captain Durbin had never seen the interior of a Tellarite vessel before, and from what little he could see of it now, he hoped he'd never have to serve on one. The compartment appeared hexagonal in shape, crammed with monitors, with angled consoles on each wall, and a single turbo elevator taking up the aft bulkhead. There was no central command chair, and it appeared that Captain Shrena was herself manning a station not unlike the other three Tellarites in Chasin's view.

"Captain Durbin, I presume," the soft, feminine voice of the snout-nosed captain sang pleasantly.

"Captain Shrena," Chasin replied with a warm smile.

"Welcome to B-117, Captain. On behalf of OSDO 5, I send you greetings. We've been ordered to escort you to the station."

"Understood, Captain. The *Ajax* will take up station beside you."

"Very well. It's nice to have the *Ajax* here, finally."

Durbin cocked his head in surprise. "Something I should know about, Captain?"

The Tellarite nodded, her deep-set opal eyes unblinking. "Then you haven't heard?"

Chasin shook his head subtly.

"Three days ago, two Vulcan frigates departed OSDO 5 on a routine patrol of a nearby sector. They encountered two Romulan vessels of nearly equal mass. The Romulans made short work of one of the vessels—no survivors recovered. The other ship, the *V'len*, managed to escape, but not unscathed. Nearly half her crew was lost in the engagement. We feared the worst—that the Romulans would follow the *V'len* back to the station and attack us. So far, they've not been seen since."

Captain Durbin nodded. "How many other vessels are there at the station now?"

"The *V'len* is undergoing repairs, but spare parts are all but nonexistent out here in the border regions. The Vulcans have a *Surka*-class starship on the way to relieve her, but they're still a week out. The Andorians have two *Taholsin* destroyers, and we Tellarites have only the *Yarnton*. The *Ajax* will be the first United Earth vessel assigned to this base, and by far the most powerful."

"Which means we'll be called upon first if there's any trouble," Chasin retorted.

What little the female Tellarite could smile, she did. "I do not envy you that task, Captain. But I will do my best to ensure that the *Yarnton* is up to the task of lending a hand."

"I'm sure you will, Captain. I've taken the liberty of going over some of your previous reports and logs. The *Yarnton* has certainly seen her fair share of action, and been quite successful in them."

"Luck and a good crew will give you such results," she joked.

"Amen to that."

"I only wish it weren't necessary. Starfleet was chartered as a primarily scientific armada, not a battle fleet. I, for one, would very much like to see it return to its roots."

Chasin nodded in full agreement. "As would I, Captain."

"Have you heard anything concerning the peace delegation sent into Romulan space?"

"No," Chasin was unhappy to report. "They're three weeks overdue for their report to the Federation Council. And, with the automated probes we sent out still unanswered, Starfleet Command has no choice but to fear the worst at this point. They've deployed several more cruisers to the border areas in hopes of curtailing further aggressions, but from what you've just told me about the Vulcans' scuffle, it may be too little too late."

Captain Shrena nodded slowly. "Still, it is a wise precaution. And the protection of B-117 is our responsibility."

Chasin nodded in understanding. "It is. We may find ourselves acting as a link in a very long chain of defensive outposts if the situation with the Romulans becomes worse."

"And with the *Ajax* here, I'm sure we will be more than ready."

"Thank you, Captain Shrena. Your words do my ship and crew honor."

"Your record speaks well of both, Captain," she smiled. "I, too, have been doing some studying."

"Of course," he said with a subtle smile. "We'll come alongside and follow you to the station."

"Understood, Captain. *Yarnton* out."

\* \* \*

"Commodore Riddle, it's a pleasure, sir." Taking the commodore's hand in his own, Captain Durbin shook it firmly.

"And you as well, Captain Durbin. I trust your journey to OSDO 5 was uneventful?"

"Uneventful, sir? It was downright monotonous," Chasin joked. "Not even a minor course correction was required to get here."

"Well, I'd like to think the tedium will continue, but I fear we're all in for a fight sooner or later."

Durbin nodded in Captain Shrena's direction at the far end of the reception hall. "Captain Shrena informed me about what happened to the Vulcan vessels a few weeks ago."

"Yes," Robert Riddle said with a troubled expression. "Terrible what happened to them. The ship that was destroyed was the *Solok*. I knew her captain well. A good man . . . would've had a fine career in Starfleet. As it was . . . well . . . it was cut too short."

"And the *V'len*?"

"Being repaired as we speak." The commodore then waved his half-empty flute of champagne around the colorfully decorated hall. "Most of their crew isn't even here. Too busy tending to their ship, and all."

"Vulcan pride, sir, is well-documented."

"Yes," Riddle said before taking a slow drink. "Ever worked with them before?"

"A few times," Chasin said. He caught a rather attractive lieutenant's eye for a moment, but then lost her in a crowd of Andorians. "Not as much as others."

"For the most part, they're not all that different from us."

Captain Durbin chuckled. "Don't let *them* hear you say that."

Riddle expelled a brief chortle. "Oh, on the surface they're cool . . . collected. They may even come off like walking computers at times. But underneath, you can see it in their eyes."

"What's that, Commodore?"

"Feelings . . . ones of love, pain, regret . . ."

"And?"

The commodore examined his glass for a long moment before responding. "And revenge. And they'll have it, too, if given half the chance."

"The Romulans."

"Not just them, Captain. Anyone. Vulcans are nothing if not efficient. You can be sure that when they do you in, it'll be with as little or as much pain as necessary to get the job done."

Durbin, feeling an odd chill, denoted a sense of pride in the commodore's words. "You approve, then?"

The commodore let out a heavy sigh. "I *understand*, Captain. An altogether different thing."

"Yes, sir."

But Commodore Riddle could see beyond the well-mannered captain's exterior. Some would even say he had a gift for it, which is



why no one ever had a short conversation with the man. “What do you know about the Romulans, Chasin?”

“Aside from the official reports, sir, nothing. I thought that was why the *Ajax* was out here.”

“Having a cruiser out here, especially one as new as the *Ajax*, is a huge morale boost, Captain. No question of that. Nor is there any doubt about her scientific and exploration capabilities, things that indeed are at the very core of what it means to be a Starfleet officer. And, I should point out, the same goes where her captain and crew are concerned, I can assure you. However, any discoveries we make out here from this point on are purely secondary to our primary objective.”

“Sir?”

“The Romulans, Captain. I mean to stop their incursions into our space in this sector, and the *Ajax* is the linchpin that will ensure that.”

“But—the council,” Chasin said in bewilderment. “We can’t just—”

“Can’t just what, Captain? Go after them like they’ve gone after us? Decimate their forces the same as they’ve done ours? Oh, I think we can.”

Captain Durbin had felt the same way, even if he’d never acted on those feelings. Ever since the destruction of the forces at Delta VII, nearly everyone in Starfleet worthy of the uniform felt it. “But, without authorization from Starfleet . . . is it the right thing to do? Morally speaking.”

Riddle looked around the room once more, his eyes falling on the officers from a half-dozen races. “Look around, Captain. What do you see here?”

As if taking in the scene for the first time, the captain did just that. The semicircular hall was perhaps fifty meters long, and just over half as wide. Draped from the ceiling were the brightly colored flags of the five founding members of the Federation—Tellar, Vulcan, Terra, Alpha Centauri, and Andor. And each was symbolized by at least one starship at the station. Their crews, while not huddled beneath their respective banners, would nonetheless occasionally glance skyward. There were a few dozen transparent circular tables strewn about, each emblazoned with the arched insignia of OSDO 5. A large buffet

was in the back of the room, filled with delicacies from each of the worlds.

"Looks almost like a political conference," Durbin said as he turned back to the commodore.

"Yes, it does very much, indeed," Riddle said with approval.

That was when it all came together in Durbin's mind. "This was Starfleet's idea, wasn't it?"

"How so?" the commodore asked, evidently pleased with himself.

"Look at this," he said, waving his arm about the hall. "The Federation Council would never unanimously agree to go to war with Romulans without unambiguous data from their field commanders."

Riddle raised a nearly empty glass to the officers milling about, but none noticed. "And we've got some of their finest here, I assure you. Captain, what you're seeing here is the very tip of what many believe will shortly become a very long, very potent spear in this quadrant."

"A battle group?"

Riddle nodded with pride once again. "OSDSO 5 has the singular distinction of being the command and control station for the First Combined Fleet."

Chasin was beside himself. "Admiral Grooms?"

"Is on her way as we speak, with ten more starships from the member races represented here this evening."

"But the peace delegation the ambassadors sent into Romulan space . . . nearly a hundred people—"

"—are dead," the commodore replied quietly. "Murdered, without ever having delivered their message of peace."

Another chill ran up Chasin's spine. "Starfleet is sure of it?"

The commodore somberly nodded, sipping at his drink once more before continuing. "Starfleet Intelligence notified all forward-deployed base commanders two days ago. So you see . . . that word that's floating around in your mind . . . the one everyone's too afraid to say, but that we all know is coming . . . it's very nearly upon us."

Durbin's mouth went dry as he spoke it. "War."

"There's very little to stop it at this point. Anything else the Romulans do from here on out will only expedite the process. And, given their propensity for aggression, it's only a matter of time."

"And Starfleet believes the Romulans will attack here first?"

"There's no telling. Starfleet Intelligence is giving OSDO 5 a fifty-fifty chance that a major offensive will take place somewhere near here in the next two weeks. Thus, the pending arrival of Admiral Grooms and her forces."

It was nearly too much for Durbin to take in at once. "And . . . our orders, sir?"

"Keep the line until they get here, no matter the cost, Captain."

Suddenly remembering the drink in his hand, Durbin downed it in a quick gulp. "Suddenly I don't feel much like partying."

Commodore Riddle placed a firm hand on his shoulder. "I thought not. Most of the crews here know very little about what's going on. But inviting them all here to celebrate your arrival gave me a good excuse to get all the commanding officers in the same place without raising too many suspicions. Starfleet is still keeping the majority of their movements under the proverbial radar, and I'm intent on keeping the status quo . . . to a certain extent."

"Sir?"

"I never believed in keeping my commanders in the dark, Chasin. Their crews are their own responsibility, but the commanders are mine. If I'm to order them into battle, they're going to know full well what they're up against, and Starfleet can court-martial me after the fact 'til they turn blue in the face."

Nodding, but still processing the information, Chasin tried to smile.

"Come on, Captain. Let's get Captain Shrena and the others away from here as discreetly as possible. I've got some things to show all of you, and they've waited far too long as it is."

\* \* \*

Stardate 15409.28

"Captain Ericksen, we're within visual range of the Calvert Array."

Nodding, Ericksen, leaning over Chief Engineer Eberhard's station on the bridge of the cruiser *Hamburg*, turned to his sensor officer. "Put it on the main viewer, please, Mr. Davis."

Launched nearly a decade ago, the deep space communications array had stopped broadcasting nearly two weeks ago for no apparent reason. The cruiser *Merlin*—an identical *Lincoln* class to the *Hamburg*—had been dispatched to investigate and repair the array. However, the damage was far more severe than anticipated, and the *Hamburg* had been ordered to ferry a new array into position.

When the image of the array appeared on the view screen, Captain Ericksen wasn't surprised a replacement had been ordered. Two of the four backup solar arrays were missing, and a third was heavily damaged. The fusion reactor, capable of providing the assembly with power for decades, was now a shattered shell, its highly radioactive core leaking a trail of noxious green particles. The main transmitter antenna appeared to be in one piece, but several of the smaller dishes had been crushed. Just beyond the array, the cruiser *Merlin* was keeping a safe distance.

"Lieutenant Martin, hail the *Merlin*."

"Aye sir," the communications officer replied.

"Speculation, Mr. Davis?"

The *Hamburg's* first officer, Commander Fred Davis, studied the visual intently from the science console before responding. "Could be the result of a meteor shower. According to astrogation records, one passed through here not too long ago."

"You don't believe the station came under attack, then?"

Davis shook his head. "I don't think so, sir. However, it's hard to discern facts through all the radiation. Visual scans show no evidence of weapons scarring, and there're multiple impact cavities along the entire length of the array."

"So, unless the Romulans are throwing rocks, this looks natural."

Davis nodded. "I believe so."

"Captain Ericksen," Tom Martin said from the communications console to the left of the view screen. "I've got Captain Berglowe of the *Merlin*. Audio and visual."

"On screen, Lieutenant."

The image of the damaged array was replaced by what was almost a mirror of the *Hamburg's* bridge. The only discernable difference was the yellow railings that lined the upper portion of the command deck.

Martin much preferred the blue of his bridge. Sitting in the command chair, the salt-and-peppered Captain Sven Berglowe smiled back.

"Captain Berglowe," Ericksen began, "what's a nice captain like you doing all the way out here?"

"Good to see you, Tom," Berglowe snorted jovially. "Sorry to pull you all the way out into the boonies. I really wish we could have done something to repair the Calvert Array."

"By the looks of it, it's a miracle the array is here at all."

Berglowe nodded. "We've been babysitting this thing for a few days, watching it leak more and more radiation each passing hour. I had an emergency repair team beam over three days ago, but there was nothing they could do. In fact, half the team is still in decontamination in sickbay."

"I don't doubt it. Prognosis?"

"My first officer, Commander Charles, took the worst of it when his suit was torn open. The doctor says he'll pull through, but there's been some cellular damage."

"Sorry to hear that, Captain," Ericksen said with understanding. "Were they able to download the station's logs?"

"Some of them. The onboard computer was pretty banged up."

"And you've had time to decode them?"

Sven nodded, his face showing concern. "From what we can tell, Calvert was the target of a meteor strike."

"That jives with what my science officer can see. A force of nature."

"Uh huh," Berglowe said doubtfully.

"And that bothers you?"

"Not in itself, no. However, the onboard computer also recorded that the array attempted to correct its own course to avoid the meteors."

"It doesn't seem like it was successful."

"That's the problem. From the data we were able to mine from the damaged core, it appears that it *was* successful."

"That doesn't make any sense," Ericksen replied, his curiosity piqued.

"Exactly why we've been holding station close to the array, despite the radiation readings."

"You suspect some kind of foul play?"

Berglowe shrugged. "All I know is that two days ago we received communique directly from Starfleet Intelligence advising us to hold our position and not to attempt to re-board the array under any circumstances."

"But communications arrays fall under the privy of Galaxy Exploration Command, not Intelligence."

"Unless someone is using the array covertly. And we have no proof either way."

Sighing heavily, Ericksen bobbed his head. "Well, whatever they were using it for, they won't be able to continue doing so until we get the new array deployed. Once we position the new subspace transmitter, we'll take the Calvert Array in tow. Maybe the technicians at Outpost 3 can figure it out."

"The sooner the better, Captain," Berglowe agreed. "We'll stand by to assist you as necessary. *Merlin* out." The screen blanked, replaced once again by the damaged array and the Starfleet cruiser beyond.

"Commander Davis, get down to the cargo bay. Prep the new transmitter for deployment. Let's send it on her way and get out of here."

"Aye, sir."

# Chapter 11

On the bridge of the *Hamburg*, Captain Tom Ericksen watched the main viewer with anticipation as the *Merlin* deployed the replacement subspace transmitter. With the rear hangar doors parted, the interior of the *Lincoln*-class cruiser's bay was clearly visible. Surrounded by floodlights, the faceted communications array lifted gently from the deck as the internal gravity to the compartment was shut down. Propelled by small thrusters, it glided gracefully from the *Merlin*, a series of antennae unfolding from the facets as the new antenna moved into position. A moment later, two more pods took off from the *Merlin* and linked up with the first. Once connected, these outer two modules deployed their faster-than-light amplifier dishes and antenna masts. In seconds, the navigation lights on the array began to flash in sequence, and Ericksen knew they were in business.

"Communications, hail the *Merlin*." A moment later, the image of Captain Berglowe appeared on the screen. "Sven, is everything up and running?"

Berglowe nodded. "Seems so. We've just powered up the new array and we're already seeing a large deal of bandwidth allocation."

"Looks like someone had a really important call to make."

"I guess so," Berglowe chuckled. "We're making preparations to take the old Calvert Array in tow, unless you'd care to volunteer for the job yourself?"

"Thanks for the offer, *Merlin*, but I think we'll be much happier providing escort duties."

"Understood. We'll extend our shields around the array once the tractor beam is attached. That should filter out some of the radiation and alleviate any problems with your sensors or communications. But since it'll be in our bubble, you'll be the one responsible for radioing our success to Starfleet Command."

Tom smiled. "I promise not to take the credit for the *Merlin's* hard work."

"Never crossed my mind, Captain. *Merlin* out."

Once the screen had changed back to the stern view of the *Merlin*, Ericksen watched as the cruiser's bright blue tractor beam sprang out from the underside of the secondary hull. A moment later the cruiser had the array in tow and her shields up. "Mr. Martin, has communications cleared up?"

Martin nodded. "Yes, sir. Considerably."

"Very good," the captain replied as he turned to the science officer. "Sensor report, Mr. Davis?"

"Short-range sensors show no unusual readings. Switching to long-range sensors, lateral and ventral arrays."

Waiting patiently for the sensor readout, Ericksen watched as the helmsman brought the *Hamburg* astern and slightly below the *Merlin*. "Nice and easy, helm. We don't want to get too close."

"Sir," Martin announced in surprise, "long-range sensors are reporting two contacts bearing down on us fast."

"What?"

"Confirmed, sir. Two *U*-type Romulan warships heading this way at full impulse."

"Time to intercept?"

"Four minutes."

"Red alert! All hands to battle stations!"

"Why didn't we see them before?" Lieutenant Steven Rowley asked from the helm.

Martin was quick to respond. "Probably the radiation from the damaged communications array."

"Regardless, we can see them now. Let's hope it's not too late. Communications, can you raise the *Merlin*?"

"I've got them, sir, but the channel is weak."

"On screen." The image wavered, then filled with crisscrossed lines of static and interference. Captain Berglowe's face was hardly discernable in all the chaos. "Sven, are you receiving?"

"Barely," the static-lined voice came back.

"Sven, there're Romulans heading this way! Release the array and get to a defensive posture!"

The garbled image of Berglowe looked puzzled for a moment, then his eyes went wide—as if it took a few seconds for his brain to decipher the broken message. The image then abruptly blanked out.



"Communications, did we lose transmission?"

"Negative, sir. It was cut off at the source."

On the screen, Tom watched as the *Merlin* did as she was instructed. Releasing the damaged communications array, she raised her shields once more. "Helm, bring us to bear on the Romulans. We need to take the fight far enough away from the radiation to make communications between us the *Merlin* tenable."

"Aye, sir," Rowley replied. "Coming about to heading 144–mark-7. Speed: one-half impulse."

"Time to intercept the Romulans now sixty seconds," Davis called out from the science station.

"Weapon status?"

"Lasers and accelerator cannons online," Lieutenant Rowley said as he turned on the tracking and targeting sensors. "Fusion missiles one through ten are green, missiles eleven through sixteen are fueling. Short-range plasma cannons are online and at your command."

"The *Merlin*?"

"Coming around to our stern, Captain," Davis said. "Romulans are within range of our lasers."

"Fire forward laser batteries!"

Jets of white-hot energy shot out of the ball-shaped forward hulls of both the *Merlin* and the *Hamburg* nearly simultaneously. But the Romulans were too agile, dodging the beams as they moved away from one another. Continuing on their trajectory, they flanked the closely formed Federation starships, each firing beams from their forward batteries. The blasts intended for *Merlin* missed, but the *Hamburg* was struck on its starboard side, its shields flaring for a split second under the impact.

"Damage to the starboard nacelle!" Chief Engineer Keava yelled from the damage control console.

"Transfer power to the starboard shields!" Captain Berglowe replied over the ruckus on the bridge of the *Merlin*. "Keep as much power to the defensive systems as possible! Weapons officer, are the Romulans still in range?"

"Almost, sir!"

"The Romulan vessels have crossed paths and are swinging around," Lieutenant Commander Attard said from the science console.

"Helm, high-energy turn to starboard. Pursuit course." In response, everyone on the bridge shifted sideways as the inertial dampeners tried in vain to keep up with the ship's erratic movements.

"Coming hard around, sir!" the helmsman called, gripping his station with all his strength.

"Starboard nacelle power is fluctuating rapidly," Keava called out in response to the heavy vibrations being felt by the crew.

Just as Captain Berglowe was about to call for a rerouting of power, the *Merlin* leveled off with the Romulan directly in her field of fire. "Mr. Medina, open fire on the Romulan vessel!"

Nodding, Mike Medina complied with everything in the *Merlin's* arsenal. The first to fire was the plasma cannons as a half-dozen blue-white blobs of energy raced out toward the Romulan. At their extreme range, they dissipated just before reaching the target. However, the follow-up blasts from the primary laser cannons and the accelerator rounds hit their mark. The Romulan's shields flared under the onslaught, then faded completely.

"Target's shields are down," Daniel Attard called triumphantly from the science console. "Minor damage to their hull. The two Romulan warships are continuing on their respective courses and will cross paths in a few seconds."

"They're running circles around us," Berglowe said in frustration. *We need to get the upper hand.* "Helmsman, as soon as the Romulans cross one another, I want you to perform another high-energy turn. Get us behind one of those ships."

"Sir," Keava began in protest from the damage control console. "The impulse engines are stressed enough as it is. We've also got some minor buckling in the starboard warp pylon. If we strain the ship too much, the integrity field in that section might not hold."

"Understood, Chief. But if we don't turn the tide of this engagement, the Romulans are going to pick us apart piece by piece until the starboard pylon is the only thing left! Divert power to the integrity field from the long-range sensors. We don't need them right now."

"And if more Romulans decide to come in and help their friends?" Attard asked from the science console.

"Nothing we can do about it," the captain finished as the two Romulans on the screen passed each other once again. "Now, helm! Hard to port!"

Both the *Merlin* and the *Hamburg* tightly turned once again, each taking aim at one of the Romulans. But the Romulans were able to outmaneuver the Federation opponents once again. Pivoting on their axes, they returned fire with blasts of disruptive energy. Their first salvos toward the Starfleet vessels missed as the Federation captains began turning the Romulan maneuvers against them. But the Romulans were quick to exploit Starfleet's inexperience in space combat. A combined series of energy blasts from both enemy vessels brought the *Merlin's* shields down completely.

On the bridge of the stricken Starfleet vessel, the weapons control console exploded violently, sending Lieutenant Medina flailing across the bridge to land in a crumpled pile below the science officer's station.

"Mike!" Captain Berglowe called out, then leapt from the command chair and down to the deck. Quickly examining Medina, Sven could see that the young man was still alive, but badly burned on his face and neck.

"Casualty reports coming from decks two, three, and four, sir," the communications officer said frantically.

There was little time to worry about that, however. The Romulans were sure to exploit the situation soon. "Ensign, get a medical team up here right away. And call up Lieutenant Medina's relief!"

"The *Merlin's* shields are down, sir!" Fred Davis called out from the *Hamburg's* science station. "That Romulan targeted her bridge!"

"Life readings?" Captain Ericksen asked in horror.

"Structural damage appears to have been minor, and there are still life signs present."

Captain Ericksen had had enough of the cat and mouse game. It was time to be the aggressor, and he knew precisely how to do it. Both Romulans were about to have their backs to the Federation starships

for a brief moment, and Ericksen was going to take full advantage of it. "Lock fusion missile on the Romulan with the previous shield damage. We're going to give them back some of their own medicine!"

"Fusion missiles locked," Rowley called from the helm.

"Helm, full rotation to starboard! Bring the missile launchers to bear on the Romulan. Once they're clear, fire the upper laser cannons!"

The *Hamburg* responded deftly to the requested maneuver. Pivoting to starboard, the fusion missile launchers—built into the spine on the engineering hull between the warp nacelles, were now pointing directly at the Romulan warship. In sequence, the launch doors sprang open, and from each of the ten tubes a single warhead was launched. Considered too slow for practical combat by many, Ericksen knew that at nearly point blank range they would be devastating to the Romulan vessel. As the blue-flamed missiles reached out, many of them missed the more agile enemy vessel. But two found their target, and the ensuing explosion gave Ericksen and the rest of the bridge crew the satisfaction they were looking for. The Romulan ship was knocked clear off course, and the bright green tips of the wings were now faded to a dull gray. The follow-on blast from the *Hamburg's* laser cannons confirmed that the enemy's shields were down as a line of destruction was carved from bow to stern in the bottom of the enemy vessel—the painted bird on the bottom sliced open like a Thanksgiving turkey. Seconds later, the vessel exploded brilliantly.

"One enemy vessel destroyed!" Daniel Attard said from the science station.

Captain Berglowe smirked at the image of the dying Romulan ship on the view screen. "Good job, Ericksen," he whispered softly, then turned his attentions to the other Romulan warship. "Status of our target, Mr. Attard?"

"Their shields are down, but all other systems appear to be functioning. They've changed course."

"Probably trying to weasel their way out of here."

"Confirmed," Attard agreed. "If they maintain their heading, they'll go back the way they came in the system."

"Toward Romulan space," Berglowe nodded. "I don't plan on letting them get that far."

"Nor does the *Hamburg*, it seems," Attard said with a smile from his console. "She's coming alongside."

"Message received from the *Hamburg*," the ensign said from the communications console. "Captain Ericksen is requesting to know if we require any assistance."

"I think it's time to end this once and for all. Advise Captain Ericksen that we'll be flanking the Romulan vessel in an attempt to make her stand down."

"Aye, sir. Sending."

As he took the *Merlin* to port, the *Hamburg* swung to the starboard side of the Romulan vessel. The enemy vessel was fast, but the Federation cruisers were easily able to keep up with her at full impulse. They hung back slightly, keeping the Romulan constantly in their combined field of fire.

"Communications, try to hail the Romulan commander. Advise him to stand down his weapons. He's got no escape. If he agrees to come with us to Outpost 5, he and his crew will be treated fairly."

"Sending now, sir."

But there was little time to wait for a response. Upper hatches on the Romulan ship opened—much like the fusion missile launchers on the *Hamburg* had—and three missiles were quickly launched. Two went wild, missing the Federation starships completely. The third hit the stern of the *Merlin*, buckling the shields near the aft shuttlebay and sending a trail of sparks shooting from the starship's stern.

"I believe we've got our answer," Berglowe said as he tightly gripped his command chair's armrests. "Weapons officer, fire main laser cannons at the enemy vessel. Let's see if that changes his mind."

Even after the blasts took down the Romulan shields, the enemy commander was still defiant. Another salvo of missiles were fired—but this time all four of the rockets missed. This time the *Hamburg* was the one to return fire with her short-range plasma cannons. The blue bolts pummeled the port wing of the Romulan vessel, sending

what was likely the warp nacelle on that side spiraling away from the hull.

"Hail them again," Sven said, hoping that the Romulan commander would see reason. The Romulan appeared to be spinning out of control, but when its bow was pointed at the *Hamburg*, it fired a laser blast that managed to penetrate the starship's already-compromised shields. As it struck the underside of the spherical primary hull, the Federation starship broke off from her attack run.

"Damage to the *Hamburg's* impulse drive," Commander Attard confirmed from the *Merlin's* science station. "She's moving off."

Sven was at a loss to understand the Romulan commander. *Why throw his life away? What was the point?* "Weapons officer, return fire. Accelerator cannons only."

The warhead-tipped magnetically accelerator rounds launched from the cruiser with little more than a slight reverberation under Captain Berglowe's feet. Their detonation, while small, was enough to tear the Romulan to pieces. In seconds, all that was left was a mass of twisted metal fragments.

Downcast at the outcome, Berglowe sighed heavily at the waste. "Scan for survivors."

Attard commanded the sensors to perform three full sweeps, but he reported nothing was located. Not even a body could be found in the debris field.

"Is it possible the ships are automated?" the captain asked in confusion.

"Not likely, sir. I was getting definitive life readings from the vessel before its destruction."

Captain Berglowe frowned at the debris field. "Puzzling. Still, I'd like to collect some of the fragments. Maybe it'll give some insights to the teams and Fleet Research."

"I wouldn't mind getting a look at them myself," Attard agreed.

"Then snap to it, Commander. Let's collect as much as we can and get back to Outpost 4. With the *Merlin's* impulse damaged and the need for us to tow the Calvert Array back ourselves, it's going to be a long journey that I'd like to start as soon as possible."

"Aye, sir."

Stardate 15502.16

February 2155

"Now, isn't this much nicer than sitting in that cramped stateroom of yours, *Captain*?"

Thomas Davidson, enjoying the last few days of leave before he'd have to report back to the cruiser *Agamemnon*, couldn't agree more. While many of his contemporaries had already been recalled to their respective vessels, Thomas and his wife had agreed to move from their home on Jupiter Station to OSDO 2, where his new assignment as captain of the *Agamemnon* waited. As such, the choice of how to get himself and his wife to the starbase was mostly left to the captain. Seizing the opportunity, he'd booked passage for the two aboard the luxury star liner SS *Diana*, with OSDO 2 being the ship's last port of call before heading back to the core worlds of the Federation.

Lying back on the deck chair near the edge of the pool, surrounded by a small selection of families representing the *Diana*'s 400 passengers, Thomas looked to the endless panorama of stars beyond the enormous transparent aluminum bubble atop the vessel. "Everything with you is nicer, dear," Thomas sighed as the stars slowly shifted. *Must be making a course correction*. As if rewarded for his correct deduction, a planetoid quickly swung into view. The *Diana* was likely hundreds of thousands of kilometers distant from it, but even at this distance Thomas could easily make out the swirls of white clouds high above a dominantly green landscape. The explorer in him wondered what world it was, while the passenger in him told him not to care and to simply enjoy the unobstructed view. In the end, it was the passenger who marveled in it. *Besides*, he guessed, *it's probably got a methane atmosphere*.

Reaching across the small divide between the two chairs, Thomas took hold of his wife's hand. It was cool and damp to the touch.

"You worried about something?" he asked. "Your hands only get clammy when you've got something troubling you."

"Just a little uneasy, that's all," Sarah replied warily. "I keep thinking we should have an official escort or something."

"We're well away from the disputed region of space, honey. Heck, even the Zone of Transport Escort is light-years away. There's no need to have Starfleet here. Besides," he said, pulling her hand to his lips for a brief kiss, "it'd just needlessly worry the passengers. We're here to relax. We'll have plenty of time to worry when we get to OSD0 2. At least they're much closer to the border."

"Gee," she replied with great sarcasm, "that makes me feel so much better."

"Don't worry," he said, pivoting his body to sit up. "How about I get you another drink? One of those Rigelian cocktails, perhaps?"

Smiling, she nodded. But when she turned her eyes up to her husband, Thomas could see they were looking at something over his shoulder. What's more, her visage of pleasure had morphed into one of confusion. Perplexed, he turned his gaze to match hers. Out in space, from the far side of the green planet slowly drifting away from the *Diana*, three small shapes were moving toward the liner. At first they appeared as stars, but they were moving in the wrong direction. As they began to take shape, Thomas quickly realized they were ships, too close in formation to be Starfleet. He was suddenly filled with a sense of dread.

As the shapes became more defined, he could see a distinct green glow from the forward-swept wings. Having seen more than a few recorded sensor logs in the last few months, he knew immediately that they were Romulan vessels. Quickly reaching down, he grabbed his wife's hand and hauled her to her feet. "Let's go!" As the two took off in a sprint for the nearest turbo elevator, the first bolts of energy from the Romulan warship reached the helpless passenger liner, shattering the protective dome over the pool.



# Chapter 12

Stardate 15506.10

"Captain, we're receiving a distress signal from one of our marker buoys in Sector 5-K."

The Tellarite Captain Jollond quickly pivoted in his command chair to face the communications officer. "Another one? That's the third this week."

"Yes, sir. Indications are that it's under attack."

"Another ghost chase, I imagine," Jollond snorted. In the previous two encounters, the *Degbaxis*-class warships *Glogak* and *Teth* had found nothing when they'd arrived at the buoys' last reported positions. That they were being attacked was without doubt. But although Jollond and his crew had yet to find the perpetrators of the destruction, there was little question who was responsible. "Romulans," the captain all but spat in disgust.

"A likely possibility," Commander Floyd Dorsey reported from the science station. "We're close to their suspected space."

"And the Federation has made it abundantly clear to them that this is *our* space, Commander. That was the purpose of the marker buoys. That the Romulans should so blatantly defy them is a testament to their audacity." Jollond turned away from his first officer in frustration and back to the stars on the main viewer. "It is not within their rights to claim all that is within their view, nor do they have the right to deliberately destroy as they see fit."

Floyd could well understand Captain Jollond's frustrations. It'd been nearly six months since a surprise attack by the then-unknown aliens had killed the captain's family during a raid. And in those six months, Jollond had vowed to destroy every Romulan warship he encountered, Starfleet orders be damned. That the *Glogak* and her sister ship had yet to come upon one was the source of the captain's current frustrations. When the captain ordered the ship to come about at red alert and set a course for the marker buoy, it came as no surprise to anyone on the bridge.

"We'll be in range in less than sixty seconds," Dorsey reported.

"Slow to one-quarter impulse power. Prepare beams and accelerator cannons."

Even though Dorsey had reported no other craft were in the vicinity, he wasn't about to tell the captain that raising their defenses was unnecessary. As the *Glogak* dropped out of warp, the view screen was filled with nothing but the vastness of space.

"These are the correct coordinates?" the captain asked in frustration.

"Yes, sir. As you suspected, it appears the buoy was completely destroyed."

"And there's no debris, just as before? And no other contacts in the area?"

"No, sir," Dorsey said.

Jollond balled a heavy fist and smacked the armrest of his chair.

"They have eluded me once again."

"Should I deploy another marker, sir?"

There was a low growl from the captain as he stared at the empty viewer. Sighing, he finally waved a hand in Dorsey's direction. "Yes, Commander. By all means."

Just as Floyd was about to do so, a reading emerged on his long-range scope. Quickly verifying the information with the sensors, he relayed the information to the captain. "Sir, I've got a positive contact half a light-year from our position."

Jollond's reaction was instantaneous. He yanked his chair sideways to face the science officer, a scowl on his face. "Romulans?"

"I can't be sure, sir. Not at this distance."

"Then we shall close that gap. Relay the coordinates to the helm. Helmsman, set a course and engage at warp three."

Ten minutes later, as the *Glogak* once again dropped from warp, it hadn't taken long for the sensor contacts to materialize more fully on Dorsey's computer. "Sir, I'm reading six transport vessels."

"Federation?"

"Yes, sir. *Zeus*-class automated transports, to be exact. They're in a tight formation, on a heading that will take them straight to Deneva Colony."

The frustration on Jollond's face was obvious. He'd been cheated of his prize yet again. Dorsey almost wished that a Romulan would show up just to give the captain a change of mood. "They're in visual range, sir. Should I put them on the screen?"

Jollond nodded without a word.

On the screen, the six submarine-like vessels appeared. Tapered, tube-shaped things, with a sail-like control tower and emergency solar panels jutting from the rear like fins, the *Zeus* class was a workhorse of the Federation. Over a thousand were in service, with more being constructed each month. Their automation gave them the ability to transport cargo at a fraction of the cost of a manned ship, and many were used for both military and civilian purposes.

"Can you get a copy of the ships' manifests?"

"It'll take a moment, sir," Dorsey reported as he went to work at his terminal. As he did, a bright light flashed over his shoulder. Turning from his computer, he watched in horror as several blasts of energy rocketed toward one of the freighters, incinerating it in seconds. "What the—"

"Romulans," Jollond growled. "Distance to the freighters?"

"Two minutes," the helm officer responded.

"Wait until the last possible moment, then drop to one-quarter impulse!"

"Aye, sir!"

In that short time, another freighter was damaged, its cargo hold ripped open and its contents spilling out into space like a gutted beast. "Manifest coming in, sir. Mostly mining equipment and high-technology goods. However, the lead freighter is carrying medical supplies for Deneva Colony. Looks like enough inside there to build a small hospital."

That's when the helm officer piped in. "Dropping to one-quarter impulse, sir."

"Center the enemy vessel on the screen!"

The viewer shifted from the dissected freighter to the Romulan. It had a disk-shaped central section, with high-swept wings like an outstretched bird. Uniformly it was a gray-green color, except for the tips of the wings, which glowed a bright lime. From those points

another salvo of energy hurtled out toward a helpless freighter. The blasts tore open the control sail and all power on the freighter went down.

"Lock lasers on the enemy vessel!"

"Shouldn't we try and hail them?" Dorsey asked. Though he knew the captain wouldn't waste this moment, Floyd nonetheless wanted the request recorded in the bridge's constantly running digital recorder.

"Negative! We will see to the safety of Federation property. The Romulans have made their intentions clear, and have left us no choice but to retaliate."

"Lasers locked, sir!"

"Weapons officer, fire beams!"

The *Glogak's* beams raced out toward the lone Romulan vessel. Sensing the incoming attack, it was able to slip around the beams at the last moment. As it moved away from the freighters, it took aim and fired at the *Glogak*, greens beams of high-powered plasma striking her amidships. On the bridge, the crew was tossed in their seats, but each of them managed to keep their station.

"Dorsal shields down twenty percent, but holding," Dorsey called. "The *Teth* is returning fire." On the small screen afforded him, Dorsey watched as the *Teth's* beams hit their target. "Impact. The Romulan's shields are damaged. They are swinging around again, possibly for another attack run."

But Captain Jollond wasn't about to give the Romulans another target to fire at. "Move to intercept!"

"Too late, sir. They're firing on another of the freighters."

On the main screen, Dorsey and the rest watched as the Romulan sped into view of the remaining four freighters. At such a high rate of speed, the Romulan's weapons weren't successful in taking down the freighter's shields fully, but the damage had been done.

"The medical freighter's been damaged, sir. It's slowing."

"Return fire," Jollond screamed. "Draw the Romulan away from those ships."

Both the *Glogak* and the *Teth* fired their powerful laser cannons, but the Romulan was once again too agile and avoided each shot. It pivoted gracefully and returned fire on the Starfleet vessels. The

*Glogak* was hit once more and, as fate would have it, the powerful, chemically fueled warhead struck the shields just forward of the bridge. Even with the shields up, the force of the explosion knocked everyone to the deck. A handful of monitors on the *Glogak's* bridge exploded, and a fire broke out near the turbo elevator doors.

Reacting without thought, Floyd Dorsey vaulted over the bridge's upper railing to Captain Jollond, who'd been tossed facedown onto the deck beside the command chair. Turning the captain over, a brief examination of the blackened face and lifeless eyes was all that was required to tell Floyd that Captain Jollond was dead. But this was no time to grieve. The Romulan was still out there, still potent in its ability to deal death out to the rest of the Starfleet officers on the *Glogak* and the *Teth*. "Lieutenant Ta'rek, do we still have weapons control?"

"Yes, sir," the Andorian weapons officer called back.

"Communications, hail the *Teth*. Tell them that Captain Jollond is dead and that I've assumed command. Then tell them to form up on our starboard side for a coordinated attack."

"They're coming alongside now," the ensign said from the communications station a moment later.

Dashing back up to the science station, Dorsey checked the short-range readings. "Ta'rek, the Romulan is bearing 220-mark-1. I want you to fire all the weapons that are online! Communications, order the *Teth* to fire as well."

Firing split seconds apart, both Starfleet vessels opened fire on the incoming enemy vessel. Their combined laser strikes missed, but the *Glogak's* accelerator cannons found their target, as did the *Teth's*. The Romulan vessel was momentarily obscured by the force of the detonation, but it emerged a moment later on an altered course.

"Romulan's shields are down, and there's minor hull damage to their forward structure," Floyd was proud to report. "They're continuing on their new course and going around the stern of the freighters on the starboard side. Helm, stay on them."

"Aye, sir!"

"The *Teth* is coming around the port side of the freighters. Looks like we're going to catch the Romulan between us. Fire as soon as you get a weapons lock, Mr. Ta'rek."

The Romulan, though damaged, was still faster than the *Glogak*. It completed its turn around the freighters and—now nose to nose with the *Teth*—opened fire once again just as the *Teth* did the same. Each vessel struck its target. The *Teth* took damage to its port nacelle, while the unprotected Romulan was struck in the starboard wing, a large chunk of which was blown free and out into space.

"A hit, sir," Ta'rek shouted as the *Glogak* completed her turn and witnessed the *Teth's* scoring blow.

"Fire main laser batteries!" Dorsey shouted.

The *Glogak's* weapons sprang to life, and the unprotected stern of the Romulan ship lit up brilliantly under the white-hot onslaught of the forward cannons. The enemy ship then veered off course once again, heading away from both the Starfleet warships and the prized freighters and leaving a trail of sparks in her wake.

"She may be trying to escape," Ta'rek said, turning to face Commander Dorsey.

"Pursuit course, Lieutenant. I don't want to give them that chance. Communications, try to hail them. Order them to stand down or we will continue to fire."

"Aye, sir."

"The *Teth*, sir," Ta'rek said, nodding to the main viewer. On the screen, the Federation starship was just coming into view. With its systems mostly undamaged, it was able to make better speed than the *Glogak*.

"Communications, have the *Teth* fire a warning shot across the enemy's bow. Maybe that'll slow them down."

After the ensign had relayed the order, Dorsey and the rest watched as the starship did as she was told. A single warhead sped out of the ship and passed within a few hundred meters of the enemy ship. The result was that the Romulan increased speed. There was little choice left to Dorsey.

"Mr. Ta'rek, target the Romulan's impulse drive section. If they don't want to slow down voluntarily, we'll make them."

"Targeted, sir. Accelerator cannons ready."

“Fire.”

Two rounds shot out from the *Glogak*. Speeding past the *Teth*, each impacted on the stern of the Romulan vessel. First there was a small explosion, indicative of a successful cannon strike. It was then quickly followed by a much larger one that enveloped the entire Romulan vessel. When the fireball faded, the warship was gone.

“Target destroyed, captain,” Ta’rek said with puzzlement.

“Don’t be too concerned about it, Lieutenant,” Dorsey replied, suddenly fatigued. Looking at the command chair for a long moment, he decided to sit in the science officer’s station. “We’ve been getting reports that the Romulans initiate their self-destruct systems when Federation vessels get too close to capturing them.”

Ta’rek scowled, then shook his head in disgust. “That they should kill so freely only to destroy themselves afterward. It smacks of cowardice and desperation.”

Floyd ran a hand through his hair, then looked around the damaged consoles of the bridge. And to Captain Jollond’s body, still lying where it had fallen. “You’ll get no argument from me.” Turning toward the sound of opened doors, Dorsey watched as a team of medical personnel poured onto the bridge, the ship’s doctor in the lead.

“Sorry we took so long,” the aging Tellarite physician began. “With the elevators down, we’ve been stuck on deck three.”

Dorsey nodded down to the deck. “Captain Jollond is dead.”

The doctor rushed to the captain’s side, waving his instruments over the body, then nodded solemnly. “We’ve got more wounded on board than sickbay can handle.”

“One of the freighters out there is ferrying medical supplies to Deneva. They’re automated, but they have several compartments set aside for use by crews. Maybe we can use some of the space to create a makeshift medical ward?”

Reaching a gentle hand out to the former captain’s forehead, the doctor bobbed his head slowly.

“I’m sorry, Doc. I know he was a friend.”

Slowly rising to his feet, the Tellarite doctor turned to Dorsey. “I’ll assemble a small team to beam over to the freighter. If we’re going

to do something, Captain, we should do it now. Most of the injured may not have long to live."

Floyd nodded. "I'll have some people from engineering beam over to assist you."

Nodding once more, the doctor motioned for two of his team to remove Captain Jollond's body from the bridge.

Turning to the communications officer, Dorsey smiled weakly. "Send a message to the *Teth*. Inform them of our plans to send some of our wounded over to the freighter. They may be able to help in the process."

"Yes, sir," the young Andorian female said.

"Engineering," Dorsey said into the intercom. "Status report?"

"Warp engines are offline," the chief engineer reported. "Two fusion reactors are down, but I think I can get one of them operational if I've got the time."

"You've got the time, Chief," Dorsey said as he looked around the damaged bridge. "What about shields?"

"I just received a report from the damage control party I sent to the bow. The generator is burnt to a crisp, and there's nothing I can do to fix it. If you're intent on engaging any Romulans, I suggest you do it stern-first for the time being."

"I'll keep that in mind."

"Lasers are online, but you've got minimal power until I can get that other fusion reactor online. Of course, impulse will be sluggish until then as well."

"Then I won't keep you, Chief. Give me an update on anything as soon as you've got one."

"Aye, sir."

"Communications officer, send a coded message to Starfleet Command. Advise them of our status, then have them direct some support ships to assist us. We're going to need some help to get home."



# Chapter 13

Stardate 15601.11

January 2156

Delegation Hall, United Federation of Planets Headquarters, Paris, Earth

Standing behind the raised podium in the center of the immense circular auditorium, Federation president Rissa Lyn looked out over the darkened room at the hundreds of delegates assembled from the still-fledgling boundaries of the United Federation of Planets. Spaced evenly throughout the hall, the resplendent flags of the founding members—as well as a half-dozen signatory ones—were draped from the ceiling, fluttering slightly in the recirculated air. As she stood, flanked by the leaders of those same founding worlds, the gentle beating of those flags was the only noise to be heard as she took in a deep breath before speaking.

"My fellow delegates, six days ago, the Starfleet orbital station at Tarod IX was suddenly and savagely attacked by the alien race known as the Romulans.

"Using horrifyingly destructive weapons of unknown type, the Romulans launched a surprise attack on station Salem One and several nearby Starfleet vessels. More than 3,000 men and women were killed in this cowardly attack. The distance to Salem One from the suspected Romulan military base in the Cheron system proves beyond *any* doubt that this attack was planned and launched several weeks ago.

"The United Federation of Planets has not initiated any hostile action against the Romulans. Time and again, we have attempted to open a dialogue with their government, but all our attempts have been forcefully rejected. Indeed, two of our diplomatic endeavors have resulted in the innocent deaths of those brave beings who sought only peaceful coexistence with the Romulans. Previous

violent encounters between our nations might have resulted from cultural misunderstandings, but the vicious attack upon Salem One, not to mention the brutal slaughtering of defenseless civilians on the passenger liner *SS Diana*, both having taken place well after diplomatic endeavors on our part unashamedly showed our willingness to a peaceful solution, proves without a doubt the Romulans' intent to wage war against the peaceful people of the Federation.

"And we have not sought war, but when we find ourselves under attack by an unreasoning foe, we have a sacred duty to defend our respective races with every means at our disposal. The Romulans will soon discover the indomitable will of not only the human race, but the combined resources of every member of the United Federation of Planets. We refuse to retreat in the face of such naked aggression. We will resist these attacks with all our strength. Together, we can and *will* stop the slaughter of our people from an enemy that knows no compunction. We must do this, for if we do not, the cost will indeed be high.

"Under the authority I've been granted as president, I have ordered that all measures be taken to provide for our defense. Our Outer System Defense Outposts have been placed on the highest alert possible, and all starships within five parsecs of space believed to be held by the Romulans have been ordered to defend Federation interests in those areas by any means possible. Starfleet shipyards, both within the inner core of the Federation as well as those near the outlying borders, have been ordered to increase production of vessels suitable to the continued deterrence of all invading alien belligerents.

"I am certain that I echo the sentiments of the Federation Assembly and of the people of the Federation when I say we will defend ourselves from this menace and will insure that such aggression will never endanger our worlds again, be it the current Romulan threat, or any other faction that believes they are free to exact judgment on those who have done them no ill.

"I hereby ask the Federation Assembly and the Federation Council to formally declare that—as of this stardate—a state of war should now exist between the United Federation of Planets and the Romulan Empire.

"This is not a decision that has been made lightly. This is not a decision that should be glorified nor be vilified. But this is something that must come to pass. To ensure the very sustainability of our new peaceful way of life, we have been forced into conflict. And it is a conflict we must win, or else face the consequence of not only invasion, but of utter and total decimation.

"My fellow delegates, as members of the United Federation of Planets, I ask that you stand with me, and that we do as we promised on Babel not so very long ago—that we will stand together, in moments of triumph and in those of adversity, for only by doing so will we continue to stand. Thank you."

As she stepped back from the podium, there was a palpable moment of utter silence in the hall. Again, only the fluttering of the high-flung flags could be heard. But it was only a moment, instantly shattered by the resounding applause from the entire assembly. Many stood to their feet, quickly joined by the others. After a full ten minutes, the entire assembly returned to their seats—save for Ambassador Abraham Dannon, the head delegate for the Federation Council. Although only slightly over five feet tall, the soft-spoken middle-aged man with a graying mustache stood with his blue eyes sparkling in the overhead lights. And the weight of that kind but imposing stare was not lost on President Lyn.

"The Federation Assembly recognizes Ambassador Abraham Dannon of the Federation Council," Rissa said with a nod. "Ambassador, you have something to say?"

"Madam President, I have little to add to what has already been established as fact. The Federation Council has been weighted with the ongoing situation with the Romulans for some time. As Starfleet is directly under our jurisdiction, I believe it is safe to say that we in the council have felt more profoundly—and with deeper regret—the loss of those brave souls who have given everything imaginable and more to ensure the longevity of the United Federation of Planets against our enemies.

"I stand here now, not only as the head of the Federation Council, but as a father—one who has lost such a soul, as many of my contemporaries have. We have reached a decision on this situation,

and no further discussion on the matter is necessary." Withdrawing a computer tablet from his robe, Dannon held it aloft for all to see. Having committed the words to his heart, there was no need to read directly from it.

"Whereas the forces of the Romulan Empire have launched numerous unprovoked attacks against the outposts and starships of Starfleet, as well as countless civilians in the affected areas of space, and bearing in mind Starfleet's primary responsibility under the United Federation of Planets' charter for the maintenance of interplanetary peace and security, and having considered all possible diplomatic alternatives, the Federation Council declares accordingly that the that a state of war does *indeed* exist between the United Federation of Planets and the Romulan Empire.

"The Federation Council, the Federation Security Council, and the Federation secretary-general agree unilaterally with the Federation Assembly to employ the entire naval and military force of the United Federation of Planets and any and all resources of the government to wage unrestricted war against the Romulan Empire, with the goal of bringing this dire conflict to a successful conclusion."

Another uproar of applause was held throughout the auditorium. After a further five minutes, all the delegates except for Dannon went back to their seats. "What say you, Madam President?" his kind but resolute voice asked, echoing off the rounded chamber walls.

Nodding with the heavy weight upon her lithe shoulders, she placed her hand atop a computer screen, which lit up under the pressure. "So noted, Ambassador Dannon," she said, then turned her head to look at the entire assembly. "My fellow delegates . . . my friends . . . we are at war. May it end swiftly."

When the council session had ended, Admiral Rom Walton could sense a distinct change in the otherwise welcoming breeze through the streets of Paris. The Federation was at war, and the weight it impressed on even the simplest of street vendors was enough to cause Walton to inhale deeply, as if that very weight was threatening to suffocate him. Sitting in the executive shuttle beside him, President Rissa Lyn did the same. He looked at her, pensively staring out a view

port at the streets below as they made their way to Starfleet Command in San Francisco.

"All those people," she said quietly, not bothering to face Walton. "Millions. Billions that I've never seen . . . never met. That we should ask so much from so many. That I should."

"This isn't your fault, Madam President."

"No," she said despondently. "I know that. We didn't make this meal, but we're being forced to eat it." She turned, sorrow-filled, to the commander of Starfleet. "And we're going to be made to pay the bill, Rom. And how much or how little will that be?"

Under the weight of her imploring eyes, Walton turned his gaze to the deck of the shuttlecraft. "I wish I could say for certain."

Forcing a smile, she reached out a gentle hand to his shoulder. "Sorry, Admiral. It's unfair of me to ask you to—"

Walton straightened, then tugged at the hem of his medal-encrusted jacket. "It's fine, Madam President. You have every right to ask."

"I was thinking . . . of your daughter."

Rom smiled weakly. "As was I, Rissa," he said, using the president's first name for the first time he could remember. The thought made him chuckle slightly. *Does war bring about such informality?* "But we've got a lot more daughters to worry about out there right now," he said as he nodded his head toward the shuttle windows. "And sons, fathers, mothers . . . a lot of people are counting on what we start here today."

She smiled back, nodding. "Anything you can tell me before the formal briefing with the chiefs of staff?"

"Not much," Walton said with a frown. "Outer System Defense Outpost 5 has been rechristened Starbase 3 for the duration of the conflict. It'll be the main staging area for all fleet movements in and around the disputed region of space. The base commander, Commodore Robert Riddle, has been promoted to full admiral. He'll be in the briefing via subspace, and is likely the only one you may have never met in person. Anything you want to know about what's currently happening out in the borders, he'll be the one with the hard info. Of course, Starfleet Intelligence will be there as well for backup

and evaluations, and Admiral Grooms will be present as the designated commander of the First Combined Fleet."

"And your thoughts on Starfleet's readiness to counter the Romulans? I want your personal opinion, Rom. Not the one you spoon-feed the new Academy cadets each fall."

He tried to smile, but it came off as a smirk. "We've got amazing people doing remarkable things in exceedingly difficult situations, ma'am. On the record, they're a testament to the uniform and to the Federation. Off the record, Starfleet is fighting an uphill battle with itself. Starfleet Academy was founded to root out these difficulties, but we can't send everyone through at the same time. The younger officers are acclimating well, as are the junior enlisted people."

"But?" she asked, sensing the coming statement.

"Some of the older officers and non-commissioned officers are still having a tough time with it. They've got decades of individual training to break down—in some cases break completely away from—and reform into the new policies. We've had . . . incidents," Walton finished with an uneasy smile.

"Pray tell?" the president asked as the shuttle, now on final approach, dipped below the Golden Gate Bridge.

Rom searched his memory, trying to find the least offensive of the infractions to relay to the president. There weren't many that fit into that category. "Several recent graduates from the Academy—humans—were stationed on board an Andorian frigate, the USS *Mol'Askanner*. Once the ensigns made the mistake of calling the ship the *Mule Skinner*."

Rissa chuckled. "That's not so bad."

"No . . ." Walton wavered. "Unfortunately, on the planet Andor, to call something a mule is to . . . well . . . is to put into question the promiscuity of a man's wife."

She put a hand to her forehead in embarrassment. "Oh, dear."

"And that's not the worst part. The offended Andorian chief petty officer promptly threw the ensign into an air lock, and was a few seconds away from opening the outer hatch before he stopped himself. Apparently, it's an unspoken tradition when their honor is in question: they scare the pants off the offending party as a way to ensure it doesn't happen again."

Rissa, wide-eyed, nodded. "And I'm supposing it worked?"

Rom nodded. "At last report, the unfortunate ensign was spending all his free time brushing up on Andorian cultural taboos. With any luck, maybe he'll be the next ambassador to Andor."

Laughing, Rissa smiled widely. As she wondered if this would be the last time she would do so for the foreseeable future, it slowly faded.

\* \* \*

Stardate 15601.19

Praetor's Throne Room, Romulan Imperial Senate, Romulus

"Admiral Jeldan, it's good to see you again."

"Praetor D'Varu," the admiral said with a cursory bow to the elder Romulan. "The honor is mine."

The throne room looked far different than the last time Jeldan had been a guest. Gone were all the former praetor's decorations of office. Gone was the purple paint and thick drapes. Jeldan now stood in a room festooned with shimmering gold accents, and drapes so sheer they were almost transparent. The sunlight streamed into the place, filled it, and through those drapes Jeldan could see the twin planet of Remus looking down on them with pleasure.

And then there was the praetor, outfitted with robes of the same golden material. Jeldan wondered what weapons such a man could conceal in those robes. *A disruptor? Or perhaps a ceremonial dagger?* He wondered if the praetor's own voice was his weapon of choice—those hypnotic, terrifyingly smooth vocals that could lull a man to sleep if he were not careful. Or wise.

"I am understandably anxious to hear your report, Admiral," the wraith-like praetor began in his signature tone.

Bowing slightly, Jeldan kept his eyes fixed on his leader—although the praetor was less inclined to do the same to the flag admiral of the Imperial Fleet. "I only wish I had more to offer, Excellency."

"Come now, Admiral, speak," D'Varu said, suddenly animated. His grin was wide and somewhat terrifying. "What have you to report?"

"It's been two years into this campaign, Excellency, and we know little more about our adversary than when we began. In fact, we grow more puzzled with each encounter."

"How so?"

"I can tell you with certainty that we have not, to this point, encountered a single Klingon vessel. There have been no bodies to account for this, nor have we see a single iota of their technology in the debris we have recovered to this point."

D'Varu nodded slowly, turning to the sheer drapes overlooking the meticulously manicured grounds of the imperial palace. "And what have you seen, Admiral Jeldan?" he asked, pulling apart the drapes to admire something in the distance.

"Again, we are not certain. At first, the bodies we recovered were those of beings like ourselves . . . yet not like ourselves. Outwardly, they bear many similarities to us. However, their internal configurations are vastly different."

"Aliens. Yes," D'Varu said with almost boredom. "*Humans*. I've heard of such things from the Tal Shiar." He then turned to face the admiral. "I see their insight is correct. Very good."

"Yes, Excellency. But, what puzzles us is that, as of late, we have recovered more bodies, not like the first, and even more vastly different from our own. Skin tone changes, facial and body arrangements all dissimilar."

"Any one more than the other?"

"Yes, Praetor. The humans. They outnumber the rest by two to one—in some cases, much more."

"Perhaps these humans conquered the others and have enlisted these other species as servitors. We are no different in those respects. And the Klingons as well. Intergalactic subjugation would appear to be the lot of the races of the universe." He turned to the admiral. Seeing no outward sign of emotion, D'Varu picked the subject that Jeldan was unquestionably waiting for. "And what of the bodies that *do* look as we do?"

"Excellency?"



D'Varu smiled dangerously. "Come now, Admiral," he chided. "Do not think me ill informed. I'm aware that certain remains have been recovered that bear a striking resemblance to us here on Romulus."

*The Tal Shiar.* There was no other way the praetor could have known. "We have not yet confirmed all reports as of yet, Excellency. But it does appear that a race similar to our own fights alongside these humans."

"You mean was subjugated by them," D'Varu said in a moment of rage. "No Romulan . . . or Romulan-like being would willingly serve another race."

"Of course," Jeldan said with an obligatory bow.

"Are they much like us?"

"From the bodies we've discovered, our scientists believe that there may indeed be a common ancestor. Again, these findings are very preliminary based on the small number of bodies and the state of their decomposition."

"Brothers," D'Varu whispered to himself. "Perhaps not at all unlike us, I think. That they should fight and die so freely for their cause. It gives me hope that we may infiltrate this distant cousin race and bring them to our side. Can it be done?"

Jeldan was astonished at the audacity of the plan that was being proposed. "Our scientists agree that we share many physical similarities, but to propose that we could place operatives in their culture to pass as like creatures . . . it defies reason, Excellency. We know nothing of their beliefs."

"The Tal Shiar will get you everything you wish to know, Admiral. Gather your finest agents."

*Impossible. Surely they would meet with failure.* "Yes, Praetor."

"And what of their technology . . . these humans?"

"Comparable to ours in many respects. Analysis of their weapons shows deficiencies, but their hull materials and propulsion systems are comparable with our own. However, if our initial estimates are correct, it's very likely they have both more officers and starships to thwart any major advance you might wish to make into their territory."

"And, thus far, have we claimed any planets of importance to our Road to the Stars in the last several months?"

"None of consequence, Praetor. At least, none that would satisfy the needs of our people."

D'Varu then turned a cold stare toward the imperial admiral. "Then let us hope for your sake, Admiral Jeldan, that your estimates of their defensive capabilities are . . . *exaggerated*."

# Chapter 14

Stardate 15602.25

On the main view screen of the cruiser USS *Bismarck*, Captain Lambert Chow watched as the Federation destroyer *Montgomery* moved slowly toward the docking arm of Defense Station Bravo. Recently positioned near the spinward edge of Federation space in the tenuous Vega Zatauri system, DS-B was tasked with monitoring Romulan fleet movements throughout the sector and engaging them if necessary. The *Bismarck*, along with the *Montgomery* and the destroyer *Trinity*, were to be the instruments of that policy.

The *Trinity* was off on patrol near what was left of the fourth planet of the system. It, along with the second planet, had long ago broken apart under the gravitational stress of the enormous star at the center of the system. Geologically unimportant, the system was of extreme tactical value due to its proximity to the Deneva colony. Littered with asteroidal debris from the two former planets, Vega Zatauri was a navigational nightmare for anyone coming into or leaving the system, and Captain Chow and the others hoped it would be a deterrent to any Romulans thinking of invading Federation space along this front.

"Message coming in from the *Montgomery*, Captain," Lieutenant Shepherd called out from the communications console. "She's completed docking operations."

"Thank you, Alexander." Chow nodded. "Signal DS-B that we'll be departing shortly to relieve the *Trinity*. Then hail the *Trinity* that we'll be rendezvousing with them at 1300 hours."

"Sir," Shepherd said with surprise, "we're receiving a hail from the *Trinity* now. Priority One. Audio only."

"Let's hear it."

"DS-B, this is the destroyer *Trinity*. We've got positive contact with three Romulan warships entering the system. They appear to be on an intercept course and are moving slowly. Request you advise?"

"Sir, DS-B is requesting we respond."

"Open a channel, Alex."

"Open, sir."

"*Trinity*, this is Captain Chow on the *Bismarck*. Can you give us the precise coordinates of the Romulan forces?"

"They're near the farthest planet in the system, Zatauri V. They must have been hiding near one of the three moons . . . we didn't see them until well after they entered the system. They're on a direct course for DS-B."

"They'll have to get through the asteroid belt first, *Trinity*. That should slow them down long enough for us get out there to help you."

"Understood, *Bismarck*. We'll plot a course to our side of their projected insertion point in the field."

"We'll be there shortly. *Bismarck* out."

"Sir, another communication coming in, this time from DS-B. Audio and video, sir."

"On screen."

On the main screen, the base commander's office was visible. Sitting behind his modest desk, Commodore Vincent Bowling stared back at Chow with unwavering blue eyes.

"Commodore, we just received a call from the *Trinity*. Three Romulan vessels have entered the area and are moving toward the station."

Bowling nodded grimly. "Yes, Captain. I monitored the transmission. That's why I'm calling you."

"We're getting underway now, sir."

"Belay that, Captain," the commodore said with a raised hand. "I'll be dispatching the *Montgomery* to assist the *Trinity*. The *Bismarck* is to remain near DS-B."

Chow tried not to show his disbelief. "Sir, if I may, two destroyers aren't much of a match for three cruisers. If the Romulans are looking for a fight—"

"We don't know *what* they're looking for, Captain. They may just be passing by. I don't want to aggravate them into attacking us. If the *Bismarck* were to become disabled, those three enemy ships will walk right over and pound the daylights out of this station. Until other units can arrive to augment our vessels already here, our orders are to engage only when we are assured a substantial victory."

Chow and the others had heard this speech before. The reinforcements Commodore Bowling was insisting were on their way wouldn't arrive at Defense Station Bravo for another week. Until then, their mission was to monitor and report, and not to engage.

"Yes, sir. However, I'd still like to detach from the station's umbilical supports. If indeed the Romulans *are* looking for a fight, we need to be ready."

Bowling nodded his bald head. "A sensible precaution, Captain. But stay close to DS-B at all times. If the need for you to intercept the enemy vessels arises, I'll send the orders myself."

"Understood, sir."

"Captain Vincent, we're nearing the edge of the asteroid belt."

Stepping away from the engineering console, the *Trinity's* captain slipped back into the command chair. "On screen, please."

On the main view screen, the jagged shapes of countless asteroids filled the entire image. They were a uniform dull gray color, ranging in size from a speck of dust to objects as large as the Starfleet destroyer herself. Although they appeared stationary, Commander Vernon Vincent knew full well that each was moving inexorably away from what used to be the center of the large planet prior to its breakup nearly a millennia ago. Travel into this region of the belt was possible on maneuvering thrusters, but any other method of propulsion would be extremely hazardous. *At least we'll see the Romulans long before they get within striking distance.*

"Mr. Avery, are the Romulans still on course?"

The science officer peered into his scope for a moment before turning to face the captain. "Affirmative, sir. They'll be entering the asteroid field in less than two minutes, assuming they maintain their current course and speed."

"And once they do, what's the estimated time for them to traverse it and come out on our side?"

"I'd say a conservative estimate would be fifteen minutes, sir. There are several large asteroids between us and them, some with considerable gravitational pulls. On maneuvering thrusters, several course changes will be required."

"And the asteroids themselves?"

"Nothing extraordinary there, sir," Avery said with a smirk. "Mostly nickel and iron. There are traces of precious metals . . . gold, silver, platinum and such, but nothing worthy of mining operations."

Vincent nodded. "But nothing that will cloud our sensors."

"No, sir. We'll have an unobstructed view of what the Romulans are doing."

"Sir, message coming in from DS-B," the young Andorian woman at communications said.

"Yes, Ensign Gnar."

"The destroyer *Montgomery* is being dispatched to render assistance. She'll be at these coordinates shortly."

"Understood."

Ten minutes later, just as the *Montgomery* was coming into visual range, Lieutenant Commander Avery's sensors began to chirp an audible alarm that drew his attention from the library computers. "Sir," he began after verifying the readings, "the Romulan force is dividing."

"Specify," Vernon asked impatiently.

"Two warships are changing course and moving up the belt and away from us. The third has increased speed and is moving into the asteroid field directly ahead of us."

"They're intent on splitting up our forces." Commander Vincent nodded in near-silent agreement. "Maintain position on our side of the field, helm. Communications, relay the sensor information to the *Montgomery*. Advise her to change course and follow the other Romulans up the belt, but to also keep her distance."

"Aye, sir," came the chorus of replies.

"The two Romulan cruisers that are skirting the edge of the field are slowing. I think they're about to penetrate. The *Montgomery* is slowing near their projected point of insertion."

"And the third warship?"

"It's halfway into the field, sir. She's nearly parallel with us."

"Arm all weapons. Go to red alert. Ensign Gnar, send a message to Defense Station Bravo. Tell them we're standing by to repel the invaders."

"Sending now, sir," she replied nervously.

"All weapons standing by, sir," the navigator said confidently.

"The Romulan has increased speed," Avery announced.

"That's madness, even for a Romulan," Vernon retorted. "It'll smash into one of those asteroids in no time."

"Sensors showing the Romulans are using some sort of drill-beam to pulverize the material in their path. They're pressing forward at nearly one-quarter impulse. Time to intercept is two minutes."

*Impossible. Even the Federation doesn't have that kind of technology!* With any kind of protection the asteroids were going to afford the Federation crews quickly being nullified, Vernon moved his tactics into high gear. "Helm, bring us up 300 meters. I want a clear shot at that Romulan before he breaks through!"

As soon as the *Trinity* moved into position, she was shaken as a fusion rocket soared past her and exploded off to port.

"Helm, return fire!" Vernon shouted as he gripped the armrests of the swinging chair.

The *Trinity's* accelerator cannons quickly fired, two warheads streaking toward the Romulan. One struck a nearby asteroid, vaporizing it and sending pebble-sized chunks whizzing off in every direction. The second impacted the Romulan, but the enemy vessel's shields held fast.

"Minimal damage to the Romulan's shields," Avery announced. "They're swinging toward the other Romulans. However, one of the other Romulan vessels is entering the field opposite the *Montgomery*. The final enemy vessel appears to have stopped on their side of the asteroid belt. The *Montgomery* is firing at the closest incoming Romulan."

Vernon held his breath as Avery watched the result of the other engagement.

"The *Montgomery's* lasers have struck the Romulan. Their shields are damaged, but holding. Our target has emerged from the asteroids and is opening fire on the *Montgomery*."

"Helm, get us there!"

"One hit, one miss," Avery called out. "The *Montgomery's* shields are holding."

"Not for long if we don't get there fast."

"The *Montgomery* is returning fire," Avery said, then paused as he watched his readout. "Two shots, split between two targets. One miss, but the shields on one of the Romulans are now completely down."

Well done, *Montgomery*. "Take aim and fire at the nearest enemy vessel!"

"That's our previous target," Avery said as the Romulan vessel swung into view on the main screen.

"Firing!"

Laser bolts shot out from the *Trinity* in three short salvos. Each hit the Romulan squarely in their stern.

"Target's shields are down," said Avery as he turned to the captain. "However, the only undamaged Romulan vessel has broken through the asteroid field and is making a run toward DS-B!"

"And our target?"

Avery looked into his sensor hood, replaying the information as it happened. "Heading back into the asteroid field for cover. The targeting computers have lost their lock. However, the *Montgomery's* target is swinging into open space, undoubtedly to get a better angle of attack on the destroyer. We can put them in range of our cannons, but only if we move quickly."

"We've got our hands full out here," Vernon said, then pivoted toward Gnar. "Send to DS-B: We're engaged with Romulan forces in this area and cannot break away. Advise them that we're requesting that the *Bismarck* be detached to deal with an incoming Romulan attack vessel!"

"Sending now," the Andorian said.

"Helm, come about to engage the *Montgomery's* target. Mr. Avery, keep an eye on our own friend out there in the field. I don't want to give them a clean shot at our backside when we're not looking."

On the *Bismarck's* main view screen, the image of the mushroom-shaped Romulan warship became larger with each passing second.

"Distance to target?" Captain Chow asked impatiently.

"Firing range in sixty seconds, sir!" Commander Steve Pittman announced from the science station.



"There's no time to wait. Mr. Brockman, fire the accelerator cannons!"

"But at this range, we'll be lucky to—"

But Chow wasn't about to hold off for another moment. With any luck, even a near miss might dissuade the Romulan from attacking the space station. "Fire!"

"Aye, sir," Brockman quickly acknowledged. Overriding the ship's targeting system, Brockman manually fired at the target. The *Hercules*-class cruiser shuddered slightly as the magnetically projected round burst from the underside of the primary hull. Just as the *Bismarck* entered the Romulan's weapons range, the lone missile struck the forward, bulbous half of the ship dead center. The target's shields flashed an angry green, then faded a moment later.

"Target hit. Their shields are down," Pittman said. "However, their course is unaltered. They are increasing speed."

"They're on a suicide run," Chow said in horror.

"They're heading directly toward us," Pittman said, his eyes never leaving the sensor display.

"Slow to one-half impulse. Prepare to—"

"Enemy vessel firing!"

A stream of energy poured out of the Romulan vessel, impacting the *Bismarck's* forward shields. The blast was enough to jolt everyone on the bridge sideways.

"Sir," Pittman exclaimed. "One of the other Romulan warships is moving toward our position! The *Trinity* is in pursuit, but they won't make it before we enter the second warship's weapon range."

Leaping out of the command chair, Chow leaned forward over the navigator's shoulder. "Hard to starboard!"

"Incoming barrage!" Pittman yelled. A second later, the *Bismarck* was again pelted with laser fire, this time from the second Romulan warship. Each of the blasts was a direct hit, and the *Bismarck's* shields couldn't stand the strain. As soon as they had fallen, the other Romulan vessel opened fire, striking the cruiser's port warp nacelle and sending the starship veering off in an uncontrolled spin.

On the bridge, both the damage control station and the life-support monitor exploded violently as power surged through damaged

circuits. Hit by a flying piece of circuitry, Captain Chow flailed wildly as he was thrown back against the command chair.

"Captain!" Steven called as he vaulted over the guard rail to the lower portion of the bridge. Turning the captain over, Steven was pleased to hear him curse in agony. A stain of blood marked Chow's right sleeve where the damaged component had struck him, but he seemed otherwise unharmed. The bridge lights began to flicker as the commander helped the captain to his feet.

"I'll be fine, Steven," Chow grunted, gripping his right forearm to stop the flow of blood. "Return to your post. Let me know where those Romulans are."

Leaping back to his station, Commander Pittman quickly reacquired the sensor lock on the two vessels. "Both of the vessels have passed us and are halfway to DS-B. The *Trinity* is coming alongside us now."

"Lieutenant Brockman, take us back toward the station. We need to stop those warships before they do any more damage."

"Aye, sir," the helmsman quickly replied.

Swinging around tightly, the damaged cruiser and her destroyer escort made fast for the unprotected space station. Two minutes later, they were within weapons range of the Romulan vessels once again. Seeing their unprotected sterns facing the Starfleet vessels, Chow had ordered the *Trinity* to coordinate fire with the *Bismarck*. They would take the targets out together.

"The first Romulan warship is locked into the targeting computer," Brockman said over his shoulder.

"I want all available weapons fire concentrated on their drive section, Lieutenant. Let's stop them before they get any closer to that station."

"Message coming in from the *Trinity*, sir," the communications officer said. "She's ready to open fire."

"All weapons, fire!" Chow replied to his communications and weapons officers simultaneously.

Out in space, both Federation starships fired everything at their disposal. The *Trinity*, trailing behind the *Bismarck*, launched a volley of accelerator cannon rounds and laser fire at extreme range. The cruiser *Bismarck* launched a devastating attack with short-range

plasma cannons and laser fire. Round after round from the two Starfleet vessels pummeled the same target, rocking it from side to side as chunks of its hull were blown free. Seconds later, the vessel exploded violently. A flaming section of the hull half the size of the *Bismarck* shot into their path, causing the Federation warships to break formation.

"One target destroyed," Pittman called out. "The second Romulan is now within weapons range of the defense station."

"On screen!"

The three-armed station appeared on the view screen, floating serenely in the blackness of space. But that serenity was broken as the Romulan warship entered the frame, its green beams of energy reaching out and striking the closest of the arms.

"The station's shields are holding," Pittman called out. "But there is structural damage to the arm."

"Lieutenant Brockman, get us there. Full impulse!"

"Sir, drive controls are damaged. It's going to be a few minutes."

"The *Trinity* is passing us to port and continuing on to the station," Pittman said.

"What about the *Montgomery*?" Chow asked, still cradling his arm as he sat back into the command chair.

"*Montgomery* reports that her target has been destroyed," the communications officer replied. "She's heading in from the asteroid belt now, but is still five minutes out."

"Best speed, Mr. Brockman," Chow said, ripping off a portion of his sleeve.

"The Romulan is firing on the station again," Pittman said from the science console. "Their shields are now down."

"The *Trinity*?" the captain asked as he tied the material around his upper arm to stem the flow of blood.

"Returning fire . . . lasers and plasma cannons. Cannons have impacted the Romulan vessel. It is altering course."

"Heading?"

"Moving away from the station at half-impulse."

Chow smirked. "Maybe they've had enough for one day."

"The Romulan vessel is now altering course once again, heading back to the station."

*I guess not*, the captain thought regretfully.

"Sir, they've increased their speed to full impulse!"

"What?"

"They may be attempting to ram the station," Pittman countered.

"Brockman!"

"Sorry, sir," the helmsman pleaded. "We won't be in range for another minute."

"The *Trinity* is opening fire again."

On the main screen, Captain Chow and the rest watched as round after round of the Federation destroyer's lasers poured into the unshielded Romulan vessel. Bits and pieces of it flaked off as the beams penetrated the hull in a dozen places. But still it continued on course—right toward the station. The *Trinity* then fired rounds from her cannons, and as Chow watched the explosions light up the port side of the now-flaming Romulan vessel, he understood what the *Trinity's* captain was attempting to do—alter the Romulan's course herself. In the end, the tactic partially worked.

Instead of ramming headlong into the station's central core, the burning mass impacted the previously damaged arm extending from it. Severing the arm neatly from the station, the Romulan wreckage continued on a course that would take it within range of the *Bismarck's* weaponry. Not wanting to risk any further destruction, Chow ordered the ship to intercept the hulk.

"Lieutenant Brockman, dispatch the target."

"With pleasure, sir," the lieutenant said dryly.

Four fusion missiles launched from the ship—that last of that weapon's inventory—each hitting the flaming debris a few meters from one another. The remains of the Romulan ship quickly disintegrated under the onslaught.

"Well done, Lieutenant."

"Casualty reports coming in now, sir," the comms officer said with a pained tone. "Thirty people on the station are listed as dead, with fifteen more missing."

"And our own?"

"Six in engineering are dead, with a dozen more wounded throughout the ship."

"Contact sickbay and coordinate the trauma teams."

"Aye, sir."

Stepping down from the science station, Steven placed a hand on Lambert's shoulder. "You don't look so hot yourself, sir."

Glancing at his wounded arm, the captain nodded. "I'll manage for a few more minutes," he said, suddenly feeling dizzy from the loss of blood. "Let's get linked up with the *Montgomery* and get back to the station. I'll see the doc after that. Make sure to get those sensor logs over to the station as soon as we arrive. I'm sure Fleet Intelligence is going to want to know what happened here today."

"Aye, sir."

## Chapter 15

Stardate 15604.21, 1030 hours

In the dark vacuum of space, decades had passed since anything of note had happened in this area so far removed from the well-traveled lanes of the United Federation of Planets—or any other spacefaring culture for that matter. In fact, not since a probe from the now-obscure Vegan Tyranny had passed through here—scanning the nearby fire-like nebulae for signs of raw materials to fuel their long-dead juggernaut war machine—did anything take note of this lonely corner of the galaxy.

But all that was about to change.

Traveling with all the speed it had mustered in the last millennia, a solitary cloud of ionized particles swimming toward the nebula was the singular dignitary to render salute as the lead ship of Task Force 25, the United Earth carrier *Enterprise*, dropped out of warp well outside the Kappa Fornacis system. Within seconds, the remaining vessels representing just over half the First Combined Fleet did the same, quickly orienting themselves behind Captain Ellis Coombs's flagship.

The first thing Ellis noted was the beauty of the nebula so far distant, yet still managing to fill the entirety of his view screen. "Hell's Gate," Starfleet Command had dubbed this place, and it was easy to see why. The nebula was generally spherical from their vantage point, with a darkness in the center where distant stars could be seen, the whole of the thing glowing like an angry halo of fire set ablaze in the heavens.

But to Coombs, there was nothing portentous about what he was seeing. He saw the universe at work, displaying with all her grandeur and beauty the wonders of the unknown he and many others had joined the service to encounter. Part of him longed to reach out for it, touch it, to imprint himself upon the ageless beauty of the thing. The other half of him knew that to do to such a thing could spoil it, that it was best left alone and should be admired from this distant vantage.

With their current mission well underway, he knew he would have to settle for the latter, though the explorer in him wished for the former.

"All ships have arrived and are accounted for, Captain," Lieutenant Hoffman said from the communications station, breaking Ellis from his admiration of the sight.

"Thank you, Lieutenant," Coombs said, regretfully turning his attention back to the mission. "Send a message to Starbase 3. Advise Admiral Grooms that the fleet has arrived at Hell's Gate ahead of schedule."

"Yes, Sir."

"Commander Pinkerton, are we ready to begin launching the sensor probes?"

"Affirmative, sir," the science officer responded.

"Good. Let's get the new detection grid deployed. If the information provided by Task Force 12 is still accurate, we've got a Romulan fleet on its way to this sector. I want to find them before they find us."

Hoffman nodded. "Agreed."

"Communications, send to all ships: deploy all sensor probes along prearranged vectors. I want the grid online by 1300 hours today. No excuses."

"Aye, sir. Transmitting now."

Ellis then turned to the newest member of the *Enterprise's* crew and one of the few newly established Starfleet Marines on board, Major Christopher Broden, sitting at his station to Coombs's right. "Flight control officer, are the fighters prepped and ready?"

"Aye, sir," the Marine responded smartly. "Squadron Three is standing by."

"Begin launch operations immediately. Order them to begin their patrol runs of this sector. Until the grid is up, those fighters are going to be our eyes. When you're done, pipe the exterior visual feed of the launch bay to the main viewer."

"Yes, Captain," the major said with a sharp nod, then turned to his monitor-laden control station to begin the flight operations.

"Lieutenant Hoffman, at your convenience, open a channel to the carrier *Lexington* and advise her to begin her own operations."

"Aye."

Coombs's attention was then drawn to the main view screen as Major Broden switched the view to the underside of the *Enterprise*. The two large hangar doors, extending halfway down the forward section of the tube-shaped hull, split evenly and opened. Visible was one of the five Minotaur fighters held securely in its cradle. Coombs watched as the docking clamps were released with a snap, and the fighter quickly glided free of the mother ship on maneuvering thrusters. Having the same basic tube shape of the *Enterprise* and her sister ships, the fighters were equipped with four fins aft that allowed them minimal atmospheric flight. On the nose of the craft, four fixed laser cannons moved out of their alcoves, the operation of which was the sole responsibility of one of the three-man crew. On the underside of the forward structure, a large shark's mouth had been painted by one of the squadron maintenance staff, a personal touch to instill camaraderie amongst the flight crew. As fighter one-zero-one moved out of view, another fighter was pivoted into position. When all five had launched, Coombs ordered the view screen back on the nebula, the admiration of which demanded his attention until the fighters reported their initial findings.

Stardate 15604.21, 1255 hours

"The sensor net is ready to come online, Captain."

"Very well, Mr. Pinkerton," Captain Coombs said with pleasure. "Communications, inform all ships in the task force that we're initializing the grid."

"Aye, sir," Lieutenant Hoffman acknowledged.

"Lieutenant Vincent," Coombs said, turning to the tactical officer. "Overlay the sensor net output with this sector on the main view screen, please."

On the main view screen, a crisscrosses of sensor beams spread out over a distance of thirty astronomical units like a spider's web. Studying the image, Coombs was pleased to see that the entire sector—and a slight bit more—was englobed in the net. It took only a minute for the grid to thoroughly scan and catalog everything, from the smallest particle of space dust to the largest planetary body. Even data on the distant Hell's Gate nebula was being returned, although



at Task Force 25's current distance, it was only inconsequential information.

"Major Broden, recall the fighter squadron. They'll be more useful as close-in support if the Romulans decide to show up."

"Aye, sir," Christopher replied from the flight operations console. "Recalling them now. They're on the far side of Deneva, so it'll be about twenty minutes or so."

"Understood."

"Captain," Vincent called out from the tactical station, "we've got an unknown contact, bearing 028-mark-14."

Turning to the tactical image still being displayed on the view screen, Ellis was greeted by several green blobs in the top right corner. *Could it be the Romulan fleet?* "Speed?"

"Now reading multiple contacts. They're moving at warp two, sir, and not on an intercept course as of yet."

"What's the nearest squadron to that location?"

"The *Lexington's*, sir."

"Communications, send to the *Lexington*: have her and her escorts detach and intercept the intruders. I want to know exactly what we're dealing with."

"Yes, sir."

Stardate 15604.21, 1325 hours

"Captain Whiteacre, we've verified the contacts are indeed Romulan," the *Lexington's* tactical officer, Commander Tim Knight, said from the captain's right.

Matthew Whiteacre, stone-faced, quickly turned to his science officer. "Commander Griffing, do we have an exact count of the enemy fleet?"

"Figures coming in now, sir. I'll pipe them over to the tactical station."

"Mr. Knight, correlate the data with the battle computer and put the information on the main viewer."

On the main view screen, the orthographic images of five different classes of Romulan vessels appeared. Beside each was the total

number present for that class, as well as any sensor data on their weapon and shield status. It didn't take long to tally the numbers; the Romulans outnumbered the Federation forces three to one. There were twenty-seven *Cabbage* cruisers alone, and a smattering of other lesser vessels.

"Message coming in from the *Enterprise*," Lieutenant Keith said from the communications console behind the captain. "Captain Coombs has reviewed the sensor data and is requesting we intercept the targets in an attempt to break up their fleet."

*Over thirty Romulan vessels against a fraction as many Federation ones. This should be interesting.* "Acknowledge the *Enterprise's* request. Helm, lay in an intercept course and engage at warp factor three. Flight control officer, stand by to deploy the fighter wing. Something tells me we're going to need their help."

Stardate 15604.21, 1335 hours

"Captain Coombs, the *Lexington* group is nearing the enemy fleet."

"On screen." With the enhanced sensor net now at full strength, Ellis was rewarded with an unobstructed view of the battle as it was about to unfold. The carrier *Lexington*—hanging back slightly—was flanked by the Andorian destroyers *Voljaz* and *Plomong*. On either side of those were the predominantly Tellarite-crewed frigates *Adversary* and *Lagan*. As the five ships made their way toward the Romulan fleet, Coombs watched as the *Lexington's* hangar bay doors opened and expelled her contingent of fighters. Faster and more maneuverable than the larger ships, the fighters of the 5<sup>th</sup> Tactical Wing sped off toward the enemy fleet, leaving a trail of ionized particles in their wake.

Ellis leaned forward in the command chair in anticipation as the conflict unfolded. *So it begins.*

The three-man fighters were the first to reach the Romulans. The bulbous *Cabbage* cruisers in the lead, by far the largest in the Romulan fleet, were the first targets of opportunity. Swarming in close formation, the Starfleet fighters fired a simultaneous spread of heavy missiles at two of them. Too agile to be hit by the returned fire, the fighters swooped over the targets just as their warheads impacted.

Coombs watched in surprise as the missiles exploded directly against the hulls, creating deep impact craters and sending the larger warships spiraling out of formation.

"Their shields were down?" the captain asked the science officer.

Pinkerton nodded as he looked into the sensor scope. "And many of them have yet to raise them. Only the smaller warships seem to be protected."

Turning back to the main screen, Coombs watched as the frigates *Adversary* and *Lagan* likewise took aim at two other enemy cruisers. Firing with accelerator cannons, the equal-sized Romulan vessels crumbled under the onslaught. Not long after, the *Lexington's* fighter swooped down from above, their quad-laser cannons repeatedly pelting a U-type cruiser and making short work of it. As the damaged Romulan ships spun out of formation, the other enemy vessels swung out of their tight-knit formation. Taking advantage of the chaos, the destroyers *Voljaz* and *Plomong*—along with the *Lexington* herself—opened fire with their short-range laser turrets. Two other *Cabbage* cruisers were destroyed, and one Romulan destroyer was so badly crippled that it broke apart as it tried in vain to make an evasive turn to port.

"Message coming in from Captain Whiteacre on the *Lexington*, sir," Hoffman said from the communications console. "The Romulans fleet is sufficiently disorganized and is breaking up, but may form into smaller squadrons. We are heading away from them on a course of 098-mark-25. Request new orders."

"Advise the *Lexington* that they should continue to press the attack while we have the enemy on the run. We're dispatching the cruiser *Providence* and the frigates *Mars* and *Bombay* to the Romulans' last known position. The *Enterprise* and the rest of the task force will remain here as a backup for the attack wing."

"Aye, sir."

Stardate 15604.21, 1348 hours

The entire view screen of the *San Francisco*-class frigate *Mars* was filled with Romulan warships moving in every conceivable direction.

The *Lexington* and her escorts had done a fine job of putting the enemy on the defensive, but weapons fire was streaming past the Starfleet frigate like rain coming from a dozen different directions simultaneously. Captain Jasiha Welch had to maintain a firm grip on his command chair to keep from sliding out as the *Mars* made her way toward the largest conglomeration of target vessels.

"Multiple targets coming into range, Captain," Lieutenant Stevenson called out over his shoulder from the helm. As the *Mars* banked to starboard, two swept-wing Romulan U-type cruisers swung into view, their sterns facing the Federation frigate.

"There's your target, Mr. Stevenson. Fire at the starboard vessel!"

The forward lasers immediately reached out and pelted the warship. Its shields flared, but held as the Romulan abruptly turned to starboard.

"Keep on the target, Alan," the captain ordered. "We're not finished with that one just yet."

"Tactical report from the *Enterprise*, Captain," the communications officer called out from the cramped bridge.

"Go ahead, Dean."

"The *Lexington* group has swung around and is pressing their attack again. The Romulans appear to be dividing their forces equally, attempting to maneuver out on two vectors."

"Advise the *Enterprise* we'll be staying with this group. I'm sure *Lexington* can handle her own for the time being, but we'll comply with whatever Captain Coombs thinks is best."

"Three enemy destroyers coming around to our stern!" Lieutenant Commander Jaffe called from the science station.

"Helm, break off pursuit of the Romulan warship. Get us out of here."

Banking sharply to port, the *Mars* spiraled out of the way just in time as multiple beams of disruptive energy passed through her previous position.

On the bridge of the frigate *Bombay*, Commander Daniel Hippensteel watched as the *Mars* executed her roll ahead of the three incoming enemy vessels. Narrowly avoiding the weapons fire, she was nonetheless struck with another beam from a fourth vessel that

had entered the fray as well as a fusion missile intended for another Federation ship. The *Mars's* shields were holding, but the *Bombay's* sensors showed that she'd taken damage to one of her fusion generators. If Hippensteel didn't act quickly, the *Mars's* impulse engines would be down in no time.

"Mr. Alex, target the Romulan that just fired on the *Mars*. Let's see if we can't get their attention."

Quickly pressing the launch sequencer, Lieutenant Eugene Alex complied. In such close quarters, Alex had taken a chance by forgoing the targeting computers and had fired on the Romulan manually. He was silently delighted that all three of his accelerator cannon rounds impacted against the Romulan's shields and caused it to veer away from the *Mars*.

"Nicely done, Lieutenant," Hippensteel complimented. "Communications officer, signal the *Enterprise* that we'll continue to assist the *Mars*."

Stardate 15604.21, 1355 hours

Watching the overall tactical display with growing unrest, Captain Coombs was trying to formulate a new strategy. That the Romulans were dividing their forces was without a doubt. Neither of the two enemy groups appeared to have settled on a final course heading, with vessels breaking formation with one group and joining the other in a seemingly random fashion. With targets of opportunity appearing and disappearing in seconds, it was making orders hard to disseminate to his people.

What's more, the Andorian destroyer *Plomong* had been pulverized under the combined fire of no less than five Romulan frigates. *Mars* had been moderately damaged, and the *Lexington* had taken three hits—one of them penetrating her shields and damaging her fighter bay doors. Until they were repaired, she wouldn't be able to retrieve her fighters, all of which were already out of missiles. Thankfully they were still able to utilize their laser cannons, but any damage to the fighters' drive modules would cut their sole remaining weapons off

indefinitely. Coombs desperately needed to regroup his forces, but the Romulans weren't about to let up.

However, in a divine moment of providence, Coombs watched the display in shock as a large portion of the Romulan fleet suddenly jumped to warp. With the bulk of the Romulans heading quickly out of the system, only five undamaged enemy cruisers remained to assist the vessels currently engaged with the distantly separated Starfleet vessels. Coombs knew that he'd have to move quickly—not only to ensure that the task force was protected, but also that the escaping Romulan fleet was tracked.

"Commander Pinkerton, course of the escaping Romulan vessels?" he quickly shouted.

"They're at 332-mark-15, sir."

"Communications, order the destroyer *Borgub* and the cruiser *Providence* to follow the Romulan fleet. I don't want to let them out of our sight," Coombs said, ordering his lone escorts away from the *Enterprise*.

"Aye, sir,"

"Helm, it's time the *Enterprise* gets into the action. Plot an intercept course to the *Lexington*," he said, pointing at the view screen to the carrier on that was holding her own against two attacking Romulan cruisers.

"Yes, sir," the helmsman said with a wide smile, eager to show the rest of the task force what the flagship could do.

"Major Broden, are the fighters rearmed and ready to launch?"

"The final one is being readied now, Captain," the Marine replied.

"As soon as we're in range, I want them deployed in a V-formation ahead of the *Enterprise*. I want to concentrate all our weapons fire on the vessels attacking the *Lexington*. Once the carrier has been secured, we'll move on to any targets of opportunity. Understood?"

"Perfectly," the major said, nodding sharply. "I'll relay the order to the wing commander now."

Stardate 15604.21, 1402 hours

Nearing the damaged *Lexington*, the *Enterprise's* fighters quickly went to work. Firing all their missiles simultaneously, they quickly decimated the shields on a *Cabbage* that was taking potshots at the *Lex*. Now it was the *Enterprise's* turn to earn her name.

Turning slightly to port, the *Enterprise* pivoted and trained her immense dual-emitter Type VII laser cannon turret at the now-limping Romulan vessel. It took a full three seconds for the powerful but non-combat tested system to charge to full capacity. Then in a powerful, high-pitched whine, twin beams of destructive energy raced from the emitters, striking the Romulan dead center and blowing holes clear through it. At the science console, Commander Chris Pinkerton reported that all power was down on the enemy vessel, and that no life signs registered.

"Very well," Ellis said with measured approval. "Major Broden—advise the fighter wing we'll be moving on to our next target. Mr. Vincent, charge the laser cannons. Our job for the day isn't done quite yet."

"Aye, sir," the tactical officer said with a nod.

"New sensor report coming in," Pinkerton said. "The *Bombay* and the *Voljaz* have eliminated their targets. They're moving in to assist the frigate *Adversary* on the far side of the battle area."

"Communications, send a message to the *Adversary*: once we've got the situation with the *Lexington* under control, we'll move to assist. Until that time, continue to press the attack against the final wave of Romulan warships. Once that's complete, I want everyone to regroup with us."

"Aye, Captain."

## Chapter 16

Stardate 15604.22, 1040 hours

Watching the life-support status monitor for any signs of stabilization, Captain Matthew Whiteacre's attention was turned toward the command chair as the intercom light began to beep and flash. Stepping down to the lower level of the *Lexington's* bridge, he eagerly opened the intercom channel to engineering. "Bridge here."

"Hangar deck. Chief Engineer Clucas, sir."

"Go ahead, Kevin."

"Just thought you'd like to know that the launch bay doors have been repaired. We can bring the fighters home at any time."

Since the battle the day before and the ensuing damage, the *Lexington's* fighter squadron had been forced to take temporary refuge in the *Enterprise*. Since the *Yorktown* class could only hold one squadron at a time, the fighters and their crews had to be rotated. As a result, flight operations had been ongoing for nearly twelve hours, with all the pilots receiving very little rest.

"I'm sure they're looking forward to coming home," Whiteacre said in relief. "Well done." He then turned to the waiting flight control officer, Major Newell, and gave the Marine a nod signifying that fighter recovery should begin immediately.

"Yes, sir. I'll be moving back to engineering shortly."

"Life-support readings are still showing fluctuations in several areas of the ship. Where's that on your list of things to do?"

"Right behind getting the shield generators back to full strength, which is my next task."

"Understood. Keep me apprised. Bridge out." On the main view screen, the carrier *Enterprise* was hanging just off the starboard bow of the *Lexington*. Whiteacre watched as the lower hangar doors opened and the *Lexington's* fighters began to disembark. "Mr. Keith—open a channel to the *Enterprise*. I'd like to speak to Captain Coombs."

"Aye, sir. Channel open." The image on the view screen then switched to the carrier's bridge, with Captain Coombs speaking to an



officer outside the field of view. After a moment, Coombs turned to face his counterpart on the *Lexington*.

"Hope I'm not intruding, Captain," Whiteacre asked with a thin smile.

Ellis dismissed the comment with a wave. "Not at all, Matt. I was just going over the revised damage report for the *Mars*."

"And?"

"Impulse power restored to full strength. She's ready to get underway."

"Good news," Matthew said with a nod. "And thanks for taking care of our fighter wing for the last few hours. I owe you one."

"Technically you owe me five," Ellis joked. "One for each fighter."

Matthew laughed. "At least you're not charging me by the crewman. I'd owe you 15."

Coombs put a finger to his chin in mock contemplation. "I hadn't thought of that. Maybe next time."

"Let's hope there won't be a next time."

"I hear you."

"And the Romulan Fleet?" Whiteacre asked as he relaxed into the command chair.

"The *Borgub* reported in about fifteen minutes ago—still nothing on their sensors. We're still waiting on the report from the *Providence*. It's due any minute now."

"You think we scared the enemy off for good?"

Coombs pursed his lips as he shook his head. "I don't think so. They want Deneva, and I don't think they're about to give up trying to get it. Not when they know they still outnumber us."

"What do you think they're up to, then?"

"The Romulans know they can't get through our sensor net without being detected. That's going to limit their options. If I were a betting man, I'd say they'll come in from the opposite side of the system."

Matthew nodded. "If you're intent on sending some ships out that way, I'd like to volunteer the *Lexington*. We've got a score to settle."

Coombs smiled weakly. "Understood, Captain. In the meantime, I'd like the entire task force to fall back along a course toward Deneva."

I'm dispatching a message to Starbase 3 now, advising them of our change in position."

"We won't get a response back for several hours."

"Exactly my point." Ellis nodded. "I'm not looking for approval, just providing them some information."

"Understood."

"Once your fighters are back on board, you're authorized to proceed to the far end of the Kappa Fornacis system. Keep your scanners on full. If those Romulans pop up, send out a call to us immediately. I'll have the frigate *Lagan* standing by. I don't want you taking them on all by yourself."

"Acknowledged."

"Good hunting, Matthew. *Enterprise* out."

Stardate 15604.22, 1200 hours

The voice of Commander Benjamin Chee broke the silence that'd been lingering on the *Providence's* bridge for the last hour. "Captain Janssens, we've got a sensor contact bearing 142-mark-12."

It'd been nearly ten hours since the *Providence* had lost contact with the Romulan fleet she'd been ordered to pursue. Fearing that the enemy vessels were deploying some type of sensor-jamming measure, Janssens had ordered the sensors on maximum intensity. Everything was to be scrutinized, no matter how insignificant. Several leads had been followed and disregarded since then, but Chee was going to leave no stone unturned. In anticipation, the captain sidestepped from the engineering console to the science station to look over his executive officer's shoulder. "What do you have, Ben?"

"Multiple ships, sir. Looks like it could be the Romulan fleet."

"Where's the *Borgub*?" Janssens asked as he scanned one of the readouts for signs of their Federation escort.

"Beyond sensor range, sir."

"Distance to contact?"

"Not far. About ten minutes from our present position. Approximate distance from the rest of Task Force 25 is 230 AU's."

"Just outside the range of the sensor net we set up," Janssens acknowledged with a nod.

"Yes, sir."

"Hmm," the captain murmured as he weighed his options. "Mr. Perry," he began as he turned his head over his right shoulder, "send a coded message to the *Enterprise*—possible contact on the Romulan fleet. Advise them we're leaving our assigned patrol area to investigate."

"Aye, sir."

"Lieutenant Utter, plot a course for the contact. Full impulse."

"Another goose chase?" Commander Chee asked in a hushed tone.

Janssens looked back to the screen and to the three green blobs that only appeared every other sweep. "Whatever it is, we're going to find out."

Stardate 15604.22, 1215 hours

Checking the sensor display one final time, Commander Chee turned to see the captain already looking in his direction. "We're coming up on it now, sir."

"Drop to one-quarter impulse, Ray," Janssens ordered the helmsman.

"One-quarter impulse, aye."

"Sensors on full, Ben."

"Aye, sir. Short-range sensors on full intensity."

"The contacts you reported earlier?"

"Still visible on the scope, sir. Several Romulan frigates, on the same bearing as before. Moving away from our position at full impulse."

"It's a good bet they've seen us," Janssens acknowledged.

"Very likely, sir."

"Do we go after them, sir?" Lieutenant Utter asked from the helm.

"I think we can handle a few frigates, Ray. Set a course to intercept at full impulse. Ben, keep those sensors on a continuous sweep of the sector. A handful of frigates doesn't account for the fleet we engaged yesterday. I don't want any surprises."

"Understood, sir."

"Can we get a visual on the targets?"

"I believe so, sir," Chee said, then piped the image to the main view screen. The stern of a single green vessel appeared in the center of the monitor.

Puzzled, Captain Janssens turned to his science officer. "I thought you were reading multiple contacts?"

"I am, sir. There are now five distinct vessels on the short-range sensors, cruising in a tight formation."

"Sensor malfunction, Mr. Chee?"

"Negative. I've checked the computers twice now. The Romulans may be employing some type of electronic ruse that fools our sensors."

"Either way, we've got at least one target to deal with."

"Agreed."

"Communications . . . Mr. Perry. Transmit our sensor data to the *Enterprise*. Tell them we're going to put a stop to this charade. I don't want anyone else chasing after phantasms."

"Yes, sir."

When the warship on the screen began to turn, Chee verified the information with the *Providence's* computer. "The Romulan has altered their course and is coming about. Their shields have gone up."

"Helm, arm all defensive batteries and raise the shields."

"Lasers charging, accelerator cannons online. Shields are building to full strength."

"Ray, fire the cannons across her bow. Let's see if we can dissuade them from making the mistake of attacking a superior vessel."

"Aye, Captain. Firing." On the screen, a solitary round from the accelerator cannon sped across the path of the Romulan. Undeterred, it continued on its turn until it was facing the Starfleet cruiser.

"Looks like they aren't going to back down, sir," Lieutenant Utter said, his fingers still poised over the firing controls.

"The enemy is charging forward batteries," Chee announced.

But Janssens wasn't about to give the Romulan a chance to return fire. "Very well. Open fire—full barrage."

Stardate 15604.22, 1245 hours

"Message coming in the *Providence*, Captain Coombs."

Ellis turned in his chair to face the communications officer. "Go ahead, Thomas."

"They've destroyed the Romulan vessel, sir. They're requesting further instructions."

*That vessel was just a decoy, to lure our ships away. I'd bet my pension on it. But lure them away from where?* "Commander Pinkerton," he asked as he looked to the science officer. "Where's the *Lexington*?"

"Moving into position on the far side of Deneva now, sir."

"Mr. Vincent, put the tactical display back on the main view screen. Plot the current position of the *Lexington* in relation to us." On the screen, a small blip on the far side of the Kappa Fornacis system began to blink steadily. "Now plot the position of the *Providence*." Directly opposite the *Lexington*, another blip lit up. Task Force 25 was nearly between the two. *That's where they're going to strike from.* "Lieutenant Hoffman, send this image to the *Providence*. Order them to plot a parabolic course, going around both us and the planet Deneva, and ending at the *Lexington*'s current coordinates. Tell them we're going to head straight for the *Lexington* at this time."

"Aye, sir."

Looking to his executive officer, Coombs offered Pinkerton an explanation before it was asked for. "The Romulans are going to attack Deneva from somewhere in the *Lexington*'s current vicinity. I'm sure of it. On her current course, the *Providence* should see them well before they see us."

"The Romulans will think that the *Lexington* and the *Providence* are the only vessels in the area."

Coombs nodded. "And they'll move in to attack. With luck, the task force will arrive just as the Romulans move in. We can sweep behind them and close off their escape route."

"That's going to put them dangerously close to the planet," the executive officer said wearily.

"I know, but it's the only way we can get a serious advantage over their fleet. Our hope is to keep them as far away from it as possible while we attempt to whittle their numbers down."

"Agreed."

Pressing the intercom, Coombs connected his microphone with the engine room. "Commander Chambers?"

"Chambers here," the chief responded.

"Carl, I need as much juice as you can feed into the impulse reactors. The rest of the task force can only move as fast as their slowest ship, and that's us under impulse."

"Understood, sir. I'll baby these old reactors as much as I can. But just remember, this is a carrier . . . not a cruiser. If we ask too much of her she might belly up."

"Your job is to make sure that doesn't happen, Chief."

"Yes, sir. I'll do my best and then some. Chambers out."

Stardate 15604.22, 1350 hours

"Captain Janssens, I've got multiple enemy contacts on my sensors."

"More phantoms, Commander, or are we looking at the real thing?"

"I can't tell, sir."

Paul nodded. "So, we won't know until we get within visual range?"

"Seems that way, sir."

"How long?"

"At present course and speed, three minutes."

*They're that close. Why didn't we see them before now?* "And how long until we link up with the *Lexington* and the rest of the task force?"

"Unless they change course to intercept us now, not for another fifteen minutes."

"Should I send out a call for backup?" Lieutenant Perry asked from the communications station.

"Not yet, Tom," Janssens replied after a moment. "If we're seeing more sensor phantoms, we could inadvertently draw our forces from the enemy's true attack vector."

"Then we're going to chance taking on the whole Romulan fleet all by ourselves for the second time in the same day," Benjamin Chee said with a smirk. "I think that's going to get some recognition in the history books."

"Hopefully we'll be around to read all about it," Paul said, mimicking the expression. "Mr. Utter, same as before. Plot an intercept course for the sensor contacts, full impulse."

"Aye, sir."

"Contacts have altered course," Chee replied in the next instant. "They are moving to intercept us. ETA, less than two minutes."

"Well, maybe we should be thankful we don't have to wait for the surprise. Communications, send to *Enterprise* that we're tracking another contact."

"Aye."

"They're in visual range now, then?" the captain asked his executive officer.

Chee nodded without turning from the sensor hood. "Affirmative. As of right now. Ten contacts total."

"On screen then, Lieutenant Utter."

Expecting to see two or three actual Romulans, Captain Janssens was greeted with nearly thirty vessels filling the main screen. Like the day before, the large *Cabbage* cruisers were in the lead of the formation, with smaller swept-wing frigates and destroyers encircling them.

"Communications, send to *Enterprise*—Priority One!" the captain yelled. "Romulan fleet in this sector. Request immediate assistance!"

"The lead cruisers are opening fire," Chee called out, gripping the side of the science console in anticipation of the impact.

"Helm, evasive action! Get us out of here!"

Stardate 15604.22, 1359 hours

"Confirmed, Captain. Multiple enemy contacts!"

Turning away from his science officer, Captain Coombs ordered the main screen on. Two swept-wing Romulan warships darted down, firing with abandon on the lone Starfleet vessel valiantly evading the incoming fire. From off the screen, two fusion missiles were also launched at the *Providence*, but she was evidently not finished with her impressive array of maneuvers. Quickly spiraling to port, not only did she skillfully evade the incoming weapons, the Starfleet cruiser

fired her own salvo at a target of opportunity—her lasers burning a deep gash in a nearby *Cabbage* as she sailed out of the combat zone.

"Lieutenant Hoffman, order the *Lagan* and the *Bombay* to clear some of the vessels off the *Providence's* tail."

"Yes, sir," the communications officer replied.

"Mr. Vincent, target the nearest cruiser—laser cannons on full."

"Locked, sir!"

"Fire main cannons!" The *Enterprise's* captain watched as the beams reached out and converged at a single point on one of the Romulan frigates. At some point the target's shields must have already fallen, because the powerful beams from the *Enterprise* impacted directly with the ship's hull, crumbling the entire forward half of the ship and sending it spiraling into an enemy destroyer. Both vessels exploded brilliantly, but a large chunk of debris was ejected directly at the carrier.

"Evasive action!" Coombs yelled, but it was too late. The impact sent the entire bridge crew to the deck just as all the lights on the bridge winked out. Seconds later, the red emergency lights flickered on the smoke-filled compartment. Getting to his feet, Captain Coombs helped Lieutenant Vincent back into his tactical station. Stepping over to the command chair, he opened a channel to engineering. "Carl, damage report?"

"Primary relays are fried," the static-lined voice of the chief engineer called back.

"Weapons offline, sir," Vincent said as he caught his breath.

"Long-range sensors offline," Commander Pinkerton added.

"External communications severely degraded," Hoffman said.

"What's left?" Coombs asked of anyone who could give him good news.

"Impulse reactors twenty-percent damaged," Chambers said over the intercom. "We've still got maneuvering thrusters."

"Helm, move us out of the combat area, best possible speed. We can't afford to take another hit."

"I'll try, Captain."

Feeling the deck plates shudder beneath his feet, Coombs knew that even at one-quarter impulse they were asking more of the



*Enterprise's* impulse reactors than she wanted to give. "Carl, I need shields and weapons online as soon as possible."

"I can give you partial deflectors in about ten minutes or I can give you weapons, but not both at the same time."

"What about the laser turret?" Coombs asked, recalling the technical specifications of the experimental weapons system. "They're able to fire a few emergency rounds on battery power alone."

Chambers chuckled sarcastically. "I've got battery power to spare, but the turret itself was what was hit. It's . . . it's just gone, sir. There's collateral damage to the lower decks as well."

Coombs sighed heavily, his shoulders sinking in despair. "Where the main relays are. Yes."

"Coming about slowly, sir. She's sluggish, but we're moving outside the combat area as requested."

Nodding, Coombs slowly sat back in the command chair. "Communications, try to contact the *Lexington*. Advise her of our condition."

"Yes, sir."

"I can see her now, sir," Pinkerton said as he peered into the sensor readout. "She's moving toward a flock of enemy cruisers. She's launched fighters and is pressing her attack."

"What about the rest of our forces?"

"All vessels accounted for except for the frigate *Lagan*. The *Bombay* has taken several direct hits, as has the *Adversary*."

"Romulan losses?"

"Based on the initial sensor scans, the Romulans have lost twelve warships total."

"We're getting picked apart out here," Coombs said. "Hoffman, try to raise somebody . . . anybody. We need to regroup our forces. We're making a strategic withdraw to Sector 2. That should give us ample time to lick our wounds as well as keep an eye on the Romulans."

"It'll also give them time to move a few AU's closer to Deneva," Chris Pinkerton said from the science station, holding a tattered piece of his sleeve to his forehead to stop a newly formed cut from bleeding out.

"We've got no choice, Chris. If we stay in this fight much longer there won't be any of us left to defend Deneva at all. Besides, we've got the faster ships and we're still almost a full day from the planet."

Nodding, the executive officer sighed. "Yes, sir."

# Chapter 17

Stardate 15604.23, 0945 hours

On the *Lexington's* view screen, the image of Captain Coombs wavered slightly—a result of the *Enterprise's* communications still being affected from the previous day's damage.

"Beyond the communication problems, what's your overall status, Captain Coombs?"

Coombs looked exhausted—a sentiment expressed by many in Task Force 25. He'd been up nearly all night as the repairs to the flagship had taken far longer than speculated. "Weapons systems are still offline, but life support has stabilized. Long-range sensors are back, but I don't know for how long. The chief engineer managed to jury-rig the main deflector to get them working."

Whiteacre nodded slowly. "Shields?"

"Sublight deflectors are operational, but physical damage to the deflector grid means defensive shields will be down until we can reach a starbase."

"Anything else *Lexington* can supply, you name it," Matthew offered sincerely.

"Much appreciated, Captain. I think we can manage for now. Do you have information on the location of the Romulan forces?"

"Yes, sir," Whiteacre nodded. "That's the other reason I called over. We just received word from the *Providence* that the Romulans have apparently tucked tail."

"They're abandoning their planned attack on Deneva, then?"

"It seems that way. They're heading back in the direction of Cheron."

Coombs pursed his lips. There'd been rumors circulating that the Romulans were operating from a secret base near Cheron. Every attempt to get close to the system was met with failure, resulting in either the loss of launched probes or in personnel. "How far away is the *Providence* at this time?"

"Just under six hours at warp three, sir. She's trailing the Romulans at a distance of about two AU's."

"I'm not interested in allowing the enemy the time they need to get back to their base, Captain."

Whiteacre couldn't agree more. "Understood. What are your orders?"

"The frigate *Bombay* relayed a communication from Starbase 3 an hour ago. Task Force 12 isn't far away. I want to order them to intercept the Romulan fleet with us. At their present course and speed, we should all arrive at the same time."

"We could use the help," Whiteacre approved. "Our forces are outnumbered as it is."

"I want you to contact Commodore Linden in Task Force 12 personally, Captain Whiteacre. Advise her that the *Lexington* will be leading our attack force, with *Enterprise* coordinating from a safe distance. Once Task Force 25 is within ship-to-ship range of Task Force 12, *Enterprise* will provide further instructions to the fleet."

"Yes, sir."

"Once you've sent the message to Linden, begin making preparations for getting underway. I want to warp out of this location by 1000 hours."

"Understood, Captain. *Lexington* out."

Stardate 15604.23, 1545 hours

Watching the sensor screen closely, Commander Bob Griffing quickly notified Captain Whiteacre that the Romulans had suddenly dropped out of warp.

"Are they altering course?"

"Negative, sir," the science officer reported. "They've slowed to sublight and are coming about."

"Lieutenant Knight?" Matthew asked as he looked to his tactical officer.

"Sensors are showing power buildups in the Romulan vessels. Looks like they're intent on engaging us."

"They knew we were gaining on them," Whiteacre said to himself. "Time to intercept?"

"About ten minutes, sir," the tactical officer replied.

"Bob, where's Task Force 12?"

"At their present speed, they'll intercept the Romulans at nearly the same time we do."

"Lieutenant Keith, send a message to the *Enterprise* and advise them we're going to engage the Romulan fleet."

"Yes, sir."

"Major Newell, order all pilots to their fighters and to prepare for immediate launch."

"Aye, sir," the flight control officer responded.

Stardate 15604.23, 1555 hours

"Captain Coombs, Task Force 12 has entered the sector."

"Understood, Mr. Pinkerton. Communications officer, send to Commodore Linden—attack all targets of opportunity. No coordination with our forces is required."

"Transmitting now, sir," Lieutenant Hoffman answered.

"Sir, the Romulans have moved into a phalanx formation," Lieutenant Commander Vincent advised from the tactical station.

"With the arrival of Commodore Linden's forces, the Romulan commander knows he's both outmatched and outgunned," Coombs said as he studied the tactical plot on the main viewer. "He's going to make a last stand. Mr. Keith, advise all starships to remain cautious. There's nothing more dangerous than a cornered animal."

With the carrier *Lexington* in the lead, Captain Coombs watched as the seven starships of Task Force 25 swooped toward the regrouping Romulan forces. Before they were in weapons range, four of the *Cabbage* cruisers coordinated a missile barrage against a single Starfleet vessel. Sixteen fusion missiles fired simultaneously, all striking the Andorian frigate *Voljaz*, and quickly blew it to pieces. As the Starfleet vessels opened fire with everything they had, a second barrage—this one aimed at the Tellarite frigate *Adversary*—met with similar results.

But the elements of the First Combined fleet were taking their own toll on the enemy fleet. Under sustained laser fire from the *Lexington*, *Providence*, and *Bombay*, three Romulan cruisers were pummeled into submission. The Minotaur fighters from both the *Lexington* and *Enterprise* had singled out a swept-wing cruiser and were busily picking it apart piece by piece until it was little more than a flaming hulk.

Three more *Cabbage* cruisers—along with several frigates—coordinated another attack, this time on the Andorian destroyer *Borgub*. Executing a skillful set of maneuvers, the destroyer was able to avoid the majority of missiles. However, she was struck at least three times, and when her impulse engines were damaged, she became an easy target for two frigates. Instead of firing on the stricken Federation vessel, the Romulans opted instead to simply ram it at full speed. The resultant explosion vaporized all three ships.

As Captain Coombs watched the unfolding battle on the main viewer, one thing was painfully clear—the Romulans actions were becoming desperate. And when Task Force 12 moved in to close off any route of escape the Romulans might have had, he knew it was only a matter of time before they surrendered.

The fifteen starships of Task Force 12, under the skillful leadership of Commodore Linden, worked in concert with one another beautifully. Without sustaining a single loss, the entire force acted as one, and using sustained laser barrages, obliterated or incapacitated nearly half the Romulan warships in their first pass.

Following their wave of destruction, the frigate *Bombay*—with one of her warp nacelles damaged and venting plasma—swung in a perfect arc and fired her last remaining missiles at a stray enemy frigate. The Romulan countered with a well-timed hard turn to starboard, but the maneuver would be his last. As he moved directly into the frigate *Mars*'s line of fire, Captain Welch and his crew did an expert job at dissecting the enemy vessel.

Swinging around from their first attack, Coombs watched as Commodore Linden's flagship, the cruiser *Excelsior*, made a bold move toward a handful of the last Romulan *Cabbage* cruisers. One of the Romulans managed to fire on the commodore's flagship, but the lasers were easily absorbed by the cruiser's shields. Responding in

kind, the *Excelsior* fired everything in her arsenal, destroying one cruiser and damaging another before she turned to starboard and sailed out of the immediate combat area.

Now, with only a half-dozen Romulans remaining, Captain Coombs decided enough was enough. "Lieutenant Hoffman, send out a message to the fleet—order them to englobe the remaining Romulan vessels. Let's see if they're willing to talk."

"Aye, sir."

"Sir, we're registering more explosions," Commander Pinkerton said in puzzlement.

"A problem, Commander?"

"It's not from weapons fire."

Turning back to the tactical display, Coombs watched as—one by one—the remaining Romulan ships exploded.

"Looks like they're self-destructing," Pinkerton replied.

"Suicide over capture," Coombs said in disgust.

"The Romulan way," Commander Vincent said from the tactical station with equal displeasure as the last Romulan cruiser winked off the display. "I'd sure like to have gotten a hold of a few of them."

"Maybe next time," Coombs replied evenly. "For now, we've got other problems to deal with," he said in reference to their own crippled fleet.

"Message coming in from Commodore Linden."

"Put her on the screen please, Mr. Hoffman." With *Enterprise's* communications array still only partially functioning, the static-lined image of Commodore Sofia Linden took a handful of seconds to solidify.

"Captain Coombs, it's good to see you again."

"Commodore," Ellis replied to the fair-haired flag officer with a nod. "Well done out here today, ma'am."

"My congratulations to your people as well, Captain, and my condolences on the loss of some of your crews."

"Thank you, Commodore," he said with a hint of sorrow. "We can discuss it later. For now, we've got some damaged vessels still out there, and I want to make sure each and every one of their crews gets home safely."

"Understood," she said firmly. "I'll get some damage repair parties beamed over to them shortly. If we can't repair them, Task Force 12 will take their crews aboard and get the vessels under tow."

"Any assistance you can provide will be much appreciated, Commodore."

"Don't mention it, Captain."

"The *Enterprise* is still some distance from the battle field. We'll get underway immediately and rendezvous with the *Excelsior*."

"Understood, Captain Coombs. I'll wait until after your briefing before I transmit the report of this engagement to Starbase 3. Again, well done, Captain. Don't be half-surprised if you've got a promotion waiting for you when we get back home."

Coombs cast his eyes to the deck, then looked quickly across the tired faces and battle-scarred bridge of the *Enterprise*. "I'll settle on promotions and commendations for everyone involved in this over the last few days, especially those who aren't going to be there to receive them."

"Agreed," Sofia said with a deep understanding. "*Excelsior* will be ready to receive you when you arrive, Captain. Linden out."

Stardate 15605.05

April 2156

Standing at the wide view port afforded to her office, Admiral Erin Grooms watched as the last handful of vessels from Task Force 25 moved into position at Starbase 3. She didn't need to discern their hull numbers to know which ships they were. Erin had been keeping tabs on every starship engaged in the Battle of Hell's Gate since they began their return trip home. These final three cruisers, with the battle-tested carrier *Enterprise* in the lead, marked the last of the survivors.

While the cruisers made their way to the outer docking arms of the station, the *Enterprise* made her way toward the center of the starbase, where she'd be moored alongside her sister ship, the equally worse-for-wear *Lexington*, and the newly christened *Yorktown*.



Even now the *Yorktown* was preparing to get underway, tasked with taking up command of the relief fleet sent to ensure Hell's Gate stayed in Federation hands. Where the *Enterprise* and the *Lexington's* hulls were burnt, battered, and scarred, the *Yorktown* was coated in factory-fresh markings, her exterior lights twinkled, and a well-rested crew manned her every station. When the *Enterprise* was at last locked onto the station and her damaged warp nacelles began to power down, Erin had the distinct impression that she was looking at two sides of the same coin.

A voice called from her desktop intercom. It was her yeoman. "Admiral, Captain Coombs is signaling. The *Enterprise* has finished docking maneuvers and he will be here shortly."

The heels of her boots clicked against the highly polished floor of her office as she made her way to her desk. "Advise Captain Coombs that Captain Whiteacre and I will meet them on the quarterdeck of the *Enterprise*."

"Ma'am?" the ensign asked in confusion, but quickly realized his fault. "Yes, Admiral. Right away."

Closing the channel, she opened another to Captain Whiteacre on the *Lexington*.

"Yes, Admiral?" Whiteacre replied somewhat out of breath.

"Catch you at a bad time, Matthew?"

The captain chuckled. "No, ma'am. Just had something of a disagreement with a particular panel that a few crewmen and I were trying to pry loose."

"Did you win?" she asked.

"Honestly, I think it was a draw. It came down, but right on my chief engineer's foot. He'll be in sickbay the better part of the day, which is far from ideal. We've got more than our fair share of damage to repair over here, to say nothing about getting the hot-water supply working again or even stabilizing life support."

"Understood, Captain. I'm sorry, but I'm going to have to pull you from your repairs for a short while."

There was a silence before Matthew spoke up. "*Enterprise*?"

"She's just finished docking. I thought you'd like to know."

"You have no idea, Admiral."

"Captain Coombs will be expecting us shortly. Are you . . . presentable?"

"No, and with all due respect, I wouldn't like to be. Ellis is bound to be in as bad a shape as I am, so it'll just make him feel all the more uncomfortable if you and I both show up in full dress."

Erin pondered it for a moment, then found herself in full agreement. Suddenly feeling a little overdressed, she decided to change into her working uniform before meeting up with Captain Whiteacre. "I'll meet you in docking area five in ten minutes, then?"

"Perfect, Admiral. I'll be there."

Even though Erin and Matthew hadn't made it passed the quarterdeck, it was plain to see that the *Enterprise* had seen her share of damage. Emergency panels were welded in strategic locations, giving added strength to the older bulkheads not designed to take the amount of damage that could be dealt by modern weaponry. One of the three corridors branching out from the air lock was cordoned off completely, the result of a hull breach in that section that had yet to be repaired. As the two officers continued to examine the damage, a very exhausted Captain Coombs entered the compartment.

"Admiral Grooms," he began as he exchanged a handshake with her, then turned to Captain Whiteacre. Glad to see his old friend, he smiled widely and Matthew returned the grin. "Matthew, it's good to see you."

"You too, Ellis," he replied, then motioned to the captain's soiled uniform. "I see we're in good company."

Ellis chuckled. "Deck 4 was damaged in the battle. A number of hull ruptures occurred, including one near my stateroom. This isn't just the best uniform I've got—it's the only one."

"I think we'll skip the uniform inspection for the time being," Erin replied kindly.

"Admiral," Ellis said, bowing his head in approval. "If you'll follow me, I'll show you to the nearest briefing room."

Traversing a handful of passageways that'd been recently cleared of debris, the trio made their way through the innards of the carrier to arrive at their final destination. Stepping inside, Erin noted that one of the two large status monitors in the compartment had toppled.

The frame—devoid of its screen—was leaning against the forward bulkhead where it'd once been hung, its circuitry exposed for all to see. The rest of the compartment seemed undamaged. Ellis stepped to the remaining monitor and accessed the main damage control systems display.

"As you can see, we've taken a lot of damage from what should have been relatively light attacks. The new shield generators installed helped substantially, but the new warp configuration made it extremely difficult to allocate the massive amounts of power they needed while we tried to maintain battle readiness and fighter operations simultaneously."

Captain Whiteacre examined the screen, which could have easily been that of the *Lexington*. "We were little different," he added. "After the first few hits, we were left switching between one system and the other, often times with disastrous results."

Admiral Grooms looked at him, but it was Ellis who spoke. "It's the older power conduits leading from the fusion generators . . . not to mention the older relays on decks 12 and 13. They were designed to handle a steady flow of power, not a constantly changing amount of it. After about a half-dozen cycles they began to give out."

"A design flaw in the upgrades?" she asked.

"No," Matthew replied, still scrutinizing the readout. "At least, I don't think so."

"Nor do I, Admiral," Ellis agreed. "I think the problem is simply that we pressed these old hulls into service, upgrading everything we thought was necessary to fight the Romulans, but we may have overlooked a few things." Smiling, he turned back to the display. "I don't fault the refit engineers one iota, so please don't think otherwise."

"The *Lexington* is in just as bad shape as the *Enterprise*," Matthew said. "And now we're sending out the *Yorktown* to take up station at Hell's Gate."

"I understand she's a newer refit," Ellis agreed, "but I can't believe she's going to hold up much better than either the *Enterprise* or the *Lexington* did if she comes under protracted attack."

Knowing the history of the *Yorktown's* refit better than most, Erin was forced to agree. The *Yorktown* was indeed a new refit, redesigned with the lessons learned since the conflict with the Romulans had begun. But many of the features she was outfitted with that had not been included in either the *Enterprise* or the *Lexington* were minimal. "Captains, your two carriers are the first to see major combat with the enemy. Starfleet Command is going to take your reports as gospel. If you think there are inherent flaws that need to be addressed, I suggest we make them known as soon as possible. Resources are scarce at best, so we can't count on any new hull designs coming out of the yards for at least the next twelve to eighteen months. We're going to need to make sure our existing hulls are up to the challenge."

Ellis nodded. "I've got one heck of a crew under my command here, Admiral, and I've no doubt Matthew would say the same for himself. Using the best personnel and materials at hand, we were barely able to make it out of Hell's Gate. We may be asking too much from these older classes."

"I understand your concerns, gentlemen. However, for now, we're going to have to make do with what we have. And that means getting the *Enterprise* and the *Lexington* back up to fully operational status as soon as possible. I've allocated two of our six dry docks to that task, and you'll have equal priority. Whatever either of you need—or think you might need to increase your chances of survival—bring it to me personally. I'll do what I can."

"Yes, ma'am," the two men said in unison.

"In the meantime, I'd like both of your crews to get some rest. Maintain a minimal watch presence on your vessels. That'll give everyone time enough to relax without them being in the way of the repair crews I'm already amassing to swarm over your ships. Fleet Captain Mark Garland is here from Starfleet Tactical Command. I'm sure he'll want to hear reports from both of you as soon as possible. Get cleaned up, gather whatever materials you need, and see him as soon as possible while the memories are still fresh."

"Aye, ma'am," they replied.

"Once you've both met with Fleet Captain Garland, let me know. There's a banquet planned for all of the returning vessel commanders. As much as either of you may not care for it, you two

are guests of honor, so I'll need you at my side." She turned away from the damage control monitor and looked to Ellis and Matthew. "Think of it less as a celebration and more of a memorial for those that didn't make it back. I know that each of you will understand."

Ellis and Matthew looked at one another and nodded somberly. There were more than a few mutual friends who wouldn't be present, and both silently vowed that their fallen comrades would be given due praise for their deeds done.