STAR TREK

THE ROMULAN WAR

3

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BASED ON THE TELEVISION
SERIES CREATED BY GENE RODDENBERRY

STAR TREK

THE ROMULAN WAR

Volume III

A novel by

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Chapter 1

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Seated on his useless throne of power, he looked out upon the scene before him, feeling for all the universe like a king watching as his empire burned around him. The bridge of the once-great starship *Hamburg* was in ruins, a third of the bridge crew dead or wounded, and the rest weary from the nearly two-hour confrontation they'd found themselves embroiled in. A thick cloud of acrid smoke hung above their heads, like a fog poised to descend and envelop the entire compartment with its choking haze. Monitors were blown out, consoles destroyed, and the normal Christmas-light patterns on the computers that typically signified a top-of-the-line starship were all but black and lifeless. Those in the ship still clinging to life were doing so tenaciously, and they were giving their all to make sure the *Lincoln*-class starship had fight left in her. But their numbers were dwindling with each blast from the swarming, accursed Romulan armada just beyond the laminated skin of the cruiser. If something wasn't done quickly, there would be nothing of their fleet left, and the Calder system would fall as others had in the recent months.

What had started as a routine sensor sweep had quickly escalated into an all-out battle for supremacy. The Calder system, on the spinward edge of Federation space, was thought to be a Romulan staging ground for an upcoming assault. Two squadrons of starships had been dispatched from Outpost 6 to investigate, and what they found was far more dangerous than a simple Romulan rendezvous point. Due to scrupulous Romulan sensor jamming, recently promoted Fleet Captain Thomas Ericksen and his crew didn't detect the almost fifty Romulan warships until the Starfleet squadrons were

very nearly on top of them. By then it was too late. They would have to fight, or die.

And death was now only a disruptor blast away.

The *Hamburg*, along with her sister ships, had fared well in the beginning of the battle. Several Romulan cruisers had been bested by superior piloting, and a number of destroyers and frigates had likewise fallen victim. But the victory was short-lived as scores of more powerful Romulan swept-wing warbirds came in, their green energy discharges tearing into the Federation ships with abandon. Even now, as the *Hamburg* twisted and turned to keep from being hit, larger and more dangerous battle cruisers of a design never before seen were moving in.

Vultures.

Fleet Captain Ericksen turned to his trusted first officer, Commander Fred Davis, standing at the science console. The commander had little choice in the matter, as his chair had been blown free and smashed, the result of the environmental control disintegrating ten minutes before. Fate had placed an unfortunate ensign between the commander and his chair, and the young man's body now lay crumpled on the deck beside Davis. Bloodied. Unmoving. Unbreathing. Dead.

Just like the Hamburg *is about to be.* But there was little time to mourn the loss of one, nor the hundred or so others that were gone. Each casualty report had threatened to take away the captain's sanity, and each time he fought it back with the same resolve his crew was giving at each of their stations. He would not give in to the temptation of believing himself a failure, thus opening the door to mistakes that would undoubtedly be made at a critical moment. Tom Ericksen was a fighter, and with the last ounce of strength in his body he would clench his fist a final time and strike back with every ounce of pent-up rage inside his tired, bruised body. No Romulan was going

to walk away from this clean and unscathed if Ericksen had anything to say about it.

"Status of the shields, Commander," he asked doggedly.

"Down to sixteen percent, Skipper. They're not going to hold much longer."

"Engineering," he asked, pressing the intercom button as he'd done so many times before, then reminded himself that the controls in his command chair had long since been fried. "Communications . . . Mr. Martin . . ." Tom pivoted his chair its full rotation—about a quarter turn to starboard. Lieutenant Martin was huddled over his terminal, his black uniform jacket long since discarded, his gold tunic missing a sleeve. The wound on his arm had been healed by the emergency medical team that'd departed moments before, but would no doubt leave a scar if not sufficiently tended to. As it was, the doctor had pumped the young man full or Cordrazine, keeping the blood flowing to where it was needed most—his ears. "You still with us, Lieutenant?"

Martin turned around, eyes wide with attentiveness. "Yes, sir!"

Despite the chaos, Tom smiled reassuringly, glad to have the lieutenant still present. "Send down to engineering. We need all the power they can muster diverted to shields and impulse engines."

"I'll try, sir. All internal channels are jammed with damage and casualty reports."

"Reroute all casualty reports to sickbay. There's nothing we can do about them on the bridge. The doctor's job is to save lives; ours is to save the ship. That should free up your board a little."

Martin didn't even try to mask his sigh of relief. "Yes, sir. I'll do that."

The ship veered sharply to port, and Tom clenched the armrests to keep from tumbling out of the command chair. A second later the ship turned again, this time to starboard as Ericksen watched a wave of Romulan weapons fire on the main screen pass under the ship harmlessly. But there were more enemy ships headed their way.

"Lieutenant Commander Rowley," the captain said down to the helmsman. "Do what you can to plot a course out of this mess."

Steven turned to the captain, narrowing his eyes in disbelief. "Retreat course?"

"Not on your life, Commander. I want to get above this mess, if we can. That'll give us a better angle of attack and also make us much less of a target."

"Aye, sir. I think I can manage that."

"Chief Engineer Eberhard on the line, Captain," Martin said from behind Thomas.

Ericksen pivoted out of the chair and grabbed the spare in-ear receiver from a side console and slipped it in. "Dave," he began jubilantly, "status?"

"Status?" the grizzled engineer spat back into the communication device. "I'll tell you what the status is. The status is quo! In fact, I think it's worse than it was ten minutes ago."

"Report, Commander."

"Three of the four fusion reactors are out, two of them permanently. The third is on her last leg, but my people down here are keeping it together. Don't ask me how . . . you won't want to know."

"Anything else?"

"Battery power is down to half, sir. The secondary electrical storage room is . . . is just gone. If we lose primary power at this point, we'll be dead in the water."

"How likely is that to happen?"

"At the rate we're being pummeled, it's a near certainty that it'll happen in the next twenty minutes. What are you guys doing up there, anyway? Are you purposely ramming into weapons fire?"

"Doing our best to avoid that, Chief. The Romulans aren't making it easy, though."

"Want me to call over and ask them to stop?"

Thomas found himself smirking at the chief engineer's jest. "I wouldn't mind, but they're still jamming all outgoing channels. We're lucky to have ship-to-ship, and that's only if our forces are close enough to collide with."

"It probably wouldn't show on our hull, not with all the damage we've taken. We've got more hull breeches than I've got toes."

"We're moving out of the combat range now. That should give you a few minutes to breathe."

"Thank God."

"But we're going to head right back in once we get a clear picture of the area."

"Belay my last, then," Eberhard moaned.

"Just keep the engines going for a short while longer. I'll call back when I need more."

"Knowing you, I'll stay within a few paces of the intercom. Eberhard out."

"We're almost clear of the area, sir," Rowley said as he took the *Hamburg* into a steep ascent. Two incoming Romulan cruisers rapidly fell off the view screen, and for once in what seemed like an eternity, the main viewer was blessedly empty.

"Signs of pursuit?"

"Nothing yet, Captain," Commander Davis replied, "although the sensors are questionable at best. Half the lateral and ventral arrays are down, and the forward long-range emitters are burnt to a crisp."

"We've still got one good eye then, Fred?"

"More like a half-open, half-blind eye, Skipper. Caution is more than warranted."

"I'll take it under advisement, Commander. Mr. Rowley, let's see if we can't get some power back to the plasma cannons."

Steven looked at the battered console in despair. "I'm not sure what I can do about that, sir, but I'll give it a go."

"I need more than just a go, Lieutenant Commander. I need results. You've got ten minutes, and the clock started three minutes ago."

"Aye, Captain."

Ten thousand kilometers from the *Hamburg*, the frigate *Mars* was faring only slightly better in her fight with the Romulans. The smallest ship in the Federation fleet, she was by far the most maneuverable at sublight speeds. Her helmsman, Lieutenant Alan Stevenson, was using every ounce of that advantage to keep the ship from slamming into one of the dozen or so enemy cruisers that were firing on them. When targets of opportunity presented themselves, as the squid-shaped Romulan vessel ahead of the frigate was now, Stevenson had free reign to fire at will.

"Target locked," he said the moment before the main laser batteries were unleashed. Bursts of blue-white beams raced out from the underside of the forward hull, each impacting the enemy starship along her spine. Fragments of the enemy vessel's hull flaked off under the first two blasts, the third striking deep into the gash. Seconds later the destroyer exploded, eliciting a hurrah from the bridge crew.

All save for Captain Jasiha Welch.

Captain Welch had temporarily taken over the duties at the science station when Commander Jaffe had been injured. It was now his job to locate and target all incoming vessels, and feed that information into Stevenson's computer. With the ship's main computer banks down, the secondary systems were working overtime to keep the command funneling throughout the ship. Fortunately, it hadn't caused a lag in routing sensor data, but that could all change at a moment's notice. The systems, already old when the war had started, were now dangerously close to becoming obsolete. And with most of Starfleet's funds being diverted to new construction of starships, the old frigates like the *Mars* were being pushed aside. Captain Welch cursed under his breath at the thought of them dying not because

they didn't fight hard enough, or that they weren't smart enough, but because of a fault in technology at just the wrong moment.

As the Romulan destroyer vanished from his sensor scope, Jasiha turned his attention to two other enemy vessels making their way toward the stricken *Hamburg*. "Alan, I've got a positive bead on two more destroyers heading toward the *Hamburg*. Can we intercept in time?" he asked, not bothering to turn around.

"I'm not sure, sir. I can point us in the right direction, but the impulse engine is already overtaxed."

"Options?"

"We've got five rounds of warheads left for the accelerator cannons. We might be able to scare the Romulans off with a close shot, or maybe get lucky and actually hit them."

Only five rounds left. Then what? All we have left is one bank of lasers and one short-range plasma cannon on the underside of the forward hull . . . and it's stuck pointing down at a forty-five-degree angle. Sighing, Captain Welch nodded into his screen. "Make every shot count, Lieutenant. The *Hamburg* is counting on us, whether they know it or not."

"Yes, sir."

Captain Welch felt the deck shift under his feet, a sure sign that both the ship was turning and that the inertial dampeners were giving out. The turn was performed smoothly, but Welch was taken off guard by a sudden dip in the *Mars*'s attitude. He gripped onto the console a split second before a dull thud reverberated through the hull, getting more pronounced with each second and then ebbing away as quickly as it'd appeared.

"That was close," Dean sighed from the communications console. "A few more meters and that fusion missile would have been our downfall."

Thankful for the quick action of his helmsman, Jasiha was nonetheless disturbed by the fact that the warhead had never once

appeared on his screen. *Must be a blind spot in the short-range sensors. That's never a good thing when you find yourself in close combat.* He didn't spend long musing over it. The Romulan warships nearing the *Hamburg* were now in range of the accelerator cannons. The larger Federation cruiser was attempting to maneuver out of the way, but without stern-facing weapons, she'd be an easy target. Captain Welch expertly trained the sensors onto one of the two enemy vessels, and with a bit of fine tuning, was rewarded with a positive sensor lock. "Target locked," he shouted as he fed the firing solution to the weapons console.

It was an agonizingly long fifteen seconds before Stevenson gave an affirmation. "Target data received. Cannon is primed and ready to fire."

"Fire!"

The *Mars* shuddered as two rounds were propelled from the underside of the ship. Unguided, they raced toward their target. At their current distance, the enemy commander had a few seconds with which to act before his ship was struck. Jasiha watched the sensors intently, hoping against hope that the Romulan wouldn't maneuver out of the way at the last minute. He watched as the distance to the target closed rapidly, and breathed a sigh of relief at the point when he knew that nothing the Romulan could do now would alter his fate. Seconds later, the two warheads struck the left wing of the Romulan destroyer, exploded, and severed the structure in two. It careened out of harm's way, but not before its wing mate fired two shots at the *Hamburg*, both of which hit home and blew the rear hangar doors completely free of the ship.

"Switching to short-range visual now, sir," Stevenson said.

Turning to the main view screen, Captain Welch watched in horror as the *Hamburg* vented atmosphere and debris from her stern. Two of her shuttlepods were blown out into space, along with what looked like two or three crewmen. A raging fire ignited in the open bay, and

for a moment the cruiser looked like a Roman candle arching through the heavens. She listed, then lurched toward the nearby planet of Calder.

"Now in laser range, sir," Alan said as he programmed his controls. "Laser control room reports they're ready to fire."

"I'll target the Romulan's engines. Let's knock them out of the fight for good."

"Agreed."

Turning back to his sensors, Captain Welch knew he had little time. They needed to dispatch the Romulan quickly if they were to have a chance to rescue anyone on the *Hamburg*. At their current speed, the damaged cruiser would hit the planet's atmosphere in minutes.

The Romulan swung in a lazy turn to starboard, intent on firing on the *Hamburg*'s stern once more. As it did, Stevenson turned right along with her and the *Mars* was rewarded with a positive lock for the lasers. "Lasers locked, Alan. Fire!"

"Aye, sir. Firing—" Steven started, but the ship rocked violently as it was struck from behind by an incoming Romulan cruiser. Stevenson didn't have time to fire the weapons before he, Captain Welch, and Dean were all ripped from their stations and tossed to the deck like dice at a craps table.

Taking full advantage, the Romulan on the trail of the *Hamburg* opened fire, long lines of green energy rippling out and striking, then severing the port nacelle from the cruiser. The result explosion sent the *Hamburg* in a fishtail slide to port, her stern swinging around as she tumbled even more rapidly for the planet's surface.

"Main power is offline!" Commander Davis called from the emergency engineering console.

Lunging up from the deck, Fleet Captain Erickson grabbed at the armrest of the command chair as if he were free-climbing Mt. Everest. His head was ringing, the result of the impact with the unforgiving

deck moments ago as he was tossed free of his chair. "Can you reroute power from the fusion reactor?" he barked.

"It's down, too, sir."

"Mr. Rowley?" Tom asked, but saw that Steven was lying unconscious on the deck beside the helm. The ship was turning and twisting all around them, the movement playing havoc with his equilibrium. Taking a deep breath, Thomas pushed himself free of the command chair and landed at the base of the helm controls. Kneeling beside the discarded chair, he tried frantically to establish some form of attitude control. But every button was dead, every switch was useless, and every computer-generated indicator was dark and lifeless. The *Hamburg* wasn't dying. She was already dead.

Twisting his upper body to the rear, the captain was glad to see that Lieutenant Martin was still at his post. "Martin, do we still have internal communications?"

"No, sir," the lieutenant cried out, trying every conceivable combination he knew of to get power back to his station. "It's just no good, sir. I'm totally offline."

And if that Romulan was intent on finishing the job it started, Ericksen knew there was no time to waste. "Fred, stand by to blow the emergency jettison bolts!"

From the science station, Commander Davis nodded, then turned to his duties. Only one of his terminals still had power, and it wasn't the one he needed. Fortunately, he knew that he could access the manual control for the bolts by getting into the panel under his station. Kneeling down, he grabbed a piece of shattered steel from the deck and, holding it two hands like a sword, stabbed the mesh cover of the panel, dead center. With a powerful wrench, the protective screen popped off, and Davis tossed it back behind him, hoping it didn't land on Lieutenant Rowley's still form. Moving onto his back, he pulled himself under the science console, quickly finding the round handle that controlled the explosive bolts. "Ready, sir!"

Thomas nodded. "Once we're free and clear of the secondary hull, the emergency thrusters should come online. That should give us some control before we set down on the surface."

"We hope," Martin scoffed cynically. "It not like this has ever been done before."

"Then we're going to set a precedent, Lieutenant," Ericksen offered back. "All right, Fred. Blow it!"

As he yanked hard on the handle, nothing happened. An entire minute passed before there was a creak of metal somewhere in the overhead, followed by a tremendous explosion aft as the couplers that held the globe-like forward hull to the drive section exploded in near-perfect unison, severing the ship in two. It also had the desired effect of giving the much-needed thrust to blow the command section free and clear from the doomed secondary hull. Attitude control was immediately restored, and miraculously, two of the three terminals came online, power now fed to them from emergency generators deep in the sphere.

However, not a single person on the bridge realized any of this. The explosion that had saved the command section had sent everyone cartwheeling across the bridge. Like Lieutenant Rowley, Fleet Captain Ericksen and the rest were now unconscious as what was left of the *Hamburg* hurtled in a partially controlled dive toward the surface of Calder.

Chapter 2

The Romulans were regrouping, likely for their final attack on the already-weakened Starfleet defenders. But the temporary reprieve was one of dread. On the bridge of the battered frigate *Mars*, all Captain Welch could do was watch in horror as the remains of the *Hamburg* entered the planet Calder's atmosphere. Her separated stern drive section, twisting and tumbling, would burn up almost completely before it impacted with the surface at terminal velocity. Jasiha said a silent prayer for whoever was still entombed in it. Then his attention went to the forward command sphere, rocketing toward the planet like a meteor.

"Commander Jaffe, are there any life readings in the command module?"

Norman tried to get his failing instruments to cooperate, but half the computer circuits on the *Mars* were fried—likely beyond anyone's ability to repair. "It's difficult to say for certain, sir, but I believe so."

"Are they going to make it to the surface safely?"

"Their rate of descent is consistent with computer models of a controlled crash landing. However, it's nearly impossible to tell for certain if they'll safely make planetfall. With the amount of damage the *Hamburg* sustained before she separated, there's no way to tell if her emergency landing systems are still operative."

Before Captain Welch could formulate any plans on the matter, Dean Baumann spoke up from the communications station. "Sir, there's a message coming in from the *Brandenburg*. It's Captain Waters."

Jasiha nodded. Ben Waters was the next senior officer in the Federation task force. A good man with a solid reputation, it was now

Waters' job to finish the job the *Hamburg* had started. "Put it on the screen, Alan."

Through a haze of static, an image of the *Brandenburg*'s captain materialized. Waters' dark hair was disheveled, and through what Captain Welch could discern on the screen, his cruiser had incurred just as much damage as the *Mars* had.

"Welch, are you receiving?"

Turning the communications officer, Welch nodded. "Dean, see if you can clear them up some more." He then turned back to the image of Captain Waters. "Affirmative, *Brandenburg*. We've got you on visual."

Waters waved at the screen contemptuously. "I can hear you but I can't really make you out."

"Understood, Captain. We'll muddle through."

Waters nodded, his eyes narrowing as he attempted to make out what he was seeing on his screen. "With the *Hamburg* out of action, I'm assuming command of our forces, Captain. At least, what's left of them."

"Yes, sir. What are your orders?"

"We can't remain here any longer, Captain Welch. We've lost the Calder system. That should be evident to anyone. Starfleet has no assistance on the way."

"But the *Hamburg*?" Jasiha protested. "She may have survivors. We can't just leave them here."

"We can and we will, Captain Welch. We've already lost more than half our forces. I see no point in wasting any more on this matter. I'm sorry, but those are my orders. We need to take advantage of the break the Romulans have given us and extricate ourselves from the system while we can. Are you warp capable?"

Anger welled in Jasiha over the entire affair. He managed to keep it under control by gripping the armrest of his chair tighter. "Yes, sir."

"Very well. Lay in a reverse course back to the starbase. I've already signaled the rest of the ships in the task force to do the same. Engage at the maximum safe speed the *Mars* can handle."

"And if the Romulans choose to pursue?"

"It's a chance we'll have to take, Captain Welch. If we stay here any longer, our chances of escape diminish drastically with each passing second. Get underway immediately."

As much as he wanted to, Jasiha was not about to disobey orders in such a hopeless situation. Without the assistance of their dwindling forces, any chance he'd have to rescue the survivors of the *Hamburg* would be futile. Hopefully, Captain Erickson—if he'd survived—would find a way to continue to do so without their help. "Yes, sir."

Consciousness slowly returned. The dull sensation of pain in his head throbbed, and before moving, he checked for feeling in each of his limbs. He couldn't feel his left arm at all. Was it broken? Was it severed completely from his torso? Tom couldn't tell. Either way, it would require his attention. Planting one hand on the first hard surface he could find, Fleet Captain Ericksen pushed himself over with great effort. Flopping onto his back, he slowly craned his neck up to give himself an examination. What's more, not only was his left arm still attached, it was undamaged. As the paresthesia wore off, the associated pinpricks began, and he was thankful that the limb had simply fallen asleep due to the unnatural angle at which his body had come to rest. When he felt sufficiently able to move, he turned once more onto his stomach, then pushed himself upright to survey his surroundings.

What little light was afforded to him was streaming in through a gash in the top of the bridge. Through it he could see clouds off in the distance, surely an unusual sight when one expected to see stars. Particles of dust danced in the cascading beams, heavier ones falling

to the deck while the lighter ones swam erratically toward the source of light and out of the ship.

The ship.

Tom was sure that whatever was left of the *Hamburg* was little more than a useless pile of scrap metal at this point. Standing to his feet, he could tell that although the command sphere had landed upright, it was still at an off-angle to port. *One of the landing struts must have given way.* Not a single display or indicator in the smashed compartment was illuminated. Cables and wires, once coursing with power and data, were hanging from the overhead like vines. Nothing was arcing or sparking as it should have, because no power was available to make such eruptions. But there was life, and right now that was all that mattered. The instant Tom heard a moan come from the far side of the bridge, he knew that whatever fate had planned for him, he wouldn't be alone on the otherwise-desolate planet.

At least, not while the crewman in question was still alive.

Rushing to aid the officer, Tom was glad to see that it was his executive officer, Commander Davis. "Fred?"

The commander's eyes fluttered open, and in doing so he took in a deep breath. He looked around frantically, then locked his gaze on Ericksen. "Captain?"

"Don't try to move too quickly. We crashed on the surface of Calder."

"I . . . I remember," Davis said, wincing as he reached out for Tom.

Looking over his friend, Tom didn't see anything amiss. But he wasn't a doctor, and the basic medical training he'd received at Starfleet Academy wasn't going to be very useful in determining if Fred had any internal injuries. "You sure you're up for it?"

"Just help me to my feet," Davis muttered. "We can make further evaluations along the way."

Grasping Fred's arm, Tom slowly brought the commander to his feet. Though he was off balance, Fred seemed to weather standing just fine. "And?"

"I'm fair, Skipper," Davis huffed after attempting to wipe off a spot of dirt from his completely tattered uniform. "Nothing seems broken. I've just got this damn buzzing in my ears."

"I think we'll skip the uniform inspections for the time being, Commander," Tom joked, which elicited a weak smile from his executive officer.

"Much obliged."

Nodding, Tom turned back to the command chair at the center of the bridge. Slowly making his way toward it, he reached out for the bottom cushion with both hands and tore it free, then tossed it where it wouldn't land on anyone lying on the deck. Flipping open a panel, the captain retrieved the emergency medical kit. He was grateful the two tricorders inside were still functioning. However, with no currently viable way to charge them, each moment of their use degraded their lifespan. Conservation was necessary. Handing one to Davis, he strapped the medical supply belt around his waist. It was lighter than he'd hoped, which meant that it only contained the absolute essentials for sustainment of humanoid life functions. If the injured crew required more . . .

We'll cross that bridge when we come to it.

The first crewman he came to was the ensign who'd previously been killed in the battle with the Romulans. Sighing, Tom made his way to the starboard side of the helm where he'd last seen Lieutenant Steven Rowley. The lieutenant was still there, lying on his side under a light panel that'd fallen from the overhead. Brushing aside the remains of the translucent panel, Tom was delighted to see the lieutenant was still in one piece. Optimistically, the captain waved the tricorder over Rowley's body. Steven's right humerus was fractured, and two of the bones in his hand were likewise broken. This was consistent with the

damage incurred to the helm console when the space navigational subprocessor screen exploded early on in the battle. Thankfully, Rowley was simply unconscious. His life readings were strong, but he'd no doubt be in considerable pain if the captain were to revive him without first addressing Steven's arm. Applying the medicines in the correct order—or what he remembered was the correct order—the captain made a splint using some panel fragments and one of the sleeves from his useless uniform jacket. Confident he'd done what he could, Tom administered the final stimulant to get Rowley back on his feet.

There was an agonizingly long wait before the young officer opened his eyes. "Captain?" he rasped.

"Your arm is broken, Lieutenant. Try not to move it."

"We're . . . still alive?"

Tom smiled down at him. "For the moment, anyway."

"The ship?"

"We crashed on Calder during the battle."

Steven closed his eyes tightly. "Sorry."

"It wasn't your fault, Lieutenant."

It took Steven considerable effort to swallow whatever was caught in his throat. "Thirsty."

Ericksen chided himself for not recognizing that the lieutenant's lips were more than a little dry. He withdrew another stimulant, then pressed the pneumatic plunger to Steven's left shoulder. "This is going to sting a little, but it'll reverse some of the dehydration."

Nodding, Rowley winced, but whether it was because he was preparing himself for the upcoming sting or from something else, Tom couldn't tell. Pulling the trigger, he sent the stimulant rushing into Rowley's blood stream, bringing him near-instant relief.

"Thank you, sir. Is anyone else . . . I mean, did anyone else make it?"

Looking up, Tom could see Fred Davis helping the fallen communications officer to his feet. Lieutenant Martin was suffering

from a black eye, and the fact that he was favoring his right leg instantly told the captain that his ankle was injured. When Erickson caught Davis's eyes, the commander shook his head in despair. None of the other bridge officers had survived.

"A few of us have, Lieutenant. But we're going to have to search the rest of the command sphere for others before the Romulans come down here and start poring over the wreckage."

Steven nodded quickly. "Understood."

"You're not going to be able to do much with that arm, but we can't stay here. I need to get you to your feet."

"Yes, sir. No time like . . . the present."

Then Fred was at their side. The two officers took up positions on either side of Steven and gingerly brought him to a standing posture, but not without a few grunts of dissatisfaction.

"Lieutenant?" the captain asked the helmsman for reassurance.

"I'll manage, Skipper," Steven exhaled. "Thanks."

Tom nodded, then looked to Fred. "We need to get out of here, Commander. Options?"

Fred jerked his head in the direction of the aft turbo elevator. "The lift doors are jammed. Even if we could open them wide enough for us to get inside, the car is stuck here on the bridge."

"Emergency crawlways, then."

Davis wagged his head as he weighed the notion, then bobbed it toward the large gash in the overhead. "Other than trying to get out that way, I don't see any other alternative. However, it goes without saying that the hull has been severely stressed, both during combat and planetary reentry. Those crawlways could fast become an instant deathtrap."

"We're going to have to take our chances. Besides, we may find other crewmen along the way. I'm not about to let anyone on board still alive become a prisoner of the Romulan Empire. That means we take as long as we need to in order to search every compartment,

every passageway, every nook and cranny of what's left of the *Hamburg* before we leave." He then looked to each of the three injured, exhausted officers. "Is that understood?" Receiving nods of acknowledgement, he stepped over the destroyed chief engineer's console and, opening a manual hatch on the underside, withdrew the five laser sidearms concealed there. Strapping two to the medical belt around his waist, he handed the others to his officers.

Once they were properly outfitted, and Lieutenant Martin's ankle had been secured in a temporary brace, Tom and Fred cleared away the debris from the deck forward of the helm console. Once the emergency hatch was unlocked and open, one by one the four officers made their way down the ladder to deck two.

Fleet Captain Ericksen had no true figure as to how long they'd been searching the remains of the *Hamburg* for trapped crewmen, but he'd guess it was at least two hours. During their journey through the twisted passageways and often obstructed crawlspaces, they'd located twenty other crewmen representing nearly every department on the ship. Each was in various stages of shock, but none were injured, save for one particular Andorian from the ship's botany department who was covered in needles from a cactus he'd been flung into during the *Hamburg*'s descent. Every other crewman they'd located was dead, and left where they'd fallen.

Slipping down another ladder well, Tom Ericksen was the first to make it to deck 9. A few minutes later the other nineteen members of his crew followed suit. So far, none of the engineering department had been accounted for. Tom feared the worst—that they'd all perished when the ship's drive section burned up in the atmosphere. His last hope was that someone from the ship's propulsion team had made it to auxiliary control, which had once been connected to main engineering via a twenty-meter-long direct access tube.

Stepping past the ship's transporter room, Tom and Fred Davis ventured a cursory inspection. As expected, no one was there. The dark and lifeless room, previously always humming with power being consistently fed to the pattern buffer computers on the far side of the compartment, was now eerily silent. Had anyone or anything been stored for materialization in the buffers, they would have been utterly lost. Shining their flashlights one final time around the compartment, they turned to make their way down to the end of the dark corridor.

Just as they were about to round the final corner, a tremendous explosion lit up the passageway. The force of the blast wasn't enough to knock anyone to the deck, but the deafening thunderclap caused everyone's hands to fly to their ears—albeit a moment too late. When the dust had settled, Captain Ericksen's first thought was of the crewmen behind him. Seeing that they were none the worse for wear from the experience, he turned and cautiously walked toward the remains of the doors leading to auxiliary control.

Through a thick fog of smoke, a formless shape rushed toward the captain. Lieutenant Martin, quick on the draw but short on his aim, fired a round that struck near the newcomer's foot. The figure lost his balance and careened right into the captain, knocking them both to the deck in a heap. The two began to struggle, and that's when Tom heard a distinctly human voice shout a gaggle of curses.

"Get away from me, you filthy Romulan swine!"

Tom tried to argue, but a right hook to his jaw knocked his senses loose. Shaking it off, he found a good hold on the man's arm, wrenched it down and around, spinning the man over until his back was against Tom's stomach. That was when the captain got a good look at him. "Dave?"

The man stopped struggling, then turned defiant eyes toward the captain. His anger quickly melted away, replaced by sheer, unbridled joy. "Captain!" Chief Engineer Eberhard exclaimed.

Tom immediately released his friend, and both quickly got to their feet. "You were supposed to be in engineering."

"And I'd be dead now for it. Are you saying you're not glad to see me?"

Tom laughed. "That's not what I meant. I'm just . . . surprised."

"The engines were a complete mess, sir. No disrespect to any order you might have handed down, there was nothing I or any of the other engineers there could have done. Magnetic bottles were toast, the power conduits were twisted and useless . . . power was fading—"

"So you abandoned your post?"

David gave the captain a sour, hurt expression. "Never, sir! I left half my team there while I and a damage control party came to auxiliary control. We were hoping to get some more power to the fusion reactors to give us some more maneuverability. Internal comms were down below deck 8; otherwise you'd have known I was here the whole time."

"And the rest of your team?"

Eberhard's eyes softened as his smile faded quickly faded. "I . . . we lost McDougal."

Tom nodded somberly. McDougal, the chief engineer's lead mate. *Good man. Bright future. What a waste.* "Sorry, Dave."

"Thank you, sir. The rest of my team is in there," he said, cocking his head toward the now-obliterated doorway. "All two of them."

"We've been searching the ship. With you and your people, that makes twenty-three survivors. We've still got three more decks to go before we—"

"We've already been down there, sir," Dave side, his voice tinged with regret. "When we couldn't find a way to access deck 8, we went down. No additional survivors. There's also a mighty big hole down in deflector control where we can get out. I wasn't about to leave anyone else on board, so that's when we came up and blew the doors."

"Using what? We've got no power."

"Seismic charges from the geology lab."

"We need to get out of here now, then. There's likely to be a whole flock of Romulans out there waiting to crawl all over what's left of the ship."

Eberhard's eyes turned cold. "I've got no intentions of letting those filthy heathens get their paws on this ship, sir."

"Neither do I, but we've got no other choice."

"Yes, we do, sir. Those seismic charges I told you about. There must be thirty more down there in the geology hazardous material locker. We plug them into one another and wrap the fusion reactor casing with them like it was a Christmas tree."

"But the fusion reactors are all dead."

Commander Davis stepped up behind the captain. "But the waste material inside them is still highly combustible. Dave's right . . . we blow those just right and the whole command sphere will shatter."

"Leaving nothing bigger than a slice of bread for the Romulans to sift through."

Tom smiled at the prospect, then frowned as he realized they were talking about destroying the last vestiges of their once-proud vessel. "How long?"

"Ten minutes to get the charges, about twenty to climb back up to deck 6 and get them wired into what's left of the reactors. With the impulse engines nice and cool, it shouldn't be a problem for my team and me. We rig it with a basic timed detonator."

"Then what do we do, sir?" Lieutenant Rowley asked. "With the ship destroyed, we've got nowhere to hide."

"Basic planetary survival training, Lieutenant," Tom replied, then addressed the crew. "Everyone, get everything you can carry and get out through deflector control. We need rations, weapons, blankets, anything you can think of that will help us last on the surface."

Fred nodded. "Calder is class M, but on the cooler side of the spectrum. If we crashed near the equator it should be relatively warm. Vegetation is pretty plentiful. Sporadic life sign readings."

"Anything dangerous?"

Davis shook his head. "Our scans weren't complete before we were attacked."

Tom nodded. "We'll have to wing it. Chief, take your team and get the fusion reactors wired. Take Gunderson and Murdock for help," he said, nodding to two of the three security guards in their company. "I want everyone out of the ship in thirty minutes. Set the charges for forty-five minutes. If we're lucky, we may even take a few Romulans with us."

The sanction the captain received was a round of resounding hurrahs from his crew as they went about their tasks. *Hopefully*, Tom mused, we won't be here too long. *Please, God, let Starfleet send a rescue team soon.*

Chapter 3

Stardate 15902.20
Feb 2159

  As the destroyer *Ajax* made her way to the Pantares sector, all was peaceful on the ship. Having left Starbase 6 nearly a month before, neither she nor the other five starships of Task Force 2 had seen an iota of action. While it was unsettling for many who wished to exact vengeance on the Romulans for what they'd done in the Battle of Calder, there were more than a few who relished the doldrums of long, uneventful space cruises. One of them, Chief Medical Officer Mark Donnelly, was one such officer. He'd seen his share of death ten times over in the last few years, and perhaps more than anyone on board wished this entire affair would simply come to an end. Far too many had died on either side, and if the reports murmured in the wardroom in hushed tones were in any way true, neither the Federation nor the Romulans were making any headway into each other's territories.

  Aside from the odd muscle strain, Dr. Donnelly had found himself blessedly without any customers to tend to. He'd taken it upon himself to stretch his own legs and take a tour of the *Ajax*. Poking his head into every compartment he came across, his rank and position giving him full privilege to do so, he similarly avoided the one place he knew where the least amount of action currently was—the bridge. Mark casually strolled throughout the entirety of the vessel, from the lower holds to engineering, then forward to sensor and weapons control, and finally to the modest arboretum. Though it was little more than a metal-walled greenhouse, he spent a few moments there taking in the scents and exercising his olfactory glands before

heading up to the officers' berthing on deck 3. Ending at the executive officer's stateroom, he buzzed the door, and the voice of Commander Joshua Garrett yelled from inside.

"Come in."

Stepping through the doorway, Donnelly saw that Garrett, along with ship's helmsman Erich Tauschmann and communications officer Paul Cordeiro, was huddled around a small circular table not native to an officer's stateroom. A casual glance at the cards in their hands and the pile of chips stacked before them told Donnelly they were playing poker.

"Doc," the executive officer said casually, not bothering to look up from his cards. "What brings you into our little slice of paradise?"

"Paradise, my foot," Lieutenant Tauschmann griped. "Cordeiro here is making a fool out of us."

"Sorry, sir," the ensign said with a smile, indicating he was far from remorseful. "Just a lucky night, I guess."

"Come now, Erich, let's be honest here," Garrett began with a wink. "He's only making a fool out of you. I'm still sitting rather pretty over here." Looking down at his chips, the commander blew them a kiss. "You little lovelies, you."

The doctor smiled at the men. Each was a friend. They'd served together for a long time, made even longer by the horrors of war. Even when they got back home, even long after he'd left the service, Donnelly knew he'd remember these men for the rest of his life. "I just wanted to pop in and see how things were going."

"The only thing going here is we're all casually waiting for Mr. Cordeiro to throw in some chips or fold," Erich said, then smiled wickedly. "I'd fancy the latter, but even the former would be preferable to sitting around here all night waiting to lose more credits."

"Don't rush me. I'm thinking."

"Yeah, don't rush him," Commander Garrett defended the junior officer. "Besides, it's not like we've got anything to do here." He then turned his head to Mark. "Pull up a chair, Doc. Always room for one more."

Grabbing a nearby chair, Donnelly sat, but declined to join the game. "So, anything out of the ordinary to report?" he asked the table.

The primary command crew shook their heads in unison.

"Not a thing," Tauschmann said, scrutinizing his cards after Cordeiro threw in twenty credits. "Unless our communications officer here is bluffing. If that's so, you might want to go prep the ER. There may be a junior officer on his way down in need of your services."

"Very funny," Cordeiro chuckled.

"Who says I'm joking, Ensign?"

Garrett smiled, then put his cards down on the tabletop. "We're on course for Pantares, Doc. So far, there's nothing to report. Just as there wasn't anything to report for the last two weeks."

"You think we're going to find Romulans there?" the doctor asked.

"I hope not."

"The chatter on subspace is that they're losing more and more ships every day." Cordeiro smiled as he dropped two cards, picked up two more in the process and beamed with joy.

"Fine by me," Tauschmann grumbled, then took a drink from a nearby glass. "That means we're doing our job."

"Well, we're not faring much better," the executive officer said diplomatically. "Starfleet's stretched pretty thin right now. They've even started pulling in other ships from the opposite side of Federation space to help with the war."

"That's a long way away," Tauschmann said, drawing out the words for emphasis.

Donnelly nodded. "Hopefully the war will be over before they, too, become committed."

"Hear, hear," Mark said as he raised his own glass in a toast.

"All right," Tauschmann said with finality. "Time to see what you're made of, Ensign. I call."

Cordeiro straightened in his chair, and was about to lay his cards on the table when the game was interrupted by the sound of the ship's intercom. It was the voice of the captain.

"Commander Garrett, this is the bridge. Respond, please."

Josh turned and pushed the receiver button. "Garrett here, sir."

"Commander, I need you and the rest of the command team on the bridge immediately."

Captain Durbin's voice was steady, but there was something in it Josh couldn't put a finger on. "Trouble, sir?"

"We picked up a contact on the long-range sensors. Might be nothing, but I want my best people up to determine that."

"Yes, sir. We'll be right up. Garrett out."

"Well," Cordeiro said with satisfaction, "duty calls."

Tauschmann threw his cards to the table in frustration. "I had you, Ensign! I know I did."

"We'll find out later," Garrett replied as he slipped on his command jacket. "Right now, we've got another game to go play." He then turned to the doctor. "You coming, Doc?"

"Something tells me I might be needed elsewhere. I better go and see that sickbay's ready."

"Always the pessimist, Doc?"

Mark smiled, then patted the commander on the shoulder. "Better safe than sorry, Josh."

On board the flagship of the Romulan convoy, Subcommander Verelan looked over the sensor officer's shoulder with curiosity. A moment ago, the centurion had reported contact with an unknown vessel. By the time she'd stepped over to him, the screen was devoid

of anything except the vastness of space. Minutes passed before another contact was made, this time closer than the one before.

"There, Commander," the officer said, although Verelan had already noticed.

"But what is it, Centurion?" she asked. "An enemy vessel?"

"Possibly. The range is too great to get an accurate scan. Do we move closer and investigate?"

To do so would mean breaking away from the bulk of their forces, many of which were unable to defend themselves. And the convoy, carrying much-needed raw materials and food supplies, was far too precious to leave in the hands of a single cruiser while Verelan departed with the *Terik* to investigate. Shaking her head, she decided that caution was warranted. "No, Centurion. Not yet. You will continue to track the target. If it moves any closer or alters its course in any way, you will alert me immediately. I will be in engineering."

"Yes, Subcommander."

Stepping onto the bridge first, Commander Garrett made his way to the side of Captain Durbin, seated in the command chair. Close on his heels, Lieutenant Tauschmann relieved the assistant helmsman, while Ensign Cordeiro did the same at the communications station.

"What do we have, sir?" Joshua asked his captain.

Chasin Durbin was sitting casually in the chair, intently examining the star-filled void on the main view screen. "I'm not sure, Commander. Something is out there; I'm just not positive what it is."

Knowing that captain needed more information, Garrett stepped over to the science and sensor computer. Quickly scanning over the sensor logs from the past hour, he noted the contact the *Ajax* had made fifteen minutes before. It was a solid contact, but it had only appeared on two sweeps of the area before disappearing. Training the sensors in the same area as before, Garrett again saw nothing out of the ordinary.

"Anything, Commander?" Chasin asked.

"Nothing there now, sir."

Captain Durbin murmured something indistinguishable, then pivoted toward the communications station. "Ensign Cordeiro, have any of the other four ships in our group reported anything?"

"I'll check, sir."

"Very good. Commander Garrett, what about focusing a high-intensity scan in the area where the last contact was made?"

"That shouldn't be a problem, sir. However, if there *is* an enemy vessel there, there's no way we could avoid them detecting it."

Chasin nodded. "I'm willing to take that chance, Commander. Besides, if it's a friendly craft out there, the last thing I want them doing is thinking we're the enemy and start taking potshots at us before we can establish formal communications. Speaking of which," he said, then turned to Cordeiro. "Ensign?"

Paul's expression was blank. "No sensor contact reported from any of our group, sir."

"So we're the only ones who saw the ghost?"

"Sir?"

Chasin smiled. "Nothing, Ensign. Keep monitoring all channels and bands. Maybe we can intercept something from the contact."

"If there's something out there to catch at all, Captain," Garrett countered. "It may just be a sensor echo. Since we're the only ones who caught it, it could be a fault in our equipment."

"I'm not discounting that possibility, Josh. In fact, I'd like you to run a full diagnostic on the sensors to be sure. But first, I want that high-intensity scan directed at the last recorded position. Maybe we'll get lucky."

Garrett chuckled as he began to program the computer for the requested scan. "And maybe we'll find a whole fleet of Romulans out there. I wouldn't exactly consider that lucky."

"Where's that gambling spirit of yours, Commander?" the captain joked.

Not turning from his duties, Joshua hooked a thumb in the direction of the communications station. "Mr. Cordeiro took most of it out of me earlier, and he's got the credits to prove it."

From the helm, Erich Tauschmann snorted. "You can say that again."

"Ready for the new scan, Captain," Garrett replied a moment later.

"Go ahead, Commander. Let's see what we can see."

"Subcommander Verelan," the voice said though the intercom in the chief engineer's office. "We are being scanned by the sensor contact."

"Federation scanning devices?" she asked, leaning over the desk.

"Yes, Subcommander. Of that there is no question."

"A single vessel, or are there multiple contacts?"

"Power emanations indicate only one vessel is attempting the scan, but considering its level of intensity, there is little doubt that they have located us."

"I will be there shortly." After closing the channel, she looked to the chief engineer. "We go to battle, my love."

The muscular Commander Delon nodded slowly. "All is ready here."

"If it can be avoided, we will not leave the convoy. However, I do not wish to allow the Federation commander an opportunity to fire on our transport ships. The loss of one would be damaging; the loss of them all would be . . . unthinkable."

Delon nodded, his dark eyes turning from her to scan the engineering readout on the far wall. The *Terik* was fully operational, with power to spare if they got into an altercation. However, the *Terik* and the warbird *Sarola* were the only two combatants in the group— the rest were lightly armed freighters that wouldn't stand much of a chance. It was a gripe he'd voiced only once before to the

subcommander, which was often once too many. However, with the relationship budding, Delon felt more at ease speaking his mind with the usually cold Verelan. "I still cannot believe this convoy was left to be as vulnerable as it is. Even if there is only one Federation starship out there, they have proven themselves to be . . . resourceful."

"We will best them, as we always have, Delon," she said, trying to subdue his bubbling frustrations.

"But not as we always have, my dear," he turned and snapped, then regretted he'd done so. "Apologies."

"None are required," she said, stepping closer to him. "Your mind, Delon. You must speak it to me now."

He searched her dark eyes, then nodded. "I know of the defeat of our forces in the Nilfas system."

She took an unconscious step backward. The defeat was highly classified information. That Delon should know about it could have meant any number of things, none of them comforting. "How did you come by this information?"

"Does it matter, Verelan? What matters is that I know it happened. Do me the honor of not thinking me a fool, then. An entire fleet of warships was bested, an outpost destroyed, and a planet captured by the Federation."

"And we exacted a heavy toll on them for it," she defended, but even her own words felt meaningless.

"We cannot continue to lose personnel and materials in this manner. To do so is a waste, and waste of this magnitude must be accounted for."

She narrowed her eyes at the implication. "Fleet Admiral Jeldan's loyalty to our victory is without question."

"He follows the orders of Praetor D'Varu."

"You would dare to question the praetor's abilities?"

"And you have not?"

She was about to agree, but before she could do so, the alarm klaxons began to sound. Smacking the intercom, she demanded an explanation.

"Subcommander, Federation starships approaching our position!" the centurion pleaded in return.

"Starships?" Delon repeated.

"How many enemy vessels?" Verelan asked.

"Five, Subcommander. Two cruiser class, three destroyer types."

Stepping up behind her, Delon moved his lips close to her gently pointed ears. "We cannot win against them, Subcommander. We must attempt evasion. The safety of the convoy—"

"Is my responsibility, Commander Delon," she whispered sharply, then turned her attention back to the intercom. "I will be returning to the command center shortly. Ready all weapons batteries."

"Yes, Subcommander," the centurion replied, then closed the channel.

"Stay here and see to the power generators, Commander Delon."

"We will fight?" he asked, although he already knew the answer.

She straightened as she mustered the courage to do what was necessary for the Romulan way. "We will do our duty, Commander."

"We're on the very edge of visual range now, sir," Commander Garrett said as the *Ajax* and her task force continued on their intercept course with the Romulan vessels.

"On screen, Commander."

On the main viewer, the distant enemy ships were little more than ill-defined metallic slivers against the void of space. But the sensors saw them perfectly—two enemy warships and eight larger, slower-moving vessels: likely freighters of some type. Task Force 2 had stumbled upon a turkey shoot—or as near to one as Captain Durbin had known in this war. The two *Hercules*-class cruisers in the task force had been ordered to draw the enemy warships away from the

convoy, which would then be picked apart by the smaller, more maneuverable destroyers. Chasin would lead the charge with the *Ajax* in the lead.

The Romulan ships were becoming more defined with each passing second, and soon the individual hulls began to take shape. The two Romulan warships flanking the freighters were keeping a tight formation with the group, which was turning in unison away from the incoming Starfleet forces.

You're not getting away that easily. Besides, we've got some new weapons we're looking forward to testing.

"How long until we're in weapons range?"

"Two minutes, thirty seconds," Garrett replied.

"Mr. Tauschmann, contact the weapons control room. Order them to place the new photonic missile launchers in standby."

Erich smiled and nodded. "Gladly, sir."

"I hope they work as designed," Joshua said to Chasin from the science station. "We had to sacrifice half our accelerator cannon rounds to get those things installed."

"They'll work fine, Commander. They've got twice the range and three times the hitting power as the accelerator cannons. The Romulans are about to find out firsthand all about Starfleet ingenuity."

"Message coming in the cruiser *Lafayette*, Captain," Ensign Cordeiro said. "She's requesting to break off and engage the enemy warships."

"Weapons control reports the photonic launchers are ready, sir," the helmsman said.

"Josh?"

"We'll be in range in less than sixty seconds."

"Paul, inform the *Lafayette* that her group is cleared to break free. Mr. Tauschmann, as soon as we're in range and you've got a positive lock on one of those freighters, you will open fire."

At extreme range, the *Ajax* and her two sister destroyers opened fire with the newly installed photonic torpedo system. The fusion-powered drive module of the warheads gave off a distinctive yellow glow as they raced forward to their targets. Each destroyer had chosen a separate Romulan freighter to target, and each had fired two torpedoes.

On the bridge of the *Ajax*, Captain Durbin watched the main screen intently. As far as he knew, the *Ajax* was the first ship to use the new weapon system in combat. There was little doubt Starfleet Command would want him to capture all the details of this encounter for later study. As the warheads inched closer to their targets, Commander Joshua Garrett's eyes were glued to his sensor monitors while he watched the torpedoes.

"Time to impact is ten seconds, sir," he said.

Chasin continued to watch, silently counting down in his mind. At the precise moment, the warheads impacted the freighters. Bright white explosions registered across all three Romulan vessels. So bright were detonations that the enemy ships were, for a moment, completely obscured from view. As it faded, Chasin smirked in admiration. Clearly, one of the freighters had been completely destroyed. Turning to Garrett, the commander noted as such.

"One transport destroyed, Captain. The other two have been severely damaged."

"Time until we can fire the torpedoes again?"

"Three minutes, sir. We'll intercept the targets well before then."

"Mr. Tauschmann, stand by on the particle beams and plasma cannons. Prepare for a strafing run. I want to finish off those two freighters before we move on to our next targets."

"Message coming in from the *Lafayette*, sir," Ensign Cordeiro said. "They've engaged the Romulan cruisers."

"Targets now in laser range, sir," Erich announced, his fingers poised over the firing controls. "Weapons control reports all beams ready."

"Fire when ready, Lieutenant."

At 500 kilometers, the *Ajax* and her two escorts again opened fire. Each Federation destroyer took a target for herself, while the *Ajax* split her weapons fire between the two crippled Romulan ships. With their limited shields already decimated, the Romulans were easy prey. It took only the single, high-speed pass to destroy each of them. The two transports exploded after they were well astern of the *Ajax* and her group, and Chasin ordered the squadron into a long turn to starboard as they prepared to attack the remaining enemy ships.

"Communications, notify the *Lafayette* that we'll move to assist them shortly. I don't think this is going to take very long."

"Yes, sir. They've already damaged one Romulan cruiser. They say the other may be preparing to warp out of the system. Should I advise them to pursue?"

It was a tempting offer, but the thought of allowing them to report back to their superiors that the Federation had new weapons to fight with was more attractive. *Maybe it'll persuade their leadership to rethink their invasion plans.* It might have been an extremely optimistic wager, but Captain Durbin was willing to risk it. "Negative, Paul. If the Romulan wants to tuck tail and run, let them."

"Weapons control reports that the torpedoes are ready to fly," Erich reported as the *Ajax* completed her turn.

"Target the remaining freighters just as before. Once we've destroyed or completely disabled them, we'll swing over to assist the *Lafayette.*"

Chapter 4

Stardate 15903.01
March 2159

  The dark streets of Kullas province was not a place one usually sought out willingly. Although only a few kilometers from the senate chambers and the heart of the Romulan Empire, one would never know to look at it. There was much poverty in this area, and crimes against persons were all too common after the security forces who patrolled this area during the day returned to the inner sanctum of the main citadel at dusk.

  The rain was unceasing as it poured down in heavy sheets, drenching the lone figure as he casually made his way to his destination. At this late hour and on such a stormy night as this one, the streets were deserted, their wet surfaces reflecting what few street lights were still turned on. Nearly all the merchant establishments in the area were closed, although the neon advertisements hanging in the unlit shops shone brightly, their light failing to illuminate the gloom more than a few meters.

  Even the destitute and the unlawful were nowhere in sight. This brought some comfort to the figure, the sounds of his heavy boots making little difference in the cacophony of noise as water poured down from rooftops dozens of meters above. The humidity this time of year was causing his clothes to stick to his skin under his coat, and despite the warmth in the air, he pulled his jacket tighter to stop the wetness from permeating any break in his garments. The hat he wore—a gift from his long-dead wife—was completely saturated, and was now doing little to stop his hair from getting soaked. Thankfully, his destination was not far in the distance.

Turning purposely into an even darker alleyway, he absently counted the closed and secured doors he'd passed. One . . . two . . . three. At the fourth, he stopped and turned. Looking up, he saw a single light fixture hung above the door, its bulb shining a sickly green glow for several meters. To the left of the door was a simple keypad with four buttons. He knew the proper sequence that would open it. Reaching out a gloved hand, he slowly entered the code, knowing that a single misstep would lead to an instant and silent demise from a disruptor hidden in the wall behind him. When the entry was finished, the door immediately opened.

Before him was a long staircase that bypassed the second floor of the structure and led to a single lift. After he stepped into the waiting car, the elevator brought him quickly to his destination at the fiftieth floor. Stepping into the well-appointed office, he wasn't surprised to see that it overlooked both the Imperial Grounds and the Senate, although both were some distance away. The dark clouds hanging over the capital city were unbroken. Not even the luminescence of the planet Remus could penetrate them. Only the lights of the buildings below were allowed to reflect off their muted surfaces, giving a disconsolate tone to the entire affair for which he had been summoned to this place.

"You were not followed," a low, powerful voice echoed throughout the chamber.

Removing his hat, he placed it on a nearby rack. "I was not."

"I know," the voice replied. "I've been watching you for some time, ever since you left your home a few hours ago. At first, there were two security men who tracked you for nearly two kilometers."

"Security men?"

"Tal Shiar, actually."

"Where are they now?" the man asked into the air.

"They're quite dead, Senator Orris," the voice said flatly. "Please, remove your coat. You must be drenched."

Senator Orris did so, placing it on a hook below his hat. He stopped to look at the dripping hat, lost in thought over the symbolism of it. "I detest all this needless death, Admiral. It's brought nothing but misery to us." He then turned slowly to face a darkened corner of the room. Seconds later, the darkness was cast aside as a fireplace embedded in the wall blazed to life, the figure standing beside it now cast in a warm orange glow.

"Their deaths were necessary, Senator," Admiral Jeldan said.

Orris looked at the fleet admiral through narrowed eyes.

"Come, Senator," Jeldan said, gesturing toward the fire with a wave of his arm. "Warm yourself. Let us talk."

Moving to stand beside the admiral, Orris held his hands out to both warm and dry them. He stared into the fire, watching it crackle and snap as it ate its way through a small pile of logs. "It is an ominous night, Admiral. A perfect one for those such as ourselves to conspire to do terrible things."

"We've had this discussion before, my friend," Jeldan said, turning to stand beside the senator. "Must we continue to convince ourselves and one another that what we intend to do must be done?"

"I have no intention of dissuading you or myself, my friend." Orris then looked over, locking his dark eyes with the admiral's. "But I do not have to enjoy it."

The fleet admiral nodded with understanding. He, too, had strong reservations about what they were planning. But now was not a time for personal morals or feelings to intrude. Surely such things had already permeated the highest levels of the senate and diverted the Romulans from their path to the stars . . . their "true" path, as Jeldan and Orris had come to believe. "It is for the good of our people that we are here, Orris. Is it not written in the ancient texts that the benefit of the many must overcome the desires of the few?"

"Are we to use that to justify murder?"

"When our leaders fail us and block our Road to the Stars, it is our duty to see that we are put back on the correct path."

Orris chuckled at the irony. "Then why must we conceal our intentions with subterfuge, Admiral? Surely those in power will listen to our concerns."

"The powerful only listen to those promising to increase their power, or to those whom they feel they can manipulate into getting what they want."

"As the fleet commander, you wield a great deal of power, Admiral."

"And I intend to continue to use it, Senator. Just not under the ever-watchful gaze of our current administration." Jeldan smiled, then turned away from Orris. "It is not my place to lead our people, Senator. I have no tongue for it, nor do I have the taste for it. I am an officer, and that is where my service to our people begins and ends. The burden of governance must fall to you."

"And you do not question my ability to lead as you do Praetor D'Varu's?"

Back at the warmth of the fire, Jeldan gazed at it for a long while, as if he were constructing the briefest possible answer based on a lifetime of experience. "This war with the Federation must end, Senator. Too many have died, and based on current predictions, many more will do so. We make no further advances into their territory, and though they do not advance into our own, we know that they soon will."

"You fear our ultimate demise?"

"It is simply a matter of materials, Senator. We do not have enough to sustain us. You of all people know that. We use what scant materials we have in our possession to build warships that never return home. Practically none of the worlds we have succeeded in taking have more than a few scraps to offer our forces. Meanwhile, the Federation has what appears to be a limitless stockpile of ships.

It's possible that, even now, their war factories are building even more powerful vessels, ones intent on taking Romulus itself."

"Can they?"

Jeldan shook his head. "What matters is that they will try. Imagine, for a moment, the loss of morale our forces would face if even the firepower of one Federation starship was turned on the homeworld? No, Senator. By then it would be too late, and I for one do not relish the thought of bowing to Federation subjugation. It is beneath me as an officer, and it is counterproductive to the Romulan way."

Orris stared deeper into the fire, as if his will alone would burn the pile faster. "I fear too much blood has been shed on both sides to end this, my friend."

"Face must be saved, Senator. No one is suggesting otherwise. That is why I leave such things to you. My responsibility is to the fleet."

"We must be cautious, Admiral. To act quickly is to invite disaster. If we fail in our task, many more will be killed senselessly."

"We have little choice in that matter. Things have been set into motion that are beyond my control."

"Oh?"

"Praetor D'Varu has placed Tal Shiar operatives in key positions in the fleet. Several battle groups have been reassigned without my authorization. When I questioned the praetor on this, I was told to leave it as it was."

"And what of these groups?"

"The Alpha Fleet has been dispatched to the shared border between us, the Federation, and the Klingons."

The Triangle. "Are they now to incite the Klingons into conflict as well?"

Jeldan shook his head. "I do not know their exact purpose, only that the praetor wishes to reinforce the starbase at Gamma Hydra and the few ships we have at Nu Chalcedonis. Beyond that, I have no answers."

"And what of Cheron?" Orris inquired.

"Cheron is not in danger. The Omega and Epsilon Fleets are there now, and for the moment are still under my direct command. However, if and when the Federation decides to strike at Romulus or any of our core worlds, Cheron will be their first stepping stone. If it falls, there will be little left of the Romulan Navy to pose any threat to them. The Alpha Fleet will be too far distant to make any difference."

Orris nodded grimly. "Let us hope then, Admiral, the Federation will not invade Cheron before we are able to put our plan into motion."

* * *

Fleet Admiral Rom Walton, along with the Joint Chiefs of Starfleet and a litany of lower-ranking aides, studied the two large screens on the wall with growing unease. Standing by the left screen was Admiral Alan Massey, the military operations commander, who was subtly arguing with the Fleet Marine Commandant Admiral Santos Ramirez. A few meters to their right, Walton—along with Admiral Martin Hirst of Starfleet Intelligence, listened to the two as they each tried to successfully get their respective points across with little success.

"I'm telling you, Santos," Massey said, his voice becoming more heated, "the Romulans are becoming more desperate. Just look at what happened in the Lokan system." To further try to prove his point, Alan pointed at the system in question on the screen. Two months prior, Romulans had attempted to use their Star Bombs to destroy the Vulcan colony there. Woefully outnumbered by both Federation and Vulcan Security vessels, each of the ten Romulan starships were destroyed before they were within striking distance of the planet.

"Then how do you explain Beta Anchora, hmm?" Ramirez responded, stepping toward the screen and pointing to another

location. "No, Admiral. I don't see that at all. I believe they're becoming more aggressive, and what we're seeing is very likely a prelude to an all-out invasion of our territories near the Triangle."

Admiral Walton considered Ramirez's counterpoint a valid concern. With little resistance, the Romulans had seized control of Beta Anchora—an otherwise-unremarkable world in the Gamma Hydra sector at the edge of Federation space. With nearly all the war taking place dozens of light-years away, Beta Anchora hadn't been considered a possible enemy target. The folly of that thinking was now evident in the recently constructed Romulan outpost in the area, and increased starship movements toward that location. If the Romulans could transfer enough ships and materials to the area, it could allow them to make a two-pronged offensive into Federation space, effectively throwing Starfleet into disarray if Hirst and the other Joint Chiefs weren't careful.

"It's not like they had a better option, Santos," Massey argued. "We destroyed their supply depot at Kanarsis and took out their supply convoy at Pantares." He waved a hand at the screen. "The only place they could have gone, other than Gamma Hydra, was either Cheron or back into their own space. Cheron is already a parking lot for a huge number of ships, and the Romulans aren't known for putting all their eggs in one basket. They can't go farther back into their territory without depleting the front lines of ships Starfleet Intelligence believes they sorely need. No, Santos, they're simply trying to reform their lines in an attempt to continue to fight."

"No disrespect intended," Ramirez said, casting a gaze in Admiral Hirst's direction, "but Starfleet Intelligence doesn't exactly have a stellar record in their efforts to gain insight into the Romulans' intentions."

Martin straightened, but made no attempt to counter the commandant's insinuations. After all, it was mostly true. Both Starfleet and its forerunner—the United Earth Space Probe Agency—

were getting taken to task on half the encounters they'd had with the Romulans. Even after all their years of fighting, very little was still understood or even known about their adversaries. Granted, detailed scans had been made of their ships, and for a short time their communication protocols had been deciphered, but that was virtually it.

As far as many in the room—indeed, the entire Federation—were concerned, not a single Romulan body had been recovered or any taken prisoner to be questioned. Of course, that was precisely the way Admiral Walton wanted it to be, although he felt little satisfaction in keeping that information from Commander in Chief Hirst. As far as Santos Ramirez was concerned, he could keep making assumptions until he was as blue in the face as an Andorian. The less he and the Joint Chiefs knew, the better things were . . . for everyone. *Good Lord*, Hirst thought, *could you just imagine what the Federation Council would do if they found out that the vicious, bloodletting enemy unceasingly attacking us was in some way related to the people of Vulcan, one of our longest and staunchest allies?* The party lines would be drawn overnight, and the delicate threads that had woven the current Federation together only a scant few years before would be broken, as if one tossed a heavy rock through a spider's web. Civil war would be almost guaranteed, resulting in a fracturing of the government. And with the number of ships in Starfleet already dangerously low because of the war . . .

It was all too much to ponder, as Martin had done time and again ever since his Intelligence operatives had discovered the biological link between Vulcans and their enemies. Informing anyone at Starfleet—let alone the Federation—had never even been a consideration. It was all Martin could do to keep the information a closely guarded secret, known only to a few key operatives and some research scientists he'd tucked away in at a far-flung asteroid outpost. For now, the secret was safe, with all logs and scans locked under

heavy key in a single computer bank on Starbase 1, isolated from the Federation network and the prying eyes of any adventurous research analysts. *Or God help us, the media!*

"Nothing to say on that, Admiral Hirst?" Ramirez asked.

"We're doing the best we can with what little information we have, Admiral," Martin replied. "Many of the operatives we send out never return. While *you* may call that a failure, I have nothing but admiration for those men and women out there trying to get the information you so flippantly dismiss as irrelevant."

"Your esteem for your colleagues is commendable, Admiral," Ramirez countered. "I don't question their intentions. I question the results."

"Gentlemen, please," Fleet Admiral Walton said, bringing all eyes to him. "This isn't the time. We've all had ample opportunity to study the information on these screens, as well as the accompanying reports that go along with the data. We need to formulate a plan to deal with what we have before us now."

The door on the far side of the room opened, and a young ensign walked inside. Stepping directly toward Walton, she stopped abruptly a few paces away.

"Yes, Ensign Napier. What is it?"

"The president's shuttle has just landed. She'll be here shortly."

"Thank you, Alicia. See that she finds her way here."

The young woman turned sharply, then headed back through the door.

Minutes later, President Rissa Lyn of Alpha Centauri entered the room. She wore a flowing ceremonial gown of silver and blue, which she'd explained was necessary for a meeting she'd just come from with the ambassadors from Andor. With her was a single aide taking notes. Rissa's hazel eyes then studied the images on the large monitors, which Admiral Walton explained over a period of thirty minutes in as much detail as he could offer. Through it all, she

remained mostly silent as she heard from the other Chiefs of Staff as well. She kept her arms folded across her chest, nodding when appropriate as she assimilated all the data.

When Walton had finished, she scanned the monitors once more. No matter the nature of the sometimes contradicting viewpoints of the Joint Chiefs, one thing was clear to her: the Romulan threat wasn't going away, nor did it look as if it might anytime soon. After listening to the projected operations that Walton had approved over the coming weeks, she nodded in agreement, then briefed them with news from the Federation Council.

"I've recently become aware of a new initiative in the Federation Council," she said as she addressed the men. "The movement is small, but it's picking up speed."

"What kind of movement, Madam President?" Admiral Massey asked.

"To put it bluntly, a peace initiative."

"Peace?" Santos spat. "With the Romulans? That's outrageous."

Admiral Hirst remained silent, his mind already working out ways to insert operatives into the council to get more information on this.

"It has merit, Admiral Ramirez," Rissa said. "This war cannot last forever. Our economy is quickly being drained as we build more ships and starbases to counter the Romulans, and we're getting little in return for it. If we do not stop the spiraling costs in personnel, materials, and supplies, we will quickly go bankrupt."

"Then you support this?" Rom asked.

She nodded. "I support what it stands for, which is stopping the violence."

"Who's leading the effort in the council?" Martin asked.

"Councilman Abraham Dannon," she replied, and Hirst mentally filed the information away, knowing it would come in handy.

"Isn't he the one who proposed the war with the Romulans in the first place?" Ramirez asked.

"Yes. And, just as then, he has valid reasons for making the proposal he has. It's worth considering."

"But will the Romulans consider it?" Rom asked.

"As I said, the initiative is still in its infancy, but it's gaining momentum. There are no hard details at this point, but I wanted you all to know what was being proposed. I don't want my officers getting blindsided. If this does come to pass, we will need to rethink our offensive strategies with the Romulans. We won't continue to arbitrarily destroy or attack the enemy if and when we begin the process of peace negotiations."

"Is there any kind of timetable at this point?" Admiral Massey asked.

Rissa shook her head. "Councilman Dannon is something of a rebel in the council. I understand he's drafting a more detailed proposal at this time, but it could be months until we hear anything from it. Then again, if he can sway enough members of the Federation Council, it could be much sooner. It's nearly impossible to tell until he really begins his push."

"But it is coming?" Admiral Santos asked.

Rissa nodded, then looked to each of them. "It's a certainty."

Chapter 5

Stardate 15903.09
March 2159

The rapid succession of beeps from a nearby console slowly drew Commander Steven Firestine from his slumber. Flipping onto his back, he blindly threw out his arm in an attempt to silence the alarm. Before he could find the correct control, the cabin lights came on, dimly at first, then illuminating to half their normal intensity. As the darkness transitioned to light, he was finally able to see and silence the offending alarm. The chronometer at his bedside read 0400, and somewhere in the half-cognizant recesses of his mind, Steven knew that was the precise time it should be. Turning to look at the wide view port angled over the head of his bunk, he noted that the stars suspended in the endless void of black were unmoving. He took note of the vibrations of the ship, far more subdued than when he'd gone to bed the night before. And displayed on the computer terminal in the opposite corner of the room was a generated image of a binary star system with seven planets.

At long last, the ship was entering the Romulan-controlled Devron system.

Slipping out of his bed, Steven was once again delighted that the floors of the ship were heated. Far more accommodating than the aged transport *Daffodil*, their new conveyance, the SS *Gulfhawk*, was a modern, executive ship. The craft, in typical Andorian fashion, was designed more like a fighter than a cargo ship, with the hull shaped like the tip of a spear, and two large engines at the rear with wings extending from them for atmospheric maneuvering. And in keeping with Andorian tradition, the transport was armed, a dual-barreled plasma cannon turret on the aft portion of the spine and forward-

firing laser mounts in each wingtip. Steven had never asked the Andorian agent, Chand Ghei, how he'd come about acquiring the impressive ship, although their compatriot, Agent Jacques Pelletier, had voiced more than a few theories, each more fantastic than the other, none of which were confirmed nor denied by Ghei.

Sitting in the plush chair behind a spacious desk, he tapped a series of controls that would awaken the *Gulfhawk*'s secondary systems from their nightly slumber. The hum of the deck beneath his feet changed pitch, an indication that another fusion reactor had come online to provide power to the requested systems.

Looking once more at the monitor on his right for confirmation, he turned on the shipwide intercom. "All hands, rise and shine. We're nearing the Devron system." When both Pelletier and Ghei had responded a few minutes later, Steven moved into the comfort of the shower stall behind the desk. Once sufficiently ready to begin the next phase of their mission, he left his cabin and made his way down the short corridor to the *Gulfhawk*'s cockpit.

As the doors at the end of the corridor parted, Steven was bathed in the light of the still-distant binary stars of the Devron system spilling through the curved, bisected view ports. The primary star, 100 times as luminous as Earth's sun, was chiefly to blame for intensity. The secondary dwarf star, a much older body, was only a third as massive and a fraction as bright. Turning, he switched on the view port filters, tinting the two ports and giving him a small modicum of comfort. Of the two control chairs at the front of the cabin, Steven noted the pilot's seat on the left was vacant, with Chand sitting in the right. Looking over the Andorian's shoulder, he saw that Chand was examining the long- and short-range sensors' readouts.

"Anything?"

Chand sighed, then brought a loosely-held fist to his lips in contemplation. "Nothing."

"I would have expected a Romulan welcoming committee at this point."

Chand nodded. "As did I."

"Maybe those reports we received last month were accurate after all?" Steven said with hope. The reports in question were from Vulcan Intelligence. Having filtered their way down the chain of command, they spoke of the Romulans' possible withdrawal from this area. Of course, having originated from Vulcans, they also outlined a great number of other possibilities, the most detailed being that the Romulans had left a sort of puppet government in charge of the Devron system. Romulan vessels were said to still patrol the area, but in far fewer numbers than projected when the three operatives had begun their trip here four months prior.

"Possibly," Chand agreed. "However, if the Romulans did indeed leave a servitor race in control of the planet, then it will require a modification to our plans."

"Maybe. But this system is out in the middle of nowhere. That we haven't even been scanned yet is an indication that there aren't very many vessels willing to stray this far from the planet. Whether it's Romulans or someone else, the dilithium in our cargo hold is going to still get us to where we need to be. Whoever is there, they're going to want it."

"The question is, what will they do to get it? If the planet in question is held by marauders, they may not stop short of destroying us."

"We'll know as soon as we get closer to the planet. Until then, the operation will continue as planned. We need to discover the location of the Federation hostages. That's the number one priority."

"If they're even here," Chand countered. "We have conflicting reports of that."

Steven nodded. "We've got more reports of them being here than not. The logs from the *Kofi Anna* clearly show that the ambassadorial transport was brought here less than a year ago. Long-range sensor

scans from six months ago show a Romulan garrison and penal settlement outside the main citadel. And the transvids from the Vulcan Intelligence report from a month ago clearly show the presence of at least one member of the peace delegation who was still alive and on Devron at that time. Since that time, there's been no report of any enemy fleet movement in the area. Even cargo vessels leaving the Devron system have been scanned, with nothing to indicate that the population of the prison complex has been moved."

"And if it's just one person, does that make it worth the trouble?" the voice of Jacques Pelletier asked from behind the two men.

Steven turned to look over his shoulder. "Even if it's just one person, Jacques, they're still a citizen of the Federation and a prisoner of war. It's our duty to get them out."

"And suppose we find more than we bargained for," Pelletier countered. "There could be a whole mess of bad guys down there. We're just one ship."

"We've got our orders, Jacques. Besides, as soon as we find anything, we report it back to command immediately. They'll dispatch whatever help we need."

"So they say," the Frenchman snorted. "It took us nearly month to get here from our last port."

"They'll be here, Jacques." Steven slipped into the pilot's seat. "Our first order of business is to make planetfall and unload this dilithium. Our contact with Vulcan Intelligence is down there, and we'll need to get in touch with them not long after we set down."

Chand nodded. "We're too distant from Devron to attempt covert communications without being detected. However, once we are in orbit, I should be able to send a coded message without alerting our adversaries."

Steven scanned the monitors embedded in the control panel in front of him. Everything appeared in order as he switched on the guidance computer and set the impulse engines to one-quarter speed. "ETA at

the planet is thirty minutes. You've both got that time to get your gear ready." As Chand and Pelletier left the cockpit, Steven grabbed the control stick on the right armrest of his chair and manually turned the craft toward the planet.

Through the view ports, the surface features of Devron were coming into focus. Minutes ago, the planet had been little more than a distant blue jewel, an ill-defined beacon of life in an otherwise empty sector of space. Now Steven, with Jacques at his side in the copilot's seat, could see a number of landmasses interspersed across the otherwise aquatic world, the largest no bigger than that of Great Britain on Earth. With roughly 75% of its surface covered in water, Devron was very nearly classified as a Class O planet by the *Gulfhawk*'s sensors. A hurricane was detected in the east, but with nothing for it to threaten for 1,000 square miles, Steven watched the great storm spin with fascination. On the far side of the planet, two Romulan cruisers orbited above what the sensors were telling Firestine was a fortress of some type, possible a garrison. Unfortunately, as they neared their orbital insertion point opposite the Romulan warships, the short-range sensors indicated an incoming craft.

"What is it?" Steven asked to Jacques, who looked at one of the small monitors on his right.

"Looks like two planetary defense fighters."

"Romulan?"

"No." Pelletier shook his head, then scowled at the screen. "They're Catalian."

"Catalian?" Steven replied with equal consternation. *Mercenaries*. "They're a long way from home."

Jacques snorted. "It's been my experience that Catalians don't really have a home. They just move from system to system, following the credits wherever they can."

"I've heard of them, but I've never had to deal with them before."

"I've had a few dealings with them in the past," Pelletier said wistfully.

"Care to elaborate?"

Jacques seemed lost in thought for a moment, then shrugged it off. "It was a long time ago. I'm sure they've forgotten about—" but whatever else he was going to say was cut off by the sound of an incoming transmission. "Here we go. Better let me do the talking," Pelletier said as he opened the channel.

"Andorian transport, identify yourself or we will open fire," the voice said the moment the channel was open.

"This is the transport ship *Gulfhawk*, Jacques Pelletier in command. We read you."

"*Gulfhawk*, state your intention in this area."

"We're a merchant vessel, three weeks out of Rigel IX," he said, giving the Catalian their established cover story. "We've come to trade."

There was a pause before the Catalian responded, enough time for the two fighters to come into visual range. They were a twin-boom design, with the lone pilot sitting in a teardrop-shaped cockpit at the rear of the fighter. The booms, rectangular in shape, had laser turrets in the front and thrusters in the rear, and were connected to the cockpit by wings capable of atmospheric flight.

"This planet is a protectorate of the Romulan Empire," the gruff voice came back. "They do not take kindly to interlopers. Be thankful we intercepted you first. Now, you will leave the area immediately."

"We were under the assumption that someone here would be interested in what we've brought."

"That is doubtful."

"But you haven't even asked what our cargo is. Don't you even want to know?"

"We have no need for your toys or trinkets, *Gulfhawk*."

"Perhaps *you* don't, but I think the Romulans might have a different opinion on that. So if you'll kindly put us in contact with them, they can tell us where to unload all this dilithium."

Again there was a pause. "Dilithium?"

"That's affirmative. Now, we were told on Rigel IX that interested parties could be found here. We came to Devron with the intention of trading with Romulans, but perhaps you know of a more interested customer in this sector. After all, we don't want to intrude."

"Standby, *Gulfhawk*."

When the channel was muted, Steven looked to Jacques. "I hope you know what you're doing."

"Like I said, I've had dealings with the Catalians before," Pelletier replied with assurance. "Just let me do all the talking and we'll be on the surface before you know it." As he finished, Steven watched as Jacques did a pre-check on the weapons systems.

"What's that for?"

Pelletier shrugged. "Just in case I'm wrong."

"*Gulfhawk*," the Catalian pilot said a moment later, "you've been instructed to land on the surface. We will escort you down to the trading center."

"Are we to expect a member of the Romulan Empire to greet us?"

"A member of the Catalian Protectorate will be there when you land. Your dealings will be with them directly."

"Understood. We'll follow you down."

"See that you do. Any deviation in your course will result in the immediate destruction of your vessel. We are sending the coordinates for the landing pad to you now. End transmission."

When the channel was closed, Steven let out a long-held breath. "I guess we found an interested buyer for our cargo."

"But not the Romulans," Jacques countered, nodding to the coordinates they'd just received from the Catalian. "This settlement

is on the far side of the planet from the Romulan base we scanned earlier."

"Any foot in the door is fine with me. Getting to the surface in one piece is our primary goal." Steven then opened the intercom to the aft hold. "Chand, we've made contact with Catalian representatives on Devron. We'll be landing shortly."

"Understood. Everything is ready."

"Good. We should be on the surface in ten minutes. Firestine out."

The two Catalian fighters led the *Gulfhawk* through a maze of jagged cliffs and outcroppings, each a silent and immovable obstacle waiting to shred the Andorian craft to pieces. Under Firestine's skillful hands with the manual controls, the transport was able to do what no computer could, deftly slaloming through the natural obstacle course to arrive at their destination.

The landing pad was little more than a paved surface on the edge of a large cliff. Larger rocks protruded up around the pad, save for the north end, which was dominated by a cylindrical structure roughly twenty meters tall. The winds in small cover were tenacious, threatening to shove the *Gulfhawk* into the rocks beside the pad if Steven wasn't mindful of exactly how much pressure he applied to the maneuvering thrusters. *Why would anyone build a landing platform here?* He voiced the question to Pelletier in the copilot's seat.

"Beats me," the French agent replied, his hands tightly gripping handles above his head to steady himself. "This seems more like a pirate hideout than a trade port."

The thought hadn't occurred to Steven until Jacques said it. But there was little time to dwell on it. The pad was only a few meters away, although with the wind shear, it felt like a kilometer. "Standby on the retro thrusters."

"Thrusters ready."

A gust of wind blew the transport back, but Steven compensated by increasing throttle while continuing descent. Dangerous wasn't the word for what they were attempting, but it was close enough. Pulling back on the stick, he vectored the rear thrusters down. The result was a nose-up, stern-first descent. The *Gulfhawk* didn't object the way any normal Federation transport would have, which sufficiently impressed Steven. "Gear lowering," he said after flipping the required switch. Through the view ports, he could see a fresh spray of water on the landing pad's surface being blown away under the transport's powerful thrusters. Seconds later, the two rear landing feet on the transport came into contact with the landing pad, followed shortly by the front one.

"Touchdown."

Steven nodded, still holding onto the stick tightly. "Disengage the main drive engines."

Jacques looked to the external sensors. "There's a protective shield falling over the landing pad."

"Physical or energy?"

"Physical," the agent replied in disparagement. "Looks like some kind of dome."

A shadow was cast over the front view ports, and Steven turned in time to see the shield close fully over the craft. "Feels like we just got swallowed by a whale."

"And it's not going to make getting out of here any easier. Electronic shields are one thing, but physical shields are a lot harder to circumvent."

"It'd be a shame to have to put some of those ordnance skills of yours to good use, wouldn't they?"

Jacques looked at him angrily. "I'm not saying I can't do it; I'm just saying it's a lot trickier."

"Oh. I'm sorry. I must have misunderstood."

"Uh-huh."

Steven smirked, then unclasped his safety harness. "Time to go meet our hosts."

When the aft cargo ramp was fully lowered, Steven and Jacques were greeted by utter darkness. The dome that had surrounded the ship evidently also filtered out the light. He was about to say something when the lights suddenly came on. About ten meters distant, three figures stood. The central one was a purple-skinned Catalian; the other two likely were the same, but their faces were obscured by cloth wrappings. The central Catalian was wearing a glittering blue jumpsuit with a flowing cape to match. Strapped to his hips were two deadly looking hand lasers, and Steven had the distinct impression the Catalian knew exactly how to use them. Thankful he had his one sidearm concealed, he took a half step toward the caped figure, but was stopped by Jacques' hand on his leg.

"I've got this," the Frenchman whispered.

"You sure?" Steven asked sideways, though barely moving his lips.

"Yep. Just stay here."

He then finished walking down the *Gulfhawk*'s loading ramp, his arms extended wide in friendship. Neither of the Catalians moved as Pelletier approached them. When he was within a meter, Steven could tell that Jacques was talking to them, but he couldn't hear what was being said. After a moment, Jacques began to laugh, but it was not a sentiment shared by the capped Catalian. The purple-skinned humanoid stared at Pelletier for a moment, cocked his head, then reared back a clenched fist and struck the Frenchman across the jaw. The impact of the blow knocked Jacques off his feet. Steven drew his two pistols at the same moment the flanking Catalians did the same, but no one fired.

The caped Catalian smiled wickedly, then began to laugh. It was a low, almost belly laugh that filled and echoed from the curved dome above them.

"No hard feelings, Jacques," the Catalian said as he bowed down to the fallen human. The alien's accent was almost a passable version of Jamaican from Steven's home planet. The Catalian then looked at Firestine, continued to smile as he shook his bald head, then turned to walk away. "Take them both to the holding center. I will deal with them later."

Chapter 6

Stardate 15903.10
March 2159

  Inside the cramped holding cell, Steven paced impatiently. Jacques lay on the single bed in silence, as he'd done for the last two hours. When they'd initially been forced into the small cell, Steven had noted the small security camera in the upper corner of the room. Likely recording both audio and visual, he'd been wise to keep quiet about their mission in the Devron system. But now, several hours later, his frustrations were getting the better of him. What were the Catalians going to do to them? Had they alerted the Romulan garrison on the far side of the planet? And where was Agent Chand Ghei? Was he still hidden away on the *Gulfhawk*, or had he been captured as well? Or worse?

  Sighing in defeat, Steven knew there was little else he could do at this point. With no weapons and a distinct lack of the materials he needed to blow open the thick steel door barring the entrance, he had taken to pacing the room.

  "Maybe you could stop doing that," Jacques asked from the bed, his eyes closed with arms folded behind his head. "It's making me anxious."

  "It's your fault we're in here," Steven snapped back.

  "How's that?"

  "What did you say to that robed Catalian that got us in here?"

  Jacques eyes popped open and he propped himself up on his elbows. "Nothing."

  "Nothing? I find that hard to believe. You were saying something to him. I want to know what it was."

Jacques head fell back on his pillow. Another silence ensued, this one lasting a few minutes before he spoke. "His name is Troem Aurrec."

Steven stopped pacing and turned to look down at Jacques. "Who? The robed figure?"

Pelletier nodded.

"So you do know him." It wasn't a question.

Another nod from Pelletier. "We had some dealings five years ago."

"What was he dealing in?"

Pelletier shrugged. "Anything that could turn a profit. Mostly stolen cargo. He'd hired me at a spaceport I was staying at on Rigel VI. He needed someone handy with weapons, and I needed the credits."

It was Steven's turn to nod. Starfleet Intelligence had evidently assigned Pelletier to infiltrate Aurrec's operation, but with the camera in the corner of the room recording everything, Steven knew he'd have to keep reading between the lines. "And?"

"We headed out on a milk run to a system on the far edge of Orion space. Nothing serious."

"What was your cargo?"

"Weapons, mostly. And a few isotons of ultritium."

"A few . . . *tons*?" Steven gasped at the mention of high-yield explosives.

"We were en route to deliver the cargo when a trio of Orion blockade runners intercepted us. We managed to disable one, but the other two got the best of us. Mind you, we were only in a simple cargo carrier with minimal weapons. We weren't expecting trouble."

"Seems that it found you anyway."

"Yep. We knew the Orions wanted the cargo, and that they'd likely kill us in the process. So when they moved in for the kill, I knew our only hope was to blow our cargo."

"How did Troem Aurrec feel about this?"

"Livid, of course. That cargo represented nearly his entire life savings. But we didn't have much of a choice. So, I rigged the ultritium to a timer, and we waited for the Orions to beam over. I convinced them that Aurrec had enough credits stashed away to make our lives worth something, and they beamed us and three others back to one of their ships. Aurrec was forced to transfer all his credits into their computer. A few minutes later the ultritium exploded. It disintegrated one of their ships, and severely damaged the one we were on."

"Lucky."

"If that's what you want to call it. So, in the chaos, Aurrec and I managed to take control of the blockade runner."

"The Orion crew?"

Pelletier shook his head. "All killed. We managed to get the ship in working order, and then we hightailed it back to our home base."

"And Aurrec's money?"

"Once it went into the Orions' computer, it was automatically transferred out of his account. He'd lost everything."

Steven was beginning to understand. "I'll bet he wasn't too happy about that."

"He'd lost everything, but I'd managed to save his life. The Catalians have a code, if you can believe that. As far as it was concerned, I'd made up for my mistake."

"But Aurrec didn't see it that way?"

"He dumped me on an automated ore station a few light-years from our home base. That was the last I saw of him. It was four months before a robot ship arrived and I was able to get off."

"Did you ever think about going back to your old base of operations?"

Pelletier nodded. "I did, but it's been deserted for quite some time."

Steven looked around. "Well, it seems that Troem Aurrec has moved up in life since then. He's got a whole planet to govern."

"Seems that way."

The door to the cell popped open with little fanfare, and the purple-skinned Troem Aurrec stepped inside. He looked from Steven to Jacques with a gaze that could have burned a hole through steel. Slowly reaching for the pistol at his side, he leveled it at Pelletier. With a quick jerk of his head toward the open doorway, the caped Catalian escorted the two prisoners out of the room. They walked down several long corridors in silence. Finally arriving at a set of solid doors, Aurrec entered a code to open them, then moved the two prisoners in.

The room, which looked more like a palace, was opulently decorated. Large paintings and tapestries hung from the walls, a roaring fire blazed in a hearth against one wall, and the center of the floor was dominated by white animal skin rug. Stepping out from behind them, the Catalian holstered his weapon and moved over to a small cabinet. Opening it, he withdrew a beaker of fluid and some glasses.

"You may speak freely now, gentlemen."

Steven turned to Jacques, who shrugged. Firestine knew he'd have to take point. "What are we doing here?"

"You're my guests," the Catalian said as he returned with a tray of drinks.

"This is how you treat your guests? By locking them up for a few hours?"

"It was necessary."

"For what purpose?"

"I had to check to see if your being here was legitimate. I have discovered that it is."

"And it if hadn't been?"

"Oh, you'd surely be dead by now."

"Still plenty of time for that," Jacques said, drawing a wide-eyed stare from Steven.

"Of course, that thought had crossed my mind as soon as I saw you," Aurrec said to Pelletier. "But that wouldn't have done at all."

"Because of the Romulans?" Steven asked.

Aurrec nodded. "As much as I'd like to at times, I cannot simply eliminate trespassers indiscriminately. It would raise too many questions in the wrong circles. And the Romulans want to keep a low profile here."

"Why?" Jacques asked.

Aurrec smiled a toothy grin. "I'm not at liberty to say."

"Our ship? Our cargo?" Steven asked.

"Your ship is as you left it. Your cargo has been . . . confiscated."

"Figures," Pelletier snorted.

"It's the price you've paid to continue to live, Jacques. You of all people should understand that."

Steven shook his head. "And what do the Romulans have to say about that?"

"The less they know, the better."

"You don't care for them?"

"They are a means to an end, Mr. Firestine. At this point, I will neither take them nor leave them. They give me certain freedoms to do as I wish as well as some protection in doing it, and I follow their instructions to the best of my abilities."

But there was more to it than that. Steven could tell. He decided to take a small risk and see where it led him. "You know their days in this sector are numbered, don't you?"

"The thought had occurred to me."

"And when they leave . . . *if* they leave . . . you'll be out here on your own."

"And an easy target for the Orions," Pelletier finished.

Aurrec smiled, then swallowed the rest of his drink. "It's most fortunate that you arrived when you did. You see, I've become quite

wealthy over the last two years—wealthier than I could have ever dreamed possible. But it came at a price."

That's when Steven figured it out. "You can't leave, can you? You're a *guest* here, just like us."

"No. I cannot. While the Romulans keep only a small fraction of personnel here on the far side of Devron, they are more than capable of obliterating this entire city if it were required of them. If it should come to pass that they have to abandon this world, they will likely destroy it when doing so. That, or the alternative, in which Starfleet beams down and takes control of it."

"In either case, you lose everything," Jacques said. "Again."

"Quite right."

"So, why is it fortunate that we arrived when we did?" Steven asked.

"My people are too well known on Devron, Mr. Firestine. If they were caught in the process, it would invariable lead back to me. It would simply never do to have them attempt what I require of you."

"Which is?" Steven asked.

Aurrec retrieved the decanter from the cabinet and refilled everyone's drinks. "I've no intention of letting the Romulans destroy my wealth, Mr. Firestine, nor am I going to allow the Federation to seize it. I need time to get it off the planet, and to do so requires that I no longer be under the scrutiny of my Romulan captors. Thus, I've loaded six isotons of ultritium into the cargo holds of your transport vessel."

"Come again?" Pelletier asked.

"Simple. You are going to pilot your ship to the far side of the planet, land it in the middle of the Romulan garrison, and detonate it. Or I'll kill you both right here, right now."

* * *

April 2159
Stardate 15903.09

As the hull plates beneath his feet began to shudder violently, Captain Paul Janssens knew that the fusion missile intended for the bridge of the *Providence* had missed by only a few meters. The quick actions of the superior helmsman, Lieutenant Raymond Utter, had no doubt saved the bridge crew from the vacuum of space, and Paul intended to file a formal commendation for the young man—if they survived the battle.

When Starfleet's 12th Strike Wing had entered the unclaimed, unexplored Nu Chalcedonis system ten hours earlier, it seemed as though the day was going to be business as usual. They were to patrol the north portion of the sector which, rumor had it, the Romulans were using as a rendezvous point for incursion into three adjacent Federation sectors. No Romulans had been detected by the *Providence* or any of the other five vessels in their group, so Janssens had ordered two of the *Hercules*-class cruisers—the *Bismarck* and the *Tarkal*—to scout one parsec ahead of the rest of the group's current position. Eight hours later, just as the two ships neared the edge of their requested route, a Romulan convoy had warped in, all but landing right on top of the *Providence* and the remaining Federation warships.

When Commander Benjamin Chee reported that the convoy consisted of seven supply vessels and three U-type cruisers, Paul knew he had to act before the enemy vessels were allowed to escape. They were only a 500,000 kilometers away, a distance quickly surmounted under full impulse power. The order to intercept and engage had been given, and the *Bismarck* and the *Tarkal* had been notified to return to the strike wing as soon as possible to provide backup.

Captain Janssens only hoped they got there soon. The Romulans, in an unusual show of ferocity, were matching wits with the superior Federation forces. The quick skirmish that Janssens had hoped for

was quickly turning into an all-out battle, and he could use the help. What he saw on the ship's main view screen emphasized the point.

The Federation cruiser *Dakota* had tried to gain the upper hand on one of the Romulan warships by using a high-energy turn to get behind it. Though the move had been successful, another enemy vessel had turned to pursue. Before the *Dakota* could open fire on her target, she was struck in succession by three fusion missiles. Each one more destructive than the first, they blew apart her impulse deck in a shower of sparks and debris. She began to turn away, but the loss off her drive module resulted in the maneuver becoming an uncontrollable tumble to port. As her belly was exposed, the attacking Romulan warship opened fire with drill lasers, slicing into the defenseless cruiser and leaving her a burning hulk.

"No life readings on the *Dakota*, sir," Commander Chee reported from the science station.

But there was no time to avenge the loss of the ship or her crew. The *Providence* was several thousand kilometers away, with the cruiser *Venass* at her side, nearing the first of the now-unprotected Romulan cargo ships.

"Target coming into range, Captain," Lieutenant Raymond Utter called out from the helm.

Giving the wreckage of the *Dakota* a final glare, Paul nodded. "Viewer ahead, Ray."

The freighter, little more than an elongated hexagon with a beak-like forward section and a single nacelle projecting from her spine, was in the lead position of the seven-ship formation. In an attempt to make themselves less of a target, the enemy cargo vessels had fanned out along different vectors. If they continued on their respective courses, it was going to take hours to track them all down. Thankfully this class of ship was well documented as being slow to maneuver with no armaments whatsoever. It might take some time, but Janssens knew they would be able to clean up the mess.

"Ray, lock photonic torpedoes on their drive section. I want to try and capture some of their cargo if we can. It might give us some insight into—" but he stopped midsentence as a great green glow emanated from the center of the freighter. It grew brighter and brighter, and it wasn't until the last moment that Janssens realized he was being fired upon. "Hard to starboard! All engines, full!"

But the maneuver had come seconds too late. The high-energy round pounded against the *Providence*'s forward shields, exploding with such force as to nearly bring the Federation cruiser to a dead stop. Janssens and the communications officer, Perry, were tossed from their chairs, and Lieutenant Utter went face-first into his console. Fortunately, his hand was over the control at the time. Although the impact succeeded in breaking his wrist, there no cranial trauma. Screaming in pain, he too crumpled to the floor of the bridge.

Janssens was the first back to his feet. He jumped into the helm station, intent on firing on the heavily armed freighter, but the cruiser *Venass* had already taken over that responsibility. Two torpedoes streaked out from behind the *Providence* and appeared on the main screen for an instant before they hit the Romulan ship. The enemy ship's shields flared, but there was no apparent damage.

"What? But how?" He turned to see Ben Chee still at his post.

"The freighter's shields are heavily damaged, but they're still up," the commander responded. "Whatever they've fired at us seems to have taken up nearly all their energy. There's a buildup in their central core. At this rate, they're going to exhaust all their power with the next shot."

"Utter?" the captain called down to the deck.

Raymond clutched his wrist. "I'm here, sir," he grunted in pain. "I don't think I'm going to be much use."

"Ben, how soon will they be able to fire?"

"Stand by," the commander said, then checked his monitors. "A few more seconds, sir. Another of the Romulan freighters has opened fire

on the *Venass*. She's evaded, but she's out of weapons range for our target."

"Transfer weapons control to the computer. I want to fire the moment the Romulan's shields go down. We're only going to get a second or two before they can fire their weapon at us."

"Whatever they hit us with, it fried the primary connections between weapons control and the sensors. Life support is also down on two decks, and the starboard power coupling is—"

"Never mind the damage report! Just tell me when they're going to fire!"

"Stand by," Chee said.

Janssens crouched over the weapons control circuits, giving each of the *Providence*'s weapons an examination. Lasers and plasma cannons were fully armed, and two photonic torpedoes were loaded. In a brief moment of complete confusion, he wasn't sure which of the three to use. In his mind, he'd been calculating blast radiuses and probable time-to-impacts. But which be the most effective in this situation? The enemy ship was less than five kilometers away.

"Now, sir!" Chee shouted.

Fanning the fingers of both hands out, Janssens slammed down every button in reach as if he were hitting the high notes of a pipe organ. All weapons fired simultaneously, the port reaction control thrusters fired, the bridge emergency lights came on, and in a dark corner of deck five, all the security doors were activated.

On the main screen, he watched as all weapons fire converged on the Romulan freighter. Under such overwhelming power, the vessel neither exploded nor cracked apart. One moment it was there, followed by a blinding white light, and it was gone. Just gone.

"It must have been that weapon system, sir," Chee spoke up from the science console. "We hit it dead center a second before it was going to fire. The chain reaction disintegrated the vessel."

Sliding his hands from the weapons controls, the captain sighed heavily. "Better them than us." Turning to the rear of the bridge, he saw that Thomas Perry had resumed his station. "Tom, get someone up here to relieve Lieutenant Utter, then pipe me through to engineering."

Perry nodded. "I've got the chief engineer on the line already, sir."

Paul furrowed his brow. Stepping to his command chair, he opened the channel. "Go ahead, Mike."

"Sir, some fool idiot closed half the security doors on deck five. Half the damage control party is stuck in the galley!"

Not bothering to answer, Janssens stepped back to the helm console and released the doors. "All right, Chief. They should be free now."

"Thanks."

"I need you to get me as much power as you can, Mike. We're not out of this yet."

"I'll see what I can do, sir. No promises. If we get hit again by whatever that was . . ."

"Understood, Chief. We'll do what we can. Bridge out."

"Sir, Romulan freighter opening fire on us," Chee said anxiously.

Paul jumped back into the helm and moved the ship out the way in the nick of time.

Where the devil was that replacement helmsman?

Chapter 7

There was very little the captain could do but sit and wait, something he didn't do very well. It also didn't stop him from asking every five minutes, even though he was receiving updated ETAs faster than that, "Are we in visual range yet?"

Trowby Brockman turned from the helm to look at Captain Chow. "No, sir. We're still well beyond extreme range."

"Commander Pittman?"

Steven turned to look at the captain. "Sorry, sir. I've got all power diverted to the sensors, and the computers are working overtime. As soon as they begin receiving data, we'll be able to put it on the screen."

"How long?"

Steven looked to the streaming stars on the main screen for a minute. Then two. "I really can't say, sir. We're heading for the *Providence*'s last known location, but that was recorded over an hour ago. She may have moved a considerable distance since then, or she might not be there at all."

"You mean destroyed?"

Steven nodded. "She did say the Romulans were getting the upper hand."

To blazes with this technology, the captain silently cursed. *We should never have left the strike group. All that was out here was more space dust. Two hours. Two hours we've been at maximum speed, and still nothing on the sensors. We may be the only ones left.*

"Sir," Lieutenant Shepherd said from the communications station, "engineering calling up."

"Engineering," the captain called into his intercom. "This is Chow."

It was the chief engineer who responded. "Sir, things are really starting to warm up down here."

"We're going to maintain speed as long as possible, Chief," Lambert replied defiantly. "In fact, I need you give me more."

"The engines are maxed out, sir. They're actually well past redlining."

Lambert needed to get back to the *Providence*, but it was tearing him and his ship apart in the process. He wasn't going to risk the lives of his people, but he knew that if he didn't do everything in his power to get back to the 12th Strike Wing as quickly as possible, he would regret it for the rest of his life—no matter how insignificant. "How critical?"

"Another ten minutes at this speed and we'll begin losing magnetic bottles for sure."

Ten minutes. That mean's I've got no more than nine to keep this up. "Commander Pittman?"

"We'll be close enough to our initial starting point to have some kind of visual by then, but don't get your hopes up about seeing anything with a great deal of clarity."

Chow nodded. It'd be better than nothing. "We'll slow to sublight before the first bottle goes, Chief. You've got my word on that."

The engineer breathed a sigh of relief. "Yes, sir. Of course."

"Keep everything together down there for a few more minutes. Bridge out." *A few more minutes.* And Steven was right. There was no telling what the Bismarck would find as soon as it entered the Nu Chalcedonis system. *A few shattered magnetic bottles might quickly become the least of our worries.* "Communications, any word on the detachment from the 5th Fleet?"

Alexander Shepherd shook his head. "Still nothing, sir. At last report they were still a considerable distance out."

"Send another hail to the *Lexington*. This time Priority One, Captain Whiteacre's eyes only. Ask them for their current position."

"Aye, sir. Composing and transmitting now."

Steven stepped down from the science station to stand at Captain Chow's side. He spoke softly, his voice barely above a whisper. "You really think we're going to need that much help, Lambert?"

"I think we're going to need a lot more than just a carrier and a few cruisers."

"Says who?" Pittman argued. "There's no evidence that fleet is moving in this direction."

Chow's eyes shifted to the commander, then back to the stars on the main screen. "You may not have faith in Starfleet Intelligence, Commander, but I do. If they say a fleet of warships is on their way here, then I plan on being ready for them."

"But it could be old data. They may not be coming at all."

"Agreed, or the *Providence* could be fighting them right now as we speak. There's no way to know. The point is we have credible intelligence that enemy forces are likely moving into this sector, and now our people out there are fighting them. They could just be the tip of the spear. Based on our most recent dealing with the Romulans, and the sheer number of vessels and people we've lost, I'm not about to give our enemies an easy victory at Nu Chalcedonis. If the Romulan fleet is a no-show, so much the better. The *Lexington* and her group, along with our own strike fleet, will wipe away whoever's left after scuffling with the *Providence*. And if the perceived enemy fleet does arrive, we're going to be thanking our lucky stars the *Lex* and her people are there."

"I hope for everyone's sake that the supposed Romulan fleet is just bad intelligence, sir. No insult to their methods implied, but I'd rather not have to scuffle with more than we can handle right now."

Lambert gave Pittman a crooked smile. "Understood and agreed, Commander. Take your post and keep an eye on those sensors. Let me know the second you've got something."

"What's left?" the captain yelled with determination across the broken starship bridge.

"Not much, sir," Lieutenant Utter shouted back over the hiss of a nearby broken oxygen valve. "Photons are down, main lasers are offline, and the plasma cannons are overheating!"

"Where's the next target?"

"Romulan gunship at heading 330, sir!" Commander Chee said from the sensor station.

Gunships. These weren't freighters at all. They might have started life as one, but they'd been converted at some point for close-in defense of larger ships. Their shields had been strengthened, their maneuverability upgraded, and whatever main battery had been installed in them was devastatingly effective against the Starfleet cruisers. The starships *Dakota*, *Arcadian*, and *Chalser* were gone. The *Avius* was heavily damaged, but still giving the Romulan horde all she could. The *Tausav* was in the same shape as the *Providence*, which was far from optimal, but at least they still had their shields. For the moment, anyway.

"Raymond, concentrate the saucer's upper cannons on that gunship. Make sure the lower batteries keep away anyone else trying to get in a lucky shot."

The lieutenant held up a bandaged hand in salute. "Yes, sir!"

Only four of the initial ten Romulans had been destroyed or disabled, and only two of them had been cruisers. The *Avius* was keeping the big guns of the warbird occupied, but she was little more than a fast-moving target. Without primary weapons and only her photonic weapons in working order, she'd make and easy target if her impulse engines were damaged. The warbird was trying hard to pounce, but like a frustrated predatory bird, it was denied each time as the nimble cruiser banked at the last moment.

Watching the main screen, Captain Janssens was rewarded when the incoming Romulan gunship was caught squarely in Raymond's

crosshairs. Three upper plasma turrets locked onto the target in unison, and the rapid-fire, high-energy rounds picked pieces off the craft as it passed by the forward hull. Its impulse engines sputtering, it banked to starboard, but not before Lieutenant Utter turned to pursue. He'd accurately deduced the Romulan's evasive maneuver, and within seconds the gunship was once again in his sights. The forward cannons fired again, this time striking a debilitating blow to the gunship's impulse reactor. Seconds later the vessel exploded in a brilliant fireball, the *Providence* passing through the cloud of debris without a scratch.

Rounds of cheers erupted across the battle-scarred bridge, the loudest of them Captain Janssens.

"Well done, Lieutenant. One for the record books, I think."

Ray beamed with pride. "Yes, sir. Thank you, sir."

"Captain," Chee yelled from the science console, "two more gunships on our tail. They're firing!"

"Evasive port!"

The cruiser banked hard, throwing everyone on the bridge to the side. The Romulan barrage, fully capable of destroying the ship, passed harmlessly beneath them. However, the follow-up laser rounds pelted the aft shields, sending violent quakes throughout the entire ship.

"Shields overloading!" the chief engineer's voice screamed over the intercom.

Before Paul could order power rerouted, the shields failed completely. Not wasting a breath, the Romulan lasers sliced into the starboard nacelle like a hot knife through butter. In seconds the pylon was blown completely free of the ship. The *Providence* traveled a farther 500 kilometers in a lazy spin until she was able to regain attitude controls with maneuvering thrusters.

"Mike?" the captain called into the intercom to Lieutenant Rabb.

"Main power is failing rapidly, sir. I can reroute, but it's going to take time."

"Plasma cannons are offline," Ray said in defeat.

"How much time, Mike?"

But it was the science officer who responded. "Not long enough, I think," then he nodded toward the view screen. The Romulan gunboats were amassing, like vultures ready to pick apart their dinner. One more had joined the fray, making three targets the *Providence* could do nothing about.

"Sensors?"

"Offline, sir."

"We've got partial maneuverability with thrusters," Ray said, his fingers poised over the controls.

Paul shook his head. There was nowhere they could go. Thrusters were good for quick bursts, but within seconds the Romulans would pounce. Despite the futility of the situation, Janssens found himself smiling. "Ben, rig for self-destruct. I'm not going to give them the pleasure of killing us."

Blinking away sweat and grime, Commander Chee nodded. "Yes, sir."

"Ten-second countdown. I don't want to give those bastards time to reconsider."

It took only a few button presses to make the necessary commands from the computer. "Ready, sir."

Paul looked around to the faces of his crew, who in turn were looking back at him. He knew they understood what was about to happen. These were his friends, his family. But the Romulans needed to be stopped, and there was only one way left to do it. There was honor in what they were about to do, and when he turned to give Commander Chee the nod to begin the countdown, he knew what he was doing was the right thing. He sucked in a breath, one of the last he would ever take, and was about to say "go" when a brilliant flash on the main

screen caught his attention. At first he thought the Romulans had fired their killing blow, but as the bright light faded, he saw one of the gunboats had exploded and listed into the side of another, damaging it, and caused the third enemy ship to veer off.

"What the devil?"

The third ship didn't get very far. As soon as its stern was to the *Providence*, three photonic torpedoes raced toward it, each once exploding after the next. In seconds the Romulan gunboat was gone. Turning to Chee, he saw that Ben was looking to Lieutenant Perry at communications, who was all but beaming at the view screen.

"Tom?"

"It's the *Bismarck* and the *Tarkal*, sir!"

It's about bloody time.

"Message coming in from the *Bismarck*, sir. It's Captain Chow."

"On screen."

The bridge of the *Providence* was destroyed. Lambert was surprised to not only see that the ship was still functioning, but that Captain Janssens was still seated in the command chair.

"Sorry we're late, Captain."

"Glad you made the party, Lambert," Paul said with exhaustion. "Our sensors are down. What is the status of the *Avius*? She was trying to evade a Romulan cruiser."

"She's not on our sensors, sir. That doesn't mean she didn't warp out at the last minute."

"Understood. And the *Venass*?"

"Adrift, but we've got life sign readings. The *Tarkal* is heading over to assist, but there's still a warbird and a few freighters left."

"They're not freighters, Captain. They're some kind of gunboat or small destroyers. Watch yourself. They're well-armed and they've got reinforced shields."

"Are you stable?"

"For the moment. We're going to need some time to route power to all critical systems."

Lambert nodded. He wasn't a bit surprised. "I'll buy you as much time as I can, sir. But I've got some bad news."

Captain Janssens sighed heavily, then dipped his head. "Enemy reinforcements?"

"Yes, sir. A whole mess of them just entered the periphery of the system. We began tracking them as soon as we dropped out of warp."

"How many?"

"Far too many for us. We may need to evacuate you to the *Bismarck* if things get tight. I sent out a Priority One to the *Lexington*, and she's on her way with her combat group."

"The *Lexington* is nearby?" Paul said in astonishment.

Lambert nodded. "We were surprised to know they were nearby as well. As soon as we got to the far side of the adjacent sector on our patrol, we entered communications range with the 5th Fleet. They'll arrive in the next thirty minutes. You've got that long to get the *Providence* up to some kind of working order."

"Understood."

Commander Pittman stepped down from the science station, handing a computer tablet to the captain. He looked it over, nodded grimly, and then handed it back to the commander.

"What is it, Lambert?" Janssens' image asked.

"The remaining Romulan ships out here are regrouping and heading out to meet up with the enemy fleet. We've got a few minutes to pick up the pieces here, but the Romulan fleet is going to arrive just under ten minutes before the *Lexington* arrives."

"How many ships does Whiteacre have with him?"

Lambert offered the captain a wry smile. "Oh, more than enough, I think."

While the news was more than encouraging, there was no time to waste. "Then we need to hurry. Let's try and put some distance

between us and the Romulans. Maybe that will buy us the time we need."

Lambert cocked his head. "Sir?"

"I want all ships to head deeper into the Nu Chalcedonis system. Plot a course for the third planet. It's class M. If push comes to shove, at least we can either beam our people to the surface or give the lifeboats a place to set down. If you get underway now, that should give the *Lexington* and her fleet enough time to get here and reinforce our position."

Ben didn't like it. "Sir, the *Providence* will never be ready in time. You won't make it."

"Oh, I don't plan on being a martyr, Captain. I want you to standby to beam me and my crew aboard your ship, but not before we can make some small modifications."

"Sir?"

"I'm going to program the ship to head straight for the Romulan fleet with the destruct system armed. We've got enough antimatter on board to level a coastline. If we can time the explosion right, we can throw the Romulans into a little confusion, which may buy us more time. Heck, we may even take a few of them out with us."

Lambert didn't like it, but there was very little he could do. Captain Janssens was in command of the strike group, and while he was still able to make decisions, Lambert would do as he was told. "How long do you need?"

"Two minutes, Lambert. Then you can start bringing us aboard."

"Very well. Two minutes, sir. Then we start bringing your people aboard."

On the bridge of the imperial warship *Ta'Pok*, Admiral Shanok stood at the forward screen with hands clasped loosely behind his back. Having received the orders—directly from Praetor D'Varu himself—to take this system, Shanok wasn't about to let his supreme leader

down. He'd served his empire with distinction, and was pleased to have such a pivotal assignment. D'Varu had even hinted that a successor to Admiral Jeldan may soon be sought, and Shanok's name was at the top of the list for that position. The admiral bore no true allegiance to Jeldan, so the thought that the supreme admiral may someday soon face an unfortunate accident was of little consequence to him. All that mattered to Shanok was power, and there was much power in the Romulan fleet.

"Admiral," a nearby aide said. "Sensors report a single Federation warship on approach."

Shanok blinked in mock surprise. "Are their weapons armed? Do they mean to engage our entire fleet with only one ship?"

"It is difficult to say, sir. Power readings are dubious."

"Perhaps they are simply mad," he said, then shook his head in disapproval. "What a pity," he said with an air of boredom, then waved a hand at the main screen. "Dispatch four cruisers. Eliminate that ship."

"Right away, sir."

Seconds later, four warbirds streaked away under full power. Shanok watched as the green glow of their thrusters faded quickly, until all he could see were pinpricks of light.

"Our cruisers will be in weapons range in ten seconds."

"The Federation," Shanok spat in disgust. "How they waste their resources so. No Romulan would willingly go to so much trouble to . . ." Then his own words echoed in his mind as a terrible thought solidified. "Communications! Hail our ships! Have them turn—" but his words were silenced as a blinding light filled the entire sector. Raising a forearm unconsciously, he didn't remove it until the bridge of the command ship had returned to normal.

"What has happened?" he asked, although he already knew the answer.

"The Federation warship exploded in an uncontrolled antimatter explosion."

Shanok's throat was parched, the wind taken out of his blustery sails. "Our ships?"

"All four cruisers were destroyed in the blast."

Four ships wasted. Four proud and fine crews eradicated, all because of Shanok's miscalculation of the methods of the Federation scum. If news of this returned to D'Varu, there would be much explanation needed. Unless the battle from here on out was won decisively.

"Communications, order all ships in the fleet to head into the system!"

"But sir, we're not properly formed. Many ships have yet to report—"

Pulling out his sidearm, Shanok dispatched the officer with a single shot. Grabbing the body by the tunic, he wrenched it free from the communications console and tossed it aside, then sat in the now-vacant seat. "All commanders, this is Admiral Shanok. Sensors have reported that the Federation craft are in orbit of the third planet. Intercept them at maximum speed. Target all vessels of opportunity and lay waste to those who would try to take what is rightfully ours!"

Chapter 8

Stardate 15903.09
July 2159

Sitting in the cockpit of the *Gulfhawk*, Steven Firestine and Jacques Pelletier waited patiently for Agent Chand Ghei to arrive. Chand had been ordered to scout the Romulan garrison on the far side of the planet several days before, in hopes that a covert way into the compound could be located before Troem Aurrec became impatient and moved on the base himself. However, based on new information Steven had received a short while ago, a new plan would have to be drawn up quickly.

"Something on sensors," Jacques said, the long spell of boredom broken by the beeping of the computer.

"What is it?"

"Checking," Pelletier replied, intensifying the sensor beams. "It's Chand's shuttlepod."

Steven sighed in relief. "It's about time."

"What gives? Why are you so impatient to get things moving? We told Aurrec it would be at least three weeks before we could get the ultritium into the Romulan garrison."

"Because we don't have three weeks anymore, Jacques. That's why I recalled Chand early."

Steven turned to the forward view port, watching as the teardrop-shaped Catalian shuttle descended and set down beside the *Gulfhawk*, a plume of water spray rising from the landing pad in the process. Minutes later the Andorian operative entered the cockpit. He said nothing as he sat in one of the available seats.

"Thanks for coming back so quickly, Chand," Steven said as he leaned forward in his chair. "I've got some news that going to alter every plan we've made to this point. The 12th Strike Wing, along with a good portion of the 5th Fleet, has eliminated a Romulan Armada at Nu Chalcedonis."

Chand said nothing, but Pelletier looked astonished. "Gamma Virginis?" he said in shock, referring to the hotly contested area between Romulan space and the Andorian Empire.

Steven nodded. "Starfleet secured the area forty-eight hours ago. I received the coded subspace message from Fleet Captain Vargas at Starfleet Intelligence about an hour ago."

The implications were vast. Pelletier leaned back in his chair, his eyes distant as he played out various scenarios in his mind. Gamma Virginis was only a few parsecs from Devron.

Chand simply nodded and leaned toward Steven. "When will they arrive here?"

"A newly formed battlegroup, the 13th Squadron, with the carrier *Lexington* in the lead, will arrive at Devron in about a month. So, we've got less than that time to figure out if there are any Federation prisoners at the garrison and get them out. If we fail to do so, the Romulans will more than likely eliminate them before the battlegroup arrives . . . and that's if Troem Aurrec doesn't get impatient and blow up the whole place well before that."

"He's got enough ships for it," Pelletier acknowledged. "Hell, all he needs is one cargo shuttle."

Steven nodded. "Right. But, for now, he's tasked us with doing it. Our primary concern is freeing any hostages at the compound. If we can do that without getting killed, I see no reason we can't continue on with destroying the garrison before the *Lexington* arrives."

Pelletier smirked. "We're going to have to keep Aurrec in the dark about the incoming fleet. If he finds out, he's liable to do something

rash. You know how much he's not looking forward to the Federation getting here before he has a chance to hightail it out."

"But why not let him?" Chand asked. "If we tell him a fleet is coming, he would likely leave the planet and be out of our way."

"We can't," Steven said as he shook his head. "I did a little investigating with regards to Troem Aurrec. He's a known pirate who's attacked a number of Federation interests in the last few years, and that's aside from the fact that he's also a known Romulan operative. There's no question he has information that'd be beneficial to Starfleet, and if we can curtail his acts of piracy in the process, so much the better. No, we can't let this one get away. While he should be considered a secondary goal of this mission, we need to keep in mind that his apprehension is a must."

"So what's the plan?" Pelletier asked.

Steven looked to Chand, hoping the Andorian had found out anything concerning the garrison that could help them.

"I scouted the area around the perimeter of the Romulan compound. It's heavily fortified, and well defended. There are numerous weapon emplacements, mine fields, and sensing devices, all hidden from view. Even initial sensor scans showed nothing."

"Then how did you locate them?" Jacques asked.

"I discovered our covert operative on the surface."

"Really?" Steven asked in surprise.

Chand nodded. "He was not far from the garrison, in a small village two kilometers from the main entrance to the compound. It was not difficult to discover him."

"How's that?"

"He is Vulcan," Chand replied evenly, drawing stares from both Steven and Jacques. "And from what he has said, the only one on the planet. His name is Sarpin."

"He'd stick out like a sore thumb," Pelletier chuckled.

"I agree," Chand said. "His skills at evasion must be considerable. It surprised me he was not located by the Romulans or the Catalians sooner, given his racial heritage."

"What's his cover?" Steven asked.

"He has posed as a Vulcan trader. In the past several months, he has gotten to know the Romulans in the compound, and he's assured me that he has gained some level of their trust. Based on information he's given me, which is considerable, there is a way to circumvent the garrison security and infiltrate the base without detection."

"Do you believe him?"

"I see no reason not to." Chand then reached into his pocket and withdrew a data cartridge that he handed to Steven. "This is from him. It contains a detailed map of the compound, the defensive emplacements beyond the main walls, and the location of an underground cistern that leads into the base."

"Nice," Pelletier approved. "Someone's done their homework."

"Using the map I was able to verify several of the peripheral weapon locations. The data checked out."

Steven flipped the cartridge slowly in his hands, his mind working a new plan over. "Chand, do you have any way to contact Sarpin?"

Chand nodded. "A secure communications link. We are in contact every hour."

"Who provided the frequency?"

"I did. In fact, our next scheduled communication is in ten minutes."

"Good," Steven muttered quietly, then spoke again more loudly. "The next time you talk to him, don't mention anything about the 5th Fleet."

"Is there any reason not to?"

Steven shrugged. "The fewer people who know about it, the better. Besides, it's not imperative to his mission. What about Federation hostages?"

"Sarpin has acknowledged that he's seen a number of human captives that match the description of several of the missing Federation diplomats."

"How did he manage that?" Pelletier asked.

"He has a surveillance station set up in the hills surrounding the compound. From there he has an unobstructed view of the interior layout. From time to time, prisoners are moved from one structure to another. Sarpin has taken several high-resolution photographs, all of which are encoded on the disk in your hand."

Steven smiled at Chand. "Perfect. Are there any portable computer terminals on board the ship?"

Chand nodded, then pointed to an access hatch on the opposite wall. "Two in there, fully charged."

"Can you set them up so we can access one of them remotely via a secured link?"

"Of course."

"What's on your mind?" Pelletier asked Firestine.

"A plan. Chand, set up the computers. Leave one here. Take the other on your shuttlepod."

Seated in the pilot's seat of the *Gulfhawk*, Steven watched the computer readout intently. To his right, Jacques was doing the same, monitoring all sensor and communications signals in the area.

"All right, Chand," Steven said. "There's a patch of open field about a kilometer south of the garrison. Set the shuttlepod down there."

"Understood," the Andorian responded with his usual curtness.

On the screen, Steven watched as the shuttle came down with practiced precision.

As soon as the landing pads made contact with the surface, Jacques began entering commands into his computer terminal. When he was rewarded with a trio of green lights, he turned to Steven and nodded. "We're green."

"All right. Chand, is the computer terminal on the pod ready?"

"Affirmative."

"Good. Begin accessing the data on the cartridge Sarpin gave you."

"Accessing," he replied.

"You really think this is going to work?" Jacques asked, his fingers poised over his console.

Firestine shrugged. "I honestly don't know, but it's worth a shot. I just hope we don't have to wait long for a response."

An indicator between the two men began to quickly flash red.

"Looks like you got your wish," Pelletier said with a nod to the light. "Something's coming toward the shuttlepod."

"Can you get an accurate reading on it?"

Jacques tried, but he sighed in frustration. "No. Bouncing the sensor signals off satellites in orbit isn't the best way to do this unless we want to boost the signal."

"I don't want the Romulans figuring out what's going on. Chand, do you have a visual?"

"Negative."

Jacques attempted to adjust his readings. "I can tell you that it's coming in from the direction of the Romulan base, and it's fast."

Steven nodded. "Probably a personnel carrier of some type. And it's not a coincidence."

"I think I can get a satellite image of what's going on," Jacques said, then brought up the image. It was a top-down view of the landing area. While blurry, there was little doubt that the incoming craft was Romulan. It stopped just beyond the shuttlepod, and deposited a squad of personnel.

"Switch to thermal imaging," Steven said. When the monitor had been switched over, he nodded approvingly. "Is everyone ready?"

"Ready," Chand replied.

"Yep," Jacques said.

The Romulans surrounded the craft. As soon as the twelve officers had the vehicle completely surrounded, Steven ordered Chand to open the pod's side hatch. Two of the Romulan guards moved cautiously toward the opening.

"They're entering the pod," Chand said.

"Jacques?"

"Just give me the word," the Frenchman replied.

"And . . . now."

Jacques flipped the three switches under his fingers, and the shuttlepod exploded in a brilliant flash of light. The monitors went white under the intense heat of the explosion. A full two minutes elapsed before the flare died down. When it had, there was a twenty-meter-wide crater where the shuttlepod had once been. Other than the burning debris, there were no other thermal images. Even the Romulan personnel carrier had been disintegrated.

Steven turned in his chair to smile at Jacques. "Well done." He then continued to turn until he was face to face with Chand sitting at the flight engineer's station. "You too."

Chand nodded.

"I guess that means that the information Sarpin gave us was fake," Pelletier said, which elicited a nod from Chand.

"But it wasn't completely useless," Steven replied. "We managed to take out a few Romulans in the process. And it's going to buy us the time we need for the 5th Fleet to arrive."

"How so?" Jacques asked.

Steven smiled. "It think it's time you go see Troem Aurrec and tell him what's happened."

"Me?"

"Uh huh."

"Alone?"

Steven nodded. "Alone."

Once again inside Aurrec's opulent office, it was apparent that the Catalian's frustrations had bubbled over to unrestrained anger. His flowing blue cape fluttered sharply as he paced around the room. "How can this possibly be beneficial?" he screamed without looking at Jacques.

The Frenchman, his hands clasped behind his back, stood calmly under the onslaught. If things got out of hand, he was glad to have a concealed blaster tucked behind him. His thumb caressed the handle of the weapon though his jacket, almost daring Aurrec to make a more threating move. "Because now we know for certain the information provided to us about the garrison was false. If we'd gone ahead with our initial plans to blow up the base, we'd have been killed before we got within five kilometers."

"I doubt your pessimism," the Catalian barked as he continued to pace.

"Say what you will, but I lost a man out there today!" Jacques lied. "Now I'm the only one left to do your bidding."

Aurrec stopped and turned to him. He grunted in disapproval, then sighed. "You have little choice in the matter."

Jacques shrugged. "The way I see it, with Firestine dead it means more profit for me on this little venture."

"I don't care about your personal finances." Troem was dismissive. "I care that the Romulans have been alerted." He reached for a tablet on his desk and tossed it to Jacques. Pelletier didn't move, letting the computer fall at his feet and shatter. "Do you know what that is? It's a message from the Romulan garrison commander. It says that twenty of his people were killed in what he considers an act of terrorism. He's requested that I account for it personally."

"Good."

"Good? What possible good can come from that?" Aurrec spat. "What am I supposed to tell him?"

"For now, you tell him that you are investigating the matter, and that you have a few possible leads."

Aurrec narrowed his eyes. "And what will that accomplish?"

"First, it will stop him from sending troops to this location and wiping you out. Secondly, it'll give us some time to come up with a new plan."

Aurrec looked doubtful. "That will only sedate him for a short time. I know this Romulan. He will want answers."

Jacques shrugged. "And we can give him some, but not before we're ready. We just need a week, possibly a few days beyond that. The plan I've got in mind will take that long to work out."

"A week?"

Pelletier nodded. "I'll need to recruit some of your people in that time and train them. Do you have any good pilots amongst your people, and anyone with skills in subterfuge?"

Aurrec grunted. "And you are sure you can still destroy the garrison?"

Jacques smiled. "Of that there is no question."

Troem mulled it over. "The base commander will want me to deliver the results of the investigation to him personally. What have you to say about that?"

"I'm counting on it. Just buy us a few weeks and everything will work out perfectly."

Chapter 9

Stardate 15904.12

Crouching behind the stump of a toppled long-dead tree, Steven Firestine watched through his binoculars as Jacques Pelletier's shuttle moved closer to the Romulan garrison. Skimming the tops of nearby trees, the shuttle and its two passengers quickly passed over his head as it headed off to the nearby compound.

"Chand, are you ready?" he asked into his communicator.

"I am ready," the Andorian replied. "Our forces?"

"The strike group will be here shortly. I received word from Captain Whiteacre a few minutes ago. The *Lexington* will lead the assault, with the *Enterprise* and a few others remaining in reserve."

"And the Marines?"

"Once the *Lexington* breaks through the orbital defenses, three troop transports will come down right on top of us. We'll have to move quickly."

"Understood."

"I don't have a good vantage on the compound. Can you tell me what the Romulans in the garrison are doing?" Steven asked, then looked to the distant spire overlooking the valley where Chand was poised.

"There is little to tell. If the Romulans have been alerted to the presence of our task force, there are no external indications. No personnel are outside the buildings."

"The prisoner area?"

"Also empty."

"That must mean they're being holed up in the main cell block. There's no other place they could be. I'll send word to the *Lexington*

to target their fire away from that part of the garrison. In the meantime, keep an eye out for Jacques' signal."

"Do you know exactly what I should be looking for?" Chand asked.

Steven smiled at the communicator. "I'm sure you'll know it when you see it."

After receiving clearance to land from the base commander, Jacques Pelletier set the shuttle down inside the prison complex as carefully as possible. Beside him, Troem Aurrec looked worried. His dark skin glistened with sweat as he turned to look at the aft section of the shuttle, where a large amount of explosives had been carefully hidden.

"Are you sure this is a good idea?"

Jacques smirked. "We're inside the complex, aren't we?"

"I said I wanted to get the Romulans off this planet, Jacques," Aurrec replied sharply. "I did not say that I wanted to die doing it."

"Relax, will you? You're not going to die. Just remember to do what I told you when the time comes." Stepping out of his chair, Jacques moved toward the doors. "Coming?"

"I don't have much of a choice."

Reaching into a nearby compartment, Jacques pulled out a towel and tossed it at Aurrec. But Aurrec's reflexes were too slow, the towel hitting his face before he could react. "Wipe off your face. You're sweating like a Tellarite."

"I'm nervous."

"Your nerves are more likely to get us killed than these explosives. Just keep your cool for a few more minutes."

Aurrec, still unconvinced, began wiping his face, his hands trembling as he did so.

Stepping out of the command chair, Captain Whiteacre fought the urge to wring his hands together nervously. "Distance?"

"Closer by the second," Commander Bob Griffing replied from the science station.

The strike carrier *Lexington* and her group had been in hiding behind one of Devron's three moons for a little over an hour. As they were still undetected by the few Romulan vessels orbiting the planet, Captain Whiteacre had given the order to slowly begin to move beyond the dark side of the moon toward Devron. There was little choice in the matter. It was sheer luck that the strike group had been able to enter the system both undetected and unmolested. Now it was only a matter of time until a wayward Romulan patrol ship picked up the twenty-odd warships nearing the planet. Though there was still no sign from the intelligence operatives on the planet that the offensive was underway, Matthew Whiteacre couldn't afford to wait. They needed to strike quickly, before whatever element of surprise they still had was lost forever.

"Status of the fighter wing?" he asked.

Lieutenant Colonel Scott Newell, Starfleet Marines, pivoted his chair away from the collection of monitors at his station. "All the *Minotaur*s are manned and ready, sir. The *Gwendoline* will lead the attack."

"And the *Enterprise*?" Matthew asked as he turned to Lieutenant Keith at the communications station.

"She's ready, sir. I just received their signal. She'll launch fighters as soon as we do."

Matthew nodded. "Good. Keep that channel open, Dustin. I want to be in constant contact with her at all times."

"Aye, captain."

On the main view screen, Matthew watched as three fast-attack transports, each burdened with more Marines and equipment than they were designed to carry, moved into position ahead of the carrier. Not long after, the cruiser *Providence* moved ahead of them, taking up her position as their protective screen. In the far distance, the

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moon of Thurn spun slowly. In a few moments, Devron would come into view, and with it, the Romulan sensors would pick up the incoming Federation warships.

"Kevin?" the captain asked of the chief engineer.

"We've got power to spare, Captain," Commander Clucas responded eagerly. "I've got a series of emergency bypasses already rigged. You won't have to worry about being without weapons or shields if we take a few hits."

"Understood. Get down to engineering. You're going to be more beneficial down there. If we get into a tight spot, it might not be our defenses that we need."

Clucas nodded sharply as he stepped away from the engineering console. "Aye, sir. I'll keep a close eye on the engines."

When the chief engineer had entered the turbo elevator, the captain turned to give the view screen a final look. "Stand by to launch the fighters, Colonel Newell. We can't afford to wait for the signal from the surface much longer."

"Aye, sir."

"Commander Knight, sound red alert. Arm all lasers, charge the particle cannons, and prime the accelerator cannons."

Tim Knight, at the tactical console, nodded as he went to work. "Yes, sir."

"Dustin, send a message to the fleet advising them to do the same. We're going to concentrate our fire on the orbiting warships. We want to draw their attention away from the *Providence* and the transports until the Marines can get to the surface."

"Aye, Captain. Sending now."

Settling back into the command chair, Matthew continued to watch Thurn spin slowly as it had for millennia. Moments later, the first sliver of blue-green came into view as Devron began to make herself visible.

In the courtyard of the Romulan garrison, Jacques Pelletier and

Troem Aurrec stepped out of the shuttle and were greeted by a handful of heavily armed sentries. They appeared to be wearing some type of body armor that obscured all their features. The dark, reflective material shimmered in the sunlight as Pelletier looked to Aurrec and nodded. Having regained a semblance of his usually calm demeanor, Troem stepped around Jacques and moved toward the nearest guard.

"As requested, I am here to see your commander."

It was impossible to see the expression on the Romulan's face through the dark visor of the helmet. The guard made no move, remaining motionless for several seconds before he raised an arm and waved it toward a structure about thirty meters distant.

Bowing his head slightly, Aurrec then turned to Pelletier. "Follow."

They didn't travel more than a dozen paces before alarm klaxons rang out around the compound. The guards escorting them turned to one another first in confusion, and then scattered in different directions.

"What is happening?" Aurrec screamed to Pelletier over the earsplitting alarms.

"The cavalry," Pelletier said, then turned to run back toward the shuttle.

"What? Wait," Aurrec shouted after him. "Where are you going? Don't leave me here!"

Quickly dashing back into the shuttle, Jacques flipped over the cushion of a long bench seat. Aurrec rushed into the shuttle behind him, but stopped dead in his tracks when Jacques withdrew a very powerful looking rifle from inside the compartment and leveled it at him.

"You said I wouldn't not be harmed!" Aurrec looked at him in horror.

"Well, you won't be as long as you stay away from the giving end of this thing. Now, if you'll kindly get the hell out of the way, I've got a job to do."

"A what? A job?"

But Pelletier was beyond listening. Stepping toward Aurrec, he moved one hand away from the rifle long enough to grab a small transmitter from a shelf. Attaching it to his weapon, he used the long barrel to push Aurrec out of the way of the doors and stepped back out into the courtyard once more. Two Romulan guards were rushing toward the shuttle, and before Jacques had made it down the two steps to the dirt of the landing pad he'd dispatched them both with well-placed blasts. Seeing no further immediate targets, he looked over his shoulder. Aurrec was huddled against the doorframe of the shuttle, apparently too frightened to move.

"Get a move on, unless you want to become a permanent fixture of this base!"

But Aurrec didn't move a muscle. Sighing in defeat, Jacques turned and grabbed the man by his flowing robes, pulling him free of the doorway and all but dragging him across the courtyard several dozen meters. Rounding a building, he threw Aurrec to the ground with a thud. "Close your eyes and don't move." Pelletier then crouched down and turned away from where the shuttle had landed. Reaching for the transmitter he'd attached to the rifle, he pressed the single button. A split second later, a tremendous explosion rocked the entire complex.

From his vantage point, Steven Firestine watched as the shuttlecraft Pelletier had flown into the complex exploded in an enormous fireball. The ensuing shockwave ripped a ten-meter gash in a nearby wall and sent more than a dozen Romulan guards flying into the air. Reaching for his communicator, he opened a link to Chand. "The perimeter defenses are down. Let's go!"

"Sensors report a large explosion on the surface!" Commander Griffing announced from the science station as he gazed at the sensor

readings.

The planet Devron, now fully visible on the main screen, was getting closer by the moment. And so were the dozen Romulan warships now heading out to intercept the Starfleet attack group.

"That's the signal, people," Captain Whiteacre replied. "Remember, we need to keep the Romulans from attacking the *Providence* or our transports for just a few minutes. Colonel Newell, signal the fighters to start their attack run toward the surface."

In the prison complex on the surface, it was absolute chaos. Dozens of Romulans were dashing about the courtyard, with presumably many more inside the two dozen buildings strewn about the complex. Pelletier watched as two large turrets elevated from one of them, then fired several rounds far into the sky. Even with his powerful rifle, he couldn't hope to damage the massive weapons platform. Thankfully, he didn't have to worry about it. Not long after the weapon had discharged, a volley of high-intensity laser bolts streamed over the shattered wall of the prison, hit the turret and incinerated it. Seconds later, the SS *Gulfhawk* made a high-speed pass over the complex and into a victory roll before heading off into the distance.

Smiling at both Steven Firestine's piloting and targeting abilities, Jacques moved toward the building suspected to be the cell block holding the prisoners. As the door opened, a lone Romulan guard appeared with a pistol in hand. Too close to take a shot, Pelletier instead quickly flipped his rifle around and jammed the butt of it into the Romulan's helmet, causing the guard to reel back into the building and thud against a far wall, then slump to the ground, unconscious. Behind him, Aurrec crawled into the building on hands and knees.

Quickly searching the still form, Jacques found a pair of laser handcuffs, and he quickly secured one end around Aurrec's wrist and

the other end to a bent pipe extending from the floor.

"What are you doing?" the near-frantic Aurrec cried.

"Making sure you don't go anywhere. You've got a few things to answer for, and I think Starfleet Security will want to know them."

"But I'll be killed!"

"This building isn't being targeted by my friends out there. You'll be safe for the time being."

"You can't leave me here!"

Pelletier, tired of the incessant whining of the man, reared back and knocked him unconscious with a single blow to the face. "Nighty night," he said, then turned to move into the cell block.

Passing over a low ridge, Steven Firestine took the *Gulfhawk* into another pass at the complex. Two more missile turrets had popped up, each one firing several rounds into space. Taking careful aim, he dispatched one with a pair of well-trained lasers. Intent on getting the other turret on his next pass, he found that the *Gulfhawk* was quickly overtaken by a squadron of fighters that'd seemingly appeared from nowhere. He gripped the controls tighter, intent on taking on the incoming attackers when he noticed they weren't Romulan warships at all.

Minotaurs, the voice in his head exclaimed. *The Lexington!*

"*Gulfhawk*, this is Major Peterson of the fighter *Gwendoline*. Respond, please," a voice echoed through his communications console.

"Go ahead, *Gwendoline*."

"Good shooting down there, sir, but we've got it from here. Your orders are to land and secure any and all hostages at your earliest convenience."

Steven quickly pivoted the *Gulfhawk* out of the way of the *Lexington*'s fighters. "Understood, Major. Good luck."

"Yes, sir. We'll give you as much cover as we can. Advise you land

outside the complex. We can't guarantee the safety of your craft if you get too close."

"Understood. *Gulfhawk* out." He then switched the communications channel over to Chand's frequency. "Chand, where are you?"

Moments before, Chand had dashed through the wide opening in the outer wall of the prison complex. As he did, several guards had rushed toward him with weapons drawn. Using superior dexterity, he'd avoided no less than six energy blasts as he made his way toward the Romulans. Dodging another, he crossed his arms over one another and withdrew two pistols slung at his sides. Rolling, the Andorian quickly took aim and dispatched each of the guards in seconds. Before the dust at his feet had settled, five Romulans lay on the ground, dead. Reaching for the communicator at his side, he opened the channel to Firestine. "Securing your entrance. For the moment, you are clear to land."

"Understood," Steven's voice said through the device. "I'll bring the ship in now. Find Jacques and get him and whoever he's found to the ship."

"Affirmative," Chand replied. He holstered his pistols, withdrew a long-bladed weapon that'd been sheathed on his back, and sprinted toward the cell block.

Inside the building, Jacques was making a thorough search of the building. He's made his way down two floors to what he felt was the lowest level before he came across what he was looking for. In a narrow passageway lined with heavy doors, he began opening each one in turn. The first few were empty cells, but when he opened the fourth he found a human, emaciated and filthy. Crouching down beside where the frail prisoner was lying on the bed, he roused the captive from his sleep. At first, there was nothing but sheer terror in

the man's eyes, but when Jacques withdrew his identification badge and the emblem of the UESPA flashed across the prisoner's face, glimmer of hope appeared in the tired, beaten eyes.

"Lieutenant Commander Jacques Pelletier, Starfleet Intelligence. I'm here to get you out."

"Rulan . . ." the man began, his voice distant and weak. "Rulan Manas . . . Ambassador to—"

"No time for that, Ambassador. We've got to get out of here. Can you move?"

The bedraggled man pivoted from the bed and got to his feet, but not without effort. "I . . . I think so, young man."

"How many more prisoners are there?"

"Not many," the ambassador said, then began to cry. "Not many."

"Come on, Mr. Ambassador. We've got to check. There's a ship standing by, but we've got to hurry."

"Yes," Rulan said, sobbing with both joy and pain at the same time. "Yes. Let's go."

Moving back into the hallway, Jacques moved toward another door when a voice called to him, "You there! Stop!" followed by a disruptor blast. Taken by surprise, Jacques whirled to face his attacker, but saw that the guard had a rather uncomfortable-looking blade coated with green blood extending through the center of his uniform. It was quickly withdrawn a second later, and when the body fell to the floor, Pelletier could see that it was Chand who had dealt the death blow.

"It's about bloody time you showed up," the Frenchman spat, although he was more than delighted to have the Andorian there to help.

"I was detained," Chand replied calmly as he slipped his sword into the sheath on his back. "How many have you found?"

"Just this one, one of the ambassadors. We've still got more rooms to check."

Chand looked Rulan over, knowing instantly that the man could never navigate the steps up to the courtyard on his own. "Take him to the ship. I will search the remainder of the rooms."

Looking down the long hallway once more, Jacques nodded. "Make it quick. I don't want you left behind."

"Concern for me?"

Jacques shouldered his rifle, then put a supporting arm around the ambassador. "I've never left a teammate behind, and I'm not about to start now . . . even one as disagreeable as yourself. But I can't vouch for the targeting abilities of those Starfleet Marines flying around up there. One stray missile could take down this whole building."

Chand reached down and slipped one of his pistols from its holster, then handed it to Jacques. "Take this."

Pelletier gave the weapon a look of admiration. An Andorian phase pistol. Only the most elite, most well-trained of their people were even allowed to carry it. It was more than a weapon to the Andorian people. It was a symbol of personal honor. "I trust you will be able to use this well," Chand said, giving Jacques a hint of a smile.

"Just make sure you come back for it."

Chand nodded sharply. "I intend to. Now go!"

Outside the complex, Steven had set the *Gulfhawk* down with her stern facing the wide opening in the prison wall. Extending the aft ramp, he waited nearby with his rifle at the ready. When he saw movement coming through the wall, he quickly took aim, but then noticed that one of the two men hobbling toward him was Jacques Pelletier. Steven continued to cover them, dispatching one Romulan guard who'd had his sights on the fleeing humans. When they were within a few meters of the ship, Steven rushed out and helped the former hostage into *Gulfhawk*'s cargo bay.

"How many more are there?" Steven asked Jacques.

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"I don't know," he replied, out of breath from their dash to the ship. "Chand's checking now."

"If they're in as bad a shape as this one, he'll need all the help he can get."

"Where are the Marines?"

"The transports are coming in now, but it'll be a few minutes before the heavy artillery can make it to the prison." When his communicator chirped, Steven flipped it open. "Go ahead."

"This is Chand. I have ten more prisoners with me, but several are badly wounded. Request you bring the ship closer to get us out."

Despite the earlier warning by the *Lexington*'s fighters, Steven knew he had little choice in the matter. "We're coming."

"Time to put some of those fancy flying skills of yours to the test," Jacques said with a smirk.

Minutes later, the *Gulfhawk* was in the courtyard of the complex, not far from where Jacques' shuttle had exploded shortly before. At the door to the cell block, Chand was waiting with a group of former inmates huddled close behind him. As soon as Steven lowered the rear ramp, Jacques dashed out, Andorian pistol in hand, and took out two Romulan guards high on a far wall. Making his way toward Chand, he waved his arm toward the ship. "Let's go! I've got you covered!"

The procession hobbled and skipped across the dusty courtyard as Steven kept the *Gulfhawk*'s engines at near-full power. When the last of them had entered the ship, Pelletier slapped the ramp controls and sealed the ship. He tossed the ceremonial pistol at Chand, who clutched at it incredulously, then opened an intercom channel to the command deck. "We're in. Let's go!"

Chapter 10

Stardate 15905.09
August 2159

Excerpted from the personal log of Captain Floyd Dorsey, Commanding Officer, USS Cutty Sark, *Golondron Core Liberation Assault Force*

   "We dropped out of warp exactly where we were supposed to. I can remember hoping at the time that the Marine strike teams had silenced all the tracking stations we passed on the way here. They must have, because we caught the Romulan defense fleet napping. I can only imagine what the techs manning their scanning stations must have thought when they saw our warp signatures on their detectors.

   "To their credit, the Romulans did get their ships into line more quickly than I thought possible. Starfleet Intelligence told us that the Romulans had gotten a new commander at the base, and it seemed they were really green when it came to combat operations. We were lucky in that.

   "When Fleet Captain Dyck ordered us to drop from war, Task Force 12 was still at about 700 kilometers when the enemy ships opened fire. A couple of fusion missiles hit our shields, but most missed us clean. I thought they were trying to fire past us at the transports until the *Trident* took a hit.

   "That seemed to be enough for Fleet Captain Vargas. He ordered the fleet's warships to swing around and engage the defenders, leaving only the cruisers *Firestorm*, *Persecare*, and *Cowpens* to cover the transports. I'll never understand why that man does some of the things he does. Standard fleet doctrine calls for the warships to screen the transports, but he ran off, leaving them almost naked.

"Most of the Romulan warships ignored the cruisers and closed on the transports—us. I thought we were going to lose more than we did in that initial pass. Fortunately, Vargas managed to pull the fleet around and engage the Romulans at point-blank range. One of their destroyers just folded up like a child's toy. I don't know what happened to her, whether we poured so much fire into her that she just collapsed, or her engine core overloaded and blew, or what, but I've never seen anything like it. And I never want to again.

"After that, the battle lost all semblance of tactics and formation. The Romulan fleet broke up. Their cruisers and frigates closed with our warships, while their remaining destroyers went after our transports. Those war lovers fought us every centimeter of the way. It seemed that the more ships they lost, the more determined they were to take us with them. I didn't see it myself, but Michael Thompson, captain of the *Invictus*, told me that he watched an entire squadron of Romulan gunboats ram one of the other transports.

"I find it amazing that after all these years, the Romulans still hate us so much that they'd gladly die to kill just a few of us. Fleet Captain Dyck didn't waste any time though. He brought his flagship, the heavy cruiser *Achilles*, straight in and took those Romulans to task. After he'd blown apart two Cabbages and damaged a Chowder, I think those Romulan knew how the rest of the day was going to pan out."

Stardate 15905.11

Excerpt from the personal diary of Staff Sergeant Harold Steiner, Third Platoon, 118th Starfleet Marines

"Our team was called up to run a raid on a Romulan base located a few klicks from the main garrison. Colonel Liam Prendergast said that some of the Romulan gunboats harassing our fleet were operating

out of a base hidden in the craggy mountains near the south polar region.

"Prendergast wanted us to hit the base, destroy the ships stationed there, and hold the facility until a garrison could be moved in. Though that seems simple enough in planning, the execution of such an operation can be a real nightmare.

"Golondron Core has a very thin atmosphere and an extremely low surface gravity. The absence of an atmosphere isn't that much of a problem, given the high-tech combat suits we use. Only a solid hit from a big weapon, like a laser or an assault rifle, will breach the suit badly enough to cause trouble. It's the lack of gravity that worries me in situations like that. The low gravity limits the use of units like APCs or hover tanks. In fact, the antigravity drives on most vehicles can't be adjusted to operate in a micro-G environment. Bounce packs can be adjusted to low-G, but it takes a great deal of training to operate one under those conditions. One wrong move and a man can land badly or overshoot his bounce.

"The difficulties in low-G vacuum ops notwithstanding, we went in. Intelligence found us a secure LZ about three klicks from the base. We dropped in there and humped it the short hike to the base. Everything was going according to plan. We took down the sentries and planted charges in some of the revetment bubbles with no trouble, then reached the main hangar dome.

"That's when they hit us.

"Somehow the Romulan garrison must have spotted us, because as soon as we started into the main dome, they ambushed us. I mean, they threw everything they had at us. Private Tajon, a rather foul-mouthed Tellarite I'd become pretty fond of, got burned down by a laser during the first few minutes of the fighting. Sergeant Kline took over, but he caught a beam in the shoulder that breached his suit. Lucky for him, Patterson slapped a seal patch over the hole before he lost too much of his atmosphere.

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"About that time, we got a call from Second Platoon. The base's fighters were trying to launch. Our platoon wasn't in much of a position to stop them. Neither was First Platoon, so stopping the fighters was up to Second. Most of the birds got away, but at least our orbiting cruisers kept them from linking up with their transports. We concentrated on the shuttles carrying their technical and support crews. The garrison stayed behind, buying time for the escaping fighters and covering the support crews.

"In the end, we did secure the base, but we had to kill every last Romulan trooper to do it. The gunboats got away, and I understand that most of them made it to the main base and landed.

"The cost to our side was enormous. Out of ninety men, seventy-five were killed or severely wounded. Tactically, the battle was a draw. We chased the Romulans out of their hole, but their ships got away. The brass is calling it a strategic victory, because we got the base and stopped the harassment. I imagine the Romulan brass is claiming the same thing."

Stardate 15905.15

Excerpt from the personal diary of Captain Irene J. Avic, Second Platoon, 12th Starfleet Marines

"When the 64th pulled back, we decided to stay. There was no order, no vote, and no discussion. We just sat there on our APCs and our hover tanks and waved goodbye to the 64th. I think that every man in the outfit knew if Romulans rolled into our location, we were going to get our teeth kicked in, and there wasn't much we could do to stop it. But what else could we do? To the 64th, Camp Larson was just a piece of real estate, but to us it was home. Sure, we sat around and brooded about the 64th pulling out and leaving us hanging, but that's human nature, right?

"After a while, Major Kestrel told us to start fortifying the camp. He had us piling sandbags around doorways and windows, erecting razor wire entanglements, and setting up laser barricades in the streets—not that they would be much of an obstacle to Romulan tanks. It just made us feel better and kept us busy. Major Kestrel had all his drives on line, if you know what I mean. He even got the junior officers to help out by digging firing pits, boarding up windows, and making grenades out of old antimatter magnetic bottles. That made me—and many of the other enlisted guys—love him even more.

"The Romulans didn't keep us waiting for long. A couple of days after the 64th pulled out, a command sled blew into town. It grounded right in the middle of the square and raised its turret.

"I don't know who fired that first shot, but the impact blew the Romulan right out of his sled. A few more shots were fired, but most of them either missed or bounced off the sled's armor. At least we got in the first punch.

"Not long after that, a Romulan armor column came down the north road. We took our crawlers out into the fields and tried to stop them, but ground tanks are no match for antigrav weaponry. Our infantry held their own for a while, but, lacking bounce packs, they got slaughtered every time they tried to move. Eventually, we had to retreat into the town and fight them for it, house by house. We gave them holy hell for about eight hours, but their superior firepower won out in the end.

"Those of us who survived but didn't surrender took to the brush and started making guerrilla attacks on the Romulans' rear areas. I don't know if it had much of an effect on the overall invasion, but it sure made us feel better."

Stardate 15905.27

Excerpt from letter written by Sergeant Karl Uhl, Fifth Platoon, 16th Starfleet Marines

"I know I can get into trouble for saying this, but don't ever let anyone tell you how glorious life is in the Starfleet Marines. In particular, don't let them tell you how safe and easy garrison duty is. There's nothing safe or easy about it. Our outfit had been at the broken end of a bottle since we landed. The brass thought it'd be nice if they pulled us out of the line and gave us a nice quiet garrison detail for a while. And for a while, it was.

"We sat around the transport base east of a little sweet spot called Rose Thorn, patching up the tanks, rooting gremlins out of the systems, and taking life nice and easy. Sergeant Levine even let us go into town once in a while. That wasn't too much fun, though. The locals were really hostile, and most of the ones who would have anything to do with us were such boot-licking toadies that we couldn't stand to be around them. Even the town joygirls turned up their noses at us. So most of us spent our time on the base.

"News from the front was scarce. We heard all sorts of rumors about how well our troops were doing, but we didn't really hear anything official. That's why, when we heard the rumor that a Romulan relief fleet was on its way to Golondron, nobody really placed any faith in it. When word came down from the colonel to cancel leaves and to increase security, we treated it as just another panic move by command.
As it turned out, we should have paid closer attention to the scuttlebutt.

"I was on watch that night, sitting on the commander's cupola of my light tank. Suddenly, I heard the high-pitched screech of a grav drive under maximum acceleration. Before I could say or do anything, a shell hit the carrier. Now, you'll hear people say that their tank got hit by this kind of round, or that kind of missile, but until you look at the

holes in the armor, there's no way of telling what hit you, and even then you can't always be sure. About all you can really tell is the difference between a laser, a missile, and a cannon round, but the kind of slug? Gimme a break.

"Whatever kind of round it was, the concussion knocked me right off the turret: not just the cupola, the whole blasted turret. I lay there for a couple of seconds, trying to figure out if I had any broken bones, when this enemy tank comes screaming past my grav. I could see the Romulan standing up in his hatch, swinging this enormous turret to line up with my nose. The next thing I knew, I was inside my own turret, listening to the snap from the shots passing overhead. I honestly don't know how I got there. I can only figure that I must have dived, head first, through the cupola hatch while he was still lining up on me.

"Well, Johansson was yelling and trying to get the drives started. Blake was yelling and trying to get the shields up, and I was yelling and trying to figure out what was going on. Right then another Romulan crossed our bows, and Blake clipped him with a fusion round. I don't think the Romulan even felt our pop-gun hit him, because he kept bearing down on one of our transports parked out on the tarmac. Blake fired again, and hit him again, before I could stop him. It doesn't do for a light APC to be calling a Romulan antigrav tank's attention to itself, especially if it has a jury-rigged patch in its hull.

"The rest of that battle is kind of a blur. I know we started shooting up the Romulan personnel carriers, but they didn't really stick around for long. Only long enough to set fire to the repair sheds and shoot up a couple of the smaller shuttles. By the time we got organized, the Romulans had pulled a disappearing act. An enterprising major from First Platoon tried to follow them. We picked up his wreck the next morning, and thirty grunts in the squad were dead.

"I found out later that there were a half-dozen raids like that all over our AO that night. It must have really honked off the brass to have an active armored unit operating behind our lines, because that was the end of our cushy garrison detail. Three days after the raid, we were back out, beating the bushes for the Romulans."

Stardate 15906.02

Excerpted from the personal log of Captain Terri Connor, Commanding Officer, USS Alcantara, *Golondron Core Liberation Assault Force*

"Word came down from Starfleet Intelligence that, as soon as Romulan High Command discovered we'd invaded Golondron Core, they started throwing together a reinforcement fleet. Starfleet response was, naturally, to deploy its own relief force. They knew that our Marines were mostly a green legion made up of training cadres, and bits and pieces of shattered units. General Gunn himself was untried as a legion commander, and Colonel Burke hadn't fully recovered mentally from the loss of her leg. The only reliable commanding officer we had at Golondron Core was Fleet Captain Dyck, and there is only so much one can do with naval assets.

"It took a while to assemble the reinforcements for the 64th. Fleet Command knew they had to hurry, or the only thing they'd succeed in doing would be breaking up the Romulan victory celebration.

"The relief command, Commodore Karen Albares, made the decision to go in hot. She wanted to arrive deep in the Golondron system and make as fast a run through the Romulan blockade as possible. That called for some pretty tricky navigation, not only for the individual ships, but for the entire fleet. If just one ship arrived off target, it could be a real disaster. Assuming that they all made it intact, she'd have to dump speed like crazy, or she'd overshoot the transport's drop points and have to swing around for another try. I

told Albares at the time that she'd be lucky if a quarter of her command didn't crash into each other during the in-run. Karen just laughed and said that she'd take the cost of the repairs out of the pay of any captain who had a collision.

"She warped in just outside of orbit and fired up the impulse drives. The Romulans came out to meet her, weapons blazing. I have to give those boys credit. They really know how to fight their ships. They should—look how long they've been doing it.

"The *Alcantara* went up behind the Romulans in an attempt to sandwich them between Commodore Albares' forces and the planet. The *Antietam* was assigned to cover our starboard flank. The Romulans hit us from the port flank, and so we were one of the last ships engaged. As a result, I had a little more time to think about what I was planning to do when we came under fire. When a Romulan warbird swung across our bow, we treated it to a few photonic torpedo care packages. The hits showed up on Lieutenant Thijs ter Horst's tactical plot as a brief red pulse, but what we saw on the main view screen was more impressive. The projectile hit the warbird just aft of the bridge, shattering the armor plates and tossing everyone on the enemy ship's bridge out into space.

"That hit seemed to make the other Romulan captains a little angry. Another warbird swung around and charged us like an enraged sehlat. Lieutenant ter Horst pumped two photons into it before we were forced to maneuver or be rammed. As we passed him, ter Horst gave the Romulan a full broadside. He replied in kind. I imagine that it looked like a battle between ancient sailing ships. We hammered at each other for twenty minutes before the *Invictus* came to our assistance. Together, we poured enough fire into the warbird to destroy two ships, but he returned fire like our guns weren't even there. Eventually, we crippled his drives so badly that he could barely maintain control. He lost his main engines and had to switch over to emergency power. That's when he switched off his maneuvering

lights and turned on his white flashers. The *Invictus* was in better shape than we were, so Captain Thompson left us to finish off the cruiser on our own.

"As soon as we'd disabled the warbird, we turned back to the fight, but it was almost over by then. Commander Diana Paprotny looked at the IFF display on the tactical and saw that Commodore Albares had lost two transports and two other cruisers. I later found out that the captain of the *Bremen*, Vera Trevion, had sacrificed herself to save our flagship when the commander of the Romulan flagship had turned his vessel to ram the commodore.

"After all the Romulans had been squarely defeated, Commodore Albares' landing operation went fairly smooth. A few stray enemy gunboats kept us busy, but they didn't amount to much. In the end, Golondron Core was squarely back in Federation hands. Commodore Albares has assured us that another Starfleet strike squadron is en route and will be here in a week, and the Marines on the surface have eradicated the last of the Romulan emplacements. It's been a long three weeks, but now there's no way the Romulans will ever be able to take Golondron again.

"Meanwhile, I've just mounted a piece of debris from that persistent Romulan warbird over the desk in my quarters."

Chapter 11

Stardate 15908.09
September 2159

   Gazing at the star-filled screen, Captain Brian Webber had one thought echoing in his mind as the red alert klaxons sounded all around him: this was where Federation space ended. In the farthest corner of Federation space, in a desolate system containing a single, uninhabited world, the thirty-plus starships of the 2nd Fleet were about to do battle, likely altering the course of the war with the Romulans in the process.

   When Golondron Core fell to the intrepid Starfleet Marines, the entire galactically north battle lines shifted. The light-year-long wall of the Romulan front was pushed back, now curving back on itself as the Federation retook systems that had fallen years before. The *Lexington* and her group were en route to Devron, and the carrier *Enterprise* and the 1st Combined Fleet were well on their way to Cheron, due to arrive in less than two months. However, in order for those two groups to succeeded, Webber and the 2nd Fleet needed to secure the Gamma Hydra system, widely considered the staging area for the Romulan fleet's reserve forces. If Webber and his people succeeded here, there would be little chance for the Romulans to claim victory in the battles to come.

   But that was for the future to decide. Right now, the crew of the *Sao Paulo* and the other thirty ships of the 2nd Fleet were about to square off with the superior Romulan armada that'd just appeared on the long-range sensors.

   "Captain," Dan Balkwill said from the communications station, drawing Webber's attention from the screen.

"Yes, Lieutenant?"

"Message coming in from Admiral Johnson, fleetwide broadcast."

Brian had been expecting as much. "Put it on the main screen, Dan."

The image wavered, then was replaced by the 2nd Fleet senior commander. Johnson, a man of some distinction who'd made a name for himself a year before for single-handedly destroying a Romulan outpost in the Regga system, still wore the scar on his cheek from the encounter. He addressed the entire fleet, advising everyone to split up into their assigned squadrons. Ending with a perfunctory "good luck," the message was short. Johnson, a man of action, was not known for long-winded speeches, and today would be no different.

As soon as the viewer faded back to the stars, Brian began handing out orders. The first was to Lieutenant Eckhoff at the helm, ordering him to move the ship into formation with the rest of the *Sao Paulo*'s squadron of three similar *Hercules*-class cruisers. The second set of orders was to Lieutenant Commander Tlustos at the sensor station, a request for constant reports from both the long- and short-range sensors. He called down to engineering, getting Chief Engineer Jason Genser on the line and making sure that all primary and secondary power sources were ready, to which the engineer had replied with an affirmative. His final call was down to sickbay.

"Lyons here, Captain."

"Lisa, we've laid in an intercept course with the Romulan forces in this sector. We'll be in combat shortly."

"Everything in sickbay is ready, sir. I've also got trauma teams set up in the galley and the wardroom, just in case."

"Good thinking, Doc," Brian acknowledged. "Let's hope we don't need them."

"Amen to that, sir."

Closing the channel, he turned to the main screen and watched as the cruiser *Neptune* formed up on the *Sao Paulo*'s starboard beam.

"We're in position now, sir," Lieutenant Eckhoff said from the helm.

"And the rest of the fleet?"

"Still underway," Tlustos replied from the science console.

"And the Romulans?" Brian asked, turning to see Reinhard staring into his sensor hood.

"They're maneuvering toward us. There's no discernable pattern to their formation. However, several large cruisers are hanging back from the rest of the mass."

Webber nodded. "Probably the flagships for the armada. Keep those ships on your periphery, Commander, but don't let it distract you from the more immediate targets."

"Understood, sir."

On the main screen, the mottled brown world of Gamma Hydra IV appeared as the *Sao Paulo* and her group made one final course adjustment. An hour before, the Romulan fleet had been in orbit of it. Though they were still too far distant to make out visually, Webber and the rest knew they were coming. "Time to intercept?"

"The outermost portion of the Romulan armada will be in weapons range in fifteen minutes at their present speed."

After Tlustos made his report, a silence fell over the bridge. There was nothing else to be said, nor was there anything to report. Admiral Johnson wanted to draw the Romulans as far from the planet as possible. He'd ordered all ships to hold fast until the last possible minute. Now, with both the impulse engines and maneuvering thrusters in hot standby, all that Webber and the rest of the 2nd Fleet could do was wait for the chaos that would soon unfold. It wasn't something he did well.

Webber looked down at Lieutenant Doug Eckhoff. One splayed hand rested above the maneuvering controls, the other hovered above the weapons console. Eckhoff watched the main view screen as if he were a statue, waiting on the order from his captain that would signal his next move. Glancing around the bridge, Brian saw the rest of his crew in the same state, all eyes glued to the main screen

as the unseen enemy drew inexorably toward their position. Brian knew the same scene was being replayed across the entire fleet, each officer and crewman waiting for Death to rear his skeletal face so they could challenge him for a few more moments of life.

In less than fifteen minutes, they'd be granted that very opportunity.

The ship shuddered to a virtual halt as the first volley broke over her forward shields. The rest of the cruiser squadron was little better off. On the *Neptune*'s bridge, sparks flew from overloaded panels and the lights flickered for a heart-stopping moment before they powered up again.

"Forward shields down to fifty-three percent. Minor hull damage reported!" Commander Connor yelled from the science console.

Captain Nicholas Shanayda's response was instant. "Target nearest Romulan warship and fire!"

Deadly photons spat from the launchers in response. The explosion registered on Connor's sensors, and he reported the information back to the captain. "Target's shields are down to ten percent . . . target shields gone . . . they're taking hull damage!" he shouted joyously.

The *Neptune* rocked again as a volley of disrupters screamed in from the wounded Romulan. They were just enough to keep the *Neptune* and her squadron mates' forward shields down near fifty percent, burning back their ongoing regeneration. But then the Starfleet ships fired back in response.

Four photonic warheads speared out from the Federation cruisers. Their shimmering blue tips slammed into the incoming Romulans. At the end of the initial attack, the Romulan cruisers had only fifty percent forward shields.

"Target's weapons systems are severely damaged!" Conner announced.

More photons were volleyed. As the range wound down, the squadron began to open up with short-range plasma cannons and primary lasers as well. Red beams and amber bolts of energy slammed into the targeted Romulan cruiser. Her shields were already down, so the fire rained on her armored hull unabated.

"Target is dropping out of formation!" the *Neptune*'s weapons officer shouted in triumph. The laser and torpedo strikes had gouged glowing, flaming craters on the Romulan's forward hull. Lifepods and shuttles began to flee the stricken and dying vessel, then the computer automatically dimmed the area around it as a star-bright explosion claimed the vessel.

But the battle was far from over. "Shift fire to the next enemy vessel," Shanayda commanded.

That was when the enemy's fighters streaked in, volleying their ordnance. While shorter ranged than that of a ship, the fighter's ordnance was no less deadly. The twenty fighters launched smaller fusion missiles, many continuing on well after the unshielded fighters had been pounced on by Federation warship.

One of the *Ajax* destroyers staggered out of the main fleet formation streaming debris, atmosphere and drive plasma. Its forward shields were knocked flat, and the grid overloaded and brought down the rest, leaving the wounded ship virtually defenseless. There was a giant hole near where its port weapons emplacement should be, and a molten fracture ran rearward from that along the darkened nacelle. The stricken *Ajax* boosted power to its impulse drive in an effort to courageously rejoin the formation. It didn't make it. A fresh volley of green disrupters streaked in from nearby warbirds and turned the ship into an expanding ball of energetic plasma.

Whipping around to starboard, the *Neptune, Sao Paulo,* and two other cruisers launched a fresh salvo of missiles right into the faces of the remaining four Romulans. The missiles streamed in, taking out a

Cabbage instantly. Its entire bulbous hull collapsed and a massive hole gaped from the engineering section. It spun out of formation, all helm control lost, with lights flickering as internal power failed. As it fell farther and farther behind the rest of the formation, it started spewing escape pods. Secondary explosions began to ripple across the ship. They rose rapidly in frequency until the entire vessel blew apart from the inside out.

Another *Cabbage* swept in from above, long beams of green plasma energy reaching out and pelting the weakened shields of the *Neptune*.

"Forward shields down to ten percent! Main lasers slightly damaged, port quantum launcher is offline. Main power failing!" Lieutenant Frahm said from the helm, then coughed on the acrid smoke that was filling the bridge.

Turning to find the source of the fire, Captain Shanayda saw that it was the science console. Commander Connor had extinguished the blaze, but the smoke was still billowing. "Return fire!" the captain shouted as he leapt between the helm and navigation stations.

Feeble next to the storm crashing in on it, the remaining Romulan vessels shot back at their attackers. They managed to take down another Federation ship's shields, but then it was over. The few remaining Romulan fighters swung back in from their latest combat maneuvers and volleyed their disrupters until their small capacitors ran dry. At the same time, the Romulan cruisers launched their next attack, flailing on the Starfleet cruiser's rear shields with first a lance strike, then a disrupter volley. Another *Hercules*-class ship ceased to exist as her warp core breached. That explosion, combined with the devastating disrupter and laser assault, blew a nearby warbird into pieces. Only the *Neptune* was left relatively intact, and Captain Shanayda wasn't about to give the enemy another chance to fire on her.

"Bridge to engineering!" he called into the intercom.

"Engineering. Commander Redden here, sir!"

"Chief, give us all the power you can muster. We need speed!"

"I'll push the engines as far as I can, sir."

Closing the channel, Shanayda stepped up beside Frahm. "Jarrod, keep our stern away from the Romulans. Put all power to the forward shields, and keep firing!"

"Aye, sir!"

On the bridge of the *Ajax*-class destroyer *Vostok*, the ship's commanding officer, Captain Chris Hunt, watched the visual display in front of him with a sense of utter astonishment. There, directly abeam of the *Vostok*, was the *Hercules*-class cruiser *Sao Paulo*. Hunt watched in silence as Captain Webber used the *Sao Paulo*'s awesome destructive power to quickly demolish two Romulan cruisers that'd been harassing the smaller destroyer.

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

After watching the victories of the cruiser, the *Vostok*'s science officer, Vincent Baggio, immediately reported that an enemy *Cabbage* and warbird had both acquired a weapons lock on their destroyer. The *Vostok*, one of twenty-six similar vessels built a decade earlier, had recently been upgraded with the most sophisticated computer and defensive systems known to Federation science at that time. Since then, however, those vessels had been lagging behind the technology curve of other ships in similar classes. Starfleet Tactical had found very little they could do to augment the *Ajax*-class's already-insufficient weapons, as the hull design didn't leave a great

deal of support structure for the newer weapons and computer control systems they would require to operate. Thankfully, the new photonic torpedo was easily adapted.

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

"Communications officer," Hunt began steadily. "Try to raise the tactical coordinator on the *Nebraska*. See if they can dispatch assistance to our location."

Steven Butler worked desperately at his controls. His fingers glided over the communication controls with practiced efficiency, but in the end it proved futile. "It's no good, sir. Either the communications are being jammed or our flagship is being overwhelmed with hails. Either way, I can't get through to them," he finished in frustration.

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

Commander Baggio called out the readings directly from his display without looking up. "The *Cabbage* is bearing 111-mark-4. The warbird is bearing mark-point-8."

Hunt straightened his tunic with a tug of its bottom hem. "Bring forward lasers to bear on the *Cabbage*. Helm, take us in to within 200 meters."

"We might not last long at close range, sir," Lieutenant Todd offered.

"We don't have much of a choice, helmsman. That warbird has us outgunned. We need to fight the fight we can win."

Richard nodded as he looked at the forward view screen, the image of the bulbous *Cabbage* growing steadily larger. "I hope you're right, sir."

"I want the forward torpedo launchers standing by as well. If we're lucky, we can catch the warbird off guard while we give that *Cabbage* a once-over."

"We'll be in weapons range in ten seconds," Vincent called out from the science station.

"Make every shot count, Mr. Todd," Hunt said to the weapons officer as the two men stared at the view screen.

Just as the *Cabbage* came into weapons range, it suddenly dipped forward and shot ahead at half impulse. The laser blast from the *Vostok* streamed through empty space above the frigate, missing the enemy ship entirely.

"A miss, sir!" Todd exclaimed.

"Target the warbird, then," Hunt shouted. "Try to get a piece of him!"

A moment later, the blue fusion glow of an antimatter missile streamed out from under the bow of the ship. The torpedoes were easily as fast as any Romulan ship at combat speed. Hunt and the rest of the bridge crew watched on the viewer as the warhead streaked downward and found its target, exploding against the warbird's already-weakened shields.

"Their forward shields are down, Captain!" Commander Baggio said proudly.

Hunt failed to suppress his own elation. They'd been lucky, and he was going to sap it for all it was worth. "Helm, Z-minus 1200 meters and come about! With his shields down, we're on equal footing."

"Sir," Vincent said with an air of surprise and confusion, "that *Cabbage* that got away . . . it's no longer on our stern."

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

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

"He's executing a Delta-Z!" Todd yelled.

The *Cabbage*, its front arsenal now pointed directly at the top of the *Vostok*, opened fire without a moment's hesitation. Long lines of hellish green disruptor energy sped out from the center mass of the ship, followed quickly by two blasts from its forward accelerator cannon.

Thankfully Hunt had the good sense to order an evasive maneuver before the beams reached the destroyer. The *Vostok* barrel-rolled to port, out of the way of the incoming blasts. In doing so, she brought herself to bear on another target, this time a frigate.

"Todd, are the torpedoes still ready to fly?"

"Yes, sir," the lieutenant replied proudly.

"Fire!"

The two torpedoes raced out from the destroyer, impacting the bullet-shaped Romulan. Her shields must have already been down, because the ensuing explosion ripped the vessel in two.

"Got her, sir!"

Chris leaned back in his chair, glad to see that the view screen was devoid of any further targets. "Commander Baggio, what's the status of the fleet?"

Vincent looked over the readouts, then smirked before turning to face the captain. "We've taken heavy casualties, sir, but the Romulans

are definitely on the losing end of the engagement. We've already whittled them down to twenty ships."

Hunt nodded somberly. "How many ships have we lost?"

"Eight starships have been destroyed—3 cruisers and five destroyers. Another two destroyers are damaged and have moved outside the combat zone."

"Message coming in from Admiral Johnson, sir," Butler said from the communications console. "Audio only, captain. He's requesting all available ships to regroup at sector Charlie-6."

"Near the planet," Vincent called from the science station before Captain Hunt could ask.

"Yes, sir," Steven acknowledged. "He's suggesting that, with Gamma Hydra IV at our back, we should be able to push the remaining Romulans from the sector."

"Vincent?" Chris asked his first officer.

Baggio nodded. "I think the admiral's got the right plan. Patterns in the Romulans' overall movements indicate that they may already be regrouping for a retreat."

"Mr. Todd?"

The helmsman turned and smiled. "We've got more than enough maneuvering power at our disposal, sir. We've nearly depleted our supply of photons, but we've got lasers and plasma cannons at the ready."

"I'd say that makes us available, wouldn't you agree, Lieutenant?" the captain asked, returning the young man's smirk.

"Yes, sir. I believe it does."

"Then lay in a course for the rendezvous point near Gamma Hydra IV, Mr. Todd. Full impulse."

Chapter 12

Stardate 15910.06
December 2159

The tranquility of the midsummer night was broken by the sounds of the Tal Shiar—personal bodyguards of Emperor D'Varu—calling for the alarm to be sounded. At once, the gates to the imperial palace were sealed and motion sensors activated, allowing only those preordained by the emperor himself to pass through their widely scattered beams unnoticed. The exterior of the palace was aglow, every internal and external light switched on nearly in unison. So bright was the fortress on the hilltop that even those dwelling in provinces several kilometers away could see that something was amiss in the capital city.

One by one, the senators were roused from their slumber by the Tal Shiar. Only when the senators were dressed would the secret police leave, and then only to escort the political officer to the main senate hall. Other than their commands to the senators to get dressed and to accompany them to the senate chambers, no other words were spoken by the secretive officers, although many senators demanded otherwise.

Senator Orris was once such senator. Roused from a peaceful night's sleep, he commanded the young Tal Shiar female officer to tell him what all the commotion was. Thrice she refused, finally placing a hand on her holstered sidearm to indicate to the senator that he should cease in his questioning. Orris did, but not without a handful of disapproving looks in the woman's direction as he was escorted to the waiting hover car parked outside his domicile. As soon as he was inside the vehicle, he was whisked from the city of Biscae

to the capital city and the senate chambers. Only then was he allowed to exit the vehicle, once again under armed escort, until he entered the large, carved doors of the circular hall. There he was greeted by a number of other diplomats.

"What is the meaning of all this?" he asked the senator from Porta. Sebib rubbed the sleep from his eyes, then glared in disbelief at him.

"You do not know?"

Orris silently shook his head.

Sebib narrowed his eyes, then looked quickly around the chamber before ushering him off to a quiet corner of the senate chambers. "Emperor D'Varu . . . he has been murdered."

"Murdered?" Orris repeated in shock.

Sebib nodded quickly, both of his chins wobbling in unison. "This very night."

"But how . . . who?"

"I do not know by whom, but that does not mean the Tal Shiar is so ignorant. How it was done is knowledge known only to myself and a few others."

It was Orris's turn to narrow his eyes. "How did you come by this . . . information?"

"I have my sources, Orris. Needless to say, I will tell you what I know," Sebib said, then looked nervously around the empty chamber.

"And that is?"

Sebib turned to give Orris a deathly stare. "Poison."

Orris looked away, contemplating what he should say next. "An injection?"

"Not so overt," Sebib said, then leaned in closer. The smell of his breath was foul. "It was in his food. At least, that is what I've been told."

Actually, it was likely in his drink. Orris did not mention as much. "Who would do such a thing?"

Sebib reeled in disdain. "Come now, Senator. You may think me an adversary on the floor of the senate, but do not think me a fool. There are many who wished for this."

That was news to Orris. Had he known, perhaps his plans would have unfolded differently. Then again, the Romulan way was sometimes one of cloaked secrecy, with layer upon layer of concealment and misdirection built inside. He could trust no one, and that he hadn't was one reason he was likely still alive. "I have never taken you for a fool, Sebib. A bit rash at times . . . sometimes far more heated than required . . . but never have I thought you an incompetent."

"It delights me to hear you say that."

"Oh?"

"We have been summoned here to be questioned."

"By the Tal Shiar?"

A nod.

"The entire senate?"

Another nod. "Even those on Remus are at this very hour being rushed into shuttles like cattle to be brought here."

"And they hope to learn the who the traitor is?"

"One can only imagine so. That is why I should be delighted to hear that we will stand together in this."

"In this?" Orris asked in confusion. "In what?"

Sebib rolled his eyes, then took another cautious glance around the empty corridor. "Aside from Senator Melton, you are the favored candidate."

"Ah," Orris said in a moment of practiced revelation. "I see."

"This night will not pass into day without a new praetor being appointed. That is the law, and the Tal Shiar can do nothing to oppose it. They may delay it, but they cannot avoid the inevitable. By daybreak, a new leader must be seated on the throne."

"And you believe that it will be me?"

"I believe that I am not in a position such as yourself, and given Senator Melton's political record, I say now that I would much rather follow your rule than his."

The Romulan way. Sometimes it sickened Orris to his stomach. That Sebib would be the first to grovel at his feet came as no surprise. Of course, Sebib would have his useful time. That it had come so quickly in the night pleased Orris. The plan set forth by Admiral Jeldan and himself was working out nicely. Now, they needed only to buy a few more hours.

"In order for the transition to go quickly, a perpetrator must be found."

Sebib nodded, his face awash in relief.

"I think perhaps someone could be found in Senator Melton's jurisdiction to fit the crime."

"You believe it to be that easy?"

Orris shrugged. "It matters not if the Tal Shiar find someone there or not. What matters is that enough voices—the *right* voices—point to that sector as the origin of the would-be assassin. I trust you are one of those voices, Senator Sebib?" Orris's question was calm and assured. Of course, he knew that indeed someone in Melton's district would be found to fit the crime: a particularly unruly officer Jeldan had singled out from the fleet, someone who had personal motive to dislike the praetor. That was all the Tal Shiar would need to know, and the fleet admiral was, at the proper time, going to make sure the authorities had the information.

Sebib nodded. "Yes . . . yes. That is what we shall do. There are others who will be with us in this."

Orris placed a gentle hand on the fat senator's shoulder. "Then go. Advise the others of what they must do, but make sure my name is never spoken. If they are worthy of the senatorial robes they wear, there will be no issues with what must be done this night."

Sebib nodded his head, then turned and scuttled away.

Stardate 15911.30

Admiral Rom Walton, with Admiral Martin Hirst at his side, departed the parked shuttlepod on their way across the landing pad to the Federation Senate chambers. To their left was the wide expanse of San Francisco Bay, with the Golden Gate Bridge gleaming in the cloudless sky. Already thirty minutes late, the two were nearly in a run as they dashed through the doors and down the red carpeted hallway. They'd just come from a briefing on the Devron strike mission, for all intents and purposes a resounding success. Several Federation diplomats had been rescued, as well as a number of their aides. The intelligence gathered by them and the operatives responsible for their rescue was going to prove invaluable in the coming months. And with Devron now back in the hands of the Federation, it was going to give Starfleet a new place from which to strike deep into Romulan space—a tactic the two men were going to bring up with the president as soon as this council session was complete.

As they neared the chamber doors, it was evident that Federation President Lyn was speaking. Her singsong voice—a result of her Alpha Centaurian heritage—echoed through the hallway as they silently entered the wide, circular compartment. As they took their seats, they noticed a gray-haired, mustached man standing from his chair. It was Councilman Dannon, the one who in recent months had come to rally nearly all the council behind him in a push for peace with the Romulan Empire. While both Rom and Martin knew that it was likely a pipe dream, they were Starfleet, and thus only advisors in the affair. Once the council made its decision it would be up to the two admirals to make it happen.

"Madam President, I wish to be recognized," Dannon said, his voice echoing out of the speakers.

President Rissa Lyn, her dark blue robes flowing and her golden hair sparkling, nodded in his direction. "Councilman Dannon, I wish to inform you that Secretary Cooper currently holds the platform with time remaining, and therefore has the right of retention. Mr. Cooper, do you wish to yield?"

Federation Secretary of Foreign Affairs Marshall A. Cooper, a former cruiser captain in the United Earth Space Probe Agency, had apparently finished. He bowed graciously to President Lyn. "I consent to yield."

Rissa bowed her head slightly, then turned to Councilman Dannon. "The distinguished guest speaker has yielded the speaking platform to Senior Councilman Dannon."

Dannon, adjusting his antiquated spectacles, moved out into the main aisle and up to the podium to stand beside the president. "Madam President, distinguished colleagues and guests, ladies and gentlemen: I wish to address you on a matter of serious import. Not only for ourselves, but for the billions of individuals who inhabit the member planets of our interstellar community. I wish to propose a solution that, although perhaps not satisfactory to all, may lead to the return of peace in known space.

"Everyone will agree that this war has been long and enormously expensive, in both lives and resources. We need only conjure the spirits of those who were killed at Delta II, Delta VII, Alpha Omega 8, or aboard the *Diana*. Though Starfleet has recently obtained several substantial military victories over our Romulan enemies, particularly at Manarram, the war is far from being won. Secretary Cooper's presentation, which he graciously permitted me to cut short, proves my point.

"How much longer can we continue fighting? We are suffering hundreds of thousands of casualties, sending our most brilliant officers and crewmembers to their deaths in the vast cold of space. Despite the finest efforts of the Starfleet Intelligence Command and

other Starfleet personnel, we are no closer to finding the Romulan homeworld than in the days when we did not even know who the pirates were. Hopefully, they have no knowledge of our own worlds. But does this mean we are to continue slugging it out, year after bloody year, with the sounds of exploding starships filling the ears of our children? And their children? In the name of sanity, this must not be!

"I am not a blind pacifist, seeking peace through weakness at any cost. I was among the first to call for increased Starfleet funding after the Atlas incident. I was also among the vast majority who voted in favor of the war authorization document against the Romulan Star Empire. I did so because I felt an assertive stand was needed to combat a race of known terrorists and marauders. When the time came, I felt that an effective war could be fought against them, even though their origins and bases of operation were not known.

"We were wrong. Starfleet and a military offensive are not the answer. I do not condemn our line officers, nor all they have done— and will continue to do—to maintain the safety and security of each and every one at us. But it is impossible to mount secret incursions into Romulan territory in search of their main bases. The number of available warships able to group for a major surprise offensive are severely limited by the sheer size of the battle zone and the inability to maintain adequate supply lines. These are not flaws inherent in our organization; it is simply that the distances involved and the hazards of combat must be taken into account.

"We may take solace in the fact that the Romulans themselves seem to have similar problems. They have had their own difficulties in fighting this war, and the hardships on their own people must be comparable with our own. This is little reason, however, to celebrate.

"All wars must end. On Andor, we were taught with great care until the day when the price to Andorian civilization and the world's environment grew too great. On Vulcan, the Years of Chaos came to

an end under the leadership of Surak. On my own Terra, not even the Hundred Years War lasted forever. If we decide to press on madly to victory, our forces searching system by system for a Romulan base, slowly and inexorably pushing forward but seeking for we know not what, this war may last decades more.

"I wish to be thought of as a sighted pacifist, holding peace as a strength, fighting only when no other course of action is open, and only when the fight is worthy of the fighters. This fight, this protracted series of battle after pointless battle, is no longer worthy of us. This war cannot be won; it can only be lost, and the loser is the side who willingly fights the longest.

"For these reasons, I recommend—no, I plead that you vote in favor of submitting an offer for a truce to the Romulan government. We can contact them by warp radio to present the proposal. Should they accept, the terms of the treaty can also be negotiated by such means. We do not need to meet with them face to face. If we can declare a war without knowing the enemy, if we can fight a years-long war without ever meeting them, then we can make peace the same way. And we must make peace, by all that we hold sacred. We must stop the fighting, before we have nothing left worth fighting for!"

At the conclusion, the entire assembly stood to their feet in applause. Admirals Walton and Hirst found themselves looking at one another with expressions of approval as they clapped along with the rest of the Federation Assembly and the council. Even President Lyn had a distinctive gleam in her eyes. Rom had seen that look before. He knew exactly how the council would vote. Turning to Hirst, he nodded his head toward the door, and the two men made a discreet exit.

"I'll give you one guess where we're heading," Walton said as the two left the council chambers and headed for the nearest shuttlepod.

"Let me get back to Starbase 1 before we start going over new plans, Rom," Martin said as he stopped the fleet admiral halfway to the shuttle.

"Something I need to know about?"

Martin sighed, then rubbed his chin as he formulated the words.

"Come on, man," Walton urged. "Caitian got your tongue?"

"Starfleet Intelligence came into some information a few weeks ago. Nothing is solid at this point."

"Why didn't you mention this earlier during our planning session?"

"Honestly, I wanted to be sure before I let you know. Now, if we're going to shift from invasion planning to a peace initiative, I think we're going to have to rethink our strategies."

"Go on."

"There's been a shakeup in the Romulan high command."

Walton was beside himself. *Why hadn't Martin said something about this?* "What kind of shakeup?"

"All I can say at this point is that I don't know if it's a good one or a bad one. Information on it is spotty at best. Some reports have a new fleet admiral taking over, other are showing a complete upheaval in their government. We have almost no facts at this point."

"You think you're going to find some up at Starbase 1?" Fleet Admiral Walton asked in disbelief.

Martin shook his head. "The problem is we've got an enormous fleet heading to Cheron right now. They're going to be there before we know it. With the fall of Golondron Core and our retaking of Gamma Hydra, there's going to be a lot of subspace chatter going in and out of Cheron. I want to make sure my people know exactly what to look for. If the president and the council want to vie for peace with the Romulans, a battle at Cheron could be a blessing for us—"

"Or a curse," Walton finished.

"Exactly. I want to make sure we've got more than enough intel from that sector. It could mean the difference between stopping the war or prolonging it."

Rom nodded. "Do what you can, Marty. Meet me back here at Starfleet Command in the next few hours. I want to go over everything you have on Cheron up to this point."

"Yes, sir."

The two shook hands, then departed for their respective shuttlepods.

Chapter 13

Stardate 16001.04
January 2160

Captain Hippensteel spun in the command chair to face the communications officer. "Lieutenant Purvis, hail the *Enterprise*. Tell them we have acknowledged their signal and will be commencing our attack shortly."

Hunter Purvis nodded sharply. "Aye, sir."

Pressing the intercom button on the command chair, Hippensteel began speaking. "Commander Iles, status of the impulse drive and reaction control thruster systems."

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

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

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

"Three minutes to intercept," Steven Baker called from the science console.

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

"There are three warbirds heading straight for our formation, sir. They're the lead group of two more squadrons coming in from mark-point-35. Their forward disruptor banks appear to be armed, but I'm getting odd readings from their power emissions."

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

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

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

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

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

"Yes, sir?" Purvis asked.

"Send a coded message, to both Captain Coombs on the *Enterprise* as well as to our squadron commander, Captain Vincent, on the *Arizona*. Inform them of our discoveries. Advise them that we will attempt to take advantage of the Romulans at their weakest points."

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

With their ships leading the assault on the Cheron system, once the communication was received from the *Bombay*, Captain Vernon Vincent on board the *Arizona* wasted little time in taking advantage.

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

Commander Simon Jaeckel, having correctly anticipated the request, was already looking at his captain. "The lead Romulan warships will be in torpedo range in thirty seconds."

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

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

Seconds seemed to stretch into minutes as the Romulans steadily drew closer. On the view screen, the bulbous bow of a *Cabbage* cruiser nearly filled the view before the deck beneath Captain Vincent's feet vibrated softly.

"Torpedoes away!" Troutman called out.

"Decrease magnification," Vincent called out. Just as the image panned back, the two torpedoes from the *Arizona*, as well as two others from a nearby vessel, impacted squarely against the single target. The warbird immediately lurched down as the forward bridge was hit, then twisted to port as the secondary hull was hit. The final impact elicited an explosion near the enemy's stern and, a moment later, the vessel vanished from the screen.

"Target destroyed," Commander Jaeckel called out.

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

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

"Helm, evasive starboard!"

Lieutenant Jaeckel was quick to act. His highly skilled fingers raced across the console, sending the frigate hard to starboard and down, narrowly avoiding two more disruptor strikes aimed at the *Arizona*'s bridge. Though the action had saved them from one strike, the bridge crew watched as the view screen was filled with a warbird battle cruiser bearing down on their position.

Troutman didn't wait for the order. Seeing the lights on his status board a beautiful green, he fired two bursts from the forward lasers at the incoming vessel. One missed, one struck the starboard disruptor pylon.

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

Captain Vincent watched as the *Cabbage* returned fire with both her disruptors and fusion missiles. The *Arizona*, however, was not the intended target. The blasts rocketed over the saucer of the cruiser and hit the frigate *Bombay* broadside.

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

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

A split second later, Ensign Tapia, who'd been standing near the environmental control console, was at the captain's side. She watched as Hippensteel held his fingers to the lieutenant's neck as he checked for a pulse. "Sir?" Hippensteel's eyes closed, and for the briefest of moments, she watched as a relieved expression washed over his face.

"He is badly hurt, but alive."

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

Reaching for the emergency medical kit, Daniel gave the wounded officer a sedative. "This should keep him stable until the medics arrive."

From the other side of the bridge, Commander Steven Baker watched the exchange for a moment before his attention was drawn

back to the sensors. "Captain, the *Cabbage* has passed us. However, we're straying even farther into the Romulan fleet." He watched as Hippensteel nodded, then locked eyes with Ensign Tapia and said something to her, too quietly for him to discern over the red alert klaxon. What shocked Baker the most was when the normally emotionless Hippensteel reached a reassuring hand out and gently grasped the ensign's shoulder. Through tear-filled eyes, she gave an understanding smile, and Hippensteel stood and returned to the command chair.

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

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

"Weapons?"

"Photon torpedoes offline. Lasers holding at ninety percent."

"Find the nearest enemy vessel and fire main lasers," Hippensteel called down to Lieutenant Commander Marc Steinijans, who'd rushed from the engineering console when the helmsman had fallen.

"Targeting a warbird off the port quarter, sir. Firing lasers!"

Baker watched in the sensor hood as the warbird, blissfully unaware of the *Bombay*'s presence and engaged with another Federation frigate, took three direct hits to her port side before she veered away from her intended victim. "The warbird's shields are down, but main power is steady. She's moving outside the combat area."

"Laser banks power down to fifteen percent," Steinijans sounded.

Pressing the intercom button, Hippensteel quickly opened a channel to Perrie Iles in engineering. "Engineering, there is a power falloff to the main laser cannons. Explanation."

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

"Steinijans?" Hippensteel said, calling out to the weapons officer.

"Lasers now at nineteen percent, sir."

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

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

"Execute!"

On the bridge of the attack carrier *Enterprise*, Fleet Captain Ellis Coombs watched as the *Bombay* sailed over the enemy cruiser she'd been attacking with less than twenty meters to spare. Just as the saucer cleared the Romulan vessel, the laser banks on the ventral side sprayed the upper hull of the warbird. With the warbird's shields in shambles, the *Bombay* left a wake of destruction that quickly put the enemy vessel out of commission.

"The *Bombay* is leaving the area, sir," Commander Pinkerton said from the science console.

"Captain Hippensteel sends his apologies, Captain," Michael Hoffmann said from the communications console. "His weapons systems are offline, although he states that the situation is only a temporary one."

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

"Aye, sir."

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

"Damage to the warbird, Captain," Commander Barry Charles said from the science station. "The cruiser is continuing to fire at the destroyer *O'Sullivan*."

The *O'Sullivan*, one of the oldest destroyers in the group, was woefully outmatched by the powerful Romulan cruiser. She'd been wrangled away from her squadron mates, and was now easy picking for the bullying Romulan capital ship. Intent on evening the odds, Captain Sven Berglowe was far from giving up.

"Lieutenant Medina," Berglowe called to the weapons officer, "disregard the enemy destroyer! Continue to fire on the warbird. We need to get the *O'Sullivan* out of harm's way."

"Yes, sir," Mike Medina said, just as two more photon torpedoes streaked toward the enemy battle cruiser. With no other screening vessels in range, the two warheads struck the warbird with devastating accuracy. The first made a sizeable dent in the starboard flank of the secondary hull. The second torpedo hit the connecting structure which attached the secondary hull to the elongated neck assembly. With the warbird at maximum range, the strike blew fragments of the structure clear, but the spine was still not broken. Sven intended to change that oversight. "Helm, bring us in closer to the target. Laser range."

Commander Charles turned from the science console. "Sir, she's picked up speed. Now moving at one-quarter impulse away from us."

"Helm, bring us around to her stern, but watch for her aft-firing weapons!"

At the helm, Lieutenant Barnaby, palms glistening with sweat, did as he was ordered. With just enough room to maneuver, he brought the *Merlin* up and around another Federation cruiser that'd been pummeled beyond repair. The warbird, weary of the cruiser coming around on its stern, fired a single aft torpedo, but the weapon impacted the already-dead cruiser nearby, separating its primary and

secondary hulls, doing no damage to the *Merlin* as she continued on her turn.

"Medina, target their rear weapons. Fire torpedoes when ready!"

Mike's aim was perfect. The *Merlin*'s torpedo hit the aft end of the larger vessel, sending out a plume of fire and debris that was short-lived in the cold vacuum of space.

"Their weapons are offline, sir," Barry said after verifying the sensor readings.

"Mike, target the warbird's starboard pylon, primary lasers and plasma cannons! Fire only when you've got a clear shot. Barnaby, maintain course and speed. Bring us over the target. We're only going to get one shot at this."

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

"Our fighters did it, sir!" Major Chris Broden exclaimed from the flight operations console on the *Enterprise*. "All power to their bridge is down, and life support has failed. Their secondary hull is damaged, but she's continuing to fire . . . probably from auxiliary control."

"Then we'll need to swing around again and finish her off," Coombs nodded. "Lieutenant Vincent, prepare to—" but the words were cut off as the *Enterprise* was pummeled by a jarring hit to her port side. Coombs, Broden, and John Vincent were each thrown from their consoles and tumbled to the cold, unforgiving deck.

"We've registered an impact!" Chris Pinkerton shouted, but when he turned to see the captain and several members of the crew on the deck, he ducked beneath the bridge railings and slid to Coombs's side.

"I'm . . . all right, Commander," Ellis muttered as Chris helped him to his feet. "What hit us?"

"Debris from a nearby explosion, sir."

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

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

Nodding, Coombs looked around himself. "Is everyone all right?" he asked, and was answered with uneasy acknowledgements. Stepping to the side of his chair, he opened a channel to engineering. "Commander Chambers, damage report?"

"Sir, this is chief engineer's mate Lieutenant Rhodes. Chief Chambers was injured a few moments ago."

For a brief instant, Ellis fought the urge to ask what'd happened to his friend. "Understood, Mister Rhodes," Coombs mustered after a moment's hesitation. "Report?"

"The starboard subharmonic inhibitor is cracked, and it's going to mean taking the plasma injectors offline for those nacelles. We're also going to need to replace the ventral manifold between three of the fusion reactors. Impulse power will be reduced by half until the repair is completed."

Commander Pinkerton stepped up behind the captain as the assistant engineer read off the last of the damage report. "Sir, the battle is beginning to thin. The *Enterprise* is out of danger for the moment. The port power coupling is damaged, and our ventral

shields are down. I suggest we take a small breather to get some minor repairs done."

Coombs seemed distant as he responded. "Our forces?"

"Holding, sir."

"What about our fighter wing?" Ellis spoke up as he looked to Broden.

"They're running low on missiles, Captain. Suggest we bring them aboard as soon as possible."

"Lieutenant Hoffmann, hail the *George Washington*. Advise Captain Vincent to assume temporary command of the fleet in our absence. Commander Pinkerton, please take the conn. Organize damage control parties and begin effecting repairs. I'll be down in engineering."

Wishing he could join the captain, Chris dipped his head sympathetically. "Aye, sir."

Chapter 14

"Captain, there's a call coming in from the *Enterprise*. They're in need of repairs and moving away from the combat area. They're advising us to take command of the fleet."

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

"We need to swing this skirmish in our favor," Theresa said from the command chair. "Commander Rozier, what do you have up your sleeve?"

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

But Vincent, now in overall command of the fleet, was having none of it. "Don't tell me what we *don't* have, Commander. Tell me what we do."

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

Theresa looked around the bridge as well, nodding at the burnt-out engineering console. Then something that Rozier had said earlier registered, which quickly turned into a workable plan. "Tractor beams!"

"Ma'am?"

"How much power can you divert to them?"

Rozier all but shrugged, wondering where the captain was going with this. "All the power you need, ma'am. But what for? If anything, *we're* going to be the ones who need towing in a few minutes."

Captain Vincent looked at the science officer as a smirk played across her lips. "Not a tow, Commander: a push."

"Sir?"

But Theresa disregarded the question. "Weapons officer, Lieutenant Stone, target the enemy destroyer. We should have enough torpedoes left to disable them or, at the very least, scare them off."

"Aye, sir!" Steven replied.

A second later, the last of the *George Washington*'s torpedoes sped toward the warbird. Two impacted, but with the targeting computers down, the third missed by only a few meters. However, the damage to the enemy vessels had been done. Combined with a laser barrage from the *Valencia*, it was enough to cause the Romulan destroyer to quickly increase speed and move away from the now-lone warbird.

"The Romulan is escaping, sir," Rozier said. "And we're out of torpedoes."

"I'll take the bad with the good, Commander. Besides, I have a feeling we're not going to need the firepower for what I've got in mind." Stealing a long glance at the mottled brown world of Cheron filling the view screen, she then spun her chair toward the communications console. "Hail Captain Williamson on the *Valencia*. Let him know we're maneuvering to push the warbird into the nebula. If he's got the spare power, I'm sure we could use it."

"Aye."

"Navigator, take us to within two kilometers of the warbird. When we're within range, lock on the tractor beam and engage the impulse drive."

"It's going to put an enormous strain on the engines, sir," Rozier said from the science console after giving a cursory glance to the on-duty engineering officer.

"Let it. I'm not letting this target out of my sights."

A moment later, Ricky Wright spoke up from the navigator's console. "Tractor beam engaged, ma'am. We've got him." Just as soon as he'd finished speaking, the *George Washington* began to shake violently.

"The Romulans are attempting to break free from the beam," Rozier said while looking into his monitor.

"Distance to the nebula?"

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

"More power to the impulse engines."

Rozier shook his head. "None available. We're using everything we have to keep a hold of him."

"The *Valencia*?"

"Closing. She has locked on her tractor beams as well. Distance to the planet now 8,ooo kilometers and closing rapidly."

Captain Vincent nodded. "We don't need to push her all the way in, just get her close enough for her hull to come into contact with the atmosphere."

"The Romulan vessel is firing on the *Valencia*. She's taken a direct disrupter blast to her forward shields. They are down to thirty percent."

"Helm, distance to the planet?"

"One thousand kilometers and closing rapidly."

Rozier adjusted his scanners to compensate for increased distortion from the nebula. "We're nearing the outer atmosphere, Captain. Advise caution. The Romulan is firing again at the *Valencia* . . . her shields are down. One more hit and she'll lose tractor beam control."

"Release the warbird! Let her inertia take her into the planet!"

"Aye, sir."

On the view screen, Theresa and the rest of the crew watched as the mighty warbird, an example of the strongest of the Romulan fleet, was pushed into the upper atmosphere of Cheron. Her unprotected hull heated up rapidly, and just as the enemy commander regained control of his vessel, Steven Stone fired two final torpedoes. Each hit simultaneously, incinerating the vessel in a shower of sparks.

When Theresa felt they were out of danger for the moment, she requested a damage report from Commander Huitt.

"Minor damage to the secondary hull, but no casualties reported," Luke's voice said through the intercom.

"Warp and impulse engines?"

"At your disposal, Captain. Though I wouldn't advise overtaxing the fusion reactors. There's some scarring on the inner linings."

"Understood." She closed the channel and glanced to Greg at the science console. "The *Valencia*?"

Rozier smiled. "She turned to starboard at the same moment we turned to port."

Thank God. I hope I never have to do anything like that ever again. "Excellent. Hail Fleet Captain Williamson and send him my compliments. Then locate the bulk of our forces. I don't relish sitting on the sidelines, but we're out of torpedoes for the moment. If we have to support them with lasers, I want to be able to rush in at a moment's notice."

At the same moment the *George Washington* and the *Valencia* were facing the warbird, Captain Coombs was entering the engineering level of the *Enterprise*. The passageway outside main engineering, normally kept pristine by Lieutenant Commander Chambers, was now a mess of charred bulkheads and dangling conduits. As he rounded the final corner, Ellis could see that the frame surrounding the entrance to main engineering had buckled, and technicians had resorted to using laser welders to cut away the doors. Cautiously stepping inside, he saw a team of technicians hunched over a form on the floor. As he approached them, one of the crewmen noticed and snapped to attention.

"Captain on deck!"

The young man, no more than twenty-three, was caked in filth and dried blood, the blood likely not his own. As the rest of the men acknowledged Coombs, one crewman remained crouched near the fallen form of Carl Chambers: the ship's chief medical officer, Dr. Devin Bishop. Kneeling beside the doctor, Coombs could see that Bishop was hard at work tending to the chief engineer, a protoplaser in one hand, a thumb-sized medical scanner in the other. Chambers, Coombs could see, was conscious, moaning as Bishop attempted to seal the deadly gash in the chief engineer's midsection.

"Doc?" Coombs croaked.

Bishop's attention to his duties was unwavering as he answered. "The bleeding from his midsection has been stopped, thanks to the

quick actions of the engineers here. However, Carl's lost a lot of blood."

"Transporters?" Coombs snapped, as much to Bishop as to the nearby engineering team.

"The power to the pattern buffers is fluctuating," one of the engineers said, "to say nothing of the internal sensor malfunctions. It'll be a gamble."

"One we'll have to take," Coombs snapped. "Pop to it, Lieutenant."

"Aye!"

"Ellis . . ." It was the labored, distant voice of Chambers.

Coombs leaned closer to his fallen friend, reaching for and gently grasping his hand. "I'm here, Carl."

"Did we . . . did we win?"

"We are, but the *Enterprise* needs her chief engineer back at his post," Ellis said as he fought to form his lips into a smile. "Who else is going to put this ship back together?"

Chambers looked down to his bandaged midsection, then to the captain. "Ah, hell. I'm a mess."

Coombs fought back a laugh. "We'll have you beamed directly to sickbay in just a few minutes. Then you'll be as good as new in no time."

"This was my best uniform, too," Chambers cried, then raised a clenched fist to the overhead. "You bloody Romulan bastards. You'll be getting a dry-cleaning bill from me!"

Before Ellis could say anything further, the transporter beam took hold and both Chambers and Dr. Bishop were beamed out of engineering.

The *Valencia*, having assisted the *George Washington* with destroying the warbird, was now swinging widely to starboard as she came about the battlefield. On the forward view screen, Captain Morgan Williamson watched as a pair of enemy frigates, who'd

previously been firing on an *Ajax*-class destroyer, were now flanked by three Federation frigates. The tide of the battle was decisively swinging in favor of Starfleet, and it brought a reserved smile to his face. *Cheron would fall, and with it, the Romulan drive into Federation space.*

"Communications, hail Captain Vincent on the *George Washington*. Inform her we're heading in to assist those frigates."

"Aye, sir."

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

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

When the *Valencia* was in range, three torpedoes streamed out, two hitting the lead Romulan frigate, the other striking the second vessel amidships.

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

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

The *Valencia* swung once again, narrowly avoiding two decrepit Romulan frigates in the process. As soon as she was clear, the *George Washington* fired full lasers on the lead Romulan. The blasts ripped open the tube-shaped hull, spilling the vessel's contents into space. Not wasting any time, the cruiser fired on the second Romulan, pulverizing the bridge with a single well-placed shot before veering away herself.

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

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

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

"Enemy fire?"

As the science officer got to his feet, he peered into his display. "Negative. A Romulan vessel on self-destruct."

The last desperate act. "Open a channel to all ships," Williamson shouted. "Advise our forces that the Romulans may be signaling their defeat. As this area is littered with warships, a dozen or so exploding warships could cause an enormous amount of damage to our forces."

"But sir," the helmsman asked, "won't they destroy their own forces as well?"

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

"Sir, I've detected another Romulan on a buildup to detonation," the science officer said. "It's a frigate, bearing 311-mark-5. It's dangerously close to the *Enterprise*!"

"Distance to that target?"

"Too far for either lasers or photon torpedoes."

"Who's in that area?"

The science officer studied his readout for a moment before responding. "The *Mariposa* and the *Rel'Tal*. However, the *Rel'Tal* is severely damaged. Her crew is being evacuated to the *Mariposa*."

"Communications, order Captain Jarvis to break off his rescue operation for the time being. Advise him to destroy that Romulan frigate before it's too late!"

"Aye!"

"Sir," the science officer shouted, "there's another vessel heading toward the Romulan. It's the destroyer *Ajax*."

Williamson nodded. "She must have figured out the same thing we did."

"She's also been heavily damaged. Life support is minimal, and her weapons appear to be offline."

"Then what is she intending to do?" Williamson asked in confusion. "Life signs?"

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

"Is she adrift?"

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

That was when it dawned on Williamson. "Get me the *Ajax* now!" he barked to the communications officer.

"Communications are down on their vessel, sir."

"On screen, full magnification!"

On the view screen, Williamson and the rest of the bridge crew watched as the Romulan frigate inched ever closer to the *Enterprise*. When the vessel was in the center of the screen, seconds away from impact the flagship carrier, the *Ajax* came rushing up to her stern. In quick succession, the small Federation destroyer slammed into the stern of the frigate. The ensuing explosion rocked the *Enterprise* out of position, but she was otherwise undamaged. Both the *Ajax* and the Romulan were vaporized.

Williamson and the crew watched the empty area of space for a moment longer before he turned to the communications officer. "Please log that the *Ajax* and her crew have perished. Note that they should receive Starfleet's highest commendation for Captain Durbin and his crew's sacrifice."

"Yes, sir," she said softly.

"Sir, the *Mariposa* is requesting to continue her rescue operations," the science officer said.

Williamson sighed heavily. "The rest of our forces?"

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

"Should we pursue the enemy vessels?" the helmsman said.

As much as he wanted to avenge the loss of life on the *Ajax*, there was still a matter of protocol. "No. Communications, hail the *Enterprise*. Let's make sure Fleet Captain Coombs and his people are

okay, and find out what their intentions are for mopping up this mess. Advise them we will remain here until told otherwise."

"Yes, sir."

Epilogue

Stardate 16002.19
February 2160

Starfleet Headquarters, San Francisco, Earth

   As the doors parted, Admiral Martin Hirst of Starfleet Intelligence strode confidently to the commander in chief's desk, a computer tablet tucked under one arm. When Fleet Admiral Walton looked up from his terminal, Hirst held out the tablet, which Rom took and studied.

   "The final ratifications of the peace treaty," Hirst said as Walton silently read the data.

Preamble
The undersigned, the Secretary-General of the General Assembly of the United Nations of Earth and the Praetor of the Continuing Committee of the Romulan Star Empire, in the interest of ending the recent conflict, with its great toll of bloodshed on both sides, and with the objective of establishing conditions that will encourage peaceful relations between the Human and Romulan peoples, do individually, collectively, and mutually agree to accept and to be bound and governed by the conditions and terms of armistice set forth in the following Articles and Paragraphs, by which said conditions and terms are intended to fully conclude the hostilities between the United Nations of Earth and the Romulan Star Empire.
Article I: Military Demarcation and the Neutral Zone
A Neutral Zone shall be established as a buffer zone to prevent the occurrence of incidents which might lead to a resumption of hostilities.

This Neutral Zone shall be defined by two boundaries one (1) light-year apart along the galactic longitudinal plane, and further defined as indicated on the attached map, along with precise accompanying coordinates. This Neutral Zone shall be plainly marked by the militaries of the opposing sides.

Neither side shall execute any hostile act within, from, against, or across the Neutral Zone. No vessels identifiable with the governments of the opposing sides, whether military or civilian, may cross the demarcation lines which define the Neutral Zone, nor may any unmanned probes, whether military or civilian, be deployed in the Zone.

Any breach of the Neutral Zone may be considered a hostile action and a breach of this Treaty. In such event, an immediate state of war shall be declared to exist, except where such intrusion can be undeniably proven to be the accidental result of conditions beyond the control of the vessel in question and did, in fact, occur without hostile intent.

The neutral zone had been Walton and Hirst's brainchild. It was felt that such a buffer would be required for the appeasement of the border worlds that now found themselves within winking distance of several Romulan outposts. In truth, Walton and Hirst had designed it as a stopgap for the next war with the Romulans, which they both felt would be coming as soon as the enemy was able to rearm and reestablish their battered fleet.

Article II: Concrete Arrangements for the Armistice

The military commanders of the opposing sides shall order and enforce a complete cessation of all hostilities by all armed forces under their control, including all units and personnel of any surface, orbital, and interstellar forces, effective twelve (12) hours after this Treaty is signed. In order to ensure the stability of the military armistice, the commanders of the opposing sides shall:

> *1.   Within seventy-two (72) hours after this Treaty becomes effective, begin the withdrawal of all military forces, supplies, and equipment from the Neutral Zone. All active*

minefields, automated monitoring stations, and other outposts known to exist within the Neutral Zone after the beginning of the withdrawal of military forces therefrom, shall be reported by the Commander of the side whose forces emplaced such installations. Eventually, within thirty (30) days after the termination of the seventy-two- (72) hour period, all such installations shall be permanently removed from the Neutral Zone as directed by and under the supervision of the appropriate Commander. At the termination of the seventy-two- (72) hour period, except for unarmed vessels which are to effect the removal of the stations and outposts remaining within the Neutral Zone, no vessels of either side shall be permitted to enter the Neutral Zone.

2.   Within ninety (90) days after this Treaty becomes effective, withdraw all their military and civilian vessels, supplies, and equipment from the Neutral Zone and any region of space to be occupied by the opposing side. If such military and civilian vessels are not withdrawn within the stated time limit, and there is no mutually agreed and valid reason for the delay, the other side shall have the right to take any action which it deems necessary for the maintenance of security and order.

3.   Cease the introduction into the adjacent sectors of reinforcing combat spacecraft, armored transports, weapons, and ammunition; provided, however, that combat spacecraft, armored transports, weapons, and ammunition which are destroyed, damaged, worn out, or used up during the period of the armistice may be replaced on the basis of piece-for-piece of the same effectiveness and the same type.

4.   Ensure that personnel of their respective commands who violate any of the provisions of this Treaty are adequately punished.

Rom nodded as he read the final details of the armistice. A large number of war-weary combatants were arriving at Earth nearly every day. In many cases, the vessels were far too antiquated to perform any type of patrol or research missions now that peace was the word of the day. They'd been abused and patched up, then hammered time and time again until—in some cases—there was very little of the original vessel left in the patchwork of durasteel.

Starfleet had made provisions to commission a handful of new classes that would replace nearly every vessel currently flying under the flag of the Federation. Until then, a small number of *Hercules-* and *Lincoln-*class ships—the ones least damaged—would be retained and upgraded as best they could. The rest were being decommissioned as fast as they could come in, freeing up both men and manpower to build and staff the new ships. Even now the proverbial furnaces of the scrap yards were firing up, preparing to recycle old battlewagons into much-needed raw materials, half of which would be related to the construction of four new starbases to monitor the Romulan neutral zone.

This Treaty shall apply to all opposing surface, orbital, and interstellar forces under the military control of either side, which shall respect the Neutral Zone and the area under the military control of the opposing side.

Responsibility for compliance with and enforcement of the terms and provisions of this Treaty is that of the signatories hereto and their successors. The leaders of the opposing sides shall establish within their respective governments all measures and procedures necessary to ensure complete compliance with all the provisions hereof.

Done by voice communication on subspace radio, at 1000 hours on the first day of November, 2160, in English and Romulan, both texts being equally authentic.

I, Oriss, having read the terms of this treaty verbatim over the agreed-upon subspace communication channel, and being identifiable by voiceprint of this transmission, do hereby certify that I am Praetor of the Romulan Star Empire with full powers to execute this treaty on behalf of the empire.

I, Rissa Lyn, having read the terms of this treaty verbatim over the agreed-upon subspace communication channel, and being identifiable by voiceprint of this transmission, do hereby certify that I am President of the United Federation of Planets, with full powers to execute this treaty on behalf of the Federation.

Spending a few moments going over the list of concessions, he placed the tablet down in disgust. "Devron?" he asked.

Martin nodded. "It was a major point of contention. The Romulans wanted it, but the Andorians felt that it should be given back to them. In the end, the Federation Council decided against giving it to anyone."

"So, it'll remain neutral."

"For the time being. However, I've no doubts that it will eventually be assimilated back into the Federation. Whether it's awarded back to the Andorians or not is a matter for a future debate."

Rom lifted the ratified treaty once more, scowled at it, then tossed it back onto the desktop. Nearly 120,000 Federation citizens were dead, with thousands more injured or missing. That they would make any concessions to the Romulans was appalling to him, no matter that the Romulan Empire had lost an estimated 350,000 people. "The Romulans should be thanking their stars we didn't continue on to Romulus."

"Not that we could have," Hirst countered. "Face it, Rom. We were stretched way too thin as it was."

"We bested them at Cheron, didn't we?"

Martin sighed. It'd been an ongoing debate between the two—not to mention Starfleet Intelligence and the brass at Military Operations

Command—for weeks. "We couldn't have continued that push, Admiral, and you know it. Their inner systems were too heavily fortified. If we'd have gone in there in the shape Starfleet was in after Cheron, Devron, Gamma Hydra . . . the cost would have been staggering."

"Admiral Ramirez disagrees."

"Then he's a bigger fool than I originally thought. You and I may not agree on the fine print of the treaty, but it was in the best interests of all parties to stop the fighting when we did."

"It's not going to win Councilman Dannon any accolades, I can tell you that much. Sure, he pushed for peace and we got it, but he's given up entirely too much Federation territory to the Romulans with very little gained for it. Look at this," he said, then produced a separate computer tablet with a map of the newly established neutral zone. He pointed to a number of border systems, one after another. "These are nothing but worthless, dead systems. Any Class M planets in these are devoid of anything useful to the Federation, and you can bet your last credit the majority of those in Colonial Operations are going to think twice before looking at them to establish outposts of any kind."

"Starfleet Intelligence is going to continue to monitor the Romulans for as long as it takes, Rom."

"But not under your guidance."

Martin shrugged. "The service is going to get by just fine without me. It's time I retire."

But Walton knew the underlying truth, that Hirst's failure—and by default the failures of Starfleet Intelligence during the Federation's first war—had become a bitter point of contention in the Federation Council. While President Lyn was far from convinced of the allegations, she had little choice in the matter when she was faced off against nearly the entire council on the matter. Deciding to save the service and the president some face, Martin had agreed to retire.

Besides, as he'd put it, he'd earned more than his pension at that point.

"But it won't be the same, Marty. We've seen some difficult times, and I've valued your counsel. And by that I mean both personally and professionally."

"Thank you, sir."

Walton chuckled. "Besides, I may not be far behind you."

"Don't tell me they've got you behind the eight-ball as well?"

"No, nothing like that. Like you, I'm starting to feel my days here are numbered. There's a lot of seasoned fleet captains out there coming home in droves. If some of us old battlewagons don't give up our seats, there's bound to be more than a few mutinies when it comes time for promotions."

"Speaking of which, I understand the *Enterprise* is due to arrive shortly."

Rom nodded. "Fleet Captain Coombs . . . or rather, *Admiral* Coombs is eager to take up his spot at Starfleet Academy."

"I don't blame him. He'll be a valued addition to the staff at the command college."

Fleet Admiral Walton pulled up the sleeve of his black jacket and looked at his watch. "In fact, she's due to arrive at Starbase 1 within the hour. The *Lexington* and the *Bismarck* and coming with her as well."

Martin smirked. "You're heading up there, I assume?"

"I am, actually. Care to join me in welcoming back some of the First Combined Fleet?"

Hirst beamed. "I'd be glad to."

"Good," the fleet admiral said as the two men stood. "You can buy me a drink while we wait for them to tie off."

"As long as we're toasting to those who aren't as fortunate as Coombs and the rest."

Rom smiled warmly, then rested a hand on his friend's shoulder. "I wouldn't have it any other way, Marty."