

The background of the entire cover is a detailed illustration of a Klingon Bird-of-Prey spacecraft in orbit. The ship is a dark, cylindrical vessel with various mechanical details, glowing blue light bars along its length, and orange engine nozzles at the rear. It is positioned diagonally across the frame. In the background, the curved horizon of Earth is visible, showing a blue sky and white clouds against the blackness of space.

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

STAR TREK THE ROMULAN WAR

2

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

STAR TREK

THE ROMULAN WAR

Volume II

A novel by

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Edited by

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Chapter 1

Stardate 15607.19

In the black, desolate void between planets, a lone transport of human design made its way inexorably toward its final destination. Having traversed this same stretch of space numerous times over the past two years, two of the three crewmembers of the *SS Daffodil* were asleep in their bunks, content in the belief that nothing of note would happen until they reached their destination—the planet Babel.

At the controls of the transport, Lieutenant Commander Steven Firestine busied himself with making a minor entry in the ship's log, one of countless he'd made to further conceal the true nature of the Starfleet Intelligence mission the trio of officers was on—should the vessel be captured and her logs scrutinized. As it was, though, their cover operation was a qualified success to this point. The trade operation they'd set up on Babel nearly two years prior had, in the beginning, produced some positive results for Fleet Intelligence—not to mention turning a tidy profit while doing so. However, the operatives hadn't discovered any information of real value in several months, and Firestine had recently begun to have doubts about the usefulness of continuing the operation. Not that he ultimately had a say in the matter.

At least we got this stuff to taste more like coffee and less like swill, Steven mused as he gazed into his half-full cup before taking a cautious sip. It was still quite bitter, though, and could only be tolerated in tiny slurps. When the communications console began to signal an incoming transmission, Steven gingerly placed the cup down before flipping on the terminal display. The words "Priority Code: Blue" at the top caused him to instantly go into high alert and,

knowing that the transmission was highly encrypted, he quickly fed the incoming stream through the transport ship's computer. After two minutes, the decoded message appeared on the screen.

"To Captain, SS *Daffodil*: Cancel previous orders. Proceeded at maximum warp to Outpost 2. Report to Suite 947B, Port Annex South, challenge phrase Alpha, challenge response 79Y. Consider this Priority Blue. Previous assignment is placed on temporary hold barring the outcome of new orders to be received upon your arrival at OSDO 2. End of transmission."

"Well, there you have it," Steven uttered to himself as he slowly leaned back in the pilot's seat. *Priority Blue—a matter vital to the security of the Federation*. The newly redesigned Outer System Defense Outpost 2 was about a week distant from their current coordinates. Taking a final swallow of his coffee, Steven knew it was time to rouse the remainder of his team. He reached out and flipped the toggle for the shipwide intercom.

"I need everyone in the control room now. We've got new orders." A moment later, the Andorian operative Chand Ghei responded with his usual curt affirmation. When another minute had passed, Steven repeated the request. "Come on, Jacques. On your feet."

"Yeah, yeah," the unpleasant Frenchman responded groggily. "I'll be there in a second."

Stardate 15401.19

Once the SS *Daffodil* set down inside the landing bay of Outpost 2, Firestine, along with agents Jacques Pelletier and Chand Ghei, made their way to the compartment designated in the transmission they'd received a week prior. No other communications had been received since that time, and the three men were anxious to learn about their

new assignment. Ten minutes later, after successfully navigating the outpost's maze of corridors, they came upon their destination—Suite 947B. Opposite the door to the compartment, Pelletier admired the view into the cavernous bay beyond. A score of warships were resting at their moorings, with an additional cruiser entering through the large open doors leading out into space. An older *Daedalus*-class exploration vessel was on the far side of the docks, tied alongside two *Tannhauser*-class cruisers that had seen better days—their hulls pitted and scarred with evidence of recent combat with Romulan forces.

As the *Hercules*-class cruiser *Neptune* finished transiting the doors to the docks, Jacques could see that she was towing the remains of a frigate in her tractor beam. Based on the extent of the damage, the smaller ship—or what was left of it—was likely to be relegated to the scrap pile. He pondered how the vessel had arrived at its current state and how many of her crew had perished in the battle. “I hope we’re here to make a real difference,” he said with marked frustration as he started into the docks.

Turning to the view, Steven nodded. “I do too.” Looking back at the door, he saw a keypad beside it studded with random numbers and letters. He entered the challenge sequence “alpha,” and the display read back “79Y” before it abruptly opened. Stepping inside with his team in tow, Steven was greeted by a young woman sitting behind a plain metal desk, the words “Department of Fleet Agriculture” across it in large, raised letters.

“Can I help you?” the young woman asked.

“The crew of the *SS Daffodil*,” Steven said, inclining his head toward his people, unsure of what else to say.

As she pressed an unseen button on her desk, a side door opened. “Through there, please.”

Inside, the trio was greeted by another desk with the same words stenciled across its face. Behind it sat a middle-aged human male

dressed in a civilian business suit. Rising to his feet, the official stepped out from behind his desk and extended a hand. "Lieutenant Commander Firestine?" he asked as Steven took his hand.

"Yes?"

"Captain Nicholas Tremaine, Starfleet Intelligence."

"Sir," Steven acknowledged, then motioned to his team. "Agents Jacques Pelletier and Chand Ghei."

"Gentlemen, thank you all for getting here so quickly."

"Of course, sir," Steven acknowledged. "Code Blue requests have a way of doing that."

"And I assure you, Commander, it *is* of the utmost importance to begin immediately. If you'll follow me, please, we've got a lot of information to cover." Waving a hand toward a set of open doors at the far side of the office, Tremaine led Firestine and his people into a secluded briefing room.

When the team had made themselves comfortable around the briefing room table, Captain Tremaine began the meeting. "As you're all aware, before the war began with the Romulans, Federation envoys were sent into Romulan space on an overt mission of peace. At that time, it was hoped that further hostilities with the enemy could be avoided before the situation became . . . untenable. Several starships were dispatched, each containing a full delegation of representatives from the founding member worlds of the Federation. None were heard from again."

"Yes, sir," Steven acknowledged, and the other two agents nodded.

"What you may not know is that United Earth Intelligence outfitted the ambassadorial vessels with specialized tracking and sensor equipment. It was hoped that—should the vessel make it back out of Romulan space—the data they gathered would be of use to the UESPA, which is, of course, now Starfleet Command. The equipment, now considered quite obsolete, was nonetheless well hidden inside the vessels."

Stepping out of his chair, Captain Tremaine moved to a large screen on the far side of the room. As he turned it on, a map of the local sector faded into view, with OSDO 2 in the center. A moment later, a small circle just beyond the outpost began to blink.

"This is the Pluuh system. Approximately ten days ago, one of those ambassadorial vessels was spotted here. However, we were too late to act on it, as the vessel warped out of orbit before we could move forces in to investigate further. However, my operatives were able to scour the port records on Pluuh and discovered that the vessel is now privately owned by a civilian corporation on the nearby independent world of Cyclopus."

"So," Jacques spoke up from the far side of the table, "you think someone hijacked the ship?"

"We don't know."

"And the diplomatic team?" Chand asked, his antennae twitching.

"Again, we don't know. That's why you and your team have been called in, Commander Firestine. You've spent the last twenty-four months building a very good reputation as civilian traders in this sector. So, considering the independent status of Cyclopus, you should have no problems getting to the planet to begin your operation."

"Which is?" Pelletier asked.

"The retrieval of that ship. If it *did* make it to Romulan space, the sensor data it contains could very well turn the tide of the war with the enemy. The company who now owns the vessel, Richmond Enterprises, is a small trading consortium on Cyclopus, with its corporate offices located in the port city of Deleon's Landing. Our investigations have shown that, although the corporate stock is in decline, the owners of the company are living rather luxuriously."

"Meaning they've likely got something going on the side to keep the credits coming in," Firestine replied.

Tremaine nodded. "And, based on our findings, very likely something they want to hide from the local authorities on the planet."

"And what if the logs have been discovered or erased?" Chand asked, the antennae atop his crown wiggling slightly as he spoke. "It's been several years, Captain. Who is to say how many times that vessel has changed hands since then?"

Tremaine nodded. "Very true, Lieutenant. However, the possibility that the data is still on board is too great to pass up."

"And the missing Federation representatives?" Steven asked.

"A secondary concern, Commander," the captain replied evenly. "The ship itself is of paramount importance. If, in the course of your investigation, you can learn the disposition of our people, so much the better. But the vessel is the number one priority, not the ambassadors or their staff. Is that clear?"

"Yes, sir."

"Due to the nature of your previous assignment, Starfleet Intelligence is unable to dip into their accounts to provide you with the necessary credits to simply purchase the ship from Richmond Enterprises. To do so could possibly blow your established cover. You'll need to figure out another way of getting your hands on it. And, as with your previous assignment, your actions are strictly off the record. I don't need to remind any of you what that means."

"No, sir," Steven replied.

"Then that is all, gentlemen. Your vessel is being restocked as we speak. I've taken the liberty of loading a rather substantial cache of Spicen flame gems on board, which you should easily be able to unload for a reasonable profit on Cyclopus. This, in turn, should get you just enough attention from the local trade guilds for them to investigate and discover your positive business reputation. Where you go from there is up to you."

"Yes, sir."

“Then you and your team are dismissed, Commander Firestine.”

During the week spent traveling to Cyclopus, the three Starfleet operatives had gone over what little information Captain Tremaine had discovered on Richmond Enterprises; its chief executive, Donald Richmond; his son, Thomas; and several other minor players in the company of over 100 full-time employees. Not many particulars could be discerned from the paltry data, and as the *SS Daffodil* dropped down to impulse speed as it entered the Cyclopus system, Firestine and his team still hadn't decided on a final course of action. What was known for sure was that a single Orion family controlled most of this sector, and anything entering or leaving the planet would bear their scrutiny at some point. Still, facts were in short supply, and when speculation was allowed to run rampant on intelligence missions, people had a habit of getting killed unnecessarily.

As soon as Cyclopus was in visual range, Steven ordered Pelletier to put it on the small viewer at the front of the command deck. Smaller than most Class M worlds, Cyclopus was still very much like most in the Federation. 70% of its surface was covered with land, while the remaining percentage was divided into two large oceans and a number of lakes. Sensors noted a weather pattern developing in the southern hemisphere, but nothing that would affect the mission. In orbit above the planet were a slew of Orion warships, as well as a number of civilian vessels from a dozen different races—and one Starfleet transport that was throwing the identifying code of *SS Argo*.

“That the one?” Pelletier had asked as he peered at the scanned image of the vessel, as were Agents Firestine and Ghei.

“That’s her, all right,” Steven said as he continued to study the technical readouts. The *Argo* was a spitting image of the Federation diplomatic transport *USS Kofi Anna*, right down to the distinctive resonance frequency of the warp coils.

"Looks like she's moving down toward the surface," Chand said from the console behind the two.

"Keep an eye on her, Chand. I want to know where she's landing."

At half a million kilometers from the surface, as the *Daffodil* slipped over the third planet's solitary moon, the communications console registered a signal coming in from the spaceport.

"This is the SS *Daffodil*," Pelletier said, still irritated over the juvenile name of their vessel.

"*Daffodil*, this is port control, Deleon's Landing. Please state your cargo and destination."

"Cargo is eight metric tons of Spicen flame gems. And as far as a destination, we're hoping to set down anyplace that will take them off our hands at a reasonable price."

There was a pause from the port control officer, and as Cyclopus loomed closer on the view screen, Firestine and his people tried to remain calm.

"They're scanning us now," Chand said from the seat behind Steven. "Low intensity."

"The Orions are making sure we're being honest," Steven nodded.

"Is that supposed to be a joke?" Pelletier snorted from beside him. "Orions wouldn't know *honesty* if it—"

"*Daffodil*, this is port control," the voice interrupted Jacques. "You are instructed to land in Deleon's Landing, Pad 17. A trade representative from the local government will greet you when you arrive."

Receiving a nod of approval from Firestine, Jacques acknowledged the request and closed the channel. "Government trade representative?" he asked Steven.

"An Orion, probably part of the ruling family," Firestine said as he entered the coordinates for Deleon's Landing into the navigation computers. Turning to face Pelletier, he smiled widely. "I think we've got a buyer."

"So the Edoan in the corridor says 'Hey, I got a brother at Starfleet Academy,' and the Andorian looks at him all serious-like and asks, 'Oh, really? So what's he studyin',' and the Edoan gives him this long blank stare for a full minute before he says . . . get this . . . 'They're studyin' *him*.'"

With the delivery of the rather bland punchline, the assembled aliens began to laugh, as did the man delivering it, the so-called captain of the *SS Argo*.

Once the *Daffodil* had set down on her assigned space, Chand had informed Steven that the *Argo* was only about half a kilometer distant near the surface-based shipyards just outside DeLeon's Landing. Tracking her down had been one thing, but the vessel was under lock and key—and more than a few armed security guards were roving about in a random pattern, guarding the vessel. Taking them out would have—at this early juncture—surely alerted someone on the surface. Firestine had instead insisted on tracking down the haphazard crew. Within an hour, the trio of intelligence operatives had located them in a bar equidistant between the *Argo* and the *Daffodil*.

The captain of the *Argo*, a ruddy alien from a race the operatives had never seen before, wore his thick black hair back in a ponytail. His beard, also dark and wiry, was glistening with the remains of whatever grog he and his people were drinking. By the uproar of their laughter over the bad joke that'd been told, and the short interval of time between their landing and their arrival at the bar, Steven assumed they'd likely been drinking since before they'd reached the surface. His five compatriots represented a litany of species, all of which were recognized by the team.

Firestine didn't need to wait long for an opportune moment to step away from their vantage point and approach the surly captain, whom the intelligence officer had learned was named Kollog. After the

laughter had died down, Kollog was asked something indiscernible by one of his compatriots, to which the captain had answered simply that "The *Argo* is the fastest ship in this sector. The Orions will have to pay a hefty price if they want to add it to their collection."

Staggering toward the seated men of the *Argo*, Firestine swished his mouth full of beer before cautiously spitting it back in his class. "You say you got the fastest ship in the sector," he slurred as he leaned over the table.

The *Argo*'s crew each turned a cold stare toward the interloper, but it was Kollog who spoke. "I do, human. What of it? And speak quickly, for you may soon lose your tongue for interrupting our celebration."

Getting down to his knees, Steven leaned in on his elbows and all but swooned at Kollog. "Whatcha celebratin'?"

"None of your business, Earther," a disfigured Tellarite snarled. "Now be gone."

Letting his mouth gape, Firestine looked to each of the men with half-open eyes and an embellished nod to each. "Now be gone," he finally said to the center of the table. "Fine. But you can say whatcha like, but you ain't got the fastest ship on this *planet* . . . let alone this *sector*!"

As Steven attempted to rise to his feet, he was pulled back down when Kollog grabbed a handful of his tunic, forcing him into eye contact with the bad-smelling alien. "For your audacity, I will take more than your tongue!"

"You can have my tongue," Steven slurred, "but you'll never get my *ship* . . . and she can run circles around yours any day."

"Perhaps I will have both," Kollog said, withdrawing a rather imposing-looking knife and rubbing its flattened edge over Steven's cheek.

"Sorry about that, friend," Jacques Pelletier said from behind Firestine, leaning down to heft his seemingly inebriated companion away from the *Argo*'s captain. "He's had a little too much to drink."

"Humans," Kollog all but spat. "They have no stomach for alcohol. One pint and either they fall down or their clothing falls off." This resulted in his compatriots having a hearty laugh at the humans' expense.

"Well, like I said, I'm sorry. He's sorry," Pelletier said with feigned embarrassment.

"We're both terribly sorry," Firestine added with all the drunken sarcasm he could muster. "We're both very very sorry you've got the second fastest ship around." Getting an angry stare from Kollog, Steven smiled and turned to Jacques. "I wonder if the Orions would rather deal with us? I mean, when they learn these people are making outrageous claims about their merchandise . . . well . . . I mean . . . my God . . ." he trailed off, then turned to Kollog and patted him squarely on the shoulder. "You know how Orions are about those sorts of things, friend. Sorry to bother you." Turning to leave, Steven gave a wink to the far side of the room, where Chand had positioned himself in an unobtrusive corner, armed with a hidden but very deadly and highly accurate laser pistol.

"Wait!" Kollog shouted after the departing operative.

"Pad 17!" Firestine shouted back. "If you're up for a race, meet us there in twenty minutes." Then they were beyond the metallic saloon doors and back out into the street.

"Are you crazy?" Pelletier countered as soon as they were out of earshot of the cantina.

"What do you mean?"

"They're going to come after us, and then they're going to try and kill us."

"And take our ship," Chand added dryly.

"Good. That's exactly what I'm counting on."

Chapter 2

An hour later, the three Starfleet Intelligence operatives were still waiting for Captain Kollog and the haphazard crew of the *Argo* to knock on their proverbial door. Inside the *Daffodil*, Steven Firestine sat alone at the control. Agent Chand Ghei, along with Jacques Pelletier, had been stationed elsewhere around the docks surrounding their ship—watching from hidden vantage points for the marks to arrive.

"Maybe they're not coming," Pelletier whispered into his wrist communicator and was picked up a few moments after by a small earbud worn by Firestine.

"They'll be here, Jacques," Steven said, calmly looking over his instruments for the tenth time.

"How can you be so sure?" the Frenchman whispered back defiantly.

"Because I know my scum, and Kollog definitely fits in that category."

"Quiet," Chand's hushed voice came over the channel. "Movement."

"Where?" Steven asked as he righted himself in his chair.

"Southeastern quadrant. Two hundred fifty meters. It's Kollog."

"That's a quarter of a kilometer away," Pelletier scoffed in disbelief.

"That's Andorian vision for you," Steven said with a smile. "What's he doing, Chand?"

"Attempting stealth, but failing miserably."

"Jacques, do you have him?"

"Negative," Pelletier replied. "I've got nothing. I'll move to a better position."

"Negative, Jacques. I need you where you are for now. Chand, is Kollog alone?"

"No. He has company. Four marks, close formation."

Most of the crew of the Argo.

"They've increased their pace," Chand said quietly. "They'll be at the ship in five minutes."

"I'll roll out the welcome mat," Steven said. "Chand, keep a bead on them. I don't want any surprises."

From high atop a crane in the northern sector of the docks, Chand flipped up the holographic scope on his long-range laser rifle. Taking aim at Kollog's heart—or what Chand thought would be the heart—he brought his communicator to his lips. "Lead mark is locked."

Flipping down the rear cargo hatch, Steven stepped out into the cool Cyclopus night. High above, only a few stars were visible, the rest washed out by the bright lights from the nearby Deleon's Landing. Checking that his pistol was both armed and well concealed, he called out to a large stack of crates to his right. "Captain Kollog, is that you?" There was a long silence, followed by a shuffling of feet. A moment later something metallic hit the ground and spun to a halt. Seconds later, Kollog sidestepped from behind the crates, a rather deadly looking pistol in his hand.

"I'll have my satisfaction now, *Earthier*," he sneered.

"You . . . and all your friends?"

"I brought no one."

"That's no way to start a relationship, Captain," Steven chided.

"You dare call me a liar!"

"I don't dare, but I do call it like I see it."

Raising the pistol, Kollog aimed it squarely at Firestine. "Now you die."

"I'm here to make money, Captain. That's what I thought you wanted as well. Killing me isn't going to make you rich."

"What do you know of wealth?"

"I know a good opportunity when I see it. And that's what you've got here, Captain. An opportunity . . . mighty fine one, too, if you ask me."

"I take what I want."

"Including chances?"

"What?"

A split second later, a beam of high-powered energy sped down from above and struck the ground inches from Kollog's right foot.

"I like body parts myself," Steven said jokingly. "Got a whole collection on Rigel. Now, I can take you apart one piece at a time, starting with your big toe, or we can talk like civilized traders trying to turn a few credits. What's it going to be?"

Glaring into Firestine's eyes, the ruddy alien slowly lowered his weapon. When it reached waist height, he let out a hearty laugh that could curl a Rigelian bloodworm. "I like you, Captain. Although I do not yet know your name, I believe you are a man with whom I might be able to do business."

"I'm glad you see things my way."

"We shall see about that, Earther. What is it that you propose?"

Steven glanced around the docks, nodding in approval. "Your friends?"

The alien smirked, then called out in a language Firestine had never heard before. A few seconds later the rest of Kollog's cadre appeared from their alcoves. Steven counted three.

"We seem to be missing someone."

"I know of no other," Kollog replied in confusion.

"Hmm," Steven hummed, then held his wrist to his mouth. "Jacques?"

To Steven's left, behind a tall stack of boxes, a seismic charge was detonated. Not powerful enough to kill a man, it was nonetheless effective in sending the final crewman from the *Argo* careening through the stacked crates and onto the hard pavement at Steven's feet.

"Ah. There he is," Firestine said with a wide smile. "Now we can talk."

"Truly impressive," Kollog said admiringly as he gazed at the engineering readouts on the *Daffodil's* main console. "You've done much to improve this vessel's efficiency."

"I've been known to light things up from time to time," Pelletier responded jokingly.

"And you say you can replicate this on the *Argo* as well?"

"Oh, well," Jacques began hesitantly, but after getting a scowl from Firestine, smiled broadly. "Absolutely. No question about it."

"And all we ask in return is a small fee, which you'll more than recoup from the Orions when you sell them your ship tomorrow," Steven said as he leaned back against the communications console. Reading hesitation on Kollog's already ugly face, Steven tried to quickly nail home the deal before it went south. "When the Orions see what we've done to that ship . . . what *you've* done to improve the speed and efficiency of that *fine* ship . . . why, they'll . . . what? Double the credits, wouldn't you say, Mr. Pelletier?"

"Maybe even triple," Jacques replied evenly.

"Maybe even triple," Firestine repeated. "*Triple*, Kollog."

"And your price on this series of . . . modifications?"

"Two percent," Steven said flatly, then waved a hand in a cutting motion. "Right off the top. The rest, of course, is yours."

"And you have done this before?"

"Oh, yes," Firestine said, then nodded to Pelletier. "My engineer may have a problem with his mouth, but his hands are . . . like a master painter . . . and those engines are like a blank canvas, just waiting for the next Picasso."

"Hey," Pelletier snapped.

"What is a Picasso?" one of the *Argo* crewman asked. "What is its tactical value?"

"Its *tactical* value?" Pelletier cracked, but was cut off by Steven.

"It's worth more than a hold full of Federation accelerator cannon rounds." When Kollog gave Steven a look of approval, he continued

to push. "Triple, Captain Kollog. From one captain to another, how can you pass that up?"

Looking to his people, then back to the engineering schematic, Kollog began to nod slowly. "Perhaps I will allow you to examine my vessel. No alterations will be made without my consent, and we will be with you the entire time to ensure you do not damage our merchandise."

The stench of brine was still strong on Kollog's breath. Had he been sober, things might not have been so easy. As it was, Steven was going to take every opportunity afforded to him. "Of course, Captain," Steven said meekly, then held his hands aloft. "We're only here to make money."

"And make it you will, Earther, if what you say is true. Otherwise, you *will* die."

"I guarantee the work with be top-notch. You'll never even know we were there."

Grunting, Kollog looked to the three men. "The Andorian does not speak. Please tell me he isn't your communications officer." This was followed by rolling laughter from the *Argo* crew.

"Science officer, actually," Steven replied.

"His silence reminds me of those accursed Romulans. He will begin speaking, or will cease to have that luxury."

At the mention of the Romulans, Steven and his team kept their composure. "Mr. Ghei?"

"The modifications will take approximately three hours," Chand said as his ice-blue eyes turned toward the ruddy captain.

"Then we must make haste, my Andorian friend," Kollog joked as he placed a strong arm around Chand and pulled him into a sidelong embrace. "For a thousand throats may be cut in one night by a running man, and if you fail to prove your worth, your blood will stain the deck plates of the *Argo* this very evening."

Just under three hours later, with Jacques Pelletier under the helm console of the *Argo* and Steven back in the engine room, Captain Kollog was beginning to show signs of unease. "This seems to be talking longer than expected, Captain Firestine," the alien sneered as he inspected the innards of a nearby open access panel.

"These things take time, Captain Kollog," Steven replied as he withdrew a section of cabling and inserted one of them into a nearby terminal. The formerly dark console abruptly lit up, all lights and indicators flashing their ready status. "There. Almost done."

"And you are sure about these modifications?"

"Oh, yes. Very." Feigning to look for a tool, Steven moved around the engine room, quickly spotting one of Kollog's men staring at him from a nearby computer. "We'll have the ship back together in a few minutes."

"I find that very hard to believe, human," Kollog replied in disbelief. "It took you nearly an hour to take this equipment apart."

"It always goes back together faster." Looking around the bay, he leaned down with his hands on his knees, squinting at the far side of the compartment.

"What are you doing now?"

"Measuring. I need to know how far that terminal is from this core junction node."

"Does the measurement need to be precise?" Kollog asked with growing impatience.

Steven squinted one final time, then pivoted his head from one side of the compartment to the other. "Yeah, but I have just the thing." Stepping back toward Kollog, Steven leaned down and grabbed two palm-size disks from a tool pouch on the deck. He stood and held one out to Kollog.

"What is this?" the captain asked as he took the device and examined it, finding nothing except a smooth black finish.

"A measuring device." He then held up a third, equal-sized device with a screen and a series of buttons. "It simply reads the distance between the two disks. Nothing fancy." Turning, he stepped to the other side of the compartment and handed the other disk to the surly looking crewman. "And one for you, my good friend. Now, if you wouldn't mind standing here," he said as he ushered the crewman toward the computer terminal. "Hold the device right up to the computer."

Looking toward the captain, Kollog gave the crewman a nod. "Do as he asks."

"And Captain, if you wouldn't mind standing right next to that core node. Hold that disk firmly right against the surface."

Grudgingly, Kollog did as he was asked.

"Firmly, Captain," Steven reiterated. "We don't want to miscalculate. Once we're done with this we can call it a night."

When the two men were in position, Steven looked at them approvingly. "Perfect, gentlemen." Then, holding the display device up, Steven pressed the single central button. Kollog's eyes went wide in terror, and a split-second later both he and his associate fell to the floor, unconscious. Retrieving the stun emitters, Steven leaned down and patted the cataleptic Captain Kollog on his cheek. "Nighty night."

Returning to the control compartment, Steven quickly found Pelletier's observers in the same state as Kollog. "Did you kill them?"

"No," Pelletier said, hands on his hips as he admired the two limp bodies at his feet. "But I really wanted to. They were getting on my nerves."

"How so?"

"Well, they just kept picking . . . you know?"

"Picking?"

"Like a couple of micromanagers," Jacques replied with a shake of his head. "They just couldn't leave a man to do his work."

"But you weren't working, Jacques. You were just supposed to *act* like you were working."

"But I was acting really well. They used to give out awards for things like that."

"Your reward is that you're still alive."

"Well, I only stunned them, just like you wanted."

"Good. Tie them up and put them back in the hold with Kollog and his pal."

"What? We're not going to leave them here?"

"Nope. We take them with us. I'm sure someone's going to want to talk to them about how they got their hands on a Federation diplomatic vessel. My guess is they were planning to steal it from Richmond Enterprises—or already had." He then stared at Pelletier.

"This *is* the right ship, right?"

"Right ship?"

"This is the Federation ship that Tremaine was talking about, right? That's what you were supposed to really be doing."

"I know," Pelletier replied defensively.

"Looking for clues, data, codes, serial numbers, things that could positively identify the craft as the *Kofi Anna*."

"I know! I know!"

"And please tell me you found something?"

"Yeah, I've got a whole mess of serial numbers from under the console, as well as a few data bits from the navigational computer. This the *Kofi Anna*, all right."

"Good," Firestine said in relief. "Now we just have to get her back to Federation space."

"We've got a few more *Argo* crewmen to worry about."

Steven shook his head. "I caught Chand on the way up here. His two are dead."

"He killed them?" Pelletier asked in disbelief.

Steven shrugged. "He said something about them killing each other, and Chand just happened to get in the middle of it."

"Dang," Jacques said with mild depression. "I'm stuck up here while Chand has all the fun."

Steven could only shake his head in wonder. "The cargo hold of the *Kofi Anna* is big enough to hold the *Daffodil* with room to spare. It's going to be tricky to get her in here without alerting the authorities on the ground, though."

"We'll have to do it after we break orbit, then."

Steven nodded. "You'll pilot the *Daffodil*. I'll need Chand here on the *Kofi Anna* to help with navigation."

"What about the Orion warships in orbit? Don't you think they'll be a bit put off by us taking their new purchase away from them?"

"They haven't bought it yet."

Pelletier smirked. "I think they'll beg to differ."

The rear doors opened and Chand stepped up to the command level. Nodding to him, Steven continued with his plan. "Once we take off, we'll bring the ship over the northern pole. The planet's natural magnetic field should mask both vessels' signatures for just the right amount of time before we jump to warp."

"Jump to warp," Pelletier joked. "While we're still within the system?"

"It's the only way," Chand replied matter-of-factly.

"Chand's right, Jacques. We're out of time. Get back to the *Daffodil* and prep her for takeoff. We leave in twenty minutes."

"It's not the *Daffodil* when I'm the only one on board," Pelletier said before turning and stepping down from the command level. "It's now called *Swift Vengeance*."

When the doors closed behind him, Steven turned to Chand, who shook his head slowly.

Stardate 15401.26

Within minutes of landing on the docking pad at Outpost 2, the trio of officers was standing at attention back in Captain Tremaine's office. The captain, looking at the logs and mission reports, nodded with approval with each turn of the virtual page.

"This is all very good, gentlemen. Exceptional work, all of you."

"Thank you, sir," the trio said in unison.

"The Orions didn't trouble you much?"

Steven looked to Pelletier. "Well, sir . . . we certainly had a disagreement about whose property the *Kofi Anna* was. Nothing a little skillful evasion and a slightly imbalanced warp core couldn't fix."

"Damn fool created a wormhole," Steven said in disgust.

"And it got the Orions off our tail, didn't it?"

"We're lucky to still *have* a tail."

"And the sensor logs," Tremaine interrupted. "Well done. We began downloading them the moment the *Kofi Anna* was in range."

"Have you discerned yet whether or not the ambassadors made it to the Romulan homeworld?" Chand asked.

"No. That is to say, the *Kofi Anna* made it to a world well into Romulan space, but we don't think it was their homeworld. Perhaps a major outpost, though."

"Where?" Pelletier asked.

"A planet near the Devron system."

"Do the sensor reports show anything after that?"

Captain Tremaine wagged his head as he continued to read the computer screen. "Some. Intelligence will have to sift through it further to mine anything of importance."

"Is there any record of the ambassadors or their staff?"

"Very little, I'm afraid. It seems that the *Kofi Anna* was boarded not long after she entered Romulan space. The captain's final log entry states as much. Two days later, according to the ship's navigational

logs, the *Kofi Anna* arrived in the Devron system and stayed there for nearly three weeks."

"Plenty of time to unload the Federation representatives and scour the ship for information," Jacques said.

"Precisely. And again, it's very early to tell for certain, but it doesn't appear that the computers were destructively tampered with."

"Meaning," Steven began, "that either the Romulans didn't bother looking, or they had a way to bypass our standard encryption methods."

Tremaine nodded. "I would lean toward the latter, Agent Firestine. In any case, there was extensive use of the ship's transporters recorded in the logs as well."

"You think they beamed the ambassadorial staff to the planet?"

"Difficult to say. The transporters didn't log *what* was being beamed, simply that a few dozen cycles were recorded. Certainly enough to account for the crew and any missing equipment stowed on the ship."

"Then you'll want to send someone to check out the Devron system . . . to know for sure," Steven said.

"Maybe a couple of someones?" Pelletier added.

"It would seem that way, based on these initial findings. However, I need to go over this some more before I make a final proposal to Intelligence Command." Turning off the computer, Tremaine stepped out from behind his desk toward the men. "Until then, you're off duty. It'll take some time to process the ship, and perhaps longer to get word back from my superiors on Starbase 3. Make use of this time, gentlemen. I'm not prepared to give you any more information on Devron at this point, but I have a feeling it's going to prove to be far more of a challenge than Cyclopus was."

Chapter 3

Stardate 15403.19

March 2154

Incoming subspace communication . . .

CLASSIFICATION: AS NOTED

FROM: The Office of the Commanding Officer, Starfleet Public Relations, Captain Eron Wyngarde

TO: All Commanding Officers, Starships and Starbases, Starfleet

VIA: (1) The Office of the Commanding Officer, Starfleet Command, Fleet Admiral Rom Walton, San Francisco, Earth

(2) The Office of the Commanding Officer, Starfleet Intelligence, Commodore Martin Hirst, Starbase 1, Sol System

SUBJECT: OFFICIAL RELEASE OF INFORMATION TO ALL COMMANDS

1. (UNCLASSIFIED) Excerpt from broadcast, Solarian News Network (SNN): There is a growing concern on Earth, as well as among other Federation worlds. Information continues to pour in from the outlying sectors. The Romulans, as they call themselves, are not merely a large band of warring pirates seeking to attack and plunder randomly. Instead, they appear to be a highly organized,

intelligent starfaring race much like humans, Vulcans, and the other major Federation races. Their skill in combat tactics, the widespread availability of high-technology warships, and their overall ability to make war with the Federation support this conclusion.

We speculate that they may have colonized a number of worlds in their own region of space, wherever exactly that may be. In fact, the extent of their territory may be as large as our own—if not larger. This changes the entire complexion of the war for Starfleet Command personnel. We are no longer fighting a localized, loosely-based scourge. Rather, we are up against an interstellar civilization existing along our own borders—a civilization fully capable of widespread aggression and destruction.

2. (CONFIDENTIAL) In response to Item (1), and in lieu of the ensuing panic that further broadcasts of this nature might engender, Starfleet Command—working in conjunction with representatives of Starfleet Intelligence—have concluded that a new branch, formerly made from the United Earth Space Probe Agency Office of Public Affairs (UESPAOPA), and henceforth designated at the Office of Starfleet Public Relations (OSPR)—would be established. The Office of Public Relations will now be the central hub for all unclassified information pertaining to the war effort, and will have the sole responsibility and the authority to disseminate that information to the general public. No unauthorized release of information will be tolerated. Starship and starbase commanders are thus charged with the overall responsibility to safeguard all information pertaining to the war effort—regardless of the seemingly benign nature or perceived benevolence it may detail. Failure to follow these guidelines—and those to be released shortly by the OSPR

and Starfleet Intelligence—will be met with swift punitive action.

3. (UNCLASSIFIED) The *Powhatan*-class starships are systematically being phased out of service. Easily outclassed in numerous encounters they've been unfortunate to find themselves in, and unable to accept new weapons and propulsion systems—either available off-the-shelf (OTS) or by those currently in development at Starfleet Research and Development (SF:R&D)—the *Powhatan* will first be relegated to convoy patrols well within the boundaries of Federation space, and should (in the next six to eight months) be completely phased out by newer hulls coming out of the Starfleet shipyards throughout the Federation. The Commander of Starfleet wishes to convey his utmost gratitude for those intrepid crews who have manned these vessels in the service they've not only given to Starfleet, but also the United Earth Space Probe Agency.

4. (UNCLASSIFIED) In view of recent conditions, the *Verne*-class light cruiser is officially removed from service. Though well-armed, this vessel is only capable of warp 2.7, and so has proved inadequate for patrol and pursuit duties along the now-disputed frontier. Once the weapons and tactical systems and associated subsystems have been removed (demilitarized), Starfleet is intent on offering these sturdy vessels for sale to the general public. The results of these sales will be twofold: reduce Starfleet's overall procurement costs for new vessels, and allow a large influx of quality starships to corporations or individuals for transportation, cargo, or passenger service to areas not readily available by current market courier-type ships and at a reasonable price. Those Starfleet officers on the cusp of retirement will have no difficulty finding any number of

financial institutions that will make loans for such purchases readily available. Interested parties should contact their nearest supply depot for further details.

5. (CONFIDENTIAL) Starfleet Command's *Arrow*- and *Gallant*-class short-range starfighters are now classified as operational. Competition for the UESPA contracts was fierce, but in the end, Aerodyne-Lockheed-Martin (Federation Stock Index ALM, +10.6c) and Chiokis-Flint and Bristol (Federation Stock Index CF&B, +16.23c) were each awarded separate funding to produce operational craft. The *Arrow* (ALM), a two-place fighter, has shown excellent performance in suborbital and interstellar combat. The *Gallant*, a three-place delta-wing craft, has equally impressive terrestrial and suborbital performance, and will do well in both fighter and ground-attack roles. Two full squadrons of each are currently deployed to the Arcturus Test Range, and should begin to filter down to frontline duties within the next three solar months.

6. (SECRET) Starfleet engineers working at the still-unfinished Centauri Test Range have begun an intensive program to create more efficient laser weaponry capable of being retrofitted to currently commissioned vessels. Their results thus far have been positive. Though a new weapon system is still forthcoming, their in-depth research with the Andorian Science Consortium—as well as input from the Vulcan Science Academy—has produced an entire suite of improved sensors and detection equipment. Along with these innovations, a new multi-layered sensing device, known officially as the DISH (Dedicated Instrument and Sensor Housing) has shown exceptional promise, and will likely be a required upgrade for all starships of Class-V and

higher. More information will be provided as it becomes available.

7. (SECRET) After-action reports from the newly upgraded and commissioned *Discovery*-class cruisers (formerly *Daedalus*-class) have been most favorable. Their explorative capabilities have surpassed all Starfleet's initial estimates, and their ability to maintain combat readiness even after taking excessive damage is a credit to the old vessels with which our new systems have been integrated. The *Yorktown* class carriers, on the other hand, have revealed some unforeseen weaknesses. They are slowly rotating back to their respective homeports throughout the Federation, the reason being the required retrofitting to accept the new *Arrow*-class interceptor fighters previously mentioned and a number of structural upgrades. A select number of *Discovery*-class vessels will host smaller squadrons of *Gallant*-class fighters. As such, these cruisers will be redesignated as Support Carriers.

8. More information will be made available as it is filtered through the Office of Public Relations.

Stardate 15404.10

The view port into the starbase's inner sanctum, designed to accommodate dozens of onlookers, was at this late hour populated by a single soul. The lights in the room, dimmed to signify that evening watch had set in, gave the lone visitor the impression that the window wasn't even there. In the vast hold of the recently upgraded Starbase 3, newly promoted Captain Terri Connor could easily see the three *Mauretania*-class fast-attack transports she was to lead into battle in just a few short days. Headed by her ship, the *Alcantara*,

Captain Connor was to spearhead the First Combined Fleet as they engaged a recently detected fleet of Romulan warships.

This incoming group of thirty or so ships was thought to be part of the fleet that'd attempted to take the Deneva system only a few months before. Starfleet Intelligence was suggesting that this new threat—likely dispatched from the Cheron system—was part of a diversionary tactic that, had they arrived on time months ago, would have successfully drawn the First Fleet's attention away from Deneva. As it was, Starfleet had been able to thwart their initial plans for that system.

Now it was time to take care of the Romulans' would-be backup, which had since taken hold of the Qualor system.

Staring across the vast hold, Terri watched in silence as a segmented cargo vessel came alongside and attached itself to the attack transport *Invictus*. The ships were taking on the last of their supplies before heading out into deep space, and the cargo shuttle likely carried the last of the ship's accelerator cannon rounds which were far too unstable to beam aboard. Across the hold, the two great doors leading out into space opened, and a single row of blinking lights on the floor of the docks began to flash in sequence, signaling that a vessel was about to enter.

From her vantage point, all Terri could see was a sliver of space, but slowly a vessel began to take shape as it entered the bay. It was a cruiser—a *Hercules* one at that, and she'd seen some recent action. Her hull was battered in a numerous places, and there were lines of blackened and burnt durasteel across her ventral side. But even under the intense glow of the dock spotlights, Captain Connor could tell the ship was only superficially damaged. All her internal lights shone brightly, and the glowing red caps of her nacelles pulsed with an array of colors, suggesting that she could jump to warp at any moment.

I wonder if she made a difference? Terri thought wistfully. *I wonder if I will. If we will . . .*

The doors on the rear of the observation lounge opened with a start, flooding the compartment with the brightness of the corridor beyond. In the reflection in the window, Terri discerned a female form entering the space and moving toward her. "I was just getting a final look at the ship before going to see Fleet Admiral Grooms and receiving our final mission briefing," she offered pensively.

"The *Alcantara* is fully manned and ready, Captain," her executive officer, Commander Diana Paprotny, said with her usual abruptness. "The *Cutty Sark* is taking on the last of her supplies now, and the *Invictus* will be ready within the next two hours."

"Two hours?" Terri asked the reflection of the tall, blonde-haired commander.

"A problem with one of the ship's fusion reactors. Captain Thompson's latest report states the vessel will be ready on time."

Nodding, Terri took in a shallow breath. "And the crew of the *Alcantara*?"

"Ma'am?"

"How are they?" When the commander furrowed her brow, Terri could see that her executive officer still didn't understand the question. Turning from the view, she smiled at the usually hard-nosed officer. "Diana, how are they *feeling*?"

The young woman's features softened, and for a moment appeared to be letting her hard exterior crack slightly. "I think . . ." she began cautiously, as if her personal opinion was the last thing she'd ever expected to say, and that anything she said about the crew might be considered an insult, "they're eager, but nervous."

Terri licked her lips, nodded with deep understanding. "I feel the same way myself. What about you?"

"You've got nothing to worry about from me, Captain. I'll do my duty to the best of my ability."

"I know you will, Commander." But Terri could see something else in the woman's face, a hint of the underlying apprehension her executive officer was feeling. Connor wasn't about to press the issue. *If she wants to talk about it, she knows I'm here.* Folding her arms across her chest, she returned to the view afforded to her. "You know, Starfleet was founded with the intention of seeking out new worlds and new civilizations; to find cultures we could be at peace with, learn from . . . provide knowledge to, so we that we could all live together in peace. To seek answers to the unknown questions of the universe and existence so that we might better understand who we are and where we're going. And this war has put a hold on all that—at least, for those of us out here on the front lines."

"Yes, ma'am," Paprotny replied understandingly.

"It'd be so much easier if the Romulans just wanted some form of peaceful coexistence with us. Then we could get back to what we do the best. But it's conflict they want, and I'm not overly thrilled that we're giving it to them."

"I don't think any of us are, Captain."

Turning, she again smiled at her younger first officer. "I know you're not, Diana. That's why I'm glad you'll be at my side. We're going out there to engage the enemy. Some of us for the first time, some of us for the last. And when it's all over, somewhere inside each of us we'll need to find those answers we were trained to seek out, not because it's our mission, but because we have to in order to cope with the next day. And the day after that. And we have to know that someday this will all be over, and we hope that we'll have made some difference out there," she said, nodding her head back toward the dock and the large doors closing behind the incoming cruiser. "I know I can count on you and the crew to give 100 percent in the coming days ahead, Commander."

Standing taller, Paprotny nodded sharply. "Orders, Captain?"

"Prepare the ship for departure, Commander. We'll link up with the rest of the First Combined Fleet outside the starbase and depart as soon as the *Invictus* is ready. I'll be there shortly."

"Yes, Captain."

When the commander had departed, Terri took a final look at the cargo shuttle as it detached from the *Invictus* and glided away. Wishing that it were sensor probes or scientific equipment that had been loaded instead of warheads, she inhaled deeply before turning to depart for Fleet Admiral Grooms' office.

Stardate 15405.30

On the bridge of the USS *Invictus*, Captain Michael Thompson watched as the last of the fifteen vessels that made up the Qualor protection fleet dropped out of warp. Arriving on schedule, the group was well ahead of the Romulan invasion force—which wasn't supposed to arrive for another six hours.

"Captain, we're receiving a transmission from the *Alcantara*," Lieutenant Judith Waidlich announced from her station. "They've contacted the settlement on Qualor II, and all is well. Captain Connor is ordering us to the far side of the planet and to stand by there for further instructions."

Turning to the young woman, Thompson nodded. "Acknowledge the order, Lieutenant. Then call down to engineering. Advise Chief Engineer Jaderborg that I'd like to see her."

"Yes, sir."

Stepping from the command chair, Michael moved between the helm and navigation officers. "You heard the order, Carolanne," he said to Lieutenant Liss, the fresh-faced helm officer not far removed from Starfleet Academy. "Set a course for Qualor II, full impulse."

"Aye, sir," she said, entering in the coordinates. "Full impulse."

"Commander DeStefano," Michael asked as he turned to his sensor control officer. "Larry, you have the bridge. I'll be in engineering."

"Yes, sir."

Stepping up to the turbo elevator, Thompson took a final look around the bridge. Save for DeStefano, every other crewman present was female. Of course, one was Andorian, one was Tellarite, and the rest were made of Vulcans and humans, but they were all women. Michael approved. He and his wife had been blessed with three daughters of their own—each a blonde-haired beauty in her own right. While Thompson had been trained through years of service to deal with the numerous races and genders that made up Starfleet, he'd spent a lifetime rearing three strong daughters—two of whom were now in the fleet, the other on the cusp of graduating university with a doctoral degree in botany. He understood women—at least as much as any man could ever admit to such a thing. And his command staff was made up of fine ones. Now it was his job to make sure that each of them got home. Smiling with approval, the captain stepped into the waiting car and headed down to engineering.

"How's the new fusion reactor holding up?"

"New . . ." Patricia Jaderborg's muffled voice laughed in response, her entire upper torso obscured because she'd crawled inside an open access panel near the floor. "Holding for now," she nearly shouted over the hum of the impulse engines only a few meters distant.

In the other parts of the compartment, the engineering staff of four was scurrying about from terminal to terminal, checking the various computers and readouts that littered the room. Thompson remembered his own time assigned to engineering years ago while only a lieutenant—recalling that he'd never been in better shape than when he was the assistant engineer of a cruiser. Crouching down until he was resting on the tips of his toes, he leaned his head in toward the

open hatch and closer to the chief engineer. "How are the power conduits at handling the increase in flow?"

"Two minor relays have tripped, and the one main relay that blew earlier is still giving me trouble," she grunted, evidently frustrated over the faults in the new equipment that'd been hastily installed back at Starbase 3. "I wish we'd had more time in dock. At least I could have sent back this reactor in favor of a better one."

"There weren't any other units available," Thompson said as he tried to soothe her frustrations. "Our supply officer had to beg, borrow, and steal just to get her hands on this one." As he watched his chief engineer slip out from under the console, Captain Thompson noted two large smudges of dark material adorning her otherwise rosy cheeks as the two stood.

"It's seen better days, that's for sure."

Seeing a clean towel nearby, Thompson retrieved it and handed it to the commander. As he pointed to a spot on his own cheek, Patricia wiped the material from under her eyes.

"Thanks," she offered with a smile born of exhaustion.

"But it's not going to give us any problems, correct?"

Sighing, Jaderborg turned and moved to the engineering subsystems monitor. As she entered a series of commands, several of the lights that were previously red turned to green, with a few going to yellow. "The main deflector relay is stable again."

"The science team will be pleased to hear it."

"But you're more interested in maneuverability during a combat situation."

"Unfortunately we're not an exploration mission right now, Patty. I need to know if the reactor is stable."

She hated when he called her that, and he knew it. Still, their friendship was a deep one, and she knew in the near future she'd have a chance to strike back. "Like I said—it's stable, but I wouldn't bet my life on it."

"We very well may have to, Commander."

Turning to see that several other engineering officers were standing nearby, Jaderborg ushered the captain toward her nearby office for privacy. Lowering her voice, she wiped off the last of the grime from her face. "I know what you're after, Mikey, but I can't give it to you. We're dealing with equipment that's seen its fair share of combat and, like a lot of people here, is just plain tired. The reactor core shows serious signs of having overheated in the past, and the outer casing has more pits than the surface of the moon. Yes, it's stable, and yes, it's holding, but I can't give you more than that. I've run a structural analysis on the unit, and I'm telling you if we push it too hard it'll give."

Nodding, Thompson leaned back against a nearby console. "Define 'too hard.'"

Pursing her lips, Patricia spent a few seconds running the numerous calculations through her mind. "If you can keep her below three-quarters impulse, I'm certain it'll hold."

"Which is fine if we have to deal with *some* of what's in the Romulan fleet, but not everything. Their frigates will run circles around us."

"I can only tell you what I know: sustained high-impulse terms will increasingly degrade the reactor until it reaches critical mass. Then we'll be a sitting duck . . . if we don't blow up first."

"And we're running at full impulse now to get to the other side of Qualor II."

"And, had you not come down here to talk to me, I would have called up to the bridge to strongly advise against it."

Reaching out for the intercom beside the engineer, Thompson called up to the bridge. "Helm, this is the captain."

"Helm officer, sir."

"Carolanne, decrease speed to three-quarter impulse until further notice."

"Yes, sir."

"New ETA on reaching Qualor?"

"One hour, ten minutes."

"Very good. Thompson out." Flipping the channel closed, he smiled at the tired engineer. "Better?"

"Much."

Reaching out to grasp her shoulder, Thompson looked into her bright blue eyes. "I know you'll do your best to keep things together down here."

"Do I have much of a choice?" she said with a smile.

"I'll be on the bridge. Call if there's any negative change in the status of the reactor, no matter how insignificant you think it is. I'll do my best to keep us from blowing up."

"My staff and I would appreciate that."

Chapter 4

Stardate 15406.05

The Romulan fleet had arrived right on schedule. However, the reports from Starfleet Intelligence had been far from accurate. What was thought to have been a small reinforcement squadron comprised mostly of frigates had instead turned out to be an entire Romulan armada. Outnumbered two to one, and with their own reinforcements too far distant to make an immediate difference, the Starfleet forces at Qualor were forced to hold the line as best they could.

Swooping between two damaged Romulan cruisers, the attack transport *Cutty Sark* took aim at an enemy cruiser that had moved outside their main attacking force, firing first with lasers, then with her accelerator cannons. All shots hit home, but the Romulan's shields held fast. On the bridge, Captain Floyd Dorsey watched the Romulan disappear from the view screen as the *Cutty Sark* sailed past her.

"Lieutenant Romano," he said without looking at the helmsman. "Hard turn to starboard. I don't want that Romulan getting behind us."

"Aye, sir."

As the *Cutty Sark* did as it was ordered, everyone shifted to port under the inertia of the turn. On the view screen, the stars shifted in a blur, and when the transport had finished her maneuver, Captain Dorsey could see that they'd moved well beyond the bulk of the fighting. The large Class-M world of Qualor II—twice the diameter of Earth—hung in space like a great purple gem. Imposed over its equator, Dorsey could see beams of laser fire exchanging between the two warring fleets. An explosion on the left side of the screen

drew his attention, and by the shape of the debris flying away from the fireball, he knew another Starfleet vessel had met her demise. "We're getting picked apart out here."

"It was the cruiser *Hemmingway*, sir," Commander Jamie Dent said from the sensor console. "Scans just before the explosion showed that the seals around her magnetic bottles had deteriorated."

"How many of our ships are left?"

"Out of the initial twenty, we're down to fifteen starships."

"Our squadron?" the captain asked, turning away from the large screen.

"The *Alcantara* has taken minor damage to her shields," Dent replied as he stared into the sensor scope. "The *Invictus* is undamaged."

"Where's the *Alcantara* now?"

"Ten thousand kilometers distant, forward-port, z-plus 250 meters."

Floyd looked back to the screen, trying in vain to see the small warship. "Disposition?"

Dent looked into the sensor scope once more. "Exchanging fire with targets of opportunity."

"Plenty of those," Dorsey replied under his breath. "Where's our last target?"

"The cruiser has altered course and is heading back toward the main attack group."

Nodding, the captain looked at the helmsman. "Romano, get us on the Romulan's tail if you can."

"Aye."

"Weapons officer, status of the lasers?"

"Primary capacitors charged and ready," the Vulcan lieutenant replied evenly.

"Sanar, as soon as you get a lock on that ship, I want you to fire at will."

"Understood, Captain."

On the bridge of the frigate *Invictus*, Captain Michael Thompson watched the unfolding battle on the view screen after narrowly avoiding a barrage of fusion missiles a few moments prior.

"Captain Thompson, the *Cutty Sark* is moving to assist the *Alcantara*."

"Are they requesting assistance?" Thompson asked as he pivoted the command chair to face the communications officer.

"No, sir," Judith Waidlich responded.

"Mr. DeStefano?" Michael said as his eyes shifted right to the science officer.

"Three Romulan warships are moving toward the *Alcantara*'s position now; two cruisers and a larger warship . . . likely a battlecruiser of some type."

"Distance?"

"We'd need to push the engines to full impulse to make it on time."

"We're going to have to risk it. Lieutenant Liss, set course for the *Alcantara* and increase speed to full impulse." Within seconds of the order, the intercom light on the command chair began to chirp. It didn't take a leap of faith to realize who it was that was calling. "Engineering, this is the bridge. Go ahead, Patricia."

"That fusion reactor is starting to heat up, Captain," the engineer said worriedly.

"You'll need to coax it for a few minutes, Commander. The *Alcantara* is in trouble."

"By my calculations, a few minutes is all we're going to get out of it."

"We'll be in range of our squadron in two minutes. Keep it together for that long. Bridge out."

"Visual range now, sir," Larry DeStefano said quickly from the science station.

"On screen." The image showed the three Romulan warships—two swept-wing cruisers and a large *Cabbage* class in a staggered

formation. The *Alcantara* was moving directly toward them, with the *Cutty Sark* moving into view a few seconds later. The *Cabbage* opened fire first with a laser barrage and a spray of fusion missiles. The nimble *Alcantara* easily moved beyond the beam weapons, but her hard turn brought her into direct contact with the slightly slower fusion warheads. Two explosions rippled across her already-weakened shields, causing the frigate to turn once more to avoid further damage.

"Damage report?" Thompson called out quickly.

"The *Alcantara's* shields are down to one-third power. The *Cutty Sark* is preparing to return fire."

On the screen, Thompson watched as the *Cutty Sark* moved into the position previously held by the *Alcantara*. Firing lasers and accelerator cannons, she was able to convince the larger Romulan cruiser to fall back behind its protective screen of smaller warships.

"The Romulan squadron is splitting up," DeStefano called out. "One light cruiser is moving away, probably trying to flank the *Cutty Sark*."

"Helm, move to intercept that target."

In response, the *Invictus* quickly turned to move north, cutting off the Romulan before it could move into position.

"We're in weapons range now, sir," DeStefano said.

"Open fire!"

The beams reached out, pelting the Romulan light cruiser, but did little to dissuade them from their task.

"They're still advancing," Lieutenant Liss said from the helm.

DeStefano spoke next. "The lead Romulan cruiser has also turned. We're directly between the two."

"We've been caught in a cross fire!" Thompson yelled. "Helm, hard to—" but his words were silenced as both Romulan warships opened fire simultaneously. The combined firepower of lasers and fusion missiles quickly decimated the *Invictus's* shields. An overload in the primary power relay caused the damage control station on the bridge

to explode, killing the engineering officer instantly and throwing two others to the deck.

"Helm, evasive turn to port!" Thompson yelled. "Z-minus 5,000 meters!"

"Aye, sir!"

"Impulse engines damaged," DeStefano announced. "We're bleeding energy."

Smacking the intercom, Thompson opened a channel to engineering. "Engineering, we need more speed."

Commander Jaderborg's static-lined voice came back after a long pause. "Impossible, captain. I had to take the replacement fusion reactor offline. It was bleeding radiation into several decks."

"See what you can squeeze out of the remaining reactors."

"I'll do my best, sir. We've got a number of injured personnel down here."

"Understood. Bridge out."

"We've maneuvered out of the way for now, sir," Carolanne said from the helm.

"The Romulans?"

"The light cruiser is in pursuit. The heavy cruiser has fallen back behind the other vessel."

"Communications, call down to sickbay. Have them send a team to engineering. Helm, plot in a zigzag course back to the *Alcantara*. Keep that Romulan from getting another lock on us."

Working feverishly at her controls, Carolanne nodded. "Yes, sir."

From the sensor station, Commander Diana Paprotny gave her captain a much-appreciated update. "Captain Connor, the *Cutty Sark* is coming alongside."

With the *Alcantara's* shields on the verge of collapsing, Terri was glad to have all the help she could get. "Communications, coordinate

with the *Cutty Sark*. I want to focus all our efforts on the nearest light cruiser attacking our forces.”

“Captain Dorsey on the *Cutty Sark* concurs,” the ensign replied within seconds.

“Romulan cruiser moving into range now, Captain,” Paprotny said.

“Lieutenant Stapleton, lock beams and missiles and prepare to fire.”

“*Cutty Sark* is also preparing to fire,” the science officer said while peering into her monitor.

On the view screen, the swept-winged Romulan was coming in fast. “Fire all weapons!”

The two Federation ships opened fire within a split second of one another. The half-dozen lasers struck the already-damaged Romulan shields, and they sputtered one final time before falling completely. The blue-flamed fusion missiles were the next to hit the now-unprotected hull. Explosions of green and orange raced from stem to stern on the Romulan vessel as it screamed like a fireball between the two Starfleet frigates.

“Reverse angle on the view screen,” Terri called out quickly.

On the viewer, the burning mass that was once a Romulan warship continued on a straight trajectory without altering course in the slightest. From the top left corner of the screen, the *Invictus* soared down on the hulk. Firing two fusion missiles of her own, the *Invictus* ensured that whatever was left of the Romulan ship exploded violently, leaving behind a ball of expanding debris.

“We’re getting a signal from Captain Thompson on the *Invictus*,” the communications officer said. “They’re requesting we now attack the larger cruiser as a combined unit.”

“Acknowledge the request, then turn to engage the lead Romulan.”

On the bridge of the *Cutty Sark*, Captain Floyd Dorsey had his hands full of Romulans. The lead cruiser had moved into a position behind the remaining light cruiser, making any attempt to inflict further

damage on it all but impossible. However, once the *Alcantara* and the *Invictus* arrived, all that changed. Firing at extreme range, the combined firepower of the two frigates managed to push the light cruiser free, and for a split second the lead battlecruiser was completely unprotected—and bow to bow with the *Cutty Sark*.

"Weapons officer, fire!"

"We're too close," the Vulcan tactical officer replied.

"Fire, Sanar!"

The main lasers were the first to strike, bathing the Romulan's shields in a greenish glow. Second to hit were the accelerator cannon rounds, each taking turns in pounding the target's shield generators into submission.

"Romulan shields are now down," Commander Jamie Dent announced triumphantly from the science station. "Fusion missiles are locked on the hull."

But the Romulan was still heading toward them fast, easily filling the entire view screen. "What's our distance to target?"

"Three kilometers and closing!" Sanar yelled in an emotional outburst not normally attributed to any Vulcan, but shared by everyone on the bridge.

"Helm, quickly! Evasive port turn." But the order came a moment too late. The power fusion missiles launched against the Romulan seconds before found their target. Along with combined weapons fire from the incoming *Alcantara* and *Invictus*, the Romulan vessel—easily twice the mass of the Federation frigates—broke apart violently as it disintegrated. Moving too fast to be avoided, a large chunk of the former cruiser slammed into the starboard warp pylon of the *Cutty Sark*, shearing it off completely and sending the frigate into a spiral, away from the incoming Starfleet reinforcements.

"Massive damage to the *Cutty Sark*," Diana called from the *Alcantara's* science console. "Main power is offline, and there's damage to their life-support system."

"Casualties?"

"Difficult to determine."

"They're sending out a general distress call, Captain," the communications officer added.

"Diana, where's the remaining Romulan warship?"

"Looks like it's moving off . . . rejoining the main Romulan attacking force near the planet."

Breathing a long-held sigh of relief, Captain Connor slumped back into her command chair. For the moment, they were out of harm's way. She intended to make the most of it while it lasted. "Lieutenant ter Horst, bring us alongside the *Cutty Sark*."

Lieutenant Thijs ter Horst did as he was asked. "Moving now, Captain. ETA is two minutes."

"Very good. Communications, notify sickbay that we'll be bringing some of the wounded on board. Then call over to the *Invictus*. I'd like to speak to Captain Thompson."

"Yes, ma'am."

Turning her attention to her executive officer, Terri could see that Diana's attention was glued to her station. "Commander Paprotny?" she asked as calmly as she could, but it still managed to startle the science officer.

"Yes?"

Stepping out of the command chair, Terri moved to the railing separating the two bridge levels. "What's the status of our forces?"

"Not good, Captain. We've lost a significant number of ships."

"Do we have enough to hold the system?"

Looking to the view screen and the damaged *Cutty Sark* still spinning out of control, the science officer shook her head slowly. "I . . . I don't think so, ma'am."

How could this have happened? the captain mused as she turned her attention to the screen. *This was supposed to be a small section of enemy vessels, not a fleet of their strongest ships.* As Terri continued to stare at the screen, the blue glow of the ship's tractor beam illuminated the view. The *Cutty Sark* abruptly slowed in her spin, then came to a halt.

"We've got her, Captain," Thijs ter Horst said confidently.

"Captain," the communications officer called.

"Put the *Invictus* through."

"Ma'am, it's not the *Invictus*. I have the USS *Charleroi* on channel six. Fleet Captain Garland is requesting to speak to you."

Surmising that her fleet commander was going to give her the same news that Diana just had, Captain Connor nodded slowly and moved back to the command chair. "Put him on the screen." Instantly the image of the fleet captain appeared. His uniform was torn across his chest, and Terri could see a line of blood extending from his left shoulder to his abdomen. Garland's silvery hair was a disheveled mess, and there was a bruise above his right eye. Behind him, the bridge of the flagship seemed to be in chaos.

"Fleet Captain Garland, we're receiving."

"Captain Connor, I'm sending out a message to all ships in the fleet," Garland said with a pained expression. "We've taken a serious beating out here today, and though we've given the Romulans a fight they won't soon forget, we're forced to fall back from this position."

"We're letting them keep Qualor?"

"We've got a little choice in the matter, Captain Connor. Most of our heavier warships have been destroyed or incapacitated. Our remaining ships just aren't going to hold up against a prolonged attack. I'm not about to send the rest of the fleet into what I'm sure will be a bloodbath."

"Yes, sir," Terri replied, her eyes downcast for a moment.

"Don't worry, Captain. We'll be back soon, and in greater strength."

"Yes, sir."

"Status of your squadron?"

"The *Cutty Sark* has sustained massive damage, sir. She won't make it back on her own power. The *Invictus* isn't faring much better, but I think she'll be able to sustain warp."

"And the *Alcantara*?"

Looking around the damaged bridge, Terri wondered it herself. Seeing the resolve on her crew's faces, she smiled halfheartedly at the fleet captain. "I think we'll make it, sir. We're planning on bringing the wounded from the *Cutty Sark* aboard for treatment in the next few minutes."

Garland nodded sharply. "Be quick about it, Captain. I'm bringing what's left of the fleet to your location now. We'll be there in under fifteen minutes. I'll get one of our cruisers to take the *Cutty Sark* under tow. Your frigate won't be able to hold her and maintain a safe cruising speed at the same time."

"Understood, sir."

"I'll send a priority message to Starfleet Command via Starbase 2 letting them know what's happened. Until then, continue your operations with the *Cutty Sark*. Garland out."

When the channel had closed, Terri looked at the science officer. "Diana, what's the status of the *Cutty Sark* at this time?"

The executive officer read over her instruments, scrutinizing every detail. "Life support is stabilizing, but I don't think it's going to hold out much longer. Four decks are open to space in a dozen sections. I'm getting life readings in most of the ship, but I calculate she's lost over twenty percent of her crew."

"The bridge?"

"Undamaged. Same for engineering. However, auxiliary control and the laser control room are shattered. Sensor control is also without power."

"She's blind and defenseless." Terri nodded as she spoke. "Distance?"

"Three hundred meters and closing," Thijs ter Horst said from the helm.

"Use that finesse of yours and bring us in as close as you can."

"Aye, Captain."

Pressing the intercom, Terri opened a channel to sickbay. "Doctor, we're about to receive a high number of casualties from the *Cutty Sark*."

"We're full-up down here, Captain," the doctor protested with his usual gruffness.

"Then start moving the less injured into the passageways. Convert the shuttlebay to an emergency triage if you have to. Do whatever you need to, but do it now, Doctor. Those people on the *Cutty Sark* don't have much time."

"I'll do what I can."

Closing the channel, she turned back to Diana. "I want to lock onto the ship with a tractor beam. I'm not about to leave it here if we can salvage her."

Paprotny nodded. "I think she can be repaired, ma'am. Once we're safely back in Federation space, I suggest we beam the chief engineer over with a damage control party to confirm it."

Terri nodded. "Otherwise we'll have to scuttle her."

"Yes, ma'am."

"We can worry about that later. Right now, lower the defensive screens and prepare to start beaming over the survivors."

Chapter 5

Stardate 15408.20

Stepping from her quarters, Subcommander Verelan of the Romulan warship *Terik* made her way confidently down the winding passages of her vessel. Each crewman she passed—no matter their position or duty—stopped to render silent salutes to their captain. Verelan took them in quiet stride, as she had for the last few years as commander of the ship. Outwardly she nodded to each, without word or emotion as she never once broke her stride. Inwardly she reveled in their praise, and the praise she'd just finished receiving from Fleet Admiral Jeldan himself over subspace.

Under her skilled leadership, the *Terik*, in a monumental feat, had not only decimated two Starfleet warships of greater mass and armament, they'd also managed to capture a small number of survivors. A smattering of them had died in the days since the battle near the Kazis system—some from their wounds, which her medical officer was ill-equipped to mend—and four others in a foiled and utterly useless escape attempt the day before. Still, several prime specimens remained, one of them the former commander of one of the Starfleet vessels. It was he whom the subcommander was on her way to speak to at this moment and, under explicit orders from Fleet Admiral Jeldan, she would do everything in her power to obtain every single piece of vital information from the officer before she disposed of him and the rest of his deplorable crew.

Rounding a final corner, Verelan came face to face with her chief engineer. So abrupt was their meeting that her long brown hair momentarily fluttered across her face before falling back over her shoulders.

"Forgive me, Subcommander," Engineer Delon said, stepping back from his commander and casting his eyes to the deck in shame. "I should have paid more attention."

Startled, she quickly regained her composure. Although she was a commander of duty, she was first and foremost a woman—one who had her fair share of admirers on board. Many wanted her for the power that such a bond would bring, others the prestige and promotion it would offer. She had rebuffed them all. Indeed, the only one she had even remotely entertained a relationship with was the powerful man now standing before her. Yet Commander Delon had given her none of the signs any of the other men aboard had. And there was something in that which made the tall, brooding engineer all the more attractive to her. "You will hold your head high, Commander Delon," she said firmly. When Delon's eyes rose to meet hers, she allowed a faded smile to cross her lips. "You have done very well, Commander, in your duties. In our dealings with the Federation vessels, you acquitted yourself with the honor worthy of being a Romulan warrior. The expertise with which you wielded your vocation allowed the *Terik* to perform magnificently in battle."

Delon's chest rose proudly. "Your words do me honor, Subcommander."

Softening, she moved aside, a sign to Delon that although she was his commander, she was willing to submit to his path down the corridor. "We have served together for some years, Delon. Yes?"

"Six and one-half, Subcommander."

Steepling her fingers together, she took a measured step toward him, lowering her voice as she did. "There is no one present in this corridor, Delon. I will say to you freely that you have earned more than my respect; you have earned my admiration. For that, in times such as this, Verelan will be the only address I require."

"Another honor," he replied softly, bowing his head while his black eyes bore into hers. "Would that I lived to see many more would make me greatly pleased."

"As it would me, Delon."

"Then you will permit me a moment to give you my report?"

"By all means."

"Engine status: fully operational at all speeds. Impulse engines operating at peak efficiency. Primary power is ninety percent of normal. Auxiliary batteries fully charged. And the hull damage to section 12 has been repaired beyond design tolerances."

"You have done much in a short amount of time," she said, now smiling unashamedly. "Excellent."

Stepping toward her, he looked down into her eyes as she raised her head. "My duty is to serve . . . Verelan."

And how she wished there could be more said and done on the subject, but now was not the time. The Earth commander required questioning. For now, Delon would have to wait. "I have duties to attend to," she said to him as she placed a gentle hand against his tunic, then pushed herself away.

"Understood."

Stepping past him, she stopped a few paces down the corridor and turned. "And Commander Delon?"

"Yes, Subcommander?" the engineer asked over his shoulder.

"Should you manage to increase primary power to ninety-five percent or more before the night duty cycle begins, I would appreciate a full report delivered to my stateroom personally. If you cannot, I will not be disturbed."

His answer was conveyed with the utmost confidence. "Disappointment will not fall over you before you sleep this evening, Subcommander."

"We shall see, Delon," she offered playfully. "We shall see."

Stepping into the *Terik's* brig, Subcommander Verelan was greeted with the sight of the Earth commander sitting in silent contemplation in his shielded cell, hunched over with elbows resting on his knees and his fingers interlaced. Outside the cell, on either side of the repulse bars, was an armed centurion, each standing at attention and rendering salute to their commander.

"You will not be required for this," she said to the guards, dismissing them without another word. Once they were gone, only Verelan and the Earth commander remained.

"I'm afraid I'm fresh out of salutes," the Earthman said glibly. His uniform was in tatters—from the dark jacket that hung in shreds over his golden tunic, to the scuffed and torn boots and leggings. His face was smudged with dried blood, his hair disheveled, and his lips dry and cracked. The only thing still lustrous on his once-proud uniform was a circular embellishment on the shoulders of his jacket.

"What is the meaning of that?" Verelan asked as she nodded toward the symbol.

Turning, the human looked down at his arm. "It's just a patch."

"What does it mean? What is its significance?"

"While it's nice and all that you came down to have a fashion conversation, I'm sure there's more relevant information you'd like to get from me," he grumbled, shook his head, then looked back down to the deck. "I know I'd like to have a few questions of my own answered."

"Such as?"

"Such as?" he repeated mockingly. "Are you serious?"

"Always, Commander."

"I'm not a commander," he retorted. "I'm a captain. There's a difference."

"We have no such rank in our military. The closest approximation would be commander. That is how you will be addressed."

"Typical Vulcan response."

"We're not Vulcans, *Commander*. We are Romulans. Do not forget that."

"You look the same to me."

"I assure you, you will find very shortly that there are a great many differences between our two cultures."

"And how is it that you speak our language?"

"It's wise to learn the tongue of your adversary, *Commander*. Besides, your crude dialect was easy enough to achieve after we stripped it from several computer systems we captured in the last year."

"We're not the bad guys here, lady. You invaded us! You've killed hundreds, thousands of innocent—"

"There are no innocents in war, *Commander*! Nor will they be acquitted of barring our way to the destiny that is rightfully ours. You and your people stand in our way, and we will destroy every colony, every world, every one of your insignificant vessels to achieve that destiny."

"Spoken like a true sociopath."

"That word has no meaning to me."

"There's a shocker."

"You *will* give me what I want, *Commander*."

"Fat chance," the human snorted.

Folding her arms over her chest, Verelan began pacing the brig. "Our methods are . . . *most* effective. Against Romulans, they give us anything we want to know. But our minds are more conditioned than your own: less fragile. I'd hoped to be able to sift the information out of some of your other officers, but they weren't as . . . *conditioned* as yourself—a starship commander."

"What did you do to them?" the human asked menacingly.

"For the moment, that's none of your concern." Stopping, she stepped to within a few inches of the repulse bars. "If, however, you

wish to see them again with all your mental faculties still in their proper order, you *will* tell me what I want to know."

"Fine. You want to know about the patch on my sleeve?" he asked in utter exasperation. "Fine. Take it." Tearing it from his jacket, he tossed the disc-shaped emblem at the bars. Upon contact with them, the patch disintegrated in a cloud of smoke.

"Futile," Verelan said as she shook her head.

The human signed heavily, then leaned back against the bulkhead. "Yeah, well . . . since I can't wrap my fingers around that pretty throat of yours, it at least made me feel better."

"If you don't tell me what I want to know, *Captain*, it will be the last time you feel better for a very long time."

"And what were you hoping to get from me?" he asked as he threw his hands into the air. "We were on a simple patrol of the Kazis system when you attacked us. A *survey* mission, if you really must know. Totally benign."

"Highly unlikely."

"Well, that's your opinion."

"It is a fact, Captain. This system is under Romulan control, and will be for a long time to come. You invaded our space, and you were attacked because of it."

"It's been my experience that Romulans have a funny idea about what *is* and what isn't *their* space."

"You were on a scouting mission, not one of exploration. Do not lie, Captain, since you are now beyond all hope of escape or rescue. There is no need for subterfuge. No one is coming. You and what's left of your crew are all alone. Why not tell me what you know? It might make whatever time you have left more pleasurable."

"I'd rather eat a vat of that blue slop you've been trying to feed me for the last . . . I don't know how many days. If I'm lucky, I'll choke on it."

"What are the Federation's invasion plans for the Kazis system?"

"I don't know."

"You're lying. Tell me their invasion plans. How many vessels are in your fleet?"

"A bunch."

"How many?"

"More than ten and less than fifty thousand."

"More specific!"

"They all have different colored carpet," he said as he looked around his cell and laughed. "And I think our brigs are bigger, and the food is certainly better."

"You may not be so eager to jest after we begin using our mind probes on you."

"We'll see about that, lady. I've got a pretty good sense of humor, and if your mind probes are as lacking as the food in this place, I may actually turn out to be funnier."

"A challenge?"

"I've got some pretty bad jokes locked up in this brain you're so eager to plunge into. I'd call it a threat. In fact, you may just want to save yourself the trouble and kill me now."

"I've already done that to half the crew we pulled off the hulk of yours that was once a ship, Captain. In the end, you'll be no different."

Sighing once more, the human shook his head. "I'm looking forward to seeing them. Unlike you, they were fine officers—each and every one."

"Once I'm done with you, you will pray for it."

"Are you going to talk me to death or can you just get on with it?"

Nodding silently, she turned to the brig door. Opening it, two Romulans in dark uniforms pulled in a metal chair with a bowl-shaped device attached to the headrest.

"The mind probe," she said as she caressed the device lovingly. "Are you sure you wouldn't like to talk over a glass of ale, Captain?"

"I'd rather spit it back in your face."

Smiling, she raised her right arm, a small device held in her hand. As she flipped a switch, the cell was invaded by a bright green light. The human screamed once in agony, then collapsed on the floor, unconscious.

"Not so funny now, is it?" Verelan said as she stepped into cell as the repulse bars slid sideways. "Place the prisoner into the mind probe. We will begin with a theta extraction, level 4."

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Starfleet Commander Admiral Rom Walton entered the dimly lit briefing room, setting his briefcase on the table surrounded by a small cadre of Starfleet's admiralty. The joint chiefs of their respective branches had been assembled purely for the point of Walton delivering the bad news he was about to give.

"Thank you all for coming on such short notice," he said to the men and women around the table. "I wanted to give you this information firsthand, as most of it has come to me." Looking to the head of Starfleet Intelligence, Admiral Martin Hirst, Rom nodded. "Lights please, Admiral." As the lights were dimmed even further, a large monitor behind Walton switched on. Displayed was a tactical map of the war zone, with Earth on the left and the known worlds under Romulan control on the right.

Stepping to the right of the screen, Rom began his briefing. "As you can see, the Romulans have secured several star systems over the last few months—Tarod, Yadalla, the pergium mining facility on Kaph-42, and recently the Kazis system. Based on reports from Starfleet Intelligence," he said as he looked to Hirst, "which are supported by reports from Admiral Massey"—he then looked at Admiral Alan Massey, Military Operations Commander—"I believe the Romulans are going to slow their coreward advance into Federation territory

and take a more northerly route here." He entered some controls on the monitor for it to zoom in on the requested sector.

"Tagus system," Admiral Santos Ramirez, head of Colonial Operations and commandant of the Starfleet Marines said with a nod. "That will put them within striking distance of the planet Utopia and the Tlolu system."

"Both major military and shipbuilding facilities for the war effort," Walton conceded. "And we cannot let them fall. Doing so would push our tactical plans back several months, to say nothing of the massive loss of manpower and materials we'll face . . . a loss we might not be able to recover from."

"And you think this is why the Romulans are choosing this course?" Ramirez continued.

"Precisely."

Ramirez nodded. "Then it stands to reason that they may have broken our communication codes."

"There's no hard evidence of that," Admiral Hirst countered.

"But there's no evidence to refute it, Admiral. This military push by the Romulans could signify a major breakdown in our communications. If they know where our major bases and depots are ahead of time, then how do we—"

But Walton interrupted the two. "Santos, we've already initiated a massive cryptologic change in our protocols. That's one of the points I was going to bring up in this briefing. Again, everything we've gotten from Intelligence and Military Operations is that this is just a lucky guess by the Romulans, one we weren't completely unprepared for them to make."

"How so?"

Walton turned to the head of military operations, Admiral Massey. "Alan?"

"Most of our forward-deployed units along what we now believe is the original Romulan border have been monitoring their

communications for months. And in doing so, we've got absolutely no evidence that they've tapped into ours. Time and again, Military Operations have found the Romulan vessels to be exactly where there communications said they would be."

"But we're not going to become complacent on this, Santos," Walton assured the officer. "The Romulans could conceivably discover that we've tapped into their communications and throw a serious wrench into plans if we base them solely on the transmissions of our enemy."

"I'm frankly amazed we've been able to monitor them this long," Hirst said from beside Ramirez.

"And this is why we need to take advantage of what we've got at our disposal right now," Walton agreed with a nod. "Gentlemen, we're getting bested out there on the front lines. Even knowing the enemy's position isn't helping us when they either outnumber us three to one or they choose these suicide hit-and-run attacks we don't have a solid defense for. Merchant shipping is chaotic at best out near the borders, and our supplies to units desperately in need of them are running dangerously thin."

"What do you have in mind?" Ramirez asked as he looked around the table.

It was Massey who spoke up. "We're going under the assumption that the Romulans are dividing their forces. We know they've committed a huge number of ships to the Tagus offensive, but we don't know how many." Stepping up to the map, he pointed to a small dot a few light-years from Tagus. "Outer System Defense Outpost 6. It's not much . . . a single starship dry dock, a communications center, and a sensor relay station that's the better part of half a decade old. But we've got eleven starships en route, with fifteen more on the way."

"And how long until the Romulans show up?" Ramirez asked.

"At their present speed, roughly three months. Unfortunately, if we start sending more ships out there today, they'll arrive at approximately the same time."

Rom nodded. "And we can't divert ships already on the front lines to assist, since they're sorely needed where they are. That's where you come in, Santos."

"I'm listening."

"We think we can draw the Romulans into a ground conflict at Tagus. Most of our installations there are already underground due to the poor terrain and low oxygen content of the planet. Our people are simply too far below the surface to reach with conventional weapons. If we can maneuver the Romulans into committing to a planetary assault, we can get the Starfleet Marines in there and make some serious headway. Colonial assault transports will take off ahead of the fleet. Once the ground combat begins, our forces will move in from Outpost 6 and catch the Romulans in a crossfire."

"Bold," Ramirez said approvingly.

"We need to be bold, Admiral, if we're going to win this war."

"How long will it take you to get three expeditionary units ready for transport to Outpost 6?" Massey asked.

Looking at the large screen, Santos scanned each of the systems, mentally inventorying all the Marine assets they held. "I can have two transports underway in less than twenty-four hours. A third in under thirty-six. My estimate is that my Marines will be encamped on Tagus within two months, give or take a week."

Fleet Admiral Walton nodded. "Very well. We've got a few more details to hash out before we begin the operation, so let's get to it."

Chapter 6

"Captain's log: stardate 15409.01. The *Arizona* is on course to arrive in the unexplored Theta Tauri system in less than an hour. All sensor officers and crewmen have been called to their stations, and we're now waiting on word from the chief engineer concerning the status of the new detection array installed at Starbase 2 some weeks ago. I admit, although I have my reservations over the area of space Starfleet Command has chosen for us to explore, I'm pleased that we're far removed from the front lines of the ongoing conflict. The *Arizona* has seen her fair share over the past eighteen months, and when we were ordered back to base for refit of the upgraded sensors, I know the crew was pleased that we were getting back to the scientific basis of why we should be out here in the first place."

Closing the log entry with a press of his finger on the biometric reader, Captain Vernon Vincent handed the black tablet to the waiting yeoman. "Thank you. Please see that this is logged into the ship's computer immediately."

"Yes, sir." The young Vulcan woman nodded, then turned to leave the bridge.

Getting a curious stare from his science officer, Vernon stepped out of the command chair and moved toward him. "Something on your mind, Mr. Jaeckel?"

The middle-aged Alpha Centaurian nodded toward the closed turbo elevator. "Your request to the yeoman."

Vernon smiled. "As of your last report, we're still having some issues accessing the main computer core."

Commander Simon Jaeckel again nodded. "And that hasn't changed. However, all logs on the primary core are constantly backed up to the secondary modules in the engineering section."

"All the same, I'm not taking any chances. These new sensors we've installed are hooked into nearly every system in the ship. If we run into a circuit fault, we could see a cascade breaker trip all over the ship."

"Unlikely," Jaeckel replied dubiously, "but not entirely improbable."

"Simon, I believe you're sounding more and more Vulcan every day."

The commander turned, inwardly processing the captain's words as his face turned sour. "Good Lord, do you really think so?"

"Uh huh. Might want to have the doctor take a look at you."

Rubbing his face, Simon waved his hands dismissively toward his console. "It's these computers, that's what it is. I've spent the last few weeks going over every inch of these systems with the starbase personnel. I think I'm actually starting to think like these things. I'm also pretty sure the doc can't do anything about it."

"I'll keep that in mind," Vernon chided, his attention drawn to the intercom request on his command chair. "Ah, that would be Mr. Miles now," he said to himself as he opened the channel to engineering. "Yes, Chief?"

"The new deflector array is now fully powered up, sir. All sensors are now at your command."

"Simon?" Captain Vincent asked sideways.

The commander requested basic sensor diagnostic information, then reported the findings a moment later. "Confirmed, Captain."

"Well done, Chief. Any problems we need to know about?"

"There are some minor power fluctuations in the portside conduits leading from the deflector array to the main computer. Nothing too serious."

"You were prepared for this?"

"The starbase engineers who installed this system said it'd happened on a few other ships. We've got the recorded procedure to fix it."

"Repair time?"

"About an hour, I'd guess."

"Very good, John. Keep me posted. We'll be arriving at our destination shortly, and we're going to need the full computing power of both cores to test the new sensors."

"Yes, sir. We'll be ready."

"We're within one parsec of the Theta Tauri system now, sir," Lieutenant Steven Vicharelli offered from the helm.

"Commander?" Vernon turned to his science officer once more.

"All long-range scanning functions are in order. We're ready to begin Phase One of the testing protocols."

"Then by all means, Commander, begin scanning."

Two hours later, the *Arizona* had fully mapped the Theta Tauri system in all its questionable glory. Nine planets and their orbits around the twin G-type stars had been plotted. The resolution of the scans was a marked improvement over current methods, with images far more clearly defined, as well as basic atmospheric and soil composition reports that were never before available at this distance. However, the new system was only scratching the surface of the planets. Now it was time to drop to impulse power and see what the upgraded short-range sensors could accomplish. Though all the newly charted planets warranted the *Arizona's* attention, one particularly "juicy" target—as Commander Jaeckel had called it—was quickly filling the Starfleet frigate's view screen.

Once the computer had scanned the system, it'd automatically cataloged and named each world according to the recognized standard set forth by the Federation council. The one chosen for the short-range sensor tests was called NGC 16475. Not satisfied with the name, Vernon had unofficially declared that the violet-tinted planet in question be christened Hope.

"Nearing orbital insertion point now, sir," Vicharelli said from the helm station.

"Slow to one-quarter speed and assume standard orbit, please."

"Yes, sir."

"Chief Engineer Miles?" Vernon asked into the intercom. "You promised an update on that fluctuation."

"Yes, sir," John called back a second later. "Still haven't gotten it locked down yet, Captain. We're working on it double time."

"Will it cause any problems with the short-range sensors?" Vernon asked the chief engineer, while at the same time turning to his science officer for an unspoken second opinion.

"No reason why it should," the engineer responded as Simon shook his head in the negative.

"Very well. Keep at the power fluctuation, John. Let me know as soon as you've got something."

"Of course, sir. Engineering out."

"Standard orbit achieved," the helm officer reported.

On the main view screen, the purple gem that was Hope IV turned slowly below the Federation frigate. High-altitude stratus clouds of white and yellows stretched across the northern hemisphere, while the southern half was oddly barren, as was the northern pole. "Thank you, Steven. Initial scan report, Commander Jaeckel?"

Turning to his sensor scope, Simon moved his hands across the computer as he switched on the new deflector circuits. "It'll take several minutes for the readings to come through my monitor."

"What do we do until then?" Steven asked from the helm.

"We wait, Lieutenant," the captain sighed.

"And suppose there's Romulans down there?" the navigator, Lieutenant Jeff Troutman, asked from beside the helmsman. "A few minutes is a heck of a long time for them to see us before we see them."

"There haven't been any reports of Romulans near here in months, Mr. Troutman," Simon said as he continued to peer into the shrouded computer readout.

"In other words, Lieutenant," the captain chuckled, "I think we'll be okay."

"Readings coming back through now, sir," Simon said as he continued to pore over the vast amounts of data he was getting. "I'll try and pull out the most relevant information first, but it's not easy. It's almost coming across in a jumble."

"Let's make a note of it and report it to the engineers at fleet command when we get home. Until then, let's press on as best we can."

"Understood. Planet is terrestrial, Classification M . . . but just barely."

"Specifics?"

"The surface is primarily tropical, with only a scant number of large bodies of waters that could be classified as lakes. Gravity is 1.3 of Earth normal." Turning from his computer, he glanced at the captain in the command chair. "These factors, in conjunction with the planet's two natural satellites, would make unpredictable weather systems quite severe across most of the surface of the planet on a yearly basis."

"Since you brought it up, what're the cycles?"

"Twenty-three-hour day, with a 452-day year."

"Temperature?"

"Varies. Warmer regions of the surface are currently at 22 Celsius, while the poles are reading -28 Celsius."

"And the next obvious question . . ."

"Life sign readings are, unfortunately, indeterminate."

Vernon looked to the commander with concern. "But I thought the new sensors were supposed to be able to discern them."

"They should be. However, as I stated, the instability in the atmosphere is making all life readings difficult to pinpoint. There is life down there, and I can give you coordinates for where the readings are most prevalent, but I can't give you exact numbers."

Scowling, Vernon turned to the violet world on the screen. "That's most un-Vulcan of you, Commander," he said in diminished frustration.

"Thank you, sir."

"What about non-life readings?"

"That's where things get interesting."

"How so?"

"I'm reading large deposits of dilithium on the planet."

Dilithium—that rare and precious material that made travel throughout the stars a reality. The Federation supply system—though not exhausted—was running lean. All starship commanders had standing orders to catalog and collect any quantities they could find, no matter how remote. And then there were the Romulans . . . or even the Orions to contend with—both of whom were more likely to kill over the material. Shoot first, and all. However, Hope was squarely inside Federation space, well away from the Orion colonies. But it was also unprotected. If a Romulan fleet were to stumble into this system in the next week, there was nothing the Federation could do about it. Captain Vincent knew that he and the crew of the *Arizona* would have to work quickly to secure the system. But orders were orders. "How accurate are your readings on the dilithium?"

"More accurate than the life-form readings, but I can't give exact composition."

"Then we'll need to get down to the surface and bring some up for further study."

But Simon gave him a disapproving look. "I'd really advise against it, sir. There's a handful of really nasty energy storms going on down there."

"Dangerous to biological life?"

Simon wagged his head. "As dangerous as any other lighting storm could be, but you'll be about ten times as likely to get hit by a bolt of lightning."

"I'm guessing transporters are out of the question, then."

"Definitely. Your pattern would be scattered before it even reached the beam-down point."

"Then we'll have to take a shuttle."

Simon looked at the rest of the bridge crew, then motioned for the captain to come within earshot and lowered his voice. "Look, Vernon, I know what the standing orders from Fleet Command have to say about this, but going down there is crazy. There's a hundred things that could kill you before you even reach the surface, and I still can't give you any specifics on what kind of life-forms you'll find . . . assuming you *do* get down there."

"You're questioning my piloting abilities now?" the captain joked under his breath.

"Not at all. You're the best on the ship, with Steven over there running in close second. Which is all the more reason to send him down there."

"I intend to, but I'm going along with him. If he gets injured, someone will need to bring the shuttle back home. And, from your own lips, that means me."

"That's not what I meant."

"It's not up for discussion, Commander. You'll stay with the ship. Send out a top-priority message to the nearest starship as well as to Starbase 2. Tell them we've found a planet with large deposits of dilithium in Federation space, and that I've gone down to investigate."

Sensing he'd been defeated, Simon took a long look at the spinning world on the view screen. "The nearest ship is the light cruiser *Decatur*, but she's three days from here."

"And it'll take over a week for the message to get to Starbase 2, and another week for it to get back. So until then, we've got to remain on station—at least until the *Decatur* arrives."

Looking back to his computer, Simon weighed all the atmospheric information he was presented with. "The storm in Sector 12 seems to be breaking up. There's a sizeable dilithium deposit nearby."

"How close?"

"A few kilometers due east from where you'll break free of the clouds. I suggest that if you're intent on going, you should do so now. That storm could flare back up at any minute."

"Agreed," the captain said and vaulted himself away from the railing. "Advise the shuttlebay that we're on our way. Mr. Vicharelli, you're with me."

"Yes, sir."

The shuttlepod—an angular three-seated craft of the latest design—was tucked away in one of the two alcoves afforded the small frigate. Just large enough for micro-fusion reactors, the gangly craft had the performance of a fighter in outer space, but all the sleekness of a pointed brick in the atmosphere. Taking her through the storms was going to be tricky, and the captain was glad to have Lieutenant Vicharelli at the copilot's controls. "Ready for liftoff?"

"Yes, sir," Steven said with assurance as he opened a direct communication channel to the bridge. "*Arizona*, this is shuttlepod *Descartes*. Ready to launch."

The communications officer's feminine voice responded a few seconds later. "Confirmed, *Descartes*. Stand by."

The shuttle, held aloft by a small gantry, was rotated out of her alcove and toward the launch doors in the hangar deck. Once in position, the launch doors opened, and the shuttle was lowered through to the empty shuttlebay beneath the main hangar. As the shuttle neared the deck, small landing legs extended before the *Descartes* was deposited on the ground and the hole above sealed shut.

"*Descartes*, you are cleared to launch."

"Understood," the captain responded back. Reaching for the controls that would depressurize the shuttlebay, Vernon flipped them. As soon as the pressure evacuated, the shuttle lifted free of the deck on her small thrusters and glided toward the planet below.

That'd been the easy part.

As Commander Jaeckel had stated, the storms of Hope were nothing to trifle with. As the shuttlecraft *Descartes* rocketed into the atmosphere, showers of electrical discharges danced around the hull. Both Vernon and Steven were doing everything in their power to keep the shuttle level, but pockets of heavy turbulence kept them from maintaining level flight for longer than a few seconds. The constant rocking was threatening to cause both men to become ill. That the forward view port was completely obscured did little to help the situation.

"How much longer until we're out of this?" Vernon asked, his hands tightly gripping the controls.

"Altimeter reads two kilometers and dropping rapidly."

"Surface radar?"

"We're passing over a mountain region right now," Steve said as he looked at the computer's best guess at the terrain. "We'll clear it and enter a flat valley by the time we hit 200 meters."

A burst of air to the shuttle's right sent Vernon and Steven shifting hard to starboard. When the two men righted themselves, Steven took another look at the sensor display. "Sir, sensors are clearing up the closer we get to the surface."

"What can you see?"

"Interesting. The storm continues down to the surface almost unbroken until exactly ten meters from the ground. From that point on, I'm reading nothing but a gentle breeze and moderate temperature."

"How's that possible?"

Steven shook his head. "It isn't . . . not by any standards we know."

There was another burst of air to the side of the shuttle, this time to port. It was followed by an intense flash of light that filled the entirety of the view port.

"Electrostatic discharges are increasing," Steven said as he tried to compensate.

"We've got to get down and into that atmospheric clearing."

"Agreed."

"Let's try to bring her down, Lieutenant. Slowly, I don't want to—"

But then, a bolt of high energy rippled out of a nearby cloud and impacted squarely with the *Descartes'* port thruster assembly. The unit fizzled in a shower of sparks, and the small craft began tumbling out of the atmosphere toward the surface.

At the controls, Steven tried in vain to right the craft. "Vertical control is down. Lateral controls are sluggish. We're at 500 meters and descending rapidly."

"Can you compensate with the main drive thrusters?" the captain asked.

"Trying."

The *Descartes'* remaining engines protested at the strain they were being put under, but slowly the craft became somewhat stabilized.

"I'm not sure how long I can hold her like this, sir."

"Let's get her down, Lieutenant. Now. Full descent. Use the undercarriage thrusters to cushion our impact with the surface."

Nodding, Steven quickly entered the data into the shuttle's computer. "I've increased power to the inertial dampers, but I've had to scavenge it from life support. That should give us a wide margin of safety."

"Understood."

Within minutes, the violet haze that'd surrounded the shuttle suddenly cleared. Stretched out below the craft, as far as the captain could see, was lush vegetation. Out of the corner of his eye, Vernon swore he saw what looked like an artificial structure the moment

before the *Descartes* was hit by a high-energy discharge. Seconds later, the engines went offline just before the shuttlepod slammed belly-first into the planet.

Chapter 7

All around Vernon, the world was spinning into a whirlpool of colors and disjointed sentences. From somewhere in the distance, the echoes of friends long forgotten were yelling about dangers that were both real and yet strangely fantastic. As his cold body closed in on the center of the darkness, there was a call to arm all weapons, followed by a violent jolt that tossed him free of the swirling abyss. Then all was still as convivial warmth surrounded his entire body. The abyss, dangerous and beautiful, was still there, turning and undulating in the skies above his prone form. Beneath him, the unforgiving ground pulsed rhythmically, growing more pronounced with each passing second.

Then a voice called to him.

"Captain Vincent?"

With difficulty, Vernon tried to open his eyes, vaguely aware of his own existence.

"Captain Vincent?" the voice called again.

This time the face of the voice materialized in the captain's mind. "Mr. Vicharelli?" he groaned, now beginning to feel his body around him. There was a pain in his left arm, distinct and growing.

"Yes, sir," Steven said as he moved into the captain's periphery. "Glad to have you back with us."

"Where . . . where am I?"

"A cave, sir. More or less, anyway."

A cave? It took several seconds for his mind to recall what a cave was. Then he tried to figure out why he would be in one instead of his ship. *The Arizona, yes. But . . . the planet. The shuttlepod. Yes, the Descartes.* Opening his eyes once more, he could now see the

flickering fire lit only a meter or so away. "We crashed?" he groaned, trying to turn onto his back.

"More of an uncontrolled landing, sir," the lieutenant chuckled.

Managing to get onto his back, Vernon was able to take in a slow, deep breath. "I take it, then, that we'll be unable to lift off from the surface?"

"I'm not certain, sir. The storm outside is raging pretty fierce. I haven't checked on the shuttle since we were brought in here."

"I see." *Wait. "... back with us" ... "we were brought in here"?* The lieutenant's words went 'round and 'round in the captain's mind as if they were about to get swallowed by the abyss of his dreams. His eyes popped open once again, and with a turn of his head, he could see that the two Starfleet officers were not alone. Across from him, sitting on the fragments of a crumbled pillar, three human-looking beings, their clothes tattered and stained, stared back him. "Who . . . who are you people?"

The central figure, a dark-skinned woman of some stature, moved to kneel beside the captain. "My name is Shrel O'Tang. I'm the first officer of the mining vessel *SS Chimera*. What's left of her, anyway."

"The *Chimera*?"

The unkempt woman nodded. "That's right. We entered orbit above this planet two months ago. After detecting a large deposit of dilithium on the surface, the captain tried to breakthrough the squalls and set the ship down. Unfortunately, we miscalculated the intensity of the storm. The *Chimera* went down about two kilometers from here."

"Survivors?"

"Myself and fifteen others from a crew of forty-two."

"Your captain?"

Shrel shook her head slowly.

"My name is Captain Vernon Vincent, starship *Arizona*."

"From the Federation. Yes. Lieutenant Vicharelli's told us as much. He also told us that you named this planet Hope."

Vernon nodded.

"Let me tell you, Captain Vincent, there is no hope here. Nothing even close."

"Had we known that someone had already claimed this world, we would have given the honor of naming it to you."

"And we have done so. We call this place Turbulence."

Sensing in himself the strength, Vernon twisted again to his side and pushed his torso upright. After gauging his abilities, he slowly stood to his feet and looked around. Similar to the toppled pillar that Shrel O'Tang had sat upon, dozens of others lined the room, some upright and extending to the ceiling far overhead. Stepping over to one, the captain reached out and touched its smooth, unblemished finish. Not the work of a laser or heavy equipment, the stone was carved, likely by hand. "What is this place?"

"We don't know," Shrel responded as she moved beside him. "A temple, perhaps."

"How old?"

Steven stood and moved to the other side of his captain, tricorder in hand. "It's hard to determine, sir. Best guess would be on the order of two or three thousand years."

"And the people who built it?"

"Gone," Shrel said. "This structure is on the edge of what was once a small city. We noticed the ruins when we descended through the atmosphere before we crashed."

"So did we."

"After we gathered what we could from the *Chimera*, twenty of us set out for this place. We found it abandoned, but with many things left in place . . . as if the inhabitants simply were there one day and gone the next."

"But you said there were fifteen survivors, including yourself?"

"The others were killed by those things out there," she said, nodding her head toward the guarded entrance to the temple.

"Things?"

"Some kind of bipedal creature, sir," Vicharelli said.

"You've seen it, Lieutenant?"

"Yes, sir," Steven nodded. "After we'd crashed, I decided to take some time and scout out the area around the shuttle. When I came back, I saw one of them trying to claw its way into the pod. I tried firing a warning shot, but it turned and came after me. Blazing fast, sir. I was lucky to get a second shot that killed it."

"What did it look like?"

"Two . . . maybe two and a half meters tall, with bony exoskeleton armor around most of its body. Arms and legs like you or me, but the head was vaguely bird-like, with a beak like a parrot that could easily snap you or me in half."

"And they're quite carnivorous, Captain," Shrel said. "They injured four of my people . . . then ate them while they were still alive. We call them the Zihq. Lieutenant Vicharelli was fortunate that he only encountered one. They usually hunt in packs of three."

"Could they be the inhabitants of the city?"

"No, sir," Vicharelli said. "Miss O'Tang showed me some carvings that were made in the temple about the time it was constructed. By the complexity of the design, I highly doubt they could have been made by those things."

"I must have been out for some time."

"About twelve hours, sir. The medical supplies on the shuttle were destroyed. Luckily Miss O'Tang had some spares, but not enough of the right combinations to get you to come out of it sooner. We did what we could, and let nature do the rest."

Vernon smiled weakly. "Well done, Lieutenant. And to you as well, Miss O'Tang."

"Don't thank me yet. We used up the last of our medical supplies to get you back on your feet."

"I'm not interested in anyone else getting hurt down here. There's more than enough room for all of you on board the *Arizona*." Opening his communicator, he tried to hail the ship, but was met with only static.

"It's the storms outside, sir," Steven said. "They're not very friendly to our communicators."

"It hasn't let up in the past twelve hours?"

Shrel laughed from behind them. "Captain, that storm hasn't let up since we crashed here two months ago. Remember, we named this planet Turbulence for a reason."

Vernon turned to face her. "But if we can get above the storm, then we should be able to get a message to the ship."

Steven nodded. "The last sensor report we got before we crashed showed the storm extends up about 300 meters over a radius of several kilometers."

"You've scouted this area," Vernon said to Shrel, to which she replied with a nod. "Is there anything in the area high enough?"

"There's a range of mountains to the east. About half a kilometer from here on the other side of the city."

"Then that's where we're going."

Shrel looked at him in disbelief. "Haven't you been listening to what we've been saying? That storm outside is throwing out lightning like you wouldn't believe. Not to mention the fact that the city is crawling with Zihq. So, if the discharges don't kill us, those creatures will."

"You've managed to survive."

"Only because we've holed up in this temple with what few hand lasers we salvaged from the ship. Even those are running low. There's only one way in or out of this structure, with all the other entrances blocked by heavy boulders. But don't think for a second the Zihq haven't tried to get in here."

"So how have the Zihq managed to survive going outside?"

"Their exoskeleton. It has some kind of immunity to the discharges . . . to a point. I've seen some of them shrug off a bolt of lightning like they were hit with wet paper. Others I've seen incinerated."

"We can't stay here, Miss O'Tang. That's a fact. Sooner or later we'll either run out of supplies or we'll exhaust the power in our lasers. Then we'll either die of starvation or be killed by the Zihq. I'm not fond of either prospect and I'm sure you aren't, either. If we can get a message to the ship we can have them beam all of us up."

"You've been down here for over twelve hours, Captain Vincent," she replied heatedly. "Do you *really* think your ship is still up there waiting for you?"

"Without a doubt," Vernon said with all the conviction in his heart. "There's nothing in the immediate area that would have drawn the *Arizona* away from here. And I know my crew, Miss O'Tang. We don't give up on our own so easily. If they haven't found a way to make it down here, then you can bet your last credit that they're up there waiting for us to contact them."

"I bet my last credit that we'd be able to get some dilithium off this planet. You see where that got me."

"I'm planning on having better luck. And speaking of which, have you managed to find anything while you were here?"

"Most of our heavy equipment was destroyed when the *Chimera* went down. However, we managed to get some smaller pieces of equipment functioning. At first we dug just to pass the time, then we realized if we did ever get off this rock, maybe we could find enough ore to have made it all worth it."

"And did you?"

Shrel inclined her head toward a passageway to her right. "There are five crates of grade-A dilithium in there, Captain. Ninety-eight percent pure. It's worth a fortune."

"But only if you can get it off the planet. Until then, it's worthless."

Sighing heavily, Shrel began to pace the circular room slowly. "So what's your plan? Make for the mountains and hope we don't get zapped by lightning or killed by the Zihq?"

"If you've got a better one, I'm open to suggestions."

"The Zihq are pretty fast, Captain Vincent."

"We could leave the dilithium behind . . . come back for it later."

Shrel gave him a death stare. "I'm not leaving my haul."

"I'm interested in one thing, Miss O'Tang, and that's getting us all back to the *Arizona* alive. If your rocks endanger that mission or slow us down for any reason, I'll get you to leave them behind."

"It won't."

After glaring at one another in silence for a full minute, Vincent finally nodded. "Very well." He took a look around the chamber, counting over a dozen civilians. "Are all your people here?"

Shrel nodded.

"What's the most direct route to the mountains?"

"We'll have to travel straight through the city. The ruins extend to the base of them."

"And you said you have weapons?"

"A few pistols, none fully charged. We might get two or three more shots out of each of them."

"Then it's lucky we crashed when we did."

She looked at him dubiously. "That has yet to be seen."

"The charge in our communicators won't hold for more than twenty-four hours, and we've already wasted twelve of them. We'll need to move out immediately. I want everyone without a weapon grouped together. The rest of us will surround them. If any Zihq show up, I want to make sure every shot counts."

"We've been practicing," Shrel said as she looked to her tattered crew. "Get the dilithium," she said to a handful of men on the far side of the room. "We're leaving."

After nearly three hours, the group had made it halfway through the twisted and decaying remains of the city. All around them, buildings of concrete, stone, and steel wore the cracked and crumbling façades of millennia of disuse. Every so often, a very human-like doorway would become visible, offering Vernon a tantalizing chance to explore this lost civilization. But there wasn't enough time. Besides, in the last hour, the shadows had begun playing tricks on him, and more than once he was sure he heard the not-too-distant chatter of creatures lurking in the darkness just out of reach.

"How much farther?" he asked over his shoulder to Lieutenant Vicharelli.

Steven had his tricorder out, scanning the way ahead. "Not too much farther, sir. Just on the other side of that next block."

That "next block" was a towering wall of what was once a plethora of skyscrapers reaching toward the heavens. Now they stood like decapitated monoliths, their top floors cut off just below the point where they contacted the powerful storms raging above the group.

"What do you think happened here?"

"I don't know, sir," Steven replied. "I'm not getting much on the tricorder, but that could be due to the storm. From the level of visible damage, my guess would be some kind of bombardment. Possibly nuclear in origin."

Vernon nodded. "Or possibly dilithium in origin."

"Sir?"

"When mankind first tried to harness dilithium into warp power, accidents were not uncommon. At one point, a very large warp reactor on the surface of the moon exploded, with results very similar to what we're seeing here on Turbulence."

"What if whoever was here tried to use the dilithium for something else? Like some sort of catalyst in a warhead?"

"Also possible, but I'm not an engineer, so your guess is as good as mine. It's likely, however, that the detonation of so many crystals would dramatically affect the atmosphere of the planet."

"And it could have created the storms we're seeing now?"

"Possibly. With all the dilithium the crew of the *Chimera* was able to get with simple tools, it stands to reason that it's very close to the surface in a number of places. If that's true, the planet's dilithium could be fueling the storm right now."

"And it won't stop until all the dilithium is gone."

As the storm clouds cleared for a brief second, Vernon and Steven got a glimpse of the mountains just beyond the city. They were indeed very close. Looking at the building before them, Vernon knew that if they could gain entrance to it, they could move out the other side, then right up the mountain. As the clouds closed back over it, the object of their salvation was once more obscured.

"*Shhh!*" Shrel O'Tang called out from the front of the group. "Something up ahead. Take cover."

Dashing behind anything they could find, the group scattered, leaving the intersection they'd once occupied as abandoned as it had been for ages. A breeze whipped around them, moving in and out of the derelict buildings with abandon as it moaned. When it was again still, Vernon and Steven could discern the sound of something being dragged across gravel nearby. Chancing a look, Vernon peeked around the crumbled remains of a brick wall that he'd found for cover.

Out in the streets, some six or seven ghastly creatures were lumbering toward the intersection. Just as Shrel had described, they looked like the decomposed remains of long-dead bipedal creatures, with beak-like snouts and hollowed sockets where eyes should have been. They were making some kind of breathing sound, as if the simple act took all their strength to do so. Every so often, one would make a chattering noise with its beak, drawing the attention of others to it.

By their collective movements and focused attention, there was little doubt in Captain Vincent's mind that the Zihq knew precisely where each of the humans was. They were going to have to make a run for it if they wanted to live.

"Everyone! Make for the building on the far side of the street. Do whatever you can to get through it and up to the top of the mountain!" Stepping out from behind the wall, Vernon found he was face to face with one of the foul creatures. Its stench wafted across his nostrils like a wave of toxic gas, threatening to rob him of his senses. Wincing at first, but then throwing the nausea aside, he leveled his laser and fired full strength, blowing a hole right through the center of the creature's armor. As it crumbled to the street in a burnt heap, the captain waved his arms high to all who could see and hear him. "Come on! Into the building!"

As everyone dashed for what the captain hoped was a haven, Vernon heard the blood-curdling scream of someone behind him. He knew well enough not to turn to save them. There was nothing that could be done for whomever it was without endangering the rest of the party . . . even if it was his own lieutenant.

"Commander Jaeckel, we're getting something on channel six. I think it's the captain!"

Leaping from the command chair, Simon rushed to the side of the relief communications officer. "Are you sure?"

"Yes, sir. I think I can patch it though."

". . . *Arizona*. Repeat, this is Captain Vincent calling *Arizona*. Are you receiving?"

"Captain, this is Jaeckel. We're receiving. Are you all right, sir?"

"Negative, Commander. We've got some wounded down here."

"Lieutenant Vicharelli?"

"The lieutenant is the picture of health, Commander. But we've found survivors of a downed mining ship, the *SS Chimera*. On our way

here, we were ambushed by creatures native to this planet. They're still in pursuit, and we're about run out of laser energy. We need an emergency beamout!"

Turning to the chief engineer, Simon received a nod.

"I've got a partial lock on them now, Commander," Engineer Miles said with assurance. "I might be able to bring three or four up at a time."

"Get down to the transporter room, John. I want our best manning the console until every last one of those people are safely on board."

"Aye, sir."

Chapter 8

Stardate 15411.14

November 2254

Dropping out of warp just beyond the gravitational reach of a large gas giant, the Starfleet destroyer *Ajax* made her ways cautiously into the interior of the Sierra Zeta star system and toward her ultimate destination, the planet Helios.

Stepping into the ship's briefing room, Captain Chasin Durbin moved to the seat beside his science officer. Seeing that all the department heads were accounted for, Chasin nodded to Commander Joshua Garrett. "Begin the conference, please."

As he pressed a control on the surface of the table, the four-sided screen in the center glowed to life with the image of three planets and a single star. "The largest planet shown in this image is Helios; the smaller two its moons, Ania and Breon. Helios is classification M, the third in the seven-planet Sierra Zeta system, and home to a thriving Federation colony. Initially founded as an agricultural experiment some twenty years ago, Sarah Colony has tripled its population size since that time and is on the verge of upgrading their status to an official outpost for the Federation." Pressing another control, he switched the image to a three-dimensional map of the colony. "As you can see, the layout of the colony is a simple grid pattern. The large buildings to the north are the administrative offices and arboretums, to the east are the transport docks, to the south are the colony's shuttle hangar, vehicle motor pool and solar collection arrays, and finally to the west are the power generators and biological and organic treatment facilities."

"Impressive layout for such a short time on the planet," the ship's helmsman, Lieutenant Erich Tauschmann said with admiration.

"Sarah Colony's remarkable work has come under the scrutiny of Colonial Operations, Lieutenant," Captain Durbin replied. "As such, the Federation has been sending a lot of supplies and materials this way. Please continue, Mr. Garrett."

"Approximately three months ago, Fleet Captain Dyck of Task Force 12 received a communication from Sarah Colony requesting medical supplies. As this was not considered an unusual request from the colony, an escorted transport ship was dispatched to Helios less than one week later. According to Fleet Captain Dyck, neither the transport, her escort, nor the colony has been heard from since."

Receiving a nod from the commander, Chasin took over. "Which is why the *Ajax* is here. Fleet Captain Dyck has ordered us to investigate the area to determine why they've lost contact with the colony and to discover the fate of our missing ships."

"A faulty subspace transmitter?" Dr. Mark Donnelly asked.

"Doubtful," communications officer Lieutenant Paul Cordeiro responded. "If it was just the colony, I might agree. But there's the transport and her escort to consider as well. To have all three transmitters go down . . . the odds would be astronomical."

"Not if the transport or her escort were destroyed en route before they got there," Lieutenant Tauschmann offered.

"A very valid point, helmsman," Commander Garrett acknowledged.

"When did we last make contact with the supply ship?" Chasin asked the science officer.

"One month, two weeks, and three days ago."

"And when were they scheduled to arrive at Sarah Colony?"

"One month, three weeks ago."

"So it's possible they made it to the colony."

"It's possible," Garrett conceded. "But they would've immediately logged their arrival with the colony, who would have in turn relayed that information to DSS 1 just as quickly. Assuming they followed standard protocols, that is."

"Romulans?" Chief Engineer Andrew Clark asked.

Garret wagged his head. "Again, it's possible. They haven't been known to operate in this section of space, but that doesn't preclude the certainty that they aren't."

Chasin nodded. "Specification on the supply transport and her escort, Commander Garrett."

"The transport ship *SS Ravenswood* is an older Hypervarion design, designated as a Mark II. It's capable of transferring several thousand standard cargo units of supplies. Navigational shields only, no armament. The escort vessel assigned by Deep Space Station 1 was the *USS Newcastle*, a *San Francisco*-class frigate."

Chasin didn't know the name. Then again, more and more ships were coming out of the various fleetyards throughout Federation space with increased frequency. Keeping up with all of them would have been a nearly impossible task. "What about the colony itself?" he asked his people. "Anything of value there for the Romulans or anyone else to consider it worthy of plunder?"

"Sarah Colony is mostly agricultural in nature," Garrett said. "Their crops, while extremely plentiful, have no real value beyond the scientific significance of their growth rates, which are quite impressive, I might add."

"The power generators or the solar collectors might be worth something to the Orions," Engineer Clark offered. "They were upgraded less than a year ago with the latest designs."

Chasin nodded, then turned to Lieutenant Tauschmann. "And the station had no offensive capabilities, so there were no weapons to steal."

"Correct, sir," Tauschmann agreed. "Other than what was held in the colony's personal armory, they were without defenses of any kind."

"Understood," the captain said, then nodded his head and looked to his people. "As you can see, there are a lot of unanswered questions out here. That's why Starfleet gave us this assignment. I'm counting on each of you to provide regular progress reports from your respective departments. Communications, continue to try to hail the colony at regular intervals. Commander Garrett, keep most of the power dedicated to the short-range sensors for our investigation, but don't neglect the long-range sensors. I don't want to get pounced on by anyone while we're snooping around."

Garrett nodded. "If we take into account recent Romulan battle tactics, it might be beneficial to deploy several sensor probes to the far side of Helios, as well as its two moons."

"We don't have an ample supply of them on board, Commander. How many do you suggest?"

"To cover the area proposed, we'd need to use all of them—and even then we should work on modifying their effective ranges."

"All of them?"

"Better that than the alternative."

Pondering the outcome of a surprise attack, Chasin agreed. "Very well. Commander Clark, work with Mr. Garrett on making the necessary modifications the probes. See that he's got everything he needs from the ship's storerooms."

"Aye, sir."

"Lieutenant Tauschmann, what's our ETA for Helios?"

Looking down at his chronometer, the helmsman did the math in his head. "Just under an hour at our present speed of one-quarter impulse."

"I don't want to increase speed for the moment. We may miss something with the scanners by doing so. Garrett, will that give you enough time to modify the probes?"

Joshua nodded. "Yes, sir. I think so."

"Good. Then let's get to work, people."

"Still nothing on hailing frequencies, Lieutenant Cordeiro?"

"Negative, Captain. I've tried everything, including several lower band channels."

"Are they receiving and simply unable to respond?" Captain Durbin asked.

Paul Cordeiro shook his head. "I've established a connection to Sarah Colony's subspace transmitter, but I can't tell you any more than that, sir. If someone is down there, they should be getting a half-dozen alerts that we're trying to contact them."

Chasin nodded slowly, then looked at Commander Garrett. "Could it be that ionizing radiation you found a few minutes ago?"

Joshua nodded. "It's possible, but I don't think so. The amount of decay in the radiation should allow for normal communications at this point."

"Entering standard orbit now, sir," Lieutenant Tauschmann said from the helm.

Nodding to the helm, Chasin stayed by Garrett's side. "And you still don't have a theory as to where the radiation came from?"

"No, sir. All I know is that on the surface of Helios, there appear to be higher concentrations of muons, protons, alpha particles, and neutrons than are normally accounted for when cosmic rays from the Sierra Zeta star reach the planet."

"How much higher?"

"On the order of four to five times."

"Dangerous to us if we decide to beam down?"

"Not at present levels, no."

Regarding the spinning world on the view screen, along with its two smaller moons, Captain Durbin weighed his options. "Report from our sensor probes?"

"Nothing unusual out there, and that's what bothers me."

Giving Garrett a puzzled look, Chasin leaned against the side of the console with arms folded. "Explain, Commander."

Josh nodded to his console. "That radiation that's down there on Helios. It's basically just highly concentrated cosmic rays. If something passed through this system, or if the Sierra Zeta star was putting out increased waves of particles, then everything in this system should show the same on our sensors."

"And they don't?"

"Ania and Breon show no unusual energy reading whatsoever, sir," Garrett said as he pointed to the probe readouts of Helios' moons. "Neither do any of the asteroids in the belt separating Helios from the star. Whatever happened, it only happened on the planet below."

"Is it uniform across the surface?"

"Not really. There's a few of large concentration, and the tertiary fallout is spread over a vast distance."

"Sarah Colony?"

"That's one of the larger ones. There are also two more of equal density: one on the far side of the planet and one in the mountains about 200 kilometers from the colony."

"And the sensors can't give you anything more on what we'll find when we get there?"

Josh smirked. "Sorry, Chasin. That's the best the *Ajax* is capable of. She's a destroyer, after all, and not a science vessel."

"Understood, Commander. All the same, I don't want to spend more time than necessary figuring out what's happened here. If the phenomena happens again—"

"We'll be in serious trouble," Garrett finished. "High concentrations of those particles could rip our atoms apart in seconds."

"I want you and Lieutenant Cordeiro to take a shuttlecraft down to the reading you detected in the mountains outside the colony. If there's any trouble, the shuttlepod's screens should be able to protect you. I'll beam down to Sarah Colony with Chief Engineer Clark and Dr. Donnelly. If we run into difficulties, we'll beam back up. If we can't, you'll be able to come in to get us with the pod."

"Yes, sir."

"Lieutenant Tauschmann," Chasin said to the helmsman, "I'll leave the ship in your capable hands. At the first sign of trouble, I want you to hail us immediately."

"Understood."

Minutes after leaving the bridge, Captain Durbin, Commander Clark, and the ship's chief medical officer, Mark Donnelly, materialized on the surface of Helios. Pulling out his communicator, Chasin called up to the *Ajax*. "Commander Garrett, status?"

"Launch bay is depressurizing now, sir. We'll be on the surface in under ten minutes."

"Signal me when you get here."

"Understood."

Switching on the device, Chasin looked around the team. Spread out before them was the main courtyard outside the administrative complex—an expanse of lawns and interconnected sidewalks interspersed with empty benches. Opposite the landing team was the large lattice dome of the colony's arboretum, its multifaceted coverings glimmering in the Sierra Zeta sun. There was a soft breeze in the air carrying the scent of fresh flowers, and in the distance Chasin could hear leaves rustling.

"It's quiet here," he said, only then realizing that his hushed tone still sounded like a yell in the eerie stillness of the colony. "No people, no children . . . not even a stray dog barking."

"Negative life readings of any kind," Dr. Donnelly said as he waved his tricorder around.

"Where did they all go, then?" Andrew asked.

Turning to face the main administrative building, Chasin scanned the tall circular building from bottom to top with his eyes, scrutinized the intact subspace antenna dish atop it. "Let's go find out."

Inside the foyer, the captain was glad to see that power was still being supplied to this part of the colony. The computer behind the receptionist's desk, although abandoned, was still powered on, and the turbo elevators seemed to be in working order. Taking the tube to the topmost floor, the team exited into the communications relay center. Banks of computers lined the circular walls, surrounding the trio with their perfunctory beeps and blips as they dutifully captured subspace communications for future dissemination to the deserted colony.

"Andrew, find the colony's sensor computers. See what you can pull out of them."

"Yes, sir. It'll take me a few minutes to download everything," the chief engineer replied, then moved off to a terminal on the far side of the room.

"Any thoughts, Doctor?" Chasin asked as the two stepped over to a large window.

Looking out over the colony, Dr. Donnelly shook his head. "I don't know, Chasin. I've run a half-dozen scans and I can't find anything—no virulent strains, nothing in the air or the water, or the soil—"

"Nothing we can detect, anyway."

"If that's the case, we could be dead already."

"I prefer to be more optimistic, Doctor," Chasin replied with a smile. "I think whatever happened here is already done and over with."

"I hope you're right."

In the mountains outside the colony, the small shuttlepod containing Commander Joshua Garrett and Lieutenant Paul Cordeiro made a final pass over the range. The large concentration of ionizing particles below was coming from a valley sandwiched between two large peaks. At their current altitude, Garrett could see that the rocky terrain had been scorched black, but little more.

"Radiation readings?" he asked Cordeiro.

"Within safety margins, sir, but I wouldn't want to camp there for too long."

Taking the shuttle in, Garrett set the pod down just inside the valley and a few meters from the edge of the radiation zone. When the pod was secured, the aft hatch opened, allowing Cordeiro and himself to exit into the midday sun. The uneven terrain before them was littered with fragments of metal, ranging in size from a few meters in length down to a few millimeters.

"Looks like something crashed into the surface," Cordeiro said as he lifted and examined a palm-sized fragment.

Stepping over to a twisted beam protruding from the side of a rock face, Garrett waved his tricorder around it. "Tritanium . . . duranium . . . and trace amounts of magnesite, along with a few other materials."

"So . . . it's Federation in design?"

Garrett nodded. "Yep. From the amount of debris here, it's too big to be any of the colony's standard issued craft."

"You think it could be the *Newcastle*?"

"Or the remains of the transport *Ravenswood*. We can't be sure yet." Josh looked around at the scorched terrain, spotting several larger pieces of debris a few hundred yards distant. "Let's go check those fragments there. Maybe we can get a serial number or something else we can use to trace back the origin of the vessel."

"Captain Durbin, I think I've got something."

Stepping over to the chief engineer's side, Chasin and Mark Donnelly took up positions on either side of the computer terminal Clark was staring at.

"What do you have, Andrew?"

"Take a look at this," the engineer said as he brought up the visual logs from the archives. On the screen, a Starfleet frigate escorting a transport ship zoomed into view. "This feed was taken from the monitoring station set up on the moon of Breon about six months ago."

"The *Newcastle*," Chasin all but whispered. "When?"

"Right before she entered standard orbit above Helios. Watch what happens next."

On the screen, the *Newcastle* and the transport ship *Ravenswood* slowed as they neared the planet. From the topography, Chasin determined the craft were likely directly over Sarah Colony.

"At this point, the *Newcastle* is requesting to open a channel to the colony. We know that because this little beauty," Clark began as he placed a hand atop a nearby mainframe, "recorded a transmission coming from the *Newcastle* at the exact same time index as the video."

"Did the colony respond?"

"No, sir. There wasn't enough time."

"Explain."

"Watch," Andrew said, nodding back toward the monitor.

On the screen, from somewhere behind the Starfleet frigate, a projectile appeared. Similar in appearance to a fusion missile, it raced toward the *Newcastle* at tremendous speed. The ensuing explosion was tremendous, whiting out the monitor and causing the captain and the doctor to turn away until it had subsided. As they did, Chasin could see two battered and burning vessels falling into the atmosphere.

"It destroyed them . . . with a single shot?"

Before the chief engineer could respond, a second warhead raced into view and down toward the planet. Andrew switched the monitor to the security cameras placed outside the building they were now in. In the now-abandoned courtyard, dozens of colonists were gathered, going about their daily lives as they strolled the now-vacant square. Seconds later there was a tremendous flash of light, one so brilliant it cast everyone in sight of the camera in a glow. When the light faded, the people were gone.

"My God," Dr. Donnelly whispered.

"Some kind of bomb?" Chasin asked the engineer.

"I think so, sir. Whatever it was, the colony's sensor logs got a fairly substantial reading on the thing. I'll need to go over them with Commander Garrett to be sure."

"The Romulans?" Donnelly asked.

Turning back toward the monitor, Andrew again brought up the sensor video from Breon. On the screen, the distinctive silhouette of a Romulan vessel appeared. The vessel turned casually, then headed out of the system under impulse power.

Chasin's communicator began to chirp. "Go ahead, Mr. Garrett."

"Sir, I believe we've found the remains of the starship *Newcastle* in the mountains outside the colony."

"Survivors?" Chasin asked, though he knew it most unlikely.

"No, sir. All indications are that the crew wasn't on board when the ship impacted the surface. I've found absolutely no biological evidence here. Just the ship."

"We've found out some things here as well, Commander. Get some fragments of the *Newcastle* into the shuttlepod and back to the *Ajax*. We'll meet you there."

"Understood. Garrett out."

"So, the Romulans have some new weapon," Chasin said, stepping over to the window overlooking the colony. "One that destroys only biological matter . . . but how?"

"My guess is that it has something to do with the abnormal cosmic radiation readings," Dr. Donnelly said. "It must be some kind of stellar radiation emitter."

"A star bomb," Chasin said with disgust. "That's . . . that's utterly barbaric."

"I can rig these computers to transmit everything they've recorded through the antenna array on the roof," Clark said as he flipped a series of switches on the sensor console. "We shouldn't have a problem storing it all in the *Ajax's* computer for analysis."

Captain Durbin was beside himself, still processing the magnitude of the Romulans' new weapon. Whatever he did next, the first thing to do was alert Starfleet Command. No time could be wasted. "I need to get back to the ship to notify Starfleet. In the meantime, get as many technicians down here as you need, Chief. Beam down half the *Ajax* if you have to. I want everything in these computers, and what's in the logs on the moon of Breon, ready for analysis in three hours."

Chapter 9

Stardate 15411.28

Verifying the readings on the sensor's scope once more to be sure of what he'd seen, the Romulan centurion moved away from his console and approached the vessel's commander. But Subcommander Neral was lost in thought, leaning against a bulkhead near one of two view ports and gazing into the vastness of space. Knowing that to intrude upon Neral was to invite ridicule, Centurion Rehu paused briefly, organizing the words in his mind before speaking.

"Subcommander Neral," Rehu began, his words laced with caution.

"Yes, Centurion?" Neral responded without turning from the view.

"I would speak to you, sir."

"Is it of consequence?"

Rehu knew that it was, but the ultimate judge of that would be the subcommander. "Yes, Commander. It is."

"Very well. You have permission to speak."

"Sir, I have detected communication transmissions emanating from a nearby star system."

Slowly, Neral turned his head to face Rehu. "Enemy transmissions?"

"Yes, sir."

"They are verified, I hope, for your sake, Centurion."

Rehu nodded once. "They are, Subcommander."

Neral stared at the centurion for a moment longer than was needed to make the junior officer feel uneasy. "Starfleet?"

Rehu nodded once more. "The transmission was sent from a mining outpost in the Sigma Cancri system to a Starfleet vessel."

"And where is this Starfleet vessel?"

"Not on our scopes yet, Subcommander."

"They are incoming?"

"There has been no reply from them as of yet, sir."

"And the nature of the transmission?"

"A request for aid. There was an accident on one of the asteroids being scoured for resources—a cave-in. The miners do not have the equipment to free their personnel."

"Then it is likely the transmission was sent with a high degree of priority," Neral said, looking away as he contemplated his options.

"The Federation will respond quickly."

"Yes, Subcommander."

Neral shifted his dark eyes to the centurion. "That was not spoken to solicit *your* approval."

Rehu took a half-step back, then bowed his head sharply. "I ask forgiveness, Subcommander."

The subcommander considered the request for a moment, then softened. "You are forgiven, Centurion. See that this does not become a habit."

"Yes, sir."

"What have you to report on the Sigma Cancri system?"

"Very little, Subcommander. It has not been thoroughly documented by our forces. Information obtained from captured Starfleet records indicate that the mining colony is responsible for producing materials used in the construction of space vessel hulls. Nothing more."

"Then it is a tactically important target."

It was not a question, and Rehu knew it needed only one response. "We stand ready to strike, Subcommander."

Taking in a deep breath, Neral continued to weigh his options. There was no question that the mining establishment required destruction. But there was also the transmission to consider. Starfleet would come, and their numbers were variable. Add to that the fact that the warbird *D'Nal* and her sister ship, the *N'Vek*, were far from Romulan-controlled space, and Subcommander Neral could well be inviting

disaster. The Romulan forces, stretched thin throughout this quadrant, could ill afford to waste resources on fruitless endeavors. But outposts were far more valuable military targets than vessels. They took much longer to construct, and they gave a permanency to areas of space not easily controlled by wandering starships. To destroy them was to earn much glory for the Romulan Empire. It was this call to glory that impelled Neral to take the *D'Nal* and the *N'Vek* into the Sigma Cancri system.

"Centurion, you will see to it that a parabolic course is laid in for the source of the transmission immediately. Use the gravitational fields present in the system for concealment."

"Yes, Subcommander."

"And you will see to it personally that communications from the outpost are continuously monitored. I will be told immediately when Starfleet responds."

Beating his hand to his chest in a salute, Centurion Rehu returned to his duties.

As soon as he'd exited the turbolift, Captain Lambert Chow was summoned by a nod from Lieutenant Shepherd at the communications station. "What do you have, Alexander?"

"Sir, we're receiving a priority transmission from the Sigma Cancri system."

"Let's hear it, Lieutenant."

A second later, a troubled voice came over the *Bismarck's* bridge speakers.

"This is Galen Marr, chief administrator of the Sigma Cancri mining complex. There's been an accident in one of our tunnels . . . an explosion. A massive collapse ensued, and over a dozen people are trapped on one of the asteroids we've been mining. Anything we do to save them could cause another cave-in, possibly resulting in the disintegration of the asteroid itself. The trapped personnel are too deep for our cargo

transporters to penetrate. We're requesting immediate assistance from any nearby vessel."

Shutting off the transmission, Lieutenant Shepherd looked up to Captain Chow. "The message repeats at that point, sir."

"How long ago did they send the message?"

"There are no subspace relays between them and our current position, so I'd estimate about two hours ago."

"Lieutenant Brockman," Lambert said as he turned to the helmsman, "distance to the Sigma Cancri system?"

"If we alter course but maintain our current speed of warp 3, our ETA at Sigma Cancri would be six days, three hours and forty-five minutes."

"Commander Fricault?"

Chief Engineer Paul Fricault turned from the damage control station at the mention of his name. "We've got plenty of power to spare, sir. I can give you warp 5 without batting an eyelash."

"That'll put us at Sigma Cancri in just under a day," Trowby Brockman acknowledged.

Lambert nodded to the helmsman. "Very well. Lay in a course for Sigma Cancri and engage at warp 5, Lieutenant."

"Aye, sir."

Sidestepping from the communications console, Lambert moved to stand beside Steven Pittman at the science station. "What do we know about the Sigma Cancri system?"

"About everything there is to know," Steven replied with a smirk. "But that doesn't mean there's a lot to tell. There's four planets total, all uninhabitable. The outer two are separated from the inner worlds by a dense asteroid belt. It's in this belt that large deposits of titanium, tritanium, and molybdenum were discovered some thirty years ago by Multiplanet Metals Incorporated, Tellar's largest mining consortium. They've held all rights to that system since that time."

"Do we know how many personnel are attached to the mining operations?"

"I can't give you exact numbers, but the initial charter listed a team of fifty."

Chow exhaled deeply. "And that's based on a thirty-year-old contract. Those numbers could have tripled since then."

"Sorry, sir. We're too far from the nearest Federation outpost to receive more current information, and the *Bismarck's* computer only has a finite amount of storage. I'm surprised we've got anything at all on that system."

"Any threat of Romulans lingering in the area?"

"I can't say with any certainty. They've been known to operate this far into Federation space, but none have been encountered in this area in months."

"Where was their last recorded contact near here?"

"Four months ago, the carrier *Lexington* was on patrol in this area. She came upon a single Romulan cruiser harassing a convoy of transports bound for Andor. The Romulan warship was eventually damaged enough to flee the area, but not before two freighters—as well as four of the carrier's on-board fighters—were destroyed."

Captain Chow recalled reading the account of the incident not long after it'd been reported to Starfleet Command. The *Lexington's* captain, Matthew Whiteacre, reported that the Romulan's attack had been both swift and vicious—an all-too-common practice of the Romulans in the last year. And the Romulans were not known for giving up their advances so easily. If they'd been intent on making a foothold in this sector, they were sure to come back.

"We're going to have to chance running into them," Lambert replied to Steven. "The rescue of those miners is our top priority."

Steven nodded, lowering his voice before speaking again. "Our orders from Starfleet Command are quite clear in these matters."

Chow licked his lips before responding. "I understand that the order states that if we're outnumbered and outgunned, we're not to engage the enemy if backup is out of range. However, the interpretation of whether we're outmatched is at the captain's discretion."

"Which will later be analyzed by Starfleet, Lambert," Steven offered cautiously, then lowered his voice further. "Now, I'm all for giving the Romulans everything they deserve and then some. But if we get in over our heads—regardless of whether we make it out alive or not—it's going to be your head on a chopping block."

Chow smiled weakly in return. "Believe me, if anyone is acutely aware of that fact, it's me. However, all we can go on is the information we have. Those miners are in trouble, and—by direction of the Federation council—a call for assistance overrides any orders we've received from Starfleet or UESPA headquarters—now or in the near future."

"Understood, sir."

Lambert could tell what he'd said had failed to placate Steven's concerns. "I refuse to endanger the ship or our crew, Commander. But we're just going to have to play this one by ear."

Pittman nodded. "Still, we'll need to send some kind of a response to Sigma Cancri to let them know we're on our way."

"That's what the regulations call for, but I'm not ready to do that yet."

"Sir?"

"If there're Romulans in the area, I don't want them to be able to triangulate our position. We're going into this blind enough. Besides, letting Sigma Cancri know we're going to render assistance isn't going to alter their predicament any. Once the Sigma Cancri system is within reach of the long-range sensors *and* we have a clear and concise picture of what we'll find in there, I want to run silent. No communications to Sigma Cancri, and none to Starfleet Command."

Steven smirked. "I think I see that guillotine being sharpened as we speak."

Chow reached out and placed a comforting hand on Steven's shoulder. "Let's hope not, Commander."

Stardate 15411.30, 1500 hours

"Subcommander Neral, we have passed the third planet of the Sigma Cancri system."

"Where is the source of the distress signal emanating from?"

Centurion Rehu requested the information from the sensor computer. "The signal comes from deep within the asteroid field, Subcommander. Bearing 225-mark-7."

"On the main screen. Now."

The large monitor at the front of the command center glowed as the image materialized. The screen was littered with planetary debris of all sizes.

"There is no uniform density to the field, Subcommander," Rehu said, hoping he'd correctly guessed his commander's thoughts.

"Have we been scanned by the mining outpost?"

"No, sir. There are active scans commencing in the area, but the presence of gravitational fields from nearby large asteroids is obscuring us from their sensors."

"Then we will slow the ship, Centurion. Plot a course to the source of the transmission. Advise the *N'Vek* to do the same, and to take whatever precautions are necessary to avoid damage while maintaining absolute stealth."

"Yes, Subcommander."

Stardate 15504.20, 1630 hours

"We're nearing the Sigma Cancri system, captain."

"Drop to sublight, Mr. Brockman."

"Aye, sir."

"Commander Pittman, what do the sensors show?"

Steven turned to relay the information to Captain Chow. "There's an uncountable number of asteroids out there. It's going to slow the rescue operation down quite a bit."

"Lieutenant Shepherd, are we still receiving the automated distress call from the mining outpost?"

"Yes, sir."

"Steven?"

"It's difficult to get an accurate bearing on anything in the field. I've located where their distress hail is coming from, but only because it's the strongest emanation in the area."

"We're going to have to chance it at this point. Alexander, open a channel to the mining outpost. Let them know we've arrived and are proceeding to their coordinates."

"Subcommander Neral, I have detected a new transmission."

Neral moved from the debris-filled view port and stepped to the sensor monitor. "Report, Centurion Rehu."

"A single Starfleet vessel has entered the system and is proceeding into the asteroid field."

"Are you able to get a fix on its position?"

"Negative. The density of the asteroid field makes it almost impossible. I have, however, tracked the source back to this region." He then pointed to a small area on the sensor scope.

"Distance to the outpost?"

"Not far. They will be in range of our weapons in moments. However, we will need to move into the open to obtain an unobstructed firing solution, possibly making us visible to the Earth commander."

Neral studied the image on the screen, attempting to figure out which path around the asteroids the Starfleet vessel would choose. There were several, but he decided that the most direct course would be the obvious choice as long as the *D'nal* and *N'vek* remained undetected.

"Order the *N'vek* to plot a course toward the Earth ship while maintaining stealth. We will take the glory of destroying the outpost ourselves."

Rehu stood with pride. "Yes, Subcommander."

Stardate 15411.30, 1700 hours

"*Bismarck*, this is Galen Marr, chief administrator of the mining facility here in Sigma Cancr," the image of the Tellarite acknowledged. "Thank you for coming so quickly."

Captain Chow nodded. "Of course, Mr. Marr. We'll be at your location in a few minutes."

But Marr raised a hand. "That won't be necessary, Captain. We need you to free those trapped miners. They're on separate asteroid several hundred kilometers from here. Once that is done, you may return them to the main complex here."

Lambert nodded. "Can you give us the coordinates for the asteroid in question?"

The snout-nosed Marr grunted as he worked an unseen computer. Moments later a series of lights began to flash on the science console.

"We've received new coordinates," Commander Pittman said as he verified the location of the asteroid in question. "Distance is 438 kilometers. However, I recommend we slow to maneuvering thrusters only. The density of the field in that location is considerable."

Captain Chow nodded, then turned back to Galen Marr on the view screen. "We're moving toward them now, Chief Administrator. We'll keep you posted."

"Thank you, Captain Chow. Once again, your—" Marr started, but the view screen flickered quickly several times before it automatically switched back to the field of asteroids. Chow and the rest of the bridge crew witnessed a large explosion in the distance.

"Weapons fire!" Pittman said as he checked the sensor readings. "The administrative complex has been destroyed."

Leaping from the command chair, Captain Chow moved between the helm and navigator. "Red alert. Arm weapons and raise shields."

"Aye, sir," Lieutenant Brockman replied.

"Pittman, I need everything the sensors are reporting!"

"One Romulan cruiser located. It opened fire on the complex at nearly point-blank range," he began, but something else on the monitor captured his attention. There was a minor energy reading to port, obscured by several large asteroids, but definitely increasing in strength as it neared the *Bismarck*. Directing all sensors to that point, Steven was convinced another Romulan vessel was present. "Sir, we've got another contact . . . a second Romulan warship. It's bearing down on us fast."

"Distance?"

"It'll be on us in just a few seconds. It's coming around a large asteroid to our stern!"

"On screen!"

The large asteroid in question took up the left half of the screen. Several smaller rocks of varying sizes were also littering the area, but a competent helmsman could get around them for a shot at their stern. Lambert quickly moved around the helm console and pointed directly to a group of small rocks. "Brockman, can you target these with the lasers?"

"I think so, sir, but why?"

"To buy us some time. Lock lasers and fire a few short bursts now!"

Doing as he was ordered, Trowby targeted the asteroids in question and fired. They exploded into a shower of smaller particles just as a Romulan cruiser moved into view. Caught unprepared, the warship plowed directly into the newly created debris field. Smaller explosions registered across its shields as it attempted in vain to move out of way, but it was to no avail. Turning into the path of an even larger asteroid, the Romulan was left without any options. It slammed head-first into debris twice its size and exploded.

Grateful for the unexpected assistance and the fragility of the Romulan vessel, Lambert breathed a heavy sigh of relief. "Commander Pittman, where's the other Romulan?"

"Moving toward us on an oblique course."

"Move to intercept."

"Subcommander," Centurion Rehu cried in disbelief, "the *N'vek* has been destroyed! The Starfleet vessel is undamaged and moving to intercept us."

"He will not remain undamaged for long! Distance to target?"

"They will be in range in a few moments."

"Increase speed."

"Sir?"

Neral scowled at the junior officer menacingly. "You have been given an order, Centurion. Follow it!"

"Yes, Subcommander."

"They're increasing speed, sir," Steven said from the science station. "Time to intercept now less than a minute."

"If they don't plow into an asteroid along the way," Lambert mused wistfully. "Are weapons locked, Mr. Brockman?"

His fingers poised above the main firing sequencer, Trowby nodded. "Aye, Captain."

"They'll be coming around that large asteroid on our port-forward," Pittman said in reference to the view on the main screen.

"Stand by to fire lasers, but keep the accelerator cannons on standby."

"Target coming into range . . . now," Brockman called, but on the view screen there was nothing but asteroids. No Romulan.

"Confirm, Commander Pittman," the captain requested.

Steven was equally as puzzled. "Sensors *do* show that the Romulan ship is now directly ahead, sir."

But there was nothing. "Increase sensor sensitivity."

Steven did as he was ordered, but the readings were even more puzzling. Then the computer locked onto something he hadn't seen before. "One small object, sir, directly abeam of us."

"A warhead?" Lambert said as his body tensed.

"Negative. A sensor probe of some type. Small, perhaps only two or three meters long. However, its emanations are consistent with that of a small warship."

"It's a decoy! Quickly, all sensors on a full sweep around the ship!" But the order came two seconds too late. The bridge crew was jolted hard to port as incoming weapons fire pummeled the *Bismarck's* shields.

When Captain Chow had regained his footing, he knew there was little time to waste. "Lock onto the source of that weapons fire!"

"I can't get an accurate bearing, sir!" Brockman yelled.

"Continual fire, lasers and plasma cannons directed in the general area!"

The *Bismarck's* weapons computer, unable to obtain the required lock, fired the armaments wildly. Asteroids of all shapes and sizes exploded or were incinerated as round after round was expelled toward the Romulan's last known position. Pittman watched the sensor screen intently, waiting for a telltale sign that their prey had

been damaged. As the field of asteroids around the ship was decimated, a positive signal was returned.

"They've been hit, sir!"

"Focus all weapons batteries at that location!"

But they only succeeded in hitting a much larger asteroid, one that the weapons had little effect against.

"It's no good, sir," Brockman said. "They've moved into cover and are heading deeper into the asteroid field."

"Then let's go after them."

"I'd advise against that, sir. Their attack on us not only weakened our shields, but it also damaged two thruster assemblies. If the Romulans decide to turn and fight, we could quickly be at a disadvantage."

"Then we just let them get away?" Lieutenant Brockman asked from the helm, his fingers still hovering over the firing controls.

Pressing the intercom button on the command chair, Captain Chow began speaking. "Commander Fricault, status?"

The chief engineer's voice came online several seconds later. "Shield reactors two and three are at half strength. Two portside thruster assemblies are down, with an additional one operating at half power. I've got damage control parties working on them from the inside, but access is limited. I have a feeling this is going to require some extravehicular maintenance to get them operational again."

"Estimated repair time?"

"If all goes well, about three hours."

"Understood. Chow out." Pursing his lips, Lambert lightly slapped the armrest. "It looks like we let them get away, Mr. Brockman."

"Romulan vessel has cleared the asteroid field," Steven said in relief. "And they have jumped to warp."

"I guess they had enough," Lambert said with a weak smile. "What about those trapped miners?"

"The asteroid reported by Galen Marr was undamaged in the battle. If we are very cautious of our maneuvers, I believe we can reach their location in just under one hour. We should have enough power for the transporters to beam them up, but only if we drop shields and lower the weapons."

"Understood," Lambert said, sinking back into the command chair with a sudden onslaught of exhaustion. "Trowby, lay in the safest possible course to those coordinates and move us in with whatever thrusters we have left. Steven, I want you to keep the sensors on a wide sweep. We can't afford any more surprises."

"Aye, sir."

Chapter 10

Stardate 15412.07

Standing on a high ridge and looking up to the clear skies above, Commander Steven Firestine could easily make out the newly christened Outer System Defense Outpost 2 moving across the night's sky as its orbit transited across this region of Enas. As it did, a cool breeze picked up, rustling the leaves in the tall trees behind him. His Starfleet training, always on standby, pulled him from the relaxation he'd briefly allowed himself before he'd even begun to move his head toward it. *Nothing there, as usual.*

Turning back, he caught the distant lights of OSDO 2 just as they faded into obscurity, its exterior lights far too dim and remote to overpower those of Enas's capital city, Limani, nestled along the coastline below. He watched as gentle green waves, irradiated from within by bioluminescent algae, lapped at the beach he'd strolled hours before, and the hundreds of hovering conveyances darted about the streets like well-trained fireflies.

Still, even though the vast majority of the population was primarily Cygnian, and it took some time to find a place where one could contemplate the complexities of life, the new OSDO 2's location in the Gamma Minora 12 system was a far cry better than the previous station which had held that designation. Built inside a hollowed asteroid, the old outpost had always been too cold for Steven's liking—both physically and metaphorically. And the few view ports that were afforded for recreational purposes had simply looked out upon more asteroids. When this new station was built with the help of the bright-eyed, bushy-tailed Cygnians, Steven was all too happy to change his venue.

In the past several months, Firestine had been called up for a single mission, one involving the procurement of information on the supposed plot to assassinate one of the Federation delegates in a nearby star system. Having procured the information, thus stopping the ill-conceived plot, he found himself once more without an assignment. Such was the life of an intelligence operative. As he gazed upon the sprawling city of Limani, the communicator in his pocket began to vibrate. Slipping it out, he held it to his head and heard the synthesized voice of a computer. Twice it read aloud an address, then was forever silent.

Gazing one final time upon the vista afforded to him, and noticing a storm moving in from the ocean, Steven turned and began walking down the winding path to the city below.

The rain began to fall just as Steven rounded a corner dominated by immense buildings. Stealthily sidestepping around a group of Tellarites milling about, he stepped into a waiting taxi, thankful to find himself alone in the conveyance.

"Please clearly state your destination," a computerized female voice said, then repeated the question twice more in differing languages.

"The Tithhuliam Club," he replied as he shook some water from his jacket. The computer responded with a series of objectionable chirps, and Steven wondered if he'd pronounced the Cygnian word with the correct inflection.

"Destination accepted. Please stand by for ascent." And with that, the door sealed shut as the cabin of the vehicle pressurized for flight.

After reaching their designated altitude, Steven took in the view of the city. Spread out for miles in all directions, the city was a grid of towering skyscrapers and the luminous streets connecting them. The tops of many of the taller structures were given over to landing pads, and their vertical facing lights added an ethereal height to already imposing structure. Two such towering buildings were flown around,

many smaller ones flown over, until finally a solitary structure was centered in the taxi's forward windscreen.

"We are preparing to dock. Please stand by."

As the conveyance moved closer, Steven could see a U-shaped landing dock protruding from the side of the upper floors of the building. Wide enough for two cabs to park side by side, the dock was some 300 meters above the crowded streets below. Once the cab was firmly parked, an exterior shield designed to thwart any wind shear at this altitude was raised over the entire docking section, and Steven exited the cab a moment later. Stepping onto a two-meter-wide catwalk, he could clearly make out the streets far below through the walkway's perforated surface. Thankful he'd long since been cured of his fear of heights, he made his way to the neon glow of the entrance to the Tithhuliam Club.

Inside, he found it was no less civilized or colorful than any other backwater dive bar he'd ever been in. No matter where a person went in the known galaxy, there seemed little variation in the layout, or in the choice of beings that frequented such places. The Tithhuliam Club was no different. There were species from a dozen different worlds huddled around a circular, raised central bar bespoke with curved monitors displaying various sporting events. Around the room, circular tables with their tops lit from within were likewise surrounded by patrons, some looking the worse for wear, none of them looking out of place in the dimly lit establishment. A trio of Cygnian women, fluffy tails wagging suggestively and with emerald eyes bright and alert, were waiting on the tables while the bar itself appeared to be tended by some kind of wheeled robot.

The computerized message Steven had received told him to go here, but gave no other information. In an effort to try and blend in, he stepped up to the bar just as a patron in a dark corner caught his eye. It was Jacques Pelletier.

Steven hadn't heard from the other agent in nearly a year. In fact, he hadn't even been aware that the brusque Frenchman was still on Enas at all. Waving away the robot barkeep, Steven moved back down the steps toward his comrade and slipped into an empty seat at his side.

"Jacques."

"Firestine," the other agent replied with a great amount of sarcasm.

"I take it, by your tone, that you're *not* the one who called me here?"

Pelletier snorted, then smirked at a passing waitress. "I don't call people."

"But you got called here?"

"Same as you, I imagine." Pelletier took a sip from his glowing drink.

"Haven't seen you around here in a while."

Pelletier nodded. "Heard you were on *Persephone* not too long ago. An assassination plot, if I recall."

Steven nodded. "How'd you know that?"

"Information comes my way."

"It was supposed to be classified."

"Let's just say I was in the neighborhood at the time and leave it at that."

Steven shook his head. *Same old Jacques*. "No one told me you were there."

"We're *in* intelligence. That doesn't mean we work for intelligent people. Besides, like I said, I was—"

"Just passing through. Right."

"Right."

"You hear from Chand at all?"

Pelletier shook his head and finished his drink. "We had a combined operation about six months ago, but I haven't heard from him since then. Andorians and all. Who know what goes on with their internal agencies at times?"

"I do," the voice called from behind the men. It was Chand Ghei.

"How long have you been sitting there?" Pelletier asked.

"Not long," the Andorian replied coolly. "However, I've been in this establishment since you came in an hour ago."

"You've been watching me that long?"

Chand nodded. "Including that unfortunate bet you made against the Tellarite game on monitor three."

"Bet?" Firestine asked wryly.

"Uh huh," Jacques confirmed. "Lost a hundred credits on that."

Steven had to admit he was glad to see both of the other two agents. They'd spent nearly two years gathering data on the Romulan war effort. Although they'd initially found out very little, the three men had somehow formed a bond . . . although none of them would likely admit it openly.

"Chand, any ideas why we're here?" Steven asked.

"Unlike Agent Pelletier, Intelligence Command trusts me with information."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Pelletier asked heatedly, to which Chand replied with a sharp smile.

"Glad to see I can still get under your skin."

"It's not that hard," Steven laughed. "So what's going on?"

"You recall when we returned the captured vessel *Kofi Anna* to Starfleet?"

Both Jacques and Steven nodded, remembering the last operation they'd had together earlier that year.

Chand continued. "There was talk of possible survivors from the ambassadorial expedition."

Steven nodded. Not a day had gone by that he didn't think about it. "Inside Romulan space, as I recall. The Devron system."

Ghei nodded. "Our suspicions have been proven correct. There are *indeed* survivors. Our orders on this are quite clear."

"Extraction?" Pelletier asked anxiously.

"At all costs. No Federation citizen is to be left behind."

Steven nodded. "Specifics?"

"Not here. Come. I've got a ship waiting nearby. It'll take us some time to get to the Devron system, and we may need to make a stop or two along the way. We can go over the briefing once we're on board."

"But we've got a ship here already."

"The *Daffodil*?" Pelletier snorted. "Forget it. That thing's a—"

"We are not in need of a cargo ship," Chand replied sharply. "Speed must be our ally on this mission, and if the need arises, offensive capabilities."

"I like the way you're thinking," Jacques beamed.

"There is no time to delay. Come."

Stardate 15412.24

Just looking at icy-cold planet was enough to fool Captain Nicholas Shanayda into thinking he needed a heavier jacket. When he turned to survey the other officers on the bridge of the cruiser *Neptune*, it appeared they felt the same. On the main screen, ringed of with dozens of bands of blue-white ice, the aqua-colored gas giant of Andoria dominated the view, its primary moon Andor hanging between itself and the *Neptune*. And, somewhere out there, a fleet of Romulan warships. *Merry Christmas*, he thought dryly.

"Lieutenant de Wolf, send a message to Andor. Let them know our squadron has arrived and we await instructions."

"Aye, sir. Transmitting now."

"Commander Connor, sensor report?"

"Nothing in the immediate area," Michael said as he studied the readouts. "There's a squadron of Andorian cruisers in orbit around Andor, but they're holding station for the moment."

"And no other Starfleet vessels except for what we brought with us?"

"Correct. The Andorians were pretty vocal when they objected to Starfleet aiding in their upcoming battle with the Romulans."

Nicholas smirked. "They can be as prideful as they want. They're still founding members of the Federation, and as such they receive the full protection of Starfleet whether they request it or not."

From the other side of the bridge, Chief Engineer Jonathan Redden laughed. "And now that we're here, what kind of reception should we be expecting?"

"Incoming message from the surface, sir," Lieutenant de Wolf interjected.

"I think we're about to find out, Chief," Nicholas said, then nodded to the communications officer. The main view screen beeped accordingly as the image of the planets faded and was replaced by an Andorian female. Her white hair, cropped to her shoulders, radiated in contrast to her blue skin and the dark surroundings in which she was located.

"Greetings. I am Throti Sh'retrohr, Minister of Protocol." Her voice was warm and her smile practiced.

"Minister," Nicholas said, returning a muted smile. "I'm Nicholas Shanayda, Captain of the USS *Neptune*."

"Welcome to Andor, Captain Shanayda. I trust your journey was uneventful?"

"It was, Minister. Thank you."

"I bring word for the Andorian Council, Captain."

"I hope it's a good one."

The minister nodded once. "They wish to thank you for coming to our aid. You and your vessels will be a valued addition to the Blue Fleet."

Nichols found himself chuckling, causing a perplexed expression on the minister's face.

"You find that humorous, Captain?"

"Not at all, Minister Sh'etrohr," he replied, hoping he pronounced it correctly. "The impression that was imparted to us from Starfleet Command was . . . that our presence was . . . unwanted."

"Ah," she said, smiling. "There are a number in the council who feel that way, especially many of the elders. I can see why your commanders may have perceived as much. I assure you, however, there are many more that welcome any assistance Starfleet can give us. I am one of them."

"I'm delighted to hear it, Minister."

"Your journey to Andor must have been a long one."

"It was. In fact, I'm sure many of my people would enjoy stretching their legs a bit."

"If I understand the analogy, then I should tell you that the surface of the planet is quite hostile—both in climate and the types of predators that dwell on it, even to us. Long ago we moved our cities underground, many of them taking up the bulk of vast caves. Though it may be a bit confining to your people, I know that it's more than spacious compared to the inside of a starship."

"You've served in space, Minister?"

Again she smiled. "It's the duty of all Andorians to serve the Blue Fleet at some point in their lives. I chose to serve very early before moving on to civil service, where I have remained ever since."

"I see."

"You and your people are more than welcome to visit our capital city. I believe you will find a great many ways to relax after your long voyage."

"And will you be there to greet us, Minister?"

She nodded. "As Minister of Protocol, I am considered the voice of the Andorian Council when it comes to offworlders visiting. As such, my duties demand that I be there to greet you personally, Captain."

"Understood, Minister Sh'etrohr. I'll assemble a small party and beam down in one hour, if that's convenient for you."

"It is, Captain. I'll have the coordinates for the administrative complex sent to your ship."

"Understood. *Neptune* out." With that, the channel was closed.

"How do you like that?" Michael Connor asked in disbelief from the science station.

"Commander?"

"I was sure we were going to get the cold shoulder out here. I mean, three weeks ago, a Federation starship passes by here . . . not stopping at all, mind you . . . just passing by, and the Andorians send out a whole squadron of frigates to 'kindly escort the earth vessel to the other side of their system' without a minute's rest for the Starfleet crew."

Nicholas nodded. He'd heard the same story from the captain of the *George Washington* herself. In fact, Captain Theresa Vincent had more than a few colorful words to say on the treatment she'd personally received from their supposed allies. "And now they greet us with arms open wide. I agree, it doesn't make much sense."

Lieutenant Jarrod Frahm turned from the helm to face the captain. "Maybe it has something to do with the fact that a whole fleet of Romulans are on their way here at this very moment."

Commander Redden chuckled again from the other side of the bridge. "That'd sure make me want to get friendly with anyone who passes by the system."

"We'll find out soon enough," Nicholas conceded. "To say that Andor's position in the Federation Council is a powerful one would be an understatement. And Minister Sh'retrohr may be the voice of her planet, but we're the voice of the entire Federation assembly. That means we represent them in everything we do, everything we say. Commander Connor, make sure you get that point out to all shore parties. That planet down there might be one big frozen ball of snow, but as luck would have it, I think we've found the thinnest ice to stand on. We can't afford any kind of diplomatic incident. If the Andorians

are intent on running hot and cold about our presence, it'll only take a minor mishap to get us tossed out and a none-too-favorable report filed to Starfleet Command."

"Of course, Captain."

"Good. Make sure all starships in our group get the same message. I'll meet you, Chief Engineer Redden, and Lieutenant de Wolf in the transporter room in one hour. Until then I'll be in my quarters . . . unpacking my cold-weather gear."

When the transporter's force field released him, Captain Shanayda expected his first inhalation on Andor would be laced with ice-cold air. Instead, he was surprised to find the air quite warm. Before them was a tall staircase leading up several meters. From somewhere above, a bright light was casting its glow, but whatever was up there was out of view. Beneath his feet was a beautifully carved path of highly polished stone, wide enough for hundreds to move about without fear of colliding with one another. Stepping to the side of the path, he could see that the walkways were carved from the same rock as the surrounding cave, extending dozens of meters down to a rather uncomfortable-looking floor.

All about them, Andorians were moving about. Occasionally the captain and his crew would get a long stare, and every so often the gaze would morph into a definite scowl. Most of the blue-skinned population simply ignored them and went about their business.

Ascending the wide staircase, Captain Shanayda was pleased to see Minister of Protocol Throti Sh'retrohr there waiting, donned in layers of blue and silvery robes befitting a typical Andorian diplomat that did little to hide her hourglass figure. Although she nodded to passersby, she was all but alone at the top of the steps, flanked only by two gargantuan stone statues—what appeared to be Andorians in combative or victorious poses—several dozen meters apart.

"Minister Sh'retrohr," Nicholas said with a courteous bow as he stopped before her.

She answered it with a nod. "Captain Shanayda. Welcome to my world."

"Thank you, Minister. These are some of my senior officers," he said turning toward his men. "This is my first officer, Commander Michael Connor. My chief of engineering, Lieutenant Commander Jonathan Redden. And my communications officer, Lieutenant Hans de Wolf."

"Welcome, all of you. I take it by your expressions that this is your first time on our planet."

"It is," Redden said as he peered around at the magnificence of the city. "The engineering to accomplish something of this scale is staggering."

The minister smiled humbly. "We prefer to think of our builders more as artists than engineers, but I'm quite sure they would appreciate the compliment."

"And these statues?" Nicholas asked, referring to the figure on the right. The figure in question—an Andorian crouching with one hand holding a long spear—was about fifteen meters tall. Had the carving been of him standing erect, it would have been a truly colossal depiction.

"Figures from our past, Captain Shanayda. Carved over 10,000 of your years ago."

"Their level of preservation is astounding," he said, stepping toward one and admiring the extreme detail.

"It's the material they're made from," the minister said, then raised her arms. "Indeed, what this entire cavern is made from. A superior element known only to Andor. While painstaking to manipulate, it retains its form in even the harshest of conditions. Statues dating from this same time period have been located on the surface, and one can still discern even the smallest details in their clothing and facial features."

Archeology had been a favorite study of Nicholas's in Starfleet Academy, and he'd taken his hobby to the stars. To be here, in this place, was almost too much for him to take in all at once. "May I?" he asked, raising a hand to the statue.

The minister smiled warmly and nodded.

Reaching out, he found that the statue was surprisingly warm to the touch. And it was unbelievably smooth. Although it looked like rough stone, it was smoother than polished marble, yet had almost no reflection. Turning back to the attractive minister, he found her still smiling. "It's very . . . beautiful."

"Thank you, Captain. I have a great deal more I can show you, if you'll permit."

The idea of a guided tour was indeed quite an intoxicating offer. But, there was something he needed to do first—his duty as captain demanded it. There would be time for the tour, and the minister, later. "I'll need to speak to the Minister of Defense first. Then perhaps I'll take you up on that offer, Minister Sh'retrohr."

"Please, Captain. Call me Throti. While I'm very proud of my position, the constant use of titles can be quite off-putting, especially to guests such as yourself."

"As you wish."

"Come. I will take you to Minister Th'esholor right away."

Chapter 11

Through the twisting corridors of the capital city of Ojharaa, Minister Throti Sh'etrohr guided Captain Shanayda and his people. Nearly everything they saw captivated them, from the feats of structural engineering to the Andorians' love of art in its many forms. Stepping up another flight of winding stairs, the landing party found themselves on a high terrace overlooking much of the underground city below. The blue lights of the many towers, and the general lack of ground transportation or other noises, gave the metropolis an otherworldly sense of mystique. It was then that Nicholas considered that not once had he seen an elevator of any kind. Everything in eyesight was traveled to by either walkway or stairs. Andorians, despite their sometimes rough demeanor, had quite a tranquil life on their world. At least as far as Ojharaa was concerned.

"It's breathtaking," the captain said as he stepped to a low railing.

"We're quite fond of it, Captain," Throti said from behind him.

"I'm sorry to say, I wasn't expecting something so . . ."

"Peaceful?"

Nicholas smiled at the remark. "Something like that."

"Your perception is based on the Andorians you've met in space?"

Again, she was quite adept at reading his mind. Or perhaps it was just the fact that his guard was very much down. Either way, he would be the first to give this lovely Andorian credit where such was due. "Perhaps it's just a narrow-mindedness in the way of my people, something from our past long denied that sometimes tunnels its way to the surface." When she smiled, he returned it gladly. "And call me Nicholas, please."

"Think nothing of it, Nicholas. We, too, have had a very difficult and often warlike past. Truth be told, we're not that much different than you are."

"Based on some of the Andorians I've met out there, I have to say that the ones here are far more pleasant to interact with."

"Speaking for all of Andor, I'm honored by your compliment, but it's unnecessary. You see, the explanation is simple; the longer we are away from our homeworld, the more our abrasive tendencies have a way of . . . how did you say . . . tunneling to the surface."

"Something in the water?" he joked.

"Or the snow," she countered, eliciting a laugh from the captain. "Actually, it's this," she said, placing her hand against the smooth stone railing. "The mineral itself. It soothes us, calms us. Helps to keep our thoughts in order."

Nicholas looked at his people, who seemed to be studying the architecture several meters away with due curiosity. "I'd expect, then, that many Andorians in the fleet bring pieces of your homeworld with them on their journeys."

"And you'd be correct. Unfortunately, when the material is cleaved from the world . . . well, as you humans would say, it begins to lose its magic."

"I don't believe in magic."

"Nor do I, Nicholas. But to see the truth, you have to look no farther than the stones beneath your feet."

"Or the people before my eyes, no doubt."

The antennae sprouting from the crown of white hair twitched. "Loopz fr'Linth," she said, bowing her head grandly.

"What does that mean?"

"The best translation would be 'gratitude for the way you look at me when you say that.'"

"It's said in the highest regard, Madam Minister. I hope, for the sake of diplomacy, I haven't overstepped my bounds."

She cocked an eyebrow, then smiled once more. "Quite the opposite, Captain. Andorians favor honesty above all other traits."

That you feel compelled to be so with me brings me great honor, and does your presence here justice."

"Just as long as there isn't a Mr. Sh'retrohr I should be concerned about offending."

"Unlike human bonding, Andorian males take the female's last name during the Great Joining. But in that regard, you have nothing to fear."

"You seem to know a great deal about human culture, but I know precious little of yours."

"It comes with being the minister of protocol, Nicholas. I know a great deal about a number of cultures. However, humanity has always carried a certain fascination with me. Perhaps you would care to explain some of the finer details after our meeting with Minister of Defense Th'esholor?"

"Are you asking me to dinner, Madam Minister?"

She looked at him wryly. "If I have to answer that, then perhaps I should retract my request."

Despite being inside an enormous hole in the ground, Nicholas was liking Andor more and more by the moment. "Not at all, Throti. I'd be delighted."

"As a starship captain, bound to uphold his position as the voice of his people?"

Nicholas nodded. "I'll agree to hang up the ceremonial robes if you will."

She looked at him coyly, her blue face taking on a sheen of violet, and then flattened out a wrinkle in her robe. "Is that . . . what humans call a figure of speech?"

It took only a moment for the captain to realize how she must have interpreted it. "Yes. Yes it is."

"Good," she said in relief. "After all, we've only just met."

At a loss for words, Nicholas again looked for his landing party. Blessedly they were coming to his aid, though neither Commander

Redden nor Lieutenant de Wolf likely realized it. "I think it's time we saw the minister of defense."

"Of course, Captain," Throti said, her once-casual voice again taking on the air of a trained diplomat. She waved her hand toward a set of large, closed doors at the other end of the promenade. "This way."

Once inside the structure, the team was taken through a labyrinth of corridors before they reached their destination. Before them was a set of double doors, not of stone like the rest of the structure, but of a sturdy metal, outlined with a thin blue glow. When Throti approached, she moved her hands over her head, held the pose for a moment, then brought them to her side. The doors immediately parted to bathe the corridor in a soft light.

Following the minister of protocol into the room, Captain Shanayda was surprised to see that, unlike the rest of the structures he'd seen since beaming down, this compartment was one of modern decor. The floor was highly polished, reflecting two thin strips of unbroken lights that encircled the room. There were large banks of computers on the right walls, and on the center of the left was a large view port. A lone figure stood by it, gazing out at something beyond Nicholas's view.

"Minister Th'esholor," Throti said to the silent figure, "may I present Captain Nicholas Shanayda of the Federation starship *Neptune*."

Th'esholor, his hands casually clasped behind his back, simply nodded. When Nicholas looked to Throti for advice, she inclined her head toward the minister of defense as if urging the captain to step to him. Doing so, Nicholas was able to see beyond the view port to what had captivated Th'esholor.

The window looked toward a large, flat valley below. An immense crack running parallel to the view port extended for a kilometer or so in each direction. Glowing embers of red and white floated from it,

with an occasional burst of magma shooting several dozen meters into the air.

"Magnificent, isn't it?" Th'esholor asked with reverence.

"I've never seen its equal."

"The particles you see floating away are captured by collectors high in the overhead. In turn, they are converted into the energy that powers this entire city."

"How stable is that fissure?" Chief Engineer Redden asked, turning to the elderly Andorian statesman.

Th'esholor smiled. "We're quite safe. This formation has existed for nearly half a millennia."

Nicholas was awestruck at its beauty. "Remarkable."

The minister nodded somberly. "When I was a boy, my father worked in this very room. I would often find myself here for hours, gazing at the embers as they floated up, knowing that each and every one was vital to the survival of the people here. Any disruption in the flow to the collectors above could be catastrophic."

"The problem with geological features is that they tend not to last for an eternity."

"Quite right, Captain," the older man replied with sadness. "Although this fissure has been here a very long time, it will undoubtedly not always be so."

"Are there others?" Redden asked.

"As a race, we've already begun the process of moving away from geothermal energy. Our alliance in the Federation has already produced many changes on my planet, and on the others we've colonized. Already the way of the Andorians is shifting, and at a pace which an old man like myself is unaccustomed to. The fissure you see before you is, like myself, the last vestige of the old way of doing things. I will tell you, Captain, that I will miss it when it is gone."

"The Federation is honored to have the Andorians as allies," Nicholas said.

Kass Th'esholor nodded. "As many of my people are about the Federation. However, there are still a number of them, especially those in the Blue Fleet, who feel that Starfleet's presence here is a hindrance. Their pride over their past accomplishments, I feel, blinds them to the more serious threat the Romulans pose."

"I take it, then, that you don't agree with them?"

Th'esholor smiled weakly as he turned to face Nicholas. "My forefathers served in the Blue Fleet, Captain. Without any assistance, they were not only able to stop the Vegan Tyranny from conquering this world, but countless others. And the Vegans were not the only threat to ever come to Andor, nor does it seem they will be the last. However, I do believe the Romulans are the most powerful and dangerous threat Andor has ever faced. Despite the Blue Fleet's reluctance to accept outside assistance, I realize now that we cannot win this war without the Federation's intervention."

"Then why was Starfleet's offer of aid so vehemently rejected?"

"Our political structure is not the same as yours, Captain. As minister of defense, I advise the Andorian council on matters of security. However, they have the final power to veto any advice I would offer them . . . not that I initially approved of Starfleet's intervention, mind you."

"That's not all that different from the United Earth way of doing things, Minister," Nicholas offered diplomatically. "But you've changed your mind on this, it seems."

"Ministers like myself are not without powers of our own, Captain. When we are able to support one another's decisions, we are able to put pressure on the council, often producing positive results. However, as Andorians are wont to do—to their own detriment—the ministers are more often squabbling amongst themselves."

"Then what changed your mind, and how were you able to convince the council to allow us to be here?"

Th'esholor turned his eyes to Minister Sh'retrohr. "Although we do not often see eye to eye in matters of politics, my daughter can be quite persuasive when she puts her mind to it." He then looked back to Nicholas. "As her mother would attest to, no doubt."

"Your daughter?" Nicholas asked, looking to Throti, who nodded quietly from the far side of the room.

"My true and pride and joy, Captain," Minister Th'esholor beamed. "It is for her and those like her that we have allowed Starfleet to be here in our time of crises. Like the energy fountain beyond this room, I represent an outmoded way of thinking, as do many on the Andorian council. If we are to survive, then there must be change, and it needs to come from the inside as well as out. Throti has convinced me of that."

Nicholas turned to Throti and smiled. "Impressive."

Minister Th'esholor stepped to his daughter's side and reached for her hand. "Someday I hope that she will take her much-needed place on the council. The future is meant for the young, not old men like myself."

"You have many more good years ahead of you, Father," Throti said, leaning her forehead down to meet her father's.

Leaning away from her after a moment, Minister Th'esholor looked back to Nicholas. "Let us hope that, with Captain Shanayda's assistance, that will be so. For all of us."

Seeing the despair not only in Th'esholor's eyes, but in Throti's as well, Nicholas had a newfound sense of resolve. "Starfleet will do everything in its power to make sure your people are defended, sir."

"I'm sure you will, Captain," Minister Th'esholor said as he placed an arm around his daughter's waist.

There was a series of beeps in the overhead, followed by a request for Minister Th'esholor to contact the minister of military operations. Slipping away from Throti, he moved to one of the computers on the

far wall and pressed one of the controls. "This is Minister of Defense Th'esholor."

The image of another older Andorian appeared on the screen. "Minister, the Blue Fleet has obtained a sensor contact on the incoming Romulan armada. They will arrive here shortly."

"Why were they not detected before now?"

"We cannot say for certain, Minister."

"And our forces?"

"They're standing by, waiting on approval to engage the enemy."

"They have that approval."

A beep from Lieutenant de Wolf's communicator drew the captain's attention to the young officer. "Sir, message coming in from the *Neptune*."

Stepping to de Wolf's side, Nicholas flipped it open. "This is Shanayda. Go ahead, *Neptune*."

"Sir, this is Commander Connor. Romulan attack fleet entering the Andor system now."

"Composition of the enemy forces?"

"Cruisers and destroyers. We count fifteen of them on the long-range sensors."

"Distance?"

"About ten minutes at their present speed. The Blue Fleet is moving to intercept."

"Sound general quarters, Commander. Advise our forces to maintain orbit around Andor, just in case any of the Romulan vessels break through the Andorian defenses. We'll be coming back to the ship shortly. Shanayda out." Closing the device, he handed it back to de Wolf before stepping over to Throti and her father. "I need to get back to the *Neptune*."

"Then we'll need to hurry. The only place capable of that will be where you beamed down."

Taking into account the sightseeing they'd done along the way, the location was nearly thirty minutes distant. "Let's go."

The two large statues Nicholas had first seen upon beaming down were visible in the distance. With Throti in the lead, the Starfleet landing party dashed for the circle of light that was their beam down location. As they neared the statues, Lieutenant de Wolf called out from behind them.

"Sir, we're getting another call from the *Neptune*. Some of the Romulan fleet has broken through the Andorian defenses and are entering orbit."

Sliding to a halt between the two large statues at the top of the stair, Nicholas turned and grabbed the communicator from de Wolf. "Commander Connor, there's no time for us to get back to the ship. Raise the shields and order our forces to repel the Romulans."

"Aye, sir."

Closing the communicator, Nicholas turned to Throti. "We need to get to shelter. If any Romulans make it through our defenses, it could spell disaster for anyone on the surface."

Throti nodded. She'd heard of the Romulan weapon that could devastate whole cities. *The Star Bomb*. Although Ojharaa was deep below the surface, there was no telling what a device of such magnitude could do. "I'll take you to the minister of military operations. From there we can monitor everything going on in orbit."

As they dashed through the streets, alarm klaxons began to sound, warning everyone to get to the nearest shelter for protection. Rounding a deserted corner, Nicholas was surprised to see an ancient-looking temple in the shape of a pyramid directly in their path. At its base was a single door, one that Throti told them was their destination. Inside, Nicholas and his people were surprised to see it outfitted with an array of computers and monitors dedicated to planetary defense. Over a dozen Andorian officers were seated at the

terminals, with the minister of military operations on a high podium that overlooked the large room. Beside him, Minister of Defense Th'esholor stood with arms crossed.

"Father," Throti called out as she ascended a stone staircase that brought the landing party to the top of the podium.

"I am sorry you were not able to return to your ship," Th'esholor said as Nicholas stepped beside him. "This is Sovial Th'vhivorh, Minister of Military Operations."

"My first officer is more than capable of taking the *Neptune* into combat, Mr. Th'esholor."

"So I have witnessed," said Sovial as he turned to Nicholas. "See for yourself, Captain."

On the large screen that dominated the far wall, Nicholas could see that the planet Andor took up the right side, with the outline of his ships in fierce combat with those of green circles denoting Romulan ships. The *Neptune* was currently engaged against a cruiser, and based on the graphs below each vessel, the Romulan was close to being disabled. When a second Starfleet vessel—the destroyer *Vostok*—also began to fire on the Romulan, the icon on the screen quickly dissolved.

"Your people fight well, Captain Shanayda," Sovial said with approval.

"And the Blue Fleet?" Nicholas asked.

"They took heavy casualties, but they are regrouping."

"How many Romulan vessels did they disable?"

"Five, out of a total of fifteen. Four of our vessels were lost in the engagement."

On the far left of the screen, two more green blips entered the view. Sovial noticed them at the same moment Nicholas did. They were heading to the planet at full speed. He leaned over the railing and called down to the security personnel below. "Target the planetary defenses at those targets and fire when they are in range."

A large monitor, smaller than the central one, switched to a view of the surface of Andor. On it, Nicholas watched as a large laser cannon emerged from a snow-covered alcove. Seconds later it glowed to life as its powerful beam shot out into space. On the central monitor, the group watched as it impacted with one of the two incoming Romulan vessels, sending it off course.

"One target disabled," a voice called out from below.

"Target the other and fire when ready," Sovial replied.

Another beam of energy lanced out from the planet, but the Romulan successfully dodged it. Flipping open his communicator, Nicholas raised the *Neptune*. "Commander Connor, there's a Romulan vessel coming toward the planet at full impulse. She may be making an attack run. You have to stop it."

"We've got the vessel on sensors, but it's too far away," Michael replied. "I'll see what we can do."

The planetary cannon fired once more, but the Romulan once again was able to dodge it. Now in striking distance, the enemy vessel fired two warheads directly at the surface.

"Target all ground-based defenses at those warheads!" Sovial screamed.

Seconds later, one of the devices exploded. The other continued on, straight for a blue circle on the surface of Andor.

"Tell whoever is there to brace for orbital bombardment!" Nicholas yelled as he pointed to the monitor.

"That's already been done," Sovial said angrily. "That location is directly over Ojharaa. It is us."

Reacting on instinct, Nicholas rushed toward Throti at the same instant the Romulan warhead impacted the surface. Although Ojharaa was deep underground, the ferocity of the device was easily transferred through the kilometer of rock, shaking the entire city to its core. Everyone in the military operations center was tossed hard to the floor, including Nicholas and Throti. There were screams from

all corners of the room as computers overloaded and monitors exploded. Stones in the overhead of the ancient temple fell from the ceiling, crushing some of the personnel below.

Then the entire room fell into darkness.

Chapter 12

On the bridge of the destroyer *Vostok*, Captain Chris Hunt peered at the main view screen as a large explosion registered across the surface of Andor. Like a mushroom cloud straight from the history books, a plume of superheated gas and planetary fragments launched into the atmosphere.

"Sir," Lieutenant Steven Butler called from the communications station, "we've just lost contact with the defense complex in Ojharaa."

"It's been destroyed?"

"Difficult to tell for certain, sir," Vincent Baggio said from the science station. "Radiation readings on the surface are making it impossible to penetrate more than a few meters into the surface."

"Lieutenant Butler, keep trying to get through to them."

"Yes, sir."

"Vincent, where's the Romulan ship that fired the warhead?"

"Bearing 021-mark-7. Range is 5,000 kilometers."

"Helm, lay in an intercept course. Weapons, target them with everything we've got. I'm not about to give that Romulan another chance to take potshots at the surface."

"Yes, sir," the officers replied in unison.

The *Vostok* quickly came to, placing the Romulan vessel directly abeam. On the main viewer, the Romulan appeared to be hanging dead in space, but Captain Hunt knew better. The two vessels were now heading right for one another.

"All weapons locked on target, sir," Richard Todd said from the helm.

"Lasers and plasma cannons only, Mr. Todd. At this range, accelerator cannons will do as much damage to us as it will them."

"Aye, sir."

"Fire!"

The main laser batteries of the *Ajax*-class destroyer fired first. Two beams of blue-white energy raced out, converging on a single point in the center of the *Cabbage's* rounded forward hull. An explosion rippled across the bow, but before the flames were allowed to die down, the *Vostok's* short-range plasma cannons came online. Although the low-powered weapons weren't effective at long-range attacks, they were devastating when used in close combat. Four of the small turrets moved out of the alcoves and sprayed the Romulan cruiser with round after round, leaving the *Cabbage* a burning hulk as the *Vostok* cruised past it.

"Power readings on the Romulan vessel are negligible," Commander Baggio announced a moment later.

Chris approved, but the space around Andor still wasn't won. "Where's the *Neptune*?"

"To our stern, sir," Vincent replied. "She's taking heavy fire from two other Romulan ships."

"And the remnants of the Blue Fleet?"

"They've regrouped and are heading back toward Andor now. ETA is ten minutes."

"Lieutenant Todd, lay in a course for the *Neptune*. Let's see if we can keep the Romulans busy until the Andorians show back up."

At the end of a dark tunnel, a strobing red glow beckoned the captain. At first, Nicholas moved toward it slowly, but then felt his momentum increase until he was in danger of colliding with it. Holding his hands before him to soften the impact, he felt a distinct pain in the side of his face as his senses returned. Slowly opening his eyes, he tilted his head to find that he was face down on a computer terminal, the flashing red light of his dream coming from the damaged workstation beneath him. Slowly checking his motor functions he discovered no pain in his body, and drew himself to his

knees as he looked around the darkened space. Only two emergency lights were still functioning, and what little light they let off still cast most of the room in darkness. There was a rustle beside the captain, followed by a soft grunt.

"Throti?" Nicholas asked, leaning toward the minister's supine form.

"Nicholas?" she breathed.

"Are you hurt?"

"I think . . . my leg. It may be broken."

Nicholas would have given anything for a flashlight. Looking around desperately and unable to find anything, an idea popped in his head. Quickly pulling out his communicator, he switched on the emergency beacon. Now, not only would the *Neptune* know he needed help, he would also have an indicator on the device with which to see. Holding the dim light to Throti's face, he could see a small cut on her forehead. Holding the communicator close, he moved it down her body, not finding anything out of place until he came to her right leg. He could tell instantly that her femur was broken, but the lack of blood told him it was likely a simple fracture. It probably hurt like hell, but as long as she remained immobile, there wouldn't be any serious damage.

Moving back to her face, he leaned in close. "Try not to move."

"I'll . . . I'll try."

"I need to find my people, but I'll be back. Do you think you can manage for a few minutes?"

"I think so."

"Good." Without thinking, he leaned down and kissed her on the forehead.

Although it must have pained her a great deal, she reached up and moved his lips toward hers and kissed him softly. "Just . . . in case I don't make it," she said with a weak smile. "I've wanted to do that since you beamed down."

"You'll be just fine as long as you stop moving. I'll be back soon." As he slipped away from her, the weak light provided by the

communicator wasn't strong enough to keep her features defined. By the time he'd stood, Throti had disappeared back into the darkness.

"Commander Redden? Lieutenant de Wolf?" he called. "Minister Th'esholor?" The sound of a metal panel falling to the floor behind him drew the captain's attention.

"Redden here, sir," the chief engineer's pained voice called back.

"You hurt, Jonathan?"

"Just a few bumps and bruises, sir. I think I'll manage."

Nicholas approached the voice, holding the communicator up for light. Shuffling his feet across the floor so as to not step on anyone, he found the engineer a few seconds later. "Where's de Wolf?"

"He was right beside me," Jonathan said as he looked around.

"You still have your communicator?"

Redden quickly patted himself down. "No, sir. It must have fallen out."

A dim light on the rear wall caught Nicholas's attention. He and the chief engineer shuffled slowly toward it, and when he shone his communicator on it, he saw that it was the controls for a doorway. Pressing it produced an audible buzz, but the door remained closed. "Damn. I think it's jammed."

"Let me see," Redden said he stepped around the captain. "It's not jammed. I think one of the circuit pathways is broken."

"Can you fix it?"

"Shine the light down a bit."

Nicholas did as he was asked. Below the illuminated switch, the engineer found an access panel. Pulling it open, they found the circuit cavity had its own light source. It bathed the area in a wash of white light for several meters. "I'll see if I can find de Wolf or anyone else."

Jonathan nodded. "I'll keep at this door, sir. It'll take a few minutes, but I think I can get it."

"I didn't know you were versed in Andorian electrical systems."

"Physics are physics, sir. Pathways don't operate any differently just because they're not designed by humans. Besides, it's only a door. I'd have reservations about tinkering with one of their power generators, but this is pretty harmless. Either I'll get it to open or I won't."

"Do what you can, Jon. I'll be back."

Scanning the now partially lit area, it didn't take long for Nicholas to backtrack and find Hans de Wolf. Checking the lieutenant's vitals, the captain found his communications officer alive but unconscious. "I found de Wolf. He's stable, for now." As he moved away, the glint of something on the floor to his right caught his attention. Holding his communicator to it, he saw that it was a scrap of material similar to the robes worn by Ministers Th'esholor and Th'vhivorh. Not far from it, a form was attempting to move out from underneath a fallen display monitor. Rushing to help, Nicholas quickly tossed the screen aside and found Minister of Defense Th'esholor beneath it.

"Minister Th'esholor, its Captain Shanayda."

"Captain . . . my . . . daughter? Throti?"

"She's fine, sir."

"And . . . Minister Th'vhivorh?"

Nicholas scanned the area, but saw no one else. "I don't see him, sir."

Th'esholor nodded, his eyes still closed. "He was . . . near the edge of the platform. He may have . . . fallen."

"Are you all right? Can you move?"

"My old body . . . is apparently not as strong as it once was, Captain," the minister half-joked. "I think I will manage, my friend. For a few moments, anyway."

Nodding, Nicholas moved away and cautiously stepped to the ill-defined edge of the platform. Below, he could a number of flashlight beams moving about. What they revealed told him the entire complex was destroyed. The large display monitors had fallen from the wall, crashing to the floor and likely crushing those unfortunate

technicians who'd sat below them. He could see two Andorians pulling the lifeless body of another from the rubble. Directly below the edge of the platform, another Andorian searched the rubble with one hand and held a light with the other. When the beam fell on a crumpled, half-crushed body, Nicholas could tell instantly that it was that of Minister of Military Operations Th'vhivorh, and that he was dead.

Sighing, he turned back to check on Th'esholor. As he did, the far door sprang open with a pop, and half a dozen Andorians barreled past a surprised Commander Redden as they rushed into the remains of the control room. Based on the devices they held in their hands, Captain Shanayda assumed they were some kind of medical team. "Over here!" he called to them. One Andorian in particular deftly leapt over several fallen chunks of debris to respond. "Minister Th'esholor," Nicholas indicated to the medical worker already injecting some kind of concoction into the minister's forearm. When he turned to where Throthi had fallen, he was glad to see another aid worker attending to her injured leg. A third Andorian had apparently injected de Wolf with a stimulant, for the communications officer was back on his feet, although he looked more than a little shaken.

"Lieutenant?" Nicholas asked, placing a friendly hand on the officer's shoulder. "Welcome back to the land of the living."

"Thank you, sir," de Wolf replied. "Commander Redden?"

"Alive," the chief engineer said as he stepped up behind the two. "Meaning you still owe me that ten credits from the bet you lost last week."

Hans laughed. "Honestly, I thought I'd just cashed in my last credit. What was that, sir?"

"A Romulan Star Bomb, most likely. A single fusion missile wouldn't have done this kind of damage."

"Any word from the ship?" de Wolf asked.

"Not yet," Nicholas replied, then looked at the ceiling. "There's no telling what kind of damage is above us. It could be blocking the emergency distress beacon. Hans, take my communicator and get outside. See what you can do to raise the ship. But watch your step. Remember, despite how large our surroundings might appear, we're still inside a cave. There could be structural damage."

"Aye, sir."

Just as the lieutenant disappeared through the open doorway, the remainder of the emergency lights in the control room sprang to life. The destruction that the captain and chief engineer could now see was far worse than previously thought, and many more were dead.

"Emergency generators must have come online," Jonathan said as he looked around. "What a mess."

Nicholas couldn't agree more. Turning back to Throti, he could see that two aid workers had moved her into a stretcher. As they lifted her from the ground, he caught her eye, and when she winked at him, he felt a sense of relief. After seeing that Minister Th'esholor was also improving, Nicholas looked back to Redden.

"You feeling well enough to help these people out?"

Redden held his hands up and checked their operation. Satisfied, he stretched out his arms and nodded. "Yes, sir."

"Good. Until we hear from the *Neptune*, these people are going to need all the help they can get." Turning about the room, he saw one of the aid workers attempting to free an injured Andorian trapped beneath a fallen metal beam. "Over there. Let's go."

On the main viewer, Commander Michael Connor watched as the *Neptune's* lasers carved a deep gash in the upper hull of a Romulan frigate.

"Fire accelerator cannons!"

The projectiles launched, hitting the wounded target a few seconds later. The portside wing was sheared off in the ensuing explosion, and

all lights immediately went dark. The remains of the ship then tumbled in a freefall toward Andor.

"They're too far away for tractor beam lock, sir," Jarrod Frahm called out.

Stepping out of the command chair, Michael moved over to the science console and confirmed what his eyes were telling him. "The hulk's going to burn up in the atmosphere long before it reaches the surface. Whatever does make it down is going to land in an unpopulated region of the northern pole."

"What's our next target, sir?" Frahm asked.

"The last of the Romulan vessels have maneuvered out of the Andor system."

"Then we won?"

Connor shook his head at the short-range sensor monitor. Nearly three-quarters of the Blue Fleet had been decimated, and what few ships still had power were barely functioning. Two Federation cruisers and one destroyer had been destroyed, with four other cruisers and a frigate badly damaged. And a five-square-kilometer area of the surface of Andor had been all but vaporized. "I don't think anybody won here today, Lieutenant. Communications, anything from Captain Shanayda or our landing party?"

"No, sir. Radiation levels at the site of the explosion are still too high to get through."

"We're not going to sit up here and wait from them to contact us. Call down to the shuttlebay. Have them prep the two pods for launch. I'll take command of one myself. Then call down to sickbay. Have them gather a medical team together, outfitted with radiation gear. If the captain can't get to us, we're going to do what we can to get to him."

"Yes, sir."

"Lieutenant Frahm, you'll be in command in my absence. Coordinate starship salvage operations with the rest of our forces.

Any vessels needing life-support repair will be tended to first, be they Andorian or Starfleet. Understood?"

"Aye, sir."

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Stardate 15412.29

Office of Tactical Planning, Starfleet Command Headquarters, San Francisco, Earth

Federation president Rissa Lyn, with two of her aides in tow, stepped through the double doors and toward Starfleet Commander Rom Walton who, along with the group of officers already present, had stood when she'd entered the compartment.

"Madam President," he said, reaching out a hand that she grasped softly. The look of deep concern on her face was understandable.

"Admiral Walton. Please let me know everything that's happened."

"The planet Andor has been attacked. The capital city of Ojharaa has sustained massive damage."

"Casualties?"

"The reports are still coming in. So far, we estimate about 100,000 dead, with another 200,000 injured. And, because the attack was against the capital city, many of the Andorian royal family were killed."

Rissa closed her eyes tightly, fighting to hold back the tears she'd been holding since she'd heard of the attack half an hour before. Taking a deep breath, she opened her eyes and looked at the large display dominating the far wall of the room. On it was the planet Andor, with a number of starships in orbit. "And what of Starfleet's forces in the area?"

"We lost eight ships total, either due to destruction in battle or because they were abandoned after the fact. The Andorians lost fifteen of their planetary defense vessels."

"And the Romulans?"

"We destroyed most of their vessels, ma'am. The rest escaped the system."

"Were they followed?"

Walton nodded, then brought up the image of a small planetary system on a second monitor. "The destroyer *Vostok* shadowed them for some time before she lost contact near the Wembly system." He then pointed to the binary stars at the system's core. "The Romulans likely used the gravity well of the two stars to mask their warp signatures. However, it's no big mystery where they were headed."

Rissa nodded. "The Zeta Reticuli system."

"Exactly. The Romulans are amassing a huge fleet there, one Starfleet Intelligence is sure they're intent on deploying soon."

"And their target?"

Rom shook his head. "We still don't know. We think the attack on Andor was an operation test for whatever they have planned next."

"I say it was more than successful, Admiral." Turning back to the large image of Andor, she counted the number of ships present at twenty. "What kind of aid have we sent?"

"Three medical transports are on their way from Starbase 3. They're being escorted by two cruiser squadrons, with the carrier *Enterprise* as the flagship. In conjunction with the other Starfleet vessels already in orbit, it should deter the Romulans from making another attack against the planet."

Shaking her head, she sighed heavily. "And what about our forces in the Shressh system?"

Walton brought up the image of the system in question on the monitor. In it were no less than twenty Romulan warships amassed around the fifth of eight planets. "Shressh fell five hours ago. Due to

overwhelming Romulan superiority, we had little choice but to pull out."

"Casualties?"

"Five starships were lost, with ten more damaged. The Alpha Centaurians took the brunt of it, with the Tellarites and United Earth forces sustaining little damage."

"Where are they now?"

"On course for Outpost 2. They should arrive there in less than twelve hours. Task Force 12, under the command of Fleet Captain Dyck, is taking up station at Andor now."

Things were quickly going from bad to worse. If the tide of Romulan victories wasn't stopped soon, more core planets like Andor would be easily within reach of the enemy forces. Whatever the Romulans were planning with their fleet at Zeta Reticuli, Rissa knew that they needed to be stopped, no matter the cost. "Admiral Walton, please call together your joint commanders for a briefing immediately. I won't be leaving San Francisco until we've formulated a clear and concise strategy to deal with this issue, and by that I mean a full-scale retaliatory strike. The now-silent voices of Andor demand it, and by proxy, so do all in the Federation."

"Yes, ma'am."

Chapter 13

Stardate 15501.04

January 2255

As the *Lincoln*-class cruiser *Merlin* slipped into its assigned berth, Captain Sven Berglowe studied the growing fleet on the main view screen with apprehension. Nearly 100 ships were present, representing virtually every class in Starfleet. Even some of the local defense forces from neighboring Andorian, Tellarite, and Vulcan colonies had joined the assembly. That the planet-based Outer System Defense Outpost 2 had been rechristened as Starbase 10 for the duration of the upcoming battle was of little surprise to the captain. Starfleet had a fair shake of admirals and other representatives in the cramped confines of what was once a simple waystation to the outer fringes of Federation space. Even now, two full battalions from the Starfleet Corps of Engineers were tasked solely with constructing further accommodations for the budding base.

And in orbit, high above the desert world, a once-sparsely occupied command station was brimming with officers as they came and went to the surface. Fleet Admiral Ian Weiger, the commander in charge of the fleet, had set up his office there, intent on personally greeting each vessel's commander as they reported in. Captain Berglowe would be no different than the hundred others who had already done so, and he wondered at how many others were yet to.

With the slightest of bumps, the *Merlin* was latched onto by one of the six docking lines stretching out from the central station. Designed to transfer materials to and from the ship, the only way to the station

was by transporter. And with so many vessels in orbit transferring personnel, Sven had been ordered to beam over at a very specific time.

"Umbilicals attached, sir," Lieutenant Medina said from the navigator's seat.

"Well done, Mike," the captain complimented.

"Impulse engines and maneuvering thrusters output is now zero," Chief Engineer Keava reported.

"Very good. Communications, send to the station that Commander Charles and I will be beaming over on schedule."

"Aye, sir,"

On the viewer, a squadron of three *Messier*-class destroyers crossed from one side of the station to the other. The angular vessels, the last of the ships designed exclusively by the United Earth government before the formation of the Federation, were easily outgunned and outmaneuvered by any number of new classes—the *Merlin* included. In fact, they'd been retired from service with Starfleet for some time. Turning his gaze to his science officer, he suddenly found his curiosity overwhelming. "Dan, what do you have on those *Messier*-class ships over there?"

Commander Attard, likewise puzzled, checked the old cruisers' identity codes with the onboard computers. "The codes being returned are Tellarite in origin." Attard entered in a further set of computations, then waited patiently for the ship's database to respond to the conjoined query. "They were sold from a Federation supply depot six months ago. The Tellarite government has them listed as planetary defense craft."

"Have any of the weapons systems been upgraded?"

Daniel nodded as he peered into the sensor scope. "The two forward laser canons have been replaced with particle beam cannons. All other armament is standard to that class."

"And their engines?"

"Again, standard for cruisers of that time period. Maximum speed of warp 2.9."

"They certainly won't be the first to the fight." Sven nodded. Still, that the Tellarites were brazen enough to bring the older vessels into combat at all was a testament to their tenacity . . . and their hatred for the Romulans.

"Any help we can get out there is fine enough for me." The executive officer, Commander Barry Charles, mimicked the captain's thoughts on the matter.

As the *Messier* cruisers moved out of view, they were replaced by two 22-laser cannon armed *Marshall*-class light destroyers making their way toward open berths beside the *Merlin*, the running lights on their trapezoid-shaped forward hulls blinking steadily.

"Message coming in from the station, sir," the communications officer piped in. "Captain Janssens of the starship *Providence* will meet you when you arrive on the station."

Sven knew the name from the frontline subspace reports he'd read over the last few months. Though he'd never met Captain Paul Janssens, his reputation as an exceptional combat officer was well known in the circles of starship captains. Captain Berglowe was glad to know such a capable officer would be going into battle alongside his ship. "Understood. Advise Captain Janssens we're on our way. Commander Attard, the ship is yours." Looking toward his executive officer, Sven motioned to the turbo elevator doors. "After you, Mr. Charles."

In the transporter room on the space station, Captain Paul Janssens waited impassively for the incoming commander of the USS *Merlin*. At his side was his first officer, Commander Benjamin Chee. The two watched as scores of officers moved about, amazed that so many could fit on such a small orbital outpost at the same time. In truth, the

sheer volume of people was starting to get to Ben. He much preferred the uncrowded passageways of the heavy cruiser *Providence*.

Picking up on his friend's unease, Captain Janssens leaned over and brushed the younger man with his shoulder. "You okay?"

"Huh?" the commander asked, then shrugged as he looked around the atrium. "I guess so, sir. I think it's just the introvert part of my personality coming to the surface."

Paul nodded in understanding. He was beginning to feel a bit uneasy himself. There was far too much noise here for his liking. "We'll be back on the ship soon enough."

A gaggle of Tellarites came sauntering in through a nearby doorway. Laughing and yelling at one another over the din of other officers, they nearly collided with the two men from the *Providence*. Paul and Ben were quick to step back, staring at hooved aliens who didn't give the humans a second thought as they moved past and faded into the crowd.

"This is what it's going to be like out there, you know," Janssens said as he nodded to where the Tellarites had vanished into the throng.

"Sir?"

"All these crews . . . and those ships out there," Paul said, pointing to a nearby view port that overlooked the docks beyond the station. "To put so many into a single sector invites disaster."

"I don't think Starfleet has much of a choice in the matter. This is where the starbase is."

Paul laughed. "I don't mean here, Ben. I mean out there . . . the *real* out there."

"Zeta Reticuli."

Captain Janssens was silent for a moment, then bowed his head slightly. "Situational awareness, Commander Chee. That's the order of the day."

It was Ben's turn to laugh. Situational awareness was something that was drilled into every cadet from the very first day at the

academy. It was the deceptively simple philosophy that an officer should have total understanding of everything going on around him. The officer who was tuned in had his mind on a constant swivel, cognizant of what was going on behind him while his eyes looked ahead to the future. There was no excuse for being distracted or careless, because oftentimes those two failings would quickly get a man killed. Victory often went to those who were not necessarily stronger or faster. Rather, in the game of chance that is life, it went to those who knew exactly where to be at precisely the right moment based on all available data, simultaneously trusting that those around them would do the same while keeping in mind that, because no one could read minds, they were also completely unpredictable. Those who practiced the art well, like Captain Janssens, were regarded as something of deities by junior officers. Those who failed to practice it were dead.

"Understood, sir."

The whine of the nearby transporter pad drew the attention of the two officers. When the beam had faded, two men from the cruiser *Merlin* stepped down.

"Captain Berglowe," Paul said as he reached his hand out.

"Captain Janssens, I presume?"

"Please, call me Paul. This is my first officer, Commander Benjamin Chee."

Sven nodded to the commander, then turned to his executive officer. "This is Commander Barry Charles."

The two first officers shook one another's hands.

Paul nodded his head to a nearby corridor. "Admiral Weiger is expecting you and me shortly, Captain Janssens. Our executive officers have a briefing of their own to attend to."

"You've been here long?"

"The *Providence* arrived about two hours ago, along with the frigates *Mars* and *Bombay*. Their captains will also be joining us for the mission briefing."

Sven nodded, and the four men divided as they went to their respective meetings.

The executive officers' briefing was a scaled-down version of the one the captains were currently engaged in with Admiral Weiger. Covered was the general invasion plan for the Romulan-held Zeta Reticuli system, as well as all planned escape routes. Communication protocols and codes were exchanged, and the fleet breakdown was described in basic detail, the finer points handed out to each respective officer in the form of data cartridges to be studied later.

Two hours later, the first officers were dismissed. When Lieutenant Commander Norman Jaffe, the executive officer of the frigate *Mars*, learned that their respective captains were still occupied, he suggested the men find an out-of-the-way corner of the station to confer. It took nearly 30 minutes for the four men to locate a suitable compartment, but as luck would have it, it was adjacent to a dining establishment.

Huddling around a circular table near a small view port, Lieutenant Commander Steven Baker of the frigate *Bombay* was the first to speak. "So," he began, "any thoughts, gentlemen?"

The three other officers picked at their food, none of them responding immediately. Cautiously, Norman Jaffe leaned forward. "It's risky."

"That's an understatement," Ben Chee chuckled back, receiving an approving nod from Commander Charles.

"More so for us than you boys," Jaffe smirked. "At least you've got cruisers under your boots. Baker and I are on frigates, you know?"

"Better maneuverability," Chee said as he sipped at his drink.

"But less powerful, both offensively and defensively," Steven Baker replied. "And let's not forget, this isn't some rinky-dink squadron of Romulans we're going up against. There's a whole fleet of nasties waiting in Zeta Reticuli for us."

"And don't forget the space station," Jaffe added before forking some chicken off his plate.

"Oh, yeah," Steven replied sardonically. "There's that, too. Lest I remind any of you that Starfleet's never gone up against a battle station before."

"There's a first time for everything," Benjamin said, the flicker of something beyond the view port grabbing his attention.

"Optimism?"

After studying the incoming cruiser for a moment, Ben turned back to Norman. "Resolve."

"You think we have a chance?"

But it was Commander Charles who responded. "There's always a chance, Norman. Fleet command wouldn't send us other there if they thought otherwise."

"Tell that to the 10th Cruiser Squadron," Baker said as he moved his green peas from one side of the plate to another.

"What about them?" Commander Charles asked.

"You haven't heard?"

Barry looked at Ben, who likewise shook his head.

Norman Jaffe leaned in and dropped his voice. "Two weeks ago. Regulus. Starfleet Intelligence gets word of a Romulan convoy moving through the area. They want to cripple the enemy's supplies lines through the region. Makes sense, right? So, they send in the 10th to take care of it. Easy. Clean. Only when the 10th shows up, they find that's it not a supply convoy at all. It's a full-fledged Romulan battle squadron, not a supply ship or freighter in sight."

"What happened?" Chee asked.

"The 10th was made up entirely of *Tannhauser*-class cruisers," Baker said. "I'll give you one guess."

"No need," Jaffe continued. "They were wiped out by overwhelming firepower. The Romulans took them out without batting an eyelash and continued on to the Farla system."

Charles nodded. "There's an Alpha Centaurian colony there, right?"

Jaffe shook his head. "Not any more. Romulans wiped 'em out. All 2,000 of them."

Charles was beside himself. "I had no idea."

"Not many do," Baker said. "Starfleet is keeping it under wraps for the moment. Not good for morale, and all."

"And you think the same thing is going happen at Zeta Reticuli?" Charles asked.

Norman shook his head. "Let's just say my faith in Starfleet Intelligence isn't what it used to be. They say we're going to run into some thirty or forty ships in there, that's fine. But, as far as I'm concerned, I'm betting on twice that . . . if not more. And that's before we take the battle station into account."

"It's not a moving target, though," Charles added.

"But it's big," Steven countered. "Big enough to hold plenty of firepower, and powerful enough to generate enough energy to keep firing long after we've depleted our resources fighting the Romulan fleet."

Jaffe nodded. "And the longer it takes to destroy the station, the more time the Romulans have to send reinforcements into the system."

Ben nodded. "Well, like it or not, boys, that's where we're headed."

Jaffe smiled, then scooped some potatoes. Swallowing, he sighed. "Like I said, it's risky."

Charles lifted his drink and regarded it for a moment. "The *Merlin* is going to be on the opposite side of the offensive line than the *Bombay*

or the *Mars*. But, first officer to first officer, if you guys find yourselves in over your heads, you give us a call. I'll do what I can."

Ben tapped his knuckles on the tabletop, then raised his glass. "Same goes for the *Providence*."

Steven leaned back and laughed. "Are you kidding? You guys are the ones in those lumbering cruisers. If anything, we'll be the ones speeding in to save *your* behinds."

Barry grinned. "Is that a fact, Mr. Baker?"

Norman raised his glass, which was followed by Steven doing the same. "It's a promise, Mr. Charles."

"All stations have reported in, Captain Janssens."

Paul nodded to the communications officer, Lieutenant Thomas Perry. "Thank you. Call down to engineering. Have the chief buzz me."

"Aye, sir."

Pivoting the command chair, Paul looked to Commander Chee at the sensor console. "Ben?"

"Ready, sir."

The intercom on the captain's chair began to beep steadily. "Mike," Paul said, linking his speaker to that of the chief engineer. "Report status."

"Impulse reactors online, Captain. Warp core is powering up as we speak."

"Damage control parties?"

"At station keeping, sir. I've got major repair crews in all critical sections of the ship."

"Very good. We'll be going to warp as soon as we leave the system."

"Understood, sir. We'll be ready down here."

Closing the channel, Paul stepped out of the command chair and down to the helm. "Ray?"

Lieutenant Utter turned his head over his shoulder and nodded. "Course laid in for Zeta Reticuli system, sir."

"Lieutenant Bavaro?"

The weapons officer sitting beside Lieutenant Utter turned to look at the captain. "Laser batteries offline to conserve power, sir. Particle beam cannon hatch covers are closed, but unlocked. Accelerator cannon tubes primed with four rounds each. Targeting sensors are online. Both automatic and manual firing controls are green."

"Very good. Set the view screen to full forward, zero magnification."

Bavaro switched on the screen, giving the bridge crew an unobstructed view of the planet below and the fleet that was lying in anchor above it. "Lieutenant Perry, put me on shipwide audio."

"Aye, sir," the lieutenant replied. "You're on, Captain."

Collecting his thoughts, Paul addressed his crew. "All hands, this is the captain speaking. In less than an hour, we'll be warping into the Zeta Reticuli system to face off against the Romulan fleet stationed in that system. Located in that system is a major Romulan outpost, one responsible for coordinating all Romulan activity in this sector." He paused, then continued. "Every soldier must know, before they go into hazard, how the battle they're about to fight fits into the larger picture, and how the success of their fighting will influence the battle as a whole. We've been assigned to the first wave of the attack, and our success in throwing the Romulans into disarray is critical to the efforts of those coming in behind us. I'm counting on each and every one of you to give their best in the engagement, and I know that this is not misplaced faith on my part. You each have your particular talents, and I've seen them all at their very best since I've taken command of this vessel. Always remember that you are not only a credit to this ship and to me, but more importantly, you've done yourself a great honor. I can't promise we're going to make it out in one piece, or that the person standing beside you will be there tomorrow. But I can promise you that we're going to do the duty

assigned to us to the best of our abilities. I can say, without a doubt, that the *Providence* and her crew will be what she needs to be, where she needs to be, and when she needs to be there before we're even asked. That's the kind of people who crew this vessel, the kind of people who are the blood that keeps her going. I'm honored to serve with each and every one of you. Now, let's go show those Romulans a thing or two about what it means to bring their ships into our backyard and take the lives of those we care about the most. Let the names of ships like *Diana*, *Solok*, *Adversary*, *Borgub*, and others be on the tips of your tongue.

"And let's bring the fight to their house, and tell the Romulans once and for all and in no uncertain terms that they're not welcome here anymore."

Chapter 14

Stardate 15501.08

All was still, save for a soft vibration in the deck plates beneath his feet, giving rise to both speculation and caution all in the same moment. The frigate *Bombay* had dropped out of warp—presumably with the rest of the fleet—nearly ten minutes ago. The binary stars of the Zeta Reticuli system would be shining brightly, casting reflections off the hulls of the throng of ships entering the system. Long ago, from the comfort of his backyard on Earth, David Baker had gazed at them with his father’s telescope, his older brother Steven at his side as they argued over who would view them first, thus claiming a temporary victory in their search of the heavens. In the end, the younger Baker always won out. Today, however, his brother had one-upped him. As the ship’s executive officer, Steven would be inspecting the two main sequence stars on the main view screen at this very moment. Poised at the weapons monitoring station three decks below the bridge, without a single exterior monitor in the entire compartment, Lieutenant David Baker had little choice but to sit and wait for orders.

In silence, he scanned the readouts on the three screens set at eye level before moving to the two large monitors above them. To the far left was the laser power input monitor, showing a schematic of the power feeds from the primary coils deep in the belly of the ship as they snaked out to connect to the emitters. The central screen showed the status of the short-range plasma cannons’ turrets, for now offline and stored inside the half-dozen recesses on the outer hull. The third screen was new, displaying the fusion missile launcher assembly that had replaced the magnetic accelerator cannon during the *Bombay*’s last overhaul some months ago. Although the new

launcher held less rounds than the cannon it replaced, the rounds were nearly twice as powerful and at almost double the range. A drawback was that it took an enormous amount of power to fire it. And, as any engineer would be quick to point out, generated power is finite aboard any starship. Due to the relatively small size of the *Bombay*, it meant that half the laser emitter coils would need to be shut down and the plasma turrets couldn't be fired at all if the new launcher was brought online.

The two wide monitors above the console displayed the overall power conduit layout of the ship, the left showing a top-down schematic of the entire frigate including shield generator output, the one on the right showing a close-up view of only the engineering section. Each was multicolored, with animated lines of blue, green, and yellow representing power feeds throughout the ship. David studied the screens intently, playing out various scenarios in his mind in which he'd have to reroute power from one location to another to ensure consistent weapons operation. Still the deck plates beneath his feet hummed softly, the computers beeped perfunctorily, and nothing at all happened.

Then a change in the vibrations. Slight as it was, David was so attuned to the everyday sensations in his duty post that anything out of the ordinary was easy to spot. The *Bombay* had increased speed—was still increasing even now as he instinctively reached out and grabbed the side of his console to steady himself. Would the ship turn hard? Would the force field dampeners fail to compensate, tossing him from his chair? There was no real way to tell. The engineering status monitor only showed an increase in power output to the primary fusion reactors as the impulse engines were brought up to one-half power. Maneuvering thrusters were still down, but that didn't mean anything. They could be brought online at a moment's notice.

His first reaction was to call the bridge and check in with the executive officer, not out of duty or obligation, but from a deep-rooted part of his personality that wanted so very badly to look into the telescope of his youth and see what was going on. But then his Starfleet training took over, and David knew that if the ship were about to go into battle, he would be the first to know about it. That's when the call came down from the bridge.

"Weapons control," Steven Baker's voice said through the compartment intercom. "Charge main laser batteries."

"Aye, sir," David said, flipping switches before his elder brother had finished speaking. The deck vibrations were still increasing in amplitude, and David's attention was drawn momentarily back to the power output monitors above. *Full impulse power. But are we dashing into a fight, or are we running away from it?* Due to the lack of space in the weapons control compartment, and the fact that it had nothing to do with David's position at all, there was no navigation data displayed anywhere. There was also no external sensor data whatsoever, save for damage indicators on the hull which would register on one of David's lower screens if he called it up.

Then his equilibrium began a gradual shift, and he felt his body shift ever so slightly to starboard. The *Bombay* was turning, and the fact that he felt it so acutely meant the ship was turning hard. In his mind, he heard the voice he carried in his youth, crying, "Let me see! Let me see!" as he pushed Steven away from the eyepiece so he, too, could gaze at the distant worlds.

The computer screen to the left flashed from yellow to green, and a series of four beeps sounded in quick successions.

"Bridge, this is weapons control. Primary laser banks online!"

There was no verbal response. There didn't need to be. The only indication David received was when the room began to rapidly vibrate with a dull thud as the forward laser emitters in the next compartment forward came online. Then again. Then again.

Looking at the laser emitter power indicator, David saw that all energy banks were depleted. The power feeds from the engineering section came online the moment the emitters ceased operation, and the bar indicating the weapon's pool of energy slowly began to fill up. Seconds ticked by like minutes, the *Bombay* exited her turn, and David's internal balance was once again restored. *Did we score a hit, or did we miss them?*

"Weapons control, this is the bridge. Bring the short-range plasma cannons online."

"Aye, sir." Pressing the required sequence, the power feed to the cannons was switched on at the same moment that the outer doors on the hull were open. When the cannons were in firing position five seconds later, they were ready to go.

"Bridge, weapons control. Plasma turrets online."

Like with the laser banks before, David waited for the telltale vibrations that would indicate the turrets were firing. Anticipating the *Bombay* making yet another turn, he reached out and grabbed the sides of his console. But, instead of the turn, the entire ship slammed hard to port, violently jerking his body to the left. Obviously the ship had been hit by weapons fire, and no doubt there would be damage, but in the split seconds following the brutal jolt, David's primary concern was not tumbling out of his chair and away from his station where he was needed most.

As he righted himself, the vibrations he'd been expecting in the hull finally came. The short-range plasma cannons were firing in long bursts, hopefully hitting whatever contemptable Romulan had thought it wise to attack one of the finest frigates in all of Starfleet. If Captain Daniel Hippensteel had anything to say about it, David Baker knew the Romulan was surely going to regret it. In answer to his silent declaration, he watched as the now-charged primary laser batteries were depleted one after another. Seconds later, the voice of the ship's

chief engineer, Lieutenant Commander Perrie Iles, came over the shipwide intercom.

"Damage control parties, respond to power conduit rupture in secondary hull, level 3, section 14."

Visually checking the engineer's description against the monitor above his console, David could indeed see that power to the life-support equipment and gravity controls in that area had been affected. Then the *Bombay* began another turn, this time to starboard, far more acute than the previous one. Damage sensors on the hull changed from green to yellow, especially near the port thruster assemblies as the hull was stressed during the maneuver.

Round and round the frigate went until David was convinced that she'd doubled back on her own location. As soon as the ship began to straighten, there was another massive jolt, this time succeeding where the other had failed, tossing him free of the console and causing him to sprawl back to the aft end of the compartment. He slid across the smooth deck until he thudded against the rear bulkhead, back first, knocking the wind out of him and tossing spots as large as asteroids before his eyes. He tried to moan, tried to protest the pain in his body, but the lack of air in his lungs left his mouth agape with nothing coming out. Seconds passed before he could inhale a ragged breath, and the first thing that came out was a series of curses that would have made an Orion pirate blush.

"Weapons control, this is the bridge. Please respond."

The voice was familiar, but the fact that the entire compartment was spinning was putting an uneasy feeling in David Baker's stomach. The intercom voice repeated itself, this time more forcefully. The speaker even added his name to the request. *Perhaps it was important?* As the deck vibrations increased, it lulled David out of his momentary confusion, and his elder brother's voice came back a third time.

"Weapons control . . . David? Respond, *please?*"

Staggering back to his station on all fours, David pushed the toppled chair aside with a wave of his arm. Then, propping himself up, slapped at the control in the far corner. "Weapons control. Lieutenant Baker here."

"David! Thank God," Steven said, his voice betraying his concern for not only a fellow officer, but for his younger offspring. "Damage report?"

"I feel awful," David groaned. "I think I hit my head."

"Not to you, Lieutenant! Is there damage to your station?"

Giving the intercom speaker an offended glare, David turned his eyes to the monitors. Everything looked good . . . lasers were online and charging . . . plasma cannons were functioning . . . and the still-dormant fusion missile launcher was status quo. He reported as much to the executive officer.

"Is there any damage to your compartment?"

David shook his head, then realized that Steven wasn't there to see it. "No, sir. None that I can see, anyway."

"Good. I think that Romulan had a thing for you personally. Their weapons fire was directed right at your section."

"We're all still in one piece here, Commander. We meaning me."

"Do you need medical attention?"

"Oh, so now you're concerned about me?"

"We're a little busy up here, little brother."

"I'm fine, Steven. Fine. Just make sure you give that Romulan hell for me."

"Will do, Lieutenant. Keep yourself together down there."

The voice from the past popped back into his mind. *Let me see!* "What's going on up there, Steve-o . . . I mean, sir?"

"No time to talk, Squirt. Stand by for further instructions. Bridge out."

David hated being called that. He said as much into the speaker, but the channel had already been closed. Sighing, he slowly lifted himself

back to his feet. *Good. The lower stabilizers are still in order*, he thought as he looked at his legs. Picking up the discarded chair, he had time enough to move it back into its proper position before the ship was rocked again. Using all his Starfleet training, David rolled with the tumble, ending in a crouched position near the aft bulkhead door. A series of deadening thuds came from the corridor beyond, and David turned to see what might pop through the doors at any moment.

Seconds later, another voice came over the intercom. This time it was the damage control officer, Lieutenant Marc Steinijans. "Damage control parties to engineering! Hull breach in adjacent sections!"

Engineering section? Looking to the status displays on his console from across the room, David could see that one laser bank after another was depleted . . . and not recharging. The plasma cannons had also gone offline. Rushing to the intercom, he quickly reported in.

"Bride, this is weapons control. Primary offensive power is offline!"

"There's been a rupture in the main power conduit near engineering," Steven responded.

"Perrie?" he asked, speaking of their mutual friend.

"No word from the chief engineer. In fact, no word from engineering at all. Damage control parties are stuck on level 6. They're trying to cut through the emergency bulkheads and bypass a hull rupture."

Turning, David looked to the aft door. When opened, it led to a stairwell that directly accessed the engineering level. "I've got to get in there, Steven."

The intercom was silent for a full five seconds before the executive officer responded. "I'm not sure what you'll find in there, but you've got nothing to do where you're at for the time being."

Nodding, he looked back to the speaker. "I'll call when I've got something to report."

"Watch your back, Squirt. Bridge out."

David reached out and slapped the intercom closed. Rushing to a side cabinet, he retrieved an emergency fire extinguisher and portable oxygen supply. Donning the equipment, he neared the aft door. When it opened, a ball of flames three meters wide burst into weapons control. Quick reaction allowed him to slip out of the way in the nick of time. When the ball evaporated, David found he could make his way into the passageway. The starboard bulkhead was on fire, which he quickly put out on his way down the hall. Reaching the stairs, he skipped every other one before hitting the bottom of the run with a thud.

The door to the engineering passageway was a complete wreck. The hull breach was likely in a section adjacent to this one. Girders and conduits were strewn about, and a ruptured power tap was throwing sparks like a waterfall cascading from the overhead. Ducking, David leapt over the debris while simultaneously avoiding being electrocuted by the damaged overhead lights.

When he reached engineering, he saw that the door was jammed shut. Looking at the controls on the left, he could see that there was still atmosphere in the compartment, but the oxygen level was depleting rapidly. That meant only one thing—a fire. A big one. But there was no time for any concern. *Only time for action.*

Pulling off the emergency release access panel, David quickly severed the controls to the doors. Placing his palms flat on either one, he observed that they felt warm but not too hot. Chancing it, he cracked them open a few centimeters. When no fire licked out toward him, he sucked in a deep breath and flung the doors open and jumped clear. Nothing came out after him. Then, taking a few quick breaths, he stepped through the doorway.

Engineering was in utter chaos. Along both the port and starboard bulkheads, whatever consoles hadn't violently exploded were without power. Normally manned by a team of twelve, only three bodies were immediately visible. Two techs were strewn at odd

angles across toppled beams, their bodies broken in unspeakable ways. The third was a lieutenant lying face down, the lower half of his body crushed under a fallen computer bank. Checking the officer, it didn't take long to discern he was dead. One of the dead but otherwise undamaged panels on the far side of the compartment erupted in a torrent of sparks, and David instinctively flinched.

"Commander Iles?" Baker called out as loudly as he could behind his facemask. "Perrie? Respond?"

The creaking of metal in the overhead captured the lieutenant's attention. Seeing that many of the support beams had since fallen, David knew the ceiling could collapse at any moment. Any Romulan scoring hits on the *Bombay* would only exacerbate it. Then a grunt came from the other side of the room, and David quickly jumped over the damaged dilithium chamber to get closer to it.

It was Perrie, and he was blessedly alive. Trapped under a pile of shattered illumination panels, the chief engineer was easy enough to extricate.

"Thank you, Lieutenant," Perrie said, then noticed it was Baker who'd come to his aid. "Aren't you supposed to be in weapons control?"

"I'd love to go back, if we had any power to the weapons systems."

Strangely enough, the curses that came from the engineer were the exact same David had muttered in weapons control after he'd regained his composure. Rushing to the auxiliary power monitor, one of the few computers still in one piece, Perrie tried in vain to get the large B-6 mainframe to cooperate. After several attempts, he pulled his leg back and kicked the side of the casing. It had no result.

"Good try, though," David chuckled.

"The internal circuitry must be fried. Nothing I can do with this hunk of junk now."

When Perrie clutched at his right shoulder, David stepped closer to his friend's side. "You're hurt."

"I'll manage, Lieutenant."

"Let's check for more survivors."

Another groan from the overhead diverted their attention. "No time, David. It's not going to hold out much longer."

Reluctantly, David was forced to agree. "Let's get back into the corridor and see if we can't seal the doors."

"Aye," Perrie agreed. "At least we can seal us from any further breaches."

Exiting engineering, the two men pulled the doors closed once more. Perrie disappeared into a nearby access hatch, then reappeared a moment later with a plasma welder and a set of goggles. Donning them, he turned the device on, its flame as bright as a nova. "Look away, David. Don't want you to burn out those optics."

"Anything I can do?" David asked, suddenly feeling like a third wheel.

Perrie grunted as he began to seal the door. "Yep. You can pray this patch holds if the overhead in engineering gives way."

"No need to ask twice," Baker replied as he did indeed ask a quick favor from the Almighty.

Flipping off the flame a minute later, Lieutenant Commander Iles took off the goggles and inspected his work. "That's gonna have to be good enough."

"Where to now?"

"Auxiliary control, my friend. And don't think you're not tagging along. I'll need the extra set of hands to get the power grid back online."

"Me?" David asked nervously, remembering with a flash of horror how his introductory engineering class at Starfleet Academy was—both times he'd taken it.

"Yep. You."

Stepping to the nearby intercom, David opened a direct channel to the bridge. "This is Lieutenant Baker. I've got Chief Engineer Iles. We're heading to auxiliary control now to restore power."

"Make it snappy, Lieutenant," the unmistakable voice of Captain Daniel Hippensteel replied. "We're doing all we can to put some distance between us and two Romulan cruisers gunning for our stern. Eugene is doing an admirable job at the helm, but I'm not sure how much longer our fortune is going to favor us."

"Understood, Captain. Tell Lieutenant Alex to keep his tunic on. We'll get things in order down here."

"Very well, Mr. Baker. Keep me posted."

"Aye, Captain. Baker out."

All but pushing David aside, Perrie switched the intercom to another channel. "Mr. Steinijans, respond."

"Steinijans here, sir!" the damage control officer responded with jubilation.

"Status, Lieutenant?"

"The helmsman, Lieutenant Alex, is reporting that maneuvering is a little sluggish. I've got a team working on the reaction control thrusters. Main power is still online, but the primary power conduit has been severed in three locations. I've got parties on two of them now."

"The third?"

"Deck two, port-forward."

Right above weapons control, David thought as he nodded in agreement.

"Understood. We're heading to auxiliary control now. I'll see what I can do along the way."

"Yes, sir. Glad you're still here with us, sir."

"Say that after I get you to clean up that mess of a compartment we used to call engineering. Iles out." Turning to Lieutenant Baker, the chief engineer scrutinized his gold undershirt poking through holes in

his black jacket. "I know they don't teach you *command* types nearly enough about engineering, but I do know that you should be well skilled in how to follow orders. Do what I say, when I say it, and we'll make it through this without a hitch. Okay?"

Sucking in a deep breath, David stood tall, hoping that with any luck he'd make both of his academy professors proud. Of course, lucky also meant they'd still be alive to tell the tale. Smiling at the thought, he waved his hand down the remains of the main corridor. Lead the way, Chief."

Chapter 15

The Romulan cruiser came in blazing fast, firing two bolts of green disruptive energy that impacted with the primary hull of the cruiser *George Washington* less than a second later. Had it not been for the fast-acting Romulan helmsman, Captain Theresa Vincent was sure the warbird would have slammed headlong into her ship.

In truth, no one could have been blamed for the miscalculation in distance. After all, the *George Washington* had been under attack by three smaller Romulan frigates when Theresa had ordered the helmsman, Lieutenant Steven Stone, to take the ship into a hard turn to starboard. Evading a flock of missiles intent on taking out the last of the cruiser's shields, they'd succeeded in bringing the ship nose to nose with the warbird. As the impacts registered across the shields, shaking everyone on the bridge to the depths of their souls, she had the strangest urge to ponder how, if space was so vast, why was it so full of warships bent on obliterating one another? In the picosecond that the question flashed into her mind it was gone, replaced with due concern of how she was going to stop herself from slamming face-first into the deck. Quick reflexes went into overdrive, and she crossed her arms over her face just as her body landed at the base of the command chair with a thump.

"Captain," a concerned Rickey Wright called out from the helm.

But Commander Greg Rozier had already slipped under the handrail separating the science station from the lower command area. Crouching near Theresa's side, he propped her up on her backside. "Ma'am?"

"I'm fine, Commander," Theresa mumbled, her head aching despite the fact that she'd shielded it.

"I can call a medic."

"You'll do no such damn thing, Mister," she snapped back as she clutched at his arm. "There's far more need for them to assist other officers on this ship right now, no thanks to that Romulan out there."

"Can you stand?"

She nodded, then sighed heavily, embarrassed at being on the floor of the bridge in the midst of a crisis. Without asking, Rozier grabbed her arm and hefted her up.

"Back to your post, Commander," she said as she found her footing. "I need to know . . . everything."

Moving back to his station, Greg read out everything the long- and short-range sensors could tell. With any luck, the captain could make use of something in there to help them get out of this alive. "There are fifteen Romulan vessels still functioning out of the original thirty. Two of them are rounding our stern, but they're taking aim at the *Persephone*. The cruiser *Sao Paulo* and the frigate *Mars* are moving to intercept."

Shaking of a bout of dizziness, Theresa leaned against the command chair. "And the *Bombay*?"

"Looks like she running under full steam again, ma'am. Power is back to the weapons, too, but she's outside the battle area."

Theresa nodded. "But also out of range of the Romulans for the time being. Captain Hippensteel isn't one to run from a fight. If he can get that old girl back in the fray, he won't think twice about doing so. What about the rest of our forces?"

"Surprisingly little damage to our fleet, Captain."

Captain Vincent looked around her bridge. There was a thick haze of smoke from the burnt-out environmental control station on the port side of the compartment. The young ensign there had a bad burn on her hand that Theresa hoped wouldn't scar. Still, the young officer had been adamant about manning her post to monitor what little she was getting on the single remaining screen, her injuries be damned. The rest of the bridge crew, despite being shaken, were in one piece.

Not a single one of them was without a layer of sweat on their brow and/or uniform. *That's what it means to be on the forefront of the engagement*, she mused. *Good people, though. A credit to their uniforms, each one of them.*

"Shields are down," Commander Luke Huitt said from the engineering station when her eyes fell on him. She knew that he wanted more than anything to be down in engineering with his team, but the turbo elevator had been knocked out near the start of the battle, so no one was leaving. As it was, the medical teams were having to make use of the emergency crawlways to get around the top four decks. Theresa had all but sealed off the hatch to the bridge, loath to admit more bodies to the cramped compartment unless it was absolutely necessary.

"I'm guessing, then, that our other ships are having more luck than we are," she said as her eyes finally fell on Commander Rozier.

"It seems so, Captain. However, we've lost fifteen ships out of our fleet."

It was a small percentage of their overall strength, but that's only how Theresa saw it, and knowing Admiral Weiger personally, she'd bet her last credit that's not how this particular fleet commander would feel about it. Ian was a tough commander, as hard as she'd ever known. But also the most fair, the most decent, and the bravest. An explorer by nature with the heart of a warrior. It was no wonder he'd moved up the ranks as quickly as he had. And, with each starship destroyed, with each crewman lost to the enemy, a piece of him was crushed . . . just as it was within her. If the *Sao Paulo* was beyond making the Romulans pay for what they'd done, she knew Admiral Weiger would find three more ships to take her place to do so.

And it'd take three ships to equal the fortitude Theresa and her crew had shown in the last hour. If she could promote every last one of the people under her command for their service in the last hour, she'd do so in a heartbeat. From the techs down in engineering, to the four

officers in deflector control, to the enlisted crewmen down in the auxiliary control—they all deserved it. Not a single soul on board wasn't engaged in making sure the *Sao Paulo* could fire one more round, could turn one last time, could scan every square centimeter of space for a full parsec, could give them that one last breath of recycled air, or could coax that last burst from her tired control thrusters that would bring her to bear on one last target. Yes, her pride for her people ran deep.

And then there were those bloody Romulans. That their forces were far fewer in number than planned was both a godsend and a curse. The Romulans had succeeded in inflicting damage, yes, but there was no way their forces here would win this day. They simply were too few in number to pose a continued threat to the Starfleet forces that were going to dominate this sector. Even the Romulan starbase nearby with its multitude of weapons would be little match against the combined onslaught of twenty to thirty battle-ready starships. It was just a matter of time.

The curse, however, likewise came in the Romulans' lack of starships. Theresa herself had seen the reports of this area. And there were multiple, overlapping accounts from both official and nonofficial sources indicating the sheer magnitude of the force that was supposed to be here. There'd been visual records, intercepted communications, and firsthand accounts from both Starfleet and Vulcan intelligence operatives who had been in this system and seen the 200-plus Romulan vessels that were, today, nowhere to be seen. *Where had they gone? Certainly not back into Romulan space.* No, this was a true invasion force if ever there was one. They were simply not in the binary Zeta Reticuli system. So where?

"Report coming in from the cruiser *Merlin*, ma'am," Sonia Koval announced from the communications console, breaking Theresa's momentary thought process.

Turning to the young woman, Theresa saw that there was a fire behind the tired eyes of the ensign. Though her face was soiled with grime accumulated while Sonia had made her own repairs to her console not long before, there was an untamed and unassailable fierceness to Koval's normally docile features. Theresa approved.

"Go ahead, Sonia."

"Captain Berglowe reports that they've destroyed the Romulan who attacked our flank not long ago. He'd like to know if we require any further assistance."

Stepping up to the communications console, Theresa regarded the makeshift repairs done by the surprisingly handy young ensign. Several circuits had been cross-wired, and power seemed to be flowing from a source that the captain wouldn't have thought possible. Admiring the work, she patted Sonia on the shoulder in approval. "Send him our thanks, but I think we can manage for now."

Sonia beamed, grateful to have the captain's approval for all but destroying the communications console. "Yes, ma'am."

With a rush, the turbo elevator doors popped open and the assistant chief engineer sprang onto the bridge with a contingent of repair party personnel in pursuit. He looked a bit surprised to see the bridge as orderly as it was. Wide-eyed, he looked from one face to another in a slow turn. "The turbo elevators are working," he said after a pause.

"As you've made very clear, Lieutenant," Theresa said, eliciting a chuckle from Lieutenant Steven Stone at the helm.

"Engineering?" Commander Huitt was quick to ask as he stood from his chair and headed for the still-open lift.

"Right where you left it, sir, although not nearly as tidy."

Luke shook his head. "That's what the junior officers are for, son. Stay here and man the engineering station while I go down and sort everything out."

"Yes, sir."

"Visual message now coming in from the cruiser *Providence*, Captain Vincent."

"On the main screen, Sonia."

Nearly a full minute passed before the image of Captain Paul Janssens solidified on the damaged screen. He appeared to be exhausted, a sentiment shared by Theresa. His uniform, less dirty than her own, was still the worse for wear. His left shoulder had been injured, and fresh blood was oozing from a gash that'd been cut clean through the black material of his jacket. The two had been acquaintances for nearly a decade, and friends for the last few years. Theresa was glad to see that he'd made it through so far, relatively unscathed.

"Greetings, Captain Vincent."

"Paul," she acknowledged. "We're receiving you loud and clear."

"Status, Captain?"

"Damaged, but we're holding together."

"Good to hear, Captain. I thought for sure your number was punched after that last salvo."

"Our shields are down, and power to the weapons is minimal. I have a feeling, though, if by some miracle we *can* get our shields back, it'll be because we sacrificed power to our offensive batteries."

"You're not counting yourself out yet, are you?" he asked slyly.

"No, sir," she assured him. "Not on your life."

"Good, because we're going to need your help."

"Sir?"

"Our forces have routed a large portion of the Romulan starships away from their base. It's still guarded, but not very heavily. I've personally received orders from Admiral Weiger to begin the assault."

"Not by yourself?"

Paul smiled. "There was a time in my youth where I would have reveled in it, Captain. But no. I've rounded up ten starships to join me. You'll be the eleventh."

She was about to protest, reminding the senior captain that the *George Washington* was far from Bristol fashion. But she quickly bit her tongue. Sure Captain Janssens was aware of the ship's status. If he felt she wasn't up to the task, she knew he would have never considered making the request. Though winning the battle was his ultimate goal, he was not about to sacrifice personnel and materials to get it done. At least, not yet.

"Whatever you need, sir," she replied. "The *George Washington* is standing by."

"Excellent, Captain. My task force is gathering in sector 6. Get there. We depart as soon as you arrive."

"*George Washington* confirms, sir. Out."

As the view screen switched back to a field of endless stars, all eyes on the bridge fell on the captain. Theresa looked at each of them in turn, proud to see that not a single officer was going to back down from this fight, and was in fact waiting for her to give the order to get underway.

"Lieutenant Wright?" she asked the helm officer.

Ricky nodded, a smile creeping onto his boyish features. "Yes, Captain?"

"Set a course for the rendezvous point, Sector 6."

"Aye."

"Mr. Stone, full impulse power."

"Yes, ma'am."

Pressing the intercom button on her chair, she patched into main engineering. "Commander Huitt?"

"Here, Captain."

"Luke, we've been ordered to attack the Romulan starbase."

"I was hoping you'd say that, Captain. I've got primary power rerouted to the main lasers. You'll have full banks by the time we arrive. Emergency fusion reactors are in standby."

"Well done, Chief. Bridge out." Turning to Greg Rozier, she knew didn't need to ask the science officer for his report.

"Long-range sensors are still inoperative, but we're not going to need them for the moment. I've got the enemy starbase on short-range scans, and I've identified the most likely weak spots in their defenses. The targeting information is being fed into weapons control now."

"Confirmed," Lieutenant Stone acknowledged as he looked at the readouts on the control panel.

Making one final turn in her command chair, Theresa looked to Sonia Koval at the communications console. "Sonia?"

"All channels are open, Captain. Damage control teams Alpha and Charlie are standing by to receive orders. I've set the emergency ship's recorder on a continuous update, complete with ship's logs. It'll launch on your order, ma'am."

"Excellent."

"Course laid in, Captain," Ricky said from the navigator's seat.

"Full impulse, Lieutenant Wright. Let's not keep Captain Janssens waiting."

"Yes, ma'am," the navigator happily replied.

Minutes later, with the rest of the squadron close at hand, the Romulan starbase rotated slowly on the *George Washington's* main screen. It had the appearance of a four-clawed talon that'd taken hold of a disk-shaped section suspended beneath. The tips of the claw structures held the docking assemblies, and likely the station's defensive batteries. The raised center of the claw was studded with view ports and antennae, and would be the main target of the USS *Providence*. Affixed to the underside of the suspended disk were three long cylinders, each pulsing with a soft green radiance. Rozier had informed Theresa that they were likely power generators of some type, and would be the primary target for the *George Washington's* lasers.

In orbit around the starbase were over a dozen enemy warships. As the Federation starships approached, six enemy cruisers and as many frigates turned to face off against the incoming Starfleet vessels.

"Three *Cabbage* cruisers and two warbirds are heading toward our location," Rozier said as he studied the sensor readouts.

"All laser batteries are online," Lieutenant Wright confirmed. "Plasma cannons are powering up now."

"Fusion missiles?" Theresa asked.

"Tubes two and three are loaded, Captain. Waiting for your order."

"Target the nearest enemy vessel and let them fly, Lieutenant."

The two rounds immediately shot out from the underside of the Federation cruiser. Trailing blue-white energy, the powerful warheads raced toward their target, a bulbous *Cabbage* cruiser barreling down on the *George Washington*. They impacted squarely with the center of the warship, destroying its primary plasma cannon in the first salvo and sending the enemy cruiser careening off the main screen. Before Theresa had time to revel in their good fortune, two enemy destroyers swung toward her ship, firing their primary weapons as soon as the *George Washington* was in range.

"Evasive!" she called out a split second before the impact registered and sent her and her people sprawling to the deck.

Stardate 15501.13

"We're picking up something on the long-range sensors, sir," John Vincent said from the ship's tactical console. "Very faint. Coming in from outside the system."

Captain Ellis Coombs stepped up to the communications station on the *Enterprise's* bridge. "Is it them?"

John nodded as he confirmed his console's readings. "I'm almost certain it is."

"Chris?" Ellis asked, looking to Commander Pinkerton at the science station.

"Confirmed, sir. I'm reading over fifty vessels on an intercept course with us."

"Then let's not let them wait. Helm, lay in a course and engage at full impulse."

"Aye, sir. Full impulse. ETA is three minutes."

"Commander Chambers?"

Carl turned from the engineering station and nodded. "Damage control parties are standing by, sir. We're ready for them."

"Lieutenant Commander Broden, stand by to launch our fighters as soon as we're in range."

Christopher turned from the flight control station and nodded. "Yes, sir. All fighters are manned and the launch bay doors are on standby."

"Sensors, where's the rest of our forces?"

"Right behind us," Pinkerton acknowledged.

"Entering visual contact range, sir," Vincent called out from the tactical station.

"On screen."

The main viewer was instantly filled with dozens upon dozens of starships. The lead formation was made up of cruisers, with squadrons of destroyers and frigates flanking them on all sides. Some of the incoming vessels looked factory fresh, while others had seen more than their fair share of combat. Lines of blackened metal streaked across the hulls of some, and more than a few had large sections of their hulls completely missing. Indeed, the *Enterprise's* sensors showed that the lead incoming cruiser was completely missing her entire stern.

But by God, it was good to see them.

"Fighter escort is away," Broden said with a grin.

"Mr. Hoffman, open a channel to the *Sao Paulo*."

The image of Admiral Ian Weiger appeared. He was sitting in the cruiser's command chair. Ellis didn't hide his surprise.

"Admiral, welcome home."

The exhausted admiral nodded back. "Thank you, Captain Coombs. It's good to be back."

"Captain Webber?" Ellis asked with due concern.

The admiral held up a hand. "Brian's fine, Ellis. He took a nasty fall when a Romulan snuck up behind us and took our stern. The ship's doctor says he'll be out of sickbay in a few hours."

Ellis let the good news wash over him. "And the rest of the fleet?"

"As well as could be expected, given the circumstances."

"And the Romulans?"

"We gave them a fight they won't soon forget, Captain. The Romulan fleet was sent packing, and their outpost was completely destroyed."

An unrestrained round of cheers erupted on the *Enterprise's* bridge, Captain Coombs included.

Admiral Weiger waited until the praise had died down before continuing. "Our people did some amazing work out there today, Captain. And while nothing will ever take away from that, we've still got plenty of reason for concern."

"Sir?" Ellis asked.

"I'll give you a full briefing when we get back to Starbase 3. But, in short, the bulk of the Romulan fleet was missing from the Zeta Reticuli system."

"We'll find them, sir," Ellis said with all assurance.

"We already know where they are, Captain. At least, we knew where they *were* two days ago."

"Sir?"

"The Calder system."

"Calder . . . you mean?"

Weiger nodded. "The entire planet was bombed from orbit . . . and Outpost 6 was completely destroyed."

Ellis's first reaction was one of anger, but it was quickly replaced by confusion. If the planet and base *had* been destroyed, why hadn't he heard about it until now? Surely such news warranted his attention, considering he was second only to Admiral Weiger in this region of space. One way or another, Ellis knew that he'd get the answers he needed when Admiral Weiger arrived at the station. "Understood, sir."

"There's time enough to go over everything, Captain Coombs. Right now, I've got some very tired people and more than a few starships that are on the verge of breaking down. Their crews have done jobs anyone should consider miraculous to get them home, but there are simply some things that couldn't be repaired en route."

"Yes, sir. We've got repair tenders and tow vessels with us now."

"There's more than enough pride in this fleet to fill three banquet halls, Ellis. I don't think a single vessel out here will refuse an offer of assistance."

"Of course, Admiral. We'll be coming alongside your group in less than three minutes. Would you care to transfer your flag to the *Enterprise* for the remainder of your trip?"

"I'll remain on the *Sao Paulo* until we reach the starbase. I know Captain Webber would appreciate it."

"Yes, sir," Ellis replied, knowing Brian as well as he did. "I know that he will. Again, welcome back, Admiral Weiger. We'll make sure you get home safely."

