

STAR TREK PHASE II **CONSPIRACY**

THE 11TH HOUR

STAR TREK
NEW VOYAGES
PHASE II
International

A Star Trek Phase II Novelette by
GLENN E. SMITH

3

Star Trek Phase II:
Conspiracy Part 2

Novelette #3
“The 11th Hour”

Glenn E. Smith

Adapted from a Story Notion by
Barry Gavin

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The following events take place after the live-action episode

“The Child” www.stnv.de/tc

and before the live-action episode

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CHAPTER 1

All was peaceful and quiet, serene and, judging from the blackness behind his eyelids, still very dark outside. Unlike many large cities throughout the Federation, and probably beyond, Babel City was *not* a city that never slept. Sure, there was nightlife to enjoy, if one was into that sort of thing. What city didn't offer a nightlife? But even that fell quiet pretty early—a good two hours before midnight on most nights—making life on the little planetoid pretty good, all things considered.

Of course, that begged the question, what had awakened him? If the city was so quiet and peaceful—and he'd closed the balcony door and windows before bed, so the suite was dead silent—why wasn't he still sound asleep? He'd been away for a long time and the juggernaut of debriefings and media interviews and politically charged sector tours had been exhausting. And there was the reunion with his wife, which, he was very happy to remind himself, he was still enjoying very much. Last night had been more a marathon than a sprint. He should have been in a near coma at the moment. So why was he awake?

His communicator beeped twice.

That answered that question. Whoever it was would have to wait. He still had another day with his family. It beeped again. David rolled up onto his side, facing the nightstand on which he'd set his communicator when he and his wife went to bed, but otherwise ignored the sound and let himself start drifting back to sleep.

His communicator beeped twice.

David sighed and half-opened his weary eyes. The room was most definitely dark, as though it were still the middle of the night, just as he'd figured. He listened, and could hear his wife breathing slowly and steadily beside him, still sound asleep. He looked over at his communicator for a moment—it beeped again—and then let his eyes close once more.

His communicator beeped twice.

"Would you please answer that thing already?" his wife pleaded drowsily, sounding a bit annoyed.

His communicator beeped twice.

David sighed and scowled, then grunted as he reached out and grabbed it off of the nightstand. "Who the hell is calling in the middle of the night, for God sake?" he grumbled. He threw off the blankets, sat up, and dropped his feet to the floor as it beeped at him again. He sighed again, then got up and gazed at his wife—bare from the waist up since he'd tossed the blankets aside—as he padded across the carpeted floor toward the sliding glass door that led out onto the balcony without bothering to pull anything on over his black briefs. As he approached it, he noticed that the glow of the morning sun shining around the edges of the curtains that hung across that door and the windows on either side of it. So, it wasn't still the middle of the night after all. That still didn't give anyone the right to bother him while he was on leave.

His communicator beeped twice, as if to mock him.

"You're off today, Dave," his wife reminded him. "Why are they calling you?"

He stopped and looked back over his shoulder at her. She'd sat up a little and turned toward him, propping herself up on her elbow, and was looking right at him, the blankets still only reaching her waist. Her golden blond hair was heavily mussed, but she still looked so

beautiful to him. After having been away for so long, he felt as though he never wanted to leave her again. Not even for a day. “Give me a minute,” he replied. Then he looked down at the communicator in his hand, realizing that it had stopped beeping. “I’ll find out in a minute when they try again...for the *third* time.”

He opened the heavy curtains that hung across the door, flooding the entire bedroom with early morning sunlight, and heard his wife moan in protest behind him. He opened the door and the sudden, comfortably cool breeze brought with it the sounds of morning traffic from both far below and above. He stepped out onto the balcony, closed the door behind him, and then walked up to the railing and looked out over the city.

The Starfleet Hotel, which had been built to provide temporary housing for Starfleet personnel visiting Babel, just as the name implied, stood as one of the tallest hotels in the city center. Their suite was on the twenty-ninth floor, about three-quarters of the way to the top, and provided a beautiful view of the southern part of the city, including a large grassy park that sat only a couple of blocks away and stretched for at least half a dozen. Modern and clean, Babel City was not unlike most others David had visited. Blocks of building of varying heights and purposes stretched for as far as he could see, separated by a grid of wide surface streets. Ground vehicle traffic was just beginning to flow through those streets in organized fashion while moderate aerial traffic was already soaring overhead in much the same way, almost as though the aerial vehicles were following a grid pattern of streets themselves, albeit invisible ones. Unfortunately, with their suite on the south side of the hotel, David couldn’t see the Babel Tower from there. Its enormous spire rose into the clouds from the very center of the city, several blocks distant on the opposite side.

His communicator beeped twice.

David drew a breath and sighed as he looked down at the accursed little box, enjoyed the feel of the gently breeze blowing through his wavy light brown hair for a moment, and then flipped it open. “Lieutenant Commander Bailey here.”

“*It’s about damn time you answered, Bailey,*” the voice on the other side barked in a strong British accent. It was the commodore herself—the woman who had given him the time off in the first place. “*I need you up here on the station straight away.*”

“This is supposed to be another day off, Commodore,” Bailey reminded the woman. “My last one for a while.”

“*It was another day off,*” the commodore emphasized. “*Now it’s not another day off. The First Federation ambassador wants to start today.*”

Bailey sighed. “You do realize, don’t you, ma’am, that when he says he wants to start today, he means he wants to hold a social gathering and drown us all in Tranya, right?”

“*Ten minutes, Commander,*” the commodore said, leaving no room for argument.

Bailey sighed again—his wife was *not* going to be happy about this—then reluctantly acquiesced. “Understood, ma’am. Bailey out.” He slapped his communicator closed with his other hand and then turned to head back inside, mumbling as he reached for the door, “Sorry daughter-of-a...”

His wife met him just inside the door, closing her short Japanese silk robe to hide her nakedness from the outside world and tying it loosely around her waist. He *really* didn’t want to leave her. “I have to beam up to the station,” he told her, regretfully, before she had a chance to ask.

“Now?” she asked him, every bit as unhappy about it as he’d expected her to be. “Today? On your last day off?” David stepped forward and took his wife into his arms and kissed her, then tossed his communicator onto the bed, stepped back from her and over to the wardrobe, and pulled out his uniform trousers. “You promised Lilly you’d take her to the park today,” she reminded him as he started pulling them on.

“I know, but Balok’s ambassador wants to start alliance proceedings today instead of waiting until tomorrow.” He fastened his trousers and then pulled a black tee-shirt out of the top bureau drawer.

“Meaning that he wants all concerned parties to gather together to celebrate and get stone-face drunk on Tranya,” she remarked.

“Probably,” he admitted freely as he pulled the tee-shirt down into place. He reached into the next drawer and took out his command-gold tunic, then stepped back over to his wife as he started to pull it on.

“That’s just great,” she remarked, not at all happy about that, either. “So you won’t be in any shape to do anything with your family when you finally get home tonight, either.”

“After all this time with Balok, I know how to nurse a drink,” he assured her as he pulled his tunic into place and then sat down on the side of the bed to pull on his socks and boots. “I promise, I’ll be perfectly sober when I get back.”

“You aren’t even going to shower before you go?” she asked him, though the answer was pretty obvious. “After last night...”

“The commodore gave me ten minutes,” he told her. “That means she wants to see me standing right there in the same room with her in ten minutes.” He raised a hand in front of him and pointed at the brand new rank braid around the end of his sleeve. “Otherwise I can kiss my new promotion good-bye.” Boots on and zipped up, he stood up and kissed his wife again, then told her as he picked his communicator up off of the bed, “I’ll be back as soon as I possibly can be.” Then stepped over to the center of the room and flipped his communicator open. “Lieutenant Commander Bailey to Babel Station. One to beam up.”

His wife stood there and watched as the transporter beam whisked her husband away, then turned to the bedroom door when their adorable sandy-haired four year old daughter Lilly opened it and rushed in, still in her little pink nightdress, just as happy as she could be. “Mommy!” she greeted her mother, smiling with excitement.

“Good morning, sweetie,” her mother replied, trying her best to smile back.

Lilly stopped dead in her tracks, her smile fading quickly as she looked around the room. “Daddy?” she called out. Then she looked up at her mother with something akin to fear shining through her big blue eyes and asked her, “Did Daddy have to go away again?”

“Daddy’s real sorry, Lilly,” her mother answered, trying to soften the blow a little bit. “He had to go to work today, but only for a little while.” She squatted down in front of her daughter and gently, lovingly, fixed her unruly hair with her fingers. Then she smiled and said, “Tell you what, sweetie. I’ll take you and your baby brother down to the park after breakfast and Daddy can meet us there later. How does that sound?”

Lilly smiled back at her mother. “Okay.”

* * * * *

Andoria, an icy class-M moon orbiting a ringed gas giant in a star system neighboring Vulcan's Epsilon Eridani, was the home world of both the blue-skinned Andorians and their much paler cousins, the isolationist telepathic pacifists known as Aenar—a subspecies whose population, which currently numbered only a few thousand as far as any outsiders knew, had been steadily decreasing for unknown hundreds of years. They were, in fact, considered to be an endangered species. Though the secretive Aenar had always chosen to remain hidden in the underground ice caverns that were their homes and keep to themselves, their much more prolific blue-skinned cousins the Andorians had turned to the stars and been a spacefaring race for hundreds of years, and were, in fact, one of the founding member races of the United Federation of Planets.

With local security provided by soldiers of their own Imperial Guard, the Andorians operated one of the largest starship construction and repair yards in Starfleet, consisting of a massive space station and ten large orbiting space docks, each one fully capable of housing a starship as it was built from the keel up or meeting any repair needs that any of Starfleet's various classes of vessels might have. Three of those ten docks were currently occupied. One of them was host to the *Saladin*-class destroyer *U.S.S. Shaitan*, NCC-519, which was in the process of receiving a number of systems upgrades. The second was housing the *Surya*-class frigate *U.S.S. Avenger*, NCC-1860, which was having its warp nacelles replaced. The third, one of the newest and largest docks in the yard, was housing the three-nacelled dreadnought *U.S.S. Concordat*, NCC-2109, the reason for whose presence was classified. As a pair of work bees approached the *Avenger* towing a brand new warp nacelle between them, several Andorian Imperial Guard security patrol craft swarmed the area like bees guarding their hive.

Imperial Guard soldiers, Starfleet officers, and civilians alike, all of them Andorians, manned the dozens of workstations in the large operations center, eyes glued to their boards as though the yards were busier than they had been in quite some time. One massive display screen dominated the center of the forward wall while dozens of smaller screens stretched to its left and right along that wall's entire length, providing numerous external views from varying angles of the entire shipyard facility. One of several space traffic controllers was in constant contact with the engineers aboard the *Avenger*, the security patrols, and those work bees to ensure their cargo got delivered as safely as possible.

"Affirmative," the controller responded to one of those work bees' pilot over the open channel. "The engineers have signaled 'ready' and the patrols have cleared all other traffic. You are clear to approach N-X one-eight-six-zero. N-X one-eight-six-zero team, prepare to receive port warp nacelle, now on approach."

"Sir," an Imperial Guard security officer called over the command channel, her eyes glued to three small blips that had just appeared on his sensor monitor screen, "I'm picking up three unidentified vessels approaching from extreme range in what appears to be a tactical formation."

"Put them up on the main screen," the yard commander ordered.

The security officer flipped a switch and the large center screen lit up with to display the same image as that on her monitor. The three blips appeared in its center, colored yellow to indicate they were unknown and possibly hostile, looking very much like they were, in fact, approaching the facility, just as the security officer had reported.

"Order them to change course and identify themselves or we will be forced to fire on

them in our own defense,” the commander ordered after watching them for a few seconds.

The security officer turned her eyes to the communications officer sitting nearby and nodded to him. The communications officer in turn opened a channel and hailed them. “This is the joint Andorian Imperial Guard, Federation Starfleet shipyard *Shrikahn* to unidentified vessels on approach. Alter course immediately and identify yourselves or we will be forced to fire on you.”

In the center of the screen, the blips began to enlarge and flicker and flash between yellow indicators and silhouettes of their actual appearance as the vessels drew closer and came within scanner range. “Magnify, quickly,” the commander ordered, having walked up to the security officer’s station.

“No response to hails, Commander,” the communications officer reported, “and they are not complying with your instructions.”

The commander looked back over his shoulder and shouted to the operations officer, “Take the facility to blue... I mean, red alert!”

“Going to red alert, sir!” the operations officer acknowledged.

No alarms sounded and no klaxons wailed—such things would only have interfered with communications and overall efficiency—but throughout the entire operations center, the lighting dimmed slightly and took on a reddish hue. Mere minutes later, dozens of additional personnel poured into the center and manned their emergency alert posts. Ever since war had broken out between the Federation and the Klingon Empire, the commander had ordered that all backup personnel report for standby duty and remain nearby on every shift, knowing that something like this was bound to happen sooner or later.

“Coming into full visual range now, Commander,” the security officer reported.

The commander raised his eyes back to the main screen once more and found himself momentarily speechless when those three yellow blips finally winked out and then took on the shape of three Klingon D-7 battlecruisers. But then, when their bow-mounted torpedo launchers lit up and began glowing bright red, he muttered, “I knew it,” and then shouted over the all-call, “Raise defensive screens! Activate the defense grid! Weapons free! Target and fire at will!”

The battlecruisers broke formation, then swooped in and attacked. One veered toward the dreadnought *Concordat*, taking heavy damage from shipyard’s defense grid weapons as it soared directly toward the massive but helpless vessel. The security patrols swarmed the enemy vessel as well, but their weapons—not that very many of them survived long enough to fire their weapons—proved ineffective against the battlecruiser’s hull. Heavily damaged but not deterred, the battlecruiser careened into the space dock housing the dreadnought and exploded right along with its target into an enormous fireball that sent deadly shards of molten, flaming wreckage flying outward in every direction to strike the station and the other ships, Klingon and Federation alike.

The battle raged on. The remaining battlecruisers fired again and again, sometimes on the station, sometimes at the starships and the Imperial Guard patrols, swooping in and out of the area while doing their best to avoid the expanding cloud of deadly wreckage that they themselves were creating. The station and those security patrols that yet survived fired on the Klingons. Patrol ships exploded one after another. The station’s defense grid took direct fire and lost weapons. The battlecruisers took damage as well, but still they continued their

devastating assault.

Someone targeted something vital and fired. Seconds later, everything—those patrol ships that had so far managed to evade fire and survive, the two remaining starships, the Klingon battlecruisers, and even the station itself—everything went up in a brilliant, blinding flash of total matter/anti-matter annihilation.

* * * * *

Vulcan, a hot, mountainous class-M desert planet with only a scattering of small seas and an atmosphere thinner than that of Earth, orbiting the star Epsilon Eridani, was the home world of the green-blooded Vulcans—the extraterrestrial race that made peaceful first contact with Earth after they detected and monitored the warp flight of Zefram Cochrane’s *Phoenix* on April 5, 2063. Now known to be the distant cousins of the warlike Romulans, the Vulcans were nevertheless a peaceful race, dedicated to logic and to the suppression of all emotion. Like the Andorians, the Vulcans were one of the founding member races of the UFP.

Several space stations orbited Vulcan at equidistant points from one another, forming a perimeter around their world that helped to maintain safe and efficient space operations and also provided monitoring network that could look out to the very edge of their star system in all directions. Every one of those stations was capable of acting as the network’s master control center, but that duty routinely fell to the largest of them—the station that bore the moniker *Surak*.

With the advantage of having been outfitted with some of the most highly advanced and efficient Daystrom duotronic computer systems in the Federation—some found it ironic that a Terran had been able to design a computer technology that far outstripped anything the Vulcans had ever created—*Surak* Station’s control center could be run easily and efficiently by a relatively few individuals. As a result, it wasn’t very large compared to those in many other stations. It had no large, central viewscreen, as everyone had monitors at their stations, and large windows around the entire perimeter provided views of the entire area, should those screens ever malfunction.

“Understood, *Sulania*,” the space traffic controller said in response to a call from one of Vulcan’s oldest research vessels. “You may depart when ready.”

“Commander,” the safety official said from his station. “Long-range sensors indicate there are three unidentified vessels approaching our position. Just entering visual range now.”

“Let me see,” the operations officer requested.

The safety official punched in the commands to send the image he was seeing on his monitor over to the commander’s monitor as well. Near the center of the image, which was a simple star-filled view of space looking in a direction opposite that of their sun, three large, unidentified blips indicated three vessels approaching in formation.

“Hail them. Request identification,” the operations officer directed the controller.

The controller opened a channel. “This is Vulcan Space Central Station *Surak* hailing unidentified vessel formation. Request that you respond and identify yourselves.” He waited for precisely five point five seconds, then reported, “No response to identification request.”

“Take us to condition yellow,” the operations officer directed.

“A logical precaution,” the safety official opined. Then, watching his screen closely, he reported when the blips began to take form, “Vessels now entering full visual range.”

“Magnify the image.”

The image wavered on both men’s monitors, and then steadied to show three Klingon battlecruisers powering up their torpedo launchers as they approached. Then, as they closed quickly, they opened fire with their disruptors and then suddenly veered off in three different directions as the station shook under the assault, only to swoop back in from varying angles, continuing to attack.

“Raise shields and warn them off,” the operations officer ordered. “Prepare to return fire if they fail to comply immediately.”

“Klingon vessels,” the controller hailed, “you have trespassed on Federation territory and into sovereign Vulcan space. You are ordered to withdraw.”

The *Sulania*, a strictly civilian research vessel, came under fire and exploded only a few seconds after the first torpedo struck her. The station’s shields absorbed more disruptor strikes and then weakened when the Klingons targeted their emitters with their torpedoes. The station returned fire. A second Vulcan vessel, a military cruiser, appeared seemingly out of nowhere and fired on the Klingons, then rammed one of the battlecruisers when its weapons failed. Both ships exploded, very likely with the loss of all hands, causing heavy damage to a second battlecruiser as it flew a little too close to the carnage.

One of that battlecruiser’s nacelles suddenly sheared off. Explosions began appearing all over the ship. It began to yaw and roll as her crew apparently lost control. The shuttle bay atop the rear hull ignited with a series of smaller explosions—ordnance, most likely—and then blew up, taking much of the upper hull with it and sending the vessel into a backward pitch. It struck *Surak* Station belly first, and both it and the station broke up into hundreds of deadly, burning fragments.

Having taken heavy damage, the third battlecruiser veered off and aimed toward the outer system, but another Vulcan cruiser warped in before it could escape and blew it to dust.

* * * * *

Tellar Prime, another class-M world, the fifth planet in orbit of the binary star system 61-Cygni, with two moons, Kehra and Phinda, was home to the rather porcine-like humanoid race known as Tellarites. Tellarites were generally an impatient people, stubbornly proud and overly emotional. Even more than the mud-baths in which they tended to enjoy relaxing, they loved a good argument and in fact considered arguing something of a sport. They often began an interaction with a series of complaints designed to draw the other party into an argument. If that other party refused to participate, then insults became the first order of business. Despite all of that, the Tellarites nevertheless joined the humans, Vulcans, and Andorians at the table in 2161 and became one of the founding members of the UFP.

Tellarites tended to build their orbital space stations in clusters, making off-planet trade and resupply between the various planetary districts that built them much easier. They didn’t usually name their stations, but rather simply numbered them. Station One, their oldest and consequently their largest orbital station—the Tellarites tended to add onto their stations

whenever a need arose, never removing a section once it was attached—acted as the center of planetary security and interstellar travel. It was manned by dozens of government operatives around the clock, as the Tellarites' propensity toward interstellar trade resulted in perpetually crowded airspace around their world.

"Yes, I said you may dock at this time!" the traffic controller squawked impatiently. "Are you deaf or just stupid?"

"Three unknown ships approaching fast!" one of the perimeter monitoring officers bellowed at the top of his lungs.

"Show me!" the supervisor shouted, looking away from the windows in the front of the control center and toward the large screen on the back wall. That screen then lit up with three white blips flashing in the center of a black star field. "Demand identification!"

"Approaching vessels!" the monitoring officer hollered when he had opened a channel. "Identify yourselves immediately!" He waited for a brief moment, then looked over at the supervisor, who in turn looked over at the security chief. "They refuse to answer! They do not identify themselves! They are hostile!"

"Sound battle alert!" the supervisor shouted. "Prepare to engage the enemy!"

"Battle alert, all hands!" the security chief shouted over the blaring klaxon when it started wailing. "Charging weapons!"

"Enemy vessels now entering identifiable range!"

The supervisor looked back up at the large screen. "Magnify!" he demanded. "Let me see them, now!" Three Klingon D-7 battlecruisers appeared on the screen and opened fire with their disruptors as they swooped in in a surprise attack. "Target those ships! Fire all defenses! Destroy them!"

The Klingon vessels fired volley after volley. The Tellarites' defenses returned fire. One battlecruiser cruised straight into the center of the station's nerve cluster and exploded, blowing the entire cluster apart and disintegrating most of the components that had made it up. The rest of the battle was then cut short when the main matter/anti-matter reactor that had powered the station breached and everything in the area—Klingon battlecruisers, Tellarite vessels, and visiting cargo ships alike—was instantly annihilated in a brief chain reaction of massive explosions that lit up an entire hemisphere of the planet below.

* * * * *

The decontaminated, partially refurbished, and recently relaunched *Constitution*-class starship *U.S.S. Exeter*, NCC-1672, the twin Tzhah'Thahn vessels that the tug *Al Rashid* had towed to a starbase after the *Enterprise* encountered them at the Klingon neutral zone and Captain Kirk brokered peace with their commanding officer, a number of Federation civilian and government vessels, and First Federation Representative Balok's small one-man vessel all orbited Babel or drifted at station-keeping around the Babel Orbital Operations Station, which, like all of those vessels, was dwarfed by the massive First Federation vessel *Fesarius*, which also drifted nearby...well, as near as safely possible, given its enormous size. All of that, on top of the normal traffic that flowed to and from the busy planetoid on a daily basis gave the station's newest transporter operator a lot to consider as she locked onto the officer

who was waiting in the city below and prepared to beam him up, but she knew that as long as nothing moved too suddenly, she should be all right.

She set the controls, activated the pattern buffer, and then pushed all three sliding paddles upward at the same time, energizing the beam. Seconds later, Lieutenant Commander David Bailey coalesced on one of the pads, seemingly in one piece with all of his parts intact. “Welcome back, Commander,” she said as he stepped down off of the platform and started toward the door. “The commodore’s expecting you. You’ll find her and all the others in the reception hall.”

“Thank you, Ensign,” Bailey replied on his way out.

Minutes later, Bailey walked into the reception hall to find Commodore Dietrich and numerous other Starfleet personnel from the station and from the *Exeter*, several Federation ambassadors—he did note that the Vulcan ambassador wasn’t there, at least nowhere that he could see—a few of those alien Tzhal’Thahn that he’d been hearing about, on whom his eyes lingered for a few moments—they really *did* resemble Rottweilers with bat wings—and of course the child-like Balok with whom he’d spent so much of the last three-plus years, along with several of Balok’s people, all eating and drinking as they mixed and mingled. Naturally, Balok and his people were all drinking Tranya, but as far as he could tell, everyone else had selected coffee, tea, or whatever other beverage they tended to drink in the morning wherever they came from. He didn’t even want to venture a guess as to what those Tzhal’Thahn might have been drinking, but looking at them brought to mind images of vampires and blood. A buffet table full of various breakfast foods and beverages from several Federation worlds had been set up against the one wall at the base of the row of windows that looked out over the planetoid below.

The commodore was laughing at something that Balok had just said to her, more than likely just to be polite. She happened to look over and noticed that Bailey had just walked in, so gestured toward him and said, “Speak of the devil, there he is now,” prompting Balok to turn and look over at him as well.

“Aaaaaaaaah,” Balok intoned, his smiling mouth wide open, though whether that was because he was happy to see him or because he’d just swallowed a big mouthful of Tranya, Bailey couldn’t be sure. Either way, Bailey returned his smile as he approached them.

“David,” Balok practically shouted, looking happy as ever. “How nice it is to see you again. I am so pleased that you could join us.”

“We just spent more than three years together, Balok,” Bailey reminded the pleasant little man, “and you just saw me a few days ago.”

“Nevertheless, my friend, it is nice to see you again.”

“Well, it’s nice to see you again, too, my friend.”

“*Commander* Bailey, I see,” Balok added overenthusiastically when his eyes fell to the rank bands on Bailey’s sleeves. “Good! That is as it should be. You deserve it. I was just telling your lovely commodore here about all the fun adventures we had together. Why don’t you grab yourself a Tranya and help me tell her our stories.”

“I think I will,” Bailey replied. Then he raised his eyes to meet the commodore’s gaze and added, “Something tells me I’m going to need it.”

Civilians and a relative few Starfleet officers representative of several Federation races manned the station's control center around the clock. The center resembled a starship's bridge in design, minus the helm/navigation console, of course, though it was significantly larger and the center seat was surrounded by a command console that circled it more than three-quarters of the way around, leaving only enough room for the shift supervisor to step through it and sit down. Directly above the supervisor's station, three large monitor screen were mounted to form a triangle so that all those who manned the outer ring could turned and look up at them for an unobstructed view of whatever they displayed at any given moment. The consoles that formed that outer ring consisted of control boards and overhead monitors, also like those on a starship's bridge, but rather than the series of mini-monitors and readouts that one would find situated between those control boards and monitors on such a bridge, the control center had a circle of windows that looked out into space or down onto the planetoid, depending on the angle.

"Affirmative *Exeter*," the Starfleet communications officer replied, responding to a call from the starship. "Starfleet Command has confirmed *Enterprise* is due to arrive within twenty-four hours and will remain with orders to assist you with security for the duration of the negotiations. Destroyer *Kublai* remains available for emergency response if needed."

Sitting at the next console to that officer's left, her civilian counterpart, an attractive young woman in her early twenties, sat monitoring the civilian comm. channels, which were relatively quiet now after the influx of traffic yesterday. To her left, a good-looking young Starfleet lieutenant sat at the external security perimeter monitoring station, bored nearly out of his mind, and the young woman decided to strike up a conversation with him...not for the first time since they'd met.

"So, why aren't you at the reception with all the other Starfleet types?" she asked him.

"Who me?" he asked her in return, looking over at her. "I'm just a lowly junior grade lieutenant. Gatherings like that are for all the bigwigs—starship captains and flag officers and diplomats. They can have them, too."

"You don't like to socialize?"

"I don't like to have to put on a front," he clarified as he turned his eyes back to his board. "Socialize with my friends, no problem, but gatherings like that? No, thank you."

"I see," the young woman remarked as she, too, looked back to her board. Then she asked him, "What do you think about socializing with co-workers?"

The lieutenant looked over at her once more, as did the officer to her right, grinning. "What kind of socializing and which co-worker do you have in mind?" he asked her.

She looked back at him again and smiled, and he returned it. "Like...a date?"

"I think I could handle that," he told her, just as something on his board beeped.

The young woman smiled a little wider and leaned in a little closer as the lieutenant turned his eyes back to his console and gazed at it, puzzled. "Great," she said. "I was thinking that we could..."

"Wait a second," he told her, interrupting. "I've got something here." He pressed a button and flipped a couple of switches, then leaned back a little and looked up at one of the monitors over his station. The monitor showed an image of deep space beyond the perimeter of the star system, and every few seconds three very dim white blips flickered near its center, just for the briefest of moments, then faded again.

“What’ve you got, Lieutenant?” the Starfleet comm. officer sitting on the other side of his date-to-be asked him.

“Not sure yet, sir,” he replied. “Appears to be three unidentified vessels approaching from extreme range at a pretty leisurely pace. If so, whoever they are, they’re not in much of a hurry.” He looked over at her and asked, “Have any incoming vessels hailed us in the last few moments?”

“Negative,” she answered.

He held his Feinberg to his ear and tapped his intercom button. “Duty Officer to the External Security station, please.”

A few seconds later, the Starfleet duty officer, a gold-shirted lieutenant commander, stepped up and stood by the lieutenant’s shoulder. “Problem, Lieutenant?” he inquired.

“I don’t know yet, sir,” the lieutenant replied cautiously.

“What do you have?”

“Sensors *might* be picking up a formation of three unidentified vessels at extreme range, approaching slowly.”

“We’re not expecting any new arrivals this morning, are we?”

“No, sir,” the lieutenant told him. “The Vulcan delegation hasn’t arrived yet, but they would have called ahead to let us know they were on approach.”

“Close enough for visual?”

“Not yet, sir.”

“Let’s assume they are vessels,” the duty officer decided. Then he looked over at the communications officer and ordered, “Hail the approaching vessels and request identification and intent.”

“Yes, sir.” She opened a channel. “This is Babel Station to formation of unidentified vessels approaching, come in please.” Nothing. “Babel Station to unidentified vessels, do you read?” Still nothing. “This is Babel Station. Approaching vessels, respond, please.” She gave them another moment, then looked up at the duty officer. “They’re not responding, sir.”

“Definitely three vessels,” the security lieutenant interjected, gazing into his scanner scope. “They’re approaching on momentum only, but I can read their coil emissions now.”

“Try again,” the duty officer told the comm. officer.

“Yes, sir.” She returned to her efforts. “This is Babel Station to unidentified vessels, respond. Babel Station to unidentified vessels, respond, please.” She looked up at him again. “Still nothing, sir,” she reported. “I have a clear open channel and they *are* receiving. They’re just not answering.”

The duty officer turned to the lieutenant again. “Visual range yet?” he asked.

“Just barely, sir. Not enough for a good lock or visual I-D yet.”

“Put them up on the main screens.”

The lieutenant switched over and the image on his overhead monitor filled the three screens hanging above the command console as well. The duty officer turned around and looked up to find that a significant amount of video noise and interference was marring its clarity and making it difficult to discern much of anything, most likely as a result of the high magnification setting the lieutenant had selected.

“I *almost* have a lock,” the lieutenant told him.

Through the noise and interference, three very dim white blips became visible, though

barely, near the center of the screen. As the duty officer watched, those blips slowly morphed into fuzzy gray-white blobs with a little bit of shape to them, but that shape and structure continued to remain very unclear. “Wait a second,” he mumbled. “Are those...”

The noise and interference began to clear as the shapes drew closer and the lieutenant was able to slowly decrease the magnification level. The outlines of those three fuzzy gray-white blobs began to sharpen and clear somewhat, but their specific shapes and structures were still too vague to be discernible. “They almost look like...”

“Visual range, sir,” the lieutenant announced.

“Lock on and magnify,” the duty officer ordered. The lieutenant complied, and the duty officer’s mouth fell open with a gasp and his jaw went slack.

A trio of century-old *Columbia*-class starships—those old upgraded *NX*-class vessels that had originally come into service during the latter years of the Earth-Romulan war—filled the centers of all three main screens, sailing on momentum alone toward Babel, their warp nacelles dark. The image had become so clear now that he could actually read the names and registration numbers painted on the leading edges of their saucers—the *Excalibur*, NCC-08, the *Soyuz*, NCC-11, and the *Shenzhou*, NCC-13.

“My God,” he remarked. “It’s... The museum ships! Those vessels have been missing for...” He looked back over his shoulder at the communications officer. “Communication, hail each one of them by...”

“All three vessels increasing velocity sharply, sir!” the security lieutenant alerted him. He looked back up at the screen to find that all three vessels had engaged their warp drives. “C-B-D-R! They’re on a collision course! Warp two!”

“Yellow alert!” the duty officer ordered urgently as he stared up at the screen with a frightened look on his face. Then he looked down at the communications officer again and told her to, “Alert the commodore!”

Less than a minute later, the commodore, Lieutenant Commander Bailey, and a few of the more key Starfleet officers assigned to the station charged in through the door. “Warn them off!” the commodore shouted.

“Commodore, they’re friendlies,” Bailey pointed out as soon as he saw what was on the large screens.

“They’re not acting very friendly, are they, Mister Bailey!” she countered as she led him over toward the security officer’s station and then nudged the duty officer aside and took his place.

“They’re powering up their phasers!” the lieutenant reported to her.

“Raise shields!” she ordered urgently. “Prepare to return fire!” She looked over at the Comm. Officer. “Alert the *Exeter* and order all other vessels away from the station!”

All three century-old starships dropped out of warp and then swooped in and opened fire on the station and the vessels surrounding it. Most of those started to move off, to make their escapes, but *Exeter* and one of the Tzhah’Thahn vessels moved to intercept. *Exeter* fired her phasers at one of the older starships and scored a direct hit, her blue-white beams carving a deep gash across the other vessel’s hull plating. That vessel, the *Shenzhou*, broke up and exploded seconds later, scattering large pieces of hull and superstructure all over the area,

some of them striking and damaging both ships and the station itself. *Exeter* took a direct hit to her forward shields, but she remained in the fight.

The *Fesarius* made its escape while the *Excalibur* came under direct fire from the Tzhal'Thahn vessel that had just veered in and was baring down on it. Despite taking heavy, even crippling damage to her hull, *Excalibur* somehow held her course and flew right into the alien vessel, destroying both ships. Flaming wreckage from the collision tumbled through space toward the station and the *Exeter* and Balok's small ship, which was just beginning to power up. *Exeter* moved to a position to protect the small craft and give Balok time to escape. She took the hit instead, and it all but crippled her shields.

More wreckage filled the area every time a weapon scored a hit. The station withstood strike after strike after strike. One particular large piece of a ship's hull struck the forward right side of the *Exeter*'s saucer at a near right angle, blasting nearly a quarter of it away, and then deflected sternward and sheared off her starboard warp nacelle, nearly striking Balok's craft as he tried to get away.

The station exploded. Wreckage began to fall into the planetoid's atmosphere. Some of it burned up, but the largest pieces plunged toward the surface. Heavily damaged with fires burning within, the *Soyuz* broke off its attack and began a kamikaze dive toward the surface of Babel—toward Babel City itself.

* * * * *

The sun had risen and the morning had grown comfortably warm. Mrs. Bailey pushed the baby stroller along the walking path that ran the length of the park with one hand while she held Lilly's little hand in her other. How lucky she was, she pondered as she looked around, watching others walking or jogging along the paths, playing with their dogs in the grass, and generally just enjoying the beautiful morning in the park, just as she was. While David had understandably been upset about the baby at first, he'd eventually come to realize that while he was off flying around the galaxy with that Balok character for three years, she had been left to raise their baby daughter alone and had only grown more lonely as the time passed. He'd apologized to her profusely for his absence and had sworn that he would raise her son as his own.

There was an empty park bench sitting on their left about twenty feet ahead. Across the path from that bench, about fifty feet or so away, several children, most of whom looked to be a few years older than Lilly, were laughing and playing in a rather elaborate playground built over a large rubbery safety surface and filled with a variety of apparatus designed for climbing, swinging, sliding, and spinning.

As they drew closer to the bench, Lilly looked at it, then over toward the playground, and then up at her mother, who looked down and met her gaze. "My feet are getting tired," the little girl said.

"Do you want to sit down and rest?" her mother asked her.

"Yes," she replied, nodding. Mrs. Bailey steered them over to the bench. She parked the stroller and snuck a peek inside to find her baby boy sleeping soundly, then sat down on the bench as Lilly jumped up onto it to sit beside her. "That's better."

"It's a nice park, isn't it, Lilly?" her mother asked.

"Yes," Lilly answered with an exaggerated nod as she watched the children playing in the playground. Then she pointed there and asked, "Can I go play there?"

Mrs. Bailey grinned. "I thought your feet were getting tired."

"They're all rested now," Lilly informed her.

Mrs. Bailey's grin grew into a full smile. "Okay." Lilly leapt off of the bench and started running toward the playground. "Be careful, Lilly," her mother called after her, "and play nice with the other children."

"I will!" Lilly hollered in reply.

Mrs. Bailey felt content to watch Lilly play for a while, but before long her thoughts inevitably turned to her husband. *Come on, David*, she thought. *You've missed enough time over the last few years. Get down here and spend some time with your family.*

She heard something off to her left—a sound like someone's expression of shock or surprise—and looked to find a couple of joggers who'd just passed her a few moments before looking back the way they had come, pointing up into the sky over the center of the city in the general direction of Babel Tower. Beyond the joggers, more and more people all over the park were stopping whatever they were doing to look and point up in the same direction.

What are they looking at?

She looked as well. *What the...* She rose slowly to her feet and raised a hand to shade her eyes from the sun as she gazed up into the sky high above Babel Tower, much of which she could see rising into the clouds from several blocks beyond the nearer buildings. Dozens of smoke trails striped the sky as the burning wreckage of...of *something* fell from space, soaring directly toward the city.

"What is that?" she muttered to herself.

Moments later, whatever it was began to crash into the city, each destructive impact accompanied by a horrific *crash* and ending in a massive explosion and conflagration that poured gray-black smoke back into the air. "Oh my God!" Mrs. Bailey exclaimed, realizing that every impact brought the deadly wreckage closer and closer to the park. All around her, people began gathering their families running for their lives, and she knew that she needed to do the same.

"Lilly!" she screamed to her daughter, growing terrified. "Lilly!"

Lilly, who had stopped playing and turned to watch the deadly show as well, looked toward her mother, saw the fear, and then grew fearful herself and started running toward her, shouting back, "Here I come, Mommy!"

Lilly reached her mother and jumped into her arms, crying, as huge pieces of blazing wreckage began to crash thunderously into the softer ground at the far end of the park from where they had come. "What's happening, Mommy?" she asked through her frightened tears.

"I don't know, sweetie," her mother replied as she shifted her around to one side and then grabbed hold of the stroller with her free hand. She started running in the same direction they had been walking a few minutes ago...the same direction in which everyone else in the park had begun to flee...away from the approaching carnage.

As Mrs. Bailey ran with her children...as everyone fled for their lives...the *Soyuz* dove toward Babel Tower. The old starship crashed to the ground at its base and the tower began to collapse...to fall sidelong into the city...but it had only barely begun to fall when the old

starship's warp core detonated, the blinding explosion wiping out the entirety of Babel City and the surrounding countryside as wreckage continued to rain down on the planetoid.

* * * * *

The dark-skinned gentleman in black made his way under the cover of the moonless night across the quiet Starfleet Academy grounds toward Archer House, the academy dean's on-campus residence. So far no one had seen him, and he hoped to keep it that way. He had a career to protect. He saw that the porch light had been left on as he approached, and that a light glowed dim inside. He stepped up to the door and pressed the bell...heard its melodic muffled chimes play their song through the door. A few long seconds passed, and then the lock clicked. He opened the door and walked inside.

He closed and locked the door behind him, then stood there in the near darkness, not sure where he should go. "Hello?" he called out.

"In the study," the answer came.

He made his way to the study and stopped a couple steps inside. The room was fairly dark, like the foyer, a single desk lamp the only source of light—the light he'd seen glowing from outside. Dressed in a long robe that she'd pulled on over her nightgown, Admiral Laura Roslyn, dean of the academy for the last twenty-five years, stood across the room with her back to him, gazing out through the window behind her desk into the darkness.

"It's done," he told her.

"May God have mercy on our souls," she replied.

"I wouldn't count in it," he suggested regretfully. "They decided not to stop with the three worlds we agreed on."

"I wish I could say that surprises me," she remarked. Then she asked, "Where else?"

"Babel," he told her straightforwardly.

"Babel," she repeated quietly.

"The president?" she then inquired. The Federation president had been scheduled to attend the talks between the Federation Council and the delegates from both the Tzhal'Thahn and the First Federation.

"We don't know yet." He hesitated for a moment, then added, "It doesn't look good." he approached Roslyn's desk, and then further explained, "We lost the station, *and* the entire city below. Initial estimates put casualties at over half a million." Roslyn bowed her head and sighed. "The *Exeter* took heavy damaged, possibly more than can be repaired," he went on. "The *Fesarius* took some damage, too, and one of the Tzhal'Thahn vessels was destroyed."

"There will be no mercy," she stated matter-of-factly. "Not for this."

"Do we stop the *Endeavour*?" he asked her, trying to move things along.

"It's too late for that," she told him. "That stage is already in motion. If we stop her now, our so-called allies will reveal everything."

"Then what are we going to do? We can't let them get away with this."

"No, we can't," she agreed, "but we can't fight a war on two fronts, either. Defeating the Klingon Empire remains our top priority. We can't fight this war on their timetable."

"We *have* to do *something*," the man insisted.

“We will, but damage control comes first.”

“You just said defeating the Klingon Empire...”

“Yes, I did,” she reiterated, interrupting, “and it does, but we must also disassociate ourselves from everything that’s happened...and from *everyone* involved in it.”

“And how do you propose we do that?”

Roslyn finally turned her back on the window and stepped up behind her desk to stand and face the man, leaning forward and resting hands on her desk. “Call the staff together,” she directed him. “The hall, one hour.”

CHAPTER 2

U.S.S. Enterprise Log, stardate 2137.2, First Officer Spock recording: Former Enterprise navigator turned ad hoc Federation Ambassador Lieutenant David Bailey recently returned to Federation space aboard the First Federation vessel Fesarius, and negotiations regarding a potential alliance between the First Federation and the United Federation of Planets are set to begin at Babel just over twenty-four hours from now. The Enterprise is transporting dignitaries from several Federation worlds to attend the conference, during which the agreed to conditions surrounding the Tzhal'Thahn request for asylum will also be formally presented to both the Tzhal'Thahn representatives and the Federation Council for ratification. Captain Kirk is in his quarters reviewing the conference's security protocols, as the Enterprise has been assigned to provide security personnel to augment those from the U-S-S Exeter, who are already on station.

Lieutenant Nyota Uhura sat at her communications station on the bridge, one hand over her Feinberg device, listening intently to more frantic and agitated subspace chatter than she had had to listen to all at once in a very long time. There seemed to be a lot of confusion as well, and she was having a difficult time making much sense out of any of it, but as soon as she thought she'd figured out the gist of it, she turned toward Commander Spock, who was sitting in temporary command while the captain worked out some of the logistical details of their current assignment, pulled her Feinberg from her ear, and reported, "Mister Spock, I'm picking up a lot of subspace chatter about a series of attacks against Federation worlds."

"Can you be more specific, Lieutenant?" the Vulcan inquired, showing what looked almost like a sense of urgency. Had she not known him better, she might have accused him of reacting from emotion.

"Not at the moment, sir," she replied honestly. "Not with any definitive facts, at least. I'm hearing mentions of Andoria, Tellar Prime, and...and Vulcan, sir. There might have been something said about Babel as well, but to be honest, there's so much confusion I can barely make sense out of any of it." She paused to let the first officer respond, but then added before he had a chance to speak, "I *am* recording it all for analysis."

"Very well," Spock replied as Uhura looked back at her board. "As soon as you feel that you have recorded a sufficient sample..."

"Stand by, sir," she interrupted, placing her Feinberg back into her ear. "I'm receiving a narrow-band transmission from Starbase Four now."

Captain James T. Kirk sat back in his chair at his desk in his quarters, legs crossed, the lights dimmed a little bit to help him relax, referring to the classified documents displayed on his monitor as necessary while he jotted down some notes on a PADD. For the most part, security protocols for the conference were pretty standard—coordination with the local law enforcement authorities on extended external security, roving and fixed security posts around the building's external perimeter as well as throughout its interior, identification checks and personnel scans at both levels—but given that there were going to be delegations from two

alien cultures not yet under treaty in attendance, the Federation Council had chosen to err on the side of extreme caution and double the normal security contingent. Wise precaution, Kirk agreed, considering their current state of relations with the Klingon Empire.

"Bridge to Captain Kirk," Lieutenant Uhura's voice called over the comm.

Kirk reached out and pressed the button on his desktop comm. unit, annoyed by the interruption and happy for it at the same time. "Kirk here," he responded, his voice sounding loud in his ears after sitting in the quiet for so long.

"We're receiving a priority-one commanding officer-only communiqué from Admiral Withrow at Starbase Four, sir."

That didn't sound good at all. "Pipe it down here, Lieutenant," he requested.

"Aye, sir."

Kirk set his PADD aside, uncrossed his legs, and sat up straight and faced his monitor directly just as Admiral Withrow's image appeared on the monitor...*not* wearing one of those new green-gray and white admirals' tunics like the one Admiral Nogura had been wearing the last time they saw each other, Kirk noted. The normally even-tempered and level-headed red-haired flag officer looked to be at his wits end—redder in the face than he'd ever seen him, with dark circles forming under his eyes. Something was seriously wrong.

"Admiral Withrow," Kirk greeted him with concern. "What can I do for you, sir?"

"We have a Federation-wide emergency situation of Biblical proportions going on, Jim," the admiral replied, getting right to the point. He actually looked like he was about to be sick. *"A few hours ago, Imperial Klingon forces simultaneously attacked and destroyed major facilities in orbit over Vulcan, Andoria, and Tellar Prime. Minutes later, those three old Columbia-class museum ships that disappeared a few months ago were used to carry out a similar attack against Babel."*

"Babel," Kirk repeated, growing even more alarmed than he had already grown at the news of the first three planets.

"We lost everything at Babel, Jim—the station and the entire city. We lost the Exeter, too, at least for the foreseeable future, and one of the Tzhal'Thahn vessels. Given that the attack on Babel came almost immediately after those over the other three worlds, we believe those Columbia-class starships were manned by Klingon crews."

Something about that hypothesis didn't sit right with Kirk, and he knew immediately exactly what that something was. "Stealing their enemies' ships and using them against those same enemies is not a normal Klingon tactic, Admiral," he pointed out.

"No, it's not," Withrow acknowledged in full agreement, *"but the timing and tactics were too close for coincidence. We're literally talking about less than ten minutes difference here, Jim."*

Kirk considered that for a moment. The three worlds, maybe, but the attack on Babel just didn't sound at all like a Klingon operation...but anything was possible, he supposed. "Casualties?" he had to ask, though he wasn't at all looking forward to hearing the answer.

"The last update I got puts the numbers at over three-quarters of a million dead, and that's just in Babel City alone, based on the last census. I haven't seen any numbers from the other worlds yet. It's just too soon for that. Local authorities are still trying to get a handle on things."

"What are we doing about it?"

“Starfleet Command has initiated a fleet-wide code black-alert. An emergency session of the provisional Federation Council has been called, but for all intents and purposes the Klingon Empire has already declared all-out war against the Federation, so our response can’t be too hard to guess. The Klingon Empire is officially denying any involvement, but that doesn’t mean anything at this point. Remote telemetry from our communications buoys shows squadrons of three D-seven battlecruisers carrying out each of the first three attacks.”

Denying involvement? That didn’t seem right to Kirk, either. “Klingons also do not attack their enemies and then deny attacking them, Admiral,” he added to his analysis of the situation. “They roar about it...proudly. Using our old ships against us, denying involvement in the attacks... Those are *not* Klingon tactics, Admiral. It doesn’t add up.”

“I understand your doubts, Jim,” the admiral told him. “In fact, I have a few doubts of my own, but the Tzhal’Thahn did warn us that something like this was coming, and I can’t deny what I saw with my own eyes.”

“If it really was the Klingons, then where the hell were the Organians?”

Withrow snickered with a trace of disgust. “*The Organians?*” he asked. “*Hell, Jim, where the hell have the Organians been for the last six months or more?*” he then countered. Then, when Kirk didn’t respond to that, he answered both of their questions with a simple, “*I wish to Hell we knew where the Organians were. Not that it makes any difference now.*”

“This isn’t just *Kargh* attacking *me*, Admiral,” Kirk pointed out, growing agitated. “This isn’t one warrior’s personal vendetta. This is an all-out military *invasion*—an open declaration of war. The Organians should have stopped it.”

“I don’t know what else to tell you, Jim. They should have, but they didn’t.”

“What about the Esterions, sir?” Kirk asked, looking for a possible alternative to the Klingons. “Their world’s economy is centered on the manufacture of machines and ships of war, and they *have* replicated the appearance of a D-seven battlecruiser’s exterior before.”

“No way, Jim,” the admiral replied adamantly, shaking his head. “The attacks on the first three worlds involved nine battlecruisers. Nine! The Esterion economy is so depressed right now they couldn’t possibly have pulled it off, especially with those sanctions we slapped on them after their little stunt still in place.”

Kirk drew a deep breath and exhaled slowly as he thought it over, but that was it. The Esterions. They were the only likely alternative he could think of...at least for the moment. With nothing more to offer, he asked, “What are my orders, Admiral?”

“With that...cargo...you’re carrying in mind,” Withrow began, referring of course to all the delegates the Enterprise was ferrying to Babel, “right now your orders are the same as they were before, with just a couple of small adjustments. First, you’re to divert immediately to the coordinates that I’m sending to you in coded package across a sub-channel right now and rendezvous with the vessel waiting for you there. Their captain will fill you in on the specifics of their situation. Second, when you depart the rendezvous point, you’re to divert to the second set of coordinates that I’m sending you now. Again, details when you make the rendezvous. And Jim, it is absolutely vital that you maintain strict communications silence all the way. We cannot risk your being tracked.”

“Understood, Admiral,” Kirk acknowledged.

“Withrow out.”

Kirk sat back in his chair as his monitor screen went black, thinking, *War*. Everything

had just changed. *Open war against the Klingon Empire.* He stood up slowly and paused, then left his quarters, and as he strolled along through the gently curving corridor, he glanced sidelong at a very young-looking crewman as he passed him walking the other direction. *So young,* he observed. As he continued on his way, he turned his head and gazed at a pair of attractive young crewwomen walking together as they passed him by as well, also walking in the other direction. *Them, too,* he observed as before. He turned to his left and stepped into the turbolift as yet another young officer stepped out. *They're all so young.* He turned to face the doors as they slid closed in front of him. *Scientists, engineers, wide-eyed explorers. None of these kids signed on to go to war.*

Kirk stepped out of the turbolift onto the bridge and paused beside Lieutenant Uhura, requested, "Ship-wide intercom, Lieutenant," and then stepped down to the center seat.

"Aye, sir," she replied.

"Mister Chekov, you have both sets of coordinates from Admiral Withrow?" he then asked the young recently redshirted navigator/security chief as he took his seat.

"Aye, Keptin," Chekov replied.

"Lay in a course for the first set of coordinates."

"Aye, Keptin," Chekov repeated.

"You're on ship-wide, Captain," Uhura advised him.

Kirk pressed a button on the arm of his chair and began, "Attention all hands, this is Captain Kirk. Moments ago, I received word from Admiral Withrow on Starbase Four that Imperial Klingon forces have carried out simultaneous attacks against Vulcan, Andoria, and Tellar Prime. In addition, three old *Columbia*-class museum ships that have been missing for several months carried out a similar attack against Babel. At present, Starfleet Command believes the Klingons were responsible for that attack as well." He paused to consider his next words, then continued, "How?...Why?...doesn't really matter now. What does matter is that as of this moment, we are officially at war. Stand to your duties and trust your shipmates, and we'll all come through this. Kirk out."

He pressed the button again, closing the channel, and then looked at the back of his recently returned senior helmsman's head and said, "Ahead warp factor seven, Mister Sulu."

* * * * *

Starfleet Captain Christopher MacLeod straightened the front of his avocado-green wraparound tunic over the formfitting black tee-shirt he'd worn underneath it as he walked through the long hallway, approaching Commodore Harry Morrow's new office at Starfleet Command. He'd always preferred it to the command-gold pullover—it just seemed to fit better for some reason—but he'd never understood how Jim Kirk and some of the other starship commanders he'd met could wear it over their bare skin. He'd always found it to be too itchy for that. *I wonder if our lady-captains have that problem with the new wraparound skirt version.* He liked his new ship's insignia that doubled as the tunic's fastener more than he ever had that of his previous command, the scout ship *Aeolus*—the silhouette of the old

twentieth-century NASA space shuttle actually meant something to him, whereas the *Aeolus*' insignia had just been...a thing—and the new captain's braid was, of course, a most welcome addition.

The commodore's door was standing wide open, so MacLeod just walked in—he was expected, after all—and then extended his hand as Commodore Morrow stood up behind his desk to greet him. “Commodore Morrow,” he said to the man in command-gold shirt. Come to think of it, MacLeod couldn't remember *ever* having seen him wear the wraparound. “It's good to see you again, sir.”

“Captain MacLeod,” the commodore returned as they shook hands. Then he informed him, “It's *Admiral* Morrow now, by the way. I just haven't put it on yet.”

“Oh,” MacLeod replied. “Then I suppose congratulations are in order for you, too.”

“Thank you.”

They released one another's hands and Morrow gestured toward the chair sitting in front of his desk. “Have a seat.”

“Thank you, sir,” MacLeod replied as he sat down.

“You're going gray, Chris,” Morrow observed as he sat down as well.

“I prefer to think of it as salt and pepper, Admiral,” MacLeod countered with a grin. “A sort of indicator that I'm a ‘well-seasoned’ officer.”

Morrow snickered and returned the captain's grin, then asked, “And the goatee?”

“Browner than the hair on my head, Harry,” MacLeod explained as he stroked the recent growth subconsciously. “A sort of indicator that a trace of youth still remains. Much like that huge black caterpillar on your lip.”

“Hey!” Morrow barked humorously. “The moustache is officially off limits. Besides, you won't find a trace of gray on my head.”

“Fair enough,” MacLeod replied, laughing. “Though, now that you've been promoted to admiral, the gray can't be too far behind.”

“Good point.” A moment passed silently between them, during which the men only gazed at one another. Then Morrow stood up and stepped out from behind his desk. “I'm going to have some coffee,” he told the captain. “Want some?”

“Yes, sir. Thank you.”

MacLeod followed his newly promoted old friend with his eyes as the man stepped over to the small table sitting against the side wall and filled two mugs with fresh coffee from an old-fashioned glass carafe. “Congratulations to you, too, Chris, for your promotion and on your new command,” he said with his back still turned to him. “The *Endeavour*'s going to prove herself a fine ship. I'm sure of it.”

“Thank you, sir. I'll certainly do my best,” MacLeod replied, wondering what bush the admiral had been beating around since the moment he walked in. Then, when the admiral approached him and held one of the mugs out to him, he reached up to accept it from him and asked, “Something wrong with your food dispenser?” Whatever his reason was for having summoned him, Harry Morrow would get to it when Harry Morrow was ready to get to it.

“I prefer to make it the old-fashioned way,” he explained. “It tastes better that way.” He walked back around behind his desk, saying, “Sorry I had to make you come see me in person, Chris, but your orders are classified Top Secret and compartmentalized.” Then he set his mug down on his desk and sat back down, and added, “There can be no record of them

anywhere until *after* you've completed your mission."

"I understand, sir," MacLeod told him, even though he didn't. "Not a problem." He took a sip of his coffee and savored it. It was hot...*real* hot...but Morrow was right. It *did* taste exceptionally good.

"All right then. With everything that's happened already today we don't have a lot of time, so I'll stop with the small talk and get to it. About a month and a half ago, the Romulan senate agreed to send a team of representatives to participate in a round of open talks with the Federation, but when *our* representative showed up for the start of those talks, the Romulans immediately took him into custody and charged him with espionage. Your first mission as captain of the *Endeavour* is to get him back. The *Endeavour* will proceed to the center of the Romulan neutral zone, where she'll rendezvous with one lone Romulan vessel and participate in a prisoner exchange—one of theirs for one of ours."

"I wasn't aware Starfleet was holding any Romulan prisoners, sir," MacLeod said.

"Very few people are," Morrow replied. "The specifics surrounding how she came to be in our custody are *also* classified Top Secret."

"I see," MacLeod said. What else *could* he say?

"At any rate," the admiral continued, "our Romulan...guest...is already enroute to your ship. I think you should be there when she arrives." He stood up, so MacLeod set his coffee aside and did the same. "Chris...now that we're at war with the Klingon Empire, I don't need to tell you how important it is that we maintain peaceful relations with the Romulans."

"I understand, sir." He extended his hand, and Admiral Morrow shook it once more. "It was good to see you again...Admiral."

"And you, Chris," Morrow replied. "Good luck."

MacLeod released the admiral's hand, glanced down at his coffee and thought about picking it up and taking it with him—it really was the best tasting cup of coffee he'd had in a while—but ultimately decided against it, and then pulled out his communicator and flipped it open as he stepped away from the desk. "MacLeod to *Endeavour*. Ready to beam up."

Seconds later, he dematerialized in the transporter beam.

MacLeod rematerialized seconds later in *Endeavour*'s transporter room number four, and the first thing he noticed was that the platform on which he found himself standing was a deep forest-green rather than that stark bright orange-red that seemed to be the more common color among Federation starships. Not that it mattered. He stepped down off of the platform and said, "Thank you, Chief," to the operator as he approached the controls console.

"You're welcome, sir," the transporter chief replied.

MacLeod stepped right up to and stopped in front of the console—it's controls surface was forest-green as well—and then asked the man, "Everyone onboard?"

"Uh..." the chief intoned, hesitating. Then he answered, "I believe so, sir, as far as I know. First Officer Kim finally stopped calling down here about twenty minutes ago, so that *might* mean everyone's aboard."

Of course he was hesitant to answer, MacLeod realized. He's one transporter chief. How is he supposed to know if all personnel have reported aboard?

"Bridge to transporter room four," came a voice over the intercom.

The chief reached over to the comm. unit and pressed the button to open the channel. "Transporter room four, Chief Hassan," he responded.

"Has Captain MacLeod beamed up yet, Chief?"

"Yes I have," MacLeod answered directly to move things along. "What's up?"

"Sir, there's a shuttlecraft registered to Starfleet Command approaching from Earth. The pilot reports they're carrying a classified package for delivery to this vessel. Requesting clearance to approach and come aboard."

"Granted," MacLeod stated, figuring the package must have been Admiral Morrow's Romulan prisoner. "I'm on my way down to the hangar deck now to meet it. MacLeod out." He nodded to Hassan, and Hassan closed the channel.

"Confirm with Commander Kim that everyone's onboard and then lock the system down, command access protocols" he instructed the transporter chief. "We'll be pulling out soon with a potentially hostile passenger onboard."

"Understood, sir," Hassan replied with a nod.

MacLeod turned and headed out into the corridor. There, he glanced over to his right even as he started turning to his left. A few steps later he emerged from that short corridor between transporter rooms into the main corridor. He gazed up that corridor to his left, noting that there was a comm. panel on the left bulkhead a short distance away. *Left?* He looked to his right. *Or right?* He looked back to his left again. *I beamed into transporter room four. I'm on the starboard side of the ship. Aft is to my left.*

He stepped up to the comm. panel and thumbed the button, then looked to his right when a very attractive young lady nurse caught his attention as she was about to stroll past him. "MacLeod to Chief Engineer," he called as he smiled at the nurse.

"Commander Baumann here, sir," came the woman's somewhat husky voice in reply a few seconds later.

The nurse returned his smile warmly as she walked by. "If you have a few minutes, Commander, I'd like you to meet me on the portside hangar observation deck."

He turned his head to get a look at the nurse from behind, and she looked back over her shoulder at him, still smiling, as she continued on her way. *"I'll be there in two minutes, sir,"* Baumann replied.

"Thank you, Commander. MacLeod out." He thumbed the button again, closing the channel and continued gazing after the pretty nurse as she walked away. *Sometimes it is truly good to be the captain,* he acknowledged.

He continued up the corridor, approaching a ninety-degree left turn that he thought shouldn't have been there. *This is different.* He made the turn to find that the corridor ahead of him ended abruptly at a door. A gangway stood to the left of that door, turbolift doors to its right. *There it is.* He stepped into the lift. *I'd better learn my way around this ship fast,* he told himself as the doors swished closed. *A captain can't be getting lost aboard his own ship.* "Hanger bay, port observation deck," he told the lift.

The Endeavour, he marveled as the lift started moving laterally. *I still can't believe it! A brand new Bonhomme Richard-class heavy cruiser still in space dock, and they gave her to me. Am I really ready for this?* Actually, she had been out of space dock. Commander Kim had been placed in temporary command for the duration of the shakedown cruises, but that had been before her official commissioning, while she was still an NX. Now that she was an

NCC preparing to launch on her first real mission, she was all his.

The lift slowed to a near stop and then started moving vertically.

Am I really up to commanding more than four-hundred officers and crew on a five-year mission of exploration, assuming we find a way to avert this war?

The lift slowed to a near stop and then started moving laterally again.

Admiral Morrow seemed to think so. Then again...

The lift slowed to a near stop and then started moving vertically once more.

Then again, Admiral Morrow's not the one taking command. He has commanded a starship before. He knows what it takes. I could handle it aboard the Aeolus, but...

The lift shifted to lateral movement again.

...but this isn't the Aeolus. This isn't a scout ship and I'm not a scout ship commander anymore. This is a starship, and I'm a starship captain now. This is the Endeavour.

The lift finally slowed to a full stop and the doors opened. MacLeod stepped out into a small anteroom between two sets of deck doors. The doors on his right led into a corridor and those on his left led into the port observation deck. As he approached those doors, he saw that the pressure indicator panel on the bulkhead to their right—a simple safety feature that had been added should anything happen to cause loss of pressure in the observation decks—indicated that the observation deck beyond was currently pressurized to one atmosphere. The doors parted in front of him and he found Commander Karla Baumann, dressed in a red shirt and black trousers rather than in the standard females' mini-dress, slowly walking away from him, apparently having been pacing back and forth along the length of the deck.

No doubt having heard the doors open behind her, the near middle-aged, somewhat homely woman turned around and faced him as he approached her. "Commander," he greeted her as the doors closed behind him.

"Captain MacLeod, sir," she returned, somewhat impatiently. "What can I do for you, sir? Is there a problem in here?"

"No, no problem, Commander," he replied evenly, noting the look of relief that then flashed briefly across her face. "I came down here to meet our incoming cargo. Thought I'd get an update on that warp reactor bug you've been trying to squash for the last week and a half or so."

"Oh, that," she acknowledged, looking off to one side and then dropping her gaze to the deck between them.

"Yes, that," MacLeod confirmed. "Have you found the cause yet?"

"Found it and fixed it, Captain," she replied, nodding and tilting her head to one side without looking up.

"Excellent," MacLeod said, truly pleased to hear it. "Well done, Commander."

Baumann drew a deep breath and then exhaled sharply as she looked up at him again. "I can't take the credit for it, sir," she told him. "Commander Lothar solved the problem."

"Oh." Lothar. "Who?"

"Lieutenant Commander Ta'lon Lothar, Assistant Chief Engineer, sir. He's been with me all along, since the day we started building this tub, from the keel up. He found the cause of the data bottleneck and then installed a supplemental drive directly into the engineering computer and reprogrammed the algorithms. Problem solved."

“I thought Pernell was your A-C-E.”

“He decided to retire after the shakedown, sir,” she informed him for the first time. “Just as well, too. Lothar’s twice the engineer Pernell was *ever* going to be.” She looked out through the window at the giant hangar bay clamshell doors as they started to open.

“So you’ve got her ready to go at a hundred percent then?” MacLeod asked her as he glanced out there as well.

“A hundred and three, actually,” she answered as though that were no big deal.

“A hundred and three!” MacLeod exclaimed, pleasantly surprised once more. “That’s an impressive achievement, Commander. Is this Lothar person staying on with us or will he be transferring to the *El Dorado* team?”

“Oh he’s staying on with us, sir,” she answered adamantly, meeting his eyes again. “He’s staying on if I have to tag his antennas with proximity trackers.”

MacLeod’s eyes narrowed. “Antennas?” he inquired.

“He’s half-Andorian, sir,” she explained, “and half-human.”

But the Andorians have four genders. “How does that happen?”

Baumann shrugged her shoulders. “You got me, sir.”

The shuttlecraft passed between the clamshell doors and drifted into the hangar bay, drawing MacLeod’s attention. “Here it comes,” he pointed out as the doors stopped opening and then started closing again behind it. Then he asked his chief engineer, “So, Commander Lothar’s really that good?”

“Damn right he is, Captain,” Baumann assured him with emphasis. He’ll tear your head off and spit down your throat if you make him angry enough, but he *really* knows his engineering.”

“I look forward to meeting him,” the captain remarked. Then he turned to the comm. panel on the wall and thumbed the call button while Baumann continued watching the hangar bay doors close and the deck’s tractor beam halt the shuttlecraft’s forward momentum above the turntable. “Captain to Security.”

“*Security Chief Dawkins here, sir,*” the answer came almost instantly.

“I need two guards to meet me at the hangar bay entrance, Mister Dawkins. We’re bringing a prisoner aboard.”

“*On their way, sir.*”

No questions. They were in space dock over Earth, *taking on* a prisoner, and the only thing the security chief had to say was ‘Yes, sir.’ MacLeod liked that. “Thanks for meeting me here, Commander,” he said as he closed the channel and turned to leave.

“Aye, sir.” She watched him leave. *I guess he isn’t so bad,* she decided. *Beats a kick in the teeth at least.*

She, MacLeod thought as he stepped out of the turbolift and approached the hangar bay personnel airlock. *She.* He waited by the doors for the bay to pressurize, the indicator on the wall to the right of those doors showing one-third pressurized. *She. I wonder who she is.*

“Captain?” MacLeod looked back over his shoulder to find two *Endeavour* security officers, both ensigns, young men with close-cropped hair, approaching him from the lift, type-II phasers hanging from their hips. “I understand we’re taking aboard a prisoner, sir?”

“That’s right,” MacLeod confirmed. “A *Romulan* prisoner, so stay sharp.”

“Military, sir?” the other ensign asked.

“Romulan. That’s all I know.”

With the bay finally having pressurized, the doors opened and MacLeod and his two security ensigns walked in. The circular table was just completing its turn, so the shuttlecraft was already facing back toward the clamshell doors, and as they approached it from behind, its side door opened and its upper step swung downward. MacLeod and the ensigns stopped where they were when a large, muscular man in red with commander’s braid on his sleeves, the Starfleet sunburst emblem on his chest, a type-II phaser on his hip, and a tricorder slung over his shoulder stepped down onto the deck, then held his tricorder out in front of him as he approached them.

“Captain Christopher MacLeod?” the commander asked in a strong Australian accent.

“I’m Captain MacLeod,” he replied.

“*Voice identification positive,*” the tricorder reported in the same feminine voice used in all of Starfleet’s computers, though it sounded a little more tinny. “*MacLeod, Christopher Allen...captain...current assignment, commanding officer, Starship U-S-S Endeavour, N-C-C-one-seven-one-six.*”

The commander took a sidestep backward and shouted back over his shoulder toward the shuttlecraft. “Okay. Bring her out.”

Another redshirt, a security lieutenant holding a medium-size travel bag slung over one shoulder, stepped out of the shuttlecraft and down onto the deck, then turned back and watched with his free hand on the phaser at his hip while another security lieutenant emerged holding their Romulan prisoner—a woman with long, dark brown hair wearing a short dress of various subdued colors and shiny black leather boots—by the arm. She was perhaps in her early forties in Earth years, was not at all unattractive, and had a somewhat regal air about her, though she seemed to be keenly aware of her situation. Her hands were cuffed behind her back, which indicated to MacLeod that at least one person with some say-so considered her to be dangerous. The lieutenants flanked her as she stepped down to the deck, took her by the arms, and walked her forward.

“I don’t remember her name, Captain, and I probably couldn’t pronounce it if I did,” the commander told MacLeod. “Just be aware that she’s an officer in the armed forces of the Romulan Star Empire. My understanding is that she’s been our...our guest...for more than a year, maybe as long as a year and a half, but that’s mostly just hearsay. All I know about the circumstances surrounding how she originally came to be with us is that the *Enterprise* delivered her a while back. Beyond that, I have no idea.”

MacLeod turned his eyes to the woman, held her dark-eyed gaze for a moment, then introduced himself with a simple, “Captain Christopher MacLeod...Commander.”

“Commander Dion Charvon of the family Charvonek,” she responded flatly.

“Okay then,” MacLeod replied, choosing not to even try to repeat any of that. Then he turned his eyes back to the security commander and told him, “My orders are to take her off your hands, Commander. Is there anything specific I need to know about her? Illnesses? Medications? Special diet?”

“Nothing I’m aware of, sir,” the commander replied. “My orders were to bring her up here and turn her over to you. That’s it. So, she’s all yours, Captain.”

As MacLeod's security ensigns took the Romulan commander into their custody and then relieved the lieutenant of her travel bag, one of them stared at her with disgust and said, "Congratulations, Romulan bitch. You'll be the first *prisoner* to grace our *brig*."

"No brig," MacLeod ordered, looking at both of the young men, "and you stow that attitude right now. The commander is no longer a prisoner. She's a guest aboard this vessel. Remove those cuffs, assign her guest quarters, and post a single guard outside her door, just in case she might need something while she's with us."

"Yes, sir," both ensigns acknowledged. One of them removed the cuffs as ordered and handed them over to the closest lieutenant. Then, as the lieutenants had earlier, they flanked her and walked her out, though they didn't presume to take her by the arms.

MacLeod watched them until the airlock doors closed behind them, then faced around to the visiting security officers again, only to find that they were already walking back to their shuttlecraft. "You're welcome, Commander," he muttered sarcastically under his breath. Then he turned his back on them and headed for the airlock himself. "Have a nice day."

A few minutes later, MacLeod stepped out of the port turbolift onto the bridge...*his* bridge...and the first thing that he noticed as he stood in place to take it all in was that it was different. The same, but different. There was the center seat, the helm/navigation console just ahead of it, the raised outer ring of stations surrounding them, and the main viewscreen in front. All of that was generally the same, but the differences were pronounced. For one thing, he had just stepped out of the *port* turbolift—one of two lifts located on either side of the science station, which had been moved directly behind the center seat where a *Constitution*-class starship's communications station would have been. For another, as in the transporter room, all of the surfaces that were orange-red aboard the *Enterprise* and her sister ships were forest green here. Furthermore, the controls consoles' surfaces, black on the *Constitution*-class vessels, weren't black. They were instead more of an 'almost' black dark gray.

There were other differences as well. The center seat was the standard captain's chair, except that it had a slightly higher back. Around the portside outer ring, the stations from the turbolift forward were the newly designed and radically different Weapons Control station, which faced more toward the main viewscreen than it did outward away from the center like the other stations, Engineering & Environmental, and Engineering Sub-systems Monitor. A door leading out into the maintenance corridor and restrooms stood between the Engineering Sub-systems and the viewscreen. Around the starboard-side outer ring, the stations from that turbolift forward were the relocated Communications station and two supplemental stations that, one full-size and the other half-size, that could be configured to backup any of the other stations or to suit whatever other temporary needs that might arise.

His first officer, Commander Sun Hee Kim, was standing beside the center seat facing forward, but turned and looked back at him, though only briefly, when the lift doors closed behind him. Pretty, petite, and kind of sexy in her command-gold mini-dress, her record had clued him into the fact that her appearance could be very deceptive. She'd shown on several occasions that she could bring on a world of hurt when she wanted to. She commanded the respect of her subordinates and superiors alike, made it her business to know everything there was to know about whatever vessel she served on and about the crew who served with her,

and was a master of the Korean martial art of Tae Kwon Do and held high rankings in several other martial arts as well. She'd graduated first in her class from Starfleet Academy at the age of 21 eight years ago after completing the entire four year program in barely three years, had been commissioned a lieutenant junior grade upon graduation, and had served her first two years right there as an Academy instructor.

Upon completing her assignment at the academy, she'd been promoted to lieutenant and assigned to the starship *U.S.S. Exeter* under the command of Captain Ron Tracey, where she'd served as a helmsman for three years—transferring out to a new assignment before the incident at Omega IV, fortunately. That new assignment, *chief* helmsman aboard the starship *U.S.S. Hood*, had brought with it a promotion to the rank of lieutenant commander and she'd served in that capacity for three more years prior to her new promotion to full commander and her transfer to the *Endeavour*. She was a hard-charging officer on the fast track to a starship command of her own. Hopefully, that didn't mean that he was going to have to deal with her always getting underfoot and second-guessing his decisions.

Science Officer Jeremy Daystrom was sitting at the science station doing...who knew what. How much work could a starship's science officer do while his ship was still in space dock? At any rate, as the oldest son of Doctor Richard Daystrom, Lieutenant Commander Jeremy Daystrom was naturally very well educated in a variety of the sciences. His record showed that while he wasn't a leading authority in any one particular field the way his father had been, he had a solid working grasp of virtually all fields relevant to science duties aboard a starship. It also showed that when he didn't know the answer to a given problem, he did always seem to know right where to go to find that answer.

Lieutenant Julen Shran, a young Andorian woman—at least she looked like a woman, though with four genders to choose from, could he really be sure?—was manning the helm and turned her head halfway around very suddenly when MacLeod's eyes fell onto the back of her white-coiffed head, almost as though she sensed his gaze. He didn't know much about the Andorian people and wondered if maybe those antennae of hers might be capable of more than he or anyone else not from her world realized. He hadn't had an opportunity to get very far into his personnel file reviews, so the only thing he knew about her personally was the fact that she was either the granddaughter or the great-granddaughter—he couldn't remember which—of the Andorian officer who had worked alongside former President Jonathan Archer when he was still a Starfleet officer to help found the Coalition of Planets and eventually the Federation.

To Shran's right, Chief Navigator Lieutenant Marco Carlucci was gazing up at the main viewscreen from his place at the navigation station. MacLeod hadn't gotten to his file, so all he really knew about the young man was that he was the chief navigator...and that he was Italian...obviously.

Communications Chief Lieutenant...he didn't even know the young man's name...was manning the communications station off to his right, and off to his left the very solidly built if a bit stocky half-Andorian half-human A-C-E, Lieutenant Commander Lothar, was working diligently at the Engineering and Environmental station.

Finally, simply because Starfleet currently found itself in a state of war, a red-shirted weapons officer, an ensign, was manning the newly designed and dedicated weapons station, although he obviously had very little if anything to do.

“Dock control reports ready, sir,” the communications chief reported.

“Helm ready, sir,” Shran followed.

MacLeod’s eyes fell on the center seat as he strolled over to the portside steps and stepped down to the lower deck. It wouldn’t be the first center seat he’d ever sat in, but...this one sat in command of a heavy cruiser—a *starship*. He was a *starship commander* now.

“Orbital departure plotted, sir,” Carlucci chimed in as MacLeod took his seat, barely able to keep from grinning like a kid on Christmas morning.

“Yard command signaling clear, sir,” the communications chief added. MacLeod told himself that he was really going to have to learn that young man’s name as soon as possible. A starship commander should know the names of all of his bridge officers.

“Running lights on,” Shran said, drawing MacLeod back to the moment.

“Maneuvering thrusters to station-keeping, Mister Shran,” MacLeod ordered.

Shran engaged the thrusters and adjusted them accordingly, then replied, “Thrusters at station-keeping, Captain.”

‘Captain.’ That was going to take some getting used to. MacLeod looked over at the half-Andorian. “Mister Lothar, clear all moorings.”

“Aye, sir,” the assistant chief engineer responded in a deep, rumbling baritone voice as he complied. “All moorings are clear, Captain.”

“Thrusters ahead, Mister Shran. One-quarter impulse power. Take us out.”

As Shran complied, those portions of the space dock latticework that were visible on the left and right edges of the image on the screen pulled back until all that was left was a view of the star-filled darkness of space. Moments later Shran reported, “We are clear and free to navigate, sir.”

MacLeod thumbed the call button on the arm of his chair. “Engineering.”

“*Intermix set, Captain,*” Baumann advised him immediately, as though she’d been standing by the comm., waiting for his call. “*Full impulse at your discretion.*”

“Full impulse power, Mister Shran. Ahead, warp point five.”

CHAPTER 3

Captain's Log, stardate 2137.9: After diverting from our previous course toward Babel, the Enterprise has arrived at the first set of coordinates Admiral Withrow provided. My orders are to rendezvous with a vessel in this vicinity—a vessel that Admiral Withrow chose not to identify—and then receive further instructions from its captain at that time. However, since our arrival we have detected no evidence of any other vessel in the area. My orders also specify that we maintain communications silence for the duration of the mission. Therefore, it falls upon us alone to investigate and discover why that other vessel, whatever its identity, is not here and where it is...if we can. That said, given the terrible events that occurred earlier today, I don't dare wait too long. If we haven't located the vessel or at least determined what happened to it by the time we exhaust our efforts, I will be forced to break communications silence to notify Admiral Withrow.

Kirk thumbed the button on his armrest to end recording and file the log entry.

"Maybe we just beat them here and they're still on their way?" Chekov hypothesized from his place at navigation.

"Our orders, as Admiral Withrow stated them, are to '...rendezvous with the vessel there,' Mister Chekov," Kirk told him. "'...with the vessel *there*,' as though it was already here waiting for us when he gave me our orders."

Chekov sighed and Kirk grinned. The young Russian navigator had never been the most patient man in the world. Speaking of impatience...

"I don't like it, Jim," McCoy told him from his customary place, standing by the captain's side. "Withrow's always been straight-talking, stand-up guy...for an admiral. If he thought at the time that we might have to wait for this mysterious other ship to get here, he would have told you that. Wouldn't he?"

"Yes he would have," Kirk confirmed, "which tells me that he expected the ship to be here waiting for us by the time we arrived."

"Captain," Spock called from the science station, where he'd been running a series of scans and gazing into his scope for the last several minutes while Lieutenant Xon sat by his side, interpreting the data. "I have now completed two additional series of particle scans. The results are identical to all previous series."

"Still not picking anything up on tactical, sir," Sulu interjected, peering into his scope for a moment as well.

Lieutenant Xon turned in his chair to face the captain, his expression, as usual, one of a man falling into a hypnotic trance. "I have completed my analysis of Mister Spock's first series of scans, sir," he reported. "There appear to be minute traces of several refined metals scattered across a wide area at the limit of our scanners' range."

"*Refined* metals, Lieutenant?" Kirk inquired, looking over at the young Vulcan. "Can you identify any of them?"

"I have already identified nearly all of them, sir," Xon replied as though it had been a simple task. "Most are Vulcan in origin. However, a small percentage appear to be Klingon."

“Klingon,” Kirk said, more a statement than a question.

“Yes, sir,” Xon replied anyway. “Specifically, the precise combination of elemental metals most commonly used in the construction of their vessels’ outer hulls.”

Kirk turned forward. “Mister Sulu, keep your eyes glued to those long-range sensors. I don’t want any nasty surprises.”

“Aye, sir.”

Captain’s Log, supplemental: More than two hours now and still no sign of the other vessel that we were supposed to rendezvous with here, which we are assuming is...or was...Vulcan in origin. Based on Lieutenant Xon’s analysis of Mister Spock’s particle scans, which he has repeated and verified per my order, I am forced to conclude that the vessel was attacked and perhaps destroyed by the Klingons.

“How long are you going to wait before you call it in, Jim?” McCoy asked him.

“I haven’t decided yet, Bones,” Kirk replied. Then he turned his eyes to the doctor and asked him, “It’s been more than two hours. How long are you going to stand there?”

“It’s good for my leg strength and helps keep me slender,” McCoy quipped. Then he got serious again and said, “Look, Jim, I’m no military strategist, but we *are* at war with the Klingons, and you and I have been through enough together over the years for me to know that if the Klingons attacked a Vulcan vessel in this area, Starfleet Command needs to know about it as soon as possible.”

“If that is in fact what happened, then yes, Starfleet Command needs to know about it,” Kirk confirmed. “But we don’t know for sure yet that *is* what happened. Until we do...”

“Captain,” Spock called out from the science station. Kirk and McCoy both looked over at the first officer to find that he was peering into his scope once more. Lieutenant Xon had left the bridge at some point without either one of them even noticing. “Picking up an object at extreme range.”

“Can you identify it?” Kirk asked.

“Not yet, sir. It is barely within scanning range, approaching our position at...” Spock turned his head to look toward Kirk while still hovering over his scope. “...at approximately twelve kilometers per hour.”

“Twelve kilometers per hour?” Chekov questioned, Sulu looking over at him to await the punchline. “I can *run* that fast.”

“Visual range?” Kirk asked.

Spock peered back into his scope and answered, “Almost, sir. Object appears to be pulsating with... No, strike that. It is tumbling. Rotating.”

“Asteroid?” Kirk guessed.

“Negative,” Spock replied with confidence. “Not a naturally occurring object. Refined metal exterior. It appears to be a vessel, Captain, though it is not travelling under power. Reading low-level internal power now...fluctuating. It is a vessel, Captain. Severely damaged and...” He stood straight and turned to Kirk. “Captain, it is Vulcan Ambassador Sarek’s long-range diplomatic shuttle.”

Still staring into his scope, Sulu reported, “I have it on targeting scanners now.”

“On screen, Mister Sulu,” Kirk ordered.

Sulu entered the command into his board, and seconds later the Vulcan ship appeared in the center of the screen as little more than an insignificant rust-red smudge.

“Magnify.”

Sulu complied once more and the Vulcan diplomatic shuttle suddenly filled most of the screen. Though smaller—MacLeod guessed that it was about three or four times the size of a Starfleet shuttlecraft—it was shaped much like the old ships of what had once been the Vulcan space navy, complete with a large warp-ring that surrounded it like a too-loose belt, and it was damaged significantly. Parts of its outer interior decks were clearly visible through large holes where the hull has been blasted away. It had obviously been attacked, and it had not won the fight.

“Life signs?” Kirk inquired.

“Strong life signs for at least twelve individuals, sir,” Spock replied, gazing into his scope once more. “Weaker signs for several more, possibly wounded.”

“Lay in an intercept course, Mister Chekov. Close on them, Mister Sulu...slowly and cautiously. Lieutenant Uhura, try to raise them.”

McCoy looked at him and waited until he looked back, then told him as he turned and started toward the turbolift, “I’ll be in sickbay, Jim.”

Kirk barely nodded to the doctor to acknowledge him, then continued speaking to the helmsman. “As soon as we’re within range, hit them with a tractor beam. Stabilize that ship relative to our position and then release it.”

“Aye, sir,” Sulu acknowledged.

Kirk turned his chair far enough around to look at Uhura and asked, “Any response to our hails yet, Lieutenant?”

“Negative, sir,” she replied, looking back at him. “They *are* receiving our signal, just not answering. Coil emissions *are* low and erratic, however, so they probably *can’t* answer.”

Kirk turned his chair a little farther and looked over at his first officer. “How’s their hull integrity looking, Spock? Are they maintaining sufficient atmosphere?”

“As you can plainly see, Captain, their vessel has sustained significant damage to its outer hull,” Spock replied. “Nearly twenty-eight percent of the vessel’s interior has suffered total decompression. However, the other seventy-two percent appears to be uncompromised and able to support life.”

Kirk let his chair spin to face forward again and looked back up at the screen, then quickly decided, “They’re in trouble. We’re going over there to see what we can do to help.” He stood up and started walking toward the turbolift. “Spock, you’re with me. Uhura, have Lieutenant Xon and Doctor McCoy meet us in transporter room two, and tell the doctor to bring two medics with him.”

“Aye, sir.”

* * * * *

Captain Kirk, First Officer Spock, Doctor McCoy, Lieutenant Xon, and two medical technicians beamed over into what appeared to be a briefing room as large as those aboard

the *Enterprise* with a significantly larger and more oval table. A number of Vulcan men and women of varied ages—some of them were dressed in the simple gray slacks and sparsely adorned tunics of the Vulcan Civil Space Service while others appeared to be members of the ambassador's diplomatic staff, judging from their more colorful and traditional attire—were sitting around the table or the perimeter of the deck against the bulkheads, some of them obviously wounded to a degree. When McCoy immediately stepped out to help the wounded and directed his med-techs where to go to do the same, the Vulcan sitting at the head of the table, presumably the ship's captain, stood up and addressed Kirk.

"Captain..." the gray-haired Vulcan male prompted.

"James T. Kirk of the Starship *Enterprise*," Kirk informed the man as he approached him. "We're here to help in any way we can."

The man stepped out from behind the table and walked forward to meet Kirk halfway, then stood face-to-face with him. "I am Captain Sulan of the Vulcan Civil Space Service," he introduced himself, reciprocating. "Your prompt arrival is most fortunate, and your offer of assistance is both welcome and appreciated, Captain." He turned his dark eyes to Spock, then returned the Vulcan split-fingered salute when Spock offered it.

"My first officer, Commander Spock," Kirk supplied.

"Peace and long life, Captain Sulan," Spock offered along with his salute.

"Live long and prosper, Commander Spock," Sulan returned. Both men then dropped their salutes, but Sulan then raised his once more, this time toward Lieutenant Xon, and said, "You as well, Lieutenant Xon."

Xon returned the salute and replied, "Live long and prosper, Captain," and then asked after he dropped his hand back to his side, "You know me, sir?"

"All of Vulcan Space Services, military and civil, possess at least some idea of who you are, Lieutenant," the captain informed him. "There will no doubt come a day in the near future when a sufficient number of Vulcans have joined Starfleet to make keeping track of their careers impractical, but that day has not yet come."

Kirk stepped forward slightly, drawing Captain Sulan's attention back to him. "If we may move on to the business at hand, Captain?" he requested.

"Certainly, Captain," Sulan consented with a slight bow of his head.

Kirk began by asking, "Is Ambassador Sarek still aboard this vessel, and if he is, is he all right?"

"Yes, Captain, he is onboard," Sulan replied. "He suffered a minor head injury, but he is all right. He is resting in his quarters."

"And the rest of your passengers and crew?"

"I lost four crewmen to explosive decompression. In addition, seven others suffered relatively minor injuries—none of them life threatening. My medical staff is treating them."

"My medical staff stands ready to assist yours in any way, should they need it," Kirk offered, glancing at McCoy.

"Thank you, Captain, but I believe that right now our vessel is in more need of care than my crew."

"Then I'll put my chief engineer in touch with yours," Kirk told him as he reached back for his communicator. "He and his staff will help in any way they can as well."

"That is acceptable. My chief engineer's name is Sub-Commander T'Lon."

“Sub-Commander T’Lon,” Kirk repeated as he flipped open his communicator. Then he called, “Kirk to *Enterprise*.”

“Enterprise. *Uhura here, sir.*”

“Have Mister Scott contact this vessel’s chief engineer, Sub-Commander T’Lon, and render any assistance she and her staff might need.”

“*Aye, sir.*”

“Kirk out.” Kirk looked back to Captain Sulan again as he closed his communicator and returned it to his belt. “Captain Sulan, my superior officer, Admiral Withrow, told me that I was to receive further instructions when I rendezvoused with you. If you can take some time away, I’d like to invite you over to my ship to get those further instructions, as well as to hear your account of what happened to you out here.”

“My crew has this situation well in hand, Captain, so I can accompany you now if you wish. However, you will have to receive your further instructions directly from Ambassador Sarek. He is the only one onboard who spoke to Admiral Withrow, and he did so privately.”

Kirk looked at Spock, who, reading his captain’s face easily after having served with him for so long, told him, “I will find the ambassador and request that he accompany me back to the *Enterprise*.”

“Thank you,” Kirk replied. Then, as Spock exited with a member of the ship’s crew at his side, he stepped over to McCoy, who was still kneeling down on the deck, treating one of the injured. “Doctor McCoy, you and your staff continue rendering medical aid as long as it’s needed, then join us in the briefing room when you’re done.”

“Understood, Captain,” McCoy acknowledged without looking away from his work.

Kirk flipped his communicator open again as he returned to Sulan and Xon. “Kirk to *Enterprise*. Three to beam over.”

McCoy and his medical technicians kept right on working as Kirk, Xon, and Captain Sulan beamed away.

* * * * *

Captain Kirk sat in his customary place at the head of the briefing room table with Captain Sulan seated to his immediate right, waiting. He’d offered the man a cup of coffee, but he’d politely declined. Both men turned their eyes to the door when it slid open and then stood to their feet when Spock escorted his father, Vulcan Ambassador Sarek, into the room. Dressed in silver-lined black trousers and dark gray tunic of a similar cut to those he’d been wearing the first time Kirk met him, the ambassador had a large bandage on the left side of his forehead, but otherwise appeared to be in good health.

“Ambassador Sarek,” Kirk said, bowing slightly, “It’s my honor to welcome you back aboard the *Enterprise*, sir. It’s good to see you again.”

“Thank you, Captain,” Sarek replied even more stoic than Kirk remembered as Spock guided him to a chair. “It is agreeable to see you again as well.”

Kirk gestured toward the chair to his immediate left that Spock had already guided to ambassador to and said, “Please, sir, make yourself comfortable. Would you like anything to eat or drink? Some fresh fruit or cool water perhaps?”

“No, thank you,” the ambassador replied as he sat down. “The chair shall suffice.”

Spock took the seat to his father’s left and Kirk and Sulan sat back down. “Captain, are you sure you wouldn’t like anything?” Kirk asked the Vulcan captain once more.

“I am sure,” Sulan replied with a good helping of his own Vulcan stoicism.

“Very well, gentlemen,” Kirk then said, addressing everyone. Then he turned his gaze to the Vulcan captain again and suggested, “Let’s start with what happened to you out here.”

“We were transporting Ambassador Sarek and his diplomatic party to Babel to attend the conference,” Sulan began. “As we passed through this immediate area, we were attacked by a Klingon vessel—a bird-of-prey, I believe is the common nomenclature. They disabled our communications and propulsion very quickly, and then fired on our cargo holds. We returned fire, scoring several direct hits, but our weapons are strictly low-yield defensive in design and proved not sufficiently effective. We lost all ability to maneuver during the battle and the Klingons left us tumbling and drifting out of control.

“What I fail to understand,” Sulan pointed out, “aside from why the Klingons attacked us in the first place, is why they did not then destroy us. We were, after all...I believe the human expression is...sitting ducks?”

“I believe I can shed some light on that for you myself, Captain, as far as *why* they attacked,” Kirk told him, “but I have a question for you first. How did you manage to regain enough control over your vessel so quickly to return to these coordinates?”

“We did not actually regain control, Captain,” Sulan explained. “We calculated our straight-line velocity and rates of pitch, yaw, and roll, then simply abandoned the outer decks and blew a series of emergency hatches and outer bulkheads in precisely calculated order at specific intervals. The resulting sequence of explosive decompression and simple physics did the rest.”

“Fascinating,” Spock opined, one eyebrow climbing his forehead.

“Not especially, Commander,” Captain Sulan countered, looking sidelong at him and shaking his head slightly. “The calculations were quite elementary.” He turned back to Kirk. “Captain Kirk, you said a moment ago that you can explain why the Klingons attacked us. I must return to my vessel, so if you would do so now...”

“Certainly, Captain. Earlier today, three squadrons of Klingon D-seven battlecruisers simultaneously attacked and destroyed major Federation facilities and a number of vessels orbiting Vulcan, Andoria, and Tellar Prime. Minutes after the conclusion of those attacks, three old *Columbia*-class starships...museum ships...were used to carry out a similar attack on Babel that destroyed both the orbital station and the city below. Casualties were extremely high and the numbers continue to increase as I speak. The starship *Exeter* and one of the Tzhal’Thahn vessels were also lost. Starfleet Command is assuming the Klingons somehow got their hands on those *Columbia*-class ships, rearmed them, and then manned them for the attack on Babel, but...” Kirk hesitated.

“You do not subscribe to that assumption?” Sarek asked.

Kirk turned to the respected ambassador and explained, “Klingons are not known for stealing their enemies’ vessels and then using those vessels to carry out sneak attacks against those same enemies, Ambassador. In addition, the Klingon Empire has categorically denied any involvement in the attacks. As I reminded Admiral Withrow, Klingons don’t attack and then deny attacking. They attack and roar.”

“Do you have an alternate theory, Captain?” Captain Sulan asked him.

“Yes I do, though I haven’t had a lot of time to really think it through.”

“And that theory is?” Sarek inquired.

“Romulans,” Kirk replied straightforwardly. “Stealth, surprise attacks, suicide runs, disguise and misdirection... All of them, standard Romulan tactics.”

“But the vessels,” Sarek reminded him. “Three squadrons of Klingon battlecruisers.”

“As you know, Mister Ambassador, the Romulans acquired D-seven battlecruisers as a part of their brief treaty with the Klingons,” Kirk reminded him. “One of the first things they would have done as soon as they got them was reverse-engineer them. There’s no reason to believe they couldn’t have built a whole fleet of them by now, given the resources they routinely pour into their military.”

“Your captain has a logical mind, Commander Spock,” Captain Sulan stated, to which Spock only raised a disbelieving eyebrow in response, bringing a slight grin to Kirk’s face.

“He does, Captain,” Sarek agreed, “but I believe there is a flaw to that logic.”

“You disagree with me, Ambassador?” Kirk asked him.

“I do,” the ambassador confessed, “but I also realize that it is not my place to...”

“Please, sir,” Kirk interrupted, “feel free to share any thoughts that you might have on the subject. I welcome your counsel.”

“Very well, Captain,” Sarek said after a moment. “As you are aware, perhaps better than anyone, a Romulan vessel crossed the neutral zone into Federation space approximately three years ago and destroyed three Earth outposts. Presumably, that vessel’s mission was to gauge Federation response time, tactics, and strengths—it’s overall vulnerability to invasion, as it were. You defeated that vessel in battle, Captain, making it impossible for them to return home. In the end its commander destroyed his own vessel and the Romulans took no further aggressive action.

“Nearly two years later...”

The call-tone sounded over the comm. speakers around the table. “*Bridge to Captain Kirk,*” Uhura’s voice then called.

Kirk pressed the appropriate rocker switch in front of him. “Kirk here.”

“*Sir, the U-S-S Wolf has arrived to render assistance to the Vulcan vessel.*”

“The *Wolf*?” Sulan inquired. “I do not believe I am familiar with that vessel.”

“A heavy-duty transport tug, Captain,” Kirk explained. “More than enough to take your vessel into tow if need be, and she’ll have a full contingent of engineering and salvage recovery personnel onboard.”

Sulan stood up. “Then I must return to my ship to coordinate with their captain.”

“Very well,” Kirk agreed. “Mister Spock...”

“I can find my way back to your transporter room, Captain, thank you,” Sulan told him before he could tell Spock to escort him.

“Very well, Captain,” Kirk acquiesced. Then he told Uhura, who’d been patiently standing by, “Recall our engineers and medical personnel as soon as they’ve had a chance to bring their replacements from the *Wolf* up to speed. Kirk out.” He closed the channel, then turned his eyes back to Sarek. “Sorry for the interruption, Ambassador. You were saying?”

“I was saying that nearly two years after your initial encounter with the Romulans, you were involved in a second incident with them,” Sarek replied, picking up right where he

had left off. “You...obtained their cloaking device and took one of their ship’s commanders prisoner, however unintentionally, and *still* they took no further action. And finally, only a few months ago, they tested a new weapon and found the results of that test to be less than satisfactory, thanks once again to your actions.”

“Forgive me, Ambassador,” Kirk said, “but you’re not telling me anything that I don’t already know.”

“My point is this, Captain. Given the string of failures the Romulans have suffered in their attempts to take action against us over the last three years, it would be illogical for them to attempt anything so aggressive at this time as the attacks you described.”

“The Romulans are not a logical people, Ambassador,” Kirk reminded the diplomat. He might have been highly intelligent and logical-minded, but he wasn’t a soldier and wasn’t trained to think like one.

“No they are not, Captain,” Spock agreed, chiming in, “but there is a certain logic to what the ambassador says.”

“Fine,” Kirk replied, not inclined to match wits with against a Vulcan tag-team at that particular time. “We’ll table it for now. It’s all conjecture at this point anyway.” He asked the ambassador, “Do you have instructions from the admiral for me, sir?”

“I do, Captain,” Sarek replied. “Now that the *Wolf* is here to render assistance to my vessel and its crew, you are to take me to attend an emergency session of the Provisional Federation Council being held at the second set of coordinates with which Admiral Withrow provided you. Our destination is a planet that has been given the codename ‘Parliament.’ ”

A short time later, Ambassador Sarek stood beside his son at the science station while everyone else on the bridge either tended to their duties in preparation for departure or gazed up at the image on the main viewscreen of the heavy transport tug *U.S.S. Wolf*, NCC-3921, and Sarek’s heavily damaged vessel, which it had come to assist.

“Transporter rooms report all *Enterprise* personnel are back onboard, Captain,” Uhura reported, “and all members of the ambassador’s party have been provided with quarters.”

“Thank you, Lieutenant,” Kirk replied. “Mister Chekov?”

“Direct course to second set of coordinates plotted and laid in, Keptin,” the navigator reported without having to be asked.

“Very well. Mister Sulu, ahead warp factor six.”

“Warp six, aye, sir.”

CHAPTER 4

The air on the bridge had grown tense when *Endeavour* crossed into the neutral zone, and as they drew closer to their destination, that tension had only grown thicker—so thick that Captain MacLeod felt as though he could have cut it with a knife. They were alone, deep in the heart of the Romulan neutral zone where no one would come to their defense should they need help—not a place where any sane starship captain would ever want to find himself. The Romulans as a race were devious, deceitful, not at all trustworthy—expansionists bent on conquest, much like the Caesars of ancient Rome. MacLeod was looking forward to getting this mission over with and racing back home to Federation space.

“Approaching...” Lieutenant Shran looked back over her shoulder at the captain, her antennae bending drawing slightly backward atop her head, somehow reminding MacLeod of the way dogs canted their heads when they felt curious or confused. “...‘Midway,’ I believe you have been calling it, sir? Nothing on targeting scanners.”

“Nothing on long-range sensors, either, sir,” Lieutenant Commander Daystrom added from the science station behind him.

“All stop,” MacLeod ordered. “Hold relative position here.”

“Answering all stop, sir,” Shran acknowledged. “Thrusters to station-keeping.”

“‘Midway,’ Lieutenant Shran,” MacLeod confirmed, prompting her to turn and look back at him once more through those jade-green eyes. MacLeod became lost in them, just for a moment, and realized suddenly that despite her powder-blue skin, undulating antennae, and head of shoulder-length snow-white hair, Lieutenant Shran was actually quite an attractive young woman...for the humanoid descendant of a big blue bug. Hoping that his thoughts hadn’t shown through in his expression, he shook off that momentary distraction and briefly explained, “An important place and an important battle during Earth’s mid-twentieth century second world war. Look it up when you have a chance. I think you’ll understand.”

“Captain,” Commander Kim called from nearby the portside turbolift alcove where she’d been standing and observing bridge operations. She stepped up to the railing beside the portside steps, then apparently thought better of that and stepped down approached to stand beside his chair. “I know exactly why you’ve been referring to this location as ‘Midway,’ ” she told him. “I know the history. Recommend we go to yellow alert and raise the shields as a precautionary measure. With that cloaking device of theirs, the Romulans could drop right in on top of us before we ever know they’re here.”

MacLeod considered that for a moment, then replied, “Be ready for that, Commander, but on my order only. I don’t want to take any action that might provoke them.” He rested his thumb over the comm. button on the arm of his chair and drew a breath to speak again, but Kim wasn’t finished.

“So we’re just going to...”

“Communications,” MacLeod called out, interrupting his first officer. If she was just going to argue with him, then she *was* finished, as far as he was concerned. “Open a channel in the clear to any ship that might be out there cloaked. Maybe if we can make them believe we found a way to detect them, they’ll think twice about trying to pull something.”

“Channel open, Captain,” the young man told him.

He thumbed the button and hailed them...whoever they might be...if they were even really there, “This is Captain Christopher MacLeod of the Federation Starship *Endeavour* to Commander, Romulan vessel.” A few moments passed in silence, and then he repeated, “This is Captain MacLeod of the Starship *Endeavour* to Commander, unidentified Romulan vessel currently holding station and cloaked. Please respond.”

Nothing.

Dion Charvon stepped out of the sonic shower and pulled on the short silk bathrobe she’d purchased about one Terran year ago when her captors finally started allowing her to go out and shop for herself...under constant escort, of course—green, the color of Rihannsu blood, a constant reminder of who she was, of where she came from, and of who she served. She held it closed in front with one hand as she walked back into the bedroom carrying her hairbrush in her other. Her travel bag still sat half-packed on the foot of the bed where the security officer had tossed it, her hygiene products, a clean, neatly folded undergarment, and a maroon and gray dress that vaguely resembled her military uniform beside it.

“*Captain MacLeod to Commander Charvon,*” she heard the starship captain’s voice call to her over the comm. from the other half of the room—the so-called living quarters that didn’t seem to much more than a small office. Had this been her permanent home, she likely would have spent most of her off-duty time ‘living’ in the bedroom. At any rate, she looked toward the voice as it called out to her again, “*Captain MacLeod to Commander Charvon, respond, please,*” and then walked into the ‘living’ room and over to the desk. “*Commander Charvon, please answer.*”

“I’m coming, Captain,” she muttered as she reached for the button. She moved off to one side of the monitor so that its camera wouldn’t pick her up, and then pressed the button to open the channel, just as the guard had shown her.

“*Captain MacLeod to...*”

“Yes, Captain MacLeod, I am here,” she told him, annoyed. “What do you want?”

“*We’ve arrived at the agreed upon coordinates in the neutral zone, Commander,*” the starship captain told her. “*No Romulan vessel has made an appearance yet, but I suggest you be prepared to transport over when they do get here.*”

“I will be ready in a few minutes, Captain.”

“*All right. The guard posted outside your door will escort you to the transporter room when it’s time.*”

“I understand.” The screen went black, so she pressed the button once more to make sure the channel was, in fact closed, and then paused for a moment. *Finally*, she thought with a profound sense of relief. *To return home again after all this time. To feel the cool ocean air at the Cliffs of Ritannsi blow across my face once more.*

She walked back into the bedroom and approached the foot of the bed, tossed her hairbrush onto it, then stood there and gazed down at her dress—that dress that reminded her of the uniform she had once worn so proudly. *Will the Praetor welcome me back into the fleet, I wonder. Or will he have me executed for my failure?* She picked it up and began gently stroking the fabric. *Will I be permitted to serve again, or will I return to my people today only to find that I will never again wear the uniform? I have always been a loyal*

officer of the Rihannsu Star Empire. I was a warbird squadron commander—one time commanding officer of the imperial flagship. The empire has invested a great deal in me. The Praetor should be ecstatic at my return.

She dropped her dress back down onto the bed, then pulled off her robe and started to get dressed. I will, of course, be subjected to an extended debriefing and interrogation. There will be no avoiding that, and rightfully so. Imperial Intelligence must ensure that I have not been compromised—that I have not provided our enemies with anything they might be able to use against us. It will be weeks...perhaps months before I am permitted to return to duty, if at all. Will I be given another command, I wonder. Will I ever again be given command of my own vessel? Most certainly, I will never again see the inside of the flagship. The Praetor will never again honor me in that way. Unless... If I were to return home with this vessel in tow... It is not the Enterprise, but it is the Federation's newest heavy starship, filled with their most advanced technology. If I could capture it...

Captain's log, stardate 2143.6: Per classified Starfleet Command orders, U.S.S. Endeavour has arrived and is currently holding station inside the Romulan neutral zone at the midpoint between Federation and Romulan borders, awaiting the arrival of representatives from the Romulan Star Empire. Our mission is a simple prisoner exchange—one of their officers for a Federation diplomat whom they recently took into custody—but we've been waiting here for nearly thirty minutes and so far there has been no sign of any Romulan vessel in the area. I can't help but wonder if this is a trap. Did the Romulans only agree to this exchange because they saw it as an opportunity to capture one of Starfleet's newest heavy cruisers? Does my first officer have the right idea? Should I take the ship to yellow alert and raise the shields?

“Yes, Captain,” Commander Kim said when MacLeod stopped recording. “Yes, your first officer has the right idea, and yes, you should take the ship to yellow alert and raise the shields.” MacLeod looked sidelong at her, standing at his side once more, and when he didn't say anything she added for good measure a hardy, “Sir.”

“They're not Klingons, Commander,” he then reminded her. “We're not at war with them right now. Yes, they are an aggressive species that can't be trusted, but I've personally never faced off against them before. Have you?”

“No, sir,” Kim answered honestly.

“Has any member of this crew ever faced off against them...to your knowledge?”

“No, sir.”

“Then tell me this, Commander,” he said, challenging her to do just that. “How do we know they won't come in guns blazing in response if we take on a more aggressive posture?”

“We don't, sir,” freely admitted. “I'm just thinking of this ship and her crew.”

Which was exactly what she, as the first officer, was supposed to do. “I know you are, Commander, and I don't fault you for that,” he told her. “However...”

“Picking up something on sensors now, Captain,” Lieutenant Commander Daystrom reported, interrupting.

“Romulan vessel decloaking dead ahead, sir,” Lieutenant Shran clarified.

Up on the main viewscreen, an area of space itself wavered and then coalesced into a

D-7-class battlecruiser facing off with them head-to-head, their version of which MacLeod understood the Romulans had begun referring to as a warbird. But this wasn't just another former-Klingon vessel with a fancy new avian paintjob. While its overall silhouette remained largely unchanged, its forward hull had been modified to resemble the head and raptor-like beak of a large bird of prey. Somehow, the Romulans had made the D-7 battlecruiser look even more ominous than usual.

Still peering into his sensor scope, Daystrom reported, "Detecting no other vessels in the area, Captain, but if they're cloaked we won't see them anyway."

"Understood, Commander."

Shran leaned a little to her left and peered into her scope as well. "Romulan vessel's weapons are powered but remain on standby, sir," she added. "No shields."

"So far, so good," MacLeod muttered aloud, speaking to no one in particular as he glanced over at the weapons station to make sure the officer manning it was alert and ready to react if the need arose. He appeared to be. "Communications officer, hail them. Direct ship-to-ship this time."

"Romulan vessel," the young officer began, "this is the *U-S-S Endeavour* representing the United Federation of Planets hailing on an open channel with universal translator online." He paused for a few seconds, then continued, "Romulan vessel, this is the *U-S-S Endeavour* hailing on an open channel. Please, respond." And once again. "Romulan vessel..." But then he stopped suddenly, hesitated for a moment, raising a hand to the Feinberg device in his ear as though he were hearing something, and then turned the captain and reported, "Receiving a response, sir. The Romulan commander is requesting ship-to-ship visual communication."

"All aft station personnel," MacLeod called out specifically to the weapons control station, sciences, and communications as he started turning his chair around in a full circle to his left. "Verify no classified or otherwise sensitive information displayed on your monitors." Then, when he had completed the circle and was facing front again, he said, "On screen."

The warbird faded from view and was replaced immediately by the medium-close view of a very serious-looking Romulan officer, apparently their commanding officer. Like Commander Charvon, he appeared to be in his early forties in Terran years. He had a slender face, a full head of thick, curly brown hair, and wore a red and black triangular-patterned sash over his right shoulder of his black and gray tunic. Behind him, beyond some kind of reddish meshwork, a pair of men in silver helmets with sashes in blue rather than red appeared to be hard at work at their stations.

"Captain Christopher MacLeod, Starship *Endeavour*," MacLeod introduced himself, knowing from his Romulan counterpart's reaction that he was seeing him and the *Endeavour* bridge as well.

"*Tal*," the Romulan replied, leaving MacLeod to wonder if that was the man's name, his rank, some kind of greeting, or if he'd just cursed him. But then the man cleared up his confusion by adding, "*Commander of the Imperial Flagship Talon*."

"May I assume, Commander, that Federation Representative Robert Charles is aboard your vessel?" MacLeod asked him straight up.

"*May I assume, Captain MacLeod, that my former commander is aboard yours?*" Tal countered.

"You may," MacLeod replied. "That was the arrangement our respective governments

agreed to, after all. She's been provided with private quarters, has been well treated, and by now should be ready to transport aboard your vessel."

"*Excellent.*" He raised a hand to one ear and looked away for a moment—someone was obviously talking to him—then looked back at MacLeod a moment later and said, "*You appear to have a small number of Vulcans aboard your vessel, Captain. Distinguishing our commander's life sign readings from those of your Vulcan crewmembers is problematic, and I would not wish an unfortunate case of mistaken identity to turn this peaceful exchange of prisoners into a less than peaceful encounter. So, if you will give me Commander Charvon's precise coordinates, my guards will transport over to your vessel and escort her...*"

"Shields!" MacLeod barked.

"Shields up, sir," Shran reported an instant later, while up on the screen Commander Tal's eyes narrowed and his lips pressed together tightly.

"Request denied, Commander Tal," MacLeod told him.

"*Why have you raised your shields, Captain?*" Tal inquired, clearly irritated. "*Some might consider that to be a provocative act.*"

"Give me your word that no one will board my vessel, Commander Tal, and I'll lower them again immediately."

Tal appeared to draw a deep breath and study MacLeod closely as he exhaled, then replied, "*Very well, Captain. Provide me with the commander's coordinates and I will have my transporter officer lock onto her and bring her aboard.*"

"Negative, Commander. Simultaneous exchange. I'll assign security officers to escort Commander Charvon to one of *our* transporter rooms and you will have Mister Charles taken to yours. Notify me when he's in position and ready. Then, and only then, I will clear your commander for transport."

"*You do not trust me, Captain.*"

"I believe trust should be earned, Commander," MacLeod told him, "and I have a difficult time trusting a government that would order a military vessel across a demilitarized zone to attack and destroy peaceful outposts simply to test the waters."

"*And I have a difficult time trusting a government that would order a military vessel across that same demilitarized zone on a spy mission to steal our technology, Captain,*" Tal countered. "*Or any soldier who represents that government.*"

"Clearly, we *both* have good reason not to trust one another," MacLeod pointed out, as much as admitting that the Romulan commander's argument was a legitimate one. "That said, we're going to do this my way, or not at all. Simultaneous beaming, and no one else from either ship boards the other. After that, we both turn back and go home."

"*Very well,*" Tal acquiesced. "*Given the current circumstances, that is acceptable. But be warned, Captain. Any attempt by you to escape the neutral zone without returning our officer to us will have very deadly consequences.*"

"I will make no such attempt, Commander. On that I give you *my* word."

Tal's image lingered for a moment as he stared MacLeod in the eye, then faded from the screen to be replaced once more by a head-on view of his vessel. "He gave in too easily," MacLeod opined aloud as he reached for his call button.

"I agree, Captain," Kim said. "Recommend precautions against covert extraction."

MacLeod pressed the button. "MacLeod to Security."

“Security. Lieutenant Commander Dawkins here, sir.”

“It’s time, Commander. Send a second man and have your people escort the Romulan commander to transporter room three. Type-one phasers only, locked on the stun setting, and both guards carry signal scramblers. I have reason to believe the Romulans might try to beam her out as soon as they see her being moved.”

“Understood, sir.”

After getting dressed, Commander Charvon had used a sturdy nail file to carefully pry off the back of the monitor and dismantled the communications unit to examine the circuitry and figure out how it all worked. The technology might not have been Rihannsu, but intraship communications was intraship communications. It all operated on the same basic principles, and as a result, tapping into the *Endeavour*’s internal communications network had been even easier than she had hoped for. She’d caught the end of MacLeod’s conversation with whoever commanded the Rihannsu vessel with which the starship had rendezvoused—he’d given his word that he wouldn’t make an attempt at something—had stood by and listened in on his call to his security chief, and was now, thanks to the existence of a remote monitoring circuit, eavesdropping on his interactions with his own bridge crew.

“He agreed with my terms of exchange too easily,” he said to someone.

“Maybe he couldn’t think of anything more advantageous to his side,” that someone suggested in response—a female. MacLeod’s second, perhaps.

“I doubt one rises to command a warbird without the ability to think on one’s feet,” he countered. *“Everything we know about the Romulans tells me that he shouldn’t have agreed so quickly. No, Commander Tal is up to...”*

“Tal!” she exclaimed aloud. Then she slapped a hand over her mouth, but realized a moment later that she needn’t worry. The remote monitoring circuit only worked in one direction. “Excellent,” she added before she finally turned her one-way dialog inward. Tal had served under her as sub-commander for a long time. Together, with her already onboard, she and Tal could take the *Endeavour*.

They’d be coming for her anytime now. She got to work putting the monitor and its communications circuitry back the way she had found it.

Security Ensign Romberg had been standing post outside the Romulan commander’s quarters for more than an hour. His relief was already several minutes late and he was starting to get irritated. He needed a bathroom break and was just starting to think about leaving his post long enough to take one when movement up the corridor to his left caught his attention. He looked to find Lieutenant Singh—she was wearing the uniform shirt with black trousers rather than the mini-dress, which of course made perfect sense for a female security officer—and a Services crewman in red utilities approaching him. The crewman was carrying a few items in his hands, but Romberg couldn’t make out what they were yet.

“Lieutenant Singh,” he said, pleased. “Better late than never, I suppose. What’s with the escort?”

“I’m not your relief, Gordo,” she replied as she and ‘the escort’ approached him.

“You’re not?”

“No, I’m not. Turn your phaser and communicator over to the chief here, Ensign,” she ordered him. “We’re going with type-ones for this detail.”

“What detail?” he asked her as he looked at the items the chief had brought along—two type-I phasers and two other devices he didn’t recognize. “I need to go, if you know what I mean.”

“You’ll have to hold it a few minutes longer,” she replied. “Orders from the captain.”

Romberg surrendered his communicator and his type-II phaser to the chief as ordered and took one of two type-I phasers and those other devices. “What is this thing?” he asked, looking at that other device as he slipped the phaser up under his shirt and stuck it on his belt.

“Transporter scrambler,” Singh told him. “Prevents anyone from getting a lock on us or anyone else within three meters of us.”

“I’ve never heard of these before.”

“They’re brand new.” Romberg watched her activate hers and then switched his on in the same way. She attached hers to her belt and he followed suit once more. They pulled their shirttails down over them to hide them, looked at one another and exchanged a nod, and then stood ready for whatever the Romulan commander might throw at them as Singh reached up and pressed the door buzzer.

The door opened to reveal her standing just inside in a short maroon and gray dress that sort of looked like a Romulan uniform and black leather knee boots, her travel bag slung over one shoulder. She might have been an enemy officer, but as Romberg’s eyes dropped to her legs and worked their way back up again, licking his lips unconsciously, he decided that she nonetheless looked pretty good...for a woman of her age.

“Time to go home, Commander,” Singh told her.

The commander’s eyes dropped as well, to her escorts’ waists. Then she looked back up at Singh and asked with a bit of a smirk, “No weapons?”

“If you’ll come with us, please, Commander?” Singh requested, ignoring her inquiry. Then she took a step back and gestured down the corridor to her right to indicate which way she wanted the alien woman to start walking. Romberg backed off a little as well, deciding that it probably wasn’t a good idea to let her get too close.

“Do you not consider me a potential threat, Lieutenant?” the commander asked her as she stepped out into the corridor.

“This way, Commander,” Singh told her, refusing to be baited.

“Very well,” the commander finally relented.

Singh and Romberg flanked her on either side when she finally started walking and escorted her down the corridor, staying half a step behind her to keep a close eye on her.

Do these two officers not realize how much stronger than Terrans we Rihannsu are? she wondered. Then she told the female, “You are taking a big risk, Lieutenant.”

“We’re delivering you to your people, Commander,” the lieutenant reminded her in response. “You’re going home. Why would you make trouble?”

You will find out soon enough. Aloud she replied, “I suppose you make a good point, Lieutenant.” *MacLeod assigned me quarters on deck five. Judging from the cabin number, they were on the portside aft...* They turned left and stepped into a waiting turbolift. *...which makes this the* “Aft turbolift.”

“Yeah,” Romberg confirmed. “And?”

“Transporter room three,” the lieutenant said.

“And nothing,” the commander replied as the lift started moving laterally. “I have had a lot of time over the last year and a half to read about your Starfleet vessels.” *Federation news services identified Endeavour as a Bonhomme Richard-class heavy cruiser.* “I was just testing my memory. A hobby of mine, the intent being to keep my mind sharp.” *Little more than a second-generation Constitution-class, nearly identical to Kirk’s Enterprise in almost every way.*

The lift slowed, then started moving vertically.

If I am right, the internal layout will be nearly identical as well, which puts the transporter rooms on deck seven with the emergency bridge and impulse engineering. The emergency bridge will likely be powered down. And if these two manage to sound the alarm, I will be locked out of it and will fail.

The lift slowed, then started moving horizontally again.

Impulse engineering, then.

The lift slowed to a stop and the doors parted. The commander hesitated, but then led the way out when her escorts didn’t move first. She turned right, heard her escorts stop short behind her, and felt their eyes on her back.

“Commander!” the lieutenant hollered. The commander turned around and faced back to her escorts. “The transporter room is this way.”

“Guess your memory isn’t so good after all,” the ensign remarked.

“What is the common Terran expression?” she asked them as she rejoined them. “No one is perfect?” Then, before either of them could answer her, she attacked. They put up an adequate fight—impressive even, for Terrans—but in addition to being physically stronger than they, she was quite adept in Rihannsu military martial arts and proved to be too tough an opponent for them. She gained the upper hand quickly and knocked the female unconscious with a back-fist strike to her temple. Then, turning all of her attention to the male, a kick to his groin followed by a downward strike to the back of his neck with the blade of her hand when he fell to his knees soon rendered him unconscious as well.

She knelt down beside the female, lifted up her shirttail, and pulled the small boxlike phaser from its hiding place on her belt, then looked up suddenly when another female, this one in a short blue dress, stepped out of an alcove into the corridor. She appeared shocked and surprised by what she saw before her and started to let out a startled scream, but the commander raised the phaser and fired, striking her in the center of her chest, silencing her abruptly, and dropping her where she stood.

The commander moved to the male security officer and checked his belt as well. *No communication devices? But what are these other devices they are both...*

“Bridge! Emergency! The Romulan officer has escaped! She’s armed and...”

The commander fired again, striking a second woman in blue in the center of her left side and dropping her before she could finish calling for help. But the call had been made. The bridge had been alerted. She grabbed the other device off of the ensign’s belt—she’d figure out what it was later, when she had time—then rushed back into the turbolift. She practically shouted, “Impulse engineering!” toward the car’s ceiling as the doors closed, and then the lift started moving laterally.

I will have to contact Tal as soon as possible. If I can get word to him to open fire on

this ship—distract the crew up on the bridge. She looked up when a light on the wall started flashing and the alert call suddenly sounded over the intercom.

“All hands, intruder alert! Intruder alert!” MacLeod was announcing himself. *“The Romulan Commander has escaped from custody. Last seen on deck seven outside the B-C-L. Intruder is armed and should be considered dangerous. Security, subdue and detain. Contact the bridge when in custody.”*

She backed up and pressed herself against the side wall close to the doors and stared at the doors, holding the phaser ready. *If Tal can occupy them for a few minutes, then I will be able to seal myself off in Engineering and take control of the ship.*

The doors opened onto the impulse engineering deck. Those few personnel she could see from her current position were busying themselves, likely locking down their stations and arming themselves. She raised her phaser and fired on the closest of them, hit him cleanly, but the shot obviously alerted the others to her presence. She crouched low to make herself a smaller target and moved forward slightly, but stayed in the lift car, for the moment, to use it for cover and concealment.

She aimed and fired again, striking down another engineer. And then another. Then, seeing no more targets, she finally moved out of the lift into harm's way. She had to, in order to engage more targets.

She fired a fourth time and struck a fourth target, then moved steadily deeper into the cavernous facility, looking all around her quickly and firing at everyone she spotted.

Lieutenant Commander Ta'lon Lothar peered down through the mesh screen from the narrow workspace that overlooked the rest of Impulse Engineering's main deck and spotted the Romulan woman, firing on everyone she saw as she moved deeper into the area, scoring hit after hit without fail.

CHAPTER 5

Lieutenant Commander Ta'lon Lothar peered down through the mesh screen from the narrow workspace that overlooked the rest of Impulse Engineering's main deck, considering what he might do to stop the rampaging Romulan woman's assault as she moved passed the bottom of the gangway that led up to his position and fired on another engineer, hitting him squarely and putting him down, just as she had all of the rest of her targets, with one quick shot. Throughout the entire firefight, the defenders had managed to get off only a very few shots at her, and all of them had missed because every time one or more of them had exposed themselves to take their shot, she had reacted quickly and put them down before they could do so. If the situation weren't so dire, Lothar might have paused for a few moments to admire her skill with a weapon.

But the situation *was* dire and there was no time to waste on admiration. He had to put a stop to her attack. She hadn't fired at him, so she obviously hadn't seen him yet, no doubt thanks to all of his subordinate engineers who had been keeping her occupied...and paying the price for it. He had the high ground, so to speak, but wasn't armed and there was no weapons locker up there in the catwalk with him. Otherwise, he could have taken her out as soon as she came in and started firing. But even unarmed, he knew that if he could somehow just get enough of a drop on her to close the distance between them, he could end this.

All the shooting had stopped. Seconds passed in silence. Then the Romulan woman stepped out from behind her cover into the open and started turning back and forth, spinning around in circles first one way and then the other as she moved, still holding her phaser at the ready, obviously looking for more targets but not finding any. Lothar knew that if that didn't change over the next half-minute or so, she would likely conclude that no one remained to resist. She would begin to relax—to become less alert and grow less aware of what was going on around her—to shift her focus from assault and penetration to whatever it was she was planning to do next.

He started moving again, slowly, quietly, out of the shadows toward the gangway, his eyes glued to the Romulan woman as she turned her back on him and hurried over toward one of the large control panels. *You missed one, Romulan bitch*, he thought. *A very careless mistake on your part.* He paused, crouching at the top of the gangway, grasping the railings on both sides as she set her phaser aside and started manipulating the controls on that panel. *A mistake that is going to cost you.*

Lothar leaped from the top of the gangway, his hands barely brushing the metal along the length of the railings, using them as guides as he dropped in virtual silence toward the main deck. But those sensitive Romulan ears of hers didn't miss the faint sound and she spun around to face him, grabbing her phaser off of the console as she turned. She fired at him, but missed him cleanly as he dropped to the main deck.

He landed hard and nearly stumbled but kept his feet, then recovered quickly and ran at the Romulan, zigzagging as she fired at him, quick shot after quick shot, making her miss and knowing that he'd gotten lucky. If she pressed the trigger and held it, it would be over. She'd only have to sweep the steady beam across him to put him down.

He closed the distance between them quickly and knocked her arm aside as she fired

once more, the beam coming so close to grazing the side of his head before it shot harmlessly up and away at the ceiling somewhere behind him that he felt its heat on his ear. He grabbed that same arm before she could try again and stepped into her, pushing her backwards into the console with his body, and then slammed that arm hard against the console over and over again until she finally dropped the phaser. He kicked it away, and that momentary distraction proved to be all she needed to free herself from his grasp.

She tried to dash around him to go after the phaser, but he plowed into her and pushed off, knocking her to the deck. She leapt back to her feet and fell into a defensive stance to await his next move. It was on.

He moved in. He lashed out. She parried and countered. He countered her counter. On it went for the next few minutes. They fought, she matching her speed and skill in Romulan martial arts against his strength and brute force, along with his training in combined Andorian and Terran fighting arts. She was quicker, but every strike he landed took something out of her and slowed her down. Then he saw an opening and struck her hard at the base of the back of her head, stunning her. He repeated the blow, and she collapsed unconscious to the deck with a thud.

Lothar stood over her, looked down at her, and muttered the only word that came to mind. "Bitch."

Having taken on a slightly greener tint, Commander Tal's frustrated image filled the bridge's main viewscreen. He was clearly nearing the end of his already short patience, and Captain MacLeod couldn't be sure how much longer he was going to be able to stall. "*I have had your Mister Charles standing by for several minutes now, Captain,*" he told MacLeod for at least the third time in as many minutes. "*Where is our officer?*"

"I already told you, Commander, your officer broke custody and is running loose on my ship." He thought about adding that if she damaged anything he would hold the empire responsible, but considering that he was trying not to provoke Tal in any way, he decided that that wouldn't be such a good idea. "As soon as my security forces take her back into custody, I'll have them escort her directly to the transporter room for the exchange. Until that time..."

"*Ta'lon to Captain MacLeod,*" someone called over the intercom, interrupting.

MacLeod looked at Commander Kim and quietly asked, "Ta'lon?" as he placed his thumb over the internal comm. button on the arm of his chair.

"Assistant Chief Engineer Ta'lon Lothar, Captain," she reminded him. "He prefers to be called Ta'lon."

"Ah." He pressed the button, automatically muting the ship-to-ship channel. "Captain MacLeod here. What is it, Commander?"

"*The Romulan woman is in custody and no longer poses a threat, sir,*" he advised. "*She made the mistake of shooting her way into Impulse Engineering while I was there.*"

"*Shooting her way in?*" MacLeod asked, alarmed. "What's your current situation? Do you have casualties down there?"

"*No one has been killed, sir,*" the ACE reported, much to MacLeod's relief, "*but there are seven crew unconscious from phaser stun.*"

"What about the commander?"

“She’s...resting at the moment, Captain. I took exception to her actions.”

MacLeod and Kim exchanged knowing expressions. They’d both seen Andorian men get angry before. “I see,” MacLeod replied. Then he gestured briefly to the communications officer. “Medical teams are on their way, Commander. Are *you* all right?”

“I’m fine, sir. What are your orders?”

“Is the commander all right otherwise?”

“I don’t believe I broke anything or caused her any permanent damage. Well...I might have given her a slight concussion. But I held back, sir. I tried not to hurt her too badly.”

MacLeod sighed. Here they were, hanging in the middle of the Romulan neutral zone negotiating a prisoner exchange with the Romulan commander of a D-7 warbird who was fast losing his patience. The last thing he needed to do was to return their officer damaged. “All right,” he said. “If you’re *sure* she’s all right, take her to transporter room three.” He gestured toward the communications officer once more. “Doctor Varan will meet you there.”

“Right away, sir.”

MacLeod closed the intercom channel, but held the ship-to-ship on mute while he and Kim gazed back up at Commander Tal’s image on the viewscreen. The Romulan was literally shaking with anger and frustration.

“He doesn’t look very happy,” Kim observed.

“He’s going to have to look not very happy for a few more seconds,” MacLeod told her. Then he pressed another comm. button and called, “Captain to sickbay.”

“Varan,” the chief medical officer, a Vulcan man, replied.

“Have you sent medical teams to Impulse Engineering yet, Doctor?” he asked first.

“I have.”

“Good. Now I need you to go to transporter room three and wake up an unconscious Romulan before we beam her over to her people’s ship.”

“On my way.”

MacLeod closed the channel, mumbled, “That was my C-M-O, Doctor Personality,” under his breath, prompting Kim to look at him with a grin—or was it a grimace?—and then reopened the audio channel to the Romulan vessel.

“Why did you cut your audio, Captain?” Tal immediately and quite angrily demanded to be told. *“What treachery are you plotting?”*

“I’m plotting no treachery, Commander Tal,” MacLeod assured him. “I’ve just been notified that your commander had been found and taken back into custody.” He stood up. “I’m on my way to the transporter room now to prepare to make the exchange, as agreed.”

“No tricks, Captain,” Tal warned.

“Wasn’t planning any, Commander.” He crossed in front of Kim, turning his back to the screen on his way to the portside turbolift. “The bridge is yours, Commander,” he told her. Then he lowered his voice to a near whisper and added, “If he tries anything...”

“Understood, sir,” she replied.

He stepped up to the lift, but then stopped and looked back at the viewscreen, noting as he turned how quick Kim was to make herself comfortable in his chair. “Commander Tal,” he called out, “do I have your word that once the exchange has taken place my ship will be free to leave the zone? There aren’t any more Romulan vessels around here, are there?”

“We have come here to exchange prisoners, Captain, as our two governments have

agreed,” Tal replied, “not to start another war. As for the current whereabouts of the ships of our fleet, that is none of your concern.”

“Fair enough.”

Kim watched her new commanding officer walk into the lift, watched the doors close behind him, and then turned forward once more and looked back up at the viewscreen. *“Is your captain always so suspicious?”* Tal asked, gazing at her.

“When he has good reason to be,” she curtly replied, adding, “Commander,” almost as an afterthought.

Chief Hassan stood behind the transporter controls staring at Head Nurse Lieutenant Isala’s smooth, bald Deltan head while the nurse stood in front of them, staring at the door, awaiting her patient’s arrival. Those infamous Deltan pheromones were working overtime on him and he’d tried to engage her in conversation, if for no other reason than to distract himself, but she’d mostly just stood there like a silent statue and ignored him. He couldn’t bring himself to hold that against her, though. That oath of celibacy that Starfleet required her people to take when they joined the service was probably harder on them than it was on their shipmates, and, in his opinion, wasn’t at all fair to her people in the first place. Maintaining a certain aloofness probably made it a little easier to deal with.

He looked over at the door as well when it suddenly slid open and that half-Andorian, half-human assistant chief engineer whom Commander Baumann had brought into the crew at the last minute walked in carrying their Romulan passenger unconscious and limp over his shoulders as though he’d just rescued her from a burning building, drops and thin trails of drying green Romulan blood staining the front of his uniform.

“What happened?” Isala asked him as she hurried forward to meet him.

“She ran into my hands and feet,” the ACE replied facetiously, “as well as my knees and elbows. Several times.”

“Is she still breathing?” the nurse inquired less patiently, pulling a hypo-sprayer out of the medical pouch on her belt as she met him halfway to the platform.

“Probably.”

She adjusted the hypo’s setting and then injected its contents into the still unconscious Romulan woman’s arm. Then, bending sideways and crouching as low as needed, Lothar set his still very groggy but waking passenger down on her feet. Nurse Isala took hold of her by one arm and held her steady as she put her hypo away and then straightened her dress for her, just as Captain MacLeod walked in and, seeing that the nurse was barely managing, hurried forward to take hold of their guest’s other arm.

“It’s been fun, lady, but playtime is over,” Lothar told the Romulan in a mocking tone of voice while the captain and Nurse Isala continued holding her steady, waiting for her to fully regain consciousness. “It’s time for you to go home now.”

“Stow that, Commander,” MacLeod ordered him. The engineer looked him in the eye, so he let go of the Romulan commander and faced Lothar directly, leaving Isala to continue holding her up and tending to her. He stared at the half-Andorian for a few moments, not appreciating the way he’d spoken to their guest, then simply told him, “You’re dismissed.”

As Lothar exited without uttering another word, MacLeod turned back to find that

Commander Charvon had grown more conscious and coherent, though Nurse Isala was still holding her by the arm and she was clearly experiencing significant discomfort. “Would you like to be taken to our sickbay, Commander?” he asked her.

“No, thank you, Captain,” she replied, still a little groggy.

Offer made and refused, so he then told her, “That was a stupid thing to do. I don’t know what you thought you would gain.”

“Your ship, Captain, had I succeeded,” she answered without hesitation.

MacLeod snickered and then remarked, “A soldier to the end, huh?”

“That is our way...and nothing has ended.” She jumped slightly and grimaced in pain and nearly fell backwards when she turned her head and glared at the nurse, who had just sprayed something directly into one of her wounds.

Isala turned her eyes to the captain and gestured toward the transporter platform and said, “Let’s sit her down over there, sir. Her full equilibrium hasn’t returned yet.” MacLeod nodded and then helped her walk the commander over to the platform and sit her down over the steps along its leading edge.

“Where’s Doctor Varan?” he then asked her.

“He found four more injured in the corridors outside sickbay,” the nurse replied as she started applying gentle pressure to the side of the commander’s neck with one hand and to the center of her chest with the other, prompting the commander to look at her with an expression somewhere between confusion and gratitude. “He sent me here in his place so he could take care of them.” She stood up and met the commander’s puzzled, curious gaze. “All finished, Commander,” she told her. “You should be feeling much better now.”

“I am,” Charvon admitted. “Thank you.”

Isala smiled down at her, no doubt seeing not an enemy officer, but rather a patient who had needed her care. Then she nodded to MacLeod and walked away. As she made her exit, MacLeod held a hand out to Commander Charvon, offering to help her to her feet.

“I do not need *your* help, Captain,” she told him as she stood up on her own, albeit a little unsteadily. “I do not trust Federation starship captains.”

“There seems to be a lot of that going around on this side of the Federation border,” he acknowledged. He gestured toward the transporter platform behind her and then walked over and joined Hassan behind the controls as she stepped up, took her place on one of the circular pads, and then turned around to face forward.

“Captain MacLeod,” she then called out to him.

He looked up at her. “Commander Charvon?”

“Do you personally know Captain James T. Kirk of the *Enterprise*?”

“Fairly well, actually,” he answered honestly, knowing of no reason to hide the fact. “We had some classes together at Starfleet Academy and I later served under him for a time aboard another vessel. Why do you ask?”

“If you would be so kind the next time you see him, tell him I said I will never forget what he did to me. You may give that same message to his First Officer Spock, as well. In fact, please be *sure* to give it to him. One of the many things I learned about your people during my time in captivity was that you have a very old saying on Earth. ‘Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned.’ They both scorned me, quite significantly.”

“Romulan vessel signaling ready, sir,” Hassan interjected.

"I'll be sure to pass on the message, Commander," MacLeod told her. Then, wasting no more time, he turned to Hassan and said, "Energize."

Hassan manipulated the controls and then pushed the three slides upward just so. The sparkling effect appeared first in the center of her torso and expanded outward. Then, as it engulfed her completely, a faint transporter effect appeared hovering over one of the other pads, and as she faded from existence Hassan pulled the slides back down and a human male figure began to coalesce in the second beam, standing with both feet on that other pad. That figure then solidified fully and became Federation Representative Robert Charles, and when Chief Hassan declared transport complete and started shutting down the system, MacLeod stepped out from behind the console to meet their new guest as he briefly glanced around the room and then stepped down off of the platform.

"Mister Charles, I'm Captain Christopher..."

"Did they carry out the attacks yet?" Mister Charles asked him urgently, interrupting.

"The attacks?" MacLeod inquired.

"On the worlds that founded the Federation!" Charles exclaimed, grasping MacLeod by the shoulders. "Earth! Vulcan! Andoria! Tellar Prime! Have those worlds been attacked?"

"How do *you* know about those attacks?" MacLeod asked him.

"Never mind that now!" Charles all but shouted his reply. "Those four worlds! Have they been attacked or not?"

MacLeod gently but firmly pushed Charles' hands away from his shoulders with his forearms, then finally answered, "Not Earth. The other three, yes, but not..."

"What happened, Captain? Tell me everything."

MacLeod was tempted to refuse—to hold back until Mister Charles first explained to him how he knew about the attacks in the first place. But then he realized that telling him what he wanted to know might be the quickest way to getting the answers he wanted from him. So, he explained, "Klingon battlecruisers in formations of three carried out simultaneous kamikaze attacks on Vulcan, Andoria, and Tellar Prime. Almost immediately after that, three century-old *Columbia*-class starships—museum ships that went missing one after another several months ago—attacked Babel in much the same way."

"Babel? Are you sure?"

"Of course I'm sure!" MacLeod snapped at the man, forgetting himself for a moment. Then he reined his emotions back in and said, "Yes, Babel. Starfleet Command is operating under the assumption that the Klingons stole those ships, or perhaps hired a mercenary force to steal them for them, then rearmed them and manned them for the attack."

Charles turned partially away, lost in thought. "Target of opportunity," he muttered.

"Target of... What are you talking about?" MacLeod inquired.

"Babel," Charles told him, looking at him once more. "It must've presented itself a high-value target at the last minute somehow."

"Mister Charles..."

"Captain MacLeod, listen to me very carefully. Those attacks were *not* carried out by Klingon forces. They were..."

"Mister Charles," MacLeod said—his turn to interrupt. "*Nine* Klingon D-seven-class battlecruisers... *Nine*."

"All of them acquired by the Romulan Star Empire during the brief treaty between

their two empires!” Charles pointed out. “Those old *Columbia*-class starships were supposed to be used in an attack on Earth!”

“We’ve gone to war with the Klingon Empire over those attacks!” MacLeod then exclaimed. “You’re telling me they weren’t responsible?”

“Who better to benefit from such a distraction than the Romulans, Captain?” Charles asked him. “Think about it. Who benefits while the Federation and the Klingon Empire are at war with one another?” He paused to give MacLeod a moment to think it over, though the answer was obvious. “The *Romulans* do! It was all a ruse, Captain! The Romulans carried out the attacks! And now we have to move! Vulcan, Andoria, Tellar Prime...done. Earth was supposed to be the fourth target, but you tell me they hit Babel instead. That means we have a chance to stop it, but we have to move fast because they *are* going to attack Earth soon!”

MacLeod started leading Charles toward the exit. “Come with me, sir.” They walked out into the corridor, turned right, and then kept walking, and MacLeod asked him, “How do you know all this?”

“I always tried to listen in on the officers’ conversations where they held me,” Charles explained. They turned right again and then took a quick left. “Apparently, no one ever told them that I speak pretty fluent Rihannsu.” They turned right once more and headed down the crossing corridor. “That’s why the Council selected me as Federation representative for the talks with the Romulans in the first place.”

They turned left again and walked into a turbolift, and MacLeod said, “I find it pretty hard to believe that the officers at a confinement facility would have been aware of military invasion plans.”

“All I know is what I heard, Captain.” The lift doors closed. “And that includes the fact that the Romulans have allies within the Federation. Maybe within Starfleet itself.”

The doors parted and MacLeod led Representative Charles out of the starboard-side turbolift onto the bridge. He pointed over at the empty chair in front of the first supplemental station beyond communications and had barely told him, “Make yourself comfortable, Mister Charles,” when Commander Kim spun the center seat around to face him with an exasperated expression on her nearly ghost-white face.

“Captain MacLeod!” she exclaimed as she started to get up. “Thank God!”

“Commander?” he inquired as she stepped to one side, surrendering the center seat to him as he approached her.

“Audio is muted, so Tal can’t hear us,” she informed him first. Then she explained, speaking quietly but with a sense of urgency, “He’s demanding an explanation regarding Commander Charvon’s currently less than perfect state of well-being, sir. That son-of-a-bitch actually just threatened to blow *Endeavour* out of space if we don’t give him a satisfactory answer immediately.”

“Is that right?” MacLeod asked, looking up at the viewscreen to find a very angry looking Commander Tal glaring back at him as he took his seat. He glanced over to make sure Mister Charles had sat down as he’d asked, then ordered the communications officer to, “Resume audio.”

“Open, sir,” the communications officer told him after he flipped a switch.

MacLeod gazed up at Tal for a moment, then calmly asked him, "Is there a problem, Commander Tal?"

"A problem?" the enemy commander asked, his eyes wide with anger. *"I dare say it is more than a problem, Captain! You have physically beaten and abused our officer! I demand an immediate explanation!"*

"I've already given you an explanation, Commander," MacLeod reminded him. "She escaped custody and had to be located and subdued."

"I demand a satisfactory explanation!" Tal countered.

"Your officer broke from custody, injuring four of my crew, and then shot her way into my impulse engineering section, injuring seven *more* of my crew! I can only speculate that she intended to hijack or destroy my vessel. Her injuries, which we *treated* for her, by the way, resulted of her own violent actions."

"A simple phaser stun could have stopped her, Captain," Tal pointed out. *"There was no need to..."*

"My crewmen don't generally wear sidearms on duty, Commander." *A practice that I might have to alter in the very near future.* "Had we known that she intended to behave like an animal..."

"I have heard enough of your weak excuses, Captain MacLeod," Tal declared, *"and I find them completely unsatisfactory! I intend to file an official diplomatic complaint against you with your government...by name!"*

"Then I look forward to reading it, Commander," MacLeod told him. "Good-bye." He looked over at the comm. officer and ordered, "Close channel. Get me Starfleet Command, priority-one."

"Captain?" Kim said.

MacLeod turned his eyes to his first officer to find her staring at him with a question on her lips. "Mister Charles tells me it was the Romulans who attacked us, not the Klingons," he told her before she could ask. "We need to get the hell out of here." He looked ahead to the navigator. "Mister Carlucci..."

"Return course out of the neutral zone already plotted and laid in, sir," the navigator told him, looking back over his shoulder.

"Well done, Lieutenant. Way to anticipate." He looked over at the helm. "Lieutenant Shran, set course for Federation space, come about, and get us the hell out of here."

"Gladly, sir."

As the helmsman started turning the ship for home, the communications officer spun his chair around and urgently reported, "Captain, the Romulans just started jamming all long-range communications!"

"Warp six, now, Lieutenant!" MacLeod barked as he slid forward to the edge of his seat. Then he turned to the weapons officer and ordered, "Arm phasers! Load torpedoes!"

Endeavour rumbled and pitched and rolled to one side suddenly, sending MacLeod and several other personnel tumbling from their chairs.

"Warp field has destabilized!" Shran shouted as she returned to the helm. "We have dropped back to sub-light!"

"Red alert!" MacLeod ordered as he, too, returned to his seat. "Return fire!"

The bridge lights dimmed and took on a reddish hue as the four alert lights evenly

spaced around the bridge's outer ring started flashing red and the klaxon wailed three times and then fell silent. The weapons officer locked weapons and fired. Up on the main screen, the twin sapphire beams of *Endeavour*'s aft phasers lashed out at the warbird and struck and dispersed over its shields as it began to maneuver away from *Endeavour*.

"Direct hit to enemy's shields!" the weapons officer reported. "Minimal damage!"

"Confirmed, Captain!" Shran added, peering into her scope.

Endeavour shook under another direct hit, though much less severely now that all of her shields were raised. "Weapons free!" MacLeod declared. "Fire at will! Lieutenant Shran, I need warp six again, right now!"

"Captain, something on scanners!" Daystrom called out from the science station.

"We can't seem to generate a stable warp field, Captain!" Shran reported, though she continued trying.

"Two more warbirds decloaking off the port-bow and starboard-bow, sir!" Daystrom announced.

"Forget warp for now, Miss Shran!" MacLeod shouted at her. "One hundred degrees hard to port! Zee minus fifty-thousand meters!"

MacLeod just caught a glimpse of the new arrivals—two more D-7-class warbirds, their bellies painted with the wings and feathers of giant raptors—as *Endeavour* rocked once more and then pitched bow-down and rolled to port, bringing all weapons to bear as she tried to escape the ambush.

CHAPTER 6

The battle raged on for several long minutes, more like Midway than MacLeod would ever have wished, except for the part where the ‘good guys’ had learned of the ambush ahead of time and set up one of their own. Fortunately for him and his crew, and despite the 3-to-1 odds stacked against her, *Endeavour* was continuing to hold her own. The warp drive was still offline, but she’d proven herself to be no less maneuverable than the warbirds she was battling and had already inflicted significant damage on them, even while sustaining some of her own. One of the two more standard D-7 warbirds—neither of them had been modified to the extent which the *Talon* had—had taken only moderate damage so far, but the second one had suffered much more and appeared barely able to maneuver anymore. *Talon*, apparently the most heavily armed and armored of the three, had taken relatively little damage and was still fully in the fight.

The image on the main screen showed the lesser-damaged D-7 angling in to attack from almost dead ahead, firing its forward disruptors. “Hard to starboard!” MacLeod ordered, and Shran reacted almost before he could finish giving the order. *Endeavour* rolled out of the D-7’s line of fire—a clean miss—at the same time maneuvering in above and behind its all but crippled sister-ship. “Port phasers, fire!” The weapons officer fired multiple banks, port and bow, and four sapphire beams scored hits. Three of them dispersed across the enemy’s shields, which began to glow under the assault, but the fourth broke through and carved a gash across the D-7’s port nacelle wing.

“I have phaser and torpedo lock on the second D-7’s warp reactor, Captain,” the weapons officer then advised.

The odds were against them, 3-to-1. This was about survival. As long as his ship was on the wrong end of those odds, he couldn’t afford to be magnanimous. This was no time to show mercy. MacLeod gave the order. “Fire!”

The order given, the weapons officer didn’t hesitate. He fired the main phasers and followed with a volley of three photon torpedoes. The phasers easily punched through what little remained of the enemy vessel’s shields and scored a direct hit atop the warbird’s aft superstructure, burning a hole through to the decks beneath into which all three torpedoes then plunged one after the other as *Endeavour* veered away, detonating on impact, scattering wrecked shuttle-like crafts into space, some of them still burning, destroying the entire aft center portion of the warbird. Then seconds later, *Endeavour* barely escaped the blast when the entire vessel exploded in blinding white light.

“Target destroyed!” the weapons officer exclaimed victoriously as pieces of the vessel struck *Endeavour*’s shields. “There’s nothing left of her, sir!”

Nothing except for what’s bouncing off our shields, MacLeod mused. That made the odds 2-to-1. Better, but no cause to celebrate. They were still outnumbered, and before the weapons officer had even turned back to his console, *Endeavour* took a disruptor blast on the rear right of the bridge deck and the communications officer had to duck and cover as his console erupted in smoking sparks and flames.

“Lieutenant!” MacLeod shouted with concern, looking over at him.

“I’m all right, sir!” the young man assured him as he started patting out the small fires

with his bare hands until another crewman ran to his aid with an extinguisher.

Endeavour took more fire from the *Talon* on her starboard flank even as the weapons officer fired torpedoes on the remaining D-7, which had come around for another pass, this time severing its port wing along the gash he'd carved through it earlier and destroying the nacelle itself. Shran then turned *Endeavour* in on the *Talon* and the weapons officer fired multiple phasers on its forward disruptors and a spread of torpedoes at its forward torpedo launcher, scoring direct hits and destroying all three targets as *Endeavour* sailed over the *Talon* to take up a position above and behind it.

"Enemy flagship's weapons and propulsion offline, sir!" the weapons officer shouted in victory once more.

"Long-range communications restored, sir!" the communications officer added.

That one was a welcome surprise. How that young man had gotten communications back online so fast, he had no idea. "Send this to Starfleet Command, Lieutenant!" MacLeod began, looking over at him. "Mission accomplished. Romulan officer returned, Federation representative recovered. Have learned Romulan forces, *not* Klingon forces, carried out the recent attacks on Federation worlds! Possible collaborators inside the Federation! *Endeavour* engaged by three Romulan warbirds in surprise ambush! *Endeavour* victory imminent!"

* * * * *

Despite the fact that four Federation worlds had been savagely attacked by forces of the Klingon Empire, resulting in untold hundreds of thousands of dead and injured—perhaps even millions—and massive devastation, routine operations aboard *Enterprise* had continued as calmly as ever as she sailed toward Parliament. Relaxed, at least on the outside, turned partially aside from her console with her legs crossed and her Feinberg device plugged into her ear, Lieutenant Uhura sat monitoring all communications channels, both open and secure, all of which had been unusually quiet for quite some time now. Silent even. That did make a certain amount of sense, she supposed, with all the early spreading of unsubstantiated rumors surrounding those attacks having finally been squashed by Starfleet Command order and the conference having been moved to a classified location. No one was talking openly about anything anymore for fear of reprisal from Command or being intercepted by the enemy.

Her console beeped, drawing her attention, and Captain Kirk cut off his conversation with Doctor McCoy and turned an ear toward her when he heard her turn and faced her board directly and started manipulating the controls. "I know I didn't just imagine that," she quietly mumbled when she couldn't pin down that cause right away.

"Problem, Lieutenant?" the captain asked her.

"More like a...a hiccup, sir," she replied as she continued scanning through all of the channels again, one at a time, looking for the source of that beep.

"A hiccup?" McCoy asked her lightheartedly from his place standing at Kirk's side. "Lieutenant, have you been drinking on duty?"

"Of course not, Doctor," she replied humorlessly. "My *board* hiccupped—reacted to something, but...it was only there for a second. I can't find the cause."

Kirk stood up, stepped back to the railing, and rested his arms on it as he asked her,

“Comm. signal?”

“Possibly, sir, but not necessarily,” she replied without turning to him, continuing her efforts to nail down the cause. “It might have been a small flare of background radiation, or a glitch in the comm. system itself, or...”

“A glitch?” Kirk asked.

“Yes, sir, a glitch,” she repeated impatiently as she kept working. “Glitches do occur from time to time, you know.”

Kirk straightened a little, taken aback by her reply, and saw Spock out of the corner of his eye, sitting at his station, look over at him. “We’re at war, Lieutenant,” he reminded her patiently but sternly. “I need to *know* if that was a glitch, or if there might be a cloaked ship out there somewhere.” Spock stood up and stepped over to his scope. “Run a full diagnostic as quickly as you can and report the results.”

“Yes, sir,” she replied, a little more submissively.

Kirk moved over closer to Spock’s station, where the first officer was peering into his scope, steadily adjusting its settings. “Spock?”

“Nothing on sensors at this time, Captain,” he replied as he continued scanning.

“All right. Keep your eyes open,” Kirk told him as he turned back to his chair. He stepped up in front of it, but Ensign Walking Bear looked back at him from the helm before he could sit down.

“Recommend you take the ship to yellow alert, Captain,” the relative newcomer to the ship offered. A fairly muscular young man of taller than average height, the long-haired Native American might have been more suited to a position in Security, at least physically, but he’d selected the helm, so the helm was where he worked. He had yet to decide whether or not to put himself on the track to eventual command, however, so he still wore red.

“That might be a little premature, don’t you think, Ensign?” Kirk asked him as he sat back down.

Walking Bear looked back over his shoulder at the captain. “Like you said, sir, there might be a cloaked ship out there somewhere.”

“Or, like the lieutenant said, it might just have been a glitch,” Kirk countered.

Walking Bear seemed to consider that for a moment, then concluded as he turned and faced forward again, “Better safe than sorry, sir.”

“Recommendation noted, Ensign,” Kirk told him. “Man your station.”

McCoy leaned in close to Kirk and lowered his voice. “I think I agree with the big guy, Jim,” he said. “Given the circumstances, a little extra caution couldn’t hurt.”

“Captain, system diagnostics came back negative,” Uhura reported. “No malfunctions and nothing out of spec.”

“So all evidence points to the likelihood that your system responded to an unknown *external* stimulus,” Kirk tentatively concluded. Then he looked up at the screen and added, “That’s just great.” He looked over at Spock, who was still scanning.

“Still nothing on sensors, Captain,” the Vulcan told him as though he’d sensed the captain’s eyes on him.

“Switch to active scanners, Mister Spock, out to ten thousand kilometers minimum,” Kirk told him. “If there is someone out there, they already know we’re here.”

“Yes, sir.”

Kirk lowered his voice to speak only to McCoy and told him, "I'm getting a knot in the center of my gut, Bones."

"Would you like an antacid?" the doctor asked him, only half-joking.

"Scanning out to ten thousand kilometers in all directions," Spock reported. "Results negative. Expanding to fifteen thousand. Results still negative. Twenty-thousand." He paused for a moment, then reported, "Results still negative, Captain."

"Repeat scans, Mister Spock. Continuous loop."

"Yes, sir."

"I have a strong feeling we're not alone, Spock," he explained to his longtime friend, despite knowing that his longtime friend did not require or expect an explanation.

"Captain," Uhura chimed in, "incoming signal from Starbase Four, priority-one. It's Admiral Withrow, sir."

"The admiral's hailing us?" he asked.

"Yes, sir," she replied.

Spock turned his eyes away from his scope momentarily and pointed out, "Violating the strict communications ban that he himself ordered us to observe throughout the duration of this mission."

"Restrictive parameters, Lieutenant?" Kirk asked her.

"Just priority-one and scrambled, sir," she told him. "No restrictions."

No restrictions. They were at war and their mission was so sensitive that the admiral had ordered them to observe comm. silence the whole way, and now he was violating that parameter himself without even restricting the transmission. Curious, as Spock would say. "On screen, Lieutenant."

"It's an audio signal only, sir."

Slightly less chance of intercept, but still risky. "On speaker then."

She opened the channel. "You're on, Captain."

"This is Captain Kirk. You're violating your own communications blackout order, Admiral. May I ask why?"

"The situation has changed, Captain," Withrow informed him. *"There are things of which you need to be made aware."*

"Very well, sir. Oscar-six-sierra-echo-zero-one, authenticate."

"I authenticate, Oscar-eight-sierra-bravo-four. Adjust authentication."

"Confirmed match with signal parameters, sir," Uhura told Kirk when he looked back at her, seeking that confirmation.

"Thank you, Lieutenant." He faced forward again and watched the star streaks soar outward on the viewscreen. "Go ahead, Admiral."

"Twenty-some odd months ago, you acquired a cloaking device from aboard Romulan vessel and later returned it and the commander of that vessel to Starfleet Command."

"You know I can't comment on that, sir."

"You don't have to, Jim. As of today, that commander has been returned to her people and Representative Robert Charles, the Federation Representative whom the Romulans took into custody six weeks ago, has been returned to us."

"That's good news, sir, but..."

"That's about all the good news I have for you, I'm afraid, Jim," Withrow advised

him. *"Mister Charles has informed us that the attacks on Babel and the three worlds were not carried out by the Klingons at all, but rather by the Romulans. The Endeavour was assigned to rendezvous with a Romulan vessel in the neutral zone for the prisoner exchange and was ambushed right after the exchange was made. Counting the ship she rendezvoused with, she just did battle with three warbirds."*

A sad expression crossed Kirk's features and his gaze fell to the empty air in front of him. The idea of having lost a starship with all hands, even in the wake of those devastating attacks... *"The Endeavour?"* he asked when the name suddenly struck him. *"That was Chris MacLeod's new ship, wasn't it?"*

"That's the other good news, Jim," Withrow gladly informed him. *"The Endeavour took her share of damage, but she still is Captain MacLeod's new ship. She came out on top."*

"Against three warbirds?" Kirk asked, hardly believing his ears. *"Alone?"*

"That's right, Jim," the admiral confirmed. *"Captain MacLeod's message ended with 'Endeavour victory imminent.'"*

"That a boy, Chris," Kirk muttered. Then he slapped the arm of his chair suddenly, startling McCoy and several of the other officers around him. *"I knew it wasn't the Klingons! We've gone to war against the wrong empire, Admiral!"*

"Yes we have, Jim," the admiral agreed, *"and that's not all. Mister Charles tells us the Romulans were originally planning to attack Earth as well, and could do so any time. Seems those old Columbia-class ships were diverted to Babel last minute."*

"So not only do we have to find a way to apologize to the Klingons and stop this war without appearing weak and vulnerable to conquest, which we all know is going to prove a hell of a lot easier to say than do," Kirk concluded, *"we also have to prepare for a Romulan attack on Earth. Perhaps even a full invasion."*

"That's exactly right, Captain," Withrow confirmed.

Kirk drew a deep, deep breath and sighed, then asked, *"What are my orders, sir?"*

"Unchanged. The planetary defense network has gone to full alert status and Starfleet is beefing up those defenses in preparation. We have more than a dozen ships coming in to blanket the area. I just wanted to fill you in on what's going on."

"I appreciate that, Admiral, but if my orders remain unchanged..."

"There is one last thing, Jim," Withrow told him, interrupting. *"Mister Charles claims the Romulans have allies somewhere inside the Federation hierarchy. Who those allies might be, we don't know yet."*

Allies inside the Federation.

Ambassador Rayna Morgan stood just outside the turbolift alcove and gazed at Kirk, who looked back at her from his place in the center seat. "You realize we may never discover who else is involved," she said.

"You mean we may never know who all of our enemies are...inside the Federation," Kirk replied to be sure he clearly understood her meaning.

"Keep it in mind, Captain Kirk...and look to your back."

"Look to my back," Kirk mumbled, remembering.

"What was that, Captain?" Withrow inquired.

"Something someone said to me a few months ago, Admiral," he briefly explained.

Then he suggested, "I think we're looking for someone who really, *really* hates and fears the Klingons, sir. Someone who might want to frame them any way they can...at any cost."

"Captain, if you're referring to the Esterions again..."

"No, sir, I'm not," Kirk assured him.

"Who then?"

"All I have right now are my own suspicions, sir. I can't prove anything...yet."

"I see. Well, I'm glad you said 'yet,' Jim."

"Why is that, Admiral?"

"Because once you've completed your current mission and departed that location, I want you personally to investigate and try to identify who those alleged collaborators might be, if they really exist."

"Me?" Kirk asked, taken aback. "Wouldn't someone from Federation Security be the more logical choice for that assignment, sir? That is their area of expertise."

"Yes it is, but Admiral Nogura has it in his head that you'll have your own suspicions and he wants you to conduct the investigation. He made a point of telling me that as soon as you heard his name, you'd know where to start."

"I do have a pretty good idea at that, Admiral," Kirk confessed.

"Good luck, Captain. Withrow out."

"Well," Kirk said as soon as Uhura confirmed that the transmission had ended and the channel had been closed, "it seems we're not going to be getting back to exploration as soon as we'd hoped."

"Shocking," McCoy responded, his tone filled with sarcasm.

* * * * *

The badly wounded *Endeavour* hung in space, her thrusters keeping station relative to the near-crippled *Talon* that drifted slightly back and forth under partial power before her, maintaining its face-to-face orientation relative to the starship while the totally crippled and powerless, half-wrecked remaining D-7...what was left of it...drifted slowly away, incapable of holding station with either of them. Main engineering appeared to have suffered a lot of damage, though the warp plasma conduits and the intermix chamber appeared to have come through the battle unscathed, thankfully. Chief Engineer Baumann had assigned Lieutenant Commander Lothar to take charge of the repair teams while she stood off to the side with the captain, giving him a status report.

"We do have partial impulse power, thanks to Mister Lothar's efforts with the repair teams, but warp drive is going to take a few more hours yet," she advised him. "Until then, it's pointless to try to go anywhere, Captain. It would take us hours just to move beyond Romulan weapons range. And *that's* only if they don't try to follow us."

"Which they can't do right now," MacLeod reminded her.

"As far as we know, sir," she countered. "They could just be playing possum."

She had a point. The Romulans, more than any other race he knew of, wouldn't think twice about baiting another trap. Deceit was in their nature. "Weapons?" he asked her.

"That's the good news, Captain," she replied with some relief. "Phaser banks, torpedo

launchers... Everything's back online. We can't run, but we can give them one hell of another fight if that's what they want."

"That's not what *I* want, Commander," Macleod pointed out, "but good. At least we have *something* the Romulans don't, in case we *do* need it."

"How do you know they don't?" she asked him, her inference clear.

This time he had an answer for her. "They're not shooting at us anymore."

* * * * *

The bridge of the warbird *Talon* had taken heavy damage and was still filled with a heavy cloud of drifting, acrid smoke. Blood stained several areas. Commander Tal had seen one of his officers killed when his console exploded in his face. The others, several of them having suffered minor to moderate injuries, continued to man their stations—even those that were not yet functioning properly again. A pair of armed guards had posted themselves one on either side of the door, presumably at his order, though he couldn't remember giving it. Only slightly injured himself, Tal still sat in command, staring at the screen directly in front of him, the Centurion standing at his side, trying to engage him in conversation.

"Status of enemy vessel?" Tal called for.

"Warp drive still offline," one of his officers replied from one of the few functioning posts. "They have partial impulse power, full life support, and full weapons capability."

Tal looked over at the officer. "Full weapons capability," he repeated. "And us?"

"We have partial maneuvering thrusters only, and no weapons," the officer reported, looking back at him. "We can maintain our position relative to the Federation vessel, but our shields are down as well and the cloaking device is offline."

"So their soldiers could board our vessel and take it at any time," Tal concluded. Then he looked to the screen again, though it showed more static than it did enemy starship. "Three warbirds," he reflected as the Centurion stepped a little closer, gazing at him with growing concern. "Three of the Praetor's finest, most advanced warbirds, and still we could not defeat a single Federation starship in combat."

"A *new* starship, Commander," the Centurion reminded him, seizing the opportunity to initiate that conversation he'd been wanting. "A new starship of a new class that we have not encountered before."

Tal peered sidelong at the Centurion. "Larger, presumably stronger nacelle pylons, a slightly larger and more firmly seated and secured deflector dish, new torpedo launchers... Superficial changes only, Centurion."

"Stronger shields," the Centurion countered, adding them to the commander's short list, "more powerful weapons... More significant differences seem to lie where they count the most, Commander."

"Every time we strengthen our forces, they are ready," Tal complained, ignoring the Centurion's argument. "The Federation seems always to be one step ahead of us!"

"The attacks against their founding worlds were successful," the Centurion reminded him, finally drawing his attention away from the static-filled screen.

"A moral victory at best," Tal pointed out. "Those attacks resulted in the destruction

of more civilian targets than military—a few starships at best—and they cost the imperial fleet *nine warbirds* and *thousands* of soldiers!”

“Thousands of *disgraced* soldiers, Commander!” the Centurion clarified firmly as he began to lose patience with the commander. “Former soldiers who had been stripped of their rank and imprisoned for a variety of crimes or failures! Soldiers who have now regained their honor and restored their families’ status through their sacrifices!”

Tal considered that for a few moments—he already knew that was the truth of it, of course—then looked his confidant dead in the eye and said, “As we also must do.”

“Commander?”

“We are defeated. We have no weapons with which to defend ourselves or this vessel. Nor do we have a means of escape. The enemy could take this vessel at any time. We cannot allow them the opportunity to do that. Our duty is clear.” He turned to one of his officers—a man who did not appear to be too busy at that particular moment—and gave him the order. “Initiate self-destruct.”

The man’s jaw slackened as he stared at returned his commanding officer’s stare. He hesitated, his lower lip quivering. And then he answered, “Yes, Commander.”

He turned to comply with the order, but at that moment Commander Charvon walked onto the bridge, in uniform, sidearm on her hip. “Belay that order!” she shouted as she passed between the guards. The guards stepped forward, well aware of who she was. One of them grabbed her by the arm while the other tried to do the same on the other side, but she turned quickly on the first one and palm-struck him straight in the nose, breaking it with a *crack* and a wet splash of splattering blood. He cried out in pain and lost his grip on her in favor of clutching his bloodied face as he fell to his knees, and she whirled around and kicked the second guard in his jaw, breaking it as well and knocking him back against the bulkhead to slide in agony to the deck.

She marched angrily forward toward Tal, who stood up to face her as the Centurion backed away. “I told you to *capture* that vessel, Tal, not *destroy* it!” she shouted at him.

“*You* are not in command here!” he argued. “I am!”

“I am your superior officer, *Sub-Commander*!”

“*You were* my superior officer!” he corrected her. “You proved yourself unworthy of command when you allowed James Kirk to steal the cloaking device out from under you!”

“As did you when you allowed the *Enterprise* to escape with me in their custody!” she reminded him. And then it hit her, like the first rays of a rising sun, and she gasped. “Or perhaps you *wanted* them to take me!” she submitted, making her accusation in the form of a theory, just in case she was wrong.

“*I* command this vessel now!” he stated firmly.

Then, before he or anyone else could even begin to react, Charvon stepped back, drew her sidearm, and shot Tal square in his chest, sending him falling backwards to the deck in short-lived agony and shocking everyone else into silent inaction. Then she stepped forward and gazed down at his unconscious form lying at her feet and declared, “You are relieved and under arrest.”

CHAPTER 7

“Does anyone here believe that Tal still commands this vessel?” Commander Charvon inquired of the entire bridge crew, waving her sidearm around at them. Then, when no one spoke up, she lowered her weapon, slowly, but held onto it. She pointed down with her free hand at the newly relieved former commander’s unconscious form on the deck in front of her, looked back at the injured guards, both of whom glared back at her with both anger and fear evident in their eyes as they pick themselves up off the deck, and commanded, “You two, pick him up, carry him to the brig, and confine him there.” When neither of them moved to obey, her eyes flared and she raised her weapon toward them and said, very quietly, “Now.” The one wiping the still flowing blood from his face on a sleeve, the other holding his jaw, which was canted at an odd angle, both men stepped forward to comply with her order.

While the reluctant guards lifted Tal into their arms and carried him away, Charvon walked over to the communications officer, glared at him for a moment, wondering where his loyalties might lie, and then asked him, “Are intra-ship communications functioning?”

“Yes,” the man replied sharply.

With her, at least for now. “Open a ship-wide channel.”

His ultimate loyalties still a mystery to her, he nonetheless did as she demanded, then looked up at her and nodded to let her know the channel was open.

“Attention, loyal officers and crew of the Praetor’s warbird *Talon*,” she began. “This is *Commander* Charvon speaking. Effective immediately, I have relieved *Sub-Commander* Tal of his *temporary* command and placed him under arrest for disobeying the direct orders of a superior officer—me—and have once more assumed operational command of this vessel. I have ordered that Tal be confined to the brig. Those among you who choose to remain loyal to Tal are hereby relieved of all duties. You may leave your stations and confine yourselves to your quarters immediately. Those of you who choose to accept this change of command and pledge your loyalty to me are hereby accepted under my command and asked to remain at your posts, and to continue serving as loyal soldiers of the empire. That is all.”

She nodded to the communications officer, who closed the channel, and then glanced around at the bridge crew one after another. “Choose now,” she commanded them.

No one moved a muscle.

“No one here remains loyal to Tal?” she asked them. “All of you accept me as your rightful superior and commanding officer?”

A few of them nodded slightly, but no one uttered a sound.

“Very well,” she said, accepting their silence as acceptance of her authority. “Then I accept all of you as well.” She locked eyes with the Centurion and held his gaze, though she continued speaking to everyone. “Your oaths of loyalty and service remain foremost to the Praetor, and then to me. From this moment on, you will obey *my* orders promptly and without question.” She clipped her sidearm to her belt, looked them all over for another moment, and then faced the communications officer and asked, “Status of external communications?”

“Short-range only at this time, Commander,” he reported. “We will not have long-range communications fully restored for another...”

“Hail the *Endeavour*,” she commanded him.

The officer fell silent for a moment and looked up at her, confused. “Commander?”

“Promptly and without question, Lieutenant,” she sternly reminded him, her tone of voice providing all the warning that was required. “Or would you prefer *Sub*-lieutenant?”

The lieutenant opened a channel and dispatched the standard hail.

“*This is Captain MacLeod of the Starship Endeavour,*” came the man’s familiar voice after a moment.

“This is your former prisoner speaking, Captain,” she informed him, remaining by the communications console.

“*You were our guest, Commander,*” the Terran captain reminded her. “*You were never our prisoner.*”

“I have relieved Tal of his command and placed him under arrest for disobeying my orders,” she told him, ignoring his reminder. “Due in large part to his utter incompetence, this vessel no longer poses a threat to you and will take no further aggressive action against you. You have my word on that. We will depart the neutral zone peacefully, as soon as we are able to do so, but know this, Captain... If you approach any closer or make any attempt to seize this vessel, I will destroy it, and I will do so in such a manner as to ensure that your vessel is destroyed right along with it. You have my word on *that* as well. Do I make myself clear?”

“*You do, Commander. We are prepared to depart the neutral zone immediately under impulse power. However, should you determine that you need assistance, we stand ready and willing to provide it in any way we can. We will be in communications range for several more hours. Call us if you need us. Endeavour out.*”

“*Endeavour* is beginning to back off, Commander,” the helmsman informed her after a moment as she stepped toward the command chair—*her* command chair.

“Good riddance,” she remarked. Then she stood in front of her chair and watched on her screen as *Endeavour* backed off, slowly, for several tens of her length, and then started turning away. *But what a glorious prize she would have made.*

Dion Charvon, once more commander of the imperial flagship *Talon*, took her seat, then said, speaking loud enough for everyone to hear—she’d grown used to speaking with Terrans, to raising her voice for their inferior sense of hearing—“Know this, all of you. You have sworn your allegiance to me, second only to the Praetor. From this moment on, any attempt at treachery will result in the offender’s immediate execution.”

By the time the lift doors opened onto deck E7, Tal had regained consciousness and freed his legs from the guard who had been holding them, preferring to stand on his own two feet despite the fact that he still felt groggy and was in a fair amount of pain. He pulled free of the other guard as well, and they nudged him out of the lift ahead of them and turned him to the right to walk him toward the brig. As they passed between the doors to the ward room on their left and another room on their right, he pressed the button on a device hidden on the inside of his belt and then coughed, loudly. The chief of security and his second then slipped out into the corridor, one from each of those rooms, and crept up on the trio from behind.

“Understand, Commander, we are left with no choice,” the one guard told him, the blood that stained the lower portion of his face and his tunic having finally started to dry.

“It is as he says, Commander,” the other agreed through his clenched teeth, trying his

best not to allow his jaw to move. “If we do not obey...”

The chief of security and his assistant jumped the guards from behind simultaneously, grabbing them up under their jaws—the guard whose jaw was broken grunted in agony—and pulling them backwards, off balance, and then injecting them directly in their necks, in their main arteries, with hypodermic syringes filled with the most potent sedative in their medical inventory, rendering them unconscious almost immediately. They lowered the guards to the deck quietly rather than let them fall. Then, as they stood over them, the assistant chief drew his sidearm and aimed it down at one of them, but Tal reached out and stopped him with a gentle but firm hand on his forearm.

“No,” he commanded firmly yet calmly. “Internal sensors will detect the weapons fire and report it to the bridge. Stealth is our ally for now.” He turned his eyes to the chief. “Secure them in the brig, in separate cells, then alert our people to await my signal. When I give the word, converge quietly on the assault troop transporter facility. There’s a full arms locker there. We are going to take back this vessel.”

Both officers saluted Tal, right fists over the left sides of their chests. The chief then crouched down and grabbed hold of one of the guards, but before the assistant could do the same, Tal held his hand out to him, palm up, and said, “Give me your disruptor.”

The assistant chief pulled his sidearm from his belt and handed it over as ordered, but reminded Tal as he did so, “Commander, by your own order the corridor outside the troop transporters will be well guarded—armed guards posted outside each of the five entrances.”

“When the time comes, bring our troops in quietly via the gangways from above,” Tal told him as he adjusted the disruptor’s power setting. Then, as he clipped the weapon onto his own belt, he explained, “We’ll take out the guards when we’re ready to deploy.”

“Yes, Commander,” the assistant replied, saluting once more.

“There is another matter, Commander,” the chief told him, lifting the unconscious guard with him as he stood up.

“What other matter?” Tal asked him impatiently.

“Our uniforms. All personnel aboard wear the same one with only minor variances for rank or station. If the regular crew rises against us in resistance, how will our people know enemy from ally?”

“Hmm,” Tal hummed as he gave that small yet important matter a moment’s thought. Then he replied, “I will have a solution by the time we are ready to move. Now go.”

As the officers grabbed up the unconscious guards and dragged them off toward the brig, Tal returned the lift. *So soon after battle the way should be clear for me*, he considered. *But if it is not, I must be prepared to kill those who have served under me.* He punched in his destination. The doors closed and the deck indicator light flashed twice horizontally. *Though I would prefer not to kill them. They are loyal soldiers after all, and have served me well.*

Tal turned so that he stood with his back to the wall on one side of the doors, and when they opened he leaned out only far enough to peer down the corridor that ran sternward between the two visicom rooms to a T-intersection. The doors leading into those rooms stood one on each side of the corridor halfway to that intersection—this soon after combat they would be empty, the comm. units having been taken offline—and a third door—that one led into one of the standard transporter rooms—stood in the cross-corridor’s wall, centered on the intersection. *Perhaps some of them will turn away from the letter of the law and realize*

that the wiser move is to remain loyal to me.

He stepped cautiously out of the lift and peered around the corner to his left, toward one of the two amidships gangways that led up to crew barracks and down to sanitary waste recovery, but saw no one. Then he shifted to the right and looked toward the other one. There was no one there, either, so he started creeping forward, down the corridor.

He stopped at the intersection by the left corner, then leaned out and looked to the left and then to the right once more. He saw no one and heard nothing.

The corridor to the left turned left again after only a few steps and then led to the lift repair shop and food fabrication, where he knew a number of crewmen would be working. The corridor to the right stayed straight, allowing him to see much farther. It also passed the crew's gymnasium, inside of which there was a gangway that led down to his destination. He headed right, toward the first door on the left—the door that led into the gym. He keyed the door and then stepped to one side as it opened, just in case, but it was dark inside, as he had expected it would be. He slipped in and closed the door behind him, then hurried across the floor toward the source of what little ambient light there was—that shining up through the gangway well from the deck below in the back right corner.

He reached the gangway, knelt at its side, and leaned out to look down the steps to the troop transporter facility that filled much of the deck below. He didn't see anyone or hear any sounds that might have been a guard moving about, and that concerned him. There should have been a guard down there. Maybe two. He'd ordered them posted there around the clock himself when he first took command. Had they learned of his escape and his plan to rally his troops down there? Were they lying in wait for him?

Cautiously, and as quietly as he could, he stepped out onto the gangway and started to descend. Then, after only the first couple of steps, he froze in place suddenly and reached for his sidearm when the shadow of a roaming guard flashed across the steps below. He listened while the guard's surprisingly light footfalls receded, then resumed his slow, silent descent.

He stepped down onto the deck, saw the guard meandering along as he approached the forward bulkhead, and then rushed up behind him, reached over his shoulder just as he began to turn and grabbed his chin, lifted and turned his head aside, and then struck hard at the base of the guard's neck, rendering him unconscious immediately. Then he lowered him quietly to the deck. "Sorry, my friend, but..."

He heard a sound in the shadows off to his right, drew his disruptor quickly, and took aim toward where the sound had come from.

"No, wait, Commander!" a second guard shouted, quickly throwing his empty hands into the air in surrender. "I stand with you," he declared. "*You* are the rightful commander of this vessel, and I intend to see you take it back."

Tal pointed over toward the door to his left. "Open the heavy arms locker."

"Yes, Commander," the guard replied as he started to move. Tal watched him closely as he crossed in front of him and then stepped over to the door and started entering his access code into the panel on the wall beside it. Something about him just didn't feel right. "How do you plan to take back the ship, Commander?" he asked when the door opened in front of him. There were no lights on inside, but Tal saw several racks filled with disruptor rifles where the area's ceiling lights shone in through the doorway.

When Commander Tal didn't respond to his question, the guard started to turn around

to face him once more, about a second too late to prevent him from striking hard at his throat with lightning speed, crushing his trachea.

The wide-eyed guard tried to shout as he clutched his throat in both hands and fell backward against the arms locker's outer wall, but as he collapsed to the deck, choking to death and spitting up bright green blood, the sound caught in his ruined throat.

"Without your help," Tal finally answered. He stood and watched the man die, told him as the light in his eyes began to fade, "You asked one too many questions—the wrong question," and then dragged his body inside the locker.

The locker lights flickered on automatically, then snapped off again when Tal stepped back out, letting him know that the second guard was truly dead. Had he not been, his life signs, however weak, would have prompted them to stay on. He dragged the first guard into the locker as well, still unconscious—the lights came up again, of course—and then, deciding that he had no choice, took a combat knife down from one of the racks and plunged it into the man's heart, eliciting one agonized groan and then a final, long exhale. Finally, not wanting to be seen if someone just happened to walk in, Tal thumbed the door closed with one hand while he pulled his comm-link off of his belt with the other. *Yes, these will do nicely.*

"This is Tal," he said, speaking quietly into his link while he scanned the walls ahead and on his right with satisfied eyes. The entire wall to his right was covered with those racks filled with heavy disruptor rifles, and the one ahead displayed grenades and mortars. "Assault troop transporter facility is secure. Instruct our people to move *quietly*, a few at a time." He looked to the walls to his left and ahead on that side, finding more mortars and high-capacity shoulder-launch grenade launchers, mines, tactical communications equipment, and rows and rows of fully charged cartridges for the disruptor pistols and rifles. "Descend quietly from the gymnasium and food fabrication gangways above and come to the port arms locker."

"Immediately, Commander," the response came without question.

"I was your sub-commander once, but no longer," Tal ruminated aloud but quietly as he clipped his comm-link back onto his belt, picturing Charvon in his mind. Then he stepped over to the racks of disruptor rifles and added, "I command the *Talon* now, and I will have it back...even if I have to kill you to get it."

* * * * *

Another blip sounded on Lieutenant Uhura's board, and this time she was ready, or so she thought. She jumped to work the second she heard it, her nimble fingers dancing over her controls like those of a concert pianist lost in her music, but she wasn't lost at all. She knew exactly what she needed to do and how best to do it. She knew the communications systems better than anyone. "Captain," she called out excitedly, knowing that she was only seconds from not only identifying the source, but pinpointing its location as well. But then, barely a second after she spoke, she realized that she was too late—that she'd reacted too slowly once again. She'd had it, and she'd lost it.

"Lieutenant?" Kirk asked, turning his chair and looking up at her.

"It happened again, sir," she reported, her disappointment evident in her tone.

"Another blip?"

“Yes, sir, but...”

“I take it you weren’t able to isolate the source this time, either,” he concluded, based on her tone.

“No, sir, I wasn’t,” she admitted. “Sorry, sir. It was gone before I could react to it.”

“I’m sure you’re doing the best you can as always, Lieutenant,” he told her, hoping to remind her that he had the utmost confidence in her abilities. “That’s all I can ask.”

“Captain,” Spock spoke up, standing in front of his sensor scope, “perhaps we cannot identify the source at this time, but we *can* eliminate one possible cause.”

“Go on,” Kirk prompted him.

“I was scanning out to one-hundred fifty thousand kilometers at the very moment the lieutenant’s board...blipped. There were no radiation surges or other natural phenomena that could have caused her equipment to react in that way at that time. Whatever the cause, it was not a natural phenomenon, and it was not external.”

“Something *internal* then,” Kirk concluded, following Spock’s report to its obvious conclusion. “Something inside the *Enterprise*. A minor glitch, or...” His eyes widened with sudden realization. “...or a covert transmission.”

Spock sat down in his chair. “Each one a theoretical and equal possibility, until you consider the fact that Lieutenant Uhura has already run a full diagnostic check on her system, which returned negative results. There is also that knot in your gut to consider.”

Kirk gave his first officer an odd look. “Why, Mister Spock,” he said, “are you finally admitting that my gut feelings have merit?”

The Vulcan raised a single eyebrow. “I believe you have proven that to be the case on many occasions, Captain,” he replied. “To deny it would, therefore, be illogical.”

Kirk stood up and approached the railing by Spock’s station as he shifted his thoughts back to the business at hand. “These...blips...didn’t start until soon after we took Ambassador Sarek and his party aboard,” he considered, “and Romulans are virtually identical to Vulcans, at least in appearance.”

“And we now know that the Romulans, rather than the Klingons, were responsible for the attacks on Babel and the three Federation founding worlds,” Spock added, “assuming, of course, that Representative Charles’ report is accurate.”

“We have no reason to believe it isn’t, Spock,” Kirk pointed out. Then he ordered, “Continue your scans. Pay extra close attention to our stern. If someone’s out there receiving covert transmissions from somewhere aboard the *Enterprise*, they’re most likely following us from some distance behind.”

“Agreed, Captain.”

As Spock stood up to resume his scans, Kirk stepped forward to the right of the center seat and stood by his navigator’s shoulder. “Lieutenant Chekov,” he said, “ready the torpedo launchers, but do not load them yet, and set all phaser banks to standby. Make no changes to the weapons systems’ current power levels.”

“Aye, Keptin.”

Kirk stepped back to his chair, pressed the call button on its arm. “Bridge to sickbay.”

“McCoy here.”

“Report to the bridge, Bones, on the double.”

“On my way, Jim.”

Kirk turned back to communications once more. "Lieutenant Uhura, put everyone you can find to work on troubleshooting ship's communications. I want every circuit on this ship checked manually, just in case it *is* a system glitch."

"Aye, sir," she replied, clearly not happy with the task that he'd just laid before her.

"Mister Chekov," he called as he turned forward to the navigator/security chief again. "Relay to your A-C, I want surveillance run on everyone we brought aboard from the Vulcan shuttle. Keep in mind they're Federation diplomats, so make it discreet. No interference with their activities. Just watch them. Go give the order in person, then get back up here on the double. I need you on weapons."

"The ambassador himself as vell, Keptin?" Chekov asked him.

"No," Kirk replied, shaking his head after thinking it over for a moment. "I think we can exclude Ambassador Sarek. We certainly have no reason to suspect *him* of..."

"If I may, Captain?" Spock interjected.

Kirk and Chekov both looked over at Spock as he stepped up to the railing. "Mister Spock?" Kirk acknowledged.

"We're taking action based on the possibility that we have a Romulan spy aboard," the first officer reminded his captain. "Given the similarities between Romulans and Vulcans, it is only logical to assume that *any* member of the ambassadorial party could potentially be that spy, including the ambassador himself. As you will recall, that first Romulan vessel we encountered approximately four years ago was commanded by an officer who bore a striking resemblance to the Vulcan ambassador and might even have been able to pass for him under certain circumstances had the empire had such a need at the time. Therefore, the only logical course of action is to conduct surveillance on *all* of the members of the ambassadorial party, including the ambassador himself."

As Kirk paused to consider, the turbolift doors opened and Doctor McCoy stepped out onto the bridge. "You wanted to see me, Jim?" he asked as he stepped down to the left side of the center seat while Kirk stepped up in front of it, looking at Chekov, who was looking back at him in anticipation of the order to go.

"Go, Lieutenant," Kirk said, giving him that order. He took his seat as Chekov walked past it, then quickly said, "Wait a moment, Lieutenant," when a possible way out of having to spy on Sarek popped into his mind. Chekov stopped. If Bones' examinations of the Vulcan had turned up anything odd with any of them, maybe he could narrow their focus and avoid having to set someone to spying on the ambassador for whom he held so much admiration and respect. He turned to the doctor and asked, "Bones, did anything unusual show up when you checked out Ambassador Sarek's party?"

"Anything *unusual*?" McCoy asked in return. "Like what, Jim?"

"Any indication at all that one or more of them might actually be Romulan?"

"Romulan?" McCoy exclaimed, his eyes growing wide. He thought about it for a few moments, then answered, "No, Jim, but we didn't look at them that closely. We just rendered first aid and mended a few broken bones."

"I see." He looked back to Chekov. "Carry on, Lieutenant...and remember, keep it as covert as possible. I don't want a diplomatic incident on my hands on top of everything else."

"Aye, Keptin."

"Do you want us to look them over again, Jim?" McCoy asked him as Chekov left the

bridge. "I'm sure I can come up with a *logical* reason."

"No," Kirk decided. "If there *is* a spy among them that might just tip him off to our suspicions." He looked at the doctor. "Thanks, Bones. That's all for now."

McCoy's eyes lingered on Kirk for a second or two—he wasn't used to simply being dismissed out of hand like that. Then, when he finally walked off to join Chekov in the lift, Kirk ordered, "Mister Walking Bear, reduce speed to warp three...gradually."

"Aye, sir," Walking Bear acknowledged. "Reducing speed to warp three."

* * * * *

The security chief, his assistant, and about two dozen officers and crew from various departments around the ship had joined Tal in the *Talon's* troop transporter facility, a few at a time, as ordered. Most of them wore helmets and the silver-grey and blue of junior to mid-level officers or the silver-gray only of enlisted soldiers, but a very few wore the silver-grey and maroon of the leadership, the senior officers, without helmets. Experienced leaders. Only a few of them, but Tal was glad for their presence—glad for all he could get. He'd known exactly who to expect, of course, having ensured they were all assigned to his ship almost as soon as he rose to command, but he was still glad. They had all come. Not a single one of them had let him down.

All of them, leaders and subordinates alike, donned ground combat vests, loaded them down with various types of low-yield grenades and disruptor power packs, slipped closed-channel scrambled comm-links over their ears, armed themselves with disruptor rifles and sidearms, and then gathered around Tal to receive their orders.

"We cannot use the transporters," he told them after he'd broken them into teams and given them their objectives, "as that will sound an alarm on the bridge and alert the crew. You will have to advance to your assigned areas on foot."

"About our uniforms, Commander," the security chief reminded him. "Knowing our enemies from our allies?"

"Yes," Tal recalled. "Officers, remove your sashes. Tear a piece off and tie it around your upper left arm. Enlisted personnel, tear out a piece of your tunic's liner and do the same. Those of you wearing helmets, remove them. When you see a shipmate armed and equipped as we are, with no sash or helmet and a piece of the colored cloth tied around the left arm, he or she is an ally. Do it now."

As those who were wearing them started removing their helmets and sashes, tore the cloth as instructed, and then piled everything up just inside the heavy weapons locker, the security chief met Tal's gaze and then stepped forward, stopped at his side with his back to the others, and then leaned in close and whispered into his ear, "It will not take long for those loyal to Charvon to catch on, Commander. If they then disguise themselves as us..."

"Then they run the risk of assaulting one another in error more than we risk failing to assault them," Tal pointed out. "We are fewer than thirty and we know one another by sight. They are hundreds and do not. At least, not all of them. Besides, my friend, if all goes well we will have retaken the ship before that happens."

Seemingly satisfied by that answer, the security chief backed off. Tal waited a couple

of more minutes for everyone to finish preparing themselves. Then, when he had everyone's attention once more, he pointed back behind him and to his right at the long forward wall and said, "Our first objectives are the guards standing post outside each of those five doors. We must take them out simultaneously and quietly. Those of you who have been selected for that task, prepare to carry it out."

Tal turned his back and walked off toward the center of the facility while those ten troops turned their disruptors over to their comrades, then looked back over his shoulder at them as they started moving in pairs toward their assigned doors. "Take your positions," he told them as he stepped up onto the front of the center transporter platform. *"This is only the beginning,"* he told himself while the ten soldiers deployed to their assigned doors. *First I will take back this ship. Then, with the help of my agents, I will take full command of the entire fleet. And once I control the fleet, the Praetor's seat and the empire will be mine.*

He looked ahead from his right to his left. The ten troops were in position, a pair of them standing by each of the five doors. The time had come. "Now," he told them.

They knocked hard on the doors. All five of them opened, almost simultaneously, and all five guards stepped inside and spotted Tal standing proudly like the Praetor himself up on the center platform. Thanks to Charvon's announcement, everyone aboard knew that he had been relieved and arrested, but almost before they could even begin react, his troops grabbed them from behind on both sides and beat them down, incapacitating them quickly and then rendering them all unconscious.

"Drag them into the arms locker and kill them...quietly," Tal commanded.

As those troops complied with his order, Tal looked back at their waiting comrades and stepped down off of the platform to rejoin them. He waited while the ten completed their task, then pointed toward the doors while the ten retrieved their rifles from their comrades. He gave the order. "Deploy!"

CHAPTER 8

“Move quickly and quietly to your objective,” Tal commanded as he led his troops toward the center door—patriots or mutineers, whoever came out on top at the end would decide. “Stealth is our ally. Make good use of it for as long as you can.” Then, when he stopped in front of the door, having finally made the one decision that he’d held off on while he weighed the pros and cons of each candidate in his mind, he looked over at Lieutenant Cetos, one of the troops wearing a strip of maroon around his arm whose duties had included commanding ground assault troops in combat, and said, “Cetos, you will command the team taking engineering. I will command the team taking the bridge.”

“Yes, Commander,” Cetos replied.

Tal and Cetos divided the troops into their teams behind them, then led them out of the transporter facility and across the corridor toward the twin gangways standing on either side of the lift. Tal led his team slightly to the right, toward the starboard gangway, while Cetos led his to the left, toward the one to port. They both then started ascending immediately so that those behind them could clear the corridor and follow. Otherwise some random crewmember might have stepped into the corridor and spotted them, and they would have been caught before they even got started.

They ascended to deck-E7 and emerged simultaneously in the same visicom facility that Tal had passed through earlier, moved away from the gangways and turned on circles as they moved, looking around the area, keeping watch while their troops continued ascending and stepping off of the gangways behind them.

“No one here,” Cetos observed.

“I doubt we will continue to be this fortunate the rest of the way,” Tal remarked as he and Cetos came together in front of the lift, still watching the area carefully.

“I sincerely hope that you are wrong, Commander,” Cetos replied. “The very thought of having to fire on and possibly kill even one of my crewmates distresses me. They are loyal Rihannsu soldiers, every one of them, even if they *are* an enemy to our cause.”

“It pleases me to hear you say that, Lieutenant,” Tal told him. “It *should* distress you. You would not be Rihannsu if it did not.” Seeing that all of their troops were present, ready and waiting, he looked the younger officer in the eye and told him, “We will split into our teams here. I need you to ascend on the portside.”

“Either side will lead us to engineering in equal time, Commander,” the young officer pointed out. Then he asked, “Why the portside?”

“Because, Lieutenant, if I lead *my* team up on the portside, we will emerge directly outside the lower officers’ mess door when we reach deck five,” Tal pointed out. “If that door opens on us before we are ready...”

“I understand, Commander,” Cetos told him. “Very well.”

“I am pleased that you understand, Lieutenant,” Tal told him, glaring at him, “but I suggest you make that the very last time you question my orders.”

Cetos looked at Tal as though he were only then seeing the warning look in his eye, then acknowledged that warning with a simple, “Yes, Commander.”

Tal turned away from him and looked back at their troops, who had begun to mingle

and whisper among themselves while they waited. “Divide yourselves back into your teams,” he commanded them. “Engineering team on Lieutenant Cetos to port. Bridge team on me to starboard. Remember, stealth is our ally. When encountering ship’s personnel along the way, neutralize them as quietly as possible. Fire weapons only as a last resort.”

The troops broke back into their teams as ordered and then followed their leaders up the gangways once more. Tal emerged in the deck-6 starboard corridor and took a quick look to his left and his right—empty, as most of them would be with the crew still manning their emergency combat stations—then stepped out of the way to allow his team to follow. As soon as they had all gathered in the corridor behind him, Tal led them forward toward the ‘T’-intersection with the main starboard barracks corridor. As they approached it, one lone soldier suddenly emerged from a barracks door on the right and surprised Tal as much as he himself was surprised, and before he could react beyond being startled, Tal punched him hard in the solar plexus, forcing the air from his lungs, then slammed his fist down on that spot at the base of his neck, rendering him instantly unconscious.

Sub-Lieutenant Brel, who wore a strip of blue cloth around his arm, stepped up beside Tal and stood gazing down at the unconscious soldier lying at their feet with him. “What do we do with him, Commander?” he asked. Then he pointed at the barracks door and added, “There are likely more soldiers in there, so we cannot drag him inside, and we cannot leave him out here. He will be found.”

“Bring him,” Tal replied. “We will hide him in the shadows.” He led the way forward once more while Brel directed two of the enlisted troops to lift the unconscious soldier up off of the deck and carry him.

The team continued forward, single file, left at the intersection and then right again where the corridor turned toward the bow once more. Tal tapped his comm-link and he moved and quietly called, “Lieutenant Cetos, Tal. Report progress.”

“Beginning ascent to deck E-five, Commander,” Cetos reported just as quietly.

As he passed a poorly lit gangway on his right, Tal turned and looked back past the sub-lieutenant at the troops who were carrying the unconscious soldier and gestured toward the darkest shadows, those underneath the gangway, while he continued speaking to Cetos. “Keep this channel on standby. Name activation. Continue to advise me of your progress.”

“Yes, Commander.”

“Make him small,” Tal told the two troops as they laid the unconscious soldier down where he had pointed. “Hide him well so that he will not be found easily.” Once they had done that, he resumed leading his team forward.

“Commander Tal, Cetos,” the lieutenant called.

“Go, Lieutenant.”

“We have reached deck E-five. So far no resistance. Proceeding to deck E-four.”

“Acknowledged. We will be ascending to deck five momentarily.”

The corridor closed in on them from the right as they reached the front of the boom and they had to squeeze around some machinery to gain access to the ship’s ‘head.’ Tal went first, then stepped aside and directed his troops ahead of him to the next gangway.

They ascended that gangway and emerged on deck-5 just starboard of the lift, amidst all the heavy food preparation machinery—an area almost always unmanned. A pair of doors stood separately in the forward wall, one on each side of the lift, which stood in the center.

The door to starboard was heavy and insulated, as it led into refrigerated food storage, which would also be unmanned, but the portside door led directly into the lower officers' mess, and this long after combat, even with the ship still on standby alert, its combat stations manned, there was at least a chance that someone might be in there grabbing a quick bite to eat. Tal's troops weaved their way in and around the machinery, just to make sure they were alone, then watched that door and covered the gangways while Tal joined them, bringing up the rear. Then they all moved to that door and prepared to charge through.

"Go!" Tal commanded. One of the troops slapped his hand down on the actuator. The door slid open and the troops charged into the mess, surprising five blue-sashed officers who had apparently been enjoying a brief meal break. Tal and his troops outnumbered them two to one, so the fight that immediately ensued turned fairly one-sided right from the beginning. Two of Tal's troops nonetheless fell in the scuffle, stabbed low in their torsos or left sides, very close to their hearts if not in them. Three of the officers fell as well, but a fourth one managed to reach a nearby comm-panel and call for help, though one of Tal's troops knocked him out before he could say anything beyond reporting a fight in their location. By the time it was over seconds later, all five officers were dead—two of them after a pair of Tal's troops lifted their unconscious heads up off of the deck and cut their throats—and a third member of Tal's team had fallen.

As repairs to all of the bridge's command and control systems continued to progress as quickly as possible around her, Commander Charvon sat confidently in full command of the *Talon* once more. Command. The center seat. This was where she belonged. This was what she had been born to do. She thought back over her career. She had risen to command an entire squadron—three of the fleet's finest vessels—a bird-of-prey and two D-7 warbirds. She had joined the service voluntarily rather than wait to be called. Her family name and her father's political connections had earned her a commission. She had climbed the rank ladder quickly and had earned her billet as commander of those vessels with the Praetor's flagship *Talon* serving as her seat. She had maneuvered as needed, when needed, and had put herself on the fast track to the admiralty itself.

And then, during a routine patrol along the neutral zone border, she had encountered the Federation starship *Enterprise* and its accursed commanding officer, that much reviled criminal, Captain James T. Kirk, and everything had changed. That lying, deceitful, thieving piece of... And then there was his first officer, the Vulcan, Mister Spock. The mere thought of him, of what he had done to her, set her jaw to clenching.

"Commander," the communications officer called, turning to face her, "I just received a report of a disturbance in the deck-five mess."

"What kind of disturbance?" Charvon inquired, growing impatient. Drifting through space all alone with no means of propulsion or self-defense was vexing in the best of times. Drifting through space all alone with no means of propulsion or self-defense halfway across the Federation neutral zone after initiating combat with one of Starfleet's newest cruisers, and losing, lifted that vexation to a whole new level.

"A fight among members of the crew," the comm. officer replied.

Charvon sighed, though the news didn't take her completely by surprise. She had just

seized command very firmly and very suddenly by means that, on the surface, looked very much like mutiny. Dropping a stone that large into the lake had been bound to create ripples. "Give me intraship," she demanded.

"You are on, Commander," the officer prompted her a moment later.

"Attention, officers and crew of the *Talon*," she began. "This is your commander. I am aware that under *former* Commander Tal's grossly incompetent leadership this vessel has just suffered a shameful defeat in combat at the hands of a Federation starship, and that that battle resulted in the complete destruction of two of our sister ships with all hands lost. We have lost hundreds of our brothers- and sisters-in-arms this day. I understand that tensions are high among you, but you are all soldiers of the Rihannsu Star Empire. I will not tolerate any breakdowns in discipline. Those involved in the altercation that just occurred in the deck-five officers' mess are ordered to report immediately to the brig. Security squad to deck-five, officers' mess. See that those who are able comply, and drag to the brig anyone involved who is unable to walk there under their own power. All decks, security alert. Further disturbances are to be put down by any means necessary. That is all."

"You heard the former commander's orders," Tal told his troops after Charvon had finished delivering her speech to the crew. "There is a security squad on the way here. Let us not be here when they arrive." He led his eight remaining troops forward, around the lift housing toward the door that opened into the next corridor. "Cetos, this is Tal."

Lieutenant Cetos and his team were gathered tightly together, hiding in the shadows of the port-forward gangway on deck-E4 from a roving security patrol when Tal's call came through. Not wanting to alert the patrol to their position, Cetos replied as quietly as possible by turning away and simply whispering his name. "Cetos."

"*We encountered resistance in the deck-five officers' mess,*" the commander told him. "*Charvon has put security on alert and is sending a team here, so we are moving to deck-four as quickly as we can. Watch for increased security activity.*"

"We heard Charvon's speech as well, Commander," Cetos advised him as though that should have been obvious as the patrol moved off, "and we are already seeing signs of the increase in security. We are halted at the gangway on deck E-four forward."

"*You must move on as quickly as possible, Lieutenant. There can be no delay if we are to succeed. And we must succeed.*"

"Understood, Commander." Cetos drew a deep breath and then led his troops forward into the narrow corridor that led past the other port gangway and then intersected the deck's main cross-corridor. As soon as they reached that intersection, he and his ad-hoc second in charge leaned out and looked up and down that corridor in both directions. Neither of them saw anyone, so Cetos glanced back over his shoulder at the next closest of his troops and said, "Go." That troop raised his rifle to the ready, crouched down a little to make himself a smaller target, and then crossed toward the central corridor.

A blue-sashed soldier stepped out through a door barely a moment after he passed it and shot that troop in the back. The rest of Cetos' troops then poured into the corridor from their hiding places and returned fire, dropping that soldier, even as Cetos shouted at them to

stop. “We were ordered to maintain stealth!” he tried to remind them. But it was too late. The damage was done. They had given themselves away.

More soldiers emerged through several different doors to both port and starboard and poured into the corridors, and a full-on firefight commenced. Both sides took casualties as Cetos and his troops tried to work their way aft toward their objective—impulse engineering. At some point during the skirmish, one of Cetos’ troops tossed a frag grenade into one of the junior officers’ billets. Seeing this, a second troop chose a different billets to maximize the potential casualties and did the same, but despite their efforts, the enemy’s numbers proved to be too much to overcome. By the time the skirmish finally ended, Lieutenant Cetos and all of his troops had fallen.

One of the junior officers who had helped to defeat them walked over to the nearest communications panel, slapped his hand down over the ‘call’ button, and shouted, “Bridge, come in! This is a security emergency! Bridge!”

“Commander!” the communications officer shouted as he whirled to face her with shock evident in his expression. “There has been a firefight on deck E-four!”

“Report!” Charvon commanded him.

“Heavy disruptor fire and two explosions. Possible fragmentary grenades. Moderate damage to ceilings and bulkheads in the area. Numerous casualties. Legate Varek reports ten to twelve of our own officers and crew armed with disruptor rifles and grenades appear to have been moving toward impulse engineering. They have been stopped.”

Charvon slapped the ‘call’ button at her station. “Brig! This is the commander!”

“Yes, Commander?” the answer came almost immediately.

“Has Commander Tal been delivered and confined?”

“No, Commander. Not yet.”

Charvon looked back over at the communications officer. “Give me intraship!”

“Already open, Commander,” the man replied.

“Tal!” she called over the intercom. He might have been one of the casualties on deck E4, of course, but somehow she did not think so. “Tal, I know what you are attempting to do! I know that you are trying to take back the ship! I know that you were behind the disturbance in the junior officers’ mess.” Merely a guess on her part, but in her estimation a pretty safe bet. “Your assault team moving toward impulse engineering has been stopped. They failed, Tal. They will never reach their objective.”

“*I am guessing that you are on your way to the bridge with a second team right now,*” she continued as Tal stopped at the top of the forward gangway on deck-4, fearing that she knew too much to be bluffing.

“Lieutenant Cetos, come in,” he called over the link, his heart pounding harder with every passing moment that the lieutenant didn’t reply. “Cetos!”

“*You should know that I have ordered a full security alert,*” Charvon went on.

“Cetos, do you hear me?” he called once more as, despite all of his conditioning and training, panic began to set in.

“*You and your fellow mutineers will never make it to the bridge, Tal.*”

Tal looked back at his troops and pointed to the four farthest away from him. "You four are team-two," he told them. "You move to port. The rest of you are with me. We are team-one and will move to starboard."

"Surrender now, Tal, and I will be merciful. I might even forego executions."

"Move out!" Tal stepped out to his left and watched while the four members of team-two hurried off toward the port transporter room, then waved the four other members of his own team on past him toward the starboard transporter room.

"If you do not surrender, I promise you that you and your cohorts will regret it."

As team-two reached the port transporter room door and that door slid open in front of them, all four of them were cut down by small arms fire before they even had a chance to shoot back, courtesy of several security troops who had been waiting for them inside, their rifles trained on the door.

Hearing the sudden fire and his peoples' screams behind him and guessing what had happened, Tal grabbed a low-yield photon grenade from its pouch on his vest and dashed ahead to catch up to his own team as they drew closer to the starboard transporter room door. "Wait!" he shouted ahead to stop them. "Stop!" Taking the bridge with only four other troops was going to be hard enough. Taking it alone would be impossible.

He caught up to them and ordered them to, "Trip the door and scatter!" He pressed the button to arm the grenade and then started falling backwards, intentionally, as the door began to open and all four of his remaining troops jumped to one side or the other and dropped to the deck, making themselves as small as possible. He pitched the grenade into the transporter room as the door opened to reveal a second security team waiting inside with their rifles up and ready. They got off three or four quick shots, all of which missed their targets, but then the grenade exploded, killing them instantly, along with anyone else who might have been in there with them. Tal even felt some of the effect himself, though not enough to do him any harm. Then he rose quickly to his knees, spun around, and tossed a second grenade back the way he had come at the security troops who had mowed down team-two just as they came around the bend in pursuit. They tried to stop, tried to escape, but the grenade exploded not two seconds later, disintegrating them all.

Tal and his team leapt back to their feet and ran into the starboard transporter room, and to their surprise the transporter operator, who had apparently been hiding down behind the controls console and had somehow escaped the worst of the blast, stepped out into the open, aiming a sidearm at them. "Stop there!" he ordered, bleeding from his nose and ears as smoke rose from what remained of his charred uniform, but one of Tal's men shot him where he stood, hitting him square in the chest and dropping him dead.

Tal led the way past the controls console to the gangway in the back corner and raised his weapon ahead of him as he ascended. He emerged in the starboard officers' lounge, where two more waiting security troops fired on him, hitting Sub-Lieutenant Brel in the head and chest when he dashed forward to act as a shield for his commander. Tal and the next troop in line fired back at them and dropped them both. Tal and his last three troops then dashed through the lounge and raced into the corridor, right into the line of fire of four more security troops who lay in wait ahead of them. They never had a chance. The security troops cut them down like targets on a range before they could even bring their weapons to bear.

The ranking security officer stepped over to a comm-panel on the wall and thumbed

the button. "Security to Commander," he called calmly.

"This is the commander," Charvon replied immediately. *"Report."*

"Deck three, corridor outside starboard transporter room. We have stopped what we believe to be the last of the mutineers, Commander. Four subjects, all stunned."

"Is Tal among them?"

The other three security troops had knelt to check on the mutineers' condition. One of them looked up and nodded to him. "Affirmative, Commander," the officer replied. "We have Tal in custody."

"Well done," she told him, her satisfaction clearly evident in her tone. *"Confine the other three to the brig. Put Tal in an interrogation chamber. I will be there shortly."*

"Yes, Commander."

Less than an hour later, Tal was strapped tightly into an interrogation chair in the brig with pain inducers fastened to his various extremities and, thanks to an unintentional courtesy on the part of their former allies the Klingons, a prototype mind-sifter ready to bore into the depths of his mind. Charvon had decided to conduct the interrogation herself and had, in fact, ordered the sifter activated and set to medium-low—not enough to cause him any harm, but sufficient to cause him additional discomfort. A guard operated the chair's various features from a controls console across the room while two more guards stood post, one on each side of the chair, and struck Tal however and wherever and whenever she told them to. He had started perspiring early and had been bleeding heavily from his nose and mouth almost since the beatings began. The vital signs monitor showed that he had long since begun to wear down physically, almost losing consciousness several times, but despite it all he continued to stare straight ahead at nothing, unfocused, and refuse to answer questions.

At Charvon's order, the guard at the controls looked over his current readings, then looked up at her and told her, "I do not understand it, Commander. He should have cracked by now. No one has ever been able to resist these levels for this long."

"He has clearly undergone special conditioning somewhere...been specially trained by someone," she tentatively concluded. She leaned in close, but his gaze remained steadfast and constant. "Is that not right, Tal?" she asked him quietly. "You have been conditioned to resist interrogation. Where did you receive this conditioning? Who provided it?" She leaned closer and whispered into his bleeding ear. "If you do not start talking, I will order a significantly higher level of...motivation. I do not honestly know if anyone has ever survived a higher level. So tell me, why do you want this ship back so badly that you would not surrender, even after you lost more than three quarters of your mutinous comrades?" She backed off a little and raised her voice, filling it with anger. "What did you have planned that you could so indiscriminately incapacitate so many of your shipmates and still hope to achieve your goal?" She leaned in closer and lowered her voice again. "What about it, Tal? Are you ready to talk, or are you going to force me to turn you into a vegetable to get the answers I require?"

Without looking at her...without even blinking as far as she saw...Tal suddenly threw his head hard to the side and struck Charvon directly on her nose, likely breaking it and eliciting a pained yelp as it began to bleed.

Charvon stepped away, her eyes tearing, blood flowing from between her fingers and

over the back of the hand she was holding to her nose. "Increase power two levels!" she shouted angrily through the pain.

"Commander, that will likely kill him!" the guard at the controls warned her. "Even *one* level higher *might* cause him permanent brain damage!"

She stared at him as one of the other guards handed her a handkerchief, giving her logic a chance to catch up to her emotion. "How sure of that are you?" she then asked him as she put the handkerchief to good use.

"Quite sure, Commander," he replied firmly. "It is the level at which the Klingons indicated the device begins to function as a mind-*ripper* instead of just a mind-*sifter*."

"So if we *do* increase the power level, even by one, we might *never* get him to talk," she tentatively concluded. "Is that what you are telling me?"

"No, Commander," he replied. "I am telling you that if we increase the power level, he will no longer be *able* to talk, and that it will likely kill him."

She glared at Tal as she folded the handkerchief and held it under her nose. "*We must* get him to talk," she proclaimed. "We must discover what his intentions were...beyond just taking back command of this vessel."

"But how, Commander? If we continue as we are..."

She raised her free hand to silence him. "No. I need his mind to function. Disconnect the sifter. I have another idea."

CHAPTER 9

“Thirty seconds to Federation border, Captain,” Lieutenant Shran reported.

MacLeod looked at the back of the helmsman’s head and watched her antennae dance their sinuous dance as he asked rhetorically, “You mean we’re actually going to make it out of the neutral zone without any more trouble?” and then concluded, “I guess miracles *do* still happen sometimes.”

“It’s not *that* miraculous, Captain,” Commander Kim offered from where she was standing beside the weapons station. She’d been wandering back and forth around the outer ring, observing operations, since shortly after they left the *Talon* behind. “Considering the resources the Romulans must have had to commit to the attacks, they may not have had enough ships available to maintain their normal number of illegal incursions into the zone.”

MacLeod looked back at her with a slight grin on his face as she descended the steps and approached him. “I was being facetious, Commander,” he told her.

“I understand that, sir,” she replied as she stopped beside his chair and smiled back at him. “I was just reminding you of the current tactical situation. A commanding officer should never let his mind wander too far unchecked.”

“The current tactical situation, Commander,” he threw back, “is that Romulan forces posed as Klingon forces and attacked the Federation, and we’re in the Romulan neutral zone without any backup after having battled three of their ships, destroying one and crippling the other two. One would think that they would have flooded the neutral zone with ships by now as a precaution against potential retaliation, thus adding literal credence to my prior facetious remark.”

“As your first officer, it’s my job to offer alternative points of view,” she countered.

“All work and no play, Commander?” he inquired, only half in fun.

“Only on the bridge, sir,” she replied. Then she smiled warmly at him and continued, “When I’m off duty I like to...”

“Captain?” Lieutenant Commander Lothar called out from the engineering station.

Kim fell silent and she and MacLeod both looked over at the husky half-Andorian, who was busy staring at the station’s status monitoring screens. “Mister Lothar?” MacLeod prompted him when he didn’t continue.

Lothar turned and looked back over his beefy shoulder and told his captain, “I prefer Ta’lon, sir.”

“I told you, sir,” Kim mumbled under breath so that no one but MacLeod would hear. Then, when MacLeod stared sidelong at her and before he could offer a reply, she asked the engineer, “Do you have something to report or not, Mister Ta’lon?” her tone making it very clear that it wasn’t the right time to be advising the ship’s captain of personal preferences.

“Yes, I do, Commander,” he replied, glaring at her, his own tone commensurate with hers, though significantly deeper and a bit more forceful. Then he shifted his fiery gaze to the captain and reported, “Commander Baumann and I have restored minimal warp capability, sir. We can give you up to warp two point two for brief periods, but I recommend you don’t push her past warp two flat unless the situation warrants.”

“Thank you, Mister Ta’lon,” MacLeod replied, adjusting his response to align with

the A-C-E's personal preference while he eyeballed his first officer. Then he looked right at her and said, "Well, Commander, it would seem that miracles and ironic coincidences both still happen."

"Sir?" she asked.

"Warp drive restored just as we approach Federation space," he explained.

"Oh," she acknowledged neutrally.

"Mister Carlucci, set course for Earth," he ordered. "Miss Shran, ahead warp two."

"*Mister* Shran," Kim corrected him.

"What?" MacLeod asked her, looking at her again.

"The appropriate address is *Mister* Shran, not *Miss* Shran," she explained.

"That's one you're going to have to get used to, *Miss* Kim," he told her as the stars on the main viewscreen suddenly stretched beyond its borders and then fell into perpetual slow motion, "because I've never gotten used to the idea of addressing young women, or *older* women for that matter, as 'mister.' "

"But, Captain, Starfleet tradition and protocol both specify..."

"Commander," he said firmly and slightly more boisterously, looking her dead in the eye and reminding her which of the two of them outranked the other.

"'Miss' it is, sir," she acquiesced, looking away.

MacLeod drew a deep breath and exhaled slowly and quietly. He hadn't meant to bite her head off, and certainly hadn't wanted to embarrass her in front of the crew. He was going to have to be careful not to do that again. He lowered his voice almost to a whisper and said, "I'm sorry, Commander." She looked back at him, her expression softening...a little. "I didn't mean to..."

"Captain MacLeod?" the communications officer called, sounding bewildered.

MacLeod looked over at him to find he was still working his board. "Lieutenant?"

"We're receiving a hail from the commander of the *Talon*, sir." He tapped a couple of more buttons, then turned and met the captain's gaze. "She's requesting that we return to our previous coordinates and rendezvous with them immediately. Something about needing your assistance right away."

"All stop, Miss Shran," MacLeod ordered. "Hold relative position."

"Answering all stop, sir," the helmsman acknowledged.

"On screen, Lieutenant."

"The signal's pretty weak, sir," the communications officer told him. "Probably won't be very clear."

"Do what you can to boost it and bring it in."

"Aye, sir. On screen."

The view of deep space waivered just as the ship dropped back into normal space, and Commander Charvon's image appeared flickering and marred with static through substantial video interference. "*Captain MacLeod*," she began, her voice scratchy and tinny. "*I apologize for the poor signal, but our long-range communications are still intermittent at best.*"

"I can hear you, Commander?" he told her. "What can I do for you?"

"*I was wondering if you might have a Vulcan who is adept in mind-meld techniques assigned to your crew. Your chief medical officer perhaps?*"

An odd question. "Last I knew, Starfleet wasn't in the habit of informing Romulan military commanders of who serves on its starships," he told her. "Why do you ask?"

She snickered, grinned slightly, and her gaze became distant for a brief moment. Then she explained, "*A little while ago, Tal led a mutiny against me. He failed. My troops defeated the mutineers quickly, but I have reason to believe that his motives go far beyond the retaking of this vessel or soothing whatever resentment he might feel toward me for relieving him of command.*"

"That reason being?" MacLeod asked her as the image began to clear up a little bit.

"*I do not know how long we can hold this channel open, Captain,*" she advised him. "*Suffice to say, finding out the truth behind Tal's motivations might very well be as important to your Federation as I believe it is to my star empire. Unfortunately, I have been unable to make him talk. Physical duress, truth drugs...nothing seems to work.*"

"I'll get back to you, Commander," MacLeod told her. "*Endeavour out.*"

Her image faded, replaced once more by that of the vastness of deep space directly ahead of the ship. MacLeod looked at Kim and commented, "Well, there's a request you don't hear every day."

"Did I hear her right?" Kim asked him. "She wants one of our Vulcan crewmembers to *mind-rape* her prisoner?"

"She said it might be as important to the Federation as it is to her empire," he replied, half answering his first officer's question and half just pondering aloud. Then he asked her, "What do you think about that, Commander?"

"I think it's a lie intended to make you believe we have a stake in her problem and more likely to choose to go to her aid," Kim answered plainly. A tendency to mince words and hold back her true feelings was obviously not a part of her character. Then she asked...or more like suggested, "What if they've repaired their weapons and are hoping to lure us back for another crack at us?"

MacLeod considered that for a few moments, then replied, shaking his head, "No, that doesn't feel right. She did seize command from Tal."

"So she claimed," Kim interjected. "All of that could have been a ruse."

MacLeod looked his first officer in the eye. She made a good point, one that he could not simply dismiss out of hand, but the Romulan woman's words carried with them a ring of truth and he couldn't simply dismiss that, either. He thought it over for another few moments, then stood up, said, "Commander Kim, you're with me," and then headed for the starboard turbolift. Kim joined him with no further argument, and as the lift doors opened ahead of them, MacLeod turned slightly and looked back over his shoulder at Lothar, who was still hard at work at the engineering console. "You're in command, Mister Ta'lon."

The ACE looked back at him with wide-eyed surprise on his face. "Sir?"

"Is that a problem, Commander?" MacLeod asked him.

"No, sir," the man replied. "It's just that Commander Baumann is next in line."

"Commander Baumann is in Engineering at the moment, Mister Ta'Lon," the captain pointed out. "You are on the bridge. You're in command."

His antennae seemed to fold back a little. "Yes, sir."

Kim grasped MacLeod's arm when he took another step toward the lift. "We're still in the neutral zone, sir," she reminded him. "Recommend we cross to *our* side of the border."

MacLeod considered that for a quick moment and decided it was a good idea. “Miss Shran,” he called out. “Move us back into Federation space and hold station there.”

“Aye, sir.”

MacLeod and Kim finally stepped into the lift, and when the doors closed MacLeod told the computer, “Deck five, port.”

“We’re not actually going back there, are we?” Kim asked as the lift moved laterally toward the central tube.

“I’m considering it,” MacLeod told her.

The lift slowed and then started to descend. “Captain, even if what Charvon said is the absolute truth, there’s no way Tal is going to open himself up to a mind-meld willingly. If a meld *is* performed, the Vulcan who performs it is going to have to *force* it.”

“Mind-rape him, as you so poetically put it,” MacLeod remarked.

“Yes,” she confirmed as the lift slowed to a near stop, “and the very idea of doing that to someone is repulsive to Vulcans.” The lift started moving laterally again. “Even if there *is* a Vulcan in this crew trained in the necessary disciplines, you *can’t* order him or her to...”

“I have no intention of making it an order,” MacLeod assured her. “I’ll explain the situation, then leave it up to the Vulcan to decide whether or not to go through with it.”

The doors opened onto the main corridor on deck-5 port. A crewman walked by as the two of them stepped out of the lift, turned to their right, and started walking up the corridor in the other direction. “Good luck finding a Vulcan who’ll do it, sir,” Kim said.

“Let’s hold this discussion until we’re in my office, Commander,” he directed as a pair of young crewman stepped out into the corridor a few yards ahead of them. “Too many ears out here, and if we *do* find a volunteer, he or she won’t want anyone to know about it.”

Kim fell silent as requested—not that it had actually been a *request*. They reached his quarters shortly thereafter and MacLeod led her inside, then gestured toward the chair behind his desk. “Have a seat, Commander.”

“There are eleven Vulcans in our crew,” she informed him as she walked around his desk. “Eight men and three women.”

“Call up their files,” he told her.

“Doctor Varan is the highest ranking among them,” she continued as she sat down, “but as a doctor...” She fell silent when she saw that MacLeod’s computer had a keyboard-like control panel sitting on the desk in front of the monitor. “A keyboard?”

“I prefer to use the computer without having to talk to it sometimes,” he explained to her. “I find I have an easier time concentrating that way.”

She accepted his explanation with a shrug of her shoulders and then started entering commands into the keyboard—at least she knew how to use it—while the captain continued talking to her. “I don’t care about rank or position in this case, Commander. I want you to look at all eleven of them. We’ll worry about who to rule out afterwards.”

“Yes, sir.”

MacLeod walked over to the food dispenser in the wall while Kim called up the first file and started reading. “Coffee?” he asked her as he started punching in the order.

“No thank you, sir,” she replied.

As soon as the dispenser door opened, MacLeod took out his steaming mug of coffee and set it down near the edge of his desk. Then he grabbed the extra chair sitting against the

wall and dragged it over beside his desk and sat down. “You knew we have eleven Vulcan crewmembers without having to check first, Miss Kim,” he observed, seeing her lips purse in that instant before she disguised her reaction to the way he had addressed her. “Are you that familiar with the entire crew complement already?”

Kim looked up at him as though he’d just challenged her to a fight. “Yes, sir, I am,” she replied matter-of-factly. “I makes it my business to know *everything* about the crews who serve under me...*and* the vessels I serve aboard.”

“Good,” he said, and she looked back at the monitor. “I’ve always done that as well. Learned it from Jim Kirk.”

She looked MacLeod right in the eye again. “James T. Kirk?” she asked him. “Of the *Enterprise*?”

“Yeah,” he answered as he picked up his coffee. “You know him?”

She shifted her gaze back to the monitor once more. “Heard of him. But then, who in Starfleet hasn’t?”

“Good point,” he acknowledged. Then he explained, “Kirk and I attended Starfleet Academy together, though I can’t say we were friends back then. I was pretty indifferent toward him, actually. We became friends later, when I served as a helmsman and navigator, and eventually as first officer under him on the *Aeolus*. Took over as that ship’s captain when he took command of the *Enterprise*.”

“And now you’re here, commanding Starfleet’s newest heavy cruiser,” Kim observed. “Kirk must have taught you well.”

“He did indeed do that,” MacLeod confirmed with emphasis. “He’s helped mold a lot of good officers in his day, and a number of them have gone on to do well for themselves after serving under him. I guess Starfleet Command is finally seeing the value in that.”

She looked up at him. “All right, that’s all of them.”

“You reviewed all eleven personnel records already?” he asked her. Then, when she nodded affirmatively in response, he asked, “What did you find out?”

“That you and I have our work cut out for us,” she replied. “*All eleven* of our Vulcan crewmembers are trained in the Vulcans’ various mental disciplines.”

MacLeod exhaled a long, deep breath that he hadn’t even realized he’d drawn. Then he said, “All right. We’ll start the interviews with the highest ranking officers to eliminate the intimidation factor as much as possible.”

“To eliminate the what?” Kim asked him.

“The intimidation factor—the feeling that he or she *has to* do the meld because I’m asking them to, even though I am only *asking* and not ordering. I don’t want that to be a factor in their decision.”

“I see. Well, as I said, the highest ranking is Doctor Varan.”

“Then we’ll start with Doctor Varan.” He stood up, leaned over the desk toward Kim, drawing her eyes up to his—in that one brief moment, he thought he read something in them and he wondered if maybe he’d only imagined it—and then tapped the ‘call’ button on his comm-panel. “Captain to Sickbay. Doctor Varan?”

“*This is Doctor Varan*,” the Vulcan answered evenly.

MacLeod hesitated for a second—perhaps he wasn’t feeling as sure about his decision as he’d thought—then said, “Unless you’re busy, Doctor, I’d like to see you in my office.”

“*Very well, Captain. I am on my way.*” MacLeod closed the channel and then pointed over toward his small oval table.

“I’m telling you, sir,” Kim said as she stood up to join him there, “as an M-D, Varan is obligated not to do it. He’s going to decline.”

“If he declines, then we’ll move on to the next candidate,” MacLeod told her as they sat down behind the table, facing the door, Kim on MacLeod’s right.

A few minutes later the door buzzer sounded. “Come in, Doctor,” MacLeod said.

The door slid open and Doctor Varan walked in wearing his short-sleeved surgical tunic, then stopped a couple of paces inside as the door slid closed behind him. “Lieutenant Commander Varan reporting as requested, Captain,” he said.

“Have a seat, Doctor,” MacLeod told him, gesturing toward the chair across the table from him and Kim. Varan took the seat, sat ramrod straight, and then looked MacLeod in the eye and waited. “According to Commander Charvon, Tal led an attempted mutiny aboard the Romulan flagship,” MacLeod began, knowing that with Vulcans it was best just to jump in with both feet. “That mutiny was put down and Charvon is holding Tal in custody, but she hasn’t been able to...persuade him to talk. She is asking for our assistance.”

“May I assume, Captain, that you are taking Commander Charvon at her word?” the doctor inquired.

“Yes, I am,” MacLeod confirmed. “At least for now. That could change, of course, if evidence to the contrary comes to light between now and when we rendezvous with her vessel...*if* we rendezvous with her vessel.”

“And are you asking me if I have some pharmaceutical product that might compel Tal to talk?” he further inquired.

MacLeod shook his head and told him, “According to the Charvon, she’s already tried truth-drugs and what she refers to as *physical duress*. Both have proven ineffective.”

“Physical duress,” Varan repeated, raising an eyebrow. “You refer to torture, sir.” It was a statement, not a question.

“I don’t know what else it could mean,” MacLeod admitted. “So, yes, Doctor, to the best of my knowledge I am referring to torture. At any rate, she’s requesting a very different kind of assistance from us.”

Varan raised the eyebrow once more. “A mind-meld,” he concluded correctly. “Under duress, if necessary. Forced upon the subject against his will.”

“Yes,” MacLeod confirmed.

“Not so very different as you might believe, Captain,” the Vulcan advised him.

“We understand the ethical ramifications of such a procedure, Doctor,” Kim quickly interjected, “and that your oath as a physician will likely force you to decline, but we wanted to give you the opportunity to make that decision for yourself.”

“I know what it means to a Vulcan to even *consider* forcing a mind-meld on someone, Doctor,” MacLeod added, although after he said it, it sounded to his ears like little more than repeating what Kim had already said with different words.

“No, Captain, you do not,” Varan told him. “You have no idea what it means.”

“I believe I have *some* idea of what it means,” MacLeod argued. “Enough, at any rate, that I am not *ordering* you to do it. I’m only requesting. I want you to be very clear on that point, Doctor. It’s your call. Your choice.”

“I am a medical doctor, Captain. As such, I am rarely kept up to date on Starfleet’s current strategic and tactical situations. However, I believe I would be correct were I to state that an attempted mutiny of Romulan soldiers aboard a Romulan vessel is hardly of concern to Starfleet or the Federation,” Varan surmised. “How important can it really be that we—*Starfleet*—learn what secrets this mutineer might be holding?”

“We don’t know,” Kim admitted.

MacLeod glanced briefly over at Kim, then looked back at the doctor and said, “The Romulan commander tells me that *she* believes revealing those secrets might be as important to the Federation as it is to the empire. That said, I’m not in the habit of trusting the word of Romulan military officers.”

“That is wise,” Varan observed evenly.

“But they *did* just carry out a series of major attacks against us,” MacLeod continued. “We can’t simply ignore this opportunity to access potentially vital intelligence out of hand. If the commander’s alleged suspicions are real, and *if* they’re justified, we could be talking about a matter of Federation security.”

“In addition to myself, ten other Vulcan crewmembers are currently serving aboard this vessel. If I decline, the assignment will fall to one of them, will it not?”

“Only if one of them volunteers,” MacLeod reiterated. “I absolutely will not *order* anyone to do this.”

“And if no one volunteers,” Varan continued, “we *may* miss an opportunity to prevent the deaths of potentially thousands of Federation citizens.”

“Possibly,” MacLeod confirmed.

“Then I will do it.”

“You will?” Kim asked him, clearly surprised.

Varan turned his eyes to her and met her wide-eyed gaze. “To expect or even *allow* a fellow Vulcan to do something that I myself refuse to do would not be logical or ethical. And to risk allowing thousands of innocent beings to die when it might be within my power to prevent those deaths would be both illogical and irresponsible.”

“Fair enough,” she responded with a tilt of her head.

“I do have one request, however, Captain,” Varan said, turning his stoic gaze back to MacLeod.

“Anything, Doctor.”

“When I have completed this task, I do not ever want to speak of it or hear others speak of it again.”

“That’s a given, Doctor,” MacLeod assure him. “I will make no mention of it in the ship’s log or mission report, and no one outside this room will ever be told about it. This all stays between the three of us. You have my word on that, Doctor.”

Varan stood up. “Then if you will excuse me, Captain, I must prepare myself.”

“Of course. You’re dismissed, Doctor.”

As Varan turned his back and exited, Kim looked at MacLeod as he reached toward the comm. panel on the table and remarked, “Just when I thought I understood Vulcans.”

“I don’t even try to understand Vulcans,” the captain remarked in response. Then he pressed a button on the panel and said, “Captain to bridge.”

“*Bridge. Go ahead, sir,*” the communications officer replied.

“Hail the Romulan flagship,” he ordered as he stood up from the table. “Inform the commander we’re on our way back and will rendezvous with her vessel shortly. Miss Shran, ahead warp one.”

Kim stood up with him and he led the way out of his quarters.

Minutes later, MacLeod and Kim returned to the bridge.

“Romulan warbird dead ahead, sir,” Shran reported as Lothar surrendered the center seat to the captain. “Shall I raise the shields?”

“Weapons, Captain?” the weapons officer then asked.

MacLeod turned around to face the science officer, whom he’d noticed was already peering into his scope, scanning the enemy vessel. “Mister Daystrom?”

“No apparent change in status, Captain,” the science officer reported. “Their weapons remain cold and their shields are still down.”

MacLeod thumbed a button on the arm of his chair as he sat down and faced forward. “Captain to security.”

“Lieutenant Commander Dawkins here, sir.”

“Go to security alert level beta, Commander, *quietly*.”

“Right away, sir.”

“Hail the Romulan vessel, Lieutenant.”

“Channel open, sir,” the communications officer advised him.

“On screen.” Once again, the image of deep space on the main viewscreen waivered as Commander Charvon’s image replaced it. “Commander,” MacLeod began without waiting for her to speak first. “I’m prepared to grant your request for assistance,” MacLeod told her, “but I must ask that you keep the details of that request between us.”

“I can do that, Captain. We are prepared to receive you in our transporter room as soon as you are ready.”

“We’ll just be a few minutes. You’ll forgive me if I have a two-man security team accompanying us?”

“Under the circumstances, Captain, I will allow that. But I ask that they not be armed with lethal weapons. See you in a few of your minutes.”

Space returned to the screen. “The bridge is yours, Commander,” MacLeod told Kim as he stood up. “Everyone here heard enough of the details of Commander Charvon’s request for help to be able to figure out what we’re about to do. While I’m gone, I want you to swear them all to silence, and make sure they know they’ll be held to their oaths. We made Doctor Varan a promise and I intend to keep it.”

“Yes, sir,” she replied as he turned and headed for the starboard rear steps. “And be careful over there.”

MacLeod glanced back at her as he stopped beside the communications officer on his way to the lift—he thought he saw that look in her eye again. He saw the comm. officer look up at him out of the corner of his eye, so pulled his gaze off of his first officer, set his mind back to the task at hand, and looked down at the young man. “Have Doctor Varan and a two-man security team meet me in transporter room one,” he told him quietly, “armed with type-one phasers only, locked on stun.”

“Aye, sir.”

MacLeod glanced forward at Commander Kim once more as she took his place in the center seat, then turned his back on her and left the bridge.

* * * * *

Captain MacLeod, Doctor Varan, and two of *Endeavour*’s security officers beamed into one of the *Talon*’s transporter rooms—they had no way of knowing which one—to find Commander Charvon and two of her helmeted, blue-sashed officers armed with disruptor rifles, security officers most likely, standing over at one of the side walls, the officers holding Tal up by his arms between them, his hands hidden behind his back, likely in restraints. The former commander looked totally drained, MacLeod noted, exhausted and haggard. Whatever interrogation methods they had used on him, they had obviously taken a toll.

Charvon approached the raised platform as soon as MacLeod and his party started to move. “Your security officers stay on the platform, Captain,” she insisted. “None of you will be moving beyond this room.”

MacLeod looked at them both and told them, “Stay put, gentlemen.”

“Thank you,” she offered.

“We’re here to render the assistance you requested, Commander,” he told her, “not to cause you any trouble.” He looked past her to Tal as she turned and he and Varan followed her over to him. “Commander Tal,” he greeted the man politely.

“Just ‘Tal’ for now, Captain,” the former commander informed him. Then he looked at Varan and said, “I know what you are about to do to me, Vulcan, but I do not know what you or your Federation expect to achieve by doing it.”

“Helping to restore a lasting peace between our peoples would be a nice beginning,” MacLeod replied.

“Shall we begin?” Charvon suggested impatiently.

MacLeod nodded to Varan. The doctor then stepped closer to the former commander. “Tal, I am Lieutenant Commander Varan of Vulcan, chief medical officer of the Federation starship *U.S.S. Endeavour*. I have mastered a number of Vulcan mental disciplines, including the melding of minds. I will be performing a meld with you in a few moments. It would be best if you did not attempt to resist. I do not wish to damage you.”

“Just do what you came here to do, Vulcan, if you can,” Tal replied spitefully. “You will get nothing from me.”

“As you wish.” Varan moved in even closer to Tal and placed one hand on the side of his face, spreading his fingers and placing them just so. Then he stared deeply into the Romulan’s defiant eyes. “My mind to your mind,” he quietly began. “Your thoughts to my thoughts.” Tal’s eyes grew wider and he began to breathe more rapidly and grit his teeth. “Our minds are merging.” Tal broke into a sweat and actually began foaming at the mouth, clearly trying to resist. “Our minds are one.” Varan paused for a moment, then said, “I... am...”

“Tal,” he and Tal said together. “I...am...Tal. I...c... command a p...p... powerful... a powerful un... underground force.” Tal was obviously resisting with every ounce of strength

he had left, but so far that had proven not to be enough. Despite his efforts, he continued to speak in concert with Varan. "A force... A force named... named for... me." He began to quiver with his efforts. "The... the Tal... the Tal-Shiar."

Charvon snickered. "Of all the egotistical..."

"The attacks," Varan and Tal continued in unison, "on Vulcan... Andoria... Tellar Prime... Babel. Our doing. All... all our doing. The... the forthcoming attack... on Earth... also our doing."

"What are the ultimate goals of this so-called Tal-Shiar?" Charvon inquired.

"Goals," they replied. "To defeat... the Federation. Heroes... of the empire. Power. Titles. Seize control...from the Senate. Kill...the Praetor. Rule...the empire."

"Treason," Charvon declared. "You will never succeed in achieving those goals," she told her former sub-commander. "You will all be executed."

"Spies... Agents... Operatives."

"Where?" she asked.

"F...Federation."

"What?" MacLeod asked, taken aback. Charvon had been telling the truth all along. This *did* concern the Federation. "Where?" he asked. "Who?"

Sweat poured down over Tal's face as he seemed to double his efforts to resist. "Am... Am... Am...bassador S...Sarek."

One of the Federation's most respected and esteemed diplomats! "How?" MacLeod demanded. "When?"

"Attacked... diplomatic... shuttle."

"You attacked the ambassador's shuttle?" MacLeod asked him. But then, before the melded minds could articulate a response, he also asked, "Where's the ambassador now?"

"Replaced... replaced..."

"*Where?*" MacLeod practically shouted.

"*Enterprise*... Vessel...following."

"There's a vessel following the *Enterprise*?" MacLeod asked to be sure he understood correctly what Tal was telling them all through the meld. "Type of vessel! Armaments!"

"Klingon...bird-of...prey. Orders. Attack...conference. Kill...dignitaries."

"Where is Ambassador Sarek now?" the captain inquired. Then, when neither Tal nor Varan answered him, he shouted, "*Where is he? Where's the ambassador?*"

"Am...Ambassador... Sarek... this vessel."

MacLeod suddenly noticed a trickle of blood flowing from Tal's left nostril. "That's enough, Doctor," he said immediately. "Break the link."

"More...secrets," Varan replied, seemingly independently.

"They'll have to wait, Doctor. Break the link, now," MacLeod ordered.

"I must know *all* of his secrets, Captain!" Charvon insisted, squaring off against him.

MacLeod turned to her as well, and her guards instantly raised their rifles, though they obediently lowered them again when she gestured toward them to do so. "I have to go *now*, Commander!" he argued. "I have to chase down the *Enterprise* and..."

"Captain!" she interrupted. "I *need* your doctor to..."

"No, Commander, you do not," Varan told her as he dropped his hand to his side, his voice calm yet still cutting her off. "You will find your lead mutineer much more talkative

from this point forward. Much more compliant as well.”

“You did something to him?” she asked him.

“Doctor?” MacLeod interjected before he could answer. And when Varan looked at him, he asked, “*Did* you do something to him?”

“Nothing so drastic as forcing a mind-meld, I assure you, Captain,” the doctor replied. “I simply helped him to recognize the error of his ways.”

“Commander,” MacLeod said, looking back at her, “I insist you release Ambassador Sarek and any other Federation prisoners who might be aboard your ship to my custody immediately.”

“I do not suppose Tal told you where your ambassador is being held, Doctor?” she inquired, ignoring the captain’s demand for the moment.

“We hold only the ambassador,” Tal volunteered. “I will show you, Commander, if that is what you want.”

“Thank you, Tal,” she responded, gazing at him. “And once we have turned him over to Captain MacLeod and allowed the *Endeavour* to depart in peace, you and I are going to have a long conversation.”

CHAPTER 10

As soon as he and his party had returned to *Endeavour* with Ambassador Sarek, who seemed none the worse for wear—he still ordered Doctor Varan to complete a full physical workup on him, of course—Captain MacLeod had ordered the ship back to Federation space immediately at warp two, and had remained on the bridge until his ship safely crossed the neutral zone border and put some distance between them. Afterwards, having no idea where the *Enterprise* was or in what direction she was traveling, he had ordered Carlucci and Shran to set course for the heart of Federation space and directed the communications officer to contact the *Enterprise*. When the *Enterprise* failed to respond, he'd told the young man to keep trying until he got through to them and got Kirk on the line. Then he'd turned the conn over to Commander Kim and gone to his quarters to call up the schematics and all known technical data on Klingon birds-of-prey. He'd been sitting in his quarters, at his desk, studying those schematics and that technical data for the last three hours now and was working on his third cup of coffee. Or was it his fourth? Starfleet hadn't learned *everything* there was to learn about those vessels, of course, but they had learned enough to provide their commanders in space with a solid basic knowledge of their capabilities, should they ever have to go up against them.

Not that heavily armed, he thought, going over the basics in his mind as he turned his eyes away from his monitor to give them a much needed rest. *Hull heavily armored, but vulnerable under sustained fire at several key points. Overall, not too difficult to defeat...as long as it's not cloaked. Enterprise could easily defeat it on her own...if Kirk knew it was out there.* He reached out and pressed the 'call' button on his comm-panel. "MacLeod to bridge. Any luck yet raising the *Enterprise*?"

"No, sir, not yet," the communications officer replied. "Still trying."

Hearing that young man's voice reminded MacLeod once more of his oversight and he harrumphed quietly. In all the time that had passed since they pulled out of space dock, he *still* hadn't asked Commander Kim what his name was. He really needed to do that as soon as possible. "Get me Admiral Withrow at Starbase Four, Lieutenant."

"Aye, sir. Stand by." MacLeod sat back in his chair to wait and stretched the muscles in his neck to work out the kinks. The lieutenant seemed like a fine young man—courteous and professional—and he obviously knew his job well. "*I have Admiral Withrow, sir,*" he came back after a few moments.

"Down here, please, Lieutenant," MacLeod told him. "Thank you."

"*You're welcome, sir.*"

Admiral Withrow's image instantly replaced that of the bird-of-prey's schematics on his monitor. "Admiral Withrow," MacLeod said in greeting as his eyes fell to the unusual green tunic the flag officer was wearing. Or was that a jacket? It looked more like a jacket with the flap that pulled across his chest.

"Captain...MacLeod, right?" the admiral asked.

"Yes, sir," he confirmed. "Christopher MacLeod, *U-S-S Endeavour*."

"*What can I do for you, Captain?*"

"Sir, I've just learned there's a Klingon type bird-of-prey shadowing the *Enterprise*

with orders to attack the conference and kill the dignitaries, and I'm having trouble raising the *Enterprise* to warn Captain Kirk."

"*The Enterprise is travelling under communications blackout to a classified location,*" the admiral informed him, suddenly looking very concerned. "*How could there be...*"

"A location that'll be compromised and attacked as soon as they arrive, sir," MacLeod warned him, interrupting with a sense of urgency.

"*Stand by a moment, Captain.*"

MacLeod drew a breath to protest, but the monitor screen went blank before he could speak, except for the image of the Starfleet seal in the center with the words 'Channel Open: Standby' underneath it. *Come on, Admiral,* he thought as he released that breath. *You don't have time to take this to committee.* It didn't take more than a ten or fifteen seconds, however, for Admiral Withrow's image to reappear.

"*I can't raise the Enterprise, either,*" he said, looking even more concerned than he had just a few moments ago. "*That bird-of-prey might be jamming communications. How did you find out about it, Captain?*"

"It came up during our first assignment, sir, which we just completed," MacLeod told him. "Admiral Morrow at headquarters can fill you in on the details if you need them. "We learned of the existence of a group within the Romulan military that calls itself the Tal-Shiar. They're planning to stage a coup against the Praetor's government and are responsible for the recent attacks. I don't know, Admiral. Maybe the attacks were meant to distract the Senate or something. What's important is that *they* were the ones responsible—not the Klingons and *not* the *legitimate* government of the Romulan Star Empire. They were also behind an attack on Vulcan Ambassador Sarek's shuttle."

"*Copy that, Captain,*" Withrow replied. "*Just so you're aware, the Enterprise found the ambassador's shuttle. The ambassador is all right.*"

"No, sir, he's not," MacLeod countered before he realized that that wasn't actually the case. Then he corrected himself, explaining, "I mean, he is, but he's not where you think. The Romulans replaced him with a lookalike spy, and I have reason to believe they've planted additional spies elsewhere in the Federation."

"*Are you sure about all this, Captain?*"

"I have the *real* Ambassador Sarek aboard this vessel right now, sir," MacLeod told him. "I couldn't be more sure."

Withrow clenched his jaw as he appeared to manipulate some controls off screen, and then said, "*All right, Captain. I'm uploading Parliament's coordinates to you right now. Your orders are to proceed there immediately at maximum warp, alert Captain Kirk, and render whatever assistance he might need.*"

"We're still limited to warp two, sir, but I've got my whole engineering staff on it. We'll get there as fast as we can."

"*Roger that, Captain. I'll send another ship if I can find one, but do your best to get there ASAP. Withrow out.*"

* * * * *

Vice-Admiral Regina Hernandez had finally been handed exactly what she had been striving for each and every day since she graduated from Starfleet Academy very near the top of her class—more authority and more responsibility. Of course, being put in temporary command of all forces assigned to defend the Earth against impending Romulan invasion wasn't exactly what she'd had in mind. After all, starship combat strategies and battle tactics were *not* her primary specialty, although she *had* done very well in those areas back in the command school's war college...in simulations. Still, she felt better with Commodore Ralston on her team to take operational command of the specific tactical deployments, because that *was* his specialty. With his help, Starfleet stood a real chance of coming out of this thing on top, and if that happened, then this assignment could make her entire career. She had only to survive it to reap the rewards, and given that her office was located deep inside the enormous, heavily shielded saucer-like main structure of Starbase-1 orbiting mother Earth herself, her chances of doing that were actually quite good.

She called up the list of the fourteen ships that had been called in to defend the Earth and tried to imagine just how Commodore Ralston might deploy them. Two *Federation*-class dreadnoughts topped that list—the *U.S.S. Compactat*, NCC-2103, and the *U.S.S. Dominion*, NCC-2115. As two of the most heavily armed vessels in the fleet, Ralston would most likely assign them to defend Starbase-1. That was what she would do and was, in fact, what she had recommended to him when they sat down to plan the whole thing out.

A pair of the original twelve *Constitution*-class heavy cruisers—the *U.S.S. Lexington*, NCC-1709, under Commodore Wesley, and the *U.S.S. Potemkin*, NCC-1657—were already assigned to serve as command ships, with one of the new *Bonhomme Richard*-class vessels—the *U.S.S. Hornet*, NCC-1714—as backup in case one of the first two got knocked out of the battle. Making up their battle groups in whatever way Ralston might determine to be most effective were four *Surya*-class frigates—the *U.S.S. Surya* herself, NCC-1850, the soon to be refurbished *U.S.S. Durmitov*, NCC-1853, whose captain still insisted that she had a lot of life remaining in her yet, the *U.S.S. Niovi*, NCC-1887, and the *U.S.S. Regent*, NCC-1883—and five *Saladin*-class destroyers—the *U.S.S. Saladin* herself, NCC-500, the always stalwart *U.S.S. Alexander*, NCC-511, the *U.S.S. Xerxes*, NCC-505, the *U.S.S. Hashishiyun*, NCC-516, and the *U.S.S. Mars*, NCC-525.

And then there was the *U.S.S. Destiny*, NCC-2519—the *Decatur*-class cruiser moored helplessly in space dock, currently being upgraded to serve as prototype for the experimental new *Ascension*-class dreadnoughts that had already been authorized for construction. The work crews had just begun to remove her old cylindrical warp nacelles and to attach her new third nacelle—one of the new design—to the back of her saucer atop her dorsal, but they had been ordered to evacuate before they could finish the job. Now that nacelle, which Hernandez saw on her monitor already bore the experimental test bed version of *Destiny*'s potential new registration number, NX-2537-E, floated over the vessel, tethered loosely in place to the space dock's latticework and connected to the vessel via nothing but flexible power conduits.

Another class of dreadnought. They already had the *Federation*-class. Did they really need another?

They were kind of odd looking, those *Decatur*-class cruisers, she thought as she gazed at the image of the *Destiny* on her monitor. The way the warp nacelles attached to the bottom of the ship's engineering hull made her look clumsy somehow...and fragile, like they might

fly right off if the ship jumped to warp too quickly. She knew they wouldn't, of course, as the class had proven itself, but that didn't change the fact that it looked like that would happen.

There were still lights on in that ship, she suddenly noticed. Everyone was supposed to have stopped working disembarked. Why were there still lights on?

* * * * *

Captain Jaroan sat in the *Destiny's* center seat, watching the half-dozen engineering technicians who were still hard at work on the helm and the engineering and related consoles with interest while his chief communications officer, Lieutenant Irene O'Faolain, sat at her station and monitored comm. traffic around the area for any word of trouble. He loved his ship. She had served her crew as well as her crew had served her and had proven to be anything *but* the ungraceful duck that some had predicted she would be. On the one hand, he hated that his *Destiny* had been pulled out of active service to be put under the proverbial surgeon's scalpel of the Starfleet 'R-and-D' engineers. Especially now that the Federation found itself at war with the Klingon Empire. Correction, the Romulan Star Empire. Word had come down that someone, somewhere, had apparently discovered that the Romulans were behind the attacks all along. On the other hand, a part of him felt proud—proud that his ship out of all the *Decatur*-class cruisers had been selected—proud that the engineers had felt she would be the most able to withstand the expected stresses of all the structural changes that had to be made. If that was only because she was the newest and therefore the sturdiest and least 'worn out' of her class, then so be it.

As the work continued around him, he thought about the fact that he and the skeleton crew that had remained aboard, as well as the engineers and technicians, had all been told to stop working and withdraw all personnel to Starbase-1 or to Earth. He understood the reason for the order, but they did have a timetable to adhere to and there was no real guarantee that the Romulan invasion everyone seemed to be so worried about was ever actually going to happen. Besides, now that he played the message over in his mind, he realized that Admiral Hernandez hadn't actually *ordered* them to evacuate the ship at all. She had only suggested they leave...strongly.

Lieutenant O'Faolain raised her hand to the Feinberg device in her ear and turned to face Jaroan, flipping her long blond hair away from her eyes as she did so. "Sir, Admiral Hernandez is hailing us from headquarters," she informed him.

"On screen, Lieutenant," Jaroan told her.

The main viewscreen, which had been shut down, lit up, and a moment later Admiral Hernandez's face appeared, obviously displeased to say the least. "*Captain Jaroan,*" she said evenly. "*I thought your people were a race of good listeners. You and your crew and the engineering teams were ordered to evacuate your ship a few hours ago. Why are some of you still onboard?*"

"We also tend to be very logical and precise, Admiral, though we don't suppress our emotional side like certain other people," he replied. "Strictly speaking, your instructions weren't an order, and everyone still aboard volunteered to stay." She drew a breath to reply, no doubt to argue, but before she had a chance to do so, he told her, "An idea just occurred to

me. We might not be able to participate in the fight, if this expected invasion ever actually occurs, but my ship has the most advanced tactical operations system in the fleet, and it's still online. If Commodore Ralston were to command our defense force from here, he'd have everything he needs right at his fingertips—deployment grid, status readouts for every ship, communications...”

“Your ship’s a sitting duck out there, Captain. I can’t let...”

“With all due respect, sir,” Jaroan interrupted, “we’re not as vulnerable as you might think we are. Our warp propulsion system is offline, of course, but the core is hot and the intermix chamber hasn’t been taken offline yet. I can raise my shields and divert warp power to extend them around the entire space dock if I have to.”

“That’s still pretty risky, Captain.”

“If the information we’ve been given is accurate, Admiral, we’re about to be invaded by forces of the Romulan Star Empire. I think a little risk might be warranted, considering the potential benefit.”

“Can’t really argue with that, I suppose,” she admitted. *“We have powerful scanners here, but nothing like your ship’s tac-ops system.”* She thought it over for a few moments, then decided, *“All right, Captain. Fire it up and prepare to have Commodore Ralston beamed aboard. Five minutes.”*

“Yes, sir. Destiny out.”

Jaroan stood and headed for the turbolift. “I’ll be in the transporter room,” he told O’Faolain as he walked by her.”

“Aye, Captain.”

Less than an hour later, Captain Jaroan had made Commodore Ralston familiar with the ship’s tac-ops system—the commodore was already an expert with that system’s previous generation, so it hadn’t taken much doing—and offered to turn the center seat over to him for the duration of the battle, effective as soon as the invasion began...if it, in fact, ever came. The commodore, however, had told Jaroan to keep his seat and had instead made himself at home at the tactical station, from where he could personally assess the situation moment-to-moment and issue orders directly to the various ships’ commanders himself, rather than bark them out to a subordinate to relay to them. A couple of seconds could make a big difference in combat, and Ralston wanted the highest level of efficiency and speed that he could get.

Minutes after Ralston notified Admiral Hernandez that he was ready, almost as if they had been waiting for that notification themselves, four squadrons of three Romulan warbirds each—twelve D-7 battlecruisers in all—dropped out of warp and swooped in toward Earth. But Ralston and the fleet were ready for them. Deflector shields went up and counter-maneuvers began before a single starship took enemy weapons fire. They returned fire faster than the enemy could possibly have imagined they might. The Romulans lost two warbirds within seconds and three more were rendered nearly combat-ineffective in the following few minutes. The other seven fought on, inflicting moderate damage to several starships and even destroying two of Starbase-1’s outer spheres before they were finally defeated.

The Romulan invasion of Earth had come, and in the end...it had failed.

CHAPTER 11

“Approaching the Parliament system, Captain,” Walking Bear reported from the helm as his scope rose slowly up out of the left side of his board. “Thirty seconds to boundary at present velocity.” He peered into his scope as soon as it activated, scanned ahead, and then added, “Course ahead appears to be clear. No obstructions or anomalies.”

“Drop to impulse when we cross the boundary and continue on to the planet at warp point-nine-five, Ensign,” Kirk instructed. “Standard orbit when we get there.”

“Aye, sir.”

Kirk turned his chair and looked back at communications. “Lieutenant Uhura?”

Uhura turned her eyes to Kirk, knowing exactly what he was asking. “Still nothing, sir,” she reported. “No unidentified malfunction, no glitch, no more signals... Nothing but the standard traffic you would expect coming from the system ahead.”

Commander Spock, who had been standing at his station and leaning over his sensor scope the entire way, stood up straight and faced the captain, drawing his attention. “I have been scanning out to three-hundred fifty thousand kilometers in all directions, Captain,” he reported. “Sensors have detected nothing suspicious thus far.”

“I almost wish someone *would* decloak and take a shot at us,” Kirk commented as he faced forward again. “At least that would solve the mystery.” He thought the situation over for a few moments, watched the stars stop streaking by as the *Enterprise* crossed into the Parliament system and dropped out of warp, and then looked over at his first officer and said, “Scan the planet ahead for any indication that its anything but peaceful, Spock.”

“Yes, sir,” Spock acknowledged as he turned and leaned in over his scope once more. Then he reported, “Numerous vessels, both Starfleet and civilian, in geosynchronous orbit over various points in the area of Parliament City—all Federation-registered spacecraft. No indication of weapons fire or signs of any other hostile action. Everything appears to be as it should be, Captain.”

“Thank you,” Kirk replied, though he knew in his gut as he watched the planet slowly grow to fill the viewscreen that something wasn’t right.

“Captain,” Lieutenant Uhura called from communications as she turned toward him. “We’re receiving another signal from Admiral Withrow. It’s encrypted, but...”

“But?” Kirk asked, turning around to face her when she didn’t say anything more.

“He’s using a cipher that we *know* the Romulans recently cracked, sir.”

“How narrow a beam is he transmitting on, Lieutenant?” Kirk inquired, suspecting that he knew exactly what the admiral was doing.

“Not very narrow at all, sir,” she replied. “Surprisingly wide, in fact, considering that he knows exactly where we are and took the trouble to encode it. The message is *definitely* directed at us, and he’s hailing you by name, but...on a much *wider* beam than necessary.”

Kirk grinned. He was right. He *did* know what the admiral was doing. “Someone is shadowing us, and he *wants* them to intercept and understand his message,” Kirk concluded aloud for everyone else’s benefit as he faced forward again. “On screen, Lieutenant.”

“Aye, sir.”

The image on the main screen of space and the planet Parliament ahead waivered and

Admiral Withrow's image took its place. "*Captain Kirk*," the admiral began immediately, "*I remind you not to respond to this transmission in any manner. If there are enemy scouts out there somewhere, we don't want them to locate you.*"

"*I just wanted to advise you that the Romulan invasion of Earth has come and gone. Their attack inflicted relatively minor damage and failed completely. Casualties on our side were relatively light, considering the scope of the battle. Romulan casualties were very high and their forces have been defeated. I say again, all Romulan forces have been defeated at Earth. All twelve of their vessels have either been destroyed or hopelessly crippled. We have taken more than one thousand Romulan troops prisoner. Please advise all personnel at your destination of the overwhelming victory that we have achieved. Admiral Withrow out.*"

The admiral's image waivered and the view of space and Parliament, now so close that it was only partially visible and filling the left third of the screen, reappeared. "That was clearly for the Romulans," Kirk remarked aloud. "We *are* being shadowed, and he's trying to dissuade our shadow from taking any hostile action."

"Or, Captain, like us, Admiral Withrow has reason to believe that someone *might* be following us," Spock offered as a possible alternative he stepped up to the railing. "We *still* cannot be completely sure that is the case."

"The admiral's action combined with Lieutenant Uhura's communications anomalies are strong enough evidence for me, Spock," Kirk responded. "I think it best we proceed as though the enemy is right on our doorstep. I just hope the admiral's summary of the battle, at least, was true."

"On those two points, Captain, we are in full agreement," Spock assured him.

As *Enterprise* entered standard orbit over Parliament, two of her sister ships appeared from around the horizon ahead of them—the starships *U.S.S. Constitution*, NCC-1700, and *U.S.S. Hood*, NCC-1703. Numerous diplomatic vessels from various Federation worlds were also holding relative station in the immediate area, as Spock had reported. Walking Bear set the ship into orbit safely among them all, then looked back over his shoulder and reported, "Standard orbit achieved, sir." Then he asked, "Should I put her into geosynchronous orbit instead, like all the other ships?"

"Affirmative, Ensign. Thank you," Kirk replied. Then he looked back at Uhura and directed her to, "Transmit standard hails and greetings to the captains of the *Constitution* and the *Hood*, Lieutenant."

"Aye, sir. And, Captain." Kirk had started to turn away, but stopped and looked back at her. She held a PADD out to him and informed him as he accepted it, "I just received a fleet-wide priority bulletin over a secure channel from Starfleet Command, sir, scrambled and encoded via a still uncompromised cypher. Seems Admiral Withrow's message was accurate. All Romulan forces taking part in the invasion of Earth were defeated. The details are there."

Kirk quickly skimmed over the data on the PADD and said, "Notify our hosts below that we'll start beaming down the remaining dignitaries as soon as security is fully in place."

"Yes, sir."

He faced forward again. "Mister Chekov, your security plan is approved as outlined. Be sure to coordinate with your counterparts from the other starships—let them know you've begun deploying as soon as you have. We don't want you stepping on each other's toes."

"Aye, Keptin." Chekov locked down his station and stood up, then paused at Kirk's

side on his way out. “Not very much chance of that happening though, sir. The other ships’ chiefs and I have divided the facility into three distinct areas of responsibility.”

“I know that, Lieutenant,” Kirk told him, slightly amused. “I’ve reviewed your plan, remember?”

Chekov returned the grin. “Aye, sir.”

“Get to it,” Kirk said with a quick tilt of his head toward the lift. He watched, his grin renewed, as the young navigator/security chief headed for the turbolift—the young man had taken to his new duties so seriously—then focused on Spock once more. “Mister Spock.” The first officer looked over at him. “I’ll beam down shortly and address the conference at my earliest opportunity. Keep scanning the area.”

“As you have already concluded, Captain, the admiral’s message, while apparently accurate, was likely meant to be heard by any Romulans who might have been following us,” Spock reminded him. “I doubt the admiral actually intended for you to address the dignitaries at the conference.”

“We still don’t know whether or not everyone in Ambassador Sarek’s party is really Vulcan, Spock,” Kirk countered. “If one or more of them *are* Romulan, I want to make sure they hear that message.”

Spock raised an eyebrow. “Logical.”

“Why, thank you, Mister Spock,” Kirk told him as he got up. “The bridge is yours.”

“Aye, sir.”

“Start beaming down the dignitaries as soon as Chekov signals that his people are in place,” he instructed him on his way to the turbolift, PADD in hand.

“Understood, Captain.”

* * * * *

The one and, so far, only settlement on Parliament was a fairly new and very modern Federation colony that, ironically, had been established with the intent of growing it into a major city that might one day serve as a center for all multi-planetary Federation conferences, replacing the much older facilities at Babel. The already completed governmental complex known as Federation Center served as the fledgling city’s central feature, its main structure a large circular building with a slightly domed roof. The banner of the United Federation of Planets had been etched into all four sets of exterior transparent aluminum doors at average eye-level, giving them a frosted glass appearance, and much larger full-color red and gold versions adorned the exterior walls at all four midpoints between those sets of doors. The individual flags of each member world were prominently displayed in a single, semi-circular row centered on the south entrance about fifty feet out from the doors that stretched from north of the west entrance to north of the east entrance, flying from the tops of almost blindingly snow-white, equally tall flagpoles that were imbedded in stone bases in the shape of pairs of olive branch leaves. The entire facility had been designed and built to resemble the seal of the United Federation of Planets when viewed from the air, right down the dark blue background and dozens of various sized stars painted on the roof.

Security was in place. The *Hood*, the *Constitution*, the *Enterprise*—all three vessels’

captains had committed their security forces to the protection of the conference, and all three teams would remain in place until it concluded and the delegates departed. Inside the south lobby of the Federation Center, Lieutenant Chekov was coordinating with his counterparts from the other starships while the last of the delegates and their aides and associates filed into the back of the auditorium through the large double-doors that had finally been unlocked and opened about fifteen minutes ago.

"Then, if we are all agreed, that is what we will do," Chekov told the other men. One of them was a full commander, the other a lieutenant commander, but as far as Chekov was concerned, they were all three chiefs of security aboard starships. "Thank you." He turned at the sound of the transporter beam while the other men walked off, then approached the spot where someone was beaming in as soon as he'd determined where that spot was. The person beaming in turned out to be Captain Kirk, who had changed into his dress uniform. "Keptin," he acknowledged. Then he reported, "Security is all in place and the last of the delegates are being seated now. I believe the vice-president is about to take the stage."

"Thank you, Lieutenant," Kirk replied. "Carry on."

Kirk pulled out his communicator and flipped it open as Chekov nodded and walked off. "Kirk to *Enterprise*," he called as he turned and gazed into the auditorium.

"*Spock here, Captain*," the first officer's response came quickly.

The delegates and their parties from all over the Federation had filled the rows upon rows of padded theater-type chairs that formed a semi-circle facing the stage according to their planets of origin. As the last of them took their seats, the beige-skinned, white-haired Efrosian Vice-President Trass took his place behind the podium and began his address. "The conference has begun," Kirk informed Spock. "Vice-President Trass has just begun speaking. Are your scans showing anything yet?"

"No, sir, nothing yet."

"All right. I don't need to remind you of who's gathered under one roof down here."

"No, sir, you do not."

Kirk grinned...slightly. "Just making sure we're on the same sheet of music, Spock. I'll check in with you later. Kirk out." He closed his communicator and stuck it onto his belt as he approached the doors and walked into the back of the auditorium to find that a number of *Enterprise* security officers, most of whom he knew by name, had posted themselves around the room. That was just like Chekov, he mused. Always trying to put himself, and in this case his people, into the middle of things where the action was.

Everyone's eyes, except for theirs, were glued to the vice-president.

"And so, honored delegates," he was saying, "it is with great regret that I must inform you that President Shankar was in fact killed in the enemy attack on Babel."

He paused for a few moments to let everyone absorb that news, then resumed. "I am quite sure that if she could be here with us today, she would urge us to consider carefully everything that we discuss—to think long and hard before we speak—to speak out of reason rather than out of anger. While I do feel confident that our Vulcan brothers and sisters have intended to do exactly that all along, given as they are to basing their thoughts and words on logic rather than on emotion, I on the other hand am finding it quite difficult to keep my true thoughts and feelings to myself.

"Those cowardly attacks against three of our Federation's founding worlds and the

Babel planetoid snuffed out the lives of millions of Federation citizens—nearly all of them civilians. They have led to our declaring war against the Klingon Empire, which we *now* have reason to believe might not have been responsible for them in the first place. Unfortunately for us, one does not simply un-declare war with the Klingon Empire. Relations between our two governments have been strained at best lately, and now it appears as though we have been tricked into going to full-scale war with them—tricked by a cowardly empire bent on galactic domination, if what we’ve been told is true.

“I for one believe that the Romulan Star Empire, *if* they are in fact responsible, must be made to pay for its cowardly acts of aggression—that we should hit them back...hard. Nevertheless, just as President Shankar would have wanted, we truly must carefully consider our words here today. We truly must think long and hard before we speak, and we must speak out of reason, rather than out of anger. For if we do speak out of our darker passions—if we do act rashly out of a need for revenge—then millions more innocent lives might needlessly be lost. I ask each and every one of you gathered here today to honor the memory of our late president by addressing these issues as she would have wanted you to address them. I ask you all to set aside your anger and strive to provide thoughtful insight. Thank you.”

One of the delegates off to Kirk’s left stood up from his...or her...its?...seat. “Mister Vice-President!” it called out loudly. “Attack by *Klingon* battlecruiser! No bird painted! Not appear Romulan! What of Esterion? They mirror design before! Maybe Esterion attack!”

The Esterion ambassador leapt to his feet off to Kirk’s right, and as the inevitable argument began, Kirk started walking toward the stage. “You dare accuse us, Ambassador?” the Esterion shouted angrily across the crowd at the other delegate. “What a small group of my people did in the past is past! That group acted out of desperation and has been dealt with according to the law!”

Kirk stepped past the front row and turned right toward the steps that led up onto the right side of the stage.

“How we know this truth, Ambassador?” the other delegate inquired.

“You *dare* accuse me of lying now?” the Esterion asked in reply.

Kirk ascended the stairs onto the stage.

“No accuse,” the antagonist argued, “but want proof you speak truth!”

“You *are* accusing me of lying!” the Esterion insisted.

The vice-president turned his eyes to Kirk as Kirk approached him.

“Want for proof is not accusation!” the other alien shouted.

“It *is* an accusation!” the Esterion argued.

“If I may, Mister Vice-President?” Kirk asked him.

“You certainly may, Captain,” Trass replied, clearly exasperated. “Anything to bring *this* to an end.”

Kirk took the vice-president’s place behind the podium and shouted in a tone of voice accustomed to command, “*Gentlemen!*” ...secretly hoping that the more alien of the two of them wasn’t actually a female, or whatever their equivalent might be. Both delegates stopped arguing as all eyes including theirs turned to Kirk. “Thank you,” he said more calmly, putting on a friendly smile. Then he proceeded. “If I may have everyone’s attention for a moment, please,” he began. “With my apology. I know it’s unusual for a Starfleet officer to speak at a conference of this kind, but I have recent news that Starfleet Command has asked me to pass

on to you. Earth has been attacked. The attack was carried out openly by *Romulan* warbirds. There is no longer any doubt. The *Romulans* are responsible for the attacks that we suffered. Not the Klingons...and *not* the Esterions,” he added with emphasis for the two arguing delegates’ benefit. “The Romulans. The good news is that we had advance warning and time to prepare. We were ready and waiting for them. In the end, all enemy vessels were destroyed or hopelessly crippled. We’ve taken over a thousand enemy prisoners. Our own casualties were relatively light, and although several of our Starfleet vessels were damaged, we didn’t lose any of them. That’s all I have right now. Thank you for your kind attention.”

Kirk’s communicator beeped as he turned the podium back over to the vice-president.

“Thank you, Captain,” Trass said.

“You’re welcome, sir,” Kirk replied, nodding politely as he pulled his communicator out again. He flipped it open as he walked off to the side toward backstage. “Kirk here. Stand by a moment.” He walked backstage, out of sight and out of earshot, looked around to make sure he was alone, and then said, “Go ahead.”

“Spock here, Captain. Lieutenant Uhura’s glitch just manifested itself three times in rapid succession. With the assistance of the other two starships, we were able to triangulate and determine that it came from somewhere among the conference delegates this time.”

“From down here?” Kirk asked him.

“Yes, Captain,” Spock confirmed. “From within the auditorium where the conference is taking place. We cannot be more precise than that.”

“Well done, Spock. Go to yellow alert...quietly. Deploy additional security troops to the city streets around this facility.”

“We’ll have to coordinate with the local authorities to avoid violating the colony’s sovereignty, sir.”

“This is a matter of Federation security, Spock,” Kirk initially argued, but then he thought about that for another moment, realized that his first officer was absolutely right, and acquiesced. “Fine. You’re right, of course. Notify Mister Chekov and have him invite local law enforcement to participate.”

“Right away, sir.”

“Kirk out.”

He looked back out at the stage as he put his communicator back on his belt and heard Ambassador Sarek just as he asked, “If I may, Mister Vice-President?”

“The podium recognizes Ambassador Sarek of Vulcan,” Trass replied.

Kirk leaned out and peeked over the stage into the audience to find Sarek standing with his hands folded in front of him. “I would like to offer another theory regarding those terrible attacks that we of the Federation have suffered,” the Vulcan calmly began. “I submit that the Romulan Star Empire and the Klingon Empire have conspired together to carry out these atrocities and possibly more in the near future.”

That makes a certain amount of sense, Kirk thought.

The Vulcan ambassador continued, “As you know, their two empires were allied with one another for a period of time a couple of years ago, and both consider the Federation to be their greatest enemy.”

Very true.

“The entire plan was likely put forward by the Klingons, as they tend to be the more

aggressive of the two species. If I am correct—if the Klingons *are* in fact to blame—then I submit that the most logical course of action for us to follow is *not* to end the war against them, but to engage them fully—to ultimately destroy their ability to make war.”

Wait, what? That took Kirk aback and he stared at the Vulcan in disbelief. That didn’t sound at all like the Ambassador Sarek he knew. He didn’t know him all that well, of course, but he was a Vulcan, after all, and that had certainly been a very non-Vulcan-like statement. Ambassador Sarek, a Vulcan diplomat, calling for the escalation of war? That was just...

And then it struck him. *I think we just identified our spy.*

* * * * *

Having taken the ship to yellow alert as ordered, Spock turned the center seat around and faced Uhura as Lieutenant Xon stepped out onto the bridge and took over at the science station. “Please pass the captain’s orders on to Mister Chekov, Lieutenant,” he requested.

“Aye, sir,” she replied.

“Picking something up on scanners, Commander,” Xon then reported.

“Can you be more specific, Lieutenant?” Spock inquired, clearly expecting him to be.

“Readings are so far intermittent and erratic, sir. It appears...” He fell silent for a few seconds, then straightened and faced Spock. “Bird-of-prey decloaking, starboard-aft.”

“Red alert,” Spock immediately ordered as he faced forward again. “On screen.”

The image on the main screen switched to the aft view as a Klingon-design Romulan bird-of-prey approached from starboard-aft and opened fire on them. *Enterprise* shook under the assault, but as her shields were already raised, any damage she might have sustained as a result was most likely minimal.

“Lieutenant Uhura, notify the captain,” Spock ordered. “Then contact the *Constitution* and the...”

“Communications outside the ship are jammed, sir!” she told him, nearly shouting in frustration. “Attempting to bypass!”

“Mister Kyle,” Spock called, addressing the officer who had taken Chekov’s place at navigation. “Lock weapons and return fire.”

“Too late, sir,” Kyle advised him. “They’ve cloaked again.”

“Break orbit, Mister Walking Bear,” Spock then ordered. “We might need additional maneuvering room.”

“Breaking orbit, sir,” Walking Bear acknowledged as he quickly complied.

Spock looked over at Xon, who was scanning again. “Mister Xon?”

“Still cloaked, sir,” Xon reported. “Attempting to track...unsuccessfully.”

“Mister Kyle, be prepared to lock weapons and fire the moment they decloak again. Disable them if possible, but destroy them if necessary to protect the civilian vessels. Do not wait for my order.”

“Understood, sir,” Kyle acknowledged.

CHAPTER 12

Set at Spock's order to automatically track the bird-of-prey's movements, the view up on the bridge's main viewscreen screen switched to a dorsal camera feed as the smaller vessel decloaked once more, bore down on *Enterprise* from above, and fired its disruptors directly at the dome atop the bridge. Multiple bright green bolts struck the ship's dorsal shields in rapid succession, causing them to flash-glow blue as the ship rumbled under the impact, but fortunately failed to penetrate them.

"Dorsal shields at eighty-seven percent and weakening!" Lieutenant Kyle reported as he returned fire without awaiting Spock's order, as ordered.

"Sustain return fire as long as..." Spock started to order, but it was already too late.

"They've cloaked again, sir!" Kyle advised him.

The first officer turned his head halfway around to his left. "Miss Uhura, are you able to break through the jamming yet?"

"Not yet, Mister Spock," she replied as she continued to try.

"Very well," he acknowledged as he faced front again. "Mister Kyle, use our running lights as a signal beacon to flash a warning to the other starships. Advise them that we have engaged what so far appears to be a lone Romulan bird-of-prey, and that communications are being jammed. Set the message to repeat automatically."

"Aye, sir."

On the screen, the bird-of-prey decloaked once more, this time beyond the other two starships. It swooped in from behind the *Constitution* and fired on her, appearing to cause moderate damage to the aft section of her saucer. Then it veered off and fired on the *Hood*, striking her amidships and blowing a small hole through her engineering hull.

A moment later, Lieutenant Xon looked up at Spock from the science station's sensor scope and reported, "Moderate damage sustained by both starships, Commander, but they have now raised their shields."

"Enemy vessel has cloaked *again*, sir," Kyle added.

"We'll get 'em now, no problem," Walking Bear remarked.

"Your optimism is admirable, Ensign," Spock told him. "However, I am unaware of your ever having been credited with an ability to predict the future."

Walking Bear looked back over his shoulder. "It's not optimism or precognition, sir," he told the first officer. "I'm being realistic. We're three starships against one bird-of-prey."

"Three starships that are currently unable to communicate with one another efficiently or effectively, and therefore cannot properly coordinate their defense, Ensign," Spock pointed out. "Attend your controls."

The bridge shook under another barrage, but Kyle saw where the fire came from and spotted the enemy vessel, quickly locked weapons on it, and returned fire, scoring a hit on its rear quarter. "Direct hit!" he proclaimed.

"Another vessel dropping out of warp," Xon reported. "It is the *U-S-S Endeavour*, on course to intercept the bird-of-prey, firing phasers. Direct hit starboard amidships. Bird-of-prey is withdrawing."

* * * * *

Still backstage, Captain Kirk was growing increasingly more frustrated as he adjusted the dials on his communicator, trying to find a clear channel to his ship. “Kirk to *Enterprise*, come in,” he repeated, moving farther away, not wanting to create a distraction as his voice grew slowly but steadily louder. “*Enterprise*, come in! Kirk to *Enterprise*,” he repeated once more. “*Enterprise* come in!” *What the hell is going on up there?* “*Enterprise!* Come in!” he demanded, as if that would make them answer. Finally, he switched over to the channel that security was using and called, “Kirk to Chekov.”

“*Chekov here, Keptin,*” the answer came through clearly after just a few seconds.

“Meet me backstage right away, Lieutenant.”

“*I’m there now, sir,*” Chekov informed him.

Kirk turned to find Chekov approaching him from behind and put his communicator away as he turns to speak with him. “I can’t contact the *Enterprise*,” he told him. “Try your communicator—see if you have better luck.”

“It’s no good, sir,” Chekov told him, shaking his head. “I was just trying to call up there when you called me. I couldn’t get through. That’s why I came here looking for you.”

Kirk sighed. He didn’t like being out of touch with his ship. He didn’t like it at all. It was never a good sign. Whatever was going on up there, he wanted to know about it. But in the meantime, he reminded himself, they had issue of their own to deal with. “I have an idea who our Romulan spy might be,” he told his young security chief. “One of them anyway.”

“Who, Keptin?”

“Ambassador Sarek.”

Chekov stared at his captain as though the man had just told him that Hikaru Sulu was secretly a Klingon general. “The ambassador?” he asked him, not believing his ears.

“He just suggested that Starfleet escalate the war—take it to the Klingons and destroy their ability to make war,” Kirk explained briefly. “Does that sound anything at all like the Vulcan ambassador to you, Lieutenant?” Chekov only shook his head in response, apparently still trying to make sense of it in his head, so Kirk moved on. “Lieutenant,” he said first to make sure he had Chekov’s attention. Then, when the younger man looked up at him and met his gaze, he continued, “I need you to redeploy your team in the auditorium...*quietly*, so they can block all exits while they converge on the fake ambassador from all sides.”

“Aye, Keptin,” Chekov replied, getting it together once more. He turned to leave, but just then Kirk’s communicator beeped.

“Just a minute, Lieutenant,” the captain said as he reached for it. Chekov stopped as Kirk flipped open his communicator. “Kirk here.”

“*Spock here, Captain.*”

“Where’ve you been?” Kirk demanded to be told. “What’s going on up there?”

“*You were right, Captain,*” Spock told him. “*There was a Romulan vessel shadowing us—a single bird-of-prey. That vessel attacked us and was jamming our communications. We have sustained only minor damage to our shields. Constitution and Hood have both sustained moderate structural damage, but are still fully operational. Endeavour has just arrived and the enemy vessel has fled. And Captain, Ambassador Sarek is aboard the*

Endeavour.”

“Go, Chekov!” Kirk ordered.

Chekov pulled his own communicator as he turned to leave. “This is Lieutenant Chekov to Security team *Enterprise*...” His voice faded as he hurried off.

“What is the ambassador’s condition, Spock?” Kirk inquired.

“*He did sustain a few minor injuries,*” Spock replied. “*However, he has assured us that he is ready and able to assume his duties immediately.*”

“Good. Tell Captain MacLeod to have him ready to beam down in a few minutes. We have the imposter cornered and are moving to take him into custody now. I’ll contact you as soon as that’s done. Kirk out.”

Chekov quietly entered the auditorium from the rear and flashed hand signals to those of his people who were closest, directing them to cover that exit. That drew the attention of those nearer the side exits—he felt pride in the fact that they were maintaining such a high level of awareness—and he signaled to them to do the same. Then he visually scanned the crowd of delegates as he moved to the right, searching for the Romulan agent posing as the Vulcan ambassador while the rest of his troops, having watched their teammates move and apparently having figured out on their own what was going on, started slowly shifting their positions along with him to better cover him. He scanned one row at a time, looking at every face—some of them only briefly, though, as they either weren’t the right color or they simply didn’t look remotely Vulcan—but there were so many delegates and aides and assistants and the gathering as a whole was such a confusing visual cacophony of color splashes that he found it difficult to pick those faces out sometimes. It was going to take a while to...

The Romulan agent suddenly made finding him much easier when he stood up slowly and started calmly making his way across his row of delegates toward the aisle to his left. He stopped when two of Chekov’s personnel raised their hands to their phasers and stared back at him while they moved to more tactically sound positions. He looked back the other way and then started making his way back across the row toward the aisle to his right. As he did so, one of the aides in his party stood up—she was an attractive young woman, though being Vulcan, Chekov realized, she might easily have been twice his age—and looked at him with a questioning expression on her face as he passed.

“Ambassador?” she seemed to mouth.

The imposter stopped again when three more of Chekov’s security personnel rested their hands to their phasers as well and moved toward that end of the row. Then, before the aide who had stood up with him could react, the imposter suddenly spun on her and pulled her into a choke hold while at the same time pulling a small handgun out of the folds of his ambassadorial robes. Some of the crowd around him took notice and stared at him in shock as he raised the weapon high into the air, then scrambled to get away from him when he fired a single shot straight up at the ceiling, alerting everyone else in the auditorium to what was happening, and then pressed his weapon’s muzzle hard against the young Vulcan woman’s temple. She showed no fear as the security personnel in the auditorium all drew their phasers, but neither did she appear to be calm.

“All weapons down!” the imposter shouted. “Allow me to leave unmolested and this

woman *will* survive! Try to stop me and I will kill her!”

“I don’t think so,” Chekov mumbled as he adjusted the setting on his phaser. Having worked closely with Spock off and on over the last few years, he knew enough about Vulcans to know that that young woman was afraid, despite her stoic countenance, and the security chief part of him wanted nothing more than to safely rescue her. He fired, even as he sensed Captain Kirk stepping up behind him, striking the imposter on the top of his head, stunning both him and his hostage.

“Nice shot, Lieutenant,” Kirk commented.

“Thank you, sir,” Chekov replied as he and two of his troops approached the stunned pair, who had collapsed where they stood, from both sides.

Kirk pulled out his communicator and flipped it open. “Kirk to *Enterprise*.”

“*Spock here, Captain.*”

“We have the imposter in custody,” Kirk informed his first officer. “He and a member of the ambassadorial party he took hostage have been stunned. Give Chekov a few moments to collect them, then beam them up and have Doctor McCoy look them over. Beam the *real* Ambassador Sarek down here at his convenience and confine the imposter to the brig as soon as McCoy’s finished with him.”

“*Understood, Captain.*”

“Beam me up and contact the *Endeavour*. Ask Captain MacLeod to meet me in the briefing room as soon as possible. Kirk out.”

Kirk closed his communicator away and tucked it back up under his tunic, and a few seconds later the transporter beam took him up.

* * * * *

By the time Captain Kirk had changed back into his standard duty uniform and gone to the briefing room, Captain MacLeod was already there waiting for him. He greeted his old shipmate with a handshake, congratulated him on being named captain of the *Endeavour*, and then got them both a cup of coffee and joined him at the table.

MacLeod thanked him for the coffee and then asked, “So what can I do for you, Jim?”

“I need you to take over for me here, Chris,” Kirk told him, getting right to the point. “The conference is over, so there’s only the wrap-up left to take care of. Send a couple dozen of your security forces to the surface to relieve mine so I can get out of here and go find that Romulan vessel before it makes it back home.”

MacLeod sipped his coffee—it was perfect—then reminded him, “Starfleet Command assigned the *Enterprise* specifically to this detail, Jim,” MacLeod reminded him. “How are you going to explain passing your orders off to me and leaving your assigned duties before they were complete to go chase down the Romulans?”

“Is that a ‘no,’ Chris?” Kirk asked him over his steaming cup.

“Oh come on, Jim,” MacLeod replied after he swallowed a mouthful from his own, as though the thought had never crossed his mind. “You know me better than that. If you need my help, you need only ask and you’ve got it. And you *did* ask, so you have it. I just don’t want to see you called to the carpet for it.”

“Wouldn’t be the first time,” Kirk remarked.

“Of that I’m well aware, but one of these days you’re not going to be able to talk your way out of that hot water you keep jumping into.”

“Perhaps, but today won’t be that day,” Kirk replied. “I’ll just explain that you had completed all repairs to the *Endeavour*, and with the *Constitution* and *Hood* still damaged, we needed a starship that was ready for anything to stay here and cover them. Damage to the *Enterprise* was relatively minor, but she was damaged all the same, so *Endeavour* was the better choice.”

“That might be one of the weakest arguments I’ve ever heard, Jim,” MacLeod told him honestly. “I doubt you’ll find a single admiral at Starfleet Command who’ll...”

“Maybe it is, Chris,” Kirk admitted, interrupting. “But between you and me, I also have classified orders to investigate an alleged conspiracy involving unidentified Federation or Starfleet personnel who might have been working *with* the Romulans.”

MacLeod took a mouthful of coffee, nearly finishing it off as he thought about what his old friend had just revealed to him. “A conspiracy,” he remarked after he swallowed, “across enemy lines, no less. Isn’t *that* a kick in the moral high ground.”

“Yes, it is,” Kirk agreed.

“Well, like I said, Jim, if you want me to take over for you here, I will. I just hope you know what you’re doing.”

“Going after that Romulan ship, Chris,” Kirk replied. “That’s what I’m doing.”

Captain’s log, stardate 2145.2: With Captain MacLeod and the Endeavour having replaced our security personnel at Parliament on my authority, the Enterprise has warped out of the system and is searching along a straight-line course toward the Romulan neutral zone for the bird-of-prey that attacked us there. So far we haven’t found any trace of the enemy vessel, but we’ve only been at it for about half an hour.

“You realize, Captain,” Spock said from where he stood beside the center seat, “that it is very unlikely that the enemy vessel will travel along a direct route for home. If you recall, our own original experience with the Romulans showed us that they tend to alter their course from time to time, in effect zigzagging all the way.”

“Yes, Mister Spock, I remember,” Kirk said. “I also remember that whatever course they used to try to throw us off, they always went back to course one-eleven mark fourteen. That course is forever etched into my memory. I have Lieutenant Xon scanning out to the limits of our instruments in all directions.” Kirk paused, then looked over at his first officer and asked him, “What else would you have me do, Mister Spock?”

“Nothing, sir,” Spock answered plainly. “In fact, you have approached this challenge quite logically. I was merely pointing out the fact in case you had overlooked it, to ensure that you had in fact considered it.”

Kirk flashed his first officer a mischievous smirk. “In other words, you were making small talk—idle conversation.”

Spock raised his eyes and looked straight ahead at the image of stars sailing by on the viewscreen with one eyebrow raised in his otherwise perfectly stoic expression. “No, sir, I do

not believe that I was.”

“How very illogical of you, Spock.”

Spock shifted his gaze back to his captain—if Kirk hadn’t known better, he might have sworn that was shock showing in his expression—then raised the eyebrow again and then told him, “Should you need me, sir, I shall be right here at my station.”

Kirk grinned openly and caught a glimpse of Uhura doing the same as he watched Spock head to the science station, where he dismissed Xon from duty.

“*McCoy to Captain Kirk,*” the doctor’s voice came over the small speaker in the arm of Kirk’s chair.

Kirk thumbed the button to respond. “Kirk here. Go ahead, Bones.”

“*I just finished my examination of Ambassador Sarek’s doppelganger, Jim. He’s pure Romulan all right, born and bred.*”

“No surprise there,” Kirk remarked. “Are you ready to release him?”

“*Oh, I’m more than ready to release him, Captain,*” McCoy assured him. “*He hasn’t exactly been the most cooperative patient I’ve ever had, and he’s shown himself to have quite extensive knowledge of the more colorful aspects of the English language. Much as I hate to admit it, he even makes Spock look like a model patient by comparison.*”

Kirk glanced over at Spock and grinned once more when the Vulcan glanced back at him. Then he said, “Let me talk to the ranking security officer there, Bones.”

“*Just a moment.*” Kirk heard McCoy call out to a lieutenant as he waited. Then...

“*Lieutenant Garrovick here, sir.*”

“That man you’re guarding is an enemy combatant, Mister Garrovick—a spy,” Kirk informed his old *Farragut* captain’s son. “As soon as the doctor releases him, I want you to take him directly to the brig and confine him there under guard. Understood?”

“*Clearly, sir.*”

“Good. Carry on.”

“*One more thing, sir,*” Garrovick said as Kirk touched his thumb to the button to close the channel.

“Yes?” Kirk asked him.

“*Just thought you should know, sir, we found a mini-transmitter concealed inside his robes—a strictly short-range device. I’d bet that it was the source of that communications blip you briefed us on earlier.*”

“See that it finds its way to Lieutenant Chekov for analysis. I want verification.”

“*Will do, sir.*”

Kirk thumbed the button twice, switching to a different channel. “Kirk to Lieutenant Chekov.”

“*Chekov here, Keptin.*”

“Have you determined how the imposter got that weapon past the scanners yet?”

“*Partially, sir. Except for its energy cell and beam emitter, it is comprised entirely of organic material.*”

Kirk looked up, and then over at Spock to find him looking back at him. “Organic?” he asked. “Are you sure?”

“*Yes, sir. Its frame is made of bone, its body of firm muscle tissue... It even has skin. I just sent a sample to Doctor McCoy for D-N-A analysis.*”

“What about the power cell and beam emitter? How did he get them past?”

“I’m still vorking on that, sir. My theory is that either the scanners at the conference could not detect this particular form of energy, or that he shielded them somehow.”

Spock stood up straight and looked at Kirk, drawing his attention back to him again. “All right, Lieutenant,” Kirk said. “Keep me informed. Kirk out.”

“Fascinating,” Spock opined after Kirk closed the channel. “An energy beam weapon constructed almost entirely of organic material.”

“A scientific wonder that you’ll be free to look into with Mister Chekov later, Spock,” Kirk told him. “Right now we have an enemy vessel to find.”

“Agreed,” Spock said. Then, a moment or two after he returned to his sensor scope, he added, “And we might have just taken a step toward achieving that goal, Captain.” He forwarded some data to navigation. “Mister Kyle, if you would plot these coordinates. Mister Walking Bear, please adjust our heading accordingly.”

Both officers looked back at the captain for confirmation. He nodded his approval and then looked over at Spock and asked him, “What do you have, Spock?”

“A warp signature that does not appear to be that of a Federation starship, Captain,” Spock replied, peering into his scope again. “It is extending along two alternating trajectories, both of which approach the Romulan neutral zone at oblique angles.”

Kirk turned his eyes back to the viewscreen. “That has a familiar ring to it, doesn’t it.”

“Indeed it does, Captain,” Spock agreed. Then, barely two seconds later, he added, “And now we appear to have a shadow.”

“The Romulan vessel?” Kirk asked him.

“No, sir. At least, not the one we’re hunting. This one is larger—exactly the size of a D-seven battlecruiser—following at one-hundred fifty-three thousand kilometers distance off our stern, paralleling our course.”

Kirk stood up, suddenly very serious, and stepped over to the railing by the science station. “Could it be a sensor ghost?” he inquired.

Spock shook his head slightly but kept his eyes on his scope, then replied, “Unlikely, Captain. It was following directly behind us and altered course when we did. However, there was a two-point-seven-second delay between our course change and theirs. It is definitely a D-seven-class battlecruiser.”

Kirk looked over at Lieutenant Palmer at communications, wondered for a quick second when she had relieved Uhura—he didn’t recall hearing the lift doors open and close—then ordered, “Open a channel, Lieutenant.”

She complied and then told him, “Channel open, sir.”

Kirk turned and faced the viewscreen as he stepped back over to the side of his chair, then hailed the vessel, “This is Captain James T. Kirk of the Federation starship *Enterprise* to unidentified...warbird, currently paralleling our course at approximately one-hundred fifty-three thousand kilometers to our stern.” He paused and looked back at Palmer.

“No response, sir,” she told him, hand on her Feinberg device, shaking her head.

“This is Captain Kirk of the *Enterprise* to unidentified vessel. We know you’re there. We have you on our sensors. Respond...now.”

The image of deep space up on the main viewscreen waivered, and Commander Dion Charvon’s familiar visage appeared. She was in uniform, Kirk noted as he did his best to hide

his surprise, and she appeared to be sitting in command of that vessel.

“*Captain Kirk,*” she said with a sparkle in her eye—one that Kirk strongly doubted came from anything resembling affection. “*How nice to see you again.*”

Kirk doubted the sincerity of her words as well, and threw back a few insincere words of his own. “Why, Commander, what a pleasant surprise.”

“*I doubt it,*” she replied. Then she shifted her gaze over to Spock, who stood facing her, looking back at her. “*Spock. I must admit, I have mixed feelings about seeing you again.*”

“Quite natural, Commander,” Spock told her. “Our last meeting ended somewhat... dubiously. I would not have expected anything else.”

“What are you doing trespassing in Federation space, Commander?” Kirk asked her, going straight to the matter at hand.

Charvon looked at him, almost as though she couldn’t believe that he had just asked her that. “*Who are you to question anyone about trespassing, Captain?*” she countered.

“That was another time, Commander.”

“*Not so far removed from this one as far as I am concerned, Captain.*”

“All right, Commander, I’ll give you that,” Kirk acquiesced, “but my question still remains. What are you doing here?”

“*Have you had an opportunity to talk with your Captain MacLeod?*”

“As a matter of fact I have,” Kirk replied, though he had no idea in what context she had been referring to. Better to let her think he knew everything already and maybe let her guard down a little bit. Maybe she’d let something slip that she otherwise wouldn’t.

“*Then you should know that I have interrogated some of my Tal-Shiar prisoners and have learned that one of our birds-of-prey is currently operating somewhere in Federation space. We are currently searching for that vessel, as I suspect you are as well.*”

“I’m hardly in the habit of discussing my ship’s operations with enemy officers.”

“*Quite so, Captain, but in this instance, at least, I am not your enemy.*”

“And yet, here you are in Federation space, in violation of treaty,” Kirk countered.

“*A position with which you are intimately familiar,*” she threw back at him, “*yet we are in your space in search of one of our vessels, as I already explained—a vessel that has gone rogue—not to spy on you or steal your latest technology.*”

“If it’s truly a rogue vessel, Commander, then you have no legitimate reason not to return to Romulan space and leave its fate to us,” Kirk pointed out to her just as Doctor McCoy arrived on the bridge.

“*Hello, Doctor,*” Charvon said, obviously having noticed his arrival. “*Tell me, have you cured any Vulcan death-grips lately?*”

McCoy looked up at the woman, surprised to see her, obviously uncomfortable, and apparently unsure as to how to respond. He glanced at Kirk, who didn’t offer him any help, then looked back at her and simply answered, “No, not lately.”

“*How about not ever?*”

“Okay,” McCoy replied as he stepped down to Kirk’s side, having no idea what else to say. “If you insist.”

“How about we get back to the business at hand, Commander?” Kirk threw out at her.

“*The business at hand, as you refer to it, is Tal-Shiar business, Captain,*” she claimed as let McCoy off the hook and turned her attention back to him, “*and Tal-Shiar business is*

an internal matter to the star empire, no longer of any concern to the Federation.”

“*This Tal-Shiar business is of concern to the Federation, Commander, and will be for as long as they’re operating in Federation space,*” Kirk countered. “*And if you truly aren’t my enemy, you’ll immediately set course directly for the neutral zone and return to your home space as quickly as possible.*”

She glared at him for a few moments, then nodded to someone off screen and replied, “*Very well, Captain Kirk. We are altering course directly for the neutral zone. Stand by for a moment.*”

The viewscreen went black. No stars, just black. She’d cut visual and muted audio, but hadn’t closed the channel.

“What the devil’s a Tal-Shiar?” McCoy asked Kirk.

“Romulan version of Section Thirty-One, I suspect,” Kirk replied.

McCoy sighed loudly and rolled his eyes. “Oh, good. I wasn’t satisfied with only one group of shady spooks in the galaxy.”

Kirk looked over at Spock. “Can you confirm they’ve altered course?” he asked.

“Yes, sir,” Spock replied immediately. “Course changed confirmed. Romulan warbird on a direct heading to the neutral zone.” Then he pointed out, “That course will bring them very close to us as they pass, Captain.”

“Weapons?”

“No increase in power levels,” Spock reported. “Nor has the commander raised their shields. She does *not* appear to be preparing to take aggressive action.”

“The Romulan commander is on again, sir,” Palmer advised the captain.

Kirk looked up at the viewscreen just as Charvon’s image reappeared and she started speaking again. “*I have just been in contact with my government, Captain,*” she said. “*The Praetor himself has asked me to convey his official apology to the Federation regarding the illegal actions taken by the Tal-Shiar. The Rihannsu... Excuse me. The Romulan Star Empire regrets the loss of life and property suffered by the United Federation of Planets as a result of those actions. Neither the Praetor nor the Senate desire that a state of war exist between our two governments, and both promise that the Tal-Shiar will be dealt with most severely.*”

“I’ll pass that on to my government,” Kirk told her, his disbelief obvious and clearly evident in his tone.

Charvon sneered, clearly having not missed it. Then she said, “*On a more personal note, Captain, I have not forgotten and most certainly have not forgiven you for what you did to me two years ago.*”

“Come now, Commander, you know how the game is played.”

“*Indeed I do, Captain,*” she admitted freely. “*Our technology advances, and you steal it. You are one up on me, Kirk, so I owe you.*” She glared at him very seriously. “*So consider yourself warned. The time for retribution may yet come one day.*”

The viewscreen went black, and then the stars reappeared.

Kirk drew a deep breath and exhaled slowly, then called, “Spock?”

“They remain on course to the neutral zone, sir,” the first officer informed him without having to be asked. “They will pass us less than three thousand kilometers distant in six point five seconds. No change in weapons or shield status.”

“An official apology from the Romulan Praetor himself?” McCoy asked Kirk quietly.

“One certainly does not get one of those every day.”

“Indeed one does not, Doctor,” Spock confirmed as he stood up straight and faced the center of the bridge. “Romulan vessel has passed us, Captain, and remains on course for the neutral zone,” he reported. Then he met McCoy’s gaze and said, “Such an apology is indeed unheard of, Doctor, and should be considered suspect at best.”

“Well, at least the commander made up for it with her clearly stated threat,” McCoy replied sarcastically.

“Spock is right,” Kirk said as he thought over everything that had happened since they left Starbase-4. Enemies within the Federation—perhaps even within Starfleet itself. They very thought of it was almost too much to believe. “The Praetor’s apology, if he really even offered one, should indeed be considered suspect. It very well might have been born out of a hope that we don’t already suspect the Tal-Shiar of having allies within the Federation.”

“And a further hope that apologizing to us may urge us to consider the matter closed,” Spock added.

“Closed?” McCoy asked with irony. “After what they did to us? That’ll be the day.”

“A matter for diplomats and politicians, gentlemen,” Kirk pointed out. “Let’s go find that bird-of-prey. Mister Spock, keep an eye on that warbird—make sure she doesn’t double back on us.” Spock returned to his scope. “Mister Walkinig Bear, continue search pattern.”

“Continuing search pattern, sir,” Walking Bear acknowledged.

* * * * *

Feeling as tired as she could be, but having lain in bed for more than an hour, unable even to begin to fall asleep, Starfleet Academy Dean Laura Roslyn relaxed in her nightgown in the overstuffed chair in the corner of her bedroom with her feet up on the stool. Actually, as she stared at the disturbing data her PADD was displaying on its screen, its light, together with the dim moonlight shining in through the curtained windows providing the room’s only illumination, she realized that ‘relaxing’ might not have been the best way to describe what she was doing. ‘Fretting over’ was probably the more accurate description.

The numbers hung on the screen in front of her, cold and accurate, unfeeling.

Vulcan:	248.
Andoria:	2,937.
Tellar Prime:	959.
Babel:	3,637,492.
Earth:	Data Pending.

My God, she agonized in silence. More than three and a half million souls lost, and that doesn’t even include the numbers from Earth. What have we done?

The door chimes played. She heard them, but several seconds passed before exactly what she’d heard registered with her conscious mind. *Couldn’t wait until morning?* she then thought as she raised her eyes toward the bedroom doorway. The chimes played again. “All

right, all right,” she said aloud with a sigh as she stood up and tossed her PADD onto her bed. She pulled on her robe and tied it off on her way out of the bedroom. “Lights, low.”

She walked into the foyer and, knowing without a doubt who had come to see her—as if it ever would have been anyone else at this hour—commanded, “Front door, open.” The door immediately opened and the man stepped inside. He’s worn very different clothing this time, jeans and pullover shirt instead of a suit, but still all in black. “Why do you always have to bring these updates to me in the middle of the night?” she asked him. She’d meant it to be a rhetorical question, but he offered up an answer anyway, albeit an old one.

“We do our best work at night,” he replied as the door closed behind him.

“Maybe we should have met with the Romulans at night,” she then remarked as she turned and headed into her study. “Come on.” The lights came up to their lowest setting as she walked in. “What’ve you got for me?” she asked when she heard him follow.

“You’re not going to like it,” he warned her.

“I already don’t like it,” she replied as she walked around behind her desk and then gestured toward the chair in front of it.

The man pulled the chair out and sat down as he answered, “They tried to plant spies and followed the *Enterprise* to Parliament.”

“If we know about the spies then I assume we have them in custody?” she inquired.

“We know about one—an Ambassador Sarek lookalike—and yes, we have him,” the man confirmed. “I’m only assuming there are more at this point.”

“What about security at Parliament?”

“In place and sufficient. Except for that spy’s attempted escape and subsequent arrest, the conference went off without a hitch. A Romulan bird-of-prey tried to cause some trouble from orbit, but the starships chased it off. *Enterprise* is looking for it now.”

“*Enterprise*?” she asked. “I thought she was assigned to the security detail.”

“Kirk passed those orders off to Captain MacLeod and the *Endeavour*.”

“He did what?” she asked, hardly believing her ears. “He passed... Starfleet Command can nail him for that—get him out of our way for us.”

The man snickered. “This is James T. Kirk we’re talking about,” he reminded her. “Do you really believe Command will bust *him* for disobeying orders?”

“Why not? I mean, I’m aware of his reputation, but he *did* just disregard his orders out of hand, and he *is* still subject to the regulations after all.”

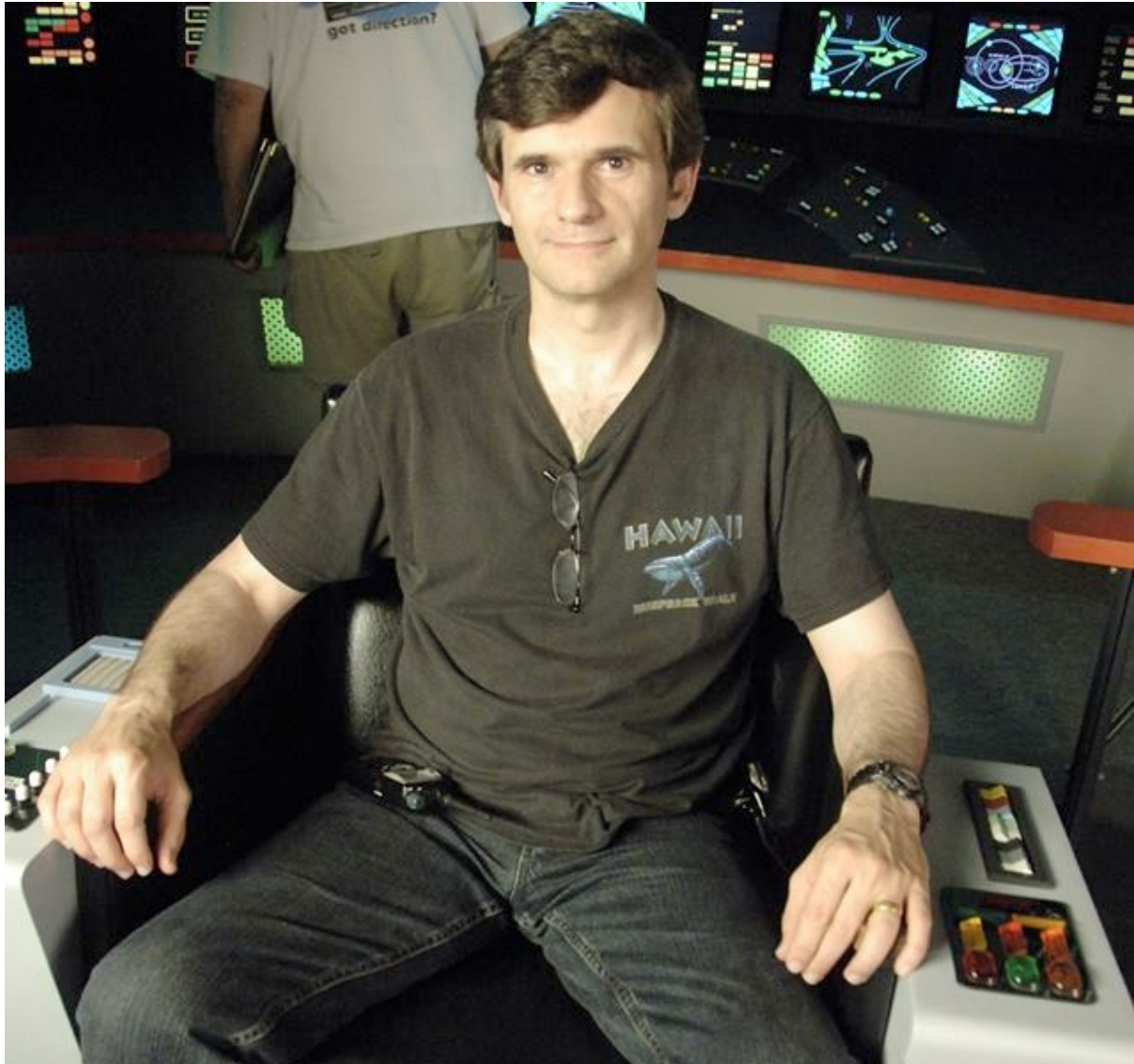
“I could show you a whole list of admirals who aren’t so sure about that,” the man told her. “Besides...he’s got Nogura on his side, remember?”

She sighed. “Right. That could be a problem.”

“Sure as hell was the last time,” he reminded her. “He has a lot of allies, Admiral. We pushed Nogura once already and that came back and bit us right in the ass. If we push Kirk, someone’s apt to take another bite, and we’re fast running out of cheeks.”

“You’re absolutely right about that,” she admitted. “We have to disassociate ourselves from everything that’s happened, now more than ever. Lie low for a while. Damage control. Erase all evidence of our involvement with the Tal-Shiar, those back-stabbing... Including the spy, Harry. I want him in *our* custody. Bring him back here, secretly, if you can. If you can’t do that, then I want him dead.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Glenn E. Smith is the author of the continuing “Solfleet” military science-fiction and “Legend of the Khi-Mara” fantasy series of novels, and writes the upcoming comic series “Sentient” for Dragon Phoenix Media™.

He joined the Star Trek New Voyages/Phase-II production crew in 2007 for the filming of the episode “Blood and Fire,” during which he served as a production assistant and bit player. He also served as Second Assistant Director for the filming of the episode “Enemy: Starfleet” and First Assistant Director for the filming of the vignette “Going Boldly” and the as yet unreleased episode “Bread and Savagery.” Glenn scripted two episodes for the series as well. Unfortunately, production of additional episodes was halted before either of them could be considered and/or scheduled for production.

ABOUT NEW VOYAGES: PHASE II



In the mid-1960s, one science-fiction series was made that would later become the most popular Sci-fi series in the world: Star Trek. What started as a simple television series went on to develop into a massive franchise of 726 TV episodes, 12 movies, many novels, dozens of computer games and other products. However, The Original Series (TOS) was only made for 3 seasons before the show was axed back in 1969.

James Cawley had already built the bridge, sickbay and several other sets from the original blueprints, when he teamed up with the director Jack Marshall and a number of fans whose aim it was to create the missing two years of the original five year mission under James T. Kirk.

The Star Trek New Voyages team started to create new episodes, based on the original series, to continue where Kirk and his crew had left off when their series was cancelled. They even numbered their episodes as the fourth season and released 11 new episodes (including the Pilot from 2003) and five vignettes, with three additional full episodes filmed, yet not released.

The series was made as a fan film project under the direction of James Cawley, who also played James T. Kirk in the New Voyages: Phase II incarnation until mid-2012 when Cawley passed on the iconic role of Captain Kirk to the professional actor Brian Gross. James continued to helm the show as Executive Producer, making costumes etc.

As this was a fan-film project, we could only work with actors who volunteered their time. This made it necessary to recast a number of actors since production began in 2003. There have been two "James T. Kirks" (James Cawley and Brian Gross), three "Mr Spocks" (Jeffrey Quinn, Ben Tolpin and Brandon Stacy), two "Dr McCoys" (John Kelley and Jeff Bond), three "Lt Uhuras" (Julienne Irons, Kim Stinger and Jasmine Pierce), five "Pavel Chekovs" (Jasen Tucker, Walter Koenig, Andy Bray, Jonathan Zungree and Brian Tubbs) and four "Hikaru Sulus" (John Lim, George Takei, J.T. Tepnapa and Shyaporn Theerakulstit). [See our cast list for full details.](#)

The production values are so high, that several of the original actors and crew have decided to join in and help them create the episodes. This includes Walter Koenig (Chekov) and George Takei (Sulu) who were able to resume their original roles in this fan-series. Other original guest stars include BarBara Luna, Eddie Paskie, John Winston and Mary Linda Rapelye as well as Denise Crosby ("Tasha Yar", TNG) and Bill Blair who originally starred

in DS9). Original writers have also worked on the series including D.C Fontana and David Gerrold.

The visual effects for “Come What May”, “In Harm’s Way” and “Center Seat” were made for us by Doug Drexler under the alias “Max Rem”. Doug is known for his work on TNG and all subsequent Star Trek Shows and he even designed the “Enterprise NX-01.”

Also on board were, Daren R. Dochterman, known for his work on the Director's Cut of “Star Trek: The Motion Picture” DVD. For us, he worked on the opening title sequence and also provided “retro” visual effects for Mind-Sifter.

Joel Bellucci provided the visual effects for Blood and Fire and was then also joined by Pony Horton. Pony is probably the only VFX artist who actually worked with the original VFX artists that made the original series. This includes Hugh Wade, Frank Van der Veer, and Barry Nolan who taught Pony directly how to make the various effects, including the transporter. Pony took on the role of VFX Supervisor for Kitumba and later episodes.

Finally, Tobias Richter joined the team in 2009 who is well known for his beautiful space related visual effects. His work can be seen in Enemy Starfleet and all later episodes. Tobias is Germany’s top CGI-expert working from his Cologne based company, “The Light Works”. www.thelightworks.com

On June 23, 2016 - CBS released new [Fan-film guidelines](#) which made it impossible for us to continue making new episodes. It was decided to close Star Trek New Voyages and open our sets to the public as The Star Trek Original Series Set Tour under license from CBS. www.startrektour.com

Although the production of new filmed episodes has ended, Star Trek New Voyages episodes will remain online through our Star Trek New Voyages International website and fan-club.

As we can no longer make new fan-films, we have started to release a series of new stories in eBook form (PDF and Kindle), written by New Voyages crew member Glenn E. Smith. These stories were initially released in 2014 and are based on the New Voyages timeline. They are now being re-released as a way of providing additional stories to our fan-base around the world.

STAR TREK ORIGINAL SERIES SET TOUR



If you ever wanted to experience what it would be like to visit the set of Star Trek: The Original Series, now is your chance. Star Trek super-fan James Cawley is honoring the 50th anniversary of the iconic franchise with the opening of his meticulously designed TOS set tour. Located in historic Ticonderoga, New York, and under license by CBS Consumer Products, the set tour brings memories to life by allowing fans to boldly go and tour the sets of the legendary Starship Enterprise.

Stage 9 at Desilu -- now Paramount Pictures -- in Hollywood comes back into focus, as the sets have been re-created exactly as they were laid at Desilu during the original run of TOS. Visitors can step onto the soundstage and be transported directly back to 1966. Additionally, beginning later this month, visitors will enjoy guided tours, photo opportunities and an immersive experience into the world of the classic television series.

Cawley started creating the sets in 1997 after receiving a copy of the original set blueprints from TOS costume designer William Ware Theiss. He then spent 15 years researching, crafting and refining his set replicas alongside other dedicated fans and craftspeople, including Trek alumni and fellow fans prop fabricator Ed Miarecki and concept designer and SFX supervisor Daren R. Dochterman.

Pouring over stills and frame captures from TOS and sourcing vintage materials and antiques, Cawley ensured that even the smallest details were accurately and lovingly reproduced. This spanned from an array of props to set decorations. The result is a stunning achievement offering the most complete and accurate reproduction of the original TOS standing sets.

“To me, there is no other franchise around that is more enjoyable and more socially relevant than Star Trek,” James Cawley said in a statement. “I’m very thankful for all the support I’ve received on this project and can’t wait to begin welcoming my fellow fans this summer.”

For more information about James Cawley’s Star Trek: The Original Series re-created sets and how to tour them - go to www.StarTrekTour.com

NEW VOYAGES FAN CLUB

New Voyages Fan Club

What is this Fan Club, what can I expect?

The New Voyages Fan Club has been setup to provide our fans with access to additional downloads, information, posters, etc. We are celebrating the series and adding to the information and downloads about the series from our archives.

Here are some of the free perks available for members of our new fan area:

- Exclusive 16:9 Widescreen edition of Mind-Sifter to watch online or download
- Hi-res downloads of our HD episodes - see the episodes in even better quality
- Downloadable DVD-images (ISO) for all our episodes, complete with extras, subtitles and even artwork
- High-quality Poster and picture downloads
- Wallpaper with pictures of our ships, etc.
- Our exclusive newsletter for fans
- And more to be added in future.

More details can be found on our website. Membership requires registration and is free:

<http://www.stnv.de/fanclub>

NEW VOYAGES: PHASE II EPISODES



This is a list of episodes in the order they were released (although not necessarily the order they were filmed). Please note that the episodes take place in a different order to that of the timeline when they take place. A list of [episodes in chronological order](#) can be found in the next chapter.

Clicking the episode title will take you to the respective episode page on our website. There, you can watch the trailer, get additional information and download or watch the episode online. Of course this only makes sense if you are reading this with a computer, tablet or smartphone. If you are using a Kindle with e-ink display, then what you can do on our website will be limited.

[Episode 00: Come What May \(Pilot\)](#)

After receiving a distress call, the USS Enterprise, commanded by Captain James T. Kirk (James Cawley), is assigned to investigate an intruder attacking the Primus IV colony. Once there, the crew encounters a strange alien life form that can produce visions of personal events displaced in time. These visions may hold the key to better understanding the threat they are about to encounter.

[Episode 01: In Harm's Way](#)

In an adventure that spans centuries, Captain Kirk fights alongside a U.S.S. Enterprise from the past to stop the devastating "Doomsday Wars" that should never have happened. In a universe forever changed by those events, the crew of the Enterprise must once again battle the powerful juggernaut known as the "Doomsday Machine."

[Episode 02: To Serve All My Days](#)

While a Klingons ship is threatening the Enterprise and Captain Kirk needs Chekov on the bridge, but Lt. Chekov is incapacitated with a debilitating disease that is causing him to age rapidly... a disease for which Dr. McCoy can find no cure.

Episode 03: World Enough and Time

A Romulan weapons test goes awry and snares the Enterprise in an inter-dimensional trap. Lt. Commander Sulu returns to find himself 30 years out of place and the key to saving the crew of the Enterprise as the precarious grasp on their own dimension begins to slip.

Episode 04-5: Blood and Fire – Parts 1 and 2 / Movie

Pursued and damaged by repeated Klingon attacks, the crew of the Enterprise must respond to the distress call from a Federation research ship. In a matter of hours the ship and crew will be consumed by a nearby star and the crew of the Enterprise will be consumed by an mysterious horror that threatens both ships as the Klingons watch and wait. The horrific story finds a battle damaged Enterprise caught between an incurable contagion that threatens to overrun the galaxy, the pull of a dying star, and Klingons poised to attack. Like all of the best Star Trek episodes, “Blood and Fire” finds the Enterprise crew facing their own human fears and failings as they have to weigh the costs and decide how much personal risk to take in order to save the people around them.

Episode 06: Enemy Starfleet

Attacked while exploring a new sector of space, Captain James T. Kirk and his crew find themselves thrust in the middle of a war. The USS Eagle, lost eight years before, is now in the clutches of a woman who bends starships and their captains to her will and has been reverse engineered into a fleet that is bent on domination and genocide. The Enterprise may be the only ship able to stop the Peshan homeworld from falling to Alerisa and her enemy starfleet.

Episode 07: The Child

While the Enterprise passes through a strange energy cloud, a mysterious light force enters the ship and impregnates Ensign Isel who, within days, gives birth to a baby girl, Irska. The child grows up at a tremendous rate and while she appears to be human, it is feared she could endanger the ship after a strange alien spacecraft appears and puts everyone in jeopardy....

Episode 08: Kitumba

"Kitumba" depicts the Enterprise on a suicide mission to the heart of the Klingon Empire. Pulled in every direction by warlords and people that have their own agenda, the Kitumba suddenly finds himself confronting his very enemy: Captain James Kirk and the Enterprise. The choices he makes will resonate through the galaxy for years to come.

Episode 09: Mind-Sifter

When the crew of the Enterprise is forced to accept the death of Captain Kirk, Spock and McCoy must come to terms with their own grief, but when Spock discovers a plot by the Klingons to send Kirk back in time in order to destroy the Federation, it will take all the

courage and abilities of the crew of the Enterprise to rescue their beloved Captain in time before he succumbs to the horrific torture of the Mind-Sifter.

Episode 10: The Holiest Thing

Captain James T. Kirk's (Brian Gross) first encounter with the charismatic scientist Doctor Carol Marcus (Jacy King), who is specialized in Terraforming. Carol is the woman who one day will mother Kirk's son David and also break his heart. Doctor Marcus is leading a terraforming project on Planet Lappa III that goes horribly wrong and devastates the planet. Was it her fault? Or is a mysterious black market operation behind the catastrophe? Kirk and the crew of the refitted, USS Enterprise, investigate.

Vignette 01: Center Seat

While Sulu was away at Command Training, Lt. Desalle has made himself comfortable with the responsibility of running the Bridge of the Enterprise when Captain Kirk is off duty. Upon Sulu's return to Enterprise, he is dismayed to find Desalle in the Captain's chair hardly paying Sulu any mind. Once Sulu re-asserts himself as the XO on the bridge, he takes the Ship out for a shakedown based on his homework from Command Training ...

Vignette 02: No Win Scenario

After being pitted against Kirk in a Klingon version of the “no-win scenario,” Kargh would hunger for the day when he and Kirk would meet for real. His hunger is soon satisfied!

Vignette 03: 1701 Pennsylvania Av.

What would it be like if president Richard Nixon was a big Star Trek fan? Nixon was elected US-president in both 1968 and 1972, but he had to resign after a scandal broke about members of his staff bugging meetings in the Watergate hotel in Washington, D.C., and recordings of the president's activities lacked 18 minutes that were never recovered.

Vignette 04: Going Boldly

A memorial service is held for lost crewmembers while the Enterprise is being refitted for new adventures. Introduces Brian Gross as James T. Kirk.

Vignette 05: Timeline Restored

Two Enterprises meet from different timelines. Can our Enterprise repair the timeline that had gone adrift in time?

EPISODES IN CHRONOLOGICAL ORDER

Our episodes were not made in the same order as they take place on the timeline. So to help you work it out, here is a list of our episodes in chronological order according to stardate (where available) and/or events in the episodes. A list of [episodes in the order they were released, can be found here](#).

Please note that this does cause some paradoxes as the Enterprise gets a refit with new nacelles in Going Boldly, as can be seen in The Holiest Thing, yet the stardate puts The Child much later with the old round nacelles. Kitumba logically takes place after "The Child" despite its stardate. For these reasons, we have placed The Child and Kitumba just before Going Boldly to better fit it in with the events and actors seen in the episodes. Two episodes also include flashback scenes from after the 5-year mission (World Enough and Time as well as The Holiest Thing), but we have not taken that into account.

Vignette 03: 1701 Pennsylvania Av. (Stardate: 20.07.1969)

What would it be like if President Richard Nixon was a big Star Trek fan? Nixon was elected US-president in both 1968 and 1972, but he had to resign after a scandal broke about members of his staff bugging meetings in the Watergate hotel in Washington, D.C., and recordings of the president's activities lacked 18 minutes that were never recovered.

Vignette 02: No Win Scenario (Stardate: Unknown)

After being pitted against Kirk in a Klingon version of the "no-win scenario," Kargh would hunger for the day when he and Kirk would meet for real. His hunger is soon satisfied!

Episode 00: Come What May (Pilot) Stardate: 6010.1

After receiving a distress call, the USS Enterprise, commanded by Captain James T. Kirk (James Cawley), is assigned to investigate an intruder attacking the Primus IV colony. Once there, the crew encounters a strange alien life form that can produce visions of personal events displaced in time. These visions may hold the key to better understanding the threat they are about to encounter.

Episode 09: Mind-Sifter (Stardate: Unknown)

When the crew of the Enterprise is forced to accept the death of Captain Kirk, Spock and McCoy must come to terms with their own grief, but when Spock discovers a plot by the Klingons to send Kirk back in time in order to destroy the Federation, it will take all the courage and abilities of the crew of the Enterprise to rescue their beloved Captain in time before he succumbs to the horrific torture of the Mind-Sifter.

Episode 01: In Harm's Way (Stardate: Unknown)

In an adventure that spans centuries, Captain Kirk fights alongside a U.S.S. Enterprise from the past to stop the devastating "Doomsday Wars" that should never have happened. In a universe forever changed by those events, the crew of the Enterprise must once again battle the powerful juggernaut known as the "Doomsday Machine."

Vignette 01: Center Seat (Stardate: Unknown - Between IHW and TSAMD)

While Sulu was away at Command Training, Lt. Desalle has made himself comfortable with the responsibility of running the Bridge of the Enterprise when Captain Kirk is off duty. Upon Sulu's return to Enterprise, he is dismayed to find Desalle in the Captain's chair hardly paying Sulu any mind. Once Sulu re-asserts himself as the XO on the bridge, he takes the Ship out for a shakedown based on his homework from Command Training ...

Episode 02: To Serve All My Days (Stardate: 6031.2)

While a Klingons ship is threatening the Enterprise and Captain Kirk needs Chekov on the bridge, but Lt. Chekov is incapacitated with a debilitating disease that is causing him to age rapidly... a disease for which Dr. McCoy can find no cure.

Episode 03: World Enough and Time (Stardate: 6283.4)

A Romulan weapons test goes awry and snares the Enterprise in an inter-dimensional trap. Lt. Commander Sulu returns to find himself 30 years out of place and the key to saving the crew of the Enterprise as the precarious grasp on their own dimension begins to slip.

Episode 04-5: Blood and Fire – Parts 1 and 2 / Movie (Stardate: 6429.2)

Pursued and damaged by repeated Klingon attacks, the crew of the Enterprise must respond to the distress call from a Federation research ship. In a matter of hours the ship and crew will be consumed by a nearby star and the crew of the Enterprise will be consumed by an mysterious horror that threatens both ships as the Klingons watch and wait. The horrific story finds a battle damaged Enterprise caught between an incurable contagion that threatens to overrun the galaxy, the pull of a dying star, and Klingons poised to attack. Like all of the best Star Trek episodes, “Blood and Fire” finds the Enterprise crew facing their own human fears and failings as they have to weigh the costs and decide how much personal risk to take in order to save the people around them.

Episode 06: Enemy Starfleet (Stardate: 7232.5)

Attacked while exploring a new sector of space, Captain James T. Kirk and his crew find themselves thrust in the middle of a war. The USS Eagle, lost eight years before, is now in the clutches of a woman who bends starships and their captains to her will and has been reverse engineered into a fleet that is bent on domination and genocide. The Enterprise may be the only ship able to stop the Peshan homeworld from falling to Aleria and her enemy starfleet.

Episode 07: The Child (Stardate: 9717.7)

While the Enterprise passes through a strange energy cloud, a mysterious light force enters the ship and impregnates Ensign Isel who, within days, gives birth to a baby girl, Irska. The child grows up at a tremendous rate and while she appears to be human, it is feared she could endanger the ship after a strange alien spacecraft appears and puts everyone in jeopardy....

Episode 08: Kitumba (Stardate: 2623.3)

"Kitumba" depicts the Enterprise on a suicide mission to the heart of the Klingon Empire. Pulled in every direction by warlords and people that have their own agenda, the Kitumba suddenly finds himself confronting his very enemy: Captain James Kirk and the Enterprise. The choices he makes will resonate through the galaxy for years to come.

Vignette 04: Going Boldly (Stardate: Unknown)

A memorial service is held for lost crewmembers while the Enterprise is being refitted for new adventures. Introduces Brian Gross as James T. Kirk.

Episode 10: The Holiest Thing (Stardate: 7713.6)

Captain James T. Kirk's (Brian Gross) first encounter with the charismatic scientist Doctor Carol Marcus (Jacy King), who is specialized in Terraforming. Carol is the woman who one day will mother Kirk's son David and also break his heart. Doctor Marcus is leading a terraforming project on Planet Lappa III that goes horribly wrong and devastates the planet. Was it her fault? Or is a mysterious black market operation behind the catastrophe? Kirk and the crew of the refitted, USS Enterprise, investigate.

ABOUT US

Star Trek New Voyages: Phase II, International is a small non-profit team dedicated to preserving the legacy episodes and running the fan-club. We started out in 2008 as the New Voyages download mirror for UK and Germany providing subtitles for the episodes in English and German. We expanded our operations to run the website in four languages (English, French, German and Spanish) with a team of translators for subtitles in up to 13 languages. We also organized the showing of our episodes in European conventions. With the closure of New Voyages in the USA, we took on full responsibility for maintaining the existing episodes while the production team turned the studio into an official set tour. We are now in the process of continuing to release more New Voyages episodes as free eBooks.

We are responsible for the following resources:

<https://www.youtube.com/user/startrekphase2DE>

<http://www.dailymotion.com/startreknewvoyages>

<https://www.facebook.com/startreknewvoyages>

<https://vimeo.com/startreknewvoyages>

<http://www.trekcon.de>

<http://forums.stnv.de>

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