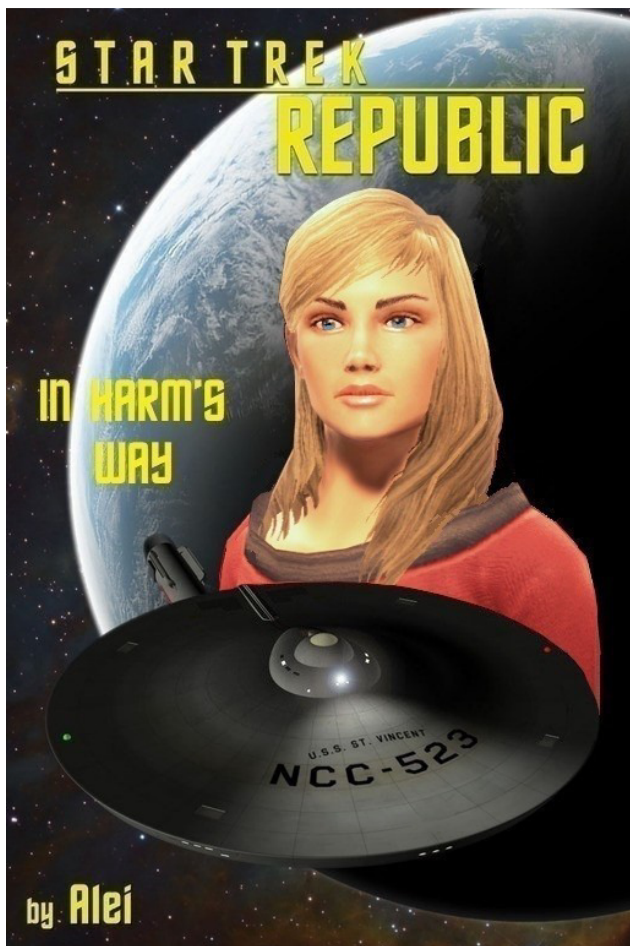


STAR TREK REPUBLIC - IN HARM'S WAY



STAR TREK REPUBLIC - IN HARM'S WAY

Peace does not come
without sacrifice or loss.

Nor does it come without courage
and the willingness to place oneself in danger
for the sake of others.

In the end though, we depend on people such as these.
Not the great and the mighty or the superhuman,
but those who toil so often in the shadows,
unrecognized, until need compels them forth.

Heroes, my friends, are not extraordinary people.
They are ordinary people who,
in times of great need,

Do the extraordinary

Flag Admiral Franklin Corely .
Romulan War Memorial .
Memory Alpha .
Stardate 28412.15 .

STAR TREK REPUBLIC - IN HARM'S WAY

Star Trek Republic

In Harm's Way

A Star Trek Fan Fiction by
Aleí

Cover by Jord and Nate

Produced by
Cascade East Productions

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STAR TREK REPUBLIC - IN HARM'S WAY

This book is dedicated to

Doug

Nate

Karrin

and Jord

without whose inspiration and assistance, this work would
not have been possible.

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Star Trek – Republic In Harm's Way

Scene 1

***Commander Elizabeth Macklin
Executive Officer/Chief Engineer
USS St. Vincent NCC-523
Stardate 27112.30***



The stars slid by, like a carpet of black velvet with diamond sparkles. It was times like these that made a career out here worthwhile and moments like these worth spending. Yes ... something special indeed and I one of the privileged few who got to see it this way.

If only everything else wasn't so god-damned awful boring.

I glanced down at the Tactical Display nestled between

the Helm and Navigator's stations and noted the task force's position. Everything was as it should be, we and the *Collingswood* keeping station on the *Nelson*, while the smaller frigates, *Leander* and *Agamemnon*, ranged out further ahead, casting their sensor webs out into the blackness of space, looking for the faintest of echoes telling them that something ... anything was out there.

And the task force would need that warning if a conflict ever erupted here. The *Nelson's* wings of heavy warp fightercraft were a formidable force indeed, but they needed time to prep and launch and her escort group was here to make sure she got that time.

Not that she would be needed, of course. It had been well over 100 years since the Federation and the Romulan Empire had last crossed lasers in the cold emptiness of interstellar space, and it seemed unlikely that the long cold war along the Neutral Zone would heat up any time soon.

Still, one didn't stay alive for long out here making those kinds of assumptions. I knew all about that. Being a line officer serving on a starship, even one tasked to Military Operations Command, was a dangerous duty. Just too many things could go wrong and when they did, people died.

I swiveled my chair as I heard the distinctive swoosh of the turbolift doors opening behind me.

"Well, Elizabeth, how's my ship?" asked Captain Andras Grave as he strode on to the Command Deck.

I rose from his command chair, brushed a lock of unruly blonde hair from my eyes, and smiled. "She's still in one piece, sir. We're still keeping station on the pregnant cow to starboard and the frigates out front haven't sniffed out anything more interesting than interstellar dust mites."

Andras frowned with mock gravity. "A 'pregnant cow' is hardly a proper title for one of Star Fleet's finest, Commander."

"Well that's how she looks, sir, and she doesn't maneuver much better," I replied with equal mock seriousness.

That almost brought a chuckle to his lips. I was right and he and everyone else knew it. The *Nelson* and her sisters really did look like a heavy cruiser that was 9 months pregnant and all that additional mass made her maneuver like one as well. But her job was to carry her flock into position and let their sting do her talking for her.

Normally she'd be back near some Starbase waiting for something horrible to happen or traveling to some friendly world to show the flag, but someone at Fleet had come up with the brilliant idea for this little cruise along the Neutral Zone. Oh well, at least it got the rest of us out into open space for a while.

"Well don't let Admiral Hayes hear you talk about his baby like that, Elizabeth, he might take exception," and this time he did let out a soft chuckle. "Report."

There really wasn't much to report but as the Officer of the Deck it was my responsibility to inform my relief of every little inconsequential thing about the operation of the ship and its findings that I thought relevant. There was a lot of the inconsequential and not a lot that seemed relevant, but who knew what might be important.

"... and the *Collingswood* is experiencing some minor sensor glitches, but nothing serious."

"Thank you, Commander, you are relieved," said the Captain as he settled down for his sure to be not so interesting time on deck. "Oh, and by the way ... I've been practicing my backhand for tomorrow."

"It'll take more than that, sir," I replied with a mischievous grin. "Maybe some anti-grav training? They did teach that at the Academy when you were there? Or had they invented grav plates yet, I forget."

"No, young lady, we were still writing with picks on stone tablets back then ... God, why I put up with an uppity XO like you is beyond me," he fumed.

"Because I make your life more interesting, sir," I replied cheerily as I retreated to the Engineering Bridge Station to check on my baby before going off shift.

"How's she behaving, Tomlin?" I asked the Andorian Engineer as I looked over the readouts from the Engineering Station.

"She appears to be behaving adequately superior, Ma'am," he responded. "Of course at warp two I am thinking we are straining her not overmuch."

"True, but there's always room for improvement," I said with a grin.

Delicately, my hands swept over the controls as I reviewed each of the displays as the *St. Vincent* spoke to me. I'd only served on her for a little more than a year,

but she and I were already old friends. I knew her aches and groans, her moods and her sweet little surprises. Ships were like people that way; know and respect them and they could work miracles for you.

The "Vinny" was a destroyer and was as fast and maneuverable as the *Nelson* was slow and sluggish. She had a large, circular hull, almost identical to that of a heavy cruiser's, but with only a single warp nacelle slung underneath and no cylindrical secondary hull. It was a lot less mass to move around and a more efficient warp field by far than the heavier starships.

The Vinny had the same weaponry too ... but with a main energizer with only half the rating. A destroyer like the Vinny or the *Collingswood* could unleash a lot of firepower provided the bad guys gave them enough time to charge everything.

I looked over at Tomlin. "Well, I'm going down to Engineering, but tomorrow we'll need to finish that game of Tsholtofan ... I still think you're cheating."

He looked back at me as his face assumed a darker blue shade of Andorian happiness while his demeanor showed nothing but shock. "I swear, superior Ma'am, that I would never do such a thing. However it might be

wise to study *all* of the rules before challenging one to such a contest."

I gave him a completely *I don't believe a word of it* look before heading towards the turbolift as the last of the members of the 1st watch arrived at their stations. I smiled at them as I entered the lift and hit the controls for Engineering.

The turbo had hardly moved when the world turned upside down.

I was on the floor, crumpled up against the wall ... my arm ached horribly, and I hadn't the first clue as to how I'd gotten there.

Emergency lights flickered in the smoke-filled interior of the stationary turbolift. Sparks from superconducting relays erupted occasionally from various locations as damaged circuits released their loads and failed.

Dear God, what was that?

Painfully, I managed to reach an upright position and look at the lift controls. It was pretty obvious that the Main

Automated Control Interface was damaged, hence the fact that I wasn't moving. But that didn't explain the rest.

I opened the panel and placed my hand on the manual controls, pressing up and out to return to the Bridge, but all that happened was a red flashing message.

"Cannot comply, Automated Damage Control procedures implemented. Emergency vacuum bulkheads sealed Decks 2 and above. Decks uninhabitable. "

I stared for less than a moment in sheer horror. The only way that could have happened was if ... if ...

... if the decks above me are ... Oh god ... no.

All those people, all my friends

No no no no NO!!!

My overwhelmed mind quickly spiraled through the list of natural events which could, without any warning, cause that to happen. It was a very short list, an almost

impossibly short list, which left only one likely conclusion.

oh my god, oh my god ...

Fighting back the horror I hit the intercom and activated shipwide.

"Attention! This is the XO. Set condition Red! Battlestations! Bridge crew report to Auxiliary Control immediately!!"

I grasped the lift's override control again and directed it toward the Auxiliary Control, simply praying that there'd be anything left, or any of us to control it by the time I arrived.

Scene #2

USS St. Vincent

Stardate 27112.30

The essence of command is making life and death situations in an environment of chaos with imperfect information.

I'd heard that phrase many times while in Command School, something that was drilled into each and every Cadet in the Academy. Life didn't always fit into nice neat little boxes. Plans, procedures, training, all of them could help, help to provide better information, help to reduce the chaos, help to save the lives of your crew and your ship.

But sometimes chaos won; sometimes there was too little information, too few resources, too little time, too much death.

As I watched the Viewscreen through the smoke and haze filling the *St. Vincent's* Auxiliary Control, I saw all of these things catch up with the *Collingswood*.

Captain Deveraux was one of the finest in the Fleet and the *Collingswood* an exceptional vessel, but Felicity

Deveraux was outnumbered and outgunned. I could almost put myself in her shoes as the bird-shaped Romulan Cruiser wavered into view directly in front of her battered vessel and released the distinctive red glob of warp-accelerated plasma toward her limping ship.

Unlike a phaser or a disruptor, a plasma torpedo is relatively slow, no faster than a starship at maximum warp. That gave you time to think about it as it closed in on you, time to consider how few options you had, time to consider what all of that raw energy would do to your shields and your ship, how the shield generators would quickly overload and burst, how the tritatinium of the hull would become molecularly unstable and brittle until it shattered... .

Captain Deveraux and her bridge crew had that time. Time to ponder, time to know that their crippled vessel couldn't maneuver, that their tattered shields couldn't possibly hold ... Time to say their final prayers before the plasma engulfed their ship, time to close their eyes as the shields flashed blue momentarily and failed. Time to scream as they and the forward half of their ship was immolated, melted and crushed, leaving behind only a drifting piece of flaming space junk where once a proud starship had been.

My god ... 240 people, dead, just like that.

That could be us ... will be us unless we're very lucky.

I looked around Auxiliary Control, really a miniature version of the Main Bridge nestled right in the center of the large disk-shaped hull, surrounded by the Main Computer Core and Sickbay. It was the safest part of the ship, which meant that we would probably be the last to die ... probably.

Some of us already had ... a plasma explosion from a damaged power main had seen to that and many other things as well. Those that were still unwounded were a mixed bunch, experienced officers working next to scared-looking ratings. The destruction of the Bridge had killed several people who should have been here, others simply hadn't arrived, which didn't speak well for their fate. Friends, associates ... dead, dying, trapped or simply dealing with emergencies which the multitude of red flashes on the Damage Control station's board indicated were everywhere.

But all the experienced officers in the world wouldn't help us at this moment. We were helpless, drifting and powerless. It wouldn't take long before some enterprising Romulan decided to finish us off, just in

case.

I looked to my board. Commanding the ship from the Engineer's station wasn't exactly a "by the book" move, but the Engineer who should have answered the red alert hadn't arrived and right now it didn't much matter. I might have been the St. Vincent's Executive Officer, but I was first and foremost the ship's Chief Engineer. Right now, more than anything else, that's what the St. Vincent desperately needed and I was it.

"Rodriguez," I snapped into the intercom that directly linked me to my assistant in Main Engineering. "Where the hell is my power?"

His voice came back a bit scratchy from power overloads to the com system. "We took a direct hit to the deflection crystal, Commander. It sent a power surge down through the Warp Core and initiated an emergency shut down. The Main and Secondary Energizers are all down, Ma'am, we're dead in space."

That shouldn't have happened ... the fail safes should have stopped that from happening.

What should have happened didn't matter though. It had happened and our only choice was to deal with it quickly

or die quickly.

I looked as my hands trembled. I wasn't scared, too much adrenaline for that, too much training. Terror kills the mind and when the mind dies in a crisis, so does the body. If that person happens to be the Captain, then they get to take a lot of people with them.

I'm not the Captain ...

But Andras is probably dead ... you're next. Get it together, Elizabeth, or there will be 240 names next to yours on your tombstone.

Think.

Losing the deflection crystal was bad news. With the new internal warp core design, it sat above the impulse engine directly above the Warp Core. When using auxiliary power, the Warp Core would pulse energy into the crystal which would then magnify it and channel that power into the Impulse drive, almost tripling the output from what the old fusion reactors had been able to accomplish in older vessels. If the Warp Core was offline, there were emergency fusion reactors that could also channel energy to the crystal at a much lower power level but still enough to make the Secondary Energizer

hum and the impulse engines move the ship.

But with the crystal damaged and the Warp Core offline, not only had we lost warp power, but also impulse and emergency power as well.

God, we are so screwed ...

Don't think like that ... parse the problem, Elizabeth ... prioritize.

... ..

Ok, we needed the Main Energizer and warp power. Even if we could restore auxiliary power somehow it wouldn't do us much good, not in a real fight. But with the Warp Core shut down, it might take hours to reenergize it and create a safe and usable reaction. We didn't have hours; even minutes would be pushing it.

I needed an idea ... I needed enough power to jumpstart the reaction ... and there was only one place we were going to find that kind of power.

I scanned my board, my hands flying over the controls as I rerouted what power was available, tied into the Main Engineering Computer and began to reconfigure the

emergency reactor emitters.

God, that's dangerous ... there's no way in a thousand years that's going to work, Elizabeth ... you're going to get everyone killed ...

"Well," I said softly to myself, "either I or the Romulans will, not a lot of options here."

A moment of doubt swept over me as the little girl that always seemed to be inside of me tried to run away and hide.

I shouldn't be the one making these decisions; it should be someone else. There should be a real command level officer here, someone that actually wants to be in command.

But there isn't, it's just you, Elizabeth.

Crud ...

I shook my head slightly and made my decision, there really was no one else that could.

"Ok, Rodriguez, here's what we're going to do," I said in as confident a voice as I could muster. "I want you to

bring the emergency impulse fusion reactors online."

"Way ahead of you, boss, we're rigging them to fire directly into the Secondary Energizer," the intercom replied.

A sensible action, it would give us a little power, maybe enough to raise our shields even or crawl a short while at a fraction the speed of light. But I had better uses for that energy.

"Belay that, Lieutenant. I want you to configure them to fire directly into the Warp Core. Align the magnetic fields for an emergency hot jump of the core and Main Energizer and I want it done yesterday. We have a couple of seconds to a couple of minutes before the Romulans turn us into plasma toast. Make it happen, Rodriquez!"

"But ... " the intercom scratched back at me. I could almost see him contemplating the same disastrous outcome that I was, his light brown face computing all the angles and possibilities. He would make a great Chief Engineer someday if he managed to live that long.

"Aye aye, Ma'am," the intercom squawked again, "I'll tell you when we're ready."

I looked up at the Main Viewscreen as one of the smaller Romulan vessels decloaked and sent disruptor fire rippling along the *Nelson's* port launch bay.

"You'd better hurry, Moreno ... you'd better hurry."

Scene #3

USS St. Vincent

Stardate 27112.30

My head bounced off the deck with a sickening thud as the world became a tilting whirlwind of sparks, smoke, grunts and screams.

All I could see were stars as I felt the inertial dampeners sluggishly respond to forces being applied against them. Another hit like that and it wouldn't matter anyway.

My ship was dying; I could almost feel her moan in pain as she tried to hold herself together. God knows how many structural members had been compromised, how many exterior breaches there were or how badly the hull had buckled and where.

Of course, that wasn't the primary concern. Mere metal cannot withstand the rigors of warp space or combat. It must constantly be strengthened with energy fields to give it the flexibility and strength that it needs and, unless I missed my guess, that energy was all but depleted.

I crawled back to the Engineering station and hauled

myself up to my feet, checking the status of the emergency batteries. They were just that, high-capacity long-life energy storage systems located throughout the ship designed to provide minimal life support and other essential systems energy in the case of an emergency ... but with a little desperation and rerouting, their energy could be used for other purposes.

Things like say, shunting power into the emergency defense fields. But that gambit had been used now and with reserve energy readings hovering around 2%, we wouldn't be using that trick again. In fact, it wouldn't be long until we lost life support. The Romulans didn't even need to do anything further, in a short while, most of us would be dead anyway.

I looked about the remainder of the Auxiliary Control; people wounded and bruised trying to man stations that were useless anyway, looking to me ... me for the answers. Answers I didn't have.

Those that were still alive that is....

What exactly do you tell people who are all about to die anyway? You'd think someone at Command School would have taught a course on that, but if so, I couldn't remember it.

I turned to the Communications Rating to order her to issue the abandon ship call when I heard something faint and scratchy from my console.

"we'r ... eady ...mmander."

I stared at it for a moment in disbelief...

Dear God, they're still alive.

I desperately punched the comm button. "Execute now, Lieutenant! Repeat, EXECUTE NOW!"

I forced my aching body to respond as adrenaline rushed through my system. I had no idea whether Rodriguez had heard me or even if it was him on the comm, but I didn't have time to worry about such things. My bloodied fingers flew over the controls, monitoring the energy levels as the Emergency Fusion Reactors begin to fire directly into the Warp Core, preheating and energizing the Intermix Chamber.

I watched as the energy levels rose ever higher, a paltry fraction of what they truly need to be, but beggars can't be choosers. I waited for a moment, almost feeling the reaction, reading the displays like a novel, trying to see

into the mind of something that has none.

Come on girl ... be good to me ...

It came suddenly ... that urgent feeling deep in my gut, that little voice inside you telling you, somehow ...

It's time.

I pressed the release command. Instantly hydrogen and antimatter fed into an Intermix Chamber that had been improperly energized the wrong kind of energy in the wrong amounts and in the wrong combination. With a matter-antimatter intermix, that was usually a combination for immolating one's starship.

But it was energy, it was a known quantity ... and now it would be a matter of skill, luck and more than a little desperation.

I saw the Fusion Reactors flash offline, their job done now for better or worse as a much more powerful reaction began. I watched as my engineering staff began the battle to save our lives. It was like seeing a movie through digital displays, energy curves and what seemed like a hundred red warning indicators flashing on in a matter of seconds. Containment fields being

strengthened and reconfigured, intermix formulas rapidly altered and applied, raw power pulsing at dangerously unpredictable levels and frequencies, energy that desperately needed a release.

I activated the Main Energizer, the device that takes the raw unrestrained energy of the Warp Core and converts it into usable frequencies and levels that can be used by the ship itself. It's a gamble, the variations are far outside of the design specs ... but we have no choice, not really.

I watched as the energy levels spiked and subsided, watching one dilutium matrix after another energize and then go offline as the power spikes fractured the crystals and caused them to blow. In a matter of moments the primaries were offline, nothing but shards and energized dust, but miraculously, one of the secondary matrices handles the load. They are lowly Grade B crystals with inferior qualities; their production is erratic, but as I hear the distinctive sound of my ship coming back to life around me I don't truly care. It's power ...

It's life ...

"Arm phasers and prepare to raise shields. Mr. Payson," I snapped at the helm officer. "Keep us adrift until my order."

Gripping the edge of my console I prayed silently for time ... just enough time ...

As I looked at the forward Viewscreen, the fabric of space seemed to waver ... distort as if it were being bent in a million odd angles, strangely beautiful in its own cold deadly way for I know what lies at its heart.

A ship coming out of cloak ... some Romulan has finally decided to deal with us once and for all. I looked over at the tactical display, all six heavy phaser batteries, phasers as heavy as any carried by any vessel in known space, flashed the urgent green of a full charge ...

They say that the Romulan cloaking devices are amazing things, but they consume huge amounts of power, power that has to come from somewhere. Star Fleet estimated that once the cloak is disengaged, it takes a moment or two for those massive energies to be transferred to ... well ... things like shields. It was time to find out if they were right.

My lips curled in a feral smile as I watched the Romulan ship seem to materialize in front of mine ... a giant raptor stooping for the kill of its helpless prey.

Not this time ... not this time ...

“Lock phasers and FIRE!!”

Scene #4

USS St. Vincent

Stardate 27112.30



Starships wheeled in the blackness ... streaks of silver, green, red, blue, whirling and spinning in the inky depths of space. The blue nimbus of phaser fire, intersecting with the angry red lines of disruptor bursts momentarily linking ... glowing ... blossoming in gouts of fire and energy.

From a distance, a battle in space must be have its own brand of unique, stark, deadly beauty.

On closer inspection, it was something else entirely. Up close the streaks of silver were ships, many of them scared and ejecting burning plasma, others, little more than spinning, burning pieces of wreckage. The beautiful beams of energy, deadly fingers of destruction seeking,

searching for any weakness in the defenses of their targets ...

One of those targets was my ship, the USS *St. Vincent* ... and we were in the middle of a truly bad day.

"Bring us to course one three five, mark four five, warp three!" I barked into the smoke-laden air. "Let's see if we can draw any of them away from the *Nelson*. Catherine, I *need* phasers."

"Aye aye, Ma'am," responded the young Ensign at the Helm. "Course one three five mark four five, warp three, recharging main phaser banks."

I could hear it in her voice, sense it in her bearing. The terror was there for her, just as it was for all of us.

Catherine Payson was a navigator, not a helm or tactical specialist. Her training did include familiarity with helm and weapons ops, but it wasn't as if this was where she would have reasonably expected to be in her young life. She was there because I had no one else available who was any better, at least no one who was here and still alive.

What a crushing responsibility for one so young, to hold

the lives of so many in their hands. And yet, as frightened as she was, she moved without the slightest hesitation, following her orders, unmindful even of the blood still splattered over her controls from Lt. Jamison, whose body lay slumped over the nearby burnt husk of the Navigator's Console.

I wanted to glance around the Bridge, to look at the hodgepodge group of officers and crew that had managed to make it here to Auxiliary Control. I knew that far too many here were like Ensign Payson, in way over their heads but here, doing what they could. But I didn't have the time, with Romulan vessels seeming to swirl around us from all directions at once; it was all I could do to keep track of what was going on as it was.

It was the training, I knew. The muscle and mental memory from countless hours of training and drill that allowed you to work through the fear and terror, the discipline to do your job even when your life is in imminent and immediate danger. It was keeping us together, keeping us alive ... for now.

"Chief?" I said, giving a questioning glance toward the Science Station station.

"It's workin', Ma'am," he replied, meeting my eyes. "One

oh the Romulan cruisers is breakin' ohf ta pursue us".

"Any sign of the other one?" I asked.

"Nah sign oh it at all, Ma'am," he replied, looking back into his readouts. "She's being out there somewhere, but I'll be dammed if I know where."

"Keep trying, Chief," I said, turning my attention back to the front tac display.

At least there were only two of the larger more powerful Romulan vessels left. Well ... at least I *thought* there were only two ... with cloaking devices it was hard to be sure. They and their smaller consorts were also all of an older Romulan design. Vessels that had been designed and built before the Klingons and Romulans had entered into their technology exchanges several years ago.

Old or not, the disk-shaped twin-engine configurations were powerful opponents. The cruisers were bit on the fragile side and sluggish for a modern cruiser, but for their size they packed a LOT of firepower, enough to challenge the most powerful vessels in the Fleet, much less a battered destroyer like the *St. Vincent*.

That was bad enough, but the Romulans had apparently

come up with a new twist for their cloaking device. The first generations of the device that we'd encountered several years ago were very effective, but if you knew what to look for, you could tell that one was around, maybe even localize its general location. What was truly scary at the moment was that when these Romulans cloaked, their ships just seemed to disappear.

There probably was a way to track them, some telltale signature that all that space-warping energy left behind, but if so, we hadn't been able to find it. For all intents and purposes, when one of their vessels cloaked, it was gone ... that is until it was dammed good and ready to reappear.

Well, Elizabeth, things could be worse ... you could be dodging plasma torpedoes in one of those little frigates ...

The frigates, *Leander* and *Agamemnon*, had returned from their scouting mission and now buzzed about the *Nelson* like a pair of protective butterflies. For the moment, they were keeping the Romulans off the big carrier's back, but they had less than half our firepower and far weaker shields. If one of the Romulan cruisers got one of those small ships in its sights, it would be a very uneven fight.

Fortunately, we'd been successful in getting the larger Romulan cruisers to be more interested in dealing with us which gave the frigates at least a fighting chance against the smaller Romulan warships present.

Of course, that wasn't exactly a healthy situation for us ...

I sensed, more than saw, the sudden disruption in power flow to the engines, a slight change in the feel of the ship.

"Engineering," I said, stabbing the com button on my chair. "Talk to me, Rodriguez."

"It's a mess, Commander," came the reply with a bit of a tinny quality. "We're keeping the Warp Core from breaching but it's highly unstable and variable. I have no idea whether it will hold or for how long and I can't guarantee you consistent power flow. Surges have already burned out some secondary subsystems and we're going to lose more. We're squeezing some power out of the fusion reactors, so even if I have to shut down the core, we won't be completely powerless."

"Thanks, Moreno, you're doing a great job but we *need* the Warp Core, without it ... *we die* ... period. I don't care if you have to sing it sweet music, hit it with a 9 pound sledge, or piss on it while hopping on one foot.

Whatever it takes ... *do you understand?*"

"Yes, Ma'am, perform miracles while pissing on the fire and jumping on one foot ... understood," came the tinny reply.

"That's what I like to hear, Lieutenant, enthusiasm!" I replied as I cut the channel.

"Ma'am?" said Ensign Payson from the Helm, looking back at me. "I think I've noticed something."

"What is it, Cathy?" I said, leaning forward.

"Well," she replied, pointing to the tac display between the Helm and Navigation Stations. "We've got this small Romulan frigate off to port and another to starboard ... and then behind us there's that cruiser?" she said a bit cautiously but with determination. "I think the two frigates are trying to box us in while the cruiser is pushing us from behind ..."

"To keep us going this direction," I finished saying for her.

"Yes, Ma'am," she continued on a bit more confidently. "I think they're trying to herd us to ... well ... somewhere"

out the open end of the box."

"Chief?" I said, turning back to the Science Station.
"Any indication that something's out there?"

"Scannin, Ma'am," he replied as he gazed thoughtfully at his screens. "Nothin' ... I danna see nothin' oot there at t'all, Commander, but I think the blasted ship behin' us is gettin ready ta launch one of them beastly large torpedoes at us."

I looked back at the tac display. We'd already picked up a good deal of velocity and a plasma torpedo launched at that range would lose a lot of effectiveness trying to catch us from behind.

But it'd be a hell of an incentive to keep running this direction ... wouldn't it.

Still, it's just a waste of a torpedo and I can't imagine those monsters are easy to charge ... what he really should do is cloak, maneuver until he can get right in front of us so that our own velocity carries us into the torpedo instead of away from it.

Just like they did to the Collingswood

Oh my God ...

"Romulan cruiser is launching a torpedo, Commander!" barked Chief Carstan from the Science Station. "Impact in 10 seconds."

I glanced at the load status for the phasers and torpedoes.

Too long, too much energy going to the warp drives ... we don't have the time.

I looked over at the Chief who had replaced me on the engineering console ... could we do it? ... did the *St. Vincent* have one more miracle in her battered body?

God I hope I'm wrong about this, but ...

"Mr. Payson, Chief Roberts, prepare for a High Energy Turn on my mark, course zero mark seven five!" I snapped. "Chief Carstan, I want a decoy punched out just as we make the turn."

"Ma'am!!??" the young Ensign at the Helm responded, her crystal blue eyes widening momentarily. "Commander ... I've"

I looked deeply into her eyes, willing trust and confidence into my gaze. "You can do this, Cathy, set it up."

At least I hoped she could. A High Energy Turn violated the laws of subspace physics, and like all laws, there was a price for breaking them.

If you put enough energy into a single point in subspace, you could bend it in a similar manner that warp drives bent normal space. Starships did this every time they turned or maneuvered at warp speeds. What made a High Energy Turn different was that it didn't just bend subspace, it fractured it, causing radical stress lines to form. If a ship was successful, if everything worked out just right, she could grab one of those lines and perform an instantaneous snap turn to any heading she wished to go.

If things did not work out just right, the warp drives might make the turn without the rest of the ship. In engineering circles this was considered a **Bad Thing**.

"Well, everyone hasta die somehow," I heard the Chief mutter. "At least this will be interestin."

I looked up into the Viewscreen as the space in front of

my ship began to waver once more, the Viewscreen automatically magnifying to show me what I knew had to be there ...

The second Romulan cruiser ... it was decloaking right in front of my ship. It would launch its torpedo right into our face at point blank range; our own velocity would carry us right into it at about warp three. If that didn't finish us, the torpedo crawling up our rear would.

"Commander!" came the shocked voice of Chief Carstan as his head rose from his scanners.

"I know, Chief ...," I replied, my eyes fixed on the forward Viewscreen ... waiting.

The familiar shape of the Romulan warship, the second cruiser, solidified on the screen. "Sound the collision alert, all hands brace for impact, prepare for evasion on my mark."

Almost ... I could almost feel it ... the waxing malevolence of the vessel looming before us, a winged bird of prey ... and we the helpless victim. I could just see the telltale ugly red glow as high energy plasma began erupting from its bow.

This is what Captain Deveraux and her crew saw just before they died ...

"NOW, Mr. Payson! EXECUTE NOW!!!" I cried as the universe went mad about me.

Scene #5

USS St. Vincent

Executive Officers Quarters

Stardate 27201.01

"Yes, Admiral, I understand. Good luck and good hunting, sir, Macklin out," I said as I shut down the battered monitor in what was left of my quarters.

He's sad ... in that "I regret to inform you" kind of way ... but it's not as if he really has any choice

Brutal ... there was no other way to describe it, what my ship, my crew, those of us left alive had undergone. Somehow the vids never seemed to capture this part of "victory" ... shattered ships, lives, dead hopes and dreams.

No, in the entertainment vids out of Altair, there might be a little smoke, some bumps and bruises ... even the dead looked peaceful ... asleep, maybe a bit of makeup and special effects to show some bleeding. It didn't show ships so mangled that the familiar became unrecognizable ... it didn't show people, people you knew, had shared your life with ... friends ... crushed to paste by collapsed bulkheads, skewered on metal

fragments, mutilated, dismembered by forces flesh and blood had never been designed to resist.

That is if we can find a body at all ...

And the characters ... yes the actors showing that grim confidence ... maybe a few sobs from a person here or there, but nothing like the deathly hollow look in eyes which had seen too much, experienced too much.

And never ... never ever was the Captain allowed to cry. No, the Captain was stoic, a person that exuded sympathy, confidence and courage even under the most difficult situations. That's how it's supposed to be.

What I'm supposed to be ... you're the Captain now, Elizabeth ... "

I had a job to do ... but at the moment all I wanted to do was cry, not just a few tears for the Altarian vid producers ... not the catch of breath that forced its way through the tiniest crack in the Captain's armor. No, I wanted ... *needed* deep wracking sobs ... vast overwhelming sorrow. Every fiber of my being demanded it ...

But I couldn't ... if I ever started, if the tears ever came, I

wasn't sure they would ever stop.

Crews, subordinates take confidence from their commanders, their faith in their actions transmitting faith to those who observe them. Doubt, sorrow, those sent a message, too ... what had Captain Corely said?

A Captain knows what to do even when the Captain hasn't the slightest clue what to do. Doubt will kill a ship.

I could feel it within me, the doubt, the sorrow fighting to be released but I couldn't. Captains don't cry. Period.

Especially when they most need to.

It was a burden that I hadn't fully understood until now. Including this tour, I'd been an Executive Officer of a starship twice. Before that I'd commanded engineering decks, sections, away teams, shuttlecraft ... and of course I'd been through all the training required for command level officers ... some of the best training in the known universe. I'd lost people before, as well ... seen them die ... blamed myself for those deaths. But this ... this was different.

I realized now what all of those Captains and instructors had tried to explain, tried to prepare me for, prepare me

for what I was facing right this moment, only to find that I was woefully unprepared for the reality of command, of being the one that everyone was looking toward with no one, absolutely zero people above you to pass the responsibility on to. The orders ... my orders would now be the final word ... the word that could mean life or death to those under my command.

It was a burden that I knew, deep in my heart, I didn't want.

And then there was the grief.

We've lost so many ...

We'd won the battle ... it was hard to tell from looking at my battered ship ... from looking at our casualty lists, but we had won.

Our attempt at a High Energy Turn had pretty much ended our participation in the battle. Somehow Engineering had been able to generate the power we needed, somehow they'd stabilized the reaction enough to give Ensign Payson what she needed to execute the turn. Somehow the oh so young Navigator had managed to grab onto one of the fractured bends in subspace and twisted the *St. Vincent* onto a radically different course.

Somehow Chief Carstan had managed to eject our final decoy marker into the subspace mess we'd left behind.

But the *St. Vincent* had given us all that was still within her mangled hull to give. Battered, jury-rigged and abused, on the verge of breaching entirely, the Main Warp Core simply shut down. The downward translation to normal space had been anything but pleasant and when it was complete, we'd been a powerless hunk of junk drifting in space.

It had probably saved our lives ...

I still wasn't clear on what had happened next. Our radical evasion should have, at most, caused the Romulan plasma torpedoes to lose their lock on us and caused them to harmlessly detonate in clear space. What had actually happened was far different and totally unexpected.

There was still a great deal that Star Fleet didn't know about Romulan systems and failsafe protocols. We weren't even sure what the Romulans used to guide their massive high energy plasma weapons. Was it active control from the launching ship, was there some kind of internal guidance within the torpedo itself? One had to assume that the Romulans had some way of preventing

their torpedoes from accidentally locking on to one of their own vessels ... but whatever that system was, if it existed at all ... it had failed in a spectacular fashion.

For whatever reason, the torpedo launched by the pursuing cruiser had instead impacted the cruiser coming out of cloak in front of my ship. The other cruiser's torpedo had impacted the cruiser pursuing us and ... well ... older Romulan vessels were a bit on the fragile side and heavy plasma torpedoes are VERY powerful.

Our sensors had been down, but as far as the *Nelson* could tell, there wasn't enough left of the two unfortunate vessels to capture a dust bunny's attention.

What we had felt was the shockwave of the blasts that had immolated both Romulan ships, a shockwave that had sent us spinning desperately off into space, causing even more damage to my battered ship and her crew.

After some very tense minutes, we had been able to restore partial emergency power and right the ship, but by then, the battle had been over, not that we could have been of much help even if it hadn't been.

That battle had been a close run thing, and the final

stages of the fight had cost us *Leander* and most of her brave officers and crew, but we'd given the *Nelson* the time she needed. At the tipping point of the battle, the wounded carrier that finally been able to bring her systems fully online and launch what remained of her heavy fightercraft. That had been enough for the remaining Romulan ships to withdraw.

We'd won ... sort of. We were still alive but our entire task force was now virtually combat ineffective. We were all out of whatever fight we'd stumbled into. And we were apparently not alone.

It was all fragmentary, the subspace messages, the rash of distress calls, even Omega transmissions. It was all still coming in and would for some time ... even traveling at speeds exceeding warp thirty, subspace communications were not exactly instantaneous. What was becoming apparent was that the Romulans had launched a well-coordinated attack all across our section of the Neutral Zone, and probably beyond.

The Admiral's decision had been clear. The *Nelson* was a near irreplaceable fleet asset and in her current condition, she couldn't fight nor could what was left of her escort force protect her. It was his duty to bring her safely someplace that could heal her wounds, restock her

flight decks and get her back into the fight. She and the *Agamemnon* still had warp capability, they could run and they needed to run. We couldn't ... not yet.

The Admiral had called us all heroes, but he'd made it very clear that if we didn't feel that we could repair ourselves enough to reach help, then we'd need to abandon and scuttle the *St. Vincent*.

The news had hit me like a hammer between the eyes. I knew my ship, knew how grievously she was wounded, knew how few of the crew was truly fit for duty. But ... she was ours. We'd bled over her ... far too many of us had died to keep her alive. It was unthinkable that we'd just abandon her.

But, we were in real danger. We weren't warp capable yet and even if we managed to effect repairs, nobody knew how long they'd last or how far we could get. I was pretty sure we could reach some Federation planet or the other, but pretty sure wasn't exactly certain.

I'd talked it over with my surviving officers and the answer had been firm. We'd put too much into the Vinny just to leave her behind. I'd asked for volunteers. Most had elected to stay with the ship. Those that hadn't, and the wounded we couldn't care for, had been shifted to the

Nelson.

And now ... they were gone ... the *St. Vincent* was now alone ... and I had never felt so isolated and desolate in my entire existence as I did right now.

I briefly contemplated the scorched wall near my bed where a power coupling had ruptured and blown in the wall to my quarters. Blown in those catastrophic moments when life and death had hung on a razor's edge for my ship and her crew . There was hardly a compartment within the *St. Vincent's* hull that didn't look like this or worse, and yet there were still eighty of us here, working to save the ship and themselves.

I don't really know the answers ...

It doesn't matter ... you're in command now ... the Captain always knows what to do ...

I stood up from my chair, one of the few pieces of furniture still intact in my quarters, and looked critically at my worn and stained uniform. It had once been red, with two bands of gold braid around each cuff, the marks of a full Commander, Engineering Division. Now, the gold braid was ripped in places and flecked here and there with blood, coolant, soot, any number of things. Not

exactly an image to inspire confidence.

I moved through the rubble, bumping through what was left of my personal belongings, as I located the small closet where just maybe a decent uniform might have survived. It was then that I caught sight of something colorful and delicate on the floor. A crystal Tsholtofan game piece that had somehow survived the mayhem here, a piece from the unfinished game Lieutenant Tomlin and I had been playing.

I was certain Tomlin would be happy that it had survived, have some innocent blue-eyed comeback that would be teasing and underpinning of his assurance of Andorian superiority, yet friendly and warm. But that wasn't going to happen ... the delicate game piece had survived ... but Tomlin hadn't We hadn't found his body ... we hadn't found any bodies from those that had been on the Main Bridge at the time of the attack. I'd never know if my mischievous Andorian friend had, in fact, been cheating ... it was lost to me ... just as he was, just as so many of my friends were... people whose deaths I still couldn't fathom.

I needed to find a way to push those deaths aside, erase those thoughts, memories ... the ache that told me that I didn't know how.

There was so much more ... so much MUCH more to do ... so much life to live ... and now ... ?

I reached down and picked up the small crystal
Captains don't cry ... so it must have been someone else
... someone shedding tears ... someone sobbing so
bitterly ... someone there on the floor, reeling with grief
... a grief beyond words ... grief for everything that should
have, but never will be.

Someone else ... someone else ... someone else

Scene #6

USS St. Vincent ***Stardate 27201.31***



The gentle swoosh of the door greeted me as I stepped into the confines of Auxiliary Control. The scars left weeks ago would not soon leave this place, nor would the memories, but at least it no longer looked like the ruin of a command center. Instead, brightly flashing lights and displays greeted me, many still jury-rigged, but functional.

Ensign Catherine Payson swiveled in the command chair, a smile flashing across her young face, a mixture of relief, satisfaction and a deep weariness that all of us shared. Behind her on the Bridge Viewscreen hung a blue planet, partially enshrouded in darkness and beyond it a main sequence yellow star. "The Aberoen Colony, Ma'am," she said as she stood to one side, emptying the command

chair for me.

"Thank you, Mr. Payson, you are relieved," I responded as I sank into the almost sinful comfort of the black smart foam.

"I stand relieved, Ma'am," she replied, as she swung smoothly into the Navigator's position.

Ensign Payson had done well. The desperate forge of combat having matured her, hardened her as it had most of the crew that had survived. It had certainly been a trial by fire and not one that any of us would have wished for. That trial hadn't ended with the defeat of the Romulan ambush, not at all.

It had been over a month since the *Nelson* and *Agamemnon* had left us behind, and there had been many times when I'd come close to regretting that decision. The simple act of restoring partial main power and limping along, hoping and praying that the Romulans, who seemed to be everywhere, wouldn't find us had been amazingly difficult. That somehow we'd win through and find what passed for a place of safety in this cosmos gone mad had often seemed unobtainable.

That place had been turned out to be Aberoen.

The colony didn't truly have all that much to recommend it, a relatively sparse population, less than a million. It was primarily a self-sufficient agrarian world, normally no real Star Fleet presence, just a modest spaceport with some orbital industrial infrastructure.

It did, however, have one significant asset that made it special. For a reason known only to the cosmos and Star Fleet Command, a fleet mobile repair dock and several fleet tenders had been in the area and set up shop there. To a severely damaged vessel like the *St. Vincent*, alone and far from home, that was nothing short of a miracle.

"Chief Carstan," I said as I glanced back at the older Chief Petty Officer who was now my acting science officer.

"Anything interesting going on out there, Sam?"

"Quite a bit actually, if you'll beg my pardon, Ma'am," he replied. "A good deal of slow traffic movin in an out oh the system and its lookin as if we have a mite of traffic in orbit as well."

"Well then," I replied with a faint smile, "I suppose we should introduce ourselves. Comm, hail planetary traffic control and see if you can find us a nice parking orbit. I don't know about Lt. Rodriguez or his engines but I could

certainly use some rest.

"An don ye be forgetting them delicious e-rats, Ma'am," replied Chief Carstan with a wistful tone. "I remembers this time, back on the old *Baton Rouge* it was, that ... "

"Yes, Chief, you ate expired e-rats and probably drank water from a wet hoof print as well," I replied, trying to hide my smile.

"Water, Ma'am?" he replied, in an aggrieved tone. "Did I say anathin about us havin water?"

I sighed. Obviously the Chief intended to milk this one for all it was worth.

"No, Chief," I replied. "I stand corrected, please forgive my brashness."

"Aye, think nuthin on it, Ma'am, twas nothing of import, just as long as ye's all understands the gravity of the situation me an mine were facin tis all."

I wasn't the giggling sort, not really, but it took all of my masterful control to suppress one now as I watched the Chief puff out his chest and give us all that, "when I was young we were real Star Fleet" look.

It felt good ... it had taken a while to get there and it was still fragile around the edges ... but it was there, that feeling of comradeship, of having faced the odds and come out the other side with something to look forward to. It was a feeling that pervaded the entire Bridge and I was glad to see it.

Your first command, Elizabeth. It's not what you wanted, but it was yours just the same ...

Yes, I was in command but regardless of everything that had happened, I wasn't the Captain, not really, and, frankly, I'd never wanted to be. Yes, I had allowed Captain Corely of the Hood to talk me into applying for Command School. I'd fully expected that application to be rejected. Engineers were almost never accepted to that prestigious institution, but somehow, I had been.

I'd gone kicking and screaming all the way, but once there ... well, it was just hard to let Frank Corely down, not to mention all of the engineers, security personnel and other "staff grade" officers who actually were looking for a chance for command. If I had failed, it would have been just one more excuse for Star Fleet to use in depriving those officers of their chance to pursue their dreams.

"You don't belong here, Macklin. Engineers like you don't belong in command of a starship," I'd been told more than once.

Over the last several weeks, I'd had plenty of time to wonder whether those old voices from my past hadn't been right.

But despite all of those senior officers who obviously felt I hadn't belonged, I'd passed the course and graduated. There were just too many people out there counting on me for me to let them down.

Besides, I didn't like people telling me what I *couldn't* do. If I'd listened to voices like that, I'd never have entered Star Fleet in the first place.

I wonder what they'd all say now ... probably the same as me I suppose ...

I'd gotten lucky.

We shouldn't have survived, I hadn't done anything brilliant. All I'd done is hold it together long enough for random chance to work in our favor, to allow the crew to do their jobs and save all of our sorry behinds.

Luck or not, I and the crew that remained had come together and I was so very proud of all of them. If I had to face the terrifying prospect of command, I knew that I wanted people like them at my back.

Regardless now though, Star Fleet would now assign a real captain to command the St. Vincent and my task here would come to an end. Maybe, if I were lucky, I'd get to stay on as the XO and Chief Engineer. Perhaps Star Fleet would keep the crew together, working on the ship and using us as the core to a new crew under a new Captain.

It wasn't much of a hope, but I'd heard some of the crew discussing the possibility with interest, which had done my own personal morale inestimable good.

It was a mood we all seemed to share until we heard a gasp from Ensign T'Vram on the Helm. The fact that T'Vram was Vulcan and a gasp was definitely an emotional reaction only drew our attention more firmly to what she was seeing.

We were moving into high orbit now but it was apparent that the "traffic" in this orbit wasn't "traffic" at all but the maimed and mangled remnants of what had once been starships. From small civilian freighters to bulk carriers

mixed in with proud Star Fleet vessels of every size and description.

Some were obviously hulled, sometimes so badly that it was hard to determine if the vessel was more hull than hole. There simply was something ... disturbing about being able to look at the top of a mighty starship, and see a hole carved through to the other side. One vessel, a *Saladin* class Destroyer just like the *St. Vincent*, must have been missing at least the starboard quarter of her primary hull. How she had survived to make it this far was more than I could imagine.

She wasn't alone. That ships so heavily damaged could manage such a feat was a testament to their crews and their designers. That so many were here at this backwater anchorage was evidence of how thoroughly the Romulans were beating us, and how much it was costing.

I'd known we'd been lucky to survive that first attack ... I just hadn't had a clue how lucky we actually had been. No glib remarks, no winks or meaningful looks ... just a few stifled sobs breaking the silence as we tried to absorb what we could not comprehend, could not fathom, could not believe.

"A whole fleet ... so much junk, lads ... so much junk and flotsam," said Chief Carstan from his station. "T'aint never seen nothin' like it."

"Neither have I, Chief, neither have I. Ensign Corridor, any orders from Star Fleet yet?" I asked the young auburn-haired Communications Officer.

"Yes, Ma'am, message coming in, Captain and XO to repair aboard Spacedock, *Weymouth* and report to Commodore Throshk, Ma'am."

I nodded and then said. "Have Lieutenant Rodriquez join me in transporter room one, Mr. Corridor. Ensign Payson, you have the con."

The doors from the Emergency Bridge swooshed obediently open for me once again as I strode into the turbolift. But where those doors would ultimately take me and my crew ... I had no idea.

Scene #7

Mobile Fleetdock #45 USS Weymouth

Aberoan system

Stardate 27201.31



Mobile Spacedock 45 USS *Weymouth* wasn't all that much as starships went. The hull was large and mostly flat, no more than a few decks thick at any one place, sort of like an overgrown shingle in space. The only thing that really indicated it was, in fact, a starship, was the single heavy-duty warp nacelle that extruded from her port side.

The *Weymouth* would never set any speed records and her combat capability was virtually zero. No, as a starship, *Weymouth* left much to be desired, but that wasn't her purpose. *Weymouth* was warp-capable for one reason only, to move her impressive mass of fabricators, repair and maintenance equipment, and the engineers to use them to where they could do the most good.

Right now that place was way out on the shaky end of the branch, Aberoen, and her task was to take mangled vessels like mine and somehow put them back together. With the mass of vessels out there, how a single repair dock was going to do that was more than I could imagine.

As Lt. Rodriguez and I strode down her corridors and into Commodore Throshk's receiving room, all I could do was marvel at how ... well ... how clean and orderly everything was. No scorched or twisted bulkheads, no areas with flickering emergency lighting, everything was uncluttered, organized, exactly as it should be.

It wasn't actually that the *Weymouth* was in truly outstanding condition, it was simply that compared to our mangled vessel, she merely seemed that way. These people had time for all of the niceties that people just struggling to survive simply didn't.

"Commander Macklin and Lieutenant Rodriguez of the *St. Vincent* to see the Commodore," I said to the young Andorian yeoman seated at the small reception desk.

"Yes, superior Ma'am, the Commodore is awaiting you, go in please," she replied with a wave of her antenna at the nearby door.

I looked over at Moreno Rodriguez with a questioning glance. I'd met only a few flag officers in my time but it was unusual that such exalted personages of note failed to have their juniors cool their heels outside their office at least for a bit. Rank had its privileges after all.

If such lowly beings as a mere Commander and Lieutenant gained immediate entrance, it normally meant that you had screwed up by the numbers or it was awfully important.

Rodriguez only returned his patented look of "I haven't the slightest idea" mixed with his "you outrank me so I'll hide behind you" gaze. That was a reaction that, while not entirely unexpected, didn't exactly help me all that much.

"Thank you, Ensign," I replied to the yeoman as we walked into the inner sanctum of Commodore Treiss Throshk.

As the door opened my gaze fell upon the Commodore. Though he sat erect behind his small desk, his faded light blue antennae indicated that he was quite elderly. Like myself and Rodriguez, his tunic was the same deep red of an engineer rather than the gold tunic of a command officer. Normally in the Fleet, if you didn't wear the gold,

you didn't command, yet the look deep within his cold blue eyes left no doubt that, red shirt or not, he was in command here.

"Commander Macklin and my exec, Lieutenant Rodriquez, reporting as ordered, sir," I stated with what I hope was the right degree of formality. Dealing with flag officers was not something I had a great deal of experience with and, especially with an Andorian and their touchy sense of honor and propriety, finding the right tone was important.

"Be seated, Commander Macklin, Lieutenant Rodriquez," returned the Commodore in a flat tone.

"I have reviewed your damage report," he stated, his antenna twitching ever so slightly. "You have done well bringing your ship here. With such damage and in such a perilous situation, abandoned the vessel would I have expected. Very brave or very foolish was such a decision. Sometimes closely related are the two."

"Yes sir, but I believed that we had the resources to reach an inhabited Federation world and hopefully save both the vessel and the crew," I replied.

"Believed? Hopefully? These are not words that are

virtues when the lives of so many are risked without necessity. Place great reliance on your 'hopes' and beliefs', do you, Commander?" he responded harshly.

I was taken aback for a moment by the hostile tone of the Commodore's statement. It was not that what he was saying hadn't been something I had thought about during the long voyage to this place, just that twinge of guilt that I might be endangering my crew's life for no gain. But we had made it, my crew had done what needed to be done so ... well, to hear that tone of reprimand in the Commodore's voice was ... unexpected.

Ok, this is not going well ... not well at all.

"No sir, I consulted with my officers and made an informed command judgment," I responded, trying not to sound too defensive.

The Andorian held my unflinching gaze for a few moments, as if trying to look into my soul, to ferret out any weakness that his eye might discern. It was a distinctly unpleasant feeling, being stared down by a flag officer and I still couldn't quite figure out where this was all going. Had his Jrezzik been too bitter this morning? Had I stepped on his pet Zygot? Was this some kind of test or did he just not like humans ... or maybe he just

didn't like me. Eventually though, his gaze dropped to a PADD on his desk and my heart began to beat once more.

"A warm recommendation from Admiral Hayes of the *Nelson*. He indicates that you are exceptional officer and he supported your decision," the Commodore continued almost reluctantly.

"Thank you, sir," I replied. "It was a more ... challenging experience than we would have preferred."

The older Andorian turned a slightly lighter shade of blue and his antenna quivered slightly. I had no idea what that actually meant, reading individual Andorians, especially ones you hadn't encountered before, was always more of an art than a science and it was hellishly easy to rub one the wrong way. Not as touchy as Tellerites, of course, but if you made the mistake of inadvertently getting on the wrong side of an Andorian, you might just create an enemy you really didn't want to have.

"Challenging. That is a ... discrete term for what you and your crew faced, Commander, very challenging indeed, and that has, may the Ancestors guide you, potentially earned you an opportunity," he replied thoughtfully. "Sector Command believes you have ability to discharge a most demanding enterprise. Before this duty I assign to

you, I wish to speak bluntly."

Ok, that sounds just a bit ominous ... maybe it was time to be blunt in return.

"Sir," I said firmly. "I'm of course grateful for Star Fleet's faith in my vessel and crew, but I'm not sure I understand. The *St. Vincent* is barely capable of making warp much less engaging in any kind of demanding mission. And while I have great confidence in my officers and crew, we're very short on personnel and experience. The *St. Vincent* isn't ready for any mission at the present, demanding or otherwise."

The elderly Andorian looked at me, his pale blue eyes intent, his antennae bent forward directly at me. Obviously he was making some sort of decision and what I'd just said had seriously focused his attention. What that might be, I wasn't quite sure.

"The Truth," he responded thoughtfully. "I am aware of these facts. It is possible it is that you are brave but not foolish. That is a trait necessary for this mission."

The Commodore's antennae seemed to relax a bit as he nodded and leaned back in his chair. "You have faced difficulties; you have survived and ensured the survival

of many others as well. This has not been ignored."

Slowly he rose from his seat and gazed out his window to a point out in deep space. "Here we take vessels that are badly damaged. We repair them sufficiently to reach standard repair facility, prepare them for tow, or prepare them for demolition. Have not the resources to accomplish more. Crews of vessels that are repairable remain at this location until ready to depart. Others are forwarded to Star Fleet as transport becomes available."

He turned then and caught us in his gaze, his pale blue eyes focused with intensity. "You are engineers. Your assessments I have reviewed. *St. Vincent* is not fit for service. We will attempt to prepare her to tow her to safety. If we fail, or this facility is overrun, the *St. Vincent*, she will be scuttled."

For a moment I was taken aback by the Commodore's directness.

Leave the St. Vincent?? Scuttled??

The pain of those words was unexpectedly overwhelming. Those who don't know better may believe that ships are simple inanimate objects. Metal and circuitry, power relays, superconductors, duotronic chips

... all material objects, reconstitutable, inanimate, not alive.

But they'd be wrong. I was sure it couldn't be proven, that no scientific analysis would ever indicate it ... but I knew that a ship had a soul. Perhaps it was just in the minds of those who served aboard her, who put their sweat, tears and even their blood into them. But to us they were friends, sometimes enemies, occasionally neither or both, but in their own way, each had a spirit, a soul that encompassed all those who served aboard her.

Intellectually I had known that scuttling was a possibility. I was an engineer, I better than anyone knew my beloved ships condition. But actually hearing the words, having that truth hammered into my awareness after all that we had done to save her was like feeling an icy dagger to the heart, like hearing of the possible death of a dear friend.

And if the *St. Vincent* wasn't going to be repaired here ... the crew ... my crew and friends ... we'd be scattered over the sector, filling gaps in other starships, or worse, just stuck on a transport with nothing to keep us company but our nightmares for the long slow voyage toward whatever awaited us. God knew where we'd all end up ... they deserved better, we deserved better!

Throshk held his hand down as if he could sense my rising anger. "I tell you the truth so you will be prepared, deserve at least that from me," he continued. "St Vincent, will be saved if it is in our power. It is valuable and the Fleet much needs her. Your crew however, it is more valuable, yes? Those that have survived such trials together are a powerful force that the Fleet cannot afford to lose, not now, not with so many other things forever gone. Star Fleet Command, Admiral Hayes concurs. Your orders, Commander."

Deftly the Commodore selected one of two secured data chips in front of him and tossed it onto the desk in front of me. For a moment it just lay there almost defying me to recognize it and deal with the reality that it held within, but only for a moment.

Reaching forward I gathered the chip into my hand and inserted it into my secure reader ...

*To: Commander Elizabeth Macklin, Commanding Officer
USS St. Vincent NCC-523*

From: Star Fleet Command, Sector 15

Upon receipt of these orders, you are directed, along with

such crew of USS St. Vincent as you deem fit for duty, to repair aboard the starship USS Republic NCC-1371 currently undergoing repair at Aberoen. There you shall assume command of said vessel and the brevet rank of Captain with all of the privileges and responsibilities of such rank and proceed with the mission indicated in section I of these orders

I raised my eyes from the viewer, shock and disbelief evident in my eyes. This couldn't be right, just couldn't be.

Commodore Throshk looked into my confusion and smiled ... actually smiled for the first time. "May the spirits of the Ancestors guide you, Captain, and serve you well. Thinking all of them you will need."

Scene #8

Aberoan system

Stardate 27202.01



It was hard to keep the look of shock off my face as Rodriguez and I boarded the shuttlepod that would take us from the *Weymouth* to the *Republic*. Certainly, I was relieved that my crew from the *St. Vincent* would be able to stay together. We'd been through a great deal, accomplished a great deal more and in the process we'd become what I recognized as something very special, we'd become a crew that was akin to a family.

I thought I'd understood that before and in part, I'd been right. However I recognized now that the act of mutual survival, overcoming the odds and learning to depend on the people around you made you closer in a way that nothing else seemed to match. I depended on these people, trusted them to do their jobs whatever the cost and, somehow, I knew that trust was returned.

They deserved a rest, they deserved recognition, even a hero's welcome for what they had already done, but they weren't going to get that. Instead, I would be again placing them in harm's way because I was going to need them, every single one, if we were going to survive what was to come.

We stepped into the old shuttle pod and I looked over at Moreno Rodriquez, a mere Lieutenant who was about to take upon his shoulders the slot of Chief Engineer and acting Executive Officer of the USS *Republic*. In a lot of ways, Moreno's story and mine were similar, if separated by time. My first time as the Chief Engineer had been on one of the *Republic's* more well-known sisters, the *Hood*, and then, as now, it was tragedy which had pushed me into the coveted post of Chief Engineer.

I had no doubt that Rodriquez was going to step up to the challenge, if he had any fold in his character, it would

have happened on the *St. Vincent* and we'd all be dead. I, on the other hand ... well it was one thing to step into a Department Head's slot, but into command of one of the most storied ships of the Fleet ... that was something I had yet to prove. Would I run, would I fold, in that instant when everything hung on my decision, would I falter?

The young rating at the controls of the pod interrupted my thoughts as he turned to me and asked, "Destination, Ma'am?"

"*Republic*," I answered in a short yet definite tone.

"Shouldn't we head back the *St. Vincent* first, Commander ... errr ... I mean, Captain? Get ourselves settled and read some of the reports first?" asked my Engineer.

I looked over at Moreno and saw the echoes of my own doubts in his eyes. Doubt was contagious; a disease that could infect everyone who felt it and it was there.

Well why the hell shouldn't it be, Elizabeth, we're all out of our depth here.

I smiled at him, as warm a smile as I could manage but genuine none-the-less.

"No," I said in a confident tone. "If she's here and someone thinks I'm the best available choice to command her, then things are even worse than we think they are. Star Fleet doesn't give one of the premier commands in the Fleet to someone with my experience and background unless things are pretty desperate."

Not the most confidence boosting thing you could have said, Elizabeth. Perhaps you ought to rephrase that a tad.

"That doesn't mean we're not capable," I continued, as I tried to suppress any lack of confidence my voice might betray. "If we weren't, we'd both have died on the *St. Vincent*."

"But we need to find out what condition the *Republic's* in," I said. "We need to get a feel for her and what she needs if we're going to command her. I believe it's important and we don't have much time to pull this all together. Besides, I want to have a talk with the officer in charge of putting her back into action and how that's even possible considering this."

I quelled Moreno's protest by handing him my data pad which contained one of the scant reports I'd received with my orders, it was the casualty and status list of the *Republic's* crew.

The *Republic's* crew, like those for all the ships of her type, was chosen from the best of the best and was considered, with little argument, the elite of the Fleet. There had been 442 souls on board when she'd been attacked and she'd brought less than 100 here to the Aberoen system. Of that, less than half were in any way fit for duty and that was being generous on how "fit for duty" was actually defined. Of the wounded, most were suffering from massive doses of radiation which was still claiming their lives. How many would ultimately survive was still an open question.

It was a daunting compilation, evidence of the brutal and wholesale slaughter of some of the brightest lights in Star Fleet, snuffed quickly and finally out of existence. The chances of suffering almost 90% casualties in combat and the ship surviving as anything more than a floating piece of deep space crap weren't even worth mentioning. Yet somehow that hadn't happened to the *Republic*, somehow she'd survived, fought her way clear and was still fit for service. How did that happen? Even with a mobile fleet repair dock that should simply not have been possible.

Moreno turned a bit paler as he read through the list, though it was a bit difficult to tell with his swarthy

complexion. I suppose it was more the expression, if an expression could be said to look pale, which in this case it did. It would have been different if we didn't happen to know some of those names, people we had served with before, Academy classmates, even a close friend or two, now just names on a data pad and memories of faces we would never again see in this life.

And amongst all of these were names that were nearly legend within the Fleet, some of my mentors like Chief Engineer Charles Ceilo, as well as officers like Captain Braham Parker, Commander Sara Smithson, people known throughout the Fleet as being amongst the very best in their fields. People who were famous, even before their posting to the *Republic*, but further enhanced by the mystique and honor of the vessel they crewed.

The *Republic* may not have been the best known ship in the Fleet. That honor probably belonged to the *Enterprise*, possibly the *Lexington*, the *Hood* or even the *Kongo*. But if she hadn't been as flashy as some of her sisters, for nearly three decades she had still been known as one of the flagships of the Fleet, one of a group of 14 starships which had revolutionized Star Fleet and the Federation. Even now, these ships were ranked amongst the best of the best that Star Fleet had to offer.

I was qualified to be her Chief Engineer; I'd already served in that capacity aboard the *Hood*. If I had been outrageously lucky I might possibly have even served as her Exec as I had with the *St. Vincent*. But I was being tapped to command her which said any number of awful things about our situation.

I looked out the forward Viewscreen, my new command still small in the distance but close enough to make out her graceful lines, the elegant saucer-shaped primary hull with her sculpted cylindrical secondary hull slung underneath and her two powerful warp nacelles positioned above. It made my heart flutter just a bit in spite of all the tragedy, to walk again on the decks of a ship like that.

I didn't want command, not really. It was hard to suppress the dread, that intense feeling that I didn't belong in that center seat, which was one of my constant companions.

Even so, it was simply impossible to completely quell the anticipation. She was a proud ship with a proud legacy and we were now going to, for better or worse, make that legacy, that history our own and there was a ... well an eagerness that I couldn't, despite my dread, quite suppress.

Not that I relished leaving my *St. Vincent* behind. However tragic the circumstances, however painful, she was my first command and she had been there for us when we most needed her. We'd saved her, but she had saved all of us as well. She'd brought us here and now we were leaving her behind.

The pang of guilt with that thought was very real, and very personal. She deserved better, but this was war. At best, if she made it out of this place, she'd be months in spacedock before being fit for service again.

The *St. Vincent* had fought her fight but as brave and hard as she had struggled to get us here, there was little left she could do until her wounds were healed. The *Republic*, however improbably, was fit to get back into the fight and she needed a crew to do that.

She had lost hers, but now she'd receive the last gift the *St. Vincent* had to give right now, the gift she had nurtured and preserved to bring here ... us.

I glance out the viewport again, gaining a look at the *St. Vincent's* battered hull as the pod swept by her on its way to the *Republic*.

Don't be sad, girl, I swear we'll meet again. This isn't over and I'll make you a deal, you don't die and I'll find you when this is all done. Pinky swear.

I glanced towards our young pilot. "Think you can find Commander Grnaff for me, crewman?"

"Yes, Ma'am," he replied. "He'll be on the Bridge now finishing up the repairs. I can get you to a dockport on Deck Three if you like."

"Thank you, that will do nicely. I have some questions I need to ask him," I replied.

And maybe, just maybe, I can get a few answers while I'm at it.

Scene #9

USS Republic NCC-1371

Main Bridge

Aberoan system

Stardate 27202.01



"I told you that I'm busy. Don't you pink skins have something better to do than bother me?" growled the rather bedraggled Tellerite as he glared around the *Republic's* devastated Bridge. "I have *work* to do."

Looking around the shattered remnants of the *Republic's* Bridge, it was hard to argue about that. Whatever had hit the Bridge had essentially removed the roof and the entire starboard side and melted the Helm and Navigation stations. The rest of the Bridge, what little there was of it, was a shattered mess.

Commander Grnaff's engineers had used some sort of dull greyish material I wasn't familiar with to rebuild the missing hull and structures. For the rest, they were busy attempting to repair bridge stations or install completely new ones where none remained. There was obviously a lot of improvisation in how this was being accomplished, but, at first glance, it all looked as if a somewhat usable Bridge would eventually emerge from the devastation.

On the other hand, I had a job to do and like a number of Tellerites in general, Commander Grnaff had obviously decided to be a bit belligerent about the whole affair.

"Actually no, Commander," I said with a smile as I leaned against one of the damaged consoles. "My orders are to assume command of this vessel and transfer my crew aboard, which I can't do until you finish your work and release the ship to me. So ... I actually have *nothing* more important to do than stay here all day asking questions."

I gave the obnoxious beast my most winning smile. "Or ... we could do this the short simple way and you can just give me the information I need and we'll get out of your way."

Commander Grnaff shot me a baleful glance from his beady eyes. "So ... *you're* going to be the Captain here,

hey? Where's your fancy gold suit then ... *Captain.*"

A quick flush of irritation swept through me but I clamped down hard on it.

"I'm an engineer and I like the color of my uniform the way it is, Mr. Grnaff. I have no intention of changing it," I replied levelly. "Besides, gold makes me itch."

I could see the small twinkle in the Tellerite's eyes which indicated he knew he'd hit a sore spot with me, as he had undoubtedly intended to.

I hadn't thought about it much, I'd just been too busy, but it was Star Fleet tradition that all officers commanding starships were expected to wear the command gold uniforms if they had been promoted from a "staff officer" position to command. To be honest, it was fairly rare for any officer from one of the "staff" branches, such as an engineer, to be promoted to senior command, but when it did happen it was expected that officer would don the "Command Gold".

I thought the whole system was antiquated and based more on centuries of tradition as opposed to any real difference in the capabilities or training of "operations" officers and their "staff" officer counterparts. The

practice, I thought, was demeaning, slightly insulting, and served no real purpose other than to maintain a tradition which existed largely because it had always existed.

I had become one of the exceptions to the rule. Not that I had been all that thrilled about it.

Thanks a lot Frank ... now look at the mess you've gotten me into ...

"Really, so ... *Captain* ... have you ever engineered on a ship as old as this one?" the Tellerite sneered, snapping me back to reality.

I smiled. Tellerites, as a race, truly valued a good exchange of what humans would consider insults. It was something of an art form that the Tellerites excelled in and practiced on non-Tellerites, often with undisguised glee.

"Older," I replied directly. "I served as Chief Engineer of the *Suffolk*."

The *Suffolk* had been my first assignment as both Chief Engineer and Executive Officer and she, like her sisters of the *Provence* class, were relics developed during the final phases of the last Romulan War. Constantly updated and

improved, they had lasted on the Fleet lists for decades and decades, a tribute to the design's adaptability. Unfortunately, by the time I'd boarded her, the *Suffolk* had been a refugee from the scrap yard and keeping her flying had required ... inventiveness.

"Really ... the *Suffolk*, you say?" he responded thoughtfully. "Well, I suppose anyone that could keep that antique piece of junk from falling out of space deserves some credit. Served on the old *Anatolia* myself, did I. Now that was no pleasure cruise. Frutzen energy exchange cores were always giving out."

"The *Anatolia* didn't have energy exchange cores, Commander," I replied with a knowing smile. "She used an inverted warp manifold just like the *Suffolk*, there just wasn't enough space for the main energy exchange cores after you'd packed a century's worth of upgrades into them."

"They were aged Presrens for certain," I continued, with respect. "And they required a true engineer's hand to keep them flying didn't they? But I suspect I don't need to tell you that."

I saw the Commander's chest swell with pride. With Tellerites, what insults couldn't get you, flattery might.

"Well," he said, looking at Rodriguez and myself critically, "I suppose you won't be a complete waste of my time. What do you want to know ... *Ma'am?*"

"First," I said, pointing to grey material on the roof of the Bridge, "What is that stuff."

"That," he said, gazing with pride at the grey metallic substance that patched the missing dome and starboard side of the Bridge, "is Plasteel. Experimental stuff, just extrude what you want, mold it, activate its molecular key and it sets just like you see it, almost as strong as Duranium, but much easier to work with and much faster to apply."

"That is," he said, looking at me with a twinkle in his eye, "if it actually works over time. We were out here testing it so we don't know for sure. Still, it was either this or scuttle half the ships here, just no practical way for us to patch up damage like this otherwise."

"So, how much of this did you use here?" I said, not letting my gaze waver.

"A lot," he replied with a small grunt. "A fresken large amount of the exterior hull, the main stress bearing

frame, bulkheads, all of it. We were able to rebuild all the damaged main structural framework and hull in a week instead of a year. When polarized with the structural integrity field, it should hold up nicely, but it's not Tritatanium so you'll have to be gentler with her than you might otherwise."

"And if it fails?" Rodriguez asked.

"Then it's a long walk to Starbase 15, Lieutenant," he growled.

"Commander," I continued. "I don't have a full damage report yet and I was hoping you could give me an overview of what happened."

The Tellerite looked at me suspiciously but then seemed to reach some sort of decision. "The primary hull was badly damaged, worst I've seen in a starship still functioning. The worst of it was a heavy plasma torpedo hit right on the front starboard quarter. It ate its way horizontally along Decks Six and Seven, through Sickbay, Main Security, the Main Computer Core and into Auxiliary Control. At about the same time she suffered heavy disruptor fire right into the Main Engineering section, shattered all the control runs, fried the Main Engineering Computer and ruptured several of the pre-

ignition irradiated plasma bottles tied to the impulse drives."

"Somehow it all knocked out the automatic damage control systems. Most of the emergency bulkheads did not close, and the damaged plasma bottles did not automatically eject, which exposed much of the primary hull to radiation and vacuum. That killed most of those in the main berthing compartments and generally made the majority of the primary hull uninhabitable."

"That's ... that's impossible, Commander. There's multiple failsafe's in place to keep any of that from happening, just to prevent exactly what you're describing. What the hell happened to them?" I asked as my mind tried to determine any series of events which might explain such a thing.

The Tellerite shrugged with a snort. "It's hard to tell. The Main Computer's just a pile of shredded silicate and the Main Engineering Computer isn't much better. We've checked the backup records in the Secondary Core but for some tresket reason, the Main Computer didn't back that data to the Secondary Computer, only fragments of it."

The Commander shook his head with frustration and

turned to face me directly. "What I can tell you is that, mechanically, there is nothing plinkin wrong with the radiation bulkheads or the emergency fusion core ejection system, at least for the reactors that are still aboard.

It's possible, I suppose, that the computers were destroyed before the emergency procedures could be executed, the damage might have simultaneously cut the control leads. That damage might have also prevented the auxiliary backups from engaging. It would have taken multiple, nearly instantaneous failures for it to have happened ... but it is possible."

Yes ... possible, but not very dammed likely.

"So are those systems repaired? What works and what's scrap, Commander?" I asked.

"Well," he said gruffly, "as I said, the primary hull is badly damaged. We repaired the structural integrity of the damaged sections but most of the starboard forward sections from Deck Six down to Deck Seven are just a jumbled wreck. It's not habitable so we didn't even bother restoring life support to it and I wouldn't recommend doing any sightseeing there without a friskat good reason. The Primary Sickbay, Main Security,

Auxiliary Control and the Main Computer are pretty much wrecked as well."

"Main Engineering is a mess," he continued. "We've patched the holes and restored the most essential controls but you'll have limited functionality from that site. The port impulse engines are also mangled scrap and you know about the destroyed reactors."

"The forward phaser banks are in good shape, as are the port banks. The starboard phasers were above the damaged zone but their capacitors are psshket and so are the power leads. I'm not sure what we can do about them. The Photon Torpedo Bay on Deck Five is damaged, we've done what we can but I wouldn't trust the starboard launcher on anything other than manual control, it might be ... unreliable."

"How about the secondary hull, much damage there?" I asked hopefully.

"No ... the damage was mostly confined to the upper primary hull. Some overloads and damaged power couplings but nothing that we couldn't repair," he answered.

That, at least, was a relief. When the *Constitution* Class

starships, like the *Republic*, had been designed, they had been built for long duration missions, often far beyond the range of any support. Most vessels that had secondary hulls used them for engineering, weapons or cargo spaces. But the designers of the *Constitutions* had envisaged a different use.

The cylindrical secondary hull of a *Constitution* was essentially its own starship. Within that hull were duplicates of every major system needed for a functional ship, a full scale Bridge surrounded by a full backup Computer Core, auxiliary crew quarters, mess facilities, a small Sickbay, Security Station, a brig, small general science labs, transporters, and both organic and inorganic fabricators, the works. In addition, where the warp drive pylons met the hull was a small Secondary Engineering Room with a Secondary Engineering Computer and control systems and, at the stern, the Shuttlecraft Bay.

Essentially, it was a huge emergency lifeboat capable of returning the ship and her crew to Federation space even in the event of catastrophic damage to the larger primary hull and the main ship's systems. In the thirty odd years since they had been built, none of the vessels had ever had to use it as such.

Until now.

"Thank you for your time, Commander, if you could forward your engineering status reports to me on the *St. Vincent* and keep me updated, I'd appreciate it," I said, smiling with a generous show of teeth to demonstrate my respect for his work.

"If you like ...," shrugged the Tellerite in a non-committal manner.

"I do," I replied and turned to Rodriguez. "Let's take a look downstairs, Moreno, and then get back to the *St. Vincent*. We have a lot of work to do."

Commander Grnaff watched the young blonde-haired Captain stride into the turbolift and disappear behind the swoosh of closing doors. There were far too many pink skins in the universe. They bred like bata and they smelled.

The gold suits were the worst, so high and mighty with their pretensions but this one ... this one hadn't been afraid to honor him with her wit and hadn't been too high to show respect. Better still, she was an engineer, probably a real one that might understand a ship like the *Republic* and treat her as she deserved. If she could

summon up kind thoughts for the old *Suffolk*, then perhaps this one could look into the zriphath of the *Republic* as well.

Yes, this one might even read his reports and perhaps even understand what they said ... and what they didn't.

Abruptly he nodded, a decision made, and then turned back to his work.

You'll have your reports, Captain Macklin, I only request of the Ressar that you have the wit to make use of them.

Scene #10

Lieutenant Commander Janice Chapman

SS Refugio

Stardate 27202.01



All hands Abandon Ship!! Repeat, this the Captain, All hands abandon Ship!!!

She saw it then, the wall of plasma racing down the corridor, engulfing friends, comrades, everyone ... all of them burning to cinders as the blast wave approached, unable to move, unable to do anything but stand in shocked terror and witness it all. And then ... then the flames found her and she burned ... burned ... burned ...

"NOOO!!!" she screamed, bolting upright in the bed,

sweat pouring across her body, her fingers tearing at the covers seeking freedom ... any way to escape.

"Lights!!" she gasped into the night, the darkness of her dreams quickly exchanged for the white sterile light of her stateroom aboard a Federation transport.

A warm disembodied voice spoke from the nearby console. "More dreams, Commander? Do you need me to give you something for sleep?"

"No ... no thank you, nurse," she stuttered. "I ... I'm alright."

"Ok, if you're sure," the voice replied, "But if you need anything, just let me know."

The active light on the console went dim and once again Janice Chapman was alone.

Sliding her legs off the bed, her feet felt the floor and the comforting thrum of the engines. This ship was still under power, this ship wasn't a funeral pyre, this ship was still alive and so was she. It just didn't feel that way.

The docs called it Survivor's Syndrome, a guilt that came with being alive when so many others had died. The

feeling that you should have died with them. She still didn't quite understand how she hadn't.

How many had survived from the *Ptolemy*? It had taken a long time before anyone would tell her. "You just need to focus on you getting better," they had all said, "Let's worry about that later."

The hell I was going to wait for later!! What was WRONG with these people!!! They are my FRIENDS ... my friends ... my people ...

Eventually, they'd relented, told her how many had survived and of those, how many they expected to keep on living. She'd discovered in that moment that the number didn't really matter, the answer was brutally simple ... far too few living, far too many dead.

Far too many for you to bear having lived.

She'd visited the survivors that had been transferred to the *Refugio*, the transport she was now on. A tiny group, plucked from the few scattered escape pods that the Romulans hadn't destroyed, each familiar face reminding her of all those that she'd never see again.

It had been her own special and personal slice of hell. But she was the senior surviving officer ... the only surviving officer from the big fleet tug left alive. Five years she had served as *Ptolemy's* Chief of Security, five years of friendships that should have lasted a lifetime.

They did ... we just didn't think life was going to be so short.

Ptolemy had been a world of its own, home for over 200 officers and crew, capable of being mission-equipped by attaching massive pods to her towing pallet. She could be a cargo hauler, a survey ship, a mobile factory, even a powerful, if sluggish, combat vessel. It all depended on her current pod load-out.

Yeah ... but with the wrong pods ... just a big-shouldered target.

She'd been hauling empty personnel transport pods when the Romulans had come crashing over the Neutral Zone. And there, right in their way, had been the Galloway's World colony.

They needed transport and *Ptolemy* was in the transport business. We'd loaded them up, men, women, children; all those lives packed in everywhere we could manage,

thousands of them. And that's right where they'd been when the Romulans had found us.

We were overstressed, overloaded, our best speed maybe warp two with that much in tow. Our combat capability modest at best, a couple of phaser banks, no more, and our maneuverability with four pods, like a rock in space. Maybe it would have been enough to perhaps deter a modest pirate vessel ... but a Romulan task force? We weren't even a speed bump.

We could have cut the pods loose and ran, who knows, maybe we could have made it on our own, but ... there are just some things you can't do, not with thousands of innocents at your back, ordinary people who need you, need you desperately.

We fought ... no help came. We'd tried ... *Ptolemy* had answered the call ... and *Ptolemy* had failed.

We failed them ... we failed ourselves ... had no business being out there without an escort. But what could we do ... they had no chance without us ... they had no chance with us. We gave them hope ... then killed them and ourselves.

She stumbled from the bed, still feeling the wounds and burns from which her body was just now recovering, and

from wounds deeper still that she knew would never heal. She needed something ... something to drink ... something *really* strong, but all the dispenser would give her was water.

She sat down with her cup, not noticing the cool liquid sloshing out and onto her bare leg. Just sitting here day after day, inching through space, it was killing her, she knew that. Blood was on her hands, in her dreams, in her waking nightmares, so deep in her skin she could never wash it out.

Here, she could do nothing but sit ... do nothing for herself nor for the ghosts that screamed in her dreams. She needed to escape ... flee the demons chasing her in the dark, to do *something ... anything*. And then Star Fleet had opened a window.

She activated her console viewer once again and inserted her security key. Salvation or damnation, she didn't know which, spilled from the screen as she read the words once again ...

*To: Lt. Commander Janice Chapman, Star Fleet Security,
Merchant Marine Command.*

From: Sector 15 Personnel Command

Upon receipt of these orders, you are directed to repair aboard the starship Republic NCC-1371 currently undergoing repair at Aberoen. There you shall assume

Scene #11

Lieutenant (Junior Grade) Catherine Payson

USS Republic

Stardate 27202.03



The Secondary Bridge of the *Republic* was quiet, the ship still at rest, slumbering, awaiting the beings that would once again give her life. Soon she would awake and this place would be alive and active, constantly crewed, the brain of the mighty starship. That day would come soon, but not today.

Newly promoted Lieutenant (Junior Grade) Catherine Payson gently passed her hand over the navigator station's controls, almost reverently feeling them under her fingers. A thrill, almost like an electric shock, passed

through her, bringing her senses to full awareness. For a moment it was as if she could feel every wisp of air flowing through the space, smell every slight fragrance, see into the soft light of the standby displays and into the heart to this great ship.

Today had been a chance for the *Republic's* officers to look through their new home, familiarize themselves with the ship that would soon be theirs. After the official tour had ended the Captain had encouraged her officers to look around on their own ... "get to know" their ship in a more personal way.

Engineers, like the Captain, seemed to think there was some sort of mystical bond between the cold hard metal of a ship and the crew who served aboard her. Personally, Lieutenant Payson had always thought those types were a bit off their rockers. Now, after all that they had gone through, she wasn't quite sure.

All she knew for certain is that the thought of leaving the *St. Vincent* was a painful one, as if the ship was a wounded friend that she was leaving behind. Whatever had happened, she knew that *St. Vincent* had become far more than a simple collection of parts and pieces to her.

So she'd taken the Captain's advice and set about looking

over her new home ... and that search had brought her here to this place.

In some ways, looking around the empty Secondary Bridge was like marveling at a new toy or game as a child ... something that would magically soon spring to life.

But this was not a game. If she hadn't understood that before, the *St. Vincent* had taught her that. This was life or death, the sharp point of the spear, the buckplate of the shield. Those were nice phrases but what they really meant is that your chances of dying had just been elevated dramatically, and so had your chances of doing something worth doing. It was exhilarating and terrifying all at the same time.

You're just a young girl from Altair ... this is no place for you, Cathy.

And yet it was. People had told her that she'd never get accepted to the Academy, and once there, she'd wondered if they hadn't been right. Yet she'd hung on, passed grueling test after grueling test and then proved herself again and again. When she'd been posted to the *St. Vincent* she'd been thrilled, a really good solid assignment for a shiny wet behind the ears Ensign fresh out of the Academy.

It had seemed all a wonderful adventure. Learning the duties of a ship's officer from Captain Grave, Commander Macklin, Lieutenant Jamison and many others, sometimes directly, sometimes by just observing them perform their duties, their commitment and yet deep caring for their vessel and her crew. Traveling with the *Nelson* and her task force to strange new planets, new cultures, races ... everything. It was all that she had hoped for and more.

But then had come the crushing horror, the waking nightmare, the sudden unexpected lurching of her vessel, the screaming klaxon of general quarters, the bright red flashing of the alert beacons, the screams of the wounded or dying, or simply watching her roommate Sara being dragged into vacuum, her screams cut off by the slamming bulkhead door. The terror had nearly overwhelmed her, all around her and with no place to escape.

She'd stumbled down the hallways, trying to outrun what was happening until she'd been stopped and almost thrown into the Auxiliary Control by a security rating.

And there they'd been, the people who'd somehow manage to hold their terror at bay, people struggling to rescue the *St. Vincent* from the void, the people who

would eventually save them. Chief Carstan at the Science Station, Ensign Mersauu at damage control, Ensign Corridor at communications, Lieutenant Jamison at navigation, and, in command, the XO.

It hadn't been a neat tidy bridge like this one, but a hell hole of smoke, burning plasma, shattered auxiliary consoles and broken structural supports. Bodies, dead, dying or just too injured to move ... blood, red, green, purple, yellow ... all mixed here, there... .

She'd wanted to run, but instead the XO's eyes had met hers and in that glance had been icy calm determination. It was a look that she had been unable to turn from, unable to run from, a look that simply expected her to do her duty with a certainty that simply riveted her soul in place.

Take the Helm, Mr. Payson ...

Those five words had changed her. In a way she was still grappling to understand, those calm certain words had touched some steel within her that she never had known was there.

She'd realized there was only one response she could give.

Aye aye, Ma'am ...

"Aye," ... I understand the order ... "Aye," ... I am obeying the order. A chorus of command and response older than the first fragile spacecraft to find its way into Earth orbit.

And so, she had, replacing the terrified rating on the Helm, she'd done as ordered, as she'd been trained. Even when an overload had blown out the Nav Station next to her, taking Lieutenant Jamison's life ... taking the life of her mentor and friend ... she'd done her duty. In those horrific moments, she'd stopped being the wide-eyed country girl on a grand adventure and become something more ... a Star Fleet officer.

Now the XO was the Captain and she, at least temporarily, was the Chief Navigator of this vessel.

She glanced down at the cuffs of her uniform, seeing the single line of dashed gold braid surrounding them.

You aren't ready for this ... there's no way ...

It doesn't matter ... you're here ... not some lofty officer with decades of service ... not some hero with medals and honors ... just you ... you're here ... and these people need you to do

your job, Cathy.

Soon this ship would live again. Soon she would sit here, in this chair, hear the orders and guide the *Republic* and her crew to whatever awaited them.

But that would be tomorrow

Today she sat here in the quiet ... took her Captain's advice ... slowly closed her eyes ... and listened to the great ship that would take her through the fire and hopefully, bring her home again.

Scene #12

USS Republic ***Stardate 27202.05***



"That should do it, Ma'am," said Lieutenant Crandall as he handed me his info board. "We'll be loading the last of it in a few hours. We don't quite have full holds but we are in pretty good shape considering."

I looked over the figures and nodded with a warm smile. "Very good, Mr. Crandall, and the special gear I requested from *Weymouth*?"

"Well, they balked at that, Captain," he replied with a twinkle in his eye. "That is until a Tellerite Commander deemed it all to be useless junk, perfect for use by pink skins. After that I didn't have much trouble."

You are not going to giggle at that, Elizabeth, do you hear me, no giggling!!

I did, however, permit myself a faint smile.

Lieutenant Joseph Crandall was a find. It was hard enough to locate a creative Logistics Officer but to find one out here in all this chaos and then have someone assign him to my ship ... that was bordering on the miraculous. Like all of us now aboard the *Republic*, Crandall was a survivor with his own personal horror story to tell, but unlike many, the ghosts of the past didn't seem to haunt him or put a serious dent in his overall cheerful demeanor. It was a nice change of pace from the haunted looks all too many of us seemed to hide behind our professional masks.

Probably a lesson you could learn there, Elizabeth ...

"It looks like our crew roster is starting to fill out a little," I commented.

"Yes, Ma'am," he replied a bit more soberly. "Star Fleet Personnel Command has no real clue what's going on out here, who's available or where they even are. We are getting some definite reassignments, but mostly we're picking up dribs and drabs from the personnel drifting

through this system. I have some information on personnel we're supposed to pick up from other ships enroute, but how many of them we'll actually link up with is something I can't say."

"Are you saying that your faith in Personnel Command is less than complete, Lieutenant?" I asked in a teasing tone.

"I'm saying that I'll believe it when I see it, Captain," he replied seriously. "We have about one hundred and fifty onboard right now, or who are in-system, but just haven't transferred to us yet. Most of those are from the *St. Vincent* and what's left of the crew that brought the *Republic* in. Of the other two hundred and fifty or so on the list, I wouldn't count on actually being able to pull in more than fifty.

I'll be able to supplement the roster by maybe plucking a few people here and there off of the vessels here at Aberoen, but in this situation, anyone the Captain of an operational ship is going to be willing to part with is probably someone they don't want aboard their ship in the first place. We need personnel, Ma'am, but we need good people, not everybody else's rejects."

"Agreed, Mr. Crandall," I replied firmly. "With people coming from so many fractured sources and under these

conditions it's going to be hard enough to make a cohesive crew, but just because a Captain wants to get rid of someone, doesn't necessarily mean that we can't use them. I'm all for having excessively inventive individuals who don't fit in the box on this ship ... in fact I have a feeling we are going to need people like that more than most. Sometimes people just need a chance, someone to believe in them. I'm trusting you to be able to figure out the difference."

Something about that seemed to put the smile back onto Crandall's face, "Yes, Ma'am, I know just where to start. Is there anything else?"

"Well ... while you're at it, Mr. Crandall, why don't you see if you can't find some level twelve power couplings ... level fifteen would be better but level twelve will do," I said trying to match his guileless smile.

"May I ask why we need those, Ma'am?" he replied.

"Certainly, Mr. Crandall," I said with an innocent smile. "We have a broken phaser bank and I need to fix it so I can shoot at Romulans. *Weymouth* doesn't have the time to do it, so that leaves us, provided we can find the parts."

"Aye Aye, Ma'am," he said, snapping to perfect parade

ground attention. "I live to serve, to hear is to obey ... and stuff like that."

"At ease, Mr. Crandall," I replied stifling a chuckle. "I wouldn't want you to break your back snapping upright like that all the time."

"I'm sure that I don't have the slightest idea what the Captain is referring to, Ma'am," he said with a broad smile.

Dear god, he's trying to cheer me up ... are my ghosts really that close to the surface?

"Off with you, Mr. Crandall," I said, not bothering to suppress the chuckle this time, "before I decide to throw you in the brig for ... overenthusiastic requisitioning."

Undeterred, Crandall flashed me a smile and swung back through the door of my quarters and into the corridor beyond, punching idly at his info board.

Some people, it seemed, were simply irrepressible.

Thank God.

I turned back to the display console on the small desk in

front of me. Using my cramped stateroom on the lower secondary hull to double as my ready room was kind of a pain, certainly a far cry from the spacious Captain's quarters and ready room on Deck Five. But Deck Five was near the most heavily damaged areas of the ship.

True, those areas had been made structurally sound once again but, Commander Grnaff had been forced to use his precious Plassteel to affect those repairs and I wasn't quite ready to trust anything "experimental" with the lives of my crew ... or my own, not if I didn't have to. Instead, all ship's functions had been rerouted through the systems of the lower secondary hull and the assignment of crew's quarters was no exception. For the moment, this small stateroom would just have to do.

Lieutenant Crandall had, however, been able to procure me an awfully comfortable chair which was almost sinfully luxurious, so at least I wouldn't have to deal with a sore back in addition to everything else.

As it happened, everything else included a number of engineering reports from one Commander Grnaff who was even now putting the finishing touches on his repairs to my ship. I'd been meaning to get back to them and I had to admit that I'd rarely seen a more competent and thorough analysis in a series of routine reports.

What had surprised me the most, however, was a series of references to repair dockets for other ships that Grnaff and the *Weymouth* had labored over recently. Those reports had also been attached and they made for disturbing reading.

With the chaos surrounding me, I and the engineering staff had been forced to concentrate on what was relevant to our own ship. I hadn't had the time to do much more than skim his other reports but what had become abundantly clear was that the *St. Vincent* and the *Republic* were far from the only vessels that had suffered critical failsafe failures in emergency situations.

What was confusing was that the failures didn't seem to be localized to any one system or series of systems. Usually when a systems defect appeared, it would show up as a pattern of related failures, a weakness in a certain system that could be tracked down, isolated and dealt with.

That wasn't the case here. On one vessel the failure may have occurred in their scanners, in another, damage control, primary engineering systems, life support, weapons, shields, any number of systems.

The only apparent common thread was that each of the vessels had received heavy damage at the time of the system failure, damage which could have caused the failure itself.

An old axiom that every engineer had drilled into them, something that they absolutely had to understand, was that the simplest explanation was usually the correct one. If you didn't understand that, you could spend your entire career looking for problems that didn't exist rather than solving problems that did. That type of approach was dangerous for your career and your crew.

In this case, the only common discernible thread was that there had been heavy damage in or near the area where the systems failure had occurred, ergo the damage had caused the systems failures. That was clearly the simplest explanation and probably the real explanation. In the absence of evidence to the contrary, it was the only game in town.

Somehow though, that explanation didn't feel right. I'd never really accepted it when I'd been aboard the *St. Vincent*. I knew that ship, knew those systems and there was no way that they could have failed like that. I didn't know why they had failed but the damage we'd received shouldn't have been able to cause it. It just shouldn't

have.

I'd convinced myself that it had just been my wounded pride trying to say, "It's not my fault, I'd done my job and those systems were well maintained, it can't be my fault." So I'd stomped on that idea. The simplest answer is the correct one. Either you didn't do something right or there was a defect in the design that put your ship and crew at risk. You're the Chief Engineer, you're responsible.

But now with this information, I believed that explanation even less. A failure like that on a single ship ... maybe ... but on over a dozen ... and those were just the ones Grnaff had provided me with reports on? All of a sudden what seemed like the simple explanation just wasn't so simple any more. There was something going on here, something I didn't quite understand, threads that I hadn't been able to pull together to make a complete whole.

I need to spend a few days reviewing this data ... but where am I going to find the time? I've got a starship to run now.

The buzzer on my comm panel startled me away from my pondering. "Yes?" I said, hitting the lighted key.

"Captain, incoming communication from Star Fleet

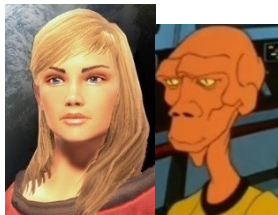
Command for you, priority message, do you wish to take it now?" said the voice from the speaker.

"Yes, thank you, crewman, patch it through," I replied.

Duty called and Commander Grnaff's reports and my misgivings were just going to have to wait for another time

Scene #13

***Mercy Heart Medical Center
Landing City - Aberoen Colony
Stardate 27202.07***



"This way, Captain Macklin," the young nurse said as she guided me through the hallways of the obviously overloaded hospital. Everything had been so busy and demanding that this was the first time I'd had a chance to visit the planet's surface and my body was still getting used to the .85g gravity of the slightly smaller than Earth planet.

Landing City was the primary population center for the Aberoen colony and Mercy Heart was its largest medical center. It had been built to handle the needs of the modest population here, maybe 50,000 in Landing City itself. It had, however, not been designed to deal with the large number of trauma cases which all of the wounded

starships in orbit had brought them. Like everywhere else on the planet facing such a large unexpected influx of people and ships in need, the people here were working tirelessly, doing the best they could.

"In here, Captain," the nurse motioned into a large hospital ward with dozens of portable diagnostic beds filled with patients which were being cared for. At first glance it appeared this space had once been the complex's cafeteria, but space was at a premium and now it served a different, more immediate purpose.

"Lieutenant Konaff is back towards the rear of the room, you can't miss him, he's the only Edoan here right now."

"Thank you, nurse," I replied with a warm smile as I headed between the rows of treatment beds holding the *Republic's* wounded towards where the senior officer to survive the disaster that had befallen the *Republic* was being treated.

A number of the patients turned their attention to me as I moved amongst them. Here on Aberoen, Captains were relatively rare. On many ships which had come here, their command crews had suffered grievous casualties. Targeting command and control systems was, of course, inevitable, but the Romulans seemed to be distressingly adept at it. Just another unexpected and

painful surprise from an enemy we seemed to be learning about again almost from scratch.

They seem to know us very well though ...

Most of those here, I was glad to see, were recovering, which made sense, this was a recovery ward. As I walked amongst them, sending a small smile to one individual after another, maybe a few words, I wondered how many of them would eventually end up under my command, on the ship they had fought so hard to save.

Eventually I made my way to Lieutenant Konaff's bed. The nurse had been right. With three arms and three legs, the tripedal Edoans were hard to mistake for any other race. I had of course, met Edoans before and while they weren't one of the core races which had formed the Federation, and had only reached space faring technology during the last few decades, they were an increasingly important part of the ménage of peoples that made up the Federation.

"Lieutenant Konaff," I asked warmly. "May I have a moment of your time?"

"Of course, Captain," he replied in the high singsong tone of his race. "May this one ask if you are Captain

Macklin?"

"Indeed you may, Mr. Konaff," I said, grabbing a rolling stool and seating myself next to his bed. "I'm very pleased so meet you."

"As this one is to meet you, Captain," he replied, sitting up rather painfully in his bed, then slowly swinging two of this three legs over the side so he could face me directly. "Have you come to discuss this one's request?"

"I have," I replied. "The doctors here have not yet released you for duty but I believed your request deserved my personal attention. After all, Star Fleet owes you at least that much, and likely a great deal more."

That was no exaggeration. I had originally wondered how the *Republic* had been able to escape its ambush by the Romulans having suffered so much damage and so many casualties. The answer it seems had a great deal to do with the officer seated before me.

The initial Romulan ambush of the *Republic* had proceeded pretty much as Commander Grnaff had described. Initial devastating strikes to the Impulse engines and their energized fuel cores, a heavy plasma

torpedo strike on the forward starboard quarter and the simultaneous destruction of the Main Bridge.

That had inflicted massive damage and released heavy radiation throughout the large disk-shaped primary hull which is where most of the crew lived and worked. That, and subsequent damage, had come close to wiping out three quarters of the *Republic's* crew in the first few minutes of the ambush.

For most ships, that would have been the end.

But the *Republic* was not most ships and she had gotten lucky.

Mr. Konaff had been assigned the duty of giving instructional classes to the ship's enlisted personnel on the subject of bridge operations. Enlisted personnel rarely found their way onto a starship's bridge so this was viewed as a manner of expanding their horizons and increasing the depth of their skills.

Fortunately, Lieutenant Konaff had elected to hold his classes in the ship's unused Secondary Bridge located in the lower secondary hull, which is where he and his trainees had been at the moment of the attack.

Crewman, and lower rated Petty Officers, may not have had much in the way of bridge experience, but their training at the Enlisted Academy, while not enough for anything fancy, was enough to cover the basics. The fact that they had been right there, where they needed to be, at the moment their ship most needed them, had allowed them to wrest control of the ship from the destroyed, damaged and malfunctioning primary systems in the devastated primary hull.

That had allowed the *Republic* to survive.

Even so, with auxiliary power down, fluctuating shields and with many of her weapons offline, most of her primary systems destroyed and badly outnumbered, the ship had been in desperate danger. Despite all the chaos and failing systems, however, there was nothing wrong with her warp drives.

In the few seconds where the difference between death and life had hung in the balance, young Lieutenant Konaff had made the right decision. With a crew of inexperienced ratings, he didn't do anything fancy, he just ordered the *Republic* to maximum warp and ran, using whatever firepower his ship still possessed to brush Romulan warships out of their ship's path.

Fortunately, like our encounter with the Romulans in the *St. Vincent*, the vessels which had ambushed the *Republic* were all of the older disk-shaped Romulan designs, not the more capable, refitted Klingon Battlecruisers that now made up much of the frontline strength of their fleet.

If she had been facing refitted Klingon ships, the *Republic* probably would not have been able to make her successful run to daylight. However, the older Romulan designs, while capable, were a bit slower than a starship like the *Republic* and their main weapon, the heavy plasma torpedo, lost some its effectiveness the further it had to travel to its target. While very powerful, this made a plasma torpedo less effective when used against fleeing starships.

A running firefight had ensued, the surprised Romulans reacting to the *Republic's* dash for freedom just a bit too late, just too late to box her in, just too late to cut off her escape route or batter her into submission before she could inch out of range.

When it was all over, most of her crew that was alive had been those who had been fortunate enough to be in the secondary hull when the attack had been launched. Only a very few others had survived and of them, most had

died before the *Republic* had reached Aberoen. Those that hadn't, owed a great debt to Mr. Konaff.

Even though he must have been well aware that the chances of anyone surviving in the upper primary hull were slim, he had still personally led rescue parties into those damaged sections and pulled dozens of trapped survivors out of blasted and mangled portions of the ship. Most of them would later die, but some would go on living to owe this officer, and those he commanded, their lives.

Heroes are hard to come by, but by every definition I knew, Lieutenant Konaff was one.

However, because of his heroic and selfless acts, Mr. Konaff had been exposed to significant radiation, which even Star Fleet's anti-radiation gear could not completely block. Though I could not see them under his tunic, I knew that his body was still scarred and painfully burned in ways that might not ever fully heal. If anyone here deserved a rest, treatment, and a chance to heal in safety and whatever comfort could be provided, Lieutenant Konaff was that one. But it seemed the young Edoan had his own ideas about that.

"Lieutenant, you've requested a medical exception that

would allow you to return to full active duty," I said, gently tapping the PADD I was carrying with my fingers. "The doctors here tell me that you are not ready and that you require additional treatment."

"Yes, Ma'am, however treatment that can be adequately administered by the *Republic* and its medical staff," he replied levelly. "This facility is badly strained. The transference of this one to the care of the *Republic's* medical staff would relieve them of the burden of caring for this one allowing them to treat others whose condition is more urgent. This one is also recovered enough to perform its duty."

I looked at him doubtfully for a moment. "You are obviously injured, Lieutenant, bringing you back to active duty could potentially prolong your recovery or even cause a setback. You are asking me to place you at increased risk. Why should I do that?"

"Because you need this one," he replied firmly. "This one has seen the crew manifests and is aware that the *Republic* is greatly lacking in experienced officers. This one ... I am such an officer", he continued. "This one has attended Star Fleet's Department Head School and has served as a Chief Helmsman of a starship. No other officer is available here with equivalent experience ... and

... Captain?"

"Yes, Mr. Konaff," I replied.

"This one can sit here and await either a transfer out of system or capture by the Romulans. This one's mind thinks and this one's body is sufficiently healed to perform this one's duties. I ... I can sit here and await that ... I can be of little use and a burden ... or I can be of service to you and the ship. Neither choice will alleviate the pain of this one's injuries; this one will deal with that whether this one is here or on the *Republic*. But if you will grant my request, Captain, I *CAN* be of use to you."

"I wish to be of use," he stated with conviction. "Allow me to be of use, Captain."

I shook my head slightly. No matter what, people could still surprise you, you could still find those who could inspire you and give you faith.

Thank God for that.

"Very well, Mr. Konaff, I'll see you get that exception, so get ready, it's likely to be a bumpy ride," I replied.

I stood up, took one last look into his grateful eyes, and

then strode out of the ward. It appeared I had some doctors that needed some convincing.

Scene 14

USS Republic
Repair dock
Aberoan system
Stardate 27202.09



"So, Moreno, are we ready?" I said to my Chief Engineer as we stepped into the turbolift.

"As ready as we are likely to get, Captain," he replied. "We're a lot short on experience and we only have about half the ship's normal complement on board, but honestly, it's better than I expected."

Indeed it was. By some magic only known to Lieutenant Crandall, we had actually managed to assemble over 200 personnel. A surprising number of the *Republic's* survivors had likewise made petitions for medical exemptions so that they could be returned to active duty

and rejoin the *Republic's* crew. I'd tried to talk with as many of them as I could and I'd sent Crandall to talk with the rest.

Most of those requests, I'd been willing to grant. I really did need them and their experience and they could reasonably recuperate aboard the *Republic*. Beyond that though, I could feel their almost desperate need to, as Lieutenant Konaff had said, be of use, not be left behind, to have a chance to do *something*.

Others had unexpectedly appeared in Mr. Crandall's company, with him claiming, "They just followed me home, Captain." Pretty much uniformly, they were young, mostly enlisted, but with that eager sense of competence that suggested that, while Mr. Crandall might have been robbing the cradle a bit, he was getting some of the best of the litter.

Still there were glaring weaknesses in our roster. I had Lieutenants doing the jobs of Commanders, Ensigns doing the jobs of Lieutenants, Petty Officers doing the work of Ensigns and so on down the line. Probably our most obvious challenge was in the sciences, personnel who were not only there to perform scientific work, but to operate the *Republic's* patchwork set of sensors and make sense of them.

A couple of Ensigns had been recommended to me, but it was painfully obvious that they were in no way ready for the position so ... in an unheard-of move, I'd decided to retain Chief Petty Officer Samuel Carstan as my acting Science Officer, relying on his years of practical experience to make up for the lack of training that commissioned officers would have received at Star Fleet Academy.

Still, Elizabeth, you have a Senior Chief Petty Officer holding down the berth the book says requires at least a Lieutenant Commander. That's insane.

Well, maybe it was, but I knew Chief Carstan and I'd seen the type of man he was. I had nothing but respect for him. If there was something he couldn't do, it wasn't something I would expect a wet behind the ears Botany officer to handle.

Yes, we were a patchwork lot. Personnel being drawn in dribs and drabs from wherever we could find them. A few here a few there, we even had an honest to god Star Fleet Academy Midshipman on board. And of course, that fragmented diversity posed a potential problem as well.

Starships simply were not crewed like this and there was

a good reason for that. For starships to function properly you had to have the right mix of skills and experience. You needed personnel resources the ship would need to confront the challenges it might face during its deployment.

We didn't have that. Our crew was mostly being assigned to us because they were still breathing, they had been readily available and, at least on paper, had the minimal skills needed to perform the job. Scratch crews simply did not function as well as crews which had been put together in the normal manner. When you matched those challenges up with the general lack of experience, bad things could happen.

"Repairs?" I asked.

"*Weymouth's* engineers finished what they could get done and departed the ship within the last hour, Ma'am. We have about half impulse power restored and while the shield grid is operational, the mess on the forward starboard quarter prevented them from completely restoring the grid there. Shield number two is probably going to be a bit spongy and more difficult to regenerate," Rodriguez replied.

"I think we've managed to mostly repair the starboard photon torpedo launcher but the starboard phaser battery is still inoperative. That leaves us with only the forward and port batteries. We also have another issue we're going to have to deal with," he finished.

"Yes, I know, if we bring any more people aboard, we're going to exceed the berthing capacity of the secondary hull," I said with a grimace. "I'm thinking what we need to do is to see what can be done with the port aft sections of Deck Six and Seven. If we can reinforce and seal off the bulkheads leading to the damaged sections, we can probably make that area safe for habitation. Otherwise we're going to have to create temporary berthing space in the Shuttlecraft Bay, we're just running out of room.

"Otherwise, are we ready for departure?" I asked.

"Yes, Ma'am, I think we are," he replied with a nervous smile as the doors to the lift opened up on to the Secondary, now really THE Bridge of the *Republic*.

"Thanks, Moreno, then I guess it's time to get started," I replied with a smile of my own.

I looked around the Bridge ... *my* Bridge, now that was a concept that I hadn't quite fully accepted

yet. Somewhere bouncing around the back of my mind was the sure knowledge that Star Fleet would eventually recognize their mistake and put a *real* Captain in charge, someone who had truly earned this posting.

After all, that's why they breveted me the rank. That, by definition, is only a temporary promotion.

Apparently someone at Star Fleet has some sense ...

But despite all of that, no priority subspace message had arrived assigning some other officer to replace me, no storied senior officer had appeared out of the blue to relieve me and I hadn't awakened to learn this had all been some kind of nightmare. This was real ... unbelievable as it was, this was real.

"Mr. Konaff," I said, approaching the command chair as the Edoan slowly and painfully stood and relinquished it to me. "Report."

"Vessel is prepared for departure, Captain Macklin, all crew are aboard and all systems show ready," he replied as he lowered himself slowly into the Helm Station's chair.

"Ensign M'Riss," I said, turning to look at my new Caitian

Communications Officer, she too a survivor of the *Republic's* original crew. "Signal *Weymouth* that we are ready to depart."

"Yess, Captaiiinn," she replied. "Dock controlllll reportssss ready."

"Helm ready, Ma'am," responded Mr. Knoaff.

"Departure course on plot, Ma'am," said Lieutenant Payson from the Navigator's Station.

"Yard Commandddd sssignalling clear, Ma'am," continued Ensign M'riss.

"Manuevering Thrusters, Mr. Konaff," I said, feeling my heart beginning to beat so loud I was amazed that no one else seemed to notice. "Station keeping, cast off moorings."

"Maneuvering thrusters, station keeping, moorings cast off, Aye," responded Mr. Konaff.

And now, this is the moment, Elizabeth. Are you really ready for what's out there?

God I hope so ...

"Thrusters ahead, Mr. Konaff," I ordered, trying my best to keep my voice from wavering. "Take us out."

And then there it was ... the slightest change in the feel of the ship ... movement, under its own power, my first feel of the *Republic* as a real starship. The image of the spacedock fell back from the Viewscreen replaced by the sparkling blackness of space and the bright blue orb of the planet Aberoen beneath us. No longer the ruined wreck people had labored to heal, not a devastated and forlorn survivor ... but a ship.

Hello girl, nice to meet you. Be good to us please coz we are all in this together now.

"Engineering," I said, looking at Lieutenant Moreno on the Engineering Station.

"Fusion reactors online, Captain, Impulse power at your discretion," he replied.

"Mr. Payson."

"Course out system plotted and laid in, Ma'am," she replied.

"Mr. Konaff, one quarter impulse power until we clear this traffic."

"Aye, Ma'am, one quarter impulse power," he replied.

The blue orb quickly faded from the Viewscreen as the *Republic* accelerated out of orbit, freeing herself from the bonds of the planet's gravity, moving quickly towards the outer system. She felt ... different. Not the same swift and nimble feel of the *St. Vincent*, but a more ... determined feeling ... the feeling of a ship putting her shoulder to the wind and pressing inexorably forward.

It was a feeling I liked....

Totally illogical ...

It's just a starship, Elizabeth.

Yes it was, but it was our starship now.

"Mr. Payson, first rendezvous?" I asked.

"The *SS Cambridge* in two days Captain, then the *USS Chelsea* in six, then several more before we reach Tiberian," she replied with a bright smile on her face.

I guess she feels it too, then.

"Very well, engage at warp three when clear, Mr. Konaff, let's see what's out there."

Scene #15

Lieutenant Commander Janice Chapman

USS Chelsea

Stardate 27202.14



It had happened far too suddenly, too unexpectedly to truly form a coherent series of events.

Everything was clear up until we'd beamed over from the *Refugio* to the *Chelsea*. The *Refugio* was simply a transport which had been near enough to pick up the signals from our escape pods and risked quick and fiery destruction to come to our aid, snatching survivors of the doomed *Ptolemy* from the void.

Her Captain and crew had risked a lot to do that, but *Refugio* was no Star Fleet vessel and was even more vulnerable than the old *Ptolemy* had been in the shooting

gallery this part of the galaxy had so quickly become. Anything other than fleeing the area as quickly as possible only shortened her life expectancy, so when Star Fleet had directed her to transfer us to the USS *Chelsea* for the final leg of our journey, her Captain had only been too happy to oblige.

It had *seemed* like a good idea at the time ...

That was until we'd materialized on the *Chelsea's* transporter pad.

The transporter room had been very familiar. The Romulans there with disruptors leveled at us had not.

The blue haze from those self-same disruptors had limited any further recollections on my part.

No, now all I felt was sore, more than a bit nauseated, and for some reason my cheeks hurt ...

"Come on, Commander Chapman," came a familiar crusty voice as a sharp blow registered on my right cheek.

"Time to rise and shine."

I cracked open my eyes and managed a small grunt as my mind began to link the pain in my cheeks to current

events. "Wha the hell??" I managed to blurt out as I tried to regain my bearings.

"Thank God, you're awake at last!! Begging the Commander's pardon, Ma'am, but we're in a hell of a shithole an I'd appreciate the Commander's help before we dig ourselves much deeper," came the reply.

Blearily, I focused on the author of these noises that had so rudely disturbed my slumber. "Master Chief Parker?"

"One an the same, Ma'am," he replied with a broad grin. "Glad ta see you're still with us. Ya took a bit more of the blast that I did, being out in front an all in good officer fashion. Almost heroic as it were."

"Oh stow the crap, Chief," I said, rubbing my eyes. "Where are we ... and where is everyone else?"

"As best I can tell, Ma'am, we're on a Federation starship. If I had ta guess I'd say this is the *Chelsea*," he continued. "As for where the rest of us are ... I haven't the faintest. Last I saw any of them they was fallen on the transporter pad, just like us."

"Right ... the *Chelsea* ... and," I looked around a bit trying to take in my surroundings, "and there were

Romulans aboard. How the hell did that happen?"

"I don't rightly know, Commander," he said with a smile, "Like you, I slept though most of the formal introductions."

As my eyes began to focus a bit better I could begin to make out certain features. Two small beds, a com panel on the wall and a small desk where a computer station had obviously been hurriedly and not very neatly removed. "We're not in the brig ... this is a junior officer's stateroom."

"That's right, Ma'am," replied the Master Chief with a twinkle in his eye. "Not sure why we're not but they've done a bloody good job a wrecking everything we might use ... and oh course the door is locked ... ya wouldn't happen to have a phaser tucked away somewheres, now would you?"

"No, afraid not, Master Chief," I said gently patting around my body. "It seems that our hosts have relieved me of such items. How about you?"

"The same I'm afraid," he responded, looking put out. "Damm bloody Romulans ..."

I nodded ... the Romulans were anything but stupid and if they were anything like their Vulcan brethren, efficiency was going to be second nature to them. Of course, given that, the fact that we were in an unused stateroom instead of the brig was an interesting twist. Nobody in their right mind would be putting two very experienced security officers, like myself and Andrew Parker, anywhere else. That opened up a couple of possibilities. Either the security brig was holding other prisoners of great value or threat, the brig itself was damaged ... or ...

The Romulans don't know we're security officers ...

That actually made sense. There really wasn't anything that distinctive about the base uniforms we wore. Engineers, service personnel, security, we all wore the same general red tunic or dress and were generally indistinguishable unless you were wearing your service insignia or you were in one of the more formal types of uniforms.

Both Parker and I had lost all but the uniforms when the *Ptolemy* had been destroyed and there was nothing distinguishing about the general utility uniforms we'd received aboard the *Refugio*. There really wasn't anything in our luggage, thankfully sparse as it was, to identify us and our security chips required biometric feedback data

for anyone to gain anything useful from them.

The only way they'd be able to identify us is if they were able to access our orders or personnel records ... and if you didn't have the proper security codes ... that could take some time.

Of course, there was always the question as to why the Romulans had allowed us to live in the first place. If they had wanted to destroy us, well a civilian transport like the *Refugio* would have been no match for a Tactical Destroyer like the *Chelsea*. But instead of blowing us out of space, they'd allowed us to beam aboard and then captured us.

That doesn't seem like a typical Romulan approach now does it?

Soooo ... maybe the Romulans thought they needed us for something, enough to at least put themselves at some trouble to obtain us. I wondered what it might be? Better question ... how long would they need us for?

Worse, the Romulans were operating a Federation starship, moving deeper into Federation space. What exactly were they up to?

I wasn't sure I would like the answers to any of those questions.

"Ok," I said struggling to my feet. "We're getting out of here."

"Oh that's dandy, Commander. Might I ask how you intend that bit of magic?" the Master Chief replied with a smile.

"Not sure yet," I said, gazing around. "But I'll think of something ...

Scene #16

Captain Elizabeth Macklin

USS Republic

Stardate 27202.15



"Any sign of them yet, Chief?" I said, looking over to the Science Station.

"No, Ma'am," Chief Carstan replied. "Na a sign of them as yet."

"Keep scanning, Chief, they have to be out there somewhere."

I frowned, swiveling my command chair back to the Main Viewscreen. Over the past several days we'd made a number of rendezvous with various ships, Star Fleet and merchant vessels fleeing the combat zones, each

providing us with at least a few more badly needed personnel. Some of those planned rendezvous had gone astray ... bad navigation or worse, the ship just disappearing before it could leave the ever expanding reach of the Romulan fleet.

This was different; it had been less than a day since we'd received a message from the SS *Refugio* that she was transferring a group of Star Fleet personnel to the USS *Chelsea* for delivery to us and the *Chelsea* should have had no problem rendezvousing with us by now.

There's a million explanations why they might not be here, Elizabeth ... maybe they were called off, had an engine malfunction, or ...

Well that didn't bear thinking about. We were still too deep into Federation space for the Romulans to be active here, weren't we?

"Ensign M'riss," I said, turning toward my russet-furred communications officer. "Any reply to our subspace messages?"

She turned back to me, her large golden catlike eyes looking into mine. "No Cappptain," she purred "No respponse fromm either the *Reffugio* or the *Chhelsea*."

I nodded thoughtfully for a moment. "Ensign ... what are the chances of both vessels suffering some sort of communications failure at the same time."

She continued to look back at me, her large eyes changing to a slightly lighter shade as she contemplated my question. "There are many phenomena that could account for such a disruption, Captain," she replied. "However, none have been detected by our sensors. The chances of simultaneous communication failures on both vessels is ... small."

I looked back at Chief Carstan. The Chief had been around for a while and was very familiar with some of the older sensor arrays with which the *Republic* was still equipped. Why the old lateral arrays hadn't been removed during the *Republic's* last refit was beyond me. However, with some of our more modern systems damaged, the Chief's ability to integrate these older systems back into the Main Sensor Grid and use them effectively had been very useful and helped fill a few coverage gaps we would have had to live with otherwise. Just one of the surprises that the *Republic* had revealed to us.

And as it turned out, the *Republic* had a LOT of surprises

to reveal.

As a member of the *Constitution* Class of starships, the *Republic* shared many similarities in design with her various sisters. Still, every ship differed in some detail from the other ships of their class, usually these differences were small, but I'd been surprised at how different the *Republic* had been from the other *Constitution* Class starships I'd observed during my career. Indeed, the old sensor arrays weren't the only system aboard that was a bit dated or even just plain non-standard.

It had taken me a bit of digging to discover why these differences existed and what I'd discovered is that the *Republic's* original design wasn't that of a *Constitution* Class Heavy Cruiser at all. In fact, her design predated that of the *Constitution* by several years and she had first set upon her journey to the stars before the ships that would eventually become her sisters had even begun construction.

The *Republic's* original design was that of a prototype, a ship designed to prove out in the field the radically new technologies that would eventually make the *Constitutions*, and the other starships of that generation, the Federation-changing vessels they had become.

But all of that had had its genesis here, on this ship.

The *Republic*, and her sister prototypes, the *Constellation* and *Reshadjie*, had been born at a time of great discoveries and innovation. Discoveries and advancements in computers and the uses of dilithium in warp cores were offering potentially staggering enhancements in the fields of starship design and operations. These advancements in turn promised to open up large areas of the galaxy to exploration and colonization which had been well beyond the capabilities of earlier vessels.

It all seemed as if these radical technological advances were about to herald a "great leap forward" for Star Fleet and the Federation.

That is if it all worked as advertised.

What the new designs promised was remarkable, but this wasn't the first time Star Fleet had been confronted with "great leaps forward". The problem was, not all of those "great leaps" had gone in the expected direction. There was after all, the *Tritium*.

The Tritium Project had promised to be an earlier

generation's "great leap forward". Designed to replace the starships that had served during the Romulan war, the *Tritiums* were to be highly advanced vessels with three perfectly balanced warp drives that would revolutionize starship capabilities and design. Star Fleet spent huge sums to develop them, even more to build a fleet of six vessels. Just one problem, they hadn't worked.

The "perfect balance" of three warp fields had just simply been beyond the capabilities of the technology of that time to reliably stabilize under actual operating conditions. The entire tremendously expensive fleet of ships had been incapable of reaching speeds exceeding Warp three without literally shaking themselves apart.

Star Fleet had been understandably reluctant to take such a gamble again. From that point forward, advancements in starship design had firmly been evolutionary, not revolutionary. Before Star Fleet would be willing to attempt another radical project, they would need proof.

The *Republic* had been that proof. Originally she had been designed as a member of the Horizon class, starships similar in structure and layout to the proposed *Constitutions* but using the tried and true technology of the day. While still under construction, Star Fleet had

radically modified her design to incorporate prototype examples of the new technology.

The *Republic* had proven out the technology in the field, under actual service conditions and opened the way for a whole new generation of starships. Eventually Star Fleet had further refitted her until she was barely distinguishable from the *Constitution* herself. But despite Star Fleet's efforts, the *Republic* was, and always had been, slightly different from her sisters.

When it came time to plan refits and upgrades to a class, being different was not a good thing. For the most part, an upgrade designed for a first flight *Constitution* Class vessel worked just fine with the older *Republic*, but that wasn't always the case.

One, but not the only example, was the Secondary Computer, which, right now, was the Main Computer. Apparently when it had come time for the *Republic's* computer systems to be upgraded, the replacement of the old computer cores on the Main Computer had gone splendidly, the replacement of the Secondary Core had not.

The secondary core was located directly behind the Main Deflector Array and wrapped around the Secondary

Bridge space. Unfortunately, the shape of the *Republic's* secondary hull was slightly more cylindrical than that of her more modern sisters. This translated into it being just a bit narrower, a bit smaller than typical which left less room for things like ... say ... a new Secondary Computer Core. When Star Fleet engineers had gone in they'd found that there simply wasn't enough room for the new system. So Star Fleet had done what upgrades they could, new peripheral systems, greatly enhanced memory storage, parallel processors and such ... but had simply left the old core where it was. It was, after all, only a backup system.

With the Main Computer now no more than so many silicate shards scattered around the primary hull that meant that the backup Secondary Computer was now the Main Computer, a genuine Daystrom Industries Mk. 1F duotronic processing system. It was a system that had been top of the line technology some three decades ago and was still used in smaller starships. Oh the various improvements had helped enormously and it was undoubtedly the fastest, meanest Mk. 1F in existence ... but at its core, it was still a Mk. 1F.

The computer wasn't the only issue. Many of the secondary backup systems that we were now relying on were as old, or almost as old, and other systems were

non-standard to a ship of this type. Warp computers that I could have sworn were the exact same systems that we'd used on the much smaller *St. Vincent*, backup comm arrays of a type I'd never seen before, and the list went on and on. Everything worked reliably and seemed to be handling the load, but how well they'd do so under stress still remained to be seen.

My question, at the moment, one I couldn't fully answer, was to what extent these older just out of the norm systems were degrading Chief Carstan's ability to find, and Ensign M'riss's ability to communicate with, the *Chelsea* or the *Refugio*.

There's just no way to know ... not yet anyway.

But there was a way to find out.

"Lieutenant Payson," I said, looking at my red-headed navigator. "Set up a search pattern along the projected course of the *Chelsea*. I want to find that ship."

"Ma'am," said my Edoan helmsman, swiveling his head to look directly back at me. "To Tiberian we are expected, this will delay us."

"Understood, Mr. Konaff," I said in reply. "But the *Chelsea*

should be out there and she should be close. It's probably nothing but I think it's worth our time to find out what's happening. Besides, the *Chelsea* has some of our people aboard, people we need here, not there."

"Yes, Captain," he replied, swiveling his head back into position, all without moving his body.

God ... I don't know if I'm ever going to get used to that ...

"Course laid in, Captain," said Lieutenant Payson, looking back at me.

"Thank you, Lieutenant. Let's go find her ... warp factor two."

Scene #17

Lieutenant Commander Janice Chapman

USS Chelsea

Stardate 27202.16



"Shit," I whispered as I bumped my head once again in the narrow crawlspace.

I caught a glimpse of Chief Parker wedged into an equally tight spot further back down the damaged conduit and the grimace on his face clearly informed me that his famous good humor was equally strained.

Well wasn't this just a lovely brainstorm ...

It had, of course, seemed like a good idea at the time. The Romulans didn't take prisoners, but they'd kept us alive. Obviously they had something in mind ... something that would very probably be best avoided. Escape had seemed like a very viable option.

Yeah genius ... but escape to where?

That question rankled. I was a Security Officer with years of experience. I knew, *knew* dammit that forcing our way out of our makeshift little prison wasn't "escape". All it afforded us was an excellent possibility of being vaporized by the next Romulan we happened to encounter.

"Escape" meant getting off this ship, taking it back from the Romulans, or doing something that gave us some measure of control over the situation. Exactly how we were going to accomplish any of those things in the middle of deep space was, at the moment, something of a mystery.

"How did I let you talk me into this, Master Chief?" I

whispered.

“Me?” he replied. “I thought this was your brilliant idea ... Ma’am.”

I smiled for a moment. “Officer’s prerogative, Master Chief, crap rolls downhill and you’re at the bottom of it in more ways than one.”

He looked around at his scorched and ruined surroundings and shrugged. “Can’t argue with you there, Ma’am.”

I slid my way a bit further up the crawlspace, maneuvering around broken shards of metal and melted circuitry in the process. Whatever the Romulans had done to capture this ship, they hadn’t taken her without a fight. Every corridor was literally filled with scorch and blast marks from a firefight that must have raged throughout the ship. Some idiot, or just plain desperate individual, had actually set off a few photon grenades which, inside of a vessel, was generally considered to be a **bad** idea.

Some areas, like the one we were currently in, had taken far heavier damage.

I reached the top of the maintenance shaft and looked back at Chief Parker. "Find anything useful?" I asked.

He looked down at the small emergency scanner we'd been able to liberate from an escape pod and shook his head. "No, Ma'am, there's nothing we can be accessing from here, whatever hit this place fried every bloody thing but good. Good news is that I'm pretty sure that whatever did all of this blew the internal security grid all to bloody hell at the same time. If the Roms are going to find us here, they'll have to do it the old fashioned way."

"Good news, Chief?" I replied. "Whatever happened to your glum 'we're all gonna die' attitude?"

"We're all gonna die, Ma'am," he replied with a helpful grin.

"That's better," I said with a smile.

I finished liberating myself from the mangled tube and into a slightly less distressed connecting crawlway, moving a bit to the side to allow the Chief to slip in as well. "So, Chief, what does your vast pool of knowledge and experience suggest we do now?"

Chief Parker looked up the tube one direction and then the other. "Well, that way heads towards Sickbay, the Brig and the Main Computer Core, the other," he continued with a nod in the opposite direction, "will probably take us back toward Engineering. "

"The crew?"

"Well, we haven't checked the entire bloody ship yet but if any of them are still living the Roms have them locked down tighter than a parson's ass, probably in the brig, I'm thinking, maybe one of the cargo holds. I don't know about you but I don't think the Roms are exactly stupid, Ma'am. We're going to need a bloody lot more than a couple of emergency stunners to get into any of those spaces," he replied.

"And they're probably working overtime trying to break into the *Chelsea's* secure databanks so the Computer Core is out," I said with a grimace. "And they're going to have guards in Engineering."

"So, Ma'am," the Chief said, leaning back and gaining what comfort he could in the cramped crawlspace. "We can basically go anywhere that the Roms don't blinking care about."

"Maybe," I said thoughtfully, looking in the direction of Engineering. "Ever seen the internal security brief on a tactical destroyer like this? If I remember right, the warp drives are connected to Main Engineering by a subassembly, just aft of the impulse drives."

"Ahhh," he replied with a slightly concerned look. "But may I be reminding the Commander that's also where the god dammed Jefferies tubes are ... you know, the ones that have all that high energy plasma feeding the energizers ... you know ... when the warp engines are online ... like right now?"

“Exactly,” I replied with a triumphant smile. “The high energy plasma and energizers stuff sounds pretty important and who in their right mind would ever look for us there?”

“Ma’am ... we’re all gonna die,” the Chief moaned.

“Outstanding,” I replied with an even broader grin, “Lead the way, Master Chief.”

Scene #18

Captain Elizabeth Macklin

USS Republic

Night cycle

Stardate 27202.16



The ship was quiet, at least as quiet as a starship at warp was ever likely to be. I could still feel my ship, the small vibrations, even the minute shifts caused by the inertial dampeners as well as the soft muted hum of superconductors carrying their load of energy throughout the mighty vessel.

But these were largely background sensations to me now, the absence of which would warrant my attention rather than their presence. I wouldn't go so far as to say that the *Republic* and I were "friends" yet, but as each day passed my feel of her, her moods, her small joys, the

rhythm of her became deeper and more natural.

We're getting there, aren't we, girl, you stick with me and I'll stick with you.

The light in the hallways were dimmer than normal. It was the night shift, the time when non-essential personnel were expected and required to rest and recuperate for the following "day".

It was devilishly hard to actually run and work on a vessel long term that didn't have cycles like this. Sentient life craves cycles and over the long term, people would suffer badly if those cycles, or something like them, weren't in place. As I could see, most of my crew was taking this rest period seriously, even if their Captain hadn't managed to get the knack of it just yet.

There were any number of reasons that I didn't want to sleep, there was the sense that there was still so much work to do, so much yet still undone. There was also the fact that most times when I closed my eyes I saw any number of things that I had absolutely no interest contemplating again.

I was, I had to admit, someone that needed a good long time of rest and a lot of psychotherapy, but that probably

described most of the crew aboard my ship right now.

And it was my ship, as much as the thought terrified me, I'd finally started to come to terms with that and accept it. It didn't matter that I was under qualified for the job nor that Star Fleet would never ordinarily sanction a vessel with *Republic's* grievous wounds for any kind of mission other than to return to a starbase for extended refit and repair. But Star Fleet was running short of resources and needed any vessel which could reasonably fulfill a role. Wounded or not, under crewed as we were, the *Republic* represented a substantial asset, one the Fleet couldn't easily ignore.

Oh sure, the call had certainly gone out to other sectors, even back to the core of the Federation home worlds, and reserves would be sent streaking toward Quadrant 3 and Sector 15 in particular. But even subspace communications took time and starships even longer to respond. It would take months before any sizable force would be able to assist us. Until then, the Fleet had to make do with what it had.

All of this was enough to keep any Captain awake at night, but there was something else, the nagging feeling that I was missing something, something important that just wouldn't let me sleep, like some streak ball rattling

around my mind, moving too fast to identify but demanding attention none-the-less.

What are you missing, Elizabeth, what's bothering you?

I looked with frustration as I passed my stateroom once again and found no refuge in the thought of entering it any time soon. Whatever the answers were, they weren't going to be found in there. I instead continued my pacing as I roamed the near silent corridors, unable just to sit still while I thought.

I eventually ended up in front of a turbolift and with nothing better to do, I walked inside and told it to take me to Engineering. After a few moments the doors swooshed open and I walked out into the wrong place.

Oh it was Engineering alright, but instead of Secondary Engineering where all of the ship's functions were currently routed to, I'd instead ended up on the Main Engineering Deck up in the badly damaged primary hull.

Like the rest of the main hull, the Engineering Deck had suffered grievous damage and the evidence in shattered equipment, patched rents in the hull and the general silence and feeling of abandonment of the place made it seem almost surreal. It was violence that was all too

familiar, I'd seen something like it on the *Hood* when I'd been younger, when heavy phaser fire from another Federation starship had accidentally opened up the compartment, killing everyone inside and inadvertently promoting me to Chief Engineer.

The scars were still there, all patched now with Commander Grnaff's miracle Plasteel but still jagged around the edges. It was definitely not the safest location on the ship.

I was about to turn around and reenter the turbolift when something made me stop and look back to the ceiling of the Engineering Deck. With an uneasy feeling, I realized that the primary damage had been done in exactly the same place that the impulse deflection crystal would ordinarily have been located in a newer or refitted vessel. But the *Republic*, unlike my *St. Vincent*, hadn't received that modification and simply didn't have one.

That was probably good news for the *Republic*. If she had been equipped with one of the new impulse systems and internal Warp Core, a hit in that location might have created the same unlikely cascade of failures that had deprived the *St. Vincent* of her power, and nearly her life.

What had happened was bad enough. Distruptors had

carved through the top of the Main Engineering space and smashed through the Main Energizer Housing and the on-duty engineering crew instead. Other blasts had shattered the Main Engineering Computer and several of the Impulse Engine's Fusion Reactors amongst other things.

It had certainly caused critical damage, just not the complete power system shut down we'd seen with the *St. Vincent*.

Still, the similarity was uncanny.

It's probably nothing, Elizabeth; it's not as if the Romulans don't know where our impulse engines are housed. Taking them out would be a worthwhile targeting priority.

True, but attempting to target a specific part of the system, like the deflection crystal, on a starship traveling many times the speed of light was exceptionally difficult and not particularly effective. To even get close to an area that small, to have it hit the same exact area on two separate vessels was unnatural. It couldn't have been purposeful, it just had to be a coincidence, dumb luck, random chance ... didn't it?

But what if it wasn't, what if it was intentional?

No, that was just idiotic. The simplest answer is the best answer...

But is it?

I looked at the large grey patch above me and willed it all to make sense.

Ok, let's assume for a moment that the simplest explanation is the wrong explanation ... what then? What if it isn't coincidence, what if the Romulans had specifically intended to hit both ships in pretty much the exact same way ... why?

Well, the Bridge was an obvious target. It was small, had significant additional defenses even when not on alert status, but if you could manage it, it would be a critical target.

Amazingly good targeting though, doing it once, maybe, doing it twice ... that's unbelievably good shooting at warp speeds.

Then there was the strike on the Engineering Deck, two attacks at almost the exact same place on two separate ships. Why would the Romulans want to specifically

target that area?

All the attack on the *St. Vincent* there *should* have done was damage the deflection crystal. That would have, at best, deprived us of auxiliary power from the Impulse engines. Inconvenient for us, but hardly a knockout blow which, if it had been intentional, was what the Romulans would have presumably been looking for.

To do that, to really cripple us in the initial volley, the Romulans would have needed to target the Main Warp Core or the warp engines themselves. The Romulans hadn't done that.

The deflection crystal also had additional defensive shielding which made it a tougher target than most other areas of the ship, so targeting it specifically actually decreased your chances of scoring a crippling hit. The only way you were going to cripple a starship with a premeditated attack there was ...

... if the Romulans knew our failsafes would not engage ...

But that made *NO* sense, I mean there was no way that anyone could have possibly predicted that. Failsafes were just that, systems designed specifically to react to prevent disaster in the case of a major systems

failure. They were specifically designed to operate when nothing else around them was. They were *designed* for situations like this.

But what if you're wrong about that, what if the Romulans could have predicted that outcome ...

That was a thought that chilled me to the bone ... but what about the *Republic*? Let's say the Romulans had somehow figured out that a strike on the deflection crystal could cause a series of cascade of failures which would rob a starship of its power. But if that was so, why launch the same attack on the *Republic*?

The *Republic* didn't have a deflection crystal. She had not yet been fitted with the early generation internal warp cores which Star Fleet was beginning to introduce into the Fleet. These upgrades moved the actual warp cores from the cylindrical warp engines where older vessels had housed them, and moved them to fit within the hull of the starship itself.

Positioned within the secondary hull and extending up the dorsal pylon to the Impulse engines, the new cores allowed for more efficient control of the warp reaction, promised future increases in raw power and allowed vast improvements to a ship's auxiliary power and impulse

engines. The *St. Vincent* had been equipped with an early variant of this system but newer vessels currently coming off the drawing boards would receive a more drastic version which would essentially turn the warp nacelles into gigantic warp coils.

But the *Republic* had not been fitted with such a system. She had undergone a significant refit a couple of years ago, but Star Fleet had judged that her secondary hull would have required a major rebuild to incorporate the new systems. The *Republic* had instead received an upgrade to the self-contained warp drives she already possessed. That meant that the *Republic's* Warp Cores were still contained within her warp drives, not the hull.

No internal warp core, no deflection crystal, and therefore no danger of suffering the same type of cascade failures that had crippled the *St. Vincent*. So, if the Romulans had deliberately decided to attack that same area on the *Republic* in the hopes of shutting down all of her power as had happened in the *St. Vincent*, they were aiming at the wrong place.

But what if the Romulans didn't know that? What if they thought the Republic had received the standard refit everyone else was receiving?

I stared at the rent ceiling patch as the chills running up and down my spine grew colder.

That can't be right ... the simplest explanation is the right explanation ...

But what if it's not ...

A million horrible ideas suddenly came to mind at that thought, none of them even the least reasonable or likely, yet all of them fundamentally disturbing to downright terrifying.

"Captain, please respond to the Bridge," said the voice of Ensign Corridor as the nearby wall speaker startled me out of my thoughts.

I took a few steps and snapped down on the respond button. "Macklin here, what do we have, Mr. Corridor."

"Chief Carstan believes we have the *Chelsea* on sensors, Ma'am," came a calm professional response.

"Believes, Mr. Corridor?" I responded.

"Yes, Ma'am. we can't be sure but Chief Carstan is picking

up something very faint on one of the old lateral arrays. He thinks it's the *Chelsea*," the young Ensign replied.

I looked one last time at the grey Plasteel patch on the ceiling as my mind raced with a million possibilities that I didn't want to think about, but had no choice but to consider.

But those thoughts would have to wait for now.

I looked over at the wall speaker, "Very well, Ensign, give the Chief a cookie and sound Yellow Alert. Wake everyone up, I'm on my way," I said, as I strode into the turbolift with the warble of Yellow Alert echoing in my ears.

There were just far too many questions out there and not nearly enough answers. Hopefully, it was time to find some.

Scene 19

Captain Elizabeth Macklin

USS Republic

Stardate 27202.16



I strode through the turbolift doors on to my waiting Bridge, the yellow flashing lights and distinctive warble of Condition Yellow indicating a vessel moving to its second highest state of alert. But despite all the noise and flashing, the Bridge Viewscreen showed nothing out there but empty space.

"What do we have, Chief?" I said, looking towards the Science Station station and its primary sensor readouts.

"Well, Ma'am," the elderly Chief replied. "We are having a group of subspace ripples, so to speak."

"Subspace ripples, Chief, not the most exact term is that? No power signatures, no warp patterns, we have subspace ripples?" I said in a mildly affronted tone.

"Aye, Ma'am," the Chief replied, lifting his eyes from his scanners to face me. "It may not be the precise way of saying it, but it works and no, Ma'am, we don't have a precise fix, so to say, the main sensors be saying that there be nothing out there, but the old laterals, they be saying something different."

"So, some piece of ancient obsolete junk says there's something out there, the main sensors say there isn't, but you think the obsolete junk is right?" I replied.

"At's about the size of it, Ma'am," he replied. "All the modern systems, well they be fine and dandy for most things, specially energy wave analysis and stuff like that, have a nice bit of range to them too. But the old laterals, well they use a semi-organic matrix they did. Real sensitive like with subharmonic subspace disruptions, even smallish ones and that's what they be finding."

"So why don't we still use them?" I replied, looking at the Chief's screens.

"Because they were less than completely reliable,

Ma'am," the Chief replied with a straight face. "They be requiring an artiste, such as myself, to make em function properly."

Oh great ...

"And what," I said, rubbing my temples before my head exploded. "Exactly makes you think that any of this, *any* of this, has anything to do with the *Chelsea*?"

"Well, look here, Ma'am," he said, turning back to his controls and bringing up a wave pattern I'd never seen before.

"Subspace has an underlying pattern, Ma'am, and warp drives tend to disrupt it something awful, take a lot of power to bend space and all," he continued. "So's the way we normally find a starship is to find the energy an' distortion waves a starship makes so's we can localize them so to speak."

"Yes, and you're not picking that up, right?" I replied.

"That's right, but if I were a ship and I didn't want to be noticed, I'd damp down my field, reduce me energy signature, suppress the distortions and travel slow and silent like," he continued. "If you knows how, a person

could make their signature mighty small if they be wanting to."

"Alright, so what does that have to do with the *Chelsea*?" I asked with a tone that suggested this better start getting somewhere fast.

"The ripples, lass, the ripples," he replied, as if that explained everything.

"Chief, pretend I don't know what you're talking about," I replied as patiently as I could. "Because I don't."

Chief Carstan made an exaggerated sigh and an almost, *almost* imperceptible shake of his head, and then continued in an "educational" tone. "When a starship does that, Ma'am, when they tries to damp their field artificial like, all that warping, bending and energy just don't disappear, they just change into something else. So's instead of getting warp distortion or energy waves from the drives, you get these ..."

"Ripples," I said, viewing the pattern on the display with new respect.

"Aye, ripples," the Chief replied.

"So, why do you think this is the *Chelsea*?" I continued.

"Well, Ma'am, the ripple patterns, they suggest that it's a high-powered drive system, not something a merchant is likely to use. I'd bet real money, I would, that these come from a military-grade warp drive and the wave pattern doesn't seem like something a Romulan ship would make, if you catch my meaning. Other than us, the only Federation starship that is supposed to be out here is the *Chelsea*," he replied in a thoughtful voice. "But to find her, well, that's why you need me, Ma'am. As I said, I'm an artiste."

I tried, somewhat unsuccessfully, to suppress a long-suffering sigh. "Alright then, let's say it is the *Chelsea*, how do we use these 'ripples' to find whatever is making them?"

"Now that is the question, Ma'am," the Chief continued. "I can give you an approximate bearing I can. I'd say she's starboard around mark one four five. I can't tell you the range, except she's close."

"Another hunch, Chief?" I queried.

"No, Ma'am, you're only going to see patterns like this if-

in we're awfully close in, besides, as I said, these old laterals are a bit temperamental," he replied matter-of-factly. "I will try to narrow it down a bit, but to get a good fix they're gonna need to do something ... noticeable, or we'll have to get into range where the main sensors can pick them up despite the dampening."

"Very well, Chief," I said as I moved over to the command chair. "Let's chase your 'ripples' and find out where they lead."

Scene 20

Lieutenant Commander Janice Chapman

USS Chelsea

Stardate 27202.16



Ok, maybe this wasn't such an outstanding idea after all.

Yes, truly the plasma feeds from the warp core to the Main Energizer were important, and yes, I was probably right, nobody would look for us here. What I hadn't quite fully taken into consideration was that there was a reason for all that. Even standing here, a decent distance from the pulsing plasma core, I felt like an egg in a frying pan, which indicated that this possibly might not be the healthiest place to be.

It had been even worse when we'd first crawled out of

the access tube leading to this place. The plasma cores had thrown out an almost blinding glare and waste heat that made even the access crawlspace decidedly uncomfortable, much less the subassembly itself. However, just a few moments ago, plasma flow through the cores had dramatically abated, allowing Parker and I to leave the crawlspace and inspect the core.

Not that it had done us much good so far.

"Ma'am," Chief Parker said as he tried to place as much room between himself and the glowing plasma core in front of us as possible, "Can we leave now?"

Parker, I had to admit, had a point. We were currently in a structure above and behind the impulse engines, something of a support and maintenance structure connecting the points where the warp engine pylons with their energy transmitting plasma cores, met the rest of the vessel just before making their way into Main Engineering and the Main Energizers. These spaces, based on all the various warnings we'd received from the ship's computer, were never physically accessed when the warp drives were operational, apparently to keep morons, such as myself, from getting fried on the crispy setting.

Having managed to get here had been a bit tricky and, unfortunately, been of limited value as, having arrived at our destination, what exactly were we supposed to do here wasn't immediately clear.

The obvious problem was that this was not a control point, a place where people worked or performed operational tasks while underway. There were no significant control panels or other control systems apparent. No, this was a place where engineers would enter with the tools of their trade, pry open a bunch of panels and do whatever engineers did in places like this.

I swear, I have no idea why anyone would want a job like that ... I mean ... honestly, they all have to be a couple power mods short of a full charge ...

I was not an engineer, nor was Parker, and the tools we had available were of limited help. I couldn't, at the moment, think of anything we could do here that wasn't suicidal, doomed to failure, or most likely, both.

"Well," I said, looking over to the Chief with a sardonic smile, "It seemed like a good idea at the time."

"Yes, Ma'am," he replied, looking at the glowing plasma

conduit as if it were some kind of venomous snake, "the worst ideas usually do."

I'm never going to live this down ... never.

The Chief, though, was right. This was probably the unhealthiest portion of the ship we could be in and not be vaporized ... at least not instantaneously.

A stroke of genius that ... sureee ... just ignore all the 'you are so going to die' warnings and open the stupid hatch anyway, what could possibly go wrong?

Still, we had to do something, and if not this, what?

"Chief," I said, as a stray thought began to form in my rattled mind. "The plasma flow is a lot less now than it was when we first arrived, why do you think that is?"

"Well, Ma'am, I imagine that we're drawing less power from the Warp Cores for some reason," he responded, still looking at the plasma core warily.

"So why would they do that?" I asked, still with a thoughtful expression as my mind began to search for an answer to that question.

"Begging the Commander's pardon, but how the bloody blazes do you expect us to know that? We don't have as much as a bloody tricorder so we have no idea, not one idea of what's happening anywhere we can't lay eyes on. An this bloody toy," he said, gesturing with the small emergency scanner in his hand, "is bloody useless."

"Yes, but ... there's got to be a reason. If you're a Romulan running around in a Federation starship and you're deep in Federation space, what would make you want to drastically power down your Warp Cores?" I replied.

"Ma'am, like I said, I don't know, maybe they stopped to take a leak," he continued in a frustrated tone.

"Or they wanted to dramatically reduce their energy signature," I replied in a thoughtful tone.

"Ummm maybe," replied the Chief with concerned look. "May I ask where the Commander is going with this?"

"Well, if I was in command, and I didn't want another starship to find me, I'd try to reduce my emissions from the Warp Core. That would make me harder to detect," I continued. "Maybe there's a ship out there and the Romulans are trying to avoid her."

"Well *maybe*, but with all due respect, Commander, if my arse had wings it could fly," Chief Parker replied. "Even if you are right, and I'm not a saying you are, but even if you are, what in the bloody hell can we do about it. It's not like we are engineers, after all, an we don't have the tools to do much here even if we were."

"Good point, Chief," I replied, as my mind began to churn.

I looked around the cramped space for anything we might use, anything we might turn to our advantage, I mean, how did engineers get anything done in a place like this, even when they weren't being fried on the crispy setting.

"Face it, Janice, you're just not the engineering type," I mumbled in exasperation.

"No, ma'am, you're not," replied Chief Parker. "Can we leave now?"

I looked back at him and glared in frustration until something he'd said registered in my brain.

No, I'm not an engineer, I'm a security officer. So why the hell am I trying to be an engineer. Why not try thinking like a security officer instead, hmmm?

Inspiration struck suddenly and swiftly.

Of COURSE, you are such an idiot, Janice, god why didn't I think of that before!?!

Taking a note of the stenciled compartment number, I turned and climbed back into the narrow crawlspace that had led out and towards the rest of the vessel. After a few minutes we reached the access hatch and I popped it open, not so hard to do from the inside, just fiendishly difficult from the outside. It, in turn, led to a small engineering access area and from there into a hallway on Deck Six. With as much caution as I could muster, I carefully slid back the hatch and looked outside.

Good, still empty

Carefully sliding out into the access compartment, I turned around and helped Parker do the same, then carefully resealed and locked the hatch, also noting its number before I started searching for what I needed.

"Well, Commander," Parker began. "I am glad you are taking a sensible approach finally. How you ever thought that would work is beyond me. I mean you've had some screwy ideas from time to time, like that time on Alturas,

or Deneb V, or ... um ... Ma'am? What are you up to?"

"Seeing if there is a com panel in here," I replied.

"A ... a comm panel?" replied Parker with a tinge of suspicion. "Who you planning on talking to?"

"The Main Computer," I replied as I continued my search.

"Umm, Commander, but that will ... "

"Yes, Parker, I know exactly what that will do," I replied as I finally found what I was looking for.

"Oh bloody hell," he replied, looking somewhat aghast.

I snapped the white comm button next to the speakerbox which I knew would immediately register on the comm panel on the Bridge. If the Romulans were watching, they'd now know exactly where we were, and if that didn't attract their attention, linking to the Main Computer was going to light up the Main security board like a Christmas tree. From that point on we had seconds at best before the Romulans took notice and acted.

Of course all of this depended on how much control the Romulans had over the security systems and what

functions they'd been able to slave and lock out. If I were the actual, assigned Chief of Security on the *Chelsea*, I'd probably have been able to overcome whatever the Romulans were up to, but I wasn't. At best I might have access to some lower level security areas and functions. I was going to have to be inventive.

But I only need one workable idea , and maybe I have it. Better be right, Janice.

God, I hope that somebody's out there.

"Computer," I snapped into the speaker. "This is Lieutenant Commander Janice Chapman security code X four, nine, five, six, red, nine, zero, three, five declaring a security code four A event. We have an alien intruder in starboard compartment Six B dash Four. Unseal access hatch Six Five B starboard to allow for security access."

"Lieutenant Commander Chapman is not indicated as a member of this crew," the emotionless computer voice replied a bit sluggishly.

"I am an officer in transit pursuant to Star Fleet transit orders. Review and establish ident with transporter arrival trace," I continued.

"Transit orders and trace confirmed. Verified identity, Lieutenant Commander Janice Chapman, security clearance four in transit," the computer replied after a slight pause.

"Computer, open starboard hatch Six Five B, security override alpha, gamma, seven, two, confirm," I stated as firmly as possible.

"Area is not accessible to human lifeforms while plasma core is energized," the computer responded in its flat tones.

"Override safety protocols related to compartment Six B dash Four, command security authorization," I repeated.

"Cannot comply while plasma core is active," the computer replied.

I reached over and grabbed something to hold on to.

"Then shut the starboard plasma core down computer, security emergency authorization priority one, execute, execute, execute!"

"Aw shit and hellfire," I heard Parker exclaim before the universe went mad. "We are soo gonna die."

Scene #21

Captain Elizabeth Macklin

USS Republic

Secondary Bridge

Stardate 27202.16



There is a certain tension that's special and unique to looking for something in the depths of space. I was an engineer, and while some might have found my fascination with warp coils and fields, structural densities and high energy distribution systems yawn inducing, to me there was a fascination in the ever changing heartbeat of a starship. All of the things that made it function working in conjunction to make life and travel possible in the most hostile environment that existed ... the dark deep emptiness of space.

Looking at that dark deep emptiness, on the other hand,

for hours and hours, days and days, even weeks and weeks on end, had never been my favorite pastime.

Of course, looking for something in the middle of all that nothing was somewhat different. If there was something actually there to find, it was infinitesimally small compared to the nothingness surrounding it.

One would think finding something in the middle of nothing would be an easy task, after all, the something was going to be about the only thing there. The problem was that there was so much nothing in deep space; it was difficult to find the area in that nothing where the something actually was.

That was, of course, if the something you were looking for was there. Things which didn't actually exist were notoriously hard to find and you could spend a surprisingly large amount of time looking for them. It was all rather a frustrating experience.

Then there was what happened when you actually found something. That could be exciting and good but was all too frequently very bad, terrifying and extremely dangerous, and to be honest, I'd had more of those experiences than I really wanted to have in one lifetime.

Hence, sitting on the Bridge watching all this searching through the nothing going on created a strange mixture of intense boredom, expectation, and just a touch of real terror as to be difficult to describe or put into words.

Of course, as I looked over at Chief Carstan puttering around happily at his Science Station, it occurred to me that my impressions of the whole ordeal were not universally shared. Some people actually *enjoyed* this stuff.

The Chief had been one of the senior Non Coms aboard my *St. Vincent* and had been the senior member of our science team to survive the experience. Carstan was an Astrophysicist but while his training was long on experience earned over decades of service, he didn't have the depth of training which one would expect from a commissioned officer. Hence, while he was indeed a gifted individual and had a great breadth of knowledge, it would have been rare for him to have stood a bridge watch on most starships and unheard for him to actually serve as the Chief Science Officer.

And yet, here we were, with an aged Chief Petty Officer using outdated and obsolete equipment that only he seemed able to understand, chasing "subspace ripples", looking for a starship that might, or very well might not,

be there.

And you're the one letting him do it, Elizabeth.

"Chief?" I asked, turning toward the Science Station station once more.

"Ahhh ... Alter berrin two degrees ta starboard, Ma'am, half a degree positive azimuth or thereabouts," replied Chief Carstan as he bent his mostly grey head to the scanner display.

"Helm, alter course bearing two, mark point five," I said as I contemplated our situation.

I looked down at the tactical display nestled between the Helm and Navigator's Station. It of course showed nothing as there was apparently still nothing to see.

Patience is a virtue, Elizabeth ...

How many times had I heard those exact same words from Captain Marshal on the Bridge of the old *Suffolk*? There were some tasks that required patience, LOTS of patience.

I'd been an enthusiastic new Executive Officer fresh out of Command School. He, on the other hand, had been a grizzled old veteran in command of an ancient starship assigned to Star Fleet's Merchant Marine Command. Not, by any measure, one of the plum assignments of the Fleet.

We'd spent the better part of two years searching the trade lanes for navigational hazards, performing search and rescue missions, and of course, commerce protection. All of these tasks involved searching through lots and lots of nothing trying to find something which, in the vast majority of cases, wasn't there. As an engineer I could sometimes escape the dreadful monotony of it all, but as the Executive Officer it was my duty to command and, unfortunately, I had to be seen commanding which meant sitting right where I was now, in the command chair, staring down at the Astrogator/Tac display in fine command style.

All of this required one virtue that I had lacked.

Patience is a virtue, Elizabeth, remember, patience is a virtue, patience is a virtue, patience is a virtue, patience is a ...

"Holy mother of Mary, Ma'am, will you look at that!!"

barked Chief Carstan as the image on the tac display momentarily blurred while the sensors attempted to make sense of the information they were receiving. Eventually they stabilized around a single unmoving contact but with any number of secondary readings that made no sense at all. I looked up at the main display, and there, where there had once been nothing, was now the image of a distant starship hanging motionless in space.

"Report, Chief, who is she?" I asked as the old familiar tingle began to work its way up my back.

"She's one of ours, Ma'am, a Federation Starship, Locknar Class Tactical Destroyer. She's na emitting a transponder signal butt she's throwin off seven kinds of radiation and leakin plasma from her starboard nacelle. She's not a goin anywhere Ma'am, but I'm getting all sort of energy readings and wave fields from her warp engines. Ne'vr seen anything like it, Ne'vr," he responded.

It had to be the *Chelsea*, it would be hard for the vessel to be anything but, not in this area of space. In addition to the fact that we knew the *Chelsea* was in the area, Locknar's were fairly rare in the Fleet. A highly specialized starship, a design bred in the depths of the Four Years War, built specifically for combat, the tactical destroyers of the Fleet were in contrast to Star Fleet's

general preference for multipurpose vessels which could be assigned to any number of mission profiles.

Multipurpose vessels, like the *Republic*, gave Star Fleet incredible flexibility in dealing with any number of situations in a universe which was anything but predictable, but ton for ton, a specialized combat vessel could outfight a similarly sized multipurpose vessel. None of this should have made any difference in this situation, of course, the *Chelsea* was a friendly vessel, one of our own so it wasn't very likely that we'd need to test the *Republic's* damaged defenses against her, but I couldn't shake the feeling that there was real danger here.

That's probably because of all those times on the Suffolk. When exactly did a ship just popping up on the sensors in front of you herald a good thing.

"Mr. Payson, activate defense fields and plot a course to intercept. Mr. Knoaff, take us in slowly. Communications, hail them, let's see what they have to say. Chief, show me those energy fields," I said as I rose from my chair and walked to my right and up one step to the Science Station.

"Here it tis, Ma'am," Chief Carstan replied, displaying the sensor readings on one of the overhead displays.

That can't be right ...

I recognized the energy wave pattern, but it was something one found in a text book, not in actual practice.

What the hell's going on over there ...

"They're warp locked," I said. "The port warp engine is still attempting to generate a warp field but it's failing because the starboard engine is down and they haven't reconfigured the field to compensate. You haven't seen it before, Chief, because it never happens. The Engineering Computer should be automatically compensating for that or shutting down the port engine, there's at least a dozen systems onboard which should prevent what you are seeing from happening."

"Captain," reported Ensign Corridor from the Comm Station. "I have a response to our hail."

"Put it on the viewer, Ensign," I replied.

An image of a Star Fleet officer appeared on the screen,

an older human with his hair slightly mussed and a frown on his face. The image wasn't from a starship's bridge but appeared to be possibly the officer's personal quarters. The pickup was very shaky and it was obvious both from the motion and the telltale moaning sound of overstressed engines in the background that something was seriously wrong, but that didn't seem to faze the man on the Viewscreen. "This is Commander Jacque Pesterman of the USS *Chelsea* responding to your hail, *Republic*. It's good to see you."

"This is Captain Elizabeth Macklin of the *Republic*, Commander. You have a serious engineering casualty, are you in need of assistance?" I asked, that feeling of wrongness still creeping up my spine.

"Casualty?" Pesterman replied in a somewhat confused tone. "I ... I'm not aware ... oh yes ... yes we have experienced some difficulties but we're on top of things here, Captain. I have to admit that I don't recollect hearing your name before. I believe Captain Parker commands the *Republic*."

"Did command the *Republic*," I replied firmly. "Captain Parker is dead, Commander, as you and your crew will be if you don't get your warp fields stabilized."

"Not Parker ... dead ... how ... ," Pesterman replied as a wave of confusion appeared momentarily on his face before it reset in a calm visage. "Perhaps we could use some assistance, Captain. I ... yes ... I think that would be fine. A damage control team ... maybe your Chief Engineer ... that could be helpful. I can have a team meet them at transporter six in ... three minutes."

I turned to Ensign Corridor and made a cutting motion with my hand to dampen the sound and turned to Chief Carstan with a questioning look. "Aye, Ma'am, I did a check in the records banks, he's a being the *Chelsea's* Captain at least as far as the computer can tell right now."

"Strange though, Captain," added Ensign Corridor as she rearranged the communications earpiece in her ear. "The *Chelsea's* transmitting on a clear channel, no coded security link or secure transmission coding at all."

I turned to look back at the man still looking out of my Bridge screen in that almost unnaturally calm visage. "This doesn't seem right ... he doesn't seem right. He's confused, almost detached. His ship is falling apart around him so why isn't he on the Bridge, why didn't he seem aware of what's going on, and then suddenly change his mind and asks for our help? It's almost as if someone is ... "

Oh my god, that can't be it.

"Chief," I snapped as I turned quickly back to my command chair. "Full active scan on that vessel, everything we have. Other than her warp drives, is there anything else wrong with that ship?"

I looked down at the Tactical display as the range between us ran down. We'd now made a positive identification of a Star Fleet vessel so communications had been established, we were all one big happy Fleet, but the feeling of dread flowing through my body and mind was telling me something very different.

"Ma'am," said the Chief, not raising his head from his scanner hood but still intent on his work. "I'm reading somethin very strange ... there's something like an energy field around the hull that's playing holy hell with my sensor data."

"Can you compensate, Chief?" I asked as my spine turned chill.

"I think so," the Chief replied as he worked to filter the data our active sensors were feeding him. "It's all fuzzy, Ma'am, but I'm readin significant hull fractures an

stressing consistent with battle damage ... I think ... "

I didn't have time to wait for the Chief to finish his sentence. "Raise Shields NOW!! Red Alert, sound Battlestations!!!"

"She's chargin her weapons, Ma'am!" came the curt clipped tones from the Sensor Station.

"Brace for impact!" I responded as the telltale glow of *Chelsea's* weapons points sprang into 8 lances of blue fire as our sister Star Fleet vessel made clear her intentions.

Patience is a virtue, Elizabeth ...

"Arm phasers, load Photon Torpedoes, Mr. Konaff," I growled as the *Republic* shook under the impact of the *Chelsea's* fire. "Whoever they are over there, they've just messed with the wrong starship."

Scene #22

Lt Commander Janice Chapman

USS Chelsea

Stardate 27202.16



An especially heavy shock moved through the deck plates throwing myself and Chief Parker from our feet and into a nearby bulkhead.

"Crap!" I snarled, trying to gather myself against the wildly vibrating and bucking deckplates.

"That was different sure enough," moaned Parker as he rubbed his bruised head and then tried to right himself as well.

And it had been, though it wasn't easy to tell the difference in the shaking starship. Just being able to

stand anywhere right now was a monumental task. Ever since I'd pulled off my most recent brainstorm, the world aboard the *Chelsea* had more to do with being in the midst of a very angry earthquake than being on the deck of a Federation starship. I wasn't sure what had gone wrong with my brilliant plan, but I had a feeling that all of the wailing alarms and blinking red lights on the Main Engineering board probably had something to do with it.

The moments after the computer had shut down the plasma cores had been ... interesting. The world had literally turned upside down, trying to first throw us off the compartment's ceiling and then off various random walls. I'd barely managed to maintain my hold on a piece of conduit but it felt like I had bruises in places that had no business having bruises. Parker hadn't been as fortunate, having bounced off a few walls before things had settled down to the vibrating, shaking, howling mess they were now.

Of course, we'd been the lucky ones. We'd at least known that something was going to happen. The Romulans, not so much.

That was especially true here in Main Engineering.

Like most Star Fleet designs, the Main Engineering Deck was two decks tall and was one of the largest open spaces on the vessel. There was lots of room between hard surfaces which didn't work out so well with the whole slamming against ceilings and walls kind of thing. One could build up a lot of velocity between the top of Deck Six and the bottom of Deck Seven and as a result, as far as we could tell, there wasn't a Romulan left alive in the entire compartment.

It wasn't all that comfortable for us either. Whatever was going on, there were spot failures in the inertial dampening systems which could be awfully painful and the screeching coming from what seemed like the entire ship didn't exactly indicate things were going to get a lot better either. In fact, they probably indicated that things were going to get a lot worse and rapidly.

I managed to regain my footing just long enough to seal the last of the engineering compartment bulkheads, after all, I was pretty sure the Romulans wouldn't just let us stay here once they found out where we'd gone, which wouldn't be long. Being thrown about like a Pinata wouldn't have been a lot of fun, but Romulans were tough. A little faceplant into a bulkhead wouldn't keep them down for long.

Engineering bulkheads were extra tough, though, and would probably require a heavy phaser torch and a bit of time to overcome, which, in these conditions ... well I wouldn't want to be the one holding the torch ... or anyone standing nearby.

At least it would buy the Chief and I a little time before we died and the disruptors the dead Romulans had left behind would let us go down fighting. But we'd go down. Either the Romulans would get us, or, if they didn't hurry, the *Chelsea* would simply fall apart around us and we'd go that way. But it wasn't a matter of if, just a matter of when and how.

"Well, Chief, it looks like you were right, we *are* all gonna die," I said as cheerily as I could manage.

"Aye, Ma'am, but it was worth a try. It was a longshot there being another vessel out there but it's not as if we had an overabundance of options and we'll take a right share of the bloody bastards down with us," he replied with a pained smile.

"Someone could still be out there," I smiled, knowing the chances of that were almost incalculably small. It had been sort of a childish hope, throwing straw into the wind to break the breeze.

Serves you right for believing in miracles, Janice, the Ptolemy should have taught you that.

"It was a good run, Chief, and we'll be in good company. We have a lot of friends waiting for us on the other side," I replied in an almost relieved tone.

"Would have been nice to keep em waiting just a little longer just the same, Ma'am," the Chief replied with an understanding smile.

"Yes, it would have, but we're not dead yet, Andy, why don't you get that ..."

A hard sharp blow accompanied by a deep thrumming sound knocked me off my feet again.

"That *was* new!!" I said as I gaped with astonishment.

"Aye, Ma'am, that was," Chief Parker replied with equal surprise.

We looked at each other, neither of us willing to give voice to our forlorn hope.

There is no way we're that lucky ...

The ship rocked again violently, and then again, throwing Parker and I back on to the deck. But even the pain to my aching posterior couldn't wipe the surprised grin off my face ...

That's not the presket engines, that's PHASER fire, dear god some glorious god-dammed ship is firing PHASERS at us!!!

I had never in my life been so thrilled to be under attack.

"Well, Chief," I said as the same realization began to dawn on Parker. "Maybe we aren't going to die after all."

Scene #23

Captain Elizabeth Macklin

USS Republic

Secondary Bridge

Stardate 27202.16



The ship shuddered underneath my feet as the energy waves from the *Chelsea's* fire were absorbed by our shields and then transmitted to the *Republic's* hull.

"Damage!" I snapped.

"Shields holding, Ma'am, minor damage to the number six shield," responded Lieutenant Payson from her Navigator's Console.

"Mr. Konaff, bring us around on her starboard quarter again and set up another firing pass," I commanded.

"Aye, Captain," came Mr. Konaff's reply is his high whistling Edoan voice as the fingers of his three hands danced over the Helm Interface.

Truly, Mr. Konaff was living up to his billing. The Edoan helmsman had doggedly kept the *Republic* on the *Chelsea's* vulnerable starboard aft quarter and the deftness with which he handled the massive starship was remarkable.

Well, at least one of us REALLY knows their job.

That, I was discovering to my chagrin, couldn't be said for all of us, at least not yet. Most of us, including myself, lacked the depth and breadth of experience necessary to really adequately fulfill our responsibilities.

Most of us had at least the bare minimum skills needed to perform the jobs that needed to be done. But a starship like the *Republic* needed more than the minimum number of personnel necessary to move her from point A to point B without blowing themselves to dust, it needed people with the experience to handle difficult situations under adverse conditions, things out of the ordinary like ...

... well ... like being fired on by one of your own starships for starters ...

Under stress, our inexperienced personnel were beginning to show cracks, deficiencies in numbers, experience or just the plain wrong blend of skills to address the challenges we faced. So far, we hadn't made any horrendous mistakes, but we'd made any number of small ones.

The miracle was that we hadn't yet made any truly significant errors. But with people unfamiliar with each other and their ship, without enough time to know each other or their environment, suddenly thrust into what was a life and death situation, eventually one of us would make a serious error that would cost us.

That is, those of us who are functional at all ...

We had people onboard who had been through too much, who were desperately in need of psychological help and rest and that was beginning to show. We'd had a few reports of people who had simply broken down at the feel of the first phaser blows against our shields.

I guess some people have ghosts that are a lot bigger and nastier than yours, Elizabeth ...

I couldn't really blame them, not when deep inside where I couldn't afford to let anyone see, there was a scared little girl who wanted nothing more than to run away and hide.

Doesn't change anything, you can't hide from yourself, there's no place that far. There are people depending on me, and just maybe, some of those people are onboard the Chelsea ...

That thought bothered me ... even more than the little girl trying to cower in the depths of my soul.

A ship like the *Chelsea* had a crew of nearly 100 officers and ratings. It was just possible that they were the ones still operating the ship. The universe was full of surprises and it wasn't like something like this hadn't happened before.

But the fact that the Romulans were everywhere and that the *Chelsea* had obviously suffered battle damage which someone had tried to artfully camouflage, suggested that wasn't the case. Someone had taken her, and considering that tac destroyers were tough starships, the chances of a pirate or something similar pulling something like that off were pretty slim.

It has to be the Romulans ...

That wasn't a particularly happy thought. With transporters, boarding actions were a possibility but very difficult to accomplish. Essentially you needed enough transporter pads with enough Marines, or the Romulan equivalent, to overwhelm the crew of the target vessel.

That meant a *LOT* of transporter pads and Marines. Not something the typical starship could just whistle up.

If the Romulans somehow had boarded and taken her the question was, what had happened to her crew? Obviously they'd kept Pesterman alive and just as obviously they were attempting to use him, and perhaps others, as camouflage for whatever they had in mind.

So, were there others? And more importantly, did it make a difference?

Whatever was going on over there, it was clear that the *Chelsea* was a threat that had to be neutralized one way or the other. At the moment, destroying the *Chelsea* would be a fairly easy task, even with the problems we were facing. The *Chelsea* was, for lack of a better term, like a fly stuck on flypaper.

She was still warp-locked, though why no one had balanced out her warp field was something of a mystery to me. Regardless, the energy disruptions around her were not only keeping her from entering subspace, they were actively interfering with the ability of her impulse engines to generate the IM pulse which allowed her to maneuver at sublight speeds.

She could still move, slowly, and turn slowly, but with Mr. Konaff at our Helm and our ship functioning in any reasonable manner, that just wasn't enough. As it was, I could do exactly what I was doing ... pick a "blind spot" in her weapons coverage and simply hammer her shields at that point into electronic vapor and shards.

As long as she didn't regain her ability to maneuver, it would take a colossal blunder on my part to allow her to survive, if I really wanted her dead.

But did I want her dead?

The book, what I should do, was pretty clear on something like this. The *Chelsea* was a threat to any Federation vessel or world she happened upon. Not only did she have the firepower to overwhelm most starships she might find or devastate the surface of a planet, she

was also, at this point, a wolf in sheep's clothing. She was a Federation starship and, if she wasn't stopped, could penetrate deep into Federation space and use her benign disguise to create untold havoc and destruction.

The *Chelsea* needed to be stopped, whatever else happened here, she had to be dealt with.

I had a raw crew, limited resources and a less than fully operational ship. Still, I had a decided tactical advantage that would disappear as soon as whatever moron of an engineer they had over there decided to balance their warp field, or even just shut the whole system down.

I could use that advantage to guarantee not only the safety of my own vessel, but any number of other starships and Federation citizens. And we were, quite literally, in a state of war. Doing anything other than assuring the *Chelsea's* destruction was placing the ship and crew I was responsible for as well as an unknown number of other Federation lives in unnecessary risk. The proper decision was clear.

But what about her crew ...

That was the problem. It was a decision I *should* make ... but confronted with it like this ...

I couldn't make it. I simply couldn't bring myself to utter the words that would seal the *Chelsea's* fate and that of her crew.

Maybe I'd just seen enough death, just couldn't bear the thought of killing more Federation officers and crew, not under the phasers and photons of my own starship.

God ... you're damaged goods, Elizabeth. You have no right to be sitting in this chair if you can't make decisions like this, you just don't!!!

I clamped down hard on my emotions. I was the Captain, there was no one else aboard remotely trained or qualified to assume command. Damaged as I was, I was still the only real option for these people, this ship and whatever other people who were depending on us. These were my decisions, they had to be my decisions, it was my job, my responsibility, oh god ... my responsibility....

You can't do that, not if those people are still there ... you just can't!!.

*But you have to be able to make the hard decisions
Dammit!!!*

I looked inside myself, to the jagged wounded mess that was my soul, as the *Republic* screamed down once again on the *Chelsea's* weakened starboard quarter. Our heavy phasers and photon torpedoes fully armed and ready to end this. All I had to do was give the order, do what was expected of me ...

It's not who I am ... I can't be that person. I just can't ...

"Hold your fire, Mr. Konaff," I heard my voice order.
"Keep us close enough for a detailed scan but try to keep us out of her weapons firing arcs."

Mr. Konaff's head turned slightly toward me as if to see whether I was in fact serious, but it was only a fractional movement as his hands glided over the controls, slowing us quickly and turning us hard over in a bid to keep away from the *Chelsea's* considerable bite.

"Chief," I said, turning to Chief Carstan. "Maximum scan of the *Chelsea*. I need to know if her crew is running that ship and if not, if they are still alive."

Chief Carstan looked up from his scanners. "Ma'am, that is going to be a wee bit of a challenge. The distortion that engine is a throwin' oof and the energy field the hull is emitting, well they be playing holy hell with the sensors, I

can tell ya there are life forms aboard, but whether they be Romulans or sometin else, I'm not sure it can be done. I be needing a Biophysicist, Ma'am, and we don't have one," he replied.

Crud, maybe letting one of the science ensigns aboard back on Abereon wouldn't have been such a bad idea after all.

The *Republic* bucked as one the *Chelsea's* phaser banks found the range and impacted on the forward shield, but I hardly felt it as I moved up out of my Command chair and up to the Chief's station.

"So, how do we figure out who's who over there?" I asked.

"I'd be bringing down that blasted energy shield if I knew how, then I might be getting a clear look insides," he replied. "Or we find a trained Biophysicist to take a look at these readings, Ma'am."

"Right," I said. "Any idea how to disrupt that field, Chief?"

"We could shoot a bleedin lot of holes in that ship, hope to hit somethin important, maybe we being due some luck?" he replied.

That's kind of what I'm trying to avoid ...

"Ok then," I continued. "Where do we find a Biophysicist in the middle of deep space?"

"Well, Ma'am," he continued, pondering. "Biology is just life sciences mum, maybe one of the medical staff?"

"Ma'am," Catherine Payson spoke, as her fingers played over the deflector controls. "I'm losing cohesion on the number two shield."

"Reinforce it, Lieutenant," I replied.

The young woman's hands danced over the controls and I saw the readouts stabilize, but not at a high enough level. "Sorry, Ma'am, that's on the front starboard quarter where we're the most heavily damaged ... we just don't have enough of the gird operational there ... it's not going to hold if they get a solid shot into us with something heavy."

"Give me as much time as you can, Cathy." I said as I swung into my command chair...

"Ensign Corridor!" I snapped to the auburn-haired communications officer. "We need the Doctor on the Bridge ... now please."

"Mr. Konaff," I said as I settled into position. "How long can you keep us here?"

"Depending, Captain," he replied in his light singsong voice. "Proximity this one needs for scanner resolution, maneuvering distance this one needs for evasion ... difficult to provide both simultaneously."

"Try to protect the number two shield, but get us in close, Mr. Konaff, very close," I ordered.

They're likely going to need it ... god help us all ...

Scene #24

Doctor Judith Pollard

USS Republic

Stardate 27202.16



Another sudden motion bounced me off the compartment wall and sent me tumbling.

"Shit," I cursed as I picked myself up off the floor of my small and totally inadequate Sickbay.

*I should be at Starbase 14 working in a REAL Sickbay, but
nooooo ...*

I looked up at the diagnostic screen of the man writhing in pain on the medical bed, an engineer who'd gotten too close to a failing plasma conduit.

"Two units of Hydroxle Melaphine!" I snapped to the overworked nurse as I regained my footing. "Add a unit of HXV-12 for the pain."

"You're going to be fine," I said looking down at the young rating with the best bedside manner I could muster. It wasn't much, but...

I'm a medical researcher; I'm not SUPPOSED to have to have a bedside manner.

I pulled away to take a look at another patient. Thankfully my plasma burn victim was our most serious casualty so far, but the way the old starship was bucking and shuddering, it wouldn't be long before my little 6 bed hospital would be overrun.

Of course, if we got many more patients, my skeleton medical staff would simply be overwhelmed and it wouldn't matter that we didn't have enough room; people would simply die because there was no one to adequately treat them. Not that I was a trauma specialist trained to treat them properly anyway, which made the situation even worse.

Where had it all gone wrong, where had it all fallen apart? I'd had a plum assignment just out of the

Academy, a job working at Star Fleet Medical in their Developing Organisms Lab under Doctor Thropt, the Fleet's leading authority in transmorphic xenobiology.

But, well, the old Andorian was kind of a prude and hadn't taken my showing up to his labs late every once in a while very well. Ok, so maybe I'd been late a bit more than every once in a while. After all, I was a young attractive single girl in San Francisco; of course I was going to party. Everyone did.

Well, maybe not as much as you did, Judith.

Well there was that, but my family was 5th generation Star Fleet Medical. Hell, my father was an Admiral for God's sake, not that bringing that fact to Doctor Thropt's attention had done me any good. In fact, it may have actually harmed my case.

I'd been booted out of my cushy Earth assignment faster than a Molerian Eel fleeing a Zagtoth. However, family prestige had its privileges. After promising Daddy that I'd never ever do anything quite so stupid again, instead of being stuck on some backwater trade station, a pimple on the ass of nowhere, I'd instead been given a post as a junior medical officer working with one of my father's old associates on Starbase 14.

Not as cushy a job as at Main Star Fleet Medical, but still a decent enough tasking which would look good to my next promotion board. All I had to do was get there, keep my nose clean for a couple of years and maybe I could wriggle my way back to the big show on Earth again.

Of course, I hadn't actually gotten off to a particularly good start. I'd partied all night before my departure and been too drunk to catch the Star Fleet vessel which would have carried me to my destination. Even pleading with Daddy hadn't helped. He'd been furious, angrier at me than I'd ever remembered. No, if I was old enough to stay out and party all night then I was old enough to suffer the consequences, at least that was what Daddy had thought.

So, instead of a nice fairly fast ride to my new posting, I'd been sent to a number of smaller cramped little vessels which were vaguely going my way, shuffled off from one to another as I crept my roundabout way through Federation space to my destination. One of those vessels, a small scout ship, had had the misfortune to be in Sector 15 when the Romulans had come crashing over the border. By the time this had happened, I'd been in the cramped little tub long enough and complained and whined about it enough that the Captain, a young junior Commander at that, lustily wanted me off his ship. As the

Scout had passed near Abereon, he'd seen his chance.

Dumped in that little backwater colony of a world and forced to work on the countless injured and convalescing personnel there had given me a healthy dislike for the place. I'd been quick to voice my displeasure, not that anyone had listened. That made a lot of sense actually. Everyone was working night and day as hard as they possibly could to save as many people as they could and it had eventually occurred to me that there might ... just might be something more important than my own personal comfort.

And then a ray of light had shown forth. I'd been offered the position of Chief Medical Officer of the *Republic*, one of the most prestigious and storied starships in the Fleet and a plum assignment in anyone's book. Of course it could be dangerous if the ship had been in any shape to do anything but limp back to a Starbase, and after my initial tour of the vessel, it was pretty clear that the old piece of junk was probably heading toward a scrap yard, not the Romulans.

That didn't necessarily rob the assignment of its prestige factor but it did make it a much safer assignment. Once at Starbase 15, I could argue my case with people who would appreciate my lineage and my family's position

and get my career back on track and my precious self out of harm's way.

Only it hadn't worked out *quite* like that and now I was here.

Another sharp blow almost caused me to lose my footing again.

What the hell am I doing here, this isn't what I signed up for. I could have ...

"Dr. Pollard, to the Bridge, repeat, Dr. Pollard, to the Bridge," the intercom sounded, stridently piercing even the General Quarters alert.

I stumbled over to the wall mounted speaker. "This is Dr. Pollard," I responded, in an irritated voice. "I'm busy."

"The Captain has requested your presence on the Bridge, Doctor," came the oh so calm response from the oh so young voice of the comm officer.

How can she be so calm, doesn't she know people are trying to kill us??

"I'm busy." I responded hotly.

"Allow me to rephrase, Doctor, the Captain has *ordered* you to the Bridge," the calm voice responded.

I glared at the speaker, wanting so desperately to tell this jumped up little shit where she could put her order and her Captain, but after a moment of more sober contemplation, I decided that might not be the best idea.

"Alright, I'm coming," I growled into the speaker, shutting the connection down.

"Howell!" I snapped at my intern, a doctor fresh out of med school who was the only other kind of real doctor on my staff. "You're in charge until I get back."

"Yes, Dr. Pollard," he said calmly as he used a laser suture to seal up a crewmember's bleeding leg.

How can these people be so frigging CALM!!!!?

I stumbled out of the small Sickbay and into one of the slightly curved but generally straight corridors which ran lengthwise up and down the secondary hull. There were people out here, too, looking grim and intense. People, who belonged here, people who were trained to be here. Some of them appeared to be as terrified as I was but

somehow they were standing there, manning their posts, waiting for whatever god awful thing to happen that they had been posted there to deal with.

A few engineering teams were running purposefully from place to place, working at various consoles and fittings both on and in connecting passages. It was all so confusing and yet all so purposeful, unlike anything I'd seen before. In a lot of ways, it reminded me of my thankfully short stint in an emergency trauma facility during my training. Organized chaos.

I continued to move my way up the corridor, brushing stray strands of my auburn hair out of my eyes as I moved my way uncertainly along until I reached that imposing barrier, the hatch leading into the Bridge. I looked at it, its red permacoating mocking me as it stood there. The threshold to a place I'd never been, never wanted to enter, and had no interest in ever seeing. Doctors who saw starship bridges were doctors in harm's way.

My father had served aboard this very starship early in his career, and his stories still rang through my quavering soul. I'd learned one very important fact from those stories, people aboard starships like this died or, if they were lucky, escaped death by the narrowest of

margins. My father had seen people die, lots of people, and I'd never wanted to have that life, never wanted to be a part of it.

But my family was Star Fleet and all I needed to do was put in my time. Time far, far away from places like this, and then get a nice plush job out in the civilian sector having done my part for the Federation and ... well, that had been the plan.

I turned from the door. I wanted no part of whatever was going on in there. Whatever the Captain wanted, she could find someone else. As I finished my turn I almost ran into the russet-furred officer that had somehow appeared behind me.

"Are you goooingg somewhhherre, Doctor?" M'Riss, the Caitian Comm Officer purred in her sibilant voice. "The Bridge, I believe, is jussstt through that dooorr," she finished.

I hesitated for a moment, looking into those large yellow eyes, and then turned back towards the door. "I was just going in," I replied.

"So I ssaww," she said, stepping around me, the door opening to give her passage and my first view into that

place I didn't want to be.

I forced my feet to move forward, shame and trepidation propelling me into the Bridge as I stared at the Viewscreen, watching a glowing blue orb arching across space towards us.

"Brace for impact," I heard someone say just before the ship shuddered violently again.

Oh my god, oh my god, oh my god ...

I stood rooted there, unable to move, my mouth hanging open in incomprehension. There was a starship there on the screen, there were people trying to kill us, trying to kill *me*.

"Keep us in their blind spot, Mr. Konaff," came the cool command from the blonde-haired woman in the command chair.

"This one is endeavoring to comply, Captain," the Edoan helmsman said in his high singsong voice. "Success is sadly less than easy."

The Captain turned her chair slightly and looked over her shoulder at me, her blue green eyes calmly fixing me with

her gaze. "Doctor, please assist Chief Carstan at the Science Station."

"Pardon me?" I replied uncertainly, not quite understanding what had been said.

"The Science Station, Doctor," the Captain said calmly, motioning me to the right with her eyes. "Chief Carstan needs your assistance, immediately if you please."

"I ... I ...," I stammered, looking over to my right and picking out the grizzled old Chief in the blue tunic looking at me with a twinkling smile on his face.

Smiling, how the hell can anyone be smiling!!!

"Aye, Doctor, I'm in a need of a wee bit of your expertise," he said in a friendly voice, as Ensign M'Riss looked at me quizzically while she relieved Ensign Corridor at the Main Communications Board.

"I ... I'm not a ... I'm not a bridge officer, I've never been on a bridge," I stammered.

"First time for everything, Doctor," the Captain said with a wry smile, turning back towards the Main Viewscreen.

I stumbled over to the Chief at what I assumed was the Science Station, fear like I'd never known coursing through my body. "I'm ... I'm not ... I'm not ..."

"Aye, lass, I know," the Chief said, softly and calmly. "We are all stretching ourselves a wee bit aren't we? But not's to worry, you're the right woman for the job."

"I am?" I asked, my mind still reeling as I tried to gain some balance, some perspective.

"Aye, Doctor, you are," he said in a comforting voice. "I be needing someone that can differentiate between Romulan life signs and those of other species. Ya see lass, seems as if the Romulans may have done taken one off are ships, an we needs to see whether our fine people over there are still alive."

"I hears that you are a xenobiologist of high repute, an I was hopin' you might be able to help us," he continued.

"I ... yes, yes I am," I replied, with slightly more confidence. "But I've never ... I mean ... Romulan??"

"Aye lass," he said with a smile. "If'n you could take a wee look at the scanner readouts, perhaps you could help us all out a wee bit aye?"

I looked over at the scanner hood he indicated as if it were a coiled snake but the Chief's demeanor calmed me, kind of like a kindly old uncle or grandfather, so I reached over and looked at the readouts. At first there was a lot of symbolology I didn't understand and couldn't comprehend, but after a moment I understood that I was looking at distorted scanner images of another starship and the scanner had been enhanced for biological entities.

"Do you have a biofilter setting?" I asked absently as I continued to look at the fluctuating readouts, latching on to something I actually did know.

"Aye, lass," the Chief replied, placing my fingers on the familiar feeling controls.

I began to filter the data, moving through known profiles, comparing them to data already brought up in the system on previous scans of Romulan and Vulcanoid personnel. "I need more gain!" I snapped.

"Aye, Doctor," the Chief replied as he manipulated the controls and increased the scanner throughput somewhat.

The data snapped momentarily into view, but I smiled in triumph as a moment was all I really needed. "There," I said, with a satisfied tone as I highlighted the areas in question. "The Vulcanoids are in these general areas, about 50 of them all told and about the same number of other non-Vulcanoid lifeforms in these locations. There might be others but most of them should be here."

"Aye, Ma'am," the Chief said, with a broad relieved smile turning to the Captain. "We have Romulans spread out in key control areas of the ship except for Engineering, there being a group of the bloody bastards right outside but none within. The other life forms a being in the Security areas, sum in Sickbay but most in Cargo Holds nine and ten."

"None in Engineering?" the Captain said quizzically, turning to look at the Chief's above monitor display.

"No, Ma'am," the Chief responded.

The Captain looked momentarily confused. "There's *nobody* in Engineering at all?" she asked again.

I looked over at the display and tried to picture what I had seen in that brief moment of clarity. "Two individuals, Captain, I'm betting human or closely

related."

The Captain's face transformed as if a puzzle was solving itself in her mind and then she stabbed controls on her chair's armrest. "Security, Rhyse, I need a boarding party, everyone you can get, at Emergency Transporter Room Two. Get your people there as fast as you can."

"Aye, Ma'am," came the reply from the speaker box.

"Mr Konaff," she said, looking at the Edoan at the Helm. "You have the conn. Keep the ship in one piece and I need one of the *Chelsea's* shields down or this is going to be the briefest boarding action in Federation history."

"Aye, Ma'am," he reported in a grimmer sing song voice. "This one shall endeavor to comply."

Much to my astonishment, the Captain rose up out of her chair and motioned me to join her as she hurriedly left the Bridge.

My god, My God, My god is she insane?? What does she want me for!!!?

She turned to me in the hallway, smiled, and briefly touched my arm. "You earned your pay today, Doctor."

The Chief was right; you were the right woman for the job. If we succeed, those people over on the *Chelsea* are going to owe you their lives. Thank you, Judith."

She smiled again, then turned and hurried down the hallway leaving me flabbergasted. People owing their lives to me? I'd earned my pay? Someone thanking me for saving peoples lives? And ... as I stared at her retreating form, I didn't get the first sense that she was saying any of it because of who I was, who my family was or because she was trying to curry favor of some kind. She was just grateful for me doing my job, saving lives?

How dare she call me Judith ... so familiar.

But as I watched the blond haired woman race down the hall to the nearest transporter, I couldn't brew up that cloud of disdain, scorn and derision she most probably deserved. I was a researcher and I had no business being here ...

But she acts like you do, she and the Chief, they act like you belong here ...

It was a strange feeling, just that tinge of feeling a part of something. It just wasn't something that I, Judith Pollard, was used to. Why did I need to belong, I was a Pollard.

But as the young Captain disappeared into the transporter room with a security team, I realized something.

Belonging feels good ... it really does.

I furrowed my brow a bit at that realization and started striding towards my Sickbay. I had a feeling I was going to be needed, and I found that I sort of liked that feeling as well.

Scene 25

Captain Elizabeth Macklin

USS Chelsea

Main Engineering

Stardate 27202.16



"GET DOWN!!" I heard just before Ensign Ryhse's lithe body knocked me sprawling to the floor. Less than a second later I felt the energy shock of a heavy Romulan distruptor beam pass overhead.

"Ma'am," the young Andorian security officer said sternly as she rose up and sent a couple of bursts from her phaser rifle back towards the Romulans. "You've got to be more careful."

"Understood," I wheezed, trying to get the air back in my lungs.

I scooted myself up against one of the secondary reactor cases next to a couple of security personnel I didn't recognize. It wasn't much as far as shelters went, but, with distrupator beams slashing all around me, I wasn't going to be overly choosy. Mostly I just needed a place to gather myself for a couple of seconds without getting disintegrated.

Beaming down to the *Chelsea's* Engineering Deck had been a mistake. Not so much the boarding action itself, but that I had decided to be a part of it.

What were you thinking, Elizabeth?? You're an Engineer, not a Marine ...

Indeed I was. It wasn't that I didn't know how to handle a phaser or had never had to use one before, but this was different, A LOT different. Here we were facing trained soldiers with modern weapons who knew exactly how to use them, not a group of pirates or smugglers and I ... well ...

I am soo much an amateur at this.

Of course it actually would have been better if the

Romulans had been outside the compartment, as the sensors had shown, rather than inside.

Yep, I could have strolled over to the Engineering Board and shut everything down.

So much for that plan.

From the cursory glance I'd gotten before the Romulans with disruptors had distracted me, it appeared as if they had managed to burn a hole through the Engineering Bulkhead Wall, just to the left of the door that led into Engineering proper. Given the thickness of that bulkhead, it was highly probable they had used something not recommended for use inside an actual starship to get the job done. The entire Engineering Subsystems Room was essentially gone but there was enough wreckage there that it did give the Romulans some cover while entering the space.

I raised myself fractionally and looked over the top of the casing and nearly took another disrupter burst for my trouble. The first shot I'd been hit with had just grazed me and my mind was still sorting out how VERY much it hurt and the second had burnt out my life support belt and the minimal protection it afforded me. That one had felt like someone taking a 12 pound sledge to my head.

God my head hurts!!!

A strong hand reached up and violently pulled me down again.

"Are you crazy!!?" hissed a blonde-haired woman I didn't recognize. "What kind of idiot are you anyway, didn't they teach you ducking skills in Security school?"

"I'm an engineer," I responded blearily as my mind tried to dispel the disrupter induced fog I was operating in.

"That figures," she responded with clear disdain.

"Ensign," she snapped at Mr. Rhyse, "what ship are you from, how much support is still available?"

The young ensign looked at me momentarily and then replied. "The *Republic*, Ma'am, and other than sending armed crewmen, what you see is what there is."

The older woman glanced away for a moment, then rose and squarely hit a Romulan in the chest with a disruptor, disintegrating her unfortunate target in the process.

"Well Ma'am," replied what appeared to be a senior non

com next to her. "Some rescue is bloody better than no rescue."

She made an unhappy affirmative sound then turned to Ensign Rhyse. "We need to get off of this tub, tell your people to beam us out of here."

"No," I gasped. "The *Chelsa's* crew is still aboard. We have to get them off."

The blonde rounded on me, her entire body screaming the anger I saw on her face. "Who the Hell are you!! I don't need an engineer telling me how to handle a *security* situation. Ensign, make the dammed call."

"Ma'am," Rhyse responded, her eyes flicking down to the cuffs of my uniform. "I can't do that," she replied as she rose back up and sent a volley of phaser fire into the Romulan positions.

The older woman glanced down at my cuffs, her eyes widened momentarily and then she shook her head. "Shit!!" she exclaimed. "An engineer!! You have got to be shitting me."

"She does have more of those gold things around her cuff than you does, Ma'am," said the non-com with the

beginnings of a smile.

"I can *see* that, Parker," she snapped, rising up to fire a few more blasts from her disruptor.

I looked around her and caught a glimpse of the Main Engineering Board, or what was left of it. Critical alerts of every nature were flashing their urgent warnings to anyone who could recognize them. Each of them screamed at me, "Deal with this now or we are all dead" but getting there would be suicidal at the moment, but if I didn't ...

Oh my god, we are so going to die!!

"Whoever you are," I said, my voice still a bit weak. "I need to get to that Engineering Board and I need to stay alive there long enough to shut this all down. What the hell happened here anyway?"

"Her fault," replied the senior NCO as he turned and fired another disrupter blast, "All her fault, Ma'am."

The blonde security officer glared at the non-com for a moment then looked back at me. "I was trying to shut down the starboard plasma cores and then this happened."

"How did you manage?" I started to ask, but then stopped myself. It didn't really matter. If she had actually managed to do that, and by the sounds of the ship tearing itself apart and all the shrieking warnings emanating from the Engineering Board, she very well may have, it was a certainty that it had been done in them most *way* wrong way one could possibly imagine.

"I'm impressed," I said a bit blearily. "It usually takes more training to screw things up that badly. I need to get to that board and I need to get there five minutes ago."

"Captain ...," she replied in a frustrated tone. "What we *all* need to do is get off this freaking ship, *right now* ... Ma'am."

I looked down at the woman's cuffs and noted a full golden band below at dashed one, the rank of a Lieutenant Commander.

She probably knows what she's talking about then ... but we aren't going to abandon these people ...

"Commander," I replied in an icy tone. "We will leave this ship when we have secured and evacuated the remaining crew of the *Chelsea*, and not a moment sooner. *Do I make*

myself clear? So get to work and make it happen and get me to that Engineering Board."

For a moment, she looked like she was going to argue and then she turned to Ensign Rhyse and said. "Ok, whatever else you have, Ensign, get it organized because we are *definitely* going to need it."

Scene 26

Ensign Rhyse
USS Chelsea
Main Engineering
Stardate 27202.16



Well this is getting us nowhere, I thought ruefully, as I sent another burst of phaser fire to where I knew the Romulans were taking cover.

My security team was now down to five, not including the Captain and the two other red shirts who had been here when we'd first materialized in Main Engineering. Perkins was gone and T'Sram had been evacuated to Sickbay just moments before and God knew here Johnson was.

The rest of us were keeping the Romulans from advancing and overwhelming us with disruptor fire. But there were more of them than there were of us and a part of me thought that the security Commander we'd found here had a point. We weren't even going to be able to hold this position if the Romulans managed to push more troops into the compartment, much less clear the Main Engineering Room.

Tresket Romulans ... just die already!!!

I was totally and truly fed up with Romulans. It wasn't enough that they'd boarded the *Castor*, killed most of my crewmates, and then forced us to nearly destroy ourselves and our ship to get rid of them. Only about 20 of us, those who had managed to barricade ourselves in and around Auxiliary Control, had survived the experience and now, here I was again in a fight to the death. As far as I was concerned, that was two such instances too many.

And now the Captain wants to cross a free fire zone and stand in the open while she does some engineering ... stuff!!!

It was almost enough to make one yearn for a career selling used hoverboards ... almost.

"So, Ensign, what reserves do you have?" the blonde security Commander asked.

"Just normal crew, Ma'am, with a couple of extra Type Two Phasers and a few dozen Type Ones," I said thinking back. "A couple of security vests and I think a photon grenade launcher, but the cupboard's pretty bare."

"You said you were from the *Republic*, right? Where the hell is the rest of your gear and why are you the only officer here that knows what the hell she's doing?" she responded in a frustrated voice.

"Long story. Ma'am," I said. "One I'm not sure we have time for."

"Good point," she responded. "So, we need to clear the Romulans out of this compartment and push them back from that gaping hole in the wall so that your Captain can do her engineering stuff. Any ideas?"

I looked around for a bit, my antenna attuning to the space around us. Being adopted and raised by human parents I hadn't always considered that being an Andorian was an especially useful thing, but there were instances where it came in handy.

I pointed up to the raised area to the starboard side of the room and behind a set of machinery spaces to port. "There are open spaces on either side where I think the Energizers are. We could beam in reinforcements safely there. They won't be security personnel, but they should know how to use a phaser at least. Even with Type One Phasers, that'll make things pretty warm for the Romulans here and we might be able to set up a crossfire of sorts, but we'll lose people in the process."

My antennas felt the spatial displacement of movement and I looked up just in time to see two Romulans rushing towards our positions on the left-hand side of the compartment. They were carrying some sort of personal energy shield in front of them that was adsorbing the fire from my people there.

Crap, Crap, Crap, DON'T get Distracted!!!

I quickly took aim just as the Romulans were reaching my team's positions.

Christ, I hope those things don't protect their backs ...

I fired two long bursts at max power from my phaser rifle and smiled a predatory grin ...

Guess not ...

I turned back to the blonde-haired Commander. "What do you want to do, Ma'am?"

The Commander looked at me with an approving smile and nodded. "Looks like reinforcements would be useful then, Ensign, call them in."

"Aye Aye, Ma'am," I responded.

Scene 27

Captain Elizabeth Macklin

USS Chelsea

Main Engineering

Stardate 27202.16



This is not good, this is not good at all ...

I couldn't reach the Main Engineering Board yet, but I could use my tricorder to read the displays, see the indicators and wince as each one screamed that impending disaster was just around the corner.

Reinforcements had arrived and were engaging the Romulans now, both from the raised area behind the engineering boards to my right and the heavy energy exchangers to my left. Most of them were using small

Type One Phasers which could fit in the palm of your hand. Easily concealable, they were intended for use by landing parties where being obviously armed was a counterproductive idea.

They were phasers but they really weren't intended for actual combat operations. A few did, however, carry the larger more powerful Type Two Phaser which was what I was armed with.

Not that it's doing anyone much good in your hands, Elizabeth.

The additions to our landing party had finally pinned the Romulans down and were preventing them from sending additional forces through the gaping hole in the bulkhead. But it wasn't enough to actually force the Romulan forces already here out of the compartment. We'd lost at least three more of our people trying, but the Romulans weren't budging an inch and our non-security crewmen were highly vulnerable.

Life support belts just aren't intended for combat ...

Life support belts, which our normal crew were wearing, were intended for away teams operating in hostile environments and created a light force field which kept the bad stuff out and the good stuff in. They also provided some light protection from various harmful energy sources but against concentrated weapons fire, that protection was very limited. Still, some protection was better than no protection.

But it's not enough ... we aren't going to get anywhere like this. We might as well beam out and abandon all those people for all the good we're doing, and if we stay here much longer, we'll die right along with them ...

I turned on my tricorder and began to scan the compartment in a manner that wouldn't get me disintegrated, looking for anything I might use that might do some actual good. The entire place was a mess, damage everywhere and all the phaser and disruptor fire wasn't making things any better. Blown panels, pieces of wrecked bulkhead, there had even been a blow-out of one of the main plasma EPS conduits that had

mangled part of the ceiling. But as far as I could see, there was nothing that might... .

Wait a minute ...

My mind was still a bit groggy from the earlier distruptor blasts I'd absorbed, but as I scanned the damaged roof section, an idea began to form.

I looked up blearily at the blonde Commander, Ensign Ryhse, and the rest of her team that were locked in intense combat with the Romulans. It was largely that fire that was keeping the Romulans in check and it would probably be a bad idea for me to redirect that fire ...

*At least they **know** what the hell they are doing ...*

They may be busy but maybe you should do something rather just cowering here while you're people die.. Move your ass, Elizabeth!!"

I looked at my tricorder again, memorizing the image where the stress points were likely to be then set my

phaser for maximum power on its narrowest beam setting. Staying on the floor, I rolled away from my protection just enough to see what I was shooting at. Trying to visualize what I'd seen, I fired a continuous high-powered beam at the compartment's ceiling.

"What ... God, what are you doing now?" I heard the blonde Commander above me snarl as she reached to drag me back into cover. She had nearly gotten ahold of me when the ceiling I was shooting at, where it had been damaged by the plasma conduit explosion my tricorder had picked up, suddenly gave way and dropped down on the Romulans sheltering underneath it. But I wasn't done quite yet.

The ceiling falling on their heads was undoubtedly unpleasant for the Romulans involved, but I didn't need to just give a couple Romulans a bad headache. I needed all them out of Engineering, and besides, the ceiling was just the consolation prize, not my real target.

The EPS, or Electro-Plasma Distribution System was a grid of plasma conduits which distributed power to the

highest energy demand systems on the ship. Superconductor relays were fine for most purposes and far less volatile but when you had to move lots of energy and move it quickly, superconductors just weren't enough and that's where high energy plasma came in.

Because ruptures to the EPS system could be particularly devastating for the ship and her crew, they were heavily shielded and protected which would normally make them virtually impossible to damage with a hand held weapon. However, the main EPS conduit over where the Romulans were positioned had obviously already failed at some point and blown out much of the ceiling there as a result, which also meant ...

The shielding would have gotten blown out with it ...

Since the main EPS conduit had already failed, there was no longer any high-energy plasma flowing through that line. However if my bleary mind had read my tricorder correctly, a smaller secondary conduit carried in the same shielded trunk was still intact and energized, so if I was aiming correctly, maybe I just might ...

Much of the ceiling next to the Main Engineering Bulkhead suddenly exploded in plasma and fire sending debris flying downwards onto the hapless Romulans underneath, scorching my face and knocking me backwards, even from my prone position.

The world went fuzzy for a few moments, my body simply refusing to obey my commands, but then I found myself looking up at the shocked face of the blonde Commander ...

"What did you ... I mean ... How did you .. ?" she stammered.

I looked up into her blue eyes, grinned weakly and said.
"Easy, I'm an engineer."

Scene 28

Captain Elizabeth Macklin

USS Chelsea

Main Engineering

Stardate 21602.16



Sometimes life hangs in the balance by the smallest of margins, hanging on near invisible twines of fate. An inch here, a moment there ... and everything can change.

I was so bleary that I could hardly stand and yet, I knew that so many of those strings of fate now turned upon what I would do next.

I could hear the thrum of phaser fire continuing behind me as my people tried to hold the Romulans away from the gaping hole in the Engineering Bulkhead which we'd managed to secure just moments before. But it all

seemed so distant, so unreal and divorced from my reality that I couldn't process it effectively any longer.

You're hurt, Elizabeth ... you're not doing anyone any good here

But there's no time ... no time for anyone else.

I looked at the Main Engineering Board and saw disaster looming from every direction. I had managed to shut the port warp engine down. There were all sorts of indications that the warp lock effect had damaged its drive coils but that wasn't my most pressing issue any longer.

The starboard Warp Core is going to breach, Elizabeth ...

A cold chill ran through my fuzzy brain as that certainty grew ever closer. However the blonde Commander had managed to shut the starboard plasma core down, it hadn't stopped the plasma injectors from continuing to produce vast amounts of highly energized plasma, and that was a recipe for utter disaster.

Like the *Republic*, and most other starships of the Fleet, the *Chelsea's* Warp Cores were located in the large cylindrical warp engines of the vessel. It was there that

the Warp Cores mixed hydrogen and antimatter to produce the high levels of energy necessary to achieve warp speeds and power a starship.

There was always, however, the real danger that an uncontrolled reaction could breach the containment fields. That would either destroy the vessel or could bathe the ship and her crew with lethal amounts of hard radiation.

Designers for well over a century had addressed this problem by keeping the warp cores as far away from the rest of the ship as possible. As such, they had designed the engines so that they could be ejected from the rest of the ship in case of a looming warp core breach.

One of the challenges of that design, however, was that enormous amounts of power needed to be transmitted from the warp cores down to the Main Energizer in the secondary hull within the ship. There that energy would pass through a ship's dilitium matrix which would both magnify and control the energy produced. It would then feed a portion of that energy back up to the warp engines where the warp coils would create the vessel's warp field. All that energy had to be moved back and forth by something, which is what the plasma cores were for.

Somehow, however, the blonde Commander had managed to get the starboard plasma cores offline but hadn't managed to shut down all the plasma injectors. Those devices took the raw energy of the warp cores and infused it into a plasma stream. But with the plasma core shut down, there was no place for that energy to go. Emergency venting of the plasma should have happened automatically, but it hadn't, and the manual override wasn't working. This was a *very* **BAD** thing.

If we didn't find a way to discharge all that energy, it would overcome its containment fields, explosively, which would, in turn, damage the Warp Core and cause it to breach as well. The *Chelsea* would essentially create its own small supernova which was a much, much, much, much, **WORSE** thing.

Should have just destroyed her while you had the chance ... you've put everybody's life at risk here, Elizabeth. GOD, what were you thinking???

I shook my head to clear it, but the pain of that movement almost caused my legs to buckle as I swayed at the console.

A steadying hand reached out to support me and I saw a blurry vision of Lieutenant Brooke, Moreno's Assistant Chief Engineer, steadying me. I tried to smile a small token of thanks and said, "What did you find, Lieutenant?"

"I checked the Main Engineering Computer, Captain, and it's in pieces," she replied. "It looks as if someone partially dismantled it and rigged a number of bypasses through new modules, but those modules appear to have been badly damaged, probably from the shock of the plasma core shut down."

Well, that explains a few things doesn't, it ...

In that condition, the Main Engineering Computer was almost certainly at least partially disabled which meant, at best, I only had partial control of the ship's engineering systems from this location. It also probably explained why so many things that shouldn't have been able to happened, had. The Main Computer was supposed to provide backup control if the Main Engineering Computer failed, but, if the Romulans were trying to physically bypass it too ...

We are so screwed ...

There was only one outcome from all of this.

"The Warp Core is going to breach," I said in an unsteady voice. "We need to eject it now."

"Ma'am," the young Lieutenant said with concern. "The manual ejection controls have been destroyed," she said pointing at a console which had been devastated by phaser and distrupor fire. "With the subsystems room destroyed, I'm not sure we can do that from here."

God, just give me one break, just one ...

My mind scrolled through the various options still available to me. There were multiple redundant systems on a starship that could be used to deal with something as critical as this, but every one of them I could think of required more time than we had, or access to areas of the ship that the Romulans controlled.

"We're going to lose the ship," I said in a weak voice.

I grabbed my communicator, almost losing my balance as the compartment seemed to spin around me. "Mr. Konaff, we have a warp core breach in progress. Can you get a transporter lock on the *Chelsea's* crew?"

There was a brief pause and then a reply, "Not as yet, Captain. The *Chelsea's* shields are still cycling in unpredictable intervals and this one is told the other unidentified energy barrier is still preventing positive scanner locks in those areas of the ship. May this one suggest we evacuate the landing party?"

I did some quick mental math. The secondary hull of the *Republic* held two emergency transporters, both of which should be manned with boarding parties deployed. Each of those was capable of transporting a maximum of 22 people at a time. They didn't have the fine discrimination of the standard transporter but they were designed just for such situations as this. In addition there was a standard 6 person transporter which meant, if we could get positive locks, we could beam out as many as fifty people at a time.

If we can get positive locks ... which isn't going to happen as long as those energy shields are operating.

"Mr. Konaff," I said weakly into my communicator, "Prepare to beam aboard all personnel in Main Engineering except myself, Lieutenant Brooke, and the security team. Then stand by for a rapid emergency beam-out of all remaining Federation personnel on board the *Chelsea* to commence as soon as her shields go down."

Then plot a course directly away from the *Chelsea* at maximum warp. If you see the *Chelsea's* core start to breach before this is done, raise your shields and protect the ship."

"But, Captain," came the reply with a concerned tone. "You and the landing party may still be aboard."

"We may, Lieutenant," I said softly as the compartment spun around me. "You have your orders."

"Aye, Ma'am," came the reply.

"Lieutenant Brooke," I said, leaning heavily on the console in front of me. "I'm going to need your help."

"Yes. Ma'am," she said in a concerned tone. "What do you need me to do?"

"On my mark, I need you to shut everything down that you can, all of the energizers, all of the reserve generators, the batteries; I need *everything* that can produce power shut off. I can't see well enough to do it alone," I responded weakly as a wave of vertigo nearly drove me from my feet.

"But, Ma'am, if we shut *everything* down," she replied.

"We'll be shutting off energy to the fields holding back the plasma surge in the Warp Cores. The emergency energy buffers will give us a few additional moments but that's all. Once they fail, the Warp Core will follow," I finished for her.

"If we knew where that strange sensor scrambler was drawing its power from, we could be more selective," I continued in a weak voice. "But we don't, so we need to shut down every power source we can and hope we get the one it's using, otherwise the *Chelsea's* crew are dead. If you have a better idea, now's the time to tell me," I said with a weak smile.

I saw her face harden a bit as she processed that information before finally nodding. "Yes, Ma'am, ready when you are."

I heard the distinctive hum as most of our landing party beamed out.

"Now, Lieutenant, shut it all down now!" I said as I struggled to remain standing.

I watched as, one by one, systems began to shut down throughout the ship. My mind spun as I struggled to

finish my task but with each passing moment, my body betrayed me, my vision growing dimmer until finally, vertigo engulfed me as I crumpled to the ground.

No, no, not done ...

I had the faintest impression of someone hovering over me before the Warp Core Breach Klaxon sounded, and sweet oblivion reached out to take me.

Scene 29

Lieutenant Commander Janice Chapman

USS Republic

Stardate 27202.17



"Your Captain is certifiable, you know that don't you?" I groused at Lieutenant Rodriguez as he escorted me down one of the overfull corridors in *Republic's* secondary hull.

"She has her moments, Ma'am, but with all due respect, she's *your* Captain, too now," he replied, the mild rebuke in his tone not without some justification. "And you *are* her XO."

Now wasn't that a laugh. Me, an XO, the Executive Officer of a *front line heavy cruiser* and not just that, oh no, a *Constitution Class Heavy Cruiser*.

You seriously have to be shitting me ...

I shook my head slightly in disbelief.

"Point noted, Lieutenant," I responded reluctantly. "She's my lunatic of a Captain as well."

That didn't seem to make the young engineer much happier, but at least he was smart enough to discontinue his current line of conversation.

"Don't get me wrong," I continued. "I am *very* grateful you came to get us, but leading a boarding party like that? No offense, Mr. Rodriguez, but that's a little outside of an engineer's training isn't it?"

"Yes, Ma'am, it is," he replied in a flat voice. "We're all being stretched more than a bit under the circumstances."

Well that's a freaking understatement, now isn't it ...

"I suppose you're right," I replied, giving just an inch. "It's been a trying time for everyone."

And it had been. The fight for the *Chelsea's* Engineering Deck had cost the *Republic* good people, but, by some

unfathomable quirk of fate, a goodly number of the *Chelsea's* crew had indeed been rescued, beamed out in the final moments before the ship had immolated itself. In what had to be a complete and utter miracle, not only had Master Chief Parker and I been snatched from fiery destruction, so had the remainder of the landing party, as well as about 40 others, including all of the *Ptolemy* survivors aboard.

That had to be a success, but the *Republic* hadn't been able to rescue everyone. The ship and its crew had time only for one single transport cycle; it had been that close ... and some people, the transporters just hadn't been able to establish a positive lock in time.

You really should be grateful ... you're alive, a lot of people aren't, you should be grateful, Janice.

I knew I should be, but for some reason I wasn't. Maybe I'd just reconciled myself to the death that had seemed so certain there on that ship. Maybe I just wanted to ... well, die, and gain atonement for having survived the *Ptolemy*. Maybe I had nothing left to give. Whatever the reason though, rightly or wrongly, I just didn't feel very "rescued" at the moment.

The Lieutenant stopped at one of the doors in what

passed for the berthing areas of the secondary hull. The staterooms here were all double occupancy with a shared common room with a couple of chairs, a small desk and computer station. Normally there were 73 beds in the lower hull but those could be easily expanded to 146. There were also provisions to convert each room's common area into sleeping areas as well which made for very cramped conditions with now around 270 souls on board.

According to Lieutenant Rodriguez, they were working on securing and making safe for habitation sections of the starship's primary hull, but those efforts were still far from complete, so people were being berthed where they were able to be berthed. I was at least lucky that I would only need to share space with one other person, at least until the quarters in the primary hull were ready for habitation. That was going to give me enormous amounts of space compared to just about anyone else, but there was one catch to it all.

I'll be bunking with that lunatic Captain ...

The universe does have a warped sense of humor, doesn't it, Janice?

It wasn't that I necessarily disliked Captain Macklin. Ok

she was an engineer and ... well ... she was an engineer. But I honestly didn't know her well enough to either like or dislike her. I also hadn't met her under ideal circumstances, after all, being hit by a couple of disruptor blasts was enough to mess up anyone's day.

The Romulans had also developed a new twist on the cellular and molecular disruption qualities of their weapons. The properties of the similar devices used by the Klingons were well known, however to the best of my knowledge, we were just now finding out about the Romulan version and it had its own deadly characteristics, namely a degenerative after-effect which was absent in the Klingon model.

Based upon what Doctor Pollard had deigned to tell me, that is.

What a prissy little stuck up piece of work that one is ...

Apparently the Romulan version didn't just disrupt the cellular structures, it somehow continued to breakdown cellular matter even after the disruptor wave was no longer present. Even people like the Captain, who had most of the blast deflected by her life support field, were suffering from the degeneration effects, and it had nearly cost the Captain her life.

She needed to be evacuated just as soon as she had been hit, but it wasn't like we could order her off the ship. She's not just a lunatic, but a stubborn lunatic ...

In any event, she, and several others were still in Sickbay as the Doctor attempted to find a way to reverse the effect; and if she failed.

Then you're the Captain, Janice ...

That thought struck hard and made me feel sick to my core. There was *no way* I wanted that job.

I gathered my thoughts as Mr. Rodriguez opened the stateroom door.

The door parted to reveal the common room which, apparently, Captain Macklin was using as her ready room.

"The sleeping area is through there, Ma'am," Lieutenant Rodriguez said, motioning towards an identically sized compartment containing two beds, "And that terminal is secure so you should be able to access any information or orders you might want to look at there."

I looked around for a few moments as a feeling of ... shame, yes shame washed through me. As I examined the space, I was looking at bits and pieces of Macklin's life. Some image holos, some obviously scorched but still functional. They showed scenes that were undoubtedly important to her, a holo of herself as a Lieutenant with an Ensign that looked an awful lot like her, both in engineering red. Images of others, older ... similar, family probably. Others showing people I didn't readily know or could identify.

There were other objects, souvenirs probably of places she had visited that were important to her. There was even a single blue crystal Tsholtofan playing piece, an Andorian game, but why it was here all alone, well that was another private mystery that likely only Captain Macklin could solve.

You're an intruder here, Janice, you have no right to be here poking around inside the woman's life, you have no right ...

I was about to turn around and tell the engineer to berth me someplace else, *anyplace* else, when my eye caught something familiar in the Captain's sleeping area.

I took a couple of steps and discovered some more of the

Captain's personal possessions. But what was striking were the various starship models carefully displayed in her personal area. All of them were exquisitely detailed, but of course a replicator could do that if it had the right program. Somehow these seemed different.

I looked back at the Lieutenant with a questioning look.

"Those are all the ships the Commander ... sorry, Ma'am, the Captain, has served on. She laser sculpts all of them by hand using material from each of the ships. 'Using old worn out trash, but trash with a soul' she likes to call it."

"You've served with her for a while then?" I asked.

"A bit over a year, Ma'am, since she assumed the post of the *St. Vincent's* XO," he replied.

"Not the Captain?" I said, a little shocked. Damaged or not, destroyer XO's simply did not rise directly to the command of a ship like this.

"No, Ma'am, she was our Executive Officer and Chief Engineer. She took over command when Captain Grave was killed in the opening moments of a Romulan ambush," he replied

I looked back at the Captain's collection of models, her career laid out before me. The *St. Vincent*, done in such warm detail you almost thought she might go to warp speed while you watched, the old decrepit *Suffolk*, the mighty *Hood*, the *Ares*, and ...

My breath caught in my throat as I examined her last model, the shape my eye must have initially noticed that had drawn me here.

It, like the others, was so detailed that it was more a work of art than anything else, something that somehow exuded warm humanity rather than a heart of cold hard tritanium. Its base had been wrapped in a dark velvet cloth on which rested a single white rose, a sign of mourning for a vessel now dead.

NCC-3801 USS Ptolemy

A surge of sadness and grief, suddenly and without warning, connected through my mind, washing over me as unbidden memories, good and nightmarish, reconnected me to all that I had lost. I took a step closer, trying to keep my hand from shaking as I reached out and touched a true piece of the starship I had loved so deeply.

My home now lost to me. For all I knew, here was the last fragment of that ship, the last fragment of all who had given their lives aboard her, still in existence.

"She ... she served aboard the *Ptolemy*?" I asked in a voice huskier with emotion than I wanted it to be.

"Yes, Ma'am, her first tour," he replied in a warmer tone than before.

So ... a lunatic, stubborn, engineer with no business being in command of a ship like this, but someone with a heart ...

I can work with that ...

"Very well, Lieutenant, I know where to sleep now. Unless you have something that needs my personal attention, I probably should get some rest if I'm going to be of any good to you or the ship," I said.

"No, Ma'am, nothing we can't handle for now," he replied.

"Then ... you are dismissed, Lieutenant and ...," I faltered.

"Yes, Ma'am?" he replied.

"Thank you, thank you to you and all of those who

rescued us. I won't forget that," I replied.

"Our pleasure, Ma'am," he responded kindly then walked out of the compartment.

I looked over at the model of the *Ptolemy* and lay down on the empty bed and drifted immediately off to sleep, and for once, just this once, the demons of the past allowed me to slumber.

Epilogue

Imperial War Eagle *Rua'thal*

The Centurion reviewed his portion of the plot of the massive holographic display that hovered mid-air in the center of the great War Eagle's Flag Deck.

It was here that the Legate controlled the actions of the great fleet that had now thrust deeply into the space formerly occupied by the Federation. Small green icons were spread over the display, showing the warships of the Imperial Fleet, and an ever diminishing number of blue icons, representing the known or suspected positions of what remained of the Federation's once vaunted Star Fleet.

It was gratifying, the long years of planning and preparation, and now finally the will to use that which had been gathered to accomplish what the Empire had previously failed to achieve.

However the Centurion's concern was not the entire scope of the display and campaign, but just one segment of it, and as he watched, one of the green icons faded and disappeared, replaced by an ever brightening blue icon.

The Centurion moved forward. "Triarii Stelam, what has transpired?"

The operator stiffened and then replied briskly. "A confirmed loss of an infiltrator, Centurion, however the infiltrator reported the identity of its attacker before it ceased transmitting."

"And?" the Centurion questioned.

"The Federation starship *Republic*, Centurion; *Constitution* Class, Heavy Cruiser," the Triarri responded.

The Centurion frowned, then turned and strode to the Tribune. "Tribune D'Nuhir, we have a confirmed sighting of a Federation Starship, *Constitution* Class, at grid eight five dash four nine point seven."

"And the vessel which had the glory of eliminating it?" the Tribune asked casually.

"It was not eliminated, Tribune, the confirmation was relayed by an infiltrator which we believe has been neutralized," the Centurion responded.

"Truly," the Tribune continued casually. "Are we certain of the identification? Did not we determine that no such vessels were near that inconvenient area of space?"

"Yes, Tribune," the Centurion replied. "That was so reported."

The Tribune turned and faced the Centurion for the first time, a dangerous look on his face. "And which one is it, did our *valiant* infiltrator bother to report *that* before it so nobly gave its life for the Empire?"

"The *Republic*, Tribune," the Centurion replied.

The Tribune raised an eyebrow in response. "So Commander Hvaid's reports of her near utter destruction were ... *exaggerated* then."

"It would appear so, Tribune," the Centurion responded.

"How unfortunate ... for Hvaid," the Tribune mused. "Still an oversight which should be corrected. She is but a single vessel, but she is in a *very* inconvenient place, would you not agree?"

"Yes, Tribune," the Centurion responded

“Find her, then,” the Tribune replied. “Find her and when you have done so, *eliminate her as should have already been done*. Report back to me *when she has been neutralized*. Do you understand?”

“Yes, Tribune. For the glory of the Empire!!” the Centurion replied sharply, bringing his arm across his chest in salute. “It shall be done.”

End.

Star Trek Republic will return in “The Cruellest Cut”