

STAR TREK PATHFINDER



THE SIREN'S CALL
by Jerriecan

STAR TREK: PATHFINDER

“THE SIREN’S CALL”

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***“Those who fail to remember the past
are doomed to repeat it;
those who choose to ignore the past...
they are simply doomed.”***

*Thana Voralas
“The Chronicle of Precedent”*

UESN *Fearless*
in the atmosphere of Malkur VI
September 29, 2159

“Cut drive engines, station keeping only. Passive sensors.”

Nobody spoke as the impulse engines of the *Fearless* fell quiet, leaving the ship strangely motionless after five days of near-constant over-thrust. Most of the bridge crew were staring at the main viewscreen, now showing nothing more than a murky brown fog bank. The *Fearless* had been engaged with a trio of Romulan Preybirds for the better part of a week, playing hide-and-seek in the nearby asteroid belt. They had managed to destroy two of the Preybirds, but the third had proven too crafty for the tricks that had destroyed its cohorts. So now the *Fearless* was doing what it could – hiding as deep as they could get in the atmosphere of Malkur VI, a gas giant, and licking its wounds until help could arrive.

If help arrived.

Captain Proudfoot looked over to his science officer, his dark face creased with worry. “Beaumont?”

Lieutenant Commander Isobel Beaumont peered into the scanner head, trying to make some sense of the garbled readings. “Nothing definite, sir. We’re getting too much scatter from the atmosphere. They might be using active scanners, but if they are, they’re not close.”

“Good. Might give us some breathing room,” Proudfoot said, turning back to the main viewer. He punched a button set into his armrest. “Bridge to Engineering. Commander Windley...”

“Sir!” Beaumont cried, her eyes wide at what she was seeing in the scanner head. Tiny pinpricks of energy were dropping through the atmosphere of Malkur VI at hyper-sonic speeds, detonating in massive fireballs that sent shockwaves through the thick atmosphere. “Depth charges! Plasma-based, six hundred gigajoule yield!”

“Helm, maximum thrust!” Proudfoot said. “If those shockwaves hit us at this depth we’ll be crushed like an empty cargo pod!”

The *Fearless* slowly accelerated, her overtaxed engines sending vibrations through the superstructure as they were ramped up to full power. Beaumont watched as a second plasma charge detonated, and a third, each one adding to the destructive force of the shockwaves heading toward them. "Impact in twenty seconds!" she said.

"All hands, brace for impact! Damage control teams at the ready!" Proudfoot said.

Too slow, Beaumont thought, *we're too damn slow* -

The shockwave hit and suddenly Beaumont was flying backward through the air, her science station lost in a dozen overloading conduits as it exploded in a shower of shrapnel. She never felt herself hit the deck plates, never felt any pain as her eyes slowly came back into focus to see a trio of her crewmates kneeling over her, a medkit open and its contents divided among them as they leaned over her. Beaumont tried to speak, tried to say she was all right, but there was this shape that kept getting in her vision, something jagged and metallic, something very much like the scanner hood that was lodged somewhere over her left eye.

Something hissed against her arm, and before Beaumont could understand what had happened, consciousness slipped away...

Phobos Orbital Yards **in orbit around Mars, Sol System** **May 6, 2163**

"I keep having these dreams. About the attack."

"About your injury, you mean." The squat, porcine face of Dr. Makav leaned in closer to the screen, as if it made any difference over a subspace link from Mars to Earth.
"Still trying to remember what happened afterward."

Commander Isobel Beaumont nodded, absently rubbing at her forehead about an inch above her left eyebrow. There was no scar from the wound, but deep inside was something that she knew she would never be without. "I keep getting new details each time. Can the processor reconstruct memories?"

"No, not in the way you're thinking. Your brain is using it to fill in the pieces with the most likely scenario, based on what you've read in the after-action reports. The cortical processor is just doing what it's supposed to – process information to solve problems, the same as the damaged prefrontal cortex it's replacing." Dr. Makav leaned back and sighed. *"This is untested technology, Commander, never before deployed in the field. I have to wonder if you're ready to return to active duty."*

"I've been out three and a half years while you rebuilt my brain," Beaumont replied. "If I'm not ready now, I never will be. And how better to test your creation than active field time?"

"Hmph," the Tellarite growled. Beaumont knew he was uncomfortable with her decision – he had not tried to argue a single point, and was on his best behavior. With a Tellarite, that signaled trouble on the horizon. *"You know the drill – daily micro-cellular scans to determine if the implant is adversely affecting the surrounding tissue, and daily diagnostics sent back to me along with the scans. If you have any trouble –"*

"Remove myself from duty and report immediately to Sickbay," Beaumont finished. "You've made that point quite clear."

"Just... be careful out there," Dr. Makav said. *"I've invested too much in your brain for you to get your damned fool head blown off."* Before Beaumont could respond the Tellarite cut the link, leaving her staring at the symbol of the United Federation of Planets on a black screen.

Beaumont stood and slowly crossed the small guest quarters to the circular viewport. Workpods and shuttles flitted about, busy at their appointed tasks of bringing starships to life. She craned her neck up, looking for a familiar shape – not the bulbous, canister-like profile of most interstellar ships, dictated by cost-efficiency. No, what she was seeking was slim and graceful, a slender disc coupled to a pair of cylinders.

And there she was, floating in one of the orbital gantries, lit up like a Christmas tree.

The Pathfinder.

“Nobody’s that lucky, smooth-skin.”

Lieutenant Tegan Webb slowly let go of the pile of credit chits and currencies of half a dozen worlds, letting the mass float in the microgravity. “Just because you can’t hit the broad side of a cargo carrier doesn’t mean I’m cheating, Vrax.”

“Prove it,” the squat Tellarite snarled, folding his arms across his grime-stained coveralls. Behind him, five more orbital longshoremen grunted in agreement, including a two and a half meter tall Nausicaan who was methodically cracking each of his double knuckles.

Tegan sighed and looked around the half-empty cargo bay. *Every time I play Rebound, it ends up just like this, every damn time,* she thought.

“Okay, boys, no need to get all worked up,” she said, holding up her hands. “You want me to prove I’m playing straight? Fine – set up your cans, anywhere you like. Wide-open bay. Two throws wins the pot, more than that and you all get your money back.

“Or...” Tegan smiled wolfishly, “...we could make things interesting. I hit all seven cans in one throw – here and now – for double the pot. I don’t hit all the cans, I pay you each double your bet. Deal?”

Vrax and his cronies exchanged glances, then he turned back to her, a crooked smile on his porcine features. “Deal. Line ‘em up, boys, wherever you want!” He looked back at Tegan, his own can gripped in a gnarled hand. “Looks like it’s going to be a profitable day. You’d better be good for it.”

“Funny, I was just thinking the same thing about you,” Tegan replied, backing away from the pile of chits and coins. Around the cavernous cargo bay, the longshoremen were already setting up their cans in the most inaccessible positions the rules allowed. Tegan swallowed the lump in her throat. *Easy,* she thought. *You’ve played Rebound thousands of times. You’ve got this.*

Rebound had been developed independently by most every space-faring race, more out of boredom than any other reason – lots of space and not much to occupy one’s

time on the long trip between star systems, especially on low-speed cargo ships. Couple that with minimal recreation facilities on most ships and deep space stations, and the expense of keeping cargo bays under full gravity when cargo netting would do the same job for minimal cost, and you naturally had the makings of a game that made the most of a large, cluttered space which was practically weightless. The closest human sports Tegan could compare to Rebound were a mixture of billiards and racquetball, only Rebound also demanded an excellent understanding of physics to even be adequate at the game.

There were no hard and fast rules on how many could play – anyone willing to play (and bet) was welcome, so long as they brought a can, the forearm-sized objects that made up the targets. Often, longtime players had their own personalized cans, decorated in favorite colors or logos of their vessel or homeworld. Tegan's was just an old Thermos, handed down from her father. The players placed their cans around the space they had, and then each player would throw a springy ball. The goal was simple – knock over all cans in the least number of throws. Good players could strike three, maybe even four cans on a single throw. Vrax had hit five on his first throw, needing only one more throw to take down all seven. Tegan had hit six on her first throw, which technically made her the winner.

Now she just had to hit all seven in one shot.

Tegan watched as the others placed their cans, waiting until the end to place her own. The other cans were clearly visible from the center of the bay (as was customary – hiding one's can was considered unsporting), but hitting them all was another thing entirely. She looked at each one in turn, then finally set her can atop a cargo pod halfway across the bay.

As she floated back toward Vrax, Tegan thought she could see someone lurking up in the shadows of the catwalk. Who it was hardly mattered; the only betting parties were clustered ahead of her, waiting for her to throw the ball. She moved up to Vrax, snatched the springy ball from his hand, then curled one corner of her mouth and flashed him a wink. Turning back toward the cans, she pulled a small seven-sided coin from beneath her collar and rubbed it between her thumb and forefinger. "Wish me luck," she whispered.

Then Tegan threw the ball with every ounce of her strength.

The ball rocketed straight across the bay, unhampered by gravity, until it struck a

heavy cargo pod and bounced away, barely glancing against the first can as it passed but imparting enough force to send the can spinning. The ball bounced between two more cargo pods, careening to the left and then striking the second can dead on, sending it flying.

Vrax and his cohorts looked on in increasing disbelief as the ball made its way around the bay, gradually losing momentum with every impact but knocking over each can with eerie precision. The final can to fall was the furthest, in an upper corner of the bay – an easy straight shot, but very tricky after bouncing all over the bay. The ball lazily traversed the space, finally striking the can with just enough energy to knock it aside.

Tegan turned to Vrax and his cronies. “Single throw, as promised. I believe that was double the money.”

Vrax’s scowl deepened. “Boomers don’t play fair. All that time in zero-G gives you an unfair advantage. Same as cheating.”

“You don’t like to lose, you shouldn’t play the game,” Tegan said. She approached the pot and gathered the floating mass into a ball. “Pay up.”

“No.”

Tegan was about to argue when a woman’s voice called out from above, “I believe you had a bet, crewman.” Tegan and the others looked up to see the figure on the catwalk, hands gripping the railing, the three rank pips of a commander clearly visible on the figure’s Starfleet badge, standing out against a mounting ring of command gold. “Or maybe I should just contact Security and inform them of the illegal gambling operation taking place in this bay.”

“What gambling operation?” Vrax said. “We’re just having a little fun...”

“And making a little profit,” the commander finished. “Against Fleet regulations. Now you can hand over what the Lieutenant won, or you can all spend a very long day in a holding cell until Security gets this sorted out. What’s your pleasure?”

Vrax growled, then reached into a pocket and pulled out a hefty handful of credit chits. The others did the same, almost doubling the size of the pile before going to collect their cans and making their way out of the bay. Tegan pulled the pile into her

carryall, smiling sweetly at each of them, saving her widest smile for Vrax.

As he watched his portion disappear, Vrax growled, “Better not come back here anytime soon, smooth-skin.”

“Don’t worry about that,” Tegan replied, slinging the carryall strap over her shoulder. “Worry about that backspin. It’s wrecking your trajectories.” With that, Tegan crouched and pushed hard off the deck, sending her flying up to the catwalk where the commander was still looking down. Tegan gripped the railing, keeping it between them as she floated twenty meters off the deck. “Thanks for the backup, ma’am,” she said. “What brings you below-decks?”

“You, actually. You are Lieutenant Webb, correct?”

“Yes, I...” Tegan mentally kicked herself. *The shuttle to the Pathfinder*, she thought. *The one the new XO is expecting me to fly her there aboard.* “Ma’am, I’m so sorry...”

Commander Isobel Beaumont fought to suppress a smile. Orbital longshoremen were much like their historical counterparts, rough and tumble and – every now and then – in need of being taken down a peg. *Then again*, she thought, *so are rookie lieutenants.* “That’s Commander Beaumont,” she said in her best stern tone. “And this will be the last time, correct?”

“Yes, ma... Commander.”

“Good.” Beaumont gestured at the carryall. “You’d better make that last – you won’t get many opportunities once we’re underway. And don’t forget your can. I’ll meet you at the shuttle.”

“There’ll be more opportunities than you might think,” Tegan said under her breath as she went back for the Thermos.

Beaumont just smiled. This was already turning into an interesting assignment, and she wasn’t even aboard the ship yet.

“There she is, Commander.”

Isobel Beaumont looked toward the front of the shuttlepod and set aside the data slate. She had been reviewing the crew roster since they had boarded some twenty minutes before, though her attention kept wandering. She moved forward to just behind the pilot's seat and craned her neck up to look through the transparent aluminum dome.

Bathed in the glow of a dozen spotlights and suspended in a web of girders, the U.S.S. *Pathfinder* was the center of attention for the always-active Phobos Orbital Yards. Dozens of space-suited figures and construction pods swarmed around her graceful lines like insects, hard at work maneuvering the final missing components into place and covering them with duranium hull plates.

Already Beaumont could see the differences between the *Pathfinder* and the NX-class that had preceded her. The saucer was thicker, more stoutly built, with an under-slung pod containing the primary navigational deflector dish, and the warp nacelles were far more massive; but the most obvious difference was the spike trailing down the center-line of the ship between the nacelles, the warp-field stabilizer that allowed the *Pathfinder* to reach speeds of Warp Six.

Theoretically, at least.

As they approached the ship, differences in the construction pods became clearer. Many had been adorned with colorful nose art hearkening back to the early days of flight, with names like 'Black Jack', 'Damned Yankee', and 'F-Bomb'. One pod sported a colorful cartoon cat sticking out his tongue with a pained expression, the word 'Sourpuss' emblazoned beneath.

Lieutenant Tegan Webb pressed the comm switch. "*Pathfinder*, this is Shuttlepod Five, requesting clearance to dock."

"*Shuttlepod Five, this is Pathfinder Hangar Control*," a tinny voice said through the speaker. "*Clearance granted. Slaving control to us in three, two, one, mark.*"

Webb sat back as the shuttlepod glided on its path toward the *Pathfinder*, its controls now in the hands of the ship's automated landing system. "Never did like this part," she said, folding her arms across her chest, her lips curled downward.

Beaumont looked down at her, bemused. "Don't tell me you're sulking already."

“Just makes me nervous, ma’am,” Webb replied. “I like being the one in charge of my own ship, even if she’s just a shuttlepod.” Webb idly pulled the seven-sided coin from her pocket and rolled it across her knuckles with practiced ease.

“What’s that?” Beaumont asked. She had never seen a coin quite like it. Even though the United Earth government was slowly phasing it out on the homeworld of humanity, money was still needed among the colonies and when dealing with other space-faring species. “A good luck charm?”

“Sort of,” Webb replied. “It’s a Rigelian twenty-one dulac piece. It’s the first money I ever made as part of the crew.”

“Is it worth much?”

“Not as much as it was when I was twelve, ma’am,” Webb said, flipping the coin into the air and catching it with her other hand on the way down. “My dad always said nothing beats an honest day’s pay. This is how I remember that advice.”

“They must start you working pretty early on those long-haul ships,” Beaumont said as the shuttlepod eased up to the belly of the *Pathfinder*.

“There’s always work to do on a Boomer ship. This was for my first solo docking.” Webb held up the weathered coin, watching it glint, remembering the feel of the ancient controls beneath her tiny hands. “That was the day I knew I wanted to be a pilot.”

The shuttlepod trembled as the docking arm lowered and made contact, locking in place. “*Good contact*,” the hangar controller said over the comm. “*Retracting now*.”

The docking arm slowly drew up into the *Pathfinder*, bringing the shuttlepod with it. As the pod cleared the edges, the doors slid into place and sealed, followed a few moments later by the rush of air as the hangar bay repressurized. As soon as the pressure equalized a trio of technicians entered the bay and began hooking up hoses and cables to the shuttlepod, replenishing its fuel and consumables.

Webb stood and went to the hatch, swinging it open and gesturing for Beaumont to go first. “Privilege is yours, Commander,” she said.

Beaumont nodded and stepped through. As soon as her boots touched the deck,

she could feel the vibration of the warp reactor, so intense it was almost ticklish – which was unusual because while in spacedock the reactor was normally kept at minimum output.

Webb looked around as she closed the shuttlepod's hatch behind them. "Power's way above normal for spacedock," she said, confirming Beaumont's thoughts. "Vibrations are way too strong. Warp engines are already hot."

"We're not scheduled to depart for another three days," Beaumont said.

From behind them a woman's voice said, "Indeed. Our departure has been accelerated." Beaumont and Webb turned to see a tall woman with sharp features standing aft of the pod, her hands clasped behind her back, the tips of her Vulcan ears just visible through her straight black hair. The three bars on her right shoulder, two silver and one gray, were set in a flash of red. "I am Lieutenant Commander T'Vril. Captain Teague has tasked me with escorting you to his ready room." She looked at Webb. "Stow your gear and report to the bridge, Lieutenant."

As Webb hurried away, Beaumont said, "Must be important. How long until we break orbit?"

"Within the hour. The captain will brief you in full." With that, T'Vril turned on her heel and strode toward the nearest turbolift, leaving Beaumont scrambling to catch up and wondering what could have changed to make the *Pathfinder's* departure so urgent.

Commander Isobel Beaumont darted through the crowded halls of the *Pathfinder*, weaving her way between the crew as she tried to keep up with Lt. Cmdr. T'Vril. By the time Beaumont caught up to her escort, the Vulcan had already summoned the turbolift and was waiting inside, one finger pressed to the hold switch next to the lift door. As soon as Beaumont entered, T'Vril released the switch and the door slid closed, sending the lift toward the bridge.

Beaumont leaned back against the wall, recalling the details of T'Vril's personnel file almost by reflex, something she had been doing more and more since receiving her cortical implant. Born in 2123 in the Lyr-T'aya province of Vulcan, T'Vril was the *Pathfinder's* tactical officer – an unusual posting for a Vulcan, given their aversion to

violence. She had joined Starfleet following the close of the Earth-Romulan War, part of the initial wave of integration among the founding worlds of the Federation. From all indications she was quite skilled as a tactician. It was no mean feat for anyone to rise to her current rank in the space of just two years, regardless of species or ability.

T’Vril clasped her hands behind her back as the lift got up to speed. “Captain Teague regrets being unable to greet you in person,” she said, jarring Beaumont back to the present. “Our advance in departure time made that impossible.”

“Understandable. Busy comes with the job,” Beaumont replied.

T’Vril nodded almost imperceptibly. “Indeed, though we may be busier than you think.”

“How so?”

T’Vril looked back over her left shoulder at Beaumont. “Several other vessels are preparing for immediate departure, primarily short- and medium-range craft with minimal scientific capabilities. Emergency crews have been dispatched to reactivate the Defense Fleet. The *Panther* and *Oguma* have already departed the Sol system.”

A cold lump settled in Beaumont’s stomach. The last time the Defense Fleet had been active was over two years before, during the closing weeks of the Earth-Romulan War. Since then, those ships had been mothballed out in Jupiter’s orbit. If Starfleet was bringing its defensive reserves on-line, it could only mean one thing.

Trouble.

“How many ships are they reactivating?” Beaumont said.

“Over thirty at last count,” T’Vril said. “But that figure is based on outdated information. It is likely much higher now.”

Beaumont swallowed, her throat suddenly dry, then stared up at the dome of light in the center of the lift, waiting for them to reach their destination... and dreading what she would find when they arrived.

Moments later the door slid aside to reveal the bridge of the *Pathfinder*.

Immediately both women were enveloped in the sound of a dozen conversations as the crew rushed to put the bridge in working order ahead of schedule. A harried Andorian ensign worked the communications station, her antennae lying flat, as she tried to route comm traffic to where it needed to go within the ship. Several panels were open, their optronic guts exposed as technicians installed and adjusted components to make them functional.

T'Vril crossed to a blue hatch set into the bulkhead opposite the turbolift and tapped the comm switch mounted on the wall. "T'Vril here, sir, with Commander Beaumont, as ordered."

"Send her in," came the terse reply.

The door slid aside, and Beaumont stepped through into the captain's ready room. The first thing that struck her was the ample headroom; both the NX-class and *Daedalus*-class refits that had been rushed into service during the War had tiny ready rooms with all sorts of protrusions that tended to leave at least a few bruises on the captain's head in the first week.

"I'll send you a message every night," the man at the desk was saying, looking at this screen. "And once a week, we'll even get to talk in real time. Captain's privilege."

"I wish you didn't have to go, Dad," the young girl on the screen said, her auburn hair falling across her face.

"Me too, sweetie," the captain said. "Be good for me, okay?"

"I will."

"Love you."

"Love you too, Daddy."

Lorcan Teague touched the screen at the same time his daughter mirrored the gesture, pressing their fingers to the screen as though it were just a window instead of millions of kilometers separating them. A moment later the screen went black, the new Starfleet logo hovering in the center.

Beaumont stood there silently, waiting until Teague turned to face her a moment

later. "Commander Beaumont, I'm sorry we had to meet under such circumstances." He gestured toward the chair across the desk from his. "Please. I'll just hit the high points for now – the senior staff will be fully briefed en route."

Beaumont sat and looked at her new commanding officer. She knew Teague's record – everyone did, after the Battle of Hell's Gate. It was estimated that over ninety-five percent of the human population was familiar with the name Lorcan Teague, and were at least passably familiar with his exploits during the War. His short brown hair framed a round face that looked more like it belonged to a farmer or a priest than a war hero. Shallow pock marks scarred his cheeks and chin, remnants of injuries that dermal regeneration had been unable to completely remove.

"What's going on, sir?" Beaumont asked. "Has there been an incident?"

"Not like you might think," Teague replied. "Not one single event, but a series of them." Teague turned his screen for Beaumont to see and brought up a list. "Seventeen starships, mostly deep space transports. All have gone missing in the past five months. No sign of their crews, no escape pods, not even a stray radio transmission indicating any kind of trouble. Over three hundred people, just gone."

"I've heard about some of these. Starships disappear all the time, sir," Beaumont replied. "It's a hazard of the job, especially with anyone willing to pay for a quick warp refit taking whatever heap they can into interstellar space."

"True enough, Commander. But thirty hours ago, Starfleet received a garbled distress call from the *Roosevelt* through one of its deep space relays. The Vulcans sent one of their cruisers to investigate, but by the time they arrived there was nothing. The *Roosevelt* had vanished, just like the others." Teague pressed a switch and a man's static-distorted voice filled the ready room. "... *stay away from the call...*" it said. "*Whatever you do, stay away from the siren's call...*"

He cut the voice off. "That's all we could unscramble. Maybe it's all they had the chance to send. But if someone can take on a *Daedalus*-class cruiser and make it vanish into thin air..."

"What's going to stop them from going after something more powerful?" Beaumont said, finishing the thought.

“Exactly what Starfleet was thinking, and since the *Pathfinder* is the most advanced starship humanity has ever built, we ought to make a nice, shiny lure to bring them out.” He looked over at the chrono and said, “Departure is in thirty minutes. Better make the most of it – I doubt we’ll have much time to spare once we’re underway.”

“Captain on the bridge!”

Lieutenant T’almo-za Marakis took his posting very seriously. He had been the first Andorian accepted into the first integrated Starfleet training class, and the first to graduate from Starfleet Academy’s two-year program, breezing through the curriculum just as easily as he could navigate a cargo carrier through an asteroid belt. The worst his instructors had to say about him was that, at times, he could be... overenthusiastic.

Such as when he made the traditional announcement, every time Captain Teague stepped onto the bridge. The captain grimaced inwardly; enthusiasm was one thing, but this was overdoing it. The Andorian’s announcement echoed across the crowded bridge, drowning out every other speaker, just as it had every time for the three days since Marakis had come aboard, and Teague was already tired of it. But Marakis was the best navigator in Starfleet, and this mission required the very best. “Thank you, Lieutenant,” he said as he took his seat, reminding himself to have a talk with Marakis later. A moment later, Beaumont was at his side, offering him a data slate. “Status of the ship, Commander?”

Without pause, Beaumont listed a handful of minor inconveniences – one of the decontamination pods had a jammed hatch, life support controls on part of E Deck were jammed on heat, making several rooms uncomfortably warm for most of the crew, and a few other technical problems they could solve in flight. “Engineering assures me that they’ll have everything locked down within six hours, sir. Other than that, just fit and finish work.”

“Just enough to keep the crew busy on the trip out. Thank you, Commander.” Teague let his eyes wander across the rest of the bridge crew. To his left, Ensign Sarria was checking the communications station for the umpteenth time, trying to keep her azure antennae from twitching, though whether from fear or excitement Teague could not tell; Lt. Cmdr. Andrei Kassin was at the science station, cool as ever – if he felt any anxiety, he would never let it slip.

In front of him, Teague watched as Lt. Marakis drummed an old Andorian rhythm on the navigation console. Beside him at the helm was Lt. Webb, chatting away with the navigator as though they were old friends; and to the right, Lt. Cmdr T'Vril was watching her console with that calm, almost bland dispassion that only the Vulcans were capable of. Teague knew that beneath that dispassion was one of the deadliest people he had ever met, which was why he had chosen her as *Pathfinder's* tactical officer. *My crew*, he thought, a smile pulling at the corner of his lips. "Ensign Sarria, put me on ship wide."

"Aye sir." Sarria pressed a few switches and nodded back to him.

Teague waited a moment before speaking. "All hands, this is the captain."

Throughout the *Pathfinder*, members of the crew paused in their tasks as the captain's voice surrounded them. "I know this isn't what you expected for our maiden voyage," he continued. "No fanfare, no speeches, not even a bottle of champagne for a proper christening. Only a call for help, and a duty to perform. I know you all have questions about the nature of our mission. You will all be fully briefed en route to our destination. You're all here because you're the very best our new Federation has to offer. Soon, we're going to prove that. Man your stations. Captain Teague, out." He gestured to Sarria to cut the inter-ship, then looked up at Beaumont. "How was it?"

"Concise, sir," she replied. "To the point."

"I never was good at speeches," Teague said quietly. He sat up straight and looked at the main viewscreen. "Clear all moorings. Helm, make engines ready for one-quarter impulse. Navigation, plot a direct course for Sol's gravitational boundary. I want warp as soon as we're clear."

A chorus of 'Aye, sir!' rose from around the bridge. The last connections linking the *Pathfinder* to spacedock broke away, venting small puffs of water and oxygen into space. The *Pathfinder* slowly pulled away from the dock, her impulse engines blazing brightly as they propelled the ship on its maiden voyage, maneuvering between the other docks and the regular Mars traffic until the ship emerged into open space.

At last, the U.S.S. *Pathfinder* was underway.

By the time *Pathfinder* finally made her way to the gravitational boundary – that limit where warp engines could safely engage without hazard to the vessel they were attached to – Lt. Tegan Webb had been awake almost thirty hours. Never mind the thrill of piloting Starfleet’s newest, most advanced ship – her sleep had been wrecked by her layover at the Phobos yards. Without the constant rumble of a warp powerplant lulling her to sleep she found it challenging to get a good night’s rest, even after two years groundside at Starfleet Academy. *Yet another legacy of being a Boomer*, she thought.

After docking the shuttle, Tegan had barely had time to find her assigned quarters and throw her duffel bag on the bunk before taking her station on the bridge. After so long on the ground, there was no way she would miss the chance to be at the controls for the *Pathfinder*’s maiden flight. But now, several hours later, the fatigue was catching up with her. With the ship safely cruising at Warp Six, Tegan at last made her way back to her quarters on C-Deck, wanting nothing more than to collapse into dreamless sleep.

As the door slid aside, Tegan had time to actually look at the room – and realized that instead of a single stateroom, there were two bunks.

Not that Tegan had anything against roommates – privacy was a precious commodity on any deep space ship, and she had spent all her life surrounded by family and crewmates, often in uncomfortably cramped conditions. For her last year at the Academy she had been paired with a Vulcan botanist, and over time she had become more of a slob just to see if she could get a reaction. However, she had been looking forward to taking a moment for herself, at long last, on a ship she could consider her own. This was not what she had been hoping for.

Even worse was the complete order of her roommate’s possessions. Everything Tegan owned was currently in her duffel or on her person, but given a little time those meager items would spread out all over her quarters. She had never cared much for tidiness. But, if first impressions were anything to go by, her new roommate was just the opposite – the bunk neatly made, a handful of knickknacks spaced precisely on the shelves, a dozen books arranged from smallest to largest, a single data slate in the center of the desk. Every surface was depressingly free of dust or grime.

Tegan leaned in to look at the knickknacks. The finger-sized sculptures were translucent, various hues of green or blue, depicting various humanoid figures in martial poses, holding representations of fierce bladed weapons, each figure sprouting a pair of tiny antennae from its head. She reached out a finger...

“Don’t!”

Tegan yanked back her hand like she had been burned. “Sorry,” she said, turning toward the door to face her new roommate. “I wasn’t planning to break them.”

In the doorway, a young Andorian woman stood with her antennae twitching. “Just... don’t touch those. Ma’am,” she said, seeing Tegan’s rank pins for the first time. Instantly her expression changed to wide-eyed surprise mixed with horror at raising her voice to a superior officer. “They’re very... they’re valuable,” she finished.

“I’ll bet. Representations of your ancestors, right? They’re lovely.”

“My grandfather carved them. He was a gifted craftsman with a blade, whether working in stone or flesh.” The Andorian took a quick look and, satisfied that nothing had been disturbed, extended a hand to Tegan. “Ensign Sarria’tathal Etana,” she said formally. “Communications Officer.”

“Oh, yeah – I saw you on the bridge. Lieutenant Tegan Webb, Chief Helmsman,” she replied, accepting the gesture. “Look, I didn’t mean to intrude. I was just curious.”

“That’s... fine, ma’am. No harm done. Just ask me next time,” Sarria said.

Tegan turned to her bunk and picked up the duffel, and the clink of a dozen currencies filled the cabin.

“What’s that?” Sarria said, looking over her shoulder.

“Nothing much,” Tegan said, smiling to herself. “You have your keepsakes... I have mine.”

USS *Pathfinder*

en route to Sector Nineteen

May 7, 2163

Pathfinder's designers had tried a new approach to a space for crew briefings. Instead of an open 'situation room' set just behind the bridge like in the NX-class, they had created a completely separate room at the rear of A-Deck, complete with a large table, chairs instead of stools, and even a pair of viewports that offered a spectacular view of the ship, all the way from the center of the saucer aft, to the tips of the nacelles. Captain Teague stood there, sipping at a mug of coffee, looking out at his ship from this vantage point for the first time, but certainly not the last.

The ship had been outbound for almost a full day – enough time for Teague's senior officers to size up their responsibilities and delegate any necessary tasks to their subordinates. Only one thing remained – the most important thing.

Telling the crew exactly what the mission was.

Over the next few minutes, the senior staff found their way to the chairs evenly spaced around the table, most bearing their own morning beverage of choice. Teague's nose wrinkled at the sour aroma of Andorian r'reghla that Lt. Marakis carried, but he hid the expression before anyone caught the reflection. He kept his face turned toward the stars passing by, occasionally nodding in reply to someone telling him 'good morning'. The last one to enter was a tall, dark-skinned human with close-cropped black hair. Teague saw his silent nod reflected in the transparent aluminum of the viewport, and only then did he turn around to look at his friend.

Lt. Cmdr. Tarik Amara took a seat at the far end of the table, his customary spot no matter what ship he and Teague served on together. Amara had been his chief engineer on the *Icarus* during the Battle of Hell's Gate, had saved the ship half a dozen times during the Romulan War. For nearly five years Teague and Amara had served together, in war and now peace, each a natural balance for the other. Where Teague was a military man from a long line of such, Amara was an explorer and scientist who happened to specialize in subspace dynamics./ He also had an affinity for understanding what a starship was capable of – and squeezing it for every last drop of that potential. Starfleet had tried to reassign Amara twice, and both times Teague had called in favors to keep his friend close. In a way he felt Amara to be his good luck charm, though he could never admit it openly.

Around the table were T'Vril, Kassin and Beaumont on his right; Sarria, Webb and Marakis sat on his left, along with the ship's doctor, a Tellarite named Ranik. Teague waited for the idle chatter to die down before he spoke. "I know you're all curious as to why we departed spacedock in such a hurry," he began, taking his seat. "For the time being, what I'm about to share with you does not leave this room. All information will be shared on a need-to-know basis. Am I understood?"

He pressed a button on the small control pad set into the table and the overhead lights dimmed. Behind him, the wall-screen lit up with an image of a sector of space divided by grid lines. "This is Sector Nineteen, recently opened for colonization by the Federation Colonial Authority," Teague said. "The region contains a multitude of star systems with terrestrial bodies, half a dozen of which are suitable for habitation by various Federation member species. A dozen more are already in the preliminary stages of terraforming to render them likewise. Add to that an abundance of raw materials, and you have an ideal zone for expansion."

"Or the Wild West," Amara said. "A lawless new frontier. Somebody could do a lot of damage."

"That's why the Federation dispatched a dozen ships to patrol the sector, to establish secure trading routes and ensure the safety of the colonists, both before and after reaching their destinations. The Federation intends for this to be our first unified effort at expanding our boundaries."

Lt. Webb whistled. "That's a lot of traffic going into the sector. Anybody with a ship that can make Warp Three will be trying to get a piece of this."

"They already are, Lieutenant. There are three colony fleets already bound this way, with twice as many getting prepared. And that doesn't even count the corporate concerns – the mining companies, the merchant fleets, the independents. This is the first test of if Starfleet can keep the peace."

Teague pressed another button, and several red dots appeared. "Over the past five months, seventeen deep space vessels have disappeared from or very near to Sector Nineteen. Not a single one broadcast any sign of trouble beforehand – they all just vanished."

"What about debris or lifepods?" Kassin said. "Surely there was some trace."

“Not a one. Of course, by the time the transports were declared overdue and search vessels sent out, any energy traces had dissipated. But one would have expected to find some sign of hostilities – vaporized duranium, traces of fusion weaponry. Like I said, not a trace.”

“Could be pirates,” Beaumont offered. “The Nausicaans keep having problems with their people going rogue.”

“None of the cargo has turned up anywhere close enough to make it worth their while. Besides, pirates wouldn’t be so brazen with what happened next. Three days ago, the *Roosevelt* broadcast a distress call from here.” Teague pressed a switch, and a larger red light appeared and began blinking. “A *T’Raal*-class cruiser was less than six hours away, but by the time they arrived the *Roosevelt* was gone – vanished, like all the others. But this wasn’t a civilian transport, this was a state-of-the-art *Daedalus*-class cruiser. This was a direct assault on Starfleet.”

“Which would explain why Starfleet is reactivating the Defense Fleet,” T’Vril said, sharing a look with Beaumont. “They believe someone may be attempting to trigger another war.”

Teague nodded. “And war is the last thing the Federation needs. Half the members still don’t trust the other half,” he said, looking from T’Vril to Marakis, fully aware of the lingering distrust between the Vulcans and Andorians that was unlikely to fade anytime soon. “A war could tear it apart before it gets the chance to take root. We don’t even know who’s behind this – it could be anybody at this point. Or it might be something else altogether.”

“So what can a single ship do?” Sarria said quietly, then flushed almost purple when she realized she had spoken aloud. “I – I’m sorry, sir. I didn’t...”

“It’s all right, Ensign. It’s a valid question,” Teague said. “We’re Starfleet’s newest, most advanced ship, bound for hostile territory. We’ve got no escort, no fleet, no backup. We’ll be days away from any kind of support. In short, we’re on our own.”

At the far end of the table, Amara smiled, realizing what Teague had in mind. “You wily cuss,” he murmured.

Expressions of confusion settled on every face but Teague’s and Amara’s. “I’m sorry, Commander?” Beaumont said.

Teague shared his friend's grin. "He's already guessed what I have in mind. That's okay, he's got an unfair advantage – years of experience," Teague explained. "Go on, then. Tell them."

Amara sighed. "We're the bait."

All eyes in the briefing room turned away from Amara and back to Teague. Beaumont clamped her mouth closed, trying not to utter the words '*That's insane*' out loud, and by the looks on the other officers' faces they were all sharing the same thought.

"Indeed we are, but I have no intention of getting caught in a trap," Teague said.

He tapped a few keys and the briefing room filled with the distorted warble of a man's voice, heavily distorted by static. "... stay away from the call," the voice said, and for the second time Beaumont felt a chill. "Whatever you do, stay away from the siren's call..." The voice was obliterated by noise, and Teague cut the playback, leaving the room in silence. "That was the last transmission received from the *Roosevelt*," he said. "Voice-print analysis has determined the speaker to Commander Alvin Williston, the *Roosevelt's* chief engineer. As for what it could mean..."

Teague's voice trailed off as he tapped another button, and the wall-screen display changed to a waveform analysis of a subspace signal. "Starfleet cryptanalysts managed to detect a second subspace signal in the background of this transmission, some kind of bleed-through from the original. They think it may be related to the disappearances."

"A weapon of some kind?" T'Vril said.

"They're not sure. Nobody seems to have seen anything like it before." Teague gestured toward Kassin. "I want you and Commander Beaumont to process this signal through every filter you can think of. Pick it apart. Starfleet will update us with any progress they make, but..."

"It may come too late," Amara finished. "If at all."

Teague nodded. "That's why I want all divisions running combat and damage control drills. Commander T'Vril will coordinate. We're six days from the *Roosevelt's* last

known location. By the time we arrive, I want this crew ready to deal with whatever we might encounter. Make it happen. Dismissed.”

The senior officers quickly departed, leaving Teague alone – save one. Amara remained seated, his arms folded across his chest, lips pressed together. Finally he said, “I don’t like this. Feels like some stunt you’d pull back on the front lines.”

“Don’t hold back, Rik,” Teague said, standing up and returning to the viewport. “Why don’t you tell me how you really feel?”

“It’s not funny, Lorrie,” Amara said, mildly annoyed with his old friend’s gentle teasing. “The war’s over, remember? We won. What’s the point in sacrificing our lives...”

“Potentially.”

“...*potentially* sacrificing the lives of this crew, to say nothing of Starfleet’s most advanced starship?” Amara shook his head. “We’re part of the largest fleet ever assembled. We have the means to get more ships out here, to make a proper search for whoever – or whatever – is behind this.”

“Which would take days to coordinate and weeks to actually arrive,” Teague replied. “Starfleet is already assembling a task force, but pulling a dozen front-line ships from their regular patrols will leave extensive gaps – and that just might be the true goal of whoever is responsible for these disappearances. We can’t take that risk, not now.”

“You’re worried about public opinion shifting against colonizing the sector,” Amara said.

“It’s bigger than that. The Federation is putting its future on the line here. If Starfleet can’t even protect a handful of merchant ships in a relatively small region, who’s going to believe we can protect the entire Federation?” Teague leaned forward and rested his hands on the table, looking straight at Amara. “Faith in the Federation is tenuous enough. People on all sides are just looking for a reason to back out. I won’t give them that, not after everything we’ve had to endure.”

“Even if it means we have to die,” Amara said grimly.

Teague looked away and stared out the viewport at the stars streaking past. “Let’s make sure it doesn’t come to that.”

USS Pathfinder

en route to Sector Nineteen

May 10, 2163

Lt. Cmdr. Andrei Kassin, science officer of the *USS Pathfinder*, leaned back from the table and rubbed his eyes. “This,” he announced, “is a mess.”

For the past three days, he and Commander Beaumont had been in the main Science Lab, breaking down the last signal received from the *Roosevelt*. They had tried to separate the signal into the main transmission sent by the *Roosevelt*, the natural noise of subspace, and another signal that was so powerful it has bled through onto the *Roosevelt* distress call – which was the one they wanted to isolate. Their quarry was slippery though, and every time they seemed to close in the computer rejected another chunk of it as noise, forcing them to start all over. Worst of all was the nagging feeling that he had seen this signal before, a maddening feeling when he couldn’t even separate it from the noise in the first place. On the table screen, bits of the signal flashed blue and vanished as the computer determined them to be part of the noise. “It’ll take weeks for the computer to sort this out,” he continued.

Reluctantly, Beaumont nodded. Her cortical coprocessor was efficiently working through the data, but just didn’t have the power to analyze it as a whole. All it could do was provide her with a tiny fragment at a time, which was even less helpful than the main computer’s output. “Maybe Starfleet is having better luck. Our systems just weren’t designed to perform deep-level subspace analysis.”

In one corner of the table screen, the computer was still processing the verbal component of the *Roosevelt* signal bit-by-bit, and had reconstructed an almost crystal-clear playback. Kassin thumped a switch and cut the quiet words off – listening over and over to the last words of a vanished ship was worse than useless, it was a distraction when they could least afford it. Besides, their target wasn’t there – it was buried deeper, somewhere in the noise. “This signal degradation is severe,” Kassin said. “Must have traveled several light-years before the repeater picked it up.”

Subspace repeater stations were springing up all across the Federation, mostly along well-traveled routes but quickly spreading into the more remote areas. Their purpose was to pick up subspace broadcasts, amplify them, and send them along to the next repeater, ensuring a minimal loss of quality over vast distances. Many ships – and all Starfleet ships – had their subspace transmitters automatically locate and connect with the nearest repeater as they came into range, eliminating the need to try and locate one during an emergency.

Beaumont frowned and brought up a graphic of the area where the *Roosevelt* had vanished. Several dots were flashing blue, each one representing the location of a subspace repeater station. The nearest one to the *Roosevelt*'s last known location was barely half a light year distant. "Why would the signal not have been sent to the nearest repeater?" she said.

Kassin brought up the signal log, which contained the record of every system that particular signal had encountered. "First repeater contact was here," he said, isolating a repeater six light years from the *Roosevelt*'s last location – and which was almost the opposite direction from the closest repeater. "That doesn't make sense – someone would have had to override the system and choose that repeater manually. They would have known they'd lose signal coherence over that distance."

"Maybe they weren't worried about the coherence," Beaumont said. Her fingers flew over the controls, and a handful of white dots appeared. "These are all the star systems within a quarter of a light-year of the transmission path from the *Roosevelt* to the repeater."

Kassin brought up the details of each of the three star systems. "Not much there," he said. "These two have no habitable planets, and the third, Tau Delta, only has one – and it can hardly be considered habitable."

Beaumont brought up the details in her mind, the data flowing from the ship to her implant to her brain over a low-strength subspace signal. Tau Delta IV was habitable only by the barest of margins – the planet had an axial tilt of forty degrees and wobbled back and forth almost randomly, creating seasonal variations of some two hundred degrees between summer and winter average temperatures. That alone had made it unsuitable for any terraforming effort, and the lack of any noteworthy natural materials had left the system of no interest to anyone – except someone who didn't want to be found. "I don't think they were worried about the words," she

said. “The transmission was a pointer, a guide. It showed the direction the *Roosevelt* wanted us to go.” She pointed at the Tau Delta system. “That’s where they came from.”

“Pretty thin logic, Commander,” Kassin said. “Whoever overrode the signal could have been impaired, or under duress. The *Roosevelt*’s transmitter could have been damaged. Even if an attacker came at the *Roosevelt* from that bearing, that doesn’t mean they came from that system. I could come up with a dozen other reasons to explain what happened.”

“We’ll be at the *Roosevelt*’s last coordinates in three days,” Beaumont said. “I doubt we’ll find anything more than the Vulcan cruiser did, not after so long. I’m open to ideas for some other direction to search – unless you want to sit and wait for another attack, maybe on us this time?”

Kassin opened his mouth, then closed it again without offering his thoughts. “I’ll... keep working on it. Ma’am.”

“Good.” Beaumont stood and stretched, her neck aching from leaning over the table screen for so long without a break. “I need to stretch my legs. Want anything from the galley?”

“Just more coffee,” Kassin said, pointing at the empty carafe in the corner. Beaumont nodded and stepped out into the corridor, leaving Kassin alone in the lab. As soon as she was gone, he frowned and touched the console, bringing the signal analysis back to dominate the table screen. He gazed at the peaks and valleys of the signal, seeing the echoes of smooth curves that the computer had not recognized buried beneath the noise...

“Achilles,” he murmured.

USS Pathfinder
Sector Nineteen
May 13, 2163

“Dropping out of warp... now.”

The *Pathfinder*'s engines powered down and the warp field dissipated quickly, dropping the ship to below the speed of light. On the bridge all eyes were fixed on their stations, scrutinizing the readouts for any signs of the enemy – whoever, or whatever, it might be.

Just as predicted, nothing more had been found at the last known location of the *Roosevelt*. Whatever particle trails that might have been left behind by weapons fire or engine emissions had long since dissipated, and the only debris was normal interstellar dust no larger than grains of sand. *Pathfinder* had lingered for barely an hour before setting course for the Tau Delta system.

Commander Beaumont stood beside T'Vril at the tactical station, watching the details of the star system resolve on the screen. Tau Delta was class-K, older and cooler than Sol, with six planets. The three innermost were small, airless rocks, the outer two were gas giants each larger than Jupiter, and the last – the fourth planet – was just barely habitable. Scattered between the orbits of the gas giants was a patchy asteroid belt which spread wider with each pass of either planet. Ultimately the entire belt would vanish, either consumed by the gravity of the giant worlds or flung out of the star system altogether, but that fate was billions of years distant.

Today, all that mattered was that something could be concealed among those rocks.

T'Vril flipped a switch on her console. "Beginning tactical scan," she said. From the pod slung beneath the saucer hull, invisible beams sprang forward, looking for anything out of the ordinary – significant masses of refined materials, or high-output energy sources that could be antimatter or fusion powerplants. For several minutes the beams swept the system, until at last the console emitted a muted beep. "No indications of enemy presence, sir," T'Vril said at last.

"Doesn't mean they aren't here," Teague said. "Lt. Marakis, plot a course that takes within detailed scan range of the gas giants and then to the fourth planet. Lt. Webb, make our speed one-half impulse. Nice and leisurely."

"Aye, sir," Webb replied, setting the controls. At that speed, it would take the *Pathfinder* the better part of a day to make orbit.

Teague looked over at T'Vril. "Commander, suspend active scans. Passive only."

"Sir?" Beaumont said.

“Let’s make it look like we’re sightseers,” Teague explained. “Just out on a normal sweep, straight out of the manual. Let’s make whoever might be watching us think they have us right where they want us.” He leaned forward, eyes fixed on the main viewscreen.

Kassin was peering into the sensor hood. “No obvious signs of habitation,” he said. “No EM emissions of any kind except for normal background noise.”

“Very good. Webb... take us in.”

Slowly the *Pathfinder* made her way toward the inner system, easing past the outermost gas giant before angling toward the next planet in. A million kilometers from Tau Delta V, Kassin’s console chirped. “Contact, sir.” He leaned closer to the hood, concentrating on the trace.

“Source?”

“In stable orbit around the fifth planet,” Kassin replied. He relayed his findings to the main viewscreen. “I’m reading multiple contacts of significant mass, but no traces of power. Readings indicate the ships are pretty much stripped to the frames.”

Tegan shivered as she saw how the ships were arranged. “It’s a boneyard,” she said.

“Lieutenant?” T’Vril said.

“It’s a typical Wrecker layout,” Webb said, referring to the unsavory individuals who made their living by stealing others’ ships – while still being used by their rightful owners. “Seize the ships, then bring them somewhere quiet and strip them to the frames. Whole ships are tough to dispose of, but parts can go through a dozen hands before anyone gets wise to the scheme.”

“What about the crews?” Beaumont said.

“Some Wreckers press them into service, others dump them off on the closest inhabitable planet. Some just leave the crew where they found the ship – in deep space.”

“I’d say we’re in the right place,” Teague said. “Tactical alert. Bring weapons and hull plating to standby. Go to active scanning – if they’re out there, I want to see them coming...”

Beaumont’s shriek filled the bridge before he could complete the sentence.

She collapsed to the deck, hands clasped to the sides of her head, the sound of her own scream lost in the cacophony raging in her consciousness. It was like a thousand overlapping shouts – gibbering, raging, terrified, all echoing through her skull at the same time, unheard by anyone else. Time seemed to distort, words dragging out as each moment became an eternity of agony.

“Commander!” Webb said as she rose from her seat, but Teague pinned her with a glare.

“At your post, Lieutenant!” Teague snapped. “Kassin, I want a full scan of the area. T’Vril, tend to the Commander.” He slapped his palm down on the comm switch built into the armrest of his seat. “Medical emergency. Medical team to the bridge.”

The gruff voice of Dr. Ranik came through the speaker. *“What kind of emergency?”*

“Commander Beaumont is having some kind of seizure.”

“We’re already on the way,” Ranik said. *“Stay out from underfoot.”*

“Understood, Doctor.”

Beaumont curled up into a ball as the screams tore at her mind, coming in waves, crashing against her thoughts over and over again...

In a pattern, she realized.

Struggling against her own misfiring neurons, Beaumont raised her head, biting back the cries still howling for escape. She looked up at T’Vril, who was kneeling beside her, and tried to speak. “H-help m-me,” she said. “Help m-me up.”

T’Vril hesitated for only a moment before looping her left arm around Beaumont’s back and under her arm, then pulled the first officer to her feet. Beaumont staggered to the tactical console, gripping the edge of the screen with her left hand

while she stabbed at the controls with her right.

“Commander Beaumont, what are you doing?” Teague said, pulling his attention away from the potential ambush they had stumbled into.

Beaumont ignored him, focusing on the screen in front of her and the madness in her mind. She tried to focus, to strip out the static, until all she could feel was the frequency of the screams, the pulses that kept repeating. She entered a series of numbers, separating a faint signal from the local background noise, something just barely able to register on the ship’s sensors, until she had isolated an ultra-low band subspace frequency – the same one that was playing havoc with her implant. “Jam it,” she said, then fell forward, her knees going limp.

T’Vril caught her with ease and lowered her to the deck as the turbolift door slid open to admit Dr. Ranik and two medics. Over at the communications station, Sarria was looking on in shock at the situation. “Ensign!” T’Vril said. “Initiate a reciprocal signal on subspace band K! Drown out that whole band.”

Kassin was gripped with panic as Sarria snapped back to the moment and worked her console, setting the subspace transceivers to radiate a signal that drowned out the almost undetectable signal that had nearly incapacitated Beaumont. Almost instantly the screams in Beaumont’s head were gone, leaving her groggy but able to control herself.

Ranik ran a medscanner over Beaumont and studied the results before grunting. “Elevated norepinephrine levels,” he pronounced, “but no indication of neurological shock.” He turned to Teague. “It looks a false seizure, a stress response. Whatever was causing it seems to have stopped.” He turned back to Beaumont. “What happened to you?”

“I-I’m not sure. Some kind of subspace interference in the cortical processor, I think.” Beaumont shook her head, trying to clear it. “I can barely remember what happened.”

“Commander Beaumont isolated an ultra-low frequency pulse on K-band subspace, broadcasting below the calibration threshold of our sensors,” T’Vril said calmly. “The signal is no longer getting through.”

“Thank god for that,” Webb muttered, keeping her gaze fixed on the helm controls.

A shrill beep sounded from the science station. “Multiple contacts inbound! They’re coming from behind one of the moons.” Kassin said as he peered into the scanner hood, hoping that nobody had noticed how pale he had become.

T’Vril’s hands flew over the controls. “Confirmed, sir. Eight vessels on an intercept vector, closing at full impulse. I’m reading energy signatures – their weapons are charged.”

Teague turned to face the screen. “Battlestations.”

Teague’s command was clipped off by the alert klaxon echoing through every meter of the ship. Red lights blinked on as the main lights dimmed, plunging the bridge into blood-red dimness broken only by the glow of control consoles. Deep within the ship the main warp reactor increased its output, shunting its energy to the many particle and phase cannons mounted within the ship, just waiting for the command to be unleashed against a target. Plasma was diverted to the torpedo bay, charging a quartet of warheads that were soon locked into their launchers.

“Can you identify them?” Teague said.

“Sir, all contacts read as Starfleet ships. Six short-range warp fighters, one *Sigma*-class fighter carrier – and a *Daedalus*-class cruiser. Kassin turned to the captain. “It’s the *Roosevelt*.”

Teague felt a lump form in the pit of his belly. Pirates and wreckers he could probably handle alone – but this was a small armada, the two largest of which could easily stand toe-to-toe with the *Pathfinder*’s firepower... and if they had control of the *Roosevelt*...

“Marakis, plot an escape course.”

The navigator shook his head. “They’re coming in on every vector we could use. They’d be in weapons range before we could go into warp.”

So, running was not an option, nor was fighting. “Hail them,” Teague said, but Sarria was already saying “Incoming hail, Captain,” before he could finish the first word.

“Put it on screen.” Teague watched as the visual of the approaching ships was

replaced by the image of an aging starship bridge, worn by age and combat. Seated in the captain's chair was a dark-skinned man, a long black ponytail draped over his left shoulder. "This is Captain Lorcan Teague of the Federation starship *Pathfinder*," he said. "Power down your weapons and let's talk."

"Or you'll do what, exactly, Captain?" the man on the screen said. *"By my math, you're outnumbered and outgunned. Pathfinder may be the most advanced ship in Starfleet, but even the Hero of Hell's Gate can't beat these odds."*

Beaumont slowly stood, her mind clear, ignoring the protests of Dr. Ranik as he continued to scan her. She knew that voice, had listened to it for years aboard the *Fearless* during the war. On shaky legs she stepped onto the lower deck. "Hello, Isaac. It's been... a long time."

On the screen, Isaac Proudfoot – once a captain in Starfleet, former commanding officer of the UES *Fearless* – sat back, his expression guarded. *"It certainly has, Isobel,"* he said. *"I only wish this meeting could have been under... more pleasant circumstances."*

"More pleasant," Beaumont said. "Sir, what have you been doing out here? What are you trying to do, start a war?"

Proudfoot shook his head. *"Just the opposite – I'm trying to end one."* He looked at Teague. *"Captain, you have my word that neither you nor your crew will be harmed – on the condition that you send over Commander Beaumont to hear our terms for the Federation."*

"Terms? This isn't a negotiation," Teague said. He knew Proudfoot's reputation, that Proudfoot had once been among the best of Starfleet's commanders. "The Federation won't negotiate with terrorists."

"I'm aware of that. I'm no terrorist," Proudfoot said. *"I assure you, Captain, you'll see things differently after I've had the chance to explain my side. Let us beam Commander Beaumont aboard. I'll give you two minutes to think it over."* He raised a hand in a cutting motion and the screen went dim as the audio was cut.

Teague looked at Beaumont, his face creased with worry. "Commander, are you all right?"

“Seem to be, sir. Whatever it was is gone now.”

“I need to check her over down in Sickbay,” Ranik said. “There may be damage a hand scanner can’t detect.”

“I only wish we had the time,” Teague replied. “But Proudfoot has us on a tight schedule, and I don’t like the odds. Commander, we need more information about this signal – what it is, how it works. Proudfoot thinks he can get you on his side. We need him to trust you – and we can’t let him figure out how we kept his signal from incapacitating us.”

Beaumont hesitated only for a moment. “Aye, sir.”

Teague turned back to the screen and nodded to Sarria. A moment later, Proudfoot spoke. *“What’s the call, Captain?”*

“Seems we don’t have much choice,” Teague said. “We’ll send Beaumont over in a shuttlepod. She’ll be ready to go in ten minutes.”

Proudfoot smiled grimly. *“We’ll be waiting for her.”*

TO BE CONTINUED IN

“THE PRODIGAL CAPTAIN”