

Ghost Ship

by Michael Bennett©

The slender, fair-skinned woman forced herself to take regular breaths as she stood silently by her cabin door. She pulled back her shoulder length, black hair and pressed her ear against the bulkhead trim of the doorway. She remembered that the more solid the material, the better sound would travel through it. Hearing no footfalls or voices, she poised a finger over the button that would open the door. A sudden fearful shudder passed through her as she pondered what she was about to attempt. Summoning all her resolve, Doctor Elizabeth Parrington swallowed hard and depressed the button. Though she had heard the sound thousands of times, she was startled by the hiss the door made as it slid open. Clutching a black pouch as if it was a matter of life or death, she cautiously peered around the edge of the doorway in both directions. The hallway was empty.

She stepped out of the room and moved quickly toward the interdeck causeway at the end of the corridor. The causeway was a closet-sized nook that contained a triangular shaped ladder to allow emergency access between the decks of the starship in case the turbolifts were not working. Just as she reached the ladder, she heard the sound of a lift coming to a stop in a nearby turboshaft. Slinging the strap of the bag over her shoulder, she grasped the side rails of the ladder and slid downward as quickly as the ship's artificial gravity would allow. As the view of the deck disappeared, the lift doors hissed open, and she heard several boots thumping against the deck. Another surge of panic swept over her as she wondered if she had been seen.

All at once pain intruded to snap her back to her situation. The friction of her hands sliding on the rails burned as she descended, but she refused to release her grip. She knew that if she let go, the fall would result in broken bones at the very least. *I've got to make it down to the Rec Deck*, she thought. *Only a dozen meters to go. I can do this!*

The Rec Deck was what all the crew called her destination. It housed a gym with accompanying workout rooms and a small bowling alley, but it was not devoted exclusively to recreation, as its name implied. The Rec Deck was also the location for storage facilities and much of the air treatment system for the ship. A large arboretum with walking trails had become her favorite part since she had joined the crew thirteen months before. Elizabeth had been surprised to learn that a light cruiser could have such a facility. She thought that only the newer, and larger, heavy cruisers would contain such a luxurious feature. She had spent many off-duty hours along its paths enjoying her hobby of cultivating exotic plants. The walking trails were designed to give respite from the confinement of the *U.S.S. Suffolk* to the space-weary members of the crew of three hundred and seventy. Some young couples took advantage of the relative privacy of the trails for occasional amorous meetings. With the ship under Red Alert status, as it was now, she did not expect to run into anyone on the Rec Deck. Her plan depended on it.

After sliding as far as she could stand the pain, she found her footing on one of the rungs and began stepping down as quickly as she could. Her hands were burning so much that gripping the railing was becoming almost unbearable. As she continued her descent, she noticed the blood stains she was leaving on the ladder. *I wish I had my med kit, but this buoy capsule is all I could fit in the bag*, she thought. *It doesn't matter, though. There's no time to stop and tend to my hands.*

The events of the past day raced through Elizabeth's mind. First there had been the cosmic storm that had blanked out the ship sensors. Then there was the encounter with the strange spatial anomaly and the weird form of space sickness it had caused among the crew. It had taken about an hour for the symptoms to appear among the crew. As a psychiatrist, she had seen forms of space sickness before, but this variety was unique. Every affected crewmember showed symptoms of extreme paranoia. They all were convinced that some type of unseen alien invasion of the Federation was underway.

Doctor Parrington had been in sick bay with three lab technicians and Doctor Wilson, the senior medical officer, when the ship hit the anomaly. They were in the middle of an experiment testing the effects of rare forms of radiation on organic tissue and were garbed in special anti-radiation suits. Evidently the suits protected them from the effects of the anomaly, as well. When they left the lab and saw the condition of the crew, they immediately returned and began researching to find an antidote. A short time later the captain ordered the crew to destroy a merchant freighter.

After several hours of work, they believed they were finally onto a cure, so they brought in an infected crewman for treatment. The drug that Wilson had synthesized seemed to work, but in the meantime, Captain Schiver had found out what they were doing. He must have thought they were part of the alien plot because security troopers had shown up to put them under arrest. Doctor Wilson and the technicians had heroically delayed them so Elizabeth could escape with the data files and a buoy capsule. With all communications being controlled from the Bridge, they realized there would not be a way for them to make a transmission from the ship to alert Star Fleet about what had happened. Their only recourse was to put the data into a space buoy and jettison it from the ship.

As Elizabeth made her way through the passages on the Rec Deck, Doctor Wilson's last words before she fled Sick Bay kept coming to mind, "Elizabeth, you must find a way to jettison that buoy and hope Star Fleet gets the message. There's no telling what Captain Schiver and the crew might do with the *Suffolk*." They knew that even a light cruiser could wreak havoc on other freighters and even unsuspecting planetary systems.

She finally reached the Recreation Deck and stepped quietly from the inter-deck alcove. Holding her breath for a moment, she listened for sounds of any crew members who might be present, but the only thing she heard was the usual rhythmic hum of the ship. *So far, so good*, she thought as she exhaled with relief. She wiped the perspiration from her forehead and brushed back her hair using the back of one of her chafed hands. Looking down the hallway from her position in the causeway, she spied her objective about twenty meters away. She glanced around as she walked quickly toward a gray, double-width door. When she had almost reached the door, a voice called out from far down the corridor. "Doctor Parrington, stop! There's no place to go. Don't make us shoot!"

She instinctively froze in her tracks. *What should I do? I wasn't trained for this kind of thing. But, I have to get into that room!* She made up her mind instantly. Without turning to face the oncoming security team, she sprang forward. The doors slid open quickly to reveal a shadowy room beyond. Elizabeth leaped headlong through the doorway, arms and satchel outstretched. At that instant, the high-pitched whine of a phaser sounded behind her. She hit the floor and did a shoulder roll, turning and rising into a squatting position. A second phaser blast hit the edge of the doorframe and scattered sparks over the floor just as the doors slid closed. She heard boots pounding louder beyond the closed doors as she spied the control panel on the wall. The doctor sprang up quickly and punched the button to engage the locking

mechanism. She knew it would not hold for long against their determined effort, but she hoped it would last long enough to give her the time to accomplish what she had come there to do.

Turning back around, she caught her breath as her eyes quickly scanned the room. The lights had come to full intensity, and she could see several tables with stacks of folded uniforms on them. Large carts held disheveled piles of colorful, but crumpled shirts, pants, and skirts. She also took in the large laundry machines lining both side walls, but she focused on her objective at the far end of the room. Swerving rapidly around the tables, she rushed forward until she reached a small red hatch imprinted with the words “Emergency Disposal.” A loud voice came from the hallway shouting something about an override control. She opened the crimson hatch and drew back the flap of the pouch she was carrying. From the bag she pulled out a black cylindrical container and placed it into the disposal chamber. Then she pressed a button on the container. *Power on*, she said to herself. Her fingers flew over the buttons on the cylinder’s keypad as she set a time delay for its transmitter. She finished with the settings and closed the hatch. Next, she quickly examined the disposal control panel and found the command sequence needed to jettison the buoy. A few key presses later and she was rewarded for her effort by the sound of air rushing out of the disposal chamber into the vacuum beyond. Through a small window she could see the buoy tumbling end over end out of the chamber. She watched as the outer door of the disposal chute closed and the buoy disappeared into blackness beyond the ship. The task completed, she let out a sigh of relief and all at once seemed to lose her vigor. Reaching for one of the neatly pressed uniforms, she sank to the floor and cuddled her bleeding hands in the soft fabric.

Moments later the double doors slid open and two red-faced security guards thrust their way into the laundry room. Seeing that she was unarmed and slouched on the floor against the wall, they lowered their hand phasers and approached. A young lieutenant followed them into the room. “Doctor,” he said with a condescending tone, “you’ve led us on a merry chase, but now the jig is up. My men will accompany you to a more suitable location.” Then to the two guards he barked, “Take her to the brig!”

Captain Rick McManus clicked a button on the right arm of his command chair. “Addendum to the Captain’s log. We continue to search for the *U.S.S. Suffolk* and the freighter that disappeared in this sector five days ago. So far, we have found no trace of either vessel. The search of the area where the *Suffolk* last reported is complete, so we are proceeding to the sector where the freighter’s transponder signal was lost.”

The captain thumbed the button again to end the log entry and a yeoman approached with a report for his inspection. After glancing at the document, he initialed the tablet screen with a stylus and handed it back to her. Looking at the young brunette to whom he had handed the tablet, his steel gray eyes narrowed slightly as he tried to remember her name. “Yeoman Jackson, isn’t it?”

“Jones, sir,” she replied, flashing a cute smile. “I came onboard at Starbase Seven.” She turned away and headed toward the turbolift, tossing her long hair to the side in the process. McManus looked back toward the front of the bridge in time to notice the gazes of the helmsman and navigator following her every movement. He cleared his throat loudly as he ran his hand through his brown hair lined with streaks of gray and the two young men

snapped around quickly to attend to their consoles.

I'm old enough to be her father, McManus thought, *And I may have to act like her father to keep these wolves away from her.*

The turbolift doors swished open and the yeoman started to exit the bridge, but quickly stepped aside to allow a tall, sandy-haired officer to exit the lift. Seeing the yeoman step back to allow him to pass, Alex Hampton quickly moved to block the doors from closing and motioned for her to enter the elevator. "After you, Miss."

She was somewhat amused at the old-fashioned manner of this officer, but when she saw his sleeves' double braid that indicated his rank of commander, her smile disappeared, and she stepped briskly past him into the lift. "Thank you, Sir," she replied. He lowered his head in a slight bow and then stepped onto the Bridge, allowing the silvery doors to slide shut. Hampton moved to a vacant station where he settled into a chair and began calling up various status reports for examination. Satisfied with what he saw, he rose and stepped down into the central area of the bridge next to the captain's chair.

"Find everything to your liking, Commander Hampton?" McManus asked. "Things are ship-shape on the *Yorktown*, Sar," Hampton drawled in reply.

McManus swiveled to face the officer and said with a wry grin, "Well of course everything is ship-shape, Commander. The *U.S.S. Yorktown* has a top-notch first officer who sees to these things. You're a credit to your Citadel training on Earth."

Hampton's business-like expression betrayed a slight smile as he turned his eyes from the main view screen to his captain. Just as quickly, the smile disappeared and he pleaded in a hushed tone, "Please, Sar, that ceremony at Starbase Seven was bad enough."

McManus studied his XO as he recalled the ceremony. "Well," he lowered his voice in reply as he leaned closer, "*you* were the one who salvaged that near hopeless mission on Kratulla Three. It wasn't my fault they decided to give you a commendation."

Alex Hampton had served as first officer on one of the older Texas-class light cruisers for two years before being transferred to McManus's newer ship. As XO of *Yorktown*, he had honed his abilities on one of Star Fleet's latest model capital ships through the second half of the war with the Kzintis and the months since. At just over six feet, two inches in height and thirty-eight years of age, he presented the image of a finely trimmed command-grade officer. He was personable and well-liked by the crew but was all business when it came to ship readiness. The recent Kratulla mission brought to light his command ability under desperate conditions and Star Fleet Command had taken note. All he needed was a vacant captaincy and he would have a starship command of his own. *He's the right age for it,* McManus thought. *Thirty-eight. He has the best part of his career ahead of him. He'll have plenty of missions to command, plenty of ways to make a difference.*

"Cap'n, you've received lots of commendations and honors. How did you learn to put up with it?"

McManus shifted in the chair and thought quickly about his own twenty-plus years in the space service. Yes, he had received his share of awards and commendations. He had served as the only captain of the *Yorktown* for the several years since its inaugural launch as one of Star Fleet's newest Constitution-class heavy cruisers. He had previously served or commanded on a variety of other ships and had experienced an array of the various types of missions that Star Fleet officers were familiar with. His certainly had been a full career.

"Oh, I don't know, Alex," he finally replied. "I guess when someone has been around as long as I have, you just get used to it." He paused for a moment and then looked up at

Hampton. “You’ll have to learn to get used to it, too. One day one of these chairs will be yours.”

With that, he rose and stepped aside. “As a matter of fact, why don’t you take a turn at it right now?” He light-heartedly motioned for Hampton to take his place in the chair. “I’m going to get something to eat and then drop in to see Doc Ainger.”

Dazzling yellow and orange glimmers of light shimmered all around the old cruiser, but no one could see it, no sensors could record it. Time and space had no meaning. From sentient being down to the smallest microbe, every living thing on board the starship existed in suspended animation. There were no thoughts of the past or present, no awareness of being, no knowledge of existence. The crew was like flesh and blood mannequins. Even the ship’s instruments seemed frozen in time, functioning, yet doing nothing. The ship seemed to be hanging in nothingness, a dimension void of time or space.

“Will there be anything else, Rick? I haven’t seen much of you since our stop at Starbase Seven.”

McManus shook his head negatively and then tipped the small cup to his lips to swallow the last of its contents. “Thanks for the tea, Niles,” he said as he set the cup on the table. “That was different from any of the other kinds of tea you’ve had me try.” Niles Ainger always seemed to surprise McManus with some variation of liquid refreshment.

The gaunt, older man seated on the opposite side of the small table in Sick Bay sat with a stiff, upright posture. He wore a half-sleeved blue tunic with the *Yorktown*’s familiar triangular insignia enclosing the round symbol of the Star Fleet Medical Corps. Setting his cup gently on the table he said, “Arcturian tea is not quite the same as British white tea from my homeland, but quite refreshing, nonetheless.”

McManus studied his friend for a moment. Ainger’s thinning pure white hair betrayed his age as did the deep lines in his face. *Too thin*, McManus thought. *Still, at his age, he’s in pretty good shape.* “Niles, what’s your evaluation of the crew? How are they doing?”

“I should have realized this was not a social call,” Ainger replied. He made a casual wave with his hand. “Oh, they’re as fit as a fiddle. Perhaps a little stressed, but with what we’ve been through, aren’t we all?” Ainger rose from his chair, clasped his hands behind his back, and began to slowly pace back and forth across his office. “What with that business of the Aurora colony’s disappearance earlier this year, our assignment to search for survivors, and now this mysterious disappearance of the *Suffolk* and another ship, well, it may have taken its toll. Some of the crew had relatives and friends at Aurora you know.” The doctor stopped and studied his captain for a moment. “This isn’t about the crew, though, is it, old boy?”

McManus glanced up from looking at the intricate design on the antique teacup. “The Aurora colony disappeared without a trace,” he answered. “There was no sign of a battle. Star Fleet has no idea what happened. The only thing I know for sure is that I was scheduled to command an exploration mission and Aurora put an end to all of that!” McManus slammed a fist down on the table that rattled the teacups. Realizing he had let his pent-up frustration get the best of him, he offered, “Sorry,” apologetically.

Ainger's grey, piercing eyes studied him for a moment. "That's quite all right. No harm done. Rick, do you think that exploration mission was to have been your last hurrah?" the doctor probed.

The captain's eyes shot quickly toward the doctor. "I spent my career working my way up through the ranks and sacrificed having a family for a career in Star Fleet. I finally got the commission every command officer wants: the captaincy of a brand-new starship. Then the assignment came along that every captain dreams about: a five-year mission to explore the new frontier toward the galactic core." McManus was silent for a moment, and then said forlornly, "All of that is on hold now because of Aurora. It will be years before those exploration assignments are given out again, and I won't be in a captain's chair then."

The doctor waited a moment before he responded. "Surely, you're not serious. Come now, Rick. Here I am almost twenty years your senior and out here amongst the stars healing the sick and curing diseases."

"It's different with you! You're a doctor. I'm a captain. They don't keep old men in command positions on starships. I'm seeing my best days *now*. *This* is the time when I should be out there exploring where no one has gone before. Who knows how many years it might be before they give the green light for those missions? I'll be too old to captain a starship by then, at least according to Star Fleet Command."

"There are plenty of officers with white hair, Rick. Now see here, I've been in Star Fleet Medical for well over thirty years. My word, I was working my way around starship infirmaries when the Federation Council issued that infernal Border Declaration."

McManus shot a warning glance at Ainger. "Careful, Niles. That's Federation policy."

"So it is," Ainger replied with a resigned tone. "Be that as it may, one thing I've learned about Star Fleet Command is that they put great value on men of experience. You and I have served together on three different ships, and I know that you are one of the most experienced commanders in the fleet." Ainger saw that his words were offering little assurance to the captain. "Perhaps I should have served something more robust than Arcturian tea," he offered with a slight smile.

"I tried that once, Niles, and it just made things worse. Remember the shore leave after that skirmish with the Kzinti cruiser several years back? After I recovered from passing out in that bar, I decided then and there to avoid that kind of stuff." McManus stopped beside a wall monitor that showed the view outside the ship and stared into its inky depth. "I enlisted just before the war with the Klingons because I wanted to make a difference. That's what I've wanted my entire career. Everything is stagnant now. I've achieved all of my personal goals except for one. I want to command a long-term exploration mission and have that 'last hurrah' as you put it. Make new discoveries, contact new species, test new technologies. But I won't be involved in any of that now."

After a momentary silence, the doctor switched topics and asked, "How is Commander Hampton doing?"

McManus broke away from staring at the stars on the monitor. "Alex is one of the best officers I've ever had, and that includes Bob Mallory. Alex has real promise. Just between you and me, it won't be long before he is given a command just like Bob was. Hampton was considered for the *Suffolk* spot six months ago, but he wasn't ready yet." He paused and then with a sigh of resignation continued, "Maybe I've been too good of an instructor. Mallory learned the ropes and got himself promoted to a command chair. Next it will be Hampton. Who knows? Perhaps a teaching position at the academy won't be so bad after all." Seeing

the surprised look on the doctor's face, he added, "I haven't had the chance to tell you yet, Niles, but Commodore Fleming mentioned it to me back at Starbase Seven. He said there would be a vacancy on the faculty in a couple of months."

"Well, don't give up hope just..."

Suddenly the intercom interrupted the doctor with its familiar whistle and Commander Hampton's voice followed. "Cap'n McManus, sensors have picked up something you'll want to see."

"Thanks for the tea *and* the pep talk, doctor," McManus called out as he quickly disappeared through the doorway.

"Holding position at 300,000 kilometers, as ordered," Hampton reported as he rose to vacate the command chair when Captain McManus entered the bridge from the lift. "Transponder signal confirms that the other ship is the *Suffolk*."

McManus had left orders to close to tactical range if the *Suffolk* was spotted and Lieutenant Tourquise, the helmsman, had done so. The captain settled into his chair and scrutinized the other ship on the main viewing screen. Though outwardly similar to the *Yorktown*, the *Suffolk* was slightly smaller. The *Suffolk* was one of the last of the earlier model Constellation-class starships still in use by Star Fleet. Most of the others had already been retired from mainline duty to continue service in various planetary guard defense fleets or were being refitted to bring them up to the Constitution class standards. Fleet Command had not made up its collective mind as to the fate of the *Suffolk*, so it was still being used for patrol duty until it could be replaced by a newer ship.

"Lieutenant Jhot, sensor report," McManus ordered.

Seddi Jhot, the pale complexioned, dark-haired Cygnan at the science station continued peering into her viewer as she made her report. "It was very strange, Captain. We had just left the first section of the new search area when sensors picked up the *Suffolk* behind us. It was not there when we were looking for it before."

"No answer to our hails, Sir," chimed in Lieutenant Adams from the communications station. "There is a lot of local interference. Long range communication is impossible. Short range is extremely limited."

McManus took a quick glance around the bridge and saw everyone attentive to their duties. His gaze ended with his XO. As if knowing the captain was looking his direction, Hampton turned from his console and gave McManus a quick wink signaling that all departments were ready and standing by.

Confident in his ship and crew, McManus turned toward the helmsman and ordered, "Mister Tourquise, close with the *Suffolk*. Let's find out where they've been."

Duty and honor. Invaders! A captain's duty is to protect the lives of his crew. Star Fleet infiltrated! Captain Carl Schiver tried to concentrate, but a wisp of confusion seemed to prevent him from focusing. It was as if there was something he needed to remember, but it was just beyond his grasp. Seated on the bridge of the *U.S.S. Suffolk*, he fought to shake off the bewilderment and tried to concentrate on the mission. *What is the mission now?*

Everything has changed since the invasion. That's it! We have a new mission. Invaders! Protect the Federation!

Star Fleet had been infiltrated. He could not remember how he learned this, but he *knew* it to be true. His thoughts raced back to their encounter with the freighter. All communication with Star Fleet had gone dead. The small merchant ship had been under control of the alien invaders. He had given the order to attack and they had obliterated it. Then the science officer had reported that the ship chronometers were not matching with signals from Star Fleet benchmark satellites. They interpreted that as a telltale sign of alien intervention through the use of the space anomaly.

And now they were suddenly and unexpectedly facing another Star Fleet vessel that seemed to have appeared out of nowhere. Schiver had immediately ordered the crew to battle stations and was considering his alternatives as he awaited the identification confirmation of the other ship. A few moments later the science officer interrupted Schiver's thoughts, "It's the *Yorktown*, Sir."

"Comm, are they hailing us?" Schiver asked.

"Yes, Sir," was the reply. "But there is a lot of interference."

Schiver thought quickly. *They're jamming our communications with HQ.* Schiver reflected on the situation suddenly came to a stark realization. "Bridge crew, listen up. That ship is being controlled by the alien invaders. It's obvious they don't know that we aren't also under alien control, or they would've come in with phasers blasting. We can use that to our advantage, but we've got to hit them hard before they realize what's happened. Helmsman, prepare to move us forward slowly. Weapons, standby to fire phasers. Do not arm the photon torpedoes. They might detect the power drain."

As the helmsman and weapons officer completed their preparations, the first officer asked, "Won't they be ready for us, Sir? That's Captain McManus's ship. He hasn't been surprised too many times, or he wouldn't be where he is today."

Schiver turned to the XO and smirked, "No, he hasn't, but I have an ace in the hole. An old friend of mine, Alex Hampton, is his first officer and if anyone goes by the book, Alex does. That's exactly what I'm counting on." Schiver then turned to the communications officer and ordered, "Comm, raise the *Yorktown*."

Ensign Leslie Adams slowly shook her head as she continued her attempts to hail the *Suffolk*. "I don't understand, Captain. They must be receiving our messages in spite of the interference. They should have responded by now." Adams was a young ensign not long out of the Academy. McManus was confident she knew the technical side of her job, but he wasn't so sure of her ability in a crisis situation.

"Shields, Sir?" Hampton asked.

"Roger that; raise shields," McManus responded. *Alex knows his operations procedures.* With that, Hampton punched the controls to bring up the invisible protective energy shields around the ship.

Jhot spoke up. "Sir, sensors are returning unusual readings about the *Suffolk*."

McManus turned toward the science station. "Let's hear it, Lieutenant."

Jhot looked up from her console. "Parts of the hull's molecular structure are in flux." The puzzled look on the captain's face demanded more explanation. "I cannot explain it, Sir. I have never seen anything like it before, but the sensor readings are confirmed. Some of the molecules of the *Suffolk*'s hull are phasing in and out."

"Phasing in and out of *what*, Lieutenant?" the captain asked.

Peering at a monitor, she answered, "It is as if molecules are momentarily disappearing and then reappearing."

"What would cause something like that?" McManus asked.

"Unknown, Sir. I am cross-referencing with the main computer." She keyed several buttons that set the ship's computer into a search of its massive database.

"They are responding to our hail, Captain," announced Adams. "Audio only and very garbled. I'll try to clean it up and put it on speakers."

The speakers crackled with static. "This is Captain Carl Schiver of the *U.S.S. Suffolk*. Go ahead *Yorktown*." Even though the voice was audible, the static refused to go away.

McManus leaned forward in his command chair and asked, "Is the *Suffolk* in distress, Captain Schiver?" The speaker gushed a massive blast of static, and Adams quickly compensated.

"Not exactly, *Yorktown*," replied Schiver. "We have experienced something unusual." There was a pause filled with more static. Schiver continued talking, but the static rendered his words incomprehensible. "... has been contained, but there has been some damage. Things are taking a little longer to..." More static drowned out his remaining words.

So, something had happened to put the Suffolk in this condition, McManus thought. *The missing freighter may have had the same thing happen to it*. He leaned back in his chair and leisurely crossed his legs as he replied in a more relaxed tone, "Captain Schiver, we've been looking for your ship. This is Rick McManus, captain of the *Yorktown*. I haven't had the pleasure of meeting you, but my XO certainly knows you."

As the *Yorktown* had traveled from Starbase Seven, Hampton had relayed to McManus how he and Schiver had been in some of the same classes at Star Fleet Academy. It was evident to McManus that there had been more to their acquaintanceship than simply attending some classes together, but he didn't probe any deeper about it.

Schiver's voice had dropped out again because of the static, but soon he responded. "We're glad you're here, Captain McManus. Though we haven't met in person ... *static* ... feel as if I know you from reports I've read of your past ... tell your XO to watch out for those manta sharks."

McManus glanced toward his XO and saw that Hampton was smiling. No doubt the two had shared some adventure in the distant past with the deadly animals.

Schiver's voice sounded from the speaker again. "Captain Mc ... *static* ... have a request." "Go ahead Captain Schiver. What can we do for you?"

"We experienced multiple malfunctions because of a cosmic storm ... *static* ... caught us by surprise. We've even kept our shields up in case ... don't want to get caught with my pants down again. Several crew ... affected ... undermanned in sick bay and engineering. Could you beam

medical team and an engineering team to help ... get things under control?"

"Just a moment, Captain," McManus said. He motioned for Adams to cut the transmission

and then turned to the science officer. “Would the phasing that the sensors detected affect the safety of our people going over there?”

“In my opinion, no,” Jhot replied. “It is occurring only in small amounts and seems to be limited to the hull. Life sign readings from the *Suffolk* show normal.”

McManus trusted the judgment of his science officer. She had been a tremendous asset to the *Yorktown* for the two years since her transfer to his command. Coming aboard as a lieutenant in the science section, she had proven her ability time and again, finally earning a promotion to lieutenant commander and head of the science department. He had come to value her insight and advice but had always thought it ironic that she was such a good scientist, considering her planet’s social background. He had never talked to her about it but guessed that her upbringing as the niece and ward of the Cygnan ambassador at the consulate on Vulcan and then later at the embassy on Earth had influenced her a great deal. She was quite fluent in English and took her proficiency at chess very seriously.

By this time the *Yorktown* and the *Suffolk* were facing one another across a distance of a hundred thousand kilometers. McManus gave Hampton the go ahead to summon the required personnel to the transporter rooms, then signaled Adams to resume the voice link with the *Suffolk*. “That is agreeable, Captain. If you will hold station, we will come within transporter range for the transfer.”

The speaker crackled again. “Affirmative, *Yorktown*. We will be standing by for your signal ... *static* ... will lower a shield when you’re ready.”

The moments seemed to pass slowly as the *Yorktown* moved into position in front of the *Suffolk*. Adams announced that the transporter rooms had signaled that the away teams were ready to beam out, so McManus directed the engineering officer to execute the transport operation. The *Yorktown*’s forward energy shield had to be lowered first. Transporters could disassemble matter into energy, beam it several thousand kilometers, and reassemble it into its original matter pattern, but not if an energy shield blocked the process. During a situation that demanded caution, a starship’s shields were kept energized and transporter operations were not possible. The engineering officer reported that the forward shield had been lowered, and they were awaiting the *Suffolk* to lower a shield.

“Signaling them to lower their shield,” Adams announced.

Seconds passed without any response from the *Suffolk* and McManus began to grow annoyed, but Hampton was the first to speak. “Why haven’t they lowered their shield? Did they receive our message?”

Jhot reminded everyone, “Captain Schiver did say that things were taking them a bit longer to do because of the damage they had taken.”

“Captain,” Adams said, “I have located the source of the subspace interference. It’s the other ship.”

Before McManus had time to process the information, six bright beams erupted from the phaser emitters of the *Suffolk*. The phaser beams played across the *Yorktown*, causing the ship to convulse as though it was being hit by a quick succession of punches. Emergency klaxons all over the ship erupted at once. McManus was almost thrown from his seat but managed to keep his wits as he instinctively shouted orders. “Helm, hard to port and initiate evasive maneuvers! Engineer, raise that shield!” The bridge personnel quickly snapped to work in spite of being jolted by the attack. “I want damage reports, and I want to know what in blazes is going on!”

The ship suddenly lurched and the bridge engineer called out, “They’re trying to

tractor us, Sir!”

“Negative tractor! Whatever it takes!” McManus snapped back.

A moment later and they broke free of the *Suffolk*’s tractor beam with another lurch. As they began moving farther away from the pursuing *Suffolk*, the damage reports began streaming in to the bridge. Commander Hampton quickly evaluated the information and issued orders to damage control teams throughout the ship. Emergency medical teams were directed to take care of the casualties from the attack. The primary saucer section of the ship had met with moderate damage, but the cylindrical secondary hull that sported the two warp nacelles had been hit hard in several places. Power levels were down slightly. One transporter room and both tractor beams were out of commission. The biggest blow, however, was to the weapon systems. Five of the *Yorktown*’s six phaser emitters and three of the four photon torpedo launchers had been damaged. Top priority for repairs was given to the ship’s phasers. McManus examined the tactical display superimposed on the view screen and saw that they had successfully turned to bear a full-strength shield toward the other starship and they were slowly increasing their distance from it. McManus quickly realized that this meant that the *Suffolk* had probably diverted some of its power from propulsion to load its two torpedo launchers.

The *Suffolk*’s phasers shot out again, and the *Yorktown*’s starboard aft shield flared brightly as it received the concentrated phaser fire.

“That shield is all but gone, Cap’n,” Hampton relayed.

“Helm, turn to port and accelerate with all available power,” McManus ordered. Several moments passed during which Hampton announced that two phasers had been

repaired. The *Yorktown* continued increasing the distance between it and the pursuing *Suffolk*. Tourquise also managed to turn the ship enough to orient one of the port shields toward the *Suffolk* just before they received a third attack, this time with fewer phasers, but including photon torpedoes from both of the *Suffolk*’s launchers. Fortunately for the *Yorktown*, both the torpedoes missed due to the *Yorktown*’s erratic maneuvering.

“Port aft shield down to sixty percent, Sar,” Hampton announced. “No damage to the ship. Both the starboard and port phaser banks are operational now.”

“They’re out of our firing arcs,” McManus retorted, “but we still have more power than they do. Helm, match our speed to keep them from getting any closer. Weapons, start arming the one good photon launcher. Engineer, channel all available excess power into that damaged port shield and readjust it with the rear shield to bring it up to full strength. Adams, try to raise the *Suffolk*. We need some answers!”

The *Suffolk* again fired its phasers and further reduced the strength of the *Yorktown*’s shield, but the increased range and evasive maneuvers were having their effect to minimize the damage. The weapons officer reported that the photon torpedo was fully armed and one of the forward phasers was now ready for firing.

The speakers suddenly crackled to life. “So, you think you can take over this sector?” Schiver exclaimed. The *Yorktown*’s bridge crew traded confused glances with one another. “Well, this is one ship ... *static* ... get your body-stealing hands on! We’ll drive you back ... anomaly to wherever it was you came from!”

McManus erupted. “Schiver! What in blazes is going on? Why did you attack my ship?” Static was the only response.

The *Yorktown* shuddered again as it absorbed another phaser attack in the weakened

rear port shield, but this time one of the two photon torpedoes from the *Suffolk* hit as well. McManus looked toward the engineering station. "Another attack like that and they'll punch through, Captain," the engineer warned.

"Understood," McManus replied. "Helmsman, use every scrap of power to increase our range. When we are far enough ahead so we can turn to fight, I want to come about and cease evasive maneuvers. We will fire everything we have as we pass. That old cruiser doesn't have as much shielding as we have. We should be able to gain the upper hand and then find out why they attacked us."

The *Yorktown* surged ahead and left the *Suffolk* far behind, then it banked hard to come about. Both ships rushed forward toward one another and moments later phaser beams and photon torpedoes flashed from each starship at almost point-blank range. The forward shields of both ships flared brightly as they struggled to handle the energy unleashed against them. Suddenly there was an unexpected eruption of light around the *Suffolk*, and it completely disappeared. Jhot blinked incredulously at the sensor readings on her panel. Then, just as suddenly as it had disappeared, the *Suffolk* reappeared. It was now located fifty thousand kilometers behind the port side of the *Yorktown* and maintaining the same heading it had before it disappeared.

Everyone on the *Yorktown's* bridge was in wonderment at what had just happened, but Commander Hampton quickly recognized the danger of their tactical situation. "We've got to get them off our rear port shield!" he exclaimed. "It can't take another attack."

The quick eye of McManus saw the heading of the *Suffolk*, and he ordered, "Helm, tight turn to port! Bring us in behind them."

"They're also turning, Sir, trying to get behind us," responded Tourquise. The two ships had begun scribing large circular paths in space, but the *Yorktown's* course was more compact than that of the other ship with the result that it was gradually spiraling in behind the *Suffolk*.

McManus was puzzled by this because both ships had similar maneuverability. *This isn't a technical matter*, he thought. *Their crew is not performing. We've outclassed their moves every time.*

"Damage report," McManus quipped.

"Portside forward shield down to eight percent," Hampton replied. "One other phaser is out, but damage control teams are trying to get it back online. Transporter repaired. They must be targeting our weapons to keep hitting them the way they've been shooting."

"How about the *Suffolk*?" McManus directed toward Jhot.

"Their forward shield is down to less than twenty percent," she answered. "They have only taken minimal damage."

McManus frowned at hearing the damage report for the *Suffolk*. He turned to the weapons officer and asked, "Lieutenant, explain. We should have done a lot more damage than that."

Lieutenant John Morgan, the weapons officer, seemed bewildered. "I can't explain it, Sir. Our firing scanners were dead on target. We hit them with all our operable phasers and the torpedo. Their forward shield should be completely gone, and they should have substantial damage."

McManus did not like mysteries, and they were beginning to pile up. He noticed that Lieutenant Jhot was ready with a report, so he turned toward her and said curtly, "Go."

“Two things,” she said calmly. “First, there is nothing wrong with our targeting scanners. I double checked them. Second, when the flash and subsequent displacement of the *Suffolk* occurred, it momentarily disappeared from our space-time continuum.”

Just then the helmsman notified the captain that they had succeeded in getting behind the *Suffolk* and had matched its speed and course. McManus ordered the weapons officer to alert the phaser crews to stand ready. The tactical display showed that all of their operable weapons could be brought to bear on the *Suffolk*. Though they were farther away than he would have liked to have been, at fifty thousand kilometers he gave the order to fire everything at the *Suffolk*. With the *Yorktown* now behind it, the *Suffolk* had no weapons in arc to fire back.

Destructive energy from the *Yorktown* tore into the *Suffolk*'s rear shield. “Hits, Sir!” Morgan exclaimed as he watched his monitor. Then in a more subdued tone he reported, “Their rear shield is down to sixty-one percent.”

“What?” McManus barked. “That shield should be completely gone!”

Jhot spoke up. “Perhaps the phasing effect is causing our weapons to be less effective.” McManus rubbed his chin in thought. “Possibly. Helm, close to twenty thousand kilometers.” “What if they pull that disappearing act again and show up behind us?” Hampton asked. “We’ll deal with it if it happens. Right now, we have them where we want them, and we have to press our advantage.” The *Yorktown* was now right behind the other ship. “If we can maintain this position long enough, we should have time to repair another photon launcher and punch through their rear shield with a devastating strike.”

The *Suffolk* tried to turn to bring the *Yorktown* into one of its firing arcs, but Tourquise handled every attempt with ease. Soon another photon launcher was repaired, and a torpedo was being armed. Another phaser was patched up, too, bringing them back to almost full phaser combat strength. As soon as the second torpedo was fully armed, McManus ordered both of them to be loaded to overload strength. He knew that they would fall behind the *Suffolk* because of the energy required by the overloading process, but it was a small price to pay compared to the possibility of bringing down a shield and gaining access by transporter. Just as the torpedoes completed their overload arming process he ordered everything to be fired.

The *Suffolk*'s rear shield fought the onslaught of firepower as it brightened, but then it faded quickly as it was overwhelmed. Just as Jhot was about to report minor damage spread throughout the other ship, the *Suffolk* was again enveloped in a blinding flash of light and vanished. It reappeared a moment later, fifty thousand kilometers away, slightly ahead this time and off the *Yorktown*'s starboard bow.

McManus thought hard as he took it all in. The first time the *Suffolk* had pulled its disappearing trick, it wound up in a slightly better tactical position. This time, however, it was no better off. He wondered if Schiver had full control over whatever technology was allowing this to occur, if that was indeed what was causing the displacements. “Mister Tourquise, stay behind them. Keep our good starboard shield facing them.” McManus also wondered about the timing of the repositioning. *Why didn't he pull that trick out of the bag before we fired? Why wait until afterward?* These were questions he knew were unanswerable at the moment. In addition, there was the nagging problem with the weapons. *Why weren't our weapons hitting with their usual effectiveness?* Even though those photon launchers had been built by the lowest bidder on a Federation contract, he thought they were missing even more than random chance should allow at those close ranges. The phasers had also been much more ineffective. The five phasers they fired and the one good photon that hit should have dealt a

major blow to the *Suffolk*. Instead, there it was, out in front of them, with only minor damage. *Bad luck?* He didn't think so. *Jhot has to be right*, he decided. The hull phasing of the *Suffolk* was rendering the *Yorktown's* weapons less effective. They would have to take that into consideration for all future attacks.

Because of the power diverted to overload the photon torpedoes, the *Yorktown* fell behind as the *Suffolk* sped away, initiating a turn to bring it back toward the pursuing ship. "If he's got his wits about him, he'll try to get on our weak port side before he attacks again," McManus said.

"Mister Tourquise, maneuver to keep him in front of us. If we can target through his bow, he'll be vulnerable. He hasn't had time to repair that shield. Mister Morgan, be ready to fire everything we have available on my order."

As the *Suffolk* completed its turn, the *Yorktown* raced ahead to meet it. True to form, the other ship attempted to cross over to the *Yorktown's* port side to get at its weakened shields, but Tourquise maneuvered the *Yorktown* to keep it at bay. Both captains realized the best shot they would get occurred just as the ships drew to a range of ten thousand kilometers. Two photon torpedoes and three phaser beams spat out from the *Suffolk* and four phasers lashed back from the *Yorktown*, its photons not having had adequate time to fully charge for firing. Both of the *Suffolk's* torpedoes found their mark and, combined with the phaser energy, impacted the starboard front quarter shield of the *Yorktown* causing some short circuits in one of the research lab areas of the ship. The *Yorktown's* phasers produced almost the same result on the *Suffolk*, but through its forward port shield. The *Suffolk's* helmsman had been successful in keeping the *Yorktown's* weapons from targeting through their weakened forward shield. Once again there was a bright flash around the *Suffolk*, and the ship was gone. The bridge crew on the *Yorktown* watched expectantly for the other ship's reappearance, but the seconds ticked by without its return. Seconds turned into minutes and still the *Suffolk* did not materialize.

"Now this *is* peculiar," Hampton drawled.

Just when McManus thought he might have had a handle on the situation, something else unexpected had happened. Everything about this incident had been unusual, but he had to agree with his XO that the *Suffolk* not reappearing was stranger still. "Lieutenant Jhot, did they go to warp?"

"No, Sir. Sensors detect no trace of an ion trail. This disappearance seemed exactly like the two previous events."

"All stop," ordered McManus. "Keep a sharp lookout for them to reappear. Jhot, I want a long-range sensor scan for any sign of the *Suffolk*."

More time passed during which Lieutenant Jhot's long-range scan yielded nothing new. After half an hour and no sign of the *Suffolk*, McManus ordered the Red Alert to be downgraded to Yellow Alert and for the ship to resume its search of the area. By that time all the weapon systems had been patched up well enough to be operable again, the shields had been restored to full strength, and damage control teams were beginning to do more extensive repairs instead of the rushed work they had been forced to do in the heat of battle.

Ensign Adams used the lull in the action to give the captain a casualty report from Sick Bay. McManus paused for reflection upon hearing Adam's report. He had been totally focused on the engagement with the *Suffolk*, but now the human cost demanded his attention. Seventeen had been wounded, but fortunately none seriously. A few suffered broken bones, several more had burns and bruises. Doctor Ainger had everything under control and was

doing his usual excellent work in Sick Bay. Adams also reported that the subspace radio interference had cleared up now that the *Suffolk* was gone.

Spacecraft wreckage was detected three hours later and the *Yorktown* altered course to examine it. The remnants of the missing freighter and part of a cargo container floated a few hundred meters apart in space, but more importantly, a log buoy emitting a very weak locator signal was discovered. The buoy was brought onboard the *Yorktown* and turned out not to be from the missing freighter but was the one set adrift by Elizabeth Parrington from the *Suffolk*. The chief engineer was given the job of examining its contents and discovered that the buoy contained medical files, so he summoned Doctor Ainger. After both of them had gone through the files, they reported to the captain. He called a senior staff meeting in the briefing room, leaving Commander Hampton in command on the bridge.

Niles Ainger had met Elizabeth Parrington once at a medical conference and had been impressed with her ability and contagious enthusiasm. The buoy revealed that the *Suffolk* had encountered a freak interspatial anomaly in the middle of a cosmic storm. Within a short time of that incident, the crew began experiencing extreme paranoid behavior. Some of the medical staff were able to synthesize a test dosage of a drug to counteract the paranoia, but they were herded into the brig before being able to use it. Parrington was able to evade capture until she could eject the buoy from the ship. After the briefing was finished, McManus had questions.

“Niles, what do you think of their antidote? Will it work? And how can we disseminate it to their crew?”

“From the data she included, it seems as if it should work,” Doctor Ainger replied. “It would depress the nervous system and render the crew compliant. We can synthesize as much of it as we need, and it would be a simple matter of getting them to breathe it to make it work. It is a nonpolar compound and would vaporize quickly.”

“What about the automatic defenses in the life support system to prevent harmful gases from being circulated through the ventilators?” the captain asked.

“Oh, the internal sensors won’t recognize this as a harmful gas,” the doctor responded. “Anyone can breathe it with no ill effects.”

McManus had asked Lieutenant Jhot to analyze the data from the displacement events that occurred to the *Suffolk*, and she matter-of-factly explained that large amounts of energy discharge against the *Suffolk* were the cause. There was a high probability of a displacement occurring whenever large amounts of weapons energy was unleashed against the *Suffolk*, but the specific results seemed to be randomized to some extent. The first two displacements were very short, but the last one was triggered by the greater amount of energy that the *Yorktown* had used in its last attack. She concluded that there was no way to predict how long it would be until the *Suffolk* would reappear.

The captain had also assigned Ensign Adams to work with the chief communications officer to find a way to clear the static that had caused so much trouble. With Jhot’s data about the interphasic shifting, they were able to fine tune the equipment to compensate. This accomplishment had the added bonus of being useful to the transporter chief. He used the same modifications to make sure the transporters would be able to beam people to the *Suffolk* with no trouble.

McManus quickly settled upon a plan and rehearsed it with the staff. “If and when

the *Suffolk* reappears, we will do just enough damage to punch through a shield, even if that means several repeated attacks with limited numbers of weapons. I do not want to trigger another displacement. If there are any shields not brought back up to full strength, we will aim for one of those. When a shield is penetrated, two engineers will beam over with as many squads of Marines as possible, gain access to the air circulation system in a sparsely crewed part of the ship, and dispense the drug in aerosol form through the ventilation system. After the crew is neutralized, we'll take control of the ship."

Alex Hampton was continuing to listen to the briefing from the bridge and thumbed the transmit switch. "Sar, I'd like to volunteer to go in place of one of the engineers. I served two years as XO of a ship like the *Suffolk*. I know exactly where we can flush the gas into the ventilators on deck eight. I know the layout. I was trained as an engineer. And Carl Shiver is an old friend."

McManus didn't want to send his protégé on a mission like this, but he couldn't deny the logic of it. "Okay, Alex. Call Lieutenant Commander Stiles to the bridge to take your place while you coordinate with Marine Major Kranz. Pick an engineer to assist you." Then to everyone in the briefing room, the captain said, "Our challenge is two-fold: to limit the weapons energy we discharge on the *Suffolk*, and to withstand point-blank attacks from them while we wait for the boarding parties to get control of the ship. Dismissed."

After dismissing the meeting so the department heads could begin preparing for the task ahead, McManus went to his quarters. From there, he had Ensign Adams open a secure subspace channel to the sector headquarters. In the ensuing fifteen minutes he relayed to the HQ Commodore a summary of what had taken place and his proposal for further action. The commodore listened intently and, after asking a few questions, gave approval for McManus to go ahead with his plan. All Star Fleet Command would be able to do would be to transmit alerts to all shipping companies in the sector and order them to stay clear of the area. The commodore made clear that there would be no additional ships dispatched to render assistance to the *Yorktown*. The only ships in range were either days away or too small to be of any help against a ship the size of the *Suffolk*. More importantly, the *Suffolk* had become a threat to Federation interests, and it had to be neutralized. Star Fleet wanted the crew and the ship back, but if that was not possible, McManus was to use any means necessary to eliminate the threat.

Upon arrival back on the bridge, McManus waited until all departments and sections had reported that they were ready for action and then made a ship-wide announcement. "This is the captain. Our mission has changed from one of investigation to one of search and rescue. What each one of us does will affect not only our ship and crew, but the crew of the *Suffolk* as well. You have all been briefed by your section chiefs and department heads. You know that what the crew of the *Suffolk* has done was out of their control. They are still Star Fleet personnel. Now I must tell you what you have not yet been told. Our orders are to rescue them if possible, but our overriding directive is to neutralize the threat that the *Suffolk* poses to shipping and Federation installations. I don't need to tell you what that might mean. Captain McManus, out."

Over the next fourteen hours and two shift changes, the *Yorktown* plied the area as it searched once again for the *Suffolk*. The Alpha watch was ensconced at their stations on the bridge when Lieutenant Jhot unexpectedly announced, "I am detecting a ship entering the

area.”

“The *Suffolk*?” McManus asked hopefully as he sat up from a casual position in his command chair.

“No, Sir,” Lieutenant Jhot replied. “It is a freighter.”

Commander Hampton called to the comm officer, “Lieutenant, hail that freighter and wave it off. Tell them this is a restricted area. Lieutenant Jhot, identify the transponder signal.”

“Yes, Sir,” Adams replied, and then went about the task of sending the dispatch to the freighter. “Unidentified freighter, this is the *U.S.S. Yorktown*. You are entering a restricted area at your peril. Reverse course immediately. Respond.” Once recorded, the message would be sent repeatedly until the freighter responded, but the freighter did not answer.

It took Jhot just a few moments to identify the freighter. “It is a small freighter named *Woven Wreath*. It is owned by the Stellar Shipping Corporation. It has a crew of twenty and its master goes by the name, Trave Jex.”

“Get him onscreen. I want face-to-face,” McManus ordered. He was clearly irritated by the freighter’s lack of acknowledgement of the warning being sent. “Helmsman, intercept that ship and take up a position directly in front of it.” *I don’t need another complication to this scenario*, he thought.

The view of space on the main screen was replaced by a view of the control center of the freighter. In the background of the dimly lighted room could be seen stained cups and soiled napkins on control panels. From the looks of the equipment, the freighter had not had an overhaul in a long time. Everything appeared to be unkempt, outdated, and messy. *It’s just like a small, credit-strapped company to try to run things on a shoestring budget*, McManus thought as he took in the display on the view screen.

A somewhat stocky man in his fifties entered the picture and sat down. He had an ashy complexion and sported a thick, dark mustache. He was wearing a brown, dingy jacket over casual clothes and, to top it off, had a platinum earring in his right ear lobe. Searching the control panel in front of him, he finally found the button he was searching for. “Federation Commander, this is Trave Jex of the *Woven Wreath* at your service!” he said with a piney voice and a broad smile that looked like it had all the sincerity of a Denuvian bat. “What can I do for you?”

McManus paused to quell his anger before he spoke. “Mister Jex, this is Captain Rick McManus of the *U.S.S. Yorktown*. I’m not going to ask why you didn’t acknowledge our hails. I’m simply going to tell you to turn around at once and leave this sector of space. Your ship is in great peril.”

Jex’s shoulders bobbed up and down as he chuckled. “Why, Captain? Are you conducting some kind of war game here? Don’t worry. We’ll be out of your way very soon.”

Shaking his head, Hampton muttered, “How long has he been at this?”

McManus was seething inside. He had rarely seen a civilian act this way toward Star Fleet authority. “Mister Jex, I don’t know if you are incompetent, or if you have some reason for what you are doing, but you had better turn your ship around *now*!”

Jex chuckled again. “Now look here, Captain. There were no warnings about any Star Fleet wargame battles in this sector when I filed my flight plan. You have no right to stop my ship. I am duly licensed...”

McManus cut him off in mid-sentence. “Jex, this is no game. This is a real situation, and your ship is in the middle of it. I’m telling you for the last time to turn around and leave the area.”

Jex appeared to be stunned for a moment, but then his smile returned. “Captain, come now. Our sensors may not be as efficient as yours, but they would still be able to tell us if there were other ships anywhere near here. And that includes storms and space monsters. Now if you’ll just move your ship out of our path, we’ll be on our way and Stellar Shipping won’t have to report you to your superiors.”

Commander Hampton couldn’t take any more. “That cuts it! He’s gone too far!” “Jex ...” McManus began but was cut short by Lieutenant Jhot.

“Captain, long range sensors just detected another ship.”

“It must be the *Suffolk*,” McManus replied. “What are they doing, Lieutenant?”

Jhot peered into the viewer at her station. “It is just sitting out there, Sir. No motion at all.” McManus sent a nod to Hampton and the XO gave a wink in return as he rose and moved to

the turbolift. The captain swiveled back toward the main view screen. Jex was still there, looking coy. “Jex, check your sensors *now*. Even that antiquated equipment of yours should be able to detect the other ship that just showed up.”

Jex turned and checked his sensor monitor. “Okay, I see the other ship. So what? Computer says it’s an old one. Is it some derelict you put out there for target practice?”

“Mister Jex, that ship you see out there is a threat to my ship as well as yours. I suggest that you turn around and make top speed to leave this area at once. If you don’t, I will personally see to it that you lose your master’s license and that you never set foot on even a garbage scow again.”

Jex’s jovial demeanor quickly disappeared and was replaced with an agitated look. “Okay, Captain, we’ll turn around. Your superiors will hear about this, though. I have perishable cargo, and this is going to cost me a lot of credits.”

The view screen shimmered and replaced the freighter’s bridge with the image of the freighter in open space. McManus watched as the *Woven Wreath* slowly turned and began moving away in the direction from which it had come. After several minutes Lieutenant Jhot announced, “Captain, the *Suffolk* is moving, and it is headed this way.”

Carl Schiver was struggling to figure out what had happened. One moment they were in a pitched battle with the alien-controlled *Yorktown*, and the next moment they were alone and unmoving in a completely different location of space. Twice during the battle there had been a bright flash and, from his point of view, the *Yorktown* had displaced to a new position. He surmised that these aliens had some strange kind of new technology but were having difficulty using it because in neither case had it put the *Yorktown* in a more advantageous tactical position. The third incident, though, moved his ship completely out of the area of the battle. They were now at the coordinates where the anomaly had first occurred, far from where they had been just a moment before.

His ship had taken a beating in the engagement with the *Yorktown*. The other ship was newer, bigger, and more powerful, yet it seemed to have trouble scoring much damage with its weapons.

Another proof that the aliens aren’t used to human technology, Schiver thought. Still,

though, it had almost been enough. Several of the shields were brought down to extremely weakened levels, but there had been little damage to the *Suffolk* itself. Schiver ordered repairs to be made to bring the shields back up to combat strength. He also assigned the science officer to assist the comm officer to try and find a way to punch through the interference that still blocked their contact with Star Fleet headquarters.

The repairs, combined with using almost all the ship's available power, soon brought almost all of the *Suffolk's* shields up to full strength. The communication situation was insurmountable, though. Schiver was about to order the helmsman to plot a course toward the sector base when a report from the science officer now back at the sensor station caused him to change his mind. A freighter had entered the area and was being escorted by the *Yorktown*. *That freighter must be carrying something of vital importance to the invaders*, he thought. He knew his duty. He would have to delay the delivery of his report to Star Fleet Command. *That freighter must be destroyed*. He ordered the crew to battle stations. No one questioned his orders. The crew blindly followed him deeper into the delusion.

Down on Deck Seven, Doctors Wilson and Parrington and three medical technicians were sitting in the brig wondering what was going on. A large doorway rimmed with bright force field emanators opened into the corridor, but there might as well have been a wall made of solid corundum. In addition, outside the doorway stood a Marine guard to add a final layer of security.

Doctor Wilson and the med techs were just recovering from the heavy stun beams they had taken in sick bay to give Elizabeth time to escape with the buoy. She had avoided being stunned by going peacefully with the security team that had captured her in the ship's laundry.

Wilson was in his late forties but was in excellent physical condition. Elizabeth knew he religiously attended some kind of class in the gym, but she had never asked which one. Still, the stun kept him from moving very freely. Sitting in one corner at the back of the room, he rubbed his knees and elbows trying to get his blood circulating more. Elizabeth moved from the other corner to sit beside him.

"I only wish there was something we could do, my dear," Wilson said lowly, stretching his arms out in front of him.

"Maybe there is," she replied in a whisper. Turning to one of the med techs, she said softly, "Tony, move between the guard and me."

The tech nodded in acknowledgment and slowly got up. He began a series of long stretches, completely natural to do after awakening from a phaser stun. Alternating bending down to touch his feet with stepping forward and stretching his rear leg, he slowly moved to block the view of the guard from Dr. Parrington if the guard should turn around. The guard, hearing the movement in the brig, glanced back to see what they were doing and smirked.

"Hmph!" he grunted. "Now you aliens know what a phaser stun can do." With that, he turned back to face the other side of the hallway.

With Tony blocking the guard's view in case he should turn around again, Elizabeth slowly moved her tunic up slightly in the front and partially pulled a narrow plastic vial up so Doctor Wilson could see it. Then she replaced it and pulled the tunic back down.

"It's some of the antidote," she murmured. "I took one of the samples you made as I

was leaving sick bay.”

“Good girl!” Wilson said softly, leaning forward with his eyes widened. Then he slumped back looking glum again. “What good is it, though? There’s a force field between us and that guard. Even if there wasn’t, how would we get him to drink it?”

Doctor Parrington’s face contorted into a frown as she concentrated on the problem. After a few moments she said under her breath, “Maybe he wouldn’t have to drink it, at least, all of it. Would a few drops work?”

Now it was Wilson’s turn to frown as he thought. “I don’t know, but I think it would be worth a try. If we can get out of here...”

“Hey, what’re you two yapping about back there?” demanded the guard. He had evidently heard something and turned to see the two doctors clustered in the back corner of the cell. “You, Doctor Parrington, move back over to the other corner,” he ordered.

She slowly moved back to the other side of the cell wondering how she could get the guard to swallow some of the antidote.

“Signaling Red Alert,” Ensign Adams said as the warning lights that were scattered around the walls began flashing their ruby color. The well-trained crewmembers throughout the *Yorktown* hustled to their battle station assignments. “Lieutenant Commander Stiles reports the emergency bridge crew is standing by.”

“The freighter has raised its shields and is turning to move away,” Jhot reported.

“Let’s get underway,” the captain said. “Mister Tourquise, move to close with the *Suffolk*. Mister Morgan, ready with phasers.”

The *Yorktown* surged ahead directly toward the *Suffolk* and the other ship reciprocated. As the ships narrowed the distance between them to 200,000 kilometers, Jhot reported that the *Suffolk* had both its photon torpedoes hot and ready. The sensors also indicated that all the *Suffolk*’s shields were energized, but its number three shield covering its starboard-aft section was still weakened from their previous encounter. Captain McManus ordered the helmsman to maneuver the ship into a position so they could fire against the *Suffolk*’s damaged shield.

Lieutenant Tourquise directed the *Yorktown* to begin a short swing to port so it would be sure to come up on the *Suffolk*’s starboard side. The *Suffolk* did not attempt to outmaneuver the *Yorktown*’s move but simply slowed down as if to meet it. McManus ordered reserve power to be ready to reinforce their own number two shield as they approached. As power was diverted to weapons and to reinforce the number two shield, the *Yorktown* slowed to match the speed of the other starship. Tourquise counted down the distance in tens of thousands of kilometers as he began veering the *Yorktown* back toward the *Suffolk*. Their battle plan seemed to be working flawlessly when suddenly the *Suffolk* darted forward with an extra burst of speed.

“They didn’t even fire at us,” exclaimed the weapons officer. “Main and starboard phaser banks, fire!” McManus ordered.

Four energy beams shot out toward the *Suffolk*. Still no return fire came back.

For a moment McManus was puzzled, but then he realized what Schiver was doing. “He’s ignoring us and heading straight for the freighter! Helm, reduce speed, hard turn to port. Once on track, accelerate with all available power. We have to catch them.”

Tourquise operated his console flawlessly and the cruiser responded, but it had fallen

behind. By reducing speed and turning to the limit of the *Yorktown's* capability, they were hot on the heels of the other ship, but still fifty-five thousand kilometers behind. By turning left instead of right, however, they were still in line with the damaged shield they needed to hit. In the meantime, Jhot notified the captain that their phaser shots had done damage to the *Suffolk's* number three shield to reduce it to eleven percent effectiveness, but not enough to bring it down completely.

The *Suffolk* had been using precious power to hold its photon torpedoes, but it was still managing to shave the distance with the slow -moving freighter. Just as the oncoming *Yorktown* began to draw close, the *Suffolk* came within firing range of the freighter and let loose both of its photon torpedoes and fire four phasers. Vex returned fire with his two phasers, but both shots missed.

“Damage to the freighter?” McManus asked.

“Its rear shield has completely collapsed, and it has taken substantial internal damage,” she said. “Its weapons have been knocked out along with almost all of its ship systems and a large part of its engine power. Its hull was breached in multiple locations. Another blow like that and the freighter could be destroyed.”

“Within firing aspect of their number three shield ... now,” Tourquise reported. “Port phaser bank, fire,” McManus ordered.

“Both hits!” Lieutenant Morgan exclaimed. “Their shield is down,” Jhot relayed.

After Jhot’s confirmation of the *Suffolk's* shield status, Ensign Adams pressed a sequence of buttons on her communication console and said, “Transporter rooms, initiate operation ‘Catlett Station’. I repeat, ‘Catlett Station’ is a go.”

The captain swiveled left toward the shield and weapons control post and said, “Mister Morgan, if you will, please.”

Morgan pressed a button on the console, checked a readout, and stated, “Shield number 6 has been lowered. Transport is commencing.” In the *Yorktown's* transporter chambers thirteen battle-ready Marines, an engineering lieutenant, and Commander Hampton dissolved into sparkling columns of light.

Fifteen figures and two metal cylinders shimmered into existence in a large, dimly lighted room.

“Verify location,” Hampton whispered to the engineer beside him.

As the engineer used his tricorder to get a fix on their exact position, a Marine officer gave a hand signal and ten of the Marines quickly spread out to secure the area.

Looking at the tricorder screen and adjusting the controls, the engineer responded softly, “We’re on the *Suffolk* on Deck Eight in the recreation area. No other life signs beside those of our group.”

The Marine officer’s communicator chirped. He flipped it open to hear one of his men report that the area was secured. “Area secure, Sir,” he said with a nod to Commander Hampton and awaited the next order.

* * * *

Back in the *Suffolk's* brig the two doctors were still mulling over the situation in

opposite corners of the room. The guard had interrupted the stretching of the three med techs and ordered them to sit down when the ship lurched from being hit by the *Yorktown's* phasers.

Suddenly Doctor Wilson called out, "Guard! Guard! She has something!" Rising to his feet, he began frantically pointing toward Elizabeth. "I saw it! Something in her belt."

The guard had turned to face the doctor as he frantically waved toward the female doctor. "What are you talking about?" he asked with disgust.

Wilson turned to cast a glance at the guard, then back to Elizabeth. "The stun must've done it. I'm free! The alien influence is gone. She has something! She showed it to me." Wilson crossed the room and reached for Elizabeth. Tony jumped to his feet and began to move toward the two doctors.

The guard hesitated. What was he to do? *Well, I have a phaser*, he thought. "Technician, step back!" he barked as he pulled his phaser from his weapons belt with one hand while he reached for the force field controls with the other.

Wilson struggled briefly with Elizabeth and managed to pull the vial from her. "Here it is!" he shouted as he held it up and turned toward the guard. "I've got it!" he yelled, waving it back and forth.

"You try anything, and I mean anything, and I'll blast all of you with a stun setting that'll make you think the last one was a hypospray," the guard stated. The techs gave slight nods. Elizabeth still stood in the corner with a look of surprise. Wilson stood in the middle of the brig holding the container up for the guard to see.

The guard pressed a button on a wall panel and the force field emanators went dark. With the phaser raised in his right hand, he stepped into the brig. As he did so, Wilson moved toward him holding the vial in both hands as if presenting a peace offering. The guard reached out for it and too late noticed that the top had been removed. Wilson suddenly squeezed the sides of the flask and squirted a stream of the liquid at the guard's face. The Marine instinctively threw up his free hand to protect his face, and, during that moment, his vision was partially blocked. The doctor's left leg flew up in a blur, knocking the guard's right hand, the one holding the phaser, up into the air. The phaser discharged harmlessly into the ceiling as the techs charged out from where they had been seated. Before they could even reach the guard, Doctor Wilson had used some form of martial move to flatten him on the floor. Instead of recovering and quickly regaining his stance as his preparation had taught him to do, the Marine merely coughed and rolled slowly onto his back.

By this time, Elizabeth had moved forward to Doctor Wilson's side. Seeing the guard unresponsive, she said to Wilson, "So that's what you spend your time doing in the gym?"

He shot a quick smile at her as he motioned for one of the techs to get the phaser. "Never thought I'd ever need to use it," he said. Looking down at the Marine whose eyes were still fluttering he observed, "He probably inhaled some of the droplets through his nose. He should be coming to soon."

As if on cue, the guard blinked several times as he sat up. He shook his head hard, as if trying to clear his thoughts. Looking up, he saw the five people standing around him. "What happened?"

"Okay, to get where we need to be, we'll go through the gym through a door over there," Commander Hampton said as he pointed toward a side wall. "There will be a shower

room on the right and an emergency transport room further ahead. There will also be a double door to the left that leads into the main corridor. We'll need one man at that door and four more to check those other two rooms."

The officer signaled for the other Marines to return and immediately sent a squad through the hallway door to secure the corridor beyond. He assigned another squad to move into the next room. In a matter of moments, the five soldiers had entered the gym and, finding no one inside, proceeded to split up to secure the entrances to the room. That being done, the rest of the group picked up the metal containers and moved into the gym.

With one of the Marines in front, they moved through the gym until they came to the emergency transporter room. Hampton, the engineer, the Marine officer, and two other Marines entered the transporter room while the rest took up defensive positions in the gym.

"Okay, the air circulation equipment is beyond that door," Hampton said, pointing toward a door in a corner at the back of the room. "It'll be locked. We don't have the time to cut through it with phaser torches, so we'll have to blow it."

"Right!" the Marine officer replied. He gave a nod to the other two Marines, and they rushed forward to the door. They each attached palm-sized boxes against the top and bottom of the door, glanced at one another, and simultaneously pressed a button on each box. Then they stepped back a couple of meters to the side of the doorway, and each shielded his face. Seconds later a small explosion blew the door away and an alarm began blaring.

"Let's work fast," Hampton exclaimed to the engineer as he picked up one of the metal cylinders. The lieutenant picked up the other and they headed through the jagged doorway. Once inside, they had to take time to locate two valves that the tanks could be connected to. It was large room and was filled with equipment and machinery, so it took time to find the valves. In the meantime, the sounds of phaser blasts and shock grenades could be heard from beyond the gym in the main hallway. It had not taken the *Suffolk's* Marines long to pinpoint their incursion and show up to investigate.

After finding the valves that would serve their purpose, Hampton had no trouble attaching the coupling that would force the gas from his cylinder into the air circulation system. The lieutenant, however, was having trouble with the other one a few meters away. Evidently when the old Constellation-class starship was being upgraded, someone had missed changing a valve on this piece of equipment.

Hampton moved over to see if he could help. "Are there any more connection valves in here?" he asked the engineer. He shook his head negatively as he rifled through a kit he had brought with him. Pulling various tools and fittings from the bag, he was feverously searching for a way to attach his cylinder to the antiquated valve. Suddenly the lights in the room dimmed and the deck plating vibrated. Both men glanced at one another. The *Suffolk* had just fired its phasers, and they had no idea whether the target was the freighter or the *Yorktown*.

"All reinforcement to the number one shield," captain McManus ordered calmly. "Helm, rotation maneuver sixty-five degrees to starboard."

"Aye, aye's" rang out in response.

"Number six shield down to sixty-seven percent," Lieutenant Jhot reported. "Their photon launchers still have not finished loading. Sensors show they have partially repaired their number three shield. We cannot transport any more Marines onto their ship unless we

bring that shield down again.”

“Very well,” McManus replied. “Mister Morgan, fire port and forward phaser banks.” “Aye, Sir,” the weapons officer replied as he touched the controls to fire the weapons.

Jhot was continuing to observe her monitor for the outcome of the attack and announced that the *Suffolk's* shield had gone down once again with no further damage to the ship. The forward shield of the *Yorktown's* was lowered, and more Marines were beamed over.

After the transport was confirmed, McManus asked Adams, “Any word yet from Commander Hampton?”

“No, Sir,” she replied. Worried looks were exchanged around the bridge.

The reaction of the bridge crew did not go unnoticed by McManus. He announced in a calming tone, “Stay focused on your duties, ladies and gentlemen.”

“Sir, another twenty seconds and their photons will be ready to fire,” Morgan reported.

McManus leaned slightly to one side of his command chair and leisurely crossed his legs as he responded, “Acknowledged. All available reserve power to reinforce shield number one. As long as they are firing at us, they are not firing at that freighter.”

Though badly damaged, the freighter was continuing to slowly move away from the two heavy cruisers. It had also managed to turn an undamaged shield toward the *Suffolk*. *Perhaps this Jex character is not as much of an idiot as he had us believing*, McManus thought.

Over on the *Suffolk* a new squad of Marines had materialized at the same beam- in location as the first group. The Marine officer quickly ordered them to move back through the circular corridor behind them and work their way around behind the *Suffolk's* troops.

As the squad moved the other direction, their point man came in sight of a lone *Suffolk* Marine who was evidently guarding the flank for his group. He spotted the squad and began firing his phaser in their direction, forcing them through a side door. One of them remained at the doorway, exchanging fire with him while the other four moved further into the room. They had entered a large arboretum that was filled with all sorts of plants, many very large. Several pathways branched through the undergrowth, but lines of sight down the paths were limited to a few meters at best. They split into two teams and began working their way through the labyrinth until they found another door at the far end of the room.

Two other squads from the *Yorktown* had been sent on hit- and-run raids to try and knock out the two photon torpedo launchers. One squad was successful, destroying a main power junction for one photon launcher and then beaming back out to the *Yorktown*. The other squad encountered stiff resistance. Two of the men in that squad were killed and the other three were stunned and captured.

The four *Yorktown* Marines in the arboretum finally converged at the other doorway and placed charges to blow the door. When the explosion occurred, two of them rushed through the smoking opening and were stunned down almost immediately by multiple phaser shots. The lone rearguard trooper from the *Suffolk's* Marines had been reinforced. One of the two remaining *Yorktown* Marines called back to Major Kranz and informed him that they could not outflank the position, but that they would use their field of fire to prevent the *Suffolk* Marines from advancing.

There was a shout from around the corner and the whine of more phaser fire. The two *Yorktown* Marines glanced at one another. Had their comrades blasted their way through on

the other side? That was impossible. A shock grenade went off and then there was silence. One of the men peered through the blown-out doorway and saw two *Suffolk* men lying on the floor several meters away. Then someone in a medical technician's jumpsuit stepped out into the open. "Don't fire!" he shouted. "Come on out. All their men are down."

The Marine eyed the insignia on the tech's uniform and saw that it was for the *Suffolk*. "Who are you?" he demanded, still remaining protected by the bulkhead.

His communicator bleeped and he heard the Major say, "Area is secure. Advance to guard the prisoners. Kranz out."

Giving a nod to his partner, they stepped into the hall and walked cautiously toward the technician.

The lab tech's hands were empty, and he was shifting around nervously as the two Marines approached him, their phasers leveled at his midsection. With a broad, but uneasy grin, he said, "Hi, I'm Tony." Then they saw the Marines from the *Suffolk*, spread around unconscious on the floor. Two more lab techs were standing nearby along with two doctors.

"Thanks for the help," one of the Marines said to the doctors. "We'll take charge of these men now."

About the time the shooting stopped, Hampton and the engineer had managed to connect the second gas cylinder and were ready to start the procedure. Just then another mild jolt sent a tremor through the room signaling that the *Suffolk* had again fired its weapons. Hampton gave a nod to his crewmate and then watched as he operated the control mechanisms. The gas began pumping into the air conditioning system. Hampton left him to watch over the equipment while he joined the Marines in the main corridor. He wanted to see the effect the gas was having on the *Suffolk* Marines they had captured. As he entered the corridor, he saw Major Kranz speaking with a man and woman whose uniform shirts identified them as medical staff of the *Suffolk*.

"What goes on here?" Hampton asked as he joined the group.

"This is Doctor Wilson, CMO of the *Suffolk*, and Doctor Parrington," the Major said. "They and these three med techs were unaffected by what happened to the rest of the crew. They were being held in the brig but managed to escape. They heard the intercom announce boarders on Deck Eight and decided to come and help us. I'm glad they did, or we might not have taken control of the deck."

"Thanks for all your help. I'm Alex Hampton, XO of the *Yorktown*."

"It sure is good to see you, Commander," Doctor Wilson sighed. "Now perhaps we can stop all this nonsense and set things right on this ship."

"That's why we're here," Hampton drawled in reply. "We found your buoy and our Doctor Ainger was able to synthesize a gas based on the data you provided. I've just now come from sending it through the environmental controls. We hope it's clearing heads all over the ship right now. This wouldn't be happening if it weren't for you, Doctor."

Wilson looked surprised. "Oh, it wasn't me. Elizabeth, here, was the brave one who launched that buoy with the data."

Hampton saw the blush redden her face and thought it was cute. "Well, ma'am, then thank *you* very much!"

Her eyelids fluttered as she held one hand in the other, cradling the lacerations she received from her slide down the ladder. "It was a team effort, Sir," she replied sheepishly.

Two of the *Suffolk's* Marines moaned as they slowly regained consciousness from their stuns. They were now breathing the air containing the invisible gas. As they came to,

they had similar mind-clearing realizations just as the guard at the brig had experienced. Doctor Wilson quickly reviewed with Hampton how they had escaped and had left the guard secured in the brig with the force field turned back on in case the effect of the drug did not last. Hampton allowed for a little more time for the gas to circulate through the entire ship and then he used the wall intercom to call up to the bridge.

“Cap’n Schiver, this is Alex Hampton. Respond please.”

The gas had reached the bridge and was gradually having a head-clearing effect on the crew members there as well. Schiver heard his old friend’s voice from the speakers. “Alex? Alex Hampton? On the ship?”

“May I come to the bridge to talk to you?” Alex asked.

“Uh, why, yes,” Schiver stammered. “By all means, come up to the bridge. I’ll order my men to stand down.”

Hampton heard Schiver make the announcement over the intraship system for all crew members to stand down, so he entered a turbolift with two armed guards. The doors were about to close when Doctor Wilson put his hand over one of them. “Mind if I come along?” he asked. “This won’t be easy for the captain. My being there might help.”

Hampton acknowledged with a nod. “You have a good point, Doctor,” he replied. “Join the party.” Wilson stepped into the lift and the doors slid together.

It was a short trip to the bridge. The Marines and Hampton emerged from the lift into the control center of the *Suffolk* not knowing exactly what to expect but found everything to be calm and unthreatening.

“Carl!” the XO said with a broad smile as he stepped forward with Doctor Wilson at his side. The *Yorktown* Marines remained by the elevator doors, phasers in hand. “I’m here to help.”

Schiver was standing by his command chair and stepped up toward the turbolift to meet Hampton. “It’s good to see you, Alex,” he said. Then he asked rather sheepishly, “Uh, what’s going on?”

Hampton waved his hand and shook his head. “That anomaly you encountered has somehow affected the minds of almost everyone on board. If it weren’t for Doctor Wilson and his staff, we wouldn’t have figured out what was going on. We beamed onto your ship and put a chemical into the air system that helped clear up everyone’s minds, but we’re not sure how long it will last. We need to get your crew over to the *Yorktown* for our medical staff to check everyone out.”

Schiver slowly nodded his head in agreement as his gaze drifted off. Then he snapped back. “Alex,” he began, then hesitated before continuing. “The *Yorktown*’s crew, were any, you know...” His voice trailed off as he turned his head away dejectedly.

“It wasn’t your fault, Captain,” Wilson interjected. “None of you were in control.”

Alex took another step forward and said gently, “Carl, we all do our duty. Everyone who signs on knows that. Now we have to finish the mission and leave this area.”

Schiver looked back at Hampton. “What about the *Suffolk*?” His concern for his ship was obvious.

Hampton smiled again. “You leave the ship to us. Our chief engineer has an idea that just might save this old bucket. First, though, we have to get everyone off. How soon can your crew be ready for beam out?”

“Within a minute, if necessary,” Schiver replied. Hampton’s smile disappeared. “It’s necessary, Carl.”

Schiver slowly nodded and then stepped to the communication station ordering the comm officer to give the signal for emergency evacuation.

Hampton reached back and pulled the communicator from his belt. Snapping it open and hearing the familiar chirp, he said, "Hampton to *Yorktown*." When Ensign Adams responded, he continued, "Everything is under control over here on the *Suffolk*. No casualties to report. Doctor Ainger's concoction worked, and the crew seems to be back to normal, but we're not sure for how long. They are preparing for emergency breakout." Ensign Adams acknowledged and relayed that the *Yorktown* was ready to receive the *Suffolk*'s crew.

"Alex, I should stay behind," Schiver said.

Hampton shook his head. "No, Carl. You need to get over to the *Yorktown* for treatment." Then in a more whimsical tone to take the edge off the situation he said, "Just leave her in neutral with the brake off." When he saw that Schiver did not understand, he remembered that his old classmate had grown up in the Alpha Centauri system and was not familiar with many of the old Earth phrases. "Back in Darlington where I grew up, my uncle had a collection of ancient automobiles you just wouldn't believe! I spent a lot of time as a boy in his garage fooling around with those old internal combustion cars with manual transmissions." Transporter beams interrupted his story as Schiver, and the rest of the *Suffolk*'s bridge crew dissolved for their short trip to the *Yorktown*. A moment later and crewmen from the *Yorktown* shimmered into existence to take up key positions on the *Suffolk*.

Ten minutes later, Ensign Adams reported that all of the *Suffolk*'s crew were accounted for and had reported to the holding areas that had been prepared for them on the *Yorktown*. The medical staff was treating them as quickly as possible with a stronger derivative of the chemical they had used on the *Suffolk* in hopes it would stabilize their minds permanently. Security guards reported that the original drug had worn off in a few cases while they were waiting for the stronger doses to be given. Some of the *Suffolk* crew had to be physically restrained, but the situations were under control. Captain Schiver was the first to receive one of the stronger doses and he had begged Doctor Ainger to clear him so he could go to the bridge. Ainger finally relented and Schiver received McManus's approval to sit at the XO's station to observe. McManus privately instructed one of the security guards to remain on the bridge and keep an eye on him.

Hampton and the other members of the skeleton crew remained aboard the *Suffolk* to secure it and prepare it for towing. After thoroughly searching the ship and powering down all unnecessary systems, the XO signaled the *Yorktown* that they were ready for the next phase of the operation. McManus took the opportunity to congratulate his first officer on a job well done.

"Thanks, Cap'n," he replied from the *Suffolk*'s command chair. "She's ready for towing," Then he added, "That sure was a weird experience and not one I want to have to repeat again. Firing on Star Fleet personnel is not something I ever thought I'd have to do."

"Well, they're all okay now," McManus replied as he looked toward Schiver with a look of satisfaction. "We saved them all, in large part due to your team's effort. Now we have another job to do. We need to get the *Suffolk* back to Starbase Seven. By the way, Alex, how does it feel to be in sole command of a starship?"

Hampton grinned as he glanced around the empty bridge where he was seated in the

command chair. "It's different, that's for sure. With their crew gone, there's plenty of room over here. I imagine things are pretty crowded on the *Yorktown* though, with their three hundred plus our four hundred and thirty."

McManus returned the grin. "That's why I'm staying on the bridge over here. Just sit back with your engines on low power and monitor your sensor readings. If you see anything unusual, contact us at once and we'll break the tractor link. We'll keep an eye on things over here. *Yorktown* out." The captain swiveled toward the engineering station. "Mister Wallace, how about it?"

The chief of engineering, Lieutenant Robert Wallace, had come to the bridge to oversee the towing operation. "We're ready, Captain."

"Okay, Chief. We'll engage the tractor beam and begin a slow tow. Lieutenant Jhot assures us that as long as we keep our power level at a minimum, we will not trigger another interphasic shift."

A tractor beam from the *Yorktown* reached out and gently latched onto the *Suffolk*. McManus gave the order to begin moving and Lieutenant Tourquise responding by coaxing the ship into minimal forward velocity with the *Suffolk* tagging along behind.

After moving along for a few minutes at very low velocity, McManus said, "Helm, let's try a little more speed. We might make it to the base by the time I'm ready to retire if we keep going at this rate. Be ready to ease off if anything unusual happens. Jhot, keep your eye on those sensor readouts."

The *Yorktown* moved forward with more power and the *Suffolk*, true to form, remained right behind it. Jhot was monitoring the sensors and reported everything to be proceeding normally.

"Things seem to be progressing well," McManus observed. "Mister Tourquise, increase speed to warp two-point-five and take us out of this area."

The warp engines responded, and, attached by the tractor beam, the *Suffolk* continued to keep pace. Jhot reported that the greater speed was having no adverse effect on the *Suffolk*.

They zipped along for a few minutes. Then the navigator announced, "Approaching our initial entry point into this sector."

Seconds later Lieutenant Jhot reported, "I am detecting an increased level of phase shifting in the hull of the *Suffolk*." In an uncharacteristic display of emotion, the Cygnan science officer shouted, "Effect increasing exponentially!"

"Full stop!" McManus barked out, but it was too late.

Everyone on the bridge watched the view screen as the other cruiser pulsed with a brightening aura. Then there was a blinding flash. The screen compensated by automatically dimming, but everyone reactively shielded their eyes with their hands just the same. When the screen came back to normal brightness, there was nothing to be seen. The *Suffolk* was gone.

The silence on the bridge was deafening. No one spoke. Even the sounds of the instruments seemed hushed.

McManus finally recovered from the shock of what they had just witnessed and turned toward the communication station. "Adams. The transporter room. Did they...?" his voice trailed away as he saw her slowly shake her head negatively. "Lieutenant Jhot, scan for survivors," he said stoically.

Jhot leaned over her station as she operated the ship's sensors to see if there was anyone who may have ejected in an escape capsule, but the instruments showed nothing. After double checking the readings, she stood erect and turned to face McManus. He was looking expectantly at her along with every other pair of eyes on the bridge. "No lifeboats detected, Sir."

McManus felt as if he was running out of options. "Keep on the lookout for a reappearance." Lieutenant Jhot used all her skill with the sensors to try and detect any telltale sign of the *Suffolk*, but to no avail. The *Yorktown* remained on location using its sensors to look for the *Suffolk* and the missing crew members far beyond the end of the watch for the bridge crew. McManus was observing not only the sensor readouts, but his officers as well. He particularly watched the Cygnan science officer. Though she had tried to adopt as much Vulcan philosophy as possible and merge it with her own Cygnan beliefs, she still was not a Vulcan and did not have their same physical stamina. Even Captain Schiver remained at the XO station doing all he could to help in the search, but he, too, was near exhaustion. McManus finally had to accept the fact that the crew on the bridge was tired and needed rest. Looking to Ensign Adams, he said, "Signal the Beta Watch bridge team and have them report for duty."

McManus stepped slowly to the front of the bridge and turned to face the others. He sensed they were looking to him for strength. "You did your jobs," he said to them. "Commander Hampton was doing his duty and doing what he loved. When the Beta Watch arrives, take some time for yourselves, but above all, get some rest." With that he returned to the captain's chair to await the replacements. As he sat in contemplation, he found his hands tightly gripping the arms of the chair. *Fourteen crew members!* he thought. *And why did it have to be Alex?*

The buzzer to the captain's quarters sounded. "Come," McManus said, looking up from the monitor on his desk.

The door slid open, and Niles Ainger took a tentative step over the threshold. "May I come in?"

McManus raised his arms over his head to stretch and leaned back in his chair. He had not realized how tired he was until just then. He had put in two full shifts and had not had time to go to the gym for his daily workout. "Sure, come in, Niles. I was just catching up on my log entries. There hasn't been much free time since all this started."

The doctor entered carrying a swan-necked, cobalt blue bottle in one hand and a small container in the other. McManus noticed that he had his med kit slung over his shoulder. "You really need more light in here, Rick. Those bloody computer monitors. Everyone thinks room lighting is not important when they are looking at one of those. Do you have two tumblers?"

McManus suspiciously eyed the bottle the doctor was holding. "What do you have there, Niles? Is that a prescription for eye strain?"

Ainger chuckled. "Oh, no. Not this. It *is* good for other ailments, however."

McManus got up, crossed the room to a cabinet, and produced two glasses. "Will these do?" "Oh, yes, they'll do nicely," Ainger replied with a smile. He set the bottle and container down

on a table and took the glasses from McManus. "Now raise the lighting and have a seat. Just sit back and I will prepare my prescription for relaxation." He busied himself with pouring a brown liquid from the swan-neck bottle into each glass and then adding another liquid from the other container.

"What's the stuff in the blue bottle?" McManus asked. "I don't recognize it."

"This is Saurian brandy. It doesn't quite look it. That's because I added some freshly brewed Arcturian tea and honey. Now for the final touch." He seemed to magically produce a lemon and a knife. After slicing the lemon in two, he squeezed the juice from each half into the glasses. He finished by taking out a micro thermal unit from his med kit bag and used it for a few seconds to heat each glass. Before sitting down, he handed one of the glasses to McManus. "We call this a hot toddy. It is guaranteed to bring relaxation."

McManus warily took the glass from Ainger. Seeing the doctor gently sniff the contents of his glass as he slowly swirled it around, he mimicked the action. "Mmm. Nice aroma," McManus observed. "Surely that isn't all we do with it?"

Ainger chuckled. "By no means! You really need to get to Earth more often, Rick." He raised the glass and said, "Cheers, old boy." Ainger took a long sip as McManus watched. The captain then brought his glass to his lips to taste it for himself. Just before he could take the sip, though, the door buzzer sounded.

"Come," McManus called out, lowering the glass.

The door slid back, and Lieutenant Jhot stepped into the room. She glanced at Doctor Ainger and then the concoction he had mixed in them.

"Yes, Lieutenant?" the captain asked tiredly.

"Sir," she began, "I request to return to duty on the bridge. I have been calculating algorithms to retune the sensors to help us detect the *Suffolk* and would like to test my hypotheses."

McManus leaned back in his chair. "Lieutenant, it's obvious that you have not been resting as I ordered." He thought he noticed a pink hue developing in her cheeks. Using her personal name, he said, "Look Seddie, I know how much this means to you. It means a lot to all of us. Alex was not only a fellow officer, he was our friend. But you can't keep up this kind of effort. You need to get some sleep. You may have adopted many aspects of Vulcan philosophy, but you are a Cygnan, and you need your rest. There hasn't been any trace of the *Suffolk* for two days and I'll wager that you've not had a wink of sleep in all that time. We're going to be ordered to move on with another assignment soon. Command will consider the *Suffolk* as lost with all hands who were aboard. I need you to be at your best for the next mission." He suddenly found it difficult to envision a 'next mission', but he knew there would be one. There always was.

"But, Sir," she started to say. Suddenly, though, the comm officer's voice broke in over the intercom.

"Captain, we have another message coming through from Sector HQ."

"The commodore is probably wondering when we're going to report back with the results of our search," McManus said to the doctor and science officer. "They want a science vessel to replace us and continue the search. I've been putting this off as long as possible. This is the second time they've tried to contact us. I know what he's going to say."

The captain pressed a button in acknowledgement. "Put the message through to my viewer here," he said into the intercom.

The monitor brightened and the familiar laurel emblem of the Federation filled the blue screen. The captain entered his identification code, and the message appeared. McManus quickly took in the words on the monitor. “Just as I thought. We’ve been ordered to break off the search and head to Base Station 31, barring any new data about the *Suffolk*.”

“Surely they’re not giving up on Alex and our other missing crew members?” Doctor Ainger asked.

“I don’t know. A small research vessel has been assigned to study the residual effects of the anomaly. It should be on station in three weeks.”

Jhot looked shocked. “Do you mean they are not going to even search for Commander, I mean, the *Suffolk*, Sir?”

He noticed his science officer’s dark eyes were glossed over with moisture. Until now he hadn’t realized how much she cared for Alex. He checked his tone and spoke softly, but firmly, “Seddi, get some rest. That’s an order.”

She blinked hard, preventing the tears from forming, and nodded. Without a word, she turned and left McManus’s quarters. When the door slid shut, Ainger asked, “Do you have time for that drink, Rick?”

“Sure, Niles. Sure. Time is all I have left.”

As Seddi walked down the corridor, a plan formed in her mind. The captain ordered her to rest but did not specify when she should begin. She quickened her pace and turned toward a turbolift. She had seen the readings of the interphasic shifting in the molecules of the *Suffolk*’s hull. She knew what to look for. But she had to act quickly. Captain McManus would not tolerate insubordination, even in a situation like this. She could not oversee the actual sensor sweep. No, but she could record the event and use it as proof that Alex and the other crewmen were still out there. Somewhere. She entered the lift and when the doors slid shut, she turned the destination selection handle to Bridge.

A very young Ensign Kyle Rodderick was conducting a sensor sweep of the space ahead of the *Yorktown* as they prepared to go to high warp speed. This was his first duty assignment at the science station on the bridge. He had joined the crew just before the *Yorktown* departed Starbase Seven and was not in the regular rotation to man the main sensors. There really had not even been time for his section chief, Lieutenant Commander Jhot, to assign him any real duty at all. Therefore, he was not aware of what had actually happened during the incident with the *Suffolk*.

Besides being drafted for damage control work during the encounters with the *Suffolk*, all he knew was from sketchy stories and rumors he heard from slightly more senior ensigns he had come to know in the days he had been on board the ship. Even then, he didn’t put much stock in their stories. He knew how it was with ensigns. They always wanted to make themselves look important to new junior ensigns and would say almost anything. He had stood around most of the time with a fire extinguisher and a radiation detector in a part of the ship where nothing had happened. With the search for the *Suffolk* and the missing crewmen called off, it was time for the regular sensor operators to get some badly needed rest, so he was assigned to the science station for the first time. He wanted to make a good impression, so he carefully examined the results of the most recent sensor sweeps. It wouldn’t do for the ship to run into an asteroid on his first important duty assignment. From his position at the science

station, he overheard the watch officer, Lieutenant Commander Stiles, contact the captain to inform him that the ship was ready for departure.

The captain. Captain Rick McManus. Kyle had heard stories about McManus at the Academy. He was dedicated to Star Fleet and was famous for being a ‘by the book’ kind of commander. Captain McManus. Kyle hadn’t even met the man yet! The captain lived on the bridge or in the senior officers’ area. There hadn’t been time for a ‘meet and greet’ when Rodderick came aboard. And now that he had his first stint on the bridge, the third in command was the watch officer. Oh, well. Maybe if he performed well enough, he could work his way into the regular rotation of the bridge staff.

Stiles had just given the order to the navigator to set the ship’s course when a weak blip appeared on one of the sensor readout screens. It was just a telltale signal; virtually insignificant. Confident in his own abilities, Ensign Rodderick was sure that no other science officer would have noticed it. He quickly verified the coordinates and discovered that the source of the blip was astern of the *Yorktown*. He had been focused on the forward sensors for their jump to warp speed and had only noticed the blip by chance. Still, it was unusual, so he began fine tuning the aft sensors when the signal disappeared as suddenly as it had shown up. Was it his fiddling with the controls that made the blip disappear? Was it instrumentation? He didn’t know. Realizing that he should not report an anomalous reading without verification, Rodderick rechecked the sensor readout, but there was no trace of anything behind the ship.

He decided he had time to check the aft sensor settings. After a few moments at the controls, he discovered that they were out of calibration badly. He had never seen anything like that before in his classes at the Academy. It was the most unusual configuration he had ever encountered.

Hmpf, he thought. *That’s not like Lieutenant Jhot to leave the sensors in that condition. It’s almost as if she had set them that way on purpose. But why would she do that? This must be a mistake. She did look awfully tired.* She had shown up on the bridge just an hour into his watch and volunteered to sit at the science station while he took a short break. He thought she had felt sorry for him because of the way she looked at him with those big black eyes. He had never met a Cygnan before but had heard stories about many of them being empathic. First time on the bridge and his kidneys just had to act up. *I knew I shouldn’t have let her spell me so I could go to the head. That was strange. I wonder if this is actually some kind of test? That must be it! She’s testing me to see if I noticed the faulty calibration of the aft sensors. She knew I would be focused on the forward sensors. Well, I’ll prove to her that I know a thing or two.* After resetting the aft sensors to their default calibrations, he rechecked them and found everything normal. There was no trace of anything unusual nearby. He considered whether to flag the data from the blip but thought better of it. His notation would be recorded as well as the bad calibration settings and, since it occurred on his watch, it would go on his record. He certainly didn’t want a blot like that early in his shipboard career, so he purged the data from the computer.

“Ensign Rodderick, what is your status?” asked Stiles. “All clear, Sir,” Rodderick responded.

Stiles swiveled back to face the front of the bridge. “Helm, warp factor three. Engage...” The lift doors swished open and Seddi Jhot burst into the bridge and exclaimed, “Wait!”

Stiles broke off his order and said, “Belay that, Helm.” Rising from the command chair, he turned toward Jhot. “Lieutenant, what is it?” Then he noticed the captain coming out of the elevator behind her.

“As you were,” McManus announced to the bridge crew.

Jhot had already rushed to the science station where Rodderick was still seated. She placed her left hand on the back of his chair and turned it slightly. With her eyes locked onto his ever-widening eyes, she demanded, “Have you seen any unusual readings?”

The young ensign seemed frozen. He tried to speak, but all he could manage was, “Uh, huh.” And then the captain was standing beside Lieutenant Commander Jhot.

“It’s okay, Ensign,” the captain said. “Just relax and tell us about it.”

Kyle thought the captain had a fatherly look. McManus stood there patiently, giving the young man time to compose himself. “Well, Sir, I mean, Ma’am, there was a ghost mass reading from the aft sensors. You know, one of those readings that appears and then, when you check them, they’re gone. I thought it was strange, so I checked the calibration. What did you do to the settings, Ma’am?”

“Never mind about what I did. Go on,” Seddi gasped.

“Well, Ma’am, I thought you were testing me, you know, to see if I was on the ball and noticed how badly out of alignment the aft sensor settings were, so I reset them.”

“Was there any more trace of that ‘ghost’ mass reading, as you put it?” she asked him. Rodderick smiled broadly, “No, Ma’am! Those sensors are set correctly now.”

Seddi straightened and turned to the captain. “You see, Sir. My calculations were correct. There was a reading. We *can* find them!”

McManus rubbed his chin in thought and slowly began to nod. “Commander Hampton on a ghost ship. Hmpf. Very well, Lieutenant. We’ll contact Star Fleet Command and inform them that we have positive proof that the *Suffolk* and our towing crew are still out there. I’m sure they will grant permission for us to remain on station and continue our search because of the new data we have.” Turning to his left, he said, “Mister Stiles, if you don’t mind, I’ll take the conn for a while. I’d like you to make preparations with Major Kranz for boarding rescue teams once we find the *Suffolk*.”

“Of course, Sir,” Stiles replied and then exited the bridge by means of the turbolift. Turning back to Jhot in a hushed voice, McManus said, “Seddi, I want you to fill in the Ensign on what you did. He might learn a thing or two.” He finished with a wink to her. Then, looking at the young ensign, he asked more loudly, “By the way, son, what’s your name?”

“Kyle Rodderick, Sir,” he replied with a gulp.

“Well, Ensign Rodderick, you did a fine job. Work with Lieutenant Jhot on those sensors and report when you have them recalibrated. We have a ship to find and some fellow crewmen to rescue.”

“Yes, Sir!” Rodderick exclaimed, his emotions suddenly going from fear of lousing up Lieutenant Jhot’s sensor adjustments to elation at being commended by the captain. Not only did he get to meet the captain, but now he would be working on the bridge with Captain McManus in the command chair and also alongside the head of the science section. *What a first watch this turned out to be!*