



NIGHT OF THE RAVEN

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STAR TREK:
THE NEXT GENERATION

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Night of the Raven is an original piece of fan fiction by T. August Green based on Star Trek, created by Gene Roddenberry.

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First published 2020 by Trekkie Fan Fiction

www.trekkiefanfiction.com

Historian's Note:

These events take place after those depicted in the feature film "Generations" and Deep Space Nine "The Way of the Warrior".

Preface

It is the maiden voyage of the *Enterprise-E* and Riker finally gets his shot at the big chair while Captain Picard is on his honeymoon. But a routine mission becomes a catalyst for danger when their Romulan nemesis, Sela, crosses the Neutral Zone and destroys Deep Space Seven. She commands an upgraded warbird with lethal capabilities. However, Augustok, her half-Vulcan first officer has an agenda of his own. His defection sets into motion a series of events that forces Riker onto the bridge of another ship and sends him on a special mission to protect the *Enterprise* and his former captain—a mission that could plunge the Klingons, the Romulans and the Federation into an interplanetary war.

CHAPTER 1

“He’s standing by, ready for transport Sir,” reported the transporter officer as Riker entered the room.

“Energize,” he ordered. Riker stood tall in his full dress uniform. A pleasant look came to his face as his friend materialized on the pad. “Welcome aboard Worf. It’s good to see you again!”

“It is good to see you as well Commander, I mean Captain,” replied Worf.

“Forget the formalities my friend. I’m just glad you could make it in time.”

“I regret my tardiness. In my haste to Leave DS9, I left behind my ceremonial robe and had to return for it,” admitted Worf.

“It won’t be the first time someone’s forgotten something for a wedding,” said Riker as he gave Worf a pat on the shoulder. They left the transporter room and started down the corridor. “By the way, that robe looks good with that red uniform.”

“This uniform has caused more than its share of difficulties.”

“Yes, I heard about what Gowron did to your house and your family name. I think you were treated very unfairly,” Riker responded with authority.

Looking straight ahead without a flinch, Worf replied, “Gowron believed he was acting in the interest of the Empire.”

“Well, at the risk of sounding selfish, I’m glad you decided to stay with us. Starfleet would’ve lost one helluva officer, and I would’ve lost a good friend.”

“Thank you, Captain. I too must admit a large part of me feels the same.”

After a pause, Riker changed the subject, “Tell me, what’s Captain Sisko like? I hear he’s quite a personality shall we say?”

“He is,” Worf paused, “...an outstanding officer. I have learned a great deal about command from him.”

“Speaking of command, how do you like the Defiant?”

Worf’s eyes lit up with fiery pride, “It is a warrior’s ship! My permanent quarters are on board the Defiant. It touches my Klingon blood.”

“I’d like to see it. Maybe you could give me a tour sometime.”

“I would do so with pleasure, sir!”

The two reached the turbolift and the doors opened to reveal Mr. Data. He smiled and extended a hand, “It is good to have you back again, Commander. How have you been?”

“I have been well Commander, and you?”

“I have been better,” replied Data as he picked, preened, and tugged at his uniform.

“Data, you seem a little nervous,” said Riker.

“Even though I have known about this event for some time, I feel somewhat confused. I have run several self-diagnostics to verify that my emotion program is functioning normally.”

“Why? Is something wrong?” asked Riker.

“I know that I should feel happy about this event and I do, but I continue to have this overwhelming urge to cry. I do not understand.” Data’s voice began to tremble, the tears welled in his eyes and he began to sob. “Why am I doing this? No one has been lost or died. This is not a tragedy.”

“Matter of opinion,” quipped Worf, revolted by Data’s outburst.

“I’ll second that,” said Riker as he offered Data a handkerchief.

The turbolift stopped, and the trio stepped out with Data still sobbing.

“Commander Data, ten-hut!” ordered Riker and Data snapped to attention. Riker wore a broad grin as he spoke. “Now Mr. Data, it’s perfectly normal for some people to get very emotional at weddings. However, I order you to get-a-grip.”

“Get a grip on what, sir?”

“A human metaphor. It means get control and relax. You’re gonna do just fine.”

“Thank you, Captain,” replied Data as he calculated “getting-a-grip”.

The group proceeded to the holodeck where Worf keyed the access panel. The doors slid open revealing a beautiful outdoor scene. They proceeded inside through several archways of flowers which led to a grove of fruit trees. There was brilliant sunlight, a gentle breeze and the smell of spring was in the air. The trees were laden with flowering blooms. The grass was thick and lush. The rolling hills provided a stunning backdrop.

Riker walked slowly up the runway and took this place at the podium beneath the largest arch. He took a moment to scan the gathering of crewmates that were in attendance. Geordi waved from the back of the crowd signaling that all was ready.

Riker stood to attention and said, "Computer, begin music."

All eyes were on Data as he joined arms with Dr. Selar. In unison they strode down the runway until they reached the podium. Stopping momentarily, then escorting her to the left, he returned to the right. They were in turn followed by Geordi escorting nurse Ogawa and Worf escorting Deanna Troi. The music stopped and then slightly increased as Captain Picard stepped from behind the flower arch. His full dress uniform was adorned with his many Starfleet decorations, but all these paled next to the smile on his face.

He gazed down the aisle to meet the sight of Wesley Crusher escorting his mother in her resplendent gown. Upon reaching the podium, Wesley gave his mother a kiss and then gave her hand to Captain Picard with a smile.

They both turned to face Riker as he began, "From the days of the very first sailing vessels, captains have enjoyed a happy privilege, the uniting of members of

their crew in the bonds of matrimony. I invite all of you to join me in the good wishes of that which we are about to witness.”

Riker proceeded by conducting the traditional ceremony with the exchanging of vows and the gift of the rings. There was a great round of applause after the ceremony concluded with the kissing of the bride. As the bridesmaids were escorted out by their ushers, Riker announced, “You’re all invited to join us for the reception aboard the space station observatory lounge!”

It wasn’t long before the crowd of guests filled the station’s lounge. There was an air of happiness as many watched the new couple cut and feed each other cake, drink champagne and open gifts. Then the lights lowered, a spotlight shone on Beverly and Jean-Luc as they danced their first dance as a married couple. Riker looked on and thought of all the good things he hoped for his longtime commanding officer. As other couples began to fill the dance floor, he looked around for Deanna only to notice her already dancing with Data. Riker picked up a drink and wandered to the viewport where he stood staring up at the new *Enterprise* docked close by. A look of pride and contentment came over his face as his eyes traced her every graceful line. Then a familiar voice interrupted his daydream.

“Worthy of her namesake, isn’t she Number One?”

“That she is, sir,” replied Riker as he turned and shook hands with Picard.

“You and your wife make a lovely couple. Somehow I always knew the two of you would end up together.”

“It did seem almost inevitable,” said Picard as he and Riker sat at the nearest table. “You seem quite taken with a lady of your own.”

Riker admitted his guilt with a grin and turned his eyes out the window once again. “You know I can still remember standing atop the wrecked saucer section on Veridian Three and thinking how it would be next to impossible to replace her.”

Picard smiled in agreement as Riker continued. “But when we finally received new orders and arrived at Utopia Planitia, even though she wasn’t completed, I felt like I was coming home.”

“I know what you mean, Will. The first time I saw her I had a similar experience.”

“It’s almost as if it were fate that we lost the *Enterprise-D*,” continued Riker, “just so this ship could carry that name, to be the new flagship. This ship could be nothing less.”

“It does seem only fitting,” agreed Picard. “For most of the recorded history of the Federation, their flagship has worn the name *Enterprise*.”

“I’d like to thank you again, Captain.”

“Whatever for?” asked Picard.

“For this opportunity,” replied Will. “I know this was only a temporary commission as Captain while you were on Leave but working on the completion of this ship and commanding her trial runs has been a very rewarding several months.”

“Think nothing of it, Will. I told Admiral Shanthi I wanted someone I knew and could trust. That’s you, Captain.”

“Thank you, sir.”

Picard continued, “However, I must admit to some regret at not being on board when the new speed record was achieved. That was a moment of major significance in our history. The first starship to reach controlled transwarp velocity.”

“It was quite an experience.” said Riker, “But Starfleet records still show you as her captain. History will remember that.”

“In record only,” replied Picard. “I’ll know I wasn’t there to see it myself. Besides, at this point you know my ship better than I do, Number One.”

“You’ll catch up quick, Sir.” replied Riker with a smile.

“I think that from now on Starfleet should make it a standard practice to assign its crews to aid in the completion of their ships. To work alongside those that installed and engineered those systems is invaluable,” stated Picard.

“I agree completely. It certainly helped me to better understand the new systems upgrades.” Riker stopped to finish his drink. “It also made me realize that I was glad I passed up those other commands. To be a part of this ship is where I want to be. Do you remember telling me about how I might get a shot at the big chair on the next ship named *Enterprise*?”

“Yes,” recalled Picard, “right before we beamed up from Veridian Three.”

“Well, here’s the next ship and I’ll be here until you’re ready to move up.”

“That time is coming,” replied Picard, “but I might offer you some advice.”

“Certainly, Sir.”

“Don’t be so single-minded about a certain goal that you pass up a golden opportunity for your career. One never knows what tomorrow might bring.”

“Thank you Captain,” replied Will. “I’ll keep my eyes open, but I have to tell you, Starfleet will have to offer me something pretty special to get me off the *Enterprise*.”

“Well, the two of you can slice up the bridge any way you want, but that engine room is all mine,” quipped Geordi who approached almost unnoticed. Riker and Picard both laughed at the remark as they welcomed him to the table. Geordi sat down and offered his congratulations to Captain Picard on his wedding day. They resumed talking about the new ship until Will and Geordi both noticed the Captain’s new bride standing directly behind him. She placed her hand on his shoulder.

“Have I become a widow to a starship on my wedding day?” she jokingly inquired.

“Not a chance,” answered her husband as he stood and took her hand.

“Then let’s dance,” she said as she led him away.

“Ain’t love grand?” Riker grinned.

“You said it Captain,” added Geordi. “I almost hated to see the new *Enterprise* completed. Working with Leah...I mean Dr. Brahms for the past several months has been a dream come true.”

“Probably one of the biggest reasons we finished on schedule,” added Riker matter-of-factly.

“I’m sure it helped, Captain, but I can’t take that much credit. You see Leah, she’s very . . .”

“On a first name basis now?” asked Riker.

“Yeah, I guess we are,” answered the slightly embarrassed LaForge. It’s more than that,” he continued, “she’s very dedicated to her work.”

“Personally, I think both of you deserve some credit in the history books for finally making Transwarp Drive work.”

“Oh no, Captain, I may have worked on it but it’s her baby from start to finish. I never would’ve had the patience to sift through all the information that she did. She reviewed all the sensor logs from when Lt. Barclay got zapped by that probe and tied himself into the computer.”

“What a trip that was!” laughed Riker. “I’m glad something good came out of that.”

“I was just glad to see it over with,” added Geordi. “But as I was saying, Leah reviewed the Cytherian data on propulsion and the way Barclay used the *Enterprise* engines to create subspace distortions. She also reviewed all of our sensor information on the trips we made through the Transwarp conduits constructed by the Borg. She even went back and pulled all the research and test data from Starfleet’s first attempt at transwarp over eighty years ago on the Excelsior Experiment.”

“Sound like she’s been busy,” commented Riker.

“That’s an understatement,” replied Geordi. “So busy that her husband decided that he couldn’t tolerate her work ethic and level of dedication.”

“He left her?” asked Riker.

“About a year ago,” Geordi paused to sip his drink. “She’s better now, but I almost hate to leave her.”

“Don’t start getting any second thoughts.” said Riker. “Who would I replace you with by tomorrow?”

Geordi smiled, “Don’t worry Captain, I’ll be the first one on board.”

Several hours passed as the reception slowly wound down. Then Beverly announced that it was time for the

last dance. She ordered the computer to play “Isn’t It Romantic?” The lights went down low as couples filled the dance floor. Riker watched and wondered how marriage and the Captain’s chair would fit together. Others had done it but always under such stress. But if anyone could make it work, Jean-Luc and Beverly could. He wondered if he could do it himself or if he would ever feel ready. His thoughts were broken as he felt a tap on his shoulder. He turned to see a smiling Deanna Troi.

“May I have this dance Miss Troi?” he said, offering his arm. She accepted his offer and he led her to the floor.

“You dance divinely, Commander.” she said with a smile.

“That’s Captain Riker of the U.S.S. *Enterprise*.” he humorously corrected her, pointing to the four pins on his lapel.

“So it is,” she replied.

“At least for a little while longer,” he added as they shared quiet laughter and affectionate looks for each other. When the dance was over Deanna handed him a small dispenser. “What’s this?” Riker asked.

“It’s rice. You throw it at the newlywed couple as they leave for their honeymoon.”

Still looking at the dispenser, Riker asked, "By the way, where is the honeymoon?"

"Paris and then Venice," replied Deanna. "They'll be leaving soon."

"By shuttlecraft?"

"No, no, Holodeck Four."

"Then I'll be sure to hang a "Do Not Disturb" sign over the comm panel," said Riker with a large grin.

"I think as Captain you should order the crew to line the entire corridor between the turbolift and the Holodeck entrance so we can give them a good showering!" Deanna giggled.

"I think I can arrange that" agreed Riker and he left the lounge to make the preparations.

An hour later, Riker escorted the new couple across the gangway into the ship. He stopped at the airlock and bowed as he graciously hand gestured for them to come aboard and said, "Welcome aboard the cruise ship *Enterprise*, Captain and Mrs. Jean-Luc Picard."

Picard laughed, and Beverly playfully slapped Riker on the arm as they crossed the corridor into the turbolift.

Once inside Riker ordered, "Deck 11 . . . Captain, I've taken the liberty of having Mr. Worf place a secured access code on the Holodeck so you won't be disturbed."

"Thank you Will. That was very thoughtful," said Beverly.

"By the way, sir," asked Riker, "We are at Earth, why not go to the real Paris if you don't mind me asking?"

"We wanted to visit old world Paris," answered Beverly.

"And our orders stated we had to be on board when the ship sets sail," added Picard. Just then the turbolift stopped and the doors opened. They were greeted with whistles, cheers and applause. The newlyweds hesitated. Picard looked at Riker and pointed to the doorway. "You first, Number One," he said with a grin.

"Oh no, Sir," came the reply as Riker produced his rice dispenser and began showering them.

Jean-Luc grabbed Beverly by the hand and the couple scampered down the corridor to the Holodeck amid a snowstorm of rice. To Picard's surprise, the doors were not open. Picard looked to the control panel where Mr. Worf stood at attention.

"Awaiting your orders, Sir," Worf spoke calmly.

Picard gave him a look of jesting sarcasm as Beverly attempted to use her bouquet as an umbrella. “Now, Mr. Worf,” laughed Picard amid the still-falling rice. The Holodeck opened and Beverly tossed her bouquet into the crowd just at the doors began to close. The bouquet fell squarely into Deanna’s hands.

Inside the Holodeck the couple walked a cobblestone path, as they dusted rice off one another. There were green trees and park benches scattered on the lush, green lawns. In the background the Eiffel Tower rose towards the sky. Awaiting them at a nearby street was a horse and carriage. He helped his wife in and then followed, closing the door. They got comfortable and close to each other.

Suddenly Beverly sat up and asked, “What finally made you ask me to marry you?”

“What made you accept?” he asked in return.

“I asked first,” she said with a pointed finger.

Jean-Luc wore a gentle smile as he grasped her hand and answered, “When I was standing on that planet and saw the wreckage of the *Enterprise-D*, my first thought was if you were all right. Not about the loss of my ship or the safety of the crew as a whole. My very first

thought was: Beverly. I knew then that for the rest of my life I wanted the same Doctor . . . you.”

His answer left her misty-eyed. She kissed him and drew close, laying her head on his shoulder.

“What about your answer?” he whispered.

“What was the question?” came the soft reply.

The carriage pulled away to reveal the small sign on the back which read: “Just Married.”

CHAPTER 2

Captain's Log, William T. Riker Commanding.

With Captain Picard on his honeymoon, the Enterprise-E has made final preparations for her first voyage of actual duty. We have been ordered to deliver supplies and personnel to Deep Space Seven. Formerly referred to as K-7, the station is in the final stages of extensive retrofit. Most of their civilian crew have been temporarily relocated to nearby Sherman's Planet, near the Klingon border.

Riker stood and brushed down his shirt. He turned off the recording terminal and exited the Ready Room. As he took his seat on the bridge he exuded an air of relaxed confidence.

"Mr. Data, report," came his first command.

"All supplies and equipment for DS7 are loaded and secure in Cargo Bay Two. All passengers are on board and undergoing quarters assignment."

"Very good Mr. Data. Mr. Worf, report."

"All stations report manned and ready Captain. Space Dock signals they are ready to cast off."

“Stand by Mr. Worf. Engineering, Mr. LaForge, report.”

Geordi’s voice rang out over the Comm system. “Engines are online and powered up. Everything’s a go down here.”

“Mr. Worf, you may proceed,” said Riker.

“Aye Sir, channel open,” replied Worf as he released the docking clamps and umbilical supports.

“Space Dock, this is *Enterprise*. Clearing all moorings,” said Riker.

“Space Dock confirms, *Enterprise*. You are clear to embark. Space doors are opening now.

“Helm, maneuvering thrusters, bring us about,” ordered Data. The ship backed away from the dock and turned about, heading for the now fully open space doors.

“We have cleared the dock,” reported Worf.

“On screen,” ordered Riker.

“Lt. Tate, thrusters ahead,” ordered Data.

“Delay that order Lieutenant,” said Riker. “Ahead one quarter impulse.” Data looked puzzled as Lt. Tate didn’t question the order, but simply smiled and activated her

control panel. The roar of the impulse engines' thrust grew inside the dock until the windows of the observatory lounge trembled, and the dishes rattled on their tables. The ship surged forward through the doors, immediately breaking orbit. The aftershock shook the other ships inside like a sonic boom.

"We are free and clear to navigate," reported Tate.

"Set course for Sherman's Planet and Deep Space Seven," ordered Data. "Speed, Captain?"

"Three quarters impulse until we clear the system, then go to Warp Five." The low drone of the impulse engines could be felt throughout the ship, and many of the crew and passengers took the opportunity to find a viewport. The *Enterprise* glided gracefully through the Terran System. Mars and the fleet-yards were the first to pass from view. Jupiter, though at a distance was still a huge and awe-inspiring sight. The rings of Saturn refracted the sun's rays like the Northern Lights. The ship began her elevation, and the remaining planets faded beneath them. Then came the thrumming of the warp engine, pulsating with increasing frequency and power. Her triple nacelles emitting a bright burst against the darkness of space. Her image stretched long as she streaked into warp.

Riker relaxed in his chair and crossed his legs. He happened to notice a wide smile on Deanna's face. He turned his chair slightly towards her and with a raised eyebrow, silently asked what was on her mind.

"You're really enjoying this, aren't you?" she asked.

"I'm living a fantasy, Counselor," he replied.

"But you wish it were reality."

"The reality is that it is only temporary."

"For now, you mean."

"I think I'm going to get my shot at command sooner than you might think," said Riker with a sly grin.

On the other side of the Neutral Zone sat a counterpart in command of a vessel—a commander whose contentment requires the acquisition of power and the satisfaction of vengeance. It was Commander Sela. She sat on the bridge of her warbird—not an ordinary warbird, but one modified for the task at hand. This was her first true test, her maiden voyage and it was not a voyage of mercy. Externally, she appeared only slightly different from most D'deridex warbirds. Its most notable change was the addition of a central pylon between her

wing sections which supported two additional warp nacelles. But more obvious than that was her hull plating, as black as the space she traveled through. Passing by stars and planets, she cast a dark silhouette. Then moving off into space she all but disappeared, save for the glow of her cabin lights and warp nacelles.

Sela sat in her command chair, her arms and legs crossed, a pensive look on her face as she spoke: "Helm, report."

"On course for Sherman's Planet. Approaching Neutral Zone," the helmsman responded.

"Engage cloak," she ordered. The lighting on the bridge changed to a bright green, indicating the cloak was functioning. Sela turned to her first officer, who manned the science station. "Soon we find out if your creation performs as promised."

"The Federation Space Station will be no match for this ship."

"You're very confident of that, aren't you Commander Augustok?" asked Sela.

"Confidence is unnecessary. I know the capabilities of their hardware and the superiority of mine," he replied.

“Don’t flaunt your Vulcan half, Commander. I detest it!”
Sela returned a cold stare.

“Your victory will be glorious and complete,” he said.

“That’s better,” she responded with only partial approval.

“Now entering Neutral Zone, Commander. No enemy scans detected,” reported the helmsman.

“E.T.A. to target?” asked Sela.

“One hour, seventeen minutes, present speed.”

Augustok approached Sela’s chair. “Commander, I recommend we go to transwarp velocity. We will cross the Neutral Zone in minutes. We can then drop to impulse once we are in weapons range of the station. By the time they run diagnostics on their sensors to determine what we are it will be too late.”

“Very well, Augustok,” said Sela. “Let us test your superior hardware. Helm! Bring secondary engine core online and accelerate to transwarp speed.”

The helmsman complied and the warbird raced into transwarp in a matter of seconds. The Federation’s long-range sensors that monitored the Neutral Zone detected

a warp signature for a moment followed by an EM surge and then nothing.

Deep Space Seven was even more vulnerable. With many of their systems off-line during the retrofit, they depended on the outpost's long-range scans for any early warning. Just as Augustok had predicted, the outposts were now running diagnostics to determine if the strange reading was simply a malfunction. All the while, the warbird closed rapidly on its prey.

"Entering Federation space," reported the helm.

"Now within the station's sensor range," reported Augustok. "We are not being scanned."

"Excellent," hissed Sela with a look of impending vengeance. "Visual," she commanded.

The image of the station appeared on the viewscreen, at extreme range but closing fast. "Battlestations!" she ordered with ferocity. "Attenuate weapons to simulate Klingon disruptors. Slow to full impulse."

"I am now detecting standard sensor sweeps." said Augustok.

"Shields? Weapons?" asked Sela.

"Negative," he replied.

“Prepare to target their primary reactor with a full torpedo spread as soon as we reach optimum range!”

“Torpedoes ready,” reported the weapons officer.

“Sensor frequency has increased, but still no shields,” said Augustok. The image of the station grew large in the viewer as Sela stood from her chair with clenched fists in anticipation of the kill.

“They are raising shields,” reported Augustok.

“Fire!” shouted Sela.

Almost from the darkness itself came a dim flash of light and a stream of torpedoes. The station’s shields were not at full power, and the barrage of weapons smashed the main engineering section. Secondary explosions from plasma conduits and anti-matter pods rocked the station hard. The loss of cabin lights on most levels was a sign that auxiliary power was not functioning properly.

“Their safety system has ejected their main reactor core. They are attempting to raise shields, but do not have sufficient power,” said Augustok.

“Hard about!” ordered Sela. “Continuous disruptor fire on our next pass.”

On board the station the crew of the command center watched in horror as volley after volley of disruptor fire seem to burst forth from the very fabric of space. Blast upon blast pounded the station, severing the connecting arms and tearing away the docking ports.

Sela settled smugly back into her chair as she watched pass after pass slowly dismantle the station that was helpless to defend itself.

In vain the station managed to fire emergency torpedoes, but without a target they could see or even detect, it was to no avail. Soon all that was left of DS7 was a large listing hulk of space wreckage.

“Cease fire,” she ordered with a look of satisfaction.

“Their main and auxiliary power is off-line, no sensors, no communications, life support is failing. Their battery back-ups are low. Hull integrity is breached on sixty-eight percent of the station. I am reading only their automated distress signal . . .”

“Distress signal!” “Sela snapped, ending Augustok’s report. “Silence it at once! Prepare another torpedo!”

“Commander! Wait!” Augustok shouted.

Sela spun around, glaring at her first officer in rage that he would dare speak in such a fashion to her on the

bridge of her ship. Augustok knew his place. He bowed his head and approached her chair.

He lowered himself to one knee and spoke softly, "Forgive me, Commander, but the information contained in the station's sensor logs, specifically the scans of our approach and attack, would be invaluable to the evaluation of the ship's performance. Who knows what other technology we might obtain? Proof of our, . . . your . . . glorious mission. But it must be gathered before the station's batteries expire. The automated distress signal can be disabled from onboard the station."

"Then we must go immediately," she rose from her chair only to feel him gently grasp her hand and elbow as he stood beside her.

"Please, Commander, let me go. Your safety is too important to this mission to put you at risk for such a task."

Sela's face was stern for a moment, then softened as she considered his suggestion. "Very well, Augustok, how will you prevent being detected?" she asked.

"I can alter our transporter frequency to match those of a Federation unit."

"And if you meet resistance?"

“Then they will meet with the same fate as their comrades,” retorted Augustok.

“Won’t our hand disruptors Leave a readable trace that will give our presence away?” cautioned Sela.

“Yes, that is why I will use this.” Augustok raised the drape of his tunic and produced a late twenty-third century Federation phaser.

“A replication?” Sela asked.

“No, a gift from my father.”

“Shouldn’t you be using a disruptor tuned to a Klingon frequency?”

“Klingons would not send a boarding party of one. The weapon and the transporter beam will be small unexplained pieces of a puzzle.”

“Excellent, Commander. Follow me,” ordered Sela as she started off the bridge. “Take Lt. Devik with you. I’ll have him waiting at the transporter room. Disable their distress signal and retrieve the sensor logs first. If you have time, then you may attempt to access their engineering data banks. You have fifteen cycles, Commander. Not a moment more.”

“Yes, Commander,” he replied.

Sela started back to the bridge but quickly stopped and stepped close to Augustok. She wore a devious smile as she stroked her fingers down the side of his face. She whispered to him: "By the way, your concern for my safety will not be forgotten." As her fingers slipped from his face to his neck, her gentle touch changed suddenly to a vicious grip around his windpipe. He gasped as she snarled at him through clenched teeth, "If you ever, ever, countermand my orders again, I will strip you of all rank and the only service you will perform for the Empire will be as my bedchamber slave!" She shoved his head hard against the wall and released him. "You are wasting valuable time, Augustok!" she snapped and returned to the bridge.

Augustok coughed and drew a deep breath. In his eyes burned the look of certain revenge as he watched her walk away. Enough time for that later; now to the task at hand. His pace was hurried as he went to his quarters. Once inside he opened a hidden storage compartment. He removed one item and placed it in his boot. He then pulled a black cape from the closet and fastened it with a large clasp that he also took from the storage compartment. Again, he moved with haste to the transporter room, arriving to find Lt. Devik already standing on the pad.

"Our time grows short, Commander," the lieutenant commented.

Augustok gave no reply as he made the necessary adjustments to the transporter unit. "Put us inside their command center," Augustok instructed the transporter crewman. He then picked up his tricorder and stepped onto the pad and signaled he was ready.

"Yes, Commander. Energizing now," acknowledged the crewman.

The two materialized in the Operations Room on board the station. As soon as transport was complete, Augustok immediately drew his phaser. The air was thin, and there were several small fires. The dead bodies of the crew lay over the consoles and on the floor. There was very little illumination. The eyes of both the men swept the room for any sign of movement. Augustok whispered his orders while he moved to the main console. "Disable the distress signal."

Devik nodded and began to work. Moments later a hand signal across the throat signified the task was complete.

"Begin accessing the engineering files," directed Augustok.

Devik again nodded, took out his tricorder and was about to begin when a noise alerted them both. Augustok moved around the console towards the Commander's office. Slowly from behind a support

beam stood a Federation security guard. Even though he was armed with a phaser, it was obvious he was having trouble standing, much less aiming his weapon. Cuts, bruises, burns, and a tattered uniform were evidence that it was a miracle that he had survived. Augustok pointed his phaser and fired. The guard's weapon flew as the blast knocked him onto his back. Lt. Devik rounded the console from the opposite side, where he drew his disruptor.

"Why did you not kill him?" he asked.

"He will perish from lack of oxygen long before any assistance can arrive."

"It is our duty to crush our enemies. If you will not, then permit me the glory of the kill." Devik pointed his disruptor at the stunned guard.

"Holster that weapon and follow my orders Lieutenant!"

"No, Sir," replied Devik.

Augustok frowned and spoke with measured intensity. "If you fire that weapon you will leave a readable trace. You will then explain to the Praetor how your one act of stupidity destroyed our entire covert operation."

"No explanations will be necessary," answered Devik as he turned to point his weapon at Augustok.

“Holster that weapon ... NOW!” Augustok’s voice was stern as he stepped closer. “You will follow my orders or I will have your head for insubordination!”

“No, Commander, I will have yours . . . for treason!” snarled Devik.

The sound of that word in Augustok’s ears pushed him to near rage. “Who are you to speak that word to me?”

“I am not Lt. Devik, I am Deslok of the Tal Shiar . . . I know much about you, Commander.” Then he added with contempt, “I know your mother was Vulcan.”

Now completely distracted from the mission at hand, Augustok snapped, “That is not a crime.”

“No, but I have reason to believe you have aided covert underground Vulcan activities on Romulus. I believe you are a sympathizer to their cause and, therefore, not completely loyal to the Empire.”

“After ALL that I have done, you dare question me! YOU are the true enemy! The disease that kills from within. I fight to preserve the Empire while you feed upon your own kind, like some savage cannibal!”

“Insults will avail you little, Commander. Your work on upgrading the warbird starship was exceptional and

appreciated. However, your usefulness is now over. You will return to Romulus to stand trial,” demanded Deslok.

“Based on your accusations?”

“I need no other. Now, surrender your phaser.”

“Death first.”

Augustok’s ultimatum had barely escaped his lips as the tension of the moment finally snapped. Both men fired. Augustok crouched to his right as his phaser shot hit Deslok squarely in the abdomen. Deslok’s disruptor blast in turn struck the clasp which held Augustok’s cloak. The burst splintered in many directions, like hitting a blast shield. The beam fragments hit Augustok’s shoulder, neck, and a grazing blow to the head. His vision grew blurry. Deslok was lying on the floor, his disruptor still in hand. Augustok knew he must act quickly. His phaser was still only on stun setting. He struggled to his feet, desperately trying to stay conscious. He staggered forward until he stood over Deslok. His adversary began to blink—he was beginning to recover. Augustok stepped on the wrist of the hand which held the disruptor. He moved the setting on his phaser to maximum. The pain from Deslok’s wrist helped bring him around. The first sight he focused on was Augustok’s phaser, pointing directly back at him. Augustok could see his enemy was awake and aware.

“Permit ME the glory of the kill,” he snarled as he slowly squeezed the trigger. The phaser shot vaporized Deslok. Augustok turned and, after only a couple of steps, fell to his knees. He shook his head trying to stay awake. His fingers fumbled through the upper part of his boot, searching for the item he had hidden there. Upon finding it he collapsed onto his side, pressing the device to his neck. The small hissing sound was a miniature hypo-spray. His world grew dark, then black.

“Commander Sela, phaser shots have been fired aboard the station,” reported the science officer.

The comm-link tone sounded, followed by the crewman’s voice. “Transporter to bridge, I’ve lost signal trace lock on Lt. Devik, Sir, and Commander Augustok’s is fading rapidly.”

Sela sat pondering the information she had just heard. She stared silently at the image of the wrecked station on the viewer. She rubbed her chin and asked, “Is there any way to access their sensor logs from here?”

“No, Commander,” replied her second officer.

“Well, Augustok, it seems we do it my way after all. Prepare another torpedo spread. Target the command center first, then obliterate the rest.”

“But Commander, with respect, shouldn’t we scan for life signs first?” inquired the second officer.

Sela gave him a menacing glare, “We will not risk dropping our cloak to perform an active scan for two men. Now keep your place you ignorant varul!”

“I obey Commander.”

“Commander!” interrupted the communications officer. “I am receiving a hailing signal, from a Federation starship.”

Sela slammed her fist on the arm of her chair in disgust. Several moments passed as she slowly relaxed and a bright look came over her face. She turned to the comm officer. “Which ship?” she asked.

“It is the *Enterprise*,” he replied.

“Excellent!” she hissed with delight. “Helm, take us to the far side of the second moon of Sherman’s Planet. We will wait for the arrival of our guests there.”

“Yes, Commander.”

Sela’s second officer went to the comm station. “The hail is repeating. It gives the ship’s registry as NCC-1701-E. This is undoubtedly the upgraded Galaxy-class ship our intelligence operatives informed us about.”

“Very good, Centurion,” said Sela with sarcasm. “Brilliant deduction.”

“They are traveling at transwarp velocity,” he continued. “They will arrive in twenty cycles.”

“I know you’re on board, Picard,” Sela whispered aloud. “I can feel it. Come, we will test your new ship in combat. After you have attempted to discern what has happened here then I will destroy you, and I will have my revenge!”

CHAPTER 3

Captain's Log, U.S.S. Enterprise, William T. Riker Commanding.

We have received an automated distress signal from Deep Space Seven. The Enterprise is responding at Transwarp Speed. The signal ended abruptly in less than thirty minutes. We can detect no transponder signal, no subspace marker and there is no response to our hails. Starfleet is sending the Sutherland to assist us, but it will be five days before she arrives. The Enterprise has performed flawlessly so far. I wish it were under better circumstances.

Riker switched off the terminal and finished his morning coffee. He checked the chronometer, noticing he still had plenty of time before his watch on the bridge began. He thought it would probably be a good idea to touch base with Dr. Selar. Since she was acting Chief Medical Officer in Beverly's absence, they should be prepared for the worst when they reached the station. He left his quarters, proceeding down the corridor to the nearest turbolift. As he stepped in, he was joined by Mr. Data.

"Good morning, Captain."

"Good morning, Mr. Data." The lift doors closed.

“Sickbay”, commanded Riker.

“Are you feeling all right, sir?”

“I’m fine, Mr. Data. I need to confer with the Doctor.”

“You are expecting the worst at DS7.”

“I smell a rat, Data, and I don’t like it.”

Data paused for a moment, a somewhat bewildered look on his face. “What has the odor of a large species of rodent to do with the situation on board DS7?” The lift stopped and the doors opened.

Riker smiled, “I’ll see you on the bridge.”

“Yes, sir.” The doors closed with Data mumbling to himself as he accessed his language banks.

Riker moved down the corridor chuckling to himself, “I just love doing that to him.” He arrived at sickbay and upon entering, went directly to the Doctor’s main office. “Good morning, Dr. Selar.”

“Captain,” she responded.

“Enjoying the big office?”

“Its space and equipment are more than adequate. To enjoy it would suggest the emotion of pleasure.”

“Right, so let’s get to the business at hand then, shall we?”

“How may I be of assistance?” she asked.

“I need to know what personnel and extra space may be required for handling the possible wounded when we reach DS7.”

“I’ll need all available medical and emergency personnel and cargo bay four as a triage center.”

“I’ll see to the cargo bay and contact you when we arrive.”

“Thank you, Captain.”

In the corridor outside Sickbay, Riker was joined by Worf.

“Are you all right, Captain?”

“Yes, my friend, I just couldn’t start my day without some of the good doctor’s Vulcan charm.”

Worf laughed out loud as they boarded the turbolift.

“Bridge,” said Worf. “You would prefer the bedside manner of a Klingon doctor?”

Riker's eyes grew wide, "Too much emotion can be as bad as none at all."

Soon, they reached the bridge and Riker stepped out as Counselor Troi stood up from the Captain's chair. "You're early."

"I was up early, I thought I'd let you get some rest. We may need you after we reach DS7."

"Efficient, but kind. We're continuing our hail, but there's still no response. Our speed has been reduced to Transwarp factor twelve to prevent coolant overheat."

"Thank you, Counselor, I relieve you." Troi and the rest of her shift left the bridge as Riker and his team settled in. "Begin day watch," he ordered.

Now came the waiting game. Wondering what he would find at DS7, he stared at the chronometer readout on the arm of his chair, 0709. But all the sounds of the bridge seemed to fade as he watched the viewscreen ... and the stars.

The stars were gazed upon by other eyes as well. Atop the Eiffel Tower, Beverly and Jean-Luc beheld a view of a fully lit city of Paris under clear, night sky. The two huddled close as a gentle but chilly wind blew.

“I had the opportunity to come here once as a young lad. I remember wishing I could spread my arms and fly right off this balcony into the stars.”

Beverly squeezed his arm and leaned her head on his shoulder. “Now that you’ve actually been there, was it a boyhood dream come true?”

“It’s been more than I even imagined, but out of all of it, it’s always been the people I’ve met that’s made the experience a rich one.” He turned to her and grasped her hand. “One person in particular.”

She almost seemed to blush at his smile. She caressed his cheek and chin with her fingers. He put his arm around her and they began to slowly stroll around the balcony.

“Has it left any questions unanswered?” she asked.

“Just two.”

“And what’s the first?”

“The one I asked a few hours ago, why you accepted my marriage proposal?”

She looked up at the night sky. “Remember our little experience on Kesprit when our thoughts were linked?”

“Vividly,” he answered with a grin.

“Remember afterwards, in your quarters that night, when you suggested we explore our feelings for one another?”

“I remember you leaving rather abruptly after making that suggestion,” he said softly.

“The truth is, I was frightened.”

“I understand.”

“No, no, not frightened about the way I felt about you. I was afraid that we would become involved and then our careers or other people would pull us apart. Or even worse, we’d turn our backs on each other because we lacked the commitment to overcome our problems. Then I would have lost the one person left in my life who meant everything to me.” She took his hands in hers and looked into his eyes. “But when you said, ‘Beverly, will you marry me?’ Then I knew, I knew we’d have the rest of lives together.” Her words were followed by the embrace and kiss of requited love. As they held each other afterwards, she asked softly in his ear, “By the way, what was the second question?”

He whispered back, “Would you like to see our room for the night, Mrs. Picard?”

“Absolutely.”

“Captain.” Worf’s voice broke Riker’s daydream-like trance. He had been deeply pondering about all the unknowns that lay ahead.

“Yes, Mr. Worf?”

“Deep Space Seven now on long range sensors.”

“Report.”

“No communications, both main and auxiliary power appear to be down. Hull integrity has been compromised. Docking arms and portions of the main section are missing. Reading debris and energy resonance traces, they have been under attack.”

Data moved to the aft science station and observed the readouts with the ensign seated there. “Confirmed, Captain, interior atmosphere has been lost in approximately seventy percent of the station. If life support has been functioning on battery back-up alone since their distress signal, then it is close to failure.”

“Bridge to Sickbay,” Riker ordered.

“Dr. Selar here.”

“Assemble your emergency medical away teams and stand by.”

“Acknowledged.”

“Bridge to Engineering.”

“LaForge here, Captain.”

“Geordi, looks like DS7 took a real pounding. We’re going to need all the damage control personnel you can spare.”

“Already on it, Captain.”

“Visual range, Captain,” reported the Ops lieutenant.

“On screen.” The image appeared small, but the damage was obvious. “Magnify.” The screen blinked and the station came into full view. Every eye on the bridge stared at the screen with awestruck silence. Riker stood from his chair. “What the hell could have...” he mumbled, shaking his head with disbelief. He looked at Data. “Life signs?”

“Life signs are intermittent and low. If there are survivors, then they must be unconscious.”

“Closing on the station now, sir,” reported the helm.

“Slow to half impulse, when we reach five thousand kilometers hold station there,” ordered Riker.

“Aye sir.”

“Data, how many were on board?”

“Starfleet records indicate a skeleton crew of 366.”

“Transporter Rooms One, Two and Three stand by to begin beaming any survivors directly to Cargo Bay Four.”

“All three transporter rooms acknowledged.” said Worf.

“Riker to LaForge.”

“LaForge here sir.”

“Geordi, is there any way we can get their life support systems back on-line quickly?”

“We could supply a power transfer beam to one of their solar arrays that are still intact. That would re-initiate their primary systems.”

“Holding station at five thousand kilometers, Captain.” reported the helm.

“Mr. Worf, initiate power transfer.”

“Aye sir.”

“Data is their operations center still intact?”

Data worked the touch pad and observed the readouts. “Affirmative, Operations remains intact, but the atmosphere is very thin.”

“You and Worf join Dr. Selar in Transporter Room Three. Beam over to Operations. Get life support back online. Then, check the sensor logs. See if you can find out what happened.”

Worf and Data left the bridge as Riker informed the doctor they were joining her.

Moments later the three materialized on board the station. The room was dark except for the light being produced by arcing circuits and small fires. The air was hazy with smoke. They activated their palm beacons. Worf drew his phaser and began to scan the room. Data made his way to the main console. His fingers moved rapidly as he rerouted the incoming power to the vital systems. The air began to clear. They stored their palm beacons as he restored emergency lighting. While he was doing so, Dr. Selar moved from body to body scanning and checking for any vital signs.

Ready to give a report, Data activated his comm badge. “Data to *Enterprise*.”

“Go ahead,” came Riker’s reply.

“I have restored life support and emergency lighting to Operations and most of the main section. Power conduits to the connecting arms and remaining main section have been severed.”

“Any survivors?”

Data looked at Dr. Selar. A small shake of her head was her reply. “None so far,” reported Data.

“Damage control teams are on their way. Keep me advised. Riker out.”

Worf climbed the stairs to the tactical console. Once there, he quickly noticed the Romulan tricorder lying next to the readout screen. His phaser at the ready, he immediately set about finding its owner. He didn't have to look far. A few meters away, prone on the floor, lay the end of his search. Worf called out for Data and the Doctor and they came with dispatch.

Dr. Selar checked for a pulse and began her medical scan. “This one's still alive,” she said.

Data began scanning the surrounding area with his tricorder. Worf stood guard over the doctor while she worked.

“Most curious,” she commented. It would appear as if there is a chemical in his bloodstream that is attempting to mask his life signs from my medical scanner.”

Data knelt over the fallen security guard and continued to scan. Dr. Selar asked Worf to help her turn the Romulan over. As they did, Worf instantly caught sight of his weapon and snatched it from his hand. Worf stared at the phaser, completely bewildered.

Dr. Selar noticed the Romulan’s head wound and turned to Data. “I need to get him to Sickbay immediately.” Data nodded his head in agreement. “Selar to *Enterprise*, two to beam directly to Sickbay.”

“Data to *Enterprise*.”

“Riker here.”

“Dr. Selar is returning with a survivor, a Romulan officer.”

A Romulan?”

“Yes sir. Please send security to Sickbay as Lt. Worf is remaining here for further investigation.”

“Mr. Worf, I’m sending security to accompany each of the away teams. They’ll coordinate with you on five-minute intervals until the station is secure.”

“Aye Captain. Worf out.” Worf handed the phaser to Data. “Why would a Romulan be armed with an antique Federation weapon? These hand phasers have not been used for over twenty years.”

Data took the weapon and scanned with his tricorder. “I do not know Mr. Worf, but its energy signature matches the resonance traces I scanned previously.”

“His tricorder was left here,” said Worf as he moved to the tactical console. “I believe he was trying to access the sensor logs.”

Data was about to follow Worf when he noticed something on the floor. Picking up the object, he held it at eye level.

“What is it?” asked Worf.

“It seems to be a miniature hypo-spray device.” Data scanned the container.

“Perhaps it contains a poison, intended for suicide?”

“I am uncertain of its content. It does not register as any widely known poison. Dr. Selar will undoubtedly need this for her analysis.” Data then joined Worf at the console. Worf brought up the station logs as Data accessed the Romulan tricorder. “It appears he did not gather any information.”

“Because there seems to be nothing here,” responded Worf.

“Please explain,” asked Data, closing the Romulan device.

“Observe the readout, Commander. Up until this point the sensors show nothing. Then from twenty-two thousand kilometers, there appears a close pattern spread of torpedoes. Shields had just been activated. A direct hit was struck in the engineering section, terminating both main and auxiliary power.”

“Download these logs to the *Enterprise* main computer for further study. Complete your security sweep and return to the ship.” ordered Data.

“Aye, sir.”

“Data to transporter room two, one to beam aboard.”

Riker hurried down the corridor until he reached Sickbay. As he walked in, he saw Data delivering the hypo-spray device to Dr. Selar. The doctor scanned the device with her medical tricorder. She then gave it to Nurse Ogawa and requested an analysis and possible antidote.

“Was he poisoned?” asked Riker.

“Unknown at this time,” replied the doctor. “However, the DNA traces on the hypo match the patient’s. Whatever is in his bloodstream, he injected himself. If it is a poison, then it is a very slow acting toxin. It is therefore illogical that it would be used for suicide.”

Nurse Ogawa returned. “Doctor, the drug contains nucleic acids and other multi-compound substances. It’s very similar to the treatment used on the soldiers on Angosia 3. Repeated use alters cell structure to mask electrical nerve impulses.”

“You mean he wanted us to think he was dead?” asked Riker.

“A possibility,” said the doctor. “Nurse, does your analysis include an antidote?”

“Yes, Doctor. The computer suggests a ribo-birathium plasma suspension.”

“Very well. Nurse, prepare a hypo, 50CCs.” The doctor then moved to the opposite side of the bio-bed. Nurse Ogawa returned with the hypo and Dr. Selar injected the patient. She then removed the clasp holding his cape and brought it to Riker.

“You should examine this,” she said. “The wounds to his head and shoulder were made by a disruptor at maximum power. The only reason he is still alive is

because the blast hit this first, splintering the beam in several directions.”

“That’s some piece of jewelry,” Riker examined the object. He then handed the clasp to Data. “Mr. Data, take this to engineering and run a metallurgical analysis.”

“Yes, sir. Would you like the report on the away team’s findings?”

“I’ll be calling a senior staff meeting in 15 minutes. Coordinate your findings with Geordi and report then.”

“Yes sir,” answered Data and he left for Engineering.

“Is he going to make it?” Riker asked the doctor.

“The anti-toxin is beginning to take effect. The life signs that are readable are low but not dropping. I should have him stable soon.”

“Good, I have more than a few questions.”

“I cannot predict how long it will be before he regains consciousness.”

“I want to be informed as soon as he does.”

“Of course, sir.”

“Will you be able to report at the staff meeting?”

“I believe so, Captain.”

“Thank you, Doctor. I’ll see you in 15 minutes.”

As Riker left Sickbay, Nurse Ogawa brought Dr. Selar the instruments to close the wounds on his head and shoulder. She scanned his cranial region and watched the bio-readout. She paused at the area near the closed head injury. “He has a subdural hematoma, neuro-stabilizer please.” Nurse Ogawa handed the device to the doctor, who paused before placing it on his forehead. Selar gently touched the area between his eyebrows. “Interesting,” she commented.

“What is it Doctor?” asked the nurse.

“The protruding parietal bones of the skull, common to Romulan anatomy, are strangely absent.” She then placed the stabilizer and activated it. She watched the readout intently as the device relieved the pressure on his brain.

“Getting a clear reading now, Doctor,” reported the nurse. “His vital signs are firming up.”

“Ten cc’s anaprovaline,” ordered Dr. Selar. She administered the hypo and continued to monitor his recovery. “Retinal scanner.” Nurse Ogawa handed her the scanner and removed the neuro-stabilizer. The doctor

then opened one of the patient's eyes and began the scan. "Computer, visual readout."

The screen above the bed displayed the interior of the eye. The kaleidoscope of green hues appeared almost like a rock formation of jade and emerald. "Excellent," commented Selar. "There appears to be no internal bleeding." She proceeded to the other eye. Just as she started to scan the patient twitched, then blinked.

"Doctor," exclaimed the nurse.

She released her finger from his eyelid as he blinked again. "His synaptic response is still too low to be regaining cognitive functions," stated the doctor. "Computer, neural readout."

He blinked again, this time his eyes remained open, staring at the doctor.

"Can you hear me?" she asked.

He slowly reached and lightly touched the edge of her ear. His fingers then slipped into her long black hair. The strands slid between his fingers down to her shoulder. She took his hand in hers and he very gently squeezed.

"Can you hear me?" she repeated. His grip faded and his eyes closed, seemingly the same as before. "If he wakes

again, administer a sedative so he will rest until he regains strength. I must report to the Captain.”

“Should I activate the restraining field?” asked the nurse.

“A wise precaution, proceed,” answered the doctor as she left Sickbay.

Aboard the Romulan ship, the bridge doors opened and Sela returned to her chair. The lieutenant seated there immediately yielded and stood at attention. “Report,” she ordered.

“We have been bouncing our scans off the moon’s gravity field to avoid detection. The *Enterprise* is holding station at five thousand kilometers. They are supplying power to the station with an energy transfer beam. There have been numerous transporter beams; presumably for their rescue operation. Their shields are down and no weapons are online. They are defenseless.”

“Defensive systems offline is not defenseless lieutenant.”

“Yes, sir.”

“What about the position of the outermost planet?”

“It will eclipse us from the station in forty cycles.”

“Excellent. When it does, take us from behind the moon to a position above the planet’s magnetic pole. One-quarter impulse power and remain cloaked.”

“Yes, my commander,” responded the lieutenant. He moved to his station and asked, “Shall we power up the weapons?”

“We will attack on my command and my command only!”

“Yes, Commander.”

Sela turned to face the viewscreen as she murmured, “Not yet, Picard, not yet. But soon, just when you think you are safe.”

CHAPTER 4

Riker stood staring intensely out the viewport of the Ready Room with a clenched fist behind his back. "I know you're still out there," he muttered with a snarl. The door tone sounded. "Come!"

Data reported, "The staff is assembled in the bridge conference room."

"Thank you, Mr. Data," replied Riker, never taking his eyes from the window.

Several seconds passed until Data approached the desk. "Is there something wrong, sir?"

Riker turned with a dry, angry look, "Yes, Mr. Data, I smell a rat, and it's got green blood and pointed ears."

"I do not believe Romulus has such a species."

Riker seemed to ignore Data's remark as he strode from the room. Data followed closely behind as they traversed the bridge en route to the conference. As Riker entered the room everyone took their seats. Riker got right to business. "Report, Mr. Data."

"Deep Space Seven has been attacked and rendered inoperable and most likely not repairable. The source of

the attack is still unknown at this time. Sensor logs retrieved from the station show they were struck with high yield photon torpedoes. Other damage sustained by the structure suggests the use of high frequency plasma disruptors. There is very little information after the initial attack due to their loss of main power. There is no evidence recorded by the sensors that a ship of any kind was present.”

“Nothing at all?” said Riker with surprise.

“Since there is no known natural phenomenon that would produce anything remotely similar to photon torpedoes, we must conclude that a ship of some type delivered those weapons. However, there were no abnormal readings of gamma or neutron radiation, matter or anti-matter energy surges or tachyon particle emissions that would suggest a cloaked ship. There is also no evidence of any chronoton fields or traces that would suggest a phased ship. In either case, the ship must become visible in order to fire its weapons.”

“It would seem someone has overcome that deficiency,” Worf grunted.

“Agreed,” added Riker.

“There is one thing,” continued Data. “At eight point two seconds before the attack, motion detectors sensed a subspace inertial displacement moving at warp 9.97.”

“And since no natural phenomenon moves at warp speed...” Geordi added.

“...then there had to be a ship,” finished Worf.

“And a fast one at that,” said Riker. “What about survivors?”

Dr. Selar answered, “Out of the 356 on board, 127 are missing and presumed dead. Only 47 survivors were found and brought aboard the *Enterprise*; 13 of those have died, mostly from a combination of injuries inflicted during the attack, blood loss and failing life support systems.”

“Does that include our ‘guest’?” asked Riker with sarcasm.

“No, sir,” answered the Doctor. “He appears to be stable.”

“I object to the term ‘guest,’” snapped Worf. “He is a prisoner! The Romulans are obviously responsible for this attack!”

"I use the term 'guest' with reservations Mr. Worf," responded Riker. "I apologize if I was misleading. However, we have no concrete evidence as yet to prove it *was* Romulan."

"He was found on board the station!" stated Worf.

"That does not prove he was responsible," answered Data. "He was unconscious when we found him, and our scans show he was injured by a Romulan disruptor."

"So, there were more than one on board?" questioned Riker.

"I believe so, Captain," Data continued. "My tricorder registered DNA fragments several meters away. The sequences were consistent with known Romulan anatomy. I believe another Romulan was vaporized in that area. In addition, the resonate energy traces correspond to the weapon we found in his possession."

"He was armed with this," said Worf as he handed the phaser to Riker. He stared momentarily at the weapon with surprise.

Riker then looked back at Worf. "A replication?"

"No, sir," he responded. "I checked its registry code and it is an authentic Federation phaser. It was issued to Lt.

Richard Castillo, Helmsman aboard the U.S.S. *Enterprise*, 1701-C.”

The room fell silent for several seconds as everyone glanced at each other, searching for an answer to the question running through their minds. Geordi finally broke the tension, “How the hell did this guy get a thirty year old Federation phaser, and why use it now?”

“And why to kill one of his own?” added Riker.

“Why was it then necessary to drug himself to appear as though he were dead?” asked Dr. Selar.

“Too many questions,” said Geordi.

“And not nearly enough answers,” quipped Riker. “But I’m willing to bet our friend in Sickbay will be a wealth of information. When can I see him, doctor?”

“I administered a sedative to help him rest. He should regain sufficient strength in approximately two hours,” answered Dr. Selar. She stood from her chair and added, “If you will excuse me, Captain, I must return to Sickbay and see to the other wounded.”

“Very well, thank you, Doctor. Dismissed.”

“Captain, this could all be an elaborate scheme to plant him among us as a spy!” Worf said with suspicion.

“A possibility,” responded Riker. “But I’m confident you will address those issues when the time comes.”

“Gladly sir,” nodded Worf.

“Mr. Data, what about the metal clasp from the Romulan’s uniform?” asked Riker.

Data looked at Geordi. “I asked Commander LaForge to assist me with the analysis.”

“What did you find, Geordi?” asked Riker.

Geordi stood and activated the viewscreen. The computer displayed a visual of the clasp and a molecular make-up of the substance. “The outside layer is strictly a cosmetic coating of silver pressed latinum. The disruptor melted right through it. However, what’s underneath I’ve never seen before. The best way I can describe it is some kind of tritanium/carbon-neutronium alloy. It not only deflected everything I threw at it, but it’s sixty-two percent harder than the best ablative armor we’ve got, with only a half a percent increase in weight.”

“It is highly unlikely it was intended for personal protection,” continued Data. “So we can only speculate as to its real purpose.”

“More questions,” sighed Riker. “Mr. Data, make a full report to Starfleet and to the *Sutherland*. Tell them to

expect updates as we get new information.” Data nodded as Riker stood from his chair.

“Well done, all of you. Keep me apprised. Dismissed.

CHAPTER 5

Captain's Log, USS Enterprise, William T. Riker Commanding

We have been engaged in rescue and relief operations for Federation Station DS7 for over nine hours. I have just dispatched our last update to Starfleet Command. The Sutherland has been rerouted as there's nothing they could do even if they were here. Our damage control teams have done all they can. I'm still shocked by the condition of the station. The level of destruction is nothing short of brutal. It's as though the Borg had returned. I'm even more sorrowful that our medical staff are burdened more with autopsies than saving lives. I can't get over the fact that, out of a crew of 356, only 32 have survived, most with severe injuries. Then there's the Romulan prisoner. The thought of him alone raises a hundred questions. But every instinct I have tells me he holds all the answers I need.

Riker sat in silence staring at his terminal screen, mulling over all the questions without answers. Then his train of thought was broken by the door tone. "Come."

Counselor Troi entered with a smile. "Can I help you Counselor?" asked Riker.

She proceeded directly to the food slot, “Computer, hot chocolate for two.”

Riker returned her smile as the drinks materialized and she brought them to the table. “To what do I owe this pleasure?” he asked.

“Chocolate first, talk later,” she said.

Several moments quietly passed as he honored her request. He smiled and shook his head with approval as he drank. Afterward, he turned off his terminal and relaxed with his cup.

“Your duty shift ended over an hour ago,” she said.

“I was just catching up my log.”

She sipped her cocoa and continued. “Something’s weighing very heavily on your mind.”

“It’s been quite a day,” he answered with a touch of humor.

“You don’t look very well.”

“That’s a helluva thing to say to a man.”

“I mean you look tired,” she smiled.

“That’s not much better, but closer to the truth.”

“I’ve seen the station; it’s tragic.”

“It’s more than tragic, I just don’t know the words to describe it.”

He paused for a moment to finish his drink. “Have you met our guest, survivor, prisoner, whatever you call him?”

“You mean the Romulan officer?”

“None other.”

“No, I haven’t. Actually that’s why I came to see you.”

“And here I thought it was my dashing good looks.”

“I thought it would be best if we went to see him together.”

“I can’t think of anything else I’d rather do,” he said as he stood, then moved around the table and gestured toward the door as if to say, “after you.”

Dr. Selar sat at her desk, busily completing information from her chart pad onto her computer terminal. She

seemed unaffected and uninterrupted when Riker and Troi entered the office.

“Excuse me, Doctor,” said Riker.

“It’s quite all right, Captain. I welcome a distraction from processing death certificate information,” responded the Doctor.

“How’s our Romulan patient?” asked Troi.

“Our half-Romulan, half-Vulcan patient is resting comfortably.”

“Half Vulcan?” said Riker with disbelief.

“I noticed inconsistencies in the bio-readings. I have run a thorough comparison and believe my findings are correct.”

“I trust your findings, Doctor, I am just surprised. I’m also ready for him to answer some questions,” said Riker.

“He has not yet awakened.”

“Would reviving him pose a danger to his condition?” asked Troi.

“No, I don’t believe it would.”

“Then wake him,” ordered Riker. “He’s had more rest than any of us.”

Dr. Selar nodded and led the way out of the office. She prepared a hypo-spray and injected the patient. Slowly he began to stir and squint his eyes. He drew a deep breath and looked around, appearing lost and confused.

“Can you hear me?” asked the Doctor.

The soft whisper of a name escaped his lips. He reached as if to touch Dr. Selar’s face but stopped. He glanced at Riker and Troi, then back to the Doctor. He felt his chest and looked at his hands, then stared at Dr. Selar again. “I’m alive?” he asked.

“Yes,” she responded. “I’m Doctor Selar; you’ve been treated for injuries. You’re aboard the Federation Starship *Enterprise*.”

“I’m Captain William T. Riker and this is Deanna Troi, ship’s counselor. You were found aboard the DS7 space station. Can you tell us who you are and why you were there?”

“Did you say this was the *Enterprise*?” he asked.

“Yes,” replied Riker.

“Picard, is Captain Picard on board? I must see him.” He tried to sit up but grabbed his head in pain.

Dr. Selar guided him as he lay back down. “You sustained a serious head injury. Do not attempt to move quickly for now,” instructed the Doctor.

Riker appeared to be growing impatient. Deanna could sense his frustration. She concentrated on the patient and whispered to Will, “I’m sensing anxiety and confusion from him.”

Riker decided to try again; “Can you tell us who you are?”

The patient struggled to his elbows but still appeared groggy. “I am Commander Augustok of the Imperial Romulan Empire, and I must see Captain Jean-Luc Picard.”

“Captain Picard is unavailable right now,” replied Riker. “I’m in command, and I’d like to ask you a few questions.”

“I will answer all questions when I meet with Captain Picard.”

“Why is it so imperative that you speak only with Captain Picard?” asked Riker in a stern tone of voice.

“He is the only one who will believe me,” answered Augustok.

Riker Leaned closer and gave Augustok a dry stare. His tone was all business. “If you don’t give me a good reason, you won’t be seeing Captain Picard until you’re in a detention cell on the nearest starbase.”

“I request asylum.”

“Are you telling me you got on board the station just so you could defect?” Riker asked with disbelief.

“I knew the Federation would send a ship. I could only pray it would be the *Enterprise* and Picard.”

“Are the Romulans responsible for the attack on Deep Space Seven?” questioned Riker.

Augustok opened his mouth as if trying to speak but collapsed back onto the bed. He drew another breath and forced out one word before he blacked out, “Nokturak.”

Dr. Selar administered a mild sedative and observed the readouts.

“The effects of the concussion will pass with sufficient rest.”

“How long?” asked Troi.

“Several hours,” replied Dr. Selar.

“You could use some rest too, Will,” said Deanna taking him by the arm.

“What was that he said, right before he blacked out?” asked Riker.

“Nokturak,” replied Dr. Selar. “A mythical bird of prey from Romulan folklore. Ancient Vulcans had a similar belief. The closest translation would be ‘Nighthawk.’ Its appearance was fabled to be the harbinger of death and destruction.”

“You mean he believes a space station was all but destroyed by some kind of ghost bird?” asked the tense Captain.

“Unknown, sir,” replied the Doctor. “His condition could result in memory loss or even delusion.”

“Thank you, Doctor,” said Deanna, sensing Riker’s growing tension with unanswered questions. She then led him out of Sickbay.

Once in the corridor, she offered her opinion. “Get some sleep, Will. We’ll try again in the morning.”

“How can I sleep with everything hinging on what he knows?”

“I sensed no deception from him. I believe he’ll cooperate when he’s stronger and thinking clearly.”

“You mean he’ll cooperate with Captain Picard.”

“I have a feeling he’ll react differently in the morning. Come on, Captain, I’ll walk you to your quarters.” Deanna’s last remark coaxed a slight grin from her Captain as they stepped into the turbolift together.

Nurse Ogawa passed the doorway to the Doctor’s office on her way into main ward of Sickbay. It was the early morning hours of night watch and Dr. Selar was still steadily at work. “Weren’t you here when I left?” asked Ogawa.

“Vulcans are able to function for extended periods without rest if need be.” answered Dr. Selar, never taking her eyes from her terminal.

“Everybody needs a break,” replied the nurse. “It’s been over five hours.”

“Doctor, may I see you?” a voice called from the main ward.

Selar and Ogawa looked at each other with surprise and left the office together. The lights in the main ward were low for night watch.

“Computer increase lighting fifty percent.” ordered Selar. The lights came up to reveal her Romulan patient sitting up in bed. “Evidently your condition has improved rapidly.” she said as she came to the bedside and began to check the bio-readouts. The sight of her seemed to have him entranced. He broke her concentration on the readings when he gently touched her chin and turned her head until their eyes met. A moment passed as a pleasant look of recognition came over his face.

“The resemblance is unbelievable.” he said.

She placed his hand back into his lap. “Resemblance to whom?” she asked.

“Please forgive me Doctor, I remember opening my eyes and seeing the face of a Vulcan woman. Someone I lost who meant a great deal to me. I thought I might be dreaming or that I had died and she was welcoming my spirit home to Sha Ka Ree.”

“You regained consciousness during my first examination. It is logical to assume you could have

mistaken my appearance for someone else," she said as she scanned his head and shoulder wounds.

"I must also thank you for sedating me at our first conversation. When you revived me, I was concentrating all my thought towards healing my body. My sudden awakening was very disorienting."

She folded her tricorder closed. "Mental concentration healing and the belief of Sha Ka Ree are from Vulcan culture."

"Yes, Doctor, my mother was Vulcan and this special person that I lost...her name was T'Lier, a Vulcan woman of great beauty. I learned much of your philosophy. I believe our people have a common future. We have much to offer one another."

"An advocate of reunification," observed Selar.

"I believe it to be logical," he added.

"Is this your purpose for defection?" she asked.

"I'm afraid it's far more serious than that. I must ask to see your Captain."

"Agreed," she answered as she tapped her communicator. "Sickbay to Captain Riker, Sickbay to Captain Riker, respond please."

Several seconds passed and Riker answered in a gruff, just awakened voice. "Riker here, go ahead."

"I have a patient requesting your presence, Sir."

"On my way."

It wasn't long before Riker arrived, once again accompanied by Counselor Troi. Together, they entered and Riker was surprised to see the Romulan sitting on the side of the bed.

"Good morning, Commander. You appear to be feeling better," greeted Riker as he approached the bedside.

"Thank you, Captain," replied Augustok.

"Do you remember our previous conversation?" asked Troi.

"Most of it, I believe."

"Are you ready to continue?" asked Riker.

"Yes, Captain."

Riker noted that Augustok seemed calm and alert, but would he be willing to provide the information he needed without the presence of Picard. He was about to find out.

“Why were you on board Deep Space Seven?”

Augustok’s answer was straightforward, “I was sent there to retrieve the sensor logs. I saw it as my opportunity to escape.”

Dr. Selar held up the miniature hypo-spray device and stated, “You injected yourself with this drug so they would believe you were dead.”

“That is correct.”

“Did you kill one of your own crewmen to cover yourself?”

“It was unavoidable, Captain. I originally intended to stage a transporter malfunction once we were on the station. However, the lieutenant who accompanied me turned out to be a Tal Shiar agent. His intent was to arrest or kill me. I was left with no other option.”

“The Tal Shiar? I thought they had been wiped out?” said Troi.

“The Praetor has been rebuilding them as his personal intelligence force. They serve and answer only to him.”

“Who is the Praetor?” asked Riker.

Augustok shook his head for a moment and attempted to explain.

“Your Federation operatives on Romulus have not been keeping you well informed. Former Admiral Mendek was installed as Praetor quite some time ago. The Romulan senate can debate all of the laws and rulings it wishes, but they cannot stop the Praetor from the conquest of space for the growth of the Empire. If any envoy or ambassador were to question the senate, they would feign ignorance of his actions. Those that would seek to unseat him are dealt with, even those that could pose a threat to his power by revealing his actions.”

“Which is why they came after you,” assumed Riker.

“I was being observed because I am half-Vulcan and because the Praetor opposes reunification. He proposes the conquest of Vulcan and everything in between. Besides, the agent he sent to watch me, I killed for personal reasons.”

Riker’s disgust with what he had just heard kindled his anger. This was the information that was so important that only Captain Picard could be told? Riker snapped, “So you’re defecting as a means of protection because you murdered a member of the Tal Shiar?”

Augustok got to his feet and faced Riker. An intense frown came over his face as he replied to Riker's charge, "Let us be very clear, Captain. I shot that gutless pig in self-defense! He was the one guilty of murder. The murder of eleven of his own people! Romulans! Innocent civilians! All just to take the life of one young woman whose only crime was being Vulcan! I can still see the burning shuttlecraft when I close my eyes. I saw him there. He asked if I was wiser now? I vowed he would pay with his life."

Several tense seconds of silence passed as Deanna sensed the anger and anguish pouring out of him from the memory of his loss. Augustok sighed and regained his composure.

"I have come here for something far more important. Not just for me but the preservation of us all."

"Let me guess, you're here to stop a war?" quipped Riker.

"Before it begins," answered Augustok.

"Forgive me if I'm a little skeptical Commander, but I've heard this one before."

"From Admiral Jarok."

"Exactly."

Augustok looked directly at Riker, "I served under Jarok's command, learned much from him and respected him. But what he did was an act of desperation, ill-prepared and without solid evidence. He made the grave mistake of making public his discontent with empire directives. What he did took great courage but it changed nothing and cost him everything. I share many of his ideals, but I knew to speak them aloud would call my loyalty into question and that would be certain death. Like Jarok, I know another war will only bring loss and destruction to my people. Yet that is exactly what the Praetor and his council order us to do; develop weapons, prepare to conquer. The space station was only a test."

"So, the Romulans are responsible," said Riker.

"Yes."

"The station was destroyed just to test a new weapon?" asked Troi.

"Not just a weapon, Nokturak."

"You said that just before you blacked out last time," said Troi.

"The Doctor said it was the legend of a ghost bird," stated Riker sarcastically. "You don't expect me to believe over 300 people died from a myth?"

“Nokturak is only a name, Captain. The name of the Empire’s latest warbird—the Nighthawk-class warbird and she is a formidable vessel. I should know ... it is my creation.”

“You mean to tell me ONE warbird attacked the station?”

“Yes, Captain, and it will be the prototype for many others. You must not let the Empire have this advantage.”

“And what am I supposed to do?” asked Riker.

“Arrange for me to meet with Captain Picard,” said Augustok.

“Why Captain Picard?” asked Riker sternly.

“Because he must have listened to Jarok and believed in him enough to act on what he was told. Because of that I believe in Picard. I was also told he is a man of integrity, diplomacy, and honor. The man who told me this knew Picard personally and I would trust him with my life.”

“Who on Romulus knows Captain Picard personally?” asked Troi.

“A former Federation ambassador.”

“Spock,” said Riker.

Augustok nodded in acknowledgment. Riker pulled Deanna aside. The look on his face asked the obvious question.

“I sense nothing but zealous honesty, no deception whatsoever.”

Riker turned to the security guard. “With the Doctor’s permission, see to quarters for our guest. Security Level One.”

“Aye, sir,” answered the ensign.

Riker then turned to Augustok, “I’ll see what I can do about contacting Captain Picard.”

“Thank you, Captain. I’ll be waiting,” answered Augustok.

Riker anxiously stood outside the door of Holodeck Four. He tapped the control pad and with distress, “Computer, send message.”

Meanwhile, inside the Holodeck, on the waterways of Venice, Picard leaned on the stern of small gondola. He wore the old traditional outfit of a gondolier, flat brim white hat with a long black ribbon, black and white striped shirt and short black pants. Beverly lounged in the passenger seat, facing Jean-Luc. She wore a full lace white gown. She held a parasol that shaded her bare shoulders. A wide smile was accompanied by an occasional suppressed giggle. Jean-Luc slowly pushed the gondola along while he softly serenaded his bride.

“You’re singing in French, Jean-Luc, we’re in Italy, remember?” Beverly said as she turned her parasol between her fingers.

“I always thought French was more romantic than Italian. Besides, I don’t know any Italian love songs,” he replied.

“Italians know other things that are romantic,” she said with an outstretched hand. Jean-Luc put down the pole and cozied up underneath the parasol with her. She kissed him and whispered, “Get someone else to pole the boat ... someone quiet.” Their mutual smile was interrupted by the computer’s voice.

“Captain Picard, priority audio message from Captain Riker.”

“Computer, play message,” ordered Picard.

“Captain Picard, I can’t tell you how much I detest the idea of disturbing your honeymoon. I have attempted to keep this intrusion to a minimum. At your convenience, you may call for the Arch. I have filed a report of our situation and mission to date. Please feel free to take your time and contact me at your leisure. Captain, Doctor, please forgive me once again. Riker out.”

Moments passed but the blank stare on the couple’s faces told the pondering thoughts over what they just heard.

With his arm still around her, Jean-Luc gazed at Beverly. A nod of her head answered his silent question. He grasped her hand and kissed her knuckle as if to say thank you. He picked up the pole and pushed them to the next landing. He climbed onto the dock and helped Beverly up.

“Computer, Arch” he ordered. The Arch appeared and he moved to the terminal. “Computer, display mission report.” He began reading the first page.

Beverly stepped up close behind him, gently grasping his upper arms. Over his shoulder, she began reading the report as well. A look of shock and sorrow seemed to

come over them both. Beverly gasped, "Dear Lord, only thirty survivors!"

Jean-Luc wore a look of great concern. "Attacking a Federation space station near Sherman's Planet, no doubt an attempt to implicate the Klingons."

After a few more seconds of reading, Beverly put her arms around her husband's waist. Placing her chin on his shoulder, she said with fear, "Another Romulan defector?"

"Indeed," said Jean-Luc. "One who served with Jarok and supposedly knows Ambassador Spock." Jean-Luc turned and held his wife by the shoulders. He looked into her eyes. "Beverly," he said, "I don't know how to ask this..."

"Don't worry Jean-Luc," she said with a gentle smile. "I almost expected this would happen. I only wish it weren't such horrible circumstances."

"You're the perfect Captain's wife, my love," he whispered.

"And I'll call you the perfect Captain when we finish our honeymoon, after this is over."

"That's a promise."

“Then let’s go, Captain.”

In his quarters, Picard affixed his rank insignia and placed his communicator on his chest. Beverly came out of the bedroom in her uniform, her lab coat over her arm. She kissed Jean-Luc on the cheek.

“I’m going to Sickbay. I’ll see you in the observation lounge.”

Jean-Luc nodded with a smile and tapped his communicator as Beverly left the room. “Picard to Riker.”

“Riker here.”

“Assemble the senior staff on the observation lounge. I want a complete briefing in 15 minutes.”

“Aye sir.”

Augustok stared at the large computer screen in his quarters. Images of history moved by, passing occasionally for sections of written text. Suddenly his door opened and Worf stepped in.

“Captain Picard and his staff are prepared to debrief you. You will come with me.”

Augustok rose slowly and looked at Worf for several seconds, "You're the Klingon officer, Worf is it?"

"What of it?" Worf questioned with distaste.

"I've heard a great deal about you. I'm honored to meet you."

"Honor is a word unknown to Romulans!" snapped Worf.

"I understand your distrust. I don't blame you. The Romulans have committed many deceitful acts against your people." Worf pointed out the door and they proceeded down the corridor. "I hope to prove there is such a thing as an honorable, trustworthy Romulan."

"That will be no easy task!" answered Worf.

In the observatory lounge, Picard and his staff continued discussing the events and information they had gathered. Worf then escorted Augustok into the room.

"Commander, please have a seat", began Picard. "I believe you already know most of my staff. Captain Riker, Counselor Troi, my Chief of Security Lt. Commander Worf."

“Yes, Captain,” answered Augustok.

Picard continued, “In addition, my Chief Medical Officer Dr. Beverly Picard, my Chief of Engineering, Lt. Commander Geordi LaForge, and my Second Officer Lt. Commander Data.”

“Ahhh, the android officer! A pleasure, sir”, said Augustok. Data nodded his head in response.

Capt. Picard Leaned forward and laced his fingers. “Commander, I have been fully briefed by my staff on the events of the mission to date. It seems ever since you were brought aboard you have been persistent about speaking to me. Let me begin by saying that if it were not for the tremendous respect and admiration I have for former Ambassador Spock, I would not be here. As for Admiral Jarok, his courage was admirable, but acting on claims without evidence provided the provocation that very nearly started an interplanetary war. So Commander, as I told your predecessor, you must convince me of why you are here. You wanted my listening ear, now’s your chance...make it count.

“Spock said you were wise... and direct. He spoke truly. Let me be equally direct when I say that if you wish to preserve peace, you must hear me out. If you will do that, you will be convinced.”

“For one to speak of peace after having participated in the deaths of over 300 people seems somewhat contradictory,” interjected Data.

“You are exactly right, Mr. Data,” Augustok answered. “How many people has the Federation lost at the hands of the Romulans since the Treaty of Algeron? How many Klingon?” he asked turning to Worf before he continued. “How many Romulans have given their lives in nothing more than a vain attempt to satisfy their glory hungry leaders? Their thirst for power could not be quenched with the entire galaxy! In my 18 years of service to the Empire, I have served on four starships. I have received the highest commendations for theoretical and mechanical engineering and scientific research for weaponry and defense systems. Through all this time there have been no battles and no victories, nothing has been gained. The only constants have been conflict and death. Three years ago my credentials garnered me the assignment of upgrading the current Warbird Starship.”

“What kind of upgrade?” asked LaForge.

“The Empire wants enough of an advantage to make them confident of victory. We have increased its stealth and tactical offensive capabilities. Speed, power reserves, durability, and resistance to sensor detection have all been improved. But most importantly, it has the ability to fire its weapons while still under cloak.”

“This is the ship that attacked the station?” asked Picard.

“Yes, Captain.”

“Judging from the damage done to the station, I’m sorry to say your project was a success,” added LaForge.

“I share your sentiment Mr. LaForge,” continued Augustok. “Unfortunately, this is only the first step. The Romulans are diligently seeking to perfect a trilitium weapon. The threat of such a weapon being delivered by this ship will be an advantage they will exploit.”

Picard was puzzled by Augustok’s statement. This was not a typical Romulan tactic. “Why after centuries of strategic entrapment and provocation would they now resort to terrorist tactics?”

Augustok spoke with zeal, “To use the word terrorist implies someone who uses violence to instill fear with little or no hope of eventual victory. This is not the Praetor’s plan. Previous tactics were aimed at weakening alliances. The Klingon’s withdrawal from the Khitomer Treaty is something he had been waiting for. Other tactics were designed to test enemy strength and levels of tolerance, which is why the Federation station was chosen for this mission. He wished to see just how far he can push the Federation before they will declare

war. But, if the Praetor feels he has a sufficient advantage, his forces will come, treaty or no; and if they perfect this weapon, then a system in the Neutral Zone will have its star destroyed, just to set an example.”

Augustok’s words set Worf’s warrior blood ablaze. It was apparent he was restraining himself as he snapped at the Romulan across the table, “The Federation will not stand by idle while your kind take the Neutral Zone!”

Augustok shot back, “If you wait until that day to act it will be too late! This threat must be neutralized as quickly as possible!”

Picard’s diplomatic skill showed itself as he calmly questioned the Romulan; “Commander, are you proposing that we quickly develop a weapon to destroy a star simply for a display of equal strength?”

Picard’s question seemed to cut Augustok to the quick. He drew a heavy sigh and softened his tone. “Captain, I know my people have a long history of being ruthless and cold-blooded. Please believe me when I say that I am not. The Romulan trilitium weapon is not yet a reality. *Nokturak* is.”

“How do you propose that we neutralize that threat?” asked Picard.

“The Romulans must have tangible proof that the odds are even or tilted against them and the threat will be negated.”

“What do you mean by tangible proof?” came Picard’s next question.

At this point Riker had heard enough. He partially shared Worf’s contempt and he held his silence no longer; “Or maybe you’re a spy,” he interrupted, “and all this is part of an elaborate trap. Just like it was with Jarok. Your Vulcan half allows you to control your emotions so our Betazoid counselor can’t tell if you’re lying. Maybe an assault force attacked the station and left you behind to alter the sensor logs. Then, when you’re rescued, you become the perfect plant.”

Augustok stood from his chair and looked at Riker with eyes of steel. “Admiral Jarok brought no physical evidence of a base on Nelvana Three because there was no evidence!”

Augustok unbuckled his belt and removed it. He then ripped away a liner on the belt’s reverse side. Isolinear optical chips spilled onto the table’s surface. Augustok’s eyes were still fixed on Riker as he spoke. “These chips contain all research data, test results, design specifications and technical schematics of the *Nokturak* Warbird.”

Geordi picked up one of the chips and asked, "How do we know the information on these chips is accurate?"

"Examine them, run simulations, test them however you see fit and I will be at your disposal to answer any questions."

"Forgive me, Commander," stated Picard. "But you seem almost too willing to cooperate. All this passion just to avert the threat of war? What is it that you're really after?"

Augustok turned and almost appeared to stand at attention as he replied, "You are very perceptive Captain, and you are correct. I am not merely seeking asylum. I seek the opportunity to serve."

Picard was stunned by what he had just heard, as was everyone else... with the exception of Worf. Picard managed to regain his speech and asked, "Are you saying you wish to join Starfleet?"

"There is much I can do for the Federation, especially now."

"This must not be allowed!" Worf blurted out with anger.

"Why, Worf?" asked Beverly.

“He will do the same as Ambassador T’Pel. He will serve long enough to win false confidence and gain access to vital information. Then carry it home to Romulus!”

Augustok hung his head in apparent failure. “You have every reason to doubt me,” he said, sinking back into his chair. He continued as if trying to explain, “For so long I served the Empire with only duty in my heart and my eyes blind with loyalty. I grew up learning Vulcan mental discipline from my mother and hearing and seeing the many achievements of my father, thinking how much I wanted to emulate him. I can still remember the day he was promoted to the rank of Admiral. He was awarded the rank for leading the assault force that destroyed the Klingon outpost on Narendra Three.”

A look of shock struck everyone except Worf who clenched his fists and growled with rage.

“You should be angered, Mr. Worf,” Augustok continued. “Many Klingons died needlessly that day.”

“What about the crew of the *Enterprise-C*?” asked Picard. “We have heard rumors and stories of survivors taken back to Romulus as prisoners. Most notably the woman Commander Sela claims is her mother; and what of the Federation phaser found in your possession?”

“All true, Captain,” answered Augustok. “Sela’s mother was a Federation officer. I know nothing more of her except that she was later executed. As for the prisoners and the phaser, when my father’s forces had defeated the *Enterprise* he led a boarding party that beamed onto the enemy bridge. There, a young lieutenant in command for his dead Captain, surrendered his phaser in exchange for the lives of his crew. My father later gave the phaser to me as a gift. He beamed the crew on board his warbird and destroyed the ship. For the defeat of a Federation Starship and returning home with its remaining crew as prisoners, he was awarded the Jade Talons, the highest decoration given by the Empire. When I think of these things now I feel shame instead of pride. When Admiral Jarok crossed over it changed everything for me. Values I never doubted were suddenly called into question. For the first time in my life, my duty was unclear. Some time later I paid a visit to Jarok’s wife and daughter to offer my condolences. They had been relocated to a remote colony. She took the opportunity to introduce me to a Vulcan woman named T’Lier. She spoke of such a bright future for our two peoples. It was she that took me to meet Spock. The few short hours I spent with him made everything so clear. He brought new meaning to the teachings of my mother and made me realize there was so much more to be gained by peace than could ever be taken by war. When I was given the Warbird project, I knew it had but one purpose. To me it became a means to an end.

By completing the project I kept my loyalty intact in the eyes of the Empire and provided myself with the chance to reach you.”

“At a cost of over three hundred lives,” added Picard.

The Romulan now seemed pierced with anguish. “Their loss is more than tragic, Captain. I feel their blood on my hands. Please help me to not let it be in vain!”

“I don’t see how allowing you to join Starfleet would make restitution for their death,” replied Picard.

“Help me to stop it from continuing,” he pleaded.

“How?” asked Picard.

“By providing the Romulans with the tangible proof that will keep them out of Federation space.”

“How do you propose to do that?” asked Riker in a sarcastic tone.

“*Nokturak* is an upgrade of an existing design. I believe it would be possible to perform a similar or even a superior upgrade to an existing Federation design.”

Picard did not appear to be impressed by Augustok’s suggestion. He gave his shirt a firm tug and responded,

“Fighting fire with fire is never my first course of action, Commander.”

Augustok expected such a reply, but he also knew the resolve of his Romulan leaders. He knew they had little reservation about using whatever was necessary to achieve their goals. Picard must be made to understand. He attempted to reason once again. “Captain, you told me at the beginning of this meeting that I needed to convince you. By the same token, simply informing the Empire that the Federation possesses equal technology will be viewed as a bluff. For the Praetor and those in the Senate who share his martial philosophy, only proof will do.”

Riker interrupted again, his voice filled with contempt, “So the Federation modifies a ship and makes a strategic strike in Romulan territory just to level the playing field, is that it?”

Augustok slammed his fist onto the table. “I said I came to stop a war, not provoke one!” He took a moment to regain his composure before he continued. “Simply beginning construction of such a vessel would be enough to make the Empire take notice. Undercover operatives that are already in place would inform the Praetor that the Federation is preparing to respond.”

“And you believe that would be sufficient to deter further action?” asked Picard with a tone of disbelief.

“It would be a first step,” replied Augustok. “They would continue to monitor the vessel’s progress as best they could. Once the ship nears completion and goes through its battery of tests, that will show the Praetor what he’s up against. He will see for himself that this advantage is lost and he will be forced to reevaluate his position.”

“Do you believe Starfleet’s security is so poor as to allow that much information to escape?” sneered Worf.

“Much of the research that enabled us to equip *Nokturak* with Transwarp capability came from Federation sources.”

Geordi quickly responded, “The Transwarp project had high priority, but it wasn’t under level one security protocols. Besides that, you don’t just build a new ship overnight. Experimental refit takes twelve to eighteen months at best. In the meantime, the Romulans gear up for production and the ship already in service destroys every outpost along the Neutral Zone.”

“The prototype’s service time will be severely limited,” replied Augustok.

“Why is that?” asked Picard.

“Before *Nokturak* was launched on this voyage, I initiated an invasive computer virus at our research facility, leaving these chips as the only remaining source of the completed information.”

“So, the prototype will have to be their template for production?” said Geordi.

“Exactly,” Augustok continued. “But that doesn’t buy us unlimited time. Actual construction time for the upgrade took less than six months once research was complete. I’m sure we could perform an upgrade to a Federation design in a similar time frame.”

“Captain, I protest!” shouted Worf. “Everything this Romulan suggests would be an enormous security breach! He belongs in the brig!”

Picard turned to Worf and answered with calm authority, “I’m aware of your concerns Mr. Worf, but I will be the judge of where he belongs.”

“Aye, sir,” replied the disgruntled security chief.

Hearing these arguments caused Augustok to sink into his chair. He closed his eyes and drew a desperate sigh. After all he had said no one seemed convinced. What would it take to make them understand? He rubbed his forehead as he muttered aloud, “It seems painfully obvious that I have failed.”

No reply. The room remained silent as he looked out of the viewport at the stars. Now he felt more alone than he ever had before. He longed to feel the touch of T'Lier's mind. Wait, that was the answer! He turned suddenly back to Picard, "Captain, is there a Vulcan member of your crew capable of performing a mind meld?"

"To prove your sincerity?" asked Troi.

"No deception would be possible. It would leave no doubt," replied Augustok.

Deanna considered his suggestion as she sensed only honesty from him. She turned to Picard. "He's right, we'd know for sure."

Picard acknowledged Troi's advice with a nod of his head and then addressed Augustok once again, "Commander, I do not believe your honesty is in question as much as what you suggest our course of action should be. However, from my personal experience with the Vulcan mind meld I know it would offer valuable insight, but such a request must be voluntary. I will not order something of such a personal nature."

"I understand completely, Captain," responded the Romulan.

"I also believe there must be a more peaceful option than what has been discussed here," added Picard.

"I wish from my heart I could believe that Captain," answered Augustok in a depressed tone.

Picard stood from his chair and gave his shirt his signatory tugging and straightening. "Number One," he said turning to Riker, "have the three senior ranking Vulcans on board report to my ready room."

"Aye, Captain," acknowledged Riker and he left for the bridge.

Picard then informed Augustok of his intentions. "Commander, I will contact Starfleet Command to make a full report on the information you have provided and I will explore your requests. I will contact you as soon as I have word. In the meantime, I'm afraid you must remain in your quarters under guard."

"Thank you, Captain, I appreciate your effort," replied Augustok.

"Mr. Worf, have security escort the Commander to his quarters."

"Aye, Captain," acknowledged Worf as he tapped his comm badge and ordered Ensign Alvarez to see to the Romulan.

Geordi then rose from his seat and gathered up the chips from the table. "I'll get right to work on these," he told Picard.

"Very good, Mr. LaForge, keep me informed."

"Data, can you give me a hand?" asked Geordi.

"Of course, Geordi," replied Data. "With your permission, sir?"

"Certainly," said Picard. "That will be all everyone."

Picard and the remaining staff exited the observation lounge onto the bridge. Ensign Alvarez escorted Augustok into the turbolift bound for his quarters.

Picard took his place in the Captain's chair. Even though it was his first time on actual duty of his new ship, the change appeared to have little effect on him. He began giving orders in his usual fashion. "Helm, set course for the nearest starbase. Three quarters impulse until we clear the system, then increase to warp four."

"Aye, Captain, course laid in."

"Engage," he ordered with his trademark hand gesture. As the *Enterprise* came about and was leaving the wrecked station behind, Picard ordered Mr. Worf to contact Starfleet Command, specifically Admiral Sonak if

he was available. Worf acknowledged the order and was about to send the message when the ship was suddenly rocked by several impacts.

“Shields up! Red alert!” ordered Riker.

“Who is firing on us?” asked Picard.

“My sensors show no vessel.” replied Worf.

Everyone held tight as the *Enterprise* shook hard under another barrage.

“Where are they, Mr. Worf?” shouted Riker.

“I still have no readings. Aft shields down to sixty-five percent.”

“Evasive maneuver sequence delta,” ordered Picard.

The helmsman responded quickly but not before a torpedo found its mark.

“Direct hit!” reported Worf. “Starboard main section, forward shields down to fifty percent.”

Picard attempted a swift counterattack. “Hard to starboard, fire a full torpedo spread, maximum dispersal pattern!”

Worf's warrior instincts and tactical skill were displayed with the speed at which he carried out Picard's order, firing away the torpedoes the instant the course change was executed. All eyes watched the viewscreen as the weapons fanned out and continued away into space, hitting nothing. Worf slammed his fist on his console and growled with frustration.

"Where the hell are they?" exclaimed Riker.

At the same time, in the turbolift, Ensign Alvarez was helping Augustok up from the floor after both of them had fallen from the last impact. "Are you all right?" she asked.

"Get me to the bridge before she kills us all," he replied.

The ensign shook her head, "I'm sorry sir, I was ordered..."

Augustok cut her off, "Listen to me! Sela is attacking this ship and your sensors are unable to detect her vessel. If you don't let me try to help, soon this ship will look just like that station back there."

Ensign Alvarez hesitated for a moment but then ordered the turbolift back to the bridge. The two arrived to find the command crew discussing blind tactics.

"Widespread ionic pulse?" suggested Riker.

Augustok quickly refuted the idea, “That won’t work, the plasma coils are shielded by her armor. That’s why you can’t read a power source.”

“What the hell is he doing on the bridge, Ensign?” snapped Riker.

Augustok answered before Alvarez could speak; “I told her to bring me here. I know your enemy’s ship. Please, let me help!”

Riker gave Augustok a cold stare of contempt. It was apparent that he had no trust in him or any advice he could offer. He proceeded to discuss options with Worf as if he had never spoken to the Romulan.

“What if we flood the area with tachyons?” asked Riker.

Before Worf could respond Augustok offered an unwelcome answer. “Her residual energy trace will not be readable enough to aim your weapons.”

“Or perhaps you wish us not to try,” countered Worf.

The ship trembled again from another impact.

“Enough of this,” Picard said with disgust as he stood from his chair and turned to Worf. “Simultaneous fire on all phasers, widest possible pattern.”

With all of her emitters firing at once, the *Enterprise* looked like a spider sitting at the center of her web. The widespread burst was not powerful but it served its purpose as the engineering section's ventral emitter scored a direct hit. Worf immediately reported the reading. "Direct hit, Captain, beneath us, port side aft."

"Project their course and fire aft torpedoes, full spread," ordered Picard, taking his seat once again.

The console tone sounded as Worf fired the weapons. A moment later he announced the result, "One torpedo detonated, Captain, but I am not showing any debris. I have no other readings."

"Mr. Worf, open hailing frequencies," ordered Picard.

"Aye sir, frequencies open."

Picard rose from his seat and walked toward the viewscreen, hoping to see the face of his adversary. "Enemy vessel, this is Captain Picard of the *Enterprise*. You are in Federation space, break off your attack and explain yourself!" Picard watched the viewer with intent but the only response he received was a dim flash of light and a stream of disruptor blasts that pounded his ship at near point blank range. The repeated impacts knocked him and other crew members to the floor. The

bridge lights blinked and then went out before emergency backups took over.

“Damage report!” shouted Riker.

The Ops officer got back to her chair and called up a status report. “Main junction to port side computer core is down; damage to our secondary hull; auxiliary generators offline; forward shields are down.”

Augustok pulled himself up next to the tactical console. This time he made his plea direct to Picard, “Captain, please! Forget the weapons for now; run! The only way to get any kind of reading on that ship is to get it above Warp Six. The cloaking device cannot hide a Warp signature that strong.”

Picard was not in the mood to argue. “Helm, course-one-nine-five mark zero-one-zero. Engage at maximum warp!”

Riker slapped his comm badge and ordered loudly, “Geordi, get us out of here!”

LaForge’s voice returned, “The central nacelle was damaged during the attack. The best I can do for now is warp eight point seven.”

“That will suffice, Mr. LaForge,” replied Picard.

As the *Enterprise* sped away, Worf concentrated his scans aft, searching for a warp signature. He found none.

“What have you done?” Worf hissed at Augustok. “Our sensors show nothing!”

“Then evidently she has broken off her pursuit,” he replied.

“Was this staged for our benefit as well?” asked Riker in an angry tone.

Picard looked at Riker with slight surprise and asked, “You believe this was staged, Number One?”

“It doesn’t add up, Captain,” he answered. “We were being outrun and outgunned. It was like fighting a ghost. They had us, why break off now?”

Riker’s statement of distrust touched Augustok’s nerve. He fired back, “Because she knew that at high warp you could have accurate enough reading for a target lock! But the real factor that saved us was simply distance. Even Sela will only venture just so far into Federation space, no matter what her tactical advantage! Now they can report that they faced the Federation’s best and they ran. The Praetor will order the refit of more warbirds and his quest to take the Neutral Zone comes one step closer!”

“You told us to run!” snapped Riker, pointing his finger.

Augustok came near rage, “Do you think you can turn around and go after her? You said yourself this ship was over-matched! What is it that suddenly makes you believe she wouldn’t have destroyed you if you had remained?”

“Gentlemen, please!” intervened Picard. “This avails us nothing. We need answers. We need some method of detecting that ship, something our outposts along the Neutral Zone can use. In light of this encounter I may be forced to reconsider your proposals, Commander. I appreciate your assistance during this incident but I must ask you to return to your quarters with Ensign Alvarez and stay there until I send for you.”

“I understand Captain,” replied Augustok. He turned and was escorted into the turbolift by the security guard.

“Mr. Worf, get me Starfleet Command immediately,” ordered Picard, “You have the bridge, Number One. I’ll be in my ready room. Have those Vulcan officers report to me as soon as possible.”

“Right away, sir,” acknowledged Riker as he took the center seat once again.

CHAPTER 6

The time passed slowly for Augustok as he sat in his quarters wondering what Starfleet's decision would be. He decided to take the opportunity to do some research. He went to the large viewer and made himself comfortable in the chair. He called up the ship's library on Federation history. His Vulcan mental abilities allowed him to speed through screen after screen of information. He paused to closely study the list of conflicts between the Federation and the Romulans. When he came upon the information concerning the loss of the *Enterprise-C*, memories began to flow. He recalled having discussions about combat tactics with his father and how the battle with the Federation starship was the most memorable of his career. He remembered how his father was impressed with their courage, to engage four warbirds at once took nerves of steel. But to this day both he and his father wondered how they pulled off what must have been a warp jump. Just when his father's forces were closing in for the kill, there was a bright flash and the enemy was gone. Seconds later they reappeared behind them and began attacking as if they had miraculously recovered from the previous fight. They were still defeated, but not before they destroyed one ship and crippled another.

"A brilliant tactical maneuver however they did it," his father used to say. His father was so proud when he

graduated the Imperial Academy and became an officer. What would his father say now?

“I’m sorry, sir,” he muttered aloud. “I hope someday you’ll understand. Maybe someday I’ll be able to tell you myself.”

The sound of the door chime broke his concentration. “Come in.”

The door opened and Captain Picard entered the room followed by Dr. Selar. Augustok stood from his chair.

“Commander, I believe you’ve already met Dr. Selar.”

“Yes, Captain.”

“She has volunteered to perform the mind meld as per your request.”

Augustok gave a slight bow as he expressed his gratitude to them both. Without further conversation, Selar went to the living area and positioned two chairs facing one another. She seated herself and, with a gesture of her hand, offered the other chair to Augustok. He obliged as Captain Picard looked on from the entryway.

“Have you every participated in a mind meld before?” Selar asked.

“Many times in my youth my mother would touch my thoughts to test my honesty. Later she tried to teach me to reach out to her mind but I was never able to fully establish the link.”

“Have you made further attempts since reaching maturity?”

“I believe I made excellent progress with T’Lier. However, I am certain that it was the strength of her thoughts that made the meld possible.”

“Very well,” said Selar as she leaned towards him and began to prepare herself. “Try to relax and concentrate on why you have come to us.”

Augustok closed his eyes and mentally collected his thoughts as Selar reached out and carefully selected the placement of her fingers on his face. She whispered to him as she began to establish contact, “My mind to your mind. My thoughts to your thoughts. Our minds are merging. Our minds are one.”

Augustok’s eyes slowly opened in blank stare as he felt the presence of her consciousness. Selar anticipated emotional responses from him but she was certain she would be able to control them. She began to see images of his parents and experience the regret he felt leaving them behind. He had great respect for them both and

knew they would be disappointed and ashamed by what he had done. Yet, he could not do what he knew was right by remaining on Romulus. It was a logical decision. Images of his mother closely followed, about her youth and how she came to be on Romulus. These were her thoughts that he had carried with him since childhood - residual thoughts from when she had touched his mind years ago. She obviously meant a great deal to him.

Then came the swirling confusion over the defection of Admiral Jarok. He understood the Admiral's family meant much to him, but why this? The values of duty and loyalty began to do battle with the caring emotions for loved ones. At this point Selar increased her own concentration in an attempt to help him focus and continue. She was not prepared for what she was about to experience. His memories of meeting T'Lier, and then Spock, released a waterfall of thoughts and emotions. Spock had communicated his visions of reunification, his trust in Picard and what he must do. The blending of logic and emotion, the use of emotion as a source of strength. All this was foreign to Selar and she exerted considerable effort to control what she was beginning to feel.

Then, like a beam of intense light piercing a dark room, Augustok's thoughts of T'Lier burst in. She had reinforced Spock's teachings and more. Their minds intertwined, open and available to experience the

other's emotions. The thoughts and memories of their relationship became intimate.

Selar struggled to maintain control but the intense love Augustok felt for T'Lier coursed through her. She began to try to break the meld, however the strength of his mind made it difficult. She continued to try to separate their thoughts, but it was as if he were holding on, trying to communicate further.

She then felt the sting of pain as she witnessed in his mind T'Lier telling him that she must Leave Romulus for a season, but that they would see each other again. The next day he was running, rushing to make it to the shuttle port to see her off, but she was already on board. The shuttle pulled away and slowly climbed skyward. He watched the viewports, but did not see her. Without warning, the shuttle burst into flames and exploded. Debris and burnt bodies were strewn for kilometers on end. First, there was shock and then the immense pain of her loss, pain so overwhelming he thought he would perish. Then a hand gripped his shoulder and a voice asked him to thank the Tal Shiar for his increase of wisdom. Pain burst into unrelenting rage as he pursued the messenger but lost him in the shadows. Why? What crime was she guilty of? This was what Jarok feared, what Spock warned him of. No longer! No more conquest of innocents! No more death!

Selar felt the grip of his mind ebb for a moment as he lost concentration from near mental exhaustion. With a mighty mental thrust she forced their minds apart. She stood quickly from her chair and without a word, left the room.

As she passed Picard on the way out he noticed her wipe a tear from her cheek. Picard was stunned. He noticed Augustok looked troubled and shaken, as if he had just been awakened from a nightmare. But the Captain was more immediately concerned with his Vulcan officer. He left the room to find her in the corridor, where she was standing, taking deep breaths with her eyes closed, regaining her composure.

“Are you all right, Doctor?” asked Picard.

“Yes, Captain, quite well.”

“I must apologize if this experience...”

“There is no need, Captain,” she interrupted. “It was not harmful in any way. It was actually a fascinating experience.”

“I thought Vulcans detested such emotions.”

“He is the first non-Vulcan I have ever chosen to meld with. I assumed with him being half Vulcan that it would not be greatly dissimilar. I was incorrect. His mind is

logical but he is not driven by pure logic. Vulcans suppress and control their emotions with logic. His logic is reinforced by his emotion and it drives him to carry out what he believes is right. His mother has left a strong impression on him. She was an outcast on Vulcan. She refused to be betrothed in her youth and later rejected the Kohlinar, the purge of emotions. She exiled herself by traveling to Romulus, yet she has passed on her Vulcan heritage to him.”

“Interesting, but what was it that was so unsettling to you?”

“The Vulcan woman he spoke of, T’Lier. She was a colleague of Ambassador Spock and an advocate of reunification. She was also emotional, in much the same way as his mother. She has touched his mind and he cared for her a great deal. Unfortunately, she was killed in a shuttle explosion and a Tal Shiar agent claimed responsibility. He was already hurt deeply by her loss. Upon learning that she was murdered, the pain of his loss turned to vengeance and rage. I sympathize and understand his loss, but it is his bitter feelings of anger I find distasteful.”

“That would explain why he killed his own officer on board the station, after he discovered he was Tal Shiar,” said Picard as he paused for a moment, mentally addressing his concerns before he continued. “Simple

revenge is not sufficient motivation for what he has done or what he proposes to do.”

“Do not misunderstand, Captain,” observed Selar. “I believe his revenge for the death of the woman was all but satisfied when he killed the Tal Shiar agent. Now he fears the plans of the Praetor will eventually destroy the Empire and the hope of reunification will be lost. He wishes to end the senseless deaths of those who perish as a result of war. He speaks the truth Captain, and he does so with great zeal.”

“About everything he’s told us?”

“Yes, Captain.”

“Doctor, this information is invaluable. I regret the unsavory emotions you have experienced, but I offer you my personal gratitude.”

“The honor is to serve,” replied Selar.

“Your service greatly honors us.” acknowledged Picard. “Now if you will excuse me, Doctor, I must speak to our guest.”

“May I accompany you, Captain?”

Picard wondered why she would wish to after such an experience, but she must have her reasons. He granted

her request and they entered the room to find Augustok still seated in the chair. He was bent over, holding his head in his hands. Picard stood next to the chair directly across from him. A moment passed before Augustok noticed him there. He raised his head to reveal an anxious look upon his face.

“It seems you have been exonerated, Commander,” stated Picard. “Dr. Selar has conveyed to me some of your experiences and reassured me of your honest intent.” Augustok fell back into his chair and breathed an exhaustive sigh of relief. “I have made a full report to Starfleet Command,” Picard continued. “And I will speak with my Chief Engineer about the details of the information you provided. If I am to be an advocate of you and your proposals, I wish to be fully prepared.”

Picard’s words rang in Augustok’s ears like sounding trumpets. “Success at last!” he thought. Finally, he could begin to see the light at the end of the tunnel. His mission had taken the first step to realization. He briskly stood from his chair and gave Picard a bow and a firm handshake. “Captain, I cannot thank you enough.”

“Save your thanks until we accomplish our goal,” answered Picard as he started out of the room. As he reached the door he added, “Commander, I will contact you as soon as I receive any word.”

“I’ll be waiting,” replied Augustok.

“Captain, may I remain for a few moments?” asked Selar.

“As you wish, Doctor,” replied Picard and he left the room.

Several moments passed in silence as Augustok turned and looked into Dr. Selar’s eyes. “I’m certain it must have been your logic that convinced Captain Picard.”

“It could have come from any Vulcan, not just me,” she replied.

“I am indebted to you,” stated Augustok with a bow of his head.

“There is no debt; I volunteered to serve.”

“Then I must apologize for my outpouring of emotion. I know it must have been unpleasant for you.”

“It was not beyond my capabilities. I am curious and somewhat intrigued. If there is ever to be reunification between our peoples, we must learn to integrate the attributes of both our philosophies.”

“You mean logic and emotion?”

“Indeed, there may even be a cure or at least a prevention for Bendai Syndrome through the controlled release of emotion.”

“So, your interest is professional?” he asked.

“Partially, I must accept it myself before I make use of it.”

“So, what do you propose?”

“You are harboring a great deal of anguish and pain that is festering into vengeance. I believe I can help you channel and control those emotions.”

“Love and loss are seldom logical, Doctor. It is a passion that we cannot live without. The heights of its joy far exceed the pain of its loss,” observed Augustok.

“Making sense of loss can negate the pain and bring peace.”

“That seems logical,” he said with a smile. “How do I proceed?”

“If you will allow me to join your mind once again, I believe you will understand.”

“By all means, Doctor,” he replied with approval.

They sat facing one another, and again she placed her fingers on his face. They both closed their eyes as she reached out with her thoughts. Slowly a gentle smile of contentment came across his face. He then lifted his hand and touched her face in a like manner. Soon the same gentle smile was on her lips as well. The communication was two-way. He caressed the back of her hand that was touching his face with two fingers. Their eyes opened into a deep gaze as he softly took her hand, breaking the mind link. His other hand slid onto her neck as he moved close and kissed her. She seemed receptive at first, but then grasping both his hands, she pushed him away.

“It is not the time of Pon Farr, yet I feel the burning,” she whispered.

“If you allow yourself to experience love, the madness will not come,” he answered.

She stood and drew a deep breath, regaining her composure. “This requires further study and thought, but for now you must excuse me,” she said politely and headed for the door.

“I am at your disposal for any further study you need,” he said.

With a nod and a hint of a smile, she left.

In Engineering, both Geordi and Data manned separate workstations as they reviewed the information provided by the Romulan defector. Geordi came upon the schematic that showed an overview of the new warbird's warp power system.

"Data, take a look at this," said Geordi with amazement. Data came over from his workstation and examined the screen. "I've never seen a set-up like this before," commented Geordi.

"Indeed," responded Data. "With a primary and secondary engine core and four nacelles, it would appear to have a complete back-up warp drive."

"Look at the subspace field pattern when both systems are online," said Geordi as he selected the next display.

"It looks virtually identical to our own transwarp field," observed Data.

"Exactly," added Geordi, "but the system requires both engine cores to make transwarp speed."

"If I am reading their scale correctly, the ship has a top speed of approximately transwarp factor twelve," said Data as he took note of the graphic in the lower corner of the screen.

“That’s one mighty fast ship,” Geordi shook his head in amazement.

Data accessed his language banks and searched for an appropriate human response to Geordi’s statement. He then questioned his friend. “Would the somewhat colorful human metaphor “hauling ass” be applicable in this case?”

The question took Geordi completely off guard. He broke down as Data laughed with him. After a few moments, Geordi attempted to answer through his still chuckling voice. “I suppose the term would fit, Data, but I wouldn’t use it in my report to the Captain.”

“I understand,” replied Data with a smile.

“Wouldn’t report what to the Captain?” asked Picard.

The sound of the Captain’s voice brought Geordi and Data immediately to attention. They were completely unaware of his presence or how long he had been there.

“I apologize, Captain,” responded Data. “I was distracting Geordi with a short discussion of human metaphors as they relate to maximum transwarp speed.”

“I see, Mr. Data,” added Picard. “Like the term “greased lightning”, for example?”

“Something similar, sir,” said Geordi.

“Well, I’m sure we’ll have ample opportunity to discuss this in the future,” said Picard as his expression turned serious. “How is the research progressing on the Romulan optical chips?”

“So far everything is consistent with what he’s told us,” replied Geordi as he pulled up another screen. “One question we’ve answered is about the alloy in the clasp he was wearing. It’s definitely a sample of their new hull material. A very tough ablative armor that can withstand several direct hits even without shields. The armor also has several side benefits. First of all, it renders the ship with a black finish, making for pretty effective camouflage in the darkness of space. Secondly, since cloaking technology involves the bending of light rays, the lower the visibility the ship has to begin with results in a substantial power savings. It also lowers the EM signature of the cloaking device. But, most important of all, the armor’s neutronium content provides an effective screen against our sensors. We can’t scan or lock onto whatever’s inside, life signs, power sources, weapons status, nothing!”

“Anything else?” asked Picard.

Geordi returned to the previous display and continued. “We’ve been looking over their power systems. The ship

has transwarp capability about equal to that of the *Enterprise*. Add to that a secondary warp core, and I'd say they have formidable power reserves at impulse speeds."

"What about their defensive systems?" questioned Picard.

"I have only made a preliminary scan of that information," replied Data. It would appear they have employed a complex computer program that interlocks the cloaking emitters to all weapons systems."

"We've really only scratched the surface on the rest, Captain," added Geordi.

"Do you think our Romulan guest could be of assistance?"

"I don't know, Captain," replied Geordi. "Do you think we can trust him?"

"Dr. Selar has assured me of his intentions by means of a mind meld," said Picard.

"Then I don't suppose it could hurt," agreed Geordi. "What do you think, Data?"

"So far all the information he has provided has proven factual," responded Data. "If he is responsible for

engineering the many innovations of this design, I do not believe we can afford to proceed without him.”

“I think I’m forced to agree with Data, Captain,” added Geordi. “The Romulans have grabbed a big advantage. We need to play catch-up, and we need to do it quick.”

“How is it possible for them to jump so far ahead of us in their technology?” asked Picard.

“Aside from the new alloy in the hull plating, most of what we’ve seen so far is technology that’s been tossed aside by others because they couldn’t make it work. Our own Starfleet records show that the Klingons built a prototype bird of prey that could fire its weapons while under cloak over eighty years ago. But it was destroyed at Khitomer on its maiden voyage. Its cloaking device put out a very large neutron radiation signature which would be easily detected with our more modern sensors.”

“It would seem our guest solved those problems,” added Picard.

“Let’s hope he’ll be able to help us as much as he did the Romulans,” commented Geordi.

The sound of the intercom tone interrupted their conversation.

“Worf to Picard.”

“Picard here. Go ahead.”

“Admiral Sonak for you on coded subspace channel.”

“I’ll take it in my quarters, Mr. Worf.”

“Aye, sir.”

“Keep me apprised of your progress,” instructed Picard.

Both Geordi and Data acknowledged and returned to work.

Picard entered his quarters and immediately activated his viewscreen. “Picard, Starfleet code: gamma epsilon delta nine zero one five. Computer, decode.” The admiral’s image appeared. “Peace and long life, Admiral,” greeted Picard with the Vulcan sign.

“I wish to preserve both of those qualities for myself and many others, Captain,” replied Sonak.

“As do I, Admiral.”

“I have reviewed your full report to date and that of your first officer. It seems you have an unprecedented situation.”

“Which is why I sought your insight, sir,” stated Picard.

“Were it not for my respect for Ambassador Spock and what he is attempting to achieve, I would look on this with great skepticism.”

“I still have a great many doubts myself, Admiral, but I believe the potential benefits are necessary. I also take some comfort from the fact that one of my Vulcan officers volunteered to perform a mind meld on our defector. She reported to me that he has been completely honest with us and his desire to serve is genuine.”

“That is most beneficial, Captain. However, I wish to reserve my final judgment until I meet this Romulan myself.”

“Certainly, Admiral.”

“You will need additional assistance, but my preliminary position is in support of your proposal. Please proceed to Starbase one-one-five. I will join you there before we meet with Admiral Shanthi.”

“My greatest appreciation, Admiral.”

“Live long and prosper, Picard. Sonak out.”

Just as the viewer went off, Beverly entered the room. “Oh, there you are Jean-Luc. I was just heading to Ten Forward for dinner. Can you join me?” she asked.

“I’ll do better than that. Why don’t you relax while I prepare a quiet little dinner here? Just the two of us.”

With a wide smile she stepped close and gave him a kiss. “Now, there’s an offer this girl will never turn down. Tell you what. After dinner, I’ll take care of dessert.”

“Or we can skip dessert and have breakfast instead.”

“Keep talking like that, handsome, and we may not make it through dinner.”

Jean-Luc smiled at her remark as she stroked his chin. “I’ll get changed for a private dinner,” she added.

Jean-Luc rubbed his hands together as if preparing a banquet.

“I almost forgot,” he said to himself while snapping his fingers. “Picard to bridge.”

“Riker here, sir.”

“Number One, set course for Starbase one-one-five, warp four, and prepare quarters for Admiral Sonak. He’ll be coming on board.”

“Aye, sir.”

Picard then went to the food station. “Computer, pink champagne for two.”

CHAPTER 7

Augustok sat relaxed in his chair. He continued once again to watch the computer screen as the text and images of Federation, and then Earth, history went by. He carefully sipped on hot soup as the door tone sounded. "Enter."

Picard entered with a greeting, "Good morning, Commander. Rest well?"

"The best I have in months, thank you."

"I see you've changed your attire," observed Picard.

"Yes, it's a Vulcan desert soft smock. Your Dr. Selar has been most kind."

"She brought you the clothing?" asked Picard with surprise.

"Yes, she also programmed your food station to produce a rather good womak soup."

"Excellent. I came to inform you that my chief engineer is prepared to have your assistance on the technical schematics you provided. He also will provide you with any information you need in regard to your proposal."

"Captain, I cannot tell you how thankful I am."

“Save your thanks for now. There is still much to be done. We are *en route* to Starbase one-one-five where Admiral Sonak will be coming on board. He wishes to speak with you personally. He has read my full report and his initial attitude is positive.”

“Spock spoke truly when he said you were one of the most logical humans he had ever met.”

“Let’s hope Admiral Sonak shares that opinion,” answered Picard as he took notice of the computer screen.

“History?”

“Yes, Captain, and quite fascinating I might add.”

“I would’ve thought you’d have a greater interest in our technology.”

“Technology speaks little about a people, Captain, but history tells volumes. Your home planet, for example. Through the centuries your history is replete with power hungry tyrants. Caesar, Napoleon, Hitler, Khan Singh, the list goes on. But they all have one important thing in common.”

“Which is?”

“The folly of their mad visions were never realized and they were overthrown or defeated. Romulan history has no such men. Our ancestors broke free of the Vulcans. First, they conquered neighboring colonies. Eventually it spread to cities, countries and finally worlds. War and conquest have been part of our culture for so long that it is now actually looked on as a justifiable means of growth. That attitude is accepted because the Romulans have never known a conqueror. Even the defeat at the battle of Jerom, that prompted the signing of the treaty with the Federation, is considered only to be a setback. A simple delay while they make better preparations.”

“From what I saw during my visit to Romulus, there’s a growing number of your people who wish to change that attitude.”

“That is the very thing which gives me hope, Captain. That is why I have done what I have done so far. The Empire must be preserved until that upcoming generation rises to power – the generation that realizes that conquering whole sectors of space is far removed from crossing a river or an ocean to take a neighboring country. The generation that knows that true growth will come from peaceful relations and the exchange of culture. Unfortunately, we have to find a way to survive until that day comes. Which means we must deal with the present leadership in terms they will understand.”

Picard was moved by the Romulan's passionate vision of the future and afraid by the circumstances of the present. "I sincerely hope to see your vision realized during my lifetime."

"The fact that I am here and that I have your support moves us one step closer, Captain."

"I'll have Mr. LaForge contact you as soon as he is ready."

"I'll be waiting, Captain."

With that, Picard started to Leave the room. But before he reached the door, Augustok posed a question.

"By the way, Captain. The Federation phaser that was found in my possession, will I be able to have it back? It means a great deal to me."

"I'm sure you must realize, Commander, even though you aren't in the brig, you are still a prisoner at this point."

"Yes, Captain, I do."

"Then you must also realize that I cannot arm a prisoner."

“Deactivate the weapon if you must. It is of sentimental value to me.” Augustok’s voice sounded like a plea.

“Yes, I remember,” replied Picard. “You said it was a gift from your father. May I ask what the occasion was that you received such a gift?”

“Of course, Captain. After I graduated from the Imperial Academy. I was selected to participate in the Sumatek.”

“The Sumatek? What is that?” queried Picard.

“A tactical mismatch test for command candidate officers. I believe Starfleet has a similar test.”

“Yes, the Kobayashi Maru,” replied Picard as the memory of the test brought an amused look to his face.

“Meaning no insult, Captain, but the Romulan test is no mere simulation. Weapons are used at absolute minimal power levels, but the risk is real. It is considered a high honor to achieve your objective. Few emerge victorious. Most are forced to surrender after their vessels float helpless in space. I refused to experience that disgrace. My father prepared me well.”

“I take it you succeeded,” assumed Picard.

“My father was extremely proud. He gave me the phaser as a personal trophy.”

“I’ll see that it’s deactivated and returned to you immediately.”

“Thank you, Captain, for understanding.”

As Picard acknowledged his guest with a nod the door tone sounded.

“Come,” said Picard.

The door opened and Geordi entered the room.

“Good morning, Captain,” greeted LaForge. “I thought I’d escort the Commander to engineering so we could get started.”

“Excellent, Mr. LaForge,” replied Picard. “I’ll be on the bridge.”

Augustok stood from his chair and greeted LaForge with the Vulcan hand sign.

“Peace and long life,” said Augustok.

“I don’t mean to be rude,” replied Geordi with a smile, “but I can’t begin to make my fingers do that. So I’ll just say good morning and ask you to follow me. We’ve got a lot of ground to cover and not a lot of time.”

“Agreed.” He was amused by Geordi’s response and he followed him down the corridor. They began discussing the warbird’s systems on the way. Their conversation continued after they reached engineering as Geordi showed Augustok to the workstation.

“So, you came up with all these ideas yourself?” asked Geordi.

“Not all of them,” replied Augustok. “I had an excellent staff of engineers.”

“Still, you came up with some pretty innovative ways to make things work.”

“You flatter me, Mr. LaForge. But in truth, when time is a major factor, there is no need to reinvent something already available. The scientific community is constantly working on new technologies. The most logical course is to take advantage of that which already works. I personally drew on the work of seven different scientists and engineers for this project.”

“I noticed during my review that there were many similarities to other systems I’ve seen,” commented Geordi.

“Not all of my information came from within the Empire, Mr. LaForge.”

"I thought so," said Geordi. "Your transwarp field patterns are almost identical to ours."

"Your assumption is quite correct, Mr. LaForge. Your Dr. Leah Brahms is quite the propulsion genius. I would hope to meet her someday. I have certainly come to respect her work."

"You had access to Leah's work?" asked a stunned LaForge.

"As I said before, the Romulans have several deep cover operatives within the Federation. They provide useful when the time comes. As for the technology I received, I was very impressed; especially with the overdriven warp core. A far superior power plant than our confined quantum singularity, which is why *Nokturak* has a secondary engine core. One core alone would not power the ship into transwarp."

"I can tell when this is over we need to revamp our security protocols," said LaForge, still amazed at how much of their work had been stolen from under their noses. Then Geordi thought, "Enough of that for now, we'll have to deal with that issue later. For now stay focused on the task at hand." Geordi moved on to other systems. There was still much to do. "What about this new cloaking technology?" asked LaForge. "I thought

inverse phasing was the next step in Romulan cloaking devices.”

“I’m sure it will have its place, probably for surveillance purposes,” responded Augustok, “but for combat it isn’t feasible. When the ship is phased, so are its weapons, making them useless against your opponent. Repeated phasing in order to fire still required becoming visible. The real danger however was with engine core containment fields. Three ships were lost as a result of phase transition core breach. We also found that in time, phasing begins to affect the body’s cellular structure. In some cases, it even resulted in death.”

“I can see why you chose another option,” agreed Geordi, “but what about this firing while cloaked capability? Was that originally Klingon technology?”

“I can tell you are very thorough in your research Mr. LaForge. Once again, you are correct. The Klingons abandoned an excellent tactical concept far too soon. They sacrificed the protection of their shields in order to cloak. They reduced power momentarily to the entire cloak to fire their weapons.”

“Don’t modern Romulan designs shut off deflector shield power in order to cloak?” asked Geordi.

“Yes, but *Nokturak* takes a different approach. When the cloak is engaged, deflectors are shut down and the power is rerouted to enhanced structural integrity field grids. This, in conjunction with the new armor, provides adequate protection. As for the weapons,” Augustok continued, “instead of reducing power to the entire cloak *Nokturak* utilizes individual power transfer conduits to each cloaking emitter. When a weapon system is activated and aimed, a computer subroutine selects the proper emitter and reduces power to match the modulation of the weapon, effectively opening a window for the weapon to pass through.”

“Very impressive,” complimented Geordi. “I think with your help we can overcome any problems we might have in adapting our systems.”

“Thank you, Mr. LaForge. I will endeavor to not disappoint you. I believe our first logical step should be to find a suitable Federation design.”

“That sounds good to me,” replied Geordi as he accessed the files on starship overview schematics. “The Galaxy-class is our most advanced design, but I think we’d be better off with a design with lower target aspect. Something a little more maneuverable at impulse speed would probably be a good idea as well.”

"I agree," added Augustok. "Impulse acceleration and maneuvering is one of *Nokturak's* less than superior areas. She relies more heavily on her stealth capabilities."

Geordi continued searching designs until he came upon the Valiant-class overview. "We have a mission specific battle cruiser. It's not comparable in size but she carries impressive firepower."

"Do you think it could be made transwarp capable?" questioned Augustok.

"I think that's still on the drawing board," replied LaForge.

"We also have to consider the possibility of having to face more than one warbird by the time we finish," observed Augustok. "This appears to be an excellent design. An attack group of these ships would be formidable, but I believe we should concentrate on upgrading one ship for the job."

"I think I see your point," agreed LaForge. "This would be something to build on in the future. But for now, let's focus on the present." Geordi tapped through several screens until one caught his eye. "How about this?" he continued. "More compact design, ample room in the drive section for a secondary core, and it's a recent

design so we shouldn't have any trouble adapting our newest technology."

"I've never seen one of these Nebula-class ships up close," said Augustok as he examined the screen more closely.

"I think it might be just what the doctor ordered," quipped Geordi with a confident tone.

"What the doctor ordered?" asked a puzzled Augustok.

"Sorry, Commander, it's a human metaphor. It means just what we were looking for."

"I can tell working with you is going to be a memorable experience, Mr. LaForge."

"Same here, Commander, same here," replied Geordi with a grin.

CHAPTER 8

Captain's Log, USS Enterprise, Captain Picard recording.

The Enterprise is docked at Starbase one-one-five and is undergoing repairs sustained in the Romulan attack. Admiral Sonak has met with Commander Augustok, myself and Mr. LaForge and is prepared to support our proposals to Starfleet Command. We are scheduled to meet with Fleet Admiral Shanthi as soon as we reach Starbase One. We should be underway in less than eight hours.

Worf strode down the corridor and entered the turbolift only to find their Romulan guest. No words were exchanged.

“Deck Eleven,” ordered Worf.

“Good evening, Commander,” greeted Augustok.

“It would seem you have succeeded in gaining the trust of everyone,” said Worf with a sneer.

“Except you,” replied Augustok.

“Correct.”

“What must I do?”

“Die...or at least risk death for the sake of someone else.”

“That I have done many times.”

“I know nothing of what you have done before. It means nothing to me now.”

Worf exited the turbolift and Augustok followed. The two arrived at the Holodeck entrance. Worf ran his program.

“Program complete. Enter when ready,” prompted the computer. Worf entered and Augustok slipped in behind him.

Worf stooped and picked up a sword and caught Augustok from the corner of his eye. He spun quickly around. “Do not invade my privacy!” Worf shouted.

“What is this place?” asked Augustok while looking around.

“Exercise for a warrior!” snapped Worf. Just then an enemy appeared from behind. Worf blocked two thrusts of its sword and then with a mighty snarl, he sliced the creature in half. He then turned back to Augustok with anger.

“Let me join you,” asked Augustok.

“There is no risk of death here!”

“Then disable the safety routine.”

“That requires the voice authorization of two senior officers!”

“Then forget the program and face me yourself!”

“With pleasure! Computer! Arena for bat’leth competition!” The program changed and Augustok looked around at the crowd of chanting and roaring Klingons. The triangular arena floor was surrounded by guards armed with pain sticks. Worf tossed him a bat’leth and combat began.

Augustok blocked Worf’s first two strikes. He then struck back. Worf quickly countered with a block, followed by a punch to the head which left Augustok on the floor. He got up quickly, blood dripping from his nose. Instincts took over as the two slashed away at each other. They would duck and jump to avoid the flashing blades. Countering with punches and kicks and even head butts at close quarters. Worf’s prowess was evident as he repeatedly knocked his opponent to the floor. However, Augustok never retreated nor gave up, each time getting quickly to his feet to face his adversary. Finally, Worf had to employ a kill move. Several quick strikes, one of which sliced Augustok’s tunic, followed by a leg sweep.

But instead of hammering the blade through his chest he brought it to lay across his throat.

“Finish me if you must,” sneered Augustok. “For if you do not, then one day I may save your life and you will not be able to bear the insult of being rescued by a Romulan.”

“You have guile in the face of death,” hissed Worf. “That is a Klingon quality. Computer, end program.”

Worf removed his blade and stood. “I cannot take the life of the only Romulan I know with the heart of a warrior.”

“Can I safely say I’ve gained your trust?” asked Augustok as he took Worf’s outstretched hand and got to his feet.

“Not yet,” replied Worf. “But you have earned my respect. You should let your hair grow, it is one of the marks of a warrior’s power.”

“I will consider it.” answered Augustok as he handed his blade to Worf.

“We must do this again sometime.”

Augustok paused, “Certainly, Mr. Worf. I’ll look forward to it.”

No sooner had Worf returned to his duties on the Bridge, Captain Picard stepped out of the turbolift followed by Admiral Sonak.

“Admiral on the bridge,” announced Worf.

Picard proceeded towards his chair where Riker surrendered it to him.

Riker reported: “All repairs are completed, and all crew members have reported in. Ready for departure on your order, sir.”

They all took their seats as Picard ordered, “Mr. Worf, signal Starbase we are ready for departure.”

“Aye, sir,” replied Worf. “Starbase acknowledges our signal. They have released the docking clamps.”

“Helm, port thrusters until we clear the dock, then ahead two hundred KPH,” ordered Picard.

“Aye, sir,” responded the helm.

With her impulse engines barely off idle, the *Enterprise* glided smoothly away from the station and its neighbor planet.

“Helm, set course for Earth. Full impulse until we clear the system, then go to warp four,” ordered Picard.

“I would be interested in experiencing transwarp travel, Captain,” said Admiral Sonak. “I authorize exceeding warp limit for our mission to the Terran system.”

“As you wish, Admiral,” replied Picard. “Engineering.”

“LaForge here, sir.”

“Prepare for transwarp speed.”

“Transwarp at your command, sir.”

“Helm, transwarp factor eleven,” Picard said as he raised his hand.

“Engage.”

The ship made its usual jump into warp, but as they approach warp four, the passing stars moving by change to long streaks of light. The blackness of space ahead of them turns to hues of red and orange leading to a black hole at its center. The bright glow from her three nacelles left brilliant blue streaks behind as she raced towards the darkness at its center. Her image stretched and then quickly, as if shot from a cannon, she burst through the hole in a flash of white light.

In his quarters, Augustok stood before the mirror, tugging and preening his new clothing. The door tone sounded. "Come in," he called as he entered the main room. The door opened and Dr. Selar entered with her medical kit slung over her shoulder. "Welcome, Doctor," he said. "It's a pleasure to see you again."

"It is agreeable to see you as well, Commander," she replied.

"Only just agreeable?" he asked with a smile as he stepped closer. "Tell me, what do you think of my new attire for my meeting with the Fleet Admiral?"

"Your attire is acceptable," she responded. "However, the contusions and abrasions on your face and neck are quite unsightly."

Augustok smiled with a soft laugh, "Why, Doctor, I believe you are acquiring a sense of humor."

"Why did you not report to sickbay?" she asked.

"It's not the first time I've crawled home and licked my wounds. Besides, I prefer it when you come here."

“Please sit down,” she asked as she sat down next to him on the sofa. She opened her kit and began to tend his injuries.

“I saw Dr. Picard treating Commander Worf some time ago. It is to your advantage that I learned the nature of his injuries. Otherwise, you would have attended your meeting looking as if you had been attacked by a wild Klingon targ.”

“That analogy isn’t far removed from the truth,” he muttered.

“Please try to be still,” she asked as she continued to work.

“It was most kind of you to come here, I thank you.”

“It was beyond my required duties.”

“I think of you often. Have you done any further study on reunification?”

“I have devoted much thought to the experience of our mind meld. But I have done no further study,” she replied, putting away her instruments.

“Then perhaps it’s time for another session,” he suggested.

“We are to arrive at Earth shortly, but I believe there is ample time.”

They faced each other, but much to his surprise, she did not reach to touch his face. Instead, she grasped his hand and positioned their fingers together as in the beginning of the Pon Farr. They exchanged caresses of the hands until he could hold himself back no longer. He embraced and kissed her. She seemed to reciprocate. He stopped and whispered, “would you like more in-depth study?”

“Please proceed,” she answered softly.

“Computer, lights off,” he said, and the room fell dark.

“Computer, belay order,” she said, and the light returned.

A puzzled look was on his face as he asked, “I thought you asked me to proceed?”

“If you proceed as I believe you will – then it is only logical to assume we must be mated,” she answered.

“Is that what you want?” he asked.

“It must be what we both believe is right.”

“I have felt this way only once before. Why would I wish not to again?”

“It cannot be based solely on emotion.”

“But if the emotion is mutual, then it’s logical to proceed, and I believe it is mutual.”

“I must confess that I have never before been so moved by thoughts and touch as I have by yours,” she confessed.

“As have I, so if we are to belong to each other then it is logical not to delay any longer.”

She touched his face to reach his mind and the strength of his thoughts rushed through her.

“Computer, lights off,” she said softly.

CHAPTER 9

Just outside the Terran solar system the *Enterprise* dropped out of transwarp in a swirl of light. She continued to slow to sublight speed as she neared the system.

On board, Geordi entered his quarters. He drew and exhaled a heavy sigh of exhaustion. Rubbing his forehead, he slowly made his way to the food slot.

“Computer, Cappuccino, 80 degrees.”

He sat down and momentarily removed his visor long enough to rub his eyes and the bridge of his nose.

“I think if I look at one more technical schematic right now, I’ll fry my neural implants.”

After replacing his visor, he carefully sipped the hot drink, then a smile crept onto his face and he quickly tapped his comm badge. “LaForge to Picard.”

“Picard here, go ahead.”

“Captain, request permission to contact Dr. Brahms. I think she would be a valuable addition to our staff for our meeting with Admiral Shanthi.”

“Excellent thinking, Commander. Make it so.”

“Thank you, Captain. I’ll inform you if she’s able to join us.”

“Very good Mr. LaForge. Picard out.”

Geordi turned to his terminal. “Computer, send a priority communiqué to Dr. Leah Brahms, Head of Starship Design, Utopia Planitia Fleetyards.”

“Authorization?” asked the computer.

“Recognize LaForge, Commander, Theta two nine nine seven.”

Moments later the screen displayed the fleetyard logo and then Dr. Brahms turning her chair to respond. “This is Dr. Brahms.” She had no more spoken her greeting when a wide smile came across her face.

“How ya doin’, Doc?” responded Geordi.

“Geordi! It’s so good to hear from you so soon. Once the *Enterprise* left Spacedock I didn’t expect to hear from you for months.”

“C’mon now, good friends don’t go that long without keeping in touch.”

“I see you’re still drinking cappuccino.”

“Yea, I think you got me hooked,” he said with a grin before he took another sip.

“So how’ve you been?” she asked. But before he could answer she raised an eyebrow and started again. “Wait a minute, you’re not calling so soon because there’s something wrong with the ship are you? What have you done to my engines?” Her constant smile let him know it was all in fun.

“No, no, the *Enterprise* is working beautifully and MY engines are running in top form,” he responded and they shared a chuckle. “Listen, Leah, I called because I could really use your help.”

“Sure, what do you need?”

“I’ve got some technical schematics for a proposed starship refit. If you could look them over for me and tell me what you think, especially feasibility and estimated time frame for completion, it would be a big help.”

“Absolutely, why don’t you send them now and I’ll look at them this afternoon?”

“I’m afraid I don’t have clearance for that.”

“Okay then, when can you bring them by?”

“Actually, we’re entering the Terran system now. We’re headed for Earth spacedock for a meeting with Fleet Admiral Shanthi. It would be great if you could come along.”

“Fleet Admiral Shanthi?” she said with surprise. “It must be pretty important.”

“Let’s just say the Federation is no longer the only one with transwarp capability in the quadrant.”

Leah’s expression suddenly became businesslike.

“I’ll inform the yard superintendent I’ll be leaving for at least one day.”

“Great! We should be at Utopia Planitia at about 1300 hours.”

“That’s too late, I need to see this material right away if I’m going to be any help to you at that meeting. I’ll be boarding a shuttle in a few minutes. I’ll meet you halfway. Besides, Geordi, why would I want to transport aboard and miss a chance to see MY starship gliding through space?” she ended with a smile.

“Thanks, Leah. I’ll owe you one for this.”

“Good. When our meeting’s finished you can take me to dinner.”

“My pleasure, Doc.”

You know you’re the only person I let call me that.”

“How about “Doc Leah”?”

“I’ll see you soon, Geordi. Doc out!”

As the transmission ended Geordi wore a look of contentment. He sipped more of his drink and thought about how glad he was that she not only agreed to help, but was enthusiastic. Better than that was how happy she was to hear from him. Maybe if he was lucky they’d get to work together again. With that he happily tapped his comm badge. “LaForge to Picard.”

“Go ahead, Commander.”

“Dr. Brahms is *en route* to us via shuttle. Her ETA is about twenty-five minutes.”

“Very good, Commander. Would you accompany her to my ready room as soon as she comes on board?”

“Aye, Captain. LaForge out.”

It was a quiet shuttle ride. Leah occasionally glanced at the pilot but he seemed immersed in his work.

Then the *Enterprise* came into view. As she drew ever closer, the sunlight bathed her hull and glistened on Saturn's rings in the distant background. The ensign broke his silence.

"That's one beautiful ship."

"You're right, she is beautiful," agreed Leah.

"I've never been aboard a Galaxy-class, especially the *Enterprise!*" The ensign's voice was full of anticipation.

"Feel free to take a short tour before you return."

"Thank you ma'am. I'll do just that," replied the excited young officer.

Leah was quietly amused with his enthusiasm, but as she gazed out the viewport at the closing ship part of her felt the same way. She became lost in thought as she fondly remembered all the long days she spent with Geordi working on this ship. He made the work enjoyable. As they reviewed schematics, ran computer simulations and tested static models she was impressed with his dedication to the work. He was so attentive to all her research, marveling at her breakthroughs and giving frank opinions. She especially remembered how

when it came time for trial runs, he insisted that she be on board. He was right about how exciting it would be to see something you've put so much time into actually work. But more than anything else, they accomplished actually being there the first time the ship went transwarp. That was an absolute thrill. They worked so well together. She missed sitting down at the end of a long day and sharing a cup of cappuccino. Talking about what worked and what failed. Reassuring her that her ex-husband's demands to give up her work were unreasonable. He helped her get on with her life after a painful divorce. For her the *Enterprise* launching ceremony was just a little sad. She considered asking him to transfer to Utopia Planitia, but she knew that would be unfair to him. She knew what his posting on the *Enterprise* meant to him. She began to wonder about his message when the ensign's voice broke her daydream.

"Enterprise, this is Shuttle Okuda on final approach."

"Confirmed, Okuda, prepare for main shuttlebay tractor beams."

"Acknowledged, Enterprise. Disengaging impulse engines." The tractor beams locked on and they enjoyed the view as they descended to a perfect landing. When the bay door alarm ceased, Dr. Brahms exited the shuttle to find Geordi waiting. He stood with a broad

smile and an outstretched hand. She clasped his hand between hers and returned the smile as he spoke.

“Glad you could make it, Doc.”

“Happy to be here, Commander,” she quipped his rank with a touch of sarcasm and they shared a laugh.

“Listen, Doc, I wish we had time to chat a little, but the Captain wants to see you right away.”

“Then let’s not keep the man waiting. We’ve still got a lot to do.”

“Amen to that,” replied Geordi as they left the shuttlebay.

Admiral Sonak sat with Captain Picard in his ready room conversing about what lay ahead for the Federation when they were interrupted by the door tone.

“Come,” said Picard.

Geordi and Leah entered the room as Picard stood and offered his hand. She returned the gesture.

“Welcome aboard, Doctor.”

“Thank you, Captain.”

“I believe you know Admiral Sonak.”

“Yes, we met briefly once before. Peace and long life, Admiral.”

“Live long and prosper, Doctor. Your service honors us,” replied Sonak.

“Please have a seat, Doctor,” offered Picard as he moved to lean on the front of his desk. “The Admiral and I both agreed with Commander LaForge, that you could provide us with some valuable insight.”

“Geordi mentioned a proposed refit and said the Federation was no longer the only one with Transwarp capability.”

“That’s correct, Doctor,” responded Picard. “I must stress that we are giving this information on a need to know basis.”

“I understand,” answered Leah.

Picard drew a deep breath and returned to his chair. “I’ll attempt to make this as brief as possible,” he began. “A few days ago DS7 was all but destroyed in what would appear on the outside to be a Klingon attack. However, upon our arrival we found a wounded Romulan officer.

He was brought aboard and treated where he requested asylum.”

“A Romulan defector?” Leah asked with surprise.

“That’s just the beginning,” commented Geordi.

“Indeed,” continued Picard. “He informed us the Romulans were responsible for the attack and the ship they used was of his design.”

“So now the Romulans have transwarp drive?” she asked with distress.

“They’ve got more than that,” added Geordi. They’ve improved their stealth and tactical capabilities. The ship has a new ablative armor and can fire its weapons while still cloaked.”

“Do we have any evidence to confirm this information?”

“Evidence is something we seem to have in abundance,” replied Picard.

“Almost too much to believe,” added Geordi.

Leah wore a puzzled expression as Picard continued. “You see our guest has provided us with research results; technical schematics and design specifications

of the new Romulan vessel, all on isolinear optical chips he brought with him.”

Leah was stunned. It took her several seconds to collect her thoughts. “Could he be a plant?” Sent here with information in an attempt to mislead us?” she asked.

“That was our first thought as well,” answered Picard. “But in addition to information, he has requested asylum. He wishes to serve Starfleet and proposes to help us upgrade our technology to at least equal or surpass that of the Romulans.”

“A Romulan serving in Starfleet?” she seemed to be asking herself out loud. She shook her head and then asked Geordi, “Is the tech data sound?”

“Everything I’ve looked at checks out. He’s definitely done his homework. He’s come up with amazingly simple solutions to things even I thought couldn’t be done. What’s more, he’s already reviewed with me how we can adapt these improvements to one of our designs. That’s where you come in. We need your input and opinion on these modifications.”

“I still can hardly believe my ears,” she said. “But if you think it’s worth looking into I’m with you all the way.”

“I wouldn’t have asked you to come otherwise, Doctor,” replied Picard.

“There’s one other thing, Captain,” said Leah.

“Yes?”

“The information may well be very good, but can he be trusted?”

“He is half Vulcan,” spoke Sonak. “I have touched his mind myself and I can assure you of his sincerity.”

“Forgive me Admiral, I meant no insult.”

“There is no harm Doctor. Your concern is well founded. You had no knowledge of his Vulcan heritage. I had similar concerns, but I now believe he represents a possible future for my people. I also believe he is an important link towards the normalization of relations with the Romulan Empire.”

“It doesn’t sound like the Romulans are interested in peace. Building a new warbird and attacking a Federation space station near the Klingon border sounds more like war.”

“They have never known any other way, Doctor,” replied the Admiral. “But the actions of men like Admiral Jarok and Commander Augustok prove there is a growing faction that no longer craves war. But in the meantime, we must deal with those who *are* in power. We must

balance the scale of strength and weakness is something we dare not show.”

“Admiral, balancing the scale of strength as you say, will mean violating the terms of the Treaty of Algeron,” Leah said with concern.

“That is already being considered, Doctor. Sometimes something old must be swept away to prepare something new,” answered Sonak. As several moments passed in silence, there was a sense of agreement between all.

Leah then stood and said, “I believe we all have a lot to do.”

“Thank you, Doctor,” said Picard.

“Live long and prosper, Admiral,” said Leah.

“Peace for you Doctor, and hopefully for us all,” replied Sonak.

“Captain, Admiral,” said Geordi as he gave a nod to each.

“Mr. LaForge, I’ll notify you when we reach spacedock. Dismissed,” ordered Picard.

CHAPTER 10

Captain's Log, USS Enterprise, Jean-Luc Picard recording.

We are approaching spacedock and have been informed that Fleet Admiral Shanthi and Admiral Hayden are awaiting our arrival. Mr. LaForge and Dr. Brahms are making final preparations with assistance from Commander Augustok. Geordi informs me that Dr. Brahms seems quite impressed with the Romulan officer's engineering and design knowledge. I only hope that Starfleet is equally taken with him.

Picard glanced out the viewport of his ready room as he finished his entry. Spacedock was drawing near. Its many cabin lights glimmered against Earth's night sky. It almost looked like an oasis amidst a dark desert. Something inside him said, "Home, doesn't it feel good to be coming home?"

What was happening to him? There was a time when the bridge of his ship or even his ready room felt like home, even more so than his quarters. He gave it no further thought and quietly entered the bridge. He took his chair and watched the viewscreen as they made their approach. This was something he always enjoyed, bringing his ship into port.

"Final approach, Captain," reported the helm.

“Mr. Worf, will you signal approach control?” ordered Picard.

“Aye, Captain,” responded Worf as he sent the signal. “I have approach control on audio, Captain. You are on speakers.”

“Spacedock, this is *Enterprise* on final approach.”

“Acknowledged, *Enterprise*. Prepare for docking sequence”.

“Impulse power disengaged, Captain,” reported Data.

“Spacedock, you have control,” said Picard.

“Confirmed, *Enterprise*. Spacedock has control. Enjoy the ride and welcome home.”

Everyone on the bridge seemed to do precisely as the dock master had requested; relaxing back into their seats, hands in their laps, simply enjoying the ride. Picard laughed silently to himself as Data moved his console and crossed his legs. He had learned his human responses well. Not a word was spoken by anyone. They all gazed with contentment at the viewscreen as they passed through the spacedock doors. Once inside, it was almost a parade. At practically every viewport on the station, people stopped whatever they were doing and stared. Offices, cabins, even docking control tower lined

up to see with awestruck faces. The flagship of Starfleet was making her appearance and every person onboard who could see the audience was proud to say to themselves, "My ship is the *Enterprise*."

Picard watched as the docking arms extended and the ship crept slowly to a halt.

"We are docked and moored, Captain. Shutting down internal power."

"Very well, Mr. Data," replied Picard. "Everyone secure your stations and enjoy your shore Leave."

The crew carried out their orders as Riker supervised. Soon only he and Picard remained. Will stood at the turbolift doors and Picard was still in his chair. Just as he was about to ask if Picard was coming, the doors opened and Beverly stepped out. Her smile and a touch on his arm told Riker she wanted a bit of privacy with her husband. Will responded with a nod and his usual large grin as he left the bridge. Jean-Luc noticed her coming down the ramp and offered her the chair next to him. She sat down and took his hand in hers.

"Are all the children gone?" she asked.

"I beg your pardon?" he replied in an amused tone.

“The house is empty; nobody home but you and me,” she said as she curled up in the chair and put her head on his shoulder.

“The house?” he questioned softly.

“Yes, I have a great big house that flies through the galaxy. Not every girl can say that.”

“In that case, would you like to get out of the house for dinner at the station lounge?”

“Actually, I thought we’d stay home tonight.”

“The *Enterprise* is home?”

“As long as you’re captain. My home is wherever you are.” Beverly stood as Picard did and they embraced. Then with a kiss, she said, “Now, don’t be late for your meeting – and play nice with the other officers.”

“I’ll be home as soon as I can,” he told her as they left the bridge together.

Finally his moment of truth had come. Augustok sat patiently as he listened to Fleet Admiral Shanthi and Admiral Hayden relay the actions and concern of the Federation Council. The Romulan Ambassador has been

sent home to inform the Praetor and the Imperial Senate that the attack on Deep Space Seven is a blatant violation of the Treaty of Algeron and would be viewed as an act of war. Although at this time there will be no formal declaration of hostilities, the Federation will tolerate these acts of aggression no longer. Borders will be defended, by force if necessary. He was also informed that Starfleet has knowledge of the new warbird and proof that it was used in the attack.

Augustok noted that no mention was made of him. Was he to be granted asylum or was he a prisoner-of-war? He wanted to speak but kept his silence. If the Federation was to be his new home, he must have faith that they will make the right decisions. If these are to be his colleagues, he must trust them, as he desired for them to trust him. He slowly began to feel more at ease as Admiral Sonak presented his conclusions. He echoed Augustok's recommended courses of action, reinforcing them with his own logic. He spoke of his mind meld and reassured them of Augustok's sincerity.

Picard then offered his views, bolstered by his first-hand experience with the Romulans. This, more than anything else so far, seemed to have the greatest impact. Both Shanthi and Hayden expressed agreement and complimented Picard on the way he handled incidents with Admiral Jarok and the Starfleet border blockade during the Klingon Civil War. It was obvious they trusted

his judgment. He accepted their compliments with modesty and then proceeded to give a detailed account of Sela's attack on the *Enterprise*. He finished by conveying the information Augustok had given him regarding the Romulan's ongoing efforts to develop a trilitium weapon. He also felt that this new warbird represented far too great an advantage and urged them to take swift action to nullify it.

The two Admirals deliberated between themselves for a few moments and then asked to see the proposal information. Leah gave Geordi a gentle pat on the back as he rose from his chair. It was his time to shine, and shine he did. From the computer terminal, he called up a holographic design schematic of the Nebula-class starship which appeared in the center of the table.

"First of all, let's be clear about what we're up against," began Geordi. "The Romulans have upgraded their D'Deridex-class warbird starship, and it's obvious they've done so with combat in mind. Now I'll show you how we propose to upgrade our design to equal, or exceed, theirs. Watch the hologram as I illustrate each change. First, the Romulans are still using a confined quantum singularity as their power source. Their new design employs a primary and secondary engine core. Both cores must be on-line to achieve transwarp velocity; hence, our first advantage—the *Enterprise* makes transwarp speed with one overdrive warp core.

So, our first modification is to relocate the Nebula-class ship's warp core one section aft, where we still have an easy access to the anti-matter pods and the primary deuterium tank. There it will serve as the secondary engine core. We then install an overdrive core as the primary power source. Now, since it is difficult to generate the field pattern necessary for controlled transwarp travel with two nacelles, we install an aft pylon wing supporting two outboard nacelles. The benefits of this are twofold. We now have transwarp capability on our primary engine core alone and we improve survivability by still being able to reach speeds of up to warp nine on either the inboard or outboard nacelles driven by either engine core. We also have the added benefit of the pylon's wing aft sensor array which will serve to replace the one we lose in the overhead module. That array will be replaced with Type X phaser emitters for rearward defense. The pylon wing also has six phaser emitters of its own. These additions to the ship's framework requires upgrading the structural integrity field. Which brings us to our next point of comparison." Geordi brought up a rendering of the Romulan vessel. "The Romulan ship's new hull plating has a sufficient content of carbon neutronium to mask power sources from our sensors, as well as being an incredibly tough ablative armor. By boosting power to their structural force field, they augment that armor. It's like generating a low level deflector shield immediately around the hull. This way they can stay cloaked and the

ship is still protected without a definite readable energy signature. Our design takes a similar approach.”

Once more, Geordi brought up the 3-D holimage of the Nebula prototype. “Our structural integrity generators are replaced with thirty-two MW graviton polarity sources with their accompanied coolant loops. Field distortion amplifiers are updated to 625 millicochrane units. Secondary feeds for the external hull get their own dedicated generators and amplifiers of the same quality. Computer simulations show our design to have a twenty-five percent better survivability rate when used in conjunction with the new hull plates, which we can easily replicate thanks to the molecular structure provided for us by Mr. Augustok.”

All attention turned to their Romulan visitor.

“Your information seems to be most valuable,” commented Shanthi.

“The honor is to serve,” replied Augustok.

“Please proceed, Mr. LaForge,” instructed Admiral Hayden.

“The Romulan design carefully tunes their equivalent of our magneto-hydromatic (MHD) system on their impulse generators to reduce ionization of exhausted plasma. They’ve also added coolant loops to their

exhaust directors. Both of these modifications have slightly reduced their impulse performance, but the ship no longer leaves a traceable energy trail. We believe we can achieve the same goals with no loss in performance by installing the eight primary impulse engines in two groups of four, as on the *Enterprise*. The computer programs for fine tuning the MHD units are easily converted to our software and we can achieve similar plasma cooling by moderately extending and chambering the exhaust directors. We also recommend the installation of secondary impulse engines as found on the saucer section of Galaxy-class ships. This would improve maneuverability at sublight speeds where most combat takes place and their fusion generators provide an auxiliary power source.”

Everyone at the table wore a look of intrigue. Both Shanthi and Hayden were noticeably impressed. Leah and Augustok watched with content as their work took shape before their eyes. Picard knew Geordi had everyone in his capable hands as he continued.

“Now, the Romulans have not significantly increased their weaponry. They instead chose to place their emphasis on the ability to mimic the energy signatures of opponent’s armament. They can attenuate their discharge to simulate Klingon, Cardassian, or Federation weapons. Since this is of little concern to us, we took the straight-forward approach. In addition to the

aforementioned phaser arrays, we will propose the installation of three additional torpedo launchers; two in the overhead module for a total of three forward launchers and one in the engineering hull for a total of two aft. We also propose the Type X+ phaser cannon be installed on the ventral portion of the saucer section. With both warp cores supplying power in series, we can generate a blast equal to that of a planetary defense unit. Last of all, and easily the most controversial system, is the cloaking device. The question is...does the Federation Council approve of its use?"

"The Federation will not condone the use of such a device for the purpose of an attack in hostile territory unless we are in a state of war," answered Shanthi.

"We've already heard formal complaints about the use of the *Defiant's* cloaking device to rescue Cardassian Council members. The Treaty of Algeron seems more meaningless each day and the Romulans continue to point the finger of guilt in our direction despite actions they have taken," commented Hayden.

The Admiral's words cut deep into Augustok, but as painful as it was to hear, he knew it was true. He also knew he must endure such things for the sake of the rising generation.

“The Federation is prepared to take whatever steps are necessary to defend its borders and protect its citizens,” added Shanthi.

“What about this firing of weapons while still cloaked?” asked Hayden.

“The Romulan cloak is interlocked to a weapons program subroutine that selectively reduces power to individual cloaking emitters, effectively opening an EM window just long enough for the weapon blast to pass through,” answered Geordi.

“I assume from your presentation so far, that our design will have that same capability,” stated Hayden.

“That’s correct, sir,” replied Geordi.

“One other question,” Hayden began as he leaned forward on the table and laced his fingers. “Why refit a multi-mission ship like the Nebula-class when we already have a mission specific battle cruiser design in the Defiant-class? To my knowledge, the *Defiant* has done an outstanding job so far and I believe we have a second ship under construction. Isn’t that right Doctor?”

“Yes Admiral, the *U.S.S. Ivanhoe* is nearing completion and was scheduled to be stationed at DS7,” replied Leah.

“Why not these upgrades to that ship?” asked Hayden.

“I agree, we should halt construction on the *Ivanhoe* to include some of these modifications,” answered Leah. “However, I still recommend we go ahead with this refit proposal. The compact design of the Defiant-class does not allow for the modifications necessary for transwarp speed. It will probably require some type of variable geometric nacelle mounts similar to the Intrepid-class. This is still at the research level. Fewer decks give the *Defiant* its low target aspect required a shorter engine core. Our best technology with overdrives, injectors, reaction sequence, and crystal orientation delivered the required power the *Defiant* needed. It is the same technology applied to a much larger core that drives the *Enterprise* to transwarp speeds. I also believe we must choose a design that will support the Type X+ phaser cannon. Against this new armor, we need the best firepower possible.”

“I agree with Dr. Brahms, Admiral,” added Geordi. “We need a ship that can stand toe-to-toe with this new warbird and throw a knockout punch if need be.”

“Doctor, what would be our time frame for completion?” asked Shanthi.

“In that department we’re in luck,” replied Leah. The *Phoenix* was scheduled for a major refit. Due to damage

incurred from a meteor shower, we got her three months early. All of the major strip down work has been done. If we can proceed as we did with the *Enterprise*, by assigning two shifts of engineering teams to augment Utopia Planitia's crew, I think we can be ready in less than six months".

"Isn't that overly optimistic?" asked Hayden.

"No, sir. All of our hardware will come from existing Federation stores," answered Leah.

"Are there any specific personnel you require?" asked Shanthi.

Before Leah could answer, Geordi spoke up. "Captain Picard, may I request a temporary leave of absence for the duration of this project?"

"Granted, Mr. LaForge."

"Thank you, Captain. It won't be permanent, I promise."

"I certainly hope not," replied Picard.

Leah couldn't have been happier, but there was another matter. "Admiral, Mr. LaForge and I feel that Mr. Augustok should be assigned to this project as well."

“Absolutely, Admiral,” concurred Geordi. “There’s no way we could have come this far without him.”

“It appears you have a room full of advocates, Mr. Augustok,” noted Shanthi.

Augustok stood and spoke with boldness, “With all of me that is Vulcan, I pledge my loyalty to the Federation and to Starfleet. With all the passion of a Romulan, I promise to serve you and these colleagues to see the dream of peace and reunification realized...with my life if necessary.”

“Let us hope that will not be necessary,” commented Sonak.

“Agreed, Admiral,” said Shanthi. “Very well, Mr. Augustok. I hereby grant you citizenship in the Federation by means of a field commission, to the rank of Ensign, entitling you to all the rights and privileges thereof. You are officially assigned to answer directly to Dr. Brahms and Lt. Commander LaForge until this project is completed. At which time, your performance will be reviewed.”

“I cannot express my gratitude,” said Augustok.

“You can express it with your service to this project,” said Hayden.

“Yes, sir.”

“Congratulations, Ensign Augustok,” added Shanthi. “This project will proceed with top priority. You are dismissed.”

As Shanthi rose from her chair Hayden commented, “I’ll have to hand it to your staff, Jean-Luc, this ship could intimidate the Romulans on looks alone. Once they see it, they may never cross the Neutral Zone again.”

“It is rather ominous,” said Picard.

“‘Quoth the Raven, ‘Nevermore’,”¹ quoted Augustok. He added another, “Nevermore,” for quiet emphasis. Silence fell on the room like a dark, giant blanket. All eyes were fixed on Augustok. He didn’t know quite how to react. “It’s a line from an ancient Earth poet, Edgar Allen Poe.”

“That’s perfect!” said Geordi as he looked at the Admirals. “It is a sufficiently different design to call this a

1 From “The *Raven*” by Edgar Allen Poe, first printed in the *New York Evening Mirror*, Jan 29, 1845.

dreadnought vessel.” Shanthi and Hayden looked at each other and nodded in agreement.

“Dr. Brahms, see that the registered name of this vessel is changed from the *U.S.S. Phoenix* to the *U.S.S. Raven*. The design hereafter to be known as the *Raven-class* Dreadnought starship,” ordered Shanthi.

“I’ll see to it immediately sir,” responded Leah. After Hayden and Shanthi left the room, there were vigorous handshakes and many congratulations.

“I’m very impressed with your study of our history,” Picard told Augustok with satisfaction.

“We do have some things in common, Captain. Like our legend of *Nokturak*; the *Raven* in your ancient culture was a symbol of doom and a harbinger of death. Especially to an ancient culture called the ... Egyptians?”

“What has inspired you to search our history in such detail?”

“You, Captain. I was told of your interests in archaeology and poetry.”

“I hope I shall have the opportunity to experience your culture as well.”

“As do I, Captain. Thank you for everything.”

“Save your thanks for now. There is still much to be done. But first of all, let’s get you a uniform.”

“One moment, Captain,” asked Augustok as he approached Sonak. “I am and always shall be in your debt, Admiral. Live long and prosper.”

“Your debt is not to me, but to the people whose future is to follow the path you now tread. Peace and long life for you and your people,” replied Sonak.

The group left the room, eager for the task which stood before them and hoping they would not be too late—too late to stop a war for at least one Romulan commander with a taste for vengeance.

CHAPTER 11

Picard sat in his ready room with a book in his hand and a cup of Earl Grey at his side. He was deep into its pages when the door tone sounded. He made no move. He spoke no word. His thoughts were light-years away. The tone sounded again, this time breaking his concentration. He sat up and cleared his throat.

“Come.”

Commander Riker stepped in and asked, “Are you all right, sir?”

“Sorry, Number One, I was lost in thought. Please, have a seat. What is it you need?”

“Actually nothing, sir. I’m sorry for interrupting. It’s just very quiet on the bridge,” said Riker as he sat down.

“That sounds like a welcomed change,” replied Picard as he sipped his tea.

“It’s more than welcomed. The past six months have been murder,” said Riker.

“Agreed, Number One.” Picard’s voice echoed Riker’s weariness. “Every outpost along the Neutral Zone is sitting on pins-and-needles. Every colony along the

border is shouting for help at the first sign of the slightest energy surge.”

“Makes you want to go to the Holodeck and lock the door, doesn’t it? By the way, how was Venice? I know it’s been quite a while ago, but we’ve been so busy, I hadn’t asked,” questioned Will with his trademark grin.

“Oh, you mean the honeymoon,” replied Picard. “My singing voice isn’t what it used to be, so we skipped the rest of Venice. Instead, we attended Data’s recorded performance of King Henry V at the Royal London Amphitheater. I know the audience was simulated, but his acting, with his newfound emotion is really quite powerful.”

“I know that’s not all,” quipped Riker.

“Well, we did some horseback riding, some camping, some fantasy role-playing,” added Picard with a wry smile.

“I won’t ask,” laughed Riker. “I’d like to ask you something else, on a more serious note. Something personal.”

“Certainly, Will. What is it?”

“What’s it like having a wife onboard? I mean, does the honeymoon still go on? I’ve never thought of marriage and starship command as being compatible.”

“It’s been far more compatible than I thought possible,” replied Jean-Luc. “Of course, it isn’t likely either of us are in danger of being reassigned against our will. We aren’t in competition for similar positions, and I must admit I’ve enjoyed not finding emptiness and solitude at the end of every day.”

“But what if you want solitude and privacy?” asked Will.

“Sometimes we spend the evenings in separate rooms. I’ve seen some of my Academy classmates go on to have families and impressive careers in Starfleet. There was a time when I never thought that was possible. Listen, Will. If you’ve thought about it, and I know you have, don’t wait too long. Don’t wait until a tragedy opens your eyes, like I did.”

“Thank you, sir,” said Riker as he rose from his chair and headed for the door. But after only a couple of steps, he turned half around. “You forgot to mention the honeymoon part.”

Picard rose from his chair and disposed of his tea cup. He then came around the table with a skip and a snap of his fingers. He looked at Will with a raised eyebrow. His

voice was ginger as he mocked a heavy French accent. "It jest so happens, that after I serve a romantic candlelight dinner for my bride's birthday...I am anticipating a beet of honeymooning before breakfast, eh?" He added a slight elbow to Riker's ribs. Will's eyes were wide with surprise. This was a side of Jean-Luc Picard he'd never seen.

"Is it Jean-Luc Picard or Don Juan Picard?" Will asked.

Jean-Luc stroked his upper lip with his fingers as if he were brushing back a mustache. He then planted his hands firmly on his hips, snapped his head to the side and raised his chin, his accent remained. "My profile says Cyrano DeBergerac!"

Will could hold it no longer. He burst out laughing and Picard soon joined-in. A few moments passed before either regained composure.

"Give Beverly my best birthday wishes," said Will, still chuckling. "By the way, how old is she?"

"Come, come, Number One, I'm her husband and even I don't have that information!" replied Picard as he rolled his eyes. Then the comm signal sounded.

"Worf to Picard." In an instant everything fell serious again.

Picard tapped his badge. "Go ahead Mr. Worf."

"Starfleet Admiral Hayden on secure channel for you, sir."

"In my Ready Room, Commander," ordered Picard. Riker nodded and exited to the bridge as Picard went quickly to his terminal. "Computer, recognize Picard, Captain, alpha zero zero one, security code gamma." Hayden's face appeared on the monitor. He wore a tense look. "Yes, Admiral?"

"Jean-Luc, I'm ordering the *Enterprise* to Earth immediately. You are authorized to exceed warp limitations. Contact me at the Office of the Federation President as soon as you arrive. Have Commander Riker beam down with you."

"May I ask the nature of this meeting?"

"That information is classified. Suffice it to say we have a crisis situation."

"I understand," replied Picard.

"Hayden out."

All sorts of unpleasant thoughts began racing through Picard's mind as he turned off the terminal. But every instinct he had told him the Romulans were at it again.

It seemed Sela would stop at nothing until she had provoked full scale war. Why else would they be meeting with the President?

There would be enough time to think after they were underway. Picard went straight to the Bridge, giving orders as soon as he passed through the doors. "Helm, set course for Earth, maximum warp. ENGAGE!"

"Aye, sir," acknowledged the comm officer.

"I take it wasn't good news?" commented Riker as Picard took his chair.

"Unknown, Number One, but I have a feeling the ghostbird has bloodied its talons once again." The *Enterprise* banked to starboard, making a sweeping turn as she came to course. The light from the stars turned to streaks as she accelerated. The bright glow from her nacelles stretched along behind her like a comet's tail. The starlight streaks appeared to swirl and blur as she raced into transwarp.

It was early in the morning in Paris. From his office, the President and Admiral Hayden stood looking out the window at the Eiffel Tower. Their discussion had left them concerned and momentarily silent.

"I still don't think we should disclose our course of action, Mr. President."

"Don't worry, Admiral, I have no intention of compromising our security." Just then a comm tone interrupted the conversation. The President activated the comms panel on his desktop. "Yes, Michelle?"

"Captain Picard and Commander Riker of the *Enterprise* to see you sir."

"Send them in."

Admiral Hayden welcomed the two as they came in and took their seats. "Jean-Luc, Will, it is good to see you again. I wish it were better circumstances."

"Let's get right to business shall we?" suggested the President in a serious tone of voice.

"Right," agreed Hayden. "Less than forty-eight hours ago, a Klingon convoy consisting of three freighters and two escort ships, were attacked and destroyed. They were *en route* to the Cardassian colonies taken during the Klingon Invasion."

"The High Council is holding the Federation responsible because of our refusal to support the invasion in the first place," added the President.

“They also claim the attacking ship was cloaked and used phasers and quantum torpedoes.”

Hayden had barely uttered this statement when Riker blurted out in disgusted surprise, “They’re accusing us of using the *Defiant*?”

“The Romulan Government is once again charging us with breaking the agreement of not using the cloak in the Alpha Quadrant. They are also accusing us of somehow modifying the device to allow the *Defiant* to fire her weapons while still cloaked.”

Picard took notice of how calm and unaffected the President seemed to be as he spoke the charges. He and Picard exchanged a look of agreement as the Captain responded with dry wit, “Me thinks he doth protest too much.”

“Precisely, Captain,” replied the President. “The Romulan charges are of little concern to us at this point.”

Hayden continued the explanation, “Deep Space Nine’s long range scanners recorded the entire incident and we know the exact location of the *Defiant* during the time of the attack.”

The President then finished, “So you see gentlemen, we have ample evidence in our favor. The Klingons however,

have none of this information and don't seem to be in a mood to talk. I called an emergency meeting with the Federation Council and it was decided that in the best interest of fostering peaceful relations, we should share with the Klingons a liberal amount of data concerning the new Romulan warbird and our course of response."

Hayden immediately protested once again. "To give them information about the Romulans is one thing, but telling them about our plans puts us at risk."

"Not necessarily, Admiral," responded Picard. "Showing that we are prepared to respond with force would be viewed by the Klingons as an act of strength and honor."

The President smiled. "I can see why he insisted on you and absolutely no-one else."

"Who insisted?" asked Picard.

The President Leaned forward onto his desk. "When I was finally able to get through to Chancellor Gowron with our proposal, he sat down the conditions of the meeting. He was non-negotiable. He made it very clear that if we sent any ambassador or diplomat he would kill them. The only one he will speak with is his Arbiter of Succession."

Picard did not seem at all thrilled with the somewhat dubious honor bestowed upon him. He had hoped he

had heard the phrase “arbiter of succession” for the last time. He drew a deep breath and asked, “When is the meeting scheduled to take place?”

“One week,” replied Hayden.

“At what location?”

“That’s one of the conditions,” the President answered. “We don’t know the exact location. The *Enterprise* is to proceed to a set of coordinates at the Klingon border where you will be intercepted by two Birds-of-Prey. You will then be escorted to an undisclosed point in Klingon space where you will rendezvous with Gowron aboard the *N`gBar*.”

“Mr. President, with respect,” responded a tense Commander Riker, “to send the *Enterprise* to an unknown destination deep in Klingon territory without escort is suicide! This sounds more like an ambush than a meeting.”

“An element of risk, Number One. It requires us to display of our trust and test our courage.”

“That might be true Jean-Luc,” said Hayden,” but we’re not sending the *Enterprise* alone. You’re going to be escorted by the most heavily armed ship we’ve got.”

“You’re pulling the *Defiant* from DS9?” asked Riker as though he had predicted the answer.

“No, Commander,” replied Hayden. “We’re sending your ship.”

“My ship, sir?”

“That’s right, Will. We’ve pulled out the Captain’s chair for you several times in the past. You just won’t sit down. Well I’m pulling it out again and this time I’m going to make you sit in it, at least for this mission. I’m giving you the *Raven*.”

“The *Raven* sir?” Riker said with surprise. “She can’t possibly be ready for a mission like this.”

“Her operational Bridge module was docked yesterday. You’ve got five days, Mr. Riker, to get her ready,” ordered Hayden.

“Yes, sir!”

“I hereby give you field promotion to the rank of Captain, with all rights and privileges. Your orders are to report to Utopia Planitia immediately. I will meet with both of you there in seventy-two hours for mission briefing. That is all gentlemen. You are dismissed.”

Picard and Riker rose from their seats and gave their respects to the President. He in turn expressed his confidence in them for such an important mission. Admiral Hayden congratulated Riker on his new command. As they were leaving, Hayden called to Riker from across the room.

“Oh, and Will, when you sit in the center seat on this one, you may never want to get up.”

Will responded with a nod, then followed Picard into the hall. As they walked outside Picard gave Will a pat on the shoulder.

“I know it was unexpected, but congratulations, Number One. I can’t think of anyone else I’d rather have watching my back on this mission.”

“Thank you, sir. I won’t let you down.”

“Of that I have no doubt. Picard to *Enterprise*, two to beam up.”

CHAPTER 12

As soon as they were aboard, the *Enterprise* left Earth behind and in a short while they were approaching Mars. When they requested clearance for orbit, they were instructed to assume a synchronous position with Utopia Planitia's space station. The instructions were accompanied by a personal communiqué from Lt. Commander LaForge to Captain Riker informing him to beam aboard the station and *not* attempt transporting directly aboard the *Raven*.

Geordi stood a personal watch at the viewport. He followed the *Enterprise* as she climbed from beneath the station and came into position nearby. The seconds passed slowly as he gazed, unable to take his eyes from her. A smile came across his face as their orbit carried them into the sunlight. He whispered, "I sure have missed you, and I'm coming home real soon."

The transporter officer called, "Commander, the *Enterprise* is signaling. Captain Riker is ready for transport."

"Bring him over, Ensign," order Geordi as he left the viewport and stood beside the transporter console. Riker materialized on the pad and immediately showed a look of pleasant recognition. LaForge, following

protocol said, “Welcome to Utopia Planitia Commander, I mean Captain.”

“That’s all right Geordi,” replied Riker as he stepped down from the pad. “I’ve been temporarily Captain so many times I’ve lost count.”

“Once you’ve seen this ship, you may change your mind,” replied LaForge.

“Is this some sort of conspiracy?” Riker asked with a grin as they left the transporter room. “Admiral Hayden said the same thing just as I was leaving his office.”

“Maybe it’s envy,” suggested Geordi.

Riker responded with only a look and they both laughed. “All kidding aside though,” continued Geordi, “everyone that looks at her is awestruck. She’s one impressive ship.”

“You make it sound like we’ve got a new flagship.”

“I wouldn’t go that far, Captain. She is definitely not suited for deep space exploration. We had to sacrifice a lot of space and multi-mission systems to concentrate on her defensive capabilities. But in that department, she’s unmatched.”

“Unmatched is a pretty strong adjective.”

“Let me put it to you like this Captain, if we had just three of these ships at Wolf 359, the Borg wouldn’t have stood a chance.”

Riker was taken aback by Geordi’s statement. Was he exaggerating or was this ship really that deadly? Time would soon tell and he hoped and prayed he would never have to find out for certain. In an effort to lighten the conversation he commented, “Well, it doesn’t sound like firepower a problem. Now if we can just get her transporters operational...”

“Oh, the transporters work perfectly,” said Geordi. “It’s just that we’re generating a subspace field around the docking frame to scramble any log range sensors that might be trying to peek at us. Besides, I wasn’t about to let you beam aboard and miss the chance to give you a little guided tour.”

Riker’s smile told Geordi he approved. The pair continued down the corridor until they reached the shuttle bay entrance. There they met Dr. Brahms and another officer.

“Welcome, Captain.”

“Thank you, Doctor, and may I take this opportunity to say what an outstanding job you’ve done getting this

ship ready in such a short period of time. I know the work you did on the *Enterprise* was impressive.”

“Well thank you, Captain, but I can’t take that kind of credit. Geordi has been my hands and eyes on this project. I couldn’t have done it without him. As a matter of fact, if he ever gets tired of warping around the galaxy he has a standing invitation here anytime he wants it.”

“You know, Captain, I’ve told her she needs to get out in space more often. She’d make a top-notch Starfleet Engineer,” said Geordi.

“I already am a top-notch Starfleet Engineer,” remarked Leah with authority.

“Yes, yes you are, but you know what I mean,” retorted LaForge with a grin.

Riker leaned over and spoke just a above a whisper, “Whenever the two of you are finished, could someone introduce this patient young man standing here?”

LaForge was speechless and his embarrassment was only made more complete as Leah stood there giggling under her breath. “Well,” said Geordi as he cleared his throat, “Speaking of top notch engineering, Captain, may I introduce Lieutenant Joshua Riley.”

“A pleasure to finally meet you, sir,” said Riley with a handshake. Commander LaForge has told me a lot about you.”

“All of it good I hope,” replied Riker to Geordi.

“Everything except how many chips he’s going to lose at the poker game,” joked LaForge. “Lucky for us his service record is much better than his poker skills. Mr. Riley served right here at Utopia Planitia for two years doing propulsion system construction. He’s served in engineering aboard two other starships with his most recent assignment being the *Phoenix*, where he’s been for almost three years. But most important, he’s been right here with us for every step of the refit. He knows the systems and understands the modifications. In short, Captain, Lt. Riley is my first recommendation for your Chief Engineer.”

“It seems you’ve made quite an impression, Mr. Riley,” commented Riker. “I know Commander LaForge doesn’t hand out glowing commendations about just anyone. I also know I trust his judgment. In light of that, as her Captain, I hereby appoint you to the position of Chief Engineer of the U.S.S *Raven*, effective immediately.”

“Thank you, sir,” replied Riley, bursting with pride.

“I hope you impress me more than you did Mr. LaForge.”

“I will, Captain. I have a legacy to uphold.”

“A legacy?”

“Yes, sir. I’m a third generation Starfleet officer. My father, Scott Riley, was Captain of Engineering aboard the *Tolstoy*. He was a casualty at Wolf 359. My grandfather was Rear Admiral Kevin Riley, who as a lieutenant served aboard the 1701 under James Kirk.”

“You should meet Captain Scott,” replied Riker. “I’ll bet he could tell you a few stories about your grandfather.”

“Commander LaForge told me about his rescue. I’ve never heard of anything quite like that! I do hope to meet him someday.”

“Congratulations, Mr. Riley,” said LaForge as he shook hands. “And I’ll tell you like Captain Scott told me, the first ship you get as Chief Engineer is like falling in love for the first time. It’s a time that’ll never come again.”

“Now that I have one of my senior officers, let’s go have a look at my ship.” Riker was already headed for the shuttle as the others hurried to catch up. The group climbed the shuttle’s boarding ramp. Once inside Riker took the copilot seat next to Geordi. Dr. Brahms and Lt. Riley sat in the passenger area and began discussing adjustments she wanted to make to the new warp

engine. Geordi powered up the engines and called for clearance.

“Control, this is Shuttlecraft *Okuda* departing Utopia Station for Docking Frame Three.” They lifted off and Geordi executed a half-orbit of the station. As he came around, he slowed to thruster speed, taking in the view of the *Enterprise* as it passed on their port side.

“I think I’m homesick already,” commented Riker as he looked on.

“You may be over that soon,” replied Geordi.

“We’ll see,” said Riker as he settled back into his seat. “By the way, how’s our half-Romulan friend doing?”

“You mean Lt. Augustok?”

“Lieutenant!” Riker looked shocked. “As in junior grade?”

“No, I mean full lieutenant,” answered Geordi.

Riker couldn’t believe his ears. “A full lieutenant already? That’s got to be the fastest promotion in Starfleet history!”

“I gotta tell you Captain, he’s earned it.” Riker’s stare and a single raised eyebrow told Geordi that it was

going to take a better explanation than that. “I’m serious, Captain. He’s put in at least twelve hours a day, six days a week since this project started. He’s one of the best problem solvers I’ve ever seen and he’s as good as any mission specialist I’ve ever worked with. On top of that, he puts in another four hours a day on his academy classes. Then he catches the shuttle to Earth one day a week for course exams. He’s gone through almost four semesters of work in less than six months.”

“That all sounds impressive,” said Riker with a tone of sarcasm.

“It doesn’t sound like you’re impressed at all.”

“I don’t know what it is, Geordi. There’s something about him. I guess it’s just past experience. It wouldn’t be the first time the Romulans have gone to great lengths to place an operative in a deep cover position.”

“That’s true,” acknowledged Geordi, “but Captain Picard and Admiral Sonak must have believed he was on the level or they never would’ve supported him.”

“I’m not questioning anyone else’s judgment. I’m just saying I haven’t convinced myself yet.”

“Then I guess you’re going to get the chance very soon.”

“What are you talking about?” asked Riker as though he already knew it was something he didn’t want to hear.

“He’s assigned to the ship,” answered Geordi, “as a member of your crew.”

“Oh that’s perfect, just perfect!” exclaimed Riker with disgust.

“Look, Captain, if you’re not sure about the guy, then put him someplace you can keep an eye on him. Give him a chance to earn your trust.”

“You’re probably right, Geordi,” responded Riker, regaining his composure. “But keeping an eye on him means putting him on the bridge. Based on what you know about him, what post would you recommend?”

“Well, despite his engineering background, I don’t think he knows our systems well enough yet to man Ops or Bridge engineering. He does seem to have a real strength in weapons systems and combat strategy. The *Raven* uses two tactical stations. You’ve already got a Chief Security Officer, and considering how well he knows our adversary, I’d use him at the weapons station.”

“Wait, back up a second. What do you mean I’ve already got a Chief Security Officer?”

“I was going to wait to tell you when we got on board, but I suppose there’s no time like the present. I hope you won’t be too upset. I know it’s always the Captain’s choice, but time was such a factor and we wanted everyone to have a chance to get familiar with the new equipment and systems modifications. I mean, I knew it was a little out-of-line, but I thought...”

“Geordi! Just spit it out!”

It was hard to tell if Riker was amused or aggravated listening to Geordi’s rambling explanation. LaForge was groping for words, trying to speak, but nothing was coming out. Finally, with a slight stutter he spoke, “I...I cho...I chose your First Officer for you.”

Riker leaned toward Geordi and spoke slowly, “Chose as in “highly recommended”, or chose as “in already onboard”?”

Geordi paused for a moment, hesitant to answer. He decided on a bit of consolation. “We both know him. He’s served under your command before.”

“And...” Riker knew there had to be more.

“And... he and I together picked your bridge crew, and all of them are already onboard.”

Geordi's response got a reaction, not at all what he expected, but a definite reaction. Riker fell back into his seat and began to chuckle. A few seconds later he broke into solid laughter. He then calmed himself a bit and held up his hands as if he were reading a report.

"Let me see if I've got all this," he began. "This morning I was given command of a new ship set to leave on its first mission in five days. Since then, you've recommended a Chief Engineer, chosen a First Officer, and hand-picked a Bridge crew. Are you sure you aren't leaving something out? Maybe a sex-starved Klingon female, drunk on Romulan ale, waiting to start a mating ritual in my quarters?"

"Would you like me to arrange that?" quipped Geordi.

"Don't you dare!" Riker quickly replied with a laugh. Geordi felt relieved and laughed along with the Captain. Riker then turned somewhat serious, "If you ever do this again under my command...I swear I'll...promote you...or I'll recommend you for a command of your own."

"Yes, sir!" replied Geordi with a wide smile.

"Now, what do you do for an encore?"

"Look out the window." Riker did as Geordi requested and his eyes grew wide with amazement. His mouth

hung slightly open but he made no sound. Lt. Riley and Dr. Brahms came forward from the passenger area. Leah sat down directly behind Geordi.

“What’s been going on up here with you two?” she asked.

“Shh, not now,” whispered Geordi as he pointed towards the mesmerized Captain Riker. Lt. Riley’s eyes became transfixed as well, even though he had seen this sight many times in the past months. Perhaps it had some special meaning to him this time because of his new position.

Once again Geordi switched to maneuvering thrusters only. They were approaching the docked ship from astern and a little below. Her most striking feature was her black color; the result of her new hull plating. It made for a very formidable appearance, letting you know right away this ship was all business.

Riker took notice of her pylon wings supporting her quad nacelles. They fanned out like a dragonfly, holding the nacelles like outriggers on a hydroplane. He thought how reminiscent it was of the old twentieth century jet bombers, with their huge engines hanging beneath their wings. Geordi began a gradual climb as they drew closer. They could see in more detail now, her twin aft torpedo launchers looked back at them like the barrels of a

shotgun. LaForge turned slightly to port as they climbed past the secondary pylon wing. He then banked to starboard and began his circle of the docking frame. The phaser discharge crystals and cloaking emitters on the overhead module looked almost close enough to touch before they passed out of view. Now at the peak of their climb, Riker looked down on the port side of the saucer section. He could see the Bridge module and directly behind it, the relocated captain's yacht docked atop the main shuttlebay.

Geordi now began a gradual descent towards the bow. The leading edge of the overhead module came into view beneath the top of the frame. Now facing them were her triple forward torpedo launchers and her weapons dedicated forward looking sensor arrays. They continued forward until both Riker and Riley felt their pride swelling within them as they silently read her discreet markings.

Geordi on the other hand felt moved to speak them aloud, "NCC-65420, U.S.S. *Raven*—the Romulans are going to find out we've got a warbird of our own, and her talons are right down here."

As the shuttle passed below the bow of the saucer, they were soon staring down the throat of what was far too big to be a torpedo tube.

“Is that what I think it is?” asked Riker.

“Yes, sir,” replied Geordi. “The Type X plus phaser cannon, the most powerful weapon ever installed on a starship.”

“Has it been tested at full power?”

“Yes, sir. All ship’s phasers have been full power tested. We also modified the computer’s weapons program to include the frequency-shift rapid pulse firing routine as used on the *Defiant*. This is now a tactical option for all ship’s phasers including the X+ cannon.”

“Good, I want the crew to know exactly what we’ve got on tap before we embark on this mission.”

“I’ll get right on these engine adjustments as soon as we’re on board,” said Lt. Riley. “You’ll have optimum power balance for any weapons exercise you wish to run.”

“Very good, Mr. Riley.” Riker was impressed with his new engineer’s eagerness. But then if he felt the same when he looked at this ship, that wasn’t too surprising.

Geordi leveled their descent as they passed beneath the starboard nacelles, affording an excellent view of the engineering hull. Riker took note of how many viewports had been blocked off on the lower half with

the new armor plates. With the expansion of engineering, the extra protection was good insurance. The two rows of cloaking emitters stretched from behind the ventral phaser array to just short of the aft torpedo tubes. As the shuttle passed beneath the secondary pylon wing, Geordi executed a climbing turn and requested clearance.

“U.S.S. *Raven*, this is shuttle *Okuda* requesting clearance to come aboard.”

“Acknowledged *Okuda*. You are clear to approach port side, shuttle bay two.”

Geordi came alongside the overhead module support pylon and cut his thrusters as the ship’s tractor beams locked on. Riker enjoyed his last few moments of sightseeing as they were guided into the shuttle bay. As they came to rest, Riker looked at Geordi with a wide smile, “Mr. LaForge, that was quite a ride. Thank you.”

“My pleasure, Captain.”

“Now you can take time to meet this hand-picked First Officer.”

“Right this way sir,” replied Geordi as he headed for the hatchway. As the group stepped out into the shuttlebay, a lone officer came through the doors and approached them. The closer he came, Riker began thinking of how

familiar he looked, but he couldn't quite place him. The officer stopped directly in front of Riker and stood at attention. He was a man of medium height. He had short blonde hair and a prominent mustache. His build was thin but muscular and he exuded an air of authority and confidence. He spoke with a firm voice.

"Welcome aboard, Captain. Please forgive the absence of a welcoming ceremony as I was given extremely short notice of your arrival. Plus, the crew is hard at work to make our launch schedule."

Geordi came to the officer's side and with an introductory gesture of his hand said, "Captain, I'd like you to meet your new first officer."

"At ease, Mr..."

"Thomas, sir," he replied, finishing Riker's sentence.

"Of course!" said Riker with a look of recognition. "Lt. Commander Thomas, Operations Officer aboard the *Excalibur*."

"That's correct, Captain."

"When did you make Commander?"

"I was promoted and made First Officer of the *Excalibur* immediately following your temporary command during

the Romulan Blockade mission, based on your recommendation, I'm told. Thank you, sir."

Riker acknowledged the compliment with a nod of his head and then turned to Geordi.

"Well done, Mr. LaForge."

"Thanks, Captain. I'll be in engineering if you need me."

"I'll be in engineering as well, sir," added Lt. Riley. "I'll report to you as soon as the engine adjustments are complete."

"Mr. Thomas, I assume you already acquainted yourself with our new Chief Engineer," stated Riker.

"Outstanding, Mr. Riley!" replied Thomas as he gave Riley a healthy handshake and a pat on the shoulder. "It's well deserved. Keep up the good work."

"Thank you, sir."

"And by the way," continued Thomas, "any reports on ship's status come to the Captain through me. I'll be looking forward to hearing from you. Carry on, Lieutenant."

"Aye, sir," replied Riley. He then joined LaForge and Dr. Brahms who were leaving for engineering.

As Riker watched this conversation between Thomas and Riley take place, he thought about how much his new first officer reminded him of himself. He appeared eager and energetic and able to enforce protocol without degrading the morale of those under his command. It felt somewhat odd to have someone doing all the things for him that he had been so accustomed to doing for Captain Picard.

“He’s an exemplary officer. He won’t disappoint you, sir,” Thomas told Riker.

“So I’m told,” replied Riker.

“I’m sure you’re ready to meet your Bridge crew.”

“You’re reading my mind, Mr. Thomas.”

“If you’ll follow me, sir,” answered Thomas as he started out of the shuttlebay. Riker was right at his side as the two made their way down the corridor to the turbolift.

Once inside and headed to the Bridge, Riker asked, “Wasn’t Captain Seto supposed to retire soon?”

“About a month ago, sir.”

“Didn’t that put you in line for the *Excalibur*?”

“I turned down command of the *Excalibur* for this assignment.”

“I know this is personal, but may I ask why?”

“When I was told about this ship and who was slated to be her Captain, I wasn’t about to miss the chance to serve with you again sir, especially as your First Officer. I learned too much from you the first time not to do it again.”

“I’m flattered, Mr. Thomas.”

“Meaning no disrespect sir, it’s not just that. Starfleet doesn’t build ships like this one every day.”

“Say no more, Commander. I know just how you feel. I wrote the book on turning down commands so you can go where you want the most.”

The two smiled in agreement as the lift doors opened. Commander Thomas stepped out first and announced, “Attention! Captain on the bridge!”

Everyone moved quickly to their post and stood tall beside their station. Riker stepped slowly from the lift as his eyes scanned the bridge. The layout was very similar to that of the *Enterprise* but the look was much different. No elegant wood trim or luxurious leather. What wasn’t onyx black was gun metal gray, with tiny

amounts of dull red trim. The lighting was for the most part subdued, allowing the mode lights to provide primary illumination, some of which were presently in maintenance-light mode to allow work on the consoles. The most boldly noticeable feature of the decor was the floor covering. The black carpeting provided a background for a huge woven logo in the center of the floor. It was the imposing image of a raven, its tail feathers fanned out between the helm and Ops chair. Its outstretched wingtips reached to the walkway up-ramps on both sides. Its head turned to one side with a frowning red eye that almost seemed to peer right through you.

Just above the bird's head was a raised platform supporting the trio of command chairs. The backrest of the Captain's chair bore a small version of the floor logo with the Starfleet insignia on its chest. The rest of the equipment looked standard with the exception of the enhanced tactical and additional weapons console.

The bridge crew remained at attention as Riker strode down the ramp then up the platform to his chair. He stared at it for a few seconds, lightly touching the armrest. He decided he wouldn't sit down until it was time to get underway. He activated the armrest control pad for ship-wide intercom. The signal tone sounded and all work throughout the ship stopped as the crew paused to listen.

Riker's voice rang out, "Attention all hands, by order of Starfleet Command, by way of Admiral Reuben J. Hayden, as of this stardate, I, Captain William T. Riker do hereby assume command of this vessel. I know each of you have been chosen for this assignment based on your dedication and skill. In the days ahead, there will be long hours and big demands placed upon you in preparation for our upcoming mission. I want each of you to know I have the utmost confidence in you and I consider it an honor to be your commanding officer. Carry on. Riker out."

As Riker stepped down from the command platform, Commander Thomas met him and motioned for the two officers at the Conn and Ops stations to approach. Thomas stepped to Riker's side as the officers stood at attention.

"Captain, may I introduce your helmsman and your Operations Officer?"

"At ease, gentlemen," said Riker. "It seems the planet Bajor is well represented here."

"These two were a package," began Thomas. "Both served a short tour with the Bajoran militia before enrolling at the Academy. Since their graduation they have been posted together on every assignment. They

were Alpha shift bridge crew members on the *Excalibur*. I brought them with me.”

“Lieutenant Fredrik Cole was my Ops backup. He more than filled my shoes when I was promoted to First Officer. He’s been very helpful with providing input for cross-links on our new systems, a benefit of his engineer background. At the Conn we have Lieutenant Douglas Canard, who was a member of the Delta Squadron precision flight demonstration team his junior and senior year. He is also a recent graduate of Advanced Tactical Flight training.”

Riker extended his hand to each of him. “Lt. Fredrik, Lt. Douglas, a very impressive dossier of your achievements. Welcome aboard.”

“You honor us with the proper use of our Bajoran names,” said Fredrik.

“I was educated by a former crewmate,” replied Riker.

“Commander Thomas, may I make a request of the Captain?” asked Douglas.

“Personal or professional?”

“Professional, sir.”

“By all means Lieutenant,” acknowledged Thomas.

“Sir, request permission to input additional tactical flight maneuvers into the ship’s computer.”

“Are these sequences of your own?” asked Riker.

“Yes, sir.”

“Put them on a PADD and leave them on the desk in my ready room. I’ll review them and give you a few of my own I want programmed as well.”

“Right away, Captain,” responded Duglas.

“Good work, both of you. Carry on, gentlemen,” ordered Riker.

Thomas then led Riker to the tactical station. There stood an officer with a long blonde ponytail. Mr. Thomas gave him a firm pat on the shoulder. He stopped his work and turned around. He wore a heavy blonde mustache and goatee. His low, heavy blonde eyebrows were at the base of a series of light ridges which ascended his forehead.

Riker stared in silence as Thomas began, “At tactical and your Chief Security Officer...”

The officer interrupted, “I am B’rtah, son of Joseph. The honor is to serve Captain.”

“I was getting to that Lieutenant,” Thomas stopped, noticing Riker’s eyes, still staring. “Is something wrong, Captain?”

“I’ve just never seen a blonde Klingon before, and I thought Worf was the only Klingon in Starfleet.”

“Lt. Commander Worf is the only full blooded Klingon serving in Starfleet. I am only half Klingon. My father was human.”

“He must have been quite a man,” said Riker with a smile.

“He may not have been Klingon, but in his heart he was a warrior. He slew my mother’s first husband in a challenge match over her honor. She gave herself to him as a prize. They left the Empire and made their home on Sherman’s planet, where I was born and raised. Learning the art of combat was a family activity. My father was a worthy opponent, even in his latter years.”

“I know they must be very proud of you,” complimented Riker. “I am proud to say that Mr. Worf is a close friend of mine, and that he is one of the greatest, most honorable men I’ve ever met. I hope to be able to say the same of you someday.”

“I shall not fail you, Captain,” replied B’rtah.

“Welcome aboard, Lieutenant,” said Riker with a firm handshake. He then added, “*K’plah.*”

B’rtah felt honored. He stood at attention and bowed his head to show his gratitude.

“Carry on, Lieutenant,” acknowledged Riker as he and Thomas turned and headed for the ready room entrance.

They were almost to the doorway when Lt. B’rtah called out, “Commander Thomas.”

“Yes, Lieutenant?” replied Thomas as he and Riker turned around.

B’rtah left his station and approached. “Have the positions of Science and Weapons officers been filled?”

“Not yet,” answered Thomas. “We have several candidates under consideration. Why do you ask?”

“For obvious security reasons, and I would prefer to have the opportunity to become familiar with the weapons officer. We will be required to work in concert in the event of combat.”

“I see your point, Lieutenant,” said Thomas. “Do you have any recommendations?”

“Yes, Commander. My choice would be Lt. Augustok.”

As Commander Thomas was taking the moment to consider, Riker posed a question. “Isn’t it somewhat out of character for a Klingon to request a Romulan to be at his side during battle?”

“I am half human, he is half Vulcan. We are something of kindred spirits. He has courage and guile—qualities of a warrior.”

“Gentlemen, would you step into my ready room?” asked Riker, as he turned and led the way in. Both Thomas and B’rtah followed wearing a puzzled look. Once inside the trio gathered around Riker’s desk.

“Is there a problem, Captain?” asked Thomas.

“I want to make sure one doesn’t arise. That’s the second time today I’ve heard someone suggest putting Lt. Augustok in charge of weaponry. Now, I realize that you and others have had more of a chance to get to know him than I have. But I also know the importance of our upcoming mission. I also know the Romulans would like nothing more than to see us fail. We cannot afford a crucial mistake or a deliberate action by any member of the bridge crew.”

“You think he may be an undercover operative?” said Thomas.

“He seems to have convinced everybody of his loyalty. But he hasn’t sold me yet, and I’m not going to have another Ambassador T’Pel incident,” replied Riker.

Thomas turned to B’rtah. “Lieutenant, what is the basis for your requesting Lt. Augustok?”

“My assessment of his knowledge and abilities. My experience of working with him on the ship’s defensive systems and our off duty time,” replied B’rtah.

“Your off duty time?”

“Yes, Captain. We exercise together regularly.”

“What kind of exercise?”

“I’ve been teaching him the Muc’Ba, mental discipline and basic forms of hand to hand combat.”

“I’m familiar with it Mr. B’rtah. Did he request that you teach him?”

“No, Captain. I told him it was necessary to improve his skills. He asked me to teach him the Bat’leth. Most of our time is spent sparring. He is not a formidable challenger, but he is learning quickly and I enjoy the workout.”

“Do you feel that you know him well?” asked Thomas.

“Yes, sir.”

“Do you think he could be a possible security risk?” asked Riker.

“I suppose there is a possibility, but as your Chief of Security it is my duty to protect this ship and see to it that nothing places our mission in jeopardy, no matter who I must keep under scrutiny.”

“Very well, Mr. B’rtah,” replied Riker. “I’ll go with your recommendation and I’m trusting you to keep an eye on him.”

“If I may make a suggestion, Captain?” asked B’rtah.

“Go ahead.”

“The weapons station need only be manned for combat situations. If we gave Lt. Augustok the science post as well, it would allow him more ready access to the computers and I will better be able to monitor his actions.”

“Is he qualified for Science Officer?” Riker asked Thomas.

“I believe so, sir.”

“Excellent thinking, Lieutenant. Mr. Thomas, see that Lt. Augustok is informed of his duties and notify Starfleet Academy that his studies will be temporarily postponed for the duration of our mission.”

“Aye, Captain. I’ll see to it right away.”

“Dismissed.”

The two acknowledged Riker and started out of the room.

Just as they reached the door, Riker spoke up. “By the way, Lieutenant, I’ve had a little Bat’leth experience myself. I might join you sometime.”

“It would be an honor sir,” replied B’rtah and he returned to his station.

CHAPTER 13

Captain's Log, USS Raven, William T. Riker Commanding

The first three days of my new command seem to have flown by, only because they have been so hectic.

The crew has worked extremely hard getting the bugs out of all the new systems. In fact, their willingness to work has forced me to impose a fourteen hour mandatory limit to ensure they aren't exhausted by mission time. So far, Lt. Augustok has performed admirably. Perhaps it's just my overactive suspicion or maybe what everyone says about him is right. Either way, I'm still not fully convinced.

The performance of the Raven has been outstanding. We haven't experienced any setbacks that weren't expected. The crew has also impressed me with the professional way they handle the problems that have arisen. Their expertise is taking full advantage of the ship's enhanced capabilities. Credit due to Commander Thomas for his coordination and leadership skills in accomplishing these goals. I believe by mission launch we'll have a few surprises for whomever we run up against. I am departing at 0700 hours for mission briefing with Capt. Picard and Admiral Hayden. I'll brief my senior staff upon my return.

Personal Log, Captain William T. Riker

I have to admit, sitting in the big chair when we left spacedock for our first operational trial wasn't quite the thrill I thought it would be. Maybe it was the absence of a ceremony, which Starfleet has postponed until after the mission. Then again, it could be the ship itself. Her very appearance almost seems like an invitation to combat. Her firepower borders on frightening. This ship will either keep the peace or plunge the Federation into interstellar war. Only time will tell.

Riker rose from his chair and turned off his terminal. It had been a long day and he was ready for some rest. He suspected the crew felt the same, especially since the ship was still understaffed. Without enough crew for a three-shift rotation, everyone was on duty twelve hours a day. Once they docked, Riker ordered twelve hours of off duty for the entire crew with emphasis on rest. As he left his ready room, he looked over the dimly lighted bridge. It was then he noticed Lt. Augustok at science station two. What was he doing on the bridge alone? They had docked over an hour ago. Riker strode firmly up the ramp to the science station.

“Lieutenant, did you understand the orders I gave after we docked?”

“Yes, Captain,” responded Augustok, rising from his chair and standing at attention.

“Then why are you still on the bridge?”

“I was not working on the ship’s systems sir. I remained at my station to finish my analysis.”

“Analysis of what?”

“On my own time sir, I have been running a detailed comparison of all available sensor logs recorded during the suspected attacks of the *Nokturak* Warbird.”

“For what purpose?”

“To determine if all the attacks were committed by the same ship.”

“I thought Starfleet had already made that determination based on your supplied data.”

“That determination was based on the localized shutdown of the cloak, allowing the vessel to fire. We did not closely examine the weapons themselves. We noted the inverted initial output spike, solely to prove that it was not Federation weaponry.”

“Are you trying to say someone else has this technology?”

“No, sir. I’m saying that I believe the Romulans have more than one *Nokturak* class ship in operation.”

Riker was distressed. He wasn’t quite sure what to think. This appeared to be the work of a dedicated officer digging for every detail, or was it well orchestrated disinformation designed to mislead the Federation?

“How many?” asked Riker.

“At least three, sir,” replied Augustok.

“What’s the basis for your assumption?”

“Beam emission wave patterns should be consistent, no matter what frequency or attenuation if they are discharged through the same crystals. My comparisons revealed at least three distinct wave patterns.”

“Show me,” ordered Riker.

“Aye, sir.”

Augustok sat down and brought up the information he had compiled. Screen by screen he showed Riker the source information, explained his comparisons, then reinforced his conclusions. Riker could not help but be impressed. If this was a hoax, it was the best he had ever seen. But his instincts told him this was on the

level. This was the first step towards trusting his new science officer.

“If your findings are correct, how did the Romulans refit their ships so quickly?”

“Perhaps they have production facilities that I am unaware of. The Tal Shiar had many resources. Since their destruction the Empire could have claimed many of their bases of operation. Another possibility would be that in their arrogance they may have compromised their upgrades.”

“You mean they might be taking shortcuts.”

“I believe I said that sir.”

Riker almost chuckled at Augustok’s response but held his composure. “I’ll inform Starfleet Command of your findings. Well done, Lieutenant. Very well done.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“Now, get off my bridge and get some rest.”

Riker gave that order with a smile and Augustok seemed to respond without insult. He returned Riker’s grin and left the bridge. Riker remained for a time as he pondered what he had just learned. How could the Romulans have worked so fast and what else could they

have in store? How will just this one ship under his command be able to turn the tide? How much of this information will the Federation choose to reveal to the Klingons and how will they react? Too many questions without answers for now. He walked over and leaned on the tactical console. Looking around the bridge he thought out loud; "Well, my lady of the night, let's hope you're as tough as everybody says you're going to be. It looks like we're going to need it."

CHAPTER 14

Riker entered the control room in the main shuttlebay. He checked the ship's chronometer. The time was 0645. He was about to start the sequence for preflighting the shuttle when suddenly an idea struck. He activated the Comm panel.

"Riker to Lt. Douglas."

Several seconds passed in silence, then he tried again.

"Riker to Lt. Douglas, respond."

"Douglas here, sir," came the reply in a groggy voice.

"I'm sorry if I disturbed you Lieutenant. I know you're off duty but I have a personal request."

"Anything, sir," answered Douglas in a more alert tone.

"I'm departing for my mission briefing. I thought you might be interested in being my pilot. The captain's yacht could use an operational test."

"You want me to fly the yacht, sir?"

"Is that a problem, Lieutenant?"

"No, Sir! No problem at all! I'm on my way, Sir!"

“Thank you, Mr. Douglas. Riker out.”

Riker smiled at the Lieutenant’s enthusiasm. In truth he wanted to fly it himself, but that wouldn’t be protocol. Besides, he remembered how grateful he was to his commanding officers in the past for giving him rare opportunities like this one. He started the preflight sequence and before the computer was finished Lt. Douglas had arrived.

“Lt. Douglas reporting, Captain.”

“At ease, Mr. Douglas. Follow me.”

Riker led the way out of the control room and followed the catwalk around to the lift which carried them up into the yacht. Once aboard, they proceeded up to the bridge.

“You take the helm, I’ve got Ops,” instructed Riker as he took the left seat. Douglas looked around in awe. It was like a miniature of the *Raven’s* bridge, minus the tactical console and aft workstations, but the decor was nearly identical.

“Are you going to sit down, Mr. Douglas?”

“What? Oh... yes sir, sorry sir. I was just...”

“Relax Lieutenant. Enjoy yourself a little.”

“Thank you, Captain,” replied Douglas as he sat down and adjusted the console to a comfortable position.

“Beginning launch sequence,” said Riker.

“Impulse engine online,” added Douglas.

“Releasing docking latches.”

“Firing thrusters, we have lift off.”

“One quarter impulse power.”

“But Captain, that’s...”

“Let’s see what she’s got, Mr. Douglas.”

“Yes, Sir!”

The yacht raced forward over the saucer section, quickly clearing the docking frame. Douglas banked hard to starboard, coming about one hundred eighty degrees headed for Utopia Station.

“Let’s take the long way,” suggested Riker.

“Aye, sir,” acknowledged the smiling Lieutenant as he continued his turn, making a loop of the dock. He then made a wide, sweeping orbit of Mars, taking in the sights. Ships in various stages of completion docked in

their frames. Huge, polar ice caps dotted the surface below.

Too soon the joy ride was over as they approached their destination. Duglas called for clearance. "Utopia Station, this is the yacht *Phoenix*, requesting clearance."

"Acknowledged, *Phoenix*, you are cleared to dock at Pylon Two."

"*Phoenix* confirms," replied Riker who watched closely as Duglas proceeded on manual control and performed a textbook docking maneuver.

"Very nicely done, Mr. Duglas."

"Thank you, Captain."

"Stay on station until I return."

"Aye sir."

The lieutenant didn't have to wait long. The briefing was a simple recap of the discussion in the President's office with the addition of specific instructions.

Picard was given a precise list of information for Gowron and Riker was provided with parameters for intervention if necessary. Hayden wished them luck and sent them on their way. Riker saw Picard off at the

transporter room and then returned to the yacht. Once underway, Riker contacted Commander Thomas on board the *Raven* and ordered him to call a staff meeting in the observation lounge as soon as the *Phoenix* docked.

“Mr. Douglas, let’s not waste any time.”

“Aye, sir,” responded the pilot, sensing Riker’s seriousness. He punched the yacht up to full power and in minutes they were closing fast on the mothership. Douglas made an aggressive approach and then manually docked the yacht in her slip as if he had done it a hundred times before.

“I’m sorry if I was a little rough, Captain,” said Douglas as he shut down all systems. “The auto docking sequence for this bird takes forever.”

“No apology necessary, Lieutenant. I’d have done the same thing myself. I’ll see you on the bridge at 0800 hours.”

“Aye sir.”

“Oh, and Lieutenant...”

“Yes, Captain?”

“That was some of the best flying I’ve ever seen—next to myself of course,” Riker added with his trademark grin.

“Thank you, sir,” replied the flattered helmsman as they boarded the lift. Once down the catwalk, Duglas expressed his appreciation to Riker for choosing him for the flight and then departed to his post.

The Captain tapped his comm badge. “Riker to Thomas.”

“Thomas here, Sir.”

“Assemble the staff, I’m on my way up.”

“Acknowledged, Captain. We’ll be waiting.”

By the time Riker arrived at the observation lounge, his staff had just settled in.

“All present and accounted for, Mr. Thomas?” Riker asked.

“Affirmative, Captain. Security Chief, Science Officer, Chief Engineer are all present. We are lacking a Chief Medical Officer however.”

“Has Starfleet been informed?”

“Yes Sir. I was told that a command grade doctor was not yet available, but we are scheduled to receive a doctor today. She is a recent graduate of Starfleet Medical, a Lieutenant Junior Grade. Her name is Dr. Missy November.”

“Dr. Missy?” Riker asked with disbelief.

“That’s what’s on her Starfleet record. She’s a Trill sir.”

“Then I guess Dr. Missy will have to fill some big shoes.”

“Aye, Captain,” replied Thomas as he and the staff took the liberty of a small laugh at Riker’s statement.

“Let’s get down to business,” Riker began. “In approximately one hour we will begin our last day of operational testing. If everything goes well we should be back in dock in less than eight hours. At 0900 hours tomorrow we depart to escort the *Enterprise* to the Klingon border. Our orders are as follows: As soon as we clear all moorings, we will engage the cloaking device. We will then shut down the docking frame’s EM Field. Anyone looking on long range sensors should see nothing leave the dock. We are to keep tight formation with the *Enterprise* in an effort to mask our transwarp signature.

“Communication silence is to be strictly maintained. We will monitor the *Enterprise*’s regular reports to keep us

informed. When we approach sensor range from the Klingon border both ships will drop to warp two.

“Once the *Enterprise* has been intercepted by the Klingon escort, we will hold position at the border and track her with passive sensors. We are not to let the *Enterprise* out of our sensor range even if it means entering Klingon territory. We are not permitted to take any provocative action, but we are authorized to use any means necessary to protect and defend the *Enterprise* in the event of aggressive action. Any questions?”

“No, sir,” was the uniform answer around the table.

“Excellent,” Riker continued. “Let’s have a test run on our cloaked departure when we launch today.”

“Aye, sir,” replied Thomas. “Gentlemen, let’s get to work.”

They all rose from the table and were filing out of the room when Riker made a request.

“Mr. B’rtah, would you remain a moment?”

The lieutenant waited for everyone else to leave before returning to the table. Riker got up from his chair and stood beside him, resting his arm on the chair’s head cushion.

“Mr. B’rtah, I thought you were keeping an eye on Lt. Augustok.”

“I am, sir.”

“They why was he on the bridge alone last night?”

“I was monitoring his computer activity and visual record from my quarters, sir.”

Riker smiled as he knew he stood corrected.

“Good work, Lieutenant. I’m sorry I doubted you. It won’t happen again.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“I’m beginning to think he’s on the level, but you keep watching just in case. Carry on, Lieutenant.”

“Aye sir,” acknowledged B’rtah as they left the observation lounge and entered the bridge.

Thomas stood from his chair and reported. “All stations show ready, Sir, that is if you wish to get underway early.”

“Why not?” replied Riker, impressed with his crew’s eagerness. He gave the order. “Mr. Thomas you may release the docking clamps and clear all moorings.”

Outside, the hard-point docking arms pulled away and the umbilical released and retracted. The pilot of an approaching shuttlepod watched in amazement as the image of the ship distorted slightly and then disappeared. Riker settled back into his chair. It was beginning to sink in that this ship was really his and the crew was coming together under his command.

“Cloak is online and functioning,” reported Lt. Fredrik.

“Thrusters ahead until we clear the dock, then punch it up to warp two until we’re outside the Terran system.”

“Aye, Captain. Thrusters ahead,” acknowledged Lt. Douglas.

Unseen and undetected, the ship moved steadily out of the dock and away from the shipyards. Once up to warp, she quickly left the Solar System.

After a half-hour’s voyage B’rtah reported: “Asteroid field, bearing 030, mark 25.”

“Go to impulse, then drop our cloak long enough for an active scan,” ordered Riker.

“Deactivating cloak,” replied Fredrik as he began his sweep. “Reading nine large masses, classes C and D, accompanied by several thousand smaller formations. No lifeform readings.”

“How about a little target and maneuvering practice, Mr. Thomas?” suggested Riker.

“Yes, sir,” replied Thomas with a smile as he began giving orders. “All hands to battle stations, repeat all hands to battle stations! Reactivate the cloak. SIF shields to maximum. Mr. Duglas, bring the secondary impulse engines online and let’s run through that list of personal tactical maneuvers that you and the Captain compiled.”

“Aye, sir.”

“All stations show ready, sir,” reported Fredrik.

Thomas stood and faced B’rtah and Augustok; “Gentlemen, let’s make every shot count. I want this ship back in dock without a scratch.”

“Aye, sir,” they replied in unison.

Thomas took his seat as Riker gave the order; “Mr. Duglas, take us in.”

Like her namesake spreading its wings for the hunt, diving onto its prey and soaring skyward once again, the *Raven* attacked. The floating rocks were unchallenging opponents for this predator, but she displayed her prowess, nonetheless. She dove onto targets from above, executed twisting and climbing turns from below and made slashing lateral passes by lines of targets, all

the while her ten phaser arrays created a light storm as they reduced the rocks to dust.

The IDF system was taxed as the ship paced forward at full impulse then abruptly twisted into a flat spin 180 degrees, bringing her phaser cannon to bear, blasting asteroids twice her size into rubble.

The rest of the day's testing was equally impressive. True to his word, Riker had them back at the docking frame eight hours later. Once in position, the EM field around the dock was reactivated and their cloak dropped.

After docking was complete, Riker paid his compliments to his crew for a job well done and authorized liberty until 0800 hours.

"Captain, I'm receiving a communiqué for you from Captain Picard, inviting you and your senior staff to join him on board the *Enterprise* for a gathering in Ten Forward at 1830 hours."

"Mr. B'rtah, send to Captain Picard, we'll be delighted."

CHAPTER 15

After all internal power was shut down, the crew set about tending to preparations for shore Leave. It wasn't long before the shuttle bays proved to be the busiest places on the ship. Amid the traffic, an incoming shuttlepod brought a passenger on board. A smallish woman with medium-length brown hair climbed out, took up her travel bag, and made her way across the busy flight deck. She climbed the stairs to the control room and inquired of the ensign at the console.

"Excuse me, can you tell me where to find Captain Riker?"

"I'm not sure ma'am, but you can try the computer interface in the corridor."

"Thank you, Ensign," she replied as she went into the hall and activated the first available panel.

"Computer, location of Captain Riker."

"Captain Riker is in the main shuttlebay."

She then followed the computer-provided directions and went to the first turbolift she could find. It took her a few minutes, but she finally arrived. Once again, she questioned the Ensign at the control console.

“Ensign, where is Captain Riker?”

“Captain Riker and his senior staff just departed for the *Enterprise*.”

“Blast!” she exclaimed with disgust as she stormed out and back into the turbolift.

“Sickbay,” she snapped.

Out of the lift, down the corridor, into sickbay she strode with fast, angry steps.

She took a moment to look around the medical suites. No one in sight. She hurled her travel bag into the doctor’s office, not caring where it landed.

Back out of sickbay she stomped, directly back to the main shuttle bay.

“When can I get a shuttle to the *Enterprise*?” she asked angrily.

“You’ll have to go down to the flight deck. The deck officer will place you as soon as possible,” replied the Ensign.

“I’ve waited all day, what difference does it make now?”

She grumbled all the way down the steps. She managed to wait patiently enough until about half an hour later when she finally got a seat. After a drop-off at Utopia Station, she arrived aboard the *Enterprise*. She immediately inquired of the whereabouts of Captain Riker and was directed to Ten Forward.

She soon arrived at the wooden doors and she entered and found the room fairly crowded. She made her way to the bar where she was greeted by Guinan. The dark-skinned, ancient lady with her broad, welcoming smile, that was overshadowed by one of her trademark wide-brimmed hats, did little to calm of nerves of the young, Trill doctor.

“Good evening, can I get you something?”

“I’m looking for someone.”

“Aren’t we all? Can I get you something to eat or drink?”

“I’m sorry. Apple juice, please.”

Guinan took a moment to get her drink and served her. “Here you are. Now, was there someone in particular you were looking for?”

“Yes. Is Captain Riker here?”

“He’s right over there, next to Captain Picard,” replied Guinan, pointing him out.

“Thank you. Thank you very much,” she said with satisfaction and walked away.

“Don’t mention it.”

She kept a discreet distance as she watched Riker introduce his officers to Captain Picard. She waited for the right moment, when it was just the two captains, then made her move.

“It seemed only proper to give you some kind of send-off Number One, especially since Starfleet chose to postpone the launching ceremony.”

“It couldn’t come from anyone I respect more,” Riker told Picard.

“Captain Picard! What an honor to meet you,” the newcomer said with an extended hand. Picard looked bewildered. She turned to her left. “And this must be the indelible, undauntable Captain Riker.”

“Ma’am, you seem to have me at a disadvantage.”

“Good! I’ve been at one all day! Tell me, Captain, were you or were you not informed by Starfleet that you had a doctor coming on board today?”

“Yes, but no time was specified.”

“Isn’t it reasonable to assume that since every bloody thing except duty and departure times are classified on this ship of yours that I would be there at the start of the day?”

“You must be ...” Riker started but she cut him off.

“It’s bad enough that transporters can’t be used, I had to take a shuttlepod out to the docking frame to arrive just in time to watch your little disappearing act. No transponder, no communications...”

“It was an operational test.”

Riker’s statement carried no weight. She kept going as Picard looked on in silent amazement.

“After waiting all day, I finally make it on board only to find I have no assigned quarters, no staff on duty in sickbay and a possible hazardous mission to prepare for, all starting tomorrow morning!”

“Listen Dr. Missy... I’m sorry, I mean Dr. November...”

“Do not patronize me, Captain. I might not stand tall enough to look you in the eye, but I can certainly rifle through your medical file and find some reason to

declare you unfit for duty, and I'll do it so fast it'll singe that beard right off your face!"

"That can only be authorized by a chief medical officer!" snapped Riker.

"I'm aware I was not assigned as such," she shot back, "but until one arrives, I am the ranking, in fact, the only doctor onboard which makes me Acting Chief Medical Officer."

"Unless I relieve you of duty," countered Riker.

"You can't delay this mission because of me. Do not be deceived by this rank on my collar. I assume you can tell by looking at me that I am a Trill."

"Yes, I noticed."

"Then you should be aware that my symbiote has been practicing medicine for three generations. Starfleet Medical was an excellent refresher course. I accept my rank as an officer, but I am fully capable of handling this task."

Riker was beginning to get the picture. "Then, why not just tell me that from the beginning?"

"Number one, I was mad about being left behind this morning."

“I apologize.”

“Number two, I had to find some way to make you look beyond my rank—a quick way to earn your respect.”

“All this hostility just to get my attention?”

“It worked didn’t it? Besides, it was good practice. I may have to stand up to you in the future.”

Riker was speechless and Picard was covering his smile with his hand as he was holding back his amusement.

“See you onboard, Captain. Good night.” She gave Picard a smile and a nod and left before Riker could respond.

“A tiger by the tail, Number One?” Picard quipped dryly.

“Hell hath no fury,” replied Riker shaking his head.

“Agreed,” Picard said with an amused smirk. “She’s probably going to make a fine officer and a leader.”

“If I don’t court martial her first,” said Riker as he sat at a nearby table. Picard joined him and called for drinks.

On the other side of the room, Worf approached Lt. Augustok.

“It seems you have accomplished much of what you set out to do,” said Worf, getting his attention.

“Mr. Worf! How very good to see you again and yes, things have been going well. I only hope they continue to do so for the duration of this mission.”

“Agreed, Lieutenant. Tell me, has your skill improved as much as the length of your hair?”

“I certainly hope I haven’t grown this braided ponytail for no reason.”

“Who has been instructing you?”

“Just a moment and you can meet him for yourself.”

Augustok motioned for B’rtah to come and join them. He made his way through the thronging people and, upon noticing Worf, immediately called for drinks. Worf interrupted and told Guinan to bring a round of his usual. The trio gathered at the bar.

“It is a great honor to meet you,” said B’rtah. “A true Klingon warrior. I am B’rtah, son of Joseph.”

“Worf, son of Mogh and a warrior yes, but I am exiled from the Empire.”

“That is no matter to me. You will always be a Klingon warrior in my eyes,” replied B’rtah.

“Drinks for the warriors. Enjoy gentlemen,” Guinan said as she placed the glasses on the bar. They all drank together. Worf showed his usual look of satisfaction.

B’rtah was pleasantly surprised. “What is this?” he exclaimed.

“Yes, what is it?” asked Augustok, looking as if he had just drunk poison.

“An Earth drink. It is called prune juice,” said Worf, smiling.

“Why did my father never tell me of this nectar?” asked B’rtah after he finished the entire glass.

Augustok placed his almost full glass back on the bar, “These humans are tougher than I realized.”

“B’rtah grabbed the leftover glass and belted it down. He growled as he set down the empty glass, “I feel like combat!”

“Then perhaps it is time to test the student and the teacher,” suggested Worf.

“Perfect,” said B’rtah. “A holodeck program written by a Klingon!”

“Excellent idea, Mr. Worf,” said Augustok.

In agreement, they left Ten Forward and went to holodeck three. Worf set up his program and they entered. First, they prepared with several series of Muc’Ba movements. Worf then called out his command, “Computer, Bat’leth Arena, practice session.”

“Why not real weapons?” B’rtah snarled.

Worf picked up the wooden weapon and stood in the center of the triangular stone arena.

“I have no wish to maim a fellow officer the night before an important mission,” he said.

“You treat me as a child!” snapped B’rtah.

“Do not be deceived. This is not mercy. You will not leave unscathed. I promise you that,” replied Worf in a commanding tone of voice.

“Which one of us first?” Augustok asked.

“Both of you,” said Worf taking his stance.

B'rtah let loose a blood curdling war cry as he leaped into the arena. He charged, but Worf was prepared. The practice blades clanked wildly as B'rtah attacked at a furious pace. Augustok thought to take advantage of this and attack from behind. He soon found Worf's senses to be keen and his reactions catlike quick. Worf continued as he would block one thrust and move, leaving his two opponents striking at each other. He would then attack from behind, sweeping the legs from under one, then thrusting at the other.

B'rtah hooked Worf's blade and sent it flying, but before he could make his next move Worf caught hold of the handles on B'rtah's blade and rolled backwards, throwing B'rtah over him with his feet. B'rtah's flying body struck Augustok, knocking them both to the floor. Worf snapped to his feet, holding B'rtah's weapon. The half-Klingon quickly got up. Now seeing nothing but rage, from under his shirt he pulled a glistening, double pointed blade. Worf knew it was time to end this.

Worf started to order him to stop but he was already charging. Worf struck with authority, knocking the knife from his hand and breaking his forearm. He then finished with a strong back fist to the chin, sending B'rtah to the floor. Worf looked up to see Augustok charging, his blade raised over his head. Worf dropped to one knee, blocked the strike and sent the blunt point of his weapon crushing into Augustok's ribs. The bones

cracked as Augustok doubled over, dropping his weapon. He slowly and painfully straightened up, looking into Worf's eyes.

"Well, any better?" he asked.

"You both fought as warriors today," replied Worf.

B'rtah struggled to his feet and faced Worf.

"I have acted without honor," he said, hanging his head in shame.

"Nonsense," snapped Worf, "You fought to the end. You fought like a Klingon!"

B'rtah raised his head with pride as Worf returned his knife.

"Nice blade," quipped Worf. "Come, I will escort both of you to sickbay. Computer, end program and save."

Luckily, they didn't have far to go. Down one deck and a short walk brought them to sickbay. They entered to find Dr. Selar running a diagnostic on one of the bio-beds. She immediately came to their aid.

"What happened?" she asked.

"Holodeck exercise," replied Worf.

“Tell me, Commander, why is it everyone who exercises with you requires medical attention afterwards?”

Worf looked the doctor straight in the eye, “That which does not kill us makes us stronger.”

“A somewhat logical, if not eccentric point of view.”

“In Klingon it has more meaning; it loses something in the translation.”

Dr. Selar was no longer interested in Worf’s discussion. She went straight to the task at hand. She scanned B’rtah’s forearm.

“The radius is broken and you have a hairline fracture of the ulna.”

“But it was a good battle,” laughed B’rtah.

“I’m sure it was,” commented the doctor as she pushed up his sleeve and used the bone knitter to heal the wound.

Augustok stood silently by, watching her work. His face was lit with the joy of seeing her again.

“It may be sore for a few hours,” she told B’rtah as she finished and he got down from the table.

“After we have finished here, I will show you a new weapon I have in my quarters,” said Worf.

“Excellent,” exclaimed B’rtah.

“The two of you go ahead,” suggested Augustok. He said to B’rtah, “I’ll meet you back at the shuttle.”

“As you wish,” replied B’rtah and he and Worf left sickbay.

Alone with the doctor, Augustok said: “You are more lovely than I remember.”

Selar seemed unaffected by his compliment as she scanned him with her tricorder.

“Two of your transverse ribs are fractured. Please place your hand behind your head and raise your tunic.”

“It’s very good to see you again,” said Augustok with a slight groan as he raised his arm.

“It is agreeable to see you as well,” she replied as she began working.

“Just agreeable?” he asked. “I apologize for not communicating with you more often.”

“No apology is necessary. I made the choice to open my mind and share my emotions with you. It was something I had never experienced before. However, I was unprepared for the effect it had on me after you left. It began to interfere with my duties and my efficiency. I could not allow that. I spent many hours in meditation on the thoughts we shared.”

“And what did you find?”

“I concluded that many Vulcan females are separated from their mates for long periods of time, but they have the assurance of knowing that the drive of Pon Farr will always bring them home. You do not experience such drives, therefore, there was no assurance you would ever return.”

“What about love?”

“Love is an emotion, and a most illogical emotion to be sure.”

“That’s true, but it is also the most powerful emotion.”

“If unchecked, powerful enough to inflict great pain. You yourself still carry the pain of your lost love T’Leir.”

“But I also still carry the joy I shared with her, of how she enriched my life. These things far outweigh the sorrow of losing her. Selar, listen to me. I don’t want to

lose you as well. Come with me. The *Raven* needs a Chief Medical Officer. I could speak to Captain Riker on your behalf.”

“I have already been offered that assignment and I have chosen to remain on the *Enterprise*.”

Augustok’s countenance fell and he felt his heart sink as she lowered his arm and straightened his uniform.

“Do not be dismayed,” she said. “I still believe in your dream of reunification. In time we will come to understand one another more fully and share each other’s strengths.”

He stood from the table and looked into her eyes.

“Your ribs may be sore for approximately twenty-four hours. Do you require any medication for pain?” she asked.

“There is no medication for my pain,” he answered in a soft voice. He caressed her cheek and chin and she felt the tinge of his emotion for her.

“Live long and prosper, Selar. I shall miss you.”

“One moment,” she said as she moved quickly to her office and returned with a piece of clothing draped over her arm. She then raised it and shook it out, placing it

about his shoulders. It was his cape from his Romulan uniform. She smoothed it down and folded it back on his left shoulder uncovering his comm badge. She then fastened it with the large clasp that bore his former insignia.

“You left this behind,” she said. “I had the clasp repaired.”

“Thank you,” he replied, touched but sad.

“The first time I saw you, you were wearing this. I wish to remember you this way. Peace and long life, Augustok. Someday your name will be spoken as a legend.”

He was moved by her words and struggled to hold his tears. He wanted to say something, but he had no words. All he could do was gaze at her beautiful face. He leaned forward and softly kissed her cheek. Then he turned quickly away and left sickbay, taking only his memory of her with him.

CHAPTER 16

The gathering in Ten Forward was all but over. It was getting late and the crews were retiring for the night. Guinan was finishing up at the bar as Will, Jean-Luc, and Beverly were all that remained. They were seated together at a table by the viewport where they had spent the majority of the evening. They had dined together and reminisced about all they had been through. As the evening drew to a close, the subject of their upcoming mission arose.

“I know it’s just supposed to be an emissary mission, to share information,” said Riker, “but something in the pit of my gut tells me we’re sitting on a powder keg.”

“There’s always the potential for danger on a mission like this, Will.”

“That’s the problem, Captain. It isn’t as if I’ve never been in command on a dangerous mission before. For heaven’s sake, what could have been more dangerous than the Borg? Still, something feels different this time and I’m not sure what it is.”

“New ship, new faces, you’re still settling in, there’s also the possibility that there’s a difference in you.”

“What kind of difference?” asked Riker.

“Experience changes our point of view, Will,” observed Beverly.

“She’s right,” agreed Picard. “All of us look at things differently than we did eight years ago. Take me for instance, at that time I would never have considered marriage.”

Jean-Luc gave Beverly an affectionate look as he reached over and joined hands with her.

“At the time, I wouldn’t have either,” she replied with a smile.

“You see, Will, sometimes changes can be very beneficial.”

“Yes, sir. You know I still remember that conversation we had when I first came on board. You asked me for a special favor.”

“Yes, I remember it well,” recalled Picard.

“You told me that you weren’t a family man and to see to it that you didn’t make an ass of yourself in front of the children.”

Will and Jean-Luc shared a chuckle as they remembered that day, but Beverly was silent and wore a concerned look was on her face.

"I hope you don't feel that way now," she said in a worried tone.

"I think that I've..." he stopped in mid-sentence as his wife looked to be on the verge of tears.

"Beverly, what's wrong?" he asked with compassion.

"Your son wouldn't like hearing that," she replied with a tear.

"My son? Do you mean that you...that we..."

"... are going to have a baby. We're going to have a son." Her tears flowed as she finished his sentence. The news left Jean-Luc speechless, but his lack of response only seemed to upset her more. She had hoped he would be overjoyed. She wanted to give him a son to carry on his family name. Instead he seemed to be in shock.

"I'll be in our quarters," she said through the tears as she got up and hurried out of the room.

Will and Jean-Luc stared at each other in silence. A wide smile slowly crept across Picard's face as the news really sunk in.

"A son, Will. I'm going to have a son," he said with delightful amazement.

“Congratulations, sir. I don’t think I’ve ever seen you like this.”

“Nor have I. Excuse me, Will.”

“By all means, sir.”

Picard rose from his chair and started to leave when Riker gently grasped his arm.

“And Captain, be careful tomorrow.”

“Don’t be overly concerned, Will. Gowron may be a Klingon warrior but he is also a man of honor. Besides, I know you’ll be watching.”

“Now more than ever.”

“Good night, Will, and thank you,” replied Jean-Luc with a hand on Riker’s shoulder and look on his face that told Will how much he trusted him, now that he suddenly had so much more to protect.

Picard quickly left the room and made haste to his quarters. He entered to find Beverly sitting on the sofa drying her eyes. He went to her. Kneeling in front of her, taking her by both hands, he kissed her knuckles and held them close to him.

“I thought you would be happy,” she said, her voice trembling.

Happy is far too mild a term for what I’m feeling.”

“But when you didn’t say anything I...”

“I was surprised, pleasantly surprised.”

Her face lit up and she embraced him, now her tears were of joy instead of uncertainty.

“When did you learn it was a boy?” he whispered.

“I ran the genetics scan today. I wanted to wait for just the right moment to tell you, after this mission was over. I don’t know what came over me tonight.”

“It’s all right. So... when’s the little fellow due to arrive?”

“Seven more months.”

“Would you like to remain on earth and when I get back we’ll ...”

“What do you mean, when you get back?” she said with surprise.

“I thought that...”

“How dare you, Jean-Luc! This does not make me an invalid! I am a Starfleet officer and fully capable of performing my duties!”

“Listen Beverly, I just...”

“I also have a moral obligation to the crew!”

“I only wanted to protect you and the child!” he said sharply.

There was tense silence for a few moments until Beverly said calmly, “What about all the other families on the *Enterprise*? Will you tell them to stay on Earth too?”

Her questions cut deep. He got to his feet and paced about, rubbing his forehead. He breathed a heavy sigh and muttered, “You’re right, you’re absolutely right. It just suddenly seems different now.”

She stood and went to him, taking his face in her hands and looking deep into his eyes.

“You’ve protected me and hundreds of other families for eight years. I’ve delivered other people’s children under the most dangerous conditions. But I never worried about that because I knew you were on the bridge. I practically raised Wesley while serving in Starfleet and you never failed to protect him. You just be Captain Jean-Luc Picard and we’ll be just fine.”

“I do love you, Beverly,” he whispered as he held her.

“And I love you, Jean-Luc, but don’t ever ask me to stay behind again.”

“I won’t. I promise.”

Back in Ten Forward Guinan approached her lone guest. He sat quietly, gazing out the viewport at his docked ship.

“The bar’s closed, Captain. Can I get you anything before I go?”

“No thanks, Guinan. I’m fine,” replied Riker.

“You mean you aren’t thirsty. Would you like to talk instead?”

“I wouldn’t know what to say.”

Just then the sound of the doors opening caught their attention.

Counselor Troi entered, still wearing her evening dress. As she came across the room Guinan noticed Riker’s eyes following her every step and his ever-increasing smile.

“Maybe you’ll know what to say to *her*,” Guinan said with a wry smile. “I’ll leave you two alone. Good night, Captain.”

“And you as well, my dear,” he replied.

“You old smoothie,” quipped Guinan as she walked away, exchanging good nights with Deanna as they passed.

“May I join you?” Troi asked as she sat down.

“Certainly, I was just thinking of a raven-haired beauty.”

“The only raven-anything on your mind has a crew of seven hundred and travels at transwarp speed.”

“What a horrible way to repay a compliment,” he chuckled.

“It wasn’t intended as an insult, and the compliment is welcomed, but I sense this mission as a heavy burden on you.”

“I wish I could say for sure that it’s just the mission.”

“What do you mean?”

“Don’t get me wrong. I mean, just look at it. It’s a fantastic ship, with one of the hardest working crews I’ve ever seen.”

“But?”

“I didn’t see it coming. Starfleet rammed this command down my throat. Admiral Hayden said it was for this mission at least, but I know that means it’s intended to be permanent.”

“There are a lot of officers who would be envious of your situation.”

“I know. Isn’t this what I said I always wanted? And yet, I’m only now beginning to realize that I’m really off the *Enterprise*. Captain Picard told me once that being First Officer of the flagship carried a certain distinction, a kind of prestige. Now I’m in command of a pathfinder vessel. The only one of its kind. That’s something for the history texts.”

“You sound as if you’re trying to convince yourself of something.”

“Why don’t I feel like I’ve accomplished my goal?”

“You tell me.”

“I told Captain Picard at his wedding reception that I would be patient until he was ready to move on. I guess *that’s* my ultimate goal, not just any command. I want the flagship. I want the *Enterprise*. Now that seems like just a dream.”

“Dreams sometimes do come true, and there’s certainly nothing wrong with lofty goals.”

“But we have to live in reality.”

“Reality is what we make it.”

“You told me once that I was happy on the *Enterprise*. Happier than you had ever known me to be. You said I was comfortable here. Remember?”

“Yes, I remember.”

“What would you say if I told you that I think the reason why I was so happy and comfortable wasn’t because I was First Officer of the flagship.”

“Then what do you think the reason was?”

“I think it was... you.”

“I’m flattered,” she said with a smile. “I’ve enjoyed working with you too.”

“I don’t mean work Deanna. I mean the personal time we’ve shared, getting closer, getting to know each other even better. Now I’ve been handed this command—I don’t want to leave you again.”

Troi’s eyes glistened. “That’s why I came back down here tonight. You left so quickly. I didn’t have a chance to say good-bye. I know it’s only been five days, but I’ve missed you. It isn’t like a vacation because I don’t know if you’re coming back.”

“Deanna, listen. Why don’t you come with me? I don’t have a ship’s counselor.”

“Your ship doesn’t have families on board. I’m needed here. It’s my job and my duty, despite how I feel personally.”

“I understand,” he said as he stood and took her by the hand. He put his arms around her and held her close as the trace of a tear ran down her cheek.

“Well, I guess this is...”

“Shhh,” she stopped him with a finger on his lips, “Just say let’s keep in touch. Just say until next time.”

He nodded his head and kissed her gently. “Until next time,” he whispered.

“Come on, Captain. I’ll walk you to your shuttle,” she said, holding her composure. Arm in arm, they left Ten Forward together.

CHAPTER 17

Picard walked onto the bridge of his ship and Data rose from the captain's chair to report.

"Starfleet has signaled that the *Raven* is ready to get underway. All stations have reported in and we are ready to leave orbit."

"Thank you, Mr. Data," replied Picard as he sat down. "Helm, bring us into a synchronous orbit with Docking Frame Three."

"Aye, sir."

"Mr. Worf, dispatch an audio message on a secure channel to Captain Riker. Give him my best wishes and inform him we are ready to depart."

"Aye, Captain. Sending now."

On the bridge of the *Raven*, Lt. B'rtah conveyed the message to Riker. He smiled at Picard's compliment, then touched the comm panel on his chair.

"Attention all hands, this is the Captain. The time has come for us to embark on our maiden voyage. This is the culmination of all our hard work and preparation.

Today, on this ship, we sail into history. Let's make it history we'll all be proud to tell others. Riker out." The Captain gave the nod to his First Officer as they both took their seats.

"Mr. Fredrik, release docking clamps and clear all umbilical and gravitational supports," ordered Mr. Thomas.

"Aye, sir. Clearing all moorings."

"As soon as we are released activate the cloak."

"Aye, Commander. Moorings are clear; cloak is activated."

The lighting on the bridge changed to blue as the cloak came online.

"Mr. B'rtah, deactivate the docking frame's EM field."

"Aye, Commander. EM field is down."

"She's ready, sir," Thomas told Riker.

"Mr. Douglas," said Riker, "thrusters ahead, take us out."

"Aye, sir."

Worf reported to Picard that the *Raven* had cloaked and sent a coded signal that there were in position.

“Very good, Mr. Worf,” replied Picard. “Remember to dispatch regular reports to Starfleet. Captain Riker will be expecting them.”

“Aye, Captain.”

“Helm, set course for the Klingon border, transwarp factor twelve,” ordered Data.

“Course laid in, sir.”

“Engage,” ordered Picard.

Lt. Douglas watched his conn reading carefully. “They’re going to warp, sir,” he reported.

“Keep us close Mr. Douglas. Stay with him,” responded Thomas.

The *Enterprise* raced out of the Terran system with her invisible guardian close behind. Lt. Douglas kept the *Raven* just off the trailing edge of the *Enterprise*’s warp field. To any long-range sensor scan they would appear

to be nothing more than a strong resonance trace. Once into transwarp, the same tactic became even better. Since the Klingons would not be experienced in reading transwarp signatures and with the hull plating masking their power source, they were invisible in every way that mattered.

Picard turned the bridge over to Data and retired to his ready room. There he spent the next few hours reviewing the material he was to present to Gowron. He thought about how much more effective his presentation would be if he could somehow persuade Gowron to agree to meet with him onboard the *Enterprise*.

Those same hours passed quickly for Captain Riker as he too turned command over to his First Officer. He took the opportunity to tour his ship and meet personally with the various department heads.

That afternoon, as the Klingon border grew closer, both ships ran combat readiness drills to hone their efficiency and response time.

“Data to Picard.”

“Picard here.”

“We are approaching sensor range from the Klingon border, sir.”

“Very good, Mr. Data. Begin gradually decreasing our speed until we’ve reached Warp Two. I’ll be there shortly.”

“Aye, Captain.”

Aboard the *Raven*, Thomas and Riker have a similar conversation as they continued to shadow the *Enterprise’s* movements and speed. In Engineering, Riker discussed the warp engine efficiency with Lt. Riley.

“She’s performed flawlessly so far, but I think I can still get more power from the new core,” Riley reported.

“This is not the time for experimenting Mr. Riley. Just keep us online for this mission. You can try to get that extra two percent when we get back,” replied Riker.

The Comm system tone interrupted their conversation.

“Thomas to Captain.”

“Riker here. Go ahead.”

“Reporting that we are now at Warp Two. Time to the Klingon border is thirty-one minutes.”

“Acknowledged, Mr. Thomas. I’m on my way.”

“Shall I warm up the secondary core sir?” asked Riley.

“Good idea, Lieutenant. Carry on,” replied Riker as he left for the bridge.

The time to the border passed quickly as both ships repeatedly scanned the area, the *Raven* using only her passive sensors to prevent detection.

“Approaching the designated coordinates,” reported Worf.

“Helm, slow to half impulse,” ordered Picard.

The watchful eyes of the *Raven’s* helmsman immediately took notice; “The *Enterprise* is slowing to half impulse sir.”

“One quarter impulse, Mr. Duglas,” ordered Commander Thomas. “It’s time to give them some room.”

The distance between the ships grew as they both came to a stop with the *Enterprise* reaching the intercept point.

“Mr. Worf, send a general hail. Let’s see if they’re listening.”

“Aye, Captain. Hailing on all frequencies.”

Several moments passed in silence. Worf was about to report that there was no response when his console signaled a threat.

“Captain, ship decloaking off the port bow. It is a Klingon bird of prey... another decloaking to starboard.”

“It appears there were listening, and waiting,” said Picard.

“We have received a single word response, Captain,” reported Worf.

“Which is?” asked Picard.

“Follow.”

“Inform them to lead on Mr. Worf.”

“Aye, sir.”

“Helm, follow the Klingons.” ordered Data.

Captain Riker watched intently as the *Enterprise* moved off, following the lead Klingon vessel, the other falling in behind.

“Mr. Thomas, keep us within sensor range but do not exceed Warp Two.”

“Aye, Captain.”

The *Raven's* bridge crew monitored the *Enterprise* closely as she and her escort went to warp speed. They waited as long as possible before Riker called for yellow alert and ordered them into Klingon territory. For hours they traveled at low warp until they reached the edge of the Mempa sector. Once again, they came to a stop and the Klingon escorts assumed flanking positions on the *Enterprise*.

Like a hawk perched atop a tree, with keen eyes watching for its prey, the *Raven* kept her distance, poised to strike at the first sign of danger.

Almost an hour would pass before their wait would end. Picard was growing impatient as silence covered the bridge. Suddenly, Worf's voice rung out.

“Captain! Klingon battle cruiser decloaking directly ahead! It is the *N'gBar*. Its weapon systems are fully powered!”

“Red alert! Raise shields!” ordered Data.

“Delay that order!” sounded Picard. “First, he makes us wait, then he tries to provoke us. He’s testing our intentions.”

Lt. B’rtah also urgently announced the arrival of the Klingon vessel and its status.

“Red alert!” ordered Riker as his voice carried with authority.

“Attack pattern, Captain?” asked Thomas.

“Not yet, Commander. We can’t afford to tip our hand just yet, not until someone starts shooting,” replied Riker with a great deal of concern.

Inside he wanted to move in and pose a threat of their own. He knew the *Enterprise* was outmatched at this point. If the shooting did start, she could be badly damaged before they could respond.

“Helm, thrusters ahead,” ordered Riker. He looked at his First Officer and added, “Let’s see if we can sneak up on them.”

Worf informed Picard that he was being hailed.

“On screen,” responded the Captain.

Gowron’s face appeared, laughing.

“You still have the iron nerve, Picard!”

“Why the wait?” snapped Picard.

Gowron’s expression quickly turned serious.

“When K’Empec chose you as arbiter of succession, he granted you certain powers. Those powers are now mine!” he snarled with a clenched fist as he continued. “It is as you once said, Picard. I am not late; it is the time I have chosen.”

Picard hated to admit it, but he knew Gowron was right. He quickly realized that he was not going to be able to deal from a position of strength. He then chose a slightly more passive approach.

“You’re quite right, Chancellor,” began Picard. “The delay is of no consequence. What matters now is why I am here. The Federation wishes to prove to you that we were in no way responsible for the destruction of the convoy bound for Cardassian space.”

“What evidence have you brought to support this?” asked Gowron.

“It would be much easier and much clearer if you would allow me to show you instead of simply telling you.”

“What do you propose, Picard?”

“I invite you to be my guest aboard the *Enterprise*. You may bring whatever security personnel you wish.”

“The Federation pushed for this meeting, Picard. I am accommodating you by being here. Why should I risk coming aboard your ship when you should be coming to mine? What good reason can you give that I should comply?”

“I have no good reason, Gowron. It is simply a request of convenience. You have my word there is no deception at work here.”

Gowron pondered Picard’s request for a moment.

“I believe you to be a man of honor, Picard, but if this is an attempt to take a hostage to force us to leave the Cardassian colonies...”

“We are not terrorists, dammit!” snapped Picard. “Look around you! You have me three to one. What would there be to gain by taking you hostage? Your ships would open fire, my crew would be killed, and you would die a death worthy of song, and our two nations would immediately go to war. You don’t seriously believe I am here for that!”

Once again, Gowron was silent as he considered Picard’s argument.

“Very well, Picard. My chief of security and I will join you shortly.”

“We will transmit coordinates for you to beam directly to the bridge.”

“So be it,” said Gowron sternly as he ended the transmission.

Lt. Fredrik’s sensor panel detected the activity. “Two transporter beams have been initiated from the *N’gBar* to the *Enterprise* sir.”

“All stop,” ordered Riker.

“We can’t find out anything else without dropping the cloak and going to an active scan,” the First Officer observed.

“Sometimes the waiting without knowing is the hardest thing to do, Mr. Thomas,” replied Riker.

“Sir,” interrupted B’rtah. “I am detecting what I believe to be an intermittent comm signal.”

“What does it say?” asked Thomas.

“Unknown, Commander. It appears to be encrypted.”

“Can you decode it?” asked Riker.

“Negative,” replied B’rtah. “Its kiloquad per second rate is off the scale.”

“Where is its source?” asked Thomas.

“I have been unable to determine that, sir. The signal has originated from four different locations, but I am not detecting a power source capable of sending such a signal.”

“Could the Klingons be signaling more cloaked vessels nearby?” asked Riker.

“I do not believe so, sir,” responded B’rtah. “None of the signals has come from or been directed at any of the Klingon vessels in this area, but they have all occurred within a one hundred-thousand-kilometer radius of our position.”

Thomas turned to Riker with a tense look on his face.

“If those signals are more Klingon ships, then we’ve walked right into an ambush and we’re in over our heads.”

“A possibility, Mr. Thomas,” said Riker, “Mr. B’rtah, continue monitoring the signals. Keep me informed.”

“Aye, sir.”

Augustok approached B’rtah’s station and looked on as he continued to analyze the signals. The energy signature was unique, but something about it looked vaguely familiar. “I wonder,” he mumbled. “B’rtah, route this information to Science Station One.”

B’rtah complied and Augustok sat down and began working. He quickly ran one comparison after another, changing the search parameters each time until he had the information he wanted. “Captain, we can’t read the entire signal because of its speed, but the encryption sequence on what we have matches a known Klingon code.”

“Are you sure Mr. Augustok?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Confirmed,” added B’rtah. “It reads a series of numbers, possibly coordinates.”

“Then it could be more ships,” stated Thomas.

“There is one other thing, Commander,” said Augustok.

“Which is?”

“The carrier wave is not consistent with anything the Klingons have used before.”

“Then it must be something new.”

“I am still unable to locate a power source, but the signals are now holding at seventy-five thousand kilometers,” reported B’rtah.

“Is it possible they’ve detected us somehow?” asked Riker.

“I do not see how, we are...” B’rtah stopped his reply and began checking his console.

“What is it, Lieutenant?” asked Thomas.

“The signals seemed to have stopped, sir.”

“Last position?” requested Riker.

“Still seventy-five thousand kilometers, but in a radius around the positions held by the *N'gBar* and the *Enterprise*.”

“Somebody's watching,” said Thomas.

“Yes, but who and why?” added Riker.

At the same time the crew of the *Raven* had been trying to trace the signals, Gowron had beamed aboard the *Enterprise* with his security officer K'mek. Picard welcomed them and requested that they join him and Mr. Worf in the observation lounge. The ensign who took Worf's place at tactical overlooked the extremely high-speed signal. He thought it to be a sensor malfunction and began a diagnostic.

In the observation lounge, just as Worf and Picard were about to take their seats, K'mek approached Worf and snarled “So this is the so-called Klingon who turned his back on his family and refused to fight the Cardassians.”

Worf brushed off the insult and stared at Gowron with distaste. “Tell me, Gowron,” asked Worf. “Is it because I

have no honor in your eyes that you bring this p'takh on board just to insult me?"

"No, Worf, it is as you said. Your oath of honor to the Federation is all you have left."

"You smell like a human," hissed K'mek. "No warrior remains in you."

Worf looked into K'mek's eyes with a cold, hard stare. Through clenched teeth he replied, "Make your challenge if you have the courage. If not, then reach for your weapon now, so I can take it from you and gut you like the overgrown targ you are."

Worf's statement brought rage to his counterpart, but as he reached for his weapon Gowron grabbed him.

"K'mek! Today may be a good day to die, but not for you. Another time will come."

"Gowron, please!" shouted Picard. "This benefits nothing!"

"Very well, Picard," answered Gowron as he sat down. "What is it you've come so far to tell me?"

"I think you will find, Chancellor, when I am finished, that we have a common threat."

“We shall see,” responded Gowron, his voice filled with skepticism.

Picard then began a well-orchestrated presentation of the information provided by Starfleet Command. He chose his words carefully, seeking to absolve the Federation of any crime and more importantly, to convince the Chancellor that he was telling the truth. However, it seemed that with each piece of information Gowron seethed with anger until he finally stood, kicking his chair from under him and pointing the finger of accusation.

“This is the beginning of a Romulan-Federation alliance!”

“What kind of alliance begins with the destruction of a space station and the loss of over three hundred people?!” shouted Picard.

“Two races without honor!” Gowron shot back. “One who practices deceit and the other who always remains innocent and neutral!”

Now Picard stood from his chair and spoke with boldness. “You may have rewritten Klingon history to convince your descendants that the Federation had no part in exposing the Romulan involvement in your civil war, but you and I know the real truth. It was also the

Federation that conveniently eliminated any further threat from Lursa and B'Etor, and even though we condemned the Cardassian invasion, we took no steps to stop you!"

"And what of the Klingon ships you attacked rescuing the Cardassian council members?"

"We will protect innocent civilians who seek asylum."

"Even Romulans?"

"ANYONE who seeks asylum, INCLUDING Romulans!"

"Then we have nothing further to discuss."

"Oh, yes," Picard snapped with sarcasm. "We certainly don't want to discuss how your forces blatantly attacked a Federation space station even after you learned that the Cardassian council members were not Founders!"

"We were never allowed to test them ourselves."

"Because your so-called test would have been to slit their throats to see if they bleed," said Worf.

"A most effective test!" replied Gowron.

"Enough of this!" shouted Picard, slamming his fist on the table. He then took a deep breath, attempting to

regain his composure. “Chancellor, I came here in good faith to share this information in the interest of cooperation. But to prove the resolve of the Federation and to refute your accusation of an alliance, I will breach orders and tell you as the Romulans were told, the Federation will tolerate no more hostile action against its citizens along the border. We have made preparations to respond and repel any such future threat.”

“We are not afraid of battle!” hissed Gowron.

“And what of manipulation?” asked Picard.

“What are you saying, Picard?”

“I’m saying very simply that you are doing exactly what the Romulans want you to do.”

“I have no fear of the Romulans. I intend to make their Empire the next Klingon colony, and were it not for my respect for you, Picard, I would have destroyed your ship as soon as it arrived.”

Gowron had barely finished his statement when the *Enterprise* shook violently. The klaxon sounded and Data’s voice came over the intercom.

“Red Alert! Captain to the bridge!”

The ship rocked from another impact as Picard asked Gowron as they entered the bridge.

“Did the captain of your flagship tire of waiting?”

“I gave no order!” snapped Gowron.

Picard took his chair as Data gave the status report. “We are being fired upon by what appears to be Klingon disruptors, but the three visible ships have not fired.”

“Helm, set course for Federation space, maximum warp.”

“Course laid in, Captain.”

“Engage.”

Gowron stormed down the ramp, “Return me to my ship!”

Picard did not even look at him to reply. “I will not lower my shields and endanger this ship for your sake.”

Lt. B’rtah announced that the *Enterprise* and the Klingon vessels were now being fired upon.

“Mr. Douglas, put us between the *Enterprise* and whoever is shooting,” ordered Riker.

“The ships are going to warp sir,” said Fredrik.

“Warp speed Mr. Douglas, overtake,” said Thomas.

“Aye, sir. Going to warp.”

“The *Enterprise* is going to transwarp,” reported Fredrik.

“I am reading a transwarp signature close behind the *Enterprise*,” added B’rtah, “and three other warp signatures behind the Klingon vessels. The *N’gBar* and one Bird of Prey are being fired upon. I am reading the signals once again.”

Augustok went quickly to his science station to scan the signals.

“Captain,” Augustok called out from his station. “The warp field has slowed the signal enough to identify the carrier wave. It’s Romulan, they must be using the signal as a transponder to keep from firing on each other under cloak.”

“Well done, Mr. Augustok,” said Thomas. “Ready torpedoes.”

“One Bird of Prey destroyed. The other taking heavy damage. The N'gBar's shields are weakening,” said B’rtah.

“Shall I go to transwarp to overtake the *Enterprise*, sir?”

“We can’t overtake her at transwarp Mr. Duglas,” replied Riker. “She’s too fast.”

Riker took a moment to consider this situation. As long as the *Enterprise* kept running at transwarp, she was safe. No-one had a transwarp torpedo, at least he hoped they didn’t. If he took care of these three ships now, they wouldn’t be chasing him later and saving the *N'gBar* from destruction might be an honorable act in the eyes of the Klingons.

“Second Bird of Prey destroyed,” reported B’rtah.

“The N'gBar's shields are damaged. She’s dropping out of warp.”

“Let’s do some damage of our own,” said Riker.

“May I?” asked Commander Thomas.

Riker could tell by the look on his face that this First Officer had something in mind.

“Go,” said Riker with a nod.

Thomas responded with a smile as he stood from his chair. He moved forward and placed his hand on Lt. Douglas' shoulder.

"Lt. Douglas, have you ever flown a Yeager Loop from the slot position?"

"Hundreds of times, sir."

"Prepare to execute that maneuver on my mark."

"Aye, sir."

Thomas turned and pointed at B'rtah and Augustok.

"Triangulate an area around the last signal reading you get. I want a full spread on both aft torpedo tubes. Set for proximity detonation."

He then turned back to Douglas as B'rtah and Augustok reported they were ready.

"Mr. Douglas, give me a rapid warp deceleration. I want to drop to impulse at a relative position above the N'gBar."

"Executing, sir."

"Mr. Fredrik, bring the secondary impulse engines online."

“Aye, sir.”

Duglas was prepared to act as he counted aloud, “Impulse in three... two... one... mark.”

Thomas clenched his fist. “Fire torpedoes! Helm, Yeager Loop, full impulse!”

The dissipating warp field energy from the *Raven* pushed the *N'gBar* low and away. The Klingon captain watched his viewscreen with utter surprise as a firestorm of twenty torpedoes fanned out before his eyes, having no idea where they came from.

Commander Thomas was already deep into his plan. The *Raven* had climbed to an inverted position relative to the *N'gBar*. As she passed over the top, she began a slow roll.

“Torpedo impact,” reported B’rtah.

“Target those impacts and fire phasers!”

She now dove onto her prey from directly above, phasers stretching out from her upper and lower arrays.

“Direct hit to starboard, zero three zero, mark two five.”

“Come to that heading and blanket fire, rapid pulse.”

Douglas fired full thrust on the port impulse engines and the ship slid hard right. The lower array started to port as the upper array began to starboard, each crystal discharging a bright pulse. Across the saucer they fired in rapid succession, until a shot to port found its mark.

“Come to port, zero-two-two and fire,” ordered Thomas with intensity.

The *Raven* quickly responded to port and the light storm began again. This time the pulsing weapons concentrated into a tighter stream. Once one hit was struck, the others followed, pounding their target. The fabric of space seemed to quiver as the warbird’s cloak failed.

“I have a target lock,” reported B’rtah.

“Ready the phaser cannon. Inertial dampeners to full.”

“Cannon ready,” said Augustok.

“Fire,” ordered Thomas with zeal.

The mouth of the cannon glowed for a fraction of a second before the energy discharged with a howl of fury.

The blast ripped away the warbird’s warp nacelle, spinning the vessel ninety degrees from the force of the

impact. A moment of silence struck the bridge as the *Raven's* crew watched the warbird list, drifting out of control. They had just witnessed their first kill. Suddenly a spread of Klingon torpedoes struck the Romulan, blasting it into several pieces.

"The *N'gBar* is firing again," said B'rtah.

This time torpedoes and disruptors in concert reduced what was left to rubble. Unfortunately, all of this concentrated firing allowed another warbird to get a relative fix. The *Raven* shook hard under the impact of the Romulan torpedo spread.

"Evasive action, Riker alpha!" the Captain shouted. "Aft phasers, lay down a pattern."

The array on the overhead module fired a pulse sequence as the secondary units on the pylon wing fired a series of beams.

"No impact, nothing!" growled B'rtah, thumping his fist on the console.

1. "Control yourself, Lieutenant," Riker said evenly. "This isn't over."

"The *N'gBar* is being fired on again," added B'rtah.

"She's not going to last," Thomas told Riker.

“Then let’s give them something else to shoot at,” replied Riker. “Drop the cloak and raise shields.”

“We are being scanned,” said Fredrik.

“They are continuing to fire on the *N’gBar*, her shields have just failed,” added B’rtah.

“Give me forward phasers concentrated in that area, and Mr. Augustok, I want that fire thick enough to walk on,” said Riker.

“Aye, aye, Captain!”

“Ready the forward torpedoes and wait for my signal.”

“Phasers ready, Captain.”

“Helm, give me a head-to-head course with the *N’gBar*, half impulse.”

“Coming about, sir.”

The *Raven* banked hard and started her run. Riker had guessed right. Both warbirds were trying to finish off the Klingon and then deal with him. He was about to remove that option. It was like playing chicken. Who was bluffing and who had the nerve? At first the Klingons were too busy with the weapons hitting them from behind to notice the closing ship ahead. Riker was

gambling that when the Klingons veered off the Romulans would split up and fire on him instead. That meant one ship would have to turn the same direction with him.

Lt. Douglas began to sweat as the distance closed. He wanted to turn but he waited. Finally, the *N'gBar* dove low as a Romulan disruptor blast hit the *Raven's* shields.

“Hard to starboard! Fire phasers!” shouted Riker.

Augustok had programmed both saucer arrays and both outboard pylon arrays to fire. The viewscreen lit up the bridge as the orange glow from the beams came together. Riker gambled and won. The concentrated blast struck the turning warbird directly in the belly. The residual energy at the point of impact illuminated the rest of the ship. The electro-magnetic field arced like lightning as the cloaking device overloaded and burned out. Now they could see that the force of the blast had turned the vessel upside down.

“Fire torpedoes,” ordered Riker.

B'rtah keyed his console and seconds later the weapons hit home before the Romulans could react. Plasma fires could now be seen burning internally through the holes blasted through the hull by the torpedoes. The vessel

hung in space lifelessly as her remaining cabin lights flickered out.

“Where’s the *N’gBar*?” Riker asked.

“Evidently she has restored partial main power. She has cloaked and I have no reading,” reported Fredrik. “One moment, Captain, I’m reading a warp signature... headed for Federation space. Now another... same heading.”

“Helm, pursue and overtake. They aren’t getting away that easily.”

Riker eased back into his chair, hoping he wouldn’t reach the *Enterprise* too late.

Once into warp, Augustok turned to his science station again. He rapidly reviewed the sensor logs recorded during the battle. One of his assumptions had proven correct.

“Captain, I’ve scanned the remains of the two Romulan ships we destroyed. It appears they have... taken some shortcuts sir.”

Riker turned half around, “You mean they’ve compromised their upgrades.”

“Yes, sir. The two vessels employed the new hull plates and the cloak weapons program but had only two warp nacelles. I would therefore assume that Commander Sela’s ship is the only one with transwarp capabilities.”

“Meaning the warbirds we just faced had lower power reserves and her ship will be a lot tougher to defeat,” replied Riker with concern.

“A reasonable deduction,” added Augustok.

“Closing in on the warp signatures, sir,” said Fredrik.

“The *N'gBar* is decloaking and raising shields, powering their aft torpedo launchers,” added B’rtah. “They are firing! Evasive action, Riker Delta!”

The *Raven* dove hard to starboard, showing her minimal aspect as she veered away.

“They have fired a full spread, two torpedoes closing on us,” reported B’rtah in a tense voice.

“Auxiliary power to shields,” ordered Thomas.

“Aye sir,” responded Fredrik, already acting on the order.

The two weapons exploded and the *Raven* shuddered from the blast.

“They exploded before they impacted our shields. They must have been set for timed detonation,” reported Fredrik, puzzled by such a tactic. “Captain, why would they...?”

“They’re trying to make the Romulans shoot at them, Mr. Fredrik, so they can vector their weapons. Mr. Augustok, let’s give them a hand.”

“How, sir?”

“Mr. B’rtah, reactivate our cloak. Mr. Duglas, give me an intercept course with the Romulan warp signature.”

The two officers acknowledged and carried out their orders.

Riker turned to face his tactical and weapons officers.

“Gentlemen, you’ve got to act fast on this one and there’s no margin for error. Give me one forward tube set for proximity detonation, high energy burst, level 5.”

“Level 5, sir?” asked Thomas.

“Something I learned from a friend of mine.” replied Riker. “One of these torpedoes should illuminate the Romulan just for a second. Get your target lock and fire, tightest possible pattern. I don’t want to miss and hit the N'gBar. Set the second tube of torpedoes for

maximum yield. Hopefully, the Klingons will get a lock and fire as well."

Both men began preparations and within a few moments reported that they were ready.

"Closing to optimum range," said B'rtah.

"Mr. Douglas, circumvental attitude, from below. Be ready to shear away as soon as we fire our second volley."

"Aye, Captain."

B'rtah gave the count, "Range in four... three... two... one..."

"Fire first tube," ordered Riker.

"Torpedoes away," responded Augustok.

All eyes were fixed on the viewscreen as they watched the first two weapons streak off into space. The third detonated with no effect but the next two set their target aglow like a flare. Augustok didn't hesitate. Riker gave the order to fire but the ordnance was already on its way. Douglas dove the *Raven* hard to port but B'rtah was tracking the weapons and adjusted the viewer screen to hold the image. The first two torpedoes hit dead on and the third a glancing blow as the warbird

began an evasive maneuver. The image of the Romulan flashed and flickered. Her ventral cloaking emitters had been destroyed.

“They are dropping out of warp,” reported Fredrik.

“Go to impulse, ready the phaser cannon,” ordered Thomas.

“I have a target lock,” said B’rtah.

But before Thomas could speak the order to fire, a volley of Klingon disruptors followed by a full spread of torpedoes finished off the warbird.

“Better late than never,” quipped Riker.

“Sir, the Klingons are scanning,” said B’rtah. “I believe they are looking for us.”

“We’re not sticking around to find out if they want to talk or fight,” said Riker. “Engineering, Mr. Riley.”

“Riley here, sir.”

“Give me everything she’s got.”

“Aye, Captain. Engaging primary core overdrive.”

“Mr. Fredrik, find the *Enterprise*,” ordered Riker.

“She is passing the Krios system, heading for Federation space.”

“Transfer coordinates to helm and engage at maximum warp. Decloak and take weapons systems off-line as soon as we’re out of range of the N'gBar.”

The Klingons tried to give chase but the *Raven's* acceleration was too quick. Before they could fire she had made the jump to transwarp and soon they were left with nothing to aim at.

“I demand that you reverse course and return me to my ship,” shouted Gowron. Picard had heard enough of his guest’s demands.

“I will do nothing of the sort so long as I am being pursued by an enemy vessel. I tell you for the last time, I will not endanger my crew and my ship for your discontent.”

Picard’s response was stern, which impressed Gowron, but not quite enough. “Then instead of running like a coward, why don’t you turn and fight?”

Picard was incensed. He stood from his chair and approached Gowron until they were nose to nose.

Gowron bore his teeth as Picard responded in a foreboding tone, his intensity growing with each word.

“I am not blinded by the blood-lust of battle, and I will not send one thousand people to their deaths for the sake of glory! Now, I will return you to your ship as soon as possible but until then sit down and do not interfere with my command aboard my ship!”

Gowron stood his ground for a moment as K'mek deemed it was time for action. He drew his blade and made his move towards Worf, but Starfleet's Klingon warrior was not caught unaware. He positioned himself quickly and grabbed K'mek's wrist as he lunged. With his other hand he slammed K'mek's forearm against the console, knocking the knife free. He then delivered an elbow to the ribs, followed by a back fist to the jaw. He finished with a fierce headbutt which left his opponent on the floor.

K'mek attempted to rise but Worf drew his phaser and stunned him. He then pointed the weapon at Gowron.

“Must I treat you in a similar fashion to maintain order on the bridge?” asked Worf.

Gowron sneered with disgust and took his seat next to Commander Data. Picard acknowledged Worf's actions with a silent nod of approval. As Picard returned to his

chair, Worf took notice of something on his readout and announced his report; "Captain, the Icaian asteroid belt is ahead, bearing one seven two, mark three four five. Its high concentrations of chromium and magnesium-dust residue from mining sites would be an effective screen against the Romulan's sensors."

"Excellent, Mr. Worf," replied Picard. "Helm, change course to take us into the asteroid field."

"Aye, Captain. Changing course."

"Mr. Worf, prepare a full spread of photon torpedoes from the aft launcher. Time their detonation so as to blind the Romulan sensors from determining our point of entry."

Worf acknowledged Data's order and made preparations. Picard waited until the last safe possible moment to drop to impulse. He knew he was vulnerable as soon as Sela could fire her weapons. The *Enterprise* executed a rapid warp deceleration. All over the ship, crew members grabbed for anything they could hold onto as the inertial dampeners were unable to compensate.

Worf fired the torpedoes just as they approached the sublight threshold. It was masterful timing. Just as Sela

was about to lock on for a torpedo shot, she was met with a full spread which detonated right in her face. She shouted for an evasive maneuver, but by the time they cleared, the *Enterprise* was nowhere to be seen. She knew where they had gone, but finding Picard now was not going to be easy. She cursed aloud, slamming her fist into the palm of her other hand. With that she ordered the helm to take them in.

In the meantime, Riker had called together his senior staff, Leaving Lt. Fredrik in command. "All right, people," Riker began, "the *Enterprise* can't run at transwarp forever. Sooner or later she has to slow down and when she does she'll be in immediate danger. Unfortunately, we can't close the gap between us until she does slow down. The problem is: do we arrive before Sela turns her into Swiss cheese? We need an advantage, and we need it fast. Waiting for her to fire on the *Enterprise* enough to triangulate an approximate position is not an option. We need a way to find out where she is, before we fire a shot and give ourselves away."

B'rtah was the first to speak up. "If we could find a way to imitate their locator signal, it would lead us right to her."

"Is that possible?" asked Thomas.

“I’m sure I could reproduce the encryption sequence,” answered Augustok. “But how do we send a twenty kiloquad per second carrier wave?”

“No problem, I can do that,” commented Riley.

“No problem?” questioned Thomas. “Would you mind telling me how it’s not going to be a problem?”

The chief engineer answered with confidence, “Certainly, sir, if this was a visual communication we couldn’t do it. But, since we’re only sending a coded number sequence, we can amp the signal with little distortion. We still have a few of the temporary relay beacons on board, the type used for placing during star mapping. Its subspace transceiver assembly has an onboard signal booster. I can install this unit on one of the optional hard points in the long-range sensor bay behind the main deflector dish. There, I’ll have an ODN link direct to the primary computer core. Mr. Augustok can program the sequence and feed it directly to the unit. The plasma energy conduits leading from the warp cores to the phaser cannon are only one deck above. I can run a tap down the Jefferies tube direct to the booster input. It’ll probably only transmit a few times before it overloads and burns out but hopefully that’ll be long enough to get a good fix on the enemy ship.”

Everyone at the table was impressed by Riley's expertise and inventive thinking.

"How long to set it up?" asked Thomas anxiously.

"As soon as Mr. Augustok can program the signal, I can be ready in about thirty minutes," replied Riley.

"Outstanding," said Thomas. "Let's get moving."

"Wait," said Augustok. "Won't Sela know it's not one of her ships if we're closing at transwarp speed?"

"We will have to slow to warp nine point two when we reach sensor range," replied B'rtah.

"How do we know where sensor range is if we don't know exactly where she is?"

"Mr. Augustok, you sound as if you don't want to try," said Riker.

"Not at all sir, I just..."

Riker interrupted, "It's worth the risk, Lieutenant. Even if we do give our position away, I'd rather have Sela shooting at us instead of the *Enterprise*."

"Understood, sir."

“Then let’s not waste any more time.”

They all began leaving the room when Riker called out, “Mr. Riley!”

“Yes, sir?”

“You just took your first step toward becoming known as a miracle worker.”

Riley smiled proudly, understanding the compliment. “Aye, sir,” he replied with feigned a Scottish accent.

They all filed out except Dr. November who lagged behind, meeting Riker at the doorway.

“I’ve got sickbay ready and two emergency teams standing by in case you’re interested,” she said with a touch of sarcasm.

“I expected nothing less, Doctor. If you had needed anything, I have no doubt you would have let me know,” replied Riker.

“You’re right, Captain. You win round two.”

“This isn’t a fight, Doctor. You have nothing left to prove to me. You gained my confidence when you bit my head off in Ten Forward aboard the *Enterprise*. In fact, I can

honestly say that I hope you don't have to do your job on this mission."

"On that we agree, Captain."

"Carry on, Doctor, and well done."

The doctor's response was a wry grin as she left. She was looking forward to their next confrontation.

Riker returned to the bridge and relieved Fredrik who reported that the *Enterprise* and the Romulan had dropped out of warp and disappeared from their sensors near the Icaian asteroid belt. Fredrik had already ordered a course change to their last coordinates. Riker commended him on a job well done. As he settled back into his chair he thought to himself how this was just what he needed to get back in the game. But how long would his poker luck hold out?

CHAPTER 18

“Anything, Lieutenant?” asked Picard.

“Nothing definite,” replied his Ops officer. “No tachyon surges or subspace inertial displacements large enough to be a ship. However, the asteroid field is interfering with our sensors. There is a forty-three percent margin of error.”

“Thank you, Lieutenant.”

“Captain,” added Data. “If our position reading is relatively correct, we should be able to exit the asteroid field just ahead and cross into Federation Space in a matter of minutes at warp speed.”

“Excellent, Mr. Data. Have the helm plot a course and await my command.”

Data acknowledged and the helm stood ready. Picard then stood from his chair and gave his tunic a firm tug.

“Mr. Worf, open a channel. This waiting game of hide and seek has gone on long enough. It’s time they made their intentions known.”

“Channel open sir.”

“Romulan vessel! This is Jean-Luc Picard of the *Enterprise*. Commander Sela! I know you’re listening. Very shortly, I will be taking my ship across the border into Federation space. If you pursue or fire on my ship, it will be considered a further violation of treaty worthy of serious retaliation. Your actions will dictate our response. Consider your position carefully.”

Picard gave a hand signal and Worf cut the transmission.

“Helm, ahead half impulse until we clear the field. Then increase speed to warp six.”

“Not transwarp, sir?”

“No, Mr. Data. If they wish to provoke a war, then let them fire on a Federation starship on a diplomatic mission in Klingon space. I will provide them with no evidence that this conflict was anyone’s but their own.”

“So, you finally decide to do battle?”

Picard replied calmly to Gowron’s snide comment. “Chancellor, it is my sincere hope that they allow us to go in peace, but my better judgment tells me that’s not likely.”

Gowron crossed his arms and grunted with disgust.

“Helm, engage,” ordered Picard.

The *Enterprise* weaved her way through the asteroids until they cleared. They wasted no time in accelerating to warp speed. Picard knew that at warp six or above, even a cloaked ship would leave a warp signature. It was his best means of defense. He also knew that at transwarp speed, his weapons were useless as well, even a torpedo fired aft couldn't escape the intensity of the transwarp field and would probably detonate, posing more of a threat to his own ship than an enemy.

Tense silence covered the bridge as Federation space drew ever closer, but everyone knew crossing the border didn't mean instant safety.

Worf watched his console with keen eyes and, as he suspected, their enemy gave chase.

"Captain, there is a warp signature closing from astern."

"Raise shields, Mr. Worf."

"Aye, sir." He barely had answered when he saw a new threat.

"Torpedoes!" announced Worf.

Picard's response was instantaneous. "Evasive sequence gamma!"

The *Enterprise* sheared away hard, but one torpedo still impacted the shields.

“Helm, return to course, increase speed to warp nine,” ordered Picard.

“Direct hit on our aft shields. Holding at eighty seven percent integrity,” reported Worf.

“Prepare aft torpedo bay, full spread,” ordered Data.

“Aye sir. Torpedoes ready.”

“Is the warp signature still with us?” asked Picard.

“Aye, sir, and I am now reading another signature also closing on an intercept course.”

“Federation space in one minute, thirty seconds,” reported Ops.

“Captain, I am detecting a high speed comm signal. It is passing at intervals between the two warp signatures.”

“Can you make it out?” asked Data.

“No, sir,” answered Worf. “The speed of the carrier wave is almost off the scale.”

“Can you lock onto its source?” asked Picard.

“No, sir, there is no discernible... they’re firing again!”

“Aft torpedoes, Mr. Worf! Helm! Evasive sequence alpha.”

The *Enterprise* fired her volley and climbed hard to starboard, but not before two enemy torpedoes found their mark. They struck close together, weakening her shields. The ship reeled from the impact.

“Damage report,” ordered Data as he held tight to his chair.

“Aft shields down to fifty percent,” said Worf.

“LaForge to bridge.”

“Go ahead Geordi,” answered Data.

“That last impact must have knocked the field coils in the central nacelle out of alignment. We’re getting an unstable warp field. I’ve got to take the nacelle offline before the distortion tears us apart.”

“Can we maintain warp drive?” asked Picard.

“I can probably give you warp eight at best, but I’m not sure for how long.”

“Very well, Mr. LaForge,” replied Picard. “Mr. Worf reload aft torpedo bays.”

“Aye, sir.”

“Time to Federation space?” asked Picard.

“Twenty-two seconds,” replied the Ops officer.

“I am reading the high-speed signal once again,” reported Worf.

“Confirmed, Captain,” added Ops. “The signal appears to be encrypted.”

“Do you have a relative fix on the warp signatures, Mr. Worf?” asked Data.

“Aye sir. One off our port quarter, the other closing fast on the same heading.”

“Fire blind. Lay down a pattern,” ordered Picard.

Worf responded and a stream of torpedoes rifled from the *Enterprises'* aft launcher. One by one they exploded in random order and as the warbird turned hard to miss one it struck another. The blast caused an energy surge and for a fraction of a second a faint image appeared. Gowron was at first surprised, then angered by what he

saw. Now, there was no doubt that Picard had been telling the truth. Now he hungered to be in the battle.

“We are now in Federation space,” announced the Ops officer.

“Mr. Data, dispatch a priority one emergency signal.”

“Aye, Captain.”

“Helm, go to impulse and bring us hard about.”

“Aye, sir.”

“Mr. Worf, open a channel and stand by phasers and photon torpedoes.”

“Aye, Captain. Channel open, weapons standing by.”

Picard delivered his warning with authority, “Romulan vessel! You are now in Federation territory. If you open fire on this ship it will be considered an act of war, and we will respond accordingly.”

“No response,” said Worf.

Then the ship rocked violently as the Romulans fired disruptors followed by torpedoes.

“Shields down to sixty-five percent.”

“Return fire, Mr. Worf. Phasers and torpedoes.”

Once gain the *Enterprise* fired blind. Torpedoes spread out ahead as the phasers swept above and below.

“No targets hit, Captain. I have also lost the second warp signature. Captain, we are being hailed.”

“On screen.”

Picard rose from his chair, as did Gowron, when Sela’s image appeared on the screen. She spoke calmly from the comfort of her command chair.

“Well, it seems today is my lucky day. I finally get my revenge on the human who has been my greatest annoyance, the esteemed android and, as a bonus, the Chancellor of the Klingon High Council. Captain, you may fire your weapons if you wish but I know my ship will last longer than yours. Now, look upon your doom and the face of the future.”

Sela looked smug as the transmission ended to reveal the image of the *Nokturak* warbird, her cloak down, directly ahead.

“Fire phasers!” ordered Picard.

The weapons scored direct hits on the Warbird but most of their energy dissipated against their shields.

The Warbird returned fire with its disruptors, but the energy pulses seemed to impact and spread out before they reached the *Enterprise*.

Sela stood from her chair in shock from what she just witnessed. Then her viewscreen lit up the bridge with a blinding pulse of energy. As she turned her eyes away, a tremendous jolt knocked her over the arm of her chair and onto the floor. She shouted to her helmsman, "Escape maneuver three!"

"Hit her again, Lieutenant!" ordered Riker as the *Raven's* phaser cannon burned away Sela's forward shields.

"Cloak! Cloak!" Sela shouted and the Warbird began to fade from view.

"Mr. Augustok, full spread on all forward tubes."

He carried out Riker's command and three blazing red clusters streaked into space. Moments later they spread

out like a deadly net. Three torpedoes struck in rapid succession, and Sela's cloak began to fail.

But she wasn't about to give up. The Warbird executed an aggressive turn which placed the *Enterprise* between her and the *Raven*. Unfortunately for Sela, her malfunctioning cloak allowed Picard to train his weapons, and showing minimal aspect he turned sharply underneath her, hammering away with his phasers as he passed. Sela returned fire with her aft disruptors and came hard about, firing again with her forward weapons.

"Deactivate cloak and raise shields," ordered Riker.

"Shields up," replied B'rtah.

"Mr. Douglas, keep us between the Warbird and the *Enterprise*."

"I'll do my best sir."

"Get creative if you have to."

"Yes, sir!"

In Lt. Douglas' mind he was now flying a one-man fighter craft. He focused on his console and the viewscreen and executed a slicing dive between the other two ships. Once again, Sela's weapons which were meant for the

Enterprise struck the *Raven's* shields instead. This time, however, the range was much closer and the energy overload fed back causing part of the tactical console to explode. Both Augustok and B'rtah were slammed to the floor.

B'rtah sat up quickly and noticed a piece of shrapnel protruding from his upper arm. With gnashing teeth and a vicious grunt, he yanked the jagged piece free and pitched it aside. His hand was covered in blood. He wiped his fingers across his nose and down his cheek like warpaint as he growled and spit the blood from his lips. He pulled himself up and manned the weapons console, rerouting functions from his destroyed station. Commander Thomas called for a medical emergency as he pulled Augustok aside.

Sela quickly corrected her course to intercept the *Enterprise* once gain. Picard was coming about and opened fire with full phasers and even though he scored direct hits, the Warbird's ablative armor held fast.

Sela returned fire with her disruptors as the *Enterprise* turned high and away firing her ventral phasers on the saucer and then the engineering hull.

“The Warbird is turning towards our starboard quarter. Mr. B’rtah fire all aft phasers and follow with one full tube.”

B’rtah carried out Riker’s order and the overhead module array as well as the pylon emitters focused on the Warbird. Sela made a steep dive allowing the beams to strike the strongest armor on her hull and making the torpedoes miss. She now countered with an equally steep climb, aiming for the *Raven’s* belly. Now it was her turn as she fired disruptors and torpedoes in unison, but Lt. Duglas was already into his next maneuver. He rolled the *Raven* ninety degrees and accelerated and Sela’s volley passed cleanly underneath.

“The *Raven* is clear.”

“Fire torpedoes, Mr. Worf,” ordered Picard.

Once gain her distraction with Riker’s ship had given Picard the opportunity for a weapons lock. His ship delivered a full spread and the Warbird pitched violently from the impact of the blast.

Sela’s ship showed its first signs of real damage.

Augustok struggled to get to his feet after Dr. November had given him a stimulant to bring him around.

“Sickbay, Lieutenant,” she said.

“Not yet, Doctor,” he replied as his eyes were fixed on the image of the wounded ship on the viewscreen. “She’s not disabled yet, Captain. Another shot to the inboard nacelle structure should destroy her main power source.”

“Prepare phaser cannon for frequency shift pulse firing.”

“Ready, Commander,” replied B’rtah.

Commander Thomas then turned to his helmsman, “Lieutenant, line us up for this one. I want a clean shot.”

“Aye, sir,” responded Lt. Douglas as he brought the *Raven* around in front of the *Enterprise* in order to keep them clear. Sela’s ship was moving slowly but she was still coming about to fight.

B’rtah watched his readout intensely as Augustok peered over his shoulder. Both Riker and Thomas were on the edge of their chairs.

“I have a lock!” announced B’rtah.

“Fire!” said Riker and Thomas in unison.

The *Raven* continued to close on the Warbird as the phaser cannon spewed bursts of energy like a gigantic

chain gun being fired on a pitch-dark night. Blast after blast pounded the Warbird until the armor could take no more. The center structure ripped open and the port inboard nacelle exploded as the *Raven* veered off. Now the heavily damaged ship that was to be the terror of the universe drifted defenseless in space.

Gowron clenched his fist and shouted aloud, "Glorious! Now finish her, Picard!"

"She *is* finished, Chancellor."

"Victory is the death of an enemy!"

"My victory is peace."

"You call this peace?!"

"The Romulans will not be so eager to attack after today. We have averted a war, Chancellor."

"And will the Klingon bases in Cardassian space be the next enemies to fall before this new Federation weapon?"

"That ship was built to defend Federation space and will not be used for any offensive action against the Klingon Empire or anyone else. But if anyone, including the Klingons, enters Federation space and attempts to harm

its citizens, what you have seen today will happen again.”

“Captain, we are being hailed.”

“On screen, Mr. Worf.”

Sela’s face appeared, this time smudged and bruised. The bridge of her ship was wrecked and burning in the background. Her voice was filled with anger and disgust.

“So, once again, Picard, you have snatched glory and victory from me. But this is not over. I will never surrender, nor will I allow you to board my ship. I will go my way and we shall meet again, and the last victory shall be mine. So, once again Picard, you have snatched glory and victory...”

“It is a recording, sir!” announced Worf.

“Helm, get us out of here, warp two!” ordered Picard.

Riker had been listening as well and the two starships raced away at warp speed as the *Nokturak* exploded in a bright flash and scattering debris. Augustok breathed a heavy sigh of relief as Dr. November led both he and B’rtah from the bridge.

Thomas manned the tactical station and reported to Riker that Captain Picard was hailing.

“On screen, Commander.”

“Excellent timing, Will, and well done.”

“Is everyone all right, sir? I’m sorry I was a little late.”

“Nonsense, Captain, you were just in time. Now, would you care to take another trip to the Klingon border? I have someone who wishes to return to his ship.”

“To the border, but no further,” replied Riker with a grin. “Oh, and Chancellor, give my most honorable regards to your warriors aboard the N’gBar. They fought well against the Romulans.”

“And you fought like a Klingon today, Captain. K’plah!”

Riker acknowledged Gowron’s compliment with a nod and the transmission ended. He then looked around the bridge with pride and took notice that all eyes were on him.

“Your performance today has been nothing short of outstanding. I’ve never been Captain over a crew that made me feel like this. “Well done” isn’t high enough praise, but I’ll leave it at that. Mr. Douglas, join formation with the *Enterprise* and escort her to the border.”

“Aye, Captain.”

“Captain,” Commander Thomas spoke up. “Sensors show a shuttlecraft moving at low warp on a heading for the Icaian asteroid belt. It’s Romulan, sir.”

“So, she sent the recorded message to buy herself time to escape.”

“Shall we go after her, Captain?”

“Not today, Commander,” replied Riker as he took his chair and looked at the logo of the fiery eyed bird on the carpet in front of him. He remembered Edgar Allen Poe’s masterpiece and thought how he wished that a night like this one would never come again. He whispered to himself, “Quoth the Raven, nevermore.”

EPILOGUE

Captain's Log, USS Raven, supplemental,

Gowron has been returned to his ship without event and my injured bridge crew members have returned to duty. The past two days have been spent making repairs as we have escorted the Enterprise at low warp speed since she is still without transwarp capability. The extra time on the trip home has given my crew a chance to unwind and relax. They have welcomed the news that we will be having our launching ceremony when we get back. That will be followed by a celebration in the Space Dock Observation lounge. Shore leave afterwards also appeals to many of them. As for myself, I must decide if I want to give up my ship and crew. I know Admiral Hayden will be expecting an answer.

Riker sat mulling over his decision for a moment. He decided to go with his gut when the time came. With that he returned to the bridge where Commander Thomas surrendered the center seat.

“We’ve just begun docking sequence, Captain. Enjoy the ride.”

Riker relaxed in his chair and he noticed his crew looked at ease for the first time in months. All eyes were fixed

on the viewscreen as the *Enterprise* passed through the space doors.

Thomas sat tall in his chair, seemingly ready to burst with pride. The turbo lift doors hissed open and Lt. Joshua Riley slowly stepped onto the bridge.

“Is there a problem, Lieutenant?” asked Riker.

“Just came to watch, sir,” replied Riley.

“Then have a seat, Lt. Commander Riley.”

“Sir?”

“Have a seat, I’m recommending you for promotion.”

“Thank you, sir!”

“Thank me later. Now, sit down and enjoy the view.”

“Aye, Captain,” Riley replied with a wide smile as he took the empty seat on Riker’s left.

As the *Raven* came inside, many on the station got their first look at the ship they had only heard rumors about. If they weren’t already impressed by the sight of the flagship, they were now awestruck by the unexpected arrival of this foreboding battleship.

Riker glanced around the bridge to see the reactions of his crew. B'rtah stood with his arms crossed and his chin high. A hint of a smile was on his face. It must be his human side coming through. One would have thought he was a Roman general riding triumphantly on his chariot being showered with flowers and laurel branches.

Augustok on the other hand looked almost overwhelmed with emotion.

“What is it, Lieutenant?” Riker asked in a low tone.

“For the first time, I feel like I’m coming home.”

“Maybe someday we’ll be able to do this at Romulus.”

“Perhaps.”

Later that evening everyone gathered in the Spacedock Observatory Lounge. It was a dress uniform affair as all awaited the ceremonial breaking of the champagne bottle on the hull of the new ship.

Riker had just finished conversing with Geordi when the sound of the door caught his attention. In walked Dr. November in her long skirt and dress blazer.

“Why, Doctor, you look positively radiant. May I get you a drink?” greeted Riker with a smile. He took two glasses from a passing waiter and offered her one.

“Thanks for the drink,” she replied. “But you can save the flattery.”

“I meant it as a compliment.”

“I don’t take compliments about my looks from my superior officer,” she quipped.

“Feisty little thing, aren’t you?” Riker said with a laugh.

“If you have a sense of humor, I’m really not so bad. I suppose its leftover attitude. My last host was a man.”

“I would like to have known him, but I don’t ever recall hearing of a Trill with a family name like November.”

“It’s a homage to my lost daughter.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be, she lived a long and full life. Several hosts ago I married a human female. She knew I was a Trill, but she didn’t know what that meant. When our daughter was born, she developed complications. She was more human than Trill and a symbiote had to be removed from her when she tried to be joined. Once my wife

learned that I was the same, that I carried a symbiont, she couldn't accept it. She took my daughter and left. Missy was my daughter's name and she was born on what is called, by your earth calendar, the month of November. She inspired me to practice medicine and I decided the next female host I joined with would carry her name. Fortunately, she didn't mind."

"That's very touching."

"Don't go mushy on me, Captain. She would have treated you just like I do. Now, enough about me. Who's launching the bottle?"

"I believe that would be Dr. Leah Brahms."

Riker and the doctor were then greeted by Lt. Augustok who donned his cape over the left shoulder of his dress uniform. His Romulan clasp was now a belt buckle.

"Nice bathrobe," commented the Doctor.

Riker began laughing and, after Dr. November smiled, Augustok couldn't help but join in. After a few moments, he regained his composure and invited them to the viewport. Dr. Brahms was preparing to launch the champagne. She aimed carefully and activated the throwing mechanism. The bottle spun away, and all eyes watched with delight, following its path. The room

erupted with applause as it burst on the bottom of the saucer section.

A large group gathered around Riker, offering him their congratulations. These included most of his bridge crew and senior officers from the *Enterprise*, including Captain and Mrs. Picard. Then Admiral Hayden entered the circle and Riker knew what he wanted.

“Captain Riker,” Hayden began, “I have taken note that you have not been assigned a ship’s counselor. I have remedied that.” He touched his communicator and said, “Counselor, please come in.”

Riker looked quickly about and didn’t see Deanna. He watched intently as the doors opened to reveal a woman of remarkable beauty, a Vulcan woman with long black hair.

“She is a special emissary from Vulcan,” said Hayden. “She’s supposed to be an expert on Romulan culture.”

Augustok had been gazing out of the viewport at the *Raven*, but the Admiral’s statement caught his ear and he turned to look. For a moment he was spellbound by the sight of her, then he began pushing through the crowd until he met her in the middle of the room. They both stood still as if frozen. Everyone watched in silent wonderment as she took him by both hands.

“Augustok, my sweet, I’m very proud of you.” she said.

“It can’t be you. You’re...” he tried to reply, still in a state of shock.

“The shuttle was a tragic decoy. I left the next day.”

Augustok let fall a tear of joy as he kissed and embraced her tightly. She smiled and tried to calm him.

“You have always been so charmingly emotional. But be comforted now. We are together again, as we will be from now on. Come, introduce me to our Captain.”

Augustok took her by the arm and escorted her to Admiral Hayden, who like the others were speechless from what they had just witnessed.

“This girl is a Vulcan?” Dr. November asked with a wry humor.

“Not like any Vulcan I’ve ever met,” said Commander Thomas.

Augustok brought her before his superiors and began the introductions, “Admiral Hayden, Captain Riker, Captain Picard, my I present Starfleet Vulcan emissary T’Lier, Ship’s counselor, U.S.S. *Raven*.”

“I gather you know each other,” said Hayden.

“Yes, Admiral,” replied T’Lier. “We represent the future of our peoples. The future of reunification. We will be examples for them, the tempering of Romulan passions with logic and the healthy controlled release of emotion for Vulcans.”

“But how will you be able to reach the Romulans?” asked Riley.

“Aboard a Federation starship, it will only be a matter of time,” she replied.

“It looks like you really have come home,” Riker told Augustok.

“Well, Captain,” smiled Hayden. “What about you?”

Riker drew a deep breath and looked around at his crew. “With respect Admiral, I joined Starfleet to explore the galaxy, not for border patrol. I’m afraid I’m going to have to pass on this commission.”

“Dammit, Riker. I thought I had you.”

“You nearly did, sir. It’s quite a ship, with an outstanding crew.”

“And no Captain!”

“I recommend that Commander J. T. Thomas be given the center seat, sir.”

Hayden just couldn't seem to find an angle. “Very well Mr. Riker. Mr. Thomas, the *Raven* is yours if YOU want her.”

“No argument, sir,” replied the smiling Captain-to-be. “You can put the pin on my collar now if you like.”

“Patience, Mr. Thomas,” said Hayden.

Riker smiled and laughed at his former first officer's enthusiasm. He then removed a pin from his own shoulder and put it on Thomas' uniform.

“My last act as Captain of the *Raven*.”

“I don't know how to thank you, sir.”

“Just keep up the good work.”

“You can count on it, sir.”

“Don't call me, sir. You outrank me now, Captain.”

Riker gave him a firm handshake and then turned to Picard. “Permission to return to duty, sir.”

“Granted, Number One.”

Hayden then interrupted and asked, "Will, what in this great big galaxy do I have to do to get you to take a seat?"

"Isn't it true that an Admiral gets his choice of ship to use anytime he wants?" asked Riker.

"Yes, why?"

"Then give Captain Picard a well-deserved promotion to Admiral and then I'll sit down on the bridge of the *Enterprise*."

Picard looked stunned and Beverly giggled.

"That is, whenever you're ready of course," added Riker.

"Thank you, Number One."

"Admiral Jean-Luc Picard has a nice ring to it," said Beverly.

Riker grinned at Beverly's comment when he felt a tap on his shoulder. He was pleased to see it was Deanna.

"Sorry I'm late. Did I miss much?"

"Nothing of consequence," replied Riker. "May I have this dance, Miss Troi?"

She smiled her approval as he led her to the dance floor. He took her in his arms and began the waltz.

“You dance divinely, Captain,” she said.

“That’s Commander Riker, of the U.S.S. *Enterprise*.”

“So it is,” she replied happily as he pointed out the three pins on his uniform lapel.

“Dinner tomorrow night?” he asked.

“That’s a date!”

“Then I guess next time has arrived.”

“I’m glad you’re back, Will Riker. Very glad.”

THE END