

The Event of the Season

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is published by TrekkieFanFiction.com
Cover image by Howie Day

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Contents

Chapter 1.....	4
Chapter 2.....	7
Chapter 3.....	12
Chapter 4.....	17
Chapter 5.....	21
Chapter 6.....	26
Chapter 7.....	29
Chapter 8.....	32
Chapter 9.....	37
Chapter 10.....	42
Chapter 11.....	49
Chapter 12.....	52
Chapter 13.....	58
Chapter 14.....	61
Epilogue	65

Chapter 1

"I'll be there for the wedding, but I won't make tonight's party," Demora Sulu said regretfully.

Nandi Trujillo observed her friend on the computer display via the subspace link. "I understand, I'm just happy you'll be here for the service. How's your ship faring post-refit?"

Sulu smiled. "*Yorktown's* now faster, tougher, and her sensor capacity has been nearly doubled. It wasn't too hard to convince Command to let me stretch her legs and conduct speed trials out to Starbase 443 and back. Given the speed we're holding at present, I don't think we'll have any issues getting out to the Picon-Synadon Cluster. Hell, they're even talking about adjusting the warp speed scale to accommodate the velocities some of our ships have been achieving."

"No issues coming all the way out here for someone's personal event?" Trujillo queried.

"I may have neglected to mention the wedding to them," Sulu answered, smirking.

Trujillo laughed lightly. "I could have always tried pulling some strings with Saavik to get you out here if that hadn't worked."

Trujillo would have had to have been blind not to see the change in Sulu's demeanor at the mention of the admiral's name.

"About that, Nandi... are you sure you want to hitch your wagon to that particular horse?"

Trujillo appeared genuinely surprised. "To... Saavik? What do you mean?"

"You've as much as admitted that she greased the skids for you with the board of inquiry before promoting you. You're politically beholden to her now; your career is in her hands. You'd talked about trying to expand your horizons, shift into exploration from defense. I'd hoped you'd try to find a way to join this latest exploratory push."

Nandi's expression grew troubled. "I... I tried; I really did. They'd had *Reykjavik* on sensor-picket duty for months before this thing with the Klingons kicked off. I was bored to tears. It's one of the reasons I pushed Markopoulos so hard about assembling a task force to go after those Klingon raiding parties. I'm a soldier, Demora, always have been."

Sulu nodded understandingly. "I know, and there's no shame in being what you are." She shifted uneasily. "It's just that Saavik's been throwing her weight around recently. I'm not a fan of Markopoulos by any stretch, but for her to banish him to Logistics Command for a plan *she* signed off on? And now she's assembling this... I'm not sure what to call it... not a cabal, exactly—"

Trujillo frowned, cutting in, "Are you referring to a group of professional, defense-minded leaders interested in preserving the integrity of the Federation?"

Sulu sighed at Trujillo's intransigence. "Leaders who owe a great deal of personal loyalty to Saavik, to the degree it might be perceived by *some* as outweighing their loyalty to the service."

"I know where my loyalties lay, Demora. Can we please change the subject?"

Sulu raised her hands in a gesture of surrender. "Yes, of course. I'm sorry for getting us off topic. How go the arrangements?"

"They go well. We're looking at venues tomorrow, and tonight, of course, is the party. We're also commemorating Glal's retirement and my helmsman's promotion to JG tonight, so it's a multi-celebration."

"I'm sorry I'm missing it, but *Yorktown* will be there day-after-tomorrow. Give that crusty old Tellarite my love and congratulations on a well-deserved retirement and say 'hi' to Gael for me."

"I will. We anxiously await your arrival."

"One last thing, Nandi..."

Trujillo had been on the cusp of toggling off her screen. "Yes?"

"That science officer of yours, Garrett... remember when you promised to return the favor some day when I let you steal Glal away from me on *Cumberland*?"

Trujillo sighed loudly, dipping her head in resignation. "I'm not saying it isn't possible, but that's going to be touchy, given how she came onboard..."

* * *

"We boast an intercultural center which can be modified to host any of hundreds of socio-religious events and can support crowd sizes of well over a thousand," the host announced.

The cavernous space appeared strangely modular, revealing its ability to conform to a wide range of demands. It was the largest such venue on the starbase.

Trujillo and Jarrod inspected the location as their entourage, consisting of Glal, Rachel Garrett and Dr. Bennett, clustered together near the entrance.

Bennett looked toward Garrett, who had a pale, sickly pallor. "You sure I can't give you something? You needn't suffer."

The ensign had survived a combined pre-wedding party, retirement and promotion celebration the night before, though only just.

"I shouldn't cheat my way around what I've done," she replied forlornly.

Glal snorted, "You got drunk, kid. It's not like you gave up state secrets to the Orions. By the Great Hoof, let the man give you something to take the edge off."

Garrett nodded reluctantly, and Bennett handed Glal his cup of coffee to hold as he produced a hypospray from a pocket that he'd evidently brought along for just this opportunity. The device hissed softly at her neck, and after just a few moments the young woman began to look significantly improved.

Bennett gestured to the water bottle Garrett carried with her. "Keep drinking water, you're still dehydrated."

Garrett nodded silently and wandered off to inspect a collection of exotic plants nearby.

The physician sidled up next to Glal, whispering conspiratorially. "What's going on with her and Naifeh? This morning at breakfast those two would barely look at one another."

Glal snorted again, then glanced over his shoulder to assess that Garrett wasn't within earshot. "Those two staggered off together at the end of the party last night. I believe you humans refer to this as, 'morning after regrets.'"

Bennett looked surprised. "Oh! I hadn't realized." He shook his head, chuckling. "I've never seen any hint of anything between the two."

Glal offered the Tellarite variant of a shrug. "Two young people, presumably attractive by human standards, add some alcohol and the erosion of inhibitions..."

"Oh, yes," Bennett agreed before taking a sip from his cup of coffee. "I too was young once."

The two looked around just as Trujillo, Jarrod, and the venue director returned. All three were smiling.

"It's a lock," Jarrod said. "We have our location."

The others gave a subdued cheer, courtesy of the previous night's festivities.

Chapter 2

Commander Jadaetti Davula ran her hand down the front of her uniform blouse, searching for wrinkles, loose threads, or anything else that shouldn't be present.

She checked her reflection in the mirror, noting the crisp lines of the newly produced and exquisitely tailored uniform. Davula had just graduated from Starfleet's rigorous Advanced Tactical School, a six-month program that had taught her more about combat strategy and tactics than she had learned in the first sixteen years of her career.

It was, she believed, the perfect accompaniment to her other professional achievements. Davula had already earned the titles of scientist, explorer, diplomat, survivor and that of full commander, Starfleet. Now her sights were set on the executive officer's position aboard the starship *Reykjavik*.

She found her reflection tolerable, noting that the Command White turtleneck undershirt did not accentuate her cobalt Bolian skin as well as Sciences Blue had. A cartilaginous bifurcated ridge bisected her body down the midline, dividing her bald head and all the rest the uniform concealed. Born to the Eastern continent of Bolarus IX, her head lacked the darker horizontal striping associated with those of her species from the westernmost landmass.

She suppressed her nervousness, telling herself this was just one opportunity of many available to her. She was a woman accustomed to challenges, and however today played out, it would not define her.

Davula stepped out of the starbase guest accommodations and made her way towards the docks.

* * *

Rachel Garrett came to attention in front of Commodore Trujillo's ready room desk. "Reporting as ordered, sir."

Trujillo offered the younger woman a warm smile, gesturing to the chair facing the desk. "At ease, Ensign. Please, have a seat."

"I've asked you here to discuss... something rather awkward, I'm afraid," Trujillo hedged.

Garrett fought to maintain her composure; her worst fears realized. "Sir, if I can just explain..."

Trujillo appeared nonplussed, but acquiesced, making a vague 'go on' gesture as she sat back in her chair. "By all means, Mister Garrett."

"I take full responsibility for my actions, sir. I allowed myself to drink too much, and although our... liaison... was completely consensual on both our parts, I regret the lack of discipline I demonstrated."

Trujillo nodded slowly. "I appreciate that. Now, can you please explain what you're referencing?"

Garrett blinked. "The party. Farouk and I... afterward."

"You and Lieutenant Naifeh engaged in extracurricular activities following the party?" Trujillo arched an eyebrow. "Well, while that's all terribly interesting, it isn't why I asked you up here."

"It's... not?" Garrett couldn't control the rush of blood to her face. She raised a slightly trembling hand to cover her eyes. "Dear God."

Now it was Trujillo's turn to struggle for composure. She had the most outrageous impulse to burst out laughing, like one might do with a similar admission from a close friend.

"Rachel, whatever happened between you and Farouk, that's entirely your business. You're both adults. I'm clearly in no position to lecture you or anyone else on the hazards of engaging in relationships with your fellow officers."

Garrett dropped her hand, nodding feebly. "I'm sorry, sir... I'd just assumed..."

"Yes, clearly," Trujillo allowed with a chuckle. "I actually called you here because, as you're aware, Captain Sulu will be attending the wedding. Now, what you may not know is that once upon a time, the good captain allowed me to steal away her second officer, a rather colorful Tellarite of our mutual acquaintance. When this happened, Captain Sulu made it very clear that at some future point, I would be expected to return the favor."

Garrett nodded fractionally, following along.

Trujillo held up a hand. "Now, before I go further, I want to make perfectly clear that nothing will happen without your express permission, Ensign."

"Sir?"

"When you confronted me about having stolen you away from Captain Erlichman, I told you that I'd make it up to you by assuring sure you got a plumb assignment moving forward. *Yorktown* is about to undertake a five-year deep space exploration mission, and Captain Sulu has just lost her chief science officer to a Daystrom fellowship. She is very interested in you, Ensign."

"Me, sir?" Garrett's eyes widened. "In what capacity, sir?"

"Chief science officer, of course," Trujillo replied. "It would come with a promotion to lieutenant, junior grade."

"I—" Garrett paused, looking torn. "I agreed to serve here for two years, sir. It's barely been a year."

Trujillo nodded. "I'm aware, and I'm fully prepared to amend our standing agreement."

Garrett looked inexplicably discomfited. "Sir, we've just lost our chief operations officer in the line of duty. Now we're losing our XO and chief of security at the same time. That's an enormous turnover in just a few weeks. I can't leave you in the lurch and compound the problem."

"I very much appreciate your loyalty, Rachel, but that's my problem, not yours. Point of fact, I assembled our entire senior staff when I took command five years ago, and this time I'd only be replacing half. I certainly don't want to lose you, but opportunities like this don't come along very often."

Garrett inclined her head. "I will give the offer every consideration, sir. How long until Captain Sulu requires an answer?"

"Day after the wedding, so two days from now."

Garrett stood. "Whatever I decide, sir, I'm grateful for the opportunity."

Trujillo stood as well. "One more thing, Rachel."

"Sir?"

"I need... a maid of honor."

Garrett was surprised. "I just assumed Captain Sulu..."

"The captain will be performing the ceremony, actually."

A broad smile erupted on Garrett's face. "Then it would be my honor, sir."

"This is a personal favor, Rachel, so when we're off duty, you can call me Nandi."

"Yes, sir. Nandi, sir."

Trujillo sighed, prompting a laugh from Garrett.

* * *

Shortly after Garrett's departure, the annunciator chimed, and Trujillo granted admittance to Lieutenant Shukla and an officer the commodore had never met in person.

Shukla made the introductions. "Commodore Nandi Trujillo, Commander Jadaetti Davula."

Trujillo stood and the women shook hands. "A pleasure, Commander." She nodded to Shukla. "Thank you, Lieutenant."

The tall Sikh took his leave and Trujillo invited Davula to take a seat.

Trujillo moved to the food replicator slot set into one bulkhead. "Something to drink, Commander?"

"Yes, thank you, sir. Acamarian tea, if you have it."

Trujillo input the drink orders, the device humming quietly. Trujillo gestured to her desktop computer interface. "I see you just completed ATS," Trujillo noted. "How did you find Kuala Lumpur?"

"Beautiful city," Davula replied, "not that I had very much time to explore Indonesia while I was there."

"Advanced Tactical School is a demanding program," Trujillo admitted. "You graduated with high marks, however."

Davula inclined her head in acknowledgement of the compliment.

"You found the coursework challenging?"

"I found it... tame, to be perfectly honest, sir," Davula appeared uncomfortable with the admission.

Trujillo retrieved two steaming cups from the replicator and turned back, a slight smile creasing her features. "Based on your service jacket I can believe it."

Trujillo handed Davula her cup of tea and took a seat with her coffee.

"I see that you attended ATS after a six-month sabbatical. I trust you've recovered from your last assignment?"

"Yes, sir," Davula confirmed. "I went home to Bolarus after returning from the Omega Centauri expedition. I spent some time deciding if I wanted to return to Starfleet service, and in what capacity."

Trujillo nodded. "After perusing your service record, I became curious and started to read *Yichang's* mission logs last night. I found I couldn't put it down. Kept me up half the night... harrowing stuff. That was quite the eventful expedition."

"You have a gift for understatement, Commodore. I started the mission as a junior science officer and returned as the XO." Davula paused, sipping her tea. "Captain Sanjrani's working on his memoirs now. He wanted to call it *A Series of Unfortunate Events*, but apparently that title was taken by a Terran author back in your 20th century."

Trujillo picked up her data-slate, skimming the contents. "What was supposed to have been a five-year mission lasted eight years, spanning nearly fifteen-thousand light years. Your crew made a full dozen First Contacts, three of whom proved wildly hostile, and your ship incurred seventy-two fatalities. In the course of that mission, you completed your command school training remotely during off-shift hours over a period of three years. You achieved that while serving as the ship's second officer and chief science officer, later promoted to first officer after your exec was killed. Following that mission, you received promotion to full commander and were awarded several medals and citations."

Davula stared off into the middle distance for a moment, her tea forgotten. "We limped in to dock at Deep Space 5, and the Corps of Engineers decided to decommission *Yichang* about thirty-minutes into their damage inspection. They couldn't believe we got her back to Federation space, given the extent of the damage and the space-frame fatigue."

"Your former chief engineer is to be congratulated," Trujillo offered with genuine admiration.

"She received the Montgomery Scott citation for her miraculous performance, but it was also a team effort," Davula replied. "Most of us spent our fair share of time in EVA gear welding patches on the hull."

"Sounds like you had a tight-knit crew," Trujillo observed.

"We did, indeed, sir. However, a lot of them mustered out of the service following that mission, both officers and enlisted. I'm one of only a dozen surviving officers who's remained in uniform."

Trujillo took a guarded sip of her coffee, studying Davula over the rim of the cup. "What are your career ambitions, Commander?"

"A captaincy in the next few years, sir. I've spent the majority of my career on research installations and exploratory vessels, and *Reykjavik* would be a chance to serve aboard a defense ship."

"Warship," Trujillo corrected. "Though Command gets anxious when I say that it has the benefit of being the truth."

Davula raised her cup, as if in salute. "Warship," she repeated. "So noted, sir."

Trujillo gestured offhandedly to the data-slate on the desktop. "I don't have to ask if you've been in battle before, and saying your references are impeccable would be a disservice."

The Bolian woman met Trujillo's gaze impassively, saying nothing.

"I've concluded my interviews for the position. This was it. There were no other candidates that came close, Commander. The position is yours if you want it."

"I do, sir. Very much."

Trujillo stood, prompting Davula to do the same, setting her cup aside.
The commodore extended her hand. "Welcome aboard, Commander Davula."

Chapter 3

“Come,” Glal called out as he stuffed another few pairs of seldom worn civilian clothing into a crate.

Trujillo entered, appearing bemused as she sidestepped around and over various packing crates, boxes, and assorted piles that now cluttered Glal’s typically spotless cabin.

“Do you want me to send you some help with this?” she asked. “I’ve got a gaggle of ensigns with very little to do during this layover. They’d love a break from the tactical simulations I’ve been running them through.”

“Feh,” Glal huffed, “not a chance. I don’t want a bunch of snot-nosed greenhorns pawing through my personal things.”

“You realize that compared to you, everyone’s a snot-nosed greenhorn, right?” Trujillo noted playfully.

Glal held up a *z’kual* blouse, a traditional vestment for Tellarite ceremonies, scowled at it, balled it up and stuffed it haphazardly into a bin. “That becomes increasingly obvious by the day,” he replied, perhaps a bit more somberly than he’d intended.

Trujillo perused some of Glal’s tchotchkes, souvenirs from over four decades of service, representing a host of different worlds, diverse assignments, and alien aesthetics. She picked up a Benzite memory stone, examining the self-illuminating heart of the crystalline bauble.

“I don’t believe I’ve ever seen this one,” she remarked.

“What’s that?” he asked distractedly, dumping an entire drawer of trousers into a crate before glancing over. “Ahh, that. That’s a little keepsake from Sonmel. I’d stuffed it into a drawer, and only came across it this week as I was packing up.”

“She’s your ex-wife, the Vulcan?” Trujillo asked.

“No, actually. Sonmel was my first wife, the Deltan. She died aboard the *Oriskany* at Janankor, a victim of Romulan intrigues and Captain Voluk’s bad timing.”

Trujillo winced, putting the memory-stone back. “Right... the precursor to Tomed. We actually gamed out that scenario at command school. What a mess.”

Glal grunted noncommittally, now busying himself wrapping others of his mementos in dura-foam cylinders before packing them into a handled carryall.

Overcome by a sudden wave of emotion, Trujillo blurted, “I’m going to miss you, you know.”

Glal stopped what he was doing and turned towards her. Trujillo noticed for the first time since entering that although he wore his uniform vest over his white turtleneck undershirt, he’d removed his rank insignia.

“I know,” he replied simply. “I’m going to miss you too, Nandi.”

She continued, spilling out what was in her heart without having meant to do so. “You’ve been my right hand for almost five years, and you helped me assemble the greatest team I’ve been a part of in my career. Losing you hurts as badly as losing DeSilva, though at least I have the relief of knowing that you’re alive and safe elsewhere.”

Trujillo realized with shock that there were tears streaming down her cheeks. “Oh, good grief you crusty old bastard, now I’m crying!”

Glal laughed, that deep rumbling sound that Trujillo secretly cherished. He moved towards her and engulfed her in a tight hug, the first one the two had ever shared. It felt as natural as anything.

“You’ve grown so much,” he said finally, breaking the embrace and drawing back to look up at her. “The woman who recruited me as her XO all those years ago could never have been this vulnerable, even if she’d wanted to. You’ve opened yourself up. You let Gael Jarrod in, and tomorrow he’s going to become your husband. This may sound strange coming from a subordinate, but I’m damned proud of you.”

Trujillo wiped at her eyes. “Strange, yes, but welcome.” She released a long sigh, the expulsion of much pent-up emotion. “I have a final favor to ask of you.”

“Anything, Nandi. You know that.”

“There is an old Earth tradition, seldom followed any longer due to its blatant patriarchal overtones. Historically, the bride’s father used to escort her down the aisle to where the officiant and groom awaited, essentially handing her over to her new husband like an exchange of chattel.”

Glal nodded, “I’ve seen that a time or two. It’s strange. Tellarite females would either kill someone outright for such an affront or give them such a dressing down that they’d beg for death, family or no.”

Trujillo grinned at that. “Despite the cultural incongruities, this tradition is sometimes still observed, but more as a role of honor for the person escorting the bride. Seeing as my father is a hundred light-years away, I was very much hoping you would do me the privilege of walking me down the aisle.”

Now it was Glal’s turn to be touched, his crusty old Tellarite heart be damned.

“It would be my honor to do so,” he said in a voice thick with emotion.

* * *

“By the power vested in me by Starfleet and the Federation Charter, I hereby pronounce you husband and wife,” Demora Sulu announced to the assembled guests.

Nandi and Gael, clad in their dress uniforms, shared a brief kiss and then turned towards the audience who rose to their feet as one and applauded.

“May I present to you, Commodore Nandi Trujillo and Lieutenant Commander Gael Jarrod, now bound in union in the presence of family, friends, and comrades.” Sulu cleared her throat dramatically before announcing, “First round’s on me!”

* * *

The party lasted into the wee hours of the morning, with much celebrating by a great many.

Naifeh had managed to drag a reluctant Garrett onto the dance floor, and she found herself having a good time, despite her misgivings.

After nearly an hour's worth of dancing to Terran, Alpha-Centauran, Bolian, Andorian and assorted other eclectic musical choices, the pair staggered to a table and sat heavily.

"It's nice to see you smile," Naifeh said, asking for two glasses and a carafe of water from a passing waiter.

Garrett immediately became self-conscious, the goofy grin she'd been wearing vanishing.

Naifeh sighed. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to kill the moment. You've been... very subdued since the party."

"It was inappropriate," she murmured.

"It was mutual and consensual," Naifeh countered, "and utterly fantastic."

Naifeh squatted down to eye level with the seated Garrett. "What I wish to convey is that if you had any interest in it being more, I would be similarly inclined." He stood, miming a backing-away gesture. "If that was all it's ever going to be, we can pretend it never happened."

"Can we?" she retorted, her irritation bleeding through.

"I can, and I certainly don't want to be the reason you jump ship if this is where you'd want to be otherwise," he offered with utter sincerity. "Now, if *Yorktown* is your dream posting, I also wouldn't want to be the reason you stayed, either."

She looked at him askance. "That's a bit presumptive, don't you think?"

"Only you can answer that," he replied simply. "Rachel, I've been interested in you since the day you came aboard, but until that night I'd never acted on it. Aside from our encounter at the party, have I ever given you any other indications? Any pressure, any advances?"

"No," she allowed.

"And I won't from here on out unless that interest is reciprocated. Beyond that, I'm fully able to maintain our previous professional relationship."

Garrett nodded slowly. "I'll take that into consideration," she allowed.

Naifeh inclined his head and moved off into the crowd.

* * *

Trujillo had just returned to the bar from the dance floor, taking a seat next to Glal. She was perspiring from the exertion despite her earlier protests that she could not and would not dance.

Jarrold had put paid to that bald falsehood.

Drink in hand, Glal leaned in to whisper conspiratorially to her. "You did well with your XO selection, for the record."

Trujillo downed a nearby glass of water, dabbing at her face with a napkin. She turned to him, glowing with a happiness he had never seen displayed so openly. "I'm glad you think so."

"She's a quick study," Glal said. "I've just about got Davula up to speed in only two days, and despite the sciences background, the woman has ice in her veins."

Trujillo quirked an eyebrow. "She did that well in the tactical simulations?"

"Indeed, she did. She knows when to pull the trigger, and more importantly, when not to."

"Partial credit to ATS," Trujillo remarked. "The advanced tactical curriculum really drives that home."

"Speaking of that demanding program, rumor has it your blushing groom happened to stumble upon a rare open spot in the upcoming class," Glal noted with a smirk.

Trujillo held up her hands. "I had *nothing* to do with it. I'd tried to smooth the way for him to slide into *Zelensky's* open XO's billet under Commander Withropp, but the ATS spot materialized out of the blue. Besides, he's made it clear he doesn't want any help from me in that regard."

"Good man, he'll make it on his own merits..." Glal apprised, then more quietly, "and on others' recommendations."

Trujillo had started in on a second glass of water when her synapses finally caught up. She set the glass down, looking to Glal with an expression of suspicion mixed with gratitude. "That was you?"

"Among others," Glal allowed. "Coordinating it was my final act as a command officer. I've got some old friends in Tactical Command, and with Jarrod's sterling service record it wasn't a hard sell." He finished his Denobulan cider in a single draught, nudging Trujillo with his elbow. "Besides, he'll be safe in classrooms, simulators, and on the practice mats for the next six months. You won't have to worry about him."

A hand flew to Trujillo's mouth at the same time as her eyes grew glassy. She blinked away tears, muttering, "You son-of-a-bitch, you've done it again." She wasn't sure if her present fragility was due to the heightened emotions of the occasion, her exhaustion, the alcohol, or a mix of all three.

Glal snorted good-naturedly, waving his empty glass at Jarrod as the younger man approached.

"What's going on here?" Jarrod asked suspiciously.

"Just me making your wife cry," Glal said in a low voice, his tusks quivering with humor.

Jarrod looked to Trujillo, confused and slightly concerned. "Nandi?"

She stood, touching her forehead to her husband's shoulder and used his dress uniform to dry her tears under the guise of an intimate embrace. Trujillo peaked out and glared at Glal. "I hate you," she hissed.

"No, you don't," he laughed again.

Trujillo looked into Jarrod's face. "This isn't me; I don't do this."

"What, feelings?" Jarrod scoffed, smoothing her hair down with one hand as one might with a small child. "Shush, I promise not to tell the Klingons."

Jarrod grunted, doubling over only slightly as a shudder passed through him. He remained standing courtesy of Trujillo.

Glal nodded approvingly, patting Jarrod on the shoulder. "You should have seen that coming. Be thankful that she pulled that, the femoral nerve is a harsh mistress." He looked to Trujillo. "On Tellar Prime it's considered bad form to incapacitate your mate on your

wedding night... well, at least in *that* fashion." Glal gave Jarrod a parting nod. "They'll teach you how to defend against that move at ATS."

With that, Glal wandered off to find himself another drink.

"Ha—had... that coming," Jarrod wheezed after a moment, then emitted something between a laugh and a moan.

Trujillo shushed him gently.

* * *

There weren't many people in full uniform at the event, but there were enough that when their combadges all alerted in unison it served as notice to the others. Groups began moving to and congregating at visual monitors throughout the venue.

A yellow-alert tell-tale flashed on screen, followed by the words, *'This is a Priority-1 readiness alert. Command is issuing notice of a presumptive Federation border incursion in Sector O2381, proximate to the Tholian Assembly. All personnel are recalled to active duty from leave or pass and will proceed to their assigned posts to receive further updates and orders.'*

Glal found himself standing next to Trujillo out of force of habit and was jolted back to reality when the commodore tapped her combadge.

"Trujillo to Commander Davula."

"Go ahead, sir."

"Please sound the recall for anyone who might not have received the all-call broadcast. Ready us for departure, prioritizing finalizing repairs, crew transfers and the unloading of tactical ordinance. I'll be heading topside to confer with Admiral Saavik. Have anyone reporting aboard from the wedding ceremony stop by Sickbay for a sobriety-booster before taking their duty stations. You have the conn until my return."

"Aye, sir. Consider it done."

Trujillo turned to Glal. "Looks like I'll be putting the new XO through her paces." She shook his hand firmly. "Goodbye, my friend. Until the next time I make planetfall on Tellar Prime."

"Good fortune to you, Commodore," Glal responded, looking somehow smaller and more awkward in his dressy civilian attire.

They had already said their most heartfelt farewells and now the clock was ticking as duty called.

She turned and disappeared into the quickly dispersing crowd as Glal looked on.

Chapter 4

The 'Triple-C' or Command Conference Center was situated in Starbase 443's sprawling Operations Hub, and *Reykjavik's* entire engine room could have fit within it. A giant circular conference table inlaid with the Starfleet delta held chairs for thirty humanoids. The table was ringed by workstations facing inward, supporting communications, intelligence, logistics, operations, and a host of other functions vital to coordination and defense.

The domed ceiling arched high overhead; a conspicuous waste of space meant to convey the august nature of the work that went on here. Dozens of viewscreens lined the circular compartment, the smallest of which dwarfed the one found on Trujillo's bridge.

A medic stood at the entryway, and Trujillo paused just long enough to receive an injection of acetazine to neutralize the alcohol still coursing through her veins after the spirited wedding reception. Trujillo felt oddly out of place clad in her dress uniform, resplendent with her medals and campaign ribbons, and kept fidgeting with the new wedding band on her left hand.

A lieutenant ushered her to a seat at the table, which was quickly filling with command-level officers belonging both to the starbase itself, as well as to the sundry ships presently berthed within.

Demora Sulu approached, leaning in from behind to grasp Trujillo by the shoulders and whispering, "Well, it wouldn't be your wedding if it didn't spark a shooting war, would it?" She grinned and slid into the chair next to Nandi.

Sulu fixed her gaze on the compartment's largest and most prominent viewscreen, which currently displayed real-time strategic information from the sector in question. A swarm of icons, presumably representing Tholian vessels, were pouring across the border. Scant few starships, represented by delta arrowheads, stood ready to oppose them.

Her mischievous smile from a moment before evaporated. "Those poor souls are going to buy time for us with their lives," Sulu noted grimly.

Captain Th'thaorhok, a lean Andorian with a receding hairline sitting a few seats down from them, shook his head in bewilderment. "This makes no sense; it isn't time. You could set an atomic clock by their expansionist phases. Last time they came boiling out of their territory, I was a lieutenant aboard the *Victory*. The Assembly shouldn't be doing this for another decade." His antennae twitched in obvious vexation.

"It is... atypical, a pronounced deviation from their established pattern," agreed Lt. Commander Sahvor, the Vulcan skipper of the scout, *Niels Bohr*. He was within earshot of the conversation from further around the circumference of the massive table thanks to his acute hearing.

"Sirs," said Lt. Commander Withropp of the *Zelenskyy*, as he took the seat on the other side of Sulu. He glanced up at the live feed on the display, frowning. "They picked the perfect time to do this. Practically the entire fleet is on the Klingon border right now."

Sulu reached out to toggle the LCARS interface set into the tabletop in front of her, highlighting one of the Starfleet icons nearest the border incursion. She enlarged and enhanced the image on another screen below the primary viewer, calling up the ship's registry. "Damn," she said with a mordant sigh. "That's Lucas Kelley out there on the *Stalwart*."

Trujillo glanced over at Sulu, still toying with the unfamiliar sensation of the ring on her finger. "Your former exec? Isn't he on an *Oberth*?"

Sulu nodded fractionally. "Yes. Try and guess how long he'll last against the Tholians in *that*."

Trujillo reached out a hand to grasp Sulu's forearm, giving it a little squeeze. "I'm sorry, Demora."

"Gentle-beings," a voice announced over the PA, "Admiral Saavik."

The officers stood in unison as Saavik strode into the room, followed by a gaggle of adjutants and support personnel who fanned out to man several of the consoles ringing the outer bulkheads. Saavik moved to a lectern set into the conference table immediately below the primary viewscreen and the assembled officers returned to their seats.

"At twenty-two nineteen hours zulu-time, sensor buoys along our border with the Tholian Assembly detected no fewer than sixty-three of their vessels of various classes approaching Federation space. They crossed the border at high warp, and our automated defense outposts were only able to destroy or cripple a few of their ships before they were overwhelmed.

"With a significant number of our available ships posted to the Klingon border at present due to the recent crisis, we will be hard pressed to meet this incursion with sufficient force to blunt it immediately. This will likely devolve into an attritional battle, with Starfleet establishing successive defensive lines and engaging in a fighting retreat to try and safeguard our colonies and outposts in that sector.

"We are scrambling all available ships to converge on that area, and we're presently forming Task Force Alamo *in situ* to try and slow the Tholian's advance."

Several humans around the table winced or shifted uncomfortably at the designation Saavik had selected for the grouping of unfortunate ships which would be thrown into the path of the oncoming threat formation. It was a suicide mission, and Saavik had named it such.

The admiral inclined her head in Trujillo's direction. "Commodore, you will be leading Task Force Gauntlet, comprised of all vessels currently docked in and around 443, and every ship we can arrange to rendezvous with you *en route*."

"Yes, sir," Trujillo answered, having already called up a list of the available ships. She split her attention between Saavik's briefing and assessing each ship's readiness for departure.

"Task Force Gauntlet will attempt to flank the Tholian formation while coordinating with any survivors from Task Force Alamo. If that goal is not feasible upon your arrival, your secondary mission will be to triage defense of the effected sectors, safeguarding those outpost and planets that you can, while bypassing those whose defense would be ineffective or prohibitively costly in ships and personnel." Sulu and Withropp were already

busy taking notes for Trujillo, who had paused in her ship-status assessments to look up at Saavik with a curious expression.

“Apologies, Admiral, but I have a question.”

“Proceed.”

“You mentioned that a number of Tholian ships were damaged or neutralized by one of our border outposts.”

“That is correct,” Saavik affirmed.

“Unless I’m mistaken, sir, our armed outposts in that region are few and far between. Oh, we have sensor buoys aplenty, but not many weapons platforms. The Tholians could easily have avoided all of those weapons-capable stations, yet they chose to cross into Federation space within the weapons envelope of an armed outpost. Why?”

“We don’t know,” Saavik replied. “They appear to have engaged in a number of inexplicable actions thus far that don’t conform to their established patterns, but our analysis of their behavior hasn’t resulted in any satisfactory answers as yet.”

Trujillo nodded. “Understood, sir.” She called up her list of available ships, cross-referenced with the sector’s personnel database. “We have a number of craft in drydock in need of crews and command officers which would otherwise be available to us. I’d like permission to sidestep the usual personnel channels and have the other task force ships and the starbase contribute qualified staff to fill those vacancies.”

“Granted,” Saavik said succinctly. She called upon her Vulcan half and offered a raised eyebrow. “Any objections if I continue, Commodore?”

Trujillo answered with a thin-lipped smile. “None, sir.”

Saavik completed the briefing with the requisite strategic, tactical, and logistics preparations currently underway.

“I know that you all have much to do in the next two hours. Task Force Gauntlet will depart in two and a half hours with every vessel we can muster. I will be available for further consultation. You may contact my adjutant to arrange a meeting in person or via comms. This briefing is concluded, and you are dismissed.”

Some of the command officers departed immediately to ready their ships, while others conferred with each other over various preparations.

Trujillo turned the Triple-C into a command-and-control node, a function for which it had been designed.

Sulu, Th’taorhok and Withropp assisted with coordinating the task force’s command hierarchy and departure logistics as Trujillo busied herself selecting available personnel to fill the many gaps in several ships’ command crews.

Activating comms via the LCARS interface at her seat, she put a call through via the station’s civilian communication net.

A surprised voice answered, “*Go ahead?*”

“It’s Nandi. I need you back. Congratulations, your retirement lasted less than thirty-six hours. I am employing the reserve activation clause to return you to service. Brevet promotion to full commander and I’m giving you the frigate *Gol* with Jarrod as your XO.”

There was a noticeable delay before Glal replied, “*What’s the magic word?*”

“Order?” Trujillo growled, “As in this-is-an-order?”

Glal cleared his throat noisily, something Tellarites excelled at. “*You know, a nice, relaxing stint in the brig does sound appealing about now.*”

Sulu had to turn away, her shoulders shaking with silent laughter at Trujillo’s predicament.

Trujillo sighed. “Please,” she finally offered, albeit reluctantly.

“*In that case, I accept your reactivation, promotion, and command of the aforementioned starship.*”

“Grand,” Trujillo exclaimed, severing the channel. She turned to Sulu and Th’taorhok. “With personnel from the other ships and others seconded by the starbase, we can get underway with thirteen ships, picking up another three on the way.”

Th’taorhok’s antennae curled in a gesture that accentuated his frown. “Sixteen ships. That’s not much of a fleet to fight an invasion with.”

“No, no it’s not. But then, no one ever said doing our duty would be easy.”

* * *

Task Force Gauntlet

USS *Reykjavik* – *Shangri-La*-class attack cruiser – Commodore Nandi Trujillo

USS *Yorktown* – *Excelsior*-class heavy cruiser – Captain Demora Sulu

USS *Yi Sun-Sin* – *Excelsior*-class heavy cruiser – Captain Adilah Idrissi

USS *Shras* – *Andor*-class missile cruiser – Captain Oshath Th’taorhok

USS *Orion* – *Constellation*-class cruiser – Captain Everett Wong

USS *Zelensky* – *Miranda*-class light cruiser – Lt. Commander Eldred Withropp

USS *Vancouver* – *Loknar*-class frigate – Captain Stanek

USS *Gol* – *Akayazi*-class frigate – Commander Glal

USS *Churchill* – *Chandley*-class frigate – Commander Kaikoura Agarwal

USS *Perseus* – *Wasp*-class frigate – Lt. Commander Ulit Toom

USS *Robau* – *Abbe*-class missile destroyer – Captain Ian Griffiths

USS *Honolulu* – *Centaur*-class destroyer – Captain Shen Quan

USS *Senator* – *Akula*-class destroyer – Captain T’sai

USS *Itoman* – *Okinawa*-class scout – Lt. Commander Erasmus Boone

USS *Niels Bohr* – *Laevatein*-class scout – Lt. Commander Sahvor

USS *Basford* – *Oberth*-class scout – Lt. Commander Drex Miller

Chapter 5

Task Force Alamo

USS *Excalibur* – *Excelsior*-class heavy cruiser – Captain Alexander Marshall

USS *Relentless* – *Tempest*-subclass (*Miranda*) torpedo cruiser – Captain Chuul

USS *Ahwahnee* – *Constitution*-class cruiser – Captain Talra Zha'Thaal.

USS *Shackleford* – *Avery*-class frigate – Captain Millicent Chang

USS *Proxima* – *Al Salemi*-class frigate – Commander Ta'anva Uresh

USS *Yucatan* – *Larson*-class destroyer – Lt. Commander Chiyo Watanabe

USS *Stalwart* – *Oberth*-class scout – Commander Lucas Kelley

* * *

Captain Alexander Marshall stepped out of his ready room onto the bridge of the starship *Excalibur*, his expression a stolid mask in the face of Admiral Saavik's disturbing news.

He was a large man, standing six foot, two inches, and if the captain's rank insignia on his uniform hadn't commanded instant respect, his bearing would have. He possessed piercing green eyes, thick brown hair, and an athletic build that he was proud to have maintained well into his forties.

His Caitian executive officer, Commander Tristienne D'Vorr, emitted a quiet growl in recognition of her captain's poker face. She rose to vacate the command chair, her mane of feline hair, so like that of a Terran lion, flowing out and away from her face.

"Sir?" she hazarded.

He leaned in, speaking for her ears only. "We've been selected to lead the task force to head off the Tholian incursion."

Her growl grew louder, this time more predatory than alarmed. "Isn't that a good thing, sir?"

He shook his head fractionally, glancing around to assure their relative privacy. "Seven ships, and *Excalibur's* the largest. This isn't a counter-offensive, it's a suicide mission. Saavik gave us the code name of Alamo, a tragic last-stand defense from Earth's 19th century."

D'Vorr's whiskers bristled. "Understood, sir. We will all do our duty."

"That was never in question," he replied heavily. "However, I have no intention of throwing all of our lives away needlessly. There has to be a way to slow the Tholians down without killing ourselves in the process. It's up to us to find it."

He handed D'Vorr an iso-chip he'd been clutching in his hand. "I need you to make notifications to the COs of these six ships. Have them rendezvous with us at the coordinates I've selected. I need this done quickly and discretely, then join me in my ready room so we can confer with the other ships on route to our assembly point."

She palmed the chip, offering a slow blink, the Caitian variant of a nod. "When do we inform the crew, sir?"

"Soon," Marshall said, before turning on his heel and returning to his ready room.

* * *

USS Reykjavik

Commander Davula entered the ship's windowless briefing lounge, located behind the bridge under the same ablative armored blister that protected the command center. The briefing room was being utilized as a C-&-C for the task force, with portable workstations having been set up around the perimeter of the conference table.

The XO held up a data-slate, her expression one of curiosity tinged with concern. "Update from the Diplomatic Corps, Commodore. It appears the Tholian ambassador to the Federation is unable to explain what's happening along our mutual border. The D.C. says it's the closest they've ever seen to a Tholian completely losing it. It appears the Tholian delegation is having difficulty even making contact with their government, and what they're getting back apparently doesn't make much sense."

Trujillo took the slate from her, adding it to the growing collection of similar devices arrayed before her on the tabletop.

"That jibes with the lack of strategy we're seeing from them so far," Trujillo observed. "No feints, no attacking secondary targets, just a straight run in towards the Longlax-Teko system."

"What's there?" Garrett wondered aloud.

"Not much," Shukla answered. "One Terran colony established in 2167 by some of our first warp-capable colony ships that left Earth in 2146. They tried to make a go of it on a marginal Class-L planet, but eventually had to be evacuated by the 2180's. There's an automated lithium cracking station on the fourth planet that was also abandoned in the 2290's after we switched over to isolinear circuitry."

"Longlax-Teko isn't the problem," a gruff voice issued from the end of the table opposite Trujillo.

Lieutenant Titus Helvia, a great brute of a man, had come aboard just an hour before departure, the commodore's selection for their new chief security/tactical officer. A native of 892-IV, he had been raised on a world unaccountably similar to Earth, a fact that still defied explanation from the finest Federation minds some fifty years after its discovery.

It was a planet upon which the Roman Empire had never fallen and had instead gone on to conquer the globe. Helvia's family had fled Magna Roma, as it was known to its population, victims of one of the planet's endemic political power struggles. A refugee in the Federation, his file indicated that Helvia had joined Starfleet as an honorable avenue by which to repay the rescue of his family from their pursuers.

He stood six foot four inches with a muscular build that seemed to threaten the seams of his uniform tunic. Sandy blonde hair, cut so short as to constitute mere stubble, only served to accentuate the ferociousness contained in his deeply set blue-grey eyes and

his pronounced jawline. Helvia was the end result of countless generations of patrilineal eugenics in the upper echelons of Magna Romanii culture, sorting for traits of intelligence, guile, and physical prowess.

Just below his Starfleet combadge on the left breast of his uniform tunic was a religious emblem that had received special dispensation from command. Three joined gold links of chain, the symbol of the Children of the Son, were displayed prominently.

Helvia called a computer image to life on the compartment's main viewer, showing the projected course of the Tholian fleet nearly intersecting with another star system on its way to the Longlax-Teko system.

He continued in his gravelly voice, "Draius Prime and Draius Secundus are populated planets in the Draius-Arigulon star system. Both worlds are warp-capable, and the Draians have begun exploring the possibility of Federation membership. The combined population of both planets is eight-point-seven billion. The Tholian fleet will come dangerously close to that system on its approach to Longlax-Teko."

Davula directed an appraising expression towards Trujillo. "Is Task Force Alamo going to intercede in defense of the system, sir?"

"Unknown," Trujillo replied. "I haven't spoken with Alamo-Actual as yet."

"Who *is* leading that task force, sir?" Shukla asked.

"Alex Marshall of the *Excalibur*," Trujillo replied. "He was our XO on the *Athena* at Tomed. Got us safely through that shit-show after Captain Urum was killed. He came away with a medal and a promotion."

"So, he's good in a fight?" inquired Davula.

"None better," Trujillo confirmed. "If anyone can slow down the Tholians with a handful of ships, it would be him."

"Given the number and type of ships under his command, sir, it would seem a head-on assault is out of the question," Helvia postulated.

"Inadvisable, yes. Impossible, no," Trujillo countered. "There are possibilities for ambush or flanking maneuvers, dependent upon whether the Tholians slow to sub-light at or near either of those systems."

Garrett raised a hand, still not completely comfortable with speaking up without acknowledgement after a year aboard.

Trujillo smiled despite the circumstances. "Yes, Ensign?"

"Sir, has Starfleet done a comprehensive assessment of the Longlax-Teko system since all this kicked off? There has to be something they're after, something that might not automatically occur to humanoid sensibilities. The Tholians are so vastly different from us, not only physically but mentally and culturally, that the answer could be right out in the open. Perhaps we've just missed the obvious?"

The commodore inclined her head in Garrett's direction. "I can think of no one better qualified to make such an assessment, Lieutenant."

Garrett blinked. "Sir?"

Trujillo looked to Davula, as if on cue. "Commander, I don't believe Starfleet would be inclined to take the word of a mere ensign, should she make an important discovery in this endeavor. Don't you agree?"

“Oh, absolutely, sir,” Davula acknowledged with a smirk.

“Let’s do something about that, shall we?” Trujillo prompted.

Davula stepped forward, presenting a small case that everyone in the room instantly recognized, aside from Garrett.

“Ensign Rachel Garrett, step forward and be recognized,” Trujillo said, rising to her feet.

The rest of those seated followed her to their feet as Garrett stepped up to her, still looking somewhat dazed.

“I have determined that whether or not you choose to pursue a post on the *Yorktown*, by virtue of your bravery, tenacity, and professionalism, you’ve more than earned a promotion.” Trujillo opened the case, producing the new rank insignia. “By order of Starfleet Command, you are hereby promoted to the rank of lieutenant, junior grade, with all the rights and privileges thereto. Congratulations.”

There was a round of applause and Davula and Trujillo busied themselves replacing Garrett’s ensign chevrons with her new lieutenant’s insignia on her shoulder clasp and left forearm. There were handshakes all around before Trujillo announced, “Alright, people, back to work. We have a potential battle to plan for.”

* * *

USS Excalibur

Alexander Marshall inclined his head towards his superior who was still light-years away, though heading in his direction with all due haste.

A decade earlier aboard the *Athena* when Marshall had been the ship’s executive officer, Nandi Trujillo had been a bright but headstrong security/tactical officer, one that he’d had to snap into line on more than one occasion. He had never had cause to doubt her abilities in a fight, but she had often sought battle when other, more diplomatic possibilities were present.

Now by some weird twist of fate, she was his superior. Last he’d heard, Trujillo had run afoul of Command by bucking orders during a recent confrontation with the Cardassians. Now, suddenly, she was Starfleet’s golden child after facing down the Klingons in their home system and garnering a promotion in the process. Marshall smelled political patronage all over Trujillo’s advancement. In his experience, career opportunists were seldom shy about sacrificing others in order to continue their rise up the ranks. “Captain Marshall,” she said with the appropriate solemnity. “Though I’m glad to be working with you again, I wish the circumstances were different.”

“Likewise, Commodore,” Marshall replied, having elected to address Trujillo by rank rather than as ‘sir.’

“I won’t pretend this isn’t awkward for the both of us, Captain. My first XO from my first command on the *Phobos*, Bayan Jiemba, made commodore three years ago. I don’t think the ink was dry on his captaincy before he made flag rank. I ended up taking orders from him on several occasions, so, I can empathize.”

“Thank you, Commodore, but that isn’t necessary. I fully appreciate and abide by the chain of command.”

Trujillo nodded approvingly. “May I enquire as to your plans *vis-à-vis* the Tholians?”

“We’re still firming those up on this end. They’ve proven very direct in this push, and it doesn’t seem they’re after any identifiable class of target. This doesn’t seem to involve territory, *per se*, and they’ve passed right by a couple of frontier Starfleet outposts only a few parsecs off their course that they could have easily moved to attack.”

“Agreed, we’ve seen the same on our end. None of this is adding up, and I’ve got my best people trying to divine what their ultimate goal might actually be. The Tholian ambassador even insists he doesn’t know what’s happening or why, so I don’t think a diplomatic solution is in the cards, at least not through official channels.”

“You don’t see any point in opening a dialogue with them?” Marshall asked, his tone a bit sharper than he had intended.

Trujillo paused, sensing the emotional undercurrent to Marshall’s question. “I believe talking is always preferable to fighting, Captain. I’m simply pointing out that it may be up to you to open that dialogue, as doing so through official diplomatic channels isn’t possible at the moment.”

“I... see,” Marshall answered, not having expected such a response from her.

Trujillo sighed. “Look, I won’t pretend I wasn’t a phaser-happy action junkie when we last served together. We both know I was. Despite my having made my career running from one hotspot to another for the last decade, I’ve learned the value of avoiding avoidable fights. I very much hope you and your task force won’t have to open fire on the Tholians, and that a different solution to this crisis can be found.”

“That’s good to hear, sir,” Marshall answered, surprised to have utilized the suffix unconsciously.

“I’m also not trying to override your command prerogatives here. I’m only asking about your plan to better coordinate with you upon our arrival.”

Marshall inclined his head, accepting this additional olive branch. “Understood, Commodore. I’ll loop you in as soon as we’ve settled on a plan of action. At present, they’re a little over three hours out.”

“One last thing, Captain,” Trujillo said, appearing conciliatory. “If this all goes to hell despite our best efforts, I’ll take the hit regardless of whose plan it was. If political cover is all I’m good for, at least I’ll have had some utility.”

“That’s very kind, Commodore, but unnecessary. I stand behind my decisions and my actions, come what may.”

Trujillo nodded. “Something I learned from your example, Captain Marshall. Good hunting, should it come to that. Perhaps ‘good talking’ is more hopeful?”

Marshall grinned at that, despite himself. “I’ll take it. Thank you for checking in, sir. *Excalibur*, out.”

Chapter 6

USS *Reykjavik*, Briefing Room/C-&-C

Trujillo and her senior officers watched the second wave of Tholian ships cross the border over a live sensor feed. This time it was thirty-seven craft, again a strange mix of classes that eschewed any standard fleet formation, more a gaggle than an armada.

Starfleet had attempted opening communications with the Tholian formations repeatedly, with no response whatsoever. Even the entreaties of Tholian diplomats carried over Starfleet and Tholian frequencies went unacknowledged.

Having grouped all available starships into Trujillo and Marshall's two task forces, Starfleet could only challenge this second incursion with a squadron of automated tactical drones.

The seventeen drones made a single pass at impulse speeds, firing photon torpedoes timed to detonate directly in the path of the Tholian ships at warp. This netted three 'kills' and a half dozen vessels damaged to varying degrees, which began to lag behind the others.

The drones then accelerated to warp and began high-speed kamikaze runs against the Tholian stragglers. This culled another five ships from among the laggards but exhausted the remaining drones' propulsion systems. They dropped out of warp and out of the pursuit.

"They didn't divert any ships to defend against the drones' attack," Lt. Helvia noted. "And none of the stragglers came to each other's aid." He shook his head as if in disbelief. "Tholians typically display some of the most elaborate and aggressive mutual-defense tactics we know of, but not in this instance. They act like moths..." he murmured the last few words, causing Garrett to glance up at him from her station.

"What?" she asked. "What did you say, Lieutenant?"

"It was nothing," Helvia demurred. "I merely said they were behaving like moths drawn to a flame. No external stimuli appears to matter, only their forging ahead."

"Moths to a flame," Garrett repeated, her eyes widening fractionally. "Thank you," she offered cryptically, diving back into her sensor returns and analysis.

Captain Marshall's Task Force Alamo had fallen back to assist in the protection of the Draius-Arigulon system, joining forces with the small native Draiiian navy to safeguard their population against a potential Tholian attack.

Trujillo and the others switched the viewer over to a real-time display of the first Tholian incursion group as it approached the Draius-Arigulon system.

The invading ships seemed to crawl past the system with an agonizing torpor, despite actually being at high warp. Trujillo awaited any sign of the Tholians angling in towards the system which they were passing at less than four AUs from the system's Oort cloud. An abrupt course change now could bring them into firing range of Alamo and the Draiiians in a matter of minutes.

Trujillo looked away from the display, fixing her gaze on the newly promoted Lieutenant (j.g.) Garrett.

“Mister Garrett, any progress on re-tasking the Shar’ar Array?”

Garrett tore herself away from her sensor returns to respond. “Yes, sir. Command pulled some strings, and the Vulcan Science Academy is reorienting the array as we speak. We should have the initial scan results in a few minutes.”

Shukla looked up from his makeshift Operations station, unconsciously touching his communications earpiece. “Commodore, we’ve received a hail from the *Fortitude*, she’s on her way from Langston Yards and is asking to join up.”

A brief smile flitted across Trujillo’s features. “The yard superintendent said they couldn’t have her ready in less than a week, but Captain Breklar insisted he would have her underway in twenty-four hours. Good as his word.” She cross-checked two of her ubiquitous data-slates. “Alamo needs the additional firepower more than we do. Tell them to join up with Captain Marshall and the Draiians.”

“Threat Formation One has now passed the Draius-Arigulon system,” Helvia observed.

“No signs of incursion,” Shukla confirmed. “They are maintaining course and speed for the Longlax-Teko system.”

Trujillo opened a channel to *Excalibur*, the image appearing onscreen was that of the starship’s auxiliary bridge, currently being employed as Marshall’s own Task Force Combat Information Center.

Marshall nodded toward the visual pickup. “Hello, Commodore. Looks like we might be in the clear.”

“That increasingly appears the case, at least from this first group. We’ll be adjusting our destination to Longlax-Teko to investigate and possibly contest TF-1’s arrival there. Our ETA to the system is a bit over six hours now. Will you be joining up with us or remaining at your present location, Captain?”

Marshall appeared to mull that over for a long moment before responding.

“Given the Draiiian military’s shortcomings, if that second threat formation decides to attack here, the locals don’t stand a chance without our help. I’m not willing to gamble the lives of eight billion beings on the actions of Tholians who’ve proven anything but predictable the past three days.”

Trujillo nodded approvingly. “Absolutely, Captain, and I fully support your decision. We’ve got the Vulcans’ Shar’ar Array coming online to give us better eyes on Longlax-Teko. Hopefully we can figure out what they’re after, or at least what they’re up to there before we arrive.”

“I wish you good fortune then, Commodore. If the next wave bypasses this system, we can join up with you there in a little over three hours.”

Trujillo made note of that on a data-slate. “Copy that, I’m not shy about calling for help when it’s needed. Speaking of that, you’ve got *Fortitude* inbound to join you.”

“So I’d heard. I can’t imagine what Breklar owes his chief engineer, but I’m guessing it’s expensive.”

“Amen to that, Captain,” Trujillo said with a half-smile. “Gauntlet, out.”

She turned away from the viewer to see Garrett looking expectantly at her from the Science station.

“Give me the word, Lieutenant,” Trujillo prompted.

“Initial sensor telemetry coming in from the array, sir. I’m running comparisons against our baseline scans of the system in our databanks.”

“Keep me apprised,” Trujillo said, standing and moving to the makeshift Tactical station staffed by Helvia.

“Lieutenant, any strategic or tactical assessments so far?”

Helvia came to attention at Trujillo’s approach, his right arm twitching involuntarily with what Trujillo was certain was a purely reflexive impulse to offer her the traditional Roman salute. He loomed over her like a piece of overly muscled statuary.

“At ease, Lieutenant,” she coaxed.

He relaxed, however only fractionally. “Difficult to say, Commodore. With the Tholians behaving so erratically, trying to predict what they’ll do in a given situation is highly problematic. They’ve displayed no impulse to spin their energetic-web defenses, nor have they directly engaged any craft or emplacement opposing them with weapons fire. The border outpost they destroyed was the result of an apparent suicide-run, a warp-speed collision.”

She inclined her head, acknowledging his appraisal. “Expect the unexpected, eh?”

“A fair summation, sir,” he replied stoically.

“Well... that’s new,” Garrett said, her face radiating both excitement and bewilderment.

Trujillo approached, sliding behind the makeshift workstation to look over Garrett’s shoulder. “What have we got?”

“Something that absolutely shouldn’t be there, sir.”

Chapter 7

USS *Reykjavik*, Briefing Room/C-&-C

The viewscreen showed a computer enhanced image of Longlax-Teko, an orange K-type main series star. The image drew back to display a circular pattern of spherical structures, thirty-two in all, arrayed in a ring formation parallel to the circumference of the star.

Trujillo frowned reflexively. "What in the hell are those?"

"Artificial satellites of some kind, sir. Metallic composition, similar to monotanium, each of them measuring ninety kilometers in diameter. They're giving off exotic gravimetric energy signatures," Garrett described, absorbed in her readings.

"I'm going to go out on a limb and guess that these structures weren't here when there was an active Federation presence in this system?"

"No record of such, sir," Shukla provided.

Helvia glowered at the screen, voicing the obvious question. "How do structures of such size simply appear without someone noticing?"

No one had an answer for that.

"Ops, transmit this telemetry to both task forces and Starfleet Command." Trujillo surveyed the readings over Garrett's shoulder. "Anything like this in our database, Lieutenant?"

Garrett failed to answer for a long moment, then realized Trujillo had been addressing her by her new rank. "Uh... sorry, sir. Checking."

"It takes a little while to sink in," Trujillo said softly for Garrett's ears only. "It's the same when you make lieutenant commander and captain."

Garrett blushed, "Yes, sir."

A series of images appeared on Garrett's abbreviated console interface, and she split the compartment's main viewer image in two so as to display the new information culled from their database in an enlarged format.

A giant metallic sphere materialized on one side of the screen, pixilating slightly before the image firmed up and resolved into an object nearly identical to the ones they were observing in real-time from the star system ahead.

Its mottled, striated surface spoke of its artificial origins.

"The image on the right was taken one-hundred sixty-eight years ago by the starship *Enterprise*, NX-01," Garrett offered. "One of the Delphic Expanse spheres that helped to create and maintain a zone of spatial anomalies that prevented most FTL travel in the region. The image on the right is what we're seeing in orbit of the Longlax-Teko star. They appear largely identical visually, though the ones in Longlax-Teko are ten times the size of those encountered by *Enterprise*."

"The Sphere Builders," intoned Shukla, a hint of near reverence in his voice. "They're supposed to have provoked the Xindi attack on Earth."

“Fables, exaggerations and propaganda,” Helvia muttered. “Many accused Captain Archer of embellishment in order to impress the Vulcans with human ingenuity and tenacity.”

Trujillo silenced the larger man with a raised hand in his direction, her focus still on Garrett’s displays. “I don’t want to confuse correlation with causation here. We don’t know if these objects have anything to do with the Tholians and their actions, but we have six hours until we’re in-system to make that determination. This is now our primary focus, am I understood?”

A litany of affirmations followed.

She gestured to Garrett. “For once we have ample scientific resources. I want you coordinating with the science personnel from ships in both task forces and whatever science or historical assets Command can bring to bear on this.”

Trujillo looked to her assembled officers. “Get me answers.”

* * *

“How goes your first command, Mister Glal?” Trujillo asked over subspace from the privacy of her ready room.

The grizzled old Tellarite smiled behind his scraggly beard, tusks twitching with amusement. “I’ve got a crew that’s nearly half starbase castoffs trying to figure out what to do on an emergency shipboard assignment and green-as-grass senior staff trying to corral them. So, overall, it’s a garden party of celestial delights. How are things with you, sir?”

Trujillo laughed aloud at that, secretly cherishing her former XO’s acerbic wit.

“You know what I don’t get from Commander Davula? Sass. I don’t get sass from Davula.”

“You miss my sass!” he protested.

“I do, in fact, miss your sass. Your punching Klingons, not so much.”

“He had it coming. He knows what he did,” Glal offered dismissively. “Is this a social call, sir, or did you need something? I’m supposed to be minding the kids on the bridge while your husband is on his sleep cycle.”

“You’ve seen the updates on the mystery spheres?”

He nodded curtly. “I have, sir. Bad business, that. Tholian incursion is dicey enough without throwing more exotic alien technology into the mix.”

“I agree, but we play the cards we’re dealt. As it happens, the *GoI* is likely the fastest ship in our formation. I may need to send you in-system to reconnoiter the situation and to assess the Tholians’ response. They’ll beat us to Longlax-Teko by a good two hours. If all this is because they want first crack at that technology, we may have to disabuse them of that notion.”

“We’re at your disposal, sir. My chief engineer is the most experienced out of my senior officers and was overseeing *GoI*’s refit when we scrambled the task force. She assures me the engines are running at peak efficiency, though she’s coping with an inexperienced deck gang she inherited from the refit.”

"We're all doing the best we can under the circumstances, and I appreciate your flexibility," Trujillo said.

"He's doing well, sir. I know you won't ask about him, so I'm volunteering the information. He's going to make someone a first-rate XO," Glal offered with a smirk.

Trujillo almost played dumb but then decided against such a disingenuous response. "I'm glad to hear that. I know he's excited at the opportunity, sudden though it was. I'm relieved he's getting the chance to serve under someone he knows."

"It wouldn't have made any difference, Nandi. He's a damn fine officer, regardless of who's sitting in the big chair."

She nodded, smiling. "I have to go. Time to go and prod the big brains about what's waiting ahead of us."

"Yes, sir. Just give us the word and we'll dip in-system and see if the Cry-Lobs want to play."

Trujillo blinked. "Cry-Lobs?"

"It's what one of my ensigns called them, short for crystal-lobsters. I just about spit coffee all over my helm officer when I heard it."

"Heavens save us from the children," Trujillo beseeched sardonically.

"From your lips to the Great Hoof's ear, Commodore," Glal laughed.

"*Reykjavík*, out."

* * *

Task Force Gauntlet was now two and half hours out from the Longlax-Teko system, trailing the first wave of Tholian ships by two hours.

Chapter 8

USS Reykjavik

The meeting had reconvened on the ship's more spacious recreation deck, as the briefing room had proved too confining for the growing number of officers involved in mission planning and task force coordination.

A large conference table had been established here, twice the size of their typical briefing table. The portable consoles crammed into the briefing room had been relocated as well, spaced farther apart in this more forgiving environment.

Rachel Garrett stepped up to a dais in front of a crowd of a dozen senior officers and science specialists, to include Trujillo and Commander Davula. Her briefing would be transmitted to all twenty-four ships comprising both task forces. She activated the large viewer set into the second story bulkhead above their heads, calling up the previous image of the ring of spheres in close orbit of the orange star.

"Thank you for joining us. This report is the combined product of personnel from across Task Forces Gauntlet and Alamo, with input from the Federation Science Directorate."

Garrett inclined her head towards Trujillo. "Commodore, it is our collective assessment that the spheres are generating a very powerful subspace field between them. This field, in turn, is creating a gravitational lensing effect. That lensing effect is focusing and modulating the star's natural energy emissions into a coherent subspace signal of enormous power."

Trujillo stood, arms crossed, her chin braced on her right hand in a thoughtful posture as she absorbed Garrett's report.

"That signal is being broadcast deep into Tholian territory and appears to intersect what we believe to likely be their home star system."

"The purpose of this signal?" Trujillo inquired.

"Unknown, sir. It doesn't appear to carry any message or code that we can divine, only a specific energy signature, amplified immensely."

Trujillo asked, "If this broadcast is so powerful, how is it that we're only now becoming aware of it?"

"The subspace frequency modulation is very high into the G-Level bands, not a frequency range any known species utilizes for communications. It's not something we would typically scan for, sir."

Lt. Commander Kura-Ka, *Reykjavik's* Zaranite chief engineer, had been requested to attend the briefing. The man rarely left the confines of his engineering decks and eschewed most social contact with his fellows. He turned his fleshy head towards Trujillo, speaking through the facemask which provided him with a steady stream of fluorine-rich gas. The mask gave his voice an oddly artificial quality.

"Sir, it might help to think of the subspace realm as a layered barrier, the energetic boundary between dimensions. We utilize some of these nearer layers to convey faster-

than-light communications, and other layers can be thought of as the tractive surface upon which our warp drives anchor in order to bend space around our vessels for propulsion. Many of the deeper bands of subspace frequencies are garbled by the natural background radiation emissions of stellar bodies and our universe itself. Our sensors are calibrated to filter out this 'noise' or they would be overwhelmed by the sheer magnitude of the energies translated through those media. The sphere-amplified signal broadcast by this star is within that deeper range and was thus invisible to us until we deliberately searched it out."

Trujillo, over twenty years on from her Academy subspace physics courses, nodded appreciatively.

"Thank you, Commander." She realized that with the ship's recent turnover of senior officers, only Kura-Ka was comfortable enough with her to have explained it in such a simplified way. Someone as junior as Garrett dared not for fear of causing offense.

"Any theories as to how these spheres suddenly appeared in a Federation controlled system without anyone noticing their construction?"

"The reports from the twenty-second century *Enterprise* indicate that several of the Delphic Expanse spheres they encountered were capable of cloaking themselves. The scans we've received from the Shar'ar Array suggest that these spheres are in the vicinity of twelve-hundred years old, meaning that they may have been built at the same time as those in the Delphic Expanse."

Trujillo mulled that over, not liking the taste of it. "So, we could conceivably have had dozens of cloaked spheres the size of moons hiding in this system for over a thousand years, and we've just been blissfully unaware?"

Garrett swallowed, discomfited by Trujillo's growing intensity. "Yes, sir. That's quite possible... probable, in fact."

"And now to the Tholians," Trujillo said. "Do we know any more about what they're doing, or why?"

"We have no firm answers, sir, only a handful of theories. The most popular hypothesis among the participating science personnel is that this energy transmission somehow interacts on some fundamental level with Tholian biology. Lt. Commander Stavek from *Excalibur* has just completed some modeling utilizing a crystalline lattice that mimics what little we know of Tholian neural pathways. It appears that the frequency might create a resonance within their neural structures that could potentially lead to aberrant neurological activity."

Trujillo's eyes widened fractionally at this. "You're suggesting it might affect their neuro-cognitive functioning?"

"Correct, sir."

"So, the unusual behavior the Tholians have been demonstrating with this incursion might simply be a physiological or psychological reaction to this massive energy broadcast?"

Garrett nodded. "Possibly, sir." She inclined her head towards where the bullish Titus Helvia stood, dwarfing his portable console. "As Lt. Helvia posited sir, moths to a flame."

Trujillo blew out a long breath as the weight of that premise settled over her.

“Sir,” Davula interjected, pausing to wait for Trujillo’s nod of approval before continuing. “I had a passing interest in the Delphic Expanse as a cadet, and there were many rumors regarding their creation and purpose. Oddly, many of the mission records from those sphere encounters, the entire Delphic Expanse expedition itself, actually, are *still* classified. A mission that predates the founding of the Federation, mind you.

“One of the most prominent claims was that whoever built them did so as a prelude to invasion, essentially spatially terraforming entire sectors to be more compatible with their physical forms. The Xindi were supposed to have been agents of this group, trying to disrupt any cohesion among the regional spacefaring powers to prevent their invasion plans from being thwarted.”

Helvia’s reaction to this statement was a disconsolate grunt of skepticism.

“I’m not sure I’m prepared to entertain temporal conspiracies on top of all of this,” Trujillo rejoined, waving a hand expansively in the general direction of the approaching star system. “But are you implying that these spheres are beaming this signal into Tholian space intentionally as a way of sparking a war between ourselves and the Assembly?”

Davula’s expression was as earnest as Trujillo’s was incredulous.

“Yes, sir. Think of the engineering and logistics effort necessary to build and presumably hide these massive machines. It can’t be simple coincidence that this signal was directed into the heart of Tholian space at the specific moment most of Starfleet was busy shoring up our border with the Klingons.”

Trujillo shook her head. “I’m sorry, Commander, but I’m not there yet. We’re trying to discern the motivations of someone who built these structures over a millennia ago. Believing that their intent was to spark a war between two powers who wouldn’t rise for another thousand years is too much a stretch for me.”

Shukla raised a hand, speaking only after the commodore’s tacit acknowledgment. He stood from his seat, the polished Starfleet arrowhead emblem on his turban catching the light.

“Sir, regardless of whether the signal broadcast was intentional or not, now that we’re theorizing that the Tholians might be reacting reflexively to it, what is our moral obligation in these circumstances? Is it appropriate to open fire on beings who’s cognitive functioning may have been compromised?”

Trujillo dipped her head for a moment before looking back to Shukla. “That, Lieutenant, is an excellent question. Seeing as we’ve now strayed into the area of command purview, I’m going to have to ask everyone but Commander Davula to clear the compartment.”

As the assembled personnel exchanged glances and began collecting their belongings and heading for the exits, Trujillo turned to the audio/visual pickup transmitting the briefing to their respective task forces. “Captains, please do the same. I’m calling a meeting with all of us and our XO’s in fifteen minutes to discuss where we go from here.”

Confirmations from the other starships began to filter in and Trujillo muted the channel, reaching out a hand to grab Garrett gently by the upper arm as she moved for the exit.

“Nice work, Rachel. My thanks to you and your team for a tremendous effort in an extreme time crunch.”

Garrett smiled, touching a hand to her new lieutenant’s insignia on her shoulder flash. “Thank you, sir. Seeing as you’d just promoted me, I didn’t want you rescinding these.”

Trujillo chuckled, swatting her shoulder playfully. “Off with you.”

Her combadge chirped three times, notifying her of an incoming comm, coded private. Trujillo moved to an isolated sitting alcove with a computer interface, routing the transmission there.

Captain Marshall looked at her from the star system her task force was currently passing, his expression pinched.

“Yes, Captain?”

“Is this a democracy now, Commodore? Are we putting this to a vote?”

Trujillo took a moment to center herself before replying, not wanting to upbraid Marshall for something she herself might have taken exception to under different circumstances.

“I’d like the opinion of the other commanding officers available to me. The final decision will be mine.”

“And if you stand down and I disagree?” Marshall asked icily. “I still have eight ships, and if the Tholians are compromised as your science officer suggests, they might not be able to put up much of a fight.”

“If that’s the case, Captain, I would issue orders for you and your task force to stand down as well.”

“You’re in command of Gauntlet, I retain command over Alamo. I don’t recognize your authority to order me to do anything in such circumstances. While I respect the fact that you do outrank me, I think you’re making the wrong decision on this one. Gather the information, stick to the facts, and make the call based on that, Commodore. Too many opinions can get in the way of good judgement.”

Trujillo cocked her head. “In that case, I’ll confer with Admiral Saavik, and she’ll order you to stand down. If I have to go over your head to snap you into line, I’ll do just that. I’m not interested in having a pissing contest in a potential war zone, Marshall.”

“I’m not interested in having a pissing contest either, Commodore. We don’t have time for that. However, this could all be a ruse for the Tholians to get their hands on those spheres. They barge in here, deliberately acting against type to confuse us and delay our response, with their government playing dumb. Meanwhile, while we’re wringing our hands, they get a firm foothold in a Federation system and have the chance to study those spheres and their advanced technology firsthand. That should be us getting our hands on that technology.”

“That may well be the case, Captain. Alternatively, we could wipe out the Tholian formations and start a war when it becomes apparent to their government that their soldiers weren’t in control of their faculties and were unable to defend themselves. We don’t know enough yet, and I haven’t made any final decisions as to our next steps. I do want to hear the counsel of my fellow captains, seeing as they’ve got skin in the game, too. Either way, Saavik will back my play.”

“Like she backed Markopoulos?” he retorted. “You carried out his plan with the Klingons flawlessly, and she still put him out to pasture because of the political blowback. Now she’s pulling your strings, and she’ll either make you dance to her tune, or she’ll cut those strings and watch you fall. There are admirals above her, too. Consider that, Commodore. Some of them happen to be friends of mine, and I’m not afraid to go above your head either. Either way we are at an impasse.” He paused to take a deep breath to cool off. “Now, I suggest we let bygones be bygones, and find a way to work together on this one. It’s not going to do either of our taskforces any good if we can’t.”

Trujillo nodded grimly. “Politics is the price of promotion. Ultimately, we’re all expendable in that respect. I’m not filtering my decisions about taking the Federation to war through the prism of career longevity. I’ll make the call the circumstances dictate, and you’ll either follow my lead or I’ll have you replaced as Alamo-Actual.”

Marshall bit back a heated reply, taking a moment to collect himself. “Understood, Commodore. *Excalibur*, out.”

The screen reverted to the Starfleet logo and Trujillo stood and took a series of deep, cleansing breaths of her own.

Her combadge chirped again.

“Bridge to Commodore Trujillo, the Tholian formation designated TF-1 has just entered the Longlax-Teko system.”

“Understood,” she replied. “I’ll be sending Lt. Shukla topside to take the conn until we’re done with the command conference.”

“Yes, sir.”

She deactivated her combadge.

“Goddamn starship captains,” she muttered to herself. “Is this what it was like dealing with *me*?”

Chapter 9

USS *Excalibur*

Commander Tristienne D’Vorr stepped out of the turbolift on deck three. She had been ordered by Captain Marshall to remain in auxiliary control, but she had another matter, a personnel matter, that required her urgent attention. The Caitian walked several meters down the corridor passing several crewmen whom she nodded to. She then found the cabin she was looking for and activated the door chime.

“Who is it?” asked Captain Marshall over the comm.

Tristi pushed a few buttons, initiating a command override to allow the doors to open and stepped inside the dimly lit room. “It’s me Captain,” she replied.

“I didn’t give you permission to enter,” he replied as he laid in his bunk staring up at the ceiling.

“Well then, you can file formal charges if you wish,” said D’Vorr.

“I don’t think we need to go that far, Commander,” said Alex. “Who’s handling things in Auxiliary Control?”

“Zarv,” she replied.

“Well, we’re only as far away as the nearest comm terminal,” said Alex knowing that while the engineer was competent in the center seat, it was not his preferred place.

“What’s going on Captain?” D’Vorr asked bluntly.

Marshall took a deep breath, exhaled, and said, “She threatened to remove me from command of the task force. Nandi Trujillo actually threatened to take this away from me just like Saavik did.”

“When did Saavik do that?” asked Tristi.

“Before I ordered you to hail the task force commanders,” he replied, “I argued against this mission. I told Saavik we were better off exploring, so that some piece of the Federation would be preserved, but she wouldn’t listen. Then she said she’d relieve me of command if I didn’t do it, and threatened to reassign me, and give the center seat to a subpar captain that couldn’t find the turbolift if his life depended on it.”

“I see,” said Tristi, “so rather than let the crew be commanded by an inferior captain, you went along with Saavik’s plan.”

“Yes, only because I felt like I didn’t have a choice,” said Alex. “I decided if I had to do it, if I had to put us on a suicide mission, and that’s what this is, I was going to do it my way. Then Saavik assigned Trujillo to head up Gauntlet.” His eyes closed for a moment as he recalled Trujillo’s exact words, “I’ll make the call the circumstances dictate, and you’ll either follow my lead or I’ll have you replaced as Alamo-Actual.”

“So, just follow her orders, and that won’t happen,” said Tristi.

Alex then sat up on the edge of the bed and faced her. He said, “What if she’s wrong? What if Trujillo is wrong? It’s not what I would do under the circumstances. It should’ve been a combined fleet. We don’t have enough numbers to be effective out here.”

"This isn't your mission. It's not yours to command. The Klingons are the reason why we don't have enough ships out here," countered D'Vorr.

"Well, it should be," said Marshall as he raised his voice a bit, now up on his feet. "My seniority should count for something. I was commanding a starship while Nandi Trujillo was still a lieutenant."

"It only counts when you have the higher rank, and right now that's Trujillo. She is the superior officer."

"No, she's merely a higher ranking one," said Alex. He softened his tone as he asked, "Remember what you asked me when you first came on board?"

"About Tomed? Yes, I do, and you said to never ask you about the Tomed Incident," said D'Vorr.

Alex decided it was time to level with her. "I was on the *Athena*, and when Captain Urum got killed, I got up from the helm, and assumed command. Guess who the Tactical officer was?"

"As I recall it was Trujillo."

"That's right," he said with a slight nod, "She'd fire her phaser before looking at a situation objectively."

"That being said, I wouldn't have been able to get *Athena* out of that situation without her. What did Starfleet do? Give me an attaboy, pinned a few medals on my chest, promoted me, and gave me command of a starship."

D'Vorr nodded now that she understood the relationship between the captain and the commodore better. "Let me guess," she said, "you were hoping to succeed with this crisis so that Starfleet will take notice and give you that promotion."

"Yes, maybe. I don't know," replied Alex, unsure of himself, "I turned down a promotion to commodore once already."

"Why? When?"

"A few months ago. It was around the time you came on board while we were still at Starbase 47. Admiral Blackwell called me into his office and offered it to me. I turned it down. I told him I had the rank I wanted, the ship I wanted, and the crew I wanted. I couldn't imagine doing anything else. Since then, I've come to realize that I've got maybe ten to fifteen years left in the center seat. I'd like to be more than just a footnote in the annals of Starfleet history."

"You know those people in the history books are the exceptions, not the rule," said Tristi.

"I know that," said Alex. "I also know that what's going on with the Tholians is damned peculiar. They're in Longlax-Teko system probably gathering data on those spheres, and we're sitting on our thumbs. We should be going in, repelling them out of there, and analyzing the spheres for ourselves. It worked against the Klingons."

"We can't deal with the Tholians the same way we dealt with the Klingons. Especially since, like you said, the Tholians are not behaving like normal. You can't always apply the same tactics to every situation."

"That's true, and you're right. I was hoping to maybe, just maybe, influence Trujillo enough that Starfleet would notice, and give me some recognition."

"We all deserve recognition, Alex," said D'Vorr.

"I'm not going to dispute that," he replied. "Saavik didn't behave logically."

"What do you mean by that?" she asked.

"If Saavik had been logical, she should've put the most senior officer in command of Task Force Gauntlet. If I had accepted promotion to Commodore, I would be the senior officer. I was hurt when she told me I would be commanding Task Force Alamo. I felt like she signed our death sentence. To defend Federation territory with only seven ships when the Tholians have... how many was it?"

"Sixty-four," replied D'Vorr.

"Right," said Marshall. "Those are overwhelming odds, and the only reason we're still here is because the Tholians are not behaving like they normally would. Let's face it, the only reason Trujillo is a Commodore is because Saavik wants her to be one."

Tristi offered, "Did it occur to you that Saavik put Trujillo in command of Gauntlet because she knew Trujillo would get the job done?"

Alex sighed. "That thought had crossed my mind, but not until a few minutes ago."

"Has it also occurred to you that just like you needed Trujillo to help you get the *Athena* out of harm's way during Tomed, she needs you now to help her make this mission succeed?"

Marshall took a moment to consider what the Caitian was saying before he replied, "I hadn't thought of it quite like that, but you do make a very valid point." He walked over to the food replicator and asked for a glass of cold water. He took a small sip from the glass. "We were supposed to be out in deep space right now. We were supposed to be exploring. That's the reason why I joined Starfleet."

"It's why I joined Starfleet too, but orders are orders, and we go where we are needed the most. Right now, that's here. This ship, this crew, would benefit more from a captain that was levelheaded, not someone trying to be a hero again."

"I won't dispute that," said Alex.

"I have to say that what you did earlier on the comm with Trujillo, she could call that insubordination," said D'Vorr. "You might want to extend the olive branch before it's too late."

"You might be right about that," said Alex. He exhaled a very deep breath. He then said, "There are only two other people I'd let talk to me the way you just did, one being Doctor Gustafson."

"And the other?" she asked.

"My wife," replied Alex as his eyes went to the picture of his wife that he kept on the bedside table. He thought for a few seconds, then came to the conclusion that D'Vorr was right. He said, "I need you to get Commodore Trujillo on the comm and tell her that I want to talk to her privately. I don't want anyone to overhear what I have to say, and I'd like it on a secure channel."

"I'll take care of it," said D'Vorr as she turned to exit the room. "Oh, and sir?"

"Yes?"

"Welcome back."

"Thank you," said Alex as he watched her leave. He then walked over to the small desk in his cabin, pulled out the chair and sat down. He needed more time to think, to consider what he was about to do. Deep down, he still held the conclusion that Tristienne D'Vorr was right, and that he was being a basket case. He only hoped it was not too late to extend that olive branch.

"Captain, I have Commodore Trujillo for you," said D'Vorr over the comm system a few moments later.

He tugged on his uniform jacket, and called out, "Put it through in here." He watched as the image on the desktop monitor changed to the face of Nandi Trujillo.

"Go ahead, Captain," Trujillo said guardedly from the confines of her ready room.

"I'm going to get right to the point," said Alex. He took a deep breath and cleared his mind. 'Here goes,' he thought to himself. He said, "Commodore, I'd like to apologize for my earlier behavior. It was brash, rude, and uncalled for. It's not something I would tolerate, and if you want to reprimand me for it, I won't fight you on it."

Trujillo studied him for a moment before inclining her head. "This is an imperfect situation where we're dealing with ambiguous information and grasping at straws. You and I had an honest disagreement as to our respective authorities and our prospective courses of action. Granted, I would rather you had made those statements from the privacy of your ready room rather than from the middle of a crowded bridge, but that's something for you to address with your crew, should you choose."

"I understand," said Marshall with a nod. "You tell me what to do, and I'll do it, no questions asked," he added.

"I appreciate that," she replied, "but I don't demand blind obedience, Captain. You have decades of experience and may well have a better take on a given situation than I do. I expect your honest opinion, which I will give due consideration. I don't care about who gets the credit for what, only about the results. In my chain of command, the people under me get the credit for success, and I take the blame for failure."

"I'm going to level with you," Marshall said candidly. "The reason why I did what I did is because I think our roles should be reversed. You should still be a captain, and I should be a commodore," he continued, before explaining to Trujillo what he had told D'Vorr earlier.

Trujillo nodded. "I'd gathered as much. As I said before, I know the circumstances are awkward."

"I had my chance for it, and I didn't take it. Part of me regrets that decision now. I can only ask for your forgiveness, and I hope we can still work together on this. I think it would be better that way all around."

"There's nothing to forgive, Captain. As far as I'm concerned, this was a disagreement between two opinionated officers. If Command hears word of any of this, it won't be through me."

"I appreciate that Nandi, and Command won't hear anything about it through me either," said Alex feeling some sense of relief. He knew he had behaved like a fool, and the current crisis was not one that would resolve itself. "So, Commodore, where do we go from here?" he asked.

“You’ll hold your position with Alamo. Just because the first wave of Tholians bypassed the Draius-Arigulon system doesn’t mean the second wave will. Once we’re confident the Draians aren’t in any danger, Gauntlet and Alamo will link up outside the Longlax-Teko system. I’m tasking *Go!* to reconnoiter the spheres and see if there’s any reaction from the Tholian ships. Once we have more information on what’s going on in there, I can decide if we’re going to wait and see or charge in there and contest their incursion.”

“Understood, Commodore,” Marshall affirmed agreeably.

“I’ll be in touch, Captain. *Reykjavik*, out.”

In her ready room, Trujillo sat back in her chair, laying her head against its headrest. The conversation had gone better than she had dared hope, and it appeared Marshall might not be the thorn in her side that she’d feared. She would keep her word, and hadn’t divulged any of their argument to anyone, not even Admiral Saavik. Marshall, however, had been openly insubordinate to a superior officer in front of his senior staff and enlisted personnel, and unless his crew was ferociously loyal, something like that would be a tale for the telling over drinks on a dozen starbases within weeks.

Ultimately, it was not her problem. With her personnel issues now in order, the mysteries and dangers of the Longlax-Teko system awaited.

Chapter 10

USS *Gol*

The *Akyazi*-class perimeter-action ships had been built for speed, a fact that Commander Glal intended to use to his advantage. The compact vessels were sturdy, built for combat, and part of the same design lineage that had spawned the *Shangri-La*-class attack cruisers just before the signing of the Khitomer Accords were believed to have made such martial designs obsolete.

The *Gol* dropped out of warp in-system, a perilous feat in and of itself, risking a potential warp core implosion or the destabilization of the Longlax-Teko star. It was necessary, however, as the only alternative would have been a long haul to the same location at full impulse from the system boundary, a journey taking well over an hour in full view of both the Tholians and the spheres.

The ship's bridge was a third smaller than *Reykjavik's*, which Glal found oddly comforting. He mused that on some level it must remind him of the close confines of a Tellarite birthing creche. Glal sat forward expectantly in his chair as the chief petty officer at the helm announced their deceleration from warp.

"Solar polarization on the main viewer," Glal ordered. "Visual on the spheres."

"Detecting fifty-five Tholian vessels in close proximity to the spheres, sir," the ensign at Operations reported.

The viewscreen image came to life, the massive star's luminescence reduced so that the spheres and their accompanying Tholian vessels could be seen.

Glal's curse in his native tongue went untranslated by his communicator as he stared at the scene before him.

The Tholian ships had assumed a circular formation mirroring that of the spheres themselves, and were rotating counterclockwise, the bows of their vessels directed towards the mysterious orbs. From the after-most sections of the Tholian craft came a multitude of energized tendrils, the vaunted Tholian Web of legend. These tendrils were being woven into an expansive conical pattern, as though the ships themselves were a great loom producing a funnel of pure energy.

Several whispered conversations between personnel broke out on the bridge at the sight of this phenomenon.

"Quiet on the bridge!" Glal barked. "Maintain your posts."

The ensign at Ops called out, "Captain, I'm detecting a fourfold increase in the power of the sphere's transmission directed at Tholian territory. If the power level continues to increase at this rate, subspace communications will be negatively impacted with increasing interference."

"How soon until we're unable to punch a signal out to Task Force Gauntlet?" Glal asked.

"I estimate thirty-seven minutes, sir."

“Understood. Route auxiliary power to our comms transceiver and begin sending sensor telemetry and visuals back to the task force.”

He looked to where Gael Jarrod, his XO, sat at an auxiliary console on the bridge’s upper level. “Thoughts?”

“Perhaps we should issue challenge? They *are* in our territory. They’ve refused to speak to us so far, but maybe now that they’re at their destination they’d be more inclined to talk?”

Glal opened a subspace channel in the clear from his armrest interface. “Tholian vessels, you have entered Federation space without permission and have taken up position in a Federation star system. This is a hostile act. You will come about immediately and return to Tholian space, or we will take the defensive measures necessary to protect our territory.”

The wait for any response from the Tholians or the spheres was agonizing, but after three minutes it became apparent that no reaction was forthcoming.

“That’s... unsettling,” Jarrod noted. “I’d almost feel better if they were wheeling about to attack.”

Glal grunted sourly. “Yes. They do seem rather preoccupied with whatever they’re doing.” He opened another channel, this one secured and encrypted, to *Reykjavik*. “*Gol* to Gauntlet-Actual, you should have live telemetry from us. No reaction so far to our presence. Standing by for further instructions.”

* * *

USS *Reykjavik*

“Gauntlet-Actual acknowledges, *Gol*. We’re going over the telemetry now. Hold position and increase the intensity of your scans of the spheres.” Trujillo replied from the command chair of *Reykjavik*.

Trujillo sat back in her chair, looking over the readings coming in from *Gol* on her swing-arm console laid across her lap. She elected to give her senior officers time to digest this new information before updating her on their findings.

She felt a tickle of apprehension at the bizarre behavior of the Tholians, at the thought that such a potent and enigmatic species might have become someone else’s unwilling pawns. A power which could do that might be capable of even greater depredations.

“I can confirm *Gol*’s readings of the increase in the intensity of the transmissions, Commodore,” Garrett advised from the Science station. “The energetic structure they’re spinning appears to be both amplifying the intensity of the signal as well as directing it in a wider arc, propagating the transmission through a significantly larger volume of Tholian space.”

Davula rested her hands atop the safety railing, looking across to Trujillo. “That means more Tholian ships will be coming, sir.”

Trujillo nodded, coming to the same conclusion. “Alert Command, let them know there’s a strong possibility of more Tholian incursions across a larger section of our border.”

She pushed her swing-arm console aside and stood, moving to Garrett's station. "Lieutenant, is there any way we might jam this transmission? Perhaps all of ours and Alamo's ships interfering with that frequency range simultaneously?"

Garrett shook her head fractionally as she crunched the numbers, her fingers dancing across her console interface. "No, sir. Given the overwhelming power of the signal, it would take hundreds of ships and dedicated communications arrays to even begin to interfere with the transmission. And that's at its present strength. If this exponential growth in signal strength continues, nothing I know of would be able to stop it."

Trujillo frowned, then nodded her understanding as she patted the young woman on the shoulder. She moved to the standing Tactical station and the imposing form of Lt. Helvia. "Weaps, given the scans we've received of the spheres, would they be vulnerable to our weapons?"

"Unknown, sir. The original spheres were durable enough to withstand the NX *Enterprise's* primitive photonic warheads and phase cannons. *Enterprise* used a deflector pulse to compromise the sphere's interspatial manifold, which set off a chain reaction that destroyed all the spheres in the Delphic Expanse."

Trujillo glanced at Kura-Ka, the engineer having made one of his rare appearances on the bridge.

"Commander, could we duplicate the pulse *Enterprise* used?"

Kura-Ka inclined his head. "Yes, sir. However, these spheres are significantly larger than the ones encountered in the 22nd century, and the consensus of several senior engineers in the task force is that they're appreciably more advanced."

"You're suggesting these versions might have been hardened against such an attack?"

"Quite possibly, sir. There would be little point in positioning devices here that proved vulnerable to our technology a century and a half ago. We've not been able to locate an interspatial manifold access on the exterior of any of these spheres, leading me to believe those networked relays are located within the sphere's interior or that these spheres operate on different principles than those encountered by Archer's *Enterprise*."

Trujillo absorbed that while moving toward the command chair, only to be intercepted by Commander Davula. The XO spoke in hushed tones, for Trujillo's ears only.

"Sir, Command has confirmed my report, and they're rerouting Task Force Palisade to the Federation/Tholian border."

Those were the thirty-two ships that were to have arrived at Longlax-Teko to supplement Gauntlet and Alamo.

The commodore sighed, cocking her head thoughtfully. "I don't envy Admiral Koizumi that assignment but given the circumstances it makes the most sense strategically."

She resumed her seat, deep in thought. Her favored course of action had been to wait for reinforcements before provoking the Tholians or testing the spheres' defenses. That was no longer an option, as their reinforcements had been diverted, and the longer she waited the more Tholian ships were likely to be drawn to this phenomenon.

Trujillo opened the comms to the *Gol*.

"Commander Glal, status of your surveillance satellites?"

Glal's face, framed by his scruffy beard and tusks, appeared on the viewer. His scout ship's small bridge was visible in the background, to include Gael Jarrod analyzing sensor telemetry at his station.

Trujillo found herself fighting to focus on Glal's image while unconsciously toying with the wedding band on her finger.

"We've deployed our surveillance sats, sir, and we managed to cobble together a subspace signal amplifier that should enable us to maintain contact with those satellites for a few more hours."

"Excellent work." She steeled herself for her next exchange. "It appears it's time to poke the bear, Commander."

"Ah, yes, just so," Glal nodded agreeably. "That's one of those small rodents that scurry about up in Terran trees, right?"

"No, Glal, that's a squirrel. Bears are the large, lumbering hairy things with the big teeth and huge claws."

"Oh, well, in that case that sounds like a rather terrible idea, sir. Still, we're all in, in keeping with this ship's theme. Did you know the quote on *Gol's* commissioning plaque is: 'You want us to do *what?*'"

Trujillo had to fight to keep from chuckling, thankful for Glal's ridiculous sense of humor at the darkest of moments. She also found herself desperately wishing that she had assigned her former XO and her husband to any other ship in the task force than this one.

"One pass on their formation, Commander," Trujillo ordered. "Target one of the spheres with your forward weapons and send a few photons from your aft battery into whatever it is that the Tholians are building. Then get the hell out of there."

All seriousness now, Glal nodded again. "Aye, sir."

"Commodore," Garrett broke in, "if I may?"

Trujillo gestured towards the viewer and surrendered the floor.

Garrett continued, "Commander Glal, be advised that the confluence of sphere and Tholian activity has created increased gravitational shearing stresses in proximity to the star itself. I would advise against attempting to engage your warp engines any closer than three AUs from the star on your egress from the system."

Glal turned and pointed to someone offscreen, apparently confirming with a subordinate that Garrett's advice had been heard and understood.

"Thank you, Lieutenant, and congratulations on your promotion."

Garrett simply dipped her head at Glal's recognition of her advancement.

"I'm always up for a bracing stern chase, Commodore," Glal remarked, attention returned to Trujillo.

"Just have someone standing by to pry the Tholians off our tail if it comes to that."

"We'll be ready," Trujillo affirmed. "Begin your run in ten minutes... mark. We'll need to notify Gauntlet and Alamo of what's about to happen."

Glal tossed a jaunty salute towards the viewer pickup and began to reach for the armrest panel on his chair to close the channel.

"And Commander..." Trujillo said quickly, causing Glal to pause. "Good fortune."

"To us all, sir. *Gol*, out."

USS *Go!* Longlax-Teko System

“Three, two, one... mark,” Jarrod called out.

“Helm, one-quarter impulse. Steady acceleration curve up to half-impulse as the spheres enter our weapons envelope,” Glal ordered.

“Aye, sir. Executing.”

“Tactical, full spread of photons on target designated ‘Sphere-Seven’ followed by phasers, same impact coordinates. As we pass and begin the slingshot maneuver around the star, fire aft torpedoes on target designated ‘Cone-One’.”

Go! leapt ahead, rushing headlong towards the surreal formation of spheres and their weirdly spinning Tholian vassals.

The ship’s red-alert indicators pulsed in steady rhythm, complementing the blood-red emergency lighting activated to preserve the command crew’s night-vision should primary illumination fail.

“Seven million kilometers to targets and closing,” Helm advised.

“No reaction detected from the Tholian ships or the spheres yet, sir,” Ops reported.

Glal reached out a hand to toggle his seat’s safety restraints, anticipating that when a reaction did come, it would be dramatic.

The ship trembled, as though experiencing turbulence.

“What’s causing that?” Glal asked.

“Spatial and subspace disruptions, sir, byproducts of whatever they’re doing here. This is what *Reyky’s* science officer was warning us about.”

Glal grunted dourly, eyeing the viewer as they plunged into the star’s gravity well, the spheres growing from specks to small moons as the rotating formation of Tholian ships continued to build their conical amplifier.

“Restraints, everybody,” Glal instructed. “I don’t need anyone flung into me and risking my ravishing, good looks.”

“Five million clicks, approaching one-half impulse.”

“Active targeting,” Tactical announced. “Targets locked.”

“Tholians are still occupied, no detectable response from the spheres.”

“Four million...”

The audio-alert sounded from the Tactical board. “Forward torpedoes away!” the junior lieutenant at the station announced breathlessly. Glal figured it was likely the first time the young woman had ever fired in anger.

“Rolling thirty degrees to port,” the Helm called out as the ship jolted again. “Subspace chop is increasing along with solar wind density. Beginning approach to slingshot initiation.”

“Movement!” Ops blurted excitedly. “Three Tholians ships have broken formation.”

“We’ll be in phaser range in six seconds.”

"Star's thermal output approaching twenty-five hundred Kelvin, Captain. Shields are holding, but any incoming weapons fire is going to be problematic with the increasing strain on the shields."

"Acknowledged," Glal said calmly, masking his own growing unease.

"Sir, those Tholian ships are moving to intercept our torpedoes."

"Point defense fire?" Glal asked, trying to read the sensor returns on his abbreviated armrest interface as the ship's juddering increased.

"No, sir, with their superstructures. Impact! Three of our four torpedoes have struck two Tholian ships and one has just impacted the surface of a sphere."

"Coming to course two-three-seven, mark zero-one-two, accelerating to three-quarters impulse and beginning slingshot maneuver," Helm announced.

"Aft torpedoes away," Tactical advised, her voice more controlled this time.

"Incoming fire!" Ops cried out. "Tholian ships are firing thermionic torpedoes and—"

Go! bucked, hard, causing consoles throughout the bridge to flicker momentarily.

"...and tetryon beam weapons," Ops resumed, finding his voice after the blow.

"Beam impacts, port-aft quarter, shields holding but I'm having trouble getting them to firm up."

"Full impulse," Glal growled, "initiate slingshot maneuver."

"Three-thousand Kelvin, shield generators three and four are beginning to redline, sir!"

"All auxiliary power to shields and impulse engines," Glal replied.

"Two Tholian vessels in pursuit, sir. They're following our course and acceleration curve."

"Aft torpedoes have impacted on the Tholian energy structure, sir. Stellar radiation interference is partly masking our sensor returns, I can't see if there's any effect."

"That's why we left surveillance sats behind," Glal reminded the young man. "Let Gauntlet worry about battle-damage assessments, we'll worry about getting out of here intact." He looked to Jarrod out of habit, then shifted his gaze to the Tactical officer one station over. "Open fire on our pursuers, all aft weapons."

"Aye, sir," she answered, intently focused on her displays. "Torpedoes away, firing phasers."

"Thirty-five hundred Kelvin, Captain. Recommend we increase distance from the star as we come around."

Go! was shuddering constantly now, accompanied by the alarming groan of her superstructure warping and flexing under the strain.

"Direct hits!" the young woman at Tactical crowed.

"Helm, ease our course away from the star as we come around. Engineering, all remaining emergency power to shields and structural integrity fields."

"One of the pursuing ship's shields have collapsed... whoa, there she goes!" Ops called. "Stellar radiation got her, sir. The other ship has also taken shield damage and is withdrawing."

Glal emitted a satisfied grunt. "Reroute all weapons power to shields and fields."

“Three-thousand Kelvin and dropping, sir. Shields are stabilizing and shearing stresses on the hull are abating.”

Glal craned his neck around to fix his gaze on the chief engineer, the tiny woman’s sweat-sheened face illuminated by multiple pulsing red indicators on her board. He gave her a thumbs-up, his second favorite human gesture. “Say, Lieutenant Galvez, you did a really good job on that refit!”

Galvez smiled back at him, the expression not wholly genuine due to her adrenaline rush. Her eyes were still wide with fear.

“Slingshot completed, sir. We’re now in excess of full impulse. If we don’t throttle back, we’ll incur time dilation effect.”

“Reduce speed to full impulse,” Glal replied, holding a deep sigh of relief in check for the sake of his inexperienced crew.

He opened the intraship comms.

“Crew of the Gol. Thanks to your hard work and tenacity, we’ve just completed a contested reconnaissance mission into hostile-controlled territory. For a crew that was just thrown together from a dozen different ships and a starbase, you’ve demonstrated excellence in the face of danger. Well done, everyone. For those of you who didn’t apply sunscreen liberally prior to this mission, Sickbay is open for business.”

Glal retracted his chair’s safety harness. “Ops, do we have clear line-of-sight back to Gauntlet for subspace comms?”

“Yes, sir. We’re around the far side of the star and the subspace interference here is reduced. I can punch a signal through if you’d like?”

“That’s alright, Ensign. I’m just sending a text transmission, I’ll handle it.”

He coded the message private and personal, for Commodore Trujillo.

‘From: CO, USS Gol. To: Gauntlet-Actual - Mission accomplished. Nandi, you owe me a bottle of the good stuff.’

Chapter 11

“Now we know the Tholians will fight to protect the spheres,” Trujillo noted, addressing her senior officers in *Reykjavík*'s briefing room.

“Not only that, sir,” Helvia added, “they’ll sacrifice their own vessels to protect the spheres from our weapons.”

Trujillo gestured pointedly at the Magna Roman, emphasizing his observation. “It seems that attacking the spheres will be impossible without incurring Tholian casualties. With more compromised Tholians undoubtedly responding to the sphere’s transmission, waiting only compounds the problem.”

Garrett still had the habit of raising her hand before speaking up. “Sir, sensor telemetry from *Gol*'s recon sats indicate the sphere impacted by our photon torpedo incurred only minor damage. That torpedo was set to maximum yield. Our phasers had even less effect on the sphere’s structural integrity.”

Trujillo looked at Helvia and the engineer, Kura-Ka, seated next to one another at the table. “Gentlemen, given that the spheres were unshielded, what about using a tri-cobalt warhead?”

The Magna-Roman and Zaranite exchanged a glance before the senior of the two officers replied.

“It could work, Commodore,” Kura-Ka answered. “Depending on the precise combination of structural alloys, a cascading tri-cobalt reaction might consume the entire sphere.”

Helvia added, “However, we would want to have a backup plan, sir. If the spheres do have defensive screens that simply weren’t employed during *Gol*'s attack, they would render tri-cobalt devices inert. I would recommend bringing enough ships with sufficient armament capacity that we can blanket the target area with as many photorps as are needed.”

“And what of the photon detonation against their web-structure?” Trujillo inquired.

Garrett answered, “Readings indicate that the web-structure suffered moderate damage and the Tholians had to affect repairs to it. It looks to have set them back some number of hours.”

Trujillo absorbed the information before looking to her XO. “Commander, what is your recommendation?”

Davula considered her words before replying. “The longer we wait the greater the risk that Tholian reinforcements will nullify any tactical advantage we might have. Their second wave is due to arrive in a little over three hours. Though I’m a diplomat and explorer by nature, sir, I fear any further delays by Starfleet will only end up making our endgame here more costly for us. Right now, there are fifty-three Tholian ships in that system, in three hours there will be eighty-two. Time is not on our side.”

“If we make our move before their second wave arrives,” Shukla threw in, “it’s inadvisable to have Alamo join our attack. The Tholian reinforcements could easily lay waste

the Draius-Arigulon star system before moving on to support the spheres if Alamo isn't there to backstop their navy."

"I... may have a possible alternative to a full-scale assault, sir," Garrett posited with some reluctance.

Trujillo offered the younger woman an expression that invited elaboration.

"The science officer on *Orion* came up with a plan based on some groundbreaking research being done in stellar forming, altering the output of main-sequence stars. The field is in its infancy, but they've already made some breakthroughs in initiating stellar flares and stellar prominence activity with infusions of trillithium and proto-matter delivered by probe into the star's photosphere.

"It might be possible to fire such a device into the Longlax-Teko star at precisely the right coordinates to cause an X-class stellar flare large enough to engulf the spheres. That would conceivably destroy the spheres, or at least damage them sufficiently to interfere with their subspace broadcast capabilities. The Tholian ships present would have some opportunity to escape at near-relativistic speeds, should they prove cognizant of the danger."

Trujillo was clearly intrigued at this notion. "How long would it take to prepare such a device?"

"Lt. Commander Reinhart and his team are already working on it. It may be complete by now, sir."

"How close to the star would a ship need to be in order to launch the device?" Trujillo asked.

"Given the Tholian's reaction to *Gol's* torpedo launch against the spheres, I'd say prohibitively close, Commodore. They'll almost certainly attempt to intercept such a launch. We'd need to be close, very nearly on top of them. However, a flight of torpedoes and decoys from several ships simultaneously might serve to camouflage the presence of the device."

Trujillo's expression held more than a hint of disappointment. "So, the device wouldn't make a full-scale run in on the spheres unnecessary?"

"No, sir. It would hopefully make only a single pass necessary, instead of the task force having to hold position and bombard the spheres while simultaneously fighting off the Tholians."

Trujillo pointed at Davula. "Commander, contact *Orion* and inform their captain that Reinhart's plan and device will be our primary strategy. He has one hour to complete construction on his device. I'll want it and he transferred over to *Reykjavik* before the taskforce departs for Longlax-Teko. If the device fails, we'll fall back on our original tactic of engaging the spheres with tri-cobalt warheads and the Tholians with conventional weapons until either they're destroyed, or we are."

The briefing was adjourned, its attendees grim but determined.

* * *

“Commodore, I’ve just reviewed your plan. Our strategists and scientific advisors give you a sixty-two percent chance of that device working as designed,” Admiral Saavik offered over subspace in Trujillo’s ready room.

The signal was jumpy and cut out intermittently due to the growing subspace interference the sphere’s broadcast was causing in the region.

“I’d rather that than the twenty-three percent chance they gave us of surviving long enough in a standard engagement to destroy a half to two-thirds of the spheres,” was Trujillo’s reply.

“Agreed,” Saavik said with a curt nod. “I’ve just come out of our high-level negotiations between the Federation Security Council and the Tholian embassy. The Tholians have acceded to our taking immediate action against the spheres, regardless of the consequences to their ships and personnel. They’re terrified by this whole business, as well they should be. They’ve lost count of the number of their ships that have been compromised by the broadcast. The Tholians can’t even venture into those affected areas to try and head off their own vessels for fear of being overcome themselves.”

“Their decision is surprisingly pragmatic given the circumstances,” Trujillo remarked with surprise.

“The Tholian military doesn’t know if what’s been done to their crews can be undone, and given the nature of their biology, they don’t want to facilitate the spread of this cognitive compromise to the rest of their population.”

Trujillo’s expression darkened. “Sever the limb to save the body,” she said in a subdued tone.

“Precisely,” Saavik acknowledged. “I hereby authorize your plan of attack on the Longlax-Teko star, the spheres, and the affected Tholian warships.”

“Thank you, sir. I hope to speak with you again, soon.” Trujillo offered in parting.

“Good hunting, Commodore.”

Chapter 12

Davula stepped into the ready room at Trujillo's prompting, coming to attention in front of her desk.

"At ease, Commander. How go the preparations?"

Davula relaxed fractionally. "Lt. Commander Reinhart and the stellar probe have come aboard, sir. Ordinance division is loading the device in the forward-center tube. We're fifteen minutes away from launching the attack."

Trujillo nodded distractedly, turning her monitor screen towards the former science officer. "I've been toying with something, and I need to know if it has any merit?"

Davula instantly gathered that the device displayed on the screen was a modified communications buoy.

"Could we mass produce enough of these buoys to mimic the broadcast from the spheres? I thought we might be able to drop them at the system's edge and activate them at the same time as we're attacking the spheres. Hopefully we might draw the Tholians away from the stellar flare and spare them the fate of the spheres themselves."

Davula surmised where this was going and took the opportunity to seat herself across from Trujillo, unbidden. "Sir, respectfully, I absolutely understand your wanting to save lives, but we just don't have time to assemble these devices before our attack. Even if we could, the Tholians are right on top of the spheres themselves. They'll be engulfed by the flare within seconds of the spheres and there wouldn't be time for them to react, even if our broadcast was strong enough to catch their attention."

Trujillo's expression hardened and she blushed, embarrassed. "Of course, Commander. I'm sorry, I..." she trailed off lamely.

"I'm torn by the necessity of attacking the Tholians, too, sir," Davula confessed. "It certainly appears they're innocents caught up in someone else's scheme. But we don't know if the destruction of the spheres will break whatever grip that broadcast has on them. Even if your idea worked as you hoped, we could end up drawing still-hostile Tholians to the edge of the system and having to fight all of them there, rather than allowing the stellar flare to do the job for us."

Trujillo shook her head slightly, an ironic smirk drawing across her lips. "I knew you were the right choice, XO. I appreciate your putting my head back on straight."

Davula mustered an awkward smile in response. "I appreciate the compliment, sir. For the record, I'm of the opinion that whoever set this plan in motion might have been counting on our inherent decency to tie our hands until it was too late."

Trujillo stood suddenly and Davula followed suit.

"I should be on the bridge finalizing our attack plan. Thank you for hearing me out."

"My pleasure, sir."

* * *

"We're holding at Phase Line Alpha, sir," Naifeh reported from the Helm station.

Shukla added, "All Gauntlet vessels report ready, sir."

Trujillo activated her chair's safety restraints and ordered her subordinates to do the same. She looked to Davula. "XO, initiate countdown to launch."

"Aye, sir. Fifteen seconds... mark."

Trujillo brought her swing-arm console interface up, over and into her lap, having already checked and rechecked all possible taskforce attack formations. She could reorganize the squadron with the push of a single icon mid-battle, if necessary.

She opened the intraship. "*This is the Commodore. Stand to red alert, all hands maintain battle-stations, damage control and casualty collection teams stand ready.*"

"...three, two, one... mark," Davula announced. "Helm, execute."

Reykjavik and the task force jumped to warp in unison, initiating an emergency deceleration after only twenty seconds at warp five.

Like *Gol* had done hours earlier, the ships of Task Force Gauntlet risked critical engine failure and a host of other catastrophic possibilities for the advantage of surprise. Warping into a star's gravity well was not advisable under any circumstances, but this was the only way to arrive within weapons range without alerting their adversaries.

"We've decelerated to sub-light," Naifeh advised. "Impulse engines to full."

"This is Gauntlet-Actual, all ships open fire," Trujillo communicated via direct laser-link, given that subspace communications were now impossible due to the cacophony of the spheres' broadcast.

Eighty-four photon torpedoes and twelve tri-cobalt missiles flashed towards the twin disk formations of the spheres and their slowly rotating Tholian satellites. This veritable wall of anti-matter warheads began to track towards individual targets and was followed by a fusillade of phaser beams, lancing ribbons of energy that briefly connected aggressor and target.

The torpedoes impacted against the spheres and among the wildly maneuvering Tholian ships intent on sacrificing their own hulls to absorb the incoming ordinance. Phaser blasts shattered Tholian hulls where shields had been compromised and torpedo detonations savaged multiple vessels among the madly scrambling fleet whose ships were now racing in all directions.

From Ops, Shukla called out, "Sir, *Gol* reports an unrecoverable critical pressure control failure in their warp reactor. They're having to eject their core."

"Acknowledged, tell them to proceed under impulse power until we've cleared the star's gravity well, then we'll tow them out of the system," Trujillo ordered, tapping commands into her console to account for that new variable. She suppressed a surge of concern for Glal, Jarrod, and their stalwart crew. She'd worried that the stress of repeated stellar proximity warp jumps might prove more than that ship's engines could take.

"Salvo two away," Helvia noted dispassionately from the Tactical board.

From the Science station, Garrett announced, "Tholian ships have abandoned their web-structure and are coming about, I'm seeing warp engine initiation indicators in multip—"

"Evasive maneuvers, all ships!" Trujillo called out over the squadron laser-link, cutting Garrett off midsentence. "Kamikaze protocol!"

A half-dozen Tholian ships jumped to warp on deliberate collision courses.

Robau, an invaluable *Abbe*-class missile cruiser, proved a scant three seconds too slow on her slewing course to port. One moment she was ripple-firing volleys of torpedoes, the next there was an intense flash of light and a corona of superluminal debris fanning out in all directions. The quickly dying flare marked the final resting place of her crew of two-hundred and seventy-seven souls.

An instant later, the sturdy *Shras* followed suit, annihilated by the FTL impact with a Tholian frigate. In less than three seconds, both of Gauntlet's dedicated missile cruisers had been destroyed, cutting the squadron's torpedo capacity by one-quarter.

"*Robau* and *Shras* are gone!" Shukla cried, cracks forming in the young man's normally imperturbable demeanor.

"Understood," Trujillo grunted as a thermionic warhead crashed against *Reykjavik's* forward shields, followed by a tetryon beam impact. She toggled a pre-set icon on her board, ordering the task force's two *Excelsiors*, *Yorktown* and *Yi Sun-Sin* to assume the former positions of their fallen brethren.

"All ships, close with the Tholian formation to prevent further warp-collisions," Trujillo commanded over Gauntlet's comm-net. "Time until we're in firing range with the stellar probe?"

"Sixty seconds, sir," Helvia replied.

This will be the longest minute ever, Trujillo reflected mordantly.

Waves of fire and counter-fire slashed between the quickly merging formations. Starfleet had struck first and hard, destroying or damaging numerous Tholian craft, but the crystalline aliens still held the numerical advantage, and their voluminous return fire began to draw blood.

The *Chandley*-class frigate *Churchill* stove in the bow of a Tholian destroyer with concentrated torpedo and phaser fire, only to have five thermionic torpedoes from three different ships impact almost simultaneously, shredding her shields. A barrage of follow-on tetryon blasts pierced her fractured hull, causing the ship to yaw wildly to starboard as she shed escape pods.

Reykjavik's port and starboard forward torpedo launchers continued to unleash flights of crimson missiles while the center tube remained silent, biding its time with the precious stellar probe.

The attack-cruiser had been designed for battle, with dedicated power-systems intended to support a reinforced shield grid and near-constant phaser fire. As such, her phasers lashed out repeatedly in concert with her blistering photon volleys, clearing a path through the maelstrom of darting Tholian ships.

"Reading multiple photon and tri-cobalt impacts among the spheres, sir," Garrett reported. "I'm seeing tri-cobalt matter consumption cascades on at least two of the spheres, while seven others show significant surface damage."

"Distress call from *Itoman*, Commodore," Shukla announced, seeming to have recovered some of his composure. "They report they've taken catastrophic damage to propulsion systems and their shields are failing. They're adrift."

“Acknowledged,” Trujillo answered by rote, her mind compartmentalizing the desperation of the scout’s almost certainly doomed crew as she realized none of the squadron’s other ships could take her in tow with their shields raised. “Tell them to play dead until one of us can come back for them.”

“Five seconds until we’re in firing range with the stellar probe, sir,” Helvia said.

“Maintain course,” she instructed, glancing down at the command console in her lap where individual starship icons had begun to flash yellow, orange, and in the cases of those destroyed, crimson. Multiple impacts against their shields threw Trujillo against her chair’s restraints.

“Enemy fire increasing as we close with the spheres,” Helvia observed. “Shields holding, sixty-five percent across the grid.”

Trujillo ordered, “Weaps, deploy decoys and countermeasures.”

Specialized ports opened along the trailing edges of *Reykjavik’s* saucer, disgorging all manner of decoy drones, sensor-spoofing pods, and micro-torpedo sub-munitions designed to intercept enemy missiles in flight.

The rate of incoming fire slackened as Tholian tactical sensors were jammed, duped, and otherwise discombobulated.

Trujillo turned to look at Lt. Commander Reinhart, the science officer on loan from *Orion* and the designer of the stellar probe, seated at an auxiliary console on the bridge’s upper level. “We’re in range, Commander. Do your thing.”

“Aye, sir,” he replied, gesturing to Helvia at Tactical. “Fire the probe, Lieutenant.”

“Probe away. All available ships are firing torpedoes and decoy munitions to the same coordinates to cover the probe.”

Trujillo input a new set of coordinates into her console, directing those Gauntlet ships still able to adjust course to initiate a looping strafing run on the spheres, now that the task force had sliced through the Tholian formation which was scrambling to pursue.

She desperately hoped the probe would function as advertised but had to continue to execute their attack as if it would fail.

“Maintain fire on those spheres, Weaps,” Trujillo directed to Helvia at Tactical. “I want to see them burning.”

With the center photorp launcher now free of the probe, Helvia unlimbered the full might of *Reykjavik’s* tactical suite. The ship disgorged a seemingly endless stream of torpedoes as phaser blasts fanned out in all directions, striking spheres and Tholian ships alike.

“Structural compromise in nine of the spheres now, sir,” Garrett noted as a weapons impact jostled her in her seat.

“Shields still holding,” Helvia reported. “Fifty-two percent, and I’m compensating for our overtaxed forward and dorsal generators with auxiliary power.”

Reinhart called, “The probe has just penetrated the star’s photosphere. The warhead is detonating... now!”

“Helm, bring us around to zero-two-five, mark three-zero-seven and maintain full impulse. Weaps, deploy a second round of decoys and target pursuing threat vessels exclusively.”

Reykjavík came hard about, shooting past the remaining Gauntlet ships that had been following her lead and expelling a salvo of ordinance and collimated energy toward the madly corkscrewing formation of Tholians following in their wake.

The wildly firing *Reykjavík* tore through the pursuing ships, scattering them in all directions as she made a beeline for the *Itoman*.

“Engineering, does *Itoman* have sufficient structural integrity left to survive a tractor-tow at warp speeds?”

The junior lieutenant manning the bridge’s Engineering station shook his head vigorously. “No, sir, she’ll come apart if we try.”

“Weaps, drop some mines behind us and get ready to lower the shields. Ops, inform all transporter rooms that we’re going to be beaming *Itoman*’s survivors aboard.”

On the main viewer, the burning hulk of the destroyer *Honolulu* drifted briefly into view and then was gone from sight, fleeting testament to the loss of her compliment.

“Commodore!” Reinhart yelled from his station. “A level X-Nine stellar flare is erupting from the star’s surface.”

“I’m going to presume that’s a good thing, Commander,” Trujillo replied dryly, inputting a series of coordinates and sending them to the Tactical station. “Weaps, before we lower shields for evac, the Tholian destroyer at these coordinates, make it disappear.”

“Aye, sir.”

The station’s weapons-firing alert was warbling almost continuously now.

“Vessel neutralized, ready to lower shields.”

“Drop shields and initiate transport.”

“The stellar flare will reach the coordinates of the spheres in seventy-three seconds,” Reinhart said.

Trujillo toggled open the laser-link to the task force. “Gauntlet, we’ve done what we came here to do. If you’re still intact, take any disabled ships or escape pods in your vicinity in tow and let’s get the hell out of here.”

Reykjavík rocked savagely as a tetryon beam slammed into her naked superstructure, fracturing the saucer’s dorsal ablative armor matrix. Any bridge crew not lashed to their seats were thrown to the deck, with the exception of Helvia, who held on to his standing console like a piece of duranium statuary.

“Hull breach on decks two and three, pressure doors and forcefields in place, sir.”

“Weaps, set phasers to intercept incoming torpedoes. I don’t want to eat one of their warheads with our shields down!” Trujillo exclaimed.

“Aye, Commodore.”

“Twenty seconds until we’ve got all *Itoman*’s survivors aboard, sir!”

Shukla advised, “*Yorktown* reports they have *Gol* in tow and are egressing the system, sir.”

Thank you, Demora, Trujillo silently acknowledged.

“We’ve got Tholians inbound, sir. Three cruisers and a frigate approaching from two-nine-seven, mark one-zero-four. They’ll be in weapons range in ten seconds.”

Trujillo looked expectantly at Shukla, the man’s turban-adorned head low over his console in focused concentration.

He looked up suddenly, "Transporter room reports thirty-six survivors recovered, Commodore. They're moving several of them to Sickbay."

"Shields up. Helm, evasive course away from those ships until we're clear of the gravity well, then kick us up to warp five."

Reykjavík shot ahead and then arced away from the pursuing ships, powering out of the star's gravitational grasp as her aft torpedo launcher and phaser banks mauled the trailing warships.

Trujillo leaned back in her seat, feeling the slack in her shoulder restraints and realizing they had been restricting the blood flow to her arms and hands. She opened and closed her fingers as her eyes were drawn to the task force status display on her laptop console.

Five of sixteen ships lost, nearly twelve-hundred Starfleet personnel dead, not counting the casualties among the surviving ships. None of them had escaped damage in the melee. Suddenly Trujillo imagined those very same hands coated in blood, the end result of her strategy and tactics. She had consigned well over a thousand people and countless Tholians to their deaths in this otherwise unremarkable star system.

The bridge had fallen quiet as the individual crew absorbed recent events and came to terms with their own survival.

"Sir," Reinhart said, shattering the silence. "The stellar flare has consumed the spheres and nearly all the remaining Tholian vessels." He looked up from his displays, his face registering disbelief. "They didn't even *try* to evade it."

"No," she breathed, her voice heavy with loss. "Of course, they didn't."

Chapter 13

It was distressingly quiet in *Reykjavik's* large sickbay. Only the soft trilling of diagnostic monitors could be heard alongside the occasional muted conversation.

Patients filled the biobeds lining the curving outer bulkhead, some sleeping, others being tended to by medical staff. The fact that the atmosphere was so orderly, so sterile, somehow belied the horror these people had been subjected to only hours earlier.

Reykjavik herself had suffered one killed and three others injured during the hull breach incurred while beaming the survivors of the *Itoman* aboard. However, given that the scout had been holed through after her shields failed, most of the rescued crew had been wounded to some degree. *Reykjavik* had also taken on additional injured personnel from other ships whose sickbay facilities were overwhelmed.

Trujillo made her way through the compartment, stopping now and again to speak with an officer or enlisted rating. There were all manner of injuries among them, from missing limbs, to burns of varying degrees, to the aftereffects of explosive decompression and shrapnel from starship superstructures rent asunder by Tholian fire.

After a time, Trujillo found herself at the bedside of Lt. Commander Erasmus Boone, commanding officer of the ill-fated *Itoman*. Half of the man's face and head was encased in a bone-knitting cranial support frame due to his having suffered a significant skull fracture during the ship's death throes.

"How are you feeling, Captain?" she asked after finding the man's gaze focused on her.

"As well as could be expected, sir, under the circumstances." He craned his head stiffly, constrained by the headpiece, looking around Sickbay. "I only see a few of my people here, and I've been unable to get any answers from your medical staff."

Trujillo nodded slowly. "What do you need to know?"

"My crew," he said heavily, laying his head back onto his pillow. "How many of them made it off the ship?"

"Thirty-six," she answered, straining to keep her voice neutral.

"Just over half," Boone rasped, closing his one good eye and fighting back tears.

"I'm sorry," Trujillo offered, unable to find anything else to say.

"Did we do it?" he asked, struggling to maintain his composure. "Did we destroy the spheres?"

"Yes, we accomplished the mission."

Boone blew out a shuddering sigh. "That's something, at least." He spent a moment staring at the ceiling before fixing his eye on Trujillo. "What of their second wave? Did Alamo engage them, or will we have to?"

"Their second wave is still on the way, but they've slowed significantly. Their revised ETA is now eighteen hours. Starfleet and the Tholians are bombarding them with comms traffic, hoping to divert them now that the spheres' subspace broadcast is dissipating. Alamo's still holding position in the Draius-Arigulon system in case they decide to attack the Draiians on the way here."

Boone reached out towards her, seemingly without realizing he was doing it. His voice increased in both pitch and volume. "They've got... what... thirty more ships in that second wave? My God, how do we fight them off after all the losses we've taken?"

Trujillo stepped forward, taking Boone's hand and speaking in a discrete tone. "Captain, lower your voice. Your crew needs you to be strong for them, despite the circumstances."

It took a moment for Boone to pull himself together. "Of course, sir. I apologize. I... I've never lost a ship before."

"It's perfectly understandable, Captain."

"No," he breathed quietly. "Not captain, not anymore."

* * *

There was something about the impassivity of Saavik's expression that angered Trujillo, as if the losses suffered by her task force were of no consequence to the admiral. Rationally, Trujillo knew it was the Vulcan mask Saavik reserved for such occasions, the façade of aloof control that contained the roiling emotions of her Romulan half lurking just under the surface.

The abeyance of the local subspace interference allowed for a much clearer connection this time.

"I've read your after-action report, Commodore. You are to be congratulated. Gauntlet defeated a threat formation of more than three times your number, and you destroyed the spheres while taking comparatively fewer losses."

"We've suffered over thirty percent ship losses and thirty-seven percent personnel casualties, Admiral. Nearly half our surviving vessels have taken significant damage. By Starfleet Tactical's own criteria, Task Force Gauntlet should now be considered combat ineffective."

"Unfortunately, though that designation would be applicable in most circumstances, if the second Tholian formation continues on course you may be forced to re-engage, despite your losses."

"Understood, sir," Trujillo replied, her stomach twisting at the thought. "Though I'd like to call upon Task Force Alamo to support us, the risk to the Draaiian civilization is still too great. I'd recommend Captain Marshall keep his ships there."

"So noted," Saavik said.

"I—," Trujillo began, then paused, glancing down to where her hands were tightly clasped in her lap.

"Commodore?"

"I was going to ask if it always feels like this?" Trujillo confided. "I've lost people under my command before, but... never so many, it's... grotesque, like someone's sick joke. Including the loss of *Feynman* from Task Force Scythe during our run in to Qo'noS, I've now lost six ships under my command."

Saavik's expression shifted, her eyes offering a sliver of empathy. "It's *supposed* to hurt, Nandi. The day the losses stop hurting is the day you need to resign your commission.

This is what flag-level command can be. It's actually easier to be a captain, responsible for only your own ship and crew, than being the one that has to order entire squadrons into battle."

The admiral leaned forward slightly, her face softening. "This is why I need you, and those like you. I can't be everywhere at once, and the Federation is only growing larger by the day. Exploration and diplomacy are the lifeblood of Starfleet, but without the ability and the will to defend ourselves, all that we've built might crumble to dust."

Trujillo nodded, taking a breath to center herself. "Thank you, sir. I understand." She reached over to pick up a data-slate, holding it up for the comm imager. "I'm forwarding recommendations for citations, Admiral. Lt. Commander Reinhart of the *Orion* for developing and building the stellar probe, and Commander Glal for the *Gol's* reconnaissance of the Tholian formation and the spheres. There will be more to follow, as the individual ship commanders forward their reports and recommendations."

"I will sign-off on those and pass them along to Command. I've just had a conversation with Captain Marshall who's requesting additional assets to help blunt any attack by the Tholian second wave."

"Marshall's nothing if not persistent," Trujillo rejoined. "Alex just hates missing out on a fight. What's the border situation, Admiral? Any sign of a third wave?"

"Task Force Palisade has been reinforced by a squadron of Border Service cutters and although they've detected movement from the Tholians from across the border, no third wave has yet materialized. The Tholians may finally be getting their house in order now that the subspace transmission has been terminated."

"Let us hope, for all our sakes, sir."

"If the second wave comes to their senses and can be made to return to Tholian space, our priority will be to scour the Longlax-Teko system for any remnants of sphere technology. Those are to be secured until a dedicated science and threat-assessment team from the Corps of Engineers and the Daystrom Annex arrive on scene."

"Understood, sir," Trujillo acknowledged.

"I know that you will keep me apprised, Commodore. My condolences on your losses thus far. I hope you might be spared any further."

"Thank you, sir. *Reykjavík*, out."

Trujillo terminated the transmission, only to have her ready room door chime some twenty seconds later.

"Come," she called.

In walked Glal and Jarrod, both of whom still bore rips and dark smudges on their uniform jackets, courtesy of their two forays into a threat-occupied star system in the past five hours.

"All done with Her Majesty the Ice Queen? Good! Ever fought the Tholians without a warp core? No? Well, I have, and let me just tell you all about it."

Glal plopped down into a chair, with Jarrod following suit. He waved a thick-fingered hand at the secretive wall compartment that served as Trujillo's bar. "And while I'm at it, Commodore, I would entreat you to break out the good stuff."

Chapter 14

Captain's Log, Supplemental:

Task Force Gauntlet continues to affect repairs to our ships as the situation in and around the Longlax-Teko system appears to moderate.

Starfleet Command has allowed a small group of Tholian ships (escorted by Starfleet) to help corral the second wave of compromised Tholian vessels which had been on course for the Longlax-Teko system. It looks as though whatever effects the sphere transmission had on the Tholians are of limited duration once the transmissions were stopped.

I am grateful that no further battles need be had, as I take no satisfaction from destroying ships and their sentient crews enslaved by others.

In the meantime, Reykjavík and the other ships continue to sweep the system looking for any remnants of the mysterious spheres for analysis by Starfleet.

* * *

Captain Alexander Marshall held Trujillo's gaze across the light years, his image appearing on Trujillo's computer terminal.

"Commodore, I've just received confirmation from Command that Task Force Alamo is being disbanded and *Excalibur* is scheduled to embark on our deep-space exploratory mission after a brief layover at Starbase Earhart."

"Congratulations, Captain," Trujillo offered with a genuine smile. "You've earned the chance to go exploring after all this."

"I regret we were not able to participate in the battle to destroy the spheres," Marshall said, his expression tightening.

"Think of the bright side of the equation, Captain," Trujillo offered. "You and Alamo helped to safeguard eight-billion people, a species who was already considering applying for Federation membership. In their moment of need, you were there for them, and that won't be forgotten."

Marshall nodded reluctantly. "There is that, I suppose..." he trailed off, wanting to say more, but deciding against it.

"Captain Marshall, of the two of us, you may have made the correct decision in turning down that promotion," Trujillo said candidly, though unable to articulate why.

Marshall's expression shifted, his curiosity evident. "How so?"

"I'm discovering flag-rank isn't all adventure and accolades. Making the tough calls is fine when your side crosses the finish-line intact, but when your decisions result in hundreds or thousands of flag-draped caskets... that's where things become tricky."

"You think you made an error, sir, some kind of tactical mistake?" Marshall asked.

"No, I did the best I could, given the resources I had available. Regardless, over twelve hundred of our fellow personnel are dead. Trying to reconcile those two facts is... difficult for me."

“If it was unavoidable, Commodore, you shouldn’t fee—”

“They’re already calling me the Widow-maker, Alex,” she interrupted, closing her eyes briefly. “I’ve gone from being a captain with some measure of renown for tactical proficiency to a ship-sacrificing butcher in the space of a few weeks.”

Marshall sat back and to his credit appeared dismayed. “That’s awful, and unfair.” He felt a pang of guilt, given that he had suspected the same of her when Saavik had placed Trujillo in command of Gauntlet.

“I appreciate you saying so, but it’s how some people feel about me now. I suppose that’s to be expected.”

“People will always talk,” Marshall offered. “It doesn’t mean they actually know anything.”

Trujillo nodded at this wisdom. “Take your ship and go exploring, Captain. Enjoy the freedom of being weeks or even months away from Command and its fickle fleet politics. A deep-space mission is something I now regret not having pursued. The admiralty will always be here waiting for you when you return, if that’s your ambition.”

“I will, Commodore,” Marshall acknowledged. “And thank you, sir.”

* * *

A high-warp courier had delivered the two men to *Reykjavik* as Task Force Gauntlet was scouring the Longlax-Teko system for sphere debris.

The missive Trujillo had received from Command identified the men as ‘strategic consultants’, a euphemism often used to obfuscate the identities of Starfleet Intelligence personnel.

As soon as they were aboard, Mr. Escoffier and Mr. DeMarius requested a meeting with the commodore.

She granted them an audience in her ready room, initially observing that the two men carried themselves more like scientists than spies or operatives, lacking the reserved façades and evasiveness she had come to associate with those in the intelligence community.

They began with polite small talk, and Trujillo tested the waters by touching on Commander Davula’s colorful theories regarding the provenance of the spheres and their possible motives of their creators.

This prompted an interesting reaction from the pair, who exchanged a knowing look before turning to the business at hand.

“Commodore, you’ve done some fine work here, and we’d like to request your assistance in continuing it,” said Escoffier, the smaller and more bookish looking of the duo.

Trujillo looked at him with open skepticism. “How so?”

“As unlikely as it may sound, your first officer’s suspicions about the nature of the spheres encountered by Archer’s *Enterprise*, as well as those encountered by you, are essentially correct. We believe there is an extra-dimensional alien intelligence which is attempting to encroach on our space. The old Delphic Expanse was their first attempt to basically transform a swath of space to make it more compatible with their exotic biology.”

“And you think these spheres manipulating the Tholians was their second try?”

Escoffier shared a glance with DeMarius before turning back to Trujillo, looking a bit sheepish. “In point of fact, this was their third known attempt. There was a classified incident in the 2270’s where we believe they were trying to manipulate the energy patterns of the Helix nebula, turn it into some kind of massive resonance amplifier.”

“For what reason?”

“We don’t know for certain, as the plan was disrupted by the USS *Kongo*, which destroyed the spheres they encountered in the nebula.”

Trujillo frowned, appearing confused. “Wasn’t *Kongo* lost with all hands?”

“Yes, and the historical record reads that she was destroyed in a freak collision with a quantum filament. That was a cover story. The ship and crew met their end sabotaging a sphere that exploded prematurely, initiating a cascading collapse of the nebula’s sphere network.”

Trujillo’s expression grew pinched. “What’s the reason behind this cover up? We’ve faced down other threat species before. What necessitates that whoever is behind this be kept so secret?”

Another look was shared between the two men before DeMarius spoke up. “There’s a potential temporal component to all this. Starfleet Intel and the Department of Temporal Investigations suspect that this threat species has been engaging in this activity because they will be defeated by the Federation some decades or even centuries in the future.”

The intensity of Trujillo’s stare caused Escoffier to shift uncomfortably in his seat. “You appear dubious, Commodore.”

“You’re joking,” she accused. “Time travel? Future enemies attacking us in the past and present?”

“We share your incredulity, but many people with far more impressive credentials than we possess believe it’s likely,” Escoffier explained.

“Each iteration of the spheres is larger and more complex than the previous ones,” DeMarius offered. “Given their evident cloaking abilities, it’s nearly impossible to know where more of them may have been hidden within Federation territory.”

“Why *Reykjavik*? We’re not a science vessel, and despite our recent upgrades, we still lack the scientific resources needed for this kind of work.”

DeMarius made an expansive gesture with his hands. “Your ship is fast and has the tactical abilities necessary to cope with nearly any contingency. Additionally, given that you’re often called to diplomatic and military hot spots throughout the Alpha and Beta Quadrants, your ship being pulled from other duties on short notice would not appear suspicious.”

Confusion was again evident on Trujillo’s features. “Suspicious? You make it sound as though someone is surveilling Starfleet deployments.”

Escoffier nodded vigorously. “Indeed. If the temporal component of our working theory is correct, it’s possible that the Sphere Builders have gained access to Starfleet records at some point in the future.

Utilizing those, they may make... or *will be* making decisions about when and where to position and activate the next series of spheres based on Starfleet patrol routes and deployments.”

Trujillo rubbed the bridge of her nose, feeling a headache coming on. “I’m sorry, but this seems so entirely far-fetched.”

DeMarius gave her a sympathetic look. “Commodore, I was highly skeptical the first time I was approached about working on this threat assessment group, too. If you agree to this assignment, we’ll provide all the classified materials gathered over the last one-hundred and sixty-eight years, which are substantial. They paint a rather convincing picture.”

“I guess I’m still unclear as to what we would be doing, specifically?” Trujillo asked.

“You’d be working as part of Admiral Saavik’s defense group, as you’d previously agreed. However, every so often you will be called away from those duties to investigate possible Sphere Builder activity. You might be called upon to scan a comet swarm, or investigate a nebula, or catalogue aberrant energy signatures from a stellar nursery. It’s entirely likely that your missions on behalf of our group will be few and far between.”

Trujillo considered the pair for a long moment, weighing the potential threat posed by this allegedly time-spanning threat species. Her innate skepticism was outweighed by the death and destruction Gauntlet had just suffered at the hands of the Tholians, at the behest of those spheres.

Nandi Trujillo decided in that moment that she owed the Sphere Builders a blood debt, and she hoped that she might have the opportunity to repay it in kind and in person.

“I’m in,” she said simply.

“Excellent, we’re very pleased to have you. Welcome to the Threat Analysis Working Group’s Team Four, colloquially known as the ‘Sphere Busters.’”

Trujillo snorted. “Can I have a patch? I presume there’s a patch.”

The Blue Orchid Restaurant Star Station Kymburn Kurata Sector

The restaurant was excellent, and the company was even better.

Reykjavik, *Yorktown* and *Gol* had wandered farther afield and docked at this frontier outpost to complete repairs, as Starbase 443's shipyards were presently overwhelmed with the more critically damaged vessels from the Battle of Longlax-Teko.

Now Trujillo, Demora Sulu, and Glal sat together, eating and talking against the mesmerizing backdrop of the Kurata Nebula through the restaurant's expansive viewports.

"Garrett still hasn't given me an answer," Sulu noted dryly.

"She's weighing her options," Trujillo replied. "Given our new mission profile, she's seriously considering staying put."

"I'm just not used to someone having to think about an offered posting to *Yorktown*," Sulu admitted before giving Trujillo a sly glance. "And just what *is* your new mission profile, Commodore?"

"I'm honestly not being glib when I say this, but it's classified," Trujillo answered with a regretful look. "Though given what we've just experienced you wouldn't be hard pressed to figure out what it's related to."

Sulu nodded knowingly as she ate another forkful of her salad.

"Our next official assignment, however, will take us core-ward towards the Deneva sector. There's been an uptick in organized piracy in the region, the Orion Syndicate flexing its muscles again."

Trujillo shot a pointed look at Glal. "It goes without saying that we could use some help. Do you know anyone with a highly maneuverable perimeter-action ship that might give Orion blockade runners an ulcer?"

Glal smiled thinly behind his beard. "I know a guy."

Trujillo raised an eyebrow appraisingly. "Is that guy going to remain in active service, in command of said vessel? Inquiring minds, and the Starfleet Bureau of Personnel, would like to know sooner than later."

A long sigh escaped Glal, and he sat back in his chair, swirling the Yridian brandy in his glass. "I can't believe I'm saying this, but yes." He shook his head. "Most of my cobbled-together crew, even the ones I Syracused off the starbase, are actually willing to stay aboard, so long as BUPERS signs off on it."

Trujillo nearly spit out a mouthful of water, coughing. "It's Shanghaied, Commander. Not 'Syracused'."

"Whatever, sir," he replied, waving his free hand dismissively. "And my damned fool first officer is insisting on remaining onboard as well, foregoing that open spot at the Advanced Tactical School."

Sulu smiled. "It appears his new commanding officer generates a healthy amount of loyalty."

"I'm really glad to hear that," Trujillo said. "The part about you remaining in command of *Gol*, that is. The bit about Gael passing on ATS, not so much."

"The school isn't going anywhere," Glal noted.

Sulu nodded supportively. "True, and a stint as XO on a ship that's seen a lot of action certainly isn't going to hurt his chances of getting back in after a deferral."

"Fine," Trujillo relented, "but you damned well better keep him out of trouble."

Glal snorted, his expression incredulous. "I'm not the one who sent him into an occupied star system aboard a single gunship to kick over the *gliesha's* nest."

"Fair point," Sulu affirmed, shrugging apologetically towards Trujillo.

Trujillo nodded reluctantly. "*Touché*, Commander." She looked to Sulu. "And you, you be careful out there in the great unknown, Demora. You will be sorely missed."

Sulu smiled. "Thank you, and I'll miss all the gang, too. I just couldn't sit out a chance to push back the curtain and go exploring like Dad."

Trujillo paused to drink in the moment, studying her friends. "I know I'm not known for effusive displays of emotion, but I want you both to understand how dear you are to me. These last few missions have reinforced for me how precious, and how fragile each life is."

She raised her glass in a toast. "To our ships, our crews and the stars, may they always occupy the heavens."

"Here, here," the others chorused agreeably.

They drank to that.

END