

# **Voyage of the Sparrow Hawk**

**By Merfilly©**

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For Reyka\_Sivao.

I had heard the Earth saying 'born under a lucky star' a few times in my relatively short career. I had even heard it applied to me, after getting out of a couple of pretty nasty scrapes. I was pretty sure, especially right now as we came out of warp into real space, that there had never been a worse description for me. Or Sarda. Or Merete. Or Scanner. Because up ahead on our sensors, there was a firefight going on, and we were running half-crew on an experimental long-distance exploring craft.

"Shields up, power up phasers," I said immediately, ignoring that we were not even a quarter of the size of the largest craft involved in the battle. I was counting three vessels. There were two attackers, preliminary identifications coming in as birds-of-prey, and one defender, a warp-impaired D7 battle cruiser.

Scanner looked over at Merete, then back at me. That he didn't look at Sarda just made me grit my teeth harder. It meant Sarda was doing the blank-Vulcan stare ahead.

"I gave an order," I reminded him.

"We can't just go bustin' on up in this little pow-wow, Piper," Scanner pointed out. "Shake-down cruise does not mean 'engage the enemy'. Especially when the underdog is still an enemy."

"The captain is correct," came Sarda's reply, and my jaw almost dropped to the deck. Granted, I shouldn't even need that vote of confidence, and technically Scanner was pushing hard against the narrow line between advice and

mutiny. But Sarda had agreed with my immediate impulse for the situation? That was showing confidence in his own designs.

Scanner didn't sigh, didn't even grind his teeth as he brought his attention fully to his console. "Shields up and phasers powering up."

"None of the three ships appear to have noticed our arrival or change in power levels," Merete reported, aiding Sarda with sensor arrays.

"Good. That means the defensive array is actually working," I said with a breath of relief.

"You were holding out on me!" Scanner accused, even as he flipped the small forward view on, orienting the ship so the battle was ahead and we shared the same plane as the D7 in space.

"Didn't think we'd get to test it," I told him cheerfully. "You really ought to have more faith in your captain."

Merete coughed to cover a giggle, but it was Scanner who answered. "I do. To go chargin' right in, like one of those fairy-tale white knights!"

"I would say that the adaptation of the hologram projectors into a masking application is going to prove its worth," I said, projecting my voice at Sarda. "First Officer, do you agree it is in the Federation's best interests for us to watch this battle and learn why two forces from our nearest threats are fighting in space contested by us and one of

those powers?"

"I do, Captain... from a distance. I do not yet know how the plasma weaponry of the birds-of-prey would affect the masking technology," Sarda said, giving me great advice as always.

"Scanner, scoot us up a little closer, to let Merete see if she can hear anything on the comm bands?" I said blithely, ignoring half of Sarda's sentiments, as he had to have guessed -- no, not guessed, but predicted -- I would.

"Scooching," Scanner said with a grin in his words for the very un-Naval wording of my order and his own acknowledgment. We were a hell of a team, and I was looking forward to hashing out who the other half of our team would be once we made it back to K-7. First things first... why were a pair of Romulan vessels, of the older design, attacking a D-7 when supposedly the Roms and Klingons were in bed with each other again? And they were just barely inside the Klingon Neutral Zone, I realized, looking at the relative locations of their ships to the delineated border on my star charts.

Then the D-7 managed to fire off a photon into the exhaust of one of its harriers, maneuvering on impulse to get her broader shielding of the main body of the ship up against the resultant explosion, and everyone on my little ship went silent.

Romulan Bird of Prey markings on the underbelly of the D7 meant that all three ships were Rom, and there were no

Klingons in the fight yet, but we all knew that wasn't going to last if they kept at it.

"This makes no sense," Merete said from her position, monitoring what she could hear even as her eyes flicked up to the screen. "Romulan language, but the computer is picking out two distinct dialects."

"It's one on one, now, but that little one seems intent on takin' the big one down," Scanner said, settling in to just observe the dogfight between the crippled D7 and its smaller harrier.

"Merete? Can you make out what's going on?"

"The translator's trying," the most gentle member of her crew stated, after a tense moment of listening further. "I am recording it all for Starfleet's linguists."

"Carry on." I turned enough to see Sarda, tipping my head to one side.

"No indication on long-range scans that the Klingons have noticed, and sensors are recording all information. The plasma explosion did cause a momentary flicker in the masking technology, but neither ship indicated an awareness of us."

"Are we cloaked?" Scanner asked, confused. "Because this just feels weird, sitting here with a front-yard view of a brawl."

"Not cloaked, exactly," I answered, so Sarda didn't have to actually talk about his genius. "The holographic technology

we all know so well can be manipulated and fed other data. As soon as we came out of warp, it analyzed the ambient environment of this sector and is scattering our energy readings to appear like normal radiation and photonic action. A direct scan would reveal us, but a passive one won't."

"Essentially correct," was Sarda's epitaph on my round-up of his concepts. I couldn't help but grin, even as I leaned forward from the center chair, my very own center chair from the very commissioning of this little vessel, called the *Sparrow Hawk*.

"I wish I could help, but which side?" I murmured.

"Obviously the one set upon by the two better armed ships," Scanner said, overhearing me.

"Both of which are older models and should not have been able to cripple that D7 so much," I said. "It doesn't add up."

"Starfleet intelligence will know what to make of it better than we can," Merete counseled.

"Captain, may I suggest we depart before there is a —"

Sarda's words trailed off as a sudden burst of speed from the small bird-of-prey had it all but leaping into the still half-functional nacelle of the D7.

"SHIELDS AT MAXIMUM!" I was screaming in the same instant my eye made out that maneuver, and Scanner, bless his soul, was flipping switches as fast. We felt gravity cut out as inertial dampeners were killed, lost most of the

lighting, and even the forward view as Scanner proved his worth ten times over, drawing every erg of energy he could to the shields. And, because Sarda had built those relays himself, the shields took the excess energy and used it. We only felt the buffeting as the wave of plasma energy mingled with a shattered dilithium-based system and spread out from the point of impact.

When Scanner got everything back to normal and gave us a forward view again, there was nothing left but debris. I felt sick to my stomach, knowing that nobody had survived, and feeling wretched at having not chosen to give aid at all.

"You could not render aid with no true data," Sarda said from his place, too attuned to my way of thinking now. "If we erred by sentiment for the lone ship, it might have been a rogue element bent on starting a new war with the Empire. If we chose to assist the older, less-capable ships, we might have unwittingly ended lives seeking escape. There was no method for stopping the battle to avoid either side from being lost."

"Doesn't make it stink less," was Scanner's addition.

"Then I suggest we attempt to capture the buoy jettisoned by the D7," Merete said, making us whirl to stare at her. Well, except Sarda, who turned more sedately with an uplifted eyebrow. "Whatever mission it was on, perhaps the buoy will be of worth to help offset their loss."

"Maybe," I said. "Scanner, navigate a course to overtake the buoy before it fully enters Klingon space, and catch it



in a tractor." I thought we would be able to do it swiftly enough to keep from violating any treaties, given our tractor reach.

"Aye aye, Captain!"

The current station manager and the Starfleet commander aboard K7 met the small crew of four without much ado, but promptly enough that I was wondering what nefarious plot we'd stumbled into this time. Sarda was carrying the buoy on a null-grav sled, and Merete was flanking him on one side, with Scanner on the other. I was, as usual, out front and center.

"We are grateful for the recovery of the buoy," the Commodore told us, and I could feel the gathering storm of 'need to know' brewing. "I am told the *Sparrow Hawk* is being tested for long-range exploration with a variety of systems designed for camouflage and security of the crew. Glad to see it aided you in going undiscovered."

"Commodore Barrett," I interjected then. "My hesitation to choose sides in what we witnessed may well have cost lives needlessly. Can you please tell us just what the buoy represents, since you are not surprised by it?"

The manager made a noise, but the Commodore waved him off. "You have a forthright manner, Commander. I appreciate that. And, while it is true that the crew of the D7 would have been even more valuable alive, the buoy

contains the information they were attempting to defect with."

I didn't need to look at my crew to know they were all startled. Why had they cut all the way over to Klingon space to try and defect?

"We have intelligence indicating there is a deep schism in the Romulan Empire, and those who were seeking asylum were bringing us the power structure behind it all."

Commodore Barrett indicated the buoy. "You will all receive commendations, and I guarantee you the pick of those eligible for transfer to flesh out your crew, Commander."

Here it was. I could see it in his eyes.

"It would be good to have a craft like yours assigned here. I've been told I may offer you the patrol route I have in mind, far ranging, up and down the boundaries."

"Neutral zone patrol?" I asked, not looking at my crew. I had to get the details, before I even took this back to hash out, and they could hear it all at once too.

"Up to and including stretches along the Romulan, Klingon, Gorn, and Tholian spaces, where they interact with Federation claimed systems," Commodore Barrett said. "Starfleet wants your little ship out on the forefront of expansion, I know, but while we dissect the data in this buoy, and decide on how to handle the Romulans, your vessel is uniquely suited to being an Intelligence

detachment."

Which, I realized suddenly, would mean some of the other half of the crew we'd be recruiting would probably be Intelligence.

"Commodore, I was really looking forward to the expanse, but if you give me a couple of hours to consider the offer, I'll have an answer for you by next meal."

I wanted to take it. But I couldn't unilaterally decide for my team, even if I did hold the rank and the hot seat.

Barrett just nodded, and gave a negligent dismissal, letting us escape.

Sarda's contemplation, Scanner's hyperactivity, and Merete's quiet worrying all weighed on me, all the way back to our ship... and I knew we were all about to make the choice that would further define us as a crew for all time.

No matter which way we chose, I knew the future was going to be loud and full of action.

Just like it always was.