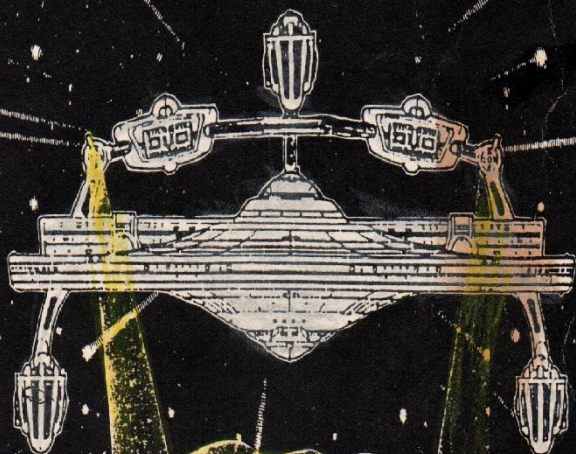


PROJECT ADREFT: THE BEGINNINGS



THE ADREFT
PROJECT

By Gary Pirtle
with Sean O'Keefe

Project Adrift: The Beginnings

By Gary Pirtle
With Sean O'Keefe
Story by Gary Pirtle

FOREWARD

Greetings everyone. I hope you will like reading this story. This is the second of a trilogy of stories written by Star Trek fans. The trilogy covers a time period in the Star Trek world from the Original Series to the Next Generation. This story takes place in the movie time period, starting with TWOK and ending at TFF. If you would like more information about this story or the other stories of the trilogy, please contact me at the email address listed below. The Trilogy consists of the following stories: Crisis on Detente II; Project Adreft: The Beginnings; and Memoirs of Samuel K. Wilkerson III.

Acknowledgments go out to the following as writers that are part of the *Gallant*.

Dana Reynolds for Crisis on Detente II.

Ben Steed for the *Memoirs of Samuel K. Wilkerson III*.
(unfinished due to his passing).

Finally, myself for *Project Adreft: The Beginnings*.

I would also like to thank Mark Vaughan, one of the founders of the original Gallant 1869 that was a part of Starfleet the International Fan Club in 1986. He wrote the David Bailey logs in this story.

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PROJECT ADREFT: THE BEGINNINGS

Part One

Through the vastness of space, a long-range shuttle was moving swiftly towards its destination. It was only three hours away from the Epsilon II space station from our embarkation point. On board were four passengers and a crew of five. I took note when I boarded – an old habit. The constant, gentle hum of the warp drive was lulling me to sleep. I noted I wasn't the only one. Sitting, gazing out the window, my eyes heavy, I heard a voice yelling out at me: "Hey, Mac! What's so interesting out there?"

Turning around to reply, I saw an older, tallish gentleman with grey hair. On his chest he was wearing ribbons, medals and awards. Apparently, he was a serviceman, he certainly wasn't backward in coming forward about his achievements. I responded, "Nothing sir. I was just thinking about how these shuttle rides are long and boring."

"I know what you mean, Mac," said the older gent, having moved to a closer seat to speak.

I looked at this gentleman, noting all of the awards. "You're with the Starfleet Marines, aren't you?"

"How did you guess? The jewelry, I suppose."

"Yes," I said.

"Let me introduce myself," said the older gent. "I am Sgt. Oscar C. Macgregor, retired of the Starfleet Marines. I'm on my way to Tarsus IV where I will live out my retirement. Whom do I have the honor of addressing?"

I looked at him with amusement, thinking this is all I need: a talkative Marine. I then proceeded to answer him. "You are addressing Rear Admiral Ollity Sään of the Inspector General's Office."

When he heard that he went quiet. "What's wrong, Sergeant?" I asked. "Did I say something wrong?"

"No, sir." said Macgregor. "I am just not used to speaking with the Inspector General."

"Don't let that bother you." I said with a smile. "I am just like everyone else."

The shuttle arrived at Epsilon II space station – eventually. Staring out the viewport, I had a great chance so see the station from the outside. It reminded me a lot of K-4. However, I had always thought that this space station was smaller.

After the airlock pressurized and everyone disembarked, I went to find the station manager, an old friend from way back. I knew just where to find him.

Upon arriving at the station manager's office, I met a woman who was quite lovely. I asked, "Is Takk in his office?"

Meeting my orange-blue eyes with her sapphire, she replied, "Yes, it is. I'm waiting to see him, too."

I gave her a brief smile, then I introduced myself – with my first name only. Hoping my skills weren't completely rusty, I asked: "Are you busy later today? I would like to buy you a drink."

"No, I'm not busy. I'd like that very much. I'll meet you in the lounge around 19:00, if our mutual friend doesn't keep you too long." She checked her wrist chronometer, which I thought an odd affectation. "I'll have to reschedule. I have another meeting to get to." She gave me a parting smile as she left: "I'll see you this evening. Bye." As she walked away, I suddenly realized I had no idea of her name.

I waited around for a few minutes when Takk entered the room, carrying a padd. He looked up when he saw my feet and, quite surprised, said: "Well, I'll be if it isn't OLLIE! How are things going? What are you doing out here?"

"Takk, you old devil, how are you doing?" I gestured about me. "So, now they got you minding space stations?" I gestured towards his office. "Let's continue this conversation where we can have a little privacy."

He nodded and ushered me inside. Closing the door, he gave me a curious eye.

I put him out of his misery. "I'm out here on a special assignment. I believe they used to call it TDY in the twentieth century. Things have been going well lately, career-wise. You do know that I am now the Vice-Inspector General."

He offered me a chair. "If anyone else had said that, I would have thought that they were boasting." Giving me a slight nod, he continued. "Yes, I do. I also know that you are not out here for that job."

"How do you know that?" I asked.

"A couple of months ago the *USS Gallant* dropped by to deliver some top-secret dispatches. I believe you know the XO, Commander Kraam." Takk poured us each a drink.

After gratefully accepting the glass of liquor, I took a sip, relishing the flavor. I gave him a smile of appreciation. "That's good stuff, Takk. You are right, Kraam and I go back a long way; I helped him to reenter the Academy." Holding the glass up to the light I added: "You still make a mean Brandy Seven."

Takk went over to his security drawer and pulled out an envelope with my name on it, then handed it to me. "Ollie please read this dispatch when you are aboard the *USS Bonhomme Richard*. I believe they used to call it the 'Bonnie Dick' using a twentieth century term."

I looked over at him after sipping my drink. It was a very old joke. "When does the *Bonnie Dick* arrive?"

Takk walked over to his desk and fumbled through some papers. Upon finding the one he wanted and reading, he said. "According to this, the *Bonhomme Richard* will be here in the morning."

Inwardly, I smiled to myself. Takk had always been a bit of a luddite. Never use a computer when good, old-fashioned paper will do the job. I had to admit to myself that even in the age of duotronics, I'd still occasionally find some of my files had gone the same way as my socks.

"Good," I said. "That gives me some time to have a drink with the lady I met in your outer office before you got here."

"What lady are you talking about?" said Takk as he walked over to pour another drink.

"A lovely blonde woman, who said she was waiting to see you as well."

Takk held up the bottle. "Want a refill?"

"No." I said, "I have to slow down."

"You must have met Ensign Daniels," said Taak. "She's been requesting a transfer for quite some time. I have got to admit to evading giving her an answer. I should say something, though."

"If you don't want her, I am still looking for a Flag Secretary for the new assignment I am on. If you have no objections, may I have her?" I asked, putting my sealed orders in my coat pocket.

"Very well, I will draw up her transfer then," said Takk helpfully. Sitting down at his desk, he pushed a button on his comm panel. In seconds, in walked one of the station's personnel. Takk proceeded to write something down, then rising, handed me the paper and said, "I hope she will work out for you." Glancing at the aide, he said: "Bok, will you show the Admiral to his quarters?"

Parting, we shook hands, and I turned and followed Bok to my quarters. It was fast approaching 19:00 hours, station time and I didn't want to be late. As I began to get dressed, I heard a knock at my door. "Enter."

It was Ensign Daniels. Brazenly, she walked over to a chair at the computer console, sat down and said, "I decided to drop by, so we could walk together to the Officers' lounge. This way we could get to know each other first."

"Fine," I said. I was impressed by how she carried herself, confident in the face of pressure. "I'll be a moment longer, then we'll go."

Finally, suitably attired, we left my quarters and headed towards the lounge. Upon entering we found it crowded, but finally we found a table in back where we ordered our drinks and began to talk.

As Daniels was sharing her opinion of the state of Romulan affairs, I was thinking, *she'll make a fine flag secretary*. She seemed to have her finger on the pulse of the Quadrant's affairs, and she wasn't afraid to share her opinions.

At that moment, a commotion was beginning in the lounge between a couple of non-coms who had clearly had one too many. Security showed up and had a few terse words and things finally cooled off. We sat silently, watching.

When it broke, I finally found out her first name was Deborah. I thought it was appropriate for a woman who seemed to always be buzzing.

I decided it was time to come clean. "Deborah, I'm Rear Admiral Ollity Sään." Across the table, I noted the young woman stiffen a little – a leftover from the Academy, I was sure. "Since I arrived on the station, I've been impressed by you. I need an assistant for my current mission." It was time to tell her that she was being

transferred to my staff. "Deborah, I have here your transfer papers," I said as I pulled them from my coat pocket. "Takk mentioned to me that you wanted one. He also mentioned that he tried to avoid giving you an answer – I'm beginning to understand why – until I mentioned that I needed a flag secretary." She looked stunned as I handed her the transfer papers. I proceeded to say, "I have chosen you for the job. My mission has its risks, so I want this to be voluntary. If you're not interested, I'll tear these up."

She was stunned, like a deer caught in the headlights. "I don't know what to say," she said. "I need to think it over first."

"Fine, but I must know by tomorrow before the *Bonhomme Richard* comes to pick me up and take me to my destination. Oh, by the way, there is a promotion in it for you, to Lieutenant Junior Grade."

Deborah then asked, "What position do you hold?"

"I hold the position of Vice-Inspector General," I said calmly.

"Oh," said Deborah. For the first time since I met her, she seemed off-balance. "I really must think this over first. I will let you know before your ship arrives." She stood. "If you'll excuse me, Admiral."

I gave her a nod, and with that, we both got up and left for our quarters. Tomorrow was going to be a long day.

It was early morning when rolled out of bed. I didn't sleep too well, my mind kept returning to my upcoming mission. I looked over at the timekeeper, which displayed 0400 hours. I started to pack my things and await the arrival of the *Bonhomme Richard*. I did not know what time the ship would exactly arrive, so I had to be ready. After taking a

shower to freshen up, I took my things to the transporter room where I left them so I would not have to return for them, then I headed towards the lounge for some breakfast.

Upon entering, I found it quite crowded for this time of the morning. I went over to the food synthesizer and ordered my favorite breakfast. Halfway through my bacon and eggs, I looked up to see Ensign Daniels entering the lounge. I watched as she went over to the food synthesizer and ordered her meal.

"Ensign, over here," I called.

Deborah turned around to see who called out to her, but it was clear she didn't see me at first, so I started to wave to get her attention. Finally, she spotted me through the crowd on the far side of the room and started over to my table. I looked up and said, "Care to join me?"

"Yes, I will. Thank you, Admiral."

She slid into the seat opposite me and carefully placed her breakfast on the table. I got the impression that she did everything deliberately. *She does not like making mistakes*, I thought.

"Have you given any thought about your transfer?" I asked while I finished off my bacon rinds.

"I have, Admiral. I have decided to accept," Ensign Daniels said while she sipped some orange juice.

"Very good," I said. "I will take care of the promotion paperwork on the *Bonhomme Richard*, along with what your duties will be."

"Ok, I've packed and I'm ready to leave at a moment's notice," said Deborah, all business.

Maintaining my poker face, I had to admit to myself I was impressed with this young woman. She was clearly efficient, and I wondered at the limits of her ambition.

Before I could say a word, she flipped out her communicator. "Ensign Daniels to Station Command. Do we have an ETA for the *Bonhomme Richard* for Admiral Sään yet?"

The tinny answer came back immediately. "She's scheduled for 1000 hours today."

Deborah gave a quick "Thank you" before she snapped the cover shut.

"Meet me in transporter room five then," I said. "I've left my luggage with them."

The ensign gave me a brief nod, then started eating her fruit and yoghurt. I couldn't help wondering if it was any good considering what I knew it was made from.

After breakfast, I went to the library to catch up on some reading. I have always had a flair for history, and I'm a big fan on the exploits of Jonathan Archer and the crew of the *Enterprise NX-01*. I selected a tape and began to read.

It must have been longer that I had expected – and my exhaustion caught up with me. I fell asleep with my head to the side. I guess the Admiral's stripes on my sleeves give me a certain amount of grace.

When I awoke, the station was bustling with people. I glanced at the chronometer on the wall and realized it was only ten minutes to ten. I stood quickly and left the library heading towards the reception room.

I wasn't surprised when over the communications speaker I heard: "Admiral Sään report to transporter room five."

I'm coming, I'm coming, I thought.

When I arrived, I saw the Executive Officer of the *Bonhomme Richard* waiting for me, a thirtyish Asian woman

of small stature, but forceful nature. She was in a hurry and began saying, "Come on, Admiral, we are running behind schedule."

I respected her dedication to the mission, so I let her mild disrespect go. I gathered my things and set them on the transporter pad, and only then realized that Deborah was not yet here.

To the XO's annoyance, I said, "I still have one more person with me." I gave her a brief smile. "You're earlier than I expected."

As I stepped onto the transporter pad, Daniels stalked through the doors, stepped up onto the pad behind me, placed her things on the transporter pad next to her, then positioned herself.

The XO gave the transporter operator a brief nod, then we found ourselves materializing in the transporter room of the *Bonhomme Richard*. In the pristine room that looked so much like what we had just left, we found the captain and security personnel waiting for us. I knew the captain by reputation; a slightly tall, dark-haired woman who was all business.

Stepping down from the transporter pad I followed tradition and said, "Permission to come aboard?"

"Granted," she said. "You have met my first officer, Commander Chan." She stepped forward, her hand outstretched. "I am Captain Kirsten Lafayette."

"Yes, I know, Captain. I am Rear Admiral Sään of the IG's office. This is my Flag Secretary Ensign Deborah Daniels. I appreciate the lift."

The captain ushered us into the hall. "This way, Admiral, I hope you will find your quarters adequate."

I couldn't help wondering if this woman knew how to have fun. *All work and no play*, I thought. "I am sure they

will be just fine, Captain." I wasn't surprised to find the ship had the standard décor that was typical of the ships modeled after the old Connies. "Do you have a meeting room that I can use for a couple of hours? I have some orders to read and a promotion ceremony to perform."

As we stopped outside the VIP Quarters, the captain toggled open the door. "Yes, I do, Admiral. Deck eight, section ten. I will join you when I have the time." The captain pointed further down the hall. "Ensign Daniels, your quarters are down the hall, Stateroom Two."

It was clear to me that the captain was itching to return to her regular duties. Lafayette gave me a brief, almost embarrassed smile. "If you'll excuse me, Admiral."

She barely waited for my nod before she disappeared down the hall.

Deborah caught my eye and I tipped my head in the direction of her room. She got the message and went to settle in.

After entering my quarters, I ordered a coffee from the food dispenser on the wall. I sat down at the small table and began putting together my thoughts before going to the meeting room to proceed with business. I tried to enjoy the "coffee", but no matter how many times I requested the Starfleet Nutrition department of the Corps of Engineers, they could never get the matrix right. Still, it was better than nothing, and it gave me a bit of a boost as my library nap didn't quite do the job.

At 1030, I entered the meeting room and broke open the sealed orders that I had received on the space station. I glanced up as Ensign Daniels arrived.

Good, I thought. We can now get down to work.

I ushered the ensign over. She stood before me. I suspected she knew what was about to happen, as her eyes

twinkled with anticipation. "With the power entrusted to me from Starfleet Command, I hereby promote you to the rank of Lieutenant Junior Grade, assigned to the position of Flag Secretary for the Vice Inspector General." I handed her the new ensign for her shoulder strap and smiled.

"Thank you, Admiral." Deborah said, quietly delighted. "I'm honored."

I pointed to the chair next to mine and we sat down. I then proceeded to inform her of the duties that were expected of her.

I was pleased when she absorbed the information without a word.

"Right now, *Lieutenant*," I said with a small smile, using her new rank for the first time. "I need you to head down to personnel records and retrieve some records for me." *I needed to know what was happening on Merrlyn.*

When the doors snapped shut behind Deborah, I found myself alone with my thoughts. I then opened my sealed orders and proceeded to read.

TOP SECRET

*To Rear Admiral Ollity Sään,
From Fleet Admiral Morrow.*

Re: Project ADREFT.

You are hereby ordered to assume command of the top-secret project code named ADREFT – Avenger Design Refit) from Commodore Alton Short. You will also serve as command of the project's security. Use any personnel that you deem fit. You will find enclosed orders for Commodore Short.

The following top-secret document will outline Project Adreft.

The reason for this change of command is that I have it on good report that Commodore Short has lost control of this project and that security is extremely lax.

Considering we are entering a time when both Klingons and Romulans will try to find out about this project, given the success of the Constitution-class refit project.

Also enclosed are orders for Commander Samuel K. Wilkerson III to report directly to Starfleet Command immediately. He is to take over as Engineering project commander of the Ingram/Excelsior Program. If you have further questions, contact Admiral Fshynda Fa'A'Aren of Starfleet Research and Development Department at Star Station Aurora.

Good luck, Admiral.

Rubbing my eyes, I realized I needed to stop by Sickbay some time and get another dose of Retinax. Focusing on the pages was not as easy as it used to be. I sighed. *The price of aging*, I thought.

I checked my watch to see that it was just past noon. My stomach told me it was time to replenish my energy supply, so I stood and carefully placed the outline in my security pouch and headed for the galley.

I was mildly surprised that the chicken sandwich I ordered was actually quite good. I noticed the usual amount of interest when a flag officer was present in the Officers' Mess. I left them alone. I knew from experience in my younger days that sometimes there was nothing more intimidating than knowing an admiral was looking at you.

As I was returning to the meeting room I heard over the ship's intercom, "Admiral Sään to the bridge."

My eyebrows shot up in surprise. It was too soon for our arrival at the planet. *Something else must be going on.*

I then headed for the nearest turbolift.

As I stepped onto the bridge, I put off my personal dislike of being announced, but it was expected of a flag officer.

"Admiral on the bridge!" a random officer announced.

Captain Lafayette turned and gestured me over as she was still speaking with her First Officer. She seemed almost embarrassed.

"Admiral, we've just received orders that I must take you directly to Starbase 21 – ASAP. I have just received a message from Starfleet Command, reporting that the Romulans are making trouble in this sector again."

It was annoying, but there was little I could do about it. My mother had always told me: *Life is what happens while you're busy making plans*. There was no point in getting upset at a situation that was out of your control. I had hoped for a bit more time to prepare myself, but now I realized that this ship was about to max out her warp drive. The situation in the region was now tense, and I had to adjust.

I gave the captain a brief smile and nod. "Very well, keep me informed. If that is all, I'll return to my work. Again, thanks for the ride, it's been fun," I said as I was leaving the bridge.

As I briefly waited for the turbolift, I noticed Captain Lafayette looked quizzical. "He is sure different from the other Admirals I know," she muttered.

"Yes, sir," the Exec said quietly. I think she guessed I could still hear them.

In the meeting room which I had decided would be my office on this ship while I was aboard, I sat in front of a computer terminal and did some more work familiarizing myself with the situation at my new command. There were a number of reports that, on the surface, didn't look that bad, but I suspected that more was going on than was obvious on the surface.

The door shushed open and Lieutenant Daniels entered saying; "Here are the files that you have requested, Admiral."

She stood there for a moment, and it took me a second to realize what she was hoping for.

I gave her a friendly smile. "Sit down, Deborah."

Daniels looked at me, a conflict clearly going on in her mind. I could see the alpha within her warring against her training. She took the offered seat. "Admiral?" she asked.

"I suspect we're going into a fairly tense situation on Merrlyn. Things are not what they appear on paper, and my orders are to straighten it out. In situations like these, there is always pushback."

Daniels looked up at me uncertainly. "Sir?" she asked, confused.

"Deb, I asked for you because I need a go-getter who isn't going to take crap from someone just because of their rank. I'm going to need your help to get to the bottom of the problems at Merrlyn and set things right. There are going to be people who are going to try to pull rank on you.

"I need you to understand that I trust you with this assignment. When you'll be going into a touchy situation, you'll be doing it with the weight of an Admiral behind you. You have a good head on your shoulders. Do this right and it'll look very good on your resumé."

Daniels shook a little at the impetus behind my words. "I don't know what to say, sir."

I gave a slight chuckle. "That's OK. I prefer to work in a fairly relaxed atmosphere. When we're alone, call me Ollie, please. Don't worry, I know the respect is still there. It's just a lot easier to say than "Admiral" all the time. Do you mind me using your first name?"

Daniels tilted her head to the side. I got the impression that it wasn't every day an admiral tried to speak to her as

a friend. She gave a small chuckle. "OK. Just please don't call me Deb again."

At that I actually laughed. "Fair enough. However, for the sake of the troops, we'll have to stand on ceremony in front of an audience."

"Of course, Admiral... Ollie. Sorry, this is going to take a little getting used to."

"I understand, Deborah. All the same, Starfleet has entrusted me with this mission, and I'm trusting you to help me make it happen."

The young woman took a deep breath. "I understand, sir. Thank you for asking me to be a part of your team."

"Not a problem. Your record speaks for itself."

This time, she gave me a bright smile. "I appreciate that, sir. If you don't mind, sir, I'd like to hit the head and get some lunch."

I nodded. "Go, I'll call you when I need you."

Daniels stepped out and I was left with my new bundle of files she had saddled me with.

I was appalled at the information they contained. I could not believe how bad it was. Now I understood why Starfleet Command ordered me to take over. Sitting back, I began to wonder how I would handle this matter when I arrived at Planet Merlynn. I needed a solid plan. I suddenly had a brainstorm; I know just how I would handle it.

I will not go in uniform; I will go undercover as an engineer, and I will wander around to find out if anyone will stop me. A small part of me relished going undercover. Perhaps it was all the old 21st Century movie files I used to watch that influenced me.

Disgusted, I was certain that if these files were correct that would not happen. *I doubt anyone would give me the time of day.*

I read some more on the Station's finances, and I was certain there were irregularities there as well. It just got better and better. After several hours of reading, I got up and headed back to my quarters for a bit of rest and chance to assimilate some of the information.

You'll need a bit of rest for when I arrive, I told myself. Doing so, I was reminded once more of my mother's wisdom, as I could hear her own voice below mine.

Looking at the chronometer, I noted it was 1730 hours. It probably wouldn't be too long before their arrival at Starbase 21, so I locked the documents in the suite's safe and headed down to the Officer's Mess.

All the while, I was uneasy with what Captain Lafayette said. Why would the Romulans make trouble now? They didn't do anything without a plan. I was certain they never took a leak without a solid strategy in mind. I hoped that this wouldn't further complicate the problems at 21. I had enough to deal with.

The *Bonhomme Richard* arrived at Starbase 21 at 1700. I had been asked onto the bridge to view. I stared at the station and marveled again at the works of man. There was the central station itself, a large, inverted mushroom-shaped construction that reminded me of Starbase One that was still in orbit of Jupiter.

I listened as the comms received instructions for orbit. I knew that, with Lafayette's orders, they would only be here long enough to drop us off.

To my surprise, the usually stoic captain looked up at me from the conn and said: "This is your stop I believe, Admiral."

I chuckled a little at that. It was nice to know she wasn't quite the hard head I thought she was. "I'll leave a tip for the service, Ma'am."

She graced me with a charming smile, and I turned heel and headed for the turbolift. On my way, I asked the comms officer to have my assistant meet me in the transporter room.

Shortly after, we materialized in the Visitors' Center, a fairly large place that was surprisingly colorfully decorated. I wondered if it was meant to look more appealing to a Van Gogh fan.

The transporter officer stationed there motioned us to follow him. He led us through several corridors to the Starbase Commander's Office. Clearly, we had been expected.

Entering the outer office, we met with the current commander's assistant, whose name escaped me at first. (It was a lot of information to assimilate in a short period of time). He stood and gave us one of the fakest smiles I've ever seen on a human being. This man should have been a used flitter salesman.

All the same, I wasn't an Admiral without being able to read people. There was something in his eyes I really didn't like.

"Sir," he said in an accent that reminded me of something vaguely Germanic. I noted he patently ignored Deborah. "The Commodore is expecting you."

Without any further ado, he escorted us inside.

I watched as Commodore Martin Lowmas, a man who was about five years older than me, slowly stood as if he had

the weight of the world on his shoulders. As he motioned for us to sit down, he looked to his assistant.

"Gregory, scare up some coffee for the Admiral and..." he glanced at Daniels' rank, "the Lieutenant. They've come a long way and we've got a lot to talk about."

Commander Gregory... whatever... left to get us some caffeine. I wasn't sorry to see him go.

I noted Martin's relief as well.

Without preamble, I handed him his orders. We sat in almost embarrassed silence as he read them to himself, his lips moving as he processed the information. "Well, that's pretty clear."

I nodded. I decided to get right down to it. "What's going on over at the construction base?"

The doors slid open and our coffees were delivered. We remained silent until the door closed. In my mind's eye, I saw him outside with his ear to the door.

"Nothing that I am aware of. Why do you ask?"

"I am asking because I am the new Commanding Officer," I said with a tight smile.

Lowmas pursed his lips. I think he was reminding himself he was in the presence of a superior officer. "I know they're having some issues, but I really believed it was nothing they couldn't get on top of."

I took a deep breath. On some level, I felt sorry for the man, but our first duty was to the service. "I got the impression from my orders that things over there are FUBAR. This is why I am here. Just maybe I can straighten the mess out. I would like to get under way as soon as possible." My eyebrows came together as I realized a need.

"Hmm, are there any shuttles available?"

"No, there aren't," the Commodore said, mildly embarrassed. "We had a problem a few days ago. I ordered

them to undergo a safety check. I'm afraid it will be a couple of days before you can use one. In the meantime, you and the Lieutenant enjoy yourselves here at Starbase 21."

My eyes narrowed a little at the statement. I couldn't help wondering if he was being sarcastic or it was just bittersweet. I stood and gave him a brief handshake, then I led the two of us out into the corridor. I tapped a wall computer panel and called up the location of the base quartermaster. We needed some VIP quarters.

Shortly after finding our quarters, Lieutenant Daniels and I went our separate ways. I decided to reflect, so I went to the observation deck to relax and engage in thought. My Flag Secretary went to the stores and game areas for some down time.

I spent a few hours lost in the vista of space, planning how I would handle some of the changes I knew I needed to implement. I found the window of the observation deck gave an excellent view of the Horsehead Nebula.

I was gazing out into space when a young Starbase Yeoman entered and spoke. "Is Admiral Sään here?"

Turning around, I answered, "Yes, I am Admiral Sään." I knew it would take a little while for the staff here to recognize me.

The young woman said, "You have an urgent message from Starfleet Command HQ. You may take it at the Communications Center. If you'll follow me, sir?"

I appreciated the professionalism on display. The NCO yeoman's name was Vicki Mansfield, and I learned she was only six months out of Starfleet's training school for regular crew members as we walked.

Following the short, fit brunette to the Comms Center I was thinking, *What does HQ. want now? I had just taken on a hot mince pie under each arm, and I'd barely begun formulating how to sort this mess out. What next?*

Mansfield stood aside as I entered the large comms center. I spoke up, "I am Admiral Sään. You have a message for me?"

A Caitian's head popped up behind a desk. He seemed a little surprised to be dealing with an Admiral directly. "Yes, we do," said the unnamed officer. He stood, his tawny fur standing on end. I must have spooked him. "You may take it in here."

Entering a private room, I sat at a table and turned on the view screen. The scanner took a look at my right eye for a retinal scan, then a few seconds later a figure appeared on the screen.

I recognized her immediately; she was my boss – the Inspector General. I'd know that tone of blue skin and her lop-sided antennae anywhere.

Respectfully, I asked: "What can I do for you, sir?"

Vice Admiral Sheriel Targarmah looked up at me from the screen and said, "Sään, I need someone to handle Inspector General duties in the Southwest Sector Command of Starfleet."

My eyebrows shot up at that. She pressed on as if I hadn't reacted.

"Therefore, I have appointed you to head this position. I will send you an Executive Officer. I have someone in mind, she has worked with the Judge Advocate General's Office as an investigator. You may, if you wish, name your own Chief of Staff and Security Officer, and any other personnel you need. That is all, Admiral. *Shosi radal.*"

Sheriel was never one for anything more than straight business. She'd ended with "swift victory" in her own tongue. I sighed. *How many balls was I meant to be juggling at the moment?*

I made one decision on the fly. I stood up and stepped over to the door and called over the Caitian.

"Yes, Admiral?" he asked.

"You are?"

The Lieutenant straightened up a little. I knew this was a cultural thing for them, as their name was directly connected to their family's honor. "I am Lieutenant Drishtafawn, sir."

I love their compound names. Drish was his "given name", ta was the connector – much like Mac for the Scots – and Fawn was their clan affiliation. "Lieutenant, in future I want all medium to high-priority messages for me to come through my assistant, Lieutenant Deborah Daniels. I don't want to have to deal with this personally – I have enough on my plate."

Drish showed me a few teeth, which I knew to be his people's version of a wry grin. "Yes, sir. I understand. I'll pass that on to my crew."

I gave him a brief nod then headed back to my quarters. Once there, I got my official papers, sat down at the burnt orange table – I love mid-23rd century color schemes – and looked through them to find someone to fill the Chief of Staff position. I needed to put together some staff, and quickly.

There was no way I was going to do this on my own. I pulled my personal communicator off my belt and flipped it open. "Sääd to Daniels."

It came as no surprise that she answered immediately. "Yes, Admiral?" she asked.

Deborah was no fool. She had no idea who might be on the other end of the line listening.

"I need you in my quarters. I've got a lot of midnight oil to burn. We've been given even more work to do."

If she was annoyed, she didn't show it. "Yes, Admiral. I'll be right there."

As I waited, I paused for a moment to reflect on what my boss said. It will be difficult to run three jobs at one time. Receiving this new appointment was all I needed, besides being the Vice Inspector General, and taking over command of Project Adreft. I wonder what was next. All I needed now was for the Romulans to invade.

At least, as an Admiral, I could name my own Executive Officer for Project Adreft – I still hadn't decided who this person would be.

As I stepped over to the food synthesizer to order a drink, the doors opened and Deborah let herself in.

That was one thing liked about her. She didn't mess around.

"Coffee, Deborah?" I asked. "Perhaps a double espresso?"

Daniels gave me a wry grin, flashing some of her perfectly aligned teeth. "It's either that or stims, sir." She frowned, then. "Admiral, I really should be getting you the coffees."

I shrugged. The momentary levity was balm for my soul. "I was on my way anyway."

Still wishing none of this was happening, I passed her a beverage, and we got down to work.

At 0200 the following day, I sent Deborah to bed and I sacked out. We needed *some* rest before the next day.

I had set an alarm for 0700 so I'd get at least five hours sleep.

At 0705, I received a call from personnel informing me of a visitor.

I made a mental note to put out a general memorandum. *All* calls to go through Lieutenant Daniels in future.

One of the beauties of my station was the ability to make people *wait*. I showered, dressed, took a hearty breakfast – after kicking Deborah out of bed and telling her I'd need her for this.

As I stepped out of my quarters, there she was, ready to go. If she was tired, she wasn't showing it. "Good morning, Ollie. I hope you slept well."

It was funny how Deborah could be friendly yet still project a decent level of respect. I appreciated that and I was determined to add that to her personnel file.

I gave her a glib smile. "Someone needs to make sleep in a can. Take it and feel instantly refreshed."

My assistant chuckled. "I think they call that Speed, sir."

On our way to personnel, I was thinking who would want to see me. I hope there was not a problem that the IG would be needed for.

Once again, I was grateful for the base's computer guide. It directly me easily. Shortly after, I entered a non-descript set of doors with the simply "Personnel" label.

"I am Admiral Sään. You have a visitor for me?"

"This way, Admiral", said the officer on duty. I followed this person to a private room where we entered. There was a woman present, and as soon as the doors opened, she got to her feet, back straight, eyes forward.

I noticed that she was quite attractive, with jet black hair and pale, blue eyes. I also could tell that she was a little spit and polish. I could not help noticing the bars on her shoulder strap.

"You must be the Officer that Admiral Smith sent to be my Exec for the Southwest Sector of the IG's office," I said by way of greeting.

"Yes sir. I am Fleet Captain Jayne Seymour, reporting for duty."

I made an appointment for 1400 hours with Captain Seymour in conference room 123 after receiving her transfer orders personally.

I knew she'd travelled from the Beta Quadrant to be here, so I gave her a few hours to settle in. The first thing for her was to send her down to the Quartermaster for some quarters.

In the meantime, we had a lot to do.

Deborah and I headed up to the command level and began to set up our temporary offices. I left her to start work on streamlining and cleaning up the financials of Merlynn. I gave her authority to deal with the finances department of the station directly, but not yet. Not until *after* I paid Merlynn a visit. I also left her orders to bring the necessary files for our 1400 meeting.

1400 came quickly after I took some time to check out the station's shopping promenade. I found a good, old-fashioned burger joint, and I enjoyed the first real(ish) burger and fries I'd eaten in years. It was like a real touch of Earth.

I arrived early, so I sat down to reflect on what I was going to say to my new Exec. I didn't know her from a bar of soap, so I decided to simply let her rank speak for her. People didn't attain the rank of Fleet Captain for nothing.

It was 1400 hours sharp when both of my officers entered. I said, "Please, sit down."

I was at the head of the table, and the women took seats on either side of me.

"I have called this meeting to go over some IG business that I have received so far, and to discuss other matters as well. Miss Daniels, I have also been given Command of the IG's Office for the Southwest sector of Fleet."

I noted her eyes widened a little. She guessed what was coming.

"You will also be Flag Secretary for that position as well."

I was pleased as she simply nodded her acceptance.

Curious, I asked, "Have you two met?"

Both shook their heads, no.

"Captain Seymour this is my Flag Secretary for Project Adreft and now also for SW Sector of the IG's Office, Lt. jg. Deborah Daniels. Lieutenant, this is Fleet Captain Jayne Seymour our new Exec for the IG Southwest Sector Command. You two will be working closely together on matters that concern the IG's office. Miss Daniels will also work with me on my Project Adreft duties in addition to this job. Any questions?"

The two looked at one another and said together, "NONE, Sir!"

Lt. Daniels reached in a pouch and handed me some cases that I was to look into. She also handed copies to Captain Seymour. Efficiently, she turned on her recording device so she was ready to take the minutes of the meeting.

Deborah sat patiently while the captain and I studied the cases that were before us.

When she finished, Captain Seymour asked, "Do we have any investigative officers here?"

"Yes, we do, I chose them earlier. All but two are here at Starbase 21. The other two are in this sector. One is at outpost Zebra, and the other one is on the Starship *Yorktown*. They've received their orders and they will be here shortly."

I took a moment to look through my papers. *Yes, I'm a bit of a troglodyte. I prefer paper. You can't accidentally delete them.*

Seymour was talking to Daniels when I ran across a note. I looked up and said, "I have a personal note here. In taking the position of the IG SW Sector, I am to name my own Chief of Staff for this position. If you two know anyone with the proper qualifications, let me know."

While the women nodded, it was clear nobody came straight to mind.

"Captain Seymour," I said. "Have you decided which case you wish to tackle first?"

Respectfully, she replied, "I defer to your judgement, sir."

"Let's start with the Anderson Case. Until I know more of what's going on, I will start with something simple."

I was giving her some background information when an aide entered. He approached, cleared his throat and said, "Admiral, sir, shuttlecraft are available now."

I looked up and replied, "All right, Lieutenant. I'll be down soon enough."

From his position at attention, the Lieutenant nodded. "Aye, sir." He then turned and left.

It seems whenever I get on track in one place, something comes along to derail it. I turned to Deborah, "I

will check on this lot later. Right now, I have some IG business to attend to. Will you have my office prepared so my staff can get down to work?"

Then we continued to discuss other IG matters.

I instructed Fleet Captain Seymour to keep me informed on progress made in all cases that we would handle.

When all questions and discussions ended, I adjourned the meeting for some small talk. I wanted to get to know my new staff members a little in the short break before my next meeting. No rest for the wicked.

It was about 17:00 hours when I entered the Commodore's office. He was sitting there reviewing orders and reports, when I walked up and said, "Martin, I understand there are shuttles ready to use."

The Commodore looked up with a discouraging look and said, "Yes, Ollity there are. I will have one readied for you. Oh, by the way, I hope that your work is not as troublesome as mine."

I turned around to leave when I replied with a dark chuckle, "I don't think that any of your work is as troublesome as mine. *Ciao*." As I stepped through the door, I noticed the Commodore reaching over to issue the appropriate orders.

As I walked down the corridor, I took out my communicator and called Deborah. "Lieutenant, I'm about to leave for Merlynn – they're preparing a shuttle for me now. I want you and the Captain to remain here and keep working on your present duties. Don't forget to send my investigators to the good captain when they arrive. I'll send for you when I've got things settled there."

There was a moment's silence on the other end. "Admiral, I hope I'm not speaking out of order, but should you be going alone? The SROs are quite clear that Flag Officers shouldn't travel by themselves."

I had to chuckle a little. I appreciated her concern. "Deborah, don't worry. This is something I have to do alone – I have a plan. If things go sideways, I'll send you an emergency call. Keep your communicator on you at all times."

"Aye, sir. Be careful."

"I will. Sään out."

I stopped by my quarters for my things, then headed down to the shuttlebay. When I arrived, I spoke to the officer on deck. I learned that I had a shuttle waiting for me at bay five.

I quickly found it and boarded. There were some other passengers and the pilot was readying for takeoff. I found a seat and began to read.

About ten minutes later, I heard the engines spool up and we left the hangar into space. I looked out the porthole at a receding Starbase 21 reflecting how I would handle this assignment. It will be a long twenty-one hours before we arrived. I secured my documents, sat back, positioned the chair and took a nap.

I learned later from Sam Wilkerson III that, while I was en route, he was having a heated conversation with his boss at Adreft.

Sam did his best to reign in his temper.

"As your Chief Engineer and Operations Officer, I wish to file a protest at the sorry state of this project. Three fourths of my equipment have not arrived, and the portion that has is completely unserviceable. Each department is at

odds with each other and the security is completely lacking. Just about anybody can waltz in here!"

The Commodore looked at his Chief Engineer and Operations Officer and angrily said, "Aren't you overstepping your bounds, Commander?"

Sam stood at attention. "No, sir! In case you forgot, this is a top-secret project. Should Starfleet Command get wind of this they will clean house and I DO mean *clean house*. I want this to be considered a formal protest because I have seen this project go quite literally to hell!"

The Commodore looked quite shocked at his bold assertions. Flustered, he had no answer for him, so he simply dismissed him. Furious, he turned around and stormed out of the office.

On his way to his own station, Sam looked at his chronometer and realized he was late for a departmental staff meeting. Arriving at turbolift four, he entered and said, "Engineering, level three."

He arrived at the meeting and found that everyone was waiting for him. Their reports did nothing to raise his spirits, and in the end, Commander Wilkerson remained seated looking disappointed as most sauntered out.

"What is the matter, sir?"

He looked up and saw that Lieutenant Robertson, his departmental secretary, had stayed behind.

Grimacing he admitted: "It's been one of those days, Lieutenant, where everything goes wrong."

"Want to go somewhere and talk about it?"

He was a little surprised by her candor. "I believe that's the finest idea I've heard today. Let me go freshen up and I'll meet you in the Officer's Lounge at 1800, on me."

The Lieutenant responded, "See you there."

Commander Wilkerson went to his quarters and started to freshen up when his com unit signaled an incoming message. Sam went over to the console and answered it, then opened his portfolio and wrote down the details about a personal matter that he was handling.

Pondering on his coming date, he took his favorite casual outfit and completed freshening up. He glanced at a chronometer and realized he still had about twenty minutes to spare. After completing getting dressed, he took a few minutes to meditate about the day's events. SNAFU was probably the best term he could give for what was happening here, and it grieved him. In a real way, he hoped Starfleet could come in and mop up this mess. It might reflect badly on his record, but what mattered was getting the job done and protecting the Federation.

Determined to get out of his funk, he left for his "date".

Arriving at the Officer's Lounge, he reserved a booth and ordered drinks. He was just sitting down when Lieutenant Robertson walked in. His pulse quickened when he saw the revealing outfit she was wearing. It was a kind of red silken gown that showed more than it concealed. She glided over to the booth and shyly said, "Hi, Commander."

Trying to keep his eyes on her face, Sam said: "Lieutenant, we are off duty. Can we please use first names?"

"Ok... Sam."

"Thanks, Jackie. You look, uh, absolutely gorgeous this evening."

"You look pretty nice as well, Sam. I like the blazer."

"Yeah, I picked it up on Rigel IV." After a pause, Sam then said, "Things came to a head today, Jackie. I... "

The waitress interrupted when she practically materialized by their table and saying, "Would you like to order?"

Surprised, Sam said: "Yes, I believe we would. Jackie, what would you like?"

The friendly waitress offered, "I recommend the Caribbean Steak Kebabs, and we have chefs here, not synthesized food."

Sam practically salivated at the suggestion. "Yeah, that sounds fine to me. How about you?"

Jackie's brown eyes lit up. "Sounds grand. How about another drink?"

Sam nodded. "Yes. Two more of the same please, Miss."

As the waitress walked away, Jackie said, "Where were we?"

"Oh, yes! As I was saying, things really came to a head today. I had it out with Commodore Short. As a matter of fact, I entered a formal complaint to Starfleet Command."

Concerned, Jackie interjected: "What do you think he will do?"

He answered honestly, "I expect he will try to have me transferred or demoted. At this point, I really don't care what he does. I feel that my talents are being wasted here. Rather than run around putting out fires, I would enjoy it if I could work on my new design as part of the transwarp team. I was put here to head that, but our good Commodore managed to divert me away."

Jackie's face tempered. "I expect things will improve. It can't get worse..."

Sam was not to be diverted. "I believe it can, Jackie. Starfleet Command will be pretty pissed off when they receive the complaint. As a matter of fact, I'm shocked Starfleet doesn't know about it already. I, for one, do not want my butt in the sling..." his voice softened, "and I definitely don't want yours there, either."

The younger woman gave him a grateful smile. "I appreciate that, Sam. What are your immediate plans, then?"

He chuffed. "Well, right now, I want to get sloshed. After that..." He stopped, noticing the waitress hustling over to bring their food and drinks. As she set them out he held up his glass and asked, "Two more of the same, please."

Surprising Sam, Jackie said, "Make that four."

They got into the business of enjoying their meal and suspended their conversation as they ate. They made the odd observation on their plates, but not much more than taking the time to enjoy their meals and the company.

Sam then touched his napkin to his lips. He dove right in. "That was excellent. You know Jackie, I always thought you were attractive, but tonight I found out how much I understated that."

Jackie blushed at the comment, and Sam found that it was true that people blushed everywhere they were uncovered. "Well, thanks, Sam," she said shyly, quietly. "I'm glad we had this chance to have a real 'date' of sorts. Most of our socializing has been, well, still somewhat distant. Business being what it is."

Sam sighed. He knew it was one of the burdens of command. "Believe me, Jackie, it hasn't been easy. I am expected to be a... well... paragon of virtue. Something my grandparents pounded into me on Vulcan."

Jackie seemed surprised. "Your Vulcan grandparents expected this? How do you feel about that?"

"I'm glad my human half is dominant... in all respects."

"Hmmm...."

Just as Sam was beginning to hope that the evening might become even more interesting, he heard an announcement over the intercom.

"Commander Wilkerson report to Engineering. Commander Wilkerson report to Engineering."

Sam let out a sigh from the depths of his soul. "Why do these interruptions happen at these times?" He shook his head. "Excuse me, Jackie, I'll be only a moment."

At that, he strolled over to the wall intercom and said in a clipped tone, "Wilkerson here. What is it?"

"This is Lieutenant Tyler, sir. We have a minor malfunction..."

Seriously? Sam thought. "Can it wait until morning, Lieutenant?"

"Sir!"

"Until morning, Lieutenant. Wilkerson out."

As he hurried back to the booth, he said, "Sorry about that, Jackie. Can we continue this some place a little more private?"

She smiled coyly and slid out of the booth then they proceeded towards the exit.

I slept for several hours on the shuttle, and I was grateful they were comfortable chairs. I had to admit that I needed the rest.

There were "windows" on the wall – which I knew were really panel screens that provided an outside view – and as the shuttle was approaching a rather dull asteroid, I began to think of what I may find when I got there. All of the other passengers had departed at other points; only myself and the pilot remained.

I wandered up to sit next to him. I marveled again at just how good this man was. He could disappear anywhere, due in good part by the fact he looked as generic a human

as you could find. I spoke to him and he was not the least bit surprised. He had been expecting me.

"Lieutenant Genoa, after I've disembarked, you will report back to Fleet Captain Seymour; I left her with orders to carry out in my absence."

I slapped him on the shoulder. "You are one of my finest investigative officers. I appreciate you taking me over here. After you drop me off, I have other duties for you. I need you to inform Fleet Captain Seymour of my arrival and that when things are secure I will contact her. Any questions?"

Genoa looked at me and replied: "No, sir." He gave me a knowing nod. "I wish you the best of luck."

Finally, the shuttlecraft touched down on what seemed to be a little used landing pad. I had to wait a moment until after the pressure dome formed around the shuttle before I could depart. Once I was clear of the craft and the airlock doors closed the shuttle took off and headed back towards Starbase 21.

After leaving the airlock, I wandered into an area that I would call a foyer, but it appeared as disused as the landing pad. Dust covered nearly every surface.

I stepped out into the hall and found myself in a much-used hallway. This area was the hub for accessing the other areas of the repair station. I was surprised the landing dock was not in service, but there could be many reasons for that.

I decided to have a look around and check out the problems stated in the Starfleet orders assigning me here. I stepped over to a computer station and requested a layout of the station. I had studied them on the way, but it was always good to not only refamiliarize, but to see how well the computer interfaces operated here. Nothing like first-hand experience.

After a few quips and quirks, the computer displayed the information I had requested. I looked at the screen and noticed the station was split into six independent operating sections should an emergency eventuate. I chose Section 1 – Stores and started walking.

I wanted to be as subtle as possible, so I had stowed my uniform jacket in my carry bag, leaving me in my black slacks, boots and white skivvies.

When I arrived, I noticed there was no guard at the assigned post. I was not surprised, but I was still stunned at the complete lack of responsibility on display. Wondering what I was going to find next, I walked through the doorway. There I found crates, boxes, and other supply articles lying strewn all over the place. I thought of the engineers I knew, and if Montgomery Scott had been here, he would have gone ballistic. I took out my recorder and started collecting evidence.

I was taking stock of some of the inventory when someone entered the area. I quickly put my recorder away, but left it on, as not to appear I'm spying. Although, I did not wish to reveal I was here to do just that. I rounded one of the piled-up crates and noticed someone rummaging through some boxes. I was concerned I might have startled him, but he looked at me as if it was a completely normal thing to meet a stranger in this space.

The individual, who was dressed very casually, looked up and said, "Hello. This place is sure a mess, huh? Been like this for up to a year."

Going along with it, I said: "Yeah, I noticed. Do you have any idea when this mess will get cleaned up and stowed away properly?"

The man shrugged. "Nah. It may never be." He went back to his rummaging.

Inside, I shrugged at the inanity of the situation. All the same, I had to remind myself that this was the fact-finding part of my mission, and I had to document everything that I needed to straighten out.

After this brief exchange, I continued my rounds seeking more surprises, recorder taking in everything. I completed looking through Stores. The disorder I found would make you sick to your stomach.

I found the exit again – after being turned around in this space full of chaos. Upon leaving, I made a note in my recorder, of what just happened in this first section alone.

I walked on for a while, annoyed that even the cleaning service droids were not doing their job and, rounding a junction in the corridor, I came upon a group of people milling around and gabbing.

Curious, and doing my best to keep my annoyance behind my best poker face, I approached, saying, "Can you direct me to Corridor 4, Section 3?"

One of them looked at me and said, "Yes, just go in that direction." He was pointing in the direction I just came from.

Did I miss something? I gave the young woman a nod of appreciation and, as I turned around, I took note of the lack of security that had been prevalent to this point.

I marched down the indicated corridor, and after a few minutes, I finally found the area I was looking for. Once again, the door wasn't even being watched. Surreptitiously entering this section, I found neatly stacked boxes. Immediately suspecting something, I opened several of them. I found they contained contraband goods; items such as Iopene Cutters, cases of Romulan Ale, Venus drugs and many other goodies that would bring a nice price on the black market.

Eyes narrowed, I was disgusted at what I saw, but I knew I had to document what I'd found. It took a little while, but in the end, I had to prevent myself from storming out of the section. Taking stock of what I found, I made a special comment on my recorder.

As I proceeded to Section 6, I considered that the situation here was so bad that this kind of criminality was being done in the light of day. No security, no nothing.

I realized that when I took over this place, I'd have to come with some serious muscle.

Finally, I turned a corner and found a top security area. *Wow, something around here is actually being taken seriously*, I thought, incredulously.

It consisted of a double-pocket door with a force field in front of it. Before entering the door, one must step into a secure archway. As I did this, I heard a beep. I turned to my right and noticed a computer console. The computer announced: "Please enter proper security code."

I quickly typed in my IG security passcode. The computer fell silent for a few seconds, then the computer said, "Security code approved."

With a slight groan, the double-pocket doors opened. I entered to see a disaster of *monumental* proportions. The first thing I saw was a 31,000-ton linear-warp engine core knocked over, and it had made an eight-inch dent in the deck.

I rounded it, recording everything. After this, I saw an impulse engine that had been taken apart. It looked like it had been scavenged. I couldn't believe the size of the area the parts were strewn over. While recording this, I looked around for other equipment that was in the same shape. I saw more than I bargained for.

When the recorder finally finished scanning the area, I was so furious; I had to leave before I started to lose control.

Exiting Section 6, I stopped in the corridor with my back to the wall and I took a deep breath.

I need time to think this out before I drop the hammer on the Commodore, I thought. What I'd seen here wasn't just neglect, it was criminality. I levered myself off the wall and walked up to a direction locator and looked to see where the nearest Officers' Lounge was. Fortunately, it wasn't far, so I started walking, trailing my luggage behind me, looking for all intents and purposes like a tourist.

I passed a few pocket doors and finally came to Officers Lounge #2, which I then entered. Always a little wary, I noted a few more people entered also – one of which went directly to the bar.

I stood there for a moment, looking around and finally found a table near the back of the Lounge. I took a seat and waited for a waitress to take my order.

After a few moments, a rather disinterested young woman sauntered over and asked: "What you'll have?"

I looked up and said, "I'll have a Scotch straight with a beer chaser." I usually don't take strong drink, but in this case, I was making an exception.

I nudged my roller bag under the table with a foot, then began looking around the lounge, trying to appear as indifferent as the rest. I noticed varying types of people from all walks of life around the Federation.

There was one person that attracted my attention, sitting at the bar. He seemed to be nervous, tuning his glass around and around before he slammed his hand on the counter – he was clearly frustrated about something. Looking at his uniform, I noticed that he wore the insignia of the Engineering Department.

About this time the waitress returned with my drink. I thanked her, then I took a few sips and sat back to think.

Nothing like this happened on Rigel IV. My homeworld was much more orderly.

I quickly turned around as something broke my concentration. A disturbance had begun; I heard the sounds of breaking glass and some colorful language. I looked up and saw two people standing up who began throwing punches. Soon others joined in the fight, furniture was being thrown about everywhere – the place was totally out of control. I wondered how long it would take security to come and sort this out – if they did at all.

During the fight I looked at the bar. The person that seemed to be nervous was dodging chairs that were being thrown around the room. A couple of bodies pushed into him, and he responded by simply pushing them back in to fight. After a few minutes he got up and left, picking his way through the debris and flying bodies.

Letting him go, I continued to watch the fight. It had been a long time since I saw a fight like this one. After a while, it stopped – all of them worn out and fed up. Looking around the room I saw three to four persons lying on the floor; two or three more sitting themselves at the table from which the fight began. They all looked worn out, torn uniforms and black eyes, cuts and bruises. Finally, the ones at the table collapsed and passed out. By this time the waitress made her way back to my table. I said, "Does this type of thing happen all the time?"

She gave me a sigh from the soles of her feet. "Yes, I'm afraid it does."

"How come security doesn't come to break this up?" I asked, wiping the table of broken glass.

She looked at me with quizzically and said, "Security really doesn't care what goes on around here. I don't blame

them, there isn't much concern at the top about enforcing the rules."

I thought about that for a moment and then said, "I'll take another drink. This time I'll have a Brandy Seven." Sitting there, I began to calm down, trying not to let the events that I observed get to me. I needed to clear my head and come up with a suitable strategy. I had my assumptions when I came here, but I'd found that the facts made my notions seem like child's play. I looked at my chronometer and remembered the instructions that I had left with Fleet Captain Seymour.

I got up to leave when on my way out I tripped over the debris from the fight, staggering a little to the right. I inadvertently bumped into one of the participants involved in the fight. He said, "If you want trouble just stick around!"

Cooly, I said, "Maybe later." I walked on and exited then headed towards Commodore Short's office. It was time to take the bull by the horns. I only hoped that I could straighten this mess out before it was too late.

I passed through corridor after corridor, most of them vacant, with muted lighting. It was clearly the night cycle here, but I was bothered by the lack of security on display. This was supposed to be a place where top secret work was being done, after all.

Arriving at his office, I entered. Being late in the evening, local time, I expected no one to be here, except the Officer of the Day and even that person was asleep!

The rooms were dark and poorly lit. Walking through the main part of the office I found Short's private space where I entered, not knowing what I expected. I found the office orderly, quite to my surprise. It seemed the man's care ended at the door.

I stepped over to the wall behind the desk and pressed a button. A few seconds passed, then the wall became transparent. I looked out and admired the view. It reminded me of the nights on Rigel with my sister when we slept outside looking up at the stars. *They were simpler times. How peaceful it was.*

Tearing myself away from the view, I sat down at the Commodore's desk and turned on the computer. Using special access codes my boss had furnished me with, I gained access.

I instructed the computer to run down a list of everyone stationed here at the time.

Each entry contained a brief and an image, as well species and gender. I continued this well into the night, my eyes becoming very weary. With so much information at hand I began to get drowsy and before I knew it, I fell asleep.

Back on Starbase 21, Fleet Captain Seymour saw off Lieutenant Harrison and his security team. She contacted the *Knox*-class ship USS *Pico* NCC-1954 and spoke to Lieutenant Connors. "Make sure you are on time, Admiral Sään will be needing you to stop all ships from arriving and leaving."

Fleet Captain Seymour also got in touch with Captain Stephens of the Starfleet Marine contingent stationed on Starbase 21 and said, "Be ready to move should the Admiral request it."

After all of these preparations, Fleet Captain Seymour joined Lieutenant Daniels in the observation area. She stood and said, "I hope that the Admiral doesn't need *everything*," she admitted. "Just in case, everything is being put into place."

Lieutenant Daniels said, "Don't worry, the Admiral knows what he is doing."

Sam Wilkerson walked down a darkened hallway, heading towards his office, when he heard a voice call out to him.

"Hold it Mr. Wilkerson!" yelled Commodore Short.

He sounds mad, Sam thought. He stopped, turned around, and saw the Commodore heading towards him. Sam noticed that the Commodore had a piece of paper in his hand, partially screwed up in his angry fist.

"Commander, I have been forwarded your formal complaint. To top it off, I have just received a message from Admiral Rowe. She says and I quote, 'Have received the complaint from one of your officers. I will send someone on a fact-finding mission to investigate this complaint. Rowe out.' I believe, Commander, that we must talk about this. Follow me to my office."

Stuck between a rock and a hard place, Sam had no choice but to follow.

As they began walking, the Commodore began talking. "Commander, Sam, I wished you hadn't filed that complaint. You know, it is not going to do any good. You know I have your career in my hands. I can strip you of your pension and leave you penniless living out your life on Nimbus III. Do *not* speak when this person arrives. Do you read me?" The man was breathing heavily and Sam believed he was sincere.

All the same, he did not sway him. "Sir, I will say whatever I need to say, and that is all I will do."

Rounding the next corner Commodore Short read further and said, "This is interesting. I believe you know the person that Admiral Rowe is sending."

"Who is it?" Sam said cautiously.

"Admiral Rowe is sending Tim O'Brien. I see he knows engineering."

"Yes, sir. You can't pull a snow job on him."

"Well, Mr. Wilkerson, we'll just have to work around this. Have you ever wondered why I haven't let you transfer?"

"No. Should I?" said Sam, confidently.

The Commodore nailed him with a savage look. "I wouldn't let you transfer because you'd head straight to the Chief of Engineering at Fleet Headquarters, blabbing about what's going on here. I couldn't allow that to happen. Therefore, you had to remain where I could keep an eye on you. So, by the time Mr. O'Brien gets back and reports it'll be too late. So, Mr. Wilkerson, where I go, you go."

Sam was discouraged, wondering *What now? How can I tip off Tim somehow and let him know what's happening around here?*

Awake for some time now, I finished the work on the computer. I had to admit, I needed the nap, even if it wasn't the most prudent place in the galaxy to have one. Burning the candle at both ends has its consequences.

I sat sideways with my feet propped up on the desk looking out of the transparent wall when I heard a commotion in the outer office.

With nowhere to go, I decided to play it cool and keep the chair's back to the door. Clicking on my recorder, I let it keep track of what was being said.

Commodore Short and Commander Wilkerson were discussing the fact-finding mission that Tim O'Brien was on. I heard some four-letter words and other unmentionables. I

continued sitting, not moving, knowing whoever it was would soon come in here.

A few minutes later Commodore Short and Commander Wilkerson entered the inner office, still cussing. I pushed off the windowsill with my feet and swung the chair around quickly and just looked at them.

They both stopped and stared at me. It was clear that a stranger, lounging in the Commodore's office, was the last thing they expected to see.

Commodore Short – I could easily tell by his rank insignia and his air of superiority – took a quick look at Wilkerson, then turned back to me and said, "Tim O'Brien I presume."

I still sat there not saying a word. I had seen the lack of recognition in the eyes of one I knew to be Sam Wilkerson. I decided to let him educate his "superior". "Commodore, that isn't Tim O'Brien," he said, deadpan.

The Commodore then barked, "Who is he then, Commander?"

"I have no idea, sir," said Wilkerson with a look of puzzlement.

Exasperated, the Commodore stepped forward and said. "**Who are you?**"

Again, I said nothing, looking at them sternly. With that the two of them were unsure what to do next. Commodore Short stepped up once more this time in a stronger voice, he said. "Listen, you. This is my office. I demand to know who you are and why are you here."

I turned and hit a couple of buttons on the computer, then said, "In due time, Commodore."

Meanwhile, the scene out in space had a *Knox*-class vessel orbiting the planetoid. I turned around, taking my feet off the desk and stood up, facing the transparent wall

looking at the events happening outside. Commander Wilkerson kept standing there, perplexed, saying nothing. Commodore Short pacing in front of the desk, still trying to find a way to find out who I was.

Pacing, he stopped abruptly and with a loud and strong voice spoke, "If you don't tell me who you are and what you are doing here, I will call security and place you in detention until I find out."

Still looking outside, I said. "I don't believe that would be wise. You would find yourself in more trouble than you have ever dreamt of."

Hearing this, the Commodore went into a rage, cursing under his breath.

Suddenly, Short walked over to a small table and opened a drawer. He reached in and pulled out a phaser. Setting it on kill, he pointed it at me and said once more, "Tell us who you are or I will shoot."

Commander Wilkerson just stood there staring at the Commodore, not quite believing what he was seeing and not certain of his motives.

I, on the other hand, did not know what the phaser setting was, and I quietly cursed myself for not looking for hidden weapons when I first entered the office.

Maintaining my cool, I looked Commodore Short in the eye. He was shaking, not wanting to pull the trigger.

Once again, he demanded, "I don't want to shoot you. Just tell me who are and what are you doing here."

Looking down the barrel of a phaser isn't what I had hoped for. I said, "If you shoot me, you are going to have to answer to whole bunch of people. How are you going to explain that?"

The Commodore challenged, "I won't have to, because no one will know."

Having heard him, I looked over at the other person and said, "What do you think? Should I tell him who I am, or are you going to let him shoot me?"

Unsure of what to say, Commander Wilkerson said, his voice quavering, "He's the one holding the phaser. I believe you are somewhat at a disadvantage, sir."

I drew myself upright in a way that said I meant business. "Am I? If he pulls that trigger, then you will be guilty the same as he is. I don't suppose you want that on your conscience. Not the least spending the rest of your life in a rehab colony."

I believe the Commodore, hearing this, was starting to twig. "If I put the phaser down, will you tell me who you are?"

I looked over at the other man and said, "What about you?"

The other gent looked at the Commodore and then back at me and said, "I agree. Please tell us who you are."

Pleased, I said. "Alright, it's about time anyway."

After hearing this, Commodore Short lowered his phaser. I then pushed a button on the desk and said. "Lieutenant Harrison, have you secured the place?"

The unexpected and strange voice surprised the listeners.

Harrison replied, "Yes, sir. Awaiting orders."

Just what I wanted to hear.

Looking up at the two officers standing in front of me I said. "You want to know who I am; alright I will tell you." I reached down and picked up my suitcase and popped the cover. Seeing the Commodore's fearful reaction, I said, "Don't worry, it's not a weapon."

On top of the pile was my uniform jacket, which I donned, with its rank insignia.

There was a startled gasp from both men.

"I am Rear Admiral Sään, the Vice Inspector General. I've been sent here to clean up this mess," I spat. "I have orders here from the Fleet Admiral, having me assume command and handle security for this project."

Both Commodore Short and Commander Wilkerson looked completely stunned, like Vulcans being accused of emotionalism, unable to say anything.

I stood looking at them both when I finally said, "Nothing to say, eh?" At that same moment I hit a button on the desk and said, "Lieutenant Harrison, you and a couple of men get up here."

"Right away, sir," came the expected reply.

While we waited, I could see the wheels turning behind Short's eyes. How much did I know? Was he going to be charged? Could he game this somehow?

Short nearly opened his mouth a couple of times, but a stern look from me kept it welded shut. He may have been a corrupt cretin, but at least he wasn't stupid enough to incriminate himself more than he already had.

Wilkerson, on the other hand, just looked relieved, like a man who had been treading water so long he expected to drown when suddenly he was thrown a life preserver.

A few minutes later Lieutenant Harrison and his men entered. They took up positions in the inner office. In the presence of senior officers, they respectfully stood at attention, their weapons holstered. That was about to change.

"Commodore Alton Short," I said, as professionally as I could considering my loathing for him, "I did have orders for you, but under the circumstances you are hereby placed under arrest. The charges are for now: dereliction of duty, conduct unbecoming an officer, along with smuggling,

possession of controlled weapons, and threatening a superior officer.

"Filing of additional charges may be made by JAG. Lieutenant Harrison, take the Commodore into custody."

Harrison took out his binders and the Commodore objected.

"Don't you dare," he snarled. "I am a flag officer."

With a look at me for confirmation, the Lieutenant said: "Right now, sir, you are under arrest with some pretty serious charges. Now, I can bring you in walking... or not."

Short had too much ego to be carried through the base stunned unconscious. Reluctantly, he placed his hands behind his back. Harrison bound him, while one of his subordinates patted him down.

"Do you need me for anything else, Admiral?" Harrison asked, with a glance at Wilkerson.

I gave him a grim smile. "No, that'll be all, Lieutenant. Show the Commodore all due respect, but he is to be treated as a volatile prisoner. He's already proven that much to me."

"Understood, sir." He then turned and he and his men escorted the Commodore out of the office.

I then turned and spoke to the remaining man. I had noted his Commander's badge earlier, so I knew he was an officer. "Now what am I going to do with you?"

Not knowing how to respond, Commander Wilkerson said nothing. I checked his insignia properly and only then noticed he was of the Engineering Department. With this in mind, I asked, "Were you in Officer's Lounge two earlier?"

Mildly surprised, Commander Wilkerson responded. "Yes, sir, I was."

He remained at attention while I returned to the computer console and punched up some information. A few seconds passed before the requested information appeared

on the screen. I returned my gaze to the Commander and asked, "Are you by any chance, Samuel Wilkerson?"

Not sure being recognized was a good thing or a bad thing, he simply replied, "Yes, sir, I am."

I gave him a begrudging smile. "From this report here on the computer I see that you have an impressive record."

Ashif Station Engineering School, 2259-2262

B.S. Degree: Major: Design Engineering

Minor: Physics

M.S. Degree: Warp Dynamics 2262-2264

Massachusetts Institute of Technology,

Doctoral Degree: Time Flow Technology 2264-2265

as it applies to Warp Dynamics.

Oxford University,

Ph. D. Degree: The Purposes of Emotion

Starfleet Academy Command School, 2265-2267

Took Kobayashi Maru Test October 22, 2269

Commissioned Lieutenant Junior Grade

SERVICE RECORD

Assigned Starfleet Academy for 2 years. 2267-2269

Instructor at Engineering School

Assigned USS Hercules 2269-2272

Promoted to Chief Engineer 2270

Assigned USS Belknap - Chief Engineer 2272-2276

Assigned to Project ADREFT 2276-Current

Operations Officer

PROMOTION RECORD

Commissioned Lieutenant Junior Grade 2269

<i>Promotion to Lieutenant</i>	2270
<i>Promotion to Lieutenant Commander</i>	2272
<i>Promotion to Commander</i>	2276

RECORD OF DECORATIONS AND COMMENDATIONS

<i>Starfleet Achievement</i>	2268
<i>Grankite Order of Tactic</i>	2274
<i>Silver Palm, with Cluster</i>	2274

A reread of the man's record left me wondering. Why would a man like this remain under the command of a scoundrel like Short? "Why haven't you left yet?", I asked, curious, but concerned.

Commander Wilkerson paused a moment to consider before he spoke. "Admiral, I have requested a transfer at least a dozen times. The Commodore stated he purposely blocked my transfer requests so I could not expose his operation. Also, I have entered three formal and many informal complaints, requesting action on this."

"I am curious because, from your record, Starfleet holds you in high regard." At that point I smiled. "I also say this because I am holding transfer orders for you."

Hearing this, Sam didn't know what to say, he seemed torn. After a pause, he offered, "I assume this isn't to a rehab colony."

I looked at him peculiarly and said, "Nothing that excessive. Your transfer will of course be put on hold until this investigation is over." I looked down at my luggage and realized his paperwork was somewhere in there. "I think I'll put you out of your misery. Don't worry, you won't spend the rest of your life fixing latrines on Mars."

Standing there, Commander Wilkerson relaxed a little and gave a sigh of relief as he listened to what I had to say.

I have to admit, I felt a little embarrassed as I fumbled around in my command packet for the transfer orders. I finally found them and, with a flourish, I handed the tape to Wilkerson and proceeded to say, "By order of Starfleet Command, you are to report to Starfleet HQ and assume command of Project *Excelsior/Ingram*. You will report to the director of Special Operations and to Captain Stiles on the *Excelsior*."

The more I spoke, the more the man began lighting up like a Christmas tree.

"All the same, you will remain here for seven to ten days. You are to brief the new personnel on what this repair base has in stock and how far you have progressed."

Hearing this Commander Wilkerson stood there, speechless. Trying to utter something, he found he couldn't.

Laughing internally, I looked at him and said, "Any questions? If not, dismissed."

I touched a communications button on the desk and said. "Communications center, send to Starbase 21, to Fleet Captain Jayne Seymour; have secured Planet Merlynn and the Construction base. Commodore Short will be arriving soon – in cuffs. Transfer the Commodore to Starfleet HQ under tight security. When the Sector JAG arrives, have them please come over here to conduct hearings. Sään out."

A voice came over the intercom. "Ensign Gale, sir. I have someone here at the main entrance. He has orders from Admiral Rowe to come here on a fact-finding mission for her. Do you wish to see him?"

"Who is he?"

"Admiral," Ensign Gale said. "He is Commodore Timothy O'Brien, Engineering Adviser for the Sector Chief."

"Mr. Gale, escort him up here."

Within minutes, Commodore O'Brien entered the office, directly opposite me. He was a little younger than me, with a little salt and pepper in his hair. Fit and ready for anything, he stepped forward and shook my hand. I offered him a seat opposite, then I turned to the young man who escorted him up here.

"Mister Gale, use the office out there and get Admiral Rowe on the horn for me. I wish to speak with her."

O'Brien looked around him and noted the security still working in the outer office. "Is this the crap storm I think it is?" he asked with more than a touch of sarcasm.

Looking up from the desk I noticed his Australian accent but said nothing.

About this time the COM panel whistled. I hit the button the voice said. "Your call to Admiral Rowe is ready, sir. Transferring to your office viewer."

I smiled as Admiral Rowe appeared on the screen. She was about my age and we went way back. For the first time in hours, she gave me a reason to smile. "Vivian, how are you?"

Vivian Rowe responded as if she was squinting at the screen. "Very well, thanks. Sään is that you? The situation must be grave to have you there."

"Yes, it is a SNAFU. I have standing before me Commodore O'Brien. Do you still want a fact-finding report from him?"

Vivian nodded forcefully. "Yes, I do."

"Very well," I replied. "I will inform him of the situation and the changes that will take place. I'll need him to sit in on the hearings that will take place here. I could use another flag officer for the tribunals. I'm sure he'll get his report to you as soon as he can. Is that fine with you?"

Vivian gave me a knowing smile. "Just fine with me, Ollie, but just don't take too long. Rowe out."

"Well, O'Brien, we've got our work cut out for us," I said. I raised my voice and called for the ensign. "Mister Gale, we could use a couple of cups of coffee in here."

About three hours later I finished telling Tim O'Brien what had happened and what changes that are going to take place.

He wasn't surprised that I'd be practically gutting the staff on the station and importing new crew from a variety of sources. I didn't want the same thing happening again.

"Tim" – we were working on a first name basis as was usually the case for flag officers. "When you make your analysis, I'd like a copy of your findings. Anything you can do to help me restructure this nightmare would be helpful."

He gave me a knowing smile. I think he knew he was about to start eating the elephant. "I've brought my go team with me, so we'll get straight on it."

He got up to leave, and I stood and gave him a parting handshake. "I'll leave you to it."

I watched him go, feeling confident that situation was in good hands. Curious, I called up on the computer the record of one Commodore Timothy O'Brien. Reading through it, I found an impressive background in engineering, noticing that he was a longtime acquaintance of Commander Wilkerson. "Small world," I muttered to myself.

I sat back and began to search through the qualified people who Starfleet had available. I was determined to pick the very finest people that I could to get this project up and going again. This was going to take a while.

A couple of hours later, I was informed that Fleet Captain Seymour and Captain Ack of the Sector's Judge Advocate General's Office had arrived from Starbase 21. They were to conduct hearings on the personnel here at the Merlynn base. In just my few hours on deck here I had seen so many failings of the handbook that there would have to be a long investigation with appropriate charges being brought.

I didn't envy them.

Especially investigating the failings of a flag officer. This situation was going to give Starfleet in this sector a black eye.

It didn't take Jayne too long to report in. She handed me a tape from Starfleet Headquarters.

I dropped it into the slot on my desk and brought up the information. I had been assigned Captain James Brooks as my Chief of Staff for the Southwest Sector of the IG's Office. He would be reporting in a couple of weeks for duty; I saw he was having to come all the way from Cait. His appointment rounded out my staff for the IG.

I sighed. *Now I have to assemble my staff for Project Adrift. This will be the hard part.* I knew before I could start that I had a few things to do first.

I looked across the table at Jayne. I was amazed by her natural sense of patience. "Can I get anything for you?" I asked. "Coffee?"

For the first time since meeting her, she surprised me with a flash of a smile, revealing pearly white, perfectly straight teeth. They highlighted the light sprinkling of freckles on her cheeks. It made her look ten years younger. "Hot chocolate will do fine, sir."

I called Gale back into the office and ordered some more coffee for myself, and a hot chocolate for the captain.

"Oh, and a donut, if you don't mind," she added with just a touch of sugar.

The ensign nodded and left to take care of things.

Jayne looked down next to the desk, noting my suitcase was still there. She looked me in the eye. "Admiral, have you had *any* downtime since you arrived?"

At that, my stomach growled, betraying me. "Ah, no."

Gale returned with our order and placed the beverages on the desk for us, including Jayne's donut.

Seymour looked me in the eye and raised a brow.

I shook my head. She was right. I hadn't been looking after myself. "Mister, I could use a cheeseburger and some fries."

If the ensign was surprised, he didn't show it. "I'll be right back, sir."

Jayne sipped her chocolate. It seemed to help her relax. "We have our work cut out for us here, don't we?" she asked quietly.

I grimaced. "Coming here, I was hoping for a SNAFU, but this place is completely FUBAR."

The captain simply raised her eyebrows. "I've seen worse, but I'm never happy about it. Starfleet has set such a high bar, but the people who make it up often couldn't reach them if they jumped on a trampoline."

I noticed my cheeseburger had appeared on the side of the desk, and I didn't remember the ensign leaving it. I noted that Jayne didn't miss a thing.

"You need some rest, Admiral," she said kindly.

I scarfed the burger and fries and started to organize the desk.

My sense of duty was in high gear. "My Flag Secretary will be arriving soon," I said. "I'll then be able to get down to business fairly quickly. With Captain Ack here, the hearings shouldn't take too long. I hear he is a fast worker on matters such as this."

I glanced at Jayne and could see she was quietly disapproving. Defeated, I called up on the computer a layout of the staterooms that were available for me. "After I finish up, I will retire and get some sleep. OK?" I asked, a little cheekily.

Jayne gave me a little smile. I could see she likes to win.

Remembering one important element, I rummaged around in my luggage and found it, then placed the picture of my sister on the corner of the desk. Looking at her, I thought, *'Well sis I will need all the help I can get. Peace be with you.'* I put my fingertips to my lips and touched the frame.

Stretching, I turned around once more to push the button that makes the wall transparent. I stood and looked out through it, and I began to lose myself. The fatigue was catching up with me. I marveled at the sight.

I realized I could remain here for some time, so I pushed the button and the wall became solid again.

I gave Jayne a smile and said, "I'll see you at..." I checked the clock, "... 0900 tomorrow."

"Good night, sir." She uncrossed her legs and stood, intending to follow me out. I knew that she still had several hours of work to do before she could settle down. I gathered my command packet and headed out, making a last-minute check. I watched as Seymour bailed up Gale and began issuing orders.

It didn't take too long for me to find my quarters. I had been followed by a trusted security officer who would stand guard outside. I wasn't certain someone would try something if they were still loyal to Short.

I don't remember much about the sonic shower, and I'm not even sure I remember my head hitting the pillow when I dropped off to sleep.

It took days for a sense of normalcy to return to Merlynn. Starfleet wasn't the only organization with an interest in this planet. Due to the carelessness of Short – and his criminal activities – I practically had to shut down everything to prevent not just the felons from getting away, but my main concern was people involved in espionage.

With every ship being examined that were coming – and going – from Merlynn, our people found some very interesting goings on. Yes, there was a fair amount of illegal commerce, but there was also evidence of classified materials leaving the complex.

Project Adreft needed to be tight as a drum. I couldn't imagine what might happen if the Romulans or Klingons got their hands on our new shield technology, among other things.

Now stationed in the office just outside mine, Lt Deborah Daniels put her head through the door. "Sir, Commander Wilkerson is here. Can you give him a moment?"

I had a little time before my next meeting. "Show him in."

Commander Wilkerson stepped into the room, and I noted his demeanor had shifted dramatically. He no longer looked like a man on death row, but a being with a bright future.

"I just wanted to stop by on my way out," he said with a smile.

I was happy to see him. "I'm glad you're here. I was hoping to pick your brain before you left. Do you have much time?"

"Actually, the shuttle leaves in about two hours. What's on your mind, sir?"

"How have your briefings been? Any problems?"

"None at all. I briefed the remaining engineering staff thoroughly. They are very sharp, and will accomplish a lot – now that all roadblocks are down."

I couldn't help but notice the undercurrent of anger towards Short.

"Captain Ack has cleared me for departure. With your permission, of course."

I simply nodded at that. "What is your assessment of Commodore O'Brien? I noticed from his file, he is quite an engineer. I would like to use him, but I am concerned his rank will get in the way."

"Yes, he is. My personal experience with him stems from our work refitting the *USS Enterprise* some nine years ago. His work has always been outstanding. He is also very good at directing other people, too. The man knows how to lead, not just be a boss." He paused for a minute. "I have to admit, though, I've never heard of a Commodore heading up an engineering department."

"Are you trying to tell me something, Commander?"

"As a matter of fact, yes. I believe he will make an outstanding Executive Officer. So long as he has some hands-on engineering work, too."

"I see." I nodded to myself. I could see that his thoughts had merit. The only problem I had was getting past

Vivian. I chuckled quietly at the notion. "I'll consider your suggestion."

I looked up to see Fleet Captain Seymour and Captain Ack enter.

Jayne looked to Sam and said, "Are you about ready? We're leaving soon."

The Commander nodded. "I'm fine. I've got a few files to grab before I go. It'll only take a few minutes. I also have to contact Lt. Robertson; she is coming with me – she doesn't know about the earlier departure."

I stood and extended a warm hand of friendship. "Good luck on your new assignment. Keep in touch."

Sam left with Seymour and Ack, who also shook my hand before they left.

I got the impression that Deborah had been waiting outside the door for the others to leave. "Need anything, Ollie?" she asked.

I gave her a friendly smile. I had her page Commodore O'Brien to report to my office. She disappeared back to her desk and within moments, the Commodore arrived. I ushered Deborah in and we began our meeting.

It lasted for about three hours. The main issue was to plan future operations at the base.

I put down my writing stylus and broached the previous subject. "Tim, I've had a recommendation for you to take over here as my XO for Project Adreft. What say you?"

Tim's eyes widened a little. "I've got to admit, I like the idea of getting my hands dirty again. Working for Vivian has been interesting, but I'm not sure I want to be a trouble-shooter for the rest of my life."

I nodded. I sympathized. "It's the downside to promotion. We're told it's great for our career, until things get boring pushing paper."

The Commodore chuckled, and I couldn't help but notice that Deborah was smiling to herself.

"If you need some time," I said. "I could use you here, but the decision is yours."

At that, Tim actually laughed. "Tell that to Admiral Rowe!"

He had a point. Vivian was practically a force of nature. "Let me know what you decide and I'll have a word with her."

Tim seemed to consider it for a moment, then grinned. "I'm sure Sam said something about it being odd for a Commodore to be running things in the engineering department." He shrugged. "So be it. It sounds like fun."

I nodded at Tim. "That's good news. Thank you, Commodore. I'll get Lieutenant Daniels here to scare up Vivian, and we'll get the wheels turning."

I suddenly had a thought and realized that this request might have more of an impact than I initially thought. "Do you have any family you need to inform?"

At that, Tim grinned. "Funny you should mention that. My wife had been bending my ear for year to settle down somewhere – that's pretty hard when you're jumping from fire to fire. She's going to be fairly happy to join me here. We'll finally have some quality time together."

"A win all around then," I said. "Merlynn's a big planet. I'm sure you'll find somewhere appropriate for your family."

We finished the meeting with my informing the others that I would be travelling to Fleet Headquarters in about six months to report on our progress.

"Hopefully, we'll be up to full strength well before then," I said, projecting confidence, while mentally crossing my fingers.

O'Brien smiled. "I'm sure we will, sir."

Deborah looked up and checked her watch. "Admiral, we need to get going with the inspection tour."

With a glance at my schedule on my terminal screen, I could see she was right. I stood, and the others followed suit.

"Commodore, I'll let you get to work with the Engineering Department and begin bringing that up to scratch." I turned to Daniels. "Lieutenant, I'll get you to send that message to Admiral Rowe now – before she finds out..." I chuckled darkly "... if she hasn't already. I've got to hit the head, then we'll make that tour."

Part Two

Stardate 8130.2

The *Miranda*-class starship *Reliant* sailed serenely into the Ceti Alpha system, completely unaware of the dangers that awaited them on the fifth planet of the system.

The crew brought the magnificent vessel into standard orbit of planet VI as they searched for a planet to suit the requirements of the Genesis Project...

I have to admit it, this is my favorite thing to do here. I was taking a moment before departure, my feet up on the windowsill, chair reclined.

It had been six months since I took command here, and a lot had changed. Overall, I was pretty happy.

I looked up, momentarily startled, as Lieutenant Deborah Daniels stormed into my office. "All is ready for your departure, Ollie."

My train of thought derailed, I considered. "Very well. Is all the paperwork completed?"

Remaining standing at the corner of my desk, Deborah nodded. "Yes, sir. Fleet Captain Seymour has reported it's ready to go.

"Oh, and I just got word that Captain Brooks has arrived at Starbase 4."

Internally, I grumbled. Admiral Rowe had poached him from me – temporarily – for a jurisdictional job.

Deborah caught my gaze with a friendly wave. She could see I'd temporarily drifted. She knew that if anyone could get under my skin, it was Vivian Rowe. "When you get

to Headquarters, Commodore Short's court martial will move up a couple of days. Remember, you must attend." As she made her way to her desk, she added: "Oh, and before you go, Commodore O'Brien would like a word."

I raised a brow. "Any idea why?"

Deborah shrugged. "I've gotta admit, I have no idea."

I had to admit, I was surprised. Deborah usually had her finger on the pulse on everything here. Mind you, she wasn't above the odd practical joke...

"Don't worry about us, sir," she said in a conciliatory fashion. "The Captain and I have got heaps to keep us busy with filings while you're gone."

I decided it was time to get going. Knowing my luggage had already been taken care of, I grabbed a valise with what I needed and headed out the door. With a nod to my staff, I walked down the hall, headed to O'Brien's office.

Upon entering, the officer on duty stood at attention. I motion to her and said, "As you were. Is Commodore O'Brien in?"

She gestured at the Commodore's private office, which meant he's in and to go ahead inside.

I gave her a nod and walked in. "What's on your mind, Tim?"

Tim O'Brien looked up from his work and said, "Just one thing, Admiral. How am I going to handle the matter of getting all of these items?"

I knew what he was talking about. Even after six months, we were still suffering from some supply shortages. I looked at him and said, "Improvise. You know I will be leaving shortly, and that you will be in command. I'm sure everything will operate smoothly while I'm gone."

Tim O'Brien put his paperwork down, looked at me and said, "Are you expecting disorder?"

Confused, I frowned as his question. "No! I'm not taking any chances. You know your job. I don't want a repeat of the former administration's problems."

At his frown, I added, "Look, shortages are the way of things in any supply chain. It's been that way since the Korean War. Just try finding a roll of toilet paper back then."

His nerves assuaged – temporarily at least, Tim replied: "Don't worry Admiral, I won't let our house of cards collapse."

I had a brief laugh at his joke. I lowered my voice. "Still planning on going ahead with the snap inspection once I'm out of here?"

Tim shot me a look. "How did you know about that?" As if a light went on behind his eyes, he said: "Deborah."

I gave him a knowing smile. "She sees all. She knows all."

The Commodore shook his head. "She does that. When are you going to promote her to Lieutenant Commander?"

"She's only just up to full L.T.!"

Tim shrugged. "She deserves it."

I couldn't disagree. She was the grease in the machine.

Giving Tim a nod, I said: "The *Concordat* will be waiting for me. Keep the lights on for me."

"If I can find some light bulbs," Tim quipped.

I tipped him a quick salute and headed out.

Arriving at the shuttle bay, I found my personal shuttle warmed up and ready to leave. I strode up the boarding ramp, sat down at my regular place and began to read over my briefings.

The pilot turned and said, "Admiral, we are ready to leave. I'm requesting clearance."

Not saying anything I motioned at the pilot. He turned around and hit the communications button – requesting

clearance. Once granted, he activated the engines and the shuttle started to move forward. Leaving the hangar deck, I looked out the porthole, where I saw the shining planetoid moving slowly away from my view.

Regretfully, the shuttle wasn't warp capable, so it would take twenty-one hours to reach Starbase 21. I knew that orbiting it would be the *USS Concordat*, the Federation Dreadnought assigned to this base. It was tasked with transporting me to Earth upon my arrival.

So, for now, all I had was a load of paperwork, some old movies and a very comfortable chair for companionship.

As we approached Starbase 21, I took the copilot's seat. The relief pilot was flying – she had been napping in the bunk when I boarded – and the L.T. in charge of the craft was currently enjoying a sandwich in the rear.

I gazed out at the huge starbase that hung on nothing – an enormous Christmas ornament in space. At the moment, there were a plethora of craft in parking orbits about it. Commodore Lowmas was preparing to host a conference by the Federation Agricultural Commission to determine this sector's agricultural needs, the reason for all the interest.

I noted a couple of Starfleet destroyers in wide orbits, and the huge *Concordat* among them. This enormous starship, a *Federation*-class Dreadnought, had just recently gone through a refit, she was sporting the new linear warp engines.

Looking at this magnificent vessel, I said, "Lieutenant, open a channel."

She reached over and pushed a few buttons. The shuttle pilot looked over and said, "Channel is now open, Admiral."

I hit the communications button and spoke. "This is Shuttle Merlynn II. Is Captain Nathan Cullins there?"

Onboard the *Concordat*, the bridge crew stopped what they were doing. Touching the communications button on the command chair, Captain Cullins spoke, "*Concordat* to shuttle Merlynn II, this is Cullins. Go ahead."

A familiar voice issued from the speakers overhead. "Nate, this is Admiral Sään. I will arrive in ten minutes. Will you be ready to leave when I board?"

Like a cobra ready to strike, the captain responded, "Yes, we're ready. Upon arrival, dock via the forward doors. *Concordat* out."

Approaching the *Concordat*, the shuttle looked like a fly compared to the size of the dreadnought. While aligning with the entrance to the forward docking clamshell in the engineering section, I got a chance to view the ship up close. The underside of the primary hull seemed to bristle with phaser pods, and we seemed to be flying down the throat of the forward torpedo launchers.

One thing was certain, there was no reason to have anxiety flying in this ship.

Entering the shuttle bay, I saw just how gigantic the bay was. I noted that most of this vessel's complement of support craft were stowed below. It gave the cavernous space an even greater sense of volume.

Landing, the shuttle made a slight turn on the pad. I could see out of the edge of the viewport the shuttle bay doors closing, and I waited for the bay to pressurize. It took only a moment.

While I waited, I took a moment to show my appreciation. "Thank you for the smooth flight, people."

The senior pilot responded: "Always a pleasure, sir," while the woman still shutting down the shuttle just gave a grateful smile.

I heard the chime of pressurizing completed. I could always be assured of that because, in a vacuum, I would have heard nothing at all.

My pilots and I disembarked, our footsteps echoing on the polished flooring. I took a deep lungful of air and wondered at the new car smell.

"Talk about brand new," the female pilot muttered.

I didn't disagree with her.

The airlock door opened as we approached and there stood Captain Cullins. Stepping through the entrance I said for all of us, "Permission to come aboard?" It was a rhetorical question, that was true, but tradition had to be honored.

The stocky, middle-aged Captain Cullins answered, "Permission granted. Welcome aboard, Admiral." He then nodded to a subordinate, who raised the bridge.

"Engage," was all he said.

I got the message. We were to depart immediately.

After the usual exchange of pleasantries, Captain Cullins instructed one of the crewmen to show us to our quarters. He offered to dine with him in the captain's mess this evening. At least our clocks weren't that far out. I'd only be having my evening meal an hour early.

Grateful for a chance to sleep on a *bed*, I took a nap then freshened up. The guest quarters on the refit Dreadnought were excellent, even given the fact the ship was technically a warship. I doubted it was the case for all

the officers. Dressed in my work uniform – I wasn't expecting anything fancy – I left for the mess.

Arriving, I rang his doorbell. I then heard a voice say, 'Enter'.

The door shushed aside and I was pleasantly ushered into the room by a male yeoman. I was quietly delighted by the marvelous furnishings on this new refit vessel. The table in the middle of the room was finished with a faux woodgrain and the captain was standing, greeting me with a pleasant smile.

Next to him was another, young, female yeoman who would be assisting.

The captain said in his gravelly voice, "Have a seat, Ollie."

I walked over and sat down in the chair opposite.

Cullins continued. "How long has it been?"

I looked up and blew out some air while I thought about it. "Quite some time... twenty years, isn't it?"

As he sat, Captain Cullins said, "Try the wine. I know you'll like it."

I raised a curious brow. Had he remembered my complete distaste for anything but the real thing? I sipped it after a brief sniff. *Pinon Noir*? Surprised, I said, "Very nice."

The yeomen disappeared to retrieve our meals. While they were gone, Captain Cullins asked, "How are things going on Merlynn?"

Setting the wine down, I honestly replied, "Not too bad, Nate. You know I have taken over as the new Commander for Project Adreft."

At the yeomen returned and placed our meals, Cullins jokingly asked: "Is that where you disappeared to?"

I was surprised by the choice. Peking Duck! I picked up a fork and tasted a piece. "This is very good, but a little

too rich for me," I said wiping my face. If my old acquaintance was disappointed, he didn't show it.

Trying another bite, I looked up at Nate and said, "Where is Admiral Baughman? Does he still fly his flag on this ship?" I wondered if he would remember the little in-joke.

Looking up at me, Nate said deadpan, "He's on Starbase 21 attending the Agricultural Conference."

I chuckled a little at that. "So, you lose one babysitter to get stuck with another."

Nate appreciated our position. He gave a light chuckle as he remembered our shared history and mutual dislike of having someone looking over our shoulder. However, he didn't feel free to answer.

I put him at ease. "Don't worry about me, Nate. This ship is yours and I have no intention of messing with you or your people. You probably won't see me anywhere near the bridge until he hit Earth Spacedock."

I noticed a lot of tension seemed to leave Nate's body at that point, and I got the impression this was the first time he'd really relaxed in some time. For that, I pitied him a little. It could never be easy running a ship you called yours while a paper-pusher – admittedly like me – was constantly buzzing around your ear.

In a much more informal manner, he said, "I appreciate that, Ollie. Sorry about the duck. If you'd like something else, I'm sure the chef can conjure something up for you."

I grinned. "I could really go a burger and some fries."

At that, Nate gave a good belly laugh, and I noted even the yeomen were smiling.

"I'll have it done, sir." He gave the female a nod and she disappeared to take care of my wishes.

We both continued some small talk as we finished our dinner. Afterward, he offered to give me a chair at the ship's poker table. He sweetened the deal with his XO and the ship's doctor becoming possible victims.

It was too good an offer to pass up, so we enjoyed a pleasant evening playing for starbases. Afterward, relaxed but still a little wired, I turned on the view screen and chose the status reports briefing channel that command officers were entitled to.

I had heard rumblings about the *Enterprise* dueling with the *Reliant* whilst en route. Now I had a moment of peace, I had to find out what happened.

I was floored to find that the *Enterprise* had destroyed the *Reliant* which had been stolen by some renegade Augment, Khan Singh. In the process, he had detonated a device that had turned the Mutara Nebula into a new planet they'd naturally called Genesis.

One odd thing I saw was a class one directive preventing travel there. Only the science vessel *Grissom* has permission to be in that region.

Considering the situation, I wasn't surprised. Anything that could turn a nebula into a planet was something that was going to cause a hell of a lot of controversy.

As I was pondering the information, an updated report had come in. The *Enterprise* was now arriving at the Spacedock.

I said, "Computer. ETA at Spacedock."

The computer responded, "Arrival will be in thirteen days, two hours." I pursed my lips in irritation. That was the sad truth about spaceflight. Nothing was instantaneous.

I turned off the viewer and prepared for bed.

Stardate 8155.3

Thirteen days later, I woke up to work on my briefs concerning the court martial of Alton Short. The yeoman who had brought me my breakfast and coffee had informed me of our arrival in the Sol System.

I enjoyed my meal, did some reading, then left for the bridge. Entering, I saw Captain Cullins sitting on his command chair.

An officer to my left noticed me and cried: "Admiral on the bridge!"

The entire bridge crew rose out of respect, including Nate.

The captain smiled warmly. "Welcome, Admiral. We are about there. It was a pleasure to have you on board."

I got the joke. For most of the trip, I had avoided interfering in any of the ship-board duties. The only person I'd worked with regularly was the comms officer on duty. "Thank you, Nate. I enjoyed the ride."

Looking at the center screen, I saw *Yorktown* leaving the system. She looked like she had just completed her upgrade.

At the edge of the screen, I noted we were now passing Mars in all her rustic glory. It's a beautiful planet and I hoped to visit my plot there soon. I missed her russet sunsets.

Within minutes, we were approaching Earth, I noticed the Spacedock growing in size.

I tapped Nate on the shoulder and saw myself out. I went to my quarters to pack and prepare to beam down.

Entering spacedock, the *Concordat* moved slowly to a mooring berth. I arrived at the transporter room, placed my things on the pad and waited. A few minutes later, Captain

Cullins entered. He wanted to see me off personally – I had expected he would.

I stepped on the transporter pad ready to beam down, when Cullins stepped forward, shook my hand and said, "Good luck to you, Ollie." He stepped back.

"Permission to disembark?" I asked.

Nate smiled broadly. "Always, my friend. Energize."

Materializing in the Spacedock transporter room I saw Vice Admiral Hawkins, the Inspector General's Chief of Staff. I was a little surprised to see him here.

Stepping down off the transporter pad I opened with, "Tom, it's good to see you again. How are things going?"

All business, Vice Admiral Hawkins spoke, "Fine. Let's talk later. I have to show you to your quarters now. The persons involved in Commodore Short's trial have been sequestered."

I wasn't the least bit surprised. However, I thought it was too little, too late. It's been over six months for some to get their stories straight. Such was the nature of subspace communications.

Leaving the transporter room, we walked past a picture window that revealed the ships moored in the Spacedock. I saw the *Excelsior* on one side with the sadly battered *Enterprise* opposite. I also saw the *Concordat* moored behind the *Excelsior*. It was a glorious sight.

Heading to my quarters, I felt my Rigelian sixth sense telling me something wasn't right.

Stardate 8190.3

Five days passed since my arrival, and I had spent the time reviewing my documentation regarding the trial and checking in with Deborah back at Merlynn.

At least things were going smoothly back there.

The trial of Alton Short had already begun. When I entered the hearing room I took a seat with the other witnesses; among them was Commander Wilkerson. He'd been here for some time.

I wondered how he was doing on the *Excelsior/Ingram* project. Even given my Starfleet focus, I was fascinated with it. The *Ingram* especially held great value for the future security of the Federation.

Tearing my attention back to the present, I noted that at the front of the hearing room were five individual seating areas where the court officers will soon sit.

The court officers entered the courtroom. First up, there was Vice Admiral Hawkins who took the chair of the President of the Court. Next was Rear Admiral Adam Masters – Chief of Starfleet Operations, then Rear Admiral Jason Freeman, Assistant Chief of Logistics. The next in the parade of dress uniforms was Commodore Steve Anderson, Operations Officer for Shore Establishment, Construction and Repair Division. Bringing up the rear was Commodore Sa'nac, Assistant Personnel Officer for Flag Ranks.

The court came to order.

Tradition was held, and the bell was rung three times to open today's proceedings.

The first witness called was Jackie Robertson, who was doing her best to not look uncomfortable.

I noted the prosecuting attorney was Captain Ack of the JAG, a good man and lawyer.

I wasn't surprised that the defense attorney was Commander J'mar, Aide to the Commander of the Earth

Defense Forces. He had quite the record and had a reputation for taking on impossible cases.

For a moment, I wondered if he considered himself a modern-day Samuel T. Cogley. I recalled the case files of his masterful defense of Jim Kirk during his first five-year mission on the *Enterprise*. Brilliant work.

Ack stepped forward. "If it please the court, I'd like to read the Lieutenant's history into the record."

The computer read out a short list. In the ten years since the Academy, reported she had essentially aided a short selection of officers in a variety of places. I did note she had been given a number of letters of commendation – hence her elevation to Lieutenant.

"Lieutenant, please confer to the court your duties at MeryInn Station."

Decked out in her dress uniform, Jackie blew an errant strand of her tightly-controlled hair out of her eyes and said: "I was stationed as the secretary to the Chief Engineer for the program."

Ack asked: "Who appointed you this position?"

I was surprised. Robertson couldn't help but glance in Sam Wilkerson's direction. What was that about?

She shifted. "Commodore Short."

She's clearly hiding something.

"Objection!"

I rolled my eyes. *If J'mar is going to object to that question this is going to be a very long day.*

"Relevance."

Really? If his strategy is to wear down the patience of the court, he's picked the wrong crowd.

I knew Hawkins well enough to know he really wanted to facepalm. "I'll allow it."

Captain Ack, who had been waiting patiently, continued. "Miss Robertson, what did the Commodore place you in Commander Wilkerson's office to do?"

Jackie answered: "Assist him, sir."

Ack tilted his head to the side a fraction. It was his way of saying: Duh! "Was there anything else he ordered you to do?"

The younger woman shifted again. Another glance at Sam. "I was to report to the Commodore what he was doing."

Ack smiled a little. "Oh, just to keep an eye on him?"

Finally, Robertson came clean. "No, sir. He wanted me to tell him if the Commander was reporting to Command on him."

"Objection! Inflammatory."

"Denied."

Sigh. Good grief, Charlie Brown.

Ack turned again to Robertson.

He looks like the Terran cat considering its latest meal.

"Did you?"

Another, this time clearly guilty, look at Wilkerson. "At first, yes. Sam... I mean the Commander... is a good officer. I figured that out quickly. He had good reasons to be worried."

"Objection!"

In the office of Commodore O'Brien on Merlynn, he felt like popping the cork on a bottle of champagne, having finally received nearly everything he had requisitioned. It had been a hard, often frustrating six months, but with the help of the project's new commander, a fire had finally been lit under the backsides of certain suppliers.

He recalled a conversation a month prior. He had been sitting off to the side while Admiral Sään had raked a supplier

over the proverbial coals. It turned out that when an Admiral threatens to cancel an order and blacklist your company things start moving. He had quietly chuckled darkly that day, and hoped he would one day be able to have that level of sway.

Deborah broke his reverie when her head popped around the doorframe. "I heard the good news," she said. "We're ready to start the next phase."

Glad to have someone to share his joy, the Commodore gave her a wide grin. "Yes! We're going to be building modules for repairing and refitting ships when they come in."

Daniels nodded her understanding. "I gather we don't have a lot of capacity though."

O'Brien shrugged. "I'm hoping that, once we get things under way, we can expand the docks and increase our production."

Deborah was curious. "How long does that take?"

"How long is a piece of string?" He chuffed at his own humor. "Usually between two and six months, depending on the complexity of the vessel. We've established the best set of blueprints for the ships, but if there's one thing's I've learned is that starships rarely return from long tours exactly as they left."

The Lieutenant seemed surprised. "Really?"

"Really." He rolled his eyes. "You should have seen what the *Enterprise* looked like when she came in for her refit. We all looked at the jury-rigged setup that she'd become and wondered how the thing worked at all."

Deborah frowned. "But she's a legend."

O'Brien shrugged. "She is, and always will be. I have to admit, we learned a lot from Scotty's engineering prowess. He came up with some really interesting solutions to bizarre

issues." He paused, smiling. "We spent a lot of time simply taking notes as we deconstructed her. I sometimes wonder if we should simply have put her into the Starfleet Museum as an example."

"Of what?" Deborah was genuinely curious.

The Commodore gave a wry grin. "Of what not to – and also do – with a starship."

"Wow."

"I have to admit," O'Brien conceded, "he's not alone. I've talked the corridors of the NX-01 *Enterprise* and what Trip Tucker did with that ship was legendary." He shivered involuntarily.

"What is it?"

Truly amazed, he answered: "I've seen the reports and video of what they went through in the Xindi crisis. That ship was held together with duct tape and chicken wire by the time she got home. Hell, there were a lot of components that weren't there when she left."

"Ah."

"That's what Scotty's *Enterprise* was like. After five years out there on her own, she came back radically different."

"Okay... Don't they carry spares?"

"Of course. But when you're far from home, you have to make do." At Deborah's continued incredulity, he added: "Look, if you found yourself marooned on the wrong side of the galaxy, you'd have to make do with whatever you find to get home. I'm sure by the time they got back, the ship probably wouldn't look all that much as she did when she left."

Deborah's eyes registered her understanding. "Gotcha." She gave the Commodore a nod. "Time to do some work," she said with a cheeky grin. "I'm helping Captain Seymour

investigate a command structure issue. Have fun!" Her head disappeared, along with the rest of her.

O'Brien had to admit to himself, this was going to be fun. If there was one thing he really loved, it was getting his hands dirty rebuilding a starship. If he had been born in the 20th century, he would have been happiest with his head under the bonnet of a hotrod.

Barely on the far side of the Klingon Neutral Zone, a lone Bird of Prey sat, parked, while her command level officers viewed a stolen recording regarding the ultrasecret Genesis Project.

Commander Kruge watched the video and could not help but feel a sense of fear mixed with a huge parcel of anger. Anger because the greatest enemy of the Klingon Empire may have just created the ultimate weapon and, for all their protestations of peace, they were clearly secretly plotting the downfall of the Empire. Fear, because he was worried someone else might beat him to it. After all, it was his ticket to taking over the Chancellor's seat. Perhaps even Emperor?

He asked his officers for their thoughts. One was smart enough to understand the practical power that it demonstrated.

The other – complete fool – was simply impressed with their technological prowess.

Did he really have to remind him that they would use it to subjugate – at the very least – their empire?

It was never a question in his mind.

Genesis would be his.

I'm finally sitting in the witness stand. For a trial that I hoped would be wrapped up fairly quickly, this one has gone on for weeks. I found it personally annoying in that I was a flag officer whose life was practically on hold while I waited my turn to speak.

Mind you, when the defense's attorney *let* me speak. So much of my testimony was peppered with "Objection!" that I wondered if the man had a big, red button on his desk he would slap every time someone opened their mouth. If he was trying to get on the good side of the board, this was not the way to go about it.

With my hand on the "truth sayer" as we like calling them, I swore into the record my video recorder's footage.

"Objection!"

I shared a look of long-suffering with Ack.

Admiral Hawkins raised his hand to his face and drew his fingers from forehead to chin. His voice reminded me of a man I once knew. He had been married to a nagging wife for twenty years and everything he said sounded soooo weary.

"On what basis?"

"Mister Sään was on the base without authorization and therefore any information he gathered is fruit of the poisonous tree."

Everyone in the room fixed their eyes on J'mar. It seemed I wasn't the only one who was incredulous.

A huge sigh came from the chair. Hawkins had had enough. "Mister J'mar, I cannot believe that anyone who passed the bar could be quite as incompetent as you have demonstrated today. *Admiral* Sään's position with the Starfleet as deputy *Inspector General* gives him carte blanche to investigate whatever issue he believes necessary. I do believe you are aware of this, so I am putting you on

notice to not waste any more of this court's time. If you breach this simple instruction sir, you will find yourself accruing time sitting in this base's brig." He fixed the Andorian with a stare that should have frozen *his* blood.

I was impressed.

Hawkin's deep blue eyes bored into J'mar. "Do you understand me, sir?"

J'mar's antennae twitched. "Yes, Admiral."

I honestly didn't think anything could rattle that shan until that moment.

Hawkins stated for the record: "Denied. Captain Ack, you may begin the video."

I smiled, knowing what was coming. *I have to admit, I'm enjoying throwing Short out the airlock. He has it coming.*

My testimony took up most of the day, and in the last hour Commander Wilkinson was called to the stand. I knew his testimony was going to take some time. I didn't know it was going to take a week. I underestimated just how much the man knew about what was going on under Short's command.

On the Friday afternoon, all was going smoothly when an ensign burst into the room and made his way up to the bench.

Hawkins scowled up at the young man, but the better angels of his nature knew he wouldn't have interrupted without a good excuse. "Spit it out, young man," he barked.

"Admiral, someone is stealing the *Enterprise*!"

I think we all blinked at that moment. We were all sitting in the scene of the crime, blissfully unaware that the most famous ship in Starfleet history was being stolen under our noses.

Hawkins blinked. "Did I hear you correctly? Someone is stealing the *Enterprise*?"

The ensign stared over the Admirals' heads. "Yes, sir. The *Excelsior* has orders to pursue."

Hawkins caught my eye, as the most senior investigator present. He mouthed silently: *Kirk*?

I nodded. Nobody would have had the *cojones* to take that ship from him – even though she had been decommissioned.

I also got the undercurrent. I wasn't necessarily needed at the moment. I rose and took the ensign with me while the case continued.

I marched straight over to the turbolift, forcing the ensign to run to catch up. I held the door while he joined me.

"Command deck," I ordered.

Within seconds, the lift spat us out into the nerve center of the station.

"Admiral on deck!"

Before anyone could move, I barked: "As you were!"

I'm not sure anyone actually noticed. They were all intent on preventing the *Enterprise* from getting away.

I looked out the viewport and saw Kirk's ship powering up as she hugged the rim of the station. She clearly had a lead on the *Excelsior*.

"How did they get out?" I asked.

A lieutenant looked up from her screen. "Captain Scott overrode the controls."

I questioned: "Tractor beam?"

"They're down for some reason," the commander on duty reported.

Scotty, I thought. *There's nothing that man can't do.*

The *Excelsior* appeared. Over the comms I heard: "Kirk, you do this, you'll never sit in the captain's chair again."

The *Enterprise* disappeared in a warp rainbow. Kirk was gone.

A thought came to me. "Wasn't Captain Scott assigned to the *Excelsior*?" I asked.

The commander caught my eye. "Yes, he was."

We both turned and gazed at the *Excelsior* and weren't the least bit surprised when, instead of going into warp, she started drifting.

Styles is going to be pissed.

I sighed. "You'd better get a couple of tugs out there and bring the *Excelsior* back inside. I doubt Scotty made it easy for them to find the bug."

As the commander turned to take care of business, I added: "Oh, and you'd better let any starship between here and Genesis not to get in Kirk's way. I don't know what he's got in mind, but there's no possibility that he'd fire on another Starfleet vessel."

The commander looked at me quizzically. "Are you certain, sir?" he asked as respectfully as he could.

I smiled and replied with absolute certainty. "Jim Kirk is many things, rogue, cowboy, sometimes hero. But he's not a villain."

I left him in control of this disaster and headed back to the trial room.

Hawkins paused the procedures while I reported to the bench. I noted that Commander Wilkinson, who was still giving evidence, slowly put his hands over his face. I was sure he was feeling embarrassed for the crew of the *Excelsior*, after all the claims that had been made, it had failed spectacularly.

The Admirals conferred for a moment, and decided that, while Jim Kirk's actions were at the very least questionable, action regarding them was beyond their

purview. The C-in-C had probably already been notified, and he was no doubt having the *Enterprise* chased down.

I had a lot of sympathy for what Kirk was doing. My people respect Vulcan beliefs, and what Commander Chekov had told me over coffee regarding the late Captain Spock had me feeling for the *Enterprise* crew. When you served together as long as they have, you gain a sense of family, and if Spock's soul did have a future, that should be respected, regardless of the status of Genesis.

Hawkins tapped the bell once more.

Ack renewed his questioning and, a couple of hours later, the good Commander Wilkinson wrapped up his testimony.

"We will now hear final statements from the prosecution."

This should be good, I thought.

For a good ten minutes, I heard Ack dig the soon to be ex-Commodore's grave. Merciless was the polite way to put it.

I was wondering if the air conditioning needed to be upped as the atmosphere was scorched. I glanced at Short and the look on the man's face reminded me of a fish after it had been caught. *Does he need medical attention?*

J'mar, in as dignified a fashion as he could, stood to give his closing comments. "Your honors, while the evidence against my client would appear to be damning..."

No kidding.

"... I would ask that you remember his previous meritorious service to the Federation. He did receive the Star Cross with clusters for his service during the Klingon War."

I wonder who he stole that from.

"I would ask that you consider his recent activities to be an aberration in what was an illustrious Starfleet career. If you are to give him a custodial sentence..."

If?

"I would request it be in a place free from people groups who may take umbrage to his previous service."

If the man walks out of here with his skin intact, I'd be surprised.

J'mar just stood there for a moment, seemingly lost in thought. I was reminded that the man had a reputation for taking on lost causes. This had definitely been one of them.

"The defense rests."

The board retired for a good... five minutes? Then came back with a guilty verdict.

As sin.

"Considering his previous service to the Starfleet," Hawkins continued, "it is the verdict of this court that Short be stripped of all rank and be dishonorably discharged from the service. Any and all benefits he might have received in retirement are therefore forfeit."

"Mister Short..."

Ouch.

"... is to be taken from here to the penal colony off the coast of New Zealand where he will labor for the rest of the term of his natural life."

Too good for him. It's a pity the Federation doesn't have its own Rura Penthe.

Short was forced to stand while his former associates stripped him of his rank insignia.

As a security officer stepped forward with binders, I used my authority and signaled to him. I moved up behind Short, took the binders and clicked them into place on his wrists personally.

Quietly, so only Short could hear, I whispered: "New Zealand is far too good for you."

With the trial over, I took some time to relax before returning to Merlynn. I decided to drop by Mars before I returned.

Standing on the porch of my wood framed home, I enjoyed the evening sun glinting off the silicates in the nearby cliffs. It was gorgeous. I knew I could only spend a day or two here after the trial. It cost me a lot of time.

While I delighted in the chance to spend some time on my own property and taking stock of some of the repairs that needed doing, I knew that my calling as an Admiral was drawing me back to that distant planet.

The evening light glinted off the side panel of Merlynn II, which was parked off to the side of my house. One of the perks of being an Admiral – especially one with multiple portfolios – was having your own shuttle.

Sitting on a two-seater swing chair near the end of the porch was my shuttle crew. They had nothing to do at this point, so I had invited them to share a beer with me.

"Thanks again for the VB, Admiral," the young man, Graham Snyder, who I had learned was from Liverpool on Earth, politely said.

I reached out and touched the necks of the beers both he and his younger associate, Susan Mainline, who also, surprisingly, came from the former UK.

"Beer was made for days like this," I said, taking a deep breath of the clean Martian air.

Susan looked up at me through her dazzlingly blue eyes. "Sir, has there been any word of the *Enterprise*?" she asked.

I shook my head, no.

I had no idea that, at that very moment, Kirk and his crew – including the resurrected body of Spock – were flying to Vulcan on a commandeered Klingon Bird of Prey.

When I eventually learned of the loss of the *Enterprise*, I felt a pang of remorse for that great ship. However, for my people, it was a better way to go out – fighting – rather than probably be sent to the scrap yard.

Before returning to Merlynn, I had my team return me to Earth two days later. Word had already come of the success of Kirk's totally unauthorized mission, but in a way, I was glad for him. Spock was a good Vulcan, and I hoped that he would eventually return to the service.

However, his shipmates on the other hand...

I wondered if they would face a trial like the one I had just witnessed.

After checking in with our offices in San Francisco at Starfleet HQ, I headed to the communications room. I had several dispatched I needed sent for Merlynn base.

My path took me past the offices of the C-in-C. As I passed by, out stepped Fleet Admiral Morrow.

When he saw me, he held up a hand. "Hold it there, Admiral Sään. I want to speak to you."

Curious – and under orders – I followed him into his office. There sitting around the office were my Commanding Officer Admiral Smith, the Deputy Commander of Starfleet, and the Federation President.

I raised my brow in surprise. It wasn't often to find this much brass in one place – especially the President.

Morrow motioned me to have a seat. He stepped over to his desk, turned around and said, "Where were we?"

The Deputy Starfleet Commander, Admiral Carson, spoke. "As you all know, the events of the past few months have been unprecedented. The way I see it, we have three major things to deal with. First, there is Genesis and the torpedo developed by Carol Marcus and her late son..."

I thought, *And Jim's.*

"... secondly there is the matter of Admiral Kirk stealing the *Enterprise* and her destruction. Third, there are the Klingons to deal with, their ambassador is here to negotiate peace terms. Any ideas?"

Everyone looked at one another, as if seeking consensus, until finally Admiral Smith spoke up. "I would like to make a suggestion."

"Go ahead." said Fleet Admiral Morrow.

"Since there are three major problems to handle, I suggest we each take on one of these problems to handle."

"A very good suggestion," said Admiral Carson. "Any volunteers?"

The office went suddenly quiet.

It's easy to ask for volunteers. It's harder to find them.

After a few minutes passed, Admiral Smith spoke once more. "I will volunteer to handle the security for the Klingon delegation. Along with any other duties to assist them."

Morrow was making notes. "Ok, that's one down, now two to go."

After a moment, the next person to speak was Admiral Carson. He said, "I will handle the Genesis problem and assist wherever needed."

The C-in-C recorded this and said, "That leaves only one." He gave me a look that said: *You've got the worst of it - sorry.* "It looks like you have the third one, Admiral Sään."

I sighed. *Surely the man is aware of my current workload.*

"Since I will be with the President and the other Ambassadors hosting the Klingon delegation, I won't have time to investigate Kirk's matter. Since you are the Vice-Inspector General this duty is yours." Curiously he finished with: "Your Commanding Officer will be busy with other matters."

Looking around I said, "Yes, sir. I have one thing first. What about my Project Adreft duties? After the trial of Commodore Short, I was planning to talk with the Council about the project. After that, I have to go to the Special Security Division Headquarters to inquire about the security needs for the project."

Fleet Admiral Morrow did not look in any way sympathetic. "You may continue your other duties *after* you handle this matter." Dismissively, he turned away from me. "Mr. President do you have any comments to make?"

I moved to watch the man. I was almost surprised to see him in a regular suit of clothes. "Just one," said the President. "We all must resolve these three important matters, then we can continue our normal duties. I believe this to be a critical turning point in the affairs of the Federation.

"One of our greatest scientists has created a method of restructuring the nature of an entire planet or region of space. The word is out. That kind of power shift is sending ripples out through the Alpha and Beta Quadrants. Even the Cardassians are making noises. What if they all decided to take us on at the same time in a mad grab to wrest that power from us? *That* is how serious the situation has become.

"The *Klingons* are making noises in our own council chambers and disrupting our alliance from within regarding Genesis. This, too, needs to be taken seriously.

"So, during this time I expect all commanders will turn command over to their executive officers until the urgent matters have been resolved."

The older human turned his balding head towards me. "Admiral Sään, about Project Adreft. If the *Reliant* hadn't been destroyed, it would be available to you for your project. In the meantime, you'll just have to wait for the next available opportunity for a ship that you can use."

He turned back to the others.

"You all know that Admiral Morrow has only one month left on his rotation as Starfleet Commander. The Council has chosen Admiral Cartwright to take over for him. He has other matters and could not attend this meeting. A tape will be available to him to review. Thank you."

Morrow nodded. "If there are no more questions, dismissed. Except you Admiral Sään; I want to speak with you."

As everyone was leaving, the handsome, dark-skinned man said, "Ollity, in investigating what Admiral Kirk did, I need you to investigate thoroughly and make a list of the appropriate charges. When you're finished, send your findings to this office and the Judge Advocate General for deposition. That is all. Good luck." He shook my hand and finally gave me the feeling that he did sympathize. Perhaps he wasn't the schmuck I thought he was.

Leaving the office, I continued to the communications center to inform my people of this new development. A million things were rolling over and over in my head.

While I was glad to put the whole, sordid affair of Alton Short behind me, I couldn't help but think about what the

President said. If he was right, the Federation really was perched on a precipice. However, I couldn't help but wonder how much of what he mentioned had the smell of Section 31 to it.

Arriving, I took a private room and contacted Merlynn. The message went through several repeaters, and I noticed there was a several second delay to the signal. Not surprising considering the distance. I gather Deborah and Seymour were busy as I was put through to Commodore O'Brien.

"Hello, sir!" He gave me a wry grin. "Long time, no see."

I appreciated the humor – especially today considering the weight I was carrying. "Tim, I've just been saddled a photon torpedo under each armpit. What I need to say I want Captain Seymour to hear as well."

After a couple of seconds, he nodded and tapped a button on the desk.

Within moments, Seymour came onto the viewer, clearly having exerted herself.

"Yes, sir? Is everything there OK? We've had some peculiar messages and we're not sure what to believe." The usually unflappable woman actually looked worried.

I shrugged. "If you mean you've heard that Admiral Kirk stole the *Enterprise*, went to Genesis when it was off limits, engaged some Klingons, stole their ship, recovered Captain Spock, had to sit by while his son was murdered and also have to destroy the *Enterprise*, you're probably right."

Jayne's mouth actually dropped open. Now, I'd seen it all.

"You don't see that every day," Tim deadpanned.

I rolled my eyes. "No kidding. Anyhow, the two of you have carte blanche to run things as you see fit while I'm gone – just like you've been doing already, so it shouldn't be a

dramatic shift for you. All the same, I've been given the fun and games of investigating the "Genesis Incident".

Jayne made a face. "I don't envy you. Never mind the situation, having to investigate someone like Jim Kirk sucks."

"No argument there. All the same, I think it shouldn't take more than five months. Oh, and get to Deborah to pack her bags. I need her here."

Jayne nodded. "Understood, sir. We'll keep your room from gathering dust."

I gave her a wry grin. "At this rate, I'll make it back some time before I make C-in-C. Take care of yourselves. I know Merlynn's in good hands. Sään out."

I cut the comms and wondered for a moment just how long it would take Lieutenant Daniels to get here. That was entirely up to a roll of the dice with Starfleet at the moment.

I was off in my own little world for so long that the young ensign helping me looked up and asked, "Is everything OK, sir?"

I gave him a brief smile and said: "Just trying to figure out how to make the Universe work, ensign. Nothing more complicated than that."

On my way back to my office, I made a necessary pitstop (we all do at times) and grabbed a stiff coffee to go. I suddenly realized the need for someone to help with simple office work now my time with the Short issue was done. I flipped open my communicator and requested a yeoman for my office.

Entering my office here Fleet Headquarters, I stepped up to the empty yeoman's desk (which was currently unmanned) and I found a group of people waiting to see me. Respectfully, they stood as I approached.

I sighed. This was one of those moments I wished I had brought Deborah with me. I looked about me at the small group and asked why they were here.

A young human male, Ensign Itomika, answered with a surprising baritone. "Admiral, we have been sent by Admiral Smith should you require investigating officers."

I raised my eyebrows. Someone here was on the ball, but a niggling doubt entered my mind. "I welcome your assistance. I've been given one of the worst jobs in Starfleet history, investigate Admiral James T. Kirk."

I observed carefully their reaction. They didn't seem surprised, so I knew they'd already been briefed. I wondered if they were expected to report back to Smith.

Knowing how badly I needed Daniels here to take these people in hand, I gave them busy work. "The senior staff of the *U.S.S. Enterprise* – with the exception of Captain Spock, naturally – have all been implicated in the theft of that ship and her subsequent destruction.

"I need detailed background information of Commanders Uhura, Chekov, Sulu and Captain Scott. They have a long and storied history in the fleet, and they have received a list of commendations that deserves respect. So, be subtle and inoffensive.

"Oh," I added, "if I find that any of you have approached any of them directly without my express order, I'll bust you to crewman. Do you understand these orders?"

The four nodded. "Yes sir!"

"Good. I'll let you divide the crewmembers between yourselves. You have three days. Dismissed."

I watched them saunter out, discussing amongst themselves the tasks ahead. I wondered if they would resort to Rochambeau to sort it out.

I stepped into my office and took a seat in my comfy leather seat. I then reached over and pushed a button on my computer console.

"Working," it responded in its mechanical voice.

"Are there any current investigations into Admiral James T Kirk, or any other legal issues, for that matter?"

The computer paused for a second, then replied: "On Stardate 8310.27, an official report was filed stating Admiral Kirk and his crew are currently receiving sanctuary on Vulcan."

Oh great. That'll complicate things.

I would have to go through the Vulcan consulate to even get close to these people. Just the thought of facing Sarek reminded me of the old conundrum of the immovable object. I certainly wasn't an irresistible force, no matter how much influence my position wielded.

I decided to start from the premise that I would not have access to the former *Enterprise* crew at all.

I'll also have to form a board of inquiry to separate fact from fiction.

My lips twitched in annoyance.

The board will have to report on a regular basis to the Federation Council if I do. This whole affair could give the fleet a serious black eye. Did Jim consider that when he went off half-cocked?

As an Admiral myself, I was well aware of the notion that actions brought consequences, many which could never be foreseen at the time of instigation. Surely, Jim could not have known that he would never bring the *Enterprise* home.

The Council will conduct a parallel inquiry on the Genesis disaster. They will use the information I'll get and add it to their own.

This did not sit well with me. *The council is well known for playing politics rather than do the right thing.*

The irony of the situation was that the Enterprise was already slated for decommissioning – although I suspect the Fleet wanted to add her to the museum. To further complicate matters, it would appear that they succeeded in bringing Spock back from the dead.

I have my doubts about that one.

I sighed and looked about me. *I need a coffee.*

I had noticed that there were many different opinions on the action that Kirk did. Some wanted his hide. Others wanted to pin a medal on him. After all, he had revealed the failure of the Genesis project. He had also revealed – unwittingly – a gap in the fleet's security. After all, how did the Klingons learn about Genesis at all?

Thinking about the Federation's arch enemy reminded me their representatives will be arriving later this week to present their charges on the matter.

Oi. I sat back in my chair and made a mental list of things I needed to address. I thought to have a chat with both Commander Wilkerson and Captain Styles about the Excelsior's failings – especially in its failure to catch the Enterprise. Today is going to be a long day. I should contact my shuttle pilots to let them know I want to be going home to Mars tonight. I'm going to need the rest and the chance to destress.

Before doing anything else, I checked the dailies. I notice that Morrow was paying special attention to the Romulan Neutral Zone. *It wouldn't surprise me if they tried something stupid considering the issue with the Klingons. We shouldn't discount their trying to make a play for Genesis either. Fun, fun, fun!*

The *Saratoga* was taking over from the *Bonhomme Richard* at the Romulan NZ. Good. The captain of the *Saratoga* knows how to take care of business if the Rommies step across the line.

I noted that the *USS Gallant* under the command of Captain David Bailey had also been sent to bolster the Klingon NZ, among others. It was a good idea, but there was always a fine line there. Too little, and they could take advantage. Too many, they accuse us of trying to start an invasion. *A very fine balance.*

An hour later, I appeared in the transporter room of the *Excelsior*. I was surprised to find no one there. I stepped over to the control panel and tapped the computer. "Where is Commander Wilkerson located?"

In an overly polite, masculine voice, it replied, "Commander Wilkerson is on engineering level three."

Okay... It took only a couple of minutes to make my way there, even given the size of this gargantuan ship. I found a group of people hunched around the transwarp computer console.

My footsteps must have drawn some attention, as when I approached, one of them looked up, startled to see an Admiral.

After a second's pause, she said, "Admiral on deck!"

Instinctively, everyone stopped and looked up. I often wondered if they felt like children caught with their fingers in the cookie jar.

"Where can I find Commander Wilkerson?" I asked.

One of the technicians pointed to his left and said, "Over there, Admiral."

I turned and proceeded to where the technician indicated. Under a support housing was Commander Wilkerson. He was inspecting the transwarp transfer conduit. "Commander, may I have a moment of your time?"

Commander Wilkerson squirmed out from under the support housing and stood. He looked surprised to see me.

"I thought you'd be back on Merlynn by now... sir." We shook hands. "What brings you here?"

"You know what they say. No rest for the wicked – which means no rest for Admirals."

He chuckled politely at that.

"I've been given a new assignment – investigating why Kirk stole the *Enterprise*. I need an assessment on the damage to the *Excelsior* during this time. I will also need a professional opinion as to preventing this type of thing from happening in the future."

Sam chuffed. "For the *Excelsior*, that's easy. I tracked down where the power loss occurred. The core program crashed during the transwarp surge. The cause of this..."

One of the technicians interrupted Commander Wilkerson with an urgent question.

"Jaylar, if it takes disassembling the entire core assembly, we have to do it."

He turned back to me and refocused. "Where were we? Oh, yes. The cause of the malfunction is the trilithium semiconductor disappeared. Captain Scott knew exactly what he was doing. None of my technicians could find the problem. I had to find it myself, because he substituted a duplicate dilithium chip. As to your second question, my professional opinion is the transwarp design used here is very shaky. That's why they call it a prototype, I guess."

This was news to me. "Why is that, Commander?"

"Admiral, the entire output of the transwarp reactor passes through one chip only five centimeters wide. All the other engineers say the atomic density of trilithium will support these power levels. My opinion is to redesign the entire transwarp assembly. I already have a preliminary holoprint for a corrected version."

I considered what I knew of the design. "Commander, isn't the transfer conduit made to disperse the trilithium energy particles through three different conductors at once?"

Sam's brows raised, surprised. "Fascinating. I never knew you were that aware of engineering principles." He gave me a head tilt and smile of affirmation. "To answer your question, you are correct. However, the engineers 'improved' the design after primary assembly completion. They combined that function with the tetragenic coolant routing. In doing this, they exceeded the design strength of the conduit. Their idea of a solution was to channel all the power through one chip to relieve the stress on the conduit."

I understood the principles, but decided to guide the conversation back to my reason for being here. "Enough grease talk. Let's get back to why I am here. I need a command appraisal on the performance of Captain Stiles. I believe you have gone through Command School."

I looked about me and lowered my voice. "As for his command ability, he is generally a good commander. However, his administration skills are not good enough to make him effective in this assignment. He is too hands-off in his style for this," I said, motioning around me. "Personally, I think he's a pompous ass."

He nodded slowly. "Interesting, I'll make a note of that."

I shifted a little. I realized he might not be comfortable with this request. "One more thing, I need your assessment of your boss, Commodore Steve Anderson."

Sam recoiled a little at that. "Why?"

I grimaced. "There were profound mistakes made in the *Enterprise* affair. I specifically want to know how anyone could override the main computer of the Spacedock. I am referring to the opening of the space doors allowing her to leave." I leveled the Commander with a harsh look. "It was his responsibility to prevent this from happening."

Sam grimaced. "You know, I haven't even *seen* my boss yet, and I've been aboard for over a week since the trial ended. I know, you'd think he would wonder about his pet 'project' and at least ask what the hell went on. However, I'm not him and I can't be certain what his priorities are at this point.

"In as far as the sabotage of the space doors was concerned, I'll chalk that one up to Scott. The main computer only needs a confirmation signal to open them. Someone very skilled with duotronic circuitry can reproduce the signal. The computer needs to have the program protected. I'm sure he had help, and my guess is Commander Uhura."

It's clear the man's thought about it. "Alright, Commander," I said with a look about me at the huge engineering section. "If you want my opinion, I believe everyone connected with this project are dorks."

Sam raised his left eyebrow. I think he was surprised an Admiral would make such a peculiar, candid comment. "Not everyone here is a 'dork'," he chuckled. "I'll have to look up that idiom. Any dorks around here got that attitude from the head dork, Anderson." He caught himself, suddenly self-conscious. "I hope this doesn't go any further, Admiral."

I realized he was just trying to protect his career. "Don't worry Sam, I will get those dorks."

Sam relaxed a little at that. "What will you do when you get them? Prosecute them, I hope."

"Maybe," I replied. "When I know more, I'll be able to make an assessment." I pushed off the console I had been leaning on and shook his hand once more. "That'll be enough for now, Sam. I have other people to interview, and the day isn't getting any shorter." I took a step away and realized he could still help me.

"Oh, by the way do you know where Captain Stiles is?"

Wilkerson rolled his eyes. "He's probably in his quarters polishing his swagger stick," he said sarcastically.

Walking down the corridor on my way to the turbolift, I passed a group deep in discussion. As one, they saw me, stood to attention as I passed, then they regrouped and I couldn't help but wonder if they were gossiping amongst themselves. The oldest gag in the fleet was that the only thing faster than warp drive was scuttlebutt. In my experience, I believed it to be fact.

No doubt Stiles was well aware of my presence on board.

When I reached his quarters, I tapped the door chime. I heard a voice say, "Enter."

The doors slid aside and I stepped through. Stiles looked up at me from behind his personal desk. "Welcome aboard, Admiral. I have been expecting you."

His posturing was clear. I wasn't going to leave him with a position of power. I grabbed the chair opposite him, dragged it to the end of the desk and sat, forcing him to turn. "I'm sure you have, Captain. You then probably know why I'm here."

"Yes, I do." said Stiles sharply. "I have nothing to hide, sir. I will tell you exactly what happened... and the way it happened."

I doubt that. I set my personal recorder on the desk and began recording. "OK, Captain. I suggest you start from the beginning."

Captain Stiles began to tell me events that occurred during the events in question. *My God, this man is a pompous ass. Hasn't he ever heard of the notion of oversharing?* All the same, I felt I should have all the facts before I formed an opinion.

Sitting there and listening to him drone on with him all too often focusing on minutiae, I began to feel the uneasiness of the Captain. It was clear he felt he was in no way responsible for the ship's failure, but he was deathly afraid of a black mark on his record.

I held up a hand and made him pause. "I assure you, this is only a fact-finding session. You have nothing to worry about as I see it. I've been made aware of Captain Scott's sabotage."

Stiles relaxed a little at that, then continued his narrative. As I listened to the captain talk, I thought to myself this would take some time to hear. I was right; after about three hours he finished. I was reminded of a bad movie I once sat through, hoping it might improve. In the end, I just wished I could get the time back.

After leaving Captain Stiles' quarters, I decided to find Commander Wilkerson and head for the officer's lounge for a beer.

A week later, I returned to my office to find a familiar face waiting for me – a very welcome one.

"Ollie!" Deborah said with a smile. "You're a welcome sight for sore eyes."

I gave her a broad grin. The relief I felt was profound. "I'm just glad to have my trusty right hand back." I noticed a steaming cup of coffee sitting on my desk – next to hers. My grin broadened. "And my left, if I had to admit it."

She and I shared a warm handshake, then she took a seat opposite mine and started filling me in on the goings on back at Merlynn.

"Tim recently completed his method of repairing starships and they should be able to process them about twenty-five percent faster than projected."

My brows shot up. "Wow. That's good news."

Daniels smiled. "Yeah. He's like a kid in a sandbox. Happy to get dirty and make a mess."

I nodded. "He is a good troubleshooter. I can understand why Vivian wanted him. However, he's always having more fun building and repairing."

Deborah shot me a look. "Jayne is beginning to wonder if you're ever coming back."

I pursed my lips. "Yeah, I know what you mean. Every time I get done with something here, I wind up being lumped with another disaster."

My assistant sucked in an uncomfortable lungful of air. "Yeah, this whole Genesis debacle just seems to stagger from one bar to another."

Colorful. "Absolutely. I just wished it hadn't happened to an officer of Kirk's caliber."

Deborah nodded her agreement. "He's got quite the reputation. Have you met him?"

I gave her an almost embarrassed grin. "Well, as you know, there is the Admiral's club. However, we move in different circles and haven't worked on any projects together."

"I can understand that." She rolled her eyes. "I hear he's quite the lady's man."

"Yes, but he's hardly alone there. Even Christopher Pike had a number of romantic liaisons in his time." I don't know why I felt the need to defend Jim – perhaps it's the boys' club.

Out of nowhere, Deborah let out an enormous yawn. She covered it with her hand. "Sorry, sir. It was a long trip and ships' time was several hours out from earth standard – never mind Pacific Time."

I took a sip of my coffee and wondered if Deborah's was decaf. She needed sleep. "I've organized quarters for you here in SF. I think you'll appreciate the bay view."

At that, Deborah gave me a smile of pure joy. "You know the way to this woman's heart, Admiral. Thanks."

Always a gentleman, I stood. "Go and settle in and get yourself a good night's sleep. I'll see you in the morning."

Once more, a yawn escaped Deborah and she moved to the door. "Thanks, sir. Have a good night."

With that, she disappeared through the door.

After a good night's sleep in my own bed on Mars, I convened a meeting in my offices.

I sat at the head of the table, with Deborah by my side. Our investigators took chairs on both sides.

I began by handing out folders with paper lists of the duties of each investigator. I also handed Deborah a tape of the information the team had gathered on the *Enterprise* crew.

A female investigator, Ananya Sharma, held up a finger. "Excuse me, sir. This has me investigating how Captain Scott

overrode the Earth Starbase space doors. I thought we were focusing on the Genesis issue."

I shot Deborah a look and she took this one.

"The IG department is always investigating multiple issues – never one at a time," she said. "You should have seen the mess we had to deal with back on Merlynn. No matter how simple it looks from the outside, it becomes worse when you engage. It's just like the rest of Starfleet, we're always fighting more than one skirmish at a time."

Ensign Sharma gave Deborah an apologetic nod. "Yes, Lieutenant. I'll keep that in mind."

Before I could say another word, Daniels interjected. "As a wise man once told me, don't let the senior officers you're having to deal with push you around. You're investigators with the IG. Your duty is to *investigate*. If more senior officers start stonewalling you, you can just remind them it just makes them look guilty."

There was a light chuckle around the table at that one.

"People, I have a maximum of five weeks to complete the list of charges that we'll be bringing against the *Enterprise* crew. The tough part will be deciding what we will – and won't – be charging them with." I took a sip of my coffee. "This is a time sensitive issue. However, that doesn't push aside the other cases we're also looking into. I know that's going to put you under some pressure. However, if you have problems, contact Lieutenant Daniels here. She can be a bulldozer when she needs to be."

We spoke some more about the assignments, then I dismissed the troops.

When the investigators were gone, Deborah swung on me and asked: "Has there been any news from Vulcan?"

I shook my head. "Sarek is proving to be harder to move than a black hole. I can't get to Kirk and his people. I

can't even get to Spock, who hasn't been charged with *anything*."

Deborah's brows drew together. "What about Lieutenant Sa'avik?"

At that, I sighed, letting my frustration show. "I can't get to her, either. Amanda Grayson seems to be shielding her."

"I can understand why, if the rumors are true."

That caught my attention. "What rumors?"

Deborah appeared a little embarrassed, but she pressed on anyway. "From what I've heard, Spock went through Ponn Farr on Genesis as his younger self rapidly aged. I gather Sa'avik "helped" him through it."

"Okay..."

"Anyhow, what I hear is she's now several months pregnant with his child."

"Oh." I took a gulp of my coffee. "That explains a lot."

Debs eyes widened a little. "I can understand that Grayson would want to protect the mother of her grandchild."

I nodded as I was thinking. *I'll have to get Cartwright to go easy on her when he gets to Vulcan. Nothing looks more sympathetic than an expectant mother.*

"I'd like you with me this afternoon to attend Admiral Cartwright's swearing in as C-in-C. I expect the Federation Council will send him to Vulcan to try to speak to Kirk and crew to have them come home and face the music."

Deborah let out a long breath, letting it whistle between her teeth. "I hope he has more luck than we have."

I finished my mug of coffee. "I doubt it."

I caught up with the new C-in-C a week later upon his return to earth. No sooner had he returned I found myself being ordered to his office.

One thing I liked about the man was his affableness. Unlike his predecessor, he liked to work in a collaborative environment. When I entered his office, decorated with wood grains and a very nautical feel, he walked up to me and warmly shook my hand.

"Thanks for coming up, Ollie," he said – we were old friends.

I got right down to business. "Thank you, sir. How did your trip to Vulcan go?"

Lance gave a disgusted grimace. "About as good as their food. I didn't even get close to Jim, but I did get to see that Klingon scow they've been using for a ship. I have to admit, I'd like Starfleet Security to get their hands on it. We could probably learn a lot from it."

Even I could see the benefit of that. "Yes, sir. It might even have a recent version of their cloaking device."

"Exactly. It was almost worth losing the *Enterprise* over."

I was a little surprised at that statement. "I'm not sure I'd have parted with the *Enterprise* for the entire Romulan fleet."

Cartwright showed me to a chair. "That's the difference with the position Starfleet has saddled us with. You can afford to be sentimental. I can't. I'm stuck with seeing the bigger picture."

I'm not sure I can afford to be all that sentimental in my position, either. When your job is putting people behind bars, sentiment has to be left on the shelf.

I decided to change tack. "Were there any positives to the trip?"

Lance shrugged. "At the very least, Sarek returned with me to fill the vacant office at the Vulcan embassy."

I nodded my appreciation of that statement. Sarek had taken over from Soval years before, and I believed both of them had an affinity for humanity. Sarek especially, as he had married one.

"That's good to hear. He's always good value in chambers when the Klingon ambassador tried to pull a stunt."

Cartwright looked at me slyly, a cheeky glint in his eye. "Yes, he is that." Suddenly all business again, he said: "However, he did mention that he plans on speaking on behalf of the *Enterprise* crew."

"Ah." *That could complicate things. If there's one man who knows how to make a good argument, it's Sarek.*

"Indeed."

"Any time frame on Kirks' return?"

"You think he will?"

I gave him a weak smile. "He's Jim Kirk. There's no way he's not."

Lance shrugged. "I hope you're right. Everyone around here is holding their breath."

"I think we can afford to exhale."

"I hope you're right."

After weeks of searching and testing, conclusions have been made in several areas.

For one, it was found that Captain Scott was able to exploit a backdoor to the Spacedock space doors control circuitry. I had to give the man credit, he's a genius. All the same, the hole has now been plugged. Responsibility could not be placed on any one being as it would appear to have been one of those issues that was created by different people working on the same equipment over a long period of time. Eventually, the software became a form of Swiss cheese with

redundant lines of code everywhere – one of which Scott was able to use.

Starfleet's coders have gone back to build an entirely new code for the system and remove all the flaws.

When it came to the crew of the former starship *Enterprise*, it quickly became clear that one had to set aside your admiration for a person so that a failing can be dealt with fairly. The Law was always meant to be doled out equally to the poor and the legendary.

It was clear I was dealing with the latter category.

There was no doubt in my mind that these people had literally saved not only the Earth, but the entire Federation several times over. Kirk, especially, was singular in creating the Organian Peace Treaty.

McCoy had not only developed treatments of a variety of alien ailments, but he had even prevented entire species from becoming extinct.

Sulu had been scheduled to take over from Stiles once the *Excelsior's* shakedown cruise had completed. Now, that looked highly unlikely.

Uhura – now, there was a legend. Linguistically on the same level as the great Hoshi Sato, she had not only helped improve interspecies relations, she had even commanded the *Enterprise* on more than one occasion, saving the crew as she did so. Like Sulu, she deserved a command of her own.

Chekov was a security genius. He would probably have headed up Starfleet security one day. Now, he'd be lucky to avoid the stockade.

Scott. The fleet owed the man so many debts he couldn't count. There were numerous regulations the man wrote himself. Patents galore. Starfleet would have suffered greatly without his genius.

Now, I was being asked to crucify these people for rescuing Captain Spock and losing the *Enterprise* – a ship that was scheduled for decommissioning anyway.

None of this sat well with me. However, my duty was clear. I may not sleep well for a while, but I knew that even the old Greek gods were fallible. It was true – after all, Kirk had met one of them.

I looked up and saw Deborah standing in my office doorway. "I've put together the list for you, sir." She was holding a manila folder in her hand.

I pursed my lips. "Thank you."

"You're not happy, are you, sir?"

I sighed, a sound from the soles of my feet. "You have the benefit of not being out of the Academy for too long. These people are all legends. I've met many of them. Their devotion to Starfleet and the Federation is rock solid."

I met Deborah's eyes and I found she sympathized. "Actually, sir, I've met all of them – except Commander Chekov. They were all teaching at the Academy my last year there. I even did the *Kobayashi Maru* test under the Admiral. His insights were valuable."

I was surprised. I had no idea Deborah had considered the command track. "May I ask...?"

"I was overwhelmed, sir. I always understood that serving in Starfleet might wind up with a letter to my parents, but the notion of ordering people to their deaths... and I couldn't prevent that... was more than I could take." She seemed embarrassed.

"That's why we have the test, Deborah," I said. "It's nothing to be ashamed of."

She rolled her eyes. "I understand that now, but right then, I was several levels of embarrassed... However, I will give Admiral Kirk kudos for one thing. He didn't speak down

to me at all. He just reminded me that everybody reacts differently to the *Kobayashi Maru* test – the point is that we learn from it, and maybe learn something about ourselves.” She clucked her tongue in annoyance. “He was right. I wasn’t cut out to be a starship captain, but I know I can serve in a supporting role at least.”

I surprised her with a light chuckle. “You haven’t considered the third option.”

She raised a brow, curious. “And that is?”

“You just weren’t ready for it *then*. However, we all learn in time, and some of us learn to be better leaders. I’ve seen some spectacular failures in the KM test go on to be amazing captains.”

She gave me a look that suggested she really hadn’t considered that. “Ok... thanks. I’ll think about it.” She glanced at the folio on my desk once more. “I still don’t envy you.”

I grimaced. “You and me both.”

The Federation council chambers were fairly large, and it was very much in session when I entered. I had finally decided on a list of charges, even though some of them left a bad taste in my mouth.

An aide to the President noticed me and stepped over and I presented it to him. Out of the corner of his eye, the President noticed me and he gave me a friendly nod.

He took a short moment, then announced: “Admiral Sään has brought us the list of charges to be voted on regarding the *Enterprise*-Genesis Incident.

“Now, I know that Admiral James T. Kirk has a long and storied career – as have those under his command – however, we cannot excuse abuses of his, and their, authority.

Their actions in stealing the *USS Enterprise* resulted in that craft's destruction, the deaths of most of the crew of a Klingon Bird of Prey..."

I was surprised he mentioned that. *Politics.*

"... the death of David Marcus..."

I note he didn't mention that man had been Kirk's son.

"... and there is some speculation on the destruction of the Genesis planet."

I frowned at that one. There was no way that could be right.

"The resulting escalation in tensions between the Federation and the Klingon Empire also have to be considered."

I was reminded why I didn't like politics. *What about the recovery of a Klingon Bird of Prey? What of the recovery of Captain Spock? Typical.*

"I will now read the charges and then we will vote on them.

"The first charge is conspiracy. Next is: assault on Federation Officers and theft of Federation property, namely the *USS Enterprise*. Sabotage of the *USS Excelsior* and willful destruction of the aforementioned *USS Enterprise*. Finally, there is the direct disobedience of the orders of the Starfleet Commander."

I waited patiently for the council to vote. While it wasn't unanimous, each and every charge was approved and would be applied.

I sadly shook my head. Here lieth the career of one James Tiberius Kirk.

I decided I needed a couple of days off, so I headed to my office before grabbing my shuttle. Deborah was there with a note from Captain Seymour, which I pocketed.

"I gather the council approved all the charges," she said, noticing my demeanor.

I was not in a good mood. "What gave you that idea?"

She looked over my head. "The storm cloud hovering over your noggin?"

That was a human aphorism I wasn't familiar with, but the universal translator sorted it for me.

I drew in a deep breath to try to release tension. "You're not wrong there. That's why I've decided to take a couple of personal days on my farm on Mars. You'll be able to find me there."

At that, she actually gave me a friendly smile. "I think we could all do with that. I'm actually taking a couple of days of leave myself. After you're done on Mars, are you heading back to Merlynn?"

I nodded. "It's long past time. I need to see how things are going."

She gave me smile of encouragement. "You've got nothing to worry about. You put together a good team."

I graciously accepted the complement, then gave her a nod before stepping into my office.

I sat down and read Jayne's note, it was simply an update on the current cases, which I saw she had well in hand. I was reminded about the proverb that a good leader is one a team can do without. I had to smile at that. I never wanted to consider myself redundant.

I took care of some business on my computer, answering emails and video messages. Before I shut it down, I checked the flag feed and found to my surprise and dismay

that the *Saratoga* had encountered something unusual that had disabled her.

I clicked on it and read the full report. An enormous tubular probe, it is thought, had passed by her as it crossed the Romulan Neutral Zone. I was broadcasting an odd wave of power that proved destructive to the ship's systems. Since the captain's last communication, she had gone dark. The *Firebrand* had been tasked with her rescue.

The note that the object was on its way here was concerning. What were its intentions? Was it something Starfleet could contend with? It reminded me of V'Ger.

Great. That line of thought brought me straight back to Kirk and the *Enterprise*. *Is there no getting away from this?*

I drew my attention back to the alien probe. It could be an existential threat to this planet – perhaps the entire system.

I put in a call to Cartwright's office. It was answered by his chief aide.

"I'm sorry, the Admiral is not available right now." The man had a talent of speaking in a totally deadpan manner.

"What are the contingencies regarding the alien probe that disabled the *Saratoga*?" I asked.

He seemed to consider the response. "A taskforce is being assembled to intercept it. Also, the *Yorktown* is on a shakedown cruise on its projected path. She may reach it first."

My brows drew together with concern. The *Yorktown* had just completed her upgrade and was working out the bugs. Technically, the *Saratoga* still outgunned her, so I held grave concerns for her crew.

"Understood. Sään out."

I disconnected the call and sat back, tapping my desk with a pen.

Very concerning. However, even given my rank, my position gave me little to do regarding the situation.

I tried to shake it off and headed to the shuttle bay and my ride home for the night.

To pass the time, I tuned into the Federation council chambers to see if there was anything new.

My timing was excellent. The Klingon Ambassador was wrapping up a presentation regarding Genesis.

"... and test detonated by Kirk himself."

Bullshit.

"... a secret base to attack the Klingon people. We demand the extradition of Kirk. We demand justice!"

Yeah, right. His delivery was impassioned – calculated. I don't believe a word of it. I wouldn't buy a used flitter from this man.

To my surprise, Sarek's tall, imposing form appeared, striding onto the floor, his robes practically following him like a ghost.

"The Klingons present a unique point of view, Mister President."

I wasn't surprised the ambassador spluttered: "Vulcans are well known to be the intellectual puppets of this Federation!"

Sarek cut to the heart of the matter. "Your ship did fire on *USS Grissom*. Your men did kill Kirk's son. Do you deny these events?"

The Klingon scowled. "We deny nothing. We have the right to defend our race."

"You have the right to commit murder?" The charge was clear and forceful, and actually made the Klingon splutter. The audience reacted with shock.

Good on him.

"Mister President, I come to speak on behalf of the accused," Sarek offered.

That doesn't surprise me at all.

The Klingon didn't fail to live up to my expectations. He obfuscated, carried on, and then made his famous declaration: "Remember this well! There will be no peace... as long as Kirk lives!"

He stormed out of the chamber with the council in uproar.

Did they seriously expect him to do something different? I ran my hand down my face in frustration.

As I made my way back to my home on Mars on my personal shuttle, I took further note of the feed and saw that the alien probe had progressed further through the Federation's territories than I expected, and it was leaving a trail of deactivated starships in its wake.

Not destroyed. I don't think the thing's fired a shot yet. Mind you, with that destructive energy wave, it may as be a flying snowplow. I hope Cartwright has his thinking cap on. What if Starfleet fails to stop this thing? What are its intentions?

I felt a sudden need to take care of my own business. I called out to the pilot: "Susan, take me to Special Security Division HQ."

If she was surprised, she didn't show it. "Yes, sir."

Entering the Capitol from the south, the shuttle moved towards a building that was about twenty-five stories tall.

Landing in the available bay, the shuttle came to a stop. I gave the pilots a nod and exited, heading to the nearest turbolift.

"Office of the Deputy Commander, please."

The turbolift roared through the building and quickly arrived at the corridor where the Deputy Commander of the Special Security Division had her office.

With purpose, I walked through the doorway.

The security officer at the door noted me, my bars, and yet still asked for my ID. I was quietly impressed. This is the level of efficiency and diligence that I wished I had found on Merlynn when I first arrived. "What are your intentions here, sir?" he asked.

"Where's the office for the Deputy Commander?" I asked. "It's a personal call."

He pointed off to the left and down the hall. "Down there, sir."

I gave him one of my patented nods, and made my way down the hall, straight past her secretary and into the inner office.

"It's been a long time, Liz," I said.

I always thought she was a good poker player. She looked up at me over the top of her computer monitor screen and I noted the corners of her mouth twitched up slightly. Try as she might, I knew she was quite surprised to see me.

She turned her screen around and closed the door. She then looked up at me and said, "It has indeed been a long time, Ollity. What brings you to this neck of the woods?"

She had a few more grays in her hair since our last meeting, but I thought they added character. Her eyes reminded me of luscious milk chocolate. I tried to be nonchalant. "Nothing really, I'm here for a little vacation and

some business I want to talk with you about. Are you free later? If so, how about some dinner and we could talk."

She seemed intrigued. "Ok, that'll be fine. How about nineteen hundred then?"

I gave her a slight smile. "Fine, I'll see you then." Coolly, I turned and walked out, thinking back to when we first met. She was only a colonel at that time, now she was a Lieutenant General. It never occurred to me she was a paper pusher – something she had always determined *not* to be.

It's strange the girl I almost married is now the Deputy Commander of the SSD. I was looking forward to dinner with her; we could talk about old times... and perhaps some new times.

Rounding the corner, I stopped and glanced back at her office. *It is sure good to see you again, Elizabeth Schaeffer.*

Sitting in a little café I'd never heard of before, we finished a toast. I set my glass down having appreciated the fine wine and said, "This is a great little place to eat."

"Yes, it is." She looked at me with more than a touch of curiosity. "So, tell me what brings you here."

"Well, Liz, it's like this. I have a little vacation time saved up. I've decided to spend some time out at my place. You know it is only twenty kilometers from the city. This has been the first time I've been here since Charmaine died."

"I'm sorry," said Liz as she finished her salad. I knew she cared from the slight crack in her voice. "I didn't know. It must be very upsetting for you to go there." She sighed. "So many memories."

She put down her cutlery on the plate. "I don't know. If it was me, I'd probably see her ghost everywhere."

I gave her a smile of *thank you*. "Maybe, but I have to. The place needs looking after now and then. These places don't maintain themselves, even though I have a gardener come by when I can't make it." I put down my napkin. "The other reason I'm here is to see if you can find me someone to handle some special security."

She quirked a brow at that. "May I ask what kind of security you need?"

Was she disappointed?

The waiter came by and collected our plates. With a questioning glance at Liz, I ordered another glass for each of us.

"It's for a top-secret project."

That was enough for her. She knew this was not the place to talk about the details. "Hmmm. I could have something for you." She tilted her head, querying. "How long are you planning to be here?"

"A little over ninety days."

At that, she surprised me with a brilliant smile. "Great! I'll drop by and visit you at your place then."

I put a fair amount of warmth into my reply. "I'll like that very much, Liz." *Even after all this time and water under the bridge, I still have a flame for you.*

Our conversation turned to more general subjects. She asked me if I knew anything more about the incoming probe. I disappointed her with a headshake. I asked her about work, and she reminded me that leadership wasn't all it was cracked up to be. Lots of ribbons and functions, and little interesting to do.

We parted and I watched her head back to SSD HQ and tore my eyes away from the way she walked. Shaking my head to clear it of hormones, I started back to where my shuttle was parked.

Upon arrival at home, I stepped through the door I remembered how I often I forgot just how big the place is. Considering how much time I don't spend here, I was glad that I had a DOT that maintained the interior.

I turned on a light and looked around, taking in the layout. I thought about the last time I was here with my sister, Charmaine. My eyes were drawn to her portrait, looking eternally young and beautiful smiling down from the wall above the fireplace.

A strange feeling started to come over me. I turned around to close the door, and I noticed in the distance strange things happening in the city.

The lights began winking out – one by one; soon the light in my place went out as well. Suddenly in pitch black, I maneuvered my way into the living room, moving my feet to where I knew I could find some old-fashioned candles. I struck a match and lit them.

The probe must have gotten here faster than I thought. Man, I hope its intentions aren't hostile.

Knowing that I was just as helpless as everyone else present on Mars, I settled down and considered what could be the end.

The sirens had only sounded for a moment before they were silenced. Deborah Daniels, Lieutenant in Starfleet, stood on the front porch of her family's home nestled in the mountains of Colorado. She had returned after receiving news of her brother's cancer diagnosis. He had a ninety percent chance of recovery thanks to modern technology,

but that life-saving equipment was now just as useless as everything else on Earth due to the probe.

Deborah looked into the sky in the vain hope of seeing their antagonist. She'd had word that it was near the Spacedock. *Was that a shadow?*

She could tell that unusual clouds were already forming on the horizon. The weather satellites usually kept a tight rein on things – Tornado Alley was a thing of the past in the Mid-West. Not today.

Her mother, a twenty-five-year older woman who looked like an older clone of Deborah, sidled up to her, a clearly worried look on her face. "I thought Starfleet could handle anything," she said fearfully.

Deborah gave her an almost embarrassed expression. "Normally, we can." She wasn't going to mention things like the Doomsday Machine or V'Ger, which had only been taken care of by a dose of James T Kirk luck. He was stuck on Vulcan with only a crappy old Klingon Bird-of-Prey to work with.

Deborah's mother gave her a knowing look. "Ah, huh. I'm not hearing a lot of confidence."

The younger woman couldn't lie to her mother. Instead, she looked up, a lone tear escaping the corner of her eye. "Do you know any good prayers?"

In the back corners of his mind, Sarek was repeating an old mantra he had been taught in his youth to help him maintain his calm. He was standing off to the side, watching the man who was this Federation's President admit there was nothing left they could do about the assault on this world that both of them loved.

Sarek was as much a Terraphile as his predecessor. He loved his wife and he loved her world. For all that, he was silently glad Amanda was with Sa'avik back on his homeworld of Vulcan.

"Save yourselves," he heard the President say into the camera. "Avoid the planet Earth at all costs. Farewell."

The feed was cut and the President slumped down and sat on a chair that had been thoughtfully provided for him. "What else is there to do?" he asked, mostly to himself.

At times like these, it was better to be in a place where one might be able to contribute to the solution. Sarek knew this. "Mister President, perhaps we should return to the Command Center."

The elderly human raised his head, grateful for the counsel of his friend. "Yes," he said, rising to his feet. "Perhaps there's something that can still be done."

Sarek nodded serenely. "Perhaps."

Commodore Tim O'Brien stepped into Fleet Captain Jayne Seymour's office, looking shocked. "Have you heard the news?" he asked.

Jayne turned her monitor towards him, the last, grainy image of the President still displayed. "I have." She shook her head. "I have family near the coast. I'm worried about them."

"I'm sorry. Hopefully they got out."

Seymour was anything but certain on that point. "What about your family?"

Tim gave a sigh of relief. "They all live in Perth which, fortunately, is on the coast of the Indian Ocean. This thing seems to be targeting the Pacific. Right now, they're literally

on the other side of the planet – something I'll be eternally glad of."

Jayne's thoughts brought her a little closer. "I wonder how the Admiral and Lieutenant Daniels are doing."

Tim shrugged. "Last I heard, Ollie was heading back to his ranch on Mars. As for Deborah..."

"Yeah." Jayne's eyes went wide and she brought her thoughts back to the job. "Admiral Rowe's put the sector on a stage two alert just in case the Romulans try to take advantage."

"I doubt that," the Commodore said with a dark chuckle. "That thing came through Romulan space to get here. I could imagine that they threw half their fleet at it just for violating their space."

That brought a smile to Seymour's face. "That's what I like about you, Tim. You could find the silver lining on a black hole."

O'Brien smiled. "That's what they pay me the big bucks for!" Turning a bit more serious, "With the base on alert, I've had to divert people from the project to boost security."

Jayne nodded. "That'll slow things down a little. I think we could all use a break from these end of the world things. V'Ger, Genesis, this probe. What next? Another Klingon War?"

"That's the thing I like about you."

"Huh?"

"We have to be here for the Klingons to go to war with us."

Jayne rolled her eyes. "You have me there."

The night sky looks spectacular without the lights of the city. Reminds me of what Mars looked like before we terraformed it.

Turning away from the window, I stepped over to the corner and flipped open the top of the antique Terran record player I picked up years ago. I'm quite fond of the old French singers and their ballads.

I wound up the ancient device – I'd had the spring prepared – and slipped a record out of its sleeve before placing it on the turntable. I disengaged the brake, then placed the needle on the edge. Crackling music immediately began emanating from the horn.

Feeling a little less like the last man on the planet, I walked back to my chair. There I pulled out a letter from my sister I had stored in the armrest. It was still sealed. The rescue party had found the letter in her hands. I was afraid to open it until now. With the possible end of life in this solar system on the near horizon, I decided it was time.

Before opening it I went and got more candles to light. Even in this simple task, I was procrastinating. I told myself I wanted to have as much light as possible to read the letter by, but I knew the truth. I still wasn't certain I wanted to know.

I slipped a finger along the top edge and took out the slip of paper. I see the writing is very scratchy longhand. I began to read aloud.

My dearest brother,

The events of the past few hours have been unearthly. Grandfather is gone and I can feel the end is near. I am writing this last letter to you for comfort and ease. I only hope by reading this letter I can ease any fears you may have of dying. The situation must be very grave or otherwise you would not be reading this letter. Death is not that unwelcome when the time comes. Remember that it's how you face death that matters. I can only impart my feelings towards you

now. Being trapped inside this cave makes one wonder about life. I have time to think. The moments with you I can vividly remember.

It was shorter than I thought. I gather she didn't have time to sign it. I actually chuckled a little at one thought. She knew me well enough to realize that I wouldn't read this until a moment like right now.

I turned it over to see if there was any more, but there was nothing. It was nice to see her handwriting again, and to hear her voice in my mind. All the same, it was comforting to know that her last thoughts were on me and on the possibility that one day we might be all together again.

The lights suddenly came on again. I hurried over to the window to see a large cylindrical object in the sky on a heading out of the Solar System. I figured this to be good news.

It was only then that I noticed the record winding down, the clicks at the end of the record slowing as the spring released the final tension. I stepped over, removed the needle and put the disk away.

I noted the house computer had booted up again, so I called: "Screen on."

The list of feeds was just starting to repopulate, and I chose the local news network. Their coverage was surprisingly informative. They reported that the alien probe was still on its way out of the system after practically boiling off a large section of the Pacific Ocean near the west coast of the North American Continent.

Power was returning and the storms that filled the saturated atmosphere were already starting to burn out.

There's going to be major flooding, though. I've gotta check in with Starfleet.

I logged in with my retinal scan and logged into the system at San Francisco. I was surprised to find myself talking with Lieutenant Commander Janice Rand at HQ.

"What can I do for you, Admiral?" she asked. She appeared to be harried, but improving.

"What happened?" I asked. "I'm on Mars and power is just coming back now."

Janice nodded. "That's good news, Admiral. I've heard that the power was also out there. I'll make sure all our data links are restored. The power was also knocked out at Spacedock, but that's restoring as well."

I sighed. "I'm glad. I'd had to see it fall from orbit."

Janice grimaced. "Indeed, sir. If it hadn't been for Admiral Kirk, we'd be under water by now."

The comment brought me up short. "Admiral Kirk?"

Rand smiled. "Yes, sir. Preliminary reports has him going back in time to retrieve some humpbacked whales that the probe was apparently trying to contact. He returned with them and released them into San Francisco Bay. I gather the probe liked what they had to say and left."

It was almost too much for me to take in. I stuttered: "He... he did all that with a Bird of Prey?"

My comment seemed to amuse her. She gave a little giggle. "I've learned not to put anything past my old captain, sir. With Spock's help, they pulled it off."

I was momentarily dumbfounded. "Wow," was all I could say.

At that point, she touched her finger to her ear. "My apologies, Admiral. I've got to take this."

I simply nodded and cut the feed.

Just when I thought I'd seen it all. The charges against the *Enterprise* crew came back to mind. *This could... it should... change everything.*

I decided to freshen up for Liz's visit. While in the shower, I hear the door chime sound. Throwing a robe on, I answered the door to see Liz standing there with a mischievous grin.

"Come in," I offered. "Please give me a minute to finish up." I gestured to the lounge. "Make yourself at home."

Whilst in my bedroom, I yelled out of the doorway, "Fix us a drink, Liz."

Dressed in some of my favorite civvies, I returned to the living room to I see a double Scotch and soda waiting on the divan next to my favorite chair. "Sorry, I wasn't expecting you so early."

She shrugged. "I wanted to see if you were alright after the power outage. I also have a message for you from the Federation President."

Today is full of surprises. That's a lot sooner than I imagined. "Wow. Let's see it." I sipped my drink and scanned the contents of the message. Its contents were today's least surprising thing. He wanted to see me in his offices tomorrow morning, Paris time. I checked my chronometer and noted I had about twelve hours. I smiled to myself.

I looked over at Liz, suddenly feeling very hungry. "The President wants to see me in twelve hours."

Liz put down her glass, looking suddenly like a teenager caught thinking the wrong thing. "That gives us some time."

"My thoughts exactly."

Exactly one week later, arriving at Earth, I beamed into the Starfleet Commander's outer office. After materializing,

the Officer of the Day told me Admiral Cartwright was expecting me.

With excellent timing, Admiral Cartwright exited his inner office. Seeing me, he said, "Glad you got here, Sään. The hearing starts in five minutes. Let's go."

Arriving at the council chamber, I received instructions to sit in the observation seats. I found myself seated with many other Starfleet representatives. I saw Janice Rand and gave her a friendly nod.

The President spoke to the crowd. "Bring in the accused."

Starting with Jim Kirk, his senior staff filed in from a side door. I wasn't the least bit surprised to see Spock stand where he had been seated with his father, Sarek, and step up to Jim's side.

"Captain Spock, you do not stand accused."

Ever serene, but strong, Spock replied: "Mister President, I stand with my shipmates."

I covered a smile with a hand. These people weren't just serving together. They were family. Never mind the sheer fact the Vulcan wouldn't be standing here at all if it hadn't been for the actions of those standing at his side.

The President rattled off the original list of charges I had recommended.

The crowd was holding its breath. I had a smile playing around the corners of my mouth. I knew what was coming.

"On behalf of all of us, I am authorized to plead guilty." Jim was never the kind to dodge responsibility.

The tension in the air was thick. I wondered if anyone was even breathing.

The President caused a stir by summarily dismissing all charges except one. The remaining charge was for Admiral Kirk to bear alone.

Whilst the tension had dropped a little, all eyes were now focused on Jim Kirk as he awaited the verdict.

The President stated, "Furthermore, it is the judgment of this tribunal that you be reduced in rank to Captain. And that as a consequence of your new rank, you be given the duties for which you have repeatedly demonstrated unswerving ability. The command of a starship." At this, the chamber erupts into loud shouting. The President asked for silence, which the chamber slowly returns to. He said, "Captain Kirk, you and your crew have saved this planet from its own shortsightedness, and we are forever in your debt."

I joined the crowd as they rose as one to celebrate and congratulate *Captain* Kirk and his crew. I shook their hands, then left, thoroughly delighted that things had worked out so well for them. With Jim and his crew back on board a ship named *Enterprise*, the universe seemed to be coming back into some kind of balance.

Dropping by my Inspector Generals' office, I closed my file on the case. I was happier than I had been for some time. I checked on Deborah and saw her working away at her usual desk here. Yes, things were returning to normal.

I had been taking note of the news – which was often better at telling me the state of the planet than Starfleet – and most of the coastal territories had taken care of their flood issues. Casualties had been minimal, and the largest cost had actually been crops. In places like northern Queensland in Australia, they had lost entire crop of sugar cane that had been growing only a few meters above sea level.

One of the good things about being part of a large Federation was that the member worlds had been sending a continuing convoy of support.

Now that the imminent dangers had passed – and Kirk and crew were off enjoying the *Enterprise-A's* shakedown cruise – I returned to Mars to continue my vacation. Once home, I contacted Liz to let her know I was home.

"We've picked up most of the pieces since the probe," she said. "I'll come and visit when I can."

"No worries, Liz. I've got a lot to keep me busy here. There's always another project."

I know she will be trying to get things back in order after the incident. Starfleet wasn't the only organization shaken up.

The following week was taken up with fence repairs, improvements to the house and the odd, pleasurable visit from Liz.

Perhaps there's a future there.

All good things come to an end, and I had to give my DOT its instructions for while I would be away.

I did have one task before leaving. I had to drop by SSD Headquarters before heading back to Merlynn

I had my shuttle land outside the SSD HQ, and I quickly went up to Liz's office with every intention of saying goodbye. On that level, I met the Starfleet liaison officer to the Special Security Division.

"Sir," he said, "I have someone who is presently unattached."

My brow shot up.

Just what the doctor ordered. "Funny you should mention that. I *am* looking for a personal aide."

As if anticipating my answer, the young man said (with almost a wink): "He's waiting for you in the General's outer office."

I thanked him and went to meet him. Crossing the threshold, the officer of the day came to attention. I motioned for her to sit down. Standing in the far corner was a Starfleet officer who had bolted to attention.

I turned to the OOD. "Where's the General?"

"She's..." she seemed embarrassed. "In the..."

I stopped her there with an upraised hand. "Ah."

I then turned to the officer standing at attention. I moved over to him and looked the handsome young man up and down. He was clearly fit, and I wondered where on Earth his ancestry came from. "At ease, Lieutenant. Relax before you damage something. Are you the person the liaison officer referred to me?"

"I am, sir. The name's David Reynolds." The Scottish lilt gave me my answer. Not to mention the pile of red, curly hair.

"Qualifications?" I asked.

He handed me a padd and I ran down the list. I was impressed for someone so young.

"I have had experience as a departmental secretary, sir, but I have to admit I haven't served as a PA."

If the information on the padd was accurate, the man was more than qualified for the job. "You're hired," I said, using an old aphorism. "Have your kit assembled and in my shuttle on the pad outside in half an hour. I'll be heading back to Spacedock to meet our ride as soon as I'm done here."

Respectfully, he came back to attention, clearly pleased. "Yes, sir! Thank you, sir!"

I gave him a nod, and he disappeared out the door, just as the General returned.

We returned to Spacedock in Merlynn II in time to see the *Enterprise-A* outside awaiting a shuttle of her own to dock. Within minutes, she warped out of the system.

I couldn't help but wonder what that was all about, so I checked the feed. Sure enough, there's trouble on Nimbus III. *Why am I not surprised?*

Within hours, my crew were back onboard the *Excelsior* which was now rocketing towards Merlynn at high warp, which was fortunately more or less en route to the Romulan Neutral Zone. There were rumors of a Romulan Bird of Prey making trouble on our side of the fence and Styles had been sent to fly the flag at the NZ while the newly commissioned *Ingram-class USS Millennium* investigated.

Just what the Federation needs. More strife.

Not far from the Klingon Frontier, the *Avenger-class USS Gallant* was screaming through space at warp six.

Captain's Log, USS Gallant: Stardate 8458.6. Captain David Bailey reporting.

We are now several weeks from Baker's World. The Gallant is under orders is to pick up Colonel Alexis Schaeffer of the Special Security Division and his party and transport them to Baker's World for a conference on the Klingon raids that have been occurring. My Executive Officer has expressed premonitions of some hazards located there. I expect no such hazards. He seems to be superstitious about certain things.

Captain's Log, USS Gallant: Stardate 8479.4.

We are dropping by Sherman's Planet to pick up Colonel Schaeffer and his party. Starfleet called in the Special Security Division to handle the delicate problem during this conference.

Captain Bailey uncrossed his legs and pondered the situation. He was never happy bringing his ship this close to the NZ. "All scanners full ahead, I don't want to run into a Klingon patrol."

At Science, the XO, Commander Kraam reported, "Aye, sir. Scanners are ahead full."

The Communications station reported, "Message coming in from Sherman's Planet."

The captain leaned forward, curious. "Put it on speaker, Lieutenant."

The Colonel's tinny voice was heard. "Schaeffer to *Gallant*, we're ready to receive you when you arrive. Do you have the Council's decision with you?"

"Yes, I do," replied Bailey. "We will be there in three hours. *Gallant* out."

On Sherman's Planet, Colonel Schaeffer listened to the final reports about his mission. Everything had gone as expected, and he was confident that the situation would remain stable.

He tapped his fingers on the table, annoyed. He was thinking: *If everything is OK, why do I feel uneasy?*

Schaeffer shook his head to clear his misgivings. He then gathered his papers and files and walked downstairs. He wanted to be outside and enjoy a few more minutes of

natural sunlight before having to be stuck in another flying tin can for several weeks.

The rest of the party was waiting for him in the garden outside the building; they consisted of two guards and three council members from Baker's World.

On his belt, his communicator chirped. He tore it off and flipped it open.

"*Gallant* to Colonel Schaeffer. Our party is ready for beam down."

The Colonel replied in his rough baritone: "Go ahead." He snapped it shut and grumbled, "It seems I'm not the only one who doesn't like being cooped up for weeks breathing recycled air."

Three beings took form before him: the captain of the *Gallant*, his XO and science officer.

"Welcome to Sherman's Planet, Captain," the Colonel said with a friendly smile. "Our party's assembled and ready to go."

The slightly overweight, and average-looking Bailey stepped forward and shook the Colonel's hand. "Nice to meet you. I thought I'd take a moment to welcome you as we took on some new supplies."

Alexis knew this to be a form of Starfleet code. Most Federation planets kept a supply of fresh water and atmosphere for their ships to quickly take on board, whilst dumping much of their waste in the upper atmosphere where the ionosphere would do its job of natural recycling.

The Federation crew weren't the only ones present. The square was a large area with people from all different worlds and backgrounds.

A non-descript individual in trader's clothing paid close attention to the new arrivals and their party. He

surreptitiously slipped a communicator from his sleeve and made a call.

It only took a couple of days for the *Gallant* to ferry the group to Baker's World. The captain beamed down with the Colonel's party and they got to work, leaving the XO in command.

General Elizabeth Schaeffer returned to her office at the SSD on Mars with half a bagel in one hand and a café latte in the other. She plopped down into her chair behind her desk and noted there was an incoming message waiting for her. She toggled on the screen and the friendly face of Ollity Sään smiled up at her.

"Hello, Liz," I said.

In my office on Merlynn, I stared into her lovely eyes, thinking she was simply delightful. I had to remind myself this was a business call.

"How many are on your list?" I asked.

She seemed to remind herself that this was a business call and she should be dignified. Suddenly feeling self-conscious, she dusted some crumbs from her uniform top. "Admiral, there are eight names that meet your specific needs."

I was mildly amused by her behavior, but before I could reply, Lieutenant Reynolds entered the office in a hurry. Urgently, he said, "Sorry for the intrusion, sirs, but both of you should hear this coming message on Hyper Channel Four."

Without preamble, he connected the call to the indicated channel.

CAPTAINS LOG, USS Gallant: STARDATE 8508.16, Captain David Bailey reporting.

The Gallant's orders are to transport Colonel Alexis Schaeffer of the Special Security Division and party to Baker's World. A sharp increase in Klingon raids and allegations of Klingon espionage have prompted its governing council to seek Federation aid. While Colonel Schaeffer's party conducts its investigations, the GALLANT will remain in orbit to deter any raiders.

CAPTAINS' LOG: SUPPLEMENTAL

The Gallant has achieved orbit around Baker's World. A security detail and I will beam down with Colonel Schaeffer's party and meet with the planetary administrative council. I have ordered the Gallant to continue scanning for other vessels and to alert me if they sight any.

*CAPTAINS LOG, USS Gallant, STARDATE 8508.16
Commander Kraam reporting.*

I can only describe the events of the past few hours as catastrophic. Lieutenant MacPhearson of the captain's security detail signaled us from Baker's World. He explained that Captain Bailey's landing party and Colonel Schaeffer have become casualties.

The dead also includes the rest of the security detail and Baker's World's entire governing council. We've detected an explosion on the surface resulting from a sonic disrupter bomb. The detonation killed everyone inside the meeting chamber.

Lieutenant MacPhearson explained he was not inside when it went off. However, he saw one of the governmental aides fleeing the building at the time of the explosion. MacPhearson pursued and cornered the man, but found only a corpse.

He beamed back with the bodies of the Captain, the security detail, and our suspect. Doctor Chir-ya performed autopsies. He found the saboteur ingested a fast-acting poison to avoid capture. Physiologically, the man was a native of Baker's Planet; perhaps a political dissident. Given what's been going on recently, we could discover no apparent connection to the Klingons.

Following the death of the captain, I assumed command. I had forewarned Captain Bailey I had sensed something extremely hazardous about the forthcoming meeting. Unfortunately, as always, he dismissed my premonitions as mere superstition.

The sensation returned when I sat in the captain's chair; I was certain danger was imminent. I ordered the crew to battle stations and the Gallant taken out of orbit. I ordered a photon torpedo barrage into what appeared to be an empty area of space.

Commander M'rack, my weapons officer and recently appointed Exec, was surprised by the order. However, my longtime friend has learned to trust my intuition.

The torpedoes impacted three cloaked objects, which immediately materialized on the screen. They were a Klingon battle cruiser and two Bird-of-Prey-class scout ships. The two scouts sustained crippling damage, but the cruiser returned our fire. Suddenly, an entire strike force of Klingon vessels became visible as they deactivated their cloaking devices. Although the Klingon forces outgunned the Gallant three to one, I was not going to leave Baker's World at their mercy.

After a pitched battle, the remaining Klingons retreated. A heavily damaged destroyer and a Bird-of-Prey scout ship escaped, but the victory proved to be bittersweet for the Gallant. Her torpedo pod, and forward-lower and starboard-upper phaser banks are inoperable. The intermix chamber in engineering and the main bridge sustained heavy damage.

The hull itself took a great deal of punishment as well, with damage right down to the keel. Crew casualties amounted to fifty-six percent dead or seriously injured. Survivors among the original command personnel included only myself, First Lieutenant Vaughan of our Marine contingent, Lieutenant Commanders M'rack and Gaak. They're the weapons officer and chief engineer, respectively. The latter sustained serious injuries when the bridge took a direct hit. Doctor Chir-ya assured me their condition is stable and they can return to duty soon.

The Gallant is currently en route to K-7 on impulse power. We've had an opportunity to carry out repairs and reassess our situation. Since Lieutenant Commanders M'rack and Gaak cannot return to active duty yet, Lieutenant Vaughan stepped forward to assume the position of XO. Although a Marine Officer, his file shows extensive knowledge of starship operations and engineering.

Given our current condition, I've requested Command send a ship to tow us to a Starbase for repairs.

After hearing of her ex-husband's death, Elizabeth broke into tears. Their parting had only been a year previous.

I wished I could comfort her. "I'm sorry, Liz."

My PA, Lt. David Reynolds, had respectfully stepped out as soon as he realized the situation would impact her personally.

On the screen, she pulled herself together for a moment. "I'm sorry, Ollie. I'll call you back."

With that, she cut the call. I knew she'd need some time.

I thought for a moment, then decided to put in a call to Command. I put in a request to attach the *Gallant* for Project ADREFT.

On the other end, the Detailer considered the request. "Considering what I've heard, she needs major work." She

thought for a moment, then said: "It's a good idea. Now that the skirmish at the Romulan NZ is over, I'll have one of the returning starships divert and bring her straight to you. The crew can give you an assist with her rebuild."

I gave her a smile from the heart. It was just what the doctor had ordered. "I'll prepare for their arrival."

Tatiana Ivanova gave me a friendly grin. "It's good to see you again, my friend. Next time you're in town, don't be a stranger."

I laughed. "I'll bring the beer."

Tatiana shook her head. "Vodka is better. Ivanova out."

CAPTAIN'S PERSONAL LOG: STARDATE 8509.02, Commander Kraam Recording. Classified.

Starfleet's reply has both good and bad news. The USS Defiance will arrive shortly to tow us back to a starbase. Starfleet feels the Gallant is too badly damaged to salvage, so they told me they will scrap her and reassign the crew. Most of the systems we need to replace are for newly commissioned vessels only. The crew took the news well, but I know they're a little disappointed. They would prefer to see her die in the battle than disassembled and cannibalized like an old servo-drone.

However, I sensed something else was in the works. The Defiance arrived to tow us back to Starbase. Before I could beam over to discuss matters with Captain Moore, he sent me a link to call Admiral Sään. He informed me he petitioned Starfleet to allow my reenrance in the Academy after my term in the Marines, Intelligence, and SSD. I learned he is the Inspector General for the Southwest Sector now. However, that wasn't all. Admiral Sään explained Starfleet is implementing an experimental top-secret program. It has the codename PROJECT ADREFT (Avenger Design Refit). While refitting at a secret Starfleet

facility, she will receive much greater firepower and warp drive performance. She will also have receive a third warp nacelle and other improvements. He explained the original order concerning the scrapping and reassignments is merely a cover story. This will explain the Gallant's temporary disappearance while the refit takes place. After the refit and recommission of the Gallant, the Admiral will use it as his flagship. He assured me I will remain captain of the Gallant with a permanent promotion to that rank. I'm glad for the advancement, but I'm not happy about the cost.

While the *Gallant* was enroute to Merlynn, now being towed by the *Defiance* at warp speed, I began thinking about the project. *I hope it turns out okay.*

My thoughts turned to the security needs for the project. I informed the *Gallant's* CO regarding the crew's role in the upcoming project and they seemed enthusiastic. I was intrigued by the possibilities.

After looking over the list of names General Schaeffer gave me, I chose Captain MacPhearson of the SSD. I need him to join my security staff to deal with possible espionage and other special security issues.

A knock at the door came and I saw Tim O'Brien enter, with Deborah in tow.

"I hear we have a new plaything," Tim said. He looked like a kid who had just gotten his favorite Christmas present.

I nodded. "The ship's a mess and we'll probably throw away more parts than we keep, but yes, we have a great candidate for the project."

Deborah surprised me with an ice-cold bottle of beer, which she opened and passed to me. She then cracked one for both herself and Tim. It wasn't regulation, but right now, we had cause to celebrate.

I held up my bottle. "Cheers! Here's to ADREFT."

The others clinked their bottle necks to mine, and we saluted the start of something great.

Part Three

The *Gallant* entered the Starbase 21 system after several days at low warp. It turns out it takes an awful lot of energy to move another starship at warp and extend a bubble around it.

I waited at the starbase in Merlynn II and docked with the *Defiance* as she had to drop out of warp in system.

Once on board, I headed for the bridge. Exiting the turbolift, I paused for a moment as the usual "Admiral on deck" was sounded. Captain Janis Moore turned in the center seat and stood to shake my hand.

"Welcome aboard, Admiral," she said in her usual, matter-of-fact manner.

Janis's always been beautiful, but I wonder if she was born with a concrete heart. She's great at her job, but those brunette locks hide a harsh intellect.

"Thanks, I hope you've enjoyed the cruise back from the NZ."

Moore gave me a curious look. "I was beginning to wonder if we were going to find out just how tough this ship is when Piper pulled her stunt and manage to call off the war."

Is she disappointed? "Peace is always the preferred status, wouldn't you say?" I tested.

The captain actually rolled her eyes at that. "If you say so, sir. I've always thought that war was inevitable and that ships like the *Defiance* were created to win it."

I noted out of the corner of my eye that some of her bridge crew shifted, seemingly uncomfortable. I decided to change the subject and looked to the viewscreen which showed the starbase shrinking in the distance.

"How long before we arrive at Planet Merlynn?" I asked.

Captain Moore returned to her chair, checked the arm display, and said, "About two hours at this speed, Admiral."

"Captain," I said, "I'm going to need to borrow your conference room."

Janis may have been tough, but she could also be gracious. "By all means, sir."

I turned to the Communications Officer. "Have Commander Kraam and Captain MacPhearson of the SSD join me in the conference room in ten minutes."

"Aye, sir."

I left the bridge and headed for the appointment. The conference room was on deck two in this class, so was there in moments, taking a seat and setting up my notes. Like clockwork, the two officers I asked for arrived.

"Gentlemen, take a seat," I offered.

Respectfully, they did so, curiosity written on their faces.

"Commander Kraam, I'll need your people to begin packing their stuff and relocate to quarters my people have organized on Merlynn. As much of the ship will be completely uninhabitable during her stay, they'll need a place to sleep, eat and breathe."

Kraam smiled politely at my little joke. "Yes, sir. I'll organize that immediately upon my return to *Gallant*."

I turned to MacPhearson. "Captain, you'll be seconded to Merlynn under my command for the foreseeable future. Quarters have also been provided for you and I'll give you a thorough briefing on your detail once we're settled in."

Mac was a fairly no-nonsense fellow and accepted the orders without question. "Yes, sir."

I handed them each a disk. "Here are your transfer orders. Once we've arrived, I'm giving the crew of the *Gallant* a forty-eight-hour shore leave to enjoy either on

Merlynn or Starbase 21. They've been through a lot recently and we're going to be asking a lot more of them in the coming months."

Kraam gave me an appreciative smile. "Thank you, sir. It'll be welcome. We've got a number of people who still aren't fully recovered from the battle and others who will need extensive counselling. We lost a lot of good people."

I sighed. "That's very true, Commander. If you need help organizing anything, talk to my PA or look up Lieutenant Daniels on Merlynn. What they can't make happen doesn't exist."

I got the impression Kraam had something more he wanted to add. He wasn't that hard for me to read. The half-Vulcan, half-Betazoid was a curious mix. He was expressive, which belied his Vulcan half, but quieter than the average Betazoid. I had noted from his file that, while both species were telepaths, he seemed to have missed out on it. What he *had* was a recorded sense of intuition that was demonstrated on many occasions to be highly trustworthy.

Physically, he was a little taller than average, and looked like a human being, even though I knew his physiology was anything but.

"What is it, Commander?" I asked.

"Speaking of losses, sir. We're short in several departments. Not only have we lost crewmembers in the recent fight, but I've had requests from some for a transfer to... she we say... less risky assignments."

Mac nodded his understanding. "Not everyone is cut out for combat. Better we find out who now."

I nodded unconsciously. "You're right about that. The *Gallant* is a ship of the line. Her crew is going to need to be ready for anything." I caught Kraam's gaze. "I see your point. We'll let the chips fall where they lay and fill out the crew

when we're near completion." A stray thought came to me. "Have those people heard of what happened to the *Grissom*?"

I actually got a genuine laugh from the men from that one. Being in Starfleet was risky, no matter where you were stationed.

Just then, a call from the bridge saying, "Admiral Sään we are entering orbit around Planet Merlynn. Please report to the bridge."

I stood and dismissed the others, letting them return to the *Gallant*, before making my way to the bridge.

"Admiral on the bridge!" Internally, I often cringed and wished I could kill that old tradition. I waved everyone down and stepped up next to the captain's chair.

Captain Moore had Commodore O'Brien on the viewscreen. I overheard them talking about how he was going to get the *Gallant* inside the planet and into the repair bay. Janis voiced some concerns about the method in use.

I interjected, "Tim, have you ever tried this before?"

O'Brien looked at me and said, "No, sir. This will be the first. I tested the procedure before you left and everything works just fine. I anticipate no problems."

I knew Tim well enough that he wasn't given to exaggeration. "Very well, start the docking procedures. I will monitor from here.

Tim glanced down at a screen, then back up. "Captain Moore, release tractor beam."

Captain Moore barked some orders, and then we all turned around and looked at the viewscreen.

A large portal in the side of the planetoid began to open. It was an amazing sight. The engineering of what the planet was doing captivated me. The portal opened up wider and wider.

A small tractor beam radiated from the space, wrapping around the *Gallant*, slowly drawing it toward the maw.

Oohs and aahs were coming from the bridge crew. It was clear many had not seen anything of this nature before.

Slowly, inexorably, the massive vessel that was the *Gallant* was enveloped by the gargantuan Merlynn. It took several minutes, but once she was safely inside, the portal began closing.

I looked over at Captain Moore and said, "I thank you for the help. Would you like to pay a visit before you leave?"

Janis appeared torn between duty and curiosity. "Yes, I would sir," she said. "The impressiveness with this repair station and what it does have always interested me." With a glance around her, she added: "With your permission, shore leave?"

With today's successes, I was feeling generous. "Why not?"

"When you've got everything organized here, I will arrange a tour for you."

"I will be ready in ten minutes, Admiral. I'll join you in the transporter room then."

Commodore O'Brien sat in the control room and looked out through the massive window at their first project. "When the area is secure and locked down before pressurizing, move the *Gallant* about five meters forward of her present position. She's not quite lined up yet."

As his order was carried out, Tim looked out at the damage to the *Gallant*. O'Brien was thinking to himself, *How lucky is it that this ship is part of the project?*

Standing next to him, Deborah had taken a break from her duties to welcome their first contestant. She gawked at the ship in amazement. "How on earth did they survive that?" she breathed.

Tim gave a light chuckle. "Consider her a fixer upper."

Daniels had been learning the ropes. "You're going to need a lot more than filler to fix those holes," she said, pointing.

O'Brien placed his hand on her shoulder. "That's just going to make it all the more fun."

Back on board the *Defiance*, Captain Moore joined me in the transporter room, leaving her XO in command.

"Energize," she commanded. Within seconds, we were back in familiar territory. Kraam and Mac had already beaten us and were waiting.

"Follow me. I'm going to show you all what we do here." I took the next two hours, proudly showing them the facilities. I was very proud of the work we had done here, and of the people under my command.

I also wanted Kraam and Mac to have a fair idea of what they were going to be involved in whilst here.

At one point, Captain Moore said, "A very impressive tour, Admiral. The place is in a lot better condition than it was the last time I was here a couple of years ago." She made a disgusted face. "I wish you the best of luck on your project."

"Thank you, Captain," I said, appreciating the complement. "Please, take advantage of our facilities here during your people's shore leave."

Janis gave me another of her odd looks. "A captain's job is never done, Admiral. I appreciate the offer, and my

people should already be taking advantage of it." She seemed a little antsy. "Admiral, if I may, I need to get back to the *Defiance*. Can you point me to the transporters?"

A very driven woman, this one. I didn't presume to know her business. I gave her some directions and, with a simple "by your leave" she disappeared.

I stood watching her go for a moment. "Devoted to her ship, that one," Mac observed.

"And wound up tighter than a warp coil," Kraam added.

The three of us shared a look and let the thought go.

My PA appeared at that moment. "Admiral, the meeting is starting."

I nodded my thanks and led everyone to the conference room where Commodore O'Brien was beginning to discuss with the *Gallant's* crew the rebuilding of their ship.

The next few days were hectic for Tim's crew. After settling the *Gallant* into the final position where repairs could begin, we began to have trouble pressuring the repair bay. The problem was soon resolved as a leak was found on the outer doors.

No sooner had that issue been solved, another minor problem began. This time, phaser torches did not align properly.

O'Brien looked up at the ship from the shop floor and muttered: "What next?"

Nearby, Mac replied, "Commodore, don't tempt the fates."

At that, Kraam said: "For once, I *don't* have a bad feeling about this. It'll be fine."

The Commodore's crew began to divide the *Gallant* into three parts, moving two of them into the smaller repair

bays. The saucer section remained in the main repair bay. Attention was then given to the impulse engines and roll bar assembly.

The warp nacelles had been removed and moved elsewhere. After looking them over, Tim came to the conclusion: "These are stuffed. We'll install a new, matched set. Start stripping these down for recycling."

Once all the components were in place, Tim had his crews begin to repair or replace the sections needed.

Standing on the saucer section, Tim watched as one of his teams began removing the bridge section that had been badly damaged in the fight. Fortunately, the designs of modern starships was fairly modular, but we had found ways to streamline and improve the process.

Indeed, one of the biggest problems had always been cabling. However, we had managed to create a universal plugin system that would simplify the task and have a new bridge module installed within hours.

O'Brien smiled to himself. This was the best part of his job. Coming up with new ideas and seeing them come to fruition.

Meanwhile, I had other duties to perform. I headed toward my office for a meeting with all the security personnel assigned here. The purpose was to improve the present system and develop a better one for future projects.

Passing the armory, I ran into First Lieutenant Vaughan of the Starfleet Marines.

He came to attention and saluted. "Sir!"

I thought Janis was wound.

"At ease, Lieutenant."

His idea of 'at ease' looks painful to me.

"Admiral, may I ask what your plans are for me and my men?" he asked respectfully.

I decided to put him out of his misery. "Lieutenant, your people will remain on station here until I have a job for you. You've been given quarters and a place to train. In the meantime, you'll assist the security personnel stationed here."

"Yes, sir."

Before I moved on, I considered him and his men. "Come with me, Lieutenant. This next meeting will interest you as well."

Vaughn fell into step and followed me back to my offices.

My PA, David Reynolds, was waiting for me in the hall. "Admiral, everyone you requested is here and assembled."

I nodded my understanding and jerked a thumb at Vaughn. "Give the Lieutenant a briefing pack and a chair as well."

Entering my office, I found Captain A. S. MacPhearson and his SSD staff sitting around the conference table. Also present were: the Chief of Security for the base, Lt. Commander Adam Rose, my flag secretary and my flag aide, who had followed me in. I took my seat at the head of the table.

Lieutenant Vaughan was seated next to Daniels. It was a good choice. I wanted the young man to feel integral to this meeting. His people weren't on base for show.

I called the meeting to order. "Greetings, everyone. I'm glad we were all able to be present. As Project ADREFT is now officially working on its first upgrade, we need to review the security we have set up here and what our needs will be going forward. I know that not everyone present is familiar with each other, so... if we could go around the table?"

After the introductions, I proceeded to the first item on the agenda. I threw open the floor to Captain MacPhearson, who outlined his plan for the upgrades to the present system.

"While many improvements have been made to security since the Admiral shone a light on what was going on here..."

Deborah couldn't help but interject, "It was a dog's breakfast."

Mac gave her a semi-amused look. "Thank you, Lieutenant, for that colorful description. There is still room for improvement." He then outlined several areas I had not considered, reminding me of the excellent choice to have him here.

I held up a finger. "Now you've heard the Captain's ideas going forward, do we have any helpful suggestions?"

Lt. Commander Rose and First Lt. Vaughan proposed a four-part plan that would tighten security and limit access. I realized they had already been discussing it. I laughed internally. *Why am I surprised? This is what men like this do.*

"This would be only for the people with proper clearances having a connection/or duty relating to the project would have access," Rose stipulated.

I'm a bit surprised by how well this discussion went.

Once the details were hashed out, Mac turned to me. "With your approval, Admiral?"

I gave him a nod. "It has my endorsement."

To my right, I noticed Deborah was being her usual, efficient self, taking copious amounts of minutes.

The next item on the agenda dealt with special security needs, such as intruders, visiting dignitaries, spies, and other special security situations. I directed this avenue of approach to Captain MacPhearson, because of his SSD training on such matters.

I looked to Deborah and she was prepared. She knew what was coming. "Before we go forward, I need to take care of some business. Captain MacPearson, please step forward."

As I stood, naturally everyone else did as well. Mac moved to the front of the room, seeming a little confused.

I love this kind of thing. I looked sternly at Mac. "Captain MacPhearson, by order of Starfleet and the SSD, you are hereby promoted to the rank of Lieutenant Colonel in the SSD with all the rights and privileges thereof."

Daniels presented me with his new jewelry, and I began changing out his regalia. He just stood there, proudly. I think I could have gutted him with a Bat'leth right then and he would still have been happy.

I gave everyone a minute to congratulate him, then indicated that the meeting continue.

"Colonel MacPhearson," I addressed him, "you will be in command of all SSD activities in this sector of space, not just on the base, although this will be your command post. Please, let the Quartermaster know if there's anything you need to assist in your activities."

Mac looked thoughtful for a moment.

I know the whole situation has been thrust upon him. I wouldn't be surprised if his head is still spinning.

"Admiral, I'd like a short recess to discuss this matter with a few people," he said.

I glanced at the wall. We had time. "Twenty minutes?"

"That would be fine, sir."

I wrapped things up and left to visit the head and grab a coffee.

As I stood stirring my freshly brewed coffee – none of that replicated garbage, thank you – Commodore O'Brien stopped by.

"I thought I'd find you here," he said as he ground some of his own beans.

I laughed at that, almost spilling my coffee. "Just good timing, I guess," I said, still chuckling.

As the machine shoved fresh water through the crushed beans, he looked at me, and the concern on his face caught my attention. "I need to talk to you about a supply issue we've got."

"Okay..." I thought for a second about my schedule and realized I could take care of it immediately after the meeting. "I'll drop by your office when we're done here."

Tim sniffed his fresh coffee and sighed. "Just the prescription I needed." He took a sip and then toasted me. "I'll see you then." He then turned and disappeared down the hallway.

The meeting resumed and Mac gave a rough outline of a proposal, but then said he wanted to meet with me for the fine details.

This is need to know only stuff.

We wrapped shortly after, so I gave the others in the room the message by remaining seated while everyone but Mac headed for the door.

It shushed behind them and then I turned to him. "Something I can do for you, Mac?"

He sucked in a breath. "I'm a man who likes to know where the edges are, sir. How much of a rope are you giving me?"

I nodded quietly and respected the question. Every man likes to know just how much they can get away with. "I may be the IG for this district, but I am *not* a security expert. The SSD is your baby, your expertise. I know you're a good

man and your Starfleet experience means you know where the black, the white and the grey areas are. Stay out of the black, and we'll be good."

Mac sat back in his chair and visibly relaxed. "I appreciate that, sir." He rubbed his upper lip and commented: "The black is more Thirty-One's bailiwick."

I wasn't about to treat the man opposite me like a fool. Section Thirty-One was supposed to be a closely guarded secret. "No argument there."

He seemed a little surprised. "You've had dealings with them?"

I gave him a disgusted look. "Just cleaning up their mess on occasion. You?"

Something dark passed through the man's expression. "Just once. I met one of their operatives on a mission in Klingon space." He let out some air as he remembered. "Suffice it to say, we had a difference of opinion. It got a little heated."

I was curious. "*How* heated?"

He seemed unsure for a moment whether he should share, but decided to trust. "Only one of us walked out of that room."

At my surprised expression, he elaborated: "He was evaced."

"Ah."

"There are just some lines I *will not cross*."

"Gotcha." I thought for a moment, then decided my first impression of the man was spot on. I leaned forward and offered my hand, which he took. "I look forward to working with you, Colonel."

He shook it warmly. "Thank you, sir. Me too."

After our informal talk secession I headed toward O'Brien's Office, passed the outer desk, then entered his private office and sat.

As usual, the man was deep into reading something on the huge display on his desktop. He was moving the design about, a frown on his face.

I cleared my throat and said, "You wanted to speak with me, Tim?"

O'Brien looked up, startled, as if I'd magically appeared, and said, "Yes! You know the parts this repair station has been receiving are not top quality as I had expected." He scowled to himself.

Starfleet deserves the best. I can relate.

"However," he added, his disappointment absolutely clear, "they will do the job. The process capability of the supplied part's function will keep performance within one-sigma reliability at a lower cost."

That doesn't sound too bad. "Well then, what's the problem?"

"The problem is I may not be able to maintain the amount and cost of the present budget outlays."

I was surprised and a little confused. "The present budget outlays are very good overall." I pondered the question for a moment, then said: "I'll look into trying to secure for you the parts and items you need at their current levels. Is that all?"

"Yes, I believe so Admiral..." He scowled again. "...no. I would just like to make a formal note that, while the components we're receiving are *technically* within specs, they could be better and our people, who are putting their lives on the line, deserve better.. especially given the tolerances in warp drive propulsion systems."

I sighed. "We're on the same page there, my friend. We've both been on the front lines, and nothing's worse than putting your faith in a dodgy system."

Tim gave me a wan smile. "Thanks for seeing me, Ollie. Remember, you said you would look over some specs in repair bay number one tomorrow sometime."

I slapped my thigh as I stood and nodded. "I'll be there. I will try to have an answer for you about the repair parts and the budget." I turned to go, then paused. "You doing anything later? Want to go and have a brew?"

"Thanks anyway, but I have already promised MacPhearson that I would join him. Maybe some other time."

I gave him a thumbs up and returned to my office. On the way, I flipped open my communicator and spoke with Deborah about the supply issues.

"I'll look into it, sir," she replied.

Content, I made my way to my office. Deborah had left some reading material on my desk that I had to read and respond to.

Hours later, with the last piece complete; I looked up and was surprised at how late it was. I put away my papers and locked up. Stopping by the commissary for a burger, I headed down the corridor to my quarters, feeling weary. *I'm not getting any younger.*

A commotion coming from the other end of the hallway caught my attention. I turned the corner and saw Tim and Mac swaying back and forth, holding onto one another.

Talk about full as a boot!

I noticed both of them were holding a bottle of spirits and talking loudly, as if they were suddenly partially deaf. Their strong accents had thickened to the point that I sometimes wondered *what* they were talking about.

They came to Mac's quarters and disappeared inside.

I peeked through the door before it closed and saw the decorations hanging in Mac's quarters. Seeing and hearing all this gave me an idea. Feeling like a cheeky teenager, I hurried to the communication room where I had a surprise waiting for them.

Tim's eyes zeroed in on the bar and he slurred, "Fill 'er up, Mac," pointing to his now empty glass.

Mac blearily complied and poured a four-finger shot of Scotch. Carefully, he passed it over. "Here ye' go thar, Timmy," Mac slurred. "I hope you like it, as this is my private stock." He proudly held up a bottle. "This here Scotch dates back over a hun'ren years or so."

Tim took a shot-sized drink and nearly gagged. "Damn, that is bloody good stuff, Mac." Looking around him like a man who had just realized he was on another planet, he scanned around the room and saw a host of anachronistic items. Among them was a crossed pair of quillion-hilted claymores on the wall with a coat of arms above. "Wow," he muttered. Like a bobble-head, he turned and took in another corner of the room in which was a four-poster Queen Anne style bed that looked like it was from a time before industrialization.

Tim took another swallow, turned back and mumbled, "This looks very familiar." He stood – carefully – and crossed to the wall bearing the coat-of-arms. "Lozenge, azure and/or, grasping a scales and imbalance sable a male gauntlet argent." He turned towards Mac, trying to focus, and slurring said, "What you know abo tha'? Your coat of arms? I have seen them before but for the life of me I can't remember where."

"Yo'll say you have seem them b'for Timmy," said Mac, as he was sitting in a chair adjacent to the arms, looking up proudly.

Entering the communication center, I entered the library where I quickly found what I wanted. I stepped over to the console and inserted the tape into the slot. I instructed the officer on duty to start playing its contents and pipe it into quarters of A. S. MacPhearson five minutes after I left.

The young man on gamma shift looked up at me with this peculiar little smile on his lips. *I don't think it's every day he helps an Admiral prank somebody.*

"Before I go, are there any dispatches for me?" I asked.

Still smirking, the young man indicated negative.

Keeping an eye on my watch, I timed it to the second – as the comms officer had clearly done. I stood outside his quarters, wondering if I should just enter.

"Yo'll seem to be getting dry," Mac said, although he wasn't quite certain because he was having trouble seeing Tim's glass. *What the hell*, he thought. "Refill 'er up a'gin." He picked up the bottle and gave it a shake, and to his disgust found it was empty. He tipped it up to check the bottom, just to see if there was a hole in it. *Nope*, he thought.

"Ju'll wait *hic* a minute, Timmy I gota' 'nother one her' somewhere." He started rummaging around in an ornate chest at the end of his bed and victoriously wielded his prize. "Gotcha!"

Just as Mac started to open his treasure, music started coming through the speakers. Both men looked at each other and smiled. It took them a moment to stand, but there was

a need. On the third attempt they succeeded. Hand in hand they stood there at attention with their glasses raised high above their heads. Both of them said together, "To the King."

Outside the door, I heard the music filter through and I couldn't resist. I stepped forward and the computer registered my presence and gave a priority override.

I stood looking at Mac and Tim standing at attention the best they could, considering their advanced state of inebriation. 'God save the King' was still playing over the intercom. I wasn't quite sure what they were saying, but they were muttering something to one another.

Speaking in a low tone whilst shaking my head, I said, "I hope you two are enjoying yourselves. After this please get some sleep and report to me in the morning."

They both turned around and slurred, "Right oh! Admiralllll Sirrrrr."

Man, I wish Liz was here to share the laugh. Oh! I should have brought a video cam with me.

Still chuckling, I turned around and exited Mac's room. I couldn't help but start to laugh. The more I thought about it, the harder I laughed.

Those two were going to have the biggest headache anyone ever had. Should I contact Medical and tell them not to dispense painkillers? I shook my head. No. Enough high jinks for this month. I need to set an example.

As I walked, I simply decided to let them have their fun, I would rather they blow off steam now than later. The greatest challenges are still ahead for all of us. With that simple idea in mind, I realized I needed to get some sleep. I would be no good to anyone exhausted.

It was 0600 the next morning when I strode into my office. I have to admit I wasn't surprised to find my PA already waiting for me, I always thought he was a bit of an over-achiever, but then, that's why I took him on.

I sat down and began reading the overnight dispatches. One caught my eye. I remembered seeing the *Enterprise-A* warping out of system weeks before. Now, it seems that, on Nimbus III, a madman of sorts had captured the governing body of that planet, a human Federation rep, another that was Klingon and a third, Romulan. Kirk and the *Enterprise* had been sent to render aid or rescue the governing body.

Now, it would appear that new *Enterprise*, with Kirk and his crew, had now disappeared, along with the "madman" and the Nimbus governors. *What the hell is that all about?* I shook my head. *The man has just pulled off the Hail Mary of the millennium, and how he and his new ship have vanished. The man is jinxed!*

There was a new report of a Klingon delegation opening peace talks with the Federation. *I sense a strong mistrust on both sides. At least they should be happy that Kirk is missing in action.*

Another report of the *Excelsior*, being refit and repaired after the Whale probe matter, and the subsequent trouble at the Romulan NZ.

I remembered the rumor that Commander Sulu was intended to take command. *That's going to be hard if he doesn't come back with the Enterprise.*

There was also a report directed to all field commanders regarding Klingon spies. I forwarded a copy to my security heads.

Finally, there was a report of some personnel changes in Sector Five and Quadrant Two. After reading the reports, I hit the intercom button calling for Lieutenant Commander Rose to come to my office; I also called for Lt. Colonel MacPhearson to report also.

After about ten minutes Lieutenant Commander Rose entered my office. I motioned for him to sit down and wait until Lt. Colonel MacPhearson arrived. In the meantime, we were able to get some work done on our personal computers.

We waited half an hour and I was getting annoyed that Mac hadn't shown up yet. I felt partially responsible. *Perhaps I should have given them both a boot up the backside last night instead of the slack.*

"I can't wait for MacPhearson," I growled. "I'm calling one of his team. I wonder where he's gotten off to." *I wonder... I just hope he's not in the medical bay with alcohol poisoning.*

I hit the intercom once more and called Lieutenant Marilyn Styles to my office, his secretary. After about five minutes, she entered, looking embarrassed and a little flustered. She reminded me of a teenager being called up to visit the Principal's office.

I motioned for her to sit down, which she did gratefully. "Lieutenant, do you have any idea where your boss *is* this morning?" I tried to tone down the sarcasm because it clearly wasn't her fault.

Marilyn, under her brunette locks, blushed bright red. "I'm not sure, Admiral," she said with a slight stutter. "I heard he's in the infirmary with a serious hangover."

Nailed it. Perhaps I should have put that call in last night and let the two of them suffer.

I was being bloody minded and I knew it. "Okay," I said, sucking it up. "Let's call this his one "Get out of jail free" card for the year and he's well and truly used it."

Even though the others had no idea where that reference came from, they got the gist.

I fumbled with the computer console and then began speaking. "I just received a report this morning about Klingon spies possibly infiltrating Starbases, and other sensitive facilities the Federation has. With this report in mind, I am informing both of you to increase your patrols in sensitive areas, and check everyone's ID. Don't be afraid to do medical scans. The K-7 incident of fifteen-odd years ago taught us that the Klingons don't mind completely altering their physiology to appear human."

Taking notes, the two of them agreed. "I am also declaring an alert status condition two. Any questions?"

Lieutenant Commander Rose held up a finger. "Just one thing, sir. I noted in your message this morning that the *Enterprise's* disappearance has a Klingon element. Perhaps they're flexing their muscles on Nimbus III as well."

Lieutenant Styles appeared surprised. "Why bother? There's not much left after the settlers practically raped the place."

I gave her a fatherly look. "Lieutenant, even a dust bowl can be useful as a base of operations."

The embarrassed teenager look returned.

"If there's nothing further?"

I dismissed the two of them and let them get back to their duties.

It turned out that talk of Mac being in the Infirmary for the world's biggest hangover was not exactly true. Using the

discretion I had afforded him for his new position, he was now... *elsewhere*. I would just have to have my curiosity sated when he returned.

The *Enterprise* showed up three weeks later – or at least, a subspace message finally got back to us that she had been hijacked and sent on a foolhardy trip towards the center of the galaxy. Fortunately, it appeared that Kirk had regained control and that he had somehow improved relations with certain prominent Klingons at the same time. The ship was now on her long voyage home.

The man lives a charmed life.

That morning, whilst conversing about the day's tasks that were ahead for us, Deborah mentioned that she'd had word from O'Brien that the refit work on the *Gallant* was seventy-five percent completed.

My eyebrows shot up. "That was fast," I said, admiringly.

"He's just waiting on some specialized computer equipment and other equipment to arrive. Tim has some reservations about whether the required equipment will arrive in time for the projected completion date."

I gave her a disgusted look. Delays seemed to be par for the course these days.

Deborah brightened up as she realized she had some good news for me. "Oh, Colonel MacPhearson is back. I hear he spoke briefly with Commodore O'Brien and then headed for his office."

Now I can have some answers. I wasn't concerned about misconduct on Mac's part. I was just curious.

"Intruder alert! Intruder alert! Bay Three!"

The alarm surprised all of us, but it was good to see my people move quickly.

I slapped the comms button on my desk. "Commander Rose, report!"

A harried, and obviously running, Rose answered. "Sir, all I know at this point is that there may have been a suspected Klingon spy cornered in bay three. I'm en route."

"Understood, Commander." I hung up and let him get to work.

I caught Deborah Daniels watching me with a knowing look in her eye. "We can always finish this later, Ollie," she said cheekily.

She knew me too well. I stood, grabbed my uniform jacket off the back of my chair and headed for the door. "I'll leave this..." I waved at my desk "...in your good hands."

Taking off at a run, I found myself glad that I kept fit. I darted into a turbolift and it spat me out at the far end of the deck.

Arriving at Bay Three, I found the security personnel, with Mac already present, trapping the Klingon spy. I couldn't see if he was armed. From a distance, the individual reminded me of K-7. Whoever this non-descript person was, they looked like your garden variety human.

In the almost glaring light of the huge, white, almost cavernous area, the being had nowhere to hide. Even though there were scattered parts of warp nacelles, I gathered they were the remains of the *Gallant's* original nacelles, there was nowhere to go, and I think he realized that. With security officers before and behind, he stopped and let them take him.

Looking like a walking thunderstorm, Mac ordered the spy taken to the detention center. As he moved to follow them, I pulled him up short. "Colonel... Mac. I know of your history with the Klingons. Keep a rein on it, OK?"

The look on the man's face was grim, but controlled. "Not a problem, Admiral." He then gave me an interesting look. "This should be interesting."

I watched him go, wondering just what he was talking about. I determined to put it out of my mind and let him go. I stayed behind to assess the damage done, if any. I had noticed the spy had some kind of tricorder with him, but I wasn't going to let it stop there. Cemeteries were full of dead men who made assumptions.

I asked O'Brien to conduct a detailed inventory and inspection of what the spy may have taken.

Tim was sour. "I had hoped we'd be able to avoid this kind of thing," he muttered, bitterly.

I chuffed. "You know what they say about the better mousetrap," I said.

"Yeah, I'm just had a gutful of cleaning up after Klingon mice," he growled.

With Mac recently installed at the chief of SSD for the region, I realized that I was walking a fine line if I wanted to be even peripherally involved in the Klingon's interrogation – if, indeed, he really *was* a Klingon.

While every bone in my body ached to sit and watch the interview, I knew I had to step back and show that I had faith in my people to do the job.

That didn't stop me from watching it on the viewer in my office.

Some things don't change after centuries. The accused was sitting on one side of a desk, his hands manacled. He wasn't looking guilty, though. He was staring defiantly into Mac's eyes.

I knew Mac well enough that *nobody* could intimidate him. He could be staring into the maw of a fire-breathing dragon and smile.

I left the screen on for a while when it became clear that the pair of them would just stare at one another for a time. I knew one of them would have to flinch eventually. I also knew it wasn't going to be Mac.

After about twenty minutes, the captive shifted slightly.
Gotcha.

A slow smile spread across Mac's face. He had won that round. He slipped his hand into his pocket and took out the alien's scanning device.

One thing for sure, it wasn't Federation, that I could see.

"We can't fire this thing up," Mac said.

The alien said nothing.

"DNA coded?"

Again, he remained mute.

"That's OK." Blindingly fast, Mac snatched the man's hand and slapped it down on the device. The screen lit up and icons appeared on its surface.

Too late, the alien resisted and pulled his hand back.

Mac smiled again and began scrolling through the items on the screen. "Thank you for your service," he said coldly.

He kept scrolling, and finally came to something, then clicked on it. I couldn't see what it was, but he was delighted to find it.

I realized what it was when he moved the pad up and down in front of the captive.

It is a scanner.

"Hmm," Mac said. "This thing tells me you're a perfectly healthy Klingon male of about thirty years of age. Congratulations."

The alien just scowled again. Finally, he spoke. "I am a Klingon warrior, human. If I wasn't in these chains, you'd be dead already."

Mac finished scrolling. "There's enough in this thing to have you tried and convicted of espionage. That means a lengthy period in a Federation prison... which you'd probably hate while trying to take it over from the inside. Or we could send you home in disgrace..."

The look of horror that came over the Klingon's face made it clear what he thought of that idea.

"Exactly," Mac finished with. He caught the man's eye. "I'll tell you what. If give you the chance for an honorable death. I'll let you try to kill me."

The Klingon's head jerked up. He was interested.

I was worried. *What's Mac up to?*

He put the tablet down to his left, face down, and then reached out and disabled the Klingon's manacles. They dropped from his wrists.

Suddenly free to move, the human looking Klingon jumped up, roaring, and moved around the table, his hands outstretched, ready to strangle Mac.

The Colonel was already on his feet. He lashed out with a flat hand and caught the man's larynx. Stunned and unable to breathe, he wasn't prepared for Mac's follow-up concussive blows to both sides of his head. The slap reverberated around my office and the impact dropped the Klingon to the floor, unconscious.

I hope he's unconscious.

Then Mac returned to the tablet and turned it over. Then I realized what it was all about. He needed the Klingon's hand to work it. The screen had already timed out.

I knew the man couldn't hear me, but I laughed to myself.

Well done. There's no telling what we'll learn from that.

The door behind Mac opened and Commander Rose entered, along with some of Mac's SSD people.

"Have *that*," Mac made a dismissive wave at the lump on the floor, "readied for transfer to Starbase 21. They can have some fun with him – once we're finished reading this thing." He looked almost sorry for the man. "He'll probably wind up in a detention center."

One of Mac's men said, "Poor bastard."

I nodded to myself. *To a Klingon, that's worse than death. No Sto-Vo-Kor for him.*

Later that day, I got an odd request from Commodore O'Brien to come to the Engineering department.

What's going on now?

When I got there, Tim and his engineering staff were abuzz about something.

I found him standing next to a desk that was littered with different devices I could only begin to imagine. "What's up Tim?"

O'Brien looked up at me and said, "Admiral you have got to see this. You will not believe it."

"See what?"

"Follow me."

We both entered the staging area for all parts and equipment that arrived at the base once they'd cleared the docks.

There, before us, were computers, parts of every known size and configuration. I recognized a lot of them and realized there were a number of critical things that Tim and his crew needed to complete the work on the *Gallant*, which I knew were at about eighty percent.

I looked around quite surprised, picked up a few components and turned them over. They appeared in pristine condition and ready for installation. I looked over at Tim and said, "Have you got a fairy godmother you haven't told me about? Do you have any idea where all this stuff came from?"

Tim just looked about him in wonder. "No, sir, and no, sir."

Computer equipment doesn't just fall out of the sky.
"Well, find out and let me know."

Tim just kept examining the equipment in wonder.
"Very well, sir. Will do."

Leaving the staging area, I returned to my office and resumed my report reading and doing the kind of things a paper-pusher does.

I was rescued by David, who stepped into my office respectfully and waited for me to acknowledge him – no matter how many times I told him he could announce himself like anyone else.

Once I'd met his gaze, he politely said: "Admiral, it's time for the promotion you've got scheduled."

I nodded. I'd been looking forward to this. "Call the senior staff. I want them here to witness."

Within ten minutes, the senior staff who were available, with the sad exception of Captain Seymour, who was away, assembled in the largest of our conference rooms. Looking around at those present, I was certain they knew this was a long time in coming.

"Commander Kraam, front and center," I called.

Kraam stepped forward and came to attention before me.

"Commander Kraam, your service to the fleet and the Federation as a whole has been noted and appreciated. In recognition of your *gallant* service..." I couldn't help but interject that little one, "... you are hereby promoted to the rank of captain and ordered to take command of the *USS Gallant* as her skipper."

Stoic, but proud all the same, Kraam's poker face remained solid, but I could see it in his eyes that this was his life's desire.

I removed Kraam's commander's pins and affixed the new ensigns. I then shook his hand. "Congratulations, sir. Well done."

His face finally broke into a broad grin. "Thank you, sir."

Two hours later Tim sauntered into my office, looking quite proud of himself. "Admiral, sir," he said as he sat down in his usual chair, coffee mug in hand. "I think I know where all those things came from. I was talking with Mac, and he revealed he knew of my problem with Starfleet HQ's quartermaster."

While the smell of the coffee caught my attention, making me realize I wanted one, I said, "Oh? And what makes you say that, Tim?"

The man sat forward and began speaking as if he was afraid someone would overhear. "Well, you know Mac, he is pretty covert at times and keeps to himself. He told me it was a present from him and the SSD for all the help he has received from my department in fixing his equipment."

I'm not surprised. "Well, Tim, did he tell you *where* and *how* he got all of the goodies you wanted?"

"No, sir. I didn't ask."

"Well, why not?" I asked.

"I didn't think it would have been proper to inquire. Never mind not wanting to look a gift horse in the mouth."

I never did understand that reference.

"I thought it was more your job, sir."

My eyebrow shot up at that. "Hmm! I will ask Mac," *if not just to satisfy my own curiosity*, "but if you see him first go ahead and ask him where he got it."

Tim finished his cup with a gulp, got up and left.

And left me wondering.

Two months have passed since the Nimbus III crisis. The *Gallant* is 95% complete, and the form has taken shape very well. Strolling through the hanger deck watching all three parts of the ship being joined was a real thrill. It's hard to really understand the scope of the size of a starship until you've stood underneath one and looked up.

I wonder if it's like what the seamen on the aircraft carrier Enterprise felt like when they saw her from the dock. So much power to project.

It had been a long, hard tough time here on Merlynn, but the project was finally coming to an end. Once the methods were put in place, this ship should be easy to replicate. It was all about making it happen and fixing the bugs that inevitably made themselves known.

Captain Kraam had chosen his crew for the new *Gallant*-class battle frigate, as the class was going to be known. It was a very impressive crew – I'd checked the manifest – and I was looking forward to using this ship as my flagship for the Southwest Sector of the Inspector's Generals Office of Starfleet.

There was a fair amount of noise as the warp nacelles were fitted, but that was to be expected. Once complete, she would be given a systems check and the *Gallant* would be ready for a shakedown cruise.

"Well, Tim," I said as I joined him at the tractor controls. "Very impressive, very impressive indeed."

"Thank you, sir." Tim looked like a kid on Christmas morn as he watched the final section lowered into place and the laser welds being applied. "We will be ready for a shakedown cruise in about three weeks, I think. The *special* equipment will arrive here tomorrow so we can finish the job."

I knew what he meant by that. "Very good, Tim. I will be on board for the shakedown cruise." I paused for a moment, considering the delicacy of my next question. "In your opinion, has Captain Kraam had enough transition time to command the ship effectively?"

Tim actually chuckled at that. "Oh, yes, he has. He now knows the systems aboard that ship..." he pointed upward, "... almost as well as I do." He clapped me on the shoulder, the picture of confidence. "Don't worry. Captain Kraam will do just fine."

We paused for a moment, watching as the final welds were run by the DOTs that swarmed over the joins. Tim O'Brien stepped off the platform and I followed him. "He's up there right now, ready for the final briefing now and I'm heading to do just that."

Nothing was as satisfying as seeing a project come to fruition. I mock toasted the vessel. "Very well. When will the first system checks begin?"

Tim tipped his head in a mini-shrug. "In a way, they have already begun. Although, the *final* ones should begin sometime tomorrow when the special equipment is installed and tested."

I smiled to myself. This ship would not only be able to deliver quite a punch, but she had some great surprises up her "sleeves".

Stardate 8615.10 (earth date May 22nd 2280)

Three weeks later, the *Gallant* was ready for the shakedown cruise. There was an uneasy nervousness around the station. This was a totally new ship and crew.

I stood, watching out the window as the senior crew and staff of the station stood with us. The *Gallant* sat outside, lit up like the proverbial Christmas tree.

I gave Deborah a nod. She deserved the chance to do this. She hit a button and, just above us, a small airlock was opened, and a very small object went spinning towards the bow of the ship. In the distance, we could see the champagne bottle shatter into millions of frozen pieces as the *USS Gallant* was now officially relaunched.

"We dub thee *USS Gallant*," Deborah said, delighted.

Those present broke into polite applause.

I leaned in close to Deborah. "No matter how much we change as we move forward, tradition must be honored."

She looked up at me, with that friendly look of confidence mixed with defiance I had come to expect from her. "Always, sir."

The shake-down crew came aboard after spending months in school learning the new systems and using computer-generated props to practice. Now, it was time for the real thing, and the crew was being tested just as much as the ship herself.

Arriving on board the new *Gallant*, I felt a sense of awe; this was the first of the class and was also a new way of building ships.

Tradition must be kept. "Permission to come aboard?" I asked.

The young, female transporter operator just smiled up at me. She'd had a very busy day bringing much of the crew back aboard. "Granted, Admiral. Welcome aboard."

"Thank you. Where's the captain?" I asked as I stepped off the transporter pad with Lt. Reynolds, my trusty aide, by my side.

"Captain Kraam should be on the bridge, sir," the officer replied.

Entering the turbolift on my way to the bridge I was in a daze. *Finally, this is all over and I can go back to my role as the Inspector General of the Southwest Sector of Starfleet. This has been fun, but I wouldn't want it for a full-time job.*

The turbolift stopped and the doors slid open. Stepping out on the Bridge, it was busy and absorbing. Then someone said, "Admiral on the bridge." Everyone turned around, coming to attention, with most smiling.

Captain Kraam turned and said, "Welcome, Admiral. We are about ready for departure."

Sometimes it's hard to show the veneer of the admiralty, today, when I'm just as excited as the lowest crewman. "Very well, Captain. At your discretion."

Captain Kraam nodded to his XO, who began organizing the troops.

Internally, I had to give the captain credit for allowing his XO the honor of giving the first orders.

"Helm, thrusters only, back us away two hundred kilometers."

Standing near the Comm Station, it felt strange watching the movement of the ship as it was leaving the construction dock in orbit of Merlynn. The *Gallant* moved out in an upward motion, away from the planetoid. Looking at the screen and seeing the stars was quite a thrill even though I had seen this many times before.

With the *Gallant* now fully clear of the construction base, Captain Kraam turned around and asked, "Where to, Admiral?"

I had a plan he was unaware of. The only way to truly put the ship's new *special* equipment to the test was in practice, and the only other ship cleared to join it for that test... well, it dwarfed this one.

I spoke up. "Helm set course 211, mark 8, warp four." Kraam eyed me curiously. "Sir?"

I gave him a thin smile. "Need to know, Captain," I said, enigmatically. I stepped down to Navigation and tapped in some co-ordinates. "Bring us to this IP. It should only take us an hour at this speed. Once we're there, bring us to a full stop."

The officer looked back at his captain, who I noticed out of the corner of my eye simply nodded.

There was tension in the air of the bridge on this, the ship's first cruise, but I wanted to throw them in the deep end, so to speak. This ship was a dangerous Swiss army knife, and I had to know it was in the best hands.

An hour later, the *Gallant* dropped out of warp, as ordered, and came to station-keeping.

Kraam stood and stepped over to my side. "Admiral?" he asked, not wanting to seem too pushy, especially as this was his first command, and he was loathe to risk it.

Standing on the bridge of the ship felt like old times to me from when I was in the Rigelian Defense force, which seemed so long ago.

"You'll know soon enough," I replied.

Right on cue, I heard a startled gasp from the sciences board. "Vessel decloaking off our starboard bow!"

"Raise shields! Red alert!" Kraam cried.

I stood there with a crooked smile on my face. This ship and crew reacted well and efficiently. It felt a little cruel dropping this on them, but there's always a reason for the madness.

The viewscreen turned to show their unexpected guest. A familiar shape filled the screen, but it was odd at the same time. At first glance, one might have mistaken it for an *Excelsior*-class ship, but the truncated dorsal, megaphasers emplacements and huge hangar deck that stretched the length of the top of the secondary hull belied that notion.

"What ship is that?" Kraam asked.

I thought I'd finally put the crew out of their suspense. "It's the *Ingram*-class *USS Millennium*," I said, trying not to laugh. I looked Kraam in the eye. "You can stand down from Red Alert, now. We're in good company."

Shaking his head in surprise, Kraam stuttered: "I thought we were the only ship fitted with a cloaking device in Starfleet."

"Ah, no," I said. I jerked my thumb over my shoulder at the screen. "Yours is based on the one in *that* ship. She's here to put yours through its paces."

The light of understanding came on in Kraam's eyes. "Oh... I see. Need to know."

I clucked my tongue. "Exactly. Open hailing frequencies, please. Low band, low energy. I don't want to be overheard."

An old friend appeared on the screen. "Piper," I said. "Long time, no see."

Captain Piper, her honey-blond hair bouncing behind her in its usual ponytail, laughed at the little joke. "That's the idea, Admiral. We're here to put the *Gallant* through her paces, as ordered."

"And then we're going to have that game of poker," I said.

"You still owe me from the last one."

I frowned. "I thought I took care of that."

Piper just gave me one of her trademark cheeky grins. "I always collect on my debts, Admiral."

That's true.

I turned to Captain Kraam, who had collected himself. "I'll leave the details to you." With a final glance over my shoulder at the viewscreen at Piper, I said, "Have fun!"

Whilst the *Millennium* played its game of hide-and-go-seek with the *Gallant*, tests were made on the systems, especially the cloaking device.

First was navigation. The test proved interesting because of the new style of sensors and locating equipment. They were being put through the paces. I was confident of success. After all, we had arrived at the co-ordinates to meet Piper. What could go wrong?

In keeping with a shakedown cruise, we did find a couple of quirks that would have to be worked out back at base. It was found that, in the seconds the ship came out of cloak, the spatial sensors were confused and her position in

space was temporarily lost. This could be catastrophic in a battle scenario.

Second were the defensive systems, such as shields and screens. While the cloaking device and on-board security systems seemed to be working well, it wasn't without its flaws.

In the end, the tests came back about 50/50 on those systems. We found that the shields worked only when the screens were down and the cloaking device worked when all systems were off. At least the *Millennium's* chief engineer, a human called "Scanner", fixed the problem quickly. Apparently, he'd had similar problems on his ship.

At least the onboard security systems worked perfectly. The interior force fields and the internal phaser hits operated on cue.

The Cetis Weapon System computer worked very well, to my delight. Also, the "Dagger" Decoy Launcher worked reasonably well, but there were some adjustments to make.

Third, we tested the weapons systems on a nearby asteroid field, once I let the *Millennium* go – not without settling the score. I sent over the collection of antique weapons I had promised her captain.

The phasers consisted of six banks of two each, with the "Sphinx" twin-mount, and four banks of "Sphinx", tandem mounted. The tests on those exceeded expectations.

No matter how old I get, I still like to see things go "boom!"

We then found a nice, big rock we could test photon torpedoes on. This ship was armed like a beast, with eight banks of MK22 Mod 4, direct forward and aft. The torpedoes themselves worked fine, but the launchers had problems. For one, the reload time was ridiculously long.

After about six hours of fixing one thing and then another going down, I ordered the *Gallant* back to the repair facility.

CAPTAINS LOG USS Gallant: STARDATE 8612.20 (Captain Kraam reporting.)

The final repairs and adjustments of the refit have begun. It will take about six months before the Gallant is ready for the second shakedown cruise and assignment. Unfortunately, only a fraction of our expected crew replacements have arrived. Lt. Commanders M'rack and Gaak have sufficiently recovered and are ready for light duty, and they have volunteered to assist during the crew shortage. Maj. Vaughan will continue his duties as Executive Officer. Admiral Sään informs me that the Gallant will be reassigned to her previous patrol area after she completes the second shakedown cruise. Those Klingon raiders will be in for quite a surprise if they dare to engage her again!

After about a six-month layover for final repairs at Merlynn, the *Gallant* was ready for her second and final shakedown cruise. During that time, I informed Captain Kraam that I will use the *Gallant* as my flagship for the SW Sector of the IG's Office. The new crew replacements that Captain Kraam requested finally arrived, were given the appropriate training and billeting. By the time the ship was ready to ship out, everything was prepared.

Admiral's log, Stardate 8706.1: Rear Admiral Sään recording.

The Gallant has completed the final stages of the repairs and testing from the first shakedown cruise. The second shakedown cruise is ready. I summoned the command crew and informed them of the second

shakedown cruise's timing and intentions. I also informed them that I will not be accompanying them on this cruise due to some matters I have to handle at Starbase 21 and the IG's. I wished Captain Kraam and crew godspeed.

I watched the Gallant prepare for departure from my office window. I saw the Gallant depart maybe for the last time. I turned from the window after they went into warp and gathered my things and began my trip to Starbase 21 and the new adventures that awaited me there. Well, at least I hope they're going to be worthwhile.

I had to say goodbye to the Merlynn base staff. It will only be a matter of time before they're all reassigned because Starfleet and the Federation Council have decided that this project is too expensive. Of the nine ships originally approved, only four will be built or refit to this class.

Commodore O'Brien will be in command for the building of the other four ships of this class here at Planet Merlynn. What becomes of the facilities afterward is up to the brass.

Naturally, this report and all information regarding this project will be sealed and only Alpha Nine and above clearance will be able to access the information.

Merlynn II, my personal shuttle, was waiting for me in the docks. As I stepped on board, I found that my PA, Deborah, Fleet Captain Seymour and her personal staff were already onboard as I was moving our operations to a more permanent base on Starbase 21, which would be much more practical for future purposes.

Standing at ease next to the open rear door was Tim, his Aussie face split in a broad grin, waiting to say goodbye.

"Fair travels, Admiral," he said fondly. He shook my hand warmly, and I responded in kind. "May the wind be in your backs."

I grinned back at him. "Fair weather always, my friend. Keep the light on for us. You never know what the future holds."

O'Brien winked at me. "That's right. You never know."

THE END