

Star Trek: Agenda

A Novel By:

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Prologue

To the naked eye it sparkles with the fire of tiny gemstones against a midnight black tapestry. Its beauty and serenity allow no measure of its true meaning. To the casual observer it is just another region of space between the Alpha and Beta quadrants of the Milky Way galaxy. But to the governments of the United Federation of Planets and the Klingon Empire, it is the Neutral Zone.

Established by the Organian Peace Treaty, the Neutral Zone is the sliver of space, light years across, separating the established boundaries of Federation space from Klingon space. By treaty, it is strictly off limits to both Federation starships and Klingon warships. Entry by either is a violation of treaty, and can be considered an act of war. Thus the intent of the zone is to prevent hostilities between these two powerful and vastly different cultures. It exists to preserve an uneasy peace.

The Neutral Zone, however, is not empty. It is full of life. There are entire systems containing inhabited worlds. Many of those worlds harbor intelligent life with societies in various stages of development. Inhabitants who, in many cases, have no knowledge of life beyond their own existences, or who simply don't care. Beings who have no idea that they lie directly between two of the dominant superpowers in this part of the galaxy.

Worlds standing directly in the path of a collision between two powerful and unyielding forces.

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Chapter One

Stardate: 5643.8

The command center lights were dimmed so that the primary illumination in the room came from the many consoles and readouts populating the enclosed area. He liked it better this way. Felt it allowed him to absorb more fully the data being compiled by the powerful computers.

The shift had been uneventful, as most shifts are. But now, something snagged his attention. The sensors had just read this sector of the Neutral Zone an hour earlier, and found nothing unusual. Now, however, the scans reported a barely perceptible subspace disturbance.

The Denebian focused the numbers two and four scanners on the coordinates in question, because these were the most sensitive. He kept them in passive mode to “listen”, because to go active might alert someone to their presence. Besides, authorization from the outpost commander was required to take scanners to active status. Even though he was Duty Officer for the particular shift, Lieutenant Ferr did not have that authority. And there was no need, yet.

He monitored the computer read-outs while the sensors listened. He then made some adjustments and read the results again. He made continual adjustments and read the results for nearly half an hour. All the while, the computer came back with the same results. Inconclusive.

Not satisfied, he pondered the puzzle in his mind, formulating theories and hypothesis. What was causing it? So vague, as if it's not really there. But there was something there. He could see it. A sensor glitch or ghost?

He was just about ready to dismiss the anomaly and move on. Something about this nagged at him though.

He called over to the shift Tactical Officer, Ensign Hardin. Together they studied the sensor scans and traded theories. Hardin listened intently as Ferr's arguments became more persuasive. Ultimately he found he had no choice but to agree with the Lieutenant's hypothesis. Something was coming at them, and fast.

The Lieutenant opened a comm channel to the outpost commander's office on the surface above.

On the surface, daylight had given way to darkness as Lieutenant Commander Adam J. Russell reclined in his efficient office, nursing a cup of coffee. He gazed out the lone window through the protective transparent aluminum dome towards space above. As the day waned, the artificial lighting in the dome, which protected them from the toxic atmosphere and sub-zero cold outside the outpost, slowly dimmed from artificial daylight to twilight.

Simultaneously, the computer lowered the lights in the office to a more subtle illumination. Russell had previously programmed the computer to dim the lights at this time of day. He found it put him in a more relaxed frame of mind.

He thought about going to the outpost gym for a work out, but that would have to wait. There was still much to do. The monitoring center's reports of today's

activity inside the zone had to be reviewed, summarized and encrypted for transmission by subspace to Starbase Thirty-one. He still had a good couple of hours of work ahead of him.

His focus changed to the wall across from his desk, a scant three meters or so away. He didn't have to look very far. The plaque, hung prominently on the wall was a gift from Captain Edward Boyle of the *U.S.S. Merrimac*. He treasured the plaque, not only because it was a gift from his first Captain on his first tour of duty, but because it held a special meaning.

*Oh! I have slipped the surly bonds of earth,
And danced the skies on laughter silvered wings*

*And while with silent lifting mind I've trod
The high, untrespassed sanctity of space
Put out my hand and touched the face of God.*

John Gillespie Magee

He knew, deep in his soul this was the reason he had joined Starfleet, to touch the face of God. Not to sit in an "efficiency" office. They told him he was on the fast track in Starfleet. Would have his own ship by the time he was thirty-two.

What happened? He was already twenty-nine years old! True, he commanded this outpost and was honing his skills, so to speak. But wasn't he wasting his time here? He wasn't getting any younger, after all.

Sometimes he felt they put him here just to get him out of the way in order to make room for other hot shot young officers. But these thoughts were self-

serving. Besides, it just didn't make sense. Starfleet had invested a lot in him over the last twelve years, and his evaluations were quite positive. Well, there was that one incident.

Those who didn't know any better believed that life on the edge of the Neutral Zone was one grand adventure after another. As commanding officer of Federation Outpost Omega IV, he had to acknowledge the dangers. But endless excitement wasn't how he would have described this assignment, especially recently. Lately, things had been pretty dull.

On the surface, Omega IV, located barely a quarter light year from the Klingon Neutral Zone, is a port of call with shops and repair facilities catering to the needs of commercial vessels traveling to and from Klingon space, and to starships patrolling the Federation border.

Below the surface however, Omega IV is a strategic facility for observing activity within the Neutral Zone adjacent to the outpost. Its proximity to the Neutral Zone makes it ideal for this purpose. Possessing some of the most sophisticated sensory equipment within the Federation, Omega IV is responsible for listening to an impressively large three parsec wide swath of the zone, and providing Starfleet Command with daily reports of activity.

This fact, while denied by the Federation, is hardly a secret to the Klingon Empire. After all, the Klingons have similar outposts on their side of the Neutral Zone, responsible for the very same tasks.

Things hadn't always been this quiet though. Just four months earlier, a Klingon warship violated the treaty and crossed the Federation border with weapons charged, threatening to attack the outpost on charges

of spying on the affairs of the empire. The Klingon Captain was drunk on blood wine at the time and perhaps was not thinking clearly.

The Starship *Challenger*, on patrol in the area at the time, detected the Klingon vessel's bold charge into Federation space and responded to the intrusion. A standoff ensued between the two powerful vessels. In between threats and posturing by the respective Captains, Adam was ultimately able to persuade the Klingon vessel's First Officer, a more level-headed Klingon, to encourage his captain to stand down and retire to his quarters. Thus no shots were fired, and the warship returned across the Neutral Zone, escorted by the *Challenger*, back to Klingon space.

Recent reports coming from Earth indicated that ongoing diplomatic negotiations between the Federation and Klingon Empire, intended to end decades of cold war, were at long last beginning to show some signs of promise. An agreement was possible within the next few months. An agreement with the Klingons would most likely signal an end to the threat of hostilities, and eventually negate the strategic importance of all the outposts along the Neutral Zone, and triggering an end to this assignment.

What then, he wondered? Where would Starfleet send him when he was no longer needed here? Would he even stay with the service?

One of the disadvantages of the military was the limited freedom to choose where to serve. A Starfleet officer went where ordered.

He hoped for another shipboard assignment, having been grounded far too long. Perhaps a position as first officer, and a promotion to full Commander?

“That was probably too much to hope for.” he thought to himself. Besides, the only such opening currently posted was on the USS *Carl Sagan*. But the *Sagan* was on a mapping mission on the other side of Federation space, so distant; it would take months to reach her by way of starship hopping. Several months of inactivity traveling to his next assignment didn’t appeal to the young officer.

On the positive side, he would be back in space. On the negative side, it would mean leaving Carrie behind. The situation was complicated. But it was useless to even worry about such events, he thought. By the time his assignment here finished, *Sagan* would have long ago found her first officer.

His mind wandered back to Carrie. Ensign Carrie Brooks. Assigned to Omega IV only eight months ago, she worked in the Engineering section responsible for maintaining the outpost’s facilities and equipment.

A promising young engineer, Carrie showed great passion for her work, and for Adam. She didn’t mind the planet-side assignment as over the last five months, she and Adam had become very close. She was one of the main reasons Adam hadn’t resigned his command. Carrie had been a stabilizing force for him and helped him endure.

Carrie would be off duty at 2200 hours. They had planned to meet at ‘*The Zone*’, a lounge just off base, famous for both Earth and Klingon cuisine. While Adam was not fond of the Klingon part of the menu, *The Zone* excelled with their pasta dishes.

So, the two of them would have dinner, some wine (not the synthesized varieties becoming commonplace on starships), some conversation about their day, and then retire back to the Commander’s quarters for some

one-on-one time. He looked forward to this with great fondness.

Movement above caught his attention. Arriving only this morning, the USS *Volare* swung in standard orbit around the small planet. Having been on a deep space surveying assignment for five months, her crew was desperately in need of shore leave, and the ship required maintenance and supplies.

Adam watched enviously as the starship, a bright speck of light among the emerging stars, arced smoothly across the darkening sky.

He allowed himself to be lost in the moment. Then, just as the ship was about to disappear over the horizon, the comm panel on his desk chirped harshly.

He snapped out of his daydream with a start and punched the button. "Russell."

"Sir," the voice on the other end was duty officer, Lieutenant Ferr. "We've been monitoring some vague readings coming out of the zone. A strange subspace distortion. Very undefined."

"Strange?" quizzed the Commander. "Is that unusual?"

"Well, not really, except that I haven't been able to identify the source." replied the specialist.

"Where is it coming from?"

"Bearing 133, mark 17." replied the Denebian officer. "And, the readings are becoming stronger. Whatever it is, I think it's getting closer."

"What does the computer make of it?"

"Not much, sir. It's still analyzing, but so far still hasn't been able to make much out of it." stated the Lieutenant.

Adam thought for a moment. "Pipe it up to my terminal, Lieutenant. Let me take a look at it."

Almost instantly, Adam's terminal display of data and sensor results was replaced by the display Lieutenant Ferr had been monitoring. Adam studied it closely for almost a minute, and reopened the comm switch.

"I'm not as good at interpreting these things as you are, Lieutenant, but it doesn't look like much to me. Could it be a glitch, or solar winds?"

"I don't think so sir. Something is there, I'm convinced of it. And, it's moving towards us. Pretty fast, I think." Adam noted the rising concern in his voice.

"Alright, Lieutenant, what would you like to do?"

"Sir, request permission to go to active scans." requested Ferr.

Adam considered this for a moment. "Any sign of non-Federation ships or any other activity in the region?"

"No sir."

"How long to get the results from the active scan?" asked the Commander.

"About three minutes."

"Note for the duty log that active scan is approved. Let's not over-react, but put the command center on tactical alert. I'll be right down." Adam closed the comm channel.

As he walked to the turbo lift to the command center below, Adam was moderately concerned. The young Denebian had been with him for a little over two years, and had proven to be a capable and resourceful officer, not prone to jumping to wild conclusions.

Adam reasoned that Ferr had registered some activity from a nearby stellar event or another natural anomaly. There was probably nothing there to get excited about. Just the same, Adam thought to himself, we could use a little excitement around here.

The only recent excitement at the outpost had been a heated shouting match between members of his maintenance team and the irate captain of a Centauri merchant ship waiting on repairs to his vessel. He felt he had been kept waiting too long for Adam's people to tend to his ship and was ready to take his wrath out on the maintenance scheduler, a rather large and fit young mechanic from Rigel 7.

Adam was able to resolve the argument before the fists began to fly, and bought the Captain ale at *'The Zone'* to put him in a mellower mood while his ship was repaired.

The lift to the command center took just under thirty seconds to reach its destination. As he stepped off, Adam observed the seven members of the Beta watch in motion. Specialists moved from monitor to tactical station, conversations were brief, but voices remained in controlled tones. The atmosphere, however, was growing tense. Monitors spewed readouts and computers were rapidly capturing all the information they could gather.

Adam approached Lieutenant Ferr's station.
"Report, Lieutenant."

"Sir, the readings are starting to come in. The library computers are working on it, going through archived files. But so far, they've still not come up with a positive match."

"Are you sure it isn't a sensor glitch?"

Ferr shook his head. "We've just finished a level two diagnostic. The sensors are functioning perfectly."

"A cloaked ship then?"

"That's what I thought at first. But, we don't really know what that would look like, and the distortion is larger and more distorted than I would expect to see from a cloaked ship. But whatever it is, the readings suggest it is compressing space."

"And that means....." Adam deferred to Ferr to complete the statement.

"It's traveling at warp, sir. And we know of no natural occurrences that can do that." Ferr turned to the monitor on his left. "Hold on!"

"What is it, Lieutenant?"

"Sensors are just now detecting very faint neutrino emissions in the distortion patterns and confirming a definite warp signature. The computer now confirms the disturbance is moving toward us at a speed in excess of warp factor eight!"

"Neutrino emissions and a subspace distortion moving towards us at high warp? That's no merchant ship." Adam muttered to himself. He thought back to his academy days. He had attended a lecture at the academy years earlier on interpreting neutrino energy patterns .

"Quickly Lieutenant, current distance and ETA."

"Distance now is approximately point four-two light years, ETA about forty-eight minutes."

"Let me see the neutrino pattern." The terminal facing him revealed the image. Indistinct at first, but as Adam watched, the image began to coalesce. His heart skipped a beat. He remembered seeing this before, years ago at the academy.

“Lieutenant, the reason your sensor readings didn’t make any sense initially is because they were looking for some ‘thing’ to be the cause of the disturbance.” Adam emphasized ‘thing’. “What we have, in fact, are some ‘things!’”

Ferr’s expression at first was one of puzzlement. Then suddenly, it changed to acute awareness, and alarm.

Then the Commander ordered, “Red Alert. Planetary shields up, full. Fortify command center defenses.”

At first the command personnel froze and stared at Adam with bewilderment.

“Let’s move people!” Adam commanded. “I wasn’t kidding.”

The command center became a beehive of activity.

On the surface of the outpost, a beautiful and serene, but artificially created evening was in progress. The weather was ideal as always, and despite the late hour activity was brisk. Civilians and off duty Starfleet personnel conducted their affairs in the shops, restaurants, drinking establishments and lodging facilities.

All that came to an abrupt end as the red alert klaxon sounded. Beings of many species, from different worlds and speaking different languages, all knew what that warning meant. They reacted as one as they sought the safety of reinforced shelters, while Starfleet personnel moved swiftly to their pre-assigned emergency duty stations.

Two hundred and eighty meters below, the command center was bathed in the harsh red glow of General Quarters. Lieutenant Commander Adam

Russell quickly organized his thoughts. “Ensign Hardin, charge phasers and place them on ready status.”

“Aye, sir.”

“Ensign, open a channel to the *Volare*.” ordered Adam. “I want to speak to the captain.”

“Channel open, sir.”

“This is the *Volare*, Captain Dolan Mitchell here. Commander, what’s going on down there?”

“Captain Mitchell, we are reading several cloaked interstellar vehicles on a high warp collision course with this outpost. I believe we are under imminent attack by long-range photon missiles.”

“What? Those were outlawed by interstellar accord.” retorted Captain Mitchell.

“I’m aware of that, Captain. Regardless, we believe this to be the case.”

“Are you sure, Commander? What are the coordinates?”

“Pretty sure, Captain. We are relaying our most recent telemetry to your tactical station for analysis. We estimate the ETA to now be about forty-five minutes.”

After a brief pause that seemed an eternity, Captain Mitchell was again on the channel. “My Tactical Officer says it’s hard to tell Commander, but not impossible. Let’s assume you’re right. Can your sensors tell how many there are?”

Adam looked to Lieutenant Ferr, who shook his head.

“Not yet Captain.”

Ferr interrupted. “Commander, the library computer has returned a match. It confirms your

theory with a ninety-three point four percent certainty.”

“Did you hear that Captain?”

“Yes, I did, Commander. We’ll break orbit and investigate. If you’re right, we’ll intercept and destroy them.”

“No!” Adam countered. “The chances of getting all of them while cloaked are slim. We don’t know how many there are yet, and if you can’t get a targeting lock, they could get past you.”

“What do you suggest, Commander?”

“Beam as many people off the surface as you can. We’ll lower our shields so you can begin transporting.” Adam gestured to his Tactical Officer, who immediately lowered the outpost’s shields. “Don’t worry about us down here; get the people off the surface first. If I’m right, the missiles will have to de-cloak before they can arm. At about the same time, they should have to drop out of warp in order to get a final fix on their target. When they do, we will destroy as many as we can with our phasers. You should be able to do the same from orbit.”

“How close to the planet will they get before they decloak?” inquired Mitchell.

“Good question, Captain. I would guess that has a lot to do with the confidence the missiles designer has in his guidance system.”

“All right then,” Captain Mitchell replied, “our transporter room reports your shields are down and we are commencing transport of surface personnel. Good luck to you, Commander.”

“Thank you, Captain.”

Adam turned to Lieutenant Ferr. “Lieutenant, establish a computer link with the *Volare*, and upload

all the data and telemetry we have collected. Keep the link open as long as possible.”

“Aye, sir.” the Lieutenant responded. “Link established.”

“Ensign Hardin, tie in to the tactical computers on the *Volare*. Coordinate our firing solution with theirs so we don’t all wind up shooting at the same targets.” Adam ordered.

“Yes, sir.”

“Sir”, called Lieutenant Ferr, “should we use the outpost shuttles to help get people off the surface?”

The outpost was in possession of two small, non-warp capable shuttles, used primarily for surface to surface jumps, and personnel transport from orbiting ships without transporters.

Each shuttle could comfortably hold up to fifteen people, not including the pilot. In a pinch, they could hold more than twenty. That would be forty additional people Adam wouldn’t have to worry about.

Adam snapped his fingers and pointed in an appreciative manner toward his specialist. “Excellent idea, Lieutenant. Contact Lieutenant Commander Schultz at the Supply Depot. Have him round up his pilots and start getting people off this rock.”

“Aye, sir.”

The tension inside the Command Center was palpable as the Starfleet specialists gathered telemetry on the incoming missiles. It was not unlike chasing ghosts.

Adam worried there wasn’t enough time to transport all of the people from the surface. The *Volare*, a starship of the Soyuz class, has only one transporter room, capable of transporting six people at a time.

Adam wanted to contact Carrie and warn her to get to safety, but he knew that she would be duty bound to stay at her post and assist civilians to the shelters. This worried him. But she was only one of more than three hundred people for which he was responsible. And there wasn't time.

Adam hoped that she, and those left behind would have time to get to the reinforced bunkers below the surface. He prayed that the outpost shields would hold if any of the missiles got through.

Minutes flew by. The *Volare*, busily transporting people off the surface, provided regular status reports to the Command Center. The process was slowed by the fact that people were on the move. This made positive transporter locks very difficult to achieve. Time was growing very short.

Meanwhile, the transport shuttles, now fully loaded and manned, departed the surface and headed away from the outpost under full impulse power. The shuttles would dock in the *Volare* shuttle bay after the starship left orbit.

"Sir," Lieutenant Ferr called, "the missiles are dropping out of warp. They're decloaking." a pause. "The warheads are arming."

"How close?" demanded Adam.

"Less than thirty-seven thousand kilometers!"

"Damn! Too close." Adam muttered to himself.

On the viewscreen above them, all watched with apprehension as the missiles emerged from warp, their drive coils going dark as their onboard thrusters fired. One by one they adjusted course into an attack formation and headed toward the outpost.

"How many are there, Lieutenant?" Adam inquired.

“Sensors show thirty-seven, sir. The computer estimates each missile has a yield equivalent to between 15 and 20 standard photon torpedoes. ETA now nineteen seconds.”

“My God!” thought the Commander. “Ensign Hardin, can you establish phaser lock?”

“Phasers locked on targets, sir. Firing solution established and coordinated with the *Volare*.”

“Fire!” ordered Adam.

Brilliant yellow-orange phaser beams leapt from the phaser array carved into the peak of a nearby mountain range. Simultaneously, the *Volare* also opened fire. Phaser beams danced from target to target as the missiles disappeared in blinding, silent flashes.

On the *Volare* bridge, Captain Mitchell watched the drama unfold on his viewscreen. All seemed to be going according to plan as missile after missile was destroyed a minimal safe distance from the planet surface. Then, in an instant, everything changed.

“Captain,” called the Helmsman, “one of the missiles has changed course and is heading straight for us. Must have a self-defense subroutine installed. Impact in nine seconds”

“Tactical, target that missile and destroy it.” ordered the Captain.

“Aye sir. No time to get a lock. I’ll have to target it manually.”

Phaser fire emitted from the forward array atop the ship’s saucer section just forward of the bridge. Several volleys were fired. All were close, but missed.

“Mr. Hu?” inquired the Captain.

“It’s a small target sir. Not presenting much of a profile.” A moment later, “Got it!”

The viewscreen display became incredibly bright as to cause the entire bridge crew to shield their eyes before the screen could polarize. A split second later, the ship was violently rocked. Crew members were thrown from their chairs. And for a brief time the bridge went dark, save for the lights from the various control panels.

“Emergency lights.” ordered the Captain.

Almost instantly, the bridge lighting was restored.

“Damage report.”

“Hull breach. Main hull, starboard side. We’re venting atmosphere. Shield strength reduced to forty-seven percent.” reported the Science Officer.

Then Ensign Hu reported excitedly, “Sir, the targeting sensors are down.”

“Target the missiles manually.”

“Can’t. It’s too late.”

On the viewscreen, the bridge crew watched helplessly as several missiles sped unabated toward the planet. Phaser fire from the outpost managed to take out three of the remaining missiles. But time had run out.

Captain Mitchell issued the order to his helmsman, “Helm, take us away from here, maximum warp. Now!”

In the command center below, Lieutenant Ferr reported, “Commander, seven missiles are still on course, impact in three seconds.”

“Brace for impact. Everybody grab hold of something!”

Seconds later, all hell broke loose inside the Command Center. The floor shook as though gripped by a violent earthquake. Tactical panels sparked and

caught fire, filling the air with acrid smoke. A plasma conduit across the room exploded.

Adam wondered why the emergency air filtration system had not switched on. Then he saw that the south wall near the turbo lift, carved from rock like the rest of the command center, had been reduced to gravel and effectively blocked the only exit to the surface.

The air, already thick with smoke filled with dust, making breathing all but impossible. Chunks of rock rained down on the equipment that had not already been damaged.

In the midst of the chaos, Adam became aware that the life support system supplying oxygen to the center had stopped working. The command center would only have a few minutes of oxygen left, if that.

He struggled to his feet to reach the portable respirators in the cabinet only six meters away. Part way there, his knees buckled and he fell and crawled the remaining distance. He reached the cabinet and from the ground managed to yank the door open. Exhausted and suffering from lack of oxygen, he fell unconscious in front of the cabinet.

The outpost shields were able to withstand the barrage from the first two missiles. But overloaded from the magnitude of the attack, they quickly failed. The outpost's protective dome was instantly vaporized, allowing the toxic atmosphere of the D-class planet to replace the artificially created oxygen-nitrogen environment.

Due to the limited transporting capabilities of the *Volare*, and the difficulty in locating people on the

surface, they were only able to beam two hundred and thirty-four people aboard before breaking orbit. Mitchell knew the subspace shock wave from the impact of the missiles could do serious damage to his ship. They had no choice but to leave. Once the wave subsided, they would return to the outpost and begin the search for survivors.

The crew watched the destruction play out on the main viewscreen as the ship warped to safety. As soon as they were a safe distance from the planetoid and free from subspace interference caused by the missiles, the Captain turned to the Vulcan Communications Officer, "Lieutenant Tel'lar, open a code-one channel to Starfleet Command."

Then to no one in particular, "God help them!"

Chapter Two

As the fog of unconsciousness slowly lifted, he was confused and disoriented. He did not recognize where he was, and being here made no sense. But soon he became aware of two things. He was in a bio-bed, and he was in pain.

As he neared full consciousness, he tried to sit up, but became dizzy and nauseous. Nearly blacking out, he collapsed on the bio-bed, and struggled to remain conscious.

He fought to piece together in his mind the events that brought him here. Slowly it came together. The attack. The destroyed command center. Finally he figured he was in a sick bay, alive, but injured. Where? How badly was he hurt? How did he get here? What about his people?

After a while, he opened his eyes. Focusing was difficult at first, but his vision improved slowly.

From his prone position, he could see all the other medical beds in the sick bay were full of people with various injuries. Adam recognized many of the people, but some he did not know. Monitors on the walls at the heads of the beds spelled out vital signs. Adam knew enough to tell many of the readings were not good. He wondered what story his own monitor was telling at this moment. Based on the way he felt, he was sure it was bad.

He thought about looking at his bio display above, but decided against it. He hoped Lieutenant Ferr had made it. He worried about Carrie.

He was suddenly aware of someone standing near his bed. "Don't try to get up, you suffered massive

smoke inhalation and a mild concussion.” advised Doctor Snow, Chief Medical Officer.

“My crew,” said Adam weakly, “where are they?”

“Captain Mitchell will talk to you shortly. When you’re stronger. Right now, you need your rest. I’ve given you a tri-ox compound to help minimize the effects of the smoke inhalation. Your vital signs have stabilized. But you are very weak.”

“I’m on the *Volare*.” Adam said to himself. “No, no, I need to talk to the Captain now.” Propping himself up, Adam grabbed the Doctor’s Starfleet issue medical smock, which took every ounce of energy he had.

The Doctor furrowed his brow. After a bit, Adam released the doctor’s now crumpled tunic. Doctor Snow sighed as he moved to a nearby comm panel and called for the Captain.

The brief argument with the Doctor took everything out of the young Commander. While waiting for the Captain to arrive, Adam drifted off again. When he opened his eyes, his vision was again blurred. More quickly this time he focused on a distinguished, graying man with a square jaw standing above him, next to the Doctor. He did not know him, but the piping on the sleeves of the tan command tunic registered Captain. Adam guessed he was in his mid-fifties.

“I’m Dolan Mitchell.” The graying gentleman said. “How are you feeling, Commander?”

“Like I’ve been hit by multiple phaser stuns.” replied Adam. “How are my people?”

“We pulled two hundred and thirty-four people off the surface before we had to break orbit. The shuttles transported off an additional forty-five, including the pilots. We had to leave ninety-seven behind. Of those,

forty-four survived the attack, including you. The others were located in the reinforced bunkers below surface, which still had functioning oxygen generators and heat. They are aboard. Fifty-three did not survive or are unaccounted for.” The Captain said somberly. “Seven members of my crew were on the surface and were lost in the attack as well.”

Adam closed his eyes and said nothing as he weighed this information. Mitchell thought Adam had lost consciousness. Without opening his eyes Adam asked, “What about the Command Center crew?”

“Six survived. You included. The Tactical Officer Hardin, and Ensign Chihara were buried under rocks and debris. They died before the rescue teams could get to them. I’m sorry.”

Adam slowly nodded. His head hurt. “How is Lieutenant Ferr?”

“He will be fine.” replied Doctor Snow. “Like you, he suffered smoke inhalation. He’s in the adjacent bay, resting. You can talk with him later, after you get some rest yourself.”

“Thank you Doctor.” said Adam. “Captain, what is the condition of the outpost?”

“Completely destroyed, I’m afraid. The post’s shields withstood the first two missiles, but the other five got through. Our sensors showed the yield from each of those missiles was the equivalent of twenty-two photon torpedoes. There isn’t much left.” The Captain said grimly.

“How did you get us out? Transporter?”

“No, the old fashioned way. Radiation from the attack prevented use of the transporters. We shuttled rescue teams to the surface in radiation suits. With schematics we were able to extract from the *Volare’s*

computers, we were able to locate the turbo shaft to the command center. Fortunately, it had not collapsed. But when the rescue team reached the bottom, they had to dig through the rocks from the collapsed wall.”

“Thank you Captain, for being there for my people.”

“Your quick thinking saved many lives, Commander.” said Mitchell. “You were right. Transporting personnel off the planet rather than going after the missiles was the right move. We couldn’t get a fix on them until after they decloaked.”

“Did you get the sensor readings we uploaded to you?”

“Yes we did.” replied Mitchell. “We have already sent those readings to Starfleet Command for analysis. Starfleet has placed the entire fleet on yellow alert. All starships within seven days travel are proceeding to the neutral zone at high warp in anticipation of a possible invasion by the Klingons.”

Adam shook his head. “Our sensors showed no other unusual activity within the zone.” replied Adam, struggling to keep his head clear.

“Starfleet will want to know that.” said the Captain. “We are currently en route to Starbase thirty-one. I have been ordered to bring you and your crew for a hearing before a Board of Inquiry. We will arrive in about nineteen hours. You’d better get some rest, Commander. You’re going to have to answer some difficult questions. But, for what it’s worth, I don’t think anyone could have done any more than you did to save those people. In fact, you probably did more than most.”

“Captain, I’d like to see a list of casualties.” Adam put this as more of a demand than a request.

Mitchell looked toward the Doctor. Snow subtly shook his head. "I don't think you're up to that now." the Captain replied.

"Please!" Adam demanded and began coughing uncontrollably.

Doctor Snow requested another Tri-ox injection from an orderly and administered it to Adam. Meanwhile, the Captain weighed Adam's request and, understanding the burden of command, relented. He instructed the orderly to position a computer terminal near the head of the bio-bed. The monitor came to life. The captain then opened a comm channel to the bridge, and ordered the appropriate file to appear.

"Commander, I am sorry for your loss." stated the Captain, solemnly.

"I'm sorry for yours too."

The Captain nodded. Then he and the Doctor left Adam to his privacy.

Adam scanned the alphabetical list of names of those missing or confirmed killed in the attack. He didn't have to scan far before he came across the entry: 'Brooks, Carrie - Ensign - Missing and Presumed Dead'. He closed his eyes, unable to look again at the monitor. He was numb. But, as crushed as he was, he didn't have the strength to cry.

Chapter Three

Stars streamed silently past the heavy cruiser as it sailed through the vastness of interstellar space. On the bridge, all was quiet save for the normal comm chatter, the sounds of scanners and the steady thrum from the powerful warp engines.

James T. Kirk sat impatiently in the command chair, pensive. He watched the stars on the viewscreen and pondered what the crew of the USS *Enterprise* might encounter when they arrived at their assigned coordinates at the edge of the Neutral Zone, proximate to where Outpost Omega IV had been destroyed a day earlier. At their current speed, they were still more than two days away.

The *Enterprise* had been ordered to take command of and secure Sector O-43, to protect the Federation border. The starships *MacArthur* and *Intrepid* were already in position in the sector, and the *Challenger* was expected in three days.

All ships were ordered to yellow alert by Starfleet Command. The two main gymnasiums were empty, as were the arboretum, mess halls, lounges and all other recreational facilities on the ship. All personnel, including those off duty, were in a state of combat readiness, and were prepared to go to battle stations when ordered.

The air on the bridge, while businesslike, was full of anticipation, and Kirk knew the only cure would be arrival at their destination and settling down to business.

War with the Klingons was foremost on everyone's mind, and little else was being discussed among the crew. Kirk shared the anticipation, although as

Captain he did not have the luxury of being allowed to show it, or discuss it openly. Such conversations were exclusively limited to his senior staff, and there was little information available yet for discussion.

This was not the first time this crew had faced danger or uncertainty. Trained as they were for these circumstances though, it never becomes routine. Kirk felt it was better this way. It helps to keep people sharp.

At times like this too, he envied his bridge crew. They were busy with their assigned responsibilities while he sat in the center seat with no routine tasks to execute. However, his was the ultimate responsibility. The safety of his ship, his crew and the success of the mission all fell on him.

But for now, he was expected to be right where he was. Attentive, but deep in his own thoughts. Command could be a lonely place at times like this. He especially envied his Vulcan First Officer. Spock's self-discipline and emotional control gave no indication of his state of mind. No sense of anticipation or uncertainty. Kirk wasn't wired to keep his feelings bottled up like that and he knew it. He needed an outlet. Spock would refer to the need as a "human failing." This probably explained why Kirk preferred to lead all those landing party missions, in spite of regulations.

It had been over an hour since the Captain last assessed the status of his ship and crew. It was time to check again. "Status report, Mr. Sulu."

"On course, Captain. Current speed, warp seven point one." replied the Asian Helmsman.

"Thank you helm. Mr. Spock, sensor readings?"

The Vulcan turned from the science station toward the Captain and reported, "Long range sensors show nothing in our flight path out to three light years."

Kirk nodded and punched the comm button on his chair. "Engine Room, Mr. Scott."

"Scott here, Captain." the Chief Engineer responded.

"Scotty, how are your engines holding up?" inquired the Captain.

"Purring like kittens." came the proud response.

"Can we hold speed, Scotty?"

"Aye, sir. We should be OK for the next twenty-four hours or so, but then we'll need to throttle her back a wee bit so as to not fracture the dilithium crystals. We can't maintain these speeds forever, ya' know." advised Scott in his usual brogue. Then he added, "And we'll have to do some maintenance on the converter assemblies when we come out of warp."

Kirk frowned, but understood. "Very well, Mr. Scott. Maintain speed as long as you can. We need to get into position." Kirk closed the channel.

James Kirk had served with these people for four years. Together, they had visited places never before seen by man. They had been to the brink of certain death and destruction on multiple occasions from causes both natural and malevolent. Yet they survived, mostly because they could rely on each other.

Kirk trusted his people with his life, and had the utmost confidence in each of them. He did not have to tell his crew what was at stake if the Federation was to go to war with the Klingons. At the same time, he relied completely on the advice he received from them, even when he didn't like it.

“Lieutenant Uhura,” Kirk addressed his Communications Officer, “any reports from the ships on scene?”

“The last regular report from the *Intrepid* fifteen minutes ago was all quiet. The *Yorktown* is in position in Sector O-42, and reports no activity. The *Constellation* is commanding Sector O-44 and reports the only activity was a minor dispute with a spice trader who refused to leave the shipping lanes. With a little persuasion, the trader complied. The sector is now secured, sir.”

“Very Good.” replied Kirk, amused at the thought of a merchant ship standing up to the *Constellation*. Nothing is more persuasive than a Federation Starship in a state of battle readiness.

“Any further updates from Starfleet?” Kirk asked, hopefully.

“No, sir.” replied the Communications Officer, sounding mildly annoyed. “I will advise you as soon as we receive any transmissions.”

Kirk acknowledged her with a nod.

The waiting seemed interminable. Kirk considered making a log entry, but could not think of anything meaningful to say.

Then his attention was diverted once again in the direction of the Communications Officer. He noticed that Lieutenant Uhura’s activity changed in a manner usually consistent with the receipt of an incoming communiqué.

“Captain,” called the Nubian Communications Officer, “I have just received an encoded message from Starfleet Command.”

“All right.” Kirk exclaimed as he rose from his chair and started toward the turbolift. “Finally some

information. Uhura, pipe it to the main conference room, and have Doctor McCoy join us there.”

Kirk turned again to the Science Station. “Mr. Spock, will you please join us?”

As the two officers moved to exit the bridge, Kirk addressed the Helmsman. “Mr. Sulu, you have the con.”

As they entered the conference room, Kirk and Spock found Doctor McCoy standing near the triangular shaped conference table with the three-sided viewscreen in the middle.

“What’s up, Jim?” inquired the Doctor.

“Message from Fleet.” replied the Captain, motioning for his two officers to sit.

As the three were seated, Kirk flipped a nearby comm switch. “Lieutenant Uhura, decode and play the dispatch.”

Instantly the view monitor activated with the message.

CLASSIFIED - EYES ONLY

To: Starship Commanders - Omega Sector
From: Rear Admiral N. Nagura – Fleet Commander -
Sector 001
Subject: Situation Update - Attack on Outpost
Omega IV

Treaty negotiations with the Klingon Empire postponed indefinitely. Delegates from United Federation of Planets and Klingon Empire departing the negotiation site. Klingon Government categorically denies responsibility for attack on Outpost Omega IV.

Outpost Omega II reports increased warship activity within Klingon boundaries. No reports of Neutral Zone violation reported at this time. All starships are ordered to achieve and maintain strategic positions relative to Neutral Zone and maintain yellow alert status pending further orders.

END OF MESSAGE

The image on the viewscreen disappeared.

“Well, that said nothing.” declared McCoy, sarcastically.

Kirk threw the doctor a look, but didn't disagree.

“It would seem we know little more now than we did a minute ago.” observed Spock.

“Where were the negotiations being held.” inquired McCoy.

Kirk shrugged his shoulders. “Classified. On a need to know basis only.”

“And we didn't need to know.” retorted McCoy.

A pause, then Kirk turned towards the Vulcan Science Officer. “The Klingon Government categorically denies responsibility. What do you think, Spock?”

“Well I don't believe them.” interjected McCoy.

“I am afraid at this point we have insufficient facts on which to form a conclusion.” stated Spock.

“Facts! You want facts! Here's one for you! Those missiles came through the Neutral Zone from Klingon space. Here's another fact. Starfleet has already determined the warp signatures from those missiles are consistent with Klingon drives!”

Kirk turned to Spock for his response.

“While it is true the technology appears to be of Klingon origin, it has not been established those missiles originated in Klingon space, Doctor. Vehicles of that design are very limited in the amount of fuel they can carry. Therefore, they are more ideally suited to high speeds over a relatively short distance, typically no more than ten or twelve light years. That would put the origin of the missiles well inside the Neutral Zone.”

“Well here’s a fact for you my green-blooded friend. The Klingons are Barbarians!” shouted McCoy.

“Bones, that’s enough.” admonished Kirk, calmly.

Spock raised an eyebrow. “Really Doctor, your emotions are once again preventing any logical analysis on your part.”

“Just the same, Spock, the Klingons do have a history of violence and aggression whenever it seems to suit their needs. Isn’t it possible their dealings at the negotiating table were a ruse to lower our guard? Or, maybe things weren’t going as well for them at the negotiation table as they had hoped, and they decided to raise the stakes. Sensor readings do show they appear to be massing a fleet within their space.” added Kirk.

Spock appeared to be looking at the table in front of him as he folded his hands together just below his chin. He steepled his index fingers and touched them gently to his chin as he composed his response. Then he raised his gaze toward the Captain and in a calm voice, addressed each of Kirk’s points in order. “Captain, it is common in these times to try to affix blame on someone or something quickly based solely on circumstantial evidence. Because of prior hostilities with the Klingons, it is easy to blame the

Klingon government for this attack. The facts remain though, that while the Klingons are an aggressive species, wantonly criminal activity is not consistent with their historical behavior as a people.”

He continued. “If you will recall, use of cloaked long range weapons is a violation of interstellar law punishable by death. This law has been underwritten by the Federation, the Klingon Empire, the Romulan Star Empire, the Gorn and even the Tholians. No evidence of the manufacture or use of such weapons has been observed since the law was established.”

“It is also possible, perhaps even likely, that the congregation of their fleet is a response to similar actions on our side of the Neutral Zone.”

“Additionally, gentlemen, if the Klingons were intent on invading Federation space, I submit to you they would have done so by now. It would make little sense to launch a disabling attack on one of our outposts, and then wait for us to amass our forces before violating our borders. That would not be logical.”

“But the Klingons don’t negotiate, they conquer. They have a different kind of logic.” observed McCoy.

“Doctor, what we know about the Klingon Empire has been acquired primarily through direct interaction with them. Conversely, what we do not know about the Klingons as a people would fill volumes. We know mostly only what their government will allow us to know. Everything else is pure speculation, and a waste of time. It would be a far more productive use of your time to make your sick bay ready for whatever we may encounter.”

McCoy was taken aback. “Well I don’t trust them!” he stated with hostility. “And furthermore, I will spend

my time in whatever manner I chose, productive or otherwise.”

Spock ignored McCoy’s retort. “It has long been human nature to adopt prejudice against that of which one knows little. Your reaction is ground in your heritage, and demonstrates little rational thought.”

“Well, this is all very interesting, but is getting us nowhere.” asserted Kirk. “Bones, what is the status of Sick Bay?”

McCoy continued to glare at Spock for a long moment, as though he hadn’t heard his Captain. Then, he turned towards Kirk. “Despite Mr. Spock’s concerns, we’re just waiting for something to do, Captain. And praying we don’t get any business.”

Kirk acknowledged with a nod. “Spock, what was the result of our last battle readiness drill?”

“Ninety-five point four percent efficiency, Captain.”

“Let’s run another drill. I want to get to at least ninety-seven percent.”

“Right away, Captain.”

“Jim, what’s going to happen to Adam Russell?” asked McCoy, in a calmer tone.

Kirk pondered this for several moments before responding. “He will be en route to Starbase thirty-one by now to face a Board of Inquiry. Standard procedure when a command is lost. I think he should come out of it OK.”

“Well I hope so. I sure liked that kid during his tour on the *Enterprise*.” reflected the Doctor.

“We should know something by the time we reach the Neutral Zone.” said Kirk.

The comm panel on the conference table beeped.

The Captain punched the comm switch. “Kirk here.”

“Captain, I have a priority communiqué for you from Admiral Benning at Starbase thirty-one.” announced Lieutenant Uhura.

“Go ahead, Lieutenant. What does it say?”

“We’ve been ordered to divert to Starbase thirty-one at once.”

Kirk looked first at Spock, then McCoy.

“Acknowledged, Lieutenant.” Then, flipping a different switch, “Mr. Chekov, plot a course to Starbase thirty-one. What is our ETA?”

After a momentary pause, Chekov replied, “Course plotted. ETA twenty-two hours, thirty-five minutes at present speed.”

“Very well. Execute course change.”

“Jim, what’s this all about?” queried McCoy.

“We’ll find out when we get there.” Kirk spun and strode briskly out of the room, leaving his two officers behind.

Chapter Four

Few things frighten Starfleet officers more than “Board of Inquiry.” These three words have been known to generate more fear in seasoned starship captains than anything else in the galaxy.

On the outside he didn’t show it, but Adam was very nervous. As he waited outside the hearing room at Starbase thirty-one with Lieutenant Ferr on his right, Adam recalled a conversation he had with Captain Boyle aboard the *Merrimac* during his first tour of duty. “Ensign,” the Captain said, “I’d rather face a flotilla of Klingon battle cruisers than a Board of Inquiry. At least with the Klingons, you’ve got a fighting chance.”

Trying to be rational, Adam assured himself everything would work out. All he had to do was tell the truth.

It was pretty evident the young Lieutenant was nervous too. He fidgeted as he sat. Adam uttered some words of reassurance. He was pretty sure his Denebian Tactical Officer heard him, but Ferr declined to respond. So they waited in silence.

While they waited, Adam reflected on the trip to the starbase. The time he spent on the *Volare* had been very difficult for him. Doctor Snow and his staff did an admirable job of restoring Adam to about eighty percent health with treatments and breathing therapies. But there was little else for him to do while he recuperated. This left him too much time to reflect on the events leading up to the attack, and what he might have done differently.

He blamed himself for Carrie's death. He blamed himself for all the deaths. If he had acted sooner, done something differently, he reasoned, more people could have been saved. As many times as he replayed things in his head, he couldn't think of what he could have done differently.

He wanted to talk with someone about his emotional pain. He wanted to unburden himself. Unfortunately, the *Volare* carried no Ships Counselor, or anyone else trained in psychology. The closest person on board to speak with was Captain Mitchell. He would understand. After all, he lost people in the attack on Omega IV too. He's previously lost people under his command, so he would be sympathetic.

But, Captain Mitchell had his own problems. He was busy overseeing repairs to the damage the *Volare* had sustained from the close encounter with the missile, while maintaining ongoing yellow alert status. He was a busy man, and the last thing he needed now was to provide an ear for Adam to bend.

Adam would have to rely on his training and discipline. Starfleet training was very thorough and effective. But, there was no manual for how to handle the way Adam felt at this moment.

Then there was the painful duty of having to notify the families of those lost under his command. He spent some of his recuperative time on board the *Volare* composing letters of condolence. The sparsely worded subspace messages just didn't seem to convey what was in his heart. The messages seemed empty, devoid of meaning.

He left the message to Carrie's parents for last. When the time came, the pain was almost overwhelming. He had never met Carrie's parents.

She had mentioned a few times that when they could get off that rock, she would like for Adam to meet them. The time had never come. So now, here he was trying to put his feelings into words in a manner that had meaning. He knew that they had to be in as much pain as he was.

In breaking with the usual Starfleet protocol, Adam promised Carrie's parents he wouldn't rest until those responsible for her death had been found and brought to justice. Expressing this made him feel better and he didn't care if this violated Starfleet regulations. This was from the heart. And he vowed to himself that somehow, he would find those responsible. He would keep the promise he had just made to Carrie's parents. He didn't know how just yet, but he knew he would, even if he had to leave Starfleet to do so.

Adam considered standing up and walking out of the building, tendering his resignation and beginning the hunt for those who were responsible for Carrie's death. Starfleet though offered resources and intelligence not otherwise available to him.

Resigning at this point was probably not the wisest course of action. So he decided to endure this inquiry. The outcome could very well be the end of his career anyway.

As the hearing was not yet ready to convene, he reflected on his career. Graduating number four in his class at Starfleet Academy seven years ago, he was immediately posted to the U.S.S. *Merrimac* as Ensign at Tactical. He was told that Captain Boyle had requested Adam specifically. He liked Adam's drive and initiative. Four months later, he was promoted to assistant department head of Life Sciences, an

assignment which lasted two years. Boyle was impressed with Adam's professional demeanor.

Then came the opportunity to transfer to the U.S.S. *Enterprise*. Adam hated to leave the *Merrimac*, but the *Enterprise* offered him a grade promotion. So, he was promoted to Lieutenant, and made Bridge Duty Officer on Gamma shift. Captain Kirk was so impressed with the young Lieutenant that he recommended that Starfleet place Adam on an accelerated career path to command.

Adam's tour on the *Enterprise* lasted a little more than a year when the opportunity to command Omega IV was offered. This was a planetside assignment. He accepted, reluctantly, and was promoted to Lieutenant Commander.

While this command was an important step in his career, Adam felt reluctance in leaving the *Enterprise*. Not that he doubted his abilities. His first love was serving aboard starships. His fascination with deep space had been what drew him from his home and family on Earth.

His parents were strongly against his enlistment in Starfleet. Had he chosen, Adam could have pursued a promising legal career, following in his father's footsteps. His grades were certainly good enough, and he showed the kind of mental capacity and ability to be successful arguing cases in court.

But, against his parents' wishes, he did choose to leave. And now here he was in this predicament. For just a moment, he found himself wishing he was back home, on Earth, with his parents.

A clerk emerged from the briefing room and announced that they were ready. Adam followed the clerk into the room with Ferr following.

The hearing room was not at all what he had expected. He had envisioned a sparsely appointed little room with rigid, uncomfortable chairs, harsh lighting and lousy acoustics. This room was richly appointed. The furniture was plush, the walls and floors adorned in polished walnut hardwoods shipped from Earth, and the lighting was warm and friendly. Floor to ceiling windows on the east wall overlooked the spacious grounds outside the building. The early afternoon sunlight pouring in from the cloudless sky further added to the room's charm.

The room was nowhere near as threatening as he imagined. Such was the case with the rest of the Starbase as well. Located in the northern hemisphere of the M-Class world Omega Regnus III, Starbase thirty-one is Starfleet Headquarters for the Omega Sector.

Adam could not help but be impressed with the size of the facility. Covering nearly nineteen hundred and fifty acres, the Starbase came with all the amenities, including tennis courts, softball fields, riding stables, running tracks, and two - eighteen hole, championship golf courses consisting of holes copied from some of the most challenging courses on Earth. If not for the large space dock in stationary orbit above the base, Adam would have sworn he was at one of the luxury resorts on Alpha Centauri.

He began to relax a little, but reminded himself this was serious business. A Federation outpost had been destroyed and lives had been lost. His outpost. He

was here to answer some hard questions about his decisions.

And although it had seemed much longer, scarcely twenty-five minutes had passed before the Commander and Lieutenant found themselves beamed down from the *Volare*. For the sake of expediency, it was agreed in advance only Commander Russell and Lieutenant Ferr would appear before the Board. The remaining survivors from the Command Center would be in the hearing room gallery, and would be questioned only if the Board considered it necessary.

As beings filed into the immense hearing room, Adam looked for familiar faces. Individuals from various species and distant worlds took seats in the gallery area. Many wore Starfleet uniforms. Others did not. He recognized no one.

A Siriun female walked into the room and assumed a position at the Court Reporter's computer terminal.

Finally a familiar face as Captain Mitchell entered next, accompanied by another Starfleet Captain, and a Commander. The three were engaged in conversation as they took seats at the head table.

A distinguished man wearing the uniform of a Starfleet Admiral entered the room and took a position at the center of the head table. Although he had never met the man, he assumed the man was Admiral Benning. The Admiral lifted a small wooden gavel from the table and tapped twice on a ship's bell on the table in front of him. At the sounding of the bell, the room fell quiet.

"This Board of Inquiry will come to order. Are the recorders on?"

The Siriun at the reporter station nodded.

“Allow me to introduce the Board.” said the Admiral. “On my left is Captain Robert Harwood, Commanding Officer of Starbase thirty-one, and to his left is my Personal Assistant, Commander Mahesh Raj. On my right is Captain Dolan Mitchell, commanding the U.S.S. *Volare*. As the *Volare* was present at the attack, Captain Mitchell has agreed to serve in this inquiry.”

Adam tensed reflexively without knowing why.

“Commander Russell, Lieutenant Ferr; you have been offered independent counsel. I have been advised counsel has been declined. Is this so?” inquired the Admiral.

Adam and the Lieutenant had discussed this on board the *Volare*. “Admiral, on behalf of the Lieutenant and me, we have declined counsel.”

“Very well then, we will proceed.”

“Commander, would you please state your full name, rank, service number and most recent assignment for the record.” requested Commander Raj.

Adam stood. “Adam Thomas Russell, Lieutenant Commander, service number N41476E. Most recent assignment: commanding officer Federation Outpost Omega IV.”

“Commander,” began Captain Mitchell, “how long had you been in command of Omega IV?”

“Three years, one month and thirteen days, sir.”

“Commander, can you please tell us in your own words what happened on the evening of stardate 5643?” .

Adam relayed all the facts of the evening, from the time he was first contacted by Lieutenant Ferr, to his requesting help from Mitchell on the *Volare*, to regaining consciousness on the starship. He took his

time and carefully relayed all the facts, leaving nothing out. This took quite a while, during which time, all eyes and ears in the room were riveted on him. At no point was he interrupted.

“Thank you, Commander.”

“Captain Harwood, do you have any questions for Commander Russell?” asked Admiral Benning.

“Yes sir, I do. Commander, prior to the attack which destroyed the outpost, how many times had the outpost come under the threat of attack by enemies of the Federation?”

“Directly, twice by Klingon battle cruisers which approached the outpost from the Neutral Zone. Indirectly, seven times by enemy vessels that assumed aggressive postures but did not enter Federation space. Additionally, we came under threat once from an anti-proton bomb allegedly planted by an Orion terrorist.”

“Did any of these threats result in loss of property, injury or loss of life?” asked the Captain.

“No, sir.” replied the Commander. “The Klingon vessels were strongly encouraged to return to Klingon space by Federation starships, and the terrorist bomb was found and disarmed. New security measures were implemented to prevent future threats.”

“In any of these encounters, were you ever required to use force in defense of the Outpost?”

Adam wondered where this line of questioning was going. “No, sir. All of the instances were resolved peacefully.”

“I see.” acknowledged Harwood. “Now, Commander, please tell the Board, have you ever been disciplined by a superior officer while in Starfleet?”

Adam paused, caught off guard. After several moments, he straightened himself in his seat and answered matter-of-factly. “Yes, on one occasion. During my original posting on the *Merrimac*, under Captain Boyle, I was disciplined for failing to carry out the orders of a commanding officer while at tactical.”

“Please elaborate, Commander.”

“I hesitated when ordered to fire upon a Romulan Bird of Prey which had attacked a Federation colony. The ship had been badly damaged in battle with the starship *Endeavour*, whose weapons and comm systems were down as a result of the battle. First Officer Sutar believed the Romulan ship still presented a threat. I disagreed.”

“I see.” mused the Captain. “And why did you disobey Commander Sutar’s direct order?”

“Power readings coming from the Romulan ship were minimal. Sensors showed their weapons systems offline, and propulsion systems disabled. In my opinion, the ship presented no further threat. To fire on a ship in that condition would have resulted in the needless taking of life, and a violation of Starfleet’s rules of engagement.”

“So, you obey orders from a superior officer only when you agree with them?” challenged Harwood.

“It was a judgment call.” countered Adam, decisively. “And for the record, may I add that it was Captain Boyle who subsequently wrote three letters of commendation on my behalf while on the *Merrimac*. One letter while I was still at Tactical, and two while in Life Sciences. May I also add, for the record, that Captain Kirk of the *Enterprise* wrote two letters of commendation while I served under him as Duty Officer. On one occasion, I was able to dissuade a

Capellan raider from attacking the *Enterprise*, which would most likely have resulted in the destruction of the raider.”

“Yes, thank you for that. Commander, didn’t you say in your testimony that you requested Captain Mitchell not leave orbit to intercept the incoming missiles?”

“As I stated in my report, sir, I did not believe he could get a lock on the missiles while cloaked, and therefore felt the best course of action was to begin transporting people off the surface to the *Volare*.” Adam tried not to sound annoyed at having to repeat himself.

“Commander, in your, admittedly brief, career in Starfleet, have you **ever** given the order to use deadly force against a threat?” Harwood asked, with exaggerated emphasis on the word “ever.”

Adam was now certain what Captain Harwood was attempting to do. He was not interested in what happened on Omega IV, he was questioning Adams willingness to follow orders and ability to make difficult command decisions. Harwood was looking to bust him down. Maybe get him discharged from Starfleet. Maybe the decision to refuse counsel wasn’t such a good idea. So be it. Stick with the truth.

“No, sir. I have not.”

“I see. Tell me, Commander, are you afraid to pull the trigger?”

“No sir, I am not.” affirmed Adam, without hesitation.

“Uh huh. And today, if you were ordered, by a commanding officer, to use force you personally felt was unjustified, what would you do?”

Adam pondered this question for what seemed an eternity. He had questioned his resolve on many occasions since the incident aboard the *Merrimac*.

“Captain, I believe my duty as a Starfleet officer is to peacefully resolve situations whenever possible. This has been a significant part of my training. After all, is Starfleet not a peace keeping armada? That is my first choice in any situation. Our mission is to seek out new life, not destroy it.”

Adam continued. “At the same time, I also believe in the chain of command as being the only viable means of maintaining order and discipline. If such a situation were to arise, I would execute such an order provided doing so was not in violation of Starfleet regulations or interstellar law.”

Harwood looked dissatisfied. “Admiral, I have no further questions for the Commander.”

Adam relaxed, but only a little. The exchange with Captain Harwood to last forever, but what seemed an eternity in reality lasted not quite fifteen minutes.

Commander Raj then addressed Lieutenant Ferr. “Lieutenant, would you please state your full name, rank, service number and last posting.”

Ferr rose. “My given name is Ferr, third descendant of the Tribe E’Brett. My rank is Lieutenant. Service number S81143D. My last posting was Duty Officer, Beta shift, on Outpost Omega IV.”

Captain Mitchell began. “Lieutenant, did you hear the testimony given by Commander Russell of events on the evening of stardate 5643?”

“Yes, sir.” .

“Are the events as described by Commander Russell true and accurate to the best of your knowledge?”

“Yes, sir. All true and all accurate.”

“Very good, Lieutenant. Do you wish to add anything to Commander Russell’s testimony?”

“No, sir.”

“Thank you, Lieutenant. No further questions.”

Admiral Benning nodded to Captain Harwood.

“Lieutenant,” Harwood began, “at what time on stardate 5643 did you first observe the anomalous subspace readings in the Neutral Zone?”

“I logged the first sensor reading at 21:07 hours.”

“But according to your Commander, you did not contact him about the readings until 21:45. Why did you wait thirty-eight minutes?”

“Sir, the area of space where the readings first originated was very active with natural eddy currents. I could not be certain at first what the sensors were registering was not natural. The computer analysis I ordered initially identified the disturbance as normal subspace noise.”

“Did you accept the computer’s analysis?”

“At first I did. But after a few minutes I directed the sensors to sweep that region again.”

“Why would you order a sensor sweep if the preliminary scan showed the area was clean?”

“Something bothered me about the first readings. It is nothing I can quantify, sir. I guess I can only call it intuition.” explained the Lieutenant, loosening up a bit.

“And what did you find with your second sensor sweep?” inquired Harwood, seemingly intrigued.

“No difference from the first scan.”

“But you still didn’t give up, did you?” led the Captain, now leaning so far forward Adam thought he would fall out of his chair.

“No, sir. I ran regular scans every five minutes over the next thirty minutes.” explained Ferr. “Every scan came back with the same ambiguous results. Finally, the computer returned the possibility of a coherent pattern to the subspace distortion. And that it was coming towards us. That is when I contacted the Commander.”

“Very good, Lieutenant.” acknowledged Harwood, leaning back in his chair. “Admiral, I have no further questions.”

Admiral Benning addressed Captain Mitchell. “Captain, do you have any further questions for either of these Officers?”

“No, sir.”

“Very well then. We will adjourn and reconvene in one half hour.” Benning tapped the ships bell with the gavel, then rose and left the room with Captains Harwood and Mitchell.

At the sounding of the bell, both Adam and Ferr stood until the members of the Board had left the room. Adam turned to Ferr to offer reassurance. “Don’t worry,” he said, “everything will be fine. You did exactly right.”

The Denebian Tactical Officer looked straight ahead and was silent again as he retook his seat.

After precisely thirty minutes, Admiral Benning, accompanied by the two Captains, re-entered the hearing room. As they entered, all stood. The Admiral took his place at the head table, picked up the gavel, and tapped the ships bell.

“This hearing will reconvene.”

All conversation in the room ceased as everyone took their seats.

“This Board has reached a conclusion in the matter of the loss of Outpost Omega IV. It has been determined that the outpost was destroyed solely through the hostile actions of parties unknown, and that there was no fault committed by Lieutenant Commander Russell, Lieutenant Ferr or any other personnel stationed on Omega IV in their actions. The officers are exonerated. For the record, both Commander Russell and Lieutenant Ferr will receive letters of commendation for their respective actions in minimizing the loss of life in this tragic attack.” recited the Admiral.

Captain Harwood looked disgusted.

The Admiral addressed the table where Adam and Ferr were seated. “Commander, your quick thinking undoubtedly saved many lives. Incidentally, Lieutenant, I had my Science Officer analyze the sensor readings that caused you concern, and he could not see what you had seen. The fact is, no passive sensor scan could have identified the subspace anomaly any earlier than you did, and most other analysts would have just as quickly dismissed it as inconsequential. Only your dogged determination allowed those weapons to be identified as early as they were. Well done.” exclaimed Admiral Benning, with a smile.

“Thank you sir.” replied Adam. “Admiral, for the record, I’d like to recognize Captain Mitchell and the crew of the Starship *Volare*. I’d like to thank the Captain and his crew for their quick response to our situation. They saved many lives.”

“So noted for the record. Thank you, Commander.” Benning turned to Captain Mitchell. “Good work, Captain.”

Captain Mitchell nodded.

Admiral Benning raised his gavel once again. “This Board of Inquiry is adjourned.” Benning tapped the ships bell.

Adam and Ferr turned to each other, both sighing with relief. They shook hands in silent mutual congratulations and gratitude. As the two officers moved towards the exit, Admiral Benning moved through the crowd to intercept them. He approached them, extending his hand in congratulations. After a cordial exchange, he turned to business.

“Commander, Lieutenant, I meant what I said up there. I am very impressed with your performance in this crisis. Your behavior is in keeping with the finest Starfleet tradition.”

“Thank you, Admiral.” Adam replied. Then, after a brief silence, “Was there anything else, sir?”

“Yes. How would the two of you like a job?”

Chapter Five

The trio of warships hung silently in the nebula, separated by no more than a few kilometers to minimize the power needed for ship-to-ship communications, and thus avoid detection. The nebula, remnant of a star long ago gone supernova, provided an excellent “soup” in which the massive ships could hide. This allowed the ships to remain invisible without the need to expend the energy needed to run their cloaking devices.

On board the Klingon Vessel *Koroth*, Squadron Captain Derm sat alone in the ships galley, drinking blood wine. He waited, impatiently, for his Commander to return with the results of the mission. His crew knew to stay clear of the Captain when he drank, lest they incur his wrath and risk being disemboweled. Aside from the Captain, the galley was empty, and dark.

The doors to the galley hissed open, and Commander Kahl entered. He approached the Captain and assumed a standing position before him, maintaining a distance of respect, and self-defense.

“Speak!” barked Derm, in Klingonese.

“My lord,” Kahl began, nervously, but with determination, “the mission is a success, the Federation outpost is destroyed.”

“Deaths?” demanded the Captain.

Kahl began to squirm. “Reports are uncertain, sir. But the outpost was completely destroyed. There must have been many Federation deaths.”

“You fool!” shouted Derm, coming to his feet. “The Captain of the *Grich* informs me the Federation

battleship in orbit around the outpost beamed most of the people off the surface before our missiles arrived. He also tells me most of the missiles were destroyed before they could reach their target. Explain!”

The Klingon Commander grew very nervous. The *Grich*, having been one of the two ships to launch the attack, monitored the results, under cloak, from inside the Neutral Zone. Kahl had been on the second of the two attacking ships, while his Captain remained on board the *Koroth*, inside the nebula. After the attack, the *Grich* rendezvoused with Kahl and reported. Kahl knew Derm would not be happy with the low number of casualties, and so the Klingon Commander spent the entire return trip trying to come up with an explanation for this unfortunate turn of events.

As he opened his mouth to speak, Kahl found himself moving slowly backward while watching the Captain’s hands, and the dagger on his belt.

“My lord,” he explained, “somehow, they detected our missiles before they decloaked. They must have new technology we did not know about.” Kahl waited for the knife, and death. When they did not come, the Klingon Warrior continued on, more boldly. “Besides, was it not your plan to attack while a Federation ship was in orbit, to insure their sensors would identify the missiles as Klingon?”

The Captain fixed his gaze on the Commander, and advanced towards him. “I wanted more deaths!” came the enraged reply. “Their technology does not concern me!”

“Yes, my lord. I have failed my Captain. I will not do so again.” replied Kahl. When he realized he was still alive and intact, he decided to press on.

“Is there word from the High Council, my lord?” Kahl inquired.

Derm seated himself and poured another chalice of wine. He smirked. “Negotiations have ended. Fleets are forming on both sides of the Neutral Zone.”

“Then war is imminent.” responded the Klingon Warrior, with manufactured excitement.

“Not yet.” responded Derm. “We need another attack.” He smiled again. A most wicked grin.

“My lord,” replied the Commander, “we used all of our missiles to destroy the Federation outpost.”

“Then we will have to make more!” shouted the Captain, slamming his chalice on the table and spilling some wine.

Kahl straightened. “Yes, my lord,” he replied, “our warriors on the planet, they will need additional supplies to make the missiles, and more anti-matter for the warp drives and warheads. It will take several days to make enough missiles for another attack.”

The Captain appeared bored with these mundane details. “Take the *Grich* to the planet, under cloak, and give them what they need.”

“Yes, sir. What is the target to be?”

“You will know soon enough.” replied Derm, draining the goblet. “Now go and leave me be! Secure the doors on your way out”

Kahl bowed and withdrew from the galley.

Moments later, the door to the galley anteroom hissed open. The dark-clad figure slowly emerged and approached the captain. Derm pretended not to notice as he poured another chalice of wine.

“Very inquisitive young man, your Lieutenant.” observed the dark-clad figure. “Can his loyalty be trusted?”

Derm spun in his chair, facing the figure, eyes bulging, breathing heavily. “He is a Klingon and his loyalty is beyond question. A Klingon warrior always follows orders!”

“Good. I’m glad to hear that. I’d hate to think one of your officers might be an obstacle to our cause.”

Derm returned again to the goblet. “*Our* cause!” he muttered. “I question the wisdom of those who have decided it would be good for us to work together.”

“Captain,” the dark-clad figure patronized, “there is much to gain, perhaps the entire Alpha quadrant itself.”

“We don’t need your help!” Derm retorted.

“Your house is powerful, influential, Captain. That is not in question. But, you have only three ships. How will you overthrow the mighty Federation with only three warships?”

Derm grumbled.

“Everyone needs help to accomplish their goals, Captain. Our combined resources, with the help of Starfleet and the combined military might of the Klingon Empire, might just be enough to do the job.”

Derm grumbled again.

The dark-clad figure continued. “The real question here, Captain, is: will you obey your orders?”

Derm stood, reflexively. Ready to strike. Realized he was being baited and stood down. “The only thing you have to worry about is not being discovered aboard this ship. Make certain you stay off deck, and do not lose that device you have on your wrist which masks your bio-signs. That is the only thing keeping you from being discovered and executed as a stowaway and a spy!”

The figure raised his arm and casually glanced at the electronic damping bracelet. “Ah, yes. Tell me Captain, where would we be without all this wonderful technology?”

Derm sat down at raised his goblet. “Yes. Where would we be?”

Chapter Six

Scarcely an hour after the Board of Inquiry, Lieutenant Commander Russell and Lieutenant Ferr stood in the observation lounge of the large space dock facility in orbit above Starbase thirty-one. Admiral Benning had asked for them to meet him here. He said it was urgent and had to do with their “new job.” Benning was purposely vague about their assignment. This, and the urgency with which he wanted to meet on the space dock left Adam extremely curious. Shortly, all would become clear, Benning promised. Adam couldn’t wait.

Adam and Ferr watched, as the Starship *Volare*, still docked in hangar A-8, was being loaded by a support shuttle with food, medical equipment and other supplies through an airlock located on the underside of the saucer shaped hull. The crew moved briskly along the boarding ramp to the ship’s portside airlock. They were preparing to get underway. Captain Mitchell moved toward the boarding ramp. Then, spotting the two officers altered his path to bid them farewell.

“Captain, thanks again for all you’ve done.” expressed Adam as he shook the Captain’s hand. “We wouldn’t be standing here right now if it weren’t for you.”

“It seems someone had an agenda regarding that outpost.” replied the Captain.

“If all thirty-seven of those missiles had hit, there would be nothing left of the outpost or the planetoid right now but an expanding dust cloud.” said the Commander.

“Can’t disagree with that. What’s in store for you fellows now?”

“We’re waiting for Admiral Benning.” replied Adam. “He wanted to talk to us about a ‘job’.” Adam made a gesture with his fingers mimicking quotation marks.

“Where are you off to, sir?” inquired Lieutenant Ferr.

“Back to the Neutral Zone. The fleet’s still on yellow alert.”

“Good luck to you, Captain.” said Adam.

“Good luck to us all.”

Captain Mitchell turned and entered the ramp to the starship. Shortly after he was aboard, the ramp was withdrawn, the airlock closed, and the running lights on the hull and outboard warp nacelles began to glow. The name and registry of the vessel were now visible, illuminated by the running lights, proclaiming the vessel as **U.S.S. VOLARE, NCC 1853**.

A few minutes later and the umbilical supports to the ship were disconnected. In the zero-g environment of the hangar, the umbilicals undulated gently away from the ship like the tentacles of a huge octopus. Released from her supports, the ship floated freely, and began to drift ever so slightly.

Then, before she could drift too far, the maneuvering thrusters fired, and the starship slowly backed out of her docking berth toward space. Adam and Ferr continued to watch, as an eternity seemed to pass before the ship cleared the hanger doors and was free to navigate in open space.

The thrusters fired again and the starship spun slowly and gracefully on its axis as the impulse engines were engaged and the drive ports glowed red. As the vessel gained a safe distance from the station, her impulse drive went dark and the starship engaged

warp drive. Faster than a thought, the ship leaped into the blackness of space and disappeared from sight.

The two officers continued to gaze, with awe at the space occupied just a few moments earlier by the *Volare*, when they were suddenly aware of a presence behind them.

“Quite a sight, isn’t it? I never tire of it.” beamed Admiral Benning.

The two officers spun on their heels and came to attention. “Sorry, sir,” responded Adam, “we didn’t hear you approach.”

“Quite all right, Commander.” replied the Admiral in a reassuring way.

“Sir,” Adam spoke, “you said you had a job for us.”

“Indeed. I believe I do. And we’ll get to that shortly. But if you gentlemen will walk with me, I’d like to introduce you to some old acquaintances.”

This piqued Adam’s curiosity and so the three Starfleet officers embarked along the corridor on the outer perimeter of the space dock heading toward another docking bay on the opposite end of the facility. No one spoke in the several minutes it took them to cross the space dock.

Nearing their destination, they turned a corner and approached a door labeled “DOCKING BAY 4.” Adam could not help but notice the pair of armed security officers standing guard in front of the door. Then to his left and saw the “old acquaintances” the Admiral had referred to. For standing there was Captain Kirk, Mr. Spock, Doctor McCoy, and Lieutenant Command Scott from the *Enterprise*. Adam grinned broadly when he laid eyes on his former ship mates.

Greetings were exchanged, hands were shaken, well wishes were extended, as well as condolences for those lost in the attack. Adam introduced Lieutenant Ferr to the group.

Adam addressed Kirk, "When did you arrive?"

"The *Enterprise* made orbit yesterday." Kirk replied. "We've been taking on supplies and rotating personnel through shore leave. But Admiral Benning kept confidential the reason for the *Enterprise* diversion here. He said he had a job for us, but we'd have to wait today to find out what that was."

"Sounds familiar." Adam smiled.

After a minute, Admiral Benning spoke up.

"Gentlemen, I hate to break up this family reunion, but we've got work to do." All eyes were now on the Admiral. "Our attempts so far to determine the parties responsible for the attack on Omega IV have failed. The Klingons continue to deny responsibility while their fleets continue to mass inside their space. But you already know that."

The Admiral went on. "Our analysis of the sensor readings you gathered on the missiles leads us to believe they were launched inside the Neutral Zone. But we can't prove this definitively. We cannot send starships into the zone without violating treaty, and the Klingons won't do us the favor of jumping first and giving us a reason to enter."

"Sir, have the other Omega outposts recorded any unusual activity within the zone?" asked Adam.

"Not at present. We've pulled records from each of the outposts for the last month and fed them through our tactical computers looking for the same kind of anomaly you spotted, Lieutenant." Benning motioned

toward Ferr. “No unusual readings. Which is why I wanted to bring us together.”

He continued. “The Federation has been gathering intelligence of dissention towards the peace talks. We feel someone has an independent agenda.”

Adam noted to himself the similar statement made by Captain Mitchell just prior to the *Volare’s* departure.

Kirk asked the question before Adam could voice it. “Admiral, do we know who the dissenters are?”

“We have some suspicions, Captain. And there are many possibilities. But we’ll discuss that in more detail a little later.”

The Admiral then approached an eye-level computer port mounted on the wall next to the bay doors and announced, “Computer. Benning, Admiral, requesting access.”

“Please hold for retina scan.” announced a female sounding computer voice. A minute pair of crossing laser beams emanated from the port and quickly scanned the Admiral’s right eye.

“Identity confirmed.” responded the synthesized voice. “Access approved.” The doors parted as the Starfleet Security guards stepped aside to allow passage. Admiral Benning entered, and motioned for the rest of the party to follow.

As the officers entered the observation area, Adam noticed all of the windows to the hangar area below were blackened. Adam’s curiosity was now at maximum as the Admiral ordered, “Computer, unblock window.” The observation window to the hangar area instantly became clear.

Inside the hangar, hanging from umbilical supports was a mid-sized Federation low-warp supply ship

which Adam quickly recognized as being from the long discontinued DY600 class. Previously used to ferry medical supplies, food and light equipment from Federation hubs to outposts and nearby star systems, all such remaining vessels are now in use strictly by independent freighters and smugglers, when they can get their hands on them. They have a reputation for being tough, durable and reliable. Albeit a little slow with a maximum speed of warp factor four.

Adam was familiar with this design, having seen them in use in the shipping lanes near the Aldebaran system and the Neutral Zone. Eleven such vessels had been bought at auction by independent dealers several years earlier.

Before the auction, the ships had been demilitarized by Starfleet. They had no offensive capabilities, but their early-generation shields had been left intact. After purchase, some of the owners “modified” the ships with weapon systems illegally bought on the black market.

Several of the “modified” ships had visited Omega IV at one time or another in their travels along the trade routes to and from the Neutral Zone.

The DY600 series featured a removable cargo pod, or “container” behind the crew quarters. This made it possible for the ship to deliver its cargo by simply dropping the container. It could then be reloaded with another container making the return trip thus saving time and reducing cost. This feature made these ships very popular with independent merchants. Many independent trade merchants make good livings shipping goods back and forth in the shipping lanes.

This vessel bore no identification markings at all, and its hull displayed the scars of years of service and

light years of travel. On the port side of the ship was obvious evidence of a repaired hull breach surrounded by the tell-tale scorch marks of plasma cannon fire. Suspended below the hull, on either side of the vessel were the warp nacelles. It didn't take Adam long to recognize these were not the conventional nacelles for this class of ship.

Instead of the usual rounded, stubby nacelles these were rectangular in shape, and much longer than normal. The subspace field generator grids on the sides of the nacelles were greatly increased in size, and the struts connecting the nacelles to the hull had been substantially reinforced.

Adam was intrigued.

Most everyone present commented on the nacelles. It was Mr. Scott, however, who summed it up for all when he said, "Will ya' look a' that!"

"Yes. Fascinating." declared Spock.

The level of activity in the hangar bay was very brisk. Maintenance crews entered and left the vessel via the two airlocks. A second crew, supported by a maintenance shuttle, worked on the underside of the hull replacing plates which had been removed for some reason. A quick survey of the rest of the ship showed other hull plates had also been replaced. The plates had been painted to match the wear on the rest of the ship, but the paint job was marginal at best in achieving that purpose.

Movement towards the stern of the ship caught Adam's attention, as another shuttle had been moved to the cargo hold, and a crew began loading supplies into the vessel. As Adam and Ferr watched, Admiral Benning spoke.

“We call her *Agenda*.” said the Admiral. “For we feel someone has one against us.”

“Admiral, what is this all about?” implored Kirk.

“The ship is a prototype. And it is highly classified.” explained Benning. “She has an experimental warp drive, developed right here at Starbase thirty-one by our elite team of systems engineers. The original plan was that once the drive was tested and proven successful, it would be installed in existing starships as a retrofit, and in new ships coming out of the Utopia Planetia ship yard.”

“But, why put an experimental drive in an old, tired piece of.....ship like that?” inquired Adam, choosing his words carefully.

“Simple,” replied the Admiral, “it was available. The hull and space frame are sound, in spite of her looks. It’s a smaller vessel, into which we could put in a smaller test version of the drive. Besides, we couldn’t very well put an experimental drive in a fully-crewed starship, could we? And, who would suspect a piece of junk like this was being used to test the most advanced warp drive ever developed?”

This made sense, thought Adam.

“What’s so special about it?” inquired McCoy.

“What I can tell you at this time is that it has a theoretical top speed of warp nine point two, and will cruise indefinitely at warp seven-point-seven.” replied the Admiral.

“In that piece of junk?” exclaimed Scott. “No way. The ship will tear itself apart!”

The Admiral smiled. “Normally, Commander, you would be correct. However, and in light of the greatly increased stresses of greater warp speeds, structural

integrity field generators have been installed on the hull where previously the ship had none.”

Kirk spoke. “The ability to travel at those speeds would represent a significant increase in a starship’s range.” observed Kirk.

“And greatly enhanced response time.” added Spock.

“A significant strategic advantage over our enemies, wouldn’t you say?” suggested Benning. All nodded agreement.

“An added benefit of the new engine is that phaser power is substantially increased by drawing energy directly from the warp drive. Though not yet tested in combat, we theorize output has been increased by at least twenty-seven percent. Shield intensity will also be similarly increased. Gentlemen, pound for pound you are looking at the fastest and strongest vessel in the quadrant.”

Adam looked from the Admiral back to the ship. “Fantastic. Do the Klingons or Romulans have anything like this?”

“Not that we know.” Benning leaned against the observation railing, beaming with pride over his teams’ accomplishment.

“Sir,” said Adam, “I don’t understand. How does this involve us?”

Admiral Benning turned to face the group. “As I stated, we cannot send a starship into the Neutral Zone without risking triggering an interstellar incident. I need some good officers to go on an undercover operation on a mission of discovery. That is where you come in. I need a team to take *Agenda* into the Neutral Zone on a covert mission to find out who is responsible for attacking Omega IV and hopefully to

avert a war. This is strictly voluntary. It's an off-the-record mission. If any of you are killed or captured, the Federation will deny any knowledge of your actions. Therefore, if you feel you cannot participate for any moral or ethical reasons, just say so. It will not be held against anyone."

Adam was stunned. Just a couple of short days ago he had hoped for a shipboard assignment. Now, here was an opportunity to take part in a covert assignment in potentially hostile territory and in an experimental ship. In spite of the risks, here was an opportunity to make good on his promise to Carrie's parents, and avenge her death. He gave the ship another good look from bow to stern.

Adam spoke first. "Admiral, I'd like to volunteer to lead this mission."

"Thank you, Commander. And I had you in mind from the start. However, this is a delicate mission requiring command experience in light of the potential risks. No offense, but Captain Kirk, would you be willing to lead this mission?"

Kirk smirked. "Actually I was just about to, but Commander Russell beat me to it. Admiral, the answer is yes. I'll lead this mission."

"Excellent." exclaimed the Admiral. "Mr. Russell, would you agree to be Captain Kirk's first officer on this mission?"

Adam was a bit disappointed, but replied enthusiastically, "Yes sir. It would be my honor."

"Alright then. Captain, who will command the *Enterprise* in your absence?" asked Benning.

"Mr. Spock will assume command." replied Kirk.

Then it was Scotty's turn to speak. "Admiral, I've got to go on this mission too. I've got to get my hands on these new engines."

Benning laughed. "I was hoping you would say that Mr. Scott. I'd like you to work closely with the system designer, Doctor Karen Morse, lead civilian engineer on the new drive system. She has volunteered to go along as well. You'll want to work closely with her because if this drive works the way we believe it will, you'll be putting one in the *Enterprise* during her upcoming refit."

Scotty could hardly contain himself. "It'll be a pleasure Admiral!"

"This mission will need a ship's surgeon." stated McCoy. "So, I'm volunteering, Admiral, sir."

Kirk addressed the Doctor. "No, Bones. You're needed on the *Enterprise*. If hostilities break out, you'll be needed there."

McCoy frowned but before he could say more Kirk silently mouthed the word "later" in his direction. The doctor backed down.

Addressing Lieutenant Ferr, the Admiral spoke. "And I have a job for you too Lieutenant, although not on the *Agenda*. You'll have to wait until tomorrow though to find out what it is. I've scheduled a briefing at 0900 for all members. Can you wait that long?"

"Yes, sir." replied the Denebian.

"Excellent, then it's settled. The team is in place." said the Admiral.

"I see the ship has some sort of dorsal mounted weapon atop the engineering section." stated Adam.

"Yes." replied the Admiral. "A forty millimeter projectile cannon with duranium tipped projectiles. It is functional and loaded."

Kirk spoke up. “Admiral, are we expected to go into potentially hostile space against, possibly Klingon warships with nothing more than a forty millimeter cannon?”

Benning smiled at this. “Relax, Captain. Do you see that hull plate in the bow, just below the navigational deflector? The one that has been replaced? It’s retractable and houses a newly installed phaser with a full one hundred and eighty degree firing aspect. The ship doesn’t have the same capabilities as the *Enterprise*, but it should serve to get you out of a tight spot.”

“No aft weapons?” asked Adam.

“Other than the forty millimeter cannon, no. Understand, Commander, the phaser array was installed to test phaser power with the new warp drive. There was no reason to install weapons in the stern, as we never intended to take this ship into combat. The phaser is a defensive weapon. I don’t expect you to engage any hostiles in battle. This ship’s greatest weapon is its speed. You should be able to outrun any hostile parties you might encounter. Given a choice of fighting or running, I would expect you to get the hell out of there. Understood?”

Kirk immediately replied. “Understood.”

“Good.” acknowledged Benning.

Scott inquired. “Admiral, what’s under those other new plates along the hull?”

“Various things. Upgraded shield generators, and highly sensitive sensory equipment so you can hopefully detect evidence of contraband or hostile activity in the regions you will investigate. And so you know, the tactical sensors on board have been upgraded also. They’re not up to the standard of a

starship, but a lot better than what this old freighter had.”

“When will the ship be ready for launch?” asked Spock.

“Since shortly after the attack on Omega IV, crews have been working around the clock preparing *Agenda* for this mission. They will need another twenty-four hours to finish installing the sensor systems and tactical equipment, calibrate the targeting sensors. That sort of thing.”

Kirk nodded.

“Any other questions, gentlemen?” asked Benning.

All was quiet.

“Very well then. We will dismiss until the briefing tomorrow morning, after which we will tour the ship. Enjoy the amenities of Starbase thirty- one in the meantime.”

Chapter Seven

The chronometer emitted its gentle wake-up call at precisely 06:00 hours, just as it had been programmed. Lieutenant Commander Adam Russell registered the sound and rose immediately, ready to start his day. Although still physically weary from his ordeal, he slept fitfully. The excitement over the mission was too much for sheer exhaustion to overcome.

With a verbal command, the chronometer ceased its call, and Adam headed into the bathroom. He grabbed a quick shower, dressed quickly in Starfleet sweats provided by the base, and headed in the direction of one of the three gymnasiums on the grounds of Starbase thirty-one.

The accommodations at the Starbase were much nicer than he was accustomed to. They were much larger and more luxurious than his quarters on Omega IV. The suite in which Adam slept is normally used by delegates, government officials and Starfleet Admirals visiting the base. The housing staff waited on Adam hand and foot. So concerned were they for his comfort, Adam felt as though they would not leave him alone. He wasn't used to this kind of attention, and felt uncomfortable at being fawned over. Adam was the sort of person who was used to doing things for himself.

He was grateful for the tailoring service offered by the Starbase. He had lost all of his clothing and most of his personal possessions in the attack on the outpost. Overnight, the staff tailors constructed five new uniforms for the Lieutenant Commander.

As he walked to the gym, Adam's mind was preoccupied. This is a large responsibility with which he and his teammates were being entrusted. The success or failure of this mission could mean the difference between war and peace.

He recalled his mixture of excitement and reluctance at receiving the assignment to command Omega IV. This was different though. He rationalized that because of the temporary and even perhaps illegal aspect of the mission, he should be more cautious about his excitement.

The potential danger didn't bother him. His Starfleet training did a good job of preparing him for that. Serving aboard a starship is a risky proposition. Death can come at any time and from any direction.

But the mission would potentially determine the future of the Alpha and Beta quadrants for years to come. And that was certainly enough to be excited and anxious about. Besides, he was back in space again. Further here he was being handed the opportunity and the means to bring to justice those responsible for the deaths of his lover, his friends and all those under his command. Suddenly everything else became irrelevant.

At last, he reached the gym. Adam noticed the running track surrounding the complex. Rather than an oval shape, the track wound through the orchards on the grounds providing a more pleasant running experience. A run would be exactly what he needed at this point to help clear his mind. First though, he decided to check out the facilities inside.

He noticed a few other people in the facility, but the gym was spacious with a large variety of equipment.

He proceeded to warm up with five minutes of stretching followed by some calisthenics.

The Commander started with one hundred pushups, two hundred abdominal crunches and fifty deep knee bends. Then he moved to the weight machines. He adjusted the machine's resistance to a fairly light weight as he began his initial cycle of repetitions for his upper and lower body. He increased the weight for each subsequent cycle until he had completed his usual four cycles on each machine.

He assessed his physical condition after the workout as he was still recovering from his injuries from the attack. Determining that he was feeling good, and because it was a beautiful morning on the starbase, Adam headed to the outdoor track where he ran eight kilometers.

After the workout, he was tired but felt great. Adam took another shower, a much longer one this time, dressed in one of his new Starfleet uniforms and headed to the Officers dining room.

Adam had prearranged to meet Lieutenant Ferr and the officers from the *Enterprise* at 08:15 for breakfast. As he entered the dining room, he saw Ferr was already there. Adam took a seat at the table opposite the Lieutenant and greeted him. Shortly thereafter, Kirk, Spock, McCoy and Scott joined them. They placed their orders through the comm panel at their table.

As their mission was highly classified, they were ordered not to discuss it openly, not even among themselves. So, while they awaited their breakfast, Kirk entertained Adam and Ferr with stories about some of their missions and encounters since Adam had left the *Enterprise*. Adam, in kind, regaled the

Enterprise crew with humorous stories about some of the more colorful characters to visit the outpost. All in an effort to keep things light prior to a mission filled with unknowns.

Adam ate lightly. His breakfast consisted of two poached eggs, a slice of lean country ham, half of a grapefruit, whole grain toast with jam, and black coffee. When they had finished, the time was 08:40.

He returned to his accommodations and checked the computer terminal for any messages. There were none, as no one off the starbase had knowledge of his whereabouts.

He then spent the next several minutes recording a personal message for his parents. Even though they would have been contacted by now regarding the attack on the outpost, any further information regarding his location or condition would be lacking. He wanted to reassure them that he was fine, while apologizing for not being able to tell them anything about his mission. He promised to contact them upon his return. Signing off with love, he ordered the message sent by subspace.

Packing his personal belongings did not take long as he had very few. Finally, he picked up his personal tablet for the meeting, and headed out of his quarters to the briefing room on level four.

Adam entered the briefing room at precisely 8:55 AM, with Lieutenant Ferr on his heels. The two officers thought they would be early. However, upon entering the room, they found nearly every chair filled. The *Enterprise* crew had arrived a few minutes prior.

Admiral Benning sat at the head of the table. Adam found an empty seat next to Captain Kirk and seated

himself. Along the same side of the table were First Officer Spock, Doctor McCoy, and Chief Engineer Scott.

“Good morning gentlemen.” the Admiral greeted them. “Did you all sleep well?”

Everyone indicated in the affirmative.

“What do you think of our accommodations here at Starbase thirty-one?” inquired Benning.

“Much nicer than we are accustomed to. Too good for us working types.” answered Adam, with a quick wink to Ferr.

The Lieutenant smiled and nodded his agreement.

“Nonsense.” scolded the Admiral. “Nothing is too good for my officers.”

Adam smiled.

“Gentlemen, let me introduce you to the other members of your team, handpicked for their abilities. On my left nearest me is Lieutenant Johnathon Crowe. Lieutenant Crowe has been stationed here at the Starbase for the last two years. He will be your helmsman aboard the *Agenda*. He is a crack pilot, and has been fully rated on the ship’s design. He is, in fact, the test pilot who was to put the ship through her paces.”

Kirk and Adam nodded to the Helmsman. There would be time for more formal greetings after the briefing.

“Next to Lieutenant Crowe is Lieutenant T’Lev. T’Lev will be your Navigator and Communications Officer.” announced the Admiral. Kirk and Adam acknowledged the female Vulcan officer.

“Further down the table is Lieutenant Commander William O’Neal, Chief Engineer here at the starbase. Commander O’Neal is the engineer responsible for the

team who built the prototype warp drive. His team is currently on board the *Agenda*, making sure she is ready to launch on schedule this afternoon. You will have the pleasure of meeting them later.” added the Admiral.

“Commander O’Neal will fully brief you on ship’s systems on board the *Agenda* following this meeting. He and Doctor Morse were in lock step on this warp drive from the very beginning. And, for that reason, he will not be going along on this mission. If something unfortunate were to happen, we couldn’t afford to lose both of the engineers with the greatest design and working knowledge of this system.”

“Understood, Admiral.” acknowledged Kirk.

“Admiral, is it not unusual to have a civilian engineer along on a mission of this sort, rather than an equally qualified Starfleet engineer?” Spock inquired.

“Yes, Commander. Quite unusual.” replied the Admiral. “Doctor Morse volunteered to go. Insisted, in fact. I had to make a decision. I chose her. Both engineers are of equal caliber in my opinion. Would you agree, Commander?” indicating in the direction of Engineer O’Neal.

“Agreed, Admiral.” O’Neal acknowledged.

“The reason I chose Doctor Morse is because she is the stronger of the two with respect to warp field theory at the higher factors.” added Benning. “I felt, that she would be better qualified to get the *Agenda* to a stable warp factor nine.”

“Logical.” replied Spock.

“And so, with that lead in, we have the aforementioned Doctor Karen Morse.”

Kirk directed toward the civilian engineer, “Doctor Morse, you are certainly welcome on this trip, but have you been fully briefed on the potential risks?”

“Captain, I am no stranger to starships. I have been aboard many as a consultant to Starfleet on troubleshooting projects. Commander O’Neal and I have worked closely on this project for five and a half years, and I can’t think of a better way to get the performance data we need. I have been fully briefed on the potential dangers of this mission, and I feel the benefits outweigh the dangers. Besides, if anything goes wrong with the drive system, you’ll need me.”

“Very well then, welcome aboard.” Kirk replied.

The Admiral nodded in the direction of the young scientist, and she returned the nod.

“Now that all introductions have been made, let’s get down to business. I will remind everyone, this briefing is classified. If tablets are in use, please put them in the encryption mode.”

Adam placed his tablet in “record” mode on and placed it on the table in front of him. He made sure the encryption icon was on, and noticed Ferr did the same with his.

“The Klingon Empire is at a crossroads. For decades they have poured massive resources into the development of their military capabilities. Ships, bases, outposts that sort of thing. As you already know, the military might in the empire is owned and controlled by the ruling houses. They possess the assets, and the wealth.”

“While the empire was developing its military might, they failed to develop their civilian population. Education, training, non-military infrastructure and jobs programs were all greatly underfunded.

Regardless, while they had natural resources, there were sufficient jobs available to support their military initiatives, if just barely.”

“All that started to change a few years ago. They have exhausted the natural resources available on Qo’noS and the surrounding systems within the empire. Without raw materials, jobs are drying up. Their infrastructure is crumbling and so is their society. Sources loyal to us inside the empire advise that poverty is widespread and crime is rampant in the streets. Meanwhile the ruling houses have begun to hoard, making the situation worse. They are becoming ever increasingly a society of the haves and have not’s.”

All eyes and ears were focused on the Admiral as he continued. “Reports I have read indicate the Klingon economy could collapse in as little as ten years unless they take drastic action. Civil war cannot be ruled out. But their choices are limited and not without substantial risk. One course of action, and something they desperately need would be to expand their space exploration deeper into the Beta Quadrant in search of badly needed resources. But this would leave their borders with the Federation and The Romulan Star Empire under protected. An unattractive option to them.”

“Another course of action would be to launch a preemptive attack on the Federation, and take our resources. There are those within Starfleet who feel the attack on the outpost was just such a prelude to an all-out invasion.”

“But I don’t think that is the case. An attack on the Federation would be an extremely risky move which would leave us both vulnerable to attack by the

Romulans. I do not think the Klingons want to risk that either.”

“I personally think that the Klingon’s only viable option is to establish a truce with the Federation, so that they can undertake the exploration they need to rebuild their society, without fear of being attacked by us. And to that end, about a year ago the Klingons accepted our invitation to begin peace talks over subspace channels. For years prior to that, our invitations for such talks were ignored. So, the logical conclusion is that something significant changed within the empire. That something being the condition of their economy.”

Spock nodded agreement to the Admiral’s logic.

Benning continued. “The talks began slowly and there were many obstacles. However, recently there have been breakthroughs. And the meetings have progressed from subspace only to face-to-face at neutral locations. In the progress briefings I have received, there has been nothing to indicate their intent is anything less than sincere. For this reason, I am of the opinion that the Klingon government is not responsible for the attack. Someone else is.”

“And so we are launching this classified mission into the Neutral Zone, codenamed *Agenda*. The objective of this mission will be to gather information and evidence as to the parties responsible for the destruction of Federation Outpost Omega IV, in the Omega sector.” concluded Benning.

“Captain Kirk,” the Admiral called, looking directly at him, “you will take command of the vessel *Agenda* for the purpose of this mission. Commander Russell will be your first officer. You, and your crew will depart this Starbase at 17:30 hours today on a course

already plotted into the navigational computer. This course is based on the sensor scan readings Lieutenant Ferr recorded in the hours preceding the destruction of Outpost Omega IV.”

“Shortly after your departure, The *Enterprise* will depart, under the command of Commander Spock for the Neutral Zone and take up a strategic position. She will remain within Federation space while you conduct your investigation. Communication with the *Enterprise* will be limited to the most critical of situations only. We do not want to run the unnecessary risk of detection. Is that clear?”

“Very clear, sir.” acknowledged Kirk.

“Good,” stated Benning. Then turning to Engineer Scott

“Mr. Scott, as I said yesterday, the prototype warp drive system in *Agenda*, if successful, is scheduled to be retrofitted into the *Enterprise*, on a much larger scale, of course, come her refitting in upcoming months. You had indicated you wanted to get your hands the new design.”

Scotty’s eyes became almost as large as the *Enterprise*’s saucer section. “Aye, Admiral.”

“Stellar.” exclaimed Benning. “Then, Mr. Scott, you will assume the position of Chief Engineer on the *Agenda*, working closely with Doctor Morse as she gathers her performance data. Your job will be to hold the ship together, while learning everything you can about the new drive system. Don’t hesitate to ask Doctor Morse any questions you can think of.”

“Yes, sir.” was all Scotty could think to reply, as he sat back in his chair, smiling.

“Admiral,” Kirk spoke, “since Mr. Spock will be commanding the *Enterprise*, she will be short a Science Officer.”

“Ah, yes.” stated Benning. “Lieutenant, yesterday I believe I promised you details on your part of the mission during this meeting. How would you like to take on the role of *Enterprise’s* Science Officer?”

Ferr was stunned. “I cannot possibly replace Commander Spock.”

“Lieutenant, no one is asking you to replace Mr. Spock. We’re merely asking you to fill in for him for a while. To learn what it’s like to be a Science Officer on a starship. Are you up to it?” Kirk asked.

All the Denebian could muster was a timid “OK.”

“Good. Then that’s settled.” Benning declared. “Now for the particulars of the mission. The missile telemetry gathered by Omega IV, prior to being destroyed has given us some possible leads to concentrate on in your investigation.”

Benning pressed a button on the table near his left hand. Instantly, the viewscreen at the opposite end of the room came to life. On the screen was a topographical display of the Neutral Zone proximate to Sector O-44, where Omega IV used to be.

“Based on what we believe to be the effective range of the photon missiles, we have identified three systems possessing class-M planets proximate to the Dorian Nebula as possible points of origin.” explained the Admiral.

“Sir,” interrupted Lieutenant Crowe, “what makes you think those missiles came from a planet? They could have been launched from a ship, or ships.”

“Quite true, Lieutenant,” Benning agreed, “they could have. It is possible those missiles were

manufactured within the Klingon Empire, brought into the zone by cloaked warships, and launched there. Or, they could have been manufactured elsewhere.” Benning paused and let those at the table ponder the possibilities.

Benning continued. “Federation Intelligence suggests, and I believe, that those responsible have a base of operations within the Neutral Zone, possibly somewhere in this area.” Benning drew a holographic circle around the area containing the star systems with the three M-class planets.

“Your job, ladies and gentlemen, is to investigate these three systems, one by one, looking for evidence our terrorists have been there.”

“What kind of evidence?” asked Lieutenant Crowe.

“Residual neutrino radiation, subspace eddy currents, ion trails, debris.” recited Lieutenant Ferr. “Maybe a recognizable warp signature, if we’re really lucky.”

“Exactly, Lieutenant.” Benning said approvingly. “Now, Lieutenant T’Lev has been reviewing all available information on the three subject systems.” The Admiral turned to the Navigator. “Lieutenant, please take us on a tour of these systems.”

T’Lev stood and walked to the viewscreen, laser pointer in hand. “The first planet, closest to Federation space, is the fourth of ten in the Callus system. It is fifteen point two light years inside the Neutral Zone which puts it closer to Klingon space than Federation. Our probes and long range scans have determined the inhabitants of this world are advanced to the point where they could potentially begin to explore their own system. However, to date we have no evidence they have left their own world.”

“Lieutenant,” interrupted Spock, “are there any indications of weapons in the system, or wars on any of the planets?”

“No such indications have been observed by our sensors. All available evidence suggests these are a peaceful people who keep to themselves.” replied T’Lev.

“The Klingons could learn a thing from them.” quipped McCoy.

Kirk shot the Doctor a dirty look.

The Vulcan ignored McCoy’s comment and pressed on. “The second closest planet is the third in the Dorian system, twenty-two point eight light years inside the zone. Scans show an industrial society, but no evidence of space flight capabilities. However, long range probes do seem to indicate the existence of man-made satellites in orbit. Possibly for military use or communications. Unlike the Callus planet, the Dorian planet does exhibit signs of previous hostilities between continents. Weapons are apparently conventional for their era, and are not consistent with the technology required in the construction of the warp missiles.”

T’Lev paused for a moment to invite questions. When none came, she continued. “The third, and most remote of the planets is in the system L-35. Scans of the system have not been highly successful due to the system’s position behind the Dorian Nebula, from our perspective. However, a class eight probe was launched into the Nebula, and scanned the system just six months ago. The probe indicated the presence of a civilization, apparently long extinct. There were no indications of life on the planet. Evidence suggests all life was wiped out by a natural

disaster long ago, possibly by the formation of the nebula itself.”

“That was millions of years ago.” observed Adam.

“Are there any further questions for the Lieutenant?” inquired Admiral Benning. When no further questions were forthcoming, the Admiral acknowledged T’Lev.

“Very well done, Lieutenant. Thank you.”

The Vulcan Navigator returned to her seat at the table.

“The mission will work like this.” began the Admiral. “Captain Kirk, you and your crew will take the *Agenda* into the Neutral Zone by way of the conventional shipping lanes. Remember that the lanes are highly monitored by both sides, so you must make it appear *Agenda* is a simple merchant ship on a commercial voyage.” the Admiral drew holographic lines on the viewscreen as he spoke. “Inside the zone, the shipping lanes run very near the binary star system Arachnis, a lifeless system. You will alter your course through this system and run an evasive course to the Callus system. You should arrive in Callus within four days of your departure from here.”

“Sir, what is our cover story?” inquired Adam.

“I was just about to get to that.” answered the Admiral. “You, and your crew are owner/operators of the Merchant ship *Largess*, six weeks out of Cephus Prime. You are carrying biological organisms used in the treatment of the Thierox plague on the Klingon colony Kurttox. Your cargo hold is protected by a high intensity force field, under the pretext of protecting the fragile organisms from external radiation. In reality, the force field will hide evidence of the technology on board, and will mask output information from the warp drive, making it difficult for anyone to get an

accurate power curve reading, unless they get within a few kilometers. Don't let anyone get that close, Captain.”

Kirk nodded.

The Admiral continued. “Your mode of dress will be that of civilian merchant freighters. You will carry no Starfleet ID or any form of identification tying you to the Federation. In the event you find it necessary to transport down to an inhabited planet, your ship’s cargo area has an extensive inventory of civilian clothing. You should be able to find something which will allow you to pass as a native. Again, don’t let anyone get too close.”

“And I need to restate,” the Admiral’s face took on an especially grim look. “There will be no record made of this meeting or mission. In the event any of you are captured or killed, your service records will show your last assignments as here on the Starbase. You will be reported as missing. Starfleet will deny any knowledge of your actions, and no one will come looking for you.”

Everyone at the table nodded somberly. “We understand, Admiral.” replied Kirk.

“Captain, you must not let *Agenda* fall into enemy hands. It possesses some of the most advanced technology Starfleet has to offer. Some of which you don’t even know about yet.” ordered Benning.

Adam’s curiosity piqued once again at this statement.

Benning continued. “If necessary, you will destroy the ship rather than letting it be captured. You must also take every precaution in preventing anyone from knowing the true nature of the vessel and the mission.” Benning cautioned.

“You can count on us Admiral.” replied Kirk.

“I know I can, Captain. That’s why I picked you for this mission. That’s why I picked all of you.” The Admiral made eye contact with each member of the team.

“Before we adjourn, are there any more questions?” asked Benning.

“Admiral, will we have a Medical Officer on this mission?” inquired Adam.

“Sorry, I forgot.” apologized Benning. “Lieutenant T’Lev has had extensive medical training. While she is not a doctor, she should be able to handle most situations capably with the medical equipment aboard the ship.”

“Thank you, sir.” Adam replied, with an acknowledging nod to the Vulcan navigator.

McCoy sat forward. “With all due respect, Admiral, you can’t send these men on this mission without a surgeon. What if there are casualties?”

“The purpose of this mission, Doctor, is investigation, not confrontation.” replied Benning.

“Investigation!” declared McCoy. “Forgive me if I’m wrong, Admiral, but didn’t you put weapons on that ship?”

“Yes we did. We had to allow for the possibility of hostilities.”

“So am I!” McCoy declared.

“Admiral, as much as Doctor McCoy is needed on the *Enterprise*, I am inclined to agree with him.” added Kirk.

“I’m afraid it’s a moot point, gentlemen. We have no doctors to spare right now.” replied the Admiral.

“I thought all starbases carried three full-time surgeons.” said McCoy.

“Normally we do. However, we shipped two of our surgeons to the front right after the attack on Omega IV, one on the *Merrimac* and the other on the *Yorktown*. We only have one remaining surgeon here.”

“So those ships now have two surgeons each, but none to go on this mission. That was terrific planning, wasn’t it, Admiral, sir?” fumed McCoy.

“Bones, that’s enough.” ordered Kirk.

“For the record, Commander, our surgeons were sent to the Federation border before this mission was conceived. And furthermore, I do not feel compelled to explain my decisions to you.” Benning said authoritatively.

McCoy ignored his Captain. “Can’t you bring a surgeon back from the front?”

“There isn’t time. This mission launches this afternoon, without fail. And, I am not inclined to pull any ships off our border at this time anyway.”

“Going on this mission without a surgeon just isn’t right.” argued McCoy.

“Admiral, would it be possible to send a surgical nurse on the mission?” inquired Kirk.

“I’m afraid we have none of those to spare either, Captain. Doctor McCoy, I understand your concerns. Lieutenant T’Lev is the best we can offer for now, but believe me, she is capable. While Captain Kirk and his crew are being oriented on the *Agenda*, I would invite you to interview the Lieutenant with respect to her knowledge and experience. Would that satisfy your concerns?”

McCoy fumed and then mumbled. “It might.”

“Then it’s done. Doctor McCoy, immediately following this meeting, report with Lieutenant T’Lev to

Sick Bay. You can conduct your interview there.” Benning said.

“Very well.” conceded McCoy, reluctantly.

Adam had witnessed this kind of exchange between Doctor McCoy, Captain Kirk and Mr. Spock several times on the bridge of the *Enterprise*. While such a display may be surprising to some, Adam knew of the friendship between Kirk and McCoy. He also knew first hand that Captain Kirk was the type of commanding officer who invited the opinion of his officers, whether he agreed with them or not. But Adam was incredulous that Doctor McCoy would go toe-to-toe with a fleet Admiral in the way he just did. Especially a highly decorated Admiral like Benning. This bordered on insubordination. Adam was astounded.

“Now that we’ve resolved that, is there any other business?” asked Benning.

Adam spoke. “Admiral, I’ve been wanting to ask this question ever since the hearing, and now is probably as good a time as any.”

“Yes, Commander?” inquired Benning.

“You said this mission was in the planning stages since shortly after the attack, and before the hearing. How did you know I would be cleared of any wrong doing?” asked Adam.

Benning smiled. “The Board of Inquiry is a formality required whenever a command is lost. I reviewed the particulars of the incident on Omega IV with the Judge Advocate General’s office prior to the hearing, and we concluded there was no issue which might lead to court martial. I have also followed your career, Commander, and realize Captain Harwood’s line of questioning may have caused you some doubts. Don’t

take his line of questioning too seriously. Starfleet has too many cowboys ready to use phasers and torpedoes at the drop of a gauntlet. Captain Harwood used to command a starship. He doesn't anymore. We need more officers like you who are willing to think and talk first and shoot only as a last resort. That's one of the main reasons why you've been chosen for this mission. Besides, I wanted personally to see how you would handle yourself under fire."

"I see. Thank you Admiral for the explanation, and your confidence." replied Adam.

"Certainly, son." replied the Admiral.

Then Benning's mood turned serious again. "There is a final piece of business to be handled here. As I indicated, this mission is off the record. That being the case, Captain Kirk and Commander Scott, the two of you will officially be on leave. Commander Russell, you will officially be convalescing here until your injuries have fully healed."

The officers nodded their understanding.

The Admiral continued. "Commander Spock, in light of Captain Kirk's status, I hereby bestow on you the field promotion to captain, and the command of the *Enterprise*. And per my orders, the *Enterprise* will lead a task force into the Neutral Zone if so ordered."

Spock acknowledged the orders with a slow and sincere nod.

Then to the rest of the group, "If there is nothing further, we will adjourn to our respective ships. To the crew of *Agenda* please be there in fifteen minutes to tour the ship. Each of you will be required to retina scan into the hangar deck. See you there." Benning picked up his recorder and as he prepared to leave the

room, he motioned to Adam. “Walk with me, Commander.”

Adam was puzzled, but walked in the direction of the Admiral, as requested.

Benning extended his hand. “I wanted to personally express my condolences for the loss of those under your command on Omega IV. Having lost people myself, I understand what you have gone through. Command can be the loneliest place in the galaxy.”

“Thank you, sir. I appreciate that.” replied Adam.

Then the Admiral lowered his voice. “I also wanted to tell you about one particular member of your team. An Ensign Carrie Brooks.”

Adam stiffened. “What about her?”

“Survivors of the attack on the outpost have been debriefed since the arrival of the *Volare*. Word has it Ensign Brooks was responsible for the survival of a lot of those people.” Benning said.

“I’m afraid I don’t understand, sir.”

“She and a number of others gathered into one of the fortified bunkers on the outpost. When they entered the bunker, the environmental generator wouldn’t activate. Seems the auto-start module had failed. Ensign Brooks bypassed the auto-start, and left the bunker to jury rig a connection into a relay tied into the outpost’s main reactor. Essentially, she kick-started the generator to life. Unfortunately, she never made it back inside the bunker before the missiles arrived.”

“If she hadn’t done what she did, those people all would have suffocated to death when the outpost’s protective dome was penetrated. She’s a hero, Commander. She saved dozens of lives.” added the Admiral.

Adam felt weak. Unable to speak, his legs trembled at this revelation. He tried hard to appear strong.

“I’ve also been authorized to tell you that Ensign Brooks is being awarded the Starfleet Medal of Valor. It’s being sent to her parents.” Benning stated. “I thought you’d have wanted to know that.”

“Yes. Thank you. Did they find her body?”

The Admiral shook his head. “Doubtful they ever will. Sorry.”

Adam nodded.

Benning stepped closer and placed his hand on Adam’s shoulder. His demeanor was fatherly. “I hear Ensign Brooks may have been special to you. And, I know how easy it can be to lose yourself in thoughts of revenge. I’ve been there. Not that your loss is unimportant, it isn’t. But, keep in mind there is a lot at stake in this mission. Perhaps the security of the entire Federation and peace in the galaxy. Don’t lose sight of that, son.”

Adam reflected for several moments. He suspected that Carrie hadn’t survived the attack. He was dealing with this reality. Just the same, to receive confirmation, it just hurt. He gathered himself and then in a reassuring voice, replied. “I won’t, sir. I promise.”

“Good man.” replied Admiral Benning. “I know you’ll make us proud.”

Chapter Eight

The Imperial Klingon Warship *Grich* hung in orbit above the planet, its cloaking device activated in order to avoid being detected by the inhabitants of the world below. Months earlier, the Klingons scouted the planet, under cloak, for the resources and facilities they would need to execute their plan. The planet met nearly all of their needs perfectly. It was strategically close to Federation space, and it was near the Dorian Nebula. The nebula would provide an ideal hiding place for the warships, and provided enough ultra-violet radiation to interfere with Federation long-range sensors.

They took over a long abandoned manufacturing facility in the heart of a run-down industrial sector, on the outskirts of a populated area. The fact that the factory was abandoned gave the Klingons license to quietly convert it for their needs, all without arousing any suspicion from the locals.

Based on materials and equipment left behind when the plant closed, the Klingons surmised that the plant was previously used to make some sort of containers for transporting radioactive fuel ore. Thus the production lines and conveyors left at the facility were well suited to their new purpose. And, the populated area just kilometers away gave the Klingons the labor they needed to man their production lines. They performed almost daily kidnappings.

The majority of the supplies and materials needed for the construction of the illegal warp missiles had been transported from the *Grich* to the factory a few hours earlier.

Commander Kahl now prepared to beam down to the planet with the last remaining item, a magnetic bottle containing several kilograms of anti-matter drained from the *Grich*'s fuel pods. Were the magnetic seal in the bottle to fail, Kahl knew he possessed enough anti-matter to destroy the production facility and an area surrounding the facility approximately ten kilometers in diameter.

The anti-matter would be used to fuel the missile's warp drives and arm their warheads. There was no reason to deliver the anti-matter personally, but Kahl wanted to pay the facility a visit. He had a message to deliver. And he felt that delivering the anti-matter along with the message would add strength to the message.

As he materialized inside the facility, Kahl noticed the place was in awful disarray. Discarded materials and dropped food littered the floor. Raw materials used in the production of the missiles were thrown into boxes with little or no organization, slowing down the production process. Klingon Warriors, disrupter rifles at the ready, oversaw the kidnapped and shackled civilians as they labored.

There were about thirty such locals working in the facility, and the Klingons treated them badly. Hours were inhumane, breaks were infrequent and beatings were common when production was perceived not to be fast enough. One poor worker was beaten nearly to death when he couldn't find just the right component in the random pile of raw materials.

The kidnappings had not gone unnoticed by the local law enforcement. As a result, Klingon guards were discretely posted at all the facility entrances. Motion sensors had been installed at strategic points

along the building's exterior. It would be difficult for anyone to approach without being detected.

Kahl watched as the abducted humanoids labored at their task of assembling components for the missiles, while keeping a watchful eye on their captors. Kahl noted that the prisoners seemed to exhibit no fear. If he had to describe their demeanor, he would describe it as disdain for their captors. He found that intriguing.

Commander Gowden was responsible for overseeing the operations inside the production facility. He approached Kahl and saluted. "I see you have brought the anti-matter."

"Yes." replied Kahl. "I have also brought instructions from Squadron Captain Derm for changes to be made to these missiles." He handed Gowden the small computer tablet with the instructions.

"This says the missiles drives are to be tuned to emit a different energy signature." recited Gowden. "What is the meaning of this?"

Kahl became enraged at this indignity. "You dare to question the judgment of a Captain of the Imperial Fleet!?" Kahl challenged. "I could kill you where you stand for your insubordination." His hand went to his holstered disruptor.

"I meant no disrespect." replied an excited Gowden, slowly backing away, while preparing to hit the ground if the disruptor cleared synthetic leather. "I beg forgiveness." he pleaded, raising his hands in a vain attempt to block the disruptor blast he believed was coming.

Kahl slowly lowered his hand. "I will overlook your disloyalty this time. But do not let this happen again."

“Never, again. I promise! And, the changes, they will be done.” pledged Gowden. “May I ask, what is to be the intended target for the new missiles so that I may program that into the guidance systems?”

“That is not for you to know. You have all the information you require to complete your task. The missiles will be programmed for their destination when they are brought aboard.” replied Kahl. Actually, he did not know himself, as his Captain had not yet told him. Also, Kahl knew he would draw the wrath of Derm had he killed Gowden. In spite of his tendency toward insubordination, Gowden was a master designer of guidance systems.

“The changes in the warp drives will require more time to construct the missiles.” said Gowden.

“How much time?”

Gowden thought for several seconds. “Four days.”

“I will return in two days. Have the missiles ready to transport to my ship at that time.”

“But, but, that is impossible.” stammered Gowden.

“Two days, no more.” ordered Kahl.

At that moment, the Klingon officers were distracted by a commotion coming from the production line. One of the Klingon guards was berating a shackled worker for a mistake. The Klingon struck the kidnapped worker, knocking him to the floor. The civilian immediately got to his feet and hit the Klingon in a very tender place, causing him to howl. Another Klingon warrior, standing nearby, raised his disrupter rifle and fired. The worker was instantly vaporized. This caused a great stir among the other captives. Despite their restraints, several tried to advance on the guard who had murdered their comrade. The workers

were quickly restrained by other Klingon guards, who ordered them to return to their work.

“I will need more workers to meet this deadline.”
Gowden advised.

“If you could keep your warriors from killing the workers you have, you wouldn’t need more.”
reprimanded Kahl.

“Yes, Commander.” Gowden replied.

“Get what you need but no more than that. You and your men have already attracted too much attention already. We don’t need the local authorities investigating around here. That could upset our timetables and be very messy.”

Gowden merely nodded.

“Two days, Commander.” said Kahl. “Or you could meet such an unfortunate fate as the poor soul your men just killed. And, clean this place up. It is a disgrace. If Captain Derm were to see this you would all be executed!”

Kahl signaled for the *Grich* to beam him aboard.

Gowden stood, frozen in place as he watched Kahl dissolve in the transporter beam.

Chapter Nine

With the aid of a maintenance shuttle, the crew of *Agenda* had a good opportunity to tour the exterior of their new ship from stem to stern and from starboard to port. No detail went unnoticed, including the pock marks in the bow section of the ship from prior impacts with space debris.

One of the main criticisms of this class of freighter from days past was that the navigational deflector was too underpowered. Kirk and Scott noted that a new, larger deflector dish was installed in the bow, just above the retracting plate housing the newly installed phaser. They hoped it would do the job.

Adam noted to himself that while the exterior of the ship remained an old DY600 freighter, enough modifications had been made that anyone drawing close enough to notice couldn't help but raise an eyebrow. It would be important not to let anyone get that close.

The shuttle docked at the starboard side airlock, and the crew boarded the vessel to tour the interior of their new home. Lieutenant Crowe, having piloted the ship in her early test phase, asked to be excused from the rest of the tour so he could insure the helm was ready for departure. He was given permission to leave and headed straight to the flight deck. Captain Kirk, Commander Russell and Engineer Scott continued.

The tour, led by Commander O'Neal, started in the crew quarters and galley directly behind the flight deck, and directly above Engineering. They worked their way forward to the flight deck itself, where Kirk and Adam would be spending the majority of their time. While on the flight deck, O'Neal pointed out

some of the new sensory equipment installed for this mission, adjacent to the helm station.

Far from the standards he had become accustomed to aboard starships, this ship was merely functional. On starships, every officer has their own quarters, complete with shower and restroom facilities. Crew members sometimes have to double up. On this ship, there is one common crew area with a dorm-like sleeping area, common shower, and common restroom. Very cozy. While mixed gender freighter crews were not unheard of, they were not very common. This mission, though would require such a gender mix. Separate schedules would have to be established for showers. All persons volunteering for this mission had been made aware of the personal conditions ahead of time, and no one grumbled. Starfleet personnel are trained to be adaptable.

The small galley separated the crew quarters from the flight deck, and was sparse. Small food storage containers were off to one side, and the size and configuration suggested the only food on board during a normal freight run was of the freeze dried variety. A quick inspection by Kirk confirmed that was exactly the type of food on board. "Starfleet emergency rations." He noted. "Terrific."

Adjacent to the galley, and also directly behind the flight deck Adam spotted a separate, single-cot sleeping cabin, presumably for the Captain. "At least Kirk will have some privacy." Adam thought to himself.

The time was 16:25 hours. They had already spent two hours touring the ship and hadn't yet been to engineering. Their scheduled departure time to launch the mission was approaching quickly, so it was decided to split up. Adam, Commander O'Neal and

Captain Kirk remained on the flight deck reviewing the ships command systems while Lieutenant Crowe readied the helm and studied the pre-programmed course in the navigational computer. Chief Engineer Scott went below to the engine room, to become re-acquainted with Doctor Karen Morse.

Upon his arrival in Engineering, Scotty's attention was immediately drawn to the unusual looking warp reactor sitting pretty much in the middle of this very cramped engine room. He watched as the reactor pulsed slowly with the power of the controlled matter/anti-matter fusion reaction, providing power for the various ships systems and the warp drive. He visualized the incredible energy being released with each pulsation, regulated by the dilithium crystals inside the intermix chamber.

With his eyes, Scott traced the plasma conduits, softly glowing with the undulating energy of super-charged plasma gas, as they led from each side of the reactor body to the warp nacelles outboard the ship. It was unlike any other warp reactor he had ever seen. While not small, it was more compact, more streamlined than those currently in use on Federation ships. He marveled at the beauty of its design.

Around him, engineers from Commander O'Neal's staff worked feverishly to perform final testing on the equipment and systems needed to make the ship operational. Time was drawing very short.

Standing near the reactor core, studying a handheld scanner was Doctor Morse. Scott made his way in her direction, which didn't take very long.

"T'is quite a beautiful thing you have here, Doctor." Scotty said while motioning in the direction of the warp core.

Doctor Morse looked up from her handheld toward Scott only briefly and uttered a simple, "Thank you."

To which Scott offered, "Is there anything I can do to help?"

"Thank you, Commander, but I think we have things under control." stated the engineer as people flew in every direction around her in the cramped space."

"Well, then do you mind if I ask you a few questions?" asked Scott.

Karen turned toward him with a stern look. "I'm sorry, Commander, but right now I'm extremely busy trying to meet launch deadline. We'll have plenty of time for questions when we are underway."

"Alright." said Scott. "The questions will wait. But if ya' don' mind, I'd like to get a look at your warp field schematics."

Without so much as a word, Doctor Morse turned to the computer console adjacent to the reactor and with a few keystrokes punched up the schematics. Then she turned back to the warp core and resumed her scans.

Scotty shook his head, sighed softly and began to study the screen.

Having completed their review of the bridge systems, O'Neal asked if there were any questions.

"What's left to do before we can launch?" Adam asked.

"We're buttoning things up now. Pretty much all that is left is to finish installing the circuitry for the weapons systems we installed. Calibrate the targeting sensors. That sort of thing." O'Neal replied.

"Will she be ready to launch on schedule?" Kirk inquired.

O'Neal studied his answer before replying. "She'll be ready to launch. I just wish we had more preparation time for this mission."

"Specify." demanded the Captain.

"Don't get me wrong, sir. This ship is fully functional. We just didn't have time to get all the systems up to Starfleet standards."

"Which systems?" asked Adam.

"The impulse drive for one. It's about forty years old. It works, alright, but she's slow. It's sluggish at the helm."

Lieutenant Crowe nodded in agreement.

O'Neal continued. "Upgrading the impulse system wasn't in the original specifications when this ship was intended just to be a prototype for the new warp drive. Had we known otherwise, you'd have new impulse reactors on board, and new circuitry. I'd hate to see you get into a dogfight with a Klingon warship at impulse speeds."

"We'll do our best to avoid that." Kirk said, sarcastically.

"In such a scenario, the increase in shield strength should better protect you." added O'Neal, as a consolation. "My recommendation: hit them hard and fast, and take them out of the fight."

"What else?" inquired Kirk.

"The tactical sensors are outdated too."

With this bit of information, Adam rolled his eyes.

"Noted." replied Kirk with a skeptical look.

At that, O'Neal led Adam and Kirk back through the galley to the ladder leading down to Engineering. On this ship, there were no turbolifts. During the short journey down no one spoke. It seemed everyone was in need of a short break from the non-stop dialogue

which had been underway since shortly after the mission briefing. They reached the bottom of the ladder and stepped on the Engineering deck.

Karen Morse and Commander Scott were now both at the computer monitor, apparently involved in a meaningful and heated dialogue. Both their faces wore grim expressions. They looked up as the two Starfleet officers approached.

“Hello, gentlemen, welcome to Engineering.” Doctor Morse greeted, her demeanor suddenly changing.

“That’s usually my line.” retorted Scott, glumly. Adam noted the tension.

“Thank you Doctor, can we see your creation?” inquired Kirk.

“Right this way.” said Karen, gesturing with her open hand to the pulsating warp reactor next to her.

“Very impressive looking, Doctor.” said Adam.

“Thank you.” Karen replied. “I only hope it performs as impressively as it looks.”

“I’m sure it will, Doctor. Right, Scotty?” inquired Kirk.

Scott’s demeanor remained grim as he said nothing in reply.

“Scotty, what’s wrong? If you have concerns, let’s hear them.” implored Kirk.

“Permission to speak freely?” asked Scott.

“Always.” replied Kirk.

“I have no doubt the reactor will generate the joules needed to run the drive, but these warp field schematics, they’re all wrong!” declared Scott.

“How so?” asked Kirk.

“The fields are too far out of balance. We’ll be ok until warp four, or so, but after that, the field stresses will either tear us apart, or the imbalance will create a

wormhole that will throw us to the other side of the galaxy. And I'm not sure which will happen first!" declared Scott emphatically.

"Doctor?" inquired Kirk.

Karen Morse straightened and composed her thoughts. "Commander Scott's concern are understandable. Commander O'Neal and I have been working on this theory for more than five years. We tried the conventional approach initially, but in our various computer models, even with the more powerful anti-matter reaction, we could not achieve the field integrity to maintain a stable warp nine. So we had to take a different approach."

She continued. "After many trials and failures with different models, we finally arrived on this field schematic." She swiveled the display terminal around so all could see.

"Multiple models we have run have returned similar results so close to each other that there is more than a ninety-six percent correlation between them. We feel that has merit. Would you agree, Commander?" looking directly at Commander O'Neal.

"Yes. I quite agree, Doctor." added O'Neal. "And frankly, Starfleet top brass also agreed, otherwise they wouldn't have funded the continued research and testing."

Kirk nodded.

Scott replied, "With all due respect, computer models don't battle Klingon warships. And this drive has only been tested to what, warp four-point-five?"

Karen replied, "Yes. Four-point-five. But that was just to check the integrity of the drive systems itself. Nothing more. And no, Commander computer models don't fight battles. But, please bear in mind that all

new technologies start with a theory. We happen to think this is a good one. If I didn't, I wouldn't have volunteered to go along on this mission."

"Fair enough, Doctor." replied Kirk. "Scotty, anything else?"

Scott's shoulders slumped. He looked beaten. "No, sir. I suppose not."

"Tell you what, Scotty. When we get underway and we're at the point where we're ready to test at the higher warp, I'll leave it to you to shut down the drive if you see any sign of excessive stresses or imbalance." Then to Doctor Morse, "Sorry, Doctor, but this is my mission and my ship now."

Then back to Scott. "Will that satisfy you, Scotty?"

Scott's posture straightened. "Yes, sir. That'll work."

"Agreed Doctor?" asked Kirk.

"Agreed." replied Doctor Morse, emotionless.

"Good. Will your engines be ready to get us out of here in forty-five minutes?" inquired Kirk.

"You can count on it, Captain." Karen replied.

"Captain, I'll return in a few minutes to help Doctor Morse and Mr. Scott with final adjustments to the drive." advised O'Neal. "But first, we've got one last piece of business in the cargo hold."

"Oh?" said Adam.

"Please follow me." requested O'Neal as he turned and headed the short distance back up the ladder to galley level.

When they reached the galley, instead of heading back to the flight deck, O'Neal wound his way through the crew quarters to the airlock separating the main part of the ship from the removable cargo container.

He verified by the simple analog pressure gauge next to the hatch that the cargo hold contained an atmosphere, and turned the large metal wheel to open the hatch, which opened with a metallic clank.

As the three officers entered the hold, they immediately observed approximately three meters above them the enclosed catwalk, where the freighter captain would be able to observe and supervise the loading of his container. The enclosure allowed him to stay in an environment while the container was open to the vacuum and cold of space.

The officers then observed that other than some containers of food, clothing, medical supplies and personal toiletries, the hold was virtually empty with the exception of something fairly large off in a corner by itself, and securely covered with a tarp. O'Neal walked toward the item.

“This, gentlemen, is the other piece of technology that Admiral Benning referred to in our meeting. This item too is highly classified.” Then with a flourish, he unfastened and pulled away the tarp. “Allow me to introduce you to the PAV.”

As the tarp was pulled away, a small craft was revealed, approximately seven or so meters in length, and standing not quite two meters high as it rested on its landing skids. The craft was charcoal gray in color, with a fuselage sloping up to a sleek cockpit with a sliding canopy located slightly more than halfway past the ship's midpoint.

The hull composition appeared to be a metal/graphite composition, presumably for weight reduction and stealth.

On either side of the fuselage were two stubby, rounded wings extending from just under the canopy

toward the rear of the craft. Each wing held two air-to-air missiles.

Ahead of the wings on either side of the craft, and extending from areas where the fuselage flared out slightly were two fixed mounted phaser cannons, one per side.

Finally, at the rear of the craft, were two over-sized thruster ports, apparently the main source of propulsion.

Adam spoke first. "This looks similar to the one-man trainers I flew in the academy."

"Exactly. And handles like it to. Similar controls and set-up." replied O'Neal. "But you'll find this to be a whole lot faster and a lot more agile."

"What does PAV stand for?" Kirk asked.

"Precision Assault Vehicle." replied O'Neal.

"Explain."

"We've been working on this under Starfleet's authority for a few years now in response to intelligence that has been gathered. The Klingons are rumored to be working on their own PAV." stated O'Neal.

"What is the thought behind this? I can't see this being a real threat to a starship." asked Adam.

"Not by itself." replied O'Neal. "But a swarm of them, and you've got a problem. These small craft are so nimble and quick, and difficult to detect beyond five thousand kilometers, that they could swarm a much larger ship or ground target before the target can adapt their defenses. The composite skin on these things too makes it much harder to establish a weapons lock."

He continued. "Imagine trying to swat a whole swarm of mosquitos around your face. You might get

all of them, eventually, but they can do a whole lot of damage before then.”

Kirk added, “And applying that analogy to this PAV craft, if the Klingon version can do damage to a starship’s shields and weapons systems, it makes it that much easier for the warships to finish the job.”

“Exactly.” said O’Neal. “So it makes sense for Starfleet to investigate making our own in answer to the Klingons. We can engage their PAVs in air-to-air combat while the starships slug it out.”

Adam nodded. “So, how does this fit into this mission?”

“I’ll answer that.” replied Kirk. “There is a high probability that we will find a planet or planets which have to be investigated. Rather than risking exposing *Agenda* in a recon mission, we can send one man in the PAV with a greater likelihood of being able to get in, gather evidence and get out without being detected.”

“I want that mission.” declared Adam.

“I thought you might.” smiled Kirk. “Let’s get underway then and hopefully you’ll get your chance.”

“I have a few more questions.” said Adam.

“Go ahead.” encouraged O’Neal.

“How fast is it?” asked Adam.

“We have it rated at a top speed of point-zero-three C. Not warp speed, or even full impulse, but a lot more nimble than anything in the fleet.” stated O’Neal.

“What about the weapons and defenses?” asked Kirk.

“Twin mark four phaser pulse cannons, with four low yield air-to-air missiles with conventional warheads.” said O’Neal.

“Why low yield?” asked Adam.

O'Neal shrugged his shoulders. "They were the only ones we had on hand with such short notice. It was this or nothing. But don't underestimate their value. Each warhead packs more than ten kilos of explosive."

"And remember, this is not supposed to be a combat mission." Kirk smirked.

Adam smiled.

"Defenses, Commander?" prodded Kirk.

"Oh right. Sorry, I forgot." shared O'Neal. "The ship is equipped with standard shields, unheard of in a craft this small. They won't stand up long to a direct hit from a Klingon warship, but will help protect you from indirect assaults."

Adam acknowledged with a nod.

O'Neal asked, "Anything else, gentlemen?"

"Very good, Commander. I think we covered it all. I'll be on the bridge if you need Me." said Kirk as he exited the hold.

Back on the bridge, Adam busied himself with a final review of the tactical systems. He conferred for several minutes with Lieutenant Crowe at the helm over the coordination of the ships sensors.

All appeared to be ready. The engineering teams which had worked around the clock getting *Agenda* for this mission had done a remarkable job, and were preparing to leave the ship. Captain Kirk made a brief log entry commending the Engineers and Lieutenant Commander O'Neal for their efforts and denoting time of the engineering teams departure.

Finally, they were less than ten minutes from launch time. Kirk addressed the helm. "Mr. Crowe, prepare to power up all systems."

Lieutenant T'Lev, monitoring the communications channels, swiveled in her seat and addressed Kirk. "Captain, Admiral Benning on secure channel. He wishes to address the crew."

"On main viewer, Lieutenant." replied Kirk, forgetting for a moment that *Agenda* only had one viewer.

The Admiral appeared on the screen. "I see that you're all set to get underway."

"Ready to go, Admiral." replied Kirk.

"Excellent. God speed to you and your crew, Captain." Then he continued more seriously. "I can't overemphasize the importance of the confidentiality of this mission. You've got some of Starfleet's most secret and prized technology on board that ship. It must be protected at all cost."

"We will take every precaution, Admiral." assured Kirk.

Benning nodded appreciatively. "Let me speak clearly, Captain. In the event there is a chance the technology will fall into enemy hands, the ship and its contents are to be destroyed. The crew of *Agenda* is considered expendable. Is that understood?"

Adam knew this but still winced at hearing it.

"Perfectly clear, Admiral." replied Kirk.

"Very well then. Good luck to all of you, and my personal thanks. Benning out."

The viewscreen image reverted to the interior of the space dock.

Kirk addressed the helm. "Mr. Crowe, bring all systems on line."

"Aye, sir." replied the young Lieutenant. Around the bridge, instrument panels which had been darkened came to full intensity, and from around the ship came

the sounds of systems coming to life. Adam was suitably impressed.

The Captain punched a button on his chair for the ship's intercom system. "Anyone not going on this mission had better be leaving the ship." he closed the channel.

Kirk addressed his crew. "All stations, please report status."

"Helm and navigation ready." advised Lieutenant Crowe.

"Tactical weapons and defensive systems ready." advised Adam.

"Sensors, communications and library computer ready." said Lieutenant T'Lev.

"Engineering ready, impulse drive at your command. Warp drive ready, I think." advised Mr. Scott via intercom.

Kirk smiled to himself.

"Lieutenant, have all non-mission related personnel left the ship?" asked Kirk.

T'Lev checked her personnel readout. "The last one has just left."

"Very well. Signal space dock we are ready to depart."

"Space dock acknowledges, Captain. We are cleared for departure." advised T'Lev.

"Commander, disengage umbilical supports. Helm, maneuvering thrusters at station keeping. Running lights on." Kirk ordered.

"Aye, sir, thrusters at station keeping. Lights on." advised Lieutenant Crowe.

"Umbilical supports released, space dock has disengaged tractor moorings. We are floating freely." advised Adam.

“Lieutenant T’Lev, please note the time, and request space doors open.” ordered Kirk.

On the viewscreen, Adam could see that the warning lights on the space doors began flashing and the doors began to slowly part.

“Time of departure, 17:28 hours.” advised T’Lev.

“Very well done, everyone. We are two minutes ahead of schedule.” joked the Captain. “Mr. Crowe, engage maneuvering thrusters. Take us out.”

“Thrusters engaged.” acknowledged the Lieutenant.

There was a brief perceptible lurch forward as the ship began to move slowly towards the nearly open space doors. Then the feeling of movement was minimized as the inertial dampeners compensated.

“ETA to space doors, one minute.” advised Crowe.

“Thank you, Lieutenant.” Kirk acknowledged.

One minute later, the covert supply ship had cleared the doors to space dock and was in open space. Below them was Omega Regnus III, a huge blue ball, not unlike Earth in its size and appearance.

Agenda’s departing course put them in standard orbit above the planet for a brief period. And as they swung around the planet Adam was able to enjoy the view. Then his attention was drawn to the top of the viewscreen. The *Enterprise* hung in geosynchronous orbit above the starbase, and *Agenda’s* course was going to bring them alongside the starship, but at the required minimum distance required by Starfleet regulations.

Adam fondly remembered his brief tour of duty on board that ship. The *Enterprise* is one of the most celebrated vessels in Starfleet, as is her Captain. The vessel was also one of the oldest ships in the fleet, being one of the original fourteen Constitution class

starships. Despite her age, and the thousands of light years on her frame, she still looked good.

From *Agenda's* perspective, now looking head on toward the saucer shaped primary hull, the warp nacelles on the *Enterprise* seemed to stretch into infinity, like the wings of a majestic bird. The lettering on the hull, just forward of the bridge boasted **U.S.S. ENTERPRISE NCC-1701.**

Adam had forgotten just how big a Constitution class starship is. The *Enterprise*, at just under 300 meters in length, was over five times as long as *Agenda*, and more than six-hundred times her mass.

Kirk couldn't help but feel a bit of melancholy as he watched his ship disappear from the viewscreen.

"We are free of orbit and clear to navigate." advised the Lieutenant.

Kirk checked his console. "Set course one ninety-one, mark forty-four, speed one-half impulse power."

"Course set." advised Crowe.

"Execute."

The ship accelerated under the power of the aged impulse drive to nearly ten percent of the speed of light. Once again the inertial dampeners struggled to compensate, and then stabilized. In the viewscreen the stars began moving ever so slowly toward the ship.

As Starbase thirty one retreated in the distance, Kirk punched the comm switch to Engineering. "Commander Scott, can we go to full impulse power?"

"Showing green lights on the impulse drive, sir."

"Thank you, Commander." said Adam, and then turning to the helm. "Mr. Crowe, increase speed to full impulse power."

"Aye, sir." acknowledged the Lieutenant.

In the viewscreen, the stars came a bit faster as the impulse drive surged.

On board the *Enterprise*, Commander Spock assumed the captain's chair in the center of the bridge. All personnel were again aboard, and all stations were fully manned. All except Captain Kirk and Commander Scott. Their absence could not be explained to the crew due to the need for secrecy, and no explanation was given. This provided the fuel for much whispering and speculation among the crew. Spock knew the only cure would be to get underway.

Finally, starbase operations had given the *Enterprise* clearance to depart.

"Lieutenant Ferr," Spock called, "are you all settled in to your station?"

"I guess so, sir." Then a pause. "I mean, yes, sir."

"Excellent." acknowledged the Vulcan.

"Captain, I want to thank you for this opportunity. I know I can't replace you, but I want you to know I will do my best." declared the Denebian officer.

"I know you will, Lieutenant. Mr. Sulu, break orbit." Spock ordered.

The powerful vessel arced smoothly and gracefully from orbit to open space. Spock needed to give no further orders, as Sulu was a master starship pilot.

"We have cleared orbit, Captain." advised the Asian helmsman.

"Very well. Mr. Chekov, reset our original course for the Neutral Zone"

"Course set, Commander. I mean Keptin." responded the Russian navigator.

"Warp six, Mr. Sulu."

“Aye aye. Warp six.” replied the helmsman as his hands moved smoothly and confidently over the controls. Seconds later, the *Enterprise* jumped effortlessly to warp.

Chapter Ten

Agenda had been under way at full impulse power for just over twenty minutes. Despite several queries from Captain Kirk as to when they could go to warp, no assuring answer came from the engine room. Chief Engineer Scott and Doctor Karen Morse continued to haggle over fuel flow ratios. It seemed there would be no quick resolution to the debate. Kirk's patience was near an end. It was time for a personal visit.

Kirk moved from his chair in the direction of the galley and the ladder below when the communications panel manned by Lieutenant T'Lev signaled an incoming communiqué. Kirk paused to listen.

T'Lev opened the comm channel and answered with the pre-planned hail, identifying the vessel as the *Largess*. She listened for a moment and turned toward Kirk. "Captain, Admiral Benning on a secured channel."

"Put him on the viewscreen right here, Lieutenant." Almost instantly, the view of space ahead was replaced by the head and shoulders image of the Admiral.

"Admiral, how can we help you?" Kirk inquired.

"Captain, how is the ship?" Benning asked.

"Just fine so far, sir." Kirk replied, biting his tongue. "But you didn't contact us on a secured channel to ask about the ship, did you?"

"No." replied the Admiral, his face assuming a more serious expression. "Fleet activity within Klingon space has grown significantly within the last twenty-four hours. There have been no incursions yet into the zone that we know of, but we feel it is now just a matter of time."

“To what end?” inquired Kirk, already knowing the answer.

“Relay stations have intercepted some of the transmissions from the Klingon fleet. It’s still possible the Klingons are responding to increased presence on our side, but we are hearing something to the effect that since the peace talks have been discontinued, war is unavoidable, and expected. These kinds of transmissions are increasing in frequency. They appear to be feeding off these transmissions. Working themselves into a frenzy.”

Kirk frowned, concerned. “That’s not really unexpected of the Klingons. Would you think a re-deployment of our fleet away from the zone may help ease the tension?”

“I’ve thought about that, but at this point, I don’t think so. And I don’t want us to appear weak along our border, especially now.”

“Yes, I can understand that.” acknowledged Kirk. “What are your orders, Admiral?”

“Move up your timetable. Get to your first destination as quickly as possible. The only way to prevent escalating hostilities is to be able to prove conclusively who was responsible for the attack on Omega IV. If the Klingons are not responsible, we need to bring this information to light quickly, and defuse this situation.”

“Yes, sir.” replied the Captain. “How much time do you think we have before the Klingons cross?”

“Additional Klingon warships are arriving daily. It’s just a matter of a few days before they feel they have the strength to launch an attack. To match their numbers, and hopefully forestall an attack, I am requesting additional starships to help fortify our side.

Obviously, the Klingons are aware of this, but this won't put them off forever."

"You can count on us, Admiral." declared Kirk, with certainty.

Benning smiled. "My prayers are with you Captain, and your crew. Benning out." The image on the viewscreen reverted back to open space.

Kirk looked toward Adam. Without exchanging any words, the two communicated. "Time is of the essence, Commander." Kirk declared.

"What would you like me to do?" inquired Adam.

"Get down to Engineering and encourage Mr. Scott and Doctor Morse to settle their differences now."

"Yes, sir. On my way." replied Adam, as he strode briskly off the flight deck toward the galley.

"Lieutenant Crowe, prepare to go to warp." ordered Kirk.

Below decks, Adam thought he walked into a firestorm. Commander Scott and Doctor Morse were both talking so rapidly and simultaneously there was no way either of them heard what the other was saying.

Scotty was waving his arms wildly in the direction of the warp core while Karen Morse was alternately punching her finger in the direction of her computer terminal one minute, and then at Scotty the next. Adam watched in disbelief.

"Excuse me." Called Adam with no effect. Then a little louder, "EXCUSE ME." Still no response. Adam stuck the thumb and forefinger of his left hand into his mouth and emitted a very loud and shrill whistle. Both of the feuding parties were immediately silenced

and turned suddenly toward Adam with looks of outright surprise.

“What is going on here?” demanded the First Officer.

Scott spoke first. “These fuel flow equations are crazy. She’s trying to blow us to bits!”

“Commander Scott is being completely irrational.” countered Doctor Morse. “Our computer models and the results from our first test flight all support these flows.”

Scott immediately replied, “up to Warp four sure, but beyond that, POOF!” Scotty gestured with his arms in a fashion to mimic a massive explosion.

“Captain Kirk sent me down here to settle this debate. We just received a message from Admiral Benning. The Klingon fleet is growing in size by the minute. It will not be long before they have the strength to attack.” advised Adam.

“But we’re not ready!” exclaimed Scott.

“The Klingons aren’t going to wait for you to get comfortable with the fuel flow, Commander. We need to accelerate our mission.” advised Adam. “We need warp six or better, now.”

Scotty looked as though he was about to faint. Then he made a counter offer. “Commander, let us verify proper fuel and plasma flow at warp three for about an hour or so, so we don’t blow the whole damn ship into atoms. If it all looks good, then we can gradually increase speed.”

Adam looked to Doctor Morse. “Do you concur?”

Karen Morse assumed a posture of cockiness. “I’ve been saying all along that these flows will work, but if Commander Scott wants to take baby steps, then I’m fine with that.”

Adam pondered this for a moment and then turned to the comm. Panel on the nearby support, flipping the switch to the flight deck.

“Bridge.” Answered Kirk to the hail.

“Captain, we have a consensus that we can go to warp three for the first hour while Commander Scott and Doctor Morse monitor the flows.” advised Adam.

There was a short pause from the other end while the comm channel played static. “I want warp four now and you’ve got thirty minutes to get your readings after which we need warp six.”

“But Captain....” interrupted Scotty.

“That’s an order, Mr. Scott. I’m counting on you and Doctor Morse to make it happen.” commanded Kirk.

Scott’s shoulders slumped. “Aye, Captain.”

“Mr. Russell, report back to the bridge.” ordered the Captain.

“On my way.” replied Adam, closing the channel. Then turning to Scotty, shrugged his shoulders and counseled, “Sorry, Scotty. You can’t win them all.”

Adam had just returned to the flight deck as Captain Kirk ordered the helm.

“Mr. Crowe, ahead warp factor four.”

“Aye, sir. Warp four.” replied the Lieutenant as his hands moved over the helm controls. As he did so, the low frequency throbbing which had been background noise all along steadily grew in intensity. On the viewscreen, the stars which had been distant, stationary points of light suddenly reached toward the ship, forming a tunnel of soft blue-white light through which the ship appeared to be hurled at increasing speed. Abruptly, the seemingly endless tunnel

vanished, leaving in its place the view of stars slipping past the ship as the transition to warp was completed.

As Adam graduated with a high ranking in his Starfleet Academy class, he possessed a thorough understanding of the physics behind warp travel. Despite this, he always expected to feel some movement or hear some sound at transition. As usual though, there was neither.

“Warp four, Captain.” announced Lieutenant Crowe, as he fixed his gaze on the viewer ahead.

“Thank you, Lieutenant.” Kirk replied, with a wry smile.

Chapter Eleven

More than a thousand light years from the Neutral Zone, on the planet Earth, in the system of Sol, The Federation Council was in emergency session.

Because of the military aspect of the crisis, members of Starfleet's Joint Chiefs were present. Together, they had been in almost constant session since learning of the attack on Omega IV, discussing the evolving situation with the Klingon Empire. Due to the distance, reports coming from the zone still required almost two and a half days to make the journey by subspace. In spite of the distance, they were in receipt of regular updates from Starbase thirty-one.

The lights in the Council Chamber were dimmed, and the members sat in silence as they focused their attention on the large viewscreen at the end of the chamber. On the screen were the images of the attack on the outpost, recorded by the sensors aboard the Starship *Volare*.

The members watched as the first of the seven missiles impacted the outpost. Some grimaced, while others averted their eyes at the horror. Others watched, apparently unaffected by the sight. Of the latter, sat Council Member T'Nath, of Vulcan.

T'Nath had been in constant contact with the diplomatic team, led by Ambassador Sarek, working to establish a peace treaty with the Klingon Empire. An initiative that, in light of recent developments, now appeared doomed. To the contrary, war was now foremost on everyone's mind.

Despite lasting just under one-half minute, some felt the attack seemed to last an eternity. Finally, the

recording ended, and the lights in the chamber were returned to normal intensity.

“Any comments?” asked the President.

“Is there any doubt the missiles are of Klingon origin?” inquired Council Member Ellis, of Earth.

“A thorough analysis of the tactical readings gathered by the *Volare*, and the outpost prior to the attack, indicate the warp signatures and cloaking shields to be consistent with known Klingon technology.” replied Commodore Ray, of Starfleet Tactical.

“If that is the case, is there any way the Klingons could not be responsible for the attack?” asked Council Member Axli, of Quanis.

“In theory, they could have sold the missiles to some other government or military faction.” replied Council Member Tesh, of Deneb IV.

“For that matter, they could have sold the components which someone else may have assembled.” offered Axli.

“Yes, yes, these are all possibilities.” Ellis countered. “But the question is, why? Who would have anything to gain by destroying that outpost? Who would want to risk war with the Federation, and to what end?”

“The Federation has other enemies.” interjected Ray. “The Romulans, or perhaps the Tholians. Even the Gorn. Maybe this is a smoke screen to hide an incursion on some other front.”

“This sort of tactic is definitely not consistent with the Tholian Assembly.” rebutted the President. “The Gorn have no quarrel with the Federation. And as for the Romulans, they have not made their presence known for some time. Our intelligence indicates they

are dealing with unrest within their Empire. I believe they are too busy right now to tangle with the United Federation of Planets.”

“Someone else then.” retorted Ellis. “Maybe someone we don’t even know about yet is hoping to establish a foothold in Federation space. Someone might think it wise to try and initiate a conflict between the Federation and the Klingons. Let us wipe each other out. Then the real instigators simply waltz in and set up shop.”

The chamber fell silent as members considered such an implication. Finally, Council Member Axli spoke. “There are potentially endless possibilities, but all the facts point to the Klingons. They have the resources, the means and the technology to pull off such an attack. Besides, I think they also have motive.”

“What do you mean?” asked the President.

“The Klingons are a warrior race.” replied Axli. “They just don’t want peace. That goes against their very nature. Just look at the percentage of their budget which goes to their military while entire worlds within their empire are left in destitution. They don’t know how to be anything but warriors.”

The chamber came alive with murmuring. The President rapped his gavel and called for quiet.

“Council Member T’Nath,” spoke the President, “you have recently been in contact with Ambassador Sarek, who has spent several weeks with the Klingon delegates in negotiations. Did he report anything of a suspicious nature to you?”

T’Nath stood, and without emotion turned to face the President. “Mr. President, just this morning I received a dispatch from the Ambassador, who is currently on your Starbase thirty-one.” advised T’Nath.

“The Ambassador reported he sensed no unusual apprehension on the part of the Klingon delegates.”

“Please elaborate.” implored the President.

“According to Sarek, the delegates seemed genuinely interested in making progress. He had sensed strong emotion on the part of some members of the delegation over specific issues, but at no time did he sense any attempt at deception.” responded the Vulcan.

“T’Nath, does Sarek believe the Klingons are responsible?” asked Axli.

“Council Member Axli,” T’Nath began, “anything is possible. The fact that Ambassador Sarek did not sense deception does not mean it does not exist. The Klingons are a people awash with emotion. Sometimes, when such a jumble of emotions exist, it is difficult to distinguish from another.”

As Axli and T’Nath debated, a Lieutenant Commander entered the Council Chamber and approached Admiral Nagura. The aid handed the Admiral a small computer tablet, turned and left the chamber. Nagura scanned the pad, frowned, and scanned it again. Nagura slowly rose from his seat.

“Mr. President, I have just been handed the latest update from Admiral Benning at Starbase thirty-one. Reports from Omega outposts indicate the situation is growing more serious. Forces inside Klingon space continue to mass, and all indications are the Klingons are preparing to attack.” stated Nagura.

“Do you have a time projection for this attack, Admiral?” inquired the President.

“Based on Admiral Benning’s tactical analysis, I project the Klingons could be at attack strength in as little as four days.” replied the Admiral.

“Since the report took two and a half days to arrive, that would mean the Klingons could be ready to attack as early as tomorrow!” clarified Commodore Ray.

“The fact the Klingons are massing a fleet inside their space does not necessarily indicate they intend to attack.” stated T’Nath, logically.

“What else could it mean?” demanded Axli.

“The Klingons may simply be strengthening their border in response to Starfleet’s movements along the Neutral Zone.” said T’Nath.

“With all due respect Mr. Councilman, aren’t you being a little naive? We are after all talking about Klingons, the aggressor species.” replied Axli.

T’Nath opted not to reply to this challenge. Axli is a Quanesian. And a relatively new member of the United Federation of Planets. The Quanesians have never been renowned for their discipline in logic. Many of the decisions they had made in the affairs of their world had been viewed as, well, peculiar. For this reason, T’Nath had voted against their admission into the Federation. Despite his vote, the Quanesians had been accepted for the trade opportunities they presented, but by the narrowest of margins.

“Mr. President,” spoke Admiral Nagura, “whatever the reason for the Klingon activity in their space, we have before us an opportunity, and justification to take decisive action.”

“Please explain, Admiral.” urged the President.

“The fact is, we have a head start on the Klingons in building strength at the zone.” He scanned his computer pad. “In less than three days, we will have a force of thirty-five starships in position to enter the Neutral Zone.”

T’Nath spoke up. “Are you suggesting we attack the Klingons?”

“What I am saying is, I don’t think we want to wait for them to make the first move. We should hit them now, in the zone, before they are at full strength. A successful strike now will significantly weaken their offensive capabilities.”

“But what if the Klingons really are not responsible for the attack on Omega IV?” Ellis inquired.

“Frankly, sir, right now that is of secondary importance. I believe the Klingons are poised for an attack. If they want a fight, my opinion is to give it to them, now, and on our terms. Don’t wait for them to call the shots.” cautioned Nagura.

“I can’t believe what I’m hearing!” proclaimed Ellis. “What you’re talking about is declaring war on the Klingons! Outrageous!”

“I am not proposing war, Mr. Council person. I am proposing a strategic strike to negate the probability of any hostile intentions on their part.”

“Call it what you will, war is still war.” replied Ellis.

“I think we should do it.” advised Axli.

“Mr. President, rumor has it that Admiral Benning has launched a covert operation into the Neutral Zone. Can you please comment on that?” asked T’Nath.

Admiral Nagura intercepted the question. “Such rumors are unfounded and irresponsible. Such an operation is not only a violation of treaty, but most likely a waste of time and resources as the chances of such an operation resulting in something tangible are slim.”

“But that’s not a denial.” retorted T’Nath.

The Admiral regarded this for a minute. “If such an operation were underway, it would have to be highly

classified for obvious reasons so as to not jeopardize the outcome or the safety of those involved. I would caution all present there will be no discussion of this topic outside these chambers.”

The President spoke. “Admiral Nagura, do you have projections on the probability of success of a military operation against the Klingons, and projections on loss of life and assets?”

“Mr. President, I can have those within the hour.” Nagura replied.

“This council will stand in recess for one hour.” stated the President. “When we reconvene, we will look at your projections, Admiral, and then we will discuss your proposal of a pre-emptive strike against the Klingon Empire.”

Chapter Twelve

True to his word, Kirk allowed Engineer Scott and Doctor Morse thirty minutes to resolve their differences. All the while though, the Captain grew impatient. Warp four wasn't going to get them to their mission quickly enough. Time was up. *Agenda* had to increase speed.

Kirk opened the comm channel to Engineering once again. "Mr. Scott, how is your patient?"

"She's holding up fine so far, Captain. Chamber pressure is within normal range, our warp field is stable and so is our structural integrity."

"I'm coming down for a visit. Kirk out." He rose and headed toward the galley. "Mr. Russell, you have the bridge."

"Acknowledged." said Adam as he rose from his chair at the science station to take the command chair.

As Kirk stepped off the ladder onto the Engineering deck, he noticed Doctor Morse back at her computer console, and Engineer Scott standing next to the warp core, taking readings with a tricorder. The reactor pulsed more frequently and rhythmically than before in response to the increased demand for power.

Kirk noted it seemed warmer down here than up above on the flight deck. "Little hot down here, don't you think Scotty?"

Scott diverted his attention away from his tricorder. His forehead was damp and his cheeks were flushed. The collar of his civilian tunic was decidedly damp. "Been a little too busy to notice, Captain." he replied.

“No doubt.” quipped Kirk. Then to Doctor Morse, he lightened his tone. “Congratulations, Doctor. Your patient has a heartbeat.”

Karen Morse smiled for the first time since Kirk had met her. He couldn't help but notice that she was attractive when her demeanor wasn't so unpleasant.

“How is your analysis coming?” the Captain inquired.

“They are progressing.” And without another word, she returned to her console, obviously trying to avoid a protracted conversation.

Kirk stole a glance at Mr. Scott, who appeared ready to say something, but decided against. “Mr. Scott, you were about to say?”

Scotty hesitated for a moment, looked at Karen Morse, and then back to his commanding officer. “Well, Captain, we should take a wee bit more time to analyze these readings. But.....” he trailed off.

“Go on, Scotty.” Kirk prompted.

“Well, based on what I've seen so far, the system seems to be holding up pretty well. But we're not in the clear yet if ya' ask me. I recommend caution, but what with our mission and all, I think we would be OK to take her up a few notches.”

Karen spoke immediately. “I'm not ready to increase power just yet.”

“What is the problem, Doctor?” Kirk urged, surprised at her sudden about face.

“I need to be able to compare the system's status with the baseline readings we gathered on the inaugural flight. I need to know that nothing significant has changed between then and now before we increase speed. Unfortunately, Captain, that takes time.”

“Surely Doctor you know of our situation. And the purpose of this mission. We need to get into the Neutral Zone as fast as possible.” admonished the Captain.

She shook her head in response. “Sorry. Captain. I can’t authorize it. Not until I’m satisfied we’re ready. This is my engine.” The unpleasant demeanor had returned.

“And this is my ship and my mission. It is my...” just as Kirk began, the ship was violently jolted. Doctor Morse was thrown off balance towards the Captain, who was able to catch her before she fell to the deck. Scotty steadied himself against a console. The lights on the deck flickered and went out. The warp reactor pulsations ceased and went dark.

“What the hell happened?” demanded Kirk as he helped Karen back to her feet.

Montgomery Scott replied. “Ah don’ know.” Then partial lights were restored on the deck. “I’ve engaged the backup generators, Captain.”

“Scotty, I need a status report as soon as possible.” Then Kirk jabbed the comm button on the support panel. “Kirk to the bridge. Report!”

“Captain to the bridge. We encountered a mine and dropped out of warp. And now a ship is closing on us. ETA about six minutes” advised Adam.

“Whose ship?” demanded Kirk.

“I don’t know yet. An unfamiliar design. I am running it through the library computer now.”

“Damage report, Commander.” demanded the Captain.

“None that we can determine, sir. The mine was a proximity type which emitted a strong EM pulse

designed to disrupt our subspace field. In effect, it was a trap”

“Why didn’t we detect it in time to avoid it?” asked Kirk.

“Sorry, Captain. Our course took us very close to an asteroid field in order to avoid detection. These older tactical sensors just weren’t sensitive enough to pick the mine out of the debris field until we were right on top of it.” replied Adam.

“What is our shield status?” inquired Kirk.

“Shields are down. All systems are dead up here except sensors.” Adam replied.

Kirk turned to Engineer Scott and implored, “Scotty?”

“Working on it, Captain. Systems are starting to come back on line now.” replied Scott.

“Why did the warp drive go off-line” asked Kirk.

“The EM pulse sent a backfeed through the system which tripped all the circuit breakers.” answered the Engineer.

“Why didn’t the safeties prevent that?” Kirk demanded sternly.

Scott looked over at Doctor Morse, now hard at work at her terminal.

“We didn’t install any safeties, Captain.” Karen Morse advised in a factual manner.

“Why not?” Kirk raised his voice.

“Simple, Captain. This is a prototype vessel which was never intended to take into a combat situation. We had two days notice of this mission. These just wasn’t time to install the safeties.”

Kirk rolled his eyes. “What’s working now?” demanded Kirk.

“Not much, Captain. The force field in the cargo hold is running off the generator. Everything else is powering up now.” Scott recited as he worked furiously to close circuits and reboot systems.

“There is a ship on its way. Intentions unknown, but probably responsible for that mine we hit. Can you give me shields and phasers?” asked Kirk.

“Sorry, Captain.” replied Scott. “Phasers went off-line with the warp core. Shields too.”

“How long to restore them?” demanded Kirk.

“It will take about twenty minutes to restore all systems.” advised Karen Morse.

“Twenty minutes!?” exclaimed Kirk. “We may not have twenty minutes to live!”

“Please understand, Captain, these are sensitive systems which need to be brought back up in a specific sequence. If we hurry the process, we run the risk of doing irreparable damage.”

Kirk issued an order. “I’m heading back up to the bridge to try and buy us time with that ship. I don’t care what you have to do, but I need shields, warp drive and phasers in that order. And fast! Make it happen.”

Doctor Morse opened her mouth to protest, but Scott spoke first. “We’ll make it happen somehow, Captain.”

Kirk turned and sprinted toward the ladder to the galley.

As Kirk stepped off the turbolift onto the bridge, his focus immediately went to the viewscreen. The image was unusually dim running off the generator. However, the picture was clear enough to see the hostile vessel positioned directly in the center. The

attackers had assumed a position only a few meters from *Agenda*, straight on, effectively blocking any attempt to escape. The two ships sat nose-to-nose.

“What have you got?” Kirk asked Adam.

“Captain, the library computer has just identified the attacking vessel as one of several designs being used by the Orion Syndicate.”

“Pirates!” proclaimed Kirk. “What are the specifics on that ship?”

Adam studied the tactical readout. “They are similar to us in size and mass. Weapons are second generation phasers both fore and aft, no photon torpedoes. Shields are simple deflector style.”

“What is the status of their weapons and shields?” Kirk inquired.

“Weapons are charged. Shields are up.” replied Adam.

Kirk nodded. Before he could speak again, the communications panel signaled an incoming message.

“Captain,” T’Lev advised, “we are being hailed.”

“Open a channel.” Then Kirk quickly raised his right hand, index finger extended as an exclamation point. “Audio only, Lieutenant.”

“Channel open.” advised T’Lev.

“This is the Merchant Vessel *Largess*. What is the meaning of this attack?” demanded Kirk.

The static voice over the speakers sounded as though it were synthetically generated, artificial. “We detect a force field inside your cargo hold. What is the meaning of this?”

Kirk’s response was consistent with their given cover story. “We are carrying fragile biological micro-organisms en route to a colony within Klingon space.”

The artificial voice pressed on. “What kind of bio-organisms?”

“Organisms needed to treat a rapidly spreading plague. We need to resume course, unimpeded, in order to deliver our cargo in time.” replied Kirk, indignantly.

A long pause, then, “We do not believe you.” countered the synthetic voice. “We will board you so we can observe these bio-organisms for ourselves.”

“We cannot open our hold and risk contaminating our cargo.” Kirk countered.

“You will prepare to accept our boarding party, or we will destroy you.” said the synthetic voice.

Just then, the lights on the flight deck brightened as systems began to return to life.

Kirk gave the slash gesture to T’Lev to ‘kill’ the channel. She complied.

Kirk slapped at the comm button. “Scotty, where are my shields?”

“Firming up, sir. They’re about twenty percent right now.” replied Scott.

“That’s not enough against their phasers.” stated Kirk.

“No.” offered Adam, “But it is enough to prevent the pirates from beaming over a boarding party.”

Suddenly the ship was jolted again.

“Phaser blast, Captain.” declared Adam.

“Damage?” implored Kirk.

“Minor. The shields took it.” replied Adam. “Just a tap on the shoulder,”

The comm panel buzzed again.

“Open the channel.” ordered Kirk.

T’Lev’s hands went to the console. “Channel open, Captain.”

The static, artificial voice returned. "You have raised your shields. This is unacceptable. Lower your shields immediately and receive our boarding party or you will be destroyed." Abruptly, the channel closed.

Kirk opened the channel to the engine room again. "Status report, Mr. Scott."

"Warp nacelles are charging, Captain. You will have warp three in just a few seconds." advised Scott.

"What about phasers?"

"Sorry, Captain. That will be a few more minutes yet. You asked for shields and warp drive in that order," countered Scott.

"Do your best, Scotty." Kirk closed the connection.

Kirk turned to Adam. "Thoughts, Commander?"

Adam turned to face the Captain. "They are probably too curious about our cargo to destroy us, just yet. At present we can't outrun them or outfight them. We also can't stay here and continue to take their phaser fire."

As if on cue, the ship was jolted again.

Kirk motioned T'Lev to open the channel.

"Alien vessel. Give us a few minutes to prepare for boarding." requested the Captain.

"You have had sufficient time to prepare. Lower your shields now or be destroyed." demanded the aliens.

"We will comply." Kirk responded as he gave the channel close gesture again. All eyes on the bridge turned to him with genuine surprise.

"We don't have time for this." he said. "We need a way to disable that ship and escape."

"There is a possibility." advised Adam.

Kirk looked quickly in Adam's direction with a quizzical expression.

“The forty millimeter cannon up top. It works.” Adam offered.

“That won’t be enough to penetrate their shields.” countered Kirk.

“No, but if we time it when they lower their shields to transport over, we should be able to take out one of their warp nacelles and escape.” explained Adam.

“Hurry, Mr. Russell. Get top side and signal when you are in position.” ordered Kirk.

Adam trotted off the flight deck to the galley and the ladder. This time, he scrambled up rather than down.

Kirk signaled T’Lev to open the channel. “Alien vessel, we are lowering our shields now. Prepare to beam over. We will offer no resistance” he signaled for the channel to be closed.

Kirk’s comm channel chirped. He smacked the button with his fist. “Kirk here.”

“In position, Captain. The cannon is loaded and ready to fire.” advised Adam.

“Stand by to fire on my command.” replied Kirk

The Captain barked orders. “Lieutenant T’Lev, take over the tactical station and lower our shields. Monitor the alien vessel and advise the moment their shields are down. Then on my order, raise our shields again.”

“Mr. Crowe, on my mark, back away from the alien vessel and go to warp.”

“Aye, sir” replied the helmsman.

T’Lev monitored the sensor viewer. “Their shields are down, now.”

“Commander Russell, fire the cannon!” Kirk ordered.

From his cramped position inside the turret atop the ship’s galley, Adam manipulated the cannon’s controls

to swing the weapon into position, taking aim on the hostile vessel's port side nacelle. Adam switched off the safety and depressed the firing release.

From the *Agenda's* topside, several staccato volleys of duranium tipped projectiles erupted from the cannon, speeding in the direction of the alien vessel. The projectiles missed the nacelle, but impacted the main hull near the nacelle strut, tearing holes in the metal through which atmosphere could be seen escaping.

Kirk barked orders again. "Lieutenant, raise shields. Lieutenant, get us out of here."

Without a word, both officers carried out their orders. *Agenda* swung around backwards on impulse and jumped to warp.

"Status of the alien vessel!" Kirk ordered.

"The cannon missed the nacelle and opened a hull breach in their cargo hold. Their engines are still on line. They are in pursuit." T'Lev reported with absolutely no emotion. As she spoke, Adam returned to the flight deck to resume his position at Tactical.

"What happened? How did we miss?" Kirk demanded.

"I had the nacelle in the sights. They appear to be out of alignment." Adam responded.

The ship was jolted. "The enemy is returning fire."

The little ship was again rocked by another phaser blast.

"Lieutenant Crowe, what is our speed?" the Captain inquired.

"We are at warp three point two, sir." replied the helmsman.

"Status of the hostile ship?" Kirk inquired.

Adam continued to monitor via his sensor hood. "They are pursuing, five thousand kilometers behind and gaining."

Kirk grimaced. Then opened the comm channel to the engine room. "Scotty, we need more speed!"

Scott replied. "Taking us to Warp five now, sir. Oh, and Captain, you now have phasers."

"Bless you, Scotty. And you too, Doctor Morse." added Kirk.

Adam noted that the phaser barrage from the alien vessel had ceased. Not that it was accomplishing anything against *Agenda's* now reinforced shields anyway, but Adam theorized the ship was no longer in weapons range.

Kirk must have come to the same conclusion. "Mr. Russell, distance from the hostile."

"Checking." Adam replied. "We are now more than five-hundred thousand kilometers ahead, and gaining rapidly sir. But they're still coming!"

"Good. Mr. Crowe, how is our speed?"

"Holding at warp factor five point one, sir." Just as the Lieutenant made his report, the ship shuddered.

"Captain!" the helmsman cried. "We're experiencing a power fall-off. Speed is fluctuating. Now falling. I can't maintain."

Kirk hit the comm switch. "Engine room! What's happening?"

After a long moment, Scott replied. "Tis' what I was afraid of, sir. We're getting back pressure from the nacelles. Pressure in the reaction chamber is spiking!"

"Why, Scotty?" implored Kirk.

"It's what I was telling you earlier. The fuel flow! Captain, I've got to back us down to warp three before we blow ourselves to bits!"

Kirk looked dejected. "Alright, Scotty. Do what you have to. Kirk out." He closed the channel.

Adam anticipated the next question. "Commander, what is the status of our friends?"

Adam reported with a sigh. "Still coming, I'm afraid."

"Can we outrun them at warp three?" inquired Kirk.

Adam shook his head no.

"Options?" requested the Captain.

Adam spoke immediately. "Captain, I think our only option at this time is to face them."

Kirk considered this with a nod as he scanned the rest of the flight deck for other suggestions. There were none. He hit the switch for the comm channel again. "Mr. Scott, we will be going to combat. I'll need shields and phasers. Meanwhile, work on the fuel flow problem!"

"Aye, sir." replied the Engineer.

Then back to Adam, "Commander, deploy and arm the phaser."

With deft movements at the Tactical console, Adam put Kirk's orders into action. In the forward section of the hull, directly beneath the navigational deflector, a hull plate slid aside and the single phaser array moved into firing position.

"Ready, Captain." Adam declared.

"Alright. Mr. Crowe, on my mark, drop us to sublight and come about one-hundred and eighty degrees." ordered the Captain.

"Ready, sir."

A long couple of seconds, and then Kirk barked, "Now."

Almost instantly, the streaming stars on the viewer retreated to their stationary position as the ship

dropped out of warp. Just as quickly, Lieutenant Crowe executed an impulse turn to maneuver the ship into a position ready to meet the enemy.

Seconds later, the alien vessel dropped out of warp less than two hundred kilometers off *Agenda's* nose and fired a phaser barrage.

Adam made note of the bravado of the alien vessel's pilot in dropping out of warp so close. It was a bold, and highly risky maneuver. Adam theorized it was probably not the first time the pilot had done this.

"Damage report." ordered Kirk.

"No damage, Captain. Shields are holding." Adam replied.

The hostile ship fired again, rocking the flight deck.

"Mr. Russell, target their weapons. Let's remove their teeth." requested the Captain.

"Aye, sir. Targeting."

A single and brief bolt of brilliant orange phaser energy leapt from *Agenda's* array and punched through the forward shield of the alien vessel like it wasn't even there. The bolt destroyed the hostile's weapons, leaving behind a glowing, gaping hole in the ship's fuselage where the weapons array was only a second earlier.

No one on *Agenda's* flight deck spoke as all gawked at the spectacle they had just witnessed.

Finally, Kirk broke the silence. "Mr. Russell, please reduce phaser power to fifty percent."

Adam replied a bit sheepishly. "Captain, that was fifty percent." With heavy emphasis on 'was'.

Lieutenant Crowe whistled appreciatively. Lieutenant T'Lev sat spellbound. The Captain merely raised his eyebrows.

“All right then. Commander, target the enemy vessel’s shields and fire.”

Adam manipulated the controls. Three phaser bolts were fired in rapid succession targeting not the enemy ship itself, but the deflector shields at crucial points around the hull. The alien vessel’s shields flared brilliantly for a moment. Then the generators failed and the shields collapsed altogether.

“The enemy vessel is defenseless.” announced Adam.

“Captain,” called Lieutenant Crowe. “the enemy ship is powering up. Getting ready to go back into warp.”

“Mr. Russell, make sure that doesn’t happen. They’ve seen too much.” ordered Captain Kirk.

Adam considered the situation for a minute, as it was somewhat similar to the position he found himself in while serving aboard the *Merrimac* when he refused to fire on the disabled Romulan vessel. He rationalized that if the pirate vessel were to escape, *Agenda*’s cover could be blown and their mission may be jeopardized.

“Aye, Captain. Targeting their warp drive.”

Adam repositioned the targeting sensors to the same warp nacelle he had tried to disable with the projectile cannon a few minutes earlier. A quick bolt of phaser energy sheared the nacelle off at the supporting strut. The nacelle spun rapidly away from the ship, while the remains of the strut still attached to the ship streamed drive plasma into space.

“Warp drive made inoperable.” announced Adam.

“Do they have impulse?” inquired the Captain.

“Negative sir. Oversized thrusters only for sublight maneuvers.”

“Can they escape with those?” asked Kirk.

“The only place they can try to escape to would be back to the debris field.” responded Adam. “And with thrusters, it will take them years to get there.”

“Three point two six years, to be exact.” added Lieutenant T’Lev. “And I suspect they would run out of fuel long before then.”

Kirk chuckled. “Lieutenant T’Lev, signal the Pirate vessel that a Federation vessel will be dispatched to take them into custody. Tell them to stay put.”

“Mr. Russell, do they have life support?” asked Kirk.

Adam ran a quick scan. “Sensors show adequate life support on their bridge to sustain them until rescue.”

“Alright then let’s resume our mission.”

Just as Kirk was about to call down to Engineering, Adam interrupted him. “Captain, I’m scanning signs of an energy build on the enemy ship. Their containment is failing.”

“Because of what we did?”

“No, Captain. Their containment was fully functional after we disabled their drive systems. I checked.”

“What’s causing it then?”

“I suspect they are doing it themselves.” Adam replied in a somber tone.

“Self-destruct.” Kirk uttered. “How many beings aboard that vessel?”

“Reading fourteen life signs.”

“Damn.” Kirk muttered. “We’ll have to take them into custody ourselves and return them to starbase.” Yet another delay, Kirk thought to himself.

“Lieutenant T’Lev, signal the occupants of the enemy vessel to prepare to be transported to this ship. Tell them to leave all weapons behind.”

“Aye, Captain.” T’Lev opened a channel to the disabled Pirate ship.

“Too late!” declared Adam. Just as he spoke, the viewscreen lit up brilliantly. Adam turned toward the viewer just in time to observe several pieces of debris racing toward them from the exploding pirate ship. Reflexively, he held an arm up to shield his face from the brightness on the screen and the incoming debris. One of the larger pieces impacted *Agenda’s* shields, nudging the ship. Adam turned to Kirk.

“Apparently, they didn’t want to be taken prisoner.” Kirk speculated.

Adam returned to his sensors and reported, “No damage, Captain.”

Kirk nodded and opened a channel to Engineering. “Scotty, when can we go to warp?”

The voice on the intercom was not that of Engineer Scott. “Karen Morse here, Captain. While you were involved with the enemy ship, Mr. Scott assisted in helping work out revised fuel flows based on conduit resistance. The computer models verify the new flow rates. We should have no trouble maintaining speed now.”

“Oh? So you and Commander Scott were able to come to an agreement?”

“Yes, Captain. Mr. Scott has been very helpful.”

“Yes. He can be at times. Can we take the ship to warp seven?” asked the Captain.

“We should be able to, Captain. However, I must caution you that we’re babying a fuel flow regulator which appears to have been damaged in the attack. It cuts out periodically, but Mr. Scott was able to jury rig it into staying on line. We’ll watch it.”

“Thank you, Doctor.” Then to the helm, “Mr. Crowe, please resume course for the Neutral Zone.”

Chapter Thirteen

Despite the risk of being exposed, the *Koroth* navigated her way out of the Dorian nebula at the pre-arranged time. She was to receive instructions from their contact on the Klingon home world Qo'noS, but radiation interference in the nebula would have interfered with the transmission. The warship would engage their cloaking device, but particles from the nebula would reduce the cloaks effectiveness for several minutes.

Meanwhile, Squadron Captain Derm paced in his quarters, impatient and anxious. He desperately wanted a chalice of blood wine, but decided it best not to drink until he received and acknowledged his orders from the High Council. It was very unusual for an Imperial warship to receive direct communications from the High Council, but these were unusual times.

The klaxon in his quarters blared, indicating an incoming message. Derm punched the comm button. "Speak!"

"My lord," spoke Lieutenant Korn, "we have cleared the nebula and are in position."

"You interrupted me to tell me this?" bellowed he Captain. "Do not interrupt me again unless you have the transmission I am waiting for."

"Yes, my lord." replied Korn, undoubtedly happy he was not face to face with the Captain. The channel closed.

Inside his cabin, the Captain resumed his waiting. He had already ordered the new lot of warp missiles modified according to his directive from the High Council, and now he awaited the intended target for

the next attack. After several minutes more, Derm decided he could wait no longer. He moved to the foot locker at the end of his cot and retrieved a goblet and half full jug of blood wine. He filled the goblet and drank long and deeply. Satisfied for the moment, he wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, belched resoundingly and drained the chalice.

The klaxon blared in his cabin again.

“What is it?” Derm demanded.

“Sir, we have received a private communication.” advised Lieutenant Korn.

“Send it here,” Derm replied, “secured channel.”

“Yes, my lord.” Almost instantly, a written message decoded itself on the monitor in the Captain’s cabin.

Derm studied the message for a long moment. He turned away from the monitor and then studied it again to make sure the information on the screen hadn’t changed. He signaled the bridge.

“Yes, my lord.” answered the Lieutenant.

“Did you verify the origin of this transmission?”

“Yes, my lord, as usual.”

“Well, verify it again!” Derm demanded.

After a few seconds of silence, Korn was back on the channel. “Origin confirmed, Captain.”

Derm punched the channel closed. He looked at the monitor one last time, got up and poured himself another chalice of blood wine. “We are Klingons, not butchers!” he muttered to himself.

On board the Starship *Enterprise*, Spock sat at rapt attention in the captain’s chair, as is customary for anyone assuming the role of acting Captain. Next to him, silent for the moment stood Doctor McCoy.

Lieutenant Ferr held position at the science station, monitoring the ship's long range sensors. Lieutenant Uhura manned the communications station, monitoring Starfleet channels for updates on the situation in the Neutral Zone, which she dutifully relayed. Thanks to Uhura's updates, Spock was fully aware of the ever increasing tensions on both sides of the Neutral Zone.

Logic dictated that the *Enterprise* belonged on the front lines, with her captain aboard. If the Federation was to go to war with the Klingons the situation would call for all hands on deck and all ships on the line. Instead, they dutifully followed orders and waited for the arrival of *Agenda*.

Meanwhile, Spock calculated the odds of Captain Kirk's mission in the neutral zone yielding any positive results. He calculated them to be very low.

To alleviate the tension and improve efficiency, Spock had led the crew in repeated mock battle drills en route to their destination. Efficiencies reached ninety-eight percent. A remarkable figure. But the crew was drilled out. Additional drills would yield no further increase in efficiency and might prove to have the opposite effect.

Spock was in regular contact with Starfleet Command to provide, and receive status updates. The prior day, Admiral Benning advised the *Enterprise* that the 'Agenda' had ran into a minor delay, but would still be there in little more than a day. Starbase thirty-one is two-and-a-half days travel to the *Enterprise's* present position at warp six, and yet *Agenda* would arrive in little more than half that time. Spock could not help but be impressed.

Finally the *Enterprise* arrived at the designated coordinates on the edge of the Neutral Zone, but several light years from the rest of the fleet. This further puzzled the bridge crew. But after only a brief wait, the ship's sensors registered that they were about to have company.

"Captain," called Lieutenant Ferr, "sensors show a ship approaching at high warp."

Spock raised an eyebrow. "Can you identify?"

"Not yet," advised the Denebian.

"Continue monitoring, Lieutenant," ordered the acting Captain. "Lieutenant Uhura, please hail them."

Uhura sent the standard hail on the usual frequencies. "No response, sir."

Spock's only response was another raised eyebrow.

"Mr. Spock," Chekov turned in his chair at the Navigation station, "should we raise shields?"

Spock had already considered this. "No," he paused, "let's wait a minute."

"Captain, the vessel is reducing speed. Now approaching at warp three." Ferr advised.

"On screen." Spock ordered.

"They're dropping out of warp dead ahead." announced the Denebian.

A quick silent flash of bright light and then the viewscreen was filled with the image of the *Agenda* sitting nose to nose with the *Enterprise*.

"The vessel is identified as the *Largess*," advised Uhura. "They are hailing."

"On screen Lieutenant," ordered the Vulcan.

The bridge crew, with the exception of Doctor McCoy and Lieutenant Ferr, reacted with gasps of astonishment as Captain Kirk, in the guise of a merchant trader, appeared on the main viewer.

“Captain Spock.” greeted Kirk.

“Captain Kirk,” replied Spock. “I’m delighted to see that you made it. We had been apprised of your delay.”

Kirk gestured with a casual wave. “A minor setback. Nothing more. I can explain later. Please have the bridge crew assemble in the conference room next to the transporter room so we can explain what’s going on. You’re invited too Doctor.”

“With pleasure.” retorted McCoy,

“Of course, Captain. We will adjourn there immediately.” replied Spock

The channel closed and the viewer once again was focused on the mysterious supply ship.

Checkov leaned over to Sulu and whispered.

“Should a DY600 supply ship be capable of warp seven plus?”

Sulu shook his head. “Not in my experience. Did you check out those nacelles? Does that look to you like a typical freighter to you?”

Checkov shook his head. “Sulu, what’s going on?”

“I don’t know, Chekov. But with all the hush-hush, hurry up and wait, “Agenda’ business, and that souped up ship out there, you can bet something big is about to happen.”

“And we’re right in the middle of it.” replied Chekov.

“You can count on that. But you know what else?”

“What?” quizzed Chekov.

“I think we’re about to find out what that is.”

Chapter Fourteen

Fortunately for Commander Gowden at the production facility, the assembly of the modified photon missiles had been completed by the established deadline. Following orders from his Captain, Commander Kahl beamed the thirty-two missiles aboard the *Grich*, and returned, under cloak, to the Dorian Nebula to rendezvous with the *Koroth*.

Kahl stood on the bridge of the *Grich*, beside Captain Kratoch as the vessel raced through the Neutral Zone. As they approached the nebula, Kratoch ordered the helmsman to reduce speed to impulse power and enter. Inside the nebula, the powerful Klingon Battle Cruiser's sensors were useless and the ship was blind. Never-the-less, the *Grich* made its way to the designated coordinates where her sister ships waited to carry out their mission.

"Coordinates reached, Captain." barked Helmsman Mek.

"Full stop." ordered Kratoch. "Communications, advise the *Koroth* Commander Kahl is ready to transport over. Line of sight communication beam only!"

Kahl bowed to the Captain and moved swiftly to the Transporter room.

The klaxon in Squadron Captain Derm's cabin blared once again.

"What is it?" demanded the Captain, now sufficiently drunk on blood wine.

“Captain, the *Grich* has returned. Commander Kahl has transported over. He awaits you in the galley.” advised Lieutenant Korn.

“Tell him to wait. I’ll be there shortly.” slurred the Captain as he struggled to find his feet.

Inside the galley, Kahl stood anxiously. He debated whether to sit or stand, and decided standing was more appropriate. He had already been warned by the *Koroth*’s bridge crew that the Captain had spent the last several hours in his cabin, drinking. Also, that the secret orders from the High Council seemed to make him highly agitated. Kahl would have to choose his words carefully if he wanted to keep his mid-section intact. He turned his head in the direction of a commotion outside as the galley doors parted, and Derm staggered in.

Kahl came to attention and bowed. “My lord, the missiles are ready and aboard the *Grich*. We are ready to deploy them at your command against the specified target.”

The Captain slumped into a chair. “Have the missiles transferred aboard this ship.” he ordered, calmly and with apparent disinterest.

This took Kahl by surprise. He had been allowed to deploy the missiles from the *Grich* against the first Federation target, and could not understand why he was being denied the glory of launching the next attack. “Yes, sir. But, may I know why?” he asked.

“I will personally launch the attack against the next target.” Derm replied.

“I do not understand.” Kahl responded. “Have we not been given the targets coordinates?”

The Captain reached into his vest and produced a handheld tablet with a copy of the High Council’s

orders. With an underhand motion, he flipped it toward the Commander, who deftly caught it with one hand. Kahl oriented the pad, read the orders, blinked, re-read them and looked the Captain directly in the face with utter astonishment.

“This must be some kind of mistake.” Kahl demanded.

“No mistake.” replied Derm. “Orders are verified.”

“This is madness!” shouted Kahl. “Are we so desperate for war as to resort to such treachery? Surely you do not intend to carry out this order.”

Derm struggled to his feet as Kahl stood his ground, all the while eyeing the Captain’s knife hand. “We are Klingons!” growled the Captain. “We do not disobey orders! We are loyal to the wishes of our superiors.”

“But Captain,” Kahl pressed on, “we do not disobey reasonable orders. These orders are not reasonable. Is it our place to blindly and loyally follow the wishes of our superiors when they are unreasonable?”

“It is not for us to question the intentions of members of the High Council. We will carry out the attack exactly as ordered.” shouted Derm. “That is why you will transfer the missiles to my ship. Tell no one of the target or this conversation. Not even Kratoch. That is an order!”

Kahl reluctantly yielded to his Captain’s authority. “Yes, sir.” He snapped to attention again.

“Does Gowden have enough anti-matter and supplies to produce another thirty missiles?” asked the Captain.

“I believe he does.”

“Contact him and tell him we will need them immediately. The High Council will pick a third target for attack.” advised Derm.

“Right away, my lord.”

Derm reached into his vest again and produced a portable memory device.. He handed it to Kahl. “Here are your orders. After the missiles are aboard the *Koroth*, you will go with Kratoch aboard the *Grich* under cloak to a position near the Federation border. You will watch the Federation fleet closely for any sign that they will cross the Neutral Zone, and destroy any ships that do. Leave immediately.”

“Yes, Captain.” replied Commander Kahl, as he bowed and turned to leave the galley.

Admiral Benning and Ambassador Sarek of Vulcan sat across from each other in the Officers Lounge on Starbase thirty-one, sharing their views on the present situation. Benning had Andorian Ale, while Sarek enjoyed a cup of hot tea. They were alone in the lounge as the hour was late, and all the regulars who normally frequented the lounge at this hour were absent in light of the growing crisis.

Sarek had been in charge of the Federation Diplomatic team involved in negotiations with the Klingon delegation. The site of the negotiations, an uninhabited planet inside the Neutral Zone, had been a carefully guarded secret for security reasons. In accordance with the pre-negotiation negotiations, both parties had arrived in the Neutral Zone by way of unarmed, unescorted transport ships. The parties had subsequently left by way of these same ships when discussions were discontinued after the attack on Omega IV.

Sarek had been requested to return to his home world of Vulcan after negotiations broke off, but decided instead to remain at Starbase thirty-one in

case hostilities ensued. In such an event, he hoped his diplomatic skills would help bring a resolution to the conflict, and minimize losses on both sides.

So while Sarek took quarters at the Starbase he regularly meditated, maintained communications with Federation Councilman T’Nath, on Earth, and spoke at length with Admiral Benning.

“Within the hour I have received an update from the *Enterprise*.” said Benning. “Captain Spock reports our boys have crossed the Neutral Zone and are on their way to the detour point. They should be there within a day.”

“Is there any sign of activity within the zone?” inquired Sarek.

“Nothing at this point. Traffic in the shipping lanes is still light at this point. So far, nothing unusual has been detected.” replied Benning.

“Do you still believe the Klingons are not responsible for the attack?” asked Sarek.

“I do.” replied the Admiral, taking a sip of his ale. “I can’t explain why, but something in here tells me things are not as they seem.” Benning tapped lightly on his chest.

Sarek nodded. “Human intuition is difficult to quantify, yet foolish to disregard. My years of experience with humans has taught me frequently to respect it, but it is not consistent.”

Benning chuckled. “I believe you’ve hit the problem right on the head, my friend. Consistency is usually not a given with humans. If it was, I would have given up Starfleet and joined the Interstellar Professional Golfers Association a long time ago.”

The comm panel on the table between the two men beeped quietly. Benning set down his glass and

pressed the switch opening the channel. “Benning here.”

“Admiral,” it was the voice of Commander Romjon, “we have just received a priority communiqué from Starfleet Command.”

Benning looked across at Sarek, who was silent. “Pipe it in here, Commander.”

The channel closed and simultaneously the view monitor near their table came to life displaying the image of Fleet Admiral Nagura. A chronometer superimposed at the bottom of the screen showed the transmission delay time to be forty-two hours and eleven minutes.

“Admiral Benning,” Nagura began, “the Federation Council has just broken session. They have reached a decision regarding involvement of Starfleet in this crisis. Your orders are as follows: all starships within four days travel of the Neutral Zone are to go to condition Red, and maintain that status until ordered to stand down. They are not to enter the zone at this point, but you are authorized to order them in if any Klingon incursion is detected. The Klingon fleet is not to be allowed inside Federation space. If the Klingons enter the zone, our ships are to intercept them, engage them, and repel any offensive. If hostilities become more wide spread, we may have to take the offensive and enter the Neutral Zone. That decision will also be yours, Admiral. Nagura out.” The image of Nagura on the monitor was replaced by the symbol of the United Federation of Planets.

“Well, that’s just lovely.” exclaimed Benning.

“I detect the influence of the Quanesian Axli in this decision.” replied Sarek.

Benning sat pensively for a long minute. “I don’t know now. The decision to send Kirk and his crew into the Neutral Zone looking for clues may have been a mistake. What do you think, Sarek? Should I call back *Agenda*? Scrub the mission?” questioned the Admiral.

“It would appear the prospect of war is more imminent than ever.” replied Sarek. “However, I see no harm in allowing them to continue with their mission. They may yet uncover something that will prove useful in preventing hostilities.”

Benning nodded. “I hope you’re right. Now if you’ll excuse me, I have a fleet to place on general quarters.” Admiral Benning rose from his chair and left the room.

Chapter Fifteen

Even though Starfleet Command reopened the shipping lanes into Klingon space several days earlier, traffic remained very light. Most independent freighters, trying to eke out a living with ships usually in need of repair, could ill afford to get caught up in a military conflict.

Agenda continued on course in the lanes as they neared the departure point toward the Callus system, the first of the three suspected star systems. Along the way they ran into a few additional problems with the anti-matter fuel regulator damaged in the attack by the Orion Pirate ship. These were relatively quickly resolved by Commander Scott and Doctor Morse, resulting in minimal delays. Otherwise, it had been a quiet trip.

“Captain,” Lieutenant Crowe called, “estimating departure point in fifteen minutes.”

“Thank you, Lieutenant. Maintain course and speed.” replied Kirk. “Commander Russell, are there any other ships in the vicinity?”

“Sensors show no vessels out to a range of over three light years.”

“Any cloaked Klingon warships?” Kirk joked.

Adam turned to the Captain with a wry smile.

“None at this time, sir.”

“Very good. I’ll be down below in the engine room.”

As Kirk made his way down to the engine room, he noted the calm. The tension level was the lowest he had seen since they embarked upon this mission. Commander Scott was at the engineering console

along with Doctor Morse and they were not arguing. Everything appeared routine.

“Commander, Doctor,” greeted the Captain, “we will be leaving the shipping lanes shortly, and will need to increase speed if we are to arrive at our destination on schedule. Can your engines handle that?”

Scotty glanced briefly at Doctor Morse, and gestured toward a monitor on the console. After a brief discussion too quiet for Kirk to hear, Doctor Morse nodded in agreement. “We believe so, sir.” said Scotty. “We think that pesky regulator is locked down now and shouldna’ give us any further problems, barring a catastrophe.”

“Well let’s hope we don’t have any of those.” quipped Kirk. “I want to thank the both of you for your efforts during this mission.”

“No effort, Commander.” replied Doctor Morse. “A labor of love.”

Kirk smiled and turned back to the crew ladder for the return climb to the bridge. On the way, his communicator signaled for his attention. He flipped the communicator open. “Kirk here.”

“Captain,” called Lieutenant T’Lev, “we have just received an encoded text only alert from the *Enterprise*.”

“I’m on my way, Lieutenant. Kirk out.” He flipped the communicator closed and returned it to his vest pocket.

As Kirk strode onto the flight deck, he ordered. “Let’s see the alert.”

T’Lev activated the monitor at her station, and decoded the message.

PRIORITY MESSAGE

To: Captain J. T. Kirk
From: Captain Spock - U.S.S ENTERPRISE

Be advised Starfleet Command has placed fleet on general quarters status. Orders are to intercept and negate any enemy offensive prior to entering Federation space. We have been instructed to be prepared to enter the neutral zone when ordered.

END OF MESSAGE

“Captain, are they going to let us complete our mission?” asked Lieutenant Crowe.

“We’re not going to quit now.” replied Kirk. “We’ve come this far and we’re not turning back. What do your sensors show, Mr. Russell?”

Adam peered into the hood of his viewer. “Still all clear, Captain.”

“Helm, set course 277 mark 4, and maintain current speed.” ordered the Captain.

“Course set.” replied Lieutenant T’Lev.

“Approaching the Arachnis system now, Captain.” advised Lieutenant Crowe.

“Execute new course.”

“Executed.” advised Lieutenant Crowe. “Speed holding at warp seven point three. Estimating arrival in three point six hours.”

“Thank you, Lieutenant. Maintain course.”

“Captain,” Adam spun toward Kirk, “We’ve just been scanned.”

“From where?”

“Just as we altered course, sir. From almost directly on our old heading at bearing 177 mark 101. The computer confirms the scan. Very brief.”

“I thought your sensors showed all clear, Commander. Explain.” demanded the Captain.

“Sensors were clear sir, as they are now. Shall I return scan?”

“Negative. Let whomever think we haven’t noticed their scan.” ordered Kirk. “Can you identify the source?”

“The computer has identified the frequency as one which has been used by the Klingon Empire, but sensors still show clear.”

“We may have company after all.” mused Kirk. “Everyone, keep your eyes and ears open. Commander Russell, are there any systems nearby?”

“Aye, sir. System S-72 is only six minutes away at our present speed.”

“What does that system consist of?” asked Kirk.

“I have the system chart up, sir.” replied Adam.

“Put it on screen.”

Instantly a computer simulation of the system appeared on the viewer.

“What is that large body in the sixth orbital position?” inquired the Captain.

“Gas giant, sir.” advised Adam. “Similar size and consistency to Jupiter. No identifiable satellites.”

“Perfect!” declared Kirk. “Mr. Crowe, can you drop us out of warp on the northern pole of that gas giant?”

Lieutenant Crowe took on a puzzled expression. “Sir?”

Kirk explained. “I’d rather whoever scanned us not know where we are going. Klingon or otherwise. The magnetic field generated by the north pole of the gas

giant will do a good job of hiding us for a while. Hopefully until whoever scanned us becomes bored or thinks we're gone."

"Yes sir, I can do it." advised Crowe.

"Excellent, Lieutenant. Prepare to alter course into the system and bring us to a dead stop on that pole."

"Aye sir, course laid in."

A couple minutes passed. The young helmsman monitored his navigational monitor. "System S-72 will be off our starboard hull in five, four, three....."

"Execute." ordered Kirk.

Abruptly the supply ship altered course. Then just as suddenly, the streaming stars in the viewer retreated to points of light as the ship dropped from warp nine to a dead stop. On the viewer, at the bottom of the screen was the image of the gas giant, perfectly calm and serene.

"Position, Mr. Crowe." inquired Kirk.

The Lieutenant studies his helm display. "Sorry Sir, I missed the magnetic pole by thirty-seven kilometers. Using thrusters to correct our position."

"Thirty seven kilometers?" declared the Captain incredulously. "You went from warp seven plus to dead stop and missed the mark by thirty seven kilometers, and you're apologizing?"

After a pause, "Mr. Crowe, that is a bulls-eye in anyone's book. Even Lieutenant Sulu's. Well done." praised Kirk.

The helmsman smiled.

The Captain turned toward Adam. "Commander, what's the composition of the gas giant below?"

Adam ordered an atmospheric sensory analysis. The computer returned the results almost immediately. "Primarily hydrogen and helium,

Captain. Trace elements of oxygen, ammonium, methane, hydrogen sulfide.....”

Kirk interrupted. “That’ll do, Commander. Thank you.”

Kirk toggled the comm switch to the engine room below. “Doctor Morse, earlier when I was down there did I see several rather large pressure vessels that weren’t part of the new drive system?”

“Yes, Captain, you did. They were the hydrogen holding tanks used by the previous warp drive. They are not being used. Why do you ask?”

“Can you verify whether they will still hold pressure?”

“They will, Captain. That’s already been verified. We were considering tying them to the Bussard collectors on the new nacelles but rejected that idea because the old tanks didn’t meet our specifications.”

“I see. Very well. Is Mr. Scott nearby?”

“Scott, here, sir.” The engineer responded.

“Scotty, I presume you overheard the conversation I just had with Doctor Morse about those pressure vessels?”

“Aye.”

“Could you rig up some temporary plumbing so that if we took a ride through the atmosphere of this gas giant we are orbiting we could use the collectors to fill those tanks with hydrogen?”

A long pause. “I suppose so, Captain. May I ask what ya’ have in mind?”

“Not yet. I’m working on an idea. Please get started and let me know when you are ready to proceed.”

Chapter Sixteen

Shortly after boarding the *Grich*, Commander Kahl sent orders to the production facility on the planet to continue producing missiles, just as Captain Derm had ordered. He then proceeded directly to the gym on board the ship, and secluded himself there while the *Grich* made its way to the Federation side of the Neutral Zone.

Kahl engaged in the most strenuous, punishing exercises known to a Klingon for more than eight hours. On three occasions, other Klingons entered the gym with the intent to use it. A quick disapproving stare from Kahl convinced them not to stay.

He was upset. It was not unusual for a Klingon to be upset, but he was really upset. He refused to believe Derm would carry out such an absurd order as to launch a secret attack against a Klingon target!

The plan obviously was to make it appear to be a retaliatory attack by the Federation. From the vantage point of strategy, it seemed brilliant. But Kahl could not comprehend the apparent desperation of those above him intent on derailing the peace process. "If we want war, we should just take it directly to the Federation?" Kahl thought to himself. "Enough with all this sneaking around!"

Kahl was a warrior. In his heart, he knew this. He sought the glory of battle just like other warriors. But a cold-blooded murderer? This he was not. And he refused to associate with those who would willingly involve themselves in such a despicable act.

He wanted to do something to prevent this dreadful mistake. But what could he do that would not be seen

as treason, for which he would be executed immediately?

As he sorted out his thoughts, the comm speaker in the gym blared with Captain Kratoch's harsh voice. "Commander Kahl to the bridge."

As Kahl stepped onto the bridge, Kratoch removed his portly frame from the command chair and moved to the tactical station. "Kahl, come here, let's see what you make of this." he ordered, as he gestured for the Tactical Officer to activate his monitor.

Kahl moved to the station and the three of them viewed the monitor. "We scanned this ship just a few minutes ago." Kratoch advised. "We were just about ready to ignore the little ship when they suddenly angled through this dead system at high warp."

Kahl was intrigued. "What do you think it means?"

"That's what I want you to tell me." the oversized Captain said as he returned and seated himself in the command chair.

"It would seem the little ship is more than it appears." replied Kahl.

Kratoch nodded. "A wolf in sheep's clothing." he said. "A Federation wolf." placing emphasis on 'Federation'.

"Do we intercept?" asked Kahl.

"We have altered course, but the ship has fallen off our sensors. We think they are still in the system."

"For what purpose?" inquired Kahl.

"I do not know. Nor do I care." declared the Captain with a grin. "All I care about is finding this little wolf and making a cloak from its hide!"

Kahl nodded, paused before his Captain for a moment, and then spoke. "May I speak with my Captain in private?"

“Whatever you have to say to me, you can say here on the bridge in front of your fellow warriors.” Kratoch replied.

Kahl looked around and then decided to press on. “Captain, what do you know of the next target for attack?”

Kratoch looked puzzled. “I was told it was to be a military target. Why do you ask?” Kratoch demanded, taking on a stern look.

“The next target is not military, it is a Klingon civilian target.” Kahl advised, against the orders of Captain Derm. “The *Koroth* is on its way to deliver the missiles as we speak.”

“You’re lying! Why are you telling me this?” demanded Kratoch.

“Captain, it is wrong to attack our own civilians with the intent to trigger war with the Federation. We must stop the attack.”

“What?! Are you a warrior or a targ?” demanded the Captain. “Even if this is true, in war, sacrifices must be made. Besides, there is no way we could catch the *Koroth* in time to prevent the attack. And what would we do if we did catch them? Destroy them?” Kratoch was now shouting, and everyone on the bridge shifted their attention on him.

“We are Klingons, not murderers!” Kahl argued. “We must warn the fleet inside our space before the *Koroth* arrives so they can stop the attack!”

“You coward!” Kratoch roared. “We are Klingons, and we are warriors. Where is your heart? Where is your thirst for battle, and your desire to die with honor and glory?”

“There is no honor in the murder we are about to commit!” demanded Kahl.

“We will do nothing to prevent this attack. Get out of my sight, p’tahk!” ordered Kratoch, swearing Klingon oaths at the Commander and spitting on the floor at his feet.

Kahl considered pressing the argument, but sensed the futility of doing so. Rather than endure any further abuse from the Captain, he spun and stormed off the bridge. As he left, Kratoch motioned to his Security Officer. “Keep an eye on him.”

The Security Officer nodded and left the bridge.

As Kahl headed purposely down the corridor of the great warship, his mind was at work. The arrival of the mystery ship would somehow figure in the plan he was formulating. The plan had risks, and lots of them, but Kahl saw no alternatives. This would be his only chance to stop this insane attack and preserve honor.

He knew it would be highly likely that he was being followed. So his first stop was to the quarters he had been assigned aboard this ship. Upon entering his room, he locked the door behind him so that even the computer could not open it. If someone wanted to get in, they would have to cut their way in.

He moved quickly to the computer terminal, hoping his network clearances had not been revoked. Activating it, he saw he still had full access. Good. His next move would draw him the death penalty if he were to be discovered, but he plunged ahead anyway.

Some time ago, Kahl had the opportunity to watch Captain Derm enter his credentials into a terminal. Kahl memorized the credentials but had never used them due to the risk. He hoped Captain Derm disregarded protocol by not changing his credentials regularly. His hopes were answered when, upon

entering the credentials, he was granted access to Derm's personal files.

Kahl wasn't quite sure what he was looking for, and so started scanning through personal communiqués from the last few weeks. Nothing stood out as too unusual until he found one that was encrypted.

Kahl had spent almost five years previously working for Empire Intelligence before being promoted to shipboard assignments. He specialized in cracking encryptions of all kinds and had built for himself a program with a number of algorithms which could be employed simultaneously to decrypt a message or communiqué.

He copied the message to his tablet and ran it through the decryption program. Within seconds, the program identified the encryption as one used by the Federation. Then the message decoded. The subject was entitled 'Special Envoy'.

Kahl read the message. It specified a date and time that would have been approximately ten days earlier. Then the message dictated coordinates. Inside Federation space! "Was there a Federation conspirator aboard the *Koroth*?" he wondered.

He drilled further into the message to identify the source. The file contained no names, and no subspace identification of any sort. This was odd, thought Kahl, as all subspace communiqués typically carry information identifying the source computer, ship or transmitter.

Kahl examined further and found the subspace frequency on which the message had been transmitted. It was not a typical military band used by the Klingons. Nor by the Federation either. The frequency was unfamiliar.

Then, on a hunch, Kahl called up from his computer the traffic log for the Klingon subspace repeater nearest the Federation Neutral Zone. Narrowing the time frame down to the time stamp from the message, he searched for the frequency. And there it was.

He displayed the message. It was a standard advisory for ships in the region advising them of the status of stellar objects in the area. Its purpose was to warn ships of solar flares, ion storms, and other hazards which might affect navigation. Such advisories were transmitted at least daily, if not more frequently when necessary.

Cleverly, the encrypted envoy message was hidden inside the advisory where it was unlikely to be accidentally discovered. The advisory message did carry a source ID. It originated inside Federation space, from Starbase Thirty-one.

Kahl shut down the terminal and stowed the tablet in his cloak. Then he unlocked the door to his quarters and quickly stepped outside. There was no one in sight. Although he knew he was under surveillance.

His next stop would be in the Tactical War Room three decks below, where weapons, communications, navigation and sensors can be controlled in the event the bridge is destroyed in battle. He moved briskly.

Just as Kahl turned a corner leading to the turbolift, he became aware he was being followed. He turned the corner, flattened himself against the wall and waited.

The Security Officer turned the corner and his world suddenly went black. Kahl hit him across the bridge of the nose with a ferocious chop, dropping the

Klingon to the deck. Kahl dropped to one knee, took the unconscious Lieutenant's head in both hands, and with a twist, snapped his neck. The gruesome task done, Kahl boarded the turbolift and proceeded to the War Room.

Kahl entered the security code into the wall panel and the doors to the War Room hissed open. He burst in. The lone Klingon manning the room had been asleep, and bolted to his feet as the Commander lunged toward him. Just as the sleeping Klingon opened his mouth to apologize for his lack of diligence, Kahl drew his dagger and plunged it into the heart of the warrior. The surprised Klingon died almost instantly with a startled look on his face. Kahl quietly lowered the body to the floor and went to work.

On the bridge, the viewscreen displayed the familiar streaming starfield of a ship at high warp, as the *Grich* neared the system where the mystery ship was last spotted. Kratoch reclined in the command chair, his enormous bulk spilling over the sides. He called out to the helm. "Time to system."

Lieutenant Wert turned from the helm, facing the Captain. "Four minutes, Captain."

"Tactical, prepare to decloak and transfer energy to weapons systems." Kratoch ordered.

Suddenly, the viewscreen, and all the other tactical and sensory systems on the bridge went blank.

"Captain," called the Tactical Officer, "all sensors just went dead!"

"Navigation too." announced Wert.

Kratoch jumped up from the command chair. "Activate back-up sensors."

“Back-up sensors do not respond!” advised Wert.
“We are blind!”

Kratoch swore a Klingon oath. “Full stop!”

“Aye, Captain. Full stop.” advised Wert, as the sound of warp engines powering down filled the bridge.

“What is our cloaking status?” demanded Kratoch.

“Cloaking shields are still functional.” replied Wert.

Kratoch slammed the button on his comm panel.

“War Room, what’s happening with our instruments?” the bulky Captain demanded.

No response came.

“Captain,” spoke Communications Officer Krouch, “someone has opened a subspace channel to Klingon space.”

“What?! Close the channel. Jam the transmission.” ordered Kratoch.

“Transmission jammed, Captain.” advised Krouch.

Kratoch fell back into the command chair and the bridge nearly shook. He punched the switch on the comm panel again. “General Quarters. Security, find Commander Kahl!”

Although he did not get his entire message off before the transmission was jammed, Kahl did a thorough job of disabling the ship’s sensors. Most of the key circuitry had been destroyed. It would take engineering several hours or perhaps days to reroute the circuitry in order to enable the ship to get under way again. He hoped this would give him enough time.

The alarm for General Quarters had sounded, and Kahl knew everyone would be looking for him. Next stop, the Shuttle Bay. He would have to move quickly, but could not risk taking the turbolifts; lest they be

disabled from the bridge and he would be trapped. Kahl crawled through conduits and access ways as he made his way to the Shuttle Bay by the most direct route possible.

Finally, he arrived in the access shaft just above the entrance to the Shuttle Bay. Despite being unable to see the corridor below him, Kahl knew the entrance to the bay would be guarded. Carefully and quietly, he removed the access panel at his feet, and jumped down to the corridor below, disrupter in hand. The two guards at the Shuttle Bay door were caught completely by surprise. As they turned to bring their weapons to bear on him, Kahl fired two quick bolts from his disrupter. Both guards were vaporized instantly.

Kahl burst into the Shuttle Bay and pointed his disrupter in the direction of the Klingon in the control booth. Even though separated by reinforced glass, the Klingon in the booth was smart enough to know he would not be protected from the Commander's weapon. The Klingon raised his hands in surrender.

"Open the bay doors." Kahl growled in his native tongue, as he moved toward one of the three shuttle craft in the hangar. The Klingon in the booth complied, and the shuttle bay door opened slowly, revealing the vastness of space outside the ship. Kahl boarded the shuttle and brought the systems and impulse drive on line.

Concerned that the warrior manning the control booth would try to prevent Kahl from exiting the warship, he armed the disrupter array on the starboard side of the small ship. Kahl targeted the control booth and fired a single blast. The control

booth and the Klingon inside were engulfed in the energy of the disrupter bolt.

With no one left to stop him, Kahl launched the shuttle, and sped away from the *Grich* under full impulse power toward the system. Warp capable shuttles are rare in the Klingon fleet, and *Grich* carried none. Consequently, full impulse was the best escape speed Kahl could achieve. He hoped he would be able to get to his destination before *Grich* repaired her sensors, or before his fuel was exhausted.

On the bridge, an alarm at the Tactical Station sounded.

“Captain, a shuttle has just been launched.” advised the Tactical Officer.

Kratoch swore again. “Destroy the shuttle.”

“But Captain, our targeting sensors are not functional, we would be firing blind.” replied Tactical.

“Captain, Security reports a dead security officer on the corridor just outside the War Room. They also found the officer on duty inside the War Room dead from a stab wound.” reported the Communications officer. “They also report two more of their officers stations near the Shuttle Bay are missing and presumed vaporized.”

Kratoch swore yet again. “It is of no matter, he cannot go far before consuming all his fuel. We will either find him or he will die in the cold of space.” said the Captain, with a sneer. Then he pressed the switch on the comm panel again. “Engine Room, get sensors repaired immediately!”

Chapter Seventeen

Inside Klingon space the various fleets of warships controlled by prominent houses patrolled along the Neutral Zone, massing their collective strength and making preparations for war.

Occasionally, ships from rival families would come within weapons range of each other and exchange low-powered disrupter volleys. The warships' shields would easily absorb and dissipate the energy from these salvos, and no real damage would be done. The exercise was all part of the ritual involved in preparing for the glorious battle to come with the evil Federation.

In charge of a fleet of six D7 class warships controlled by the House of Dakram, was Captain Garren, aboard the Flagship *Dakram I*. The elders in this house were powerful, influential Klingons with seats on the High Council.

Captain Garren was an older brother in the house, and had proven himself in battle as a brave and honorable Klingon Warrior on many prior occasions. Garren had battled the Romulans, the Gorn, the Andorians and one unknown race which had dared venture into Klingon space. He had been victorious in every instance.

He even personally took on the Federation three years earlier, having battled the Starship *Calumet* in a dispute over mining rights in an asteroid field in common space. The *Dakram I* inflicted sufficient damage and casualties aboard the *Calumet* to force the starship to withdraw. Garren's fellow Warriors sung songs in his honor for months after the battle.

Garren stood aboard the bridge of his vessel, eyes fixed upon the viewer ahead and the emptiness of space. He detested sitting, and expressed the opinion anyone who sat, especially during battle, was no warrior. All those aboard his bridge, except for the helm and navigation, stood.

“Helm, position.” demanded Garren.

“We are holding ten thousand kellicams outside the Neutral Zone.” replied the Helmsman.

“Weapons status.” the Captain barked.

“Disrupters and torpedoes armed and ready, deflector shields and cloaking device standing by.” responded the Tactical Officer.

Garren was meticulous and demanded such updates every hour. His crew knew to expect these demands, and stay ever vigilant.

Like other fleets, Garren had been ordered to their current position in the event the Federation decided to launch an attack upon the Empire.

Like other warriors, he yearned for battle and the glory which accompanied it, but privately was apprehensive about all-out war with the Federation. Not that he was concerned for himself, for like all noble warriors, Garren’s fondest desire was to die in honorable battle.

He was more concerned for the state of his house, and the Empire. The Federation was powerful, and a formidable foe. The battle three years ago with the Starship *Calumet* was not a true test of the Federation’s strength. The *Calumet* was a research vessel, and not as well armed as the classes of starship they would engage in all-out war.

Garren was concerned that even if victorious, war with the Federation would be costly, and likely leave

the Klingon Empire vulnerable to attack from another enemy, such as the Romulans. Just the same, he dreamed of the challenge.

“Just once I’d like to do battle with a Constitution class starship.” Garren thought to himself. “That would be glorious.”

Chapter Eighteen

T'Rawl hailed from a proud house and a long line of warriors with a fine fleet of battle cruisers. His family boasted of many conquests and battle victories, and had attained seats on the High Council.

As a youngster on Qo'noS, T'Rawl had access to the finest schooling and training in his quest to follow his family line and become a fearsome warrior. But as he matured, his quest for glory began to subside.

As he reached the age of Ascension and became aware of his inner self, he realized he no longer wanted to pursue the path to warrior and pulled out of his training. This did not sit well with his family and they pressured him to reconsider. When he refused to re-enter the program their pressure turned to ridicule. He also suffered physical assaults from other warriors in training.

He moved out of the family home to a nearby village. But the residents there knew of him and of his bloodlines. And so the abuse continued until finally after months of relentless tormenting, he decided it was time to leave the planet.

With the help of another Klingon who had no love for the Empire, and whom he had befriended, T'Rawl received forged documents altering his identity and thus distancing himself forever from the distinguished house of Dakram, their riches, fleet and seats on the Council.

About that time, an undeveloped planet in a system inside Klingon space, and not far from the Federation Neutral Zone, was being terraformed into a farming world capable of producing food supplies for worlds

within the Empire. The Empire began searching for “recruits” to develop this new world named Bothes.

Transplanted Klingons were given plots of land, seed and supplies with the expectation they would provide a harvest to the Empire within two year’s time. To assist them, they were also given slave laborers, consisting mostly of races from other worlds conquered by the Klingons as their empire expanded.

Klingons who failed to provide a harvest meeting the expectations of the government had their land taken away and were exiled to parts unknown. Those who returned a suitable harvest were given land taken from those who failed. They also received the prior occupants’ slaves, equipment and allotment of seed.

T’Rawl, now under an assumed identity, decided to give farming a try. And so, with nothing more than the clothes on his back and his meager personal possessions, he caught a transport for the six day journey to Bothes.

Upon arriving, he was immediately given his parcel of land, seed, some ancient farming equipment and his allocation of slaves.

He set to work immediately, building housing for himself and his slaves from the raw materials of the land during the morning and early afternoon, and working the fields in the late afternoon and until the sun set.

This went on for almost three months. It was hard work, but T’Rawl soon began to realize he was enjoying it. Before too long he realized this was his destiny. He and the land had become one.

He did well growing the staple crops tartok and leola root, and returned a small but respectable harvest to the Empire after the first season.

Although the land and the crops belonged to the Klingon Empire and were merely loaned to T'Rawl, he was paid for the harvest. It wasn't much, but it was enough to live on with a little left over.

After the second, much larger harvest, he was notified by the Regional Governor that he was being given a plot of land adjacent to his own, and more than twice the size. Overnight, T'Rawl's land had more than tripled. He was excited about the growth opportunity, but at the same time distressed over the circumstances under which he acquired the land.

As was policy, the prior occupants of the land T'Rawl assumed were to be removed from the planet. He knew them personally. They were a small family consisting of the master of the house, his wife, and a daughter about three or four years younger than T'Rawl. He had gotten along with them well, but knew they were having trouble meeting their harvest quota. The master was getting along in years and appeared to have lost interest in the land. Or perhaps it simply became overwhelming.

T'Rawl would spend spare hours along with his slaves trying to help them meet their quotas. Unfortunately, as the master became more disinterested, his slaves had lost direction and after a while it became obvious the land would be lost.

During this time, T'Rawl had taken an interest in the daughter, Marsa. She would bring him cold water to cool his ridged brow and quench his thirst. As it was not proper to flirt without a proper courtship endorsed by the father, T'Rawl and Marsa would do little more than smile at each other and engage in small talk.

Once he learned of the family's pending exile, T'Rawl took the bold step of asking Marsa's father for her hand in marriage. Eager to protect his daughter from exile, he agreed in spite of the knowledge they would never see each other again. And so Marsa became T'Rawl's wife.

Over the years to come, T'Rawl's land grew as did his family. Marsa bore him thirteen children consisting of nine boys and four girls.

As his family grew, the need for a larger house became increasingly important. And so, the one room shack T'Rawl had originally built for himself was replaced by a much larger, sprawling structure with accommodations for his ever increasing numbers of slaves and servants.

Over the years, Marsa took care of the domestic matters at home and reared the children, while T'Rawl tended to his now enormous plantation and his slaves.

T'Rawl was a Klingon. He never became a warrior. He cared nothing for the political wranglings of the Empire or the ongoing conflicts of its military. He was a farmer. And he was happy.

Chapter Nineteen

As with their Starfleet counterparts in their starships across the Neutral Zone, the stress of boredom and anticipation was wearing on the Klingons aboard *Dakram I*. Tensions were high. Warriors snapped at each other, which while not unusual, didn't often result in hand to hand combat aboard a warship. Such skirmishes were occurring frequently.

However, their boredom was about to end suddenly.

"My lord," called the Tactical Officer, bringing Captain Garren out of his dream state, "a reading on sensors, just inside the Neutral Zone and heading this way."

"What is it, a ship?" asked Garren, not yet completely focused.

"Cannot determine yet. There is a lot of ultra violet interference from the nearby nebula." replied Tactical.

"Range." demanded the Captain.

"Eight hundred thousand kellicams, and it's moving fast." responded Tactical.

"Helm, plot course to intercept." ordered Garren. The Helmsman punched orders into his console, firing up the impulse reactor. The *Dakram I* moved off at impulse power in the direction of the object.

"Range, seven hundred thousand kellicams." advised the Helm.

"Can you identify yet?" Garren growled at his Tactical Officer.

"The object is coming into visual range now." announced Tactical, as the main viewcreen snapped to life.

“Those are missiles!” exclaimed Garren. The Captain began barking orders. “Battle Stations. Helm, take us to warp. Communications, order the rest of the fleet to pursue. Tactical, what course are those missiles on?”

“The missiles are on a direct course to Bothes.” replied Tactical.

“When will we be in weapons range?” inquired Garren.

“Not until the missiles have entered our space.” advised the Weapons Officer.

“Communications, order the rest of the fleet to fire on those missiles as soon as they are within range.” ordered Garren. “Tactical, speed of the missiles?”

“Warp seven point nine.” replied the Tactical Officer.

“Weapons, you will have to destroy them while they are still at warp. Do not fail.” warned Garren.

“Yes, my lord.” replied the Weapons Officer, fearfully. His hands moved furiously over the controls of the targeting computer as he programmed firing sequence, lead, duration and intensity of disrupter energy.

“The missiles are entering our space.” advised Tactical.

“Where did they come from?” demanded Garren.

After a pause, the Science Officer spoke. “My lord, engine energy output is of a frequency consistent with federation drive systems.”

“Federation!” exclaimed Garren.

On the viewscreen, the missiles, which had been in a very tight formation, began moving away from each other as they assumed attack positions. The Weapons Officer’s hands moved again as he fed new information into fire control.

“Missiles within range.” announced the Helm.

“Fire!” ordered Garren.

Bright orange beams erupted from the disrupter banks mounted on the struts supporting the warp nacelles. Seconds later two more of the warships opened fire.

Garren watched the viewscreen as disrupter beams found their targets, causing them to disappear in brilliant white flashes. On the viewer, he could see that several of the missiles which had eluded the disruptors were increasing their lead. They were outrunning the warships.

“Missiles now out of range, Captain.” announced the Helm.

“Go to maximum warp.” ordered Garren.

“Sir, the engines are already at maximum. Any faster and we might explode!” declared the Helm.

Garren leaped from the command chair and grabbed the helmsman by his collar. “More speed!” he demanded.

“Aye, sir.” acknowledged the helmsman while straightening his uniform.

The warship groaned under the strain of the extreme speed. The remaining missiles were framed in the center of the viewscreen as the Klingon warship pursued. But the missiles grew no larger. At best, the warship was pacing the speed of the weapons of mass destruction.

“Are we in range?” inquired Garren.

“No sir, the missiles have too great a lead.” replied the Helm.

Garren punched open a comm channel. “Engine room. More speed!”

“Sir, we are entering the Bothes system.” announced the Helm.

“Can we overtake the missiles?” asked Garren.

“No sir, we must break off pursuit as we are coming dangerously close to the planet.” replied the Helm.

Garren stood for several seconds to consider possible alternatives.

“Fire disrupters.” the Captain ordered. On the viewscreen, the disrupter beams leaped toward the speeding missiles. Prior to reaching their targets, the beams lost their cohesion, and the energy dispersed.

“No effect, Captain.” replied the Weapons Officer, glumly.

“Captain...” the Helmsman began. Before he could finish the Captain spoke.

“Break off pursuit.” Garren ordered glumly. “All stop.”

T’Rawl and his family had just finished their evening meal on what had turned out to be a glorious day. Even though most of his children had grown and moved to other houses built on the plantation, it was the custom for the entire family to gather for the evening meal at the parent’s house. The women would prepare the meal while the grandchildren played. T’Rawl took great pleasure in this evening gathering.

As he surveyed his legacy, the floor beneath him began to tremble. Softly at first, but then quickly became much stronger. Marsa’s expression registered puzzlement, and then concern. The tremors continued to grow in strength until plates and bowls on the enormous dinner table began to vibrate onto the floor and shatter into pieces. Then windows exploded in

and huge cracks began to propagate in the walls and ceiling.

Outside, the slaves panicked as they rushed outside and ran around aimlessly, screaming with fear. With all eyes on him, and fearing the house would collapse, T'Rawl ordered everyone outside as well.

Once outside they were buffeted by a brutally hot wind from the west. The slaves continued to run around in sheer panic, but T'Rawl and his family, in the finest Klingon tradition, stood their ground.

As they struggled to support themselves from the wind and debris, they saw the wall of fire on the western horizon. It appeared to grow quickly as it raced toward them.

T'Rawl and his family stood and watched it advance. Not a word was uttered by anyone. As the wall of fire was nearly upon them, T'Rawl placed a supporting arm around his wife's shoulder, as if to reassure her things would be all right.

His final thought was of the Klingon proverb he learned during his warrior training days long ago which proclaimed that, "perhaps, today is a good day to die."

On the *Dakram I* all eyes watched as the surface of the planet was blanketed by the growing inferno. The entire planet was converted into an angry, red, glowing sphere. There was nothing anyone could do.

No one on the bridge of the great warship uttered a word until Garren announced out loud, "The Federation will pay!"

Chapter Twenty

Having completed their ascent through the atmosphere of the gas giant to collect hydrogen, *Agenda* returned to polar orbit.

All primary systems were taken down except for thrusters, which Lieutenant Crowe would fire in short bursts to keep the ship perfectly centered over the magnetic north pole.

Captain Kirk had made the decision upon arrival that they would wait five hours before continuing on with their mission, provided they detected no further evidence of scans into the system. So far, all had been quiet.

While they waited, the command crew took turns napping in the crew quarters for an hour at a time. Down below, Commander Scott and Doctor Morse continued their fine tuning of the prototype warp drive system. Scotty took the time to rebuild the bothersome fuel regulator while it was shut down.

Even in the midst of performing these tasks, both managed to find a few minutes for some much needed rest.

On the flight deck, Adam was in the command chair while Captain Kirk rested. To his left, the communications panel signaled softly that a message was incoming. Lieutenant T'Lev received the message and turned to face the command chair.

“Commander, we have just received an encoded message from the *Enterprise*.”

“Please relay the message.” requested Adam.

“Long range sensors on Omega III show the Klingon colony Bothes has been destroyed.”

Adam was stunned. "By whom?"

"There's more." advised the Lieutenant. "Sensors did show Klingon fleet activity in the vicinity of Bothes just prior to its destruction."

"What is going on?" puzzled Adam.

"Sir, should we awaken Captain Kirk?"

"Not yet. We can brief him when he returns to duty. There is no action to be taken at this time.

Acknowledge message, Lieutenant."

No sooner had Adam said this than an alert began signaling on the tactical station. Adam leapt from the command chair and peered into the sensor viewer.

He announced to no one in particular. "Sensors have just detected a small vessel passing the fourth planet in the system, traveling at impulse speed, on course to this planet."

Adam turned to the communication station, "Now it's time to wake the Captain."

Lieutenant T'Lev strode briskly from the flight deck into the crew quarters. Seconds later, Captain Kirk, now fully awake, jogged onto the flight deck with the Lieutenant in tow.

"What do you make of it?" asked Kirk, as he seated himself on the edge of the command chair.

"Small craft, possibly a scout."

"Have they scanned us yet?"

"No, sir. And they'll have to get a lot closer to cut through all this magnetic interference with their scanners.

"Orders, Captain?" asked Lieutenant Crowe.

Kirk responded quickly. "Maintain position. Don't give them a reason to spot us."

Minutes passed as Adam continued to monitor the progress of the small vessel.

“Captain, we’ve been scanned. The unidentified vessel has altered course. They are now on a direct heading toward this position.” advised Adam.

“Who are they?” implored Kirk.

“Sensors now confirm the vessel to be a shuttlecraft of some.....” Adam suddenly looked up from his viewer, directly at Kirk. “Sir, it’s a Klingon shuttle.”

“Where the hell did it come from? Any sign of a warship in the area?”

“No, sir. However, the warship could be cloaked, or, the shuttle could have already been in the system.”

Kirk sat back in his chair and chewed on his lip some more. “This is very odd. Why a shuttle? What would they intend to accomplish? Mr. Crowe, bring all systems back on line, but maintain position.”

“Captain, the warp drive is still offline.” Crowe advised.

Kirk, jammed the comm button to the engine room. “Scotty, how soon can we have warp drive back?”

A few seconds passed before the response came. “We’re putting the regulator back together now. Should be just a few more minutes.”

“We’ve got company heading our way.” advised Kirk. “We may need to get out of here in a hurry.”

“Aye, Captain. I’ll let you know when we’re done.” replied Scott.

Then to the helm, “Mr. Crowe, precautionary. Raise shields to fifty percent level and charge the phaser. Place on standby.”

“Aye, sir.” replied Crowe enthusiastically.

All on the flight deck were now fully engaged.

On Starbase Thirty-one, Admiral Benning’s blood pressure had reached a dangerous level. “That’s

ridiculous!” Admiral Benning screamed at the image of Klingon Ambassador Tek in the view monitor. “The mere suggestion that the United Federation of Planets is capable of such a terrorist act is preposterous.”

“You Federation dogs are all alike.” retorted the Ambassador. “You talk of peace while you plan for the domination of the Klingon Empire. The destruction of the Bothes colony is just the first step in that direction.”

“Mr. Ambassador,” spoke Sarek, calmly, “I assure you the rhetoric and propaganda to which you have been exposed regarding the Federation is simply that. You and I have been involved in close discussion for several months. We have established a bond which cannot be denied. Please believe me when I tell you Admiral Benning speaks the truth.”

The Klingon glowered, skeptically. “It is the opinion of my people the Federation has retaliated for the attack on your outpost, which was not perpetrated by the Klingon Empire. I have no evidence with which to contradict that popular opinion.”

“Ambassador Tek,” spoke Admiral Benning, “if my information is correct, Bothes was destroyed by long range warp missiles. The fact is, the Federation possesses no such weaponry, and is not capable of such an attack.” This was not entirely true, as components for such weapons had been placed in storage shortly after they were made illegal, and forgotten by most. This fact was a distant memory in the recesses of the Admiral’s mind and totally unknown to Sarek.

“Your honor is questionable.” replied the Klingon. “I will relay your declarations to my superiors, but I

cannot vouch for your sincerity. Nor can I be responsible for any action taken by my government.”

“Ambassador, I implore you not to undertake any rash action. If we work together we can.....” the Admiral trailed off as the channel with the Klingon Ambassador abruptly closed.

“Well, Sarek, what do you think now?” asked Benning.

Sarek stood, hands clasped, and reflected for several seconds before replying. “Logically, the situation has worsened with the destruction of the Klingon colony. All out war may still be avoidable if the responsible parties are discovered. However, short of all-out war, a confrontation is now likely. I would estimate the probability to be in excess of ninety percent.”

Benning nodded. “If you will please excuse me, I need to update Starfleet Command.”

“The Federation is taking us for fools!” railed Poch of the House of Kremek. “Their plans are now clear. The elimination of the Klingon Empire is only the first step in their dominance of the Alpha and Beta Quadrants!”

Poch had the full attention of the Klingon High Council with his harangue. The House of Kremek had long been influential in the affairs of the Klingon Empire, and for four generations had a seat on the High Council. General Poch’s long military career was filled with successes and honor.

Now too old to command the squadron of warships controlled by his house, Poch had to be content with advising the High Council in military matters.

“While it is true the Federation cannot be openly trusted, we have no clear evidence they are responsible for the destruction of the Bothes colony.” retorted Ambassador Tek.

“No evidence!?” screamed Poch. “The sensor logs relayed from the *Dakram I* clearly show the drive systems to be of Federation design. Is that not enough evidence?”

“The *Dakram*’s logs are not in dispute, Poch. I am merely stating that evidence is not enough to prove conclusively the Federation is truly behind this. I have spoken personally with their Admiral Benning and Ambassador Sarek, of Vulcan. They deny responsibility for the attack categorically. And, after all, their outpost on Omega IV was destroyed in a similar manner. Are they responsible for that as well?” challenged Tek.

“Ambassador, I believe you have been living among the Federation demons far too long. They actually have you believing in their lies. The Federation has no honor! Of course they deny responsibility for the attack. Do you really think they would reveal to you the true nature of their plans? Also, I would not think they would be beyond destroying their own outpost, and killing their own people in order to promote their cause.” replied the aging council member.

“If the Federation wants war, why haven’t they attacked? What are they waiting for?” inquired the Ambassador.

“Are they not amassing for war along the Federation border? Do their numbers not grow by the hour? They are waiting for us to divert all our resources into the Bothes sector, leaving other areas

vulnerable. That is where and when they will attack.” replied Poch.

“Poch, House of Kremek, get to the point. What do you propose to the High Council?” demanded Chancellor Kapronek.

At that moment, a junior member of the House of Kremek entered the chamber and approached the General. The younger Kremek handed a tablet to the General, and whispered, “Subspace message from the *Grich*.”

Poch read the message and frowned.

“General Poch, we are waiting.” demanded the Chancellor, losing patience.

“Forgive me. Urgent family business has been brought to my attention. Chancellor, Council Members, in my opinion we cannot afford to wait any longer. For the security of the Empire, and the preservation of our ways, we must attack now!” Poch enunciated every word of his final statement slowly and precisely.

While the council chambers erupted in murmurs, Poch took his seat and listened.

Chancellor Kapronek slammed his walking staff to the stone floor of the council chamber three times, signaling for quiet. Once order was restored, the Chancellor declared, “Discussion on this matter is over.” The chamber fell silent. “The council will adjourn to consider the words of General Poch. A decision will be made before nightfall.”

Chapter Twenty-one

The Klingon shuttle approached slowly and cautiously, but with disruptors charged. The crew of *Agenda* watched on the viewscreen as the vessel closed to within twenty kilometers, and then came to a full stop. For several very long minutes, there was no activity of any kind.

“Orders, Captain?” asked Lieutenant Crowe once more. Evidently he was not the only person on the flight deck with mounting anxiety.

“Hold position, Lieutenant. Let them make the first move.” replied Kirk. Then he turned to Adam, “What is their status?”

Adam scanned the vessel again. “Weapons charged and locked on our position. Drive systems are shut down.”

A few more minutes of silence, and then the comm panel signaled. “Captain, we are being hailed.” announced T’Lev.

Kirk thought for a minute. “Open a channel, Lieutenant. Audio only. No visual.”

“Channel open.” declared the Vulcan.

“How can we assist you?” asked Kirk.

“Why are you here?” the voice answered back.

“We are affecting repairs on our drive systems.” replied Kirk.

“Who are you and what is your purpose?”

Holding to the pre-arranged script, Kirk replied, “My name is Bahr. Captain of the *Largess*. We are six weeks out of Cephus Prime with cargo bound for a system in Klingon space.”

A long pause. “What system? Why is your cargo hold shielded?”

“We are heading to the Kurttox system. Our cargo hold is shielded because we are carrying organisms sensitive to radiation.”

“I have not heard of a plague on Kurttox.” was the reply.

Kirk shrugged. “Then why would they order these micro-organisms?”

“Who placed the order?”

“Why?” countered Kirk.

“I need the name in order to verify the validity of your claim.”

Kirk paused. All on the flight deck were glued to him. “Why are you here?”

“To determine who you are.”

“I already told you who we are. Why would a Klingon shuttlecraft be dispatched all this way just to find a simple freighter?” challenged Kirk.

“I don’t think you are a simple freighter. Your ship was observed entering this system at high warp before you dropped off sensors. Now that we are in visual range, I can see that your ship has been greatly modified, and that you have a phaser cannon locked onto my vessel. I think you are more than you claim.”

Kirk challenged. “Even if we aren’t who we say we are, what does that matter to you? What do you want of us?”

Another long pause. “I want your help.”

Kirk sat upright in his chair. “In what way?”

“In preventing a serious injustice which will lead to war.”

“What war?” asked Kirk.

“Between the Klingon Empire and the Federation. An unjust war brought about by lies, deception and cowardice.”

Another pause. Then the voice on the speakers asked, "Will you help?"

Kirk replied, "It is possible. Who are you?"

"Do you have visual capability?"

"Yes." Kirk replied quickly.

"Then I request we switch to visual communication."

Kirk nodded to T'Lev, and the face of a Klingon warrior appeared on the viewer. "My name is Commander Kahl. I am an Intelligence Officer attached to the Imperial Warship *Grich*. Whom am I speaking with?"

Kirk started to respond with the script, but Kahl cut him off before he could get started.

"I see three humans and a Vulcan on your bridge. Do not try to convince me that you are a simple freighter on a fictional freight run. I suspect you are Starfleet."

Kirk ignored this. "Commander, where is your warship?"

Kahl replied, "Disabled, on the outer edge of this system."

"Disabled how?" asked Kirk.

"By me. But only temporarily. We do not have much time." replied Kahl.

Kirk's mind was racing. "Commander Kahl, you asked if we can help you prevent a war. We may be in a position to do that. Let's stop dancing around and tell me what's going on and why you are here."

"An outpost on the Federation border was attacked by long range missiles." advised Kahl.

Adam stiffened.

"Yes, we know that." responded Kirk.

“A similar attack is currently being planned to destroy a Klingon farming colony just inside our space.”

Kirk paused. “That attack has already happened, I’m afraid. The planet Bothes was destroyed a short while ago.”

Kahl looked down and swore a Klingon oath. Then he composed himself. “I know who is responsible for both attacks.”

“Who is responsible?” demanded Kirk.

“I am.” came the emotionless response.

Adam bolted upright in his chair. Kirk caught this reaction in his peripheral vision and gave his second in command a subtle calming gesture.

“You’re going to have to explain, Commander.” declared Kirk.

Kahl inquired, “Do you have transporters aboard your vessel?”

“We do.”

“Then I request you transport me aboard so we can discuss face to face.”

“Stand by.” ordered Kirk, as he gestured for the channel to be closed.

Kirk addressed the flight deck crew, “What do you think?”

Adam spoke first. “Don’t trust him, Captain. This could be a trap or an attempt to lure us into one.”

Lieutenant Crowe nodded his head in agreement with the Commander.

Kirk turned to Lieutenant T’Lev. “What do you think?”

Still seated, T’ Lev straightened her blouse and sat erect to address her Captain. “It could be a trap, but logically it makes no sense. Why send a shuttle craft

to lure us into a trap rather than a warship to destroy us?" She continued. "I sense no attempt at deception from him, but there is perhaps an element of desperation. He took a great chance in difficult conditions to locate us. Perhaps we should hear him out."

Kirk nodded. "We're here to get some answers. They may be in that shuttle off our bow. Mr. Russell, anything on sensors?"

Adam ran another scan of the system. "Nothing, sir. May I suggest that if we bring him aboard, it is with all precautions."

Kirk signaled for the channel to be opened. "Commander Kahl, if you will disarm your disruptors we will lower our shields and prepare to transport you aboard this vessel." The channel closed.

Adam monitored his sensor hood. "His weapons are powering down."

"Alright." acknowledged Kirk. "Mr. Crowe, when I give the word, lower our shields until transport is complete, and then raise them again, full intensity. Mr. Russell, set your phaser on heavy stun and follow me."

The Captain and First Officer stepped from the flight deck toward the transporter pads in the crew quarters, adjusting their phaser settings as they walked. Once in position, Kirk gave the word to lower the shields. Adam operated the controls on the transporter and a shimmering form began to materialize on the transporter pad.

When Kahl materialized, he was face to face with two phasers pointed directly at him. He ignored the phasers and studied his surroundings, but did not

move from the pad. His arms hung at his sides in a non-threatening manner.

“Don’t move.” ordered Kirk.

“Starfleet issue phasers.” observed Kahl.

“You came aboard armed.” observed Kirk, noting the disruptor at the Klingon’s right side and the dagger on his left.

“A warrior is always prepared for battle.” replied the Klingon in a conversational tone.

Kirk nodded. “Never-the-less, we’re not going be able to let you keep those.” Kirk slowly reached in and relieved the Lieutenant first of the disruptor and then the dagger while Adam kept Kahl in his sights. The weapons were stowed in a nearby locker and secured.

Still at phaser point, Kirk invited Kahl to step from the pad and escorted him to the flight deck and a chair at an unmanned station. Once seated, Kahl was shackled to the chair with a pair of wrist braces already on board, and Kirk and Adam were able to relax their aim a bit.

“Comfortable?” asked Kirk.

“Comfort is of no concern to a warrior.” replied Kahl.

“Alright then, let’s get started. Explain what you meant when you said you were responsible for the missile attacks.” demanded Kirk.

“First, I want to know exactly who I am speaking with. If I’m going to be truthful with you, I want the same in return.” requested Kahl.

Before Kirk could say anything, the speaker at the command chair chirped with the sound of Mr. Scott’s voice. “Engineering to Captain Kirk.”

Kirk’s face displayed annoyance. He punched the button. “Yes, Mr. Scott?”

“Captain, the regulator is back together. We should have full warp capability at your command.”

“Excellent, Engineer. Kirk out.” The channel closed.

Kahl grinned. “Do I have the honor of being in the presence of Captain James Tiberius Kirk of the Federation Starship *Enterprise*?”

Kirk mused. “You seem to know a lot about Starfleet.”

Kahl’s demeanor turned more serious. “It is my duty!”

“Yes, I suppose it is. Now that the introductions are over, you said you wanted our help. Explain.” demanded Kirk.

With that, Kahl began to reveal the detailed explanation of the planning and execution of the two missile attacks, the trio of warships involved from the House of Kremek, and the secret messages from General Poch on the high council, directing all the activities.

As Adam listened to this tale unfold, he struggled to keep his emotions in check. While his duty demanded he be a good witness and absorb as much information as possible, he was also aware that seated before him was one of the perpetrators of the attack on Omega IV. An attack which destroyed the outpost he was responsible for protecting, and the attack which took the life of his beloved Carrie. It required every fiber of his being to refrain from raising his phaser and vaporizing the Klingon into atoms.

As Kahl began to wind down his lengthy monologue Kirk and Adam digested the information. Much of what was revealed left them shocked and disgusted. More so Adam than Kirk. As captain of a

starship one has the opportunity to see and hear many things which harden the individual.

After a pause began the questions. "How did you locate us?" asked Kirk.

"Intuition." replied Kahl.

"In other words, a hunch? A guess? If so, you took an awful chance." pressed Adam.

"I took a chance either way. If I found you, there was the possibility that you could not or would not help. You may have killed me. If I didn't find you, then the probability was high I would die here in space when I exhausted my fuel. In either case, this was a one way trip."

Kirk nodded agreement.

"Besides," added Kahl with a wry smile, "This is where I would have hidden."

Kirk sat back, a bit more relaxed. "What do you want from us?"

"I want you to destroy the facility where the weapons are being manufactured so there are no further cowardly attacks."

Adam leaned forward. "Cowardly attacks! You mean against your own people? What about the attack on Omega IV?" he challenged.

"I make no apologies for actions taken by my people against enemies of the Empire!" growled Kahl.

Adam returned the growl. "Well it would benefit you to know that I was in command of that outpost at the time of the attack, and your attack killed many of my people!"

"At ease, Commander." Kirk ordered.

Kahl sat stoically.

Kirk leaned closer to the Klingon. "Are we your enemy, Commander?"

Kahl said nothing.

“If you ask me, it’s pretty ironic that you would turn your back on your own people and seek your enemy for help. Isn’t it? Makes it a little difficult to figure out who your allies truly are.”

Kahl breathed heavily and exhaled. Finally, after a long minute of soul searching he spoke. “I will admit my loyalties at this time are not clear.” Then a pause. “I felt such disgust at the thought of committing such a dishonorable act against my own people that I had to do something. I had to take a desperate chance. I was not able to act in time to save Bothes. Maybe I can prevent another Bothes from happening.”

Adam had experienced a wide variety of emotions in the last half hour listening to this enemy. Now he found himself experiencing compassion. This confused him.

Kahl spoke again. “There is more.”

Kirk and Adam refocused their attention on the warrior.

“I have evidence of Starfleet collusion in this matter.”

“What evidence?” demanded Kirk.

Kahl reached a shackled hand inside his uniform. Instinctively both Kirk and Adam raised their phasers. Kahl paused and slowly retrieved a micro storage device and handed it to Kirk.

“On this chip you will find a message proving a Federation conspirator is on the Klingon Warship *Koroth*, our flagship.

After a brief examination of the device, Kirk handed it to Lieutenant T’Lev. “Can you retrieve the information?”

T'Lev also examined the chip. "I believe so, sir. It should be a simple matter of adjusting the formatting to correspond with our equipment." She inserted the device into a chip slot and made the appropriate adjustments to the controls. Instantly the message appeared and she read the contents to Kirk.

"So what?" declared the Captain. "This doesn't prove any conspiracy. What makes you think that it does?"

"The message originated in Federation space. Examine the attached source information." advised Kahl.

T'Lev did just that. "Captain, the source information is incomplete, but it may appear the message was attached to a navigational advisory originating from Starbase Thirty-one."

"Can you verify that independently?" asked Kirk.

"I can retrieve the advisory logs for that date and examine them." T'Lev accessed the logs and found the advisories for the date in question. "Captain, that particular advisory aired six times on that stardate. All six are of identical size and duration, with the exception of the advisory which aired at time index 22:00. The duration is identical, but the size of the advisory is slightly larger."

"Still not positive proof of a conspiracy." declared Kirk, defiantly.

"No, Captain. Not positive proof. But still a curiosity, isn't it?" pushed Kahl.

Kirk asked the Klingon, "Were you able to tie the message to a specific source within the starbase?"

Kahl shook his head. "Not with the equipment I had access to on the *Grich*."

Kirk turned to T'Lev. "Lieutenant, can you tell?"

The young Vulcan had already been working on that puzzle. Reluctantly she had to admit defeat. "Sorry, sir. Not with this equipment. If I had access to a lab on a starbase I could drill down farther."

"Or a starship." Kirk retorted.

T'Lev raised an eyebrow.

"You will find, Lieutenant that with the right people in place, there is little a starbase can do that a starship cannot. Please encode the message and dispatch it to Captain Spock aboard the *Enterprise*. Send for his eyes only.

"Aye, sir. Right away."

"So Captain, will you help prevent more bloodshed?"

Kirk turned back to the Klingon officer. "You've told an interesting story. But you haven't given us much to support your claims. How do we know you're not luring us into a trap?"

"I found you in a shuttle." replied Kahl. "If I were lying, I could have found you just as easily in a warship. If it's substance you're looking for, I can give you the coordinates of the system where the missiles are being made."

"Give the coordinates to the helm." ordered Kirk.

Kahl did so.

"The coordinates are to the Dorian system, Captain."

Kirk nodded knowingly.

"Time is wasting, Captain. If we are to stop what has already been put into motion, then we must go now. The *Grich* could restore their sensors any time. And they will surely come looking for me, and you. And our destination will take about two days travel at maximum speed."

“Oh, I think we can get there a bit sooner.” smirked the Captain. “What do you think, Mr. Russell? Is it worth the risk?”

Adam pondered this before answering. “Captain, I think it’s the best lead we have so far. And Commander Kahl is right. Time is now of the essence.”

Kirk agreed. “All right, Commander, we will check out the system. But we are investigating. Not destroying. We will provide you additional fuel for your shuttle to power your life support until your ship arrives to rescue you.”

“No, Captain. I must accompany you.” argued Kahl.

Kirk shook his head. “Impossible.”

“Well then Captain, you have two choices. Either I accompany you on this mission or you transport me into space to die.”

“Why only those choices?” inquired Kirk.

“Before you transported me aboard, I rigged the impulse engines on my shuttle to implode in forty five minutes.”

Kirk looked alarmed. “Lieutenant T’Lev, how long ago did we transport Kahl aboard?”

“Forty three minutes and twenty five seconds, sir.” was the reply.

“Mr. Crowe, back us off!” ordered the Captain.

The helmsman fired the reverse thrusters and *Agenda* backed away from the Klingon shuttlecraft. Seconds later, the shuttle was consumed in a fireball which shook the occupants on the flight deck.

“Too close!” declared Crowe.

“Like I said, Captain, you now have a choice to make. And it will only be a matter of time before the *Grich* registers the explosion and comes to investigate.”

Kirk rose and stepped purposely in the direction of the Klingon Lieutenant with an expression which conveyed so much fury that Adam thought Kirk might punch Kahl. The Captain stopped short of striking the Klingon, but took the opportunity to vent his anger. “I don’t like having decisions forced on me.”

Kahl said nothing in reply.

Then Kirk turned again in the direction of the helm. “Mr. Crowe, set course for the coordinates our guest gave you.”

“Aye, sir. Course set.”

“Warp eight.” ordered the Captain.

Seconds later, *Agenda* leaped past the expanding ball of vaporized material that was the Klingon shuttle.

Chapter Twenty-two

“Mr. Spock,” called Lieutenant Uhura from her bridge station. “I’m receiving an encoded digital message and attachment from Captain Kirk’s ship. It’s addressed to you and labeled for your eyes only.”

The Vulcan raised an eyebrow and rose from the command chair in the direction of the communication station where he viewed the subject line which read ‘verify validity and source of the attached’. Addressing Uhura, spoke instructed, “Forward this to Science Lab One, that’s where I’ll be.”

“Yes, Mr. Spock.” replied the Nubian communications officer.

“Mr. Sulu,” announced Spock, “you have the conn.”

Upon arriving in Science Lab One, Spock set out to work immediately. First he read the message and the attached explanation that the message may have piggy-backed onto the navigational advisory.

Pulling up the log of advisories and locating the correct one, Spock was immediately able to verify that indeed the message in question had been cleverly hidden within.

Using the equipment available in the science lab, the hidden message was separated from the host message with relative ease. However, any identification of the source was efficiently removed from the file.

Undeterred, Spock dug deeper into the supporting data transmitted with the message. Buried deep in the digital data of any Starfleet message, and frequently overlooked, is information regarding the command section from which the message originated. Within

seconds, Spock was able to identify the specific section within the starbase. Using the *Enterprise* computers, he created an uplink with the mainframe computer on Starbase thirty-one.

Once established, Spock downloaded the activity logs for all computers in the section. Based on the message time stamp, it took just seconds to locate the specific computer from which the message was sent, and the computer's owner.

Spock studied the information and then re-verified the accuracy of his findings. Once satisfied that all was in order, he opened a channel to Lieutenant Uhura on the bridge.

“Lieutenant, please open a secure channel to Admiral Benning on Starbase thirty-one.”

Chapter Twenty-three

The broadcast was sent throughout the empire. Even at the speed of subspace radio, it would be days before the farthest reaches of Klingon space would receive it though.

In the broadcast, Chancellor Kapronek praised the brave men and women of Bothes and thanked them for their duty and sacrifice. He spoke fondly of his many visits to the world, and urged all warriors to avenge their reckless and wanton slaughter at the hands of the Federation.

In actuality, Kapronek had never been to Bothes. Being a warrior himself, he cared little for the loss of a few farmers. The fact that Bothes supplied large quantities of sustainable food crops to the empire, and was a central cog in the Klingon economy were of little concern to him. These were matters for his economic advisors to worry over.

Kapronek was a warrior, leading a race of warriors. His focus was simple: to get the empire ready for war with the Federation. Anything else was now of secondary importance.

Commander Mark Dillon estimated that in the last four days he hadn't had more than two hours of uninterrupted sleep. Since the destruction of outpost Omega IV, Omega III had to do more than double duty in keeping watch over the Neutral Zone and the Klingon fleet on the other side. As a result, Dillon, commanding this outpost, had been required to push his people, equipment and self to their limits and beyond.

He had been on constant duty and was always instantly accessible. He took his meals on the run, and rarely yielded to the call of nature.

Over the last several days, there had been numerous false alarms, anomalous sensor readings to be scrutinized, and the ever constant requests for updates from Admiral Benning's staff on Starbase thirty-one.

Above all else was the threat of war with the Klingons. If that were to become a reality, things around Omega III were really going to get busy.

Dillon was tired, and understandably more than a little irritable. His crew was all too aware of how the stress of the situation was affecting him. How it was affecting them all.

Commander Dillon listened intently as the Chancellor's emotional speech was translated and recorded. With the destruction of Omega IV, this command post was now the most strategically located relative to Klingon space, and the first to receive transmissions and broadcasts from the empire.

His duty then was to upload the speech, translations and all other data to Starfleet Command. There top brass would slice, dice, analyze, theorize and meet over the information in order to formulate a plan.

"Commander." called Lieutenant Starke, from his console on the far end of the command center.

"What is it, Starke?" he asked wearily.

"Long range sensors have lost track of a fleet of Klingon warships in sector T-19, proximate to the Neutral Zone." responded the Lieutenant.

"Analysis?" demanded the Commander.

"Running it through the computer now, sir." after a momentary delay, "Here it is. Sensors showed six

warships, unable to get an exact fix on their class, probably D-7. Their last recorded location was point one-two light-years from the Neutral Zone. Last known heading was course one-twenty four, mark nine at a speed of warp factor six.”

“Conclusion, Lieutenant?” asked Dillon.

“Sir, based on this data, it would seem the fleet cloaked on their way to the Neutral Zone.” replied Starke.

Dillon acknowledged Starke with a grimace. “Computer, based on last known data regarding Klingon fleet in sector T-19, calculate the probability on Neutral Zone violation.”

“Estimated ninety-seven point three percent probability of Neutral Zone entry.” replied the synthesized female electronic voice.

Dillon and Starke exchanged looks for a long second. Suddenly, the Commander spun away and called to the Communications Officer. “Ensign Tighe, open a priority-one encoded channel to Starfleet Command.”

“Right away, sir.” replied the Lieutenant as her hands moved rapidly over her console.

“Looks like we’ve got a war on our hands.”

Chapter Twenty-four

Scarcely seventeen hours after getting under way, *Agenda* sat at the outer edge of the Dorian system. The trip had been without incident. Even the troublesome anti-matter regulator did not cause any problems.

Adam had begun pre-approach scans of the system, especially the third planet, as soon as they were within two light years. Making use of the sensors, he had been able to detect video and audio transmissions of various sorts emanating from the planet. He concluded some would be helpful in learning about the inhabitants of the planet. These he recorded. The information might also be useful for fine-tuning the portable universal translators onboard, in the undesirable event contact with any inhabitants should be necessary.

“Commander, scan for warp signatures or eddy currents around that planet, and elsewhere in the system.” ordered Kirk.

“Scanning.” responded Adam. Then after several seconds he reported. “There is evidence of eddy currents around the system, with the third planet as a focal point. However, there is no evidence of recent warp signatures.”

“Do the currents look like they are going toward, or coming from the planet?”

“Unknown, Captain.” replied Adam. “The youngest currents are old enough to have dissipated to a point where making that distinction is not possible. I’d say forty-eight hours.”

Kirk turned to Kahl. "Commander?"

The Klingon looked purposely at Kirk as if trying to determine whether to answer. Then he appeared to make up his mind. "The currents are probably departing with the missiles to destroy Bothes. But by now the ships will be on their way back."

"So, there should be no warships in the system right now?" Kirk quizzed.

"Most likely not."

"When are they due back?" pushed Kirk.

"I do not know. But you can be certain they will be returning as fast as they can." advised the Klingon.

Kirk nodded, and was about to give the order to enter the system.

"There will be patrols around the planet." added Kahl, without emotion.

Kirk swung quickly in the warrior's direction.

"Patrols? What kind of patrols?"

"Single warrior fighter craft. Very fast and agile."

"So, the intelligence was correct." said Adam.

Kirk glanced toward Adam and then back to Kahl. "How many?"

"Two that I know of."

"Commander, can you detect anything?" inquired Kirk.

"Not at this distance, Captain."

"We'll have to proceed on the belief there are patrols then. And that makes proceeding all the way to the third planet unwise. We need a stealthier solution."

Kirk glanced in Adam's direction.

Adam gave a wry smile.

"Commander, bring up a schematic of the system with its current orbital positions." requested the Captain.

Instantly an overhead view of the system with the relative positions of the planets appeared on the viewscreen.

“Commander Russell, if you were looking for a safe place to hide while launching a reconnaissance mission, where would you go?”

Adam studied the schematic. “Relative to our position, I’d say the seventh planet in the system would be the most optimal. It’s large, will have a big magnetic field to help hide us, and it’s uninhabited.”

Kirk nodded appreciatively.

“Lieutenant Crowe,, ETA to the seventh planet at impulse?” requested the Captain.

Crowe consulted his navigational display. “Two hours, forty-seven minutes, sir.”

Kahl interrupted. “How do you plan to conduct a reconnaissance mission from such a distance?”

“Don’t be concerned, Commander. Your people aren’t the only ones who have been busy developing new technologies.” retorted Kirk.

Returning his attention to the helm, Kirk ordered, “Lieutenant, set course and execute.” Then to Adam, “How are you doing with information on the inhabitants of the third planet?”

“Quite well, Captain,” Adam replied, “I have been able to record several transmissions which may prove helpful. Most are of military content.”

“Oh?” exclaimed Kirk, “please elaborate.”

“Based on information provided by Commander Kahl, the missile production facility is on a continent the citizens refer to as Tok. Tok is at war, and apparently has been for some time, with the continent of Erfel.”

“Over what?”

“From what I understand, the fight is over rights to a small continent in the northern hemisphere called Mala.” replied Adam.

“Is Mala rich in some natural resource the other continents don’t possess?” asked Kirk.

“It does not appear so, Captain. According to long range scans for radiation and other emissions, both Tok and Erfel are rich in naturally occurring radioactive minerals, primarily uranium. I am also detecting deposits of dilithium, some of the richest on record if these scans are correct. Ironically, I am detecting no such deposits on Mala. In fact, I’m not seeing anything special about Mala.”

“Then what makes Mala so worth fighting over?”

“Captain,” spoke Lieutenant T’Lev, “based on our early intelligence, Tok and Erfel have been at war so long, the original issues have most likely been forgotten or at least have become secondary. Mala may have no value, other than both peoples wish to possess it.”

Kirk raised his eyebrows subtly in disbelief. “Can you tell what kinds of weapons are being used?”

“From this range it is difficult to determine.” replied Adam. “However, I am not seeing the kinds of radiation patterns you would expect to see with the use of thermal-nuclear weapons.”

“Maybe they haven’t found their uranium deposits yet.” offered Lieutenant Crowe.

“That does not appear to be the case. There are indications of nuclear power in use all over the planet.” refuted Adam.

“Lieutenant T’Lev, theorize please; have the people of this world not discovered the potential use of uranium

as a weapon, or are they smart enough to avoid such a scenario?" asked Kirk.

"Since they seem to have developed the ability to refine uranium for use as a power source, it would seem logical they have discovered the science and principle of nuclear fission. This should lead to the conclusion that they are intelligent enough beings to, as you say, avoid such a scenario." replied the Vulcan.

Kirk nodded his comprehension. "Ok. Commander Russell, you said most of the transmissions you have recorded are of military content. What have they been saying?"

"It would seem from the transmissions there has been considerable terrorist activity on Tok, apparently committed by militants from Erfel. They refer repeatedly to the Ghattu. I believe this is the term they have applied to the terrorists. The transmissions are a combination of public service announcements teaching the inhabitants of Tok how to protect themselves from the Ghattu, and propaganda against Erfel. In any case, there is little being broadcast anywhere on the planet which is not military in origin."

"Let's see what you've got. Main viewer, please." ordered the Captain.

The scene on the viewer changed from the view of space ahead to a humanoid dressed in what appeared to be military style garb. The being on the screen had two arms, two legs, and a face which was mostly humanoid in appearance. It was apparently male. The bone structure around his eyes, and forming the bridge of his nose was more pronounced than that of a human, making his eyes appear to be deeper set in the skull. He had no eyebrows. Closer examination of his

face showed the pupils of his eyes were elliptical in shape rather than round. The irises of his eyes were multi-hued, a combination of yellows, blues and purples. They reminded Adam of a holographic kaleidoscope he had as a child.

The male had what appeared to be hair on the top of his head, dark in color, and very closely cropped. His hairline began very high on what would be his forehead, but formed a point extending down from the middle of his forehead toward the bridge of his nose.

The male was speaking, and as he spoke, he gestured with his hands in a very human-like way. His hands contained five digits each, including an opposable thumb. The digits were somewhat longer than those on a human hand. Ridges on the male's face, as well as the weathered appearance of his hands gave the impression this being was of advanced age.

The scene on the viewer switched to a group of what appeared to be civilians. There were seven in total, five males and two females. Their appearances were remarkably similar to that of the military figure, except they were younger looking.

Upon closer examination of the females in the group, it became apparent the beings of this world were mammalian. The men were clad in loosely fitting trousers with wrapped long sleeved tunics, and boots. A sash went around the waist, with a matching sash draped across the tunic from the right shoulder to the left hip. Adam noticed that while the sashes at the waist and tunics matched in color, the sashes of the individuals in the group varied. He could only speculate the color was significant in some way. Perhaps it indicated class, or family.

The two women in the group also wore loose fitting pants, but with tops which came up to the neck line and sandals as footwear. While the women wore sashes about their waists, they wore none on their upper torsos.

The group milled about discussing a recent terrorist attack on a community center, allegedly perpetrated by the Ghattu. The image of the badly damaged masonry structure was clearly visible in the background.

The men did all of the speaking while the two women remained silent. From this, the *Agenda* bridge crew unanimously concluded this society was not as socially advanced as it was technically. Adam wondered if the beings on the screen were representative of the civilians of the continent, or were public officials of some sort.

“Commander,” Kirk called, “is this how all the civilians dress?”

“I have limited images on non-military personnel, Captain. But this mode of dress is consistent with the few images I do have recorded.”

“It would appear these people are in a state of martial law.” stated Lieutenant T’Lev. All nodded in agreement.

“What do we know about their physical dimensions?” asked the Captain.

“The average male is one-point seven two meters tall, and weighs sixty-three point four kilograms. They’re shorter and lighter than we are.” replied Adam.

Kirk considered this for a moment, then punched open the comm channel to the engine room. “Scotty, please prepare the PAV for imminent departure. Commander Russell and I will meet you in the cargo hold shortly.”

“Aye, Captain.” sounded the Scottish brogue.

“Lieutenant T’Lev, relieve Commander Russell at tactical. Keep those sensors on maximum sensitivity. Lieutenant Crowe, stealth approach. Keep shields up to help avoid detection. At the first sign of a Klingon vessel, reverse course and leave the vicinity at maximum warp. Commander, time to suit up.”

Adam followed Kirk off the bridge.

Kahl, still manacled to the empty station observed everything.

Chapter Twenty-five

The aide wordlessly handed the tablet to Admiral Benning and quickly left the office. Benning scanned the pad and set it on his desk in a very deliberate manner. “Omega III has now confirmed a seventh squadron of warships has entered the zone.”

“What is the total of Klingon vessels now confirmed in the Neutral Zone?” asked Ambassador Sarek, seated on the sofa in Benning’s office.

“At least forty-seven.” replied the Admiral, dryly.

“And how many starships do we have assembled on the border?” inquired Sarek.

“Forty-nine now with the reinforcements we were granted.” said Benning.

“At least for the moment, we have the numerical advantage.” observed Sarek.

Benning thought for a brief moment that he detected a hint of humor in Sarek’s tone. But, considering who he was talking with, he dismissed the possibility. “The Klingons have cut all military lines of communications. We can’t establish a link to determine their intentions or discuss the situation. We could have a full scale war within the next few days. A manufactured war. A war in which we are complicit.”

Sarek noticed that Benning suddenly looked at least ten years older. The stress of the situation was clearly weighing on him. He hadn’t slept in days, and barely ate. His silver hair now appeared gray, and was unkempt. He desperately needed a shower and a solid night’s sleep. The starbase had been under yellow alert since the first Klingon squadron entered the zone.

“Unfortunately, the diplomatic channels have likewise been terminated.” advised the Ambassador.

Benning let out an audible sigh. “What else can I do, my friend?”

“You have done everything you could possibly do to avoid this situation. You have also done everything possible to prepare your fleet and neighboring sectors for what is to come. The only logical course of action now is to realize that matters are out of your hands. You must have faith in your people.” counseled Sarek.

Benning nodded. “What you suggest is logical, but very difficult.”

“I understand.” acknowledged Sarek. “Logically, there is nothing more you can do.”

“There has to be some way to let them know what we know. What Kirk has discovered. This could all be avoided, or at least buy us some time.”

Benning considered the information on the computer pad once more, hoping it would somehow miraculously change to something less ominous. “Can I arrange transportation for you back to Vulcan, to be with your family?”

“No.” replied Sarek. “I will remain here. It is possible I may yet be needed.”

“If things go really wrong, the fight could wind up here.” Benning advised.

“That is a risk, and I am willing to accept it. Besides, my son is on the ship that will be part of the first wave into the Neutral Zone. I wish to remain here.”

Benning nodded. “Thanks for staying. Your advice has been invaluable.”

Sarek eyed Benning with a curious gaze. “Like you, there is little I can do about the present situation,

except wait. If my advice is needed and desired, then I am inclined to extend it.”

Benning nodded, then stood and faced away from Sarek, looking out the window at one of the championship golf courses, devoid of any players. It was a beautiful day. He desperately wished he could be out there relaxing, instead of stuck in his office and waiting for Armageddon.

“Have you assessed the probable outcome of the battle to come?” asked Sarek.

The Admiral looked over his shoulder at the Vulcan, and then turned back to the window as he formulated his response. “The Klingons are a warrior species. From what we know about them, they are born and raised to fight, regardless of the cost. Retreat is not an option for them. Their ships are fighting machines with incredible firepower.”

“Our people, on the other hand, are highly trained in multiple combat strategies, including knowing when to retreat. Our combat training also includes specialized strategies for fighting the Klingons. Our ships, while well armed, are more defensively designed and are not exclusively weapons of war.

Our defenses, shields and sensors, we believe, are superior to the Klingons. We also believe our starships are more agile than the Klingon warships. Bottom line, Sarek, we just don’t know. We’ve run the various scenarios through the computer dozens of times. It’s a toss-up.” Benning turned to face the Ambassador. “The only thing I’m sure of, knowing the Klingons if it starts, it will be a fight to the finish.”

Sarek nodded his understanding.

Benning turned away from the window with determination. "We can wait no longer. I'm giving the order. We're going into the Neutral Zone."

Chapter Twenty-six

Adam stepped onto the deck of the cargo hold and walked in the direction of Captain Kirk and Commander Scott. He was dressed in his Starfleet issued flightsuit, and carried his pack over his left shoulder.

As he approached his shipmates, he saw fuel lines and digital connecting cords running to the PAV, as the tiny craft underwent the final fueling and preparations for launch. The cockpit was slid open as if in welcome to the young commander. His heart rate increased.

“All set to get underway, Commander?” asked Kirk.

“Raring to get going.” replied Adam, trying to conceal his nervousness.

“Very good. We’ll hold our mission briefing here rather than on the flight deck so Mr. Scott can finish prepping the ship.”

“Yes, sir.” Adam concurred.

“Your mission is reconnaissance, Mr. Russell. Nothing more. Stealth approach to the planet. Avoid any contact with the Klingon patrols which may or may not be orbiting the planet.”

Adam nodded.

Kirk extended a computer tablet and Adam took it. “If Kahl is being honest, the coordinates for the missile production facility are approximately eight kilometers inside an industrial area which is bordered by an undeveloped area, mostly flat and devoid of tall vegetation such as trees. It will not be possible to scan adequately from the air. You’ll have to set down and approach the facility on foot. To avoid detection, this is where you will land the PAV.” Kirk dropped a

marker on the tablet in the general area. “Based on your scans, the area is somewhat rocky, so be selective about your spot.”

Adam nodded again.

“Have you been running, Commander?”

“Yes, sir. I have.” replied Adam.

“Good. You’re going to need your legs. Get in, scan the area with your tricorder, record anything that you deem appropriate and get out. Shields up the entire way to avoid detection. No contact with indigenous life and no contact with any Klingons. Understood?”

“Absolutely, sir.” responded Adam.

“The wee ship has enough fuel for the flight there and back, but not too much more than that. So no sight-seeing.” offered Scotty.

“I’ll try to remember that, Commander.” quipped Adam with a smile. Scott smiled back.

“How long has it been since you’ve been in the cockpit of one of these?” Scott asked.

“A few months. I used a little jump ship like this fairly regularly to get around the system surrounding the outpost.”

“Well, this one might have a wee bit more horsepower.” Scott smirked.

Kirk continued the briefing. “Radio silence throughout, Mr. Russell. You don’t want to give away your location or ours. If you see any Klingon vessels enroute, try to avoid detection and hightail it back here. If you run into trouble, use the emergency beacon on your communicator. We’ll be monitoring your progress to and from the planet, but won’t be able to monitor you while on the ground.”

“Yes, sir.” stated Adam.

“One more thing, Adam. If anything happens, do not let this vessel fall into the hands of the Klingons, or be discovered by the natives. It is expendable.”

“Understood. As am I.” declared Adam.

“Kirk smiled and jabbed Adam on the upper arm. “Let’s not let it come to that.”

Kirk’s communicator beeped. He withdrew it from his cloak pocket and flipped it open.

“Captain,” called Lieutenant T’Lev, “The *Enterprise* reports numerous Klingon vessels have entered the Neutral Zone under cloak. Starfleet has ordered all available vessels into the zone to intercept.”

Kirk looked first at Scott, and then Adam. “Thank you, Lieutenant. ETA to our destination?”

“Lieutenant Crowe estimates arrival in just under seven minutes.”

“Synchronous orbit above the north pole upon arrival. Kirk out.” The Captain closed the communicator.

“Are we proceeding with our mission, Captain?” inquired Adam.

“Our mission is now more important than ever. We are on the brink of all out war and we may be the only ones that can do something about it.” Kirk replied.

The expressions of Adam and Scott became grim.

“Time to saddle up, Commander.” Kirk prompted.

Adam climbed into the cockpit of the small fighter while Mr. Scott proceeded to disconnect the hoses and cords. Captain Kirk and Engineer Scott both wished Adam good luck. He responded with a thumbs-up, just as the cockpit cover slid into place and locked with a resounding thunk.

Adam then donned and locked his helmet into position as all the PAV systems came to life. He

watched as Kirk and Scott ascended the metal stairs to the observation booth on the catwalk above. Since the cargo hold would be depressurized when the hatch doors opened, the observation booth was the only part of the container which would remain pressurized.

It seemed an eternity to Adam as he completed his pre-flight checks. Then the speaker in his helmet clicked on and he heard Lieutenant Crowe report, "Ten seconds, Commander. We're nearly in position." The speaker clicked off and that was when Adam's heart really began to race.

Seconds later the hatch doors on the aft end of the cargo container opened revealing the vastness of space beyond and the serene beauty of the planet below. *Agenda* had successfully achieved orbit, and it was now time to depart.

Adam placed the horizontal thrusters on standby as he brought the main thrusters on line in idle mode. The little ship began to vibrate.

Verifying all thrusters were operational, he deactivated the safety on the horizontal thrusters and manipulated the throttle to five percent lift. The little ship immediately jumped from the deck. Adam pulled back on the throttle just before the cockpit could slam into the top of the hold.

"Oops. A wee bit more horsepower?" he said to himself as he looked in the direction of the observation booth. Captain Kirk displayed no emotion. Adam thought Scotty was going to be sick in the booth.

With the horizontal throttle now set at three percent lift, the PAV was holding a nice, stable position just a meter off the deck floor. Adam then slowly throttled up the main thrusters until forward momentum was

achieved and the ship crept slowly toward the open hatch.

Seconds later, the little jump ship cleared the hatch and was free to navigate. Adam throttled up as he angled away from *Agenda* and the planet. Throttling up to fifty percent, the planet behind him shrank in size. When safely away from the gravitational pull of the planet, he activated the auto-navigation system which put him on course for the third planet in the system. He was under way.

Chapter Twenty-seven

“You’re a fool, Captain.” declared the shackled Klingon.

Kirk was not in the mood but decided not to ignore the challenge. “What makes you say so?”

“You’re wasting time. By now, the *Grich* is certainly on its way here. To find you. To find me. To kill us all. And you’re playing games with this so-called reconnaissance mission. What do you hope to accomplish?”

“I hope to stop a war. Isn’t that why you sought us out?” challenged the Captain.

Kahl pondered this. “I came to you to prevent any further dishonor by destroying the production facility making the missiles!”

“I see. And what would that accomplish? Aside from destroying the facility, you would be killing all the Klingons in the facility.”

“They have no honor.” retorted Kahl.

“And what about the civilians inside the facility? Or around the facility? Don’t they matter?”

Kahl did not reply.

“They matter to me, Commander.” Kirk added. “And perhaps that is the biggest difference between us.”

After a few seconds, the Klingon stated, “I need to relieve myself.”

Kirk smiled. “I would think so. It has been nearly a day since you came on board.”

Motioning to Lieutenant Crowe, “Cover him.” ordered the Captain.

The helmsman rose from his station and drew his phaser as Kirk removed the restraints securing the Klingon to the console. Then, re-securing the constraints to Kahl's wrists, Kirk drew his own phaser and motioned for Kahl to precede him off-deck in the direction of the crew quarters. Crowe followed closely behind.

As they entered the crew quarters, Kahl unexpectedly stumbled and collapsed to the deck. Instinctively, Lieutenant Crowe moved to assist the stricken Klingon just as Kirk shouted, "Lieutenant, no!"

Instantly, the warrior struck the helmsman with an elbow to the side of the head, sending Crowe sprawling and the phaser flying. Kahl dove for the phaser and deftly scooped it up as Kirk took aim with his phaser so as to not hit the unconscious Lieutenant Crowe. While still prone, the Klingon warrior directed a backwards kick to Kirk's phaser, knocking it out of his hand.

Rising quickly from the deck, Kahl aimed the phaser in Kirk's direction as the Captain leaped at the Klingon. Both combatants dropped to the deck and began wrestling for control of the weapon.

During the scuffle, several shots were discharged from the phaser, impacting the ceiling and bulkhead. A couple of the wayward shots found their way out to the flight deck.

Captain Kirk was strong and physically fit. Kahl, by virtue of his genetics and training, was stronger and began to overcome the Captain. Both soldiers still had their hands on the weapon, but Kirk was beginning to succumb to the Klingon's superior strength.

As the Captain was slowly losing his grip on the phaser, he noted the look of pure determination and rage on the Klingon's face accompanied by a ferocious growl.

Then suddenly the look of determination turned to surprise as Kahl loosened his grip and slumped to the deck. Kirk now had sole control of the phaser as he tried to comprehend what had just happened, when he saw Lieutenant T'Lev standing directly behind the fallen Klingon with her right hand still applying the Vulcan nerve pinch to the Klingon's neck and shoulder. The young Vulcan was expressionless.

"Thanks." Kirk managed to utter as he struggled to his feet. "I've been trying to get Spock to teach me that for years."

"It is a difficult concept for humans." responded T'Lev.

Kirk nodded. In a fatigued voice he requested, "Help me get him back on the flight deck before he comes too."

Lieutenant T'Lev and Captain Kirk dragged the unconscious Klingon back to the console and secured him there once again. Kirk moved to the tactical station to monitor Commander Russell's progress while keeping an eye on Commander Kahl. Lieutenant T'Lev dutifully provided medical assistance to Lieutenant Crowe in the crew quarters.

A few minutes later, the Klingon officer regained consciousness and tested his constraints. Then he threw a murderous glare in Kirk's direction.

"You try that again and next time I'll lock you in the cargo hold." stated the Captain.

"This is a doomed mission and a fool's errand!" stated Kahl.

“Perhaps. But we’re going to see it through, my way.”

“Your Commander Russell will never get past our patrols, or our troops on the ground.”

Kirk directed his focus back to the tactical console monitoring Adam’s transponder signal. Verifying that the signal showed forward progress, he retorted, “So far, so good.”

“He will soon be dead. And shortly after, when my ship returns, so will you be.”

Kirk digested this. Deep down he worried that Kahl may be right. But there was no way he was going to concede this to this enemy.

“Well, you’d better hope you’re wrong, Commander.” retorted Kirk. “Because if we die, so do you!”

Chapter Twenty-eight

He made good time to his preliminary destination, the moon orbiting the third planet. Achieving orbit on the far side, he allowed the PAV to orbit to the near side where he fired his navigational thrusters to lock into a synchronized orbit. From here, Adam could scan for the presence of any enemy vessels which might be in orbit around the planet before completing his ascent to the surface.

With all systems shut down except for life support, he would be virtually invisible unless directly approached. He prayed fervently that didn't happen.

Adam had managed his fuel well. On the way in, he took the opportunity to put the PAV through some maneuvers in order to become more familiar with the little ship. The craft had handled splendidly. At the same time, heeding the advice of Mr. Scott, he was mindful of his fuel and was pleased that he managed to arrive with sixty percent in reserve. More than enough for the return trip back to *Agenda*.

The plan was to sit tight in synchronous orbit over the moon for an hour, and if no activity was observed via passive sensors execute a stealth approach to the landing site. A little more than an hour had passed and the sensors had observed nothing. It was time to get moving.

Adam brought the systems on line and had just nudged the main throttle forward when the computer voice in his helmet notified him of a sensor alert. He immediately pulled back on the throttle, but having overcome his inertia he was moving.

He watched the sensor readout as two small craft were observed in close proximity orbit around the planet. "Damn!" he thought to himself. "I sure hope they didn't see me."

Adam didn't dare scan the craft as they crossed his field of view. He couldn't take the chance of being discovered. As the ships crossed, he recorded everything he could for intelligence. At this distance though, there was no way to know who those little ships belonged to or what their capabilities were.

Adam watched as the ships continued their orbit across the terminator and disappeared from sensor view. Feeling somewhat relieved, he waited a few more seconds and was about to power back up when the computer advised him the ship was scanned.

He checked his sensor display and the ships were back on the screen and on a course directly toward him. Then the computer alerted him to a weapons lock.

Adam pushed forward on the throttle for the main thrusters and swung the PAV around the moon and away from the planet. He ordered the computer to raise shields.

Green flashes of disruptor energy darted past him as he flew an evasive pattern at full throttle. An occasional bolt of energy would graze the shields creating a momentary flare. There was little doubt now in Adam's mind. Those were Klingon disruptors!

As Adam raced away from his destination he weighed his options. If he flew all the way back to *Agenda* under full throttle, there was the danger of running out of fuel before he got there. There was also the possibility of putting his shipmates in danger by leading an enemy directly to them.

Adam was certain *Agenda* could hold its own against these fighters, but there might be a Klingon warship lurking nearby somewhere. He couldn't risk that.

He thought too about calling *Agenda* for help. But this too was a bad option and for the same reason. Eliminating all other possibilities, Adam decided the only remaining option was to fight.

He ordered the computer to go to combat mode. Immediately a heads-up targeting display appeared on his helmet visor as the phaser cannons on his fuselage powered up. At the same time, Adam sent out a jamming frequency so that whoever was in those small craft would not be able to call for reinforcements, if any were in the area.

Putting out the jamming signal also meant that *Agenda* would lose the ability to track the PAV. It was a trade-off, but necessary.

Adam formulated a strategy from his training. He pulled back on the throttle just a bit to allow the enemy vessels to close the gap. Then suddenly, he pulled back hard on the joystick and put the little ship into an inverted loop. The inertial dampeners on board did their best, but struggled against the tremendous g-forces being generated in the maneuver.

Just as Adam was feeling the effects of the maneuver he observed the two enemy vessels shoot past and underneath his position. At the same time, he felt his Starfleet issue flight suit tighten up his lower extremities, forcing his blood to remain in his upper body and brain. This helped Adam remain conscious through the maneuver. He made a mental note to mention this problem to the PAV developers, provided he survived to do so.

The loop completed, Adam felt the flight suit relax. He also saw the two enemy ships now ahead of him as they broke off in opposite directions in an attempt to double back and flank him.

Not able to pursue both, Adam decided to ignore the ship on the left for now and follow the one on the right. His only chance at surviving this battle was to reduce the odds against him. That would only be accomplished one ship at a time.

Adam found that he was quickly closing the gap between his ship and the craft in front of his. As soon as he was within weapons range, he lined up the enemy ship in his targeting display and pulled the trigger on the joystick.

Brilliant yellow bursts of phaser energy jutted out in staccato fashion toward the enemy ship. Some of the phaser bolts grazed the hull of the craft scarring the surface, but doing little more than that.

“Armor.” Adam observed. They opted to go with armor instead of shields. Adam theorized his ship should be lighter, faster and more maneuverable. He hoped this gave him an advantage. He also knew though that it was going to take more than glancing hits to get through that armor. He was going to have to put some direct hits on those ships in order to do any real damage. And probably a lot of them.

Adam continued to close the gap while formulating a plan. He purposely fired a volley to the starboard side of the Klingon fighter. Instinctively, the pilot of the enemy craft pulled the vessel to the left. Anticipating this, Adam pulled left a split second before the enemy vessel, and fired.

The Klingon fighter flew directly through Adam’s volley, sustaining multiple hits from the forward

fuselage through to the tail of the ship. Adam was preparing for his next maneuver when he observed an explosion from the top of the Klingon vessel. The canopy cover blew off and the pilot was ejected violently into space. Simultaneously, the thrusters died with the ship in mid-turn. The ship began tumbling one way, while the pilot and canopy cover flew off in another direction.

Adam had no way of knowing whether the pilot lived or died; only that one of the enemy ships was out of the fight.

As Adam flew past the wreckage of the tumbling vessel, he refocused his attention on his sensor display to try to locate the other enemy ship. Suddenly his craft was jarred violently as the PAV was enveloped in a blinding aura of green disruptor energy. He had taken a direct hit from astern!

The circuit panel at his left knee sparked furiously, burning a hole in Adam's flight suit. At the same time, power readings at the main thrusters dropped to zero. He was dead in space and drifting at a terrifically fast pace. He watched as the enemy vessel raced past him, preparing to come about for a head-on killing shot.

Adam quickly checked all his systems. Fortunately, the main computer was still operative. He had phasers and sensors, but no thruster control, and so could not maneuver the ship in order to line his guns up against the approaching enemy ship.

His only options were the low yield air to air missiles under his wings. Adam ordered the computer to arm missiles one and three. The computer acknowledged. He watched the sensor readout as the enemy ship approached. Then, at the crucial moment before the Klingon opened fire, Adam ordered the computer to

acquire a targeting lock on the incoming vessel and fire.

The two missiles raced away from the PAV toward the Klingon who quickly pulled the nose of his craft up, apparently in reaction to the incoming missiles. In spite of this desperation move, the two missiles impacted the underside of the fuselage in a fiery explosion, shearing off the starboard wing. The force of the blast skewed the ship sideways as it raced past Adam and out of sight.

Adam did a quick check of the tactical sensors to verify there was no attempt by the second Klingon ship to recover. Both Klingon fighters had been taken out, but Adam was stranded in space.

Chapter Twenty-nine

Having treated Lieutenant Crowe's injuries, Lieutenant T'Lev returned to the tactical station to monitor the ship's sensors and Commander Russell's progress. As she took her seat she noted that the long range scanner console had taken a direct hit from the phaser commandeered by the Klingon. The scanner was badly damaged and inoperable.

She made some adjustments to the controls in an attempt to bring the console back to life, but to no avail. She then checked long range communications which share the same circuitry, and was dismayed to discover the entire system was offline.

"Captain, it would appear our long range sensors and communications are out."

Kirk faced her. "What happened?"

"It would appear they were damaged during the scuffle over the phaser. There are clear indications of phaser damage to the console." replied the Vulcan.

Just then Lieutenant Crowe entered the flight deck, rubbing the back of his neck and looking a bit disheveled. "That was my phaser Kahl had. I set it on stun. That shouldn't have caused much damage."

"Maximum stun, Lieutenant, as ordered." countered the Captain.

Crowe looked puzzled.

"A hand phaser on maximum stun, while not generally lethal, still delivers a great deal of energy. Enough to disrupt sensitive electronic systems, apparently." counseled Kirk.

“Well, what do we do now?” inquired the helmsman as he retook his place at the helm while casting a menacing look at the Klingon shackled to the unused station.

“Lieutenant, do we still have short range sensors?” asked Kirk.

“Yes, sir. They are functional.”

“Good. Keep a close eye on them. Mr. Crowe, keep the engines on standby. We may have to get out of here in a hurry.”

Kirk punched the comm button to the engine room. “Scotty, please report to the flight deck. And bring your tool belt.” Kirk closed the channel.

“We have another matter, Captain.” advised Lieutenant T’Lev. “We’ve lost Commander Russell’s transponder signal.”

“When?” Kirk was alarmed.

“Apparently a few minutes ago.”

“Are you reading anything from his location? Any radiation or debris?” inquired the Captain, hoping the response was in the negative.

“Sir, I’m not reading anything currently. In fact, I’m getting static interference.”

“Static? Sounds like someone is jamming the area. See if you can isolate the static frequency and run it through the computer for analysis.”

Commander Scott stepped onto the flight deck with a tool kit slung over his shoulder.

“Scotty, see if you can do anything with the long range sensors.” Kirk ordered.

“Aye, sir. But did I just hear something about jamming?”

“We’ve lost Commander Russell. Looks like someone is jamming the transponder signal. Trying to determine who.” explained the Captain.

“The computer has identified the static frequency as one used by the Federation.” advised T’Lev.

“Why would Commander Russell jam his own transponder signal?” puzzled Scott.

“He wouldn’t.” declared Kirk. “He was most likely jamming someone else’s transmissions. He may have run into company.”

“And is now dead.” added Commander Kahl, without expression. “See Captain, I told you this mission was a fool’s errand.”

Kirk dismissed The Klingon. “Commander Russell can take care of himself.”

“But Captain, shouldn’t we go lend him a hand?” worried Scott.

The Captain had already weighed this option. “Not yet. Let’s wait a while and see what develops.”

“How long?”

“I don’t know, Scotty. I don’t know.”

Chapter Thirty

Adam continued to drift as he performed systems checks. Main thrusters were out. So too were the aft shields. He still had the computer and phasers. And he still had life support. This was fortunate since his flight suit had been damaged to the point where it would not hold pressure if he needed it to.

He popped open the circuit panel which caught fire during the attack. Several of the circuits in the panel were badly charred. But most were apparently undamaged.

Pulling up to the computer schematics, Adam located the circuit chip for the main thrusters. It was the most heavily damaged. He located a spare chip and replaced it in the socket which was also heavily charred.

Hoping against hope, he tried firing the thrusters. Nothing happened. This meant that either the socket was bad, or the controller in the engine compartment of the ship had been damaged, or both. In any event, there was only one way to remedy the situation. Adam was going to have to go outside.

Before he could attempt a spacewalk, Adam had to repair his damaged flight suit. Fortunately, the damage to the suit had not reached his leg, but the suit was not able to hold against the zero pressure and lethally cold temperatures of space outside the cockpit.

Behind his seat, Adam found a maintenance kit and began rummaging around inside. In short order he discovered a small pack of flexible carbon fiber patches, specifically designed to patch small holes in the hull. He set these aside and continued looking.

Finding nothing more suitable, he returned to the hull patches and opened the pack.

The patches came in a variety of sizes and thicknesses. Adam sorted through them until he found one just a little bigger than the jagged hole in his flight suit, and thin enough to flex.

Straightening his leg as much as possible inside the cramped cockpit, Adam peeled the backing off the self-sealing patch and applied it to the area. The patch held instantly and securely. He flexed his knee a few times and watched the patch flex too with no indication of wanting to peel off.

Satisfied for now, Adam knew the real test would come when he pressurized his suit for the space walk. First though, as it had been several hours since he had left *Agenda*, he was hungry.

In his pack, Adam carried a number of compact survival rations in bar form. He found one labeled turkey with stuffing and cranberries, and ripped open the wrapper. Taking the first tentative bite, Adam evaluated the taste and concluded it wasn't that bad. It wasn't Thanksgiving dinner at his parent's house on Earth, but it would do. In three more bites, the bar was gone.

He found another labeled roast beef with mashed potatoes and peas and downed that one too. Although edible, it paled by comparison to the turkey.

His hunger addressed, Adam pulled a packet of protein water from his pack and deploying the built in straw, quenched his thirst. It was time to get to work.

Adam located the support hoses and tethers from the compartment behind and to the right of his seat. He then deftly connected them to the interlocking ports on his flight suit. Then the moment of truth was

at hand as he opened the valve to pressurize the suit. If this didn't work, he was out of options.

He said a little prayer as he monitored the pressure readout on the suit's left wrist. The numbers began to climb, leveling off at twenty-nine point four kilopascals. Well within the green zone. And better yet, the pressure held with no indication of a leak at the patch. Things were looking up.

Adam depressurized the cockpit and slid the hatch open. Releasing himself from his seat harness, he slowly exited the cockpit while maintaining a grip on the hand holds fitted to the hull. With a hand over hand effort, Adam made his way to the rear of the ship to view the damage.

The starboard thruster nozzle was a charred and melted mass of graphite composite. It was completely unusable. However, the port thruster, while burned on the exterior, appeared to be intact. Evaluation of the jets inside the nozzle showed they were undamaged. Perhaps there was hope.

Before moving to the engine compartment, Adam evaluated the four shield emitters on the stern of the ship. All four were burned out, having been overloaded by the energy from the Klingon disruptor. He would have no aft shields for the duration of his trip.

Moving back toward the cockpit, Adam arrived at the engine compartment and secured his secondary tether to the hull.

Unlocking the two latches, he slid the compartment door open and a cloud of smoke lazily ascended from the compartment into the zero-gravity environment of space.

He allowed the smoke to clear and retrieving the hand held light at his side, shined it into the compartment. Following the leads from the thruster engines, Adam quickly located the thruster control module. It looked almost as bad as the starboard nozzle and was still smoking.

The leads from the control module to the thruster ports were in pretty bad shape too. The starboard lead was charred to the point of disintegration. The port lead, while damaged at the controller end, was in good shape at the engine.

Adam moved the light around the compartment and found another damaged controller with four leads coming away from it. He theorized this was the control module for the aft shields.

Further into the compartment, and just behind the cockpit Adam found the fuel cells. He found no evidence of damage.

Adam theorized that the shields took the brunt of the energy from the disruptor blast. What energy got through the shields concentrated on the starboard thruster, frying it and the control module. But the shields did their job and protected the rest of the ship, including the fuel cells. That was a good thing, otherwise Adam and the PAV would be nothing more than an expanding cloud of debris right now.

He formulated a plan. First priority was to become mobile again. Since the thruster control module had been destroyed, something else was going to have to serve the purpose. Fortunately, the Starfleet engineers had designed the ship with standardized, modular connectors thirty centimeters in length which could be connected in series for the length needed.

Looking off to the port side of the compartment, Adam found a pack of spare connectors. He said a little prayer of thanks and proceeded to look for a control module which he could use to replace the destroyed thruster controller.

The controller would have to be sizeable due to the amount of power it would need to handle. It was obvious simply by looking inside the engine compartment that the thruster controller was the largest, and for good reason.

The next largest control modules handled the shields. The forward and aft shield controllers sat side by side. The aft one was destroyed, and Adam considered the forward controller, but almost immediately rejected it. He knew he would need whatever shields he had for protection while entering the planet's atmosphere. The shields would also, hopefully, prevent his detection during descent.

The next best option was the weapons controller. It was designed to handle a great amount of power, but was not as large as the other controllers because the weapons were intended to be used sporadically. Just the same, it would have to do.

Adam worked quickly, but carefully. First he disconnected the weapons controller from the phasers, leaving the leads to the guns floating in the compartment. He experienced a moment of anxiety as he realized he would have no phasers for the duration of the mission.

Next he disconnected the port thruster lead from the damaged controller, and splicing in a section of spare lead, coupled the weapons controller to the remaining good engine. He double checked the connections,

closed and locked the compartment, and returned to the cockpit.

Once back in his seat, he closed the hatch and turned his attention again to the circuit panel at his left knee. He jumpered the weapons circuit to the throttle control and closed the panel.

Another moment of truth was at hand as he tried to fire up the port engine. Adam toggled the ignition switch and was rewarded with the sensation of the thruster trying to engage, but it failed to fire. He toggled the switch again with the same result.

His anxiety growing, he theorized the cause of the problem by tracing the system backwards in his mind. Suddenly it dawned on him.

When the thruster control module was destroyed by the enemy shot, the system automatically shut down the fuel pumps to prevent a leak and fire. Adam performed a quick diagnostic and found that the pumps were in the off position. He activated the port side pump and prayed.

Toggling the port ignition switch again, he felt the same sensation of the thruster attempting to fire, and then a few moments later the vibration of successful ignition. The thruster sputtered for a few seconds, and then the power readout indicator started to climb.

Feeling a huge sense of relief, Adam took the thruster off standby mode and slowly pushed the throttle forward. Forward motion! He pushed the throttle forward a little more as he swung the ship around in the direction of the planet. He eyed his tactical sensors. All was clear.

The PAV accelerated under the thrust of the remaining engine and had just crossed the thirty percent power level when the thruster began to

sputter. Then a warning appeared on the console that the weapons controller was overheating.

Adam pulled the throttle back to ten percent. A few seconds later the warning disappeared and the thruster stabilized. He pushed the throttle forward again, easing up to twenty percent, then twenty five. The warning sounded again. He eased back to twenty percent and by experimenting found that the maximum thrust which could be consistently handled by the weapons controller was twenty-two percent.

Before the encounter with the Klingons, Adam was facing a descent to the planet which would have taken only ten minutes from his lunar orbit.

Now, further out into space, and with only one thruster operating at twenty-two percent, the trip in was going to take more than an hour. But at least the mission had resumed.

As he stabilized the remaining thruster, Adam checked his fuel reserves. The battle with the Klingon fighters had taken a significant portion. The readout now indicated less than forty percent remaining. It was pretty clear with the damage and the diminished fuel that the PAV was not going to return Adam to *Agenda*. Once his mission was completed, he was going to have to find another way home.

Chapter Thirty-one

Fortunately, the rest of the trip toward the planet was uneventful. It was painfully slow, but without incident. But as Adam was about to descend he faced yet another challenge.

The loss of the aft shields made a direct descent through the atmosphere unwise as he risked burning up before reaching the planet surface. Adam would have to enter the atmosphere hundreds of kilometers from his original entry point and glide in on the PAV's belly, which was protected by heat shielding material.

This would not only lengthen the trip to the surface, but greatly increase the possibility of his being discovered by the tracking systems of the inhabitants of the planet, or worse, by any Klingons on the surface.

Seeing no other options, Adam plotted his sloping descent and entered the atmosphere. In short order the belly of the little ship heated as reddish orange flames engulfed the fuselage, blinding him. Fortunately, he still had use of the ship's navigational sensors, and used these to make minor adjustments to his course.

After a few minutes which seemed much longer, Adam entered the lower atmosphere and was able to get a visual look at the surface below. The flames had ceased, and the little ship was still intact. Adam breathed a sigh of relief.

The terrain was desert and rocky, as their prior intelligence had indicated. With maneuvering

thrusters and the ship's small wings, Adam guided the craft toward his original landing point.

Within minutes he was near enough to his landing spot to fire the braking thrusters and the vertical thrusters for a vertical landing. As he did so, he deployed the landing skids and began the controlled descent to the surface.

Suddenly, the aft vertical thruster cut out and the rear of the craft dropped, pointing the nose of the ship at the sky. Alarms blared and warning lights flashed on the control panel. The ship was about to flip over backward from the force of the forward landing thruster which was still firing.

Adam cut power to the forward thruster and the fighter, with no supporting thrust at all, was going down tail first. A crash would be imminent.

Instinctively Adam pushed forward on the throttle to the remaining main engine. It fired to life and Adam feathered the throttle to keep the engine from cutting out. Slowly the ship struggled against gravity to regain altitude.

After a few tense moments Adam was able to reorient the ship to a horizontal flight pattern and pushed the nose of the craft down to gain flight speed.

He noticed for the first time that his heart was beating furiously. He had averted a crash, but a vertical landing was now out of the question. Adam would have to try to fly the craft to the ground.

He flew past his landing spot and circled while looking for an approach. No matter where he looked, he saw rocky formation after outcrop after unforgiving hill. There was absolutely no sign of anything vaguely resembling a landing strip which he could use for a

controlled landing. Worse yet, he was running dangerously low on fuel.

He ran the options through his mind, and came to the conclusion there was only one possibility to get down safely. He would have to ditch the ship while in flight.

He circled the little fighter around again and pointed it in a direction away from civilization while approaching his original landing spot. As he approached he burned off as much altitude as he could.

Nearing his destination, the craft was only a few meters off the surface and barely above the rock formations. Insuring his flight helmet was still on and secure, Adam took a deep breath and pulled the eject lever on the pilot seat.

Instantly, the cockpit canopy blew off and the seat Adam was strapped into ejected from the ship. Thrusters on the underside of the seat fired to clear the pilot safely from the fuselage. He was buffeted by the wind as the pilot seat gained altitude. Then a parachute deployed as the thrusters quit, and Adam started his slow descent to the surface, minus his ship.

All this took place in the span of a few seconds, during which Adam watched as the pilotless PAV, still only a few meters off the ground, clipped a high rock formation, and tumbled end over end, crashing to a rest against an outcropping about two kilometers from the ejection point.

Remarkably, the ship remained mostly intact, and did not explode or catch fire on impact. Adam noted this as a testimony to the fighter's ruggedness. Then concentrating on his descent, Adam picked out a

clearing in the rocks and using the thrusters in his pilot seat, aimed for the spot.

Moments later Adam, still in his seat, landed with a thump. He ripped off his helmet and unstrapping his safety harness, scrambled out of the pilot seat.

Retrieving his tricorder, he made a three hundred and sixty degree sweep of the area to see if anyone had noticed the crash and was coming to investigate. Fortunately, no one was in range of the sensors.

From his pack Adam retrieved his digital binoculars and viewed the crashed fighter at the base of the outcropping. Although badly beaten up, the ship was still intact. Incredibly, the two unfired missiles were still in their positions under the wings.

It was getting dark and Adam had a long hike to get to the location of the suspected missile manufacturing site. First though, and following orders given to them by Admiral Benning, Adam had to insure that the PAV did not fall into enemy hands.

Also, per the prime directive, no evidence which could corrupt or influence the culture on this planet could be left behind. Adam had to destroy the fighter and anything else which he could not take with him.

He stripped off the flight suit and tossed it into the pilot seat along with his helmet. Adam then gathered the parachute and laid it on top of everything else. Then, standing back a few meters, he drew his phaser and dialed in the maximum setting with wide dispersal. Aiming at the pilot seat, he fired. In a matter of seconds the phaser beam reduced the seat and everything on it to an unrecognizable lump of carbon.

He then tuned his tricorder to the frequency of the PAV's main computer. Amazingly, it was still on line!

Establishing an uplink, Adam ordered the computer to arm the two remaining missiles. Seconds later the computer confirmed they had been armed.

Looking around one more time to see if anyone was approaching, and seeing no one, Adam ordered the missiles detonated.

The resulting explosion was both impressive and loud. Adam stood and watched for a minute as the PAV was engulfed in a most gratifying fire while rocks from the outcropping rained down on it. Nothing recognizable or usable would remain. However, if Adam's prior antics hadn't attracted any attention, this most certainly would. It would only be a matter of time before someone came to investigate the explosion.

Adam quickly scanned the area, and then established a bearing to his destination. The tricorder read the distance as just over eight kilometers. All of this on foot and in treacherous, rocky terrain.

Without wasting another moment, Adam stowed the tricorder in his pack and set out in a jog toward civilization.

Chapter Thirty-two

The *Enterprise* was now well inside the Neutral Zone, leading the rest of the fleet on a warp seven race to a probable encounter with the forces of the Klingon Empire somewhere along the way. All the ships were at status general quarters, with shields up and weapons armed.

So far, their incursion in to the Neutral Zone had gone unchallenged. The crew of the *Enterprise* knew, as did the crews of all the other starships that this was subject to change in a heartbeat.

Unlike the Klingon warships, Federation starships, by treaty were not equipped with any cloaking technology. They were completely visible to the tracking sensors of whoever may be watching. And the greatest likelihood was they were being watched.

Spock, commanding the *Enterprise* and the first wave of starships into the zone, was on the bridge mentally performing loss calculations from likely battle scenarios. Although his expression betrayed nothing, he was less than pleased with the results of his calculations.

“Lieutenant Ferr, what is our tactical situation?”

Ferr had been focused almost constantly on the sensor hood at the science station. He turned his attention to the command chair. “Nothing on sensors that I can detect, sir. But.....” His voice trailed off.

“But what, Lieutenant?” Spock probed.

“There may be enemy ships out there. I just can’t tell.”

Spock nodded. "It is a risk, Lieutenant. Please continue to monitor the sensors and alert me of any change, regardless of how insignificant it may seem."

"Sir." called Ferr. Then after a brief pause, "I may be able to adjust the sensors to improve their sensitivity."

Spock raised an eyebrow as he swiveled the command chair in the direction of the science station. "Are the sensors out of calibration?"

Spock had personally calibrated the sensors just prior to departure from the starbase.

"No, sir!" replied the Denebian assuringly, "they are well within Starfleet standards. But I might be able to tweak them a bit."

"Please explain, Lieutenant."

Ferr relaxed. "When I was on Omega IV, Commander Russell gave me permission to experiment, off shift, with an unused sensor bank. I had a theory that if I enhanced the gamma and theta bands while retarding the ultraviolet channel it might make cloaked vessels easier to detect from further away. After months of experimenting, I was able to see some results."

"Fascinating." replied Spock. "Were these adjustments in use when you discovered the cloaked missiles approaching Omega IV?"

"Yes, sir. It was the first time the new scan parameters were put to practical use."

"And, do you remember the precise adjustments you made?"

Ferr smiled. "Yes, sir."

"Lieutenant, please create and save a sensor mode with those exact adjustments. Alert me when you have completed this task."

“Right away, sir. It should only be a matter of moments.” Ferr immediately returned to the sensor console and began programming the computer.

All was quiet on the bridge save for the normal muted computer chatter relaying systems status. The viewscreen ahead showed the stars of the Neutral Zone rapidly slipping by. Moments passed.

“Finished, Mr. Spock.” called Lieutenant Ferr.

Spock rose from the command chair and stepped over to the science station.

“I saved the mode as ‘Ferr Scan 1’.” he smiled sheepishly.

Spock nodded. “Activate the mode on the main viewer.”

Ferr pressed a button and the main viewscreen switched from space ahead to the tactical sensor display. At first, nothing looked out of the ordinary. The display appeared to be devoid of any potential threats or areas of concern. Spock and the rest of the bridge crew studied the viewscreen while Ferr studied the sensor hood at the science station.

Suddenly, “There!” Ferr exclaimed, pointing to the upper left quadrant of the viewscreen.

“I don’t see anything.” Sulu stated.

“Lieutenant, can you please enhance the subject area?” requested Spock.

Ferr complied and the image zoomed in. “Can you see it now? The subspace distortion?”

In the enhanced image, a small portion of the screen displayed three translucent, formless shapes.

“I see the distortions, Lieutenant. However, I cannot associate it with a fleet of cloaked ships. Any number of natural phenomena could cause such a disturbance.” replied Spock.

“True. However, this is precisely what the missiles looked like on sensors.” replied Ferr.

Doctor McCoy, standing adjacent to the command chair, had been silent until now, listening and observing. “Does that mean there are only three ships?”

“No, Doctor,” replied The Lieutenant, “at this distance, the subspace distortion caused by an individual ship would be too small to detect. There are most likely three squadrons of ships, at a minimum.”

McCoy displayed a pained expression. “How many ships per squadron?”

“Impossible to tell at the moment.”

“Are they moving? How fast?” asked Chekov.

“I instructed the computer to analyze the disturbances and calculate heading and speed. It will take a few minutes in order to gather enough telemetry to estimate.” Ferr peered into his hood and studied it for several seconds, then directed his attention back to the bridge crew. “According to the computer, the distortion is moving, and toward us. The computer calculates the speed to be approximately warp factor seven.”

“Matching our speed.” mused Spock. “Distance, Lieutenant?”

“That’s a little harder to calculate, sir. The computer places it on the other side of the Neutral Zone relative to our position.”

“Did the computer give you a heading, Lieutenant?”

“Sir, the computer puts the distortions on a general course for the Dorian system.”

Spock returned to the command chair and sat down, thinking.

Then McCoy interjected, “Well, there’s your proof that the Klingons are responsible. Why else would they be heading for the Dorian system other than to try and cover up their crimes?”

“They may be heading in that direction because we are also heading in that direction, Doctor.” replied Spock. “We can be certain they are monitoring our heading. This, in itself is insufficient proof of guilt.”

Then redirecting toward Ferr, “Thoughts, Lieutenant? Who would arrive at the Dorian system first?”

Ferr didn’t have to think long, as he already considered this. “Sir, the Dorian system is somewhat closer to the Klingon border than the Federation border. Therefore, if both fleets entered the zone at approximately the same time, and are traveling at approximately the same speed, logically the Klingons would arrive first, by a bit.”

Spock had to appreciate the Denebian’s logic.

“Spock, we have to get there first! Jim is in danger!” declared an agitated Doctor McCoy. “Can’t we go any faster?”

“No, Doctor.” responded the Vulcan, unphased by McCoy’s emotional outburst. “Our ability to detect the Klingon fleet at warp, while cloaked, gives us a potentially significant tactical advantage. If we increase speed, they may suspect we can detect them, and our advantage will be gone. We know they are monitoring us. And so they would increase their speed in response. The net result being they would still arrive first and possibly before Captain Kirk and his crew are able to complete their reconnaissance mission.”

Spock's response failed to satisfy the doctor. "Jim would be helpless against the entire Klingon fleet!"

"The Captain is a resourceful man, and with his prototype ship he is not entirely helpless. I have no doubt he will endure until we arrive." Spock turned toward the science station while McCoy fumed.

"Lieutenant Ferr, continue to monitor the disturbances and report any changes. Additionally, please share your findings with the rest of the fleet, as well as your 'Ferr Scan 1' sensor mode."

"Yes, sir. Right away." piped the young Lieutenant, pleased that he was able to contribute in such a profound way.

Chapter Thirty-three

Barely forty-five minutes after destroying the PAV, and running over rugged and uneven terrain, Adam arrived at the outskirts of what appeared to be a large and abandoned industrial complex.

Under the cover of darkness and taking advantage of cover in the form of various kinds of wild brush and battered metal boxes, he crept ever closer to the facility while scanning the area with his tricorder.

The run had done him good. His legs grew restless in the hours cooped up in the fighter craft. Now his legs felt more relaxed. And while his breathing and heart rate were faster than normal, Adam was far from fatigued. His mind was clear and he was ready to confront whatever challenges awaited him.

As he moved closer to the complex, he noted a metal fence approximately three meters high around the perimeter. Inside the fenced area Adam noted four structures. Of those four, two of them appeared to be in a state of partial collapse and unsuitable for anything other than demolition. The remaining two appeared to be largely intact and secured to prevent unauthorized entry.

Adam scanned the closer of the two structures. He could detect no neutrino emissions, signs of life or energy consumption coming from the building. And so he performed the same scan on the second, more distant building. In spite of a very good effort to mask signs of activity, Adam's tricorder detected traces of neutrinos, as well as energy consumption and unidentifiable life signs from inside. Adam theorized

that the masking efforts would most likely have precluded detection from space.

Still outside the fence line, he slowly and cautiously positioned himself closer to the building while continuing his scans. Closer examination of the building revealed no windows on the side closest to his position, although there were three rather large service doors which were closed and secured.

Adam crept along the perimeter, carefully monitoring his tricorder when it silently alerted him to the presence of a scanning field just a few meters ahead. Adam stopped and widened the scan on his tricorder in an attempt to locate the source of the unidentified scanning field.

The widened display showed not only one scanning field, but several fanning out from the structure in all directions. The fields extended dozens of meters from the building and overlapped each other as the fields reached the perimeter fencing.

“Motion detectors.” Adam mouthed to himself.

He zoomed the tricorder in and onto one of the field source points on the building, recording as he did so. The display clearly showed the field emitter. While not large, it obviously did not blend with the exterior of the structure, and it was definitely not of Federation origin.

Adam knew that if someone had gone to all the trouble of shielding this building and installing these detectors, it was for a good reason. He also surmised that the technology in use was inconsistent with that in use elsewhere on the planet.

Clearly there was something going on inside which they did not want discovered. Secondly, the beings responsible were most likely not from this planet and

thirdly, it was a good bet someone was monitoring those motion detectors.

Adam widened the tricorder view again, looking for any gaps in the detector fields. Whoever had installed these detectors had done a pretty thorough job, but maybe not thorough enough.

After a minute of slowly sweeping the perimeter, he found a break approximately sixty meters ahead. It was not a large gap, not quite half a meter wide, and it was adjacent to a group of metal boxes haphazardly stacked near the inside of the fence line.

Adam believed that he could scale the fence at the break in the detector field and use the boxes for cover as he made his way closer to the building for a better scan of the interior. It would be a gamble, but if he could pick up evidence of Klingons inside, that and the other evidence he had already gathered would hopefully be enough evidence to clear the Federation of any involvement in the attacks, and prevent an all-out war. It was worth the risk.

First though Adam would have to get to the opening in the scanning fields. To do so, he would have to skirt the fields, which involved backing quite a long way away from the fence line as he worked his way to the opening. Further, in order to prevent visual detection, he would have to proceed on his stomach, crawling his way along.

Slowly Adam got onto the ground, and began the trek away from the fence line with his tricorder in hand. As he crawled, he would monitor the borders of the scanning fields in order to insure he didn't accidentally stray into one.

After about fifteen minutes he cautiously began his approach to the fence line and the break in the fields.

Finally he arrived. No alarms had gone off, nor was there commotion from inside. So far, so good.

He studied the fence and started visualizing his next task, getting inside the perimeter. The good news was the tricorder revealed the fence was not energized or booby trapped in any way. The bad news was the fence was tall. If Adam were to scale the fence, it would take a while to get over and he would be very exposed. He looked for other options.

Putting his hand on the fence for the first time, he tested its strength and integrity near the bottom. The interwoven metal links were heavily corroded, and not very resistant to flexing under moderate hand pressure.

Adam tugged at the bottom and several of the links had separated and broken. The broken links had fallen to the ground with almost no sound. This created a small gap in the fence line. He tugged again, this time a little harder. More links gave way. He paused and listened. Hearing nothing he swept the building with his tricorder. No sign of anything.

Adam yanked on the fence again. This time much harder than the first two attempts and making a bit more noise. The fence opened up to a height of almost two-thirds of a meter. He paused and listened again. Still nothing!

He scanned the boxes he would use for cover not far from his current position. The boxes were of a leaden alloy and emitted rather large amounts of residual radiation not inconsistent with uranium ore; similar to that used centuries earlier on Earth. Adam speculated this facility had once been used to process and enrich raw ore into a refined state for use in power generation. Or maybe for use in weapons.

The boxes had probably been used to transport raw ore into the plant. Adam hoped that the residual radiation from the boxes would interfere to some degree with the motion detectors in this area, and mask his movements toward the building.

He stowed the tricorder and prepared to breach the gap in the fence. Crouching low, he quietly made the opening a bit larger and began to squeeze through slowly so as to make no sound. He had just managed to get his head through the opening when he felt something hard jab him in the back. Simultaneously, the universal translator bud in his left ear said something, but he couldn't comprehend what.

Adam froze as his mind raced to comprehend what was happening. His first thought was that he had been discovered by the Klingons, and was about to be vaporized. Not wanting to face death without confronting his killers, he quickly backed out of the fence opening while still in the crouched position. He could not see the antagonist, but over his shoulder he could make out the form of a weapon.

The universal translator spoke again, this time much more clearly as it adapted to the language, dialect and inflections coming from the being issuing orders.

"I say again, do not move." The voice said, punctuating with repeated jabs of the weapon in Adam's direction.

Suddenly, and with unexpected swiftness, the voice holding the weapon snatched the tricorder from Adam's hip. "What is this?" the voice demanded, thrusting it toward Adam accusingly.

Adam spun around in an attempt to retrieve the tricorder, but the voice pulled it away from his reach all the while demanding, "Do not move!"

"If you please, that is a very sensitive instrument. Please be careful." Adam requested as calmly as possible.

The voice with the weapon seemed confused by the synthesized response from Adam through the universal translator. This confusion lasted only a moment though, and the air of authority quickly returned.

"Turn around slowly, Ghattu. Where are the rest of your....." the voice trailed off as Adam turned around and slowly stood up, his face becoming visible.

Three facts immediately became apparent to Adam simultaneously. Fact one, this being thought he was Ghattu, a terrorist. Fact two, the being was apparently female, and rather striking in appearance in spite of the obvious differences in facial structure. Fact three, the female who was dressed in a military or police style uniform held a most lethal looking weapon which she cradled in both hands and with apparent experience.

The muzzle of the weapon was now pointed directly at Adam's chest. It did not appear to be an energy weapon, like a phaser or disrupter. It more closely resembled a projectile weapon similar to the type used centuries earlier on earth which would ignite gunpowder to propel metal projectiles at high speeds with expanding gases.

Regardless of the style of weapon, she looked like she knew what she was doing.

But now, the female holding the weapon was speechless as she gazed up to Adam, astounded by his

height and strange appearance. "I am not Ghattu." said Adam.

"Wha...what are you? Where are you from? What are you doing here?" the female demanded.

"I come from very far away." began Adam, thinking about what an understatement that was. "As far as why I am here, that is a very long story."

Adam took a small step toward the female and away from the fence. This caused her to bring the weapon to bear with greater determination.

"I said, do not move. What have you done with the people from this area?"

Adam was caught by surprise at this challenge, but decided it might be an opening to ease tensions with this being. "I have not taken your people. But I am here for the same reason. I also have been attempting to find out what has been happening to them."

"I do not believe you. Why do you look as you do? Where are you from?" she demanded again.

Suddenly, an entry door on the building, meters away swung open with an audible screech. A Klingon warrior stumbled out of the structure, holding a small flask containing blood wine. His unsteady gait and fumbling hands were evidence the Klingon had been imbibing for a while. He raised the flask to his lips, when he suddenly spotted Adam and the female just outside the fence line. He dropped the flask while clumsily attempting to retrieve the disrupter rifle slung across his shoulder. In the process, the Klingon triggered a wild shot which came nowhere near his target.

The female with the weapon froze at the sight of the Klingon and the disrupter shot. While Adam, in a desperation move, drew his phaser while dropping to

the ground. Through the opening he had created in the fence Adam took a snapshot sighting of the Klingon and fired. The phaser beam caught the Klingon in the upper left chest, spinning him around and to the ground where he lay motionless.

“What was that?” demanded the female, now over her shock, as she reoriented her weapon in Adam’s direction.

“That was your real enemy.” replied Adam as he prepared to move, “and an even longer story. We have to go. We’re in danger here.”

“Do not move!” demanded the female, one more time.

“Listen to me.” challenged Adam. “In seconds, there are going to be more of those Klingons coming out that door, and they are going to want to kill us. They are the ones responsible for the disappearance of your people. Not me! Please trust me. If we stay here, we will both die!”

The female was conflicted. She was in no way convinced this strange and tall being with the crazy weapon and gadgets was worthy of her trust. But she also had no reason to trust the other bizarre looking creatures with all the hair had taken a shot at her with an equally strange weapon.

She continued to weigh the situation when a Klingon disrupter bolt struck one of the metal boxes nearby. The blast sent shards of searing metal flying in all directions, narrowly missing the two of them. In the blink of an eye, the female grabbed Adam and pulled him down behind the boxes as the disrupter bolts flew.

As Adam watched, a very portly Klingon was standing over the body of his fallen fellow warrior. He

sprayed disrupter fire in the general direction of Adam and his companion while yelling into the doorway in an apparent demand for reinforcements.

As disruptor energy impacted all around them, Adam took careful aim and fired his phaser, hitting his target square in the torso and vaporizing him. The female watched the Klingon disappear, and eyed Adam incredulously.

“What kind of weapon is that?” she questioned.

More disrupter fire erupted from inside the doorway. Adam had declined to answer the female’s question about his phaser. Instead he focused suppressing fire on the doorway in an attempt to keep the Klingons inside the building. The female, taking Adam’s lead, fired short, loud bursts from her weapon in the same direction.

Adam startled at the noise her weapon made. So too apparently did the Klingons, as no additional warriors were bold enough to show themselves. However, occasionally a poorly aimed disruptor bolt would erupt from the entrance in the general direction of the metal boxes.

The exchange of fire continued for several seconds when Adam turned to his newly found partner. “What is your name?”

Without hesitation she responded, “I am Larbeth, First Diehl of the Citizens of Tok Security Force, Monad Section.”

“That was quite a mouthful.” replied Adam.

“What is your name?” inquired Larbeth.

“Adam.”

“Just Adam?” quizzed Larbeth.

“Just Adam. The rest is too long a story for now.” he replied as the disrupter fire intensified.

“Well, Adam,” Larbeth began with exaggerated emphasis, “you said those....Klingons, as you called them, are responsible for the disappearance of my people.”

“That’s correct.” Adam replied as he fired his phaser.

“Why?” Larbeth asked.

“They have been forcing your people into slave labor.” he fired another shot.

Larbeth followed Adam’s phaser pulse with another short burst from her weapon. “Here, inside this abandoned fuel refining factory?” she shouted.

“Yes, I believe so.” replied Adam

“Then I’m going in there! Cover me.” announced Larbeth as she broke from cover and ran with astonishing speed. She ran in an evasive pattern toward the door to the facility, dodging disrupter bolts as she approached. As she moved, she efficiently swapped the partially depleted ammunition magazine in her weapon for a fully charged one.

“Larbeth, No!” shouted Adam, but too late. He fired rapid bursts from his phaser into the opening of the facility to keep the Klingons at bay.

As Larbeth was near the structure, Adam rose and prepared to follow her inside. But before he could leave his position, Larbeth disappeared into the doorway. A fury of disrupter fire ensued accompanied by sporadic bursts of automatic weapons fire. After a few seconds everything was quiet.

Adam cautiously approached the doorway from the side, phaser held at the ready. As he prepared to enter a figure suddenly appeared in the opening. Adam halted, and aimed the phaser, preparing to fire. His heart raced. There stood Larbeth, removing the now

empty magazine from her weapon and replacing it with a full one.

“Come on, it’s clear.” she declared and disappeared down a long corridor.

Adam kept his phaser at the ready as he entered the doorway. Inside laid the bodies of three Klingon warriors, bleeding from multiple wounds and all decidedly dead. Adam whistled as he surveyed the scene and then hurried to catch up with Larbeth as she made her way along the corridor, weapon at the ready.

“Where did you learn to run so fast and fight like that?” Adam asked.

Larbeth looked puzzled. “We are taught to fight while very young. And my speed is merely average. Can you not run as fast?”

Adam shook his head. This would explain why she was able to sneak up on me without being detected.

“Hold on,” Adam said, “the device you took from me earlier, I need it.”

Larbeth looked at him skeptically. “Why? What is it?”

“It’s called a tricorder. I can use it to see if there is danger ahead. Please!” Adam implored.

Larbeth paused to consider the request, then reluctantly reached into her tactical vest and retrieved the strange device. She cautiously offered it to this tall stranger.

“Thank you.” Adam said as he slowly took the tricorder and activated it. “Let’s see if we can tell what’s going on beyond that door ahead.”

He held the tricorder purposely low so Larbeth could see the readout, which she examined with great fascination.

“What is that telling you?” she asked.

“It’s telling me there is a large, open area up ahead with people and equipment. I am trying to determine how many people there are, where they are, and who they are.”

“How can it do all this?” she asked.

Adam declined again to answer the question, as he attempted to make sense of the readings the tricorder presented. In the facility ahead was a mixture of Klingon readings, and readings he now recognized as Dorian. The readings fluctuated wildly, possibly indicating a great deal of interaction between the two species, and possibly because of interference by the residual radiation which permeated this place.

Adam closed the tricorder, stowed it on his belt, and again removed his phaser from his tunic. “We must be careful. Follow me.”

They reached a large metal door at the end of the corridor. A great deal of noise and disrupter fire emanated from the other side. Adam feared a massacre was in process and he was not going to stand by and allow this to happen. He placed his hand on the door latch, and motioned for Larbeth to follow him.

When Larbeth nodded she was ready, Adam threw the door open and the two of them burst in with weapons raised. But Adam was not expecting what he witnessed.

Three Klingon warriors lay motionless on the floor, along with four Dorian civilians. Another Klingon was on the ground, attempting to fend off the blows being inflicted by another Dorian swinging a heavy metal rod. Four more Klingons had their hands up in apparent surrender, as they were covered by two

Dorians who had managed to confiscate their disrupter rifles.

The rest of the Dorian captives were moving about quickly, scooping up disrupters dropped by fleeing Klingons and freeing other Dorians who were still shackled. It was clear the natives had turned the tables on their captors during the fire fight outside. They were in control.

Adam activated his tricorder and began recording everything in the room as evidence of Klingon involvement. Meanwhile Larbeth, in her official capacity, moved quickly toward the Dorians holding the Klingons at bay in order to assist them. She had nearly reached her countrymen when another door near the rear of the production bay flew open, and four Klingons burst in firing disrupters.

Adam drew and fired a pulse from his phaser, hitting a Klingon in the arm and severing it from the rest of the warrior. The Klingon yelled in pain and dropped to the ground.

Simultaneously, Larbeth and the now armed Dorians returned fire, forcing the Klingons back through the doorway.

In the melee, a disrupter bolt from a Klingon inadvertently found a fellow warrior who had been disarmed in the original uprising. The unarmed Klingon disappeared in a cloud of ions. At the same time, an unfortunate Dorian captive got in the way of another disrupter bolt and was also vaporized.

The combined firepower of the armed Dorians, with an assist from Adam, was enough to force the attacking Klingons into retreat. When no further enemy fire came from the doorway, Adam called for Larbeth to lead the Dorians in escape back the way

they had come. The Dorians had accumulated five disrupter rifles and two hand disrupters, all confiscated during the initial siege.

Finally, and with no further interruptions they reached the opening to the outside where the bodies of the four dead Klingons lay. Larbeth unlimbered a communication device from her vest, and was about to speak into it when Adam interrupted her.

“What are you doing?”

“I must contact my superiors and report what has happened.”

Adam thought to himself that he had neither the time nor the desire to face Larbeth’s superiors. The inquisitions would be endless. Adam opened his communicator and triggered the emergency evacuation transponder, hoping in all the interference and distance that it would be picked up by *Agenda*.

Larbeth concluded her call and watched Adam activate yet another strange device. She inquired as to its purpose.

“It’s like your radio.” he replied. “I’m contacting my people. I have to leave.”

At this, Larbeth again brought her weapon to bear on him. “I cannot let you leave! There are many questions.”

Adam nodded his understanding. “I know! But I don’t have time for questions.” He gestured toward his tricorder. “I have to get this information to my superiors in order to prevent a war!”

Larbeth once again suspected Adam was some sort of Ghattu. “What war?” she demanded.

Adam had just started to explain about a war with the Klingons when suddenly the roar of an

accelerating land vehicle, a heavy one, caught everyone's attention.

A large transport vehicle with at least a half-dozen Klingons had burst through one of the high bay doors in the facility and was bearing down on Adam and the Dorians at high speed.

The transport was only a few seconds away when Adam dropped his communicator, gripped his phaser with both hands and fired two rapid shots.

The first pulse struck the vehicle in the left front wheel, shearing the axle and causing the vehicle to drop onto its frame. The second tore through the engine compartment, blowing the metal hood off the compartment, and sending shrapnel into the passenger compartment where three of the Klingons resided. None were seriously hurt, but the vehicle skidded to a halt short of the mark.

The Klingons scrambled to get out of their now wrecked vehicle and readied their disrupters. The Dorians took retreated inside the doorway for cover while they unleashed their own disrupter fire in the direction of the Klingons. Larbeth and Adam were caught in the open and scrambled to take cover behind another broken down and rusted transport vehicle directly between the Dorians and the Klingons.

Adam and Larbeth were pinned down by the fire fight taking place directly over their heads, and were prevented from being able to return accurate fire.

Suddenly more disrupters sounded from behind the Dorians in the corridor. The Klingon assault team which was forced to retreat in the production bay made its way around and ambushed the Dorians from behind.

Half the Dorians repositioned to take on the flanking Klingons, while the remaining force continued to fire over Adam's and Larbeth's heads at the Klingons taking cover near their wrecked transport.

Adam observed with satisfaction that two Klingons behind the wrecked transport fell victim to the Dorian onslaught. Their marksmanship was improving, and the Dorians appeared to be outgunning the Klingons.

Larbeth managed to raise up just long enough to fire a burst from her weapon at a Klingon who exhibited the bad judgment of moving around for a better angle. The burst raked across the Klingon's midsection and he collapsed to the ground. This infuriated the remaining Klingons who concentrated their fire on the position held by Adam and Larbeth, pinning them even further.

Larbeth raised her weapon over her head to fire blindly at the Klingons. A brief burst erupted from the weapon followed by a dull metallic sound. Larbeth lowered the weapon and examined it. The bolt was locked open. "I'm out of munitions." she announced, looking at Adam with concern.

Just then, a disrupter bolt struck their cover just over their heads, raining hot metal debris on them. Larbeth yelped as Adam instinctively threw himself on top of her, using his body as a shield.

The Klingons continued to rain fire on Adam's and Larbeth's position. They were chipping away at what little cover remained with every shot. Adam feared that they were finished when unexpectedly, the battle scene dissolved from view.

Chapter Thirty-four

Captain Kirk stood by with phaser at the ready as the figures began to materialize on the transporter pads. Lieutenant T'Lev operated the transporter controls and notified the Captain that one of the figures was not human. The phaser may be needed as they had no idea who was transporting aboard their vessel.

Kirk leveled the phaser at what would normally have been torso height when he realized the subjects were materializing in a horizontal position. Curious, he adjusted his aim downward.

The shimmering shapes took form and it became obvious that one of the targets was indeed Adam Russell, lying directly on top of another humanoid who was clearly much shorter than the Commander.

Kirk's face took on an expression of amusement as the phaser was brought down to low ready. "Welcome aboard, Commander, we had just about given up on you. Care to introduce us to your guest?"

Aware of the awkward appearance of his position, Adam removed himself from Larbeth and quickly got to his feet, holding a cautionary hand towards the phaser. "Don't fire. She's a friendly, Captain."

Larbeth sat up at an incline on the transporter pad, with an expression which could only be described as utter confusion. "Where....where am I?" she asked, weakly. The universal translator had now completely adapted to her language and dialect.

"Explanation, Mr. Russell?" requested the Captain, as he put away the phaser.

Adam didn't know where to begin. Then composing his thoughts, he started. "Sir, it's just like

Commander Kahl described. The facility I investigated is full of Klingons. They kidnapped the locals and forced them to build the weapons. I've got it all on tricorder."

"What about her?" Kirk gestured toward Larbeth, still dazed, unmoving and trying to make sense of what was happening.

"She's military, sir. Kinda like a homeland security. She found me as I was trying to get inside the plant perimeter. She saved my life when the Klingons attacked. She's very brave." Adam nodded in Larbeth's direction. She had been listening to the exchange. Adam thought he saw a brief smile, but wasn't sure.

"What about the PAV?"

"Destroyed, sir. On the surface. Nothing left."

"Nothing left?" retorted Kirk? "How did you get down uninjured?"

"Sir, it's a very long story. I will prepare a complete report as soon as we are underway."

"Yes, Commander. I believe you will." stated the Captain. "And we will be getting underway shortly. First though, we will have to return her to her home. Lieutenant T'Lev, please prepare to return our guest to the planet surface."

Almost before Kirk could finish the order, Lieutenant Crowe called urgently from the helm station.

"Captain, incoming! Two Klingon warships have just entered orbit with us and decloaked. They are charging weapons!"

Kirk was prepared for this eventuality. Immediately he began reciting orders. "Shields up, Lieutenant. Commander Russell, take your guest with you and

man tactical. Arm the phaser and place it on standby.”

“Aye, sir.” Adam took Larbeth by the arm and led her to the flight deck. When she resisted, Adam pleaded. “Please come with me. I have to get to my station. We are about to come under attack. I promise to explain everything to you.”

Larbeth saw the sincerity in Adam’s eyes, and reluctantly accompanied him to the tactical station and an empty chair.

Meanwhile, Kirk was now on the intercom with Engineering. “Mr. Scott, Doctor Morse. I’m taking us to maximum warp now. We’re going to need everything you’ve got!”

“Aye, sir. Ye’ve got it!” Scotty replied.

“Lieutenant Crowe. Take us out of orbit, reverse course. Maximum warp to Federation space.”

The ship was rocked by a disruptor blast as the Klingon ships came within range. Crowe cringed at the jolt but quickly recovered. “Maximum warp, aye.” The stars lurched for the little ship as the thrumming of raw power resonated through the deck plates below their feet.

“You have sealed your doom, Captain.” pronounced Kahl, glowering at Kirk from the vacant console to which he was still shackled. “You cannot escape. You and your crew will soon be dead.”

Kirk threw him a quick glance. “We’ll see about that.”

From the tactical console where he and Larbeth had just settled in, Adam set to work. His movements stopped suddenly when he saw the scorch marks, and exclaimed, “I have no long range sensors. What happened to my console?”

“A long story, Commander.” replied Kirk, throwing a thumb in the direction of the Klingon. “Do your best.”

Adam looked directly at Kahl. The warrior was grinning menacingly. Adam scowled and set back to the task at hand. Meanwhile, Larbeth was focused on the main viewer and the image of the stars racing toward the ship. She was fascinated, but didn’t understand.

“Mr. Crowe, how are you navigating without long range sensors?” asked Adam.

The response was immediate and direct. “Flying blind, sir. I plotted a reverse course back the way we came and really hoping we don’t run into anything. Also, I’m watching the short range sensors like a hawk.”

“Wow!” replied Adam.

Below decks, Commander Scott and Doctor Morse huddled over the control console for the prototype warp drive. Karen called readings to Scotty while the engineer made finite adjustments to the fuel flow, the plasma flow and finally to the warp field.

Finally, when both were satisfied nothing more could be done, Scotty signaled the flight deck.

“Captain, you’ve got all we can give ya’.”

“Mr. Crowe, what speed are you reading?” inquired Kirk.

The helmsman checked his indicator one more time. He had checked it at least a dozen times in the last few minutes but wanted to be accurate. “Showing we are at warp nine-point-two-four, Captain.”

Kirk nodded appreciatively. “Commander Russell, what is the status of our pursuers?”

“Falling behind, Captain. We are outrunning them.”

“Very good. Scotty, how long can we maintain speed?”

Scott checked the readouts, and then looked quizzically at Karen. She shrugged her shoulders. “I dunno’.” Scotty finally replied. “The board is green all across. In theory, forever!”

Kirk smiled. “Well done, Scotty, Doctor.”

Larbeth, taking all this in and did not understand any of it. She confronted Adam. “Where have you brought me? What is happening on that.....screen?” she gestured emphatically toward the main view screen.

Adam took a deep breath, then sighed. He addressed her calmly. “We’re not from your world. You are on board a space ship and we are being pursued by more of those beings we fought on the surface below.”

She looked stunned. After a moment she composed herself. “Klingons?”

Adam nodded.

“Show me.” She demanded.

Adam toggled a switch and a monitor at the tactical station displayed the distant image of the two pursuing warships. Due to the loss of the long range sensors, the images were small and not very clear. Adam explained this to Larbeth who seemed to understand, but became distressed.

“Take me back to my people.” She demanded.

Adam winced. “We can’t do that right now. Not while we’re being chased. If the Klingons catch us, they will destroy us. Besides, we’re rather far from your world already.”

He toggled another switch and pointed to the pinpoint of light on the monitor which was the sun at the center of the Dorian system.

For a moment, she was again speechless. "How?"

"It's difficult to explain." started Adam, "We are traveling very fast. Faster than light itself. To explain how would require much more time than we have right now."

"So you are saying you will not take me back? Am I your prisoner, like this Klingon?" Larbeth screamed, pointing at Kahl while standing and preparing to defend herself. The Klingon watched with amusement.

Adam calmly held out his hands to her. "Of course you are not our prisoner. We would take you back if we could, but right now we cannot." Adam gestured toward the monitor with the image of the pursuing ships. "I promise you that once we are clear of this danger, we will return you to your home and your people as soon as we can. Please trust me."

Kirk watched this exchange without intervening. Larbeth looked toward him, then the rest of the bridge crew and once more toward the main viewer. Reluctantly, she retook her seat.

"Thank you." said Adam.

"We were told this was not possible." Larbeth stated calmly. She pointed to the viewer. "We wanted to get out to space and perhaps colonize our satellite. But we just didn't have the resources. It costs so much to defend our land."

Adam nodded reassuringly. "We were like that too at one time. And it wasn't that long ago that we too thought it impossible to warp space. You can get there too, but probably not if you're so busy fighting each other."

Kirk cleared his throat. Adam glanced at his Captain as he gave a cautionary look about going any farther with this conversation. Adam understood Kirk's concern about violating the prime directive. At the same time, given the level of contamination already inflicted on these people by the Klingons, Adam wondered just how much additional damage his conversation with Larbeth could cause.

Just the same, the prime directive is the order sworn to by all Starfleet personnel, which governs their dealings with other cultures. There was no higher order. Adam said nothing more.

Satisfied for the moment that one of his crew was no longer in danger of violating the prime directive any further than had already been done, Captain Kirk redirected his attention to escaping the Klingon warships pursuing his experimental vessel.

Their lead over the two pursuing warships was substantial and getting bigger with every passing second. Just the same, Kirk was uneasy. Commander Kahl had made reference to three warships involved in this conspiracy. Where might the third one be?

"Lieutenant T'Lev, have you been monitoring communications to or from our pursuers?" Kirk inquired.

T'Lev conveyed an expression of frustration. "Captain, I've been attempting to monitor subspace. But our long range communications went down when the sensors were damaged. It is possible there have been transmissions. I pick up bits and pieces of data but am unable to determine if it is communications or subspace noise."

"I assume this holds true also regarding any possible communications from fleet?"

“I’m afraid so sir.”

Kirk acknowledged her with a frown. “Keep trying, Lieutenant.”

The Dorian Nebula was opposite their current direction of travel, but closer in terms of distance than the Federation border. And while traveling to the nebula would put *Agenda* physically closer to Klingon space, hiding in the Nebula could have provided valuable time to repair their damaged systems in the hopes of transmitting the evidence Adam collected to fleet headquarters.

Kirk wrestled with himself for his decision to make a run for the Federation border. But it was too late to turn back now. The decision had been made. They had no choice but to keep going. Besides, running the opposite way increased their chances of running into the Klingon fleet reportedly now in the Neutral Zone.

Minutes passed with no further conversation on the flight deck. The only sounds were from the engines, and systems that were still operational.

Suddenly the silence was broken by Lieutenant Crow. “Incoming torpedoes off the port bow!”

On the viewer, the first of the three torpedoes flashed across the bow of the ship and barely missed. The second and third slammed the vessel on the port side, violently throwing everyone from their seats, and plunging the flight deck into complete blackness.

Chapter Thirty-five

In the dim glow of the emergency lights he could see slow signs of movement around him on the flight deck. “Is everyone all right?” Captain Kirk implored.

One by one the officers responded as they retook their stations. All acknowledged bumps and bruises, but no more serious injuries were reported.

“We’re out of warp. We’re on battery, Captain. I’ve got some sensors.” reported Adam.

“Helm is dead, Captain. We’re not going anywhere.” added Lieutenant Crowe.

“Captain, I’m receiving a communication from the attacking ship, in Klingon. We’re being ordered to stand down and prepare to be boarded.” relayed Lieutenant T’Lev.

Kirk muttered. “They’ve seen what this ship can do and they want to see her secrets before they kill us. Quickly, Commander, locate that vessel.”

Adam scanned the immediate space. “Got him. He’s off our port bow and approaching at a very slow speed. He’s being cautious. I estimate intercept in fourteen seconds.”

“How about our pursuers?”

“They are still enroute. Estimated to be in weapons range in thirty-six seconds.”

Commander Kahl smiled. “Now we will all die in glory.”

“Not if I can help it.” Kirk slammed the comm switch the engine room. “Mr. Scott, get us out of here!”

“Captain, when the torpedoes hit us the emergency interlocks kicked in to prevent a plasma backup from

the nacelles. The core is online but it will be a bit before the nacelles recharge.” reported the engineer.

“Captain, can he give us shields and phasers?” pleaded Adam.

“I heard that, Captain.” replied Scott. “I’ll divert power and give you what I can.”

True to his word, the phaser cannon charged and the shields began to firm up.

“Shields at sixty-three percent, Captain. Port side shield generator is fluctuating. I can’t get it to settle down” reported Adam.

“Helm, keep our port side away from that ship. Commander, status of the approaching Klingon vessel.” requested Kirk.

“Increasing speed toward us. They must have registered our shields firming up.” Then with alarm, Adam reported, “They’re firing torpedoes!”

“Take them out, Commander.”

Before the captain could finish his order, Lieutenant Crowe used thrusters to put *Agenda* in a position to face the oncoming warship. Adam fired multiple, rapid bursts from the phaser. The shots found their targets and vaporized the incoming torpedoes.

“Good shooting, Commander.”

But the little ship was rocked by return disruptor fire.

“Shields held, Captain. The Klingon vessel has halted its approach. Apparently they’re going to try to pick us apart with disruptors.”

The tension on the flight deck was interrupted by the staticy voice of Mr. Scott on the comm speaker. “Captain, warp drive is back on line.”

“Bless you, Scotty.” praised Kirk. “Mr. Crowe, get us moving forward. Impulse only. Mr. Russell, fire on that enemy vessel. Take out their torpedo launcher.”

Both officers acknowledged their orders. *Agenda* surged forward while angling away from the *Grich* while Adam secured weapons lock on the bow of the ship in hopes of disabling their torpedo launcher. Adam fired. A sustained burst backed by the power of the warp core.

The enhanced phaser overwhelmed and flared the bow shields of the warship and penetrated the hull adjacent to the torpedo launcher. The resulting explosion destroyed the launch tube and blew a jagged hole in the bow of the ship, extending up to and through the bridge.

All watched on the viewscreen as debris and bodies were thrown from the bridge in the vacuum of space.

“Captain, the bridge of the Klingon vessel is open to space.” Adam reported.

Kirk acknowledged. “They will transfer command functions to their auxiliary control room. The ship is not out of the fight yet, but you bought us time. Mr. Crowe, accelerate to maximum warp. Get us out of here before the other ships arrive.”

“Aye, sir.” the helmsman acknowledged as *Agenda* leapt past the injured warship.

“Sir, I can’t get any better than warp four.” Crowe reported.

Kirk was already on the comm with Engineering.

“It’s the damn regulator again, Captain.” advised Scotty. “It’s fused. I don’t think I’m gonna’ get it working again. You’ve got everything I can give ya’ from the backup regulators.”

“Captain, the pursuing Klingon ships are just about on our tail now. Weapons range in seconds. The vessel we damaged has joined the chase.”

Just then, the ship was rocked yet again by disruptor fire. Then another jolt.

“Listen up everybody. We can get out of this but everyone is going to have to have their best game and execute my orders without hesitation. Understood?”

Everyone acknowledged with an “aye”, save for Commander Kahl and Larbeth.

“Mr. Russell, concentrate all reserve power to aft shields.” ordered Kirk. “Mr. Crowe, reduce speed to warp three.”

“Sir?”

“Do it. I have a plan.” Kirk opened the comm to engineering again. “Scotty, watch your patient closely. We’re going to do some things it probably will not like. In a few moments, we’re going to do a drop and warp. Keep the drive on-line.”

“Aye. We’ll do our best.” Scotty’s voice did not convey much confidence.

“Commander, are the Klingons reducing speed to match ours?”

“Yes, sir.” reported Adam.

“Alright. Everyone hang on. We’re going to take some shots. Lieutenant Crowe, on my order I want you to drop us out of warp, and then immediately engage at maximum to overtake. Commander, I want you to pick whichever Klingon vessel on which you can get a lock and disable their warp drive. Everybody understand?”

Ayes from both stations. Adam looked briefly at Larbeth. Amazingly she didn’t look afraid. She merely observed everything.

The ship was rocked from behind by multiple volleys.

“Shields are holding, Captain.” Adam reported.

“Mr. Crowe, now!”

The stars in the view screen retreated as the Klingon warships warped past the covert freighter. Then, the stars leapt toward the ship again, as the deck groaned with the resurgence of power from below.

“We’re gaining, Captain. I don’t think they have figured out what happened yet. I have a target lock.” advised Adam.

Based on the hull markings, the ship Adam had chosen was not the same ship whose bow they had all but destroyed. Adam obtained his weapons lock and fired a long burst at the warship’s starboard nacelle.

The warship, aware it is under attack, fired a volley of torpedoes from the aft tube, which missed by a wide margin. The vessel attempted to veer off, but *Agenda’s* targeting computer was able to track the warship as it maneuvered in order to keep the phaser beam on target.

A few moments later the shield protecting the nacelle flared a brilliant red and suddenly disappeared. At almost the same instant, the nacelle exploded in a flash of plasma and the warship dropped out of warp and immediately fell behind and out of the fight.

“Helm, hard to port.” ordered the Captain.

Lieutenant Crowe carried out the order without hesitation and *Agenda* pulled away from the warships as they executed their own maneuvers to pursue the mysterious vessel.

“Captain, the enemy vessels are again in pursuit. Estimate they will overtake us in thirty-seven seconds.” reported Adam.

Kirk punched the comm switch. “Scotty, time to prepare our little surprise party.”

“Aye, Captain.” came the reply.

Adam looked puzzled. “Surprise party?”

Kirk smiled. “While you were gone, I asked Mr. Scott to rig a detonation device on the reserve fuel tank used by the PAV in the cargo pod. I also asked him to run some temporary plumbing so that the hydrogen we picked up from the gas giant could be pumped into the pressurized pod. Between the leftover fuel and the pressurized hydrogen, that should be one hell of a bang, wouldn’t you think?”

Adam nodded. “It would, but that won’t destroy a Klingon warship with shields up.”

“No, it probably won’t. I’m hoping though that if detonated close enough it will overload their sensor relays and blind them just long enough so we can inflict some damage to their weapons and drives.”

“Ready, sir.” Scott reported over the staticy connection.

“Commander, ETA on our pursuers?”

Just as he spoke, the ship was jarred once again from astern.

“They’re here, Captain. And in classic Klingon attack formation.”

“Good, so that means they are close together. Mr. Crowe, arm the detonator.”

“Armed.” the helmsman replied.

“Eject the cargo pod and detonate.”

The cargo pod released from the body of the freighter in an upward trajectory, and immediately cleared

Agenda's warp field, dropping it into space in the direct path of the advancing warships where it detonated in a blinding fireball.

Because it all happened so quickly, the warships were unable to navigate around the pod or fire upon it. Also, due to the proximity the warship's navigational deflectors had insufficient time to sweep it out of their path before it detonated.

The explosion appeared to consume both vessels. In reality, the warships shields absorbed the bulk of the energy of the blast. Only the *Grich*, whose bow had already been severely damaged by the earlier phaser blast, sustained additional minor damage from the exploding cargo pod.

While the hulls of the Klingon ships were largely undamaged, the same did not hold true for their sensors. As Kirk theorized, the close proximity of the explosion blew out sensor relays aboard both vessels. They were temporarily blinded and unable to target or navigate. In response, both vessels reduced their speed to sublight, and fired their disruptors at random into the vastness of space.

"Captain, it worked!" declared Adam. Both warships appear to be blind."

"That won't last long. Lieutenant Crowe, full stop and reverse course. Engage at maximum warp. "Mr. Russell, target weapons and engines."

Agenda's space frame groaned again at the stresses of the sudden stop and start. In seconds the little ship, now relieved of the burden of the cargo pod, overtook the powerful Klingon warships while evading their blind and erratic fire. As soon as they were within range, *Agenda* dropped to impulse and navigating across their bows, Adam laid down volley

after volley of full-powered phaser fire in precision strikes to the warships weapons systems.

Their shields weakened by the attack, both of the warships bow torpedo launchers and primary disruptors were damaged enough to be rendered inoperative. But before *Agenda* could jump to warp for another pass, one of the warships fired on them with their dorsal mounted secondary disruptors.

Then both Klingon warships, having recovered their sight moved off at warp to regroup for attack. *Agenda* jumped back to warp and circled to come up from behind.

Being more maneuverable at warp than the warships, *Agenda* caught up to the warships and unleashed a torrent of phaser fire on the drive nacelles, while being careful to evade the volley of torpedoes launched by the aft tubes. The attack was successful at bringing a second warship out of warp.

After the second pass, the comm speaker crackled. "Scott to bridge. We canna' keep this up. Every time we jump back to warp red lights go off on the control board like crazy. It's everything Doctor Morse and I can do to keep the whole system from shutting down!"

"Keep us in one piece, Scotty. It's going to take a few more passes to take those ships out." Kirk replied.

"This isn't a starship ya' know! It wasn't meant for combat!" retorted the Scotsman.

"You have your orders, Mr. Scott. Carry on. Kirk out."

Scans showed significant damage done to the Klingon vessels. The warships navigated on impulse power as *Agenda* came around for a third pass.

The small ship had just dropped to impulse and was again preparing to attack from the rear when another

volley of torpedoes was unleashed in their direction. *Agenda* strayed a little too closely this time, but was able to evade all but one of the torpedoes, which took the vessel in the starboard bow.

The impact dislodged a metal panel directly over the captain's chair. The panel caught Kirk with a glancing blow to the side of the head, sending him spilling onto the flight deck. Simultaneously the warp power indicators at the helm went to zero.

"Captain!" exclaimed Lieutenant T'Lev as she leapt from her station to and rushed to Kirk's side.

"I've got no power." declared Lieutenant Crowe, with alarm.

Adam leapt into action. He knew that the first priority was the ship. Adam rushed to the captain's chair and toggled the comm switch. As he reached the chair, the ship was again jolted. "Scotty, we've lost warp drive."

"The nacelles have locked out again. It'll be a few minutes to get them energized again."

"We don't have a few minutes!" bellowed Adam.

"Where's the Captain?" asked the engineer.

"Injured. We don't know how badly yet. I've assumed command. Get us out of here, Scotty."

"Commander, the Klingon vessels have regrouped and are advancing at impulse speed." reported the helmsman.

"Mr. Crowe, take us away from those ships, best speed."

"Aye, sir." the helmsman acknowledged as he fired up the impulse drive.

Adam motioned to the unconscious Captain Kirk. "How is he?"

T'Lev stopped scanning with her medical tricorder long enough to respond. "He has a concussion, but otherwise appears to be uninjured. Will you help me carry him to a bunk?"

Adam moved to assist her and lifted Kirk under his shoulders while T'Lev carried him by his feet. All the while their efforts were hampered by the repeated hammering of disruptor fire. Even though the disruptors were the weaker, secondary ones they packed a punch just the same.

The Klingons warships were closing on either flank while continuing to pound away at *Agenda's* shields. Each volley rattled the crew.

"Commander, our shields are weakening. Now down to seventeen percent!" reported Lieutenant Crowe.

Adam had taken the captain's chair while Lieutenant T'Lev took over tactical. Larbeth continued to observe silently while Commander Kahl displayed a toothy grin as he awaited death.

Adam opened the channel to the engine room. "Mr. Scott, can you reinforce the shields?"

"Commander, everything is overheating and shutting down here. I had to take the warp core off the line!"

The ship was rocked by bolt after bolt. Around him, displays on consoles flashed and flickered. The flight deck began to fill with smoke. More metal panels fell from overhead, narrowly missing crew members and hitting the deck with loud metallic clangs. The situation appeared hopeless.

Adam felt concern for his fellow ship mates. True, they had volunteered for this mission and they knew the risks. But the burden of the command he had just

assumed made him responsible for the people under him. At the same time he doubted that even Captain Kirk could get them out of this situation.

His mind drifted to thoughts of Carrie and her untimely death in the line of duty. How ironic that he should face the same fate so soon. But the thought of seeing her again calmed him. Strangely, he felt at peace and was just about to resign himself and his crew to their deaths when Lieutenant Crowe exclaimed in an excited manner.

“Commander, four more ships are coming in directly ahead!”

“More Klingons?” queried Adam, sarcastically.

“No, sir!”

Through the smoke on the flickering view screen, Adam watched as the ships emerged from warp. He was identified them as the Federation starships *Enterprise*, *MacArthur*, *Intrepid* and *Challenger*.

Chapter Thirty-six

“What is the status of Captain Kirk’s ship?” inquired Spock.

“The vessel has sustained heavy damage.” advised Lieutenant Ferr while peering into the hood of his sensor display. “I am reading minimal energy signatures from their warp drive system. Shield readings are weak and fluctuating all around the ship. They do appear to have life support and impulse power, and are moving away from the Klingon ships.”

“Life signs?”

“I am reading numerous signs through the weakened shields. Including three that are not human.”

Spock raised an eyebrow. “We can account for one of those signs as Lieutenant T’Lev, I expect. The other two are unknown at this time. Lieutenant Uhura, please hail the Captain.”

“I’ve been trying, Mr. Spock. It appears their comm system is down. I do not show they are receiving.” replied the Communications Officer.

“What is the status of the Klingon vessels?” requested Spock.

Ferr returned to his viewer. “Both vessels have also sustained heavy damage to weapons and engineering sections. Shields on both warships are severely weakened or down completely in areas. Neither ship has a functioning warp drive at the moment. I am also reading radiation leaking from the number two impulse engine on the starboard most vessel. There is a third warship one-point-four billion kilometers away. The vessel is emanating drive

plasma from the starboard warp nacelle. Its warp drive is inoperative.”

“Captain Kirk has been busy.” quipped Chekov.

“Mr. Spock,” called Sulu from his station at the helm, “one of the Klingon ships has broken off pursuit of Captain Kirk’s ship and is moving to intercept us. The other is still pursuing and is in weapons range.”

“Spock, we’ve got to help Jim.” demanded Doctor McCoy from his customary place on the bridge, standing at the left side of the captain’s chair.

“I agree, Doctor. Lieutenant Uhura, please advise *Challenger* that we are about to maneuver the *Enterprise* between Captain Kirk’s ship and the pursuing Klingon. Ask them if they would like to join us.” ordered Spock.

“Mr. Spock, the Klingon ship is firing on the Captain again!” exclaimed Sulu.

“Spock!” yelled McCoy.

“Mr. Chekov, are we in weapons range?” asked Spock.

“Yes, we are, but barely!”

“Phasers only, disable that warship. Fire.”

All hands on *Agenda*’s flight deck were intently focused on the view screen and the pursuing Klingon warship which was once again firing on them.

As much as Lieutenant Crowe tried to evade the incoming fire, the little ship was just too sluggish at impulse power to respond in time. And warp power was evidently off-line until extensive repairs of overheated circuits could be performed.

The ship had again been shaken, further weakening her already strained shields when the

pursing warship was suddenly overtaken by twin pairs of brilliantly yellow phaser beams.

All watched as an explosion of escaping atmosphere burst from the side of the massive warship where it had been hit. Smoke began escaping from the numerous hull breaches and the now lifeless ship began a weirdly canted spin on its horizontal axis.

“Commander, the *Enterprise* and *Challenger* fired on the warship.” advised Lieutenant Crowe.

“Lieutenant T’Lev, status of the warship? Is it still a threat?” asked Adam.

“Power readings from the Klingon vessel are now zero. The ship appears to be disabled.” reported the Vulcan.

Commander Kahl sat quietly and stoically, torn with mixed emotion at the turn in developments.

“Excellent! What is the position of the other ship?” inquired the acting captain.

“The other Klingon vessel is holding position relative to our fleet. It is not moving, nor offering a threat of any kind.”

“Perfect. Mr. Crowe, come about and approach our fleet. Wide arc and make sure you approach well underneath them so we stay out of their line of fire.”

“Aye, sir. Executing.”

Agenda completed her turn and was on approach to the fleet under full impulse power. The badly damaged vessel was well beneath the remaining Klingon warship when Lieutenant T’Lev sounded an alert.

“Commander, something is happening on the Klingon ship. A large hatch has just opened on her belly.

“Let’s see it, Lieutenant.” Adam ordered.

The viewscreen focused on the warship and magnified her underside. A large double hatch had indeed been slid open and as they watched, four long cylindrical objects were lowered from the hull, one at a time.

“What are they doing?” asked Lieutenant Crowe.

“The *Koroth* is preparing to deploy missiles against your fleet.” replied Kahl, with his toothy grin once again on display.

Crowe looked over his shoulder at Adam. “Will their shields stand up against those missiles?”

“I don’t know. Lieutenant T’Lev, can we warn them?”

T’Lev darted to the communications console and toggled some switches. Showing frustration she reported, “Communications are still down. We can’t reach them.”

“Phasers!” ordered Adam.

“Not functional. We have no weapons.” replied Lieutenant Crowe.

“Oh yes we do.” responded the Commander.

“Lieutenant Crowe, full impulse power towards that warship. Bring us up beneath her. I’m going topside!”

“The projectile cannon?” challenged the helmsman. “What good will that be?”

“Hopefully good enough if you can get us close enough to that ship, Lieutenant. Now execute my order!”

“Aye, sir.” Lieutenant Crowe’s hands moved efficiently over the helm console. The hum of the impulse engines reached a crescendo and the image of the Klingon warship grew ever larger in the viewscreen.

Adam scrambled up the ladder to the turret housing the cannon. Fortunately, it was undamaged in the battle with the Klingons.

He reached the turret and strapped himself in. He made sure a round was chambered and took the safeties off. The weapon now ready to go hot, he flipped open his communicator. "Lieutenant Crowe, I'm in position."

"Now coming within range, Commander." advised the Lieutenant.

"Get us closer. The sights on this thing are a far cry from targeting sensors. And Lieutenant, if this doesn't work, you are ordered to take us all the way in."

"All the way in?"

"Yes, collision course. We must protect the fleet even if it means sacrificing ourselves."

A momentary pause. "Yes, sir. Understood."

The huge warship loomed directly in their path making a collision appear imminent.

"Almost there." reported Adam. "Firing!"

A volley of projectiles streaked towards the underside of the Klingon warship and the instruments of mass destruction she was preparing to launch. The initial burst missed both missiles and warship, and raced off into space. Adam adjusted and walked the subsequent bursts onto *Koroth's* starboard hull, where they impacted harmlessly.

Just as the drive coils on the missiles began to glow, Adam's aim improved and he emptied the magazine in the direction of the missiles. The volley caught the trailing missile, rupturing an antimatter bottle which released the fuel inside.

Witnessing the impact and the beginning of a cascading reaction, Adam yelled into his communicator for Lieutenant Crowe to veer hard to port.

The reaction unfolded in seconds. The damaged missile exploded and caused a chain reaction which consumed the remaining three missiles. The massive release of energy ruptured the battle cruiser amidships.

Within seconds, the warship was completely engulfed in the still growing holocaust of unharnessed antimatter, and was completely gone save for a huge cloud of highly energized dust.

Meanwhile, all aboard *Agenda* were trying to deal with the tremendous g-forces of the high speed impulse maneuver, while trying to outrun the shock wave they all knew was coming.

“All hands, brace for impact.” Adam bellowed into the communicator.

No sooner had Adam issued the order than *Agenda* was dealt the most violent blow yet. The ship was jolted so severely, Adam was concerned she would come apart.

All hands on the flight deck were thrown from their seats. The turret surrounding Adam developed severe cracks and began to fill with smoke. Adam guessed it wouldn't be long before the turret ruptured and was exposed to space.

Feeling his way along, he found the ladder and scrambled to the flight deck below, making sure to secure the atmospheric hatch to the turret as he descended.

As he reached the flight deck, signs of failing systems were all around. The back-up lighting under

which they had been operating failed. Small emergency lights operating on battery power came on, but had a difficult time cutting through the smoke. The viewscreen was dark.

Adam was mentally thrown back to Omega IV, and the aftermath of the attack in the command center. After a few seconds, he regained his bearings. "Report!" he ordered, not knowing who was capable of answering.

Lieutenant Crowe was the first to respond. "Shields are down, main power has failed. We are dead in space."

Adam looked first at his Helmsman, bleeding from a head wound, then at Larbeth, unconscious and streaked with soot. At the rear of the deck, Lieutenant T'Lev was struggling to retake her station. Commander Kahl, still shackled to the console, was conscious.

"Commander," the comm channel to the engine room still worked. It was Karen Morse.

"Are you all right down there?" asked Adam.

"Bumps and bruises, and maybe a cracked rib, but that's not important now. We've got much bigger problems."

"What's wrong?"

"We can't maintain containment. I estimate a warp core breach in less than three minutes." advised Doctor Morse.

"Eject the core and fuel pods"

"We can't. There wasn't time to install ejection mechanisms before we left Starbase." Karen replied.

"T'Lev, how many escape pods are on board?" inquired Adam.

“Only two, capable of holding two people each. It doesn’t matter though, they would never get far enough away from the ship before it breaches.”

“Doctor Morse, you and Commander Scott are to come up to the flight deck immediately. If we are to be rescued by emergency transport, we’ll all need to be in one place. Russell out.”

Adam then turned to Lieutenant Crowe. “Are you well enough to help me get Captain Kirk in here?”

Crowe nodded and rose, albeit slowly, to retrieve the captain from his bunk.

“And what about me?” demanded Commander Kahl.

Adam paused to consider his prisoner. Turning to Lieutenant T’Lev, he handed her his phaser. “Uncuff him, but keep your weapon on him.” Adam strode quickly to the crew quarters behind Lieutenant Crowe.

As Adam and Lieutenant Crowe returned to the flight deck supporting a groggy Captain Kirk, Doctor Morse and Commander Scott ascended the ladder from the engine room and stepped onto the deck. Both were sweaty and grimy and in general looked like they had been in battle.

“It’s getting hot in here.” remarked Adam.

“Aye.” acknowledged Scotty. “That would be due to the loss of containment. We’ve got barely a minute before she breaches.”

“Lieutenant T’Lev, any sign of rescue?” Adam asked, hopefully.

“Negative, Commander. None that I can see.”

“Well, if any of you believe in prayer, now would be the time. We need a miracle.”

Chapter Thirty-seven

Ferr studied the sensors intently as the cloud that once was the Klingon vessel *Koroth* dissipated. The sensitive instruments were just now beginning to cut through the radiation interference and he focused intently on *Agenda*, adrift in space. What he saw concerned him.

“Mr. Spock, reading an increase in heat from Captain Kirk’s ship. I believe they are building to a breach of their warp core.”

Spock rose quickly from the captain’s chair and strode to Lieutenant Ferr’s station. Peering into the sensor hood, he quickly withdrew. “I agree, Lieutenant. In fact, I would conclude a breach is imminent.”

“Spock, you’ve got to do something! You can’t just let them all die!” demanded Doctor McCoy.

“I am doing something, Doctor. Mr. Sulu, plot an intercept course to the captain’s ship and execute, full impulse.”

Sulu looked over his shoulder at the Vulcan. “But, Mr. Spock, if the ship explodes.....”

“I understand the risks, Lieutenant. Execute please without further delay. Keep our shields up until I order them dropped.”

“Yes, sir. ETA in twenty-three seconds.”

Spock turned to face the Chief Medical Officer. “There may be injured. I would suggest you may be needed in the transporter room.”

“Right.” With that, McCoy strode quickly to the turbolift and off the bridge.

The *Enterprise* surged away from the rest of the fleet. After the initial increase in g-forces, the inertial dampeners compensated and the acceleration of full impulse power was barely noticeable.

Spock toggled the comm switch to the transporter room. "Chief Kelso, can you get a transporter lock yet?"

The response was immediate. "Negative, Mr. Spock. We need to be closer with all this interference."

"How much closer?"

"To be sure, within twenty kilometers."

Spock raised an eyebrow but betrayed no other reaction. "Take us in, Mr. Sulu."

Seconds later, Sulu reported, "All stop, Mr. Spock. Captain Kirk's vessel is fifteen kilometers off our starboard side."

Spock opened the channel to the transporter room again. "Mr. Kelso, bring the *Agenda* crew aboard."

"Getting a lock now sir. I've got eight signals."

Spock raised his eyebrows again. The ship had departed with only six aboard, including the civilian Doctor Morse. How they ended up with eight was at present a mystery.

"Beam them aboard."

"Transporting now. The locks are good. Wait! I've lost one! Mr. Spock, I've lost one of the signals. Non-human."

"Captain Spock!" called Lieutenant Ferr from the science station. "The ship's core is going critical. An uncontrolled breach is within seconds."

"Mr. Kelso, do you have the seven patterns?" inquired Spock.

"They're in the buffer, sir."

On the viewer, *Agenda's* mid-section began to glow red, then very quickly transitioned through orange and yellow on the way to white.

“Mr. Sulu, take us directly away and raise shields. Full impulse.” Spock ordered.

Without a word, Sulu executed as ordered and the *Enterprise* once again leapt away under full impulse acceleration. A mere second later, *Agenda* released the energy of the no-longer contained anti-matter fuel and exploded with the brilliance of a supernova.

The *Enterprise*, hurtling away from the explosion was caught by the expanding shockwave. The jolt was powerful. On the bridge, the lights and displays flickered momentarily, but then settled down.

“All stations, damage and injury reports.” ordered the Vulcan.

Lieutenant Uhura began relaying information as it poured into her station from the various departments on the ship. “No injuries. Damaged latching mechanism on the starboard aft docking port, and a buckled bulkhead on deck seventeen, section AA3. Engineering reports repair crews have been dispatched.”

“Very well.” Spock was just about to signal the transporter room to ask about the condition of the *Agenda* crew when Lieutenant Ferr called excitedly for his attention.

“Captain, six Klingon warships are about to decloak dead ahead!”

“Mr. Sulu, all stop.”

“Aye. Answering all stop.” replied the helmsman.

The viewscreen was suddenly filled with Klingon warships.

“Status of the Klingon vessels, Lieutenant?”

Ferr's response was prompt. "Shields up and all weapons systems armed. Our fleet has broken position and is joining us."

"Lieutenant Uhura, open hailing frequencies."

"Frequencies open, Mr. Spock. There is no response."

"Are they receiving us?"

"I believe so sir, but can't be certain."

"They haven't started shooting yet." observed Chekov.

"No, Lieutenant, they have not. And that's a good sign. Lieutenant Uhura, please continue hailing. All frequencies."

Spock then did what he had intended earlier, and opening the channel to the transporter room. "Doctor McCoy, please report. Is Captain Kirk aboard?"

"He is, but he's been injured. I'm tending to him now."

"Is he in condition to come to the bridge?"

"No, Spock. He suffered a severe concussion. I've sedated him to reduce swelling on the brain. He's going to be out for a while."

"I see. What is the condition of the rest of the crew?"

"Mostly bumps and bruises, and a fracture or two. Nothing too serious considering what they've been through. I'm going to get this bunch to sickbay for thorough examinations. Oh, and Spock, you might be interested to know there is a female alien on board."

"Fascinating. I would relish the opportunity to know more, but a squadron of Klingon warships just arrived."

"We know." retorted the Doctor. "Commander Russell says he has some important information

regarding that matter. He wants to come to the bridge.”

“Have Commander Russell report to the bridge immediately. Spock out.”

“Captain, five more Federation starships are inbound and will arrive at our position within the next three minutes.” reported Lieutenant Ferr.

But before Spock could comment, Ferr had a follow-up report. “And six more Klingon ships are dropping out of warp ahead.”

The turbolift doors hissed open and Adam stepped onto the bridge with Larbeth in tow. She was wide-eyed with wonder as she took in the sights and sounds around her.

Both were covered in soot and grime. Their clothes were tattered and in general looked like they had been through the war they had, in fact, experienced.

“Commander?” Spock challenged.

“Mr. Spock, I, that is, we have evidence for you that hopefully will be helpful.” Adam handed over his tricorder, and gestured toward Larbeth.

“We also have a first-hand witness to the crimes committed by a faction of Klingons on the planet from which this being hails.” Adam added.

Spock considered Adam’s statements without comment. Then he turned to the communication station. “Lieutenant, any response to our hails?”

“Still nothing, Mr. Spock.” reported Uhura.

“Mr. Spock, play the recording.” Adam pointed at the tricorder. “Put this over the hailing frequencies. I think you’ll get a response.”

Spock considered the tricorder in his hands for a moment, and then carried it to Lieutenant Uhura. As

he handed it over he ordered, "Patch this in. Do as the Commander suggests."

Uhura took the tricorder and immediately began to tie it into her console. She toggled a switch and as the recording went out over subspace, it played simultaneously on the main viewscreen.

The images were clear and unmistakable. Missile components, views from inside the production facility of Klingons in close quarters combat with beings from the Dorian planet. Images of dead Dorians. Images of dead Klingons. Widespread signs of battle and abuse.

The recording ended and the bridge was in silence. Larbeth was focused on the view screen filled with the image of a dozen Klingon warships. All armed. All ready to do battle.

For several long moments no one moved. No one spoke. Then Lieutenant Uhura broke the silence. "Mr. Spock, we are being hailed."

"On screen, Lieutenant."

The anger in the Klingon's expression was unmistakable. "How dare you charge into the Neutral Zone and attack warships of the empire!"

"This is the Federation Starship *Enterprise*. To whom do I have the pleasure of addressing?" asked Spock, in his usual pleasant manner.

"I am Garren, captain of *Dakram I* and commander of this imperial fleet. Who are you? Where is Captain James T. Kirk?"

"He is not here. I am Spock, commanding the *Enterprise* and representing the United Federation of Planets and this task force."

"I was not aware Captain Kirk had been replaced." challenged the Klingon.

“On behalf of Starfleet, I apologize for the oversight in informing you of our personnel changes.” offered the Vulcan.

At the helm, Lieutenant Sulu fought to contain a smile. It wasn't often he observed sarcasm from the First Officer, or any Vulcan.

“I demand to know why you fired on our warships? And where did you get that recording?!” shouted the Klingon.

“It was necessary, Captain. Those ships were attempting to destroy evidence of their complicity in the manufacture and deployment of long range weapons which destroyed our outpost, and your settlement. We felt it necessary to prevent them from doing so.”

“Lies!” railed the Klingon Commander as he slammed his fist on his chair arm. “All lies and treachery by the Federation to divert attention from their own crimes!”

“These are not lies, Captain.” Adam stepped into view and addressed the viewscreen. “I witnessed the crimes of those Klingons on a world in a system only a few light-years from here. I recorded that video.”

“Who are you?” demanded the Klingon, obviously caught off guard.

“I am Commander Adam Russell of Starfleet. I was the one in the small ship your warships were chasing. They were trying to kill me and destroy this evidence. Captain Spock was merely protecting me to preserve the truth.”

“How do I know this video is authentic? You have fabricated it!” challenged Garren, now not quite as animated as before.

“You are welcome to examine the footage for yourself to determine its authenticity. But, that may be a moot point, as we also have a witness.”

“A witness?” exclaimed Garren.

Adam stepped out of view and escorted Larbeth in front of the viewer. He stood with her, with Spock alongside them both.

“This being is in law enforcement on the world where your countrymen committed crimes against both our nations. They abducted her fellow citizens, forced them into slave labor, and murdered them. “

“You witnessed this?” grilled Garren?

“You murdered my people!” yelled Larbeth, apparently no longer in awe of her surroundings. “My only satisfaction is that I killed some of your people!”

Adam ushered Larbeth off screen. Meanwhile, additional reinforcing vessels were arriving on both sides. The numbers of ships in the area, primed for battle grew significantly.

“Captain,” Spock began, “we have irrefutable evidence of involvement by members of the Klingon Empire in major war crimes against both our peoples.”

Garren no longer glared at the viewscreen as Spock spoke, apparently trying to reconcile the information coming at him.

Meanwhile, Spock continued, “In the interest of full disclosure, I can tell you that your people did not act alone. We also have evidence of complicity by certain individuals in Starfleet, and we are taking action against them.”

Garren’s gaze suddenly returned to the viewscreen at this revelation.

“Klingons are not cowardly murderers.” responded the Klingon.

“And we are not asserting they are, Captain.”
reassured Spock.

“What are you saying?” grilled Garren.

“Captain, forces on both sides continue to grow minute by minute. We both have powerful fleets in the area, ready to fight if necessary. Your sensors will no doubt show we have more starships enroute. I have no doubt you have additional warships on the way as well.”

“Clearly we both have been drawn into the Neutral Zone in response to others with an agenda that differs from that of our governments. They would like nothing more than if we went to war today.”

“A war we would no doubt win!” Garren exclaimed. Spock could hear supporting cheers and shouts from behind the Klingon commander.

“Perhaps.” Spock conceded. “Perhaps not. Whatever the outcome, there is no doubt that an all-out war would be devastating to both our forces and economies. Wouldn’t you agree, Captain?”

Garren said nothing, but his gaze held steady.

“There is no doubt that by now the Romulans have heard about the missile attacks and growing tensions between our governments. There is also no doubt that they are monitoring this situation via their channels of communication. An all-out war between us would open the door for the Romulans to step in and establish themselves as the dominant power in the Alpha and Beta quadrants.”

Garren grimaced at this prospect, and Spock knew he had hit a nerve.

“The Romulans have no honor!” argued Garren.

Spock nodded. “Never-the-less, they are a force which cannot be ignored, and await the right

opportunity to expand their empire. I suggest we not give them that opportunity.”

“Klingons were born to fight! We do not run!” declared Garren.

“I understand. Vulcans once were a warrior race. But I submit to you Captain that today is not the day. This matter, which has drawn both our forces to this encounter, is the doing of neither of our governments. I submit that this is not the cause worth going to war.”

Garren grimaced again as he considered Spock’s words.

Spock continued, “This situation requires a gesture of good will. Captain, I will make that gesture by powering down the *Enterprise* weapons systems. And I will invite the commanders of all Federation vessels in the area to do likewise.”

Uhura’s communications panel instantly lit up like a Christmas tree. Spock expected this, and ordered her to mute the channel to the *Dakram I*.

No sooner had she muted the channel when she began to relay messages from the other starship commanders. “Mr. Spock, most want to know if you have gone mad.”

Without emotion, Spock replied. “Lieutenant, please remind the commanders that Admiral Benning placed the *Enterprise* in command of this task force. And since I am currently commanding the *Enterprise*, I am ordering that all ships disarm as a gesture of peace to the Klingons.”

“Yes, sir.” Uhura returned to her console and relayed Spock’s request.

A few moments later Lieutenant Ferr announced, “our ships have begun to power down their weapons, Captain.”

“Very well. Lieutenant Uhura, please unmute the channel to the Klingon vessel.”

A quick chirp from the console notified Spock that the channel was once again open. “Captain, as your sensors will no doubt tell you, we are disarming. Will you do the same?”

Garren was in conversation with one of his officers just out of view. He returned to face Spock and challenged, “Your shields are still up.”

“One step at a time, Captain. We have disarmed. Will you return the gesture?”

Garren stared the Vulcan down for several long seconds, but Spock did not blink. Finally, the warrior turned to one of his officers and barked some brief orders in Klingon. Seconds later, Lieutenant Ferr’s scanners showed the Klingon fleet had also powered down their weapons.

“Thank you, Captain.” Spock offered graciously. “As a further gesture, we will be happy to share with you the evidence we have obtained which may point to responsible parties within the empire.”

“No need, Captain Spock. We have already identified the house owning the vessels involved. Their elder has already been removed from the high council and executed for treason. His family has been exiled in disgrace.”

“Indeed.” Spock stated.

“Klingon justice is swift.” Garren grinned. “The empire has no use for conspirators, unless they serve our purpose.”

“Then that leaves only the matter of the Klingon personnel, equipment and weapons left on the Dorian planet.” advised Spock.

Garren raised his hand. "That is a Klingon matter, Captain, and we will handle it."

Spock retorted, "By the terms of the Organian peace treaty, establishing the existence of the Neutral Zone, any matter inside the zone which affects one party in the treaty affects all parties and must be resolved mutually. If you wish, I can direct you to the specific section, sub-section and paragraph."

Garren stopped grinning. "That will not be necessary, Captain Spock. I should have known that a Vulcan would have the terms of the treaty thoroughly memorized."

Spock acknowledged with a nod. "It is only logical. In any event, in short order our government will contact yours for the purpose of establishing a joint task force to repair the damage done on the Dorian planet. Until then, I suggest that we both return to our respective sides of the Neutral Zone. "

Unable to overcome Spock's logic, Garren replied, "We will comply, Captain Spock of the Starship *Enterprise*. But first I have a request."

"Certainly. What is it?" invited Spock.

"When you see Captain Kirk, tell him I so looked forward to meeting him in battle today."

"I will relay the message."

The channel closed abruptly and the viewer showed the multitudes of Klingon warships beginning slow impulse turns toward Klingon space.

"Mr. Checkov, plot a reverse course back to Starbase thirty-one."

"Captain Spock," Ferr called excitedly, "two of the Klingon ships have powered weapons. They are heading at high speed toward the Klingon ship we disabled."

On the view screen the bridge crew watched as the Klingon warships approached the drifting warship and fired volleys of torpedoes, obliterating it.

“Two other inbound Klingon vessels are moving toward the other damaged Klingon ship we detected further distant.” Ferr reported. “I’m reading weapons signatures.” A few seconds later, “The damaged ship no longer registers on sensors.”

All eyes were on Spock as he mused over what they had just witnessed. “Klingon justice. Swift indeed. Mr. Sulu, return us to Federation space. Warp factor four.”

Chapter Thirty-eight

The doors hissed as they parted. As Adam and Spock stepped inside sickbay they were greeted by Doctor McCoy.

“You summoned us, Doctor?”

“Why, yes, Mr. Spock. Someone’s been asking for the two of you.”

McCoy led them to the treatment room where to their surprise, the two officers found Captain Kirk upright and dressed in his duty uniform.

“Captain, you are well?” inquired Spock.

As Kirk began to reply the Doctor spoke first. “He has a concussion. Thanks to my quick intervention, the severity has been greatly reduced. He thinks he’s fit for duty and dressed against doctor’s orders.”

“Bones, we’re still in the Neutral Zone. And this isn’t the first bump to the head I’ve ever had. I’ve got to get to the bridge.” Kirk argued.

“Your first officer has done a fine job handling things to this point, Captain. You need your rest.” McCoy retorted.

Changing the subject, Kirk addressed the Vulcan. “Speaking of which, I understand you managed to talk the Klingon’s out of a war without so much as a shot being fired.”

“I merely applied logic to the situation, backed up by the evidence Commander Russell was able to obtain from the planet.”

“What kind of logic, Spock?”

“I merely pointed out that neither we nor they were the responsible parties in the conflict, and there was insufficient provocation to go to war. The Klingons are

perceptive enough to know that without proper cause, any conflict, especially in the Neutral Zone, would invite intervention by the Organians. And that is clearly something they do not want.”

“I see. Well done just the same. You may have a career in diplomacy ahead of you, Spock. And Mr. Russell, according to Mr. Spock’s log, you single handedly saved the *Enterprise* from missile attack in spite of the loss of main power and phasers.”

“It was nothing, sir.” Adam replied.

“It was indeed something, Commander. You saved my ship and the more than four-hundred lives aboard her. That’s command decision making. I intend to recommend the both of you for commendation.”

Both officers expressed gratitude toward their captain.

“By the way, Mr. Russell, your report is unclear about what happened to Commander Kahl during transport off the *Agenda*.” stated Kirk.

“I had gathered all the personnel on the flight deck for emergency transport, including Commander Kahl. As we waited for the *Enterprise* Kahl became irritated at the thought of being taken prisoner on a Federation vessel. I tried to reassure him, but just as we felt the transporter beam he shouted that he was a traitor and did not deserve to live. He threw himself out of the beam.”

“Sacrificed himself to maintain his honor.” Kirk mused.

“Captain, I most likely wouldn’t have located the facility as quickly as I did without Commander Kahl’s intelligence. He played a large role in preventing a war and should be recognized for that, both in the Federation and in the Klingon Empire. On a more

personal note, when Kahl first came aboard *Agenda*, all I wanted was to kill him for what his conspirators did to Omega IV and Carrie. I couldn't see beyond my own hate. But after what has happened and the role he played, I have to respect his sacrifice."

Kirk nodded as he listened. After a few moment of reflection, he responded. "Getting past hate is a very difficult thing for us humans, isn't it Mr. Spock?"

"Indeed." Spock replied.

"The fact that you can look beyond your personal feelings is a promising sign that you are destined for greater responsibility. Perhaps command of your own ship someday. You have a promising future ahead of you."

"Regarding Commander Kahl, as far as the Klingons know he died aboard one of those ships. Died as a conspirator perhaps, but as a warrior. It's a funny thing about the Klingons. Even though Kahl did the right thing in the end, he would not be seen as a hero in his home state. Best to leave it as is for now. Perhaps at some time in the future his heroism can be brought to light."

"Yes, sir. I understand." Adam responded.

"Where is that female guest of yours, Commander?" asked Kirk.

"In her quarters, sir. I was just on my way to see her. Even though I've told her otherwise, she still thinks she's our prisoner since we're not taking her home right away."

"Commander, I'm making her your responsibility since you and she appear to have made a connection. She can play a prominent role in introducing us to her leaders if she so chooses. Make her feel comfortable."

"Yes, sir. I'll do my best"

“Jim, you look tired.” McCoy chimed in. “You need to rest.”

“I’ll be fine Bones. Just need a minute. Am I released?”

McCoy looked to Spock, but received no guidance from the Vulcan.

“I don’t think so, not yet. Let’s give it another twelve hours and see how you’re doing tomorrow.”

McCoy offered.

Kirk sat down on the bed and offered no resistance. “Spock, how long till we’re back in Federation space?”

“Twenty-seven hours and fourteen minutes at present speed.”

“Alright, keep her together Spock. I’ll see you on the bridge in the morning.”

“Maybe.” countered McCoy.

On his way to Larbeth’s quarters, Adam stopped by ship’s stores for a clean change of clothes for his alien guest. Due to her size and build, it was difficult to find anything that would fit appropriately. However, being a ship that is often home to many alien species of varying shapes and sizes, Adam was able to find an ensign’s uniform which would most likely fit.

Adam reached her cabin on deck five and rang the chime to request entry. The door slid open almost immediately. Larbeth still in her dirty and tattered uniform, stood stoically in the entrance.

“May I come in?” inquired Adam.

Larbeth took a small step to her left but said nothing. Adam took this as a positive response to his request and stepped inside. He held the uniform out to her but she did not take it. “I thought you could use a change of clothes.”

“I prefer my uniform.” she replied, coldly.

“It’s your choice, but I thought you might have preferred something clean and not torn.”

“I will not wear your prison uniform.” she declared.

Adam sighed and looked around the cabin.

Nothing had been touched or disturbed in any way. There was no evidence that the bed had been laid in or a chair had been sat in. The plate of food brought to her earlier had grown cold, and untouched.

“Have you been standing here the whole time?”

“I wish to go home. Until then, I am your prisoner and I will not yield to your efforts to control me with your comforts.”

Adam’s shoulders slumped. “Larbeth, please hear me. You are not our prisoner. You are our guest.”

“Then why won’t you take me home?” she demanded.

“It’s complicated. Can we please sit? I’d like to explain it to you.”

When she did not move, Adam took a chair. “Fine, stand if you want but I’m going to sit. I’m tired.”

He waited a minute as she stared at him silently. Finally, she moved to the chair directly across from Adam and sat, very erect. “Explain.”

Adam gathered his thoughts and began. “We have had hostile relations with the Klingons for a very long time. There have been many skirmishes. We’ve been to the brink of war with them on several occasions, most recently only a few years ago.

That most recent dispute centered on a planet not too far from here called Organia. The Klingons were intent on taking the planet as a strategic base of operations. We were ordered to prevent that from happening.”

Adam seemed to have Larbeth's attention, and so he continued. "The Klingons tried to subjugate the beings on Organia, just as the faction you and I fought tried to do with your people."

"Were they successful" she asked?

Adam was pleased with her interaction. "No. But not because of our intervention. It turned out that the citizens of Organia, although very undeveloped in appearance, were highly evolved beings with incredible mental powers. Not only were they not subjugated, but with their abilities they were able to prevent our fleets from doing battle in the space surrounding their planet."

"That seems incredible." Larbeth responded.

"Yes it does, but it's true. This ship that we're on now, the *Enterprise*, has been to many worlds and has been witness to many species and cultures. Many of them would amaze you."

"If this ship is able to visit so many worlds, why can't it take me home?"

"Remember I said it was complicated? I'm getting to that. Since the Organians would not let our forces fight each other, they negotiated an uneasy peace treaty between our governments. Part of that treaty established a neutral zone between our borders. By treaty, neither Klingon warship, nor Federation starship can enter the Neutral Zone without just cause. Your planet is inside that Neutral Zone."

"I don't understand. If my home is inside this Neutral Zone, why were the Klingons on my world? Why was this ship there?"

"The group of Klingons we found on your world, attacked an outpost on a small planet just inside our

border. The destroyed the outpost and killed many people. I was in command of that outpost.”

“The evidence we gathered showed the attack came from inside the Neutral Zone, in the same region of space as your world. We were ordered to investigate. That’s when you found me.”

Adam’s perception was that she was beginning to understand. And so he continued. “With the evidence you helped me gather in the fuel factory, we were able to avert a war. You were on the bridge with me. You saw all that. So, we were successful in that regard. But we were faced with a problem regarding you.”

Larbeth looked puzzled. “Me?”

“Yes. Once we had come to terms with the Klingons, we were obligated to leave the Neutral Zone and return to our border. Your planet was in the opposite direction. So, we had the choice of sending you to a Klingon ship to take you back, or taking you with us to our space. We chose the latter. I’m sorry we didn’t give you a choice.”

“I would not have gone to the Klingon ship!”

“We suspected that was how you would feel.” Adam replied.

Larbeth sat quietly for a minute as she tried to comprehend.

“What of my people? I am concerned.”

Adam nodded. “I wouldn’t be too worried. It looked like your people were getting the better of the fight. And you had called for reinforcements before we transported out, hadn’t you?”

“Yes.”

“The three Klingon ships we disabled, and were subsequently destroyed, were all that remained of the faction of Klingons who attacked your people and my

outpost. There was no way the Klingons on your world could receive reinforcements. I'm sure your people have the matter well in hand."

"I hope you are right," she said.

"Where did your people learn to fight like that?" asked Adam.

"We've been at war a long time. We're taught to fight from the moment we become aware," she paused. "If we had some of those weapons like you have, we could quickly defeat our enemies."

Adam shook his head. "Sorry, that can't happen. We operate under a standing order and principal called the Prime Directive. It prevents us from interfering in the development of cultures not yet ready for interstellar space travel. Planets like yours."

"But the Klingons....."

"Are not as concerned about contamination. Although they should be."

"Contamination?" Larbeth queried.

"Yes. Introduction of technologies into a society before they're ready. Even knowledge of the existence of life among the stars. The Klingons left a lot of contamination in that factory. What you've been exposed to, you should not have. It was too early. Unfortunately, the damage is done. And we, with the Klingon government, must go to your world to try to repair the damage. But maybe you can help us with that."

"How?"

"In about three standard days, we will arrive at Starbase Thirty-one. It's our home base of operations in this part of the galaxy. Once there, you will have a choice. We can charter a non-military ship to return you to your world, or....."

“Or?”

“We were hoping you might stay for a while to talk with our senior officers. We’re hoping that you might go back with us as part of a joint task force with the Klingons to repair the damage done on your world. We’d like you to introduce us to your leaders. It might make the whole introduction process go more smoothly.”

“The Klingons again!” she wrinkled her nose in disgust.

“Unfortunately, it’s necessary. By treaty, we have to do this together. Will you help us?”

“Do I have a choice?”

“Yes, absolutely. Whatever you decide will stand.”

“If I choose to help, how long before I can return home?”

“Once we reach starbase, our leaders will want to talk with you. Learn from you about your world, your people and culture. Learn about your leadership structure. I won’t lie to you, it could be several days to put together the joint task force with the Klingons and a time table for the voyage back to your world.”

Larbeth was deep in thought.

“But, you would be helping us. Helping your people. Maybe helping yourself, as you take on a leadership role by introducing outworlders to your elders.”

She smiled at the thought. Adam believed that was the first smile he had seen from her.

“And, you could be instrumental in helping us establish trade relations with your world.” Adam offered.

“What kind of trade?”

“We noted in our observations a high degree of famine on your world, presumably due to the ongoing military conflicts. We could offer food, medicines and non-military technologies. We could also perhaps offer some impartial help at the negotiating table with your enemies, if that is desired.”

“And what would we have to offer in return?”

“Our long range scans of your world detected veins of an element known as dilithium in your ground. It’s an important element used by ships with warp drive.”

“I see.” commented Larbeth, apparently already contemplating the possibilities.

“Of course, the Klingons have equal rights to try to establish trade with your world. But with your influence, if you see fit, perhaps you could present us in a favorable light to your leaders.”

“I have no reason to recommend trade with the Klingons.”

Adam smiled. “Well then, what do you think?”

“If I agree, will you stay with me on the starbase?”

Adam thought for a moment. “I am in-between assignments right now. If you request that as a condition of your cooperation, I do not see why my superiors would not agree.”

“In that case, Adam, I will go with you and talk with your leaders.”

Adam beamed. “That’s excellent.” Then, extending the uniform again he asked, “Care to change clothes now? You will be an unofficial Starfleet ensign.”

Larbeth took the uniform and immediately began to shed her own.

Adam turned his back to give her the privacy she apparently cared little about. “I have a question to ask. As we approached your system, we picked up

some video transmissions of a group of people gathered in front of a war damaged structure. The group consisted of some men, in the foreground, doing all the talking; and two women in the background, saying nothing. We concluded yours was a male-dominant society. Yet, here you are in an important military position. We're a bit confused."

Larbeth laughed. A laugh that sounded surprisingly human to Adam's ears. "The females in the background were the community leaders. It is customary to let their male underlings speak for them in public gatherings. Ours is actually a female dominated society."

"Interesting." Adam observed.

"Well, how do I look?" inquired Larbeth.

Adam turned around and eyed her from head to toe. "You look like a natural in that uniform. Can I show you around the ship?"

Larbeth nodded and Adam extended his arm to her. She accepted the invitation, and together made their way out of the cabin and into the hallway.

As they walked Adam handed Larbeth a small card. "This will grant you access to most parts of the ship if you want to go exploring on your own at some point over the next few days. The ship has many amenities including a couple of gymnasiums, an arboretum and several recreation rooms."

"That sounds nice and I may explore. But I have to admit I'm growing rather fond of my cabin. It's very big and comfortable. We are not accustomed to such luxuries on my world."

"Well, you should be fond of it. That is one of the nicer accommodations on the *Enterprise*. That cabin

is typically reserved for visiting dignitaries and heads of state.”

“Now I feel honored!” Larbeth confessed with a smile.

“Larbeth, based on the concern I’ve seen from you over your people, and the exposure you’re going to receive presenting us to your government, I have no doubt that in your future, you will be seeing even nicer accommodations.”

Chapter Thirty-nine

Adam sat at his computer terminal and tried to compose the many reports Starfleet Command would be expecting after such a mission. But the words were not coming easily. After a lengthy and extensive tour of the *Enterprise* with Larbeth, he took his leave of her an hour earlier and returned to his assigned quarters. And he was suddenly lonely.

Unable to concentrate, he reminisced about Carrie. He thought about Larbeth. He thought about Omega IV and his uncertain future. He questioned the decision which had brought him to Starfleet to begin with. It had cost him much.

With a sigh, Adam rose and walked over to the window. He clasped his hands behind him and watched the stars slip smoothly by as *Enterprise* warped back to Federation space accompanied by the rest of the fleet.

Next stop would be Starbase Thirty-one and another debriefing. He had to finish his reports before they arrived. Even though he still had more than a day to complete the task, he wasn't certain it would be enough time.

Adam continued his stare out the portal window when the door chime sounded. Startled back to awareness, he shouted, "Come in."

The door hissed open and there stood Doctor Karen Morse. Her left arm was immobilized by a Starfleet issue sling owing to the fracture she sustained on *Agenda*. Otherwise, she appeared in good form.

"Doctor," Adam exclaimed, "this is a surprise."

“I hope I’m not disturbing you, Commander.” she replied.

“Not at all. Please come in. How are you?”

She gently lifted her immobilized arm. “I’m fine. Doctor McCoy fixed me up. He wants me to wear this for the next couple of days to allow the injury to heal completely.”

“What can I do for you?” inquired Adam.

“I just wanted to talk to you for a minute.”

Adam gestured for her to sit on the couch. She did and he seated himself in the chair directly across from her.

“What’s on your mind, Doctor?” asked Adam, puzzled by her visit.

“Please, Commander, call me Karen.”

“All right, Karen, let’s drop rank then. Call me Adam.”

“You seem unhappy to see me.” asked Karen.

Adam looked startled, then quickly replied, “No, no. Not at all. More surprised actually. To be honest, I didn’t think you’d want to see me or any of us again, considering that the ship, and your prototype warp drive, were lost.”

“Don’t be silly. You did what you had to do, Adam. Besides, I knew the risks when I volunteered to go on the mission. And it was worth it.”

Adam looked up suddenly. “It was?”

“Oh, yes. The performance data we gathered on the mission was much more useful than anything we could have simulated. With Commander Scott’s help, I got a lot of good information to help with the next version.”

“But the ship was lost.” countered Adam.

“True, but it was just a machine. And the loss was as much my responsibility as anyone’s.”

Adam’s look implored her to continue.

“The ship failed due to design issues, not command decisions. The problems we had with the anti-matter regulator were unexpected. The regulator was not beefy enough to handle the sustained demand at warp or in combat. And the plasma pressure feedback at high warp was much greater than our models indicated. This is information we couldn’t duplicate in simulation. With this information, we will now be able to redesign the regulator, and redesign the drive’s plasma conduits.”

“That’s excellent!” exclaimed Adam.

“Yes. Bottom line, in spite of the loss of the ship, the mission and inaugural flight were successes.”

Adam was astounded. “Is this information in your report?”

“Every word.” replied Karen. “And if I might add, I’m personally very impressed with how you put yourself at risk to help those people on that planet, and to prevent a war which would have resulted in the loss of countless lives.”

Adam was speechless. “Thank you. But it was a team effort. I was just doing my part.”

She decided to ignore Adam’s modesty. “What will happen when you when get back to starbase?”

Adam was brought back to reality. “There will be debriefings for everyone, and then perhaps a board of inquiry. In-between all that I will be spending time with Larbeth as she meets with top brass and the joint task force back to her home world is formed.”

“And what will you do after all that?” inquired Karen.

“I...I really don’t know. I was just thinking about that and don’t honestly have an answer. Perhaps considering something other than Starfleet.”

Karen smiled. “Well, at some point before you leave starbase, I’d like to have dinner with you, if you’re agreeable.”

Again, Adam was stunned. Suddenly, he saw Doctor Karen Morse not as a design engineer, not as a cold impersonal professional, but as a woman. A very attractive woman. Something he had not seen in *Agenda’s* engine room.

“I’d like that very much.” he replied.

She rose from the couch. “Well, I’d better let you get back to work then.”

Adam rose to see her to the door, then gently stopped her. “You said the prototype warp drive was a success.”

“That’s right.” Karen replied.

“Then the new drive will go into starships?”

“Starfleet Command is awaiting my final reports and will review, but it is my understanding they are leaning in that direction.”

“Do you know which ship will get the first drive?”

Karen held her unrestrained arm out to her side. “From what I hear, the one we’re standing in right now.”

Adam smiled.

Karen returned the smile and departed.

Adam watched her leave and the door automatically closed behind her. He was still stunned by her visit, but felt so much better. He re-seated himself at the computer console and resumed dictating his reports. The words flowed like water.

Chapter Forty

He examined the sphere closely. It was round, of course, but too perfectly round. It was also white. Brilliantly white in the light of the nearby sun. Its surface was cratered as though struck by hundreds of tiny meteors. But the craters were precisely arranged and in repetitive patterns. The sphere rotated slowly.

On the surface, among the tiny craters, he observed the Federation logo. As the sphere continued to rotate in his hand, the word "Titleist" came into view.

"So, this is a golf ball." Adam thought to himself. Then the sound of an impact diverted his attention away from the tiny sphere.

"Nice shot, Admiral."

Admiral Benning held his follow-through as he watched his drive bisect the fairway. Overhead, a flock of T'tatale birds soared, riding the thermal updrafts. Their blue and violet plumage shone brilliantly in the midday sun. Life had returned to a more relaxed state, and it was a truly gorgeous day on Starbase Thirty-one.

"Thank you, Commander. I was afraid I'd lost my swing in the last few weeks." Benning handed Adam a driver. "Would you care to give it a try?"

Adam accepted the club. He teed the golf ball, gripped the club and addressed the ball. He started his backswing slowly and smoothly, and sharply swung down and through the ball. The golf ball immediately took flight, and almost as immediately took a sharp right turn and disappeared out of bounds and into the trees.

“Sorry, Admiral, I think I lost your ball.”

“That’s quite a slice.” quipped the Admiral.

“So it would seem. I’ve never played before. Really didn’t have the time, and the facilities on a starship, or on Omega IV really weren’t conducive to golf.”

“A pity. It’s a challenging game, to be sure, but relaxing at the same time. I find I do some of my best thinking out here.”

Adam took in the natural beauty around him. “I can understand that.”

Captain Kirk was next up to the tee. “I’m afraid my game will be a bit rusty too, Admiral.” With that, Kirk delivered a drive just to the left of the Admiral’s, besting his distance by approximately fifteen meters.

“I had heard you were a sandbagger, Captain.” the Admiral kidded. “I’m glad I left my wallet in my quarters.”

Kirk smiled. “I get lucky once in a while.”

“Did you know, gentlemen that Starfleet Imaging Engineers are working with advanced holograms? Someday, they say, you will be able to play an entire eighteen hole round of holographic golf on a starship! And, in a room no larger than a small gymnasium. Perhaps very soon.”

“Incredible.” replied Adam.

Benning sighed. “As real as it might seem, I can’t believe it could be as good as this.”

“Aye. That would be hard to image.” added Commander Scott as he teed up his ball. With only minimal address and preparation, Scotty ripped a drive that started low and began to climb slowly, beating all other drives by no less than thirty meters.

“Commander, you’ve brought you’re “A” game, I see. I didn’t know you were a player!” declared Benning.

“I was born in Scotland, ya’ know, Admiral. I was raised with a golf club in one hand and a wrench in the other.”

Everyone laughed. Adam couldn’t help but appreciate the comradery of being on the golf course with good people, especially with the tension of the Neutral Zone matter behind them.

The Admiral took a quick look around as they walked to their golf balls. “Captain Kirk, did I neglect to invite Commander Spock?”

“No, Admiral. You did not neglect. Spock sends his regards and appreciates the invitation. However, he felt his time was best served preparing the *Enterprise* for departure tomorrow. Besides, isn’t a five some a violation of golf etiquette?”

Benning smiled. “That’s a very dedicated first officer you have, Captain. I wanted to thank him for his diplomacy with the Klingons. If he ever decides to leave Starfleet, he may have a bright future with the Federation State Department. And with regards to etiquette, when you’re an Admiral, no one ever challenges you on that.”

“I couldn’t have a better first officer, Admiral.” Kirk added. Then, remembering Adam was in the foursome, quickly added, “With all due respect to you, Commander. You did fine work on the *Agenda*.”

“I reviewed all your reports, as well as those from Doctor Morse and your bridge crew. You all did a damn fine job out there. The Federation owes you a debt of gratitude.” Benning offered.

“Thank you, sir. But *Agenda* was lost.” added Kirk.

Benning was silent as he selected his three wood. He addressed the shot and smoothly stroked the ball. Adam watched as the little white sphere took off over the horizon on a path toward the green.

“True, Captain, the ship was lost. However, Doctor Morse detailed in her report the problems with the under-spec’d regulator. Also, the ship really wasn’t designed to endure all the punishment it took in your battle with the Klingons. Considering the circumstances, only top-notch command ability and ingenuity was going to salvage the situation.” Benning paused as he studied his officers. “To that end, I think I selected the right team.”

“Admiral,” spoke Adam, “you said you reviewed all the reports and depositions?”

“That’s right.”

“Will there be a Board of Inquiry over the loss of the ship?”

Benning turned, placed his hand on Adam’s shoulder and smiled. “My boy, we just had it.”

Adam smiled, and the four officers continued on their way. “Thank you, sir.”

“You know, Commander, if you like it here, rumor has it there is an opening for a commanding officer on this starbase. I think you could fill it very nicely.”

Adam considered this for a moment. The arrest of Captain Harwood on charges of treason and conspiracy with the Klingons had left the vacancy to which the Admiral referred. “A very generous offer, sir. Let me think about it.”

“Certainly, son.” Benning responded.

“How is the joint task force on Dorian progressing?” inquired Adam.

“Quite well, I’m happy to report. The Klingons have been very cooperative, and that little friend of yours, Larbeth, has been quite the advocate for ongoing cultural and trade relations with the Federation. Apparently you made an impression on her.”

“That’s good news. And what about the resumption of peace talks with the Klingons?” asked Kirk.

The Admiral’s expression became more sullen. “Captain Harwood and his co-conspirators did a lot of damage to the trust between the Federation and the Empire. I’m afraid it will take years to build that trust back up. But we’ll keep working at it.”

Since the Admiral had opened the door on the subject of Captain Harwood, Kirk decided to press on further. “If I may ask, Admiral, how is the case developing against Captain Harwood?”

Benning was forthcoming. “The evidence you obtained from Commander Kahl was just the beginning. All the computers from Harwood’s offices and staff were confiscated and thoroughly examined. There is massive evidence pointing directly to the captain and his aid, Lieutenant Wilson, who is still missing and presumed to have died aboard one of the Klingon vessels in the Neutral Zone. A conviction is a foregone conclusion, even without a confession.”

“What was his motivation?” asked Adam.

Again, Benning held nothing back, demonstrating the trust he has in his officers. “Harwood was relieved of his starship command seven years ago. He was too aggressive in his interactions with alien species, especially the Klingons. He justified his aggressions by claiming that the Klingons were testing the Federation in preparation for war, and he was trying to

demonstrate our might and resolve. It seems his part in this conspiracy was an attempt to prove he was right, in order to get a ship again. As far as Lt. Wilson is concerned, well it just seems he bought too deeply into Harwood's beliefs."

Benning surveyed each of the officers to see what impact his comments had made. All showed sufficient concern. And so he took the opportunity to turn the discussion into a teaching opportunity.

"There is a lesson to be learned here for all of us, but especially for the young, upcoming officers like Commander Russell here. It takes a combination of patience, temperance and toughness to command a starship. Am I right, Captain Kirk?"

"Quite, Admiral. Those are qualities I try to work on every day." replied Kirk.

"Remember this, Commander." Benning ordered Adam.

"I will, sir. Believe me."

Benning nodded. "So, Commander Scott, I read your report, but please give me your opinion of the new warp engine design. Be candid."

Scotty didn't think long before responding. "It's a neat, compact and efficient design. With the right support systems and hardware, I think it could be the design for the future."

"So, would you be in favor of installing a larger version in the *Enterprise* when she is due for refit?" probed Benning.

Scotty grinned. "I canna' wait to get my hands on it!"

Benning smiled. "Splendid, because you will be responsible for overseeing the refit, Commander."

Then turning to Kirk, “You know, Captain this will be a major refit for the *Enterprise*? She’ll be in space dock for the better part of a year and a half.”

Kirk grimaced. “So, I’ve been told, Admiral. But that’s still more than a year away. There’s plenty of time yet to explore.”

Then addressing Adam, “And what about you, Commander? It’s been, what, a week since you’ve returned from Dorian after helping to set up the task force? Are you ready to get back to work?”

“Yes, sir. I am. And I appreciate the various options you’ve given me, including command of the starbase. But as nice as that sounds, I’d really like a shipboard assignment, and first officer of the *Carl Sagan* sounds like the right opportunity for me at this time.”

“An excellent choice, son. And in anticipation of your choice, I took the liberty of having your files forwarded to Captain Romero. He’s looking forward to meeting you. And if Captain Kirk would be kind enough to give you a ride, you can link up with the starship *Hood* in six days. Then the *Hood* can take you to Earth.”

“The *Enterprise* would be delighted to entertain the Commander for a week. You may be interested to know that Lieutenant Ferr has been assigned as Chief Tactical Officer. Under Mr. Spock’s direction, he will refine his sensor protocols to detect cloaked vessels at longer distances and with greater clarity. Also, rumor has it we will have a certain civilian warp drive design engineer on board for a while as she gathers specs for the new drive system.”

Adam was momentarily flustered at this revelation, and the fact that his relationship with Karen Morse

was not as private as he thought. But he recovered quickly and asked, “Admiral, why am I going to Earth?”

“To spend a week with your family before heading off to deep space on the *Sagan*. That’s an order, Commander.” Benning smiled.

“Yes, sir.” Adam beamed. “I’m looking forward to it.”