

Star Trek Exploration  
The Adventures of the USS Explorer

The Arrival

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The Star Trek Exploration, The Adventures of the USS Explorer, The Gathering  
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The Star Trek Exploration, The Adventures of the USS Explorer, The Journey  
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Created in the United States of America.

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# Introduction

The changes in the United Federation of Planets since the Dominion War, over the last ten years, may not seem very great to the normal Federation citizen; however, to the informed members of the Federation, especially those in Starfleet, there have been many.

The new President of the Federation Council, who came to the position just before the assassination of the Romulan Star Empire High Council, would heartily agree with them.

With the help of the Romulan Commander Donatra and Captain Picard, the Federation has avoided the destruction of Earth at the hands of the Romulan Praetor Shinzon.

Thought of as a traitor for helping Captain Picard, Commander Donatra was removed from command of her warbird and made commander of the Romulan Empire Diplomatic Liaison garrison on Earth. The council thought this was a good way to be rid of a perceived troublemaker.

However, as most of these things go, she excelled in the position and made a name for herself in the Romulan High Council as well as in the Federation council. She assisted and advised the Romulan Ambassador to the Federation Council and was instrumental in arranging the exchange program between Starfleet and the Romulan Fleet. Many officers on both sides were serving on each other's vessels; however, there is still tension and deep distrust between the members of both fleets.

During the recent visit by the new Praetor to the Federation Council, the Praetor had two private meetings. One with the Federation President, which was expected and one with Commander Donatra, which was very unexpected.

The exchange program with the Klingons has continued to this day. It had gotten to the point where, in some cases, it was difficult to identify the flag of a ship with its crew complement. Starfleet technicians replaced warriors on many Klingon war ships and released many Klingons to other duties, such as security. Starfleet Commander Worf had shown Starfleet the value of having Klingon Security officers.

Following the Dominion War, many of the border worlds of the Klingon Empire began seeking entrance into the Federation, especially those left to fend for themselves during the war. They had been supported by the Federation during the war. The forthcoming induction of the first of these worlds into the Federation was a very heated topic in the Empire and on the planet. Many Klingon warriors saw this as the beginning of the fall of the Klingon Empire. Thus, on the planets themselves, riots have broken out against the Planetary Governors.

However, the Federation and Klingon Empire continued to work toward full diplomatic relations through the soon to be completed Klingon-Federation Accords.

Project Icarus is underway. The President is facing challenges in the Federation Council. The completion of the USS Explorer in route and the gathering of the right officers—in her estimation—was the key to success of the project. Trying something new in expanding the exploration of the Alpha Quadrant was not popular.

The acceptance of the first Klingon Empire world into the federation under the new Federation-Klingon accord will be followed closely by three more worlds seeking Federation membership.

The President could only ride the wave of time and look toward the future with the hope that sins of the past aren't visited on her future. She is convinced her future is in the tunnel with the USS Explorer.

**Update:**

Following the escape from the nebula, the creatures eating the energy and the skin of the vessels, the USS Tunnel arrived and repair of the fleet ships began.

Following the repair of the USS Explorer fleet, the fleet is again on the way to the target sector.

Their arrival is imminent, and they are looking forward to exploring the new, to them, sector. They are very cognizant of the previous 2 missions by Captains Pike, Kirk and Picard and hope not to get into the trouble of many of the previous Captains' exploits.

# Chapter 1

It had been a short rest after the engineers finally got the bugs off our back, but Sub-Captain Randal McLorn was used to short rests. With Operations being one of the smallest and easiest departments to manage, the boredom associated with the position took a lot out of a person. This was one of the reasons, the main one; Captain Beck had used to assign the executive officer's duties to the Sub-Captain of Operations.

Even with all his responsibilities, he had managed to get 4 hours of blissful sleep before the computer rudely awakened him. He was sore from sleeping in the Captains' chair, but a few moments of stretching would take care of the kinks.

He was almost overjoyed when the communications panel lit up and he heard, "*—Explorer, this is the USS Tunnel, can you hear us. USS Explorer, this is the Tunnel, can you hear us.*"

"Captain to the bridge," Randy called to this combadge after touching it. He did not hear an acknowledgement, nor did he listen for one. The captain had a bad habit of responding before acknowledging the call.

Randy touched the Communications Panel and said, "*USS Tunnel, this is the Explorer, Sub-Captain McLorn. We are really glad to hear from you!*"

Captain Beck came down the ramp in a bathrobe at a very quick pace dripping water as he came onto the command deck. Randy was not surprised by the captains' appearance, but rather amused. It was unlike him to not be a prim and proper gentleman. Beck motioned Randy to remain seated.

*"Explorer, we have the supplies you requested and a bit more. If you pass your coordinates, we will drop the stuff and head home."*

Randy did not recognize the voice on the *Tunnel* and assumed it was a crewman conscripted into the role of communications officer. He narrowed the view of the communications link so the captains' attire would not show on their screen.

The captain stayed to the side of the chair as he said, "This is Captain Beck. We are headed at warp eight to the closest planetary system. I wanted to get far away from the cloudy nebula as quickly as possible. Sorry to make your trip longer..."

"*Did you say warp eight?*" said a new voice. They both recognized it from all the meetings and arguments they had had over the time it took to design and build the *USS Explorer*.

“Yes, Allen. I said warp *eight!*” confirmed the captain. “And before you ask, we are using the *Galileo*’s warp drive to move the docked fleet. Something their Chief Engineer came up with.”

Chief Engineer Allen Asley entered the view screen area and said, “*Bravo! That’s something I never thought of. Give him my complements and if we have time, I would like to meet him. We do, however, have some upgrades for your warp drive to get you up to warp five-point-two. Anyway, your time is our time, Captain. I have a crew of construction engineers ready to put you back together.*”

“Glad to hear that Allen, we can use the help. Do you have the list of supplies you brought?” Alexander asked.

He turned to the side for a moment and when he turned back, he said, “*I am informed we will rendezvous in 21.7512 hours. Leave it to a Vulcan navigator to be so precise. And yes, the list is being transmitted now.*”

“We should arrive at the system ahead in approximately five hours. Should give the crew time to get a real good rest and then go over the list of supplies you brought, before getting to work.”

“*Standby, Captain,*” Asley stated as he turned to talk to someone outside of the visual range of the screen.

“List of supplies received sir,” Randy said as he forwarded the list to the engineering section, the chief engineers of each shift and Sub-Captain Cunningham.

He turned back to the captain and said, “*I am told that the 21.7507 hours is at maximum warp for this ship. We will tunnel over and met you there.*”

“Have a great trip, we will join you shortly, Captain Asley,” Randy said smiling.

“*We will be waiting. See you then. Captain out.*”

The screen floating before them faded out quickly.

“Randy, inform the rest of the sections the,” the captain hesitated for a moment, “*Tunnel* has arrived and will be waiting for us. Let John know I will want a system review briefing 10 minutes after the docking to see the repair plan,” Beck ordered before turning and departing up the ramp. Randy was sure the captain had almost said the word rescue but caught himself in time.

Acknowledging this as a rescue mission would not go over well for the Captain in the Captain’s mess back at Starfleet—no matter how long this trip took!

“Aye sir.” Randy said as he turned his attention back to the console on the arm of the chair. He rose, walked down the ramp to the lower deck, sat down at his console and began making notifications, the ships first.

“*Galileo*, Captain David, this is Randy sir,” he said. He knew he would not get the other four hours rest any time soon.

“Sub-Captain McLorn, what can the crew of the *Galileo* do for you today?” asked Commander Fossey as Randy’s image appeared on the main view screen.

“*Is your Captain about?*”

“No sir. Got him all bedded down for the night!” The first officer joked.

“*Well then. Please pass a message to him. The sled has arrived and will be waiting for us at the system ahead. You might also ask him if he has a little more push in his engines.*”

“I will take care of the first part when the captain comes back to the bridge and I can take care of the second part, standby sir.”

Jeffery turned to the Ensign at the engineer station and asked, “J’al, is there anything left in the engines, or do you get out and push?”

A startled J’al looked at the console readouts and energy levels. She hesitated—the image of her pushing the ship entered her mind and distracted her. Her first shift on the bridge and she had to make a decision. Well, time to do the job. She looked the Commander directly and said, “We should be able to get up to warp eight-point-five if we push the engines a bit, sir.”

“No pushing Ensign. The captain gave me the ship in good repair, I intend to return it in the same condition,” Jeff said. He turned to the helm and said, “Take us to warp eight-point-four, helmsman.”

“Aye sir,” was the helmsman response.

Jeff turned this attention back to the main view screen and said, “Will warp eight-point-four do it for you Sub-Captain?”

“*More than I expected.*” Randy said as he nodded. He stopped for a moment of thought and then asked, “*By the way, did you get the supply list?*”

“Aye sir, we did,” Jeff acknowledged.

“*Thank you, Mister Fossey. McLorn out.*”

• • •

He notified the other two ships and then turned his attention to the helmsman, “Helm, have you computed our new ETA?”

“Yes sir. Four hours and twenty-three minutes to the coordinates provided by the *Tunnel* sir,” the helmsman responded.

“*Coordinates?*” He thought. Then he remembered that the ships are auto linked and pass telemetry, as well as almost every other bit of information, to each other. Another of the Borg innovations. This ensured data on one ship was not lost if it was damaged or destroyed if another ship was within link distance. The ships would be talking even if the people in them were not.

“We are receiving telemetry from the *USS Tunnel?*”

“Yes sir. We have her position, status and configuration,” the helmsman said.



“Configuration? It’s a sled for Pete’s sake!” Randy stated.

“Not anymore sir. The configuration is ... changing.”

“What do you mean, not anymore? Changing?” He said, this was getting too bazaar. “Are we within sensor range?” The Sub-Captain asked. As the helmsman nodded to the affirmative, McLorn turned to look at the operations officer on duty.

“Ops, put the bloody thing on the screen.”

The Ensigns’ fingers dance over the panel quickly, deftly. Randy was amazed at the youthful officers of the present day—he was sure he was never that young! As the main view screen materialized and cleared Randy looked up to it.

“My word,” was his only comment as he stood transfixed by the scene before him. The other crewmembers stared with him but remained silent.

• • •

The captain was sitting in his command chair on the command level of the bridge, properly dressed and with his normal air of a prim and proper gentleman, as they entered the final ten minutes of the voyage. He concentrated on the view before him.

The Admiral sat beside him at her fleet console. She touched the communications panel and ordered, “fleet standby for maneuvering.” She set up her display for a tactical view since this was what she was most comfortable with.

Alexander heard the three Captains in the background acknowledge her command. He said, “Acknowledged Admiral.” He turned slightly to the left and called down to Randy, “Standby for maneuvering, Randy.” He turned back to the front. The Tunnel was a distance bright beacon in the field of stars.

“Main view screen, orientation aft,” the captain called out. The main view screen materialized before the command deck displaying a view of the aft section of the ship from behind the ship. The *Voyager* and *Pioneer* sat in their cradles with their maneuvering lights running. As he watched the same lights on the *Galileo* began to wink on and off. It reminded him of the small tree he allowed himself at Christmas time.

“It’s your show Randy, you have the conn. Dock this lady gently,” the captain called down to his First Officer.

“Galileo reports they are bringing us out warp now sir,” the helmsman said.

The stars slowed and came almost to a stop as the fleet dropped from warp. The *Explorer* continued forward on one-half-impulse power.

“Galileo, thanks for the ride. We have it now,” said the helmsman.

“Slowly helmsman. Remember we have to undock the fleet before docking with the *Tunnel*.” Randy said. He watched as the helmsman slowed the ship to one-quarter-impulse. Then slowly down to one-tenth-impulse. “Sub-Captain, we are at docking speed,” the Helmsman reported.

The Admiral touched a control on her console and said, “Fleet prepare to undock.” The split-screen over her showed the *USS Tunnel* ahead on the left side and the *USS Explorer* from behind on the right side.

Randy touched a control and reconfigured his console for the undocking maneuvers. His screen now showed diagrams of engineering hull of the *Explorer* from above and below displaying the docking clamps in green.

“Release the docking clamps...now,” The admiral ordered.

Randy touched the three release controls all at once. He monitored the latches as they began to retract into the hull. The clamps turned red on the screen as the locks released. They began to fade in color as they retracted. Finally, they all turned white, showing the clamps full retracted. The image changed to the exterior view from behind the saucer as the ships moved slowly away from the *Explorer*’s hull and came to a stop five meters above the damaged hull plating.

Randy could just make out the screen above the Helm and the old fashion gunners’ sight in the center. Mikhail had a liking for the archaic and nostalgic. Having a gun sight off a WWI Fokker Dr.1 - popularized by the Red Baron - made him unique in Starfleet. The only helmsman to navigate in close quarters with a gun sight! “Helm, increase speed to one-quarter-impulse until the ships are clear,” the Sub-Captain ordered.

As the helmsman acknowledged and increase their speed, McLorn looked back to the main view screen, still pointed from behind the ship. The three ships began moving astern. As the *Voyager* and *Pioneer* cleared the tunnel generator ring the ships moved laterally away from the *Explorer* to dock slightly above the *Explorer* and to the sides of the *USS Tunnel*. *Explorer* was headed to a position directly below the *USS Tunnel*. When they were clear of the generator ring, the *Galileo* rose between the two Intrepid class ships so it could dock on top of the *Tunnel*.

As the fleet took up the formation that would allow them to dock, he watched the ballet around him. The *Explorer* slowed back to one-tenth-impulse and the other ships continued to come along side. Randy shut down the display above his console and rose to step to the front of the lower deck. He turned and watched the other vessels catch up to and come even with the *Explorer*.

“Ops, drop the Main screen,” Randy ordered.

The main screen dissolved before him and left only the rear view of the *Tunnel*, a bright light, blocking out the stars ahead.

“By all the warriors in Stoval Core,” Worf exclaimed as the main view screen dissolved to show the ship ahead of the fleet. He had entered the bridge on the catwalk, walked down the ramp and was to the command deck when the screen dissolved, revealing the *USS Tunnel*.

The ship ahead of the *Explorer*, if you could call it a ship, looked more like a group of mutilated spiders. Worf had a hard time making out any of the detail from this distance, but he could see the tunnel generator ring in the back of the ship they were now facing.

The engineering or main hull was flattened more than most of the Starfleet vessels he had ever seen. The main hull seemed to project forward past the point where a normal vessel would have the saucer section attached. He noticed there were no docking latches for a saucer. The *Tunnel* reminded him of a long thin pancake with a ring attached to the backend.

As they came closer to the *Tunnel*, he discerned the spider arms unfolded over the length and breadth of the vessel were actually gantries and work lights.

He saw the large stack of hull plating and other stores mounted on the back of the main hull. He had initially thought the supplies were a small city or part of the super structure of the ship. As they slowly moved closer, he continued to discover more and more detail, to become more amazed by the sight before him.

A movement caught Worf’s attention. It was the *Galileo* catching up even with the rest of the fleet. He watched as the smallest of the fleet ships came over the top of the bridge and pulled even with the rest of the fleet. It was still an impressive sight seeing the vessel gliding overhead and so close he could almost touch it. The other two ships on each side, all three providing escort for their lady.

He was still amazed at this bridge. The illusion was almost to the point of vertigo. Worf had hated his zero-gravity training, and this brought back those feeling all over again. He had to fight the illusion every second as well as the nausea, vertigo and all the rest of the feelings of being weightless in space. He held on to the command deck railing for stability as well as to keep his stomach under control. He did not want to make a spectacle of himself. Klingons did not get space sick!

He switched his attention back to the scene ahead and found the fleet only a few kilometers from the *Tunnel*. Worf could now see that it had only three decks, but it was the size of a flattened Galaxy class vessel, so those decks were quite large. He guesstimated that the ship would hold about one hundred and thirty people comfortably or about three hundred in cramped quarters. For a test ship, she was very impressive.

The gantries slowly opened to receive the ships. As the fleet moved within a kilometer of the repair ship the gantries came to a stop. It now resembled a super space dock with places for each ship to dock.

“One thousand meters,” the Helm officer, Lieutenant Giffinson said.

“Steady Helm,” Randy said, “you don’t want to scratch what is left of the captain’s shiny new ship do you?” He smiled as he watched the docking procedure continue before him.

He was still feeling the awe of the first sight of the Tunnel as it uncoiled like a spider awakening. The sight of the gantries unfolding to receive the four ships now docking within these gantries was still with him. He stood at the front of the lower deck with the floor set to be transparent so as to have a view all around the ship.

He still wondered how he had done this in the past with only a small view screen before him. With only sensors to tell him how close they were to the space dock. He still remembered the first time he had piloted the *USS Lexington* out of Starbase One above Earth. He had been scared beyond even his imagination. The huge ship. The small doors. The rampant perspiration. The anxiety! All that and much more. He had thought the captain was being kind to let him get the experience, but later he found out the captain was more nervous than he was!

“Computer, show me the factors,” he called out. Instantly faint lines shot out from him to each object before the ship and the distances were shown just above the lines. A green line was drawn to his feet. He knew the green line represented the glide path for docking the large ship. It would turn red if the ship strayed from the glide path.

He had managed not to scratch the paint, as the captain of the *USS Lexington* had called getting too close to obstacles, then and thereafter. Now it was his turn to be nervous!

“Five hundred meters,” Giffinson said, concentrating on the task at hand. Watching the instruments since his view was blocked by the Sub-Captain before him.

“Good, Lieutenant, very good. Just keep her moving slowly, switch to forward thrusters and start killing the inertia.” Randy directed. He knew this was the first time for Lieutenant Griffinson, so he really wanted to hold back. However, this was the biggest ship in Starfleet heading into a small space dock and he really did not know the young officer’s abilities yet.

He considered this a failure on his part not to know the officers who worked for him. He should know his personnel by now, however Mikhail was new to the ship and with the push to get ready to leave, a records review was overcome by events. While they were in space dock, he would have to take care of this deficiency.

He suddenly realized the helmsman could not see through him and moved off the left side of the lower deck. "Computer, hide the factors," he ordered and then returned to his console.

"Two hundred meters," the Helm officer reported. "Computer, show me the factors." Mikhail requested. The lines and distances appeared. He made a few minor corrections and relaxed somewhat at the results. He was right on the center line and the exact elevation above the plain to the space dock the *Explorer* would occupy.

"Very good, Mister Griffinson," Randy said.

"One hundred meters," Mikhail said.

Randy touched the communications button on his console and requested, "*USS Tunnel*, permission to dock."

• • •

Captain Asley checked the glide path of all four ships. The *Galileo* was a little high but was correcting this as he watched. He made the decision to allow docking.

"Fleet, you are cleared to dock," Allen said. Seeing the fleet coming at the *Tunnel* was very impressive. Four ships in a close diamond formation really highlighted the power and capabilities his team had put in one basket. He felt the pride of fatherhood at the sight of his 'children' performing so well.

He checked the docking alignment grid on the screen to his right to verify the ships were ready to dock. The grid showed *Pioneer* had drifted a meter off the beam, but this drift was being corrected.

"Fifty meters," called his Helmsman. He continued shortly, "twenty-five meters."

Captain Asley, looked down at the command panel and touched the open channel and said, "Fleet, you're at the outer threshold and have a go for dock entry."

As he listened to the acknowledgements, he was suddenly stunned by the fact that this was historic. Never in the history of Starfleet had four ships dock simultaneously with another ship, Starbase or dry dock. He opened a connection to the computer, "Computer, record the docking," he directed.

"Recording..." The computer reported flatly. He was not upset by the fact the computer had no personality. Most of the *Tunnel* was like that, enough to prove a concept and none of the fringes.

"Docking fifty percent complete," reported his helmsman.

Allen continued to watch the main view screen as well as the individual screen around the bridge, which showed different aspects of the docking maneuvers.

He looked closely at the *Explorer* as it slowly moved under the *Tunnel* and Allen was startled to actually see the damage previously reported. He knew many of the hull plates had been removed to get a start on repairs, but still, the amount of damage was more extensive than he had first imagined. “*The thing looks like Swiss cheese*”, he thought. He looked quickly at the other screens showing the other three ships and found the same amount of damage. He continued his thought, “*a fleet of Swiss cheese.*”

Allen tapped his combadge and asked for Randal McLorn. “Randy, what did you do to our toy?” Captain Asley joked with him as the *USS Explorer* slowly moved to a halt just below the sled. Allen continued, “I can guarantee you this is *not* in the same condition you got it in!”

“*Not my fault,*” Randy said with overly hurt feeling showing, “*Slept through most of it! Take the current condition up with John.*”

“I have an assistant that will do just that. Permission to beam aboard.”

“*Permission granted,*” Randal McLorn said, “*McLorn out.*”

“Docking completed,” the Helmsman called out.

“Lock the ships to the dock,” Allen ordered, “Fleet, you may shut down and begin retrofit operations.” He closed the fleet communications connection.

Captain Asley rose stating, “Helmsman you have the conn.” He tapped his combadge and said, “transporter room, one to beam to the *Explorer.*”

Allen, called out to the beam curtain, “Command deck,” as soon as the transporter released him in the vestibule. His assistant beamed in at the same time. He saw the dock portal was almost connected out of the corner of his eye as he turned to face his assistant.

• • •

Randy acknowledged the completion of docking and looked up at the captain, stating, “docking completed Captain.”

“Very good, Mister McLorn,” the captain replied, “my compliments to your staff.” He was impressed with the docking. This ship made it seem easy, but there was still a bit of skill necessary.

“Thank you, Captain,” Randy said as he moved over to pat the helmsman on the back with a “Good job, Mikhail.”

The captain opened a channel to John Cunningham, “John, we are docked. You can fix the ship now. Keep me informed of the repairs. Beck out.”

• • •

Allen Asley’s chief assistant said, “I will be in engineering, sir.” Her boss nodded and then walked through the curtain. She said, “Computer, location of John Cunningham.”

“John Cunningham is in the engineering control area,” the computer replied.

“Engineering control area,” she called out as she walked to beam curtain that had claimed her boss. The portal opened and she walked through, leaving another member of the boarding party beaming into the vestibule.

She continued past life sciences to the engineering control area, walking up behind John and said, “What did you do to my ship?”

John did not react immediately since he had seen her reflection in the console and had known she would be the first one on the ship when it docked. He straightened up and turned to face her.

“Seven, you look gorgeous when you’re upset!” John said.

Seven of Nine regarded him with a stern, ‘I want to beat you’, look. Slowly she said, “Then I must be more beautiful than anything you have ever seen.”

John burst out laughing, Seven joined in only after seeing his reaction and realizing how funny her statement was.

When he had just about recovered his composure, John said, “It is good to see you Seven.”

“And you John. You must have had a time of it over the last two days.”

“That is not the half of it. But, let me show you the schedule I have worked out before the captains’ update briefing in a few minutes.”

“Good, then I can throw the preverbal monkey-wrench into it.”

John was not laughing this time, “That is not very funny, Seven.”

She looked at him sternly as she said, “It wasn’t meant to be, John. We have one hundred and nine of the construction workers that built the hull and superstructure of this ship aboard the *Tunnel*. Actually, they are probably on the hull of *Explorer* and the other ships by now. We have delayed the construction of the *Endeavor* by two weeks coming out here already. We would like to be headed back to Charon as soon as possible. Bottom-line, John, we will do your hull and you can spread your engineers out over the rest of the fleet.”

“Right now, Seven, that works for us. We are working on the repairs to the tunnel generator and don’t have many engineers left to fix the hull and help with the other ships.” John paused for a moment to switch subjects, “We had better get to the conference room and update my briefing.” John turned to head to the conference room by way of the bridge.

• • •

The third member of the boarding party followed the example of the other two and requested the Ambassador’s quarters. The docking port collar finished attaching to the ship with an audible bang and the port began to cycle open. When the curtain opened, she stepped through ignoring the rush of personnel entering the *Explorer* behind her. She was not surprised to step through the

portal into the Ambassador's Outer office. She walked to the desk console, scanned the controls for a moment and inserted a data crystal into the computer terminal. She stated, "Computer, verify orders."

The computer acknowledged, "Orders verified, instructions complied with. System privileges set and your authorities logged."

She removed the data crystal and placed it back in her uniform pocket. She sat down to wait. She shifted her weight finding the seat overly comfortable. She thought, "Typical Starfleet! This seat is too soft..."



## Chapter 2

“Captain, permission to come aboard,” Asley said as he arrived on the bridge.

“Permission granted, Captain,” Alexander said shaking hands with Allen. “Have you met Ambassador Worf and Admiral Donatra?”

“Ambassador Worf, I have heard of your exploits.” Asley said as he shook hands soundly. Worf was surprised at his strong grip at first, then realized this man had probably been bending wrenches for most of his life.

Turning to Ael he gave her a Romulan salute and said, “Admiral Donatra. We met at the Federation Banquet of Welcome for the Romulan Mission to Earth, but... you were not an Admiral then. Nice to see you again.”

The Admiral returned the salute, nodding and said, “Thank you Captain. This ship of your design is a marvel of engineering. My compliments to the Chef.”

He nodded gracefully and turning back to Alexander. He said, “My assistant is in engineering, probably making life a purer, living hell for your Sub-Captain.”

“No more than I have! Since this started, I have relied on him to get the ship out of trouble and now, to get it fixed. Come up to the conference room and we can go over the current status of the fleet. I have a Captain’s Review briefing scheduled in,” he glanced at the chair arm, “five minutes.”

They turned as a group and walked up the ramp to the catwalk. Alexander noticed that Ops was at minimum manning now that they were docked. He did not see Randy, but guessed he was in the engineering control area being gnawed on by Seven!

They entered the conference room and sat at the table. The captain called up the ship diagram and they began discussing the repairs. The captain was pleased to learn that the *Tunnel* had over a hundred construction workers aboard. He had been concerned that John’s staff would be over tasked with the tunnel generator repairs and the hull reconstruction.

This news would definitely help John get the ship repaired quickly and put him back in the hot seat if the Tunnel generator was not repaired by the same time the ship hull was finished.

Alexander secretly smiled at the thought that this would be *his* problem if the ships’ organization were not so diversified. Being the Sub-Captain, John was now in the hot seat and Alexander was sure it would actually be the three Chiefs that he would hang out to dry. Everything rolled down hill.

Allen plugged a data crystal into the table console and called up the display that his engineers had put together on the timeline to repair the *Explorer*. They all studied the display.

Ael asked, "Can any of the *Explorer* crew be of help."

"Of course, Captain the more the merrier!" Allen replied.

Captain Beck took the lead from the Admiral and got a stern look in response, "We have limited crewmembers available, but will provide what we can," he said.

Ael, "I have a few resources that can also assist you." To which Captain Beck gave a questioning look.

• • •

As they walked to the Lower command deck and around to the ramp, Seven noticed that only one officer was manning bridge. She also noticed it was not the Sub-Captain for Operations. She would have to speak to him later. They walked up the ramp past the empty command deck and continued to the catwalk.

John led the way to the conference room door. The door cycled open, and they entered the room. They found the command staff meeting already in progress. John turned to leave, but Alexander beckoned them over to join in the conversation.

John and Seven took seats across the table from the Ambassador and Admiral. John said, "Ambassador Worf, this is Seven of Nine."

"Very unusual name," he said. Then he remembered reading a report on the return of the *Voyager* and the unassimilated Borg they brought back. "Oh, you are *that* Seven of Nine! Pleased to meet you, Seven."

"I have heard about a lot about you," Ael said, "while I was on Earth. You are one of the designers of this vessel are you not?"

"I was part of the team. The Borg knowledge did come in handy while we were designing this ship."

"Seven is too modest, Admiral. The Tunnel Generator was designed by Commander Barclay and Seven. They designed many systems on the ship," Allen said with the pride of a father.

They all sat back down, and the captain showed John the display of the repair schedule.

John studied the schedule before he said, "Captain, with the Charon team repairing the *Explorer*, and my third team split onto the other ships, we should be ready for departure by the time the generator is repaired."

"I make it three days from now," said Captain Beck. "Allen, I appreciate the help."

"Nothing to it Alex," Captain Asley said. Then in a very low and confidential voice, "besides, it gets the President off my back. She thinks your problem is my fault!"

Alexander Beck let the comment go and did not tell Allen that the problem was leaving before the generator and other systems were fully tested. They were both well aware of that fact!

John broke the short silence by asking, "Captain Asley, may we have Seven to help lead the repairs on the generator?"

"I don't see why not, she built the thing," Asley said. He then turned to Seven, "Seven?"

"Not a problem sir. I can monitor the upgrade of the warp drive at the same time," Seven observed.

"Captain Asley, you have your personnel on the *Explorer* repair and the fleet ships are working on their repairs with the assistance of the *Explorer* engineering crew." The Admiral stated. "I have asked the Romulan garrison commander to assign our engineers to the effort."

"The Romulan garrison?" Worf asked. This was news to him. "I would think the Romulan's assigned to the ships in this fleet would be under the command of the ships' Captain."

"Yes, you probably would Ambassador, but I do not. I must keep them free from dual loyalties. Their first and only loyalty is to Romulus."

"That will be difficult to enforce when a ship is being shot to pieces," Worf pointed out.

"Not at all. The soldiers will defend the cloaking device. This causes them to defend the ship the device is attached to. However, they must remain free to ensure the device is not scanned or tampered with. If the ship is compromised, they will destroy the device." Ael said.

"We can discuss this later." Worf said. He hated the conflict that was brewing between the Admiral and himself. A Federation Admiral would not have two loyalties! "Right now, I think the repairs are well underway." Worf concluded.

"I agree. Let's set a status update for every twelve hours and let the captain's handle the rest of the details. Your office?" The Admiral said as she rose. Worf nodded as he rose with her, and they headed to his office by way of the catwalk.

The rest of the ignored staff watched with blank, incredulous stares as they left. Then, recovering, they looked at each other. Allen, looked at Beck and said, "You run a happy ship, Captain!" Beck was not smiling as they returned to the discussion of the schedule.

• • •

She pulled out the data crystal, placed it in the data port again and transferred the entire contents to the console. She pulled up a plan of the immediate area and studied it for a few minutes.

She could make out Worf speaking in, what the plan showed was, his office. She did not want to disturb him yet. She rose and walked to the door to, what the plan showed, was the Ambassador's assistant's quarters and it opened quickly. The door closed just as the Admiral walked out of Worf's office and asked the beam curtain for her office. She noticed the door closing as the curtain cycled open. She walked through and the curtain closed, leaving the outer office empty again.

• • •

"John, please stay for a moment," Alexander Beck stated as what was left of the command staff meeting was breaking up. Allen, Seven and Randy headed to the bridge.

John sat back down in the chair he was vacating. He was not looking forward to what the captain was about to say. He envisioned a chewing out over their current difficulties with the tunnel generator and the time the repairs were taking.

When they were left alone in the room the captain's stern look faded to one of concern. He looked at John like a father to a son and said, "John you have been doing a great job as the Sub-Captain of Engineering during these difficult times and I hope you will continue to do a great job."

"Thank you, Captain." John said a little confused. Where is the captain going with this peep talk? *Ah! Peep talk*, the thought finally struck him and removed his confusion. The captain was very good at getting the people around him to work hard and smart.

"John don't lose sight of your crews. You have been working them hard with only a short rest period and stand-down. Be prepared to have a few pushed past their limits and have personal problems. I notice you have been riding Justin for damaging the tunnel generator and I thought you might want to get into the trenches with him and walk a few moments in his shoes."

"Yes sir. I have been in his shoes, captain. But I will ease off for a while and let him have time to complete the repairs."

"This is not an order, John. How you run the second biggest section on this ship is your business, unless you make it mine. We have worked together long enough for me to have complete confidence in you. I just want you to realize I am not going to ride you. I know you will do your best. Anyway, keep me advised of the problems. Now, go and take care of your teams."

Alexander rose a moment before John. They both turned to different doors and left the room by different avenues.

• • •

"How many more power managers do you have to replace?" Tommy asked.

The baby-faced Lieutenant looked up and said, “fourteen, sir.” He was covered with the grime that was synonymous with the tunnel generator. Tommy could not believe that a generator could be *this* messy in *this* day and age.

“How long have you been on duty, son?”

“Seventeen hours, sir.”

Another one! A crewmember working past the safe duty time to get the work done and the generator back online. Dedication was one thing, but it has always been his imperative that no one gets hurt. “Stand-down and take a break, Lieutenant. We don’t want anyone injured or overstressed. Finish that installation and get two meals and at least six hours rest in between them.” Tommy ordered.

Doug assigned a crewmember from his team to continue the work.

They continued moving around the inside of the generator ring replacing crewmembers. Tommy would not allow himself to take a break until all of his team did. He had run the numbers and found that they were about an hour ahead of schedule. As he and Doug finished up the replacements and updates on the repair status, Tommy finally relaxed. He turned the repairs over to Doug and went to his quarters.

After cleaning up and changing his uniform he decided to have his meal in the dome. He entered the sparsely filled room and took a table that was away from anyone else but still afforded a good view of the *USS Tunnel* suspended overhead.

Tommy was well aware that this room would be called ten-forward on any other ship, but with the bridge now in the middle of the ship, this area had afforded a chance to move the crew lounge to a nicer location.

From this room it was easy to see almost the entire ship. He could see that the hull repair was almost completed on the topside of the ship. He knew that the *Tunnel* engineers had started on the underside of the vessel from the review with Doug. Tommy also knew it was a race to get the ship underway and into sector grid ninety-one. He would hate to be the cause of the delay on what was to be a historic mission for the Federation.

He ordered a meal and a drink from the assistant and continued to go over in his mind the status of the repairs and how much he thought Doug’s Crew would get done. As the drink arrived, he came to the conclusion that the generator would be repaired before the hull, provided that nothing went wrong.

His meal was delivered, just behind his drink, and he started eating.

“Need some company?” John asked as Tommy took his first bite.

He was not surprised that someone would ask him a question just after he put food in his mouth. Murphy’s Law reined on this ship. He swallowed and said, “Not at all, pull up a chair and have a drink.”

“No thanks, I just ate, and I am headed to bed. I just wanted to get a quick update.”

“We are about one hour ahead of schedule and expect to be online when the hull repairs are finished,” Tommy said, then took another bite.

“Excellent, take the rest of the night off and I will see you in the morning.”

Tommy nodded at John as he got up and headed to the beam curtain.

Tommy continued to eat in silence. He spent the rest of the meal trying to figure out what John was up to and why he did not rib him about his breaking the generator. He finally gave up and finished his meal. He returned to his quarters for a blissful 5 hours of sleep.

• • •

“Ensign Tully, bring the warp core up to 90%,” Tommy ordered. He watched the readings silently until they showed 90%

“Bring the power managers online,” Tommy called out from the main propulsion console. It had been a rough two days replacing burned out parts on the tunnel generator. *Now the proof was in the pudding*, he thought of the very old saying his mother used.

He watched the lights wink on as the power managers began to power up.

While the tunnel generator was not part of the warp drive it still got power from the warp core. This was one of the reasons that the ship was not capable of more than warp two, well now warp five-point-one, if Seven got her tweaking right. The tunnel generator took most of the power to create and maintain the tunnel which helped limit the *Explorer* to warp two in the tunnel. The warp field interference was the other reason.

“Power managers coming up to full power, sir,” came the reply. He could not see who was calling out the status from behind the warp core, but he thought it sounded like Ensign Tully.

He saw Sub-Captain Cunningham’ reflection in the console. Tommy assumed he was there to monitor the final test. He turned to find Captain Beck was with him.

“We are about to get the generator online sir,” Tommy told them both.

“Very good Mister Avery,” Captain Beck said as his eye wandered around the room. Tommy realized that it had been a while since the captain had been in this part of the ship, let alone, this room.

“Power Managers are at full power, sir. The generator is coming online in standby mode,” Tully called.

“Good Job, Tommy,” John told him with a light slap on the back. Then he and the captain turned to leave. They were halfway to the beam curtain when John stopped and turned back to say, “aren’t you coming to the staff meeting.”

“I will be there as soon as I have the generator aligned,” Tommy said.

John turned and followed the captain through the curtain.

Tommy turned back to the console and brought up the generator alignment controls. He set the auto-align functions and executed it. As he monitored the progress on the display before him, he remembered the days, not long ago, when an engineer would have to actually align the thing by hand. He kind of missed his last ship which did not have the auto-align system. He was able to get into the guts of the systems and tweak them to operate better than they were designed too. He did miss the good old days.

The console beeped to notify him the alignment was complete. He quickly ran a diagnostic and found the generator was up and running again. He rose from the console as Seven joined him. She smiled her approval at his thumbs up. They used the beam curtain to get to the conference room.

As they entered the conference room the side conversations died.

“Sir, the tunnel generator has been restored to full operation,” Tommy stated with confidence.

A round of applause started and continued until he took the open seat next to John Cunningham.

Captain Asley silently took a piece of paper from his pocket and handed it to Captain Beck beside him. That was a greater reward than the applause was. Knowing that the ‘buck’ was back aboard was a great feeling. The buck had been going back and forth between the two to settle bets and had become a thing of pride for the senior officers of the crew as well as the construction staff. They would keep the buck as long as they continued to win the bets. He knew that this bet had been who would finish the work first and the engineering staff had won the bet.

As the buck passed, Seven took the empty seat next to Allen.

“The hull repairs have been completed to the *Explorer*, *Galileo* and *Voyager*. *Pioneer* will be complete in less than one hour,” she reported.

“Captain Asley, Seven, let me thank you for your time and assistance,” Admiral Donatra said.

Worf said, “I hope this incident does not delay your efforts on the *Endeavor* too much. The Federation needs more of these ships. I have been thinking about the Dominion Wars and what affect a fleet of these ships would have had on the outcome.”

Captain Asley replied, “We cannot speculate on the past with any accuracy; however, we do know that the improved shielding, weapons and speed would have saved many lives. That is why I want to get back and begin building on the keel of the *USS Deterrence*. Don’t worry about our time, construction continued in our absence and the schedule is well in hand. We expect the *USS*

*Endeavor* to be launched within a few months and the *USS Deterrence* within the year. You are correct, Ambassador, we do need ships of the line like this one, but not to fight. We need them to keep the peace. My vision is a fleet of Deterrence class ships guarding the exterior borders of the Federation and the Klingon and Romulan Empires. Ships so powerful they are not needed. This will bring a much-desired peace to the Alpha and Beta Quadrants. This is my vision; this is my mission.”

He rose as he said the final sentence and extended his hand to Captain Beck saying, “Thank you for your hospitality, Captain. But it’s time for me to return to my ship so we can get on with both our missions.”

Beck rose and shook his hand, “Thank you for your assistance, Captain Allen. We will try to take better care of the *Explorer* in the future,” he glanced at Sub-Captain McLorn, “won’t we Randy?”

“Yes, Sir!” Randy said with a cringe.

Allen said, “If not, it is nice to make a house call now and then. Gets us out of the office, hey Seven!”

Seven got up nodding. She and her captain left the room through the beam curtain.

“Let’s spend the rest of the hour getting ready for the continuation of our trip,” Ael said. “If there is nothing else to discuss,” she paused, “Then, this meeting is adjourned. The next command staff meeting will be one hour after we are underway.”

The Admiral rose and moved quickly to her outer office doorway.

Captain Beck was caught off guard by the rapid conclusion of the meeting. He said, “Sub-Captain’s release all the crew members you can and give them my thanks for a job well done.”

• • •

“Aulee, I want to meet with all the Centurian’s,” Ael said as she walked through the outer office.

She was still upset from her very heated meeting with Worf. He had insisted the Romulan engineers be under Federation command and under their control. She had monitored the Romulans working with their Federation counterparts and realized it was time. She knew it was time for this to occur; however, she would not be directed by Worf on a subject that was not under his purview. How the chain of command worked below her in the fleet was her business, not his. She was the senior commander; he was the senior civilian.

The Romulans in the fleet were under her direct command. She had initially thought they must remain this way to ensure they were not compromised or ordered into revealing secrets or losing control of the cloaking device technology. She realized she was wrong when she observed the soldiers



working so closely with their fellow crewmembers. She also realized her soldiers were strong willed enough to resist any compromise or illegal order.

“They are waiting for you Admiral,” Aulee said. “Also, this message arrived for you from the high command.”

She stopped long enough to retrieve the message. “Join us,” the Admiral told her as the door cycled open and she entered her office skimming the message. A smile came over her face.

The soldiers came to attention and saluted her as she entered the room.

She was almost to her desk before she noticed they were standing at attention. “Take your seats,” she said as she returned their salute and took her seat behind her desk.

“We will be continuing our journey to Alpha sector grid ninety-one shortly as you are aware. Be it known that you will be the first Romulans to enter this quadrant of space.”

The soldiers around the table nodded acknowledgement of her statement.

“We have also taken a great stride in Federation-Romulan relations, for which you,” she stopped to scan the faces, “for which all of you should be very proud. I have read nothing but good reports from the captains of the fleet ships. You have shown them my resolve to make this fleet work for the betterment of all the species of the Alpha and Beta Quadrant. We have explored parts of the Delta and Gamma Quadrants with many casualties on both sides. Now we are exploring the outer Alpha Quadrant and we are determined not to repeat the mistakes of the past. In an effort to accomplish this mission, each crew must be united and work as one.”

She paused to let what she had said sink in. Then she continued, “I am placing you directly into the chain of Federation command. If you have a problem with this, I will hear them here, not from the captains of the vessels you are assigned to.”

Commander Kirill asked, “what about the garrison?”

“You will still command the garrison; this has not changed. What is changing is I will no longer expect you to be isolated from the crews you serve with. You are to participate in the activities of the ship. Your work under the command of your respective Chief Engineers was the final fact I needed to make this decision. You pitched in and worked for the betterment of your crew, and the Empire.”

Sub-Lieutenant Mardorak said, “How did my laboring in an environmental suit server the Empire?”

“The Empire has embraced peaceful relations with the Federation. You,” she said looking at Mardorak. Her eyes now went around the table, landing on each of them as she spoke, “and the rest of you, showed you could work side-by-

side, surrounded by your Federation counter parts and together the whole could achieve success. I have been working for over a year to do what you have done in one week. I commend you all.”

Uhlan Aulee Tyanala said, “So how does this change us?”

“You will be under the garrison administratively and fall under the operational command structure of your ship. Your day-to-day work will be under the command of the Chief Engineer or whomever he places above you as your supervisor. You may be given normal engineering duties to perform. Learn them. You will be the few Romulans with training in Federation systems. You must still keep the secrets of the Empire and the cloaking device. You may also have other personnel assigned to work for you.”

“Work for and be commanded by the Earthers?” Sub-Lieutenant Arlok asked. “You are not acquainted with Commander Berroc, or you would not ask the impossible! He is a tyrant, worse than Praetor Shinzon. I cannot work for him!”

“Yes, you *can*. And you will. I am familiar with the Zaldan, I met him at our first staff meeting and know it will not be easy. You must stand up to him and never show any weakness. That should be easy for you Arlok!” A few snickers broke out. Ael continued immediately, “but, know this, if you can work for him, there will not be a Romulan Commander you will not be able to work for.”

The laughter broke out slowly. As she realized what she had said, she joined in. She finally stopped laughing and said, “Yes, even me.” This statement caused the laughter to start again.

“Know this,” she said sternly, the laughter suddenly forgotten. “Romulus and the Federation will be friends and allies within a few years. Vulcan and Romulus will reunite socially at first, then economically and finally, who knows. Also, know that I will not tolerate the use of the term ‘Earther!’ We must use our differences to make the friendship stronger, not to destroy it. This is why I have taken this action. You have shown me you can do it.”

Commander Kirill said, “Yes, we can!” The others echoed his statement.

Ael said quietly, “Then make the citizens of Romulus proud of you.”

“To this end, I sent a message to Romulus through Starfleet Command. The answer just arrived. This message grants my request to promote each of you one rank. Most of your records reflect this is long overdue. It is advanced for one of you. Instead of an official ceremony, we will have an Admirals’ mess after the *Explorer* is under way. Sub-Lieutenant Tyanala will notify you of the time. You may invite a few of your fellow crewmembers if you wish. Please let them know that Romulan cuisine will be served as well as Ale for the toast. Notify Aulee of how many you are bringing.”

Their reaction was stunned silence as the news sunk in and their pride at their promotion took hold.

Ael continued, "I will be announcing this change of policy and your promotions at the next command staff meeting after we are under way. You are dismissed."

They slowly filed out of the room, still stunned, and headed to their quarters to change their rank sash.

Aulee came around the desk to stand next to Ael. Even with the forewarning of receiving the message, she was recovering just as slowly. "Are you sure this is the right time for this," Aulee asked.

Ael looked up at her saying, "It was past time for promotions. Most of them were overdue, mostly because of the dead-end positions they had been placed in."

"No, not the promotions," she said quietly, slowly, "putting us under Starfleet command and control."

Ael did not have to think about this answer long. She looked up at the new Sub-Lieutenant and said, "It must be now or never. I want to build on the close working relationship they had while working on the hull of their ship. This is what I want them to see; the ship they are assigned to *is* their ship. Do you see that?"

"Not really," she said.

"You are aboard the *Explorer*; this *is* your ship. Would you not help to save it?"

"Yes"

"Would you help fight for it?"

"Yes"

"Would you help save a Romulan in trouble?"

"Yes."

"Would you die for *this* ship?"

"Ah...yes"

"Would you die for a Federation member of the crew?"

She remained quiet.

"And *that* is what I am trying to get around, what I *need* to change. We are reluctant to die for a cause or thing we are not a part of. I want the hesitancies to be removed. I want you, and the rest, to die, if necessary, for the ship and personnel you are assigned to as if it were a Romulan ship and the Empire was at stake."

"I think I see your point."

"We must be one people to survive. We have a fleet of Starfleet personnel, Klingon Warriors and Romulan Centurions, it must become one fleet. We must care for and help each other regardless of the uniform we wear. And the most

important thing we must do is become friends with each other. Aulee, we are from one quadrant, we are one people!”

Aulee looked straight at the Admiral as she nodded her understanding.

“I do not want a Romulan standing before me for standing by and letting a fellow crewmember die.”

“I understand, Admiral.” Aulee said. “I hope we can live up to your vision.”

“I do too. Now what is for lunch?” She said as she rose. They turned and walked toward Ael’s quarters, a new future before them.

## Chapter 3

“*USS Tunnel*, this is the *USS Explorer*, request permission to depart. Please disengage the umbilical connections and docking latches.” Ael commanded from the command deck.

Allen granted permission for departure and acknowledge her request. The Admiral knew he wanted to get back to his facility and complete the *USS Endeavor*. She was hopeful they would spend more time testing and working out the ‘bugs’ than they had on this ship. She was also hopeful they would get the warp drive up to full potential and solve the warp/tunnel interference problem.

“Captains, you may proceed with your un-docking. Clear all docking pylons, engage reverse thrusters.” she ordered.

Captain Beck repeated her orders as she was sure the rest of the captains were doing. She heard McLorn acknowledge the command and comply with it. He ordered the helmsman to begin backing away from the repair ship.

She saw rather than felt the ships moving apart. It was as beautiful a sight as the docking had been.

Captain Beck cleared his throat.

She realized she was blocking his view. She turned and walked from the forward railing of the command deck back to her console. “Captain Beck, dock the fleet as soon as we are clear of the *Tunnel*,” she ordered as she sat down to monitor the displays.

“Aye, Sir.” Captain Beck acknowledged. He watched the screen as the *Explorer* cleared the *Tunnel* and backed five hundred meters away. Then he looked at Sub-Captain McLorn below and ordered, “Mister McLorn, bring the ship to a halt and dock the fleet.”

• • •

“Aye, Captain. Think you can bring the ship to a halt, Mister Griffinson?”

He let the rest of the ships continue to fall astern until they were clear of the stern of the *Explorer*.

He touched the fleet communications button on this console before him and said, “*Galileo*, move negative five hundred meters.”

“*Roger, Explorer.*” Captain David said. McLorn watched as the *Galileo* dropped astern of the *Explorer*.

As the *Galileo* came fully astern of its docking port Randy said, “*Galileo* you are cleared to dock. *Voyager* and *Pioneer*, you are cleared to move laterally to docking positions. *Pioneer* you are cleared to dock.”

A rash of acknowledgements was heard coming from Randy’s console as he continued to monitor the docking maneuvers. Randy McLorn sincerely hoped the three Captains were very careful of their new hulls, not to mention his new skin! He could not imagine living down the ribbing *he* would get if the ship were damaged again. He assumed this was the reason *he* was performing the docking maneuver and not Captain Beck!

• • •

Ael set her view screen to watch the *USS Tunnel* prepare for her return to Charon. The gantries began folding back against the hull as the ships reversed out of the docking areas. The rest of the appendages also began to pull back into the hull.

Even as the metamorphose was occurring, the ship was moving away and turning starboard for her return to the Sol System.

She opened a commlink to the Tunnel, “Have a safe voyage, Captain Asley. Thank you again for your assistance.”

“*Your very welcome, Admiral. See if you can keep McLorn and his Captain from converting the Explorer into Swiss cheese again,*” he said laughing.

She had a thought and decided to share it with Allen. “Captain, you should consider commissioning the *USS Tunnel* as a deep space rescue ship.”

When he recovered, he said, “*We have considered your suggestion Admiral and asked Starfleet for concurrence. I will let you know the outcome. Asley out.*”

• • •

“*Voyager* you are cleared to dock,” McLorn said as the *Pioneer* began moving past the tunnel generator ring.

“*Galileo* is docked, sir,” called Mikhail as his eyes moved over his console to see the red indicator begin blinking.

Randy reached down to his console and tapped the controls that would lock the docking clamps. “Locking *Galileo*’s docking clamps now,” he said. He heard the *Galileo* acknowledge as his attention returned to the main screen.

Randy watched as the *Pioneer* came to a halt and settled into its cradle perfectly. He thought, “Two down one to go.” As the lights started blinking, he locked those docking clamps also. “*Pioneer* is docked. Locking the docking clamps now,” Randy said.

“Confirming *Galileo* is locked down, sir,” Griffinson said as the warning on his console disappeared. The docking clamp indicators turned green on McLorn’s console.

Randy checked the status of the fleet on his console and then watched *Voyager* come to a halt and settled into its cradle.

“Confirming Pioneer is locking down, sir,” Griffinson said as the warning on his console began to blink.

Randy watched his console. Like a watched pot that may never boil, it took forever for the docking clamp indicators to turn green.

“*Voyager* is docked. Locking down the docking clamps,” reported Randy as he touched the controls.

“Confirming, the fleet is docked sir,” Griffinson said as the last warning on his console disappeared.

Randy released an audible sigh of relief, rose and turned to report to face the command bridge, “The fleet is docked, and we are ready to maneuver Captain.”

• • •

Captain Beck turned to Ael and said, “We are ready to get the fleet out of here Admiral.”

She snickered for a moment before ordering, “Resume course for our original destination Captain.” She then looked to the console and opened a commlink to the *USS Tunnel*. “Captain Asley, we are departing, again have a safe trip home,” she said.

“Roger, *Explorer*. May to wind be at your back. Asley out.”

She looked at Captain Beck with a questioned look on her face.

“A Gaelic blessing, Admiral. He wished us a smooth journey.” Alexander Beck told her, then leaned forward and ordered, “Randy, get the fleet back on course.”

Randy turned to the helmsman, but before he could ask the question Mikhail said, “Course laid-in and ready to execute sir.”

The Admiral opened the fleet communications channel and said, “Fleet, standby for tunnel operations. Power down all shields and weapons. Lock all weapons consoles.”

The three acknowledgements came quickly. She suspected the captains had already completed the task and handcuffed the weapons officer on duty! She closed the connection, waited the count of ten and nodded to Captain Beck.

Captain Beck called out to Randy, “Randy, take us into the tunnel, warp one-point-five.”

“Aye, sir,” he said to the captain and then turned to the helmsman and said, “Tunnel time, Mikhail, let’s get a move on.” He quickly sat down at his console and lay back in the chair as the helmsman’s finger touched the execute control on his panel. The ship began to turn in the direction of sector grid ninety-one as it oriented itself for tunnel operations.

Randy's console showed the tunnel generator ring, which was showing life at the outer edges of the ring. He watched as the energy built and began moving from the edges of the ring toward the center. As the energy met in the center of the ring, top and bottom, Randy closed his eyes. He hated this part of entering the tunnel from a bridge station.

As the energy met it shot out in an oval pattern slightly behind and over the ship at once as if a giant creature was swallowing the ship. Entering a tunnel reminded Randy of the story his mother would read to him as a bedtime story. He would go to sleep thinking he was being swallowed by a giant whale.

He still had a queasy feeling when they entered a tunnel because the stars would blink out as the tunnel moved forward to its destination, just like the ship was being swallowed by the tunnel, which it was!

He heard the whine of the warp drive begin.

The tunnel streaking forward very quickly consumed the display around them. Then, they were moving, and this caused the view around them, the cloudy wall of the tunnel, to be perceived as streaked, colored clouds on the tunnel wall. It reminded Randy of flying a shuttle through a thunderstorm on Galorndon Core.

The warp drive whine stabilized at a constant frequency.

"Tunnel entered, steady on warp one-point-five, sir," Mikhail reported.

Randy opened his eyes. The current sight did not bother him since he was a highly qualified shuttle pilot. He examined his console; everything was normal and running smooth. He saw that the warp was one-point-five, and the equivalent was warp twenty-three.

Randy thought, "We're on their way... again." He looked up to the captain above and reported, "On course at warp one-point-five, Sir."

Alex nodded as he began walking up the ramp toward his quarters.

• • •

Worf entered the briefing room and took a seat in the chair at the head of the table. He looked around the conference table at the Admiral, the four Captains and their first officers, nodding an acknowledgement to each one. After the arguments and soul searching on his and Ael's part, a final solution had been found.

"Good morning," he said. "I am hoping this is the only meeting like this we will have to have on this subject. Now that the command structure has been settled, it is time to ensure we are all on the same page."

"This fleet is under civilian control of the Federation Council as all Starfleet vessels are. I have been appointed as Ambassador at large for the Federation to assume control of the fleet. Notice I do not say I was in command of the fleet. I am responsible for the political decisions and direction of the fleet." He was not



happy with this part. Worf wanted to command the fleet also. He did not feel there would be enough for him to do as the director only. The Ambassador now felt this fleet should be under the command of an ambassador only. No Admiral. However, there was an Admiral, so...

“The command of the fleet is in the hands of Admiral Ael Donatra. She reports directly to me. She is also responsible for the Romulan Garrison within the fleet.” Worf concluded his remarks with “Admiral...”

Ael said, “I am responsible for the external operation of the fleet and you, Captains, are responsible for the internal operation of your ships. I will not interfere in the operation of your ships unless it is required. You are all extremely capable command officers, or you would not be here. If there is a problem between ships, then I will step in to resolve it. I expect you to notify me of any issues as they occur.”

“The external operation of the fleet, combat, mission direction, deployment will rest in my office. I expect you to keep command updated as your individual mission progresses. This is important to completing the mission we have been assigned. Following this meeting we will discuss the arrival and mission development of sector grid ninety-one.”

“One more item. For administrative purposes, Commander Krill, assigned to the *Explorer*, is the Romulan Garrison Commander. If you have a problem with the Romulan engineer assigned to your ship, contact him. I consider this good training for him. Captain Beck, you may talk directly to me about him.”

Captain Beck nodded and said, “I understand he has been promoted to Sub-Commander.”

“The Romulus Star Empire has seen fit to promote all the Romulans in the fleet,” she informed the staff.

Slowly, the Captains nodded their understanding.

“I have notified each of these officers that they are a part of your crew and will be integrated into the crew and under your command.”

She paused to let this sink in. “As shown by the close working relationship which has occurred so far, integrating these engineers should not be a problem. I want the crews to function as a single team and having the Romulans aboard outside the chain of command is not in the best interest of the fleet. To handle what could become a problem, I have ordered them to integrate into the ships engineering department as you direct.”

She leaned forward and said, “However, the cloaking devices aboard your ships are still Romulan property and will continue to be protected and maintained by your assigned Romulan engineers. However, if this becomes an excuse for not performing the duties you have assigned, I hope Commander Krill will hear of it immediately.” She sat back and said, “Do you have any questions on this subject?”

Captain Dar'Tok was the first one to speak. "How do we do this? How do I treat him?"

She looked at him and said, "Treat him as an exchange officer, like you are. The difference is that you don't lose anyone in exchange." She smiled as she said the last line.

Captain David said, "I don't have a problem with this. Integrating him into the crew, as an exchange officer, is not a problem. This helps me out, since I am an engineer short."

Ael leaned forward again and asked, "Do you all understand the chain of command?"

She looked around the table and received a nod from each captain. Then she went down the other side of the table getting nods from the first officers.

Commander James asked, "am I to understand that they are part of the duty schedule, subject to the orders of the supervisor assigned over them?"

The Admiral asked, "Paul, isn't it?"

He nodded.

"Yes, Paul. They are now exchange officers under the command of Starfleet, please treat them as such. Where need be, you are to assign them subordinates and teach them the systems they will be working with."

"But, Admiral, this will take valuable time away from the mission if we are to train new engineers!" Commander Fossey exclaimed.

"Not at all," the Admiral said calmly. "They are all very qualified engineers having served on our vessels. You will find them knowledgeable in most engineering systems. I am sure they will be—I believe your saying is— 'quick studies.'"

This seemed to vilify Jeffery's objections as he had no further objections or questions.

She continued, "Remember, the training you invest in every fleet member will be paid back in more resources."

She leaned back and said, "Excellent. Ambassador Worf..."

Worf looked around the table before he spoke. "This is a historic mission that we have embarked upon. We represent not just the Federation of Planets, but the Alpha and Beta Quadrants as a whole. The Federation, the Klingons, the Romulans and even the Cardassians, whither they like it or not. As we go forward and explorer the sector grid ninety-one, we take the hopes of these Quadrants with us. We carry the hopes that we will *not* repeat the misunderstandings which have caused the neutral zones to be established and blocked us from forming lasting friendships before now."

“More than one hundred years ago, the Klingons and Romulans met the Federation. These were not the best of introductions. War and the neutral zones were the result. Now, a hundred years later, a Klingon is leading a fleet commanded by a Romulan with a Klingon commanding one of the starships. We have wasted one hundred years of peace. The Federation President commissioned project Icarus to begin exploration again. But not the exploration of the past; where Starfleet Captains would ‘Boldly go where no man has gone before.’ We now go quietly to explore the stars and make friends. To that end, we enter the sector grid ninety-one. Admiral, the mission briefing...”

“Computer, display sector grid ninety-one, system one,” the Admiral commanded. A planetary system appeared over the conference table in the center of the group. “Stellar Cartography has determined the system ahead is a G3 class star with a system of eight planets. They have come to the conclusion this is one of the oldest systems in the galaxy. They and life sciences will be managing the surveys you will perform. They are responsible for building the system picture.”

The officers looked at the system floating over the table before them. From the yellow sun the eight planets were scattered out toward the edge of the table. The fifth planet was five degrees above the plane of the system, which was very strange.

“The first and second planets are large moons and too close to the sun for habitation. Survey teams will scan these planets in *Explorer* runabouts. Captain Beck, have you assigned the runabouts yet?” The Admiral asked.

“Runabouts?” Captain Dar’Tok asked.

Captain Beck said, “This ship carries four Danube Class ships referred to as runabouts. These are super shuttles. Superior shields, weapons and warp drive. Would you like to see one?”

“Yes,” Dar’Tok said.

“Ask the beam curtain for the ship name,” Alexander said turning back to the Admiral, “I have assigned the *USS Louis* and the *USS Clark* to these planets,” Alexander said.

“Thank you, Captain. Captain David, you have the third planet.” He nodded as she continued; “*Galileo* will perform a survey as directed by the *Explorer* survey section.”

She looked back at the display over the table and said, “The fourth and fifth planets are also not habitable and will be scanned by the *Explorer* runabouts...”

“*USS Hudson* and *USS Cabot*,” said Captain Beck.

“Captain Beck, you have the sixth planet and Captain Chakotay, you will have the fourth moon of that planet. Captain Dar’Tok, the seventh planet. *Explorer*

will be approaching above the plane of the system and will survey the uninhabitable eighth planet as we pass by.”

“Questions?” The Admiral said. She received a negative nod from each member of the command staff. “Excellent, the appropriate data has been forwarded to your science officers.”

Worf said, “Then we are done here. Prepare for your missions, dismissed.”

• • •

Admiral Donatra walked through the beam curtain onto the command deck and took the seat at her console. She noticed she was the first one on the command deck. She was tempted to take the center seat for a moment, just to try it out, but she knew the captain was soon to arrive and her sitting in his chair would not be appreciated. Beck would not say anything, but she knew how she would feel if a superior took her chair. She would ask his permission at a later time.

Worf entered a moment later and took his seat. “Are we ready to do this?” He asked with a resigned look at Ael as he sat down.

“I hope so,” she said smiling back at him. She switched the display to the more comfortable tactical depiction. She was still amazed at the technology behind the display. It was a three-dimensional view when seated before it, but it was perceived as a vertical strip from the side and could not be seen from behind.

She touched a control on her console and said, “Sub-Captain McLorn, how much longer?”

“Two minutes, Admiral.” She heard him from the console as well as from below. She had not seen the Sub-Captain seated at his console when she entered the command deck, so she did not know he was there. She was so used to seeing people on the bridge; she only used the communications system when she did not see them, even though they were seated just out of sight before her. She would have to work on this.

She touched another control on her console and ordered, “Fleet, standby to return to normal space in two minutes.”

She heard her own voice behind her as the Captain of the *Explorer* walked onto the command deck. “Aye, Admiral,” Beck said adding his acknowledgement to the other three.

“Standby to take us out of the tunnel, Mister McLorn,” the captain ordered as he assumed the center seat

“Aye Captain,” McLorn replied and then turned to the helm and said, “Bring us out easy helm.” He caught a look at the circular star field growing larger as the tunnel end got closer. He felt his stomach begin to get queasy and returned his eyes to the console before him.

“Yes, sir,” the Helmsman said. Thirty seconds later he reported, “Tunnel termination in one minute.”

McLorn returned his attention to his console and watched the countdown. He touched the fleet communications control and began the countdown at fifteen seconds. As he said, “...one, zero,” he closed his eyes and tried to crawl into the seat. He did not like this part either.

• • •

Worf watched the star field in front of ship, as it got bigger and then, on zero, seemed to explode around the ship. It was a weird feeling. A rush! It reminded him of riding a bullet train out of a tunnel, which is exactly what it was. The sun ahead was just below the lower deck.

He was not surprised when he did not feel the sudden slowdown in the speed of the ship, the dampeners would see no one felt anything. Going from warp twenty-three down to warp two was a tremendous decrease none the less.

“Tactical,” the captain called out.

The planets appeared on the display as outlines with their statistics next to them.

“Bring us out of warp, Randy,” the captain ordered.

“Aye, sir,” McLorn responded to the captain’s order. “Helm, bring us to full impulse. Set course for the sixth planet by way of the eighth.”

Worf watched the stars slow and come to almost a complete halt. The system expanded before them. The intensity of the tactical display of the planets and moons reduced as the planets and moons were shown on the display.

“Standby to deploy the fleet,” the Admiral ordered.

Captain Beck called out, “Ops, prepare to undock the fleet.”

• • •

“Aye sir,” Randy said as he initiated the release of the docking clamps. He knew the helmsman would be too busy setting course for the eighth planet and a follow-on course to the sixth planet.

He began monitoring the withdrawal of the clamps as the clamps were released.

As the second to the last clamp released, they all reengaged and he felt a wave of nausea hit him heavily to the point of blacking out. It took all his control to keep from losing his last meal and consciousness. When his vision cleared, he saw that the helmsman and communications officers had not been as valiant.

“Computer, cleanup on isle nine please,” McLorn called out. His first thought had been an expletive he repressed. He was very glad for his flight training and stamina.

“Please re-state location,” the computer responded.

“Computer, please clean the stomach contents and other debris from the bridge.”

The foreign matter disappeared from the console before the unconscious helmsman. He checked the helmsman and the communications officer, they were out, but otherwise uninjured.

“Sickbay, medical emergency on the bridge,” he said touching his combadge.

“St-and-by,” came the very quiet, almost inaudible reply.

“Computer, EMH,” he said.

“*The bridge EMH is in life sciences,*” the computer reported.

He looked up at the command deck and saw that Worf was taking care of the Captain and Admiral.

“Computer, assess any damage to the ship and personnel, and then consolidate a damage report,” Randy ordered.

“*Working...*”

He walked under the command bridge and checked for injuries in the control areas. Life sciences personal were taking care of each other with the help of the EMH. He moved on to stellar cartography where the personal were unconscious. He noticed one was bleeding from the nose and mouth.

“EMH to stellar cartography immediately,” he said as he moved in to help the injured. They began to help each other as he aroused a few and they moved to help others.

Then he moved on to the engineering control area where most of the engineers were also unconscious. He got to the senior officer, awoke him and said, “Find out what happened.”

Once the engineers were checking each other, he went back to stellar cartography to verify everyone was basically alright. As he got to the back of the room, the EMH entered the area.

“Sub-Captain McLorn are there any casualties?” the EMH asked.

“Not so far Emit,” McLorn replied. He used the standard name for the Emergency Medical Hologram. “Do you have a status on the helmsman?”

“The helmsman is recovering,” Emit stated. He then cocked his head slightly and gave the impression that he was thinking, before continuing, “A medic is with him. He has been released for duty.”

Randy released his last breath in a sigh of relief. “Take over,” he ordered and walked past the EMH and returned to the lower deck.

“Report,” he said as he emerged from the walkway under the command deck.

The Ops officer jumped at his unexpected order but recovered quickly.

The computer responded, *“Most of the crew has suffered nausea and/or unconsciousness. The ship is intact and functional, the external sensor array, minor systems in stellar cartography and a library computer node where damaged and are off-line.”*

The captain joined him while the computer was reporting.

“Computer, what caused the damage?” The captain asked.

*“A very high energy scan from the planetary system ahead. The exact location could not be determined before the array was damaged by an overload.”* The computer reported.

“And we are blind as a bat without the external sensor array,” Randy said. He looked at the bubble surrounding them. The normal star field was black. No stars, no planetary system, no nothing. *“Without the external sensor array, we were truly blind,”* he thought.

He heard, more than saw the command staff moving around and someone on the ramp. He was not surprised that the captain appeared in the glow of his console a few moments later.

Randy sat down at his console, cleared it and began trying to find any elements of the array that was working. He was hopeful there were a few undamaged sensors he could connect to the bridge display systems. His hopes were dashed after a scan of the array elements. All of them would have to be replaced. He did not envy John in the least!

## Chapter 4

Admiral Donatra joined the Captain and Sub-Captain on the lower deck and asked, "Computer, state general damage to the fleet ships."

*"Working...The USS Explorer has sustained damage to the external sensor array, minor systems in stellar cartography and library computer node alpha five. USS Galileo, USS Pioneer and USS Voyager sustained damage to the external sensor array and the library computers,"* the computer reported.

"Computer, have any of the members of the fleet been seriously injured?" The Admiral asked.

"No," responded the computer.

She breathed a sigh of relief. She had lost crewmembers before and did not like it any more than any other commander, especially when she knew them personally. This was one reason she had never gotten close to anyone. But then, in Romulan society, very few people got to know anyone else very well, too much suspicion. While this was changing slowly, it was not yet as rampant as she would like. It is one of the things which caused her father and mother to never tell her precisely what they did for the empire. She learned later her mother had been a cryptographer working on Klingon code breaking. She also learned her mother was very good at it! Her father also worked in the underground headquarters, but her clearance was still not high enough to find out what his duties had been. Maybe now, as an Admiral, she could find out. This thought brought her back to the present moment and the problems at hand.

"Helm, bring the fleet to a full stop," the Admiral ordered.

"Aye, sir, full stop," responded the helmsman, quieter than normal.

Captain Beck started to turn to face her, and she was sure the first words he uttered would be a protest of her ordering his ship to a stop. He was right, but she was in a hurry, and he would have to eat this protest. She spoke before he had a chance. "Captain Beck, we need to get our sensors back," the Admiral said with a strong sense of urgency. "Then we need to repair the rest of the fleet and find out *what* hit us and from *where*. I don't want to enter the system blind or under attack."

Without waiting for a reply, she turned and walked up the ramp to the command deck.

She heard the captain order the repair with emphasis placed on the sensors.

She arrived at her console and touched the fleet intercom control and stated, "fleet, this is Admiral Donatra, there will be a command staff meeting, to



include the chief engineers, in the *Explorer* conference room in ten minutes to discuss our current situation.”

She closed the connection and walked up the ramp to her office. Once the door closed and she reached the sofa, she lay down, closed her eyes and cursed the gods for this mission. She was not having a very hard time believing this mission was cursed, because it very much seemed like it from her current point of view.

She heard the outer office door cycle and looked up to see Aulee walking toward the sofa. She sat up and Aulee handed her a cup. She sipped the liquid to find it was a cup of her favorite hot tea.

“Thank you, Aulee.” The Admiral said after three sips of the refreshing beverage.

“I thought you might need an interlude to recover from the trouble you face,” Aulee began, her face full of sympathy as well as a fresh bit of dried blood at the corner of her mouth. “Before you had to face more.”

“Thank you for your understanding. Command can be a burden,” Ael said between sips.

“You wear it well. That is why I like being your aide. I did not think I would like to be an aide, but you make it easy,” she said sitting down in the chair facing the Admiral.

Ael asked, “If you did not think you would like to be my aide, why did you accept the assignment?”

“I did not want to stay on the *RSE Predator*,” Aulee confided, “I had heard the stories from the crew about your adventures and thought of the adventures yet to come. I decided the unknown was better than the known.”

“To the Klingon’s, it is called ‘the undiscovered country’. So, now we can discover it together.”

“It has been an adventurer so far. Traveling to Earth, this ship, the mission and working for you. I never would have gotten to do all this without you.”

“I hope you will continue to like working for me. You have been a good companion as well as aide,” the Admiral said and noticed a wetness at the corner of her aides’ eyes.

Aulee wiped her eyes and said, “Thank you.” She held out her hand for the cup and said, “It is time for your meeting.”

She looked at her aide wondering how Aulee knew she had scheduled a meeting. “Yes, the adventure continues,” she said mockingly.

Aulee smiled as she stood waiting for the cup. Ael handed her the cup as she rose and headed to the conference room through the outer office. She would find out later if her aide was physic or not.

• • •

Worf returned to his quarters after helping the Admiral and waking the captain. He noticed Sub-Captain McLorn helping the crew members on the lower level, so he returned to his quarters, via his office to take care of himself privately.

As he walked through the office, he noticed papers neatly stacked on the right edge of his desk the way he liked them. He did not give this a second thought even though he did not remember the stack being as big as it now was.

He entered his quarters and ordered a blood wine and a headache remedy. This got him a call from the CMO.

“Am-ba-ss-d-or, y-ou s-hu-ood c-um t-oo ss-ick b-ay,” said Commander S’har.

“I just have a mild ache beginning to be felt. Nothing important or warranting a trip to sick bay right now. I would think you are too busy,” he retorted.

“Y-es, Am-ba-ss-d-or. No b-lo-ood w-ine. Re-p-ort in s-in-gle ho-our.”

“Acknowledged, Worf out.”

The replicator delivered the remedy in a liquid form. He drank it down quickly as he sat down in his favorite chair. He placed the mug on the end table next to the chair. He steeped his fingers in a pyramid and began focusing on nothing.

About five minutes later, he was disturbed by a door cycling open and he felt a presence. He was momentarily struck by the fact the door had cycled without his permission. He very quickly realized the reason.

“You would be dead by now if I were an assassin,” a female Klingon voice stated.

“You would not have been able to enter if you did not have the code.” He opened his eyes to see Kurah. He suppressed, barely, his excitement at seeing her. He rose and approached her as he said, “You are a sight for these sore eyes, but how...”

“As you have probably heard already, the President wanted to cover-up the new ambassadors in discretion. She granted my request to join you. I came out on the *USS Tunnel*. However, she did not tell me you had been banished!”

“Not banished, given a real assignment!” He retorted. He loved the bantering, loving relationship he had with her. Seeing her again was very invigorating. “If you came out on the *Tunnel*, where have you been?”

“In my quarters,” she said. “I have been studying the ship, catching up on your logs, setting up my desk and quarters. It has been hard to stay away from you, but you seemed very busy.” She moved forward to hug him. He returned the hug and wished it was more.

Pushing him back, she said, “Enough of this, my warrior, you have a meeting...”

Worf looked into her eyes and promised, “when I am done.” As he walked to his office door, he realized his aches were gone.

She stood and watched him strut from his quarters. “*That was just what he needed,*” she thought. She would have to thank Commander Sh’ar for informing her of Worf’s distress. As the door closed, she picked up the mug and returned it to the replicator.

• • •

As she entered the conference room the staff rose. She hated this form of military respect, thinking it an ordeal, when she was a fresh Uhlan. As she progressed to Commander, she realized it was a very quick way to stop conversations and get down to business. “As you were,” she said and took the seat at the head of the table. She paused for a moment to get her thoughts together before starting.

“Where are we at Captain Beck? Is there any new information on the damages or personnel?” The Admiral asked.

“Yes and No, Admiral. The engineering section is pulling together everyone not affected by whatever hit us and will have an assessment of the damages and repair time, I hope, before this meeting adjourns. No news on the casualties except that almost eighty-three percent of the crew is affected and incapacitated in one-way or another according to Doctor S’har. It and its staff are working to overcome their own problems as well as the crews’ problems.”

“Admiral,” John Cunningham began, “it looks like the scan was meant to blind us.”

The Admiral looked long and hard at John before she nodded at him and Alexander. She then turned to Captain Dar’Tok and asked, “How is the *Pioneer*?”

“Seventy-two percent of the crew is affected, and the engineers have told me it will be three hours to replace the external sensors that were overloaded. One of the major parts will have to be replicated aboard the *Explorer*. Also, some of the internal circuits and conduits were damaged and will be repaired at the same time. All my shuttles are damaged also.”

She nodded and looked at Captain Chakotay who started talking before he could be asked. “Seventy-four percent of the crew is affected and two plus hours to repair the sensors on the ship and another four for the shuttles.”

She looked at last at RAD who said, “Sixty-nine percent and thirty plus minutes. We have one shuttle that will be ready to assume position over the fleet with passive sensors in five minutes.”

The Admiral asked, “How was it your ship not affected as bad as the rest?”

“Simply, Admiral. The *Galileo* had her sensors and other external systems powered down for tunneling. We had not brought them back up yet. When we

ran a diagnostic, we found only one element in the array and a few internal parts were damaged. Would you like us to launch the top cap mission?”

“Top cap?”

“Yes, Admiral, a top cap mission. A top cap mission comes from ancient airplane pilot times. It was a mission flown over an important position or target to protect it and provide warning if there was a problem or potential attack.”

“Yes. I believe your assessment of the situation is correct, launch the mission,” the Admiral ordered. Also, as they become available, assign your engineers to assist with the rest of the repairs. I will leave you captains to coordinate the shifts of personnel.”

“And, Captain David,” she continued, “If you have a second shuttle, I authorize a bottom cap also.”

Captain David’s response was very much unexpected when he burst out laughing. She was also surprised when the other Starfleet officers also laughed or tried to hide a snicker. Worf leaned over and said, “there is no such thing as a bottom cap. However, a second will follow...”

Worf looked at Captain David who said, “in seven minutes, after the first shuttle.”

He turned back to the Admiral, “In this case a top cap will be flown under the fleet.”

Ael could feel her face beginning to show the embarrassment she felt as the laughing subsided. She regained her composure and said, “You may launch another shuttle to maintain vigilance under the fleet also. If there is nothing else...”

She waited a moment and then started to get up from her chair while she said, “Then this meeting is adjourned. Captain Beck, I will be in my office when the repair information is received.”

She moved as fast as she could without seeming to run to the door connecting to her outer office where Aulee had another cup of hot tea and her office door open. “Thank you, Aulee. Today is just not my day.”

“Don’t I know it, sir. Wait till you hear what happened on the *Pioneer*.”

Ael entered her office with Aulee close behind. She settled on an easy chair she had on Earth and took a sip of the wonderful fluid before asking Aulee to brief her on the events she alluded to.

Aulee said, “Sub-Lieutenant Arlok has been assigned by Commander Berroc, the Chief Engineer of the *Pioneer* as a junior engineer under a, in his words, lowly Uhlan. He took exception to this assignment and went to speak to the Chief. The Chief told him to be quiet and do as he was told. Well, more words were said, blows exchanged, and Commander Kirill and Captain Dar’Tok were called.”

The Admiral sat shaking her hanging head and then sipping her tea. "This is a very bad day," she thought.

Aulee continued, "The final outcome left both without scars; however, now Arlok is the Assistant to the Chief Engineer of the *USS Pioneer*. Can you believe it!"

Ael looked up with the last sentence and laughed as hard as Captain David had. When she recovered her composure, she said, "You just made my day."

"It seems that Commander Berroc is a Zaldan, and he enjoys a good fight now and then. He and the Captain have been sparing and it seems that Sub-Lieutenant Arlok and Commander Kirill will be joining them on the holodeck for their exercises," Aulee told her.

Ael did not know whether to laugh or cry.

• • •

Three hours later, found Ael in a much better mood. Having eaten and changed after a nice long, hot soak. It had taken her more than a few minutes to convert a corner of her quarters to a spa like a pool of the spa at Sonsoulla, but it was worth the time and effort. She had saved the program as she exited. However, she had to remember to take a real towel with her next time!

She walked onto the bridge command deck with a revitalized outlook on her assignment and the prospective outcome of the mission. Worf was standing beside the Captain and Sub-Captain below on the lower deck. She walked down and joined them.

The captain said, "Admiral, I was just about to inform you the repairs are complete and stellar cartography is ready to brief us on the system."

"Good timing," Ael said.

Alex said, "Randy you have the bridge."

He turned and gestured for them to proceed to the conference room. The three command officers walked up the ramp to the conference room.

They entered to find the captains, first officers and engineers from the fleet where already seated in the amphitheater like briefing area. The senior *Explorer* engineering staff was also present. Margie started the briefing as soon as the command staff had taken their seats in the front row. "Computer, display sector ninety-one, system one." The holographic display of the system appeared before the group. She began the briefing, "You are familiar with the system ahead, as shown, and I have nothing to add to the information you have. My staff has rescanned the system and we did not get an answering scan *this* time."

There were a few chuckles in the group.

Sub-Captain Varrec added, "The scan was of a very high intensity, about twenty-two times the strength we use. This is the reason most of the crew became nauseous and some became unconscious. The intense energy upset the electrical energy and nervous systems of most of the personnel in the fleet."

"However, going back in the logs, we found the scan we received, on entering the sector, originated within the system ahead," she continued.

She hesitated before saying, "Computer, add the position of the fleet at the time of the scan and the unknown scan sensor data to sector ninety-one, system one." A symbol for the *Explorer* appeared, as did a thin line slowly fading out as it entered the system on the holograph floating before them. The holograph reoriented itself to better display the information. "As you can see," she continued, "the scan seems to have originated from the direction of the sun."

Captain David was the first to ask a question, "You can't get closer to the point of origin?"

"No, Captain. Not at this distance. We are still one-point-seven light years from the system. We are working on the sensor data to try and pinpoint the location, but at this point, we just don't know where it came from. The data we have come from the *Voyager*. I believe *Explorer* blocked a direct line of sight and gave *Voyager* more time to get the sensor data."

Captain Dar'Tok asked, "Is this to be considered a hostile action? Should we go to yellow alert?"

"Not at this time. I don't think it was a hostile act, but it does show something inhabits the system and we must use caution in approaching it," the Admiral said.

The assemblage nodded their agreement as she looked at Sub-Captain Rawlins, "Margie, I will task you and Sub-Captain Varrec, through Captain Beck, to continue to try and determine the origin of the scan."

Sub-Captain Rawlins looked at Alexander, who nodded to her, before saying, "Yes, Sir."

"Now, how close are we to getting underway?"

Captain Beck answered, "The *Explorer* has been repaired and is ready to enter the system. The crew is back to normal with the exception of four crewmembers still in sick bay."

Captain Chakotay said, "The *Voyager* is ready."

Captain Dar'Tok said, "The *Pioneer* is ready, one left in sickbay."

Captain David said, "We are ready, but will have to recall our shuttles before continuing on to the system."

"Excellent! Captain David, recall your shuttles. Captain Beck, I would like to test a combat deployment of the fleet as we get underway."

RAD touched his combadge and relayed the recall order. His second officer reported the shuttles returning to the hanger deck and they would be secured within ten minutes.

Captain Beck looked a little irritated.

“If there is nothing else,” she concluded the briefing, “you are dismissed.”

They rose and went their separate ways.

• • •

The Captain of the *USS Explorer* entered the bridge from the conference room and walked along the catwalk. As he walked down the ramp toward the command deck and his chair, he looked over the rail at Randy and said quietly, “Randy, the Admiral would like a combat deployment of the fleet as soon as we get underway.”

Randy looked up as he turned around in his chair and stood to talk to his Captain. He had a strange, mischievous look on his face as he said, “Shouldn’t we practice it first?”

“I would think this is a practice practical!” The captain retorted.

Randy shrugged and said, “I will have to download the instructions and simulation to the fleet ships.”

“Make it so,” Beck said as he stepped onto the command deck and took his chair.

“Are we going to use computer control for the first try?” Randy asked.

“I think we should,” Alexander said and then he asked, “Have the shuttles returned?”

Randy looked over at the Ops officer, who said, “Docking right now sir.”

“Helm, as soon as the docking is completed, take us to impulse point-nine. Put us on course to over fly the eighth planet,” the captain ordered.

Without awaiting the inevitable “Aye, Sir,” Beck touched his combadge and said, “Mister Varrec?”

“*Sub-Captain Varrec here Captain.*”

“Are you ready to deploy your survey teams?”

“*Yes, Captain. The teams are standing by in the roundabouts for your word to launch.*”

“Excellent, we should be deploying them in a few minutes. Are you and Margie ready to collect and analyze the survey data?” Beck asked. He knew the answer of course but liked to ask the question to be sure. Margie’s crew would be analyzing the planets, moons and other heavenly bodies, while Varrec’s crew would be analyzing everything on them. He expected they would be very busy if

their initial arrival and the scan 'attack' were any clue to this system being inhabited.

Varrec's answer had the expected tone of tiredness added to it, "Yes... *Captain.*"

Beck smiled as he closed the connection. "Very good, Beck out." He had known the Vulcan for many years on-and-off and respected his abilities beyond those of the legendary Mr. Spock.

As the connection closed Alexander noticed the reflection of the beam curtain activating in the floor beside him. Worf sat down at his station. Beck felt a little sorry for the warrior who was a diplomat. It must be very frustrated for a warrior who must now find peace rather than participate in war. He knew Worf served for a month each star-year aboard the *USS Enterprise* as part of his agreement to be the Federation Ambassador to Kronos. It must be the fuel he used to keep going in the mundane arena of politics. However, Beck knew this was at an end. For the next few years Worf must be an ambassador; a position, this Captain, was going to enforce! There would be no Weapons officer time for Ambassador Worf aboard his ship.

Reverie over, he snuck a look at Worf and noticed a calm smile on his face, his hands folded in his lap, waiting. Given the same circumstances, Beck was sure he would not be as calm as Worf was at this point in time. He wondered what was going on. Worf was only a passenger aboard the *Explorer* and for a warrior this must be very disconcerting. But he was smiling! Beck wondered how Worf was handling it so well.

Alex noticed the beam curtain reflection again as the Admiral entered and sat down at her console. The stars around them started to move almost imperceptibly, but the system before the ship began to grow measurably. He missed the days when he could hear the whine of the engines and the vibration beneath his feet. This loss of perception was one of the costs of having this bridge, he was told. The ship was isolated from the bridge by the holographic interface. He was also told this would be remedied soon.

Randy stood facing the captain, to attract his attention, as he said, "The fleet is ready for combat maneuvers."

Alexander ordered, "Computer, tactical overlay." Grid lines appeared over all the objects around them.

The Admiral touched the communications panel on the console before her and said, "Fleet, standby for a combat deployment." She left the commlink open and set her view screen to a point behind the ship. She called up a forward screen oriented backward toward the ships. This gave her the vantage of front and rear views.

"Impulse point-nine, sir," she heard the helmsman report.



Ael ordered, "Fleet, Deploy!" She watched the screen as the docking clamps where released, snapping back out of the way. She saw the ships move away from the hull slightly and then the show began.

The *Galileo* slid forward, down and away from the ship, beginning a roll-over maneuver as soon as they had room. *Voyager* moved forward turning forty-five degrees to port and thirty degrees negative, moving away from the explorer at a forward downward vector to the right. *Pioneer* performed a mirrored maneuver. As the large ships moved forward away from the *Explorer*, four runabouts launched from their docking bays on the top, rear of the saucer section in two flights of two.

Ael changed the angle of the view to slightly above the fleet but still looking forward. See watched the ships deploy toward their targets. She was very impressed, especially since this was the first time the Fleet Deployment had been tried. She sat nodding her head as the ships continued to disperse on their individual missions. One ship expanding into an armada.

She heard Beck order the *Explorer* to full impulse and they continued toward the eighth planet. She continued to watch as the ships move across the system taking up their assigned missions.

The weight of this mission of exploration was beginning to dawn on her as she watched the fleet of eight ships deploy. This is a fleet! And I am responsible for its operation. This is my mission. "I hope I am up to it," she thought.

• • •

"Standard approach, Helm," Randy said as the *USS Explorer* approached the eighth planet of sector ninety-one, system one. He hated calling this system sector ninety-one, system one, but if it was inhabited, then giving it a name would be redundant since the inhabitants would have already named it!

He touched his combadge and said, "Life sciences, please notify the bridge when you are ready to proceed to the fourth planet." He did not order a standard orbit because this would be a simple scan of the planet, a basic fly-by.

"Aye, Sir."

"McLorn out," he said to close the connection. Then he walked up to the command deck and sat down in the center chair. He liked the feel of the hot seat. After years as an executive office, the captain's chair was not very hot to him. As a new executive officer, he had once asked Commander Riker why he had stayed on the *USS Enterprise* so long as the executive/first officer turning down the captain's chair and his own ship more than once. The answer had surprised him.

The answer had also kept *him* an executive officer after he should have gotten his own command when it was offered to him. He had decided to remain with Captain Beck as Commander Riker had remained with Captain Picard. Now

that Captain Riker was in command of the *USS Titan*, he could see what the *Titan's* Captain was talking about and it continued to make sense.

He continued to reminisce as he watched the planet grow larger as the *Explorer* approached. He could begin to make out frozen mountains and valleys where the great ice sheets, he assumed they were made of frozen water, had cracked and moved apart. It reminded him of the demonstration model for the Genesis Project he had viewed two years ago.

Randy moved to the Admiral's console and called-up his personal console overlay. He setup the console to monitor the life sciences master console so he could see the model of the system being built. When he was done the entire system was floating above her console. The eighth planet was taking form directly before his eyes. As he watched the orange center core was being covered by rock and then by fluid, which was covered in frozen fluid. It struck him as almost magical as the planet was slowly created in the air before him.

"Computer, move the Admiral's display to the captain's display and reset the Admiral's console back to her settings," he ordered as he returned to the center seat.

The communication panel on the center chair began to beep. He touched the control and said, "Sub-Captain McLorn."

*"This is Captain Dar'Tok. Pioneer is entering orbit and is beginning a scan of the planet."*

He looked at the system display before him and saw the seventh planet had started building. "Thank you, Captain, we are receiving your data," he told the Captain of the *Pioneer*.

*"Luq, Pioneer out."* The connection closed. He continued to watch the model as the eighth planet took on a solid look and the features, he saw on the wall around him, began to match the system display.

His combadge beeped three times before he acknowledged it. *"This is life science sir; we have completed the scan of the eighth planet."*

"Thanks, McLorn out."

He leaned forward and callout to the helm officer, "Helm you may set course for the sixth planet, best speed."

"Aye sir," responded the helmsman.

He touched his combadge, "Captain Beck. We have completed the survey of the eighth planet and are on course to the sixth."

*"Acknowledged,"* Alex responded.

The communication panel on the center chair began to beep again. He touched the control and said, "Sub-Captain McLorn."

*“Commander Paris on the Voyager, sir. We have entered orbit and begun scanning the moon.”*

He looked at the system display before him and saw that the fourth moon of the sixth planet had started building. “Thank you Commander, we are receiving your data,” he said, then remembered that this was Tom’s first mission in command and he added, “Good luck with your first survey mission, McLorn out.”

*“Voyager out.”* The connection closed.

He slipped back into the model of the sector ninety-one, system one before him. The shadow planets, moons and a few of the asteroids were taking shape. He was not surprised with the speed at which the model was being completed, since there were eight times the ships performing it. He knew this survey would have taken a single ship more than a week to complete. They should be done in less than two days. The survey data continued to flow into the *Explorer* and feed the holo projection before the center chair.

The communication panel on the center chair began to beep again. He touched the control and said, “Sub-Captain McLorn.”

*“Lieutenant Commander Kato Yomata on the USS Cabot, sir. We are entering orbit of the fifth planet and beginning our scans.”*

He looked at the system display before him and saw that the fifth planet had started building. “Thank you, Cabot, we are receiving your data,” he said.

*“Cabot out.”* The connection closed.

No sooner had he sat back in the center seat, the communication panel beep again. He touched the control and said, “Sub-Captain McLorn.”

*“Lieutenant Montoya on the USS Hudson, we are entering orbit of the fourth planet, if you could call it a planet. We will be stating our scanning in a few moments.”*

He looked at the system display before him and saw the moon of the fourth planet and the planet itself had started building. He asked, “Are you doing two at once Hudson?”

*“Yes sir, two in the database are better than one! We installed a second scanner in two of the runabouts for this mission,”* Louis told him.

*“Good deal, Hudson. McLorn out.”* Randy said and the connection closed.

That got Randy to wondering where the second scanner was being used. He looked hard at the model projected before him. He touched the control that caused it to slowly rotate to the right. About halfway around the model he noticed the tiny dots near the fourth planet. As he watched, Randy saw one then two more winked into being. “Of course,” he thought, “they are scanning the asteroid fields near the fourth planet! I must be getting old to have missed that!”

The communication panel on the captain's chair beeped again. He touched the control and said, "Sub-Captain McLorn."

*"RAD here, Galileo is entering orbit and beginning a scan of the planet."*

He looked at the system display before him and saw that the moon of the third planet had started building. "Thank you, Captain, we are receiving your data," he said.

*"Galileo out."* The connection closed.

"Sub-Captain McLorn," the helmsman called out.

"Yes, Lieutenant?"

"We have reached the sixth planet sir. Standard orbit?"

"Standard survey orbit, Lieutenant," he ordered.

"Aye sir, standard survey orbit it is!"

Randy loved it when a plan came together! He felt on top of the world, which in fact, he was. *Here I am*, he thought, *in command of the fleet survey and loving every minute of it*. The center chair began beeping again. *Except when I am interrupted every two seconds*, he completed the thought. He tapped the control and said, "McLorn."

*"Lieutenant Commander Lu here, we are in orbit and scanning."*

He looked at the system display before him and saw that the first planet had started building. "Thank you, Commander, we are receiving your data," he said.

*"Lu out."* The connection closed.

He watched as the first planet started taking shape and saw that the sixth planet was also forming. Then he noticed that the second planet was also forming. "Where is the call from the Lewis," he thought.

He whomped the communication panel control on the center chair and called "USS Lewis, this is the *Explorer*, Sub-Captain McLorn." When he did not receive an answer, Randy started to get worried. His first command and he lost a runabout! He tried again, "Lewis, this is Sub-Captain McLorn, can you hear me."

*"Yes sir. I hear y'all just fine. What can I do for y'all?"*

"Did you forget to call us with your arrival?" McLorn asked.

*"Did y'all want me to do that? Well, we're here and a scanning."*

"I can see your data, who is this?" Randy asked beginning to become irritated.

*"Lieutenant Richard Houston sir, and if you can see it, why do y'all want me to bother y'all."*

“Thank you for your speedy reply, Lieutenant. McLorn out,” he said ignoring the comment, but making a mental note to contact Sub-Captain Varrec about his Lieutenant Houston. As his heart settled down to a steady beat, Randy thought, “I didn’t think they made them like that anymore!”

## Chapter 5

Captain Dar'Tok lounged in the center chair on the bridge on the *USS Pioneer* watching as the planet they were approaching grew on the main view screen. Finally, he gauged the distance to the planet was small enough to make his helmsman very nervous and he ordered, "Standard survey orbit helm."

With a sigh of relief, the helmsman said, "Yes, Sir!" He executed the instructions he had fed into the console five minutes ago and had been updating very few seconds.

"Sciences, begin the survey," he ordered, even though he could see the Science officer was already hard at work. *If he was going to enjoy this 'milk run', he was going to have to add the excitement himself,* he thought.

"Open a connection to the *Explorer*," he ordered the communications officer.

The communication panel on his center chair illuminated and he heard, "*Sub-Captain McLorn.*"

"This is Captain Dar'Tok. *Pioneer* is entering orbit and has begun a scan of the planet."

A moment later he heard McLorn say, "*Thank you Captain, we are receiving your data.*"

The captain responded with, "Very well, *Pioneer* out." The 'very well' he said in Kingon. The connection closed. *Now what to do,* he thought. He rose and walked over to look over the shoulder of the Science officer. The displays at the back of the large console showed the core and cross section on the layers of the planet. *Pretty normal stuff,* he thought.

"Too Normal," he said to himself. He relished the days he commanded a Vor'Cha class battle cruiser in the Dominion War. Now that was glorious! Now he commanded a Federation ship of sheep. He was a warrior, not a shepherd! But he had chosen this assignment to avoid the destruction of the Empire he saw coming with Krackon's entry into the Federation. He wanted to understand the Federation, to see what drew the Klingon Planets to it. He had found an easy life. He found not all Klingons aspired to greatness; some just wanted to get through the day. The easy life, this was the draw. The corruption of the easy life. He let his thoughts head back to the task at hand.

He walked slowly across the back of the bridge half examining the consoles and readouts. A glance at the main viewer showed the *Pioneer* had entered eclipse of the planet. "Commander Berroc, the temperature on the sensor array is beginning to drop," he observed.

“Still within normal bounds, Captain.” Berroc said challengingly as he adjusted the temperature back to an optimum level.

“I would have expected more from you,” the captain stated. He would turn these sheep into warriors to bring greatness to the Federation.

The commander stayed quiet. He had learned over the last eight months it was better to remain quiet than to challenge *this* captain to violence. He knew this from their sparing together.

Secretly, he really enjoyed being aboard the *Pioneer* under Captain Dar Tok. Captain Randwood had run a loose ship and was weak in his opinion, even for a human. Now they had a strong captain, one he could look up to and enjoy working for.

He also knew the captain would not hesitate to strip him to his bones and enjoy his flesh for his supper if anything went wrong. He liked the knowledge the captain would back him up if he were right. *But when am I wrong*, he thought, *Targ meat!*”

He finished adjusting the temperature to the exact temperature for optimum sensor operation and set the controls to maintain the temperature within one hundredth of a degree. He had gotten sloppy on this ‘milk run.’ It was not the normal mission of this ship to survey planets, but to fight. He was allowing the psychological let down of the mundane affect his work. He vowed to do better. He needed to do better. The vision of the captain eating his brains out of his lifeless skull came to mind and reinforced his desire to perform at maximum efficiency

He looked up and found the captain had moved on to his next victim, the Weapons officer.

“Your board is locked!” The captain roared. He could not believe the weapons aboard *his* ship were locked down. “Are you not aware this fleet was attacked as it entered the system? Were you spawned from a Targ only a moment ago!” The captain was shouting at the Weapons officer, who was cowering in his chair against the bulkhead. His hand went to the knife at his belt. Although meant to be a decorative symbol of the power of the empire, he kept it clean and razor sharp. If this ship were at war, the knife would be stained with the blood of this crewman at this moment. He was incensed. He knew he could not treat the Federation crewmembers as he would Klingon warriors. He stared at the crewmen, allowing the full wrath he felt to be reflected in his eyes.

“Commander James,” the captain shouted slowly, in a measured voice barely under control, “get me a Weapons officer who knows how to man a weapons console when *my* ship is in a hostile area!” He turned away from the terrified Ensign, looked at Paul James and said, “Put this one out an airlock.”

He walked to the turbolift saying, "Commander James, you have the bridge and if you cannot get a minimally efficient bridge crew, you will follow the Ensign!" He noticed Commander Berroc was smiling.

Commander James quickly responded with the tried and true, "Yes, sir." He was aware his Captain was very excitable and capable of violence at a moment's notice. He did not want to make him any angrier. Besides, he, like Berroc, liked the captain. He knew Captain Dar'Tok would calm down by the time he got to his quarters. He also knew the captain was trying to whip the crew into a fighting force to be reckoned with. He was proud to serve under him and hoped he could be half the captain this captain was when it became his turn to command. His only relief was the fact his own center chair was years away!

The captain entered the turbolift and gave a very slight wink to Commander James. "Quarters," he said as the doors closed.

He entered his quarters and ordered, "Romulan Ale." He took the mug from the replicator almost before it was finished forming. He knew a force field would prevent this, but still liked the challenge of trying to beat the field.

He sat in his chair and asked the Computer for an Italian Opera he favored. He calmed down and thought about the Ensign floating in space while the Opera was playing over the ship's speaker system. He smiled. He wanted to run a tight ship under Federation guidelines; he saw this as a challenge. A challenge to prove the Klingons not only had a place in the Federation, but also a place where they could grow as warriors and become the teeth of the Federation. To bring glory to a seemingly staid Starfleet was the goal of his captaincy. To show, abet, lead the way to integrate Klingons into Starfleet.

He imagined himself in a Starfleet uniform and laughed. Then he thought of Worf, a Klingon, serving in Starfleet. He would have to discuss this with Worf. Worf had made his service in Starfleet work without too much problem. Moving between Starfleet and the Klingon Defense Forces and back again. He had even challenged Chancellor Galron to a battle to the death and won. Claiming the Empire. Dar'Tok did not understand why Worf had given up the glory of being Chancellor. He only knew Worf gave it up to General Martok. And it was his service to Martok that had caused his rise to a diplomat. "A waste of skin, but Worf handled it well," he thought. Martok had insisted Worf be the Ambassador to the Klingon Empire if he was to be Chancellor.

He felt the Klingon-Federation accord, Worf had created and fathered until the signing just before they had departed, would be the final death knell of the Empire as the planets slowly become independent and joined the Federation. However, given a place in the Federation, the heart and heritage of the Klingon Empire could be preserved. He knew in his Klingon heart; the Klingons would breathe new life into the velvet gloves worn by Starfleet.



His combadge beeped, pulling him from his thoughts. He touched it and said, "DarTok."

"Captain, the survey is almost completed. We have found something I think you will want to see," said Commander James.

He trusted Paul to know what would interest him by now. "On my way. DarTok out."

He rose and walked the short distance to the turbolift quickly narrowly missing the opening door of his quarters. A very short ride to the bridge brought the usual 'Captain on the Bridge' announcement as he entered and walked to the Science station.

"What is it, Commander?" The captain asked. He felt a new challenge on the horizon, a new mystery to solve.

"We have found a very small settlement on an island in the North Sea, Captain," James told him.

"Is that the only life on the planet?" The captain was very surprised by this finding.

"Other than small animals, that's it." James pointed to the spot on the map that was blinking. "We have not detected any other signs of life. No radio signals. No energy signatures. No other buildings. Nothing at all, sir."

It was obvious to DarTok this was confusing Commander James as much as he. He felt Paul saw the captain's wrath was eminent. He needed to defuse the situation and get on with the investigation. "What do you think, Commander?" He asked in a very curious tone.

"I would be hard pressed to explain this small a settlement except for maybe a group of survivors of a crash or something like that."

The captain became excited with the prospect of something to do! Like the bold captains before him, he would find an answer to this mystery. He liked a good mystery!

"I see. Report your findings and sensor data to the *Explorer* and then put together an away team. I will be leading the team myself to find out if you are right. You have the ship Commander," the captain said.

Commander James reached over the Science officer and keyed in the instructions for the transfer. "Records trans...fer...ring. Done. The away team will meet you in the transporter room, captain," James said as he moved to center chair. He was not about to remind the captain of the Federation rules governing a ships' captain going on away missions again. Once was enough! He arranged for twice the normal security contingent to meet the captain in the transporter room immediately.

The captain turned and left the bridge stopping in his quarters for his favorite weapons.

DarTok took the turbolift to the transporter room and as he entered, he saw the standard survey away team was waiting for him on the transporter pads as well as two security officers. Three more security personnel waited. *This is the efficiency I like*, he thought, *I will have to toss more Starfleet personnel out the airlock if this is the result!* He felt the extra security was over-kill, but...it kept Paul off his back about Starfleet regulations.

He walked toward the open position on the transporter platform, raised his foot to step on the pad and disappeared.

• • •

“I realize that this is not your normal job, but are we ready to begin the survey?” Captain Ryan David looked around the small briefing room at the assembled senior officers. He had gotten used to a mission update meeting just before each mission to ensure they were always ready and focused.

Chief Borall said, “We have tied the sensors directly to the *Explorer* and will be monitoring the data being sent. Beyond that, we could send down the two shuttles to map the surface much more quickly.”

“That will not be necessary, Chief,” RAD said. He wanted to keep this mission as simple as possible.

“Then the answer to your question Captain is yes, we are ready to begin the survey.” Borall said with his usual raise of an eyebrow. He wondered if all Vulcan’s were born with this quirk or if it was learned. He would have to ask the Commander sometime, but not now.

“Jeffrey, I would like you to monitor the survey information and see if there is anything interesting,” the captain told him.

“Yes, Sir,” was his only reply. Ryan could tell the younger officer wanted to command the survey, but as Captain, he wanted the first one to go smoothly.

“After the trip here, let’s make this a cake walk. Position people. Let’s get this survey done and get back to *Explorer*.” Ryan said as way of dismissal.

RAD was the last to rise from his chair and head out the door. He walked the short distance to the turbolift and took it to the bridge. As he stepped off the turbolift he heard the familiar, “Captain on the bridge,” and was struck, again, by the fact no one could have seen him *prior* to the announcement!

“Captain, we are closing on the planet,” the helmsman said as RAD moved to the center chair.

“Standard orbit helm,” the captain ordered, “Sciences, begin the survey.”

As the officers began to carry out his orders, Ryan touched the fleet communications control on the arm of his chair and heard, “*Sub-Captain McLorn.*”

“RAD here, Galileo is entering orbit and beginning a scan of the planet,” the captain reported.

There was a momentary delay before Randy said, “*Thank you Captain, we are receiving your data.*”

“*Galileo out,*” Ryan said to close the connection.

“Jeffrey, how is it going?” RAD asked from the center chair. He knew it was too early to expect results, but not too early to ensure all was going well. While he trusted his crew to do a good job, he still had a little micro-manager in him.

“We have almost completed the deep scan,” he said.

He got out of his chair and moved over to the small sciences console. He looked at the display of the planet with a tactical overlay. The core was being covered as he watched the data be processed into the information displayed on the screens. He noticed the two left screens were running surface scans. This was his crew, efficient if nothing else!

“No electrical or radio emissions at all. Two small settlements are on the planet’s equator, sir. This makes the area a little uncomfortable for us humans,” Jeffrey reported.

“Two settlements you say,” RAD said like he was getting an idea. It was actually an idea he was hoping to have.

“Yes sir.”

The captain asked, “How uncomfortable is the area for humans?”

“Temperatures in the low hundred’s, slightly thinner atmosphere than what we are used too,” Fossey stated.

“Good. Looks like an opportunity for an away mission.”

“I will put together two teams to take with me,” Fossey said. He leaned toward the board and made the announcement for two away teams to report to the transporter room.

“Observe only, Commander.” RAD told him as he returns to the center chair. He missed the away missions but knew that Jeffery would protest any order which allowed him to accompany either team.

“Captain, the survey is completed. Records are transferred. We have not found anything new,” said Commander Fossey.

“Then on your way Commander,” the captain directed.

Jeffery rose and exited to bridge quickly.

RAD turned in the chair to face the engineering console, “Commander Borall, are you not going to lead the second team?”

“No, Sir. I have a third engineer who needs the experience leading an away team without his Chief over his shoulder,” he said raising his eyebrows on the latter part.

RAD chuckled and said, “I can understand.”

Turning back to the front the communications panel beeped. “Captain,” he said.

“Commander Fossey, sir. We are ready to beam down to the surface.”

“Observe only. Be careful. Good Luck,” Ryan said. He reached out to terminate the connection and disappeared.

• • •

Worf had not stayed on the bridge since there was nothing for him to do. He knew his mission was not as active as the captain’s or even the Admiral’s mission was.

He made his way back to his quarters and had a good meal with Kurah. They had discussed what went on after Worf had left. He was distressed to find out Ambassador Menden had tried to claim responsibility and glory for the Klingon-Federation accord. He was very glad to hear Chancellor Martok had asked him to convey the thanks of the Empire to Ambassador Worf and dismissed him like a lowly page! Worf had tried to envision the scene. Then Kurah had called up the recording she had brought, and they watch it twice before Worf could stop laughing!

Meal and entertainment over, he went to his office and found nothing but paperwork to do. He finished it quickly and wandered down to life sciences and watched the small model forming above the center console.

Worf did not notice the Lieutenant approach him from behind. He was startled when the Lieutenant said, “May...may I help you sir?”

Worf turned to face the Lieutenant, the hem of his ambassadorial robe bouncing off the foot of the officer. The Lieutenant jumped back a foot and became even more nervous. Worf said, “You may continue to serve this ship, if you do not challenge death in the manor of sneaking up on warriors, even old ones!”

The Lieutenant went into a shocked response. “Sir, I did not mean to startle you.”

“What is done, is done,” Worf said. He turned back to the display and said, “this is the system display.”

“Yes sir.”

“Where is the Sub-Captain?” Worf asked.

“Sub-Captain Rawlins is in the conference room monitoring the building of the system.”

“This is not it?”

“No sir. This is only our reference model we are using to track the scanning beam.”

“Have you found the point of origin, Lieutenant?”

“No, sir,” the Lieutenant said, but added quickly, “But with the data we are collecting from the survey teams, we are narrowing the area down to a point.”

“Good, keep up the good work,” Worf said. He turned, stated, “conference room,” and walked through the beam curtain to the conference room.

He thought the curtain was malfunctioning and had put him outside the ship; the shock was such he swore an oath to the Gods of Stoval Core.

“Quiet,” a female voice said as the curtain cycled closed and left him suspended in space. The sector ninety-one, system one was all around him. The feeling was very strange. He could breathe and there was a surface under his feet. His eyes, however, told him he was floating free in open space.

As his eyes adjusted to the low light, he saw the owner of the voice standing near the center of the room watching the second planet. He walked over to the Sub-Captain and stood beside her as she entered commands into the data pad in her hand.

He slowly got used to the scene around him and the dizziness and queasiness began to subside. He marveled at the sight around him. He could walk up and look closely at any planet.

Margie said quietly, “times 2,” and the area she was examining bulged forward to twice its previous size. She looked closer, made a pad entry and then said quietly, “normal size.” The section returned to normal.

Worf asked, “Are there any signs of life?”

“No radio waves or electrical energy detected on any of the planets so far, but the ones we are surveying by ship all show very small settlements,” she said. She walked to the third planet. “You see here,” she said pointing to the equator, “two small settlements and nothing else. The seventh planet shows one as does the sixth planet and its moon. Very, very strange.”

“Why do you say that?” He was beginning to become curious at the mystery and he hated mysteries. He had thought they would find a large, thriving civilization on one of the planets near the sun where the scan had originated. But, only a few small settlements? This he thought was, as Margie had said, very, very strange. He gave her his full attention.

“Settlements like these should be larger, since they are advanced civilizations. However, they are just below the level of mechanization. They possess fire, but not a manufacturing capability. They do not possess steam power or electricity yet. Life sciences is observing only a few inhabitants A civilization at this level

should have a population of at least a million!” She was shaking her head as if not to believe the data she was receiving.

“Captain on the bridge,” was called out as Chakotay left the turbolift and it closed behind him. Tom started to rise to vacate the Captains Chair, but the captain motioned him to stay in the chair.

Tom returned the smile. He was always trying to get more experience. He still wanted to make his father proud of him, but he wanted to prove the faith the captain and Admiral Janeway have showed in him was not wrongfully placed.

The captain continued softly as he approached the side of his chair, “You need to get the most experience you can if you are to get your own command someday. It is time you sat the center seat during the routine missions to get experience.”

“Thank you, Captain,” Tom said as he retook the captain’s chair. He had handled a few missions before. He found it was getting easier as time went on. Problems arose and were solved. They were becoming no big deal.

Chakotay return to the upper part of the bridge and took a seat at the sciences console. He watched the science officer, Lieutenant Commander Randella Scaros, set up for the survey. While the officer was the chief Science officer and a Lieutenant Commander, she still looked very young to him. Or maybe he was getting old! She certainly was experienced.

“Commander, we are within one hundred kilometers of the planet,” the helmsman said.

“Enter a standard survey orbit, helm,” the Tom ordered. He half turned toward the Science section and ordered, “Lieutenant Commander Scaros, you may begin the survey. Ensure every byte is transferred to the *Explorer* as you get it.” She nodded as she began executing his instructions on her console.

Commander Thomas Paris, acting Captain of the *USS Voyager*, looked around the front of the bridge and then at the helm he had once manned himself. It felt funny to him not to be sitting at the helm, plotting and executing the survey orbit. Then, as the ship slid smoothly into orbit, he realized with a start he forgot something. He looked at the captain with a slightly embarrassed look as he touched the fleet communications control on the arm of his chair and heard, “*Sub-Captain McLorn.*”

“Commander Paris on the *Voyager*, sir. We have entered orbit and begun scanning the moon,” the Tom reported.

There was a momentary delay before Randy said, “*Thank you Commander, we are receiving your data. Good luck with your first survey mission, McLorn out.*”

Tom was surprised at the comment and then realized the captain would have informed the command staff of any change to the mission profile. Placing him in command of the mission was definitely a profile change.

He turned his head toward the sciences console and asked, "Lieutenant Commander, how is the survey going?" He noticed the captain was grinning at him. He returned a half smile. Something was up with the captain, and he was missing it.

"I have completed the cursorily surface scan," Randella said, "I am working on the detailed surface scan now."

"Anything unusual with the planet," Tom asked. He was hoping that this would not be a normal boring survey mission.

"No electrical or radio emissions at all," she said.

"One small settlement on an island in the planet's northern sea," Chakotay pointed out.

The Lieutenant Commander turned to give her captain a rather stern, "that is my job," look, but said nothing out loud. She turned back to her console and continued to monitor the scanners and the data resulting from the scan.

He got out of the center seat and moved over to the small sciences console. He looked over the captain's shoulder at the display of the planet. He noticed it had a tactical overlay. "A settlement? How big?" Tom asked. *This was something out of the ordinary*, he thought.

"Not that big, sir," replied the Sciences officer. "Only about 60 people and most of them are on a sailing vessel."

"Good. Looks like an opportunity for an away mission," Tom said.

"I will put together a team," the sciences officer said quickly and set about forming the team.

"And since you have command, Tom, I can lead it," Chakotay said with a very large grin.

Tom began to stutter his objection and then realized the captain had fixed it so he could go on the away team. Tom had not seen this coming but knew he had been had! "Sir, the captain may not place himself in danger whether he is in command or not," Tom said, letting the captain know he was not pleased!

He missed the away missions but knew Tom would continue to protest until he returned safely. He put up his hands to ward off any more objections. "We will be observing only, Commander. No danger," Chakotay told him.

"Captain, the away team is forming in transporter room one," she said and turned to Tom to continue her report, "Commander, the surface scan is completed, and we are now performing a subsurface scan."

The captain was very grateful for the excuse to leave the bridge and the ship. Tom would find out when he got his own command that the captain was tied to the center chair and very seldom got to leave it. He would find, as Chakotay had when he became the captain, any chance to break away from the ship was welcome. Chakotay loved the ship and being captain, but a few moments of freedom now and then were needed. Tom would find this out in a few years when he got his own command. The Captain of the *Voyager* straitened up and headed to the turbolift.

“Please take care, sir. I would hate to have to report your injury to the Admiral,” said Commander Paris.

*I would like to witness the conversation,* the captain thought. Chakotay entered the turbolift and rode it down to the deck containing transporter room one. He walked the short distance to the transporter room.

He entered the room and walked toward the open position on the transporter platform. Captain Chakotay stepped onto the platform within the circular transporter chamber. He turned to face the transporter operator to order the transport and disappeared.

• • •

The captain entered the command deck and asked, “If you are not too comfortable, Randy, may I have my chair?”

“Yes, sir,” a startled McLorn said as he jumped out of the chair. He hated the captain sneaking up on him like this, but he was at a loss to figure out how to rig a warning device. He would have to talk to John.

The captain touched the control for the life sciences section, “How is the survey going,” he asked.

Sub-Captain Varrec answered, “*Very well Captain. The surface scan is completed, with some very strange results.*”

McLorn pointed at the sixth planet he was watching build and said, “times 2 and center.” The view of the system shifted as the sixth planet expanded to twice its former size.

“Go on,” the captain said.

“*The scan shows there is a very small village on an island in the single ocean on the planet,*” Varrec reported.

“Why is this result so strange,” the Admiral asked as she entered the command deck and moved forward to stand next to the center seat.

“*Because a village of this small a size could not support the level of advancement, we have detected within it. A larger population is needed to create the number of minds which are necessary to bring a civilization to the level we see,*” he said with a hint of bewilderedness in his voice.



The captain sat up in his chair during the exchange and looked at the planet closely. He thought, "*If nothing else, a bewildered Vulcan is strange indeed!*"

McLorn caught the hint and raised his eyebrows in a mock imitation of the Vulcan.

Alex found the location of the village by the blinking red dot on the surface of the planets image.

"What do you think this means?" The captain asked Varrec over the open channel.

"*Unknown Captain, but we are working on it,*" Varrec answers.

"Prepare an away team to beam down and observe the inhabitants. Keep me advised," Beck ordered.

"*Yes, Sir. Varrec out,*" he said as the connection closed.

"What do you think it means, Captain," the Admiral asked.

"I don't know, but I have an idea where to find out," he said as he got down from his chair and started walking up the ramp. "Mister, McLorn, you can have the chair back," the captain called back over his shoulder.

The Admiral followed him to the conference room. The captain walked through the door with the Admiral close behind.

## Chapter 6

Ael could not believe the conference room configuration as she began to follow Captain Beck into the room. She stopped right inside the door. It closed behind her cutting off her escape and reducing the light level within the room. This allowed the full effect of the allusion to hit her. She recoiled from the shock of what she saw and, before she could catch herself, she uttered a mild oath. She was standing in open space with the sector grid ninety-one, system one slowly, imperceptibly moving around her. The allusion of being in space was really disturbing to her internal systems.

Worf heard Ael enter and saw her distress. His own distress not completely gone; he walked over to assist her. He said in a whisper, "It will pass shortly." He took her arm and slowly escorted her to where Alexander and Margie were standing. She began to recover as she got used to the allusion, but it still made her stomach very queasy. She was very glad for the invisible floor she was walking on. She had never liked the spacewalk training she had to complete. Now this...

However, she was more upset at her reaction than the fact the allusion was so greatly affecting her. It did not seem to be affecting any of the others. *This is not the face you want them to see*, she thought. But she realized this marvelous ship still had surprises for her and she would have to get used to them. So, she would have to be on guard for them.

As Ael and Worf approached the other two officers, Captain Beck asked, "Margie, do you know anything about the small village on planet six which has Mister Varrec so puzzled?"

"We have basically the same thing on the third and seventh planets also. I am betting we will get the report of a small settlement or village on the moon also."

"Any explanations," the captain asked.

"None, as of right now. At first, we thought it might be a group of marooned survivors, but when the second small village showed up, we ruled it out. Mister Varrec has a team working on it. Still, this is a very, very strange occurrence and getting stranger the more we investigate."

"Alright, continue your work and keep me advised," Beck said as he turned toward the door to return to the bridge. He exited quickly.

The Admiral continued to stare around the room at the amazing scene around her. The more her eyes got used to the dim lighting, the more detail she discovered.

Worf leaned over and said, "I had the same reaction. Isn't this wondrous?"

Ael returned to the dimmed reality and said, “yes,” absentmindedly.

Then the Computer began repeating, “Red Alert, all hands to battle stations,” over the ship wide intercom. A red light began running around the edge of the ceiling of the room like a halo over the planetary system.

Worf and Ael sprinted for the bridge. As the door opened, they heard Randy shouting orders. He looked like a demon in the deepest part of hell, bathed in the pulsing red light of the command deck.

“Life sciences scan the local area and planet for the captain,” Randy ordered, “Weapons ready, shields up,” he said as he moved to the force railing around the command deck. “Ops scan the ship for the captain.” He touched his combadge and said, “Captain Beck, can you hear me.” He stared straight ahead while he waited for a response. He took on a comatose stare as he realized the captain was not going to answer.

They ran down the ramp to the command deck, Worf arriving first, he grabbed the man by the shoulders and looked into eyes which were full of horror, but far away. “What happened?” Worf asked over the noise of the red alert. He shook the officer when he did not get an immediate response. He asked a second time, “Get a hold of yourself. What happened?”

Randy looked at Worf as if recognizing him for the first time, his face reflecting the horror he felt inside. He looked at Worf and said, “The Captain returned to the command deck and as he sat down in his chair, he just... just disappeared! He was there, then he wasn’t!” Randy was shaking and yelling by the time he finished telling Worf what had happened.

Worf stood back and slapped the Sub-Captain on the back of his shoulder. “Sub-Captain, remember your training. Captain Beck has disappeared, what is your first duty?”

• • •

The Communications Panel on the chair arm started to beep. Commander Paul James touched the control and asked, “What is it?”

“*The captain is gone sir,*” blurted the excited transporter operator.

“I know. He just beamed down to the planet,” James replied distractedly. He was focusing on the main view screen and wishing he were on the away team.

“*No, Sir. He was stepping into the transporter chamber and just... well... disappeared!*” Exclaimed the excited transporter officer, “*I did not transport him anywhere, sir. One second, he was stepping onto the platform and then poof, he was gone! He never touched the—*”

Paul, sat up straight in the chair, forgetting his remorse, as he realized his captain was actually missing. He hit the red alert button on the chair arm, then the inter-ship intercom button—cutting off the babbling transporter officer—and ordered, “Red alert, everyone to battle stations. Red alert, everyone

to battle stations. All sections report any missing crewmembers to the bridge immediately. Cap..." He had almost added a call for the captain to come to the bridge! *That would not be a smart thing to do*, he thought. He was very glad he had caught himself.

"Sciences, scan the region and the planet for Klingon life signs," he ordered.

*Have I done everything I need to do?* He asked himself.

After less than two minutes he had the answer to how many crewmembers were missing – just one, the captain.

The fleet communications channel lighted on the panel at this right hand, startling him. He touched the control and heard the Admiral say, "*Calm down Commander. What happened?*"

*"He disappeared right out of his chair in the middle of the bridge!"* James could not readily recognize the voice of the other officer. He only knew how the voice sounded and how they felt! *The same way I do right now*, he thought, *second-guessing myself and trying to remember everything that needs to be done while fighting off a blank panic!* He took a few deep breathes to try and calm down. He looked around the bridge and saw most of the officers were watching him. He took a few more breaths and tried to exert an air of confidence. He remembers this first supervisor telling him a captain could 'Walk through a swamp of alligators and still maintain his calm.'

"*Our Captain is gone also*," reported Tom Paris. "*He stepped onto the transport pad and disappeared.*" He was surprised how calm Tom was, so he took another deep breath before adding, "Captain DarTok is also gone. He was also transporting when he disappeared. No other crewmembers are missing."

The Admiral came back on the channel and ordered, "*Fleet red alert, I repeat, fleet come to red alert.*" She caught her breath and continued, "*Captain Beck has also disappeared from the bridge of the Explorer. Begin scanning the planets, moons and surrounding areas for the missing captains. Until they return, first officers will take command of your ships. Check your crew rosters for any other missing crewmembers. Report back your status as soon as possible. Donatra standing by.*"

He was already at red alert and scanning the area and planet, those orders satisfied, now for the biggie. He sat up in the center chair and touched the log control, "Captain's log, this day and time. The captain has mysteriously disappeared from the transporter room while getting ready to transport to the planet. I have declared red alert and began a search of the planet and surrounding area. By order of Admiral Donatra, I have assumed command of this vessel. End log entry." He started to wonder what to do next.

"Captain," said the Science officer, Lieutenant Commander Sandra Mayandski. When she did not get a response, she raised her voice and called, "Captain, we have finished a scan of the local space and are concentrating on the surface."

Paul came away from his thoughts and said, "Oh ... ah, thank you, Sandy." He mentally slapped himself. *Calling Commander Mayandski by her first name*, he thought to himself, *what am I thinking! I had better get it together; the crew is depending on their new Captain. Captain! Am I ready for this*, he wondered, *what to do next, **what** to do next!*

He looked around the bridge hoping his fear did not show on his face. He looked at each position. The Science officer was working on scanning for the captain, *this is a good thing*, he thought then he said, "Commander, broaden your scan to include human life signs."

"Aye, sir," she stated.

He continued his scan of the bridge. The Communications officer was looking at him with a questioning look on this face and the fear they were all showing. As he continued looking at each bridge station, he wondered if he was forgetting or overlooking something he should be doing. The Engineering officer was busy, but he was not sure at what. The Weapons officer was testing the weapons configurations and monitoring the shield status. The Operations officer was monitoring the ships status very closely. The Helmsman was monitoring the orbit and propulsion systems.

None of the officers on the bridge were watching him anymore except the Communications officer, but he knew they were expecting something. He looked back at the Weapons officer and saw the red haze over the console. *We are at red alert*, he thought, *I have something to do*. He looked back at the Communications officer and suddenly remembered what it was.

"Communications, open a channel to the *Explorer*, he ordered.

"Channel opened sir," the officer reported, the relief showing in his voice. "I must have gotten it right," he thought!

"*Admiral Donatra*," she responded.

"Admiral, this is Commander Paul James, Captain of the Pioneer. We are at red alert and no one else is missing from the crew," he reported.

"*Very Good, Captain*," she said.

"Admiral, I would like to drop to yellow alert," he requested. Then, he thought he had better explain the request, "I don't see an immediate danger and the shields will remain up."

"*I agree, Captain. Carry on. Donatra out*," she said quickly.

She kept calling him Captain and he guessed he had better get used to it. He noticed she had not ordered him to yellow alert. She had not tried to tell him what to do!

The communications panel beeped, and he touched the fleet communications control, "*This is Admiral Donatra, you may reduce fleet readiness to yellow alert if your situation warrants the change. Donatra out*." The channel closed.

“Drop us to yellow alert,” he said, “Weapons maintain the shields at full strength and Ops, keep the sensors peeled.”

“Aye, sir,” came from two directions. The crew seemed to be recovering from the shock of losing a Captain. He was also starting to relax.

He leaned back touching the log button and, as close as he could, related the happening to the log. He ended with the acceptance of command of the Pioneer. He looked around his bridge settling on sciences, “Commander Mayandski, have you found any life signs yet?”

“No, sir,” Sandra said. He could hear the disappointment in her voice.

He said, “keep scanning, Commander.” He looked around the bridge again and thought, “*what else to do...*”

• • •

The Chief Engineer jumped to his feet and was at the captain’s chair before anyone else could do more than notice he was gone. Borall waved his hand through the space where Captain Ryan Alan David had been as if to convince himself the captain was really gone.

“Red alert, shields up,” he ordered, “Sciences, scan for a transporter beam and the captains’ life signs in the ship and local space. Ops, check if any other crewmembers are missing.”

He touched his combadge, “Transporter room.”

“*Transporter room, Aye.*”

“Has Commander Fossey beamed down to the surface yet?”

“*This is Jeff, Borall, what do you need and why the red alert?*” Jeffery asked.

“Return to the bridge. The captain has just disappeared.”

“*On my way,*” Jeffery said, his frantic voice fading. Borall closed the connection.

Borall confirmed with the Ops officer only one crewmember was missing, the captain. The Science officer reported the captain was neither on board nor in the surrounding space. She also reported there was no trace of a transporter signature within the local area. He ordered a sensor sweep of the planet. Weapons reported the shields up and weapons ready.

Commander Jeffery Fossey exploded onto the bridge asking, “What happened?”

Commander Borall turned to face Jeff and calmly reported, “The Captain was reaching out to cut the connection open to you in the transporter room and he just disappeared. I immediately called for a red alert; raised shields, which are up; ordered sensors sweep of the ship, which was negative; a sensor sweep of

the local space, which was also negative; and ordered a sensor sweep of the planet, which is in progress.”

Jeffery had sat down in the center chair in a condition which resembled shock. He shook it off and stabbed the fleet communications control on the arm of the chair and said excitedly, “This is Commander Fossey aboard the Galileo, the Captain’s gone!”

“*Calm down Commander. What happened?*” Ael asked calmly.

“He disappeared right out of his chair in the middle of the bridge!” He said, the words exploding from his mouth.

He recognized the voice of Commander Thomas Paris from the dinner aboard the *Explorer* after they had set out on this voyage. “*Our Captain is gone also. He stepped onto the transport pad and disappeared.*”

He did not recognize the next voice but did notice it was calmer than his. “*Captain Dar’Tok is also gone. He was also transporting when he disappeared.*”

“*Fleet red alert, I repeat, fleet come to red alert. Captain Beck also disappeared from the bridge of the Explorer,*” the Admiral ordered. “*Begin scanning the planets, moons and surrounding areas for the missing Captains. Until they return, first officers will take command of your ships. Check your crew rosters for any other missing crewmembers. Report back your status as soon as possible. Donatra standing by.*”

“You heard the Admiral,” Jeffery said.

Borall leaned down and said quietly, “We are at red alert, Captain.”

“Captain! The captain is gone,” Jeffery said.

“Admiral Donatra ordered you to take command of this ship. You *are* the Captain of the *Galileo* now. Pull yourself together sir,” Borall said quietly in his ear.

He took a very deep breath and let it out slowly. “*You have commanded this ship many times as the acting Captain,*” he thought. Then asked himself, “*what is different now? Nothing. Didn’t you command the ship for the voyage from earth to Charon, during the retrofit and docking before they left?*”

He straightened in the chair. Borall stood back up and returned to the engineering station. “Ok, where are we are?” He asked the air.

Weapons answered first, “Shields up, weapons hot sir.” Ops reported all crew at battle stations and accounted for, except Captain David. He cringed at the mention of the captain. Sciences reported the scan of the planet was in progress.

“Communications, open a channel to the *Explorer*, he ordered.

“Channel opened sir,” the officer reported.

“*Admiral Donatra,*” came the response.

“Admiral, this is Captain Fossey on the *Galileo*. We are at red alert and no one else is missing from the crew. We are currently scanning the planet and the space around the ship,” he reported calmly. Then he thought about what he had said, “*Captain Fossey on the Galileo.*” He felt he did not earn the position. But he resolved to do the best he could. It was time to put his money where his mouth was!

“*Thank you, Captain. Donatra out,*” she said and closed the connection.

*What to do next*, he thought. He looked slowly around the bridge at each station; everyone was busy either performing a task or monitoring their station.

The communications panel beeped, and he touched the fleet communications control, “*This is Admiral Donatra, you may reduce fleet readiness to yellow alert if your situation warrants the change. Donatra out.*” The channel closed.

“Drop us to yellow alert,” he said turning to the Weapons officer, “Keep the shields up.”

“Yes, Captain,” replied the Weapons officer with a very slight smile.

He started to warm to the idea of being the captain. The bridge crew seemed to be supporting him. He leaned forward in the chair, punched the log button and made his first log entry as the captain. He looked over at the Science section and asked, “Any results yet, Hutch?”

“No, sir,” Lieutenant Commander Bruce Hutcherson said.

He looked back at the main view screen showing the arc of the planet and thought, “*This is the hard part, waiting for something to do...*”

• • •

“Red Alert, all hands to battle stations,” the automated announcement began sounding and repeating. The red band around the bridge ceiling also illuminated and began pulsating.

“What the—” Commander Tom Paris began from the center chair.

The Communications Panel on the chair arm started to beep. He touched the control and asked, “What is it?”

“*This is the transporter room, sir. The captain has disappeared from the transporter chamber sir,*” said the excited transporter operator, “*he’s just gone.*”

“He didn’t beam down to the planet?” Tom asked.

“*No, Sir. He was stepping into the transporter chamber and just... well... disappeared.*”

“Acknowledged, Paris out,” he said. He knew he should not have let the captain go on the away team! He sat back for a moment to think about what was happening and what he should do about it. Sweeping his eyes around the bridge, he could see all eyes were looking at him.



“Weapons, are the shields up? Are the weapons ready?” He asked. Then commented loudly, “We are at red alert!”

He began giving orders and watched the crew carry them out. “Ops, how many of the crew were also taken? Scaros, scan for human life signs around the ship, in the ship and on the planet in that order. If you find anything or anyone, send the coordinates to the transporter room.”

Both officers turned to follow out his orders.

The fleet communications channel lighted on the panel at this right hand, startling him. He touched the control and heard the Admiral say, “*Calm down Commander. What happened?*”

“*He disappeared right out of his chair in the middle of the bridge!*” He was pretty sure the officer was Commander Fossey, but he was not absolutely sure. He knew how he felt though!

“Our Captain is gone also,” he jumped in and reported. “He stepped onto the transport pad and disappeared.”

“*Captain Dar Tok is also gone.*” He was sure the reporting officer was Commander James. “*He was also transporting when he disappeared.*”

Tom looked over at Randella and asked, “Any luck Scaros?”

“I have completed a scan of the surrounding area and one scan of the inside of the ship. No joy, sir. I am now scanning the surface for any life signs of the same mass, it is quicker.”

“Carry on, Scaros,” he ordered.

The Admiral came back on the channel and ordered, “*Fleet red alert, I repeat, fleet come to red alert. Captain Beck has also disappeared from the bridge of the Explorer. Begin scanning the planets, moons and surrounding areas for the missing Captains. Until they return, first officers will take command of your ships. Check your crew rosters for any other missing crewmembers. Report back your status as soon as possible. Donatra standing by.*”

Red alert, she is a little late, I am already at red alert. Search the area for the captain, doing it. Assume command of the vessel, reluctantly done. He was sure they would find the captain and rescue him soon, so his captaincy would be a short one. *But I might enjoy it while I can*, he thought, *especially since my father did not expect me to survive the academy, let alone my first tour of duty!* He smiled at the thought of his father finding out he was in command of a Starfleet vessel. He owed it to Admiral Janeway and silently thanked her for placing him on this road.

“Communications, open a channel to the *Explorer*,” he ordered. “Ops, anyone else missing?”

“Channel opened sir,” the officer reported.

The Ops officer shook their head.

*“Admiral Donatra,”* came the response.

“Admiral, this is Captain Paris. We are at red alert and no one else is missing from the crew,” he reported.

*“Thank you, Captain. Donatra out,”* she said and closed the connection.

*Now what would the captain do,* he asked himself. He looked slowly around the bridge at each station; everyone was busy either performing a task or monitoring their station.

The communications panel beeped, and he touched the fleet communications control, *“This is Admiral Donatra, you may reduce fleet readiness to yellow alert if your situation warrants the change. Donatra out.”* The channel closed.

“Yellow alert Ops,” he said.

“Yes, Captain,” replied the Ops officer with a warm smile.

He punched the log button on the chair arm and made a log entry.

He got up and went over to the Science section and asked, “Scaros, got a bite yet?”

“No sir, still fishing” Lieutenant Commander Scaros said.

He said, “You need to change the bate, Commander,” jokingly to release the tension as he sat down in the same chair as Chakotay had and watched her work. *“Am I next,”* he thought, *“For sitting in his chair?”*

## Chapter 7

Admiral Ael Donatra stared at the surreal scene before her. The Ambassador had struck a senior officer of the ship, *the* senior officer as of right now, and was continuing to man-handle him. She was not completely sure Worf would not kill him at this point. Randy was clearly in shock at the loss of his friend and captain. But this did not excuse Worf. She could only suspect Worf was trying to snap the man back to reality so he could perform his duties. In her estimation, sending Randy to sick bay would be a better and safer course of action!

She examined the Sub-Captain's face closely and caught the light of understanding as it began to show in his eyes. He began to recover.

Setting the shock and the accompanying feels aside, Randy seemed to be concentrating on his training as a Starfleet officer to help pull himself out of his stupor. Worf's tactics, unorthodox in Starfleet but probably normal for the Klingon culture, seemed to be working.

Worf took him by the shoulders, looked him straight in the eyes and asked, "Sub-Captain, do you know who I am?"

Randy looked at him and the shock in his eyes turned to ire in his voice, "Yes, Ambassador Worf, I know who you are." He struggled against Worf's grip.

Worf released the solid grip he had on Randy's shoulders and said, "Good, now what do you need to do?"

As Randy was thinking about the answer to Worf's question, Ael sat down in the captain's chair as the fleet communications control lighted and the panel beeped. She touched the control to open the communications channel. "*This is Commander Fossey aboard the Galileo, the Captain's gone!*"

She could hear the panic in his voice and knew she had to do something about it. "Calm down Commander. What happened?" Ael asked.

"*He disappeared right out of his chair in the middle of the bridge!*" He was not going to calm down any time soon from the way his voice sounded. The man was this side of panic! *Are all Starfleet officers like this*, she wondered.

She also wondered if everyone had gone over the bend like Sub-Captain McLorn and Commander Fossey.

"*Our Captain is gone also*," reported Tom Paris. "*He stepped onto the transport pad and disappeared.*"

Finally, a calm voice in the storm, she thought. He was not as panicked as Commander Fossey, and she hoped his calmer demeanor would calm down the rest of the first officers.

“Captain Dar’Tok is also gone,” reported Commander James. “He was also transporting when he disappeared. No other crewmember is missing.”

“Fleet red alert, I repeat, fleet; go to red alert,” the Admiral ordered calmly. She tried to stay calm, even though she had never faced a situation where the senior officers from four different ships had disappeared simultaneously. She was sure this was insane, but insanity seemed ‘par for the course’ on this mission. “Captain Beck has also disappeared from the bridge of the *Explorer*. Begin scanning the planets, moons and surrounding areas for the missing captains. Until they return, first officers will take command of your ships. Check your crew rosters for any other missing crewmembers. Report back your status as soon as possible. Donatra standing by.” She did not close the fleet channel since she was expecting rapid replies from the two other first officers on crew status.

She looked up at Randy, whom still had an expression of utter doom written all over his face. She was not sure that Randy could handle both the search and command of the ship. Taking command would also give her the opportunity to command a ship of the line again. She made the decision to take command of the ship. She looked at Randy and said, “I will take command of the *Explorer* while you concentrate on finding the captain.”

He stared at her for a moment until the reality of what she was saying struck him like a ton of hull plating. His confidence seemed to return in an instant. “I can do both, Admiral,” Randy told her slowly, quietly. She could see his expression was changing to one of purer hatred. “Proper succession of command gives *me* command of the *Explorer*.”

Worf stepped forward next to the Admiral. He saw the Sub-Captain’s demeanor change and wanted to be close to both if there was trouble. He sensed the situation was becoming explosive.

“You need not remind *me* of the succession of command, Sub-Captain,” she said in a commanding voice. “*He is challenging my decision,*” she thought. She continued, trying to be more reasonable, “However, you need to concentrate on finding the officers we have lost.”

“I would think *that* would be your duty, sir,” Randy said boldly. He had been training for command for many years and felt he was ready to take command of this ship. But now he would be prevented by a senior officer who should be doing what she wanted him to do, coordinating the search.

The Admiral became enraged with his insubordination. She slammed her hands down on the Chairs arms, cutting the fleet connection as she said, “Sub-Captain McLorn, you are bordering on a trip to your quarters or the brig.” The Admiral continued with fire in her eyes, her Romulan stubborn streak showing

brightly, "*I have command.* That is all, Sub-Captain!" She was reminded of and sounded like the Tal'shar she hated. This helped to calm her down.

Worf leaned over and said quietly, outside the hearing of the Sub-Captain, "Admiral, the Sub-Captain is correct. You have a fleet to coordinate. The fleet is your job. Let the Sub-Captain do his job of running the ship."

She turned in the chair to face Worf. She did not return his quiet council, "Ambassador, I am aware you are also a Starfleet Commander and as such follow the proper Starfleet protocols; however, I have made my decision and it will *stand*. Taking command of the *Explorer* is taking care of the fleet, which as you said, is my job."

"Admiral, you should reconsider," Worf stated flatly, his voice at the same, normal level as hers.

Randy was astonished at the argument between the two. Worf was fighting his battle as if he could not! He stared; his mouth opened slightly at the scene before him as it continued.

"Ambassador, we agreed that I would have command of the fleet and I have made a decision about the command organization within the fleet. Are you now going to challenge that decision?" She asked him.

"No, however, I am asking you to reconsider," Worf said quietly. He was trying very hard to remove the emotion he felt from his voice as he said, "You have a survey to complete, a mystery to solve, a search to coordinate and now you want to command a starship on top to the rest of your duties? I would think you would allow the Sub-Captain to take command of his vessel as stated in the succession of change. He has only one task on his plate whereas yours is full."

"I have commanded a starship before, the Sub-Captain has not." She began.

He saw the opening he needed and struck, "I have commanded this ship before, during the construction. I know this ship inside and out. The captain has been grooming me for my own command just as Captain Picard groomed Captain Riker. I was in line for my own ship but turned it down to be the first officer of this ship. I thought first officer of the newest, fastest, best ship in the fleet is better than captain of a small..."

Worf saw the futility of the Sub-Captains' arguments and in fact was behind McLorn in his belief that she should not take the Captaincy from the Sub-Captain. However, the Admiral saw his arguments as a direct attack on her authority and Worf knew that the Sub-Captain had lost this round with the Admiral.

She held back her ire and said nothing. He stared at her for a moment until he could see the argument with her was over and she had won. She looked at Randy, a very stern look on her face. "Sub-Captain," she said, "find your

captain. You are dismissed.” She turned back to the system display handing before her to emphasize his dismissal.

Randy did not move. He called down to the operations officer, “Ops, set up a grid search of the region and the planet. Look for any Human or Klingon life signs.” He seemed to except the situation, but clearly did not like it one bit.

Sensing the moment had passed, the situation defused; Worf turned and walked back up the ramp to the conference room.

Randy heard the faint acknowledgement from below as the fleet communications control lighted on the arm of her chair. He began to reach for it but was blocked by the Admiral as she touched it and said, “Admiral Donatra.”

*“Admiral, this is Captain Paris. We are at red alert and no one else is missing from the crew,”* he reported.

“Thank you, Captain. Donatra out,” she said and closed the connection.

The communications control lighted again. She said, “Admiral Donatra.”

*“Admiral, this is Captain Fossey on the Galileo. We are at red alert and no one else is missing from the crew. We are currently scanning the planet and the space around the ship,”* he reported. She noticed his voice was calmer, but was still not the detached, focused voice of command. She felt sorry for the crew of the Galileo!

“Thank you, Captain,” she said, this time leaving the connection open.

*“Admiral, this is Commander Paul James, Captain of the Pioneer. We are at red alert and no one else is missing from the crew,”* he calmly reported.

“Very good, Captain,” she said.

*“Admiral, I would like to drop to yellow alert,”* he requested. *“I don’t see an immediate danger and the shields will remain up.”*

“I agree, Captain. Carry on. Donatra out,” she said quickly, closing the channel. She thought about his request for a moment.

She opened the fleet channel again to ensure all the ship heard her, “This is Admiral Donatra, you may reduce fleet readiness to yellow alert if your situation warrants the change. Donatra standing by.” She waited until the rest of the roundabouts had checked in and then closed the channel.

She looked at Sub-Captain McLorn standing to the side and asked, “your report is?”

McLorn slowly leaned toward the railing and without removing his eyes from the Admirals face or changing his defiant look, asked, “Ops, have we lost any other crewmembers?”

The Ops officer stated they had not.

Randy straightened and said flatly, "We are at red alert and no one else is missing from the crew." He was evidently working overtime to keep his temper and voice under control.

He felt the Admiral had overstepped her span of control and needed to remain in a position to pick up the pieces.

He also appeared very defiant in the Admiral's opinion. She let it pass; she was not worried about how he felt, just what he did.

She nodded, rose from the chair and headed up the ramp to her office. She said, "You may take the ship to yellow alert keeping the shields up. You have the conn, Mister McLorn," as the conference room door closed behind her.

Fuming, Randy turned and walked down the ramp to the lower deck and checked his console. He was barely keeping his temper, using the calming techniques he learned from a Vulcan friend. He knew she was wrong. She did not understand Starfleet. But she was the Admiral and she had made her decision. No matter how wrong he felt the decision was, he was honor bound to follow it. He still did not have to like it.

He looked at the other bridge officers and found they were looking at him. He noted the look of a 'bystander at the scene of a very bad argument' they both had on their faces. He looked away, embarrassed by their looks.

He muttered an oath under his breath and almost slammed a fist on the console as he sat down. He looked back at them trying not to look at him! Why he felt better, he was not sure, but he did. He also did not feel like staying in this chair for a moment longer. He checked the status of the ship on his console and rose to his feet.

"Ops take us to yellow alert. Weapons, keep the shields up at full strength," he ordered. "I will be in life sciences." As he left, he gave the conn to the Ops officer.

He walked under the command deck to the life science section to get and update on the search for the captain. Commander S'har, the Chief Medical officer was the only entity in the area.

"S'har, do you have any results on the search for Captain Beck?" Randy asked it. He was not really sure what species it was, or even if it was gender based and if so, what gender. It referred to itself in the singular, but never, in his dealing with the creature had he determined a gender. Thus, he just referred to it as it or called it by name.

"No, S-ub-C-ap-ta-in. I h-ave s-can-ed n-ear sp-ace f-or h-is li-fe s-ign an-d f-oun-d no-th-ing," she said very slowly. "I h-ave s-can-ed the sh-ip and f-oun-d no-th-ing. I w-ill st-art s-can-ing the p-lan-et sh-or-t-ly."

“Thank you S’har,” he said, then turned and left when it did not offer anything else. He went back to the lower deck and noticed the command deck was occupied by only the ops officer at the helm. He walked up the ramp and sat down in the center chair as if it were his. “*This chair should be mine,*” he thought.

He settled in as if it was his. Enjoying the feel of the hot seat he had been preparing to occupy for years. He vowed not to let this minor setback put a damper on his career plans or his ego. He would get a ship of his own with his next change of command and with his experience and dedication; he would bet it would not be a cargo hauler either. He closed his eyes and imagined commanding an Intrepid or Galaxy class starship with an exciting mission on the horizon.

• • •

She stormed into her office and marched over to stand behind her desk pumping her arms, with their closed fists, up and down as if pummeling someone before her. Ael was seething as never before in her career. She wanted to beat the human to death but lowered her arms to pound on her desk. She stopped pounding the desk with an expression of exasperation as the office door opened. She spun to face away from the door as Aulee entered the office to see what the racket was all about. She did not want her aide to see her like this.

“Admiral?” Aulee asked, hoping the Admiral would calm down enough to tell her how she could help her.

The Admiral turned back and looked Aulee straight in the eye, shouting, “That human needs a good flogging!” She tried to release her anger on Aulee, who stood her ground. Ael’s face showed she regretted the attempt immediately.

“Which human, Sir,” Aulee asked quietly. Aulee did not want to upset the Admiral any more than she already was. She did not want to chance a flogging, whatever that was, for herself. In her recent experience with the Admiral, she had not seen Ael this upset, abet this incensed!

“Sub-Captain McLorn!”

“Can’t you have the captain take care of him?”

“I would like very much to, but Captain Beck, as well as the other ship captains have all disappeared.” Her breathing was beginning to come back under control as she began to calm down.

Aulee was shocked, stunned. “You’re kidding,” slipped out of her mouth before she knew it was anywhere near her lips! She tried to recover, tried to understand, “All four captains – gone!” She starred at the Admiral. “I am sorry Admiral, but how can this be true?”

“It is true. The four Captains disappeared from their ships a few moments ago. That is why *Sub-Captain McLorn* ordered the ship be placed on red alert.” She



glanced at the little red bullet racing around the edge of the ceiling. Looking back at Aulee she said, "I have since taken command of this ship."

"You are the captain?" The question escaped before she could catch it—"I need to control my surprise," she thought. This shocked her almost as much as the disappearance of four Captains. People move up in rank, not down—unless they did something wrong.

"Yes, and McLorn is fighting me. I assume he thinks *he* should be the acting captain, but I do not want him distracted from looking for Captain Beck."

Aulee was not sure this last statement was true.

The Admiral continued quickly, "I also do not feel he is ready. His current behavior is proof of that."

As the gravity of the situation slowly fell on her aide, Ael sat down and tried to calm herself. The silence did not last near as long as she would have liked.

"Can you run this ship and command the fleet, Sir," Aulee asked quietly.

"Of course," Ael said quickly, snapping out the answer. Aulee jerked back slightly in response. Donatra continued, "I have commanded a war bird in battle before and this is only a hostile area."

"But now you have seven other ships to command as well," she reminded the Admiral.

Ale looked up sharply, trying to determine if her aide was turning against her or, worse, attacking her decision also. She saw the concern on Aulee's face and banished any thoughts of mutiny on the part of her aide. She said, "McLorn does not have the battle experience to command this ship."

Aulee responded quietly, not wanting to upset her boss and new friend in a time of distress. "Sir, I think you should read his record. I have and he does have battle experience."

Ael looked at her aide questioningly.

"I have been reading up on the senior crew members to assist you with personnel matters just like this," she said. She shrugged as she continued, "You have not had the time and I did not have much else to do."

Ael was stunned. She had been so busy trying to understand the ship, she had forgotten about the crew records. Something she would have to rectify.

Her aide continued, "Sub-Captain McLorn was at Wolf-359 and survived the Borg attack."

Aulee let this revelation sink in for a moment.

The Admiral steeped her fingers before her, resting her elbows on the desk. She lowered her gaze to stare at her fingers, remembering the battle with the Borg at Worf-359 had cost the Federation dearly. About fifty percent of the available Federation ships had been lost or damaged in the battle.

The High Council had wanted to invade the Federation, but cooler heads had prevailed and convinced the council not to call attention to Romulus. The Star Command had ordered half the fleet, including all the newest, most powerful vessels to the Federation-Romulan border to ensure the Borg would not catch them by surprise. Ael turned back to look at her aide, who was now seated in a chair before the Admiral's desk.

Aulee continued when the Admiral looked back at her, "I also examined the logs for his ship. He was the first officer on the *USS Bellerophon*, a Nebula Class science vessel, when his captain was killed in the first attack," she related. Her eyes glassed over as if she saw the record before her. "The Sub-Captain took command of the vessel and continued the fight until the ship was disabled. Only the arrival of the *Enterprise* and other rescue vessels saved him and what was left of the crew."

She continued, "He was next posted as a replacement Executive officer on the *USS Magellan*, a Galaxy Class vessel under the command of Captain Beck, for the Dominion Wars. Again, his captain was injured, but this time the Sub-Captain fought the ship to a victory. Although the ship was badly damaged and he was nursing a minor wound himself, he managed to get the ship to a Starbase for refit. After repairs and his captain's recovery the ship returned to the War and served valiantly until the end of the war. He and Captain Beck became very good friends and they have become an integrated team since the war."

She paused for a moment to collect her thoughts and then continued quietly, "He has, if I may say so sir, less combat time than you have, but only by a few hours!"

The Admiral looked at her sternly but said nothing. Ael was madder at herself than at her aide. She should have known all this. She vowed not to make this mistake again.

She continued, "He has also turned down command of the *USS Norway*, the first Norway class vessel and the *USS Bellerophon*, an Intrepid Class vessel. Both times he stated he did not feel ready to command a vessel; that he had more to learn from Captain Beck before he inflicted himself on an unsuspecting crew."

She had un-steeped her fingers, placing her hands on the desk as she listening to her aide. Aulee's comment caused a very quick smile to appear before Ael could suppress it. She leaned forward and asked her aide, "then he is qualified to command this vessel?"

Aulee shifted in the chair to give her time to think. She was not used to providing her opinion to a flag officer, heck, she was lucky if her immediate supervisor asked her opinion on any subject! Aulee finally looked Ael in the eyes and said, "Yes sir. I believe he is. The record shows he commanded this ship for seven months while Captain Beck was temporarily post to the *USS*

*Ulysses*. Sub-Captain McLorn performed most of the initial space trials, taking the cloaked ship out and testing the impulse engines and warp drive.”

“I was not aware that Captain Beck was on the *USS Ulysses*,” the Admiral said. She seemed distracted as she tried to reach a solution to her problem with the Sub-Captain. Her year on Earth had brought her many stories of the exploits of the Starfleet ships. She had heard one about the *Ulysses* and tried to remember the particulars.

“He was. The ship’s captain – Captain Willis, I think - was disabled for five months. Because of the ships’ mission on the Cardassian border, it was decided that a seasoned captain would command. Captain Beck was the only captain available and took command until Captain Willis returned.”

Aulee continued her briefing. “Are you also aware this ship was involved in the incident at Norpin V?”

Captain Beck was at Starfleet receiving the mission briefing from the Federation President, so Sub-Captain McLorn commanded the ship at the time. They were testing the tunnel with short hops when they received the report. They had Admiral Na’mur aboard for their final test runs and he ordered them into battle. Three Borg ships were destroyed in almost as many minutes by the *Explorer*. The Admiral called it the final shake-down he wanted, and the ship went operational upon its return. This was only a month ago.”

“I heard a rumor of the battle, but could not find out any of the details,” Ael said.

“It’s in the ships logs.” Aulee paused and then added, “Where you also aware Captain Beck turned down promotion to Admiral to take command of the *Explorer*?”

“Yes, I did know he turned down the promotion, but not why. It happened while I was on Earth. Admiral Na’mur was not pleased with his decision it seemed at the time. Captain Beck disappeared the next day. It was a very strange situation, but I can see now how and why he ended up on this ship. In hindsight, I would think it was staged to make Beck disappear so he could command this vessel without being missed.”

“That is not what the records show. He *was* to be an Admiral. He was already in command of this ship at the time. He said he did not want to leave the bridge of a ship.”

Ael stared ahead, steeping her fingers again. A very old habit used for concentration and focus. She tried to integrate this new information into her decision-making processes. She said nothing for a long time, lost in her thoughts. If Beck had made Admiral, would she be here right now? Would Randy be the captain? Many thoughts went through her mind.

She was beginning to believe she was *not* the right person for this position. She was beginning to doubt her abilities to handle all the responsibilities. She knew

she could handle the command responsibilities, but the decisions she was being forced to make were in the areas she had not yet entered or was comfortable operating in. Or areas she did not want to enter at all. Making decisions affecting lives of her crew. The crew looked to her to bring them home safely and she was not sure she could accomplish this responsibility on such a scale.

She commanded the fleet, thousands of lives, not just hundreds. She realized she had to be up to it. It was her job to be responsible for them. She repeated her solemn oath to herself to keep her crew safe. It always made her feel better and energized her.

When she came back to the moment, Ael was startled to find Aulee at her side with a cup of hot tea. She accepted the hot beverage and began sipping it. Aulee returned to her chair with another cup, her demeanor seemed grave.

“You don’t think I should have taken command of this vessel, do you?” Ael asked over the top of the cup in between sips.

“My opinion is of little consequence. It is what *you* think that counts, sir. If this new information changes your perspective, then it is up to you, not me, to change your mind.”

“Thank you. Your innocence and clarity are two of the reasons I wanted you as my aide. Maybe you should take this seat,” Ael said smiling.

“If there is one thing, I have learned in the short time I have worked for you, it is this—I would rather not sit in your chair. And if I am ever called to sit in your chair, I know it will be many years before I can sit in the chair with your wisdom and confidence. No offense intended sir.”

“Aulee, one day you will sit in a chair just like this one. I see too much of me in you. That is the main reason I asked for you.”

“I hope you will wait a few minutes before you make me an Admiral!” They both laughed, which was something that Ael needed.

She finished her tea and put the cup down on the desk and rose, saying, “Well thank you for the information. But it is time to get some rest.”

Ael walked to the doorway to her quarters looking very tired. She entered her living room, leaving Aulee to clean up the teacups.

Aulee was very pleased with herself at the outcome of her first crisis with the Admiral. She was well aware this would not be the last time she would help the Admiral make a decision.

• • •

Worf tried to walk quickly through the conference room, but he only made it two thirds of the way across. It still made him a bit queasy to be walking through space without a space suit, but then, he did not like walking in space with a space suit either!

He noticed most of the system surveys had been completed and the planets and moons looked very real, as if he could reach out and hold one.

Margie looked up as he entered; the dim light from the bridge was like a spotlight shining across the even dimmer room. She noticed he stopped a few yards away. She was very glad he did not bother her while she finished integrating the last of the initial survey data into the model.

“Computer, return the model to normal size,” she stated flatly. The first and second moons reduced in size to a more normal perspective based on the rest of the model floating in the conference room. She longed for the old days when she had the feel of a control unit in her hand. This computerized puzzle palace, a marvel of technology, made her uneasy. She really longed for the decade’s past, when a ship was controlled—not asked!

She walked slowly over to where Worf was standing, trying to get his space-legs she imagined.

“It took me months to get used to this model presentation, Ambassador,” she confided in him quietly. “Don’t feel bad if you don’t adjust to it as quickly as my staff or I do.”

“I don’t like being in open space, so it may take me longer,” he replied with a wry smile. “How is the survey going,” he asked, changing the subject to the reason he had braved the room in the first place.

“Pretty much completed, sir. We only lack a few of the smaller space debris and we will have the system fully surveyed down to the level of small rocks!” She was very pleased to be able to say this. Many of the ships, all the ships, she had worked on had lacked this level of sophistication and technology. And with four ships and four runabouts providing ten channels of data, a month’s surveying had been completed within a few days. Her uneasy feeling diminished a bit more.

But, at what cost. She had heard all four captains had disappeared right off their ships. Now the survey had turned into a race against time to find the missing captains and rescuing them. She felt more hope of finding them alive every time a report came in stating nothing was found in the surrounding space and the efforts of the ship were now focused on the heavenly body they orbited.

“How is the search going,” Worf asked, again very quietly.

“As of the last report, all the efforts are now focused on the planets and moons, sir.”

He nodded in the dim light and said, “Thank you, Sub-Captain.” He nodded again and turned toward the door to his outer office. Fighting the bit of nausea he felt, and avoiding walking through the third moon of the sixth planet, he made his way to the door of his office without incident and walked quickly through it.

Margie felt for the warrior. She had served with Worf briefly and knew how much any sign of weakness affected him. She was not sure if Worf was even aware of the fact they had severed together on the *USS Enterprise-E*. Even though they shared the *Enterprise* for Worf's one month of duty for two years in a row, he had not acknowledged her as a former co-worker. "I guess I will have to bring it up to him next time," she thought.

She slowly walked to the sun and examined the thin blue line as it abruptly ended just short of the sun. She wondered out loud, "A ship in orbit of the sun? A very likely hypothesis." She continued to study the model.

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Worf entered his outer office to find it empty. He wondered where Kurah was. He walked to the door of her quarters and touched the announcer. There was no answer. He called out for her and the door to his office slid open.

He walked across the small space and through the door to his office and found what he was looking for holding his mug in her hands. She was standing next to his favorite chair. He was surprised to see the chair since he had not brought the pattern with him. "*Kurah must have had it replicated,*" he thought.

"Sit down my warrior," she said. She could tell he was still upset from the incident on the bridge, but he was also sure he looked a little 'blue in the gills,' as the humans called it. She had noticed the anomaly many times before and asked him twice about it before giving up. He had always growled about an upset stomach. It usually occurred after his zero-gravity combat training.

Worf walked to the small grotto setting and sat in his favorite chair. It formed to his body like a warm, cuddly friend. He began to relax as the chair comforted him.

Worf exclaimed, "I am being tested for entry into Stovalcore! The Admiral is being unreasonable again. I would strike her down, if I did not need her."

Kurah replied comfortingly, "You can handle any Romulan. Don't let her get under your warrior skin Worf, I don't want to share my place!" She smiled down at him.

Kurah turned the chair's setting to a mild massage; she would not want him to spill the drink she had handed him. "And besides, you will have no problem entering the most scared place of all the Klingon warriors," she retorted standing over him, rubbing his shoulders. She felt him relax after a while. She stopped rubbing and busied herself with the preparation of a meal for two.

She entered Worf's quarters, went through the motions of replicating the meal, and setting the table. Kurah was lost in thought as she fixed his favorite meal of fresh Gagh and Rokeg Blood Pie.

Kurah was trying to find the right time to tell him the news she had brought with her. She wanted to tell him all the news from home, good and bad. News

about his brother. How the Klackon incident had ended. As well as news from Chancellor Martok and the House of Martok.

She decided on a good meal and the news about his bother first. Then the news about them in the morning after a good night's rest.

She finished the meal and put the other mug at his place. She went back into his office and found him asleep in the chair. Kurah placed a covering over Worf and went back into his quarters to eat. The news would have to wait for another time.

She returned to his quarters and ate a solitary meal lost in the thoughts and the glow of the news she carried.

## Chapter 8

Ael entered the conference room and was immediately hit with the woozy feeling she felt the first time she had entered with the system displayed. But this time it was not as bad. *“I must be getting used to this,”* she thought, *“maybe I should spend more time here.”* Even with the woozy feeling, she felt refreshed after only five hours sleep.

She made her way over to where Worf, Varrec and Margie were discussing one of the planets.

“We all know this is *not* possible,” Worf said excitedly as Ael joined them. She hated coming into the middle of a conversation. She always missed the subject!

“Yet it is sir,” Varrec stated in his flat, even voice although the fact his eyebrows rose betrayed his incapacity to fathom how Worf could not understand the obvious!

“Whither it is or is not, it is still impossible for a civilization this *small* to produce these results. It simply is *not* possible!” Worf thundered.

“Do you have any explanation for this phenomenon,” asked Ael.

Varrec looked at Ael and said, “Not at this time. We are working with all the data as it is being collected. Many things are not as they seem.” He glanced at Worf and then looked back at the Admiral and continued, “We are trying to work out the explanations as the data is accumulated, which is very difficult.”

“Then I will let you get back to your duties,” she said.

Varrec turned and left the room via the beam curtain.

Turning to Margie, she asked, “Have you found out any more information on the scanning beam that we experienced upon entering the system?”

“Yes, sir. Each of the ships has also been feeding us readings on the path of the beam residue. Computer, display the scanning beam on the system display,” Margie commanded. A thin blue line shot from a point near the sun, across the room to stop at a point just above the plain of the system. Ael assumed this was their position at the time of the scan.

Margie continued, “As you can see, Admiral, the faint traces lead directly to the vicinity of the sun.”

“Has the runabout completed the survey of the first planet?” Ael asked.

“It will finish in about 11 minutes if the data display next to the planet is correct.”

“Good, have them investigate the origin of the scanning beam,” Ael ordered.



Her combadge beeped and she touched it saying, "Donatra."

*"Admiral, the Cabot and Hudson have completed their elements of the survey and the Hudson is returning to the Explorer,"* McLorn said.

Ael looked at Margie and asked, "do you have another target for them?"

*"The Cabot is continuing the survey of the asteroid field, sir. The Hudson is no longer needed, that is why we directed them to return when they finished their survey."*

"Thank you, Sub-Captain. Donatra out."

Worf said, "I would like the runabout to scan for anomalies and life forms around the sun, also."

"Do you have an idea?" Ael asked.

"I have been thinking about what the system is telling us. The story *I hear* just does not make sense."

Margie started to inject a thought and Worf held up his hand, "Please hear me out, before shooting me down."

Margie closed her mouth and opened her ears.

"We have a system of three habitable planets and one moon. All are beautiful gardens. Nature does not work that way. These celestial bodies should be flora gone wild or deserts, but they aren't. The first question I have is why not? Why do they seem like well-maintained gardens?"

He paused for that thought to sink in before continuing, "The next problem I have is with the populations. We have detected small pockets of civilization on each celestial body, which are at different levels of industrialization. One has barely entered the tool making age and the most advanced has sailing ships. But the populations are not anywhere near big enough to support a civilization which could or would be able to rise to a level where these are possible."

Again, he paused and it was Ael that continued, "And in the midst of these discoveries, the captains of all four fleet ships disappear from their ships. None of the celestial bodies have a population that has transporter capability, let alone, the technology to cause a person to just wink out of existence!"

Worf looked at her and said, "Four Captains, four Civilizations?"

"Are you saying the abduction of the captains is connected to the pockets of population?"

"It correlates that way," said Worf.

As the two ponder the thought, Margie took a chance and starting to put in her two cents, "We only detected the life forms after the captains vanished!"

"Another correlation," Worf said, "I believe there is something controlling what is happening."

Margie attempted to change back to the original line of investigate. She stated quickly, “We have traced the original scan to the sun, are you thinking there is something in the vicinity of the sun, like a ship or space station we cannot see or detect?”

“Yes, I do,” said Worf.

“How would you explain the planets and moon?” Margie asked.

“I have not gotten that far, but I could guess they are there to keep us busy and focused on them rather than what is going on elsewhere.”

Margie brightened as she started to understand where Worf was headed, “Like the magician trick, you direct attention away from the secret of the trick,” she said.

“That is my thinking,” Worf concluded.

Ael said, “So if we are not supposed to see the secret, where do we look for it?”

Worf turned to the center of the room and said, “I would quietly direct attention at the one place we have not been looking,” he pointed to the sun, “the origin of the scanning beam, the sun.”

Margie said, “I will have Lieutenant Commander Lu in the *Clark* begin surveying in the vicinity of the sun.”

“Have the *Hudson* join in the survey from the other side of the sun, but I don’t want any of the ships out of visual contact,” Ael ordered.

“Yes, sir,” Margie said. She touched her combadge and said, “SC.”

“Yes, *sir*” answered Lieutenant Terak.

“Terak, please ask Lieutenant Commander Lu in the *Clark* to begin a low-level survey of the sun and the surrounding region. She is not to get any closer to the sun than she is now during the survey. Let her know the *Hudson* will be doing the same thing from the other side.”

“Yes, *Sir*.”

“Then you need to call the *Hudson* and direct them to start a low-level survey of the sun and surrounding region from the other side of the sun. They are not to get any closer than the *Clark* is now. Provide the same instructions to Lieutenant Montoya. Are you clear on those instructions?”

“Ah, *yes sir, I think*.”

“Very well Lieutenant. If you have any problems let me know, Rawlins out.” She closed the connection, looked at the Admiral and Ambassador and said, “Sorry, good help is hard to find!”

• • •

“I have found him, Captain,” Commander Sandra Mayandski yelled excitedly, “I found him. I have located Klingon life signs on the planet near the settlement,

sir.” She pointed to the slowly flashing blue dot on the planetary display on her sciences console.

Commander Paul James, acting Captain of the Pioneer, jumped from the center seat and rushed over to the console. Commander Berroc joined the two at a stately rate of speed as befitting a Vulcan.

Captain James touched the communications panel on the console and said, “transporter room, we have located the captain, beam him aboard.”

“*Receiving coordinates now, Standby Captain,*” said the transporter operator. When he came back on the line, James could hear the disappointment coming through the intercom, “*Captain, I cannot get a lock on those coordinates.*” There was a short pause and then the operator continued, “*This is very weird sir. I cannot get a lock on anything in the direction of the planet sir.*”

Paul could hear him giving orders in the background. He asked, “Have you checked the other transporters?”

“*Checking them now, sir.*” There was a short pause which felt a lot longer. The transporter operator finally said, “*The cargo transporters will work perfectly as long as they are not pointed at the planet. We are running diagnostics on all transporters.*”

“Carry on and keep me informed, James out.” He turned and looked at Commander Berroc. He gave the Vulcan the ‘please go and oversee the problem’ look.

The Commander read the silent message loud and clear. He stood up and headed toward the turbo lift. A moment later he was gone from the bridge. James returned to his chair, a great weight on his shoulders. He sat down hard. “Commander Mayanski, prepare a shuttle mission to the planet to retrieve the captain,” James said.

She turned from her console to look at him and said, “Yes, Captain.” She turned back to the console to make the arrangements.

The captain leaned forward and shook his hanging head. He knew it would not be that easy. “*Why did you have to fall for the idea you would be able to easily retrieve the captain,*” he asked himself. Now the crew is disappointed!

He slowly sat up straight in *his* chair and touched the fleetcom control.

“*Sub-Captain McLorn.*”

“This is Captain James. We have found Klingon life signs on the planet near the settlement we found. We believe we have found Captain Dar’Tok. However, all attempts at beaming him aboard have failed. The transporter officer reports that none of the transporters will lock on to anything in the direction of the planet. Engineering is working on the problem.”

“*Thanks for the report, Captain. Keep trying to rescue Captain Dar’Tok. I will inform the captain. McLorn out.*”

*"That is easy for you to say,"* Commander Paul James thought.

• • •

"I might have something, Captain," Lieutenant Commander Bruce Hutcherson said.

The Captain of the Galileo, Commander Fossey, rose from the chair and hastily walked to the science console. He had to stop himself from running. *Dignified*, he reminded himself, *be dignified*.

Bruce was pointing to the planetary display and the blue dot that was flashing. Jeff could see the life sign readings on the console, "I think you have found the captain, Bruce," he confirmed.

"Transfer the coordinates to the main transporter room," Jeff continued. He touched his combadge and said, "Transporter room."

*"Transporter room, we have received the coordinates,"* the operator stated.

"Beam up the captain from those coordinates," Fossey said. There was momentary silence from the other end of the connection. He heard a double click and silence.

Shortly, as Jeff was about to ask for an update, he heard another click and the operator said, *"Commander, the transporter will not lock on those coordinates. Engineering is checking the systems, but my testing shows the transporter is functioning properly as long as it is not pointed at the planet!"*

The fleetcom channel opened and they all heard the report from the *Pioneer*. Fossey made the only decision remaining to him, "Bruce, take a shuttle down and get the captain," Fossey ordered.

"Be right back sir," Bruce said as he headed to the shuttle bay.

Three minutes later, Commander Hutcherson requested permission to depart.

"Ops, this is Galileo One, ready for departure," Bruce stated.

*"Permission granted,"* came the reply.

"Opening shuttle bay doors," Bruce said. He could hear the warning siren start sounding and the door began to rise. He lifted and began moving toward the door. The door stopped halfway up and started back down, and the engines of the shuttle died abruptly.

"What in the...," Bruce started as the shuttle's power slowly drained away. The shuttle slowly began to drift toward the floor of the shuttle bay. He touched his combadge and said, "Captain."

Jeff watched the aborted shuttle launch on the main view screen. He watched the shuttle rise, as did the main bay door. Then he watched the door begin to

close as the shuttle lights dimmed and the shuttle settled back to the deck plates. At the same time, he heard Bruce on his combadge.

“Galileo One, this is the captain,” Jeff said watching the shuttle touch down.

*“Captain, the shuttle aborted the launch and then lost all power. I assume the other shuttles are in a similar state.”*

“Have engineering check on the shuttles, you return to the bridge and monitor the captain’s life signs.

He touched the fleetcom control.

*“Sub-Captain McLorn.”*

“This is Commander Fossey, sir. We have found Captain David on the planet. Our attempts at a rescue have not produced the captain. We have tried beaming him aboard and sending a shuttle mission, both have failed. Engineering is working on the problems.”

*“Thanks for the report, Captain. Keep trying to rescue your captain. McLorn out.”*

Commander Jeffery Fossey thought, *“That’s easier said than done!”*

• • •

Commander Tom Paris was sitting in the center seat thinking about what steps he wanted to do next. He had issued all the right commands, so far at least, and he did not want to mess up his record. He had Scaros scanning and the rest of the crew at yellow alert as ordered by the Admiral.

The fleetcom channel indicator lit and began to beep on the chair arm. He had heard the two previous reports and had told Scaros to concentrate on the area around the village they had discovered.

Even before he touched the control to stop the beeping, he heard, *“This is Sub-Captain McLorn, with a fleet wide update. Galileo and Pioneer have reported finding their Captain’s life signs on the planets they are orbiting, near the settlements. I would suggest Voyager concentrate in those areas.”*

Tom looked over at Scaros to ensure he heard the announcement and was taking action. He saw the display center on the inhabited area and begin to expand out very slowly.

A moment later Randy continued, *“They have also discovered their transporters will not lock on or operate when pointed at the planet. A Galileo shuttle also went inoperative when they attempted to launch it toward the planet. I would suggest the rest of you test launch a shuttle toward the planet to see if you get similar results. I also request each ship continue to keep the fleet command informed, as information is available. McLorn out.”*

He touched his combadge, “Engineering,” Tom said. He looked around to the engineering station and saw the bridge engineer was running a diagnostic. He was not sure of the ensign’s name!

Tom turned back to the main view screen as Laren said, "*Commander Ro, sir.*"

"Please check the transporters and see if they will lock onto an object on the moon. Then have a crew attempt to launch a shuttle to the surface. I have been informed neither is possible from ships around the planets."

*"Right away Captain."*

"Scaros, continue to scan near the village and see if you find the captain's life signs."

"I have found him, sir. I missed his life signs twice because they are very faint, but I have verified it is him. Third time is the charm, sir."

"Good, pass the coordinates to the transporter room and have them see if they can beam the captain aboard. And Scaros, let's try getting it right the first time and spend the rest of the time on a coffee break!"

"Aye, aye, Captain," she said. To which they both smiled. He noticed the tension on the bridge was also reduced. He wondered to himself, "*is it reduced because the crew is gaining confidence in me or because the captain has been found?*" He shook his head. "*You don't want your thoughts to go in either direction, Tom,*" he thought to himself.

His communications panel beeped. Commander Ro Laren did not sound at all please when she said, "*Captain, the transporter will not work on the moon, and I have four shuttles' dead on the deck!*"

"Thanks, Paris out," he said, cutting the connection as fast as he could. He knew how much training she had been through to control her attitude and temper and he did not want her to celebrate a relapse anywhere within his hearing!

He touched the fleetcom control.

*"Sub-Captain McLorn."*

"This is Captain Paris, sir. We have found Captain Chakotay on the moon near the village. We have tried beaming him aboard and sending a shuttle mission, both have failed as you stated. Engineering is working on the problems."

*"Thanks for the report, Captain. Keep trying to rescue your Captain. McLorn out."*

He leaned back in *his* chair and continued watching the crew working around him. "*It is good to be the boss,*" he thought.

• • •

Randy sat in the captain's chair concentrating on the planetary display before him, but his thoughts were not on the display as the communications panel beeped. He reached down and touched the fleetcom control.

"Sub-Captain McLorn," he said. Hoping the disappointment, he felt could not be heard over the communications link.

*“This is Captain James. We have found Klingon life signs on the planet near the settlement we found. We believe we have found Captain Dar”Tok. However, all attempts at beaming him aboard have failed. The transporter officer reports that none of the transporters will lock on to anything in the direction of the planet. Engineering is working on the problem.”*

“Thanks for the report, Captain. Keep trying to rescue Captain Dar”Tok. I will inform the captain. McLorn out.”

Before he could touch his combadge and report to the captain, the communications panel lit up again.

“Sub-Captain McLorn,” he said.

*“This is Commander Fossey, sir. We have found Captain David on the planet. Our attempts at a rescue have not produced the captain. We have tried beaming him aboard and sending a shuttle mission, both have failed. Engineering is working on the problems.”*

“Thanks for the report, Captain. I have had similar reports from the other ships. Keep trying to rescue your captain. McLorn out,” he said. This was beginning to get interesting.

• • •

“Computer, display all the fleet ships,” Ael ordered.

Tiny blue dots appeared in the air showing the positions of the ships. She noticed immediately that three were moving very quickly. Two were headed for the sixth planet. One must be the *USS Hudson* returning to the *Explorer* from the fifth planet and the other was the *USS Lewis* from the second planet. The last ship, the *Clark*, was heading towards the sun.

As she watched, the *Hudson* veered from its course and took up a new course headed for the far side of the sun.

The *Clark* moved to a point halfway between the orbit of the first planet and the sun and stopped.

Margie’s combadge beeped beside her. Margie answered. Lieutenant Terak said, *“The USS Clark has reached the sun and started scanning for abnormalities. The Huson is on course for the far side of the sun. And the Lewis is returning to the Explorer.”*

“Very good, Terak. Rawlins out.”

• • •

Randy thought for a few moments and then made the decision to inform the fleet of the latest intelligence. He touched the fleetcom control to activate the channel. He also touched the ship-wide intercom and stated flatly, “This is Sub-Captain McLorn, with a fleet wide update. *Galileo* and *Pioneer* have reported finding their Captains life signs on the planets they are orbiting near

the settlements. I would suggest the *Explorer* and *Voyager* concentrate in those areas.”

He paused for a breath and then continued, “They have also discovered their transporters will not lock on or operate when pointed at the planet. A Galileo shuttle also went inoperative when they attempted to launch it toward the planet. I would suggest the rest of you test launch a shuttle toward the planet to see if you get similar results. I also request each ship continue to keep the fleet command informed, as information is available. McLorn out.”

He thought, “*Now, that should upset the Admiral just a tad bit!*” And sure, enough it had! As the channel closed, his combadge beeped. With one touch he had a very angry Admiral peeling the paint off his combadge. Not that his combadge had any paint.

“*Sub-Captain, you should have briefed me before making any updates to the fleet. As your Captain and the Admiral of the fleet, I will be notified before the next update, or you will be introduced to Romulan discipline!*” The Admiral continued shouting, “*Is that understood, Sub-Captain?*”

Randy had never heard her in such a rage. He was stunned! All he could say was, “Yes Sir!”

“*Good, Sub-Captain. Very Good. ADMIRAL Donatra out.*” Thankfully the channel closed!

He sat in the center chair for a moment and allowed his internal systems to calm down. He looked down at the floor below him to see if anyone was watching him, thankfully not.

The commpanel beeped causing Randy to jump in the chair. He reached out and touched the button and said, “This is Sub-Captain McLorn.”

“Tom, sir. We have also found our Captain. He is currently on the moon we are orbiting. All efforts to rescue him have failed up to now.”

“Acknowledged. McLorn out,” he said distractedly as he returned to his thoughts.

He had always wondered what receiving a dressing-down was like, now he knew! And now he knew he did not like it!



## Chapter 9

The connection closed. The fact that Sub-Captain McLorn was not standing before her was the only reason the man was still alive! She could not believe the treachery of this officer. If this was a Romulan ship...

The Admiral, standing in the middle of the conference room in the dim glow from the planets and the sun displayed around her, began to resemble a red moon! She needed something to throw at the wall! She settled for a string of quiet expletives that would have removed the paint from the bulkheads, if there were any visible.

She continued to stew in her own anger while watching the runabout return to the *Explorer*. "*He had no right, she thought, He is undermining me at every turn. I cannot give into him now!*"

She was so distressed; she had forgotten Worf and Margie where only a few feet away.

Worf looked at Ael from across the room having witnessed her side of the conversion, as had Sub-Captain Rawlins. Margie looked embarrassed as any person would who had witnessed an out and out tantrum like the Admiral had just had. She closed her mouth before looking at Worf trying to get an explanation to justify what she had just witnessed. Not knowing how to answer her unasked question, Worf turned back to the Admiral and became distance as his thoughts took over.

He was convinced this tension and animosity between the Admiral and the Sub-Captain was going to hurt the mission. Not having been in the Sub-Captain's position of a First officer not being allowed to assume command, Worf was not sure how he felt, but the outward signs showed he really did not like it!

Command of the fleet was in the Admiral's hands, but he was still convinced the Admiral's assumption of command of the ship would reduce her effectiveness in commanding the fleet. The announcement over the intercom was an indication this reduction was under way.

He hated to 'step on the Admiral's toes,' but if the mission degraded any more than it already had, he knew he would have to step into the mess.

And he was not looking forward to that step!

• • •

Randy was not pleased over the state of affairs aboard this ship. His eyes physically glassed over as he thought about how he should be the captain and what it would be like under the current emergency. The Admiral was off doing whatever and left him with the ship, and the fleet for that matter. He really was in command in fact if not in name. This made him feel better, but not complete. He still believed he should have the title.

The intercom on the chair arm beeped for attention, taking him, momentarily, out of his thoughtful fog. He touched the acknowledgement button and a screen appeared before him at a comfortable distance. Commander S'har's image was on the screen.

*"S-ub-C-ap-ta-in,"* it said slowly. There were times when he wished S'har would use the universal translator rather than slowly sounding out each syllable. *"I h-ave f-oun-d h-is li-fe s-ign on the p-la-an-et n-ear the ed-ge of the v-ill-a-ge,"* she said.

"Computer, display the planet surface, location, village area," he commanded. Another screen appeared before him as the original screen moved to the left to make room. The screen showed an aerial view of the village. "Computer, add life signs to the village display." Many blue dots appeared on the display, but it was the pulsing red dot which interested him. The key in the lower right corner of the display showed the red dot indicated human life signs. The dot was within a medium sized building on the outer edge of the village by a small inland lake.

"Thank you, Commander S'har. McLorn out," he said as he tapped his combadge and asked for the Admiral. S'har's screen winked out of existence and the village screen centered on his vision.

*"What is it Sub-Captain,"* she said. He could still hear the ire in her voice.

"Life sciences has found the captain in the village on the planet, sir."

*"Thank you, Sub-Captain."*

"We have also received the report that the *Voyager* has found their captain and also has no transporters or shuttles working."

*"Anything else Sub-Captain?"* She asked like it was a challenge.

"No, Sir. McLorn out," he said cutting the connection. He did not like the way things were going and he was the type of person to let her know it!

The communications panel beeped again, ship to ship this time. Randy touched the acknowledge button and said "McLorn."

*"Lieutenant Richard Houston sir, USS Lewis. We are request docking instructions, sir."*

"Standy by," he said getting an idea.

He touched the standby button and then touched his combadge, "Admiral," he said.

"Yes, *Sub-Captain*," she said. He could tell she was still quite irate. *Good*, he thought.

"The *Lewis* is returning. I would like to divert them to the planet to see if a runabout could land on the planet."

"*Did you not say earlier the shuttles would not work when launching toward the planet?*" She asked in the same manor a mother would ask a young child.

He did not take the bait. "Yes sir. But the launch was from their ship, not a runabout heading toward the planet already in space."

After a short pause she said, "*request approved Sub-Captain, but have a rescue party standing by. Donatra out.*" She seemed to be losing her mad and focusing on the fleet operation.

"Helm, pass the captain's coordinates to the *Lewis*," He called to the lower level, then touched the standby button and asked, "*Lewis*, are you receiving planetary coordinates?"

"Yes, *sir*."

"You are directed to attempt a landing at those coordinates," he instructed the lieutenant.

"*Wilco, sir. Lewis out.*"

"Ops, put the *Lewis* on the main view screen and move it to the command deck. Also, get a tractor beam lock on the runabout and standby." He watched as the screen formed in front of the bridge and then advance to the point it was sitting above where the force railing was, right in front of him.

He watched the runabout glide under the *Explorer* and begin its landing sequence. As the runabout settled into a descending orbit, he saw the small nacelles and running lights go out.

"*Lewis*, can you read me," Randy called out, "*USS Lewis*, can you respond." He rose from the chair as he watched the craft begin to hit the atmosphere. "Ops, energize the tractor beam."

He watched the beam reach out toward to shuttle, but not capture it.

The ops officer said, "we have lost our lock sir."

He continued to watch as the craft bounced off the atmosphere. He thought; *now the stuff is going to hit the fan!*

• • •

Margie concentrated on the data arriving from the area around the sun as it began to add detail to the image projected in the conference room. She was also trying very hard to ignore the Admiral and Ambassador. In the final analysis, at

least to her, it was none of her business how they ran the fleet. She also did not want to get pulled into an argument between them. She was not a diplomat or arbitrator and did not want to be used as one!

Margie centered her concentration on the *USS Lewis* as it returned to the *Explorer* to avoid being brought into the mess between McLorn and the Admiral. She knew Randy and felt he had been wronged by the Admiral. He was the acting captain for months for the final assembly and most of the space trials. The captain had only recently returned and checked out the ship before starting on this mission. She could feel Randy's pain at being treated the way he was.

She watched the Admiral out of the corner of her eye as she talked to McLorn. Margie was only trying to figure out when to duck! She could tell the Admiral did not want to deal with McLorn right now. Ael was very short with Randy.

But, since the Admiral's problem with McLorn did not affect her, she was not going to get involved or be around when the problem came to a head. Margie just hoped the fight did not spread to her section.

She glanced again at the Admiral after her last conversation with Randy and noticed Ael was beginning to calm down.

Margie turned back and continued to concentrate on the *USS Lewis*. She watched the blue dot move under the other blue dot, the *Explorer*, and move into a de-orbital pattern. The *Lewis* continued on course to the ground and then Margie noticed it seemed to bounce off the atmosphere, slow down and start to drift.

She said a mild oath to herself, which was, unfortunately, loud enough to attract the attention of the Admiral. She was not sure how to address an Admiral who was also her Captain! Margie finally decided this was a fleet problem and Admiral was appropriate. She called over to the Ael, "Admiral, there is a problem with the runabout. It seemed to have bounced off the atmosphere and is now drifting on a terminal trajectory."

Ael rushed over to where Margie was standing and touched her combadge, "McLorn, what is the status of the shuttle," Donatra asked.

"*It has lost power and is about to enter the atmosphere with a dead stick,*" he answered. Ael could tell Randy was upset. She almost went with her instinct to subjugate him further, to berate him for the potential loss of a runabout and crew, but she held back. This was his fault and an 'I told you so' was appropriate to her, but she would not make the situation worse by escalating the bitterness between them. It was time for clear heads and attention to duty. She focused on saving the crew and vehicle.

The Admiral asked, "A dead stick, Sub-Captain?"

"*An early Earth flying term, it means without control.*"

He covered his combadge and called, "Ops, do you have a tractor beam lock-on to the *Lewis* yet?" Randy asked.

"Got 'hem, sir," the ops officer called back.

"Bring them into the shuttle bay, ops," he said with a sigh of relief.

He uncovered his combadge and said, "We have a tractor beam on the runabout, and we are pulling it in, sir." He seemed and sounded greatly relieved.

*"Very good, Mister McLorn. Carry on. Donatra out."*

He watched the screen as the runabout was slowly pulled from the brink of disaster. He was very glad whatever was preventing the transporter from working was not interfering with the tractor beam anymore.

He continued to watch as the *Lewis* was pulled away from the atmosphere and moved toward the shuttle bay. He touched his combadge and said, "Life sciences."

*"Yes, S-sub-C-ap-ta-in,"* Commander S'har said slowly.

"Please scan the *Lewis* for life signs, Commander," he ordered.

*"St-an-d-by, S-sub-C-ap-ta-in..."* It paused and then said, *"fa-int li-fe s-ign-s de-tec-ted."*

He became concerned, "Are they in trouble?"

*"S-can-ning...no s-ir, ju-st un-con-sc-ious,"* it said

"Have them beamed to sick bay, if the transporter will work," he ordered.

*"Yes, S-sub-C-ap-ta-in,"* S'har said.

"McLorn, out," he said. Randy touched his combadge and said, "Admiral."

*"Yes, Mister McLorn,"* Ael said in a calmer voice.

"The *Lewis* is being tractor-beamed into the shuttle bay and the unconscious crew members are being beamed to sick bay."

*"Thank you, Mister McLorn. Donatra out."*

• • •

Worf decided to give it one more try. He had to do something as the ultimate authority in the fleet. He was not comfortable with the Admiral running the fleet and the ship. He felt she was spread too thinly.

Also, she was having problems with Sub-Captain McLorn, who rightfully, in Worf's opinion, felt he should be commanding the *USS Explorer*. The Admiral had had to threaten him, her second in command, to get the job done. This was a ridiculous way to run a ship. It may work for the Romulan Star Empire but will not work in the Federation or with a Federation crew.

It was like the roles had suddenly reversed. She was acting Captain and Randy was the acting Admiral. This *had* to change, or disaster would entail. The history of the Federation supported his assumption of pending doom. Never had a senior officer's assumption of command over the vessel's executive officer amounted to anything but disaster. Worf was determined this mission would not end in such a disaster.

*"Besides, this is just not right! It is not good for the mission and crew. I must not allow it,"* he told himself. Then he asked himself, *"this has to change, but how..."*

He sat and thought for a while, eating a small, quick meal and then, over a mug of blood wine the answer suddenly struck him... He was amazed he had not thought of the answer sooner. It was so simple. It was so devious!

He reached up and touched his combadge and said flatly, "Admiral Donatra, *please* come to my office. Worf out."

He had not given the Admiral time to respond but knew she would have. He rose from his chair, placed the dishes and mug in the replicator, disposing of them, donned his ceremonial robe and walked into his office.

He took his chair and sat in a way which would make it appear she had kept him waiting.

• • •

Sub-Captain Varrec entered sickbay and in a steady, but hurried, Vulcan pace and asked, "How are the crew of the *USS Lewis*, doctor?"

Alpha looked up and said, "they will be well,"

Beta looked at Alpha and said, "after some rest,"

Delta challenged both, "Lieutenant Houston may return to duty now!"

Beta turned his head toward Delta and said, "After a short rest."

He wondered why he let Starfleet Medical talk him into allowing the Trimarian Doctors aboard, let alone work in his sickbay. He was not yet convinced that having three mentally connected but distinct persons was a good thing. It provided more than an ample venue for argument and, in his opinion; this is all they ever did. It was difficult to get a definitive answer out of them!

However, the crew seemed to like having them aboard, because they were unique in Starfleet and at least one of them would agree with anything! Which would cause them to begin another argument, thus they were very entertaining for the crew.

Trimaria was not yet a member, *"only because their 'trident,' or three leaders, could not make up its collective mind,"* he thought. He was not sure how they ever invented a warp drive!

He looked directly at Delta since he was for returning his crewmembers to duty and said, "I need them in life sciences as soon as possible."

"I feel fine, sir," Richard Houston said turning to the doctors, "doctors, I want to return to duty and promise to take it easy for the next few hours."

All three doctors looked at each other and then back at the junior officer said "agreed."

Beta looked directly at Varrec and stated, "However, the two other crew members will remain in sickbay until they are completely rested."

"One is better than none. Houston, you are with me." Varrec turned and said, "Life sciences" and entered the beam curtain with Houston close behind.

As they emerged from the curtain in Life sciences Varrec said, "Lieutenant, I would like you to work with Sub-Captain Rawlins and Engineer Anderson to trace the origin of the scanning beam that almost disabled us upon arrival. I want to know where it came from as soon as possible. Is that clear."

"As clean water, sir," Richard said as he sat at the console to begin gathering data. Varrec was not sure what clean water had to do with understanding an order, but he would let it pass since Richard seemed to know what he wanted done. Also, he was sure it would entail of the Lieutenant's 'back woods' long drawn-out stories and this he wanted to avoid at all costs!

"The conference room has a planetary system holograph Sub-Captain Rawlins is using to display and coordinate information as it is received. It might be helpful," Varrec said as he left in the direction of the bridge.

• • •

"*John, how is the runabout?*" Randy asked the Sub-Captain of Engineering.

"About as good as can be expected for a system drained of all energy; in great shape but won't do anything!" John retorted. He hated it when Randy asked silly questions. "If you are looking for a repair estimate, it will take about four hours to replace the energizers and refill the matter/anti-matter tanks. After we get the systems up, we will be able to ascertain any damage to them."

"*Thank you, John. Randy out.*" The channel closed.

John grabbed his combadge and stated, "badge command line." He was answered by three quick beeps. "Refer communications to message," he ordered. He was rewarded with three beeps and released his combadge. "That takes care of silly and stupid questions," he thought.

He slid farther under the stern of the runabout and continued directing the replacement of the left energizer. It had already been a long day and it was getting longer every moment. He was also getting hungry and ill tempered.

He looked at the way the young engineer had the energizer conduit connected and shaking his head said, "No, no and not right! It needs to be..."

• • •

Richard Houston touched his combadge and said, "Crewmen Anderson."

"Yes, *what is it*," she said sleepily.

"Is this how you normally respond to a Starfleet officer, crewmen?"

"*Not normally, sir. But then most Starfleet officers do not contact me after only thirty-two minutes in the rest chamber. What would you like, sir?*"

"I need your assistance with determining the point of origin for the scanning beam we were hit with on our arrival in this system."

"*Can it wait?*" She asked and then answered her own question, "*No, I guess it can't. Not if it was necessary to wake me after on thirty-two minutes sleep following a nice twelve-hour shift in engineering!*" She said, "*Give me fifteen minutes, sir.*"

"Granted." He touched his badge to close the connection. He was not sure how this working relationship was going to go based on how it went so far; but he was pretty sure there would not be any wedding plans in their future!

His combadge beep immediately. He touched it and said, "Lieutenant Houston."

"*Crewmen Anderson, sir. Where do you want me to meet you?*"

"The conference room, crewmen. But you could have asked the computer for my location," Richard said smugly.

The smugness must have translated to the other end because she said, "*I could have and would have used the computer if you had told me your name, Anderson out.*"

It took him a few seconds to get the wind back in his sails.

He rose and used the beam curtain to get to the conference room. He entered and walked slowly to the golf ball sized red orb with the designation of fleet entry point. From this point, a yellow line stretched sunward. He followed the yellow line to the point where it faded out. Here was the blue dot of the *USS Clark*. The surrounding area showed much more data than most of the sun.

He expanded the area at the end of the yellow line and found it faded out rather than abruptly ended. This left the point of origin very much up in the air.

"*The origin point could have been a ship in orbit,*" was his first thought. He called for an engineering console display and started checking the data and information to either confirm or deny the hypothesis.

He started searching the data associated with the fade point and then moved out from there. He had the computer use a cone shaped pattern, moving toward the sun, to look for a scanning source and a flat, circular pattern, looking for a ship. He did not find any residual scanning energy recorded by the Clark's scanners.



He immersed himself deeply into the data surrounding him. He called up more and more of the raw data and processed it in different ways. He called for a chair and sat down without looking for where the chair was. Time began to fly by as he became very entranced in his own thought processes. He was so enthralled; he physically jumped when he heard his name whispered closely behind him.

“Don’t do that!” He shouted.

She jumped back away from him a step, in reaction to his outburst.

“You scarred at least forty years off my life,” he said loudly, still panting, trying to get his breathing under control again.

She moved to the console he was using to see the data. “How were you proceeding?” she asked. She began examining the settings he was using for the search.

“A flat spiral from the fade point,” he told her.

“Good, but you might want to look for neutrinos also.”

He adjusted the search parameters and began the search again. He said, “Thanks.”

They watched as the scan spiraled out from the scan energy fade point. She reached past him and set up another test for a warp energy signature in the area of the sun. She then adjusted each for spatial drift.

Sharon called for a chair and console of her own. She was not used to the arrangement of his console, and it was slowing her thought processes and actions.

They continued working together examining the data.

Sub-Captain Rawlins joined them quietly, so as not to disturb the two. She had been advised of the project and asked to assist if necessary. She determined her assistance would not be needed. She watched the data coming in from both the *Clark* and the *Cabot*.

The picture continued to build...

## Chapter 10

She entered the Ambassador's office through his currently unmanned front office. She noticed he was impressive sitting behind his desk with the Federation of Planets seal and flag behind him. The ceremonial robe he was wearing did not distract from the overall effect but enhanced it greatly. She was impressed but had a bad feeling about how this meeting was going to go for her. He was about to play the ambassadorial card and use his authority over her.

However, the effect was lost on her. She knew he was in charge already. She also knew this meeting was not going to be pleasant. His demeanor was very serious. He said nothing when she entered the office. He did not rise to greet her. He simply indicated she have a chair with a nod of his head.

As she took the indicated chair, Worf leaned forward and placing his hands together with elbows spread forming a steeple of his hands before him. His elbows rested on the desk.

He regarded her seriously for a moment. As if trying to assess her mood, decide what to say or how to say it, before beginning.

He focused on back on his fingertips before him as he said, "I am not comfortable with the way this mission is being carried out. Something needs to be done about it."

She sat up and started to say something and he cut her off before she could say a syllable. He stared at her sternly. "It is not *your* turn yet!" He said quietly but sharply. She sat back and remained quiet. She seemed to expect what was coming and was going to take it quietly. This surprised him, but he did not show it.

He looked back at his fingertips before him. He wanted to give her the impression he was very sorry he had to do this. He wanted her to feel she had earned his sorrow. He wanted her to know the pain he felt in having to step it to the situation and bring it to an end.

Shortly he looked up and said, "You and the Sub-Captain are at odds in my estimation. Obviously, he resents your assuming command of the vessel, which is your prerogative. I still believe you have a fleet to manage and running a ship this large, even with the Sub-Captain structure, is pushing the limits. Sub-Captain McLorn is monitoring and communicating with the fleet while you are handling the management of the ship. Can you see my problem?" He asked rhetorically and then continued quickly to enforce the rhetorical nature of the question, "In my estimation the rolls are reversed!"

She remained quiet during his pause for effect.

“While I don’t want to command you to relinquish command to the Sub-Captain, I would strongly recommend you re-consider your decision. I would rather you concentrate on cleaning up the overall mess this mission has become.”

Worf paused momentarily. He spread the fingers of his left hand and started ticking off points.

“One, we are short four Captains and I see you as the focal point for the coordination of information reported to fleet command.” He touched his second finger, “Two, we are still investigating the initial scanning beam which ‘attacked’ us on entry to this system.”

He touched the third, “Three, we are still exploring the system and building a system display.” The fourth, “Four, morale on this ship has fallen, it must be restored.”

He put his fingertips together and looked her straight in the eye and said, “How are you going to resolve these issues?”

She shifted in her chair and after a short pause she said, “I am in command of the fleet, as such I have the authority to assume command of any ship under Starfleet regulations and I have.”

Worf could not believe the arrogance of this Romulan. He placed his hands on the desk and said, “I have come to the conclusion *that* if you cannot focus a hundred percent of your efforts to the fleet, *I* will have to assume command of the fleet as allowed by those same Starfleet regulations. Would you like me to announce that now?” He moved his left index figure to hover over the communications panel.

Her face flushed with anger quickly; however, it subsided almost as fast as it occurred.

She said, “As you and Sub-Lieutenant Tyanala have reminded me, I am spreading myself too thin. She also reminded me I was not as familiar with the records of the officers around me. I know yours and the four Captains, but not the Sub-Captain’s. Are you aware of Sub-Captain McLorn’s record?”

Worf shook his head. He wanted her to make up her own mind and figured she could talk herself into taking the right course.

She continued, “Were you aware Sub-Captain McLorn was at the disaster you call Worf-359 and survived? He was the first officer on the *USS Bellerophon* when his captain was killed. He took command of the vessel and continued the fight until the ship was disabled and all but destroyed. Only the arrival of the *Enterprise* saved him and what was left of the crew.”

She continued quickly, “He was then posted as the first officer on the *USS Magellan* under Captain Beck, for the Dominion Wars. Again, his captain was

injured. He fought the ship to a victory and limped to a Starbase for refit. After repairs and his captain's recovery, the ship returned to the war and to serve valiantly until the end of the war."

She said, "He has also turned down command of the *USS Bellerophon* and the *USS Norway*. Both times he stated he did not feel ready to command a vessel and he had more to learn from Captain Beck. The record also shows he commanded this ship for seven months while Captain Beck was temporarily posted to the *USS Ulysses*."

"I also found out Captain Beck turned down promotion to Admiral to take command of the *USS Explorer*." Her amazement at the decision to turn down any promotion was showing on her face as she finished.

Worf said, "I was aware of most of the information from the regular intelligence briefing Ambassadors receive and the war reports. Now do you see why I questioned your decision to take command? I *did* review their records."

She had looked down at her hands in her lap, the failure clearly shown on her face. But now she looked up at him and said, "Not at the time. Say it was Romulan arrogance, the idea only we can command well. I have known for the past hour I will have to step down and allow the Sub-Captain to command the *Explorer*. You have confirmed my decision. But his continued challenges have made it almost impossible to relinquish command. It would be losing face before the crew."

"Would you like me to step in?"

"No. I will be turning over command immediately and run the fleet from the conference room where I can better observe what is going on."

"Very good, Admiral," Worf said.

The sting of his words, showed in her reaction as she looked away from him.

He asked, "Is there anything else?"

"No, Sir." She rose and departed via the catwalk doorway. She walked across the catwalk observing the bridge below. Sub-Captain McLorn was lounging in the Captain's Chair on the command deck. "Let's see you lounge like this after I give it to you," she thought. A smile came to her face as the thought formed but the smile disappeared quickly. She knew what it was like to have command thrust upon you. She could almost describe how the Sub-Captain felt at Worf-359, it had happened to her at another junction in her life, many years ago. She was going to enjoy dropping command in his lap, making him responsible for the continuing mission.

She stepped onto the command deck after traversing the ramp down to it. Randy began to get up from the chair. She held up a hand to stop him and

said, “keep your seat, Captain.” She stepped to the chair arm and touched the log entry control.

She stated, “Captain’s Log, this star date. Begin entry—Sub-Captain Randal McLorn is ordered to take command of the *Explorer* in the absence of Captain Beck—end entry. Computer, transfer the appropriate command functions to Captain McLorn.”

“*Command functions transferred,*” acknowledged the computer.

A very stunned Captain of the *USS Explorer* looked at her and asked, “Why?”

“Simple, you need the command experience, and I *am* spread too thin to command the fleet and the ship. You will have to take command and help me as Captain Beck did. Are you up to the task?”

“Yes, Admiral.”

“Computer,” Ael called, “transfer fleet command to the conference room. Close the connection.”

“*Command transferred,*” acknowledged the computer as her console went blank.

She turned and left the captain on the command deck as she headed up the ramp to the conference room.

Entering the conference room, she touched her combadge, “Ambassador, the deed is done. Donatra out.”

• • •

His combadge beeped for a few moments before Randy, ah, Captain McLorn, became aware of it. “McLorn,” he said as he tapped the badge.

“*Randy, John. I have had had two crews, one behind the other, check every transporter on this ship and they are all in perfect working order,*” Sub-Captain John Cunningham reported.

“Thanks, John. Can we beam up the captain now?” He asked secretly hoping the answer was no for a little while longer. He had liked being Captain for the seven months in space dock and during the trials, but this was a real mission. He had just made captain and with the return of Captain Beck he would lose it without even using the title! This was not the way he envisioned his captaincy. Not this temporary!

“*The transporters work perfectly everywhere but when aimed at the planet,*” John admitted.

He was relived, captain for a while longer. “How close can you get to the planet before the system goes off-line?” Randy asked.

“*I have not had them test proximity. I will get the transporter engineering teams on it, Ran-,*” John said before being interrupted.

*“Attention ships of the fleet and crew of the USS Explorer,”* Admiral Donatra’s voice came over the fleetcom and the ship wide intercom system, *“As of approximately five minutes ago, command of the USS Explorer was transferred to Sub-Captain Randal McLorn.”* She paused for effect and then continued on another note. *“Captains, please prepare a status update on your current condition and rescue efforts. We will have an update meeting on the fleetcom in approximately ten minutes. Admiral Donatra out.”*

*“Excuse me, sir. I will get the transporter engineering teams on it, Captain,”* John corrected. He made a big deal of Randy being appointed captain as good friends do. He and the rest of the Sub-Captains had worked out all the problems of his being the captain back when Randy had replaced Captain Beck for seven months. Running *the* biggest sections on the ship, luckily in his estimation, precluded him from becoming the first choice for captain. Randy knew this and also the fact the other Sub-Captains did not envy him or want the duties of captain; they had their own sections to run and were very happy where they were. They believed Randy should have it seeing he ran the smallest section of all for just this reason as well as the fact he was the senior Sub-Captain by one week as well as the executive officer. The next smallest section was Margie’s, and she sure did not want the captaincy!

On the other hand, they also knew Randy had turned down the center chair at least twice and knew why.

So, Randy was sure as soon as the connection closed, John would be laughing at him on the inside. On the exterior, John would be cool, calm and collected, but on the inside, he would be ‘rolling on the floor.’

Randy did not care. He was the captain of the most powerful ship in this fleet, as well as the federation fleet, far from home and with a real mission as well as an emergency to handle. Besides, he had put up with it for seven months so he could do it again...

• • •

She sat at her console in the far corner of the conference room, although it was difficult to tell since open space surrounded her. The planetary system, Sub quadrant 01, sector gird 91, was laid out before her and two Starfleet crewmembers were working over by the Sun.

Initially, she had wanted to move command to her office rather than the conference room since she has suffered from queasiness for the last 10 minutes as she knew she would; however, luckily, it was wearing off as she became used to floating in space behind her console. She knew she had to get used to this situation if she was going to be able to command the fleet. She also knew she could not be restricted from any area of the ship just because of the distress the area caused her internal systems. Finally, she knew the feelings would go away after she got used to it just like her first spacewalk. If she were wearing a spacesuit, she would not be in any distress right now. But showing

up in an environment suit would look very strange. She needed to beat it on her terms—no suit!

She reached out to activate the fleetcom as Worf entered and walked deliberately across the room. He called for a console chair and sat down.

“Just in time,” she thought as she touched the communications switch and pulled her hand back.

“Computer, activate fleetcom and record to the Admirals’ log,” Admiral Donatra commanded, “This is Admiral Donatra, this stardate. *Explorer*, what is your status?”

*“Captain McLorn, Admiral. Sub-Captain Cunningham has determined the transporters are work perfectly as long as they are not pointed toward the planet. He is current checking to see how close the transporter will get to the planet. He is also testing the runabout engines and systems, which began working once the bay doors were shut.”*

“Thank you, Captain McLorn,” she said. She had expected the first part of the report, but not the second. Having Sub-Captain Cunningham test the transporter systems was something she had not thought of. She thought, “Maybe having McLorn captain the ship was a good idea after all!” Then she asked, “Voyager?”

*“Captain Paris, transporter and shuttles are off-line when exposed to or directed at the planet, sir. Rescue efforts continue.”*

“Thank you, Captain Paris,” she stated. *Nothing was new there*, she thought. She asked, “Pioneer?”

*“Captain James, same here Admiral.”*

“Thank you, Captain James, *Galileo?*” She continued.

*“Captain Fossey, sir. Same here. The SCE engineers are still trying to rig the transporter and/or a shuttle to rescue Captain David.”*

“Thank you, Captain Fossey,” she said. Now this was something to get her preverbal teeth into. She asked, “Do you expect the SCE engineers to have much success?”

*“Not at this time, sir, no. They don’t seem enthusiastic about their chances of beating the dampening field surrounding the planet.”*

“Dampening field?” Worf asked as he leaned toward the console. He looked questioningly at the Admiral, who just shrugged an ‘I don’t know!’

*“Yes, Ambassador,” he said haltingly, “Commander Borall detected a very weak dampening field surrounding the planet at an altitude of ninety-eight kilometers.”*

This was new information, and she was not pleased finding out about it now. She asked, “Is there a reason this information was not reported earlier?”

He hesitated before answering. *“Yes, sir. I just became aware of the facts when I asked engineering for an update. I have made the senior engineers aware of the need to share all information with command and the fleet the moment it is found. They are not used to working with others, I will be monitoring the situation closely and keep you better informed in the future,”* Paul James stated flatly.

Ael could tell he did not want to swing the spotlight onto himself by invoking the Admirals’ wrath this early in his captaincy. Like the rest of the new captains, he was trying to deal with a new and difficult situation. Well, she could not let it go but she did not want to berate him on the fleetcom in front of the other captains. She focused on what he had said. *“No apology,”* she thought, *“but a promise to do better.”* Good, something she could hold him to. She stated flatly, “Very well captain, I can only assume the engineering staff of each ship is now informed of your findings. Anything else?”

*“No, Sir,”* he said quickly.

“Excellent captain. Is there any further discussion?” She paused to allow time for a response. “This completes the update. Any further information or update will be transmitted over the fleetcom, so all ships get the information at the same time.” She said the last sentence slowly to ensure it was understood by all the new captains.

A new thought dawned on her, and she was glad it had before she closed the connection. “Have any of the missing personnel been contacted by combadge?”

The frequency was very quiet for a few moments, which was long enough for the combadges to be tested, in her estimation. Finally, one by one, the captains reported negative contact.

*“Galileo, could this be a result of the dampening field or something else?”*

*“I will pose the question to the SCE engineers and report shortly sir.”*

“Very well, Captain. This conference is closed. Donatra out.”

She looked at Worf and said, “Besides the dampening field, nothing really new. But I am surprised none of the ships would try to contact their captains by combadge as soon as they were found.”

He looked at her and reminded her she didn’t try either.

She defended herself quickly, “The emphasis was on finding them not talking to them!” She smiled as she said, “Next time I will know better.”

Worf shrugged as if to say, oh well, missed one! They turned to watch the activity around the sun and missed the very pale blue fields that began to surround the fourth, sixth and seventh planet as well as the moon of the sixth planet. These were to indicate the dampening field surrounding the planets and moon detected initially by the *Galileo* engineers and now by the rest of the ships.



Worf rose to inspect the planets. As he approached, the pale blue field began moving from the fade point near the sun outward, following the contour of the sun as if it were a slowly creeping virus spreading over the system's sun. He walked up to join the crewmembers and was joined shortly by the Admiral.

As he watched the spread of the field around the sun, a thought came to Worf. He whirled and looked at the rest of the heavenly bodies. He noticed immediately the thought was right, only the bodies they were exploring were shrouded in pale blue.

He pointed this out to the Admiral who touched her combadge and ordered, "Captain McLorn, dispatch the *USS Lewis* as soon as possible to the closest planet or moon and have them test for the dampening field."

*"Admiral, the USS Hudson is close to a large body right now. They are mapping the asteroids and are coming up on the sixth moon of this planet."*

"Have the runabout scan the moon for the dampening field, Captain," she ordered.

*"Aye, sir. I will report back as soon as I have some news."*

"Very good Captain. Donatra out."

Worf was very grateful the two of them were no longer fighting and were now working closely together. He turned to watch the sixth moon as the asteroid belt continued to work toward the moon being preceded by the very tiny blue dot of the *USS Hudson*.

He looked back at the scan fade point, attracted by the slow evolving discussion which was increasing in volume as the junior officers became more excited. Worf took the three steps needed to join them and asked, "what is so interesting?"

The crewmember answered, "Sir, the fade point is right on the dampening field. I feel there is a connection. The Lieutenant is more reserved in his speculation."

He wondered, *what is in store for us now...*

• • •

*"Very good Captain. Donatra out."* The connection closed. He leaned forward and called out for the Ops officer. "Did you hear the Admirals orders?"

"Aye, sir."

"Then make it so," he ordered.

He leaned back in *his* chair long enough for the intercom to beep. "McLorn," he said. "When it rains, it pours," he thought.

*"John, Captain. I have the report on the transporter problem. We have identified the dampening field and the teams have determined the field is the point where the transporter lock stops."*

He nodded to himself and asked, "Have you looked at the runabout?"

*"Yes. Doug's team has been looking into the runabout status for almost 30 minutes now. They have recorded residual traces of the dampening field energy pattern. As the energy dissipates the runabout systems are returning to normal operation."*

"Have you notified the *Galileo* SCE engineering team of these findings?"

*"Yes, and they thought it was very interesting. They are examining their effected shuttles to see if there is a way to defeat the dampening field or shunt the energy away quickly."*

"Keep me informed of any further developments, John," the captain asked.

*"Will do. Cunningham out."*

He leaned forward and asked the Ops officer when the *USS Hudson* would arrive at the moon.

He touched his combadge after receiving the answer and relayed all the information to the Admiral in the conference room.

He sat back and looked at the updated display of the system floating before him off to the right side as if seeing it for the first time. The holographic planetary system had changed a lot since he had last looked at it; what seemed like, only a few minutes before. He realized by the time stamp on the display almost an hour had gone by! *"I am losing touch with time now. I guess time does fly when you're having fun!"* he thought.

He also realized he was hungry! He got up from the center chair, notified Ops they had the conn and he used the beam curtain behind the captain's chair to return to his quarters. As he entered the room he said, "coffee, hot, light, double sweet. Sandwich, hero, standard, McLorn build. Packaged to go," as he walked toward the replicator. He waited the few seconds while his meal materialized, snatched it from the replicator and curtained back to the bridge.

Randy called down to the Ops officer he had the conn and sat down in the chair saying, "Computer, tray and cup holder, standard, Captain's chair." A tray appeared before him just above his lap. A cup holder appeared on the outer edge of the chair arm. He set the package on the tray and took out the cup of coffee. He put the coffee in the cup holder and pulled the sandwich from the package and its wrapper. As he devoured the hero, he realized just how hungry he was—the sandwich did not last long!

The coffee went a bit slower as he continued to examine the system. He saw the blue virus had gotten about halfway around the sun. He saw the now green dots of the ships circling the sun. He noticed the green dot of the *Hudson* was passing the moon and not stopping.

He opened a channel to the *USS Hudson*, "*Hudson*, have you completed the survey of the sixth moon?"

*“Montoya sir. We scanned the moon with the second scanner and found nothing, sir. Reported same to the stellar cartography section, sir”*

“Thank you, Lieutenant. Good job. McLorn out,” he said. *“Great way to make an idiot of yourself, McLorn, he thought, ask an already answered question!”* He watched as the runabout continued to work toward its starting point. He guesstimated it would take another forty-five minutes to complete the asteroid survey.

He sat back and watched the system as the information was added. He knew he needed to get some rest, but with all the operations on going, he knew the rest would have to wait. He decided on more coffee.

He leaned back in the chair, lifted the cup and took a sip. Putting the cup back in the holder, he got into a comfortable position and watched the system before him.

## Chapter 11

“What the heck”, he yelled, “red...” He jumped out of the chair but stopped as he realized where he was and what had startled him. He saw the Ops, Weapons and Helm officers had all responded to his outburst in one way or another. Mikhail stood up at the helm and looked at the command deck. Lieutenant Commander Justyn Higgins, the Weapons officer on duty, was hunched over his console checking weapons and shield status, ready to signal a red alert. Commander Jessycka Nicks, Operations officer and shift supervisor was halfway up the ramp.

“Belay that order,” he said as the hot, red feeling of embarrassment began to quickly spread across this face. He turned back to the captain’s chair to answer the beeping communications panel. He tried to recover his composure as he touched the intercom control and said, “Captain McLorn.” He was very glad the communications channel only supported audio.

*“Margie, Captain. Have you been monitoring the holographic system display sir?”*

“Yes, Margie. What about it?” He asked as he slipped back into the chair. He eyed the cold coffee before looking at the display.

*“You might want to take a second look at the USS Cabot on the far side of the sun. It is no longer running a sensor scanning pattern but moving into an orbit which will bring it back here very quickly,”* she said.

He reoriented the display as she was talking so he could see the green dot that indicated the *Cabot*.

She asked, *“Did you order them to return?”*

“No, Margie, I did not order their return. You are right though; they seem to be on a slow course back to *Explorer*. Have you tried contacting them?” he asked.

*“Yes, twice without a response,”* she stated. He could hear the alarm entering into her voice. She continued, *“I did get in contact with the USS Clark and Hudson, they are both continuing with their missions.”*

“Thanks for the report, Margie, I will see if the *Lewis* or another shuttle is ready to speed to the rescue. McLorn out.”

He leaned forward and then wondered why! He leaned back and called to Commander Nicks, “Ops, have a runabout or shuttle prepped for immediate launch on a rescue mission.”

Commander Nicks acknowledged his order and leaned over her console to carry it out.

Randy leaned to his right and said, "Life sciences. Scan the *USS Cabot* and determine if the communications or any other system is out and check on the status of the crew."

Sub-Captain Varrec looked up and called back an acknowledgement. Randy heard him giving some orders as he attended to his duties. The bridge began to get a little noisier as reports began coming in from engineering, ops and stellar cartography.

Randy tapped his combadge as soon as Commander Nicks reported a shuttle was ready and Lieutenant Nora Sawyer, the Communications officer, reported there was still no answer from the *Cabot*.

"Admiral, I have a situation," Randy reported absentmindedly as he tried to take in all the information coming from the officers around him, "please come to the bridge."

He heard the swoosh of the conference room door above and behind him. He started talking before he knew it was the Admiral. "The *USS Cabot* is on a very fast course back to the *Explorer* and it is not responding to hails," he said not taking his eyes off the green dot before him. He saw in his peripheral vision both Worf and Donatra came down the ramp and then slipping into their seats.

He glanced in the Admirals direction. "I have a shuttle on standby read for your launch," he informed her.

"You may launch the shuttle," the Admiral told him.

He heard the crew below carrying out his unspoken order.

Ael asked, "Do you have any more information about what happened?"

"No, sir," was his only reply. He was still struck by the thought his sleeping on duty might have caused this affair. He had to stop kicking himself for his mistakes and remedy the situation.

"The shuttle has launched and will rendezvous with the *Cabot* in fifteen minutes, sir," Jessycka reported. It seemed to him that she was a lot perkier since the bridge got busy.

Fleetcom beeped and the Admiral punched the control quickly, "Donatra," she said.

"*Explorer, this is the Hudson. Would you like us to assist?*" asked Louis Montoya.

"Negative, *Hudson*. Finish your survey and move toward the sun and continue the *Cabot's* survey. Contact the *Clark* and get the search pattern the *Cabot* was following," she ordered.

"*Acknowledged, Sir. Hudson out.*"

The green dot of the shuttle had detached from the *Explorer* and was heading at maximum impulse toward the *Cabot*. He had recovered from his

embarrassment. He tried to stay calm and hide his ire over his falling asleep in his chair. "I knew I was tired and should have had Sub-Captain Rawlins take the conn," he continued to kick himself silently.

His combadge beeped, "Captain," he said as he touched it.

Sub-Captain Varrec stated, "*Captain, we have strong life signs aboard the USS Cabot, although they are reduced. There is a seventy-eight percent chance the crew is unconscious, sir. Sensors show no damage. Their communications systems are working within established parameters. We completed two scans, sir, to ensure the scanner was working properly.*"

"Thank you, Mister Varrec, return to your duties." He leaned back in the chair to get more comfortable, without the fear of falling asleep. He knew falling asleep in the hot seat would be impossible for a long time to come.

He saw the shuttle was halfway to the *Cabot* by now and still driving through the system as fast as it could. He watched the shuttle veer away from the *Cabot's* course to perform a wide turn to match the *Cabot's* flight path. *They definitely were not sparing the horses*, he thought.

He heard the Admiral open a channel to the shuttle. She informed them of the life sciences findings. He thought the shuttle had slowed slightly, but a quick check of the data next to the green dot showed he was imagining it as the shuttle entered the reverse bank to bring it around to a rendezvous.

"The *USS Hudson* has completed the asteroid survey and is on a heading for the far side of the sun, sir," Jessycka reported.

He heard the Admiral acknowledge the report. "*Why aren't you acknowledging them,*" he asked himself and then answered himself, "*because this is a fleet operation, and I am not in charge of the fleet. However, I should be acknowledging input from my troops regardless of what they are reporting and regardless of whether or not the Admiral acknowledges.*"

The fact he was beginning to have conversations with himself startled Randy somewhat. He tried to clear his mind for the events which were coming up because he knew with his luck; the events were headed down hill!

Randy watched the dot of the *Hudson* move in toward the sun. It seemed to move slower than the shuttle, like it was afraid it would suffer the same fate that the *Cabot* had. He knew this was more of his imagination as a glance at the *Hudson's* data showed him, but he could not shake off the feeling this was not a normal exploration mission.

The dot of the *Clark* continued to build the blue field around the sun. The field was almost completed when the *Cabot* left the area. The *Clark* continued to slowly close the gap between the two efforts.

The *Hudson* seemed to change course and now looked to be heading for the *Cabot*. "Of course," he thought, "that would make sense." The two ships would

work almost side-by-side and thus support each other if there was any more trouble.

Randy moved his focus back to the shuttle and the *Cabot*. They were very close now and the shuttle had begun to slow. He kept his attention on the two ships and watched the shuttle finally match speed and attitude with the *Cabot* before attempting to transport. He heard the shuttle report they were in position and were transporting to the *Cabot*. The Admiral acknowledged and authorized the transport. Randy continued to listen to the reports from the shuttle.

The crew aboard the *Cabot* was alive, but appeared to be in a stupor, frozen at their posts. The medic on the team reported they were alive but not responsive to exterior stimuli.

The Admiral ordered the team to monitor the crew during the return to the *Explorer*. The team leader acknowledged the order. Randy watched the larger green dot continue on a course to the *Explorer*.

He watched for a few minutes and then looked back toward the sun. He noticed the beam curtain colors reflect off the sun as the Admiral and Ambassador left the bridge, the emergency over.

The *Hudson* was moving into position near to the *Cabot* on a parallel course. The gaps in the pale blue field surrounding the sun began to close. He noticed the data from the *Hudson* was showing darker blue highlights where the field began to close.

He wondered about the few dark blue streaks caught by the scanner on the runabout. It reminded Randy of throwing a line out away from the boat and catching a fish where the fish don't expect you to be.

He continued watching the gap close.

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The Admiral and Ambassador returned to the conference room and walked up behind the three officers they had left only a few minutes before.

They were deep in a discussion over a darker blue highlight the *Hudson* had scanned. The data showed the highlight to be an energy field moving over the dampening field. This was causing quite a bit of heated discussion.

Crewman Anderson stated hotly, "This is not possible. An energy pattern cannot exist within a dampening field. It must be a different type of energy the sensors are not designed to sense."

"But the sensor scans show an energy pattern floating on the dampening field. You cannot state what is, is not!"

Margie pointed out, "If the energy pattern exists where it should not be, then let's concentrate on finding out why, shall we?"

Crewman Anderson and Lieutenant Houston nodded, turned and took the beam curtain back to the engineering and life science areas.

Margie sighed. "*This is going to be a long day,*" she thought.

Then the Admiral asked why the data stream had stopped from both of the runabouts and she added to herself, "*A very, very long day...*"