

Star Trek Exploration The Adventures of the USS Explorer

The Gathering

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Star Trek Exploration: The Gathering

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The Star Trek Exploration, The Adventures of the USS Explorer, The Gathering
by P D Hutcheson

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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 new Romulan council thought this was a good way to get 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 by examining its crew. 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 see 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.

Chapter 1

“What Now!” He bellowed at the hail from the door. The bony plate on his forehead dipped toward his eyebrows to reflect his anger. He was beginning to believe all the Klingon warriors in the Empire wanted to see him today. He had gone months without more than a single telecom or appointment in any one day. Then when the final draft of the Klingon-Federation accord, an eleven-year effort, finally arrived for his review and approval, interruptions! Time was very, very short. He had a ship to catch after the final ratification of the accord in the high council. The ship would take him to Earth for the signing of the accord. It would be his most glorious achievement. Not the achievement of a warrior in battle, but a great achievement less.

Eleven years he had been the Federation’s Ambassador to the Klingon Empire, the Federation voice in the Klingon High Council. Eleven years smoothing over this problem, working out that problem... Eleven years with only a few breaks; his yearly reserve duty assignment for a month aboard the *USS Enterprise*, or while traveling to Earth and back to Kronos. And most of the travel breaks included hours of paperwork. Paperwork, he hated paperwork! If it weren’t for the hunting trips with Chancellor Martok, he would be driven crazy. “*Worf*,” he told himself, “*An Ambassador must be calm!*”

He thought of the ‘battles’ he had won and lost in the council chambers of both the Federation and the Klingon Empire. Some had been glorious battles; with the outcome not known till the end, the final vote. Others, like those of late, had been minor. He battled more with his counterpart on Earth, Ambassador Menden, than in the council chambers. He was still smarting over the loss of the final point of disagreement on the accord that led to the approved draft now sitting on his desk. He would present it to the Klingon High Council tomorrow for their vote of approval and the official signing. While Menden was getting better, Worf still did not like the fact he still took what seemed to him, too many words to get across any point he tried to make!

“Ambassador,” his assistant said as she stood in the doorway, “There are visitors to see you.”

His dislike for this position was beginning to grow, like his hunger for a real battle. He longed for the battles he would hear about in the bars; the war stories the warriors would tell from the Dominion war. His own stories were getting old with the other warriors. Even the battles between other houses, though these battles were over money and status, he even found these battles intriguing of late! Eleven years. He felt he was losing his edge as a warrior. He was forgetting what it felt like to be Klingon.

Worf returned to the moment. "Who now," he roared, "Does the maid wish to see me about how many towels to leave in the bathroom?" He let his ire show. If he could not be in distant battles, then he could have a contest of wills with his assistant. They had been playing this game for years. Usually, it got more intense around the time he would leave for Earth or on the *Enterprise*. It was a small enjoyment, a consolation of the position he now held. His latest assistant had been chosen for her ability to battle with him as well as her victories as an accomplished administrator.

"No, but you can discuss that with the yeoman aboard the *Enterprise* the next time you come aboard." Picard said jovially as he entered the office. Commander Thompson and Ambassador Menden followed him into the room. Mendon's ambassadorial finery flowed with him across the room and was in stark contrast to the standard Starfleet uniforms worn by the Captain and Commander and the simple robe worn by Worf.

Worf hesitated for a moment as the surprise he felt dissipated. Then he was instantly out of his chair, all but running around the desk.

"Captain, I will take you up on that," Worf embraced Captain Picard as the friend he had become over the years since he served on the *Enterprise*, "and I will expect a tour of your newly refitted *Enterprise*."

What a welcome change, especially for a visitor he knew well. It had only been seven earth months and thirteen days since his last tour aboard the *Enterprise-E*. He could not believe his luck. He wondered if his next tour was coming early.

"Sorry, Ambassador, we are leaving in the time it takes to introduce Ambassador Menden. We have very urgent business on Romulus and will have to ride the engines to get us there in time. I am very sorry, maybe next trip."

Worf could not believe the gods hated him this much. To give him friends for a visit and then snatched them away again so quickly, he felt he was being punished. He could not fathom what he had done to cause the gods to punish him this way.

"Ambassador Worf and I have worked together—"

And on top of the gods' punishment, he must suffer this fool for more than the few hours he had to deal with him now and then. As the Federation representative to the Klingon conclave on Earth, Worf dealt with him on a monthly if not weekly basis. The fact he was standing in his office did not please Worf at all.

Worf cut him off. "Yes, we have." Turning to face his friends, "Commander Thompson, it is good to see you again," his eyes pleaded with them, "Are you sure you won't have time to share a keg of blood wine, and talk of old—"

Now it was Picard's turn to interrupt. "You honor us Ambassador, but we are very pressed for time." As the Captain and Commander turn to leave,

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Thompson commented under this breath, “Thank the Admiral!” The pair drank almost anything, but Klingon blood wine was just off the bottom of their scale.

“Kurah,” Worf called to the next room.

“I am here Ambassador,” she said as she appeared in the doorway.

Captain Picard called for a beam out as they entered the outer office. He dissolved in the bright light of the transporter beam. Worf’s elation at seeing his friends and fellow warriors dissolved with them.

He paused a moment, then focused on Kurah and said, “Please ensure we are NOT disturbed this time.”

“Yes, Ambassador,” she mumbled as she left, allowing the door to slide closed behind her. Worf motioned Menden to a chair before what appeared to be a large stone table.

Menden looked around the cave-like room, noting the ornate torches that seemed to provide the illumination. He had never been in Worf’s office or on Kronos before. The candleholders on the desk were fascinating. Fashioned to look like daggers stabbing the table with candles atop the handle. This brought him back to Worf as he sat down behind the desk. “Ambassador Worf, I have been sent here, by the Federation President herself, to—”

Worf cut him off again. “I know why you are here. I received the communiqué appointing you this morning. What I want to know is why. Why after eleven years as the Federation Ambassador to Kronos, I am to be replaced. We are at a critical moment in time. The accord we have worked on for years is to be signed here tomorrow. This is not the time to be replaced!”

“Ambassador, please calm yourself. My posting is not a punishment for either of us; at least the President told me it wasn’t,” the joke did not go over, so he continued quickly. “However, she also told me,” he lowered his voice, “in strict confidence; you are needed on Earth as soon as you can get there.” He relaxed in his chair feeling the hard part of this conversation was over. While the chair looked like hard stone, it was very comfortable. “Now, about that blood wine.”

“I have not known many humans that like blood wine,” Worf said as he rose and addressed getting them both a drink. He walked to a small alcove that resembled a section of his favorite Klingon bar. He grabbed two of the stout mugs off the shelf and drew a long draft of blood wine from the ornate tap.

The ambassador rose from his chair as Worf approached. Worf offered one of the mugs to Menden, who took the one held back. “You must have some Klingon in you,” Worf observed slyly. He raised his mug, “To the Federation!”

Menden raised his mug with a triumphant look and said, “To the Klingon-Federation Accord! And yes, I learned my lesson at the conclave years ago. I will have to tell you the story sometime unless you would like to hear it now.”

Worf returned to his chair with a puzzled expression. This situation was beginning to intrigue him. Ignoring Menden's comments he asked, "So, Ambassador, can you tell me why we are here?"

"The President seemed to believe I am your perfect replacement. Since we have been working together on the accord, I am, after all, very familiar with what is going on here and with your duties. I am the logical person to replace you." He relaxed deeper into the chair. "With my experience with the members of the Klingon conclave in the hills above Oakland; my work on the Federation-Klingon accord; my studies into the Klingon culture; my work in—"

"Enough!" Worf stopped the diatribe. This was becoming a habit. This was the main reason Worf did not like the man. He never got to the point! "I know that. Why am I being replaced at such a critical point in the negotiations? The final draft is here on my desk. Tomorrow I will be headed to Earth for the Federation signing and celebration." He regained his calm, hating the fact that this person irritated him so. "Why now?"

"I don't know. The president would not say anything more about any mission or your new duties. The President's aide would tell me only it is a mission of the highest importance to the Federation. That is all. They both said you were needed as soon as you could arrive."

Worf was becoming tense again, like a warrior preparing for battle. The unknown ahead, the known behind; he could almost taste the battles to come. He had missed this feeling since he had taken this position at the insistence of Chancellor Martok. The few hunting trips they took together each year left them both wanting more. They both believed they never should have taken on their current duties, but should have continued in the ranks of the warriors whose stories they could only enjoy hearing but not participate in.

"I do know the President does not want to take your thunder from you. She asked that you finish the work on the accord and return to Earth with the final document. But, that you do it within eighteen hours of my arrival." He sat up in his chair a little taller. "May I help you review the changes?"

"There is only one change, and I am reviewing it now. You may leave and settle into your temporary quarters. The high council is expecting us in the morning."

With that dismissal, Menden rose and left. Kurah entered and cleared the mugs. She took twice the time to wash the mugs than was necessary. He watched her work admiring her features. She turned and looked at Worf, "The president has no right to remove you now. You have worked so long, so hard, and she is taking the reward from you."

"You are not supposed to be listening," he said with a little irritation. He knew she watched over him like the warrior she was, ready to fight with and for him at a moment's notice.

She asked a rhetorical question with a note of sassiness in her voice. "If I did not listen, how would I know how best to serve you?"

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"You serve me well enough. Off with you now and let me finish."

"I will be back with your dinner shortly, a warrior, even a paper one, needs to keep up his strength!" She taunted him.

"Arg! Out with you!" Worf roared in mock ire. Shaking his head, he returned to being a paper warrior.

• • •

The chamber Menden entered looked very much like a larger version of Worf's office. Worf's office was something he would have to change immediately. Chancellor Martok and Worf rose as he was ushered into the room. He was surprised to find Worf here at this hour.

"Chancellor, may I introduce Ambassador Menden," Worf said.

Martok nodded to the Ambassador and said "Worf, we have met." Then he seemed to lose interest in him. He continued, "Now, you have a document for me?"

Ambassador Menden stepped forward offering the parchment he carried. "Yes, my letter of authority from—," he began.

"Yes, yes. Thank you." Martok cut him off. Taking the rolled announcement and laying it on the table behind him, he turned back to Worf, "To continue. So, you have found the changes to be acceptable to the Federation?" They sat back down, and Menden took the only remaining seat near the desk.

"Yes, but I do not find them agreeable to the warrior in me. Allowing the Federation to annex Klingon planets is a concession that will destroy the empire." He said with his usual flare for overstatement and a hint at oratory.

Shaking his head, he said "It will eventually happen, Worf. The problem is trying to hold the empire together without the glorious battles of old. Our empire of warriors needs a cause, a battle, a glorious war to stay together." A gleam entered his eye as he continued. "Those days are behind us. Peace, the undiscovered country, is before us. It's time for old warriors like us to rest." His face now reflected a tired heart. "The Federation needs the Klingon heart in the battle against the Borg. We stood side-by-side in the Dominion war, and it was glorious for both, but as separate people. We must come together as one. We can continue as the warriors of the Federation. This accord can be the way to achieve more together than apart!" The gleam returned as he spoke, his face now reflected a strong warrior. He stared across the room before saying, "It is time." They rose together, catching Menden unaware. Martok and Worf turned together and started the short walk down the hall toward the council chamber leaving Menden to follow.

• • •

The clamor rose as Menden and Worf marched to the center of the chamber and faced the raised platform, which now contained two thrones. Cheers

erupted as Emperor Kaylus entered with Chancellor Martok to take their seats of power. Kaylus hesitated before taking his seat to allow the cheering to continue. While he knew this irritated the Chancellor, he wanted Martok to be reminded that he was the heart of the Empire. Martok sat last to remind Kaylus he had the power.

When the room quieted, Kaylus rose, “Klingons hear me! The Klingon heart beats strong. The Klingon Empire is sound. The council is in session.” The cheering returned, as Kaylus slowly sat down, allowing the adulation to continue as long as possible.

“Ambassador Worf, you are before us,” Martok said in recognition.

“Emperor Kaylus, Chancellor Martok, Members of the Klingon Council,” Worf began turning in a circle to address all the council members. “The heart of the Klingon Empire is well known to the Federation of Planets. We have fought many glorious battles together. We have many before us.” The council members began stomping their feet in acknowledgement of his words.

Worf continued, his voice raising to a shout. “The Federation has known the Klingon Empire as foe and respects it as a friend. We come this day before the council to bid you accept Hardon, house of Menden to speak for your friends in the Federation.”

The council chamber exploded into jeers. Many voices were heard. One stood out, “You are the voice. Worf is the only voice the council wants to hear.”

Menden spoke. “Hear a new voice, but a familiar voice. A voice that knows the Klingon heart.” His voice grew in volume as he continued. “A voice that has spoken many times to the Klingon conclave on Earth. A voice that has been raised in unison with the Klingon voice in the Federation Council.”

As Menden continued, Worf backed away from Menden, leaving him in the center of the chamber, alone.

“Hear this voice now to represent your friends in the Federation and the warriors that you have shared many glorious battles with. Hear now this Voice!”

Worf turned and left the chamber. It was now up to Ambassador Menden to capture the council and be accepted by them, as Worf had done many years before.

The thunderous applause dissipated as Worf returned to his office for the last time. Kurah was waiting for him as he entered, “Ambassador, your possessions have been forwarded to the *Agarth*. The signed accord is on your desk. You are ready to depart.”

Eleven years and he would not miss this office.

“Always so efficient.” Worf said as they walked to the entrance to his private quarters. “But you forgot one thing.”

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“I did not,” she said as the door closed behind them.
But after only three years he would still miss her.

• • •

“Computer, execute and lock program Menden, Office 1.” As the cave motif dissolved into an ancient Greek study, Menden standing in the middle of the room with Worf, raised his mug to Worf. “Fair sailing Ambassador, in whatever waters you may travel.” As the mugs clinked and the Greek motif solidified, “The accord is aboard the *Agrath* in your quarters. I thank you for letting me bring it to the council for consideration.”

“It is a product of both our efforts. You had the council ‘eating out of your hand’ and so it passed quickly. It also solidified your connection to the council.” Worf felt disappointed by the turn of events. Menden had taken the council by storm and Worf’s place without a fight. He felt that something was missing. His only comfort was that he would still be presenting it to the Federation Council.

“Worf, I wish this could have been done better. I will try to follow in the footprints you have left, and perform—”

“Menden, you talk too much.” Worf moved forward and embraced him as if he would a Klingon. The gesture was returned. Stepping back a pace, they raised their mugs and toasted “To battle.”

Worf finished his mug, placed it on a table that resembled a short column and called to the air “*Agarth, I am here. Hijol.*”

Menden watched as he faded away.

Kurah stood in the doorway, a tear in her eye. She would miss her warrior.

• • •

“Permission to come aboard, Captain.” Worf repeated as he had a thousand times before. He looked around the transporter room. This was one of the newest ships in the fleet and Worf had never been on one. Worf wrinkled his nose, “*It smells like a new ship,*” he thought to himself.

“Permission granted, you son of a Targ!” the captain replied.

The transporter officer looked nervous at hearing the insult to an Ambassador of the Federation of Planets.

“That makes you one also, Kurn,” Worf deadpanned to his half-brother quietly as they embraced, “it is good to see you too!”

The officer relaxed as he realized that his Captain and the Ambassador knew each other. He realized he was new to the ship, but how did the captain know a Federation Ambassador, even a Klingon one, well enough to insult him? He

would have to check the rumor mill and find out what this was all about. His face showed his confusion.

"You need to work on your Federation sarcasm, it is not battle hardened."

"I see your Klingon humor is in the same state!" They both laughed.

Kurn glanced at the transporter officer, "Tell the bridge to get under way, best speed." Kurn turned back to his brother, "Come to my quarters, we will drink, and you will catch me up on the latest gossip from the high council."

They started to leave the transporter room, "How is it you are a week ahead of schedule?" The doors closed.

The transporter officer watched the two leave as he complied with the captains' order.

Chapter 2

The Federation President knew she should have talked to him at her desk, but she was still hoping this meeting would end without the usual confrontation. Dealing with the Romulan High Ambassador to the Federation of Planets was not usually very pleasant. While the governments were outwardly becoming friends, the internal struggle to form an alliance seemed to be a lot more work of late. She would have thought the peaceful relations that had begun with Commander Donatra and Captain Picard five years ago would have produced an ambassador that would like to work more toward friendly relations.

This had not happened. She feared the Romulan Senate was afraid of the Federation and would not give a 'light-second' toward friendly relations. Her fears had been answered when the High Ambassador had arrived. He argued much more than he compromised. He was never satisfied with anything, not even with the chair he sat in!

She had tried a new tack lately. She tried to be nice and not overbearing. She had asked him to sit in the conversation alcove. Made small talk. That had not worked either. She was becoming very impatient with the man, and she just did not have the time.

She calmed herself using the technique taught her by the Vulcan Ambassador. It did not help the situation for her to be upset also. She worked to return to her calm center.

"The Romulan soldiers will take care of the damages even though they did not start the altercation." The High Ambassador continued. "They were provoked into defending themselves from the four Starfleet officers that were harassing them."

She could see he was getting tired of these types of meetings. The surly dialog, back and forth, as supposed equals, was still like his being called to the principles' office and she resented it.

"Ambassador Torrecka, I am told the Starfleet officers were simply trying to buy their Romulan counterparts a round of drinks. The Lieutenant even used tried to your own language to make the offer. They were in fact trying to be nice to the soldiers." Her voice began to show her frustration, "I don't see how that can be offensive or provoking."

"Madam President, the offer of a drink is not, the offer to buy a Romulan soldier a drink of mother's milk is," replied the Romulan in disgust.

Her patience was all but gone by this point. She was very busy ensuring her place in the history of the Federation. She was very busy with the next step in the evolution of the Federation. She did not have the time to deal with petty

incidents that did not mean anything. She knew from personal experience that the problems with the Romulan Empire would slowly go away; they had with the Klingon Empire. Time would take care of that, but time was also her enemy where her legacy was concerned. And her legacy was the most important to her. She knew she was not as firmly entrenched in the Presidency as her predecessor. She did not know how much time she had left to make her mark on the Federation and incidents like this, taking that valuable time, was becoming even more annoying.

The Ambassador continued, "These incidents are beginning to erode the friendship that has been built between the Romulan Star Empire and your Federation." He stood. She could see the anger in his eyes. He looked down on her outwardly calm demeanor and said, "Do you want a return to the fighting that ensued before the war with the Dominion? Before we came to our current level of understanding? To the battles that raged along the neutral zone!"

That was one, she thought. Calmly, she said, "Ambassador, a misunderstanding has occurred on both sides, I am sure." She motioned Torrecka to retake his seat. "I am sure an apology will be extended if it has not been extended already." She leaned forward and quietly said, "Please, don't let this incident destroy the gains both sides have made." She looked him in the eye. Her face took on a look of mild amusement as she declared, "Besides, are you sure you want to go before the Romulan Senate and propose they declare war on the Federation over mother's milk."

She saw a hint of amusement on his face as he considered her statement. Then, as the amusement grew into a grin she burst into laughter. He joined in and they laughed together.

"*This was much better,*" she thought, and continued aloud, "Ambassador, you must realize that these incidents are part of the growing pains that all groups go through. I will ask Starfleet to ensure they use universal translators when our groups interact. That should stop misunderstandings of this nature."

"I can agree to that. I will relate your proposal to the Senate." A smile remained.

She thought, "*Ah, another opportunity!*" She said, "This is not a proposal, Ambassador, it is *the solution.*"

The smile instantly left his face as the Romulan Ambassador returned. He stood again, "I will not be dictated to by the Federation. If we return to the neutral zone and a state of war, it will be on your head!" That was two!

She looked up at Torrecka with a very stern expression and statement flatly, but forcefully, "Ambassador, remember your place! Sit down and calm yourself." "*Got you,*" she thought. If he could not be reasonable, she could still calm herself and have fun.

She continued as Torrecka sat down. "I am saying that this is a simple solution that we, and I emphasize we, can easily agree to. We do not need our relations

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to be adversarial. That is what got us the neutral zone and a hundred years of distrust in the first place.” She slid forward to the edge of her chair moving closer to him. “Torrecka, please, we can both direct our forces to use universal translators to stop the continued misunderstandings between our two peoples. Can we agree to this?”

“Madam President, I can agree to this, but I do not command the forces that Romulus has in Federation space. I will relay your request to the Romulan Senate. It will be up to them to give the orders to the military.”

They both slid back in their chairs as he calmed himself. She could see the seething rage in his eyes dissipate somewhat as they sat quietly for a moment. She broke the silence, “Thank you, Ambassador.” She moved forward to stand. She knew she had won this session and it was time to let go of her prey.

They got to their feet and, as she escorted him to the door, which slid open, she said. “Thank you again, Ambassador. I will direct Starfleet to dispatch the order immediately and leave you to confer with Romulus.”

“Thank you, Madam President,” he said tartly. He knew he had lost the battle. He also knew she knew it and that galled him even more than the loss. He did not like being treated like an underling or having the fact that he was not the supreme Romulan power here thrown in his face. He would have to bring this up to Romulus also. If he was to be effective, he had to be on an equal basis with the Federation. He exited the Presidents’ office and headed back to the Romulan compound in Marin County. He could feel the grin on the Presidents’ face as he left the room. Today was not a good day. The door closed behind him.

• • •

“Nicky,” the President called to her assistant as she walked back to her desk.

The door to the outer office slid open to reveal a tall, slender woman who entered the office. She was dressed in the latest seasonal San Francisco fashion. This was one of the reasons the President had hired her as her personal assistant. The other reasons were her high intelligence and sense of humor. Nicki looked at the President and said “Yes, Madam.”

As the President crossed to her desk, she said, “Please get me Admiral Na’mur as quickly as possible.”

Nicki turned to leave when the President continued, “And, Nicky—”

She turned back to face the President, “Yes, Madam?”

She sat down and said, “Tell him that I am not happy.”

“Yes, Madam,” Nicki said with a slight smile. The door opened and closed as she left the President’s office.

The computer chimed and stated, “Madam, the council is assembled.”

She thanked the computer as she got up and walked to the wall next to the alcove and then through it. She had entered the private connecting hallway to the council chamber. She composed herself as she walked down the short hall. She firmly believed the hall was designed for this purpose. This was it. She was sure her place in history would be assured when she left the council chamber. Her elation at the fact that all the planning was finally ending, was beginning to overwhelm her. She paused short of the door and again composed herself. She set her Presidential pose and stepped forward and through the door as it quickly cycled open and closed.

She begins speaking as she entered the chamber and moved to the podium. "Federation members, have you reached a conclusion to the discussion on the proposal before the council?"

The different delegations were bathed in green light as the council silently voted. She liked the new way of voting; it made the council look happy with yes votes and angry with no votes.

"Discussion is concluded, what is the decision of the council?" A few lights changed from green to red. However, there were not enough red lights to kill the proposal. She was mildly surprised to see two of the yea votes. She had expected the Bajoran and Elaysian delegations to vote no. Before she broke out in a cheer, she said, "The proposal passes. Is there any more business for the council?" The room took on the look of an Elizabethan scene as the lighting changed to red. She quickly stated, "The council is adjourned." Just as rapidly, she turned away from the podium and re-entered the hallway to her office, thinking 'that was too easy'.

As she entered her office, Admiral Na'mur rose to his imposing 7.34 feet. She always felt uncomfortable around the Delton. She got right to the point as she walked to her desk. "Admiral, would you please issue instructions to the fleet to ensure that universal translators are used when dealing with other species," she said tersely. She sat down before continuing. "These incidents are taking too much of my time away from planning the project." Her mood after the vote could not get any better, but she did not want him to know it. She wanted him to understand that this issue was a thorn in her side, and he needed to pull it out and make it go away.

"I will issue the order, but I do not guarantee it will solve the problem. The Romulans are not making this easy." He tilted his head and smiled, which was a sign he would be changing the subject. "I have heard the High Ambassador only rose twice, is he mellowing?"

"I think he is concluding that this new friendship could work. And in doing so, it would lead to the reunification of the Romulans and Vulcans. I am not sure, but I get the idea he is afraid of not being allowed to laugh!"

They both chuckled for a moment. The President continued, "Not to change the subject, but the council has approved my proposal for project Icarus," she said

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as she moved to the real reason for the meeting. "I have started putting the plan into effect. Is the ship ready?"

He was hoping this subject would not come up. "No. It will be a month before the testing and shake-down cruise are complete." He slid back in his seat waiting for the vituperations that normally follow giving the President bad news!

"Admiral, I hope you are in error," she quietly said, still frowning. "Barring any unforeseen incidents, you only have three weeks," she made it sound like an order. Her stare continued to drill into him.

"They will have the main and auxiliary drives operational by then," he said hoping that would appease her, "but they will not be fully assessed. Leaving in three weeks will combine the final shakedown cruise and their first mission," providing more bad news. He would put it in her hands, "Are you sure you want to do that?"

Her expression changed to the politician's poker face that had brought her to her current position. "I have no choice." Her tactic changed to that of a conspirator. "If the mission doesn't start soon, my opponents on the council may be able to rally the few votes needed to stop the project. While there were two more votes than I was counting on, the vote was too close for me to be comfortable."

"Are you sure you want to risk the mission? Remember what happened with the *Enterprise-A*." He was only a youngster when *Enterprise-A* had left the dry dock early on the V'ger mission and had the wormhole incident that almost destroyed it. He knew the story by heart. When he made Admiral, he had finally read the full report and found his hero Admiral Kirk had almost made a fatal mistake.

The adventures of James T. Kirk, the legendary Captain Kirk, are what led him to space and Starfleet command. And led him to be in the president's office explaining Starfleet safety procedures to the President of the Federation of Planets. An unhappy President of the Federation of Planets at that! "That is why Starfleet insists that all testing be completed before a ship leaves the yard," he finally stated.

"You will have to make an exception this time, Admiral," she commanded. She would not be put off. Having worked many years on this project, her legacy, she would not have anything to halt or hinder its execution. Not now!

Na'mur rose and said, "I will do what I can to ensure the ship is ready, but now I have an order to send. With your permission, madam president, I will go take care of it." He was suddenly mad at himself. He could have used the communiqué as a reason to leave before he got into the conversation about the ship!

The president rose with him, "Yes. Please, do your best." As he left, Nicky entered. "Nicky, please inform Ambassador Torrecka that I would like to see him."

Nicky looked at her President, "I asked the Ambassador to return after I heard the proposal passed in the council. I knew you would want to see him," she said with a pleased look on her face.

The president began to look irritated again, but before she could speak, Nicky continued, "Madam, you told me that you would be talking to him first thing after the council passed the proposal. He was almost back to the mission, so he is not in a good mood right now."

She calmed down, knowing that Nicki was just being efficient. However, she knew she was not going to get away with only two 'jumps' this time. As she stopped to take a breath, the President said, "Nicky, please ask him to come right in when he arrives. I will be waiting for him. And have the Admiral return as soon as the communique is sent." She composed herself while returning to her desk and Nicky went to await the arrival of the Romulan Ambassador.

The President sat down at her desk. She wanted to meet the Ambassador at her desk because it was designed to intimidate the visitor. Her chair was higher, making the visitor feel smaller. The desk was wide and deep, massive in proportion to the President herself, but it had a depression in the center where she sat, allowing her to move forward and 'lord' over the seated visitor. She liked adding the intimidation factor to the awe of the office when necessary. She was sure this was going to be one of those occasions.

Ambassador Torrecka entered the office like an exploding missile. "Madam President, you are trying my patience!"

She pointed to the left chair in front of her desk indicating the Ambassador should sit down.

He continued his rage, "You think I serve at your pleasure? That I come running when you call? That the Romulan Star Empire is a puppet empire of the Federation of Planets."

The President rose slowly to her feet, placing her hands lightly on the desk.

His voice rose to a crescendo. "That I am your dog to be ordered around by..."

She glared at him as she said quietly, "Are you done now?"

That stopped him long enough for her to add, "I have just stepped out of a council meeting, and I needed to discuss the resolution with you as soon as possible. Time is very short, and this just could not wait. I am sorry if this has caused you any trouble. Please, Ambassador, have a seat."

The Romulan's chest fell like the wind leaving a billowed sail. His face reflected confusion. He seemed to be unsure how to proceed. This blasted female had caught him off guard again. He was beginning to feel anger overwhelm once

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more. His face reflected the struggle within him. Calm down and find out what she was talking about or continue to rage and be dismissed. He started to calm down. She could see, she had done it again!

She again pointed to the left chair in front of her desk indicating the Ambassador should sit down. The chair in front of the desk was a masterpiece of misdirection. Low and very comfortable, it placed the visitor at ease and relaxed, ready for the ‘slaughter!’ She now used every ounce of this to manage the Romulan.

The door opened to admit Admiral Na’mur. He crossed too and sat down in the right-hand chair before the President’s desk. She could see he sensed something by this demeanor. He leaned back in the chair and the High Ambassador calmed down as he sat down before the imposing desk. She could see the chair’s effect was even worse on Torrecka since the Admiral sat a head above him.

The president took her seat crossing her hands before her and out of his sight. She wanted a calm session to brief the Ambassador, but she did not want to explain too much and take valuable time away from the next few steps of her project.

She continued, “The council has approved project Icarus. What this means to you is that I need your help, and I need it quickly.”

She hated asking the Romulan for anything, but to cement relations with Romulus, she needed their help. She half smiled at the irony of having to ask them to help themselves. She broke out in a full smile as she realized that the High Ambassador would be furious when he realized what she had asked him to do. *“The Klingon’s say that revenge is a dish that should be served cold,”* she thought. Well payback is also a dish that should be served cold, and it was time for the first course.

Torrecka was now more curious than mad. However, the ire he had felt before was returning. How could she keep something from him? “What is this resolution and this project Icarus?” He began to jump up in protest, but slid to the front of the chair, sitting up as straight as possible. His curiosity becoming greater than his anger. He asked, “How do I help your Federation?”

She realized this was going to be fun. The Admiral was smiling behind the Ambassador as he lounged in the right chair. Having been in on project Icarus for some time, he knew this briefing was not for him. Only the outcome was.

“I cannot go into much detail, since the details are being worked out as we speak; however, the point is, that I need your assistance with two things. The first is equipment and the second is a proposal.” The President leaned forward seemingly coming across the desk and continued in a low, conspirator’s voice, “I would like to ask you—”

Chapter 3

In the Captain's Cabin aboard the *Agrath*, laughter shook the walls as Worf told of the latest adventures of the members of the high council. They had been laughing and drinking for hours. Worf related many stories that had happened over the last two years since he had seen Kurn. "I watched as she whipped him like a Targ," more laughter, "then she rode him around the room!"

A buzz interrupted the laughter. Kurn, still laughing said, "Why have you interrupted me?"

"*Captain, we have received new orders,*" the disembodied voice of Bosrah stated from the ceiling above them. Worf could not figure out where it was coming from. He could not see any speakers or openings anywhere in the ceiling. He put his mug on the table before him. The table also claimed his brothers' mug a moment later. Worf looked a little woozy but tried not to show it. He did not want to appear even more drunk than his younger brother.

"I will be up shortly, Captain out." Kurn looked back at his brother as they got up and turn to leave. "And they did this in sight the security system?" His brother asked, continuing the conversation.

Worf managed to rise from the chair without too much difficulty. He continued, "not only in range of security, but the council had opened a channel to his office to ask for clarification on his proposal, so the scene was recorded as part of the council record!" The hearty laughter started again as the door closed behind them.

• • •

"Admiral Na'mur, Mister Asley is waiting on the comm. channel, sir," said the computer. The admiral leaned forward and tapped the communications panel on the left side of the desk in his Starfleet office. He despised the voice interface the engineers had installed before he had taken over. He admired people who answered their own calls and tried to do it when he could. Having the computer do his work for him was not who he was.

The Chief Engineer of the Charon Facility appeared on the holo-screen above his desk. The overly large human looked straight at him with the disturbing green eyes that unnerved him. Asley's build was offset by the blond hair and strong nose of a Scotsman. He was not sure why all engineers he knew were Scotsman, but it seemed to be a Starfleet norm! Starfleet Corps of Engineers was populated with mostly Scotsman. He shook his head clearing it of these thoughts.

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"Mister Asley, good to see you again," Na'mur said. He tried to imitate a human smile and failed.

"What is it, Admiral. We are very busy trying to get the project ready for the President," Allen said quickly. He reminded him of Captain Montgomery Scott, but without the Scottish accent.

The Admiral knew the Chief was trying to impress upon him the fact he had no time to spare. He also knew this was not an act. The Chief had worked for Na'mur for many years, and he knew he was active in all facets of the operation.

"Chief, the President would like the project ready for conclusion as soon as possible, but no later than 20 days from now!"

The Chief gave him a very hard look before answering, "You realize that the project will not be fully tested and certified."

The Admiral returned the Chief's stern look, "I am aware as she is of the fact the testing will not be completed. Will it be ready?"

"Yes, sir. I will see to it that the project is ready for implementation in 20 days. I sincerely hope you and the President know and except the danger." His demeanor did not change.

"I am aware of it Chief. Thank you. Na'mur out," he said as he closed the connection.

• • •

"*Commander Donatra?*" The voice interrupted her thoughts of her coming vacation. She needed a rest. After dealing with the High Ambassador to the Federation for over a year, all her soldiers needed a vacation! However, she was the lucky one this month.

She had concluded many months ago that Ambassador Torrecka was terminally angry. And he seemed to enjoy it! If anything were to destroy the alliance that was being built, it would be his attitude. She was very glad to be entering the orbit of her home planet, Romulus. "It has been too long indeed," she thought as Romulus moved into view through the portal in front of her.

"Yes," she said quickly, her thoughts returning to the present. She had been waiting for this notification for months and the moment had come. Commander Tomalak was nothing if not punctual.

"We are entering orbit of Romulus and the Praetor is expecting you," he said. She turned to face the screen and the Commander.

The surprise of the announcement showed slightly in her voice as she said, "The Praetor? This is a vacation, not an official visit."

Tomalak showed no emotion as he stated, "None the less, the Praetor contacted me a few moments ago and asked that you beam directly to his office complex. He awaits you now."

She had wished she could have watched the *Preditor* enter orbit. The vision of a large Bird-of-Prey swooping down into orbit was very impressive. She had performed the maneuver in her own ship, the *Valdore*, many times. However, a year off the deck plates tends to dim the memory. That was why she made the trip home to refresh these memories. She wanted to spend time at the Spa of Sonsoulla, refreshing the memories of her time there with her family. Her family had gone there for a week each year when she was growing up, and she so looked forward to the vacations, they were her best and most cherished memories. It had been over a year since her last visit and now it was time for her next visit.

She picked up her bag, set her shoulders and headed for the Transporter room. After a year as the Senior Romulan soldier and garrison commander at the Earth Embassy compound, returning home for a vacation should be relaxing. Still, she had not known how much she missed commanding a starship.

Spending the trip from Earth to Romulus aboard the *Preditor* had brought back many memories of a young centurion's first year in space. It also brought back the memory of returning home for the family's last trip to the Spa of Sonsoulla. She had only been back twice since. As she entered the Transporter room, reality returned.

Being dragged into the politics of the hour was not high on her list of things to do before leaving for the Embassy again, in only two weeks. She hated the direction that this vacation had begun to take. She walked across the Transporter room and took her place on the transport pad. A moment later, she put down her bag in the Praetor's outer office.

"You may enter, he is expecting you," the assistant said as she directed one of the soldiers to take control of her bag.

The large doors parted as she approached, revealing an equally large office. She had not been in the Praetorate since the last renovation, so she was not ready for the massive changes that had been made. She moved to the center of the chamber-like office to where the Praetor was standing. She noted that the room had been doubled in size, which gave the impression that the occupant was small and of little consequence. She, however, knew better.

"Commander Donatra, Ael, I trust the journey home was not too arduous." He said this as a statement, not a question. He did not offer her a seat, which told her something was up, or this would be very short.

She, however, treated it as a question, "no Praetor, it was rather relaxing. I had hoped it would continue." She let her mild curiosity show by asking, "may I ask why you have asked me here?"

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"Yes, you may ask," he said quietly, "but, I would rather you accompany me and find the answer for yourself." With that, he turned toward the back of the office.

The fact he was being secretive was beginning to distress her. Her curiosity was turning to dread. It was not like the Praetor to be quiet and cryptic like this. He was normally very straight forward and to the point in dealing with the military. The Military leaders and commanders liked him for this reason. They knew where they stood with him.

His manner was more conspirator than Praetor.

She followed him to a nondescript doorway that revealed a turbolift behind it. Two soldiers were waiting inside. As they joined the soldiers, he called out, "Senate." She felt what the humans called a knot in her stomach. The doors closed and the turbolift began its journey. It was a very silent journey. She had enough time to look at the Praetor and the guards. She tried to read any expression on their blank faces, without success.

• • •

"What new orders," Kurn said as he and Worf entered the bridge of the *Agrath*. His second officer rose from the command chair and handed his captain a data pad. Kurn reviewed the information displayed on the pad as Worf looked over the bridge. Second officer Bosrah watched Worf as he scanned the consoles around the bridge. While Worf was Klingon by birth, he was Federation by upbringing. Bosrah did not like the Federation knowing the capabilities of this new class of ship. He was not a fan of the Federation at all.

Worf had never been on one of the new Vor'Cha II class of destroyers, let alone the bridge of one. He slowly strolled around the bridge stations, looking at the changes and additions that have been made. The helm officer asked if he could be of assistance, to which Worf replied, "I see the weapons improvements. Have the engines been changed?"

The helm officer told him that the warp engines had not, but the maneuvering thrusters and impulse engines had. He said with pride, "We can spin in place and be within firing range before the captain can complete the order."

Bosrah had suffered the Federation enough. He said, "Helm, that is enough."

The captain gave his second a stern look. "Helm, set course for Klackon, best speed," Kurn ordered.

Worf gave Kurn a puzzled look. He moved to join his brother, who said quietly, "later."

Without waiting for an acknowledgement, "Bosrah, you have the bridge. I will be in my quarters," Kurn called back over his shoulder as he and Worf departed, the door cutting off the conversation. "Tell me more about—"

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The turbolift arrived at the Praetor's Senate office. The doors slide aside, opening onto a normal, but large, office. They left the turbolift, leaving the soldiers inside. As they crossed the office to the normal door, her curiosity was returning and beginning to become overwhelming. He was moving too quickly for her to do anything but follow. She could not see his face to try and gauge or get an inkling of what she was in for. She had no idea why they would be proceeding to the Senate Chamber. The dread was returning and building inside her.

They passed through the door into a hallway, which led them to the Romulan Senate Chamber. She managed to get beside him long enough to see his face and was surprised at the change that came over the Praetor as they moved down the hall toward the Senate. She watched him as he went from a concerned leader to a stern combatant.

She took a step back and followed him as they entered the chamber and marched down the steps to the center of the chamber. She looked around at the new faces. Praetor Shinzon had killed all the Senators, apart from one who had not lasted very long once her treachery had been found out. Commander Donatra recognized only three of the new Senators. She nodded to each of them in recognition, but they sternly ignored her. Her dread deepened.

Seated to the left, she saw her old mentor and friend, Admiral Saron. Captain Picard and Commander Thompson entered the chamber through the main entrance and quietly moved to sit with the Admiral. They also ignored her.

Commander Ael Donatra began to get very nervous. Why was she here? She had been in the Senate chamber many times, but why now? The Senate was well known as the guardian of the Romulan Star Empire and for holding members of Romulan Star Navy, as well as its citizens, accountable for their actions. Could she have done something on Earth? With Captain Picard here, could it be the fight with Praetor Shinzon? She had many more questions and they threatened to overwhelm her.

She tried to quiet her mind by reviewing her service record over the last year. She tried to find fault with anything she had done that would find her before the Senate. She had served the High Ambassador as best she could, keeping him calm when the Federation President went out of her way to infuriate him. She maintained the garrison of soldiers, ensuring there were no incidents like the ones that occurred on other planets and on the Romulan and Federation ships. Her recent failure could not be the reason she was here, could it?

As they arrived in the center, surrounded by the full senate, the President of the Senate called the chamber to order.

This had been changed after Shinzon had been Praetor and President of the Senate. The Empire had decided that being both gave one person too much power. The Senate now had a separate President to handle and direct its affairs. The Praetor now ran the government and the Senate directed how it ran. The Praetor took his new position across the room from the President.

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The President rose slowly. "Fellow Senators, Praetor and Citizens; the senate meets this hour to examine the record of Commander Donatra," he began as the echoes of the gavel died to silence. His mentioning of the citizens told her that the Senate was being broadcast across Romulus and the rest of the empire.

He continued, "Ael Donatra entered service and rose uneventfully though the levels to Commander." He paused for effect; Donatra could feel her heart pounding. She could not think of anything she had done wrong! Her thinking began to become muddled. The thought: "*What have I done!*" was running rampant through her mind over and over.

"Here Senators, here is where her life story changed!"

She felt her knees weakening. This was a trial!

A low murmur began to fill the chamber as he continued; "This Commander conspired against Praetor Shinzon, fought against him with the Federation's Captain Picard, who killed him.

She said, "It was the right thing to do!" She looked around the chamber trying desperately to find someone to take her side. Looking, searching for an ally.

He paused and lowered his voice to a whisper before continuing; "I leave it to you to decide if you agree."

In a normal voice he continued his attack. "As the senate was rebuilt and a new Praetor elected," he nodded toward the Praetor and received a nod in return. He continued mockingly, "she worked with her friends in the federation to better *our* relations!"

He scanned the chamber for effect, raising his voice slowly as he said, "Some in the empire, call her traitor, sympathizer, a disgrace to the soldiers' uniform she wears in our presents."

"Senator—" she began. She had to try to defend herself against these changes.

"Silence," he shouted at her, causing her to physically recoil and fall silent. The shock of his shout caused her to begin to tremble slightly. She hoped the tremors were not visible. A sudden clarity came to her.

"You will not speak until I have finished," the Senate President almost shouted at her.

He continued. "She was sent to the Embassy on Earth where she continued to work against the way the Empire has operated for centuries."

Donatra believed her life was coming to an end. The confusion in her mind was paralyzing her where she stood, but also gave her clarity of the condemned. Of those that knew their life was coming to an end.

Her mind focused on the belief she had worked to better the Empire, not destroy it. Her goal was *for* the empire, not against it.

She rallied around that idea. Her goal was to work toward better relations with the Federation. Yes, they *had* been the enemy. Yes, there had been hatred between them for centuries. But she knew it could be overcome, it had to be overcome, it would be overcome. The trembling slowed as she became focused. It finally stopped.

But then, Galorndon Core, the Klingon incident, Praetor Shinzon; Picard had been instrumental in all of them. Trying to smooth relations. He was not the evil demon the Federation was seen to be. She had to come to the realization that the Federation had changed, and that the Empire was changing; had to change.

Ael dedicated her life to that goal, to find better relations. The goal is to seek out a better understanding of these people of the federation. And the more she learned, the more convinced she became that she was right.

Commander Donatra had thought the new leaders were behind her when she was assigned to command the garrison on Earth. Maybe she was wrong. Maybe the Ambassador had changed their minds. Whatever had happened, she was now determined to face it.

So, she stood tall and alone in the center of the Senate, knowing in her soul she had nothing to answer for, she would stand confident before the Senate. Accepting their judgment, whether she was right or wrong.

He glared mockingly at her. "Smoothing relations, helping our High Ambassador to *understand* these earth creatures!"

She stared back. Locking her gaze on him. She knew she was right!

• • •

The small globe on the screen became sharper and larger as the *Agarth* approached Klackon. At the proper moment Kurn said, "Standard orbit, Bosrah."

"Yes, Captain," stated the second officer and then relayed, "standard orbit helm." He glanced at his console, reports, "Captain, weapons are fully armed, shields are at 100 percent."

"Captain, we are being hailed from the planet," reported communications. "It's the Governor, sir."

Kurn wondered what is so important that he can't even park his ship before he was bothered. The *Agarth* slid quietly and quickly into orbit, dwarfing the two birds of prey already there.

"On Screen," Kurn ordered as he slouched farther into his command chair. He found the chair to be almost too comfortable. He was now the power in the area. There wasn't a ship that could stand against his new destroyer. He marveled at the power he now commanded, ten times that of his old bird of prey.

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"This is Captain Kurn of the Klingon Destroyer *Agarth*, what is your problem, Governor?"

"If you will come down here, Captain, we can talk over MY problems as well as YOUR problem," the Governor replied distastefully and closed the connection.

This was not starting out well. But then, most planetary Governors did not impress Kurn. He saw them as old warriors that had lost the desire or stomach for battle. He saw this governor as nothing more than a scrubwoman in warrior's clothing.

"It seems you have the bridge, Bosrah," Kurn said as he rose and headed for the bridge turbolift. A short ride and the doors opened directly onto the Transporter room. This was far superior to the old ships.

He made that short walk to the platform, then one command later he materialized in the outer office of the Planetary Governor of Klackon. The doors opened as he materialized. He entered the office through the open portal.

He was not impressed as he looked around the office and then focused on the Governor behind his desk.

• • •

The President of the Romulan Senate lowered his taunting voice to just above a whisper, "To show us that the Empire can co-exist in a peaceful relationship with the Federation. To show us a way to a peaceful existence, where both sides work toward understanding and help each other. Where we are friends."

He raised his voice to a roar. "But this is not our way!" The Senators rose to their feet, pounding their desks to show concurrence.

Donatra feels faint again, but stayed standing tall, as the president continues in a slow, metered, normal voice, "this was not our way."

"You, Commander, have shown the Senate and the citizens of the Empire that the Federation is not the enemy the empire thought it was. You have shown us a new way."

Confusion and relief filled her. Was this a trial? Her confusion returned.

The president moved to the opening in the council table, "You have shown us that a federation warship in orbit about Romulus is not a threat. You have shown us that the captain of that vessel can be welcomed to, and stand with honor in, the senate chamber. You have opened the eyes of your people," he said slowly, distinctly and with reverence.

As the president arrived in the center of the chamber, he called, "Admiral Saron, Captain Picard, please join me." The three surrounded her. The president standing before her raised his hands before him. "Commander Ael Donatra, for your faithful service to the empire; for your vision of a more prosperous Romulus; for showing your people a better path and at the

recommendation of the Admiral of the Star Navy, by Senate proclamation you are commissioned as an Admiral in the Romulan Empire Star Navy.”

Admiral Saron and Captain Picard removed the Commander’s insignia. She felt the hands of her friends holding her up as the President bestowed the rank of Admiral upon her.

Her mind, at this point, was numb. It was all she could do to stand and receive the congratulations of the Senate. The cheering. The banging of tables. The president returned to his position as the applause died down. He declared, “The Senate thanks you for your service and trusts it will continue. The Senate is adjourned.”

Picard and Saron escorted her out of the chamber where the Praetor was waiting.

“I would like to see you first visit, tomorrow morning,” he said in a whisper as he congratulated her.

She, Saron, Picard, and Thompson left the Senate building with a celebration before them.

Chapter 4

“Captain Kurn, thank you for coming so quickly,” the Klackon Governor gushed. This was a big swing in his manner from the call to the ship!

Kurn disliked him immediately; this was not a true Klingon, let alone a Klingon Governor! “Your call seemed urgent, what is your problem.”

“During the Dominion war,” he said, “the Federation provided numerous missions to keep us going when support from the home planet stopped. This is not a self-sustaining planet yet. The citizens of this planet are very grateful to the Federation for their help. So much so, that they voted to request entry into the Federation!”

Kurn began to get impatient. “I would think you could control the population. Why did you divert us?” He demanded.

“The dissidents, those against Klackon becoming a member of the Federation, are rioting in the streets,” he said hurriedly, “and my security forces are very small and overwhelmed.”

“You brought the *Agrath* here, interrupting a very important mission, so we could play policeman!” Kurn was furious! He thought, *“How could this weakling put him in this position?”*

The Governor reared back from Kurn’s verbal onslaught, and yelled, “Control yourself, Captain and remember who you are talking to!” Kurn stopped and looked at the Governor anew. “I need your forces to maintain order,” he said in a raised voice, “I don’t care about your mission! The citizens on this planet are fighting in the streets, half my security force is injured, and I need your help to quell the rioting.”

“I will call the ship and have two companies of warriors beamed down,” Kurn said as he calmed down.

Kurn opened a channel, “*Agrath.*”

“*Vorn here, Captain.*”

An officer entered the office and handed the Governor a note.

“Beam down two companies of warriors to supplement the security forces here,” he ordered.

The Governor looked up from reading the note. “I will also need help guarding the landing field, one of the ships has just been reported stolen,” the Governor interrupted.

“Also cover the landing field and quarantine the planet,” Kurn added.

“Understood, Captain,” Vorn said as the connection was closed.

Kurn turned and looked at the Governor again and with a disgusted look left the office to return to the Klingon Destroyer *Agrath*.

• • •

Donatra arrived at Praetor’s office just prior to the Praetor’s first visit time and announced herself to the Praetor’s assistant. “Congratulations, Admiral, you are an inspiration to all of Romulus,” she said proudly.

Donatra had gotten the same response at most of the places the group had visited last night. She could not buy a thing last night. It seemed all of Romulus was celebrating her vision and promotion! Hence the reason she was feeling a bit woozy this morning.

The Admiral still felt a little embarrassed by her promotion, but said, “Thank you.” She continued quickly, “Is the Praetor ready to see me?”

At that moment, the Praetor’s voice came from the communications panel on the desk asking, “Has Admiral Donatra arrived yet?”

The assistant motioned Ael to the office door and said, “on her way in, sir,” as the doors cycled open.

He stood in an alcove to the left of the door.

She moved to join him as the door cycled closed. “Good morning, Praetor,” she said in a quiet, measured voice.

The Praetor motioned her to sit in the chair in front of him. They took their seats as he said, “Good morning, Admiral, how are you this morning?”

“Not very good. I believe I’m allergic to celebrating!” she continued in a low voice.

He smiled as he slid to the front edge of his chair, closer to her. “I’m sorry to hear you are not feeling well, but I’m sure you will recover quickly,” he said.

“Thank you, sir, but I’m sure you didn’t ask me here to discuss my health.”

He gave her a pained expression as if to say, “I care for all my people.” However, he said, “No, I wanted to congratulate you personally,” in a normal voice and then continued in a much lower voice, “No. I wanted to give you your next assignment.”

She had to lean forward to hear him. She was not used to having two conversations at one time and the way she felt right now, she hoped she could keep up.

“Thank you, sir,” she said normally and then in a low voice she asked, “What assignment?”

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The Praetor said, "Your Welcome. I hope it was not too much of an ordeal." He whispered, "You are to return to Earth. On the way you will be met and briefed by the High Ambassador to the Federation."

The Admiral said out loud, "It was a rather unique way to be promoted." She whispered, "Do you have any more information?"

"The Senate was very pleased with your work and wanted to make an example for the citizens. To show them one person can change the empire if they are right and committed as you are." Quietly, he added, "I have only been told that the President of the Federation has asked for you personally. She also strongly suggested your promotion."

"Thank you again, Praetor. If I did not really need a vacation before, I need one now!" She asked under her breath, "When do I have to leave?"

He stood as he said, "Then I will not keep you from your vacation any longer." Leaning forward, he whispered, "As soon as you leave here, the *Predator* is standing by to return you to Earth."

"Thank you for your kindness, sir," she returned as she got slowly to her feet.

The doors cycled open as they walked toward them. She came to the position of attention and saluted. The Praetor returned the salute and she turned and left.

As the doors closed behind her, she wondered where she should go. She decided to return to her temporary quarters. She walked to the outer office entrance and entered the hallway.

Turning to the left toward the main entrance to the building, she felt the transporter beam before she heard it. As the hallway faded, she thought, "Well here I go again!"

• • •

The ship rose quickly from Klackon. "First Officer, there is a ship leaving the planet," yelled the Sensors officer. Hours of nothing had left her very excited when something did happen. Vorn gave her a stern look; he did not like excitement on the bridge. Once the warriors had been beamed down to the planet at the start of the duty tour, the tour had become very uneventful.

Vorn ordered, "Berhar, Battle Alert. Navigation, move to intercept the fool." The *Agrath* turned and moved to intercept the ship. He, like his captain before him, sank deeper into the chair. The rising ship was now on the screen before him. A medium sized freighter.

"Battle alert sounded, shields up, weapons online, sir," called second officer Berhar.

"It is a Saber FRT class cargo ship, sir," reported the Sensors officer.

"Hail the ship," ordered Vorn, from the command chair. He felt the chair becoming very comfortable. "Order them to halt for boarding."

The second officer replied, "They are powering their weapons and shields, captain."

"They must believe it is a good day to die. At this rate they will. Don't they know they are no match for this vessel?"

A large, but out of shape Klingon came on the view screen and said, "This is Captain Ko'ron of the freighter Tomara. How can I help you?"

"Halt and be boarded, Captain," stated the first officer, as Worf entered the bridge, responding to the battle alert.

"We are on a standard cargo run with a few women and children aboard, Captain. Nothing to worry about," Ko'ron said. "I hope we can continue on our way."

"I did not ask you what you were doing, *Tomara*, power down your weapons, lower your shields, assume orbit, cut your engines and prepare to be boarded!" Vorn was beginning to tire of this debate, "And do it now!" He signaled the Communications officer to cut the connection.

The screen switched to the forward view as the ship lurched slightly from a minor hit on the shields.

Vorn sat up in the command chair. He could not believe Captain Ko'ron had fired on his ship. He made a mental note to log this Captain as mentally deranged and yelled over the din and reports, "Weapons, target the main engine and fire!"

The ship shuddered as the disrupters fired on the smaller ship. A shimmer enveloped the rear of the *Tomara*. In a silent, slow-motion explosion running from back to front, the *Tomara* disintegrated.

Worf ran to the command chair and grabbed Vorn by the arm, "That was not necessary! There is no honor in killing innocent woman and children. You have brought shame to this ship!"

Vorn pulled away and backhanded the Ambassador, knocking him off his feet and sending him to the deck. Standing over Worf, Vorn said, "I am in command of this ship. I was fired upon and returned that fire. I do not answer to a Federation Torbor!" Looking at two officers and indicating the Ambassador, he ordered, "Remove *this* from my bridge." The disgust was heavy in his voice. He turned his back to Worf and the officers helped him up.

"Weapons," he said trying to get some order on the bridge, "I told you to target the main engines, not to destroy the vessel! Sensors," Vorn took his chair and continued, "Search for any survivors. Navigation, resume a standard orbit."

Worf allowed himself to be escorted from the bridge. He was returned to his quarters where he immediately calls the communications officer, "open a channel to Kurn," he orders.

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As she materialized on the transporter platform, "Admiral, congratulations on the promotion," Commander Tomalak said. He saluted and said, "Welcome aboard." He called out, "Bridge, Engage," and felt the engines begin to carry the ship out of orbit and on a course to Earth.

He looked back at Donatra and saw the question on her face. "Forgive me Admiral, but I have liked that phrase ever since I heard Picard use it," he explained.

She stepped from the platform saying, "Thank you. I was not expecting to see you again this soon."

They headed out of the transporter room toward her quarters.

He looked mildly confused as he explained, "The Praetor sent word you were ready to leave. His assistant packed your bag and had it transported to your quarters."

She changed the subject. "How long will it take to get to Earth?" she asked hoping beyond hope that she would have time to recover. She still did not feel well and hoped it did not show.

"We are eighteen hours from the neutral zone where we will meet a Federation ship and be escorted the rest of the way to Earth," he said in a voice tainted with ire. "It will take about three days if the Earth ship can keep up."

"You don't like this arrangement, do you?

"No," he said without hesitation, "I have dealt with many Captains from the Federation," he still remembered the incident with the machine Captain, "and I have never agreed with the results of any of the encounters."

She admired his restraint. She too remembered the Romulan fleet being outwitted by Commander Data. She later found out that not only was that his first command, but he had defied orders to catch them. She had admired Commander Data ever since. She was saddened when he was lost during the fight with Shinzon that led to the destruction of the Reman battleship *Scimitar*. She attended his wake aboard the *Enterprise* after the battle.

She came back to the conversation. "A little less arrogance, more understanding and trust will help you through the days ahead," she advised him quietly as a crewmember passed them.

They entered a lift, "Level five," he called.

She said, "I thought we were headed to my quarters, on level six."

"We are, but your quarters are not on level six anymore, *Admiral*. You are now in the Admirals' cabin," he said with a smile, "enjoy your promotion."

She was not happy with this revelation since the Admirals' cabin was between the Captains' and Political Officers' quarters. She did not like being so close to a member of the Tal'shar. They still made her very uncomfortable. As the lift

stopped and the doors opened a crewmember ran into the Admiral almost knocking her off her feet. Donatra bounced off the closed lift door as the crew member stepped back.

"I am sorry," the crewmember began, then caught sight of the Admirals rank, "ADMIRAL! I am so, so sorry!" The young Uhlan soldier continued stepping around the two officers causing the lift door to open. She continued to repeat her apology until the sound of her voice was gone as the door closed.

"A very busy crew you have Commander," Donatra said, still in shock and smarting from the collision.

"I will see that she is punished as soon as you are settled," he stated.

"Please don't. I would rather you have her report to my quarters. After all, I am the one she hurt."

"She is my crew and I like to do the disciplining on my ship." He was beginning to get irritated thinking the Admiral was usurping his authority.

"Then discipline her. When you are finished, send her to my quarters afterwards. I hope I don't have to say please, Captain," she made it sound like a challenge.

"As you request, Admiral." He did not want to challenge a new Admiral. In his experience, they tended to try flexing their new gained power and he did not want to become the focus of her wrath.

"Thank you, Commander," she said with a smile. She did not want to get on his bad side since she really did like him.

They arrived at the Admirals' cabin, "If you need anything please call me," he said as the door opened.

"Thank you again," she said as she entered the cabin.

She spent the next thirty minutes stowing her belongings. She showered slowly enjoying every drop of water, becoming more refreshed and rejuvenated with every moment. She finally finished the shower, air-drying quickly in the heated stall. She returned to the bedroom to find her dress uniform laid out on the bed. She put on her robe and looked quickly around her quarters, finding no one. With a puzzled look on her face, she turned back to the bed and her uniform.

• • •

"Kurn here," he answered to the hail looking at his first officer on the Governors' desk screen. He had returned to the Governor's office when a flash appeared in the sky.

Vorn said, "Captain, the Tomara attempted to leave the planet, we intercepted the ship and targeted the engines. The ship was destroyed," looking over at the Sensors officer, then looked back and continued quickly, "with no survivors."

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Kurn began to get mad, “Do you not understand the word quarantine, Vorn,” he asked, “I am sure that is what you were ordered to do!”

“Yes, Captain. The Weapons officer is being disciplined for the mistake. We have a new Weapons officer on the bridge.” Vorn communicated.

The Governor spoke up then and asked, “How many people were aboard the ship?”

Vorn looked at the Sensors officer, who stated that there were fifty-seven life signs aboard the craft. Vorn relayed that to the captain. He was very glad to have an atmosphere between him and his Captain right now!

“I will trust that this new Weapons officer knows how to follow orders,” Kurn said, “or do I have to get two more officers replaced?”

“That will not be necessary, Captain, I trained this one myself.”

“Is there anything else, Vorn?”

“Yes, Captain. Ambassador Worf charged onto the bridge and interfered with the quarantine operation. His interference distracted the Weapons officer and may have caused the miss-shot that destroyed Tamara. I had him removed from the bridge and confined to quarters under guard.”

“I will deal with that when I return. Is there anything else, Vorn?”

“No, Captain, Vorn out.” The connection closed.

Kurn turned back to the Governor who said, “fifty-seven less rioters on our hands, but I hate to lose the ship. I hope your warriors are a lot more careful with the next ship.”

Kurn, shaking his lowered head, replied, “So am I, Governor, so am I.”

Their conversation returned to planning the next move to protect the planetary resources that the rioters seemed to be after.

• • •

When she had dressed for lunch, a call came from the door chime. “Admiral Donatra?” she heard a young voice say through the intercom.

“Yes?”

“I am here to escort you to the captain’s table for lunch, sir.”

Ael walked to the door, and it slid out of the way, revealing a very young male Sub-Lieutenant. “I was not aware that I had a Luncheon engagement,” she told him.

“I only know that I was detailed to escort you to the captains’ dining room,” he said nervously, “however, I have had this detail for all the special visitors for the last five months. The captain usually arranges for a meal in their honor on the first day or night aboard.” He mentioned quickly.

"Then lead on," she told him lightly with a broad smile. It was my first smile today.

They started down the corridor with him in the lead. They entered a turbolift for a short trip, emerging in the middle of the ships' spine. They continued their travel down the dorsal corridor to the captains' dining room. Stopping before one of the doors about halfway down the corridor, he turned and indicated she was to enter as the door slid aside.

She entered the room, immediately noticing the clear wall beyond the table and the stars speeding by. It was still breathtaking after all these years. She remembered her own ship and her dining room with a feeling of great loss. She used to dine in this environment almost every night. But now she realized that she did not appreciate it then as much as she did now when it was absent.

The captain and five other officers rose as she entered. She nodded acknowledgement of the show of respect.

"Thank you for joining us, Admiral," the captain said with a smile.

"Thank you for the invitation, Captain," she returned the smile, "it came as a pleasant surprise.

"Thank you. It was intended to be a pleasant way to welcome you aboard and introduce my officers to you." He indicated the officer on his left, "Sub-Commander Dosrala, my first officer." Continuing around the table he introduced the second officer, chief engineer, their second and finally the political officer of the Tal'shar.

She tried to hide her ill feelings toward the political officer, she did not like the Tal'shar, feeling they had too much power in the Empire. This officer had the power of life and death over the captains' or any other officers' career and sometimes their very lives.

She acknowledged each of the introductions, making small talk with each before moving to the next. She had always noticed that the good Admirals, the ones she looked up to, had always made a point of taking the time to take an interest in the soldiers they encountered. She had decided early in her career to pick up this trait. She felt it had served her well in her rise through the ranks.

She had never had a problem with any of the troops she had commanded. Then there was the Tal'shar officer. She disapproved of the political officers since they had close contact with her crew. They believed a commander must be arrogant and above the crew, caring nothing for them.

She could not do that.

Captain Ryker had once said, "Be nice to the people you meet climbing the ladder, they are the ones you will meet on the way back down!" She could not quite agree with the Earth saying.

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Rather, she lived by the motto, 'Take care of the troops and the mission will take care of itself.' Meaning that a caring commander caused the soldiers to work harder to complete the mission. This worked because soldiers did not like being forced to do their job; they would rather do it to the best of their ability to please someone. They also like to show their initiative.

This motto had yet to fail her, except where Tal'shar officers were concerned. They, as a group, refused to be 'cared about.' They remained arrogant and aloft. They followed their own way and insisted she follow their rules also; hence, the ill feelings between them. Only her accomplishments had kept her from being reduced in grade and dismissed from her past positions.

Commander Tomalak motioned her to the center of the table across from himself and facing the stars. She moved to stand in front of the chair, and she sat down when the captain sat. The others followed closely behind. The small talk resumed almost immediately, but slowly. She felt she was inhibiting the conversations.

Tomalak started the conversation, "You were going on vacation I understand. May I ask where you were going?"

"I had not thought much past returning home for a short, quiet rest. Just getting away from Earth and back to Romulus was enough."

"Then you find your duties on Earth to be a chore," the Tal'shar stated quietly.

"Not at all," she said guardedly, "after a year of commanding a regiment of Romulan soldiers with all the inherent problems, I simply needed a rest, a change of pace. Think of it as a moment's diversion to refresh the mind."

"Then you do not like commanding the regiment so much that you must get away from the duty. You can't handle the daily operations to the point you have to steel away and shirk your duties to the Empire!" He almost shouted the challenge.

"Sub-Commander Talmar, please, we are not here to attack the Admiral, but enjoy a fine feast with her," Tomalak intervened with a stern stare before the Admiral could respond to the attack.

"Captain, I do not need your defense, but I thank you for it," she said. After the experience in the Senate, this one, lone Tal'shar was nothing to her. "I took a short vacation to refresh my memories of home, to refocus on the Empire and my work, to ensure myself that I was still connected to the desires of the Empire and its citizens. I think my recent experience in the Senate and before the citizens of the Romulan Star Empire would attest to my loyalty, direction, and the accomplishment of my mission."

"The Tal'shar does not share the assessment of the Senate," Talmar said with a note of disgust in his voice.

"That is between the Tal'shar and the Senate. I do not presume to know the mind of the Senate, nor am I disposed to make policy for them," she said hoping this verbal slap in the face would stop the attack.

With the Captain's stern stare and the rest of the officers looking at him, Talmar decided he had made his point and kept quiet.

At this point, the serving staff entered with covered plates which were set before them.

"Admiral, I found out that you are a connoisseur of Earth food and that you love something called Chinese food. I have asked the chef to program your favorite dishes for lunch," the captain said confidently.

The covers were removed to reveal a Romulan equivalent of what she thought might be sweet and sour something over rice with stir-fry vegetables on the side. She looked closely, noticing the rice and other vegetables were not quite right in appearance and she had no idea what was in the puffs under the red sauce.

She tried a puff and found it to be remarkably like the original, except for the fact that the meat was a type of lizard that she loved. The red sauce was a very close imitation of a sweet and sour sauce. She then tried the 'rice,' which turned out to be a thickened, pelleted form of bread dough. The vegetables were all Romulan, and the sauce used to stir-fry them only enhanced their flavor.

After sampling the meal, she asked, "Is the chef available."

The captain asked a server to ask the chef if he would join him.

She continued enjoying eating every mouthful.

Six minutes later, a large Lieutenant entered the dining room in full dress uniform mildly out of breath. "You asked for me, sir," he said as he came to attention facing the captain's chair a respectful distance away.

"The Admiral did, Chef," he said. The Chef walked around the table to stand near the Admiral. He came to the position of attention and waited.

The Admiral rose from her chair, pushing the chair backward, and turned to face him. The rest of the officers stood. She stated ceremoniously, "Chef, you have made a meal beyond imagination. The use of normal Romulan foods, in this manner, shows you are a true master. I wanted to commend you personally for this wonderful meal. You are a credit to your Captain and ship. Thank you very much, chef." She bowed slightly in his direction, in a traditional Chinese manor.

With the Captain smiling, the chef said, "You are very gracious Admiral, thank you. It is a pleasure to know you liked it so much." He returned her bow.

She stood back up, turned and bowed to the captain, saying, "Thank you Captain for your kindness and such a wonderful welcome."

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Turning, the Chef retreated to the next room as the officers took their seats. Only the Captain caught the smile on his face.

After the chef had existed the room, Tomalak said with a smile, "Admiral, chef will be difficult to live with for a week after such a compliment!"

"I am really sorry to upset your routine, Captain," she retorted with a fake sneer. The laughter was slow in starting but gained momentum as the Captain and Admiral joined in. Only Talmar did not join in, keeping his air of stiff aloofness.

She finished her meal in short order, "Thank you Captain, you set quite a table."

He put down his fork and asked, "what gives you the idea we are finished?"

She looks at him closely trying to find the meaning of his words, "are you telling me there is another course? I don't think I could eat another bite."

"For this, I think, you will make an exception," he stated as the chef, still in his dress uniform, led a parade of servers with the desert.

The Chef set the desert in front of her, and she recognized it easily, since it was her favorite. She grew suspicious. Looking at the captain, she asked, "May I ask what you want?"

"Why, Admiral, what do you mean by that," he asked innocently.

"A wonderful meal and my favorite dessert, you must want something," she said in a mild jest.

He gave a mock look of hurt, "I only want you to be welcome and happy aboard my ship." His manor changed. He became very serious as he continued, "You have undergone a very trying experience. You held up as a true Romulan would and now we want to celebrate your promotion." His manner changed back to one of joviality. "Fine food and ale are yours." He winked before continuing, "and only the best company."

She felt very honored but guarded; "I thank you again for your kindness."

The first officer spoke for the first time since the meal started, "I see you are headed back to Earth?"

"Yes. I find I must return."

"May I ask why," he asked cautiously, like he did not want to broach the subject.

His manor gave her the impression he had been ordered to ask about her mission and he did not really want to.

She became guarded, but outwardly kept her celebratory countenance. "I don't think I could stand any more vacation," she let the laughter subside before continuing, "I also want to get back to work, there is so much to do."

Talmar spoke up at this point, "If there is so much to do, why did you leave in the first place." He continued the earlier attack. Again, the Captain took on a stern, irate look.

"Because of just this thing. The constant attacks on my vision and the way I perform my duties. I took a short vacation 'to' how do the humans say it, 'to recharge the batteries.' I needed a vacation to refocus my thinking. I needed to take a step back and re-examine my direction in life. If you haven't learned to do this yet, you will when you must take on the mantle of command."

She had been working on her dessert during the conversation and now placed her fork on the empty plate thinking, "*I am not going to let this idiot ruin this wonder meal.*"

"If you find fault with my decision to take a vacation, you can report it to your superiors," she said in way of dismissal, her voice dripping with venom, "I however am going to continue to enjoy this wonderful afternoon by visiting the Spa at Sonsoulla."

Turning to the Captain, she said, "Captain, I hope your holodeck programmer is as good as your chef."

"Only the best for you today, Admiral," he stated as he rose to end the meal.

The same Sub-Lieutenant entered the dining room as she rose. He approached the Admiral and came to attention behind her. "Sir, the holodeck is waiting for you. If you will come this way," he said pointing out the door and back down the hall toward the turbolift.

As she exited the room, she heard Tomalak beginning to rake the Political officer over the proverbial coals! One for her side, as her friend Captain Picard has said more than once.

Back in the turbolift, she was whisked to another part of the huge vessel. The turbolift stopped and the doors opened. As she exited, an Uhlan ran into her.

"This is becoming annoying," she said to no one, barely containing an oath.

• • •

"Ambassador Worf," came the announcement from the communications panel.

"Yes," he replied.

"We have an open channel to Captain Kurn, sir."

"Kurn," Worf roared. He was still furious over the murder of fifty-seven people.

"*Yes, brother, what can I do for you,*" Kurn said calmly. Kurn's tone left Worf with the impression he was bothering the captain.

"You can remove that murderer from your bridge," Worf said loudly to the communications panel.

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“Vorn is following MY orders, Worf. I don’t want you interfering with the operation of MY ship.”

Worf physically recoiled from the rebuff. He could not believe his ears, “you ordered him to kill every person on the *Tamara*?”

“No, I ordered Vorn to quarantine the planet. No ships in or out. The ship fired on the Agrath and Vorn returned fire. Even Federation ships are allowed to defend themselves,” Kurn retorted beginning to get angry.

“A Starfleet vessel would not destroy the ship!”

“Ambassador, calm yourself. The destruction of the Tamara was not intentional but caused by a Weapons officer that was distracted by your interference on the bridge.”

Worf did not notice the change in the official tone that Kurn began using.

Kurn continued, *“If you have a problem with Vorn, take it up with Vorn. Or you can file an official complaint with the Klingon council, Ambassador. Until then, do not interfere with the operation of the Agrath. Kurn out.”*

As the connection closed and the communications panel went dark, Worf slammed his fist on the desk in frustration. *Ok, if he wants me to take this up with Vorn, he thought, then I will take it up with Vorn.*

He turned and walked to the door, expecting it to open. He banged into it and then on the door. A voice from the communications panel said, “May I help you Ambassador?”

“You can fix the door,” he said.

“I am sorry, sir, but you have been confined to your quarters,” the guard said.

“Who gave that order?”

The guard replied, “First officer Vorn, sir.”

“Get me Vorn,” he ordered.

“The first officer is very busy, sir, I will relay your request for an audience,” the guard said laughing.

Worf could hear a second guard laughing with him. He closed the connection and yelled, “Blood wine,” at the replicator. Getting the wine, he sat down in a chair to let his angry smolder.

• • •

The Admiral looked down to see the same young Uhlan that had run into her earlier. She began to calm down as the pain of the collision ebbed slowly away a second time.

“Do you make it a habit of assaulting senior officers, or is it your volition in life,” she asked with a straight face.

The young Uhlan was speechless.

"Well, which is it?" She stepped off the turbolift with her escort. The Sub-Lieutenant had a very shocked look on his face.

"No, Sir, Sorry, Sir. Captain Tomalak told me to see you, I guess this is a bad time," she asked, all but scared to death. She stepped onto the turbolift.

Ael could not contain her laughter, knowing exactly what this young Uhlan was going through. She had just experienced the same thing approximately 18 hours ago. She decided to let her off the hook, "No, now is not a good time." She continued to laugh as she continued; "Two hours from now, in my quarters would be better. And Uhlan," she stopped to give the young woman a stern look, "please don't attack me at the door."

"Yes, sir, I mean, No Sir," she said as the lift door closed.

They turned and continued their way to the holodeck.

Chapter 5

“Captain, Admiral Janeway is on the horn for you,” he heard *USS Voyager’s* second officer’s voice as he came fully awake. The hail had awoken him from his first sound sleep in weeks. With all the problems in his patrol area, he was grateful for a little quiet. He looked at the display on his desk to see what time it was. At least he had managed to get 6 hours!

It had been a while since Chakotay had heard from his old Captain and lately it always related to a crisis somewhere along the Klingon-Federation border. Klingon-Federation ‘border’! No longer the neutral zone. Now it was a border, a line in space; and that line was soon to change.

He had been briefed that one of the Klingon border worlds, Klackon, had applied for entrance to the United Federation of Planets. He had been to Klackon many times helping ferry supplies and personnel to help the citizens of Klackon following the ship’s return to sector zero and their subsequent assignment to the border. He liked the citizenry of Klackon. He and the Governor, in fact, were becoming fast friends. He found it a pleasure to hoist a flagon of Earth synth-beer and discuss Federation philosophies. He thought sometimes the Governor liked the barrel he always brought with him better than his company!

He thought back to the last meeting where they had spent many hours working, planning and ‘celebrating.’ While his taste for blood wine was still not the equal to the governor’s, he could match him glass for glass! And had!

He also knew that the Chief of Starfleet operations had assigned him to this section, only because it was Admiral Janeway’s area of operations. The chief did not support Chakotay being offered a Starfleet commission by the President of the council. It was a political issue he had been told. He had also been told to live with it!

That was why Chakotay stayed on the *USS Voyager*. The Chief had not wanted Chakotay promoted to Captain. However, the chief was still in charge of assignments. So, he left Chakotay on Voyager and assigned Voyager to a ‘milk run’ ensuring that he would not raise any further up the ranks.

There were other Maquis members that were part of *USS Voyager’s* crew and hence in Starfleet. The Chief was not fond of them and to have six of them in Starfleet was not making him happy. One had already escaped what the Chief called the cursed ship, and he hoped more could be spirited away without notice.

However, Chakotay enjoyed these milk runs after his experiences in the Gamma Quadrant. He had had enough excitement and was looking for a quiet tour till his retirement in a few years. He was looking forward to returning home and working on his spiritual side.

But, with all that, he still looked forward to the Admirals' calls. He rolled out of bed and slowly moved to the desk. The desk was still littered with research for his book on Mayan Spiritualism. He reached for the console to call communications and have the call transferred to his quarters when the screen lit to show the Admiral.

"It looks like good morning is in order, Captain, did I wake you?" she asked with a smile at his disheveled appearance. She had seen him like this many times in the Delta quadrant.

Chakotay enjoyed having the conversational 'ball' in his 'court.' He felt it allowed him to control and direct the conversion. Especially when he felt that the news was not good. The way he felt now. "Good morning, Admiral. It is my day to sleep in," he bantered. Hoping he could keep the subject of the call a secret for a little while longer, "How have you been?"

"Well. Enjoying the San Francisco lifestyle as always. And you? Run into any Klingon Governors lately?" Again, she smiled with a secret knowledge only they shared.

"Good and not within the last month. How is Starfleet Command?"

She said, "Political." To which, they both laughed. But she turned serious quickly, saying, "But that is not why I am calling. Starfleet command has received an emergency request for assistance from your friend the Governor of Klackon."

"I have not received a planetary distress call yet." The concern showed as he sobered from the laughter of a moment before. She always had a flare for 'dropping the other foot' or was it 'shoe.' He had trouble remembering some of her many flamboyant sayings.

"As I said, it was a request for assistance not a distress call. He stated that a few of the citizens were not comfortable with becoming federation citizens and there were a few minor tussles."

Tom broke into the conversation, "Captain, we're receiving a distress call from the Klackon system," he hesitated for a moment and then continued, "it's gone now. The call came from the freighter Tomara. It was being attacked by a Klingon Destroyer."

"Tom, set course for Klackon, best speed. Sounds like we need to be there yesterday," he said to both Tom and Kathryn as he turned back to the communications panel.

"It looks like I don't have to ask you to head over there, Captain," she said ironically.

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He retorted, as if the weight of the world had just landed on his shoulders, "I guess not. Take care, Admiral, Chakotay out."

He closed the connection and headed to the fresher thinking, "*I was going to sleep in today!*"

• • •

A guard from the corridor burst into the room as small explosions echoed throughout the building. "Governor, a riot has broken out in front of the palace. They are throwing small packets of explosives at the walls, trying to breach them," he said breathlessly and then he was gone, continuing to sound the alarm.

The governor turned back to Kurn, terror showing in his eyes, and yelled, "Do something."

"*The scared rodent has returned,*" Kurn thought. He made a mental note to not give this disgusting creature the title of warrior again. Not even old warrior!

He looked at the Governor as he quietly, calmly opened a channel to his *Agrath*. He was not going to give the Governor any opening to say he was not supportive of the efforts to control the planet. He also would not show any of the weakness the Governor was continuing to display. HE was a warrior and would handle himself as a warrior, not a scared school child!

"Vorn here, Captain," the first officer answered as he appeared on the Governor's screen. Kurn was very glad Vorn was still on duty. He was sure that his orders would be carried out to the letter after the *Tamara* incident.

"Vorn, the palace is being attacked," Kurn said in a low, measured voice while staring at the Governor. The stare was more a challenge to be a warrior than a show of the disrespect the captain felt. "Please set the disrupters on stun and stun the area around the palace. I hope the weapons officer is trained to do that much," Kurn said, needling his first officer.

"He is, Captain," Vorn replied sarcastically.

A few moments later, a short, whining sound filtered into the room over the chaos in the hallway.

Vorn asked, "anything else, Captain?" with an air of confidence.

"Yes, Vorn, send down all available medical personnel to attend to the medical needs of the sleepers and security to assist with their incarceration. Have them locked away in one of the cargo bays for the time being," Kurn continued.

"Yes, Captain," Vorn acknowledged.

"Also, have you released the lock on the Ambassadors' quarters yet? And the guards?" Kurn asked.

"Yes, sir. The guards have returned to their duties. Anything else, Captain?"

"Yes. When you are done with these requests, transport down to the palace, I have further orders for you."

"Yes, sir. Vorn out," he said closing the connection before the captain could think of anything else for him to do.

"Now governor, shall we get back to the planning and your earth brandy," Kurn said. He was developing a taste for replicated Brandy. *I must get the pattern sent to my replicator*, he thought. He would also have to watch his intake; he would not want to lower his guard with the Governor.

The communications panel on the governors' desk called for his attention. He rose for his chair and staggered toward the desk. Leaning over the desk, he tapped the keys and asked, "Yes, what is it?"

"With the help of Agartha's security, we have transported 86 citizens, and two town council members," came the reply.

"Good, document the charges and we will hold them till morning for the judge," Kurn said before the Governor had a chance.

The Governor closed the connection, turned, and staggered back to his chair and almost missed it as he sat down with a thud. "Now where were we?" he asked Kurn.

• • •

Arriving at the entrance to the holodeck aboard the *Predator*, the Sub-Lieutenant pushed a button on the wall communications panel, "Run program Spa at Sonsoulla," he ordered.

The holodeck computer replied, "Program loaded, enter starting point."

The Sub-Lieutenant looked puzzled, so Ael leaned forward and said, "On the lookout path, near the viewing area by the cliff."

The computer responded, "program running, enter when ready."

"Computer, set an audible, one-hour time notification," she said as she moved to the access portal. The portal dilated to admit her, and she walked through the portal onto a short path.

The view as she walked toward the end of the path, the breath-taking viewed brought back memories of other days and other walks along this path. Maybe what the Embassy on Earth needs is a holodeck.

At the end of the path the beauty of the scene took her breath once more. It had never ceased to amaze her. The canyon was just over one thousand meters deep, about as wide, and twice as long. The fog that shrouded the far end resembled the fluff candy at the fair but looked twice as delicate. The water falling into the valley landed in a thundering torrent of mist; the rainbow above the falls reached into the depths and touched the fog. It never stopped moving her almost to tears, it was so beautiful.

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She had to shout over her shoulder to be heard by the computer, "Computer, new location, beach." "*That was silly,*" she thought, "*the computer could hear every word I said in a normal voice.*"

Instantly, the scene shimmered and changed to the beach at the edge of the lake. The fog looked like white, lacy clouds far above in the sky. The rainbow peaked through the foggy clouds. Her eyes moved over the cliff face, smooth by the falls and much rockier as the eye moved away. She brought her gaze from the far end back along the far side of the cliff face. She saw the many fake cave openings that shielded the balconies and room walls a short distance inside those openings. As a child she had stayed for their yearly weeks' vacation with her parents in a room on the middle level.

She had learned the true meaning of beauty sitting on her mother's lap on those terraces. Her father had taken her for a swim every morning of their short stays, in the chilly water, just before her now. She closed her eyes. She could just about visualize them running across the sand from the lower cave opening from the hotel lobby to the water's edge. She remembered his reaching down and lifting her off her feet as they reached the shore and their plunge into the cool water.

She had wanted to vacation there again. She yearned to relive the memories and return to a simpler, uncomplicated time. She had been returning here every chance she got to refresh her soul.

She walked the short distance to the water's edge and removed her shoes and foot covers. Rolling her uniform pants up, she waded almost up to her cuffs in the cold water letting the memories rush over her. Her father played in the shallow water with her on the warm, carefree days they had enjoyed. She felt the warmth of the sun on her body that offset the cold on her feet. She stood in the water with her eyes closed reviewing every memory of every trip she had ever made here, for what seemed like days. Finally, the memories came to an end, and she opened her eyes to start a new memory. She moved back up to beach and called to the computer for a lounge chair, table, book tablet, and drink.

She sat and read leisurely, slowly sipping her drink and drank in the scene with every turn of a page. The cares of her existence slowly left her as she found the total relaxation of her inner peaceful place. She felt like she was part of the landscape, like a painting she had seen on earth. She slowly relaxed into the moment.

A chime sounded by her left ear and a voice said, "It is time Admiral." She realized that she had fallen asleep in the chair. It took her a moment to realize the voice was the computer, notifying her the hour was up.

She rose and instructed the computer to remove the chair, table, and the rest. Giving herself one last drink of the scenery, she turned and called out, "Computer, end program and dilate the portal." She exited the portal to find the

Sub-Lieutenant gone. She felt a bit abandoned since she liked the company of an escort but felt a bit uneasy being escorted about a sister ship to the ship she had commanded and knew well.

She made her way back to the turbolift and rode it to level 5. She walked the short distance to her quarters. She saw Sub-commander Talmar leaving his quarters as the door opened to allow her into her quarters. She was thankful when the door cycled closed. She was also thankful the announcer did not chime.

• • •

“Admiral Na’mur, Mister Asley is calling, sir,” said the computer. The admiral leaned forward and tapped the communications panel on the left side of his desk. The Chief Engineer of the Charon Facility appeared on the holo-screen above his desk.

“Mister Asley, good to see you again,” Na’mur said, concerned this would be bad news.

“The project has completed its initial testing and is being provisioned,” Allen said quickly, distractedly. He nodded to someone off screen. “I thought you would want a quick update.”

“Thank you, Chief. Is there anything in the way of an on-time completion?” Na’mur asked.

The Chief gave him a very hard look before answering, “Only moving up the date again!”

The Admiral smiled as best he could, “I will try to ensure that doesn’t happen again. Na’mur out,” he said as he closed the connection.

He touched the direct line to the President.

“Yes, Admiral,” the President said.

“The project will be ready as you requested,” he stated.

“Thank you, Admiral.” She closed the connection.

• • •

“What is left on the punch list to finish this job folks?” asked the *USS Galileo* Captain. David looked at the senior engineering team seated around the table in the main briefing room. Their nine-month mission to retrofit Starbase Seventeen and bring it up to date with the latest technology the Federation possessed was almost over.

He, like the rest of the crew, was ready for a nice long rest. Twelve-hour days for nine months tended to wear on the soul, even if the schedule was three days on and three days off. There was little to do on a small Starbase, or for that matter, a Saber class starship. The really bad thing was that the new holodeck was still having the programs loaded.

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Chief Engineer Borall spoke first, "Only a final testing of the power reactor and testing of the shields," he said with his usual emotionless sense of calm. As the only Vulcan aboard the ship, watching him handle a situation was like seeing a giant vessel cutting calmly through a rough sea on Earth. He was the calm center in the middle of the storm.

The Alpha Bynar said, "And the Computer core—"

"—still has to be sealed," completed the second Bynar, Beta. Having a set of Bynar computer experts on board each Starfleet Corp of Engineers vessel was not yet the norm, and the *USS Galileo* was no different. Although the Bynar pair had only been assigned just prior to this mission, they sped up the computer retrofit by a factor of six. Starfleet Command, and especially Captain Scott, had seen the wisdom of assigning a Bynar pair to each of the Saber Class SCE ships. The only problem was getting enough pairs to assign a pair the number of vessels Starfleet had. As they became available, they were being assigned to the ships and projects that needed them the most. Hence, the Bynar pair would be leaving the ship when this project was done.

The rest of the engineers had minor items to complete.

Borall summed up the status of the retrofit, "Sir, as the project chart on the view screen shows, we are ahead of schedule in many areas and the engineers involved in those areas have been reassigned to assist in the others. Overall, we are ahead of the schedule and barring minor difficulties, we should be finished by this time tomorrow."

"Then, I will assume that the retrofit will be completed by this time tomorrow," said Captain Ryan Alan David, RAD to his friends, looking at each officer in turn around the medium sized conference table.

"Ok. Please don't disappoint me, people. I will expect our final wrap-up meeting to be twenty-four hours from now. You are dismissed."

Chapter 6

A low-level alert tone sounded across the bridge of the *Agrath*, waking two officers and startling the Sensors officer so badly he almost fell out of his chair. Second officer Berhar sat up in the command chair and stared at the buffoon. The Sensors officer turned to his console and reported, “A ship is entering the system, sir.” He scanned the console, making a few adjustments to the controls and reported, “It is a Federation ship, Intrepid class, sir.”

“So, the Federation is sending help to stop the loyalists. Weapons, wake up and raise shields and bring the disrupter banks to full charge, sound battle alert,” Berhar ordered.

As a loyalist, Berhar was sympathetic to the ‘rebel’ cause and supported them as best he could. Now he could fight on their side and do more than just overlook a regulation or infraction of the law.

“If the Federation wants a fight, we will give it to them. Range,” he shouted at the Weapons officer.

“Ten thousand kellcams, sir. Disrupters at full charge and shields are up.”

Berhar felt the adrenaline filling his warrior body and soul. He was finally in a fight and about to get this first kill. This was why he had trained so hard, for so many years. Now it was his turn to sing of a glorious battle and of the kill.

“Target engines and weapons,” Berhar ordered.

“Sir, we are receiving a hailing message, sir,” said the communications officer. Faintly, in the background, Berhar heard, “*Klingon Battle Cruiser, this is Captain Chakotay of the USS Voyager, answering the—*”

Berhar yelled out the order, “Fire disrupters! Load torpedoes!”

The sound of disrupters firing resounded throughout the ship. Worf was the first to enter the bridge.

“Hit to the starboard nacelle and port phasers, they are down,” the weapons officer reported. “They are powering shields, sir, but the starboard side is only at ten percent.”

“Fire again!” Berhar ordered, “destroy the Federation ship!”

“No!” Worf yelled as he jumped over a console to get to the command chair. “Do not fire on that ship!”

Berhar turned toward the Ambassador with murder in his eyes, his hands looking for something to kill. Worf yelled, “You have no authority to attack a Federation vessel.”

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"I am in command here. I am the captain and that ship is breaking the quarantine. They have entered Klingon space and I have a right to defend the planet," Berhar yelled back and then turned to look at the weapons officer, "Fire again!"

Worf could not believe that this fool was going to attack a Federation vessel for simply crossing the Klingon-Federation border! Then he heard the faint communication from *Voyager*. Captain Chakotay was asking the *Agrath* to hold its fire. He was surrendering his vessel.

Worf spun the second officer back around and grabbed him by the neck. "Belay that order. Do not fire on that ship." Worf yelled at the weapons officer, who looked totally confused and was frozen at his station.

• • •

She entered her quarters, removed her dress uniform coat, and placed it on the back of the chair. She felt refreshed and relaxed from her visit to the holodeck. The programmers had captured the essence of the Spa at Sonsoulla valley very well. She was very impressed.

"Tea, Earl Gray, hot," she called to the replicator. Ael had picked up a liking for the relaxing beverage. It would relax her further and she knew it would help her sleep through to the morning.

The door chimed. Putting the mug of tea on the low table in front of the chair she said, "One moment." She put her uniform coat back on and called, "Come in."

The door cycled open, and the young female soldier entered the Admirals' quarter's two steps and came to attention. She remained silent.

The Admiral moved forward to inspect the Uhlan. Her uniform, showing an attention to detail, was spotless. "*With an hour to get ready it should be,*" she thought.

She continued to slowly walk about the young soldier inspecting the whole person closely. She was impressed. As she came around to face the soldier squarely, she said, "Stand at ease."

The soldier visibly relaxed as she came to the position of 'At Ease.' She faced the Admiral with a fearful, questioning look. "*She is expecting to be punished and she is not sure why,*" she thought. Captain Tomalak would have punished her for the first incident but may not have had time to address the second. Well, if the Senate could promote her by making it seem like a punishment, why should she be different? She thought, "*Because I did not like it!*"

She moved to the low table and retrieved her tea, "Would you like something to drink," she asked the youngster.

"No, Sir," she said quickly like a well-practiced statement.

“Do you like serving aboard this ship?” Ael asked.

The soldier blushed and said, “It is very hard to arise to the expectations of our Captain, sir. He demands attention to duty and perfection from his soldiers.” She recovered quickly, straightening her posture, and taking on a more professional manner.

“Do you think you don’t rise to these expectations?”

“I try my best...but that is not always enough for my Centurion.”

“How many times have you been disciplined since being posted to this ship?”

“Only twice, sir.”

“What for?”

“For running down an Admiral, twice, sir.”

Ael smiled and barely contained herself. *So, she had been disciplined a second time,* she thought. She recovered enough to ask, “What is the going punishment for running over a senior officer?”

“Two cycles of extra duty, for the first time; four cycles and a lecture for the second, sir,” she said stiffly.

Ael could not contain her laughter anymore. When she had stopped laughing, she said, “Please forgive the laughter. I am sorry I caused you six cycles of extra duty,” she said. The young soldier was beginning to relax.

“It is not your fault, sir. I ran into you because I was not watching where I was going.”

“Were you in that much of a hurry?”

“Not really, sir. It was the end of my third cycle, and I was very tired.”

“Why are you on duty for a full rotation?”

“I am working for a fellow Uhlan who is on sick list.”

“And the second time?”

“I was in the middle of my second double cycle and all but walking in my sleep,” she said with a straight face.

Ael smiled and asked, “But you are not tired now?”

“No, sir. Just exhausted.”

The Admiral laughed again. *She was not sure what to make of this young soldier. Over tasked, over stressed, and still ready for more. Pleasant socially and states her mind with caution. The soldier reminded her of a younger and inexperienced Donatra.*

“Well then, I will not keep you long. The last reason I asked to see you, was to ask you if you would mind serving on my staff,” she asked.

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The Uhlan was silent for a few moments, her head cocked slightly in thought. She came to a decision, "May I ask the Admiral, why she would want me?"

"You impressed me and continue to impress me. Exhausted and still, you are sharply dressed and a fine example of a soldier above your rating. I need a hard worker and one that can think on their feet. You strike me as that individual," she rubbed one of the concealed bruises, "in more than one way!"

They laughed together for a moment before the soldier straightened and asked what her duties would be.

"Heavy administration, running my office, and private confidant. One of the things I have missed over the last year is someone to laugh with and relax with. Do you think you could befriend an Admiral off duty and put that aside on duty?"

"I can try. May I speak plainly?"

"Please..."

"I have few friends on this ship and have a problem feeling comfortable around senior officers, but I can try," she said shyly and then continued in the same manner, "if you can stand the bruises."

They laughed comfortably together for a few moments. The Admiral got up, motioning the soldier to keep seated, and moved to the replicator requesting two more cups of tea. Returning to her chair, she handed one to the soldier and sat down. "If we are to work together, maybe you should get to know what I like," she stated lifting the cup to her lips, blowing on and then sipping the hot beverage. The soldier did the same and scrunched her face.

"It may take a while to get used to this Earth beverage," Ael said.

"It is not that, sir, it felt like a hand slapped me awake," she said with a smile, "it is quite strong, but good."

"If you are to work with me, there are many new things that you will have to get used to." At this point it struck her that there was a piece of information she did not know about this young soldier. "One major thing I will have to know about you if we are to work together," she said.

The young soldier looked apprehensive but remained silent.

"What is your name," she asked laughing. The soldier smiled and then laughed at the question.

"You asked me to work for you without knowing my name?"

"I know who you are, now, I would like to know what to call you," she said as the laughter subsided.

"I am Uhlan Aulee Tyanala," she said.

"Aulee, I am Ael," she returned and stretched out her hand and shook Aulee's hand. She continued, "I will discuss your transfer to my staff with the captain tomorrow. Now it is time I get some rest for what I am sure will be a very eventful day. And I am sure you also need some time alone."

They rose and Aulee came to attention, saluted, turned and left the Admirals' quarters.

Ael turned away from the door and began getting ready for bed.

• • •

Berhar pulled away and back handed the Ambassador, "I am in command of this ship. We are in a state of war, and I fired on an enemy. You are a hostile combatant! Put this federation Targ in the brig."

Worf avoided the officer on the right as the three officers moved in to carry out the order. He spun and grabbed the knife from the officer on the left, stepped forward and plunged the knife into Berhar's chest. Berhar slumped back onto the command chair. He stared at Worf as life left his eyes. His blood ran across his uniform and dripped on the deck plates.

Before anyone could react, Worf took control, "We are not at war, I am in command. Remove the former 'Captain' from my chair. Open a channel to the Voyager, power down the weapons, lower the shields."

"This is the *USS Voyager*. Captain Chakotay commanding. Why have you fired on my ship," he demanded as his image appeared on the screen. His expression changed to one of surprise as he realized to whom he was talking.

"Ambassador Worf here captain, the second officer fired on your ship, he is dead. I have taken command of this vessel and have ordered the shields and weapons powered down. Do you have casualties?"

"Yes, Ambassador, but we can handle them."

"I will send you help to repair your ship, then," Worf said, turning to the Engineering officer he continued, "Have engineering assist with the repairs to *Voyager*. I want the damage repaired and that ship operational now."

"Yes, Captain," the engineer barked and turned back to his console to begin the task of repairing the *Voyager*.

Back to the panel he said, "Captain, you are cleared to dock on the left quarter."

"Thank you, Ambassador, Chakotay out."

Worf turned to the communications officer, "open a channel to Kurn," he ordered.

• • •

The door chime sounded pleadingly and was followed by, "Admiral?"

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She rolled over and sat up in bed. "Yes," she said sleepily.

The door opened and the young Sub-Lieutenant escort entered stating, "We will be arriving at the neutral zone in an hour, I thought you might need help getting ready."

"Thank you," she said getting out of bed and heading to the refresher, "but that isn't necessary."

"It may not be, but it's my duty assignment while you are aboard the ship. I was assigned as your yeomen."

Ael peeked out of the doorway, "then it was you that set out my dress uniform for dinner last evening?"

"Yes, Admiral," he said shyly, "and I will straighten up your quarters and set out your uniform before I leave. Would you like a meal ordered?"

"No, thank you," she said turning on the shower and thereby cutting off any further conversation.

She enjoyed a nice, long, hot shower, which topped off the refreshed feeling from her visit to the holodeck and a wonderful night's slumber. She knew she had not felt this good in over a year.

She finished her shower and dried herself, wrapping the towel around her before leaving the refresher. While she was not a modest person—who in the military was?—she did not want to embarrass the young soldier.

She found the caution was unnecessary. The bed was made, the teacups were removed, and her uniform was laid out on the bed. Her yeoman was gone. She dressed quickly and ordered breakfast.

As she finished the communications panel chimed. "Admiral, we are arriving at the Neutral Zone. You have been asked to transport to the *USS Pioneer*, would you please report to the transporter room."

"On my way, Captain," she said moving the chair back, getting up and heading for the door. "Would you meet me in the Transporter room?"

A short walk to the turbolift, a quick ride in the turbolift and a few steps brought her to the Transporter room.

"I have the coordinates, Admiral, they are standing by to receive you," said the soldier at the controls.

The captain entered and she turned toward him and asked, "Would you please assign Uhlan Aulee Tyanala to my staff, Captain."

The captain let her see the request surprised him, "Wouldn't you rather have one of our best soldiers?"

"No thank you Captain. I would like her."

"As you wish Admiral. I will see to it."

"Thank you, Captain Tomalak," she said as she stepped onto the pad and the room dissolved to be replaced by the *Pioneer's* Transporter room.

The Captain and High Ambassador met her. She was surprised to see Torrecka. She was even more surprised to see the captain of the *Pioneer* was a Klingon.

"Admiral Donatra, this is Captain Dar'Tok," Torrecka said.

"A Klingon captain of a Federation vessel, this is something unique." She clasped arms in salute of warriors and then followed with a Romulan salute that was returned by the captain.

"Yes, Admiral. Relax, I am the only one," he said stiffly, "for now."

"And a sense of humor too. The Federation *has* come a long way." Turning her head to speak directly to Torrecka, she said, "Maybe a Romulan Commander commanding a Federation vessel is also in the future."

The High Ambassador raised his eyebrows but did not answer directly. He said, "Shall we head to your ready room Captain, where we can continue this conversation and I can satisfy the Admiral's curiosity as to why she has been returned to duty and had her vacation cut short.

The captain gestured toward the door, and they moved into the hall for the ride to the bridge. Arriving, they walked across the bridge and entered the Captains' Ready room.

"Please be seated," Torrecka said as they entered the Captain's Ready room. He sat down in the captain's chair behind the desk as the captain sat with Donatra on the other side. "This room has been evaluated for listening devices Captain?"

"Yes, Ambassador."

"Admiral, the Captain has heard some of what I am about to tell you. The rest will be news to him also. This briefing must not leave this room. It would destroy the alliances between the Romulan and Klingon empires and the Federation of Planets."

She nodded her understanding, but they remained silent while the Ambassador continued.

"The Federation President told me that the history of the Federation of Planets has been dimmed by only one thing. First Contact."

Donatra thought about the first contact with the Romulan Star Empire that had started the war that ended in over a hundred years of distrust between the Federation and Romulus and the neutral zone.

Dar'Tok thought about the Klingon first contact. The federation had seemed weak and an easy target for conquest. There had been many glorious battles before both sides had worked out the treaty that established the new understanding between the Klingon Empire and the Federation of Planets.

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“The Federation is now working to change that.” The ambassador continued his briefing after a pause. “While I don’t have any of the details—she stated they were still working them out—I do know her plans somehow include the two of you.”

“The two of us?” Both looked surprised and confused as they parroted each other.

“Yes, the two of you. I only know that the President has asked the Romulan Star Empire, in confidence, to assign you to the President’s office for this project. She asked that you be promoted to Admiral and returned for a very important assignment as soon as possible.”

Torrecka saw the questions forming on Donatra’s face. “Admiral, Captain, I cannot tell you more. I do not know anymore except that the name of the project is Icarus. The Federation council approved project Icarus three days ago and I get the impression the vote was close because of the speed with which the project is being put into operation. So, do you have any questions that I cannot answer?” He held out his arms and he said the last line.

They laughed for a moment. Donatra was not easy with the secrecy around her new assignment, but neither was Dar’Tok by the look on his face.

Dar’Tok spoke up at that point, “Are we to assume that we are not being asked if we want the assignment?”

“That is correct. I have been told the council has approved your assignment to project Icarus. You will get official orders upon arrival on Earth. Please let me reiterate that you are not to speak of this outside the three of us or this room.”

“For the moment, Admiral, please return to the *Preditor* and move your belonging to this ship,” the ambassador said, “I will be moving to the *Preditor* for the return to Romulus. Captain Tomalak should have his change of orders by now. Once we have transferred ships, Captain, please make all speed to Earth.”

With that dismal, they rose and left the captain in his ready room. Donatra and Torrecka went to the transporter room and were back on the *Preditor* within a few minutes.

Chapter 7

"You have done what?" Kurn's voice came from the communications panel on the command chair as his image come up of the main display.

"Your third officer, Berhar, fired on the *USS Voyager* without provocation, killing 4 crewmembers and damaging the warp drive, the shields, and phasers. The ship was responding to the planetary distress call sent from a freighter and a request for assistance from the Governor of Klackon. He had permission to be here," his brother yelled back.

"Whither he was invited or not, the planet is quarantined and Berhar had full authority to destroy the ship." Kurn was furious. Worf could hear it in his voice.

He continued, "You have interfered with the operation of my ship for the last time. Vorn and I will be returning shortly to complete this operation and end the quarantine. I want you off my ship as soon as I return." The channel closed.

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

"Chakotay here Ambassador. What can I do for you?" He said as his image came on the view screen.

"You can relay your status and make quarters available. It seems my welcome aboard the *Agrath* is rapidly ending."

Chakotay laughed, "I can imagine that Captain Kurn would not appreciate losing an officer and having a Federation Ambassador assuming command of his ship!"

"No, he did not. He is on his way to rectify the situation."

"Repairs are almost completed. The warp drive is restored, and the shields are back. I left the phasers for last, and we estimate four hours to restore the port phaser banks."

"Thank you, Captain. If you can get along without the *Agrath* assistance, please ask the warriors to return to their ship. Worf out."

Worf sat back in the command chair to wait for his brother. He did not have to wait long.

Kurn burst onto the bridge, "Worf, get out of my chair," he yelled.

"Kurn, I have no interest in your chair, only in"—his brother's back hand cut him off in mid-sentence. Worf fell against a console knocking the officer from his chair—"saving the lives of all officers on both ships. Berhar was out of

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control. He attacked a peaceful ship out of the mistaken belief they were here to put down the rebellion.” Worf stood up and faced Kurn as he continued, “As with the *Agrath*, they responded to the distress call and were contacting the *Agrath* for instructions when they were viciously”—Worf fell back against the console under the second blow.

His brother was breathing heavily, “I don’t care about that, I care that a Klingon officer is dead, his blood on my chair, defending his ship.”

“Are you sympathetic to the rebellion?” Worf asked his brother.

“I am sympathetic to the loss of an officer.”

“You are in league with them!”

“Yes, I agree that the Empire is being invaded by the Federation, what they could not win in battle, they take with paper.” This was a clear insult to the Federation that Worf almost responded to by sending Kurn sprawling on the floor.

Worf realized this was a lost cause as he once again stood and faced his brother, “You can file a complaint through the Klingon Embassy on Earth. Until our individual governments settle this, you will honor my position. As for me, you may have command of your ship back. I will transfer to the USS *Voyager* as soon as I am packed.”

“Guards,” Kurn yelled. Two warriors stepped forward. “See the Ambassador finds the Transporter room as soon as possible.”

Worf, assuming the air of an ambassador, walked off the bridge of his latest command. Following a short walk, he entered his quarters to pack. The guards stood inside the doorway, watching him closely. They knew how Berhar had been killed with a guard’s weapon. They had no intention of following the third officer to Sto-vo-kor.

• • •

Tomalak and the Tal’shar representative met them in the Transporter room. Tomalak did not wait for her to get off the transporter pad before asking the Ambassador about their orders.

“Ambassador, we have received new orders to return to Romulus immediately. Would you know anything about this?” asked the captain.

“I hope you will wait for my belongings to transport to your ship before carrying out your orders!” He said this in a jovial mood and immediately regretted it.

“Yes, yes, of course.” The captain was beginning to display restless frustration.

The Admiral looked at Tomalak and stated, “We can only say that we have new orders, and I cannot talk about it.” She left a little room for discussion.

"Keeping secrets from the Tal'shar is not a good way to start your career as an Admiral," Talmar said.

Now she was becoming cross, "The Tal'shar can talk to the Romulan Senate since that is where my orders came from," she retorted with a sneer. She still did not like this Sub-Commander.

The Ambassador gave her a sharp look.

They began the trek to their quarters. "I had hoped you would be more forthcoming about the orders we have both received." The Captain and Admiral followed the Ambassador and Tal'shar to the turbolift.

"I cannot talk about my orders, and I know little about yours. I suggest you contact your headquarters if you need further clarification." She was beginning to become irritated.

They arrived at the door to her quarters. "If there is nothing else, I have to pack and transport back to the *Pioneer*." She turned and entered her quarters not leaving them time to respond.

She found her bags were packed and waiting for her. So was the yeoman.

"We received orders transferring you to the federation warship for the journey to Earth. I was looking forward to seeing the Federation home for the first time. I hear it is a garden." He looked to her for confirmation.

"Yes, it is. Thank you for taking care of the packing. Earth is a very beautiful planet. I hope all Romulan will be able to visit it in the future." She moved to pick up her bag, but the yeoman got to it first.

"I will carry your bag to the transporter room, Admiral."

As they moved to the door, Ael looked around the room, then turned and stepped into the hallway.

Back on the *USS Pioneer*, she was escorted to the Admirals' Day cabin. Dropping her bag on the bed, she felt the ship go to Warp, the stars began to stream by her window on the universe. She began to put her belongings away.

• • •

As RAD rose to leave the conference room, almost as if by divine providence, his combadge beeped. It always seemed to know when he was available. He touched the badge, "Captain here," he said as the officers filed out of the room.

"*Captain, you have a call from Captain Scott, sir,*" said the communications officer.

"I will take it in my quarters. Please advise Captain Scott it will be approximately five minutes before I can get on the line."

"An' why would it be takin' ye that long, Capt'n, when we're talking right now," said Scotty.

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The door hissed closed, leaving him alone.

“Screen on,” Ryan commanded the computer as he turned his chair back around to face the main viewing screen at the end of the room. The smiling face of Scotty came on the briefing room view screen.

“As usual, I thought this might be a long, private conversation and I wanted to be comfortable,” David shot back with a smile.

“Aye, an’ keepin’ a very old man waiting is not very polite. That was why I told your communications officer ta transfer the call ta wherever ye where without waitin’ for your approval.”

“I will have to speak to him about loyalties!” They both laughed, remembering a situation where Scotty had needed Ryan’s assistance and his loyalty had come into question. He had stood the test and ever since, the great Montgomery Scott had called on him when he needed a loyal Captain. Loyalty had become a joke between them, but it only made the bond stronger in his mind.

“But down to business, Capt’n,” said Scotty. He continued, “How soon will ye be finished with your retrofit of Starbase Seventeen?”

“The engineering staff tells me this time tomorrow. We must button up the main computer and the power systems.”

“An’ your plans after that?”

“Shore leave,” he said, beginning to think Scotty was getting too old. Nine months on a retrofit without shore leave, which was the only thing on every crewmember’s mind. He continued, “We need about two weeks of not worrying about a nine-month schedule.”

“Would ye be to upset if I asked ye to spend your shore leave on Earth?”

He thought for a moment, trying to estimate the travel time to earth rather than Clarkson colony. He added that to the estimated finish time and added a six-hour buffer just in case something unforeseen went wrong.

“I don’t think the crew would be very upset, but it would delay our leave by fifty-six hours,” the captain said guardedly. This assignment started the same way nine months ago. Scotty had a reputation for being coy about giving out assignments.

“Would ye be able to be here in forty-eight hours, Capt’n?”

“We would have to work both shifts at once, but I think we can get there in forty-eight hours with a little effort.”

“Good, take care of business, Capt’n an’ I will see ye in my office two days from now.”

“Mr. Scott, can you tell me why so soon?” His curiosity was pinging.

"Not until we can talk ov'r a glass of Scotch, Scott out." Scotty's image faded, and the connection closed before Ryan had a chance to ask more questions or even say goodbye.

He stared at the communications Panel for a few seconds trying to fathom the meaning of that conversation. He shook his head to clear the cobwebs.

Touching his combadge, "Chief Engineer Borall, please return to the conference room." He did not hear the reply that he knew the Commander had given.

• • •

"Vorn, setup cargo holds seven and eight to receive the real warriors from the planet. When you are ready, begin transporting them aboard. Advise me when you are done," Kurn ordered.

Vorn began giving orders as the captain turned to leave the bridge. A thought occurred to him on the way to the door. He tried to regain his composure as he turned back and told Vorn, "I will need a list of warriors that could replace Berhar. Put one together and come to my quarters when you have finished with the patriots. You have the bridge."

Kurn turned and left the bridge, headed not to his quarters, but to the ambassadors' quarters. The door was open when he arrived, the two guards standing watch, one in the doorway and one further into the room.

Worf was quickly packing his belongings into four trunks of ancient design. Worf finished putting his uniforms and ceremonial robes into a standing trunk as his brother entered the room.

Kurn knew Worf loved nostalgia. His anger at his Worf was waning away. He still did not like his brothers' ways. The warrior in him still wanted to fight Worf, to vanquish him in single combat for killing a valuable crewmember, but he held his anger and his desire for revenge. Now was not the time.

Kurn still showed his anger with Worf for killing Berhar. He knew that killing a third officer was not as bad as taking command of his ship! Kurn had lost status with the crew. Now he had to get the status back. Worf seemed to steady himself for the fight that was about to start. Kurn knew he would not fight his brother and his brother knew this.

Kurn slowly walked to stand before his brother. Worf stood as he approached. "I apologized for taking your ship," Worf started, "my concern was for the lives of both crews."

"I know your ways are not the ways of a Klingon warrior." He spoke slowly and distinctly.

"Kurn, the old ways are changing. You must be bold enough to change with them."

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"I must do nothing. I hold to the ways of our father, he was a warrior that stood bravely, wrongfully accused, and still met death with pride and a warriors' heart. You have only half his blood and none of his heart."

"I have a heart made of both worlds, Federation and Klingon. I live in both worlds. I learn how to fight in one and how to pick my fights in the other. It is easy to die for a cause, but it is not always a good day to die for that cause. Living, that is the hard thing to do, Kurn. To continue a path to greater glory, bypassing the smaller glories for the greater good."

"That is not the Klingon way, Worf. We must battle to be a people. We have gloried in battle for over a thousand years, it is in our blood, in our soul; it is our soul."

"It is time for that to change! The Klingon heart can stay the same, but the mind must change, the mind is changing. You have seen it yourself."

"I have seen nothing!"

"You have on the planet below. The old Klingon would have killed the rebels. You are transporting them to another planet deeper in the empire. The citizens of the planet would have died to save their planet from the Federation just fifty years ago. Now, most have embraced the ways of peace. They have decided that the Federation ways are better for their planet."

"They have been brainwashed by the Federation lies. They have blocked-out their heritage by the good will of a weak people, who are afraid to fight."

"The Federation is not afraid to fight. Remember WOLF359, they fought an overwhelming enemy and destroyed that enemy. However, the Federation only fights when it is the last course of action. This is why the citizens of both the Federation and the Klingon Empire must become one people. The Federation needs the Klingon heart to keep it strong and the Klingons need the peace to rebuild the Empire."

"The Federation will get my heart in battle. A glorious battle to reject the invaders of the Empire."

"Your eyes are closed. Open them to a new world, a world where the glorious battles are on the borders of a greater Empire of Planets, where we battle the elements of nature to survive. There are many glories to sing about, not just battles! Kurn, open your eyes to peace and prosperity for our people. During the war with the Dominion, Klingon's were fighting side by side with the Federation and Romulan's under the direction of a command staff of all three and a Klingon field commander. A Klingon was in command of the battles. History was made the day of surrender. The three foes of yesterday fighting as friends today, this is the future Kurn. A future we should not fear but should embrace."

"No, that is not our way," Kurn rebutted.

"Kurn that *was* not our way. The undiscovered country of the future will bring about the change to a united sector. Klingons serve on Federation vessels and Starfleet personnel serves on Klingon vessels. The exchange program is already integrating the two fleets. You have seven Starfleet personnel on your own ship. Have they failed to serve you faithfully? General Bor'kat teaches Klingon battle strategy at Starfleet Academy, not because we need to know how to defeat you, but to learn from the masters. The Federation mind and the Klingon heart are merging all around us. Take a drink of the future, Kurn, it will be glorious."

"I will remain loyal to my teachers, my history, and my empire. If the Empire changes, so be it. But until that occurs," Kurn backhanded his brother knocked him back onto the floor. He continued, "get off my ship." He turned and marched out of the quarters turning toward his own. The guards smiled after their captain had passed them. Worf knew that Kurn was back in command of his vessel.

Worf got up and finished packing. He went to the communications panel and called the *Voyager* to beam his luggage to his quarters. As the trunks faded, he picked up his ambassadorial robe, put it on and checked his appearance in the mirror. He turned and left the quarters heading to the Transporter room. The guards were close behind.

"Permission to"—Worf was cut off as the transporter was energized the moment he stepped on the pad, "disembark."

"You just got here Ambassador," Chakotay said.

"Sorry, permission to come aboard, Captain."

"That's better. Granted, Ambassador. Welcome aboard. I have arranged quarters for you. Your luggage awaits you there."

"Thank you, Captain. Please lead the way."

"This is your first time on an Intrepid class, Ambassador?"

"Yes."

"I will have to arrange a tour on our way back to Earth. Speaking of Earth," he tapped his combadge, "*bridge, set course for Earth and don't spare the horses.*"

"Yes, sir," came Tom's reply as the connection closed.

"This way Ambassador," Chakotay said indicating the door.

They walked to the turbo lift in silence. Once they had entered the lift, Chakotay called out the deck number and they started the journey to deck two.

The captain turned and faced the Ambassador as he asked, "I have been ordered to get you to Earth with all haste. Do you know why, sir?"

"Only that I carry the Klingon-Federation accord and it must be ratified very soon," he replied.

"That would not seem very urgent, sir."

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“I was thinking the same thing, Captain. I have a feeling that something else, to quote Holmes, is afoot.”

“I am beginning to believe you are right. The orders coming from Starfleet Command lately are reminiscent of the affair with the alien race that tried to take over Starfleet some years ago.”

“Captain, you are starting to see creatures under the bed!”

“Not under it, Ambassador, but in it!” They laughed together as the door to the turbo lift opened and they disembarked.

A short walk and they arrived at the Admiral’s cabin.

The door cycled at the Ambassadors approach. They both entered the cabin.

Chakotay said, “I hope you will be comfortable for the duration of your stay aboard, sir.”

“I am sure I will, Captain. It is good to be in space again and have a Federation deck plate under my feet.”

“Then, sir, I have a ship to return to...” He turned and left.

Chapter 8

Scotty's request was beginning to pique his curiosity, "what could be so important or secret for that matter, that it could not be discussed on a secure channel," he asked himself. Other questions started coming to mind as the conference room doors open to admit Commander Borall. As the doors cycled close the captain indicated a seat.

"Commander, Captain Scott has requested we be in Earth orbit in forty-eight hours. Can you finish the retrofit in twelve hours?"

The Commander became lost in thought for a moment. Then he consulted the data pad and made a few inputs.

RAD was becoming bored waiting for his Chief Engineer to decide. He had always thought Vulcans always had the answer to any query on the tip of their tongue, so to speak. Commander Borall had changed his perception.

The commander seemed to finish his computations and said "Yes, Sir. If all continues as it has to this point, the retrofit may be completed within twelve hours."

"Would doubling the shifts help?"

"I have already added that option into the computations. Allowing the current crew, four hours of rest and placing all crews on shift at once, should achieve a twelve-hour completion time." The chief finished with his standard, "Barring any unforeseen circumstances, sir."

"You don't need to qualify your figures, Commander. I am very familiar with *unforeseen* circumstances! Unforeseen is this ship's real name."

The joke went right past Commander Borall, who stood awaiting further instructions.

RAD sighed shaking his head slightly. Vulcans! He looked to his Chief Engineer and said, "Please carry on then."

The Captain and the Commander got up together and headed for the door. The commander headed to engineering to take care of business and the captain headed to the bridge to check on the ship's status before retiring for the evening.

• • •

"*Ambassador Worf, please come to the conference room,*" asked Chakotay.

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Worf was just getting settled into his quarters aboard the *Voyager*. Most of his belongings were in storage. He had only asked for one trunk to be delivered to his quarters.

He left his quarters and touched a direction panel on the wall asking for directions to the turbolift. Finding it easily, he entered and requested the bridge. He was surprised how compact this ship really was. It reminded him of the *USS Defiant*. This caused him to look forward to the promised tour. He thought he might just forgo the formal tour and explore the ship himself. However, he knew from personal experience how disrupting a roaming senior dignitary could be to a starship. He was sure this one would be no different.

As the doors opened and he walked onto the bridge he heard the traditional “Ambassador on the Bridge.” He had to stop himself from looking around, as he was the Ambassador! *“I should be used to this after almost eleven years,”* he thought.

He walked to the door to the conference room.

• • •

Entering the engineering section of the ship, Command Borall called his team leaders together. Once they had arrived, he explained the reason for the schedule change and then gave out the assignments. The officers left as they received their assignments. Only the team leader going on rest period was happy!

The Bynar pair were the last, since the only one thing that could not be rushed was the computer retrofit.

“Alpha are you sure you can complete the retrofit within twelve hours,” he asked.

“Yes,” responded Alpha.

“We can,” finished Beta.

“What is left to complete,” he asked, not sure that they understood what he was asking. This pair of Bynars were new to Starfleet and they had trouble communicating with non-Bynars.

“We have the final,” Alpha started.

“Testing to complete.” Finished Beta.

“What systems are left to test?” He began to walk through the items he knew had to be completed.

“We have attitude control,” “and library functions to complete.”

The Chief asked, “How long to complete the attitude control tests?”

“Three hours, twelve minutes,” “once we return to work.”

“And the Library functions?”

"Seven hours, fifty-four minutes," "once we return to work."

Borall had only one concern left, "You are planning to run the test at the same time then?"

"Yes," "we are."

"Then return to work and keep me apprised of your status every two hours."

The Bynars turned together and left the office.

• • •

The door cycled open, and Worf entered. He walked to the table and took the indicated chair. Admiral Janeway was on the view screen.

"Ambassador Worf, it is very good to see you well," the admiral said.

"Thank you, Admiral. May I ask the reason for this conference," he asked.

"I would like to get your side of the Klackon incident for the record. Captain Chakotay has given me the Voyager side and transmitted the log entries and supporting documentation. But we thought you would be able to add the Agrath side."

"First, I would not want the incident at Klackon to damage the relationship between the Klingon Empire and the Federation of Planets. Second, the incident was caused by only one officer, the second officer of the *Agrath*. Third, while Captain Kurn, my brother, is sympathetic to the 'rebels' cause, he did not authorize the firing of weapons on the *USS Voyager*."

"Understood, Ambassador."

"The second officer, who it turned out was very sympathetic to the rebel cause and counted himself a rebel; declared the *Voyager* a hostile vessel based on the fact it had crossed into Klingon space. He did not pay attention to the bridge officers that were telling him *Voyager* was hailing the *Agrath*. Nor did he allow the *Voyager* to explain their actions, since it seemed he wanted to direct the 'Battle to defend Klackon.'"

"So, the second officer was wholly responsible," asked the captain.

"Yes. When I stepped in to stop him from destroying *Voyager*, he declared me a hostile combatant and ordered me taken into custody. That is when I took the knife from one of the three officers that stepped forward to carry out his order; and I killed him."

There was momentary silence while Janeway and Chakotay took in this new information. Neither officer looked pleased.

• • •

The *USS Galileo* began backing away from the station for the thruster testing and the computer-controlled thruster testing.

"Hold at one kilometer, Helm," Fossey said.

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“Holding at one kilometer, sir,” responded the Helm officer.

“Starbase Seventeen, *Galileo*. You are cleared to begin thruster testing,” the first officer said.

• • •

On the Starbase, the installation commander activated the inter-station communications address system and stated, “All Hands, prepare for thruster testing.”

He then gave the order to begin, “Damping and structural integrity fields to maximum. Begin testing.”

The pre-programmed testing would test fire each thruster in order and then randomly for random intervals. Then the computer testing would begin and would be required to restore the station to its previous position and orientation.

“Thruster one is firing, thruster one off, thruster two firing,” the station officer began. He continued through each thruster firing and shut down. Then the random sequence began. The station began wobbling and moving toward the *USS Galileo*, which began backing away to maintain a one-kilometer distance.

Nineteen seconds into the automatic thruster test, the station shook with a small vibration. Then the dampening field began to fade.

“Thruster three is malfunctioning, sir,” the station officer reported. “And there goes the dampening field! Aborting the Test.”

“Assign a maintenance team.” The commander opened a channel to *Galileo*, “*Galileo*, Seventeen here. Thruster three has malfunctioned and we are starting to make repairs. Please monitor and assist if you can.”

“Understood, sir,” came Fossey’s reply.

• • •

“Keep your distance helm,” Fossey ordered. He touched his combadge and said, “Commander Borall, there has been a thruster malfunction on the Starbase. They are requesting assistance.”

“*Borall, here. I have it under control, Commander. Borall out,*” he said quietly.

In the engineering ready room, Commander Borall was quietly handing out assignments to his available personnel. He also contacted and assigned personnel already on the station.

Engineers began appearing in vicinity of thruster number three to begin the damage assessment. They quickly synchronized with the movement of the Starbase and moved to the thruster. Opening panels and scanning the thruster, they made many adjustments and called for a new part now and then.

• • •

“Bridge, Status,” Captain David asked. Eight hours of sleep found him fully refreshed for the long day ahead. He was looking forward to his imminent shower that would complete the process.

“*We had a thruster blowout during testing, but repairs are underway. Otherwise, status quo, Captain,*” stated Commander Michael Fossey. His Executive officer and second in command loved to collect and use idioms.

“And the rest of the retrofit?”

“*Almost completed. The power reactor testing is complete. The library computer access testing should be completed in the next twenty-two minutes.*”

“Good. Please keep up on the repairs to the thruster and I will be on the bridge in thirty minutes. David out.”

“Aye, sir,” Michael said as the channel closed.

He put down his shirt and combadge and headed to the fresher. Twenty minutes later, dry and dressed, he called to the replicator, “Coffee, black, three spoons of sugar, container covered.”

Grabbing the coffee cup from the replicator, he headed for the bridge. Thirty minutes to the dot, the turbolift doors parted and he entered the bridge.

“Captain on the bridge,” the traditional called went across the bridge.

Commander Fossey turned in his direction, sliding out of the captain’s chair. “The thruster repair will be completed in sixty-seven minutes and the final testing will continue from that point. We are getting the ship ready for space in the meantime,” Fossey reported.

“Very good Mister Fossey, I have the con. You can get some rest now.”

The Commander took that as his queue to depart the bridge, so he headed to his quarters. It had been fourteen hours since he had slept last, and he was looking for at least six hours. He knew that the ship would be at warp by the time he got up and assumed the night shift. He arrived at his quarters and had a quick meal. A hot shower completed his pre-sleep routine. He hit the pillow and was out in a few seconds.

• • •

Finally, the engineers closed the panels and quietly disappeared.

“*Captain David, Borall here.*”

“Yes, Commander, please proceed.”

“*The repairs are complete, and testing may resume. Borall out.*”

“*Galileo to Starbase Seventeen.*”

“Yes, Captain,” said the station officer as he appeared on the screen.

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“Repairs are complete.”

“Thank you, *Galileo*, testing is now continuing,” said the installation commander. He nodded to the station officer who triggered the controls to resume the testing.

The testing of thruster number three began and was quickly completed. Thankfully the computer testing began to stop the wild antics the station was performing. Half the crew was on Dramamine and many more were headed to get some. The dampening field slowly began to function again. The field only operated while the thrusters were being used. He made a mental note to add a request to divorce these functions to his next status report!

The computer began maneuvering the station back into position and settled it down to the proper orientation. The Bynars continued to be in close communication with the computer core, monitoring the progress and making minor, final adjustments. Finally, they moved back from the panel as the station maneuvering stopped.

Forty minutes later, the installation commander called the *USS Galileo*. As Rad appeared on his screen he said, “Testing has been completed, *Galileo*. Thanks for the retrofit and completing it ahead of schedule.”

• • •

“You’re welcome, sir. *Galileo* is clear,” Ryan said to the figure on the viewing screen. He finished with, “*Galileo* out.” The screen cleared to show the station with the star field behind it.

“Helm, get us on course for Earth, best speed.” That blasted thruster had cost about thirty minutes but pushing the engines for a little while would make that up.

He touched the communications panel, “Chief Borall.”

“*Borall here*,” came the reply.

“The Starbase Commander has officially cleared the ship and stamped the retrofit complete. You may stand down your staff. Well, done, Commander.”

“*Thank you for your kind words, sir. I will pass them to the staff. Borall out.*”

“Helm, you have the ship,” he said as he got up from the chair. He headed to his ready room for a late breakfast.

• • •

“You killed the second officer to save *Voyager*,” the Admiral asked quietly.

“I wish it were not so, but yes. It was the only option open to me at the time, to stop the destruction,” turning to Chakotay, “to save your ship.”

"I am sorry that you had to take such drastic measures to save *Voyager* but killing only was a last resort in a situation," the Admiral reminded Worf.

Turning back to the Admiral, "I realize that, and I could not see another way to stop Berhar from destroying *Voyager*. Kurn was not pleased with my solution either."

The others smiled at the subtle irony of the joke.

"I took command of the *Agrath* and ordered the repairs to the *Voyager*. Kurn returned and took back command—"

"I can see that," she said referring to the bruises on the Ambassador's face.

"—and ordered me off his ship. I transferred to *Voyager* and sit here before you now." Worf finished.

"Thank you, Ambassador, which clears up a number of questions except one." The Admiral asked, "why were you on the ship in the first place."

"It is an honor for a ship to be called on to transport an honored Ambassador of a friendly Empire. My brother fought for the honor to convey me to the border."

"Thank you again. Captain Chakotay, do you have any questions?"

"No, Madam, only one comment. I would like to thank the Ambassador for his intervention in what would have been the end of my career."

"Ambassador, do you have any questions?"

"Only one and I doubt you can answer it." He paused for a moment, then continued when she remained quiet, "Do you know why I was recalled?"

"Thank you both, Starfleet out." The screen went blank.

They both stared at the blank screen. Chakotay recovered first.

Chakotay said, "Well, what was that about?"

Worf said, "That is the response I seem to get from everyone!" Ire deepened his voice.

"Again, Ambassador, thank you," was all Chakotay could say.

"You're welcome," Worf said, then very quietly he said, "but I needed a ride home!"

They both laughed.

"We are planning a dinner for you tonight, so the officers and crew can thank you personally," Chakotay said. Then he thought for an instant and asked, "I hope you will attend."

Worf laughed again, "I suppose I should attend a dinner in my honor."

• • •

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“Captain,” Commander Fossey said from his combadge on the chair across the room.

“Yes, Commander, what is it,” he asked as his feet hit the deck plates.

“*We are forty-five minutes from Earth, sir.*”

“Thank you. Captain out.” He rose and headed to the fresher.

Twenty minutes later, dry and dressed, he called to the replicator, “Coffee, black, three spoons of sugar, covered container.”

Grabbing the coffee cup from the replicator, he headed for the bridge. Thirty minutes to the dot, the turbolift doors parted and he entered the bridge.

“Starbase One, Galileo. Request docking instructions,” Commander Fossey said to the communications panel.

“*Assume standard orbit of the planet, Galileo. We are uploading the coordinates to your helm now, Starbase one out.*”

Fossey gave the captain a strange look wondering what was going on. He said in the direction of the helm, “Standard orbit helm.” To the captain he said, “Good morning, Captain.”

“Good morning, Commander. I trust all is under control.” He made it a statement rather than a question.

“All was under control!” They both smiled, wary, guarded smiles. He continued, “I have set the shore leave assignments, Captain.”

“Very good, I will be heading down as soon as we are in orbit. Hopefully, some of our questions will be answered.”

• • •

He entered Scotty’s office and was still amazed at the way the old technology covered up the new. Captain Scott’s office looked like the Engineering office aboard the Constellation class ship in the Starfleet Museum. Scotty said this was the surrounding he was comfortable in. It had taken a group of twenty-eight Starfleet cadets just under a week to create this office as a commemoration of his Starfleet service. It had been a labor of love and received with a tear.

Smiling, Scotty rose from his seat and bid the captain to take a chair across the desk from him. He went to the corner cabinet and returned with two scotches, placing one down in front of Ryan, before returning to his own chair.

“Capt’n David, it’s good ta see ye again. How did the retrofit go on Starbase Seventeen?” he asked.

“Captain Scott, I know you have read the reports at least twice and cleared up the discrepancies with our Engineering Officer, so can we get to the reason why we are here.”

"I wish I could tell ye, Ryan, but I donna know. I can pass on some rumors to ye." He continued quietly, "It has to do with project Icarus. Very hush, hush. The Admiral and I only know that a vote was taken in the council an' the President began making 'requests' to Starfleet Command."

He continued before David could ask a question. "I know that Worf has been recalled to Earth without explanation, as were ye. *USS Pioneer* was sent to the Romulan Neutral Zone with the Romulan High Ambassador aboard. It is returning tomorrow. Worf is due here about the same time."

"This is very disturbing information. Do you remember the 'Commander Remmick' incident where Starfleet was almost taken over? These orders remind me of that."

"Aye, tis very true, but I have spoken ta Admiral Na'mur, an' he's mum as a post! He would only say that ye were needed here as soon as possible an' that ye would have orders within two days. So, until then, provide shore leave ta your crew and be ready ta depart in three days."

Scotty rose from his chair signaling the end of the conversation.

But Captain David had one more question, "why did the *Galileo* need to be here today?"

"It's simple, laddie, I wouldda be thinking ye would want ta go out on a mission of unknown duration without a wee bit of shore leave, now would ye?"

Scotty thought of everything.

He said, "Thank you, Captain Scott," as he rose; then turned and left the room.

Chapter 9

He heard the chime and said, "Yes?"

"Ambassador Worf, Tom Paris. I am here to escort you to the dinner."

"Come in Mister Paris."

Tom entered and shook hands with Worf. They had never met. Tom had been assigned off Earth and then been lost in the Delta Quadrant. When the Voyager had returned, Worf was negotiating the Klingon-Federation accord and could not return to Earth.

"I met your father a few years ago, you look a lot like him. How is he?" Worf asked.

"Thank you, sir. Very good, I saw him just before this assignment began."

"He did not seem to like your current posting; he said you could do better."

"I like this ship, sir. With respect to my father, I think this is the place for me. I have loyalty to the captain for helping me to straighten out and get where I am. Also, to Admiral Janeway for her help when she was captain. I owe them both a lot over the years, but enough of the old home week, the party awaits!" He pointed to the door.

As they left Worf's quarters, he asked, "Will you be visiting your father when we get to Earth?"

"I'm not sure I will have time. We will have to load stores and such," Tom said.

"I think you should take the time. I had very little time with my father after I joined Starfleet and while I know he was very proud of his son, I miss his counsel and complaining I am never home. Now that he is gone, I don't have the opportunity to make it up." He concluded his advice quietly.

Tom said, "I will try." The turbo lift came to a halt and the door cycled open.

The journey to the cargo bay was a short one, as were all journeys on this small ship. The door opened to all but a few of the crew who were manning critical stations. The large cargo bay seemed very small with most of the crew celebrating inside. Worf plunged in behind Tom, who worked his way to the refreshment table on the far side of the room. There they found the captain waiting with drinks in hand.

"Ambassador, Romulan Ale." He handed the drink to Worf. He nodded and said, "Tom," as he handed Tom his drink.

"You know that I personally banned Romulan Ale within Starfleet," Worf said.

"Yes sir, I heard the story about you at Captain Riker's wedding."

"You have no shame, Captain!" They laughed heartily. It was one of the best laughs Worf had had since he had left Klackon.

Many of the crew stopped by and thanked him or asked him to tell a story of his exploits. Worf was becoming a legend in Starfleet almost as big as Kirk. One of the more decorated and heroic officers, he was asked to tell almost every story he could remember. A few of the stories had the crew laughing so hard the doctor almost silenced him!

Worf began to tire after about five hours of celebrating and four Ales. The party began to wane as about half the crew began to return to quarters. Worf excused himself and found his own way back to his quarters.

The next morning, he called the captain, who requested his presence in his ready room.

Arriving he asked, "Captain Chakotay, any word on the situation at Klackon?"

"Ambassador, Starfleet dispatched three vessels to Klackon and a burning communiqué to the Klingon High Council through Ambassador Menden. The *USS Venture*, Galaxy class, is due to arrive in a few hours, the *USS Galaxy*, another Galaxy class and the *USS Yamoto*, a Sovereign class, are within a day of arrival."

"Admiral Janeway has received a message back from Ambassador Menden to the effect that Chancellor Martok is dismissing the complaint because both sides were wrong," Chakotay continued, "Admiral Janeway is not pleased with this, and neither is the President. If we must ask permission to enter Klingon space to answer a distress call, that will set relations back to the days before the neutral zone."

"Has Menden brought this to Martok's attention?" Worf asked.

"He is trying to get an audience with the Chancellor. Martok is not responding to his requests."

"Would it help if I contact Martok?"

"Admiral Janeway stated that the President wants to handle this and has asked that you keep a low profile. She does not want to aggravate the situation by discussing 'who did what to whom.'"

"Then I will bow to her wisdom. How long before we arrive at Earth?" Worf asked.

"A little less than one day."

"Good, it will give me time to take a look at this ship of yours."

"I will ask the Chief Weapons officer to give you the full-blown tour right now," Chakotay told Worf.

"Thank you, Captain," Worf rose and followed the captain out to the bridge.

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He and the Weapons officer left the bridge within a few minutes.

• • •

Once back aboard the ghost town that was the *USS Galileo*, her Captain headed directly for the bridge and found the Helm officer in command. He received a briefing that most of the crew was on Earth or Mars and the ship was in first class shape.

The restocking of depleted stores was well on its way to completion, which struck him as odd. Usually, the stores officer had to pitch seven fits to get half of what they needed. Looking at the figures of what was being beamed aboard showed that the entire list was almost complete.

“Sir,” the helm officer said nervously, “we have received orders to move some equipment out of the phasers equipment areas.”

“Please relay that to the Chief Engineer,” he said, “and carry on. If I am needed, I will have my combadge.” The Helm officer acknowledged him.

“Otherwise, I will be on leave,” he said.

Seeing nothing else to do he headed to his quarters, packed, and then beamed to his home in Las Vegas in the Northwestern hemisphere.

• • •

Lieutenant Commander Vanya Soraz, the Chief Weapons officer was one of the three Bajorans that made the switch to Starfleet and remained on the ship. She and Worf had spent most of the day together touring *Voyager*. He had come to enjoy her company quickly; she was all business and very knowledgeable. They had toured the engineering and operations sections over the past nine hours and were just finishing up his tour of the weapons section of *Voyager* when the captain asked them to come to his ready room.

“Ambassador, Vanya, please be seated,” Chakotay directed them to chairs at the end of table as they entered his ready room. Admiral Janeway was on the view screen. He continued, “The Admiral was just briefing me on the situation on Klackon.”

“I hope it has gotten better,” Worf said to all.

“Yes, it has. As you know, when the *Venture* arrived the *Agrath* was still in orbit transferring aboard the Klingons that wanted to leave. The Klingon freighter *Valdar* arrived shortly thereafter and completed the task. The *Agrath* and *Valdar* left the area without incident after the Governor officially submitted his application to enter the Federation of Planets and the *Galaxy* and *Yamato* arrived.”

“The President has forwarded the application and recalled the *Venture* and *Galaxy*, leaving the *Yamato* to help the Governor maintain order. The incident is officially over, and the President and Chancellor Martok have dropped it.”

"Thank you, Admiral," Worf said.

"Captain, how long before you arrive?" Janeway asked.

"Within two hours."

"Good," she said to the captain. Looking at Worf, she continued, "Ambassador, the President asked that you beam down to her office when you arrive. Captain, I will also have your orders then. Janeway out."

The abrupt termination of the connection took us all by surprise. Chakotay was the first to recover again. "Well, Ambassador, it looks like it's time for you to pack!"

"I guess it is," Worf said.

• • •

"Sir, Captain Scott is hailing us," said the Communications officer.

"Captain Scott, good to see you again, sir," Fossey said as Captain Scott appeared on the bridge view screen.

"Aye, wouldna ye be Commander Fossey?" Scott asked.

"Yes, sir." Fossey was surprised that Scotty remembered him.

"Commander, I have new orders for ye," Scott said matter-of-factly.

"I will call Captain RAD sir."

"Nye, these orders are for ye only," Scotty caught him before he could signal Captain David. This would be easy from here. "The Capt'n will be busy here an' we donna wanna disturb him, now do we?" Scotty reasoned.

"No, sir. What are the orders, sir?"

"I would be wantin' ye to recall the rest of ye crew and head out to Pluto. Ye are receiving the coordinates now?"

"Helm?" Fossey asked.

"Yes, sir," the helm officer reported, "we have received a set of coordinates within the system."

"Yes sir, we have the coordinates."

"Aye, now be roundin' up the rest of the crew quietly and take the ship ta the coordinates ye just received. Ye'll be contacted there. Can ye do that laddie?"

"Aye, Sir."

"Good, Scott out." The view screen went back to a view of earth as the channel closed.

• • •

"Please transfer the baggage directly to my quarters in the Ambassadorial residence wing," Worf told the transporter office.

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He turned and shook hands with the captain.

"You have a very nice ship here Captain. I still long for the days when I was assigned to a ship."

"Maybe you'll have another chance to visit us," he said. "I will look forward to having you crawling over the equipment again."

Worf laughed. "Thank you for your hospitality, Captain. I enjoyed the crawl very much!" They both had a quick laugh as they shook hands again and Worf stepped on the transporter pad.

A moment later he was in the Presidents outer office.

• • •

"Admiral Donatra," Dar'Tok said, breaking into her daydream.

"Yes, Captain?"

"It is very beautiful here," he said, staring around the holodeck at the Sonsoulla Valley.

"It is and it holds my fondest memories of growing up on Romulus. My family took vacations here once a year for as long as I can remember. My father and I would swim in the water at least once a day. I swam with my sister the rest of the time. We had no cares while we were here."

"I have my escape place also." He gave her a knowing look. "My memories are from visits to the Kelemar Mountains with my father to hunt for ma'aph. I have enjoyed the holodeck for many hours hunting with him again."

"You have a program with your father as a character?"

"Yes, it was not easy to program, but the crew secretly worked on it for three months. It was a gift from them on the anniversary of my assumption of command."

"They must like you."

"They tolerate a Klingon Captain, but they are all formidable warriors and I enjoy commanding them."

"I have noticed that the tempo on this ship is higher than on most Federation ships I have been on. More drills and battle alerts. You don't let the ... ah ... the, oh yes, the dust settle on anything." She finally remembered the saying.

Dar'Tok revealed he had a deep warriors laugh as they laughed together.

"Yes," he said, "I do work them hard. You have spent time on Earth?"

"Yes, a year at the Romulan Embassy. And you?"

"No, this will be my first visit. And speaking of a visit, we will arrive in less than an hour. I thought you might want to get ready to leave us."

"I would think you would want your holodeck back!"

"I would not presume to tell the Admiral to share with the rest of the crew!"

They laughed again.

"Computer, end program," she said.

"Computer, store program," he said, "I might want to visit here again. It has a rugged beauty."

"Enter at the rim next time, the view is breath taking."

They headed toward the door as it cycled open. He escorted her back to her quarters.

Along the way, she asked, "How does a warrior command Federation sheep?"

The question and point of view seemed to surprise the captain, because he did not answer quickly. Finally, he said, "It is easy when you find out the sheep are sly foxes and wolves under the fleece!"

"I see... Have you ever seen the Earth ant?"

"No, Admiral, I have not heard of it."

"It is a small earth insect. It works continuously for the colony. It never seems to sleep, to eat, to enjoy life. It just works. I would ensure your ship is not an ant colony."

He nodded, thinking about the advice.

• • •

The admiral entered her cabin to find Aulee just closing the bag, having to sit on it! She looked up at the Admiral and said, "I was just packing for you, Admiral."

"Aulee, would you like help?"

"No, Admiral. I am just finishing. I am already packed, so we are ready to go," she said as she closed the last clasp.

"Thank you. I hope this trip has not been too boring for you."

"No, sir. I have been enjoying the company of this crew. They are very different from the Romulan crew. I have seen three of what they call movies about ancient Earth. They are very informative. Do you know that western warriors strike four footed animals for their subsistence?"

"I have seen something like that. They do not strike them; they move the animals."

"But, Admiral, they said that they were cow punching!"

Ael could not hold in the laughter any longer, "That is a term used to describe the moving of cattle. They don't actually hit the animals."

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Aulee looked confused and ashamed of her misunderstanding, “I have a lot to learn about the humans.”

“Not as much as I had,” she laughed again, remembering some of the ‘misunderstandings’ she had had in her early days on Earth. “Don’t worry about it, I have a notebook that will help.”

“Thank you, Admiral, I think I will need a lot of help.” They both smiled.

“For now, let’s get a last meal before arriving on Earth. We may not get a chance once we arrive there.”

• • •

The *Pioneer* approached Earth slowly as per the regulations. Dar”Tok was not sure why this was done until he passed the asteroid belt and saw Mars for the first time. It was breathtaking to see the angry red planet and to know it supported millions of citizens.

The screen shifted slightly as Mars passed to starboard, and Earth came into view. He stood as he caught sight of it. Stepping down to the bridge deck staring at the beautiful planet before him. The blue sky surrounding the planet had white clouds suspended magically and majestically above the lands and oceans. The scene mesmerized him.

The helmsman called out to him, “Captain, we need to call for docking instructions.”

He continued to examine the marbled ball before him.

“Captain Dar”Tok,” the helmsman said louder.

“Yes, what is it,” the captain said still not taking his eyes off the Earth. The view shifted as the *Pioneer* adjusted course to avoid the Moon, which caught his attention now.

“Sir,” the operations officer added his voice to the helmsmen.

The pot marked moon slipped past, and the Earth centered in the screen. He broke out of his reverie, shaking his head to clear it. Now he knew the reason for approaching the Earth so slowly. It was too dangerous not to.

“Yes, Helm,” he said.

“We need clearance for our approach sir.”

He leaned back and opened a channel from his command chair. “Starbase One this is the *Pioneer* requesting docking instructions.” Captain Dar”Tok loved commanding Federation personnel to do his bidding.

“Pioneer, assume a standard orbit. The captain will transport to the office of the Chief of Starfleet.”

This is not the answer he was expecting. “Helm, standard orbit. Commander, you have command,” he said as Fossey entered the bridge, and he got up,

heading for the turbolift. He almost made it when he heard the whine of a transporter beam and froze.

The bridge faded around him and he found himself materializing in a medium sized room. Large doors led from the room in two directions. A tall, slender human female sat behind a console style desk.

She looked up as the transporter's whine faded out. "Captain Dar'Tok, please forgive my snatching you from your bridge, but the President and Admiral Na'mur are very busy and only have a few moments to see you. Please go in," she said as the doors to the left opened.

Chapter 10

"The President is ready for you Ambassador," Nicky said.

"Thank you," Worf said as he turned to enter the President's office.

She was standing by the conversation area. She said, "Ambassador, I am sorry you had such an eventful trip."

She indicated a chair next to hers and they both sat down.

"I can echo that sentiment. It is not every day that I am forced to kill someone to save many more. I will leave that to the professionals in the future."

"Thank you. I am sure they will not cause the same problems for my office that you did," she did not hold her punches. But as Worf started to defend himself, she waved his explanation aside and continued, "But that problem is now settled and best left alone." He decided to let the subject die and remained silent.

She asked, "You have the treaty?"

"Yes madam," Worf said handing over the bound parchment document he held.

"I am glad you had the chance to complete this great work. It is the reason I am not worried about the incident at Klackon. The Governor's application will be voted on in a few minutes and so will this treaty. I want you at my side when this happens."

"To share the blame?" Worf said with a very straight face.

The president did not laugh at his comment. She said nothing, leaving an icy pause between them.

Finally, Worf said, "Then can you tell me why I was replaced and recalled?"

"Not right now. I have a new assignment for you. I know you are curious about your future, but the wheels are just beginning to turn, and I would hate to say anything before all the plans are set. I hope you will bear with me and wait for another two days."

Worf started to protest, but the computer chimed and announced the council was formed.

She thanked the computer as she got up and moved to the connecting hallway to the council chamber. Worf rose and joined her. She composed herself as she walked down the short hall.

She entered the chamber and moved to the podium. Worf followed and stood behind her to her left. "Federation members, have you reached a conclusion to the discussion on the application for membership before the council?"

The different delegations were bathed in mostly green, but some red light as the vote was taken. She liked the new way of voting; it gave the council chamber a more festive air when items before them were passed. This was the main reason she had ordered the change to the previous way of voting.

"Discussion is concluded, what is the decision of the council?" A few lights changed from green to red. "The Federation grows with the addition of Klackon, the council has spoken." She raised the gavel ball and banged it once on the cradle to signal the end of the item. She left the ball in its cradle and folded her hands before her on the podium. She looked around the room before beginning the next order of business.

"The next order of business is the Klingon-Federation accord. Ambassador Worf will address the council."

Worf moved to the center of the raised dais on which the podium stood. "Members of the Council of the Federation of Planets, I bring before you the final signed copy of the Klingon-Federation accord. This accord abolishes the neutral zone between the Federation and the Klingon Empire. The result of eleven years of work, this document has been ratified and signed by the Emperor and Chancellor of the Klingon Empire in and for the Klingon High Council. It lacks only the signature of the President of this august body to become the greatest accomplishment of this decade. I urge its passage."

He bowed to the council and backed away from the center of the stage, returning to his former position. This was the traditional signal to the President of the end of his address.

The President thought, *not the greatest Worf, but you will have a hand in both!* She said, "Will the council consider a vote on the Klingon-Federation accord, which is unchanged from the last vote taken on this treaty?"

The vote was remarkably close. Many of the planets near the Klingon and Romulan neutral zones became red. However, the greens beat them by a margin of two. Klackon abstained by the mere fact their representative was not there. He had returned to Klackon to await the verdict of the council.

"Before the council is the Klingon-Federation accord, how do you vote?" The room lighting did not change!

"I perform the will of the Council," the President said.

Worf moved to the podium, which lowered and flattened to become a table. He set the document on the table, open to the proper page and with a flourish the President signed the document with ten pens in the ancient tradition of all leaders.

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Standing and facing the council, she said, "The Council of the Federation of Planets has made history this day."

She raised the gavel ball and banged it once on the cradle to signal the end of this item. She then asked, "Is there any more business for the council?"

The room took on the look of an Elizabethan scene as the lighting changed to red. "The council is adjourned." She raised the gavel ball and banged it twice on the cradle to signal the end of the meeting.

As the red lighting changed to white, she turned away from the podium and re-entered the hallway to her office, with Worf close behind her carrying the accord and pens.

As she entered her office, Nicky was there to take the document and the pens. Admiral Na'mur was also in the room and rose as the President entered.

"Thank you for the great work you have done for the Federation. You shall be rewarded. And all your questions will be answered in two days. Until then, you are free to visit your wonderful mother or enjoy a well-deserved break," she said as she escorted Worf to the door to the outer office. "Again, thank you, Ambassador." With that, the door cycled closed. He was not happy about what was to be the pinnacle of his career, there were too many questions in his head.

He left the building, went to his quarters, and repacked the daily items into a travel bag. He called his mother and found she would be thrilled to have him visit for a few days. He transported to the pad down the street from her house and almost ran into her hurrying back with a bag of groceries.

"Oh, Worf, it is so good to have you home, but I was out of the ingredients for my Rokeg Bloodpie," she said while she hugged him.

Worf took the sack and they walked to the house while she continued to talk. She related most of what had happened in the area since his last visit. He knew better than to interrupt her with other than a normal nod or 'is that right.'

He was pleased when they arrived at his boyhood home, and he headed to his room to unpack. She made way to the kitchen to begin cooking.

• • •

He entered the office of the President of the Federation Council wondering why he was there.

"Captain Dar'Tok, it is really a great pleasure to finally meet you. Your exploits in the Empire and within the Federation have preceded you. I am honored by your presence," she said as she walked to the doorway to greet him.

He saluted the President and said, "Thank you, Madam President. I am not sure why I am here, but I am honored that you would take an interest in me."

Escorting him back to the conversation area she asked, "Have you met Admiral Na'mur, the Chief of Starfleet?"

"Yes, madam. Admiral." He nodded and saluted Na'mur.

"Please join us," she indicated the chair next to her and sat down. They joined her.

"You must have many questions, even though you are not briefed on project Icarus yet. The USS *Pioneer* has been chosen to participate in the project. You and your ship are the last piece in the puzzle. I cannot explain yet exactly what the project entails except to say I need you to take the *Pioneer* to Pluto, the outer most planet in this system."

She put up a hand to stop his interruption and continued. "Captain, please. When you arrive at Pluto, you will be told where to dock and you will get a quick retrofit of your systems that will take approximately eighteen hours. We will join you in two days and all will be explained." She reached down and retrieved a data pad from the coffee table before her. "Your orders," she stated as she handed him the data pad.

He quickly reviewed the contents of the data pad and slid the pad into this pocket. "I am not sure what to say except, yes madam."

The president rose and waited for him to rise. She escorted him to the door as she said, "Thank you, Captain. Since time is of the essence, I will not keep you any further."

The doors cycled closed behind him.

He touched his combadge and said "Bridge."

"Captain, we were worried when you were beamed from the bridge," said Commander Paul James, his executive officer.

"Mister James, set course for Pluto and transport me to the bridge."

He saw Nicky give him a small wave goodbye as the room faded and the bridge surrounded him.

"Are we on course."

"Yes, Captain," Paul said as he left the captain's chair. "We will arrive in twenty minutes."

"And our passengers?"

"They transported to the surface shortly after you were beamed away, Captain."

The Captain of the *Pioneer* sat down in his chair and pulled out the data pad. He spent most of the trip reviewing his new orders in depth. He was amazed by how much official language it took to say he and his ship were assigned to project Icarus and nothing else!

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Admiral Donatra and her Uhlan aide transported to the coordinates provided by Starfleet. A Starfleet Commander met them at the transporter pad. They were escorted to temporary quarters and asked to wait.

Aulee began to unpack when the communications panel buzzed. She walked over and touched the receive button. "Yes," she said.

"Is Admiral Donatra there?"

Since she did not know who was asking, she thought it would be a good idea to start guarding the Admirals privacy. She asked, "Who is calling?"

"Nicky, the President's aide," Nicky said.

Aulee thought, "Here I go again, running into things." To Nicky she said, "The Admiral is here."

"Nicky, how are you?" Ael asked.

"Congratulations ADMIRAL! I was so happy to hear you got promoted."

"Thank you, Nicky, what can I do for you?"

"Admiral, the President will be available to see you in a few minutes. Would you like me to transport you from there?"

"Please, Donatra out." She barely got the sentence out when the whine of the transporter beam began, and the room faded.

She materialized in Nicky's office before the large double doors, which began opening. She entered the room. This was not the first time she had been in the President's office.

"Admiral, it looks very good on you," the President greeted her. She pointed to a chair in the conversation area.

"I would like to invite you to a very informal dinner tonight to celebrate, at about eight in the evening. I will send an escort for you."

"That would be very nice. I hope that is not the reason why I was asked to cut my vacation short and return to Earth."

"No, it was not. You have been relieved of your duties at the Embassy and assigned to my office for a special project. Project Icarus. Please consider yourself a part of my personal staff for the time being. I cannot go into much more detail right now, just keep the project and your assignment confidential. We are still awaiting a few pieces of the puzzle to fall into place."

She gave the President a questioning look and said, "Excuse me Madam President, pieces of the puzzle? I am not sure what that means."

Surprised by the question, she answered, "Oh, it means not everything is ready. Anyway, I still have a few things to finish. Tomorrow evening, we will be leaving Earth for a short trip, and everything will be explained then. I just wanted to put you at ease over your quick return."

"Thank you for your consideration and the invitation to dinner."

Getting out of her chair, the President said, "At eight then..."

Donatra rose, saluted, and turned toward the opening doors.

"Ael, I am told you have a new aide with you."

The Admiral turned back and said, "Yes, I do." She showed slight surprise in the use of the familiar.

"The invitation extends to her also. That will give me an excuse to invite Nicky."

"I would like Nicky to attend. So, I will have Aulee accompany me."

"I will see you both at eight then..."

Ael saluted, turned, and departed the room.

Nicky closed the doors and said, "I will transport you back to your room if you want."

"Yes, please. Thank you, Nicky."

The transporter whisked her back to her room. Ael could tell Aulee was excited and full of questions, but she continued to unpack the Admiral's belongings.

"Aulee, do you have a dress uniform?"

"Yes, Admiral."

"We need both our dress uniforms tonight. The President of the Federation has asked us to an informal dinner at eight this evening. She asked that you and Nicky attend. We need to be ready by seven thirty."

• • •

At twenty minutes to eight, the same Starfleet Commander returned to escort them to the President's quarters.

"Admiral Donatra, Commander Danson," he said from the communications panel.

She opened the door, and they joined the Commander in the hallway, the door closed automatically behind Aulee. They took an almost leisurely walk to the President's quarters, two buildings over. Aulee had heard that Earth was one gigantic park and from their short walk she was sure this was true. The beauty of the landscaping and the way the buildings flowed out of it was, to her, breathtaking.

They entered a building and the turbolift was just inside the foyer. As the turbolift stopped at the top floor, the Commander ushered them into the President's foyer, but remained on the turbolift.

Once the turbolift door closed, the door before them slid aside to show Nicky.

"Admiral, welcome. You must be the Admiral's new aide Aulee. Hi, I'm Nicky." She said extending her hand.

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“Yes, hello Nicky.” Aulee said shaking her hand tentatively. Hand shaking was a new custom for her, and she was not sure how she felt about it yet.

“Please no ceremony here, just us girls. Your coats please.”

They removed their uniform coats as they entered. The President was waiting in the rather small living room. Behind her the view of San Francisco at night was breathtaking, Aulee gasped at the sight. She slowly walked past the President and drank in the view.

The President greeted her guests. Aulee turned at that point and came back to the now. The sight had mesmerized her. “It reminds me of light falls at Trilith,” she said.

Nicky returned to the room and began serving drinks.

“It is very beautiful, I never tire of watching the city,” said the President.

“Please, have a seat.”

“Again, I would like to congratulate you on your promotion, Ael, may I call you Ael?”

“Please, Madam President.”

“Ael, please this is meant to be a very informal evening, as Nicky said, just us girls. Please call me Meri. It is short for Merortha. You can see why I use the short version.” That comment caused everyone to smile.

She turned to Aulee and said, “We haven’t met yet.”

“Aulee Tyanala, Meri.”

“Very good Aulee. Ael, she is a quick study. I would keep this one. Nicky is dinner set?”

“Yes, Meri.”

Meri rose and led the way to an adjacent room with a view of the Golden Gate Bridge and the entrance to San Francisco Bay. Again, the view from fifteen stories in the air was spectacular. Aulee had never seen a table like the one in the center of the room. It was built around a large metal plate, which was set flush to the edge of the table facing the view. On either end was a single seat with two seats facing the view and the metal plate. The table had enough room to be comfortable but not feel like you would have to shout to the person next to you. The table was nicely proportioned to the room.

Aulee sat to the left, with Meri next to her at the end. Ael had the second seat with Nicky on the other end.

Meri said, “Aulee, have you tried any of the foods from this planet yet?”

“No, Madam,” she said, which earned her a cross look from the President. “No, Meri,” she corrected.

"Good, then this will be a new experience." Meri reached out and patted Aulee's hand. "I promise not to poison you on your first trip down the San Francisco culinary road!" Nicky snickered as if she was in on the secret.

"Since this dinner, however informal, is in your honor Admiral, I did some research and found you have a favorite local cuisine, but that you have never been to a local restaurant. Tonight, in your honor, I have brought the restaurant to you."

As if to emphasize the point, Meri clapped her hands and a door opened at the far end of the room. A short man dressed in a white uniform with a tall hat; pushed a small cart into the room and maneuvered it to a position next to the table. Ael recognized him as a professional chef.

The chef bowed silently to each person at the table.

"This is Chef Chan from Makato's in the Japanese district. I know you like Chinese food, Ael, but that you have never tried Japanese style food or been to a Japanese Steak House. It is like Chinese, just a different cooking style and flavor. I hope you enjoy it."

The Chef pulled out a spatula from the tools on the cart and began to twirl it over the metal plate, which Aulee noticed was getting warmer. She wondered just how hot it would get.

"You also get a show," said Nicky excitedly.

The chef finished twirling the spatula and set it down on the edge of the metal plate. He got out a bowl of what Ael knew was rice, spreading it out flat on the metal plate. He then added chemicals from little shakers, which he banged on the bottom with his knife. He got out two eggs and performed an 'egg roll.' He used the spatula to toss the egg into the air and catch it again. On the third toss, he turned the spatula sideways and broke the egg onto the now hot plate.

Aulee was entranced as the show continued. This was all new to her. Her fascination was broken at intervals when the chef placed food on the single dinner plate before them. Meri and Nicky used chopsticks to eat with great proficiency. Ael tried her luck at using the chopsticks next to the plate; Aulee used the fork.

They enjoyed what Ael knew as fried rice. Aulee was skeptical at first, but Ael assured her that the meal was safe and very good. She tried a small bit, remembering her survival training. "If a little did not make you sick, it was probably OK to eat," the training Centurion had told her.

Next the Chef prepared steak, chicken, and shrimp. He detailed and de-veined the shrimp and then cut it into little pieces, which he flipped at each of them. Nicky caught hers right off. Ael got hit in the nose. Aulee caught hers and found out quickly she was not fond of shrimp. The little bit quickly shot out of her mouth, bounced off her plate and ended up back on the grill. Ael gave her a stern look while trying very hard not to laugh. Meri smiled as she told Aulee

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seafood was a developed taste and took a while to get used to. Aulee decided that it would be a long while! Finally, Ael caught hers and quickly swallowed it.

The steak was very good, and the chicken was a new taste for Aulee. She decided she liked it as the last piece disappeared.

The next course was what the Chef called grilled vegetables. She learned the metal plate was a cooking surface called a grill and that the style of cooking was Hibachi.

The chef completed the cooking and began cleaning the grill. He bowed to each person starting with Meri when he was finished. He then pushed the cart back out of the door through which he had entered.

Meri sat back against the chair and sighed with the contentment that follows a wonderful meal. She turned to Ael and said, "I hope you liked the meal, because I can guarantee you, I cannot eat another!"

Ael laughed with her. Nicky had just taken a drink and almost lost the fluid in her mouth as she giggled. Aulee tried to get the joke.

They rose and returned to the living room. The four of them spent the rest of the evening discussing the difference between the different styles of cooking available on Earth. Meri firmly believed that this was the culinary capital of the Federation. See pointed out a Klingon restaurant from her window.

Shortly after eleven, Ale and Aulee headed back to their quarters. The Commander had not returned, so they retraced their steps carefully in the dark but well-lit path.

They arrived at their quarters to find the High Ambassador waiting for them. Aulee retired to her bedroom and had a hot shower.

"Admiral Donatra," Torrecka began, "Your transfer to project Icarus is official. Your new aide, Uhlan Tyanala, will accompany you. You have my best thoughts." He handed her a data crystal containing her orders.

"I expect you will want to pack your office and quarters at the embassy tomorrow morning. I have asked Sub-Commander Kirill to assign three soldiers to assist you. Would you need anything else?"

"No Ambassador, you are very kind."

He took her hand and patted it as he said, "You have helped me over the last year to deal with the humans. Your promotion, while devastating to my staff, is very well deserved. I will not be available tomorrow so I will say my goodbyes now." He released her hand and stepped back one pace.

"Thank you, Ambassador for listening to me and taking my advice. You have made this assignment the best in my military career." She saluted him and said, "To the Empire!"

"To the Empire, take care." He turned and left her quarters.

• • •

The morning came too early. Aulee was up and dressed by the time Ael got up. A traditional Romulan breakfast was on the table when Ael entered the living room. Aulee stated she was not sure yet what the Admiral liked in the morning, so the Admiral quickly discussed her likes and dislikes as she sat down and started eating.

When finished, Ael said, "We have my quarters and office at the Embassy to pack today."

"I have already talked to your human assistant. She said your office is already packed and she is working in your quarters. She seemed very sad."

"We have been together for a year, and I know we will miss each other."

"Do you have other plans for today?" Aulee asked.

"No. I will have to perform the change of command at the Embassy and then I am free till tomorrow morning."

They finished breakfast in silence and Aulee cleaned up.

"You might see the sights. Tour Fisherman's Wharf and ride a Cable Car perhaps," Ael suggested to her, as she cycled the door, "I will not be back for a few hours."

"Yes Sir, I will."

Donatra walked to the transporter platform in the lobby of the building and transported to the Romulan Embassy, entering her security code in advance. She walked the short distance to her office. The outer office was deserted. She walked into her 'old' office and sat in her chair before an empty desk and stared at the empty walls and shelves. All her belongings had been removed and only the standard furniture remained. *One road end, and another begins,* she thought.

Sub-Commander Kirill knocked on the wall near the open door. She waved him forward and indicated the chair in front of the desk. He entered and took the seat he had used many times over the months he had been there.

"I will miss our conversations, Admiral," he said.

"So will I, Commander."

"Admiral, it is Sub-Commander."

"That it is. I read my orders this morning assigning me to the President's staff. They also contained other orders for you and my aide. Is the garrison formed?"

"Yes, Admiral, which is what I came to tell you."

She rose saying, "Shall we go..."

They got up and walked at a slow march out of the building. They switched easily to a proper march as they come into sight of the formation. Marching to

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the front of the formation, Sub-Commander Kirill took his position as the acting commander of the garrison. Ael stood before him.

She began a simple ceremony, “Attention to orders. The Commander of the Garrison, Admiral Ael Donatra is relieved of her assignment. Sub-Commander Kirill is commanded to assume command of the Garrison and the duties thereof.”

A murmur of approval flashed through the ranks. She knew that the soldiers liked Kirill as she did.

“Do you, Sub-Commander Kirill, accept this assignment?”

“For the glory of the Empire,” was his reply as tradition dictated.

Two soldiers marched forward from the building and took up positions on either side of the Sub-Commander.

“I also have the privilege and honor to confer upon you the rank of Commander.”

Ael removed his Sub-Commanders sash and handed it to the soldier to her left. She took the Commanders sash from the soldier on her right and placed it on the Commander. She leaned forward and said quietly, “Congratulations, you deserve this.”

He thanked her very quietly.

Stepping back, she commanded, “Commander Kirill, you may dismiss the Garrison.”

The Commander dismissed the Garrison and accompanied the Admiral back to her office. “Now *Commander*, this is now yours. I was told that the office makes the person. Good luck, as the humans say, with this office.”

“Thank you, Admiral.”

She turned and left his office. She made the last walk to her quarters, finding her assistant, Holly, just finishing the packing.

“Holly, please take good care of the Garrison, I leave it in your hands.”

“Congratulations, Admiral. It will be easy to carry on with Commander Kirill as the boss!”

“How do you...,” she began, but then Holly knew everything. “Thank you.”

Holly walked to the communications panel and said “*Federation*, the rest of the Admiral’s belongings are ready for transport. You may energize.”

Donatra’s possessions faded from the room, leaving it very empty. They looked sadly at each other and, with a conspirator’s look in their eyes, they both said, “Ice Cream!”

They had often ended a bad day with a dish of ice cream together in the mess hall. It had always lifted their spirits. Ael had come to think of chocolate ice cream as a gift from all the Earth gods!

They sat and ate, sharing memories of their year together. Laughing and crying as the emotions hit them.

Shortly before noon, Ael left the Embassy and returned to her quarters. They were empty. She decided to do some sightseeing herself.

She left her quarters and walked in the direction of Aquatic Park. She passed by the fishing pier which made and guarded the small inlet and beach. The pier was closed now since fishing was no longer allowed.

She continued walking and found herself in front of the museum. She entered and spent the rest of the afternoon examining the models of aquatic vessels.

Chapter 11

"Worf, Worf, wake up," his mother. As he stirred, she continued, "The Federation President is on my phone. She wants to talk to my son. What a day, what a day!" She continued to repeat 'what a day!' as she left the room, and he got out of bed. "It must be very early in the morning," he thought, because the single, small window only dimly lit the room.

He tried to straighten his hair as he pulled on his Ambassadorial robe. He walked slowly to the communications panel in the living room of the small Russian home.

"Worf are you alone?" asked the President as soon as he appeared on her screen.

He nodded.

"I will be holding the initial project meeting in the SCC at six pm Pacific Standard Time. That is nine hours from now."

Worf looked half asleep as he acknowledged the appointment.

"Also, we will be leaving for the project site shortly thereafter. Please have anything you want to take to your new assignment transported to the *USS Federation* in orbit."

This woke him up quickly. "The *Federation*?" He asked, continuing without waiting for an answer, "Isn't that your ship?"

"Yes, it is the ship that was converted for the use of the President of the Council of the Federation of Planets." She implied that to explain things was a waste of time.

He got the message. "Thank you, Madam President. Worf, out."

• • •

It was a very warm afternoon in Las Vegas when the call came through. Captain David was sunning on the artificial beach in front of the wave pool at the Desert Oasis Water Park. His communicator started beeping incessantly.

Visions of Jeffery Fossey running the ship into Starbase One came to mind as the only reason he should be disturbed.

He rose slowly and found the noisy thing. People around him were showing their distaste for his having an active communications device within the park boundaries.

"David," he said activating the combadge.

“Captain David, this is Nicky in the President’s office, please hold for the President.”

Now the people around him were becoming curious. Who was this person the President of the Federation Council would be calling? They did stay a respectable distance away.

A few moments later, “*Captain David. Are you in a location where we can talk?*”

“One Moment, Madam,” he said.

He moved to a small alcove built into the side of the low rock face surrounding the wave pool.

“I am now Madam President.”

“Good, I will be holding the initial project meeting in the SCC at six pm Pacific Standard Time. This is just over two hours from now.”

“Yes, Madam.”

“Also, we will be leaving for the project site shortly thereafter. Please you’re your baggage transported to the USS Federation in orbit.”

“Yes, Madam.”

“*Thank you, Captain,*” she said as the channel closed.

He went back and retrieved his belongings and started the trek back to his home. Two things struck him almost immediately. One was that the call came directly from the President and not through the SCC and the second was that he was to transfer his baggage to the *USS Federation*, the Presidents’ ship, and not to his ship, the *Galileo*.

He got a strange feeling as this sunk in. He tapped his combadge and said, “*Galileo, Captain David here.*”

Nothing.

He tapped it twice and said “Starbase One, Captain David.”

“*Yes Captain,*” came the answer.

“Is the *USS Galileo* having communication problems, I can’t seem to raise her,” he asked the duty officer.

After a short pause, the duty officer said, “*Sir, the log shows the Galileo left Earth orbit nineteen hours ago, headed for Pluto.*”

My ship is gone! He thanked the duty officer after ensuring he did not know why the ship had left.

Arriving at his home, he packed quickly. Then he cleaned up, dressed in the single remaining uniform in the house. Closing his home, he called the *Federation* and had his baggage transported aboard.

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He left the house and walked the short distance to the local transporter pad and beamed directly to Starfleet Headquarters. A quick turbolift ride found him talking to the SCC duty officer.

The Duty officer here did not know much more than the Starbase duty officer. His ship had left the local space headed to Pluto. The duty officer did offer one more piece of the puzzle—the orders to move his ship had not been placed through the SCC.

“Sir, your ship is not the only one. The *Pioneer* and the *Voyager* have also arrived and set course for Pluto after dropping off passengers.”

He thanked the officer and took the turbolift down to the Officers Mess for lunch. He still had an hour before the briefing.

• • •

The communications panel began buzzing as the Western Movie came to an end. Aulee answered it to find Nicky on the line. Nicky asked for the Admiral, but she was not there. No, Aulee did not know where she was. She would have the Admiral call as soon as she returned.

Aulee had walked along the beach at Aquatic Park, spent time in the Ghirardelli Square shops and ended up on Fisherman’s Wharf at the Boudin Bread Store. She discovered Vegetable Beef Soup in a Sourdough Bowl.

After consuming the meal slowly, she had returned Ghirardelli Square and bought a pair of Blue Jeans, Western Blouse, and Boots. She had really enjoyed the shopping. The store clerk had been very helpful. Then she returned to her quarters, added her new wardrobe to the luggage and had it all transported to the *USS Federation*.

She had no idea where Admiral Donatra could be. She called the Embassy and was told she had left. She checked the entry log and found that the Admiral had entered and left around noon.

She left a message and walked toward Aquatic Park. She found the Admiral at the end of the pier. She was watching the waves lapping on the pier pilings. She yelled at Aulee as she approached, pointing out into the bay.

Aulee saw creatures jumping out of the water, some flipping in the air. She had never seen such a creature before. When she had arrived next to Ael, she said, “What are those creatures?”

“They are called dolphins and they are very playful as you can see. Amazing creatures, aren’t they?”

“Yes, they are. I have experienced many amazing things in the last week, thanks to you.”

They remained silent for a moment before Aulee gave the Admiral Nicky’s message, “The President would like you to report to the SCC briefing room

within the hour. Nicky would not tell me why," she looked around to ensure they were alone, "but I got the idea it has to do with the project."

"Let's go then."

They took most of the time to walk to Starfleet headquarters. They entered a turbolift with a Starfleet Captain.

They followed the captain, without meaning to, into the briefing room. The three entered and took seats in the front.

Worf finished packing and had his bags transported to the *USS Federation*. He also had them beam his luggage from his quarters at the Council building. He spent a full ten minutes saying goodbye to his foster mother. She would not stop crying! He thought, *why are mothers not like warriors?*

He finally managed to get out of the house, walked to the local transporter pad and returned to Starfleet Headquarters. He entered the turbolift and was on the proper floor in seconds. A short walk put him in the briefing room. He entered to find four others already seated. He hated being the last one to arrive anywhere. He walked down to the front and began to take a seat when the Starfleet Captain recognized him, rose quickly to attention, and saluted. Worf returned the salute and said, "At ease, Captain."

"Captain David of the *USS Galileo*, Ambassador," he said in way of introduction.

"Admiral Donatra, Ambassador," Ael said as she rose and gave a slight bow of acknowledgement.

"I know. But you were a Commander when we met last. I was with Captain Picard on the Enterprise when you helped us stop Praetor Shinzon."

"I remember you now. But you were a Commander then. We have both been promoted it seems," she said.

"No. I maintain my Starfleet commission and serve for one month a year. It just happened to be my month," he said with a grin. He looked past the Admiral at Aulee. "And this is?"

"My aide, Uhlan Aulee Tyanala," she introduced her. She skipped the new designation hoping to give Aulee the status of a seasoned veteran. Aulee gave a Romulan salute, which Worf returned, surprising her. She decided she liked the old warrior.

The door to the back of the conference room attached to the Starfleet Command Center opened. Admiral Na'mur entered with the President. She walked to her chair and sat down while he moved to the podium to begin the briefing.

"Gentle beings, you are about to embark on a great adventure. Project Icarus was conceived by the President"—He paused as she nodded—"many years ago

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to correct the biggest problem the Federation has faced throughout its history. This project is the latest and what the President and Starfleet Command hopes will be the last attempt at finally correcting the problem."

The group looked attentive as he continued.

"We have a full mission briefing awaiting you at the Charon Development Facility. I do not want to get into the mission profile now so as not to spoil the surprise. I will tell you that this project has been in development for over twenty years and only with the latest technological advancements has it been made possible."

Admiral Donatra spoke up during his pause, "we are not aware of a development facility near Charon."

He did not look surprised or upset as he simply stated, "you were not supposed to."

The President rose and said, "You will forgive me, but I have waited many years for this trip, and it is time to get it underway." She produced a combadge and activated it. "*Federation*, six to beam up." Moments later the briefing room was empty.

• • •

Dinner aboard the *USS Federation* was a very formal affair, even when they tried to make it an informal one. The surroundings seemed to mitigate any informality. Most of the Forward section of deck seven had been converted into a very formal state dining room.

The seven people in this great room seemed to be a big waste of space to Aulee. She had seen more opulence in the last week than through seven years of service as a soldier. Only a week ago she was running into senior officers and thinking she was on the fast track to a court-martial!

Now, here she was in the service of that same, run-over senior officer having dinner with the President of the Federation Council, the Chief of Starfleet, the legendary Ambassador Worf, and the captains of four vessels. How her life had changed!

She had tried to explain this to her family without saying too much but was at a loss for the proper words. She was therefore surprised to get a communiqué from her father congratulating her on her assignment as the Admiral's Aide. Later she learned Ael had sent them a letter informing them the Admiral was incredibly pleased to have their daughter on her staff.

She broke out of her daydream to notice the main course was being served. She did not recognize the entrée. Worf leaned over and told her it was a boned chicken breast. She had had chicken at Meri's dinner party, so she ate it without the fear of having a recurrence of the shrimp incident! She had to learn quickly to control her impulses and to slow down.

She did know the vegetable was a type of cut green bean; she had had some in her vegetable soup at lunch. The fluffy, white substance was a mystery. She tried a little and found it tasted like the potatoes in the soup. She asked Worf, sitting next to her, what it was. He explained quietly it was called mashed potatoes and the yellow substance on top was called butter. She found the butter enhanced the flavor of the mashed potatoes. Worf suggested the sprinkling of white crystal and black powder to further enhance the flavor. She found sniffing and tasting the white crystal yielded no smell and a sharp flavor she did not like. Sniffing the black powder caused her to sneeze repeatedly. When she finally recovered enough to have a drink, she noticed all the diners had stopped and were staring at her.

Ael asked, "Are you alright?"

Aulee said, after a second drink, "the black powder is dangerous!"

Worf snickered and said, "Only if you sniff it! It is called Pepper, take a taste."

She tasted it tentatively and found it had a sharp, hot taste. She decided to try the 'spices,' as Ael called them, later. She continued the meal as the embarrassment drained from her face.

She began to feel like she would never learn to be a good aide because she lacked the social experiences that would help her. She also did not know how the Admiral would act in any but the most basic situations. Aulee knew that 'knowing how the boss made decisions' would help her to provide her best support to the Admiral. She had seen many assistants and they all emulated their bosses where minor decisions had to be made.

She managed to get through the rest of the dinner without further embarrassment. Desert was a wonderful food called ice cream. She was told it was a frozen product that originally came from an animal. She was not sure how true that was, but it was wonderful! She noticed that the Admiral really liked it, especially the chocolate.

Admiral Na'mur left after the meal, skipping the desert, claiming his system could not tolerate ice cream.

Unfortunately, the meal was over before she knew it.

The captain's combadge beeped and his executive officer notified him that they had arrived at the Charon Development Facility beam-down point. The Admiral returned and told the President that everything was ready for her to transport to the facility. The captain led the way to the transporter room.

"Madam President, as always, a pleasure having you aboard. I will ensure all the baggage is transferred as necessary and await your return," the *Federation* Captain said.

"Thank you, Captain. Energize." The room faded around them and they materialized in a large conference room with a large table in front of a gallery of seats. A Starfleet and a Klingon Officer rose as the group arrived.

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“Please have a seat,” the President said as she sat at the head of the conference table. The rest of the group followed her example.

“Now that we are in a secure facility, I can finally let you in on the details of project Icarus. However, a bit of housekeeping first. Let’s go around the table and introduce our players. Admiral Na’mur does not need an introduction but has been my defining force behind the project since its inception.”

“Ambassador Worf,” she nodded to him, “is a highly decorated Commander in Starfleet as well as a 3-Bar Federation Ambassador.” She bowed to him, and he returned it.

She continued, “Admiral Donatra, has done more to reduce the Federation/Romulan distrust and misunderstandings than any other person alive. We personally thank her for her efforts. She is the force behind the normalization of relations between the Romulans, the Vulcans and the Federation. She is also a highly decorated combat officer. Her new aide, Uhlan Aulee Tyanala, is a decorated soldier as well,” she nodded to Aulee.

“Captain David is the Commander of the *USS Galileo*, a Starfleet Corps of Engineers vessel. He has many years of command experience on larger vessels. His performance at Wolf 359 and on subsequent postings has earned him a position as Captain of the next Sovereign class vessel.” She looked directly at him when she said, “I hope you will not hold your ‘apparent’ demotion to a Saber class ship against me. You were the best person for the position you now hold.”

Captain David took a chance and asked, “Speaking of my ship. I would like to get it back. Do you know where it is?”

“In a moment Captain,” she said and then continued the introductions.

“Captain Chakotay is a former Starfleet and then Marquis Officer. Captain Janeway’s crew has done more to make this project a reality than they will ever know. His commission in Starfleet was reactivated upon his return and his promotion to Captain followed shortly thereafter. He, like all the officers here, has extensive command and combat experience. He also has years of experience in facing the unknown.”

“Captain Dar”Tok is a highly decorated HoD in the Klingon Defense Force and is currently an exchange officer who, like Worf, is more commander than warrior.” She raised her hand to stop any protests. “Please don’t take offense Captain; we need your type of warrior in the Federation. Captain Dar”Tok commanded one of the most decorated Klingon battle cruisers during the Dominion war. He was selected for this assignment following the war and has been ‘groomed’ by Chancellor Martok and myself for this assignment, mostly without his knowledge.” He blinked at his surprise at this revelation.

She touched the combadge she now carried. “Captain Beck, would you join us please?”

As a new figure materialized and moved to take the chair across from Admiral Na'mur, she continued, "Captain Alexander Hamilton Beck has commanded many ships of the line. His command experience at Wolf 359 and during the Dominion war was invaluable. He commanded the first Sovereign class starship and is now finishing the development and construction of our newest class starship."

"Computer, clear wall," Meri ordered. The wall behind her became transparent and disclosed a vast cavern. They saw three ships near the far end with a great deal of activity on and about them. An intrepid class ship faded out of view and then returned.

"Captain David, I ordered your ship to this facility eighteen hours ago for installation of a cloaking device, new shield and phaser arrays and a few other upgrades. The *Voyager* and *Pioneer* have had similar modifications. I have the CDF Chief Engineer's guarantee that all three ships will be able to go 'toe-to-toe' with a Sovereign class vessel when they are finished with their retrofits." She paused for effect. The idea of a small intrepid class vessel fighting a vessel two times its size took a bit of imagination.

"The mission you will be undertaking will be dangerous. We have tried to mitigate the danger with the latest technology to protect and defend you and your crew. Now that you know the project players, let's get on to completing the picture."

• • •

"Throughout the history of the Federation, first contact has been its greatest problem. In the distant past, we had not developed to the stage we are at today."

She began to orate as she briefed them on the distant history of the Federation. "The Romulan and Klingon first contacts were the worst and have caused many casualties on both sides. 'Cowboy' Captains, like Kirk and Tracy; Commodore Decker, even the historian John Gill caused problems during first contact missions. These *colorful* figures were the Federation to most of its citizens. Many of these incidents could have been avoided. The 'shoot first and ask questions later' attitude is gone from Starfleet today."

"We have moved beyond the need to prove the might of the Federation. We are beyond the xenophobic era in the Federation's development, but we still have much farther to go, much more to learn and more lives to save."

"Captain Picard's first contact with the Children of Tama and the Borg showed we still have far to go. These incidents have shown me, as a young Ambassador, we need a dedicated team of a mixture of Beta Quadrant inhabitants to go beyond our borders and make these first contacts. Project Icarus is well named, in that the mythical Icarus lacked respect for his materials. He recklessly blinded himself to the urgency of accepting inherent limitations without looking at the consequences. He paid for his blindness as

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much as the Federation has. We are on the brink of a new era in exploration. The Quadrant is at peace and should continue to be at peace. It is time to expand; to find new friends, not enemies.”

The other intrepid class vessel faded and returned. A moment later *Galileo* tested its cloaking device. The President nodded to Captain Beck, who touched his combadge and commanded, “Fleet, cloak your vessels.” The three visible ships faded quickly, and the cavern seemed empty.

The President continued, “We hope you will not make this historical mistake with the newest vessel in the Starfleet inventory. Captain Beck has overseen the development of the first Deterrence Class Starship over the last eight years. This class has incorporated all the technologies returned by *Voyager* from the Delta Quadrant, from the Breen and Borg and finally those gleamed from our current understanding of the gateway technologies. There is not another ship that can match—” She nodded again to Captain Beck.

“Randy let’s show off our girl,” said Captain Beck. A rather large ship de-cloaked, just outside the transparent wall giving the impression you could reach out and touch the top of the saucer.

“—the *USS Explorer*.” The President continued, “Unlike the past where the first ship of a series takes the name of the series, I have directed that this ship takes the name of its mission.”

From their angle, they were looking along the right beam of the ship, which looked to be the outward size of a Sovereign Class. The saucer section of the ship was slightly bigger, but beyond this section the ship was very different.

“Sub-Captain McLorn, de-cloak the fleet and begin recovery operations,” Beck ordered.

Worf looked at Admiral Na’mur and mouthed ‘Sub-Captain?’ Na’mur shook his head in a common earth expression to say not now. Worf returned his gaze to the *Explorer*.

The single lower engineering section connecting to the saucer section spread out to just beyond the width of the saucer section ending in a right angled, oval structure that could be completely seen from the front of the ship. Small warp nacelles were incorporated into the inner ring of the outer edges of the oval section. The Engineering section seemed to be slightly triangular with the top of the triangle bowing inward slightly as it flowed toward the outer edge.

Meri continued her briefing, “The ship before you is much bigger than it seems. The crew complement is roughly seventeen hundred personnel. Most of these personnel are first contact support personnel. Life Sciences, Linguistics and Stellar Cartography sections are much larger than those of a normal Starfleet science vessel.”

The other three ships de-cloaked directly behind the *Explorer*.

Over the speaker in the room they heard, “*Voyager* you are cleared to begin docking operations.”

The President asked Captain Beck to brief them on the ship. He rose and began, “The *Explorer* is equipped with a newly developed tunnel generator, which is the oval ring at the rear of the vessel. This generator is based on the Borg conduits technology. The ship has a warp capability of warp eight.”

As he spoke, the *USS Voyager* slowly moved forward, carefully sliding inside the large oval structure at the back of the ship on the side toward the briefing room. *Voyager* stopped when the engineering section came to rest above the left side of *Explorers*’ engineering section. It gently lowered into the depression in the engineering section.

Worf realized that the *Explorer* was designed to carry two Intrepid class ships. As he was coming to this conclusion, “*Pioneer* you are cleared to begin docking operations,” was heard from the overhead speakers. The *Pioneer* began moving forward and was lost to view behind the *Voyager* as it docked.

The captain continued, “As you can see the tunnel generation technology allows us to carry other ships within the field it creates. The ship has been designed to dock two Intrepid class ships and as of six months ago”—

“*Galileo* you are cleared to begin docking operations,” was heard from the overhead speakers.

—“the design was modified to dock a Saber class vessel.”

In the distance *Galileo* began moving very slowly forward and started what an ancient fighter pilot would have called an aileron roll. The ship continued to roll on its axis until it was upside down and then slid into its docking notch below the engineering section.

Captain Beck completed his remarks with, “We will be going over the ships’ systems when we board. The Chief Engineers aboard *Explorer* will brief your crews.” As he finished, he turned to the President and nodded. “Madam President,” he said to end his remarks.

“Thank you.” The President said. “These four ships and this mission are historic. *Galileo* was one of the first to study the stars; *Voyager* and *Pioneer* are the names of the first space probes to leave the Sol system. These were all explorers, and that is the basic mission of this fleet.”

She paused and then continued, “Now to that mission. As I have explained, the largest problem the Federation faces is from first contacts. Very few in the past have gone well. Your mission will be to explore the Alpha Quadrant, Sector Grid 91, to start. You will be leaving shortly to finish the final testing of the *Explorer* on your way to Alpha Quadrant. Then you will start the first exploration mission the Alpha and Beta Quadrants has ever launched. The Federation has only a few planets in the Alpha Quadrant, and it is time to begin full exploration. You will not be the last. The keel for the *USS Deterrence*

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is already laid at the bottom of the cavern before you. We expect to launch *Explorers*' sister in 10 months."

"I hope you can appreciate the magnitude of the mission you are about to embark upon. This ship is the first to carry a diplomatic mission, an Embassy, to the stars. This is my vision. Not to send our Federation military to explore the new frontiers, but to send representatives of both the Alpha and Beta Quadrants to do the exploration. Therefore, it must have a very knowledgeable Senior Ambassador aboard. Worf you are the best Ambassador in the Federation for this assignment."

Worf acknowledged the complement and stated, "It will be an honor to serve."

"The ship is compact but has the capabilities of an entire fleet. It is in fact a fleet. For this, there must be an Admiral to command it. Admiral Donatra has shown the Federation that she is more than a friend; she is also a very capable commander. You were the obvious choice. Your promotion was a consequence of my request for your service. Again, congratulations."

Ael saluted and said simply, "Thank you Madam President, I will not disappoint you."

Meri acknowledged the salute and continued. "The rest of you are also just as important to the mission. The *Voyager* and *Pioneer* will allow the *Explorer* to accomplish the mission in a third of the time. The *Galileo* will have the engineering expertise to assist with almost any problems you may encounter."

There was a murmur of assent among the rest of the officers. Ael leaned over to her aide and said, "Never a dull moment. Are you sure you want to be my aide?"

Aulee looked like an animal caught in a bright light. She said slowly, quietly, "I don't know for sure, but I would like to try."

The *Explorer* began to rotate on its axis, appearing to turn away from the briefing room. It also began to move away from the briefing theater. Turning her stern to the room the three docked ships came fully into view. It continued to move toward the mouth of the cavern and toward the infinite void beyond.

"I do not want to delay you any further," the President said, "Your final mission briefing, and vessel orientation will start as soon as you are settled in your quarters. Is that correct Captain?"

Captain Beck watching his ship maneuvering out of the cavern, simply said, "Yes."

With a tap of her combadge the President said, "Captain, we are ready to depart. Good luck to you all." She and Admiral Na'mur disappeared from the room.

Captain Beck, tapped his combadge and said, "Randy, Time to go."

"About time, Captain," said the Sub-Captain, "we almost left you behind!"

As the transporter removed the last of the occupants from the briefing room, the lights began to dim and then they were extinguished automatically.

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Above the moon the President of the Federation Council and the Chief of Starfleet watched as the *USS Explorer* emerged from what appeared to be solid rock. The impulse engines glowed as they moved the large ship through the nothingness. The warp nacelles began to glow as the energy built up to its full potential.

"I hope we have done the right thing sending them out before the ship was ready," the President said in a whisper. It was the first time Admiral Na'mur had seen or heard any doubt from her.

"It was necessary," said Na'mur beside her. He tried not to echo her doubt.

She watched the Explorer and said quietly, "My hope for the Federation goes with that vessel. I don't think I will survive a vote of confidence any time soon, but our legacy is on its way to being fulfilled."

About one kilometer from the moon, the outer edges of the tunnel generator ring began to glow with the tremendous energy developed by the generator. The energy at each side began to expand around the oval, top and bottom, toward the middle of the ring. Meeting in the middle, it continued to build until it flashed into a momentary tunnel spreading out before and enclosing the vessel.

As their sight returned, they saw only empty space. Her hopes for a new era for the Federation and the *USS Explorer* were on their way to the Alpha Quadrant, Sector Grid 91. The stars began to rotate before her as the *USS Federation* turned on its axis for the return home.

"I hope I have done the right thing..."