

To Boldly Go: Incursion

The first mission of the starship *Trailblazer*

By Cleve Johnson

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Sources

Star Trek® Encyclopedia: A Reference Guide to the Future by Michael and Denise Okuda, 1999 edition

Star Trek® Star Charts by Geoffrey Mandel

Star Trek The Next Generation® Technical Manual by Rick Sternbach and Michael Okuda

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Prologue

Starbase 117. It was a large space station in orbit around a red dwarf star. It was the residence of hundreds of people—Humans, Vulcans, Bolians, Andorians, and several other races. Most were members of Starfleet, although some civilians lived and worked on the station.

Some of the Starfleet personnel worked busily at their duty stations while others slept or found time to relax, either alone or with friends, utilizing the various lounges, holodecks, or recreational facilities that the massive station had to offer. None were aware of the danger that would soon change the daily routine of all those who lived and worked on the base.

The alien ship stealthily moved toward the Federation facility. The hull of the vessel was constructed of a special material that prevented detection by the sensing devices of most worlds. It was a craft that had one purpose—surprise attack. And the race that had constructed this particular ship had that very purpose in mind.

When the explosions rocked the starbase, no one knew what was happening. There had been no warning. Several patrons of the popular *Quantum Flux* nightclub met death quickly as a beam of energy blasted through the observation windows that provided a clear view of open space. Now, the transparent aluminum windows and tritanium hull had been blown away, leaving it literally open to space. The emergency force fields activated quickly, but not quick enough to prevent half a dozen off-duty Starfleet officers and crewmen to be sucked into the cold, dark void of the universe.

The klaxons blared throughout the station as emergency repair crews scrambled to the damaged areas. Every security team, whether on duty or off let their training guide their actions. They rushed to their assigned posts to try to keep order if order was possible to keep during a surprise attack such as this. They started leading the inhabitants toward the interior sections and designated shelters of the station.

In the command center of the station, the crew tried to locate the ship or ships that were conducting the attack to no avail. Admiral Noland Z'tal hurried out of his office and immediately took personal charge of the control room. His starbase was under attack and he saw that as a personal attack upon himself. "Report status, Ensign Gates," the admiral said calmly.

The ensign at the defense station kept his eyes on the monitors as he spoke to his superior officer. "Shield generators four, seven, and eight have been severely damaged, Admiral," he said. "Repair teams have been dispatched."

"What about our attackers?" Z'tal asked. "Have you returned fire?"

"Nothing shows on sensors, Sir," Ensign Gates stated. "The automatic defense systems won't engage without sensor contact."

"Transfer to manual," Z'tal ordered. "Fire all weapons."

"Fire at *what*, Admiral?"

"Just fire in all directions," Z'tal said. "We might get lucky and hit whatever is out there." Z'tal knew that was a long shot, but it was the only chance they had against an attacker that could not be seen.

The aliens anticipated the tactic and warped away as multiple phaser beams and dozens of photon torpedoes shot in all directions from the starbase. But once the barrage ceased, the raiders came back and made a second assault upon the unprepared station.

This assault was worse than the first, critically damaging the main drydock facility and several exterior docking ports.

The invaders, having made their mark upon the Federation starbase, warped away, once again not being detected.

Admiral Z'tal realized that the attack was over and mentally reviewed the events that had just transpired. He looked around the command center and saw the looks of fear, shock, and panic on the faces of those who still manned their stations. "Commander Bennett, do we still have communications?" the admiral asked.

The duty officer quickly checked the panel that he was sitting near. "The communications array is not damaged, Sir."

"Send a priority one distress call," Z'tal said. "And get me Starfleet Command."



William J. Parker strode through the corridor of the fifteenth floor. As he approached the double doors, he noticed the sign that indicated that beyond the doors was the office of Starfleet Intelligence. Only four months had passed since his last promotion and assignment as the Deputy Chief of this department, but in that time, he had been able to reorganize and retrain most of the covert operatives under his command.

The doors parted, allowing the admiral to enter the office suite. He acknowledged the lieutenant that sat outside of Admiral Sanol's office. Parker pressed the com panel on the wall beside the door, which opened a few seconds later. He stepped inside and walked toward the desk of his CO. "Good morning, Admiral," he said as he stood at attention in front of his superior.

"Please sit down, Admiral Parker," the Chief of Starfleet Intelligence said in his normal emotionless tone.

Admiral Parker sat in the chair nearest him, noticing that the Chief of Starfleet Operations was already seated in the other chair. Parker smiled at Admiral Hathaway and offered his hand to the older officer. "Admiral Hathaway. How have you been?"

"Fine, Bill," Hathaway replied as he shook the younger man's hand. "You?"

"I've been keeping busy. Admiral Sanol is quite the taskmaster," Parker said, realizing that his attempt at humor was wasted on the Vulcan, but not on Admiral Hathaway. "I understand that Rob got married last year."

Hathaway smiled. "Yes, he did," he said. "Best thing that happened to him."

Sanol, who had been patiently waiting for his fellow admirals to dispense with what he considered to be needless small talk, tapped his desk. "Gentlemen. We need to address the matter at hand," he said. "Admiral Parker, did you receive the information on Starbase 117?"

"Yes Sir," Parker said. "I also have reviewed the attack on Krios and the Romulan incident as well."

"Good," Sanol stated. "Do you think that these incidents are related to each other?"

Parker took a deep breath. "Yes. And I believe that they are related to last year's attack on Harrell Shipyards," he said. "I'm also concerned that the Romulans and Klingons are blaming each other for the attacks that they have suffered."

"As am I, Admiral," Sanol stated. "But these attacks apparently have been conducted by someone with cloaking technology. Based on the history between Klingons and Romulans, it is logical for each government to blame the other."

Hathaway jumped into the conversation. "Our ambassadors to each of their governments are working to convince them that an outside power is responsible, but without any evidence to corroborate, neither will listen."

"We were all allies against the Dominion, but now we may be on the verge of war with each other if we don't find out who is responsible for these attacks," Parker said.

"Then it's imperative that we find the identity of the perpetrators of these attacks," said Admiral Hathaway.

"The question is how do we discover the needed evidence?" Sanol asked.

Parker sat straight in his seat. "I would like to assign a special investigator to the case," he said. "Someone who knows how to get to the truth."

"We would need someone that could work autonomously in the field," Sanol said. "And with full resources at his disposal.

"I agree," Hathaway echoed.

"Admiral Parker, I leave it to you to pick a worthy investigator," Sanol stated. "But I want you to be actively involved in this mission since the security of the Federation is of supreme importance."

"Yes Sir," Parker replied. "I already have the perfect person in mind for this assignment, but I will need to get clearance from Admiral Olanski and..." Parker paused and looked at Hathaway.

"Hathaway took the cue. "You probably will need a ship," he said.

Parker nodded. "One that's both fast and capable of holding her own in a battle if necessary."

"I believe that I have one that will fit your request," Hathaway said.

"Thank you, Admiral," Parker said. "Can you also arrange for a ship to take me to pick up the person that I want to conduct this mission?"

"I believe that can also be arranged," Hathaway replied. "What's your destination?"

"Beta Tongarii," Parker replied. "Rob's first officer is the person that I want for this mission."

Robert Hathaway had met Melanie Leeson on more than one occasion. He had been the person who had suggested that she be assigned as first officer of the starship that his nephew commanded. Hathaway knew Leeson's record well enough to realize that Parker had chosen wisely. "I can make sure you have transportation to get there and back," he said.

"You are personally going to retrieve the special investigator?" Admiral Sanol asked.

Parker was the type of person to not sit on the side while others did the work. He knew that he could not be the one to directly investigate the attacks, but he still wanted to do whatever he could do first hand. All Parker had to do was convince Sanol of the necessity that he goes to pick up Leeson. "Yes, Sir," he replied. "I think it would best to brief Commander Leeson in person on her assignment, so we don't reveal too much over subspace."

Sanol saw the logic in his deputy's position. "Very well, Admiral Parker."

Parker stood up and faced Sanol. "With your permission, Admiral, I need to get to work."

Sanol stood and offered the Vulcan salute to his assistant. "Success to you, Admiral."

Parker tried to return the salute but found it to be very difficult. "Thank you, Sir," he said, then turned to leave the room.



The alien vessel approached its mother ship. The huge alien ship, approximately twice the size of a *Galaxy*-class starship, severely dwarfed the smaller attack vehicle that had just returned from its mission of destruction. Doors on the underside of the ship opened, allowing the smaller vessel to enter and dock.

A tall, gray, scaly-skinned alien exited the attack ship and started toward the nearest door where another of his kind waited to greet him. The first alien stopped and saluted his superior. The ridge of hair on the center of the alien's head rustled to indicate his joy at the prospect of what his race was now on the verge of doing. He opened his mouth, revealing fangs dripping with saliva. "It has begun."

Chapter One: A Change of Seasons

The Federation starship *Providence* sped toward its destination at high warp. The stars streaked by as the small scout vessel approached the star known as Beta Tongarii, where it would rendezvous with the ship that would take the former first officer back to Earth.

Commander Melanie Leeson finished packing her clothes and personal belongings into the hexagonal storage bin. Only one uniform hung in her closet for her to wear the next day. She pulled a long wooden case out from under her bed and placed it on top. Leeson carefully opened the case and walked to the wall next to the door. She reached up and took her bat'leth from its hanging position and placed it in the case. After closing it, she placed the case next to the storage box.

Leeson looked around her quarters, realizing how bare they now appeared. She only had one more night aboard the ship that had been her home for less than two years. It did not seem like a long time, nor did it seem long enough.

The door chimed, interrupting Leeson's thoughts. "Come in," she said.

The two halves of the door slid apart and the ship's CMO entered the room. "I wanted to see how you're doing," Janice Stuart said. "Am I interrupting your packing?"

"Come in, Jan," Leeson said. "I just finished."

"Good," Jan said. "I thought that I should let you know that there's a reception in the main crew lounge at 1800. It's in your honor."

Leeson faked a smile. "Thanks, Jan. I'm not sure I feel like celebrating."

Jan put her hands on her friend's shoulders. "Blake went to a lot of trouble planning it," she said with a smile.

"If Blake planned it, I *definitely* don't want to go," Leeson said jokingly.

"Come on, Mel," Jan said. "Let's take a walk."

Leeson shook her head. "I need some time alone," she said. "I'll see you at the party."

Jan Stuart shot a look at her friend. "Promise?"

“Promise,” Leeson said.

After Jan left Leeson’s quarters, the former first officer walked to the window and watched the stars streak by.



Captain Rob Stuart looked at the chrono display above the main view screen. It read 1755:47. Realizing that it was time to go, he stood up from the command chair and walked down to the CONN station. Stuart placed a hand on the flight officer’s shoulder to get his attention. “I’m going to leave you in command for a couple hours, Lieutenant,” he stated. “Do you think you can handle that?”

Eric Kelly was a junior grade lieutenant, recently assigned as the senior flight officer of the *Providence* since Lieutenant Commander Blake Adams was being promoted to the first officer position. He was eager and willing to take on more responsibility. The young man realized that his captain was placing a lot of trust in him to place him in command, even if it was for only two hours. “Yes Sir,” Kelly replied. “I’ll try not to let you down, Captain.”

Stuart smiled at the young officer. “Don’t hesitate to interrupt me if you need to,” he said as he walked back up the steps toward the turbolift doors.



Rob Stuart had gone to his first officer’s quarters to escort her to the crew lounge on deck 4. Upon finding her quarters empty, the computer informed Stuart, at his request, that Melanie Leeson was in the forward torpedo room. He immediately took the quickest route to Leeson’s location and found her inspecting the torpedo control panels.

Leeson did not hear the door slide open, nor did she hear her captain enter the room.

“Don’t you have a party to go to?” Stuart asked.

Startled, Leeson spun around to face her CO. “I didn’t hear you come in, Captain,” she said, trying to mask her surprise at his presence.

“Taking one last look around before you leave?” Stuart asked.

Leeson rubbed her hand across the control panel. “I suppose I am,” she said. “I’ve spent the last hour touring the ship.”

“Fortunately, it’s a small ship,” Stuart replied. “I understand how you feel, Mel. I felt unsure about getting my own ship as well.”

“How did you get through it?” Leeson asked.

Stuart smiled. “I’m not sure I totally did,” he replied. “It’s a process. At least it is for me.”

“But even from the first day that I met you, you seemed so confident in your command ability,” Leeson stated.

“As a CO, that’s what you must portray, regardless of your inhibitions,” Stuart said.

Leeson nodded. “I hope I portray it as well as you, Captain.”

“I think you will,” Stuart replied. “You have a lot of strength and ability. I’m convinced that you will make a fine captain.”

“Thank you, Sir.”

Stuart turned his head toward the door. “Come on,” he said. “You have some people that want to honor you and say goodbye.”

Leeson walked past her former captain and exited the control room. Stuart followed, and the door slid shut behind the two officers.



James and Mary Goodman approached Leeson, who was talking with the ship's doctor, Janice Stuart. James, being one-quarter Betazoid, could sense Leeson's anxiety over leaving the *Providence* and her friends. *Friends*. They were more than that. During the last two and a half years the crew of *Providence* had become a family.

"Are we interrupting?" James asked as he and his wife approached Leeson and Stuart.

"Not at all," Jan replied with a smile. "I should track Rob down anyway," she added as she excused herself.

James smiled at Leeson. "So, how are you holding up?" he asked bluntly.

Mary, who had been holding her husband's hand, squeezed it to let him know that his tact needed improvement. She sometimes thought that James did not utilize his abilities as a trained counselor during social occasions. Of course, as a counselor, James Goodman always strove to utilize his abilities to their fullest—*especially* in social gatherings.

Leeson, remembering Captain Stuart's earlier advice, tried to portray herself as looking forward to her new assignment. "I'm doing fine, thanks," she replied. "I have to admit that I'm going to miss everyone."

"We'll miss you, too," Mary said. "I'm sure that you will do well, Captain Leeson."

Leeson smiled. "Thanks, Mary. But I'm still a commander," she said.

"Only for a few more hours," Mary replied.

The new first officer, who was trying to get everyone's attention, interrupted the conversation. Blake Adams stood in front of the large forward-facing windows. Everyone in the room grew silent to hear what Adams was about to say. He cleared his throat to quiet the last few conversations. Blake put on a serious face as he looked around the room. "I wanted to take this opportunity to say a few words about Melanie Leeson before she leaves us," he said. "But since I might tend to say something that would embarrass her and get me in trouble, Captain Stuart will not let me."

The room filled with laughter, but Blake raised his hands to calm the crowd. He focused his attention on Leeson, who still was standing next to the Goodmans. "I would like to say that Melanie Leeson has not only been an excellent first officer but a good friend." Blake lifted a glass filled with a dark liquid and saluted Leeson. "Captain Leeson, on behalf of the entire crew, I wish you success and good luck."

Everyone in the room started to applaud. Leeson felt undeserving to receive so much...recognition. She tried to be graceful as her she mouthed *thank you*, but Mel Leeson almost faltered as she heard several of the crew yelling for her to give a speech.

Rob and Jan Stuart, standing together near the front of the lounge, motioned for Leeson to come forward. They started to move toward her and Melanie Leeson knew that she had the choice of walking forward of her own accord or be dragged against her will. She decided to do the former.

Every officer and crewman continued to applaud as Leeson walked slowly toward the dais of the crew lounge. She noticed the stars through the forward windows and something inside of her soul began to stir. The feelings of trepidation began to dissipate,

and Melanie Leeson started to realize that she did have the strength and ability to command a starship of her own.

The crowd quieted as the former first officer reached the dais and turned to face them. Leeson looked around the room and rehearsed all the memories—good and bad—that she could recall of those that she had worked with for most of her tour as the first officer. Some, Leeson knew better than others. Some, like Jan Stuart, she knew very well. And there was Blake Adams, whom Leeson had once hated because of his incessant practical joking but had learned to become friends with. Actually, they were more than friends; however, each had decided to not allow their feelings for each other to blossom much beyond a close friendship.

Leeson looked at her captain—former captain, she reminded herself—and thought of the advice that he had given to her earlier. She knew that Stuart had confidence in her, and she realized that to doubt herself would be to doubt all that the captain had taught her. Leeson decided that she would live up to the person that Stuart believed her to be. She would live up to who she knew herself to be. “I want to say that I will miss serving on this ship,” she began. “More importantly, I will miss each of you that I have served with over the years.”

Janice Stuart smiled at her friend, hoping the gesture would give Melanie some strength. It did.

“I want to publicly thank Doctor Janice Stuart—my best friend,” Leeson continued. “She has been a confidant and a source of strength for many years.”

There was a round of applause for the doctor, who tried not to blush at the attention she was given.

Leeson waited for the applause to die down before continuing. “I also want to thank Captain Robert P. Stuart, from whom I have learned a great deal about command.” Leeson paused to allow the crew to applaud their CO as they had done for his wife. “Captain Stuart, you are one of the finest officers that I have served with during my career.”

Leeson looked at Blake Adams who stood only a few feet away with a huge grin on his face. “And I want to especially thank Commander Adams for a wonderful sendoff,” Leeson said.

The crew erupted in loud applause for Blake Adams. As the clapping continued, Leeson noticed a yeoman entering the crew lounge and walk toward the captain. The enlisted crewman whispered something to Stuart, who in turn spoke quietly to Jan before leaving the room.



Stuart entered the transporter room and nodded to the crewman that was on duty. “The admiral is ready to beam over, Sir,” the young woman at the console stated. “Thank you, crewman,” Stuart replied. “Energize.”

Within a few seconds, the transport cycle was complete, and Admiral William Parker stood on the once empty transporter pad. He stepped down to the main deck, smiling and extending his hand to Stuart. “Rob, it’s good to see you,” he said, shaking hands with Stuart.

“Good to see you, too, Bill,” Stuart replied. “How long has it been?”

Parker looked up at the ceiling as he tried to remember the last time that he and Stuart had seen each other. “I think it was at our fifteenth-class reunion,” he finally said.

“That long ago?” Stuart asked. “It seems like forever.”

“And it seems like a lifetime since our days at the Academy,” Parker added. “Sometimes I wish we were still cadets. Life was so much simpler.”

Stuart and Parker continued to reminisce as they left the transporter room.



Melanie Leeson mingled with several crewmen and junior officers. Everyone wanted to make his or her farewells and spend time with her before she left the *Providence*. Melanie saw Blake, Jan, and the captain across the room talking with an admiral. She knew that the senior officer must be her new CO. Leeson excused herself from the small crowd that had gathered around her and walked toward the senior officers.

Admiral Parker saw Leeson approaching and ended his conversation with Commander Adams and the doctor. “Excuse me, Commander. Doctor. I see Starfleet’s newest captain coming this way.”

“I’ll introduce you,” Rob Stuart said. He waited until Leeson reached his side of the room. “Commander Leeson, this is Admiral Bill Parker.”

Leeson reached out her hand to shake Parker’s. “A pleasure, Admiral,” she said. “I understand that you and Captain Stuart were at the Academy together.”

“That’s right, we were,” Parker replied. “We served on the same ship for a short time together as well.”

“Begging your pardon, Sir, but you must be one of the youngest admirals in the history of Starfleet,” Leeson stated.

Parker looked down as he smiled at Leeson’s remark. “Well, James Kirk was younger when he made admiral,” he said, looking up. “While we’re on the subject of promotions, I think this would be a good time to present you with your fourth pip.”

Parker pulled out a small box that he had been carrying and opened it. He removed the rank pin from inside and attached it to Leeson’s collar. “I hereby promote you to the rank of captain with all the responsibilities and privileges that come with it,” he said. “Congratulations, Captain.”

“Thank you, Sir,” Leeson replied.

Parker looked around the room, seeing the room full of people who had served with Melanie Leeson. He perceived the loyalty that this crew had pledged to Leeson and knew that he had chosen the right person for the job. “I hate to take you away from such a great party, but we have a three-week journey back to Mars.”

“Of course, Admiral,” Leeson said. “I’m packed, but I would like a few minutes to make my final goodbyes.”

“Thirty minutes be enough time?” Parker asked Leeson.

“I believe so, Admiral,” Leeson replied. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome,” Parker said. “We’ll have time on the return trip to get to know each other and discuss the mission.”

“I look forward to it, Admiral,” Leeson replied.

“I’ve instructed Mac to transport your belongings to the *Artemis*, Rob Stuart said.

“Thanks, Captain,” Leeson replied. “If you will all excuse me?”

“Certainly,” Stuart said.

The admiral turned toward the Stuarts. The three officers resumed their conversation as Captain Leeson motioned for Blake Adams to follow her into the corridor.

The doors shut behind Leeson and Adams. The new captain turned to face Blake and she stared intently into his eyes. “There’s so much that I want to tell you, but time is getting short,” Leeson said.

Blake smiled. “Maybe it should remain unsaid,” he replied. “I think we each know how the other feels.”

Leeson smiled back at the man that was a friend, and more than a friend. “I wish...”

Blake cut Melanie’s sentence off with a passionate kiss.



The door slid open and Captain Melanie Leeson entered the transporter room. Robert and Janice Stuart waited for Leeson’s arrival. She stopped in front of Rob Stuart and stood at attention. She reached out her hand and shook his. “It’s been a pleasure, Captain,” Leeson said. “I have learned a great deal from you and hope to make you proud.”

Stuart smiled at his former first officer. “I’m already proud of you, Captain,” he replied. “This is your season. It’s your time.”

Leeson smiled and turned to face Jan Stuart. “I’m going to miss you, Jan,” Melanie said.

“I’ll miss you, too,” Jan replied as the two women hugged each other. “We can send subspace letters between each other.”

“I’ll write as soon as I can,” Leeson replied.

“Take care of yourself, Mel,” Jan said with one final hug.

“You too,” Leeson replied. The new captain stepped up on the transport platform and turned around to face Rob Stuart. “Permission to disembark, Captain.”

“Granted,” Rob said. “Energize.”

As the energy beam coalesced around her, Melanie Leeson felt that a part of her life was over. She also knew that new challenges and adventures lay ahead. A new chapter had begun for *Captain* Melanie Leeson.

Chapter Two: Preparations

The U.S.S. *Artemis* sped toward Sector 001. The starship’s destination was the fourth planet of the Sol system—location of the Utopia Planitia orbital shipyards. It was also the location of one of Starfleet’s newest starships and, according to the designers, the fastest vessel ever constructed by Starfleet.

Melanie Leeson had spent the past several days studying schematics of her new ship—the U.S.S. *Trailblazer*. The projected speed of the starship was impressive, but the new captain’s focus was on the defensive and offensive capabilities of the ship. Leeson knew that her job would be to investigate the mysterious attacks against Federation, Klingon, and Romulan targets, but she also knew that her ship and crew would be called upon for potential military action once the perpetrators were discovered. And Leeson wanted to make sure her ship had the fortitude to stand up against any foe.

The door to the conference room slid open and Admiral Parker entered. Leeson started to get out of her chair, but Parker motioned for her to be at ease. “How’s it going, Captain?” Parker asked as he sat in a chair across the table from Leeson.

“Fine, Admiral,” Leeson replied. “I was looking at the armaments of the *Trailblazer*.”

“I hope they are satisfactory,” Parker said.

“They seem state of the art, but I wish the ship came with a holographic cloaking device,” Leeson replied.

Parker shrugged his shoulders. “Sorry, but our latest treaty with the Romulans only makes allowances for survey vessels to have a holocloak,” he said. “And we can’t afford to alienate *them* right now.”

“At least the ship will be equipped with ablative armor,” Leeson said. “I just want to be ready for anything.”

Parker nodded in agreement. “I understand completely,” he stated. “Here,” the admiral said as he handed a PADD to Leeson. “I finally received an approved list of your senior officers.”

Melanie Leeson took the PADD from Parker and activated it. She scanned the list, skimming the personal details of each person. “Vic Jacobs is my security chief?” Leeson exclaimed.

“You know him?” Parker asked.

Leeson’s face glowed with excitement. “He’s an old family friend,” she said. “My dad served with him on the *Repulse* years ago. Dad took Vic under his wing and taught him how to be a top security officer.”

Parker noticed a look of sadness on Leeson’s face. He was aware that her father had been court-martialed years before for dereliction of duty, leading to a major diplomatic incident with the Tholians. That was the *official* story anyway. Chief Petty Officer Gregory Leeson was given a dishonorable discharge and disappeared without a trace—leaving family and friends behind. A few weeks after his disappearance, it was discovered that he was a passenger on a Yridian freighter that had the misfortune of meeting up with a band of Orion marauders. The freighter, along with all aboard, had been destroyed.

The admiral did not want to dredge up painful memories, so he decided not to say anything to Leeson about her father. “Anyone else on the list you know?” Parker asked.

Leeson continued to scroll down the display. She recognized the name of the tactical officer—an Andorian. “Commander Shrev served with Captain Stuart on the *Republic*,” she said. “I’ve never met him, but I understand that he’s a good strategist.”

Parker smiled. “That’s an understatement,” he said. “Shrev’s tactical and strategic capabilities rival that of the Zakdorn.”

“He’s that good?” Leeson asked.

“For fun, he plays Stratagema,” Parker replied. “Last year he even beat the reigning Zakdorn champion after a record-length match that lasted forty-seven minutes.”

Leeson was very impressed. “He beat Sirna Kolrami?”

“The very same.”

Leeson shook her head in disbelief and continued looking at the list. After a few moments, she looked up at Parker. “I don’t see a first officer listed, Admiral.”

“I noticed that, too,” the admiral said. “Admiral Olanski is having trouble finding an available candidate that is specially qualified for the position.”

“What about Shrev?” Leeson asked. “He’s been an XO before.”

Parker shook his head. “No, I don’t think your senior officers should double up on their duties,” he said. “You will need Commander Shrev at tactical. And you will need someone that can be solely devoted to the role of a *number one* on this particular mission.”

“Understood, Admiral,” Leeson replied. “I wish I could pick my executive officer.”

“If the mission wasn’t so critical and time not a crucial factor, you would have had that opportunity,” Parker stated. “I’m sure Olanski will find the right person by the time we reach Mars.”



Commander Paul Edwards had spent more than a year at Utopia Planitia overseeing the refit of the starship *Republic*. The old *Ambassador*-class ship would have probably been decommissioned if Starfleet had not been so badly decimated by both the Dominion War and the Vendoth invasion of 2376. Now, after thirteen months, the starship neared completion and Paul Edwards’ promotion would finally come to fruition. Or so he thought.

As Edwards sat behind the desk in the *Republic*’s ready room, the computer announced an incoming message from Starfleet Command. “Open channel,” he said.

The United Federation of Planets emblem on the computer monitor was replaced by the image of Admiral Patricia Olanski, Chief of Starfleet Personnel. Edwards had been waiting to hear from the admiral, expecting the news that his promotion to captain and assignment as CO of the *Republic* had been finalized. “Admiral Olanski,” Paul said as he tried to act surprised.

Olanski typically had an upbeat personality, but on this occasion, she portrayed an uneasy demeanor. “*Is this a bad time, Commander?*” she asked.

“Not at all,” Edwards replied. “What can I do for you, Sir?”

“*I’m not sure you will like what I have to say,*” the admiral stated. “*I have new orders for you.*”

“New orders?” Edwards said. He wondered why the admiral made the comment about *not liking what she had to say*.

Olanski continued. “*You’re not going to get the Republic,*” she said. “*You’re being assigned to the U.S.S. Trailblazer....*”

Edwards, thinking he would be the CO of the newly commissioned starship, felt refreshed by the news. He felt a surge of excitement building within. He had waited a long time to add another pip to his collar, especially since his promotion had been delayed due to what his former CO and the ship’s counselor termed obsessive behavior concerning the marriage of his ex-wife to another man—Robert Stuart. But Paul’s elation was shot down as Admiral Olanski continued her sentence.

“*...As executive officer.*”

Edwards did not know if the computer had a glitch, or if his ears failed to register what the admiral had stated. “Did you say I would transfer to the *Trailblazer* as...executive officer?”

The image of Olanski nodded affirmatively. *“That’s right,”* she said. *“I’m sorry, but your promotion has been put on hold for a while.”*

“Excuse me, Admiral, but can you define what you mean by...*a while?*” Edwards asked, beginning to feel frustrated.

Olanski sighed. *“I’m sorry, Commander Edwards, but I can’t be sure of the timetable,”* she said. *“The only thing I can say is you’re needed as the first officer for a mission of supreme importance. You will be briefed by your new commanding officer when she arrives next week.”*

“And what about the *Republic*, Admiral?” Edwards asked, trying unsuccessfully to hide his irritation. “Will it still be here for me after this mission?”

Patricia Olanski felt sorry for Edwards. He had worked hard to rise through the ranks. He had worked just as hard, with the help of counselors at Utopia Planitia, to get over his former wife’s marriage to another man. She wanted to assure Edwards that his day would come, but to make a promise to secure a particular ship for him to command was not in her authority. *“I can’t answer that, Commander, but I promise you that I will do whatever I can to try to get you a command once this mission is complete.”*

Edwards resigned himself to the situation and nodded to the admiral’s image on the monitor. “Thank you for that, anyway, Admiral,” he replied. “I guess I better start packing.”

Olanski forced a smile to try to reassure Edwards. *“Good luck, Commander Edwards,”* she said. *“Starfleet out.”*

The monitor went blank for a moment before the UFP emblem once again appeared on the screen. And Paul Edwards shook his head in disappointment.



Commander Shrev got off the medical exam table. “I trust you find my health satisfactory, Doctor,” he said as he started to put on his tunic.

“You’re as close to perfect as any patient that I’ve seen in a long time,” Doctor Michael Keegan replied. “I do have a question of a...personal nature.”

The Andorian’s left eyebrow went up. Shrev had seen many Vulcans do the same thing and he learned to imitate the characteristic almost flawlessly. “A personal nature?” he said. “You just completed a complete medical examination, Doctor. How much more personal can you be?”

Keegan found the second officer’s remark to be humorous and could not help but smile. Andorians were known for their tendencies toward violence, but humor was not something most people noticed about Shrev’s race. “I’ve been acquainted with several Andorians during my career,” the doctor said. “I’ve noticed that some have two names—a surname and a family name. Others, like you, only have one. Why is that?”

Shrev thought about the question posed to him. He wanted to be truthful with Keegan about Andorian cultural practices, but not too revealing about his own circumstances. “Our naming practices are based on clan preference,” Shrev stated. “In my case, my family name is unpronounceable by most non-Andorians.” It was a true statement that Shrev had made, but he did not reveal the real reason behind dropping the family name. The truth of the matter was Shrev’s father, Thelas, had disgraced his clan in an act of betrayal against Andor. And because of that betrayal, Thelas was sentenced to death by his government.

“Thank you for clarifying that, Commander,” the doctor said. “I knew there had to be a reason.”

Shrev, glad that Doctor Keegan accepted his explanation, breathed a sigh of relief. After all, an Andorian had to carry his familial burdens alone. “I’m glad I could satisfy your curiosity, Doctor,” he said as he walked toward the exit.

Keegan watched as Commander Shrev left sickbay. The ship’s CMO walked to his office and pulled up the files on the next member of the crew scheduled to get his physical.



The bridge was a flurry of activity. Lieutenant Heron Jaxx had re-configured the OPS station for the fourth time, still not satisfied with the amount of control that would provide the Bolian to do his job with optimum efficiency.

The turbolift doors opened and two officers, each with the rank of lieutenant commander, walked onto the bridge. The man, showing his female companion the various stations, approached the OPS station. “How’s it going, Lieutenant?” he asked the young Bolian.

“Fine, Commander,” Jaxx replied. “Well, almost fine,” he added.

The chief of security smiled. “You’re too much of a perfectionist, Lieutenant,” he said. “I want to introduce you to Lieutenant Commander Nora Jaeger. She’s heading up our science department.”

Jaxx reached out his hand toward the woman. “A pleasure to meet you, Commander,” he said. “I’m Herron Jaxx. Ops manager.”

Jaeger, surprised that a Bolian would use the human custom of a handshake, reached out her hand to grasp his. “Good to meet you, Lieutenant Jaxx,” she replied. “I understand that my bridge station is next to yours.”

“Right here,” Jaxx said pointing to the console just forward of his. “I expect that we will be working together quite often.”

Jaeger did not know if Jaxx was just being friendly, or if he was coming on to her. Not that she was prejudiced against relationships between different species, but Nora Jaeger could tell that Lieutenant Jaxx was several years younger. “You’re probably right about that,” she said, trying not to send any mixed messages to the young officer. “Commander Jacobs told me that you served on the *Hood*.”

“That’s right,” Jaxx stated. “You’re familiar with the *Hood*?”

“My younger brother is part of the medical staff,” Jaeger said. “Do you know him?”

“Karl is your brother?” Jaxx asked, surprised and excited at the same time.

Jaeger nodded.

“Karl and I are good friends,” Jaxx said. “It’s too bad that you missed him. The *Hood* just left the system three days ago.”

“I talked to him over subspace last week,” she said. “Both of us serving in Starfleet has kept us apart for more than two years, but we send communiqués back and forth fairly frequently.”

Lieutenant Commander Jacobs, who had remained quiet in the background, stepped forward. “I hate to break this up...,” he said. “...but there is still more to see of the ship.”

Nora smiled at Heron, tilting her head to one side. "It was nice to meet you, Mister Jaxx," she said. "I'll see you later."

Jacobs led the science officer toward the door that led to the rest of "A" Deck, pointing out the entrances to the conference room and captain's ready room. Lieutenant Jaxx returned to his console to try one more time to get an acceptable configuration.



Lieutenant Commander Carmen Petroni strode down the corridor toward the nearest turbolift. She was in a hurry and started to rush into the lift as soon as the doors opened. Because of her haste, she almost bumped into the man who was trying to exit the lift. "Sorry, Lieutenant," Carmen said apologetically. "I guess I shouldn't be in such a hurry," she added.

The young officer smiled at Petroni as he stretched his hand out to shake hers. "I'm Ezred Eedo, ship's counselor," the man said.

Carmen shook his hand and returned his smile. She noticed that the officer was a Trill. She also noticed the sparkle in his eyes. "Carmen Petroni," she said. "Chief engineer."

"Glad to meet you, Commander," Eedo said. "You seem like you're in a hurry now, but would you be willing to take me on a tour of the ship later?" He smiled again at the engineer. "I know we just met, but as chief engineer, you should be the one person who could show me all the points of interest on board."

Carmen thought the young man was a little forward, but he was also very cute. She wondered if he was a joined Trill. Carmen had considered herself open to the different cultural nuances and physiological differences of the many species that she had encountered, but the thought of having a giant slug inside a person's abdominal cavity was somewhat repulsive. The thought that Ezred might be "host" to a symbiont almost made her ill, especially considering how handsome he looked. She quickly pushed that thought from her mind. "I know every millimeter on this ship," she stated. "Okay, I'll give you the grand tour. Will you be available at 1500?"

"I'll make myself available," the counselor replied, still smiling.

Carmen returned his smile. "Meet me in the officer's lounge on deck one," she said.

"I'll be there, Commander," Eedo said.

Carmen smiled as the counselor exited the turbolift. She watched him as he walked through the corridor until the turbolift doors closed. She sighed as the memory of where she was headed brought her back to reality. "Main engineering," she told the computer.



Ezred found his office on deck four and decided to get a head start on his job as ship's counselor. Officially, he was not on duty until the next morning, but sitting in his quarters was creating boredom for the Trill. "Let's see what we have here," he said out loud, although he was the only person in the room.

"Please restate," the computer replied.

"What is my agenda for this week?" Ezred asked the computer as he sat down behind his desk, turning the monitor so that he could see the screen.

"Audio or visual display?" the computer inquired.

“Visual at my desk terminal,” the counselor replied. The screen came to life with a schedule listing. The crew had not scheduled many appointments...yet. One person was listed for the next morning—Commander Paul Edwards. “Computer, what is Commander Edwards’ position?”

“Commander Edwards has been assigned as the first officer of U.S.S. Trailblazer, NCC-89721, effective stardate...”

“Thank you,” Eedo interrupted. “When is the captain due to arrive?”

“Captain Leeson is scheduled to arrive on stardate 55223.6, 1350 hours.”

“Four days,” Ezred muttered to himself.

“Three days, twenty-three hours, forty-sev...”

“Stop,” Ezred ordered the computer. He began to get frustrated with the “brain” of the ship. “Computer, make a notation that I tend to talk to myself from time to time and I don’t require a reply unless I specifically ask for one. Is that clear?”

There was a brief pause. *“Notation made and acknowledged,”* the computer stated in a tone that the counselor thought sounded a bit curt. Must have been his imagination.

“Thank you,” the counselor said. “Set up a tentative schedule for each member of the crew to meet with me for an informal introduction beginning tomorrow at...when is Commander Edwards scheduled?”

“Commander Edwards is scheduled to meet with you at 0800 hours tomorrow.”

“Make appointments each half-hour beginning at 0900 with the last appointment at 1630,” Eedo said. “And I will take a lunch break at 1100 hours.” He looked at the chronometer display on the wall. Seeing that it was almost 1500, he smiled, turned the monitor off, and walked toward the exit. He didn’t want to be late for his tour of the ship.



“I don’t know if I’ll have time, Mom,” Melanie Leeson said.

The image of the older woman on the computer monitor tried to look stern, but her smile was still in place. *“Surely you can take a few hours to be with your family, Mel,”* Leeson’s mother said. *“It is your birthday, after all.”*

Leeson knew that when her mother’s mind was set, there was no arguing. “I’ll see what I can do, Mom,” Leeson said. “But don’t hold me to any promises. I’m on a tight schedule.”

“It won’t be anything fancy. Your brother and sisters have already said they will be here.”

Leeson resigned herself to her mother’s wishes. “Okay, Mom. I’ll be there, but don’t plan on me spending the night.”

“Deal,” the older Leeson said as her face lit up. *“I’ll see you in a few days.”*

“See you then, Mom,” Melanie said. “Love you.”

The image of Leeson’s mother faded, and the monitor went dark just as the door chime sounded. Leeson looked toward the door. “Come in.”

The door slid open and Admiral Parker entered Leeson’s quarters. “Pardon the intrusion, Captain,” he said. “I have some news for you.”

Leeson stood up and approached her superior. “No intrusion, Admiral,” she said. “Please come in.”

Parker handed a PADD to Leeson. “I just received this from Admiral Olanski,” he said. “She found you a first officer.”

Leeson activated the PADD and had to sit down as soon as she saw the name that was listed. “God, why does it have to be him,” she exclaimed.

Parker became concerned. “What is it, Captain? What’s wrong?”

Melanie Leeson looked up to the admiral, the color draining from her face. She shook her head in disbelief. “I think you should sit down, Admiral,” she said. “I have some things to tell you about my first officer.”

Chapter Three: Conscience and Conflicts

Paul Edwards exited the turbolift and walked through the corridors of Deck Four. He found the door identity sign that indicated the counselor’s office. Taking a deep breath, Edwards reached toward the control panel on the wall and pressed the touchpad to announce his arrival.

The door opened and the voice of Counselor Eedo invited the first officer to enter. Edwards immediately saw the Trill rise from behind his desk.

“Please come in, Commander Edwards,” Eedo said warmly as he stepped from behind his desk and offered his hand to Edwards. “I’m Ezred Eedo.”

Paul shook hands with the counselor. “Commander Edwards,” he said, deliberately using his rank. Edwards had held an isolinear chip in his left hand. He handed it to Lieutenant Eedo. “Here you go, Counselor. Everything you need to know about my case should be on this.”

Eedo took the chip from Edwards and set it on his desk. He realized that the first officer was going to be resistant, making Eedo’s job harder than it needed to be. “Your file only gives so much information, Commander,” he stated. “I need to get to know you for myself.”

“You may not like what you see,” Edwards stated coldly. “I’ll be honest with you, Lieutenant. The only reason I’m here is because I have been *ordered* to see a counselor weekly.” Edwards was agitated with the whole idea of these continued counseling sessions. He had spent a full year with the Utopia Planitia counselors dealing with his “obsession” over his ex-wife’s marriage to someone else. He felt that these sessions should be over and done with. “And I want you to remember that I’m your superior officer.”

Ezred nodded. “I’ll remember that, Sir,” he said. “You’re the first officer of this ship and my superior. I intend to treat you as such, but you need to understand that in this office *I* am the ship’s counselor. And you are *my* client.”

Paul Edwards started to protest, but he knew Starfleet regulations. And something inside his soul told him that the counselor was right. Paul respected the counselor for standing up to him. “You’re...right,” he said. “I apologize for my attitude toward you. I don’t mean to take my frustrations out on you.”

Ezred smiled. “That’s quite all right, Commander,” the counselor replied. “In this job, I know to not take anything personally.” The counselor pointed to a chair. “Let’s sit down and start from the beginning.”

The first officer relaxed a little as he sat down and gave a brief account of his desire to get back with his ex-wife, but her marriage to someone else prevented him from

it. He had made a great deal of progress dealing with his obsession over Janice Stuart during the past year. He started to feel happy for the woman that he had once been married to, knowing that she had found happiness. Now, Paul Edwards had another reason for needing counseling. He was upset about being blocked a second time for promotion...and command of a starship.

“You’ve worked hard to rise through the ranks, haven’t you,” the counselor stated after listening to Edwards tell his frustration over being assigned to the *Trailblazer* as executive officer.

“That’s right,” Edwards said. “I can understand why Starfleet felt it necessary to delay giving me a command a year ago, but with the progress that I’ve made during my counseling sessions...”

Eedo understood what the first officer was going through. After five lives, the symbiont portion of the Trill had been severely disappointed more times than it could remember. He still had to be objective. “How does that make you feel?” he asked.

Edwards did not have to think about the question very long. “Cheated,” he said abruptly. “I worked hard to get where I am. I deserve to have my own command.”

“Knowing how you feel, how do you think that will influence your relationship with the captain?” Eedo asked.

Edwards was stunned by the question. He did not think it would influence him at all, but the question made him realize that some feelings of resentment toward his new CO had hovered near the surface of his emotional awareness. And he did not yet know who his CO would be. “I would like to think it won’t be an issue,” he said. “But that would probably be a mistake to think that.”

“Understanding *that* will help you be aware of how your feelings influence your perceptions of other people as you relate to them,” Ezred said. “I’m sure that you will want to have the best relationship that you can have with Captain Leeson,” he added.

“Captain *Melanie* Leeson?” Paul Edwards said. In all the changes of the past few days, the first officer neglected to find out who his new CO would be.

Ezred knew from the first officer’s response that the captain and first officer were already acquainted. And the relationship, as it moved forward, would be an awkward one.



“I hope you found everything satisfactory, Captain,” the chief engineer said to the visiting officer.

Captain Johnson of Starfleet Engineering pulled out a white cloth and rubbed it across the main console. He inspected the cloth for any dust that might have been wiped off the console. Nothing. The senior engineer smiled. “Good job keeping my ship clean,” he said.

Carmen Petroni realized that Captain Johnson was the chief designer for the Pioneer-class, naturally thinking of the *Trailblazer* as *his* ship. She tried not to be offended, although it was common knowledge that the chief engineer of any starship was the rightful master of it. “No offense, Captain Johnson, but why did Starfleet Command order a refit for a ship that has never been in active service?” she asked.

Johnson had wondered that as well. The Chief of Starfleet Operations himself placed a request with Engineering Command to add phaser pulse cannons and ablative armor to the *Trailblazer*. This was not to the liking of Johnson, who had designed the starship. He designed this class to be a ship of peace, not war. The original specs called

for limited defensive weapons, but Starfleet had decided otherwise. “Starfleet has its reasons,” he stated. “If it makes you feel any better, I opposed the weapons upgrades.”

“Why?” Carmen asked, although she agreed with Johnson.

“Because this ship was intended to be *Voyager*’s escort back home...not a warhorse,” the engineer said. “But if Starfleet Command says to upgrade, we upgrade.”

Lieutenant Commander Petroni could not argue that point. She accepted what Captain Johnson said. “I appreciate your position on this, Captain,” she said. “But I must say that the increased firepower might be a bit much for a survey mission.”

Johnson did not immediately reply, but Petroni noticed the look on his face. She could see that the senior designer of this class of starship knew more than he would admit to. The representative from Starfleet Engineering looked over the master console, then back to Petroni. “Are you sure that you’re going on a survey mission?” he asked.

The statement piqued Petroni’s curiosity.

Captain Johnson smiled. “Well I have to tell you that I think this ship is the best possible hands with you as chief engineer,” he said, changing the subject. “I want you to take good care of her, Lieutenant Commander.”

Petroni decided to not press the issue, but she wondered what one of Starfleet’s senior engineers knew about the *Trailblazer*’s mission. “Thank you, Sir,” she replied. “I plan to.”

Johnson shook Petroni’s hand and left the engine room.



Two days passed. The members of the crew, all except for the ship’s captain, had arrived and busied themselves with pre-launch preparations, learning the layout of the ship, and settling into their quarters. Facilities for families were available, but none of the crew was allowed to have civilian family members with them on this ship—a concern noted by many among the crew.

Commander Paul Edwards and Lieutenant Commander Victor Jacobs walked through the curved corridor. Neither said anything to the other until they reached the port airlock. Jacobs looked at the first officer, deciding to break the silence. “I think you’ll like our captain,” he said. “I’ve known her since she was just a teenager.”

Edwards remained silent for a moment. “I know the captain,” he finally replied. “We’ve been acquainted for several years through my...a mutual friend.”

Jacobs picked up on what Edwards’ said...or, in this case, what he didn’t say. But the security chief did not pursue the matter. “It’s good that you know her,” he said. “That should make the transition time shorter than normal.”

Edwards, for the first time in his career as a Starfleet officer, felt awkward. He stood motionless and stared at the airlock door that separated the ship from the drydock gangway. He straightened his uniform and stood silently at attention waiting for the door to open.



Melanie Leeson stood in front of the large forward windows of the *Artemis*’ mess hall. She looked out, watching the drydock grow larger in the window. The ship, surrounded by the metal framework was more beautiful than she imagined from the diagrams and specifications. The ship was sleek and smooth. From the looks of it, the starship *Trailblazer* truly would break all known speed records.



Admiral Parker quietly walked toward Leeson, stopping just behind her. “Beautiful ship,” he said.

Leeson smiled. “Yes, she is, Sir.” She turned and faced Parker. “I’m ready,” she said. And the two officers started toward the door.



Captain Melanie Leeson, accompanied by Admiral Parker entered the corridor. She smiled at the security chief, and then gave a warm, yet uncomfortable glance toward the first officer. “Permission to come aboard?” she said.

Edwards nodded. He tried to speak, but a lump had formed in his throat. Finally, he managed to clear the tension-induced obstruction in his throat. “Welcome aboard, Captain. Admiral.”

Leeson shook Edwards’ hand. “Thank you, Paul,” she said. “How are you?”

“Fine,” he lied. “And you?” What Edwards *really* wanted to know was information about Janice, but he left that unspoken.

“I’ve been well,” Leeson replied. She moved closer to Edwards and spoke in a low tone of voice. “Can we meet after I settle in?” she said. “I think we need to talk about some things.”

“Of course, Captain,” was Edwards’ reply. He quickly changed subjects. “I have taken the liberty of coordinating with the *Artemis*’ XO to have your luggage brought over.”

“Thanks, Paul.” The new captain paused and looked over her shoulder. “Admiral Parker, this is Paul Edwards,” she said, introducing the senior officer.

“A pleasure, Commander,” Parker said as he shook Edwards’ hand.

“Likewise, Admiral.”

“And this must be my security chief,” she said as she hugged Lieutenant Commander Jacobs. “How’ve you been Uncle Vic?”

Jacobs returned his captain’s embrace warmly, although he felt uncomfortable doing that in front of an admiral. “It’s good to see you, Melanie,” he said.

Parker reached out his hand to Jacobs. “Don’t worry Mister Jacobs,” he said smiling as he shook hands with the security officer. “I’ll refrain from hugging you.”

Jacobs’ face turned slightly red. “I don’t usually make a habit of hugging my commanding officer, Sir.”

“No need to explain,” Parker said. “Captain Leeson has told me that you are practically a part of the family.”

“Now that we’re here, Admiral, I suppose I better get settled and plan for our meeting with the senior staff,” Leeson said.

“Sounds good,” Parker said. “You’re getting down to work before the airlock has even had time to repressurize.”

Leeson smiled at the admiral.

“I have arranged quarters for you, Admiral,” Paul stated.

Parker raised his hand to cut off the first officer. “Thank you, Commander, but I won’t be staying on the ship,” he said. “I just need an office to use for a few hours.”

“Feel free to use the ready room,” Leeson said. “I won’t be ready to move into it just yet.”

“Thank you, Captain,” the admiral replied. Turning his attention to the first officer, “Lead the way, Commander Edwards.”

The four officers began their trek to the nearest turbolift, then...the bridge.



The senior staff gathered in the main conference room on deck one. Each had taken his or her seat and conversed quietly among themselves while waiting for Captain Leeson and Admiral Parker to arrive. The wait was not a long one.

The *Trailblazer*'s new CO entered the room, followed by the admiral. They walked up to the conference table, but neither sat down immediately. Leeson looked around the room and was greeted by friendly faces, except for the first officer's. His face remained neutral. “Good afternoon ladies and gentlemen,” she said. “As per Starfleet orders, I hereby take command of U.S.S. *Trailblazer*, NCC-89721. Computer, acknowledge command orders, authorization...Leeson Beta Three Nine Gregory One.”

“*United Federation of Planets starship U.S.S. Trailblazer, NCC-89721 is now under the command of Captain Melanie Leeson,*” the computer replied.

“Now that the preliminaries are out of the way, I want to say that I'm looking forward to working with all of you,” Leeson said. “There will be time for us to get to know each other later, but now, I want to turn this briefing over to Admiral Parker.” With that, Captain Leeson sat at the head of the table.

“Thank you, Captain,” Parker said as he stepped closer to the conference table. “For those of you who don't know, I'm with Starfleet Intelligence,” he began. “Last year, Harrell Shipyards was attacked by an unknown enemy. Since that time, there have been additional attacks upon Federation, Klingon, and Romulan targets.”

“Excuse me, Admiral Parker...” Shrev interrupted.

“Commander Shrev,” Parker said in acknowledgment.

“Are these attacks related to one another?” the Andorian tactical officer asked.

Parker's expression seemed solemn, yet a look of determination was etched on his face. “We believe so,” he said. “The attacks seem to be similar in the strategy of hitting quick and hard.”

“For what purpose, Admiral?” Vic Jacobs asked.

“That's for all of you to find out,” Parker replied. “The sole mission of this ship and crew is to investigate these attacks and find out who's behind them. Once you find out who, you report to me. Then we do what we can to stop them.”

“What information do we have from the sensor logs at Harrell Shipyards, Sir?” Edwards asked the admiral.

“Sensor logs show nothing until the weapons fire started,” Parker said.

Captain Leeson rose from her chair and stood beside Admiral Parker. “The attackers have some type of cloaking technology that has, so far, rendered our ability to track the aliens useless,” she said. “And that means the Klingons and Romulans are accusing each other of the attacks since they are the only two superpowers in this region of the galaxy with cloaking technology.”

“And what if it turns out to be one of *them*?” the science officer asked. “What then?”

Leeson turned toward Parker, noticing that his jaw stiffened. “Then we deal with that situation if that's what your investigation uncovers,” he said. “Captain, is there anything you would like to add?”

Leeson looked around the room before making eye contact with Lieutenant Commander Jacobs. “Vic, since you are the security chief, you will be working closely with me on the investigation,” she said. Leeson turned to face Commander Shrev who sat directly across the table from Jacobs. “Commander Shrev, you will also be working on the investigation with me. The three of us will meet tomorrow at 1030 hours to review all information on the previous attacks.”

“Mister Edwards,” Admiral Parker interjected. “I need to add that Starfleet’s standard policy concerning away missions do not apply to this ship. Captain Leeson has my blessing to lead all away teams as she deems necessary.”

Edwards nodded. “Understood, Sir,” he said. The first officer, not exactly thrilled with the admiral’s proclamation, turned his attention to Leeson. “When do we leave, Captain?” he asked.

“The dockmaster has scheduled our departure for 1300 tomorrow,” Leeson replied. She looked at the chief engineer. “Lieutenant Commander Petroni.”

“Yes, Captain?”

“Begin warp core startup procedure at 0900 tomorrow,” Leeson said.

“Yes Sir,” Petroni replied.

Leeson looked back to the admiral, giving him the cue to make his final comments.

Parker cleared his throat. “I want you all to understand that what has been said stays in this room,” he said. “You’re working for Starfleet Intelligence now...at least until this mystery is solved. Any questions?”

The room was silent.

“Very well,” Parker said. “Godspeed on your journey.” The admiral looked to Leeson as the officers stood and began to exit the room. “I need to get back to Earth, Captain,” he said. “Is there anything else that you need before I head out?”

“I don’t think so, Sir,” Leeson replied. “I have some personal business on Earth before we launch. Can I give you a lift?”

“I’d appreciate that, Captain,” Parker said.

“I need to take care of some details with Commander Edwards,” Leeson said. “I should be ready to take off in thirty minutes.”

“I’ll meet you in the shuttle bay then,” the admiral stated. He turned and started toward the exit.

“Paul?” Leeson said to the first officer before he exited the conference room.

“Captain?”

She waited until everyone else had left the room before addressing the first officer. “I just wanted to let you know that I’m sorry about the situation that we’re in.”

Paul’s face began to turn flush as he tried to maintain control over his feelings. “And what situation is *that*, Captain?”

Leeson sensed Edwards’ awkwardness. Or was it hers? “Well, if I were in your place, I would be pretty angry about someone with less time in Starfleet and less time-in-grade being promoted over me,” she said directly. “That alone might not be enough to create a conflict, but under the circumstances...well, to put it as delicately as I can...my friendship with Jan...”

Paul put up his hand to wave Leeson off. “That shouldn’t have a thing to do with it,” Edwards said.

“Maybe it shouldn’t,” Leeson replied. “But it does.” She waited for Paul’s reaction, but when he did not respond, Leeson told how she felt from her perspective. “I can understand you feeling awkward about all this. *I feel awkward about it.*”

Edwards looked Leeson directly in the eye. “I guess we’ll just have to get used to it,” he said. “Was there anything else, Captain?”

“No one is with us, Paul,” Leeson said. “You can drop the ranks now.”

Paul forced himself to relax. “Sorry, Melanie,” he said. “I’ve been a little angry since my promotion was put on hold. I was supposed to get command of the *Republic*, you know. Now I’ve lost that opportunity.” Edwards finally let go of the pent-up emotions. “I’ve been tense about this whole thing since I found out you were my CO.”

“I understand, Paul,” Leeson said. “We’re both career Starfleet officers. I think we can overcome our personal discomfort.”

“I do too,” Edwards said. “But there’s one piece of advice that I want to pass on to you if you don’t mind.

“Go ahead,” Leeson said.

“As CO, you need to display confidence at all times,” Paul said. “Don’t ever let a subordinate know that you feel awkward about something. It’s not a good thing to let the crew see your vulnerabilities.”

Melanie thought about that for a moment. “You’re right,” she replied. Thanks for the advice.”

“Anytime. Now I better make arrangements for a runabout to be ready to take you and Admiral Parker to Earth,” Edwards said. “Will you need a pilot?”

“No,” Leeson said slightly shaking her head. “I’ll fly it myself.”

“With your permission?” Paul said.

“Granted,” Leeson responded.

The first officer started to leave, but Leeson thought of something else. “Paul?”

Edwards stopped and turned.

“I’m sorry about the away team situation,” Leeson said apologetically. “But as the chief investigator, I have to be the one who will be the point person when off the ship.”

Paul shrugged his shoulders. “That’s okay, Mel,” he said. “It will give me more time in the command chair.”

Leeson could not help but smile at Edwards. “It’s good to be working with you,” she said.

“I was thinking the same thing,” Paul said with a slight grin on his face. He turned back toward the door and exited the room.

Leeson smiled. She put her hand on the back of the chair at the head of the conference table as she thought about the mission that was about to begin. *If only my family reunion this evening will turn out this well, it will be a good day*, she thought.

With one look out the forward windows into space, Captain Melanie Leeson decided that the day would end on a positive note.

Chapter Four: Influence of the Past

Melanie Leeson approached the old Victorian house where her mother lived. She stopped to look around the old yard that Nita Leeson had kept in perfect order for so many years. It was a beautiful sight to behold.

Leeson started toward the porch and climbed the four steps that led to the door of her mother's home. The door opened before she had a chance to knock.

"You're here," exclaimed the older woman. "I'm so glad you made it!"

Mother and daughter embraced each other. The younger woman noticed a tear welling up in her mother's eye. "Hello, Mom," the daughter said. "It's good to see you."

Nita let go of Melanie and said nothing for a few moments as she sized up her daughter. "Well, come in," she said. "Your brother and sisters are waiting to see you inside."

Leeson followed her mother into the house. As soon as she stepped through the doorway, her siblings crowded in to welcome her—Michael, her brother, his wife Joanna, sisters, Rebecca and Eve, nephew Ryan, and brother-in-law Robert.

The reunion only lasted a few hours since Melanie had to get back to her ship to prepare for its launch. Unfortunately, the warmth and good feelings that the presence of family would normally bring lasted an even shorter time. From Melanie Leeson's viewpoint, her brother Michael could not resist dredging up the past sins of the now-deceased patriarch of the Leeson family—Gregory Leeson.



The U.S.S. *Trailblazer* silently waited, the metal frame surrounding it as it floated hundreds of kilometers above the surface of Mars. Melanie Leeson's runabout approached the starship, allowing her to see its beauty through the forward windows. The sight of the ship, and the knowledge that tomorrow it would be leaving its nest, helped ease the anger that Leeson felt toward her brother.



Victor Jacobs walked toward the runabout that had just landed in the *Trailblazer's* main shuttle bay. He waited as the hatch opened. When it did, he could sense from the Captain's facial expression that her time with family did not fare well. "Welcome back," he said cheerfully. "How's the family?"

Leeson forced a smile as she exited the runabout. "They're fine," she said.

"Don't try to fool your uncle Vic," Jacobs said. "I look at your eyes and can see that things didn't go well."

"I never could fool you, could I?" Leeson said as she walked toward the nearest door. "Mom sends her best."

Jacobs followed Leeson into the corridor, as she did not offer any more information. "What about Becky and Eve?" he asked, pressing Leeson to talk about what had happened.

"They're fine," Leeson replied. "Ryan has been accepted into the Academy. He starts in August."

Jacobs looked almost to age when he heard that news. "It's hard to believe that Ryan is old enough to go to Starfleet Academy," he stated.

Leeson relaxed a little. "He'll be eighteen next month," she said as she stopped in front of the turbolift door.

"And was Michael there?" Jacobs asked.

Leeson's face started to change color. Her ears turned red hot at the sound of her brother's name. "Michael," she sneered as she looked directly at Jacobs. "Michael needs to learn to keep his face shut," she said angrily. "Especially about things he knows nothing about."

Jacobs looked sympathetically at his captain. Being a close friend to The Leeson family, he had first-hand knowledge about the feud between Melanie and Michael concerning their father. "Want to talk about it?" he asked, then realized that his wording of the question left an "out" for Melanie to *not* talk about it.

Leeson's response surprised Jacobs. "Yes," Leeson said. "I think I *need* to talk about it."

Before Leeson could say anything else the turbolift doors slid open, two crewmen exited and excused themselves. Leeson nodded to the crewmen. "Carry on," she said. Melanie and Vic entered the lift, the doors closed behind them. "Deck six, forward section."

Jacobs waited for Leeson to continue the conversation, but she remained silent until the doors parted. The turbolift had deposited the two officers near the captain's quarters. He followed her out of the lift and into her quarters. "Not had time to settle yet," he said, noticing the unopened storage containers in the middle of the room.

"I'll unpack later," Leeson replied. "Would you like something to drink?" she asked as she walked toward the replicator.

"Water will be fine," Jacobs answered.

"Computer, two glasses of ice water," Leeson said. She extracted the glasses from the replicator and walked to the nearby couch. "Have a seat," she said to the security chief, who sat down in the chair across from Leeson.

Jacobs reached toward Leeson and took the water glass from her hand. He took a sip and set it down on the end table next to him. "So, what happened?"

Melanie took a deep breath to try to gain control of her anger. "We were talking over old times. We were actually getting along pretty well," she said. "When Ryan was telling me about the results of his entrance exams for the Academy, Michael commented on how Ryan needed to be careful to pay attention to following the rules and not neglect his duty."

"That sounds like Michael gave Ryan good advice," Vic said.

"It's good advice, but there was something in his tone that sounded...well, it sounded like a slam against Dad," Mel said. "It made me angry and I asked Michael what that was supposed to mean."

"And what did he say?"

Leeson took a drink of water before continuing. "He said it meant exactly as it sounded," she said. "And I told him it sounded like he was putting Dad down." Leeson took another drink of water and set the glass down. "He then said that he didn't want to see Ryan turn out like his grandfather and disgrace the family."

"And that's when the fireworks started, I bet," Vic said.

"Let's just say that I had a few words for him," Mel said. "At least Becky and Eve had enough sense to stay out of it."

“Do you still believe that your dad was set up?” Jacobs asked.

Melanie stood up and started to pace the room. “I don’t know if he was set up or just a victim of circumstances,” she said. “I do know that Dad was not the type of person to abandon his post unless he had been ordered to. And he testified that the security officer on duty relieved him and ordered him to report to the armory.”

“The findings of the court-martial showed that the duty officer was in the security office at the time,” Jacobs said.

“Well the findings are wrong,” Leeson said angrily as she spun around to face Jacobs. She glared at the man who had been a close friend and surrogate uncle since Leeson’s teen years. “You used to believe that he was innocent,” Leeson said. “Have you turned against him now?”

Victor stood up and faced Melanie with a sympathetic look. “I still think your dad was innocent,” he said. “But my opinion can’t overrule the verdict of a court-martial.”

Leeson’s face relaxed slightly. “Sorry, Vic. I...didn't mean to take it out on you.”

Jacobs half-smiled at Leeson. “I know that you have carried this with you for a long time,” he said. “Your father was a good friend to me and I believed him when he said that he was ordered away from his post. I also believe that he was the fall guy in the assassination attempt on the Tholian ambassador.”

“Are you saying that Starfleet deliberately used my dad as a scapegoat to smooth relations with the Tholians?” Leeson asked.

Jacobs did not say anything for a moment. He took a deep breath and sighed. “I think that it’s a possibility that Starfleet could have been pressured to do that by the diplomatic corps, possibly by the Federation Council,” he said.

Leeson walked toward the large windows and looked into the depths of space. “How could Starfleet do that to someone as loyal and dedicated as my dad?” she asked.

Jacobs approached Leeson from behind and placed a comforting hand on her shoulder. “We don’t know for sure that they did, Melanie,” he said. “I have some contacts in the JAG office that owe me some favors. I can have them see what they can dig up.”

Leeson turned to face Jacobs. “No,” she said. “I appreciate the offer, but now is not the time. Once this mission is complete, I’m going to take an extended leave of absence and take care of this myself.”

“You wouldn’t do anything foolish, would you?” Jacobs asked, fearing that Leeson would ruin her career.

“I’m just going to conduct a little investigation to find the truth that will clear Dad and force Starfleet to exonerate him from any wrongdoing, Leeson said.

“You might just find out some things that will get you into trouble,” Jacobs replied. “I remember how proud your dad was when you graduated from Starfleet Academy. I know how proud he would be if he could see you now. Do you want to jeopardize all you’ve accomplished?”

Leeson’s eyes brightened as she looked directly at Jacobs. “I am what I am because of my father,” she said. “I think uncovering the truth is what he would want...at any cost.”

Jacobs shook his head. “Let it go, Mel. Your father is dead,” he said. “Let him rest in peace.”

Leeson smiled half-heartedly. "He can't rest until his name has been cleared and the truth known," she said. "I intend to see Michael and everyone else eat their words."

Jacobs acknowledged what Leeson had said with a determined nod. "Just do me one favor," he said. "Put this on the shelf and don't let it interfere with our current mission."

Leeson nodded. "Agreed," she said. "But once this mission is over, I intend to take that extended leave to deal with this."

"I might just take a leave of my own to help you," Vic said. "Now, if you will excuse me, I need to prepare for a departmental briefing."

"I'll see you tomorrow," Leeson said as the security chief turned and started toward the door. "Vic?" she said to get Jacobs' attention.

Jacobs stopped and turned before the open doors slid shut.

"Thanks for listening...and for the advice."

Jacobs smiled. "That's what uncles are for," he said. He turned and exited the captain's quarters.

The doors slid shut and Leeson walked toward her desk, where the computer monitor flashed that she had messages waiting. She pressed the activation key and the short list of messages appeared. "Computer, play the message from Nita Leeson."

"Hi, honey. I'm sorry about what happened. I had a long talk with Michael after you left, and he feels bad about upsetting you. I just wanted to let you know that what your father did or didn't do should not reflect on our family. Each one of us is an individual. Who we are and what we do is the only thing that should reflect upon us as individuals. I also wanted to tell you about your father. Now promise to keep this to yourself, Melanie. Your father willingly accepted a guilty verdict to protect the Federation and Starfleet. But you need to know, for your peace of mind, that he did not leave his post without orders to do so. Wherever he is, your father is proud of you. There's more that I wish I could say, but it could be dangerous to all that I love if I did so. I've said too much already, but I wanted you to know the truth. I hope this knowledge will help you forgive your brother. I love you, honey."

Leeson's eyes started to water, but she refused to let herself openly cry. This revelation from her mother brought peace. And when the time was right, she would find out the truth about Gregory Leeson.



Commander Shrev drank the amber liquid straight from the bottle. He was not on duty, so he decided that he would indulge himself. No synthale this time. He looked out the window, searching for the star system that he called home. His thoughts were of his father. The Andorians were once a savage race. In fact, the tendency for savagery still existed and would show itself at times. Even if they were considered civilized people, the Andorians still dealt with certain crimes in ways that seemed barbaric to most Federation cultures. And requiring a son to execute his father was definitely an act of barbarism.

"Mind if I join you, Commander?" the voice interrupted Shrev's thoughts.

Shrev turned to see Heron Jaxx watching him. "Lieutenant, I was getting ready to go to my quarters," he said. "You're welcome to have the table."

"Thank you, Sir," Jaxx said as he sat down. "I hope I'm not driving you off," he added as the tactical officer began to leave.

“No,” Shrev stated. “I was thinking about leaving anyway. Good night, Lieutenant.”

“Good night, Commander,” Jaxx replied as he watched Shrev walk toward the exit.

Chapter Five: The Approach of Destiny

The alien commander approached his lieutenant. The ridge of hair on his head rippled, his excitement evident to all his crew. “The next phase is at hand, Turkla,” he said. “Are your troops ready?”

The second alien bowed reverently. “Yes, Lord Mokdor,” he replied. “First, we will destroy the alien space station and open the way for our people to return home. Then, we will drive the boneheads from our homeworld.”

“What was once ours will be ours again,” Mokdor stated. “The destiny of the Chulak rests on you, Turkla.”

“I will not fail,” Turkla said as he saluted his superior by forming a fist and pounding his chest. “The Chulak Empire is reborn.”

The gray-skinned alien exited the bridge of the command cruiser. The commander took his station at the rear of the control room, where he could watch his crew and their every move. Mokdor did not retain his position as the ruler of his people by trusting subordinates. He believed that to be lord over his kind, he would need to keep careful watch to prevent anyone from usurping his authority.

Mokdor activated the monitor at his side and switched the viewer to show the underside of the gargantuan vessel. Moments later, Mokdor watched four of his fastest attack ships leave the massive landing bay of his ship. “Century after century the Chulak have wandered the galaxy, displaced by the ancient enemy,” he said in a booming voice to be heard by the entire command crew. “The ancient enemy is no more. The time to take back what was once ours has come,” he added.

Mokdor, the heir to the Royal Scepter of Chula and commander of the Imperial Fleet, closed his eyes to imagine the soon-coming victory. “Now behold the approach of our destiny. It is at hand.”



The U.S.S. *Trailblazer* was a beautiful ship. It hung in orbit of Mars, suspended by the power of the planet’s gravity. The starship was still surrounded by the metal web

of the drydock facility, but that would soon change. Its departure was less than an hour away.

Melanie Leeson, Victor Jacobs, and Shrev had spent more than two hours reviewing the attacks that had occurred against the Federation, Klingons, and Romulans. The answer to the mystery, so far, had eluded them.

“It seemed that these attacks’ only commonality was that a cloaked ship was involved,” Commander Shrev stated.

“Except for Starbase 117 and Krios, the locations of the targets are not close to each other,” Jacobs added. He faced his captain with a look of frustration. “What’s the connection?”

“I know none of this makes sense, but Admiral Parker is convinced that these attacks are related,” Leeson stated. “I wish we could find something more concrete.”

“Perhaps something will reveal itself when we get to Starbase 117,” Shrev said.

“Perhaps,” Leeson echoed. “But that will have to wait until after we visit Krios.”

“Why are you starting at Krios, Captain?” the Andorian asked.

“The attack on Krios happened after the one at the starbase, Commander,” Leeson replied. “I’m hoping the evidence is fresher. I also happen to be a friend of the new governor and I think he will be more willing to give me some information that the Klingon High Command may have left out of their official report.”

“The Klingons tend to be efficient in their investigations,” Shrev said. “I find it unlikely that anything of importance was left out.”

“That’s true, Commander, but I don’t want to leave any stone unturned,” Leeson replied. She looked at the chronometer above the wall monitor. “It’s almost 1215 hours. Is there anything else before we adjourn?”

Both officers shook their heads to indicate that all the pressing business was concluded.

“Get something to eat,” Leeson said. “I would like to have all the senior officers on the bridge when we launch.”

All three officers rose to their feet. Captain Leeson turned and started toward the door that separated the main conference room from her ready room as Shrev and Jacobs exited to the corridor that led to the officer’s lounge.



“Computer, ham and cheese on wheat and a glass of ice water,” Leeson said as she stood in front of the replicator. She took the sandwich and water out of the slot and began walking toward her desk. A chime sounded to indicate someone was on the other side of the door. Leeson looked toward the door as she sat down behind her desk. “Come in.”

The doors parted, and Commander Edwards entered the ready room. “Am I disturbing you?” he asked.

“Just getting a bite before launch time,” Leeson replied. “Have a seat, Paul.”

Edwards walked over and sat in front of the desk. “The chief engineer informed me that the warp core startup is complete, and all engineering systems are ready to go,” he said. “All other department heads have reported in and are also ready.”

“Sounds like everything is under control,” Leeson stated. “Now we wait until the dockmaster turns us loose.”

“There’s something you should know, Melanie,” Edwards said reluctantly.

Leeson saw the concern etched in Edwards' face. "What is it, Paul?"

He hesitated, but the first officer gave up what bothered him. "I just heard on the Federation News Service that the Romulan ambassador to the Klingon Empire has been recalled," Paul said. "They have also told the Klingon ambassador and his staff to leave Romulus within two days."

Leeson shook her head. "And what about Federation representatives?"

Paul sighed. "Well, we haven't been expelled so far," he said. "And the Romulan embassy in Paris is still being occupied. But it's probably only a matter of time before they pull out of our space and kick us out of theirs."

Leeson got up and walked to the nearest window. She looked past the metal framework that surrounded the starship. "These are perilous times that we live in," she said. "And somewhere out there are the answers that will determine our fate." She turned to face the first officer, who remained sitting in front of the captain's desk. "Will you assemble all senior officers on the bridge in thirty minutes, Paul?"

"Thirty minutes. Yes, captain." Edwards arose from his chair. He started to leave but turned to face his CO. "There's one other thing I'd like to mention if I could."

"Go ahead, Paul," she said.

"I know Admiral Parker wants us to keep the true nature of our mission from the crew, but I think anyone who serves on the bridge should be informed as well," Edwards said.

Leeson smiled at the first officer. "I agree," she said. "I contacted the admiral this morning about that and was able to convince him to allow me to inform the entire crew about our mission."

"The entire crew?" Edwards was both shocked and impressed that Melanie could get Parker's permission to inform the *entire* crew. "He agreed to that?"

"Well, providing we make sure no unauthorized transmissions or information leaks out," she replied. "I want you to have all transmissions, including personal correspondence, monitored."

"Gee, thanks," Paul said.

"At least I'm taking it upon myself to inform the crew," Leeson said in jest.

The first officer smiled smugly. "I'll take care of it, Mel," he said. Edwards turned and exited the captain's private sanctuary.

Leeson sat back down to eat her sandwich as the door slid shut behind the first officer. As she ate, Captain Leeson realized that she only had thirty minutes to think of what she would say. She had never been one for giving motivational speeches, but she realized that as the commanding officer it was a tradition and an obligation to say a few words before the ship set out on its first voyage.



Carmen Petroni made some last-minute warp field adjustments. "There, that should do it," she said. "Keep a close watch on the power flow, Lieutenant. I'll be manning the engineering station on the bridge."

"Count on me, Commander," the engineering duty officer said.

Petroni left the engine room and went to the nearest turbolift. She entered the lift and the doors closed behind her. "Deck four portside," she said.

Within moments the doors opened. Petroni intended to meet Counselor Eedo in his office, so they could go to the bridge together. But Ezred Eedo was already standing in front of the chief engineer. He had been waiting in the corridor for her arrival.

“I was just coming to get you,” Petroni said.

The Trill smiled. “I thought that I would save you some steps by waiting for you here,” he told the engineer. “Is there room for one more?”

Carmen’s heart melted as she saw the counselor standing before her. Her face felt warm as she imagined that her skin color must have turned bright pink. She didn’t know what it was about Ezred Eedo, but Carmen Petroni had never felt quite like this before. The only other time she felt like this was when the captain of the swim team in high school asked her to a school dance. That was years ago, and Carmen Petroni was a giddy schoolgirl then. Now, she did not have that excuse. “Of course,” she said, inviting the Ezred into the turbolift.

Ezred entered the lift and the doors closed. He looked directly into Carmen’s eyes, still smiling an irresistible smile. “Shouldn’t we be moving?” he asked.

“Huh? Oh yes, of course.” Carmen was embarrassed by her behavior. She did not know what it was about Ezred that made her feel this way, but his very presence made her feel alive and vibrant. *Could this be love?* She wondered. “Bridge,” she finally said. And the two officers were on their way.



Doctor Keegan stood a few feet behind the command area of the bridge. As a physician, his duties would rarely allow him to be present in the command center of a starship, but Michael Keegan felt thrilled and privileged to be present with the other senior officers as the starship *Trailblazer* embarked on its maiden voyage.

The chief engineer and ship’s counselor exited the turbolift together. Lieutenant Commander Petroni walked directly to the rear of the bridge. She sat down at the engineering station, relieving the ensign that had been manning it. “Computer, switch engineering command to the bridge,” she spoke to the console.

Lieutenant Eedo had followed the engineer to the rear of the bridge, but walked toward the doctor and stood beside him. “Good afternoon doctor,” he said.

“Good afternoon, Counselor. I see you don’t have anything to do either,” Keegan replied. “Such is the life of a staff officer on the bridge of a starship.”

“But I do have a job to do on the bridge, Doctor,” Eedo stated in a friendly tone. “I get to observe the actions of the bridge crew.”

“Ever faithful to your role as a psychologist,” Keegan stated. “But that’s not why you were summoned here. Was it?”

Eedo thought about that and grinned at the doctor. “I don’t think so, but I might as well see how well the command staff work together since I have the opportunity,” he replied. “Part of my job *is* crew evaluation.”

Keegan couldn’t argue with the counselor’s logic or his sense of duty. “You got me there, Counselor.” The CMO only knew Eedo for a few days but decided that he liked the young man. Which was a good thing since they would be frequently collaborating on professional matters.

The bridge was bustling with activity as the time for launch approached. The captain entered the bridge from her ready room and noticed that the senior officers were all present. She started to sit in the center seat but decided to remain standing until launch

time arrived. “Ladies and gentlemen,” she said in a loud enough voice to get everyone’s attention.

From each of their assigned posts, the officers and crew grew silent and faced their CO. The entire bridge crew waited to hear what their captain had to say.

Leeson looked around the room and smiled confidently. “Today, we begin our journey,” she said. “Our destiny lies ahead of us. I know that each of us will do whatever we can to discover the truth that will restore peace to the Federation and our neighbors. Whatever comes our way, whether good or evil, will serve to unite us as one crew with one purpose—the defense of the Federation against an unknown foe.”

Victor Jacobs winked at Leeson and nodded. He gave her a thumbs up to let her know that she had made a positive step to begin unifying the crew, at least the senior officers that she had to work with each day.

Leeson, noticing the chronometer reading above the main viewer, sat down and settled comfortably in her chair. “Lieutenant Wells, standby on maneuvering thrusters,” she said. “Mister Edwards, please inform the dockmaster that we are awaiting his instructions.”

“Aye Captain,” Edwards replied.

“Miss Petroni?”

“Engineering reports ready, Captain,” the chief engineer replied. “Mooring beams have been deactivated. We’re totally on our own power now.”

“Very good, Commander.” The captain fixed her eyes on the viewscreen.

“Dockyard has signaled that we may launch at your discretion, Captain,” Edwards stated.

Leeson smiled. “Ahead eighty kph, Mister Wells. Once we clear the drydock, leave orbit at full impulse,” she said.

“Aye, Sir,” the junior grade lieutenant replied from the CONN position.

To the workmen in spacesuits, the Trailblazer looked like a thing of beauty as it started to pull away from the metal frame that had surrounded it for such a long time. One of the workers started to wave as the ship left its berth.

Leeson began to feel the thrill of command rise from within. She glanced around the bridge, beginning to feel a sense of pride in this crew, *her* crew, that she had not yet come to know. She looked forward to getting to know the people that she had just started working with.

“We are clear of the drydock and I am engaging impulse engines, Captain,” Lieutenant Wells said. “Now leaving orbit, Sir.”

“Well done,” Leeson said. “Set course for Krios, Lieutenant.” The captain turned in her chair toward the engineering station. “Commander Petroni, how long until we have warp drive?”

“You have it now, Captain,” she said. “But I recommend keeping it under warp nine until we make sure the intermix formula is stable.”

“Agreed,” Leeson replied. She faced forward again and stared at the viewer. “Warp factor eight point five, Lieutenant.” Leeson paused, taking a side-glance of her first officer. “This is it, Paul.”

Edwards smiled without taking his eyes from the view screen. “This is it,” he echoed.

“Mister Wells...engage.”

The ship lurched into the realm of faster-than-light travel. Starlight streaked past the sleek starship. For the crew of the *Trailblazer*, their approach toward destiny was now underway.

Chapter Six: Day of Destruction

Three weeks. It had been three weeks since the U.S.S. *Trailblazer* had left Utopia Planitia Shipyards. The officers and crew were settling into their new positions, learning the ship, and making new friends. And the ship was performing admirably.

Captain Melanie Leeson entered the bridge from the aft starboard doors and walked directly toward the center of the room. The first officer noticed her approach peripherally and rose from the center seat, facing his CO. Leeson stopped and placed her hand on the back of the chair. “Anything to report, Paul?”

“Still on course for Krios, Captain. Our ETA is four days, seven and a half hours.”

“See if we can get Lieutenant Commander Petroni to squeeze a little more out of the engines. I would like to get there as soon as possible,” Leeson said as she sat down.

“Gladly,” Paul Edwards replied. “This trip is starting to get boring.” The first officer took his place in the chair to Leeson’s right. “I hope this investigation picks up when we get there.”

Leeson could not help but smile. She also felt somewhat bored after spending three weeks at warp nine. “Maybe you can arrange entertainment in the forward crew lounge. How about a concert with an informal reception afterward?”

“I’m not a musician myself, but I’ve met a few people on the ship who are,” Edwards replied. “I can see about getting some of them together.”

“Good. It will be a good way to bring the crew together as well.”

“Captain,” Lieutenant Jaxx interrupted from his position at OPS. “I’m receiving a Priority One distress call from Starbase 36. They say they’re under attack.”

“Have they identified the attackers?”

“No Sir,” Jaxx said. “They don’t detect any non-Starfleet ships in the area.”

“Starbase 36 is almost a day and a half away at maximum warp, Captain,” Edwards stated.

“CONN, change course for Starbase 36. Maximum warp,” Leeson ordered.

“Aye Sir,” the female ensign replied.

“Respond to their distress call, Mister Jaxx. Give them our ETA.”

“Aye Captain.”

Leeson pressed the intercom control on the armrest of her chair. “Attention all hands. Starbase 36 is under attack. We are going to Yellow Alert.”

Paul looked gravely into Leeson’s eyes. “I guess we don’t have to worry about being bored anymore.”



“Hit them again, Brak,” Turkla ordered. “I want those shields down.”

“Yes, my Lord.” Brak, who commanded the ship, started to issue orders. He was slightly shorter, but no less capable of command, than Turkla. Brak envied his superior, but he also knew his place. He was the type who knew how to ingratiate himself toward his superiors, especially if personal gain might come from it.

“Contact the *Garken*, Brak,” Turkla said. “Tell Rek to prepare for his attack.”

Brak hesitated. He did not agree with Turkla’s strategy or the loss of life that the plan may cause, but he obeyed the order. “Rek reports ready, Sir.”

“Tell him to implement the plan in six yanex.”

“Yes, my Lord.” Brak entered the command codes that authorized the other Chulak ship to prepare for its attack.



“Red alert,” the captain of the *Churchill* ordered. “Full power to weapons systems, Mister Tyree. CONN, prepare to detach from docking port.”

“Aye Sir. Umbilical lines detached,” the young ensign said as he piloted the *Galaxy*-class starship away from the giant space station.

“Still nothing on sensors, Captain,” the OPS officer stated.

Captain Nathan Henry frowned at that. “Impossible,” he said. “Something’s firing those weapons. And I don’t believe in ghost ships.”

“Yes Sir, but our sensors aren’t detecting anything.”

Tyree’s eyes went wide as the ship shook from a direct hit from the unknown assailant. “Shields at eighty-three percent, Captain,” he yelled.

“Return fire, Lieutenant,” Henry replied.

“Nothing to fire at, Sir!”

“Let the computer track where the incoming weapons fire comes from and fire in that direction.”

“Yes Sir.”

Another hit. The first officer was thrown from her seat as the ship rocked from the impact of enemy fire. She tried to pull herself up by grabbing the armrest on her chair, but another volley knocked the Denobulan woman back to the floor. Fortunately, the carpeted deck absorbed most of her impact.

“Are you alright?” Captain Henry asked the first officer.

“I will be if our friends out there would stop,” she replied.

“Shields at seventy-four percent,” Tyree said from tactical.

The ship was struck again, this time from multiple locations.

“Sixty percent.”

Nathan Henry felt helpless. “What’s the status of the starbase?”

The officer at the OPS position quickly scanned the huge station, which was also being struck by energy weapons from an unseen foe. “They’re getting hit harder than we are, Captain. Their shields are down to forty-seven percent.”

Henry looked over his shoulder at the tactical officer.

“We’re down to thirty-two, Sir,” Tyree said. But then his eyes narrowed as he focused on one of the many readouts on his display. “Intruder alert on deck thirty-six. Engineering.”

“Send a security team and alert the chief engineer to evacuate the area, Lieutenant.”

“Security team already on their way, but I can’t raise the chief engineer...or anyone else in engineering, Captain.”

Henry cursed under his breath. He hit the ship-wide intercom button on the armrest of his chair. “All civilians and non-combative personnel report to your pre-assigned escape pods and shuttles.”

The first officer, now back in her chair next to the captain, shot a worried look at Nathan Henry. “You’re going to launch escape pods during a battle?”

“We may not have a choice, Commander.” Henry looked worried. He had one of those bad feelings that told him the survival of his ship and crew was doubtful. He hoped he could at least save the families and some of the crew before it was all over. “CONN, set course zero four zero mark seven, warp two.”

“Sir?”

“You heard me, Ensign. We need to get out of the battle zone before getting non-essential personnel off the ship. We’ll come back once the shuttles and escape pods are launched,” Henry said. “Engage.”

The captain looked at the viewscreen. The stars did not streak toward him as they should when the ship was at warp. “Ensign?”

“Sorry, Captain. Helm control has been overridden in engineering,” the young CONN officer said. “I’m trying to override, but...”

“Mister Tyree? What’s going on down there?” Captain Henry demanded.

The tactical officer’s face started turning red; the veins on his neck began to show. “My team was under heavy fire at last report, Captain. I lost contact a few moments ago.” Lieutenant Tyree looked like he was ready to explode with anger. Or was it fear for the security team members’ lives? “Permission to lead another security team to engineering, Sir?”

“Go!” Henry said. “And Lieutenant...”

Tyree was already to the turbolift but turned for his CO’s last instructions. “Captain?”

“We may not have much time.”

“Understood Sir.” The turbolift doors closed.

Henry did not have to tell his first officer anything. She was already at the tactical station to cover for Tyree. Sweat formed on Henry’s forehead and hands. “Prepare to drop shields and launch escape pods.”

“Captain, they won’t have a chance,” the first officer protested.

Henry looked straight ahead at the station growing larger on the viewer. “They’ll have more of a chance than if they stay aboard.”



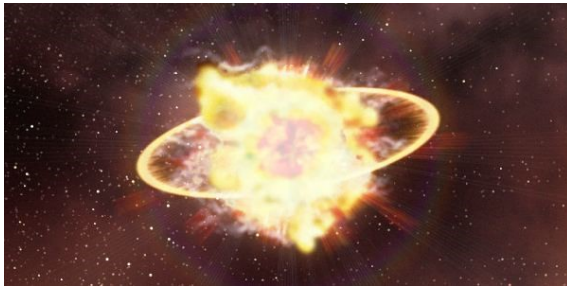
Lieutenant Tyree, flanked by four other security men, rounded the corridor that led to the ship’s engine room. Holding a phaser, he ran into the room and fired at the gray-skinned aliens that had captured or killed the engineers and the first security team that had been dispatched to deal with the intruders. It was a foolish move, he realized after firing. What if he had hit the warp core? It didn’t matter since the aliens had erected a force field surrounding the master control table, where they had diverted helm control from the bridge. The phaser blast ricocheted back, nearly missing Tyree. It hit one of his men, stunning him.



The *Churchill* continued to fly closer to Starbase 36 with each passing second. Several shuttles and runabouts launched from all three of the starship's landing bays. Seconds later, the escape pods were jettisoned. The commanders of the unseen alien ships either did not notice the smaller Starfleet vessels and pods or chose to ignore them since it was unlikely they would survive what was about to happen.

Each shuttle and runabout flew toward the pods. As they passed, the pilots activated tractor beams, locking on to as many escape pods as possible. The small ships increased to full impulse, flying away from their mother ship and the starbase. Six runabouts and those shuttles with warp capability zoomed away at several times the speed of light. The sub-light shuttles didn't have a chance.

The *Galaxy*-class starship, under control of alien invaders, increased speed as it remained on a direct course for the central section of Starbase 36—the section that housed the station's reactor core. Only seconds remained.



▲▲▲
“Eject the warp core,” Captain Henry ordered.

The OPS officer shook his head. “They’ve disabled the warp core ejection system, Captain. And the self-destruct has been activated.”

Henry closed his eyes in quiet defeat. “May God have mercy on our so...”

▲▲▲
The starship collided with the space station. Its warp core breached, timed perfectly with the collision. A flash of light and the energy of an exploding star destroyed both the U.S.S. *Churchill* and Starbase 36 simultaneously. And all sub-warp shuttles and escape pods were engulfed in the giant fireball.

▲▲▲
Captain Melanie Leeson sat in the conference room staring out the forward windows. She raised the coffee cup to her lips as she watched the stars streak toward her. She did not look when the doors separating the conference room from the bridge slid open. She knew who it would be. “Any word from Starbase 36?”

“I didn’t think you’d expect any,” Lieutenant Commander Victor Jacobs replied as he approached the captain.

“Not really,” she said. “Not since losing contact yesterday.”

Victor walked around the table and sat down, facing Leeson. “Long-range sensors have picked up debris and radiation where the starbase should be located.”

Leeson could not fathom that much destruction. “How many people were stationed there?”

“Station compliment for a starbase of that type ranges from eight to twelve hundred, depending on families and civilian personnel,” Vic said. “More if any ships were docked there.”

“We’ve got to find out who’s behind this...and stop them,” Leeson said.

Jacobs nodded in agreement. “We’ll be there in three hours,” he said as he started to get up.

“Wait,” Leeson said. “I have something on my mind that I need to talk about.”

Jacobs sat back down. "What is it, Mel?"

"Before we launched, I went to see my family."

"I remember," Vic said. "You told me about how Michael acted."

"After you left my quarters, I pulled up some messages that were waiting for me. One was from Mom."

"Anything wrong?"

"Not really. She told me how Michael felt bad after I left."

"He could have sent that message himself."

"True, but that's not what's bothering me," Leeson said. "I've listened to the message over and over. Mom was trying to tell me something about Dad, but there seemed to be something in the way she was talking...something hidden."

"What exactly did she say about your dad, Mel?"

Leeson thought a moment, trying to recall the exact phrase. "She told me something about Dad that she wants me to keep to myself, but I can tell you that she also said that 'wherever he is, your father is proud of you.'"

Victor didn't make the connection that Melanie tried to make. "Sounds like a normal thing to say, to me," he said.

"I thought so at first," Leeson said. "But as I listened to the message again, I noticed that Mom used the present tense."

"A lot of people do when attributing that sort of statement to someone who's deceased. 'I don't think you need to read anything into it.'"

Leeson sighed. "Maybe I am reading more into it than what she meant, but..."

Leeson picked up her cup of coffee and took another sip. "...She's not a religious person. I wouldn't expect Mom to refer to someone who's died by saying 'wherever he is.'"

Jacobs tried to be sympathetic. Greg Leeson had been his mentor and closest friend. The Leesons had adopted Vic into the family and he considered Melanie to be like his own daughter. "Mel, I know what your dad meant to you. I miss him, too, but he's gone."

"I'm not so sure anymore, Vic," Leeson said.

Victor Jacobs walked around the table and place a hand on Leeson's shoulder.

"Promise me one thing?"

Melanie looked up at her surrogate uncle. "What?"

"Don't become obsessed with this. It can blind you to more important matters...and ruin your career."

Melanie smiled. "I promise," she said. "Now you promise me something."

"Name it."

"Don't dismiss the possibility."

"Okay, Mel. I'll keep an open mind," Jacobs said suppressing a grin. "Now, I better get back to..."

"*Bridge to Captain Leeson,*" Paul Edwards' voice said over the intercom.

Leeson put her finger on the touchpad next to her. "Leeson. Go ahead, Paul."

"*We're receiving a distress call from the U.S.S. Vindicator. It's very faint, Captain.*"

"Can you get a position lock on it, Commander?"

"*Dead ahead on our present course, in the location of Starbase 36.*"

“I’ll be right out,” Leeson said as she rose from behind the conference table. She quickly walked toward the door, Jacobs closely following.

Leeson and Jacobs entered the bridge. Jacobs relieved the ensign manning the security station. Leeson sat in the center seat as soon as Paul Edwards vacated it and took his seat to the captain’s right.

“Report.”

“We have tried to hail the *Vindicator*, but no response yet,” Edwards stated. “The distress signal is automated and keeps repeating.”

“What do we have on the *Vindicator*?” Leeson asked.

Edwards activated his console and displayed the search results for the other starship. “*Defiant*-class, NCC-75532. It’s under the command of Lieutenant Commander Nicholas Hancock. The *Vindicator* was assigned last month as tactical support for Starbase 36.”

“Time to intercept?” Leeson asked.

“Two hours, twenty minutes,” Edwards replied.

Leeson arose from her seat. “Please inform sickbay to prepare for casualties and prepare an away team,” she said. “You have the bridge until we arrive.”

“Aye Captain.”

Leeson started to retreat to her ready room.

“Captain?”

Leeson turned back to the first officer. “Yes, Commander?”

“Will you be leading the away team?” he asked.

Leeson smiled slightly. “This one’s yours, Paul,” she said, turning to enter her office.



Melanie Leeson entered the bridge and strolled to the command area.

“Good timing, Captain,” Paul Edwards said as he got out of Leeson’s chair. “We just dropped out of warp. The *Vindicator* is four hundred kilometers to our port bow.”

“Any contact or life signs?”

“Still no contact,” Edwards said. “Commander Jaeger?”

“I scanned the ship, Captain,” the science officer said. “I can detect thirteen positive life signs, but some of those are faint.”

Leeson looked at the viewer, noticing that the ship looked heavily damaged. The starboard nacelle housing seemed to have taken the worst of...of whatever damaged the small vessel. “Power status?”

“Emergency life support and batteries are functioning, Captain, but both impulse and warp engines are down,” Jaeger said. “Weapons and shields are also not functional.”

“Get going Paul,” Leeson told the first officer. “I want to know what happened as soon as possible.”

“On our way,” Paul said. “Mister Jacobs, you’re with me.” Edwards tapped the communicator badge on his chest. “Doctor Keegan, report to transporter room three with an emergency med team. Commander Petroni, report to transporter room three.” The turbolift doors slid shut.

Leeson turned toward the OPS station. “Mister Jaxx, establish a link with the *Vindicator*’s computer and begin a download of their files. Maybe we can figure out what happened.”

“Yes, Captain,” Heron Jaxx said as he started his work.

“Captain?” It was Shrev who interrupted Leeson’s train of thought.

“Yes, Commander?”

“I have scanned the damaged areas of the *Vindicator*.”

“What does it look like?”

“Based on these readings and the visual inspection, I would say the ship was caught in an explosive blast caused by a warp core breach,” the Andorian stated. “I would say that another ship may have been involved in the destruction of Starbase 36.”

“An alien ship?”

“Possibly, but we can’t dismiss that it was a Federation ship or even Klingon.”

“Check with Starfleet Command to see if any starships were assigned to, or laying over at Starbase 36,” Leeson said.

“Aye Sir,” Shrev replied.



Sickbay was very busy. One of the three Emergency Medical Holograms had even been activated to lend a hand. Melanie Leeson entered and saw Paul Edwards talking with a man in his early thirties. The young man wore command red with the rank pips of a lieutenant commander. His uniform was streaked with burn marks and minor tears at the seams. His brown, short-cropped hair was disheveled. Leeson figured that this had to be the *Vindicator*’s CO. She approached the two officers as they spoke.

Edwards noticed Leeson’s approach. “Captain Leeson, this is Lieutenant Commander Nicholas Hancock of the U.S.S. *Vindicator*,” he said, introducing the two officers.

“Captain Leeson, thank you for coming to our rescue,” Hancock said.

“Fortunately, we were on our way to see what happened to the starbase when we received your call for help,” Leeson said. “Can you tell me anything about what happened?”

“Captain?” Doctor Keegan interrupted Hancock before he could speak.

“Yes, Doctor?”

“If you don’t mind, I have a great deal of work to do here. Mister Hancock has been checked out and some of his other crewmen are well enough to be assigned quarters.”

“Of course,” Leeson said. “Paul, will you take care of getting quarters assigned for our guests?”

“Certainly, Captain,” Paul replied.

“Commander Hancock, do you feel able to answer some questions?” the captain asked.

“Yes, of course, Captain,” he said. “Could I be informed when Lieutenant Petrov regains consciousness, Doctor?”

“I’ll let you know as soon as I can,” Keegan replied.

“Thanks, Doctor.”

“Please come with me.” Leeson, leaving the other *Vindicator* crewmembers to Paul Edwards, led Lieutenant Commander Hancock out of sickbay and to the nearest turbolift. Leeson waited to ask anything until they arrived on the top level of the ship and entered the ready room.

They walked toward the desk and Leeson pulled out the chair across from hers before rounding the desk and sitting down. "Please have a seat," she said. "Can I get you anything?"

"No thank you, Captain," Hancock replied.

Leeson saw the stress written on the man's face. She knew that if she were in his place, she would want to be by her injured crewmen's side. "I won't keep you long, Commander," she said. "You probably want to be back in sickbay."

"That obvious?"

"That's where I'd want to be," Leeson said. "Is the Lieutenant your XO?"

"Yes," Hancock said. "And he's a good friend. We've known each other since the Academy."

"I understand," Leeson said. "I'll try to be brief. Tell me what happened."

Hancock shifted in his chair. "We were on a routine patrol, about a light-year from 36 when the distress came. I ordered the ship to set course for home, maximum warp. We dropped to full impulse just in time to see the *Churchill* slam head-on into the station. The blast caught us before I could even give the order to go back to warp."

"How far away were you?"

"I'd say about fourteen hundred kilometers, maybe a little more."

"Were shields at maximum?"

"If they weren't, I wouldn't be here talking with you, Sir."

Leeson smiled at that. She liked this young man's laid-back approach. It reminded her of Blake Adams. At least Hancock didn't seem quite as cocky. "Did your sensors detect any other ships?"

Hancock shook his head. "Nothing when we were coming in, Captain. The only other vessel we saw was the *Churchill*...right before she hit 36."

Leeson leaned back in her chair. "Thank you, Commander. I'm sure you want to get back to check on your injured shipmates."

Following her lead, Hancock rose from his chair. Leeson reached out her hand to shake his. "Please feel free to make use of the *Trailblazer's* facilities while onboard," she said.

"Thanks." Hancock started for the door, but stopped and looked back at Leeson. "I lost twenty good crewmen today, Captain. Four others are seriously wounded and one of those is critical. How does a CO live with that?" He did not expect an answer as he turned and exited the ready room.

The doors did not have time to slide shut before Victor Jacobs entered the room. "We have survivors from the *Churchill*, Mel," he said. "A group of shuttles and runabouts are towing several escape pods to our location. Should be here in forty minutes."

"I'm surprised to hear that there were survivors," she said. "Okay, get quarters ready and make sure they all get a good meal and medical attention. I want to interview them as soon as possible."

"Understood. I'll take care of it," Jacobs said. "But what do we do with all the lifeboats and shuttles?"

"Just beam everyone off. I'll contact Starfleet to send a ship to pick them up along with the *Vindicator*."

"And the people?"

“They’ll come with us. We can drop them off at Starbase 117 when we get there,” Leeson said. “Can we deal with a few guests for a couple of weeks?”

“I don’t see a problem,” Jacobs said. “I’ll let Keegan know to expect some bruised knees.” With that, Vic left the room.

Melanie Leeson shook her head. She was already feeling the weariness of the next few days of debriefings.

Chapter Seven: Krios

The starship *Trailblazer*, secured from warp, approached the planet Krios. It was an M-class world like Earth in many respects. The Kriosians were humanoid, nearly identical to humans, except for the spots on their skin. They looked very similar to Trill hosts in that manner. The planet had been under Klingon domination for decades, but most of the inhabitants had learned that the Empire allowed them to live peaceful lives as long as they did not interfere with the ruling status quo. Of course, some rebellious factions had tried to gain independence a few years before, but that rebellion had been put down decisively.

Captain Melanie Leeson entered the bridge. “What’s our status, Paul?” she asked the first officer.

“Good morning, Captain,” Commander Edwards replied, standing up from the CO’s seat at the center of the control room. “We will be entering orbit of Krios in thirty-five minutes. A Klingon battle cruiser is on its way to escort us.”

“Does Governor Kogath know I’m coming?”

“Yes, Captain,” Edwards said. “He sends his regards and looks forward to seeing you.”

“Do you trust this Kogath, Melanie?” It was Lieutenant Commander Victor Jacobs who spoke from the security station.

“Kogath is an old family friend, Vic,” Leeson replied. “I’m surprised Dad never told you about him.”

“He mentioned knowing a Klingon, but I never heard his name.”

“Dad always trusted him,” Leeson said.

“Well, that’s good enough for me,” Jacobs replied.

“Captain?”

“Yes, Paul?”

“Commander Jaeger and Lieutenant Jaxx may have found something on those cloaked ships,” Edwards stated.

Leeson, followed by Edwards and Jacobs, started toward the two officers whose workstations were on the starboard side of the bridge. “Commander, Lieutenant? I understand you may have made a discovery?”

“It was Mister Jaxx’ discovery, Captain,” Nora Jaeger said as she nodded to the Bolian.

“What did you find?” Leeson asked.

“I was helping Commander Jaeger run a subspace analysis on the records we downloaded from the *Vindicator* when I noticed this.” Heron Jaxx pointed to the display on his panel. “This is a subspace compression.”

“Subspace compression?” Jacobs asked.

“Yes Sir,” Jaxx said. “I had to enhance the scans several times to pick it up, but it indicates a ship going to warp.”

“A cloaked ship, you mean,” Edwards stated.

“I found four of these signatures right before Starbase 36 was destroyed,” Jaxx said. “I’m not sure the ships were cloaked, either.”

“Can you explain that?” Leeson asked.

“A cloaked vessel would have residual tetryon emissions when it went to warp. These signatures don’t have that,” Jaxx said. “Commander Jaeger and I theorize that these ships have some type of hull plating that is undetectable by our sensing devices.”

“We compared these readings with the sensor logs of Starbase 117 when it was attacked,” Jaeger stated. “We found the same thing.”

“There’s the connection,” Jacobs said.

“I’ll ask Kogath if we can have access to any sensor logs from the Klingon defense command station on Krios,” Leeson said. “I’ll bet a year’s supply of synthale it’s there, too.”

“I don’t think I’ll take that bet,” Edwards replied.

“Good work,” Leeson said as she patted Jaeger and Jaxx on their shoulders.

“Now, can you find out how to modify our sensors so we can see those ships?”

Herron Jaxx, who had been thrilled at the captain’s praise of his and Commander Jaeger’s work, changed his facial expression from joy to concern. Now Captain Leeson was offering a challenge that may not be as easy to solve. “We’ll do our best, Sir,” he said, looking at Jaeger for any sign of confidence that they would succeed.

Leeson knew what she was asking, knew it would not be easy. “If I understand you right, these ships can be seen with the naked eye. Is that right?”

“Absolutely, Captain,” Jaeger said.

Leeson tapped her combadge. “Bridge to Engineering.”

“*Engineering. Petroni here.*”

“Please report to Lieutenant Commander Jaeger in the main conference room.”

“*On my way, Captain. Petroni out.*”

Jaeger and Jaxx stared at their CO. “What do you have in mind, Captain?”

“The two of you and our chief engineer will work together to work on a way to modify our sensors. We need to see the enemy.”

“We could station lookouts at all the viewing ports to try to detect them visually,” Edwards stated.

Leeson contemplated Paul’s suggestion. “Seems like a good idea. Make it so.”

“Aye, Captain.”

Leeson turned and strode toward the door that separated the bridge from the ready room. “Meet me in transporter room two, Vic. Thirty minutes.”

“Aye,” Jacobs said as the door closed behind Leeson.

Commander Edwards returned to the central command area and sat down in the “big chair.” He looked up at Jacobs, who still focused on the door to the CO’s office.

“Mister Jacobs? Something wrong with the door?”

Vic turned and faced the first officer with a slight grin plastered on his face. “Just thinking about how much she’s changed since she was a teenager,” he said. “Her father would be proud of the officer that she’s become.”



The capital city of Krios was beautifully designed. It was an innovation of the most modern technology combined with the artistry of the people of Krios. The buildings rose hundreds of meters into the sky, almost as tall as the mountains that shadowed the great metropolis. No one would have known that this city had been the site of an attack from orbit only a few months before. But the attackers had specifically targeted a single building—the location of the previous Klingon governor and his staff. Little damage had been done to the surrounding structures.

The transporter beam faded, and Melanie Leeson found herself in the governor’s spacious office. The room had a high ceiling. It must have once been a reception hall, based on the size of the room. It was modestly decorated with wooden furniture and a few paintings of various Klingon spacecraft adorning the walls. A large flag, emblazoned with the symbol of the Empire, was suspended from the ceiling above the center of the room. A bat’leth hung on the wall, proudly displayed behind the governor’s desk.

“You don’t have an office this big,” Victor Jacobs stated as he surveyed the room.

Leeson smiled at her security officer. “No, but my office is bigger than yours,” she replied, mischievously.

A door, disguised as part of the west wall, opened and a Klingon of medium size and a hint of gray in his long hair walked into the room. “Little Warrior,” he exclaimed with as much joy as a “happy” Klingon could muster.

“Kogath, it’s good to see you again,” Leeson said as she ran into the Klingon’s open arms. She embraced the big man as if he were her own father.

“You have grown up,” Kogath said. “And you have done well for yourself. A starship captain.”

“And you, a governor,” Leeson replied with a big smile.

Kogath waved his hand as his face turned smug. “Politics is not as fun as blowing Romulan ships out of existence,” he countered. “Tell me, Little Warrior, who do you bring with you?”

Leeson motioned for Jacobs to come forward. “This is Lieutenant Commander Victor Jacobs, my chief of security.”

“You think you need security to protect you from me?” Kogath asked with indignation.

Leeson smiled at the Klingon. “No, Kogath. I brought Vic along to meet you. Like you, my father was very close to Vic. A part of our family.”

Kogath studied Jacobs, sizing him up. “Gregory Leeson chose his friends with great care. If you were like part of his family, you are part of mine as well, Victor Jacobs.”

Jacobs saluted Kogath in Klingon fashion, then bowed. “I am honored, Governor Kogath.”

“Come. Sit. We shall have a drink as we talk,” the Klingon said, leading his guest toward his large wooden desk. He pulled out two chairs, indicating to Leeson and Jacobs to sit. “I will summon the steward to bring us drink.”

“I hope you remember that I never developed a taste for bloodwine,” Leeson said cheerfully.

Jacobs grimaced at the thought of Klingon bloodwine but chose not to say anything.

Kogath merely laughed at Leeson. “I remember,” he said. “No bloodwine today. My tongue has fallen in love with an Earth drink.”

“You’re kidding,” Leeson said, surprised at her Klingon friend.

“Not at all,” Kogath replied. “Ambassador Worf introduced it to me. He calls it prune juice.”

Jacobs and Leeson turned toward each other and smiled. “Prune juice?” Jacobs said.

“Yes. Worf claims that it is a warrior’s drink. I have to agree with him.”

“How is Worf?” Leeson asked. “I haven’t seen him since he was on the *Enterprise-D*.”

“Worf has found politics and diplomacy to be less than what he had hoped,” Kogath said. “His old captain offered him a position on the newest *Enterprise* and he jumped at the chance to get back into Starfleet. Of course, Chancellor Martok was not pleased, but he regards Worf with the highest honor. Martok chose not to stand in his way.”

“Do I hear a sound of disappointment in your voice over Worf’s decision?”

Kogath became serious. “No, Little Warrior. I think he made the right choice for him.” The Klingon appeared sad as he looked at Leeson. “I envy him. I would love to get out and command a ship again.”

“Why don’t you?” Jacobs asked innocently.

“I fear that I’m getting too old,” Kogath replied. “And the duty I perform as a governor is still service to the Empire.”

Leeson could feel the pain that Kogath projected. A warrior needed the opportunity to fight in battles, to win glory and honor. A desk job for such as Kogath was like being put out to pasture. “Maybe you will command again, Kogath.” Leeson knew it was a shallow statement as soon as it left her lips.

The Klingon smiled. “At least my Little Warrior still has confidence in me,” he said. “So, you came here for a reason other than talking over old times.”

“Yes,” she replied. “I’m investigating the attacks that have been taking place, including the one that killed the former governor of Krios.”

“I was on the homeworld when the attack happened,” Kogath stated. “I don’t know how I can be of assistance.”

“I am hoping that you will allow my ship to link with the Kriosian computer archives to see what the sensor logs might tell us,” Leeson said. “I also would like to talk with anyone that may have witnessed the bombardment.”

“My adjutant served with the previous governor and was in the defense monitoring bunker during the attack,” Kogath said. “I will arrange to have him meet with you. As for the sensor logs, our people have studied them thoroughly without any success.”

“My science and OPS officers have found a minute reading in other logs that can be easily overlooked,” Leeson replied. “They know precisely what to look for.”

Kogath nodded. "Of course, you may have access to our archives," he said. "I will authorize it."

"Thank you, Kogath," Leeson said. She turned toward Jacobs. "Vic, would you mind returning to the ship and informing Commander Jaeger to await contact from the Klingon archive control?"

Jacobs knew that Leeson wanted some time to speak with Kogath privately. He guessed that it concerned her father. "Aye, Captain." Jacobs stood from his chair and walked a few meters away from the governor's desk. "An honor to meet you, Governor."

"The honor is mine, Commander."

Jacobs tapped his badge. "Jacobs to *Trailblazer*. One to beam up."

"Acknowledged, Commander."

A moment later, Jacobs' molecules were converted to energy and whisked away to the orbiting starship.

Kogath smiled at Leeson. "I like him."

"He's a good friend," Leeson replied. "I wanted to talk to you about my father."

"I honor his memory...and his daughter," the Klingon said with pride. "I remember when he asked me to teach him how to use a bat'leth. It took much training, but he finally became skillful with it. But you learned much more quickly than he did. Do you still practice?"

Leeson nodded. "Every chance I get," she said. "As a starship captain, I'm finding less time than I'd like, though."

"You need to keep your skills fresh," Kogath said. "You must make the time to practice as often as you can."

"I will," Leeson replied. She hesitated and looked hard at the governor. "I need to ask you something."

"Ask anything, Little Warrior. I will answer if I can."

"If my father were alive, would you know about it?"

Kogath was stunned by the question. As a warrior, he had tried to be prepared for any situation. But this innocent question completely took him off guard. "If he were alive, I think I would know of it," he replied. "With the bond between us, I believe your father would trust me enough to contact me. Why do you ask?"

"It may just be a feeling of false hope, but I think he is still alive."

"Your father was a brave man, Little Warrior," Kogath stated. "I have good memories of him. But you should let him rest."

"Kogath?"

"Yes, Little Warrior?"

"My heart says that he's alive," Leeson said. "I don't know why he would not contact his family, but something deep inside tells me he's alive."

"Your father does not exist anymore, Little Warrior," Kogath said matter-of-factly, but with a hint of sympathy. "He will always live in our memories."

Leeson forced a smile and rose from her chair. "Thank you, Kogath. I'll let you know when we find out who attacked Krios."

Kogath rose and hugged Leeson tightly. He backed away and saluted her. "Qapla'!"

Leeson tapped the combadge on her chest. "Leeson to *Trailblazer*. I'm ready to beam up."

Kogath waited until the beaming process ended. “You may come in now,” he said as he turned around.

The hidden door opened and a Kriosian entered the room. The man’s hair was a combination of black and gray. The spots on his skin showed a definite sign of the man’s aging. “You avoided her question about her father, Kogath.”

“Avoided? Perhaps in a small way, my friend.” The Klingon governor smiled. “I did not lie to her.”

“No, you didn’t lie,” the Kriosian replied. “Gregory Leeson no longer exists.”

“Have you discovered anything about the attackers’ identity?” Kogath asked, changing the subject.

“I’ve been searching for any similarities in battle strategies and invisible ships, but no luck yet.”

“No luck yet?” Kogath frowned as he repeated his friend’s words. “That is a human phrase, my friend.”

“My search has not produced positive results,” the Kriosian rephrased.

“That sounds more like a Kriosian,” Kogath said sarcastically.

The man smiled at the governor. “I have a possible lead that I want to check out with the Library of Ancient History. With luck, I might find something in the ancient texts.”

“What would ancient texts tell you about attacks that occurred just weeks ago?” Kogath blurted.

“You would be surprised.”

Chapter Eight: Bold Maneuvers

Chief engineer Carmen Petroni was on her way to her quarters. It had been a long day working on the problem of detecting the alien ships. She was ready for some much-needed downtime. She wanted to spend time with *him*. She was within a few meters of her quarters when she decided to find him. She stopped and turned to the computer interface on the corridor wall. “Computer, locate Lieutenant Ezred Eedo.”

“Lieutenant Eedo is in his office,” the computer replied.

“Does he have a client?” Carmen asked, expecting to be disappointed if he did.

“Lieutenant Eedo has no more appointments scheduled until 0830 tomorrow.”

Sounds promising, Carmen thought. Her decision had been made. Carmen Petroni turned around and followed the curved corridor to the nearest turbolift. In moments, the lift deposited the engineer near the counselor’s office. She paused, having second thoughts about being too forward in developing a romantic relationship with Eedo, but decided that nothing would be gained if she didn’t try. Carmen reached for the touchpad next to the door and pushed the intercom.

The door chime chirped inside the office. Eedo, who had been trying to nap for a few minutes, opened his eyes and lifted his body from the couch. “Come in,” he said as he brought himself to a standing position. He was tired from the past several days, but the weariness immediately left him as he saw who stood beyond the parted doors.

Carmen saw the counselor's face light up. "I was going to call it a day but thought you might want some company," she said.

Ezred invited Petroni in and pulled a chair close to the couch. "I've had quite a bit of company the past few days," he said. "But *you* are always welcome."

Carmen entered the room and seated herself. "I've been wondering if you were avoiding me," she said with a hint of disappointment in her tone. "I've not seen you very much."

Ezred sat on the edge of the couch to face the engineer. "I've not been avoiding you, Carmen. I've been very busy counseling the survivors of the *Churchill* and the *Vindicator*."

"That must be a big job, considering what they witnessed," Carmen replied.

"And the friends and family that were lost," Ezred added. "I've been working fourteen to sixteen hours each of the last three days."

Carmen felt like this might not be the best time to be with Ezred. "Maybe I should let you get some rest," she stated, trying to keep her voice neutral.

Ezred smiled at Carmen. His entire face seemed to glow. It was almost hypnotic. "You being here is refreshing. Have you had dinner?"

"Not yet," Petroni said, anticipating that she was about to be asked.

"Want to go to the officer's lounge with me? We could find a quiet corner by ourselves."

"I don't think I can pass up an offer like that, Ezred," Carmen said.

The two officers stood and left Eedo's office. He offered his arm and Carmen place her arm around his as they walked to the turbolift.



"...and the Romulans have severed diplomatic ties with us. They're still convinced the Klingons are behind the attack on their convey," Captain Leeson heard Admiral Parker say as she listened to the message that was sent hours earlier. *"Of course, they don't want to continue relations with the Federation as long as we remain allied with the Klingon Empire. The admiral, sitting behind his desk, leaned forward and folded his hands together. "It's vital that you get to the bottom of this and expose the truth about these attacks, Captain. Otherwise, tension with the Romulans will escalate to the point of threatening the peace."*

Leeson saw the intent in Parker's eyes and the concern drawn in the lines of his face. To her, Parker looked as if he had aged ten years since she had seen him only a few weeks before.

"I know you are doing what you can, Captain Leeson. With the destruction of Starbase 36, I am going to recommend to the Chief of Operations and the C-in-C that a fleet be assembled to head out your way. Please reply as soon as possible, Captain. Parker out."

The image of Admiral Parker faded, and Leeson turned the monitor off. She rubbed her eyes and turned to face the window. She knew that somewhere amongst the stars a mystery waited to be solved. And time had become her enemy.



Carmen sat at the table, her back against the wall. She gazed out at the stars through the window a few meters away. As she did, her thoughts were about Ezred Eedo.

Sure, he was a Trill, complete with a “slug,” but she thought she could overcome her prejudice. She saw him coming with their drinks in hand. “What’s this?” she asked.

Ezred sat down and handed one of the glasses to the engineer. “Something special,” he replied. “It’s called Yas Devrine. It comes from Risa.”

“Sounds exotic,” Carmen said. “You’ve been to Risa?”

Ezred sensed that Carmen’s tone indicated some jealousy. She probably thought he had been to Risa with someone of the opposite sex. “Yes and no,” he replied.

Petroni was confused by his response, so she gave a questioning look.

“I haven’t been there, but one of my previous hosts visited there as a young man.”

“What host was that?” Carmen asked.

“Renek Eedo,” Ezred replied. “He was vacationing with a...friend.”

Carmen tried not to feel hurt by Ezred’s memory of an event that happened during a different lifetime. “Have you considered going to Risa with a friend?”

Ezred smiled broadly. “I might consider it for my next leave,” he said. “Have you ever thought about go...”

“Did you see that?!” Carmen exclaimed, interrupting Ezred. She jumped up from her chair and ran to the window.

“What?” Ezred stood and followed Carmen to the window to see what she was looking for. “What did you see?”

“I thought I saw a flash of light. I’m not sure what it was.”

The two officers peered out the window, looking for...a flash of light appeared.

“There! Did you see it?” Carmen asked Eedo.

“I saw it, too, Carmen. What was it?” Ezred asked.

The engineer looked at Ezred. “Maybe the answer to many questions,” she said. Carmen tapped her communicator. “Petroni to Captain Leeson.”



Leeson, Edwards, Shrev, and Jacobs entered the officer’s lounge together. “What do you have Commander Petroni?” Leeson asked the chief engineer.

“Over there, Captain,” Carmen said, pointing out the window. “An occasional flash of light.”

As if on cue, the flash appeared again.

“What is it?” Jacobs asked.

“A reflection off a ship’s hull?” Edwards said.

“That’s what I think it is,” Leeson answered. “Shrev?”

“Very probable,” the Andorian stated. “I estimate that it is about one hundred twenty kilometers to our port.

Leeson hit the delta on her uniform top. “Leeson to Jaeger. Do you have any contacts on sensors?”

“Jaeger here, Captain. The only other ships in orbit with us are two Klingon Vor’Cha-class cruisers.”

“Thank you, Commander.” Captain Leeson looked at her officers. “I think we can now say that this stealth ship does not use a standard cloaking device,” she said.

“I would like to get a closer look, Captain,” Shrev said. “Permission to take a runabout on a recon mission.”

“They might decide to fire on you,” Leeson replied. “I don’t think so, Commander.”

“With respect, Captain, this could be our only chance to analyze their capabilities.”

“I agree, Captain,” the first officer echoed. “I volunteer to pilot the runabout.”

Leeson thought it over, realizing that Paul was the most qualified pilot on the ship. She nodded her approval. “Very well,” she said. “I expect the two of you to be on your guard.”

“Of course, Sir,” Shrev replied.

“We better get going, Mister Shrev.”

The two officers exited the lounge.

“Good work, Petroni,” Leeson said as she left the room.



The runabout *Tigris* passed through the atmospheric force field that kept the shuttle bay from depressurizing when the bay doors were open. The small vessel left its mother ship and flew toward the area where the flash of light was spotted a few minutes earlier.

“Keep an eye out, Shrev,” Edwards said. “We won’t have much warning if she decides to attack.”

“I’m still trying to make visual contact, Commander,” Shrev replied.

Edwards surveyed the emptiness through the runabout’s forward windows without seeing anything except the stars. He glanced out the side window. “There it is,” he said as he turned toward the flight console. “I’m coming about.”

The small vessel banked several degrees port, placing its forward section to face the alien spacecraft. The runabout decelerated and came to a complete stop.

“Nothing on sensors,” the tactical officer stated. “I estimate that our distance from the alien vessel is approximately three kilometers,” Shrev said. “Shields are at one hundred percent; phasers charged and on standby.”

“Can you hit that ship without weapons lock, Shrev?”

“Yes, Commander. At this distance, I can target manually and hit them full force. But I have no way of knowing the strength of their shields without sensor readings.”

“Too bad the *Trailblazer* can’t lock on,” Edwards said.

Shrev thought about that as he peered out the window, admiring the design of the alien ship. “Perhaps they can.”

“Explain, Commander.”

“I can transmit the coordinates to the captain.”

Commander Edwards smiled. “Brilliant. Go ahead.”



Melanie Leeson stood behind the conn officer, staring intently at the image of the runabout in the center of the screen. She tried to use her will to see the alien ship that remained invisible to the starship’s sensors.

“Captain, Commander Shrev is hailing us on a secure channel,” Lieutenant Jaxx said.

“Put him on, Lieutenant,” Leeson replied as she made her way back to the command chair. She sat down and pressed the communication pad on the armrest of the chair. “Go ahead, Commander.”

“Lock phasers, coordinates zero-zero mark zero relative to the Tigris’ position, two point eight one kilometers distance from our bow.”

“Vic?”

“Locking phasers,” Lieutenant Commander Jacobs said from the tactical position next to the captain. “But there is nothing there.”

“What’s your plan Commander Shrev?” Leeson inquired.

“*Request permission to hail the alien, Captain,*” Shrev’s voice said. “*If they fire on us, you will be in a position to avenge our deaths.*”

The captain wondered if Shrev’s comment was meant as a joke or not. She was not accustomed to Andorian humor. “Give it a try, Mister Shrev. Leeson out.” She looked to Jacobs at her left. “Stay sharp, Vic.”



Shrev opened standard hailing frequencies, tying in the universal translator.

“Alien vessel, what are your intentions?” he asked calmly.

No reply came from the ship. It started to back away from the runabout.

“This is Commander Shrev representing the United Federation of Planets. You are to state your intentions immediately.”

Shrev watched the spacecraft through the forward window. He turned to Edwards.

“Commander, could you maintain a relative distance with the alien ship as it moves?”

“I’ll see what I can do, but without sensors...”

“I understand, Sir,” Shrev replied. “Should I fire a warning shot across their bow, Commander?”

“Hail them again. With a warning this time.”

“Alien vessel. If you do not power down your engines and respond, you will be fired upon.”

Edwards raised his eyebrows, surprised that the aliens would not even respond to the threat of coming under fire. “Fire a warning shot, Shrev.”

The *Tigris* maintained a constant distance from the retreating vessel. A phaser beam raced from the runabout, barely missing the alien ship. Shrev had to manually fire weapons without sensors to lock on. His aim had been as close as he had intended to get the attention of whoever was on the other spacecraft.

Mere seconds passed before the aliens replied. Several beams of destructive energy slammed against the runabout’s shields. The *Tigris* was shaken severely as the aliens continued to pound away at the Federation craft.

Inside the runabout, Edwards and Shrev struggled to stay seated. “Full phasers, Shrev,” Edwards shouted. “Fire!”



Leeson watched the beams of whatever type of weapon come from...nothingness, due to the apparent invisibility of the other ship. “Now, Victor! Fire in front of the runabout!”

“Firing, Captain.”

Multiple phaser beams struck the shields of the stealth ship. After a few seconds, the shields of the alien ship begin to weaken. Unknown to those on the *Trailblazer*, the other ship changed course and engaged its warp drive.

“*Edwards to Captain,*” the first officer’s voice echoed through the bridge intercom. “*They’re gone.*”

For Melanie Leeson, time stood still. The enemy got away. She still did not know who the aliens were. Still did not know the reason for the mysterious attacks.

“Understood, Paul. What’s your status?”

“Minor damage to the port impulse unit, but I can fly her in.”

“Report to the bridge as soon as you’re aboard,” Leeson said, the disappointment evident in her voice. “Leeson out.”

All eyes were on the captain and she knew it. “I’ll be in my ready room, Vic. You have the bridge,” she said as she started for the door to her sanctuary.



Leeson stared out the window of her ready room when the door chime chirped. She turned to face the door, straightening her jacket. “Come.”

The door slid open and both Commanders Edwards and Shrev entered the captain’s office. They approached and stood side-by-side at attention. Disappointment was written on each of their faces.

“Report,” Leeson said, also disappointed in the mission outcome.

“I must take full responsibility for allowing the aliens to escape, Captain,” Shrev stated.

Leeson held up her hand, cutting the Andorian off. “No one is being blamed, Commander. You did what you could against an enemy that has a definite advantage over us,” she said.

“Captain?”

“Go ahead, Paul.”

“We know they don’t use a cloaking device. Their hull must be made of something that our sensors can’t detect or penetrate,” the first officer said. “We should be able to figure a way around that.”

“Describe the ship.”

“It appeared to be an attack vessel of some kind. I could see cannon ports fore and aft. There was also a turret on the top and one on the bottom,” Edwards stated. “Without sensor contact, I don’t think I could estimate the size.”

“Commander Shrev? Care to take a guess at the size of that ship?”

Shrev rubbed his chin, a gesture that he had seen many humans do when contemplating their thoughts. “I would say that the ship was approximately forty-five meters long by twenty meters wide,” he said. “No more than two decks thick.”

“Long-range vessel?”

“Possibly, Captain, but I would think that a mother ship is more likely based upon the distances between the various attack sites during the past several months.”

The door chime chirped once again.

“Come,” Leeson said.

The chief engineer entered Leeson’s ready room. “Sorry for the intrusion, Captain.”

“That’s alright, Commander. It must be important if you didn’t wait,” Leeson replied.

“I think I know how to overcome our friends’ ability to block our sensors.”

“By all means, tell us,” Edwards said.

“Well, we now know that the alien ships are visible to the naked eye,” Petroni began. “Our view screens use sensor imaging technology to translate an object into the image we see.”

“And that has been the problem since these people can blind our sensors,” Leeson said.

“Yes, Captain,” Petroni agreed. “That’s why we have to use technology that doesn’t rely on sensor imaging.” The engineer looked at her captain and to Shrev and Edwards. She paused to let allow the other officers to consider other possibilities. “We need to use a visual technology that has been obsolete on Earth for almost three hundred years.”

“I don’t understand, Commander,” Shrev said. “How can an ancient form of technology help us against one that appears to be more advanced than ours?”

“It was called closed-circuit television,” Petroni said. “A video camera, or electronic eye, which works on the same basic principles as our eyes.”

Leeson thought about Petroni’s idea. “Sounds like it may work. Can you create these cameras and install them on the exterior of the ship?”

“Yes, Sir,” Carmen said. “I can install cameras to all the sensor arrays and other parts of the ship to give us every possible view of the space around us. There will be very limited distance on what we can see, but it’s better than what our sensors can do under the circumstances.”

Leeson looked at her first officer and back to the engineer. “I like your idea, Carmen. How long will it take to build and install the cameras?”

“I have to check the computer library on the basic components and operation of the camera first, but using the industrial replicators and working around the clock...within twenty-four hours, Captain.”

Leeson smiled. “Make it so.”

“Yes, Captain,” Petroni replied, returning the captain’s smile. She turned and left the ready room.

Edwards watched the engineer leave. When the doors slid closed, he turned to face Leeson. “I agree that Petroni’s plan will help, but relying on primitive technology makes me nervous, Captain.”

“I know it’s not a perfect solution, Paul, but as she said, it’s better than what we have,” Leeson stated. “Shrev, I want you to coordinate with Mister Jacobs to run battle drills during each shift over the next three days. I want to be prepared when we meet that ship again.”

“Understood, Captain.”

“Paul, see if you can arrange transport for our guests from the *Churchill* and *Vindicator*,” Leeson said. “I’m canceling our trip to Starbase 117.”

“Where do we go from here, Mel?”

“Until we have somewhere to go, we’re going to stay where we’re at,” the captain replied.

“Understood,” Edwards said. “Will there be anything else, Captain?”

Leeson shook her head. “Not at the moment, Exec,” she said, using the term that Rob Stuart had referred to her when she was the first officer of the *Providence*.

“Dismissed.”

Edwards and Shrev nodded and left the room.

Leeson sat down behind her desk and turned the monitor to face her. She hit one of the touchpad controls. “Computer, record message. Address to William J. Parker, Rear Admiral, Office of Starfleet Intelligence, Earth.” Leeson straightened her posture and allowed a slight smile for the Admiral to see. “Hello, Admiral Parker. We have encountered one of the attack ships. It uses stealth technology to blind our sensors, but my chief engineer may have found a way around that. She is working on some modifications to the *Trailblazer* now. Once complete, I will have her send all the information to you so that the fleet you’re assembling can be modified as well. Leeson out”

Captain Melanie Leeson hit the transmit control. She leaned back in her chair, allowing a smile to cross her face. She felt pleased that a breakthrough—albeit a small one—had occurred.

Chapter Nine: Revelations

The Kriosian entered Kogath’s office. He approached the Klingon governor and held a PADD out to him. “I found some information that may be useful to Captain Leeson.”

Kogath took the PADD and skimmed through the information that was displayed. He looked up from his seated position and regarded the Kriosian. “I agree. You should take this to the Federation ship at once,” he said as he started to hand the device back to the man that stood before him.

The Kriosian did not accept the PADD but shook his head. “No Sir,” he stated firmly. “You know that I cannot deliver this.”

“I’ll order a ship made ready,” Kogath said. “I think that it’s time for you to speak with her.”

The Kriosian’s eyes went to the floor. His shoulders slumped. “I don’t want her involved, Kogath.”

“She is involved, my friend. I think you will find that she is strong enough to learn the truth.”

The Kriosian reluctantly agreed with Kogath. He nodded and turned without saying another word to the governor. As he approached the door, the man turned back to face his long-time friend. “I know she’s strong, Kogath. I’m not sure about me.”

The Klingon let out a roaring laugh deep from inside his belly. “I’ve known you for a long time, my friend. Trust me when I say that you are strong enough.” Kogath approached his friend and placed his big hand on the Kriosian’s shoulder. “In your heart, you are a Klingon. Qapla!”



Melanie Leeson stood poised for the Mugato’s attack. She held the bat’leth up to absorb the brunt of the animal’s powerful blows. Sweat streamed down the captain’s face. Her breathing was heavy.

The white-furred ape-like creature growled ferociously as it prepared to strike. It jumped from the ledge that it had perched on, making use of its strength and bulk. An

ordinary human would not have a chance against the creature. Fortunately, Melanie Leeson was no ordinary human.

Leeson stood her ground as the Mugato came down, nearly landing on top of the experienced officer. Leeson's bat'leth made contact with the animal's large arm. It screamed in agony as it pulled away from its intended prey, nursing the deep wound that gushed orange blood. Leeson took full advantage of the alien gorilla's surprise, swinging the Klingon sword at the animal's neck. It moved, preventing the captain from decapitating her opponent, but the Mugato's left arm had been severed.

Leeson looked at the pitiful creature and almost felt sorry for it. But she remembered that this creature was only an apparition, not possessing any true life. The captain knew that a wounded animal, even one that was computer-generated, would be more dangerous than a dozen angry Klingons. She approached slowly, her weapon held ready to strike the killing blow.

"Bridge to Captain Leeson," Heron Jaxx's voice came over the intercom.

Leeson stopped advancing on the Mugato. "Freeze program." She tapped her combadge. "Go ahead, Lieutenant."

"There's a message coming in from Governor Kogath, Captain. He wants you to meet with a special envoy that has some information about the aliens responsible for the attacks."

Leeson started toward the holodeck's exit. "I'm on my way."



"Are you sure you want to go alone?" Victor Jacobs asked his surrogate niece.

Melanie Leeson smiled as she entered the transporter room, followed by the chief of security. "That was Kogath's instructions." She stepped up on the platform and turned to face Jacobs, noticing the worry that his face projected. "Everything will be fine, Vic. I trust Kogath as much as I trust you."

Jacobs smirked. "Be careful, Mel. Don't give anyone your *complete* trust."

"I'll be back in a couple of hours," Leeson said as she gave a reassuring look to Jacobs.

Victor turned toward the transporter technician and nodded. "Energize." He watched as Leeson dematerialized from the transport chamber. He exited the room, concern written on his face.



"Sixteen ships may not be enough, Admiral," William Parker told the chief of operations. "We very well may be going up against a vastly superior foe."

"We don't know that for sure, Admiral Parker," Admiral Hathaway stated. "With their stealth technology, we don't know what their strength is."

"That's my point, Admiral." Parker realized that he was overstepping his boundary by being so adamant. He took a step back to increase his distance from Robert Hathaway. "I don't mean any disrespect, Sir, but I strongly recommend that we send a battle fleet of no fewer than thirty starships to rendezvous with Captain Leeson."

Hathaway stepped closer to Parker, placing his hand on the other man's shoulder. "Listen, Bill," he said in a grandfatherly way. "If you get a report from Captain Leeson that warrants more ships, I'll authorize it. But understand that we are still recovering from the Dominion War and the Vendoth attack. Starfleet is stretched pretty thin."

Parker looked down momentarily. He lifted his head and stared into Hathaway's deep blue eyes. "I understand, Sir. Can I at least send the ships that have been assembled to Kriosian space?"

"I think that would be prudent, Bill," Hathaway said. "Tell you what I will do. I'll put all starships within fifty light-years of Krios on standby alert. Just in case."

Parker nodded with a half-smile. "Thank you, Admiral."

Hathaway saw an unasked question in Parker's facial expression. Over the years, Bob Hathaway had learned how to read people very well. "I suspect that you want to lead this battle group. Am I right?"

Bill Parker cocked his head with a puzzled look. He wondered if Admiral Hathaway was part Betazoid. "Are you a mind reader, Admiral?"

Hathaway laughed. "Not at all, Bill. I know what kind of man you are. I know I would want to command the mission if I were in your place." He considered Parker's wishes. He considered the importance of the mission and its outcome. "I'll talk with Admiral Sanol. I think that I can convince him to cut you loose to do this."

"Thank you, Admiral." Parker snapped to attention.

Hathaway offered his hand to the younger man, who grasped it firmly. "Good luck, Bill."

Parker nodded. "To us all, Admiral."



The *K'Vort*-class cruiser orbited Krios. The Klingon captain, Torak, led Captain Leeson through the dark corridor of the battleship. Neither said anything until they stopped in front of the door of the war room. "The envoy is in this room, Captain," Torak stated sharply as he entered the security code on the control panel.

The door slid open and Leeson walked into the room. She turned to see that Torak did not follow her through the doorway. "Thank you, Captain," she said. The door slid shut and she turned to see a man standing near the window, looking out. For several moments, the room was silent. Leeson, feeling uncomfortable with the silence, finally spoke. "I'm Captain Melanie Leeson. I understand that you have some information about the alien attacks."

The man slowly turned to face Leeson. His face was obscured by the shadows and low light levels. He stepped forward so that Leeson could see his face.

Leeson's mouth opened, but the words did not come out. The shock of seeing the man before her had temporarily overcome the ability to use her vocal cords. As much as she wanted it to be him, her eyes did not believe that it was...but her heart knew.

"Hello, Mellie," the man said with a smile.

The man appeared to be Kriosian. But despite the spots on his skin and the increased amount of gray hair, Leeson recognized the man who had returned from the dead. "Daddy?" Her voice trembled. "Is it really you?"

"It's really me, sweetheart," Gregory Leeson replied with outstretched arms.

Melanie rushed to her father and embraced him, not wanting to let go. "Oh, Daddy..." She started to cry, something that did not come easy for the well-trained officer. She had always felt the necessity of keeping her emotions under tight control. Now, the tears flowed freely, and she did not try to suppress them.

"I've missed you, Mellie," her father said.

"And I've missed you, Daddy, but..."

“I know. You must have a thousand questions,” he interrupted. “I’m sure you’re wondering why I faked my death and have been away all these years.”

Melanie felt the warring emotions within her. She was very glad to see her father alive, but anger toward him and her mother for keeping the truth from her started to build. Fortunately, the joy of knowing that her father was alive and with her overshadowed the anger. “I want to know everything, Dad, but I want to tell you first that I love you. No matter what reasons kept you away, I truly love you.”

Greg Leeson’s eyes started to water. He too felt the rush of various feelings—guilt, happiness, rage—that had separated him from his family. “I’m sorry that I’ve been away, not able to let you know that I was alive,” he said, still holding onto his daughter. “I’ve been hiding to protect not only myself but also to protect you, your mother, your brother and sisters.”

Melanie pulled away and looked into her father’s eyes, searching for answers that might show on his face. “I don’t understand.”

“Sit down, Mellie, and I’ll tell you what happened.



It’s been several years, but my memory is so clear about the incident that it haunts me almost daily. The Tholian ambassador had come aboard the *Repulse*. We were transporting him to Starbase 12 for treaty negotiations. Security was tight due to the Gorallan threat. The Gorallans and Tholians were on the brink of war at that time and the Intel reports indicated that an attempt might be made on the ambassador’s life.

I was on duty outside of the ambassador’s quarters when I received a call from the duty officer. He told me to report to the security office. Of course, I informed him that I was the only one guarding the ambassador, but he told me that my relief was on the way. He said that I was needed immediately and that a few minutes wouldn’t matter since the internal sensors were being monitored.

I got to the security office and the duty officer—Lieutenant Rhineholt, I think it was Rhineholt—claimed that he didn’t call me. Communications records showed no call was ever made, but I’m convinced that the records were altered.

“Rhineholt lied?”

Melanie’s father shook his head. “I don’t think so,” he replied. “I think his voice was artificially reproduced.”

“So, what happened?” Melanie asked her father.

I rushed back to the ambassador’s quarters. I was just in time to be thrown against the wall by the explosion. The Tholian ambassador was nearly killed due to my “dereliction of duty.”

Obviously, I had been set up.



“Who would set you up? The Gorallans?”

“It was made to look like the Gorallans, but they had nothing to do with it,” Greg said. “There’s a group of people who think they serve the Federation by engaging in, shall we say, special methods that are not sanctioned by Starfleet...or the Federation Council.”

Melanie looked at her father. She focused on his voice, wanting to believe every word. She knew of whom her father spoke of. “Section 31,” she let the name out in a whisper.

Greg Leeson was surprised that his daughter knew of the people that had ruined his life. “You’ve had dealings with them?”

“Not really,” she replied. “I’ve heard enough about them to know what they’re capable of.”

“They’re capable of *anything*.”

Melanie stood up and walked toward the viewport. She stared out the window, focusing on the planet below. “You’ve told me who. Now tell me why.”

“They wanted to recruit me into their little group,” The elder Leeson stated. “I wanted nothing to do with them. So, when I refused, they set me up to get me out of the way.”

“So you disappeared,” Melanie said.

Gregory Leeson nodded. Sadness emanated from his face. “I was afraid,” he said. “Not for myself, you understand. I was afraid that they might hurt your mother...or you.” He walked toward his daughter and placed his hand on her shoulder. He contemplated the look in Melanie’s eyes. “I’m so sorry, honey. I wish I could be with my family again, but the danger is...”

A tear ran down Melanie’s cheek. “I understand, Dad,” she said, forcing a smile. “I’m just glad that we have this time.”

Greg returned his daughter’s smile, the wrinkles around his eyes stretched as he did so. “I am too, honey.” He hugged his daughter tightly and held her the way he did when she was a little girl, but he knew that his little girl had grown up. She had responsibilities of her own and he was here to point her in the right direction.

“Listen, honey,” Gregory Leeson said as he slowly released Melanie and placed his hands on both shoulders. “You can’t let anyone know that I was here or that I’m alive.”

“I understand, Dad.”

Greg Leeson nodded, acknowledging that he could trust his daughter to be silent. “I want to spend more time with you, but I need to let you know why I’m here. I came to give you information on the alien attacks.”

“How would you know about that?”

“Kogath keeps me informed and I heard stories on Krios about an ancient race that once ruled over several planetary systems in this part of the galaxy. The stories mentioned Krios as one of those planets that had been subjugated, so I did some research.” The father looked at his daughter, a sense of urgency was in his eyes. “Fortunately, the Kriosian archives go back several millennia. Based on what I’ve read, I think this alien empire is trying to reassert itself.”

“You know who they are?” Leeson asked her father.

Greg walked to a nearby desk and picked up a Kriosian data storage device, which was similar to a PADD. He handed it to his daughter. “Everything that I could find in the archives is right here. They’re called the Chulak.



Brak entered Turkla’s private sanctuary. The room was adjacent to the control room of the attack ship. “You sent for me, Commander? I am here to serve,” he said in the formal tone that subordinate officers address their superiors.

The Chulak nodded to his second-in-command. “Sit down, Brak.”

Brak hesitated and observed his superior before relaxing his posture. It was unusual for Turkla, or any commander, to invite a subordinate to be seated in his presence. He sat down, facing the commander.

“I find my thoughts drifting back to when I was a child,” he said. “I remember when my father would tell me stories of the glorious empire that our ancestors ruled.”

“I have also heard stories, my lord,” Brak said. “Our empire will rise again. Your leadership will assure our victory.”

Turkla allowed himself to smile slightly. It was a thing rarely seen by his subordinates. “Nothing is sure, Brak. But should we win the day, it will be Lord Mokdor’s victory.” Turkla stood and walked to the window to peer into the void of space. “And if we are not victorious, the defeat will be mine.”

Brak understood what his commander meant. The Chulak culture tended to reward the supreme leader of the empire for his victories, but the defeats would always belong to those who served him. “There will be no defeat, my lord,” Brak said with confidence.

“I trust that you are correct, Brak, but the empire’s former glory may never shine as it once did.”

Brak stared at the floor, realizing that his commander was right in his assessment of the empire. It had been a strong empire once, controlling dozens of star systems. But the interference of the *others* changed everything. Brak doubted that he would see the glory restored to its fullness. He would have to be content with the return to his ancestor’s homeworld.



Paul Edwards and Victor Jacobs entered the transporter room just as their captain stepped out of the chamber. She looked up, seeing the relief that she had returned safely.

“Welcome back, Captain,” Edwards said. “I trust everything went well?”

Leeson smiled. “Yes, better than I hoped,” she replied. “I would like a staff meeting in thirty minutes to discuss the information that I received. It’s very illuminating.”

“Aye Captain,” Edwards said before turning to leave the transporter room. “Oh,” he said turning back to face his CO. “We received word that Admiral Parker is leading a battle group to rendezvous with us. They should be here in thirty-three days.”

“Good,” Leeson said. “I think that we’ll need them. The information I received indicates that.”

Paul Edwards understood Leeson’s meaning. “I’ll inform the senior officers to be ready in thirty minutes,” he said and exited the room.

Jacobs waited until the first officer had left. He turned to face Leeson. “There’s something different about you, Melanie,” he stated.

Leeson shrugged and started toward the door. It slid open and Leeson, followed by Jacobs entered the corridor. “I’m the same person that I was before going over to the Klingon ship.”

“Maybe, but you seem much happier,” Jacobs said as the pair walked through the corridor.

“Of course I am, Vic,” Leeson replied, trying to subdue the emotional signal that seemed to be flowing from her. “I was given information that will help us get to the bottom of the attacks. And stop them.”

“I think there’s something else.”

Leeson shook her head. “Just your imagination, Vic,” she said, entering a turbolift.

The security officer knew his captain well enough to know that there was something she was hiding. His instincts told him so. But he decided not to push the issue as the turbolift door closed behind him.

Chapter Ten: Storm Clouds on the Horizon

Melanie Leeson entered the conference room. All her senior officers were already seated around the table. She walked to the table and stood behind her chair. “Ladies and gentlemen. We have been given some information that will help us stop the attacks that have been perpetrated on the Federation and Klingon Empire.”

The room remained silent as all eyes were on the captain. “These aliens are called



the Chulak,” Leeson stated. “More than two millennia ago they controlled an empire that covered portions of the current Klingon and Romulan controlled areas of space, including our present location.”

Leeson stepped away from the table and faced the monitor on the wall.

“Computer, display

spatial map Alpha-Beta two and overlay Chulak borders.”

The dark monitor came to life, showing the requested map. Each one of the *Trailblazer*’s senior officers focused their attention on the display. “The Kriosian history archives tell of another space-faring race that moved in and brought an end to the Chulak Empire, forcing them to flee,” Leeson said.

“And who were the ones that drove the Chulak away?” Commander Paul Edwards asked.

Leeson returned to the table and sat down. She pressed a button on the control panel in front of her, turning the wall monitor off. “The archives only refer to them as ‘the others.’”

“No other information, Captain?” Doctor Keegan asked.

“When the Chulak left, according to the Kriosian records, they said that one day they would return to reclaim what they had lost,” Leeson replied.

“It appears that they are making good on their promise,” Lieutenant Commander Jacobs said. “So, what’s their strategy?”

Commander Shrev shifted in his chair. “If I may, Captain?”

Leeson nodded. “Go ahead, Commander Shrev.”

“From a strategic point of view, the Chulak probably would want to return to their homeworld. That is if they intend to rebuild their empire.”

“I agree, Captain,” Edwards stated. “It would be a great morale booster to return to their own planet first.”

Leeson also agreed. “That’s what I would do,” she said.

“And where is their homeworld, Captain?” Lieutenant Commander Jaeger said.

“Chula is in what is now Klingon space, the second planet orbiting B’Moth,” Leeson said. “And they won’t have an easy time taking it with half a million Klingons living there.”

“The Klingons won’t just give it up,” Edwards said.

“The question is why have they been attacking Klingon and Federation targets.” Doctor Keegan said. “And why were the Romulans attacked?”

“I suspect they wanted to drive a wedge between the Romulans and Klingons to make it easier for them to move in,” Leeson said. “And Starbase 36 was probably destroyed because of its proximity to their planet.”

“What about Starbase 117?” Edwards asked.

“And the Harrell Shipyards at Catulla?” Lieutenant Commander Jaeger said.

Leeson shook her head. “I’m not sure,” she said. “I’d like to talk with a Chulak to find out why.”

“Then our priority should be to capture one of their ships and interrogate the crew,” Jacobs said.

Leeson smiled at the security chief. “And how do we do that, Vic?”

“They’re heading for their homeworld if they aren’t already there,” Jacobs said. “We send in a strike team and catch them off guard.”

“With their stealth technology, we’ll be the ones caught off guard, Mister Jacobs,” the first officer stated. “We’ve got those cameras so that we can see them, but without sensor contact, we couldn’t lock weapons on their ships.”

“With respect Commander, Captain, I have an idea that could work to our advantage,” Lieutenant Herron Jaxx said.

Everyone in the room stared at the OPS officer. “Go ahead, Lieutenant,” Leeson said. “Let’s hear it.”

Jaxx’s skin turned a darker blue as he became the center of the discussion. “Well, I was thinking that we could modify the photon torpedoes by taking out the warheads and replacing them with magnetic sensor tags,” he said. “We detonate the torpedoes close to the Chulak ships and the sensors will cling to their hulls, giving us a way to get sensor lock.”

“How do you suggest we get close enough to their ships to tag them?” Edwards asked.

Jaxx folded his hands and looked at the table. “I don’t know, Sir.”

Leeson thought about Jaxx’s suggestion. “It’s a good plan, Lieutenant,” she said. “You assist Commander Shrev and Lieutenant Commander Petroni in modifying the torpedoes.”

“Aye Captain,” Jaxx replied.

Paul Edwards shook his head. “Photon torpedoes would not be a good delivery system for the sensors, Captain.”

“Why not?”

“We’d lose most of the sensors with the detonation.”

“Captain, I believe we should just beam several of these sensor tags in orbit around their planet and they will attach to their ships as they enter or leave orbit,” Shrev stated.

“Why not do the same thing in orbit around Krios?” Edwards asked. “I don’t think for a minute that the Chulak don’t have at least one ship keeping an eye on us.”

“I’m sure your right, Paul,” Leeson said. She thought about his suggestion. “I’ll talk to Kogath to see if he will authorize that. In the meantime, Commander Petroni, I would like you to start replicating the sensor tags.”

Petroni nodded. “Aye Captain. How many do you want?”

“I’d say about two million per planet should give enough saturation to attach to any orbital ships,” the captain said. “How long to produce that many, Commander?”

“Not more than two or three days with all our industrial replicators working.”

Leeson gave a nod to the engineer. “Make it so,” she said. The captain looked around the room at the other officers. “Any other questions?”

Everyone was silent.

“Okay,” Leeson said. “Let’s get to work.”

The senior staff stood and began to exit the room. Captain Leeson walked toward the large windows that gave a spectacular view of the planet Krios below. “Thanks, Dad,” she whispered.

Unknown to Leeson, someone lurking in the shadows of the access corridor overheard her. The truth that Gregory Leeson still lived had become known.



Admiral William Parker set his cup on the table of the ready room. He had just finished his third cup of coffee—full of caffeine. The captain of the U.S.S. *T’Pol* shook his head.

“What’s the matter, Rich?” Parker asked the starship’s CO.

“We just left Earth three days ago, Admiral,” the man said. “I don’t think you need that much coffee when you should be taking this time to rest while you can. We still have almost a month to go.”

Parker leaned back in his chair. “Sorry Rich. You know how I get when the situation is like this.”

“I know, Sir,” Captain Barnard said. “I’ve served with you long enough to know all your bad habits.”

Parker thought that the captain’s comment was funny. It was true. The two men had served together for many years. Captain Richard Barnard had been Parker’s first officer when the admiral had been the captain of the *T’Pol* a few years before. Now, it seemed like Déjà vu. Only instead of commanding a starship, Parker now commanded a small fleet—one that was heading into harm’s way.

“Will twelve ships be enough, Admiral?” the captain said.

“Four more will join us by the time we get to Krios,” Parker said.

Barnard shook his head in disapproval. “I don’t understand why Admiral Hathaway didn’t put together a larger task force,” he stated. “Especially if these aliens have the upper hand with their stealth ships.”

Parker tried to be offended on Hathaway's behalf. "He did what he could, Rich. He can't justify any more unless the situation shows that they have a vastly superior force."

"And if we find that they do have a superior force, it will be too late to get backup," the captain said.

Parker knew that Barnard's complaint was justified. "We'll just have to make the best of it."

"There's a priority one transmission coming in from Captain Leeson, Admiral," a voice said over the intercom.

"Patch it through, Lieutenant," Parker replied as he turned the monitor on the desk toward him. "Computer, decode the transmission. Code: Parker seven Alpha one."

Captain Melanie Leeson's image appeared on the computer screen. Parker noticed that the captain's face seemed to glow. The admiral took that as a good sign.

"Hello Admiral," Leeson said. *"We've discovered the identity of the aliens. They are called the Chulak. We have reason to believe that they are planning an invasion of the B'Moth star system in Klingon space. It seems that that is their ancestral home. I've attached the ship's logs and a recording of a meeting with my senior officers that explains all the details. I understand that you are leading a battle group to this area, but I would request that you divert to B'Moth. I'm sure that is where we'll confront the Chulak. My concern is the strength of their forces, but we're going to try to find out what we can. If we're lucky, we are going to try to capture one of their vessels and get some information from the crew. It's a long shot, but I don't want you to come in without as much Intel as possible. We don't want to be outgunned."*

Parker paused the recording and looked at Captain Barnard. "Inform the fleet to change course for B'Moth and engage at warp nine."

"Yes Sir," Barnard said and left the ready room.

Parker touched the monitor's control and put his hands together as he listened to the rest of Leeson's report.

"I've talked with Governor Kogath and he has informed the commander of the B'Moth garrison to prepare for an attack. The Klingons will also dispatch a fleet of cloaked ships to the system to keep an eye on any Chulak activities, but we still have to deal with their stealth technology." Leeson smiled broadly, feeling pride for her crew's efforts. *"My people are working on overcoming the Chulak's little advantage."*

Admiral Parker nodded as Leeson continued. He knew that his choice of Leeson to lead the investigation had paid off.

"I'll report any updates to our progress when appropriate. Leeson out."

The monitor turned dark as the image of Melanie Leeson faded.

Parker leaned back in his chair. He was pleased with the way everything was going. He touched a button on the desk. "Computer, record and code the following reply," he said. "Hello, Captain. I received your message. You and your crew are doing a bang-up job. The information that you have provided is invaluable," he said. "I will forward the results of your investigation to Starfleet Command. Hopefully, I can convince Admiral Hathaway to divert more starships to your area. Just in case. Parker out."

Parker ended the recording and pressed the emblem on his chest. "Captain Barnard, please put me in touch with Starfleet HQ. I want to talk with the Chief of Operations."

"Yes Sir."



"Okay, Bill. I'll see what I can scrounge up, but don't get your hopes up," Admiral Hathaway told the holographic image of Admiral Parker that stood before him. "I'll see what other starships are available and get them to the B'Moth sector as soon as possible."

"Thank you, Admiral," Parker said. "I could use as many additional ships as you can give me."

"If I can send more, I will."

Hathaway noticed Parker's sigh and his shoulders drop. "For whatever help you can give, I appreciate it, Sir."

"Good hunting, Bill," Hathaway said.

Parker nodded and smiled. His image disappeared.

"Where am I going to get extra ships?" Hathaway said to himself. He thought a moment; then an idea hit him. "Donato," he said.



Captain Anthony Donato stirred in his sleep. His mind could not focus, but in his slumber, he struggled to identify the irritating sound that assaulted his ears. Donato kicked off his covers as the continuous beeping became clear and he finally recognized the sound of the communications panel informing him that someone on the bridge was trying to get his attention. He sat up on the edge of his bed and rubbed his eyes. "Donato, go ahead bridge," he said groggily.

"Sorry to bother you at this hour, Sir, but Admiral Hathaway needs to speak with you," the voice of the night shift communications officer stated.

Donato shook his head as he looked at the chronometer on the desk across the room. He stood and slowly staggered to the monitor on the wall. "Better not keep the Chief of Operations waiting, Lieutenant," he said. "Pipe him through."

The image of Admiral Robert Hathaway appeared on the monitor. The admiral's left eyebrow rose as he noticed Donato's appearance. "Did I catch you at a bad time, Captain?"

Donato yawned and ran his fingers through his already disheveled hair. "Sorry Admiral for my appearance, but it's 0320 hours here," the tired captain stated, not trying to hide the irritation in his voice. "What can I do for you, Sir?"

The image of Hathaway, seated behind his office desk, leaned back slightly. "What's your status, Captain?"

"We just completed our shakedown cruise yesterday, Sir," Donato replied. "We are en route to Yed Post to pick up a science team for transport to Kel-J'Na."

"I'm going to delay your trip to Yed Post," Hathaway stated. "I want you to divert to the Klingon Empire, to the B'Moth system."

Donato, fully awake now, stared at the admiral in disbelief. "That's quite a distance, Admiral," he stated. "May I ask why?"

Captain Donato noticed the admiral's image reach for a panel on his desk. "I'm transmitting the details in a secured file to your ship's computer now," Hathaway said. "You'll need your Alpha one clearance to access it."

Donato nodded his head toward the picture on the monitor. "May I ask the nature of this diversion, Sir?"

"Just read the file, Captain Donato," Hathaway said. "It explains everything. Good luck."

Anthony Donato rubbed his eyes as the image of Admiral Hathaway faded from the screen. He walked back to his bed and lay down. "Donato to bridge."

"Bridge, Sahami here."

"Set course for B'Moth in the Klingon Empire, Commander," Donato said.

There was a brief pause. "What about our rendezvous at Yed Post, Sir?"

"There will be a slight delay on that, Commander. I'll fill you in tomorrow," the captain stated. "Donato out." He closed his eyes. "The file can wait till morning," he said to himself as he began to drift back to sleep.



The battle group of starships, under the command of Admiral Parker, sped toward Klingon space. Twelve ships approaching their destiny.

Admiral Parker entered the bridge of the starship *T'Pol*. He walked toward the center of the bridge. Captain Barnard turned in his chair to face Parker. "You needed to see me?"

Barnard stood to face his superior officer. "We received word from Admiral Hathaway," he said. "The *Oceana* has been dispatched to B'Moth."

Parker smiled. He knew what kind of firepower, if needed, the *Oceana* would bring to the enemy. "Contact the *Trailblazer*," he said. "Inform Captain Leeson of the good news."



Mokdor, lord of the Chulak race, stood on the platform that allowed him to tower over each one of his subjects—more than three thousand of them. The large room was filled to capacity, and all but a skeleton crew left to operate the command ship were present in the great hall of Chula to hear their leader.

The hair ridge on the top of Mokdor's head rippled as if a gust of wind had blown, but no wind was found within the confines of the enormous space vessel. Mokdor's pride and arrogance was the wind. He gazed down, observing that his people showed proper respect before addressing them. His sharp teeth dripped with excitement as he smiled hideously. "People of Chula," his voice boomed throughout the great hall. "Remember this day, for this is the day that we have long-awaited. The ancient enemy no longer pursues us. What they took away centuries ago is about to be ours once again."

The crowd cheered their leader with anticipation of his next words. Mokdor held up his talon-like hand to quiet his people.

"We have created dissent among the great powers of this region and eliminated a base that could have threatened us," Mokdor continued. "But now is the time. Our fleet has congregated to this place for one purpose—our return to the home of our ancestors."

The room filled with cries of triumph. It was a mighty roar echoing throughout the ship so that those in the control room could hear the vibration of sound seven decks away.

Lord Mokdor surveyed the cheering crowd with perverted joy. He silenced them again. “Today is the day, my people, that signals the rebirth of our empire,” he stated. “The storm clouds have gathered. And like a storm, we shall advance on those who have infiltrated our world, destroying and washing them away.”

Once again, the cheers of the assembly erupted. The crowd of Chulak expressed a mixture of joy and anger as their impatience to return to their ancestral home grew with each word spoken by their leader.

Mokdor’s excitement grew as well as he basked in the ovations from his subjects. He let the loud display continue without silencing them. He waited as the roar of the crowd died down before giving his final address. With his hair rippling even faster than it had previously, Mokdor opened his mouth once more to speak. “Now is the time for the storm to strike. Let us take back what is rightfully ours for Chula is reborn!”

With saliva dripping from his fangs, Mokdor accepted the praise of his people—the storm that he set in motion.

Chapter Eleven: The Chulak

“What’s going on, Paul?” Captain Melanie Leeson asked as she entered the bridge.

Paul rose from the captain’s chair and turned to face his CO. “Our starboard cameras have zoomed in on a small ship that looks very much like the one that Shrev and I went up against a couple of weeks ago.”

“Can you determine their range?” Leeson asked as she sat in her chair.

“I can’t be certain. Commander Shrev?”

The Andorian looked intently at his console. “I estimate nine hundred to twelve hundred kilometers, Captain,” Shrev stated without taking his eyes off the alien ship’s image on the monitor. “I’m sorry, but I cannot be more precise.”

Leeson pressed a touchpad on the armrest of her chair. “Bridge to engineering.”
“*Engineering. Petroni here.*”

“It’s time to test those sensor tags Commander,” the captain said. “Commander Shrev will feed you the coordinates for beaming.”

The chief of security looked at Leeson. “As I said before, Captain, I cannot give precise coordinates,” he said with a hint of irritation.

Leeson overlooked the tone that Shrev had used, realizing that she would feel just as upset with the situation in his shoes. Then again, she realized that Shrev had never displayed frustration before. He was bothered by something and Leeson made a mental note to talk with him when circumstances permitted. “Best guess, Commander.”

Shrev frowned and looked back to the monitor. He began to tap in the coordinates of where he thought the Chulak vessel would be. But his assessment was based purely on a visual image without sensors to confirm it. And estimating distances in the void without sensors was near impossible. He hit the send touchpad to transmit the information to the chief engineer.

Only a few seconds passed when Lieutenant Commander Petroni’s voice spoke through the intercom again. “*Transport complete, Captain.*”

“Now let’s see if we’ve caught anything,” Leeson whispered more to herself than to those on the bridge. “Lieutenant Jaxx, activate the sensor tags and show them on the main viewer.”

“Aye Captain,” Jaxx replied from the OPS station.

Leeson, the entire bridge crew, watched the large screen that dominated the forward wall. Dozens of red dots appeared, overlapping the image of space. “Magnify,” Leeson said. A few of the red dots began to move in unison. “We’ve got them!”



The alien attack vessel *Garken* kept a synchronous orbit above the capital of Krios, maintaining a relative position to the Federation starship. Rek, the commander of the Chulak ship, peered at the image of the starship that appeared on the viewer. “I wonder what they are like, these humans,” he said to his second-in-command.

“Does it matter, Commander?” Volnar asked. “They are the enemy. That should be enough for us to know.”

Rek cocked his head to one side. He regarded his second with amazement. How could someone be so numb to the welfare of another? Had Lord Mokdor poisoned the minds of the Chulak that much? “Why are they the enemy, Volnar?” he asked. “What makes them our adversaries?”

“The supreme commander says that it is so, Sir,” Volnar replied. “I am not prepared to question him. Are you?”

Rek smiled, baring his pointed teeth. “No Volnar, I’m not,” he stated. “We are creatures of duty. And I will do mine according to the will of *Lord Mokdor*.”

“Commander,” one of the Chulak crewmen interrupted. “A flash of energy appeared directly in front of us, Sir. There are multiple small objects in our path.”

“Analyze,” Rek ordered.

“The objects appear to be some type of sensing devices with a magnetic base, Sir.”

“Raise shields and bring weapons to bear,” Rek said.

“Several of the objects have attached themselves to the hull, Commander,” Volnar informed his commander. “Should I target the starship?”

“Lock weapons and fire!”

The Chulak ship shook as consoles erupted in sparks and flame. The aliens nearly lost their balance as the ship rocked again and again.

“Weapons and shields are offline, Commander,” Volnar said with panic in his voice. “We are caught in their tractor beam, Sir.”

Rek surveyed the battered control room and injured crew. He looked intently at his second. “Prepare for self destruct, Volnar,” he stated coldly.

Volnar stared back at his commander. “One last duty to perform for the honor of Chula, Sir.” He rushed to the defense console and brushed the burned metallic debris off its surface. After entering several commands on the keypad, Volnar looked back to his superior. “Awaiting your final order, Commander Rek.”

He looked at his crew one last time. Although the Supreme Commander would consider it weakness, Rek felt a deep sense of regret for the impending deaths of those who had loyally served with him. The hue of his gray skin darkened as he prepared to give the final order. “Computer, activate self-destruct sequence. Authorization Rek Noland Chu.”

Rek waited for the explosion that would end not only his life but also the lives of his crew. Suddenly, he felt a strange sensation. It was like being engulfed in pure energy. For a moment, Rek thought that he was amid the blast created by the overload of the main reactor. He closed his eyes for a moment but realized that he did not feel the pain and heat of the destruction of his ship. Perhaps the transition to the next dimension through death's doorway did not involve pain and suffering as he had thought that it would. The Chulak opened his eyes and saw several aliens—humans—pointing energy weapons at him and the other five members of his crew.

“Welcome aboard,” the yellow-haired man, who led the humans, said with a hint of sarcasm.



Captain Melanie Leeson approached the security guard that stood watch outside the *Trailblazer's* brig. The young man, he couldn't have been more than twenty, snapped to attention as soon as he noticed his captain. “As you were, crewman,” Leeson said. “Any word from Commander Jacobs?”

The guard turned to face Leeson. “Commander Jacobs has not been seen or heard from since he went in thirty minutes ago, Sir,” the young crewman said.

“Okay, open it up, crewman.”

“Aye Captain,” he replied as he turned to enter the security code on the locking panel.

The doors parted, allowing Leeson to enter the brig. She walked briskly toward Jacobs, who stood outside of the first of four cells. “What have you found out, Mister Jacobs?” she asked.

Jacobs turned to face Leeson. “They're not exactly being cooperative, Captain,” Lieutenant Commander Jacobs said. “They won't tell me their names, which one is in command, nothing. They won't even accept medical attention for their injured.”

Leeson nodded. “Very well,” she said. “If they don't want to cooperate, we can have the Klingons use their mind sifter to pull the information directly from their brains.”

Jacobs did a double-take and smiled at his captain. “That could be messy, but it'll get the job done, Captain.”

“There wouldn't be much of a mind left,” Leeson replied.

“You can do what you want with us, Captain,” one of the Chulak barked. “It will do no good.”

Leeson turned toward the cell. “You must be the man in charge,” she said. “It might interest you to know that our people disabled the self-destruct system on your ship and are tearing it apart for answers to why you have attacked our facilities.”

“You are wasting your time, Captain,” the Chulak stated, baring his teeth. “Your people will find nothing.”

Leeson turned to Jacobs. “Remove this one and take him to my ready room.”

Jacobs motioned for one of two of his security guards to move close to the cell. They drew phasers, one pointed toward the “leader,” the other at the other alien crewmen. Jacobs looked back toward the other man who sat behind the master console a few feet away. “Chief, lower the force field,” he said. Jacobs pulled out his phaser and pointed it to the one that walked out of the cell. “Take it nice and slow.”

The force field re-engaged after the alien cleared the cell entrance. Leeson watched the gray alien lower his head in defeat. “Come along peacefully,” she said in an authoritative voice.

Leeson, followed by the alien, followed by Jacobs and one of his security crewmen, left the brig and strode toward a turbolift station several feet away. The captain stepped back against the wall to allow the alien to pass. She began to walk beside him. “I have no intention of harming you or your people,” she said, “but your people have made several unprovoked attacks on the Federation and our allies. I want to know why.”

The Chulak commander looked into Leeson’s eyes as they continued walking. He tried to determine what form of torture this human would put him through. He knew that he could withstand any form of pain inflicted on him, but he suspected that this female would not follow through on her threat. Not that he considered her incapable of violence—she seemed to be strong, for a female—but his instincts told him that she was...bluffing, as the humans say. The commander would not, could not betray his people. Even if he did not agree with Mokdor’s orders to attack people who had done nothing to the Chulak. “Do I understand you correctly, Captain, that you do not plan to hand us over to the bone heads?” he asked, confidence returning to him. “Our minds are not to be...sifted?”

Leeson smiled at her captive. “That’s right,” she replied. “My people don’t use torture to get information, Commander Rek.”

Rek stopped, his mouth opened to reveal his confusion. “How do you know my name?”

“My people broke the computer codes on your ship,” she stated. “We found quite a bit of information about you and your crew, but the official records don’t tell me *why* these unprovoked attacks took place.”

Rek considered the human’s position. It would not be a betrayal to answer her question. Her people did have a right to know. He nodded as he made his decision. “I will answer *that* question, Captain,” he said, “because the answer does not compromise our operations. Is there somewhere that we can talk other than in a public corridor?”

Leeson pointed to the turbolift at the end of the corridor. “This way,” she said. As Leeson, Jacobs, the security guard and their *guest* started walking, the captain’s communicator chirped. “Leeson here,” she said as they all continued to walk through the corridor.

“This is Petroni, Captain. I have an update for you.”

“Just a moment, Commander,” Leeson said as she stopped. “I’ll be along in a few minutes, Mister Jacobs.”

Jacobs nodded. “Yes, Captain,” he said as he led the guard and Commander Rek into the turbolift.

Leeson waited until the lift door closed. She tapped the badge on her uniform to reactivate the transmission with the chief engineer. “Go ahead, Commander.”

“The Chulak ship is badly damaged, but I think we can learn a lot about their stealth technology.”

The edges of Leeson’s lips moved in an upward direction ever so slightly. “Can we adapt their technology to one of our shuttles?”

“It might take some time, but I think so, Captain.”

Leeson pressed a button on the turbolift control panel to call the next car. “Good,” she said. “Get to work on it right away, Commander.”

“*Aye Captain.*”

The turbolift doors opened and the captain stepped inside. The lift sped her to what would hopefully be a productive interrogation.



“Our leader wanted to test our stealth technology before the main attack,” Rek stated as he sat in front of Leeson’s desk. “That was the purpose of the attack on your ship construction facility...and the one on the first interstellar base.”

“I guessed as much,” Leeson replied. “But why the attack on the Romulan convey? Why the attack on the Klingon governor’s residence on Krios?”

Rek hesitated. “Our leader decided to create an atmosphere of discontent among the most powerful empires in this part of the galaxy. He expected that each of your governments would blame the others and the alliances would be broken.”

“And while we prepared for war with each other,” Leeson interjected, “your people could quietly infiltrate Klingon space and retake your world.”

Rek lowered his eyes to gaze at the floor. “Yes,” he whispered.

Leeson saw a glimmer of remorse in the features of the alien who sat across the desk from her. She decided to take advantage of Rek’s current emotional instability. “Commander, tell me why you felt it necessary to reclaim your former world by force,” she said. “You could have tried a diplomatic solution.”

Rek looked up, his eyes pleading. “Lord Mokdor made the decision,” he said. “He is our leader and must be obeyed without question.”

“That doesn’t answer my question, Rek,” Leeson said with blunt force to her voice. “Do you realize how many senseless deaths your people caused?”

Rek shook his head. “I regret the suffering that we have caused,” he said with genuine sadness. “But you must understand that Mokdor must fulfill his destiny to reclaim Chula.”

Leeson stood and leaned forward, the palms of her hands placed on the desk to support her. Her face came within a few inches of Rek’s. “Why?”

Rek, feeling intimidated by the human female, backed away slightly. He did not avert his eyes from the Starfleet officers. He remembered the stories that had been told to him since he was a mere chulk’nu in his mother’s arms. “I will tell you.”



Long ago, Chula was the center of a mighty, space-going empire. For seven hundred years the Chulak Empire grew and continued its expansion into space. One system after another fell to the might of Chula until more than a dozen worlds swore allegiance to the Lord Emperor. What choice did they have? The empire flourished with no other race within a hundred light-years possessing the technology to travel outside of their atmospheres, let alone to other stars.

But a day came when *they* came—the others. Where the aliens originated was a mystery that is still unknown after the two millennia since their appearance. The Chulak discovered too late that at least one race existed that had the technology to be a threat to the empire, even to the people of Chula. They came with a hundred ships and attacked from orbit, destroying our major cities and killing millions. Ships that responded from Chula’s colony worlds rescued the survivors. As the Chulak fled their home, the Lord

Emperor declared that one day one of his descendants would lead the Chulak back to the world that had spawned them. Without the promise of retribution, the Lord Emperor would appear weak and his family line would lose the right to rule.

The unknown *others* pursued the Chulak people to the other side of the galaxy, constantly driving us away from our home for two thousand years. The enemy, whoever they were, was all that stood in the way of the Chulak's return. And they ended their pursuit more than a century ago, never to be seen or heard from since. Mokdor's father was the leader of the dispossessed Chulak during that time. It was he who decided that, with the disappearance of the *others*, the time had come to return to Chula. Since the return voyage would take half a lifetime, Mokdor's father appointed Mokdor to be the one to fulfill the vow that the Lord Emperor, his ancestor, had made. And Mokdor, Lord of the Chulak race, had every intention of fulfilling that vow—his destiny—and taking his place as the Lord Emperor of the new Chulak Empire. The fact that Chula was now a planet occupied by bone heads made no difference, for any oath made by an emperor was binding to every member of his bloodline. To not fulfill his destiny would bring shame and ridicule to Mokdor, his father, and all who came before.



Melanie Leeson stood by the transparent aluminum window of her ready room. She stared into the darkness, wondering what kind of culture required its leader to complete a personal destiny even if it meant wanton destruction perpetrated on unsuspecting innocents. She wondered what kind of people the Chulak were. Then she wondered why Rek cooperated to give up information, an act that his people would most likely consider treachery. Why did he agree to help?

The chirping of the door chime interrupted Leeson's thoughts. "Come in," she said as she turned to face the entrance to her office.

The door parted, and Commander Edwards entered. He walked several steps to stand in front of his CO. "Our *guest* is back in his cell, Captain," he said. "Did you get anything useful from him?"

"I'm not sure how useful it is, Paul, but at least I know what the motivation is behind all this."

"And how will that help us, Mel?"

Leeson forced a smile. "I'm not sure that it does, Paul. I'm not sure that it does."

"Then where do we go from here?"

Leeson bit her lip as she played different scenarios through her head. She analyzed the situation and weighed the possible outcomes of each strategy. A look of uncertainty changed to one of determination. "We go to Chula."

Chapter Twelve: Matters of a Personal Nature

Stardate 55502.8

The U.S.S. *Trailblazer*, one of the fastest vessels in Starfleet, sped toward the B'Moth star system—location of the ancient Chulak homeworld. The starship's beauty during warp flight, with the streaking stars as its backdrop, could only be matched by the grace of the flight of an American Bald Eagle native to Earth.

Captain Melanie Leeson knew that each moment brought her closer to her destiny as the ship neared its destination. She sat quietly in her chair, occasionally peering at the chrono readout on the armrest. Her demeanor indicated the anticipation of the next few days.

Commander Paul Edwards, as well as everyone else on the bridge, could see that Leeson was facing an internal struggle. He leaned over to her, whispering. “Why don’t you get some rest, Melanie,” he said to his captain. “It’s two more days to B’Moth.”

Leeson thought about what her XO said and knew that his advice was sound. She felt like some sleep might do some good. “I think I will, Paul. Thanks for looking out for me.” She stood and started toward the port side exit. “You have the bridge, Commander Edwards.”

“Aye, Captain.”

The turbolift doors slid shut as soon as she entered. “Deck six, forward section,” Leeson ordered.

▲▲▲

Lieutenant Ezred Eedo entered the shuttle bay looking for the chief engineer. He saw her exit one of the shuttles and smiled at her as she approached.

Lieutenant Commander Petroni returned the warm smile. “Hey Ezred,” she said.

“It’s getting late, Carmen” Eedo stated. “I thought I would see if you wanted dinner with me.”

Petroni nodded. “I think that would be nice, but I have to get the shuttle modifications finished for the captain.”

“You still have to take time off to eat,” Ezred told her. “And I’m sure that you have members of your department that can work on this without you hovering over them every minute.”

Carmen’s head tilted to one side as she gave a look that said *you’re jealous for my time*. “Are sure you’re only interested in my health?”

Ezred smiled knowingly. “I’m always interested in the mental and emotional health of the crew. And in your case, you need to stop pushing yourself for hours on end without food.”

“I’ll take that as a reprimand, Counselor,” Petroni said.

“Besides, we haven’t spent any time together for...”

“...Too long,” Carmen finished. “Okay, you win. Mess hall? Or the officer’s lounge?”

“How about dinner in my quarters?” Ezred suggested. “I can replicate a nice Italian dish for you.”

“How about an old-fashioned pizza?” Carmen said.

“What’s a pizza?” Ezred asked.

“It’s the best meal that my ancestors ever invented,” Petroni said. “Next to ice cream, that is.”



“Then I look forward to it,” Eedo said as he took Petroni’s hand, leading her toward the shuttle bay exit. Carmen looked at Ezred and spoke to him in her native language. “Penso che stia cadendo nell'amore con voi.”ⁱ

Ezred smiled back at her. “Vi ritengo lo stesso per.”ⁱⁱ

Carmen’s mouth dropped open as she stopped and turned to face the Trill officer. “You speak Italian.” It was a statement rather than a question. “You love me?”

Ezred nodded. “Since the day I met you, Carmen.”

Translation notes

ⁱ “I think that I am in love with you

ⁱⁱ “I feel the same for you.”



From the computer terminal in his quarters, Commander Shrev scanned the information that he had retrieved. During his spare time, which came infrequently, he worked at trying to break the encryption codes that sealed the classified information. The Andorian knew that his attempt to access records sealed by Starfleet was an illegal act, but what he had stumbled across—purely by accident—touched something personal inside. He needed to know if he had done the right thing by executing his father. His father had been tried and convicted of treason by the Andorian government and, according to the customs and traditions of his people, the sentence of death had to be administered by the eldest son to redeem the family of any responsibility for the crime. Now, based on what he had recently discovered, Shrev felt regret concerning the death of his father.

Shrev grabbed a PADD from the alcove above his desk and downloaded the information from the ship’s computer into it. He decided to take what he had discovered to the one other person on the ship who he could share it with.



Melanie Leeson entered her quarters and went directly to the replicator. “Milk. Chilled.” She retrieved the glass as soon as the computer produced it and gulped it down. She placed the glass back inside the replicator alcove. “Recycle.”

The captain had not slept more than a couple hours each night since leaving Krios. The upcoming battle—she was not optimistic that the conflict would be resolved peacefully—occupied her thoughts, keeping her awake. But sleep deprivation began to take its toll and her body refused further pushing. She went to her bed and dropped onto it without bothering to remove her uniform.

Just as she started to doze off, Leeson heard the chirp of the door buzzer. She opened her eyes and rolled out of bed. Standing up, she straightened her uniform tunic. “Who is it?”

“Commander Shrev, Captain. I hate to disturb you, but I need to talk with you about a personal matter.”

Leeson shook her head. *A personal matter.* She knew Shrev well enough to know that he would not bother her when she was off duty unless the matter was an important one. “Come in.”

The door parted and the Andorian officer entered Leeson’s quarters. “I did not want to disturb you, Captain, but I need to speak with you about...your father.”

Leeson’s mouth fell open, but she said nothing for several seconds. The silence was uncomfortably long. “My father?”



Two weeks earlier... (Stardate 55467.2)

The plan had been laid out on the table. Each member of the senior staff knew what he or she had to do.

“Okay,” Leeson said. “Let’s get to work.”

The senior staff stood and began to exit the room. Commanders Shrev and Edwards walked together through the curved corridor toward the exit. Shrev stopped short of the door as it slid open. “Excuse me, Commander, but I forgot to ask the captain about the torpedo yield.”

“I’ll see you on the bridge,” Edwards replied as he continued through the doorway.

The Andorian tactical officer turned and retraced his steps through the corridor, stopping before reentering the conference room. He noticed Captain Leeson standing near the large windows as she gazed at the view of the planet below. That’s when Shrev heard her say, “Thanks, Dad.” He stepped back into the shadows, pondering Leeson’s reference to her father—a man that had died years before. For a moment he entertained the thought that the elder Leeson may not be dead after all and, based on the captain’s expression of gratitude toward her father shortly after a briefing that revealed vital information about the alien attacks, may have been the source of the captain’s information.

Shrev decided to keep his suspicions to himself. He quietly turned and started back through the corridor. He knew that he would have to confront his captain about her father, whether he was still alive or not. But first, he needed to find out everything about Gregory Leeson and the events surrounding his “death.”



Stardate 55503.1

Melanie Leeson handed a cup of water to her tactical officer before sitting in the chair across from the one that he was sitting in. “So, you overheard me thank my father and realized that he is still alive?”

Shrev’s antennae twitched slightly. “I suspected it, Captain, but I needed proof,” he replied. “I have spent much of my off-duty time since that briefing searching Starfleet records concerning your father. I also...”

Leeson sensed the tactical officer’s hesitation. “Go on, Commander. Tell me the rest.”

“I beg forgiveness, Captain, but I accessed classified information concerning your father,” Shrev admitted with remorse.

Leeson felt anger toward the Andorian for sticking his blue nose into her business, discovering the Leeson family secret. She was more concerned that Shrev put his career on the line by illegally digging into classified documents. She forced herself to be calm as she calmly addressed Shrev. “Commander, why would you do something that might get you a court-martial?”

Shrev quickly got out of the chair and stood at attention. “I have no excuse, Captain. I respectfully submit myself for disciplinary action.”

Leeson raised her hand, shaking it. “At ease, Commander,” she said. “Sit down and tell me what this is about. You said it was a personal matter?”

Shrev reluctantly returned to the chair. He stared at his captain, remaining silent for several moments. He realized that the time to reveal his secret had come. “Like you,

Captain, I have a family secret,” he began. “My father was an officer in the Andorian Guard. He oversaw security for one of the highest nobles on our planet.”

Leeson’s anger began to subside as Shrev told his story. She could see the parallel between his father and hers.

“The noble was assassinated by a rival faction—a family feud that began centuries ago,” Shrev continued. “My father failed in his duty and was accused by the government of aiding the assassins.”

“Did he do it?”

Shrev averted his gaze from his CO. “I thought that he did,” he said. “But now I don’t know, Captain. I don’t know anymore.”

“What happened to him, Shrev? To your father?”

Shrev shed a tear as he looked at his captain. “He was convicted of treason...and executed.”

Leeson, being a strong woman who did not want to display the emotion that she now felt, fought back the desire to shed tears with the Andorian officer in front of her. “Don’t hold back, Commander,” she said softly. “There’s something else you haven’t told me yet.”

Shrev stood and walked toward the windows. He stared at the stars streaking toward him. “To redeem my family from my father’s crime, I was chosen to be his executioner.”

Leeson’s mouth opened, but no sound came out as she stared at Shrev standing by the transparent aluminum that allowed the magnificent view of space.

The Andorian turned slowly, instinctively knowing that his captain was watching. “As the eldest son, it was my duty to carry out the sentence,” he said. “Now I regret being the instrument of my father’s death.”

Leeson swallowed hard. “Do you think that he was framed?”

“Framed?”

“It’s an old Earth expression,” Leeson said. “Did someone make it appear that your father was a traitor when he was innocent?”

“I don’t believe so, Captain,” Shrev replied. “My father had been a secret supporter of the family that assassinated the nobleman for years. I think that he was guilty.” Shrev faced Leeson. “Even so, I wish my father was still alive.”

Leeson approached the officer and put her hand on his shoulder. “Why did you tell me this, Shrev?”

“Because no other could understand how I feel, Captain.”

Leeson forced a smile as she patted Shrev on his shoulder. “Thank you for trusting me, Shrev,” she said. “I think we should keep this conversation to ourselves, Commander.”

Shrev reached his hand toward Leeson’s face and touched his index finger just under her right eye, wiping a tear away. “Agreed, Captain. Agreed.” With a nod, Shrev stepped away and started to leave the captain’s quarters. He stopped short of the door sensor’s range. “Captain?”

“Yes, Commander?”

“And what of your father? Was he...framed?”

Leeson nodded. “He was framed,” she said. “And he faked his death to protect his family from those who set him up.”

Shrev understood the sacrifice that the captain's father had made. "An honorable man," he said. He turned and stepped toward the door, which parted to allow him to exit.

Leeson watched until the doors slid shut. "And you are just as honorable," she whispered, speaking of the Andorian tactical officer.



Mokdor stood in the observation room of his ship, gazing on the planet below. He looked upon the homeworld of his ancestors with pride, knowing that *he* was the one chosen to take back Chula. *He* was the one to expel the boneheads and rule. *He* was the one to rebuild the empire to its former glory...and beyond.

A Chulak officer entered the observation room. He pounded his chest in salute to his superior. "Everything is prepared, my lord."

Mokdor turned to face the officer. "Launch the attack," he said. "Send our troops to the surface and kill all the trespassers."



Carmen Petroni took a bite out of the slice of pizza as she stared into Ezred Eedo's eyes. The Trill mesmerized her as she looked at him through the flickering flame of the candle in the center of the table. "Do you like it?"

"The pizza or the time with you?" Ezred asked with his face glowing from the reflection of the candle's light.

Carmen started to blush. "I meant the pizza, but since you brought it up..."

Ezred grinned from one ear to the other. "I can't think of anywhere else that I'd rather be," he said. He reached his hand across the table and took Carmen's hand that was inching toward him as well.

"Me neither," Carmen replied as she gently took his hand. "Why didn't you tell me you knew Italian?"

Ezred shrugged. "I never thought about it," he said. "My previous host was a linguist and studied several languages, including several from Earth."

Carmen stood up, still holding Ezred's hand and lightly tugged to draw him out of his chair. He stood and drew close, placing his arm around her waist. They moved closer to one another. "Fin dove può questo andare, Ezred?"ⁱⁱⁱ

Carmen closed her eyes as she waited for Ezred's lips to make contact with hers.

Ezred's lips drew closer. "Per quanto lo desiderate a, il mio amore."^{iv}

Translation Notes

ⁱⁱⁱ "How far can this go, Ezred?"

^{iv} "As far as you want it to, my love."

"Shuttlebay to Lieutenant Commander Petroni."

Carmen opened her eyes, seeing Ezred stepping back and smiling. She let out a deep breath of frustration as she tapped her combadge. "Petroni here."

"The modifications to the Ramon are complete, Commander."

Carmen rolled her eyes. She noticed Ezred fighting back a smirk. "Thank you, ensign. I'll be there in a few minutes," she said. "Petroni out."

Ezred started laughing. "Being the chief engineer has its disadvantages, doesn't it?"

Carmen stepped toward the Trill and took his hand. They can wait five minutes,” she said as she pulled Ezred in a tight embrace. She closed her eyes once again and felt his lips touch hers.



Stardate 55504.8

Commander Paul Edwards tried to keep up with Leeson’s fast pace as they walked swiftly through the corridor that led to the shuttlebay. “Please, Mel, I think that I should do this,” he said. “I’m the better pilot.”

“You’re the better pilot, but I’m the one that’s responsible for the success of this mission,” Leeson replied.

“With all due respect to a superior officer, you’re place is on the bridge right now.”

Melanie stopped and faced her XO. “Paul, I know the regs. If you remember a few months back, Admiral Parker told you that standard procedures would not be in place.”

Paul nodded. “I remember,” he said. “But I think you’re being stubborn about this one, Mel. If you want this mission to be successful, you need to let the members of your team participate by doing their jobs. In this case, you need the best pilot available,” he said forcefully. “And that’s me.”

Leeson didn’t say anything, but she felt her blood start to boil. *How dare he try to second guess his CO*, she thought. She turned and continued toward the large doors at the end of the corridor, beyond which was the shuttlebay.

The doors parted and the captain, followed by the first officer, entered the bay. They approached Lieutenant Commander Petroni and Lieutenant Jaxx, who were talking outside of the modified shuttle. They turned toward the approaching officers. “The *Ramon* is ready, Captain,” Petroni stated.

Leeson looked over the shuttle in front of her. “Any problems with modifications?”

The stealth generator on the Chulak ship was only slightly damaged when we captured it, Captain,” Petroni said. “My team was able to repair it without much difficulty.”

“And what about the transponder assembly?” Leeson asked. Commander Shrev, Lieutenant Commander Jaeger, and Lieutenant Jaxx had broken the encryption codes and downloaded the entire contents of the captured ship’s main computer, which contained the transponder codes of each of the other Chulak spacecraft—a necessity for the Chulak to keep track of their ships when operating in stealth mode. Now, one of *Trailblazer’s* shuttles had been outfitted with the alien stealth technology.

“I’ve given Commander Shrev the shuttle’s frequency so that he can keep track of it, Captain.”

“Are you ready, Lieutenant?”

“Aye, Sir,” Heron Jaxx stated. “The sensors are on board and ready for deployment.”

“Good,” Leeson said. She turned to face Edwards. “Commander, you will pilot the shuttle and command the mission.”

Edwards was not sure that he heard correctly as he gave a puzzled look to his CO. “Why the change of heart, Captain?”

Leeson stepped toward Edwards and whispered to him. “Because you’re right about this,” she said. “You’re the best person for the job. Thanks for reminding me that the mission is more important than my pride.”

“That’s what a first officer is for,” Edwards said with a touch of humor.

“Get in, tag the Chulak ships, and get out,” Leeson said. “Understood?”

“Clearly, Captain. We’ll be careful.”

“Admiral Parker’s task force will be here in about twenty hours. I want you back by the time the fleet arrives.”

“Aye Captain.”

Leeson stretched out her hand and shook her first officer’s. “Good luck, Paul.”

The first officer nodded and turned to enter the shuttle behind Heron Jaxx. They walked up the ramp and it closed behind them.

Leeson waited until the hatch closed and nodded to the officer behind the control console. She tapped the Starfleet emblem on her uniform as she noticed the atmospheric force field activate and the bay door begin to open. “Leeson to bridge. Take us out of warp.”

The shuttle’s engines came to life and the small craft gracefully left its nest. It passed through the energy barrier and into the vacuum of space. Leeson watched the tiny ship grow smaller as it flew farther from *Trailblazer* and go to warp.

Captain Leeson exited the bay and walked back through the corridor. She planned on getting some sleep before Admiral Parker arrived.

Unfortunately, she heard the familiar communicator chirp that indicated she was needed. “Leeson. Go ahead.”

“Mel, we just heard from Kogath,” Victor Jacobs stated. “The Chulak have landed troops on B’Moth and they’re marching on the Klingon settlement.”

“I’m on my way to the bridge,” Leeson stated and hurried to the turbolift. It had begun.



Chapter Thirteen: A Good Day to Die

Melanie Leeson came out of her ready room for the fourth time in thirty minutes. She looked around the bridge at her officers and crew. She started to turn and reenter the sanctuary of her office when the security officer rose from his station and approached. He leaned toward Leeson and whispered to her. “You’re wearing the carpet thin, Mel. Try to relax.”

“I can’t relax, Vic,” Leeson replied. “Not when I know that a settlement of Klingons is being slaughtered.”

“They’re warriors, Mel. I doubt that they’ll allow themselves to go out without a fight.”

Leeson shook her head. "I feel useless just sitting here." She looked up to the man who had been like an uncle to her since she was a teenager. "Have we heard from Paul and Jaxx?"

"They left just a couple hours ago," Vic said. "They won't make orbit for another ten minutes or so."

Victor Jacobs looked at Leeson and saw the determination in her eyes. He had seen that look before...and knew what it meant. "I see the warp core pulsating, Melanie. Might as well tell me what you're thinking."

"Get me the *T'Pol*. I want to talk with Admiral Parker on a secure channel." With that, Leeson rushed into her ready room, the door sliding firmly shut behind her.

Lieutenant Commander Jacobs went back to the internal security station and punched in the codes that would establish a communications link with Admiral Parker's flagship.



"Our ETA is roughly an hour and twenty minutes, Captain," Admiral Parker stated. "I'd prefer you wait on the rest of us...but I won't make that an order."

Leeson allowed a brief smile as she understood the ramifications of what Parker was saying...without really saying it. "Thank you, Admiral," she said.

"Now listen to me, Melanie," Parker began. "Be careful."

Leeson nodded toward Parker's image on the computer monitor. "We'll keep them busy till you get there, Sir."

The monitor went dark as the transmission closed. Leeson got out of her chair and hurried to exit. She left the ready room and entered the bridge. "Commander Shrev, transmit the sensor tag frequencies to the fleet. CONN, set a direct course for the B'Moth system and engage at maximum warp."

"We're not waiting for the admiral's task force?" Jacobs asked, surprised by the orders that he had just heard.

"We're going to slow down the Chulak advance as much as possible," Leeson replied. "The admiral and his fleet will join us as soon as they can."

"Aye, Captain," Jacobs said reluctantly.

Leeson put her hand on the security chief's shoulder. "We'll be fine, Vic. Now get me a secure channel to the *Ramon*."



Shuttlecraft 5 raced toward the planet known as B'Moth II to the Klingons, Chula to those who claimed it as their ancestral home. The shuttle had been equipped with the stealth generator from the Chulak attack ship that the *Trailblazer* captured several days before, at least it would appear as a Chulak ship on the enemy's sensors. The stealth generator that Chulak vessels employed masked them from the sensors of all other starships, but the Chulak sensors could detect their own ships due to a special transponder built within the generator. Each transponder's frequency allowed the Chulak to distinguish between individual ships within their fleet.

Commander Edwards checked the readout on his console. "Coming up on the B'Moth star system," he said. "As soon as we come out of warp, prepare to target the Chulak vessels and transport the isolar tags onto their hulls."

"Aye Commander," Lieutenant Heron Jaxx replied. "Sir?"

"Yes, Lieutenant?"

“Sensors are picking up debris, along with several dozen Chulak ships, in orbit around the second planet.”

Edwards looked at the Bolian OPS officer. “Can you identify the debris?”

“It appears to be the remains of destroyed starships. Several large chunks of hull plating with charred areas...wait. Some of the hull remains have Klingon markings.”

“Can you tell how many ships were destroyed?”

“At least four ships, based on the amount of debris, Commander.”

Edwards sighed. “We must make sure that we tag every one of the Chulak ships...otherwise, the same fate will happen to the task force,” he said. “Are you ready, Lieutenant?”

“Yes Sir,” Jaxx stated without hesitation. He knew his duty and the importance of making no mistakes on this mission.

“I’m taking us out of warp,” Edwards stated.

The small Federation craft exited warped space and dropped to sublight speed. It approached the fleet of alien ships that orbited the planet. Paul Edwards gracefully parked the *Ramon* below the Chulak command ship. “Do your stuff, Lieutenant,” Edwards said.

“Yes Sir. Locking transport coordinates on the command ship.”

“Energize when ready, Mister Jaxx.”

The Bolian started his task of transporting isolinear tags to the hull of the command ship, then doing the same for the much smaller attack craft that orbited the planet. He was interrupted by the flashing light on his console. “Incoming transmission from the *Trailblazer*, Sir. Code Alpha Seven.”

“On speaker.”

“Report your progress, Paul.”

“We just started attaching the isolinear tags, Captain. I also regret to inform you that we’ve detected the wreckage of...at least four Klingon ships in orbit.”

There was a brief silence from the COM system.

“Understood, Commander. What about the surface attack?”

“One moment, Captain,” Edwards said as he turned to Lieutenant Jaxx. “Mister Jaxx?”

“Scanning now. It looks like the Klingons have been overrun, but they seem to be putting up a fight on the edge of the main settlement.”

“Very well. We are en route and should arrive in about thirty-five minutes. Will you be done tagging the ships by then?”

“That’s sooner than I thought, Captain, but our job will be done before you get here,” Edwards stated. “May I ask if the battle fleet is with you?”

“They’re over an hour behind us. We’ll have to make due until they arrive, Paul. Rendezvous with us in the asteroid belt at 1740 hours.”

“We’ll be there, Captain. *Ramon* out.” Edwards looked at Jaxx. “Well, Lieutenant. Let’s get it done.”

Heron Jaxx nodded. “Aye Sir.”



The Klingon governor scowled at the news that he just heard. “*Chulak dogs*,” he said. “*They will discover the true nature of the Klingon heart, this day.*”

Leeson nodded to Kogath’s image on the main viewer. “Starfleet is on the way, but we’ll have to do what we can until they catch up, Kogath.”

“I’ve called for reinforcements,” the governor stated, *“but they may not arrive in time.”*

Leeson tried to stay optimistic. “They may be late, but I’m sure we can buy the time they need to get here,” she said. “I promise that I will fight the Chulak with honor, Kogath.

Kogath laughed deep from his belly. *“Of that, I have no doubt, little warrior. After all, it is a good day to die.”*

“And the day is not over,” Leeson replied. “I’ll see you soon. *Trailblazer* out.”

The large screen that occupied the front of the bridge changed from Kogath’s image to stars streaking toward the starship. Leeson looked at the empty chair to her right, wishing that Commander Edwards was back on the ship to give his experiential advice. She turned her attention to the left chair, where Commander Shrev manned the tactical console. Admiral Parker had told her that Shrev was a master tactician. She knew it to be true, but the test before him would prove the quality of his abilities. “Commander Shrev?”

“Sir?”

“Are we ready?”

Shrev nodded. “If not, we shall find out in short order, Captain.”

Leeson smiled as she rose from her chair. “I’m going for a walk,” she said. “You have the bridge, Commander.”



Melanie Leeson entered the security section on deck seven. The guard snapped to attention. “At ease, crewman,” the captain said. “Let me into Commander Rek’s cell.”

“Yes Sir,” the security guard said as he drew his phaser and walked toward the cell that housed the alien commander. He reached toward the controls that would deactivate the force field.

Leeson stepped into the cell, the force field reactivated once she did.

“Commander Rek.”

Rek stood from the bunk that he had been sitting on. “Captain Leeson.”

“I wanted to tell you that we’re approaching the home of your ancestors,” Leeson said. “I thought you should know.”

Rek hesitated before speaking. “I wish I could set foot on my homeworld...just once,” he said. “Mokdor would think me weak, but I want to apologize for what my people have done. The surprise attacks were shameful.”

Leeson nodded. “I hope you understand that I can’t let it continue, Commander,” she said. “I must stop Mokdor...if I can.”

Rek realized that the human captain wanted information that could help, but he could not give it even though he knew Mokdor’s thirst for war and power was wrong. “I cannot help you, Captain Leeson,” the gray-skinned Chulak stated. “I respect you. I could possibly call you a friend in another reality.”

“Thank you for your honesty, Commander,” Leeson said. “I...hope that you will have the opportunity to feel the soil of Chula under your feet one day.”

“Excuse me, Captain.”

Leeson turned to see Lieutenant Commander Victor Jacobs on the other side of the force field. “Vic?”

“Sorry to disturb you, but we’re coming up on the B’Moth system,” the security chief stated. “Commander Shrev requests your presence on the bridge.”

“Drop the force field.” Leeson walked out of the cell once the energy barrier disappeared. It reappeared as she turned to face the alien. “I could have called you friend as well.” She turned and left the brig, followed by Jacobs.



Leeson and Jacobs entered the bridge. The security chief sat at his station, replacing the junior officer who previously manned the console. Leeson went straight to the center seat and sat down. “Take us out of warp and set course for the asteroid belt,” she said.

“Aye Captain,” the female ensign acknowledged from the CONN station.

“Melanie,” Jacobs said to get the captain’s attention. “I have a coded transmission from Commander Edwards.”

“On screen,” Leeson ordered.

The main viewer changed from the image of asteroids, which loomed larger as the starship approached them, to the interior of the shuttle *Ramon*. Commander Paul Edwards looked directly at the captain with a slight smile on his face. “*Welcome to the B’Moth system, Captain.*”

“Report, Commander,” Leeson said.

“*Mission accomplished, Captain,*” the first officer stated. “*Every Chulak ship has been tagged.*”

“Good work, Paul. You and Lieutenant Jaxx report to the bridge as soon as you’re back on board.”

“*Aye.*”

The image of the cockpit disappeared, replaced by the exterior of the shuttle approaching. “Activate the sensor tags, Commander,” Leeson said to Shrev who sat to her left. “Ensign Garrity, as soon as the shuttle is aboard, find a nice big rock to shield us from the Chulak sensors.”

“Yes Sir,” the CONN officer replied.

“Captain Leeson?” the Andorian tactical officer said.

“Yes, Commander?”

“Two Chulak ships have broken orbit and are approaching our position.”

“They’ve detected us,” Leeson said.

“Or they’re wondering why one of their ships is heading in this direction,” Jacobs said.

Leeson looked toward the senior security officer and hinted at being amused. “That’s right. The stealth field generator makes the shuttle appear on the Chulak sensors as one of their own.” She looked at the approaching shuttle on the screen. “Full stop, Ensign. Vic, shut down all lighting in areas that have external windows.” Leeson hit the COM panel on the armrest of her chair. “Engineering.”

“*Engineering, this is Petroni.*”

“Carmen, I want the ship to go dark. Can you shut down power to the nacelles without shutting down the warp core?”

“*Yes Captain, but only for a few minutes. Otherwise, the warp plasma has nowhere to go and the transfer conduits will overload.*”

Leeson turned to Commander Shrev. “When will the Chulak ships arrive?”

“Twelve minutes.”

“Can you shut it down for fifteen minutes, Carmen?”

“I think so, Captain. If I reroute some of the plasma through the EPS grid, I can give you the time you need.”

“Make it so,” Leeson said as she closed the COM. “Commander Shrev, arm all weapons and lock on those ships. We’ll give them a little surprise when they arrive.”



The shuttle *Ramon* approached the asteroid field with two Chulak attack vessels following. Commander Edwards knew that the Chulak vessels had more speed than his type 5-B shuttlecraft, but his piloting skills allowed a slight advantage over the alien ships.

“They’re hailing us, Sir,” Lieutenant Jaxx stated. “They want to know why we broke formation.”

“Continue to ignore them, Mister Jaxx,” Edward said. “We’re almost home.”



The two attack ships entered the field of rocks that orbited the B’Moth star. They were only minutes from catching the wayward vessel when the signal disappeared. Suddenly, a beam of energy raced toward the unsuspecting ships, nearly missing the first one.

“Hail the lead vessel,” Leeson ordered.

“You’re on, Captain,” the ensign manning the OPS station stated.

“This is Captain Melanie Leeson of the United Federation of Planets,” she stated with authority. “You are trespassing in Klingon imperial space. I invite you to stand down your weapons and withdraw.”

The closest Chulak ship responded to Leeson’s transmission by firing in the *Trailblazer*’s direction, shearing off chunks of the asteroid that partially hid the Federation starship. Several hundred small shards of rock and natural ores collided with the starship’s shields, which obliterated or deflected the debris.

“I don’t think they want to negotiate, Mel,” Jacobs said with a touch of humor.

“I’ve laid down the gauntlet,” Leeson said. “Lock onto the ship and fire.”

Yellowish red phaser beams fired from the U.S.S. *Trailblazer*, impacting the Chulak’s shields. Several torpedoes, glowing red, followed. The first ship endured the pounding for a few seconds before its shields collapsed. Then a flash of light erupted...and the Chulak vessel was no more.

“Got him!” Lieutenant Commander Jacobs yelled.

“Target the second ship,” Leeson said.

“She’s running, Captain,” Shrev said calmly.

“Pursuit course, CONN. Full impulse,” Leeson said to Ensign Garrity. She hit the COM button. “Engineering. Turn everything back on.”

“Aye Captain,” Petroni replied.

Commander Paul Edwards and Lieutenant Herron Jaxx entered the bridge, each going to their respective stations. Jaxx sat at OPS and smiled at Lieutenant Commander Jaeger seated at the science station directly in front of him. “Welcome back,” the science officer said to the young Bolian.

“Thank you,” Jaxx said.

Leeson turned her head to the right as Edwards sat in the XO's chair. "Good work Commander," she said. "So, what are we up against?"

"About three dozen attack ships and one very big command ship," Edwards replied.

"How big, Paul?"

Paul hesitated. "I've not seen anything come close to its size. I expect an *Intrepid*-class could fit inside its landing bay."

"I estimate two could fit inside," Jaxx interjected.

"Like Kogath said, today *may be* a good day to die," Leeson said.

"Only a Klingon would see things from that point of view," Jacobs said, smirking. "Can't they show a little optimism?"

"I'm detecting eight more Chulak ships breaking orbit and approaching us, Captain," Commander Shrev said.

"Full power to shields, double front," Leeson said, trying to maintain a calm tone. "Target the lead vessel and prepare to fire the phaser pulse cannons. Standby photon torpedoes."

"Aye Captain," Shrev replied.

"Hailing frequencies, Mister Jaxx."

"Frequencies open Captain. All channels."

"This is Captain Melanie Leeson representing the United Federation of Planets," she said. "You are trespassing in Klingon space. You are ordered to break off your attack on the planet and leave this system."

No response.

"You have committed acts of aggression against three major governments in this region of space," Leeson continued. "Unless you stand down, we will be forced to fire upon your fleet."

An image of a Chulak commander appeared on the screen. "*You and the boneheads are trespassing in Chulak space. It is you who will stand down,*" the alien said as his fangs dripped saliva. "*Your vessel has no chance against our fleet. I suggest that you leave immediately if you value your lives.*"

"I think that you have underestimated us, Commander," Leeson said as she nodded to the security chief, who pushed one of the touchpads on his security console.

Leeson smiled as she saw the arrogance on the Chulak's face disappear. "This is your last chance to stand down, Commander."

As anticipated, the image of the alien disappeared, replaced by the image of open space and the approaching vessels. Flanking the Chulak ships were four Klingon vessels and the fifth one in process of decloaking.

"They have not altered course, Captain," Shrev said. "Shall I fire?"

"Not yet. Let's let them make the first move."

Leeson did not have to wait long. The *Trailblazer* shook violently as the enemy ships simultaneously fired their energy beams.

"Shields at ninety-two percent, Captain."

"Return fire."

The starship didn't flinch as it showed its teeth. Phaser beams and torpedoes reached out to smash into the Chulak lead ship. The Klingon starships—four birds of prey and an attack cruiser—opened fire on the other Chulak ships. The enemy vessels

were pounded hard, but their shields seemed to hold. Finally, one of the enemy starships erupted into a fireball.

“Score one for the Klingons,” Jacobs said with a huge grin.

“All but two Chulak attack ships are leaving orbit and heading our way, Captain,” Shrev stated calmly.

“Keep firing at the lead vessel, Commander,” Leeson replied. “We’ll worry about the others when they get here.”

The deck shook as the *Trailblazer* took another volley from the enemy ships. Sparks erupted from several consoles. Ensign Garrity at the CONN fell backward out of her chair as her console exploded when a second salvo struck the Federation starship.

Leeson hit the COMM touchpad on her armrest. “Bridge to sickbay. Medical emergency on the bridge!”

Commander Edwards rushed to the young ensign and checked her pulse. She was unconscious but alive. He then stood and looked at the charred control panel. The controls were useless. “Computer, transfer CONN control to the XO station,” he said as he hurried back to his chair.

“Shields are down to sixty-eight percent, Captain,” Shrev stated.

“Engineering, we need warp power to the shields,” Leeson said.

“*Bridge, this is Petroni. The warp core is offline, Captain. I can divert power from secondary systems to boost the shields and weapons.*”

“Do whatever you have to, Carmen,” Leeson replied. “Paul, take us right down the middle. Full impulse. Mister Jaxx, prepare to lock tractor beam on the lead ship. I want to grab it and slam it into one of the other ships.

“The strain could tear us apart, Captain,” the Bolian argued.

“Not if you go to repulse mode and push it as we pass.”

“Aye Captain,” Jaxx said from the OPS station.

“Captain,” Shrev said to get the captain’s attention. “One of the Klingon ships has been destroyed. The governor’s flagship has been damaged.”

“Kogath,” Leeson whispered. She had no time to worry about her old family friend. She had to maintain the big picture to see the success of the mission.

The deck shuddered once again, tearing Leeson from her private thoughts. The lights flickered several times before going dark.

“Emergency lights,” Leeson ordered. She looked at the OPS officer. “Do we still have power for the tractor beam, Mister Jaxx?”

“Affirmative.”

“Distance to the lead ship?”

“Fourteen point seven kilometers, Captain,” Jaeger replied from the science station.

“Jaxx, activate tractor beam.”

“Tractor beam on,” Jaxx said. “We have a positive lock.”

“Switch to repulse on my command.”

A few seconds passed as the starship closed the gap between itself and the Chulak vessel.

“Now!” Leeson ordered.

The tractor beam shifted frequencies and the Chulak attack ship was pushed away from the approaching *Trailblazer* and it crashed into another one of the alien ships. The

shields of the two ships crackled and sparked as they touched. The light show from the colliding energy shields would have impressed anyone who observed the effect. The shields of both vessels finally collapsed from the strain and the hulls of the two ships made contact, resulting in a massive explosion.

“Got them!” It was Jacobs who uttered the cheer.

“Four others are closings, Captain,” Shrev stated.

“Fire all weapons, Commander. Multiple vector attack patterns.”

Phaser beams lanced out from the Federation starship and photon torpedoes raced toward their Chulak targets. The Chulak ships fired back at the *Trailblazer*, which shook violently by the pounding.

“Shields are down to twenty-one percent, Captain.”

“Evasive action, Paul,” Leeson said as she fought to keep any indication of panic from being heard in her voice. It seemed to Leeson that her first command would be her last.

“Target coming up from behind, Captain,” Jaeger said.

“Shrev, aft torpedoes,” Leeson said. “Fire!”

Three photon torpedoes exited the aft launcher one at a time, each one striking the weakened shields. A Klingon *K’Vort*-class cruiser swooped in and finished the Chulak attack ship off.

“Another ship is coming toward us, Sir,” Jaeger stated. “She’s coming straight for us, course four-seven mark two-one.”

“Evasive. Increase speed to...”

The shaking of the ship interrupted Leeson’s command. Two Chulak ships circumvented the Klingon ship that seconds before aided the *Trailblazer*. The enemy vessels converged on the lone Federation starship, firing their weapons.

Leeson felt the impact of the enemy vessels’ energy weapons as she struggled to stay in her chair. “Report!”

“Shields down to twelve percent, Captain. Phaser generators four and seven are damaged.”

“The Klingons have lost another ship, Mel,” Jacobs stated.

Leeson closed her eyes. *Where’s Admiral Parker*, she wondered. *I always thought the cavalry arrived by this time.* “Paul? Can we escape?”

“I don’t think so,” the first officer said. “The maneuvering controls are sluggish and the best speed I can get out of these engines is one-half impulse.”

Leeson realized that her ship and crew were dying. The best she could hope for would be to take out as many as the enemy ships with her that she could. “Paul, get as close as you can to the most Chulak ships congregated together.”

Edwards guessed at what his captain had in mind. “Is there nothing else we can do, Melanie?”

“Not from where I’m sitting, Paul.”

“Well, I never expected to live forever,” Edwards said. “I at least hoped that I would have had my own command before the end.”

Leeson looked at her exec in the eye, the edges of her lips slightly moving upward. “I wish you had the opportunity, too. You would have made a fine CO.”

Edwards smiled back. “It’s been a pleasure serving with you, Captain.”

The *Trailblazer* shook as it was hit by another round of weapons fire.

“Shields at four percent,” Shrev announced.

Leeson sat up straight in her chair, pride in her crew welling up within her soul. “Computer, activate self-destruct sequence. Code Leeson alpha one.”

“*Executive officer must enter corresponding code before the self-destruct sequence can be enabled,*” the computer’s feminine voice replied.

Leeson looked at her first officer.

Commander Paul Edwards nodded in response. “Computer, enable self-destruct sequence. Code Edwards alpha two.”

“*Self-destruct sequence enabled. Please enter time delay.*”

Leeson paused as she mentally estimated the time it would take to reach the cluster of Chulak attack ships. “Activate self-destruct in forty-seven seconds. Begin countdown...now.”

The *Trailblazer* continued on course for the group of Chulak ships in their path. A good day to die indeed.

Chapter Fourteen: Battle Stations

Admiral Parker sat in the V.I.P. seat to the left of Captain Barnard. His eyes were intently looking at the streaking stars on the large view screen. “What’s our ETA, CONN?”

The junior lieutenant peered at the readouts on his console. “Four minutes, twenty-eight seconds, Admiral.”

“Patch me through to the fleet,”

“Frequency open, Sir.”

William Parker stood and straightened his uniform as he usually did when rising from a seated position. It was a habit that he picked up from his first CO years before. “This is Admiral Parker to all ships,” he began. “In less than five minutes we will exit warp and engage the enemy. The fate of the quadrant may well be decided by our success or failure here today. We must make sure that we do not fail.” The admiral thought about Melanie Leeson and her crew. He wondered what the status of the *Trailblazer* was. “All ships go to battle stations and arm weapons. We’re going to meet the enemy head-on and show them that they have awakened a sleeping giant.”



Mokdor, lord and emperor of the Chulak race, kept vigil over the monitors in the control room of his command ship. He watched as the ground troops continued their assault on the boneheads, who resisted despite their futile effort. Mokdor glanced at another monitor and noticed the Federation starship, wounded and beaten, approach a group of attack ships. The sovereign of Chula admired the tenacity of the human commander who refused to relent and admit defeat. It didn’t matter anyway since the humans had no hope of surviving their assault on superior forces.

“Your Excellency, we have a group of signals approaching the system,” a Chulak officer stated.

“Divert the fleet to intercept as soon as they exit hyperspace,” Mokdor ordered.



Doctor Keegan entered the bridge along with an orderly. They rushed to Ensign Garrity's side and the doctor started to treat her injuries. "Superficial burns to the face and a concussion, but she should be fine," the CMO told Captain Leeson. "I need to get her to sickbay."

He doesn't know that all of us are about to die, Leeson thought. She wondered if she should tell the doctor that he, and everyone on board, only had a few more seconds. Or would it be better to let the doctor meet his end in ignorance? "Just make her comfortable, Doctor," she said.

Keegan picked up on the captain's clue, realizing that the battle was not going well. "Captain?"

"Time, computer."

"Eighteen seconds."

Keegan focused on the main viewer, noticing several Chulak starships growing larger as *Trailblazer* neared its destination. The doctor realized that Leeson had put them on a suicide run. *The situation must be hopeless,* he reasoned. He knew that Leeson was not the type to do something so drastic unless she saw no other alternative.

"Captain, sensors pick up fifteen Federation starships and two squadrons of fighters coming out of warp," Lieutenant Commander Jaeger yelled.

"Thirteen seconds."

"Admiral Parker is hailing us, Mel," Vic Jacobs said.

"Put him on," the captain said as she stood to her feet.

"I bet you were wondering if we would show up for the party, Captain," Parker stated.

"Ten seconds."

"One moment, Admiral," Leeson said. "Computer, abort self-destruct sequence. Leeson omega one."

"Does the executive officer concur?"

"Absolutely," Edwards said.

"The proper security code must be entered. Six seconds."

"Code Edwards omega infinity."

"Self-destruct sequence has been aborted."

Leeson noticed the visual countdown display in the lower-left corner of the main viewer. She turned toward her first officer. "Three seconds to spare," she said with a grin.

"Closer than I like," Paul replied.

Leeson turned her attention back to Admiral Parker's image on the screen. "Glad you could make it, Admiral. We could use some assistance."

Parker nodded. *"Find a safe harbor, Captain. We'll take it from here."*

"Yes Sir," Leeson said as Parker's image faded. She turned to Paul Edwards. "Set course zero-five-two mark seven if you don't mind, Paul. Take us back into the asteroids."

"With pleasure, Skipper," Edwards said in a way that reminded Leeson of Blake Adams—the only man that she had ever loved. She thought it funny that she could now admit that. Maybe coming so close to death forced her to that realization. If she survived this battle, Leeson knew that she would have to contact Blake to find out if he felt the same about her.

The deck trembled beneath Leeson's feet, jolting her back to the situation at hand. She grabbed the armrest of her chair to steady herself. "Shrev?"

"One Chulak ship is pursuing, Captain," The Andorian said as another energy blast rocked the ship. "We just lost our shields."

"Fire aft torpedoes."

Shrev ran his fingers along the console targeting touchpads. "The aft launcher has been damaged, Captain."

The ship rocked again.

"Outer hull breach on decks four and five, section sixteen," Jaxx said in alarm.



"Evacuate those areas and activate emergency force fields as soon as possible," Leeson said.

"Force field generators are down all over the ship," Jaxx said.

"Bridge to engineering. We need emergency power to force fields ASAP."

"I've rerouted most of the systems already, Captain," Petroni said. "I'll see what I can do, but I can't guarantee anything."

"Just give me your best, Carmen, and I'm sure you can find a way to get it done."

"Aye Captain. Petroni out."

The *Trailblazer* sped toward the asteroid field, followed by the attack ship. The alien vessel closed in for the kill when another ship decloaked and swooped in between the Chulak ship and the *Trailblazer*. The timely maneuver protected the Federation starship by taking weapons fire from the enemy craft.

"We're being hailed, Captain," Lieutenant Jaxx stated. "Audio only."

"Patch them through."

"I'll draw their fire away from you," a man's voice said.

Victor Jacobs could not believe his ears. He recognized the voice but knew that it could not belong to the man he thought of when hearing it. The security chief glanced at Melanie Leeson, noticing that she did not appear to recognize the similarity of the voice with her own father's. But Greg Leeson had been dead for several years. It couldn't be him.

The Kriosian ship fired on the Chulak attack vessel as it tried to evade the energy blasts from the enemy ship.

"Take your ship to safety, Captain," the man's voice said over the com system before the transmission ended.

"Continue on our present course, Paul. Best speed," Leeson said.

"Captain." Vic Jacobs' voice had an urgent tone as he quickly stood. "Security force fields have failed in the brig. The Chulak have escaped." He started toward the turbolift. "I've dispatched security teams to protect vital areas."

Leeson stood and hurried to follow the chief of security. "I'm coming with you," she said. "You have the bridge, Mister Edwards."



The Chulak prisoners felt the violent shaking of the starship. Except for one—Commander Rek—the aliens welcomed the imminent destruction that would befall them.

They knew that their deaths meant victory over those who interfered with the retaking of their homeworld.

With each additional blast the lights flickered, then the force fields on the cells failed. The prisoners rushed out to attack the lone security guard behind his panel. The crewman managed to send an alert to the head of security and stun three or four Chulak before they overran him. But the aliens were too many for one man to ward off.

“Stop it,” Rek yelled. But it was too late. One of Rek’s crew had snapped the guard’s neck, killing him instantly.

“Let us aid our people by taking this ship, Commander,” one of Rek’s crew said.

“We will do no such thing,” Rek replied. “Our part in Mokdor’s insane dream is over. Return to your cells!”

The band of Chulak glared at their commander, appalled that he would willingly be a prisoner instead of fighting for his race. One of the crewmen stepped forward, bloodlust in his eyes. “You are a traitor to your race if you do not lead us into battle against these *tashvat!*”

Rek bore his fangs and glared at his subordinate. “Keep your place, *hudvaq*,” he said, spitting out the worst curse one could call a member of the Chulak race. “I am your commanding officer and you *will* do as I say. Or you will die by my hand,” Rek added.

The crewman stood his ground as the other Chulak waited to see what he would do. Some were unsure as they contemplated loyalty to their race versus loyalty to their commander. Rek had always led them with honor, but his reluctance to fight now caused his crew to question his allegiance.

The first crewman glared more intently at Rek. “I will not do as you say, traitor.” With that, he started toward the door that led out of the *Trailblazer*’s detention area.

Rek moved quickly, blocking the door. “Return to the cell...or die.”

The subordinate grabbed Rek and flung him against the wall. Rek staggered but rushed back toward his opponent. He sunk his fangs into the other Chulak’s arm, drawing blood. The other Chulak yelled in pain and struggled to get away from his commander.

The rest of Rek’s crew stood in silence, remaining out of the personal battle taking place. The victor would be the one to whom loyalty belonged. If Rek prevailed, they would return to the cells. Otherwise, they would follow their new commander to take the humans’ vessel.

The subordinate kicked at his commander, inflicting damage to his legs. Rek fell to one knee and received another kick, this time to his midsection. He crumpled over from the pain.

His opponent, breathing heavily, backed away as he straightened his posture. He looked with contempt at his commander lying on the deck. “Go back to your cell if you want,” he said. “The rest of us will take this ship for Mokdor and the Chulak people.”

The former prisoners left the brig...and their one-time commander.



Admiral Parker coordinated the Federation’s attack from the bridge of the U.S.S. *T’Pol*, a *Galaxy*-class starship. “Set course zero-seven-one mark six,” he ordered. “Fire on my mark.”

“The *Foxfire* just took a hit, Admiral,” Captain Barnard stated. “The *Fearless* is coming to her defense.”

“What’s the status of the *Jackson*?”

“Her shields are down and engines offline,” Barnard said. “She’s adrift, but the Chulak are leaving her alone for now.”

“Send the *Triumphant* to protect her in case the Chulak decide to finish her off.”

A blast of energy impacted the *T’Pol*, forcing Parker and Barnard to grip the armrests of their respective chairs. “Damage report,” Captain Barnard requested from his OPS officer.

“Shields holding. No damage.”

“Admiral, the Chulak command ship is coming toward us,” the CONN officer stated in a shaky voice.

“Lock all weapons on her,” Parker ordered.

The *T’Pol* took a direct hit from the command ship. The artificial gravity fluctuated, causing Admiral Parker to feel a wave of nausea come over him. “Return fire!”



Melanie Leeson and Victor Jacobs exited the turbolift into the corridor that would lead them to the security section. As they rounded their way along the curved hall, they noticed several Chulak and members of Jacobs’ security force lying on the floor. One of the guards struggled to get to his feet. Leeson and Jacobs ran to his side, Jacobs put his arm under the other man’s head to support it.

“What happened?” Leeson asked.

“They overran us, Captain,” the guard said. “They rushed us, throwing themselves in the line of our phaser fire. We got several of them, but they were too many.” The man shook his head, trying to clear away the fog. “They took our phasers.”

Leeson heard a moan come from the open doorway that led into the brig. She rushed, with phaser drawn, toward the door. Jacobs helped the guard to his feet and they both followed Leeson.

Leeson cautiously peeked into the brig, seeing Rek slowly get off the floor.

“Commander Rek!”

Rek looked at Captain Leeson with pitiful eyes. “I could not stop them, Captain. I am sorry.”

“Tell me what happened.”

“The force fields collapsed, and my crew rushed the guard,” Rek said, pointing to the fallen crewman behind the console.

Jacobs went to the man and put his fingers on the side of the man’s neck. “He’s dead.”

“They would not obey my orders to return to the cells,” Rek said. “I fear that your ship and crew are in danger, Captain.”

Leeson looked at Jacobs. “They’ll try to find engineering if they plan to take over the ship, Vic.”

“I’ve already dispatched a security team, Mel,” Jacobs said. “I should go there myself.”

“You stay here, Vic,” Leeson said. “At least till you have a team here to take care of these Chulak.” She pointed to the unconscious aliens in the hall. “They’ll be coming around soon.”

“And what do you plan to do?” Lieutenant Commander Jacobs was concerned about his surrogate niece.

“I’ll try to catch them before they find engineering,” Leeson said. She smiled knowingly at the security chief and started toward the exit.

“Let me help, Captain Leeson,” Rek interjected.

Jacobs turned his phaser toward the alien commander. “You just stay put,” he said. “I wouldn’t trust him, Mel.”

Leeson considered her friend’s advice, but her gut instinct told her that she could trust Rek. And she recognized his need to regain his honor by subduing his own crew. The Chulak apparently had similar codes of honor like the Klingons. “You’re with me, Commander,” she said, ignoring Jacobs’ warning. “Let’s roll.”

Rek did not pick up on Leeson’s terminology, but Jacobs immediately understood his captain’s reference to the quote on the ship’s dedication plaque. It was the last known words of a man who had led his fellow passengers of a commercial airliner against terrorists almost four centuries earlier. That man and his companions gave their lives to thwart the terrorists’ plans to use a hijacked jet for mass death and destruction. Jacobs knew that Melanie Leeson would give her life, if necessary, to protect her ship and crew. “Be careful, Melanie.”

“Always,” Leeson replied as she, followed by Rek, rushed out into the corridor.



The Federation battle group continued its assault on the Chulak fleet of attack ships. The Chulak had more ships—faster at sublight speeds and more maneuverable. Starfleet had better shields. Weapons seemed pretty equal for both fleets. That was true, except in the case of the Chulak command cruiser.

Two *Excelsior*-class starships—the *Eisenhower* and the *Hood*—headed toward Mokdor’s vessel to defend the *T’Pol*, which had been fired on by the Chulak cruiser. Eight Chulak attack ships swooped in and fired at the Starfleet ships, forcing them to break off their engagement.

The U.S.S. *Prince William* entered the battle. Several platoons of Starfleet Marines had been beamed to the planet’s surface to aid the Klingon forces against the Chulak ground attack. As soon as the *Prince William* completed the transport of the troops, the *Sovereign*-class starship left orbit and proceeded to attack all enemy vessels within the optimum firing range.

“Report,” Admiral Parker said as he tried to revive the injured captain of the *T’Pol*...and his long-time friend.

“Shields are down to thirty-three percent. Phasers are offline,” Lieutenant Commander Balli, a Bajoran officer, said. “Casualties are reported on decks...”

“Belay the casualties for now, Commander,” Parker said, cutting her off. “Call for help, Commander.”

“Sir, we’re being hailed,” the CONN officer said. “It’s the *Oceana*!”

“On screen.”

Captain Anthony Donato’s image appeared on the viewer. “*Hold on, Admiral,*” Donato said. “*We’ll have them off your back in a matter of minutes.*”

The U.S.S. *Oceana*, one of four mega starships that had entered service within the last year, came out of warp. A *Defiant*-class starship, the U.S.S. *Laran*, came from its hiding place behind the *Oceana*’s port nacelle and began firing at the huge Chulak vessel. After it made a pass over the enemy ship, the *Oceana* fired multiple torpedoes at the command cruiser.

Admiral Parker entrusted the care of Richard Barnard to the CMO, who had entered the bridge. Parker turned his attention back to the pressing matter of the battle. “Hail the Chulak command ship,” he ordered.

The image of Mokdor, self-proclaimed emperor of the Chulak race, appeared on the viewscreen. Small fires and smoke could be seen in the background.

“This is Admiral Parker representing the United Federation of Planets,” the admiral stated. “Power down your weapons and surrender your ships.”

Mokdor spat at the screen. “*I am Mokdor, lord of the Chulak. We will destroy you before we die. But know that we will never surrender.*”

Parker looked down at the injured friend on the floor. He looked back at Mokdor’s image. “I’d rather you surrendered, but if you prefer to do it the hard way...”

Mokdor bore his fangs. The ridge of hair on his head began to vibrate violently, but he said no more. The image of Mokdor and the damaged control room of his ship faded, replaced by the external view of the large vessel looming larger as it continued its approach.

Energy beams crossed the distance between the Chulak ship and the *T’Pol* in almost zero time as the two ships fired at each other. Both starships felt each other’s fury.

“Shields are down to seventeen percent, Admiral,” the tactical officer said. “One more hit and they’ll be down.”

“CONN, evasive,” Parker said. “Tactical, fire everything we’ve got.”



Captain Anthony Donato saw the damage that the Chulak command cruiser inflicted on the *T’Pol*. Parker’s flagship, in turn, inflicted just as much damage on the enemy ship. Unfortunately, the Chulak vessel’s size dwarfed all the Federation starships save one—the *Oceana*—so the damage done did not have quite the same effect on the enemy. “Lock onto the command ship, Berda,” he told his tactical officer. “Target their weapons and shield generators. Try to disable them.”

“Aye, Captain.”

As the other starships battled against the attack ships, the *Oceana* unloaded several torpedoes and phaser shots against the command cruiser. The Chulak weapons systems were crippled, but the ship continued to move toward the *T’Pol*, its speed increasing.

“They’re on a collision course with the *T’Pol*, Sir.”

“What’s the status of the enemy’s shields?” Donato asked.

“Fifty-eight percent, Sir.”

Donato quickly considered all the possibilities. He wanted to take the Chulak ship intact and its crew alive, but he saw no alternative to destroying it if the crew of Parker’s flagship was to survive. “Prepare to fire the primary weapon,” he said as he made up his mind.

“Sensors show more than six thousand Chulak aboard that vessel, Captain. Many are women and children.”

Anthony Donato didn’t like what he had just heard. He was no killer of children. But his back was against the wall—he needed to think fast to find a solution or several hundred members of Starfleet, including an admiral, would die in the next few minutes. “What kind of power will it take to blast through their shields and take out the engines?” he asked.

“Eleven or twelve percent should do it, Captain.”

Donato saw his way out of his dilemma. “Make it eleven, then,” he said.

“Aye Captain.” Lieutenant Commander Daval Berda of Tiburon started the arming sequence of the reactive quantum plasma weapon—the most powerful weapon ever created by the Federation. The *Oceana* had never fired the weapon in actual battle before, but one of its sister ships, the U.S.S. Chamberlain, had once used it successfully against the Borg. “The *T’Pol*’s shields are weak, Captain,” Berda said. “I’m afraid that she will be caught in the blast.”

“What’s the closest starship?” Donato asked.

“The *Eminence* is within two hundred kilometers, Sir,” the OPS officer said.

“Hail them and have them intercept the admiral’s ship,” Donato said. “Tell them to extend their shields around the *T’Pol*. And they need to do it fast.”



Captain Leeson and Rek entered the engine room. They approached the security team that had been dispatched to protect Lieutenant Commander Petroni’s staff in case the Chulak escapees decided to take over. “Keep a sharp eye out, Ensign,” Leeson said to the security officer in charge. “Our *friends* will probably try to make their way here.”

The security officer looked suspiciously at Rek.

Leeson saw the ensign’s discomfort. “He’s okay, Ensign,” she said. “It’s the other Chulak that you need to be concerned about.

The chief engineer saw Leeson and walked to the open entrance of the engine room. “What’s wrong, Captain?”

“The Chulak have escaped from the brig. I expect that they’ll try to take engineering,” Leeson said. The captain looked around, seeing the engineering staff rushing from one station to another. “What’s our status?”

“We’ve restored power to the weapons and shields, but they won’t last long in another fight,” Petroni said. “Repair teams are working on the hull breach in section sixteen.”

“What about the force field generators?”

“They should be back online in a few minutes.”

“Engines?”

“Warp drive is still out, but I could give you three-quarter impulse if you need it.”

Leeson was grateful that Carmen Petroni had worked on the development and construction of the *Trailblazer*. Her intimate knowledge of the ship sped up the repair time in order to get back into the battle. “Good work, Carmen. I want to get underway as soon as we contain the Chulak.”

“Aye Captain.” Petroni turned and rushed back to the master control table to coordinate her team’s repair efforts.

Leeson turned around to exit engineering when she heard phaser fire in the corridor. She crouched down with a phaser in hand and moved toward the doorway. A phaser beam streaked past her as she tried to find a position to get a clear vantage point to shoot from.

The security team fired continuously but did not have the cover that they would need for protection. The ensign aimed at the oncoming aliens but was struck down by a shot from one of the stolen phasers. The other guards kept firing.

Leeson looked back toward the chief engineer. “Carmen, seal off the bulkheads and flood the corridor with anesthazine gas!”

Petroni ran her fingers across the control panel and the door in front of Leeson slid shut, barely in time to shield the captain from a phaser blast.

One of the Chulak entered engineering from another door before it closed the engine room from the corridor. He rushed in and aimed the phaser at Leeson, who rolled away as the warrior fired. He nearly missed. Before he could press the trigger a second time, Rek rushed at the mutinous Chulak. The phaser discharged its energy and Rek fell.



Leeson, coming out of the roll, aimed and fired. Her aim was perfect and the Chulak slumped to the deck.

Leeson hurried to Rek and knelt by his side. “Take it easy, Commander Rek,” she said. The captain turned her head toward Petroni. “Get a medical team down here.”

Rek slowly shook his head. “It is too late for that, Captain,” he said. “I only regret that I did not set foot on the soil of my ancestors.” With that, his eyes closed for the last time.

Leeson stood up and faced the chief engineer. She sighed. “What’s our status, Carmen?”

“The Chulak in the corridor are out cold, Captain,” Petroni stated. “I’m venting the anesthazine now.”

“Have security round up the Chulak before they regain consciousness.” The captain turned and slowly walked toward the exit. “I’ll be on the bridge.”



The U.S.S. *Eminence* came to a stop alongside the *T’Pol* and extended its shields to protect both ships. The damaged Chulak cruiser continued its assault and closed the gap between itself and the two *Galaxy*-class starships.

On the bridge of the *Oceana*, Captain Donato peered at the viewscreen. He waited until the *Eminence* had positioned itself next to the flagship. “I hope eleven percent’s not too much. I don’t want them destroyed,” he said. “Fire.”

The plasma beams, extremely powerful even at a substantially reduced power setting, exited their emitters and sped toward the unsuspecting enemy vessel. With ease, the shields of the Chulak command ship collapsed and the engines had been severely damaged. Mokdor’s ship was adrift.



Mokdor was furious. He swore that he would be victorious...or die. When the battle went against him and his ship was deprived of its weapons, Mokdor decided to use the ship itself as his final weapon. But before he could ram the lead ship of the battle fleet, another ship—vastly superior to any he had encountered—destroyed the ship’s main propulsion. He would not be taken as a prisoner of the humans...nor of the boneheads. “Engage self-destruct sequence,” he ordered.

Mokdor and his crew—essentially the majority of the Chulak race—perished in an instant as the Chulak command ship erupted in a huge fireball.

The remaining Chulak attack ships broke off their attack within seconds of the explosion that destroyed Mokdor, along with any hope that its native people would once again inhabit Chula. The ships started to flee, but Klingon and Federation starships pursued them. Starfleet would show the enemy mercy, but no such thought would enter the mind of a Klingon.



Melanie Leeson entered the bridge and went to the center seat. She sat down slowly, contemplating the sacrifice of an enemy who turned out to be a friend before the end.

Lieutenant Commander Jacobs entered the bridge and resumed his station. “All the prisoners are back in custody, Captain,” he said.

Leeson acknowledged the information with a nod but did not say anything. She merely stared at the image of asteroids displayed on the viewer.

Heron Jaxx interrupted the uncomfortable silence. “Captain, Admiral Parker is hailing.”

“On screen,” Leeson said.

“*It’s over, Captain,*” Parker said. “*The Chulak ships are in retreat and the Chulak combatants on the planet surface have surrendered.*”

Leeson forced herself to smile, still grieving over Rek’s death. She never thought that the demise of an enemy would cause regret or sadness, but Rek proved himself honorable—a trait that Leeson admired above all others. “That’s good news, Sir,” she said. “We’ll rendezvous with you in orbit shortly. *Trailblazer* out.”

Leeson rose and faced the screen. “Paul, set a course and enter standard orbit please,” she said without making eye contact. “I’ll be in my ready room.” She exited the bridge, shutting out the rest of the universe.

The Klingon/Federation victory over the Chulak was cause for celebration, but Melanie Leeson did not feel like celebrating in the shadow of all the death and destruction. How many had died? How many letters would she need to write to her crew’s families?

Epilogue

The battle was over. The Klingons lost more than two thousand warriors during the surface battle and a total of seven ships in the space above. The I.K.S. *Kang*, Governor Kogath’s flagship, had suffered damage and lost forty crewmen during the battle. Kogath sustained a few bruises and burns when one of the bridge stations exploded, throwing him across the command center of his ship; but his wounds were not serious enough to keep him from retaining command.

Starfleet was more fortunate than the Klingons. Not one starship was lost; however, three ships—including the *Trailblazer*—sustained severe damage. The ships under Admiral Parker’s command reported a total of three hundred forty-two minor injuries, seventy-nine serious ones, and twenty-six deaths. Eleven of the latter were among the *Trailblazer*’s crew due primarily to the Chulak prisoners who had escaped from the brig and tried to take over the ship. In addition to the casualties on the starships,

forty-three Starfleet Marines died on the planet surface in defense of the Klingon settlement.

The Chulak race paid the greatest cost. The command ship, which housed thousands of civilians in addition to the crew, had been destroyed. All but four of the attack ships were also destroyed during the fight. The other four escaped, but two *K'Vort*-class cruisers pursued them out of the system. And the Chulak survivors will not fare well if the Klingons, who have never been known as a merciful race, catch up to them.



Melanie Leeson and Victor Jacobs stood over the fresh grave. Kogath had given permission to Leeson when she requested that Rek be buried on B'Moth II—Chula. He agreed only because the Chulak had sacrificed himself honorably to save his *little warrior*. Leeson bent down and placed a silver object—the rank insignia of a Chulak officer—on the mound of dirt and rock. She stood back up, continuing to stare at the ground. “Rest in your own soil, Commander Rek.”

Jacobs silently watched his captain. He remembered how proud her father was when she entered the Academy. After hearing the voice from the Kriosian ship that had saved the *Trailblazer* from becoming space dust during the battle, Jacobs knew that Greg Leeson still lived. And he was convinced that the Leeson patriarch, wherever his current location, still felt pride for his daughter. The security chief, not expressing his suspicions about Melanie’s father earlier, decided to reveal what he suspected. “I’m sure Greg’s ship survived the battle.”

Leeson smiled knowingly. Turning, she faced Jacobs and leaned toward him. She raised herself up, standing on her toes and leaning her head up, and kissed Jacobs on the cheek. She backed off and smiled, evading Jacobs’ comment. “Let’s get back to the ship.”

Leeson and Jacobs walked slowly back toward the shuttle a few meters away. Jacobs realized that he would not get anything out of his captain concerning her father. He figured that she had her reasons for not telling him. Suddenly, just as the pair reached the shuttle, Greg Leeson stepped around the shuttlecraft’s nose. Jacobs’ mouth opened as if he wanted to say something, but the words were stuck in his throat.

Greg threw his arms around his daughter, who returned the strong embrace. Jacobs merely watched, almost disbelieving that his long “dead” friend was right in front of him, yet he shouldn’t be surprised.

Greg, after releasing his daughter, smiled with a tear forming in his right eye. “I’m so proud of you, Honey,” he said.

Melanie also cried tears of joy. “Dad.”

Jacobs approached the elder Leeson and stared at him for what seemed like an eternity but, in actuality, was only a couple seconds. “You’re late.”

Greg Leeson grabbed Jacobs in a bear hug, lifting him off the ground. “It’s good to see you, too, Vic.”

Jacobs did not know where his friend had been all these years, but he felt confident that Greg would explain everything in his own time. For now, Greg had returned from the dead...and Melanie had her father again.



The U.S.S. *Trailblazer* rested on its landing gear inside the *Oceana*’s main bay undergoing repairs. Captain Melanie Leeson looked in awe at her ship. She had never

seen it from this perspective, inside a bay. The enormity of the gargantuan docking bay within another starship was a more impressive sight than the size of her ship. She turned to leave, almost bumping into the *Oceana's* CO. "Oh...sorry, Captain. I didn't know you were there."

"Please call me Tony," Donato said. "She's a beauty, isn't she?" He pointed to the *Trailblazer*.

"Why yes, she is," Leeson replied. "You have quite a ship here, yourself."

"Only four of these monsters exist," Donato said.

"I know," Leeson replied. "I saw the *Chamberlain* right before its launch."

"You did? How'd you manage that?"

"I was the first officer on the ship that transported Captain McCall and his wife to Delta Ophiucus," Leeson said.

"You know Jack McCall, then?"

"Just met him once," Leeson replied. "He and his wife were only on the ship for a short time."

"Small universe. Jack's an old friend of mine," Donato said with a gleam in his eye. "So, what's next for you?"

Leeson started walking slowly, accompanied by Donato. "I'm not sure yet," she said. "I was given command of the *Trailblazer* for *this* mission. Now that it's over..."

"Why not keep it?"

"Keep what?"

"Command of your ship, of course," Donato said. "From what I hear, you've proven yourself as a CO."

"Most of my time was spent on the investigation," Leeson stated. "My XO did more in the area of command than I did."

"Delegation is an ability that all good captains have to have," Donato said.

"Maybe Edwards spent more time on the bridge than you, but he acted under your authority and support. You're the captain, the one who gives the orders."

Leeson shrugged. "The truth is that I haven't thought too much about what comes next," she said. "A lot has happened in just a short time. And right now, I want to get home to spend time with my family." She smiled at the *Oceana's* captain. "I want to thank you for fixing her up for me," Leeson said, nodding her head in the direction of her ship.

"My pleasure," Donato said. "It gave my engineering staff something to do. At least she'll get you back to Utopia Planitia to get a *professional* refit." He stretched out his hand toward Leeson. "Best of luck in whatever you decide."

"Thank you," Leeson said. "And thanks for the advice."



The U.S.S. *Trailblazer* gracefully backed out of the enormous main bay of the *Oceana*. Melanie Leeson stood in front of the large conference room windows, watching the gargantuan starship leave orbit.

"Captain Leeson. Am I disturbing you?"

Melanie turned to face Admiral Parker. "Not at all, Admiral. What can I do for you?"

“I wanted to tell you how pleased I am with your performance in this matter,” Parker said. “And I want you to know that the sacrifice that you and your crew will not go unnoticed.”

Leeson appreciated the admiral’s words of encouragement; but duty, honor, and all the patriotic rhetoric could not wash away the death and destruction that had taken place. Melanie Leeson knew that she had done her duty. She even knew that routing out the Chulak for their terrorism was the right thing to do, but she would have preferred a peaceful solution. Unfortunately, a terrorist’s mentality rarely allowed for peaceful solutions.

“You were given a tough assignment, but you came through with flying colors,” Parker stated.

“Thank you, Admiral,” Leeson replied. “I’m glad we put a stop to the attacks and the invasion. I only wish we could have avoided all the bloodshed.”

Parker nodded in agreement. “You would think that we were advanced enough to eliminate war.”

“Yes Sir.” Leeson searched her feelings on what had happened—her feelings about her involvement in the last few months’ events. “War’s a terrible thing, Admiral, but sometimes we’re forced into it.”

“Maybe we can negotiate our way out of the next conflict,” Parker said.

“I wouldn’t count on it, Admiral.”

Parker knew that his hope of never having another conflict with some new species or alien government was a false one. “Frankly, neither would I,” he said with a grin. He paused and looked directly at Leeson. “Now that this is over, I want you to consider joining Starfleet Intelligence, Captain. With your security background and investigative skills, you would make an excellent agent.”

Leeson considered the admiral’s proposal, but she suddenly realized what she wanted to do with her life and career. Not more than an hour before, she had told Captain Donato that she wasn’t sure what was next. Now, Leeson could think clearly and came to her decision. “Thank you, Admiral, but I respectfully decline your offer,” she said. “I would prefer to retain command of the *Trailblazer* and...be an explorer.” *Now where did that come from?* Captain Stuart’s influence over the last three years had tempered Leeson’s *warrior* instincts and developed within her a desire to seek out the unknown.

If Bill Parker was disappointed, he didn’t show it. “I think I can get that arranged if that’s what you want. I assume you want to keep your crew intact?”

“I would, Sir,” Leeson said. “However, there is one exception.”



Melanie Leeson sat behind her desk, completing her log entry. She turned as she heard the swoosh of the doors open and close.

Commander Paul Edwards approached his captain. “You wanted to see me, Captain?”

“Admiral Parker wants to get underway within the half-hour,” Leeson said. “He would like us to take the point. Would you move the ship into position?”

“Certainly, Captain.”

“And I would like all the senior staff on the bridge when we leave orbit.”

“I’ll inform them, Captain,” Edwards stated. He started to turn to leave but stopped when Leeson called his name.

“Wait a second, Paul. I have something else.”

Paul turned back to face Leeson. “Captain?”

Leeson got up and stepped toward her first officer. “I want you to know that I appreciate your service to me and the ship,” she said. “I know that your career goals were put on hold due to this mission.”

“It was a struggle at first, but I think that I adjusted pretty well,” Edwards said.

“I think so, too,” Leeson replied. “You’ve done a great job as first officer, but I think you’re not meeting your potential.”

Edwards felt confused by Leeson’s apparent contradictory statements. “Captain?”

Leeson smiled. “I’ve recommended you for promotion, Paul. Admiral Parker has informed Starfleet Command that you should be given your own ship as soon as one is available.”

Paul wasn’t sure what to say. He had always wanted his own command but resigned himself that circumstances would not allow that for some time. “Thank you, Mel,” he finally said. “I…”

“You’re welcome,” Leeson said, cutting Paul off. “You deserve it.” Leeson nodded to the man. “That’ll be all.”

Paul smiled and turned. He exited the conference room as Leeson’s eyes followed him until the door slid shut behind him. Now she had to figure out who would replace Edwards as first officer.



The U.S.S. *Trailblazer* took a position in front of the other starships orbiting B’Moth II. They began to leave orbit and head into deep space.

Melanie Leeson sat in the captain’s chair turning her head to survey the officers that had served her so well under difficult circumstances. A sense of pride filled her very being as she observed each one of them—Vic Jacobs, Nora Jaeger, Heron Jaxx, Shrev, and Paul Edwards—at their stations. Petroni and Eedo stood hand in hand behind the captain. Doctor Keegan rested his hand on the back of the XO’s chair.

“Set course for home, Ensign,” Leeson said.

“Aye Sir,” the young CONN officer stated.

Leeson thought about her father and the reunion that they—the entire Leeson family—would have once they reached Earth.

Greg Leeson, no longer disguised as a Kriosian, stood on the bridge next to his daughter. Earlier he had told his daughter that he was tired of hiding from Section 31 and that he wanted to be with his family. Greg had decided to approach Admiral Parker and tell him about the “real” circumstances that led to his court-martial and the reason that he had faked his death. Parker gladly offered SI’s protection. He even offered Greg Leeson a job as an undercover agent. Greg told the admiral that he would consider the job offer. Right now, all he wanted was to be with his family again.

Melanie Leeson smiled as she felt her father’s hand rest on her shoulder. There would be difficulties ahead as they explained to her siblings the circumstances of the death and resurrection of Greg Leeson. But Melanie knew that everything would work out. She straightened her posture and faced the view screen in front of the bridge.

“CONN, set course for the Sol system. Warp factor eight. Engage.”

The *Trailblazer*, followed by the rest of Admiral Parker's small fleet, entered the realm of hyperspace. The threat had ended, and *Trailblazer*'s crew was bound for a well-deserved time of rest and relaxation.

