

Stardate 57012.6

Captain Rob Stuart stared at the planet Velanwar through the large conference room windows. He turned when he heard the doors parting. “Ambassador Chen, Lieutenant Commander Mills, please come in.” Stuart approached the ambassador and shook her hand.

“Good to see you again, Captain,” Chen said.

“My pleasure, Ambassador.” Stuart pointed to the nearest chair. “Please, make yourself comfortable.”

Chen sat down as did Lieutenant Commander Mills and Captain Stuart. “Please, call me Lirian.”

Stuart nodded. “I prefer first names as well. So how are the talks going?”

“I’m happy to say that Velanwar has agreed to align itself with the Federation.”

“That’s good news,” Stuart said.

Chen smiled and nodded. “The signing ceremony is scheduled for the day after tomorrow followed by a celebration meal.”

“Once again, you’ve proven yourself, Lirian. Your reputation as a skilled negotiator is well deserved.” Stuart leaned back in his chair. “I need your help with another matter if you’re up for it.”

“Does it have to do with Captain Leeson’s contact with the Ruhl?”

“You’ve found time to keep up with the reports, I see,” Stuart said. “I’m sure that the Diplomatic Corps will assign you to go negotiate with the Ruhl, and based on Captain Leeson’s reports, that should be an easy job for you; however, we need you back at Gateway Alpha.”

“And why is that, Robert?” Chen sensed Stuart’s anxiety. “Is there a problem?”

“No problem, Lirian.” Stuart tensed a bit as he leaned forward. “A few of the races that we have met in the last few months are wanting to get to know us—the Federation—better, and Admiral Sjögren suggested that it would be a good opportunity for us to help them get to know each other since many of them have not contacted each other before. The admiral wants to host a conference to introduce all of the races to their neighbors.”

“And the admiral wants me to be the Federation liaison?”

“You’re the logical choice,” Stuart said.

“And I’m the only ambassador within thirty light years.”

“Yes, there is that.” Stuart let out a small chuckle. “Are you up for it?”

Lieutenant Commander Jennifer Mills interrupted. “I’m prepared to brief you on the attending governments and their representatives at your convenience, Ambassador.”

Chen smiled. “Thank you, Commander. Of course, I’m at the Federation’s disposal. When is the conference?”

“Next week, Stuart said. “I hope that it will give you enough time to prepare.”

“The admiral doesn’t waste any time. I’m sure I’ll be prepared,” the ambassador said. “Especially since Lieutenant Commander Mills is ready to brief me on the delegates and their worlds.”

“Good,” Stuart said. “After we’re done with the treaty signing...”

“...Don’t forget the celebration meal,” Chen inserted.

“...and the celebration meal, we will start back for Gateway Alpha so that you can do your magic.”

Chen smiled widely. “It’s not magic, Robert. It’s empathy.”

“You’re Betazoid?”

“Half. I was raised on Earth, but my mother is from Betazed. My parents met when my father was working as the assistant to Earth’s ambassador to Betazed.”

“Do you plan to read the representative’s minds?” Lieutenant Commander Mills was curious about the ambassador’s abilities.

“No, Commander. Like most half-Betazoids, I can read emotions, but I can only communicate telepathically with other Betazoids and very few non-Betazoids.”

“I see,” Mills said. “I apologize if I am getting too personal.”

“Not at all, Commander Mills,” Chen said. “I like people who express their curiosity.”

The captain’s communicator chirped. “*Bridge to Captain.*”

Stuart tapped the Starfleet insignia on his chest. “Stuart. Go ahead.”

“*I’m sorry to interrupt, sir, but you have a message from Captain Grey.*”

“One moment.” Stuart smiled at the ambassador and his second officer. “I apologize. Can you excuse me?”

Mills nodded, and she and Ambassador Chen exited the conference room.

“Bridge, patch him through.”



To Boldly Go: Building Alliances

A Starbase Gateway Alpha story

By Cleve Johnson

After a few moments passed, Captain Marcus Grey’s voice said, “*Captain, I wanted to update you on the mission to Pelax Vas.*”

“How did it go, Exec?”

“The Vasi have agreed to let us set up a medical research lab on their world. They are willing to share their resources and wish us well in any medical discoveries that we find.”

“What about the conference? Did they accept our invitation?”

“Yes, they seemed pleased to be a part of it,” Grey said as his eyes lit up. “The Vasi King will be there to represent his people.”

“Royalty,” Stuart said. “You must have made quite an impression to get the top person to attend.”

“From what I found out, representing his people to other planets is one of the king’s main duties.”

“Well, don’t sell yourself short, Marcus. You got him to agree to attend.”

“Thank you, Robert. The doctor and I should be arriving in a little more than seven hours.”

“Safe journey. Stuart out.” The captain smiled as he started toward the exit, thinking how pleased Admiral Sjögren would be that his dream of building alliances between the various races that had been discovered during the last year was coming together.



Eight days later...

Fleet Captain Rob Stuart entered the bridge and approached the command area at the center of the bridge. He placed his hand on his first officer’s shoulder when Captain Marcus Grey had started to relinquish the center seat. “As you were, Marcus.” Stuart peered at the alien ships that were either docked or orbiting Starbase *Gateway Alpha*. “It looks like we have a good turnout, Exec.”

“It’s a good sign, Captain.” Grey, normally very cautious in his assessments of situations, displayed a ray of hope that the conference would bring several recently discovered species together to form an alliance with each other and with the Federation. His eyes brightened as he turned his head toward the tactical station. “Hail the station, Commander.”

“Hailing frequencies open, sir,” Lieutenant Commander Mills said.

The image of half a dozen starships on the main viewer coalesced and changed to the interior of the starbase Command and Control center. Captain Uri Ivanov, *Gateway Alpha*’s XO, appeared. “*Welcome back,*” he said. “*I trust that all went well with your mission.*”

Stuart smiled. “Miss Chen has secured a formal alliance between Velanwar and the Federation. And I can tell you that the Velanwar know how to set a table.”

Ivanov smiled. “*Did you happen to bring back one of their cooks?*”

“Unfortunately, no,” Stuart replied. “When the Velanwar delegate’s ship arrives, maybe you can sneak into the galley and try the cuisine, Uri.”

“As long as it is better than my mother’s cooking, I might do that.” Ivanov’s smile evaporated and his usual stoic countenance returned. *“While you were gone, our tactical support vessel we were promised several months ago finally arrived. It is the U.S.S Cheron. With the potential Enkara threat, I feel more comfortable with a Defiant-class at our disposal.”*

“Me too, Uri.” Stuart smiled at the other captain. “Now the *Monarch* can have a chance to get away from the station for some exploratory missions.”

“Good. You will not be here to irritate me as often,” Ivanov said while smirking.

“You wound me, Uri.” Stuart and Ivanov occasionally liked to taunt each other as they became more familiar with one another. “Who says I will be on the *Monarch* when it gets it out to spread its wings?”

Ivanov harumphed in mock contempt. *“I will tie you to the center seat if I have to. I suppose that you are wanting to dock now.”*

“With your permission, Captain.” Stuart held out his arms in an open gesture and bowed slightly.

“Permission granted. Docking port eight.”

“Thank you, Uri. How about lunch tomorrow.”

“If you are buying, yes. 1200 hours.”

The image of Ivanov and the CnC disappeared and was replaced once again by the station and alien ships.

Stuart nodded to his first officer. “Commence docking, Marcus, and schedule forty-eight-hour leaves in four rotations. I want every member of the crew to take some personal time away from the ship.”

“I prepared the rotation schedule last night, sir. The first rotation will begin within the hour.” Marcus didn’t smile but there was a brightness displayed on his face that did not go unnoticed by Stuart.

“Your efficiency is noted, Exec.” Stuart exited the bridge and entered the turbolift.



Captain’s Log: Stardate 57034.1

The conference has started with a reception, and Ambassador Chen says that the delegates all seem happy to meet their interstellar neighbors. The only complaints have been from the Incharu delegates, who are very uncomfortable in our environment. They come from a planet that has much colder temperatures and about three-quarters of Earth’s gravity. Being a canine species, they have started shedding their fur in our warmer temperature. Station personnel has been able to lower the gravity and temperature in the Incharu’s quarters to accommodate their needs. The gravity in the conference and dining rooms has been adjusted to 0.82 Earth normal, which is

more comfortable for the Incharu and not too light for the other delegates. One of the Velanwar commented that the lower gravity was quite refreshing and that he enjoyed almost launching himself into the air when he stood up. I hope that he doesn't hit his head on the ceilings. Both the ambassador and Admiral Sjögren have said that their conversations with the delegates show potential for cooperation and trade between several planets that have previously not had contact with each other. The Pelaxians have expressed a desire to formally become allied with the Federation, and the Vasi, already allied with the Pelaxians, indicated that they would follow where Pelax leads; however, the Vasi king has expressed his concern about how an alliance with the Federation, specifically with Starfleet's military role, will affect his people's way of life. The Vasi are extremely pacifistic and will not violate their conviction to not harm others even to defend themselves. My concern is that they would allow themselves to be enslaved if the Enkara decided to besiege Pelax Vas, which is less than twenty light years away from the Enkara border.

Stuart ended his recording. He stood and walked toward the window that provided a beautiful view of the stars. He watched as one of the alien starships—a Nazar Alliance transport—flew by as it orbited Starbase Gateway Alpha. He admired the design. In comparison to Starfleet vessels, the Nazar ship was about the length of a *Miranda*-class but with half the breadth. Stuart estimated that the ship had nine, maybe ten, decks. Assuming the height of each deck was similar to Starfleet ship specs.

He turned away from the window at the sound of the door chime. “Enter.”

The door panels slid apart, and Admiral Sjögren, followed by another man, entered the office. “Welcome back, Robert,” the admiral said. “I wanted to introduce you to the skipper of the *Cheron*. This is Commander Carl Johnston.”

Johnston thrust his hand toward Stuart, and the two vigorously shook hands. “Glad to meet you, Fleet Captain Stuart.”

“And I you, Commander. We’ve waited a long time to have a tactical support ship assigned to the station.” Stuart pointed to the couch and started moving toward it. He didn’t sit until the admiral and commander sat down. “Can I get either of you something to drink?”

Admiral Sjögren shook his head. “Nothing for me, thank you. Commander?”

“No thanks,” Johnston said.

Stuart sat on the padded chair across from the couch. “So, tell me about yourself, Commander.”

“Not much to tell,” Johnston said. “I’m from Ohio. Academy class of sixty-seven. Fought in the Dominion War and survived. I’ve served on four ships and been in command of the *Cheron* since Stardate 56463.”

Sjögren smiled. “Don’t be so modest, Commander. You’ve had some major accomplishments in your career.”

“Well, sir, I’m not one to toot my own horn as my great-great-grandfather used to say.”

Sjögren looked at Johnston and then at Stuart. He winked. "I'll fill you in later since Commander Johnston doesn't like to...toot his own horn. Breakfast tomorrow?"

"I'll see you at the usual place and time, Admiral."

Sjögren and Johnston stood and smiled at Stuart. Johnston reached out and shook Stuart's hand again. "back to the grand tour," Sjögren said.

The admiral and the CO of the *Cheron* exited Stuart's officer as Stuart turned back to look at the ships and the stars beyond.



The next day, Rob Stuart and his wife Doctor Janice Stuart entered the café and headed for the table where Admiral Sjögren was seated. "Good morning, Erik," Rob said as he pulled out a chair for his wife. "I hope you don't mind that I brought Janice along. We haven't had too much time together lately, so..."

"No need to explain, Robert." Sjögren stood and motioned to the chair. "Glad to have you, Doctor."

"Thank you, Admiral." Jan smiled as she sat down and moved her chair closer to the table.

"No one else is around, Janice. You can drop the ranks," Sjögren said as he sat down. "I hope you won't be as hard to convince to call me by my first name as your husband was."

Rob smiled as he took his place in the chair between his wife and the admiral.

"I'm not hard to convince, Erik," Jan said. "I find it easy to use first names with superior officers. When appropriate, of course."

As Sjögren and Janice conversed, Rob observed the other early morning patrons at various tables. He noticed someone setting in a corner booth drinking from a coffee mug. "Erik, is that a Ferengi in a Starfleet uniform?"

Sjögren looked over to the corner. "Yes, your eyes are working fine, Robert."

"I'm not prejudiced," Rob said, "but I never knew that any Ferengi were in Starfleet."

"He's the only one," Sjögren said. "He's the *Cheron*'s chief engineer. Commander Johnston speaks highly of him. And it was Captain Sisko who wrote the recommendation for him to get into Starfleet Academy."

"Sisko must have been impressed with him, too, to put his reputation on the line for someone from a non-Federation planet." Rob pushed away from the table and stood. "Excuse me for a moment. I want to meet him."

"The waiter is coming this way, Rob," Jan said. "What do you want for breakfast?"

Rob gave his wife a mischievous grin. “Just tell him I’ll have the usual.” Rob turned and walked toward the young officer.

“For a senior officer with his responsibilities, he is one of the most personable that I’ve seen in a long time,” Sjögren said.

“Yeah, that’s my Rob.” Jan smiled. “He doesn’t feel the need to distance himself from the troops.”

Rob approached the Ferengi, who glanced up and quickly slid his legs out from under the table and stood to attention.

“As you were, Lieutenant,” Rob said. “I’m Captain Stuart. I just saw you from across the room and wanted to meet you.”

The Ferengi relaxed as he offered his hand to Stuart. “Lieutenant Nog, sir.”

Rob shook the young engineer’s hand. “I hear that you are the chief engineer on the *Cheron*.”

“Yes, Captain.”

“How do you like serving on a *Defiant*-class vessel?”

“I like it very much, sir,” Nog said. “I had the privilege of serving at Deep Space 9 and on the *Defiant* during the Dominion War, so I found it...profitable to be assigned to another ship like it, sir.”

Stuart nodded. “Well, Lieutenant Nog, I won’t keep you, but I want you to know that I’m glad you’re with us on the frontier.”

Nog seemed pleased as he smiled, his sharp teeth showing. “Thank you, Captain.”

Stuart turned and headed back to his wife and the admiral. As he approached them and sat down, he said, “Nice kid. I think he has a promising career ahead.”

“From what Captain Johnston told me, I suspect you’re right, Robert,” the admiral said. “He has an impressive record and was decorated for his service during the war.”

Jan wanted to enjoy breakfast with her husband and the admiral, but she did not want to talk about the Dominion War. Too much loss and several unhappy memories. She purposefully changed the subject. “So, Erik, how is the conference going?”

“We just had the opening reception so far, but there’s a lot of promise for building an alliance between the various races in the area,” Sjögren said. “Robert, you must be proud of the people under your command and the work they’ve done to make so many first contacts in such a short time.”

“I am, Erik. We’ve been fortunate to meet people from several planets that have been open to forming a relationship with the Federation.”

“Ambassador Chen knows her stuff,” Erik said.

“Yes, she is a tremendous asset, and I’m glad that the Diplomatic Corps saw fit to assign us an Ambassador-at-large,” Rob replied. “You might want to insist that she take some time off after the conference is over before her next assignment. I get the feeling that she will want to rush off to meet the Ruhl without taking a break.”

“I can help with that,” Jan said emphatically. “If she doesn’t want to take time off, I can make it a medical order.”

“I will let you know if it comes to that, Janice.” Sjögren smiled. “I remember when Doctor Patel had to force me to take leave a time or two when I commanded the *Starquest*.”

“Speaking of the *Starquest*, I found a CO for her—T’Paski,” Rob said.

“The first officer from the *Icarus*?”

“I’m just waiting on the official word from Admiral Montoya about her promotion to captain and for the *Icarus* to arrive in a few days.” Rob looked at his wife. “She will be choosing her senior officers, but I was wondering if you knew of any possible candidates that you could recommend as her CMO.”

Jan immediately thought about the Starfleet doctors that she knew personally and by reputation. “I can provide a list of eight to ten people that she might want to interview for the position.”

“Please don’t include Doctor M’Tan on your list,” Rob said. “I don’t think the *Monarch*’s crew can adjust to replacing two CMOs within a year.”

Jan offered just a hint of a smile. “Don’t worry, Captain. I won’t take away your favorite doctor.”

Rob’s eyebrows drew close together as he frowned. He felt a little hurt by his wife’s insinuation. “*You’re* my favorite doctor.”

Admiral Sjögren shook his head. “Are you two always like this?”

“Not always,” Rob said.

“But most of the time,” Jan added.

The three sat silently for a few seconds as they saw the waiter coming their way with a tray of food. They waited until he placed each of the meals and hot beverages in front of them and thanked him before resuming their conversation.

Sjögren took a bite of toast, and he looked at Jan. After he finished chewing, he said, “Ambassador Chen told me that the Vasi king asked if he and his delegation could tour the medical facility. They are interested in our medical procedures and pharmaceuticals.”

“I think a tour could be arranged,” Jan replied. “How about 1400?”

“I’ll let Ambassador Chen know. I think if the Vasi see how well we care for the sick and injured,” Sjögren said, “they will see that Starfleet is not strictly a military organization.”

“You can show that we are concerned about life and not about being a military power,” Rob said to his wife.

“Now that is settled, Robert, I assume that you still want to know a little about Commander Johnston.”

“Of course. What can you tell me about him?”

“That’s the second time you mentioned that name,” Janice said. “Who is Commander Johnston?”

“He’s the CO of the *Cheron*,” Rob said. “I met him yesterday.”

“Carl Johnston was a young junior grade lieutenant serving on the *P’Jem* during the Dominion War,” Sjögren said. “He was at the helm during the attack on Chintaka when his ship was hit by fire from one of the weapons platforms. The captain and first officer were killed, and most of the other bridge officers were injured, so he took command. Continued to pilot the ship and made some very impressive evasive maneuvers. He took out one of the platforms, saved the ship and the remainder of the crew.”

“We lost a lot of ships during that battle,” Rob said. “Sound like he was the right person in the right position on that day.”

“He earned a promotion to full lieutenant and received the Starfleet Medal of Valor and the Starfleet Decoration of Gallantry for it.”

“And what came after that?”

“He was in operational command of the *P’Jem* during its refit,” Sjögren said. “Once it was ready for service again, a new captain and XO were assigned, and Johnston became the senior flight officer and second officer. He served on the front lines during the remainder of the war. Afterward, he was promoted again and asked to serve as the XO of the U.S.S. *Ontario* under Captain James Hunter.”

“I’ve heard of Captain Hunter,” Jan said. “I hear he took out two Jem’Hadar warships during the last battle of the war.”

“And lived to tell about it,” Sjögren said. “Johnston learned to be a top-notch commander when he served with Hunter.”

“I assume that Captain Hunter recommended Johnston for command of the *Cheron*?” Rob picked up his cup and took a sip of his favorite hot beverage—apple cinnamon tea.

“He did,” Sjögren replied. “And Commander Johnston has been patrolling the borders between Breen and Federation space since he took command. He told me that he was glad to have this assignment as a change of pace.”

“The frontier appeals to a lot of people,” Jan said as she winked at her husband.

Rob smiled back at Jan and took another sip of tea. “Is that a complaint, dear?”

“Just an observation.”

Sjögren straightened his posture as he drew himself up closer to the table. “Now I’m not going to need to separate you two, am I?”

“We’re not fighting,” Jan said. “I just like to tease my husband.”

Sjögren smiled and took a bite of scrambled eggs. He decided not to throw more deuterium into *this* warp reactor. “Any other questions about Commander Johnston?”

“Not that I can think of, Erik,” Rob said. “I know that he is under your direct command and not mine, but I hope that I can borrow him and his ship from time to time if needed.”

“All you have to do is ask, Robert.”



After breakfast, Rob Stuart exited a turbolift and followed the rounded corridor toward his office. He stopped in front of the door, just short of the sensor, and turned his head in the direction he came from because he heard approaching footsteps. “Good morning,” he said to the two crewmen that were passing by. After they acknowledge his greeting and continued walking, Stuart took a step closer to his office door, which parted as soon as the sensor detected him.

“Good morning, Captain.” Stuart’s aide, Lieutenant Richard Baker stood to his feet from behind his desk. “How are you this morning?”

“Good morning, Mister Baker.” Stuart smiled. “I’m doing fine and ready to get off to a good start. And you?”

“Just fine, sir.”

“What’s on today’s agenda, Richard?”

Baker sat down and looked at his computer monitor. “The *Sonak* is due to arrive this afternoon, and Captain Thorpe would like to meet with you at your convenience. Admiral Montoya sent a communique about your request for a science vessel to be assigned.” He paused and tried to keep a neutral expression.

Stuart waited for a moment to hear his aide finish his thought. He assumed that the pause meant good news. “And?”

Baker smiled widely before continuing.

Stuart looked at Lieutenant Baker’s face and knew that his assumption was correct. “Good news?”

“Good news, sir. The admiral is sending us two *Nova*-class starships,” Baker said as he held up two fingers. “The *Solar Flare* and the *Eclipse* are both on their way.”

“Two? Admiral Montoya must be a generous mood,” Stuart said. “How soon?”

“The *Solar Flare* will be here in five days, but the *Eclipse* will take a couple of months because it’s currently with the 5th Exploratory Group in Sector...”

“...four-two-eight,” Stuart said, completing Baker’s sentence.” He saw his aide’s curious expression. “Before I was assigned command of the *Monarch*, I was in that sector on the *Providence*. The 5th Exploratory Group was assembled shortly before I left.”

“You know Captain Storan?”

“We met once,” Stuart said. “I understand that he is a fine captain with a well-trained crew.”

“The admiral suggested that the *Eclipse* might have the right people and resources to do some serious research on that planet the *Balboa* surveyed several months ago,” Baker said.

“Takaria,” Stuart said. “Yes, the ruins that Commander Morgenstern and his crew found during the initial survey need to be thoroughly investigated. “After a short contemplative pause, Stuart spoke again. “Anything else to report?”

“The Diplomatic Corps and Federation Council issued a joint news release that Welva’s petition to become a full member has been approved.”

“That’s wonderful!” If he had not been happy about the previous information, Stuart certainly was now. “Any news on when the signing ceremony will be?”

“To be determined,” Baker said. “I’m sure that it will be a big affair, and the planning for all the festivities takes time.”

“I’m sure all the politicians and bureaucrats involved need the time to figure out how to get as much credit as they can.” Stuart produced a little smirk. “See if you can get me through to Welva. I want to get in contact with a man known as Jovani.”

“Is there a last name, sir? Or a location where he can be reached?”

“It shouldn’t be too hard to find him, Richard,” Stuart said. “He’s a celebrity on his world.”

Baker had an inquisitive look.

“He was the person to pilot his planet’s first warp vessel,” Stuart said. “And he was the attaché to Welva’s Ambassador to the UFP until I met him, and he served as a guide when we first came to this sector in search of a missing crew.”

“He might be on board the Welvan ship that is due to arrive later this morning.”

“For the conference?”

Baker nodded. "Yes sir."

"Please check with CnC to contact the ship and find out if he's aboard," Stuart said. "If he is, find out which docking port the ship will be berthed and the time of arrival."

"Will do, Captain."

Stuart nodded started for the door to his private office. He stopped and turned as the doors slid aside. "Also, contact the *Sonak* and tell Captain Thorpe to meet up with me at 1600. She should be here before then, yes?"

"Due to arrive at 1450, sir."

"Very good," Stuart said as he turned and entered his office. The door slid closed behind him.



1558 Hours

"Enter," Stuart said in response to the door chime. He stood as the doors slid open. "Connie, good to see you. You're two minutes early by the way."

Captain Constance Thorpe smiled. "Remember what Professor Cantrell always said when we were at the Academy?"

"The best way to not be late to class is to be early." Rob returned his friend's smile. "Congratulations on mediating a successful trade deal between the Nazar and the Oshi. *And* for getting the Nazar to send delegates to the conference."

"Thank you, Rob. I only wish I could have talked the Oshi into sending representatives, too." Thorpe walked to the replicator and ordered a cup of coffee without waiting for Stuart to offer her something. Their friendship went back to the Academy, and she was not one to always adhere to protocol around him. "Do you want something while I'm over here?"

Stuart sat down behind his desk and leaned back in the chair. "Peppermint tea, if you don't mind."

"I thought you preferred apple cinnamon," Thorpe said in mock surprise.

"Jan suggested I try some different blends so I wouldn't appear too set in my ways," Stuart replied.

"Sounds like good advice. Computer, hot peppermint tea." Thorpe took the two cups of steaming liquid and walked back to Stuart's desk, setting one of the cups on the desktop in front of her friend. She sat in the chair on the other side of the desk and took a sip but quickly pulled the cup away from her lips and set it on the desk. "Too hot. Needs a few minutes to cool down."

"All the replicators tend to make the hot beverages too hot. I've mentioned it more than once to maintenance, but they haven't seen fit to do anything about it yet."

“Too busy?”

“So they say,” Rob said. “Don’t worry about not getting the Oshi on board. You just met them. And I’m sure there will be future opportunities.”

“They are interesting people, Rob,” Thorpe said. “Most of the reptilian species the Federation has encountered tend to be hostile or at least somewhat belligerent, but the Oshi seem very peaceful.”

“I read your report,” Stuart said. “I understand that they have had warp capability for about 55 years, but they haven’t traveled very far away from their system.”

“They don’t explore for the sake of exploration,” Thorpe said. “They look for uninhabited worlds that have edible vegetation and water.”

Stuart’s face displayed a quizzical look, which Thorpe picked up on.

“Their planet is mostly dessert,” she said. “They’re vegetarians, and their world barely has enough edible flora to support a population of 1.7 billion.”

“Ah, so the trade agreement with the Nazar is extremely important for the Oshi’s survival.”

“I wouldn’t say the Oshi wouldn’t survive without the agreement, but it makes life less stressful knowing that they will have a steady supply of food.”

“And the Nazar are happy with the agreement?”

“Very,” Thorpe said. “Their worlds have raw materials for building their fleet, but not as much as they would like. They have a small fleet of ships for exploration and defense, but they are like us in their desire to explore space. They just have not had the resources to build more starships with enough range to go to the unknown.”

“And Oshanis IV has the resources,” Stuart added.

“Some on the planet, and more on its two moons.” Thorpe took a sip of her coffee. “That’s better. Not too hot now.”

“Are you ready for your next assignment?” Stuart transitioned into a more business-like tone as he pushed a PADD across the desk. “Kelos III.”

Thorpe picked up the PADD and starting reading. “I heard about the Kelosians from the Nazar.”

“As you can see, we don’t have a lot of information, but the Welvans have had some contact with them over the last few years,” Stuart said. “According to the Welvan government, the Kelosians are curious about other worlds but not too ambitious about space travel.”

Thorpe read from the PADD. “It says here that they sent out an expedition seventy years ago, and when it returned, the planetary government decided that interstellar travel was too dangerous.” She looked up from the PADD. “What happened?”

“The Welvans don’t know, but they speculated that the Kelosians encountered a hostile race.” Stuart tapped his desktop twice. “The Welvans say that the Kelosians are welcoming of others coming to their world though.”

“They just aren’t too keen about going to other worlds to satisfy their curiosity.”

“Right,” Stuart said. “So, your mission is to go to Kelos III and get to know them. And let them get to know us. We have already made first contact via subspace communication, and the Kelos government has extended an invitation to visit.”

“Do you want me to find out why they gave up space exploration after only one try?”

“Find out all you can, but don’t press the issue if they are unwilling to share that information,” Stuart said. “Make sure that they know that we don’t want anything from them other than friendship and knowledge.”

“Of course.” Thorpe picked up her cup and finished off the coffee that was in it. “I don’t mean to rush our visit, but is there anything else? I promised the Nazar ambassador that I would meet her before tonight’s festivities.”

“A Starfleet captain’s work is never done. I’m sure you’re tired, Connie,” Stuart said as he stood and walked around to the other side of the desk. “Try to take a day or two to rest before you ship out to Kelos. They don’t expect you until next week.”

“After I meet with the ambassador and the dinner tonight, I plan on spending the next two days in my quarters reading a good book.” Thorpe stood and, instead of shaking Stuart’s hand, kissed him on the cheek and tightly hugged him. “I’ll see you tonight?”

“Jan and I will be there.” Stuart smiled as he watched his friend turn and exit his office. He went back to his desk, picked up the cup, drank the rest of his tea, and took the cup back to the replicator. “Computer, recycle.”

A familiar chirp indicated a visitor on the other side of the door. *Busy day*, Stuart thought. “Enter.”

The door slid open, and Lieutenant Baker took a step inside Stuart’s office. “Sir, I located your friend Jovani. He is in command of the Welvan ship that docked earlier today, and he requested that you be his guest to tour his ship as soon as your schedule allows. The Welvan ship is berthed at Port 5.”

“Thank you, Richard. Please reply and let him know that I will see him shortly.”

“Aye, sir.” Baker backed out to the outer office and started toward his desk as the door that separated the two offices closed.

He tapped his combadge. “Stuart to Doctor Stuart.”

After a short pause, Janice Stuart replied. “*Yes dear, what’s up?*”

“I wanted you to know that Jovani arrived a few hours ago and offered to take us on a tour of his ship,” Rob said. “Can you take some time off early and meet me at Docking Port 5?”

“*Give me five minutes,*” Janice said. “*I look forward to seeing him.*”

“See you shortly, Hon.” Stuart tapped the badge to close the transmission and started toward the exit. As he walked through the outer office, he nodded to his aide. “I’m going to be on the Welvan ship, Richard. Feel free to knock off early if you want.”

“Thank you, Captain,” Lieutenant Baker exclaimed as he watched Stuart leave the room.



Robert and Janice Stuart entered the airlock leading to the Welvan starship. When the inner hatch opened, they saw Jovani smiling. “Permission to come aboard,” Rob said.

Jovani, wearing a blue satin robe with a silver sash to indicate his position as the commander of his vessel, spread his arms and smiled. “Welcome my friends, he said as he embraced the Stuarts. He backed away and bowed in the traditional formal greeting of his people. “Please come and be the first non-Welvani to see the *Aldorfen*.”

“Thank you, Jovani,” Jan said, her face beaming with joy. “It’s good to see you again.”

“I second that,” Rob said. “It’s a pleasure to come aboard and tour your ship. Judging by the design of the outside, I can only imagine the artistic beauty of the interior layout.”

“You will not be disappointed, Robert Stuart,” Jovani said. “Come.” He turned and led the Stuarts on a tour of his ship.



“...and this is the command center,” Jovani said as the trio walked into the room where he commanded the starship.”

Rob and Jan surveyed the different stations in the room. There were four consoles and chairs on each side—port and starboard—and a console with three chairs in the center of the room facing forward. Rob’s attention was drawn to the large window directly ahead that curved vertically over what he assumed was the command chair. He wondered why the ship’s CO would be at the front with the flight control station behind him. He thought that it would be difficult for the crew to hear the commander’s orders if he was facing away, but then he remembered that Welvans had exceptional hearing. “I’m very impressed, Jovani. You have good reason to be proud of your ship. I’m sure that the designers are proud, too.”

“My team is proud, friend Robert,” Jovani said.

“Do you mean that you are part of the design team?” Jan asked.

“I designed the spaceframe and flight controls, and I was the team leader,” Jovani said. “But most of the credit goes to a group of 20 of the best starship designers on our planet.”

“I noticed that all the crew I’ve seen wear identical uniforms with no visible signs of rank or departmental designations,” Rob said.

“All crew members are trained in every department and every function except for medical personnel,” Jovani said. “We find that it promotes more efficiency and variety. The crew rotates assigned positions and departments every other day. We follow a minimal rank structure so that equality can be maintained.”

“What if something would happen to you? Who would take over command?” Rob could not fathom a starship without some orderly form of structure.

“As the commander, I appoint a second and a third to take command when I am not in the command center or to take my place if I become incapacitated. Leadership in the ship’s departments and command structure follows a rotation schedule.”

“You are not always in command?” Jan asked.

“I am the leader of the *Aldorfen*, and I am responsible for the crew, passengers, and everything that happens onboard,” Jovani said. “Having observed your hierarchical structure when I was a guest aboard your starship helps me to understand that our way must seem strange to you.”

Rob smiled and placed his hand on Jovani’s shoulder. “Yes, it seems strange, my friend, but I appreciate our differences as well as our similarities.”

“I am curious about your medical section, Jovani,” Jan said. “I noticed that your doctors don’t rely on a lot of technology as we do.”

“No, our healers develop medications from the various herbs, plants, and roots found in most of our forests. Remember that we are a people that live close to nature and have learned to rely on those resources.” Jovani paused and swung his arm widely pointing out the stations and consoles. “All of this technology is important and useful, but if we abandon living harmoniously with nature, then we would be a lost people.”

“I think I understand,” Jan said. The people of Earth have created a paradise, but sometimes I wonder if we might have gone too far by artificially controlling the weather and micromanaging the environment instead of letting nature takes its course.”

Jovani cocked his head to one side. “Perhaps you would benefit by talking with our healers. We will be here for the remainder of the conference before departing for Earth.”

“I appreciate that, Jovani,” Jan said. “When would be a good time to meet with them?”

“Tomorrow morning would be acceptable. I will talk to our healers and...”

Rob interrupted as he realized something that Jovani had just mentioned. “Earth? Is the date for the ceremony to welcome Welva into the Federation happening this soon?”

“Yes. The Federation Council has requested that we bring a delegation for that purpose, and our current ambassador to the Federation is being replaced,” Jovani said. “The ambassador longs for the forests of Welva and has requested a replacement. I am taking the new ambassador and his staff to Earth. He will sign his name to bring Welva officially into the Federation.”

“I was hoping to be present at the ceremony, but I didn’t think it would be for a few months,” Rob said. “I just heard the official announcement today.”

Puzzlement showed on Jovan’s face, and Jan picked up on it. “What Rob means is that the Federation Council doesn’t usually move this fast. It’s normal for months to go by after an announcement of a new member world before the signing ceremony takes place.”

“I see,” said Jovani. “The speed of this ceremony seems abnormal?”

“Politicians like their ceremonies and generally put a lot of planning into them,” Rob said. “Well, now that we have had the pleasure of your hospitality, perhaps we could also provide you with a tour of *Gateway Alpha* in the next day or two before you leave, my friend.”

Jovani bowed. “I would be honored, but I believe that there is a gathering and formal dinner scheduled this evening?”

“Quite right,” Rob said. “Jan and I need to get back to our quarters to get ready so we’re not late. “We will see you in the main dining room on deck 7 at 1830 station time.”

Jovani bowed again. “I look forward to it, Robert Stuart.” Jovani motioned toward the exit hatch and the three were on their way back to the airlock.



Earlier...

Admiral Sjögren enjoyed watching the Pelaxian, Vasi, and Nazar delegations conversing as they marveled at the variety of, from their view, alien plants and trees in the station’s botanical garden. It was a large parkland that took up all of Deck One, which the three races admired and wondered how many different varieties of plant life existed in a single room on a space station. Sjögren looked up from his seated position on one of the many park benches and viewed the stars on the other side of the large transparent dome that protected the garden from the vacuum of space. It was the admiral’s favorite place on *Gateway Alpha*.

One of the Pelaxians left the group of delegates and approached Sjögren. He smiled and held out his hands in a welcoming gesture. “I am impressed with your starbase, Admiral, and this botanical garden is truly a wonder.”

“Thank you, Ambassador Haroom,” Sjögren said as he rose from the bench. “I am glad that you are enjoying your time with us.”

Haroom nodded. “Your hospitality is appreciated. Thank you for bringing several of our interstellar neighbors together.”

“I understand that you and the Vasi already are allies.”

“Yes, the Vasi are our good friends,” Haroom said. “We gave them Pelax Vas when an asteroid collision made their homeworld uninhabitable long ago. Our two societies have been closely tied together ever since.” Haroom’s tone and facial features exhibited pride and a little bit of cockiness. Bragging about his world’s benevolence toward the Vasi was somewhat of a trait among Pelaxians.

“You and the Vasi don’t seem to have much in common,” the admiral said.

“We have our friendship in common, Admiral. You will find that we value diversity and seek out people who are not like us.” The Pelaxian lowered his head, a gesture that indicated curiosity or surprise, Sjögren had learned. “I have noticed that the inhabitants of your starbase come from many worlds, so your people must believe in diversity as well, yes?”

Sjögren nodded and smiled. “Yes, we share this quality with you.”

“Sharing this quality is a good beginning for my people and yours.”

“I agree, Ambassador, and appreciating our differences as well as our similarities is what building alliances is all about.”



Later that evening...

In the main dining hall, Admiral Sjögren had just finished eating. He placed his fork back on the plate and turned his head to his left to address Ambassador Chen. “Is the food to your liking, Lirian?”

The Federation Ambassador-at-Large nodded as she picked up the napkin from the table and patted the corners of her mouth. “It’s very good, Admiral. Your chef did a wonderful job providing a wide variety.”

“I’ll let him know,” Sjögren said. “How do you think the conference has gone so far? Do you think most of the delegates will want to become our allies?”

Chen shrugged. “I think the Pelaxians and Vasi are definite. The Nazar are impressed with how Captain Thorpe handled the trade negotiations with the Oshi, so I think there is a good chance that they will sign.”

“And the others?”

“You already know that the Velanwar have signed a treaty, but I’m not sure the Incharu are ready to make any formal alliance with us...not yet anyway. They tend to be independent, but they are open-minded, so there’s hope for the future.”

“Do they have any specific concerns?” Sjögren asked.

“None that they have said, and I don’t sense any hidden motives,” Chen answered. “I asked if we could visit their world and maybe send a research team.”

“And what was the response?”

“They said we are welcome to visit, but their planetary council will need to decide about the request to allow a research team or not.”

Admiral Sjögren smiled. “All in all, it seems like you have been successful in bringing people together.”

“I believe that this conference was *your* idea, and most of *your* staff put it together, Admiral.” The ambassador lifted her glass and returned Sjögren’s smile. “Well done, sir.”

Sjögren nodded. “Thank you. I understand that you want to go to Ruhl after the conference.”

“Yes,” she said. “From Captain Leeson’s report, the Ruhl are requesting that talks begin as soon as possible to create an alliance with us.”

“Yes, I read Leeson’s report, too. The Ruhl are highly motivated by their proximity to the Enkara, and an alliance with the Federation would benefit them because of our non-aggression pact with Enkar.”

“Do you think the Ruhl want to take advantage of us because of the pact?”

“I think it calls for caution,” Sjögren said. “We only know what little Captain Leeson has discovered about them. And her visit was only for a few days.”

“I agree that caution is warranted, Admiral, but Leeson’s security background has helped her to read people pretty well, and she seemed to have a good *feel* about the Ruhl,” Chen said. “Of course, I will not jump in too deep until I get to know them firsthand.”

“Before you go to Ruhl, will you do me a favor?”

“I’ll try. What is it?”

“Take a few days off and get some rest before you go,” Sjögren said. “You’ve been working nonstop since you were assigned here.”

Chen contemplated what the admiral had said. “It has been a long time since I’ve had a vacation. I suppose that you’re right. I should take some time off,” she said. “I haven’t even had time to explore most of *Gateway Alpha* because I’ve been working either in my office or on alien worlds for the better part of the last six months.”

“To be honest, Lirian, there are still a few places on this starbase that I haven’t seen either.”

Lirian reached over and placed her hand on the admiral’s. “Maybe we can take the full tour together when the conference is over?”

Sjögren nodded. “It will be my pleasure.”

Chen stood up and let go of Sjögren’s hand. “I look forward to it. But now, I suppose I should make my rounds to the tables and converse with the guests.”

“You might want to avoid the Batirians until they finish eating,” Sjögren said. “They think it’s rude to have a conversation while dining.”

“Good to know, Admiral,” the ambassador said as she made her way toward the nearest table where the Stuarts sat with the Welvan delegation.

Uri Ivanov, seated at Sjögren’s right, set his glass of synthale on the table. “You seem quite...how do you say...enticed by the ambassador.”

“Sjögren turned to face his first officer. “I find her to be intriguing, but I don’t think at my age....”

After the admiral trailed off and never finished his sentence, Captain Ivanov nonchalantly said, “You are only in your mid-eighties, Admiral. I think the two of you would make a good couple.”

“She’s always on the go, and I don’t think I have the strength to keep up with her.”

“Do not underestimate yourself, sir,” Uri said.

“I appreciate your confidence in me, Uri, but my courting days are long gone. And I’m old enough to be her grandfather.” Sjögren grinned as he pushed his chair away from the table and stood. “Excuse me, Captain. I promised the Pelaxians and Vasi that I would take them to see the Oceanography Center and Aquarium.”

“I suspect that the Vasi will want to take a swim,” Uri said.

Sjögren cocked his head to one side. “They *are* amphibians, so I suspect that you are right.”

“Having tentacles instead of hair growing on their heads.” Uri’s eyes lit up. “Reminds me of one of my favorite restaurants in Moscow where calamari is the specialty.”

Sjögren just shook his head and walked away.



The Enkara officer approached and saluted his commander. “Zar-Bek, the weapon is ready.”

“Zar-Bek, the former supreme commander of Enkar nodded to his subordinate. “Very good, Lusom. Set course for the launch point. Maximum velocity.”

“Yes, Supreme Leader.” The officer saluted and quickly turned and went to his station to carry out the order.

Zar-Bek sat down at the monitoring station and whispered outside of his crew’s hearing, “Now I will have my revenge and put my plan in motion to regain what I lost.”



After dinner, the Stuarts and their friend Jovani went to the Stuarts’ quarters. They entered, and Rob stretched out his arm toward one of the chairs. “Please sit down, Jovani. May I offer you something to drink?”

“Thank you, my friend. What is that hot beverage you introduced me to when we first met?”

“Apple cinnamon tea,” Rob replied as he walked toward the replicator. He turned toward his wife. “Hon?”

“Just water, please.” She took off her dress white uniform jacket. “I’m going to check on the kids.” She walked into the bedroom as Rob retrieved two cups of tea and a glass of water from the replicator.

Rob handed a cup to Jovani and set his cup and Jan’s glass on the table in front of the couch. He sat and gave his attention to his Welvan friend. “So, Jovani, what are your plans now that Welva has been accepted as a Federation member?”

“The ruling council has requested that I work with the Federation to integrate some of our crews into Starfleet service.”

“What about you?” Rob asked. “Do you want to serve in Starfleet?”

“I have considered it,” Jovani said as he leaned forward in his chair to reach the teacup on the table. “I am the first of my people to have flown faster than light and served the longest in our space program, so it would be a reasonable choice.”

“With your experience, you could take the accelerated path through the Academy and have a starship command in less than two years. I would be happy to be your sponsor.”

“Thank you, Robert,” Jovani said. “Your suggestion appeals to me, and I will give serious consideration.”

As Rob and Jovani talked, Janice came out of the bedroom, followed by Christine Nelson. Jan turned her head and smiled at the other woman. “Thank you, Christine, for watching the babies.”

“They are little angels,” Christine said. “I’m glad that I had the opportunity to watch them. Carrie has told me how wonderful it is to babysit for you, and I thought that she didn’t need to have all the fun.”

“I figured that tonight would be a little too late for Carries to watch them, so I’m glad that I asked you to watch them this time,” Jan said. “The childcare center does a good job while I’m on duty, but I like friends to watch them if Rob and I need to participate in other functions like tonight.”

Christine smiled. “If you ever need me to watch them again, feel free to ask. If I can’t do it, I’m sure Carrie will be glad to.”

“She and Ian make a good team watching them.”

Christine’s smile was not as bright as previously. “Ian’s a good kid, but I’m trying to limit how much time Carrie spends with him alone because...”

Jan placed a hand on Christine’s shoulder. “I understand. Two young teenagers of the opposite sex need some supervision.”

“I was wondering if you could help by not asking both of them to babysit together, Christine said. “I don’t think that they would do anything while watching the babies, but...”

Jan immediately chimed in. “But you don’t want to put them in a situation where they might be tempted.”

“Exactly.” Christine’s facial expression appeared more relaxed. “Thank you, Janice.”

“You’re welcome.” Jan noticed that her husband and Jovani had stopped talking to each other and were beginning to listen to her conversation with Christine. “Jovani, have you met Christine Nelson? She’s the arboretum steward on the *Monarch*.”

Jovani bowed slightly. “Yes, I remember you from when I was a guest on the ship. I am very impressed with your care for the plants and trees.”

“It’s good to see you again, Mister Jovani.” Christine smiled and turned her head toward Jan. “Thank you again, Jan.” She faced Rob. “Good evening, Captain.”

“Good evening, Christine. Give my best to Lieutenant Nelson and your daughter.”

Christine smiled as she exited the Stuarts’ quarters.

Jovani addressed Jan. “How are your children, Doctor?”

“They are doing well,” Janice said. “I hope you’re still here when they wake up. I would love for you to see them.”

“I wish that,” Jovani said. “I am grateful for how they blessed my planet with renewal at their birth.”

“You know, Jovani, we never figured out how the birth of our children on your world stopped the quakes and affected your world.” Rob gave a curious expression. “Can you explain it?”

Jovani cocked his head to one side as he contemplated Rob’s lack of understanding. “I cannot explain it in a way that you would understand. Welvani have a deep connection with our world and have knowledge that outsiders do not.” Jovani looked into Rob’s eyes. “It is merely the way of things on Welva.”

“I’ve experienced a lot of things that I could not explain during my travels, Jovani.” Rob took a sip of his tea. “I guess I just have to accept that this is another one of those cases.”

Jan re-entered the bedroom when she heard the babies crying. Moments later, she brought both of the kids, one in each arm, into the main living area. “Would you like to hold them?” She moved closer to the Welvan.

Jovani’s face lit up as he took the children in his arms. “I am honored to hold them. They are beautiful.”

“Thank you,” Jan said.

“I see that the boy resembles his mother, but the girl has her father’s features.”

“She looks like my mother,” Rob said. “I’ve seen holographs of my mom as a baby, and Kelly looks just like her.”

“Your mother was a Starfleet officer, yes?”

“Yes, she was.”

“Kelly will follow your path, Robert, but your son will choose another.”

“Why do you think so?” Rob hoped that he was right about Kelly, but he hoped that Kevin would also choose Starfleet. Jovani’s words were puzzling, and Rob didn’t place much stock in the idea that his Welvan friend was some kind of soothsayer.

Jovani, however, was confident in his prediction about the Stuart twins. “I just know.”

Jan silently pondered what Jovani had said. She hoped that one of her kids would choose to become a doctor, but no matter what, she would be proud of whatever they decided to do when they grew up. Her reverie was interrupted by the intercom.

“Fleet Captain Stuart, this is CnC.”

Stuart went to the intercom switch on the wall next to the door. “Stuart here. Go ahead.”

“Sir, Admiral Sjögren would like you to report to CnC right away. We have a situation.”

Rob looked gravely toward his wife as he addressed the intercom. “On my way. Stuart out.” He looked at Jovani, and then at Jan. “I apologize, Jovani.”

“I understand that duty takes precedence, Robert.”

Rob nodded to his friend. He stepped toward Jan and kissed her. “I’ll let you know what’s going on as soon as I can.”

“I’ll contact Medical and have them go on standby alert.”

Rob left his and Jan’s quarters and made his way to the nearest turbolift.



Stuart entered the CnC and saw Admiral Sjögren and Captain Ivanov standing behind a young ensign who was hunched over a tactical console. Stuart approached the trio. “Admiral?”

Sjögren did not turn his attention away from the monitor. “Sensors picked up several objects heading in our direction.”

The ensign keyed some information into his console. “The readout on the objects is coming in now, sir.”

“Starships?” The admiral placed his hand on the young man’s shoulder.

“Negative, Admiral. They appear to be meteors,” he said. “The largest is about twenty-seven meters long by fourteen meters wide. I’ve detected about a dozen that are slightly smaller and hundreds of smaller fragments.”

“How close will they come to us, Ensign Taggart?” Ivanov asked.

The ensign pulled up more information from the sensor readings. “Sir, they are on a direct course for us.”

Stuart frowned. “We’re several light-years away from any star system. It’s hard to believe that rogue meteors would be this far out from any of them.”

“Or on a collision course with us,” Ivanov said. “Admiral, our shields will protect us from the smaller fragments, but the larger ones will need to be destroyed.”

“Agreed, Uri,” Sjögren said. “Have Commander Johnston take the *Cheron* out to intercept and destroy them.”

“Yes, sir,” Ivanov said as he turned and started toward the communications station.

“Sir?” The young ensign looked up toward Sjögren.

“Yes, Taggart?”

“The meteors are traveling extremely fast. I’ve calculated their speed to be zero point five seven light speed.”

“Are you sure?” Sjögren looked closely at Taggart’s instruments.

“I ran it through three times, Admiral.”

“Something seems wrong about this,” Stuart said. “It’s not natural for meteors to travel at that speed. I recommend that we put the station on yellow alert, sir.”

“Let’s not rush into that yet, Robert,” Sjögren replied. “We don’t want to worry our guests unless we have to.”

“Taggart, upload your data and the meteors’ position to the *Cheron*. Keep me posted.”

“Aye, Admiral.”

Sjögren and Stuart started toward the master situation control table located in the center of the room. “Robert, you might want to have the *Monarch* on standby.”

“I’ll be on my ship, sir.” Stuart started to turn to leave, but Sjögren gently grabbed his arm.

“Let’s keep this low-key.”

“Will do, Admiral.” Stuart left the CnC and made his way to the nearest turbolift.



The U.S.S. *Cheron* exited warp as it approached the oncoming space rocks.

“Full sensor sweep, Mister Matsuka.” Commander Carl Johnston kept his focus on the main viewer. “Mister Amari, lock phaser cannons on the closest meteor.”

The Zakhorn tactical officer, Lieutenant Garfen Amari, brought the weapons online and acknowledged with a short “Phasers locked, Captain,” as he was already anticipating and getting ready to blast the second and third largest rocks as soon as the first was dispensed of.

“Captain, sensors detect a warp trail leading away, Lieutenant Hikaru Matsuka, the science officer, said. “No sign of any vessels on short-range or long-range scans.”

Johnston turned slightly in his chair toward the science station. “Thank you, Mister Matsuka. We’ll have to wait to investigate.” Turning toward the weapons station, he said, “Prepare to fire...” Johnston was an experienced tactician and could mentally calculate the optimum range for firing. “Fire now!”

The powerful phaser pulses left the *Defiant*-class starship and hit their mark just as the tactical officer had intended; however, only surface debris was blasted away, leaving the meteor’s metallic core intact.

“Only a small portion of the meteor has been destroyed, Captain,” the tactical officer said.

“The first officer, Lieutenant Commander Michelle McNeal was standing to the right of the command chair. “Matsuka, scan the first meteor. Why didn’t our phasers pulverize it?”

“Scanning now.” The young science officer adjusted his instruments and double-checked the readings. “The core is comprised of rock, iron, standard silicates, and an unknown metal that we have not encountered before.”

“Any small shards of that unknown metal in the debris field?”

“Yes, Exec,” Matsuka said. “I’ve detected several hundred fragments.”

McNeal turned to face her CO. “Permission to beam samples aboard, Captain?”

Johnston stroked his chin for a moment, pondering the potential risks. “Granted. Make sure to take all safety precautions, Shelly.”

McNeal nodded and turned her attention back to the science officer. “Lock onto a few of those fragments and beam them into an isolation storage unit in the cargo bay, Lieutenant.”

“Aye, Exec.”

McNeal turned back to look at Johnston. “May I recommend that we see what a quantum torpedo will do, sir?”

“It’s worth a try, Shelly,” Johnston said. “Mister Amari, arm one quantum torpedo and fire when you have a good lock.”

Amari responded quickly. “Locked on and firing now.”

The torpedo exploded on impact and reduced the core to smaller chunks, but the unknown metallic core still was roughly eight to nine meters in diameter. If a quantum torpedo at maximum yield could not obliterate the core, it was doubtful that *Gateway Alpha*’s shields would handle a chunk that size.

Johnston shook his head. “I’m open to suggestions.”

“Perhaps we can use the tractor beam,” Lieutenant T’Luta said from the OPS station.

“Would we have time to tractor all of the meteors before they reach the starbase?” McNeal asked.

“Twenty-six of the meteors are too large for the station’s shields to handle,” Matsuka said. “What if we just need to concentrate on those?”

Johnston nodded to the OPS Manager. “Lock onto the lead meteor and engage tractor beam, Lieutenant T’Luta.”

The Vulcan officer said, “Yes, Captain,” and manipulated the proper controls with efficiency. “Engaging tractor beam.”

The beam emanated from the *Cheron* and grabbed hold of the metallic core and held it relative to the ship. Due to the speed of the meteor compared to that of the *Cheron*, the small Starfleet vessel shook as the beam forced the meteor to drastically slow down.

“CONN, pick a course that will send that rock away from any habitable star systems.”

“Aye, Captain,” Lieutenant J.G. Heyman said. “Course set.”

Johnston leaned slightly forward in his chair. “Good. One-half impulse.”

“One-half impulse, aye.” Heyman worked his controls as the ship fought him. “It’s sluggish, sir.”

Johnston nodded to his senior flight officer. “To be expected at the speed that rock is moving, Mister Heyman.”

The crew felt a slight shudder as the ship tried to change the meteor’s course. After a few seconds, the shaking stopped, and Lieutenant Heyman smiled. “Now on designated course, sir.”

“Good work, Mister Heyman. OPS, release tractor beam. Let’s go get another one.”

The *Cheron* returned to the field of hurtling rocks and repeated the maneuver until the largest meteors were on their way along an altered course that would eventually deposit them into the star of an uninhabited system. The threat to Starbase *Gateway Alpha* had been eliminated.



Zar-Bek watched the monitor closely to study the Federation starship that had thwarted his plan. He wanted to put his fist through the monitor, but that would be a signal to his underlings that he did not retain control of the situation. He forced himself to stay calm and even allowed himself a brief smile. “This is a minor setback, but we will prevail,” he said to his second-in-command. “Set course for Enka-Ner. We will gather our forces and create a new plan.”



On the last day of the conference, the delegates of each world thanked Admiral Sjögren and Ambassador Chen for their hospitality and the opportunity to gather with the Federation and other races for a chance at mutual cooperation.

The results of the five-day conference pleased the admiral. The Pelaxians and Vasi signed a treaty of alliance with the Federation. The Nazar agreed to continue talks toward that same end, and they requested that Ambassador Chen, along with Captain Thorpe, schedule a visit to their homeworld to negotiate directly with their leaders. The Incharu invited the Federation to visit, but they were not ready to commit to anything official. They did want to maintain a friendship, which should prove to be a positive step toward the future. The Batirians were already allies, and they were grateful to be introduced to the Nazar and Pelaxians, whom the Batirians had been studying covertly for hundreds of years. And the Velanwar could not stop talking to the other races about the benefits they could foresee by formalizing an alliance with the Federation.

Lirian Chen said her goodbyes to all the delegates; after the last of them left the conference room, she turned toward and smiled at Admiral Sjögren. “I think that went well, don’t you, Erik?”

Sjögren also smiled. “This week exceeded my expectations,” he said. “I think we did well.”

“Still want to give me the grand tour?”

“Let’s start with breakfast tomorrow at the Starview Café, and then we can go to the botanical garden on Deck One and work our way down,” Sjögren said. “Is 0730 too early?”

“Sounds perfect,” Lirian replied. “I’ll see you in the morning.” She walked out of the conference room and toward a nearby turbolift.

Sjögren looked around the room as he thought about the new beginning that had occurred. He started toward the exit when Rob Stuart entered.

“Successful conference, Erik?”

“I would say it was very successful, Robert. I need to write up a report and inform Starfleet Command of the results.”

“In light of all the positives, I need to let you know about a concern,” Stuart said.

“About the conference? About one of the species that attended?” Sjögren was trying to read Stuart’s expression.

“No, it’s about those meteors that were headed in our direction.”

“I thought Commander Johnston and his crew took care of that.”

“They did,” Stuart said, “but it is extremely unlikely that those meteors would be this far from a star system and traveling at that speed. It isn’t natural.”

“Just because it’s not likely doesn’t mean...” Sjögren ’s words trailed off when he considered the report that Commander Johnston had sent him earlier. “I only skimmed Johnston’s logs when he submitted them. Did I miss something?”

“Your focus was on the conference, but read the logs and the report again,” Stuart said. “The *Cheron*’s sensors detected a warp trail moving away from those rogue meteors.”

“The meteors were deliberately sent in our direction?”

“I believe so, Erik. I think that there was a ship with a mass driver that launched those rocks.”

Sjögren stood silently for a few moments, and then he said, “Do you think it was the Enkara?”

“I don’t want to make any accusations without more evidence, but...”

“But your gut tells you that it’s them.”

“We don’t know the extent of their technology, and we don’t know how far they would go if they have become aware of our seeking alliances with planets that the Enkara would like to conquer.”

Sjögren ’s elation over the conference results disappeared as he thought about how what was accomplished could be derailed by a hostile force. Whether it was the Enkara or another race did not matter. The admiral decided that he would not allow it as he quietly left the room with Stuart walking at his side.