

Stardate 57280.1

Rob and Jan Stuart had just returned to their quarters after picking up their twins from the Childcare Center. They set the toddlers down on the carpeted deck next to a box of toys and smiled at each other.

“Hard to believe it’s been a year since these two showed up to change our lives,” Jan said.

“Seems like yesterday when they started crawling, and now they’re walking everywhere.”

“This morning, after you left, Kevin tried climbing to get on the couch,” Jan said. Not sure I’m ready for that. Not yet.”

“He’s going to be a daredevil.”

“I hope not.” Jan turned and started toward the kitchen. “Keep an eye on them while I fix dinner, okay?”

Rob nodded. “I probably need to keep both eyes on them, especially Kevin it sounds like.” He started to sit on the couch when the door chime announced that the Stuarts had a visitor. “Come.”

The computer opened the door in response to Rob’s command, and Captain Melanie Leeson entered the room. “Mel! Come in and have a seat.”

Melanie smiled as she carried two boxes wrapped in paper that had images of balloons and birthday cakes. “I heard that we have a couple of special people with a birthday today.”

Rob stood and approached his former first officer. He shook her hand and motioned toward one of the chairs. “I thought that you would be busy making preparations to head back to the New Britain colony.”

“Already prepped and ready to go. Commander North is anxious to get back, but she wanted to wait one more day with her brothers.”

“I’m amazed that they made the trip from Earth at their ages,” Rob said. “I hope that I’m still that fit when I reach one hundred twenty-five.”

“I’m sure you will be, Rob.” Leeson smiled as she picked up little Kelly. Especially with these two keeping you on the move.”

Jan, who had been in the kitchen programming a special meal into the replicator had heard Melanie’s voice and entered the living area. “I thought that you would have left the station by now,” she said as she hugged her friend. “She rubbed her daughter’s head as the little girl seemed to enjoy the attention that her ‘Aunt Melanie’ was giving her.

“I didn’t want to leave without bringing by these little darlings’ something on their birthday.”

Leeson looked down as she felt Kevin hugging her leg and trying to climb. She handed Kelly to Jan and reached down to pick Kevin up. “I didn’t forget about you, little guy.”

Kevin giggled and said, “Ma.”

“I’m not your mom. I’m Aunt Melanie. Can you say Aunt Melanie?”

“Ma.”

Jan and Rob both laughed. Jan said, “Right now, everybody’s called Ma.”

“Anmelnie,” Kelly blurted out.

“That’s new, Rob said. “That’s right, Kelly. This is Aunt Melanie.”

Jan sat on the couch, and Melanie followed her lead. “Can you stay for dinner, Mel?”

“I don’t want to impose.”

“You aren’t. It will only take a moment to replicate,” Jan said.

“And you will want to see the kids try to eat birthday cake,” Rob added.

“I don’t want to miss th...”

The room shook, and the red alert klaxon started blaring followed by two one-year-olds crying and the voice of Admiral Erik Sjögren coming over the COM system. “*We’re under attack. All Starfleet personnel to battle stations. Starship crews report to your ships. Civilians report to your designated shelters.*”

Jan took Kevin from Melanie’s arms and huddled with her children. “I’ll take the kids to a shelter. Childcare will have their people there. Once they’re secured, I’ll be in the primary sickbay. You two get going.”

Rob kissed Jan and his children, and quickly turned toward the exit to the corridor, tapping the communicator pin on his uniform. “Stuart to *Monarch*.”

Leeson contacted her ship as well as they both rushed out of the Stuarts’ quarters.



To Boldly Go: Vengeance

A Starbase Gateway Alpha and 3rd Exploratory Group story

By Cleve Johnson

Fleet Captain Stuart entered the command center of the starbase as the floor shook under his feet and he grabbed a nearby console to steady himself. He continued toward the middle of the circular room where Admiral Erik Sjögren was looking at the main viewscreen. Rob looked

up at the screen and saw two alien ships. “It looks like the Enkara have broken the non-aggression pact.”

The admiral turned to Stuart. “We’ll file a formal protest after this is over.” He looked to the tactical and defense stations. “Lieutenant Ross, keep firing phasers. Ensign Torres, divert emergency power to the shields.”

Stuart kept his focus on the viewer. He saw the U.S.S. *Cheron* as it swooped in and fired its pulse phaser cannons at the lead Enkara vessel. “The *Monarch* and *Trailblazer* should be joining the fight momentarily.”

Just as Stuart mentioned them, the two Federation starships came into view on the screen and fired phasers and torpedoes at the second Enkara ship, weakening its shields. The first Enkara ship fired on the *Trailblazer*, but the *Cheron* flew in and took the brunt of the hostile ship’s weapons.

Stuart tapped his combadge. “Stuart to *Monarch*. Marcus, see if you can get behind the lead ship and take out its engines.”

“We’re working on it, Captain. Captain Leeson is leading it towards us.”

Stuart watched the battle continue as the three starships drew the fire away from the station.



On the *Trailblazer* bridge, Captain Leeson clung to her chair as the ship was hit by a weapon’s blast. “Return fire, Mister Dren,” she said to the Trill tactical officer. “Bridge to Engineering. Carmen, can you transfer power to the shields and weapons?”

Over the intercom, Lieutenant Commander Carmen Petroni’s voice answered. “*Reactors are already running at a hundred five percent. I’ll try to divert power from other systems.*”

“Do whatever it takes. Bridge out” Leeson turned in her chair to face the security officer. “Vic, any advice would be appreciated.”

“If we could get one clean shot in that part of the ship...” Lieutenant Commander Victor Jacobs pointed to the image on the small viewscreen on his console. “...we can weaken their shields enough to follow up with a few torpedoes and take out the main shield generators.”

“Getting into position is the trick. Send a message to the *Monarch* and *Cheron* with your idea, Vic. See if either could slip in to get that ship’s shields down.”



“We just received a message from the *Trailblazer*, Captain,” Lieutenant Commander Michelle McNeal, the XO of the U.S.S. *Cheron* said. The message includes targeting coordinates for the lead Enkara ship’s main shield generator.”

Commander Carl Johnston smiled. “Transfer the coordinates to Lieutenant Amari. Let me know when we have a lock, Amari.”

The Zakdorn tactical officer quickly entered the coordinates and let his fingers hover over the firing control. “Phaser cannons locked on target as are the photon torpedoes, sir.”

Johnston looked nodded to Amari. “Fire phasers and torpedoes simultaneously, Lieutenant.”

The rapid-fire phaser cannons and torpedoes pounded against the alien ship’s shields, reducing their strength. After the *Defiant*-class starship let loose its destructive energy, it sped by the enemy vessel; the *Monarch* quickly closed on the Enkara ship.



On the *Monarch*’s bridge, Lieutenant Commander Jennifer Mills looked from tactical toward the center seat. “The enemy ship’s shields are down to twenty-four percent, Captain.”

Arm two quantum torpedoes and fire,” Captain Marcus Grey said calmly.

“Two Borg busters away.” Mills hit the launch touchpad and intently watched the viewscreen as the torpedo sped toward the Enkara vessel. She nodded her approval as she saw the impact bring down the enemy’s shields and blast part of the hull away. “That did the trick, sir.”

“The ship is retreating,” Lieutenant D’Neskos said from the CONN station.”

“The other ship is too.” Lieutenant Jeremy Brackin turned from his station to face Captain Grey. “Are we going to pursue, sir?”

“Lieutenant Commander Mills, please contact *Gateway Alpha* for instructions.” Marcus Grey would have liked to capture at least one of the ships to interrogate the crew for tactical information, but he knew that it was not his decision. Fleet Captain Stuart would need to make the call.

Mills complied and sent the message. Immediately after sending it, she looked up from her console and said, “I guess they aren’t as tough as they think they are.”

“It seems not, Commander.” Grey looked at the tactical officer with a quizzical look. “Borg busters?”

Mills tilted her head to one side. “You’ve never heard them called that?”

The corners of Marcus Grey’s mouth raised slightly. Not quite a smile but close enough to count as one. “No, I don’t believe I have.”

“After the Borg attacked Earth the second time, the *Enterprise* let a few quantum torpedoes loose and destroyed the cube. They started being called Borg busters after that.”

Grey rubbed his chin and nodded his head a few times, pressing his lips together.
“Interesting. The name fits.”

Mills looked back to her console when a light flashed to show an incoming transmission.
“Captain, *Gateway Alpha* is signaling.”

“On screen.”



Rob Stuart faced the main viewer in the CnC of Starbase Gateway Alpha. The viewscreen was split into three sections so that Stuart and the starbase officers and crew could see the bridges of all three ships. “All ships, stand down and return to base. Captains Leeson and Grey, please report to my office for debriefing at 0800 tomorrow.”

Erik Sjögren was standing next to Stuart. “Same for you, Commander Johnston. My office at 0800.”

All three commanding officers acknowledged the order, and the transmission ended.



The next morning, Captains Grey and Leeson entered Rob Stuart’s office. He motioned for them to come in and sit in the chairs across the desk from his. They did so but remained silent, waiting for Stuart to start the conversation.

“Something to drink?” Stuart asked as he stood to walk toward the replicator.

“Earl Grey, please,” Marcus said.

“Coffee for me,” Leeson added.

“Cream and sugar?” Stuart glanced at Leeson.

“You remember well, sir.”

Stuart retrieved the beverages, along with a cup of apple cinnamon tea for himself and returned to his chair behind the desk. “So, how did we fair?”

Marcus looked at Leeson and back to his CO after Leeson gave a silent nod for Marcus to start. “The *Monarch* had less than a dozen crew members injured, and those injuries were minor. No casualties. We did lose a few power couplings to the dorsal phaser array and minor damage to several EPS conduits, but Commander Li assures me that all repairs will be completed by the end of beta shift tomorrow.”

“Two of my engineers had second-degree plasma burns when an EPS conduit exploded, but Doctor Hogan said that they are recovering and will be back on the job in a few days. Other than those two, there were just a few scrapes and bruises; nothing serious. Petroni and her team are working on repairs. She estimates forty hours until the Trailblazer is ready to get underway.”

Rob rubbed his head. “You both know that I would like to avoid a conflict, but...” He did not get much sleep since the battle the previous evening, but he had contemplated every possible contingency that he could think of trying to avoid said conflict. “...I think that we need to let the Enkara know that we’re not going to tolerate another attack.”

“Have you contacted Ambassador Chen?” Leeson leaned forward and leaned on the desk. “She negotiated the non-aggression pact with Enkar, didn’t she?”

Stuart nodded and leaned back in his chair. “I already contacted her and let her know what happened. She said that she would contact Enkar’s Supreme Leader to protest his people’s actions and get back to me with his response.”

“Captain, what if they come back with more ships?” Marcus Grey asked.

“I’ve recalled the *Icarus* and *Alliance*, and I put the other ships on alert, but the three science vessels don’t have the defensive strength to stand up to *Enkar*’s ships, so I don’t see a reason to pull them off their assignments.” Stuart finished his tea and set the empty cup on the desk.

Grey wrinkled his eyebrows closer together. “I don’t understand why they only sent two ships to attack us. They overwhelmed us with many more when they attacked the *Monarch* and took you hostage during our first encounter.”

“Yes, that is curious, Marcus,” Stuart replied. “Their weapons are as powerful as ours, but two ships against a starbase and three starships doesn’t seem to be a wise move on their part.”

Leeson thought about what might have motivated the attack and, like Marcus, wondered why only two ships had attacked. “Maybe the attack was meant to fail.”

“What makes you say that, Mel?” Stuart was aware how his former first officer had a knack for figuring out an opponent’s mind worked.

“What if the Enkara have some sort of plan to throw us off guard by focusing on something other than what we should be focusing on?”

“It would not make sense to attack us,” Marcus said. “They should know that they’re taking the risk of retaliation.”

“Maybe that is what they want,” Melanie said. “Maybe they want us to retaliate and leave *Gateway Alpha* vulnerable to another surprise attack, or maybe they want us to cross into their space so that they can claim we are the aggressors.”

Stuart thought about Leeson’s hypothesis. “Clearly our records show that they were the aggressors, but in their thinking...” He shook his head. “We’re missing something, some piece of the puzzle.”

“We’ll figure it out, Rob,” Leeson said. “Maybe Ambassador Chen will get some answers.”

“I hope so,” Rob said.



Ambassador Lirian Chen ended the transmission with Zar-Pela, the Supreme Leader of Enkar. She had spent a lot of time last year negotiating with him. He was arrogant and came across with an air of superiority during the negotiations that led to the non-aggression pact between Enkar and the Federation. Although it took time to get past his people’s lack of respect for females, she eventually won him over, and he had at least become somewhat reasonable. Lirian again found him to be reasonable, and even though she was not willing to completely trust him or his people, she did believe that he was being truthful when answering the questions that she had posed concerning the attack on *Gateway Alpha*. Lirian was concerned that if her instincts were wrong, that the planet Ruhl, her current location for a diplomatic mission to work out the details of a formal alliance between Ruhl and the Federation, could be in danger. Ruhl was only a few light-years from the Enkara border and had already been attacked more than once in the last few months, and for the alliance to work in protecting Ruhl from attack by the Enkara because of the non-aggression pact, the pact had to be kept.

She pressed the power control on the communications monitor in the office that the Ruhl government had graciously provided. “Computer, begin recording a priority one message to Fleet Captain Robert P. Stuart. Location: United Federation of Planets *Starbase Gateway Alpha*.”



Captain’s Log: Stardate 57285.4

According to Ambassador Chen’s discussion with Supreme Leader Zar-Pela of Enkar, his people did not attack Starbase Gateway Alpha; however, he admitted that several Enkara starships have seemingly gone missing within the last year. He suspects that his kinsman, Zar-Bek, the former Supreme Leader that was removed from his position because he had shown that he was an unfit leader by allowing me to capture him during my rescue from his prison nearly a year and a half ago. Apparently due to his disgrace, he has imposed self-exile; however, Zar-Pela has heard reports that his cousin has convinced the crews of at least a dozen ships to follow him to help him regain his former position. I suspect that Zar-Bek wanted to trick us into blaming Zar-Pela and retaliate against Enkar, which would start a war. It would destabilize the sector and destroy the non-aggression pact. It would also weaken Zar-Pela’s leadership and allow Bek to regain power. At the same time, it would give him vengeance against me for causing his downfall. Bek is crafty and calculating. I must be careful with my next decisions and be just as crafty as he is.



Zar-Bek, former Supreme Leader of Enkar, stood behind the pilots’ stations. He watched the stars speed by as his commander cruiser, the *Zarka-Kimbii* retreated from the battle with the Starfleet vessel. He turned and walked toward another station along the port wall. “Report, Zen-Koba.”

“Supreme Leader, we suffered minor damage. Repairs are in process. No casualties.” The adjutant had more information, but he knew from his experience with Zar-Bek that his commander did not appreciate his subordinate giving more information than what had been asked.

“And what about the *Zarka-Frug*?”

“Severely damaged, Supreme Leader, but it maintains sixty-three percent ethrals. Zen-Tres suffered grave injuries; however, he is expected to recover. Nearly one-third of the crew is wounded or dead.”

“Zen-Tres is strong. He will continue to serve me well.” Zar-Bek saw that his adjutant wanted to say more, but he knew that Zen-Koba was a good officer and disciplined enough to insult his commander by voicing his concerns without permission. “I see it on your face, Zen-Koba. You may speak what is on your mind.”

“Sir, we suffered a great loss today. How could this have happened?”

Zar-Bek’s face displayed a look of satisfaction as he smiled. “It was not a loss. I found out the strength of their ships, and I have set my plan in motion. These Starfleeters will fall into my trap, and I will have my revenge on Stuart for my disgrace.”



Rob did not sleep well. His thoughts about the attack and what type of response would be needed woke him on several occasions throughout the night. The only good thing to brighten his mood was the message that waited for him when he activated his computer monitor shortly after he entered his office. Captain Constance Thorpe had sent her report that her mission to Kelos III was successful, and future relations with the Kelosians looked promising. The other piece of good news from the *Sonak*’s captain was that the Nazar wanted to ally with the Federation. Rob had known that Connie was going to succeed in both missions.

Rob had contacted Admiral Luis Montoya to report on the attack and to request additional starships, starships with some fight in them; however, the last time he had communicated with his CO, the 4th Fleet was spread thin in other sectors. Until a reply would come, Rob would have to collaborate with Admiral Sjögren and Captain Uri Ivanov to figure out how to deal with the situation.

As he was thinking, the chime indicated that he had a visitor. “Enter.”

The door slid open, and Captain Melanie Leeson entered. “Good morning, Rob,” she said as she strode to the desk and sat down in front of it. “I wanted to see how you’re doing.”

“I’ve been better.” Rob forced himself to put on a ‘happy’ face even though Melanie would see through the façade. “It will be about two weeks until the *Alliance* gets here, but the *Icarus* should arrive in less than five days. Captain Jeffers was checking on our research station on Xander’s World, so he doesn’t have to come as far.”

“What do you want me to do?” Leeson had always been one jump in to be as helpful and productive as she could. She didn’t have anything to prove to Rob Stuart or herself. She had been his XO before getting her own command, and she did an outstanding job with the mission that discovered the Chulak and dealing with them. No, she had nothing to prove. She just wanted to support her friend. “I could start a search for those rogue Enkara ships.”

Rob smiled but said, “Thanks for the offer, Mel, but we need to be patient. I’ve sent a request to Admiral Montoya for some additional starships to help defend the station in case there’s another attack.” He looked at his eager friend. “Besides, I thought that Commander North was wanting to get back to the New Britain Colony now that she’s seen her brothers.”

“Well, she does, but she understands the situation. She knows that Starfleet is not a transportation service.”

“That’s true, but it would be safer for her if she was to return to her home.”

Leeson nodded. “I’ll talk to her. Her brothers are heading back to Earth tomorrow, so I’m sure that she will be willing to leave after she sees them off.”

Stuart nodded. “Please let her know that I am honored to have bet her and hope to see her again.”

“Of course.” Leeson reached across the desk and touched Stuart’s hand. “Do me a favor?”

Rob Stuart smiled gently. “What would you like, Mel?”

“Take a few hours to get some sleep.”

Rob let out a ‘harumph’ and grinned. “Do I look that bad? You can tell that I didn’t sleep that much last night.”

“Yes, and yes,” she said. “Please. Take a sleep aid if you have to.”

Rob’s grin faded. “Could you sleep while wondering if another attack was on its way?”

Melanie drew her hand away and stood without answering. “I need to check with Shrev to see how repairs to the *Trailblazer* are going. Unless there is anything else?”

Stuart appreciated the sound advice that Leeson had given, and he knew that he should follow it, but he had to tease her before she left. “You never answered my question, Mel.”

She cocked her head to one side. “Really?” She turned and exited Rob’s office.”



Rob entered the primary sickbay and asked the duty nurse if his wife was in her office. After the affirmative reply, Rob walked down the corridor leading to the medical staff’s offices and, seeing that Janice Stuart was engrossed in reading something on her monitor, knocked on the door frame. “Busy?”

Jan looked up and smiled. "Not too busy for you. I've been expecting you."

"You have?" Rob walked around the desk and leaned over to kiss his wife.

"Mel said to expect you."

Rob frowned. "She knows how to read me and predict what I will do...a little too much for my tastes."

Jan started to laugh. "Does it get on your nerves?"

"Almost as much as it does when you pull that trick. I'm beginning to think that both of you have some Betazoid blood somewhere in your ancestry." He sat on the edge of the desk. "I don't suppose that I need to tell you what I need."

Jan stood up and grabbed the hypospray that she had placed on her desk before her husband's arrival. "Sure don't," she said as she pressed the hypospray against Rob's neck. "Now get to our quarters and go to bed. This stuff will put you sound asleep in about ten minutes, so don't delay. You'd be embarrassed if people found you unconscious in one of the corridors."

Rob kissed his wife again and smiled at her. "Yes, sir." He turned and started for the door, stopped just as he entered the corridor, and turned back to face his wife. "The thing that bothers me most about that attack is that it spoiled our children's first birthday." He turned and left Jan's office.

She felt the same way, but she knew that there will be other birthdays.



Captain Marcus Grey entered the main engine room and looked around at the repairs that were underway. He spotted Henry Li, the chief engineer at the 'pool table' console near the center of the large room and walked toward him. He stopped next to the engineer and greeted him. "Well, Commander, how are the repairs going?"

Li pressed one of the touchpads on the console and turned his attention to the *Monarch's* XO. "We are ahead of schedule and all repairs should be finished in less than seven hours."

"Well done," Marcus said. "You and your team will get some well-deserved time off as soon as it's practical."

"Thank you, Marcus. Speaking for my team and me, that will be appreciated. Even though it might not be practical for some time."

Marcus patted the engineer on his left shoulder. "Unfortunately, I do not have any control over the timing, Henry. Keep up the good work," he said. "I will let Robert know about your team's outstanding work."

"What do you think will be his response to the attack?"

“Captain Leeson and I had a meeting with him, and we discussed a few possibilities; however, he is being patient. He will be discussing options with Admiral Sjögren and Captain Ivanov. He has sent a request to Admiral Montoya for additional ships.” Marcus Grey paused as he guessed about his CO’s future orders. “I suspect that whatever he does or recommends to Admiral Sjögren to be done will be thought out carefully. After his earlier ordeal with the Enkara, I’m sure that he will not want to leave anything to chance.”

“I agree,” Henry Li replied.



As Marcus neared the turbolift, his son Ian came around the curved corridor. “What are you doing here, son?”

Ian stopped in front of his father. “Hello, Captain!” He smiled at his father. “I’m just taking a walk, sir. I need to keep fit.”

“Ah, I see,” Marcus said. “Have some excess energy that you need to burn, yes?”

“Well, you could say that, sir.”

Marcus placed his arm around his son’s shoulders, and they began to slowly walk toward the turbolift. “I’m going to reserve guest quarters for you on *Gateway Alpha* just in case the Enkara decide to attack again.”

“I would prefer to stay on the Monarch with you, Dad.”

“I know, Ian, but concern for your safety, if you stayed on the ship, might distract me at a critical moment.” Marcus smiled at his son. “I’ve arranged for someone in Child Services to oversee you.

“Dad, I’m not a child anymore,” Ian protested. “You don’t trust me?”

“I trust you, and I know that you are no longer a child, but you’re not yet an adult.”

“I’m almost fifteen.”

“I’m still trying to get used to that,” Marcus said.

“Who will protect Carrie?” Ian referred to his girlfriend.

“Oh, I see. You have an ulterior motive.” Marcus grinned as his son started to blush. “I’ve talked to all the crew with family onboard, *including* the Nelsons, and requested that they follow my lead in this, Ian.”

“So, Carrie and her mum will be staying at the station?”

“Yes, son.”

“Why don’t I stay with them instead of reporting to Child Services several times each day?”

“I don’t think that sharing quarters with them would be a good idea.”

“Some of the family suites have three bedrooms.”

“I’m sure that the Nelsons would not be comfortable with that arrangement.” Marcus sighed. “Ian, you are very responsible and mature for your age, but you’re still fourteen.”

“Almost fifteen,” Ian interjected.

“Almost fifteen,” Marcus repeated. “And I trust you, and I trust Carrie, but I don’t trust your hormones. Not at this vulnerable stage in your life.”

Ian’s face continued to turn a darker red than before as he looked down. “I understand, Captain.”

Marcus rubbed his son’s head, messing up his hair. “You will still be in contact with her, and maybe your quarters will be on the same deck.”

“I still don’t think that I need to be in the care of Child Services.”

“Well, on this point, I am willing to compromise, Ian. I will talk to Mrs. Nelson to see if she would be willing to be responsible for you, *but* you will still have separate quarters. If she agrees, that will settle the issue, but if she does not agree, that will still settle the issue, and you will need to report to Child Services. Agreed?”

“Yes, Dad. I agree to your terms.”

“Good. Now on your way. You need to finish your walk to burn up some more of that teenage energy.”

“Right-O.” Ian walked briskly around the corridor as his father watched him go.

Marcus shook his head. “Almost fifteen. I’m still not ready for him to grow up.” He entered the turbolift after the computerized sensor opened the doors. “Bridge.”



Rob Stuart was able to get a few hours of uninterrupted sleep, but he had set an alarm to wake him in time to freshen up, put on a clean uniform, and go to Admiral Sjögren’s office. Instead of entering through CnC, Rob went to the office door that was accessible from the corridor. He pressed the intercom touchpad on the wall next to the door. Admiral, permission to enter?”

The single-paneled door slid aside, and Stuart entered the room where he saw that Captain Uri Ivanov, Starbase *Gateway Alpha*’s executive officer, entered through the other door that separated the office from CnC. Commander Goran Anish, the Trill senior tactical officer, followed Ivanov into the room.

Sjögren stood up and welcomed all three officers. “Gentlemen, please have a seat.” All four men sat down. “We need to determine why the Enkara attacked. Why did they break the non-aggression pact?”

“It wasn’t the Enkara, or I should say that it was not ordered by the legitimate government of Enkar.”

“A rogue faction?” Ivanov asked.

“How do you know this?” Commander Anish added.

“I contacted Ambassador Chen, and she confronted Zar-Pela. She found out that the crews of a dozen or so of Enkar’s ships had apparently defected to join Bek. It seems that he wants to plan a coupe and regain power.”

“That does not explain why he attacked *us*, Robert,” Ivanov said.

“I believe that his actions are two-fold,” Stuart said. “First, he is seeking revenge on me. And the other reason is to make it seem that Zar-Pela is responsible so that we will retaliate against Enkar.”

“Are we not?” Commander Anish was a true soldier who had been affected deeply by his experiences during the Dominion War and because of the memories passed down by one of his symbiont’s previous hosts who had also fought in defense of the Trill homeworld nearly three centuries prior when an aggressive species had tried to conquer it.

“According to the ambassador, it was a rogue element. The true leader of Enkar has not violated the pact,” Stuart said bluntly. “If we go to Enkar, *we* will be the aggressors, *and* we will be playing into Bek’s plans.”

“Then what do you propose we do, Captain Stuart?” Anish did not try to hide the frustration in his voice.

Stuart looked at Sjögren and then at Ivanov before turning his attention back to the *Gateway Alpha*’s tactical officer. “Well, Goran, I would like to send a few ships to search for the ones that attacked us, but most of the ones currently at our disposal would not do well in a fight with theirs.”

“One of theirs was severely damaged,” Ivanov said.”

“That’s true, Uri, but remember that they might have at least a dozen ships, and they tend to overwhelm the ships they attack.” Stuart was halfway standing and leaning on the desk. He realized that he was starting to get worked up, so he returned to a seated position. “I sent a request for additional ships to Admiral Montoya.”

“And how many is he sending?” Anish asked.

“I’m still waiting on his reply.” Stuart looked toward the admiral. “Sir, I would like to transfer the 63rd Fighter Wing from the *Monarch* to *Gateway Alpha*. They can fly regular patrols that should be able to provide an earlier warning than what we had the other day.”

Sjögren nodded in agreement. “I’ll accept the transfer and with my thanks. I suppose in return, you want to borrow the *Cheron*.”

“Maybe. It depends on what Luis sends here,” Stuart said. “The *Alliance* and *Icarus* are on their way here. The *Alliance* will help defend the station if it becomes necessary. The *Icarus* will join the *Monarch* in the search. And like I said, it depends on what Luis sends us as to other deployments.”

“The enemy has a few days’ start on us, Captain,” Anish said. “Don’t you think that the *Monarch* should depart immediately?”

“I don’t think the *Monarch* should leave until the station has a strong enough defense force,” Stuart replied.

Sjögren smiled as he shifted in his chair. “And I appreciate that, Robert; however, your trail grows colder the longer you delay.”

“If what I suspect is true, then I shouldn’t have any difficulties in finding those two ships.” Stuart smiled at his colleagues. “I think they are waiting to spring a trap for us in case we don’t go to Enkar as I think Bek wants.”



After the meeting ended, Stuart went to his office. It was almost 1800 hours, but Stuart’s aid was still working. “What are still doing here, Richard?”

“I was waiting to see if Admiral Montoya had sent a follow-up to your request, sir”

“And?”

“And he did, sir. He is sending three starships—*Ontario*, *Kiev*, and *Diligence*.”

“*Diligence* is your brother’s command, isn’t it, Richard?”

“Yes, sir. Martin was excited to get a *Prometheus*-class vessel for his first command.”

“I’m sure he was,” Stuart said. “Did the admiral give an ETA?”

“The *Ontario* was already en route to Pacifica, so it should be here the day after tomorrow after it drops off some Bajoran dignitaries. The *Kiev* and *Prometheus* are almost two weeks away.”

“Very good. Anything else that won’t wait until tomorrow?”

“We received the weekly report from Captain Storan,” Richard Baker said. “But there’s nothing out of the ordinary. It can wait until tomorrow.”

“Right. I do have to commend Storan for his promptness. I wish all my other captains would get their reports to me on time.”

“Captain Thorpe sent hers early if you remember, sir.”

“That’s because she knows that I have ways of making her life miserable if she’s late.”

Richard laughed. “Understood, Captain.”

“Okay, Lieutenant, I appreciated your loyalty and willingness to work over but stay balanced. I will see you in the morning.”

“Aye, Captain.” Richard logged off the monitor on his desk and left the outer area as Stuart entered his office.

He started for the replicator out of habit but changed his mind and went to sit behind his desk and activated the computer terminal. After the news about the additional starships that would soon arrive, Stuart’s mood brightened a little. He had hoped for more but also understood that Montoya was responsible for a large area along the Cardassian border where the 4th Fleet

was on patrol and helping with the relief effort for some of the former enemy's colony worlds.
"Computer begin recording."

Captain's Log: Supplemental.

I'm pleased that Admiral Montoya can supply three more starships to help us get through the current crisis. I'm especially pleased that one of those ships is an advanced tactical escort that will be of great help if it comes to a fight. I hope that we can convince Bek and his followers that vengeance is a poor tactic that will lead to his downfall, but I suppose that he has fallen as low as he can...in his eyes. I can only guess what is going on in his mind, and I don't understand the nuances of his culture or the psyche of his species. I doubt that this situation will end positively for anyone, but I would like to be wrong about that. Unfortunately, I'm probably not.

"Computer, end recording."

Rob sent a message to Admiral Erik Sjögren to relay the news of the three ships that were on their way. The admiral was happy to hear the news and told Rob that he would pass on the information to Captain Ivanov and Commander Anish. Rob then had a thought and sent a coded message to Ambassador Lirian Chen before he powered down the monitor and directed the computer to dim the lights as he exited his office.



Stardate 57321.1 (Two Weeks Later...)

Fleet Captain Robert Stuart entered the conference room that was next to the 3rd Exploratory Group's office suite. He held his hand up to indicate to the starship captains that they should stay seated as he walked toward the chair at the head of the table and sat down. "Greetings, ladies and gentlemen. I trust that you have all introduced yourselves to each other."

The group of captains and the COs of the 63rd Fighter Wing and U.S.S. *Cheron*, both assigned to *Gateway Alpha*, nodded and answered in the affirmative.

"For those of you who I haven't met yet, I'm Rob Stuart." He looked at a man and woman sitting next to each other, and these were the only ones at the table that he had not seen before. He knew that they were the captains of the starships *Diligence* and *Kiev*. "Captains Santiago-Vargas and Baker, I would like you to stay after this briefing so we can get to know each other."

"It will be a pleasure," Martin Baker said.

"Of course, sir," Maria Santiago-Vargas echoed.

Stuart looked around to face each person as he doled out the assignments. "Captain Jans, I would like the *Alliance* to stay within a light-year of the starbase, and CAG, I know that you only have eight fighters. Can you provide round-the-clock patrols within a five hundred thousand kilometer patrol radius?"

"Certainly, Captain," Lieutenant Commander Kimberly Thomas said. "We'll have two ships on six-hour rotation, and I can ask Legal Eagle to put in a daily shift to give the regular pilots a day off."

“I’m sure he will jump at the chance,” Stuart said. “Okay, Captains Santiago-Vargas and Commander Johnston, I would like the *Kiev* and *Cheron* to go to the Thezel V, which is the closest habitable planet near *Gateway Alpha*.”

“There’s no sentient lifeforms, but it’s class M and would make a good base within striking distance,” Johnston said.

“Right,” Stuart replied, “But don’t be surprised if you don’t find anything there because I have a hunch that Bek and the rogue ships under his command might be hiding near Vedren.”

“Why is that, sir?” Captain Martin Baker asked.

Stuart looked toward the Trill captain of the U.S.S. *Alliance*. “Kazed? Do you want to answer that?”

Captain Jans tilted his head in Stuart’s direction. “Thank you, yes. Last year, the *Alliance* did a quick survey of Vedren’s star system, and although the planet is class D, it has a strong magnetic field that could easily block long-range sensor scans of any vessel that might be in orbit. Also, the system has a large asteroid field between the third and fourth planets that would provide a source of meteors that could be used as ammunition for a mass driver.”

“Like the meteors that came hurtling our way a few months ago,” commander Johnston said.

“The station’s science section analyzed a chunk of unidentified metal debris that the *Cheron* recovered, and it matches elements from that asteroid field,” Stuart said. “I cannot prove it, but I believe that Bek wants me to find him so that he can catch me in a trap.”

“So why walk into the trap?” Captain Santiago-Vargas asked.

“We’re going to turn the tables against him,” Stuart said. “I typically don’t play poker, but the saying goes, ‘I have an ace up my sleeve.’” He looked at Captains James Hunter of the U.S.S. *Ontario*, Franklin Jeffers of the U.S.S. *Icarus*, and Martin Baker of the U.S.S. *Diligence*. “Captain Hunter, Captain Baker, Captain Jeffers, I would like your ships to accompany the *Monarch* to Vedren.” Stuart turned his focus to the captains of the *Cheron* and *Kiev*. “Carl, you and Captain Santiago-Vargas will rendezvous with us at Vedren ASAP after you check out Thezel V. If I’m wrong and they are on Thezel, then contact me at once and fall back until we meet up with you. Questions?”

All shook their heads and remained silent.

“I would like all ships to get underway in two hours. CAG, how soon can you start patrol duty?”

“Starburst and Spots are prepped and ready to go. I thought that I would have them launch at the top of the hour.”

“Very good,” Stuart said. “I’ll let you get to ships to prepare for departure. Captains Santiago-Vargas and Baker, I would like the two of you to stay for a few minutes just for us to get to know each other a little before you ship out.”



Fleet Captain Rob Stuart entered the U.S.S. *Monarch*’s bridge and immediately went to the command chair. “Status report.”

Captain Marcus Grey, from the XO's chair, said, "All systems ready, Captain. Starbase *Gateway Alpha* Command and Control has given clearance to detach."

"Thank you, Exec." Stuart next addressed the Veloran CONN officer. "Mister D'Neskos, Detach from the docking port and set course for Vedren. Take the lead position."

The four-handed officer started running his fingers skillfully across the various touchpads. "Moorings retracted and secure. Magnetic locks powered down. Thrusting to starboard," he said. "Impulse at your command, sir."

"One-quarter Impulse," Stuart said. He turned his head to look at Lieutenant Commander Jennifer Mills at the tactical station. "Notify all ships to get underway, TAC."

"All ships report ready, sir," Mills said. "The starships *Icarus*, *Ontario*, and *Diligence* have taken a position to our aft quarter."

"Let's go," Stuart said. "Warp eight."

To be continued...