

STARDATE 58114.2

Commander Thel, the Andorian CO of the U.S.S. *Raleigh*, sat in the officer's observation lounge alone at the table in front of the center table. He was enjoying the view of streaking stars coming toward him as the *Ericsson*-class scout ship sped toward the next star system as it continued to map Sector Gateway-03. He spent most mornings enjoying the view before going on shift, but on this day, the viewing time would be cut short by the chirping of his communicator.

"Bridge to Captain."

His antennae moved forward as he tapped the Starfleet emblem on his chest. "Thel. What is it, bridge?" His first officer never would call him when it was not his duty shift unless there was a situation that required his attention., so he was already out of his chair and moving toward the exit.

"Captain, we intercepted a distress call directed to the Vaxinaal home world from a planet known as Nix-El. The message says that an unknown spacecraft is bombarding the planet's surface."

"I will be on the bridge momentarily. Change course for Nix-El and increase to maximum warp."

The officer's lounge was on deck two, so Thel made it to the bridge in less than a minute. He quickly exited the turbo elevator and strode to the center of the bridge where his chair was waiting for him. Before he sat in it, he faced his first officer, Lieutenant Commander Lorna MacDonald, who had vacated the center seat upon his arrival. He addressed her professionally. "Commander MacDonald, you said the transmission was directed to the Vaxinaal home world?"

The U.S.S. *Monarch* first encountered the Vaxinaal race roughly five months prior. According to Captain Grey's report, the species was the most advanced in the sector, and they were the protectors of many lesser developed worlds within twenty-five light years in any direction from their home world, which the inhabitants referred to as Vaxi. The Vaxinaal accommodated the *Monarch*'s crew by providing star charts and information about the various worlds that they frequently visited and aided. Captain Marcus Grey had transmitted the star charts to the other ships of the 3rd Exploratory Group, which was instrumental in shortening the time it would take to map thousands of cubic light years.

Commander Thel sat down and turned his head toward the tactical station. "Mister Smothers, send a message to Vaxi and inform the government that we are responding to the distress call. Ask if they will also be responding."

"Aye, Captain," the tactical officer replied.

"Sir, the distress signal is no longer transmitting," Lieutenant Commander MacDonald said. "Lieutenant Surla, scan the system ahead."

"Scanning," the science officer said. Long-range sensors indicate a large vessel leaving the Nix-El system. The ship is of unknown origin and design."

“What about the planet?” Thel asked.

“The planet has been decimated, Captain,” the Vulcan science officer said. “The atmosphere is burning and the planet will be completely uninhabitable before we arrive.”

“Extrapolate the alien ship’s heading,” Thel said.

“The ship is heading toward the next star system,” Surla said. “The fourth planet is designated Ax-El on the Vaxinaal star charts. More than five billion inhabitants. It is a pre-warp civilization; however, there is a unified planetary government, and the society has interplanetary space capabilities.”

“CONN, alter course for Ax-El and see if engineering can provide more speed.”

“Aye, sir,” the pilot replied as she adjusted the ship’s heading.

“Sir, I received a response from Vaxi. Their nearest starship is about sixteen light years away and has been dispatched to Nix-El,” the tactical officer said.

“Update the Vaxinaal on what happened to Nix-El and inform them that the hostile vessel is en route to Ax-El,” Commander Thel said. “And contact the *Monarch* and *Icarus* about our situation. If that alien ship can destroy the atmosphere of a planet, we will need all the help we can get.”



To Boldly Go: Path of Destruction

A 3rd Exploratory Group Story

By Cleve Johnson

Captain’s Log: Stardate 58116.1

After a productive diplomatic mission with the Tirathians, we are on our way to rendezvous with the starship Raleigh in Sector Gateway 03 where I have the happy duty to personally inform Commander Thel of his upcoming promotion and transfer to take command of the U.S.S. Freeland. The Republic will escort the Raleigh back to Starbase Gateway Alpha where Commander... Captain Thel will relinquish command and take a transport to Starbase 375 where the Freeland awaits his arrival.

Fleet Captain Rob Stuart ended the recording. He enjoyed seeing those under his command flourish in their specific areas of expertise and career development. Commander Thel had worked hard to earn his first command post as CO of the U.S.S. *Raleigh*, and he had done a wonderful job in that position. Thel and his crew had successfully mapped Sector Gateway Alpha 02 and a portion of Gateway Alpha 03. In addition, he had made first contact with two species within the past year. A few years earlier, he had been decorated by Starfleet for his heroism and bravery during the Dominion War when, as a lieutenant assigned to the OPS position, he took command of his ship when it was ambushed by a Jem’Hadar attack squadron and both the captain and first officer were severely injured. If it had not been for Thel’s quick

action, his ship would have been destroyed with all hands; however, he had led the crew to victory against superior forces. It earned him a promotion to lieutenant commander and a posting as the second officer on a *Galaxy*-class starship. Two years after that, he was a first officer. For the past two years, he became the commanding officer of the U.S.S. *Raleigh*.

Stuart got up from behind his desk and made his way to the door between his ready room and the bridge. Walking through after the door panels parted, he entered the bridge and took the steps to the upper level where he made his way to the center seat.

Commander Lexra rose from the captain's chair and stood at attention. "Captain on the bridge."

"As you were," Stuart said to let the officers know that they should go about their normal duties. "Number One, how soon until we arrive at *Raleigh*'s destination?"

"Three hours, forty-two minutes at present speed, sir." The Trill first officer relaxed his posture and moved out of Stuart's way. Both men sat in their chairs as they continued the discussion. "You seem to be more relaxed and in a better mood since..."

"Since the *Solar Flare* was lost?"

"Yes, sir." Jeron Lexra regretted bringing up the subject. It had been a subject that had affected the entire crew, but it was especially difficult for Stuart. "Sorry, Captain. I shouldn't have said..."

"It's okay, Number One," Stuart replied. "We know that Captain Granger and his crew survived the trip to the other universe, and with the discoveries that Captain Storan and his crew continue to make on Takaria, I have high hopes that we will see them again."

"You seem confident that we will pull them back to our universe."

"I believe miracles can happen," Stuart said, "and I believe in Captain Storan and his crew's ability to get that Takarian machine up and running again."

"What are the chances of finding the quantum and temporal signatures of that universe again if...when they restore the vortex generator to working order?" Lexra agreed that the Eclipse crew would eventually repair the alien machine, but he was a realist; therefore, he did not have the same conviction that his captain held about finding the exact universe among the infinite number of other universes that co-existed on other dimensional planes.

Stuart half-grinned toward his first officer. "I've found that members of Starfleet have a pretty good track record for doing the impossible, so I would say that the chances are pretty good."

Lexra nodded his head to one side in the realization of the truth of Stuart's words. "You have a good point, Captain."

"Captain?" Lieutenant Tharon Ch'Toriith, the Andorian OPS manager looked up from his station.

"Yes, Lieutenant?"

“Sir, I am receiving an emergency signal from a Federation starship distress beacon at coordinates zero two four mark eight.”

“Mister Grezka?” Stuart turned his head toward the science officer.

“Scanning,” the Xindi Arboreal said. “According to long-range sensors, the signal is coming from just outside a star system containing thirteen planets. The fourth planet registers as class M. It is listed in the Vaxinaal star charts as Ax-El, a pre-warp civilization.”

“Is the signal coming from the *Raleigh*, *Icarus*, or *Monarch*? At last report, all three were in this sector,” Commander Lexra said.

“The signal belongs to the *Raleigh*, Commander.”

Stuart had a bad feeling in his gut. “Mister Axred, alter course and increase speed to warp nine.”

“Yes, Captain,” the Bajoran senior flight officer replied.

Lexra sat on the edge of his chair, his posture tense. Like Stuart, he had a bad feeling about the situation. He entered some information into the small console to his right. “We will arrive in one hour, and nine minutes, Captain.”

“Thank you, Number One,” Stuart replied. He closed his eyes, and silently prayed that his bad feeling was wrong.



The U.S.S. *Republic* came out of warp as it approached the signal. On the bridge, the science officer monitored the area. “Class six communication beacon detected three thousand four hundred seventy-two meters directly in our path, Captain.”

“Bring it aboard and download the data.”

“Yes, sir,” Grezka replied. “And Captain, there is a debris field approximately one hundred twenty-eight thousand kilometers to the port bow.”

“I recommend a defensive posture, Captain,” the tactical officer said.

“Agreed, Captain,” Lexra echoed.

“Go to Yellow Alert, Lieutenant Commander Barnsdale,” Stuart said. “Mister Grezka, how long will it take to download the beacon?”

“If it is not damaged, twelve to fifteen minutes.”

“Number One, have all senior officers meet in the main conference room in twenty minutes.” Stuart stood and looked at the viewer. “CONN, set course for the debris field, three-quarter Impulse. Mister Grezka, please scan for escape pods and survivors. Number One, you have the bridge.” Stuart didn’t wait for any acknowledgment from his officers as he quickly walked toward his ready room. As soon as the doors closed behind him, he sat in the nearest chair and planted his face in the palms of his hands. It had only been a few months since Thomas

Granger and his crew were stranded in another universe, and now it appeared that one of the three other starships—most likely the *Raleigh*—in this sector had been destroyed.

After a few moments, Stuart willed himself to set the emotions aside so that he could think clearly. There would be a time to mourn for those that were lost, but it would have to wait. For now, the mystery of who had destroyed a Federation starship needed to be solved.



Captain Stuart entered the conference room as the senior officers either sat around the table or stood nearby murmuring. As soon as the captain had entered, the murmurs stopped and those standing took their seats. Stuart walked slowly and deliberately to his chair at the head of the table and sat down.

“Mister Grezka, report.”

“The debris is all that is left of the *Raleigh*, Captain,” the Xindi said sympathetically. “No survivors.” He waited to let the officers have a few moments to digest the sad news.

“Were you able to get any useful data from the emergency beacon?” Commander Lexra asked.

“Yes. It appears that the *Raleigh* intercepted a distress call from the planet Nix-EI in the neighboring star system indicating that the planet was under attack. Before the *Raleigh* arrived, the planet had been rendered uninhabitable.”

“What? How many people?” Doctor Achebe asked.

“Per Vaxinaal records, more than seven billion,” Grezka said. “Although Commander Thel was too late to reach Nix-EI in time, he was able to distract the hostile alien vessel and draw it away from Ax-EI.”

“There was only one alien ship that rendered Nix-EI lifeless?” Cooper Barnsdale asked, surprised. Barnsdale, the chief tactical officer usually did not flinch when it came to hostile races, but any species that had developed a single ship that could wipe out all life on a planet was nothing to take lightly. “Sir, I realize that the *Republic* has better shields and weaponry than an *Ericsson*-class scout, but based on what I’ve heard so far, we’re no match for whatever destroyed Nix-EI and the *Raleigh*.”

“The *Monarch* and *Icarus* are on the way here, Mister Barnsdale, so we’re not going to engage the alien alone unless we absolutely have to.” Stuart looked back toward the science officer. “Anything else to share, Mister Grezka?”

“The data from the emergency beacon does have images of the hostile vessel from *Raleigh*’s sensor data before it was destroyed.”

“On screen,” Stuart said.

The viewscreen on the starboard wall activated and each of the senior officers turned in their chairs to face it. An image of the U.S.S. *Raleigh*’s bridge appeared. Commander Thel was on his feet giving orders.

“Hail that ship.”

“No response to hails, Commander.”

“Sir, we have to draw them away from the planet,” the first officer said.

“Tactical, lock phasers and photon torpedoes,” the Andorian CO said. *“Prepare to fire on my mark.”*

The image shook as Stuart and his officers watched Thel grab the OPS console to steady himself against falling.

“Shields down to eighty-seven percent,” the tactical officer yelled. *“There is solid matter forming around the shield where their weapons hit us, Captain.”*

“CONN, prepare to go to warp.”

“Engineering reports that warp drive is down.”

“Impulse power?”

“Operating at one hundred percent.”

“Full Impulse. Let us see with we draw them outside the system.”

“Aye, sir,” the CONN officer said as he quickly worked the flight controls.

The first officer was seen talking to the OPS officer who nodded her head and was keying something into the console. She then came forward and placed her hand on Thel’s shoulder. *“All logs and visual recordings are being downloaded to a class six probe, sir.”*

“If this battle goes against us, launch at your discretion, Exec.” Thel returned to the command chair and continued to issue orders. *“Increase power to rear deflector shields. Fire aft torpedoes, full yield.”*

The image of the bridge was replaced by the aft sensor image, and Stuart stood up to walk around the table to look closely at the viewscreen. He peered at the alien ship. *“Vendoth.”*

Jeron Lexra had read about the Vendoth invasion more than four years ago. He was away from the Sol system commanding a *Defiant*-class starship for its shakedown cruise at the time the Vendoth fleet reached Earth. The destruction of Jupiter Station and the damage inflicted on the Utopia Planitia orbital shipyards and on Mars’ surface was a major blow to Starfleet that set back shipbuilding that could still be felt. It took three years just to get back to full production. *“Captain, were you involved in the defense of Earth?”*

“I commanded a small task force and was involved in the fighting, but I didn’t quite make it to Earth until the battle was over. My task force was preoccupied with another battle—Jupiter Station. The station was destroyed, but we successfully rescued hundreds of the people stationed there, and we helped destroy the Vendoth ships responsible for the station’s demise.”

“I thought their fleet in Earth orbit was pretty much annihilated,” Lexra said. *“Where did this ship come from?”*

“Before their main fleet reached the Sol system, there were several engagements with individual Vendoth ships over the last few years. At least one occurred in the late twenty-third century when the U.S.S. *Excalibur* under Commodore George’s command encountered Vendoth ships that had been separated from their fleet.”

“How is that possible, sir?”

“Much of the information about those engagements had been classified over the years, but what is known now is that the Vendoth FTL propulsion uses a drive system that created a vortex that involved temporal properties, and some of the ships fell out of formation at different times along the continuum.” Stuart pointed to the ship on the viewer. “That is a Vendoth battleship, and it is very powerful.”

“How did you defeat the Vendoth, Captain?” Lieutenant Commander Barnsdale asked.

Stuart turned and looked his tactical officer in the eyes. “Some say it was luck, but the truth is we outthought them, and their arrogance and false sense of superiority caused them to beat themselves. They believed that they were invincible.”

“I guess you showed them differently,” Barnsdale said, almost smiling.

Stuart shook his head. “It was a unified effort.”

“It appears from the information we have, Captain, that Commander Thel was able to deter these Vendoth from returning to Ax-El.” Lieutenant Commander Grezka deactivated the viewscreen. “Sensors show a warp trail with a heading that will lead to the Pekrish system, Nu-Tirath, and Enkara space.”

“We need to stop them,” Stuart said. “Computer, I am authorizing all senior officers in this room and those assigned to tactical access to classified information regarding Federation encounters with the Vendoth. Priority one. Code Stuart beta eight two.”

“Access granted.”

“Study their tactics closely,” Stuart said. His demeanor showed the senior staff that his character was going to a place that they had never seen him go before—a dark place. “As much as I respect and want to preserve life, even among our enemies, I am going to give an order that I’d prefer to not give. But this enemy is more dangerous than any we have encountered.”

“Including the Dominion and the Borg, sir?” Lieutenant Commander Barnsdale asked.

Stuart met his tactical officer’s steely eyes with his own. “The Dominion, yes. The Borg? Too close to distinguish which is worse.”

Lexra, who had been quietly analyzing all that his CO had revealed and the sensor analysis that Grezka had provided, looked at Stuart with complete trust. “What is the order, Captain?”

“When we encounter the Vendoth, we are not interested in taking prisoners. From this point forward, our mission is to destroy that ship and all aboard. No quarter.” Stuart looked

around the room to see the reaction on each officer's face. "If anyone objects, make it known now."

There was a pause as each person looked at the others. Doctor Kofi Achebe cleared his throat before speaking. "Captain, as a doctor, I am sworn to do all I can to save life whenever possible. Should we not try to negotiate with these aliens?"

"I understand your position, Doctor, and normally I would be in total agreement, but the Vendoth are not willing to negotiate. They are maniacal in their belief that they are far superior to any other race. In their eyes, we are inferior and only worthy of conquest and to serve them. I, for one, have no intention of serving a race of beings so self-absorbed in their...Sorry, Doctor." Stuart feigned a very slight smile. "I know that my reaction to the Vendoth probably seems extreme, but if you had witnessed their barbarism, you might feel the same way. Everyone, please read up on the Vendoth encounters and let me know if you still have a problem with my order. We'll discuss it then. In the meantime, we need to get underway. Mister Axred, plot a pursuit course and engage at maximum warp."

"Right away, Captain." Lieutenant Commander Axred Nulan nodded and exited the conference room to carry out Stuart's order.

"Everyone else, please return to your duty stations. Dismissed."

All the officers went to either the bridge or to the turbolift except for the ship's counselor, Lieutenant Commander T'Faaz Laris. "Captain, I know we are pressed for time, but this might be a good time to go to the gym and put some time in on the stationary bike, don't you think?"

Stuart started to object, but he saw an unspoken message in the counselor's eyes. He realized that she intended to be his conscience, which was appropriate in this type of situation. "I think I need a riding partner if you are interested."

"Thank you for asking, Captain. I would be glad to join you," The Vulcan-Betazoid counselor replied with a touch of humor laced in her voice. "Maybe you can make it to fifteen kilometers this time."

Stuart could not help but grin. "It depends on how soon we catch up with that Vendoth ship," he said as he motioned for the counselor to walk toward the turbolift. As he followed her, he tapped his combadge. "Stuart to Lexra. Number One, I will be with Counselor Laris if you need me." The turbolift doors closed after the two officers had entered.



Fleet Captain Stuart and Counselor Laris had been peddling on the stationary bicycles for nearly ten minutes without either saying a word. The counselor's Betazoid ancestry allowed her to read his thoughts quite easily, but her Vulcan ancestry helped her to block out his stray thoughts. She did not want to read his mind without permission. As a hybrid of two telepathic species, T'Faaz sometimes walked a tightrope between the two extremes of her mixed heritage.

Finally, Stuart opened up as he approached five kilometers. “Counselor, I’m not sure how to balance my feelings with my duty. I’m not a vengeful person, but when it comes to the Vendoth...”

“You doubt your motives.”

“Exactly. The Federation lost a lot of good people when the Vendoth invaded. They wanted to enslave every race in our galaxy. Who wouldn’t want to take revenge?”

“What you feel is perfectly normal, Captain.” T’Faaz cocked her head to one side. “I’m wondering if there might be more to how you reacted earlier than finding out the Vendoth were back. The fact that the ship destroyed the *Raleigh* and all aboard has to be a major reason for your feelings, but you recently had another loss.”

Thomas and the crew of the *Solar Flare*,” Stuart mumbled. “Yes, that’s still weighing heavily on me even though I know that they are alive in another universe.”

“And what about a more personal loss?” The counselor continued to pedal at a steady pace. “I have read your file, sir, and I remember seeing that the Borg were responsible for your mother’s death at Wolf 359.”

Stuart clenched his lips tightly. “I’d feel the same hatred for the Borg if I ever encountered them again. But not just for my mother. For all those who lost mothers, fathers, sons, daughters, siblings, spouses.... I feel hatred toward the Borg on behalf of all of us. And for those who lost people to the Vendoth, I feel the same way.”

“Again, what you feel is normal, but you do need to deal with it and not hide those feelings.”

“I thought I had dealt with it long ago, but now that The Vendoth are back...”

“Those feelings have come back to haunt you,” T’Faaz said. “One thing I’m sure of, Captain, you will do your duty and do the right thing regardless of your personal feelings.”

“How do you know?”

“You are more concerned with justice than with vengeance.” The counselor smiled.

“I appreciate your confidence in me, Counselor,” Stuart said. “I hope that I don’t disappoint yo...”

The bosun’s whistle sounded to interrupt Stuart. “*Bridge to captain,*” the first officer’s voice said over the intercom.

Stuart stopped peddling and grabbed a towel that he had previously hung on the handlebars. “Go ahead, Number One.”

“*Sir, Icarus has hailed us. Captain Jeffers said he was on the way to rendezvous with the Raleigh. I...filled him in on the situation.*”

“Thank you, Number One,” Stuart replied. Ask him to alter course to join our search for the Vendoth vessel.”

“Aye, Captain.”

“Any word from the *Monarch*?”

“Not yet, but at last report, the *Monarch* was several light years away meeting with a *Vaxinaal* delegation.”

“Try to hail them again. If you get a reply before I get to the bridge, let Captain Grey know what we’re dealing with and have him join the hunt.”

“*The more the merrier, sir,*” Lexra said with a hint of a jovial tone in his voice.

“I will join you on the bridge in about fifteen minutes,” the captain said. “Stuart out.” He looked at the counselor with a slight frown. “I still didn’t get fifteen kilometers on this thing.”

T’Faaz smiled. “Maybe next time, sir.”



The next day, the starship *Republic* came out of warp just outside the Pekrish system and engaged full Impulse drive.

“Captain, the U.S.S. *Icarus* is orbiting the fifth planet,” the science officer said.

“Thank you, Mister Grezka.” Stuart got out of his chair and walked down the steps to the lowest level where the CONN and Tactical stations were located. He turned around to face the OPS station. “Mister Ch’Toriith, please hail the *Icarus*.”

“Aye, Captain,” the Andorian replied. “On screen, sir.”

The main viewer’s image morphed from a picture of stars to the face of Captain Franklin Jeffers standing on an *Intrepid*-class bridge. He didn’t look happy.

“Franklin, it’s good to see you again,” Stuart said.

“*It’s good to see you, too, Robert. I just wish the situation was better.*”

“What do you have to report?”

“*We were too late to help the people of Pekrish Five,*” Jeffers said solemnly. “*It looks like the Vendoth did a thorough job of wiping out the civilization down there. From the data obtained from the Vaxinaal, the inhabitants were on the verge of developing warp drive. Now, the major cities are mostly rubble. And the farm crops have been burned. The survivors are few, but they’re going to have a tough time with most of their food source gone.*”

“I assume that your crew is rendering aid?”

“*Shuttles are being loaded with emergency rations and supplies as we speak,*” Jeffers said. “*As soon as they deliver the supplies and return, we’ll be ready to get underway to find the vermin who did this.*”

Stuart frowned as he saw Jeffers express the same sentiment that Stuart himself had seen in himself earlier. He knew that he needed to provide Captain Jeffers with a fresh perspective just as Counselor T’Faaz Laris had provided. “Franklin, I felt the same way, but my counselor

recently helped me to remember that despite everything that the Vendoth have done, we cannot stoop to their level. We can't seek revenge." Stuart paused to see if Jeffers would respond. When he didn't, Stuart continued. "We are going after them, and we will stop them even if that means destroying every Vendoth on that ship, but we will do it for the sake of justice, not for revenge."

Jeffers tightened his jaw as he struggled to remain calm. Doing his best to put his personal feelings aside, he said, "*Understood, Fleet Captain.*"

Stuart's feelings were difficult to control, and as he looked at Jeffers, Rob realized that the other captain's emotional state was even more difficult. Rob realized that Jeffers had lost someone close to him during the Vendoth's main fleet invasion of the Sol System. "Who was it, Franklin? Who did you lose?"

Franklin's manner was hesitant, but he let go of what he had been holding back. "*My brother was in command of one of the security teams trying to repel Vendoth soldiers when they boarded Spacedock.*"

Stuart bowed his head slightly. "I'm sorry, Franklin."

"I know that a lot of good people were lost that day, Robert, but I can only picture one in my mind."

"I know this probably won't help, but I know what it feels like. My mother was at Wolf 359."

Jeffers did not take any solace in Stuart's loss, but the knowledge strengthened the bond between the two men. The CO of the U.S.S. *Icarus* started to say something, but he stopped when he heard someone off-screen tell Fleet Captain Stuart that the *Monarch* was hailing.

"Franklin, I will get back to you. Stuart out." Rob turned to his OPS manager. "Put Captain Grey through."

The main viewer's image switched from the bridge of the U.S.S. *Icarus* to the bridge of the U.S.S. *Monarch*. The image of Captain Marcus Grey leaned slightly forward in his chair. "Marcus, it's been a while," Stuart said.

"Good to see you, Robert. We received a message from Commander Thel, but I understand that the Raleigh was destroyed. Were there survivors?"

Stuart shook his head. "None. It looks like Thel was able to deter the Vendoth from destroying Ax-El, but Nix-El was another story."

"The Vaxinaal informed us that another planet under their protection—Engarth—was wiped out, too."

Stuart closed his eyes. In his previous encounters with the invaders from the Kalium Galaxy, he understood that they wanted to conquer every race in the Milky Way and subdue them to serve the Vendoth Empire as slaves. He did not know that they were genocidal. The Vendoth were a greater threat than what he previously realized. "We just met up with *Icarus* at

Pekrish Five. The Vendoth have wiped out most of the natives and are on their way toward Nu-Tirath.”

“*Nu-Tirath?*”

“We just made first contact with the Tirathians a few weeks ago,” Stuart clarified. “Tirathians are felinoid. Friendly but fierce when necessary...by their own description.”

“*Have you let them know about the coming threat, Robert? They might want to use some of that fierceness.*”

“I sent a message to them shortly after we determined that they were in the Vendoth’s path of destruction,” Stuart said. “They have a fleet of fourteen ships to defend their planet, but their technology is about two hundred years behind ours, and ours is not as advanced as the Vendoth’s.”

“*We will get there as fast as possible, Robert, but we need the coordinates.*”

Rob Stuart looked to the OPS manager and nodded. Turning back to the viewscreen, he said. “Transmitting now. Marcus, the *Monarch* is the big gun, so try to arrive as quickly as you can.”

Marcus nodded. “*We will do our best, Robert, and we are bringing a new friend.*”

“Vaxinaal?”

“*Yes, sir. They have a technology that is very different from ours but is advanced. And they are not happy about what the Vendoth have done to three planets that the Vaxinaal felt responsible for.*”

“I will see you soon,” Rob said. “Stuart out.” As the viewer’s image faded, he returned to his chair and looked at his first officer sitting to his right. “Number One?”

“Captain Jeffers signaled that the *Icarus* is ready to get underway.”

“CONN, set course for Nu-Tirath. Maximum warp.” Stuart peered at the image of the devastated planet moving off and disappearing from the screen. “Engage.”

Both starships entered warp and sped away in hopes of saving the enemy’s next target.



The Vendoth battle cruiser sped toward the next nearest star system. The Vendoth commander, VenQa’ Lat’Visa, stood at the front of the bridge gazing at the oncoming star field. She could not understand the inferiors of this galaxy. How dare they defy the powerful Vendoth. Did these people not understand the way of things? That it was the natural order for the lesser to serve the superior? Lat’Visa almost regretted the destruction of three worlds, but the people of those worlds brought it upon themselves. They defied the Vendoth. They defied the natural order and insulted their superiors. She did not enjoy ordering the destruction of the inferiors. It was necessary...in her way of thinking. *If only they would have submitted*, she told herself.

“VenQa’! Our sensors have detected two alien vessels following us,” the second-in-command said.

“At what distance, VenQe’ Tral’yun?”

“Two point seven light years and gaining, VenQa’.”

“They dare chase us? Are they the same species of the planets that we destroyed?”

“Unknown, VenQa’,” VenQe Tral’yun said. “Shall I give the order to turn to intercept?”

Lat’Visa turned to face the VenQe’. “Not yet. Let the foolish ones think that we are unaware of them until the time of my choosing. Let them fall into the trap, and I will give them one chance to surrender and submit to the superior Vendoth. If they do not choose to submit, they will meet the same fate as the people on those planets.”



Lieutenant Commander Brian Kilrain, the U.S.S. *Republic*’s chief of security, entered the bridge and walked to the center and stood to one side of where the captain sat. “Sir, I have a request,” he said.

“What can I do for you, Mister Kilrain?” Stuart replied.

“I’ve been reading up on these Vendoth hooligans, and I discovered that they are not easy to take down in a fistfight if you take my meaning.”

“I never had the pleasure of meeting one face-to-face, but I’ve read several reports and seen a few security vids from Spacedock of them in action against our security forces. Those thick hides were effective against phasers.”

“Yes, sir. I don’t think the lower settings had any effect at all.” Kilrain, normally a jovial man, frowned. “Captain, I know that you’re a peaceful man and don’t want to take life away from any sentient creature, but...”

“But I don’t know of any other way to deal with this species other than to fight them measure for measure.”

Kilrain’s frown transformed into a wide smile. “Then we’re seein’ the situation from the same angle.”

Stuart slowly nodded his head. “It’s unfortunate to take life, but when someone is so...wicked...as the Vendoth are, then we have little choice. Inform your people that if we board that vessel or if we are boarded, phasers are to be set to level sixteen.”

“I was hopin’ that you would see it that way, Captain. I just hope that you don’t think of me as a warmonger.”

“Not at all, Commander.”

“I have one other request. I would like to have some people from other departments prepared to be transferred to security if the need arises, and I would like to give them a crash course on the phaser range.”

“No hand-to-hand training?”

“Waste of time, sir. No use tryin’ to go hand-to-hand against the Vendoth.”

“Agreed.” Stuart turned his head toward his first officer. “Number One?”

Commander Jeron Lexra, seated to Stuart’s right, shifted in his chair to lean slightly toward the captain. “Sir?”

“Coordinate with Mister Kilrain to transfer anyone that we can spare from each shift to security. Also, I want all personnel to be armed while on duty.”

“Aye, Captain,” the first officer said as he stood. “Mister Kilrain, let’s meet in the conference room and figure out who will be the lucky people to join your security team.”

Kilrain smiled and bowed to Lexra. “After you, Commander.”

Both officers went to the back of the bridge and took the steps down to the conference room, disappearing as the doors slid shut behind them.



The pursuit took more than a day—thirty-two hours to be precise—but the starships *Republic* and *Icarus* were closing on the Vendoth battle cruiser, which had a slower warp-equivalent speed than the two Federation ships. The *Icarus*, an *Intrepid*-class starship, could have overtaken the enemy several hours sooner, but Fleet Captain Stuart did not want the other ship to take on the more powerful Vendoth cruiser alone. No, even both Starfleet vessels were still at a disadvantage against the Vendoth. The U.S.S. *Monarch* was on the way, but it would take longer to arrive. Stuart’s plan was for the *Republic* and *Icarus* to get the enemy ship out of warp and delay it as much as possible until the more powerful *Monarch* could join the fight.

Stuart entered the bridge followed by Commander Lexra. They each walked to their respective chairs and sat down. Stuart looked at the back of the tactical officer’s head. “Mister Barnsdale?”

Lieutenant Commander Cooper Barnsdale, the senior tactical and second officer, turned around to face his CO. “We will be within weapons range in less than an hour, Captain. I suggest that we go to red alert when we are ten minutes from weapons range.”

“Agreed, Mister Barnsdale.” Stuart turned his head to the OPS station to the XO’s right. “Mister Ch’Toriith, Any word from the Tirathians?”

The Andorian looked up from his console to meet the captain’s eyes. “The Tirathian fleet is in formation on the outer edge of their star system ready to intercept the invader.”

“And the *Monarch*?”

“Captain Grey is pushing his engines to the limit, but I estimate that we will be engaged against the Vendoth for some time before he joins us.”

Stuart contemplated the situation as he considered the risks involved with the time he needed to slow down the Vendoth and how much longer it would take the *Monarch* to arrive. He

concluded that once the *Republic* and *Icarus* were close enough to fire torpedoes, there would be a considerable amount of time for the two ships to keep the Vendoth battle cruiser busy before reinforcements arrived. He needed to get the Vendoth out of warp as soon as possible. He knew that the entire Tirathian fleet would be outgunned by the enemy battle, but he also needed the *Sovereign*-class U.S.S. *Monarch* to be engaged in the upcoming battle as soon as it could before the Vendoth reached Nu-Tirath. The entire Tirathian fleet would be outgunned by the battle cruiser. "Open hailing frequencies to the Vendoth ship, Lieutenant."

"Open."

"Vendoth vessel, this is Fleet Captain Robert P Stuart representing the United Federation of Planets," the captain said. "In the name of the Federation and of Starfleet Command, I order you to stand down."

There was silence.

"Are they receiving?"

"Yes, sir. On all frequencies," Lieutenant Ch'Toriith said. "Shall I boost the..."

"Federation starship, you dare insult the Vendoth! You are addressing VenQa' Lat'Visa, a superior being. The Vendoth have come to your galaxy to subjugate all the races that inhabit it."

"It seems like you came to murder every species if you treat every planet as you did the last three that you came across."

"They refused to give themselves over to our superior rule. We have come to educate your kind. Anyone who does not give themselves over to the correct way, then they will pay the price."

Stuart stood up and took a few steps in front of his chair. He stared at the streaking starfield on the viewscreen. "I will make sure that your ship never reaches the next planet. You will pay a price of your own for what you have done. I am holding you personally accountable for the genocide that you have committed." He clenched his fists tightly as he started to feel his face turn warm.

"Once I rejoin the Vendoth fleet, we will strike at the heart of your Federation. Your homeworld will fall. So will the other planets of your Federation followed by the Klingon and Romulan Empires, and every habitable planet in your galaxy."

"Let me educate you, VenQa' about your fleet," Stuart said. "Your fleet has already attacked our homeworld...almost five years ago. The invasion failed."

"You lie, Fleet Captain!"

"Your Roj Ch'Dak is dead. The Mer'jot Ducmre was destroyed...along with every Vendoth ship that attacked Earth." Stuart realized that he had revealed that information to humiliate the Vendoth commander, and he felt good about it, but he then realized that his motive was wrong. He suddenly felt shame for feeling pleasure at giving the news to the VenQa'. Stuart

not only had to fight the Vendoth but also his own demons that the Vendoth had awakened within him.



On the Vendoth battle cruiser, VenQa' Lat'Visa growled in her throat. The sound started low at first, but it began to build quickly until she howled and spat out the vilest expletive her language provided. She turned to face VenQe' Tral'yun. "Send out a signal to all Vendoth ships. I want to know where we are to rendezvous with the rest of the fleet."

"But the Federation captain said that the fleet was destroyed, VenQa'!"

"And I say that he lied to us. It is a trick to get us to lower our resolve."

"I do not mean any disrespect, VenQa', but what if he told us the truth? What if our fleet has been destroyed?"

Lat'Visa started to grow angry at her subordinate, but even she had to admit to herself that the enemy captain might have been truthful although the idea that the entire Vendoth fleet could have been decimated by inferiors was incomprehensible. She refused to believe that the Roj Ch'Dak could have been beaten. "VenQe' Tral'yun, we are superior in every respect. Send the message and find our fleet."

"As you wish, VenQa'." The second-in-command turned and went to the communications station.

Lat'Visa returned her gaze to the viewscreen. "Pilot, how soon until we reach the next habitable star system?"

"Less than nine cycles, VenQa'; however, sensors detect a fleet of fourteen ships stationed outside the system."

"Level of technology?"

"Primitive by our standards. Less developed than the ships that pursue us."

"The inferiors never learn. They do not see that our way is better than theirs. Why they resist following the path that we set before them is a mystery." Lat'Visa shook her head. "I almost pity them for their ignorance. VenQi' Yet'zel'qa, open communication to the fleet ahead of us. I will give them the same chance to submit as I did the others."

Yet'zel'qa did as he was commanded. "VenQa', the transmission is open."

Lat'Visa positioned herself to show her sense of superiority over those who would receive the visual message that she was about to give. In her mind, she was not arrogant. She simply believed that all others were inferior to the Vendoth race. "Aliens, I invite you to power down your weapons and disband your fleet. I am VenQa' Lat'Visa of the Vendoth. We are a superior species and have come to your galaxy to teach you the way of order. You will submit to us if you want to live. If you choose otherwise, you will be swept away as the previous planets we have visited. Your technology is inferior to ours, so you will not be able to resist our superior

might. I offer you this one chance to live and learn from us. I await your answer, but do not delay in giving it.”

Lat’Visa did not have to wait long. Within seconds, the image of the commander of the lead alien vessel appeared on the viewer. He was felinoid with a bushy mane. He opened his mouth to bare his deadly teeth as a growl formed in his throat. The growl got louder, and the sound changed to a loud roar. No words, just a roar. And the image went dark.

Lat’Visa shook her head. “Fool. Just like the others. Do I have to destroy every planet that I encounter?”

“VenQa’, the Federation ships are gaining. They will overtake us before we reach the fleet ahead,” the pilot said.

“We will deal with them first. Come to a full stop and turn us around. Power up all weapons and raise shields.”



“Captain,” the CONN officer said, “the Vendoth vessel dropped out of warp and is coming around.”

“Contact the *Icarus*,” Stuart replied. “Red Alert. Shields up. Load torpedoes and power up the phasers.”

Lieutenant Commander Barnsdale quickly complied and started adjusting the targeting scanners. “Phasers charged. Torpedo bays are manned and ready. Quantum torpedoes set at full yield.”

“We’ll be on top of them in twenty seconds, Captain,” Commander Jeron Lexra said.

“Take us out of warp in five...four...three...two...one...now!”

The starship *Republic*, followed by, the U.S.S. *Icarus*, dropped to sub-light speed and came to a stop facing the enemy battle cruiser. All three ships were poised for battle with the Vendoth clearly the most powerful even though two Federation starships were standing against it.

On the *Republic*’s bridge, Rob Stuart wanted to order his tactical officer to fire, but he could not bring himself to fire the first shot. As much as he wanted the Vendoth to pay for the billions of lives that they took, Stuart would not fire the first shot. He forced his emotions into that inner part where he could keep them away from interfering with clear thinking. He had to separate his emotions from his duty. “Open hailing frequencies.”

“On visual and audio, sir.”

Stuart remained seated. His previous experience with the Vendoth told him that there would be no negotiation with the VenQa’, and he knew the situation would only end one of two ways. Either the Vendoth would destroy the Federation starships, or the starships would destroy the Vendoth. “VenQa’ Lat’Visa, your reign of terror is over. Power down your weapons and lower your shields. You have ten seconds to comply, or you will be fired upon.”

On the screen, the Vendoth's mouth opened just enough to show her fangs. It was a fierce and vicious smile that confirmed Stuart was right about how this would end. *"You will surrender and prepare to be boarded."*

Stuart's eyes narrowed as he leaned forward. "Not today." He turned his attention to the OPS station and motioned for Lieutenant Ch'Toriith to end the transmission. He then grabbed both armrests tightly. "Brace for impact. Mister Barnsdale wait for them to take the first shot and then let loose everything we have."

Barnsdale nodded. "Yes, sir." His voice came out enthusiastically, but he had read all of the information that Stuart had made available about the Vendoth, and it scared him. He would let anyone else see his fear. He would display complete calm during the crisis, and then he might let some people know how he really felt—but only to those he was close to. "They're firin', Captain!"

"Hold on," the first officer said a second before the ship rocked violently. "

"Our shields are solidifying at the point of impact, sir," Lieutenant Commander Grezka said from the science station.

"Barnsdale, rotate shield harmonics every few seconds," Lexra said as the bridge shook again. "CONN, we need to get a clear shot at their shield generators. Heading zero four two mark five nine. Full impulse."

"Yes, sir."

"Status on the *Icarus*?" Stuart asked.

"Captain Jeffers is taking the same pounding we are, Captain," Lexra replied. "His shield strength is down to seventy-four percent with multiple solidified areas. The area over the bridge is close to cracking."

"We have a solidified shield area over the starboard bow that has developed several cracks forming as well."

Stuart shook his head. "What kind of damage are we doing to the battle cruiser?"

"We have weakened the shields over their main thrusters and primary life support generator. Solid metal has formed to allow the shields to regenerate underneath," Grezka announced.

"Mister Barnsdale, target those areas and fire quantum torpedoes until the metal breaks." Stuart looked at his first officer. "Number One, now would be a good time for the *Monarch* to show up."

"No argument from me, Captain." Lexra keyed some information using the console to his right. "Signal sent."

"What signal?" Lieutenant Commander Kilrain, from the internal security station, turned his head toward the captain and first officer.

Stuart almost smiled at the security chief. “We have a little surprise for the Vendoth. You must have missed that meeting.”



The U.S.S. *Monarch* exited warped space and immediately started firing on the Vendoth battle cruiser. Phaser beams lanced toward the enemy ship along with several salvos of quantum torpedoes. The solidified protective shield could not stand up to the multiple concentrated impacts and gave way after several seconds. The final torpedo made it through and destroyed the Vendoth ship’s main thrusters.

The U.S.S. *Icarus* came around and pelted the shields above the primary life support. That solid shield also collapsed and was obliterated. The *Republic* followed up with a phaser burst that took out the enemy’s life support generator.

The battle cruiser continued to fire weapons at the three Federation starships; however, the Vendoth targeting scanners must have been damaged as it missed more times than it hit.



On the bridge of the *Icarus*, Captain Jeffers had taken the CONN because his flight officer was knocked unconscious during the battle. “Hail the *Republic*.”

“Hailing frequencies open. Fleet Captain Stuart is on audio, Captain,” Lieutenant Autumn Bries said.

“The battle cruiser is drifting, Robert, but she still has a lot of stingers,” Jeffers said.

“Then we need to focus on taking out as many of its weapons as we can, Franklin.”

“I’m in a position to bombard their forward and portside cannons.”

“I can take the ventral and starboard ones,” Stuart said. “I’ll contact Captain Grey to come around and take care of the rest.”

“Ready when you are,” Jeffers said.

“Then let’s do it.”



On the *Sovereign*-class U.S.S. *Monarch*, Captain Marcus Grey stood behind Lieutenant Commander Jennifer Mills at the tactical station. “Damage report?”

“Shields are down to eighty-one percent, and we have a blown EPS conduit on deck four. A dozen injuries were reported, but they are all minor and are being treated.”

“Thank you, TAC.” Grey returned to the captain’s chair and sat down. He looked at the Tiberonian first officer to his right. “Commander? What is your assessment?”

Before the first officer could answer, Lieutenant Jeremy Brackin at OPS interrupted. “Sir, Fleet Captain Stuart is hailing.”

“On screen, please.”

“Marcus, it was good of you to join the battle when you did,” Stuart said. *“I think that the Vendoth were surprised.”*

“Yes, we did seem to catch them off guard, didn’t we.”

“We will catch up later, but please aid the Icarus and Republic in taking out the Vendoth weapons so that we can end this.”

“Are you planning to take prisoners, sir?”

Stuart was silent as his facial features did not reveal what he was thinking. He closed his eyes momentarily closed. When he reopened them, he said, *“We will give them the opportunity to surrender, Captain Grey, but remember that they are very strong and extremely difficult to subdue. If they board any of our ships...”*

“Understood, Captain,” Grey replied.

“Let’s get to work, Marcus. Stuart out.”



It didn’t take long for the three Federation vessels to knock out the battle cruiser’s remaining shield generators and weapons; however, the enemy still had enough teeth to do some damage...when those manning the weapons stations were able to get lucky enough to hit their targets without the ability to lock weapons. By the time the starships were done, the Vendoth ship was adrift and without power except for emergency life support and gravity. On the alien bridge, VenQa’ Lat’Visa could not believe that the inferiors of this galaxy had defeated her. “I will not be taken by these primitive life forms. VenQe’ Tral’yun, the only way for us to reclaim our honor and dignity as Vendoth is to keep the inferiors from gaining access to our vessel. We must destroy it, and we will take the inferiors with us.”

“I obey, VenQa’,” the executive officer replied. “I will instruct the VenQo’ to overload the reactors.” He saluted, turned, and left the bridge.

Lat’Visa instructed the communications officer to contact the Federation ships and to broadcast to all three. In defeat, she would not go quietly. She puffed out her muscular bulk and stood tall. “This is VenQa’ Lat’Visa to all enemy ships. You have done the impossible. You have defeated the Vendoth.”



On the bridge of the starship *Republic*, Stuart stood and took a few steps closer to the viewscreen. “This is Fleet Captain Rob Stuart. VenQa’, if you or your crew require medical attention, I am prepared to offer it.”

“Yours is a strange people,” Lat’Visa said. “You defeat your enemy and then offer assistance. That only adds to your inferiority.”

“We consider it part of our strength,” Stuart countered. He took a deep breath and placed his hands on his hips. “VenQa’, For the lives that you have taken, the worlds you’ve destroyed, you deserve to die, but the Federation does not have a death penalty. If you don’t need medical

assistance, we will tow your derelict ship to the nearest starbase where you will be charged with genocide and probably dozens of other crimes.” Stuart turned to face the OPS station. “Lieutenant, prepare a tractor beam and inform the other two ships to do the same.”

The Andorian looked at his console and then at the captain. “Sir, power to the tractor beams has been transferred to life support and engineering due to several EPS conduit outages on decks four, five, and seven.”

Stuart looked at his first officer. “Number One, please assist Commander McDougall in engineering.”

“Right away, Captain,” Commander Jeron Lexra replied as he stood and strode toward the turbolift.

“Mister, Ch’Toriith, what is our condition?”

“In addition to damaged EPS conduits on decks four, five, and seven, we seem to have only minor damage and less than a dozen casualties. No fatalities reported.”

“Thank God for that,” Stuart said. “Since we are unable, see if either the *Icarus* or *Monarch* are able to give that monstrosity a tow.”

“Aye, Captain.”

“Captain.”

“Yes, Mister Grezka?”

“Sensors detect another alien ship approaching.”



A large crystalline object appeared suddenly and approached the three starships. It had no visible engines, but the configuration was unlike any ship previously known to Stuart. Six crystal pyramids, each connected to the others at the base, hovered near the starship *Monarch*. It was a ship from Vaxi.



“We are being hailed, sir,” Ch’Toriith said. “It’s Captain Grey.”

“Put him on,” Stuart replied.

Marcus Grey’s image appeared on the main viewer. “*Don’t be alarmed, Robert. The Vaxinaal are here to assist.*”

Stuart heard several voices begin to speak to him, but the voices were not heard through the ship’s communications. Neither were they heard through Stuart’s ears. The voices spoke directly to his mind. “*Do not trust Lat’Visa. We sense that she wants to destroy you.*”

Stuart, at first, thought that he was imagining what he heard; however, he remembered reading in Captain Grey’s mission logs from a few weeks earlier that the Vaxinaal were a

telepathic race. Somehow, he knew that it was important to trust the voices. “Mister Grezka, scan the Vendoth vessel.”

“Scanning.” The Xindi Arboreal manipulated the sensor controls to focus on the enemy ship. He quickly turned in his chair to face his CO. “Captain, there is a buildup in the Vendoth’s engine room.”

“Shields up,” Stuart said. “CONN, get us away from the Vendoth ship. Best speed.”

Lieutenant Tharon Ch’Toriith quickly contacted the other Federation starships to warn them. “Sir, Captains Grey and Jeffries are moving their ships away as well.”

“Good. It appears that the VenQa’ decided to take her ship out rather than let it fall into our hands.” Stuart rushed to his chair and sat down in expectation of the enemy’s destruction. “Everyone, hold on.”

The Vendoth ship exploded in a massive fireball, which disintegrated most of the vessel. What debris was left was quickly expanding away from the center of the explosion. The three Federation starships had successfully made it far enough away to avoid destruction, but each one sustained more damage to shields and sections of the outer hulls. The *Republic*, closest to the blast, had scorch marks on the aft quarter and nacelles.

“Shields down to thirteen percent, Captain,” Lieutenant Commander Cooper Barnsdale announced. “Phasers are offline, and the aft torpedo room has sustained damage. It will take a couple of days before it’s operational again.”

“Any casualties?”

“Reports of minor injuries and radiation exposure coming from decks six through nine in the aft section of the ship. Sickbay has dispatched personnel,” Lieutenant Ch’Toriith said. “Damage control teams have been dispatched to the most critical areas.”

Stuart nodded his head. “It could have been worse. Much worse.”

“Sir, Captain Grey is requesting to beam aboard with a representative from the Vaxinaal vessel,” Lieutenant Theron Ch’Toriith said. “He also would like Captain Jeffers to attend.”

“Permission granted. Please contact the *Icarus* to invite Captain Jeffers if he can be spared,” Stuart said as he slowly turned to make his way to the turbolift. After he entered the lift and turned around, he continued. “Mister Barnsdale, you have the bridge.”

The tactical officer nodded to his CO. “Aye, Captain,” he said just before the turbolift doors slid shut.



Stuart had just entered the transporter room as Captain Jeffers stepped down from the raised transporter pad. He walked up to the other officer and offered his hand. “Franklin, it’s good to see you again, but I’m sorry that I asked you to come over when I’m sure that you have a mess to clean up as we do.”

“No problem, Robert,” Jeffers replied. “It gives Commander Ward more experience to take charge when the situation is not so routine.”

“How is she doing? I know that T’Paski left some pretty big shoes to fill.”

“Erica is doing very well,” Jeffers said of his first officer. “She’ll probably be ready for a command in a couple of years if she keeps going the way she is.”

“That’s good.”

“Not for me. Then I’ll have to break in another exec.” Jeffers smiled. “So, why did you ask me over?”

“Captain Grey requested that you be a part of his introduction of our new friends.”

“From that alien ship?”

“Yes. I assume that it’s the captain of the Vaxinaal.”

“Sir?”

“Yes, Chief?”

“The *Monarch* has signaled that Captain Grey and his guest are ready to beam over,” Chief Petty Officer Natalie Anderson said.

“Energize.”

The energy beam started swirling with a familiar sound, and two people, Captain Marcus Grey and a member of the Vaxinaal race, coalesced on the pads.

Stuart and Jeffers both realized that the Vaxinaal was unlike any humanoid species they had ever encountered. He was bipedal, but he had bovine-like hooves instead of feet. Instead of ears, the Vaxinaal had fleshy tubules hanging from each side of his head. He had white hair, a white goatee, purple eyes, and dark purple skin. His clothing consisted of a loose-fitting sleeveless tunic surrounded by a cloth sash, and his trousers ended midway down his calf. In his hand, he held a staff made of a crystalline substance, which glowed blue.

Stuart remembered the first contact report that Grey had sent a few weeks prior, which included information about the Vaxinaal and their customary forms of greetings. Stuart remembered reading that these aliens did not shake hands, nor did they engage in any form of physical touch with other species. “On behalf of The United Federation of Planets, I welcome you aboard The U.S.S. *Republic*. I am Fleet Captain Robert P. Stuart. And this is Captain Franklin Jeffers in command of the U.S.S. *Icarus*.” Stuart blinked slowly two times and spread his arms apart in a welcoming gesture. “I invite you to enter my mind and share my thoughts.”

The Vaxinaal was a telepathic species. Each person maintained mental contact with every other member of their race even when some were several light years away from each other. They had a spoken language, but they preferred to communicate telepathically with each other and with other species; however, they would not read the thoughts of others without permission. The representative from the planet Vaxi blinked twice and spread his arms wide. He closed his eyes

and smiled. After several seconds, he opened his eyes and let his arms fall to his sides. “Thank you, Fleet Captain Stuart, for your greeting and hospitality. I am Weyasaar representing the planet Vaxi,” the alien said. “And thank you for saving the people of Ax-El.”

“I wish that we had been able to reach the other planets in time.”

“You did all that you could against the Vendoth.”

“Have you encountered them before?” Jeffers asked.

“We were not aware of them until we received an emergency signal from Engarth. When we learned of the destruction of Engarth, followed by that of Nix-El, we used our mental powers to search for the destroyers. We normally do not seek to enter the minds of others without permission; however, we tried to enter their minds to see if we could persuade them to stop the destruction. We found that their minds were extremely well-ordered and impervious to our thoughts.”

“It is too bad that you could not have read their minds,” Jeffers said. “Maybe we could have exchanged information with you about the Vendoth to see what their motives were.”

“We will still share all we know about the Vendoth with you just in case their kind come this way again,” Stuart added. “In the meantime, I want to offer my personal thanks to you for sending me that warning even though you don’t like to enter one’s mind without permission.”

“When my people sent the warning to your mind, we did not violate our customs or laws since sending information into another’s mind, especially to protect or warn of danger, does not require permission. However, it would be unethical to read another’s thoughts without first asking permission,” Weyasaar said.

“Robert,” Marcus Grey said, “Our new friends are going to be leaving soon to render aid to the people of Ax-El and assure them that they don’t need to worry about another attack, but I wanted you to meet Weyasaar in person.”

“I appreciate that, Marcus.” Stuart nodded to the Vaxinaal representative. “I look forward to future meetings with you and your people.”

“We also look forward to that, Fleet Captain.”

Weyasaar and Marcus Grey stepped back on the transporter platform. Marcus looked to Stuart and Jeffers. “Before leaving, do either of you need assistance with repairs to your ships??

“I’m not too proud to accept that offer, Captain,” Jeffers said.

“Neither am I,” Stuart echoed. “I will have my chief engineer contact Commander Li within the hour.”

“Goes for me, too.” Jeffers nodded to the *Monarch*’s captain.

Marcus nodded “I’ll inform him. With your permission, Robert.”

“Talk to you soon, Marcus,” Stuart said. “Chief Anderson, energize.”

Captain Grey and Weyasaar were whisked away in the energy beam.

Jeffers turned to Stuart and shook his hand. "I should be getting back to the *Icarus*. I don't want to leave Erica for too long. She might decide to take over." He smiled as he stepped onto the transporter pad and turned around. "You want to make a friendly little bet?"

"I don't like to gamble, Franklin."

"We can keep the stakes low. Loser buys dinner at the winner's choice of restaurant on *Gateway Alpha*."

Stuart stroked his chin thoughtfully. "What's the bet?"

"After seventy-two hours of repairs, we start back to the starbase. The first one to dock his ship wins."

Stuart shook his head, "No, I don't think I'll take that bet. Maybe another time."

"Maybe next time," Jeffers repeated. "Take care, sir."

"You, too." Stuart nodded to the transporter chief, who worked the controls to send Franklin Jeffers back to the starship *Icarus*.



Stuart entered main engineering and found Commanders Jeron Lexra and Anne McDougall leaning over the main control and monitoring station more commonly referred to as the 'pool table.' He approached both senior officers. "I hope that you have some good news."

"Repairs are underway throughout the ship. Temporary fixes will be done by the end of the day, but we will need to be overhauled when we reach *Gateway Alpha*, Commander McDougall said. "The impulse engines are operating at eighty-three percent, and the warp core should be up and running by tomorrow afternoon if we work around the clock."

"Captain Grey has graciously offered whatever assistance that we need. Contact Commander Henry Li, the chief engineer on the *Monarch*, and let him know what kind of help you need."

"Right away, sir." McDougall took pride in her work and abilities, but she was never too proud to accept help from another qualified engineer.

"We got beat up badly, sir, but at least we didn't lose anyone," Lexra said.

Stuart stared at his first officer for a moment before answering, but then he said, "You're wrong about that, Number One. We lost Commander Thel and the other sixty-two crewmembers of the *Raleigh*." He turned and walked away as he considered all the condolence letters he would be writing.

The End