

Star Trek: The Courageous

“The Galaxy's Pyre”

By

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What Went Before:

Seven Years Ago....

"You are all go," the comm system announced. Captain Callista Keller sat proudly in her command seat. She looked around the bridge, at her crew. After months of intensive training and simulations, the day had come. Keller and her crew would take the prototype ship out from the Sol system.

"Helm, you heard Command. Power up the transwarp engine," Keller commanded.

"Aye aye, sir!" Lieutenant Miller replied. She ran her nimble fingers over the conn console, sending the order to Engineering to start up the power relays which would feed electroplasma power into the latest transwarp engine. All thoughts about previous transwarp tests which yielded negligible results were banished from Lieutenant Miller's mind. She was confident that the Research & Development team, the team that had labored on this Transwarp Project for years, had succeeded this time.

Captain Keller held the same confidence. She was sure that each of the 46 other crewmembers aboard held the same confidence all over the ship. However, it wouldn't hurt for some inspirational words. Keller pressed a console on her armrest, opening a comm channel.

"This is Captain Keller to everyone. As we prepare to embark on the first actual Transwarp test flight, I wanted to say a few words. First of all, I wish to commend each and everyone of you for your hard work and dedication to this project. Next, I wish to commend you all for making this a successful test flight. I know, we haven't even left yet. However, I'm optimistic enough to say so at this point. I'm proud to be with you all." She looked around the bridge, seeing proud smiles on the rest of the bridge crew. She nodded, acknowledging their smiles.

"The success of the new Transwarp Engine will inaugurate a new era in space travel and exploration. This flight will become a legend. The *U.S.S. Galaxy* and her crew will become a legend. Captain Keller out."

"Good speech, sir," Miller said, turning to face the captain.

"Thank you, lieutenant."

"Engineering reports all ready. Just say the word," Miller smiled.

Captain Keller settled back in her seat. She said the word. "Engage."

The other ships gathered near Pluto watched as the *U.S.S. Galaxy* made the jump into transwarp. A bright glowing light surrounded the large ship, until the observers could only see the outline of the broad saucer and the three warp nacelles. The image of the ship shimmered, then snapped in another flash of bright light.

When the light faded, the ship was gone. Cheers arose throughout the other ships. These cheers slowly subsided as the first signs of trouble came in.

Captain Keller was correct. The *U.S.S. Galaxy* became a legend, but not in the way she expected.

What Went Elsewhere:

Within the interspatial vortex that conveyed the precursor of the Vendoth Armada, a scientist glanced over her computer readouts. Her green fingers ran over the computer panel, her trimmed claws tapping lightly on the surface.

The Vendoth looked up from her computer panel and tightened her jaw. "Tr'Dunarg, Is the data you are feeding me correct?" she asked her subordinate, who stood stiffly nearby.

"Yes, Qe'doth Project Leader," Tr'Dunarg murmured in reply. "All sensors have been calibrated thrice, and filtered. The information you are reviewing is correct."

Aung'Rama's quills flexed as her frustration became evident. "This bears further investigation."

Another Vendoth stepped to the central station. "Qe' doth Project Leader, this VenQu' respectfully offers a contrary viewpoint."

"What is it?" Aung' Rama asked.

"As per our order specifications, we are to journey through the vortex along the prescribed pathway," the security chief stated.

"Yes, VenQu' Roq' Ragn, to ensure smooth transit for the Mer' jot Armada. I fully aware of our order specifications."

"In my opinion, the benefits of diverting our vessel' s course does not outweigh the benefits of adhering to course," Roq' Ragn clasped his hands behind his back, thrusting his chest to Aung' Rama, indicating his confidence.

Aung' Rama clicked the stubs of her three talons together against her sharpened thumb talon as she mused over several courses of actions and responses. With a few seconds, she had crafted a response.

She fixed her dark, deep-set eyes on Roq' Ragn. "VenQu' Roq' Ragn, I see your point of view. However, your point of view does not matter, since I am the Project Leader, chosen by the Roj Che' dak' s staff. Naturally, as such, my judgment overrides yours. You may return to your station."

Roq' Ragn jutted out his jaw, exposing his two lower fangs and turned on his feet, walking away from the central station without a word. Aung' Rama kept her eyes on him as he resumed his post. After a moment, Aung' Rama returned her gaze to her monitor. "Crft Navigator Si' Paien, please adjust course to the coordinates I have entered."

Tr' Dunarg remained standing next to the central station. Aung' Rama turned to look at him. "We shall have to investigate this anomaly. While it' s to be expected for temporary instabilities to occur within the vortex, these readings have the indications of inter-dimensional instabilities."

Tr' Dunarg bowed his head slightly. "Yes, Project Leader. That is why I triple-checked sensor readings."

"It is good you did. Your initiative shall be noted in my evaluation report. However, be mindful of your position aboard my craft. Now, if these readings do bear fruit, we may be on the threshold of proving Kart' esdec' s theorem regarding inter-dimensional rifts. As the first Doths, we will have the exclusive rights to research this phenomenon. This will be a tremendous honor to us all."

Si' Paien turned to her post. "Project Leader, we are approaching the coordinates."

"Sensor readings on view," Aung' Rama ordered. She turned to look at a curved wall with multiple monitors, each showing a different sensor wavelength. She took in the multiple feeds simultaneously, assembling a mental view of the anomaly.

Outside of the angular scout shuttle, a roiling mass of energy spun slowly, reminding her of the Pylops' tren storm on the gas giant in her home system. Just like the storm' s size dwarfed her homeworld, the anomaly dwarfed her scout shuttle.

"Si' Paien, maintain a cautious distance," Aung' Rama warned.

"Yes, Project Leader."

Tr' Dunarg walked to his station, running his fingers over several menus. "Project Leader, readings are fluctuating the closer we are. I am detecting an increase in gravimetric forces."

Aung' Rama turned to the navigator. "Increase distance between us and the anomaly!"

"I cannot!" Si' Paien declared. "We have lost momentum. We are in a gravitational stasis."

"Increase power allotment to impulse motivators," Aung' Rama ordered.

"No effect," Si' Paien reported.

"Increase power allotment to gravitational dampeners."

"No effect."

Roq' Ragn declared, "Project Leader, the rest of the expeditionary fleet has passed by us. Within the next moment, the vortex bubble will pass by, and we will revert to realspace."

Tr' Dunarg looked at Aung' Rama. "I do not know the effect the anomaly will have on us, upon reversal."

Aung' Rama hissed a long breath. "Well, we shall find out. Is there time to-"

Chapter 1

Lieutenant Janet Kyle stroked the armrests of the command seat, as she sat in it on the *U.S.S. Courageous's* bridge. She liked the feeling of power that it implied. The small monitors at her hands allowed her instant access to any and all aspects of the starship' s operation. If she wanted to, she could take control of the helm, and put the *Tri-Warp Galaxy*-class ship into a corkscrew barrel roll maneuver.

Of course, if she did, she'd have a hell of a lot to explain to her commanding officer, Captain Thomas Johnson. Instead, Kyle remained content with reviewing the periodical status reports from the other various departments aboard the bridge. It was the night shift, her shift. As the third in command, behind Johnson and the first officer, Major Max Ironsides, it was her duty to command the ship on the third shift.

She enjoyed it very much. She enjoyed sitting in the command seat. The only thing she didn't enjoy was the boredom of the night shift. Almost nothing happened during the night shift. If the captain expected something to happen, he'd be sitting in the command seat instead of Kyle. He had done so for several weeks in Romulan space. Kyle had resented that. She resented the implication that she wasn't capable of handling whatever emergencies might have arisen.

Her ego was placated when Captain Johnson had explained that he had done that due to behavioral modifications by outside parties. The captain had apologized to Kyle and reassured her that he still believed her to be a capable Executive Officer. Kyle recalled that the captain had to make quite a few apologies for his behavior to others as well.

Kyle sighed, and looked at the view screen. The only image was of the blue vortex of the quantum slipstream the ship was traveling in. The No Man's Land was a vast wasteland, utterly devoid of celestial bodies. Planetary systems, asteroid belts, comets and the like were not to be found here. The stars were few and far between. There was nothing of worth at all in this large stretch of space. Therefore, no one wanted it. Hence the name, No Man's Land. No government bothered to stake a claim.

It was not very interesting at all. However, it stretched across vast sectors of space, which would require years upon years of traveling at Warp Factor 9. But with the introduction of the Quantum Slipstream Drive by the now famous *U.S.S. Voyager*, vast distances were no longer daunting. The *U.S.S. Courageous* boasted the first Federation Quantum Slipstream Drive, based on the one the *Voyager* used.

Now, what would have taken decades to traverse, only took a month. The ship had been in this slipstream since leaving Romulan space three weeks ago. There was nothing to do but maintain the slipstream's structural integrity. The sparseness of No Man's Land offered no other distractions. The night shift was even more boring than usual. Kyle started tapping her fingers on the armrest idly, as she settled in to pass the long hours.

Kyle heard a turbolift whine to a stop, then the hiss of opening doors immediately thereafter. She turned to see who was the new arrival.

"Oh, Sir!" Kyle looked up at Johnson in surprise. She began to stand, as per protocol for when a captain stepped onto the bridge.

"At ease, lieutenant," Johnson waved his hand. She noticed that the captain wasn't wearing his usual black uniform. Instead, he wore light brown pants and a gray long-sleeved shirt, with a large number 86 on the front and back. Kyle recognized it as the captain's old Parrises Square team shirt.

Kyle sat down hesitatingly. "I wasn't expecting you. Is this a surprise inspection?"

"Oh, no, nothing of the sort," Johnson shook his head. "I just couldn't sleep. The last few weeks have been so boring. Even my dreams have become boring. Well, except for that one dream..." Johnson frowned and shook his head, shrugging it off. He looked back at Kyle. "Anyway, I thought I'd come up to my ready room and do a little paint work on my starship models."

"I see, sir," Kyle nodded slowly.

Johnson shot her a friendly smile and walked across to the entrance to his ready room.

Ensign Polonski called out. "Sir, I'm picking up something odd."

"What is it?" both Kyle and Johnson asked. Johnson caught himself and took a step back. He looked at Kyle.

"I'm sorry. You're onto it. I'm not. You can take care of everything. I'll be in my ready room." Johnson then stepped in front of the doors, allowing them to slide open for him.

Kyle turned to look at Polonski at tactical. "What did you pick up?"

The young man shook his head, shrugging. "I don't know. The signal just vanished."

"Hmm," Kyle frowned. Inwardly, she was smiling. *Finally! Something to do*, She thought to herself. She looked at the ensign. "Pull out the recording from memory. Play it back, use standard communications protocol."

"Aye, sir." Polonski ran his fingers across the black tactical console, examining the mystery signal. "I think I may have something. I'm not sure, but I think it's a fragment of the first part of a Federation automated distress signal."

"Really? Out here in No Man's Land?" Kyle tilted her head at that news.

"That' s what it looks like to me," Polonski replied.

"Can you determine where it came from? Which ship it came from? When it was sent?"

"I doubt it. As I said, it' s only a small fragment. I' ll do my best."

Kyle turned around in her seat, facing front now. She leaned on an elbow, pondering what to do next. Should she call in the captain now? With only the barest hint of information they had? Or should she wait until morning when his shift began?

"Jakob, you' re sure it' s a fragment of distress signal?"

"I am reasonably certain of that," Ensign Polonski answered.

"That' s that, then," Kyle said. "Bridge to Captain Johnson."

"What is it?" Johnson asked over the comm.

"It' s a mystery, that' s what it is," Kyle muttered to voice. She cleared her throat and reported back. "Ensign Polonski picked up a signal. He believes it to be a fragment of a Federation automated distress signal."

"Out here?" Johnson' s voice replied. "As far as I know, we're the only other Federation ship ever to travel this way, after the Voyager."

"I know. Still, the signal was there."

"I see," Johnson said.

"I have him working on tracing its location, and ship of origin."

"Good. I see you're on top of everything. Keep me informed."

"Yes sir. Any other orders?" Kyle asked.

"Not at the moment. There's nothing we can do until we find out more about that signal. Until then, maintain course for the Borderlands."

"Yes, sir."

"Hey, the distress signal is back!" Ensign Polonski called out. "No, it' s gone again."

Kyle sighed. "Well at least we know it' s really there, not a distortion of the quantum slipstream we' re in, don' t we?"

"I' m not even sure about that, sir. Really, I can' t say anything for sure unless we were out of the quantum slipstream. Sensors are only at half strength from within the quantum slipstream. All our other systems are affected as well."

Kyle nodded, acknowledging Polonski' s point. She bit her lower lip and mulled over the situation. "I don' t think we should do that. You know as well as I do, if we drop out of the slipstream, it' ll take weeks to calculate another set of slipstream variables. You have nothing to lock onto anyway. Now if we were receiving the signal as we dropped out..." Kyle' s voice trailed off as she thought about the options.

"It' s back!" Polonski shouted.

Kyle spun around and looked at the helmsman. She froze for a split-second. The words were out of her mouth before she consciously chose to speak them. "Drop out of the slipstream. All stop."

"Oh God! Oh God!"

Ensign LeAnn Walker arched her back as she squirmed in her seat. Her quarters were dark, illuminated only by the iridescent blue-white glow of the quantum slipstream the starship was traveling through. It was enough light for LeAnn to look down to her lover, Lieutenant Amanda Ruiz, kneeling on the floor in front of her.

"You like that, huh?" Ruiz smiled, her dark eyes looking up at LeAnn.

"Oh yes," LeAnn panted. "It feels so good. Oh! Mmmm..." LeAnn bit her lip as Ruiz resumed her work. She looked down, watching Ruiz. "You' re so good at this... you just know how to rub it right..."

Ruiz stopped and looked back up at LeAnn. "Well, I picked it up in Basic Training in Starfleet Marines training. It' s come in handy a lot. Especially after long hikes."

LeAnn wiggled her toes playfully as Ruiz began massaging the sole of her foot. LeAnn rolled her eyes back in her head, and sighed contentedly, settling in her seat. "Oh, Mandy, that feels so wonderful. I wish I knew how to do it as well you do."

Ruiz smiled. "That' s all right. You do other things that I like just as much."

"Really? Like what?"

Ruiz smirked. "I love the way you nibble on my ear."

"Oh yeah..." LeAnn smiled softly. "You know, the Bajorans believe that the *pagh* is accessible through

the ear. You can really tap into a person' s soul that way."

"Do you believe that?"

LeAnn shrugged, and wiped her blond hair out of her eyes. "Well, not really. My mother wasn' t all that devout in her beliefs. And my father, well, he' s human so he never really got into it."

Ruiz nodded. "I understand. I' m a lapsed Catholic myself." Ruiz got onto her feet and stood up slowly, sitting in the large armchair next to LeAnn. She leaned in to kiss LeAnn. "Feet all better?"

"Yes," LeAnn replied, kissing Ruiz back. "Much better."

"Good," Ruiz nodded.

LeAnn ran her fingers through Ruiz' s short, dark shoulder length hair, twirling a strand around her finger. "Is there anything I can do for you? How can I make you feel as good as you made me feel?"

Ruiz' s brown eyes glittered as she looked in LeAnn' s eyes. "Well... why don' t you nibble on my ear as I think about it?"

LeAnn laughed, her lilting voice filling the quarters. "You' re almost Bajoran in your ear fetish!" LeAnn sighed, shaking her head bemusedly.

Ruiz ran an index finger down the faint ridges on LeAnn' s nose. "You know, these past few weeks we' d had together have been so great."

"It' s been really good for me too," LeAnn agreed.

"I never thought I' d be so happy to spend a month doing nothing," Ruiz murmured.

"Me too."

"Walker..."

"Yes, Amanda?"

"I' m really happy I find you."

"I' m happy too," LeAnn nodded slowly.

Ruiz' s lips tightened as she swallowed. "I... I just wanted to tell you that... I--"

The room suddenly went dark as the undulating light streaming through the exterior windows vanished.

"Now what?" Ruiz frowned, looking out the windows. Very few pinpoints of stars were visible now, the quantum slipstream gone.

The helmsman had went to work quickly. He had been listening and knew time was of essence. The large ship shuddered slightly as the energies of the quantum slipstream were allowed to dissipate around them. The view screen showed the spiral waves of the slipstream fading away. A few stars came into view. The helmsman then worked on cutting off the ship' s leftover momentum.

Kyle spun around to look at Polonski. "You got it?"

"Got it! Analyzing it now..."

The door to the ready room opened. "What the hell is going on? Why are we out of the slipstream?" Johnson asked darkly. He stared at Kyle, awaiting an answer.

"I' m sorry, sir. I ordered us out of the slipstream," Kyle said. "The ensign informed me that he was unable to trace or analyze the mystery signal unless we were out of the slipstream. It had been reaching us erratically, fading in and out. It had just appeared and I had to make a quick judgment call."

Johnson frowned and Kyle could see his jaw muscles at work beneath his skin. The captain glanced over at Polonski. "Have you reacquired the signal?"

Ensign Polonski nodded "Yes, sir. I have. I' m running an full analysis on it now."

Johnson slowly exhaled. He looked at Kyle then back at the young ensign. "Continue doing so." He looked at Kyle again. "We' ll see if your judgment call pans out. If not..." Johnson let the words linger in the air. He turned and walked back into his ready room.

The first shift of the new day was on the bridge when Johnson walked out of his ready room. Chief Bogarde and Garak were immersed in a discussion at the tactical station. Lieutenant Ruiz and Ensign LeAnn were talking as they controlled the *Courageous'* flight.

Johnson didn' t see Lieutenant Kyle. Instead, he saw Major Ironsides, the first officer and the ship' s Marine Commanding Officer, seated in the command seat. He sighed. Perhaps he had been too hard on the lieutenant earlier. After all, if the signal turned out to be nothing but a trick of quantum subspace, they' d only arrive about a week or so later into the Borderlands. Hardly worth the heavy threat he had left implied.

"Good morning, sir," Ironsides said. He stood up, allowing Johnson to take his seat.

"Morning, Max," Johnson said, sitting down. Ironsides sat down in the seat on Johnson' s right hand. The

captain noticed that. "Well? Aren' t you going to take up your favorite position at OPS?"

"Not just yet. You look like you' d like to talk," Ironsides replied.

"Do I?" Johnson glanced at the major. "Well, maybe I do. No matter. What' s the progression on the investigation? Why is that Cardassian here?"

Ironsides glanced at his seat' s armrest console. "It' s almost time for their next update. Why don' t you ask them yourself?"

"Good idea. Get it straight from the horse' s mouth," Johnson nodded as he stood up. He walked around the long rail that separated the command seats from the aft stations. He walked up to Bogarde and Garak.

"Gentlemen. I hope you have something new to report?" he asked.

The dark human security chief and Cardassian looked up from their consoles to look at the captain. "First of all," Garak said, "I wish to object to my mouth being compared to a horse' s mouth. I think my mouth is a very fine example of an Cardassian mouth. Hardly like anything resembling a Terran quadruped."

"It' s just a Earth idiom," Johnson sighed.

"Ah, I see. One would have thought after spending a decade in constant contact with humans, one would have learned all the tedious and inane turn of phrases that arose from Earth. Obviously not," Garak shook his head. "What, pray tell, does that idiom mean?"

Bogarde turned to look at Garak. "It means getting the information straight from the source."

Garak looked up at the taller man. "And how does that relate to a horse' s mouth?"

Bogarde shrugged and raised an eyebrow. "Well, uh, I think it goes back to the old Earth gambling game..."

Johnson held up a hand. "This is a tedious and inane conversation, one I don' t wish to listen to. Now someone tell me what you have learned."

"Well, the signal has been showing up on and off as usual," Bogarde said. "There' s no pattern to it at all. We don' t know why it' s doing that."

"I see. What else?" Johnson prompted.

"It' s Federation," Garak offered.

"Are you sure of that?"

"I am reasonably certain of that fact," the Cardassian nodded.

"How do you know?" asked Johnson.

Bogarde explained. "Ensign Polonski came up with a list of possibilities regarding the signal. He made it when I told him to go back to his quarters and get some sleep."

"The poor lad had been up all night," Garak nodded.

"One of the possibilities was that the signal had corrupted data in it. So I ran a clean-up filter on the signal, and it turns out he was right. A lot of the data has been corrupted. However, the clean up showed that the signal is originally encrypted."

"Which explains why the ensign had been unable to get any information out of the signal," Garak added. "A corrupted signal... difficult to analyze. Now, for a corrupted encrypted signal..."

"Forget about it," Bogarde ended Garak' s statement. "no chance. Anyway, once I found that the signal was encrypted, I checked it against our record of encryption fingerprints. I came up with no hits. So, I thought of the one other person who' d be most familiar with encrypted signals."

"Which is where I came in," Garak said. "The chief showed me the signal and I analyzed it. The encryption pattern is uniquely Federation."

Johnson shook his head. He looked at Bogarde. "If you already checked it, how did you miss it?"

"You have to understand, Captain," Garak explained, "the signal is corrupted. Very corrupted. Almost as corrupt as the old Cardassian Central Command, as I' d say." He chuckled.

Johnson didn' t track a smile. Garak cleared his throat. "Well then, I extracted what little clean data I had and checked those scraps. I was able to identify a Federation pattern."

"Garak showed me that, and I took it and replicated the data strands further, extrapolating what the full encryption code might be," Bogarde concluded.

"And it' s Federation?"

"Yes," Bogarde said. "Actually, it' s the encryption process in use from seven to ten years ago."

"The plot thickens," Garak smiled.

Johnson sighed, nodding. "Well... you still can' t decode the signal and find out what it says, who it' s from, or where? Even knowing the encryption pattern?"

Bogarde shook his head. "The signal is FUBAR. Forget about it."

"Acknowledged," Johnson said. "Well, can you at least trace it back to the origin?"

"We were working on that just now. Garak was about to leave to Astrometrics. There, I'd feed him information so between the two of us, we might be able to triangulate a location."

"Good job chief. Thank you, Garak, for your help. Carry on, men." Johnson turned to return to his seat, when a beep on Bogarde's console made him pause. Bogarde quickly checked the console. He looked up at Johnson.

"Sir, it's Admiral Nechayev, priority signal, for you."

"Really?" Johnson frowned. "Not Lisa? Hmm. Well, it's probably our weekly report session. I'll take it in my ready room as usual."

"Aye sir. Transferring now," Bogarde said. Johnson walked over to the door to his ready room. He heard Garak ask a question.

"What's FUBAR?"

"Military term. Fouled Up Beyond All Recognition. That's the clean version though," Bogarde replied.

"Oh? What's the dirty version?"

Johnson continued on into his ready room. He went over to his desk, quickly glancing at the half-painted model that stood in the center of his hobby table. The paint should be dry about now, he thought to himself. He tapped his desktop monitor and saw the thin face of Admiral Nechayev.

"Hello, Alynna," Johnson said. Johnson was allowed to call the admiral by her first name due to their shared histories. They had both been on intimate terms once, briefly. It didn't last very long, but fortunately, they formed a good friendship from it. She was in fact, the admiral who assigned him to the original *Kitty Hawk* all these years ago. Johnson still harbored some suspicions that she had reined in Admiral Stone so that he was able to command the next *Kitty Hawk*. He smiled at his friend and commanding officer.

"Thomas," she nodded back.

"I was just going to get in touch with Headquarters today," he said. "You'll have to give me a minute, I don't have my PADDs together yet. I wasn't expecting to make contact with Earth for a few days, much less be contacted by you directly. Is there something wrong with my wife? Why isn't Lisa briefing me?"

Nechayev shook her head. "No, she's all right. I know that as the liaison between the *Courageous* and Starfleet Command, Captain Stone-Johnson usually handles your briefings. Several points of interest have risen that necessitated an earlier meeting, and a more direct one just between you and I, not through the office of Captain Stone-Johnson."

"Oh." Johnson frowned, looking at Nechayev. "Well, you'll have to give me a few moments, I don't have any of my status reports together to transmit to Headquarters. I wasn't planning on making contact with Earth for another three days."

"That's all right, I know I'm early. I'll wait."

An hour had passed since Johnson sat down to talk with Nechayev. "And that takes care of Engineering's report. Scotty and LaForge and Dr. Brahms will be glad to know their ship's running perfectly," Johnson concluded.

Nechayev nodded with a slight smile. "I'm sure they will."

"Oh, one last thing- last night we picked up a signal. It seemed to be a fragment of a Federation distress signal. After further analysis, we've confirmed that. Right now I have my people working on triangulating the signal. Once we locate it, I'll order the *Courageous* to change course to investigate it."

"How far off course are you going?" Nechayev inquired.

"We'll enter the Borderlands five to seven days later than planned," Johnson scratched at his dark brown hair. "It depends on the location, how far away. It's not too much of a delay. The peoples of the Borderlands will just have to wait a bit longer to meet us." Johnson smiled.

"That seems satisfactory to me. And besides, you're bored and this is something to do."

"Uh, yes," Johnson admitted sheepishly, "That's correct, sir."

"Carry on with your course of action, Captain. Be sure to keep us here back at home informed."

"Of course, Admiral."

Nechayev sighed. "I suppose you're wondering why I've contacted you earlier than usual."

"I have, but I know you. I knew you'd explain in due time."

Nechayev smiled sadly. "You're right. I have important news to relay to you. I know the news I am about to tell you are already contained within the standard news packet carried on this signal from the Midas

Array, but I wished to speak to you personally about them. The packet, of course, has the latest casualty lists on it as well. "

"Any increase?"

Nechayev shook her head. "No. Casualties remain at the same level as last week. I suppose it' s better than more casualties. As I said earlier, I wanted to personally inform you of two things."

"Go ahead," Johnson inclined his head.

"Several days ago, the structural skeleton of the *U.S.S. Saratoga* NCC-31911-B collapsed entirely. One person died and several others were critically injured. An investigation is currently underway, but the prime suspect is substandard materials."

"Oh...the *Saratoga* was to be the next *Tri-Warp Galaxy*-class ship to be produced, right?"

"That' s correct," Nechayev confirmed. "However, in light of this disaster, we' re leaning towards scrapping the project and salvaging the materials to put towards other ships. The materials originally intended for the *Saratoga* could be used to make at least four Defiant class ships. We' re running low on materials, as you can tell."

Johnson nodded somberly. "What of the third ship slated for production?"

"You' re referring to the *U.S.S. Discovery*, I take it. That is currently in pre-production, and should be completed in two to three years."

"That' s good," Johnson nodded. "The *Courageous* won' t be alone then."

"No it won' t," Nechayev smiled lightly. It faded quickly. "However, this only serves to underscore the importance of your mission. Hopefully, you' ll be able to find more resources in the Borderlands. We' re not running out of supplies just yet, but we still are approaching a crisis-point in about five years."

"I know," Johnson nodded. "Don' t worry, I know the seriousness of the situation. I know how the war is eroding the Federation' s economy and eating away at our supplies."

"Now, onto the second point..." Nechayev paused and drew in a deep sigh.

Johnson could see the sadness and seriousness in Nechayev' s eyes. He leaned in close to the monitor to listen.

Garak looked up at the large curved tri-dimensional map that took up the wall of the Astrometrics lab. "There you are..." he said. He glanced at his console, then looked back up at the several blinking dots on the map. "Well actually, I probably should say, ' There you probably are.' " He tapped his comm-badge. "Garak to Bogarde. I think I' ve narrowed down some locations."

"That' s great. And just in time."

"What do you mean?"

"I' ve been noticing a gradual decrease in the signal power- well apart from the erratic appearances. It' s losing power."

"Ah."

"Yeah. We only have less than a few hours to get to it before we lose it completely," Bogarde' s deep voice intoned.

"Well then I' d better forward my findings to the bridge."

"Yeah. You better. Bogarde out."

Chapter 2

Lieutenant Commander Fonda sat down wearily onto her couch in her quarters. She had spent two shifts finishing off the repair jobs in Engineering. The journey through Romulan space had made Fonda' s job so much harder. She looked around her quarters. Furniture and objects laid sprawled over the floor.

She sighed. She hadn' t even had the time to clean up her quarters after the last attack. The mess made her skin crawl. Her body was at war with itself. Half of her wanted to get right on the floor and clean everything up and put the room back into it' s normal pristine condition; while the other half just wanted to sleep.

As her eyes slowly closed, signaling the end of her inner war, her comm-badge chimed. She shook herself awake, and tapped the badge. "Fonda here."

Ironsides' s voice spoke: "*The captain' s called a staff meeting in a half hour.*"

"Can I send Lieutenant Hiroshi in my stead? I' ve been on duty for almost 25 hours."

"*Sorry, Chief. You need to be here.*"

"All right fine, Major. I' ll be there. Fonda out." She sighed and stood up. At least she' d have time for a sonic shower and change of uniform. She stepped over an upturned coffee table to get to her bedroom. She paused to pick up a holopicture.

She set it on its proper spot, the desk. She activated it to see her daughter, Rene•. She smiled at her young daughter' s beautifl face. She sighed and headed for a good sonic shower. The mess, as much as she hated to admit, had to wait.

Ironsides' voice piped through the ready room comm system. "*Captain, I' ve informed everyone of the staff meeting.*"

"Thank you, Major. That' ll be all for now."

"Aye sir."

The channel clicked closed. Johnson sighed, tapping on his desktop. He glanced at the desktop monitor, which showed the ship' s seal. Nechayev' s news still hung in the air. It still took time to sink in. He leath forward. "Can' t put it off any longer," he said to himself. He tapped on his desktop console, activating a shipwide link. He'd rather wait until after the staff meeting, but it wouldn' t be fair. Johnson sighed again, and tried to think of what to say.

Hartman sipped at his hot tea, as Favor sat across the booth, wolfing down toast. "You sure you don' t want some of my toast?" the ambassador gestured to his plate of toast.

Hartman shook his head. "No thanks, Nathan. I' m fine with my eggs and bacon."

"Suit yourself, Ed," Favor shrugged. He sliced off a piece of ham and spiked it with his fork.

Hartman set down his cup of tea, and sighed, looking around the nearly empty crew lounge, Eleven-Forward. It was not even breakfast time yet, which explained the absence of the other crew. Only Favor, Hartman, and Seamus were in the lounge.

Seamus, the Chief Galley Officer, shook his head at Favor' s large breakfast. Hartman smirked. He would have thought that Seamus would be used to it, after serving him breakfast every early morning for the duration of the *Courageous'* trip through No Man' s Land.

Favor swallowed down his food and picked up his mug of coffee. After a swig from the mug, Favor sighed and looked at Hartman. "How come you' r not eating?"

"Oh, I' m eating. Just slower than you are," Hartman smiled.

"Well, breakfast is the most important meal of the day. You' re a doctor, you should know that."

"I do know that. But you always eat like there' s no tomorrow."

Favor cocked his head. With a lopsided grin, he said, "I always live like there' s no tomorrow."

Hartman could only shrug and nod.

"Actually," Favor frowned, "it' s just a habit I' ve picked up from my vagabond days. Some days I didn' t have enough money to buy food, so I had to go hungry. So I know the value of a good large meal."

"Interesting isn' t it?" Hartman leaned against the table, picking up a strip of bacon.

"What is?" Favor looked questioningly at Hartman.

"Back then when you were off, uh, gallivanting around the quadrant, you were dirt poor. And today, you' re one of the ten richest people in the Federatin."

"Yeah," Favor shrugged. "You know, if I had to do it all over again, I would have done it all exactly the same." After chewing thoughtfully on another piece of ham, Favor reconsidered. "Well... I probably wouldn' t have insulted that Nausicaan. Or rainy days, my knee aches, because of that big galoot breaking it."

Hartman rolled his eyes.

"I suppose I shouldn' t complain. I got off easy. Besides, everyone' s got problems."

Hartman looked up at Favor. "What do you mean by that?"

Favor shrugged, chewing. "Just that. Everyone' s got problems. Hmm?"

"Sorry. I thought you were saying something else."

Favor paused, furrowing his brows. "No... I wasn' t. Is there something on your mind?"

"No, not really," Hartman shook his head.

"Okay. You know, you can talk to me about anything. I' m your buddy."

"I know. I' m just tired, that' s all."

"Yeah. Seems like everyone' s tired. I have to admit, I' m feeling a bit stiraazy, being cooped up on this ship for weeks on end. I keep checking on the computer how much longer it' s going to take until we get to

the Borderlands." Favor turned to look out the large bay windows. "And we're not there yet, I can tell you that much. Do you know what's going on?"

"Nope."

"Ah well. Good to know you're out of the loop, just like me." Another silence descended as the two friends resumed eating their breakfasts.

Favor set his fork down on the table. "You know, lately I've been getting the impression that Tom seems uncomfortable when I'm on the bridge. Do you know anything about that?"

"Not really. I don't spend that much time on the bridge," Hartman said. "I'm usually in one of the sickbays, or in a science lab." He paused, thinking. "Well... if anything- it might be that, uh, he doesn't really know you that much anymore."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, you've been out of touch with Tom and I for almost ten years. And for the ten years before that, we only heard from you once in a while. You can't expect to pick up where you left off in a friendship."

"But you and I did," Favor pointed out.

"I'm a different person from Tom. Look, don't talk to me about this, if you have issues, talk to Tom himself."

Favor pursed his lips. "Perhaps I'll just do that. We haven't talked much since the fight in the brig."

"Yeah. That definitely is an issue, right there," Hartman wagged his index finger.

"Ok, we don't have to talk about it. It's not really your problem. It's Tom's and my problem. We'll work it out. Hey, I got a letter from Selari last night."

"Oh?" Hartman picked up his tea cup. "How are things going there?"

"As well as ever. Romulan politics is still a bear, but she's gotten back in the swing of things."

"That's good," Hartman nodded, sipping at his tea. He narrowed his eyes at Favor. "You know, I've been meaning to ask you this. Are you actually planning to get married?"

"Yes."

"You're serious?"

"Dead serious." Favor's customary smile faded as he looked back at Hartman.

"How does she feel about a five year engagement? I mean, you're stuck on this ship for a while."

"She doesn't mind. In some cases, Romulan tradition dictates up to ten years before nuptials are allowed."

"Really?"

"Nah. I'm just BSing you," Favor laughed.

Hartman groaned and shook his head.

"But seriously, she really doesn't mind. I love her. She loves me. We waited almost ten years before seeing each other finally. We can wait just another five years to get married."

Hartman shook his head, and pushed his empty plate forward on the table. "Man, I envy you guys. You and Tom. Tom, married, what has it been? Nine years? to Lisa. And you, about to get married to your dream Romulan girl. Sometimes I feel like I'll never find that one gal."

"Don't worry, Ed. If it's fated to be, it'll happen." Favor winked at his friend.

"Yeah."

"Hey, whatever happened to that redhead you told me about, the one you dated on the *Pacific*?"

"You mean Jaime? I don't know. I haven't checked up on her in years."

"Why not?"

"Well, I suppose I'm afraid to find out that she's now married with three kids."

"Hey, you never know..." Favor shrugged with a smile.

"Well as you like to say so much, we ought to think about the future. I'd rather not think about the past."

"Suit yourself. I'm easy," Favor replied.

Just then, the comm system chimed, alerting the ship to an impending announcement.

"This is Captain Johnson speaking."

"I wonder what news Tommy has for us today," Favor said, while listening to the announcement.

"Maybe another poker game like the one a couple nights ago?" Hartman said. "Or maybe an explanation of why we're out of the quantum slipstream?"

Johnson continued on. "I'm afraid I have sad news to present. I've just recently found out that two days ago... Admiral Leonard H. McCoy, head of Starfleet Medical, had passed away."

Hartman's jaw dropped. He stared at the ceiling's comm speaker.

"Oh man!" Favor sighed.

"For those of you interested, Starfleet Headquarters has sent a holovid package of the memorial service. Please come to my office about this matter. That is all. Johnson out."

The comm system shut off.

Favor sighed again. "Wow. He's been around so long, that you'd have thought he'd live forever. He was what? 130 years old? Something like that I guess." He looked at Hartman, noticing the doctor's stillness.

"Ed? Hey, Ed. You okay?"

Hartman shook his head, blinking his eyes. "I'm all right. I guess I was just shocked by the news."

"You worked with him once, didn't you?"

Hartman nodded. "After graduation, I interned with him for about a month." He looked around, noticing some crew people entering the lounge. "Look, I think we better get going. I've got some paperwork in my office to do before the staff meeting."

"No problem," Favor said. "Hey, I wasn't invited. I wonder why."

Hartman shrugged slightly.

Favor shrugged too. "Probably not a diplomatic matter. You'll tell me what's up afterwards?"

"Yeah if I'm allowed to," Hartman nodded.

"Okay. Breakfast same time tomorrow?"

"Sure," Hartman nodded. "Just like the day before and the day before that."

Favor stood up, smiling. "And we'll talk about how nothing happened the day before, and the day before that, et cetera, et cetera, ad nauseum. Hey, that's the glorious boredom that No Man's Land has to offer!"

Hartman smirked as he stood up. The two of them walked out of Eleven-Forward, heading off to their respective work.

Fonda walked into the conference lounge, to see that she was the last person to arrive. She disliked being the last to arrive. She always prided herself on being punctual. The captain was seated at his usual place at the head of the curved table. His hand was over his mouth as he leaned on the table, deep in thought.

The rest of the crew were seated around the table. Fonda took the nearest available seat, which was next to Doctor Hartman. Like the captain, Hartman seemed deep in thought. Fonda was surprised to see Lieutenant Kyle seated at the table. She yawned inconspicuously. This was her off shift, and she usually was sleeping. *At least I'm wasn't the only one going without sleep* Fonda thought to herself. The rest of the crew were talking amongst themselves. Fonda was able to hear snatches of conversation.

"Can you believe it?"

"End of an era I suppose."

"Yeah, he went. So what? Everyone knows he wasn't really running thing"

Fonda leaned over to Lieutenant Ruiz who was near her. "What's the chatter about?"

"You don't know?" Ruiz asked, surprised. "Didn't you hear the announcement?"

"What announcement?" Fonda answered. "I was in the sonic shower."

Ruiz nodded in understanding. "Doctor McCoy died," she said simply. Fonda nodded slowly. Ruiz continued. "The captain has the funeral on holovid, if you want to see it."

Fonda frowned slightly. "Ah, I see."

"LeAnn and I might check it out. You're welcome to join us," Ruiz offered.

Fonda smiled politely. "Thanks, but no thanks. I don't really feel the need to observe his funeral. The end result is still the same. He remains dead."

"That's true," Ruiz nodded.

Johnson looked over his crew. Naturally they were talking about McCoy's death. He had to admit he was thinking about it as well. He sighed inwardly. Death was never easy to accept, though this particular one was easier. The venerable doctor had lived a long life, experiencing all the 23rd and 24th centuries had to offer.

Johnson's eyes fell upon the youngest person at the table, Ensign LeAnn Walker. The young half-Bajoran was barely finished with her teenage years. Johnson smiled slightly. Why, it had only been a month ago that Ensign LeAnn had her first Romulan Ale. Looking at her, Johnson knew he'd take her death differently. There was a vast difference between a life ended after a century, and a life ended before its prime.

Johnson shook these thoughts out of his head. It was counterproductive to begin this mission with thoughts of death. He cleared his throat, and got the desired result. The crew looked at him, listening

attentively. Even Garak's mouth was closed.

"I suppose you all are expecting me to say a few words regarding Dr. McCoy. Well, I'm not. I've already said my piece in the announcement. Yes, it's all right to acknowledge his passing, but business doesn't stop," Johnson said as he brought his hands together on the table top, interlacing his fingers.

"Which brings me to today's particular order of business. We've stopped in our journey to the Borderlands due to a mysterious signal that the night shift tactical officer, Ensign Polonski, detected. I have Lieutenant Kyle, the night shift commander, here to explain. Lieutenant, if you please."

"Thank you, sir," Kyle said. She looked at the others. "While within the quantum slipstream, Ensign Polonski detected a faint and erratic signal. As you know, sensors aren't operating at full efficiency due to the nature of the slipstream. I made the decision to cease slipstream travel in order to investigate the signal further, based on the suspicion it might have been Federation in origin. The ensign was later joined by Chief Bogarde in his analysis of the signal. I'm afraid I'm not up to date to what you've learned, Chief."

"That's okay, sir," Bogarde nodded. "I took over the analysis of the signal when Polonski's shift ended. I determined that the signal was encrypted, and I consulted with Garak to determine the encryption pattern. Polonski's initial hunch was correct. It was a Federation encryption pattern. However, we couldn't decode it due to extensive interference and corruption of the signal. However, Garak and I were able to triangulate the signal. We reported the possible coordinates to the Major."

Johnson nodded. "That pretty much sums up just about everything with this situation. I've already approved a course change to intercept the signal. We're currently on course for it."

Kyle turned to Bogarde. "Wasn't there anything else that you could figure out from the signal?"

"Only that it was an older encryption pattern. It hasn't been in use for over seven years," the chief replied.

"Let's not forget that the signal is losing strength by the minute," Garak cautioned.

"Good point," Johnson said. "Will we reach it before it fades out permanently?"

Ruiz shook her head. "When I changed course, Bogarde told me that the signal was getting weaker. I calculated our ETA to his estimated last reception. We'll get there about 67 minutes after the signal ends."

"I see," Johnson nodded. "Has the signal moved at all?"

"No, captain," Garak replied. "I've been monitoring it in Astrometrics. It hasn't moved from the estimated area we believe it to be in."

"Lends credence to the fact that it may be a ship in distress," Fonda remarked at last.

"Very true," Johnson tapped a finger on the table top. "Ruiz, what's our current ETA?"

"One hour and 31 minutes, sir," Ruiz reported.

"That's how much time we've got to prepare for what we may find," Johnson declared. "I want to be prepared for damage control, both ship and crew." Johnson looked at Fonda and Hartman. "I want to be prepared for a trap. In short, I want to be prepared for everything. Fonda, are we ready for combat with an unknown enemy?"

Fonda's lips pressed together tightly before she replied. "We will be in a hour and 20 minutes."

"Good," Johnson nodded. That was the only answer he expected from his able chief of engineering. He looked over at the Bajoran seated at the far end of the table. "Dr. Joh, I'd like you to learn as much about this area of space as you can. If I can't know what I'm getting into, at least I can know where I am going."

The Bajoran science officer nodded.

"Everyone else knows what they should be doing. Garak, keep an eye on the signal for us. If you can learn anything new, tell us ASAP."

"I will certainly do that, captain," Garak nodded solemnly.

"Dismissed," Johnson said as he stood up. "Get to work." He walked over to Hartman, putting a restraining hand on the doctor's shoulder. "Hold on for a moment," he told Hartman, as the others filed out of the conference lounge.

"What is it?" Hartman asked.

"When Admiral Nechayev informed me of Dr. McCoy's death, she told me that the doctor composed a message for you before he died. I have it on file. You can access it anytime you want."

"Ah, I see. Thanks, Tom," Hartman nodded. "Can I go now?"

"Sure. You okay?"

"Yeah, I'm fine." Hartman looked out the windows. "Just odd to think about it." He shrugged. "It had to happen sooner or later."

"That's true." Johnson paused for a moment. Then he said, "I'll let you get back to work."

"All right." Hartman and Johnson walked out of the conference room, and Johnson headed to his seat.

"We've lost the signal," Bogarde declared.

Johnson twisted in his seat to look back at the security chief. "For good, or temporarily?"

"I think for good. Our last contact was very faint. I had to boost sensors to 115% to even read it."

"I see. Ruiz, is the ETA you mentioned earlier still accurate?"

"Yes, sir. We'll be approaching the signal zone in 66 minutes now," Ruiz said.

"Okay." Johnson leaned over, pressing on his chair's armrest console. "Johnson to Engineering. Fonda, repair status report?"

"Phasers and Torpedo systems all online at specified efficiency levels. Shield systems powered up. The Phaser Cannon is still offline, though. We still have to complete power relay repairs on Deck 10."

"That's fine. We still should be able to ~~face~~ down anything that might crop up."

"That's my belief, sir," Fonda said back.

"Good. I'm going to order an increase in speed, so we'll arrive, hmm twenty minutes earlier than reported. Just letting you know."

"Thank you sir. I'll prioritize repair efforts accordingly."

"Johnson out." He sat up and looked at the helm. "Increase speed to Warp Factor 8."

"Aye, sir," Ensign LeAnn reported back. "Warp Factor 8."

The comm system chimed. "*Joh Emmeril to Captain Johnson.*"

Johnson glanced upwards slightly. "Johnson here. What is it, doctor?"

"The report you requested on No Man's Land I've prepared. Meet me in Stellar Cartography."

"I'm on my way," Johnson said, already getting out of his chair. He glanced at Ironside. "You have the bridge."

"Aye sir." Ironside nodded as he moved out from the OPS cubicle to the command seat.

A quick turbolift ride took Johnson to the deck where the large Stellar Cartography room was located. Johnson stepped into the darkened room. The Stellar Cartography room was basically a nearly spherical holodeck with a long plank suspended in the center. This room was one of the most essential rooms on the *Courageous*. The Stellar Cartography department was responsible for mapping the previously unexplored Borderlands.

Since they weren't in the Borderlands, the department worked at half strength. Johnson could see that only a few scientists, including the scientist on loan from the Bajoran Militia, Joh Emmeril, were in the room. Johnson glanced at the curved walls. The holo-emitters were projecting mostly dark black space. Johnson could only count about six stars in the entire map projection. Joh hadn't been kidding when she had told him that No Man's Land was a vast wasteland.

"Doctor," he nodded to the waiting scientist. "Do you have anything new to report?"

"No, captain," Joh replied, shaking her head slightly. Her long braided ponytail wagged slightly. Even in the dim light of the map room, Johnson could see the considerable streaks of gray through Joh's light brown hair. "As I've already informed you, this area of space is very empty. I have tied in long range sensors to scan the sector where the signal is thought to originate from." She waved her hand. "This is what sensors report back."

"A whole lot of nothing, huh?" Johnson remarked.

"If you insist on putting it in imprecise terms, yes."

Johnson wanted to roll his eyes at her straitlaced response. He resisted the impulse, not wanting to disrespect this eminent scientist. "So, you can't offer us any helpful information regarding on what we might encounter?"

"There is none to be gathered, sir."

"I see. We'll be arriving at the location within forty minutes. You might want to be on hand on the bridge."

"I shall be there," Joh nodded once. "There is one other thing."

"Yes?"

"I have proved one of the theories about No Man's Land."

"What's that?"

"Warp travel speed is increased, due to the low gravitational fields in this area of space."

"Ah, that's because there's less stars around?"

"Correct, sir."

"How much faster?" Johnson asked, curious.

"There is a .000000032 increase."

"Ah," Johnson nodded. "Well, make a report of that, and we' ll send it along back to Starfleet Headquarters on our next communications dump."

"I have already done so."

"Okay, good." Johnson crossed his arms and leaned against the railing that enclosed the workstations. "You know, doctor, we haven' t talked much in the last few months since we began. How have you been doing?"

"Fine."

"Good. How have you been getting along with the rest of the regular Starfleet crew? This is a kind of a new situation, having a member of the Bajoran Militia serving as our science officer. How do you think that' s working out?"

Joh sighed impatiently. "The situation is fine. The science department acknowledges my authority and follows my orders. There are no problems with my integration with the Starfleet crew. I merely do my job. They merely do their job. That is all is required."

"Made any friends?"

"Excuse me?" Joh looked at Johnson.

"Friends? Acquaintances? Relationships?"

"No. I was not aware I had to."

Johnson uncrossed his arms, and stood up straight. "No, it' s not required. However, it' s a long journey. Five years is a long time to be alone."

"No it' s not," Joh said quietly. "Now if there' s nothing else, I shall continue monitoring ~~son~~ readings from here. I shall be on the bridge when you arrive."

She turned away and walked towards an unused console, making it clear she wanted no further conversation. Johnson sighed, and walked along the plank to the exit. He made an mental note to talk to Raven about Dr. Joh. His friend was in charge of the Bajoran contingent aboard the *Courageous*, so he should know a little about her.

"Have you ever seen anything so boring?" LeAnn asked Ruiz as they sat at the *Courageous'* helm.

"Yeah," Ruiz nodded, looking at the empty view screen. "The mineral run between Jupiter and Alpha Centauri V. That was my father' s regular route. It' s a totally mindless job. Hell, even a Denebian slime devil could have done it."

"Ah," LeAnn nodded.

"Yeah. I rode along with him on that haul often. It' s very boring. In fact, that' s one major reason why I decided to enter Starfleet Academy. I didn' t want to just fly freighters," Ruiz explained.

"Yeah, I know. You mentioned that before. I remember," LeAnn nodded.

"At least it' s a cakewalk," Ruiz shrugged. "So, when do you want to check out McCoy' s funeral?"

"Oh, I don' t know..." LeAnn mused. "Let' s just see what happens when we get there."

"Okay, no problem," Ruiz nodded. "Have you ever met him?"

"Met who?"

"Doctor McCoy?"

LeAnn shook her head. "No, I never did."

"That' s a shame. He used to make speeches once a year at the Academy, until like five years ago, when he stopped. Probably health problems."

"Oh yeah. Did you hear him?"

"Yeah I was in the Academy before that. I heard one of his last speeches. He was very charming and interesting. Hard to believe he was over a hundred years old at that time," Ruiz said.

"You know, I wonder if Dr. Hartman knew Dr. McCoy," LeAnn mused.

Ruiz shrugged, frowning. "Who knows? Maybe. There' s thousands of doctors from Starfleet Medical, not all of them knew Dr. McCoy personally. We could ask him sometime."

"Yeah, we could," LeAnn agreed.

The turbolift door opened, and the two of them turned to glance at the newcomer. Captain Johnson walked down to the command seat. Ironsides stood, and walked over to OPS, as was his custom.

Johnson settled into his seat, and glanced at his armrest consoles, checking the current ship' s status. He

looked up. "So, Ruiz, have you noticed that we're traveling a little faster than normal?"

"Yes, sir. It's because of the low number of stars in this area of space," Ruiz nodded.

"Ah. I just learned that from Dr. Joh," Johnson said.

"Yeah. She contacted me for navigational data a while ago," Ruiz commented. She glanced at her console. "Hmm. That's odd."

"What is?" Johnson asked.

"I'm not showing the increase in speed now," Ruiz said. "I'm actually showing a decrease."

"Could something be affecting our speed?" Johnson inquired.

LeAnn shook her head. "No, sir. Everything's running in near peak condition. I've already checked with Engineering just now. We're getting the same engine readings."

"It has to be a gravitational influence," Ruiz said. "But sensors show nothing that should be affecting the gravitational fields of this sector of space."

"Ironsides," Johnson looked over at the major. "Are you looking into this?"

"I'm on it, sir," Ironsides nodded, already peering over his OPS consoles.

Johnson tapped his chair's armrest. "Bridge to Dr. Joh."

"Yes, bridge?" Joh asked.

"Remember that speed increase you told me about? We can't find it now. We're trying to account for the loss."

"That shouldn't be," Joh said over the comm system. "I have analyzed our route and there is nothing that should affect us. Perhaps it is mechanical? Have you checked with Engineering?"

"Ensign LeAnn has already compared her readings to Engineering. It's an outside influence," Johnson stated.

"I shall look into it further," Joh said. "Joh out."

Johnson clenched his fist, and tapped his knuckles lightly on his chair's armrest. An unknown situation didn't need any more mystery, but that's what was happening.

Joh Emmeril walked onto the bridge approximately fifteen minutes later. Johnson glanced up at her. He gestured to the empty seat to his left hand. "You can sit."

She nodded and walked around to the seat from the turbolift. She sat down, sitting on the edge of the seat. "I am sorry that I have no conclusive data to give to you. I have checked and re-checked sensors. All I can tell you is that there is something where sensors say there is nothing."

"And we're coming right up to that something right?" Johnson asked.

"Yes, captain."

"Well," Johnson sighed, "since you're here, you can stay and see it as we did."

"That was my intention," Joh said, standing up. She looked at him, waiting politely. He nodded, letting her go. She walked over to the science station that was among the aft bridge stations and sat down.

As the *Courageous* approached the signal's location, different stations began getting various odd readings. Joh oversaw all these readings, and tried to unite them to get a better understanding of what they were approaching. And finally the ship arrived within visual range.

Johnson and the others looked upon the view screen with expectation as the ship dropped out of warp near the signal. The view screen showed only sparse blackness. Johnson called out, "Maximum magnification."

The view screen complied, now showing a splash of dark color in the center of the screen. It grew larger as the ship flew towards it. On a few occasions, Johnson thought he saw flashes of light from within the color.

He didn't bother asking Joh or Ironsides what it was, because it was clear they were busy examining their sensor readings. As they got closer, Johnson could see it more clearly. It seemed to be a huge gaseous phenomenon, primarily dark blue and green. There indeed were flashes of light, which reminded Johnson of lightning in a rainstorm. In fact, the phenomenon reminded Johnson of a giant thundercloud. It constantly changed shape, roiling around.

"All stop," Johnson ordered, just as the view screen was filled with the dark inky colored 'storm.'

"Aye, sir. All stop," Ensign LeAnn reported back.

"All right, Dr. Joh. You've had a few minutes to check it out. What is it?"

Joh stood up and walked over to the tactical station that was between the aft stations and the command seats. "It seems to be a very unusual nebula."

"And why haven't we picked it up earlier?"

"It's hard to tell, but I think it's operating on an extra-dimensional level. The normal indicators that our sensors would be receiving are in fact being emitted in a different dimension."

"Sir, the ship must be within that nebula," Ironsides said. "Perhaps that accounts for the erratic signal, and the sporadic contacts."

"That is a plausible hypothesis," Joh remarked.

"I see. So, why can we see it now? Is it some kind of wormhole?"

"The closer we are, the easier we can pick up the standard emissions," Joh explained. "As for it being a wormhole, no it is not. It merely is an unstable nebula, interacting strangely with the layers of space here."

"I see. Well, looks like we'll have to go inside if we want to find the source of this signal," Johnson sighed.

"I have to caution you, captain, that once we enter the nebula, we'll be subject to extreme electromagnetic fields and radiation. Sensors will be severely compromised."

"How bad?"

Joh turned to glance at the science station's readout. "Sensors will be functioning at under 15% strength."

"That's very severe, all right," Johnson mused. "Well, see if you can boost sensors, cut through some of this interference?"

"I shall begin working on possible solutions," Joh nodded.

"All right." Johnson turned to look at the nebula undulating on the view screen. "Until then, we'll just have to feel our way through. Helm, take us in at one-eighth impulse. Bogarde, find us that signal."

Chapter 3

"Approaching the perimeter of the nebula, sir," LeAnn declared. "One-eighth impulse."

"Shields up," Johnson ordered. "Put us on yellow alert."

"Aye, sir," Bogarde said.

A ship-wide announcement went over the comm system, declaring the yellow alert. Unused consoles flashed yellow as a visual cue. Johnson's mouth firmed into a frown as he watched the nebula slowly engulf the view screen. Flashes of light were seen from within the nebula.

"We're inside now," LeAnn announced. Almost immediately, Johnson could feel something was wrong. The hairs on the back of his neck stood up. He felt goose bumps spring up over his skin. He could detect a slight vibration in the ship.

"What's going on?" he asked aloud.

"I believe the EM waves are creating a disharmonic vibration with our shields," Joh called out.

"What can we do to get rid of it? I don't like it," Johnson said.

"We can modify our shield frequencies, but I doubt it'll have any effect. There are far too many wavelengths being emitted out there to have a single shield harmonic that will not react negatively to them all."

Johnson sighed, and gritted his teeth. "Fine. As long as it isn't dangerous."

"It's not, sir," Joh confirmed. "Merely a matter of discomfort."

Johnson nodded silently. His skin was crawling now. Looking at the others crew, Johnson could tell they were feeling the same thing as well. "How much further to the nearest possible signal location?"

"About 40,000 kilometers," Ruiz reported back.

"Let's be careful here," said Johnson. He looked at the view screen. It was getting darker by the second. "Mister Bogarde, can you detect any sign of a ship?"

"No, sir. I can barely read anything in this soup. Hell, sir, I can barely detect our own ship."

"Acknowledged, Chief. Acknowledged," Johnson nodded slowly. "I can't see anything. Put the search lights on, sweep the area before us."

At Johnson's command, several bright points of light on the rim of the *Courageous*' saucer lit up. The directional searchlights made some slight headway in piercing the murky nebula. "Damn," Johnson silently cursed. Visibility was still extremely low, in spite of the added light.

"Sir, we're almost at the location," Ruiz called out. "14,000 clicks and closing...10,000 clicks..."

"Bogarde, see anything? Anyone?" Johnson asked.

"Nothing here," Bogarde said.

"Nothing on my sensors either," Ironsides reported from OPS.

"Ensign, go to all stop when we get there."

"Aye, sir. Coming to all stop," LeAnn declared.

"Anything yet?" Johnson inquired.

"No, sir," Bogarde answered back.

"Okay. Let' s keep looking," Johnson nodded. "LeAnn, back to oneighth impulse."

"Aye sir."

Long minutes passed as the *Courageous* sliced through the dark purple and blue haze of the nebula. Johnson was slowly becoming accustomed to the flashes of light that appeared on the view screen. However, his skin continued to crawl at the irritating faint vibration.

"Coming up on the next probable location," Ruiz called out. "9,000 clicks and closing."

Johnson turned around in his seat to look at Bogarde.

"Nothing, sir," Bogarde said.

"Do you want me to go to all stop?" LeAnn asked, looking at the view screen.

"No, ensign. Change course to the next probable location, and go from there," Johnson answered back.

"Aye sir. Changing course."

Johnson let out a long and slow sign, and leaned back in his seat. He crossed his legs and watched the view screen. Yet another flash of light played across the screen. Johnson blinked his eyes to get rid of the afterimage. He looked at the screen again as his vision readjusted. "What' s that?" he asked.

"Hmm?" LeAnn asked.

Johnson uncrossed his legs and leaned forward. He thought he saw a dark spot, but he couldn' t find it anymore. "Uh, nothing. Thought I saw something. Just a trick of light, I--" The captain didn' t get to finish his sentence due to a series of loud alarms emanating from several different stations.

Johnson knew what those meant. The computer announced it anyway, "Proximity alert, proximity alert!"

Johnson didn't have to give his helmsmen orders. Ruiz and LeAnn were already moving the *Courageous* away from the unidentified object. The inertial dampers strained as LeAnn put the ship in a rolling bank. Johnson gripped his armrests as he fixed his eyes on the view screen. The searchlight swept over the gray hull of a starship that was dangerously close.

He was unable to read any of the markings since they spun on the view screen as LeAnn attempted to avoid a direct collision. The loud proximity alert alarms stopped screeching, as the ship' s motion came to a stop. Johnson panted as he looked at the image on the view screen. He could discern a ship' s saucer, although it was the underbelly. Johnson twisted his head around to look at the view screen upside-down. "NX-70637," he read aloud. "Computer, flip image vertically, and reverse."

The image righted itself, and Johnson was able to read the ship' s registry number. Johnson tapped his armrest console, and a directional pad appeared on the flat display. He ran his thumb over it, to move a searchlight across the other ship' s saucer. *U.S.S. Galaxy?*

"What? The *U.S.S Galaxy?*" Ruiz murmured.

"Thought it was destroyed," LeAnn said.

"Damn, if that don' t beat all..." Bogarde whispered.

The entire bridge stared at the name and registry number currently in the spotlight on the view screen. Johnson' s brow furrowed as he looked at the ship. "Well," he said, sitting straight up. He looked around the bridge at the amazed and confused faces on his crew. "Well, quit your gawking, people. We came here for a reason. Bogarde, I assume this is the ship that sent the signal we detected earlier."

"I' d have to say so, sir. Its location corresponds with one of the probables that Garak and I triangulated," Bogarde reported back.

"Any life signs?"

"Can' t tell," the security chief replied.

"Power signs?"

"Can' t tell."

"Atmosphere on the ship?"

"Can' t tell."

"Anything you can tell me?"

"Just that I didn' t expect this at all."

"You and me both, Chief," Johnson smiled. He turned to look at Ironsides. "Major, assemble an away team. I don' t know what the hell is going on so I' d like for you to select a squad of Marines and lead them."

"Yes, sir," Ironsides nodded.

"Suit them up in space gear, and take a runabout over there. I assume we can't use transporters?"

Johnson turned to glance at Joh, still at her science station. "Doctor?"

"You are correct, sir. I would recommend against using transporters within this nebula."

"Okay," Johnson nodded. He turned to look at Ironsides. "Take a runabout over there. Use extreme caution. Find out the status of the ship, and report back to me."

"Yes, sir." Ironsides nodded and let an ensign relieve him at OPS. He walked over to the turbolift, on his way to the Marine decks on the ship.

Johnson looked at the view screen again. He thumbed the controls to sweep the hull of the *Galaxy*. Sections of the hull were buckled, and in a few places, holes were visible.

LeAnn asked, "What's that? Battle damage?"

Ruiz shook her head. "No, it's not. It's structural damage. See, there are no carbon scoring marks around the hull breaches. That would show weapons were involved. There are none at all."

"I see," LeAnn nodded. "But what caused all that structural damage?"

"I don't know," Ruiz shrugged.

"But we're going to find out," Johnson said from behind the two helmsmen.

Chapter 4

In Shuttlebay Two, a group of Starfleet Marines were busy suiting up in their Combat Extra-Vehicular Activity suits. The major had called down and chosen an away team to accompany him to the other ship. He ordered the away team to suit up in their CEVA suits. However, he neglected to mention where they were going.

Consequently, that was the topic of conversation in the suit-up area. "You know, I heard that we nearly hit the other ship," said one of Marines, Lieutenant Antonio Roberts. He shook his head, brushing back dark black hair. "I mean, who's flying this thing anyway?"

"I heard from somebody who heard it from one of the bridge crew that the other ship's name is the *U.S.S. Galaxy*," Private Timothy Longton said.

"What?"

"That's what I heard."

"No way!"

"Gotta be kidding me!"

The Marines all reacted in various degrees of amazement and disbelief.

Everyone knew of the story of the ill-fated *Galaxy*. It had set out on a test flight, and was never heard from. It was the most famous lost ship in Starfleet, second only to the *U.S.S. Voyager*.

The Marines started talking about the possibilities they might face. They didn't notice Major Ironsides entering the shuttlebay. He stood watching the group, listening to their speculations. He put his fists on his hips and cleared his throat.

The Marines immediately ceased talking and turned to look at the major.

"Fall in!" Ironsides ordered.

The group assembled into a straight line.

"At ease," Ironsides nodded once. The Marines relaxed their muscles. "Yes, it's the *U.S.S. Galaxy* out there, as near as we can tell. Sensors are mostly useless, so we've got to make a visual inspection. And since this damn nebula is screwing with everything, transporters are no go. We'll be taking the runabout *Fuji*."

"Sir?"

"Yes, Private Lugosy?" Ironsides looked at the young tall Andorian.

"Are there signs of survivors?" Lugosy asked.

"Unknown. You'll have to keep your eyes peeled, and pray the tricorders work in this soup," Ironsides said. "Anything else?"

When none of the Marines moved to ask a question, Ironsides nodded. "All right then. Longton, you're helming the *Fuji*."

The fair haired Marine nodded and walked over to the *Everest*-class runabout.

"Roberts, distribute the rifles," Ironsides ordered the black haired lieutenant. Roberts walked to the shuttlebay's special armory closet.

"Pennywise, get everyone a tricorder. Everyone else, board the *Fuji*."

Ironsides turned to his own locker. He tapped in his personal code, and the locker opened to reveal his CEVA suit. He snapped the pants on over his black trousers. Then he pulled on the armored top half. He easily snapped the fasteners in place. He pulled the suit's gauntlets off the top shelf in his locker, and locked them in place on his suit's arms. Finally, he lowered the suit's helmet and locked it into place.

That final lock activated the suit's interior systems. Several indicator lights began blinking on the suit's front, and also on the suit's left gauntlet. Ironsides raised his left arm to glance at the indicator lights to verify everything was running properly. He tapped several controls to turn off the internal air circulation. He didn't need it, since he could breathe the external atmosphere at the moment.

Ironsides walked to the *Fuji*, which was already moved into launch position. Lieutenant Roberts was waiting outside the runabout's open hatchway, holding two rifles, waiting for Ironsides.

The major passed by a large metallic partition which separated the main launch pad from the various computer stations and maintenance bays. He saw his own reflection.

The sight of himself in the gray armored CEVA suit brought a familiar thought to his mind. In the suit, he looked invincible, strong enough to take on entire battalions of Jem' Hadar soldiers. That was the single biggest drawback to the CEVA suit, Ironsides had always said. It projected a false self-image. He had seen too many young Marines wade into a hail of weapons fire, thinking the suit would protect them. Their suits never did.

Ironsides stepped up to the runabout's hatchway. He took the proffered phaser rifle, nodding to Roberts. The lieutenant entered first, and Ironsides entered next, closing the hatchway behind him. He stood, glancing at his away team standing in the cockpit. He knew these Marines were better disciplined. They knew the strengths and weaknesses of their CEVA suits. And if one of them pulled a boneheaded stunt and somehow survived it, Ironsides' wrath would make them regret they were even born.

"Shuttlebay Control to Runabout *Fuji*, you are cleared to depart," Longton heard over the comm system.

"Acknowledged, Control. Runabout *Fuji* departing now," Longton replied. He ran his ungloved hands over the pilot controls. His helmet sat on the floor next to his boots. The runabout lifted off the landing deck and hovered close to the already open shuttlebay door. Warning klaxons were going off in the shuttlebay, informing the shuttlebay personnel that the forcefield was about to drop to permit departure.

Normally, the forcefield was permeable, allowing shuttlecraft to enter and depart without dropping the energy field. However, inside the unpredictable, ever-changing circumstances of the nebula, the shuttlebay personnel erred on the side of caution.

The runabout exited the shuttlebay, and the forcefield immediately went up behind them. Almost immediately, a wave of static rushed over the runabout, jarring the craft and the passengers.

"Crikey! That's a creepy feeling! Worse than when we first went in," Sergeant Victoria Pennywise muttered audibly.

"Longton, more power to the shields," Ironsides calmly ordered. "It's just the effects of the nebula. Now that we're outside of the ship, it's going to hit us harder. Suck it up, and get used to it."

Pennywise nodded and drew in a deep breath. She lifted her phaser to check its charge and settings, busying herself.

Ironsides walked up to the front to stand behind Longton. He looked out the cockpit windows, to the spotlighted *Galaxy*. Longton had already maneuvered the runabout past the saucer of the *Courageous*. The runabout neared the other ship. Longton activated the runabout's own small lights to sweep over the hull.

Ironsides looked at the *Galaxy*'s hull, viewing the damage closer. He shook his head, wondering at what could have happened in the ship's flight to do that.

"Do you see that?" Ironsides leaned next to Longton, at the helm. He pointed with his gloved hand to one of the three warp nacelles on the *Galaxy*.

Longton looked up from his consoles, and studied the starboard nacelle that Ironsides was indicating. "Yeah, looks damaged."

"My thoughts. But this kind of damage doesn't fit in with the rest of the hull damage. It looks more like the effects of a collision."

Alongside the darkened nacelle, there was a slight indentation, and Ironsides could see a large breach in the housing of the warp field coils that lined the interior of the nacelle. Even the blue warp engine field grill was cracked. Above and below the housing, he saw long striated marks. Longton had seen them as well.

"Another ship perhaps?" Longton looked back down at his console, keeping the runabout clear of the *Galaxy*.

"Yeah, that's what it looks like to me. See those scrape marks? Still, I don't see another ship nearby."

"Maybe it happened before they got in this nebula."

Ironsides shook his head. "No, it couldn't have. That kind of damage would force the *Galaxy* to stop and make repairs. They wouldn't be able to go to warp, unless they took that nacelle offline. Otherwise they'd be risking contaminating the warp drive reaction."

"Oh, that wouldn't be good," Longton looked up at Ironsides.

"No, Private, it wouldn't be. The *Galaxy* probably wouldn't be here at all for us to find. Continue your approach."

Longton guided the runabout around the drifting ship, turning the craft 180 degrees to face the rear slope of the *Galaxy*. Even through the thick haze of the nebula, Ironsides could tell that all the shuttlebays were closed up. Longton took the runabout in close to the main shuttlebay door. He ran his fingers over the comm console.

"Sir, I can't get the shuttlebay door open, he said to Ironsides.

"Why not? Are you having communications interference or are their shuttlebays deactivated?" Ironsides prompted.

"Unknown," Longton answered.

The major knew this might happen. That was why he selected the *Fuji* specifically. Ironsides tapped his suit's comm system. "Marine One to No Name City. We can't enter via the *Galaxy*'s shuttlebays. We're going to dock at one of the side ports. Over."

"No Name City to Marine One, acknowledged. Be aware that communications are disrupted by EM interference. Over."

Ironsides frowned. "Understood. Repeat, I understand that there is communications interference. Over."

"Good. We're working on boosting communication power. Proceed with docking. Over."

"Proceeding with docking," Ironsides replied. "Marine One out." He glanced at Longton. "Find a suitable port. Try the sail underneath the saucer. A midships, deck 25 if memory serves."

"Aye, sir."

The runabout glided down the slope of the *Galaxy*, slowly moving around to the side. The runabout's lights swept over the hull as Longton searched for the docking port. The murky nebula made it very difficult to see clearly. Suddenly a bright wash of light swept over the runabout and the ship's hull.

Ironsides blinked, startled. He saw the shape of the light, and realized it was a spotlight from the *Courageous*. The ship must have moved in position to watch the *Fuji*.

"Name City to Marine One. Better?" Ironsides could barely tell it was Johnson asking the question.

"Yes, sir. Much better," Ironsides nodded, smiling. "We're docking right now, sir."

Longton brought the runabout alongside the now visible docking port. He ran a hand over another console. The runabout began rumbling, as its specialized docking collar extended to latch onto the *Galaxy*'s docking port.

A moment later, Longton reported, "Docked now. You can open the hatch, sir."

"Very good private. Suit up, and grab your weapon," Ironsides ordered. "No Name City, we have successfully docked. We're about to enter the docking airlock. I will make communications contact in thirty minutes for a status report."

"Acknowledged, Marine One. No Name City out," Johnson replied. He sighed, looking thoughtfully at the hazy image of the *Fuji* on the bridge's view screen.

A soft grunt behind him made Johnson twist in his seat to look at Bogarde. "Problem, Mr. Bogarde?"

Bogarde shook his head. "No, sir. Just thinking back to some of the missions I've been on with the Major."

"Oh?" Johnson smiled. "Miss it? Wish you were there with him?"

"Oh ho, no sir," Bogarde shook his head exaggeratedly. "Let the young guys go looking for trouble and get killed, not me."

Johnson frowned suddenly. "Let's hope that there's no one gets killed here."

"Yeah," Bogarde nodded.

Johnson turned around in the opposite direction, looking at Joh at the science station. "Doctor Joh, any luck with cutting through this sensor interference?"

"I regret to report no success," Joh replied. "However, I have thought of one other thing to try. It will take a great deal of time, but it might work."

"Oh? What's that?"

"We could scan for one thing at a time. I believe that given enough time, I can find a frequency that will be able to pick up x-ray emissions. Then I would find a different frequency that would be able to pick up electrical activity. The process continues like that."

Johnson frowned. "If that's what you think we should do, then go to it. Find the frequencies that will provide us with the most vital information first- life sign information, radiation information, anything that can tell us what happened to the *Galaxy*. Call up the whole science department, bring in personnel from Stellar Cartography and Astrometrics if you need the manpower. I want information now."

"Aye, sir," Joh nodded. She stood up. "I shall go begin the work." She walked briskly over to the nearest turbolift, and left the bridge.

Johnson crossed his legs and tapped his boot.

LeAnn turned to look at Johnson. "Captain, why don't we just tractor the *Galaxy* out of the nebula? Even if a tractor lock won't work here we could attach grapples to tow it."

Johnson smiled slightly. "I had those things in mind as well. However, I wanted to check the *Galaxy* out first before attempting to move it. For all I know, towing it would tear the ship in half. Or after going to all the trouble of towing it, we find out we could have simply turned on the impulse engines and flew the ship out under its own power."

Johnson uncrossed his legs and leaned forward, clasping his hands together. "Doctor Hartman, our chief medical officer, is a close friend of mine. He's also very skilled in forensic science. Hanging around him, I've learned a few tricks of the trade, regarding investigating mysteries.

"What we have here is the scene of a mystery. One of the first rules of investigating a scene is to not disturb anything. A lot can be learned by looking at the way things are. That's what Ironsides is doing. He's being our eyes and ears on the *Galaxy*."

Johnson sat back. "I know, I'm sounding a little dramatic here. But you can't blame me for that. After all, we have the *U.S.S. Galaxy*, missing for over seven years, out here in the middle of nowhere. I have to consider all the possibilities here. It could be just as simple as the ship has lost power. Then we'll just help the crew restore power. A simple rescue mission. Or the crew may have abandoned ship. In which case, we'd need to investigate for any clues where they might have gone. Or worst case scenario, everyone's dead." Johnson shrugged.

LeAnn nodded slowly. "You're right, sir. I hadn't thought through all the possibilities."

Johnson smiled warmly. "When you've got four gold pips on your collar, you've got to think things through. You'll do the same when you get up to four pips."

LeAnn nodded, smiling. "Yes, sir." She turned to focus on her duties.

Ruiz moved her elbow, trying to get LeAnn's attention. LeAnn glanced at the lieutenant. Ruiz smiled at LeAnn and winked at her.

LeAnn smiled in response, and looked back at her console.

"Testing, one...two...three. Do you read me?" Ironsides spoke into his helmet's mic.

"I read you, sir," Roberts' voice carried through. Slight static tinged his words.

"I read you. Getting a little bit of fuzz in here too," Ironsides commented. "Guess it's probably because the ship's exposed to the elements." Ironsides shook his head and gripped his rifle.

When they had opened the inner airlock to the *Galaxy*, they found that much of the gases from out in the nebula had seeped into the ship through the various hull breaches. A thick carpet of dark purple gases rolled across the decks. With each step Ironsides took, gas swirled around his dark gray boots.

"Just like the foggy mornings back home at Ireland," Private Mickey O'Halloran had remarked. Ironsides wasn't inclined to disagree with the comparison.

"Listen up, grunts. Communications is affected by the crap outside, so don't get too far away from each other," Ironsides told the others. "Split up in two teams of three. Roberts, take Pennywise and O'Halloran with you and look in Engineering. See if you can find what's powered up, and what's not powered up. The gravity net obviously is working, since we're all not floating around. Make life support and communications your priorities. Longton and Lugosy, you're with me. We're going to the main bridge, since it's nearby.

"Keep your weapons hot, but don't shoot first and ask questions later. One man goes on point. The next uses a tricorder to scan for any information. Last man brings up the rear. Everyone check in, and acknowledge."

Ironsides listened as each Marine stated his or her name and confirmed they heard his instructions.

"Good. We meet back here in exactly thirty minutes. Get going."

Roberts gestured with his rifle, indicating he'd take point. "Pennywise, you're on tricorder watch." He started off down the dark foggy corridor, turning his rifle's flashlight on. Pennywise pulled out her tricorder from a suit compartment. She flipped it open, the lights blinking in the gloom. She followed Roberts, and O'Halloran hefted his rifle and started after her, his flashlight sweeping the corridor. Within the minutes, they vanished down the dark tunnel.

Ironsides turned to look at his team, Longton and Lugosy. "Longton, start taking readings. Lugosy, you take point. Turbolift should be that way." Ironsides pointed with his rifle.

"Yes, sir," Lugosy nodded. He clicked his rifle's flashlight on and started walking in the direction Ironsides pointed in. Longton started taking readings, sweeping his tricorder around. Ironsides held his rifle up, glancing around the dark corridor.

The major walked slowly, and after a few moments, he spoke. "Longton, what are you getting?"

Longton held his tricorder up to see it better. "It's hard to say. There's still a lot of sensor interference, but as near as I can figure, no life signs. But then again, I can't read Roberts and the others. I can only read you, me, and Lugosy. I think the tricorder range has been severely compromised."

"Understood. What else can you tell me?"

"Well, I'm picking up traces of radiation and plasma. Not too dangerous if we stay in our suits." Longton kicked at the nebula carpeting the deck. "This stuff is just the nebula outside, in a small degree."

"I figured that, but good for a confirmation," Ironsides nodded. "Go on."

"I think I may be reading some pockets of atmosphere up ahead, on the next deck up."

"Enough to sustain life?"

"I can't get a read on the atmosphere mix. It could be mostly nitrogen and carbon dioxide for all I know. Sorry, sir."

Ironsides flexed his fingers on his rifle. "Well if there's some pockets of atmosphere, then that must mean the ship must have enough power for force fields. We may find the crew holed up in those places."

They approached a turbolift. Lugosy went up before the doors. They didn't move. He tapped on the door control panel next to the doors. The doors still didn't move.

"Jeffries tube," Ironsides simply said.

They started walking down another corridor looking for a Jeffries tube access way.

"You never know how good you have it until it's taken away from you," O'Halloran said as he climbed down the metal ladder in one of the *Galaxy's* Jeffries tubes. "I haven't climbed this much since Boot Camp."

Roberts looked up to O'Halloran. He smirked. "You haven't been in the Marines long. This is nothing compared to other ops we get sent out on. Right, Vicky?"

"That's right Tony," Pennywise said. "Remember the op where we had to climb the face of a volcano?"

"Oh crap, man. Almost two kilometers of climbing!" Roberts moaned. "Thank God that planet was only half norm grav."

"All right, I get your point, sirs," O'Halloran said. "Shutting up now."

Roberts smiled. He glanced at the deck number plate. "Ok, this is it." He got off the ladder and went up to the access way. He flipped open the lid to the recess that held the manual door opener. He pulled the circular magnet and attached it to the door. He twisted, but the door mechanism didn't move. Roberts sighed and shifted his grip, and twisted again, with more effort. The doors slid open, leading them into Main Engineering.

O'Halloran was already there, his weapon ready for anything behind the access way door. He waved to Roberts, who then stepped out into the small cubicle that led to Main Engineering.

Roberts looked around, and saw that the dark 'fog' wasn't present in Engineering. He took a few steps forward, looking around corners. He saw nothing. "All clear," he informed the others.

Pennywise and O'Halloran walked out to meet with Roberts in Engineering. "Fan out. See if you can find any bodies, any sign of the crew. If something bad went down on the ship, Engineering should have some bodies."

O'Halloran and Pennywise each picked a direction, and started walking. Roberts took the direction not taken. He waved his rifle, casting light to and fro. He sighed. He saw nothing still. Computer monitors blinked intermittently. He noticed that some monitors remained on, while others appeared to be losing power. He glanced at the stations, to make a note of what was working and what wasn't.

Everywhere he went, he saw signs of fire and power outages. Not for the first time, he wondered what happened to the *Galaxy* in all these years.

He made his way into the Chief Engineer' s office. His flashlight played over the desk. PADDs laid spread out on the desk top. He noticed a few of them were smashed. He also noticed that the desktop monitor was cracked.

He felt something crunch beneath his boot. He bent over, to see that he stepped onto a holopicture generator. He kneeled to pick it up. He tried activating it. A faint image flickered into view. The color was incomplete. He figured he damaged one of the mini-emitters. He could still make out the subject, a family. Probably the Chief Engineer' s family. Roberts set the holopicture back on the desk.

After taking one last glance, he left the office, and walked up to the oddly shaped warp core in the center of Engineering. He saw a Marine approach him. As the Marine got closer, he saw it was Pennywise, from her nameplate on her chest. "Find anything?"

"Nope. Not a trace of the crew," Pennywise reported back. "Just various forms of damage. No clue as to what caused the damage."

"Damn," Roberts sighed. "Where' s O' Halloran?"

"Didn' t see him," she replied. "O' Halloran, come in."

When the private didn' t reply, Roberts tried. "Private O' Halloran, report in now."

After another moment' s wait, Pennywise scanned the area with her tricorder. "I don' t see his life signs here. He must have wandered too far away. You heard what the major said. Communication range is bad here."

"I know, I know. Let' s go find him. Maybe he' s on the trail of something."

"I hope so, we haven' t seen any sign of the crew at all."

Roberts and Pennywise started off in the direction where they last saw O' Halloran had in. "They could be in the other designated shelters, like Ten-Forward," Roberts ventured.

"Which do you think would be worse- finding a ship missing her crew, or finding a ship with all of her crew dead?"

"Depends."

"On what?" Pennywise asked.

"On if anyone on the crew owed me money," Roberts quipped.

Pennywise groaned. She sighed and tried again. "O' Halloran, come in."

No response was forthcoming. They saw that they had searched all of the lower level of Engineering.

"Let' s check up there. Maybe he finished here and moved on up," Roberts said. He went to a nearby ladder and started climbing up, Pennywise followed him up. They split up, walking around the ramp that lined the circular warp core chamber. Finally they met again at the ladder.

"You think something' s happened to him?" Pennywise asked.

"Nah. He' d have fired his rifle for attention if he got in trouble. No, he' s just got himself wandered off. The major is going to rip him a new one when we find him. He had better find something worthwhile." Roberts raised his left arm, glancing at his indicators. "We have some time before we' re due to rendezvous at the airlock. Let' s start getting some of these systems working."

"All right," Pennywise nodded.

Chapter 5

"No sig of the crew," Johnson heard Ironsides say. He sighed in frustration.

"Bogarde, can' t you boost the signal any better than that?"

"I' ve diverted as much power as I can," Bogarde ran his palm over his smooth black scalp. "Any more than that, I' d have to take it out of other vital systems."

"Do that, Chief," Johnson said. "Take it out of weapons, they' re useless to us in here. If we fired phasers, the gases in this nebula would burn up and us along with it."

"Aye, sir," Bogarde nodded. He ran his strong fingers over the tactical console. "Okay. Communications is operating at 120 percent."

"Good. Let' s see if that works." Johnson turned his ear back to Ironsides' report.

"Did you copy that, No Name City? Over." Ironsides asked.

"Good work, Bogarde, much better!" Johnson smiled. The communication was clearer, though not crystal clear. Still, Johnson could understand Ironsides much easier. Ironsides repeated his question again.

Johnson answered back. "No, Marine One, we did not copy. Communications had to be re-adjusted. Repeat your report. Over."

"Ah, acknowledged," Ironsides said. He seemed to sound a little less frustrated as well. "We haven't found any sign of the crew yet. Our preliminary recon in Main Engineering and the Battle Bridge yield no answers. Tricorders are only slightly effective, and in a limited range. Communications is limited as well. We're missing one man. He's probably out of communications range, Over."

"I see, Marine One. What are your recommendations? Over."

"Recommend deploying more Marines. Send over a team of engineers, there's a lot of damage. Cause unknown. Over."

Johnson nodded. "Acknowledged. I'll take that under advisement. Are shuttlebays operational now? Over."

"Shuttlebays are not operational, yet. Over."

"Remain at the boat. We will send reinforcements. No Name City out."

Johnson pressed his seat's comm panel. "Johnson to Fonda. Assemble a damage control team, and send them to Shuttlebay Two."

"Should I include myself, sir?" Fonda asked.

"No. Remain aboard. I need you here. I want you to figure out a way to tow the *Galaxy* out of this nebula. Check with Dr. Joh, she's been working on ways to get through this interference."

"Aye, sir."

"Also, I need you to study up on the *Galaxy's* Transwarp Drive system. We probably will need to use that to send the *Galaxy* back to Earth. We should have information on transwarp propulsion in our archives."

"I have already been doing that, sir," Fonda replied.

Johnson smiled. He had always known Fonda to be a completist, going above and beyond her range of duties.

"Thought so," Johnson said. "At least we know it worked, since the ship made her way from the Sol System to here."

"And several points in between, if the reports of *Galaxy* sightings turn out to be true," Fonda added.

"Yes," Johnson nodded. "We'll be able to finally put that matter to rest, and return the ship home Bridge out."

As the damage control team arrived on the derelict *Galaxy*-class ship, armed with more lights, more tools, and portable power generators, they got a better look at the state of the ship. What they saw surprised and perplexed them. Lieutenant Hiroshi, the young man who was currently known as Chief Fonda's right hand man, directed the division of duties. He had a difficult time making out the faces of his fellow crew through their white and red-trimmed Extra-Vehicular Activity suits.

Fortunately, a nametag on their chestplates helped him identify them easily. "Harrigan, Liol, and Isowko, you guys make your way down to engineering. Lieutenant Isowko, you're in charge. There should be three Marines down there, but they can't do much without the power generators from the *Courageous*," Hiroshi ordered.

"Should be?" Liol asked, holding up his white gauntleted hand, for attention. The Tellarite grunted, punctuating his question.

Hiroshi spread his arms. "Last I heard, one of them got separated from the others. They're looking for him now."

Chief Harrigan laughed. "That's the Marines for you. Some of them aren't the brightest pulsars in the galaxy."

"Hey, watch it," a newcomer said. The others turned to look at Ensign LeAnn, making her way through the docking port hatch. "Some ex-Marines are regular Starfleet too."

"You were one?" Harrigan asked, looking skeptically at the petite half-Bajoran.

"No, not me. But Lieutenant Ruiz is ex-Marine. And Security Chief Bogarde."

"I had heard that spoken of Chief Bogarde," Lieutenant Isowko remarked. The Tilonii nodded within his helmet.

Harrigan cleared his throat. "Well, I was just joking. It's nothing nobody else hasn't said."

"I know," LeAnn said, "it's just that you never know who might have the stars and anchor on their service record."

"Stars and anchor?" Harrigan asked.

Lieutenant Leeyan turned to Harrigan. "That's the emblem of the branch of the Starfleet Marines," the

Native American prompted, raising her tattooed eyebrow.

"Oh. Point taken," Harrigan conceded.

"Okay, let's get back to the task at hand," Hiroshi declared. "Ensign LeAnn will be accompanying Leeyan, Andorra, and me up to the main bridge. The rest of the Marine recon team are meeting us up there, including Major Ironsides. Everyone got that?"

A chorus of nods and verbal acknowledgements reached Hiroshi. "Good. Oh, one more thing. Stay within a few meters of each other. Communications are severely hampered in this nebula, at least until we can get this ship's shields back up and running. Also, tricorder range is very limited as well. Be careful."

"I didn't know you cared," Andorra smirked, her dark violet mouth crinkling behind her faceplate.

Hiroshi shrugged. "Not particularly, but Chief Fonda will be mad at me if I lose one of you guys. She doesn't like training replacements."

The engineers laughed, knowing Fonda's surly reputation.

"All right, you guys. Get going. We've got to meet back here at the runabout *Rainier* in approximately an hour, since we need to report back to Engineering," Hiroshi concluded. He gestured for the divided teams to start walking.

Three EVA-suited people split off, their lights shining down the gloom of the corridor. Hiroshi joined his designated team, his boots falling in step with the others. He imagined the footsteps echoing throughout the corridor, although he knew it was only his imagination. There was no air present to conduct sound at all. *In space, no one can hear you walk*, he mused.

"Lieutenant Hiroshi?"

Hiroshi glanced at the person to his left, to Ensign LeAnn.

"I'm sorry, what?"

"I was just saying I don't see any bodies at all."

"It doesn't look too bad to me," Liol remarked as he shuffled down the corridor. His group headed down yet another dark and gloomy corridor. The only lights came from their suits' headlamps, and from Harrigan's handlamp as he waved it up and down the corridor, taking tricorder readings. The only color came from the thick carpeting of nebula gases that seeped in through the various hull breaches.

"I'm reading nothing at all, except for us," Harrigan announced. "I mean, I know that tricorder readings here are limited, but, where the hell is everyone? We haven't seen a single body, living or otherwise."

"Patience, Chief," Isowko said. "We don't know what exactly has happened here, and since the *Courageous*' sensors can't penetrate the nebula to scan the ship, we'll have to do a physical search. More Marines are on the way to do just that. Our job is to get some power going, and Lieutenant Hiroshi and the others will be able to access the ship's logs on the main bridge."

"What about the battle bridge?" Liol asked.

"I don't know what they've found," Isowko said.

"Hey, look at this!" Harrigan called out. He fixed a wide beam of light on a section of the wall. The additional light of his suit's headlamp brightened the spotlight.

The others turned to look, adding their headlamps' light. The brightly illuminated area revealed the tell-tale signs of weapons fire. Long black marks and small burnt holes marred the tan corridor panels.

"Well, something definitely happened here," Harrigan concluded. "Why didn't the Marines see this when they came through before?"

Isowko glanced down the corridor. "They came through to Engineering in a different direction. We docked on the other side of the ship. They didn't come through here. Chief, how recent is this?"

Harrigan raised the tricorder to his helmet. "I can't tell. This fog is interfering with my readings on the nadian residue. And look, no bodies."

Isowko glanced up and down the corridor. He saw no remains. "Guess the good guys won here."

"No bad guys' bodies here either," Harrigan remarked.

"I'll feel better when we meet up with the Marines," Isowko said. "Let's press on. It's only a few meters away. Come on."

They walked away from the battle scars, albeit uneasily. The engineers continued on in the darkness, until they came up to two tan interlocking doors. More battle scars crisscrossed the doors, blackening them.

The engineers looked at each other silently, then back at the doors. "Liol, you can put those generators down," Isowko said, setting down the generators he had been carrying himself.

The Tellarite grunted as he bent his knees, setting the generators down on the deck.

Isowko stepped to the side of the doors, feeling for an access panel. Finding the nook, he flipped up a panel, revealing a manual door release. He twisted the handle, but it wouldn't budge. He grunted with more effort, twisting. Still, the handle wouldn't move.

"Oh, here! Let me," Harrigan said, stepping up to Isowko. The lieutenant backed away and let the taller man try. Harrigan twisted with all his might, but to no avail.

Liol stepped up close to the door seam, snuffling as usual. "Oh, it looks like the doors have been welded shut."

Harrigan sighed and leaned against the wall. "No wonder."

Isowko looked at the seam. "It looks like it was done from the inside."

"A barricade?" Liol suggested.

"Maybe. How did the Marines get in anyway?" Isowko wondered. "Maybe we're close enough to get in touch with them. "Lieutenant Isowko to Marines, come in?"

"Who is iss? Ovr."

"Lieutenant Isowko, engineering. Who is this?"

"Sert Pennwi, over."

"I'm having a hard time reading you. We're outside of Main Engineering, right in front of the doors."

"We're in Main Engineering too," the voice replied, the static lessening. *"Are you by the main doors? Over."*

"Yes, we are. We can't get in, the doors are welded shut."

"They are?"

Isowko sighed. "Yes, it's done from the inside. You should see it on your side."

"Yes, I see it."

"How did you get in?" Isowko asked.

"Through the main Jeffries tube, just by the doors."

Isowko turned to the others. "We'll get in through that way. Marine, wait for us there, we'll come in that way."

"Acknowledged, over and out."

Harrigan led the way, guiding the others to the nearby Jeffries tube. With some clumsy maneuvering, they all managed to get the generators up the ladders to the horizontal tube. They shoved the generators ahead of them as they crawled across to the next vertical junction. Within moments, they were all in Main Engineering, greeted by two gray suited Marines.

"I'm Lieutenant Antonio Roberts, Starfleet Marine. This is Sergeant Pennywise," one of the Marines said.

"Lieutenant Isowko," the engineer introduced himself. "Ensign Liol, Chief Harrigan. Need some batteries?"

"Glad to see you, gladder to have them," Roberts said, smiling behind his clear faceplate.

"Where's the third one?" Harrigan asked.

Roberts glanced at Pennywise. "He's out of communications range. We can't find where he went, and we couldn't leave here before relief, which is you guys. We'll show you the damaged stations."

Roberts led the assemblage into the main chamber. Isowko looked at the warp core and the rectangular array connected to it. "So that's the infamous Transwarp Drive. Is it functional?"

"I don't know," Roberts answered back, but it doesn't look damaged at all, which I can't say for much of the other stations."

Liol spoke up. "Do you know why the doors were welded shut?"

Pennywise said, "No. We didn't even notice until I talked to Lieutenant Isowko. We were too busy sweeping the area for hostiles and survivors, then working on power restoration."

"Did you find any?" Harrigan asked.

"Any what?"

"Hostiles or survivors?"

"No," Pennywise replied.

Isowko glanced at the station that Roberts was standing by. "Okay, thanks. We can take over from here."

"Good luck," Roberts said. "The sergeant and I are going to search for Private O'Halloran. Perhaps he's found something."

"Or something's found him," Harrigan muttered under his breath. He shook his head, shaking away an impending sense of doom.

Isowko turned to Liol and Harrigan, and began giving orders.

Hiroshi looked up at Ironsides, looking at the barely visible Engineering station. "Power hasn't been restored yet, sir."

Ironsides sighed. "We'll just have to wait a few more minutes." He looked over at LeAnn. "Ensign, as soon as power is restored, check on the ship's flight status. Try to pull its flight log too. If we know where it's been, we might be able to figure out what's happened to it."

"Understood, sir," LeAnn nodded. She adjusted the seat to the flight station to fit her EVA suit.

The bridge was the same as most *Galaxy*-class ships. The color scheme was tan and brown, although that wasn't clearly visible in the darkness. However, the station layout was clearly visible. The curved tactical station, the trio of command seats in the center, and the OPS and Conn stations at the forefront, all were familiar to the boarding party.

"Major," Ensign Leveysan called out from her post at the life support systems. "I'm seeing some power coming in."

"Same here," Hiroshi reported, standing at Engineering. "I'm reading a slight increase in power. They've must hooked up at least two generators already."

"Good," Ironsides nodded within his suit. "First priorities, data retrieval. Ensign LeAnn, go to it. Andorra, start looking in the ship's logs, try to get the captain's logs and the Chief Engineer's logs."

Ensign Andorra nodded although it wasn't visible in the darkness. She turned and sat on the stool in front of Communications.

"I'm rerouting power to the computer core and the EPS conduits," Hiroshi declared. "You guys should be able to get through to the memory banks."

"Something's wrong," Andorra said, almost immediately.

"What?" Ironsides' eyes narrowed.

"I'm reading many blanks in the computer memory banks," Andorra reported.

"Accidental erasures? A result of whatever happened to this ship?" the major inquired.

"I think it was deliberate. It looks like the results of an emergency deletion, like we're supposed to do when we lose control of our ship without any hope of recovery."

"I'm well aware of these emergency protocols," Ironsides nodded. "That's good. That gives me more clue as to what happened here. Ensign LeAnn, can you retrieve any flight information?"

"I have no idea what to make of these files. Most of them are corrupted, partially deleted, but there looked to be terabytes upon terabytes of information in here. There's an computer warning indicating near memory overload."

"I'm even seeing some constellations I don't even recognize and star types that are un-cataloged. I don't know where to begin tracing the *Galaxy*'s flight path." LeAnn shrugged, pressing the menu buttons on the Conn station.

"Is there any information we can use?" Ironsides asked.

"I can't tell until we sort through all this information," LeAnn said. "I can't do it here. We'll need to transmit this to the *Courageous*."

"We can't do that until we find a better way to communicate with the *Courageous*," Hiroshi cautioned. "If we try to send this much information the way things are now, most of it would be corrupted, just like the distress signal was."

Ironsides hefted his phaser rifle. "Ensign Andorra, do you think you can get this ship's communications array up and running again? Having the power of both ships just might do it, couldn't it?"

Andorra nodded. "It's certainly worth a try, sir. I'll get right on it."

Ironsides walked over to Leveysan. "Ensign, don't worry about venting out the decks and pumping in new atmosphere. That power is better served to maintaining the artificial gravity, and trying to get the structural integrity field up."

"Aye, sir," Leveysan nodded, setting to work.

"Lieutenant," Ironsides turned his attention to Hiroshi. "Are the rest of the portable generators connected?"

"Yes, sir, they are."

"Good. See if you can get shields up."

"I don't think we have enough power for that."

"Something is better than nothing. Even a low energy shield might do some good."

"That's a sound idea," Hiroshi agreed. "I'll get right on it."

The wide beam of light pierced the blackness, illuminating nothing. Lieutenant Roberts sighed and shook his head, and turned around to look at Sergeant Pennywise. "Dead end," he told her.

"Damn," Pennywise muttered. "Where the hell did Longton go?"

"The major is NOT going to like this at all," Roberts said. "Do you think there's a connection between the sealed Jeffries tubes we've been finding and his disappearance?"

"Probably," Pennywise answered, "but then again, I'm a cynic."

"Someone got out of here after all the access ways were sealed. You were the first to notice that the Jeffries tube we used to get in was melted open."

Pennywise waved her dark gloved hand dismissively. "Anyone would have thought to check the doors to the Jeffries tube after we saw the main entrance was welded shut."

"That was a good call," Roberts said. "Hey, shine your rifle light down here for me. I'm going in here."

Pennywise raised her rifle, aiming it as she shone the lamp inset on it. Roberts cautiously turned the corner, aiming his rifle as he ventured forth. The faint colors of the gases swirled quietly around their thick black boots, as they crept down the darkened niche. The twin beams of light danced up and down the hallway, spotlighting the deck, walls, and ceiling panels.

"Wait," Roberts whispered. "What's that?" He froze his rifle lamp on a dark shape. Pennywise added her light to his. The strengthened beam showed the boot of a CEVA suit. They traced the light up to see the rest of the suit, standing awkwardly, facing away from them.

"Private Longton?" Pennywise asked.

"Tim?" Roberts added. He noticed the awkward look of how the other's arms were laying. They stuck out from his sides at an angle. Suddenly, the suit turned slightly, bobbing.

The two Marines raised their rifles defensively. Roberts' light now shone across the CEVA suit. It reflected off something just behind the CEVA suit. It looked like an hexagonal block of obsidian. The object shifted, and the suit shifted.

"What the fuck?" Roberts muttered, sweeping the corridor with his light. He saw more reflections in the darkness.

Suddenly, the CEVA suit toppled to the ground with a reverberating thud, causing the Marines to train their rifles on it. Roberts realized too late that the suit was only a diversion. He swept his rifle back to the black figure that rushed at him.

In the quick moments before he lost consciousness, he saw another oddly configured EVA suit, as black as space itself. Angles jutted from the shoulders, helmet, and boots. The last thing Roberts remembered were the fact that the gloves that reached out at him had only three fingers and an oddly placed thumb. The angled edges of the gloves' digits were sharp enough to crack his faceplate in one forceful thrust.

Liol backed away from his station "Did you feel something?" he asked the others.

Harrigan turned, so Liol could see his face. "No, why?" he asked. Nearby, Isowko walked over to Liol's side.

"I thought I felt a thud. Some vibrations," Liol replied.

Isowko turned, glancing around the dimly lit Engineering chamber. "Maybe the Marines are having problems with doors again. Just resume your work. If you feel it again, we'll go and look for them."

Liol nodded from within his helmet. "Yes, sir."

Isowko returned to the station in front of the warp core, where he had been working. He took one more glance around. The lights that they had brought online did very little to dispel the penetrating darkness that came from an apparent power failure. Even the elongated warp core that reached to the ceiling was dark, inoperative.

The whole experience was very surreal to him, as if it was merely a holodeck simulation. A blur of motion drew Isowko's oblong eyes to a corner of the room. "Lieutenant Roberts? Sergeant Pennywise?"

Another blur of motion on the opposite side of the Engineering chamber caused Isowko to spin in place. "Who's there?" His hand dropped to the phaser attached to his thigh. "Harrigan, Liol, I think-

The lieutenant stopped mid-sentence when he saw several black suited beings step forward towards him, with what seemed to be weapons aimed at them.

Isowko moved his hands away from his phaser and the console. He was about to introduce himself to the strangers, when they cut him down in weapons fire.

Harrigan and Liol barely had time to react before they saw their soon-to-be killers.

Within the moment, all three were lying on the deck.

"VenQu' Roq' Ragn, it is done as you ordered. The intruders in the Engine Room are eliminated." One of the obsidian suited figures stood before another dark suited figure.

"Good," Roq' Ragn nodded, pleased. "The craft remains in our possession. Did they undo our progress?"

"No, VenQu' . In fact, they seem to have helped. They added an influx of more energy to the ship' s power reserves," the subordinate reported.

"All the better. Have the Qo' Doths and the others return to the Engine Room to resume their study of the superspace conduit device."

"Yes, VenQu' ," the aide turned and walked away.

Another suited figure approached Roq' Ragn. He recognized the faint markings on the other' s chest, visible only through the polarized filters of his black faceplate. His voice activated the suit to suit communicator.

"Project Leader Qe' Doth Aung' Rama," he stood stiffly.

"I have discovered from the others that you had an armed engagement in the Engine Room," Aung' Rama hissed.

"Yes, Qe' Doth. I was just about to brief you."

"Roq' Ragn, why did you not consult me?"

"I felt it beneath your notice. The intruders, obviously more of the inferiors that populated this ship, were in a position to discover our work. As the chief VenQu' for our group, I could not allow them to compromise our secure position."

"Were all the inferiors killed?"

"Yes, Qe' Doth."

Aung' Rama turned from Roq' Ragn, exposing her back to him. That was a foolish move, the product of an inferior thought process. You should have taken at least one of the inferiors for interrogation."

"Interrogation is useless," Roq' Ragn told her. "None of the inferiors we interrogated would help us earlier. I have every confidence in our Qo' Doth and VenQo' team, that they will be able to reactivate the superspace conduit device, and control it. It is the product of an inferior species, therefore as Vendoth, we shall be able to decipher it."

Aung' Rama slid her eyes and turned back to face Roq' Ragn. "Confidence in Vendoth Superiority is a given. However, understanding is not the same as confidence."

"Understanding will come in time," Roq' Ragn countered.

"Yes, but do we have the time?" Aung' Rama stepped to within centimeters of Roq' Ragn. "You are aware of the same fact as I am that we are most likely not even in the right dimensional vibration?"

"Yes, Qe' Doth. I read the same findings from our Qi' Doth, as you did. I understand his calculations from the star patterns found on this craft."

"There may not even be Vendoth in this existence."

"The same concept has struck me as well," Roq' Ragn replied. "All the more incentive to use this superspace conduit device to return to our proper destination, as soon as is possible."

"Our Qo' Doths have salvaged all the data they can from this craft' s computer. We need more information," Aung' Rama said. "Thus, I am ordering you to seize new captives at the next available junction. Qo' Doth Tr' Dugash should be returning any moment from the higher decks with a report on what the other intruders are doing. Use that information to plan. Do you understand your orders, Roq' Ragn?" She glared, pointing at Roq' Ragn.

"I understand, Project Leader Qe' Doth Aung' Rama."

Chapter 6

Captain Johnson looked up from his PADD and leaned back in his chair. The entrance to his ready room opened, letting in Chief Engineer Fonda and Science Officer Joh Emmeril.

"Ah, you two are the most punctual crewmembers I have on my ship," Johnson smiled. "Thank you for coming in to brief me on the current situation. Please, be seated."

Joh tucked her long brown dress in to her legs as she sat down, and moved her long braided ponytail to behind her shoulder. Fonda sat down next to her, tugging at her black overtunic as she crossed her legs. They looked at the captain behind his curved desk.

Johnson set aside his PADD and interlaced his fingers together, resting his hands atop his desk. "Let's start with you, Doctor Joh. What more can you tell me about this unusual nebula?"

Joh had a PADD in her hand, but she didn't consult with it as she began speaking to the captain. "First, I checked all available databases, and have found no record at all of this nebula. All the long range astrometric scans of No Man's Land showed no indications of nebulae. I have taken the liberty of designating this nebula as nbNML-1."

"So noted," Johnson nodded. "Please continue."

"This nebula exhibits several unusual properties. There is an increased gravitational field, far more than one would expect of a nebula this size and composition. Although we are not near the center, where the gravitational forces are strongest, we are feeling the effects. There are gravitational tides and eddies throughout this nebula."

"Yes, inertial dampeners are working more," Johnson said.

"The composition of this nebula is interfering with our sensors, which is to be expected. However, this level of interference indicates there are more forces at work."

"Could another ship be hiding in here, jamming our sensors?"

"No, the interference is not artificial in origin. Which leads me to another unusual reading we have found." Joh sighed and consulted with her PADD. "We found traces of chronometric radiation that should not be here. To be sure, it might be an inaccurate reading, which should be expected with our current sensor strength and resolution."

"So, what are you saying?"

"I hesitate to say without more sufficient information," Joh said.

"Understood. Still, I'd like to know something I didn't know before," Johnson shrugged.

"Very well, captain. The leading hypothesis is that this nebula exists on different spatial planes. The nebula shares several traits in common to other interspatial anomalies, such as the Goldin Discontinuity. However, the nebula also exhibits other characteristics unlike anything recorded before. The intense gravimetric forces located in this nebula may be a result or a cause. We have insufficient data to elaborate further."

Johnson stroked his bare chin. "So, we might be dealing with inter-dimensional forces?"

"Our current data would not exclude that," Joh answered. "We cannot probe further with our current sensor strength."

"This would be a good time to go to Chief Fonda," Johnson said, shifting his gaze to the other woman seated before him. "How about it? Any progress on cleaning up sensors?"

Fonda rubbed her neck and shrugged. "We're making progress little by little. The largest problem is that we're unable to shield the sensors from the barrage of radiation being generated within this nebula. We already been in conference with Doctor Joh, and if what she's saying does turn out to be the case, then we just won't be able to shield the ship fully. The radiation will be just weaving in and out of our plane of existence. They'll just bypass our shields completely."

"Are we in any danger?"

Fonda shook her head, looking at Johnson. "No, I've already checked with Doctor Hartman. He hasn't seen any cause for alarm. I just wouldn't recommend staying within this nebula longer than 48 hours. Certain ship components won't be able to withstand much more of this. Which may explain the state we found the *Galaxy* in."

"Acknowledged. I don't like it very much here. I keep getting goosebumps for no reason at all," Johnson admitted. "So, we're not going to be able to improve sensors or communications?"

Fonda bristled. "I didn't say that, sir. I'm not going to give up."

"I didn't think so," Johnson smiled.

"May I point out that this nebula is quite unstable, by normal standards?" Joh remarked.

"How so?" Johnson frowned, looking back at the Bajoran scientist.

"We have been noticing gravitational fluctuations. The mass of this nebula varies from moment to moment. If I were to guess, I would be saying that parts of this nebula is phasing in and out of our plane of perception. And of course, the assorted stellar dust, including a large amount of hydrogen and other volatile elements, present in this nebula makes our location a precarious one."

"I already am aware of that. It's standard procedure to assess the conditions of a nebula. Don't worry, I won't fire phasers or torpedoes, or do anything that might otherwise threaten ourselves. I have no wish to strike a match here."

"Good," Joh replied. "I believe I have said all I have to offer. Here is a PADD with the latest compilation of sensor reports and our various hypotheses, and work." She handed the brown PADD to Johnson.

Fonda stood up. "Well, if there' s nothing ~~le~~se, there' s work waiting for me in Engineering."

"Uh, just a minute, Fonda," Johnson pointed at her. He looked at Joh. "Thank you, Doctor, for your good work. You may return to work."

Joh nodded, and walked out of the ready room. Fonda sat back down, frowning slightly at Johnson.

Once the door closed behind Joh, the captain looked at the engineer. "Janelle, you look like crap."

"Well, thank you, Thomas. You sure know how to flatter a girl," Fonda retorted.

Johnson sighed and shook his head. "Have you gotten any sleep recently?"

"No, I' ve been too busy."

"Well, you really look terrible. Why don' t you take a short break and head to your quarters for some sleep?"

"I' d rather not. Hiroshi is on the *Galaxy* so that leaves me to take care of Engineering."

"You have plenty of capable people there who can handle Engineering without you around," Johnson leaned forward. "Now don' t make me order you to take a nap."

"I really look that bad?"

Johnson nodded.

Fonda sighed and raised an eyebrow. "Well, I suppose I could... ok." She stood up. "Thanks for being concerned."

"Always," Johnson smiled softly.

As she neared the door, Fonda turned back. "You know, I really hate taking naps in the middle of an situation. It seems that every time I wake up from a nap, something has happened."

Johnson glanced out the window near the end of the room, looking at the faint outline of the *Galaxy*. "Nothing much is happening now."

"Fall back!" Ironsides shouted, squeezing off several bursts of phaser shots across the bridge, at the swarm of black-suited attackers. He swept his arm back, pushing Lieutenant Hiroshi, back, shielding him.

Private Lugosy kneeled behind the curved tactical station, resting his phaser rifle on the brown wood, firing. "Sir, Setting 10 is not working!"

"Damn it!" Ironsides said. "Setting 12!"

Lugosy paused to dial up his phaser rifle' s setting. The next compressed beam he fired struck one of the obsidian suited aliens squarely in the chest. He staggered backwards, but recovered to fire his own narrow triangular weapon. The energy bolt struck Lugosy' s faceplate, bursting through and turning his blue Andorian face into an unrecognizable mess.

"Private Lugosy' s down!" LeAnn shrieked, looking at Lugosy' s collapsed body near her boots.

Ironsides turned to look at Lugosy' s body, and then at LeAnn. "Ensign, get out of here! Everyone, get out! Longton, cover their retreat! I' ll stay in position and lay down some cover fe!"

The remaining Marine stepped up in front of the engineers, firing his rifle in a wide arc, forcing the attackers to spread out and hide behind the conn and ops consoles.

Ironsides looked down at Hiroshi. "Get your team out of here! Go through the conference room and then wait for us!"

"Yes, sir!" Hiroshi fired his phaser, backing alongside the aft computer stations. He pushed Andorra towards the door to the conference room. She crouched, hugging her engineer' s case near her chest.

She stopped, blocking Hiroshi' s progress. He turned to her. "What' s wrong? Keep going!"

"But.. but..."

Hiroshi turned to look at Andorra. "What?!" He looked down to see the torn suit of Leeyan, the first victim of the surprise attack. "Oh. Just crawl over her."

Andorra' s Guassan face wrinkled in a horrified face. Her dark purple eyes told Hiroshi that she' d rather not.

"Oh, all right!" Hiroshi handed Andorra his phaser. "Trade places with me. Just shoot at them, cover me."

Andorra nodded and shifted, kneeling on her knees, firing the phaser through the opening beneath the tactical station. Hiroshi grabbed Leeyan' s legs and tugged at them. LeAnn crouched next to him, helping. Together, they managed to shove it away out of their path of retreat. As an added bonus, it provided slight

cover from the enemy fire.

"Okay, Andorra. Let's go!" Hiroshi patted Andorra's arm. Within the next few seconds, the EVA suited Starfleet crew found themselves in the dimly lit Conference Room. Longton burst through the open door, firing behind him as he ran.

"Where's Ironsides?" Hiroshi asked.

"The major's pinned by the turbolift door," Longton told them. "He says to go on without him."

"I don't think we should," Andorra said.

"I don't care what you think we should do," Longton shouted. "His orders are to go to the *Fuji* and get the hell off this ship!"

"That's that, then," Hiroshi said. "Andorra, open the door, and we'll make our way to the corridors and a Jeffries Tube access. I'll stay here with Longton and cover us."

Andorra nodded and went to the other side of the room. She opened the other door via the manual release hidden in the wall. The door slid open slowly and she stepped out, only to be grabbed by another black suited intruder. She screamed, attracting the attention of the others.

LeAnn, being the closest, raised to shoot her phaser, but decided against it due to Andorra's flailing arms and legs. She squinted. "There's more of them! We're trapped!" Andorra was dragged away, and more black suited intruders ran towards the open doorway.

Longton sidled up to the doorway to the bridge. "There's less of them. They must've circled around."

Hiroshi looked at Longton with shock. "They know the layout of the ship!"

Longton breathed heavily. "I think we can get back to Ironsides and get out another way."

"Okay," Hiroshi nodded. He looked at LeAnn. "Quick, close the door!"

LeAnn ran up to the door, pulling down the switch, closing off the Conference Room.

"Good, come on!" Hiroshi gestured to her. She ran across the long room back to Hiroshi and Longton.

Longton looked out at Ironsides, still firing his rifle, hiding in the alcove near the turbolift.

He ran out, firing at the attackers that were focusing on Ironsides. One fell to the deck, a smoking crater near his suit's shoulder.

Hiroshi and LeAnn ran out into the bridge, following Longton's lead. They fired, forcing the intruders to withdraw through the hatch they came up in.

"What are you doing back here?" Ironsides shouted.

"Sir, they cut off our retreat," Longton reported. "They circled around and blocked off the Conference Room. One of the engineers was captured."

"Ensign Andorra," Hiroshi supplied.

"Damn, they've done their recon," Ironsides sighed. He fired a blast at the hatch, noticing a dark helmet rise. It dipped down again. "We can't stay here. We've got to get out of here."

LeAnn shouted, and fired her phaser at an intruder in the doorway they just came through. "They're coming in the other way!"

Ironsides squinted and stood up. "Watch the hatch and the door, cover me."

Longton nodded, and trained his rifle on the hatch. Hiroshi and LeAnn raised their phasers at the doorway.

Ironsides turned to the closed turbolift. He made a quick adjustment to his rifle and aimed at the doors. "Brace yourselves," he said.

He fired his rifle, and the doors exploded inwards, rocking the immediate area. The crumpled doors fell down the turbolift shaft. He stepped to the edge, and looked down. "I see a car several levels down. It's jumpable."

"Jump?" LeAnn said.

"Quicker than climbing down the ladder. There's not that much gravity generated in a turbolift shaft anyway," Ironsides said. "Go!"

Longton nodded, and leapt down the shaft with a long shout, which abruptly cut off.

"Is he dead?" LeAnn asked.

Ironsides leaned over to look. "No, he's fine. Just out of comm range. You next."

LeAnn sighed and gritted her teeth. She took one last glance back and stepped off the edge.

"Good, Lieutenant, now you," Ironsides ordered.

The intruders were already filing through the Conference Room door, firing at them. Hiroshi paused to fire several more rapid shots, before jumping down the shaft. He felt the familiar looseness of zero gravity as he flailed his arms and legs, shooting down the shaft. He felt hands on his legs, and looked down to see

the others keeping him from landing on them. They were able to shove him aside. He landed with a mild shock, on top of the unmoving turbolift car.

"You okay?" Longton asked.

"Yeah."

"Then move, the major's on his way down!"

Hiroshi flattened himself against the circular walls of the shaft. He watched Ironsides glide down to them. He landed effortlessly, and quickly looked up, aiming his rifle. They could see the intruders peek into the shaft. They started firing their weapons.

Ironsides turned and fired his rifle again at the doors that led to the deck above them. The doors exploded outwards, shaking the shaft. Longton ran and jumped up, grabbing the edge, and pulling himself over. The gravity on the deck pulled him through easily, counteracting the lower gravity in the shaft.

Hiroshi and LeAnn didn't need to be told what to do. LeAnn ran and jumped up. Longton kneeled to grab and pull her up.

"Incoming!" Ironsides shouted, alerting Hiroshi as he prepared to jump up to the ledge. He looked up and saw one of the intruders falling towards them. The intruder fell on his back, lying by Ironsides' and Hiroshi's feet.

Hiroshi stepped close to have a closer look. He couldn't make out any facial features through the dark faceplate. He could tell that the suit obviously was an EVA suit, just as they were wearing. It was slightly more armored than the one Hiroshi was wearing, and had an odd geometry to it. It wasn't smooth and curved. Instead, it almost looked like hewn stone. His boot hit the arm of the intruder.

The intruder grabbed Hiroshi's leg, digging in with sharp gloved fingers. "Major! It's not dead! It's got me!" He felt the fingers dig into the flesh of his calf.

Ironsides swung down his rifle and fired pointblank in the intruder's helmet. It erupted in a blossom of orange toned blood. The glove stopped digging into Hiroshi's calf. He bent down to pull out the fingers and thumbs, noticing that there were only three fingers. The suit hissed, and Hiroshi quickly pulled out an emergency patch from a interior pocket on his suit's thigh. He taped it over the small openings, stopping the leak. He still felt blood creeping down to his ankle from the tears.

"Go!" Ironsides shouted.

Hiroshi nodded and took a steadying breath. He glanced at the exposed face of the alien. He couldn't tell what they looked like, at least not superficially. He could tell that it bled orange, though. He looked up at Longton and LeAnn, who were firing up at the intruders, covering their retreat.

Hiroshi ran and leapt over the dead intruder, grabbing the ledge. LeAnn grabbed his arms, dragging him over the edge. He scrambled to his feet, and returned to the doorway, pulling his phaser off his thigh holster. He joined Longton in firing at the intruders, keeping them away from the doorway, so Ironsides could make his escape.

Ironsides stopped firing long enough to run and jump up onto the ledge. He barely needed any help pulling himself over the edge, but Longton and Hiroshi pulled him over in any case.

"Okay, what deck are we on?" Ironsides asked as he got on his feet.

"Deck Four," Longton reported.

"All right. We need to get back to the *Fuji* and contact the *Courageous*," Ironsides said. "Go!"

Safely ensconced within the runabout *Fuji*, Ironsides and the others contacted the *Courageous*.

"We need reinforcements!" Ironsides told Johnson through the runabout's comm system.

"Done," Johnson replied. "I'm ordering two squads to fly over to the *Galaxy*. The first squad should be there under ten minutes."

"We also have an injured crewman who needs attention- Lieutenant Hiroshi."

"All right, have Ensign LeAnn take the *Fuji* and bring it back home. I want you two to make your way to the *Rainier* and secure it, I don't want to lose it."

"Acknowledged, sir," Ironsides replied. "Marine One out."

He sighed and turned to the pathway that led to the docking collar. "Longton! Come back in. Get some fresh power packs, we're moving out to take the *Rainier*."

Longton came back inside the runabout from his sentry post. "Yes, sir."

Ironsides looked back at LeAnn. "You heard the captain. Get out of here. See if you can see any signs of another ship docked to the *Galaxy*. They had to come from somewhere."

"Aye, sir," LeAnn nodded.

Ironsides walked over to Hiroshi, who was already out of his suit, pressing a dressing on his leg wound. "How' re you doing?"

"I' m fine, sir," Hiroshi replied.

"Good. You' ll be patched up soon. Be sure to report everything you saw to the others."

"I will."

"Sir, I' m ready," Longton called out. He was still in his combat suit. Ironsides nodded, and picked up his helmet, snapping it into place. He joined Longton and they stepped off the runabout. The docking hatch closed, and the *Fuji* pulled away from the ship.

Longton looked at Ironsides. "What about the others in Main Engineering, sir?"

"Unknown. We have to assume the worst. First priority is the *Rainier*. Then once the relief squads get here, we' ll look in Engineering."

"Yes, sir."

"Options?" Johnson asked.

"Well, they have full control of the Main Bridge," Bogarde said. "And we have to assume the same of Main Engineering."

"Yes," Johnson nodded, tapping his foot on the deck as he looked up at Bogarde. The security chief stood at the Tactical station, thinking.

"No one' s been to the battle bridge," Bogarde said to Johnson. "We might be able to get in there, lock them out using emergency protocols that they won' t know about."

"Right," Johnson stroked his chin. "We could be able to fly the *Galaxy* out of the nebula, and we' ll be able to deal with this threat better."

"That' s an idea, sir."

"Did we finish downloading the ship' s logs?"

Bogarde checked his console. "No, sir. I estimate about 63% of the download was complete before it cut off, probably due to the attack."

"That' ll have to do. I' ll have Kyle ~~no~~ up here and look at them. Maybe these intruders are already on record."

"Yes, sir." Bogarde looked down at his console. "Sir, the runabout *Vesuvius* has docked to the *Galaxy*."

"Good, have them split up. I want one team to rendezvous with Major Ironsides at the *Rainier*. I want the other six to head to Main Engineering and find out the status of our men there. Is the *Fuji* back yet?"

"No, sir."

"Tell Lieutenant Dawson to load up the second squad onto the *Fuji* as soon as Ensign LeAnn returns. I want the ensign to stay for debriefing, though."

Bogarde nodded and tapped his comm-badge. "Bogarde to Lieutenant Dawson."

Johnson turned his chair to the front of the bridge, to the static filled view screen. He thumbed his armrest. "Bridge to Lieutenant Kyle."

No reply was immediately forthcoming. Johnson repeated his hail. Finally a voice answered. "*Kyle here.*"

"Kyle, report to the bridge. I need you at my side," Johnson told her.

"*What? Why?*"

"Ironsides is on the *Galaxy* indefinitely. There are intruders aboard the *Galaxy*. I need you here as my executive to fill in for Ironsides."

"*I' non my way, Captain.*" Kyle replied. The line clicked closed.

Johnson turned back to Bogarde. "Can you put a tractor beam on the *Galaxy*?"

"I already tried to, but targeting sensors are inoperative," Bogarde reported back.

"Damn it," Johnson muttered, running his fingers through his short brown hair. "As soon as we find out what' s happening in Engineering, I want to tak the Battle Bridge."

Chapter 7

Lieutenant Dawson stood on the flat deck of the shuttlebay. He was shouting. "Everyone move! Get on the runabout now!"

Twelve men, in full combat EVA suits, rushed to the just landed runabout *Fuji*. The door hatch swung open, allowing them to enter. The lead Marine ran up to the front, tapping LeAnn on the shoulder.

"What?"

"You're relieved. You need to stay for debriefing," the Marine told her. "I'll pilot."

LeAnn sighed. "Okay," she said. "You need to run a check on the starboard Bussard collector. I think it's malfunctioning."

"Will do. You're dismissed."

LeAnn looked up, looking at the Marine's chestplate. She hadn't learned all the ranking insignia for the Marine branch, but the way he spoke told her he certainly outranked her.

She picked up her EVA suit helmet and gloves, making her way past the incoming Marines.

She stepped off the runabout, and headed to the suit-up room to take off her suit. She turned after she heard the hatch door slam shut on the *Fuji*. She stood in front of the open doorway to the suit-up room, pausing to watch the runabout lift off a meter off the shiny deck. She turned to enter the locker room, since it would seal in the air while the shuttlebay depressurized.

She started undoing her suit's latches. A tremendous explosion shook the locker room, causing her to slam against her suit's locker. She staggered to her feet, then stumbled to the door of the suit-up room. She saw that the door was slightly buckled inwards, but it still opened when she pressed the keypad.

She walked out, and saw the *Fuji* back on the deck of the shuttlebay. Her eyes immediately went to the port nacelle that was slung underneath the runabout. Black marks covered the entire front portion and the side.

Shuttlebay personnel were rushing out with emergency gear now. The hatch of the runabout opened, and the Marines started hopping out.

"What happened?" she shouted over the bustle.

"Damn nacelle burned out," one of the Marines said. "Pilot thinks some of the nebula gas leaked in."

LeAnn shook her head. The pilot must not have checked the Bussard collector as she suggested. It seemed no one was hurt, which was lucky. She returned to the suit-up room and finished taking off her EVA suit. Her comm-badge chimed in the locker room.

"LeAnn here."

"It's Amanda. Are you all right?"

LeAnn smiled. "Yes, I'm okay."

"I heard about what happened in the shuttlebay. I was afraid you might have been hurt."

"I'm okay."

"Listen, I'm in the Mess Hall. Would you like to get something to eat?"

"I'm sorry, but I've got to go to Bridge. I have to debrief the captain, first."

"Okay."

"After, all right?"

"Great," Ruiz replied.

"Love you. LeAnn out."

LeAnn stowed her suit away, and walked out of the locker room. She saw the Marines entering another shuttle, a cargo shuttle by the looks of it. It made sense. Only a cargo shuttle would be large enough to accommodate 12 Marines in full gear.

Shuttlebay personnel were attaching a docking collar to the shuttle. She noted the name of the cargo shuttle before she walked out of the shuttlebay. The shuttle was named after one of Earth's most well known cities, the *San Francisco*. The docking collar covered part of the shuttle's identifier number, which was also the *Courageous*' registry number, 81822.

LeAnn zipped up her black tunic and headed to the Bridge.

Andorra sat on one of the chairs in the *Galaxy*' ready room, looking at the trio of obsidian suited intruders. It seemed as if they were talking amongst themselves, but she could not hear it. Obviously it was because their suit's comm systems operated differently than her own EVA suit. Her stomach growled. She realized she hadn't eaten yet since she woke up.

Suddenly, she heard a strange voice speak to her. It was both gravelly and sibilant at the same time. It spoke to her in the standard language of the Federation, which surprised her more.

"What is your clan name and job designation, inferior?"

Andorra bristled slightly at being labeled an inferior, but she was already overwhelmed by the recent series of events, so she didn't speak out as she would've. Instead, she only replied, "Ensign Fiorchel Andorra, I'm a, uh, engineer." Silently she cursed herself for not replying in the standard name, rank and

serial number as she had been trained to.

It didn't seem to her that these intruders would've been pleased to hear just ~~that~~ though. They turned to each other. After having had few moments of watching the intruders interact with each other, Andorra recognized a clear chain of command, though there were no markings she could detect on any of their suits.

She noticed that the shorter one on the left of the central figure was more obsequious, and the one on the right, who was the tallest one she had seen so far, was almost challenging. She smiled, thinking of their heights. Most of them were her height, and she was one of the shorter crewmembers on the *Courageous*, just over one and a half meters tall.

The center figure turned to her. She heard a voice again, probably that of the leader's voice. "Engineer? You understand the workings of this ship?"

"Yes," she replied.

"Can you reactivate the superspace conduit device?"

Andorra frowned and blinked. "I'm sorry, but I don't know ~~why~~ you're talking about."

The tall one stepped forward, reaching out with sharp edged gloves. Andorra winced, and tried to back away in her seat. The leader's arm shot out, pointing ominously at the taller one.

"Roq' Ragn! Do not harm her!" Aung' Rama ~~shouted~~ roared in her native dialect.

The other Vendoth paused in his reach. "Qe' Doth Aung' Rama, she lies. She purposefully ~~lies~~ lies. Such an inferior is of no use to us."

"It is good that you remember she is an inferior," Aung' Rama hissed. "As ~~such~~ she may not fully understand our phraseology. Their language is quite simple, as our briefings have informed us. Any Vendoth can learn their language with minimal effort. So it is to be expected we will have some communication barriers when we express our desires to her mind."

"Yes, Qe' Doth," Roq' Ragn dropped his hand. The captive relaxed slightly in her seat.

"Do not be so quick to dismiss her usefulness. Only I have the authority to decide that, not you. Do not make me remind you of your place in the hierarchy."

"Yes, Qe' Doth."

Aung' Rama turned back to look at the alien. Idly, she wondered if her violet skin ~~coloring~~ coloring was common of the races in the Federation. Their briefing on the Federation was not as comprehensive as she'd liked, ~~but~~ it was sufficient to determine that they were inferiors, compared to the Vendoth.

She paused and mulled over how best to speak to the inferior. It was maddeningly frustrating, worse than speaking to a child Vendoth novice fresh away from his brood.

She activated her communications link to the inferior's comm system. "You may not have understood what I was referring to. This ship has an unusual propulsion system, does it not?"

"Oh yes. Yes, it does."

"We call it the superspace conduit device," Aung' Rama stated.

"I see. We call it a transwarp engine."

Aung' Rama smiled at the awkward name. "I see. I shall refer to it from now on as the transwarp engine, to prevent further confusion." She glanced at Roq' Ragn, her narrow eyes ~~lit~~ litting at him. She knew he heard this exchange, and once again, her reasoning proved superior to his reasoning.

"Okay," the alien nodded, which seemed an odd gesture to Aung' Rama.

"Can you reactivate it?" she asked.

The alien paused, thinking. At length, she replied. "I don't think I can."

Roq' Ragn surged forward, but wisely, he held back, Aung' Rama noted.

The alien jerked back in fear.

Aung' Rama sighed a long sigh. She looked at the inferior. "Do you mean you cannot, or ~~th~~ you will not?"

"I mean, I can't. I don't know enough about it. I'd need time to study it. I'm only an ensign," the alien replied.

"Are there others who would know?"

The alien paused before speaking. That alone told Aung' Rama volumes. She ~~was~~ was thinking whether she should answer or not.

"We only wish to learn more," Aung' Rama told her. "Quite like your Federation ~~we~~ we embrace knowledge." She winced at making such a gross comparison. Even Tr' Dunarg, her subordinate, looked at her openly, questioning her statement. Roq' Ragn's opinion was expressed in a clear grunt through the comm

system.

"Maybe," the alien said.

Aung' Rama blinked several times, regarding the seated captive. Another one of her crew entered the room quickly.

"Project Leader Qe' Doth Aung' Rama," the newcomer began, "We have reports of more intruders boarding the ship. Analysis indicates these are of the combat caste."

Roq' Ragn clenched his hands. "Where are they going?"

"One subgroup is traversing the ship, and another seem to be headed for the Engine Room, VenQu' Roq' Ragn."

"They are mounting an invasion," the security chief concluded.

"We think another small craft might be attaching to this craft, as well. Sensor data is not clear," the subordinate added.

Aung' Rama hissed, and looked at Roq' Ragn. "Collect the necessary personnel. Repel the invasion to the Engine Room. We must retain control of this ship. And find the new craft."

"Yes, Project Leader Aung' Rama," Roq' Ragn said. "What of the inferior captive?"

Aung' Rama looked back at the alien. "Now she is not useful. Dispose of her."

"All inferiors are not useful, in the light of Vendoth superiority," Roq' Ragn declared, stating a point from Vendoth dogma.

Aung' Rama decided not to waste her time arguing the point with Roq' Ragn. It was true in most cases, she had to concede. Instead she gestured for Roq' Ragn to carry out her order. She watched as Roq' Ragn seized the alien by the weak neck collar of her suit. He snapped the helmet off, and she immediately began suffocating in the vacuum. She memorized the stages the alien went through. Briefly, she wondered if she should call in her Qa' Doth to make a medical record.

She clicked her jaw shut. "Roq' Ragn, end it quickly. We have no time for this," she said.

Roq' Ragn grabbed the flailing alien by her head, and twisted it effortlessly around. The captive's wild motions ended. He turned to face her. "Do you wish me to capture more of these inferiors for interrogation?"

Aung' Rama recognized the veiled insinuation. "This was but one of the many inferiors aboard the other ship. Statistically, the odds were low that we would find an inferior with the pertinent information we need. That does not excuse us from attempting to find one. Since these new intruders are combat ready- do not take captives. Only take the ones similarly attired as this one was."

Aung' Rama gestured to the white and red suit that the captive was in.

"Yes, Project Leader."

"Inform the others of our analysis of their environmental suits. Exploit their weaknesses."

"Sir, Corporal Yonig reporting as ordered," the gray suited Marine stood at attention. Five other similarly suited Marines stood behind him.

Ironsides stepped out of the docking collar that linked the *Rainier* to the *Galaxy*. "You the new squad from the *Vesuvius*, right?"

"Yes, sir."

"Where are the others?"

Yonig replied, "Captain Johnson ordered a detachment of six men to Main Engineering, to recon."

Ironsides closed his eyes and shook his head. He bit his tongue. He opened his eyes again and looked at Yonig, who he recognized as a tan-skinned Arsatic. "All right. We'll lockout the runabout, and leave it here as an staging point."

He looked at the other men. "Listen up, grunts. Set your rifles on Setting 14. Anything below that won't scratch 'em. Anything more, you risk damaging the ship irreparably. Their suits are better armored than ours. If you've got a shotaim for the head. That seems to be a good weak spot." Ironsides looked down at the orange stains on his boots.

The Marines dutifully readjusted their weapons.

"What about taking one captive?" Yonig asked.

Ironsides looked at the corporal. "Why?"

"To find out who they are. This may be a new species."

Ironsides grunted. "I'm more inclined to shoot first, thenask questions later. They've already killed one that I know of, and taken another. I don't think these bastards come in peace. Move out."

The newcomers set off down the corridors.

"And for god' s sake, don' t wander off more than a few meters. If you do, you' ll be out of comm contact, and then I' ll have to hunt you down and kill you before they do," Ironsides shouted.

Nobody laughed.

Chapter 8

"See those marks? There' s been some fighting here," one of the gray suited Marines said, using his rifle' s mounted flashlight to point them out.

The senior officer, Lieutenant Campion, took one look. "Well, better get your weapons hot. Whoever fought here, might still be here."

"Yes, sir," the others said. The small group continued down the corridor. Their lights came across the large beige double doors that led into Main Engineering.

Campion walked up to the doors. When they didn' t open for him, he turned to the others. "Private Ballatin, use the manual," he told one.

Ballatin went to the side of the doors, to the already open panel. She twisted at the handle. "Sir, it' s not working."

Campion shone his light on the doors. "Looks welded shut from inside. We don' t have the time to go in through Jeffries Tubes. Everyone, back off. I' m going to cut it open."

The lieutenant thumbed his rifle' s setting up higher, and adjusted the controls. He stepped back and aimed carefully at the door seams. A thin red beam struck out at the doors, producing sparks. Campion slowly brought the laser-like beam down from the top to bottom of the doors. The cut metal glowed faintly in the darkness. After several minutes, the lieutenant was done.

He stepped back to survey his work. The orange glow faded as the heat dissipated across the metal doors. "Ballatin, try it again."

The private stepped back to the manual door switch. She twisted, and with a grunt, the doors cracked open. Ballatin set her rifle down, and grabbed the handle with both hands. The extra leverage brought the doors open several more centimeters.

Campion turned to the others. "Help me," he told them as he grabbed a door edge. He pulled one door away as a few others grabbed at the doors. Their team effort widened the space between the doors, enough so that the Marines, within their bulky combat suits, could fit through. The others that didn' t help, stood back, with their rifles ready. Their lights shone into the dark Main Engineering.

Campion picked up his rifle, and gripped it tightly. He motioned for several others to line up behind him. He stepped through the half-open doorway, peering into the darkness. His light played across the room, illuminating computer consoles and wall stations.

He stepped forward, allowing another Marine to get through the doorway. He turned around to face the other Marines waiting to enter. "All right," he began, "There' s supposed to be six people in here. Let' s find them."

A blur of motion rushed out of the darkness to smash into Campion. The others couldn' t ascertain what was happening. It seemed as if a shadow came to life. The shadow pushed Campion up against a nearby wall with such force that Campion saw cracks spider outwards on his own faceplate.

He tried to raise his weapon, but it was knocked down and out of his grip. He tried to grab at the shadow, but he was driven into the wall violently again. His own face smashed against the cracked faceplate, and Campion felt blood flowing freely. The shadow kicked his legs out from underneath him, and he fell down backwards, and his faceplate exploded when the pressure inside the suit became too much for the faceplate to hold in.

All of this happened within a space of heartbeats. The other Marine that was already within Main Engineering tried to find what was attacking his lieutenant. His light cast shadows on the wall behind Campion, and he couldn' t differentiate between the figure and the shadows on the wall. Suddenly, blackness filled his faceplate. He thought he could make out the outline of a hand, and felt himself being pressed backwards. His arm was grabbed and twisted around his back.

The Marine felt an icy coldness in his shoulder, and realized that his suit was breached. Air was rushing out of his suit. With his last few breaths, he shouted to the others, "Get back! Shoot!"

The other Marines backed away from the doorway. The ones in front began firing pulses of phaser energy through the doorway. Several hit the other lead Marine inside, but it didn' t matter. He was already in

his death throes from a lack of oxygen.

"Hey, someone take a reading!" Ballatin shouted.

Private Robrah raised his black tricorder, initiating a quick perimeter scan. "I'm reading two bogeys in front, and three behind! Moving fast!" He spun around, using his rifle to shine light in the corridor behind them. The light reflected off the smooth black suits of the intruders. Bright light erupted from them, and Robrah flew backwards, hit by an energy bolt. He lost his grip on his tricorder. It sailed through the air and clattered down to the deck, lost in the carpeting of red and purple gases.

"Shit!" Ballatin shouted. She fired her rifle in the direction of the new intruders. The Marines huddled together, firing in two directions. She heard the scream of another Marine, cut down by the intruder's weapons fire.

A shadow reached out from through the Main Engineering doors and grabbed the legs of a nearby Marine. With a powerful jerk, the intruder pulled the Marine down on the ground.

Ballatin heard the scream as the Marine was dragged inside Engineering. He was pulled so quickly that he barely had time to grab the doors. The intruder's strength was so great that the Marine couldn't hold on for longer than a second. Abruptly, the captured Marine's screams ended.

Ballatin gritted her teeth and ramped up her phaser fire strength. The intruders clung to the walls, firing methodically. She watched as one energy bolt struck the Marine in front of her. The bolt ripped through the knee joint in the Marine's combat suit.

She heard his gasp of surprise as his leg buckled underneath him. The Marine tumbled to the floor, and another energy bolt struck the fallen Marine right in the shoulder collar, where the arm attached to the main body of the combat suit. It snapped open, and Ballatin saw the hiss of air escaping into the vacuum, moisture crystallizing on the suit.

"Damn it!" she shouted. "They're hitting us in all the right places! We gotta take cover!" She fired her rifle in a wide arc as she crouched to grab the arm of the Marine that fell in front of her. She didn't bother to look back and see if anyone followed her as she started dragging the injured Marine down a side corridor.

She stopped dragging the Marine, whose name she read off his chestplate, H. Dixon. None of the intruders seemed concerned with her at the moment, when she looked back to the hallway junction in front of Main Engineering. Most of the others were already down, either struck down or kneeling for cover.

The reddish orange light of their phaser rifles periodically illuminated the dark corridors. The faint yellow light of the intruders' weapons flashed less often, but when they struck, it was usually with devastating effect.

Ballatin looked down at H. Dixon. She remembered H. stood for Henrich. "Come on, Henrich, hang on," she told him, trying to figure out how to stop the leak in his suit's shoulder joint.

"It's so cold," he mumbled back to her.

"I know, you've got a suit breach. I can't patch up, the blast ripped open the collar. Look, we're gonna have to seal it up, or you're gonna die in a few seconds."

"How?"

Ballatin frowned. "I'm gonna have to cut your arm off so you can seal up the arm socket."

"What? No!" Dixon shouted. Ballatin already was aiming her rifle at Dixon's arm. A thin beam lanced out, slicing through Dixon's arm. She braced herself for a piercing scream, but none came.

Instead, she only heard a chuckle. "I don't really feel anything," he told her. "My arm's so frozen numb, I didn't feel it."

His arm dropped to the deck. Ballatin looked at Dixon. "It's off." She reached to his front chestplate, and popped open an emergency panel just beneath his nameplate. Shaped grooves within the access panel allowed the fingers of her combat suit's glove to activate a switch. The arm socket of Dixon's left arm irised shut. Ballatin sighed, thankful that the emergency seal was still operative.

She picked up Dixon's right arm and checked his wrist panel. "Your Ox is low, I'm gonna set Ox production on high. That should keep you going until we get you Med attention."

"Fine," Dixon sighed.

The flashes of Marine phaser fire was lessening, making Ballatin look back up and saw that all the others were out of action. "We gotta go," she told Dixon, grabbing his remaining arm.

She dragged him backwards with one hand, using her other hand to hold her rifle level.

She saw several of the black intruders emerge around the corner. She fired at them, forcing them back down the hallway for cover. She caught a slight motion, and saw an energy bolt fly out at her. She hugged the wall as the bolt flew past her, exploding at the end of the hallway. She squeezed off another burst of

phaser fire down the hallway at the corner.

A figure leaned out through the open doorway to Engineering, firing. The yellow energy bolt struck the wall in front of Ballatin. The dark black panel that lined the wall exploded, striking her with shrapnel. The bright light of the energy bolt momentarily blinded her as well. She staggered back, unable to focus. The shards of the black wall display bounced off her suit.

She blinked her eyes rapidly, trying to clear her vision, firing randomly in hopes of holding them back.

Finally, she regained her sight, and saw four of the intruders waiting at the corridor, crouching out of range of her wild phaser fire. She let go of Dixon's arm, using her now free hand to steady her phaser rifle.

One of the intruders raised his weapon and fired.

Dixon waved his arm backwards, grabbing at Ballatin's legs. "No, don't leave me ~~beh~~"

Dixon's hand went between Ballatin's legs, and she stumbled backwards, tripping over it.

She fell onto her back, just as the energy bolt passed over her, narrowly missing her.

She grunted, trying to sit up so she could aim and fire at them.

Red-orange phaser fire struck one of the intruders in the arm, knocking him off balance. More phaser fire splattered onto the intruders' suits.

Ballatin frowned, watching the intruders turn to face unseen attackers. They fired their weapons down the hallway where they had come from. Several went through the doorway, as the one in the open went down after being struck with a barrage of phaser fire from multiple sources. The intruder collapsed over the body of a Marine.

"Rnside to ... read.... do yu read..." a crackle of static and voices flooded Ballatin's helmet.

"Private First Class Ballatin here," she shouted in response.

The intruders were being driven back into Main Engineering. Ballatin got back on her feet, and sidled alongside the wall, keeping her rifle trained on the open doorway. She saw the doors slowly move together, narrowing the opening. Phaser fire splashed against the doors. Finally the doors were completely closed, sealing the intruders off.

"This is Major Ironsides to Private Ballatin, do you read me?"

Ballatin smiled. "Yes sir, I read you loud and clear."

"What's your loction?"

"Less than three meters from the Main Engineering doors," she replied.

"Starboard or Port?"

"Portside."

Multiple spots of light fixed on the doors of Main Engineering. The spots narrowed down as the other Marines came closer to the Junction. Suddenly, Ballatin found herself targeted by several Marines. The lights from their rifles shone into her eyes. She raised her arms and her weapon in a non-threatening stance.

"Don't shoot! It's me, Private Thora Ballatin!"

The others dropped their lights from her face, so she could see them now. She recognized them as the others from her squad. "I've got man down here," she gestured to Dixon's body.

One of the Marines broke from the group and approached Dixon. He knelt and looked at Dixon's chest panel. "Life signs are faint, he needs med attention, fast."

She heard Ironsides' voice again. "Check the others. They may still be alive. I want two on watch in case they decide to come out in a different direction."

The group split up, checking the bodies. Ballatin frowned as she heard announcement after announcement of the dead. Only one Marine was still alive, but she was slipping fast.

Ballatin walked up to join the others. She knelt down to look at the intruder the others had shot down. She saw that it was in an environmental suit. A crater from concentrated phaser fire was dug into the intruder's suit. She now understood why the Marines targeted him more than the others. He was the only one out in the open, an easy target.

Ironsides stood by her side, slapping her on the shoulder. "You did good, soldier. I think Dixon will pull through just fine."

She looked at him. "What do they look like, sir?"

"I don't know," Ironsides said. He knelt down next to the intruder. He ran his fingers over the enemy's helmet. "I can't find a way to open it up."

Ballatin picked up her rifle and brought down the butt with vicious force onto the faceplate. It cracked. She brought it down again, harder. The faceplate cracked more.

"Hold, that's enough," Ironsides shouted, raising a hand to her. He used his fingers to pull back the

shattered faceplate to reveal a dark green face and narrow but still open eyes.

"Looks like an uglier cousin to the Gorn," Ballatin remarked. The dead alien she saw had a flat face, with a heavy brow ridge running across its forehead. The eyes were a faint grey, with a vertically slitted pupil, which only served to enhance the alien's reptilian features. The long mouth had two sharp fangs jutting out from its lower jaw.

"Should I take a tricorder reading, sir?" another Marine asked.

"Sure, if you want, Corporal," Ironsides grunted, standing back up. "I don't think it'll do any good in this screwed up environment." He looked around. "We better get Dixon and Quincy back to the *Rainier* so they can get med attention ASAP."

"What about the others?" the corporal asked. Ballatin remembered his name as Yonig.

Ironsides looked down at the dead Marines. "Leave 'em, they'll weigh us down," Ironsides said.

"What about the technology?" Yonig countered.

"Doesn't matter. Look at the point of impact on their suits. These intruders knew how to take us out. They must've already studied our suits. What I don't get is how fast they learned about us." Ironsides sighed in frustration. "There's only two ways they could've done that. One is if we run into them before. The other is that they must be fucking brilliant and fast learners."

"Which do you think it is, sir?" Ballatin asked.

"I don't think we've ever run into each other before. Up on the Main Bridge, when they attacked us, they didn't hit us as sharp as they hit you guys down here. If they knew how to take us down then, I wouldn't be standing here."

Ballatin watched as several of the others picked up Dixon and Quincy, carrying them back down the main corridor. She hefted her rifle and started walking after them, with the major by her side.

The major asked her for a quick rundown of what happened. "Well, sir, they ambushed us. They knew we were coming," she told him. She went on to recount the recent events.

"Marine Boat Three to No Name City," Sergeant Fischer spoke in his suit's comm system. "We are now docking."

Bogarde's voice came through relatively clear, although background noise filled the signal. "*Copy that, Marine Boat Three.*"

Fischer ran his fingers over the cargo shuttle's controls. He looked out the rounded cockpit windows to see the mottled hull of the *Galaxy* alongside them. "I need visual, someone line up the collar!"

Another Marine stepped up to the console that linked to the docking collar. "It's a bitch operating without transporters," he muttered, to the agreement of the others.

"Yeah, yeah," Fischer said. "So how about it? Am I lined up?"

"Yes, sir, you are."

Fischer gently set the shuttle in a lateral motion. He felt the slight jarring of the connection. "Mags on!" he shouted.

"Mags on," the Marine on watch acknowledged, stepping away from the docking collar. The magnetic latches that ringed the docking collar attached to the metallic circle that lined the *Galaxy's* docking port.

Fischer tapped in the commands to extend the collar and hooks that held the collar in place on the docking port. The shuttle shook slightly as the mechanisms snapped into place.

The vibrations ceased, and Fischer checked his readouts. "We're fully docked. Suit up and seal up, we're going in!" He twisted the pilot's seat around to watch the Marines latch onto their helmets and check their rifles. He started putting on his gauntlets and his helmet. "Marine Boat Three to No Name City, docking successful. We are disembarking in one minute."

"*Copy that,*" Bogarde replied from his station on the *Courageous*.

Fischer snapped his helmet in place and stood up, grabbing his rifle. "Move out!"

The Marine that stood by the door hatch tapped on the keypad. The door slid open, revealing the short metallic tube that connected the shuttle to the ship. He walked out onto the tube, feeling a slight weightlessness. He bounced up to the *Galaxy's* docking port, and used the manual switch to open the port.

As the door opened, there was a slight hiss of pressure escaping as the minimal air in the ship entered the docking tube. The lead Marine stepped into the ship, clicking his flashlight on. He looked around and swung his rifle around, shining his light.

He failed to notice a glint of reflected light as he turned to signal all clear.

A sudden onrush of air pressure pushed the Marine back into the shuttle. He turned and saw two black

suiting figures hiding behind a force-field.

Fischer saw the same thing as well. He realized that they must've flooded that particular section of the deck with air, and released a force-field. The Marines hadn't been planning on docking with a port full of high air pressure.

All of this came too late to him as he tumbled end over end, when the shuttle broke free from its docking clamp. The enemy had avoided using weapons due to the gases in the nebula. Instead, they had used the force of an explosive decompression to drive off the shuttle.

He grabbed on desperately for any kind of handhold. He needed to get back to the pilot's console to stop the shuttle's tumbling. He pulled himself into the cockpit, and slid himself into the pilot's seat. He tapped the consoles, when a warning light flashed.

He read the warning message from the computer. The structural integrity field was failing. Gravitational forces were increasing. The shuttle began buckling all around him.

Chapter 9

Johnson watched aghast as the shuttle tumbled away from the *Galaxy*. "Bogarde, can we tractor them?" "No, sir, we can't," Bogarde said. "Even if targeting sensors could work properly, we're much too out of range."

"Damn it!"

"Looks like it's being drawn to the dense gravitational fields further in the nebula," Bogarde added.

"Doctor Joh told us about those. They'll be crushed," Johnson realized. "Their shuttle can't hold up against those kind of gravimetric forces."

"They're off sensors now," Bogarde announced. "They're gone."

Johnson sat back down in his seat, rubbing his forehead. He heard a woman's voice talking. It was the *Galaxy's* captain speaking on the monitor between Johnson's seat and Kyle's seat. She had been listening to the captain's logs for the past hour. Johnson shook his head and looked back at the view screen.

Kyle blinked and looked away from the view screen, back at her monitor.

"Right now, we're under attack," Keller said. "The aliens are overrunning us, we can't hold them back. They keep pushing us away. I can't contact anyone in Engineering. I have to assume they're all dead now. Whether it's from a structural breach or from the aliens, I don't know."

Lieutenant Kyle sighed, watching the replay on the monitor by her side. She looked up at Captain Johnson, seated in the command seat. He was frowning at the view screen.

She returned her attention to the captain's log that had been running during the horrible crisis with the Marines' shuttle. "All attempts to communicate with them have failed. Either they're not listening, or they can't understand us. I think they're not listening!"

Kyle heard several hurried voices shouting in the background, but the poor quality of the recording prevented her from being able to understand them. Captain Keller understood them, however, and barked several orders in reply.

The recording froze, then skipped several time frames, resuming in mid-sentence. "--think that we will get out of this. We were finally able to shut down the Transwarp Drive before we were sent to another location. Doctor Ganner thinks it had something to do with the gravimetric forces of this nebula we're trapped in. We think the aliens are trap--"

The log entry went black, and Kyle stopped the playback, since that was all that was available to view. She looked up to see Johnson looking at her. "Can you give me some good news? Anything useful?"

"Not sure. The intruders on the ship may have been trapped in here the same as the *Galaxy* was. I think the nebula affected the Transwarp Drive," she told him.

"Perhaps Doctor Joh will be able to determine that. If you find any information, forward it to her."

"Yes, sir."

"What else can you tell me?" Johnson asked, crossing his legs as he rubbed the back of his neck.

"Well, I can tell you that Captain Keller put the emergency protocols in effect when the aliens revealed an hostile intent. She wiped out most of the information about the Transwarp Drive."

"She stated that in her log?"

"Not in so many words, sir," Kyle replied. "She made a reference to it. In addition to that, I can't find any technical information in the download we made. Much of the computer memory has been erased."

"Do we know when this happened? Or how the aliens got aboard?"

"I can't find much information at all, captain," Kyleighed. "There was a mention of a collision with another ship soon after entering the nebula."

"Ironsides mentioned that one of the nacelles showed signs of an collision," Johnson mused.

"That's probably it, sir."

"Where's the other ship then?" Johnson frowned, looking at the murky view screen.

"Unknown. If I had to guess, it'd be in one of the shuttlebays."

"How many aliens are there?"

Kyle looked at Johnson. "Look, sir, I don't know. I still have hundreds of log entries to go through. Most of them are badly fragmented, so I can only retrieve partial recordings. The computer purges Captain Keller did affected her log entries too."

"I see," Johnson nodded. "Well, resume your work. I'm going to Sickbay to see to the injured w brought back. And I need to tell Ironsides what just happened."

Kyle nodded, and fixed her bleary eyes back on the monitor by her seat.

Johnson walked into Sickbay, hearing a hurried conversation. He saw Ironsides standing with his helmet in his hand, watching several people huddled around the surgical bed in the far back of Sickbay. Johnson recognized Hartman as one of the doctors at work.

Johnson walked over to Ironsides. "What's going on, Max?"

"Private Micah Quincy is dead," Ironsides told him. "She died en route to the *Courageous*. The docs couldn't revive her."

"What about your other man, Dixon?"

"They're still working on him. His lungs almost collapsed in the low pressure of his suit when he had the breach."

Johnson nodded. "I'm sure he'll pull through." He sighed and leaned against an empty biobed, looking at Ironsides. "Something's happened."

Ironsides frowned and looked at Johnson. "What is it, sir?"

"We lost a squad."

"What?! How?"

"It seems that the intruders pressurized the deck where the *San Francisco* was to dock. They didn't know about it. They docked and, I guess, the intruders flooded the deck with air pressure somehow. Maybe they set up a force field through the controls on the Main Bridge."

Ironsides' jaw clenched as he listened to Johnson explain what happened to the shuttle. He shook his head when Johnson finished.

"I'm sorry," the captain said. "Now that we know a little more about them and what they know, we'll be able to stop them."

Ironsides turned to look at Johnson. "A little more? We know next to nothing about them. And they sure as hell know more about us than we do about them. They nearly annihilated six Marines in full combat gear in almost no time flat. At least two by hand-to-hand combat. And they've got partial control of the ship, apparently. They know their way around our technology."

"Those were ambushes. We'll be more prepared. We'll have more men too. I have Lieutenant Kyle reviewing the records we were able to pull from the *Galaxy*'s memory cores. That should give us some more information. She's already found their name the Vendoth."

Ironsides glanced at Johnson. He raised his wrist gauntlet, looking at the readout. "The *Vesuvius* is due to disembark to the *Galaxy*. I have to go."

"I'll accompany you to the shuttlebay," Johnson said. He took one last look at the doctors working on Dixon.

Ironsides walked out of the Sickbay, and Johnson hurried to catch up with him. The two walked silently down the corridor. They entered a turbolift and went down through the ship.

Finally Ironsides spoke. "Sir, there comes a point where enough is enough."

"Hmm?" Johnson asked.

"The casualty list is now at twenty-four, and one seriously injured."

"I'm well aware of that."

"What's the mission parameters here?" Ironsides asked, staring at Johnson.

"Well, we need to find out what happened to the *Galaxy*."

"You have Lieutenant Kyle working on that already."

"We can't leave the *Galaxy* in the Vendoth's hands."

"We don't have to. We can scuttle the ship," Ironsides said. "I can load up the runabout with Q-6 charges, and have my men plant them near the *Galaxy*'s own autodestruct ordinance, and we'll blow the ship."

"We can't waste a ship like that," Johnson shot back. "You know as well as I do we need all the ships we can salvage for our fleet."

"Yes, I know."

"So your mission parameters are to eliminate the intruders and secure the ship, Major. So there's not a repeat of you re-interpreting my orders, like you did a few months ago with Zandria Soran, I'll make it clear. We need that ship, that's an order. I'm not going to consider ~~scuttling~~ it."

"Yes, sir."

The turbolift doors opened, and the men walked out into the hallway. They continued walking side by side. Johnson looked at Ironsides. "Do you have any questions about the plan?"

"You still want to go ahead with the plan? After what happened to the *San Francisco*?"

"Yes. The plan is still viable. The men on the *Vesuvius* and the ones still on the *Galaxy* should give you enough to carry out the plan. It should be easy once we're all out of the nebula. Chief Fonda's ~~able~~ able to establish better communications, so we'll be in constant touch with you, all the way."

Ironsides nodded. "That much will make it a little better. I still think we need more prep time."

"The sooner we do it, the better. We can't let the Vendoth entrench themselves in the ship and get more control. We already know they're in Main Engineering and the Bridge. If we give them more time, they could take the ship themselves." Johnson sighed. "You said so yourself that they're learning at a fast speed."

"I still feel we're going in this ~~as~~ backwards," Ironsides shook his head. "This is a very smart enemy, which makes them a very dangerous enemy. This is a fucked up situation all around."

"I know. Look, all we need to do is get to the Battle Bridge, lock them out with the security codes we know. Then we'll take the ship out of the nebula. Once outside all this ~~interference~~ interference, we'll have the advantage."

They approached the double doors that led to the shuttlebay. Johnson stopped Ironsides. "Look, I don't have to explain myself to you, but I did. We need that ship. Scuttling it is not a good option."

"You're right," Ironsides said. "It's not a good option. I think it's the best option."

Johnson frowned at the major.

Ironsides nodded. "But I will carry out your orders, sir."

Johnson watched Ironsides enter the shuttlebay.

Aung' Rama ~~breathed~~ breathed in the air in the dimly light Engine Room. Her people had done a good job deciphering the power scheme of the ship. They rerouted the power and filled the chamber with air. Now the Vendoth could work without the constraints of their suits. The inferior technology, while interestingly designed, was not very compatible with the suit's hand gloves.

Tr' Dunarg stepped up to her. "Project Leader Qe' Doth Aung' Rama, is everything to your acceptance?"

"Yes, Tr' Dunarg," Aung' Rama replied. "It was ~~fortu~~ fortunate of the previous intruders to supply us with the power we so needed. Unfortunately, we expended much of that energy in repelling the small craft recently. Now... if Roq' Ragn had not attacked so precipitously, we might have been able to gain more of ~~the~~ power batteries before we revealed our presence."

Tr' Dunarg shifted in position, indicating his discomfort. "That is no for me to comment on, Project Leader. Roq' Ragn is our VenQu', I must defer to his judgment in these matters."

"But I don't need to," Aung' Rama replied. She regarded the other Vendoth intently. "Do you defer to his judgment that we do not need more information from the inferiors who designed this ship?"

Tr' Dunarg opened his mouth, and clamped it shut.

"Answer," Aung' Rama hissed.

"From a logical viewpoint, he is correct. We naturally should be able to understand their technology."

"That does not sound like an answer."

Tr' Dunarg clasped his hands together in front of him. "There are always exceptions to ~~ircumstances~~ circumstances, and this seems to be one of them."

Aung' Rama stepped up to the long column, which the VenQo' and Qo' Doths ~~deter~~ determined to be the main source of energy for the ship's propulsion. "You seem to be afraid to indicate the superior reasoning"

She turned around to face Tr' Dunarg. "There cannot be two superiors in one group."

"Of course, you are the superior to Roq'Ragn. Your bloodline, your knowledge, and your experience clearly overwhelms Roq' Ragn' s."

"Then why is it that Roq' Ragn seems to refuse to acknowledge that?" Aung' Rama clicked her trimmed talons on the console that ringed the propulsion column.

She turned to Tr' Dunarg. "Continue your work. I will go to this craft' s Command Center and supervise your efforts from there."

"Got any new information I can use?" Nathan Favor asked, walking down to Kyle' s side.

Kyle looked up at the Federation Ambassador. "A little. They' re called the Vendoth."

"Vendoth? I wonder if that' s the correct way to pronounce it," Favor mused. "Where' d you get that information from?"

Kyle leaned back in her seat and twisted the monitor at an angle so Favor could see. She tapped a menu button, and a recording started playing.

Favor could see the bedraggled face of Captain Keller. "They call themselves the Vendoth. They claim to be an advanced race. Apparently their shuttle collided with--" The recording froze and ended.

Favor frowned. "Is that all there is?"

Kyle rubbed her reddened eyes. "The minute I saw this playback, I ran a search through the whole database, such as it were, for any mention of the Vendoth. That' s the only entry that mentions them by name."

"Any visual recordings of them?"

"Just one," Kyle answered. "Won' t be much help for you."

"We' ll see about that," Favor said. "Show me."

Kyle tapped in a series of commands. Another recording of Keller appeared on the monitor. She was shouting.

"--my last recording! They' re breaking through to the Bridge! If anyone ever retrieves this, tell the families of my crew, I' m sorry. So very sorry."

Weapons fire erupted through a door behind Keller. A black figure stepped through, waving what seemed to be a rifle. He fired at Keller. The captain' s mouth opened, and the screen went black.

Favor sighed. "Go back to when the figure comes in full view. Freeze that."

Kyle nodded, and produced the image. "That' s what the others have reported seeing on the *Galaxy* now."

"Looks pretty short."

"Yes. The computer' s extrapolated this being height to 1.47 meters high."

"Much shorter than me," Favor remarked. "Can you give me a close up view?"

"Sure, already did that, but there' s no details to make out. You can' t see their faces and you can' t see any markings on their suits."

Favor leaned against the Tactical station' s railing. "The absence of what we can see can still tell us something. There are a few possibilities I can think of right off the top of my head. One, the fact that they' re not revealing their appearance means they like holding their cards close to their chest. Like the Breen, for instance. These Vendoth probably consider knowledge as an edge, something that gives them an upper hand in dealings with other species."

Kyle nodded.

"No markings. That' s very typical. Usually there are markings to tell one from the other. We have nameplates on our EVA suits. I' m sure they have something, but we can' t see it. That leads to another possibility. They may see in a different visual spectrum than we do. Or it could be the faceplate that acts like a filter."

"Well, how do you know what' s the right guess?"

"I don' t," he told Kyle. "Just keep all the possibilities in my mind so I' m not too surprised when one possibility reveals itself as the truth."

"Oh. A poker face, then?"

"Exactly."

Bogarde cleared his throat. "The *Vesuvius* has reached the doors to Shuttlebay One."

Favor looked up at Johnson, who sat in the command seat. The captain nodded. "Proceed with the plan."

Chapter 10

LeAnn looked back at the Marines standing at the door hatch. The runabout was packed to nearly full capacity. A squad of twelve Marines stood ready in the aft section of the runabout, while Ironsides and one of the Engineering crew were seated near LeAnn in the cockpit. "We're secure," she told them. "The magnetic clamps are holding. You can start cutting."

Ironsides nodded and turned back to the Marines. "All right. Get to it."

Two Marines handled the laser shears controls mounted on the wall next to the hatch. They cut a wide oval, just within the short docking collar that held the runabout *Fuji* to the massive doors that sealed off the *Galaxy's* main shuttlebay.

Within moments, they had cut a hole into the shuttlebay. They had already checked for an atmosphere, so there wouldn't be a repeat of what happened to the cargo shuttle *San Francisco*.

"All clear," one of the Marines said, looking at his black tricorder. "No atmosphere and no bogeys in range."

Ironsides nodded from inside his suit. "All right. Open the hatch. Weapons hot."

The door swung open, and the Marines filed out into the dark cavern that was the shuttlebay.

Their lights shone on rows of shuttles parked alongside one side of the bay. Then their lights hit a large craft that took up more than half of the shuttlebay. It had a smooth, yet angular design, something already familiar to Ironsides and LeAnn.

"So that's how they got here," Ironsides remarked.

"Looks damaged, sir," Lieutenant Dawson said. He shone his rifle's light at a deep groove alongside the shuttle.

"Yeah," Ironsides said. "Probably from hitting the warp nacelle."

"The *Galaxy* must have let it come in, to help out," Dawson guessed.

"Bad move." Ironsides turned and looked at the others. He raised his rifle, looking at the power indicator. "I've got a bad power pack, I need to swap it, Ironsides told the others. "Hold position here."

The major walked back into the runabout, going into the aft compartment. LeAnn's voice spoke to him in his suit. "Major? Something wrong, sir?"

"Bad phaser power pack. I'm changing it out," Ironsides told her. He kneeled at the far back of the runabout, out of view. He pulled open a storage drawer, looking at the small octagonal gray devices inside.

Ironsides tapped on his gauntlet's wrist readout. His suit's limited computer processor spoke data to him. "Confirmed, Q-6 charge frequency keyed in to Ironsides' suit."

He pulled several of the charges out of the drawer, secreting them into his suit's various storage compartments, discarding his suit's tricorder and first aid kit to make room.

Once he had stowed away five charges, the major cleared his throat and spoke into his suit's comm system. "Ensign LeAnn, sit tight. If there are any problems, we'll be coming right back for a pull out. *But not before we blow this ship to hell, Captain's orders or no*," he thought to himself.

"Yes, sir," LeAnn nodded, speaking into her suit's comm system, unaware of Ironsides' covert actions.

Ironsides shoved the drawer back closed, out of view. He stood, picking up his rifle and walked out to see the other Marines standing vigilantly.

"Come on. We've got a timetable to keep." Ironsides looked at the group under his command. "Stay together."

The group of Marines walked out into the dark shuttlebay, passing underneath the Vendoth craft, headed for the doors that led out into the ship.

One of the Marines doused his rifle's light and held his fist up, making the others pause and do the same. Ironsides saw why. One of the Vendoth entered the shuttlebay, heading for the ramp that led up into their craft.

Apparently he was unaware of their presence since they were behind one of the large landing struts of the craft. Ironsides motioned for them to wait until the alien reached the ramp.

When the black suited Vendoth stepped in front of the ramp, Ironsides and two other men converged onto the alien. They leapt on him, wrestling him to the ground. Ironsides tried to pin the alien's arms back, but his sharp fingers kept scraping across his suit's armor. He kicked with a squat leg, pushing one of the Marines backwards. The other Marine jumped on his legs, trying to press them down.

Another Marine came out of hiding and kneeled on the Vendoth's chest. "Smash the helmet," Ironsides ordered.

The Marine obliged, hammering on the Vendoth's black featureless helmet with his rifle's butt. After several blows, the faceplate cracked. It took several more blows to subdue the alien.

The Vendoth laid motionless on the deck of the shuttlebay, his face a pulpy orange mess.

Ironsides stood up and looked at the Marine laying on the floor several meters away. "Someone check on Private Winvox."

A Marine hurried to the fallen Marine's side. "He's unconscious. His suit indicates a severe concussion. Must've banged his head hard on the deck."

"Damn it," Ironsides sighed. He turned to Dawson who stood by his side. "Go and help him carry Winvox back to the runabout. I'll contact the ship."

"Yes, sir," Dawson said, walking over to Winvox.

Ironsides shook his head and took one more look around the shuttlebay, with his rifle's light back on. "What the?" He slowly walked up to one of the far walls, just beyond where Winvox fell to the deck. He moved his light and saw that the far wall was bumpy.

The closer he got, he saw the truth. Piles of bodies were stacked like cordwood, to over his head. Some of the other Marines walked up to him, looking at the grotesque pile.

"Holy shit," one whispered.

"So that's where all of them went," the other said.

"No," Ironsides said. "There were 47 crew. This is only about 20 or so. They must be gathered up elsewhere." Ironsides shone his light on a single body laying next to the pile. The body was human, stripped of her uniform. Her chest was opened, revealing the internal organs.

"Why would they do that?" one of the Marines asked.

"Probably a dissection," Ironsides said. "These Vendoth apparently like to learn new things."

"I think I'm gonna be sick."

Ironsides turned back to the Marine. "Don't. It's too messy in a suit. Be sick some other time."

"Yes, sir."

Ironsides stepped away from the stack of bodies. He looked at the queasy Marine. "Take a tricorder recording of this. Maybe we'll be able to sort out who is who, so their families can be informed."

The Marine nodded, pulling out a black tricorder. He walked slowly past the pile of stiff bodies, waving the tricorder.

Ironsides watched the Marine for a moment, before turning away. "Marine One to No Name City, please advise."

Johnson's voice echoed within his helmet. "No Name City here. Give me a sitrep."

"We subdued a Vendoth, no weapons. There's an alien shuttle in this shuttlebay, probably their ship. We've also found approximately 20 of the ship's original crew here, all dead."

"I see."

"One of my men is down, Private Winvox. Severe concussion. That will leave us with only seven to take the Battle Bridge."

"Is the engineer still alive?"

Ironsides turned to look at the white suited engineer that was part of the group. "Yes, sir. Lieutenant Poulson is fine."

"Good, we need him to break the Vendoth's computer control."

"Without Winvox, I will only have eight men to take the Battle Bridge," Ironsides pointed out.

Johnson's answer was almost immediate. "Take Ensign LeAnn, have her replace Winvox. She can help pilot the ship out of the nebula."

"Is that wise? She has not been in a combat situation like this before. She's green."

"She'll be fine. Your men will be there to protect her. Proceed as planned. No Name City out."

Ironsides heard the telltale click of a closed connection. "Yes, sir," he sighed.

Johnson rubbed his finger against his thumb, frowning at the view screen. "Status of the *Rainier* team?"

Bogarde replied, "They're en route to rendezvous with the *esuivius* team."

"Good, is everything going according to the timetable?"

"Yes, sir."

Johnson looked at the helm officer, Lieutenant Amanda Ruiz, seeing her glancing back at him.

"Is there something, Lieutenant?"

She took a deep breath, about to begin to say something, but instead expelled the air. "No, sir. I'm just

concerned about the teams."

"They' ll be fine," Johnson said. "Ensign LeAnn will be fine as well," he smiled.

Ruiz blinked at the mention of the ensign' s name. "Yes, sir, they should be," she replied, turning back to her station at the helm.

"All right, this is the junction we' re supposed to hold at," Corporal Yonig said to the rest of his men. "Lieutenant Dawson is due here any minute," he said, looking at his wrist gauntlet' s readout. He looked at the six other Marines who stood warily in the corridor. As per their training, they watched all directions.

Private Ballatin spoke up. "Do you think we' re gonna makét?"

Yonig looked at the private. "Of course. We know how to hurt them now, and we won' t be ambushed. I' ve been thinking about something. We' ve never seen more than five of them together at the same time. Makes me wonder just how many there are, really."

"Good point, sir," Ballatin nodded. "I can' t help but feel like they can' t be stopped. I watched them wipe out four of our guys in no time flat. I would' ve been smoked too, if it hadn' t been for you guys showing up just on time."

"Relax, Thora," Yonig said. "I know you' re scared. We' re all scared. Anyone who says otherwise is a lying *endvoith*."

Ballatin chuckled slightly.

Yonig added, "But we' re Marines, aren' t we?"

"Yes, sir, we are."

"I didn' t hear you!"

Ballatin shouted, "Yes, sir, we are!"

Yonig slammed a fist on Ballatin' s shoulderpad, and she slammed a fist on his suit as well.

Several dots of lights floated down one of the corridors, approaching the Marines. Yonig tensed up, aiming his rifle. The others took aim with their rifles as well, shining lights down at the newcomers. "Halt, friend or foe?"

"Neither," came the reply. "Lieutenant Dawson here. At ease."

Yonig smiled thinly, exhaling a sigh of relief. "Right on time, sir," he said to the lieutenant.

"All right," Dawson said. He surveyed the group of Marines, twelve in all. "Let' s get moving to Main Engineering."

Bogarde called out. "Lieutenant Dawson' s team has joined up with the *Rainier* team. They' re en route to Main Engineering. ETA less than nine minutes."

"And the ETA for Ironsides' men?" Johnson asked.

"Under five minutes."

Ironsides paused, switching off his rifle' s light. He peered around the corner to the single door that was in the hallway. "Doesn' t look like anyone is around," he said. He stepped around the corner slowly, clicking his rifle' s flashlight back on. The light shone dwn the hallway, revealing nothing.

He motioned for the others to follow him down the hallway. "You, watch down that way. And you, guard the other direction. We have just about four minutes before we start."

His men acknowledged his orders, spreading out in a defensive posture. Ironsides looked at his wrist readout. After pressing a series of requests on the console, his suit' s computer told him what he wanted to know.

"Confirmed, all charges are now active, awaiting encrypted detonation code."

Each of the five charges he had surreptitiously placed throughout the journey from the shuttlebay to this deck were ready. Ironsides looked up from his wrist readout and stared out into the corridor, waiting.

Dawson paused, crouching at the corner. He knelt forward, looking around the corner. Then he looked in the other direction. "All right. Move, double time!"

The others hurried past Dawson, weapons at the ready.

"They' re gone," Ballatin declared.

"Who?" Dawson asked as he stood up.

"The Marines that were killed from before," Ballatin explained. Four of them were right here in front of the entrance."

"She's right," Yonig added.

Dawson looked down the hallway that led up to the large doors of Main Engineering. "Well, they must have taken them elsewhere. Remember what the major found in the shuttlebay?"

"Ugh, yeah," Ballatin said.

Dawson looked at his wrist gauntlet and tapped in a message.

"Lieutenant Dawson reports his team in place," Bogarde told Johnson.

The captain turned to look at Favor, sitting in the adjacent seat to him. He turned to look at Lieutenant Kyle sitting in the other adjacent seat. Johnson looked back up at the blurry view screen. "Tell all teams to be ready," he said to Bogarde.

"Aye, sir."

The captain twisted the monitor between him and Favor, calling up a tactical schematic.

Johnson looked back at Favor. "Go ahead."

The ambassador stood up and stepped to the space in between the helm station and the captain's seat. He looked back at Bogarde. "Chief, if you please?"

"Yes, Ambassador. Hailing the *Galaxy*."

"Project Leader, the other ship has initiated an communications connection to this craft," Si' Paien said from her seat at one of the aft stations.

Aung' Rama looked up from her remote minutiae viewer in her hand. "Are they attempting to seize control?"

"No," Si' Paien answered. "This is an communications request, addressed to us."

"Allow it," Aung' Rama said, looking back at Si' Paien.

The view screen on the *Courageous* changed from a murky, static filled view of the *Galaxy* within the nebula, to a slightly clearer, but still static filled view of the bridge of the *Galaxy*.

Favor saw one of the Vendoth seated in the captain's seat. The Vendoth turned to see Favor in her own view screen. He thought he could see another Vendoth seated in the far back, but the resolution of the image was too poor to be accurate.

He licked his lips and smiled. "This is the *U.S.S. Courageous*, a Federation starship. I am Ambassador Nathan Favor. You are the Vendoth, correct?"

The Vendoth turned aside, speaking to another figure. Favor couldn't understand what was being said. All that came through was a long series of guttural sounds. Favor turned to Bogarde. "Is the Universal Translator working?"

"Yes," Bogarde said. "It just says it needs more information to analyze their language."

The Vendoth turned back to face the view screen. "*You are correct. We are the Vendoth. I am Project Leader Qe' Doth Aung' Rama, the superior here.*"

Favor looked back at Bogarde. "About time the translator started working."

"It's not the translator," Bogarde answered back. "That alien is speaking Federation Standard."

"Oh," Favor nodded, looking at Aung' Rama. "Well, Project Leader Aung' Rama..."

"*Project Leader Qe' Doth Aung' Rama!*" the Vendoth snapped.

"Project Leader Qe' Doth Aung' Rama," Favor amended. "I'm here to negotiate for the release of our ship."

"*There is nothing to negotiate. We have this ship in our control. It is ours now.*"

"Well, I would understand that under certain salvage laws. However, I know that this ship was not abandoned when you arrived. So it remains the Federation's property."

"*This ship and its technology is Vendoth property. We will use it as we see fit.*" Aung' Rama stared at them through the view screen. "*You seek to negotiate with us. You have nothing to offer. You have nothing to bargain with. Our superiority should be evident. Your soldiers have seen that.*"

"The fact that your soldiers were able to kill ours quickly does not prove superiority," Favor said.

"Your ignorance to facts is almost forgivable in light of your inferiority," Aung' Rama said. "*The simple fact of the matter is that the only thing we need to negotiate is your surrender. Realize the truth. We Vendoth are superior.*"

Favor turned to face Johnson, hoping for some hint as to how to proceed. Johnson's face was only set in a grim frown. "Right," he said, pressing an icon on the monitor next to him.

"Time to go," Ironsides looked at his men. "Move out."

"That' s the order," Dawson shouted. "Go!" He set down the corridor, running at breakneck speed, followed shortly by the others. They slammed against the wall next to the Engineering doors. Two Marines twisted the door manual release.

"It' s not working!"

Dawson swore. "Someone give me a quick reading!"

"There' s an atmosphere in Engineering!"

"Right, then," Dawson nodded. He stepped back and leveled his rifle at the door. The others did the same. They started firing. Within seconds, a huge gaping hole was burned through the locked doors. Air started rushing out, pressing the Marines back.

Almost comically, a partially suited Vendoth was sucked through the hole, slamming into the Marines, knocking several, including Ballatin, down to the deck.

The Vendoth, having a remarkable presence of mind not to breathe, grabbed at the collar of Ballatin.

The others struggled to grab the Vendoth, dragging him off Ballatin. She swung her gloved fist in the Vendoth' s face. The punch seemed to have no effect.

The walls around the Marines erupted into weapons fire. Ballatin looked through the hole and saw that several of the Vendoth were fully suited, protected against the explosive decompression. They were firing wildly, trying to regroup against the unexpected attack.

Ballatin pushed with her feet, forcing the Vendoth to lose his balance. She was able to scramble for her rifle while the other two Marines pulled at the alien. Once she seized her rifle, she spun around on her knees, and fired at near-pointblank range. The Vendoth' s exposed head ruptured in a geyser of orange blood and tan bone shrapnel.

"Move back!" Dawson shouted, seeing the suited Vendoth approaching the ruptured doors. "Take cover!"

The Vendoth converged at the entrance, firing at the Marines. One Marine' s chestplate ruptured in a flare of sparks, exposing the sensitive inner workings. He pin-wheeled his arms as he staggered backwards. It only took another shot to pierce the chestplate and scorch the Marine' s chest.

"Spread out," Dawson screamed into the comm system. "Don' t bunch up together, you stupid assholes!"

Ballatin scrambled further back in the corridor. She turned and kneeled in a firing position, laying down cover fire, keeping the Vendoth pinned in Engineering. She saw the others doing the same in the side corridors. She smiled grimly. This time, it seemed, they had the upper hand against the Vendoth.

The thin door slid open easily, and a gray-suited Marine rushed in, waving his rifle around. "All clear," he called out. His light played over the small pie-shaped room that was the Battle Bridge. Several more Marines rushed in, spreading around the perimeter of the room, their multiple beams of lights crisscrossing across the dark room.

Ironsides stepped in, and grabbed Poulson. He pointed to one of the small curved Aft stations.

"Lieutenant, get to work, we only have so much time!"

Poulson rushed to the station, not bothering to sit at the small stool provided there. He ran his thick white gloved fingers over the dimly lit console. The lights brightened at his touch. Within seconds, the rest of the consoles in the Battle Bridge lit up.

Ironsides watched LeAnn rush into the room, carrying a phaser rifle clumsily. He pulled her aside.

"Ensign, forget the rifle. Go to the helm. As soon as Lieutenant Poulson gets impulse power, get us the hell out of this nebula."

"Aye, sir," LeAnn nodded, dropping her rifle against the side of a computer station. She weaved past the freestanding Tactical station and the lone captain' s seat to one of the two stations at the forefront of the Battle Bridge. She sat down in the right hand station, sliding the seat up against the console.

"Rerouting power," Poulson called out. "Initiating fusion reactors."

Ironsides looked over at LeAnn at the forefront of the bridge. "Get us moving as soon as impulse engines are hot, Ensign."

"Just a minute, sir. I have to reset flight configuration. I don' t know why, but all warp nacelles are being brought online."

"No, shut down the Starboard Nacelle!"

"I just did," LeAnn said. "Warning lights were starting to come on. I just took all nacelles offline."

"That' s fine,Ironsides nodded. He turned to Poulson. "How' re you doing with those command lockouts, Poulson?"

The lieutenant spoke as he typed. "It' s hard. So many relays through this ship are blown out, either by damage or by the emergency protocols."

"Well, hurry," Ironsides said. "Pretty soon the Vendoth might figure out what we' re up to."

Aung' Rama looked at the tall long haired human that stood in the view screen before her. He continued talking about the legality and illegality of her actions. She listened to him out of morbid curiosity, listening to him trying to explain their laughably inferior system of law.

He was attempting to open a mutual dialogue, as she had been told to expect. She felt almost embarrassed for the ambassador, because he was clearly making a fool of himself.

If Roq' Ragn had been here, he would have not even allowed the communication to occur. He saw no point in talking with these inferiors. She prided herself in listening to new sources of information, however unorthodox they might be.

Still, she was gleaned no new information from this human. She turned to Si' Paien. "Terminate this conversation," she ordered the other Vendoth.

"Wait, Project Leader. I' m detecting unusual computer activity," she told Aung' Rama.

"From their craft?"

"No, from within this craft," Si' Paien said. "I' m being denied access to various subsystems. It seems to be a fairly simple encryption code. I shall break through in several moments."

"Good," Aung' Rama said. She turned to the view screen and clacked her teeth shut. "This conversation is over. Take this time to prepare yourselves for your surrender."

The view screen went black. She raised her remote minutiae viewer, using her sharpened thumb claw to activate it. "Tr' Dunarg, report." No reply came.

She tried again. "Qo' Doth Tr' Dunarg, answer to your superior!" She turned to Si' Paien. "Can you determine the status of the Engine Room?"

"There is no longer an atmosphere within the Engine Room," she reported back.

Suddenly, the craft began vibrating around her. Aung' Rama jerked in her seat at the startling motion. She leapt to her feet and ran to Si' Paien. "What is happening?"

"Propulsion has been activated. The craft is attempting to move."

"The fools! Don' t they realize this craft is mired in the gravitational pools? Can' t their sensors see that?"

"Apparently not," Si' Paien said. "They are attempting a course outside of the nebula."

"Where are they doing this? From the Engine Room?"

"No, Project Leader. From within another command nexus in this craft."

Aung' Rama hissed. "Discover the location, and contact Roq' Ragn on his personal communications signal."

Dawson watched another Marine fall forward, struck by a precision strike by the two Vendoth snipers hiding behind the Engineering doors. He frowned and fired his rifle, driving them back under cover. The ship' s strange vibrations told him that the Battle Bridge team had taken control.

He counted how many Marines were still left. He could make a visual headcount of nine Marines. He squinted, looking into the Engineering chamber. He saw several Vendoth run in one direction, while one remained fixed in front of the warp core.

"Everyone, start preparing to pull out," he spoke into his suit' s comm system. "We' ve done our bit."

He slowly walked backwards, firing his rifle. From his new vantage point, he saw that only one Vendoth remained at the doors. Sudden realization dawned on him.

"Dawson to Ironsides! Come in, Ironsides!" he shouted. A squeal of static answered him. "Goddamn piece of shit," he banged his helmet. "Dawson to Courageous, warn Ironsides! They' re after him now!"

"What' s going on?" Ironsides shouted, steadying himself against a bulkhead. "Why' s the ship shaking like this?"

"I don' t know!" LeAnn shouted. "I have full impulse already, and the sensors say we' re not moving a millimeter!"

Poulson added, "We' re draining energy by the second. If we haven' t broken free of any gravitational

forces by now, we' re not likely to. I recommend we shut down before we tear the ship apart."

Ironsides swore indistinctly. He cleared his throat and looked over at LeAnn. "Ensign, power down the impulse engines. Poulson, keep locking the Vendoth out."

"They' re already hacking into the security codes," Poulson said. "I' ve never seen anything like it. I' ll keep trying more sophisticated encryption codes, but I think--"

The emergency turbolift on the far side of the Battle Bridge, just beyond where Poulson was sitting, exploded outwards. The Marine standing nearby was flung to the front of the bridge by the force of the explosion. Ironsides saw several shards embedded in the private' s side.

A Vendoth, in full environmental gear, leapt through the open turbolift doorway, his weapon firing. Ironsides dove for cover, shouting, "They' ve found us! Pull out!"

Another Vendoth jumped in through the turbolift shaft. He brandished his weapon, and fired. Ironsides followed the energy bolt as it blasted through LeAnn' s suit. The console in front of LeAnn exploded, knocking her backwards. He heard LeAnn' s scream of agony, ~~the~~ a sudden silence.

Chapter 11

The silence following LeAnn' s curtailed dying scream was replaced by Johnson' s voice. "the Battle Bridge secure?"

"No, the Vendoth burst in us," Ironsides shouted glancing around the enclosed location. "We can't keep them out!"

"Why haven' t you moved the ship yet?"

"We tried! No good! I' m ordering a retreat! I' ve already ~~id~~nsign LeAnn and Private El Abbendi," Ironsides shouting, looking around on the bridge.

"No! Stay there!" Johnson shouted into Ironsides' ear.

"I' m not going to lose more people," Ironsides shouted back. "Our defenses are blown! We' re pulling out!"

The major gritted his teeth and fired his rifle from his low position. His shots found their marks in the first Vendoth' s leg, knocking him down on the deck.

Another Vendoth came through the shaft, diving to the ground. Ironsides saw that the alien had a clear shot at him. He rolled quickly onto his back, pushing with his right arm. The energy bolt that would' ve drilled down his head, instead struck his wrist, causing the keypad to explode.

He shouted at the searing pain, and jerked his hand back, tucking against the wall. Ironsides looked up at Poulson, and saw him trying to run. A Vendoth fired, ripping an energy bolt through the small ankle joint in Poulson' s boot. He screamed, tumbling to the ground, losing hold of his weapon.

Ironsides scrambled to his feet, shouting into his helmet' s comm system. "Everyone, pull out!" He ran backwards, firing his rifle in a wide arc, awkwardly with his left hand and arm. He bumped into another Marine, headed back out into the corridor. The other Marine stepped aside to let the Major through, and that courtesy cost him his life.

One of the Vendoth fired a head shot, knocking the Marine back against the wall. Ironsides paused to see if he could grab the Marine, but a bloody faceplate told him it would' ve been pointless.

He fired his rifle at the Vendoth who had just killed the Marine next to him. Most of the shots went wild, but a few struck the Vendoth on the shoulder, causing him to drop back for cover.

Ironsides turned and ran, following several Marines out into the corridor. He felt a dull thud on his back. Since it didn' t burn through to his skin, he guessed it was just a shot that grazed him. He dove out of the door, spilling into the hallway.

The other Marines that were able to escape looked at him. "Back to the runabout!"

They set off running. Ironsides turned, running backwards, watching the corridors. None of the Vendoth seemed to come after them. "Singleminded sons of bitches," he muttered to himself. They hadn't changed their *modus operandi* - drive out the intruders, and secure the area.

"We' re almost there," Dawson told the others. "Ballatin, are any of them following us?"

"No," Ballatin answered back. "Nothing on the tricorder either."

"I hope Ironsides got out," Dawson sighed. He turned another corner and saw the docking port. He looked at the Marine he was carrying. "You' ll be okay. We' ll patch you up in ~~the~~ *Rainier* and take you back to the *Courageous*."

The Marine could only groan his thanks. His suit's midsection showed a dark gray patch covering up a large burn hole below his suit's chestplate. The two of them hobbled to the docking port as others rushed by them.

Within moments, Dawson was seated next to the designated squad pilot. "No Name City, come in. Marine Boat Two requesting evac."

"Come home," Bogarde's vice said.

With that, the squad pilot pulled the runabout away from the *Galaxy*.

Aung' Rama looked at Tr' Dunarg. "Your bravery is commended. I am pleased you are able to continue your service to the Vendoth."

"It is simply the fact that I still cannot get this ship's technology to reveal itself to me," Tr' Dunarg said, wincing slightly. His green hide showed gray scaling, a result of the low temperatures when the Engine Room had been decompressed.

"Referring to that, what is your progress?"

"I regret to inform you, Project Leader, that our progress is nil. With our limited working technology, we are unable to make progress as usual."

"I understand," Aung' Rama blinked.

"Furthermore, this craft's power reserves are dangerously low. We need more power, otherwise we will be soon dead in space, as we were before."

"Well, it seems I shall now have to bargain with these inferiors. Fortunately, we come prepared." She turned to Roq' Ragn. "Stay here. I shall return to the Central Command." With that, she clicked her helmet back on, and strode out of the Engine Room.

Johnson looked at Ironsides. "You did a good job pulling your men out."

Ironsides shrugged, looking at his hand, encased in a metallic cast. "I was doing my job, sir. I look out for my men. I do what's in their best interests."

"I know," Johnson nodded. "I see no other option. I'm going to have to scuttle the ship."

"Lieutenant Dawson already has a plan for that. Talk to him," Ironsides said.

"I will," Johnson nodded, leaning against the wall of the biomed Ironsides laid on. He looked around, seeing other injuries being treated in the large Sickbay.

"Bridge to Captain Johnson."

Johnson tapped his comm-badge. "Johnson here."

"The Vendoth are hailing us," Kyle announced.

"I'm on my way," Johnson said, walking briskly out of the Sickbay. Moments later, he walked onto the Bridge. "Report, Lieutenant."

Kyle stood away from the command seat. "The Vendoth, Aung' Rama, is hailing us."

"On screen," Johnson told Bogarde.

The view screen showed Aung' Rama standing in the center of the *Galaxy's* Bridge.

Johnson walked to the center of his bridge and sat in his command seat, glaring at the Vendoth.

Aung' Rama began speaking. "Courageous, *your diversionary tactics failed. Once again, you lose more people to our superior forces. You prove your inferiority in your actions.*"

Favor, who had remained on the bridge, spoke up. "Superior people don't need to gloat, since they know they are superior. You contacted us for a reason."

"Ah, a minuscule flash of superior insight," Aung' Rama said. *"Earlier, you wished to bargain. You had nothing to offer. Now it turns out you do."*

"And what do you have to offer?" Favor asked.

Aung' Rama looked at him. *"Are you the superior on your craft?"*

Favor frowned slightly. "No, I'm not necessarily"

"Begone, do not waste my time. Who is the superior?" Aung' Rama asked.

"I am," Johnson leaned forward in his seat. "What do you propose?"

"I do not propose. I dictate," Aung' Rama said. Her eyes narrowed into thin slits. Johnson noticed the strange black marks on her head seemed to raise away from her skin, like quills. *"Your foolish maneuver has cost us much power. We require more of your power batteries."*

"To what end? What do you want?" Johnson asked, realizing this was the first time anyone had asked the Vendoth that question.

"I want your submission. I want you and one other of your subordinates to deliver more power batteries. I also wish for you to deliver all your technical data on your superspace, that is, your Transwarp Drive, to us."

Johnson frowned. He remembered that Dawson noticed how much they protected the interior of Engineering. "If I do this for you, what will you offer in return?"

"We have survivors from your previous blunders. I am willing to return them to you, in exchange for the power batteries and technical information."

Johnson frowned and clasped his hands together, thinking.

Aung' Rama spoke again. *"We also know you want this ship. If you follow our terms, there is the highest likelihood that we will return this craft back to you. You asked what we wanted. It should be clear from what we asked for from you."*

"You just want the *Galaxy*'s Transwarp Drive," Johnson stated.

Aung' Rama cocked her head. *"Do you see? There are instances in which you can rise above your own inferiority."* She put her hands behind her back, and turned away from the view screen. *"We will expect your arrival within twenty of your standard minutes. We shall discuss terms more. Do not bring weapons. That will only serve to lower my opinion of you, and it is low enough already."*

The connection ended, and her image disappeared from the view screen. Kyle looked at Johnson. "What are you going to do, sir?"

"What else can I do?" Johnson shrugged. "I have an opportunity to salvage this screwed up situation. They have hostages as well."

"But how will we know they will keep their word?" Kyle asked.

Johnson turned to Favor. "You're one of the best judges of character I know. You've had time to speak to this Aung' Rama."

"Aung' Rama. There's an emphasis on the second syllable as well. Yes, their cultural viewpoint is glaringly obvious, and I hate to add, reasonably acceptable. I've read all the reports on the Marines' encounters. Their suits are more advanced and resilient. Their weapons seem to be more accurate and destructive. They've demonstrated a high level of intelligence and sophistication."

"Get to the point, Nathan," Johnson snapped.

"They're certainly more superior than we are," Favor said. "They know that. They've known that for time. As such, they have no reason to lie to us. You've noticed her arrogance, too."

"Her?" Johnson's eyebrows went up. "Aung' Rama is a she?"

"Yes."

"Oh. I didn't know that. Well, you're right. She's fairly arrogant."

"That only bolsters my opinion that they're telling the truth. Why lie when the real truth is so much more devastating?"

"So you think they'll do what they say?"

"Well," Favor sighed, "I think so, as long as you give them what they want. At least, that's the impression I've garnered from speaking with Aung' Rama. Favor looked at Johnson. "I think you should make the trade."

Johnson looked back at Kyle. "What do you think?"

She seemed slightly surprised at being asked. "Well, uh, sir, the ambassador's observations certainly seem very valid. I'm just concerned with what they may do once they get what they want."

"So am I," Johnson said. "Still, I think I should go and talk with their leader. She seemed fairly reasonable."

"That much, she did," Favor said.

Johnson stood up, tugging down his uniform. "I'm going. Kyle, since Ironsides is recuperating from his injury, you have the bridge. Use your best judgment."

Ruiz spun in her seat and stood up. "I volunteer to take you to the *Galaxy*."

Johnson turned to look at her. He paused for a moment, considering it. He nodded briefly. "All right." He tapped his comm-badge. "Bridge to Engineering. Have four portable power generators brought to Shuttlebay Two."

"Acknowledged, Bridge."

Johnson turned to Ruiz. "Meet me in Shuttlebay Two. I have some information I have to dig up."

When Johnson stepped into the shuttlebay, he saw several of the Engineering crew set down four boxy

power generators next to the shuttlepod. Lieutenant Ruiz was already in the shuttlepod, which Johnson noted was named after Edward Teller, the 20th century Earth scientist.

Johnson looked at the PADD in his hand. Contained within the memory of this device were a dozen files full of sensitive information Johnson was able to find on the *Galaxy's* experimental Transwarp Drive. It pained him to prepare to turn it over to a ruthless enemy, but Admiral Nechayev's dire prognostications continued to echo in the back of his mind.

The *Galaxy* was an unexpected treasure, found in the emptiness of No Man's Land. The retrieval of the ship could only boost morale, but also fill up another slot in Starfleet's war fleet.

Ruiz stepped out through the back of the shuttlepod *Teller*, and grabbed two of the portable generators. Johnson stepped up and took a third, carrying it in his free hand into the aft compartment of the shuttlepod.

Another crewman stowed away the final generator. Johnson looked at Ruiz. "We need to suit up," he told her. She nodded, and walked to the rear of the shuttlebay, where the EVA suits were stowed. Johnson followed her, and they both went through the suit-up procedure in silence.

Once in full EVA gear, they walked back to the *Teller*. The flight deck had been cleared in anticipation of their departure. Ruiz took the small boxy shuttlepod through the deactivated force-field, looping around to the *Galaxy*.

Johnson squinted through the foggy view to look at the lost ship. Now closer to the ship, he could make out better details than the view screen on the Bridge ever could show.

"The Vendoth shuttle must have crashed into that warp nacelle," Johnson remarked, pointing upwards through the cockpit windows. "I don't know what else could've done that."

Ruiz only grunted, focusing on the shuttlepod's flight controls. Johnson looked at the PADD in his hand, reading.

"What are you doing?" Ruiz asked after a moment's silence.

"Well, I'm reviewing the data I gathered. I need to know what my enemy's going to know, if I'm going to hand this information over to them."

"I'm also reading up on the status of the *Galaxy* from the briefings we got from the surviving Marines," Johnson added.

"I see."

After several long silent minutes, the *Teller* backed into the docking ring set on the *Galaxy's* 25th deck. With a shudder, Johnson remembered this was the port the *San Francisco* had docked to.

Johnson stood up and went to the aft compartment, stowing away his PADD in one of his suit's utility pockets. The air within the shuttlepod was vented, and the docking hatch opened. Johnson took a surprised step backwards to see two black suited Vendoth standing inside the *Galaxy*. One of them gestured with his weapon.

Johnson looked at Ruiz. "They want the generators. Help me carry them."

Ruiz stood up and joined Johnson in the aft compartment. Each Starfleet officer picked up two generators and followed their Vendoth escorts.

After a lengthy journey through Jeffries tubes, hampered by carrying their loads, Johnson and Ruiz came up against a force-field in front of the open Engineering doors.

Another force-field went up behind them and their Vendoth escorts. A sudden gust of air pushed Johnson back. He realized the force-field was holding air in. The Vendoth behind Johnson and Ruiz pushed them forward to the ruined doorway into Main Engineering.

Johnson saw a Vendoth he believed to be Aung' Rama, and several other Vendoth. He glanced around the area, noting Vendoth posted in strategic points. He counted only seven.

Aung' Rama was standing in front of the Master Control Station, the table-like computer station that stood between Johnson and the warp core. Two other Vendoth were there as well. Johnson noted that one was taller than most of the other Vendoth, and was still partially dressed in his EVA suit.

His escorts were the two exceptions, still fully clad in their EVA suits.

Aung' Rama stepped forward, and gestured to her head and hands.

Johnson unfastened his helmet's collar, and pulled it off his head. Ruiz followed suit.

"Good," Aung' Rama's sibilant voice reached Johnson's ears. "And your gloves. I'm sure you, as we do, have a much easier time manipulating tools without the bulk of vacuum suits."

"Yes," Johnson nodded, taking his gloves off. "You are Project Leader Qe' Doth Aung' Rama, correct?"

"Yes."

"I'm Captain Thomas R. Johnson, Junior, commanding officer of

"Your name is not important," Aung' Rama interrupted him. "You are the superior for your ship. That is all I need to know. I see you have complied with part of our terms. Attach these batteries to the power system."

Johnson looked at Ruiz and nodded. They walked over to a wall. Ruiz pulled off a beige panel, and Johnson knelt, pulling out clear cords from within the recess in the wall. Ruiz did the same, connecting the cords with the generators she carried.

Johnson finished and stood up, turning to look at Aung' Rama. "The generators are feeding their charged power into the ship' s power system."

"Yes, so I see," Aung' Rama nodded, looking at a thin angular device in her hand.

Johnson had to guess it was their version of a PADD. He spoke again. "It' ll take a few moments before the power is fully fed into the ship."

Aung' Rama stared at Johnson for a moment. The captain fixed his eyes back on her, determined not to appear afraid.

Aung' Rama' s gray eyes blinked. "I am certain you know the fate of this ship' s peoples."

"I know you killed some of them," Johnson said.

"Yes, regrettable," Aung'Rama rubbed her hands. She turned to look at the tall Vendoth, who only stared blankly back at her. Johnson frowned, wishing he knew what that was about.

Aung' Rama turned back to him. "After our unfortunate collision with their ship, they allowed us to enter their shuttlebay. It was then we noticed odd behavior. Some acted very irrational and attacked us. We noted some cellular disruption in their bodies."

"Yes, the effects of transwarp travel," Johnson nodded. "We know. The ship was not fully protected against that."

"Our Qa' Doth has come to the same conclusion, the radiogenic effects of your transwarp device affected their physiology."

"Look, with all due respect, you said you would just leave this ship to us," Johnson said. "Let' s just do this trade."

The tall Vendoth surged forward, obviously angry at Johnson' s terse comment. Aung' Rama pointed at him, shooting him a stare. She turned back to Johnson. "You cannot be blamed for your erroneous behavior to us. You cannot understand our infinite superiority without sufficient information. We come from the Kalium Galaxy. Actually, not your Kalium Galaxy, but one that exists on a different plane from this one.

"Our society has thrived for many generations, and we control much of the inhabited systems in the Kalium Galaxy. It is only understandable, since we have proved to be superior to the other species we have encountered. My shuttle was trapped in this gravitational nexus, interacting with the energies released by your Transwarp Drive. We only wish to return to our proper home. Once we are able to operate your Transwarp Drive, we will incorporate it within our shuttle and leave your dimension, rejoining our fleet."

The tall Vendoth shouted a long string of guttural noises, pointing at Aung' Rama.

Her eyes narrowed in slits, and her quills stood on end as she spun to face the tall Vendoth. She shouted at him. Suddenly, the tall Vendoth leapt forward, grabbing Aung' Rama' s arms, his own quills erect.

Johnson furrowed his brows in confusion. He looked at the other Vendoth, and none of them seemed concerned for their leader' s welfare. They only stood by, watching the struggle.

"That is enough! You seek to bring yourself down to their level," Roq' Ragn shouted. "You speak to the inferior as a near equal, and provide information unnecessary to his submission. This, in addition to your clear dependence on inferior minds and technology requires me to challenge your claim to superiority. I, VenQu' Roq' Ragn, challenge you, Qo'thAung' Rama. Since there is *no* *umcre* to judge my claim, I invoke a challenge by strength, to you, Aung' Rama!"

Aung' Ramawhirled around to look at Roq' Ragn. The subdued resistance to her authority had erupted full force. She glanced around at the others, and saw no support. She knew that Roq' Ragn had the clear advantage in a purely physical combat. However, she was highly trained in combat. She would prove herself to be the superior, once and for all.

"Fine, Roq' Ragn, I accept your challenge by strength!"

Roq' Ragn wasted no time in attacking. He grabbed Aung' Rama' s wrists, but she spun deftly around, countering his move. Now one of her hands was free. She ducked a chop from Roq' Ragn' s hand, and jammed the sharp talon of her thumb into Roq' Ragn' s neck.

Orange blood spouted from the wound. Roq' Ragn hissed and staggered. The tide had turned into

Aung' Rama' s favor. Suddenly, Roq' Ragn spun, executing a malyered move, which ended with Aung' Rama bent backwards over his kee. He bent down, burying his lower fangs into Aung' Rama' s exposed neck. With a jerk of his head, Roq' Ragn tore her throat out.

Victorious, Roq' Ragn dropped Aung' Rama' s body to the deck, as orange blood pooled around her. He glared at the others. "I have proven my superiority by strength! Are there any who challenge my claim to superiority? Come, before I assume leadership."

None of the others called out a claim. "Good. I am your superior. You are my inferiors," he declared, ending the ritual transfer of power.

Chapter 12

Johnson barely could keep up with the aliens' ritualized grappling. It superseded all forms ofombat he had ever seen. It was like a complex martial arts exhibition being presented in high speed. Almost as quickly as it began, it ended with Aung' Rama' s throat ripped open by the tall Vendoth. He stood tall, dropping the other Vendoth to the deck. He called out again in his own language, looking at the other Vendoth.

All of a sudden, Johnson realized the whole incident had the striking similarity to the way the Klingons challenged their superior officer' s competency. The tall Vendoth must be the new leader.

The Vendoth turned to Johnson. "Now, give me the transwarp data," he said in Federation Standard, tinged with a mild accent.

Johnson put a hand to his pocket. "Who are you?" he asked.

"I am superior, that is all you truly need to know," the Vendoth said. Johnson noted that the accent was completely gone. "By now, our superiority should be evident. However, you may address me as Project Leader VenQu' Roq' Ragn. Now, turn over the transwarp data."

Johnson set his mouth in a tight line. "Show me the hostages. I want to know if they' re still alive."

Roq' Ragn gave Johnson what seemed to be a hissingigh. "Be mindful that resistance to Vendoth superiority is punished by death."

Johnson crossed his arms and looked at Roq' Rgn. "Fine, do what with me as you will. I don' t care. Kill me, and you lose the data you desperately need."

Roq' Ragn stant at Johnson, opening and closing his jaw with a slight clacking sound. He turned to another Vendoth nearby. Talking in his native language, he spoke a string of commands. The Vendoth answered back and walked into the Chief Engineer' s office. He and anotherVendoth came out with two of Johnson' s men.

With a start, Johnson recognized a half-Bajoran, Ensign LeAnn Walker, and a human, Lieutenant Anders Poulson. LeAnn was bent over in pain, holding her side. Johnson saw a burn hole in the front and back of her EVA suit. She had a scabbed over wound and some bruises from an impact on her head.

Poulson was limping painfully. His suit' s right boot had been removed, and Johnson saw blood seeping through some rudimentary bandages made from his black trousers.

The Vendoth escorted the wounded prisoners to Roq' Ragn' s side. The Vendoth placed a hand on the nape of LeAnn' s neck. "Ayou can see, they are relatively alive. We were able to provide some medical attention."

"Walker! Are you okay?" Ruiz shouted.

The ensign wheezed. "I' ve been better, Mandy."

Johnson' s mouth suddenly went dry. He swallowed. "Okay, Project Leader VenQu' Roq' Ragn, I will

Roq' Ragn squeezed his thick hand, twisting. LeAnn' s neck snapped loudly, and her body welimp. Roq' Ragn held her lifeless body up by the strength of his hand and arm. "You misunderstand meYour resistance does not necessarily mean *your* death," he spoke.

"Walker!!" Ruiz surged forward, held back by the two Vendoth escorts. "Walker!"

All the words left Johnson' s mind. He watched as Roq' Ragn dropped Ensign LeAnn' s body down to the deck. He heard the sobs of Ruiz behind him. Roq' Ragn clasped his hands behind his back, looking placidly at Johnson. His voice sounded distantly in Johnson' smind. "Provide us with the transwarp data, now."

Johnson turned back to see Ruiz, on her knees, weeping. His shoulders slumped and he unsealed the pocket he secreted the PADD in. He pulled it out, walking to Roq' Ragn at the Master Control Station. "I'll help you, Roq' Ragn."

"Project Leader VenQu' Roq' Ragn," he corrected Johnson. "It is good to see you accept the properder

of things." Roq' Ragn said. "Finally, you submit," He took the PADD from Johnson and handed it to a nearby Vendoth, speaking briefly.

The Vendoth nodded and walked towards the Transwarp Drive near the warp core, reading the PADD. Johnson stepped to the Master Control Station, calling up an engineering display. "The power transfer is nearly complete. I'll reconfigure Engineering so you can get this working, and get the hell out of here."

Roq' Ragn watched the human working at the station. He looked at the other Vendoth. Tr' Dunarg was busy reading the PADD that they just acquired. He looked at one of the other Vendoth, his clanmate, Roq' Rulgul.

"The fool doesn't realize he is dooming his Earth. Once we return to our proper dimension and carry out our invasion, destroy the offending Federation, we shall use this technology to return here. Then we shall obliterate this inferior's Earth, thus proving Vendoth superiority in two dimensional planes. Imagine the accolades we shall garner! Our clan shall be elevated!" Roq' Ragn gurgled in laughter.

The human looked up from the computer station, his dull eyes looking into Roq'Ragn's eyes. "Project Leader VenQu' Roq' Ragn, you wanted it? You got it." The human jammed his blunt thumb on a menu icon on the table.

The ship bucked beneath them, the deck rolling beneath their feet. A tremendous vibratory shockwave rippled throughout the metal of the ship.

"Inferior!" Roq' Ragn shouted at the human, grabbing at the station for support. "What did you do!"

The vibrations worsened, and the shaking was jarring Roq' Ragn's teeth. The human tumbled to the floor and started scrambling for the entrance. Roq' Ragn felt a draft of air blow past him, towards the ruptured entrance doors.

He looked over at Tr' Dunarg, who was trying unsuccessfully to get to his feet. "Report!"

"The Transwarp Drive is energized! I don't know what's happening, I cannot see the control panels!"

The lights began flickering, as did the control station displays. Roq' Ragn stared at the menu the human was working on. "No!" he shouted.

Johnson managed to get to his feet. It felt like an earthquake was ripping the ship apart. He called out to Ruiz, who managed to free herself from her Vendoth captors in the explosive confusion. "Lieutenant! Put your helmet and gloves on!"

"Why? What did you do, Captain?"

"I fed all power into the Transwarp Drive! Life support's losing power now! So is everything else, this ship is gonna tear itself apart!"

Ruiz had her gloves on in a matter of seconds after pulling them out of an utility pocket. She went after her helmet, which was rolling on the deck.

Johnson ran after his own helmet, crouching for stability. A Vendoth fired at him, but the shot went over his head since he was bent over.

His helmet rolled towards the entrance, following the out-rush of air. He managed to grab it, breathing heavily in the thinner air. He snapped it in place and looked at Ruiz, who was fully suited now.

Johnson turned back and saw Poulson struck down with a Vendoth energy bolt. Blood spilled from his mouth as he crawled across the deck. The Vendoth that killed Poulson looked at Johnson. It was Roq' Ragn. He screamed at Johnson.

Johnson spun and dove past the crumpled doors, hitting the deck. Roq' Ragn's shot sizzled over him.

Ruiz grabbed him and pulled him to his feet, leaning against the side of a corridor for support. "How the hell are we supposed to get back to the shuttlepod before this ship goes?"

Johnson thought back to a favorite phrase that his father tended to employ, while at work in his naval shipyards in Ireland. *Oh, bugger me.* He looked at Ruiz. "I'm sorry. I wasn't thinking that far ahead."

Ruiz frowned angrily at Johnson.

"Wait, Deck 40! Port side! We can get there just in time, there should still be lifeboats there!" Johnson ran down the corridor, with Ruiz in tow. Together, they pulled open a vertical Jeffries Tube, and slid down the ladder to the next deck. Fortunately, most of the hatches between decks were open, so they were both able to slide down the ship. The dwindling gravity let them leap down the final few decks without serious injury.

Ruiz saw the deck number plate first. "Captain, here!" She rushed to the hatch leading to Deck 40. She pulled it open, and jumped through it. Johnson leapt through the hatch, bouncing off the deck. Ruiz shone

her flashlight. "Down here!"

They ran to a series of hatches. Ruiz peered in one. "This lifeboat' s gone."

"So' s this one," Johnson said, struggling to look through the hatch window in the midst of the severe vibrations. He ran to the last one in the series. "This one' s still here!" He grabbed the long lever, opening the lifeboat hatch.

The ship shook violently again, throwing them to the deck. Ruiz yelled as she climbed up on the lifeboat hatch. "What the hell did you do?"

Kyle watched the view screen nervously. Now that she had the bridge in a crisis mode, with the first officer in Sickbay, and the captain in the middle of the danger, she didn' t quite like the feeling of the command seat.

"Sir," Bogarde called out to Kyle. "I' m reading a power spike in the *Galaxy*."

"What?" Kyle sat up in the command seat. She saw the faint red glow of the Bussard collectors appear in all three of the *Galaxy*' s warp nacelles. Then blue light shone through the warp engine field grill that lined each nacelle.

Suddenly, a blinding flash filled the view screen. The view screen went black for a moment, compensating for the high illumination factor. When the view screen turned back on, Kyle saw that the starboard warp nacelle was completely gone, and part of the nacelle support strut was gone as well.

In horror, Kyle noticed something else as well. A burning fringe of gases was sweeping around the *Galaxy*. The liquid-like flames continued to consume the pockets of flammable elements hanging in the nebula.

"Red alert!" Kyle ordered. She looked at the helm officers at the helm stations. "Get us out of the nebula, full impulse!"

Favor turned to look at Kyle. "What about Captain Johnson?"

"He' s probably gone. I' ve got to get us out here. Chief Bogarde, what' s the status of the *Galaxy*? Is she moving?"

"Sir," Bogarde said, "If I' m reading this right, I think the *Galaxy* is going into transwarp. I don' t think it' s going to make it."

The *Courageous* shuddered violently. "Report," Kyle called out.

"I don' t know what' s going on," Bogarde said.

Kyle thumbed the command seat' s comm panel. "Bridge to Science Lab One."

"*This is Doctor Joh*," a woman' s voice answered.

"Can you tell us what' s going on here?"

"*Yes, I can*," Joh replied. "*I' ve been monitoring the situation. Part of the gravitational mass of this nebula is due to the elements suspended here. Since the warp nacelle' s explosion ignited the elements, the unusual gravitational fields are changing.*"

"She' s right," one of the helm officers said. "We' re being pulled and pushed in different directions." The ship shook again, and Kyle felt her motions turn sluggish.

Bogarde confirmed her suspicions. "We' ve been just hit by two gravitational fronts!" The lights dimmed on the bridge. "The Structural Integrity Field and inertial dampers are being overloaded!"

Suddenly, a computer display on the far wall exploded in a shower of sparks, coinciding with a near blackout on the bridge.

"EPS relays are blowing out all over the ship! Decks 4, 8, 27, 43! More reports coming in," Bogarde called out, gripping the Tactical station for support. The lights came back on as Bogarde finished his report.

"Maintain power to the SIF and IDF," Kyle shouted. She looked at the helm officers. "Helm, do the best you can," Kyle said. "We need to get out of here before the whole place goes up in flames around us, or before we' re crushed by the nebula' s gravitational center."

"I concur," Doctor Joh added through the comm system. "Can you tell me what the captain did?"

"Starboard nacelle," Johnson answered Ruiz, climbing in the lifeboat. He twisted around, sitting in the acceleration seat. "There' s no time to explain, get going!"

Ruiz, already belted in her seat, jammed the emergency release, and the lifeboat propelled away from the ship. Johnson got a glimpse of a huge ball of fire beyond the broken ship, just before the hatch sealed shut. He turned to Ruiz, who was already gripping the joysticks that flew the lifeboat. "The nebula' s on fire."

"I got worse things to worry about. We' re stuck in a gravimetric current, I can' t alter our course. We' ll be

crushed."

A sudden jolt shook Johnson and Ruiz. "Our course' s changed. We' re being pushed in a different direction."

Another jolt shook the lifeboat. "We' re being bounced around by the gravitational forces in here!"

Johnson activated a small computer display. "It looks like the gravitational currents are being changed. The gravitational center of the nebula is fluctuating."

The lifeboat was shook again by another shockwave. Johnson refocused his eyes on his display. "The *Galaxy'* gone."

"Gone?" Ruiz repeated. "Where?"

"I don' t know, but it' s changed the gravitational fields again. I think we' re being ~~shud~~ away from the center of the nebula now."

"That' s good news," Ruiz said, struggling with the flight joysticks, peering at the small flight information readout mounted in front of her.

"Yeah, but the bad news is to get out of here, we' re going to have to go through the burning gases. It' s coming now," Johnson looked at Ruiz. "I' m sorry." He squeezed his eyes shut as the lifeboat jerked.

The cube shaped lifeboat was engulfed by the rolling tidal wave of fire, spinning helplessly.

"We're clear!"

Kyle sighed in relief at the helm officer' s announcement. Still, the danger wasn' t past. "Bogarde, fortify the shields! The nebula may still be erupting."

"Already on it, sir," Bogarde replied.

As if in response to Kyle' s instinct, the ship shook as geysers of fire shot outwards from the burning nebula.

"We' re being hammered by gravitational shockwaves," Bogarde said. "Shields are still holding, but taking a beating."

"Helm, increase distance between ourselves and the nebula. Stay within scanning range. Doctor Joh will need the data to analyze what happened."

Kyle looked at the view screen, which at last was perfectly clear. The nebula, which once had filled the screen, was now dwindling small and smaller. Flashes of light and eruptions of fire streamed out into the cold vacuum of space.

Kyle panted, tugging at her uniform' s collar. "Bogarde, any sign of the *Galaxy'*?"

"No, sir. It' s vanished from sensors."

"Well, scan harder! Maybe the captain did take control of the ship... I don' t know." A sick feeling filled the pit of Kyle' s stomach.

Bogarde nodded. "Aye, sir. Increasing sensor range and strength."

Kyle chewed on her lower lip, watching the roiling ball of fire on the view screen.

"I' m picking up something!"

"What is it? On screen!" Kyle told Bogarde.

A small beige speck floated on the view screen, trailed by quickly evaporating fire. Kyle leaned forward. "Magnify."

The speck grew to a large misshapen hunk of metal. It looked like a molten slab of tritanium to Kyle. "Is it... a lifeboat?" It didn' t look like any she had ever seen before. No hatches were in view, nor were there anything else recognizable about it.

"Could be, it' s about the right size," Bogarde said.

"Any life signs?" Favor asked quickly.

"I' m not reading any," Bogarde intoned.

Kyle breathed deeply. "Lock a tractor beam on it."

Johnson opened his eyes. He saw Chief Fonda' s worried face looking down at him. He realized he felt someone holding his hand. With a slight move of his neck, he saw Fonda holding his hand.

"Hi," he croaked.

"Hi," Fonda replied. "Well, you' re awake. I' ll be going to Engineering now." She withdrew her hand from his, and walked around Johnson' s biobed, on her way out of the Sickbay. She paused and turned back to Johnson. "Don' t ever give me a scare like that again, Thomas. I mean it." She turned and stepped to the doors that led out of Sickbay.

Another person stepped up to Johnson's side. Johnson looked up into the light blue eyes of Doctor Michelanos, the ship's other senior doctor. He smiled back at the captain. "Hi." He looked at the departing figure of Fonda, then looked back at Johnson. "You know, Commander Fonda has been here for over nine hours, since we brought you in."

"Oh," Johnson managed to say.

Michelanos looked at Johnson for a moment. Finally he said, "So, how're you feeling, Captain?"

Johnson took a moment to assess the state of his body. "I hurt," he declared.

"As well you should," Michelanos said. "You're very lucky to be alive. When we cut you out of the lifeboat, both you and Lieutenant Ruiz had suffered varying amounts of first and second degree burns, and you two had been without oxygen for approximately fifteen minutes. It's fortunate you were wearing EVA suits, that protected you from the intense temperatures your lifeboat was subjected to."

"How's the lieutenant doing?"

"She's fine," Michelanos glanced across the Sickbay. "She's sleeping now, which is what you're supposed to be doing."

"Where's Ed? Doctor Hartman?"

Michelanos looked away and shifted on his feet. "There was an incident earlier today. Everything's fine, but he took himself off the rotation for the day. Do you want me to contact him?"

"No, no. What about the others? The Marines?"

"They're all recovering from their wounds," Michelanos answered.

"Good. Good," Johnson nodded, immediately wincing at the motion. "Doctor, I think I'd like to be alone. I think I'll go back to sleep."

"Sure," Michelanos smiled. "If you feel any itching, just call me or any one of the nurses, and we'll give you a topical cream, or a hypo. Do you need a sedative to sleep?"

"No, I'm tired enough as it is," Johnson said. "Thanks, doctor." He settled back and closed his eyes.

Johnson sat up in the biobed, tugging at his blue jumpsuit. He adjusted the blanket over his legs, and looked back at the PADD in his hand. He read the text of his previous recording.

"Resume record mode," he spoke to the PADD. "It's hard to believe that it's only been 48 hours since we first got the distress signal from the *Galaxy*." His words appeared in text form on the PADD's display window.

"Even harder to believe is the fact that the entire events I have just dictated in my log happened within less than 23 hours. 48 hours ago, I still had 33 of my crew still alive. Now, I have six people, including myself, in Sickbay. The good news is that we all should recover nicely.

"I have read Fonda's report on the *Galaxy*. In her professional opinion, which I will take over the entire Corps of Engineers in Starfleet, she believes that the *Galaxy* was unable to overcome the strain of transwarping to another location.

"There was little to no power to any system but for the Transwarp Drive propulsion system. Combined with the destroyed starboard nacelle, the ship almost certainly collapsed with the lack of a Structural Integrity Field. Chief Fonda also believes that some of the *Galaxy*'s autodestruct ordinance were triggered by the catastrophic series of explosions that resulted from the starboard nacelle's destruction.

"So the fate of the *Galaxy* can be laid to rest. The ship could not have survived.

"In Lieutenant Kyle's review of the logs we were able to recover, she has determined that part of the *Galaxy*'s crew died in an attempt to abandon ship during one of the rare instances it emerged from transwarp. The rest most likely died trying to repel the Vendoth incursion on the ship. We have tricorder readings confirming the identities of 19 crewmembers, who died from various causes: decompression, cellular degeneration, and of course, the Vendoth.

"The theories about what happened during that tragic test flight can now be settled. Just as the *Voyager* reported in their transwarp experiment, once the *Galaxy* entered transwarp space, she lost directional control. A power feedback ran through the ship, keeping her transwarping from place to place all over the universe, before it was caught; trapped within the anomalous nebula we found in No Man's Land.

"Doctor Joh has said what Aung' Rama told me may be true, that the Vendoth had been drawn through the dimensional layers enclosed in the nebula. I hope it's true. I hate the idea of a planet full of these ruthless soldier-scientists, spreading their hold on an entire galaxy. We have no record of a Kalium Galaxy, but then again, that was her name for her home galaxy.

"Ambassador Favor raised a very interesting point when he visited me earlier today in Sickbay. He

remarked that the Vendoth were exactly what we' re looking for in the Borderlands a race with advanced knowledge and technology. I certainly hope the ones we meet are much more hospitable and tolerant.

"Still, one thing bothers me. Aung' Rama said she was separated from the rest of her fleet. Where were they going? And to what purpose? Somehow, I doubt it was a peaceful mission. I pity the people who will have to face that fleet. We got lucky. Pure dumb luck. And the deaths of 33 of my crew weighs heavily on my mind. Still, our mission still stands. The Borderlands lie in wait for us, to explore and discover new worlds and new peoples. By doing that, we will be helping the Federation fight back in this ugly war against the Dominion. End log entry."

Epilogue

Billions of light years away from the *U.S.S. Courageous*, a nearly sentient creature stepped out from its dark nest. The hunched bipedal creature looked up into the night sky. Its rough brown skin rippled in the starlight. Its multifaceted eyes took in the vista of the night sky. Suddenly, a bright star appeared, blossoming outwards. Tiny pinpoints of lights spread out from the star, appearing to rain on the planet below.

The creature would not understand that it was not a star, but an exploding starship. The rain of light was not magic, but debris from the *U.S.S. Galaxy*, entering the planet' s atmosphere. Among the debris were the dead cellular remnants of aliens that did not originate from this universe.

Meanwhile, in another universe, apart from that of the *U.S.S. Courageous'* own, a message speeds its way through the interstellar void. It is a call to arms, for any ship that can receive the message. The Vendoth Fleet has found their target. Earth is under attack. However, such extra-dimensional matters are not the *Courageous'* concerns as she speeds her way to the Borderlands...

THE COURAGEOUS' CREW

Thomas R. Johnson, Jr.

Name: Johnson, Thomas Robert, Jr.

Date of birth: April 8, 2342

Location of Birth: Cleveland, Ohio, Earth

Rank: Captain

Position: Commanding Officer of *U.S.S. Courageous* NX-81822

Last Post: Commanding Officer of *U.S.S. Kitty Hawk* NCC-44052-A

History: After his birth, Johnson' s family moved to Cork, Ireland, where his father operated a shipyard. Johnson acquired his love for the seas. With his mother as a Starfleet Captain, Johnson also grew up with Starfleet. In spite of his mother' s death at the hands of Breen Privateers in the line of duty, or perhaps because of it, Johnson entered Starfleet. He rose through the ranks to command his first starship, the *U.S.S. Kitty Hawk*. He suffered another personal loss when his wife, the CO of the *U.S.S. Cabot* was destroyed by the Jem' Hadar.

After his leave of absence, Johnson returned to take part in Operation: Betazed, which liberated Betazed from Dominion control. There, he met his new wife. The *Kitty Hawk* was destroyed in the military operation, however. Soon later, a new ship was commissioned as the second *Kitty Hawk*, and he embarked on a five year exploratory mission. At the end of that mission, he was selected as the CO of the newly commissioned *U.S.S. Courageous* NX-81822.

Janelle Paige Fonda

Name: Fonda, Janelle Paige

Date of birth: May 23, 2344

Location of Birth: Paris, France, Earth

Rank: Lieutenant Commander

Position: Chief of Engineering on *U.S.S. Courageous* NX-81822

Last Post: Chief of Engineering on *U.S.S. Kitty Hawk* NCC-44052-A

History: With a mother as a Starfleet Academy Instructor and a father as a Starfleet captain, Fonda grew up learning all about science. The new challenges and puzzles that a career in Starfleet attracted her. As such, she dedicated herself to learning as much science and engineering she could, which lead her to become a top engineer out of Starfleet Academy.

Her strong self discipline and streak of perfectionism made her an attractive team leader and eventually, a strong young Chief Engineer for several starships. Barring a near court-martial, in 2378, Fonda' s record has nothing but high marks. The situation had concerned her young daughter and the father. The intervention of Captain Johnson and extenuating circumstances prevented the court martial.

Her friendship with Captain Johnson of the *U.S.S. Kitty Hawk* led her to continue her job aboard the new *Kitty Hawk-A*. When Johnson took command of the *U.S.S. Courageous*, he requested Fonda to join him, and she accepted again to become the Chief of Engineering.

Leonard Marcus Bogarde

Name: Bogarde, Leonard Marcus

Date of birth: June 19, 2350

Location of Birth: Savanna la Mar, Jamaica, Earth

Rank: Senior Chief Petty Officer

Position: Chief Security/Tactical Officer of *U.S.S. Courageous* NX-81822

Last Post: Chief Security Officer of *U.S.S. Golconda* NCC-67011

History: A middle child in a large family, Bogarde sought adventure and excitement away from his family and home. The Starfleet Marines offered him that, and Bogarde served on a series of missions, most of them classified. He served on Major Ironsides' s squad for most of his time in the Marines.

However, having married while enlisted in the Marines, Bogarde wanted more free time to be able to visit his wife and young child. He applied for a lateral transfer from the Marines to Starfleet, retaining his equivalent ranking. The marriage fell through, and Bogarde accepted more exotic postings, creating an estranged relationship with his son.

His extensive experience from his time with the Marines and with Starfleet made him the ideal choice for the *U.S.S. Courageous'* mission, and he was transferred aboard in September 2384.

Maximillian Roger Ironsides

Name: Ironsides, Maximillian Roger

Date of birth: March 15, 2339

Location of Birth: Northridge, California, Earth

Rank: Major in Starfleet Marines

Position: First Officer of *U.S.S. Courageous* NX-81822 / Commanding Officer of Marine contingent

Last Post: [CLASSIFIED]

History: Most of Ironsides' s history is classified, due to the high sensitivity of his work in the Starfleet Marines. It is known that the bulk of his missions have been undercover. He also has served as base commander for several Marine outposts in various hot spots around the Federation and in outlying territories. On occasion, he spends several months as a visiting Drill Instructor at the Marine Training Camp.

Emmeril Joh

Name: Joh, Emmeril

Date of birth: approx. Earth Date March 1, 2333

Location of Birth: Kanizola Muncip, Valo III

Rank: Major in Bajorian Militia

Position: Chief Science Officer on *U.S.S. Courageous* NX-81822

Last Post: Science Officer on *Deep Space Nine*

History: Born in one of the first expatriate Bajoran cities, Joh Emmeril showed an aptitude for science and

mathematics. This led to her enrollment into the Vulcan Science Academy on a special Bajoran Relief Scholarship funded by the Vulcans.

After receiving her Masters degree, Joh decided to return to the Bajor sector, hoping to aid the Bajoran Underground. She was able to join a resistance cell. Her skills were invaluable in maintaining the resistance' s weaponry and technology. However she was captured along with the rest of her cell in approximately 2361.

She was not freed until 2369, when the Cardassian forces were preparing to withdraw. Since then, she dedicated herself to assisting the Bajoran Reconstruction, as well as working as a science officer for the Bajoran Militia. Her expertise in astrophysics and theoretical quantum mechanics made her an attractive candidate for the Chief Science Officer; going into the unexplored Borderlands on the *U.S.S. Courageous*.

Raven

Name: Raven [true name is classified]

Date of birth: Unknown, possibly 2325

Location of Birth: Betazed

Rank: Major in Bajoran Militia- Commander equivalent in Starfleet

Position: Commanding Officer of the Bajoran Militia contingent on *U.S.S. Courageous* NX-81822

Last Post: Bajoran Militia Training Camp, Bajor

History: Much of Raven' s history is either classified or unrevealed. What is known is that Raven was born to a Bajoran father, a renowned scientist, and a Betazoid mother, a daughter of a high ranking house on Betazed.

When Raven came of age, he left his family on Betazed to enter the Bajoran Resistance. After a traumatic battle with a Cardassian garrison which left Raven in a coma, his mother pulled him out of Bajor and into Starfleet Medical. He decided to enlist with the Starfleet Marines, hoping to learn new things to take back to the resistance. He became an unofficial liaison between Starfleet and the Bajoran Underground, dividing his time between his duties to both groups.

As a visiting instructor to Starfleet Academy, he mentored several young officer' s candidates, including the now Captain Thomas R. Johnson, Jr. This relationship led Raven to be tapped to lead the integrated Bajoran Militia aboard the *U.S.S. Courageous* in 2384.

Janet Abbey Kyle

Name: Kyle, Janet Abbey

Date of birth: October 14, 2355

Location of Birth: *Starbase One*, Earth Orbit

Rank: Lieutenant

Position: Executive Officer on *U.S.S. Courageous* NX-81822

Last Post: Operations Officer on *U.S.S. Britain* NX-44479

History: Born in the Starfleet Infirmary on *Starbase One*, Kyle began her lifelong association with Starfleet. She grew up watching her mother rise through the ranks in Starfleet, to eventually become the base commander of the massive space station. She also split her time with her father aboard his command, the *U.S.S. Sturm*. Since then, she wanted a starship of her own.

After leaving the Academy, she worked hard to enter the fast track for command. She served with distinction aboard several different starships, the last being an experimental starship, the *Britain*, earning several medals and citations. Her latest coup is securing the coveted Executive Officer position on the *U.S.S. Courageous*.

Amanda Carisa Ruiz

Name: Ruiz, Amanda Carisa

Date of birth: January 14, 2354

Location of Birth: Temuco, Chile, Earth

Rank: Lieutenant

Position: Navigational Officer of *U.S.S. Courageous* NX-81822

Last Post: Helmsman of *U.S.S. Athena* NCC-10777

History: Born and raised in Chile, Ruiz always sought for something more than her family' s life could provide for her. The high points in her life were when she was able to travel with her father as he piloted cargo freighters on interplanetary routes. She however, wanted more than just commercial piloting jobs. She applied to Starfleet Academy but failed twice. Upon the recommendation of a guidance counselor, she instead enlisted with the Starfleet Marines. There, she was trained as a pilot. Most of her tour of duties were served under Major Ironsides. As such, part of her records are classified.

After recuperating from a serious injury sustained in action, Ruiz re-applied to Starfleet Academy. This time, she succeeded, and became a full fledged Starfleet officer, piloting Starfleet' s ships. As one of the best pilots in Starfleet, she was chosen to serve as a helmsman for the *U.S.S. Courageous* in September 2384.

Edward Brent Hartman

Name: Hartman, Edward Brent

Date of birth: December 22, 2343

Location of Birth: Ceske Budejovic, Czech Republic, Earth

Rank: Commander

Position: Chief Medical Officer of *U.S.S. Courageous* NX-81822

Last Post: Chief Medical Officer of *U.S.S. Pacific* NCC-59798 prior to resignation

History: Born to two teachers, Hartman grew up constantly learning. Due to his father' s work in forensic pathology, Hartman came to develop an interest in that area of expertise. However, he decided to set himself apart from his father and got a medical degree from Starfleet Medical Academy.

His first posting out of the academy was a laboratory internship with Dr. Leonard H. McCoy, the head of Starfleet Medical. He remained in the internship for 59 days before he quit, setting a new record for the longest internship with Dr. McCoy. He was then assigned to the *U.S.S. Avalon*, a medical ship.

Occasionally, Hartman would serve on investigative teams as a medical examiner.

Finally, he became a CMO on the *U.S.S. Pacific*, shortly before it was destroyed during Operation Return. The events surrounding the destruction were suppressed. Hartman resigned shortly thereafter, unable to work in Starfleet, until his old friend requested his presence on the *U.S.S. Courageous*. Hartman re-entered Starfleet and became the CMO of the *U.S.S. Courageous* on September 2384.

Walker LeAnn

Name: LeAnn, Walker

Date of birth: November 9, 2362

Location of Birth: *Mare Sederis Base*, Luna (Earth' s Moon)

Rank: Ensign

Position: Flight Officer of *U.S.S. Courageous* NX-81822

Last Post: Helmsman on *U.S.S. Hippolyta* NCC-76018

History: The only child of a human father and Bajoran mother, a husband-wife stellar cartography team, LeAnn' s early life was one of constant journey and exploration. She spent her life on her parent' s ship, the *S.S. Mercator*.

She continued her life of exploration by entering Starfleet, becoming one of their finest young pilots. She became well known for her ability to adapt in difficult conditions on the *U.S.S. Paraguay*, a science ship that studied stellar phenomena. She also continued to exhibit strong skills on the *U.S.S. Hippolyta* in combat duty. For these reasons, she was chosen as one of the two helmsmen for the *U.S.S. Courageous* in September 2384, assigned as the pilot.

Nathan Xavier Favor

Name: Favor, Nathan Xavier

Date of birth: July 18, 2343

Location of Birth: *Jove Station*, Jupiter Orbit

Rank: Federation Ambassador

Position: Federation Envoy to the Borderlands on *U.S.S. Courageous* NX-81822

Last Post: Junior Ambassador at the Federation Embassy on Jarada Centre

History: The only son of the Favor Family, known across the quadrant for their mine holdings, especially around the moons of Jupiter, Favor disdained the money and prestige. He refused to be groomed to take over the family business, instead entering Starfleet Academy, with plans to enter the Diplomatic Corps. His father' s pressure proved too extensive, and Favor quit the Academy. He went on a cross-quadrant journey, traveling aboard freighters and commercial starships, picking up a life education. He developed an extensive network of contacts and friendships in dozens of races and governments. These served him well, when he returned to Earth, brokering the entrance of the Draganzians into the Federation. He was offered a post on the Federation Diplomatic Corps in light of his abilities. He was instrumental in the trade negotiations with the Romulans. Now the Federation has made him their representative to the new races in the Borderlands, creating an embassy aboard the *U.S.S. Courageous* with him as its Ambassador.

THE COURAGEOUS

