

STAR TREK: Unity -- United We Stand
Deep as a Well, Wide as a Church Door

an Excalibur Epic by

Walter S. George
(USS Excalibur NCC 2004)

Frontiers of any type,
Physical or mental,
Are but a challenge to our breed.
Nothing can stop the questing of men,
Not even Man.
If we will it,
Not only the wonders of space but,
The very stars are ours!

"'tis not so deep as a well, nor so wide as a church-door;
but 'tis enough , 'twill serve:
ask for me to-morrow, and you shall find me a grave man."

Mercutio from 'Romeo and Juliet' Act III Scene I by William Shakespear

Circa Terran Calendar 2376 C.E.

An image is worth a thousand words.

Many words came to mind at the image in the runabout's forward viewport. The windows in the primary hull spilled light into the space of the berth, but the nacelles were dark and quiescent.

The vessel looked like a queen in her throne room granting audience to her subjects, or a phoenix in a cage yearning for the fires of its next rebirth or a sword in a sheath dreaming of its glorious history. "I wish the Commodore were here to see this."

"You say that every year, Admiral Blasberg."

Daniel C. Blasberg, Junior, Admiral, Starfleet, Retired regarded his companion. "It's true every year, Zacky."

'Zacky' sighed with practiced tolerance. "You never really liked it when the Commodore called you 'Number One.' Why do you insist on calling me 'Zacky' when you are well aware I am a Starfleet Admiral just like you?"

Blasberg grinned at his fellow Starfleet Admiral. "I had no control over what the Commodore called me, Zacky... I mean... Admiral Riley. And since I am your other godfather you have no control over what I call you either."

Admiral Zachary Riley, Curator of the Memory Alpha Starfleet Starship Museum, frowned at his other godfather but inwardly shared the grin. "Uncle Dan, no one had any control over your words. Mom and Dad told me all the stories over and over again."

Blasberg tapped at the runabout's control panel and it slowed to a halt in front of the starship berthed in the Starfleet Starship Museum. "Tim and Lainie only tell the stories they know about. But, I guess I never accepted the fact that discretion is the better part of valor."

Riley laughed. "That's an understatement. I might also point out, for the record, that the Commodore was promoted over eighty years ago. What would Admiral George say if he heard you demote him like that?"

"Admiral George can only hear me now from whatever afterlife he embraces," Blasberg said, supressing the angst of thirteen year old grief. "His promotion notwithstanding, he will always be 'The Commodore' to me." He assessed the vessel before them with a critical eye. "He always loved this view of Excalibur. Still as beautiful as ever isn't she?"

"The museum's engineering team has kept her in prime condition for the past fourteen years," Riley answered. "Preserving the USS Excalibur NCC 2004 in museum stasis is a fitting tribute to the life and career of Admiral Walter S. George."

"You say that every year, Zacky."

"I miss Uncle Walt more and more every year, Uncle Dan."

"We all do, Zacky," Blasberg agreed. He pushed the grief deep into his conscience. "We're running out of time."

"The others are already here," Riley informed him. "The ceremony will begin shortly after we dock and board the ship."

"I mean, we're running out of time before they invade," Blasberg repeated. "You said the museum's engineers have Excalibur running in prime condition. Does that also mean you've completed the upgrades we planned?"

Riley nodded. "A few days ago. The warp drive is now at contemporary specs. The shields and weapons also have the programmed modifications. Then there is the special data base."

"Yes," Blasberg said. "The special data base. Our trump card."

"It may not be enough," Riley warned. "The survival projections are unacceptably low."

"I always knew this would be a one way trip," Blasberg said. "If it is Excalibur's last trip, at least it will make a difference one final time."

"Have you told the others?"

"Not yet. I figured it would be best for security's sake to brief them en route."

"I wish I were going with you, Uncle Dan."

"Your mom and dad would never forgive me if I let you come along, Zacky."

"If the worst case scenario happens, their forgiveness will be the least of your worries."

"The worst case scenario is my only worry. And I'm really not worried about that one bit."

Riley reached over and squeezed his other godfather's shoulder. "Then I'll worry for you, Uncle Dan. Shall we get the party started?"

Blasberg tapped the runabout's helm controls. "All I need is a docking port, Zacky."

Riley activated the commlink. "This is Admiral Zachary Riley aboard Runabout Vingilot to Starfleet Starship Museum Dock Control. Request permission to dock."

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Admiral Zachary Riley eyed the audiovisual sensor at the back of the bridge of USS Excalibur NCC 2004. Fully conscious of his place before the main veiwscreen showing the spacedock behind him, he marshalled his thoughts to address the assembled dignitaries as well as the subscribers to the Federation News service watching from their respective homes. Background music swelled to full volume and he began to speak. "Frontiers of any type, physical or mental, are but a challenge to our breed. Nothing can stop the questing of men -- not even Man. If we will it, not only the wonders of space but, the very stars are ours!"

The background music continued through now familiar cadences of what was known as The Excalibur Suite. "I would like to greet and recognize our honored guests. Seated at the helm is Excalibur's second commanding officer, Admiral Blasberg, who was Admiral George's second-in-command." Riley almost sighed in relief as he knew the recording sensors would center on each of the people he named in turn. He fixed his attention on his other godfather who had elected to wear the crimson uniform from eighty years ago.

"Seated at communications is Excalibur's third commanding officer, Admiral Holmyard, who also served as the second chief communications officer." Holmyard, as well as Molina, had donned the grey and black Starfleet uniform of the contemporary era.

"At engineering is Admiral Molina who was this ship's third chief of security.

"At the science station is T'Tala, Dean of the Vulcan Academy of Science, this ship's second chief science officer." T'Tala was modestly dressed in conventional Vulcan attire.

"At navigation is Federation Ambassador Chilton, Excalibur's second chief xenologist." Chilton was tastefully attired in civilian garments as a proper Federation ambassador would.

"And at tactical is the Proconsul of Magna Roma, Flavius Silva, the fourth Starfleet officer to be chief of security of this vessel." Silva looked every bit a Terran Roman dressed in his diplomatic Magna Roman clothes.

Riley paused as the recording sensors recentered on him. "The center seat remains unoccupied in honorable memory of the man who commanded this ship when she was first launched, Admiral Walter S. George." Riley allowed a moment of silence for respect and reflection. "Fourteen years ago he passed beyond the final frontier. But on this day, his birthday as it happens, fourteen years ago USS Excalibur NCC 2004 was berthed here at the Memory Alpha Starfleet Starship Museum. We meet here once a year aboard this vessel to honor his memory and to maintain this ship's active status in Starfleet with a one parsec out and return trip from the museum spacedock." Riley winced inwardly since the words felt like a lie under the circumstances. He caught the gaze of his other godfather for validation for the minor lapse of integrity.

Time for the final words to commemorate the occasion. "The war with the Dominion is over and the peace of the Alpha Quadrant is once again secure. Many Starfleet officers and starships gave the ultimate sacrifice to buy that peace. The rest of us who live beyond owe them all our deepest and most heartfelt gratitude. Excalibur is but one of our many fine Starfleet vessels that remain. The accomplishments of her crew, from the days when Commodore George commanded and beyond, are discrete and distinguished by the historians and chroniclers of Starfleet. She may not be the only ship able to save the galaxy in times of peril, but she certainly made a difference when a difference had to be made. USS Excalibur NCC 2004 and her crew... the Federation salutes you." One last dramatic pause. "Launch will commence in ten minutes."

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"Stand down from red alert," Blasberg announced as he stood and smacked his palms together. "The cameras are off. The masses are moved. Time for a group hug."

"Daniel, act your age," Chilton admonished as she also stood and stretched.

"At my age I can't remember what my age is," Blasberg returned, "so how can I act my age if I can't remember what it is?"

"A logical if facetious conjecture, Admiral," T'Tala told him.

"Besides, back here on this ship, I feel eternally young," Blasberg continued and gave Chilton a big hug in greeting.

"Where's mine?" Holmyard asked, stepping near her two comrades. Blasberg and Chilton each spread an arm and Holmyard stepped into their composite embrace. "Every year seems to last longer than the one before it," she sighed. "The chronometer tells me a year has passed since last year's launch but it feels like only a year ago that we were all here with Commodore George in command."

"Zack's speech gets better every year," Molina observed.

"Thank you, Admiral," Riley demurred. "I look forward to making it almost as much as my birthday and Christmas. Remember I was on this ship when Commodore George was in command too."

"Well, since you are eighty-three years old, Zacky," Blasberg said, "And Commodore George was last on this bridge in command eighty-three years ago, I guess we can include you in the group hug too."

"Sorry, Uncle Dan," Riley responded. "I have a launch to coordinate so time is short."

"If so, when does the piloting crew come aboard?" Silva asked. "I see there are no extra seats for us to occupy while the ship is in motion."

Blasberg shared a glance with Riley. "Well, we have a surprise for you, Flavius and everyone else here. The piloting crew is on board even as I speak."

"That is not a surprise, Admiral," T'Tala pointed out, "since the piloting crew is an annual convention for this particular occasion. Still, if they are on board, why do they delay reporting to the bridge to assume their stations?"

"They're already on the bridge, T'Tala," Blasberg insisted, "and we are at our stations."

"Esoteric conundrums are an impediment to efficient time resources, Admiral," T'Tala said. "We are the only personnel on the bridge and there is no sign of the piloting crew."

"Hey!" Molina exclaimed. "T'Tala is right but so is Admiral Blasberg. We ARE on the bridge and so is the piloting crew. We ARE the piloting crew! Am I right, Dan?"

The group of veterans fell silent.

"Surprise!" Blasberg said.

Holmyard crossed her arms and speared Blasberg with a fiery look. "Daniel, we are getting too old for your bullheaded humor. The launch countdown continues. Get the REAL piloting crew here and we can sit back and enjoy the ride."

“Bonnie, we ARE the ‘real piloting crew’ this time,” Blasberg affirmed. “Zacky and I arranged it with Starfleet Command. After the Dominion War, the public relations for Starfleet need a boost. What better way to bolster our image than with nostalgia? We’ll remind the Federation-at-large of the good old days.”

“Except for Zachary,” Chilton spoke up, “everyone else here is over a century old. As Admiral Kirk once said, ‘Galloping around the cosmos is a game for the young.’”

“A one parsec round trip hardly qualifies as ‘galloping around the cosmos,’ Debbie,” Blasberg insisted. “Where’s your spirit of adventure? Your motivation to be an explorer? Did they retire when you retired from Starfleet?”

Silva sat at the tactical station. “I do miss the good old days, as Admiral Blasberg says. Perhaps one more trip aboard this ship as ‘crew’ rather than V.I.P. would be agreeable. Being Proconsul does get tedious.”

T’Tala resumed her seat at the science station. “The controls, though obsolete, are still as functional as they are familiar. It is logical to assume that in spite of our chronological longevity we are still capable to pilot Excalibur on a limited basis.”

“I can take on Engineering,” Molina offered, “as long as we don’t have to change the laws of physics.”

“That won’t be a problem,” Riley said. “All ships functions are routed to the panels here on the bridge and have been automated for the most part.”

Holmyard shook her head, but sat at the communications station nonetheless. “Where is my earpiece? I can’t open hailing frequencies without my earpiece.”

Blasberg sat at the helm and began to configure it. “Let’s see... if I remember right, this is the ‘go’ button and this is the ‘stop’ button. But where is the ‘how fast’ thingy?”

Chilton scanned her ‘shipmates’ with a critical gaze. “It’s right next to the Reality Check Doohicky, Dan. Do you realize none of us have logged a single space hour for almost half a century?”

“Then we’re long overdue,” Blasberg retorted, “And since we’re running out of time there’s no better time than the present.”

Chilton, hands on hips, scowled. “And just what am I supposed to do? My specialty was xeno and we appear to be fresh out of first contacts.”

Blasberg swivelled his seat to face her. “If I remember your records correctly, your secondary at the academy was astronomy and astrogation. Take navigations and plot us a one parsec course out and back. I think you should be able to do that with your eyes closed.”

Chilton huffed but sat at navigations. “I’m an ambassador not a pathfinder. Let’s see...” she squinted at the panel before her. “There’s Memory Alpha and...” she looked the starmap on the display over, “...which direction do we go for one parsec?”

Blasberg grinned. “That’s the spirit! Set a course for Earth. You should be familiar with where Terra Mater is.”

Riley strode around the upper level of the bridge. “I can see Excalibur is in good hands once again. I’ll take my leave and monitor from dock control.” He looked directly at Blasberg. “Good luck, Uncle Dan... and to you all.” and the turbolift carried him away.

“Like slipping into an old space glove,” Chilton whispered as she decreased her trial-by-error margins on the navigation console.

“More like falling off a cliff,” Blasberg whispered back. “The first step is hard but gravity makes the rest of the trip easy.” He watched as the coordinates for the trip coalesced on his readouts as Chilton accomplished each vector calculation. Senses seasoned by years in space, he absorbed the ambient chatter of a starship preparing to launch.

“Pre-stage flux chillers, port.”

“On.”

“Pre-stage flux chillers, starboard.”

“On.”

“Main stage flux chillers, port.”

“Engaged.”

“Main stage flux chillers, starboard.”

“Enabled.”

It was the lull in the launch chatter and the ubiquitous bridge buzz and hums that alerted Blasberg to the problem, but it was Silva who voiced it. "Who is in command?"

Blasberg looked at Molina who looked at Holmyard who looked at Blasberg. Admiral to admiral to admiral. Like iron filings to a lode stone, all eyes on Excalibur's bridge turned to the center seat.

"With all of us here together," Holmyard said, "it feels like there's only one man who can rightfully sit there."

Blasberg and Chilton followed in tandem. "The Commodore." "Commodore George."

"I am sure he watches from where he now lives," Silva said softly.

"It's like the Commodore is here even if he isn't," Molina said.

"Our gestalt paradigm is incomplete in the Commodore's absence," T'Tala noted. "But, logic dictates we perform as though he is indeed present. We learned to anticipate his commands and function as a team to supply the demand prior to the need. Certainly it is a matter of custom and instinct now for the six of us to launch a starship as if Commodore George had the conn."

"...the stars are ours," Chilton breathed into the nostalgic silence.

A second later, their team dynamic meshed with a subliminally tacit yet tactile click.

"Clearing all moorings," Blasberg announced.

"Museum Spacedock this is USS Excalibur," Holmyard carried the flow, "requesting final authorization for launch."

"Excalibur this is Spacedock. You are cleared for departure."

"Engineering systems are go," Molina said.

"Tactical systems are green," Silva added.

"Sounds like we are spaceworthy to me," Blasberg announced and sensed the team concurrence.

"Ahead, one quarter impulse power."

"Thrusters only in spacedock, Dan" Chilton whispered a reminder.

"Gotta give the launch some spice to make it an event," Blasberg whispered back and tapped the ENABLE key to move Excalibur at one quarter impulse toward the museum spacedock spacedocks.

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The queen rose from her throne in regal splendor.

The phoenix spread her fiery wings and the bars of her cage dissolved as the reborn bird soared for the freedom between the stars.

The sword slid from its sheath with a metallic chime and was released to parry, riposte and thrust in the starfields of glory once more.

USS Excalibur NCC 2004 breezed past the Memory Alpha Starfleet Starship Museum spacedocks and vectored towards the ocean of stars she longed to sail.

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Warp Factor One was by no means fast. At least, not anymore. Three hundred thirteen years ago, travelling faster than the speed of light was a physicist's dream -- before Zefram Cochrane launched the Phoenix and broke yet another barrier to Terran advancement. But Warp Factor One was fast enough for the occasion. It gave one time to think. Now, the speed of thought -- there was a barrier to break. How fast was an idea? What was the speed limit of the imagination? One could live a lifetime in a dream. And with a lifetime behind him, life was but a dream to Blasberg.

The speed of time was another unknown. Sure, with a gravimetric slingshot or tachyon charged pulse time travel was within contemporary capabilities. But how fast did time pass? With mindboggling speed one left the past to travel in the present towards the future. And all too soon, the ultimate limit of the speeds of both time and thought was reached in the terminal moment of the end of the journey of life.

To sleep- perchance to dream: ay, there's the rub! For in that sleep of death what dreams may come... But that the dread of something after death- the undiscover'd country, from whose bourn no traveller returns- puzzles the will, and makes us rather bear those ills we have than fly to others that we know not of?'

Hamlet had it down pat. And after over a century of life, thought and time, Blasberg wondered about 'the undiscovered country' more and more. Still, he believed in the maxim that it was not the destination that mattered it was the journey that gave meaning to life. Commodore George had reached the final destination thirteen years ago. Blasberg knew beyond the shadow of a dream that his journey would soon reach its destination as well.

"One parsec in five, four, three, two, one," Chilton announced.

"Time to turn the old girl around and put her back to bed," Molina said.

Too soon. All too soon. "What's the rush?" Blasberg asked. "Let's push the envelope a bit more and pretend we are still adventuresous. Who knows what we will find beyond the one parsec limit?"

"This is explored space, Dan," Holmyard said. "We have mapped it to the nth degree. We don't have time to find the new boundaries of the final frontier... unless you want to go looking for the USS Voyager in the Delta Quadrant."

Blasberg glanced at the chronometer ticking away, marking the passage of time with subatomic accuracy. "Sounds like fun, Bonnie. And I could sure use some fun right now." THEY were late -- at least according to eighty-three year old predictions.

"There's a reception back at Memory Alpha," Molina reminded him. "If you think of it as a party, that should be enough fun for all of us."

"I have ambassador duties at that reception," Chilton sighed. "Gotta do some gladhanding to restore Starfleet's image after the Dominion War. Besides, Daniel, Sue must be waiting for you."

"Sue is with Susan at Tim and Elaine's home on Terra," Blasberg said. "They are having a small party of their own watching the ceremony on FederationNet. Now, we COULD just continue on this course and arrive at Terra in time for the action there." How ironic. That was exactly the plan though not exactly the 'action' implied. When WAS that communi...

"Holy Q!" Holmyard exclaimed. "We're receiving a distress call from Memory Alpha!"

"Let's hear it," Blasberg urged.

"As if you could stop me," Holmyard giped and with a flourish, established the subspace link.

"This is Admiral Riley of Memory Alpha. We are under attack! Sixty-four alien vessels appeared out of some sort of subspace vortex and..." The message was aborted by an ear-piercing subspace squeal.

Then... "I am the Roj Ch'Dak of the Vendoth Empire. We are here to right the errors of your ways. No longer will you interfere in other's cultures as you did in ours. You will now humble yourselves before the might of Vendoth and learn subservience...or die."

"Them?" Molina breathed into the stunned silence. "Here? Now?"

"Yes, yes and yes," Blasberg said. "We've had a Vendoth ship and database to study for eighty plus years. But I expected them to attack Sector Zero Zero One first."

"You expected the Vendoth?" Chilton gasped. "And you put the six of us alone on Excalibur? Dan, what were you thinking?"

"I was thinking we could make a difference one more time," Blasberg replied, "but now we are out of time!"

"But we defeated the Vendoth eighty-three years ago," Silva said.

"No," Blasberg said. "We stopped just one squadron lost in time and space from the main invasion force -- which is attacking Memory Alpha here and now!"

"What do we do now?" Holmyard asked. "We're no match for them all by ourselves."

"This ship and crew were good enough to defeat the Vendoth once before," Blasberg said. "Their technology is the same today as it was then since the Vendoth then were the same as the Vendoth now."

"If I recall correctly," T'Tala said, "we surrendered after only two volleys of Vendoth fire."

"That was then this is now," Blasberg returned. "Now is as good a time as any to tell you that Zacky and I have prepared for this day. Excalibur's warp engines have been completely upgraded. We also back-engineered the shields and weapons from the Vendoth ship we captured eighty-three years ago. We can now match them shot for shot. Plus, although our readouts are Federation Standard our operating system is not LCARS. It is Vendoth. We've had almost nine decades to study it and put it to good use."

"Upgrades or not, one ship is no match against sixty-four," Molina countered. "And the only reason we beat them before was due to the Emfive Virus. I don't suppose you're keeping that in your pocket?"

"We must act," Silva urged, "but we ARE outmatched."

"There's only one thing we can do," Chilton said. "Warn Starfleet Command to muster the fleet!"

"We can do more than that, Debbie," Blasberg said. "We can muster WITH the fleet!"

"This is no longer a Starfleet vessel," Silva said. "Excalibur is a museum artifact."

"Excalibur IS a Starfleet vessel!" Blasberg corrected. "That's what this annual trip is for -- to maintain her active status."

"Debate is counterproductive at this juncture," T'Tala said. "The Vendoth have attacked. Wherever their next target is, we must act to warn Starfleet Command."

"Their next target will be Sector Zero Zero One," Blasberg revealed, "at least, that was their plan eighty-three years ago."

"We kill two birds with one stone, then," Holmyard said. "Warn Starfleet Command and set course for Sector Zero Zero One at maximum warp."

Chilton consulted the navigation console. "At maximum warp, it will take us five days to reach Sector Zero Zero One."

"Then there's no time to lose," Blasberg said. "Course laid in. Engaging at maximum warp... now!"

"Starfleet Command this is Admiral Holmyard aboard USS Excalibur," Holmyard announced as she established a subspace link. "Memory Alpha is under attack by sixty-four alien vessels identifying themselves as Vendoth."

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"Are they still behind us?" Blasberg asked.

"The same as they were the last time you asked fifteen minutes ago, Dan," Chilton answered from the science station. "The Vendoth are still on course for Sector Zero Zero One an hour behind us."

Blasberg glanced at his helm readouts. Maximum Warp. Course set for Terra. For the past four, angonizing days. "We can't just lead them to home!" he exclaimed, slapping the helm.

"I don't get the impression we are leading them anywhere," Chilton countered. "After their siege of Memory Alpha, the Vendoth probably harvested the Federation database there. They know where 'home' is just as much as we do. If anything, we're just in their path of least resistance."

The six of them had worked in eight hour shifts manning the helm and the science station. In spite of the encroaching Vendoth invasion fleet, it had been an uneventful trek. "Maybe we should alter course and try to divert them," Blasberg offered.

"Again... for the umpteenth time?" Chilton asked. "Every time we try that the Vendoth don't budge a millimeter from their course. I don't think we matter enough to them to follow us anywhere. Nothing continues to happen on a regular basis."

"Four days of nothing happening except a Vendoth invasion fleet hounding our course!" Blasberg glanced at his helm readouts again. "We arrive at Sector Zero Zero One in an hour. I haven't seen a single starship for parsecs! I hope the fleet has managed to muster."

"It's not like we'll get an update on fleet status en route," Chilton said. "The last thing that Starfleet will do is broadcast fleet strength or weakness over subspace channels when there's an invasion force eating up distance with every passing second."

"At least we've been transmitting everything we record continuously to Starfleet Headquarters," Blasberg said. "We may not know how Starfleet is doing but at least Starfleet knows how we and the Vendoth are coming along."

"Gives them time to roll out the red carpet with all the bells and whistles," Chilton quipped. "We'll get there just in time for the playing of the Federation Anthe..." A bleep from her console diverted her attention. "Dan, we're receiving a Priority One message from Starfleet Command."

"This is it!" Blasberg said. "Let's call the others to the bridge, Debbie."

Moments later, Holmyard, Molina, Silva and T'Tala were seated on the bridge at stations.

"Establishing the Priority One commlink," Holmyard announced. "It's visual. On screen."

The Starfleet logo popped into view on the main viewscreen. It faded out to be replaced by a Starfleet admiral. "This is Admiral Gatch of Starfleet Command Invasion Operations."

"Hi, Admiral," Blasberg said. "I'm Admiral Blasberg on board USS Excalibur and with me are Admiral Hol..."

"We know who is with you, Admiral," Gatch cut in. "We also know who is following you. We've received your reports and are grateful for the advance intelligence."

"We're grateful you're grateful, Admiral. We'll be there in under an hour."

"Good. We need every ship we can get. We only have five in system even as we speak."

"FIVE!"

"Excalibur will make six," Gatch amended. "You are to report to Utopia Planetia to take on crew replacements."

"But the Vendoth..."

"...will be dealt with when they get here," Gatch finished for Blasberg's protest. "Don't spare the dilithium getting here, Admiral. With Excalibur added to the fleet, we might hold the Vendoth at bay until we can get reinforcements."

"But, Admiral, SIX starships against sixty-four Vendoth vessels?!"

Gatch looked glum. "Just so. This may be Starfleet's finest but last stand. Gatch, Starfleet Invasion Operations, out."

The viewscreen went dark, then the stars reappeared.

"It can't end like this," Chilton murmured into the thick blanket of shock suffusing the bridge.

"Who says it's going to end?" Blasberg growled. "It won't if we have anything to do with it."

"The six of us?" Holmyard said. "One of six starships making a stand against all of... them?" She swept an arm dramatically aft.

"It may not be as hopeless as that," Silva spoke up.

"There is no logic in exaggeration, Proconsul," T'Tala admonished.

"There is logic in Starfleet Regulation Forty-six Alpha," Silva said.

"If transmissions are being monitored during battle, no uncoded messages on an open channel," Molina quoted. "Of course!"

"I know Starfleet Regulations," Blasberg grouched. "What has Forty-Six Alpha got to do with it?"

"Admiral Gatch knows the Vendoth are hot on our warp trail," Molina said. "He knows the Vendoth will intercept our communications."

"And..." Chilton prompted.

"What if Admiral Gatch deliberately misreported the number of starships mustered to defend Sector Zero Zero One?" Molina asked rhetorically.

"The Vendoth will think there ARE only six starships," Holmyard concluded.

"So, logically, Starfleet is employing programmed disinformation," T'Tala said.

"The first shot in their arsenal," Molina nodded. "I'll bet there are far more than five starships mustered. They will probably keep them hidden in the asteroid belt, or in the moons of Jupiter. Then, spring them on the Vendoth with the element of surprise."

"And we're the decoy," Blasberg realized. "The Vendoth will follow us to Utopia Planetia where they think the fleet is mustering."

"It is the classic Kirk Corbomite Maneuver," Silva said. "The Vendoth will be caught between the fleet at Utopia Planetia and the fleet that closes in behind them."

"It might work," Blasberg mused, "IF that is Starfleet's plan and IF Admiral Gatch purposely underestimated fleet strength and IF the Vendoth buy it."

Molina nodded. "Too many ifs if the ifs all add up."

"In that case we'd stand an equal chance facing the Vendoth ourselves," Holmyard said.

"Which is exactly what we're going to do," Blasberg announced.

"Right," Chilton said, "and then we'll take on the entire Borg Collective and persuade them to play nice in our playground."

"I'm serious," Blasberg insisted. "IF it's the element of surprise that Starfleet is counting on, what better way to surprise the Vendoth than by doing the one thing they'd least expect?"

"But one Starfleet Starship against an armada of Vendoth is suicide," Holmyard protested.

"That would be true," Blasberg agreed, "IF we were a Starfleet starship. But what IF we were a Vendoth vessel?"

"I smell a plan," Chilton hedged.

"Sorry. I haven't showered in four days," Blasberg shot. "But, yes, I have an almost fool-proof plan."

"Unless it is your intention is to undergo a mindmeld," T'Tala said, "it would expedite our discussion if you would use more detail in your elucidation."

Blasberg inhaled slowly. "Excalibur is running with a Vendoth database with readouts in Federation standard. What would happen if we just ran the ship with pure Vendoth protocols?"

T'Tala raised an eyebrow. "The compatibility ratios would be entirely theoretical at best."

"And you are one of the best probability ratio theorists I know, T'Tala," Blasberg returned. "Can you do it? Can it be done?"

T'Tala nodded. "Indeed. It would be a fascinating undertaking in logic and computer programming. But, to what end?"

Blasberg turned to Molina. "If we let the Vendoth database configure our warp drive, would we emit Vendoth power signatures?"

"I see where you're going with this," Molina said. "And I'm beginning to like your fool-proof plan. Yes. It would camouflage our power signature just as you'd expect."

"Great!" Blasberg said. "Here's what we do then. We turn around and join the Vendoth Invasion Fleet... sort of like the Trojan Horse."

"Too direct," Silva said. "We would need to do something more covert."

"Such as...?" Blasberg urged.

Silva thought a moment. "If Excalibur appeared to be destroyed, then the Vendoth would no longer consider us as an obstacle to their tactics."

"They're already ignoring us," Chilton said. "If we're destroyed they can continue to ignore us without us."

"How do we destroy ourselves," Holmyard asked, "without actually destroying ourselves?"

Molina grinned. "This is my bailiwick. What IF we fire a spread of quantum torpedoes and destroy them with the Vendoth weapons you say we have?"

"It would appear to sensors that both Federation and Vendoth weapons signatures had discharged," T'Tala answered "The detonation of a spread of quantum torpedoes would diffuse sensors for a moment."

"During that moment we reconfigure our warp signature to Vendoth parameters," Molina added. "We raise our Vendoth shields and presto chango we appear on sensors as a Vendoth vessel. We're about the same size as one of their scoutships."

"We stop and wait for the Vendoth Invasion Fleet to catch up to us," Blasberg concluded, "and slip in to their fleet as slick as slime on gagh."

"And then...?" Chilton had to ask.

"And then we wait for the right moment to say, 'trick or treat,'" Blasberg said. "Let's do it!"

"I'll transmit a distress call to Starfleet Command," Holmyard added, "keeping Starfleet Regulation Forty-six Alpha well in mind."

"If this fool-proof plan is not," Chilton sighed, "Forty-six Alpha won't be the reason we send our next distress call."

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Commander Timothy Stubbs acutely felt the symptoms of LCARS finger sprain. For four days he had manned his station at Starfleet Command Invasion Operations receiving, relaying and reporting incoming communications from starships mustering to engage the Vendoth as they approached Sector Zero Zero One. He frowned, then sighed as the display indicated yet another message from a particular starship sending Vendoth intelligence updates for the past four days. He tapped 'ACKNOWLEDGE' and the message content appeared on his screen. His frowned transformed into a gape. Quickly he accessed sensor readings both archived and active. The readings confirmed yet obscured the facts of the message. "Admiral Gatch!" he called to capture the attention of the admiral in charge.

Gatch turned from another station at SCIO. "What is it, Commander?"

"A message from USS Excalibur, sir."

"It's about time we heard from Captain Calhoun. What's their ETA?"

"It's not from Captain Calhoun, Admiral. The message is from USS Excalibur NCC 2004."

"Oh. Them. Log their message into the sitrep and send them the routine affirms."

"Admiral, I think you need to hear this one."

Gatch raised an eyebrow and crossed over to Stubb's station. "Let's hear it."

"This is USS Excalibur NCC 2004. We are under attack by a Vendoth scout class vessel. Shields are almost gone and we..." The message aborted with a squeal of subspace static.

Gatch was silent for a moment. "Were they destroyed, Commander?"

Stubbs hesitated. "Yes... no... maybe, Admiral."

"Which is it, Commander?"

"Sensors readings are inconclusive, Admiral. They record the NCC 2004's approach. They are the only vessel registering. There are indications of weapons fire... probably a spread of quantum torpedoes. They appear to have been detonated by Vendoth weapons fire. After the detonation, NCC 2004 no longer registers but the warp and energy signatures of the vessel that remains ARE Vendoth. The size of the vessel indicates a scout class vessel, but slightly smaller than those on record."

"Is the Vendoth fleet still there?"

"Yes, Admiral. ETA in Sector Zero Zero One in two hours. But..."

"Go on, Commander."

"But, the last intelligence report from NCC 2004 indicated sixty-four vessels in the Vendoth fleet."

"And..."

"Current long range sensor readings register sixty-FIVE Vendoth vessels now."

"That's either very odd or very convenient," Gatch observed. "Starfleet Regulation Forty-six Alpha may be in effect here. Hmm. A very interesting tactic that could prove useful." He considered a second or two more. "Log USS Excalibur NCC 2004 as 'destroyed' and transmit that to the fleet."

"Transmit it? But if the Vendoth intercept..."

"Let's hope they do, Commander," Gatch nodded. "And let's hope they believe it more than we almost did."

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"Roj Ch'Dak! "

The name meant, 'Most Superior,' and she relished hearing it as fine meat in her teeth. The name held portents of Life and Death to all who knew her. She had fought many battles and made many advances in science to earn the name. She had killed Vendoth and inferiors alike when they omitted it whenever speaking to her.

She favored the summoner with her attention. "VenQa' Re'Ijom?"

"The Qo'Doth report, Roj Ch'Dak."

"And...?"

Re'Ijom was a supreme Ven. He had survived as her VenQa' of Mer'jot Ducmre for many campaigns and conquests. "The inferior ship in our path ceases to exist, Roj Ch'Dak."

"How?"

"A scout, Roj Ch'Dak. Ja'Xui'Niu."

She peered at the screen on the front bulkhead of the command center. The stars of the alien galaxy beckoned her to redeem them from inferior occupation. "That scout was one of the sundered. It was of VenQa' Ja'Omoq was it not?"

Re'Ijom grinned his teeth carefully concealed by his thin lips. "It is so, Roj Ch'Dak. It appeared as the inferior was annihilated."

"So, the first kill of our conquest of these inferiors," she trilled to herself. "Ja'Omoq is to be honored. But, we cannot allow chaos to compromise our fleet integrity." She took a moment to dicomfit Re'Ijom with the suspense of her command. "Where is Ja'Xui'Niu now?"

"It waits, Roj Ch'Dak."

"Send it the interlink codes and augment our formation with the addition of another scout."

"It is done as you say, Roj Ch'Dak."

She kept her attention on Re'Ijom until he began to consult with the Qo'Doth. She then fixed her gaze on the solar primary selected as their first target. It was the home system of the inferior vessel called Dragon, imprisoned in her home galaxy far away. Dragon had dared to interfere with the Vendoth Supremacy in the Kalium galaxy. She had brought her fleet here to exact the justice on the worlds that had spawned Dragon.

Of the one thousand Vendoth vessels translocated from there to here, only sixty-four remained. The others, lost in time or space, had been sundered by anomalous fluctuations in the Translocator Vortex. If Ja'Xui'Niu could reorient and find its way back to her, so might others of the sundered. While she had no beginning of doubt that the superiority of sixty-four Vendoth vessels would conquer these inferiors, the path of prudence inspired her to a tactic of patience.

"VenQa' Re'Ijom!"

He was in place before her with admirable swiftness. "Roj Ch'Dak?"

"When we reach the outer perimeter of the star system ahead, bring the fleet to a halt."

Re'Ijom was too accomplished a Ven to speak a question. But she saw it shine in his eyes nevertheless.

"Ja'Xui'Niu may be the first of many of the sundered to return," she answered his unspoken question and saw his pride amplify at the favor of being privy to her designs. "We wait ten timespans. Then we proceed as strategy mandates."

"Your thought is the command, Roj Ch'Dak."

"Advise me as the fleet expands, Re'Ijom," she almost purred and dismissed him with a glance. Perhaps she would favor Re'Ijom in a more personal way. She still had not chosen a qualified sire for her offspring.

She consulted an information viewer. Terra. The name of the home planet of Dragon. Honored to be the first for redemption from inferiority. Mer'jot Ducmre would be in orbit above it all too soon and the sacred Vendoth Precepts would be impressed upon yet another Vendoth conquest soon after that.

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"I feel like a sheep in wolf's clothing," Chilton whispered as she watched the Vendoth fleet approach on the viewscreen.

Blasberg shared her scrutiny of the viewscreen. "This sheep has teeth and claws, Debbie."

"The Vendoth command ship is establishing a full duplex interlink with our computer," T'Tala announced.

"Are we being scanned?" Molina asked.

"Negative," T'Tala reassured. "Vendoth Protocols are performing checksum and match paradigms. Our identity as a Vendoth scout is being verified."

"If they look out a window we're going to have to do something slick quick," Holmyard said. "It's odd they didn't hail us to confirm our bona fides."

"It is the Vendoth Psyche," Silva said. "Superiority knows no threat. We are too small and too few to pose a serious compromise to the Vendoth."

"Identity as a Vendoth scout confirmed," T'Tala said. "We are receiving autopilot instructions for fleet logistics."

"Transfer them to the helm, please, T'Tala," Blasberg requested. "Toby, keep a sharp eye on those warp signatures. Keep up the camouflage."

"We look, smell and sound like a Vendoth scout," Molina said. "One curious sensor scan would be fatal but they don't appear to be too worried we are other than we are."

"New coordinates coming through," Chilton said. "They're aligning us in position with the rest of the fleet."

Blasberg tapped his controls. "Course laid in... whoops."

"Don't say 'whoops,' Dan," Chilton warned. "This is not the time to say, 'whoops.'"

"Sorry," Blasberg said. "I was a bit surprised that the autopilot just kicked in. Seems like they want total control over where we go and how fast."

"Coordinating fleet maneuvers for sixty-five vessels by a single automated interlink is efficient and leaves little room for autonomous mistakes," Silva said.

The Vendoth fleet now engulfed the view on the main screen. They held a collective breath as Excalibur threaded her way unchallenged through the alien armada.

"We are positioned at the perimeter," Silva reported. "We are interlinked into the Vendoth tactical database and I can now determine the Vendoth fleet consists of one Command ship, two Dreadnoughts, twenty-five Battlecruisers, thirty-six Scouts."

"If only we could get that information through to Admiral Gatch," Holmyard said. "We dare not risk Starfleet channels of communication though."

"The interlink with the command ship is on a subspace carrier wave," T'Tala said. "Perhaps we might modulate a minute data packet within the interlink."

"Good idea, T'Tala," Holmyard said. "I'll work on it."

"So far so good," Blasberg said, and tapped at the helm. "We seem to have reached our designated position without arousing their suspicions."

"Now we have them right where they want us," Chilton said. "What do we do now?"

"Sit tight and look for opportunities to take advantage of," Blasberg offered.

"We need to do something sooner than that," Silva said. "The Vendoth tactical network has detected an incoming vessel. The profiling indicates it is a Starfleet vessel approaching Sector Zero Zero One very close to the Vendoth fleet."

"Lots of chatter on the battle nets," Holmyard said. "They're mobilizing an assault."

"Long range sensors detect no other Starfleet vessels in range except Excalibur and the incoming starship," T'Tala said.

"We've got to warn them somehow," Chilton said."

"We can't compromise our camouflage," Molina said. "Neither Excalibur nor the incoming Starfleet vessel are a match against the whole Vendoth fleet."

"I have identified the Starfleet vessel," Silva said. "It is the USS Incipiens NCC 90866, Sovereign class."

"The Vendoth assault fleet reports they have engaged the Starfleet vessel," Holmyard said.

"Can we get a view of it?" Blasberg asked.

"A moment," T'Tala responded, then, "On screen."

The six retired Starfleet officers could only watch in helpless horror as the Vendoth vessels surrounded Incipiens, bombarding it relentlessly with blazing bolts of lethal energy.

"We can't just sit on the sidelines!" Chilton insisted.

"We can't do anything else," Blasberg countered. "Helm and navigation are locked into the Vendoth fleet interlink by our Vendoth database."

"So is tactical..." Silva added.

"...and communications," Holmyard concluded.

Less than a battle and more than a massacre, it was all over in seven brief minutes. Incipiens was reduced to quantum dust and the Vendoth assault force reformed with the Vendoth fleet.

Chilton cleared her throat of the suppressed tears collecting there. "Isn't the Sovereign class starship the state-of-the-art for Federation engineering?"

"It was designed to combat the Borg," Molina answered.

"I wonder if even the Borg could withstand the Vendoth?" Holmyard said. "All those people... dead in seven minutes!"

"The odds of Starfleet survival do not indicate optimism as a logical expectation," T'Tala said.

"The day's not over yet," Blasberg growled. "We will make the Vendoth pay for every Starfleet life we lose."

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"I wish you really were here to talk to, Commodore," Blasberg told the figure seated in the chair behind the desk. He stood within the dim environs of Excalibur's ready room. A museum quality hologram of Commodore Walter S. George occupied the all too familiar space the real life version had more than eight decades prior.

The simulacrum remained silently oblivious, sipping a cup of holographic coffee, virtually reading reports on the desktop monitor. Blasberg had disabled the interactive protocols on purpose. In life, when The Commodore had been Excalibur's commanding officer, they had shared a rapport based on mutual respect, synergy and a friendly antagonism. Blasberg smiled as he recalled George's consternation at how his executive officer had been able to anticipate The Commodore's inner thoughts with near telepathic accuracy.

The George Hologram was a photonic surfeit, unreadable and ungoadable. Still, Blasberg experienced nostalgic angst at the memories evoked by the animated image. "It figures, Commodore. Of all the commanding officer's Excalibur had in her time, Starfleet picked you to sit there for the museum tourists to admire. How does it feel to be a timeless, cultural icon?"

If I ever meet a cultural icon, Number One, I'll ask them and let you know.

Blasberg speared the George Hologram with a glance. Did it just speak right now in spite of its silent-running mode? Or was he finally going senile?

No more senile than I am, Number One, with all due respect.

Or, years of practice anticipating and finishing The Commodore's unspoken thoughts had become a subconscious habit for Blasberg. "Old habits die hard," he whispered, "and old die-hards become habits, Commodore, with all due respect." Nostalgic inertial dampeners and emotional structural integrity fields within were creeping into the yellow alert range. Blasberg distracted his mood by a critical scan of the Ready Room's décor. It was festooned in George Modern. The Commodore's fleet of starship models hung in mid-air around the room. George's collection of sword replicas, several of them Excaliburs, hung from the bulkheads or rested in places of honor on display stands. His library of Arthurian fiction lined the shelves. Hey! A gap in the bookshelves caught his eye. Where had it gone?

A movement from the desk pierced his peripheral vision. The George Hologram was absorbed in a book, to all appearances. The very Book that Blasberg had identified as missing. How had it gotten on the desk in the hologram's hands? Those very hands were resting on the open Book, tracing the lines on the page.

"Computer, freeze George Hologram," Blasberg commanded. He moved behind the desk and looked over the hologram's photonic shoulders. Yep. "The Poetical Works of Tennyson." The pages were open to the poem, "Locksley Hall." Blasberg scanned the page, zeroing in on where the George Hologram's fingers rested.

'Men, my brothers, men the workers, ever reaping something new;
That which they have done but earnest of the things that they shall do.
For I dip't into the future, far as human eye could see,
Saw the Vision of the world, and all the wonder that would be;
Saw the heavens fill with commerce, argosies of magic sails,
Pilots of the purple twilight, dropping down with costly bales;
Heard the heavens fill with shouting, and there rain'd a ghastly dew
From the nations' airy navies grappling in the central blue;
Far along the world-wide whisper of the south-wind rushing warm,
With the standards of the peoples plunging thro' the thunder-storm;
Till the war-drum throb'd no longer, and the battle-flags were furl'd
In the Parliament of man, the Federation of the world.
There the common sense of most shall hold a fretful realm in awe,
And the kindly earth shall slumber, lap't in universal law.'

Quite a testament to the talents of the hologram programmer. The passage from Tennyson was one of Commodore George's favorites. With Vendoth all around them and the defense of Sector Zero Zero One before them, Blasberg felt the words of the poem sting his awareness.

"All right, Commodore," Blasberg surrendered. "You get the last word this time." He placed his hands on the George Hologram's shoulders, willing Time to reverse and reimburse them for the theft of The Commodore.

"Dining on ashes, Dan?" Chilton's voice softly interrupted his regretful reverie.

Blasberg steeled himself against a wince of surprise. "Ashes upset my delicate constitution, Debbie. I've done quite well on a lifetime diet of crow."

Chilton strolled around the ready room. "They really did a good job restoring this to the George Days. I used to dread having to come in here and face him. He was so... so... Starfleet."

"Yes," Blasberg agreed. "If I grow up I want to be just like The Commodore."

"If you don't get some rest," Chilton admonished, "you won't even have the energy to attempt to fill his left shoe."

"The crew of Incipiens are at rest now," Blasberg sighed. "They can do all my resting for me."

"Dan, you haven't changed a bit," Chilton said, "which means you were a grouchy old man at a very young age."

"And you always say I never act my age," Blasberg retorted. He moved over to an Excalibur hanging on the bulkhead. Gripping it by the pommel, he lifted it from its mounting. Blade up, he held it before his face and could almost feel the chill of steel. "When I first took command of Excalibur, The Commodore told me that this was the most honest weapon ever crafted. With a phaser, you can't tell if it's charged, or set to kill. There is no doubt about a sword. But with both weapons, there is plenty of room for doubt where the wielder is concerned. The whole difference hinges on who is holding the handle."

"That's a typical Georgeism," Chilton noted. "And...?"

Blasberg closed his eyes, remembering. "The Commodore also said, the sword this replica symbolizes was distinguished in three ways -- its name, its wielder and its legacy."

"Excalibur... King Arthur... and...?"

"Protection of the weak and preservation of the peace."

"Where is all this going, Dan?"

Blasberg replaced the sword in its mount. "A sword is only as good... or evil... as the person who swings it. When Incipiens was massacred by the Vendoth, we could only sit and watch. Since we could do no good with the sword in our hands, was it evil to choose to play hide and seek with the Vendoth?"

Chilton moved close to Blasberg and gave him a hug. "You get more like the Commodore every year. He did too much thinking, too."

Blasberg returned her hug. "I'll take that as a compliment."

"Do you two want to be alone?" Holmyard asked from the doorway.

The interruption ended the hug between two old friends. "The last thing I want right now is to be alone, Bonnie," Blasberg replied.

"Then join Flavius and me on the bridge," Holmyard said. "Toby and T'Tala are on their way up."

"What's up?"

"We're getting mobilization instructions from the Vendoth interlink," Holmyard reported.

"Finally!" Blasberg said. "We've been sitting still out here for over fifteen hours."

"Flavius thinks the Vendoth are sending scouts out for reconnoiter," Holmyard went on. "It could be a prelude to their assault on Terra."

"That's excellent!" Blasberg said.

"How is an assault on Terra excellent?" Chilton asked, moving for the door.

Blasberg followed Holmyard and Chilton out of the Ready Room and onto the bridge. "What I mean is, it's excellent we are getting instructions to mobilize as a Vendoth scout. That means they really think Excalibur is just one of their scouts." He turned for once last glance at the George Hologram behind the desk. By habit, he heard in his mind the thoughts The Commodore would have expressed had he actually been there.

You wield Excalibur now, Number One.

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"We have cleared the asteroid belt," T'Tala reported.

Thirty-six Vendoth scout vessels and one lone Starfleet vessel were spread in a phalanx across 4.902 astronomic units, 0.1325 a.u.'s apart. The Vendoth Phalanx had mustered at Neptune then trawled a sensor net through Sector Zero Zero one at a relentless, somewhat arrogant, sublight factor nine. The cusp of the phalanx was vectored toward Sol, the system's primary. By design, luck or fate, Excalibur occupied a point near the center of the phalanx.

"An arrow aimed for the heart," Blasberg muttered as he absorbed the tactical display with dispassionate numbers on his panel.

"An admirable offensive tactic," Silva observed. "There has been no deviation from our course. It took us a little over twenty hours to reach this point. This phalanx spreads across the entire orbit of Mars. The Vendoth are testing Starfleet resolve and response with sufficient advance warning of our approach."

"Starfleet's response has also been admirable," Molina added. "We've seen no Starfleet vessels since this Vendoth advance began. The absence of Starfleet vessels gives no indication to the Vendoth of fleet strength or vulnerability."

"Starfleet channels are all quiet," Holmyard said. "There is no intership chatter or communiques from Starfleet Command. My guess is Starfleet imposed a communications blackout for the duration of this Vendoth advance. They're keeping fleet status very close to the vest."

"But where is everybody?" Chilton wondered. "Could it be true Starfleet has only mustered six starships?"

"They're probably in silent running mode," Blasberg said. "They're out there somewhere with only minimal life support operating."

"The Vendoth sensor interlink detects no other vessels in the sector but ours," T'Tala confirmed.

"Tactical directives coming through the interlink now," Silva said. "We're getting coordinates for a target -- Mars."

"Makes sense," Molina said. "Utopia Planetia and the Mars Defense Perimeter."

"Speed increasing to warp factor one," Blasberg called out. "Looks like the Vendoth are anxious to show off their superiority."

"Are we going to play along and attack our own?" Chilton asked.

"When a Vendoth, do as the Vendoth do," Blasberg quipped.

"Attacking our own will be academic," T'Tala said. "The Mars Defense Perimeter just went active. We have been targeted as a hostile."

On the viewcreen, the crimson sphere of Mars loomed closer. The planet named for the Roman God of War seemed to glow with anger at the inimical Vendoth threat.

"Weapons charged," Silva said. "We're tasked to take out a Perimeter Probe on an intercept course."

"With our Vendoth modified shields and weapons," Molina noted, "that probe has no more chance than its predecessors did when the Borg swept through here back in '67."

"The probe is transmitting the standard warnings," Holmyard said. "Looks like we're about to receive friendly fire."

"This is where we get off, then," Blasberg said. "Our orders were to report to Utopia Planetia. Well, here we are."

"Do we just surrender?" Chilton asked.

"That would be counter to Vendoth modus operandi," T'Tala said. "A superior-minded species never surrenders to inferiors. Were we to do that we would signal our adversaries as to the truth of our nature."

"We won't surrender," Blasberg said, "but we will throw the Vendoth superiority for a loop."

"We let ourselves be destroyed," Chilton realized. "The Vendoth will have doubts about their invulnerability if the smallest of their vessels is taken out by a lone Starfleet Perimeter Probe."

"Are we really going to let that probe destroy us?" Holmyard asked.

"Not necessary," Molina answered. "All we have to do is shutdown primary power systems after the probe's first shot. Then we go to silent running mode."

"Once we power down we will no longer register as a hostile to the Mars Defense Perimeter," Blasberg said.

"The Vendoth will see the disappearance of a scout from their interlink," Silva concluded. "Which will occur in five seconds. The probe is preparing to fire."

"Four..." Blasberg counted out. "Three... two... one."

The viewscreen flared with the feral light of destruction as the Perimeter Probe lanced out. Excalibur shuddered with the impact of coherent energy against her shields.

"No damage," Silva reported. "Shields holding. Our weapons are primed to fire."

"Shutting down primary power systems now," Molina said, and a second later all lights on the bridge went dark.

"Did it work?" Chilton whispered. "Does the probe think we're dead?"

"The cessation of further assault logically indicates the Mars Defense Perimeter no longer considers us a threat," T'Tala said. "With primary power shutdown, we will register on its sensors as a Starfleet vessel."

"But what if the Vendoth destroy the Mars Defense Perimeter anyway?" Chilton asked. "Then Utopia Planetia is defenseless."

"Memory Alpha survives," T'Tala answered. "The Vendoth, though ruthless, are pragmatic. They will not waste an asset if it can be subdued. If Utopia Planetia offers no resistance, they too will survive."

"But the Starfleet Database there will also become a Vendoth asset," Blasberg moaned.

"Unlikely," T'Tala dismissed. "Before primary power shutdown, I injected cascading checksum errors into the Vendoth interlink. Any inputs from now until they correct the errors will be corrupted."

"Good thinking, T'Tala," Molina said.

"It was logical," T'Tala said. "The relative quality of my thought processes does not factor in to the deductive matrix."

"Well, at least we've given the Vendoth second and third thoughts about Starfleet's vulnerability," Chilton said. "Now what do we do?"

"We play dead until the Vendoth scouts clear the area," Blasberg said. "Then we contact Utopia Planetia and Starfleet Command. If the Mars Defense Perimeter is destroyed, we may be the only defense Utopia Planetia has left."

"What a week!" Chilton exclaimed. "We've been destroyed twice and still live to tell about it."

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"Roj Ch'Dak! "

VenQa' Re'Ijom knew the best way to survive an encounter with the Most Superior was to meet her eye to eye when present face to face. And when one had information of less than positive content, it was vital to one's physiological integrity to deliver such information with one's eyes solidly aimed into those of the Most Superior. To lower one's eyes was to invite certain termination of one's existence.

"VenQa' Re'Ijom?" The predatory fire was smoldering in the eyes of the Most Superior. Did she sense the portent of his report?

"The scouts have finished the sweep of this system," Re'Ijom reported, his gaze aimed directly into hers. "The rest of the system is void of planetary bodies."

"What of the defensive system around the fourth planet?"

"We have eradicated it, Roj Ch'Dak."

"And the vessel construction facility?"

"Intact and ready to be annexed, Roj Ch'Dak."

"But...?"

"Minimal resistance. A ship, Akira class, USS Swiftfire, attacked the group that attacked Sol 7. No losses in that group, but three vessels did receive medium to heavy damage."

"From one vessel! I want those VenQa' relieved. They will be punished for such incompetence!"

"In their defense, Roj Ch'Dak, the Starfleet vessel used a clever move. It went to warp and came out close to the Scouts. They had little warning. It was a daring move. One that would not be expected from a race like the Federation."

The Roj Ch'Dak hissed in a way that indicated that she was nonetheless displeased.

"Once again, Re'Ijom you stop me from making a rushed and harsh move. But those Ven with be punished when the battle is over."

"A wise decision."

"Continue your report."

Perhaps the Most Superior already knew the negative portion of his report. Still, Re'Ijom was duty bound to report it all. "We have lost a scout vessel."

"Who?" The smoulder was flaring to life.

"Ja'Xui'Niu', Roj Ch'Dak."

"How?"

Re'Ijom resisted the instinct to lower his eyes. "One of the defensive drones, Roj Ch'Dak."

"Are you certain?"

He felt the air grow hot. "Not entirely, Roj Ch'Dak. Our interlink experienced a disruption. Data has become sporadic and unreliable."

Roh Ch'Dak rose from her seat and prowled near him, eyes fixed on his. "Is this a challenge to our superiority or a defeat?"

Death or life would result from his next words and to shield the truth would be fatal. "A challenge to overcome, but no threat, Roj Ch'Dak. Our data of the system is intact. We know all about the inferiors' tactical disadvantages."

Re'Ijom glanced back at his Padd device.

"The group that was headed for the fifth planet encountered several vessels. There were no losses but they were driven away. It seems they are protecting something."

"What?"

"The data files we got from their Memory Alpha state that the only asset around that planet is a single research station noted for its holographic research. There could be a covert facility hidden there. The communications we intercepted indicate that whatever is there is very important to the Federation."

"Hmmm...how many ships did the Scout group encounter?"

Re'Ijom moved to a 3D tactical display of the Sol system and started to point out places on the display.

"Five. But a sixth, the Akira ship that attacked our ships at the seventh planet is moving to join them. They are in the solar orbit of the fifth planet. They seem to be offering protection for a number of planets, the third planet, which is their homeworld Earth, the fourth planet and the fifth. But their formation and position is designed to offer more protection to Earth, to draw hostile forces away from Sol V. A lesser race would continue into this system and change course here and attack Sol V. But the Starfleet would move ships to flanking positions, here and here. The outcome would be heavy casualties to the attacking forces."

"What do you suggest?"

"We don't give the Federation the satisfaction, we head straight for Sol V. It will force their ships into moving and engaging us out here, not in their place of choice."

Her claws neared his throat. "Are you ready to command our assault, Re'Ijom?"

"I am ready to serve the desires of the Roj Ch'Dak of the Vendoth."

The claws closed on his throat. "If my desire is to spill your blood?"

"It is not my blood, Roj Ch'Dak. It is yours."

The tip of one claw scratched deep but not terminally. His blood glistened on her finger. "Our blood IS superior, Re'Ijom. We will teach the inferiors to savor the taste of it as we open the floodgates of their veins." The claws withdrew but the Most Superior remained within the threshold of intimacy. "Regroup the remaining scouts. Find out from them first-hand what happened to Ja'Xui'Niu'. No matter the outcome, we begin the assault in one time-span."

Re'Ijom bowed. "I am honoured by your confidence in me, Roj Ch'Dak." Re'Ijom turned to and faced the Helm officer. "Helm, set a course for the fifth planet. Standard formation. Maximum speed."

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"This is USS Excalibur NCC 2004 hailing Utopia Planitia Shipyards...please respond." The Signal Response Indicator remained dark.

"Are they deaf or just ignoring us?" Blasberg asked, peering over Holmyard's shoulder.

"It's hard to ignore forty-seven iterations of 'hailing frequencies open,' Dan," Holmyard replied and leaned back in her seat. "I just hope the problem is selective deafness on their part."

"I am picking up lifesigns," T'Tala said. "But power signatures are minimal."

"They must be under orders to maintain communications blackout," Molina suggested, "following the Vendoth assault on the Martian Defense Perimeter."

"Since there is no more Martian Defense Perimeter I guess the word 'assault' would be considered underkill," Blasberg said. "Hail them one more time, Bonnie."

Holmyard tapped at her console. "I'm a Starfleet Admiral... I commanded this ship... and here I am playing interstellar telecom operator all over again." She held a hand to her earpiece. "This is USS Excalibur NCC 2004 hailing Utopia Planitia Shipyards... please respond."

Excalibur shuddered and those standing wrestled with their balance.

Chilton pushed herself up from the console she had used to prevent a full-blown tumble to the deck. "Someone just responded, I think."

"Phaser hit on our forward shields," Silva reported. "Not Vendoth... Starfleet signature."

"No damage," Molina added. "Our shields held."

"Why are they firing at us?" Chilton asked. "We're on the same side."

"Five minutes ago we were Vendoth in appearance," T'Tala reminded.

"Proximity alert," Silva continued. "Incoming vessel... Starfleet profile."

"So, why did they fire at us when we hailed them?" Chilton asked.

Blasberg returned to his seat at the helm. "We could hail them again and ask but their last reply was a little one-sided."

"They're hailing us," Holmyard said, "using a permutated code reserved for invasion scenarios." She tapped at her console and, "I've matched their protocols. On screen."

"Identify yourselves," the Starfleet officer on the viewscreen demanded. "Our next shot will not be a warning."

"And your first shot was?" Blasberg asked.

"They're charging weapons," Silva announced.

"We are USS Excalibur NCC 2004," Blasberg said quickly. "I'm Admiral Daniel C. Blasberg, Junior."

The Starfleet officer held up a hand to someone off-screen. "I'm Captain Makenzie Calhoun commanding USS Excalibur NCC 26517. My apologies for the warning shot, Admiral. We had to be sure you weren't hostages of the Vendoth."

"Been there, done that," Blasberg said, "but that was over eighty years ago. This time around we just played a little hide and sneak."

Calhoun nodded. "I've been briefed on your first contact with the Vendoth, Admiral. I had no idea when I woke up this morning that I'd be talking to legends like yourselves."

"I'm too young to be a legend, Captain," Blasberg dodged, "but I'm not getting any younger. With Vendoth on the way none of us may get any older."

"Your reputation as a survivor may give the Vendoth a few surprises," Calhoun countered. "Speaking of surprises for the Vendoth, I suggest you beam over to Excalibur so I can brief you on our defense strategy."

"There's only the six of us here on Excalibur," Blasberg pointed out. "Shouldn't you beam over here?"

"We already have the commanders of the Mars Defense Task Force on board," Calhoun said. "We were about to sit down and coordinate tactics until you and the Vendoth showed up. Easier for one to beam from there than for sixteen of us to beam over there."

Blasberg nodded. "Alright, Captain. Count me in. Excalibur out." He turned to face his comrades. "Now that was one for the history books."

"And I thought we were done making history when we all finally retired," Chilton sighed. "Speaking of which, Calhoun didn't mention when our replacements will arrive."

"I noticed that too," Molina said. "Under the circumstances, all possible replacements are probably not. We may be stuck here for the duration."

"And how long will that be?" Holmyard asked.

Blasberg was on his way to the turbolift. "Until either Starfleet or the Vendoth are victorious I guess. I'm sorry I got you all into this. I thought all we had to do was make it to Terra and..."

"Your convention of involving your shipmates in challenging situations is well documented," T'Tala said. "Apologizing for age-old habits is illogical."

"Ouch," Blasberg said. "Did you have to use the word 'old?'"

"We forgive you anyway, Dan," Chilton said. "Go find out what Starfleet's plans for us are. Whatever they are, we're with you two hundred percent."

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Blasberg waited until the scintillation of transporter fog cleared from his vision. "Honey, I'm home," he announced to his comrades on Excalibur's bridge.

"It's about time," Molina said. "The Vendoth are on their way."

"Yes, I know," Blasberg said, crossed over to Holmyard and handed her one of the PADDs he was carrying. "Here are Starfleet's contact protocols for this crisis. The Vendoth know all previous codes by now." Next he gave T'Tala a PADD. "Here are all the log entries on Vendoth contacts to date. We need to analyze them and see if there are vulnerabilities we can exploit." Next he also gave Silva a PADD. "Here is the tactical defense plan for Sector Zero Zero One." He moved to the helm and sat down.

"The first defense is at Jupiter Station?" Silva asked.

"Yes," Blasberg affirmed. "Debbie, plot a course for Terra."

"Terra?" Chilton repeated. "We aren't going to Jupiter?"

"The defense of Jupiter station will be a delaying tactic at best," Blasberg told her. "Starfleet Tacticians feel our Vendoth upgrades are an element of surprise best used in defense of Terra."

"That doesn't sound very optimistic," Holmyard said.

Blasberg swivelled his seat to face her. "It's not. They aren't. Sixteen Starfleet vessels against a force of sixty-four Vendoth vessels is considered a suicide defense."

"So, we'll be the only ship defending Terra?" Molina asked.

"Only long enough for the others to arrive and help," Blasberg said.

"Other Starfleet vessels?" Silva asked.

"If we're lucky... yes," Blasberg nodded.

"Dan, give it to us straight," Chilton insisted. "We don't have time to play twenty questions. How bad are our chances? What's going on?"

Blasberg sighed and sat straighter in his seat. "I won't even try to sugar-coat it. Yes, there are only sixteen Starfleet vessels currently mustered. Yes, there are sixty-four Vendoth vessels incoming. Starfleet plans for the first engagement to be at Jupiter Station. But we saw what happened to USS Incipiens. She was Sovereign class, our most advanced starship. And the smallest Vendoth ships blew Incipiens to quantum dust. What chance will those sixteen starships have? We are tasked to mount whatever defense we can at Terra. But, the Klingons are on their way."

"The Klingons?" Molina repeated.

"Just so," Blasberg said. "They are sending a warfleet. But the question is... when will they get here? Starfleet says other starships are on their way but they may be too little, too late."

"Remember when the words, 'a Klingon warfleet is en route to Terra,' used to be a bad thing?" Holmyard asked.

"It WILL be a bad thing for the Vendoth," Blasberg said, "but if they get here too late, Vendoth is all the Klingons will find. We won't be here to see for ourselves."

"You neglected the most positive element of the equation, Dan," T'Tala said.

"Is there a positive element?" Blasberg challenged.

"Indeed," T'Tala affirmed. "Since we made first contact with your species three hundred thirteen years ago, we have experienced a most illogical amazement at the indomitability of Humans. More often than not, when you are faced with overwhelming odds Humans overcome with methods that defy logic. This makes predicting victory or defeat superfluous but where there are Humans there is unpredictability."

"I think that was a compliment," Blasberg hedged. "And I hope you are right, T'Tala."

"We're being hailed by Captain Calhoun," Holmyard announced. "On screen."

Calhoun appeared on the main viewscreen. "Excalibur this is Excalibur. We're departing, Admiral Blasberg."

"We're behind you all the way, Captain Calhoun," Blasberg returned.

Calhoun smiled. "I know how much you protested your, 'charge to the rear,' Admiral. We'll fight better knowing you are on station on the homefront."

"We'll keep the home fires burning, Captain," Blasberg told him, "and do everything in our power to keep home herself from burning."

"Fight the good fight, Admiral," Calhoun said. "Excalibur, Excalibur salutes you. Calhoun out."

On the viewscreen, they watched as sixteen Starfleet starships formed a phalanx and warped away for the frontlines at Jupiter.

"...theirs not to make reply, theirs not to reason why, theirs but to do or die..." T'Tala quoted. All eyes turned to her. "A favorite selection of Commodore George I thought appropriate for the occasion."

"High time we were on our way," Blasberg said, turning his attention to the helm. "ETA to Terra is two minutes with a short detour around the sun. Ready or not, here we..."

His thought was aborted by a blast of sound from the speakers. "I am the Roj Ch'Dak of the Vendoth Empire. We are here to right the errors of your ways. No longer will you interfere in other's cultures as you did in ours. You will now humble yourselves before the might of Vendoth and learn subservience...or die."

"Holy Q!" Holmyard exclaimed. "That was sent on a subspace carrier of massive power. It overrode all frequencies and overloaded our reception protocols."

"I guess they wanted our undivided attention," Blasberg said. He looked at the viewscreen where the Starfleet armada had warped away. "And we're about to give it to them." Without further comment, he tapped the helm and Excalibur surged for Terra.

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"Message from the Fleet," Holmyard called out. "They have engaged the Vendoth."

"Now we have them right where they want us," Blasberg said, and made final adjustments at the helm "Most of us anyway, excluding us. We're in standard orbit around Terra out of harm's way."

"The odds of sixteen Starfleet vessels against sixty-four Vendoth vessels do not favor Starfleet," T'Tala said. "We may be out of harms way only long enough for the odds that favor the Vendoth to apply their statistical results."

"With all due respect for the odds, T'Tala," Molina said, "Starfleet rarely fails when the odds are against us."

"The Human variable chronically defies statistical probabilities," T'Tala agreed.

"Starfleet Command is hailing us on a secure channel," Holmyard said. "Two-way visual established."

The image of the homeworld of the United Federation of Planets was replaced by a Starfleet admiral on the main viewscreen. "This is Admiral Joseph Gatch of Starfleet Command Invasion Operations. Welcome home to Terra, Excalibur."

"What's the strategy, Admiral?" Blasberg asked.

Gatch's smile was grim. "Straight to the point, Admiral Blasberg. Survival is the strategy."

"Then Excalibur could be more effective on the battle front," Blasberg said.

"Excalibur is our wild card," Gatch countered. "By all indications, the Vendoth have not yet blown your sheep-in-wolf's-clothing maneuver. We may need that surprise advantage when the situation becomes desperate."

"If we're the only ship that survives, then surprise is our last defense?" Blasberg summarized. "Are things that desperate?"

"For now, yes," Gatch said. "The Klingons are on their way. The Romulans and Cardassians say they will help but it is doubtful they can muster and arrive in time to save Terra, which may be their intent."

"I must interrupt," Silva said. "Tactical reports from the Fleet indicate one Vendoth dreadnaught has compromised the Starfleet armada and is heading for Terra."

Gatch glanced offscreen. "Confirmed, Proconsul Silva. We need our wild card played now more than ever. It would have been better for you to have stayed on Magna Roma."

"If Terra falls, Magna Roma has no chance," Silva said. "As her Proconsul, I am here to defend her as I defend the survival of Terra and the United Federation of Planets."

"I won't delay you, Excalibur," Gatch said. "May the wind be at your backs."

"Strategy, admiral?" Blasberg asked.

The grim smile returned. "Surprise me... and the Vendoth. That's what Excalibur is best at. Gatch, out."

"T'Tala do you have the Vendoth dreadnaught on sensors?" Blasberg asked.

"Affirmative," T'Tala said. "It will be at our position in four point eight four minutes. I am transferring interception vectors to the helm."

"Any brainstorm?" Blasberg asked as he and Chilton prepped the helm to intercept the Vendoth dreadnaught.

"We need to do something sneaky," Chilton offered. "And the last time I looked 'sneaky' up in the database, Toby's picture was given as the prime illustration."

All ten eyes on the bridge turned on Molina. He grinned. "I prefer to call it skillful misdirection. And I think I have a plan but it's a little risky."

"We've been playing risky since the Vendoth arrived," Holmyard said. "Why change tactics now?"

Molina nodded. "All right. First, we need to intercept the Vendoth dreadnaught beyond Luna's orbit."

"Done," Blasberg said as he tapped the helm. "Thirty seconds to interception point."

Molina worked at the engineering station. "I have reestablished our Vendoth power signatures. Now..." More relays and controls were manipulated. Lights on the bridge flickered and faded.

"Hey! I've lost starboard stability!" Blasberg protested.

"Good," Molina said. "Can you make us look crippled when we get to IP?"

"Without starboard stability we'll look anything but optimal," Blasberg said.

"Shields are out on the starboard side," Silva said. "This is part of your risky plan, Toby?"

"Yes it is," Molina affirmed. "What is our complement of quantum torpedoes?"

"Thirty," Silva answered.

"Prime them all for full charge and prepare to fire them all at once," Molina said. "Bonnie, transmit a Vendoth distress call when the dreadnaught is in visual range."

"Bob's your uncle, Toby," Holmyard said. "What do we do when the Vendoth hail us?"

"If no one else minds," Molina responded, "let me do the talking and let Vendoth nature take its course."

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"Course!"

VenQe' Vi'Ejor glanced at the navigation status screens. "Direct, VenQa'!" she announced promptly.

"Weapons!" VenQa' Xa'Ymaz snapped.

Vi'Ejor knew the VenQa' was not in a foul mood. Battle protocol eliminated tact. But she knew the VenQa's mood would turn foul if she was slow to report. "Primed hot!"

Xa'Xua'Kai had a superior campaign record back in the Kalium Galaxy. Many inferior worlds had submitted to the Vendoth Way after a persuasive visit from Xa'Xua'Kai. The mere rumor of their approach caused the rest of the inferior worlds to disarm and await the arrival of the superior way of life. Vi'Ejor entertained no doubt this world in this galaxy would be no different or no less inferior.

"VenQe'!"

Vi'Ejor turned at the hissed summons from the VenQu'. He was intently fixed on his proximity monitors. She was behind his position in a step and peering over his shoulder. "Define!" she snapped in emulation of the VenQa'.

"A vessel approaches." The bleb on the monitor confirmed this.

"Ident!"

"Vendoth. Scout. Ja'Xui'Niu'."

Vi'Ejor's spine-fur bristled. Her instincts chilled her in warning. She pivoted. "VenQa, Ja'Xiu'Niu' approaches."

"So. Was it not destroyed as reported?" Xa'Ymaz mused.

"It approaches," Vi'Ejor repeated. "Vessel ident confirms."

"Contact," Xa'Ymaz directed.

A glance at the VenQi' was all it took to complete the action. He nodded.

"Open," Vi'Ejor said.

"Ja'Xiu'Nui'. Xa'Xua'Kai," Xa'Ymaz snapped.

"Ja'Xiu'Nui. Damaged. Assist."

Xa'Ymaz sat like stone for a moment. "Define."

"Inferior subspace mine. Motivator's down. Weapons out."

The silence on the bridge was total. The VenQa' considered. "Grapplers," he directed the VenQo'. "VenQe'."

She was at his side in a step. "Attend, VenQa'."

"Do you believe it is truly Ja.Xui'Niu?"

"I sense it may not be."

"You sense?"

"The ident is Ja'Xui'Niu. The feel it is not."

"So. And one inferior subspace mine outmatches Vendoth defenses?"

"Not."

"So. Inferior wears superior cloak." Xa'Ymaz grinned, all teeth showing. "An admirable waste."

"Destroy?"

"Not. We bring them in and they are ours! First capture!"

Vi'Ejor spared a glance at the monitors. "They are near. No weapons or defense."

"Good. They know the superior have them."

"Entered," the VenQu' reported.

"Assault," Xa'Ymaz ordered and Vi'Ejor knew troops below were moving.

"Open. Ja'Xui'Niu."

"Speak."

"Motivators unstable!" The voice from the inferiors revealed. "Critical!"

"Confirm," the VenQo' said. "It will destruct in ten."

"Remove!" Xa'Ymaz shouted.

"Weapons armed," the VenQu' followed. "They release!"

“Inside?” Xa’Ymaz was beyond amazed.

“Confirm.”

The decks of Xa’Xua’Kai quaked.

Vi’Ejor regained her feet. All around her Vendoth expired as their controls imploded in their faces. “Bridge loss in five,” she told her VenQa’. It was the last thing she would ever report.

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The main viewscreen was alight as fires burned all through the Vendoth dreadnaught. In a spectacular explosion the top deck blasted open to space.

“I’ll bet that doesn’t tickle,” Blasberg quipped.

“It had to hurt,” Molina agreed. “But we didn’t destroy them in spite of the forcefeeding of thirty quantum torpedoes down their throats.”

“I’m amazed they actually let us inside their hangar deck,” Chilton said.

“The Vendoth think we are inferior,” Molina said. “We’re no threat to their superiority. But every Achilles has his heel. All we had to do was initiate a warp core breach and the Vendoth kicked us back out in self-preservation – but not until we dumped those quantum torpedoes within their defense perimeter.”

“An attitude of superiority is a threat unto itself,” T’Tala added. “The nature of the universe is such that there will always be an exception to a superior veneer.”

“In other words, ‘pride goeth before a fall,’” Blasberg quoted. “Now, do we go in for the kill or do we remain ‘the good guys’ and offer our assistance to the damage we caused?”

“Can they still fight?” Holmyard asked.

“Not at present,” Silva replied. “They’ve lost their command deck. That alone may keep them out of the fight for good. But they still have offense capability and impulse power in good health. They just need someone to organize them into fighting shape.”

“They pose no threat to us at present,” T’Tala summarized. “However a continued assault by us alone would be a risk beyond the odds.”

“We’ve beaten the odds for far too long,” Chilton said. “Sooner than later our luck will run out. Isn’t it about time we called for help?”

“The Vendoth fleet is on its way here, ETA two minutes,” Silva said with a gesture at his tactical display. A beep from the console drew his attention. “But, so are USS Adventure, USS Defiant and at least one Klingon battlecruiser.”

“The cavalry is charging,” Holmyard said. “Shall I hail Adventure? Wait!” She tapped at her communications relays. “Spacedock is sending a distress call.”

“Spacedock is under Vendoth assault,” Silva said, “A Vendoth assault force must have slipped in while we were busy with that dreadnaught. Adventure is maneuvering to assist.”

“Where is the rest of our fleet?” Blasberg asked.

“Right behind the Vendoth.”

“Show the tactical display on the main viewscreen,” Blasberg requested.

A tactical graphic of Sector Zero Zero One appeared. Jupiter Station and Utopia Planetia glared red indicating a negative battle status. A large, malignant, yellow blob flashed its way through the system with a smaller blue blob close behind it.

“Give me some finer resolution on our fleet,” Blasberg said. “Show me vessel IDs.”

The tactical display reoriented and magnified on the blue blob. Nine Starfleet vessels remained of the sixteen that had launched from Utopia Planetia. Blasberg tapped his helm controls and one particular vessel was centered.

USS EXCALIBUR NCC 26517 AMBASSADOR CLASS.

“Calhoun and crew are still with us,” Blasberg sighed in relief. “What say we rendezvous with the fleet and crash the Vendoth party?” He set the helm controls to make it happen.

“Shouldn’t we help Adventure and Defiant at Spacedock?” Molina asked.

“They’ll be ok with that Klingon battlecruiser,” Blasberg said. “Spacedock only has a few Vendoth vessels to worry about. The rest of the fleet has an entire armada to deal with. We’ll be more effective if we’re with the fleet.”

“Your choice is illogical,” T’Tala said. “In the time it takes us to rendezvous with the fleet, we could already be assisting at Spacedock.”

“What are you really up to, Dan?” Chilton probed. “When you get this bullheaded, it means you have an ulterior agenda.”

“Hail Calhoun’s Excalibur, Bonnie,” Blasberg hedged.

“Not until you answer Debbie’s question, Dan,” Holmyard countered. “You may be driving but no one communicates unless I make the connections. What have you been holding out on us?”

“I’ll cut engine power right now, Dan” Molina added. “We’ll go nowhere fast talking to no one if you don’t let us all in on whatever big secret you’re nursing.”

“This is mutiny!” Blasberg fumed.

“This is a communal effort,” T’Tala pointed out. “We have operated by gestalt rather than by chain of command. Where there is no command chain there can be no mutiny. Logically, if you wish for your designs to succeed, we must all act in unison and agreement.”

“Alright,” Blasberg sighed. “I surrender. I’m dying.”

“Now is not the time for melodrama, Dan,” Chilton said.

“I’m not being melodramatic,” Blasberg returned. “I’m being honest. I’m dying. And only Calhoun’s medical officer can save me.”

“You look healthy to me,” Molina said. “What are you dying of, terminal stubbornness?”

Blasberg looked at each of his shipmates in turn. “Synthococcus novae.”

“There hasn’t been a case of that in over a century, Dan,” Chilton said. “Federation medical science has improved the life support systems to eradicate it.”

“Lucky me, that’s what I’ve got,” Blasberg said. “I don’t know when, where or how, but I’ve had it for at least ten years and the strain I’ve got is mutated beyond modern medical’s ability to counteract.”

“Does Sue know?” Chilton asked.

“No,” Blasberg answered. “I was hoping a cure would be found and I’d never have to tell her.”

“She has a right to know, Dan,” Chilton pressed.

“I told you, Calhoun’s medical officer has the cure,” Blasberg shot back. “You’d never know and she’ll never know if we can rendezvous with Calhoun’s Excalibur before the Vendoth destroy it and the cure.”

“Logic dictates prudence,” T’Tala said. “The cure will be academic if the Vendoth destroy THIS Excalibur.” She nodded her head towards the main viewscreen.

The massed might of the Vendoth invasion fleet loomed closer with every passing second. Like a many-headed hydra, the harbingers of the doom of the Federation infested the stars of Sector Zero Zero One.

“Not to worry,” Molina said. “Our Vendoth camouflage protocols are still in place.” The evidence of Excalibur’s Vendoth masquerade was self-evident as the invasion fleet bled over them, around them and beyond them.

“Now all we have to worry about is my synthococcus novae infection,” Blasberg said.

“You might have told us this from the start,” Holmyard admonished.

“I didn’t want to worry you,” Blasberg explained, “I don’t want any sympathy.”

“Unfair to us, Dan,” Chilton chided. “We’ve spent decades worrying about and sympathizing with each other.”

“You won’t have to do either one if you let me rendezvous with Calhoun before the Vendoth make the point moot,” Blasberg challenged.

“You’ve always worried me, Dan,” Holmyard jibed, “and it’s Sue who has my sympathy. Nevertheless...” she configured the comm. channels like an impresario. “Excalibur to Excalibur, come in please.”

The reply was nearly instantaneous. “Excalibur. Calhoun, here.” The image of the Ambassador class Excalibur’s commanding officer appeared on the viewscreen.

“It’s time, Captain Calhoun,” Blasberg said “We’ll be in transporter range in thirty seconds. Are you prepared for transport?”

“Acknowledged, Admiral Blasberg,” Calhoun said. “We’re ready to transport as pre-arranged.”

Blasberg rose from his chair. He gave Chilton a hug, then crossed to Silva and Molina and gave them each a firm handshake. He gave Holmyard a hug as well, and rendered the Vulcan Tal salute to T’Tala. He then faced the viewscreen. “Please forgive me for deceiving you all,” he said softly. “Captain Calhoun, energize.”

He watched expressions of relative surprise crease the faces of his shipmates as they disappeared in transporter scintillation.

They reappeared across the distance aboard the other Excalibur's bridge.

"Daniel Christopher Blasberg, Junior!" Chilton fumed. "This is not funny!"

"No, Debbie, it's not," Blasberg agreed as he resumed his seat at the helm. "I'm sorry I lied to you."

"You're not dying?!" Chilton was incensed.

"Yes, I am dying," Blasberg revealed. "I do have a mutated strain of synthococcus novae. But, Calhoun's medical officer can't cure it any more than the rest of know Federation medical science can."

"You get us back this, minute!" Holmyard demanded.

"No can do," Blasberg shook his head. "Where I'm going you can't go. I always knew this would be a one-way trip."

"You can't leave us now!" Chilton insisted. "You just can't!"

"I have a red flag to charge and I don't want you to get in the way," Blasberg said. "I'll be freer to complete the trip since I know the five of you are safe."

"What trip?" Molina asked.

"Captain Calhoun," Blasberg addressed the other Excalibur commander, "inform Starfleet Command I am implementing Plan Omega in the hopes it will give the rest of the fleet a fighting chance for victory."

"Plan Omega, confirmed, Admiral Blasberg," Calhoun nodded. "I am glad the name of the ship to consummate it is Excalibur."

Blasberg straightened at the helm. "This is my last transmission. In accordance with Plan Omega I will enforce communications blackout. Tell Starfleet, the Federation and the rest of the Alpha Quadrant this: One fell swoop for Excalibur; one full sweep for the Federation! I defy the Vendoth and Excalibur is my sword of defiance and defense. When this moment passes, the Vendoth and all who would dare invade will know that now and forever, these stars are OURS!

"Blasberg, aboard USS Excalibur NCC 2004, out."

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"Personal Log Stardate..." Blasberg glanced around the dimly lit ready room, looking for a chronometer. The only active electronics in the room was the Commodore George hologram sitting across from him. "Stardate Omega. I have set a parabolic course outsystem that will circle back and intercept the Vendoth invasion fleet in orbit around Terra. I am tracking the course of the Vendoth command ship and have plotted the vectors to collide with it. If I hit it at full impulse speed it should make quite a deep impression on the Vendoth. I trust the Vendoth will least expect an inferior vessel to take the element of surprise on a high-speed kamikaze run. After the smoke clears and the dust settles, the rest of Starfleet can mop up the mess I hope to make.

"For the record, I do not fear the end. But, I will confess I have not enjoyed wondering when the end would be with a terminal illness and decline looming in my future. Now, I am in control of my destiny. My end will make a difference and preserve the life I have protected as a Starfleet officer for almost a century.

"Sue, I will release this in a log buoy at the perigee of my course. After the Vendoth are defeated, and they WILL be, know that I did this for you as much as for the rest of the Federation. Deep down you knew beyond knowing I was on the decline. Thank you for your love and support. Respect my choice of departure from this life. Remember me and I will always be with you."

Watering eyes obscured Blasberg's vision and he paused in his recitation and reflection. "To Bonnie, Debbie, Toby, T'Tala and Flavius, I couldn't have made it this far to Plan Omega without your help. We made a great team then... and now. To Tim, Elaine and Susan, please know I know what you would call me for doing what I am doing. All I can say is, I resemble your remarks without regrets." He looked at the hologram across from him. "To Commodore Walter S. George, wherever you are, with all due respect, ready or not, here I come.

"Daniel Christopher Blasberg, Junior, out."

Blasberg swiveled the chair and jumped to his feet, unburdened, feeling younger than he'd felt in decades. On impulse, he removed one of the Excalibur replicas from the wall and swung it experimentally.

The weight of the sword in his hand filled him with a virile sense of purpose. Confidently, he stepped out of the ready room and onto the bridge for the last time.

"It will be a pity to waste such a moving speech."

Blasberg froze. The voice had come from behind him. Had the George hologram spoken? Slowly he turned and a frisson of shock crept over the top of his skull.

"Barker!"

"Discrete High Technology Systems is gratified to render service," Barker intoned.

"You should be dead."

"That inevitability is."

"You were exiled to the Vendoth world over eighty years ago!"

"We are aware of the role you played in extending DHTS operations into the Kalium Galaxy."

"But you don't look like you've aged more than a week."

Barker stepped out of the dim lighting, around Blasberg, and onto the bridge. "DHTS assets transcend temporal dynamics. I am here now to fulfill contractual obligations to Starfleet, with your forbearance," Barker said as he sat in the center seat.

"I'm actually glad you're here," Blasberg said, "since in a few minutes I'm ramming this ship into a Vendoth command ship and you'll be here at the end with me. Nothing could make me happier." He sat at the helm and double-checked Excalibur's final course.

"Not even the cure for synthococcus novae?" Barker all but whispered.

"No such thing," Blasberg huffed.

"DHTS is unaware that there is no cure for synthococcus novae."

"What kind of double-talk is that?"

"DHTS offers synthococcus novae sufferers a complete cure."

"A little late to tell me, isn't it?"

"No better time than now. The cure is yours for a price."

Blasberg suppressed elevating his hopes. "I have the feeling the price is worse than the disease."

"Not necessarily," Barker said. "We will cure your synthococcus novae if you give us the command prefix codes for USS Excalibur NCC 2004."

"The codes will do you no good after I crash this ship."

"Why is it necessary to crash a perfectly good, if archaic, starship?"

"It's the last thing the Vendoth expect me to do."

"Is it?"

"It will decisively turn the tide of battle against the Vendoth."

"Will it?"

"Do you have a better idea?"

"Give us the command prefix codes for USS Excalibur NCC 2004."

"And you'll cure my synthococcus novae?"

"That is part of the agreement."

"And eliminate the Vendoth threat."

"Again, that is part of the agreement."

Blasberg studied Barker's face, looking for deception. The history between him and the Starfleet renegade was long and negative. Yet, DHTS had hired Barker as an operative and that corporation while unorthodox had a record of success in the services it occasionally provided to the Federation, not to mention the Klingons, Romulans or other highest bidders. They did have a reputation of sorts to maintain after all.

"DHTS can wait until more profitable opportunities present themselves to obtain the required minutae. We believe you do not have the luxury of that much time."

"Two zero zero four Alpha four Gamma four Psi six." The command prefix code came easily to mind and easier to enunciate.

Barker nodded. "Now, we slave helm, communications, weapons and engines in tandem." He handed Blasberg a PADD. "Readjust your course to follow this vector."

"This still takes us on a collision course with the Vendoth command ship," Blasberg observed but adjusted the course as the PADD indicated.

Barker moved from weapons to engineering to communications, configuring the systems to operate in tandem. "Just so. But we will not collide with the ship... exactly."

“How so?”

“Do you see that array we have targeted.”

“Yeah. So?”

“It is the transportal generation the Vendoth use to bridge the space between here and the Kalium Galaxy.”

“I repeat, yeah. So?”

“We will cross that bridge then burn it.”

“You’re crazy.”

“The sanity of DHTS is not in question. Were we not to adjust your plan it would be your sanity alone under scrutiny.”

Blasberg studied the viewscreen, wondering who on the bridge was suffering from a lapse of reality orientation. Terra loomed closer and closer. He could see the Vendoth fleet that besieged his homeworld and the flashes of battle indicating his Starfleet comrades were valiantly mounting what defense they could. “My plan was to ram the Vendoth command ship. What adjustments have you made.”

“DHTS is acting to ensure the security of this galaxy. We have studied the Vendoth database for over eighty years ever since it was obtained during your first encounter with them. Now, we have the tools and the data to effect the ultimate solution to the Vendoth problem.”

“And that is...?” Blasberg glanced at the helm. “One minute to impact. Doesn’t give you much time to escape.”

“Escape is not the plan,” Barker dismissed.

The Vendoth command ship was now centered on the viewscreen. Blasberg mentally picked out the point of the ‘transportal generation array’ Barker had targeted.

“Thirty seconds. I’d like to say it’s been nice to know you, Barker, but that would be a lapse of integrity on my part.”

“One lapse among many would be easy to overlook,” Barker said. “DHTS is not concerned with individual lapses. Transmitting now.”

“Transmitting what?” Blasberg demanded, and winced involuntarily as the Vendoth command ship filled the viewscreen.

He saw the flash at the same time he felt the familiar rumbles in the deck that indicated Excalibur was gathering its energies for a jump to warp speed. Time itself stretched and protracted. He would have been amazed that he couldn’t remember he had closed his eyes were it not for the fact he was even more amazed he was still alive to be amazed at all.

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It seemed as if all of Starfleet was in attendance today. Not only were the majority of the crews of the ships in system gathered on the massive auditorium deck of Spacedock, but holographic communication interface images of all ranks - captain and above - were present as well.

In front of the large view ports, a lone casket sat with the flag of the United Federation of Planets draped over it, representing those who gave their lives. Flanking the casket, hung banners of allied races who joined in fight. Behind the casket, a holographic display flashed a continuous stream of names and service photos of those killed during their encounters with the Vendoth. Beyond that, through the windows, several starships could be seen in defensive, battle ready positions.

The Starfleet personnel formed ranks by ship and affiliation. The front rank consisted of fleet captains who had engaged in battle. In most instances, the most senior surviving officer held the position. Behind them, stood their crews - those who were not part of sentry duty outside. Starfleet admirals, active as well as retired, entered the room and lined up behind the casket, facing the crowd. Under guard of a heavily armed security detail, Federation President Jaresh-Inyo walked forward and stepped up to a podium to the right of the casket. Without prompting, the whole room came to attention and he began his speech, which was broadcast to all Federation worlds.

“We gather here today to honor and grieve. In the face of malevolence, we came together to fight for our very survival. From the farthest reaches of the universe came an alien race bent on the destruction and enslavement of the inhabitants of our galaxy. They had only one thing on their minds - conquer the Federation. They failed to consider one thing... Starfleet.

“Two centuries, one score and five years ago our progenitors brought forth in this Quadrant a new United Federation of Planets, conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all sentients are created equal. Now we have emerged victorious from a great invasion conflict, testing whether that Federation or any realm so conceived and so dedicated can long endure. We are met on a great battlefield of that conflict. We have come to dedicate this portion of Sector Zero Zero One as a final resting-place for those who here gave their lives so that Federation might live. It is altogether fitting and proper that we should do this. But in a larger sense, we cannot dedicate, we cannot consecrate, we cannot hallow this space. The brave sentients, living and dead who struggled here have consecrated it far above our poor power to add or detract. The cosmos will little note nor long remember what we say here, but it can never forget what they did here. It is for us the living rather to be dedicated here to the unfinished work which they who fought here have thus far so nobly advanced. It is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us--that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion--that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain, that this Federation shall have a new birth of freedom, and that government of the sentients, by the sentients, for the sentients shall not perish from the universe.

“Those gathered here today have but one question on their minds: ‘Why?’. The answer is still being sought. What we do know is this: the Vendoth, as we have discovered, are not of this galaxy, but of one far, far away. Honorable in their own eyes, with intentions all their own, they have trekked across the stars to instill their idea of justice upon us. We resisted their tyranny, as did others in our galaxy and have emerged intact.

“Our scientists and intelligence services claim that the vortex through which they traveled was unstable, depositing their ships throughout space and time. We are unsure of their numbers and must therefore be forever vigilant. Years ago, Commodore Walter George encountered the Vendoth during his missions aboard the *USS Excalibur*. Their existence was deemed classified due to the nature of *Excalibur*'s mission. In hindsight, our cautiousness nearly cost us our future. Though those events are still kept in secrecy, the knowledge gained from our study of Vendoth technology was put to good use during the battle by his successor Admiral Daniel C. Blasberg. It was his last full measure that helped turn the tide of battle when, by sacrificing his own life, he charged headlong into the serpent's maw.

“However, victory did not come by the actions of one alone; but through the unity of vision that the men and women of Starfleet shared of a free universe. They all fought for the ideals of the Federation and for those who make it possible. Our stories will go down in the annals of history for those who follow, to learn from and gain knowledge, to better their own lives. To those involved, I give you the thanks and the appreciation of billions.”

Jaresh-Inyo turned and motioned to his aide, who then transmitted an order. The ships outside had formed a line and fired a single torpedo each, which then detonated some distance away.

The ceremony over, the crowd began to disperse and make their individual ways to friends and comrades in order to talk, embrace, cry, and share stories of absent friends.

A small collection of officers, ranging from commander to admiral, gathered in front of the windows.

“This has been an interesting venture,” said a tall dignified captain.

“Indeed,” replied a Vulcan female bearing the rank of admiral.

“I will second that,” chimed in a second captain.

A commander raised a glass of wine that he had procured from a nearby refreshment table. “To heroes absent and present. It has been a pleasure serving with you all.”

The auditorium emptied, the echoes of stories told faded, and soon...ships departed for their next adventure, where ever it may be. History would remember the name ENTERPRISE, but new names were added to a list of distinguished vessels of Starfleet. Names that would be forever remembered for their part in Unity.

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“Debbie, the shuttle bay is this way,” Holmyard called from among the remaining group who had crewed USS *Excalibur* NCC 2004.

Ambassador Debbie Chilton turned to her long-time friend. “You can go on without me. I have something to do.”

A tacit message flashed between Chilton and Holmyard – the natural instinct of years of close association. Holmyard’s pause in departure was noticed by Molina, Silva and T’Tala who also stopped and turned. Chilton sighed. Explanations were required to fulfill their curiosity. She crossed the space between them. “I am conducting a research project at Starfleet Sensor Central.”

“Indeed?” T’Tala raised an eyebrow. “I was unaware that Federation ambassadorial duties incorporated such research projects.”

“I don’t think it has anything to do with diplomacy,” Molina said. “What are you up to, Debbie?”

Chilton withheld the urge to sigh again. “Dan’s not dead.”

“Excalibur was destroyed when she rammed the Vendoth,” Silva reminded her. “We all saw it. Admiral Blasberg couldn’t have survived.”

“I’d know if he were really gone,” Chilton shook her head. “I don’t feel emptiness inside where Dan ought to be. I feel annoyed and affectionate as usual where he is concerned.”

“Human feelings often obscure the logical evidence,” T’Tala said, “however the Terran philosopher, Rossiter Worthington Raymond is attributed as writing, ‘Life is eternal; and love is immortal; and death is only a horizon; and a horizon is nothing save the limit of our sight.’”

“So, I ask the next question, did we actually see Excalibur destroyed? Our sight was definitely limited by circumstances. I just want to replay the sensor logs of the battle and see for myself,” Chilton insisted. “If they show the logical evidence is conclusive, I can let Dan go. But, if the sensor logs confirm my Human feelings that something happened beyond the logical evidence and the limits of our sight, then I can hope that Dan and Excalibur survived somewhere beyond that horizon.”

“IF Dan survived,” Holmyard repeated. “And IF he did, then what are we going to do about it?”

“We?” Chilton asked. “This is my concern. You have other lives to live.”

“We!” Holmyard confirmed. “WE will ALL go to Starfleet Sensor Central. After that, WE will do what WE must where Daniel Christopher Blasberg, Junior is concerned.”

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Blasberg opened his eyes and immediately regretted it.

The viewscreen was awash in an eyetwisting maelstrom of light and energy.

“Are we dead?”

“Far from it,” Barker negated. “We sent a signal to activate the Vendoth transportal generation array. We also fired full-power phasers the minute we jumped to warp to enter the transportal vortex.”

“And that is your ‘ultimate solution to the Vendoth problem?’” Blasberg asked. “Mine was more direct. Smash the bastards!”

“The damage we inflicted as we exited out galaxy will be sufficient to give Starfleet the victory,” Barker informed him. “We are now in transit to the site to implement the ultimate solution.

“And where would that be?”

“The Vendoth homeworld in the Kalium Galaxy.”

“I knew I’d regret the answer,” Blasberg said. “It was bad enough facing a whole Vendoth fleet in our galaxy. But the odds were better there than... where we’ll end up.”

“DHTS does not operate on the law of averages and odds,” Barker said. “Our ultimate solution is not based on odds but on corporate certainty of a profitable venture.”

“This I’ve got to see for myself.”

With a nauseating lurch the transportal vortex dissipated and a completely alien solar system appeared on the viewscreen. In synchronus orbit above the planet appeared to be over a thousand Vendoth ships in formation.

“If Debbie were here,” Blasberg breathed, “she’d say, ‘for the love of Abboris!’”

“Defeat of the Vendoth advance force in our galaxy would be pyhrric with this larger occupation force waiting for the signal to invade,” Barker assessed.

“And you have an ‘ultimate solution’ to... THIS?”

“DHTS will fulfill the contractual obligation to Starfleet,” Barker replied.

“How?”

“As a Starfleet officer, the least information you possess on the modus operandi the better it will be for the success of the ultimate solution,” Barker said.

“I don’t like the sound of that,” Blasberg said, “and I’d love to take the time to beat it out of you, but it looks like our Vendoth ‘friends’ have noticed we’ve crashed their party. Here they come!”

“Then it is time for DHTS to depart the bridge,” Barker said, heading for the turbolift.

“Wait! Where are you going?”

“DHTS will contact you from torpedo control.” And the turbolift spirited Barker below decks.

“Maybe next time I’m dying I will wait and see what deals the devil, the Dominion and the Borg all offer first,” Blasberg muttered. At least a hundred Vendoth scouts were heading in Excalibur’s direction. He crossed up to the weapons station and felt his fingers itch reaching for the ‘ARM PHASERS’ button. To his surprise, the tell-tales lit up indicating a quantum torpedo was primed for launch.

“DHTS to Blasberg.”

Blasberg thumbed the comm. “What are you doing, Barker?”

“Fire the torpedo.”

“What’s the target?”

“The Vendoth.”

“All of them?”

“Yes.”

I did die. I’m in hell. This is retribution for all the times I irritated the Commodore.

Because it was no crazier than giving Barker command prefix codes, or ramming a cyclopean alien command ship, or crossing intergalactic distances in mere minutes, Blasberg pressed the ‘FIRE TORPEDO’ button.

The ship gave that little jolt it always did when a torpedo was fired.

Blasberg studied the sensor reading on the torpedo’s yield. Boronite? Barker was tossing boronite pebbles at a Vendoth occupation force numbering over a thousand? He was crazier than Blasberg first believed.

Omega.

The symbol bled like an open wound on the weapons monitors, and on all the viewscreens on the bridge.

“He wouldn’t dare!”

Further expressions of incredulity were aborted as Blasberg was flung from the chair and into the air across the bridge. The ship rolled, inertial compensators overloaded by the force of an Omega particle destabilization over the Vendoth homeworld.

In the red emergency lighting, Blasberg picked himself up off the deck and counted his bruises.

“Dying is better than this,” he groaned and crawled over to the center seat. He hauled himself into Excalibur’s command seat and thumbed the comm. “Barker! You there!”

“DHTS is at your service.”

“You destabilized an Omega particle?”

“That is the ultimate solution to the Vendoth problem. Subspace in several thousand sectors of this galaxy is now destroyed. The Vendoth will be incapable of warp travel. Their dominance of the Kalium Galaxy is ended. They will be unable to generate transportal vortices to threaten the Federation. The ultimate solution is complete.”

Blasberg pounded the arm of the center seat. “You realize this means we’re stranded too?! A million lightyears from home?!”

“It is true you are temporarily stranded.”

“What about my synthococcus novae cure?”

“You will be contacted.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

The comm channel sounded dead.

“Barker?”

Silence.

“Barker?!”

Silence continued.

“BARKER!”

What next?

"But now is the time for the younger men to lock in rough encounters,
time for me to yield to the pains of old age.
But there was a day I shone among the champions."

Homer, The Illiad, 23.715-719 (800 BC). King Nestor of Pylos