

RUN SILENT, RUN DEEP

235895

EPISODE 5 - The Wedge (Part 1)

Epilogue

Stardate: 8417.8 -

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Earth date: September 11th, 2285

Setting: U.S.S. Columbia, NCC-1830, Light Cruiser

235896

The door hissed closed behind the Klingon delegation.

Once gone, the three Humans, two Andorians, and two Vulcans looked at one another. The regal-looking Vulcan at the table spoke first, "They are close. The talks are going well, don't you think?"

"There are still the differences regarding the Enterprise and Admiral Kirk. I wonder if that will be something that can be overcome?"

Listening to the others, the President of the United Federation of Planets stood, "That is the least of our problems. The Enterprise incident can be overlooked. The Klingons are a proud, warrior folk... certainly they must respect Kirk. The demand for his head is nothing more than bluster."

The President turned to the window and looked out over San Francisco and the Golden Gate Bridge - still elegant in its design those many centuries ago. It was a testament to the engineers of Earth. They built things that lasted... and so would he. "It is the other problem that concerns me most. Are the pieces in place Admiral Devereaux?"

The uniformed officer cleared his throat and spoke, "Yes sir. It took the ship a bit longer to get to the *Wedge*; but her captain has done well. I believe that they will be able to achieve their mission."

The Andorian spoke next, "It is an inexperienced crew that you have sent... and hardly a vessel of great capability. Can you be so optimistic?"

To this, one of the Vulcans raised an eyebrow, "Logical," he thought.

The president replied, "It is their inexperience that will allow this mission to happen. A more experienced crew may question their orders. If the captured information on that data disk is what our analysts have defined it to be, then the Klingons may be on the brink of war and they do not yet know it. The fractures in their government could leave it quite vulnerable to an attack and to being toppled. I do not want to see our relations return to what they were fifty years ago. Besides... it is the Columbia's inexperience that we can offer up as an excuse... in case they fail."

The human's trust in luck made the Vulcan council wonder, but it was too late - the pieces were in place, they must now play their part. The Presidential council members each nodded, one at first, then another, and then another, until all shared agreement.

"Give the order," the President commanded of Admiral Devereaux; his voice held little emotion.

Mr. Stonn watched as the starmap scrolled, centered as it was on the Columbia. Starboard of the ship's course was the neutral frontier with the Klingon Empire, to port was that of the Romulans. The Federation starship was currently navigating a course along the thin area of space that lay between the two called the wedge. They were still well within Federation territory, but at their current speed and course, they would come to the end of that wedge in less than five days.

There was some comfort from the fact that along both borders there were many Federation defense installations, but these positions were fixed and could only offer aid to those near at hand. There was also a starbase (234) currently under construction within the sector, but it would not be a true asset for some time. The wedge was notorious for dangerous interactions with rogue ships, be they Klingon, Romulan, or some other captain with ill intentions. And so, the science officer remained ever vigilant in his duty of scanning the space before the ship.

The bridge of the Columbia was quiet, save for the electronic beeps and hums that went along with the many controls. The lights were low to signify the 6:00 PM hour. The senior staff were all still at their stations - Townshend sat writing on her PADD instructions for her relief; Pushkin monitored the ship's course; and Grahm checked over maintenance data of the ship's main torpedo tubes. Her captain sat within his Ready Room, just off the main bridge and the crew had not seen him in over an hour. Stonn assumed that he was still working on his reports that needed to be filed to Starfleet Command in regards to the recent incident with the Tau Hydraen princess.

The princess and her crew had been left at Starbase 157, in the custody of the Starfleet commander there, until the situation could be resolved... diplomatically. Captain Darkan's report would be the damning information that would make the diplomats' job a little easier. The princess had tried to commandeer a Federation vessel. That was hard to excuse, whether Tau Hydrae was a part of the Federation or not.

The helm console beeped, "Mr. Stonn," said Pushkin in his heavy accent. "We are at the commencement point of our primary mission."

Darkan had gotten only a rough outline of the incident report he was to file to Starfleet Command when he could go no further. No matter how many times he tried to progress with the tedious busy work over the last few days, the mission and his command had begun to wear on him. With a frustrated groan, he punched his terminal off and laid his head down on the desk while looking wistfully on at the picture of Mia and remembering the smell of her hair and feel of her skin. To his disgust, the recent memories of coercion by the alien pheromones

and the near breaking of his will and commitment came flooding back, making his lonely heart hurt all the more.

Not quite despondent enough to do something rash or fall apart emotionally, Darkan reached into a compartment in his desk to pull out a bottle of liquor that he had found left by the previous captain. Must have been some secret tradition he'd never heard of but now understood all too well. He'd been nursing it ever since the Columbia left the starbase -- a little here, a little there -- not ever too much to affect him beyond the moment of weakness. He made a silent salute to "naval tradition," downed the mouthful, and put it away for the next rainy day.

Juan Ramos pushed the button on the last containment unit, flipping off his tricorder as he did. The probes all checked out - at least those that weren't defective upon their initial loading. His staff had had to strip down three of the adapted Mark-IV photon torpedoes, to bring two others to 100%, but they would have enough for their mission.

Their mission.

Ramos looked at his watch and did a few calculations in his head - departure time from Starbase 157; the speed that the Columbia had been maintaining the last few days - they should almost be to the commencement point.

He would have to get with Graham - the tactical officer would be taking over these crates real soon. The thought pleased the engineer actually... it would free up room in his engineering holds.

Ramos felt better about things than he had in months. He and Graham had been working on shifting materiel around, as is normal during ship replenishment at a starbase, and although the large man was concerned about "his" torpedoes, Ramos didn't worry much about it - he wasn't a provincial man. Things would work themselves out before they got under way, and that was all that concerned him.

Stonn decided to head to the Captain's room, curious about their next mission. He was satisfied that the recent down time had helped the Columbia and their crew recuperate from their recent voyages, and it gave the engineering team the opportunity to get the ship into excellent condition. The captain would have a ship and crew that were prepared for almost anything, and as First Officer, this was his primary concern.

John Graham ran his fingers through his thick blond hair. He was frustrated. His hand went next to rub along his face even as he let the PADD go to clatter on the console. There was a slight delay in the port tube launcher opening. Of course that was automatically compensated for by the computers so there was no danger of blowing themselves up at the 'fire' command but it could impede a tactical torpedo spread and make it less effective. And where they were going it was a matter of necessity to have this operational.

He thought, his eyes flickering to the viewscreen. He'd looked over the schematics of that door. It seemed to be working fine when they did centralized tests of it. But maybe it wasn't the port? He keyed in a notation for the shift on duty now to check the command console. Maybe there was a problem there that delayed the command for those milliseconds. Bad circuit maybe? He hoped they would trace it.

Engineering was already squabbling about the probes and he was squabbling back about the use of two of his torpedoes.

In the background he heard some general chatter, ship operations and the like. These are the kinds of missions he had often thought of - without viable backup, limited resources and having to make do with what one has to the best of one's ability. John would be stretched in this mission. That he felt assured of.

On the bridge, Jess Townshend set down her PADD and took the comm unit from her ear. Another day. An ensign approached her; the young woman would be taking her senior officer's place at the comm station for the evening.

Jess smiled as the ensign came to stand next to her, "Everything you need to know is on the PADD there. You have a good night."

Townshend stood and began to walk towards the turbolift, when behind her the comm panel began to beep. "Commander," she heard. Jess gave a silent curse as she turned back towards her station.

In his ready room, Darkan heard the communicator, "Captain Darkan, receiving flash traffic from Starfleet Command. It is encrypted top secret and it is for yours and Stonn's eyes only."

Darkan took a moment to respond, rubbing his eyes and letting out a yawn. Punching the speaker button, he replied, "Acknowledged. Route it to my ready room and have Mr. Stonn report to me. Thank you, Darkan out."

Stonn walked into the softly lit Ready Room seeing his captain sitting at his desk, his face aglow from the monitor before him. The first officer took a seat across from Darkan and the senior officer pushed a button.

Upon his XO's arrival, Darkan called up the priority message from Starfleet Command. The screen immediately became active and a female voice spoke, "Authentication code please."

Darkan replied, "Darkan Steven, Commanding officer U.S.S. Columbia, DS22032."

"Secondary authentication code, please," the computer answered, to which Stonn returned, "Stonn, First Officer U.S.S. Columbia, SV14557."

The two identifications confirmed by both number and voice imprint, the message began to scroll up the screen for the officers to read.

TO: Captain U.S.S. Columbia, Commander Steven Darkan
FROM: Admiral John Devereaux, Starfleet Command
SUBJECT: EYES ONLY

By presidential order, the U.S.S. Columbia is to immediately commence OPERATION SHARPEYE.

The details of said operation have already been discussed in full with the senior commanding officers of the U.S.S. Columbia and both have taken responsibility to act on said orders. A secure electronic data package has been sent with the following coordinates for the disbursal of the modified Mark-IV torpedoes. Once prepared, the computer will automatically transfer coordinates to the probes prior to launching. The data collected by each probe is to be gathered after their flight plan has returned

them to the Columbia's location, barring unforeseen circumstances. During this period, the U.S.S. Columbia is to go into blackout of all communications to ANY Starfleet or Federation facility, ship, or person.

Captain Darkan and Commander Stonn, you are given permission to act on the behalf of your ship in all things with the understanding that Starfleet Command takes no responsibility from this point forward, until the secure return of the probes and the Columbia to the Sol system.

Best,

Admiral Devereaux

With that, the screen went blank and at the tactical station, coordinates were written into the firing commands of the soon to be launched probes.

For the first time since the Romulan-Federation war, Starfleet Command would be intentionally, although deniably, violating the agreements of truce which were set long ago with the Romulans.

"At least my ship will," thought Darkan.

Darkan and Stonn would need to meet now with their senior officers. They had all committed upon being chosen for this assignment - Darkan hoped that none would have a change of heart. The Columbia's actions could be deemed an act of war. Commander Darkan pondered that as he and Stonn rose - the final word of the transmission leaving the weight of the whole mission on their shoulders, with no one to call for help.

"If you don't need anything further from me, call up the senior officers to the conference room in 15 minutes... umm, make it 30 -- I need to freshen up a bit." As the two stood, Darkan muttered playfully to himself, "I've always wanted to be a spy."

Stonn had no such desire.

Darkan went to his quarters to change and throw a bit of water on his face. Looking in the mirror he saw a man in conflict, but put on his "commander face" and headed to the upcoming briefing.

With a twinge of a headache, but feeling much more refreshed, Darkan stepped out of the turbolift on Deck-2 and entered the briefing room. Sitting around the table was his senior staff, all of whom quieted down as the captain took his place. Lt. Townshend pressed a button on the auto-recorder bringing the meeting to a start.

Grahm smiled inwardly as he looked at the communications officer - things were starting to take shape. It had been a bit rough re-breaking the ice with Jess after the Tau Hydraen incident; the pheromone effect needing time to dispel. Soon after though, the couple had begun their daily handball matches and John finally got the nerve up to ask her to a movie. The rest was history, as they say, and Grahm smiled again at the envious looks that the small Russian helmsman had been giving him.

Tam sat quietly beside Ramos - the two had also formed a bonding friendship from the prior incident. They had been the only ship officers that had evaded the Princess's tactic and kept the Columbia from being commandeered. The two had a respect for one another,

each a highly capable technician - one of the body and the other of the massive vessel around them.

Stonn chimed the bell that sat on the table bringing everyone's attention to their commanding officers.

Down to business, Darkan broke the silence, "Before the briefing begins, are there any issues you'd like to address?"

Tam looked up at the captain, "No sir, nothing new to report from sickbay."

With each department reported, Darkan looked to Stonn to lay out the mission once again for the senior staff. The XO illuminated the viewscreen on the wall and stood in front of it to address the staff.

"This mission is top-secret and we will be disavowed by Starfleet in case of failure. Nothing about the details I am about to provide should be revealed to anyone on board without the express permission of Captain Darkan."

The assignment, to Stonn, did not seem sensible; or at least the information they might retrieve seemed unlikely to be worth what they would risk for it. But he was an officer, and he knew that if he refused, someone else would simply take his place and the mission would commence anyway. Therefore, it seemed logical that the best course of action was to support the mission and help it to succeed despite its risks and whatever he may think about the strategy behind taking them.

He laid out the plans in exacting detail, making certain that the rest of the staff understood the strict radio silence, the fact that Darkan's word was as good as Commander, Starfleet's on this mission - and that until they reached Earth, they were entirely on their own.

Once Stonn started his speech, Dr. Tam sat quietly and observed. Although the journey thus far had been rather interesting, with the parasite possessions and persuasive princesses, he wasn't really looking forward to the next leg too much. After all, when you're in enemy territory there's not a lot of medical study called for, so the only time sickbay was likely to be called upon was if the ship were found and attacked.

For the first time since they departed the Sol system, the senior staff was given full disclosure of their mission.

When they had been selected, they had been questioned as to whether or not they could follow orders that may deviate from the letter of the law although they may have a moral weight that would supersede said law. All had agreed that they would see a moral issue through if it was just, even if it required plausible deniability from the government in which they served.

Stonn pushed a button and Admiral Devereaux's face appeared on the view panels in the center of the conference table. The officer began to speak...

"Good evening Steven, I want to bring you and your staff up to speed on your mission. You have reached the initiation point of Operation Sharpeye and the U.S.S. Columbia will, by your order, commence launching probes into both Klingon and Romulan space to gather data regarding an offensive build-up by the Romulans on the Klingon border.

You see, eighteen months ago, Starfleet came into possession of some critical information regarding an armament

build-up along the Romulan/Klingon border. A merchant vessel that had been in the 'employ' of Starfleet passed very near a Romulan installation drydock, within Romulan space, in an area that we had no charted installation. The merchant's scans picked up that the installation was being hauled by tugs towards Klingon space. Unfortunately, the merchant vessel was only able to broadcast this basic information to our 'snooper' installations on our side of the Neutral Zone before the Romulans had destroyed it. And so, there is critical data that is unknown.

As you may all know, the Klingon Empire is in fractured situation right now and harbors on civil war. The Klingons and the Federation have slowly been building relations over the last decade and we foresee stronger relations as long as the empire doesn't fracture completely. What the Federation fears is that the Romulans are aware of our ongoing diplomacy and they are preparing a strike on the weakened Empire in the hopes of seating their own puppet government, or at least to create enough anarchy to breakdown any relations that we have built. It is presumed that the Romulans would never want to see an allied Federation-Klingon front.

That is where you and the Columbia come in. The probes launched by the Columbia will penetrate deep into both Romulan and Klingon space to determine what level of security the Klingons have prepared, and what kind of armament the Romulans may have possibly arrayed against them. Understand, that until this data returns to Earth, the Columbia as well as all of its personnel no longer exist. The Federation will not, cannot recognize your activities nor support them either politically or martially.

We trust in your skills and may you be successful in this endeavour.

Admiral Devereaux out.

With that, the viewscreen went blank.

With the Admiral's message complete, the viewscreen next displayed the area of space commonly known as the Wedge. The course that the Columbia would follow was illustrated and the launch points for the series of probes. The elliptical paths of the probes were then displayed stretching deep into both territories of Romulan and Klingon space only to return back into Federation space a week after their launch.

To Jess Townshend, it had become suddenly surreal. She remembered her interview for this mission and the questions that had been asked of her. She remembered how her desire to take her first departmental command had superseded all other issues... how she also felt that she was doing her duty. Townshend had a strong sense of duty, but now it felt like a liability. Things had become very real. She and her shipmates may be the precursor to a war. Could or would the captain stop this?

The communication officer realized that she was not the only one in the room that was doing some soul searching. Jess sat up straightening her uniform tunic as she did... she was a Starfleet officer. She would follow the orders that she had committed to and she would do everything in her power to see the mission through.

"We will be at the highest EMCON condition and stand at Yellow Alert status until we have picked up the probes and are well on our way back home. I know that will cause a bit of stress, but everyone needs to keep their edge -- this mission is that important." He said that not just for the others but also as a reminder to himself. "We may have gone rogue per our orders, but we will still comport ourselves as usual even if in contact with a perceived enemy; I expect nothing less. Com, all eyes are on our emissions. Engineering, I know I needn't remind you that your focus is the Prairie Masker system but I will anyways for the sake of my conscience. If there is a possibility of this, try and beef up our passive sensor sensitivity -- we'll need all the help we can get to make sure no one gets too close. How long until the torpedoes are ready?"

Graham answered his captain, "The torpedoes are ready now sir. We have 24 from the original 25 loadout."

Across from him, Stonn had also began to give thought to one of Darkan's questions -- could the Arc Bow II passive sensor be enhanced? The Vulcan knew it was primarily a matter of software, the sensitive hardware could 'hear' up to five light years away. The problem lay in the software that needed to filter through all of the noise of space and to do it better than even the engineers that designed it planned. Theoretically, he, Ramos, and Townshend could enhance the programs that interpreted the data and thus improve the sensors range, if not just the level of information discerned. He looked to Ramos who appeared to have similar thoughts as well.

Townshend asked the next question, "Sir, do you want us to return to our stations or should we get some rest. I have just come off a ten-hour rotation, but I am able to work a little longer."

Pushkin nodded, for he too had just ended his shift. Waiting for Darkan's reply, Jess pushed a button on her console that immediately took the ship to yellow alert and outside the briefing room the Columbia became very active.

Stonn raised one eyebrow in contemplation and then spoke. "It is conceivable that we could refine the computer's ability to filter long-range data somewhat." He looked at Ramos for a moment, who nodded, but seemed as if he were holding something back, "The task would be difficult, but not impossible. However..."

Ramos piped up, his slight Spanish lilt softening his words, "However, sir - I'm not sure it's worth it. After leaving starbase, the sensors are ideally calibrated to Starfleet specs and Commander Stonn's preferences. It's *possible* that we might squeeze a bit more out of them, but it's also *possible* that we might throw them out of alignment or even damage them by pushing them too far, as well." Ramos wasn't exactly the most conservative man - few of Starfleet's engineers were - but he thought of himself as something of a physician to his one and only patient, the *Columbia*. Like all physicians, Ramos kept one thought at the fore of his mind - *first, do no harm*.

"I'd hate to have something happen out here, sir - we're on our own, and I'd rather not be risking blindness just to see 20/10... when we already see 20/20."

Stonn sat still. The concept of improving the sensors appealed to his sense of curiosity, of course, but the engineer's thinking was indeed sound, "Captain," he said. "The Arc Bow sensor array is indeed functioning at nominal levels, and it is in excellent condition. The decision is yours, of course."

"Alright, work up your solution but we can keep it on the back burner until we have time to tinker or we are in need of it." Turning to

Ms. Townshend, "Those coming off-duty are to get their normal rest while the remaining crew shall remain on alert. All duty rotations shall operate as such until our condition changes. We need to maintain a state of constant readiness, but we will not sacrifice our efficiency and alertness for it." To the table, "Make final prep of the torpedoes for launch and our protective measures; launch shall commence following that -- no sense staying here longer than absolutely necessary. If there is anything else, you can see me in my Ready Room," said Darkan, "Let's get to work or get our rest."

The Columbia was brought to a halt.

They were at the initiation point of the primary mission and it was time for the modified probes to be loaded into the torpedo launcher. It actually proved to be ideal as it allowed the senior staff to get some needed rest while the engineer and tactical teams did the load. The ship needed to be stopped due to the photon launcher, which ran fully automatic, hung from the rollbar that straddled the top of the ship. The weapon armories were normally loaded in spacedock but the top secret nature of their mission did not allow for this.

So, crates were emptied and loaded onto worker bee shuttles and the great launching bay doors were opened to allow the crafts to move the probes out into space. There the tactical teams, working in EVA suits moved them from the shuttles to the automated launchers, all the while removing the weapons that had been there. The idea of removing weapons this close to enemy space did not excite anyone, but it had to be done. Hopefully they would be able to restore them to the magazine once all the probes were launched. Ramos and Graham, as heads of the departments, stayed close at hand during the job for there would be no one else to answer to but themselves if anything should happen to the sensitive hardware. They were too far out in space to afford any losses.

The masking system was brought on line while the loadout took place allowing the operators to test the system for any bugs - fortunately it worked perfectly during the eight-hour load. The Arc Bow II peered out into the blackness of space for any whisper of another ship, passively listening but emitting no radiation itself that could alert another to the Columbia's presence.

Stardate 8425.0 - By morning, the senior staff was returning to their stations, as the worker bee shuttles were being re-secured. Captain Darkan strode onto the bridge and took his chair feeling well rested and ready to commence the mission. Pushkin looked to him and he gave a nod; the cruiser began to move forward again slowly accelerating towards warp speed.

Graham began to call up the launch commands on his console and he too waited for the captain's order, which was promptly given. Outside the ship flared red as all four torpedo bays opened and launched the first spread of snooper probes into both Romulan and Klingon space.

Darkan sat there watching the probes disappear via the viewscreen, hoping the engineers on Earth that designed the stealth gear did their jobs right. Otherwise, he may have just started a war.

After waiting awhile, "How's telemetry? All's well?" asked the captain to the science station. "Any indication of Romulan or Klingon border response?"

All was clear. There had been no reactions from either side of either neutral zone, taking some of the stress away that many of the bridge crew had been feeling. As for telemetry, there was none. The probes flew silent deep into the Klingon and Romulan's space in massive elliptical orbits that would bring them back into Federation space at the end of seven weeks. It would take approximately twenty-five days to cover the designated launch points, and then the wait would begin. During those weeks of waiting, the Columbia would patrol back and forth retrieving the data packages as the probes completed their orbits. In truth, the mission could be considered quite boring save for the fact that the Columbia was now essentially a rogue ship that would not be recognized by Starfleet.

The probes themselves were also highly stealthy and would passively collect any information. Should they be discovered, the probes would rapidly drop from warp and begin to emit old radio signals... to hopefully be deemed as space garbage. Time would tell if the emergency features worked.

And so, from the captain's question to the next launch point, the days passed on the Columbia and the crew anticipated the end of this assignment.

Stardate 8446.6 - It was on third day of travel within the wedge that the Arc Bow II began to relay data to the science and comm stations - radiations were being emitted in close proximity to the silent starship.

Townshend spoke up, "Captain, I am picking up subspace communications, but the broadcasts are in crude code... probably smuggler merchants."

"Can you determine the race this code is most likely used by and how far away they are coming from?" queried Darkan.

Townshend turned with a frustrated look, "I am sorry captain, it is a crude code that they are using and there are not enough permutations for the computer to recognize a consistent pattern. I'd be surprised if they are relaying very much information to each other at all... I will keep trying."

With that the comm officer turned back to her console.

Across the bridge, Stonn peered into his sensor hood, his eyes scanning the readouts for anything out of the ordinary. He analyzed the data he was receiving through the highly sensitive Arc Bow system.

The unknown ships were radiating at approximately 2 light years distance in many different spectrums from radio waves to other forms of emissions. The ships must have been running silently for they had just appeared... or uncloaked.

Stonn scanned his computer to see if there was any information on the comparison analysis of the radiating warp cores to see if he could identify the allegiance of the unknowns via their power signatures. He breathed a slight sigh of relief when he saw that there were no matches to any known Klingon or Romulan warships. Still... they could be Klingon or Romulan merchants or smugglers.

It was then that Jess shouted out, "Got it captain!" The communication officer had doubled her efforts in trying to resolve the mystery code knowing how precarious things were in their current position. She knew that having unknowns out there was a dangerous addition to the formula. "It is an Orion code, sir, used by many of the pirate cartels. Give me a few more minutes to see if I can break the code and determine what is being said."

Still peering into the sensor hood, Stonn watched as the warp signature of one of the ships began to increase as the vessel prepared its departure.

"Do you think we've been found out? Or maybe one of our probes? Who's space are they in?"

Graham answered the captain's questions, "Sir, I can't even get a read on the probes with the advanced hardware we have on the Columbia. I doubt that some second rate sensor suite on a merchant smuggler is gonna be able to track them, unless of course... they had a visual. But even then, there is no way they could have tracked them or even followed them at their speed."

The answer was made in a confident voice, but the silence that hung on the bridge when the tactical officer finished speaking made everyone ponder the possibilities... even Graham.

Darkan's final question was for Stonn to confirm. The Arc Bow array was able to make distinct measurements of distance using multiple known radiations that came from known fixed points, such as pulsars and quasars; it was simple triangulation formula from there. The ship's computer was able to discern from the signal strengths that the unknowns were near the Klingon neutral zone but on the Federation side - the Vulcan science officer came to the same conclusion through his own mental calculations mere seconds after the ship gave the coordinates.

Stonn watched as the increased warp signature heralded one ship's departure.

Jess gave a sigh as the communication between the two ships ended. She had been unable to break the pirate's code, but she did have a recording of it, which would give her the time to break it down for future need.

"The ships were within Federation space... barely," said Stonn. "I concur with Mr. Graham - assuming they were merchant ships of some variety, it is exceedingly unlikely that either our vessel or the probes were noticed. Such sensitive readings are only barely possible with our sensor array, some of Starfleet's latest technology."

"Yet pirates are not without their own resources. What was the heading of departing ship? Can you determine where they came from prior to the encounter?"

Darkan felt his hackles rise a little. Covert actions in the Klingon Empire wouldn't be above the Romulans, especially if they got wind of easing of tensions between the Federation and Klingons.

Stonn was able to see the flight path of the outbound ship heading back into Federation space; trying to discern from where they came would require active sensors. It would take a while but it was possible to detect the warp signature left in subspace, like a wake behind a ship on the water. The science officer watched on his screen as the second freighter went to warp.

"I cannot determine from where they came without active sensors, captain," answered the Vulcan.

Darkan shook his head and left the two merchant vessels to remain a mystery.

Stardate 8776.8 - The days passed and though tense, duty aboard the Columbia became quite dull. Cruising at low warp speed and doing nothing more than passively scanning, the crew's primary job was to wait for the return of the data probes and to make sure the ship was nothing more than a hole in space.

In the labs, Tam closed the file on the *prax tanimae*. The data that had been collated would be delivered, by diplomatic pouch, to his homeworld of Trill for any further research, but for now the doctor had gleaned everything he wanted, or needed, to know. Except for a couple of cuts and burns, the sickbay had been very quiet. The ship was doing no research so little opportunities were arising that required the physician or his teams. Still, Tam worried about what could happen should an enemy engage the ship. He hoped it would not come to anything like that and instead he and his associates would have a time to rest and relax until the ship was re-dispatched on more exciting research missions.

Six decks above the good doctor, Jess Townshend sat at her station on the bridge. She had been perplexed since grabbing the snippet of communication between the freighters and had struggled to make sense of it. She had begun to see repeated syntax in the code and was seeing a relationship - it would not be long until she cracked it. Her console beeped once as the sensitive antenna that laced the light cruiser received a burst signal from somewhere out in space, but in relative close proximity.

Jess turned to see Mr. Stonn reacting at his station already from the contact, "Captain! One of the probes just transmitted its return."

It was the first of many.

Stardate 8791.2¹ - Over the next couple days, the Columbia began to collect her charges as they appeared along her flight path. Graham worked diligently alongside Ramos' men to bring the probes back on board and then to transfer the data core from each into the ship's main computer as well as a *'black box'* that would supposedly survive the utter destruction of the starship. There had been no direct order given to Darkan or his crew as to whether or not the information could be reviewed, and so Stonn and the captain did just that.

With the retrieval of probe 11, things became very interesting. Darkan sat alone in his ready room calling up the many images that the probe had captured beyond the Romulan neutral zone when he saw something that chilled his blood. He paused the computer in its scroll and stared at the image. On his screen was a Constitution-class starship, or at least a ship that looked just like one, slung under a Romulan drydock.

"Impossible," the captain thought. Where did the Romulans get a *Connie*? And why by the coordinates displayed in the lower left corner of the image, was it sitting in a drydock on the Romulan-Klingon border?

While he marveled at the picture, his communicator beeped on his desk. He stubbed the button with his thumb and heard Townshend's voice, "Captain, I think I have broken this code down enough to get a basic meaning... *'Chak-ruth accepts... await go'*... that's it captain."

"Do you have any idea what it means?" Darkan asked his comm officer. The response from Townshend was vague but the name Chak-ruth struck a note in the captain's memory. The Klingon government was made up of a group of loosely organized families, each vying for domination of the empire but control always falling in the hands of the strongest. The Chak-ruth were a formidable family and the Federation estimated they controlled a forty ship fleet but they were still low on the totem pole.

¹ Earth date November 2nd, 2285

The monitor glowed before him with the image of the Constitution tied up to the drydock. If there were Klingons covertly or with the approval of the High Council working with the Romulans, this would be deemed a high priority threat by Starfleet.

To Jess, "Send all the sensor information obtained about the starship and drydock to Mr. Stonn and Ramos. Orders are to determine if the ship is indeed a captured Starfleet vessel or a Trojan horse. Then I would like you and Mr. Grahm to investigate the reference to the Klingon House of Chak-ruth for information about alliances between them and the Romulans and other prominent houses. Senior staff meeting in three hours with preliminary reports."

This potential Klingon connection got Darkan on edge -- the last time he tangled with them, it wasn't pretty. In fact, encounters with them never were.

"Aye sir," Townsend replied. She quickly transferred all the records to the appropriate people, then looked at Grahm and nodded her head towards the conference room door. "Shall we get to work?" she asked, secretly looking forward to the idea of spending a few hours alone with him.

Townsend and Grahm moved to the quiet of the conference room and Jess immediately started calling up information on the computer, reading through information with Grahm, handing him any interesting passages, bookmarking the complicated stuff for further review later, and just enjoying the time spent with him, even if they were only exchanging a few words of small talk as they pored over the information.

The two officers spent the hours reading the monitors as data scrolled up and their eyes began to ache from the work, trying to glean some piece of information that could bring to light the meaning of the vague communiqué. Even Captain Darkan had to step in to help by allowing further clearance into the confidential files stored within the computer core.

So far what had been pieced together was that the imperial houses of the Klingons were fighting amongst themselves. Not that this was unusual, but there had been a hard economic period suffered by the empire and Starfleet had begun speculations of civil war. The three main houses that had greatest control of the empire were struggling to maintain control of the other four, but these four had become very adventurous in their ways and were beginning to defy the common order. Reports had come in of Klingon incursions along the Neutral Zone by rogue warships that flew the banners of the lesser families, which gave evidence of the greater houses losing influence.

Lastly, Townshend scrolled up an article that added a chilling aspect - the Federation had just been told through diplomatic channels of the death of the lord of the Tal-Hok'nah, the dominating house within the Klingon Empire. Infighting was now being reported as the various leaders within the family vied for the top position. The weakness this had caused had given the other houses opportunity to make claims for themselves.

All in all, the two officers looked at the information before them and there was but two words that summed it up... pending anarchy.

While Grahm and Townshend made headway with the transmission, Stonn and Ramos worked diligently to try to enhance the grainy image of the apparent Constitution-class starship that had been taken by the

probe. The Vulcan's fingers moved over his console and the ship's computer cycled through the digital pixels again to 'clean' up and refine what was starship and what was surrounding spacedock, and space behind that. The shadows were the hardest part, as the spacedock was far away from any star that could light the vessel.

As the image was refined, Ramos set about laying technical structural charts over the image in three dimensions, the ship's computer rolling the blueprint so that it sat in the same manner as the image. The two officers, along with computer analysis, then compared the lines to see if it were a captured Federation ship or a mock up. Although the lines did not line up completely, the computer generated an 85.263% reliability percentage that the image was a true Constitution.

The captain's board meeting was scheduled to start in another twenty minutes and the two officers would have to try to help Darkan make decisions on almost a 15% margin of error.

The officers entered the conference room minutes before the time set by their captain - Darkan already sat at the head of the table. When all were settled, Darkan looked to Townshend who pressed a button to have the computer begin recording the meeting minutes. She nodded and turned the table back over to the commander.

The officers about the table looked expectantly on their young captain, "Before you begin your and Mr. Stonn's brief, Mr. Ramos, please summarize the status and condition of our returned probes and the state of that part of the mission."

Ramos mentioned the status of the array of probes - losing four was not unanticipated as long as the others were retrieved - they were designed to be disposable, anyway.²

"Data is being retrieved from the probes and forwarded to Tactical as we speak; no significant problems have been encountered thus far." On the whole, the mission was proceeding well enough, he thought. If they could just get a few of those last five probes.

"Were any of the missing probes also in range of the dry dock?" asked Darkan.

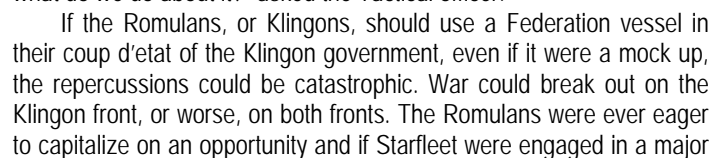
Ramos pushed a button and the table's central console screen illuminated with a map of the region of space called the Wedge and the Columbia's flight path could be clearly seen. From its ingress, the screen displayed multiple (25 to be exact) animated parabolic paths that originated along the Columbia's course to return again to the ship on its egress. Each of the trajectories was labeled and was in different colors. The Red paths showed probes that had not returned, or had not been launched; green were those that had been retrieved; and the amber paths were still expectant.

Of the five red trajectories, the staff knew that one had not even been launched due to the probe's malfunction, and the remaining four branched off of the ship's flight path in equal numbers into both

2

- 25 mission probes were originally loaded on the ship
- 1 was defective out of the box and scrapped for parts
- 24 probes were launched.
- 15 probes have been retrieved
- 4 probes were not at the designated location when the Columbia passed; That leaves 5 probes still be determined if they have returned. The mission had an acceptable loss number of 8 of the 25 probes loaded, so if only 17 probes were retrieved, Starfleet would have considered the data collection a success.

Graham thought a moment, "If you were going to start a war Alex, or attempt to takeover a government, how would you do it? How about a



action against the Klingons, it would be a perfect time for the Romulans to escalate their own warfare footing. They could attempt to push beyond the Neutral Zone and claim new territories in Federation space!

Grahm knew the Columbia was a warship - a very capable one in the Federation's armory - but she was alone. The stealth technology would make for an easier ingress into foreign territories, but it was **not** a cloaking device. They had no support from Starfleet at the moment, but they were the only ones who knew about the pending situation... if it existed at all, because everyone at the table was still not 100% sure what the data before them revealed.

Darkan's dislike of the Klingons ran deep and personally he didn't care what happened to them, but if that Trojan horse of a starship is used in the worst possible way, the consequences to the Federation and the rest of the Quadrant could be dire.

"It seems that we've stumbled along something that would require us to act if we can and quickly. Without contact with Starfleet Command, it comes down to us to decide what to do with this intelligence. Mr. Stonn, I want a complete threat analysis done with the information we have at hand, incorporating discussion from this meeting. Provide possible outcomes and consequences and their probabilities. Mr. Grahm, make sure we're ready if need be to enter Romulan or Klingon space. Ms. Townshend, continue monitoring all channels for communications. Mr. Ramos, continue probe mission, but if technically feasible, make repairing that malfunctioning probe a high priority; it could come in handy. Do you think you could replicate parts needed? Or could some of the returned probes be reused? More information, especially about a timetable, would be extremely valuable. Time is of the essence people. Meet back here in 24 hours."

The meeting was adjourned and the officers stood and filed out of the conference room, each parting ways in the hall to go to their respective stations. They had some jobs to do and 24 hours to get them done.

The bridge was quiet save the thrum of the ship and the occasional beeps from those working at their stations. The Columbia was approaching the rendezvous point with the last probe and her many pallets of passive sensors strained to hear some sign of its arrival. Stonn was hard at work on his analysis for Captain Darkan and was currently in the sick bay to get Dr. Tam's input to the report. But even though the lead science officer was away from his station, Lt. Marshal sat there performing the tasks at hand.

The ship sat in the heart of the Wedge, heading back into Federation space, and in the heart of the Acamar sector - not too far from the giant blue star that gave the sector its name. The pulsing radiation from the giant had been creating a lot of *noise* for the sensor teams (along with the ship's computer) to sort through but there were three *tracks* that had been moving through the sector that Marshal had been keeping watch on. All three were radiations from ships moving at warp speed, but distance made classifying said tracks pretty much impossible - at least until that distance was closed.

It had.

Marshal was able to classify the second track as a Federation Destroyer on patrol in the sector. She was cruising at EMCON level 2 and was fast approaching the Columbia - thus labeled a potential threat due to the mission at hand. The other two tracks were still distant

enough to not be able to classify the warp core by type and so were just dots and respective numbers on the screen.

Marshal looked to tactical, "That destroyer is closing at warp factor 3 - she will be in range soon to where her sensors could overcome the prairie masker. I estimate a three hour window until you will have to start some fancy work Mr. Grahm."

As the conversation went on between the junior and senior officer, Townshend put her hand to her earpiece as a faint but familiar sound came through her comm system.

When time was available, Stonn sought out Capt. Darkan to brief him.

"Sir, there is no way to determine from our data if the vessel we saw is a legitimate *Constitution*-class vessel or not; but I suspect that it is not. The Romulans are not known to take prisoners in most cases, and it seems highly unlikely that any crew of such a vessel - Starfleet's ship-of-the-line until and unless the *Excelsior* class is fully commissioned - would allow it to fall into Romulan hands in any salvageable condition."

While Starfleet officers were not specifically ordered to destroy their own vessel instead of risking capture, it did happen - especially when the ship was valuable in some way, and a Constitution-class vessel certainly fit that description. At the very least, Stonn reasoned, a crew would be able to significantly damage the vessel internally either by physical means or a computer wipe, rendering it all but useless.

"I'm certain that I need not remind you that we are not authorized to enter Romulan space, nor would such a course of action be advisable. As for combat preparations, if this vessel were hypothetically 'real', then the Columbia would be hard-pressed to challenge it. Mr., Grahm could give you more specifics, of course."

Stonn had heard (along with most of the Fleet!) rumors about Adm. Kirk's flagship, the Enterprise, being significantly damaged by a *Miranda*-class vessel in a classified action not long ago, but Stonn reasoned that any such intra-Starfleet activity had to either be a war game, or an extremely unlikely occurrence. The *Mirandas* were constructed primarily for science, even though they had better-than-average armaments - but they were no match under normal circumstances for a fully-armed ship of the line like the powerful *Constitutions*.

Grahm, standing by the tactical station, listened to the analysis given by Mr. Stonn. The Vulcan's reference to him opened the door for him to add to the report, "Captain, Mr. Stonn is right. There is no record of any Constitution-class ever being captured by the Romulans - either old or new. So, if this is a mock-up, which I too believe it is, there is no way it will fight like a Connie. It may look like a Connie, but the weapons on it have to be Romulan."

"As well as the Romulan's battle tactics would be poor too, by using a ship unfamiliar, but point taken," Darkan agreed.

The officer gave a moment for his thoughts to sink in, then continued, "I believe that the intent of this ship is to distract... I think we all do. So, my thoughts captain is, what if we destroyed it while it was still in spacedock? Before it gets the chance to launch."

Again he paused to let the Captain register his words and stood to walk towards the command chair, "I understand it is a violation for us to cross the Neutral Zone, but we are not governed by any body right now - Starfleet does not recognize us. We have the masking system and if it can at least get us in there to destroy this ruse, than at least we may

avoid the Federation being implicated in attacking the Klingons. The empire may be falling into anarchy and the Romulans may be assisting in that, but at least fingers won't be pointed at us. In fact, the Klingon house of *Tal-Hok'nah* could seek out the Federation in aiding with their political situation. It would be easier for them to do that without a Constitution-class starship flying around in their space. We could be helping the political situation by destroying the mock up."

The tactical officer stood there with a grin thinking his input quite clever.

The captain nodded, "That is precisely what I had in mind, Mr. Graham, but we need to be prepared for worst case I think."

Behind the trio, Lt. Marshal called out to Mr. Stonn, "Sir, I have just picked up on passive sensors two ships dropping from warp at 2.5 million kilometers away. The signature appears to match those of the freighters we picked up a few weeks ago."

"Mr. Marshal, have you observed their course?"

Stonn wondered if they had been "tailed", as the ship's navigator was fond of saying. It seemed unlikely that freighters would have the ability to track the Columbia, but Stonn suspected that these vessels were not what they appeared to be... space was vast, and the likelihood of encountering the same vessels in such close proximity as happenstance was statistically infinitesimal.

"Captain, I recommend we move to Yellow Alert."

"Agreed," and the klaxon sounds at Stonn's order. "Put them on visual once in range. Helm, maintain speed but put us on course towards some stellar phenomenon; let's make it look like we're actually doing scientific research. See what we can find out more about them, but don't perform standard active scanning until they get to 1 million kilometers."

The Muskaloosa was an earth freighter that was over twenty years old, and she was no longer maintained in any database due to her being reported destroyed *twelve* years ago while moving supplies along the Romulan frontier; in truth, she had been captured by the Romulans.

Though she was getting up in age, her new 'owners' had re-built her internally and had made some improvements enough to be a useful tool, but not to draw attention. For all intents and purposes, she was a non-interesting Federation freighter with appropriate, albeit useless, markings, and she still was used in merchant capacities to far, off the beaten path locations. The kind of ship that would never raise an eyebrow of concern, and thus, crewed by a mostly unsavory sort of people, she still plied the spaceways of the United Federation of Planets.

Today the Muskaloosa came with an important errand - one that would hopefully throw two of her peoples' enemies into war, thus weakening both. The key figure in this errand was Korvona. She was a delegate of the Romulan Senate and had come personally with the message that the countdown had begun - the Chak-ruth would have their distraction. With it, hopefully the whole of the Klingon Empire would be thrown into a conflict that would decimate it through infighting and going against their opponent (whom the Romulans considered much superior). When all was done, the Federation would not have the strength, nor likely the political will, to stave off her own people from increasing their claims.

"Delegate Korvona, we are picking up the beacon from the Argonaut," said one of her bridge crew.

"Good... begin transmission," Korvona replied with a smile.

Not far away, the Columbia began to detect both the beacon and the two ships' rendezvous. At yellow alert, the light cruiser slipped closer to the old merchants approaching on a course that allowed the radiation of Acamar to hide it even more. Townshend pushed the button that brought the image of the two ships on screen and held her earpiece as they began to communicate - the Columbia recording every bit of the coded messages.

On screen, the bridge could see two merchant vessels - normal in every way.

"Any translation so far of the communications?"

Townshend looked towards her captain and shook her head, "Nothing yet sir, but the translation should be quicker than last time. It seems that the code has been changed again... they have changed the calculus..."

Townshend's voice faded off as she worked on her task before her. From across the bridge, Graham called out, "Captain, at yellow alert we have weapon-stations manned, but they have not yet been energized. Do you want to advance to Red Alert?"

Behind all, Stonn worked emphatically at trying to ascertain as much information as he could with the passive arrays: Darkan would have to give the order for them to go active. The Columbia continued to glide towards the freighters and would soon be within range of the lesser ships' sensors.

"Captain, if we raise shields, the vessels will know that we think they are hostile. Perhaps risking an active scan first would be beneficial. The stations are manned - it will only take a moment to raise shields and charge weapons if the need arises."

"We will remain at Yellow unless the situation demands a change." Darkan's voice had a bit of an edge to it. He didn't mean to be, but everyone else was too and that didn't help him remain calm. At that moment he noticed that he was standing, even nervously pacing a little, so he took a seat in the Captain's chair to get himself under control.

Jess suddenly looked up triumphantly from her terminal, as the transmission started to stream across her display, at least intelligible to her. "Sir, I've got it!" She pushed a button and allowed the ship's computer to translate the strange code into words in its metallic, female voice, "Chak-ruth has GO. Commencement T-20. Chak-ruth to draw back its vessels beyond engagement zone. Once engaged, Fed-vessel will make indiscriminant attacks along border. We will await word of the second phase on Qo'nos."

Meanwhile in Sick Bay, Dr. Tam was quickly organizing his staff and getting ready to receive casualties. These drills were getting pretty routine at this point, with the number of times during this mission they've gone to yellow alert. Still, it made his blood pump every time it happened, and it was always best to be prepared. After waiting 5 minutes to ensure it wasn't a false alarm, his curiosity finally got the best of him. "Tam to Bridge, what's going on up there?"

On the Muskaloosa, the sensor operator kept a close eye on the screens in front of her. They had chosen Acamar as the second meeting due to the radiation blanket that it emitted, but the distortion worked both ways. She fine-tuned her scans as the Romulan delegate transmitted her instructions.

Graham answered the captain, "Sir, if the Constitution-class mock-up was to depart its hangar, it would enter Klingon space within 1 to 2 hours. They could initiate attacks from any point forward."

Darkan pounded a fist on the arm of the command chair. "Senior staff meeting in 5 minutes." He knew what they must do and his crew trusted his judgment, but at this moment he needed their assurance. What he was planning to do, even if successful, could start a war.

Again the senior staff of the Columbia was circled around the conference table looking towards their captain - each was beginning to feel, if not show the stress caused by their situation. They all knew what needed to be done and what Darkan would most likely order - all of them were glad that the decision did not rest on their own shoulders.

Dr. Tam quickly gathered readiness notes from his department supervisors, and headed up to the meeting room. He felt his pulse quicken as he walked... although he hadn't been on the bridge recently, he knew that something big was happening. He could feel it in the air, and although he knew it didn't directly affect him, he wanted to make sure that his department was ready to perform to whatever the need.

Lt. Townsend had quite the different emotions, however. She was fully aware of what was going on, and didn't like it one bit. She hoped that the captain had a plan in mind, because from everything she could see, things were going in a bad direction right now and would likely get worse before they got better.

Both arrived in the conference room at about the same time, sitting in their usual chairs and waiting for the captain to enter and start the briefing.

Darkan entered the room, looking more haggard than he did on the bridge, or maybe it was a trick of the light. Taking a seat, he began, "Thank you for being prompt; the preamble will be short. First, we discovered a mock Federation ship in a Romulan dry dock. Second, we come across transmissions that hint at some covert intentions. Now, we've discovered a command to set in motion what seems to be a plot to bring the Federation and Klingon Empire back to war and, even though our government'd disavow us, any overt action we do could lead us down the same path. We are at best 10 days from intercepting the mock ship and really no reliable way to hide it. We need to disrupt this plot before any shots are fired upon innocents. I am seeking options to accomplish this mission, so let's hear them."

Mr. Graham looked to his left and right - seeing no other officers speak up, he cleared his throat and offered his thoughts to the group. "Captain... I have been a student of tactics for many years and I have always been most intrigued by those of the late-20th Century mariners. During the period known as the Cold War, the United States of America and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republic sparred in both technological development and war posture, although it never went further than a battle of words. Needless to say, the submariners of the time used to see how closely they could get to the other side to be in the best position to launch a devastating strike. To do this, they built stealthy, fast attack ships - but they also practiced in the art of using their environment as well. In the ocean it is called the thermocline and it can re-direct noise radiation and there is also ambient noise that the mariners would *hide* in to confuse their opponents' sensors."

Graham could see impatience grow on his captain's face, for the man was also well schooled in old Earth tactics. He decided to get to

his point... "Err... anyway captain, my point is... we make a fast run to the end of the Wedge at warp 8 and close the distance between us and the Connie quickly. Then, we disappear with the Prairie Masker and attempt to engage the faux Fed vessel within the Neutral Zone itself. That way, we are not technically violating either space. With the masker and the noise of a potential civil war in Klingon space, we may be completely unnoticed."

Graham stopped speaking, leaving his idea for all of his comrades to evaluate. He was no politician. He was trained to make the U.S.S. Columbia the most deadly ship she could be... and that is what he intended to do to make sure his government did not have to enter a war that would certainly kill so many.

"Well if we do use the Neutral Zone as our lane of ingress, we will still need to be careful of spill-over," said the Russian-accented helmsman. "We can certainly make our course down the Neutral Zone, but if we engage, I cannot promise that my maneuvers will not take us into Klingon or Romulan space."

"Agreed," replied Graham. "Captain, if we do this, we must make it a fast and devastating attack. There unfortunately can be no allowance for prisoners and the ship must be utterly destroyed. The potential political ramifications that could result if even a piece of this mock up were displayed as evidence of a Federation intrusion... it could set diplomatic relations back years."

"Why not try and blow the ship in the drydock?" The question came again from Pushkin, "We have no knowledge that this ship *has* or *ever will* be able to leave its harborage. Maybe we could sneak in and beam over demo teams to destroy it from within... or even attempt to capture it?"

The last proposal was certainly the most far fetched that had been voiced, but it did need to be discussed and eliminated as an option. At least that is what Pushkin told himself as he looked at the incredulous faces looking back at him.

"What?" asked the Russian - always the comedian, he wasn't sure if he was being taken seriously.

Dr Tam looked around the table to see what kind of response Graham and Pushkin received, and then spoke up with his own idea. "Well sir, when we started this mission I read up on some of the old mission reports from other important encounters with both the Klingons and Romulans, and one tactic employed previously against the Romulans has given me a possible idea. In one of Dr McCoy's medical logs, he tells of a mission where he had to disguise his captain as a Romulan, using prosthetics. I believe that I'd be able to perform the same operation on a few members of our crew if needed. Having a "Romulan" face on the screen might allow us to talk our way into close proximity of the other Federation ship, to get a jump on them that way. Maybe if we explain that we're another Romulan crew working a similar operation, and here to escort them, or something like that? From what I've heard, the Romulans have so many intelligence operations on the go, that I would be surprised if anybody had the proper authority to know about all of them... so they might easily believe that they just weren't told about us until now?"

"Such a ruse would entail a great deal of risk, but it does have merit, as does Mr. Graham's plan," said Stonn. "However, Doctor, if we were to only appear on-screen, we may not have need of your services." He said the last while staring at the doctor with a look that

might have been bemusement... had the look not come from a Vulcan, of course.

"There seems to be no way to avoid an engagement, Captain," said Stonn with a bit of resignation apparent in his voice. "But I find it unlikely that the Star Empire would allow a vessel of such strategic importance to travel unescorted. It seems likely that one or more cloaked vessels will be traveling with it; I would suggest we prepare accordingly. We should also... *consider* ...finding a reasonably safe space to broadcast a brief, encoded warning to Starfleet, despite our stated orders, and then continue on as planned without waiting for a response. Most certainly, Starfleet Command has not anticipated a situation such as this when originally assigning the Columbia this mission, and alerting them of the impending risk of deception and possible war may be of the utmost importance."

Darkan sat a moment thinking about the options given him -- this looked more and more like Kobiyashi Maru: damned if you do, damned if you don't. Then a thought unbidden and almost dismissed out of hand, but another pie-in-the-sky thought. "Stonn, what do you think are the chances of the Klingons working together with us? What if we took our case to the local governor and showed him our intelligence? It might tip our hand to the Romulans and traitors, but it could at least put them on alert or at best give us a hand in destroying the imposter ship."

Darkan's history with the Klingons had not been good in the slightest, but he'd rather take his chances with the devil you know instead of the devil you don't. The captain kind of squirmed in his seat, showing his displeasure at his own idea.

Stonn raised his eyebrows in surprise. The captain was discussing ending the stealth mission on his own - but Stonn also thought that the risk was probably worth it. If the Klingons ignored them, they'd be no worse off - still in the neutral Wedge, facing the same situation. But if the Klingons chose to listen...

"It would provide a rare opportunity to foster positive relations with the Klingons," he said, "and it seems unlikely that our situation would worsen substantially, with the exception that our presence here would no longer be secret. Nevertheless, it would seem to be a worthwhile strategy, Captain."

Darkan looked about the table to gauge the reactions of the others. "Other opinions?"

"The only challenge I can present to this course of action captain is the uncertainty of whom we may talk to," answered Graham. "Sir, if we accidentally reveal ourselves to one of the factions involved in this potential coup... well, we could be led into a trap and destroyed. The problem is that we do not know who is on whose side over there - only that the Chak-ruth have commenced with a plan that involves the Romulans."

"Agreed," Darkan answered, taking a deep breath while he looked around the table once more, his mind, contrary to his heart, was made up. "The orders will be as follows..."

"1. We shall take the Columbia to a spot on the other side of Acamar where it'd be as blind to the Klingon and Romulan space as possible and make a burst transmission, encoded of course, back to Starfleet with the data we've collected, a report of the current situation, and our course of action.

"2. We shall do as Mr. Pushkin suggests and make a dash to the Wedge as fast as the ship can sustain.

"3. During this time, we shall monitor transmissions from both sides of the border, noting on the Klingon side anything that would hint at the regional politics so we can contact a general or governor who would most likely listen to us.

"4. In the event that we don't get help either by the Klingons declining or at the point of their disruptors, we shall proceed to the dry dock to destroy the imposter ship. I like the idea of the destroying the installation and ship without guns a'blazing so I'd like a mission briefing put together on how our team will pull that off, but everyone should be ready for ship-to-ship combat.

"Mr. Graham, you will put together the briefing on the demo team insertion on the installation and the usual for starship combat. Work with Mr. Ramos to make your best assumptions on the imposter ship for placement of the charges.

"Mr. Ramos, you are in charge of keeping the ship from flying apart getting us through The Wedge. When we reach the intersection of the borders, we will slow the ship, go to silent, and engage the Prairie Masker, so make sure those systems are in top condition.

"Ms. Townshend, you will be monitoring comm traffic for intelligence purposes, but, as I said, keep an eye to the Klingon traffic. Mr. Stonn, go through our databases to see what we already and coordinate with Ms. Townshend.

"Finally Doctor, you keep doing what you do best. I am aware that our situation is causing a lot of stress on the crew, so please report any drastic increase in crew medical issues and everyone monitor the ship's efficiency.

"Any questions?"

Darkan, Steven
USS Columbia, Captain

Mission complete and successful, data collected is attached. Due to preliminary analysis of the data, an imminent threat to security and well being of both the Klingon Empire and Federation has been detected; crew analysis attached. Threat deemed necessary to be neutralized immediately. Initial mission parameters remain understood and acknowledged.

Stardate 8791.2³ - President Falon sat at his desk and stared out of the window at the majestic skyline of San Francisco. He had just finished watching the secure data for the fourth time since it had arrived on his desk earlier that morning. The images had proved their sources correct - the Romulans had moved a drydock facility to the edge of their space that bordered the Klingon Empire, and within the structure hung a Federation vessel, or a very good mock-up.

The president wasn't sure what he was more aggravated with... the potential attack on Klingon territory or the blatant disobeying of orders by that young captain out there. He had been given explicit orders not to break silence, but Starfleet captains were trained to think on their feet - so this Darkan must have had a good reason for it. His crew's analysis seemed solid but still there was a lot built on speculation.

³ Earth date November 13th, 2285

Falon knew that something was about to happen. He knew that the knowledge the Federation possessed would damn it as much as help others. He knew that something needed to be done. What he didn't know was how to use the information that they possessed. It could be a simple matter of contacting the Klingon delegation that was on Earth and inform them of a potential attack and coup within their government. But was there really a coup d'etat in the works within the Klingon houses? Was the delegation that the Federation had been dealing with a ruse? Or members of the coup?

Falon pushed his comm button and a familiar voice answered, "Mr. President?"

"Admiral, I want the Klingon Neutral Zone to be quietly reinforced... and I know I do not need to explain to you the need for subtlety."

In his office, Devereaux felt his skin chill, "Mr. President, I will commence formulating fleet positioning and we shall commence transmitting orders."

Falon knew that the admiral would mask all said orders to disburse the Seventh Fleet in a manner that would not draw attention. He hoped this would be nothing more than a lesson in covert ship movement.

"Very good, Admiral," replied the President. "Now, I need to meet with you and the rest of the cabinet... have your people put together an analysis regarding our Klingon visitors and the potential risk of letting them know their danger. Also, I want an analysis of the survivability of the Columbia if she should attempt a stealth raid on the mock-up."

Little did Falon know that the Federation vessel was already poised to strike into Romulan territory. Little did they all know that within ten days the whole of the Klingon Empire would be immersed in a civil war.

The U.S.S. Columbia did sit poised at the very end of the Wedge where Klingon and Romulan space began. She had just come off a ten-day run at warp factor 8, a task that she had performed magnificently, although Ramos had quite a few more gray hairs to show for it. The engineer was certain that the ship had been noticed making the fast-run, but there was nothing that anyone could do... time and space were the key factors in their current equation and the ship needed to get back to where they could effect any potential strike by the Romulans.

Ramos sat in his captain's Ready Room, the two men poring over the Engineering departments analysis reports along with data that they had been collecting since Acamar. Townshend was due in shortly but for all intents and purposes, the Klingon and Romulan territories that bordered the Wedge had been quiet. Transmissions had been at a minimum... the calm before the storm, maybe?

The absence of information was beginning to concern Darkan - it was getting closer to the point where he either needed to break silence in an attempt to contact a local Klingon vessel - hoping they were not part of the potential rebellion - or to move his vessel into Romulan space. If the former, it would be a challenge to convince an enemy that they were about to be attacked, if the latter... well that was something entirely different.

Grahm would also be in shortly to present his options on destroying the hanger and mock-up - via Columbia bombardment or covert team insertions.

Bottom line, it came down to the captain of the Columbia and the weight of the choices were heavy.

Townshend's voice filled the Ready Room as Ramos began to stand, "Captain, you were right, we are getting more inter-Federation space communications... a lot of ship movements. Starfleet must be quietly reacting to our message, sir."

Darkan nodded to Ramos as he prepared to leave, "Thank you, Mr. Ramos... keep up the good work."

"Well that doesn't bode well for us coming to the Klingons; they're bound to be watching our movements on this side of the border," he thought. "Ms. Townshend, based on our best intelligence find for me the most likely loyal Klingon captain nearest the border between here and where the Romulan hanger is. If you can't find any, prepare to get me online with the local governor of this sector."

Speaking those words caused his heart to race a bit... he was becoming anxious, not of the impending battle but of dealing with the Klingons.

Townshend heard her captain's request and turned to her console to bring up current Federation data on the region. She also pushed a button to have the computer begin to record local transmissions from the Klingon side of the Neutral Zone in hopes to collate what captains may be in the vicinity and which would be loyal to the Tal-Hok'nah. The communications officer suddenly felt the burden of her current duty and how any error could spiral into an awful situation.

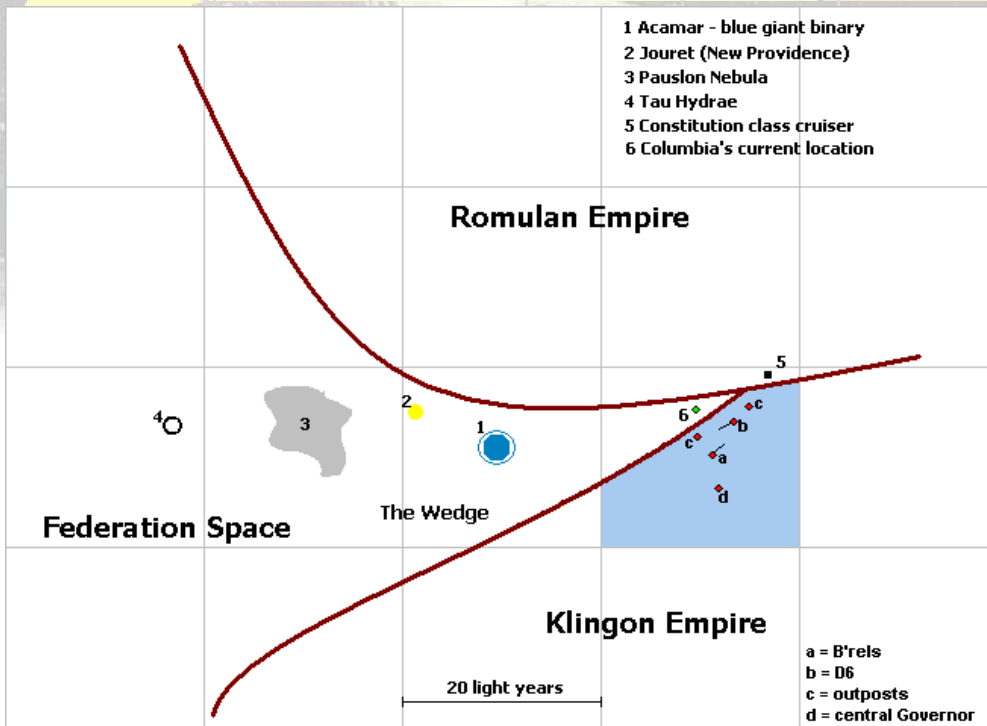
Around the ship, there was a discernible tension filling the crew. The information of where the ship was located and what they might be doing had filtered out through whispers from junior officers and crewman. Tam watched as three security personnel sat across from him, in the crew's mess, and talked amongst themselves and made a mental note to talk to the captain. Maybe a word from their leader would assist in abating the stress and misinformation that was being passed about.

The Columbia itself was at EMCON 1 and the Prairie Masker system was online. Stonn observed his passive sensor readings and was both pleased to see little activity in both Romulan and Klingon space. The activity he did see was currently being analyzed by the ship's computer to give him a definitive as to who or what was out there.

Townsend spent most of the next hour slaving away at the computer, processing data and listening carefully to chunks of Klingon conversation to see what she could pick out. She preferred to listen to it in the original Klingon, in the hopes of picking up the subtle nuances of language that would better indicate whether a speaker was talking to a true friend, or quiet foe, and whether they were being truly honest, or simply diplomatic. The computer translation only translated the words used, and missed out on the importance of the choices of words, so she hoped that by listening to it herself she might help to get some further insight into the true political situation of the ships and officers in the area.

Stonn turned from his station and addressed the captain, "Captain, I am tracking one vessel and have forwarded its coordinates to the navigator. Judging by it's warp signature, it is most likely a D6-class cruiser; a somewhat outdated vessel that is known to be kept in service by specific Klingon families as opposed to the Empire's formal military."

The D6 was a top-of-the-line vessel less than twenty years prior, but after the Klingons and Romulans agreed to a technological exchange that led to the Empire acquiring Romulan cloaking



probably be identified soon enough, but he wasn't going to help those listening along.

Townsend fiddled with the controls to see how narrow she could refine the beam, and then opened the transmission for the captain. She stuck her earpiece back into her ear and set it up to play the raw, pre-translated, feed straight into her ear. The Klingon language could be tricky and there might be some odd nuances of language that she could pick up on that it would miss, such as a particularly aggressive or evasive choice of words that the translator would literally interpret. Well, it couldn't hurt anyway.

She had little difficulty focusing the transmission, though the comm. officer preferred her captain make a friend quick so that they could agree to switch to an encoded transmission. She also now appreciated her years at the Academy spent in her foreign languages department - primarily Klingon - because she could hear the legitimate surprise in the Klingon

technology, the vessels fell quickly out of favor, and were removed almost entirely from the front lines.

"Current intelligence indicates that the Tal-Hok'nah and the Bor-Klah houses do maintain D6-class vessels." He looked into his viewer briefly, and then turned back toward the center of the bridge, "Three B'rel-class scouts are flying in formation; in a direction opposite the presumed D6 and towards the Constitution-class mock-up. It is not possible to determine whether they have scanned it or not, but at this range, it seems unlikely. I am also reading power emanations from three asteroids nearby; they are almost certainly Klingon listening posts."

The question hung in the air for a moment before the Vulcan spoke, "No indications of movement along the Romulan border has been detected. It would appear, Captain, that we still have some time in which to act."

Townsend looked up from her station upon hearing the Vulcan's description. "Sir, I can confirm that the D6-class is under the command of a house Bor-Klah captain, I've been monitoring his transmissions. He's currently flying a patrol mission between the two Bor-Klah outposts along this border. It seems like they might be our best bet for somebody to contact, because aside from them the sector is under the watch of a Chak-ruth governor, who probably has the most to gain from a coup."

Darkan slumped into his chair - he had made his bed, now he had to lie in it. The news of the governor's alliance was unwelcome, but they'd have to deal with it when the time came. Trying to pull his stomach out of his boots, he called to Townshend, "Open a channel to the D6. If you can narrow down the transmission to avoid as many eavesdroppers as possible, especially the Romulans."

"Bor-Klah House vessel, please respond. There is a matter of urgency to which your attention is required. You have enemies on your border and in your midst and we've come to help." Darkan knew they'd

captain's gruff voice.

"Who... is transmitting to my ship?" the Klingon asked. "This is Captain Vrang of the IKS Gr'Toth and I demand an answer!"

Darkan heard the faint Klingon over the intercom, the computer speaking over the detached voice translating it into the Federation's standard language. The captain smiled as the ship's name was revealed - IKS War Demon. Klingons were always so... on edge.

Well, Darkan had their attention - now it was time to make his case.

The voice that came over the speakers, electronic translation notwithstanding, brought back memories, unpleasant ones at that, to say the least. Darkan stood up from his command chair out of habit to address his counterpart.

"Captain Vrang, I am Steven Darkan, captain of the U.S.S. Columbia. We had been tracking some unusual activity in the vicinity of Acamar, which has turned out to be a covert Romulan mission. I'm sure you're thinking why would this involve you, but we also discovered that the Romulans were communicating details of a highly sensitive nature with another vessel with ties to the Klingon House of Chak-Ruth."

There was no immediate response back from the Klingon commander and the Columbia bridge crew began to look at one another in wonder and worry, but then Vrang's voice came through the ship's intercomm. "Captain Darkan, although you have piqued my interest enough to continue this dialogue, why do you think I would have any care about a Romulan mission? The Chak-ruth house governs this sector... certainly they would have dealings with Romulans."

On his ship, Vrang looked at his comm officer with a questioning gaze. It was now common knowledge that the Klingon Empire and the Federation were initiating diplomacy, but as far as he was concerned the human he was talking to was still his enemy. And yet the strange

communication from the Federation ship created concern - Vrang knew the house Chak-ruth and their conniving ways. Maybe it might be worth getting all the information he could out of this human.

Vrang spoke once more to the Columbia, "What proof do you have of this Romulan - Klingon interaction?"

"I hope you will find these illuminating... the transmission came from a conversation held between two vessels in Federation space not far from here and the sensor records come just across the border from your patrol." Darkan nods in Townshend's direction to prompt her to send a copy of the recording, sensor data, and scan of the drydock.

Vrang listened to the transmission and the vague words passed between the two parties, all the while puzzled within his command chair. He also perused the images sent to him of the Federation vessel slung under the Romulan spacedock. Moments passed and Darkan wondered if the Klingon had disappeared, but then Vrang's voice came through the bridge's speakers.

"Captain Darkan... how am I to be sure that these are genuine communications between Klingon and Romulan agents or that these are not manipulated images? And lastly... why do you have any interest in sending this information to us... me in particular?"

Darkan did what he could to prove his sincerity, "First you can train your long-range sensors to that location -- we aren't all that far away. If you want to wait long enough, you could always hunt down the Klingon ship we observed and interrogate the crew, but I think we don't have time for that. I picked you to contact and not the governor because we believe he is a puppet of the Chak-ruth and you are a loyal son of the Empire."

"You hope," replied Vrang in an emotionless voice leaving Darkan wondering if Klingon's knew humor and if that was sarcasm. "Columbia, stand by while we authenticate this data... it may take us some time but we will respond again on this channel. Vrang out."

Townshend heard the hiss of the connection end and all was quiet as the bridge crew looked to their captain for any orders. At his station, Stonn watched as the D6 cruiser changed her course towards the Klingon / Romulan Neutral Zone. "Captain, voice analysis did not indicate any stress in the Klingon commander's voice. Now that he has changed course, it is reasonable to assume that he is attempting to determine the veracity of our claims."

Steven slumped into his chair in the characteristic manner of one just completing a long, hard day's work. "At least that's something; it could have gone a lot worse. Good job, everyone," he said addressing the bridge. "We're not out of the woods yet though. Don't worry so much about Vrang, but keep an eye to Klingon and Romulan comm channels for any hint of our discovery. We will stay on course unless our business with the Klingons changes that."

Stardate 8812.8 - Again it became a situation of hurry up and wait. "Days" were

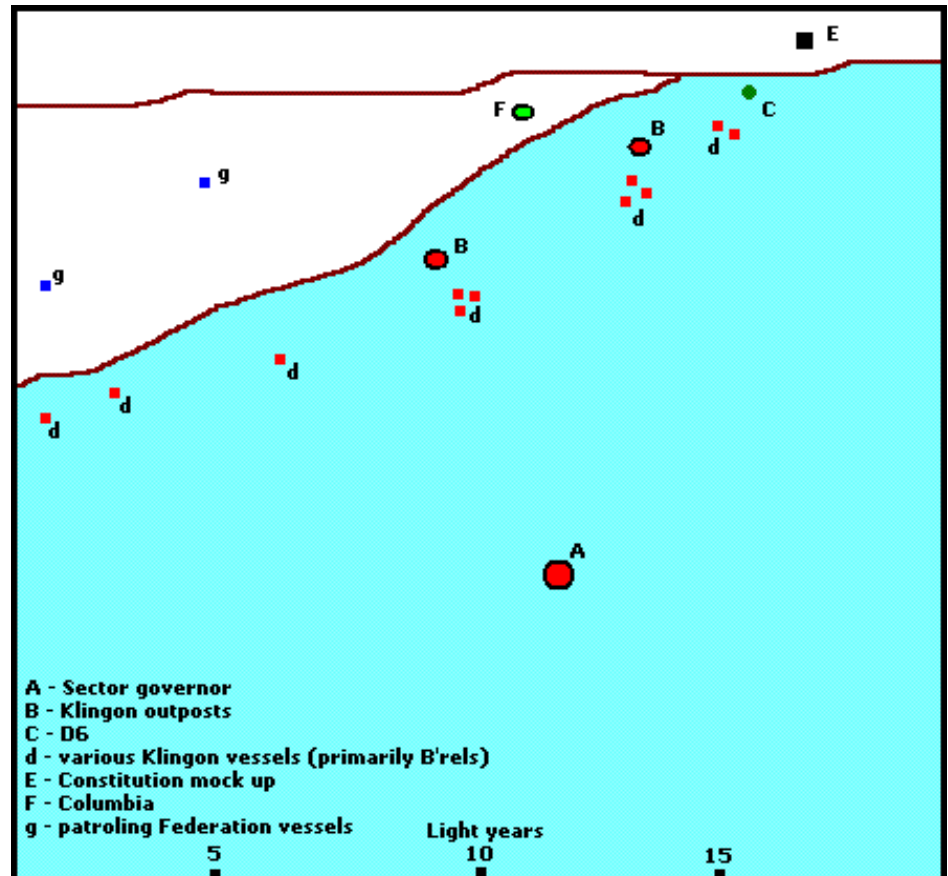
passing aboard the Columbia as she maneuvered near the Neutral Zone at the very end of the Wedge. It had been just over 72 hours since Darkan had spoken with Vrang and the Klingon had changed course to investigate the data sent to him by the Federation starship. Everyone aboard hoped that the D6 cruiser would confirm the ruse created by the Romulans before anything could come of it - Townshend spent many hours at her station (*beyond the standard order*) listening for word from Vrang. The comm officer was retrieving all sorts of communications from both sides of the line but all were encrypted and she could only decipher the Federation messages. Starfleet was ready just in case, but were positioned to look as if everything was normal.

Otherwise, it had been, and still was quiet.

Stonn on the other hand had a lot to do. The sensor station tracked multiple ships on the Klingon side of the Neutral Zone and it appeared that there was an increase in tracks. He watched the screen and couldn't help but notice that the Klingons were moving ships into position for some major offensive, but he wondered against whom. More B'rels had come into the sector and now held position close to the Neutral Zone, the Klingon outposts and two even tailed the D6 - surely Vrang could see that he was being shadowed.

To his left, Townshend was confirming the Vulcan's fears as the sector had suddenly grown quiet of any Klingon communications. Stonn pushed the comm button and called for Darkan to return to the bridge.

Moment's later, the captain returned looking refreshed from the shower he had just taken. The viewscreen showed the sector predominated by Klingon space and Darkan did not like what he saw. Vrang had yet to communicate back and it appeared as if time was running short.



"Captain, given the situation, it is quite possible that Vrang's ship is in danger. The Empire, or some faction of it, seems to be moving to protect this ruse from being discovered. If that is the case, we would seem to be in great danger as well."

It seemed to Stonn that they had stumbled into a much larger plot - possibly one that they would be unable to unravel alone. All the pieces fit - a Romulan faction had allied itself with a Klingon one in an effort to foment a larger war in the region, and place the blame upon the Federation.

"Sir," he said, "we may not be able to foil this plot. It may be advisable to warn Vrang and escape to safety, if possible. From there, it might be advisable to break radio silence and sound the alarm to Starfleet forces in the area... while we still can."

Darkan had a few choice epithets come to his tongue but thought of maintaining decorum... for the moment. "Which ships are those?" he asked, pointing to the Federation ships on patrol.

Townshend answered her captain, "Sir, through traffic communication, I have determined that the two local Federation ships are the Endeavor and the Groton. The Endeavor is a re-fit Constitution-class vessel and the Groton is a destroyer. They seemed to have gone into a higher level of emission control about two days ago."

"We cannot let the Romulans continue with this deception and terrorize the innocent falsely using the name of the Federation. That imposter ship must be destroyed -- it's our highest priority!" Knowing that committing to the action he was about to order, he realized that it might be a death sentence for his crew and ship.

"More than enough firepower for what they're up against. Ms. Townshend, please notify Vrang of our intentions and that we request his assistance in defending the Klingon Empire in the same manner as previous. Mr. Pushkin, set a course for the Romulan station at the maximum speed where the Prairie Masker will still be in effect. Once we breach the Neutral Zone, maximum warp. John, get your people ready to board the dry dock; we'll first attempt the subtle approach, but if that proves unachievable, we'll use the direct approach."

Getting up from the command chair, he gives one last command, "Mr. Stonn, please notify me when we are 5 minutes out from the Neutral Zone; I want to address the crew. I'll be in my Ready Room." With that he leaves the bridge.

Stardate 8813.7 - Darkan felt the change; his ship was slowing down. He looked up to the wall chronometer - over three hours had passed just like that and he knew that Pushkin was bringing the ship to the point of embarkation. Upon his command, the U.S.S. Columbia would break the long existing order by entering the Neutral Zone.

He looked down as his desk comm beeped. The emotionless voice of Stonn, "Captain, we have reached the Neutral Zone."

A more pleasant voice came next and Darkan smiled at the humanity that it contained, "Captain Darkan, I have been unable to raise the Gr'Toth. Either she is unwilling to reply, or unable to... sir."

"Understood, I'm on my way," the young captain said with heavy heart. The door to his office whooshed open and again as it shut behind him. Collecting himself, he strode to the command chair and pressed the comm for all hands. "Attention Columbia, this is your captain speaking. I know we haven't been long together as a crew or I as your captain. There are many I have yet had more than a passing 'good day'

with and there are probably some I have yet encountered. And so I apologize for you all have been a crew worthy of note in my tenure as this ship's commander. We have weathered a horde of space creatures, infiltrators, and Romulan duplicity, but our primary mission has been the same and completed per our orders.

"But why, some may ask, haven't we yet turned our sails toward home... why are we still silent and in the cold. The answer is simple and yet it isn't. In the event of preliminary analysis of data collected as a part of our original orders, it was discovered that there is a joint Romulan and Klingon plot to destabilize this region and force the Klingon Empire and Federation once again into war. These Klingons are not the loyal sons and daughters of the government with which our leaders have laboriously worked to entreat, but a rogue faction that wishes to overthrow the peace that has been struggled to maintain. This plot hinges upon the use of fake Federation ship to make raids in the adjoining Klingon sector so as to force a Klingon response in attacking the Federation. Our mission, no our **duty**, is now to breach the Neutral Zone, enter Romulan space, and destroy the mock up ship. If effort to curry favor with the Klingons, I sought out and requested assistance from who I think to be a loyal captain of the Empire. Since the request, we have received no answer. This may be due to its inability to do so, a double-cross, or something worse. Regardless of aid from the Klingons, the peace we've all fought and lost much for is threatened and we, the Columbia, are the best chance in averting such a result. I won't lie to you, this is a mission where some or maybe even all, won't return from, but from the bottom of my heart I thank you all for your dedication and service. Good luck to one and all. Darkan out."

Turning to his comm officer, he said, "Ms. Townshend, I have made a comm packet available for secure, tight-beam transmission to the closest Federation starship to relay on. It contains a copy of my orders and other pertinent info for Command and the crew's families in case of ... well, just in case."

At that, he sat down in the chair that all of sudden felt too big and too small at the same time. His crew was ready and more than competent. All there is left now is to wait.

Stonn surmised that their odds of success were long, but the Captain's course of action was logical - they had simply run out of time and options. Naturally, Stonn would do his duty, and although he would not cling to such a uniquely human contrivance as "hope", he did understand that the universe held many surprises...

He spent his time preparing the ship's sensors; honing them to near-perfection and running a systems check on whatever else he had time for.

When the tight-beam transmission was made available, Stonn submitted his packet to Townshend. In it, the spartan missives greeted his family and passed on his personal recollections of the science he had gathered over his time on the Columbia for posterity and future research.

There was no concern - something he saw in many of his crewmates - simply a task to perform, coldly logical... if a mission of war could be described as such. Stonn brushed aside such notions; there would be time for that later, if the task at hand was completed.

He was ready.

Things began to happen at different points throughout the sector - some unintentional.

A Klingon commander named Qwarl headed the conspirators of the Chak-ruth clan and he had been nervously watching the days pass until the t-mark - the point when each of the three phases of his plan would initiate. Eighteen days past, he and his Romulan associate, Delegate Korvona, had commenced the countdown with her message of the final preparedness of the mock-up Federation vessel. The project had been fully funded by the Romulan Empire and Qwarl wondered what concessions they would demand once he had removed the Tal-Hok'nah from power.

His plan was seamless as long as there were few unknown occurrences, but with the demise of the Klingon Empire's most powerful patriarch, the Tal-Hok'nah clan had become immersed in an inter-family dispute as they all vied for the leadership. Their allies, the Bor-Klah merely stood on the sidelines, inert, while they watched and waited to see what would happen - perhaps they even planned their own succession. Needless to say, while they all looked on the inside, Qwarl and his fleet was about to use the fragile moment to supplant he and his allies to greatness.

First they would stir the pot with the mock up Federation vessel entering Klingon space and destroying outposts along the H'atoria Sector; second his ships would commence limited border attacks with the Federation - enough to draw all eyes to there and not to Qo'nos. Finally, Qwarl had his assassins in place to make the House of Tal-Hok'nah nothing more than a group of master-less slaves. The Bor-Klah alone would not have the strength to stop the tide of change and Qwarl and his House of Chak-Ruth would rise to dominance allied with the four other lower houses. He would soon command the assets of Bor-Klah and Tal-Hok'nah and return the empire to greatness.

There was less than 24-hours left before phase one was to commence when Qwarl received the call. "Commander Qwarl," the unfamiliar voice said, "we have a problem."

The words made his blood turn ice, "What is it?"

The messenger was the local governor of the T'wanful Sector, and he was surprised by the calm reply from his commander, "Sir... two of our B'rels have been tracking a D6 called the Gr'Toth of the Bor-Klah House. Commander, they have just made sweeping scans of Romulan space outside the T'wanful Sector where we have the Federation vessel prepared. We think that they have found it, sir."

Qwarl's decision was immediate, "Destroy them now and be prepared for an immediate commencement of Phase One. You will proceed with your orders commencing in two hours. Qwarl out."

The leader of the Chak-Ruth house pressed another button, "I need to speak with Delegate Korvona immediately. Inform her T-mark has been moved to a two-hour commencement."

The Columbia moved at Warp 8 along the Neutral Zone between Klingon and Romulan space and as yet had not been intercepted, although they knew that they had to have been tracked. Townshend continued with her intermittent coded transmission to the Gr'Toth in hopes that she would once more make contact with their only hopeful ally - Commander Vrang.

Nothing yet had been heard.

It would not matter soon as the Columbia would be reaching her last known position within the hour.

Stonn looked up from his sensor hood, and then peered back inside - was he really seeing what he thought he was seeing?

"Captain," Stonn said sharply, "I have ascertained the position and status of Vrang's D6 vessel. It is engaged in combat with two B'rel-class vessels, and readings indicate that the D6 is over-matched. Sending coordinates to the helm and navigator now."

Darkan knew if he could help the Klingon vessel, they'd be more inclined to help him -- Klingons hated owing anyone anything. "Time to intercept?"

"It would seem sensible, Captain. Obviously, the Klingons involved in this plot feel that Vrang and his crew are a threat. I believe humans have a saying - 'the enemy of my enemy is my friend'? We will need every ally we can, sir - *from where* seems less important now than *how many*."

Pushkin looked at the navigator's plot and answered the Captain's question, "At this speed we will intercept in just under fifteen minutes, sir."

Without any command, Graham went about preparing his department although Darkan would need to order the charging of weapons and shields - the Tactical Officer wanted to be ready for whatever his captain ordered.

Still at a distance of over 360 million miles away, the Gr'Toth shook with another impact from a B'rel. Panels shorted and blew on the bridge sending a shower of sparks over the commander and his surviving bridge crew.

Vrang had seen the Romulan mock-up and knew that the Federation captain had spoken truthfully, but he did not know what to do with the information. His initial thoughts were to send word to his superiors when his ship was ambushed. The B'rel attackers had made a decisive strike on his communication suite and with his ship's shields down, the system was made inert. By the time his tactical officer had the Gr'Toth's defense active, she was heavily damaged.

Vrang had expected a potential attack from across the Romulan border, not one from his own people - and now he and his crew were doomed. Again the Federation ship had spoken truthfully about a conspiracy. Well, he would see to it that he would take as many of the traitors with him that he could.

From his left, a shout came from his sensors operator, "Commander! There is a third ship approaching at high speed!"

Vrang breathed deeply, it would be over soon. "Keep returning the attack! We are warriors! We will confront all of our enemies!"

As the ship drops out of warp, Darkan gives the commands as routine as any captain of a ship in battle. "Red Alert, shields up! Graham, target the closest B'el's weapons and fire. Helm, put us on a course to provide maximum cover to Vrang's ship."

As the ship dropped out of warp, Darkan gave the commands as routine as any captain of a ship in battle, "Red alert, shields up! Pushkin, close to the nearest B'el. Graham, strafe them with everything we've got."

The Columbia quickly maneuvered bringing her in to closer range and Graham issued the fire command for all weapons. Space around the

ship flared red and blue as phasers and photon torpedoes fired and ripped into the Klingon scout-class ship. Her shields resisted a portion of the attack but the bridge crew was pleased to see her slightly list from the impact.

At the same time, Vrang also fired on their other opponent and it to was struck with evident damage... but not enough for either. The B'rels opened up again and Vrang's ship was struck multiple times. Darkan watched as the venerable D6 rocked and shifted under the assault, her hull flashing in areas as it was rent open and systems blew.

Stonn calmly spoke, "The Gr'Toth's shields are down sir."

Darkan nodded, although the viewscreen showed the evidence of that. The Columbia's strafing maneuver had made her pass her primary target but still she was within lethal distance.

"Helm, put us on a course to provide maximum cover to Vrang's ship," Darkan ordered. "Get us as close as you can to the D6. Stonn, when the opportunity shows itself, extend our shields to cover both ships while Graham locks on to the most vulnerable enemy ship."

"Captain, extending our shields around the Klingon vessel will make the Columbia significantly more vulnerable to attacks from multiple angles." Stonn did not question the captain's orders - he simply wanted to give his commander as much information as possible before making a tactical decision.

Pushkin masterfully brought the Columbia into a position of close proximity to the D6, all the while the other bridge staff rushed to achieve the orders given them.

Stonn sent from his station to Graham's the tactical data on the most vulnerable B'el and the Tactical Officer locked his weapons system on the ship. At the same time he configured the shield grid so that it expanded and enveloped the Klingon vessel on their starboard side, protecting it although reducing the effectiveness - now the Columbia could not maneuver, unless the D6 moved in tandem with them.

In unison the two B'el craft fired upon the D6 and struck the Columbia's stretched shield grid. The Federation vessel's bridge became a frightening scene of flashing lights and small explosions. Townshend made a guttural sound and was thrown from her chair to lay motionless on the floor, the panel under her console belching out smoke.

The Miranda-class vessel rocked hard again as the Klingon disruptors once more lashed at her shields at close range. Pushkin cried out as his helm console blew and the man stood quickly from his chair with burns on his chest, arms and hands.

Graham yelled out, "Sir! The shields are down!"

Stonn, eyes to his sensor hood, lifted his head speaking calmly, "Captain, the Klingon D6 has come about and has moved to disengage... her warp engines are spooling up."

On the Gr'Toth, Vrang watched as the Federation ship's shield grid failed. He had issued the command to retreat and it went against everything in his warrior heart. Yet, the Starfleet vessel offered the distraction and he needed to communicate to the High Council... before it was too late.

Korvona ordered the last of the mooring lines to be released. The Constitution mock-up had all systems active and there appeared to

be no problems. She would be into Klingon space within two hours. The Romulan delegate smiled at the fact that she would be able to kill some of the barbaric Klingons as well as causing a small war between her Empire's vaunted enemies... and it was all in the name of aid.

"Medical team to the bridge!"

Throughout the Columbia, different stations became very busy. Tam was the first to move when he heard the Captain's call for aid. He and a small team of his staff ran to the closest turbolift and took the short ride to the bridge. The doors whooshed open to the controlled anarchy of the ship's main command center. The red lights of battle stations illuminated everything in crimson and made it somewhat difficult to see through the smoke.

Darkan pointed to Townshend first and then yelled, "Pushkin is hurt too!" He then turned immediately back to the tactical situation, "We can't let them follow Vrang or us for that matter... match their speed, but keep us in between them and the D6."

The helmsman replied through gritted teeth, "Sir, I can at least get us in position." With that he moved to the secondary helm position and gingerly called up the 3-dimensional aspect of the *battlefield*. Not until he had maneuvered the ship and matched speed, per his captain's orders, did he step back and let one of Tam's physicians tend him.

In Engineering, Ramos watched and felt the battle ensue through his consoles. He saw as the ship's shield grid was suddenly bombarded with a series of hits and then wink out.

"Engineering, get those shields back online now!" Darkan shouted through the comm panel.

"Working on it," Ramos replied to himself.

From Darkan's left, Graham yelled out, "Shields are back up, sir! We have 30% efficiency."

"Mr. Graham, let them have it all."

Graham nodded as he performed a Theta pattern attack. The ship had lock on the vulnerable B'el, but the Tactical Officer targeted the second enemy ship as well and then pressed the command for a multi-weapon fire. Outside the Columbia, both phasers and photons launched again, this time at both B'rels and at a far deadlier range.

The photon torpedoes struck the weakened B'el amidships and in a spectacular, yet horrific scene, blew the neck of the vessel from the main hull - moments later the vessel exploded. Its companion was also doomed as both phasers and photons hit the command center at the bow of the ship literally disintegrating it. More weapons impacted upon the right wing and tore it asunder. In what was only moments of combat died down to respectful quiet as the flare of the explosion faded. One of the Klingon B'rels was gone while the other drifted off into space in multiple pieces, its crew dead from exposure to the vacuum of space.

Graham, somewhat shocked by the power he unleashed, gave a tactical situation update to his commander, "Sir... both B'rels are destroyed and I show no other threat tracks on my board."

Stonn spoke next, "The D6 looks as if it has secured from going to warp."

Around them all, the bridge went back into motion as the crew of the Columbia saw to their duties.

Darkan didn't realize he was gripping the arms of the command chair so tightly. Smoke hung in the air around the bridge, people were coughing, and something warm was sliding down his face. Reaching up to his forehead he found that some shrapnel had cut him after the last barrage. For a moment, he flashed back to the last time he was on a bridge fighting Klingons, but this time it was different - he was in command of his own ship and he just had save a ship full of them. His mouth was dry, making the first words out of his mouth stick there. "Good work, people, but we're not done yet."

Townshend was being helped to her seat. Tam had administered a smelling salt to bring her to and though she felt nauseous from both the salt and the effects of the explosion's pressure wave on her body, she was no worse for wear. Pushkin on the other hand had some minor first-degree burns. The doctor would not allow the helmsman to return to his post without a thorough physical in sickbay, and even Darkan had to interject.

"Alex... to sickbay. Now!" he said, jerking a thumb towards the turbolift.

The Russian, along with the medical staff exited the bridge only to be replaced by a team of engineers - including Ramos. Dr. Tam had stayed to learn more of what was going on with the Columbia.



On the viewscreen, the wounded D6 hung motionless. Suddenly Vrang's voice emanated across the encoded channel with which they had communicated in the recent past that was still open. Townshend moved quickly to ascertain that the channel was not set to ship-wide and she adjusted the volume.

"Well Darkan, we meet," the Klingon commander said. "You are far from Federation space. What makes you think that I will not destroy you for this intrusion across the Neutral Zone?"

Ramos, who had just arrived on the bridge, harrumphed audibly. He had barely been able to keep the Columbia in one piece while saving the ungrateful Klingon and his ship, but if it came to it, he'd make damned certain he could keep her together longer than the Klingon's

chief engineer could keep his rust-bucket from flying apart at the seams.

"Captain," Stonn said under his breath, "the Klingon vessel is in no position to fight. It's likely he is simply posturing. Requiring Starfleet aid - in the Neutral Zone - would probably be seen as a great dishonor. Therefore, he may be trying to 'save face'. Helping him do so may be advisable."

Darkan had to tread carefully, choosing his words and hoping that Vrang indeed was a loyal and honorable soldier of the Empire. "One word, Vrang: Honor. You just proved it by speaking to me and offering a challenge as an equal and not by stabbing us in the back like those traitorous dogs did to you." That might've been a little too much, but he hoped it worked.

There was silence from the Klingon commander - Darkan wondered if he *had* gone too far - but on his ship, Vrang looked to his XO and the two warriors exchanged thoughts, the comm system muted as they talked.

"They have to know that we have no means at the moment of complying with a threat," the second-in-command said.

Vrang nodded, "And this Captain Darkan's ship, though shaken from the B'rel assault, is quite capable of finishing us."

The XO shook his head, "I do not believe that is why they are here. It is very irregular this alliance, but we do owe them... at least to listen."

Vrang agreed once more, "Do we have a choice?"

The Klingon commander gave the command to reopen the channel visually and he answered Darkan, "It is the way of the warrior to show honor in combat. You have shown honor in the truth of your words and the aid - though unlooked for and against our laws - which you have extended us. So I extend you this opportunity to explain what your intentions are before I order any attack... what is it you want Captain Darkan?"

On the Columbia, Vrang's face appeared on the main viewscreen and Darkan and the bridge crew saw their potential ally. He was a tall Klingon with short, coarse hair circling his great forehead crown, his skin swarthy and a long moustache wrapping his mouth. He had a determined look upon his face no matter what the condition his ship was currently in. Darkan and Stonn looked behind him to see the condition of

the bridge crew and Vrang seemed to have them all well ordered.

Vrang spoke once more, "Your information has proved itself true. It seems that the Romulans and the Chak-ruth have conspired against the major houses of the Empire. The attack on my ship being infallible evidence, but why are you here... what does the Federation want from this? Or do you have a part?"

"According to our laws," Darkan answered, "many which I have recently broken, I and my crew are rogue, no longer under the protection of the Federation. Our duty was to serve and protect our people just as it is yours; even though rogue, we still consider it our duty. When we found this deception, orders were stretched or broken while seeking to

remove the threat and gain your aid by, as it has become apparent, any means necessary. The only thing I seek out of this is the destruction of the ship we've disclosed to you previously and your aid in doing so. Bringing traitors and enemies to justice or their destruction I think would be more than enough incentive for you to join us."

While loathe to interrupt, Stonn stood back from his sensor hood and spoke loudly, "Captain... Captains. We are reading a power spike in the D6's impulse engine. The ship may have sustained more severe damage than originally thought, and there may be a risk of explosion unless the problem is mitigated immediately."

Ramos turned around quickly to his engineering station, where the efficient science officer had already forwarded the readings. He studied them quickly to determine the risk and what could be done about it.

"Wha... Options? How much time until critical? Is this due to battle damage or could it be sabotage?" Darkan was not yet ready to believe Vrang would commit suicide.

"The damage appears to be battle-related, Captain," said Stonn.

Ramos spoke up, without looking away from his board. "It looks like the attackers got a lucky shot - but not too lucky. Vrang's ship took an indirect hit to the impulse block. Instead of causing an immediate explosion, the disruptors broke down multiple conduits. They'll start failing in time, though. Shutting their impulse engines down should allow them to repair the damage well enough, but it'll take time..."

Ramos turned to the captain, raising his hands with a helpless look. He knew time was a luxury they couldn't afford.

Ramos was almost right.

The main fusion reactor that powers the impulse engines was linked to two systems - the primary warp reactor and the auxiliary reactor (generally used for cold-starting the ship's engines and emergency power supply). Though all three were independent of each other and each had its own reactionary fuel, they all were still tied together with TFC, or Transfer Flow Conduit. The conduit was huge and laced throughout most starships and though their designs were different between Klingon and Federation engineering, the physics was the same. Magnetic force was used the entire conduit length to both contain and shift the amazing amount of energy that the reactors created to fill the many needs of a starship.

Unfortunately for the D6-class battlecruiser, the Klingons only serviced the vessels enough to keep them as transports and to provide for patrolling, not front-of-the-line ships. Yes, they could be used in a conflict but most knew that they would be merely a blocking force, not a maneuvering one. The venerable system failed. The disruptors' hit had broken down multiple conduits but it also had damaged the breaker control system. And so the safety program had gone into effect and the energy was redirected away from the destroyed grid, but it built upon itself and with no automated breakers, the TFC blew. It happened on the starboard side of the ship just along the warp nacelle wing. The whole length of the conduit exploded outwardly and literally sheered the wing and nacelle from the main body of the craft. With the extent of her power grid sundered, the vessel lost the bulk of its power and went dark. The force of the explosion caused it to list and drift in the opposite direction of the outward blast. Emergency battery power went active throughout the decks to keep main environmental functions active for however long they would last or until the Klingon engineers could restore what power they could.

On the D6's bridge, Vrang began to yell as his ship shook and the lights went out, "GR'L FROK-NA*!! WHAT!? WHAT HAPPENED!? DID THEY ATTACK US!?"

The crew around him began to rush about and semi-chaos ensued, each station trying to get some kind of answer from their mostly dead ship. The XO answered his captain, "I DON'T KNOW! I DON'T KNOW!"

In the confusion, Vrang was unaware as to who was talking to whom - "DID THEY ATTACK US!?" he demanded once more.

On the Columbia, Darkan frowned as his viewscreen went blank of Vrang's bridge only to see the external view of the D6. The bridge crew watched as the silent image suddenly flared with light along its starboard wing and then list to one side as the nacelle blew off. The cacophony of Vrang's bridge could still be heard over the open channel and the captain cringed to hear the insinuations of the Klingon commander.

Graham shouted out information Darkan already knew, "Sir! There was no, I repeat, no weapons fire from the Columbia!"

Townshend spoke slowly to no one in particular, "Vrang is the only Klingon that knows that the Federation is not willfully attacking the Empire - especially if the whole H'atoria sector is part of the coup. If he dies, we may be at war..."

Stonn spoke next and his emotionless voice only added to the stress of the moment, "Sir, sensors are picking up a warp signature of an approaching vessel. It is still fifty minutes from our position."

"Vrang, come in! We did not, repeat, did NOT fire upon your ship. One of your nacelles just blew off. ID that ship inbound now!" Darkan was quickly considering options in his head.

1. He could tow the ship to a nearby system, but that'd likely get them killed.
2. Beam over the Klingon crew. They wouldn't necessarily get killed, but things would get complicated quickly such as what to do with them then?
3. He could tow them to the Federation, but likely the same result as 1 and more complicated than 2.
4. Leave them and head out after the Federation look-alike. This really wasn't an option for them after what Darkan's already said and done.

But these were the only option he could come up with. "Alright, people, we need options and fast regardless if that ship is friendly or not."

From across the distance of cold space, Vrang's voice shouted to Darkan, "DARKAN! DID YOU ATTACK US?! YOU SPEAK OF TREACHERY!"

Townshend spoke next to her captain, "Sir... we have another problem here! The Gr'Toth is broadcasting only. I am not getting any evidence of reception. He cannot hear you sir!"

When the combat had broken out with the two Chak-ruth B'rels, the scout vessels had targeted and damaged the D6's main communications system shutting down any means of long-range broadcasting. The explosion from the conduit shook the ship bad enough to disable her 'ears' as well.

With Jess' announcement hanging there, Graham spoke next, "Options sir? We need to make sure that Captain Vrang survives above all else. We can attempt to beam the whole bridge crew to our ship that way we do not miss the only Klingon with authority who can stop this tide of war. Once he is secured upon the Columbia, we can do what we need to make sure that he is able to contact the Klingon High Council. We can destroy the Federation mock-up and then we can get outta Dodge."

Stonn's scans of the D6 showed that her auxiliary power reactor had yet to come on but batteries were powering environmental systems. The GrToth's crew should be able to restore some sort of power and maybe even get the old ship moving again.

Darkan mulled this over a moment. He detested such a brute force approach to the problem, but seeing as there was little to debate this, he looked around for any objection to Graham's suggestion. Not seeing any, he nods, "Call a security team to the bridge and then transport the bridge crew over."

Graham added a little more input, "Captain, I would recommend a full security detail - armed with phasers - to be sent to the transporter room. By the way Vrang is ranting over there, I do not think he will be to friendly upon his arrival... at least until we calm him down and explain what happened."

"I don't know how 'calm' I'd be," Ramos quipped. "Captain, if someone took you off the bridge, the rest of the ship would be ready for a fight." Ramos didn't really see any other realistic options, either - but he knew that this wasn't going to go over well.

Jess turned in her chair listening to the men talk, "Captain, I am not sure if extracting the Klingon commander and his bridge crew is the wisest of ideas. Certainly they must come to a conclusion that their ship's damage caused the explosion - let them figure it out and then we can try to talk to them rationally."

Graham interjected, "But there is no way to communicate with them Jess, and we have an unknown ship coming down on us at high speed! We do not have time for them to figure out what happened with their limited resources, and then formulate some means of communication with us. If we beam them over now, yes they may be angry, but we can at least talk to them."

Stonn looked up from his sensor hood, and spoke up, cutting through the rest of the conversation. "Captain, I have some information on the incoming vessel." Assuming that the captain would wish him to continue, he saved his commander the time, "The incoming ship's warp signature is unknown. It does not match any known Starfleet, Klingon, or even Romulan types. However, the warp field around it is seemingly unstable, as if the vessel is having difficulty maintaining it. It is approaching at Warp Factor 6."

Ramos turned, and asked the captain, "Sir, our damaged systems will take time to repair - should I focus our getting the shields back up?" He wanted a look at that warp field, but he knew he wouldn't have the time. If it was the fake Starfleet vessel, maybe it wasn't a particularly good one, he thought... he *hoped*.

"We haven't the time to waste even to meet them in the transporter room, beam the Klingon bridge crew directly to ours. At this point we must assume the vessel is unfriendly, but keep working on trying to identify it. Ramos, do whatever it takes to get the shields back to full strength and make any repairs necessary to keep this ship battle-worthy."

"Aye, sir," said Ramos as he got up and headed for the turbolift that would whisk him to Engineering. On the way, he admitted that he felt relieved that he wouldn't be on the bridge when the Klingons arrived - that was going to get messy.

The main turbolift doors opened onto the bridge dispatching a small detachment of security crewmen - each man and woman, per Graham's orders, wore a phaser II on their belt. They spread out and took up positions that were both out of the way of all bridge staff, but close enough to provide support once the Klingons appeared.

Townshend pushed a button, "Transporter room, commence beaming of the Klingon bridge crew to the Columbia."

It took a moment as the ship's computer tied into the sensor system and locked onto all targets within the D6's bridge and then there was a crackle, a hum, and then energy began to shimmer in six spots on the bridge. Each shimmer restructured itself into a member of the Klingon command crew and it took only a moment for each of them to realize what had happened.

"TREACHERY!" Vrang yelled and his hand went down to his belt where was holstered his disruptor. Beside him, Vrang's XO reached out and grabbed one of the Columbia's security team and literally lifted and threw the man across the bridge. The crewman hit the deck in a crumple near Townshend - he did not get up.

As the other Klingons went for their weapons, phasers also were drawn.

With his hands up to show that he was not armed, not a threat, Darkan approached the Klingon who spoke, "Captain Vrang, I am Darkan. I apologize for the abrupt exit from your ship but we couldn't communicate with you and there is no time to wait for your ship to be repaired at the moment. There is an unidentified incoming vessel that is only a few minutes out and we're going to have to work together if it turns out to be the fake Federation ship. Regardless of what it really is... Vrang, we're here to help."

Darkan made his plea to the Klingon commander but it fell on deaf ears, so enraged was Vrang and his fellow crewmen. Disruptors were drawn and the bridge of the Columbia became a battlefield.

"Ah, hell!" thought Darkan, "*Things are never easy, are they?*"

Flipping the comm switch and diving for the phaser of the downed crewman, Darkan barked out a command, "Transporter room, beam the Klingons to the brig without their weapons and flood it with anesthetic gas, now!!"

Hearing the urgency in his captain's voice, the transporter crewman and his superior commence an immediate re-beam of the Klingons to the brig. The computer was already locked onto Vrang and his crewmen and so it only took moments to re-energize.

On the bridge, Vrang drew forth his disruptor and aimed it towards Darkan as the Columbia's captain dodged to the left to grab for the unmoving security guard's phaser. Surprise crossed the Klingon's face as his body and weapon began to dematerialize.

Graham and Tam, who had been in motion since the arrival of their 'guests' moved to the prone crewman, Tam could see by his body position that the man's back was not laying naturally - he worried about paralysis or something worse.

The tension quickly dissipated as the Klingons disappeared.

Vrang looked around, his weapon extended and pointing at a gray wall. He lowered his arm as he realized they had been transported again and then looked up as he heard a hiss - they were being gassed. He yelled out for his crewmen to hold their breath.

The Security guards outside watched for some time and were quite surprised at how long it took for the Klingons to finally succumb to the anestheazine- their redundant secondary biology keeping them cognizant longer than any human could last. Finally there was no more movement and the team entered to quickly search the Klingons and remove all weapons that could be found.

Darkan's comm panel lit on his chair and he hit the button. An unknown voice spoke, "Captain, we have the Klingons secured and they are beginning to stir already. It took a lot of anestheazine to subdue them - I can't believe that they are moving already. Jones out."

"Never a dull moment," grunted Darkan as he got to his feet. "Stonn, you have the bridge. Graham, you're with me. As soon as we know who that incoming ship is, let me know." As soon as he is inside the turbolift and the doors shut, he slumps in relief against the wall of the lift.

Everyone on the bridge just stared as their captain entered the turbolift, each still a bit stunned with adrenaline coursing their systems. The beeps and hums of the ship and its consoles were the only sounds that could be heard for that eternal few seconds, but then Stonn spoke to his subordinate, "Mr. Marshall, keep me advised on the approaching vessel and get me more information of the Gr'Toth's condition."

Townshend spoke next, "Mr. Stonn, the Gr'Toth crew are now realizing that their captain and bridge staff are gone... it sounds like chaos is beginning to ensue."

Business went back to normal on the Columbia's bridge. Tam looked to Townshend, "Jess, can you call for some assistance for me?" Without a word, Jess paged the medical department, "Medical team to the bridge to assist Dr. Tam; a stretcher will be needed."

Stonn replied to Townsend, "Please send: Your crew is in no danger from this vessel. Your commander will speak to you shortly. We will endeavor to assist with damage control; please assess damage to defensive systems and impulse assembly and advise. Columbia out."

He then mentioned to the bridge, "We will make no mention of the Romulan intruder unless it is absolutely necessary. The Klingons will surely be more trusting of their own commander." If Vrang would be trusting of Stonn's own captain, that is.

Jess stood and walked to Stonn. She had no desire to embarrass the Vulcan - if they could be - but...

"Mr. Stonn," she said softly, "the D6 has no way of receiving any communications. They can broadcast only."

"Then, Ms. Townsend, please translate to Klingon and send via running-light Morse. It is imperative that we contact the Klingon vessel and relay what is happening." Stonn knew that such communication was unusual, but when standard methods of communications were down, one had to attempt other options.

The order was issued with no emotion to it and Jess did not know how to take it. The logical mind of the Vulcan Science Officer had run through all possibilities, where she had not - still it seemed condescending. She nodded, "Right away, sir."

"Mr. Ramos," the engineer turned to take the PADD that was handed to him. The report showed that the shields were back to 100% and the damage caused by he and his staff to re-route power had also been rectified. The bridge, too, had been taken care of and the burnt panels replaced.

He smiled at his staffs' efficiency.

Darkan and Graham exited the turbolift on deck seven and went left down the passageway. Moments later, they entered the brig and a security crewman conducted them to where the Klingons were being held. The two officers looked into the cell and saw the six captives sitting about on the stainless steel benches. Vrang looked up and saw Darkan and he stood up to walk over and stand before the force-field door. He crossed his arms and spread his feet and stared with a bitter glare at the Columbia's captain.

"I wonder now who has allied with whom in this little attack on our sovereign space? The Federation, Romulans and one of our lower houses? Why? To stage a coup and topple the strength of the Klingon Empire! Perfect ruse... inviting us to Earth and sending your wily diplomats!"

"Vrang, if you're now willing to listen instead of fight, open your ears. The inbound ship is still unknown, presenting a threat to the both of us. Your communications were down and we were in need of consulting with you and your crew -- that is why I had you beamed over." He disengaged the force field, though he was sure the security guards behind him were prepared.

"You are not our prisoners nor do we backstab our allies. If you are willing take counsel with us, be my guest and we can send your crew back and even an engineering team of my own to assist in your repairs; otherwise, I will escort you to the transporter and we can go our separate ways. What say you, faithful warrior of the Klingon Empire?"

Vrang looked at the open cell door and then to Darkan. Why should he trust this human anymore? Yet... Darkan had appeared to show honor in each move.

"So, you say that we are free to go? What of my ship? Did you not fire upon us while we were beginning to discuss our options?" Already Vrang was beginning to disbelieve that there was any attack, but he had to see the human tell him - he had to look into his eyes as he did.

"Yes you are free to go if you so wish. We made no attack on your vessel. The nacelle blew off your ship due to battle damage, wreaking further havoc upon it. If you wish to see it with your own eyes, I can make the sensor information readily available. But captain, we have decisions to make and fast. We still don't know who's out there and your ship won't make a jump to warp without help. Your ship could regain some functionality in the time we have left, but it will be limited. Face it, we are in this together. Without you, your Empire could be ripped apart with civil war as well as drawing the Federation into a conflict as well. Without us, you can't get the truth out as well as fend off that fake ship from preying on the innocent."

Vrang side glanced to his XO. The Klingon officer gave a nod that displayed the two were in some sort of agreement. Looking back at Darkan, Vrang agreed, "I will see this data you offer... you must understand that any alliance built here must be based on trust and honor. It is through your honorable acts thus far that we are willing to continue this dialogue, but in these times trust is hard earned. I also

request that my bridge staff be sent back to my ship to continue the work necessary to get my ship operational."

An unbidden memory of his father popped into Darkan's head, "*Son, honor without trust is like a pie without the filling: it's nothing but an empty shell, just hollow words.*"

The Klingon captain gave him an inquisitive look, "There is wisdom in what you speak," said Vrang. Darkan didn't realize he had spoken aloud.

"Mr. Graham, will escort the Klingon bridge crew to the transporter room and provide them with a copy of our sensor logs about their accident for independent analysis and Captain Vrang will join us on the bridge. I would like to send over an engineering crew of mine to facilitate communication between our ships until repairs are complete, if that is alright by you, captain?"

Again there was a silent conference between captain and XO, and again both nodded. Vrang spoke, "This is my second in command, Korris; he will stay with me here while the rest of my crew are returned to the Gr'Toth. You are welcome to send a engineer team over, but I assure you that my own crew are quite capable of handling our ship."

With that approval, Graham went to a comm panel and broadcasted ship-wide, "Mr. Ramos, prepare a team to accompany the Klingons back to their ship and offer any aid that they can."

In Engineering, Ramos looked at Lt. Zantz and both had a look of shock on their faces. "What a crazy universe," thought the Chief Engineer.

The groups in the brig separated and Darkan led Vrang to the turbolift and he and his *guests* took it to the Bridge. Graham escorted his charges to the transporter room where the Klingons were immediately beamed back to their ship with instructions that the engineering team would be following.

On the Bridge, Townshend worked diligently to transmit via Morse code to the Klingon ship, but as yet had had no response. The turbolift doors suddenly opened and out stepped Darkan with two Klingons.

Seeing his crew tense, a few even reaching for phasers, Darkan held up a hand, "At ease everyone. Our little misunderstanding is resolved." Even with his reassurance, the bridge lightened up but only just a little. "Senior staff to the conference room post haste."

Darkan escorted his guests to the conference room, making the "tour" of the bridge as long as it took to move between those two points with minimal delay. Offering the Klingons seats, he took his own at the table's head and awaited the arrival of the rest of his officers.

Columbia's senior staff quickly congregated in the briefing room, save for Mr. Pushkin whose burns were still being treated. Within five minutes, Darkan was able to call his meeting to order.

Korvona once again read through the handful of reports that she still held. One was from her engineering staff that was concerned about a multitude of irregularities in the ship they had built. Romulan technology was advanced, but in their designs - trying to squeeze their engineering into a Federation style mock-up was causing havoc. The ship could barely maintain a warp field and so she was able to get to warp factor 4 at the most. Worst of all, the ships systems were not rigged well and so departmental communications were quite choppy.

The ship's main computer core would lose contact with different systems at times and cause a rush of panic.

The Romulan Delegate shook her head. They had not been able to test this beast! Oh well, it's purpose was mainly as a *smoking gun*, to use Earthling jargon that she had learned from the few smugglers that crossed into their space. Besides, it was up to the Klingons of the Chak-ruth house to do the fighting. Still, she wanted to partake in a little bit of the fun.

Her second report was that of the final communications she had received from the two B'rels. They had reported a venerable D6 closing on the Neutral Zone very near to where her ship had been moored in spacedock. Now she had lost communication with those B'rels although the mock-up's sensors were picking up a ship - apparently it was stationary. Perhaps the B'rels had destroyed the D6 and left the hulk hanging there in space, and then moved on. Maybe they had destroyed each other.

Korvona and her ship would check it out.

"**Status** reports? Any news of the incoming ship?" Darkan asked, looking about the table to his officers, Stonn first.

"The ship is still headed in this direction, and its warp field is still unstable. It is reasonable to assume that the vessel is the Constitution-class mock-up, and therefore, it is imperative that we have both vessels as ready as possible to repel it within the hour."

Darkan nodded, "We'll come back to that. So Mr. Ramos, where do we stand and have you status from our away team?"

Graham sat quietly while waiting for Ramos to respond to the captain, but the Tactical Officer was very uncomfortable due to the Klingon presence. It was not because there were Klingons on board the Columbia, and that they were considered allies - it was because the tactical situation would soon need be discussed. Graham was not sure that he wanted to reveal the new technology that the Federation starship possessed and the upcoming battle would certainly be a factor.

The Tactical Officer would wait to see what Darkan would ask and then reply accordingly.

"Getting the report now, sir," Ramos said while looking at a small PADD in his hand. "Our team just beamed over, and they've been informed that the Klingon engineers don't feel our help is required." He scanned the pad quickly and continued. "The Gr'toth (he said the name clumsily) cannot go to warp; one nacelle is gone. Power can be restored with bypasses within roughly forty minutes, which will allow the vessel some movement and, potentially, some weapons usage, but it'll be dicey. I wouldn't expect miracles, sir - the ship needs more than an engineering team, it needs a dry-dock."

To Ramos' comments Vrang boldly replied, "The Gr'Toth will fight any invading force or internal threat! That I promise you! Klingons are warriors and we will fight to the death if necessary. Now, what is your plan Darkan... words here grow old and I have a ship to ready for another fight! Be quick so I may beam back to my vessel."

Townshend interjected, "Commander Vrang, no disrespect but it may be wiser that you remain aboard the Columbia. You are the only Klingon of authority that can attest to the potential coup of the Chak-ruth. Your death aboard your ship, though admirable amongst your folk, may be a foolish loss in the greater picture. The Columbia, at this time appears a much safer place."

Stonn, already thinking the same thing, could only appreciate the young communication officer more for her logical insight.

Vrang's voice boomed, "SAFE! KLINGON'S DO NOT SEEK SAFETY IN WAR! WE CONFRONT IT AND FIGHT!"

"Vrang if one doesn't know the condition of his weapon, he sets himself up for failure. I agree that it would be safer for you on board our ship, but, Ms. Townshend, Klingon or Human, a captain is first aboard his ship and the last off. Captain, if you will consent to make an encoded message to your superiors with the help of my comm officer, I think that should suffice if you or your ship doesn't survive. If need be, I'll deliver it myself. As for a battle plan, if your cloaking device is operational we will have a significant advantage."

"It is not our way to reveal secrets of the Empire, but at this moment, things are critical," said Vrang quietly. "The D6 generation of our ships were never fitted with cloaking devices... the new technology was installed on the new D7's that came online soon after trade was started with the Romulans. We have never seen any need to upgrade the older vessels as they serve back of the line purposes."

It could be heard in Vrang's voice a bit of embarrassment, not so much that his ship was not technologically advanced, moreso that he was relegated a captain of a forgotten class of vessel.

"Then, Captain," Ramos said to Darkan, "with all due respect to our guests here, we're going to need to keep ourselves in front of their ship and bear the brunt of any combat." Ramos winced, knowing that the Klingon wouldn't appreciate it. But Townshend was right - Vrang needed to live - and Ramos didn't think the Klingon vessel was truly up to the task.

Stonn considered the engineer's suggestion and made another of his own. "Sir, there may be... *challenges* if combat becomes necessary; but it may also become possible to draw the mock-up away from the Gr'toth."

As the officers talked, Lt. Marshal's voice came over the intercom, "Captain Darkan, Marshal here... sensor readings have the inbound vessel at approximately thirty-five minutes away flight-time. We are picking up sensor sweeps from the inbound, so far we do not think they have tracked us yet."

A tidbit of intelligence, no doubt noted by everyone at the table, but now wasn't the time to ponder such things; Darkan went on, "One option down, with others remaining. Our vessels are in such close proximity that they probably only detect one ship at this time. The plan I have is risky and I only see it two steps ahead of our visitors once they arrive. The Columbia will be moved close to your ship yet diametrically opposite of the inbound course of the vessel and go silent while your ship, Vrang, appears helpless and in disarray. If the incoming ship is the Romulan vessel, then it is here to destroy your ship. The instant they appear to fire, we will envelop your ship with our shields and then maneuver around so that both ships can give it all we've got. Getting your shields and weapons online should be the primary focus with a second on your maneuverability; anytime we can get the vessel between pincers, all the better. My engineers, with your permission captain, will remain on your vessel to assist in any capacity. For any of us to come out this, we need both ships able to stand as tall as possible. Time is pressing, everyone, so poke holes and fill them fast."

Grahm still felt a bit uncomfortable answering with the Klingon presence, "It sounds like a good plan sir, though I am concerned about using our shields to defend the D6. Doing so makes one attack from our

enemy effective against both of our ships. It seems wiser to me to press the engineering department on making sure the Gr'Toth's shields are back up."

Vrang responded, "My people will see to my ship, although your engineering staff is welcome to stay aboard and assist. Anyway, the plan you present is sound and we shall have it as the back up option. The first option is for me to get back aboard the Gr'Toth and see that my systems are back up and functional... if I fail in this, be prepared to put your plan in motion upon the Romulan's arrival. Now, let me see to this communiqué for my government."

"Yes, of course, we will do what we have to. If no one has anything else, you have your orders... to your stations."

With Darkan's order, Townshend pushed a button on her console, "RED ALERT! RED ALERT! ALL HANDS TO BATTLE STATIONS!"

The Columbia crew again went into motion, each individual working as a whole to make the ship the most effective and deadly thing in space. Townshend gave a nod to Captain Vrang, "Captain, if you will come with me. I will take the encoded message from you and your XO and then show you to the transporter room."

The rest of the senior staff was up and on their way back to their stations. Ramos made a quick call to his assistant chief engineer whose present location was on the beat up D6.

"Torrence here," said the voice. "Yea commander... it's a bit of a mess over here. We are just standing around for the most part... not sure if it's 'cause the Klingons don't want to reveal any of their technology, or if there's not much need for our help. Anyway, we have ran about 50 meters of light-guage TFC to patch the power grid - not sure how long that stuff will hold. It's already reading high Kelvin so we shall see what happens."

The engineer paused a minute as he listened to someone explaining something, then he came back on, "The power from Impulse and the Warp core is now available. The Gr'Toth is going to have limited maneuverability and her weapons appear to be coming back online. We are concentrating our efforts on the shield grid - hope to have about 50% within the hour. I will report soon, Torrence out."

Ramos made the call to Darkan to keep his captain apprised.

"Tell them they have half that time, Mr. Ramos, and that I'll be addressing them momentarily when Captain Vrang returns to his ship."

"Yes, sir," Ramos replied, though he knew that the intractable Klingons and the state of their ship would make anything his team could try difficult. "I hope we're not expecting miracles." He worried for his team; stuck on a dangerously vulnerable (and erstwhile enemy) vessel and desperately wished that their lives didn't have to be put at risk in this manner.

"Away Team, this is Captain Darkan. We are preparing for battle between both ships but I am extending your post aboard the Klingon vessel. I believe it necessary that both ships be given a fighting chance for survival and with you there, that ship has a better chance of survival. Mr. Torrence, I will be placing you and your team, albeit temporarily, under the direct command of Captain Vrang. Follow his orders as if they were from me but I will not grudge you to question them if they seem improper according to your training. Do your best and make us proud."

On Deck 1, Pushkin sat on an exam table as Dr. Chan observed his wounds. The burns were minor, but still quite painful and so Chan

prepared a hypo of Asinolaythin and Kelotane - the first for the pain and the second to aid in the healing of the burns. The doctor injected them both and then tapped Pushkin on the knee, "Should be good as new... but you may want to rest for a bit longer here."

The doctor walked away to aid another patient who had sustained an injury during the small battle with the B'rels. A pretty nurse approached and smiled at the helmsman, who immediately puffed his chest and acted like it no longer hurt. "Here," she said. "Let me wrap the burns in a light gauze for the moment - we want the wounds to breath but not be scuffed or get dirty."

Pushkin knew that the removal of the gauze would be another painful bonus from the attack, but for the moment he was pleased with his caregiver. He moved to get to his feet and was hit by a wave of dizziness. "Guess my head and gravity are currently incompatible." Pushkin laughed as he gave the pretty nurse a smile, "Um... I'm in your hands. I don't think I have introduced myself. I am Alekseyev Pushkin."

Not looking up from her work, but a smile still evident, the young nurse answers, "Hello Alekseyev... I am Cindy, Cindy Timmons. And what happened to cause you to visit us today?"

Suddenly, the ship's klaxon system began to sound, "RED ALERT! RED ALERT! ALL HANDS TO BATTLE STATIONS!"

"Well, hello Cindy. Very nice to meet you. I'm afraid a panel exploded and it..." Alex was unable to finish his comment due to Townshend coming over the internal PA. "Excuse me, duty calls." He grabbed his uniform jacket as he tried to make his way for the bridge, hoping the dizziness was only a temporary thing.

"Alekseyev," the nurse said. "You need to wait a few more minutes... the Asinolaythin will impair your abilities and surely the captain will not allow you to helm the ship."

Pushkin knew Cindy was right - but he also knew what was going on outside the vessel and how close they were to an engagement with an unknown enemy. The Columbia would need his skills!

Still, the loss of equilibrium was enough to convince the young Russian to take a moment and sit back down. The ship was not engaged yet. Pushkin had ten minutes until that was no longer the case. "Would you like some water?" she asked, as she helped him into a seat.

Pushkin nodded, "Da... thanks."

The nurse steadied the helmsman and stepped away to get him a cup of water. As she did, Pushkin felt his balance return and the tingling feeling begin to subside. He took the cup with a smile and downed the liquid, returning the empty upon completion. She was a pretty woman and he wanted to chat some more, but he had seven decks to cover to get to the bridge, and so he again picked up his tunic and gave her a smile, "I am feeling better. I think I had best get to my station. I hope to see you again, Ms. Timmons."

Moments later, Alekseyev was on the turbolift heading towards his duty station.

Communication between the Federation and Klingon vessels was reduced to nothing. Vrang had been beamed back to his ship roughly ten minutes prior and the Columbia had moved to a position that placed the Gr'Toth between her and the oncoming enemy vessel. Unbeknownst to the Klingons, the Federation starship had also been employing her Prairie Masker system and was truly a black hole in space... at least until the Connie mock-up, if that was what was

approaching, got closer - then the crew would learn how well the technology truly worked.

Phaser stations were all manned, and the automated torpedo system had loaded a full spread into the Columbia's tubes. Graham looked at his console and saw a green light for each ready system. The shields were at 100% - Ramos' teams were on top of their game - the ship was as ready defensively and offensively as she could be.

Stonn sat looked into his hood and called out the distance to the approaching vessel - it would be in visual and combat range within 10 minutes. Darkan sat in his command chair and watched his staff at work, impressed by their efficiency. The Federation commander hoped the Gr'Toth was ready for another fight.

Time ticked down.

Korvona watched with concern as her engineer flitted about the helm console. The damned ship was supposed to be able to fight a battle or two, let alone move at warp speed! Right now, her vulnerable systems were playing havoc with each other and the Romulan knew that it would be a short encounter for them unless the crewman could shore up the controls.

"Will this ship be able to fight and win?" she asked in an exasperated tone.

"We will be destroy anything we cross!" her engineer answered a bit over enthusiastically.

Behind both another voice called out, "Commander Korvona, we are coming into range - I should have the ship we are detecting on visual in a minute or two. It has not changed position... I think it is safe to assume that it is a wreck."

"Prepare to drop from warp," Korvona answered. "Let's not assume anything... the Klingons have long been wily in the ways of war. Tactical, bring all batteries on line!"

The tension on the Columbia's bridge was almost unbearable. The red lights of the high alert flashed all about, the klaxon silenced long ago. Everyone was quiet except for the recitation of the approach of the vessel, maybe enemy vessel. In an even voice, Darkan gave his first commands of the battle before the first shot was fired. "Helm, if the vessel comes in hot, bring us around the Gr'Toth on the side of the lost nacelle, placing us between it and the attacker, but keep us nimble. Tactical, you will put shields to maximum, aiding the Klingons if need be. Get us a Lock On as soon as they are at Medium range and give'm our best. Mr. Stonn, unless you can do this earlier, once the cat is out of the bag, I want you to scan for the vessel's weaknesses... anything to give us an advantage."

The Romulan ship dropped from warp at an extended range of 350,000 Km from the Gr'Toth and immediately commenced sensor sweeps of the entire area. The ship's computer took in all of the energies and particles that it registered from the miniscule to the massive and began to feed that information to the sensor technician.

"Commander Korvona, I am detecting both warp and impulse energy readings from a D6 battlecruiser. It is leaking large quantities of

radiation so it is assumed it is heavily damaged. I am bringing up visual now."

The viewscreen on the connie bridge lit up and showed the wounded starship as it drifted in space - the Klingons had yet to reveal that they had any flight control. Behind the Gr'Toth, something else could be seen - but it was indiscernible.

"What is that behind the D6?" asked Korvona.

"Sir, I don't know. We are picking up something large but I cannot get an exact on it. Perhaps it is the ruins of the two B'rels that had communicated their presence to us a few hours ago. Needless to say, I am not detecting any energy signs as of yet."

Korvona did not like the answer, but still decided her course. "Close in on the D6 - let's finish what has been started here. There are no communications emanating?"

"No sir... it is as quiet as the dead."

"Let's make sure of that," Korvona replied. "Charge all batteries and prepare to fire."

Vrang and Darkan were also looking at their viewscreens. On both, a Constitution-class starship was fast approaching but still distant enough to make phaser fire useless - though torpedoes would still be effective - at her rate of closure that would soon change. Even now, Vrang stared with a feeling of apprehension. Was this really a Romulan mock-up? Or had he allowed himself to be a pawn in a most ingenuous of Federation plots?

He would know soon enough, and if the Columbia was truly his enemy, it would not matter for he and his crew much longer.

Darkan, along with the rest of his bridge staff, could immediately see that the approaching ship was a bad imitation. It would definitely cause the unfamiliar to point the finger at the Federation, but her design, though close, was clearly not a Connie. The saucer had an irregular forward bulge and the graceful lines that would normally be seen, were squat and irregular.

It would not be much longer until the Columbia knew what her true capabilities were.

Stonn looked up from his viewer and addressed the captain, "They have detected us, but it is unlikely that they have fully penetrated our masking device... otherwise, they would undoubtedly be acting more aggressively. I will not commence full scans until it is clear that we have been revealed, per your order, sir." He glanced at the viewscreen again, taking in the clumsy lines of the mockup, "Captain, the bulge on the underside saucer appears to be a retrofitted plasma torpedo - extremely dangerous at close range; it will dissipate with distance. This vessel is undoubtedly of Romulan origin."

"Slight change of plans -- that will be our first target. We'll let Vrang pound it while we pick it apart. Helm, keep them at long range; Tactical, unless the Klingons shoot first, wait for the Romulans to get to long range, go shields up and lock on. Target the Weapon Systems. Since this thing is big, use the torpedoes."

"**There** is another vessel present!" shouted the Romulan sensor control officer. "I have movement beyond the Klingon vessel, sir, and it is... it's a Federation ship!"

Korvona's head turned quickly from the officer back to her viewscreen as the Columbia moved from her position behind the Gr'Toth.

Stonn peered into the hooded viewport; surely, the Romulans were now close enough to tell they were there. "Commencing active scan," he announced to the bridge, never looking up for acknowledgment.

Billy Anderson sat at the navigation console, and for the second time today was about to engage in battle. It seemed to him that they were nearly shaken apart the first time, but evidently things weren't as bad as he thought; they were once again up to 100%.

The fight, the negotiations, the high warp incursion deep into the neutral zone, the confrontation on the bridge, another blistering phaser fight; what else could happen in one day?! This was more than he'd seen in the last five years combined. Deep space was all he'd heard it was, and then some.

He knew all of the propaganda about the Romulans, but he wanted to understand more about their culture. He'd finally learned the language well enough, he hoped, to read their own literature - if he lived through this encounter with them, that is.

He plotted a course around the port side of the D6 (to protect the fragmented nacelle) and to a point 100,000 Km from the Romulans and sent it to the helm.

Even though it looked wrong, and he *knew* that it wasn't really a Federation ship, it still felt odd to him to be engaging it. He checked his sensors for rate of closure, aspect, and angle of attack to the Romulan ship.

Alex Pushkin stepped out of the turbolift and onto the bridge, his wounds having been cleaned and healed. He looked to the viewscreen and the situation before stepping forward to take his station. He nodded his head in thanks to his replacement, leaning to ask quietly about the helm status. He quickly took his seat and scanned the panel to confirm their heading and speed. The Captain was busy with a tense situation so he could not dally. He glanced over to Anderson and offered him a polite nod of the head - unfortunately, no time for chit chat either.

On the Gr'Toth, Vrang ordered the Romulan mock-up to be locked and all weapons to fire. The ship's torpedo tubes fired causing it to literally shift backward from the recoil due to its weakened propulsion system. Still, the Klingon gunner was on target and the Romulan ship's forward screens took the barrage of fire.

Korvona smiled, "It seems that the Klingon has a bit of fight left in him... but not enough, I think. Tactical! Re-target... let us see what the Miranda can take. Lock and Fire!"

The Columbia bridge crew watched as the Klingon disruptors struck the Connie and wondered what affect they had achieved. Pushkin

settled into his seat and prepared to maneuver the vessel; Stonn read through his scan to determine if there were any weaknesses to be exploited; Graham looked to his captain with his hands poised to unleash the Columbia's deadly weapons; and Darkan sat in his chair - the weight of command resting on his shoulders.

Townshend called out, "Captain, the encrypted message from Vrang is completely packaged and ready for transmission."

The viewscreen showed the Romulan vessel changing her course and bringing her weapons to bear on the Federation ship. Stonn looked up from his viewer and turned toward the Captain, "Sir, their plasma torpedo is fully charged and ready. We will be in increasing danger the closer we get, and the Klingon vessel may be all but defenseless against it." He let that sink in for a brief moment and continued, "There are roughly eighty-five life forms aboard - an exact reading is difficult due to the charged plasma weapon - so it stands to reason that the vessel does not have all the redundancies and hardened systems that an authentic Starfleet vessel would, or it would be extremely difficult to operate with a crew of only one-quarter normal. This vessel was built for deception, not combat."

"Transmit as soon as you're ready, Ms. Townshend." Turning to his other officers, "Let's take it out of the fight quickly. Fire as ordered, Mr. Graham."

"Aye aye, sir," answered the Tactical officer. Graham touched the fire control button on his console and above the bridge, on the Columbia's rollbar, photon torpedoes streaked forth. They flared red on the viewscreen as they raced towards the Romulan mock-up and struck the ship's shields.

Unhappy with the apparent useless attack, Darkan ordered, "Pushkin, keep us moving but hold the Romulans at this distance."

Pushkin's hands flew across the console as the Captain gave his command, but still Korvona's ship raced in to point blank range. It released the terrible plasma torpedo on the Columbia and the Federation vessel had no way to evade. The shields held against the onslaught though some of the weapon's destructive power exceeded their threshold and the Columbia took structural damage.

Inside the ship, the bridge lights flickered and went to all red; a panel burst off to Darkan's right and one of his staff again was knocked back stunned. Darkan yelled out his command to come hard about and again the viewscreen flashed with the light of phaser fire.

"Aye, sir. Hard about." Pushkin looked to his instruments and glanced to the viewscreen, using the two as the ship moved into position. Now it was time to show the Romulans what a real Federation starship could do.

Ramos handed off the PADD, pleased at the Columbia's status. Still, he was concerned about his other crewmembers aboard the flying wreck not far away. Juan became aware of a young lieutenant staring at him from across the room... he was Andorian.

"Telek," thought the chief engineer as their eyes met. The subordinate officer averted his gaze and Juan decided he'd go see what he was working on - after all, he had to make time for all of his staff.

Telek's cheeks flushed a slightly deeper blue as he realized Chief Engineer Ramos was heading in his direction. "Blast it! He probably thinks I need help or something... caught me staring like a lost school

child..." He thought to himself as he quickly resumed the routine duocyclic guidance grid calibration he was working on.

He had only been with the Columbia for a few short months and hadn't had time to get to know anyone, what with the hurried preparations for the new mission.

As the Chief approached he couldn't help but feel a little nervous. The engineering staff had been together for a while and were used to working together. Ramos had them dialed in to a high proficiency and they functioned more like a well-oiled machine than a group of individuals. He figured it wouldn't take very long for him to integrate into the mix and thus was content to concentrate on his duties and try to excel there. He was good at his job and quite frankly felt more at home around machinery than people. A fact he was sure wasn't lost in his astute superior officer.

As the Chief stepped up to him Telek stood up straight and said. "Hello sir. Sorry for the... delay. I'm almost finished here."

"Very good," said Ramos, looking the nervous young man over. He had read the dossier: intelligent, self-motivated and easily adaptable; exactly the type Ramos preferred. Telek struck him as the type that could become an excellent ready-response officer, the type that he could trust with emergency work - and in engineering, was there any other kind?

"We'll make it through this, Lieutenant," he said reassuringly. "The Romulans may not know how Starfleet vessels work, but we sure do - and the Columbia's ready for action. Carry on."

The man and Andorian shared a look as the Columbia rumbled and then shook violently from the Romulan's first attack; around them, lines burst and panels sparked. The two engineers moved off in the same direction to secure the damage, Ramos shouting orders as they did.

Vrang shouted the fire command and his vessel fired upon the now close Romulan. He smiled as the GrToth struck again, but the Constitution mock-up did not appear to be affected by his attack. The Klingon realized that the proximity of the combatants made his situation precarious, "Open some room between us and them."

The GrToth limped its way a little further from her enemy.

With her ship now charging its primary weapon, Korvona commanded her bridge, "Helm... I want a minimal aspect to both of those ships; Tactical, take the fight out of that Federation ship and let's see if we can jam their sensors; and Engineering, I want those shields shored up!"

Again the Connie's phasers fired and struck the Columbia, her shields absorbing the bulk of the attack.

"Pull us back a little and get that lock back. Engineering, shore up those shields! Stonn, if they were trying to pretend that they are a Federation ship, maybe they tried to emulate our systems signatures too.... see if you can determine their shield frequency."

Pushkin's fingers moved again across his console, "Aye, sir. Moving in reverse to give us distance." He gave a glance to the Navigator, making sure he was on top of his game with the nav sensors - he didn't want to back the ship into the Klingon vessel. Alex looked

back up to the fake Constitution as the distance grew between the two ships.

Rocked by the previous attack, and amazed at the effectiveness on the Romulan plasma weapon, Billy Anderson, the Chief Navigator, did his best to stay focused on his tasks. The skipper was giving orders all over the ship and the crew was efficiently filling them, keeping them together and fighting. He only hoped he could measure up.

Billy checked the sensors for the positions of all the ships relative to one another. Even though hundreds, or even thousands of kilometers separated them, the distance could quickly close to a dangerous nothing in a matter of seconds. It would not do for them to run into each other. He also looked for the fastest, most efficient means of putting the Columbia in the exact position the skipper wanted to protect the Klingons and launch an attack against the Romulans.

The D6 was a wired mess and each hit it took, no matter how slight, caused it to potentially lose any one of its many systems. Vrang shook his head as he saw his screens go blank. The old warship's sensor suite winked out depriving them of any means to attack or maneuver.

He slammed his fist against the arm of his chair, "GET THE SENSORS BACK ONLINE! NOW!"

His ship had effectively been taken out of the fight by nothing more than its old faulty wiring and the rattling that it had thus far taken since the day's conflicts began.

Korvona's face, on the other hand, beamed with a smile. The battle thus far was not going to badly, though her ship was taking heavy fire.

Her sensor operator spoke, "The Federation vessel has once again locked us up, sir!"

To her right came another voice, "Delegate Korvona, engineering is reporting damage to our propulsion system, though they have it contained for now."

She nodded. She would soon have her main weapon charged, but for now, "Hit the Klingon and once again maneuver for minimal aspect."

"Lieutenant," Ramos said to the young Andorian. "The Klingon ship's a sitting duck. Get on the horn with our team over there and help facilitate repairs ASAP. Notify me when the situation changes." He noticed the Andorian's antennae dipped slightly, and Ramos regretted using so many Terran euphemisms. He waited for acknowledgment before heading off to his next emergency. "The kid can handle it," he thought, and sometimes, trials by fire forged steel in young officers.

"Aye, aye sir." Telek said as Ramos walked off to see to the Columbia. He turned towards the communications panel to call the Gr'Toth trying to keep the surge of panic and adrenaline from overwhelming him.

It was like the away team was reading Ramos' mind, as suddenly an urgent call came from the Gr'Toth.

"Commander Ramos, this is Zantz! We have some serious issues here! We have a black out on the D6's sensor suite and I am looking at two redundancy panels, neither of which is responding. One appears to

have an Ionic-conversion coil and the other a Dekyon-imaging grid - totally incompatible - but my question is, do you think I can graft the imaging grid to the other to allow for sensor energization because that coil should be able to distribute power?" Zantz went quiet for a moment, waiting for a response, but then added, "We don't have much left to work with over here, sir. What do you think?"

The Columbia rumbled again as it came under fire from the Romulans.

Telek reached a hand out toward the panel when the call for Ramos came through. The worried sound of Zantz's voice galvanized Telek into action and his momentary apprehension faded away with the presentation of a problem to solve.

The Andorian engineer tapped the communication button and replied, "Lieutenant Zantz this is Lieutenant Telek, Commander Ramos is unable to assist you and he has placed me at your disposal."

Zantz heard Telek's voice and for a moment had trouble placing it. He had met the Andorian upon his arrival to the Columbia, but they had not yet spent a great deal of time working together. Telek continued, "I have never actually worked on a Klingon ship before but a guest speaker at an Academy symposium I attended once said that Klingon vessels contain many redundancies and most of their equipment is designed for splicing and cross grafting... I can't recall if the imaging grid was one of them but it would seem that with a little ingenuity you could make it work... Oh and watch out for energy fluctuation and potential blow back." Telek paused a moment wracking his brain for ideas and then one more came to mind. "If the cross grafting doesn't work you might try splicing into the ships transporter sensor array... I know it sounds dicey but the transporters should have enough range to give you a good look at the surrounding area... you might even be able to hook it up to targeting but I can't be sure without looking at it."

He began tapping on the engineering console. "I am sending you a schematic of what I am talking about... you will have to modify it a bit to fit the Gr'Toth specs. Hmm... is there any way you can send me the schematics of the Gr'Toth? I could work on it while you try cross grafting the imaging grid."

As Telek made his suggestions, Zantz began to smile - they were some great ideas! He had never thought about a bypass through the transporter sensors. They would certainly provide for close in scanning, and should be able to gain a lock for the weapons.

The tricorder in the lieutenant's hand began to whirl and its screen flash as the data feed from Telek came through, "Err... yea. I will transmit the schematics upon completion of your download Telek! And thanks!"

There was some background talk and then Zantz was back, "I will be back in touch with you shortly... going to attempt the graft. Zantz out."

Ramos had one ear in on Telek's conversation with Zantz, and was impressed. The young man thinks outside the box, Ramos mused. He'd keep his eye on this one... sometimes, some engineers just have the knack.

The sensor jamming was impressive. The Romulans had obviously planned this well. He struggled for a moment to adjust to it, and then, a

mathematical pattern coalesced in his mind. Applying the new pattern to the sensor loops quickly, Stonn began to see the interference clear.

Anderson checked his sensors, watching the movement of the Romulan ship, the Klingon ship and the Columbia. His superior grasp of 3D astrogation aided in his working through the problems inherent in the close-in battle. He began to work out and plot courses to keep their aspect low to the Romulans, protect the Klingon's flank, and expose as much of the enemy vessel as possible to their weapons.

Knowing his weapons were all charged and ready to go, Darkan decided to put an early nail in this coffin of a fight. Standing with a little apprehension, he took couple of steps and with a hand on the back of Pushkin's chair, he gave his commands. "Let's give them a bit of a distraction while the Klingons can shore up a bit. Just like before boys, Attack Pattern Gamma-5."

Pushkin sat on the edge of his chair, as he adjusted the controls, pushing the engines from having to go backwards to forwards again. "Aye, sir." He finally answered the command, his eyes glancing to the data coming from the Navigator.

The Columbia sped up and soared towards and past the Romulan vessel, firing as she did. Phasers and photons struck in tandem and the mock-up ship shook violently, its shields unable to absorb the entire force of the impact.

With the Federation ship now behind hers, Korvona ordered her ship about, "Bring us around... we'll give them a taste of the same!"

On his bridge Vrang could do nothing but stare at the comm panel. It would be at least another two minutes before the ship's sensors could be brought online, and even then they would not be at 100%. The Gr'Toth could not help the Columbia, or itself. The ship's captain could not even get an image of what was going on outside or to know when another attack was imminent.

Darkan knew he'd gotten the attention of the much larger and still likely more capable ship. "Stonn, how's it coming with their shield frequencies? Let them come to us, Alex, and when you're ready, Graham, lock on and continue to target their weapon systems."

With Korvona's order, the Constitution mock-up mirrored the Columbia's prior attack, performing a strafing run with its most deadly of weapons available. At point blank range, the Romulans released a plasma and phaser salvo upon the Federation light cruiser with a devastating effect. Its shields insufficient at protecting against such fire power; the energy overcame the threshold and struck the vessel.

Just as the mock up fired upon them, Darkan heard, "Brace for impact!"

Within the Columbia, small fires and explosions erupted everywhere while lights

flickered or failed in some areas. On both the upper and lower sides of the ship, two small hull breaches formed and in an instant six crewmen were lost to the vacuum of space before the secondary security systems could activate the breach force fields; on all ship levels crewmen were thrown to the deck and more deaths and injuries occurred. In total, the Columbia lost twenty-three of its fine crewman due to the overwhelming attack. What was worse, the ship's fire suppression system was damaged and on deck eight, in a secondary electrical power room, a conflagration began to burn uncontrollably - the fire finding its way through ducts and man-accesses gobbling up the oxygen as it went.

Townshend climbed back to her seat and began the task of clearing the board to reduce the noise that pervaded the bridge - the injured cried and moaned as all decks called in their status. The comm officer held her earpiece and then called out over the noise, "Captain all decks reporting in... but still only preliminary reports."

Outside the Columbia, the Romulans raced by and the range between the two ships grew. Korvona smiled at the viewscreen as she watched her plasma torpedo strike the Federation ship and knock it sideways from the location of space in which it had previously occupied. The Columbia was now at an angle to its past plane of travel by some twenty-four degrees and there were two micro-breaches visible - the ship's environment bleeding out.

Graham had a ringing in his head that he could not shake, but the orders given him moments earlier rang louder still. He had a terrible anger filling his being for what the Romulans had just done to his ship, his crewmates, and Jess? The tactical officer quickly glanced to her section of the bridge and watched as she crawled back into her chair. Enraged at the scene, Graham bent his attention back on his console and tapped a few commands hoping the ship would respond...



He smiled, she was hurt but the girl wasn't out of the fight yet! He brought the tactical sensors on target, waited for the reticule lock and then fired the phasers.

The Columbia's phasers flashed blue, striking the Connie as she raced past. The close range gave the weapons a more effective punch and the Romulan ship's shields were drastically reduced.

On board, Korvona held on tightly as her ship shook violently and panels burst and exploded around her.

And then... nothing.

The Connie was a patchwork of systems that were meant to deceive – not engage in a prolonged battle.

"We have no forward mobility!" cried her helmsman.

"Maybe standing wasn't such a good thing," thought Darkan as he got back to his feet, and then limped to the command chair. He was pleased to see Gramh continue to follow his orders and put a hurt on the Romulans, "That's more like it!"

Darkan watched the viewscreen, his face momentarily puzzled while his brain registered what he was seeing. The Romulan ship was struck cleanly with the phaser burst and then its nacelles flickered and went dark. Although its momentum carried it forward in the frictionless bounds of space, the Romulans made no new changes in course.

The captain thought it best to find out how his own ship was before he worried about what was going on with their enemy. "Engineering... this is the bridge. Juan, how bad is it?"

Ramos was sure he was seeing light. It was fuzzy around the edges, but he was now quite aware of the glaring light. He also heard the muffled sound of yelling and screaming, as if his ears were full of water - and then his senses returned to him. He lifted his head and looked around him, slowly pushing himself up from the deck with his arms. The engineering department was a chaotic scene of wounded crewmen being pulled from dangerous fires or being administered aid, to others running about tending their duties.

Suddenly there was a face in his; it was blue. It was the Andorian that he had been talking to... what? A minute ago? Or had he been out longer? Telek was talking to Ramos and holding him by the arms and steadying the chief engineer...

Ramos felt a rivulet of blood running down the side of head, but his mind was starting to clear. He looked to Telek and nodded, then strode to the middle of Engineering, barking **"REPORT!"**

A level five diagnostic reveals:

- Structural integrity is at 42% [9 left of 21 structure points]
- Shields at 50%
- Life support hit, but superficial
- Cargo hold atmospherics and doors/Replicator network have been damaged and are currently inoperable
- Fire suppression system currently inoperable
- Small hull breaches both dorsal and ventral; secondary security systems (breach force fields) active

- Fire burning on deck 8 in electrical room between forward and port phaser banks, and growing to surrounding areas.

Tam was also steadying himself after the plasma and phaser attack had knocked the Columbia aside. The doctor looked around to see his staff beginning to perform emergency preparations - the stuff they had been drilling the last month. Medics were preparing the surgery rooms; collecting the many drugs that would be needed very soon; and setting up computer files for still unnamed patients. Though the situation did not make Tam smile, the Trill still felt a bit of pride as he saw that even in the mass confusion, their instincts were in override.

It took what seemed only seconds before the sickbay doors opened and two crewmen struggled in with the burden of another crewman between them, badly burned and near death. At the same time, the comm panel began to crackle with the calls of multiple stations requesting emergency medical teams.

"Close!" Anderson thought to himself. He had been apprehensive about getting near to that plasma weapon and the hit really rang his bell. His mind was still reeling from the death and destruction dealt the Columbia.

"Did they just lose their engines?" queried Darkan aloud, more to himself than anyone else. "We're gonna need some help on this." To the bridge, he asked, "Do we still have communications?" There's obviously something wrong with the Klingons; Gramh, keep it quiet, but if their weapons are operational, see about linking their weapons to ours so they will fire upon the same target. I'm gonna try to talk to the Romulans, but Stonn get me those shield frequencies -- we need that ace up our sleeve if I can't talk our way out of this.

"Engineering, get those fires out and shore up the shields. Gramh, Lock On to the Romulan vessel, we need to be a credible threat. Helm, prepare for evasive maneuvers even without my command. Open hailing frequencies, Ms. Townshend. Adjust the video so it will tighten just on me. Here goes nothing..."

"Romulan vessel, this is Commander Steven Darkan of the USS Columbia. We've got you in our crosshairs and are prepared to destroy your vessel if you do not power down your weapons, drop your shields and surrender. The alternative is for us to continue to beat each other into oblivion. This is our only chance to survive this encounter. I don't know about you, but enough good people on both sides have been lost today."

Wiping the sweat from his brow, Anderson checked his sensors and plotted a course directly towards the Romulans, feeding it to the helm.

"I hope this works," he thought. "Course plotted and laid in, Skipper, when you are ready," he said, watching as the action unfolded on the viewscreen.

Pushkin, sitting beside him, held on tightly to his console, giving it a worried look - that was all he needed for it to go up again in his face. He made sure to keep the Columbia steady after the Plasma torpedo sent her for a little tumble. He gave a look to Anderson and began tapping the keys to follow the Captain's command. "Coming about, aye."

Stonn was working as quickly as he could; his long fingers dancing across the lighted console as he searched for the information the Captain required.

Moments ago, Stonn had almost lost the signal entirely as the Romulans' weapons disrupted systems throughout the ship. Fortunately, he was able to quickly shunt extra processing power to the sensors and retain the momentarily tenuous lock. He had heard the Captain's request for an update, but he was deep in concentration... and then, he had it. He turned and faced the Captain, his voice rising above the din.

Darkan's face appeared on Korvona's viewscreen and the Romulan stared at him, unable to decide on what to do with the sudden change of events. Her mind was still registering the calls from her operations officer regarding the loss of all propulsion.

"There is no reply from engineering, sir."

Korvona gave an unsteady nod as she formulated some kind of plan. She turned to the viewscreen and focused on the Earthling's words.

"...I don't know about you, but enough good people on both sides have been lost today."

He was right in one respect - too many of her people had perished thus far in this little escapade. She looked at the mortality report that she had been given moments before. The battle had claimed ten of her crew so far and all they were here to do was to help in a Klingon coup... not to die for the barbarians! All the Romulan Star Empire wanted to achieve in their part was a war between its enemies.

"Delegate Korvona, we are still getting no answer from engineering. Internal sensors are starting to detect heavy rads in all ship sections surrounding the warp core! Sir, I think we have a core breach!"

The Romulan operations officer was mostly right.

The mock-up Constitution had passed very close to the Columbia in its strafing run and Graham had taken full advantage of the range. His phaser fire had struck the vessel and a greater portion of its power had overcome the shields striking it in a critical area. The attack had caused the warp-cooling unit to buckle and break free from the couplings that held it to the deck. Once free, the many lines that flowed to and from the warp core burst and in milliseconds the bulkheads were immersed in highly radiated coolant.

The crewmen closest to the disaster were the lucky ones; their lives extinguished quickly. It was the others in the immediate surrounds that suffered most, as the radiation attacked their bodies causing their cells to burst and internal organs to fail. They died fast, but not fast enough to not be aware, their eyes and lungs filling with the lifeblood now freed from the veins that once contained it.

The warp core, now deprived of the cooling fluid, began to super heat. The power and heat burnt through all transfer conduits and shut down the ship's flow of power. Back-up systems immediately went online and transferred all systems to auxiliary power, but due to the faulty designs of the vessel, its many systems were slow to react, by only mere seconds.

And so, Korvona was unaware as her ship began its course towards immolation.

Tam and his team got busy as the wounded began to arrive.

The fourteen beds in the two intensive care areas of sickbay were setup for triage, while the severe patients were moved quickly to the exam and operating rooms. Surgeons and nurses worked on the wounded while lab technicians prescribed and administered drugs for the non-critical crewmen.

Tam floated around the triage for a short while and then immersed himself in surgery.

One of the departmental crewmen, Ensign Ario T'Plek, went from each of the worst cases and spoke with them - those that could - trying to soothe their pain and fears.

Ario took a deep breath- it had been a long day, and it was going to be even longer. He had spent the last hour working with the emergency teams, finding and bringing in wounded, working triage and administering emergency attention; his skills weren't prodigious, but he was at least the equal of a newly qualified nurse, meaning he was probably as good as at least some of the crew.

He cleared his mind and walked over to the next Crewman, quickly passing his scanner over, checking that his wounds weren't too serious, or that he had been seen to. Ario confirmed that this crewman had been attended to as much as possible; he placed his scanner down, and placed two fingers from each hand on the crewman's neck, placed just above the join with his collarbone.

Ario breathed out, then with his next breath in he felt the pain coursing through his body, wracking him; his Vulcan physiology abated some of the pain but it was barely effective. He knew it would pass eventually, but that didn't help now; his abilities deadened the pain receptors, cut off the pain recognition systems in the crewmember's brain.

A second later and it was all over, the pain was all but gone from Ario's mind, the crewman was slightly better off; it felt so inadequate, Ario knew that it would help, but inadequacy didn't listen to reason. As he picked up his scanner and crossed to the next patient he opened his mind, allowed the pain and anguish in the room to flow over him, shuddered and then reversed the feeling, sent out waves of calm. In a room this large, in a room this crowded, it would have little effect, but until he could sit and talk to the crew; until the bustle had died down and he could take the necessary time. The headache was already building; his control was already failing...

Ramos shook his aching head.

The *Columbia* had paid a terrible price for their victory. It was worth it, he thought, but the ship needed major repairs - and probably time at a shipyard. There would hopefully be time for that later, but now, he needed to get them all home in one piece.

He ordered fire suppression teams out immediately and sent a request to the bridge, asking for security personnel to help his people battle the blaze.

After that, he set up a rotation for immediate EVA repairs, and noted that he would address this again after the team's initial report... he knew it would take weeks.

Weapons would have the lowest priority unless the captain ordered otherwise; being able to shoot, but not being able to stay in one piece, didn't seem practical to Ramos.

He called Telek over and assigned him to repairing their most critical system, life-support, and told him to check back when he had completed them - perhaps at that point, he could move on to the weapons' repair.

Ramos would begin work on the operations systems - without computer control and automation, they were sitting ducks. He was looking forward to having Zantz back.

On the Columbia bridge, Stonn became aware that the Romulan's warp core was on the verge of exploding as the Romulan operations officer informed his commander that they had a radiation leak.

Pushkin continued to watch the Romulan mock-up hang there in front of them. He gave a glance to his console, making sure to keep the Columbia under control. He then looked in the direction of the XO, "Radiation leak?"

He looked back to the ship before looking to his controls, making sure the board was green and warp power was available.

"Captain," Stonn said from his station, "the Romulan vessel is heavily damaged. Its warp core is becoming rapidly unstable. We should move away from the vessel quickly and notify the Gr'Toth to do the same, if possible."

He stared back down into his sensor hood - he had seen something earlier, but he had been focused on the battle. "Sir," he said once more, "two Klingon warp signatures are en route. They appear to be B'Rel-class scouts and will arrive within the hour."

Darkan nodded. "Do it. Romulan ship, we have detected that your warp core is about to breach. Abandon ship and we will retrieve your escape pods." To the helm, "Follow the Klingon ship out and prepare to transfer as much power as you can to aft shields if we need it."

Pushkin dragged his attention away from the damaged Connie, looking back to the Captain. "At what speed, sir? Proceed on thrusters in case they eject escape pods?" he asked before turning back to his station. He cast a look to Anderson as he started to slowly turn the ship in the direction of the Klingon cruiser. Pushkin shifted in his chair, ready to hit the throttle.

"Trail behind the Klingon cruiser, keeping us between it and the Romulan ship. If escape pods are launched, we may need full impulse in a hurry." To Stonn, "Have all available personnel and cargo transporters on stand by."

"Aye, sir," came the reply from Stonn. The cargo transporters generally weren't used to transport life forms, but they could be used in an emergency with proper tuning. The tall Vulcan reasoned that the current situation qualified, though Romulans were notable in their resistance to capture.

Generally, Romulan commanders and crew perished with their vessel, often initiating destruct devices to avoid capture and intelligence gathering when the outcome of a battle was certain... then it hit him.

"Captain," he said with a tone that sounded uncharacteristically startled, "We should consider that the Romulans may destroy their vessel in an effort to not only hide their deception, but to eliminate all witnesses, as well. In fact, sir, I presume that this is their most likely course of action. I recommend that we move away at maximum speed and ensure that the Gr'Toth does the same. Their survival and testimony will be of utmost importance regarding the veracity of our claims.

"Their warp core will explode in any case, but if the Romulans choose to augment their impending destruction, one destroyed vessel could easily become three."

It was to soon.

She actually was still a bit shocked that it was this way at all. The battle had been going superbly, and for the most part, in her favor. She knew that the Federation vessel had *felt* the last plasma volley that they had delivered. One more and things may have been different.

The thought of death was also very clear in her mind and though she was willing to give her life for the empire, the fact that her life was at its end also had her in a bit of shock.

She heard Darkan's voice speaking to her along with reports given her by the operations officer aboard her ship. The Constitution was rapidly heading to its fiery destruction - a glorious one.

Korvona shook her head and looked up to the viewscreen, "Captain Darkan... you know that that is not possible. We are warriors. We live by a warrior's code. I applaud yours and your crew's skill - an unexpected turn of events." Her eyes seemed to stare off, then she straightened up, "All is set in motion. The presence of this ship and your own, only furthers our goals. The destruction of this ship only increases your guilt... I believe you Earth folk say, *'the smoking gun?'*"

In the Constitution's engine room, the few engineers that were still alive watched as the core superheated and became incandescent. The bulkheads around it were turned to slag in seconds as the FTL drive went critical. The ship's computer core, which still functioned and realized its impending doom, activated a series of networked high-intensity explosives throughout the Romulan vessel. Each were placed along primary seams and bulkheads of the ship to shred it to pieces.

"Soon there shall be pieces of a Federation vessel drifting through this sector of space and none will ever know that it was not a Starfleet ship. The Chak-ruth house is making its own move on Qo'nos and soon, if all goes as planned... the Federation and the Klingons will be in a heated war. Forgive me if I do not wish you luck..."

Korvona's screen went black.

The warp core shone like a star and then it burst its bonds. The energy contained was released on all spectrums first as x-rays and gamma rays, then ultra-violet and heat. In moments, the ventral hull was consumed and the upper saucer was blown free. While the warp core overloaded, the nuclear explosives that laced the ship also went off adding to the energy output and even at 50,000 km away, the Columbia and Gr'Toth felt the effects.

Shards of the Constitution mock-up were accelerated to light-speed in milliseconds and the two starships could not escape the hail of shrapnel that came their way. The Gr'Toth had it worse for they never knew it was coming and even though the Klingon vessel had its deflectors operational, the large fragments penetrated and tore into her already battered hull.

The Columbia fared better.

Pushkin had the ship's engines ready to accelerate if the Romulan vessel exploded. When the white flare burst out from where the Constitution mock-up had been, the helmsman tapped the console command to initiate warp speed. The Columbia's systems reacted in seconds, but in its incredible complexity, the ship's computer was still

man-made and was unable react faster than the nuclear reaction at 50,000 km distance.

Like the Gr'Toth, some of the larger fragments overcame the Columbia's deflectors and a length of nacelle skittered across the upper hull. It tore through sensor palettes and nicked through the upper rollbar. Second came the electro-magnetic pulse; the already overwhelmed defensive systems diverted most of the secondary effects, but not enough for the ship to have its power winked out.

The Columbia came crashing out of warp and its crewmen were thrown to the deck.

All went black.