

STAR TREK: The Next Generation

Incursion

By

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For all fans of Star Trek in all its incarnations!

“Live long and prosper”

A forest trail on the vacation planet of Risa. Charles Appleton, a Starfleet Captain, was thoroughly enjoying his first vacation in over five years. He had put his career before everything else, which included his personal life. His boss was very demanding but he enjoyed the work. Besides, he was privy to all sorts of sensitive information as an Admiral's aide and he rather enjoyed knowing something that most others did not. He was also happy with the security clearance accorded him as an Admiral's aide. It made him feel important and it also dulled the pain and disappointment somewhat that he could not fulfil his primary reason for joining Starfleet, the command of a Starship. He was one of those that had the enthusiasm for the job but did not have the capacity to make the hard decisions under pressure.

He worked long hours to please the Admiral, often being found working beyond midnight in his office. It was worth it though, as the Admiral was quick to praise those who pleased her. He had advanced quickly from Lieutenant Commander to Captain, mostly through his hard work and diligence but also a good word here and there by the Admiral.

This explained why he was alone on his vacation and was now alone as he rode his horse through the valley below the mountain that overlooked the hotel in which he was staying. He was enjoying the solitude, the time away from work. The horse was trotting through the woods that were almost as green as those were on Earth. The sun cast a golden light over the countryside and almost made it all the way down through the canopy of the forest to touch the grass. Almost, there it was early twilight even though it was mid afternoon. The hotel stood on grounds next to a deep sparkling lake in a valley between two mountains. The slopes of the mountains were carpeted in green and brown. The forests teemed with wildlife, from the smallest of mice to the largest of bears, from a bird that resembled a sparrow to one that resembled an eagle. It was warm, the sun shining down from a cloudless blue sky. A soft breeze soughed through the branches of the trees filling the air with a pine fragrance that was very refreshing and very relaxing. The soft foliage beneath the horse's hooves muffled the sound of their passage so much that he was able to hear the multitude of birdsong and the movement of animals in the undergrowth. It was perfect!

Suddenly several birds were startled into flight. The horse became worried at the sudden change of attitude of the forest through which he had carried people everyday for the last four years. Normally it was the same thing, up the mountains through the forest and back to the hotel. He had never known the forest to have this sense of trepidation. The human he carried today did not feel what he felt, was unaware of the danger.

"What is it boy?" Appleton asked, patting the horse's mane trying to calm him and encourage him to move on. He wanted to get to the summit and see the whole mountain range from the viewing platform there. It was supposed to be spectacular. The horse refused to move. It looked left and right into the trees as if searching for something. It was then that he noticed that the world around him was totally silent. All birdsong had ceased. No animals moved among the trees. He began to wonder what had spooked everything. It must be what the horse is worried about, he thought. After all animals have keener senses than people do. It must have been a predator of some kind he felt and thought that the day was far too nice to be spoiled by being hunted and becoming something else's lunch. He was only half-right. There was a predator in the forest but it was the worst kind. The kind that hunted for money.

After several minutes of silence the sounds of the forest had returned,

whatever was there appeared to have moved on and the horse was once again spurred on. It moved quickly in a hurry to leave the troubled area. As they approached a bend in the trail that opened out to a wonderful view of the entire valley back to the hotel and the lake, the horse reared up and threw Appleton off. An ultrasonic pulse that had caused it intense pain and forced it to throw its rider had hit it. Appleton, surprised by the sudden stopping of the horse, was thrown over the horse's head and tumbled head over heels and over the cliff. His right hand, trailing behind him as he fell, found something solid and gripped it firmly. His left hand, broken, hung useless at his side. The horse had raced off down the trail back toward the hotel leaving Appleton hanging by the roots of a tree that had burst through the side of the cliff, dangling above the valley floor.

His unseen assailant walked slowly over to the cliff edge and looked down. He was surprised to see Appleton a few feet below clinging for dear life the roots of a tree. Masked in shadow he was unseen by Appleton below as he approached. He did not speak. He looked at Appleton's hand clinging to the roots above the cliff with his body pointed toward the valley floor a thousand feet below. He raised his foot to kick him off.

As Appleton began to pull himself up to the rim of the cliff he felt a heavy boot stamp down on his hand breaking his fingers. The pain was so excruciating from his broken arm that the sudden burst of extra pain as his attacker brought his foot down on his fingers that he almost passed out. He did not feel the hypospray inject him. His scream of agony drowned out its telltale hiss. As he lost consciousness he lost his grip on the tree roots and fell. His attacker watched as he tumbled and rolled down the mountain side to the valley colliding with trees and rocks that stood immovable and broke more bones as he bounced off them. The shadowy figure made no sound, not even a grunt of satisfaction. He just turned away from the edge of the cliff, began walking back towards the trail and vanished in a transporter beam.

He did not have to wait around, Appleton was out of the way, and the plan could proceed. He did not care if Appleton survived the fall or not. He had not been seen by anyone on the planet and no one but his employer and himself knew he had been there. He had completed his mission and left, having signalled its successful completion, that was the extent of his part of the plan.

It was 3 am on Earth when the message was received. A figure moved through the grounds of Starfleet Headquarters stealthily, always keeping within the protective shroud of the shadows. He gains easy access to the communications building. His psi-talents came in handy for this. He entered the mind of the security guard on duty in the main foyer and ordered him not to log his entry. He accessed the long-range communications array without detection and checks the out-going messages. A suitably long message is selected from those being routed to Starbase 673. A coded message is piggybacked onto the original and sent out. The intruder expects no answer and receives none. After it was successfully delivered all traces of the message were deleted from the computer's memory banks and the communications logs. Leaving as stealthily as he had entered, and smiling at the guard as he passed him on the way out, the intruder once again enveloped in shadow, smiles a hidden but menacing smile.

The transmitted message was intercepted and copied by a freighter orbiting near Starbase 673, while it waited for docking clearance to approach the Starbase. The hidden message was extracted and passed on to its intended recipient.

“Helm, standard orbital approach!”

“Standard orbital approach, aye sir!”

The USS Venturer, NX-242587, approached the planet Santara 4 and settled into orbit around the lifeless planet. The planet deep inside Federation territory had been selected for this test after an exhaustive testing procedure lasting over a year and involving a myriad of planets that were possible test sites. Santara 4 was selected because either it had never sustained life or its existence had been wiped clean from its surface aeons before.

Her dark drab Starfleet grey colour and few running lights made her a difficult ship to see. Added to this was her diminutive appearance. A Defiant-class ship, sister to that stationed at Deep Space Nine, she was a tough little ship which was massively overpowered for one of its size. It differed from the USS Defiant in one major way. The Venturer did not possess a cloaking device. She did however contain a newly designed warp engine that could be used inside the atmosphere of a planetary body without destroying the biosphere of the planet. She was the first ship to be fitted with this type of engine and was in the process of testing it. That was also why Santara 4 was chosen. It was too deep into Federation space for observation platforms to see and it was well away from any travel or trade routes so no one would witness the test.

“Okay people! Here we go! Helm take us to the initial point and stand-by!”

“Aye sir!”

The helm was engaged and the ship was dropped into the atmosphere of the planet. All was ready for the test. They waited tensely while the helm officer positioned them at their initial point.

“Altitude is now 200,000 meters above the planets surface, sir. We are in position!”

“Very well. Full scan, all sensors. Transfer data to recorder buoy, synchronise systems and launch when ready!”

“Scan complete, sir! Recorder buoy away and holding station at designated co-ordinates!”

Pushing the intercom the captain prepared to address the crew.

“Attention all hands, this is the captain! This is probably going to be a bumpy ride everyone so make sure everything is firmly secured. Stand-by for main engine test!

“Helm, set heading 007 mark 12!”

“Course set Captain!”

He leaned forward in the command chair in anticipation of a successful test.

“Engage!”

“Warp engines coming on-line. Warp field forming. No change in atmospheric readings, sir! We are now at Warp 1 and accelerating!”

“Check recorder buoys scanners! Any change?”

Eager to receive his answer to confirm a successful test the Captain left the command chair and walked over to the Science station where he could see the raw data for himself. The Science officer reported his findings as the captain arrived beside him.

“Atmospheric conditions remain unchanged sir! We did it!”

“Helm, reverse your course and enter standard orb....”

An explosion behind the bridge while the Captain was in mid sentence rocked the ship. All primary control systems were frozen, their control circuits having been severed by the explosion. The helm officer was unable to alter the Venturer’s course.

It made little difference, as a second explosion that actually severed the bridge module from the rest of the ship suddenly rocked the bridge. Every crewmember stationed on the bridge died instantly as the bridge tore itself from its housing at the top of the diminutive starship's saucer section. The wall area behind the Captain's chair that had housed the turbolift disappeared and before the computer erected the emergency forcefields two crewmen and all the bridge module's air supply had been vented to space. The emergency forcefields having been erected contained the remaining crewmember's bodies inside the bridge module.

The bridge module with no means of propulsion began to slow and was immediately overtaken by the remainder of the ship, which was still travelling at Warp speed and accelerating directly toward the Santaran sun.

The Chief Engineer, upon regaining consciousness from the knock on the head received when the first explosion rocked the ship quickly saw what had happened and began to re-route the control systems to Engineering. They were still accelerating and were now caught in the gravity well of the star, being inexorably pulled towards it and certain doom. Lacking the power to break free from the gravitational pull of the star the Chief Engineer hoped to alter the *Venturer's* course sufficiently to enter orbit around the sun or maybe slingshot around and break free on the opposite side. He dumped as much power as he could into the RCS thruster systems and prayed. Painfully slowly the ship began to alter course, but would it be altered enough to prevent them being burnt to a crisp?

The recorder buoy launched to record the mission should anything unforeseen occur was fulfilling its mission. It recorded the *Venturer's* plunge towards the sun. As its sensors recorded the scene in its entirety it noticed that the ship was ever so slowly changing course. It streaked around the far side of the sun but it did not reappear on the opposite side as the Chief Engineer had hoped and prayed for. The *Venturer* was gone. The recorder buoy continued to record the slowly spinning bridge module until its memory was full and could hold no more information.

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Cruising through the infinite void of space at Warp 5, the Galaxy-class USS *Enterprise*, NCC-1701-D, was as majestic as a champion surfer on the perfect wave. Emotions were running high throughout the mighty vessel and the ship's Betazoid counsellor did not need her empathic abilities to know how the crew were feeling or why. Deanna Troi smiled as she sat in the command chair on the main bridge effectively in command of the Federation's flagship. Ever since she had passed the Commander's exam she had wanted more and more bridge duty. Both Captain Picard and Commander Riker smiled knowingly at her when she asked for extra bridge duty because it was an all-too-familiar request. They had both made the same requests of their Captains on their way up the command chain.

"Were you ever that enthusiastic about getting bridge duty, sir?", asked Riker as he and Picard entered the turbolift. Captain Picard smiled warmly, "Probably, but then commanding the *Enterprise* is an experience to be cherished Number One. She is, after all, not just the best ship in the fleet but she is also the Federation flagship and the number of people having the honourable distinction of commanding her will be few and far between!".

"Yes sir, I know what you mean." He turned to the computer panel in the turbolift and waited for the doors to close. "Deck 10!", he ordered and turned to face

Picard as he spoke.

"I must admit, sir, that after six months of endless border patrol at the Demilitarised Zone, I'm looking forward to returning to Earth for some well deserved leave and plenty of R+R!"

"Yes, indeed!", agreed Picard with a smile, " Even a two week break at home will do wonders for the mind as well the body. And I believe that the crew are already having animated discussions about where they will spend their leave".

"With their families and friends for the most part", Riker answered,

"However, several of our new Ensigns have signed up for refresher courses at the Academy!"

"Very commendable! I believe that I myself will enjoy a short tour of the Academy. That is, after I finish with Admiral Carmichael! I'm really looking forward to seeing him again. We have so much to catch up on!"

The turbolift halted its decent at Deck 10 and the doors slid apart. Riker waited until Picard exited the lift and then followed behind him. The two men headed in the direction of 10-Forward. As they drew closer they heard quite a din coming from it. They were both worried that the already taxed nerves of the crew had finally snapped and a riot was in progress. They were just returning from border patrol between the Cardassian and Bajoran systems, searching for Maquis resistance cells, interloping Cardassian vessels, and ships trying to run the blockade to the DMZ. It would be very easy for frayed nerves, already as taut as bow strings, to be snapped at the slightest word which would then erupt into a full blown riot. It was exactly this they were expecting as they raced the last few yards to the doors of 10-Forward which parted at their approach.

Instead of the flying fists, glasses and bodies they had been expecting, they encountered a scene that neither would have wagered on. Guinan, the Enterprise's El Aurian bartender/hostess, was treating the off duty personnel to free drinks and a limbo dancing contest to celebrate their R+R. The apprehension of entering the equivalent of a war zone was quickly lost when they saw the smiles, heard the laughter and witnessed the sight of Guinan, with her hat still perched atop her head, shuffling under the limbo bar, which the two Ensigns who were acting as support poles, generously raised from its intended height to one which would permit her hat to transit beneath it with ease.

The roar of the applause that erupted for her was like a volley of cannon fire as she emerged on the far side of the bar and straightened to an upright stance. Even Picard and Riker could not refrain from joining in the applause. The joy that was prevalent in the room was infectious and the two men were quickly immersed in it, even though they were still somewhat dumbfounded at the sight before them. After a few bows Guinan spotted them and glided over to them. That was something they had never been able to explain but just accepted about her. She was never seen to walk anywhere. She always appeared to be gliding across the surface on which she stood like someone skating on ice.

Riker failed to notice the trace of heat that rose in her cheeks for an instant at being caught behaving in such a childish manner before it disappeared. Picard, who had known her far longer than his First Officer, did not miss it.

"Very impressive!", Riker said through his smile and gently clapped her on the back as he ambled over to the bar leaving Guinan and Picard to talk.

The Enterprise dropped from Warp in a blinding flash of light and colour and entered the Sol system at full impulse. Commander Troi pushed the intercom button on the armrest of the command chair.

“Bridge to Captain Picard, we have just entered the Terran solar system and have dropped to impulse power. Estimated time of arrival at Spacedock is 20 minutes!”.

“Very well, thank you Counsellor! I’m on my way. Picard out”.

A brief bout of sadness washed over her as Picard and Riker exited the turbolift a few minutes later because she knew that this would be her last chance to command the Enterprise, however brief it may have been, at least for a few weeks. She moved one seat to her left to her regular position at the Captain’s left side while Commander Riker occupied the seat on Picard’s right. Picard remained standing for a moment and beheld the familiar, but nonetheless, breathtaking sight of the Earth hanging in the bejewelled blanket of the night skies in the centre of the viewscreen.

No matter how many times they left it, every time, without fail, the return to Earth filled them all with the feeling of joy only felt when after having been away for some time one returns **home**.

As Picard eased himself into his command chair Worf, the burly Klingon Tactical Officer and Chief of Security, who was also looking forward to visiting his parents and his son Alexander on Earth, announced from his position above and behind the Captain that Spacedock was hailing them. Picard motioned for the overhead speakers and a moment later the message was heard.

“Enterprise, this is Spacedock. You have been cleared for priority approach! Please stand-by to surrender control to us!”.

Picard surveyed the bridge, his people at their duty stations and he knew without having to be told that all was in readiness for docking procedure. The standard lighting was suddenly replaced by blue background lighting as the Spacedock approach controller took remote control of the Enterprise’s systems and began to guide her in towards her assigned berth.

“Spacedock, this is Enterprise, you have control!”

“Affirmative Enterprise, we have control. Enjoy the ride and welcome home!”

“Enterprise confirms. Thank you!”

Welcome home. How good that simple statement felt and not a single face did not have a smile etched upon it. Actually, there was one! Worf, who rarely smiled except in battle, was doing his best approximation of a smile.

The Enterprise was guided slowly into her berth and looked oddly out of place parked there at rest connected via umbilicus instead of flying free and unhindered through the depths of space. Nevertheless they were home!

Captain Jean Luc Picard had just completed his tour of the Academy and was now scouring the grounds for his old friend Boothby. He had finally tracked him down tending to a flowerbed when his communicator chirped. With a heavy sigh he gave it a tap.

“Picard here!”, he barked, irritated at being disturbed while on leave and wanting that person to know it. He was about to say Not Now! when a stern but worried voice answered him, chilling the blood in his veins.

“Captain, this is Admiral Nechayev. I apologise for disturbing your leave but I need to speak with you immediately!”

“Of course Admiral, I’ll be right there!”

He cast a long glance at the busy hunched form of Boothby and sighed again. He so wanted to speak to his old friend but that was not possible at the moment. Perhaps later.

6

The transporter effect halted and Picard materialised into a very crowded office. Crowded not with people but with computer workstations, PADDs and about a decade’s worth of paperwork.

“It’s actually worse than it looks, Captain!” Vice Admiral Alynna Nechayev laughed one of her extremely rare laughs when she saw the stunned look on his face and Picard instinctively knew that something was seriously wrong. “Please sit down and we’ll begin! I expect you’re wondering what could be so important that it necessitates interrupting your leave. Before you deny it Captain, let me remind you that I know you far too well for that!”

She turned to the replicator that was hidden behind a stack of printouts. “Tea! Earl Grey! Hot! Twice!”, she ordered and smiled as she turned back to face him handing him his cup of tea. Picard smiled back but it felt false on his face. The Admiral was right. Picard was worried. Indeed, what could be so important to interrupt the leave that was assigned to them by none other than Admiral Nechayev, head of Starfleet Security, herself? Before he could ask the office door opened and a Vulcan Starfleet Officer, whose tunic pips showed him to be of Captain rank, entered the office bearing more PADDs.

“Ah, good! Captain Picard I would like to introduce my aide Captain Silvan.”

“Live long and prosper, Captain Picard!”, he said and gave the traditional gesture of the raised hand with parted fingers as he placed the new PADDs on the Admiral’s desk and pulled up a chair. Returning the gesture Picard responded with the equally traditional response.

“Peace and long life, Captain Silvan! Forgive me Admiral, but I thought that Captain Appleton was currently your aide?”

“He was until three weeks ago”, she snorted in disgust before composing herself and continuing. “I ordered Captain Appleton to take the few weeks vacation that he had accumulated and fully deserved. Two days after he arrived on Risa, while he was out on a horse ride, his horse apparently became spooked over something and threw him off. He was thrown over the cliff and fell a thousand feet to the valley floor he was riding beside and has been in a coma ever since. The doctors are baffled. They differ on whether or not the fall was sufficient to induce this type of coma. Captain Silvan has kindly agreed to fill in until such time as Captain Appleton is pronounced fit to return to his duties.”

“Kindness was not an issue. I am pleased to be of service!”

“Now Captain! Back to the matter at hand! How long would it take to recall your senior staff?”

“It depends on where they went after disembarking. An hour perhaps two, may I ask why?”

She sat upright in her chair and pushed a button on her desk with activated a device that would thwart the efforts of any listening device that might be trying to eavesdrop

on their conversation.

“What I’m about to tell you is extremely classified. You may brief your senior staff about this but the rest of your crew are on a need to know basis!”

Picard bolted from his slightly relaxed position in the chair to sit ramrod straight as if he had been caught falling asleep in class. This must be very serious indeed, he told himself.

“Twelve hours ago the starship *Venturer*, under the command of Captain Mike J. Trask was testing a newly designed prototype warp engine. Nothing wholly classifiable in the development of a new engine except for the fact that the *Venturer*’s warp drive, if successful, would be capable of being engaged while the ship was *inside* the atmosphere of a planet!”

“What?!” Picard asked with incredulity written across his face. Surely they were not conceiving of such a thing, were they? The Admiral was having a joke at his expense wasn’t she? The stern look on her face discouraged any further doubt. He sat through the rest of the briefing dumbfounded.

7

The viewscreen in the *Enterprise*’s main conference lounge flickered into life and displayed the data recorded by the bridge flight recorder of the *USS Venturer*.

“Altitude is now 200,000 meters above the planets surface, sir. We are in position!”

“Very well. Full scan, all sensors. Transfer data to recorder buoy, synchronise systems and launch when ready!”

“Scan complete, sir! Recorder buoy away and holding station at designated co-ordinates!”

Pushing the intercom the captain prepared to address the crew.

“Attention all hands, this is the captain! This is probably going to be a bumpy ride everyone so make sure everything is firmly secured. Stand-by for main engine test!

“Helm, set heading 007 mark 12!”

“Course set Captain!”

He leaned forward in the command chair in anticipation of a successful test.

“Engage!”

“Warp engines coming on-line. Warp field forming. No change in atmospheric readings, sir! We are now at Warp 1 and accelerating!”

“Check recorder buoys scanners! Any change?”

Eager to receive his answer to confirm a successful test the Captain left the command chair and walked over to the Science station where he could see the raw data for himself. The Science officer reported his findings as the captain arrived beside him.

“Atmospheric conditions remain unchanged sir! We did it!”

“Helm, reverse your course and enter standard orb....”

An explosion behind the bridge while the Captain was in mid sentence rocked the ship. All primary control systems were frozen, their control circuits having been severed by the explosion. The helm officer was unable to alter the *Venturer*’s course. It made little difference, as a second explosion that actually severed the bridge module from the rest of the ship suddenly rocked the bridge. Every crewmember stationed on the bridge died instantly as the bridge tore itself from its housing at the top of the diminutive starship’s saucer section. The wall area behind the Captain’s chair that had housed the turbolift disappeared and before the computer erected the emergency

forcefields two crewmen and all the bridge module's air supply had been vented to space. The emergency forcefields having been erected contained the remaining crewmember's bodies inside the bridge module.

The bridge module with no means of propulsion began to slow and was immediately overtaken by the remainder of the ship, which was still travelling at Warp speed and accelerating directly toward the Santaran sun.

The recorder then focussed on the images being displayed on the main viewscreen. It shows an image of a rapidly, but slowing, spinning starfield. This was swiftly replaced by the image of the remainder of the *Venturer* streak by. Then the starfield came into view again. The *Venturer*. The starfield. The *Venturer*. This scene is repeated as the bridge spins in space. The images fade and the screen turns blank again.

8

Even though it was the second time that Picard had seen this footage, its impact was no less diminished. Troi gasped as the tape finished. Dr. Crusher merely blinked, stunned into disbelief. Data was the only there that had no feelings about what he had just seen but he did, however, understand its effect on his crewmates and remained respectfully silent. Riker and LaForge both had known people who were on the *Venturer* and had closed their eyes in silent prayer for their fallen comrades. Worf's countenance was one of troubled questioning. His mind searched for possible causes of what he had seen on the viewscreen. It came up with only one answer. The stresses of atmospheric warp flight were too much for the little starship. Geordi was the one who voiced what they all thought.

"It looked as if the bridge module was torn off by the stresses of atmospheric warp flight!"

"Yes, that is exactly what we were supposed to think!", Picard said as he popped another data cartridge into the reader and gave his access code. The data on it was classified.

"This is the data gathered by the recorder buoy the *Venturer* launched prior to engaging warp engines. You can clearly see the *Venturer* inside the atmosphere. Now watch closely!", he said as the footage began to play.

The viewscreen now showed the dance of colour and light as the *Venturer* accelerated into warp. The sensor details flashed by so fast at the bottom of the screen that Data alone could read it. The sensors then turned from the planet to follow the *Venturer* after completing surface scans to make sure that the planet was entirely unchanged. It was. But that was cold comfort knowing that the bridge crew of the *Venturer* would never know that they had succeeded. As it turned to follow the *Venturer* it picked up the bridge module separating from the rest of the ship and floating free in space as the rest of the ship streaked on a collision course towards the Santaran sun. They collectively held their breaths as the *Venturer* raced towards the sun only to veer away at the last possible second. They reflexively exhaled as one as they saw the *Venturer* begin to slingshot around the sun. They were all stunned when it did not emerge on the opposite side of the sun as expected. Sadness stole over them again as they imagined the *Venturer* crash into the sun at warp speed and burn to a cinder. Picard stopped the tape and addressed his crew.

"The *Venturer* was presumed to have impacted on the far side of the sun at warp and destroyed leaving no trace of its fate. However, when this data was analysed

it revealed some startling information. Computer, replay from time index 325!”

The screen flashed backwards to the requested time index and began to play.

“Hold! Magnify grid 12 A and enhance!” He sat back and awaited their reactions.

A small square was highlighted and dragged to full frame. Even before the enhancement of the image was complete Worf stood up glared at the screen and spat out a hated name.

“ROMULANS!”

The screen was filled with the image of a partially cloaked Romulan vessel. A variation on the D’Deridex class Warbird, it had the same basic double hull shape with a beak-like forward section but it was considerably smaller than any previously encountered. The normal D’Deridex class of vessels towered above the Enterprise at nearly four times her size. This one however seemed to be on a par with the Enterprise if not slightly smaller.

“It would appear that the Romulans have improved their cloaking technology somewhat!”, admitted Data.

“And managed to slip by our early warning installations in the Neutral Zone”, added Riker, angry not just at the destruction of a Federation starship by the Romulans but also at the fact that they were able to strike deep into the heart of Federation without detection.

Worf was looking at the image of the Romulan vessel on the screen with the same feelings as Commander Riker. A snarl began to pull at his lips as his mind showed him how much suffering, hardship, treachery, devastation, destruction and death the Romulans had wrought over the years. He still loathed the fact that they had stolen his parents from him when he was a child with an attack on the Khitomer outpost. More recently they had been instrumental in assisting the traitorous Duras family in turning brother against brother in a bloody civil war, something from which the Empire still bore scars.

Picard sat upright in his chair and tugged his tunic down, internally chastising himself for slouching in the first place. He refused to allow the fact that the Venturer’s destruction was not an accident but an act of murder and technically an act of war to cause him to slouch. His tone took on a note of optimism as he spoke.

“The telemetry the recorder shows is that the Venturer was not destroyed but rather was slingshot around the sun and into ‘time-warp’! It was only recently discovered that the new engine design reduced the Venturer’s shield strength by twenty-five per cent which explains why the Romulans only needed two shots to separate the bridge module from the rest of the ship.”

At the very mention of ‘time-warp’ the face of every assembled senior staff member took on the Oh-My-God look. On seeing this Picard had to bite off a smile as the look infected him with a bout of hilarity. However, the situation was a dire one and there was no time for joviality.

“We have been ordered to retrace their steps and see if the Venturer or any of her crew survived the Romulan attack and above all, repair any contamination of the time-line that may have occurred or prevent any that might still occur, without contaminating it ourselves during our search. We are currently off-loading all nonessential personnel and their families and will be operating on a skeleton crew to be decided by a volunteer basis. This information is need-to-know and I do not need to add that while we’re searching for the Venturer, Starfleet Intelligence will also be searching for the traitor!” Every head in the room snapped around to look directly at Picard. “The Romulans must have been informed about the Venturer’s new engine

and why her test stage was rushed through. Someone leaked to the Romulans information that enabled them to intercept the *Venturer* at Santara 4. Had this test proved successful the *Venturer* would have been used to ferry equipment and supplies in to the Federation colony on New Dublin in the Neutral Zone. It would have prevented further loss of lives, equipment and ships.”

The colony of New Dublin, whose last census numbered its inhabitants at just over one million, had been a contentious issue over the last four months. It was an unclaimed planet close to the Federation border but was actually inside the Neutral Zone. The Romulans had been blockading the planet, claiming that it was a clandestine Federation outpost that was involved in long range espionage of Romulan space. They further claimed that the planet would be used as a staging area for Federation forces if hostilities were renewed between the Federation and the Romulan Star Empire. The allegations were totally without basis in fact. It was only a colony set up for those who had been forced to quit their homes when the Federation-Cardassian Peace Treaty redrew the boundaries between their respective areas of space. These were people who could not, for one reason or another, be a part of the Maquis. However, many were sympathetic to the plight of the Maquis and offered their members a safe haven in which to relax in safety whenever they left the DMZ.

The whole issue over the colony developed when a cloaked Romulan ship, returning to Romulus after an exercise in the Neutral Zone, detected several ships heading to the Federation colony. The captain of the vessel decided to alter course to investigate. They discovered that the ships were of Federation design and were heavily armed. They did not know that they were Maquis vessels and not Federation ships. When they reported their findings the Romulan leadership discovered the truth about the vessels but decided to use them in their argument with the Federation Council to remove the colony on New Dublin. The Federation of course pleaded their innocence but the Romulans became intransigent. They would not settle for anything less than the total evacuation of the New Dublin colony and its total dismantling or destruction. They offered their assistance with the latter.

While their representatives held discussions with the Federation Council, Romulan vessels were turning back any ship that approached the New Dublin colony. The colony was living on its reserves of food stores, as the terraforming had only recently been completed and no crops had yet been able to be harvested. The Romulans were also covertly pulling ships from their regular patrol stations and sending them to the blockade of New Dublin in preparation for its destruction. They did not consider the small fleet of six Federation starships as anything to be concerned about. With their cloaking technology the fleet of ten Romulan D'Deridex class Warbird were able to slip by the Federation ships with ease to harry the cargo transports that were heading to New Dublin and forced them to turn back. Several had tried to run the blockade but were no match for the powerful Romulan ships. One was destroyed, two disabled and five suffered moderate damage. Even though they had violated Federation space and coerced Federation registered vessels they had not fired or threatened in any way any of the six starships that were there to escort the transports to the colony. It was like the Battle for the North Atlantic all over again. This was a period in Earth's past during a period of their Second World War where ships from the Allied Navies, including the United States of America, Great Britain and Canada, were detailed to escort convoys of merchant vessels, containing badly needed supplies, equipment and men across the North Atlantic Ocean. They were constantly harried and attacked by German submarines hunting in packs. They had too few ships with which to protect the convoys adequately and men were sunk. It

was the same again now. The convoys consisted of approximately one hundred transport ships at a time. They were stretched out of several light years of space as the older vessels, whose engines were badly in need of repair or replacement, were unable to maintain pace with their newer sisters.

Had the *Venturer's* test flight proved a success then the Defiant-class fleet built to defend against a feared Borg invasion could have been fitted with the new engines in a matter of days. This would have negated the need for the convoys as they could just drop from warp inside the planet's atmosphere, beam down the supplies and warp out before the Romulans could react to their presence. The introduction of this new engine would have dealt their plans for New Dublin a serious blow, possibly a fatal one.

"They tried to make it look like an accident so that they could capture the *Venturer* and gain its and Starfleet's latest secrets! Their pattern of fire attempted to fool us into thinking the stresses of the atmospheric warp flight were too severe and would have set the development back years if not indefinitely."

"They almost succeeded," agreed La Forge, "If it hadn't been for the recorder buoy we would not have suspected anything untoward and the designers would have been forced to re-examine every component and redesign the engine."

"Mr. Data, Mr. La Forge, can you begin to plot a course using the *Venturer's* telemetry to enable the *Enterprise* to travel to the same point in time as the *Venturer*? Time is of the essence gentlemen. We need to arrive at the precise time/space co-ordinates as the *Venturer* and we need to do so quickly. The *Venturer's* crew compliment was 150, 10 of whom we know perished in the bridge module. Someone had to be still alive to alter the *Venturer's* course away from the sun. It's up to us to rescue them and the *Venturer* if possible. If there's nothing else, Dismissed! "

Everyone rose and left the conference room returning to their duty stations. Dr. Crusher, Data and La Forge headed for the turbolift. Crusher exited at Sickbay to prepare her nurses in anticipation of the worst and she wanted them all to be ready for anything. Data and Geordi continued down to Engineering.

9

Precisely 32 hours after his meeting with Admiral Nechayev, Ensign Jiro at Conn informed Captain Picard that the *Enterprise* had arrived in the Santaran system and had entered orbit around Santara 4.

Commander Riker had already gone down to Engineering to see what progress Geordi and Data had made with their time-warp equations. Picard, however, was required to remain on the bridge just in case the Romulans were still loitering about. The medical vessels Saint Bernard and Saint Christopher had been ordered out of the Santaran system by Starfleet Command utilising a false distress signal claiming an outbreak of Rigelian fever on Starbase 125 as soon as the Romulan involvement was discovered, leaving the Santaran system once again uninhabited. They had departed the area begrudgingly, requesting to be allowed to continue the search for the *Venturer* or for any of her escape pods that may have been used. There were none of course, but Starfleet knew well that two lightly armed hospital ships would have absolutely no chance against a Romulan warship. It was still undetermined whether the Romulan vessel had thought the *Venturer* destroyed and departed or if she was still hiding under cloak to see if the Federation had better success in finding their lost ship.

Picard began to pace the bridge. He did not enjoy just sitting and waiting

while their comrades were possibly suffering untold hardship, perhaps even dying while they waited for rescue. Even though Lieutenant Richmond was qualified to man the Ops console, Picard would have preferred Data to be at his station. How little did Commander Maddox know how indispensable Data was when he tried to have him disassembled to produce hundreds, possibly thousands, of Soong-type androids, Picard mused as he watched Lt. Richmond operate Data's station. Indeed it was really at times like this when Data's speed of hand and calculation and his wealth of knowledge, which was often infuriating, were truly needed that Picard himself realised just how valuable, irreplaceable and indispensable Data actually was to him. But he needed Data to remain where he was for now, working on the time re-entry calculations with Geordi in Engineering, knowing that to disturb him could spell disaster. If the calculations were not precise there was the possibility that would fail to enter time-warp and crash into the sun or they could drop from time-warp and end up any time in the Santaran past or even in the wrong place as well as the wrong time.

10

Commander William T. Riker strode into Engineering completely unlike his usual self-confident self. His normal cavalier, flamboyant attitude toward life was now masked by the same worries that plagued his Captain 35 decks above him.

"How's it coming?" he asked, hoping he had optimism in his voice and not the pessimism that he actually felt at the outcome of this mission. La Forge looked up from the computer simulation they were running.

"We're almost ready! We're just waiting on the results of this simulation. We'll know more in about twenty seconds!"

Riker walked around the desk and looked at the screen. It showed a small graphic representation of the Enterprise on a course around the Santaran sun with telemetry data scrolling across the bottom of the display. At least we won't fry up on the sun, Riker thought. Data looked up from the rows and columns of numbers scrolling past at blurring speeds. He looked up, blinked once, and tilted his head slightly as if listening for some faint sound barely heard, and reported his findings.

"The figures from the Venturer's recorder-buoy are difficult to recreate exactly but, as the people of the 20th century were fond of saying 'We will be in the ballpark'!"

Riker and La Forge grinned despite themselves at Data's use of the colloquialism.

"That's where the Venturer ended up?"

"It would be more correct to say that that was *when* the Venturer ended up!"

11

Picard sat staring at the display screen in his ready-room, a stern look was on his face. Admiral Nechayev looked, at from the other end of the secure communications link, as though she had been sucker punched, which was a first for Picard, as he had rarely, if ever, seen her display such emotion, indeed any emotion. Admiral Nechayev had hoped that the Venturer had gone forward in time not back. She also hoped that if the Venturer had been transported to the future then it was possible that she could be in a position to bring back vital information and possibly some technical advances.

"I see," she mumbled. She tried to sound upbeat about it but failed.

"Very well, Captain. The President has given his approval for the mission to proceed given the Romulan involvement. Proceed at your discretion. Bon chance, Jean-Luc!"

“Merci beaucoup!” Picard replied to the vacant screen. As he returned to his command chair and gave the order that would send the Enterprise hurtling through time he unknowingly quoted another, former, Enterprise Captain, James T. Kirk.

“May fortune favour the foolish!”

12

Data swivelled his chair around to face Picard.

“Sir, it may interest you to know that this *exact* type of rescue mission has never been attempted before...”

“I am aware of that fact Data,” Picard interrupted. Data ploughed on regardless.

“Yes, sir. However, while searching archival records, I did find some rather intriguing precedents involving a predecessor of yours. Captain James T. Kirk time travelled to Earth’s past on several occasions. The first was while in command of the Enterprise-1701 and again in a captured Klingon Bird of Prey. Captain Spock’s calculations have proved most useful and have formed the basis of our time re-entry program. In both instances Kirk travelled to the latter part of the 20th century and returned with no apparent disruptions to the timeline. I can therefore conclude that our mission should also cause no disruption in the timeline, depending on the condition of the Venturer and her crew, of course.” He began to turn back to his console but halted and turned back to Picard adding with an inclined head, “I could, of course, be mistaken.”

The bridge then erupted with laughter and Picard himself could not help but join in, even though Data was quite serious in his admission of possible error. This only served to make the statement all the funnier. Data’s grasp of the concept of humour is getting better all the time, Picard thought as he almost laughed himself to tears. Data saw this as another time that he wished he had installed the emotion chip given to him by his father and creator Dr. Noonien Soong before his death. The chip which was subsequently stolen by Data’s evil brother and eventually re-acquired and currently residing in a sealed case in Data’s lab. The only one not laughing, apart from Data, was Worf. The Klingon looked upon his comrades as they were consumed by their fit of laughter with incomprehension. He felt that Data’s admission of possible error was a courageous and honourable one. He did not understand why his crewmates found it amusing.

When the laughter had subsided Picard straightened up in his seat and tugged down his tunic that had risen during his bout of laughter. He scanned the bridge and noted with satisfaction that all was in readiness.

“Helm, follow Mr. Data’s course and speed,” he raised his right hand as he started to give the order, as he concluded it his hand came down in a chopping motion, index finger extended.

“Engage!”

13

The great starship Enterprise raced out of orbit around Santara 4 and aimed itself directly at the Santaran sun as she surrounded herself with light and colour as she exploded into warp. She was following the course devised by Lieutenant Commander Data, which varied only slightly from that

taken by the Venturer. Due to the mass difference between the Venturer and the Enterprise, the course followed had been altered slightly to allow the Enterprise to follow the Venturer's trajectory back through time.

At the precise moment calculated for their turn the Enterprise's RCS thrusters fired. The Enterprise turned away from the Santaran sun by the merest fraction of a degree, but it was enough. She was whipped by her velocity around the sun at a blinding speed and in a kaleidoscope of colour the Enterprise slipped into time warp and vanished.

14

Data was the only one who remained conscious when the Enterprise entered time-warp. The last thing Picard ordered him to do before he passed out was to find a suitable observation point from which to determine *when* they were and if there was any trace of the Venturer, without being discovered themselves. Even though they were travelling to the past, the Prime Directive remained in force, if not more strongly so for precisely that reason. Anything that was done by them in the past could have untold repercussions for the future, their present.

Data assumed helm control and piloted the Enterprise to a stop behind one of Santara 4's moons, which just happened to be the direction in which they were headed after exiting time-warp. There were no other vessels in the immediate area and a quick scan out to twenty light years revealed no signs of any vessels whatsoever. This presented him with a dilemma. Where was the Venturer? A second more intensive scan detected strong remnants of the Venturer's plasma trail, not much but enough to follow and to determine it's heading and extrapolate a course to its destination. A third scan revealed evidence of their own plasma trail which was the same as the Venturer's. This was interesting in that the Venturer, being of less mass and volume than the Enterprise, should have left a smaller plasma trail. Curious, perhaps it is just a quirk of time-warp, he thought. Data had checked the results twice before the rest of the crew regained consciousness. It was not something the Captain would be happy to hear. The Venturer was on a direct course toward Earth!

15

"It would seem plausible that the Venturer's surviving crew have no idea what century they are in. Indeed they may not be aware that they have travelled through time at all. To their point of view they just rounded the Santaran sun and emerged safely on the other side. They might assume that their communications equipment is faulty or damaged when they receive no answer from their attempts to contact Starfleet Command. Finding no trace of the bridge module they would merely have assumed that it had been utterly destroyed and would have taken the most logical course of action, that being to return to Spacedock for repairs and to report the incident," Data explained to Picard.

"They wouldn't be aware of the predicament they're in. Nor the profound effect that their arrival at Earth would have on the future. Sorry, the effect they will have on the future!" agreed Picard.

"It is now conceivable that the security, indeed the very formation of the Federation itself could be in jeopardy," Data said noting the gravity attached to his words by his crewmates.

"The Venturer's plasma trail leads directly towards where the Spacedock facility will be in another 400 years, but the trail is unusually strong," added Geordi after checking Data's scan results himself at the android's request. "I can only assume that their trail was somehow magnified by the time warp due to the damage sustained from the Romulan attack. Because of this I can't even guess at how long ago the Venturer was here. There does not appear to be any debris in the area so it's safe to assume that the damage to the Venturer was restricted to the bridge module."

"What's our status Data?" asked Riker.

"The Enterprise is currently orbiting the larger of Santara 4's moons and have suffered no damage!"

"Several crew members were taken to Sickbay to be treated for minor injuries, cuts and bruises mostly, nothing serious," added Crusher, who had come up to the bridge to check on their conditions.

"Very well, full scan of the entire system. I want to be sure before we break orbit that the Venturer did not crash land on a planet near here, or is waiting in orbit somewhere for a rescue, or simply broke up. I also to know if there is any trace of debris or escape pods that would give us clue as to her fate!"

Two hours later Data informed Picard that the scan of the system revealed no trace of the

Venturer whatsoever. There had been no trace of any space faring ships of any kind save for the Venturer's plasma trail, which led unerringly towards Earth. Geordi had managed to determine that either the Venturer's engines had been damaged slightly or the stress on the hull was too great at higher speeds, and that she was only travelling at Warp 4. With no other course of action left open to him Picard ordered Ensign Jiro to follow the Venturer's plasma trail at maximum warp, pushing the engines beyond their limits. Perhaps they could catch her before she reached Earth and so prevent any damage to the timeline. Not since their first encounter with Q during their mission to Farpoint station had the Enterprise's engines been taxed so hard. This was clear evidence to the crew how dangerous a situation their Captain felt they were in.

16

The Enterprise slowed to impulse speed from a silent explosion of light on entering the Sol system. After taking considerable caution not to have been detected by the vast amount of terrestrial based telescopes that scoured the heavens for signs of extraterrestrial intelligence, the SETI project it was named, and also the Hubble space telescope the Enterprise continued its hunt for the Venturer. They were being extremely wary of the Hubble's huge lens, if it was to catch sight of the Enterprise then the future of the Federation was at risk hundreds of years before it would be formed. The Venturer had also slowed on entering Sol. Suddenly Data called out as his console received new data from the sensors tracking the plasma trail. They had detected a course change.

"Captain, the Venturer has changed course! The plasma trail has now diverted towards Mercury!"

"Helm, lay in a pursuit course, full impulse!" snapped Riker. He then leaned in close to Picard and said in a hushed voice, "At least we know someone made it this far. They must have realised something was wrong and changed course, probably the lack of starships at their patrol stations; or no challenge from the Mars defence perimeter; or if their sensors were still working no Spacedock and no planetary satellite defence systems."

"Possibly, Number One. But where did they go from here?"

Ten minutes later he had his answer. But it was not the one he would have expected to receive. When he learned the answer Picard was shocked and stunned.

17

Arriving in orbit on the dark side of Mercury Data's scans picked up debris floating near to the magnetic pole of the planet.

"They must have been attempting to use the magnetic field as a cloaking device to hide from the scanning devices of this time," La Forge thought out loud. "It seems that the Venturer sustained more damage than we previously thought but managed to get this far before she broke up completely. According to these readings Captain this didn't happen too long ago, possibly within the last hour or so!"

Ten minutes later they had transported the debris field aboard and had begun their analysis of it. Picard was anxious for news of their discovery.

"We're analysing the debris now Captain to see if we can explain what happened but with the magnetic and plasma residue and the fact there is so little of the Venturer left to analyse, its slow going! But first indications are of a plasma leak and possibly a core explosion!"

"Very well, keep me informed Mr. LaForge!"

It took them almost 30 minutes to determine that the debris they had scattered across the floor of Cargo-bay 2 was what remained of the Venturer's rear weapons array. This posed a very worrying question for LaForge. He became suddenly convinced that he was missing something in the debris that would reveal the answers. But what?

It took several more orbits before the puzzle began to become clear. As the Enterprise rounded the planet again her sensors located the final resting-place of the USS Venturer. She had crashed near Mercury's equator. The magnetic and plasma residue that was evident on the weapons array was also present on the main body of the ship and prevented the sensors from penetrating the ship. An away team, clothed in environment suits, was transported down. They were taking no chances on beam-in. It was very likely that the Venturer was breached and that her vital, life-giving atmosphere had been vented when she crashed. As it turned out it had. The away team searched as much of the ship as they could; often finding corridors blocked and turboshafts crushed together like so many empty beer and

soda cans, but found no survivors. Power on the *Venturer* was non-existent, everything was smashed. The computers were inoperative, even using the portable generators they had brought with them they could not be coaxed back into operation. As a result neither the ship's log nor the computer records could be uploaded to the *Enterprise*, the *Venturer's* entire computer core would have to be removed if any information were to be retrieved. As the power grid exploded on impact with the surface of Mercury the warp core had been shut down. Emergency power was not operating either. Had anyone survived the crash in any of the sections that had remained intact the loss of power, and subsequently the environment controls and life support, meant a slow agonising death through suffocation and a massive drop in temperature to well below freezing.

The word quickly spread around the *Enterprise's* limited crew of the fate of the *Venturer*. Deanna Troi felt the depth of the grief that now prevailed over the crew but did not need to tell Picard of this. He was all too aware of their grief, it was plainly visible on their faces. He too shared their grief, Captain Trask had been a good friend and comrade.

Geordi, grieving for his friends on the *Venturer* but trying not to let it interfere with his work, almost missed a vital clue to the *Venturer's* ultimate cause of destruction. He had been examining the plasma residue that coated the debris found in orbit and the *Venturer* herself and because of his fatigue, combined with the almost overpowering sense of loss, he had gone with his first assumption obtained by the evidence at hand. This was totally out of character for him as he usually checked and then double-checked, sometimes triple-checked, his work before he presented his answers to the Captain. Due to this he almost ignored the nagging question at the back of his mind: why was there such a large amount of residual plasma energy on everything? His first assumption was that a plasma leak from the engine core had combined with the plasma conduits that fed power to the rear weapons array and that the explosion that had separated the array from the ship had simply expanded the affected area to include the entire outer hull. Unable to quiet the nagging voice he ran another series of tests on the debris from the weapons array and was shocked at the results.

"LaForge to Riker, Commander can you come down to Engineering please? I've found something interesting that I think you should see!"

Two minutes later Riker strode into Engineering eager for Geordi's news. He was shown the results of the scans of the debris as Geordi spoke.

"At first I almost failed to recognise that were actually two almost identical but separate plasma energy signatures on the debris!"

"I take it the first came from the *Venturer's* systems, but what about the second one? Where did it come from?", asked Riker. When he got the answer it came with such force that he was literally knocked off his feet. This discovery, because they were so long in finding it, risked the destruction of the *Enterprise* herself.

18

Jean-Luc Picard was trying to rest in his ready-room, reading some Shakespearean works when his comm badge chirped. Although not a totally unwelcome disturbance he did so hate intrusions upon his Shakespeare. With a heavy sigh he answered the call.

"Riker here sir! Sorry for disturbing you, but Geordi has found something you should see!"

When Picard had left the bridge for Engineering Deanna Troi was once again delighting in the fact that she was commanding the *Enterprise* again. Eager to again be sitting in the command chair she had jumped at the opportunity. Unseen by Troi a knowing smile had crossed Picard's lips as he handed over command to her and walked up the incline to the turbolift. Moments later he entered Engineering where he found Riker and LaForge gathered around a console and looking intently at whatever it displayed.

"What have you found Mr. LaForge?"

"Something I should have seen a lot sooner Captain", he said with a hint of embarrassment, "When I examined this section of the *Venturer's* weapons array debris I found an unusually high concentration of plasma energy. At first I thought leakage from a damaged warp nacelle was responsible, but on closer inspection I found that there is actually two distinct but almost identical plasma energy traces. I eventually managed to differentiate between the two traces. One is definitely of Federation origin, coming from the power relays of the weapons array; the other was altered to make it look like it was a Federation signature!"

"Let me guess", Riker put in, "the Romulans!" Geordi just nodded his confirmation.

"But why go to all the trouble of altering their weapons to appear of Federation origin?", Picard asked.

“Perhaps it was because they thought that we’d think the Venturer was destroyed on the Santaran sun and that they’d then be able to capture the Venturer and bring her back to Romulus for study and to acquire the prototype engine for themselves”, suggested Geordi. “And when the Venturer did not emerge from the far side of the sun they would have surmised that she was actually destroyed. I think it would be very unlikely that they discovered that the Venturer was actually thrown into time-warp.”

“But what if they did discover that little piece of information and followed the Venturer back here?”, asked Picard. They all grew pale as the answer to his question arose in their minds. The Romulans had a chance to destroy the Federation before it even existed. They could prevent First Contact by simply destroying the Earth before its scientists achieved interstellar travel. They would be in a position to do what the Borg could not, defeat Starfleet!

At precisely that moment the deck shuddered below them and threw them all off their feet as the Red Alert klaxons began their high-pitched wailing and Deanna Troi’s voice announced Battle Stations over the intercom system.

19

“The Romulans are firing again!”, Worf shouted to be heard over the din on the bridge. Deanna realised what Worf had been trying to say to her as she was almost wrenched from the command chair by the force of the disrupter blasts as they repeatedly rocked the ship violently.

“Return fire!”, she screamed.

Worf, having already loaded a full spread of ten torpedoes stabbed the launch button and watched with satisfaction as all of them found their marks.

“Direct hit on their forward shields. They have sustained minor damage to their secondary hull. They have engaged their cloaking device!”

“Worf, find them! Don’t let them sneak up on us again! Damage report!”

Worf did not like the way Deanna’s orders had sounded. He did not feel he was negligent in his duty. Starfleet had no way of knowing that the Romulans had also travelled to the past so could he be expected to. He would have to explain that to her later when he got the chance. If he got the chance, the Enterprise had taken quite a pummelling from the Romulan’s first volley before her shields automatically came up.

“Shield strength down to 52%!”, Data announced from ops. “There are hull breaches on Decks 8, 10 and 14! Emergency forcefields are in place and holding! The Saucer Separation servos have been damaged and the interlocks have been fused shut. The saucer has been sealed off from the rest of the ship. We cannot separate. Main power is fluctuating!”

My God, Deanna thought, could it have been any worse? How the hell do we fight a Romulan warship, as badly damaged as we are? Knowing that they could not allow the Earth orbiting telescope or its planet-bound sisters to scan them or the Romulans Deanna took the only course of action left available to her. She ran.

“Helm, set a course out of the solar system keeping Mercury behind us, best possible speed! Engage!”

“Aye, sir! Course laid in and engaged but we only have 2/3 impulse power!”

Damn!

“Evasive action at your discretion helm. All hands brace for evasive manoeuvring! Go!”

The Enterprise turned painfully slowly, compared to her normal swift gliding through space, as her damaged and sluggish systems struggled to keep up with the demands made on them from the bridge and the intermittent fire from the pursuing Romulans. They were using the hit-and-run tactics perfected by the Klingons. They were moving into an attack position, uncloaking, firing, cloaking and moving to another firing position. The Enterprise was taking quite a beating while they received very little in return. The odd photon torpedo would find its mark and several phaser hits had resulted in slight damage to nonessential areas and had caused several injuries and only two deaths.

20

As the Enterprise struggled gamely onwards in an attempt to leave Sol to protect the timeline she entered the asteroid field. This caused the Romulans to curtail their effective hit-and-run attacks.

The crew of the Enterprise used the respite to assess their situation. The internal sensors were not functioning. Main power was still fluctuating. Several fires had broken out, two on decks where the

fire suppression systems had failed but, thankfully, there was no crew on either of those decks. They had lost communications with all decks below 12. The turbolifts were off-line due to failure of their artificial gravity units and closure of the turbosh shafts. There were three hull breaches, currently contained safely behind emergency forcefields. There were 22 known dead and 54 injured. Those figures would have been much much worse if the full crew was aboard thought Crusher as she moved from deck to deck with her mobile triage. The medical teams had to crawl through Jeffries tubes and scale turbosh shafts to get between decks to treat the injured.

Thank God for small mercies and Admiral Nechayev's paranoid streak, thought Troi as she grimly assessed the damage. She turned to Worf and asked his opinion of the origin and type of the next Romulan attack, just as Captain Picard would, she thought, if he had he been here. With the internal sensors off-line they had no way to know that he lay unconscious on the deck in Engineering.

"They will most likely use a large asteroid to hide behind while they decloak, emerge from behind it, launch one maybe two salvos and recloak before we can return fire."

"How many asteroids are immediately close to us large enough to hide them?"

A quick scan revealed three; two ahead of them with one astern on their port side.

"Okay, target phasers to the target on the forward port section, forward torpedoes on the starboard target and aft torpedoes to the rear target. Fire as you soon as you get a lock on them!"

"Yes, Commander!", he gave her a small grin, impressed by her tactical solution to the problem of not knowing from where the next attack would come. Given the fact that her primary role was that of the ship's counsellor she had created a sound tactical response.

21

Thirty-five decks below the commotion and tension on the bridge main Engineering was in total disarray. A junior technician, also trained in basic first aid, was treating the unconscious form of Captain Picard while Riker and LaForge laboured furiously to stabilise the wildly fluctuating power systems. With three EPS power relays burnt out and two others intermittently failing it was an extremely arduous task. They had to somehow keep the shields up, then boost their strength back up and also maintain power to the life-support, propulsion and weapons systems. They had just started to get on top of the problem when the final Romulan attack began.

By this time a medical team had also arrived down from Sickbay and was treating the wounded. Engineering was getting very crowded all of a sudden. The Captain was hurt badly but not seriously. He had been knocked unconscious when the deck lurched under his feet during the Romulan attack and he was thrown head first into the display console.

22

Worf's instincts were telling him that the 'cowardly' Romulans would more than likely attack from the rear and concentrated on the rear tactical display more than the others, he also had extra torpedoes ready there, just in case his warrior's instincts were proven to be correct. It just so happened that they were!

A triumphant grin spread across his face as he informed Troi of the Romulan approach from the rear. An instant later several of the workstations that ringed the bridge exploded as the bridge was rocked by a direct hit. Ensign Gardiner, the duty science officer, was killed instantly when his console exploded in a shower of sparks and electrical discharge. The force of the explosion threw his body over the rail and down onto the deck beside Troi's feet.

The Romulans had tried to destroy the Enterprise in the same manner that they had dispatched the Venturer: separating the bridge module from the rest of the saucer. Fortunately, the Galaxy-class vessel, being larger than her Defiant-class sister, was able to withstand such an attack. It didn't hurt that her crew had been aware of this type of attack and had increased the Structural Integrity Field to take the strain.

The instant the targeting systems locked onto the Romulan vessel Worf punched the launch controls and two salvos of ten photon torpedoes streaked from the Enterprise's aft photon launcher towards the Romulan ship.

The first three missed as their guidance systems were damaged. The rest of the first volley slammed into the Romulans' shields. The first three torpedoes of the second volley collapsed their shield grid and destroyed their shield generators. Of the remaining seven two failed to detonate, damaged in the exchange of fire, but the last five did not miss and exploded on target.

Being smaller than the regular D'Deridex-class of Warbird, which were larger than Enterprise, this version was almost the same size as her and could not withstand the impact of five photons directly onto the hull of the ship. With its bridge section immolated and a hull breach in its Engineering section, there was no one left alive qualified to deal with the energy build-up in the engine core. No one alive had the codes to eject the engine core, nor, indeed, did the majority of those still alive, after the torpedo impacts, know of their impending deaths as the computer systems had sustained extensive damage and did not reveal the energy build-up. When their ship exploded around them not one Romulan knew what had happened or remained alive to wonder about it.

The Romulan ship suffered a catastrophic engine failure and exploded silently in the centre of the asteroid belt. The light from the blast was blinding on the Enterprise's main viewscreen to all but Data. The subsequent blast wave obliterated the nearest of the asteroids and ejected their remains at accelerated speeds out of their orbits and out of the belt, and also towards the Enterprise trying desperately to escape.

23

On the Enterprise bridge Data had recognised the energy build-up in the Romulan engine core for the breach that it was and advised Deanna of vacating the area. Deanna heeding his advice ordered the ship moved clear of the asteroid field as quickly as possible. It was at exactly this moment that their luck ran out.

As they emerged from the asteroid belt the main power grid finally defeated Riker and LaForge's attempts to keep it on-line and failed. They were now moving by inertia, with some assistance from the RCS thrusters, and they had very little time to reach minimum safe distance from the accelerating engine overload on the Romulan ship. They almost made it.

24

As the main power grid failed, life support on Decks 35 to 37 also failed causing everyone to evacuate. The injured were hauled out with abandon, the medics preferring the worsening of their injuries. To them a badly injured but treatable patient was preferable to a dead patient. Picard who had come around seconds before life support failed managed to struggle and stagger to the nearest safe area on Deck 34. Three times he almost passed out but he continued on and finally exited the turboshaft on Deck 34 where he subsequently did pass out, this time from exhaustion brought on by the blow to the head and the loss of blood. The medics informed Riker that the Captain would have one vicious headache when he came to but otherwise he'd be alright.

Geordi, nursing a broken arm, managed to crawl and drag himself up through the Jeffries tubes to the Engineering Support Labs on Deck 22. Arriving there he found that the Auxiliary Control team were on the ball and having realised the danger had already changed their units over to handle the primary Engineering controls.

With main power still off-line and their shields collapsed Troi ordered all available power transferred to the RCS thrusters to give them a chance of evading the approaching wall of fast moving rock.

Quickly checking the sensor information of the rapidly approaching asteroid debris Geordi noted that they would not be able to outrun it. Having no time to ask for permission from the bridge he took primary control of the helm systems and dumped all remaining power into the RCS thrusters as ordered. The Enterprise moved but not in the direction that anyone expected.

Everyone was expecting the ship to head straight out in an attempt to out run the rocks but they realised too late that they would be overtaken and pounded if they continued in the direction they were headed. Fortunately Geordi was one step ahead. He punched the controls and the RCS thrusters received all the power that was available. The thruster output increased and the Enterprise moved: vertically!

Still moving with considerable forward momentum the Enterprise rose upwards like a helicopter lifting off on the vectored exhaust of the RCS engines. Several of the smaller, faster moving fragments of the destroyed asteroids impacted on the warp nacelle support pylons and the lower three decks of the Engineering hull. They did not impact with sufficient force to cause any further damage. Casualties from the asteroid impact were few and only reported ringing in their ears.

With the ship out of immediate danger the crew let out its collectively held breath with an

audible hiss. After a short period of intense repairs on the major damage the crew were given a little time to relax before they tackled the minor damage.

25

Twelve hours later Captain Jean-Luc Picard stepped back onto the bridge and assumed command of the Enterprise. He had just been released from Sickbay only after Dr. Crusher had finally consented to let him leave after his concussion, despite his many protests of feeling fine.

The last of the minor repairs were just being completed as Picard took his seat. Main power had been restored and was holding steady with only the occasional, minor fluctuations. The hull breaches however were a different matter altogether. They required the facilities of a Starbase to effect the repairs.

Riker gratefully vacated the command chair and moved to his usual seat at the captain's right hand. For the last fourteen hours the Enterprise crew had been removing all traces of the Romulan ship from the asteroid belt and had completed the recovery of the *Venturer* from the surface of Mercury for study back at Starfleet Security, if they made it back at all. Everyone was still worried that the hull breaches would become enlarged when they re-entered time-warp. Data was unable to provide definitive answers. His only recommendation was to return to Santara and re-enter time-warp there to return to their own time. To return from their current location inside Sol would create numerous problems, foremost among which was that Data and Geordi did not have exact figures for the time-re-entry calculations so they were unable to predict the exact time to which they would return. Also, just to suddenly appear at high warp speed from behind the sun and within Sol could lead to a crash with some unsuspecting vessel. This would have the effect of alerting the Romulan agents on Earth to their return, possibly the same ones who had leaked the information about the *Venturer*. This would also give the Romulans an excuse to raise all kinds of hell with the Federation Council as intentional time travel was deemed far too dangerous and hence illegal. It was considered treason to blatantly violate that law.

26

Cruising at warp 5 so as not to tax the engines too much or place unnecessary strain on the damaged sections, the Enterprise arrived back at Santara 4 some fifty hours later. After extensive computer simulations it was determined that they had a 50/50 chance of surviving the re-entry process. In half of the simulations the Enterprise successfully returned to the 24th century with the hull breaches expanding by only a few metres. However, in the other half of the simulations the stresses proved to be too great and the ship tore herself apart from the inside with the debris being scattered over countless time periods.

Accepting the risks and wanting more than anything to return home, even if it was only to die, the crew prepared themselves for time travel as Data entered the appropriate inputs and the helm engaged.

27

The 24th century.

From a point in space 200,000 kilometres from the Santaran sun a blinding flash of light erupts in the darkness of the void and for an instant brings to the perpetual ebony an inkling of what daylight is like. The light turns and spirals into a kaleidoscope of colour.

In an eerily silent explosion of light and colour and blackness the shape of the Federation starship Enterprise bursts free of the maelstrom and gracefully slows to orbit the fourth planet. After a few moments its darkened hull comes to a complete stop. The hull breach on Deck 13 had expanded to include Shuttlebay 3 which was now open to space. Fortunately Shuttlebay 3 had been closed for periodic maintenance and repairs when they initially returned to Earth, and was luckily free of personnel. Only one shuttlecraft, a damaged one, had been present in the bay at the time. When the bulkhead gave out the shuttle was blown out into the void.

28

“Status please, Mr. Data!”

“One moment Captain,” replied Data as he plied his console so fast that his hands were but a blur of movement. Several agonising seconds later the navigational computer responded to his inquiry. With a tilt of his head he swivelled around to face Picard.

“According to the positions of the constellations we appear to have returned to the 24th Century!”

Rapturous applause and a loud cheer went up all over the bridge but Picard could not allow himself that luxury until he was certain.

“Data, check with the nearest Federation timebase beacon and confirm the time and date!”

At this announcement and the undertone of concern in their Captain’s voice, the cheering quickly subsided into deathly silence. Fear that they might not be home had quelled the fires of excitement that had only moments ago been as bright as novae. After receiving the response from the beacon Data turned to Picard and announced, “Captain, we have returned to the 24th Century in the Santaran star system precisely 36 hours, 27 minutes and 15 seconds after our initial departure!”

The collectively held breaths of the entire bridge crew were released at the same instant in an audible sigh. Sounding so much like the hiss of the turbolift doors opening, several crewmembers actually turned in that direction to see who was about to step onto the bridge.

Picard rose from his seat having ordered the Enterprise to be taken home and walked to his ready-room leaving Riker in command on the bridge. He now had to inform Starfleet Command that the *Venturer* had been destroyed. Riker did not envy his Captain that duty. He ordered the helm officer to best possible speed. She had already the command input as Riker spoke. They all wanted to get home as quickly as possible to get this mission over with and to get back to enjoying their shore leave.

29

As the stern visage of Vice-Admiral Alynna Nechayev appeared over the secured frequency on the viewscreen on his desk monitor, he took a deep breath trying to organise his thoughts on how to begin his report. She waited the few seconds it took him with uncommon patience. She saw that Picard was somewhat flustered and did not want to place him under any more pressure. At length he began.

“Admiral, I regret to inform you that the *Venturer* was lost with all hands. We removed all evidence of her presence and our own in that time-scape. We have the wreckage of the *Venturer* in our cargo bays and are en route back to Earth as we speak.”

A touch of sadness touched her stoic face for an instant but as Picard continued her normal inquisitive, feral some would say, look returned to her face as though it had never gone.

“We also had some company but I will not report on it until we reach Earth and I can brief you fully in person Admiral. The Enterprise has sustained moderate damage and we expect to reach Spacedock early tomorrow afternoon!”

Admiral Nechayev’s keen mind quickly picked up on Picard’s mention of ‘company’.

“Do I take it Captain that your ‘company’ was the as we discussed before your departure?”

“The very same, Admiral. However, they ran into a little engine trouble and could not accompany us after that!”, he said in response to the concerned look that the Admiral had adopted. She had been unaware that the Romulans had travelled back after the *Venturer* and was eager for Picard’s news.

Almost unable to wait until the Enterprise returned to Spacedock for a full briefing from Picard, Nechayev diverted herself by returning to the task she had been engaged with since the Enterprise had left, the search for the Romulan spy, the one who had leaked the information about the *Venturer* that had resulted in its destruction with all hands. The traitor! She had had a list of about 200 people starting out who had been involved in the project or had information about it. The list even included the ship yard staff that had built her, of which there were 120 men and women. They were discounted as the Admiral had handpicked each and every one of them for the project and was sure of their loyalty. This left her with 80 people, including those who were responsible for the development of the engine, the planning of the test run and her own staff. This was why she was conducting the search herself. She was not fully assured of her own staff which was a frightening thought to her. But she swore to herself that she would not have another incident like the one with Ro Laren and the Maquis. Keeping her staff at arms length was one way to ensure that they would not get too close to her and thereby prevent her getting hurt, but it distanced her from them and they did not appreciate that they were not totally trusted by their own boss.

She had discounted the Venturer's crew immediately as she had also handpicked them after reviewing every aspect, in great detail, of their personnel records. The one person she did trust was her aide Captain Silvan. His Vulcan telepathic skills had been of enormous assistance since his arrival to take over from Captain Appleton after his 'accident'.

30

As soon as the Enterprise had achieved a hard dock at her assigned berth within the Spacedock facility, Picard, Data and LaForge accompanied Admiral Nechayev and Captain Silvan to view the contents of Cargo Bay 1. He scarcely needed to tell her what her suspicious nature already knew: the debris on the deck before her had come from a Romulan vessel. There was not much left but what there was had the unmistakable green hue of all Romulan vessels.

Picard handed her a PADD with a clearer image of the vessel than had been visible on the Venturer's recorder buoy's scanners. "It's about half the size of the D'Deridex-class Warbird and considerably larger than any scout ship previously encountered!"

"So this is their elusive War Eagle! Finally!", she said triumphantly.

"War Eagle? Then I take it Starfleet Intelligence already know of this vessel?"

"We've known about them for the past 3 months now! Yes them, there are currently two prototypes undergoing testing!" She looked at the wreckage before her and kicked the closest piece with her left foot. "Well, there's only one now!" she said with a wry smile. "Our operative on Romulus has been most efficient in getting us information on these craft. However, we are only aware of its designation and crew compliment at present." She threw a sly look in Picard's direction, already anticipating his next question. With another smile she said "750. Its classed as an intelligence gatherer and light strike combination. We were also informed that some modifications in their cloaking technology were being tested!"

"It would appear that the new modifications were successful", said Data.

"Yes, a little too successful!", snapped Silvan. This was the first time since coming aboard that he had spoken and almost everyone had forgotten he was there. The all started when he spoke up. Nechayev continued, "This one's sister ship is no longer at the orbital facility at Romulus where it was undergoing testing! We do not know its current whereabouts!"

She gave Picard an admiring glance as she took note of his thoughtful expression. He's thinking the same thing I am: the security of the Federation is at stake with these craft on the loose. Bravo Captain!, she thought. Captain Silvan smiled an unseen smile as he read both their thoughts.

Picard turned to his people. "Geordi, I want you and Data to begin reviewing EVERY piece of sensor information gathered from the time we left Spacedock until our return today. I want to know about every discrepancy, no matter how small or trivial it may seem!"

"We'll get right on it Captain. But its going to take some time to complete!", he bowed his head slightly to Nechayev as he passed by her on his way out of the bay heading for Engineering. It's not as if we're going anywhere, is it? Picard asked himself. He was loath to just sit in Spacedock and wait while that new Romulan ship could be anywhere in the quadrant, and no one would know about it until it was too late.

31

Down in Main Engineering, where life support and power had been restored, Data sat at a terminal, with Geordi standing behind looking over his shoulder, in Geordi's office.

"Computer. Display all sensor logs for the past five days and scan for anomalous readings!", Data ordered.

"There are 256 anomalous readings in specified time index."

"Display the relevant portions of the sensor logs!"

They were surprised to find that the first anomalous reading in the sensor data was only one hour after they had left Spacedock. As the Enterprise transited the asteroid belt the lateral sensor array detected the displacement of several small asteroids behind the ship with no discernible cause. But as the ship was undermanned there had been no one stationed to monitor the lateral sensor grid and the incident went unnoticed by the rest of the crew.

The next anomaly was when the Enterprise had dropped back from warp to impulse speed as

she entered the Santaran system. Again it was the lateral sensor array, operating on passive systems, that detected particles of stellar dust that had been inexplicable displaced at warp speed after the Enterprise had slowed to impulse. When a full sensor sweep had been performed by the main sensor grid, all had returned to normal and nothing out of the ordinary had been noticed on the bridge.

"Curious", admitted Data.

"I'll say! I've suddenly got the funny feeling that we were being watched and followed throughout that whole mission!" With a snap of his fingers Geordi exclaimed, "The other Romulan War Eagle! It must have followed us to find out what happened to their sister ship, was her mission to capture the *Venturer* successful and to discover what we knew of their plans." He paused as his mind screamed a warning at him. "My God! They could be right outside Spacedock right now waiting for us to leave again!"

While Data continued to review the anomalous readings at a fantastic rate to see if they could glean any further information from the sensor logs, Geordi went to see the Captain. Admiral Nechayev was there too.

32

"The second War Eagle?"

"Yes Captain! Its our opinion that it followed us under cloak!"

Just then Data arrived and was admitted to the Ready-room, interrupting Geordi's report.

"Captain, from the information derived from the sensor logs I can verify that the War Eagle did indeed follow us under the protection of its cloaking device where it remained undetected, until now, but it did **not** follow us back through time. Instead it had remained here in the present and recovered the *Venturer*'s recorder buoy which the rescue vessels did not retrieve. They only downloaded the logs and sent them directly to Starfleet. The buoy itself was of little importance next to the search for the *Venturer*. When they were recalled the buoy was left behind. The Romulans would have undoubtedly downloaded the buoy's logs and discovered that their sister vessel had travelled through time with the *Venturer*. When they saw us enter time warp they probably assumed that their sister would destroy us in the past. When it was the Enterprise that returned from the past and not their twin vessel they must have become worried and followed us back to Spacedock!"

"Why didn't they destroy us when they saw how badly damaged we were?", asked Picard.

"They needed us to find out what had become of their vessel. If they destroyed the Enterprise they risked destroying the very information they were seeking", Geordi replied.

"So they could still be lurking around out there undetected outside Spacedock?" asked Admiral Nechayev.

"Admiral, it is my belief that they are hiding under cloak *inside* Spacedock, not outside!"

Everyone turned and stared incredulous at Data while he led them onto the bridge. He sat at the Ops console and brought up an image of the interior of Spacedock on the main viewscreen. The image was being displayed by the passive systems of the lateral sensor array that had initially detected the anomalous readings. Everyone was intently focused on the image on the viewscreen. After a minute, with a perturbed look on his face, Data said, "Perhaps I am in error and the Romulan vessel is actually outside Spacedock as you guessed Admiral!"

"Wait! Data, go back a bit!", ordered Geordi. The tension on the bridge rose palpably as the image on the viewscreen scrolled back from right to left until an image of the USS *Ireland*, berthed across from the Enterprise, appeared.

"There, just above the *Ireland*! Scan that region again Data!" He pointed out the section to Data who obliged with the scan. When it was complete Geordi grinned.

"Gotcha!"

33

Amazed at how quickly they had managed to accumulate data on the Romulan's newest secret innovation the traitorous member of Starfleet was determined that they would not get their filthy hands on it. It was now his only means of escape. He knew exactly where it was. They had contacted him with an extremely urgent request for information: where was their sister ship and how much did Starfleet know? He was painfully aware at how close Starfleet Intelligence's sniffer dogs were getting. Too damned close. If he did not leave soon he never would. It would be extremely doubtful if that Nechayev bitch would permit him to live when he was discovered. She would take great pleasure in

ordering him put to death, slowly. They were closing in on him because he had made some small mistake that had given them a sniff in his direction.

He had! He had been too smug when he had left the communications centre at Starfleet Headquarters and did not scan the mind of the security guard at the foyer security station. The guard whose mind he had invaded and removed the memory of his arrival had been relieved by his twin brother who had picked up an overtime duty as the regular guard had gone to the hospital to be with his wife while she gave birth to their first child. Finding it odd that his entry had not been logged by his brother the guard logged the departure time on the register and made a mental note to ask his brother why he hadn't logged the entry time.

This link in the chain that lead to and threatened to hang him had only been discovered as Data was adjusting the Enterprise's sensor readings on the viewscreen to show an image of the USS Ireland. While Data conducted his scan, another scan of a different sort was being performed in Starfleet Headquarters. The security officer's mind was being scanned by Commander Stonn, a Vulcan security officer. He discovered through the mind-meld the partial mind-wipe and who had placed it there.

"Captain Silvan!"

"Dear Lord! The Admiral's aide?"

"The same. What is his current location?"

"He's on the Enterprise with Admiral Nechayev right now! We've got to warn them!"

34

The image on the screen was adjusted to show the area immediately above the USS Ireland. At first glance there was nothing out of the ordinary. But then 30 seconds later it appeared briefly and disappeared just as quickly as it had appeared. The anomalous reading that the sensors had been tracking, unattended, all along. 30 seconds later it reappeared and disappeared again. A tiny shift, folding, of the fabric of space as their cloaking field was adjusted.

"Gotcha!" exclaimed Geordi.

"Is there anyone aboard the Ireland?", asked Picard.

"Yes!", replied Nechayev immediately. "Her entire crew should be aboard now. They are due to depart for patrol duty at the Cardassian border via a short stop at Deep Space Nine in two hours", she informed them, checking her chronometer.

"Someone will have to go over to the Ireland in person and inform her Captain of the situation. They would surely detect a secure channel, ship to ship, transmission at this close range and run before we could be ready to stop them. We also cannot permit an exchange of weapons fire inside Spacedock! So we will have to come up with something more subtle."

"We could arrange the simultaneous transport of several security teams from the Enterprise, Ireland and Spacedock. They could be beamed aboard the Romulan vessel and take her from within. While they are operating under cloak their shields are down and they are vulnerable. It will take a little fine-tuning of the targeting scanners to pinpoint a suitable boarding point for the troops so that their beam-in will remain undetected by the Romulans until it is too late!" suggested Worf from his tactical position behind Picard.

"Very well, I will make the arrangements with the Ireland. Captain Silvan, you will inform Spacedock's chief of security of the plan of attack! Let's go!"

"I'm afraid that won't be possible Admiral! No one is going anywhere but me!", he snarled as he drew his phaser and aimed it at them. It was level with Admiral Nechayev's chest and was about six feet away.

"Silvan, what are you.....", understanding hit her in mid sentence and she was unable to finish it. Her anger at being betrayed in this manner bubbled to the surface of her face and shaded it a deeper crimson than her tunic. Her mouth was moving but no words, she was so angry she had lost the capacity for speech. A feral look appeared in her eyes that frightened all who noticed it, especially Silvan. He knew that given the chance she would rip him apart with her bare hands, tear him limb from limb with her hands, nails and teeth.

"You goddamned dirty, rotten traitor!", she finally managed to scream at him.

"Actually Admiral I am a patriot! A patriot of the Romulan Star Empire!" he admitted proudly. Confused, Picard asked, "How can it be that a Vulcan would describe himself as a loyal Romulan?"

"Oh come now Captain! I thought it should be obvious. Especially to you, considering the situation!"

Watching from the back of the group that had assembled around Data's console Geordi noticed through his VISOR that Silvan was agitated. His carefully laid plans had gone awry. He had been discovered before he could enact his plan to escape. To Geordi's unique perspective he was agitated, off balance and upset. This made him dangerous. To the others he projected the perfect outward image of one at peace, at ease in control of any situation.

Silvan's mind raced in an effort to find a way out of his current predicament and onto the Romulan ship, just a few hundred metres away. It might as well have been a light year away to Silvan while he remained stuck on the Enterprise's bridge with his 'prisoners'. He had to get to the Romulan vessel, open the space doors and escape before Nechayev or Picard could raise the alarm. A wide beam stun setting on his phaser would be effective on all but Data. He would have to take his eyes off them to adjust the phaser, he was not too familiar with the Federation weapons. But he was loath to take his eyes off them even for the few seconds it would take to adjust the phaser. Picard was close and that android was fast. He had to get to the turbolift first to get off the bridge. While he racked his brain for something to use to aid his escape enlightenment reached Picard. There was a noticeable cooling of the air between Picard and Silvan as the realisation struck him. Caught by the intensity of Picard's stare Silvan's aim wavered. He lowered the phaser slightly but no one moved to tackle him. Everyone was caught by the magnetic pull of the contest of wills being displayed before them.

"*Ambassador T'Pel!*", Picard nearly spat the name out.

When he heard the assumed name of his mentor, Silvan flinched at first but then he smiled a wicked smile. Picard was as good as he had been informed and the remembrance of that particular success obviously still chafed him deeply. The Enterprise had met with a Romulan Warbird in the Neutral Zone a few years previously. A Vulcan Ambassador, T'Pel, was aboard for a secret peace conference with the Romulans. They had faked a transporter accident and had abducted the Ambassador. Or so the crew of the Enterprise thought. She had actually been a Romulan infiltrator and Picard had delivered her home. He still felt betrayed and ill whenever he thought of that incident. It was a major black mark on his own personal record of his missions despite Starfleet's insistence that he had done nothing wrong.

35

As Picard tried to stare down Silvan on the bridge, Commander Stonn had arrived at the Enterprise's berth and was coming aboard via the umbilical on Deck 10. There he met Commander Riker and briefed him on the situation. They immediately checked the internal sensors for Silvan's location and finding him on the bridge they went to the visual monitoring systems and were alarmed to find Silvan gesturing with a phaser. They had little time to plan a co-ordinated attack but hastily assembled a strike force from the Enterprise's security teams and the ones that Commander Stonn had brought with him. They decided on a multi-front attack to confuse and overpower Silvan quickly.

36

"Get over there and sit down, all of you!", he ordered as he waved the phaser in the direction he wanted them to go. He was just beginning to relax with the seeds of a plan germinating in his mind. He decided that he was a safe distance away from them and took the opportunity to look down at the comm badge on his chest to adjust it properly. It was all Riker and Stonn needed. He tapped his comm badge.

"Now!"

37

As Silvan was finishing the adjustments on the comm badge he heard the distinctive whine of a transporter beam to his left. He turned to his left slightly to see who it was who had the impertinence to beam directly on the bridge unannounced. He did not see the stun grenade materialise on the deck beside him until it was too late.

He dived to his right just as the grenade exploded in a shower of light. At the same instant Picard, Nechayev and the rest of the crew on the bridge were beamed site-to-site to the conference lounge at the rear of the bridge. They were dematerialised in mid explosion of the stun grenade. Riker and Stonn burst in from opposite sides of the bridge, phasers levelled and ready. As it turned out they did not need them. In his desperate attempt to escape the effects of the stun grenade Silvan had collided

with a wall and had knocked himself unconscious. Unfortunately they did not manage to prevent him from transmitting a signal.

38

As Picard and Nechayev informed the crews of the Ireland and Spacedock of the Romulan intruder, the space where it was located began to shimmer as it decloaked, raised its shields and began to move.

“Red Alert! Battle stations!”

As the Romulan ship moved by her the Ireland powered up and began the pursuit. The Spacedock controllers initiated a station wide Red Alert! The Romulan ship angled towards the space doors which were in the process of being sealed. The station’s shields were raised but what good could that do when they were designed to protect the facility from an attack from beyond its bulkheads not from within.

“They have raised shields and are arming weapons!”, Worf reported.

The Romulans fired salvo after salvo of disrupter fire at the space doors until they were blasted apart, and escaped through the gaping hole that was created in their place before the explosion had fully ceased.

“Umbilicals disconnected, sir!” announced Data.

“Helm! Pursuit course, full impulse, engage!”

The Enterprise, though still battered and bruised by her last encounter with this type of Romulan vessel, powered away from her moorings and flew through the hole ripped into the Spacedock where the space doors had been only moments ago. The Ireland had already exited Spacedock when the Enterprise slipped through the exit hole. Closely watching everything that was happening Admiral Nechayev raised an important point.

“Why haven’t they cloaked and made a run for the Neutral Zone? They had the time to do so before we left Spacedock.”

“They must have sustained damage to their cloaking systems during their escape from Spacedock.”

“They’ve gone to warp!”, announced Worf.

“Helm follow them, maximum warp!”

Instantly the Enterprise and the Ireland entered warp and streaked after the fleeing Romulan ship.

39

Being slightly faster than the War Eagle the Federation starships began to close rapidly on their quarry. They were aided in their chase by the Mars defence perimeter which went on alert as soon as the word reached them from Spacedock. Their timely intervention caused the Romulans to alter their course allowing their pursuers to catch up with them.

“Phasers ready, torpedoes armed and loaded!”, Worf announced with relish.

“Target engines and weapons only!” ordered Nechayev. She still wanted to try to keep that ship as much together as possible. It would be an invaluable intelligence treasure chest.

“Fire!” Picard gave that order. The Enterprise was still his ship, after all.

The combined onslaught from the two Federation ships was too much for the light attack cruiser. Her power distribution nodes were rendered useless and her engine core was damaged. She slowed from warp to a crawl. In the few moments it took for the Enterprise and Ireland to regain contact with the War Eagle after overshooting it when she dropped unexpectedly from warp had given its second-in-command the opportunity to initiate the self-destruct systems, the captain had been killed when the power distribution nodes had gone. The panel she was standing beside, as well as a few others on the bridge, exploded in her face, killing her instantly and greatly injuring the rest of the crew. Some of the crew on hearing the self-destruct command had managed to make it to the escape pods and vacated the doomed ship. The Romulan First Officer, dazed and confused by a concussion and his other injuries, had ordered an overload to be initiated in the antimatter pods in an effort to take the Federation ships with them when they went to the next plane of existence. He was unaware that the power distribution nodes had failed. As the last of the escape pods blasted free of the ship an explosion in the engineering section rocked the ship. It had caused a warp core breach to begin. The computer recognised the danger but with no one left aboard with the authority to engage the manual override the computer ejected the warp core into space where it detonated causing only minor damage to the War

Eagle itself but its escape pods were all vaporised. The Captain of the Ireland, realising the danger had positioned her ship between the Romulan vessel and the Enterprise as she backed slowly away. The explosion caused minor damage to the Ireland but it would have caused major damage to the Enterprise if she had not been shielded by the Ireland. They took the Romulan vessel under tow and returned to Spacedock.

40

While the Ireland towed in the Romulan War Eagle, the Enterprise and Admiral Nechayev went on ahead to Spacedock to arrange a small incident of her creation. She had managed to arrange that for the ten minutes it would take for the Ireland to get the Romulan ship into Spacedock and berthed in the secured lower repair bays, the Spacedock's sensors would fail, apparently due to power fluctuations caused when the space doors were blasted open.

Silvan had been transferred to Spacedock's brig to await transfer to Earth for trial as a traitor and spy. Commander Stonn was ordered to perform a mind-meld on Silvan's inert form and had extracted the names of his co-conspirators. It was quite a network. Starfleet Intelligence were going to have a field day feeding disinformation to these people to send to Romulus and also to find any other traitors, moles, agents or spies that they might have missed. However they were called they were all the same: the enemy.

Shortly after he had awakened the moment he had dreaded had finally arrived. She stood outside his cell glaring in cruelty at him. If looks could kill he would have died a thousand deaths and still not be one per cent into the intensity she was giving him.

"Well", she snarled through gritted teeth, "your friends will not be taking you home with them!"

"So they managed to escape from the mighty Nechayev's Starfleet!", he replied his voice dripping with hatred, excited at the prospect that his countrymen had managed to escape. They would shortly begin legal proceedings with the Federation council to get him returned to them. Nechayev saw this and let him enjoy his moment of triumph before she burst his bubble.

"Actually, they were destroyed by the Enterprise and the Ireland before they could even leave the Sol system. A pity really, we could have learned so much from it. A lucky torpedo hit caused a containment failure in their engine core. No one survived the explosion and the fragments we managed to salvage will be of little value except to the metallurgical department. That will probably reveal very little!"

"Aw, too bad!", he sneered enjoying the frustrated look on her face.

"We still have the Enterprise's sensor logs, so its not a total loss!" She grew suddenly very cold. "Who else was in on this with you? Tell me!" she screamed, startling him.

"I'll see you at your trial!", she said icily as her parting shot before walking out of the brig.

41

"I'm sorry sir, the transporters are still off-line until they can lock down the power fluctuations!", the transporter chief informed the head of the security detail assigned to transport the shackled Silvan to Earth.

"We'll have to take him down in a shuttlecraft then!"

As they entered the hangar deck and moved towards a shuttle a power conduit exploded behind them injuring two crewmen and killing one security officer. Silvan was thrown roughly to the deck when the panel blew out. As the security team picked themselves up the shuttle's pilot approached them, raised his phaser and fired. The security team were all stunned without realising what or who had hit them. Silvan's restraints were removed as he was led aboard the shuttle. They immediately sped out of the shuttlebay and entered warp to complete their escape while Spacedock's sensors were still 'down'.

"It is good to see you again Silvan!", said the pilot. "That was rather a close call!"

"It was indeed Reed! Its good to see you again too my friend. Where are we going?" He had noticed from the navigational display that they were not headed for the Neutral Zone.

"First thing we do is put some distance between us and them", she jerked her thumb over her shoulder at the diminishing Spacedock and Earth. "We are to rendezvous with a Pakled freighter that will take us to the Neutral Zone where some friends will be waiting to take us home!"

"Is it true about what *she* said? Our ship is destroyed?"

“I am afraid so. The warp core was breached by a photon torpedo impact and destroyed the ship. They did not even have time to get to the escape pods!”

With a heavy sigh Silvan sat back and began to relax on what would prove to be a very long trip home. On Romulus questions would be asked. At least he had given them a good deal of secrets over the years prior to being discovered, including the Venturer’s. That alone would be enough to save his neck, but what of the others? He did not know, nor did he really care so long as he was alright.

42

Sitting in his ready-room, Picard and Admiral Nechayev, sipping tea smiled as they scanned the PADDs before them.

“Well Captain, it would seem our little ruse worked perfectly! They have escaped in a warp capable shuttlecraft and Silvan’s subdermal transponder appears to be working perfectly!”

“Almost perfectly”, sighed Picard. “Ensign Rivers was killed in the escape”.

“We could not have warned the security detail of the rescue attempt. It would have been like Britain announcing to the world in World War Two that they had cracked the German’s Enigma code! No, it was a tragic loss but a necessary one!”

By that remark Picard was reminded just how cold Vice-Admiral Alynna Nechayev really was. She got up from the couch she had been sitting on and went to look out the windows. Picard joined her there. The Enterprise was berthed in the repair bay in front of the Romulan vessel effectively screening it from view. The windows on the ready-room opened directly on it. Picard would spend many hours in the coming days while his ship was repaired around him standing and looking out the windows at the Romulan vessel.

He caught the look on her face and was surprised to see a similar look on his own face when he caught a glimpse of his reflection in the window. Eagerness, inquisitiveness. What secrets will it reveal?

They gazed out the window at their prize and watched as the umbilicus was extended over and teams from Starfleet Intelligence, Command, Security and Engineering practically fought each other to be granted first access.

When all was said and done it would provide a wealth of information that was invaluable. Enough so that the Romulans were forced to concede defeat over the New Dublin colony and had to withdraw. They had also to make reparations to the colony for the hardships they had had to endure during the conflict and blockade.

The Enterprise crew returned to their shore leave while the Enterprise herself was given top priority in the repair rotation. Everyone who had been on the mission had attended the memorial ceremony for the crew of the Venturer.

Two weeks later, after extensive repairs, the USS Enterprise, flagship of the United Federation of Planets, glided gracefully out of the newly repaired space doors on a shakedown cruise. Her engines engaged and in a silent explosion of colour and light she streaked into warp.

THE END