

Conquest

*"War is a matter of vital importance to the State;
the province of life or death; the road to survival or ruin.
It is mandatory that it be thoroughly studied."*

Sun Tzu, "The Art of War"

By Michael Wong

Chapter One: Contact

Admiral Kanos peered into the twisted vortex of hyperspace flashing by his observation window with an air of quiet reflection. It had been many years since the Great War. Many years since Emperor Anakin Solo had finally driven the New Republic from the core worlds. Already, the Emperor had rectified most of the New Republic's tampering with historical records, to reveal the truth about that dark period in galactic history.

It still brought a smile to his face, to think of how easy it had been for his master. How the aging Skywalker refused to believe that his beloved nephew had turned against him and his New Republic. It was still incomprehensible, how Skywalker could have been so foolhardy as to follow Solo to Korriban in his attempts to "save" the Emperor.


Now, his spirit was trapped forever on Korriban while Emperor Solo consolidated his control over the galaxy. *Fitting end for the hated Skywalker*, he mused to himself. *If only he could have seen how his beloved New Jedi were destroyed, and how his ridiculous patchwork of independent territories flocked to the Emperor's banner!* He almost missed that heady time— this business of suppressing regional conflicts and hunting down New Republic remnants was tedious at best. At least the people of the galaxy finally seemed to be recognizing that only the central authority of the Empire could maintain the peace.

"Admiral, we have arrived at the Kerenos system. It appears your sources were correct— the traitor Athon has marshalled his forces here, along with the last remnants of the Mon Cal armada. We finally have them!"

"This has been a long time in coming, Captain. Launch all fighter squadrons. I assume the flanking groups are in position?"

"Yes Admiral, we have them trapped. Interdiction fields already active."

"Crushed between the hammer and the anvil, Captain. No need for subtlety— fire at will!"



The USS Carolina flashed through the emptiness of space like a falcon in pursuit of its prey, phaser fire erupting from its forward weapons array. Its quarry, a Jem'Hadar cruiser, left a flickering trail of superheated debris behind it as it fled its determined pursuers.

"Their shields are buckling, Captain. They have serious system damage, several hull breaches, and heavy casualties."

"Hail them. Give them one chance to surrender." Captain Trent wasn't sure that there was any point; the Jem'Hadar were not given to surrender. And he wasn't so sure he *wanted* them to answer, knowing that they had killed Captain Harris and destroyed his

ship.

"No answer sir. We have quantum torpedoes locked on."

"Send them to hell then. Fire." Captain Trent growled his orders from behind clenched teeth. *The only good Jem'Hadar is a dead Jem'Hadar*, Harris was fond of saying.

Four glittering quantum torpedoes hurled themselves from the Carolina's forward torpedo launchers, rapidly closing the distance on the Jem'Hadar cruiser. It was all over, and the Jem'Hadar would be a superheated gas cloud in seconds.

"Captain, they're gone!"

"What? What do you mean "gone"?"

"Some sort of wormhole, Captain. They haven't developed the ability to form transwarp conduits, have they?"

"Damned if I know, but I'm not letting him get away. Is the wormhole still open?"

"Yes sir, it even appears to be stable. It may be a semi-permanent conduit. Should I launch a class one probe to inspect the phenomenon?"

"Do it."

Captain Trent waited anxiously for the results. Every second that passed was another second for the Jem'Hadar cruiser to put space between itself and the wormhole terminus, wherever that was. *At least we managed to knock out its warp drive before it pulled its disappearing act!*

"Captain, the wormhole appears to be stable. It should be safe for travel. It may actually be a natural phenomenon— it would seem to be statistically improbable to say the least, but the Jem'Hadar may have stumbled upon it accidentally."

"Lucky bastards. Helmsman, move us in there. The Jem'Hadar can't get away from us that easily." Captain Trent felt his stomach churn and his senses reel as the ship seemed to twist for a moment and then accelerate into the wormhole. He didn't recall hearing of any such debilitating side effects associated with the Bajoran wormhole, but the ship seemed to be functioning normally even if its crew was on the verge of vomiting. The trip seemed to be taking hours, but he doubted it had been more than a minute or two before the flickering vortex of the wormhole abruptly transformed itself into the familiar curtain of night.

"Oh my god" Trent breathed. "Where the hell are we?"

The scene that greeted Trent's eyes was one of unbridled carnage. Everywhere he looked, he could see starships, enveloped in storms of energy. Explosions dotted the

starry sky, and four ships flared up like exploding suns before his eyes. As he watched, two stricken starships, their backs alive with flame, hurtled suicidally into a much larger starship and exploded harmlessly against its shields.

"Mr. Portugal, tactical evaluation!"

"We have approximately one hundred and twenty thousand sensor contacts sir. Everything from tiny one-man fighters to ships the size of San Francisco. We count roughly two thousand capital ships, ranging from under one kilometre in length to more than twenty kilometres. The rest appear to be fighters."

Captain Trent let out a long slow whistle. "Hell of a party. Who's winning?"

"It looks like a massacre sir. One group of ships seems to be surrounded by five other groups, which are pounding it from all sides."

"Luckily for us, this isn't our war. What happened to the Jem'Hadar?"

"No sign of it, sir. There's unbelievable interference here. I've got heavy subspace jamming on all frequencies and massive gravitational distortion fields, so the sensors are almost useless. For all we know, they crashed on that planet below."

"Stay close to the wormhole, Lieutenant. Maybe we can pick up that damn Jem'Hadar's trail again, and besides, I'm sure Federation HQ will want as much data as possible on this new civilization we've encountered, whoever they are. Do you have any idea where we are yet?"

"Sir, we've left the Milky Way galaxy. It looks like we're on the other side of the known universe. We're definitely not in Kansas anymore."

Trent managed a wry smile. "Thank you, Lieutenant. Can you determine anything about those warships?"

"Other than their sheer size and numbers, not much. They're using an unknown power source, and I don't read any sort of warp signature at all. They seem to be using various types of high-powered directed-energy weapons, and I'm picking up a lot of thermonuclear explosions out there, probably from torpedoes of some sort."

"Captain, I must voice my strongest objections to staying here. Whoever these people are, they are clearly dangerous and hostile, and the longer we stay here the higher the likelihood is that someone will notice us." Commander Chang was growing visibly agitated.

"Your objection is noted, Commander. But we have standing orders to investigate all new life forms and civilizations, and this definitely qualifies, does it not? Just keep us close to that wormhole. Mr. Portugal, can you scan anything on that planet below?"

"The planet is massively industrialized, Captain. Roughly two hundred billion inhabitants, and they appear to have an almost impenetrable deflector shield operating, which protects the entire planet. We could ram that shield at full impulse and not make a dent, Captain."

"Must be a pretty damned important planet— this is one hell of a firefight."

"Captain, we have a new sensor contact! It came out of nowhere ... it's big ... it's some sort of huge spherical ship, roughly *nine hundred kilometres* in diameter! It's approaching the planet ... I'm picking up a massive power surge ..."

As Captain Trent watched in disbelief, a series of enormous green energy beams shot forth from the vessel's weapons array. They converged on a single point which seemed to build for a moment, seething with raw energy. He watched in an almost hypnotic trance as the roiling, seething energies suddenly formed into a beam, and lanced out at the planet below. Horror was quickly followed by reaction.

"Helmsman, get us out of here!"

The USS Carolina lurched and turned away from the doomed planet of Kerenos IV. As the Death Star's blast pumped an ungodly amount of energy into Kerenos IV's core, 200 billion lives were extinguished in one screaming instant of terror. The stupendous explosion hurled the mass of the planet outwards like shrapnel from a monstrous bomb.

The Carolina was buffeted like a leaf in a hurricane. Countless pieces of planetary debris battered her shields, and Captain Trent had a vague sensation of warmth on his back as he was thrown from his chair. He staggered to his feet and turned to see the rear of the bridge enveloped in flames, with crewmen running and shouting in what seemed to be slow motion. He saw two crewmen running toward him as if to tackle him and thought to ask himself why.

"Captain, don't move!" He could feel strong hands on his arms and legs, picking him up and laying him on his side. His back was going numb, and he could vaguely feel his jacket being removed. As he lost consciousness, he could see that his jacket was soaked in blood.

Commander Chang looked down at his captain. "Is he going to live?" He wanted his own command, but not this way.

"He'll make it Commander. I hope."

"Damn it, we're going to do what we should have done when we first came to this place. We're getting out of here, if we still can. Damage report!" Commander Chang barked.

"We've lost main power and shields are down, but antimatter containment is holding and we still have auxiliary power. We can still limp back to the wormhole under impulse

power, Commander."

"Take us out of here, helmsman. If the Jem'Hadar are still alive, I can't think of a better fate for them than to be trapped in this place."

The crippled starship began to turn. Without warning, the ship stopped as if in the grip of an invisible fist, and began to move backwards.

"Helmsman, what's happening?"

"We're caught in a tractor beam, Commander. It's originating from that giant spherical ship."

"Can you break free?"

"I'm applying all the power I can, sir. We're not going anywhere."

Damn you, Captain Trent! "All hands abandon ship. Repeat, all hands abandon ship! Computer, this is Commander Chang, acting Captain. Initiate auto-destruct sequence, two minute timer. At least I can make sure they won't get the Carolina ... "

Chapter Two: Machinations

"All warfare is based on deception." – Sun Tzu

The U.S.S. Carolina tumbled end over end in space, its warp nacelles trailing plasma and flickering debris into the darkness. Flames could be seen burning inside the hull. Inside the bridge, the stench of death and burning flesh permeated the air. Commander Chang sat in his chair, and willed himself to get up and run for an escape pod. But he couldn't move— he screamed silently at himself to get up and run, but his feet seemed to be welded to the deck. He screamed, and railed at the monstrous, implacable starships on his viewscreen. The flames tore through the bridge, and he could feel his body being engulfed in flame. The searing heat ... the pain ...

Chang woke with a start, and reminded himself that he was still alive. *The same damn nightmare over and over ... maybe it's my mind's way of telling me I should have stayed on the bridge*, he mused grimly. Instead, he was painfully pulling himself to a sitting position on the hard metallic bed, in a solitary prison cell. And he was wondering what happened to his crew. More than six weeks of waiting, and wondering. *I wonder if they want me to die of boredom ...*

Suddenly, abruptly, the cell door shot upwards and a man of regal bearing stepped in, flanked by a pair of white-suited soldiers. He reached into his tunic, pulled out a Federation universal translator, and casually threw it on the hard metal floor. It clattered and bounced into the corner of the room, and Chang immediately picked it up.

"Mister Peter Chang, I believe? That's an interesting toy you have there. It took a little while to program it for Basic, but some of your men were kind enough to render assistance." The man was a full head taller than Chang, with black hair that was flecked with white at the temples. He had the bearing of a man accustomed to power and influence, and continued without waiting for a reply. "I am Admiral Kanos, and I would like to extend official greetings from the Empire."

Chang blinked, unsure of what to say. "My crew—"

Kanos cut him off in mid-sentence. "Your crew is alive and well, except for those who were unfortunate enough to perish with your ship, and a small number who were injured during interrogation, before we realized you were not affiliated with the rebels on Kerenos Four. All injured crewmen have been given medical attention, I assure you."

"Injured during interrogation? What right do you have—"

"We have the right granted to us under Imperial law, and you were *trespassing* in Imperial territory!" Kanos snarled. "In case your memory is deficient, you mysteriously appeared in the midst of a major engagement, and when we tried to render humanitarian aid to your damaged vessel you immediately self-destructed your ship! As far as we were concerned, you were probably a new faction of rebel collaborators." He paused, and

his expression darkened. "And as of this moment, we still have no concrete evidence to the contrary."

"Mister, we don't know who you are, who these rebels are, or how we got here. We're just travellers who were in the wrong place at the wrong time, and I want to see my crew *now*."

"You are *hardly* in a position to make demands, Mister Chang. But very well, I will take you to them ... *after* we discuss terms."

"Terms?"

"Terms of surrender. Your Federation, to the Empire."

Chang stood dumbfounded. "You can't be serious. We're not even at war!"

Kanos' expression was impassive, but his voice was laden with menace. "Not yet."

"We have no intention of surrendering to *anyone*, Admiral. And even if we did, I don't have the authority to negotiate anyway."

"Nevertheless, I intend to discuss terms. If not with you, then with the Federation president on Earth. We might also wish to send envoys to the Romulan, Klingon, and Cardassian territories. But I need you, to verify to your leadership that my intentions are genuine."

Chang felt an icy sensation in the pit of his stomach. "How do you know about Earth ... the Klingons—"

Kanos smiled. "Your crew was kind enough to furnish me with an extravagant amount of information once they were properly ... *motivated*, and our scouting missions through the wormhole have confirmed their reports. It is fortunate that you dropped by when you did, because the wormhole was starting to destabilize and we were forced to use hyperspace tunnelling equipment to stabilize it again. Another week, and it would have collapsed completely."

"And if I refuse?"

Kanos said nothing for an uncomfortably long time, and then said quietly "then I will torture your crewmen to death, one by one, until you agree. I promise you that their deaths will be grisly, and exquisitely painful. If you require a demonstration of my willingness to carry out this threat—"

"No!" Chang blurted out. "I believe you." he sighed heavily, and continued. "I'll come with you to Earth. But I want a guarantee that my crew is safe, I want to see them before I leave, and I expect that they will be released after I fulfill my end of the agreement." *Might as well angle for as much as possible*, he thought to himself.

Kanos threw his head back and laughed. "*Agreement?* I like a brave man, Mr. Chang. But there is no agreement. I am dictating terms and you will accept them. But in the interest of humanitarianism, I will agree that no further harm will come to them if you do as you are asked, and I will release you into Federation custody upon the completion of our expedition. The prisoners have been interred on an Imperial base located about fifteen light years from here, and you will be allowed to see them before we leave. But they are prisoners of war, and they will *not* be released until the Federation surrenders to the Empire."

Sensing that he wasn't going to get anything more, Chang agreed. After changing into a clean uniform, he was herded into a docking bay of vast proportions. A Lambda-class shuttle, looking insignificant in the cavernous docking bay, sat waiting for him. Kanos spoke in an imperious tone. "Commander Chang, I trust that you will not be foolish enough to attempt escape. You will find your restraints to be unbreakable, and your guards to be capable of exercising any force necessary. I trust we understand each other?"

Chang nodded and headed into the shuttle, flanked by a pair of stormtroopers. As the shuttle roared out of the docking bay, Chang caught his breath as he looked out the side windows. The pilot grinned. "Never seen an Executor-class ship up close eh, stranger? They're expensive, but worth it."

Chang said nothing, as he gazed out the window at the gleaming red city-sized behemoth they had just left behind. "What did you say it was called?" he asked.

The pilot was nothing if not talkative. "They told me you're not from around here ... are you from the Corporate Sector or something? Anyway, we just left an Executor-class command ship. It's a battleship, more than seventeen kilometres long, and this one's name is Crimson Blade. They're normally not blood-red like that, but Kanos must have friends in high places, because it couldn't have been cheap to dress up a ship that big. Know what I mean?"

Good, thought Chang. *This guy loves the sound of his own voice, so keep him talking ...* "What about those other ships?"

"You mean the ships flanking the Blade? They're just regular Star Destroyers, and they're the escort. The rest of the fleet is too far away to see with the naked eye, but it's in formation near the Death Star, over there." He jabbed his finger almost directly upwards, and Chang craned his neck to see. The enormous bulk of the Death Star was clearly visible even at this great distance, and Chang recognized it instantly.

"So they call it the Death Star, eh? Nice name." Chang tried to inject a friendly bantering tone into his voice.

"That's right. I've been in the fleet for eight years, and I never thought I'd get to see them fire that thing off. But when I got transferred to this outfit, I just *knew* I'd get to see a planet blow sooner or later, and boy, did I ever! Did you see it too?" The pilot grinned his toothy grin again, and Chang felt sick to his stomach. *Billions of lives ended, and this*

snickering pilot thinks it's funny! He tried to calm himself. "Yeah, I saw it ... heh heh" he laughed weakly. "So, how does it work?"

"Do I look like Bevel Lemelisk to you? It's got the biggest superlaser ever built, and it blows the planet up. What's to know?"

"But does it use a nucleonic chain reaction, or a subspace inversion, or does its reactor—"

"Hang on a minute, buddy. We've cleared traffic and we're ready for the jump. Here we go!" The pilot pulled a lever, and Chang watched as the stars blurred into streaks of light and collapsed into a swirling vortex. *Obviously not warp drive*, he thought to himself. After a couple of minutes, he pushed the lever back, and they abruptly decelerated back into realspace, in orbit over a planet.

"Are we ... there already?" Chang asked hesitantly.

"Of course. It's only fifteen light years, and it's a good space lane. Hell, I could make it from here to Dantooine in less than six hours" the pilot bantered. Chang's mind was racing. *Fifteen light-years in less than 2 minutes! It would take more than 3 days at warp 9 ...* He stared glumly at the floor. *The Federation doesn't even know what's coming. Perhaps if I'd tried to fight instead of abandoning ship. Perhaps if I had self-destructed the ship without evacuating, so they wouldn't have any prisoners to interrogate ...*

The shuttle suddenly rocked violently. The pilot swore under his breath, and began frantically operating the controls. "We're under attack! Going to active scans ... I'm picking up a half-dozen corvettes, one light cruiser, and four squadrons of fighters. They're pounding the hell out of that base down there ... they must be trying to rescue the prisoners. Time to get out of here ..." He reached for the lever, but he never made it. Chang heard the sound of an energy weapon being discharged, and the pilot fell to the deck in a crumpled heap. It came from one of the stormtroopers, who coolly targeted and fired upon the other trooper before the stunned man could react. He fell lifeless to the floor, and the gunman coolly stepped over the corpse and unlocked Chang's binders.

Chang tried to keep his composure. "Is this a rescue?"

"Damned right" came the reply. The stormtrooper removed his helmet and spoke quickly. "We're grabbing you, your crew, and about five thousand other prisoners at the base. They just set it up a few weeks ago, and they don't have their shield up and running. This is our only chance to pull this off cleanly. I just hope no one got any distress calls out before we got the jammers going ..." Over the next fifteen minutes, the small group of starships and transports extracted the prisoners, tractorated the shuttle into a docking bay, and demolished the base with exacting precision.

After debarking from the shuttle, Chang was quickly escorted to the cruiser's bridge to watch the operation unfold. He stepped onto the bridge to face a reptilian creature,

sitting in the command chair. The creature stood, extended a webbed hand in greetings, and croaked "Greetings, Commander Chang of the United Federation of Planets. I am Captain Ruk. Our operation is nearly complete, and you will be able to speak with your crew shortly. The transports are almost away—" He was cut off by a screeching alarm klaxon.

"Super Star Destroyer coming out of hyperspace! It's coming in fast, it's red ... it's the Crimson Blade!" a crewman barked. "I don't know how he knew, but Kanos is here!"

Captain Ruk responded immediately. "Break formation, prepare to jump! The Blade is accompanied by an interdictor cruiser, but it will take at least twenty seconds for their gravity well projectors to fire up. Protect the transports until they can make the jump!" The rebel starships fired their maneuvering thrusters and their engines bloomed to full radiance as they quickly moved to fill the gap between the transports and the Crimson Blade. Vast swarms of starfighters were boiling out of the Crimson Blade and its escorts, and the emptiness of space was quickly filled with the radiant flashes of exploding fighters and dying men.

The rebel ships performed their grim duty, and placed themselves directly in the line of fire. Their turbolasers fired long-range shots at the Crimson Blade, a useless gesture against the larger vessel's powerful shields. To the gunnery crews on the Crimson Blade, it didn't matter whether they scored kills on corvettes or transports, and they did not hesitate to return fire. Their heavy turbolaser batteries quickly targeted the hapless Rebel corvettes, and enormous bursts of green radiant energy filled the empty void between them and their targets. Commander Chang watched in dismay as a coruscating green blast of energy struck a corvette and completely vapourized it. The Crimson Blade's gunners were among the finest in the fleet, and their accuracy was unerring. They fired again, and a second corvette sublimated into a cloud of durasteel vapour. And a third. And a fourth. But by now, both transports had made the jump to hyperspace, and the battered remains of Captain Ruk's force escaped with them.

Chapter Three: Plans and Portents

"Agitate the enemy to learn his patterns." – Sun Tzu

A small group of starships drifted in a desolate region of interstellar space. A pair of bulky 5 kilometre long transports formed the bulk of the group, and they were accompanied by a 1.2 kilometre long light cruiser and a pair of badly damaged corvettes. Worker-bots flittered about from place to place upon their scarred hulls, patching the ships' numerous wounds. Aboard the cruiser, Captain Ruk contemplated his future. It was all so hard to accept sometimes— after a thousand generations of peace, Emperor Palpatine had plunged the galaxy into civil war and caused the deaths of billions. After he was finally destroyed and his Empire driven to surrender, many hoped that Skywalker and his New Jedi would usher in another thousand generations of peace. But it was not to be.

"Mr. Chang, these are dark times for our people. We are ruled with an iron fist by Emperor Anakin Solo, son of Han Solo and Leia Organa. It was not always like this— Anakin Solo was originally elected a Senator, like his predecessor Palpatine. He proved to be a good leader, and successfully maintained order over his territory even as regional flare-ups plagued the other regions. But when his beloved and elderly parents were both murdered while attempting to negotiate a peace treaty between two warring systems, Anakin became enraged. He blamed the non-interventionist policies of the New Republic for their deaths, and many in the Senate agreed with him. With their help, he instituted a massive rearmament program, ostensibly to restore the credibility of the central government and crack down on criminals, terrorists, and local warlords who had gotten out of hand."

"But he went farther than that, right?" Chang was starting to expect the worst at every turn. The stories he was hearing— Death Stars obliterating planets, millions of planets, millions of starships, billions of deaths, Galaxy Guns, World Devastators, Suncrushers ... he would have been inclined to think it was all the ravings of a madman, except that he had seen a Death Star in action with his own eyes. The level of carnage and devastation in this galaxy's history was unmatched by anything in his experience.

"Correct. He decided that a weak central government would eventually lead to total anarchy, and he used hundreds of localized conflicts to justify his claims. Some local territories refused to accept his harsh policing requirements and a few openly defied him. That was all the excuse he needed to declare martial law. He began brutal crackdowns on rebellious systems, claiming that they were responsible for heinous criminal acts and that this gave him the right to take whatever action he felt necessary." Ruk's scales rippled slowly as he said the words. Chang wondered what the rippling might mean in Ruk's society. He guessed it meant sadness, but he had no idea what the reptilian creature might be thinking. Its slimy, scaled appearance still disgusted him, but he forced his revulsion aside.

"Captain, I sympathize with your plight, but why are you interested in me and my

crew? And as long as we're on the subject, where *is* my crew?" Chang couldn't help but wonder what was happening back home, and whether he and his ship had been written off for dead. For all he knew, the Empire was already wreaking death and destruction in the Alpha Quadrant.

"Still suspicious, eh Commander? Well, I can't say I blame you. Your crew is being rescued as we speak. My commandos are storming the prison complex now— you see, we didn't have time to invade the complex and free the prisoners back there, so we simply tractorated the prison complex buildings into the cargo holds of our transports and escaped. The Empire's pre-fabricated outposts can be useful sometimes— they're modular, easy to drop, and easy to pick up. Come, let me show you." A viewscreen flickered to life at Ruk's console, showing a group of buildings which looked rather incongruous in a vast cylindrical cargo hold. It was surrounded by what appeared to be a swarm of ants, but Chang knew that they were men, and that some of them were dying. Flashes of green and red blaster energy could be seen clearly even on the small viewscreen, and it was clear that the Imperial prison guards were determined to fight to the last man.

Without turning from the viewscreen, Chang quietly said "Captain, you still haven't explained why you are interested in my crew, or why you were willing to risk the lives of your crew to rescue us."

Captain Ruk sat back in his chair and his shoulders slumped. "The reason is simple, Commander. You are our last hope."

Chang couldn't believe his ears. "Captain, surely you must be joking. What makes you think *I* can help *you*? I don't even have a ship!"

"No, but there have been a lot of high-level Imperial troop and ship movements related to your presence. I have taken that to mean that they consider you a threat, and that I should consider you a possible ally. Am I mistaken?"

"Maybe. We should talk, Captain. After I see my crew."

It was many days before Chang sorted through the survivors of the crew. 500 left, from a crew that originally numbered 1500. He shuddered to think of the fact that they told him more than 300 crewmembers had "disappeared" during interrogation, and that their guards had begun executing prisoners when they knew they had no hope of escape or victory. After surreptitiously learning as much as they could about their new galaxy and their new hosts, his technical staff was finally ready for a briefing.

"Commander, we've developed a pretty good picture of what we're dealing with. This civilization is distinctly unlike our own. Their ships contain almost no creature comforts, and are designed for pure war. As far as we can tell, they don't even carry any scientific crew at all! The cultural differences are interesting, but nowhere near as interesting as the genetic profiles. There is a disturbingly strong similarity between the DNA of their dominant race and human DNA. Further testing is necessary. In fact, they might even be

identical! We have no idea how—"

"Spare me the anthropology and biology, Lieutenant. I'm interested in their *weapons*. What can you tell me about them?"

Lieutenant Portugal cleared his throat and began speaking slowly, with the air of a man delivering news of a death in the family. "Their propulsion system is amazing, sir. I'm still not sure exactly how it works, but depending on the route, they appear to be capable of covering a hundred thousand light years in as little as a day. They call it hyperdrive, and it seems to involve some sort of transition to tachyonic state, or possibly a transition into a subspace domain we haven't discovered yet. I don't have enough information to know for sure, but the speed is incredible. I can't even begin to calculate the amount of power it must take to hold a ship together at such speeds, never mind ships as big as these."

Commander Chang thought about the latest Federation projections on power requirements for transwarp speeds and above, and grimaced. "Yes, Lieutenant. I was aboard one of their shuttles— I noticed the speed. But if we can't outrace them, maybe we can outmaneuver them. Have you learned anything more?"

"Yes, sir. They are almost totally sensor-blind while in hyperspace; they can only detect large masses directly ahead of them, probably due to the tremendous speed. They travel as much as two hundred times faster than subspace sensor packets, so they can't really see very much ahead of themselves, and we won't be able to see them coming. This means that they have limited control while in hyperspace, so they have to calculate a safe path before they jump. This requires complex navigational data which would ordinarily require time-consuming scouting operations, but the Empire seems to have already acquired as much navigational data as the Federation has."

"What? How could they possibly get so much navigational data so quickly? The life pods don't carry full navigational data." Chang felt his blood pressure rise, and wondered how much work the Empire had already done in Federation space.

"We don't know, sir. Our hosts also have this data, apparently from whatever intel source they had inside the Empire's command structure. I wasn't able to determine where the Empire got the data from, but I got a look at the files and they appear to have originated from the Federation. There's no way they got it from the wreckage of the Carolina— the primary destruct reduced the ship to stray atoms. But some of the files refer to an information broker named Quark. Possibly a code name, or possibly someone in Federation space that they've co-opted."

"Quark? I *know* that name ... I'll be damned if I can remember where I've heard it before, though. Well, it doesn't really matter. What matters is that they have the technology and the information they need to move about Federation territory at will. This is not what I wanted to hear, Lieutenant. I hope you have some encouraging news about their weapons."

"Sir, we have made some inquiries into the weapons, but the gunnery crews we talked to aren't very knowledgeable about the physics. They're technicians, not scientists. However, I *can* tell you that it's some kind of high-energy particle pulse weapon. I can't give you precise specs, but I'd guess maybe ten isotons per shot. Roughly two seconds to recharge, although the crew admits their systems aren't running at optimum."

"That's not bad but we can handle it. If the ship can only fire a ten-isoton shot every two seconds—"

Lieutenant Portugal grimaced. "Ah, I'm afraid you don't understand the situation, sir. Those figures are for one gun. This ship has *sixty* of these guns, all capable of targeting and firing independently. This ship is small by their standards, but it's still almost twice the size of a Federation Sovereign-class ship, and it's got guns all over the place. It's also got a half-dozen *heavy* guns which are good for at least a *thousand* isotons per shot. The big ones even sport their own redundant backup power sources, in case the ship should lose main power. This decentralized design approach applies to their entire shipbuilding philosophy— they use hundreds of decentralized computer systems and androids rather than a single all-encompassing computer system, and they have separate shield generator and projector systems for various parts of the ship."

"Wonderful. So it's armed to the teeth and designed to fight until it's almost totally destroyed. Would you say it's like a Borg ship in this regard?"

"Not quite, sir. It still has a central reactor system, without which they cannot replenish their shields or maneuver. This reactor can be attacked and destroyed by an aggressor, provided he can penetrate their shields. I wasn't able to learn much about their shields, but they seem to use separate particle-shield and energy-shield systems. That's obviously different from what we use, but it may be similar to Borg shield technology. Borg drones carry energy-shields but not particle-shields."

"Do you have any idea how much pounding their shields can take?"

"No, sir. But since they are designed to withstand extended combat with enemy starships which carry similar or superior armament ..."


"I get your point, Lieutenant. So they can move around our territory at will and their ships are extremely powerful. I sincerely hope you have some *good* news to tell me, because right now it *really* doesn't look good."

"I've learned some encouraging things about their sublight propulsion technology, sir. Their sublight acceleration is good but their maneuverability is low. This particular ship has fairly well-distributed armament, but I've learned that the Empire's ships carry all of their heavy weapons on the dorsal side of the ship, so that less than ten percent of their firepower can be directed to their ventral side. Also, they have trouble targeting ships which are extremely close to them, due to a problem with overlapping fields of fire. So a small, maneuverable vessel like the Defiant might be able to maneuver close to an Imperial ship's ventral hull surface without taking too many hits."

"That's the good news? Well, I guess it's better than nothing. What about that Death Star?"

"You saw as much as I did, Commander. It blew a planet apart pretty easily, and some preliminary calculations have revealed that at a minimum, you'd need at least *three hundred trillion* quantum torpedoes to pull that off. At our current rates of production, it would take us, oh, a few million years to build that many. I don't know where they get all their resources from. They must have thousands of planets ... maybe millions."

"Lieutenant, I don't like what I'm hearing. Your job is to find a weakness, and help me exploit it. And my job is to somehow get us home, so we can warn Starfleet. You have your assignment— find me that weakness. I'll go speak to our hosts."



Admiral Kanos sat in his command chair, swivelling slowly from side to side. His visage was wizened with age, but his eyes still gleamed with unseen and unknowable machinations. "Any word, Captain?"

"No, sir. Those ships could be anywhere by now." Captain Daron was fidgeting visibly.

"I'm not surprised, Captain. They pulled off their little operation quite competently— if we had appeared one minute later, we never would have seen them at all."

"Admiral, if I may speak freely—"

"Yes, Captain?"

"Admiral, if you suspected that some surviving rebels might try to attack our outpost, why did we delay our arrival? Why didn't we target the transports or the light cruiser? We could have destroyed them all, sir." Captain Daron delivered the words with the pained look of a man who was afraid his outburst would cost him dearly. But he was not a man to keep his feelings to himself, and Kanos valued this quality in a man. Mindless obedience was ego-building but virtually useless in a subordinate.

"We didn't target the transports or the light cruiser because I didn't want our new Federation friends killed. They may yet be of some use to us, Captain. But I think that we damaged them badly enough to force them into hiding for a while. I suspect that they are not totally incommunicado— they undoubtedly have a method of contacting other resistance cells ..." His voice trailed off into silence, and he gazed out into space quietly for a long time. Captain Daron stood stiffly at his side, trying to decide if he should break the silence or await the Admiral's convenience. Eventually, Kanos spoke again.

"Captain, the legendary Grand Admiral Thrawn once said that one should examine all obstacles carefully, for with a little patience, they can be turned into levers. Did you ever hear that?"

"No, sir. But it sounds like something he would have said. Admiral, I'm afraid I don't understand where you're going with this—"

"Captain, have the strategy planning team on Vestrun lay out plans for an assault upon the Federation homeworld, using one Executor-class command ship, fifty standard Star Destroyers, and one hundred heavy troop transports."

"Only one command ship and fifty Star Destroyers, sir? If we're going after their homeworld, why stop at fifty? We could even use the Death Star. The tunnel's stabilized, and they've enlarged it enough to squeeze the Death Star through."

"I have my reasons, Captain. One Executor-class command ship and fifty Star Destroyers." Kanos was in one of his scheming moods again, and he generally volunteered very little information when he was in such a mood. Captain Daron had learned that Kanos' schemes usually worked even if they seemed like insanity at the time, but he wasn't about to stop asking questions or pointing out problems as he saw them.

"Very well, sir. However, I am obliged to point out that our intelligence sources are close to locating a mole in the Vestrun command structure. We are certain that the location of the Federation prisoners was leaked from there. Any plans drawn up at Vestrun may quickly become rebel knowledge, sir."

"I know, Captain. I know."

Chapter Four: Escape

*"Leave an avenue of escape to a surrounded enemy.
When he takes it, strike."— Sun Tzu*

"Captain, this is insane! This will *never* work!" Captain Ruk's first officer slammed his fist into the table in frustration, and showed no signs of backing off.

Captain Ruk's scales shimmered as he drew himself up to his full, imposing two metre height. "Athon's fleet is gone, Kerenos Four is gone ... if we go into hiding, it's over. There aren't enough rebel ships left to take on a single sector fleet, never mind Kanos and his armada. Don't you see? We're the only ship left in a position to strike one last blow against the Empire. We're the only ship left in a position to do *anything!*"

"A pointless suicide mission is *not* the way to strike a blow against the Empire, Captain. We still have our contacts. We still have safe havens in the outer rim. Disgression is the better part of valour, Captain. What are we going to accomplish by getting ourselves vapourized?"

Chang listened to the two reptilian creatures as they continued to argue. The command structure of this vessel was surprisingly informal— aboard a Federation starship one would not see such a vehement disagreement between two senior officers played out in front of the crew, and from what he'd seen of Imperial starships, such shenanigans would not happen aboard those vessels either. But the crew of this ship seemed to exist with an extremely loose set of protocols, and the crew seemed to be ignoring the debate as they went about their rounds. In fact, *everything* about this ship was alien, from the technology to the interior appearance, and the astonishing variety of bizarre aliens. He had already seen everything from humans to huge caterpillar-like creatures and terrifying giant insects. More than once, he'd forcibly suppressed reactions of revulsion or fear when encountering yet another incredible new life form. But the bickering between Captain Ruk and his first officer was anything but alien, so Chang decided to say a few words on behalf of the Federation.

He listened to them argue for a few more minutes, and then finally interjected. "Gentlemen, if I may speak, I would like to point out that it's been a full day since we learned about the Empire's plan to attack Earth. They will be coming, and my people are totally unprepared. I implore you to help us. Without your help, I can't even send a message to *warn* the Federation! But if you *do* help us, we can prepare. We can hit them first and hit them hard, when they're not expecting it! We have more than fifty thousand starships, ready and armed for war. With fair warning and your technical information, we can *smash* an assault before it begins. Just think about what effect that might have on the Empire— it might weaken them enough to help *your* cause as well as mine."

Captain Ruk's first officer glared at Chang. "It isn't that simple. The plan has an extremely low survival probability. Our latest intel reports indicate that Kanos has the bulk of his armada arrayed around the wormhole. We have to fly *through* them to get to

your Federation, and we'll have to get past any ships he's got on the other side. The only way to get anywhere *near* that wormhole is to perform a hyperjump which is so carefully timed that we drop into realspace right on top of it. The timing must be *absolutely* precise. If we drop out a fraction of a second too soon, we'll be so far away from the wormhole that we'll be cut to shreds by Kanos' ships before we can reach it. If we drop out a fraction of a second too *late*, we'll run into the wormhole while still in hyperspace, and that'll scatter us into a cloud of subatomic particles from here to Endor! It's no small feat, to get through a blockade of thousands of ships with two corvettes and a light cruiser."

Chang chose his words carefully now. "I need to speak to my crew, but I sincerely hope that you will agree to help us. If you help us, you'll be helping yourselves. If we fall, the Empire will have access to our technology and resources. But if we stand, you will have a new ally. You can save *two* galaxies, gentlemen. Think about it." He walked away, hoping that his words would have the desired effect. He could feel a tickle in the back of his mind, as if his own conscience were grilling him for the truth. Of course, he knew that the Federation did not have anywhere near fifty thousand starships, and he knew that they would be unable to stop an all-out Imperial assault. His real agenda was to get back to Federation territory and find a way to shut down the wormhole before Kanos could come through. He knew he was using Captain Ruk and his ship as a means to an end, but he wasn't about to lose sleep at night worrying about a few thousand lives when the lives of billions hung in the balance. He headed off down the hall toward the rear of the ship where his crew had hastily found quarters. *Quarters vacated by this vessel's deceased crewmen and pilots*, his conscience reminded him. He shook his head to clear the cobwebs, and marched off.

Captain Ruk and his first officer watched Chang walk down the hall, and waited until he was out of earshot. Ruk chose to speak in low tones, using a guttural tongue rather than Basic. "B'Rom, speak Arajkiic. The Federation universal translators aren't programmed to handle it."

"Of course, Captain. But why?"

"The Earther is *lying*, B'Rom. I could *see* it in his mind. His Federation has a few thousand ships at most, not fifty thousand. They are a pitifully small organization— they only have a few hundred member planets! They are weak, and he has no intention of helping us once he gets back to his own territory. Instead, he plans to summon reinforcements, find a way to close the wormhole before Kanos comes through, and rid his Federation of a problem. He hopes that they will be able to assimilate our technology once we are trapped in their galaxy, but what happens to us is no concern of his. In other words, we are just aliens, and alien lives are expendable in light of his larger goals."

Commander B'Rom knew about his captain's latent Force sensitivity, and he knew that he was never wrong when he had a flash of intuition about someone's motivations. Confusion quickly became comprehension, and comprehension quickly became rage. "That filthy mammalian *slime!* I will crush him with my bare hands, and tear his throat—"

"No, Commander. We may yet derive some benefit from helping this human. He has

no chance of destroying the Imperial tunnelling equipment anyway. He doesn't know it, but they would need to destroy the equipment on *both* sides of the wormhole and then set up their own equipment to destabilize it. Kanos is no fool; he undoubtedly has a powerful fleet on the other side. A fleet we'll have to escape once we get through that wormhole, if we survive that long."

"Sir, I still don't see how this is going to help us, or hurt the Empire."

"B'Rom, the Emperor's control is not as unbreakable as it seems. He has the population of the galaxy convinced that only his authority can maintain the peace. Many of the people think we're terrorists! Some are dubious, but not enough to make a difference. But if the Emperor starts yet another war for no reason, his carefully constructed public image as peacemaker will fall apart. People will see that he wants power and territory, not peace. And if the Federation or their allies are capable of retaliating with sufficient force to cause bloodshed in our galaxy, the Emperor might lose his grip entirely. I know it sounds far-fetched, but it can work, B'Rom. We can give the Federation enough information to *make* it work. I must ask that you trust me, old friend."

B'Rom bowed deeply, knowing that the debate was over. "As always, this is your ship, and I am your first officer. We will prepare."

"B'Rom, I have one more request. Although I would like you here, the captain of the Arajkon Avenger was killed in the last skirmish. The Avenger and the Indomitable are the only escorts we have, and I want you to take command of the Arajkon Avenger for this mission. It's going to be risky, B'Rom. I don't know if either corvette will survive, or indeed, if any of us will survive. But I need an experienced officer in command of that corvette."

"Of course, Captain. Good luck. Good luck to us all."

Coruscant. Beneath vast swarms of starships, defense platforms, satellites, and sky hooks, Imperial City sprawled over the surface of the planet. Unimaginable wealth and power was concentrated in this place— even lowly bureaucrats wielded power in excess of some planetary heads of state. And in the centre of this vast city, amidst its trillions of inhabitants, Emperor Anakin Solo meditated in his private chambers. A slowly blinking light on his dais reminded him that Admiral Kanos had been patiently awaiting his convenience for the better part of an hour, and he decided not to keep him waiting any longer. He depressed a button on his chair, and Kanos' image flickered into view.

"Admiral, I understand that the Earthers are now firmly in the custody of the rebels." The Emperor was not a man to waste time on pleasantries.

Kanos knew full well that the Emperor could kill him with a thought, in spite of the thousands of light years that separated them. He had seen other officers perish in this manner, and he had no doubt that the Emperor would not hesitate to execute him in similar fashion if he so desired. But he saw no point in quivering at the possibility, and

answered in a matter-of-fact fashion. "Yes, my lord. The rebels seized the prisoners. We inflicted heavy casualties on them, but they escaped."

"Do you offer any *explanation* for your failure?" The Emperor's voice took on a thinly veiled sinister tone.

"The Rebels found out about the prisoners through an intelligence leak. I failed to anticipate this event, but I can turn this situation to our advantage. We have sifted through the wreckage and determined that the Rebels failed to discover or penetrate the underground portion of the complex. Our special operative is safe, and has been retrieved. My humblest apologies for allowing the Rebels—"

The Emperor silenced him with a wave of his hand. "It is of no consequence, Admiral. In truth, I had foreseen that this would happen. You will proceed with the plan."

The Emperor switched off the connection, and Admiral Kanos' holographic image faded from view. He turned to look at his galactic map, now accompanied by a preliminary map of the new galaxy that Kanos had discovered. Alone among the countless trillions in the Empire, the Emperor knew about the difficulties of mobilizing for another war. As always, the forces of anarchy threatened to incite thousands of scattered uprisings across the galaxy, and most of the Empire's vast military machine was dedicated to the suppression of this activity. Kanos could probably subdue the Federation without assistance from the rest of the Imperial war machine, but his absence would weaken the Empire's perceived strength.

Unlike his predecessor Palpatine, Emperor Solo knew about the importance of maintaining high morale among the population. Galactic history clearly indicated that apathy and material contentment suppressed rebellion as effectively as any fleet or superweapon. The promise of order and security had propelled the Emperor to his position, and he did not want to risk suffering Palpatine's fate by pushing too hard at this critical moment. Not now, when the populace was finally reaping the benefits of the peace and prosperity that he had promised them.

Emperor Solo was determined that his reign would be different from his predecessor. Palpatine had been arrogant, and perhaps quite mad. Emperor Solo felt that madness on occasion. He could feel it crawling under his skin; he willingly gave himself to the Dark Side of the Force at the moment he learned of his mother's death, and he had used it to exact revenge against those responsible. In Palpatine's case, the Dark Side had virtually consumed him. Palpatine's very body was literally eaten away by the corrosive influence; too much power in one body, hollowing it out from within and leaving only a gaunt, terrifying shell. He could only imagine whether a similar fate awaited him. Would his mother be horrified to see what her son had become? Perhaps. But the end justifies the means, and Anakin Solo knew that he had brought order to the galaxy after decades of conflict. Now, an alien influence threatened the galaxy again. It had to be crushed before it could undo all that he had wrought, and the people of the galaxy had to understand. They had to believe that this war was *necessary*. And they would— he had foreseen it.

Three ships streaked through hyperspace, toward the Kerenos system. Captain Ruk's light cruiser and its two diminutive escorts had almost no hope of surviving their impending operation, but it is often said that the gods smile upon fools. And so the fools and their ships hurtled toward almost certain death, in the vain hope that they might somehow strike a blow against their enemies.

"Approaching the Kerenos system, sir. Sublight in three, two, one—" the helmsman was interrupted in the midst of his countdown by a physical shock that reverberated throughout the ship. It was an unmistakable shock; the ship had been violently wrenched out of hyperspace by an interdiction field. *Just a split-second before reaching the target!*, Captain Ruk thought bitterly.

"Weapons free! Repeat, weapons free! All ships concentrate fire on the lead Star Destroyer! Flank speed toward the wormhole!" The 1200 metre long ship's engines flared brilliantly, and it shot toward the wormhole like a bullet. Its two escorts fell in behind it, but they had no hope of survival. Even though Kanos' armada was dispersed throughout the system in such a manner that only three Imperial warships blocked their way, they were still totally outgunned. The wedge-shaped Star Destroyers approached in a phalanx formation, unleashing a deadly hail of turbolaser fire from their forward batteries.

Aboard the lead Star Destroyer AR-512, Captain Tyrian calmly directed the battle. "Enemy shield status update?"

"The cruiser's shields are down to fifty percent, sir. One of the trailing corvette's shields are almost gone, the other one might be able to take a couple of good hits."

"Excellent, Commander. Maintain fire, but remember that Kanos wants the cruiser captured, not destroyed." Captain Tyrian intoned. This was entirely too easy, but it was still curious that Kanos had not concentrated more ships near the wormhole. It was almost as if he wanted the rebels to have a fighting chance to escape, but no matter—escape was impossible now. The rebel captain was skilled, and he was carefully maneuvering his ships to stay out of the firing arc of the AR-512's heavy dorsal gun turrets. He toyed with the idea of ordering his two trailing ships to invert, but their heavy weapons might destroy the rebel cruiser rather than merely disabling it for capture.

Aboard his cruiser, Captain Ruk gripped the armrests of his command chair and clenched his teeth as a generator failure rocked his ship with internal explosions. Screams could be heard from the next room. His crewmen, clearly rattled, were barking status reports in an increasingly strident tone.

"Shields down to twenty five percent, sir! The Indomitable is almost—" the crewman's report was cut off by a brilliant flash from the starboard side. He bravely regained his composure and continued. "Captain, we just lost the Indomitable, and the Arajkon Avenger is badly damaged. Fifteen seconds to the wormhole. Lead Star Destroyer down to forty percent shields and their bridge tower shields are badly damaged, but our shields will fail before theirs do."

Another explosion rocked the ship. "Main reactor just went off-line, switching to backup ... shields at fifteen percent ... we're not going to make it, Captain!"

From the Arajkon Avenger, a grim voice cut into the intercom. "You'll make it, old friend." The tiny, 400 metre long corvette was far too badly damaged to survive. Its weapons had been shot away, and great gouts of flame were shooting out of gaping wounds in its hull. It was slowly spinning out of control, but it still had one critical system left: its hyperdrive. On its bridge, a gloved hand pulled a lever, and the Arajkon Thunder seemed to elongate for an instant. Then, it flashed into hyperspace, and hurtled directly into the lead Imperial Star Destroyer.

Aboard the AR-512, Captain Tyrian did not even have time to scream as the Arajkon Avenger crashed headlong into his vessel's bridge tower at incredible speed. With a violence that defied description, the Star Destroyer's entire bridge tower was shorn away. In its place was a tangled maze of piping, structural supports, and twisted remnants of armour plating. Flames poured uncontrollably from the great open wound, and the crippled vessel spun violently to port. Panicked crewmen in its primary hull frantically tried to regain control. Now, the tight phalanx formation worked against the Imperial ships. Alarm klaxons blared as the other two Star Destroyers banked to avoid the uncontrollable, crippled vessel. And in the confusion, Captain Ruk's ship slipped into the wormhole.

As he gazed out his window at the flickering lights of the wormhole, Captain Ruk whispered to the void. "Farewell B'Rom, old friend. I will avenge you."

Chapter Five: The Test Begins

*"Offer the enemy a bait to lure him;
feign disorder and strike him."— Sun Tzu*

Commander Chang staggered into the smoke-filled bridge, pushing his way past damage-control teams. An acrid, foul-smelling gas was leaking into the room from a gaping hole in one of the bulkheads, and he could only hope that the fumes weren't toxic to human physiology. He lost his footing on the slippery deck and flailed out at a handrail, but fell heavily to the floor. He looked down, and saw with horror that his hands had plunged into the steaming intestines of a dead body. Recoiling with disgust, he dragged himself to his feet and attempted to wipe the bloody entrails from his hands. The stench of death was overpowering. *The familiar sights and sounds of war*, he thought. *It's hard to believe the Klingons find this sort of thing exhilarating.* He saw Captain Ruk on the other side of the bridge and shouted over the din. "Captain, how bad is the damage?"

Captain Ruk did not acknowledge him for a few moments, as he attempted to coordinate damage-control efforts. Eventually, he passed Chang and stopped long enough to speak. "We will survive, Commander. That is enough, and it is more than I can say for our escorts, both of which were destroyed. Now if you will excuse me—"

"Yes, I was told about your first officer's sacrifice. I'm very sorry to hear of the tragedy."

Ruk bowed his head momentarily. "Thank you, Commander. And now, I have matters I must attend to." He turned to walk away, but Chang moved slightly to stand in his path. "Captain, I need more information if I'm going to warn the Federation. Your first officer used his hyperdrive even though we were pulled out of warp— er, hyperspace, by an interdiction field. I thought that it was impossible to engage hyperdrive in an interdiction field."

Ruk grumbled to himself for a moment, and then reluctantly stopped to glare balefully at Chang. Chang, knowing the importance of gathering as much information as possible, stood his ground. When Ruk finally spoke, he spoke slowly, as if speaking to a small child. "We were pulled out of hyperspace by an interdiction field. But the interdicator cruisers can't project their gravity beams in all directions at once, and they had no idea what our approach vector would be. They had a lot of space to cover, so the fields weren't very strong and we overshot the interdiction field perimeter by a large margin before we slowed down to normal sublight speed.

"But still—"

Ruk cut off his objection. "We have better sublight acceleration than the interdicator cruisers, and we also had the benefit of starting out with a lot of initial velocity, while they did not. They were oriented away from the wormhole, so they had to rotate one

hundred eighty degrees and *then* accelerate, essentially from a dead stop. We simply outran them, until the fields were weak enough to engage hyperdrive. It's risky to make a hyperjump even in the outer fringes of an interdiction field, but that's irrelevant if you plan to crash into another vessel. B'Rom fought bravely, and made the ultimate sacrifice to ensure our survival. And now, if you will excuse me, I have work to do." With an air of impatience, he began to walk away.

"I see" Chang nodded, while silently adding this last piece of information to his growing mental catalogue of Imperial technology strengths and weaknesses. He felt that he was starting to get a basic grasp of the tactical strengths and weaknesses of hyperdrive, but he was still curious about many aspects of their technology, particularly the technology they had used to stabilize the wormhole. The trip back through the wormhole was accompanied with none of the sickening physical discomfort of the first trip— perhaps their technology protected them from the distortions, or perhaps the wormhole's stabilization eliminated the problem. *If only we knew more about how their propulsion technology works!*

He chased after Captain Ruk, who seemed to be ignoring him. But with only a few minutes left until they re-entered the Alpha Quadrant, every piece of information was precious. "Captain, I need to know more about your technology, and I need to know *now*. First, I need information on—"

With a blinding speed that Chang never expected, Captain Ruk's right arm flashed toward Chang's neck. Before Chang could react, powerful reptilian fingers were closing around his throat, blocking the flow of oxygen to his brain. He struggled to pull Ruk's fingers away from his throat, but the alien creature's strength was staggering. Ruk hoisted Chang up into the air like a rag doll, and Chang began to see black spots clouding his vision.

"You stand amid the bodies of my crew, Chang! Have you no respect?" Ruk roared. "How *dare* you interfere with my duties in your search for information? Don't lie to me, Commander. I see through it. I see through *you*! You don't expect us to survive, so you interfere at this *crucial* time to gather enough information for a burst transmission! You have even placed your men so that they can seize control of our communications gear on your orders! I know your plans ... do you take me for a fool?"

With this final taunt, Chang felt himself being hurled through the air. When he slammed into the bulkhead, he *heard* the impact rather than feeling it. His body seemed to go numb, and he collapsed to the floor in a heap. Moments later, the pain began to flow, as if slowly released from a floodgate. It started as a trickle, and slowly increased to a torrential flood. He rolled over in agony, and clutched at the area of his lower back which had borne the brunt of the impact. As he lay there, panting and groaning, Ruk continued to berate him. He could barely hear the tirade over his own miasma of pain and his jumbled thoughts. *How did he know? Have they been tracking us?* But Ruk wasn't finished thundering at him.

" ... so if we die trying to help you, then we die! But don't *dare* presume to give me orders on my ship! Arrogant mammal ... your lack of respect sickens me. Is *this* what we

can expect of your Federation?"

Chang could not muster a reply, and simply lay on the floor. When he finally struggled to his feet, he spied Ruk halfway across the bridge, talking to his helmsman. He fought back an impulse to attack Ruk, knowing that he was no match for the powerful alien. Instead, he slowly moved towards Ruk and decided that it would be best to smooth relations rather than alienate a potentially crucial ally. With his voice still hoarse, he managed to wheeze out a few words. "Captain, whatever I do, I do to protect my homeworld ... I meant no disrespect ... The safety of my people ..."

"Human, you may *ask* for information. But the next time you *demand* anything, I will crush you with my bare hands. We have already sacrificed much to help you— perhaps too much." Without waiting for a reply, Ruk turned and stalked toward his captain's chair. He began to bark orders at his crewmen. "We are approaching the wormhole terminus. Raise shields and prepare to engage hyperdrive evasion pattern as soon as we drop to sublight!"

Chang gripped the handrail and waited. Too soon, the wormhole's flickering colours reverted back into the familiar star-speckled blackness of normal space. He groaned inwardly as hundreds of enormous warships immediately became visible. But just as the enemy vessels began to hurl their devastating barrages of turbolaser fire at Ruk's ship, the stars before him elongated into streaks of light and the ship passed into hyperspace. Ten seconds later, the ship dropped into realspace, executed a sharp turn to starboard, and jumped into hyperspace again. Several more abrupt, short hyperspace jumps followed of varying lengths, and then the vessel cut its engines and began to drift. *Interesting evasion technique*, he thought to himself.

"Kanos' ships aren't likely to find us now. We're lucky they didn't have an interdiction field up and running— they must not be able to communicate with the other side of the wormhole." Ruk said to no one in particular. He turned to his helmsman. "Lay in a course for the Federation homeworld, as soon as you have achieved a fix on our location." Chang waited patiently as Ruk's crewmen scurried about the spacious bridge. The task of reprogramming the navi-computers for an entirely new galaxy was daunting but not impossible, and Chang was surprised at how little time passed before he heard a crewman announce that the navi-computer had successfully identified their position and plotted a course to Earth.

Captain Ruk smiled and cocked his head slightly. "Engage."

The stars elongated into brilliant streaks of light, and Captain Ruk's badly damaged starship leapt into hyperspace. Chang sat back against the wall and slowly slumped to the floor. His back still ached, and he would need to talk to the doctor. But he had succeeded— the glow of accomplishment almost compensated for the pain of Ruk's attack. *We're going to get home ... I never thought we would make it.* He smiled inwardly and walked haltingly, painfully toward the rear of the ship, to speak to his crew. A passing crewman stopped long enough to give a few words of advice.

"Earther, you need to learn some diplomacy skills."

The USS Enterprise pulled itself free of Earth Spacedock, and began to cruise away from Earth. Captain Picard settled back in his chair, eager to be away from the bonds of Earth's government bureaucracy and free to roam the vast reaches of interstellar space. No longer did Picard derive any pleasure whatsoever from revisiting Starfleet Headquarters. The Dominion War had helped the hawks climb in power and status: callous, hard-bitten veterans who tallied up body-counts like abstract scores in some sort of game, and who were all too enthusiastic to send more young men and women into the killing fields. Picard couldn't wait to leave them behind. "Helmsman, set course one fifteen mark three five, warp six."

The helmsman turned around slowly, and smiled an all-too-familiar self-satisfied grin at Picard. "Of course, *Mon Capitaine*. But some interesting things are about to happen right here— are you sure you don't want to stay a while?"

Picard felt his blood pressure skyrocket and he growled his reply from between clenched teeth. "What do you want *now*, Q?"

Abruptly, the Enterprise's real helmsman reappeared in a flash of light, and Q vanished. Picard impatiently drummed his fingers on his armrest, waiting for Q's inevitable theatrics. He didn't have to wait long. With another of his trademark flashes of light, Q appeared in full Arabian garb, sitting with crossed legs upon a floating Persian rug. "Oh, *Mon Capitaine!* Is that any way to greet an old friend? Whenever we meet, it's always the same! 'What do you want now, Q? What is this all about, Q? Why are you here, Q?' Why don't you ever ask how I'm doing? Or whether I'm *truly* happy with my existence?"

Picard was never particularly fond of Q, and he certainly wasn't growing fonder. "I don't have time for this, Q. Either say what you have to say, or get off my bridge!"

"Oh so prickly, *Mon Capitaine!* You should really learn to relax— maybe if you weren't so tense, you would still have your hair!"

Picard's anger was rising now. "Q, get—"

Q disappeared again, and reappeared on the Enterprise's main viewscreen. This time, he was wearing an unfamiliar military uniform, and appeared to be standing on the bridge of an alien spacecraft. His voice boomed out from the Enterprise's bridge audio system. "You spend entirely too much time in that ready-room of yours, Picard. Can you *seriously* be meditating and reading Shakespeare all that time? Or are you fantasizing about that woman you found in the Briar Patch? I wonder what you *really* do behind that closed door, Captain." A lascivious smile spread across Q's face.

Picard felt the hot rush of blood flowing into his face, and he was furious at Q for publicly mocking him in front of his crew again. *Doesn't a godlike being have better*

things to do than torment me? "Main viewer off!" he barked. Q looked mildly offended as his image winked from view, but he reappeared almost instantly. This time, he came striding out of the turbolift in the uniform of a Starfleet admiral.

In an imperious tone, Q boomed out in a stentorian voice: "The good citizens of Earth are about to face another test, Captain. And this time, you will *not* personally serve as humanity's proxy defender. Humanity will stand or fall based on the actions of Starfleet Command. A time of great darkness is coming, Captain. I personally expect you to fail this latest test—the arrogance of the human race is truly astounding, and it will bring you down this time. But then again, you *have* surprised the continuum before." He leaned closer to Picard, and whispered in his ear: "I'm going to bend the rules and give you a hint: at the most critical juncture, you may find that the most obvious action is the wrong one." And with another flash of light, he was gone.

"Q!" Picard bellowed. "I am tired of your games! Get back here and ... tell ..." his words trailed into silence, as he and every other officer on the bridge stared at the viewscreen. With no warning, a huge starship had suddenly appeared on his viewscreen, and it was heading directly toward the Enterprise.

Picard's mind was racing. *Do they have a cloaking device? How could they just appear without tripping the early warning systems?* But even as his mind began racing with questions, he began issuing orders instinctively. "Yellow alert! Raise shields!" The alarm klaxon sounded as his crew leapt into action. With Q's warning still ringing in his ears, Picard wanted to tread cautiously. This alien spacecraft had made no overtly aggressive moves, but he knew full well that starships did not normally travel under cloak without sinister intent. "Data, report!"

"Captain, the alien vessel's subspace signature does not match any starship type in the database. Its technology is completely alien to us. It is approximately twelve hundred metres long and eight times our mass, with dozens of separate weapon emplacements. We are scanning traces of neutronium and several unknown elements in the hull, but it is difficult to obtain accurate scan data because they appear to be operating some kind of sensor-jamming field. Their hull shows signs of severe damage, with numerous large breaches. I am detecting several large plasma leaks, and more than half of their weapon emplacements appear to be inoperative. Their shields are raised, and their weapons systems are armed."

Picard stood arrow-straight, and stared intently at the behemoth on the viewscreen. "Thank you, Mr. Data. Arm phasers but do not lock on target. Let's not provoke them—this is a standard first contact situation." he said cautiously.

"Hailing, sir. They are responding."

"Put it on main viewer."

A man in a Federation uniform immediately appeared on the viewscreen. "Captain

Picard, this is Commander Chang of the USS Carolina."

Data turned in his seat. "Captain, the USS Carolina disappeared over six weeks ago, following a battle with Jem'Hadar warships. The ship and its crew were presumed lost in action."

Picard straightened his uniform and turned back toward the main viewscreen with a quizzical expression on his face. "Commander, I have just been told that you're dead. May I presume that my information is in error?"

The man on the viewscreen smiled weakly. "Yes, Captain. I'm alive, and so are many of my crew. But Captain Trent was killed in action, and the Carolina was destroyed by hostile forces. We chased a Jem'Hadar battlecruiser through a wormhole and found ourselves in another galaxy, halfway across the universe. We found ourselves in the middle of a major battle, and were caught in the crossfire. The Carolina was destroyed, and we were captured. As you can see, we escaped and found ourselves an alternate ride home."

Picard allowed himself the luxury of a smile. "I see. Your new accommodations are interesting, to say the least. Do you think your benefactors would be willing to lower their shields and disarm their weapons? We take a dim view of heavily armed starships cruising about within firing range of Earth."

Chang looked embarrassed. "Our hosts are ... shall we say, somewhat guarded. They insisted on dropping into realspace with shields raised and weapons armed, but I may be able to convince them to relax a little bit. Let me see what I can do."

"Do your best, Commander. If your hosts would like to choose a representative, we can beam you down to Earth for a full diplomatic welcoming committee."

"I'll see what I can do about the shields, but Captain, my hosts don't have transporters and are unwilling to undergo the transportation process. I've explained it to them, and they appear to have some sort of religious or philosophical objection to the concept."

"I see. Are they in possession of a shuttlecraft? Perhaps they would be amenable to visiting Earth the old-fashioned way."

"Apparently, they would rather not leave their ship. My new hosts are ... difficult to deal with, Captain. Perhaps it would be best if I simply transport to Starfleet Headquarters with some of my command crew. I have extremely important information, Captain. Information which is vital to the survival of the Federation."



After six hours of intense briefings, Chang had briefed Starfleet Command on what he knew.

"Commander, are you absolutely *sure* that there is no possibility of diplomatic

resolution?" Admiral Keyes was one of the few "doves" left in Starfleet Command. His voice had been increasingly ignored during the Dominion War, when the hawks had effectively taken control.

"Yes. Hundreds of my crewmen were tortured to death while in captivity, and I witnessed the destruction of an entire planet with my own eyes. I don't think that there is any possibility of negotiation with such an enemy."

"Then you feel we should attack the wormhole and close it."

"Yes, sir."

"And you are comfortable with the fact that this will put the Federation in the position of being the aggressor in this war? I remind you that this Empire hasn't taken any aggressive actions in Federation territory yet, despite more than six weeks of lead time."

Chang was incredulous. "No aggressive actions? Captain Trent is dead. Our ship was destroyed. Hundreds of crewmen were tortured to death! How can you—"

"I remind you that all of those events occurred in *their* territory, where you were unwelcome invaders. I appreciate your feelings, but those events do *not* constitute acts of war against the Federation."

"Admiral Keyes! With all due respect—" Chang began to protest, but was cut off by the President.

"Gentlemen, I appreciate Commander Chang's concerns, and I agree that based on the information at our disposal, this Empire should be considered an extreme threat. However, I do not feel that we should adopt the position of drawing first blood. That would run counter to the entire philosophy of the Federation. Moreover, our allies and enemies in the Alpha Quadrant will perceive us in an entirely different light if we attack an enemy who has thus far taken no direct action against us. This is a serious quandary, gentlemen. I will *not* unilaterally start a war."

Admiral James "Bull" Halsey, a barrel-chested, grizzled old war veteran, chose this moment to stand. Even the President stopped to hear what he had to say, for Halsey was a man of no small repute among the military. He claimed to be a direct descendant of another Admiral Halsey, who served with distinction in the American Navy hundreds of years ago during the 20th century's so-called Second World War. Like his predecessor, he was blunt, gruff, and aggressive. And like his predecessor, he was ill-suited to peace time and well suited to warfare. Keyes resented Halsey's growing prominence in Starfleet Command but grudgingly acknowledged his brilliant military successes.

"Mr. President, I have an alternate plan."



Captain Ruk was startled by the shimmering humanoid form that suddenly appeared on his bridge. "Chang?"

"Yes, Ruk. I'm back."

"Something which looks like Chang is standing on this bridge, but you aren't Chang. You're a clone."

"More of that religious nonsense, eh Ruk?" Chang's demeanour of subservient humility had evaporated now that he was in the presence of Starfleet Command.

"You can call it nonsense if you wish. But my perception of time, space, and life extends beyond yours. You are but the latest in a long line of transporter clones created from the corpse of the original Commander Chang. The original Commander Chang has been dead for years."

Chang was growing irritable, and he didn't like the air of confidence and finality in Ruk's voice. "Enough philosophical discussions, Ruk. The Empire is coming, and we intend to stop them. We need your ship."

"My ship? For what?"

"As you can imagine, we're not confident that we can destroy the Imperial installations on both sides of the wormhole, to shut it down. Instead, we theorize that a cascaded combination of inverse graviton and chroniton particles may set up a first, second, and possibly third-order harmonic oscillations in some of the subspace strata of the wormhole. A carefully calibrated pulse emission may create these harmonics. We've determined that the subspace distortions caused by a hyperspace jump will amplify the pulse and modulate—"

Ruk cut him off with a wave of his hand. "Spare me this nonsensical technobabble, Chang. How does my ship fit in to your long-winded plan?"

"The device will only work in conjunction with a hyperdrive unit. It might take years to study your hyperdrive technology and adapt it to your ships, and we don't have the time. We need to close that wormhole *now*, before Kanos can send thousands of ships through. We will install a special device aboard your ship, after hollowing out some of the aft section. We will jump to the wormhole, and activate the device at its end-point. The pulse should set up the subspace harmonic, and destabilize the wormhole." Chang suppressed a smile. This plan would solve all of the Federation's problems in one fell swoop, without having to pull hundreds of ships off the front line. In spite of his gruff demeanour and wildly aggressive style, Admiral Halsey could still come up with beautifully crafted schemes.

Ruk locked eyes with him, and for a moment, Chang had the distinct feeling that something was probing at his mind. Ruk closed his eyes, and when they opened, they were full of rage. "Your thoughts betray you, human. You forgot to mention that you

aren't sure this will work, so you want to use our ship to keep the Empire from determining who launched the attack! You *also* forgot to mention that this special device of yours will release this energy pulse by exploding like a *bomb*, and taking our ship with it! Do you take me for a fool? You lied about the Federation's size and strength. You lied about wanting to help us. You want to destroy our vessel and close the wormhole to rid your precious Federation of a potential threat, don't you? You may think that your actions are justified to save a few hundred worlds, but I am trying to save an entire *galaxy*! You sicken me, Chang. Your deceptions never end."

Chang tried to suppress his shock. *Damn it— is Ruk telepathic?* "Captain, I assure you that this is not the case at all."

"Silence!" Ruk thundered. "Get off my bridge *now*, or I will kill you where you stand."

Chang sighed heavily, and tapped his comm-badge. "Chang to Earth Spacedock ... " he paused for a few moments, " ... Blitzkrieg."

Dozens of Federation marines suddenly materialized aboard the bridge, with weapons pointed at key personnel. Chang pulled out a hidden hand phaser and pointed it directly at Ruk's head. Too late, Ruk reached out again with the Force. He reached deep enough into Chang's mind to know that more than two thousand Federation marines had boarded his ship in various places, and were attempting to seize control of his vessel. He could faintly hear the sounds of combat as the Federation troops ran into stiff resistance.

"Mammalian filth! This vessel is more than one hundred years old— it has survived more than fifty fleet engagements, and I value it far more highly than I do *your* life!" Captain Ruk was enraged, and he seemed to be trying to burn a hole through Chang with his glare.

"I'm not impressed by your blustering, Ruk. I don't enjoy having to do this, but you leave me no choice. The safety of the Federation is the *only* thing that matters to me."

"On the contrary, Earther. You *do* enjoy doing this. But your efforts are doomed to failure." Ruk closed his eyes, and visualized the helmsman's control panel. As Chang and the others watched in amusement, Ruk seemed to enter a meditative state. Chang began to speak, with contempt dripping from his voice. "You can pray to your gods if you like, but they won't help you now."

Suddenly, switches began to move of their own accord on the control panel. The ship began to move, and Chang looked back at the control panel in shock. "What the hell? The controls are moving!"

He dived toward the control panel, but it was too late. The hyperdrive lever moved as if guided by an invisible hand, and the serene backdrop of stars shifted and transformed into the swirling vortex of hyperspace before his eyes. Shaking with rage, he pointed his phaser at Ruk again. "Enough tricks, Ruk! I am taking control of this— urghh" his voice

trailed off into nothingness, and his phaser clattered to the ground as an invisible noose seemed to tighten around his throat.

Ruk smiled with satisfaction as the brash young Federation officer collapsed to the deck. He could feel the life draining out of the human, but he felt no remorse. Chang was dead already— he just didn't know it. At that moment, the bridge erupted into pandemonium. Eight wookiees burst into the bridge with guns blazing, and the Federation troopers, still moving to assist their commander, were caught off guard. Ruk hit the deck as one of the wookiees brought up a heavy Blastech riot gun, and sprayed the room with automatic fire. Fifteen Federation marines died in the first onslaught, their charred bodies falling gracelessly to the ground like puppets whose strings had been cut.

The others tried to return fire, but were quickly overwhelmed by the combination of reckless wookiees and the bridge crew themselves, who unholstered their weapons the instant the Federation soldiers turned to face the wookiee threat. Blaster bolts sizzled through the air. Where they found flesh, they transformed healthy tissue into burned, smoking ash. Phaser bolts arced through the smoke in return, but the outcome was inevitable. Into the midst of the fray leapt Ruk, who had drawn a light sabre and was slashing through the Federation ranks like a man possessed. Rage filled him, and he could feel the power of the Dark Side beckoning. He sliced a man in half, then turned to deflect a phaser beam. He could feel the anger rising in him, and he could feel the desire to kill. He wanted to rend their bodies, to tear them apart and scatter their remains across the galaxy. But he fought back, and regained control over his emotions long enough to stop his headlong rush.

"Cease fire!" he roared. Only four Federation marines remained, using the sensor console for cover. He looked back at the command deck, where Chang lay unconscious, but alive. He addressed the surviving marines in an imperious tone. "You cannot win. I never told Chang about the Balmorran SD-10 war droids on board. War droids don't show up on lifeform scans, gentlemen. Your boarding parties are outnumbered and outgunned. Your mission is doomed to failure. If you wish to live, surrender now."

Chapter Six: Aftermath

*"When capable, feign incapacity.
When active, inactivity"*– Sun Tzu

Captain Picard paced restlessly in his ready room. His mysterious orders were maddening, and in his view, quite an injustice. He had amassed an outstanding record of performance in first–contact situations, and he had allowed himself the luxury of assuming that he would be part of the diplomatic welcoming committee for Commander Chang's new acquaintances. First contacts were always an exhilarating time– the chance to encounter a new species, a new civilization, an alien culture ... it was the sort of thing that he lived for.

But instead, he was immediately ordered to proceed to an unexplored star system deep in Federation territory. Two weeks at maximum cruising speed, even for the Enterprise–E's advanced new engines. After two days, he had heard nothing from Starfleet Command despite repeated requests for information. So he had nothing to do, but pace in his ready room. Pace, wait, and wonder how the critical first contact was going. He was about to get his answer.

"Captain, we are receiving a priority one transmission from Starfleet Command."

"I'll take it here," Picard ordered. *I had better get some answers ...*

Admiral Halsey and Admiral Keyes appeared on his viewscreen. Halsey spoke first. "Captain Picard, I believe it is time you were briefed on the situation. Two days ago, an alien spacecraft appeared in orbit around Earth as you know. We have ascertained that this spacecraft was a rebel ship, fleeing from a totalitarian government regime in another galaxy. This galaxy is connected to our own galaxy by a wormhole which was inadvertently discovered by the USS Carolina during a combat mission. The totalitarian regime in control of this galaxy destroyed the USS Carolina, and tortured many of its crew to death. Based on our intelligence reports, this very same regime is now preparing a massive attack upon Earth, as a precursor to a war of conquest. They intend to conquer the Federation, and use us as a beach head in the Alpha Quadrant."

Picard took a few moments to digest this news, and when he finally recovered from the shock, he quickly spoke his mind. "Admiral, you *can't* be serious. In two days, you feel you can ascertain the nature of an alien government whose representatives you have yet to meet? This is a first contact situation! We should be sending diplomatic envoys, learning about their culture, their history–"

Halsey looked shocked. "Captain, perhaps you didn't *hear* me. They *destroyed* the USS Carolina, and tortured hundreds of its crewmen to death!"

Picard adopted his best stentorian tone. "There *may* have been extenuating circumstances, Admiral! We cannot jump to conclusions until we have more evidence!"

More work is necessary before we decide that an alien government is truly hostile!"

Halsey smiled. "Jean-Luc, you haven't changed a bit. I suppose I shouldn't be surprised ... perhaps if you had been involved in the first contact incident, that alien ship might still be here."

Picard's brow creased with concern. "Admiral, am I to take that to mean that it is no longer in orbit around Earth?"

Halsey fidgeted slightly. "I'm afraid so, Captain. Our intelligence reports indicate that the Empire is planning to attack Earth in two weeks with roughly fifty starships. Each of these starships is *twice* the size of the one you encountered, and armed proportionately. They use an incredibly advanced form of propulsion technology. Your two-week trip would take one of their vessels less than *one hour*. They call it hyperdrive, and we discovered that it creates highly unusual distortions in the space-time continuum which could be theoretically used to destabilize the wormhole. We decided to seize the rebels' ship--"

"You did *what?*" Picard couldn't believe his ears. He had always known Halsey to be wildly aggressive-- his nickname was "Bull", and for good reason. During the Dominion War, he had masterminded Operation Tanaka, in which he recklessly attacked a vastly superior fleet with only 150 vessels. It looked like it would be an utter disaster for the Federation, but during the inevitable rout and counterattack, he led the Jem'Hadar forces on a wild goose chase for more than six hours, across a distance of more than a light-year. Throughout the duration of the pursuit, his ships fired hundreds of aft torpedoes which almost invariably missed their pursuers. Little did the Jem'Hadar know that the torpedoes were in fact long-range probes, equipped with mini-warheads. While the Jem'Hadar chased Halsey across the sector, hundreds of long-range low-yield torpedoes were streaking toward more than 30 unarmed, virtually defenseless antimatter refuelling facilities behind enemy lines. By the time the Jem'Hadar realized their mistake, it was too late. They had lost more than 150,000 tons of antimatter fuel, along with dozens of tankers and antimatter production stations, and even an entire *shipyard*. By the time the costs were tallied up, Halsey's little stunt had given the Federation a *crucial* strategic victory over the Dominion.

However, when starry-eyed Starfleet recruiters waxed poetic over the brilliant Admiral "Bull" Halsey and Operation Tanaka, they invariably forgot one small detail: the loss of more than 40,000 Starfleet crew members' lives. The men and women who sat behind desks and crunched numbers at Starfleet Headquarters found this to be an acceptable trade-off for an important logistical advantage, but no man of conscience would casually shrug off the deaths of 40,000 men and women as "acceptable losses". In Picard's opinion, men like Halsey couldn't feel true *pain* at the deaths of the men and women under their command-- instead, they only feel regret at the loss of strategically and tactically useful *personnel*. By Halsey's way of thinking, those men and women were numbers on a balance sheet, and if the numbers on the other side were larger than the numbers on *your* side, then you patted yourself on the back for a well-earned victory. This sort of stark logic was the stuff of war, but it made Picard's blood run cold. Picard had never liked Halsey and probably never would, but at this particular time, in this

particular place, Halsey had the skill, the nerve, and, although Picard found the thought distasteful, the *ruthlessness* to win.

Halsey, for his part, thought of Picard as a bombastic political influence—peddler who was content to sermonize while others had to dirty their hands with the unfortunate necessities of war. It was all too easy for someone like Picard to make his eloquent speeches about principles and conscience. But while Picard sermonized, Halsey knew that real soldiers were out on the front lines, putting their lives on the line to protect humanity. What good would speeches and sermons be if humanity was reduced to the status of Dominion slaves? Halsey had nothing but contempt for men like Picard, but he had to admit that Picard's diplomatic skills had proven critically useful for forestalling or preventing hostilities in the past. "Captain, if I may be allowed to continue?"

Captain Picard pursed his lips, set them into a frown, and nodded his head.

"Good. Now, as I was saying, we decided to seize their ship because it was our best chance of stopping an invasion. It could reach the wormhole in hours, while it would have taken weeks to deploy a fleet. Weeks which we did *not* have. It had the hyperdrive technology, which we needed to make our plan work. And we thought that we could take the ship easily. Instead, the aliens successfully defeated our boarding parties and disappeared. We waited for two days, in the hope that our boarding parties would eventually be able to take control of the ship and return it here. But after two days, we have declared our boarding parties missing in action, and the operation a failure."

"Admiral, this is a disaster of *unprecedented* proportions! I can't believe the President permitted this nonsense— this goes against *everything* the Federation stands for! If we conducted all of our first contact operations this way, we—"

"We would *never* have given the Dominion a foothold on our territory! We will *not* make that mistake again, Captain. This time, we hoped to deal with a deadly threat *before* it was too late. Our fatal mistake lay in underestimating the defensive capabilities of the alien spacecraft."

"Admiral, with all due respect, did you even *consider* negotiating before undertaking this aggressive action?"

Admiral Keyes finally spoke. "*Some* of us did." Admiral Halsey shot him a venomous look, but Keyes ignored it and continued. "While Halsey was preparing his attack, I gave the order to send you to your current destination. We have named it the Gate System, for obvious reasons. I'm sorry I couldn't explain myself earlier, but the President wasn't willing to divulge information until we knew the fate of Halsey's operation. He now agrees that we have no choice but to attempt to open diplomatic negotiations as per *normal* Federation policy." He raised his eyebrow and made an almost imperceptible gesture in Halsey's direction. Halsey noticed the gesture and fumed, but said nothing.

Keyes continued. "Your mission is to make contact with the Imperials, and attempt to open negotiations. Ascertain if they really are planning an invasion of the quadrant, and

attempt to forestall any such invasion in favour of diplomatic actions. This may be an extremely dangerous mission, Captain. But your ship is the fastest in the fleet, so you can get there before anyone else. We are sending a full diplomatic team on the USS Arclight, but they're four days behind you. Stall them, or better yet, convince them to talk. I trust that you will perform admirably, Jean-Luc. I am sending you all of the intel data and linguistic databases at our disposal. You will have ample time to examine this information on your way to the Gate System. Godspeed, Captain."

Captain Picard smiled. "Thank you, Admiral Keyes. Hopefully, we can conduct ourselves like a *civilized* society from this point forward." The not-so-subtle dig was not lost on Admiral Halsey, whose face turned an angry red shade. Before Halsey could speak, Picard cut off the transmission and sat back in his chair. He smiled to himself, and started examining Keyes' intelligence data. *Looks like I'll be in charge of a first contact operation after all.*



The briefings had been conducted. The ship had been prepared. All was in a state of readiness, and now Picard could only wait, and re-read the intel files for the third time. His research had left him hungry for more information, but cautious at the enormous violence and power that this "Empire" was clearly capable of wielding. He was particularly interested in this mysterious energy field they called "The Force". Was it unique to their galaxy, or an invalid superstitious belief? Or was it related somehow, to the powers of the Traveller, or the ancient Vulcan psionic weapon he encountered many years earlier? Could it be that these aliens had somehow learned how to harness the mysterious "energy of life" that the Traveller mentioned? These questions, and a hundred more like them, fascinated Picard but he knew they would have to wait. If Starfleet Intelligence was correct, his primary concern would be the protection of the Federation against a hostile and lethal enemy, not the accumulation of academic knowledge. Still, he felt something of a schoolboy's excitement as they approached the system. A massive gravitational distortion and subspace sensor jamming field was obscuring their readings, but as they dropped out of warp, they were able to obtain reliable data. And more importantly, they were able to obtain clear *visual* information. For the first time in years, Picard was awed.

Directly ahead of the Enterprise floated a gigantic ring-like structure. Its sheer scale dwarfed anything Picard had previously seen, short of the Dyson Sphere. It was so large that a moon could fit through it, and although it looked fragile, almost wisp-like, Picard suspected that the ring was much thicker than it appeared. An incredible profusion of light and colour flowed around the ring, creating what appeared to be a rapidly spinning pinwheel in space. The lights seemed to flicker and modulate, in an almost hypnotic pattern, and Picard couldn't help but stare at the strangely beautiful sight. The idea that someone could create such a structure in less than 2 months was staggering, and his knowledge of the necessary industrial capability was such that he knew with confidence that the Federation couldn't hope to build such a structure even over a period of many years. Near the centre of the ring, a small group of starships were barely visible, approaching the Enterprise at high speed.

"Captain, the ring structure is incredibly massive, and is approximately twelve hundred kilometres in diameter. The ring is at *least* one kilometre thick at all points on its circumference. I am reading several *million* life forms in the ring, which appears to have only minimal armament and shielding. The ring structure appears to be designed to stabilize the wormhole and make it safe even for very large starships to traverse. There appears to be a stream of highly energetic matter moving around the ring's circumference, at such speed that it is making approximately seventy nine point five revolutions per second. There are waves of gravimetric, subspace, and even chronometric distortions emanating from the ring structure, and interacting with the wormhole."

Picard stared at the ring for a few more moments, digesting the information. But he had more pressing concerns than his fascination with this engineering marvel. "Data, what about the approaching fleet? Can you tell me anything about them?"

"I have very little substantive information, Captain. The fleet consists of over two hundred vessels, most of which appear to be the Star Destroyers mentioned prominently in the intelligence files. At sixteen hundred metres in length and approximately fifteen times our mass, they seem to match the descriptions in Commander Chang's report. They are arranged in a defensive formation around a massive red vessel, approximately seventeen point six kilometres long and several thousand times our mass. There is an extremely high probability that this vessel is the Crimson Blade, which Commander Chang described as the flagship of Admiral Kanos. There are also several vessels which appear to function solely as jamming vessels. They are projecting extremely high-energy subspace and gravimetric distortions over a very large region of interplanetary space in this system, thus making it difficult to obtain accurate sensor readings. They are approaching at high sublight speed, Captain. They will be within range of our weapons in two minutes."

"Hail them." Repeated hails were sent, but the vessels continued to approach. There were no responses to the hails, and no indication that the aliens were anything but hostile. The tension level on the bridge began to rise, as every officer felt the pressure of the primeval fight-or-flee response. Picard had felt this kind of trepidation before. No matter how many times one entered a completely foreign situation, it was never possible to truly eliminate the instinctive feeling of fear.

Data chose this moment to speak. "Captain, they are almost within weapons range. Their shields are up, and their weapons are armed. I *strongly* recommend that we raise our shields."

"Recommendation noted, Data." Picard stood resolutely, and watched the ships approach.

Riker was having great difficulty controlling his emotions. "Captain, I agree with Data. They are clearly aggressive, and they are *refusing* to answer our hails! We *must* raise our shields and arm our weapons!"

"I don't think so, Number One. We cannot afford to provoke them." Picard could feel

Riker's eyes boring into the back of his neck, but the stakes were far too high to play the role of space cowboy. In spite of the enormous risk to his vessel, Picard refused to take any action that might potentially result in a serious threat to the billions of lives at stake. His years of experience had given him certain instincts, and one of those instincts told him now that an enemy with such vast resources and technology would not pointlessly destroy a lone starship that posed no threat. The Enterprise's lack of shielding was his way of saying that he wanted to communicate, and the intel files on Kanos suggested that he was too thoughtful to simply fire upon a defenseless ship. The monstrous fleet continued to approach.

Abruptly, just as the fleet approached point-blank weapons range, the ships began to break formation. They spread outwards in a starburst pattern and split into smaller combat groups which flanked the Enterprise and surrounded it. As they peeled away from the massive command ship at their centre, the blood-red dagger-shaped behemoth continued to approach, until its enormous bulk was positioned directly in front of the Enterprise. *David and Goliath*, Picard thought to himself. Riker was almost beside himself with frustration. "Captain—"

"You have your orders, Number One. Hold your ground. We will take no actions that might antagonize the alien ships— they clearly have us at a disadvantage, and I want to assure them that we are no threat." The ships were now surrounding the Enterprise, and Picard didn't want to think about the sheer number of weapons that must now be targeted on his ship. But they did not fire. The Enterprise and the fleet floated in space for two long minutes, before the mysterious aliens broke the silence.

"Captain, they are hailing us."

"Put it on screen, ensign." Picard tried not to let his great relief show. His confidence in his own judgement had seriously wavered during the long delay, but the hail was vindication for his decision. Someday, he knew, he might make a mistake and cost his crew their lives. Or worse yet, he might cost *billions* of Federation citizens their lives. But if all went well, today would *not* be that day.

Admiral Kanos immediately appeared on the Enterprise bridge main viewer. "Greetings, Captain Picard of the USS Enterprise. I apologize for the long delay in communication."

"Greetings. I take it that you are Admiral Kanos of the Crimson Blade?"

Kanos raised an eyebrow but did not appear particularly surprised. "It appears we already know about each other, Captain. I presume that all of your intelligence reports come from the Federation officers we captured, and their new rebel friends?"

"And your intelligence reports come from a harsh interrogation of those same captured Federation officers, correct?"

Kanos grimaced. "Correct, Captain. You have to understand that we thought they were

invaders or rebel sympathizers, and responded appropriately. In fact, we were initially convinced that the entire Federation was merely another Rebel support enclave until we did some more research on your organization."

"I see. But I hope you can understand our continued skepticism, *particularly* when you have hundreds of heavily armed warships operating in our territory. Perhaps if you were to remove those ships from our territory so that we may discuss possible trade negotiations without threat of violence ..."

Kanos' expression grew darker. "Those ships are here to *protect* our installation, Captain. I'm sure you appreciate that one would want to maintain a strong defensive posture around such a structure, particularly when it is still not complete. Are you suggesting that I leave millions of civilian employees of Sienar Fleet Systems defenseless? There are men, women, and children aboard the installation who are Imperial citizens. As such, I have a duty to ensure their safety. The fleet stays."

Picard was displeased but hardly surprised by that response. "Of course, I understand. But surely a much *smaller* fleet of ships would still be more than adequate to protect this installation. Furthermore, I give you my personal guarantee that this installation will not be attacked if you demonstrate a willingness to negotiate. If it is territory, resources, or trade that you want, I'm sure we can come to a mutual understanding without the need for posturing or violence. If you have researched my history, then you know that I do not make promises lightly."

Kanos looked like he was about to speak, but instead, he muted the audio on his end and conferred with a robed, shadowy figure standing in the background. Picard could not tell whether Kanos was conferring with an advisor, or superior. "Counsellor?"

Counsellor Troi's brow was creased with concentration. "Captain, Kanos is in full command of his fleet. The other man is neither his superior or his subordinate. I don't understand the exact nature of their hierarchal relationship, but they appear to be conferring as equals. The other man ... he is evil, Captain. There is a darkness about him which I cannot penetrate— each time I try, the effort leaves me ... drained. It .. hurts, Captain. Kanos seems human, like you or me. But that other man ... there is something about him which is *more* than human, and which is *less* than human at the same time. Almost as if he is engaged in a symbiotic relationship with another being."

"Like a Trill?"

Troi looked like she was starting to wilt in her chair, almost as if something were dragging her down. "No ... whatever he is joined with ... it has ... neither a distinct ... personality ... or ... or ... presence." Her brow furrowed further, and she appeared to be in almost physical pain. "He ... has great power, Captain. This must be that Force we were warned about. That man ... must be ... a Sith Lord. I can't ..." Troi's words trailed off as she lapsed into unconsciousness. A medic rushed forward to examine her, but she did not appear to be in serious trouble. Her breathing appeared to be steady, and Picard turned his attention back to the matter at hand. *A Sith Lord! If the intel data is correct, they're*

telepathic. He may be able to read my thoughts, and he might have even disabled Troi! I must tread carefully ...

Kanos appeared to be have finished conferring with his mysterious advisor, who stepped back into the shadows. Picard was sure he could see a pair of deep-set eyes from beneath the mysterious figure's hood, and he had the uneasy feeling that he was being examined. His instinctive sense of violation was tempered by a guilty realization that he had casually employed Troi's services in precisely this manner for years, without once giving it a second thought. Kanos stepped forward, and motioned to one of his crewmen to restore audio.

"Captain, I don't like diplomats. I don't like politicians. But I appreciate a brave man, and your refusal to raise your shields marks you as either brave or foolish. My research into your service record leads me to believe the former, and I have discussed this matter with my colleague. We have decided that as a show of good faith, and as a gesture of goodwill to offset the unfortunate incident involving the interrogation of your men, I will withdraw to Imperial territory along with most of the defense fleet. I will leave five star destroyers here, as a light defense force. Should you foolishly decide to *attack* this installation, you will find that five Star Destroyers are a more formidable force than you may expect. In any case, an attack upon this installation would be considered an act of war, and we would respond in kind. In the meantime, I will wait on the other side of the wormhole for one week, to provide enough time for your diplomatic envoys to arrive aboard your slow, primitive warp-driven vessels."

Picard bristled at Kanos' gratuitous rhetoric, but this was no time for posturing. "Your gesture is very much appreciated, Admiral. I promise you that you will not be sorry. With any luck, we may be ushering in a new era of co-operation between our peoples."

Kanos bowed slightly, and smiled briefly before his image faded from view. The great fleet began to break formation, and they performed a complex ballet of movement until they were all arranged in their layered formation again, around Kanos' behemoth vessel. With a brilliant flare of their sublight engines, the vast assemblage of warships accelerated toward the wormhole. They hurtled through the vast man-made ring, entered the wormhole, and disappeared. Nothing remained of the imposing fleet but five forlorn star destroyers and a trail of ionized gas.



Picard's looked at the empty space where Kanos' fleet had just been, but his reverie was not to last long. Data had been examining some anomalous sensor readings and he had just come to a conclusion. "Captain, we may have a problem."

"Yes, Data?"

"Captain, I am detecting a group of sensor ghosts approaching our position at high warp."

"Sensor ghosts?" Picard sensed something seriously wrong.

"Yes sir. The readings are somewhat anomalous, consisting mostly of low-order subspace harmonics. The energy signature is consistent with Romulan Warbirds, sir. The sensor ghosts appear and then disappear, and it was only after repeated sensor echoes that I was able to determine their velocity. They are approaching at approximately warp nine point nine."

Picard was taken aback. "Nine point nine? But that's well above the known maximum speed of a Romulan warbird."

"That is correct, sir. Clearly, our intelligence data is obsolete. However, it may appear that their high velocity is overcoming the ability of their cloaking devices to shield their emissions. That would explain our ability to track them, Captain. They will arrive in less than four hours. Although it is difficult to obtain precise figures, I estimate that there are roughly forty vessels."

Forty Romulan Warbirds! Picard knew that there was only one reason the Romulans could be sending such a large force so deep into Federation territory. They knew about the Gate System, and they were coming to destroy the alien wormhole stabilizer. They had tried this insanity once before, when they attempted to obliterate the Founders' homeworld. They failed, and Picard had no doubt they would fail again. The energy readings from those warships were high enough to make Picard seriously question the viability of a direct assault, even with the 8 to 1 numerical advantage the Romulans enjoyed. However, the Imperials were not expecting an attack, and they might be incapable of detecting cloaked ships. The Romulans had to be stopped *here*, or they might start a full-scale war.

"Helm, lay in an intercept course. I intend to stop this lunacy before it starts."

Two hours later, the Enterprise was standing toe-to-toe with a Romulan warbird. Picard's fists were clenched, and he was vociferously arguing with the Romulan mission commander. It was pointless, of course. It was virtually impossible to have a reasoned discussion with a Romulan— they treated every conversation like some sort of chess game.

"We are on the verge of opening diplomatic negotiations with an alien race! They are under Starfleet protection, and you have *no right* to be conducting operations in Federation territory! This is a blatant violation of the Neutral Zone treaty!"

As usual, the Romulan on his viewscreen was unimpressed by his vehemence, and spoke in the same infuriatingly measured tones that he had heard from every other Romulan captain he had ever encountered. "Captain Picard, we are merely acting to protect the Romulan Empire from a potentially deadly threat. We've seen the files— haven't you? The last time we encountered a dangerous enemy like this, it turned out to be a disaster. Our only concern is for the safety and well-being of *all* our peoples. That alien installation must be destroyed, or we may be facing another war! Can't you see this, Picard?"

Picard's eyes opened wide with surprise at the Romulan's arrogance. "Well, I hope you will forgive me if I am *skeptical* of your judgement! You helped bring about the Dominion disaster, by attempting to eradicate their homeworld!"

"Captain, surely you can't be so naïve as to believe that the Dominion would have entertained the notion of diplomatic negotiations had we not launched our attack. Our only mistake was in not *successfully* eradicating them from the universe." That same smug smile spread across the Romulan's face again. Captain Picard was not a violent man by nature, but Romulans were maddening enough to make him think of becoming one.

Picard decided that it was time to end this pointless debate. "I don't have time to debate this. You are in violation of the treaty stipulations, and I am hereby *ordering* you to stand down, and return to Romulan territory."

"And if we refuse?"

"Then I will take whatever actions are necessary, to protect the lives of several million sentient beings who have been entrusted to my protection. We stand at the precipice, either of a new age of intergalactic relations, or of a new age of death and destruction. I would prefer the former, and I will take whatever actions are necessary to stop you."

For the first time, the Romulan's placid face changed expression, as he laughed out loud. "Captain, surely you must be joking! One Federation starship against forty Romulan warbirds? Do you value the lives of your crew so little, Picard?"

"If the cause is just, we are all prepared to give our lives in defense of our beliefs. You have ten seconds to power down your weapons and reverse course."

"Captain, surely—"

"Eight seconds!"

"Captain—"

"Six seconds!"

"You leave me no choice, Captain. I will not—"

"Two seconds!"

The time interval passed. Picard knew that the Romulans would never back down, particularly with such a strong tactical advantage in their favour. But if he were to leave, and allow the Romulans an unimpeded path to attack the alien installation ... there was only one choice.

"Target the lead warbird with phasers and quantum torpedoes. Maximum yield."

Picard ordered quietly. His weapons officer grimly followed orders.

The Romulan still couldn't believe his ears. "Captain, you will be destroyed! I am giving you a chance—"

"Fire."

Chapter Seven: First Blood

"Soldiers gain strength from rage" – Sun Tzu

For a moment seemingly frozen in time, the USS Enterprise floated motionless in space, before a vastly superior force of 40 Romulan warbirds. In an instant, the false tranquility dissolved into an explosion of violence. The Enterprise leapt forward into the midst of the Romulan formation, spitting phaser blasts and quantum torpedoes from every available launcher and array.

The lead warbird took the brunt of the attack. In a few impossibly chaotic seconds, her frame shuddered with more than 20 quantum torpedo detonations and an almost continuous stream of phaser blasts. Aboard her bridge, Admiral Feh'rok screamed as he pulled a piece of shrapnel out of his leg, and struggled agonizingly to his feet. He was stunned by the ferocity of Picard's attack, and he was dismayed to see that more than half his bridge crew lay dead or dying. He never seriously expected Picard to attack, and his mistake had left his ship crippled and unable to defend itself. A blaring alarm announced the imminent failure of the damping field around the ship's quantum singularity power source, and he knew that he was doomed. With venom in his eyes, he turned to his political officer.

"You assured me that Picard would never fire on us! You said he was a diplomat, not a warrior! I should kill you where you stand, you incompetent fool!" Feh'rok snarled.

The Tal Shiar political officer was never able to voice a reply. With a titanic blast, the warbird's quantum singularity converted itself to pure energy and blew the ship apart, transforming its multi-million ton bulk into a rapidly expanding cloud of superheated debris. Even without direct orders from Admiral Feh'rok, the commanders of the other Romulan warbirds hastily attempted to fire upon the Enterprise as it twisted and turned through their formation. But as impossible as it seemed, the Enterprise was not only surviving, but it was dealing severe damage to the Romulan fleet. It is a maxim of space combat that a numerically superior force can sometimes "get in its own way" when dealing with a single, determined foe, and Picard was pushing this advantage to the hilt. The Romulans had difficulty bringing their phasers to bear on the Enterprise as it wound its way through the tight formation, and because of their reluctance to hit their own vessels, they were relying exclusively upon auto-homing photon torpedoes.

Aboard one of the remaining warbirds, Commander Pa'rehk barked orders and tried to conceal his disbelief from his junior officers. To his dismay, he saw *another* warbird explode in a brilliant fireball of superheated metal and plasma. Picard had obviously *expected* the Romulans not to take him seriously. Pa'rehk has to reluctantly concede to himself that Picard's attack was suicidal, but brilliantly effective. By immediately striking at the Admiral's ship, he took advantage of the fleet's confusion and their disbelief, as well as Admiral Feh'rok's foolish decision to array his ships in a tight, impressive-looking formation. *Idiot ... toying with psychological warfare when he should have been worrying about tactics and strategy...* he thought to himself.

"Status report!" Pa'rehk shouted.

"Our shields are down to twenty percent, sir. We took heavy damage when the Admiral's ship exploded, and the Federation vessel is systematically attacking the ships which were closest to the blast."

Of course, Pa'rehk thought to himself. *Exactly what I would have done*. But still, he couldn't understand it. The Enterprise should surely have succumbed by now to the overwhelming firepower of the fleet in spite of the unwieldy formation and its initial success. He glared at the seemingly indestructible Federation vessel wending its way through his fleet, and he saw an incredible sight. An entire spread of Romulan photon torpedoes struck the streaking Enterprise squarely in its primary hull, and ... *nothing happened*. For a few seconds that seemed to last an eternity, he tried to digest this baffling sight. When he finally realized what was happening, he was furious. Both at himself, and at his weapons officer.

"Get us out of formation! The Enterprise is so close that our torpedoes are failing to arm before they strike her! Inform the fleet!" he roared.

His communications officer pounded his console in frustration. "Communications are being jammed, sir!"

Obviously, Pa'rehk thought to himself. *Picard is no fool ... his pre-emptive strike destroyed our command ship, and he intends to compound the confusion. The other commanders will have to figure this out on their own*. He could see the formation breaking up as the ships tried to put some distance between each other, but not quickly enough. Another warbird exploded before his eyes, heavily damaging two other ships. One of those ships spun crazily out of control and crashed into another vessel, exploding upon impact. Pa'rehk could not believe the carnage that Picard was inflicting upon his fleet, and decided to take extreme measures.

"Disengage the torpedo safeties and disregard friendly-fire protocols! Fire at will, all weapons!"

As his ship's weapons opened fire without regard for friendly casualties, he could see several other ships taking the same action. At last, the Enterprise began to take serious damage. As torpedo after torpedo slammed into her from all directions, the ship began to slow. However, the withering attack didn't seem to dampen the resolve of her crew. A seemingly endless stream of phaser blasts and quantum torpedoes continued to spray out of the wounded vessel, and Pa'rehk cringed as he saw two more Romulan vessels explode. He knew that the decision to disregard friendly-fire protocols would lead to even more Romulan casualties which he would have to explain to his superiors, but the alternative was to continue allowing Picard free reign to attack his fleet. *That*, he thought to himself, *is no alternative*.

No warship, no matter how valiant her crew, could survive the combined hammering for long. As the Enterprise's shields buckled and failed, her return fire became more

sporadic. Eventually, the great ship lost the ability to fight. Her weapons fell silent, and flames could be seen burning inside great breaches in her hull. Pa'rehk exulted in each torpedo explosion, each phaser hit. For years he had dreamed of bringing the great Captain Picard to heel, and now, that victory was within his grasp. The jamming stopped, and the crippled Federation vessel began venting plasma from its starboard warp nacelle. In moments, the ship was drifting powerless through space.

Aboard the Enterprise, Picard reeled from another direct hit. He knew he would never defeat the Romulan fleet, of course. But he had hoped to bloody their noses enough to dissuade them from attacking the Imperial facility. With his weapons gone and his ship crippled, he had done all he could. Now, he could only hope that they would be reluctant to attack the Imperials after taking such heavy losses.

"We have lost main power, Captain. They are moving in for the kill." Amidst the flames and chaos of the Enterprise's badly damaged bridge, Worf sounded surprisingly calm, almost serene. For as long as he could remember, he had dreamed of dying a glorious death in battle. As the warbirds approached, he smiled. To die in battle against the Romulans would have been glorious. But to die after fighting a suicidal battle against overwhelming odds ... to have single-handedly destroyed eight Romulan warbirds ... it was a battle for the ages. He felt a sense of being *complete*, that he had never known before, and he prepared himself for a glorious entry into Sto-vo-kor.

Every surviving officer tensed now, waiting for the killing blow, or for the telltale sound of transporters as they were boarded. But it never came. Instead, there were gasps of relief and shock as the Romulan fleet cloaked and disappeared. Worf was furious. "Romulan dogs ... finish it!" he growled at the viewscreen. Picard turned to look at his weapons officer, whose face was now mottled with rage.

"Worf?"

Worf seemed to shake himself out of a trance, and looked sheepishly around the bridge. "Captain, I ... I expected them to destroy us, sir. Their withdrawal was ... unanticipated."

Picard smiled. "It appears that you have been cheated out of a glorious warrior's death today, Worf. However, the *rest* of us are quite thankful to still be alive. Perhaps another day." In spite of the harrowing near-death experience, many of the bridge crew found enough dark humour in the situation to chuckle.

Riker let the moment linger, and then delivered his grim news. "Damage control reports are coming in, Captain. We're not going anywhere for a while. Damage to the antimatter containment pods forced us to jettison more than a third of our fuel supply, and damage to the antimatter transport and injection system forced us to shut down the warp core and the torpedo launchers. Two of the impulse reactor vessels have stress fractures and had to be taken off-line as well, and we have gas venting from the primary deuterium tank. The starboard warp nacelle has taken heavy damage, and structural integrity fields are barely holding it together. The main computer is operating at only

fifty percent capacity, and long-range sensors are down. Communications are totally inoperative."

Picard scowled. "Number One, please tell me that *something* is still working around here."

"Well ... most of the phaser arrays are still functional, so we could fire phasers if we had any power available to feed them."

Picard's face set into a grim mask of frustration. "That won't do us much good. Is that all?"

"Umm ... the turbolifts still work." A few more chuckles could be heard around the bridge.

Picard smiled briefly, and then his scowl returned. "Launch a long-range probe toward the Gate system, Number One. I assume we can still launch probes?"

"Yes, sir. Mr. Data, launch a long range probe toward the Gate system." Riker turned to Picard again. "Captain, with long range communications down, we won't be able to communicate with it ..."

"I'm hoping that mister Laforge will outdo himself and get our communications system back on-line in time for us to find out what those Romulans are up to. If we're lucky, we might also be able to warn Starfleet Headquarters. We failed to dissuade them from their mission, Number One."

"Sir? How do you know that?"

"They left us here, alive. They could have finished us, but they chose not to. The only way for them to make up for such a disastrous encounter in the eyes of their superiors would be to capture the Enterprise and bring it back to Romulus. Destroying us would only heighten the humiliation of their losses."

"Yes, but they didn't attempt to capture the Enterprise."

"Exactly. Which means that they intend to carry out the rest of their mission without wasting time capturing our ship. They can't attack the Imperials with our damaged vessel in tow, and they can't afford to leave one of their ships here. They're obviously hoping that they can carry out their mission and then pick us up on the way back to Romulus."

Riker cursed to himself. *Of course— I should have thought of that*, he thought. "But Captain, if you're right, then we need to get this ship back up and running before they get back. If we assume that they will take two hours to get to Gate, two hours to attack the Imperial facilities on both sides of the wormhole, and two hours to get back here, then we have six hours before they return. If we can't get underway by then..."

"We'll be captured and carried back to Romulus like hunting trophies. I know, Number One. But don't worry, I have no intention of allowing that to happen. If the Imperials fail to stop them, and if we can't get the ship underway before they get back ..."

"Yes, Captain?"

Picard's expression was grim, and his next words were spoken very quietly. "Then we'll have to destroy the Enterprise, Number One."

Total silence descended over the bridge, as every crewman let Picard's words sink in. When Riker finally spoke, he tried to force an optimistic smile onto his face, fooling no one. "Understood, Captain. I think I'd better go down to Main Engineering and see if I can lend a hand."

Two hours later, at the Gate system, a group of Sienar Fleet Systems technicians were playing Sabacc in the main control centre of the vast ring-shaped structure that served as gateway and stabilizer for the wormhole. Sabacc games can often last far into the night, and this one had accumulated a substantial pot. Amidst the clamour and accusations of cheating, no one noticed a group of anomalous spatial distortions on the CGT display. If they had, perhaps they would have informed the Star Destroyers in the defense fleet. Or perhaps not ... small spatial distortions were not normally considered cause for alarm. As long as the ring's monstrous energy pulses continued their endless circular rotation, the technicians were confident that all was well.

However, unbeknownst to the technicians aboard the ring, or the crews of the five Star Destroyers in the system, a group of cloaked Romulan Warbirds was taking up pre-arranged positions. Thanks to intelligence data that they had obtained through unknown, and mysterious channels, they knew enough to take up position directly beneath each ship, so that their weapons were trained upon the bulbous protrusion that was clearly identified as a Star Destroyer's primary reactor. Each Star Destroyer cruised through space with six or more attackers poised beneath it, and its crew had no knowledge of their peril.

"Are their shields still down?" Pa'rehk queried.

"Yes, sir. They appear to be in a stand-down mode, and do not detect our presence."

"Excellent. Prepare to disengage cloak and fire all available weapons."

With precise timing, more than thirty Romulan warbirds de-cloaked and began firing almost simultaneously. If anyone aboard the five Star Destroyers noticed the ships de-cloaking, they reacted far too slowly to save themselves. In less than five seconds, each Star Destroyer was hammered by more than 300 photon torpedoes, and countless phaser blasts. Every one of them was precisely targeted upon the heavily armoured sphere that contained its power generator, and without shields, the hapless ships were doomed. The

armour around their power reactors was never intended to substitute for shielding, and the concentrated attack quickly penetrated the thick durasteel plating. Five brilliant explosions lit the starry sky, as the ring's small defense fleet met a fiery end. Without firing a single shot, the defense fleet was gone.

Aboard the Imperial ring, sabacc cards fluttered through the air as their owners, having completely forgotten the game, rushed to their stations. Each man knew without asking, that the defense fleet had been destroyed by a hostile force. With their meagre defense fleet was gone and with no operational shielding, they had no choice but to defend themselves with their incomplete weapons. A steady stream of tiny message pods began flying into the wormhole, and sporadic bursts of turbolaser fire began to lance out from isolated spots around the ring's perimeter.

However, the defensive action was too little, too late. The Romulan fleet formed up and commenced a withering attack upon the ring structure, targeting any point which their sensors showed to be a power transfer node. The defensive turrets quickly fell silent, bereft of power. The lightly armoured ring was never intended to survive a direct attack in this manner, not without its shielding system operational. A massive fireworks display erupted into being all over the perimeter of the ring, as power transfer conduits ruptured and generators exploded. The massive, near-light-speed particle-beam pulses that coursed through the ring now spelled its doom, as they broke free and shattered their restraints.

The liberated energy vapourized billions of tons of metal in an instant, and along with it, millions of civilian men, women, and children. Their deaths were almost instantaneous, and their suffering was brief. However, in a vast and unimaginably distant palace, Emperor Solo stiffened as he felt their life energies ebb away. He had been waiting for this moment, trancelike, for hours. Now that it had come, he found himself torn between conflicting emotions. A pang of remorse flickered through his mind, but he suppressed it through the same iron force of will through which he believed he held himself at the precipice of evil without falling. *Their sacrifice will not have been in vain*, he thought to himself. *Their deaths will serve a greater purpose*. He gestured toward a control panel on the far side of the room, and the holographic image of Admiral Kanos floated up in front of him.

"Admiral, the time has come. Prepare your fleet, and be sure to collect every message pod. Transmit the data to me."

The holographic image of Admiral Kanos bowed deeply. "Yes, my Lord. It will be as you command." Emperor Solo gestured again, and the image of Admiral Kanos faded away. *Everything is happening as I have foreseen*, he thought to himself.



Captain Picard's communicator crackled to life. "We have restored intra-ship and long-range communications, Captain." Geordi had performed another miracle, as Picard had hoped he would.

"Well done, Mr. Laforge. All right now. Mr. Data, let's see if we can contact that probe."

Within moments, the probe relayed its images of destruction to the bridge of the Enterprise. Picard sat back in his chair, horrified. When he finally spoke, the words came out in a whisper. "The Romulans killed millions, and we helped them. I convinced Admiral Kanos to withdraw most of his fleet ..." his voice began to crack, and faded into silence.

The brittle silence on the bridge lasted for several long minutes, as each man and woman contemplated the meaning of this event. When Picard spoke, it was in a low, resigned tone.

"Mr. Data, contact Starfleet Headquarters."

"Yes, sir." Data was surprised to get an almost immediate response. "Sir, they must have been expecting our communication. Admiral Halsey is answering."

"Put it on the main viewer, Mr. Data."

"Captain Picard, what the devil is going on out there?"

"Admiral, we successfully negotiated with the Imperial fleet to withdraw most of their forces to the other side of the wormhole. However, we encountered a fleet of Romulan warbirds trespassing in Federation territory, with the intent of attacking the Imperial forces. We engaged them in battle and inflicted casualties, but we were unable to stop them from proceeding to the Gate system. Long-range sensor probes have revealed that they successfully attacked the Imperial facility and destroyed it completely."

Counsellor Troi, who had finally returned to active duty, sharply drew her breath, but Picard did not notice. Admiral Halsey immediately began speaking. "Captain, did you sustain damage?"

"Yes, Admiral. We are adrift but we are repairing our damage. We hope to be underway before the Romulans return. This is a dark day in the affairs of the Federation, Admiral. I hope we can piece together what happened, and determine how the Romulans got through our sensor net."

Admiral Halsey looked hesitant. "Yes ... yes, of course. An investigation will begin immediately. In the meantime, reinforcements are en route as we speak, but will not arrive for several days. Until then, good luck, Captain." His image faded from the viewscreen.

Counsellor Troi spoke in hushed tones. "Captain, Admiral Halsey was lying. He *knew* about the Romulans."

Picard felt his world imploding around him. "What? Are you sure?"

"I'm sure." Troi said with an air of finality.

Picard had a flash of insight. "Mr. Data, see if you can access the sensor logs of the Romulan neutral zone sensor-net stations. See if you can locate any anomalies."

"Yes, sir. Accessing." Data analyzed the data for a few moments, and stopped. "Captain, the rotating maintenance schedules of the neutral zone sensor-net stations coincided in such a manner that several adjacent stations went through a periodic maintenance shutdown at the same time."

Picard's heart sank, and even as he asked the next question, he knew what the answer would be. "Mr. Data, when was this ... *coincidental* ... shutdown?"

Data replied in his characteristically even tone. "The shutdowns coincided in such a manner that a small gap opened for approximately twelve hours, at the approximate time that I estimate the Romulans entered the neutral zone. This gap would only have been a few million kilometres wide, but it would have been easily large enough for the Romulan fleet to enter."

With a brilliant flare of light, the all-too-familiar face of Q suddenly appeared on the bridge, as a disembodied, ghostly apparition. "Well done, Captain. You did the best you could, and you should be proud. But I told you that you would not serve as humanity's proxy defender this time, and that humanity would stand or fall based on the actions of Starfleet Command. Didn't you listen?"

Picard's anger with Q had reached its boiling point, and it simmered as he gritted his reply out from between clenched teeth. "Q, please tell me that this is all one of your illusions."

"Oh, this is no illusion, Captain. The renowned Admiral Halsey appears to have opened the chicken coop door just long enough to let the fox in, hasn't he? You didn't *really* think that Halsey would just sit idly by while the Federation attempted a diplomatic solution, do you? He saw the Empire as a threat, and he attempted to deal with that threat, any way he could. Your mistake was in behaving as usual, and using your diplomatic charm to talk Kanos back to his home territory. I told you not to take the most obvious route, didn't I?"

Q's words hit Picard like a physical blow. Self-recrimination and doubt swirled in his mind, as he attempted to make sense of the situation. "So what happens now, Q?"

Q smiled. "Well, you don't have to worry about being captured and carted back to Romulus. Your little Romulan friends won't be coming back."

"Are you saying they will be destroyed?"

"Of *course* they will be destroyed, Captain! Do you have *any* idea what awaits them on the other side of that wormhole? Trust me, the next thing to come out of that

wormhole will most definitely *not* be a Romulan starship. You had better tell Mr. Laforge to hurry. If I were you, I wouldn't want to be anywhere *near* this place in a few days."

"So you're saying that the Empire will attack?"

Q looked irritated and gestured in Worf's direction. "I would have expected these questions from micro-brain over there, but not from you!" Worf growled and moved toward Q, but stopped at a gesture from Picard.

Q continued speaking. "Of *course* they will attack! There's nothing like an unprovoked sneak attack to start a war, is there? A sneak attack boosts propaganda campaigns, eliminates political opposition ... try looking in your history books, Picard. Someone named Franklin Roosevelt used this trick very successfully a few centuries ago. I believe they called it World War Two, correct?" Q snickered to himself. "World wars ... you humans have always had a knack for exaggerating the importance of your insignificant little skirmishes, haven't you?"

Picard shuddered inwardly, as the enormity of the disaster finally became clear. "Wait a minute. You're not just saying that the Empire will seek revenge for this attack ... you're saying that they *expected* this attack, aren't you?"

A broad smile spread across Q's face. "Oops! I may have said too much, Picard. Let's just say that the Federation has grown complacent, and overconfident. Your social structure is depressingly conformist and uncreative, and your enemies are pathetic. The Empire will shake humanity out of its doldrums, and under their rule, some of you will achieve the greatness that lies in humanity's future. They will introduce humanity to what they call the Force, Picard. Someday, you will learn what an important evolutionary step this will be. Those who survive will be stronger for it."

Picard looked unimpressed. "Evolution is a destructive process, Q. The strong survive and the weak are destroyed. Humanity evolves now through education and experience, not ruthless Darwinian selection."

Q smiled. "Exactly, Picard. You still don't understand, do you? That is exactly what is *wrong* with the Federation! The human race *needs* this test of fire, to continue the process of evolution that the Federation has so rudely *interrupted*. I assure you Picard, humanity *will* persevere and thrive under the Empire. They will show you things you cannot imagine, and some gifted members of humanity will eventually achieve greatness, through their children and their children's children. But this ridiculous, stifling, dehumanizing system of government you call the Federation ... its end draws near, Captain."

Q's disembodied head vanished, and he reappeared moments later in his usual form, complete with a Starfleet uniform. "The Federation *deserves* to be destroyed, Picard. Despite all of our gentle encouragements, no one in the entire Federation has shown the ability to break free of your stunted mindset of technological determinism. The Empire

will show you the *real* meaning of power, Captain Picard."

Picard stepped close to Q, and spoke in a low, aggressive tone. "If you think that we won't defend ourselves—"

Q's voice became contemptuous, as he interrupted Picard in mid-sentence. "How many times do I have to explain this to you, Picard? True power doesn't flow from ridiculous *toys* with names like *warp core*, *fusion reactor*, or *plasma conduit*. True power flows from the *mind*." He leaned close to Picard, and whispered in his ear. "Embrace this change. It's for the best."

With a wink and a flash of light, Q was gone again, leaving Picard and the rest of the crew alone with their thoughts.

Somewhere beyond three-dimensional space and time, the Romulans were hurtling through the wormhole to meet Kanos' waiting fleet. They had hoped to capture prisoners for interrogation, but the ring's self-immolation was so utterly destructive that there was nothing left to capture, or even to analyze. They collected some pieces of flotsam and jetsam for materials analysis, but scientific concerns were secondary to their primary mission. Their primary mission was to seal this wormhole, and Pa'rehk would waste no time now. Unlike the late Admiral Feh'rok, Pa'rehk prided himself on expediency rather than flair.

He knew that what they had accomplished back in the Alpha Quadrant had been far too easy. The element of surprise had been overwhelming and total. The ring was unfinished, and the ships were unshielded. Neither was prepared for battle. However, countless tiny pods had been fired into the wormhole by the doomed ring crew, and he had no doubt that they were message pods, designed to warn the enemy. What they faced now would be a far more difficult task. The ring on the other side of the wormhole had to be destroyed also, and their cloaking technology would be the only thing standing between success in their mission, and instant destruction.

Abruptly, the twisting kaleidoscopic display before him shimmered into blackness, and he found himself looking into a viewscreen that seemed to be clogged with starships. Thousands of them, in every imaginable size and shape, framing the image of the horrifying weapon of mass destruction which he had been briefed about, and which this entire mission was designed to stop. *They call it the Death Star*, he thought to himself. The sight was daunting, but he knew that their mission priority was to protect the Romulan Empire by sealing the wormhole. His fleet, and his life, were expendable in favour of the greater goal. All he had to do was maneuver his ships into position and attack the ring structure's critical weak points, and his mission would be a success, regardless of whether his fleet was torn apart by the horde of enemy warships afterwards.

Under communications silence, his fleet moved silently away from the wormhole. However, one of his officers sounded a note of concern. "Sir, we have a problem. The ring structure on this side of the wormhole is very heavily armoured and shielded. We

will not be able to penetrate its defenses. Also, we are monitoring the weapon emplacements on those enemy warships. They appear to be tracking us."

Pa'rehk shot to his feet, with a look of disbelief on his face. "That's impossible. They can't detect cloaked ships!"

The junior officer re-checked his tactical display. "Yes sir, but those weapons are definitely aimed at us."

With an almost plaintive tone in his voice, Pa'rehk hoped beyond hope that this was a mere fluke. "It may be a coincidence. Change course to three degrees, mark six."

"Yes, sir. Changing course." The ship changed direction slightly, and dozens of monstrous gun turrets rotated to follow it. With a hint of panic in his voice, the junior officer reported quickly. "The enemy weapons are still tracking us, sir."

Damn, Pa'rehk thought to himself. That can only mean ...

He never had a chance to complete the thought. Aboard the *Crimson Blade*, Admiral Kanos growled out a one-word command: "Fire."

As one, hundreds of heavy turbolaser cannons opened fire upon the cloaked and unshielded Romulan warbirds. A vast fusillade of massive, luminous blasts of energy lanced out toward the defenseless intruders, like a green-tinted hail. The hail of fire struck home in moments, and countless gigatons of particle energy shredded duranium and tritanium plating like paper. Each ship flared up like a tiny star, scattering its particles across the cosmos. Where Pa'rehk had stood on his bridge commanding his fleet moments before, a cloud of slowly cooling radioactive gas now dissipated into the blackness of space.

Admiral Kanos turned to his captain and smiled. "It appears that the Emperor was correct, as usual. Transmit all sensor logs and holo-images to the Emperor, as well as all data retrieved from the ring message pods."



Over the next few hours, news of the outrage quickly spread across the galaxy. With no formal declaration of war, marauding starships from an alien race had attacked and murdered millions of Imperial civilians without provocation. Those same starships had even attempted an invasion of the Empire itself, but were destroyed by Admiral Kanos' famed armada.

Worse yet, there were rumours that even more dangerous foes lay in wait on the other side of that wormhole, ready to attack, with mysterious names like "Klingon" and "Borg". Some rumours even suggested that the aliens had somehow created the wormhole itself, and it was only sheer luck that the Empire managed to seize control of it in time to stop a major invasion. There were even those who claimed to have access to classified data, showing that the enemy could open new wormholes at will, anywhere in

the galaxy. All of this fell into the Emperor's grand plan, of course. A carefully placed information leak was invariably ten times more credible on the street than an official government statement, and a hundred times more corrosive.

The brutal holo-images of death and destruction, replayed again and again on every available channel, silenced what had been a strong voice of opposition to the military, and the Emperor. The crew of the ring had been carefully hand-picked to represent a broad cross-section of the galaxy, with representatives from nearly every major race. The outrage was therefore almost universal. Political agitators who had been demanding the decommissioning of the Death Star and much of the star fleet now performed a miraculous about-face and joined the chorus of criticism, asking why Imperial defenses were allowed to diminish as far as they had. Supporters of the military infrastructure, steadily decreasing in number with the perceived onset of galactic peace, now found themselves being hailed as visionaries.

Most importantly of all, over the next two days, public resistance to continued military spending and conscription evaporated. Small *increases* were even approved in some sectors, and in marathon emergency sessions, the Imperial Senate voted overwhelmingly in favour of a formal declaration of war. They also voted to recommission the long-dormant World Devastators and Galaxy Gun, and to give the Admiralty a free hand to crush the invaders with whatever means were deemed necessary.

Tens of thousands of light years away from the Core systems, Admiral Kanos watched the political developments proceed, exactly as he had known they would. The preparations were now complete, and reinforcements were flooding in from all sectors.

When the long-awaited message finally came from the Emperor, it was a short, succinct message with only one word: "Begin."

Chapter Eight: Retribution

*"When campaigning, be swift as the wind.
In leisure march, majestic as the forest.
In raiding and plundering, like fire.
In standing, firm as the mountains.
As unfathomable as the clouds,
move like a thunderbolt."— Sun Tzu*



"Captain, something is emerging from the wormhole." Data reported.

"On screen, Mr. Data."

The viewscreen flashed to life, and Picard could hear several of the bridge crew behind him catch their breaths. They watched in silence as a seemingly endless stream of starships came pouring out of the wormhole. First came the wedge-shaped Star Destroyers, followed by transports, frigates, corvettes, heavy cruisers, dreadnaughts, and assorted support craft of every kind. Then came an Executor class command ship with an unmistakable red hue: the Crimson Blade. Picard groaned inwardly as the flood of ships

continued. Interdictor cruisers, mobile battle stations, monstrous vessels that dwarfed even the behemoth Crimson Blade, and a variety of other assorted craft poured out of the great wound in the fabric of space-time.

"Captain, I am currently reading three hundred ships. No, I am reading four hundred ships. Six hundred ships ... nine hundred ships ..."

"That's enough, Mr. Data. Have they engaged the fleet?" Picard queried. He knew that Starfleet had managed to scrape together more than one hundred ships, and he knew that they were accompanied by numerous diplomats whose orders were to attempt negotiations in an attempt to stave off hostilities. However, he had the uncomfortable feeling that any attempt at negotiation would be futile.

"Not yet, sir. They are moving toward the fleet at high speed, and they will reach weapons range in less than one minute."

"Thank you, Mr. Data." Picard tapped his communicator. "Mister Laforge, how long before we can get underway?"

"At least another day, Captain. Even with the replacement parts brought by the USS Victoria, we still have a lot of work to do. I can give you half impulse power, but warp drive is still off-line."

"Understood, Mister Laforge." Picard clenched his fists and watched the growing Imperial fleet on his viewscreen with growing frustration. Another crucial confrontation, and the Enterprise would not be there. He could only watch events unfold from afar, for all the good it would do.

The vast Imperial fleet accelerated to high speed and hurtled toward the Federation ships, and the entire scene unfolded exactly as Picard feared it would. The Star Destroyers rushed through the Federation fleet like a stampede, scattering the defenders before them. Picard was reminded of a tidal wave crashing upon a shore.

The silence lent a surreal atmosphere to the battle. Communications from the battle itself were garbled and incomprehensible, so they had nothing but the long-range visual from the probe. The sheer numbers of Imperial warships were so large that it was difficult to see individual Federation vessels within the swirling mass of ships. Explosions and flashes of energy could be seen in the chaos, and Picard strained to see what was happening.

"Captain, I believe one of the Imperial vessels has taken serious damage." Data enlarged one portion of the image, and enhanced it. A massive Star Destroyer was indeed limping away from the battle, venting flames from its ventral armoured surface. The ship suddenly exploded in a brilliant fireball, and cheers went up from the Enterprise bridge.

Data pumped his fist in elation, but the expression on his face quickly grew sour. "Captain, the battle appears to have ended. Sensor-log analysis indicates that the

Imperial vessel exploded after being rammed by the last surviving Federation ship."

Picard's spirits sank again. "Magnify, Mister Data."

The viewscreen focused in on the battle scene, as the Imperial fleet began dispersing and moving away. The flaming wreckage of dozens of vessels could be easily seen, most of them obviously the remains of Federation starships.

Data began to recite names when he could identify them. "The Victoria. The Hiryu. The Yamamoto. The Kipling. The McArthur. The Makai. The Hornet. The Bryson. The Manchester ..."

"That's enough, Mister Data. We don't need a full forensic accounting to know what happened." Picard slumped heavily into his chair, and wondered what would be next.

He did not have to wait long for his answer. "Captain, we are receiving an extremely high-powered transmission, on several frequencies. It is being broadcast at more than fifty times the power of our own transceivers."

"On main viewer, Mister Data."

The message started with graphic images of the Romulan attack on the Empire's ring structure, and a sullen voice announcing the death toll. It switched to a vast hall full of floating pods, each carrying a different alien life form. Picard could only guess that it was some sort of congressional hall or similar government structure. The monotonic voice-over became charged with anger, and announced that the Empire was formally declaring war on the Federation and the Romulan Star Empire. Bombastic speeches from various politicians then followed, along with strong rhetoric about the immorality of the Federation and the Romulans. Although unpleasant, none of this was unexpected. However, the most disturbing part was still to follow.

The voice-over returned. "The Empire will use any means necessary to protect the safety of our citizens. However, we do not wish to inflict needless suffering upon the innocent. We will take no hostile actions against any star system or regional government that formally renounces any association or alliance with the Federation and the Romulan Star Empire. We will also extend an offer of amnesty to any Federation star system that renounces its membership, and we extend the same offer to Romulan star systems. Any systems which formally break their ties with the Federation or the Romulan Star Empire will be rewarded with a *guarantee* of safety." The message then restarted, in what was apparently an endless loop.

Troi spoke in hushed tones. "They're trying to break our alliances."

Riker agreed. "I concur, Captain. They seem to think that they can get our allies to abandon us with threats. They don't seriously think this will work, do they?"

Picard's voice was weak, as if the confidence had been drained from him. "We shall

see, Number One."


"Captain, what about Halsey? He conspired with the Romulans to *cause* this fiasco. We can't allow him to remain in control of the fleet."

Picard sighed. "We don't have enough evidence, Number One. We can't find any direct link between Halsey and the sensor-net maintenance schedules, and we have no evidence of direct communications between Halsey and the Romulans. He can chalk it all up to coincidence, or claim that someone else was responsible."

Riker was adamant. "But Q said that Halsey was responsible. He plunged the Federation into a war! We can't allow him to continue."

"I agree, Number One. But Q is not likely to testify in a Federation court-martial. We'll need to return to Earth, to collect more evidence."

Riker set his expression into a grim mask. "Let's just hope it's still there by the time we get the warp drive on line."



Captain Ruk leaned back from his chair, and smiled. After weeks of non-stop work, the ship's repairs were complete. Although more than a dozen of her weapon emplacements would be useless until they somehow obtained replacement parts, they had cannibalized enough parts from damaged systems to get more than forty turbolasers operational. They also had full shields, and full power to all propulsion systems. Only one question remained: what to do with the Federation prisoners. At that moment, a wookiee security officer dragged Commander Chang into the bridge and hurled him bodily over the railing, to collapse unceremoniously in a heap at Ruk's feet.

Ruk stood up, and looked down at Chang with a mixture of contempt and amusement. "Well, Mister Chang. Are you ready to leave? I tire of your presence."

Chang scrambled to his feet and straightened his tunic. He stood to his full height in an attempt to project confidence, but Ruk towered over him anyway. "Is that an offer of freedom?"

Ruk's eyes gleamed, and for a moment, Chang thought he could feel his throat constricting. The moment passed, and Ruk seemed to calm himself. "No. Your boarding parties killed more than two hundred of my men. I intend to exact payment for your treachery, Commander."

"Then you intend to execute us? Humanitarian conventions for the treatment of war prisoners—"

Ruk interrupted him "I do not intend to kill you, Chang. I intend to *use* you. When I agreed to help you, I hoped I could be an advisor. I thought I would teach your Federation how to resist the Empire covertly. Instead, you chose to betray me, and your

Federation chose to strike against the Empire directly! Fools ... you have played *directly* into Emperor Solo's hands. He never could have launched another full-scale war without an excuse, but your Federation conveniently *gave* him an excuse! We recently picked this up from your own subspace relay network."

Chang watched as Ruk replayed the formal Imperial declaration of war. He said nothing for a long time, and then turned to Ruk. His words came out in a flat, resigned monotone. "What do you intend to do?"

"I intend to warn your Federation's enemies about the Empire. You and your men have learned enough to be a valuable resource to any alien race that might ... acquire you." He gestured to the massive wookiee standing at Chang's side, and Chang felt the wookiee's iron grip around his left arm. "Take him." The wookiee growled, and just before Chang lost consciousness, he saw the blurringly fast movement of a hairy, pan-sized fist at the periphery of his vision.

Kanos brooded in his darkened chambers, waiting for news. A chirping sound announced a visitor. "Enter."

Captain Daron stood stiffly at attention in the doorway, framed by the light from the corridor. "Phase One is underway, Admiral."

"Excellent, Captain." He paused for a moment. "They fought very well, didn't they?"

"Sir?"

"The Federation ships. They fought well. There were only a hundred of them, against thousands of us. They were outnumbered and outgunned, but they charged ahead. They did not hesitate or flinch, even when taking fearsome losses. They even inflicted losses upon our fleet! How many ships did we lose?"

Captain Daron hesitated. "Fifteen, sir. Including two Star Destroyers."

"Fifteen ships. With such a tremendous disadvantage, I would have expected them to flee, or to be easily routed. Instead, they held their formation, picked targets, and maintained a cohesive plan of attack. When faced with destruction, they chose to ram our vessels rather than abandon their ships. They have more fighting spirit than Imperial Intelligence gives them credit for. Listen to this." He turned to his side, and switched on his audio system. A harsh, discordant sound immediately filled his chambers. Captain Daron immediately put his hands over his ears. The music had a visceral, throbbing beat, and the singer had a strident voice with which he half-sang, and half-screamed.

"What is that?" Daron shouted over the din.

Kanos switched the blaring music off. "Music from their twentieth century. Try feeding it through a translator, and listen to what it's saying. This is a violent, savage

society, Captain. Look at their poetry. This was written by a someone named Alfred Tennyson." Daron leaned forward to look at Kanos' datapad. The glowing words on the datapad spoke of a civilization that glorified death in combat, despite all of its protestations to the contrary.

Half a league, half a league,
Half a league onward,
All in the valley of Death
Rode the six hundred.
"Forward, the Light Brigade!
Charge for the guns!" he said:
Into the valley of Death
Rode the six hundred.

"Forward, the Light Brigade!"
Was there a man dismay'd?
Not tho' the soldier knew
Someone had blunder'd:
Their's not to make reply,
Their's not to reason why,
Their's but to do and die:
Into the valley of Death
Rode the six hundred.

Cannon to right of them,
Cannon to left of them,
Cannon in front of them
Volley'd and thunder'd;
Storm'd at with shot and shell,
Boldly they rode and well,
Into the jaws of Death,
Into the mouth of Hell
Rode the six hundred.

Flash'd all their sabres bare,
Flash'd as they turn'd in air,
Sabring the gunners there,
Charging an army, while
All the world wonder'd:
Plunged in the battery—smoke
Right thro' the line they broke;
Cossack and Russian
Reel'd from the sabre stroke
Shatter'd and sunder'd.
Then they rode back, but not
Not the six hundred.

Cannon to right of them,
Cannon to left of them,
Cannon behind them
Volley'd and thunder'd;
Storm'd at with shot and shell,
While horse and hero fell,
They that had fought so well
Came thro' the jaws of Death

Back from the mouth of Hell,
All that was left of them,
Left of six hundred.

When can their glory fade?
O the wild charge they made!
All the world wondered.
Honor the charge they made,
Honor the Light Brigade,
Noble six hundred.

Kanos waited for Daron to absorb the words before speaking. "Centuries later, they think they can conceal their true nature behind a facade of civility. But *this* is their true essence, Captain. They are capable of hate but they must always blame others for inciting them to rage. They are capable of cruelty but they blame others for making it *necessary*. They believe that a futile sacrifice in battle leads to everlasting glory after death. Typical warrior psychology."

Daron objected. "Intel says they're soft. All of the evidence indicates that they have socially conditioned themselves into easy prey over the past century. Besides, you can't judge a society by its art, music, or poetry. You're not trying to emulate Thrawn again, are you?"

Kanos chuckled, and leaned back in his chair. "No, I have no such illusions of grandeur any more. I never did understand how he could possibly read a species by looking at their art. A society can be measured by its history, not its art. However, its art *can* be used to *demonstrate* an established characteristic. I have always suspected that this is what Thrawn was *really* doing. He simply covered up the true source of his intuitions with that art business, to enhance his reputation as a genius. I've been looking through their cultural records, and I find that they have *never* relinquished their capacity for violence. They have only suppressed it. When pushed, it will return. The music was merely used to drive a point home."

Daron grinned. "Then you *are* emulating Thrawn."

Kanos allowed himself a smile. "Perhaps, just a little. In the meantime, we need to adjust our tactics. Do not take them lightly, Captain. They have neither the numbers, the power, or the speed to stop us. However, they *can* make this operation more costly than it needs to be. That will be all for now."

Captain Daron saluted, turned smartly on his heels, and marched back out to the corridor. Kanos watched him leave, then returned to his studies. There was much to do.

A black cloud seemed to hang over the office of the President. Ever since the incendiary declaration of war, a seemingly endless procession of diplomats, advisors, and soldiers had been marching in and out of his office. He looked like he hadn't slept in days, and barely acknowledged Admiral Halsey as he walked into the room.

"Mister President?"

The president looked up from his desk with an expression of pure exhaustion. His eyes were sunken, his skin drawn. "Ah, yes. Admiral Halsey. Before you speak, I would like to inform you that you cannot expect any help from the Klingons. Our request for assistance has been officially denied. They have released a public statement, indicating their *extreme* disappointment that we chose to conspire with the Romulans to launch a *dishonourable* sneak attack upon the Empire. Needless to say, the Cardassian/Dominion Union has also denied our requests for assistance."

Halsey cleared his throat. "I'm not surprised, Mister President. The Klingons were overly aggressive, and took heavy losses in the Dominion war. They are obviously hoping that the Federation and the Romulans will take such heavy losses against the Empire that we will be effectively eliminated from contention in this quadrant, leaving them and the Dominion as the two remaining powers."

"And the Empire."

"True. The Klingons and the Dominion would surely recognize the threat posed by the Empire, unless the Empire has attempted to talk them into alliances or non-aggression treaties. I wouldn't be surprised if Imperial envoys are on Cardassia Prime and Qo'noS right now. But in truth, I didn't come here to discuss the Dominion or the Klingons. I didn't expect the Klingons to be of much help, and I never expected the Dominion to help either."

"If you didn't come here to discuss the Dominion or the Klingons, then why are you here?"

"Mister President, we have scattered reports coming in from the outlying regions. More than one thousand outposts are under attack. There is a predictable pattern to the attacks. A warship appears in orbit over the outpost, fires a few shots to destroy any defensive equipment and inflict random casualties upon the colonists, and then initiates a blockade."

The President buried his head in his hands for a few minutes before speaking. "Send ships to all besieged outposts."

"Sir, with all due respect, that is not strategically wise. They're using their speed to attack outposts from one end of our territory to the other, but all of the targets are small, isolated settlements. It will take *months* for ships to reach these systems. It's obviously a diversionary series of attacks, designed to spread our forces thin. That's why they allow us to receive distress calls and casualty reports, instead of simply jamming communications. We *cannot* afford to take the bait! I suggest that we consolidate our forces around strategic targets."

The President stared at Halsey with an incredulous look on his face. "And leave the besieged colonists to die?"

Halsey sighed deeply, and had obviously been expecting this question. "Mister President, I don't like it either. But we don't have any choice. It will be hard enough protecting our strategically important centres without spreading our fleet any thinner than it is. Over the past century, our entire military structure has been organized to defend against attacks from the direction of the Cardassian, Romulan, or Klingon empires. The border regions are heavily scanned and patrolled, but we have very few defensive fleets or installations in our deep territories. We have performed a lot of simulations, and it doesn't look good. These Imperials are unlike any enemy we have faced before. They can use their speed to jump anywhere they want, deep in our territory, without warning. In the final analysis, these small outposts *must* be considered expendable."

"Admiral, that is *your* final analysis, not mine. I was *not* elected to sacrifice millions of Federation citizens upon the altar of military expediency! At the same time, I recognize your criticism about the wisdom of dispersing our forces. We need another alternative, Admiral."

It was only through great effort that Halsey suppressed his contempt for the weak-willed politician sitting before him. "Mister President, with all due respect, my staff has been running strategic simulations around the clock, and there *are* no other alternatives. If we take the bait, we disperse our forces. If we don't take the bait, we sacrifice millions of Federation citizens. War does not always present us with an easy way out."

The president was infuriatingly calm, and acted as though he hadn't heard anything Halsey was saying. "There must be a way. Your staff will need to redouble their efforts. Report back to me when you have studied the problem further. I will defer any final decision until that time."

Halsey finally lost his patience, and pounded his fist down on the president's desk. "There *is* no other way! If there were another way, we would have *found* it by now! If you don't have the courage to make these decisions, perhaps you should step down in favour of someone who can!"

The president leapt to his feet and leaned over his desk until he was inches away from Halsey's face. He spoke quietly, but firmly. "I can make decisions, Halsey. My initial decision was to send ships to all besieged outposts. In spite of your objections, that decision *stands*. This discussion is over. You will obey the directives of your Commander in Chief, or face dismissal and court-martial. Is that clear?"

Halsey stepped back from the president's desk, and stood ramrod-straight. He fought down his rage and hoarsely mumbled. "Yes, sir. Crystal clear." He turned and marched stiffly out of the president's office. He noticed the Romulan ambassador standing in the hallway outside, waiting for an appointment. He moved close to the ambassador and spoke in hushed tones.

"Any news from Romulus?"

The ambassador's face was ashen. "Nothing. I cannot raise Romulus on subspace at

all. I fear something terrible has happened, Halsey. We should never have listened to you."

"Keep your mouth shut, you fool." Halsey growled. "The Empire would have attacked us anyway. It was worth the attempt."

The Romulan's eyes betrayed something Halsey had never before seen in a Romulan: fear. "You say that now, Halsey. Let's see if you still say that when the Empire has scattered your people and mine across the galaxy."



"Commander? Are you all right?"

Chang forced his eyes open and saw a blurry image of a Federation marine crouching over him. His head throbbed, and felt unnaturally heavy. As his eyes began to focus, he saw that he was lying on his back in a huge rectangular room. The room appeared to have no decorations, and no functional areas. The walls were smooth metal, and the ceiling was more than 20 metres tall. Three of the walls were completely bare, but the fourth wall was dominated by an enormous door, more than 15 metres tall and more than 30 metres wide. There was nothing else of interest in the entire room except for a single viewscreen next to the door, and Chang guessed that the room must be some sort of cargo hold. He groaned as the marine helped him up.

"Thank you. Where are we?" Chang mumbled.

"I don't know. They shoved us all in here and locked the door. I think they were waiting for you to regain consciousness."

Chang stumbled to the viewscreen and randomly punched buttons until Ruk's face appeared on the screen. He growled at the screen. "What do you want, Ruk?"

Ruk smiled. "Nothing. I just wanted to see your face while I do ... this." Ruk motioned to someone off-camera, and a loud concussion shook the entire cargo hold. Chang felt a sensation of movement, and then the artificial gravity began to weaken. In moments, he found himself floating in zero-gravity conditions. The cargo hold filled with the sounds of voices, as hundreds of Federation marines began clawing for a grip on the smooth metal walls, and attempting to keep the wounded from crashing into something.

"What have you done?" Chang shouted at the viewscreen, which was now several metres beneath him.

"I have released you. You weren't in a cargo hold. You were in a cargo *container*, which I just launched from the ship. It is fully sealed, and it has a rudimentary environmental control system that will keep it habitable for several hours. I just gave you a spacecraft, and your freedom. Isn't that what you wanted?" Ruk had turned up the volume on the audio communications system, and it boomed throughout the entire cargo container.

"You can't leave us here to die, Ruk!" Chang screamed in impotent rage.

"You won't die. I took the liberty of putting a distress-call beacon on your container. You can consider your debt of betrayal paid in full, Chang. Goodbye."

"Ruk!" Chang screamed. "Ruk! Answer me!" For more than an hour, he heard nothing but silence. He could only assume that Ruk had jumped into hyperspace and stranded them as he claimed. The temperature in the container was starting to drop noticeably, and Chang wondered how long the oxygen would last. Just as he resigned himself to the eventuality of death by asphyxiation or freezing, he heard a voice coming through the cargo container's audio communications system. The emotionless, chilling voice boomed through the entire container, and the all-too-familiar words put terror into the heart of each and every soldier.

"We are the Borg. Prepare to be assimilated. Your existence, as you know it ... is over. We will add your biological and technological distinctiveness to our own. Your culture will adapt, to service us. Resistance ... is futile."

Chapter Nine: Betrayal

*"A victorious army wins its victories before battle.
An army destined for failure fights in the hope of victory."— Sun Tzu*

"Transport the ambassador directly onto the bridge. I want some answers." Picard ordered. The Romulan shuttlecraft in the main viewer had been positively identified as the ambassador's personal ship, and he was in no mood to obey the ambassador's instructions to let him go. Ever since the Enterprise had finally gotten its warp drive on line, they had been heading back to Earth. Detecting the ambassador's ship on their long-range sensors was the first stroke of good luck in weeks. Intercepting it was child's play.

Ambassador Tu'rohn materialized on the bridge in seconds, and he was none too pleased. "What do you want, Picard? I have more important things to do than waste my time talking to you." he snarled.

"I want answers, Tu'rohn. I want to know why the Romulans attacked the Empire. I want to know what you were told, and who told you. I know you had help from within the Federation, and I want names. Your ship is being tractorbeamed into one of our shuttle bays and you will be permitted to leave as soon as you give me the information I ask for."

The ambassador folded his arms and smiled at Picard, with that same smug, arrogant smile that all Romulans seemed to be born with. "It appears I have something you need, Captain. Therefore, it is not I who will obey your wishes. It is you who will obey *my* wishes."

Picard was furious. "You are in no position to make demands, Ambassador! You are in custody, and your forces violated the Neutral Zone. I can keep you here as long as I wish. You can answer my questions, or you can think about it in the brig."

That smug smile again. "And I can keep my silence as long as I wish. If you will not release me, then you will take me to Romulus. I will reveal nothing until I see my home world again."

Comprehension slowly dawned on Picard. "Ambassador ... you're hiding something, aren't you? You *need* to see Romulus. The communications network is down. We can't communicate with Romulus, and you can't either, can you? You're *afraid*. You're afraid that the Galactic Empire has already attacked Romulus, and you need to return so you can see what's happening. It appears that the ball is back in your court, Ambassador. You need to see Romulus, so you need to tell us what we want to know." Picard derived some satisfaction from seeing the smile drain from Tu'rohn's face.

"It appears we need one another, Captain. But I will tell you nothing until I see Romulus. My conditions are *not* negotiable."

At Starfleet HQ, Admiral Halsey looked around the darkened room at the collection of faces. He saw fatigue in their expressions, mixed with frustration, anger, and in some cases, fear. He saw both supporters and rivals, but they all shared one thing in common: they were dedicated soldiers, who knew that the survival of the Federation might hinge upon their actions. "Gentlemen, we are losing this war."

A low murmur spread through the room, but there was no shortage of opinions. "Admiral, with all due respect, the relay net is under constant attack. Our ships have been dropping emergency relays as fast as they can, but the relays are destroyed as soon as they go online. We only get scraps of information between relay-net blackouts. In light of this fact, how can you possibly know how the war is going?"

Admiral Halsey stood, planted his hands on the podium, and affixed a steely-eyed glare upon his audience. "Yes, the relay net is down. Yes, we only get the occasional burst of communications. But that fact doesn't keep me from learning how bad the situation is. No, in fact, that fact *tells* me how bad the situation is." He stepped back from the podium and keyed a remote control. A hologram shimmered into view over the large conference table, depicting the Federation's territory.

"Gentlemen, our forces have engaged the enemy on at least four separate occasions that we know of. In each case, our forces were completely routed, with heavy losses in manpower and equipment. Commodore Lane is the highest ranking officer to have survived combat with the Imperial fleet. Would you care to brief the group on the incident, Commodore Lane?"

Commodore Lane looked furtively around the room as if he hoped Halsey was talking to someone else, and then stood up. He took slow, deliberate steps as he walked toward the podium. Halsey had activated a large viewscreen, upon which video images from the battle were already being displayed. He cleared his throat and began. "My group was reinforcing the defensive fleet at Tarsus Three when a large group of Imperial warships appeared. They dropped out of hyperspace almost on top of us, with no warning. They came with more than a thousand ships, against fifty. We lost Starbase 74 almost immediately, and when we tried to mount a counter-attack, we took such heavy losses that I had to call a strategic retreat. The Imperials brought in interdictor cruisers and a lot of my ships never made it out."

He stopped and looked around the room, as if expecting sympathy. He saw none, and continued. "We did inflict casualties upon the enemy, but they attacked in overwhelming numbers. If we could engage them on equal footing, I believe that we have learned enough to develop effective tactics. They are *not* invincible."

Halsey stood up, walked toward the podium, and motioned for Commodore Lane to step aside. "Thank you, Commodore. That will be all."

"Sir, my staff has developed several tactical plans for a possible future engagement under numerically even conditions. I would like to brief the group—"

Halsey abruptly interrupted him. "That's all well and good, Commodore, but what makes you think we will *ever* engage them on equal terms? You treat them as a conventional enemy, like the Klingons or the Romulans. But these are *not* Klingons or Romulans. Their hyperdrive technology gives them an advantage that we simply cannot overcome." He turned toward the audience. "The Empire can keep fully *half* of its alpha quadrant forces in a single large group, which can conduct hit and fade operations at will, anywhere in our territory. As any pilot knows, when you have a speed advantage you have the luxury of engaging the enemy only when you have the advantage. Unlike us, they don't need to disperse their forces— they have superior speed, and no planetary assets to protect. We don't have the speed to intercept them with a large force of our own, so we spread our forces around in a futile effort to whittle away at his large fleet whenever it drops out of hyperspace. *That* is why we are losing this war."

The room was silent, as the officers in attendance pondered their situation. Commodore Lane spoke up. "I presume you have a plan? Or are you suggesting that we surrender?"

"The Federation will *never* surrender, Commodore. We are losing because we don't have the technology to intercept his ships. However, there are old-fashioned methods we can still use." He flashed his pointer toward the viewscreen, highlighting a dozen star systems in order. "He has made massive, destructive strikes in these systems. Therefore, he is attempting to draw our forces away. Those systems are roughly equidistant from Earth, to within a tolerance of plus or minus 10 light years. I therefore suspect that he is planning to attack Earth in the near future."

Lane looked disgusted. "Admiral Halsey, with all due respect, that is obvious. We have known about the probability of a large strike on Earth for some time. What do you suggest we do about it?"

"I suggest we collect every available ship to make a stand here. The Empire's forces will come sooner or later, and we should be ready. Without every single ship at our disposal, we can't hope to stand up to his forces."

A chorus of criticism greeted Halsey, as he knew it would. Admiral Shimizu voiced the most obvious complaint. "What makes you think we will be able to collect every ship? It would mean leaving dozens of systems totally defenseless, and the president would *never* agree to it."

Halsey's expression hardened into stone. "I agree. Something must be done about the president's position on this matter. The future of the entire Federation is at stake, and that is more important than any one man."


Drone number 15 of 35 on-line. Species: human. Point of origin: Earth, Federation sector 001. Gender: Male. Height: 1.7 metres. Obsolete identification tag: Chang. Obsolete occupational descriptor: Federation officer. Obsolete

hierarchal command structure locator tag: Commander.

Analyzing neural network data storage contents for drone 15 of 35. Analyzing. Sorting. Collating. Data mining operation commenced. Level 12 species identification data identified. Federation designator: Galactic Empire. Allocate species identification number: 16852. Category: bipedal humanoid. Point of origin: beyond the borders of this galaxy. Known assets: more than 12 million star systems located in distant galaxy.

Identify potentially useful technologies: High energy hybrid particle beam/electromagnetic energy weapons, descriptor name: turbolasers. Electromechanical control system disruption weapons, descriptor name: ion cannons. Extreme high-velocity transdimensional superluminal propulsion system, descriptor name: hyperdrive. Extreme high-density power generation technology, descriptor name: hypermatter. Mass-manufactured sentient artificial life forms, descriptor name: droids. Techniques for advanced telepathic manipulation of matter and energy, descriptor name: the Force.

Species 16852 added to target species database. Identify species 16852 resources and current locations. Optimize flight paths. No transwarp conduits have been constructed in that quadrant. 5 Borg vessels can reach target system in 8 days at maximum transwarp speed. Assimilate with 8.93 priority level.



Ambassador Tu'rohn stepped out of the turbolift, expecting to see Romulus on the bridge viewscreen. Picard turned to speak. "Ambassador, it appears that our navigational database has suffered some corruption due to our battle damage. We should be approaching Romulus right now, but as you can see, we appear to be in an asteroid field. Stellar cartography is currently attempting to get a fix on our location."

Data turned to speak, with a look of concern on his face. "Captain, we have already completed the navigational realignment and we appear to be in the correct location. The asteroids in front of us are merely the slowest moving pieces of a large expanding debris field, which is spreading rapidly outward from the former location of Romulus. The mass of the debris field is appropriate for a class M planet, sir."

The Ambassador's knees buckled, and he sank to the deck. "Romulus ... no ... it can't be true ... no ... check your position again! Check your position again ... it can't be true ..." his voice trailed off to silence. Tears welled in his eyes, and Troi rushed to his side.

Picard was in shock. "The Empire destroyed the entire planet ... this means they were able to send the Death Star through the wormhole. The Death Star is already in the alpha quadrant ..." The implications of this fact were horrifying. A stifling silence settled over

the bridge.

More than a minute passed as the bridge crew pondered the enormity of what had just happened, when Picard finally collected himself. "Mister Data, how long ago did this happen?"

"Captain, based on the average velocity and range of the debris, I estimate that Romulus was destroyed approximately twelve hours ago. I have also detected debris which may be the wreckage of Romulan starships. There may have been a battle, or perhaps the Romulan ships were destroyed along with the planet."

Worf sounded an alarm. "Captain, several warships are decloaking!"

"Shields up!" Picard instinctively ordered. He knew the Imperials had cloaking technology but he hadn't considered the possibility that they were lying in wait. *Damned fool— I should have anticipated this*, he cursed to himself.

The sensors quickly located the decloaking ships and the viewscreen displayed them. Several of the crew gasped in shock. Worf looked dumbfounded, but calmly and professionally identified the ships. "Captain, I am detecting four Negh'var-class heavy carriers, twenty three Vor'cha-class attack cruisers, sixty four B'rel-class birds of prey ... and four Imperial Star Destroyers."

"Klingons and Imperials together! But how ... " Picard looked back at the Romulan ambassador, but he appeared to be in a state of shock, and would probably be unable to answer questions. He decided that he would have to deal with this situation without the ambassador's help. "Hail them, Mister Data."

"Yes, sir. Hailing."

Chancellor Gowron's face quickly appeared on the viewscreen. "Hail and well met, Picard! For the Romulans, today was a good day ... to die!" He threw his head back and laughed, and the rest of his bridge crew quickly joined in the raucous laughter. When the laughter finally died down, Gowron turned back to Picard and smiled. "Picard, I regret to inform you that you are illegally trespassing in Klingon territory. I suggest that you leave now, or be destroyed."

Picard could not believe his ears. "Chancellor Gowron, why would you ally yourselves with the Empire against the Federation? Don't you see that if they conquer us, you will be their next target?"

Gowron sneered. "Is that a plea for help? I will not be deceived, Picard. The Empire has assured us that they are not interested in our territory, and as a gesture of good will, they gave us the Romulan Empire and they have placed several of their starships under my command. They only seek to avenge their honour, Captain. Honour is something that we Klingons understand perfectly. I *thought* you understood this, Picard. But by the cowardly actions of your Federation, I see that I was mistaken."

Picard took a deep breath, realizing the importance of convincing Gowron to see reason. "Chancellor, the Empire clearly intends to conquer this entire galaxy. By allying yourselves with them, you are playing *directly* into their hands!"

The sneer had not left Gowron's face. "I do not listen to the words of cowards who conspire with the Romulans to attack defenseless women and children. The Galactic Empire and the Klingon Empire have a mutual agreement. We will take the Romulan Empire and the Dominion, and they will take the Federation. They gave us ships and helped us crush the Romulan and Cardassian leaderships, and we gave them information. Technical specifications of Federation starships. Location of Federation shipyards and starbases. Your Federation will be destroyed, Picard. And if you don't leave in ten seconds, you will be destroyed as well."

Gowron's image vanished from the viewscreen. Worf reported quickly. "Captain, they are powering up their weapons."

"Hail them, Mister Data."

Data hailed. "They are not responding, Captain."

Damn. "Set course for Earth, Mister Data. Maximum warp. Engage." The Enterprise swung on its axis, and the stars elongated in the viewscreen as the ship outraced laggardly photons and disappeared. In its wake, Gowron returned to the task of conquering the Romulan Star Empire. Decades of betrayal and treachery were piled upon the altar of Gowron's hatred for the Romulans, and it was time for an accounting.

1 Imperial vessel identified by vessel 1 of 5.
Identification tag: Imperial Star Destroyer. Current status:
fully functional. Imperial vessel is destroying a Federation
subspace relay station. Approach to weapons range.


Transmission active. We are the Borg. Prepare to be
assimilated. Your existence, as you know it, is over. We
will add your biological and technological distinctiveness
to our own. Your culture will adapt to service us.
Resistance is futile.

Primary target acquired. Align beam array 3 to target. Fire.
41% damage to Imperial vessel's shields. Imperial vessel
returning fire with hybrid particle beam/electromagnetic
radiation weapons. Damage to 18% of superstructure. Auto-
repair systems on-line. Weapon characteristics identified.
Attempting to adapt shielding to compensate.

Primary target re-acquired. Align beam array 4 to target.
Fire. 47% damage to Imperial vessel's shields. Imperial
vessel returning fire with hybrid particle
beam/electromagnetic radiation weapons. Damage to 6% of

superstructure. Adaptation successful.

Unable to re-acquire primary target. Imperial vessel engaged hyperdrive propulsion system. Assemble 1 of 5 through 5 of 5 into formation and continue to Imperial power base, Federation designator: Gate System.



President Inyo looked up with alarm. There hadn't been a power blackout in the presidential building in years. *Not since Admiral Leyton attempted to seize control of the government ...*

He activated his communications console. "Security, this is the President. I need extra security personnel in my office. Security, are you there? Security, do you copy?" He pounded the console, and realized that the blackout had probably rendered communications inoperative. He began shouting. "Security! Get in here!" The two guards posted outside his office did not respond.

The hair stood up on the back of his neck, as visions of a bloody coup entered his mind. He fumbled in the dark, to find the phaser pistol that he kept in his desk. He gripped its smooth, contoured handgrip in his hand and moved cautiously toward the door. *What happened to the guards?* The door did not respond to his approach, and he slowly pried the door open.

He crouched to present the smallest possible target and stuck his head through the gap, into the hall. His blood ran cold when he saw the two guards in the dim emergency lighting, dead on the floor. He stepped back from the door, and as he did so, he could hear his heart beating and feel the pounding of his pulse in his temples. In the silence, his ragged breathing seemed thunderously loud. Sweat glistened on his skin, and the phaser's smooth handle was starting to get slippery in his grip. He kept his eyes fixed unwaveringly on the door, waiting for the inevitable assassination attempt.

He tried to still his breathing, but an instinct, a sixth sense, warned him that he was *not alone in the room*. He spun around and saw a figure stepping in from the balcony. With the fastest reaction he could muster, perhaps the fastest reactions of his life, he brought his phaser up and fired. But he was a civilian, and had never fired a weapon before in his life. The beam missed by more than a metre.

In contrast, the assassin was an expert marksman. With cool, military precision, he dropped to a three-point stance and fired his weapon. An iridescent red bolt of energy sizzled through the air and struck the president squarely in the chest, blasting a hole in his body and knocking him to the floor with a dull thud. The assassin calmly walked to the president's prone form and kicked the phaser out of his hand. He knelt at the president's side, and could see that the president was unconscious. Blood oozed and bubbled from the chest wound, but incredibly, he was still alive. The assassin pressed the muzzle of his weapon against the president's forehead, and pulled the trigger.

2417 Imperial vessels identified by vessel 1 of 5. Approach

to weapons range.

Transmission active. We are the Borg. Prepare to be assimilated. Your existence, as you know it, is over. We will add your biological and technological distinctiveness to our own. Your culture will adapt to service us. Resistance is futile.

Primary target acquired. Identification tag: Imperial Star Destroyer. Align beam array 5 to target. Fire. 48% damage to Imperial vessel's shields. 45 Imperial vessels returning fire with hybrid particle beam/electromagnetic radiation weapons. Damage to 82% of superstructure. Auto-repair systems on-line. Primary power system-

...

Monitor switch to vessel 2 of 5. Vessel 1 of 5 destroyed. Primary target acquired. Align beam-

...

Monitor switch to vessel 3 of 5. Vessel 2 of 5 destroyed. Primary target acquired. Align beam array 1 to target. Fire. Imperial vessel's shields collapsed. 57 Imperial vessels returning-

...

Monitor switch to vessel 4 of 5. Vessel 3 of 5 destroyed. Primary target acquired. Align beam array 6 to target. Fire. Damage to Imperial vessel's superstructure. 62 Imperial vessels returning fire. Damage to-

...

Monitor switch to vessel 5 of 5. Vessel 4 of 5 destroyed. Primary target acquired. Align beam array 6 to target. Fire. Imperial vessel destroyed. 49 Imperial vessels returning fire. Damage to 93% of super-

...

5 vessels destroyed. Species 16852 technological capabilities in excess of predicted level. Initiate analysis of predictive algorithms to isolate error. Optimize flight paths. Divert 475 vessels to known power base. Assimilate with 9.89 priority level.

Chapter Ten: Onslaught

*"Those skilled in the art of war subdue the enemy's army without battle.
They capture his cities without assaulting them,
and overthrow his state without protracted operations."— Sun Tzu*

"Admiral, do you see how the wound is cauterized almost completely?" The medic pointed at the blistered, burned crater in President Inyo's chest. Some blood had pooled into the gaping wound, but certainly not the torrent of blood that one would expect. The head wound was no different. Worse yet, six other high-ranking politicians had also been found murdered, all during the same blackout. As a result, the presidential building had been thrust into total chaos, as reporters, dignitaries, and soldiers crammed the building. It was ironic that the only quiet space in the entire building would be the president's office, which had been sealed off to all but the medics and the handful of reporters and Starfleet officers, by order of Halsey himself.

"Yes, it doesn't look like a phaser or disruptor wound. What sort of weapon does this kind of damage?" Halsey asked the medic with the best tone of sincerity that he could muster.

"A plasma discharge would do it, sir."

"Or a plasma *weapon*." Halsey stepped back from the cold, dead body of the president, and turned to Lieutenant Portugal. "Lieutenant, I asked you here because you were part of the USS Carolina's crew. You came back from Imperial space along with the late Commander Chang, correct?"

"Yes, sir. But Commander Chang's death has *not* been confirmed. He is missing."

"Yes, of course. My apologies." There was an awkward pause, and then Halsey continued. "Nevertheless, your experiences in Imperial territory make you qualified to answer this question. What is the standard sidearm of an Imperial stormtrooper?"

Portugal nervously cleared his throat, sensing that Halsey was putting on some sort of show. "As far as we can tell, it's some sort of jacketed particle beam weapon, sir. Similar to a plasma rifle. They call them blasters."

Halsey raised his voice, as if challenging anyone in the room to question his next statement. "I see. And would the wounds of the late President Inyo be consistent with the effects of an Imperial blaster rifle?"

Portugal fidgeted slightly, as if he knew that the eyes of the room were fixed on his every movement. "Yes, sir. These injuries are consistent with the effect of an Imperial blaster rifle."

Halsey raised his voice another notch. "And similar injuries were found on all six of


the other victims. We can therefore conclude that the Empire somehow found a way to smuggle assassins onto Earth, who were able to induce a temporary power failure in the presidential building and slip past our security forces to assassinate the president and six other members of his staff. Do you feel that is a logical conclusion?"

Portugal could see where this was heading, and he didn't like it. "That is the most *obvious* conclusion, yes. But it isn't—"

Halsey abruptly cut him off. "It is the *only* conclusion which fits the facts, Lieutenant Portugal. I have already met with the other senior admirals, and we have decided that it is time to declare a state of emergency. Martial law."

Portugal looked like a caged animal, trying to escape the inevitable. "But sir, you don't have the authority to declare martial law—"

Halsey interrupted him again. "All of the people who *do* have the authority to declare martial law are *dead!* If the Empire could do this, think of what else they are doing while we stand here debating the issue! The decision has already been made. Every ship within transmission range is converging on Earth, to defend us against what is sure to be the most dangerous assault that the Earth has ever faced." He turned to the reporters, and spoke in an imperious tone of voice. "Ladies and gentlemen, it is with no small regret that I take such extreme measures. But this is not the time for idealism— we must *face facts*. The brave men and women of Starfleet are the *only* thing that stands between the people of the Earth and utter annihilation. We *need* your co-operation. This war isn't just happening in isolated outposts, out on the frontier. No, we can no longer pretend that this war is someone else's problem. It has come *here*, to Earth. We must take steps to defend ourselves, before it is too late."



Imperial vessel detected exiting hyperspace 23 million kilometres from Borg planet 824. Hull configuration: spherical. Diameter: 900 kilometres. Identification tag: Death Star. Primary starship weaponry: compound energy weapon of unknown design, identification tag: superlaser. Estimated yield of primary weapon: in excess of 50,000 times the energy requirement for destroying planet 824. Defensive weaponry: in excess of 1.25 million hybrid particle beam/electromagnetic energy weapons, identification tag: turbolaser turrets. Defensive equipment: energy shield, high-density armour.

Energy transient detected in Imperial vessel. Superlaser discharging. Impact on planet 824 in 79 seconds. 23 vessels redirected to intercept Imperial vessel. Intercept in 153 seconds.

Planetary transmission active. We are the Borg. Prepare to be assimilated. We will add your biological and technological distinctiveness to our own. Your culture will

adapt to service us. Resistance is futile.

Imperial superlaser impact on planet 824 in 1 sec-

...

Planet 824 destroyed. 23 vessels approaching Imperial vessel. Weapons range in 47 seconds.

...

15 of 23 vessels within weapons range of Imperial vessel. Transmission active. We are the Borg. Prepare to be assimilated. We will add your biological and technological distinctiveness to our own. Your culture will adapt to service us. Resistance is futile.

Imperial vessel firing 377,850 hybrid particle beam/electromagnetic energy weapons. Primary target acqui-

...

Vessel 1 of 23 destroyed.
Vessel 2 of 23 destroyed.
Vessel 3 of 23 destroyed.
Vessel 4 of 23 destroyed.
Vessel 5 of 23 destroyed.
Vessel 6 of 23 destroyed.
Vessel 7 of 23 destroyed.
Vessel 8 of 23 destroyed.
Vessel 9 of 23 destroyed.
Vessel 10 of 23 destroyed.
Vessel 11 of 23 destroyed.
Vessel 12 of 23 destroyed.
Vessel 13 of 23 destroyed.
Vessel 14 of 23 destroyed.
Vessel 15 of 23 destroyed.

15 of 23 vessels destroyed. Remaining 8 of 23 vessels within weapons range of Imperial vessel. Transmission active. We are the Borg. Prepare to be assimilated. We will add your biological and technological distinctiveness to our own. Your culture will adapt to service us. Resistance is futile.

Imperial vessel firing 287,450 hybrid particle beam/electromagnetic energy weapons. Primary tar-

...

Vessel 16 of 23 destroyed.
Vessel 17 of 23 destroyed.
Vessel 18 of 23 destroyed.
Vessel 19 of 23 destroyed.

Vessel 20 of 23 destroyed.
Vessel 21 of 23 destroyed.
Vessel 22 of 23 destroyed.
Vessel 23 of 23 destroyed.

All planet 824 facilities and defensive vessels destroyed.
Total losses since initiation of hostilities with Galactic Empire: 21 planets, 856 vessels. 163.24 billion Borg.
Redirect all available vessels to attack on Imperial power base. All other priorities rescinded. Assimilate Imperial forces. Priority level 10.00.

"We are entering the solar system, Captain. I am detecting more than eight hundred starships in orbit around Earth, not including fighters."

Picard was aghast. "That's almost everything we have. How could Halsey pull together so many ships, with long-range communications down? Especially after our losses in the Dominion War ..."

Riker leaned forward. "He must have called in ships from all the nearby sectors. Used emergency buoys and temporary relays to send the call out as far as he could. He must be hoping to hit them with more starships than they expect to see."

"Yes, Number One. But how many star systems did he leave defenseless, so that he could build this fleet? How many Federation citizens are looking up into the sky tonight and wondering why Starfleet has abandoned them?" Picard's disgust with Halsey was obvious.

"Did he have any alternative?"

"There are *always* alternatives, Number One. I'm going to beam over to the USS Tanaka, to speak with Halsey in person. Number One, you have the bridge." Picard strode into the turbolift, and within minutes, he was materializing in the transporter room of the USS Tanaka. The Tanaka's transporter operator stood stiffly at attention and greeted the unexpected visitor with an expression of surprise followed by recognition.

"Captain Picard? I didn't realize you were coming onboard."

Picard didn't have time to explain himself to the ensign, so he merely smiled and raised an eyebrow in mock surprise. "Well then, someone must have forgotten to inform you! Carry on, ensign." He quickly strode down the hallway toward his meeting with Halsey.

Meanwhile, back on the Enterprise, Riker was no longer on the bridge. Instead, he was standing in Ambassador Tu'rohn's quarters. With a sinking feeling in his heart, he looked down at Tu'rohn's grey, lifeless body. The dead man lay peacefully in his bed, clutching a portrait of his wife and children.

"How did he do it, Doctor?"

"He had a subdermal implant in his neck which released an unidentified toxin into his bloodstream. I'm not sure how he activated it, but it was *very* effective. Death occurred in seconds."

Troi chimed in. "Once he came to accept that Romulus had been destroyed, he decided that the blame fell entirely on his *own* shoulders. He was convinced that if he had not co-operated with Halsey, the entire war could have been averted and Romulus and all of its inhabitants would never have been destroyed."

Riker looked down upon the body of Tu'rohn with a new-found measure of sympathy. "My god ... I've been so wrapped up in our own problems that I hadn't even thought about the ambassador. Such a terrible burden."

Data injected a note of practicality. "This will have severe repercussions on our case against Halsey."

"Yes, *very* severe. We've lost our only witness, and Counsellor Troi's conversations are protected, and therefore inadmissible." Without a witness, Riker knew that it would be impossible to lay charges against Halsey. As a result, it would be impossible to remove Halsey from command and more importantly, it would be impossible to convince the Imperials that the Romulan attack was not sanctioned by the Federation government. His hopes of an eleventh hour diplomatic resolution dimmed almost to nothingness.

"Should we contact the Captain?" Crusher asked.

"Not over an open channel, Doctor. He'll have to find out when he returns."

Aboard the USS Tanaka, Halsey responded to the chime from the door of his ready room. "Enter." He looked up with an expression of mild surprise to see Picard walking through the door. "Ah, my good Captain. Glad to see the Enterprise in one piece! My compliments to your chief engineer. I hope your valiant crew will fight bravely in the coming battle."

"I have every confidence in my crew, Admiral. But the Enterprise is still too heavily damaged for combat. In any case, that is not why I am here. I am here because I want to know what happened to the President."

"Haven't you heard? He was murdered by an Imperial assassin. The situation is far worse than we had feared, Captain. The Imperials have infiltrated our organization to the point that they can put assassins in our highest government offices and murder our leaders at will. I took control of Starfleet, and declared a state of martial law to deal with the crisis. It was only the first step—"

"Martial law! Do you *seriously* think that such an extreme measure was necessary?"

Picard was utterly dumbfounded.

"Captain, I'm afraid you don't realize how bad the situation is. Martial law wasn't just *necessary*, it was *long* overdue! You have been isolated, and thanks to the destruction of the subspace relay network, you have been incommunicado. What you may not know is that the enemy is attacking colonies all over our territory. Our forces are outnumbered by a huge margin in every battle, and the Romulans appear to be too involved with their own problems to help."

Picard suddenly realized that Halsey didn't know what had happened to Romulus. "Admiral, the Romulans aren't helping because they have been *erased* as a political and military entity in the alpha quadrant. The Empire destroyed Romulus, and they are helping the Klingons conquer the Romulan Empire. Not only can you *not* count on the Romulans for assistance, but you can forget about the Klingons as well. They are now Imperial *allies*."

Halsey stared at Picard for a moment, seeming to contemplate this latest bombshell. Then he lowered his voice, and leaned closer. "Picard, this isn't good. The situation is even worse than you may have imagined. Some of the colonies have broken away from the Federation, citing fears of Imperial reprisals and announcing that they've signed non-aggression treaties with the Empire. In fact, even *Vulcan* has officially announced its neutrality in this conflict!"

Picard's jaw set. "Admiral, since you left Vulcan defenseless in order to assemble this huge concentration of ships," he said, gesturing at the vast fleet in the viewscreen, "I can certainly understand their decision! The Empire might bombard their planet or worse yet, destroy it completely if they remain a full Federation member. But if they declare neutrality, they won't have to worry about Imperial reprisals. And they know that we would never punish them for leaving. So it is an eminently *logical* decision regardless of how this war turns out, isn't it? I wonder how many other member systems are mulling the same decision." He paused briefly, and continued in a darker tone. "This *never* would have happened if this situation had been handled properly from the start."

Halsey's expression hardened. "Picard, if you've got something to say, then say it."

Picard almost growled his response. "I am *trying* to say that you have spent every effort to win the war, without giving any thought to winning the peace! Let's suppose that through some miracle, you actually *win* this battle. *Then* what? The Empire will simply send more ships. More men. More *deaths*, Admiral! They can *outlast* you, and they will continue bombarding and threatening star system after star system into submission. One by one, more Federation systems will secede until there is no Federation *left* to fight for!" He paused, expecting Halsey to interject something, but Halsey merely sat there fuming. Picard continued. "You have *no* right to continue plunging us deeper and deeper into this war. You were *never* elected to your position, and you have *illegally* seized control of the government."

Halsey said nothing for a long time. He continued staring at Picard as the icy silence

lengthened, until he eventually spoke in a quiet, deliberate tone of voice. "*Captain Picard, this is hardly the time to debate legal technicalities. We are on the brink of the most important battle in the history of humanity. We need your help in the coming battle Picard. We don't need a controversy. You are dismissed.*"

Picard stood his ground, and raised his voice. "The coming battle shouldn't be happening *at all*, Admiral! I know about the sensor-net relays. I know about how you sent all of our classified intelligence data to the Romulans on a coded subspace frequency. You betrayed the Federation and dragged us into a war that should *never* have started!"

Halsey's skin turned a dark shade of red, and the veins stood out on his forehead. "Captain, you are *dismissed!* You will obey my orders and return to the Enterprise, or I will relieve you of command. Is that clear?"

"Yes, Admiral. Perfectly clear." Picard was furious but he knew better than to risk a direct confrontation before he had any hard evidence. He toyed with the idea of mentioning Tu'rohn, but Tu'rohn hadn't said a word since leaving Romulus. He had remained in a semi-catatonic state, staring at pictures of his family. Picard tried to imagine what it would do to a man's psyche, to witness the total destruction of his homeworld and all of the billions of people living on it, and decided that Tu'rohn probably wasn't over-reacting at all. *Nevertheless, I'll have to convince him to talk now, so that I can bring charges against Halsey before the Imperials attack.* He turned to walk to the turbolift, knowing what he had to do. *Everything hinges on Tu'rohn*, he thought to himself ...



Aboard the Crimson Blade, at the Gate System, Admiral Kanos contemplated his options. "Captain, how many ships did we lose this time?"

Daron responded with a slight edge of trepidation in his voice. "Sir, we destroyed all of the attackers in the last wave of Borg cubes, but we lost eighty seven of our own ships. They seem to have adapted their weapons and shields to be more effective than we expected. If this keeps up, our losses will become a great source of embarrassment to the Emperor."

"I suppose we shouldn't be too surprised— the Borg are known for their ability to quickly adapt to new threats. Is the Death Star on schedule?"

"Yes, sir. Twenty one planetary targets eliminated so far, along with all of their defense fleets. It's amazing— the Borg keep coming, and refuse all attempts at negotiation, even though we have destroyed twenty one of their planets! Surely any civilized sentient race would have to consider surrender after such losses."

"The Borg are unlike any other opponent we have faced, Captain. They don't shrink from losses, and are unresponsive to negotiation. They have kept coming, and they will keep coming, until they are *all* exterminated. That is the cost of doing business in this

galaxy— we must eliminate the Borg." He sighed heavily, and continued. "We always expected this to happen, but not so soon. The Borg somehow learned of our existence sooner than we expected them to. We expected to have the Galaxy Gun and World Devastators recommissioned before encountering the Borg, but it looks like we'll have to destroy them without the extra firepower."

"Yes sir, but what about our rate of losses?"

"I don't expect our rate of losses to get any worse than they already are, Captain. The Borg's shields and weapons may be more effective than we expected, but they have shown an utter lack of tactical inventiveness. It's almost comical, isn't it? In every single battle, they make that *ridiculous* speech of theirs, they form up into a group, and they move in a straight line toward the heart of our forces. They ignore flanking maneuvers, they ignore damage, and they move mindlessly forward in a straight line until they are destroyed. The only reason they are even *remotely* dangerous is their lack of individuality. They don't play, they don't marry, they don't relax, they don't study philosophy or create art, nor do they take vacations or fight amongst themselves. Each and every Borg drone's existence is an unbroken stream of military or industrial activities. I don't know whether to find that fearsome or laughable."

"Perhaps both, sir." Daron didn't know what to make of the Borg. He found their apparent stupidity amusing but he was deeply unsettled by their apparently complete lack of fear, and their relentless nature.

"Yes, perhaps." Kanos was confident in the Empire's eventual victory over the Borg, especially with the aid of the Death Star, but they would take unacceptable losses in manpower and equipment. They might even have to request heavy reinforcements from Imperial space, and the Emperor would undoubtedly be displeased with his performance. He would be removed from command, and he knew perfectly well that there was no comfortable retirement home for Imperial officers found guilty of incompetence. *Rightly so*, Kanos reminded himself. *I should have had a contingency plan for the premature appearance of the Borg. My mistake may cost a great many lives.* But there was no point dwelling upon mistakes. Instead, he would have to find ways to deal with the problem at hand. He reviewed his options, and decided upon a plan. "Captain, we need to accelerate our campaign against the Federation. Contact Tharde aboard the Death Star and inform him that he is to return for an attack on Earth in two days."

Captain Daron didn't want to question Kanos more than he had to, but this time he was sure the Admiral had made a mistake. "Sir, with the continual Borg attacks, is this a good time to accelerate our campaign against Earth?"

"Captain, this isn't just a good time to accelerate our campaign against Earth— it is the *ideal* time." With that enigmatic statement, Kanos turned and walked off the bridge.

"Just for once, I wish he would let me in on his little schemes ..." Daron muttered beneath his breath. But frustrated or not, he never questioned Admiral Kanos' orders. He began to apply himself to the task of organizing the attack on Earth.

At Earth, the Federation fleet waited. It could be hours, it could be days, but they knew something was coming. Lieutenant Portugal had long since grown impatient, but the wait was about to end. Without warning, his display suddenly filled up with sensor contacts, and he immediately turned to Halsey. "Admiral! Imperial fleet dropping out of hyperspace eighteen million kilometres from our position!"

"Size and composition?" Halsey inquired.

"Roughly five hundred assorted capital ships, including two extremely large vessels which match the profiles of an Executor and Eclipse-class warship respectively. They are launching fighters and approaching at high sublight speed. If intel is right, they'll power up their interdictor fields in approximately one minute."

So it begins, Halsey thought to himself. "Red alert! Inform the fleet that they are to execute tactical maneuver Foxtrot Tango Three on my mark." *Only five hundred ships—we actually outnumber them! But all those fighters ... and those two big battlewagons must count for hundreds of ships apiece.*

"Yes, sir. Informing the fleet." The vast Federation fleet formed into a cohesive group and hurtled toward what would be the most critical battle in Federation history. *Into the valley of Death rode the six hundred*, Portugal thought to himself. *Give or take a couple of hundred ...* he was interrupted in his thoughts by a message coming through. "Sir, they are hailing us, demanding that we surrender and hand over Captain Picard to them."

The first demand didn't surprise Halsey, but the second one did. "Picard? What would they want with Picard?" He thought about it for a few seconds, and then shrugged. "It doesn't matter— let them eat static, Lieutenant."

"Sir, someone else is trying to contact the Imperial fleet. It's the Enterprise. They're transmitting from inside Spacedock."

Halsey's anger flared as he realized what Picard was doing. He had been quietly pleased that the heavily damaged Enterprise was still being repaired when the Imperial fleet arrived, and it hadn't occurred to him that Picard would be brash enough to try and circumvent his authority. "Damn that Picard. Kanos wants to buy time, and Picard wants to help him! Can we jam his transmission?"

"Not without transmitting so much subspace energy that our ECM will be useless. We'll be the biggest target in the solar system."

"All right, forget that. I've got a better idea." Halsey grumbled. "Open a channel to Admiral Shimizu in Earth Spacedock."

Aboard the Enterprise, Data turned to Picard with a glum expression on his face. "Captain, we have lost communications with the Crimson Blade. We are being jammed locally, by the spacedock transmitters. They are far more powerful than our own communications system."

"Damn! Mister Data, how long before we can get the impulse engines on line?"

"The system is currently in a non-operational state. An emergency cold-start will take at least three minutes, sir."

"Do it." Picard ordered sharply. *We've got to get clear of Spacedock so that we can communicate with Kanos before Halsey squanders our only chance!*

Aboard the USS Tanaka, Halsey smiled with satisfaction as the Enterprise's transmission was obliterated by spacedock's powerful transmitters. The Imperial ships grew ever larger in his viewscreen, and he leaned forward in his seat. "Wait for it ... wait for it ... NOW!" In a complex ballet of movement, the fleet broke up into a huge, pre-programmed starburst pattern. Hundreds of ships streaked past the Imperial warships on all sides, and executed pre-programmed, sweeping turns. They rushed toward the Imperial fleet from various angles, and dropped out of warp just inside weapons range. The Imperial fleet found itself completely surrounded by the Federation ships, which began pouring phaser and photon torpedo fire into the trapped group. The Imperial ships returned fire immediately, and the darkness of space was illuminated by the unleashed energies of countless weapons of mass destruction.



On the vast and eerily tranquil bridge of the Crimson Blade, Kanos watched the unfolding chaos and smiled. "Very good! Very good, indeed. They may prove to be worthy adversaries after all ... Captain, all ahead flank! Concentrate fire on the ships in front of us, and order the escort vessels to deal with the surrounding enemy ships. And get those damned interdiction fields up!"

"Admiral, their fleet is weakly arrayed to starboard. If we make a course correction—"

"We will be allowing the enemy to control where we move. I doubt that his uneven fleet deployment was an accident, Captain. I repeat, all ahead flank. Never let your enemy control your actions. Now, let's see what his next trick is."

Aboard the USS Tanaka, Admiral Halsey was about to demonstrate his next trick. The ship shuddered from a turbolaser blast, and he barked out a critical order. "Activate phase cloak!" The Tanaka shimmered, and then vanished, much to the astonishment of Imperial gunnery crews. But a phase-cloaked ship is still affected by gravity, and still produces gravity. The gunners quickly realized they were dealing with a cloaked ship, and after switching to focus scanning they picked up the trail and fired. A series of turbolaser blasts hurtled toward the invisible USS Tanaka, and Halsey recoiled in horror as the entire bridge blazed with a blinding green light. At first, he thought the cloak had failed, and that he was dying. But the light faded, and he realized that the cloak had worked perfectly. A monstrous heavy turbolaser bolt had just passed *through* his body, and he was still alive! Dozens of bolts passed through the ship from various angles, all without effect. He began to laugh. "If only we had time to install these cloaks on *all* our ships!" *The President never even would have allowed us to take this prototype out of storage*, he thought to himself.

Aboard the Crimson Blade, Kanos wasn't laughing. "You're telling me that you can still track it but your shots pass harmlessly *through* the ship? Is it firing back?"

"No, sir."

"Then it must not be able to fire while cloaked. This must be the phase-cloak that we learned about. If he fires, his weapons will pass through us just as harmlessly as our weapons pass through him. I don't know what our enemy hopes to accomplish with it— if he can't shoot at us and we can't shoot at him, it's a bit of a stalemate, isn't it? Perhaps he just wants a safe platform from which to command his fleet. Ignore him until he de-cloaks."

Halsey was indeed commanding his fleet from his safe vantage point. Moving easily through the battle, he had the luxury of being able to observe combat from every angle without the risk of destruction. He watched with satisfaction as three Galaxy class ships hammered the engine cluster of a dreadnaught with a huge simultaneous phaser and photon torpedo barrage, sending the dreadnaught spiralling out of control with flames pouring out of its breached hull. He watched with frustration as two Miranda class ships foolishly flew in a straight line right through the firing arc of a Star Destroyer's heavy guns, and cringed as the Star Destroyer opened fire with the huge, rarely-used turrets. In

a single moment, the Mirandas were both blasted into clouds of duranium shrapnel and superheated vapour. He shouted into his communicator. "All ships, remember the briefings! Stay *away* from the topside heavy turrets! I repeat, stay *away* from the topside heavy turrets!" Of course, he knew that it was a much easier order to issue than obey, with the confusion of battle and the jumbled mass of ships. But he continued issuing orders, redirecting ships, exhorting his men. And so the battle raged on.

Aboard the Crimson Blade, Kanos didn't like the way the battle was going. "Captain, the Federation vessels are moving much too easily through our fleet. Increase interdiction fields to maximum strength, and put full power to all subspace jammers and distortion field generators."

Aboard the Tanaka, Halsey felt the ship sickeningly lurch, first to port and then to starboard, before the inertial dampers compensated for the outside influence. "Lieutenant Portugal, what the devil is going on?"

"Sir, the Imperial ships are generating high energy subspace distortion fields. We can't form a stable warp field, and it's also affecting our maneuverability and sensors. However, when I was aboard the Rebel spacecraft I learned that these jammers and distortion fields also affect their *own* maneuverability and sensors. Their fighters are slowing down and losing maneuverability, just like we are. It's like fighting in mud."

"A situation which favours brute force over finesse, thus giving them an advantage." Halsey muttered to no one in particular. He stared at the viewscreen, almost hypnotized by the interplay of violence. The flaming wreckage of Imperial and Federation ships floated through space before him, as the battle took its toll on Federation and Imperial ships alike. He watched an entire squadron of TIE Defenders launch its torpedoes into the starboard warp nacelle of an Excelsior class ship, which obliterated the fighters with a proximity-burst spread of photon torpedoes just as its nacelle disintegrated into a billowing cloud of alloy and plasma. He turned his gaze elsewhere, to see a Victory class Star Destroyer explode like a dying sun under a merciless barrage of quantum torpedoes. He reflexively covered as a Peregrine fighter flew directly *through* the phased bridge of his ship, pursued by an Imperial Skipray gunboat, and regrouped just in time to see a crippled Sovereign class starship hurling itself suicidally against the seemingly impenetrable shields of the enormous Eclipse-class Star Destroyer.

Aboard the Enterprise, trapped in spacedock millions of kilometres away, Picard could only listen to the communications chatter in impotent frustration. He could hear captains ordering their crews to abandon ship, helmsmen announcing that they were going to ramming speed, the sound of explosions and screams. *Where are those engines? If the Imperial fleet breaks through, we'll be a sitting duck*, he thought to himself. He started pacing again, when he felt an unmistakable vibration in the deckplates beneath his feet. A ship's captain knows his vessel as intimately as he knows himself, and the subtle vibration was as clear as if the message had been displayed in giant glowing letters on the bridge viewscreen. *The impulse engines are on line!*

"Excellent. Mister Data, release the pod."

"Pod released, Captain." A specially modified antimatter containment pod shot away from the side of the ship, and its containment field, marginally stable, collapsed within seconds. The explosion triggered alarms all throughout the cavernous spacedock facility, and Data immediately opened a channel. "Containment field strength dropping. One pod ejected due to instability. Cascade failure imminent. Request spacedock door release under emergency procedure number one seven three." A containment failure inside spacedock would be disastrous, so the men and women operating the door controls obeyed their training and began opening the doors, without question and without hesitation.

Admiral Shimizu ran to the control room and demanded to know what was happening. She looked out the window and saw the Enterprise moving toward the doors, and realized what was happening. "No, close the doors! It's a trick!" she shouted.

"Sir, we have an emergency—" the ensign began to protest, but Shimizu pushed past him and aborted the door release. The massive doors slowed, stopped, and then reversed direction.

"Captain, the doors are closing."

"Shimizu reacted quickly. Raise shields and squeeze us through, Mister Data. Full impulse!" The Enterprise's impulse engines flared brightly, and the ship twisted sideways as it leapt toward the doors. The opening was not *quite* wide enough for the ship to fit through, in spite of Data's expert piloting. He knew it, and split seconds later, so did everyone else on the bridge. The Enterprise's shields struck the doors and the Picard was thrown off his feet, but the ship's powerful engines forced it through. With a trail of twisted and shattered pieces of the spacedock door behind it, the Enterprise escaped into the emptiness of space.

Once outside the confines of spacedock, they finally got a clear visual of the battle. Only now did Picard realize the gravity of the situation, as he saw the massive bulk of an Eclipse-class Star Destroyer in the centre of the Imperial fleet. *Good lord, they're just toying with us ... that Eclipse could have fired its superlaser as soon as they came out of hyperspace. What is Kanos waiting for?* He tore his eyes away from the intimidating sight of the primed Imperial weapon of mass destruction long enough to order the Enterprise to head straight for the battle at full impulse, and hoped that they would get there before Kanos decided to use his trump card.

All he could do now was wait, until the Enterprise reached the magic point where the ratio of its distance to spacedock and its distance to the Crimson Blade was such that they would be able to burn through the jamming. They were almost there when he heard the voice of Geordi Laforge. "Captain, I've broken through the encryption on the Romulan shuttle's main computer. We have access to all of Tu'rohn's personal logs," he paused for effect, "including his communications with Admiral Halsey. Captain, I think we've got what we need."

"Well done, Mister Laforge! Well done!" Picard turned to Riker. "Well, Number One.

It looks like we finally have something to sell. Let's just hope that Kanos is still willing to negotiate. Once we can show that Halsey acted without the approval of the Federation government ..." his words trailed off when the unmistakable bulk of the Death Star appeared on the viewscreen. Visions of the shattered remains of Romulus flashed through his mind.

Data began reporting information in a rapid fire staccato flood of words. "There is a massive vessel appearing out of hyperspace. Configuration is spherical. Diameter is nine hundred kilometres. Range is 3 million kilometres. Power surge in central reactor. Energy spike ..." He turned to face Picard. "Captain, the Death Star is about to fire."

Chapter Eleven: Turnabout

*"In battle, use normal force to engage.
Use extraordinary force to win."— Sun Tzu*

"Commence primary ignition."

The order, given so many times in the last few weeks, was given again. Millions of soldiers, technicians, and officers paused in their rounds and waited for the inevitable, familiar vibrations to resonate through the deckplates of the vast battle station. Deep within the Death Star's hypermatter reactor, a turbulent vortex of energy began building to a crescendo, and Grand Moff Tharde smiled as a subordinate pressed the firing trigger into his hand. It was perhaps an overly melodramatic gesture— this firing switch. It would have been just as effective to simply order an underling to press a button. But he lusted for the feeling of power— the sensation of godlike omnipotence and invincibility that came with watching helpless planets explode into dust at the mere touch of his finger.

With a mere touch ... Tharde caressed the trigger almost sensuously, as if holding a lover's hand. The Death Star was the closest thing to a lover he had ever known. In union with it, he became a god. He was the Destroyer of Worlds. He was the Bringer of Justice— the blood-soaked Angel of Death. But without the firing switch in his hand, he was a mere mortal. An unimportant underling of the Emperor, relegated to the unenviable role of taking orders from Admiral Kanos. *Me— a Grand Moff, taking orders from a mere Admiral!* The thought had been enough to drive him to thoughts of disobeying the Emperor and eliminating Kanos to seize power for himself, but no matter how many times the idea occurred to him it was quickly banished, as if it were ripped from his mind by force. So he stood trembling in the Death Star's control room, holding the firing switch in his hand, waiting for the order, and listening to the dispassionate voice of the controllers. "Stand by."

Aboard the Tanaka, Admiral Halsey knew that it was time. Time to sacrifice himself to save humanity. He may have disobeyed his own government, and murdered his own president, but History would remember him as the man who saved Earth. With the calm, satisfied tone of a man who had found his destiny, he gave the order. "Helmsman, set a course for the Death Star. Maximum warp. Prepare to drop out of warp and de-phase when we enter the reactor chamber." *The Empire will rue the day ...*

"Admiral, we cannot form a stable warp field in this distortion field, and the field strength jumped three times when the Death Star appeared. At our best possible sublight speed, we would need ... Sir, we are picking up a massive energy surge from *behind* us. The Eclipse Star Destroyer is firing its superlaser!"

"*What?*" Halsey sat frozen in horror as the viewscreen switched to the massive Eclipse Star Destroyer in the centre of the Imperial fleet. A fifteen kilometre long build-up of energy culminated in a focused stream that erupted from the bow of the ungainly behemoth, and lanced toward his home. This was no low-powered ship killer beam. It

was a full power blast, designed to vapourize entire continents in an instant. Several unfortunate starships from both sides were caught in the path of the beam and blown to dust, but the beam would not be stopped. Halsey clenched his fists, and in an instant, realized that his dreams of finding a place in history were doomed to failure. *I never thought the Eclipse would fire with their own fleet surrounding them ... what a fool I've been!* He slumped in his seat, knowing that there was nothing he could do. A blast that powerful would kill everyone on the Earth, and Halsey would be reviled as the man who led humanity to its darkest hour.

However, fickle Fate was about give Halsey another chance. Lieutenant Portugal turned to face Halsey with a look of relief on his face. "Admiral, the superlaser is *not* aimed at Earth. It will hit the Moon!" Sure enough, the superlaser beam was headed for the diminutive moon rather than the green planet known as Earth. It struck the moon with titanic violence, drilling through its bulk with a blinding flash and tearing it to pieces. Where the moon once wended its path through space, a cloud of mountain-sized asteroids now drifted away. Where millions of people once made their home, nothing survived.

However, Kanos wasn't finished with his demonstration. On cue, fifty Star Destroyers hyperjumped from deep interstellar space into the system, but from a direction opposite to Kanos' own approach vector. In an unusual variation upon the Thrawn Pincer, they dropped into realspace not in position to attack the Federation fleet, but millions of kilometres away, in orbit around Earth. They were on the opposite side of the planet and out of interdiction range, and they promptly loosed a devastating barrage of heavy turbolaser blasts at San Francisco. These shots were *not* carefully calibrated precision shots, intended to frighten or harass. These shots were unfocused, full powered, Base Delta Zero blasts, designed to reduce the entire area to a molten lake. The lethal salvos slammed into the ground, melting and vapourizing countless tons of dirt, metal, and building materials. The men, women, and children of San Francisco barely had time to scream in agony before their bodies were obliterated by the firestorm and shockwaves. Stunned ground controllers slowly recovered from their surprise and a few sporadic phaser shots leapt up from the surface, but the Star Destroyers were already leaving. One by one, they disappeared into hyperspace and left the carnage behind.

A calm, dispassionate voice could be heard through the ship's communication system. It was Kanos, broadcasting on all frequencies. "Federation vessels. I salute you! You have fought bravely, and you have shown that you can defend yourselves. But you *cannot* defend your civilians, as we have just demonstrated. As you may have already detected, the Death Star is fully charged and ready to fire at a moment's notice. Our next demonstration will not kill *some* of your people— it will kill *all* of them. You have sixty seconds to stand down, lower your shields, and disarm your weapons. Do *not* presume to test our resolve."

Halsey decided that they only had one chance. He thumbed his communicator and opened a channel to the fleet. "The Eclipse will require eight minutes to recharge its superlaser. All ships attack the Eclipse. We will attack the Death Star." He thumbed his communicator off, expecting the fleet to launch a withering attack. But they seemed to be hesitant, and unbeknownst to Halsey, the Enterprise had finally managed to burn through

Admiral Shimizu's jamming signals.

"All Federation vessels! This is Captain Jean-Luc Picard of the USS Enterprise. Admiral Halsey is gambling with the lives of *billions* of Federation citizens! I address every starship captain— do you want the deaths of *billions* on your conscience? Stand down, and do *not* further provoke the Imperials! I am transmitting records which show that Admiral Halsey acted in criminal defiance of Starfleet regulations and the direct orders of the President. He is not fit to command this fleet, and he should be placed under arrest!"

Halsey's face was mottled with fury and he half-snarled, half-barked into his communicator. "Commander Riker of the Enterprise, I order you to relieve Captain Picard of command for insubordination! All Federation ships, attack the Eclipse. *Now!*" His rage only increased when none of the ships on his viewscreen dared attack. "Insubordinate fools! We have only one chance, and they are *squandering* it! Lieutenant Portugal, I think we need to show them how it's done. Set course for the Death Star."

The silence was deafening, and no one moved. Halsey raised his voice a notch. "Lieutenant, I gave you an order."

Lieutenant Portugal turned in his chair with a pained look in his eyes. "Admiral, I cannot obey that order."

"What? You *cannot* obey?"

"I cannot obey, sir. I cannot take an action that may result in the destruction of Earth."

Halsey jumped to his feet. "Lieutenant, I am placing you under arrest for insubordination!" he shouted. He gestured to a pair of security officers, but before they could move, they stopped at a voice from the back of the bridge.

"Stand your ground, gentlemen." It was Captain Ramsey, who had stepped aside for Halsey when he came aboard. "Picard's evidence looks genuine." He stepped forward, and looked at the seething Halsey with a mixture of respect and pity. "Admiral, it has been an honour to serve with you. But I'm afraid I must place you under arrest and relieve you of command."

Halsey's expression changed from anger to slow realization. "Captain ... you don't understand. This is our only chance to save Earth!" His voice took on a desperate tone. "We will never get another chance. We can stop them, don't you see? I can stop them! They would enslave us all— do you want your children to be slaves?"

"I want my children to *live*, Admiral. I'm willing to take my chances at the negotiation table." He gestured to the waiting security officers. "Gentlemen, take Admiral Halsey to the brig." One of the security officers stepped toward Halsey but in a blindingly quick move that surprised everyone on the bridge, Halsey punched him in the solar plexus, pulled the phaser from his holster, and spun around to point it at Captain Ramsey.

"Captain, you don't have the authority to relieve me of command. Take this ship into the Death Star."

Ten phaser pistols were already aimed at Halsey, and Ramsey spoke very softly. "Sir, if you fire that weapon, you will be cut down where you stand. Killing me won't accomplish anything, and you know perfectly well that we can't possibly attack and destroy the Death Star faster than its commander can push a button. Please, don't make this any more difficult than it already is."

Halsey looked around him. The crew looked back at him, some with apprehension and some with sympathy, but they were all clearly behind their Captain. He weighed his options for what seemed an eternity, but was in reality only a few seconds. Then, he slowly lowered his phaser, finally dropping it to the floor where it clattered loudly. It was the only sound that could be heard on the deathly silent bridge. His arms hung limply at his sides, and he spoke in a hoarse, pained voice. "Captain ... you have the bridge." He offered no resistance as two security officers escorted him to the turbolift.

Ramsey opened a channel. "This is Captain Ramsey of the USS Tanaka. I have relieved Admiral Halsey of duty. Standing down."

Meanwhile, Kanos has been observing the proceedings with interest. The Federation fleet had largely surrendered, and boarding operations were already beginning. The Enterprise was still approaching, and he decided that he wanted this "Halsey" character as a trophy. "Captain Daron, has the Tanaka de-cloaked yet?"

"They appear to be de-cloaking now."

"Good. I was growing weary of listening to communications from an invisible ship which doesn't even show up on half our sensor systems. I suppose we'll never find out whether your tractor beam/repulsor beam shear force idea would have worked, will we? Maybe we'll run some tests after we capture that ship. I'm sure the techs will look forward to examining it. In the meantime, tell Tharde that he can resume his attacks on the Borg as soon as we've secured the Federation ships. I'm sure he is growing impatient to destroy something. He's probably stroking that firing switch of his right now." Kanos chuckled softly and leaned back in his chair, waiting for Captain Picard to surrender himself.

In less than an hour, Picard strode onto the bridge of the Crimson Blade, flanked by a pair of stormtroopers. Admiral Kanos imperiously motioned to the stormtroopers to remove Picard's binders and leave them alone, and they obeyed. Picard was still rubbing his wrists to restore blood circulation when Kanos extended his hand. "Greetings, Captain Picard. We meet at last."

"I am ... pleased to meet you, Admiral. I hope we can sit down and resolve our differences diplomatically." Picard responded. He turned slightly to look at the hooded

figure standing in the shadows behind Kanos, and asked "May I presume that you are an advisor?"

A thin, almost whispered voice came from the shrouded figure. "My name ... is Jacen. I speak for the Emperor."

Picard opened his mouth to speak, but found that he had forgotten what he wanted to say. An instinct in the back of his brain urged him not to speak any more to the mysterious cloaked man, and he felt the stirrings of some primordial fear in him, as if the seemingly harmless man before him were some sort of monster from the fairy tales his mother had told him as a child. He stepped back gingerly, and turned back to Kanos.

"Admiral, I am eager to discuss a diplomatic resolution to this conflict."

Kanos responded confidently. "Captain, I hesitate to state the obvious, but there is no need for a diplomatic resolution. We are victorious. We can invade your world and enslave your citizenry at will."

Picard carefully modulated his voice to strike just the right balance between strength and obsequiousness. "Admiral, you have seen the evidence. Halsey acted without the formal authorization of the Federation government. He *alone* bears responsibility for his actions, not the rest of humanity."

Kanos' expression was grim. "Captain, let me say how pleased I was to learn that you were not responsible for the attack on our wormhole facility. I had considered the attack a personal betrayal, and I was glad to learn that I had not misjudged you. But wars are strange things. They take on a life of their own. Warring populations both seek revenge for their respective losses, heedless of the fact that it would only cause more losses. Politicians become demagogues, inflaming hatred and selling young soldiers on the idea of glorious immortality through death in battle. I'm sure you know all about this, Captain. Once a war has started, it serves no master apart from itself. And it cannot be easily stopped, until the victor has extracted his pound of flesh from the vanquished. Our leaders would be satisfied if Earth is conquered and its people enslaved. Anything less, and I may not be able to satisfy them."

Picard paused briefly, and spoke even more smoothly than before. "Admiral, it sounds like you need a prize to bring back to your government. A token, if you will, to prove that you have been victorious in your war. I submit that you already *have* that token. You have destroyed our moon, and San Francisco, where our headquarters was located. As a result, most of the Federation government is already dead. Our fleet has surrendered, you have secured non-aggression pacts with many of the Federation's planets, and you have Admiral Halsey in custody. That is a victory by any stretch of the imagination. I *beg* you to reconsider your plans to occupy Earth, and end this destructive conflict."

Kanos smiled. "You are mostly correct, Captain. By many definitions, victory has already been achieved. But I may as well be blunt. There is no reason for us to stop, apart from impractical scruples or sentimentality. We have come this far, and you and I both

know that you cannot stop us, or even impede us. But you have distinguished yourself as a man of honour, and I want to give you a chance to *personally* make reparations to the Empire on behalf of your people.

Picard stared at Kanos for a long time, weighing the possibility that he would be imprisoned, taken to Imperial space, forced through some sort of show trial and then executed ... or worse. But he had contemplated worse personal sacrifices for the sake of humanity in his time, and he would be prepared for this, no matter how painful, humiliating, or unjust. He straightened, held his head high, and gave his answer. "Admiral, if you truly need a trophy to take back to your leaders, then I am willing to be that trophy."

Kanos looked at him quizzically for a few moments, and then threw his head back and laughed. He continued chortling for what seemed to Picard to be a rather excessive period of time, before finally calming himself. "Captain Picard, I think you have misjudged me. You thought I was going to haul you back to Coruscant in chains, didn't you?"

Picard was taken aback, and answered cautiously. "I was under that impression."

Kanos stood up, and began walking toward the panoramic bridge windows. He motioned for Picard to follow. As the two men walked past the huge windows and took in the view of the Imperial and Federation ships scattered through space outside, Kanos made his offer. "Captain, with all due respect, your imprisonment and execution would *hardly* satisfy the more bloodthirsty elements of my government. No, we could imprison and execute a thousand Federation officers without changing things. I want you to know that I respect your abilities, so I am making you an *offer*. A most generous one, in fact, and one that involves your services rather than your blood. In return for those services, I am willing to ensure that the people of Earth will be well treated. They will not be enslaved, nor will the Earth itself be plundered for its resources. In fact, we will even help with the environmental clean-up around what used to be San Francisco, and we will remove some rather large pieces of your moon that are due to impact on your planet's surface. Does that sound like an acceptable offer to you?"

Picard became even more suspicious. Kanos appeared to be giving away the farm, and asking nothing in return but the services of one Federation captain. *What's his game?* "Admiral Kanos, what kind of services are you looking for?"

Kanos smiled again. He continued walking, until they were looking out toward the starboard front quarter of the Crimson Blade. In the distance, they could see the massive Eclipse class ship, surrounded with mile-long Star Destroyers that looked positively miniscule in comparison. Kanos made a grandiose gesture toward the city-sized vessel. "Captain, that ship over there is an Eclipse class Star Destroyer. It carries the strongest shields of any Imperial starship. It carries thousands of turbolaser turrets and the superlaser which we demonstrated for you. It is designed to take on entire fleets, and win. Your friend Halsey was wasting his breath by ordering his ships to attack it, and it is a credit to your officer corps that none of those ships followed his foolish commands."

"All very impressive, Kanos. But you haven't told me anything I didn't already know."

"Captain, don't be so impatient. I am showing you this vessel because I have an offer to make."

"And that offer is?"

"I would like you to be the captain of that ship."

Chapter Twelve: Revenge

*"Know the enemy and know yourself,
and you will never be defeated."— Sun Tzu*

"You want to *recruit* me into your military? Surely you can't be serious!" Until now, Picard had been able to follow every one of Kanos' actions, even if he didn't predict them until too late. But this was completely inexplicable. Why would Kanos entrust one of his most powerful warships to a man with whom he had been at war, mere hours earlier? He couldn't understand Kanos the man— his motives and personality were a mystery. But Kanos the soldier had stepped through a series of actions that always made sense, once viewed from the twisted context of a man for whom human life was a mere triviality compared to the need for military victory. However, this recruitment offer took Picard *completely* by surprise. He found himself ill at ease, not knowing what would happen next. Kanos' cloying smile and poorly faked charm made his skin crawl. He actually preferred Kanos the military conqueror to the smiling and now utterly inscrutable man standing before him.

"I am quite serious, Captain. I want you to take command of that ship. Your unique skills will be very useful to us."

"What if I refuse?"

The counterfeit smile wavered for a moment, and then reappeared. "Captain, please understand that although I am most *reluctant* to invade Earth, strip mine it, and sell its people into slavery, I will do whatever I need to do in order to satisfy my political masters. Of *course*, I would prefer to resolve this situation some other way. Wouldn't you?" Kanos' smile reminded Picard of a Ferengi trader.

Picard thought of stalling, conferring with his crew. "Yes, I would. But if I could discuss this with my crew—"

"Captain, I'm afraid we don't have time for delays. I will need your answer immediately."

Picard asked himself what Kanos might ask him to do in his service to the Empire, but with the entire population of Earth effectively held hostage, he knew he really had no choice at all. He let out a sigh of frustration, but consented. "Admiral Kanos, I accept."

Kanos' smile looked almost genuine this time. "Excellent! Your new starship is named Obliterator. You will be taken there on a shuttle and debriefed immediately. You will receive technical training from the Obliterator's support staff and you will receive advisory assistance until we feel that you are ready to assume command. I'm afraid we don't have time for you to say goodbye to your shipmates, but you can send them messages in the future. As soon as you board the ship, it will be returning to the wormhole. You will receive further instructions there."

Picard hesitated, and then decided that he might as well ask. "Admiral Kanos, how will you guarantee that you will keep your word?"

"Your fleet has already surrendered, and most of your ships have already been secured. If I wanted to destroy or devastate Earth, I could do it right now, and you would be unable to stop me. I *choose* not to. You are being offered a chance to render us services that we would find extremely useful. If you perform your duty well, you can rest assured that you will become too valuable to lose or antagonize. *That* will be your guarantee."

Picard's expression brightened in a forced show of sincerity. "I see. Well then, I will endeavour not to disappoint you." This entire incident seemed almost unreal to Picard. He came on board the Crimson Blade expecting a gruelling diplomatic negotiation, and instead found himself being recruited by the enemy under threat of global holocaust. He turned away soundlessly as his stormtrooper escort led him to the Crimson Blade's shuttle bay.

Kanos' smile slowly drained from his face as he watched Picard walk down the corridor and disappear around the corner. He looked toward Jacen. "Does he suspect?"

Jacen, the Emperor's brother and most feared henchman, spoke in even, confident tones. "He suspects everything but he knows nothing, old friend. My sister will have no difficulty with him."

Kanos smiled, knowing Jaina's track record. "And what of Halsey?"

"Leave him to me."

In less than fifteen minutes, Picard was peering through the window of a Lambda-class shuttle as it lifted off from the Crimson Blade's landing bay. The bay was cavernous—much larger than the shuttlebay of a Federation starship. *Of course, since they have no transporters, they must have a huge volume of landing bay traffic*, he mused to himself. The shuttle gently banked and twisted as it slipped through space toward the massive Obliterator—balletic movements clearly intended more for the pilot's enjoyment than for any utilitarian purpose. *If they had transporters, I would be there already*, he thought, *but then again, there's an appeal in the old-fashioned way— I so rarely get to see a starship up close, from the outside ...*

As the shuttle approached the Obliterator, he could fully appraise it for the first time. From a distance, it appeared to be a smooth, gleaming black monolith. But now, as they drew closer, he could see countless tiny imperfections on the hull. The ship filled his view now, but they were still nearly ten kilometres away from it. As they drew even nearer, the hull imperfections came into focus. He could make out surface blisters of various shapes and sizes, windows, antennae, and the unmistakable jutting barrels of gun turrets. He reflected that for the turrets to be visible with the naked eye from this range, they must be huge— perhaps fifty metres wide or more, and he could see hundreds of

them at a glance. The shuttle pulled to within 100 metres of the Obliterator's surface and performed a hard turn, skimming the huge ship's surface at blinding speed. *The damned pilot is showboating again ...* Picard reflected that this would be a lot more enjoyable if he were flying the shuttle rather than riding in it. The shuttle eventually slowed, pirouetted in space, and gracefully turned into the Obliterator's landing bay. He could see white-armoured stormtroopers standing post at the various entry and exit points of the bay, and in its centre, a lone officer waiting for him.

The shuttle's wings smoothly folded up around its body as it gently set down on the hard, metallic landing bay surface. Picard waited for the ramp to drop down, and walked confidently onto the deck. He was surprised to see that the officer waiting for him, his lone welcoming party, was a woman. She wore no military uniform, but instead was clothed only in a plain black form-fitting bodysuit. She appeared to be in her 30's, with long flowing brown hair and no decorations, jewellery, or weapons apart from some sort of cylindrical baton which hung off her belt. She looked harmless enough, and Picard noted that she was quite attractive for her age, although this was hardly the time to think about such things. *Of course, appearances can be deceiving ...* Picard debated whether to adopt a friendly or formal posture, and decided upon formality as the safest route. He stood ramrod-straight and announced his arrival. "Captain Jean-Luc Picard of the Federation starship USS Enterprise. Permission to come aboard?"

"Permission granted, Captain Picard. Welcome to the Empire. My name is Jaina." She smiled, but it seemed to take an effort on her part. Picard stole a glance into her eyes and saw a deep well of sadness. She returned his glance in an instant, and in that moment Picard felt almost as though her eyes were burning through him. He blinked, averted his gaze, and tried not to reveal his discomfiture.

"I am pleased to make your acquaintance, Jaina. I was sent here by Admiral Kanos. I assume he left instructions?"

"Yes, he did. But he is not here, is he? The only one you have to satisfy ... is me. We will contact Kanos when we arrive at the wormhole in one hour. Until then, come along. I have much to show you." She walked away and beckoned him to follow.

Less than an hour later, after a brief tour of some of the ship's more interesting areas, Picard walked onto the bridge. Through the panoramic bridge windows he could see the phenomenon of hyperspace clearly for the first time, and he marvelled at the interplay of light and colour. It vaguely resembled the simulations of quantum slipstream drive that he had seen at the Daystrom Institute, but it was intensified dramatically. *I wonder if it is an advanced form of quantum slipstream drive, refined over thousands of years ...* He tried to think about what effect this technology would have on the balance of power in the galaxy. Civilizations that had previously been separated by a vast gulf requiring many decades to cross, such as the gamma quadrant Dominion and the Federation, would now be virtual neighbours. The ramifications of such a change were momentous, but he had no time to contemplate them. The ship reverted to realspace, and he was stunned by what he saw.

Huge pieces of wreckage floated through space before him, with countless damaged or

crippled starships cluttering his view. Some were drifting, unsalvageable hulks, while others were being repaired and still others were limping toward the wormhole. Picard could see the unmistakable wreckage of Borg ships intermingled with the damaged and destroyed Imperial warships. The events of the past few hours crystallized into perfect clarity. *Of course! The Borg! They must have already found out about the Empire, and Kanos is on the defensive!* It was now obvious to Picard why Kanos wanted his help.

"Are you ready to speak with Kanos now?" Jaina inquired.

Picard nodded yes, and Jaina gestured imperceptibly at a distant control panel. A life-sized hologram of Admiral Kanos soon flickered into being, hovering over the deck. Picard noted cynically that Kanos' hologram was actually *larger* than life size, and that he had apparently adjusted his hologram to enhance his aura of power and presence. It was an obvious psychological tactic, but it was difficult not to be intimidated by the imposing image. The hologram began to speak. "Ah, Captain. I trust you have arrived at the wormhole, and appraised the situation?"

"Yes, I have. This is what you wanted my help for, isn't it? You want me to help you fight the Borg. Am I correct?"

"Let's just say that I knew you would understand my motives once you saw the situation with your own eyes. Do we have an understanding, then? You have a unique connection to the Borg. You can help us destroy them, and in return, we will agree not to demand war reparations from your world."

Picard grimaced. "Admiral, I am flattered but I think you overestimate my capabilities. What difference would I make in your war against the Borg? I have some knowledge of their technology and tactics, but judging by the size and scope of these battles, your men actually have more experience fighting the Borg than I do."

Kanos folded his arms. "My men know the Borg only from combat. On the other hand, you know them from *within*. And more importantly ..." he paused for effect, "you can still *hear* them, can't you?"

"Excuse me?"

"Don't be coy, Captain. You can *hear* their song. You were assimilated into their collective, in a position of some importance. You were retrieved from their organization and mostly repaired, but you still have their cybernetic devices implanted in your brain, don't you?" He paused for a moment, as if expecting Picard to deny it. Picard said nothing, so he continued. "You underestimate the effectiveness of Klingon intelligence sources, Captain. I know all about your mysterious *intuitions* in combat with the Borg. In their latest attack on Earth, you knew precisely where to hit them for maximum effect. You even knew they were going to attack, *before* you were told. Am I correct?"

"Yes, my experiences allowed me to predict—"

Kanos waved his hand imperiously and interrupted Picard in mid-sentence. "Don't lie to me, Picard. I don't have time for games. It was more than simple *experience* that told you where to hit the Borg ship in your last encounter with them. It was more than simple *experience* that told you they were coming. It was your direct connection to the Borg Collective, wasn't it? You were once part of their collective, and some small part of you still is. You can hear their thoughts, predict their plans, and sense their weaknesses. I am unlike your Starfleet superiors. You don't need to assuage any neurotic fears by cloaking the facts, Captain. You are still connected to the Borg Collective, aren't you?"

Connected! Picard had never thought of his remaining implants, or his ability to intercept and interpret Borg communications, in such terms before. Certainly, the notion that he was still partially connected to the Collective was abhorrent. But he knew in his heart that Kanos was right. He had never entirely escaped the Borg, despite his best efforts. He looked up at the hologram of Kanos and muttered quietly "Yes, I am still connected to the Borg Collective."

Kanos smiled. "As I expected, Captain. Now that we've resolved that issue, you can see why I value your services. In battle, you can potentially aid our forces greatly, better than any normal, unmodified human. This is a noble cause, Captain. We are ridding your galaxy of a repugnant abomination. You should be *pleased* to have the opportunity to help us."

Won't I be replacing one abomination with another? Picard asked himself. He had thought long and hard about what he had gotten himself into. Kanos would undoubtedly keep his word as long as he needed help with the Borg, but once the Borg had been destroyed, if such a thing were even possible, Kanos would undoubtedly discard Picard, and his promises. He resolved to help the Empire, but if victory were to actually become achievable, he would have to find some way to prolong the conflict long enough to find some way to thwart Kanos' plans. He smiled bravely at the hologram. "I have no love of the Borg, Admiral Kanos. I will do whatever I can to help you destroy them, as per our agreement." Kanos nodded, and his hologram shimmered, then vanished.

Jaina sidled up to Picard and whispered in his ear. "Captain, the Borg will attack again soon. I hope Kanos did not overestimate you." She paused for a moment, and then moved closer. "You *will* be able to satisfy my expectations, won't you?" He could feel her hot breath on his neck, and he suddenly felt an overpowering desire for her. It made no sense—he felt no emotional attraction to this woman whatsoever, yet he longed to feel the touch of her skin. He tried to force himself back away, to avoid sending inappropriate signals. But instead of backing away, he found himself turning toward her face, inches from his, and looking into her eyes. He intended to say nothing, but he felt himself smiling and heard himself saying "Of course, Jaina. I would *never* want to disappoint you." He couldn't believe these words were coming from him. *What am I saying?* It was as if he was no longer in control of his own actions.

She smiled back at him, and turned to leave. Picard stood rooted in place, watching her walk away. She looked back at him, winked, and disappeared around a bend in the corridor. Several lower-ranked officers immediately accosted him and tried to escort him to a training centre, but he found himself wishing that Jaina was still with him.

Out of Picard's sight, Jaina leaned against a corridor wall to rest. *He is stronger than I expected*, she thought to herself, *but he can be manipulated. All men can ...*

Aboard the Crimson Blade, Kanos was just starting to relax after a tense day. His mood was starting to improve, until he heard a familiar voice behind him.

"Feeling rather pleased with yourself, aren't you?"

Kanos spun his seat around, with an irritated look on his face. "What do you want now, Q?"

"I just wanted to drop in and say hello. I also wanted to warn you. I've dealt with these people before, Kanos. They will give you more trouble than you expect. They are more dangerous than they seem."

Kanos didn't like Q but he was not above asking for advice if Q was willing to give it. This irritating being had dropped in on him periodically for years now, and he had demonstrated his power enough times that Kanos took him quite seriously. But he had never allowed himself to help or hurt the Empire— he seemed to prefer the role of court jester. Still, it couldn't hurt to ask. "In what *way* are they dangerous to me?"

Q pursed his lips unapprovingly. "Oh dear, you aren't asking *me* for advice, are you? Are you worried?"

"I am curious. You brought it up."

"Hmm ... I did, didn't I? Well, I'm afraid I can't give away too many secrets. That would spoil all the fun, wouldn't it? And I do so love entertainment ..."

Kanos was growing impatient again. "Q, if you have nothing useful to say, then leave."

Q threw his hands up in mock despair. "You try to drop in on someone, to give them some friendly advice, and what does he do? He asks you to leave! The ingratitude ..." he clasped his hands over his chest in mock pain, "it just breaks my heart."

"Q, I don't have time to play games with you. You obviously want to say something, but you apparently intend to put me through some sort of ridiculous verbal obstacle course before I can hear it! Well, I don't have time for games. I have duties which demand my attention. Duties to my Emperor. Say your piece, or leave me to my work."

"Oh, yes. Your *duties* to your precious Emperor. Your all-important *job*. You lead an empty life, Kanos. You have spent most of your insignificant life studying military strategy. Weapons systems. The history of war. All so you can present an unending string of victories to your superiors. All so that you can bask in their praise, so that you can

receive that pat on the back and a hearty *Well Done!* Even your studies of history and philosophy are only a means to an end— tools with which you hope to gain an edge over your enemies, so that you can win more victories, more accolades. And for what? You have no wife. No children. When you are gone, the only legacy you will leave behind is a *footnote* in the history books. Buried and forgotten."

Kanos was quickly becoming infuriated with Q's endlessly mocking tone. "I seek no legacy, Q. I do not share your vanity or narcissism. I proudly serve the Emperor."

Q laughed. "Spoken like a true robot! Do you seriously—"

Kanos interrupted him. "I've had enough of this, Q. Get off my ship."

Q's expression became deadly serious. "My my, aren't we touchy! I'll leave, Kanos. But first, I feel I ought to tell you that it is tempting to destroy them. We ourselves have come close to destroying them before. But there are sparks of life amidst the masses of mediocrity on that small blue planet. They can't resist you through sheer force of arms, but not every threat is a weapon or starship."

Kanos leaned back in his chair and folded his arms across his chest. "I've heard this before. The pen is mightier than the sword. Is that all you came to say?"

"No it isn't, my overconfident friend. I also came to say that the resemblance between Imperial humans and Federation humans is *more* than skin deep. Think about it." He snapped his fingers, and with a flash of light, vanished.

Kanos stared at the spot where Q had been for a long moment, and then settled back into his chair. Should he have simply destroyed Earth? Would the Earthers prove to be a thorn in his side? He had no way of knowing. All he did know was that Q seemed to be fond of the Earthers for some reason, and the Earthers seemed to be perfectly stock humans in every respect. Something about Q's mannerism suggested that there was some sort of link between the Earth humans and the Empire's humans. *Could we both have originated from the same stock? Are they our distant descendants?* He shrugged off such concerns. Whatever they were, they would be bent to the Emperor's will. This entire *galaxy* would be bent to the Emperor's will, and he would be able to return home in triumph. Again.



"Incoming ships will be in range in ten seconds!" a crewman barked. Picard would have appreciated more time to learn the Imperial control systems and their unfamiliar positional addressing schemes. But he would not have that time— he could sense their approach almost as soon as his training session began. He was hardly prepared to command an alien starship, but he didn't appear to have much choice. *It will have to be trial by fire*, he thought to himself.

Time to issue my first command. "All batteries, fire at will as soon as the enemy ships are in range. Heavy guns on maximum setting." The cubes were fast approaching, and

their approach vectors were displayed before him. Now that he could see their movements and hear their thoughts, he finally understood why Kanos had never taken the Obliterator as his personal flagship. Its superlaser and its reinforced shields and armour made it the most dangerous warship in the fleet, but these attributes also made it the biggest target. Borg cubes virtually ignored lesser Imperial warships, which mercilessly pounded them as they passed by. They were clearly planning to attack the Obliterator as their top priority. *Or assimilate it*, he thought to himself.

His concerns eased somewhat as the cubes approached. The Obliterator's guns spoke, and the coruscating green energy blasts slammed into the Borg ships with an impact that caught him by surprise. He belatedly realized why the Imperials had used their heavy guns so sparingly during the battle against Starfleet. They were so ponderous and inaccurate that only huge, similarly ponderous targets would be easily hit. *Huge, ponderous targets like Borg cubes*, he thought to himself. Each direct hit caused so much damage he could *feel* the reaction in the Borg. He could hear them again, and he knew what to do.

"Target heavy guns on the indicated co-ordinates as I enter them. Fire at will!" Picard barked. In the heat of battle, he was relieved to find that he could recall some of the flash-training. He couldn't recall all of it, but he could recall enough to punch in co-ordinates. *Enough to destroy the Borg ...* He entered co-ordinates into the system as quickly as he could, and he watched with satisfaction as huge green blasts of energy leapt away from his vessel. Borg ship after Borg ship flared up and blew apart, one by one, as he continued to feed crucial co-ordinates to the gunners. They were true to their nature, and continued to attack. *Let them come*, he thought to himself. *This time, I will make them pay ...*

"Helm to 30 degrees mark 15!" Picard suddenly ordered. The city-sized Obliterator slowly changed its heading, just as a group of 50 Borg cubes regrouped into a flying wedge formation in the distance. "Fire superlaser on my mark, ten percent power, at the centre cube ... Now!" he barked. He had seen the Obliterator's fearsome superlaser in action before, but this time he was wielding it rather than fighting it. The fifteen kilometre long build-up of energy surged to a crescendo and burst forth from its bow, lancing out to touch the cube vessel in the centre of the formation. The titanic explosion obliterated every ship in the formation immediately, breaking the spine of the Borg attack. *It can be useful to know what they'll do next ...* he thought to himself.

The surviving Borg ships bravely continued to attack, if bravery can be attributed to Borg drones, but Picard easily outmaneuvered them. He watched the last cube as it was blasted into a green smear, and let out a sigh of relief. He sat back in his chair, and reflected that this was a bittersweet victory if there ever was one. He had wanted to inflict heavy losses on the Borg for years, to repay them for what they had done to the Federation ... and to him. But it was hardly satisfying to win a victory while under the control of a conqueror who had dismantled the Federation. He began to brood over his future.

Jaina's soothing voice cut into his haze. "You performed wonderfully, Captain. I am pleased."

"Thank you, Jaina." Picard could feel a hot flush in his cheeks, and the inexplicable stirrings of lust returned. *I'm too old for this sort of thing*, he reminded himself. But his pulse quickened in spite of his resistance.

"You took revenge on the Borg today. Your revenge gave you pleasure, did it not?" she whispered.

"Pleasure ... no, revenge is a base instinct. Humanity has evolved ... beyond ... such ... such things." Picard stammered. He was having difficulty thinking clearly.

"When the Borg attacked, I could sense fear and anger from you. When you destroyed them, you felt ... pleasure. Didn't you?" she cooed. "Why hide from your true feelings? Have you evolved beyond the truth? Admit it. You hate them. You enjoy killing them."

"When I killed the Borg ... I felt ... I felt ..."

"Pleasure, Picard. You felt pleasure." her voice, silky smooth, seemed to echo in his mind.

He opened his mouth, intending to deny her. Instead, he heard himself speaking, as if from a distance. "Yes. I felt pleasure."

Her hand brushed his cheek, and she moved closer. He could almost feel an electric tingle pass through him. He didn't know why, but he *wanted* her. He wanted to please her. He could feel her hot breath in his ear. She whispered to him huskily. "You hate them, don't you?"

Picard hesitated. "Hate is a primitive ... destructive ..."

She whispered in his ear again. "They have given you reason to hate them. Your hate will give you the strength you need. Don't hold back, Jean-Luc. I know it's true. You know it's true. You *hate* them."

She only wants the truth. Is that so much to ask? His resistance faltered. "Yes, Jaina ... I hate them."

Chapter Thirteen: The Hunter

"He who intimidates his neighbours does so by inflicting injury upon them." – Sun Tzu

William Riker stared out the window of his escape pod as it approached Earth. He thought about how he and his crew had been unceremoniously forced to eject in their own escape pods after Imperial troops took control of the *Enterprise* and the rest of the Federation fleet, and the memory left a bitter, acid taste in his mouth. He kept analyzing and re-analyzing the sequence of events leading up to their surrender, wondering whether there was anything he could have done differently. There was no telling what this Empire would be capable of doing now.

A cold-sounding voice broke through his haze of self-recrimination. "This is Admiral Kanos of the Imperial starship *Crimson Blade*, addressing the crew of the *USS Talisman*. Your ship has just self-destructed, heavily damaging one of our vessels. You were specifically instructed *not* to set any silent self-destruct codes or commit any other malicious acts of sabotage before abandoning your ship. You will now be punished."

Riker scrambled to focus the escape pod's tiny viewscreen aft, on the fleet of Imperial starships and their captured Federation prizes. The *Crimson Blade* suddenly leapt forward, accelerating at seemingly impossible rates until it seemed to disappear. By the time he was able to shift the viewscreen forward, the *Crimson Blade* was already in a low orbit around Earth. He felt his knees go weak beneath him as a series of energy blasts flowed from the side of the massive vessel like a green, luminescent rain. They poured down at a point somewhere around the European continent, producing a brilliant flash of light. He collapsed to the floor and clasped his head in his hands, listening to the gasps and cries of his fellow crewmembers.

"That ... was a warning. We are not intent upon murdering your species— we only desire peaceful coexistence. In the spirit of that intent, we bombarded a point just *off* the coast of the land mass that you call Europe, rather than destroying another of your cities. Civilian casualties were minimal. However, the crew of the *USS Talisman* must still be punished, so we will destroy her escape pods."

Riker clenched his fists and stared at the tiny escape pods and Imperial fighters on his viewscreen, as if he could somehow force the Imperial fighters off their attack vectors by sheer force of will. The fighters wasted no time, each picking an escape pod and flying directly toward it, guns blazing. The victims could do nothing but scream with pain and fear as their escape pods were punctured and then destroyed, and Riker could do nothing but watch them die. He noted with disgust that they weren't specifically targeting the *Talisman*'s escape pods at all, but simply destroying pods at random.

Kanos began to address the survivors. "Amnesty will be granted for any *other* acts of sabotage provided that they are reported *immediately*, before any damage is done. Conduct yourselves honourably, and there will be no need for further escalation of

violence. I trust that I have made myself clear."

Riker glared at his viewscreen and softly growled "Crystal clear, Admiral."

Data, having disabled his emotion chip during the battle to avoid distraction, seemed more curious than angry. "Commander, I still do not understand the actions of the Imperial admiral."

Riker was about to berate Data for not appreciating the gravity of the situation, but stopped himself. Data was, after all, always trying to learn more about human behaviour, even after gaining the emotions he had sought for so long. "How so?"

"He lost numerous vessels in extended combat with our fleet, before using the threat of planetary destruction to force our surrender. I do not understand why he would expose his fleet to damage when he could have simply conducted his demonstration immediately. Why did he not drop out of hyperspace in orbit, instead of giving us such a long time to attack him? Why did not he fire his superlaser immediately, or co-ordinate the approach of his fleet and the Death Star to coincide?"

Riker thought about this for a moment. "Data, when I was a young cadet, I got into a fight with a senior. I underestimated him— he was smaller than me but he was as tough as a Gorn! At one point in the fight he had knocked me on my back, and when I got up, he carelessly left himself open. I took my best shot—" he said, making a roundhouse swinging motion in the air, "and connected, right in the jaw. His head snapped right, and when he turned his face back to me, he was smiling. *Smiling!* He *let* me hit him. He wanted me to know that he could take my best shot."

"I see. What happened after that?"

Riker grinned. "Let's just say that I managed to bloody his nose, but that's it. He gave me a pretty good beating, as I recall. It seems that he wasn't even human— he just *looked* human. His musculature and bone structure were much denser and stronger than mine, as I discovered during the fight."

Data's face brightened. "Ah! Essentially, you are saying that Kanos deliberately exposed himself to our attack, to demonstrate his resilience."

"Simple psychological warfare tactic. My only problem is that I don't understand why he would go to all the trouble. Psychological warfare is something you use when victory is in doubt, and they had more than enough firepower to ensure victory."

Data analyzed this question for almost half a second before responding. "Perhaps victory *was* in doubt. You and I are defining victory as the military conquest of Earth. Perhaps Kanos defines victory differently. The ancient Chinese philosopher Sun Tzu defined the art of war to include not only battles and conquest, but also the successful assimilation of the conquered population."

Riker leaned forward, his interest piqued. "Hmmm. Maybe Kanos was trying to make an impression. Maybe he wants to make sure that the people of Earth are too afraid to form an organized underground resistance after he takes control. That would explain why he held back this time. He knows that if he overdoes it, we might resist regardless."

Data looked thoughtful. "There is another possibility, Commander: a secondary motive. Kanos did not demonstrate his strategic weapons and tactics until *after* the Enterprise left Spacedock, and became visible to their sensors."

Riker looked incredulous. "So he specifically wanted to impress *us*?"

Data looked directly into Riker's eyes. "There is too little evidence to leap to that conclusion. However, it is possible. It is also possible that they were even more specific than that. Perhaps they wanted to influence Captain Picard."

Aboard the Obliterator, Captain Picard was starting to feel better about his surreal conversation with Jaina. He had always hated the Borg. He had always wanted revenge against the Borg. Was there any shame in admitting the truth to himself, or to her? The Federation's moral strictures were so constraining— one could never admit to hate, or to a desire for revenge. Such emotions had to be cloaked beneath a veneer of civility, given ridiculous euphemisms and code names. Hate and prejudice are immoral, but "recognition of societal distinctions" is perfectly acceptable. Revenge is "beneath" evolved Federation sensibilities, but one can always take "pre-emptive action against an established threat." With Jaina, there was no need for such deceptions. She knew precisely how he felt, and accepted it without judgement.

Somehow, his years with the Federation seemed like a hazy memory already, mere hours after leaving the Enterprise. Whenever he tried to think about Earth or the Federation, his thoughts became clouded. But when he thought about the Borg, his memories and plans suddenly came into perfect focus. When he thought about Jaina, he felt invigorated and alive. He cursed himself. *This is ridiculous! I feel like a lovesick schoolboy, over a woman I don't even know!* He was still wrestling with his feelings when the bridge suddenly came alive with activity.

"One hundred Borg cubes incoming!" an officer shouted. A cacophony of bridge chatter erupted. Officers to his left and right started barking orders, taking instructions, relaying messages. Picard strained to hear what was happening, and could only hear snippets of dialogue: "one hundred and forty Defender squadrons deployed ... charge turret ... generators fifteen and thirty four down ... shunt from four ... unit eight to redline ... in range in fifteen seconds ... "

This was happening much faster than the previous attack. The Borg were definitely focusing entirely on the Obliterator now, remaining in transwarp until the last possible moment, accepting the sudden shock of being forcibly ripped back to sublight speeds by the interditors. Picard strained to listen to the communications chatter of the Borg, using parts of his cybernetically altered brain that he had fastidiously avoided using for years,

and he could hear them calling his name, over and over: "Locutus."

He heard the name they had chosen for him, and he understood: *They know I'm here.*

"In range," a weapons officer stated calmly. Without waiting for Picard's orders, the fleet opened fire on the attackers, and the Obliterator joined them. Picard shook off his confusion and began assisting them with co-ordinate data. The first cube absorbed a tremendous barrage of fire and exploded almost immediately, but they kept coming, in the most determined attack that Picard had ever seen. They came closer than they had in the previous battle— *too* close. Picard lost count of the shield-draining blasts that he saw striking the Obliterator's shields, and could only hope that the shields would hold.

Dozens of Borg cubes were blown apart, but they kept coming. Eventually, one cube managed to survive long enough to actually ram the Obliterator at high speed, exploding with a brilliant flash and sending shockwaves reverberating through the ship. Shield generators overloaded, force fields collapsed, and explosions ripped through the ship's internal structure but the ship's gunners continued to fire away. Picard could hear someone shouting something about angling overlap fields to compensate for a failure, but he was entirely too involved to listen very carefully.

He picked apart cube after cube with the precision of a surgeon, focusing all of his concentration on the task. Tactical controllers began counting down the attackers: "forty three cubes remaining ... forty one cubes remaining ..." A cube exploded very close to the Obliterator, and it launched a sphere which slammed into the bridge shields with a rippling explosion. He heard raised voices from the shield control stations, and the tension was starting to have an adverse effect on him. His stomach felt like it was twisted in knots, and sweat began to pour down his brow. The strain of simultaneously dealing with real-world sensory input and Borg implant data was starting to wear him down.

"Thirty six cubes remaining ..." A carefully timed superlaser shot blew more than two dozen cubes to oblivion, along with four Star Destroyers. Two cubes approached the Obliterator from its aft quarter, attempting to slip between gaps in its fire coverage zones by flying directly toward one of its starboard engine banks. He tried to instruct the gunners to target the cubes, but his jaw clenched in frustration when he saw that they could not bring their heaviest guns to bear. *Damned design oversight if I ever saw one ...* Picard was beginning to panic, until he heard Borg drones reporting that the relativistic ion storm blasting out of the engine cones had overwhelmed their shields and was about to destroy their ship. *They won't be trying that again,* he thought to himself.

"Six cubes remaining ..." Picard relaxed. The battle was almost won now, but he knew that the cost had been high. Dozens of Star Destroyers were destroyed or crippled, including at least four ships by his own order. *Jaina won't be pleased ...* he watched the last remnants of the Borg attack being blown to pieces as the Imperial fleet closed in around them. The burning muscles in his stomach finally began to unwind.

Jaina had remained silent through the entire battle, merely standing in the corner and watching. Now, she walked to Picard's side. "You destroyed four of our own ships,

Jean-Luc."

He suddenly felt a terrifying confusion of emotions washing over him. He was painfully aware that he had just sacrificed more than one hundred thousand lives in battle, but he was desperate to please her, terrified of her displeasure, and yet somehow indignant that she was questioning his decisions. "Jaina ... I had no choice. The Borg ships were too close to—"

"Shhhh ..." she abruptly silenced him by placing her fingers on his lips. "Don't worry, Jean-Luc. I approve. You made a sound choice— the ships were an acceptable loss. I just wanted to see if you were sure of yourself." She smiled at him, and gently ran her finger along his cheek as she walked away.

Picard felt immensely relieved, watching her from behind as she moved to one of the damage control stations. He struggled to collect his thoughts, but he suddenly froze in his tracks and gasped with shock. A whispered word invaded his brain: "Locutus".



Riker stepped out of the escape pod along with a small group of accompanying officers, to survey the devastation around the desolate wasteland that was once known as San Francisco. A cold, harsh rain had begun to fall, thick with ash. Huge, bloated black raindrops splashed down in the dirt, creating oozing pools of a viscous black liquid.

The wind began to howl around them, driving the pelting rain into their faces. "Mister Data, what are you picking up?" he shouted over the wind.

"I am currently reading very high concentrations of particulate matter in the atmosphere, reaching up into the cloud layer. The particulate debris is consistent with the effects of an orbital bombardment, and we should expect this fallout to continue for an extended period of time. Radiation levels are significantly elevated above normal background levels." He ran a few more checks. "Commander, I think we need to return to the escape pod immediately. This rain contains toxic and radioactive materials in high concentrations."

"Understood." Riker and the others hurried back into the escape pod and waited for rescuers to arrive. "Open a channel to Starfleet head—" he stopped himself in mid-sentence, remembering that Starfleet headquarters no longer existed. "Open a channel to Spacedock."

Admiral Shimizu's face quickly appeared on the escape pod's viewscreen. "Commander Riker, there are shuttles en route to many escape pod drop locations, including yours." She chose not to say anything about her attempt to stop the Enterprise from leaving Spacedock, or her apparent ties with Halsey. *Just as well*, Riker thought to himself. *She'll have to answer for her association with Halsey eventually.*

"Thank you, Admiral. The Imperials promised decontamination and environmental cleanup assistance. From what I can tell down here, this area's weather control net was

destroyed along with the city, and unless we have some spare ships, we're going to need all the help we can get. Have they shown any indication that they intend to keep their word?"

"Yes, they are sending transport ships. But there is a problem."

"What problem?"

"Perhaps you should look up and see for yourself. They should be breaking through the cloud cover any moment."

Already? Riker thought of turning the escape pod's sensor system back on, but decided he would rather see this for himself. He opened the pod door and looked out into the pelting, poisonous rain. Sure enough, a group of perhaps one hundred large transport vessels had broken through the cloud cover, plummeting toward the ground in a steep descent vector. "Here come the transports!" he shouted. But the group of transports was not alone. Another large group of transports broke through the cloud cover. It was followed by another. And another. And another.

Damn! He sealed the pod door and turned back to his crewmates with an anguished look on his face. "Mister Data, reactivate the sensors. I need to know how many ships are approaching."

After powering the sensor system back up, Data could clearly see what was happening. "Commander, I am detecting more than eight hundred ships, with thousands more on the way. It is *highly* doubtful that this is a simple decontamination team." Riker could only nod his agreement in silence. The two of them, man and machine, watched the seemingly endless procession of transport ships on the sensor displays.

When the first group began to set down, they magnified the viewscreen to inspect the vessel. It was a blocky, ungainly vessel out of which a huge ramp was now unfolding. Riker increased the magnification again, hoping to see decontamination workers coming down the ramp. But the strange mechanized objects that marched out of the transport looked like *anything* but decontamination workers. Even from this great distance, he could feel a barely perceptible tremor in the ground that sounded like the thudding footsteps of prehistoric monstrosities.

"Mister Data, can you identify those ... robots?"

"Very curious, Commander. They are not robots. They are vehicles of some sort, but they are apparently designed to resemble large mammals such as dinosaurs or elephants. They are more than twenty metres tall, and very heavily armoured. They are also very heavily *armed*, and I am detecting large numbers of people inside each vehicle. My assessment is that these vehicles are armoured personnel transports."

Riker's jaw set. "An invasion force."

Aboard the Obliterator, the situation on Earth was the farthest thing from Captain Picard's mind. "Jaina, you *must* listen to me. The Borg are here, on this ship!" the words rushed out in a flood, as if he could give her a sense of urgency if he simply spoke quickly enough.

Jaina seemed to undergo a transformation in front of his eyes, as the seductive smile vanished from her face and she changed from temptress to cold-eyed commander. "Are you sure? Why haven't we detected any intruder alerts? Other ships have successfully detected and repelled incursions."

"I don't know. This ship is much more highly automated than your other vessels—there are large sections of the ship with very few personnel. I ... I heard someone reporting a shield breach during the battle. Perhaps they transported during the breach—perhaps they have some kind of stealth technology that I haven't seen before. It doesn't matter—the point is that they are here. I tell you Jaina, I can *hear* them!"

Jaina's eyes seemed to bore into his, then she stepped back. Her seductive smile returned. "I believe you, Jean-Luc. You have done well." She closed her eyes, seeming to drift into a trance for a moment. When she opened her eyes, they were hardened with resolve. She marched to a communications station and opened an internal channel. "Intruder alert in grid three five five. Intruder alert in grid three five five. Repeat, Borg intruders in grid three five five. Maximum security alert. Isolate grid three five five. Deploy war droids to all access points."

Picard opened his mouth to speak, but Jaina wasn't finished giving orders. She moved to one of the tactical stations. "Drop shields adjacent to grid three five five. What is that ship's name?" she pointed at one of the Star Destroyers cruising alongside the Obliterator.

"That ship is the Eviscerator Three, sir." the tactical officer quickly responded.

"Eviscerator Three, this is Jaina. You are to open fire on our starboard side. Twenty four heavy turbolaser shots, on the following co-ordinates." She began punching in co-ordinates.

A confused voice cracked through the communications system. "Please confirm, Lady Jaina. We are to fire upon your ship?"

"Yes, you are to fire on us. Now."

As Picard watched in fascination, the Eviscerator Three maneuvered to get a clear shot at the desired co-ordinates, and then fired an eight-shot heavy turbolaser salvo down onto the Obliterator's unshielded hull, more than eight kilometres away from where Picard was standing. The blasts punched through the ship's thick armour, sending reverberations through the ship for kilometres in every direction. Deck plating and machinery boiled away, but it was too far away for Picard to see any distinct details. A second salvo pounded into the Obliterator's hull, followed by a third, each blast gouging

deeper into the great vessel. Where a partially assimilated section of the ship had been, there was now a gaping crater, spewing superheated metal vapour and glowing debris into space.

Jaina reviewed the damage reports, and calmly opened a channel. "Well done, Eviscerator Three. Jaina out."

"Jaina!" Picard hissed. "You didn't kill them all– I still *hear* them!"

She stared at him for a moment, and then entered one of her trances. When she opened her eyes, she startled everyone by suddenly whirling on her heels and marching down the hall. In a clear, high voice she announced, "I will eliminate the survivors personally." Horrified, Picard ran after her.

Chapter Fourteen: Whirlwind

"Sun Tzu, who was a native of Ch'i, had secured an audience with King Ho-lü. Ho-lü asked Sun Tzu to demonstrate his famed techniques for conducting the movement of troops, by commanding one hundred and eighty of the king's concubines.

Sun Tzu divided the women into two companies and put the King's two favourite concubines in command. He instructed them all in the use of halberds, and the proper way to respond to marching commands. He explained the orders five times, after which he gave the signal to face right. The women did not move, and laughed at him.

Sun Tzu said 'if instructions are not clear and commands not explicit, it is the commander's fault. But when instructions have been made clear, the fault lies with the officers.' He ordered that the two company commanders, the King's two favourite concubines, be executed immediately.

The king was horrified, and sent an aide to protest. But Sun Tzu declared that he had been placed in command, and as the King's appointed general, he therefore had the right to deal with his army as he saw fit. He repeated his order, and the two concubines were swiftly beheaded.

He then chose two other women to serve as company commanders, and when he gave the order to face right, the women efficiently turned to face right. This time, there was no laughter."

From the biography of Sun Tzu

The pounding footsteps grew closer, and closer. Bereft of weaponry, Riker and his fellow officers could only listen to the massive walkers approach. All manner of war machines were disgorging from the bulky Imperial transports now: huge four-legged heavy walkers, nimble two-legged scout walkers, hovering tanks, lightning-quick speeders, and war droids of various shapes and sizes.

Riker and Data huddled over the escape pod's tiny viewscreen. "What's all that activity in the middle of the landing zone? Are they trying to build something?" Riker queried.

Data checked his sensors and increased the viewscreen magnification. "They appear to be constructing a habitable structure. Most likely a provisional headquarters building. They are also assembling power generation equipment, and a field projector system which is probably a ground-based deflector shield."

Riker checked the pod chronometer. "They don't waste any time, do they? They've been on the ground for less than two hours and they're already putting up a headquarters building, a shield, a power generator ..."

The Imperial troops and war machines flew, hovered, rolled, crawled, and marched outward from their landing site in every direction. From the air, they looked like a flood of scuttling ants, and the transports looked like fat, grey-hued beetles. Lieutenant Cates piloted his runabout toward Riker's escape pod, and tried to appraise the situation. It was difficult to see clearly, because the thick, spattering black rain was creating a flickering light show as it impacted against the runabout's shields. But there was no mistaking this army for a decontamination team— it was clearly an invasion force.

He hurriedly activated his communications system, and attempted to contact Spacedock, since San Francisco HQ no longer existed. "Spacedock, this is Whistler. Spacedock, this is Whistler. Please respond." He waited, but there was no response.

"Spacedock, this is Whistler. I repeat, Spacedock, this is Whistler. Imperial ground forces sited in vicinity of San Francisco are armed and probably hostile, please advise. Spacedock, come in." Again, he waited, but there was still no response. *Damn it— they must have taken out Spacedock!* He was sure the Imperials had spotted him now— from a distance, he knew his runabout must look like an ellipsoid strobe light, with the way the rain was impacting off its shields. He thumbed his communications controls again.

"Enterprise escape pod, this is Lieutenant Cates, on the runabout Whistler. You've got a lot of hostiles coming your way. Prepare for emergency extraction."

Riker's voice crackled through his communications system in response. "We're glad to see you! You land your bird, and we'll be ready."

Lieutenant Cates smiled, and pushed his runabout into a steep dive. But as he approached, he could see five enemy vehicles that were already within range of the pod. He knew that if he landed, he would be a sitting duck for their heavy weapons. Without contact with Spacedock, he knew he had a decision to make. But he didn't waste time deliberating— he knew immediately that the Imperials were obviously hostile, and that he would have to delay or destroy them if he was to have any chance of rescuing the people in that pod. He calmed his nerves, steeled himself, and banked right. He swooped toward the walkers, gleefully shouted "Tally ho!" into his communicator, and fired his phasers.

All five vehicles were walkers: three lumbering AT-AT's and two small AT-ST's. They seemed to be ignoring his approach, so he opened fire on the smaller scout walkers. His phaser blasts slammed into them, easily punching through their thin skins and blasting through engine components and cockpits. One of the scouts exploded from within, while the other belched flames from its aft quarter and pitched forward to the ground. He let out a cry of triumph, and swung around for another pass. The three AT-AT walkers' heads turned in near-unison, "looking at" Cates' runabout as it streaked back into the sky after the strafing run. The machines evoked an uncannily strong association with elephants, and Cates found himself thinking of them in that manner. He spun around for another pass, but this time, they were firing up at him. Red blaster bolts leapt skyward, and Cates juked his runabout violently to throw off their aim.

He swung around in a broad arc and came into range again, raking the walkers'

armour with phaser blasts. But although the blasts created great blooms of radiance where they struck armour, they did little damage. As he pulled away, he knew that it would take far too long to stop them this way, whittling away at their thick armour. He had do something quickly because the flak bursts around his runabout were seriously draining its shields. He banked hard to his left, came in a few metres above the ground, and armed a full-yield micro-torpedo. The walker pilots continued to hurl a relentless barrage of fire at Cates' runabout. Red blaster bolts exploded like flak around his ship, some of them striking the ground and throwing up huge plumes of dirt and smoke.

His fingers danced over the firing controls, and the torpedo shot away from his small craft. He let out a whooping war cry and pulled up into a steep climb, but his luck had run out. The walker gunners finally scored a direct hit, and the cockpit seemed to dissolve into blinding white light. Cates found himself on the floor, with blood obscuring the vision in his right eye, and no vision at all in his left eye. In fact, the left half of his face was completely numb, and he knew he must have suffered severe plasma burns at the very least. Wind howled through the cockpit, indicating that the hull must have been compromised. He struggled to his knees, but when he looked up, he could see a large hole in the side of the ship, and through it, he could see the ground rushing toward him.

Unmindful of its owner's fate, Cates' torpedo raced on. Red blaster bolts pounded the ground beneath it, exploded in mid-air flak bursts around it, and skimmed by it, but none hit it directly. Before the flaming wreckage of Cates' runabout hit the ground, his torpedo reached its target. It slammed squarely into the head of the lead walker with a tremendous explosion, and when the smoke cleared, the walker had been stopped cold. Smoke poured from a wide gash in its wounded head, and twisted, still-glowing tendrils of metal sprouted from the opening. The walker swayed crazily on its four legs for a few moments, staggered forward, and then collapsed to the ground with a bone-rattling crash.

Riker pounded his fist on the escape pod's viewscreen in frustration. He leaned on the console, head hung low for a moment, and then looked up. "Looks like our air support is gone. At least he took out three vehicles before he went. Data, what do we know about these walking vehicles?"

"They appear to be personnel transports. The smaller models are very lightly built, and are apparently designed to serve only as escorts or scouts. The larger models carry a significant number of troops in addition to their command crews, and are very heavily armoured. They did not appear to expect an air attack. Numerous fighter craft began launching from their landing site as soon as Cates' attack began."

"Wonderful." Riker grumbled. The pounding footfalls continued, getting louder by the minute. The remaining two AT-AT walkers, undaunted by the loss of the lead walker and their two scout units, continued to advance.

One of the men, a young ensign whose name escaped Riker for the moment, spoke up. "What are we going to do, sir?"

Riker looked back at him with a pained expression on his face. "We have no weapons, so it looks like we have no choice. We're going to surrender. Again."

Picard stopped to catch his breath, panting heavily and leaning against a corridor wall. Jaina's lithe form seemed to shimmer as she moved into the distance, running at what appeared to be an impossibly fast pace. He blinked, and she was gone. If he didn't know better, he would have sworn she had become a wraith and disappeared. But he knew where she would be going.

He gathered a few more lungfuls of breath into his burning lungs and sprinted to the nearest turbolift. He prayed that it would respond to voice commands, but it didn't. He tried to decipher the console controls, and was relieved when a group of heavily armed stormtroopers hurried into the turbolift with him.

Their sergeant quickly moved to address Picard. His tinny, artificial-sounding voice crackled through speakers in his helmet. "Captain Picard, we have been assigned to protect you."

"You can start by moving this turbolift to grid three five five."

"Sir, that area is extremely dangerous. We have orders to—"

"Sergeant, I hold the rank of Captain on this ship, do I not?"

"Yes, sir. *Acting* Captain, sir."

Picard straightened his uniform. "Well, regardless of whether I am an *acting* Captain or a regular Captain, I still outrank you, correct?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then I *order* you to move this turbolift to grid three five five."

"Sir, that area is open to space. We can't go there, but we can go to the nearest adjacent location."

"Make it so."

The stormtrooper hesitated, then reached out and punched a few buttons on the console. The turbolift began to move. "Sir, that area is contested by the Borg. We have war droids at all access points, but I can't guarantee your safety if you go in there."

Picard gave the stormtrooper a wry smile. "There are no guarantees in war, sergeant. Now, I'll need a weapon."

The sergeant nodded at one of his men, who handed over a black, metallic blaster rifle. "Sir, this is a Blastech E-11 standard Imperial sidearm. It fires high-powered energy bolts, but it can also fire stun bursts by switching the firing mode," he flicked a toggle slide back and forth, "here. It takes standard charge clips," he handed Picard a pack of four rectangular blocks, "that you load into the base, like this." He flipped a cartridge release, ejected the old clip, and slammed a new clip into the base. "Here's the safety," he said, pointing at another toggle switch on the side of the weapon, "the stock folds out for long-range shots, and the scope has light-amplification and infrared imaging. And one last thing," he said, toggling another slider on the side of the gun, "this switches the gun to full auto. But you'll go through a clip pretty fast if you leave that on."

Picard appraised the weapon in his hands. It had none of the smooth, sleek feel of a Federation hand phaser. It was angular. It was cold to the touch. It was designed to kill large numbers of people in as short a time as possible, and from the descriptions he'd heard, it was a plasma weapon, with no coherent frequency that Borg shields could adapt to. *Excellent*, Picard thought to himself, lengthening the strap and slinging it over his right shoulder. "What is the combat effectiveness of this weapon against Borg drones?"

"They *were* lethal with one shot. But intel says they've found a way to dissipate part of the bolt. You can still take 'em down with a burst of full auto, or you can use heavy guns, like this one," he said, unslinging a large shoulder-fired weapon and handing it over to Picard. It carries enough punch to blast through a light door or bulkhead."

Picard took the gun, noted that its controls were similar to the E-11, and slung it over his left shoulder with a grunt. The gun was quite heavy— at least 15 kilograms by his estimate. It would slow him down, but he wouldn't need top agility— Borg drones were not known for their speed. The stormtroopers began arraying themselves between him and the turbolift door, so he figured they must be approaching their destination. *Not bad for an eight kilometre trip*, he thought to himself.

The sergeant watched the display and barked out orders to his men. "Protect the captain. ETA in five seconds." The men braced themselves, aiming their weapons at the door. The door slide open, and every man in the turbolift stiffened with apprehension. But the hallway was empty, well-lit, and quiet. On the surface, it appeared as though they'd arrived nowhere near the contested area. Several of the stormtroopers moved out into the hallway, scanning in every direction for threats.

"The area is secure," the point man reported. Picard was waved into the corridor and he stepped out, blaster rifle ready.

"Are you sure we're in the right place?" Picard asked.

"As near as we can get. Turbolift won't go any farther."

Picard nodded and looked around anxiously, trying to discern traces of combat. He felt a subtle tugging at his mind, and somehow, he suddenly knew which way to go. He

turned and began jogging down the corridor to his left, as swiftly as he could with the bulky weaponry he was carrying. With muffled curses, the stormtroopers ran to follow him. He continued for what seemed to be a very long time, and he started seeing strange debris littering the corridor: dismembered Borg arms, legs, and heads. He also saw numerous intact Borg bodies, laying still but with no obvious cause of death.

He quickened his pace, and rounded a bend in the corridor, to see an amazing sight. Alone and without backup of any kind, Jaina was slicing her way through Borg drones, advancing relentlessly forward. The battle was surreally quiet, with none of the usual sounds of blaster fire or explosions. The only sounds were the humming sound of her lightsabre and the clattering of Borg body parts as they hit the deck.

Jaina's lightsabre flashed through the air, a glowing red blade of destruction. *So that's what the baton is for— I wonder how it works ...* Her speed and agility were amazing— the clumsy, slow-moving Borg drones seemed like immobile signposts compared to her leaping, pirouetting form. Cyborg arms and heads fell away from their owners as the humming lightsabre blade scythed through Borg bodies, and her fluid movements seemed almost scripted, as if both Jaina and the Borg had been choreographed for this battle. *It's almost as if she can see their movements before they happen,* he thought to himself.

Their stiff, clumsy movements were almost comical in comparison to her startling agility. Their mission was hopeless— in spite of the three foot long lightsabre that flashed through the air, they had to somehow get close enough to touch her with their hands. It was not an easy task, to touch one who was accustomed to dodging and blocking lightning-quick blaster bolts. One by one, they fell before her, and none of them even came close. She switched to a one-handed grip on her light sabre, and with her free hand, she seemed to wave at a group of drones approaching from her left. While Picard watched in disbelief, the entire group was lifted off the ground, hurled through the air, and slammed against a bulkhead. They lay where they fell, necks snapped like twigs. She continued to slice through her victims, and Picard thought that he caught a glimpse of a smile on her face.

The stormtroopers caught up to him, but did nothing. They appeared to be in awe of her, or perhaps fearful that they might be more of a hindrance than an aid. A drone approached her from behind, but before Picard could shout a warning she calmly spun and sliced the drone's outstretched hands off. The hands clattered to the deck and the drone staggered back, scrabbling at its throat with its severed forearm stumps. It seemed to be choking to death, and it eventually collapsed to the deck in a heap.

"Sergeant, we've got to help her." Picard said.

The sergeant's voice came filtering out of his helmet. "How? The best thing we can do is stay out of her way. I recommend we keep our distance, and follow her."

Reluctantly, Picard agreed, and they followed her as she advanced deeper into the Borg enclave. He knew they must be close to the centre, because the walls were

beginning to take on that uniquely Borg look. Black, sculpted Borg technologies adorned the walls, and the atmosphere was becoming stiflingly hot and humid. Jaina continued to advance, but seemed to be finding less and less resistance. *Perhaps the Borg have already shot their last bolt— maybe they're running out of drones*, Picard thought to himself.

Jaina walked calmly and deliberately forward. The occasional drone rose up to stop her— some fell in glowing pieces while others were telekinetically choked to death, hurled against bulkheads, or torn apart. She had no fear of them— Picard could sense that. *And why should she— the Borg can't shield against telekinesis*, he thought to himself.

They eventually came to an open room, and Picard knew what to expect inside: the Borg Queen. She stood in the centre of the room, and Jaina stopped at the entrance. A wall of twenty Borg drones blocked her way, but with a wave of her hand they were thrown about the room like toys. Picard looked at the Queen, and thought her expression betrayed an emotion he had never imagined he would ever find in the Borg: fear. Jaina advanced toward her, brandishing her humming lightsabre. She backed away, finally retreating to the far end of the room and finding herself trapped. Jaina, Picard and the stormtroopers quietly surrounded her from all sides, brandishing blaster rifles, assault guns, and in Jaina's case, a lightsabre at her. Some of the stormtroopers began to taunt her, shouting crude phrases like "come and get it, honey!", and worse. Jaina wore an amused expression on her face.

The Queen crouched warily, glancing around at her tormentors. She locked eyes with Picard. "Locutus!" she shouted haughtily. "You are a fool if you think you can stop us!"

Some of the stormtroopers jeered at her, but Picard silenced them with an outstretched hand. He looked at the Borg Queen with a mixture of pity and contempt. "Frankly, you don't look particularly unstoppable right now."

She shot him a venomous look. "You don't really think you can stop us by destroying *me*, do you? Many have tried to destroy the Borg, Locutus. One by one, they all failed. A thousand civilizations on a thousand worlds, now all Borg. You will fail in turn, even with the help of your new friends. Finding *their* weakness will only be a matter of time."

Jaina seemed to take offense at that, and casually swung her lightsabre at the Queen. With a flash of light, a loud pop, and the stench of burnt flesh, the Queen's leg fell away. She collapsed to the ground amid hoots of derision and laughter from the stormtroopers. "Aaaggh—" she gasped, more in shock and humiliation than actual fear. She glared at Picard, and a contemptuous smile crept onto her face. "Locutus ... you *will* come back to the Borg." She looked around at the stormtroopers, and at Jaina. "You will all be Borg."

Picard still didn't entirely understand the Queen, and how she seemed to possess individuality while being part of the whole. But she seemed to be concealing fear behind a wall of contempt, and he couldn't help but pity her. He looked at Jaina to see how she was reacting.

Jaina smiled at him. "Don't feel sorry for her, Jean-Luc. She is Borg. She is your enemy."

Picard suddenly felt reassured. *Yes, of course— what was I thinking? She is Borg ... I can't make the same mistake that I did with Hugh. She deserves neither pity or sympathy.* He cleared his throat, and turned to the stormtrooper sergeant.

"Kill her." he snarled, not quite believing the callous tone of his own voice. Twelve stormtroopers raised their weapons in unison and began firing, hammering away at her defensive shields with whatever weapons they had available. Some of the energy got through and some splattered uselessly against her defensive shield, but eventually, her defenses collapsed completely. The men moved closer, and blasted away until her body was a smoking ruin.

The head, however, was still alive. Picard pulled the head and spinal attachment out of its socket, and held it in the air. "This is the second time I've held a Borg Queen's head in my hands." he announced. Just as he had before, he snapped the quivering spinal attachment and let the cold, dead skull drop to the deck with a metallic clatter.

Jaina hurried to his side, as if wishing to console him. "You did very well, Jean-Luc. I knew you would be able to face your demons without flinching."

"One by one," he muttered to himself.

"What?"

"One by one, a *thousand* other civilizations tried and failed to stop the Borg. Are you sure that we'll be any different?"

Jaina grinned and playfully put her arm around him. "We have *you*, don't we?"

Picard tried to sound reassured. "Yes, of course." *One by one ...*

Thousands of light-years away, William Riker was seated in the Imperial field headquarters outside what used to be San Francisco. He was flanked by two heavily armed stormtroopers, in a well-lit room that seemed to be made completely of dull, grey metal. His hands were secured behind his back with a pair of cold, hard binders. The binders, roughly clapped onto his wrists when he was captured, were so tight that they were reducing blood circulation to his hands, and he had been struggling to loosen them for half an hour without success.

"The commander is here! Get up!" One of the stormtroopers brutally jabbed Riker in the ribs with the butt of his blaster rifle, knocking him off the chair and onto the ground. He staggered back to his feet, glaring angrily at the trooper. The man ignored him, standing stiffly at attention while two officers entered the room along with more guards.

The two Imperial officers, one male and one female, greeted him with stern expressions on their faces. The female, a slim, red-haired woman, spoke first. "I am Commander Evleston, and this is General Harn," she gestured at the man, who nodded stiffly. "General Harn is responsible for our land-based operations, and I am responsible for the capture, analysis and refit of your Starfleet vessels and orbital facilities, as well as our transport fleet operations. Would you care to explain why your shuttle fired on our troops?"

Riker held his bruised head high. "Name, William Riker. Rank, Commander. Starfleet registration number—" he was cut off when one of the troopers viciously struck him in the jaw with the butt of his blaster rifle. He staggered, then doubled over when the same trooper hit him again, this time in the stomach. He collapsed to the ground and lay there, bleeding on the floor.

Evleston's voice was much harsher this time. "Don't waste my time with this nonsense, Commander. The Empire does not obey any of your humanitarian conventions for the treatment of prisoners. You will co-operate, or you may find that your fellow prisoners may not survive our hospitality. Do I make myself clear?"

Riker lifted his head painfully, but he was still defiant. "Go to hell," he snarled.

She looked rather exasperated, and gestured to one of the troopers at the door. The trooper left, and returned in less than a minute with another prisoner. It was Lieutenant Barclay, and he was clearly terrified. The trooper swung his blaster rifle and struck Barclay in the back of the knees, eliciting a shriek of pain and forcing him to the ground.

Barclay's eyes were closed tight, and he whispered "please don't kill me" over and over.

Evleston spat contemptuously on Barclay, and looked at Riker. "You call *this* a soldier? How many of these snivelling cowards do you have?"

Riker was furious. "He is one of my men. Do whatever you want to me, but leave him alone!" he shouted.

Evleston smiled cruelly. "Why would I want to kill you? After all, you are the senior officer of this group, so I need to *talk* to you. On the other hand, *he* is expendable."

Riker glared at her, but he knew he had no leverage here. "I can be more co-operative. Let him go ... please." Riker asked quietly.

Evleston shook her head. "No, I'm afraid I can't do that. You see, my policy is to punish defiance. You defied me. Therefore, a price must be paid, and he will pay it." She pointed, first to one of the stormtroopers, and then to Barclay. "Kill him."

Barclay panicked, and started pleading pitifully for his life. "No, please, don't—" there was a bright flash, a puff of thick, grey smoke, and Barclay's words died away to a

pathetic gurgle in his throat. His body went limp, and he fell forward onto the floor with a heavy thump. Smoke floated up from a blackened, burned crater wound in his back, and he lay perfectly still. Riker stared at the body in disbelief, wishing he could somehow reverse the events of the past five minutes.

"Barclay ..." he whispered. He could still remember first meeting a hesitant and neurotic Lieutenant Barclay on the Enterprise–D, many years ago. Barclay had grown on him over the years, but Riker had never found time to really get to know him. Now, he would never get the chance.

"I punish defiance swiftly and without reprieve, Commander. Now, you have a choice. You can be co–operative, or you can be defiant. If you choose to be defiant, I will select someone else to pay the price for you. Do you understand?"

Riker stared at Barclay's smoking body and then looked at Evleston with fire in his eyes. Between clenched teeth, he growled "I understand."

Evleston leaned against the wall now, and folded her arms confidently. "Now, let's start again, shall we? Would you care to explain why your shuttle fired on our troops?"

"You landed an invasion force. He was trying to defend us." Riker replied in a monotone.

The Imperial officers exchanged glances, and Commander Evleston spoke again, in a slightly mocking tone of voice. "Invasion force? Who said anything about an invasion force?"

Riker raised his voice. "You landed heavily armed troops when you claimed you would be landing decontamination workers and equipment. Tens of thousands of heavily armed troops constitute an invasion force in my book."

Evleston smiled. "Actually, we wanted to secure the area before landing our decon teams. It's a perfectly normal security measure, to protect our workers from terrorist attacks. Judging by your actions, our concerns were *completely* justified. Perhaps your memory is faulty, but our logs clearly show that *your* man fired first. You're lucky I don't declare this a violation of our agreement."

Riker bit off a retort, knowing that there was nothing he could say that would not further aggravate the situation. He kept silent, watching her.

Her green eyes bored into his, and she continued. "I'm willing to give you the benefit of the doubt ... this time. But this incident proves that we will need a much larger, better–equipped ... security force ... than we had previously anticipated. Because of this incident, I am *forced* to declare a no–fly zone over this hemisphere, and I am also *forced* to create a large security buffer zone on the ground so that our workers need not fear more acts of terrorism."

She turned to General Harn. "General, reinforcements and heavy equipment will be arriving within twenty four hours. We will be deploying more fighters, and several Victory class Star Destroyers for low–altitude support." She turned back to Riker. "Please understand ... we *need* to protect our workers." Riker thought he could see the barest hint of a smile on her smooth face as she turned and walked away.

Admiral Kanos paced back and forth along the observation deck, overseeing one of the Crimson Blade's cavernous cargo bays. The technicians down in the bay were putting the finishing touches on their latest acquisition: an array of 150 transporter units cannibalized from various Federation starships and orbital facilities, all slaved into a central control panel. *This transporter technology may be an abomination, but it is a useful abomination*, he admitted to himself.

"Initiating primary test sequence," a technician announced. Banks of glowing readouts and displays lit up in sequence, and the transporter pads began thrumming with energy. Shimmering objects seemed to materialize out of nothingness on the transporter pads. They were cargo containers from the Imperial landing site, full of complex equipment. Loud popping sounds were heard from some of the pads, and sparks shot into the air.

Technicians scurried to the transporter pads and inspected the containers, scanning their contents and examining the equipment. One by one, they gave the all–clear signal. All but seven. 143 out of 150 pads were fully operational, but the remaining seven pads had either transported nothing and blown themselves out, or they had hopelessly mutilated the transported material.

One of the techs brought him the operations report. "The array is ninety five percent operational. We will have to run diagnostics on the malfunctioning units. It will take some time, as this alien technology–"

"Just take the malfunctioning units off–line and try to correct the error. Ninety five percent is adequate for now. Inform Lord Jacen that we are ready." Kanos ordered. His aide marched off smartly toward the turbolift, feverishly hoping that Jacen would be in a good mood when he interrupted him.

Luckily for the aide, Jacen was indeed in a good mood. He arrived at the cargo bay shortly, and began ordering the technicians to acquire their targets.

Kanos pondered the morality of their actions, and he could contain himself no longer. He felt that they were crossing a line with this action– the line between wartime actions and criminal conduct. Q's stinging remarks in their last meeting had struck a nerve, even if he hadn't wanted to admit it at the time. *Maybe Q was right– maybe I've become so obsessed with victory that it has consumed me. Maybe I've lost any other values I ever had. Then again, maybe not.* He turned to Jacen. "Is this really necessary?"

Jacen turned his head slowly toward Kanos, and his eyes glowed faintly with a yellow hue. "Do not question me, Admiral. Once, many years ago, we were friends. But a Sith

Lord no longer has need of friends. Do not overstep your bounds."

Kanos wanted to respond, but bit off his reply and said nothing. He looked mournfully at the man he had thought of as a friend, and asked himself how a man could change so much in such a short time.

Eventually, the equipment was ready and Jacen gave the order to proceed. The pads shimmered, and 143 human children appeared in the cargo bay. *Their bodies destroyed so that these duplicates could be made ...* Kanos grimaced at the thought. None of them were older than one year, and all of them were terrified. Kanos had very few memories of his own parents— his mother had died when he was an infant, and his father had disappeared without a trace when he was a young boy. *At least I have a few memories— these children will have no memory of their parents at all,* he thought to himself.

Some of the babies began crying, a chorus of wails that spread and quickly filled the cargo bay. They had all been taken while sleeping, with no one around to witness the abduction. Most of their families would not discover the disappearances until morning. They would be frantic with terror, they would search their homes and their neighbourhoods, and over time, they would eventually surrender to their grief. They would mourn their terrible loss for the rest of their lives, and they would have no idea what had become of their precious children.

Some would suspect the Empire of course, but they would have no evidence. The population would be generally well-treated during the change of governments, and planetbound investigators would find that there was no pattern to the abductions. *At least, no pattern that they will ever discover,* he thought to himself.

While Kanos and Jacen watched from the observation deck, caretaker droids rushed in, bundled up the babies in swaddling cloths, and carried them away. The pads were cleared, and the technicians began acquiring another set of sensor locks.

Kanos stalked out of the cargo bay and headed back to the bridge, but Jacen ignored him. His eyes gleamed with savage delight as he looked down on the transporter array.

"This will be an *excellent* harvest." he whispered to himself.

Chapter Fifteen: Revelations

*"In war, the best policy is to take a state intact,
not to ruin it." – Sun Tzu*

Riker's hair was tousled, and his face was covered with dirt, but he seemed to be in good spirits. Wind howled around him, and decontamination droids could be seen hovering in the background, from what Picard could see in the small viewer. "Captain, the Imperials are proving very difficult to work with, but we are making progress."

"Very difficult? How so?"

"Well, they're making a *lot* of demands. A demilitarized zone around the contaminated area. Total control over the operation. A no-fly zone over the entire hemisphere. Control of Spacedock. This is not exactly what I would call a co-operative effort."

Picard was not pleased, but he was not surprised either. "Have they taken any hostile actions?"

"None yet, but the situation remains volatile. Captain, we could probably handle this mess ourselves if they would just give us control of our fleet."

"Yes, I know. But we both know that the Empire has no intention of doing that, so we're going to have to live with this arrangement for the time being. You'll have to keep an eye on them, Number One."

"Understood."

"Keep me informed of any new developments. Picard out." The viewscreen went dark.

Picard was not pleased at the Empire's behaviour, but he was not surprised either. He was still in shock at how easily the Federation had self-destructed in the face of the Empire's terror campaign, seeing but not quite believing the manner in which individual planetary governments scurried to protect their own interests rather than making sacrifices for the greater good.

He wasn't naive enough to believe that he could somehow make things right again, but he knew that the long road back would have to be taken one step at a time. And the first step was to delay an Imperial invasion of Earth for as long as possible. If that meant going along with their plan to wipe out the Borg, then so be it. *I certainly won't miss the Borg when they're gone*, he thought to himself. *At least the Empire is composed of human beings— a human being, no matter how powerful his weapons, can still be understood and dealt with.*

Thousands of light years away, Riker stood frozen in front of a dark viewscreen. Or

perhaps more accurately, the *image* of Riker stood frozen in front of the viewscreen. Commander Evleston turned and spoke calmly to the console. "Computer, end program." The ersatz Riker faded away, along with the viewscreen, the wind, and the shattered landscape around him. Evleston walked out of the USS Tanaka's holodeck and into the corridor where the genuine Commander Riker stood flanked by two stormtroopers.

"I must compliment you on the operation of this holodeck of yours. It was actually quite fortunate that you weren't killed. I didn't realize until *after* we'd captured you that your archived image was so badly out of date. Picard would have seen through that deception quickly. But now, I doubt that he suspects anything. After all, your doppelganger *mostly* told him the truth, didn't it?"

Riker merely glared at her, maintaining a tight-lipped silence.

"Playing the stoic, eh? I suppose you're still angry about that unfortunate business with your crewman. Very well, be as sullen as you wish. You have your duty, and I have mine." She motioned to one of her officers. "Take him back to the surface."

Back aboard the Obliterator, Jaina had invited Picard to her quarters for dinner after his communication with Riker. She spoke in soft, reassuring tones. "Jean-Luc, you seem pre-occupied. Is something wrong?"

"No! No, nothing's wrong— I was just, ah, contemplating the situation on Earth." He was still trying to determine why she had asked him to dine in her quarters— he had difficulty believing that she actually found him desirable. He felt he was in good condition for his age, but he had no illusions about being the sort of man that one might expect to see in the company of such a woman.

She moved closer to him, and seemed to completely ignore what he had just said. She leaned over the table, arching her back and moving so close that he could feel her breath on his cheek. "Tell me, Jean-Luc. How often do you feel ... lust?"

Picard was taken completely by surprise, and didn't know how to respond. When he spoke, he spoke very slowly. "Jaina ... I'm a little too old for that sort of thing."

Jaina smiled. "No one is *ever* too old, Jean-Luc. You shouldn't be ashamed of lustful feelings. Do you feel lust for me?"

Picard smiled wryly. "Do I *have* to answer that?"

"You shouldn't be ashamed of lustful feelings, Jean-Luc. Lust comes from the Dark Side ... the source of all anger and aggression. These feelings make you *strong*."

Picard felt a tinge of concern. "But anger ... aggression ... they cause violence and war. What about compassion ... understanding ..."

Jaina wore a scornful expression on her face. "What you speak of is *weakness*, Jean-Luc. Humanity has thrived because of aggression. *Conflict* makes us grow. It makes us *strong*. Kanos studied your history— your own race has grown in times of conflict, has it not?"

Picard heard Q's mocking words ringing in his ears, cackling about how humanity had to return to a brutal process of Darwinian selection if it was to evolve. Q had hinted that the Empire would somehow force humanity into this process, but he didn't want to believe in Q's precognition. Q's predictions had been wrong before. "Conflict can spur development, but it's not worth the cost. Anger, aggression, conflict ... they lead to hatred and fear. Hatred and fear can only lead to pain and suffering."

"Oh, Jean-Luc. No one *ever* won a war without anger and aggression. Would you rather be a victim?"

Picard started to agree with her, but stopped in mid-sentence and after a brief moment of confusion, managed to clear his mind. "No, I don't want to be a victim. But I would rather be a victim than a tyrant."

Jaina sighed and began speaking slowly, and quietly. "That's what I used to believe. When my mother and father died, I wept all night. Anakin wanted to hunt down the killers and take revenge on them, but Jacen and I opposed him. When he went away to hunt them down, we followed."

Picard had a feeling how this would end, but couldn't help asking anyway. "Did you find them?"

"Yes. We found them, and captured them. Anakin wanted to kill them all, and we tried to stop him."

"And did you?"

"Barely. We had to stand in his way to save them, and that's when it happened."

"That's when *what* happened?"

"One of them held out his hands and asked us to take him into custody."

Picard couldn't see the significance of this. "And why was this so important?"

"You weren't there. You didn't see the look on his face. He was *sneering* at us. He *knew* we wouldn't kill him, and he had friends in the Republic who would help him."

Picard tried to imagine how he would react in the same situation. "What happened next?"

"Anakin went berserk. He killed them all, one at a time. Jacen and I just stood there

and watched him."

"You didn't participate."

"No. But I watched them die, one at a time. I could see the fear in their eyes. Have you ever seen the look in a man's eyes when he knows he's going to die, Jean-Luc?"

"Yes, as a matter of fact, I have. It's not something I care to see more than I have to."

"I saw that look in the eyes of a dozen men that day. And ... " she paused and locked eyes with Picard, "*I enjoyed it.*"

Picard hesitated, and then decided he might as well share confidences. "Jaina, I understand how you feel. I've wanted revenge against the Borg for a long time, and I *have* felt pleasure at killing them. But I'm not proud of it. You shouldn't be proud of it either."

"No? If you eventually manage to destroy the Borg, you won't be proud of what you've done?" She locked eyes with Picard again, reached out, and took his hand in hers. "You *will* be glad when they've been defeated, and you *will* be proud of what you've done."

Her touch was electrifying. Picard's jumbled thoughts suddenly became crystal clear. "Yes, of course. I will be glad when they've been defeated, and I will be proud of what I've done."

"It is your hatred that will give you the strength you need."

"It is my hatred that will give me the strength I need."

Jaina smiled. "Now, Jean-Luc. Now you begin to see, don't you? Anger and aggression make you strong." She leaned across the table and gripped his hand tightly. "*Lust* makes you strong" she whispered, arching her back seductively.

Picard's reeled. All of the forbidden impulses and thoughts of the past few days returned now, intensified a hundredfold. His vision seemed to narrow so that she was all he could see—the rest of the room seemed to dissolve away into a fog in his mind. He began to feel feverish, as if his blood was boiling, and it was almost as if his conscious self were being submerged beneath his base instincts. Like an animal, he uncoiled from his seat, leapt upon her, threw her to the ground, and forced himself upon her.



Admiral Kanos sat in his quarters and brooded. Jacen's recent behaviour had been disturbingly out of character, and he was trying to decide whether Jacen had *really* changed, or whether the man he had known for all those years was a mere facade.

A mocking voice interrupted his thoughts. "It's so hard deciding what to do, isn't it?"

Kanos recognized the voice instantly and groaned to himself. He rubbed his temples wearily and turned to face the intruder. "I'm not in the mood for games right now, Q."

"That's unfortunate, but unlike you, I *am* in the mood for games. Why don't we play a little game called *Insurrection*? You *were* having second thoughts about your allegiances, weren't you?"

Kanos jumped angrily to his feet. "*Never!* The Emperor has forged order out of chaos. I have *never* questioned my loyalty to the Emperor."

Q's expression was one of mock surprise. "Oh no? Well, what about your little discussion with your old friend Jacen?"

Kanos sat back down and turned away to face his desk again. "That's none of your business, Q."

Q vanished and reappeared as a tiny blue hologram floating over Kanos' desk. "Oh, but I consider *everything* my business! It's one of the privileges of being omnipotent, you know." He lowered his voice. "You don't have to worry, Kanos. I give you my word— I can promise you that Jacen will not detect anything we say here, telepathically or otherwise."

Kanos began to laugh. "Your *word!* Since when—"

Q interrupted him. "I like my privacy as much as you do, my friend. Trust me when I say that *no one* can hear us." The hologram vanished, and Q reappeared in physical form behind Kanos' back. He waited for Kanos to turn and face him again, and resumed speaking. "I overheard your little conversation with Jacen in the cargo bay— you aren't enamoured of his latest scheme, are you?"

Kanos sighed. "I see you will stay here and annoy me until I tell you what you want to hear. All right, I don't agree with the covert abduction of a thousand children. There— are you happy now?"

Q laughed. "You don't agree with *kidnapping*? How laughable! You can calmly order the destruction of an entire world, with billions of people living on it, yet you feel moral qualms about kidnapping a few thousand sentients? Your sense of morality is *incomprehensible!*"

Kanos felt the anger rise in him again. "The destruction of an enemy world, in a time of open warfare, is a legitimate military action. The clandestine kidnapping of children is not. It isn't the numbers— it's the *principle*."

Q threw up his hands in mock despair. "You humans have such a *warped* set of principles ... you're almost as bad as Picard!"

Kanos stiffened. "You know Picard? How long—"


"That's none of your business, mon ami. Let us return to the issue at hand, shall we? You don't agree with Jacen's little project. What do you intend to do about it? Kill him? Reject the Empire and join the Rebellion? Expose his actions?"

Kanos' expression was grim. "I made my objections known, and that is all I can do. I have a sworn duty to the Emperor, and to the Empire. If this is the Emperor's wish, then I must obey, in spite of any objections I may have. Now please leave. There is nothing more for you to learn here."

Q sneered at him contemptuously. "The *Emperor's wish*— how ridiculous! You actually treat your precious Emperor as if he's a god! Guessing his intentions and wishes based on the testimony of special anointed messengers like your friend Jacen ..."

"The Emperor is not some religious fantasy, Q. I have seen him myself. And Jacen is his brother. He speaks for the Emperor, and he ..." Kanos paused in mid-sentence, as if he had just experienced a revelation.

Q wore a smug, self-satisfied smile on his face. "Ah, I see that an actual *thought* has invaded that insignificant brain of yours." He touched his finger to his forehead. "Remember to *think*, Kanos. Don't take your situation at face value." He vanished into thin air.



Picard awoke with a start, dreading the coming day. He knew he would have to face Jaina, and he had no idea what he would say to her. After he had attacked her, she had nothing to say except for the lone word "leave". He left in silence, not knowing what he could possibly say. Now, he had to live with what he'd done.

It had occurred to him that he shouldn't be too sympathetic towards her. She was part of the same Empire that had destroyed the Romulan homeworlds of Romulus and Remus. The Empire that had declared war on the Federation, and used a combination of terror tactics, political pressure, and naked force to cause its disbandment. The same Empire that now held Earth in a stranglehold, and him along with it. She probably stood on the bridge of the Obliterator as it destroyed Earth's moon, killing millions of people. He was sure that she and the others had something unpleasant planned for Earth once the Borg were out of the way, and he knew that he would have to try and stop her.

Furthermore, there were some things about the previous evening that didn't make any sense. She had powerful telekinetic abilities— he had seen what she had done to the Borg and he knew that she could have stopped him or killed him easily. *So why didn't she? Perhaps she was afraid she might accidentally kill me*, he thought to himself. *No*, he reprimanded himself. *I won't shift the blame. The crime was mine.* He tried to remind himself that she was the enemy, but it didn't seem to assuage his sense of guilt at all.

He arrived on the bridge half an hour later, and saw Jaina talking to one of the tactical

officers. He thought of slinking away to a corner of the bridge, but decided that it would be best to get this issue out of the way immediately. He waited until she was done, and then walked up to her. She turned to face him. Her clear eyes locked on his, but she said nothing.

He cleared his throat uncomfortably. "Ahem ... Jaina, I must apologize for my ... *deplorable* conduct last night." He straightened his uniform and stood stiffly at attention. "I am prepared to accept whatever punishment your justice system requires."

Her face betrayed no emotions that he could read. "We still need your help, so there will be no punishment. If it is redemption you seek, then just make sure you do your job. Destroy the Borg for me, Jean-Luc."

Picard opened his mouth to speak, but something in her eyes told him that it would be best to remain silent. He closed his mouth soundlessly, averted his gaze, and walked over to the navigation area. He found himself infused with a renewed desire to crush the Borg, but he couldn't shake the feeling that there was something wrong.

He felt as if he were being manipulated— as if there were something wrong with Jaina's instructions, no matter how eminently reasonable they seemed to be. *What is happening to my mind?* The question swirled in his brain for one second, perhaps two. Then, as quickly as it had come, it seemed to vanish into a haze. He shook off his confusion and refocused himself on the task at hand, his momentary disquiet forgotten.

He marched to the navigation area and gave his next order. "There is an extremely large Borg facility located at these co-ordinates" he said, keying in numbers. "Kerenos Station Two needs reinforcements, so send all of the ships in the fleet there, except us."

"Yes sir. And what heading should I set for us, sir?"

"Set course for the indicated co-ordinates. Program the jump so that we drop out of hyperspace one light-year short. We're going to pay a visit to one of their largest installations. Countless interconnected structures, strung across space in a latticework of alloy. Trillions of drones. And because it's so loosely assembled, it's not a suitable target for the Death Star." Picard explained.

"Yes sir. Course laid in, sir." There was an uncomfortable silence, and the young officer asked the inevitable question. "Sir, if I may be so bold ..."

"Yes?"

"Is it wise to attack such a large facility with one ship? Even an Eclipse class Star Destroyer?"

"Not really. But I have an idea."

The junior officer cast his gaze in Jaina's direction, and she nodded her head to affirm

the order. The rest of the fleet began to break up and maneuver in preparation for the jump back to Kerenos Station 2, the Imperial name for the new ring station being constructed at the near end of the wormhole. The Obliterator, still showing the scars earned during its Borg incursion, separated from the rest of the ships and pointed its massive bow toward a point deep in the Delta Quadrant.

Aboard the Obliterator's bridge, Captain Picard straightened his uniform and gave the order. "Engage."

The mighty vessel's monstrous engines flared brilliantly, and the stars seemed to elongate as it leapt forward into hyperspace. It disappeared from view almost instantly, as if it had never been.



On Earth, eight stormtroopers had entered the holding cell in which Riker and roughly thirty other crewmen were being held. They entered in pairs, moving carefully and keeping their weapons trained on the Federation crewmen.

"We've come to question your droid. Is that it?" the stormtrooper barked, pointing at Data while speaking to Riker.

Data stood up stiffly. "I am quite capable of speaking for myself. My name is Data."

The stormtrooper turned to look at Data, his expression hidden beneath the permanent grimace etched onto the face of his helmet. "You're the droid?"

"Yes."

"Come with us. We have orders to take you to the tech labs for analysis."

Data walked stiffly toward them, imitating the stilted, marionette-like gait of the protocol droids he'd seen when he was brought in. They flanked him and began walking toward the door of the cell. But before they got there, Data dropped the pretense and stunned them by punching one stormtrooper in the head while kicking another stormtrooper in the chest. He held nothing back—both troopers were killed by the impacts, and in a swift, fluid motion Data rolled to his right, picked up his first victim's blaster rifle before it hit the floor, and began firing.

His shots were devastatingly precise, striking and killing three stormtroopers before they could return fire. Three more shots finished off the remaining men, but not before they had fired wildly in return. They missed, but their wild shots killed an unfortunate ensign in the corner of the cell. Data had no time to express regret, because there were two troopers stationed outside the door and they had to be neutralized. In one fluid motion, he dove to the floor and into a roll, picking up another blaster as he moved. He exploded out of the roll and burst toward the door.

"What the hell is going—" one of the sentries shouted, only to see Data burst headfirst

out the door but at knee level, holding a blaster in each hand. He fired both guns simultaneously, one shot to his left and one shot to his right. The two sentries, stunned by the ferocity and speed of his attack, never had a chance.

Riker and several of the other crewmen quickly picked up whatever discarded blaster rifles they could find, and joined Data at the door. He stopped for a moment to admire Data's handiwork. "Good work, Data. Remind me *never* to get on your bad side."

Data looked back at him quizzically. "Bad side? Commander, I have no bad side. Both my left and right sides were manufactured to within a tolerance of plus or minus—" he trailed off when he saw some of the others grinning at him. "Ah. That was a figure of speech?"

Riker hoped this wouldn't be the last time the crew shared a laugh at Data's expense. "I'll explain it later. Did they manage to sound any alarms?"

"It does not appear that they did, Commander. I believe they were taken off guard by the speed of my attack. It is my opinion that they were not adequately briefed by their superiors, sir."

Riker finally cracked a smile, for the first time since he'd watched Barclay die. "Too bad for their superiors. Did you map out this building when you were being brought in? Which way to the nearest ship?"

"I tried to observe as much as I could, but I could only see a small portion of the building. I believe our highest probability for success will be if we head in this direction" Data said, pointing down the hallway to his right. "We should hurry. We have no way of knowing how often these men are supposed to check in, or how long it will be before someone comes along to investigate."

"Agreed. We've got all ten weapons and they seem to be intact. Everybody, familiarize yourselves with these weapons quickly. We don't have a lot of time." While the crew studied the weapons, he thought about the situation and had an idea.

"We'll *never* be able to fight our way out of here. Check those armour suits for damage" he ordered. "Maybe we can salvage a few complete suits and try to *sneak* out of here."

"Excellent suggestion, sir" Data agreed. They managed to mix and match parts from the ten dead troopers to assemble six acceptable uniforms, and donned them quickly. Riker, Data, and four ensigns agreed to wear the armour, and pretend to escort the others to a shuttle. Thus attired, the entire group moved out into the hall and toward the hangar.

The "prisoners" did their best to look weary and downtrodden as they marched through the hall with their hands in unlocked but very real binders, and the six "stormtroopers" did their best to act in as brutal and unfeeling a manner as possible. Harsh language and violent shoves helped complete the image, and Riker breathed a sigh

of relief when they passed a group of black-helmeted soldiers without incident. They passed a few more groups before they finally arrived in the hangar, where an officer stopped them.

"Halt!" he ordered. "Where are you taking these prisoners?"

Riker tensed inside the suit of armour, grateful for the fact that it helped hide his uncertainty. "We have orders to take them to Commander Evleston's ship for interrogation" he ad-libbed.

"There are no shuttles scheduled to depart." the man quickly retorted.

That's it— time to think on your feet! "Wonderful. Are you telling me that the scheduling was fouled up *again*? How are we supposed to do our jobs when you *flyboys* can't even figure out your own flight schedules?" He gesticulated wildly and tried to make a grand show of his frustration, stomping his boots on the floor for emphasis. Some of the other quick-thinking "stormtroopers" behind him joined in the act by throwing their hands up in mock disgust.

The officer was clearly irritated by Riker's tone, but also somewhat disarmed. "You've got quite an attitude ... for a *grunt*. Have you got a problem with us *flyboys*?" he sneered, bringing his face close to Riker's helmeted visage. He got no response except for the cold, emotionless stare of the stormtrooper helmet, and seemed to wilt a little bit. "All right, I'll check in and see if I can confirm the orders."

He started to activate his comlink, but Riker quickly put his hand over the comlink and interrupted him. "Listen friend, I'm sorry about that flyboy crack. Just let us know which ship is prepped and ready, and we'll just board the ship and wait for the confirmation, all right?"

The man sighed. "I'm sorry, but I can't let you into the hangar until I have confirmation and a departure clearance. For what it's worth, the only ship ready to leave is that assault gunship over there" he said, pointing toward a large, gleaming winged craft about 100 metres away. "But it's assigned to patrol duty, and you'll probably have to wait until we can get a regular shuttle prepped. Now, what's your operating number?"

Riker panicked and tried to think if he'd heard any stormtroopers mentioning their operating numbers. He couldn't recall hearing any numbers, so he simply invented one. "Ah, my operating number is 42856." he said, cringing inwardly.

"42856? What kind of number ... oh wait, OK, you're on file. I'll check your orders." the man said, backing slightly away from Riker and the others.

Riker watched the man like a hawk as he slowly backed away, and he had the distinct feeling that his cover was blown. The officer kept backing away from them, and Riker's suspicion changed to certainty. He drew his blaster as quickly as he could, and brought it to bear on the man before he could react. "Put down that communicator and step out of

the way." he said.

The officer dropped the comlink and slowly stepped out of the way, but Riker didn't realize that the man had quietly set his comlink on "send", and it had been broadcasting on an open channel. An alarm sounded through the building, warning of an intruder alert in the hangar bay. Within seconds, guards and stormtroopers throughout the hangar bay began to converge on Riker's position, and he heard shouts from behind.

"Oh hell" he swore to himself. He shot the man point-blank, and watched him fall lifeless to the deck with a burning, sizzling hole in his chest. "Go, go, go!" he shouted. His crew dropped their pretenses, threw off the unlocked binders, and sprinted for the gunship. Those with guns fired wildly, and those without simply ran for their lives. Red blaster bolts criss-crossed the hangar, striking bulkheads, floor plates ... and human flesh.

Data was well out in front, methodically picking off enemy soldiers at long range with his superior reflexes and accuracy. He did his best to clear a path for the crew, but there were simply too many targets, and too much return fire. Thirty crewmen became twenty five, and twenty five became twenty. Riker's breathing became ragged as he ran, and more men fell by the wayside. He finally made it to the gunship, and stumbled into the craft while five men formed up around the boarding ramp and tried to lay down suppression fire. Blaster bolts slammed into the ship's hull from all directions, throwing off smoke and sparks where they hit.

"Data, I hope you're a fast learn—" he stopped in mid sentence. The ship's pilot, bloodied and beaten, was being held by Worf while Data pored over the controls. *Maybe we don't have to figure out how to fly this thing after all!* "Get us off the ground or you're a dead man" he barked at the pilot. One of the men at the boarding ramp screamed in agony from a blaster hit to the abdomen, punctuating the urgency of the situation.

The pilot was uncooperative. "Well, I guess that means you'll have to shoot me."

Riker heard another scream from the direction of the boarding ramp, followed by a sickening thump. He jammed the blaster muzzle into the man's forehead, and repeated his demand. "This is no game. Help us or die."

The man was unmoved. "Then I'll die. And so will you."

Riker's trigger finger tensed and he almost killed the man right there, but he couldn't bring himself to do it. "Damn it! Data, can you figure out those controls?" A rapid-fire sequence of blaster bolts laced their way across the cockpit window, causing the transparisteel canopy to darken momentarily. Yet another defender cried out from a fatal blaster wound. Five more men ran down to help.

Data was working quickly. "I studied the language files brought back by Commander Chang. I believe these switches should activate the antigravity lift system." He flipped a bank of switches, and a low thrumming sound immediately began in the back of the ship.

The captured pilot looked rather disheartened, and Riker allowed himself the luxury of a triumphant sneer.

However, there was little time for celebration, as he could see Imperial reinforcements arriving through the cockpit canopy. It seemed as if there were stormtroopers behind every conceivable piece of cover in sight, and perhaps there were. More screams could be heard from the direction of the boarding ramp, and the volume of defensive suppression fire began to drop off. Groups of stormtroopers broke from cover and began to advance toward the ship. Riker saw them and knew that if Data didn't get them off the ground in the next minute, there would be no escape today. "Data, we don't have a lot of time!" he shouted.

"I am trying, Commander. I believe these controls should put the ship into automatic hover mode." He pressed a series of buttons and switches, and the ship began to lift off the ground. Two men backed up the boarding ramp, firing as they moved, and Data closed the ramp. *Only two men!* Riker cringed inwardly. Eight out of ten defenders had bought precious time with their lives.

Data punched a few more buttons, and a brief luminescent flash outside the ship signalled the activation of its shields. Riker was gratified to see blaster bolts being reflected harmlessly away. The gunship now floated two metres above the ground, its shields easily deflecting blaster fire.

"Data, can you arm the weapons systems? Let's burn this place to the ground."

"Commander, that may not be wise. We don't know how many other Federation prisoners are being held in this building. Also, the Imperials are undoubtedly calling in much heavier weaponry as we speak. If we don't leave immediately, we may not be able to leave at all."

"Point taken. Can you figure out how to fly this thing?"

"I can try." Data's fingers flew over the controls, and the ship lurched forward. It almost careened into the hangar bay walls before Data regained control of the ship, and then it clumsily left the hangar and began its ascent.

As the gunship climbed into the sky, Riker caught his breath. "*Now what?*" he muttered. A pair of Victory class Star Destroyers, each nearly a kilometre long, hovered above the ground at an altitude of less than five kilometres. Green turbolaser fire lanced out from the two ships toward the lone gunship, which was rocked violently by a series of near-misses.

Data's piloting skills were steadily improving, and he immediately banked away from the two looming vessels. He managed to activate the ion drive, and the small craft's engines flared brilliantly as it climbed rapidly out of the planet's gravity well and toward open space.

Riker was about to congratulate Data on his piloting skills, but his smile faded when he saw more warships in their path. "This doesn't get any easier, does it?"

"No, sir. But we are clear of the planet's atmosphere, and we can activate our hyperdrive."

"Jump blind? I thought you said this hyperdrive technology was dangerous if you jumped without calculating a safe path."

"Commander, I believe that a short jump may be safer than remaining here, even *without* calculations." The gunship was thrown violently off course by a turbolaser hit, as if to punctuate Data's words.

Riker struggled back to his feet. "I see your point. Activate the hyperdrive."

"Yes, sir." Data reached out and pulled the lever to activate the hyperdrive. The stars elongated into streaks of light, and the gunship crossed the threshold into the tachyonic realm of hyperspace. He waited 10 seconds, pulled the ship back into realspace, changed course, and then pushed it into another 10 second microjump. As soon as the ship re-entered realspace, he powered down most of the ship's systems.

"Rigged for silent running, sir. We are now five light-years from Earth. We can receive subspace communications from Earth, but the Imperials will be able to get a fix on our location if we send any transmissions of our own."

"Good work, Data. It might be best to listen in for a while. See if you can pick up any friendly signals. We've got to find out if they know what's happening in the contaminated zone."

"Yes, sir. It will take a few moments to determine how to operate the communications systems, and I will need to configure them to scan for Federation signals." Twenty minutes later and without any help from the captured Imperial pilot, Data had learned enough to accomplish his goals. He quickly scanned through multiple frequencies, finally locating one based on Federation protocols rather than Imperial protocols. "I have a Federation signal, Commander. It seems to be originating from the Paris transmitters."

"Let's see it." Data brought up the signal, and it was Admiral Shimizu. She wore her Starfleet uniform, but on the wall behind her was the familiar Federation logo side by side with an unfamiliar, burnished-metal logo.

She was in mid-sentence. "and we must stress that despite today's terrorist attack on an Imperial base, the provisional government is *committed* to maintaining the peace. As we go through the process of negotiating the peaceful sharing of power with our Imperial partners, we must remember that there will be those who heedlessly risk the lives of their fellow citizens in pointless acts of wanton destruction and murder. Make *no* mistake. We will find *any* such offenders and turn them over to the Empire for appropriate justice. There is *nowhere* for terrorists to hide. I repeat—"

"Turn it off" Riker ordered. The cabin of the gunship was silent for a long time, save for the snickering of the Imperial pilot. "Shut up!" Riker shouted. "Is this how you operate? Create an environmental disaster and then quietly take over the planet while you pretend to help clean it up?"

"Why don't you ask Kanos when you see him? I'm sure you'll all be captured soon."

Worf growled. "Sir, let me interrogate him. I *will* extract the necessary information."

Riker shook his head. "No. We won't stoop to their level" he said, glancing meaningfully at the pilot. He turned to Data. "It must be some kind of trick. Provisional government? Peaceful sharing of power? I can't believe our own people would become collaborators so easily."

"Actually, there *are* historical precedents in your planet's history to support this. In your twentieth century, the so-called Nazi regime conquered the nation-state known as France, with minimal combat. The French people surrendered out of self-interest and the fear that a war would devastate their nation, and after the surrender, most of their population either collaborated with the invaders or remained neutral. Again, out of self-interest and fear."

"Better to live on our knees than die on our feet, eh?"

"Sir, if you don't mind an observation, I have studied Earth history and concluded that throughout that history, courageous *sentiments* have been more plentiful than courageous *actions*. And from the point of view of individual collaborators, it *is* logical. They put themselves in a position to gain from the new regime."

Riker nodded in grim agreement. "All right, so what do we do now? We don't have any allies on Earth. At least, none that are out in the open."

Data agreed. "Logically, if we cannot get assistance from Earth, we must get assistance elsewhere."

"Agreed. Let's see if we can study this ship's computer systems and determine how to make a controlled hyperspace jump."

"I believe it will be possible. But what course should we set?"

"Well, unless anyone's got a better idea, I think we should try to find Captain Picard. They've gone to a *lot* of trouble to hide the truth from him, and I think it's time he found out the truth."

Chapter Sixteen: Wolves upon Prey

*"When your weapons are dulled and ardour damped,
your strength exhausted and your treasure spent,
neighbouring rulers will take advantage of your
distress to act." – Sun Tzu.*

Sweat beaded up on General Harn's forehead as he tried to explain himself to Jacen. "My Lord, the Earthers' droid appeared to be a high performance battle droid. It eliminated the entire squad, as well as both sentries. They used the squad's weapons to fight their way to the hangar and ... urgh ..." An invisible force seized his throat and squeezed tight around his windpipe.

"You *knew* they had a combat droid. Your men should have been better prepared. I grow tired of your mistakes, General." Jacen glared at Harn, whose face was now a pallid shade of blue. He was enraged at the thought that the Earthers might try to contact his sister or disrupt the Borg sterilization job that was already sapping the strength of his forces and wasting precious time. With the subtlest of mental manipulations, he squeezed tighter and tighter around the Harn's throat until the life force ebbed away. Jacen turned back toward Kanos, allowing Harn's lifeless body to fall limply to the deck plating behind him.

Kanos spoke quietly. "We were unable to track the ship. They could be anywhere in the galaxy by now."

"Then *find* them, Admiral. You will find them, and this time, you will *kill* them!" Jacen hissed. He whirled on his heels and stalked away, leaving Harn's cooling body behind him.

Kanos waited until Jacen was out of sight. With the infant Sith trainees to occupy his attention and millions of living beings aboard the Crimson Blade, Kanos doubted that Jacen would be watching him. *And what if he is? I suppose I'll have to take that chance.* He gestured to Captain Daron, who hurried over.

"Admiral?"

"Captain, have we got any leads on the whereabouts of that ship?"

"No sir. We've been unable to detect them so far." Daron grimaced, watching a pair of security officers dragging Harn's dead body away.

Kanos frowned in concentration, seemingly unaffected by the sight. "They'll be detected if they go anywhere near a Federation system, and they have no remaining allies in this quadrant ..."

"So there's no way to find them."

"Perhaps. But Evleston is working on a special long-range sensor sweep, in case they've stayed close to the system. If she can't find them, then our only hope is that they'll try to contact Picard."

"I hope it doesn't come to that. How would they even find him? They can't possibly know his location."

"No, but I'm sure they'll be able to find him. In the meantime, contact Evleston and obtain a status update."

"Yes, sir. Will that be all, sir?"

"There's one more thing. I need you to prep a message drone. Send it to the Obliterator the next time she checks in. I'll compose the message." Message drones were unwieldy and inconvenient, but without a functioning Holo-Net in this galaxy, it was the best way to send a message over such a long distance. It also had the advantage of being far more secure than any transmission.

"Yes, sir." Daron smartly saluted and marched off.

Kanos settled into the captain's chair and activated the recorder. He smiled at the recorder's eye and began to speak. "Lady Jaina, this is Admiral Kanos. Several Federation prisoners have hijacked a gunship and escaped into hyperspace. They are all former crew members of the USS Enterprise, and they may attempt to contact Picard." He paused for a few moments. "Also, I would like to report that Lord Jacen's Sith training project is proceeding rapidly." He switched off the recorder and breathed a barely perceptible sigh of relief. One way or another, he would find out whether she already knew about this project.

Aboard the stolen gunship, Riker watched the small control panel viewscreen. For the last thirty minutes, while Data struggled to interpret the navigation system and locate information on Picard's whereabouts, the crew had been watching broadcasts from Earth.

On the viewscreen, a beautiful and very lightly clad woman was seated in some sort of gleaming blue hovership, while a narrator extolled the virtues of the small personal craft. "... assembled to precise specifications by the Sorosuub team, the XP five hundred is the fastest luxury landspeeder in its class. Fuel economy, handling and reliability are all what you've come to expect from Sorosuub, the most trusted name in landspeeders. A cockpit airflow control field and multi-zoned adaptive noise-cancellation technology allows you to hold quiet conversations even while you're approaching the speed of sound, and you can relax in the rich, luxurious Corellian leather interior. Best of all, with the Sorosuub Flex-Lease option and twenty year warranty, you can feel comfortable about your XP five hundred even when you're *not* in the driver's seat." The woman on the viewscreen brushed her hair out of her face, smiled at the camera, and accelerated rapidly into the sunset in the small craft, to the sounds of stirring music. The viewscreen faded to black and switched to some sort of racing event, in which a horrible crash was being repeatedly

replayed in slow-motion.

Riker spoke to no one in particular. "Data, this is incredible. They've taken over all of the cultural and news broadcast frequencies for this nonsense. And what are those short thirty second programs they keep overlaying on top of their broadcasts?"

"The entertainment programming may be for the benefit of their troops, but I cannot determine the purpose of the short programs. Although one would expect the Empire to broadcast propaganda about its own superiority, it instead appears to be broadcasting curious stylized descriptions of its consumer goods." Data replied.

The still-defiant prisoner spoke up. "Commercials, you tin-plated idiot. They're called commercials! Don't you have commercials in your galaxy?"

Data cocked his head to the side. "Commercials ... ah! Advertisements. A type of programming dating back to the Earth's twentieth century capitalist societies. Short video programs ranging in length from fifteen seconds to one minute. Interspersed throughout entertainment broadcasts, so that viewers could not see the entertainment programming without also seeing the advertisements. Advertisements served the dual purpose of generating desire and steering individuals toward one particular vendor in a competitive market. They were often based on psychological conditioning techniques such as positive reinforcement, such as the use of the female in the program we just saw. Her revealing clothing was intended to attract the attention of male viewers."

"She had *my* attention ..." one of the ensigns whispered. A few of the men chuckled.

Data continued. "This type of programming is no longer relevant in the Federation. It was determined long ago that nationalized manufacturing is far more efficient because it eliminates the need for competition and wasteful duplication of goods and services. It was also determined that it was wasteful to artificially generate desire for products, because increased demand causes increased production, thus wasting resources that could be more productively employed elsewhere. By matching production accurately to demand, we have eliminated the need for market competition and the attendant need for advertisements."

Riker nodded his head in agreement. "Yes, it's amazing that societies like the Empire can survive. They spend all of their time and effort convincing you to buy things you don't need, and then competing with each other to see who can sell these things to you! I can't imagine a more inefficient way to run a society."

The prisoner had a dumbfounded look on his face. "You don't actually *believe* that, do you? You're actually *happy* in your little socialist paradise? What about freedom of choice? What's *wrong* with you people?"

Riker looked down at the captured pilot with a look of contempt. "In your case, freedom of choice seems to mean freedom to behave irresponsibly. Freedom to be cruel to others. Freedom to waste resources, and oppress the weak. We have freedom in the

Federation, just not *your* kind of freedom."

The pilot sneered up at him. "Freedom to play by the rules of your wonderful, controlled, idyllic, happy-faced society until I pray for my own death? No thanks. I prefer *real* freedom."

Riker returned his sneer. "Well, then it looks like we have something in common. You don't think much of my Federation, and I don't think too highly of your Empire."

The pilot, still tied in place, shifted his weight and tried to lean against the wall of the cramped cabin. "Sure, whatever. But we won ... and you lost."

Riker pointed his blaster rifle directly at the man's face. "Well, we're armed and you're not. So this conversation is over. Keep your mouth shut or you'll be taking a long nap, courtesy of a stun blast."

The prisoner glared but didn't say anything.

Riker decided he'd wasted enough time with the prisoner, and he turned to look over Data's shoulder. "Data, are you making any progress?"

"I am afraid I have yet to find any information on the whereabouts of Captain Picard."

"Any technological information?" Riker asked.

"Apart from specifications and operating procedures, nothing. This may be the manner in which Imperial starship computers are typically programmed, or it may be a defensive measure against the possibility of Borg assimilation."

"They can't assimilate what the computer doesn't know."

"Precisely. However, as I stated previously, the computer *does* contain specifications and operating procedures. As a result, I have determined how to operate the navigation system. I have also located the specifications for this craft. It is an Imperial assault gunship, which is apparently an upgrade from a class of ship known as the Skipray Blastboat. It is heavily armoured and it has shields, a hyperdrive, and an array of forward-firing energy pulse weapons including a light turbolaser and ion cannons. It can also carry up to eighteen missiles. Those missiles can be tipped with anything from biological or chemical weapons to high yield nuclear warheads."

"Not bad. What kind of warheads are loaded right now?"

Data's expression was glum. "The missile racks are empty. Either they had not yet loaded the missiles at the time of our escape, or they were not required for this ship's scheduled mission."

"Wonderful. Keep looking for information on the Captain's whereabouts."

"Commander, I feel I must inform you of the possibility that Captain Picard's whereabouts are *not* stored in this ship's computer system. We may have no way of ..." the gunship suddenly began to vibrate strongly, and Data immediately checked his sensors. "We are caught in a tractor beam. A starship appeared without warning, directly astern." He rapidly powered up the ship's systems.

"Damn! Get us out of here!" Riker ordered.

"Sir, we cannot engage our hyperdrive while in the tractor beam."

"Well, what type of ship are we dealing with?"

"It's not an Imperial vessel ..." Data paused and rechecked the sensors. "It is the USS Tanaka, Commander. That would explain how they were able to appear so close to us without detection. They must have approached while cloaked, and then moved into tractor beam range before decloaking."

Riker's mind raced while Data threw the gunship into a violent evasive maneuver. *How could they have gotten here so quickly?* he asked himself. *They must have found a way to install a hyperdrive into a Federation starship!* The sobering realization was tempered by the fact that the ship's crew couldn't possibly be up to speed on Federation starships yet, even with help from collaborators. Perhaps that would give him an edge.

"Commander, a second ship has dropped out of hyperspace, approximately ten thousand kilometres away. It is an Imperial interdicator cruiser."

"Backup, in case we get away from the Tanaka ..." Riker grumbled.

A woman's voice came from the instrument panel. "This is Captain Evleston of the Tanaka. It was very rude of you to steal that ship, Riker. It's Imperial property! Surrender now, and I won't have to destroy you."

Great, Riker thought. *She's been promoted to Captain.* He tried to think of a witty reply, but came up empty. The tractor beam continued to reel the gunship in toward the Tanaka, like a fish on a hook.

"Data, can you break free of the tractor beam?"

"I will make the attempt, but escape is unlikely." Data replied. The engines whined and the ship shook, but it was still pulled inexorably toward the former Federation starship.

Riker desperately wracked his mind for ideas. "Data, give me a tactical analysis."

"This vessel does not carry sufficient firepower to penetrate the Tanaka's shields."

Riker's jaw set, a grim line of frustration. "Damn it ... there's got to be a way out of

this ..." His brow furrowed in concentration. "Data, do you have the Starfleet remote access code database in your memory banks?"

"Yes, sir."

"Would that include the USS Tanaka?"

"Yes, but the Imperials may have changed the code."

"Not if they don't know it exists. It can't hurt to try." The Tanaka was looming large in the cockpit canopy now, its running lights blinking bright in Riker's eyes. There was some sort of ungainly box-like object welded to the back of its primary hull. It looked like a huge thruster pack, and he guessed that it must be the source of the Tanaka's newfound hyperdrive capabilities. The thought crossed his mind that if he could somehow steal the modified Tanaka, it would be a formidable weapon. *A Sovereign-class starship with a phase-cloak and a hyperdrive ...*

"I can attempt to use the access code, but this ship's computer is not very compatible with Federation systems. I can only send an extremely simple command. What command shall I send?"

Riker didn't have to think for very long to decide. "Put the tactical systems into a level one diagnostic cycle. That should shut down their shields and weapons for a while."

Data turned back to the instrument panel. The gunship was directly underneath the Tanaka now, and Evleston's voice came through the console again. "Lower your shields, disarm your weapons, and prepare to be boarded. Don't force us to fire on your ship."

The tone in Evleston's voice was growing more strident, and Riker knew she wouldn't wait too much longer before opening fire. Once the gunship's shields were down they could be transported out, boarded by force, or hauled into the Tanaka's shuttle bay after having their weapons disabled. *This has to work!*

Aboard the Tanaka, Captain Evleston leaned forward in the Captain's chair. The recapture of the escapees would be a nice feather in her cap, coming hot on the heels of the hyperspace tug project. It was awkward to attach the bulky tugs to the captured ships' hulls, and it was even more awkward to make everything work properly. But the complex arrangement *did* eventually work, albeit slowly. The modified ships would be easily outrun in hyperspace by the slowest Imperial freighters, but they were still much faster than before. And the successful operation had won her a promotion to Captain.

"Sir, they are hailing us." the communications officer announced.

She felt more than a little bit of disappointment at the news, hoping he wouldn't surrender so she could conduct her first live-fire exercise in her new ship. But that would have to wait for another day. She turned to the communications officer. "Let's hear it."

The officer manipulated the controls, but no sounds were heard. "Sir, they sent some kind of short burst binary transmission!"

The tactical officer sounded an alarm with a somewhat panicked tone in his voice. "Sir, the shields are dropping!"

"*What?*" she exclaimed. "Raise them!"

"It's not responding ... there's some kind of override!"

Aboard the gunship, a smile spread across Riker's face. "All right. Let's shut off that tractor beam."

Data put his knowledge of space combat maneuvering to good use now. A stream of green energy blasts erupted from the nose of the small gunship and toward the Tanaka's ventral tractor beam emitter, punching through the unshielded components and reducing them to slag. Once free of the tractor beam, the Skipray blastboat lurched forward, spitting ion cannon fire into the Tanaka's primary hull and saucer section as it moved. It accelerated past the front of the Tanaka's saucer section, climbed into an upward loop, and then spun on its axis to bring its guns to bear on the Tanaka's bridge. Its ion cannons spoke, pummeling the bridge mercilessly.

Aboard the Tanaka, Captain Evleston reeled from the attack. "Return fire!" she shouted. But the tactical systems were still disabled, and the ion cannon fire was playing havoc with the Tanaka's bridge systems. Consoles exploded all over the bridge, and the grim realization dawned on her that she would never be able to command the ship from here. "Bridge control is out! Backup bridge, take over!" she screamed into her comlink.

The Tanaka's inexperienced crew simply didn't have the experience or knowledge to deal with such widespread system failures, and they seemed to be taking forever to take control of the ship. The Tanaka spun out of control, and Evleston cursed in frustration as she watched the diminutive gunship darting around, disabling critical systems with a surgeon's precision. *Of course*, she thought to herself, *they know all of this ship's weaknesses*.

The distant interdicator cruiser reacted to the Tanaka's predicament quickly, its engines blooming to full radiance. It accelerated rapidly toward the stricken Tanaka and its tiny attacker.

"Data, the other ship's coming right at us! I'd suggest a strategic retreat."

"I concur, Commander" Data replied calmly, as he spun the gunship around on its axis and pushed its engines to full power. However, the interdicator continued to gain ground on them, growing larger and larger in the aft viewer.

"Data, I don't suppose you have override access codes for Imperial starships in that positronic brain of yours, do you?" Riker quipped.

"I am afraid not, Commander. Furthermore, I am detecting several small craft launching from the Tanaka's shuttle bays."

"Shuttlecraft?"

"No, sir. According to this ship's threat identification system, they are single-seat starfighters. TIE Defender class. The fighters are closing rapidly, and I estimate that they will overtake us in less than one minute. The interdicator will overtake us in less than five minutes. At this point, I calculate that the probability of a successful escape is approximately one in eight million, seven hundred—"

"That's all right, Data. I don't need to know the odds." He tried to think of a way out, an escape route, a tactic that might allow them to somehow escape this snare. But no ideas were forthcoming, and their pursuers continued to gain on them.

Data chose this moment to deliver more bad news. "Commander, another starship has appeared out of hyperspace, directly ahead of us."

Riker groaned. "Boxed in. Wonderful."

The new arrival was over a kilometre in length, much larger than either the Tanaka or the interdicator. They were trapped now between the interdicator, its fighters, and a heavily armed capital ship. Data threw the gunship into a downward spiral to escape the multiple threats, and the warship's nose seemed to erupt in light as its heavy guns opened fire. Riker instinctively flinched, in expectation of the tremendous impact that would most likely breach the shields, disintegrate the hull, and end his life.

But the impact never happened. He glanced at the aft viewscreen, and saw the interdicator cruiser, still rushing forward. But gouts of flame belched from a gaping breach in the ship's armour, just ahead of one of its gravity well projectors. Another salvo of heavy turbolaser blasts slammed into the nose of the dagger-shaped ship, hitting home with a devastating impact. The ship's nose was blown apart, transformed from a dagger-point into a maze of flaming, cauliflowered wreckage which looked for all the world as if it had been crushed by some giant mallet. The battered vessel fired a few weak shots in return, then abruptly engaged its hyperdrive and disappeared.


"What happened?" Riker asked quietly.

"Commander, the newly arrived starship attacked and heavily damaged the interdicator. The interdicator is disengaging. The Tanaka has regained navigational control, and it is also withdrawing." Data replied.

Riker couldn't believe his good fortune. He stared at the starship, slowly realizing that it was the same vessel upon which Commander Chang had returned to Earth. He noted that the ship was in weapons range but the tactical display didn't show any weapons locks. "Hail them, Data."

"Hailing, sir. They are responding."

A reptilian creature's face appeared on the small viewscreen. "Greetings, Commander Riker. Captain Ruk, at your service."



Aboard the Obliterator, a junior officer marched briskly across the command deck until he stood face to face with Captain Picard. "We've completed our long range scans of the Borg array, sir." he announced.

"Excellent." Picard replied. "Jump to these co-ordinates" he said, indicating a spot near the outer fringes of the array. He glanced over at Jaina, who had been sullen and withdrawn ever since he had assaulted her. She sat in her chair, eyes devoid of expression, talking to no one. The sight knifed into Picard's heart— an overwhelming sense of guilt washed over him anew, and he resolved to do whatever he could to redeem himself.

"Course plotted, Captain. Ready to jump."

Picard straightened his uniform. "Engage."

The Obliterator hurled itself into hyperspace, and in an instant, dropped out of hyperspace within range of the Borg array. The vast array stretched across space like a great spider's web. Countless huge, interconnected structures were arrayed together in an intricate latticework, stitched together in a maze of metal. It was at once overwhelmingly massive, yet curiously delicate and empty. Thousands of cubes swept back and forth through its structure, pausing in their rounds to examine the new arrival.

A familiar chorus of voices sounded through the bridge audio system. "We are the Borg. Prepare to be assimilated. Your existence, as you know it, is over. We will add your biological and technological distinctiveness—"

Picard had heard this speech before. He made a cut-off motion with his hand, and the voice was silenced. "Fire superlaser. Ten percent power." he ordered.

Picard felt the familiar vibration in the deckplates beneath his feet again, as colossal energies surged within the Obliterator's city-sized bulk. A massive stream of destructive energy hurtled out of the great ship's bow and raced toward a point at the fringe of the array, and Picard watched impassively as it impacted into its target with a blinding flash. The shockwave exploded outwards and obliterated ships and structures for hundreds of kilometres in every direction, creating a sphere of destruction in which nothing but white-hot superheated metal fragments and vapour remained.

Picard wasted no time admiring the view. "Lock in preset course. Engage."

The Obliterator rotated downward slightly, its engines flared brightly, and it leapt into hyperspace. Picard watched the stars elongate and dissolve into the now-familiar

swirling vortex of hyperspace. He breathed a sigh of relief— everything had gone exactly as expected. He felt that he knew the Borg well enough to plan such attacks, but in every game there was always the possibility that someone had changed the rules. This time, the rules remained as he had remembered them. *For now...* he reminded himself.

A tactical officer presented a report. "We destroyed approximately four percent of the structure, Captain."

"Excellent. Continue on course." The Obliterator's flight plan had been carefully planned en route to the array. It would follow a huge, looping course that would bring it back in one hour, without ever having to expose the ship to the possibility of attack.

"Yes, sir." the young man replied. Picard nodded, and he stood stiffly at attention for a few seconds. "Sir, if I may be so bold, how many more attacks are you planning?"

"As many as are necessary, lieutenant." Picard replied.

"Sir, at this rate, it will take many attacks ..."

"I'm aware of that, lieutenant. But it will *work*. The Death Star would be inappropriate. It can't maneuver quickly enough for this sort of hit and run attack, and this structure can't be destroyed by a single shot, not even from the Death Star's superlaser. It's not solid enough— the shot would simply blow a hole through the array. Besides, the Death Star can't be pulled away from its mission."

The officer looked acutely uncomfortable. "Permission to speak freely, sir?"

Picard looked at the young man in front of him, and reflected that he lieutenant would probably show more deference to any other Imperial captain. The thought galled him for a moment, before he asked himself why he would *want* to be regarded like other Imperial captains. The question disturbed him for a moment, but it suddenly seemed inconsequential and he let it pass. "Permission granted," he replied. He wasn't particularly interested in conversation, but he quite literally had nothing else to do for the next hour.

"Sir, that's all well and good for the Death Star, but what about the risk to *us*? We're out here alone, with no support fleet, against that giant 'array', or whatever you call it ..."

"We can quickly get in, fire the superlaser at long range, and then get out. The risk is minimal."

"But if we had a larger force ..."

"More ships wouldn't help. Our superlaser has more firepower than a *fleet* of Star Destroyers, and much more range. More ships would only be more targets for the Borg." Picard replied.

"I see. But the next time we hit them, won't they be waiting for us?"

"Oh, I'm *sure* they will. But I *know* them, lieutenant. I know what they can do, and what they can't. They can't detect our approach vector, and we can take our shot from tens of millions of kilometres away. They *can't* cast a net that wide."

"I see."

Picard reviewed the reports again, and decided that it was time to put the next phase of his operation into action. "Lieutenant, are we ready to broadcast our next attack run?"

"Yes, sir. With the support relays we've got in the area, half the quadrant should pick this up. Coverage will be a little patchy, but it should work."

"Excellent. You are dismissed." Picard replied. The young man saluted smartly and marched off, and Picard pondered his current course of action. He wasn't entirely sure of what would happen after this broadcast, but he felt secure in his conviction that a public demonstration of Imperial strength and Borg weakness would have a positive effect. He glanced at Jaina again, hoping for some sign of approval. She gave none, and he looked away. He wondered what his former shipmates might think if they saw him now and the thought disturbed him for a moment, but the moment passed almost immediately. It was curious—almost as if thoughts of his old shipmates and former allegiances grew more fleeting by the day.



Tens of thousands of light years away, Captain Ruk laid it out for Riker and his men. "You'll never be able to reach him. Jaina is on that ship, and all communications are being monitored. The instant you show up, they will jam your communications and destroy your ship. It would be a useless gesture."

"Well, how else are we going to get him out?" Riker asked.

"You won't, Commander." Ruk replied evenly. He paused, let his words sink in. "If your Captain was taken onto the Obliterator as you say, then he is beyond help. If they don't need him, he's dead. If they do need him, then Jaina has probably turned him already."

"Turned?"

"Turned, Mister Riker. It's something I know she can do, with a bit of effort." He leaned over and put his hand on Riker's shoulder, as if to console him. "Why don't you pour your glass of water on your pants?"

"Are you talking about some sort of brainwashing?" Riker asked, while calmly pouring his glass of water on his own pants. The cold water seemed to shock him into awareness. He jumped out of his seat in alarm, staring wide-eyed at Captain Ruk. "How did you do that?"

Ruk's reptilian visage crinkled in a rough approximation of a smile. "It's an old Jedi mind trick, Commander. And Jaina is far, far stronger than I am. I told you, if he's still alive, then Jaina has probably twisted his mind to her uses. The Dark Side is insidious. Subversive. Cunning. Even if you were to find him, you might discover that he doesn't want to come back with you."

"Captain Ruk, with all due respect, it sounds to me like an even *better* reason to go after him."

"Your loyalty is commendable, Commander. But it simply isn't an option. Have you ever *seen* an Eclipse-class ship?"

"Yes, I have. During the last battle, just before we surrendered. That ship destroyed the Earth's moon."

"A ship like that can take on an entire fleet, and win. Do you think you can *board* such a vessel with that little stolen gunship?"

"I don't need to board it. I only need to get within transmission range, so I can send him a message."

"Your message will never reach him. It will have to pass through the hands of numerous Imperial officers before it ever reaches his ears, and that won't happen. And once you've sent your message, you will be destroyed. You won't be able to escape; an Eclipse class ship can generate its own interdiction field."

Riker paused, thinking it over. He looked at his men, and he knew that they had already accepted the hopelessness of the situation. He took in a deep breath, exhaled slowly and turned back to Ruk. "I suppose you have a better idea?"

"Yes." Ruk replied. "Join us. We heard about your escape, and we can use men with your skills. Your droid is known to have extensive files on Federation industrial facilities, population distributions, starship designs ..."

"Why would you want that? The Federation has already surrendered to the Empire. Our resources are useless to you."

"I want that information because those have now become *Imperial* industrial facilities. *Imperial* population distributions. *Imperial* starship designs. They will use whatever they can, slowly reshaping your society to fit their needs. They will add your ships to their fleet, altering them as necessary. They will use your Federation as a beach head to build a power base in your galaxy. They will combine your people, resources, and industries with their technology and military power to create a self-sufficient sector government, complete with its own military-industrial complex." Ruk explained.

"You've tapped into their plans?"

"I don't need to. It's what they *always* do."

"All right, so how do you plan to stop them?"

"The oldest methods, Commander Riker. Guerilla warfare. Work in secret. Marshall your forces quietly. Fight Imperial propaganda with pirate broadcasts. And most importantly, build up a spy network."

"And what about Captain Picard?"

"That's where the spy network comes in. We do have covert operatives on the *Crimson Blade* and the *Obliterator*, but they've all gone to ground and it will take a long time to re-establish contact. I'm afraid there's nothing we can do for a while, Commander. If the Empire is victorious over the Borg, then they will start to consolidate their territory. They will try to make it seem as if everything is fine, to give your people the impression that your surrender to the Empire wasn't really that bad. Trade will be opened up, civilian traffic will increase, and we will have time to quietly build our spy network and our military strength."

"What if the Empire loses?"

"You don't need to worry about that, Commander. It won't happen."

"But how do you know—"

"I *told* you, it *won't* happen." A long silence followed. "I imagine this is all a bit much for you to handle right now. I have some ship's business to attend to, so I'll leave you to discuss this with your men." He walked out of the room, and the heavy blast door closed behind him.

Riker turned off his universal translator, and motioned for a close-in conference. "Let's hope they can't understand English," he whispered. "Did you see how quickly he broke off the conversation when I asked about the Borg winning the war?"

"Perhaps he finds the possibility emotionally disturbing." Data offered.

"Or perhaps he hopes for a Borg victory." Worf suggested. "It is not uncommon for a warrior's hatred for his enemy to overwhelm his sense of logic."

"Why would *anyone* want a Borg victory? I hate to say this, but I would rather live as a human being in a dictatorship than a half-man, half-machine in the Collective. I don't want to think about what the Borg would be like after assimilating the Empire's forces."

Worf's eyes narrowed, as he suddenly understood Ruk's motives. "Commander. I believe I understand Ruk's plan. If the Empire starts to lose the war, they will undoubtedly retreat to their own territory. The logical course of action would be for them to destroy the wormhole as they leave. If the Borg assimilate a large number of Imperial

ships and men, they will have to leave *them* behind as well."

Riker understood quickly. "And we'll be stuck with the Borg, who will be more dangerous than ever. Ruk will have weakened the Empire. They'll lose ships and men, maybe even the Death Star, and they'll have gained nothing in return."

"But Ruk and his entire crew would be trapped here with us." Data objected.

Worf's face betrayed a mixture of anger and grudging respect. "Sacrificing himself to strike a blow against the enemy. A glorious fate for a warrior."

Riker's shoulders slumped. "And if our galaxy gets overrun by Borg, well ... you can't make an omelette without breaking a few eggs, right?" He looked like the last vestiges of hope had been drained from him.

Data sounded an objection. "Sir, we do not know for certain that Captain Ruk actually desires this outcome. The fact that it would serve his long term goals does not, in itself, prove that he wants it to happen. I believe we should give him the benefit of the doubt, and assume that he is sincere in his desire to help us."

Riker looked unconvinced. "Still, the fact that he's hedged his bets doesn't exactly fill me with confidence. I think we have to go along, for now. But we have to be careful."

The men nodded their heads in agreement, and settled down to wait. Some of them looked through the windows, watching the blue-white vortex of hyperspace outside. They didn't know how long Ruk was going to take, and started talking amongst themselves. It wasn't long before they began to debate how the hyperdrive might function. Theories about quantum slipstream, transient wormholes, and even the possibility of heretofore undiscovered subspace domains were all bandied about, and Data was attempting to access the conference room's computer terminal when the ship abruptly dropped back into realspace. All eyes went to the windows.

Riker stared at the view. He could see hundreds of starships, in all shapes and sizes: Federation starships of every class, Cardassian and Jem'Hadar warships, Romulan warbirds, and several other designs he didn't recognize. He let out a long, slow whistle, and tried to count the ships he could see. He knew Data could probably do a better job, but for some reason he wanted to do it himself.

Ruk eventually returned, walking confidently through the door. "So, Commander. Will you join us?"

Riker stood up. "Yes. We're in."

Chapter Seventeen: Confrontations

"Weigh the situation, then move"– Sun Tzu.

Borg Collective status update: 18 standard time periods elapsed since destruction of unicomplex.

Cumulative losses to Imperial forces: 745 planets, 12 trillion drones, primary unicomplex, 29000 ships. Species 3387, Species 1242, Species 6211, and 35 other species have now allied themselves with Imperial forces and launched attacks on Borg planets since destruction of Unicomplex.

Assimilation attempts ineffective. Imperial starships programmed to self-destruct to avoid assimilation. Assimilation totals: 3 heavily damaged Imperial starships, 2450 personnel. Limited useful information extracted from Imperial computer systems. Limited useful information extracted from Imperial personnel. Strategic projection: 97% probability that assimilation efforts will be insufficient to prevent destruction of Borg Collective.

Conclusion: diplomatic negotiations required, to delay destruction of Borg Collective.

Captain Picard felt a deep sense of satisfaction, watching the seemingly endless stream of tiny pods racing away from the fleet. They were modified hyperspace pods, originally designed to spread probe droids across the galaxy in search of Rebel hiding places. But these pods carried high yield warheads rather than probe droids, and they were programmed to collide into a planet at maximum velocity rather than gently touching down on its surface. The swarm of missiles, each too small and much too fast to detect or intercept, were like a rain of death upon anything in their path.

Millions of the pods had been launched ever since he had come up with the idea, and they had been manufactured in a variety of places: captured Federation manufacturing facilities, Imperial manufacturing facilities on the other side of the wormhole, and manufacturing facilities aboard the Death Star and Obliterator themselves.

Indeed, manufacturing resources were being stretched to the limit throughout the Federation, and the vast resources of the Empire on the other side of the wormhole were also being brought to bear. Every Borg planet was being targeted by thousands of pods, with devastating effect. There were too many pods to stop, too much firepower to survive. Planet after planet was being laid waste, their surfaces reduced to radioactive rubble.

It had occurred to him to wonder how anyone would be able to stop the Empire once it destroyed the Borg. There was a certain genteel civility to the way war had been

traditionally practiced in the Alpha Quadrant. Even when given the opportunity, races had rarely attempted to murder the population of an entire planet. Such acts were usually limited to remote outposts and colonies, or military ships and stations. But the Empire was different— the Empire considered the annihilation of an entire planetary population as their *first* option. It seemed to be their *preferred* option, and their weapons technology was apparently optimized for the task, more so than any weapons he had seen before. Such methods were barbaric and morally repugnant, and yet, he had to acknowledge their ruthless effectiveness.

He continued to watch the pods racing away from the fleet, each one jumping into hyperspace and heading off for its destination. They were mindless instruments of destruction, programmed only to reach their targets and then explode in a tremendous blast of light and heat. If their targets had been anything but Borg, he might have felt remorse. But try as he might, he could not summon any sympathy for the Borg. Their lives had ended when they were assimilated. The destruction of their bodies was a *release* rather than a punishment. Of all the millions of men and women in the fleet, he was the only one who truly understood that.

"Captain, we have a Borg ship approaching!" one of the sensor operators announced.

"Just one?" Picard asked, incredulous.

"Yes, sir. Cubical, scout class. I'm not picking up any other ships."

"Damned peculiar." Picard muttered to himself. He tried to silence his thoughts, to reach out and listen for the Borg chorus. But he heard nothing but the faint background whispers that permeated this region of space.

"It's dropping to sublight, Captain. I'm picking up two life forms in the ship. Weapons range in ten seconds!"

Picard quieted his mind and tried to listen again. His eyes snapped open. "Hold your fire! Inform the fleet, hold your fire! I'm not sure I believe this, but I think they want to negotiate."

All eyes on the bridge turned to him now, and he could tell that more than one of the men under his command was now suspecting him of having lost his mind. He heard running footsteps coming from behind him, and he knew that Jaina was approaching. As always, she somehow knew that something important was happening.

"Jean-Luc?"

"Jaina, the Borg want to negotiate. They've sent an envoy." Picard explained, noticing with a flicker of joy that she was addressing him by his first name again. She had mostly kept to herself lately, spending a lot of time in her quarters. Her mood was mercurial, shifting unpredictably from calm to anger and back again with no obvious reason. For now, she seemed to be in good spirits.

"I thought you told me that they don't negotiate, Jean-Luc."

"They don't. I've never heard of it happening. But that's what I'm picking up. There are only two life forms on that ship. Probably the Queen and a drone to operate the ship. I think they want us to drop our shields so they can beam onto the bridge."

"You're not seriously thinking of doing that, are you?"

"Jaina, I believe they actually want to negotiate."

She locked eyes with his for a moment. It could have been seconds, or minutes, or hours for all Picard knew— he seemed to lose track of time. Her expression softened, and there might have even been a hint of a smile on her face. "If you believe them, Jean-Luc. I trust your judgement." she said.

He nodded at the shield operators, who looked profoundly unhappy but obeyed the order. The bridge shields dropped for an instant, which was all the Borg needed. Two humanoids shimmered into existence on the bridge, directly in front of Picard and Jaina. They were roughly five metres away, and the bridge crew immediately scattered to give them both a wide berth. Dozens of stormtroopers aimed their blaster rifles on the intruders, who appeared unperturbed by the commotion.

The Queen took in a quick glance around the bridge and then turned to Picard. "Locutus."

"What do you want?" Picard asked with a snarl. The sight of the Queen, standing right there in front of him, instantly brought up a wave of revulsion and hatred in him.

"To negotiate." she said. Her tone was soft, cloying, and deferential.

"Why? The Borg don't negotiate." Picard barked back.

"The Borg are capable of any action which we deem necessary, Locutus."

"And why should I believe you? Why are you doing this?"

The Queen's tone became more strident, betraying anger and annoyance. "Don't play games with me, Locutus! You know why we are here. You are trying to destroy the Collective. There is a remote possibility that you will succeed. We are here to negotiate."

Picard's tone grew harsh. "I would say the possibility is *far* from remote. I've destroyed trillions of drones, and I'm not done yet. While you've been standing here talking to me, thousands of hyperspace pods have been launched toward your territory. Give me one good reason to stop launching those pods." Picard answered confidently.

Anger flared in the Queen's expression. She looked like she was ready to scream, but she seemed to fight her emotions down. "Be that as it may, Locutus ..." she said quietly,

"but you are taking casualties of your own. According to our estimates, more than a million soldiers have died on your side."

Picard was unmoved. "They were soldiers. They knew the risks."

The Queen continued. "I offer you a cease fire, and a mutual non-aggression pact. If you agree not to attack or invade the Delta Quadrant, we will agree not to attack or invade the remaining three quadrants."

Jaina stepped purposefully toward the Queen. "We can take the other three quadrants without your help. Why should we negotiate with you, for something we can take by force?"

"To save billions of lives." the Queen replied, ignoring Jaina and addressing Picard. "The Empire may not care about that, but you know about the importance of saving lives, don't you, Locutus?"

Jaina's mood, until now calm and controlled, suddenly exploded into rage. "YOU WILL ADDRESS ME WHEN I SPEAK TO YOU!" she thundered. In a flash, almost faster than the eye could follow, her lightsabre seemed to leap out of its holster as if possessed of a life of its own. It flew into her hand, the humming blade already extending to its full length. In a single, fluid motion, she lunged toward the Queen and swung the cutting beam through the Queen's midsection, neatly separating her torso from her waist and legs. The drone made a move toward her, but was lifted off his feet by an invisible force and thrown against a bulkhead. He slammed into the bulkhead with a loud crack that announced the breaking of bones, and lay still.

The Queen was still alive, despite having been sliced in two. Her wounded torso, flopping on the deck like a fish out of water, flailed its arms in an attempt to draw itself to a sitting position. "Fools!" she growled. "If we will be destroyed, then I promise you, we will take you with us! If we can't stop you from destroying our worlds, we will send every remaining ship into the Alpha Quadrant, with instructions to bombard or assimilate every inhabited planet they encounter. You can't destroy *every* ship before it reaches its target! If you won't negotiate, you'll have the lives of *billions* on your conscience!"

Picard was horrified. He moved close to Jaina, and whispered into her ear. "Jaina, she may have a point. If we negotiate—"

Jaina, still enraged, turned her merciless glare on him. He wilted immediately, feeling almost as if he was being physically assaulted by the malice in her eyes. "There will be *no negotiation!*" she shouted. She turned back to the Queen's torso, laying on the deck. "We will obliterate your worlds. We will hunt down your ships and destroy them. Your aura of invincibility has been broken. You are under attack from every direction. Your precious Collective will die. *You* will die."

The Queen seemed to retain all of her haughtiness in spite of having been split in two. She pushed herself up to a standing position. "And if you can't stop all of our ships

before they reach the Alpha Quadrant, billions of *your* people will die. Don't you care?"

Jaina's expression became a sneer. "No. I don't." She raised her hand, and the Queen's eyes bulged. Her torso bucked and flailed on the deck, and her head seemed to elongate. She opened her mouth as if to speak, but no sound came out. Her expression became distorted, the flailing became more and more violent, and then, with a sickening crunch, the top of her skull was torn off to expose the soft brain within. Jaina calmly walked up to the body, casually slicing off both arms one at a time with her lightsabre. Then, she pushed the lightsabre into the exposed brain cavity, boiling and burning the brain away slowly. Picard tried to tear his eyes away from the nauseating scene, but found that he could not.

Picard, and many of the other bridge crew, simply stood and watched the macabre spectacle until Jaina had mutilated the Queen's body to her satisfaction. She turned back to Picard. "They are desperate, Jean-Luc. This proves it."

"But Jaina ..."

"They're just trying to buy time. We have them, Jean-Luc. They are doomed. The worst case scenario is that they destroy a few worlds in retaliation before we destroy them all. It's an acceptable price to pay, to eliminate them once and for all."

"Acceptable price!" Picard spluttered. "But—"

"Jean-Luc, Jean-Luc ..." Jaina admonished. "Do you know how many billions lost their lives in the war to liberate our galaxy? You would be saving more lives than you sacrifice, Jean-Luc. The Borg identified humanity as a target. They would have eventually assimilated *every* human being in the galaxy. A few billion lives is an acceptable price to eliminate that threat. Simple mathematics."

Yes, of course ... Picard thought to himself. It all made perfect sense now. Things always made sense after Jaina explained them.

One of the stormtroopers turned a scanner on the drone which had been thrown against the bulkhead, and then backed away in consternation. "It's still alive!" he reported. Jaina began walking toward the drone, while she tried to decide upon a particularly creative and nasty way of killing it.

Picard watched in disinterested fashion, until he suddenly noticed something familiar about the drone. He did a double-take, staring at its face. Dim memories nagged at him, and just as Jaina pulled her lightsabre out of its holster, he managed to snatch a fragment of those memories. Suddenly, he knew what he was looking at.

"Jaina, don't kill it! The drone ... it's a human being. It's too heavily damaged to be a threat— I think we should remove its implants and question him. He might have a lot of useful knowledge."

Jaina held up, and then sheathed her lightsabre. She turned to Picard. "Interesting idea, Jean-Luc. Let me know what he has to say."

A pair of worker droids picked up the fallen drone and carried it off to the medbay. Picard watched them leave, cradling his secret in his mind. He thought the drone had looked familiar when he had first boarded the ship, but he hadn't been able to put a name to the face until now. It was the same man who had accompanied a lone Rebel cruiser to Earth. The same man who had been reported missing in action after a failed attempt to capture that cruiser. He could remember his name now: it was Chang. Commander Chang.



Riker crouched in the thick forest, his senses alert for sounds in the night. This was his first ground mission for the allied rebel forces, attempting to infiltrate a captured Federation supply depot. The depot was hardly a stronghold— it only stored raw foodstock for replicator systems. But it had also acted as a subspace communications relay station, and it had apparently been jury-rigged by the Empire to serve a similar purpose in their organization. Their mission was to download a copy of its communications log.

Like all of their actions, this was to be a tiny operation, undertaken in covert fashion at great risk. In fact, the risk was great enough that Ruk had removed Data from the mission roster for fear that he would be destroyed. Riker hadn't been pleased, but he knew that he might very well have given the same order if he were in command.

The mission commander, a man named Lieutenant Rawna, crouched to his right and peered through a set of macrobinoculars. "Okay Riker, we've got a pretty good view from here. Your people built this thing, so have a look and tell me the best way to get in." he whispered.

"A transporter." Riker answered snappily.

Rawna did not look amused. "We're not using those things, Riker. You know that. Besides, aren't you the one who said they had some kind of interference field?"

"Inhibitor field. Sorry, Lieutenant. I was just trying to lighten the mood." Riker took his own set of macrobinoculars out, and turned on the night-vision system. He poked his head through the bushes, looking down at the depot from the ridge they were on. "I can see the main entrance, but the doors are sealed and they've got guards posted."

"I count four stormies, eight bikes, and a landspeeder. What's the door made of?" Rawna asked.

"Nothing heavy. It's a metastable ceramic, laminated in sheet tritanium. Superconducting rods inside the door are hooked up to the building's central cooling system. It will stop hand phasers .. er, blasters easily, but it's not physically tough, so you can destroy it with heavy explosives or large projectiles." Riker answered.

"Good. Any other defenses?"

"Sometimes we built these storage depots with computer controlled phaser emitters guarding the main entrance." Riker answered. "But I don't know if this facility was important enough for something like that. Replicator supplies weren't that valuable." He swept his view from one end of the compound to the other. "The easiest way to get in is to go through the ventilation system, from the back ..." he said, sweeping his view from one end of the compound to the other," and they won't have a phaser emit- ... what the hell are *those* things? They're guarding the back!"

The other man shifted his view to the other entrances. "Let me see ... aw, damn. A pair of SD-10's."

"SD-10's?"

"SD-10's. War droids. They've got self-healing armour and shields for defense, and they're armed with heavy blaster cannons. Those things'll wipe out our entire team easily, including our speeder. I think I'd rather take my chances going through the front door. Okay people, time to crack some heads."

"Wait! They're probably still using the original security system. I'm not picking up any active scanning signals, so it's probably on passive mode." He rummaged through his pack, and pulled out a small object. "I've got a Federation tricorder here, and I can set it up to fool the system into thinking that it's an intruder."

"So if we drop this thing in the forest, far from the compound, and set it to go off on a timer ..."

"Some of them will go to investigate. Cuts down the odds."

"Not bad, Riker. That might buy us a little time, before they can get reinforcements over here from the main base. Okay people, let's saddle up."

"We're pulling him out of the tank, sir." the medical droid explained. Picard still didn't understand how this "bacta" liquid worked, but he gathered that it was some sort of bio-engineered substance that could repair damaged tissues. After the massive and invasive surgery required to remove most of the Borg implants from Chang's body, a lengthy stay in the bacta tank had been necessary to keep him alive. He waited until Chang was brought out of the tank, and laid on the bed. His right arm was missing, but the medics had assured him that they could fashion a cybernetic limb that would be indistinguishable from the original.

Picard waited until they were alone, and then he leaned over the bed. "Welcome back to the land of the living." he said quietly. "No one but me knows who you are. If you are asked, your name is Flim Turrone and you're an Imperial stormtrooper. Your service number is RP four two five one."

Chang stirred weakly in bed. "Captain ... the Borg ... the Borg ..."

"Yes, I know. You were assimilated. If anyone can understand what you've been through, it's me."

"No, you don't understand ..." he struggled for breath. "The Borg aren't ... aren't ... a threat."

Picard thought Chang must be delirious. "Are you all right?"

Chang closed his eyes and gathered his strength. "They're beaten, Captain. They've got nothing left in the tank and they've got the tactical creativity of spinach. They're used to things going a certain way. They're supposed to attack, their victims are supposed to be abandoned by their allies, and then they can take their time wearing down their victims' defenses. It can take years, sometimes decades, just to assimilate one well-defended planet. Look at Earth. They've been trying to assimilate Earth for almost a decade. They're not worried about rushing it because they've got all the time in the world, and they'll get us sooner or later."

He closed his eyes again, and breathed deeply to regain his strength again. "But now, they're on the defensive. They *don't know* what to do when they don't have a huge advantage. They were attacked by some creatures from another dimension a while ago—they called 'em Species 8472. We never heard about it, but they lost a *lot* of their forces. They were in no shape for another war, especially not a war against the Empire."

"So you're saying that we will win?"

Chang smiled weakly. "I'm saying that you've already won. They're desperate— that's why they want to negotiate. The Queen brought me along because she hoped you'd recognize me. I guess she thought that a familiar face might make you more sympathetic."

He rested for a few more seconds and then continued. "Even if the Empire pulls out today, the Borg are still doomed. There are a few very powerful species in this quadrant which have held off the Borg for thousands of years. Species like the Voth, and the Hirogen. They smell blood now, and they've gone on the offensive. The Borg aren't the real threat any more, Captain. The Empire is the real threat."

Picard lowered his voice. "What do you mean?"

"The Borg assimilated a handful of Imperial officers and men. I know some of what they knew. Unfortunately, that wasn't much. But I gather that they plan to take over the entire Alpha Quadrant."

"Commander, I'm aware of their aggressive tendencies. But I made a deal with them, to leave Earth out of their plans."

Chang arched an eyebrow. "You don't seriously think they'll keep their word, do you?"

"Jaina assured me herself, and I spoke to Riker recently. The situation has changed since you were assimilated."

"Captain ... I've *heard* their thoughts. I find this hard to believe."

Picard relented. "All right, let's suppose for a minute that you're right. What about these other species you talked about? If the Borg is no longer a threat, are these other species powerful enough to challenge the Empire?"

"I don't know, but they're isolationists by nature. I wouldn't count on their involvement— they only came out now because they saw a chance to get rid of the Borg without getting their hands too dirty."

Picard drifted into a haze, staring off into space. "It shouldn't matter. Jaina ... Jaina wouldn't betray me." he muttered.

"What are you talking about?" Chang asked.

Picard pulled himself out of his trance. "What? Oh, nothing. Well, I see your point. But I've been in command of an Imperial ship for weeks now. I've learned a lot about their capabilities. Their procedures. If there was ever a problem, I could—"

"Do what? Take over this ship? One man against more than a million? They would kill you."

"Well then, perhaps I should try to arrange for some sort of escape route, in case the unthinkable happens." Picard mused.

"That's what I was thinking. And I don't find it unthinkable at all." Chang replied. He had wanted to meet the Great Captain Picard face to face for years, but he had to admit to himself that he was not impressed by what he saw. Picard seemed to be incredibly naive, and he wondered what sort of gullible fool could believe so wholeheartedly in the Empire's sincerity. If he didn't know better, he would think the man was under some form of mind control.

"Commander, what ever happened to the Rebel ship that brought you here? Perhaps we could secretly contact them ..." Picard ventured.

Chang's face fell. "Oh, that. Um, Captain, the Rebels *gave* me to the Borg. They marooned me in a cargo container in Borg space, with a signal beacon on it to attract attention. They may know about how to fight the Empire, but they're not interested in helping us. They just want to hurt the Empire, and they don't care who they have to sacrifice in the process."

"Commander, it has often been said that the enemy of my enemy is my friend. Besides, you *did* antagonize them." Picard reminded him. "If you're right, and the Empire intends to turn on us, then I think it is imperative that we contact someone who knows how to run a resistance movement against the Empire. I'm the only one on this ship who knows who you are. I believe I can get you off this ship. Once free, you must try to contact the rebels."

"Captain, you've got to be joking. The last time I saw Captain Ruk, he marooned me in a cargo container and rang the lunch bell for the Borg!"

"I'm not joking. And this is an order, not a request. Find those rebels, Commander."

Deep in a thick forest, somewhere on an insignificant planet, a tricorder nestled in the bushes suddenly began actively scanning everything in its vicinity. The scanning signals were picked up by the security system in the nearby supply depot, and alarms began blaring all over the compound.

Riker heard the alarm, and put down his macrobinoculars. He turned to Rawna. "I modified the tricorder to send out a lot of random noise. It'll blind their local sensors until they can shut it down, so they won't be able to find us." he whispered.

"Good." Rawna whispered back.

The four sentries at the door stood rooted in position and for a moment, it seemed as if there would be no response to the alarm. However, in less than thirty seconds, the doors opened and four men came running out. They mounted the speeder bikes and flew off into the forest at high speed, looking for the intruders. Riker watched them leave, and noted that one of the big war droids was lumbering off to follow them.

"Great! One of the droids is moving off. We'll give 'em all a minute or so, before they find that tricorder." Rawna whispered. He waited, and then motioned to his men. Four snipers took up position and aimed carefully at the stormtroopers, hoping to kill them all with synchronized fire so they could quietly enter the building. But before they could line up their shots, one of the stormtroopers decided to sweep the forest with infrared, and he picked up the intruders. The stormtroopers immediately took cover and began firing into the jungle, at the rebel position.

"Damn it! Son of a gundar ..." Rawna swore. "Get in!" The men piled into the landspeeder and he fired up its engines. He pushed the throttle to half power, and the speeder lurched forward. It crashed through the dense underbrush, and exploded into the wide clearing in front of the compound. It streaked across the clearing, overloaded with twelve occupants who fired wildly at the defending stormtroopers.

Two of the stormtroopers went down, but three rebels were hit. Their shrieks of pain could be heard clearly over the whine of the speeder's engines, and Rawna pushed the throttle to full power. One of the surviving stormtroopers leapt onto their heavy speeder

and fired a shot from its turret cannon, missing Rawna's speeder by ten metres. The second shot struck the speeder amidships, killing three more men and sending the speeder careening out of control. Rawna held a white-knuckled grip on the controls, piloting the wounded speeder directly into the double-doors at the front of the compound.


The doors shattered from the impact, and the speeder skidded to an ugly stop in the hallway within, wedged sideways and completely immobilized. Its surviving five occupants scrambled out, but not before Rawna set a self-destruct timer on the speeder. The group followed Riker's lead as he ran down the hallway and dove for cover, split-seconds before the speeder exploded.

The entire front door area was blown apart by the blast, which instantly killed the two surviving sentries and choked the hallway with smoke and wreckage. Riker tried to peer around the crippled speeder wedged in the hall, to see if any reinforcements were arriving.

"No time for sightseeing, Riker. Where's the comm station?"

"Underground. We've got to take a turbolift."

"All right then, let's go!" The surviving members of Rawna's little team sprinted for the turbolift doors.



"Jacen, why are you doing this?" Jaina asked the shimmering holographic image of her brother. She had simmered over the warning hidden in Kanos' message for more than three weeks, and she finally decided to confront him directly. The Borg Queen's pathetic display was enough to convince her that the Borg were no longer a concern, and she could afford to turn her attention to her brother.

Jacen looked unperturbed. "Doing what?"

"You know what I'm talking about! Training Sith!"

"I don't know what you're talking about. Where ever did you get such an idea?"

"That is none of your concern. Tell me the truth- are you training Sith?"

"Of course not, sister. You know perfectly well that Anakin warned us not to raise an army of Sith, because it would never work."

Jaina seemed to wilt a little bit. "Yes, I remember. Well, I suppose it might have only been a rumour."

"Next time, dear sister, be careful what rumours you listen to." Jacen replied, and then he faded from view.

Jaina stood frozen in place, lost in thought. She knew his brother was lying to her. She could see it in his eyes, his mannerisms, and his expression. She knew now that not only was he trying to raise a Sith army, but he didn't want her to know about it. She thought about her options for a moment, and then decided to go to the bridge. Picard was there, directing fleet actions against the Borg.

"Jean-Luc, we have to go to Kerenos Station Two." she ordered.

"Of course. But why?" Picard asked.

"My brother has gone mad. We have to stop him."

"But the Borg—"

"They are of no consequence." she interrupted. She turned back to the helmsman. "Set course for K2, and engage hyperdrive."

Admiral Kanos leaned on his desk and rubbed his temples. More than three weeks had passed since the Federation prisoners had escaped, and it appeared as if they had simply vanished. On a more positive note, Jacen had transferred to the Death Star along with his secret group of infant trainees. Kanos had breathed a sigh of relief when Jacen had left—although he didn't like to admit it, he was beginning to feel more than a little fearful of the man he had once called a friend.

Captain Daron entered. "We've arrived at K2, Admiral." They had yet to find a more imaginative name for the Federation side of the wormhole, so they were still using the Kerenos One and Kerenos Two designations for the Imperial and Federation sides of the wormhole, respectively.

"Excellent. Now that the Earth situation is under control, we can concentrate on consolidating our gains."

Daron cleared his throat. "Sir, what about those Federation escapees? I know there's only a handful of them, but Jacen ordered us to find them."

"Well, do you have any news?"

"No, sir. Not since Evleston was ambushed by that rebel ship."

"Ah, yes. The rebel ship. Who could have predicted that, eh? It must be the same rebel ship that we chased through the wormhole." Kanos mused.

"Intel said the captain's name was Ruk. Reptilian species from Arajka, one of Skywalker's Jedi students. I thought they were all dead, but I guess some of them got away."

Kanos smiled. "Reptilian, eh? Maybe we'll get lucky and he'll *eat* them."

Daron chuckled. "Somehow, I doubt we'll be that lucky. Do you think we should just write them off, sir?"

"I already have. We *are* only talking about a *handful* of men, and it's simply not worth it. I would have called it off a long time ago if not for Jacen's orders, but there's only so much we can do. We really need to focus our attention on more important matters."

"Like the Borg?"

"Actually, that situation should be resolved soon. You know, that Captain Picard is more clever than I gave him credit for. He's been very successful running the campaign against the Borg. Broadcasting the destruction of that big Borg complex was a stroke of genius— did you know that more than fifty of the local governments in that area have launched their *own* attacks on the Borg in the last three weeks? They smell blood."

Daron arched an eyebrow. "There are still a *lot* of Borg out there, Admiral."

"Yes, there are. But they've been slowly expanding in piecemeal fashion for thousands of years. Did you know that even after a hundred thousand years of expansion, they still only have a few thousand star systems in one small corner of one quadrant of this galaxy? There really *should* be a lot more of them."

Daron seemed shocked. "I had no idea they'd been around for so long. Why do you think there are so few of them?"

"My guess is that the Federation has got them pegged wrong. They're actually *not* expansionists by nature. They think of their society as some sort of perfect little jewel. They're always polishing it, improving it, and occasionally, they find another piece which they think might make it better."

"Lucky for us. If they'd been aggressive expansionists, they would have taken most of this galaxy by now."

"Maybe. But it's a bit late for that now, isn't it?" He was interrupted by an incoming message. It was encrypted for his eyes only, and he had to dismiss Daron from the room to read it. Daron waited patiently outside the door for five minutes, until Kanos emerged with a sour expression on his face.

"Captain, I'm afraid I was right. We have a problem. A very serious problem."

Daron knew that Kanos was not given to exaggeration. "What is it?"

"Jacen has betrayed the Emperor. Jaina has confirmed our suspicions— Emperor Solo never sanctioned this Sith training school. *That's* why no one but command staff were

allowed to know about it. She tells me that Jacen has gone mad. He intends to shut down the wormhole and create his own Empire, right here."

"But he's on the Death Star ..." Daron sputtered.

"Yes, I know. From there, he can shrug off any attack, destroy any fleet or planet."

"If he were to fire a superlaser blast through the wormhole ..."


"To be honest, I'm not sure what would happen." Kanos answered. "But I doubt it would be good. If the beam spreads in there, it would wipe out the ring at K1, and any reinforcements massing on that side."

"Now we know the *real* reason he went to the Death Star." Daron said quietly.

Kanos expression was one of grim fatalism. "I'm afraid so. Our duty to the Emperor is clear. We will have to quietly gather as many of our forces as we can, before Jacen realizes that he's been exposed. We can also ask for reinforcements from K1, now that we know Jacen is moving against the Emperor. With any luck, he won't be able to gather any forces to his flag apart from what he already has: the Death Star."

Daron was very quiet for a long time. "You're talking about a civil war. And we'd be on the side with no Death Star."

"Yes. But Jacen is starting this war, not us. We have to tell the others. Quietly, before Jacen makes his move."



Riker worked feverishly to hack into the communications computer, which had been heavily reprogrammed. But he knew a few backdoor routes, and was confident that he would be able to secure the data. He had erected forcefields all over the depot as soon as he'd gotten into the computer system, but he could hear a heavy pounding sound overhead, and he knew that the Imperials had just blasted through the last of them. He didn't have much time.

Rawna didn't bother looking over Riker's shoulder. He manned a heavy tripod-mounted E-Web that the Imperials had conveniently left for them, and his men all covered the turbolift door. It was their only escape route and the Imperials' only possible entry route. *This has become a one-way mission*, Rawna reflected ruefully. He had no illusions about escaping from this underground tomb, but if Riker could get the communications log before they were overrun, they would be able to upload it to the Federation science ship that was hiding behind this planet's moon. *I just hope it's worth dying for*, he thought to himself.

The turbolift didn't move because Riker had disabled it, but Rawna had no doubt that brave but misguided stormtroopers would soon be rappelling down the turbolift shaft. Sure enough, he heard a thump from the turbolift, announcing the fact that someone had

just jumped onto its roof and was in the process of opening the hatch. His nerves tensed, and he abandoned the E-Web in favour of his blaster rifle so he could stand right outside the turbolift door and mow down the first intruder. A white-suited stormtrooper jumped down through the hatch, but before he had even hit the floor, Rawna hit him with a three-shot burst in the chest. The poor man landed and staggered, before Rawna loosed another burst directly into his helmet at point-blank range. The white helmet exploded in a grisly shower of blood, bone fragments, and brain matter, and the body crashed to the floor.

Two more men jumped down into the turbolift, with similar results. Rawna was starting to feel invincible, as if he could hold them off indefinitely. But the next intruder through the turbolift ceiling was no stormtrooper. A tiny, fist-sized metallic ball dropped into the turbolift, and was clattering around on its floor. *A thermal detonator!* He turned and ran for his life, as did the rest of his team. The device exploded with a deafening roar, burning his back and sending him sprawling to the deck. He struggled to his feet, and tried to get to the E-Web. But before he could grip its handle, the ruined turbolift filled up with stormtroopers who began pouring fire into the room.

He squeezed off a long burst into the turbolift and killed half of the stormtroopers within, but at this angle, he didn't have a direct line of sight to its corners. Some of the stormtroopers could take cover in those corners, but the sheer volume of suppression fire from the E-Web kept them from poking their heads out into the open. However, they still had more thermal detonators, and they quickly lobbed more than a half-dozen of them out into the room. They clattered noisily on the floor, and one of them bounced directly toward Rawna's E-Web. He had just enough time for his life to flash before his eyes, before his universe dissolved into white light.

Riker had just started the upload to the USS Hargrove, when the explosives went off. He felt a wave of heat, and the numbing impact of flesh and bone against bulkhead as he was thrown against a wall. As he lay on the deck, he could feel a burning sensation in his abdomen, as if someone had jammed a white-hot knife into his stomach. He raised his bloodied head with a heavy effort to look around the room, and he could see that everyone was dead but the stormtroopers, who were now pouring into the room. He tried to drag himself to the nearest weapon, but a metallic boot stepped on his wrist. Its owner ground its serrated heel into Riker's outstretched hand, tearing flesh and eliciting a grunt of pain.

The white helmet bent close to Riker's lacerated face, and a tinny voice came out. "Rebel scum."

Riker gritted his teeth in pain. "There's something you don't know, soldier." he said.

The stormtrooper took his boot off Riker's hand and folded his arms confidently. "Oh yeah? And what's that?"

"I turned off the transport inhibitor field." Riker said with a smile. He felt the familiar tingling sensation, and the USS Hargrove's transporter beamed him away. He found

himself laying on the Hargrove's transporter pad, bleeding profusely from multiple shrapnel wounds and suffering from severe burns. The transporter chief said something about a medical emergency, just before he lost consciousness.

When he awoke, he was in the Hargrove's sickbay, and Data was hovering over him.

"Errrrmm ... how long was I out?" he whispered.

"You were unconscious for approximately two hours, thirteen minutes, and forty three seconds, Commander."

"Ohhh ..." he groaned, sitting up and rubbing his head. "What a disaster. The whole team was killed."

"Yes, Commander. But the mission was not a failure. You successfully uploaded the communications log." Data explained.

"Was it worth getting a dozen men killed?" Riker asked wearily.

Data handed Riker a datapad. "Just before you uploaded the log, a large burst of messages came through. They were heavily encrypted and we were unable to decode them, but something very important seems to be happening. Admiral Kanos just sent a captain's-level encrypted message to every Imperial starship captain in the galaxy."

"*What?*" Riker examined the datapad. "Thousands of ships, all being sent a top-level message at the same time?"

"Yes. And we noticed something else. Shortly after Kanos' message, another top-level encrypted message was sent out. But this message was sent from the Death Star, also to every ship in the galaxy. Again, we were unable to decode the message. But most of the Imperial ships sent reply messages back to Kanos, while a small percentage sent reply messages back to the Death Star. It is doubtful that we will be able to decode the messages, but even without knowing their contents, we can determine that their transmission pattern is indicative of a major event."

Riker sat up and tried to clear his head. "Like what?"

"While you were unconscious, we rejoined Captain Ruk's fleet. He says there have been reports of anomalous ship movements— Imperial vessels everywhere are abandoning their missions and jumping to hyperspace in the general direction of the wormhole."

Riker's eyes opened wide. "You were right, Data. The mission was not a waste. Something big is happening. Something *really* big."

Chapter Eighteen: Desperate Measures

*"One who has few must prepare against the enemy.
One who has many makes the enemy prepare against him."— Sun Tzu*

An Imperial landspeeder sat parked outside a large dwelling on Vulcan, its driver manning the turret and its occupant, a white-suited stormtrooper, walking purposefully toward the door. He knocked three times.

Ambassador Marek opened the door for the stormtrooper, not knowing what to expect. Although there had been some concern that the Empire would ruthlessly subjugate his people after the surrender, there had been no incidents so far. Apart from quietly guarding the Imperial embassy, the white-suited soldiers had simply not been very visible, so he was more than a bit surprised to find one standing on his doorstep now. "Yes? What is this about?" he asked.

"Ambassador Marek, my name is Flim Turrion. I am looking for information on the Stone of Gol."

If the words affected Marek, he didn't show it. "The Stone of Gol? I don't know what you're talking about."

"Don't play coy, Marek. I'm talking about the Stone of Gol. The ancient Vulcan psionic weapon discovered a few years ago. It feeds off a man's aggression and anger, and uses it to kill him telepathically. I've been fully briefed."

"I'm afraid you are gravely mistaken. The psionic resonator was destroyed many years ago because it was too dangerous. Its destruction is a matter of public record."

The stormtrooper lowered his voice. "Are you alone?"

"Yes. But what does that—"

"Keep your voice down!" the stormtrooper hissed. My name is not Flim Turrion and I'm not an Imperial stormtrooper. I am a Federation officer, my name is Commander Chang, and I am here on behalf of Captain Picard."

The Vulcan was not impressed. "The Great Collaborator, Captain Picard? His face is on Imperial propaganda everywhere. Even if the Stone of Gol still existed, and even if I knew where it was, I certainly wouldn't tell you." Marek closed the door in Chang's face. Chang stood there dumbfounded for a moment, and then rang the door chime again.

Marek quickly opened the door. "Please leave."

"Not without the Stone of Gol. Picard says he knows for a fact that it was never destroyed. He says that a *replica* was destroyed. He says that the original Stone of Gol is

in the hands of a group of extremists. He says they're studying it, and they plan to use it as part of a reunification program with the Romulans. He also says that *you* are a member of this movement, and that the Stone of Gol is in *your* possession. Apparently, an investigation was closing in on you when the Empire showed up." Chang replied.

"He is mistaken. There is no extremist movement." Marek closed the door in Chang's face again, and Chang's temper flared. He pounded insistently on the door until it was obvious he would get no response, then he pulled out his blaster rifle and opened fire. The flimsy door of Marek's home was never meant to repel a determined intruder, and it was quickly reduced to smoking rubble. Chang stepped through the hole and into Marek's home.

Marek turned to face him, seemingly unmoved by the violent intrusion. "Obviously, you wish to make this difficult. The people of Vulcan have already suffered enough without being further harassed—"

"Shut up! Shut up with that damned self-righteous Vulcan attitude!" Chang shouted. He pulled off his helmet and showed Marek his mangled face, still missing one eye and still badly scarred from the Borg implants. "Do you have *any* idea what I've been through, Marek? I dragged myself out of sickbay to come find you! I wouldn't even be standing if the medics didn't pump me full of drugs before sending me on this mission! I *have* to wear this stormtrooper armour because I'm still not fit to be seen in public! So don't talk to me about your suffering, Marek. I've gone to Hell and back for the Federation! What have *you* done?"

Marek looked at him impassively. "This display of emotion will accomplish nothing."

"Shut up!" Chang screamed. "There are thousands of ships out there," he said, pointing at the sky, "preparing for battle. After the battle, no matter which side wins, they will be weakened. This will be our *only* opportunity to strike! Picard from within, and our forces from without. The Stone of Gol ignores shields. It ignores armour. It can kill a man from thousands of kilometres away. Even if he's an Imperial admiral, and maybe even if he's a Sith lord. So I don't have time to dance around with your little games. Where is it?"

"If the Stone of Gol still existed, why would we give it to Picard? He is an Imperial puppet."

"He is a *Federation officer!*" Chang exploded. He looked at the ambassador with contempt plainly evident on his face. "Worthless politician ... you don't wear the uniform," he snarled, "so you don't know what it means. You don't know what it means to risk your life in defense of your world. But I know what it means, and so does Picard. He never had a choice!"

"We *always* have a choice, Commander."

"Yes, we do, don't we? Picard chose to accept Kanos' offer because the alternative

was to watch Imperial troops turn Earth into a smoking wasteland. But what about *you*? Your government signed a non-aggression pact with the Empire without even engaging them in battle! You got on your knees and begged for mercy, so you wouldn't have to sacrifice any of your oh-so precious and oh-so *superior* Vulcan soldiers. While the rest of us were fighting and dying, you *chose* to cower in your homes. And now you condemn Picard for what *he* did? People who live in glass houses shouldn't throw stones, Marek."

Marek's face remained maddeningly impassive. "Be that as it may, I can't help you. The Stone of Gol was destroyed."

Chang's patience was wearing thin. "The lives of billions may turn on what happens in the next twelve hours, Marek." he said quietly, pulling out his blaster rifle. "Desperate times call for desperate measures. If you won't give me the Stone of Gol, I will kill you and search your house myself."

That same impassive expression. "You're a starfleet officer. You're bluffing."

Chang raised the rifle, pointed it at Marek's head, and released the safety. "Are you willing to bet your life on that?" he asked quietly. Marek merely stood there staring back at him. His finger tensed on the trigger, but he couldn't bring himself to do it. He threw the blaster on the floor in frustration. "Damn it, what the hell are you saving it for?" he screamed. "This thing might give Picard the edge he needs, and you want to keep it. And for *what*? Your reunification with the Romulans? They're *dead*! The Empire blasted Romulus and Remus into dust! If you *really* want to help the Romulans, you'll give me the Stone of Gol now!"

Marek's expression still didn't change. "Even if we assume that the Stone of Gol wasn't destroyed, and even if we assume that I know where it is, why should I believe any of this? Am I supposed to believe you based solely on your word, after you showed up on my doorstep wearing stormtrooper armour and blasted your way into my home?"

Chang walked toward Marek slowly, and purposefully. "You want proof? You want to know what's been happening out there? I've got the memories of Federation officers, Imperial officers, Romulans, and a whole damned pile of others that I don't even want to think about, all stored in my brain thanks to the Borg. Mind-meld with me, and you'll see that I *am* telling the truth."

Marek contemplated the offer for a moment, and then nodded his head in quiet assent. He gingerly placed his hands on Chang's face, being careful to avoid the scarred areas. He closed his eyes, and Chang felt his thoughts merging with Marek's own. It would have seemed like a violation once, but after having gone through the trauma of Borg assimilation, this wasn't so bad. He found himself reliving all of the events since this nightmare began: stumbling into the midst of a monstrous battle in Imperial space, watching the USS Carolina explode through the hatch of his escape pod, meeting Admiral Kanos and Captain Ruk, and barely surviving the harrowing escape back into the alpha quadrant. In some kind of nightmarish fast-forward, he then found himself

remembering the disastrous attempt to capture Ruk's ship, and the agony of Borg assimilation.

Marek gasped in surprise and broke contact at this point, but after taking a few seconds to recover from the shock, he resumed contact and Chang found himself reliving all of the time he spent as a Borg drone, right up to the moment that he was telekinetically smashed against a bulkhead by Jaina. Picard's debriefing followed, and then Marek broke contact again. Chang staggered for a moment, regained his balance, and was surprised to see what appeared to be genuine sympathy on Marek's face.

"Commander, I apologize. I had no idea what you'd gone through." he said quietly. "Picard was right, although I would like to know the name of his source. Nevertheless, the Stone of Gol was *not* destroyed, and I *am* part of a group that wishes to achieve the goal of reunification with the Romulans. I also believe that the Vulcan peoples' single-minded pursuit of logic has blinded us to certain truths, and that the Romulan and Vulcan people would be stronger together than apart. I can take you to the Stone of Gol."

"Thank you. What about the rebels?" Chang asked.

"Ah yes, of course. You want to contact the Rebels, to co-ordinate their attack with Picard's attempt to decapitate the Imperial chain of command. It may please you to know that I do have contacts with the Rebels, since many of the surviving Romulan ships joined their forces. But there is no need to contact them, because they're already on their way to the site of the battle. They plan to observe from afar, wait until one side is destroyed, and then attack the victor."

"I suppose that will have to do." Chang agreed. "Now, can you show me the weapon? My pilot is probably getting impatient by now."

"Yes, of course. When you meet Picard again, tell him that I hope he finds it useful."

Chang tried to smile, not realizing what a grotesque expression it was on his scarred face. "Thank you, ambassador. I'll do that."

"Admiral, the current tally is roughly twenty seven hundred ships. We also have a half-dozen Golan Arms battle stations at our disposal, the Emperor just sent a brand-new World Devastator, and roughly ten percent of Ring 2's turbolaser emplacements are operational. For all the good it will do against the Death Star, sir." Captain Daron reported.

"Thank you, Captain. Is that a hint of pessimism I detect in your voice?" Kanos asked.

"I apologize, sir. It's just that I can't see how we can win this one. That World Devastator is nice to have in the long-term, but against the Death Star, it might as well be a child's toy. And the Obliterator's superlaser may be nothing to sneeze at, but it's no Death Star blast."

"Understood, Captain. But don't count us out yet. I just might have another card up my sleeve. And even if I don't, I wouldn't want any of the crew to sense pessimism among the command staff. Our odds may be slim, but they'll be even worse if the crew morale goes down. Do I make myself clear?"

Daron wore an appropriately chastened expression on his face. "Absolutely, sir. As far as the crew is concerned, victory is inevitable."

"Very good, Captain. Dismissed." Kanos replied.

Daron turned smartly on his heels and marched back to the bridge, and Kanos turned back to Jaina and Picard. "So, Jaina, do you expect any trickery from Jacen?" Kanos asked.

"Don't take this the wrong way, but I'm sure he doesn't consider you a threat. The only one he fears is the Emperor, so now that he's been exposed, he will try to destroy the wormhole immediately." she replied.

Kanos thought about that for a moment. "He'll probably wait long enough for his command staff to co-ordinate their battle plan, and then he'll commence a frontal assault. At best, we have a day to prepare."

"So how do you plan to stop him?" Picard asked, genuinely curious. After having seen the Death Star up close, he shared Daron's pessimism. Luckily, his conflicted interests were not causing him any more problems than they did against the Borg. The destruction of the Death Star would represent the destruction of most of the Empire's power in this galaxy, so it served his loyalty both to Earth and to Jaina.

Kanos calmly activated a holographic view of the system. "The first step is to make it more difficult for Jacen to destroy the wormhole, so I have ordered K2 station to fire its maneuvering thrusters and change its position. It will drag the wormhole endpoint to a new location."

"It can *move* the wormhole?" Jaina asked.

"Yes. After the first ring station was destroyed by the Romulans, this one was constructed in record time. We got it up and running only a week ago, but it *is* functional. You must remember that a wormhole is just a tunnel connecting two points in space-time. It isn't necessary for the end-points to be fixed in place, so you *can* move one end of the wormhole through space. With the right equipment, of course."

Picard sat forward, his interest piqued. He glanced out the briefing room's window and saw the ring station in the distance, flickering brightly with the massive energy pulses coursing round and round its circumference. Sure enough, it was moving. "So if Jacen comes out of hyperspace expecting to take a shot at the wormhole ..." Picard began.

"It won't be where he expects it to be, and we'll have jammers running at max power. He won't be able to scan the relocation from long range, and we can keep any advance scouts from transmitting. If we're lucky, we'll be able to destroy any scouts before they can get out of range and warn him. I'm also having the station reorient its axis by ninety degrees. Instead of seeing a ring, he'll just see a flat line. He would have to align the Death Star with the ring's new axis in order to take a shot down the wormhole. This will be our only chance to attack."

"What is our attack plan?" Jaina asked.

"Well, this won't be a typical Death Star battle. Tharde won't be able to sit safely inside his shield and pick off our ships at his leisure this time, because we have a superlaser of our own. A full-power shot from the Obliterator's superlaser should create a small breach in the Death Star's shield, perhaps a dozen kilometres wide." Kanos replied confidently, as if this battle would be a milk run.

"So we can fire through it, and pound the surface." Jaina concluded.

Kanos shook his head. "I'm afraid it won't be that easy. The Death Star's shield array is composed of interlocking segments, projected by redundant generators on the surface. The shield operators will immediately move the segments around to seal up the breach, but they'll open up a few seams."

"And we can fire through the seams?" Picard asked hopefully.

Kanos shook his head again. "Maybe, if we can get a clear line of sight to the surface. But even so, it will take far too long to do enough damage that way, and we won't have a lot of targeting flexibility. Besides, once you get past the surface turrets and utility structures, there is some *very* heavy armour on that battle station, not to mention ray-shielding over anything important. No, we have to get some ships *through* those seams so they can attack at low altitude."

"What difference would it make to attack at low altitude?" Jaina asked.

"It will be much harder for their defenses to hit our ships at low altitude." Picard answered. He knew that she had little or no tactical knowledge, and so he wasn't surprised at the question. He also knew that Kanos wanted to answer her question, and took some pleasure in saying it first. "At high altitude, a ship is exposed to the combined fire from dozens, hundreds, or perhaps even thousands of turrets. But a planetary body as small as the Death Star has a very short horizon at low altitude— only a few kilometres. This puts a low-altitude ship out of range for all but the turrets in its immediate vicinity."

"And at low altitudes," Kanos interrupted, "the turret gunners run the risk of inadvertently hitting the surface when they miss our ships. They also must traverse much more quickly than they would at long range, and they may not be able to depress their barrels enough to hit fighters and small attack ships. There are a lot of things our ships can do once they break through the shield."

Picard shook his head. "Admiral, with all due respect, isn't that the problem? It sounds like you're saying that our ships should carefully slip through a handful of small seams in the Death Star's shield while thousands of turbolaser turrets are firing up at them. They'll have to maneuver very carefully through the seams because the shield will vapourize them on contact, and each seam will become a killing zone."

"I never said this would be easy, Captain. In fact, that's where *you* come in. The Borg have been driven to the brink of extinction, so you've lived up to your end of our bargain, but I would like to request your assistance one more time." Kanos replied, still cool as ice. It seemed almost as if he had scripted this briefing in his mind, and was simply playing it out.

"You want me to command the fleet?"

Kanos smiled. "That's *my* job, Captain. But I'm not fighting some backwater pirate group here— I'm attempting to destroy the most powerful battle station ever built. I'm not ashamed to admit that I'm pulling in every asset I can find, and that includes about six hundred Federation starships."

Picard suddenly realized where Kanos was heading. "You want me to command these ships."

Kanos smiled. "Naturally. After we confiscated and upgraded the ships, we sent their crews back to Earth. However, in light of this crisis, we recalled most of those crews and restaffed the ships."

"And they *agreed* to fight for the Empire?" Picard asked incredulously.

"I've taken some measures to ensure their obedience." Kanos explained, in a tone that did not invite further inquiry. "I also made an offer that Earth's central government couldn't refuse. The return of all confiscated property, including all orbital and deep-space facilities and any starships which survive this battle. Permission to operate indefinitely as an independent, *self-governed* Imperial territory, with no obligatory ties to Imperial government whatsoever, save for a modest trade tax. And the full protection of the Imperial star fleet against any and all aggressors, as befits a lost colony of humanity."

"Lost colony?"

"You don't know? Our peoples don't just *look* the same— we *are* the same. Right down to our DNA. I can't explain it, but perhaps some ancient hyperspace explorer somehow stumbled through a wormhole like the one we found, and ended up on your homeworld. In any case, your people and mine are the same."

"I must admit I'm intrigued," Picard said, suddenly more than a little curious about some of the ancient Atlantis myths, "but it takes more than common genetic ancestry to earn trust. Are you sure Earth's government will agree to this deal?"

"Oh, they've *already* agreed. They've ordered their crews to overlook our past conflict, and obey my orders in combat against Jacen. The simple reality is that if my forces fall, then they will face Jacen alone. If my forces succeed, then the worst-case scenario is that they continue as they are, and the best-case scenario is that I live up to my word and restore their freedom. As I said, I made them an offer they couldn't refuse."

"I see."

"But even though those men have been instructed to follow my orders, I have my doubts. I think they would much rather follow *your* orders. So I am placing those ships under *your* command, and I'm putting you on the fleet flagship, the USS Tanaka."

"With all due respect Admiral, I would prefer the Enterprise."

"I'm afraid that's not possible, Captain. The Enterprise is still awaiting repairs. But the Tanaka is fully functional, it has undergone several armour and shield upgrades, and it incorporates that interesting cloaking device of yours."

"All right, but I would like to have my old crew."

Kanos looked rather uncomfortable, and cleared his throat. "Ah, Captain, I'm not certain we will be able to round up all of your original crew in time. There was an ... incident ... with Commander Riker and a couple of the other bridge officers."

Picard's smile faded. "An *incident*? What sort of incident?"

"Riker, Data, Worf, and a handful of others murdered several dozen men at one of our landing facilities, stole an assault gunship, and disappeared. Apparently, they were displeased at the provisional government's decision to work peacefully with us, and they decided to take matters into their own hands. Your own Admiral Shimizu has publicly condemned their actions."

"Riker, Data, and Worf? I just can't believe that they would do such a thing ... are you sure?" Picard asked.

"I'm afraid so. You can talk to Admiral Shimizu if you wish to confirm it. As for the rest of your crew, I will see what I can do." Kanos answered.

Picard tried to look pleased. "Thank you, Admiral." He got up and turned to go, but stopped himself in mid-stride. "Admiral ... I was just wondering. Why would the Earth government trust your word about Jacen's intentions? How can you be sure that Jacen won't offer them a similar deal, or better?"

Kanos leaned back in his chair. "I've known Jacen for a long time, Captain. He won't even *try* to negotiate. And your government knows what kind of man he is— they've seen the evidence. They know about the children."

Picard looked at Kanos, and then at Jaina. "What children?"



"Jacen, we—" Tharde began.

"Disrespectful fool! You will address me as *Emperor!*" Jacen interrupted, with a wave of his hand. Tharde felt his throat constricting for a split-second, just long enough to remind him that he was no longer in command here.

Tharde massaged his throat, and continued warily. "Emperor, we have plotted a course for K2. But I would like to offer my humble suggestion that we should send advance scouts, to see what Kanos has planned for us. One or two fast ships sent in ahead of the main force should give us an idea of what we can expect."

"Tharde, you incompetent fool. One or two ships would only warn Kanos that the attack is imminent."

"But we have no idea how many ships he has, or where they are, or what traps he might have set—"

"I am your Emperor, and this is the *Death Star!*" Jacen angrily shouted. "Kanos is *nothing!* His fleet is nothing! I could kill him with a thought ..." he said, his voice thick with menace, "but I will punish his disobedience by forcing him to watch the destruction of his precious fleet before he dies."

Tharde was intimidated by Jacen, but it was madness to engage an enemy without scouting his forces first. "But your Excellency, it is standard procedure to—"

"Are you questioning my orders, Tharde?" Jacen asked, raising his hand slightly.

"No, your Excel ..." Tharde began, choking for breath. He fell to his knees, feeling sure that his life was about to end. Jacen's eyes bored into his, and he felt a damp coldness that seemed to emanate from those eyes and penetrate his body to its core. His mouth opened in a soundless scream, and he felt terror such as he had never felt before, as if something worse than mere death awaited him. But then, as suddenly as it began, the invisible constriction around his throat disappeared. He sucked in a lungfull of fresh air, and struggled up to his feet again. "Your Excellency, " he gasped after a long delay, "I apologize most sincerely. We will enter hyperspace at your command."

"Good." Jacen said, folding his arms and gazing quietly out the window of the Death Star's overbridge. Tharde bowed deeply, and then scurried out the door, still shaking from terror.



The fleet was ready, the officers and men had been briefed, the battle plan had been laid out. Phaser and turbolaser batteries were charged, missiles and torpedoes were

armed, and mines were set. Chang had finally returned from his mission, and now it was time to sit and wait.

Picard sat down in the Tanaka's ready room and tried to calm his nerves by reading "The Great Gatsby". Kanos' offer of autonomy for Earth and the return of all Starfleet assets was almost too good to be true— if they could win this battle, they would accomplish what might have been thought impossible: the Federation would rise from its own ashes.

He stood up, walked to the window and looked at the fleet, which seemed to stretch out to infinity. Hundreds of Federation starships maintained formation around the USS Tanaka, and in the distance, Kanos' vast armada dotted the inky blackness of space like so many stars. The sight was at once awe-inspiring in its grandeur, and sobering in the realization that all of this was dwarfed by the planet-destroying behemoth they were about to confront. His sombre reflection was interrupted by the door chime.

"Enter."

The door slid open and Counsellor Troi entered. "Captain, do you need to talk about this battle?"

"I don't think there's any need. Everyone has been fully briefed. I'm aware that there are mixed feelings among the crew, but I know that they'll do their jobs."

"I wasn't talking about military tactics, or motivational techniques. The mood among the crew is apprehensive, but they still trust your judgement."

"Then what *were* you talking about?"

"I think you already know, Captain. You've been through a lot. *We all* have. Commander Riker, Worf, and Data are all missing. We all know that they saw something that the Empire didn't want them to see, and everyone's worried about them. And we don't trust Admiral Kanos. Someone is blocking my ability to read him, but I don't need telepathy to know that he can't be trusted. Aren't *you* worried?"

"Counsellor, I appreciate your concern. And I *am* concerned about Riker, Worf, and Data. But I can't afford to worry about them *right now!* The Death Star will arrive within hours! If we destroy it and Kanos lives up to his word, we'll regain most of what we lost. Even if he *doesn't* live up to his word, the destruction of the Death Star is absolutely *imperative* if we ever hope to have *any* chance of overthrowing the Empire. But if we fail, then Jacen will kill Jaina and we'll have no way to stop him! This is neither the time or the place to burden ourselves with any extra concerns."

"Actually Captain, I think it *is* the time *and* the place. You have many unresolved issues about the Empire, and I sense *very* strong emotions whenever you think about this 'Jaina' woman. Are you sure that—"

"Counsellor," Picard said, his tone growing stern, "my feelings about Jaina are my concern, not yours. They are *not* open for discussion. Is that clear?"

"Captain, I don't mean to pry. But this is hardly an ordinary—"

Lieutenant Portugal's voice interrupted her in mid-sentence. "Captain, the Death Star just dropped out of hyperspace and is closing rapidly. Range: twelve million kilometres."

"Acknowledged." Picard replied. He turned to Troi. "Duty calls, Counsellor." He walked swiftly onto the bridge and to his seat. The viewscreen had switched to a long-range tactical display, showing that the Death Star was headed directly toward the ring station's original location. Jacen was just as arrogant and predictable as Kanos predicted—he approached on a perfect firing line down the ring's original axis, and flew directly into a massive minefield, along with a hundred escorting warships flying in rigid formation.

"The Death Star ran straight into the minefield, sir." Portugal reported.

"Damage?"

"None to the Death Star. But the escorts are gone."

"Excellent. Now that the escorts are out of the way, signal the fleet. Intercept course. Full impulse!" Picard ordered. "Engage the cloak."

The helmsman complied, and the USS Tanaka faded into invisibility. Picard's fleet raced toward the Death Star, followed closely by Kanos' armada.

"He arrived earlier than we expected, sir. The ring isn't far enough out of location. They've already detected it, and they're changing course to move into firing position. Massive energy spike behind us, sir." Portugal reported.

"That will be the Obliterator." Picard replied. A fifteen kilometre long build-up of energy surged out of the Obliterator's bow, and hurtled past Picard's strike force on its way to the Death Star.

"Superlaser impact in thirty five seconds, sir. We'll be in weapons range in one minute." The crew watched the superlaser beam streak toward the Death Star, as if it was moving in slow motion. "Impact in twenty seconds ..." the helmsman called out, "fifteen seconds ... ten seconds ... five, four, three, two, one, impact!"

The huge green superlaser blast splashed against the Death Star's shield in a flare of energy that would have engulfed Picard's entire force. It seemed to splinter into millions of smaller bolts, which showered through the shield and onto the surface like water spraying through a screen.

"Report!" Picard ordered.

"Fifteen kilometre wide breach in the shield, sir. They're altering their shield geometry to compensate. Widespread damage on the surface, but only limited penetration of the armour belt." Portugal responded, while the computer calmly reported that the Death Star would be in firing position in two minutes.

"Good. Signal the fleet: fire at will. Repeat, fire at will! First wave, into the shield breach after the fleet bombardment."

Aboard the USS Kirktown, Captain Jellico heard the dreaded order come through. He was ready to die for Earth, but it didn't seem quite right to die for Kanos, no matter what promises he'd made. He knew perfectly well what it meant to be part of the first attack wave, and that he would probably never see the skies of Earth again. But this order came down through what passed for the Federation chain of command now, and he had a sworn duty to uphold.

Kanos fleet launched a withering bombardment of the shield now, in hopes of blasting the seams open. More than half a million turbolaser bolts splashed uselessly against the Death Star shield, creating a spectacular display around the breach.

"Fleet bombardment ineffective, sir. No effect on the shield seams." the helmsman reported.

"Damn." Jellico replied. "All right, it's time. Divert all power to shields!" he ordered, as the stripped-down Galaxy-class ship charged for the breach in the shield. More than a hundred other ships from both fleets flew alongside his vessel, all angling and maneuvering to slide through the seams.

"Sir, we're twenty seconds from shield penetration and there's still no defensive fire."

"Maybe that superlaser did more damage than we thought." Jellico replied hopefully. The Death Star filled the viewscreen now, but there was still no defensive fire. The ship slowed to carefully maneuver through the seams in the shield.

"Penetration in five, four, three ... oh no!" the helmsman exclaimed.

"What are you—" Jellico began, but he didn't have to ask. One hundred thousand turbolaser turrets on the surface had been waiting, and waiting, and suddenly opened fire. The swarm of turbolaser bolts intersected at the seams, and they became a murderous killing zone. The last thing Jellico saw was a wall of green turbolaser fire about to engulf his ship.

Aboard the Tanaka, Picard watched the slaughter in dismay. Federation and Imperial ships alike exploded like a string of firecrackers. "It looks like that superlaser blast didn't do as much damage as we'd hoped." he said quietly.

"First wave destroyed, sir. No damage to the Death Star, but the seams are a bit bigger. Probably due to all those warp cores exploding inside." Lieutenant Portugal

reported.

"Damn." Picard whispered, not in response to the report but as a reaction to what he was seeing now on the screen. The Death Star seemed to blink green, and suddenly, hundreds of thousands of turbolaser bolts were hurtling toward the fleet, along with one titanic superlaser blast.

"Evasive action!" he shouted instinctively, even though his cloaked vessel was immune to this attack. The massive salvo swept past the Tanaka and through the fleet.

"Aft viewer!" he ordered. The viewer quickly panned over his fleet, showing the glowing debris of dozens of shattered starships. Kanos' fleet had also taken casualties, and there was nothing but empty space where the massive Obliterator had once been. Hundreds of thousands of turbolaser bolts swarmed out of Kanos' fleet and toward the Death Star, and the murderous exchange of firepower began in earnest.

"Jaina ..." he whispered. He fought back tears of grief, then he gathered his composure. "Transmit to the fleet: all remaining waves, advance through the shield during the next break in bombardment. We will decloak and search for survivors from the Obliterator."

"Captain, shouldn't we be advancing with the fleet?" Portugal asked anxiously. The rest of the bridge crew was looking at Picard with the same expression on their faces.

Picard looked back at them. "You have your orders, Lieutenant."

"Aye, sir. Disengaging cloak and changing course." Portugal answered reluctantly. "Initiating sensor sweep for escape pods ... the explosion was too violent. No escape pods— wait ... one pod. Trying to lock on with transporters, but there's some kind of interference. Trying to compensate ..."

Picard's heart skipped a beat. "*No!* No transporters! Engage the tractor beam and pull her in."

"But it will take too long—"

"*No transporters*, Lieutenant! That's an order!"

"Aye, sir. Engaging tractor beam." Portugal answered. While the tiny escape pod was being drawn into a shuttle bay, he switched the viewer back to the Death Star where the second assault wave had just been blown to atoms. It was with a heavy sense of guilt that Picard realized he had ignored his fleet while they had been fighting and dying.

"Mister Portugal, engage the cloak as soon as you have the lifepod. Inform the fleet that we're going to try to enter the Death Star and destroy its main reactor from the inside. Continue the attack."

The fleet was doing just that. Even as Jaina's lifepod was being carefully tractored into the Tanaka's shuttle bay, the sheer volume of attackers was finally causing problems for the Death Star's defenses. The seams had been slightly widened by the carnage, and a massive cloud of drifting wreckage fell slowly toward the surface. It obscured the defenders' fields of fire and gave successive attackers a tiny but precious edge as they tried to slip through the seams and break through to the inside of the shield, where they could freely maneuver.

While Picard watched, a dozen huge Imperial transports lumbered through the widening gaps in the shield. Each transport was more than five kilometres long and could barely fit through the seams, but they were loaded with durasteel ingots and shield generators. Each transport acted as a blocker for dozens of small attack craft, surviving just long enough to give the small attack craft their window of opportunity to sneak through the breach and begin evasive maneuvers. Hundreds of small craft were now streaking down to the surface, to attack beneath the murderous cross-fire.

"The Death Star will be in firing position in one minute." the computer reported in its emotionless voice. The Death Star had also seized the ring station with long-range tractor beams, forcibly rotating it into a more convenient orientation.

"We've secured the life pod, sir. The occupant is alive and well." Portugal reported.

"Excellent. Engage the cloak and set course for the Death Star's main reactor. Full impulse!"

The Tanaka shimmered and disappeared, then raced toward the Death Star at breakneck speed. The tactical display seemed to show heavy static partially obscuring the Death Star.

"Lieutenant, try to clear up that interference." Picard ordered.

"Dear sweet Jesus ..." Portugal mumbled.

"What was that, Lieutenant?"

"I'm sorry, Captain. That isn't interference. That's about two hundred thousand fighters."

"Did you say ... *two hundred thousand*?" Picard asked incredulously. In all his time aboard the Obliterator, he had never once launched fighters— they would have been a waste of time against Borg cubes. The sheer numbers were staggering.

"Yes sir. Some from Kanos' fleet, and some from the Death Star. They're dogfighting inside the shield."

The cloaked Tanaka passed through the breach in the shield, and through the burning wreckage of a wrecked Carrack cruiser. Ships were darting back and forth over the

surface of the Death Star now, blasting away at the surface and desperately trying to evade the streams of defensive fire coming back up at them. But the Death Star was thickly, massively armoured, and many of its vital areas had their own protective shield systems. A thousand explosions bloomed on its surface, and he could see how badly its surface had been scarred by the superlaser and the subsequent attack. Flames belched from thousands of damaged and destroyed surface structures, and thousands of glowing craters pockmarked its surface. However, the battle station's sheer bulk was so vast that all of this destruction was *still* not enough. *This is taking far too much time*, Picard thought to himself.

"The Death Star will be in firing position in thirty seconds." the computer announced.

"We'll be entering the Death Star in five seconds." Portugal reported, just before an invisible force seized the ship. His fingers danced over the controls, but the ship was held firm.

"Lieutenant! What's happening?"

"Sir, we appear to be caught by the combination of a tractor beam and a repulsor beam. We're held fast. I guess the phase cloak isn't immune to tractor beams!" Portugal responded, with a slightly panicked tone in his voice. "The tractor and repulsor beam are pushing the structural integrity fields to the limit ... the hull can't take this for very long!"

"The Death Star will be in firing position in ten seconds." the computer announced.

Picard gripped his armrests in impotent rage as he watched the carnage on the screen. The fleet had lost a third of its ships, and they had failed utterly. The Death Star was almost in firing position. Jacen had won, and he would soon be free to engage his hyperdrive and escape. The handful of ships that had penetrated the shield could be destroyed at his leisure, and he could wait for his shield to completely regenerate before attacking Kanos again. The next time, without the Obliterator's superlaser at his disposal, Kanos wouldn't have a prayer. Jacen would be unstoppable.

The computer spoke again, in a cold, clinical voice which conveyed none of the importance of its message. "The Death Star is in firing position."

Aboard the Death Star, Tharde listened to the controller calmly make the familiar "commence primary ignition" announcement. The vast weaponry of the Death Star pulsed and surged with energy, and if he concentrated, he could almost *feel* the power throbbing and surging under his control. He held the firing switch tightly in his hands, and felt the familiar rush of almost sexual release as he pulled the trigger to unleash the massive streams of energy under his control.

Aboard the Crimson Blade, Kanos silently watched the energy beams erupt from the Death Star's dished main weapon and combine into a single beam. The blast disappeared silently into the wormhole as if it had never been, but he knew that it was all too real. It would soon emerge on the other side of the wormhole as a dispersed, diffuse flood of

energy, and it would destroy everything in its path. The bridge rocked from another direct hit, but he didn't even notice.

"It will probably wipe out everything on the other side, sir." Daron said quietly.

"I know, Captain. I know. Tell me, has the Death Star released its tractor beams on the ring station?"

"Yes, sir."

"Good. Contact ring station. Tell them to rotate axis until they're laying flat with respect to the Death Star again."

"Sir, what's the point? The damage is already done. The wormhole has been blasted, a third of our fleet is gone, and Jacen might as well pat himself on the back and leave."

"Maybe, but there's a slim chance that we can get the wormhole back if we can keep our side up and running. I have a feeling that he'll try to take out our ring station as soon as he can recharge his main weapon. We've got a couple of minutes at best, so tell the ring station operators to push the engines to maximum safe output." Kanos answered. He had never been so completely defeated before, and it was a terrifying, uncomfortable feeling. The fact that the enemy had overwhelmingly superior firepower didn't assuage his sense of failure at all. He sighed heavily before giving his next order. "Captain ... signal a general retreat."

"Sir?"

"You heard me, Captain. General retreat. We're not going to stop him this way."

"But what about the ships inside the shield?"

"They're on their own, Captain. But we have to move out of range before Jacen wipes out the rest of our fleet."

"Yes, sir. Signalling general retreat." Daron answered reluctantly.

Aboard the Death Star, Jacen basked in the glow of victory. He keyed a command sequence on the armpad of his chair to transmit his voice over an open channel.

"Jaina! Jaina, I know you can hear me. I was always better than you, dear sister. You should never have betrayed me." He waited patiently for her response. He didn't have to wait long.

Jaina's face appeared on his viewscreen. "Spare me your gloating, Jacen. And spare me your outrage. You betrayed *us!*"

"Still loyal to Anakin, eh sister? What about me? Am I not also your brother? Together, we could have ruled this pathetic little galaxy as brother and sister. Look at them! They are worthless! Puny fools who have no idea what power they could wield, if only they knew how! I can't believe you actually *consort* with them. I should crush that ridiculous little ship of yours, and you with it."

"Then do it!" she barked back. "I would prefer death to the sound of your droning voice."

Aboard the Tanaka, Picard had quietly retrieved the Stone of Gol while Jaina and Jacen had ranted at one another. He cradled it in his hands, but was struck by the sudden realization that he had no idea what to do with it. He knew how to use it against a man standing in front of him, but a disembodied voice transmitted via subspace radio was another matter entirely. He tapped his communicator. "Mister Laforge, how long will the structural integrity fields hold up?" he whispered.

"Two minutes at most, Captain. And when they give out, we'll be crushed like a tin can, phase-cloak or no phase-cloak." Laforge answered from Main Engineering.

"Acknowledged, Mister Laforge." Picard whispered. Jacen was now ranting about having chased Kanos away, and Portugal switched the viewscreen to show Kanos' fleet. He was horrified to see that it was indeed in full retreat, abandoning all of the ships inside the shield and fleeing at maximum speed.

"—and Kanos has now demonstrated his cowardice for all the galaxy to see!" Jacen boasted. "I could kill him, but I think I would rather see him live with his shame."

Jaina was furious. "This isn't between you and Kanos! It's between you and *me!*" she shouted.

Jacen began laughing now, a mocking, infuriating laugh that echoed through the ship. "And you've *lost*, dear sister. I have your ship in my grasp. I have scattered Kanos' fleet, and I've had the satisfaction of watching him run like the coward that he is. I have destroyed the wormhole and cut off your only link to our brother Anakin. And now, dear sister, I will have the pleasure of watching you die."

Chapter Nineteen: Last Man Standing

"The responsibility for a martial host of a million lies in one man. He is the trigger of its spirit." – Wu Ch'i

"She's not gonna hold together much longer, Captain!" Geordi shouted into his communicator. His expression told the whole story as he stared at his control panel. Every indicator was in the red zone, every alarm seemed to be flashing. Crewmen worked frantically to contain a leak behind him and the ship was starting to shake, its metallic frame singing a death song.

An ear-splitting alarm went off and an ensign working to his right swore. "God damn it! Junction twelve just blew out, sir ... it's gonna flood the whole compartment!"

"Close the isolation doors!" Geordi shouted. "We've got to contain it!"

"But sir, there are twenty crewmen in there!"

"You can't help them, ensign! Now close the doors! That's an *order*!" Geordi shouted back.

The young man stared at him and then complied. Geordi turned back to his panel, cringing inwardly at the thought of those crewmen trapped in the flooded compartment. The corrosive gas would dissolve the skin off their bodies. *Not the way I'd want to go*, he thought to himself.

The console showed the doors closing, but thankfully it didn't show a video feed of the crewmen trapped inside. The blaring alarm ceased and the ensign pounded his console in anger. "This shouldn't be happening, sir. Who the hell knew they could grab us with tractor and repulsor beams?"

"We *should* have known, ensign. They had all the time in the world to study that cloaking device."

"Then why don't we just drop the cloak, sir?"

"Not a good idea, ensign. They'll blow us to pieces the second we decloak. The only way out is to break free of those beams."

"But sir, it would take a miracle to— aw hell! We've got microfractures in the starboard nacelle strut! She's starting to give way!" A new barrage of alarms began to sound.

"We're gonna lose her in about thirty seconds if we can't break free of that tractor beam!" Geordi shouted over the noise. "Wait, I've got an idea!" he said, tapping his communicator. "Captain, I recommend we raise shields!"

"We're phase cloaked, Mister Laforge. Shields are irrelevant." Picard answered.

"Yes sir, but the shields might disperse some of the forces. That'll take some of the load off the integrity field, and the shield bubble has a bigger section modulus than the hull!" Laforge answered, his voice gaining urgency as the ship's impending destruction drew near.

"All right, Mister Laforge. Raising shields." Picard answered. After a delay which lasted a few seconds, the shaking began to subside.

The ensign was ecstatic. "It worked, sir! Hull stress indicators dropping below critical!"

"Yeah, but for how long?" Geordi muttered. He tapped his communicator again. "It worked, Captain! We've got a few more minutes, but that's assuming they don't just increase the power. I've got a feeling they're just toying with us, so I hope you can think of something fast!"

"So do I, Mister Laforge." Picard replied from the bridge. The bridge was quiet and calm, a stark contrast to main engineering. It could have been due to fatalism, misplaced optimism, or simply their training, but the crew was entirely businesslike and professional. Every one of them worked to deal with the damage and casualty reports, while others still reported regularly on the status of the battle. But although they did not betray a sense of panic, the shields were dropping at an alarming rate, and they knew they had only postponed the inevitable.

Jaina turned to face Picard, "Your engineer is right, Jean-Luc. Jacen is toying with us. He could destroy us at any time."

Picard nodded, and turned to face her. "Jaina ..." he began.

"I know, Jean-Luc. You tried your best." she said quietly. "But it's hopeless."

"You don't know that." he protested. "We can still try—"

"No." she said, tears welling up in her eyes. "It's over. You forget, Jean-Luc. I can see things before they happen. I'm going to die."

"I don't believe that!" Picard said firmly.

"It's true, Jean-Luc." she said, her voice cracking. "I'll never grow old, I'll never have a family—"

"Jaina, I—"

"My son will never be born ..."

"Jaina!" he shouted.

She looked around the bridge, suddenly aware that some of the crewmen were staring at her. They immediately turned back to their stations, leaving her and Picard looking at one another. "Jean-Luc," she said, trying to compose herself, "there's something I have to tell you ... before the end."

"It can wait." he said with a forced smile. "You can tell me *after* we break free."

On the bridge of the Crimson Blade, Admiral Kanos was furious. "How the hell did she end up on the Tanaka?"

"Picard picked her up before Search and Rescue could get to her, sir. We didn't realize what happened until now."

"What was he *thinking*? She would have been perfectly safe in the pod until Search and Rescue got her."

"I don't know, sir. Are we going to attempt a rescue?" Daron asked.

Kanos sighed heavily. "We don't have a choice, Captain. It's our duty. It looks like this is end-game."

"End game? What do you mean, sir?"

"I mean that a strategic retreat is no longer an option. Regroup and begin a new offensive. Protect the Tanaka at all costs."

"Admiral, I must protest. That's a suicide mission! Ring Station reports that they've still got some control over the wormhole, so this is our last chance to escape."

Kanos locked eyes with Daron. "Your objection is noted, Captain. And *if* we somehow survive the journey back home through a slowly destabilizing wormhole, perhaps *you* would like to tell the Emperor that we abandoned his sister to save our own lives."

Daron lowered his gaze and pulled at his collar, as if he could feel the cold, invisible noose of the Emperor around his throat already. "I see your point."

On the bridge of the Death Star, Tharde paced back and forth, occasionally stopping to look at the timer. Its glowing red symbols counted down until the primary weapon would be ready to fire again, but they counted far too slowly for his tastes. He clenched and unclenched his fists, staring at the timer as if he could *will* the timer into counting down faster.

A junior officer came running. "Sir," he exclaimed breathlessly, "Kanos' forces are attacking again!"

"Again? I thought we sent him packing. All right, put it on the main viewer."

Kanos' ships were indeed accelerating back toward the Death Star, taking casualties and firing as they approached. The shield breaches had grown and some of their blasts struck home, but it was too little, too late.

Tharde began to chuckle. "He just doesn't know when to quit, does he?" Dozens of Star Destroyers were reduced to molten slag, succumbing to the barrage from the Death Star's heavy guns. But despite their fearsome casualties, Kanos' ships kept coming.

"Sir, it looks like he plans to *enter* the shield with his heavy ships!"

Tharde sat forward, his interest piqued. "He's not kidding around this time, is he? Intensify firepower at the shield breach!" He watched with growing satisfaction as Star Destroyer after Star Destroyer attempted to enter the breach, only to be blasted to atoms. But as before, the drifting clouds of wreckage acted to obscure the gunners' line of fire, and one of the lumbering ships finally managed to break through.

"One ship is through, sir. Targeting—" the young officer was cut off by an explosion which shook the station and knocked him off his feet.

"Damage report!" Tharde bellowed, scrambling back to his feet.

"Sir, the ship jumped to hyperspace and *rammed* the station! Took out every turret and surface battery in a two kilometre radius, as well as one buried shield generator unit. But the heavy armour belt is still intact."

"I don't believe it ... can't we close that damned shield breach?" Tharde asked.

"No, sir! It's getting bigger ... Kanos' ships are still coming through ... brace for impact!" Another tremendous explosion rocked the station.

"He's insane ... he's trying to thin out our defenses," Tharde muttered in bewilderment, "but for what? He'll run out of ships before we run out of weapons."



Aboard the Tanaka, the crew watched the suicidal attack unfold.

"He's *really* pulling out all the stops now." Portugal said in awe.

"It's a rescue." Jaina said. "He has sworn to protect my life at all costs."

"Even if he has to sacrifice his entire fleet?" Picard asked in amazement.

"Yes." Jaina answered sheepishly.

"Sir, his ships are approaching our position!" Portugal reported. More than a hundred Star Destroyers converged on their location, taking horrific casualties as they approached. More than fifty ships were blown apart as they approached, and the survivors were belching flame and trailing debris.

"This is insanity! What do they hope to accomplish?" Picard asked. But the words were barely out of his mouth before a burning, badly damaged Star Destroyer passed right through the Tanaka. It slowed and stopped so that the cloaked ship was embedded in its bowels, and the Tanaka shuddered violently. It lurched forward as if the tractor and repulsor beams had been cut off, but it stopped again when the stricken Star Destroyer succumbed to a mercilessly intense turbolaser bombardment and disintegrated around them.

"Son of a bitch ..." Portugal swore. "Kanos' ships are trying to block the beams, sir! When the other ship passed through us, the Death Star tractor beams lost the lock!"

"But they regained the lock as soon as it was torn to pieces." Picard concluded.

Kanos began broadcasting on an open channel. "Admiral Kanos to USS Tanaka. Get out of there while you can! My ships will escort you out!"

"Admiral, save your men! It's not worth it!" Picard protested.

"Captain, my men are dying while we debate this. Get out of there. Now!" Kanos replied emphatically.

Picard bit off a reply, knowing that Kanos was duty-bound to sacrifice millions of men if necessary. "Damn it, get us out of here." he ordered.

The ship accelerated away from the maelstrom in fits and starts, as starship after starship sacrificed itself to buy time for their escape.

Picard tried to talk some sense into Kanos. "Admiral, I still have a mission to complete. I've got to enter the Death Star!"

"Captain, we tried your plan and it didn't work. Lady Jaina, I humbly request your permission to execute Operation Javelin."

Jaina's face fell. "I suppose we have no alternative. Permission granted, Admiral."

Picard waited until the channel was closed, and then asked the question on everyone's mind. "Jaina, what is Operation Javelin?"

Her eyes were downcast. "A weapon of last resort. No one knows about it but Kanos, Daron, and myself."

"Another superweapon?" Picard asked, wondering how many instruments of mass destruction the Empire had brought into his galaxy. "Where is it?"

"Believe it or not, it's been sitting right under your noses all this time." Jaina replied. "But it comes with a price. It's too bad ... I would have liked to see Coruscant one more time."

Aboard the Death Star, Tharde watched the incredibly costly rescue operation proceed. "He's throwing his men into the meat grinder just to save Jaina." he muttered in amazement.

The junior officer returned. "Sir, we've monitored some strange activity on the ring station. The energy readings are skyrocketing. It looks like they're going to lose containment on the energy stream soon."

"Good. That'll save us the trouble of destroying it for ourselves. We'll destroy Kanos' ship instead." Tharde answered smugly.

"But sir, the ring station is very similar to a giant particle accelerator."

"Yes, yes, I'm already aware of that, *lieutenant*."

"Its circumference is nearly four thousand kilometres."

"*Thank you* for the technical review, *lieutenant*." Tharde hissed with obvious annoyance. "I *hope* you have a point."

"Well, if they keep ramping up the power, they'll eventually lose containment of the energy stream. If that happens—"

"The station will be destroyed. The wormhole will completely destabilize. That's exactly what we were trying to accomplish, young man."

"Yes sir, but if they drop containment properly, they can control the direction of energy release."

Tharde threw his hands up. "Who cares? The wormhole would *still* destabilize. What would they accomplish by ..." Tharde's eyes widened and his voice trailed into silence.

"Sir, they can turn that station into a huge particle cannon. They'll only get one shot ..."

"But that's all they're going to need. Maker help us!" Tharde sputtered. He fumbled for his comlink and tried to contact Jacen.

Alone on the darkened overbridge, Jacen had begun to rant anew. "You'll never escape, dear sister! You can run, and you can hide behind your lackey Kanos, but there is no escape! I will destroy him, I will destroy his fleet, and I will hunt you down no matter where you go!" He shut off the transmission to answer Tharde's blinking signal.

"How *dare* you interrupt me in my moment of triumph?" he bellowed.

Tharde's holographic representation appeared before him. "Your Excellency, Admiral Kanos is attempting to—"

"Silence!" Jacen thundered. "I don't have time to waste on your petty concerns!"

"But my Lord," Tharde spluttered, glancing nervously at something out of the holocam's view, "he's going to attack us with the ring station."

"Fool! We are *invincible!*" Jacen roared. "Begone!" he shouted, shutting off the channel.

To Jacen's utter astonishment, the worthless bureaucrat actually had the temerity to re-open the channel. His holographic image appeared once more. "My Lord, *please!* We must—"

"How *dare* you defy me!" Jacen screamed. "You have made your last mistake, fool!" he thundered, as Tharde began to clutch at his throat. He crushed the life out of the Grand Moff in seconds, then he turned his attention back to Jaina. He tried to reach out with the Force to feel her fear again, but something nagged at the back of his mind. *What was that idiot Tharde talking about?*

Millions of kilometres away, the ring station was reaching overload level.

"The javelin is ready, Admiral." the ring station commander reported.

"Commander Kinan, may your aim be true. Fire." Kanos ordered.

Seconds later, a precisely controlled forcefield shutdown released the station's enormous payload. The gargantuan energy stream obliterated a section of the ring's outer wall, and shot out in one long, cohesive line toward the Death Star.

"Only six microradians off, Admiral." Daron exclaimed with a gleam in his eye. "We've got him!"

On the Death Star's overbridge, Jacen *felt* the threat, rather than seeing it. He saw a blindingly bright white line in his mind, drawing itself between the distant ring station and his Death Star, and he saw what would happen when it struck home. His eyes snapped open. "No ..." he whispered.

Aboard the swarms of Federation and Imperial ships battling for supremacy around

the Death Star, they all picked up the approaching threat. Hundreds of starship captains screamed orders for their helmsmen to get away from the path of the incinerating beam. They had mere seconds to act, and for many of them, it wasn't enough. Hundreds of starships and fighters were caught in the path of the beam and disappeared as if they had never been. It plunged through the breach in the shield, through the warring ships, and into the surface with a cataclysmic impact.

Millions of Death Star crewmen died instantly as the beam carved out an enormous hole, blasting its way hundreds of kilometres deep into the Death Star's innards. A vast plume of vapourized metal and white-hot debris shot away from the impact crater, obliterating everything in its path. The widespread destruction caused systems to overload and fail all over the entire battle station, and in an instant, the crew of the Death Star went from a calmly conducted textbook defense to a desperate struggle for survival. It was all they could do to control the station's massive machinery and keep it from self-destructing.

"Kanos!" Jacen screamed amid the chaos of the overbridge as wreckage fell from the ceiling and flames rose around him. "I will *destroy* you!" He contacted the bridge. He couldn't remember the name of Tharde's second in command, but that hardly mattered. "Commander, target the Crimson Blade with the superlaser."

"My Lord, that is impossible. Primary weapon control is inoperative. The superlaser array has been heavily damaged. The shield is down, and propulsion control is out! The whole power grid is fluctuating— we can't maintain defensive fire." The terrified officer saw bank after bank of turbolaser turrets and batteries going silent on his status displays, and the tactical display showed that the surviving attackers were now free to wreak havoc on what remained of the battered space station.

Jacen raged at him. "We've lost our ability to fight? How *dare* you fail me?"

"My Lord, there is too much damage— urgh ..." the unfortunate officer's words trailed away to a death rattle in his throat, as the invisible grip of the Force crushed the man's windpipe. Jacen roared in frustration and lashed out again with the Force, uprooting everything in the overbridge and scattering it about the room like leaves before a hurricane. When he regained control of his anger, he turned to the door and casually noted that the guards had been killed by the flying debris. He casually deflected a falling girder, stepped over their broken bodies, and with a flare of blue lightning from his fingertips, tore the door to pieces. He stalked through the ruined door and into the hallway beyond, his eyes glowing fiercely.

Aboard the *Tanaka*, Picard watched the carnage with a mixture of elation and horror. "We're free! Turn us around, and set a course for the Death Star's main reactor. Best possible speed." he ordered.

"Jean-Luc, *no!*" Jaina exclaimed. "The Death Star is doomed, but Jacen is the *real* threat— we must stop him when he tries to escape."

"But now we can destroy the Death Star." Picard protested.

"The fleet will do that for us, Jean-Luc. Look." she said, pointing at the viewscreen. Indeed, Kanos' fleet was now attacking with the defenseless Death Star with renewed vigour. Salvo after salvo plunged into the Death Star's unprotected surface, many striking deep within the gaping hole and destroying the exposed equipment therein. All of the light attack craft which had survived the initial blast were now flying into the hole, blasting away at obstructions and wending their way through the superstructure toward the reactor core.

"Yes, but we can destroy it faster than they can, and with fewer casualties."

"And if Jacen escapes, all of this will be for nothing. We *must* stop him, Jean-Luc."

"All right," Picard agreed, "but how are we going to find him?" The viewscreen showed thousands of ships pouring out of the Death Star, as its crew abandoned the doomed battle station for the relative safety of deep space. "He could be on *any* of those ships."

"Look for a two hundred metre long space yacht." Jaina replied.

The Tanaka's sensors swept through the horde of escaping starships for what seemed to be a very long time, before Portugal reported success. "Captain, I'm picking up a space yacht. It fits the tactical profile of Jacen's personal ship."

"Lay in a pursuit course." Picard ordered. The Tanaka decloaked and accelerated toward the sleek luxury starship.

"We're gaining on him, sir." the helmsman reported.

"Good. Jaina, what kind of weaponry does Jacen have on that ship?" Picard asked.

"I wish I'd paid more attention when he used to talk about his ship. I know he's got some weapons, but I'm not sure what type." Jaina replied apologetically. "But it's not a warship. It's just a modified space yacht. My father helped him modify it. They used to stay up all night ... Chewbacca would sometimes help ..." her voice trailed off, as she thought of better times.

"We're coming in weapons range, Captain." Portugal reported.

"Target his engines and prepare to fire—"

"*No!*" Jaina exclaimed. "He's not on that ship. It's a decoy. If he were on board, I would have felt him by now."

"Great." Portugal grumbled. "*Now* what do we do?"

Jaina closed her eyes. "He's on an unmarked transport." she whispered. He's surrounded by hundreds of ... hundreds of ... *children*."

"Of course. His trainees."

"He's running away ... running ... toward the wormhole." Jaina whispered, her eyes still closed.

"I've got him, Captain." Portugal reported. "One transport has broken away from the others. It's headed toward the wormhole." A blocky, nondescript starship accelerated toward the distant ring station, now cold and dark.

"Shouldn't he know that the wormhole is unsafe? Are you *sure* he's on that ship?"

"I'm sure, Jean-Luc."

"Very well. Helm, lay in an intercept course. Full impulse." Picard ordered. The Tanaka gave chase to the new contact, closing rapidly on the sluggish transport.

"Coming in weapons range now, Captain." Portugal reported.

"Target his engines and fire phasers." Picard ordered.

"Firing." Phaser beams lanced out from the Tanaka's forward array and struck the transport's shields. There was no return fire.

"Keep firing, lieutenant. But remember— he has hundreds of innocent children on board. Be careful."

Portugal nodded and continued the attack. Phaser beams played over the transport's shields until they collapsed. The ship's engines were disabled in short order.

"The ship is disabled, Captain."

"Helm, come alongside and match speeds. Transport those children aboard." Picard ordered.

"I can't get a transporter lock, sir. He's running some sort of interference field."

"Mister Portugal, can you disable it?"

"Only at the risk of destroying the ship, Captain."

Picard grimaced. "All right, open a channel." Picard ordered. He adopted his most commanding tone of voice. "Jacen, your ship is disabled. You cannot escape. Surrender and prepare to be boarded, and you will receive a fair trial."

The sound of laughter could be heard as Jacen responded. "A fair trial? Don't waste my time, Captain. I don't need your help, or your empty promises. I have four hundred hostages. You will surrender *your* vessel. You will lower your shields and allow me to board *your* ship. And if you do not comply, I will kill the children one by one."

On the bridge of the Crimson Blade, the enemy's exposed throat seemed to energize the crew. Most of them had all but forgotten the fact that they were now stranded in this galaxy, so eager were they to strike the crippled Death Star and its defenders. The fleet had inflicted a punishing assault upon the traitors, and the end was near.

"Admiral, the Death Star's main reactor is going critical!" Daron reported.

"I thought our ships hadn't reached the reactor chamber yet." Kanos replied.

"They haven't. But it looks like the reaction is out of control. Must be all the damage. It could go any second!"

"Get us to minimum safe distance. Flank speed." Kanos ordered. "Where is Jaina?"

"She's still on Picard's ship, but he's staying well out of range."

"Good." Kanos replied. He walked over to a communications panel and opened a channel. "This is Admiral Kanos to all Imperial ships. The Death Star's main reactor is destabilizing. Retreat to minimum safe distance immediately. Repeat, retreat to minimum safe distance immediately."

Swarms of fighters, cruisers, destroyers and battleships responded to the warning. Ships on both sides, cognizant of the immediate danger to their mutual survival, temporarily suspended their struggle in their flight to safety. In their wake, desperate Death Star reactor control technicians struggled with their damaged equipment. Success would mean another minute of survival, and perhaps more, but failure would mean vapourization. They didn't even notice the passage of time until it began to occur to them that they had survived for longer than they expected to. Incredibly, some of the reactor core readings were actually stabilizing, and it looked like they would be able to successfully throttle it back to a safe level.

Kanos observed the retreating ships, until most of the combatant vessels were safely out of range. "Captain, may I assume that your ships successfully disabled Jacen's ship?"

"Yes, sir. One of our strike cruisers disabled his yacht. Shall we board it?"

"No, not yet. He's too dangerous. We'll keep him bottled up in his ship until we decide what to do with him."

"Yes, sir."

"Um, Captain ..."

"Sir?"


"Why hasn't the Death Star exploded yet?"

Daron cleared his throat uncomfortably. "I don't understand, sir. They must have somehow brought it back from the brink."

"Either that, or it was a ruse." Kanos mused.

"Shall we attack?"

"No. Tharde might be willing to surrender." He gestured to one of the communications officers, who opened a channel. He cleared his throat. "This is Admiral Kanos to Grand Moff Tharde. We have destroyed your defenses and weakened your forces. It is time to discuss terms of your surrender."



On the bridge of the Tanaka, the horrified crew saw the body of a small boy float out of the airlock of Jacen's transport.

"All right!" Picard cried hastily. "We will do as you ask! We will drop our shields, and we will allow you to board the Tanaka. We have disabled all intruder control systems, we have blocked command access from anywhere but the main bridge, and we have placed the transporter system into a diagnostic cycle. It cannot be used for three hours."

"You cannot deceive me, Picard. Disable *all* of your transporter systems, not just your primaries."

Damned telepaths! Picard frowned and then nodded at Portugal to proceed. "Very well, we will disable our cargo bay and shuttle transporter systems."

"Do *not* attempt to deceive me again." Jacen's shuttle soon made the short trip from the transport to the Tanaka's shuttle bay, and it eased down onto the hard metal deck. The ramp opened, and Jacen strode out confidently to face a squad of Starfleet marines.

He smiled. "A welcoming party ... very good. Take me to the bridge." The marines silently parted to let him through, though their weapons remained trained on him with nervous fingers tensing on the triggers.

On the bridge, Portugal noted Jacen's arrival. "Jacen is on his way, Captain."

Picard's new first officer was distinctly uncomfortable with the situation. "Are you sure this is a good idea? If the reports are true, this man is extremely dangerous." he

asked.

"Jaina feels she can handle him, Number One." Picard answered. If it had been Riker, he might have told him about the Stone of Gol. But this man had supposedly been picked at random, and he didn't feel entirely comfortable with him. The Stone would have to remain hidden for now.

The doors to the turbolift slid open, and Jacen walked onto the bridge. He betrayed no concern about the dozens of phasers aimed at him, and he seemed to exude a sense of power and confidence that everyone could feel the moment he entered.

"What do you want with my ship, Jacen?" Picard asked loudly, hiding the Stone of Gol behind his back.

"Do not address your Lord and Master in that tone!" Jacen roared. Picard felt a sensation like icy cold fingers around his throat and he collapsed to his knees, gasping for breath. The Stone of Gol fell to the floor as his hands involuntarily went to his neck in an instinctive attempt to remove the suffocating grip. Black spots clouded his vision, and he could see that the rest of the bridge crew was similarly stricken. The marines died almost immediately, their necks snapped like twigs. Jacen had apparently reserved a slower death for the rest.

Lieutenant Portugal somehow managed to draw his phaser, and with shaking hands, he fired a shot at the glowering Sith warrior. Jacen seemed to anticipate the attack, and his hand was already moving upward when the weapon was fired. The blast ricocheted off his hand and directly back toward Portugal, striking him squarely in the chest. Portugal fell with a look of disbelief frozen on his face.

Even before Portugal's body hit the floor, Jaina was already lunging at Jacen with a lightning-quick motion of her lightsabre. He produced his own lightsabre from inside his cloak, jumped back and parried her thrust at the last instant. Brother and sister eyed each other warily, their humming lightsabres between them.

"I have no use for those underlings," Jacen said, as he effortlessly squeezed the life out of the rest of the bridge crew, "but I will spare these two." He raised his hand in a mock gesture of magnanimity as he released his suffocating grip on Picard and Counsellor Troi. "So they can watch you die."

Picard sucked precious air into his lungs, and he had enough presence of mind to wave off Troi before she attempted anything foolish. He massaged his throat and crept toward the Stone of Gol, still laying on the floor.

Jaina looked at her brother, and saw nothing but single-minded blood lust. She had seen him angry before, and she had seen him prepare for combat. But this was different—he had changed somehow, and she knew that his powers had grown. She didn't know whether it was some Dark Side sorcery or some unspeakable horror he had unleashed upon his kidnapped infant students, but he had gained new strength from somewhere, and

this was not the same man she expected to see. She tried to focus her thoughts.

"What? Nothing to say, dear sister?"

"Not yet." Jaina replied defiantly, as she lunged toward him again. Their blades met, and they began duelling in earnest.

Picard picked up the Stone of Gol and turned toward the duelling siblings in triumph, but the two fought so furiously that he couldn't get a clear shot. "Jaina, get out of the way!" he cried.

Both combatants ignored him, and they continued to fight. But Jaina was weakening by the moment. With each slash, lunge and parry, she seemed to wilt a bit more, and Jacen's strength seemed to grow. He pressed and she retreated, still fighting valiantly. But Picard could see that her strength was waning, and cursed beneath his breath. He had a white-knuckled grip on the Stone of Gol, but he was powerless to help her.

"You are weak, Jaina. Your power is fading."

Jaina said nothing, as she desperately blocked a series of vicious attacks. She began to falter, and fell back again. Jacen was pressing his advantage to the hilt. He commenced a furious attack, raining blow after blow down on his wilting sister. She staggered backward again, and found herself with her back to the wall.

"Jaina, get away from him!" Picard pleaded, but she had nowhere to go.

She knew the danger she faced, and in desperation, she gathered her strength and charged at him. But he avoided her thrust effortlessly, and she overextended herself. His counterstrike caught her in the side, and she collapsed to the ground with a shriek of pain.

"No!" Picard screamed. In an unthinking rage he unleashed the Stone of Gol, and the ancient psionic weapon conjured up a nightmarish glowing spectre. Jacen put out his hand and his skin seemed to crawl with blue lightning, but the luminescent cloud swept through him unabated. It lifted him off his feet and hurled him against the wall with a heavy thump, and then the Sith lord fell to the floor and lay still.

"Medical emergency!" Picard barked into his communicator as he rushed to Jaina's prone form. Her eyes fluttered open and she tried to speak.

"Jean-Luc ..." she gasped. Dark, almost black blood oozed from her side, and he knew that she was seriously, perhaps mortally wounded. Troi picked up Jacen's lightsabre and gave it to him.

"Jacen is dead." he said, brandishing Jacen's lightsabre for her to see. "Everything will be all right. Help is on the way." he assured her. Her blood was on his hands, and tears streamed down his face as he tried to staunch the flow from her wounded midsection.

"How ..."

"A psionic weapon. It's right here," he said, holding it up and letting her see it. He never did know if she saw it, because her eyes were already closed. He felt her go limp in his arms, and he gingerly laid her down on the floor. He didn't even notice Troi stiffening in terror beside him.

"Captain!" Troi cried in a panicked voice.

Picard looked up, only to see the Stone of Gol leap off the floor and fly through the air. He watched in horror as it flew directly into an outstretched black-gloved hand. Jacen slowly stood up, and Picard felt a sickening sense of dread. The weakened Sith Lord stood unsteadily and leaned against a wall, but he was very much alive.

"The next time ... you try to kill a Sith Lord," Jacen sneered, seeming to gain strength by the second, "make sure you finish the job."

Counsellor Troi pressed the lightsabre into Picard's hand. He activated the weapon and its humming blade shot forth. "I can fix that mistake." he said with a forced show of confidence.

Jacen was unimpressed by Picard's display of bravado or the sight of his own lightsabre. He examined the Stone of Gol in his hands. "I see you have a primitive Dark Side weapon. Impressive." He aimed the weapon at Counsellor Troi, and a wave of psionic energy appeared between them. She barely had time to scream before it swept through her and completely disintegrated her body. "*Most* impressive."

"Monster!" Picard shouted, advancing toward Jacen. It had taken mere seconds for Jacen to learn the inner workings of the Stone of Gol, and make it more powerful than he thought possible. He pushed aside a growing sense of terror and brandished the lightsabre, but it was abruptly ripped from his hand. Picard's expression changed to one of grim resignation as he watched the lightsabre glide through the air and land firmly in Jacen's palm.

"Fool." Jacen sneered, walking confidently forward. "You don't know the power you face." He strolled toward a hidden hatch in the floor and abruptly plunged the lightsabre's glowing blade through the hatch. Picard heard bloodcurdling screams and clenched his fists in impotent rage as Jacen plucked a thermal detonator from his belt and dropped it down the hole. The ensuing blast made the entire deck shake, and the screaming stopped. "And *they* shouldn't have tried to interfere."

"That wasn't necessary." Picard growled from between clenched teeth.

"I know." Jacen said with a smile. "Now, take us into the wormhole."

"No."

"Fool. You aren't indispensable. I don't need you to take control of this ship."

"Your overconfidence is your weakness. I have locked out the ship's computer, and only I know the code."

Jacen smiled, and addressed the computer. "Computer, override command lockout. Authorization code Jacen, omega five five nine." The computer processed the instruction briefly, and then the bridge consoles became alive with activity. System after system reinitialized itself, and the bridge was fully functional again. His smile grew even wider, and he continued. "Computer, restrict system access to Imperial personnel."

"Access now restricted to Imperial command level personnel." the computer reported.

Jacen swung his lightsabre at Picard again, and Picard hastily jumped out of the way. "Now you see. Did you *really* think Kanos would give you control? Your ship's computer was reprogrammed when it was in our custody. Your command access was an illusion. On this ship, root privilege is reserved for the Empire."

Jacen advanced toward Picard, swinging his lightsabre casually at him. Picard leapt back, barely avoiding several slashes.

"Then why didn't you take control of the ship remotely? Why board my ship?" Picard asked, silently cursing Kanos for not having trusted him.

Jacen's eyes gleamed. "Fool. I had to kill my traitorous wench sister, and I wanted you to watch."

"You can't escape, and the wormhole is unstable. Your allies are gone, and Kanos will kill you at the first opportunity. If you think you can escape, you're insane."

"And you're stalling for time, Picard. Here," he said, gesturing toward one of the bodies strewn about the deck. A hand phaser leapt from the corpse's hand and flew toward Picard, who caught it. "Now you have a weapon. *Try* to die like a man."

Picard held the phaser in his hand, and considered his options. It didn't take him long to come to a decision. "I won't give you the satisfaction." Picard said, dropping his arms to his side and letting the phaser fall to the floor. "You can kill me if you want, but I *won't* perform in your game."

"Very well, then. So be it." Jacen snarled. He raised his lightsabre over his head, and Picard tensed in anticipation of the death blow. But there was a loud popping sound, and Jacen stopped dead in his tracks. His eyes bulged, and he looked down in disbelief. The tip of a glowing lightsabre blade protruded from his chest, and Picard saw that Jaina had somehow struggled to her knees and run him through from behind. Brother and sister remained frozen in place for a few seconds, and then both collapsed to the deck.

Picard was not one to make the same mistake twice. He picked up the phaser, set it to

maximum power, and fired it point-blank at Jacen's body. The corpse disintegrated completely, and he heaved a sigh of relief. The turbolift doors snapped open, and he realized that Jacen must have been holding them closed somehow. Doctor Crusher and some of her staff came running out, and they went to examine the dead and wounded. Crusher ran directly to Jaina, while the rest of the medics checked the rest of the bodies for life signs.

"How is she, Doctor?"


"She's been very seriously wounded, Captain. The wound is very deep, and her liver has been partially disintegrated."

"Can you save her?" Picard asked, his voice quivering.

Doctor Crusher couldn't look him in the eyes, and shook her head. "Jean-Luc, I don't even understand why she's still alive. These wounds should be fatal." She continued to work, and swept her tricorder over Jaina's abdomen. She stopped, double-checked her readings, and her eyes widened. She tapped her communicator badge. "Doctor Crusher to sickbay, prepare for emergency surgery."

"Doctor, what's happening?"

"Captain, this woman is pregnant."



Commander Riker looked at the alien display system in front of him. "Admiral, the Death Star has signalled its surrender."

Ruk's new rank insignia was still shiny, and it would take some time to get used to the title of Admiral. But as the architect of the new Rebel Alliance and the only one who had ever fought Kanos and lived, Ruk was the logical choice to command the fleet. He leaned forward in his chair. "Damn him. I was hoping they would destroy each other. Report status of Kanos' fleet."

"He's down to roughly a thousand capships, many of which have suffered serious damage or shield depletion."

"What about fighters?"

"It's hard to get an accurate count. I think we're looking at around fifty thousand."

"Death Star defenses?"

"Hard to say. The Death Star power grid is fluctuating and its defensive systems are powering up and down randomly."

"Ring station?"

"A few hundred turrets, nothing else. But the station's shield is at full strength."

"All right. We'll move the fleet in closer, and try to get targeting solutions—"

"Captain, the Romulan ships are breaking formation!" one of the tactical officers exclaimed.

"What? Contact the Romulan fleet commander. Tell him to get back into formation immediately."

"They are ignoring hails, sir. They've gone to warp."

Captain Ruk swore loudly, in an incomprehensible jibberish language that was apparently not in the universal translator's database. He pounded his armrest in frustration and then calmed himself. "Fools! Vengeful fools! Well Commander, it looks like your Romulan friends are hungry for vengeance."

"So what do you plan to do?"

"What *can* I do? I was hoping that only one side would survive. We don't have enough ships to destroy Kanos' fleet and the Death Star at the same time."

"Admiral, the Romulans are the heavy hitters of our fleet." Riker gently reminded him. Many of the other governments had officially allied themselves with the Empire for fear of reprisals, but the Romulans had thrown themselves wholeheartedly into the cause. Thus, their ships comprised more than a third of the fleet, and more than half of the firepower.

"Yes, they are." Ruk agreed. "I take it you think we should back them up?"

"We can't destroy both Kanos and the Death Star, but we *can* destroy the Death Star itself. Its defenses are down. This will be our only chance, Admiral."

"Maybe, but we'll probably all be destroyed in the process. Blaze of glory, eh Riker?"

"Admiral, the Klingons have a saying: Today is a good day to die."

Ruk smiled. "Riker, you would have made a fine rebel. You're a madman, but you would have made a fine rebel nonetheless. I think perhaps I've been running from Kanos for long enough." He flipped on his voice transmitter. "All ships, go to battle stations. Repeat, all ships, battle stations. Set nav co-ordinates for the Death Star and jump to hyperspace on my mark." He flipped off the transmission and turned to Riker again. "It's time we finished this."

Chapter Twenty: Closing the Circle

Captain Picard ran to keep up with the medical team as they rushed to sickbay. "Doctor, how long?" he asked.

"We'll do the best we can." Crusher mumbled absent-mindedly. She was completely absorbed in her patient's situation, and Picard's question had barely registered.

"Beverly!" he said loudly, to get her attention. "How long has she been pregnant?"

"It's hard to be precise ..." she began, clearly still concentrating on her patient, "but it's *very* early. Maybe a month, maybe less. She probably didn't even know yet." she answered tersely, as they reached sickbay. As soon as she entered, she began barking orders to her staff, which was already preparing to operate.

Picard followed her into sickbay and watched from a distance as her team jumped into action. *Maybe a month, maybe less ...* he thought to himself. "That sounds just about right." he whispered, so quietly that none could hear.

Daron presented a datapad to Admiral Kanos. "Admiral, the evacuation of the Death Star is proceeding on schedule. Approximately seventy percent of the nonessential personnel are already out, and the rest are in the process of boarding transports and lifeboats."

"Good. With any luck, we'll be able to repopulate the station once they get everything under control. Report status of Death Star main reactor."

"Half the control systems are inoperative, sir. They kept it from cooking off by throttling back to minimum idling power, but there's still too much damage. It could go at any time. The station has minimal propulsion and a handful of working defense grids but that's it."

"What about hyperdrive?"

"It's shot. At best, it will take weeks to get it running again. They're not even working on it, because the reactor and defensive systems have priority."

"Of course. So we're down to a thousand ships, a dead ring station, and a Death Star that's so badly damaged that it's more of a target than a threat."

"We've also got the World Devastator, and a hundred or so Fed ships, sir."

"Oh yes, I almost forgot about that. But I still don't like it. That planet smasher won't be useful until it chews through a good sized planetoid, and we don't have time to wait."

The Fed ships might come in handy, but I have doubts about their loyalty. We're pretty damned vulnerable, and we've made more than our share of enemies."

"Yes, sir. But the situation isn't that bad. The locations of major threat forces are known, and there are none close enough to threaten us. We should be able to get the Death Star situation under control before anyone can get here."

"Before anyone we *know* of can get here" Kanos corrected him. "Increase fighter patrol density around the Death Star. What about the wormhole?"

"I'm afraid we can write it off, sir. Ring station reports that it's gone unstable. The other end lost its anchor so it's flailing around wildly in spacetime, and this end is already starting to contract. The whole thing is shrinking and it will eventually disappear."

"Wonderful. So what happens if we go in there?"

"Sir, we might get crushed or torn apart if it closes on us before we can reach the other end. We would have to leave the Death Star behind because the wormhole is already too small. And since the other end is moving around in spacetime, we could end up anywhere. The wrong galaxy, a billion years too early or too late, the middle of a black hole cluster or a quasar ..."

"Thank you, Captain. I get the picture. So, we're stranded here."

"They're still working on it, sir."

"But there's no way of telling how long it might take to re-establish a connection, or whether they can do it at all. No, Captain, we shouldn't raise false hopes."

"Are you going to address the men, sir?"

Kanos sighed heavily. "Yes. They have the right to know."

"So ... what's the plan for the future, sir?"

Kanos thought about that for a moment. "We stay with the original plan. We were about to fortify our beach head and assimilate Federation assets, and that's still the best course of action. We need to build a base of power in this galaxy from which to operate. Contact Jaina. I take it you've been keeping an eye on her, and her ship is still intact?"

"Yes, sir. The Tanaka stayed well out of range the whole time."


"Good. While we're waiting for her to contact us, we still have her brother to deal with. We may have Jacen bottled up on his yacht, but we should be careful not to underestimate him."

"Shall we destroy the yacht, sir?"

"No. We've got to make sure he's in there. Use assault shuttles to board the yacht, and have them send camera droids inside. As soon as they get verification that he's on board, pull them back and then destroy the ship."

"Yes, sir." Daron replied, before walking away to execute the orders.

Kanos settled down to compose his address to the troops, but he couldn't escape an uncomfortable sense of foreboding. His forces were extremely vulnerable right now, and he couldn't help but feel that someone would show up to take advantage.



Aboard the Tanaka, Picard had returned to the bridge. The bodies had been cleared away, new officers had taken the places of the dead, and Geordi was delivering the bad news. "Captain, we've tried everything in the book. We just *can't* break through the command lockout. We have no helm control, no weapon control, no shield control, no transporters, no sensors ... we don't even have any external communications."

Picard grimaced. "That is unacceptable, Mister Laforge. Have you tried shutting down the computer and restarting it?"

"Yes, sir. However, the command lockout extends to maintenance functions. We can't restart the computer."

"There's too much automation on the new ships." Picard grumbled. "This wouldn't have been a problem on the Stargazer. We would have gone to manual override from Main Engineering."

"Unfortunately sir, we don't have that option."

"What options *do* we have?" Picard asked irritably.

"Well sir, we could simply wait. You said that Imperial officers have root access, so Kanos figures out something is wrong, he'll probably try to override our control systems remotely. He can break the lockout for us."

"I'm afraid that won't be good enough, Mister Laforge. The situation is worse than you realize. If we don't have helm control, we have less than ten minutes to break the command lockout. We can't assume that Kanos will try to contact us before then."

"Ten minutes, sir? Why the time limit?"

"Because in ten minutes, we're going to fly into that wormhole."

"Sir? But why—"

"We knocked out the transport's engines and left it coasting through space. Then we matched speeds with it, before Jacen boarded the ship and locked out the computer."

"Oh my God ... since the transport was still coasting toward the wormhole ..." Geordi began.

"We're *also* coasting toward the wormhole. And without helm control, we can't change course or slow down."

"But the wormhole is destabilizing!"

"Exactly, Mister Laforge." Picard said in measured tones which belied the gravity of the situation. "You now have nine and a half minutes. Dismissed!"

"Yes, sir." Laforge saluted and immediately sprinted out of the room, tapping his communicator and barking instructions down to Main Engineering as he ran.

Picard tapped his communicator. "Captain Picard to sickbay. Doctor, how is your patient?" he asked.

"She *should* be dead, Captain. We've detected some kind of psionic energy in her body. It's keeping her and the baby alive, but I don't know where it's coming from or how long it's going to last. We've got to remove the fetus and put it in stasis until we can find a suitable surrogate mother."

"So they're both alive?"

"For now, Captain."



"Jacen's not on the ship." Captain Daron reported glumly.

"Are you sure?"

"The camera droids couldn't find anything, so we sent stormtroopers in there. They searched the ship from bow to stern and came up empty. Nobody but the pilot."

Kanos' jaw set. "Damn." he said quietly. "So we've lost him."

"Maybe he was killed in the attack, sir."

"I don't think so, Captain. If he was killed, then who gave the pilot the access codes? That yacht has more booby traps and security measures than a class one design facility."

"So he must have given out the codes, and then he must have left on a *different* ship."

"Exactly."

"One of the transports?"

"Presumably. But there are thousands of transports, and no way to figure out which one he's on. We could try interrogating the pilot, but he might not know. Unless ..."
Kanos paused as if struck by a revelation.

"Sir?"

"Didn't you say that the Tanaka pursued and disabled one of the transports?"

"Yes sir." Daron replied with a gleam in his eye. He turned to one of the communications officers. "Contact Jaina immediately."


Before the officer could send the transmission, one of the sensor operators sounded an alarm. "Unidentified ships dropping out of hyperspace at the edge of the interdiction field!"

Kanos sat bolt upright. "I *knew* we were too vulnerable." he growled. "Battle stations! Protect the Death Star at all costs!"

The remnants of the Imperial fleet immediately moved to block the attackers, and the fighters swiftly raced toward them like a swarm of angry insects. However, the Federation ships separated themselves from the rest of the fleet and began moving away.

"The federation ships are ignoring the order, Admiral."

"I'm shocked." Kanos said sarcastically. "One warning, Captain. Give them one warning."



Aboard Admiral Ruk's cruiser, Commander Riker stood at one of the weapons control stations. "We got here ahead of the Romulans, sir. I don't think we gave them enough of a head start. We're also a little off course. The Death Star is at roughly three ten degrees mark thirty five."

"We're not off course." Ruk replied. "I held a conference with the subgroup commanders and we revised the plan while we were waiting to time the jump."

"What were these ... revisions?" Riker asked warily.

"Commander, Kanos has been evacuating the Death Star because it is dangerously unstable. There are *thousands* of transports and lifeboats massing directly ahead of us. All full of soldiers and techs who are crucial to his war effort." He flipped on his transmitter. "This is Admiral Ruk to the fleet. All fighters stay in formation until the

Romulans arrive. All capital ships are to target the transports and lifeboats."

Riker wore a look of confusion. "Transports and lifeboats? Is this your idea of a diversion?"

"Who said anything about a diversion? We're *destroying* them." Ruk replied, as if it was the most obvious thing in the world. "The Romulans will undoubtedly drop out of warp heading straight for the Death Star, so they can support the other half of this attack when they arrive. In the meantime, we will commence the destruction of the transports and lifeboats."

Riker's expression hardened. "Why wasn't I told about this?"

"You had the conn while I was in conference with the others. This revision was drawn up at the last minute when we realized he was evacuating the Death Star, so we didn't have time to tell you. For what it's worth, I apologize."

"Those transports— are they armed?"

"That's the best part. They're emergency evacuation transports. They have shields, but no weapons or hyperdrives. They'll be easy pickings."

"So they're helpless. Admiral, you're talking about killing millions of defenseless human beings!" Riker protested heatedly.

"No, I'm talking about eliminating part of the enemy's infrastructure." Ruk growled. "Defenseless or not, they're legitimate *strategic targets*. By attacking them, we guarantee positive results for this battle even if we fail to destroy the Death Star. They represent maximum damage for minimum risk. Standard military doctrine, Riker."

"Maybe in *your* military, but *not* mine. This goes against all recognized humanitarian conventions of war. Human beings haven't been this savage since our twentieth century!" Riker insisted adamantly.

"Don't be ridiculous, Riker. The Empire doesn't observe these conventions of yours. Why should we? Why should anyone?"

"Because otherwise, we're no better than they are. We should be capturing them, not slaughtering them."

"And I would love to capture them, but we don't have the time or resources." Ruk replied, clearly wearying of the discussion. "We've got to hit them hard and then get out while we're still able. And speaking of time, we'll be in range soon. We don't have time to debate this." Ruk replied.

"So we should debate it *after* you murder millions of unarmed people? What are you going to do, destroy those transports and then ask everyone if they thought it was a good

idea? And what do you think the Federation ships in this fleet will do? Do you think they'll fire on unarmed transports, just because you order them to?"

Ruk was obviously irritated. "Maybe I was wrong about you being a good rebel, Riker. You still don't get it, do you? We're *guerilla fighters!* We have no industrial base, and precious few resources. Victories will be difficult enough to come by without worrying about your delicate sense of ethics. If the other Federation officers are smart, they'll follow orders. And if you can't deal with that, you can consider yourself relieved of duty *right now!*"

Riker stared at him, then raised his head and stood ramrod-straight. "I won't be an accomplice to this crime, Admiral. You'll have to find yourself another commander." He swivelled on his heels and stalked off the bridge.

Ruk stared after him in disbelief for a few seconds and then shrugged his shoulders. He swivelled his chair to face one of the other officers. "Pollus, you're the new first officer. Target the big ones first." he ordered.



On the bridge of the Crimson Blade, Daron reported on the status of the transports. "Our transports aren't fast enough to get away, sir. They haven't got a chance. Shall we move the fleet to intercept?"

"No. Intel says Ruk's gathered a lot of Romulan ships, and I don't see any. This is obviously a diversionary attack, designed to draw us away from the Death Star. I want the fleet right here when the Romulans arrive."

"Yes, sir." Daron said, and at that very moment, as if on cue, a hundred Romulan warbirds dropped out of warp. "You were right, sir. Romulan capships dead ahead." he reported. "They're coming in hard, and Ruk's fighters are breaking formation and heading straight for the hole."

"How many fighters do we have?"

"Including the Death Star squadrons, about forty thousand total."

"More than enough, especially with half of his forces engaging the transports. Bring our fighters in to tighten up over the hole." Kanos ordered. "We don't want to let so much as one enemy fighter get by us. And move us closer to the Death Star. The Crimson Blade will block the hole, and the rest of our capships will throw up defensive fire."

"Aye, sir. So we hang the transports out to dry?"

"I don't see that we have a lot of choice, but I've got an idea. Who's taken charge of the Fed fleet?"

"They seem to be getting their marching orders from some guy named Captain Sisko, sir."

"Never heard of him."

"Me neither, sir. He's ignoring our hails. Shall I send the remote destruct sequence?"

"No, not yet. We could use their help." Kanos said, flipping on his transmitter. "This is Admiral Kanos to Federation fleet. You are ordered to defend the transports. Acknowledge."

Aboard the USS Defiant, Sisko sat in silence. The rest of the crew wore expectant looks on their faces, wondering if their captain would respond, but he merely stroked his chin and brooded.

Kanos transmitted again. "This is Admiral Kanos to Federation fleet. Those transports are unarmed evacuation vessels. They carry millions of people, some of whom are civilians. We have our hands full here, so it's up to you. Their lives are in your hands! Acknowledge!"

On the bridge of the Defiant, Kira broke the tense silence. "I could handle attacking the Death Star. Anything to get rid of that monstrosity. But now we're being asked to help Kanos *defend* it!"

"Not quite, Major. We're being asked to defend helpless transports." Sisko responded.

"He *could* defend them himself. He's got more than enough firepower." O'Brien interjected.

"He's got enough firepower to *destroy* these attackers in battle, but that won't be enough. He has to throw up a watertight defense over that hole in the Death Star, and that won't be easy. Besides, the Romulans are coming in fresh, and his ships have suffered serious damage."

"We're not responsible for his priorities." Kira objected.

"That Death Star represents the bulk of his military-industrial base, Major. He doesn't have any choice. But *we do*." Sisko replied slowly.

"You're not thinking like a resistance fighter." Kira retorted. "If we extend aid to the enemy, even unarmed transports and lifeboats—" Kira began.

"We'll be fulfilling our oath as Starfleet officers." Sisko interrupted.

"Sir, you can't be serious!" Kira retorted with a look of astonishment on her face.

Sisko was about to reply when O'Brien interrupted them both. "Sir, I'm receiving

multiple distress calls from the transports."

"On audio, Chief."

O'Brien complied, and the sounds of battle could soon be heard. Scraps of tactical reports mixed with alarm klaxons, desperate calls for help, and screams of agony and death. The bridge crew sat in silence, listening to the carnage.

"One of the big transports just went up, Captain."

"How many people on board, Chief?"

"Maybe a hundred thousand, sir."

Sisko fumed and wrestled with his emotions, then he came to what historians would someday refer to as a pivotal decision. "Damn it, I'm not going to sit here while millions of defenseless people die. Battle stations!"

"I can't believe we're letting Kanos manipulate us." Kira muttered under her breath.

"I heard that, Major! But it *doesn't matter* whether we're being manipulated or not. If we sacrifice our principles, then we don't deserve to wear this uniform. Chief, inform the other ships, we're going in!"

The Defiant's engines flared to full brilliance, and it peeled off toward Ruk's fleet. One by one, the other ships followed the Defiant's lead, charging directly toward Ruk's forces.



"The Fed ships are engaging the rebels!" Daron reported. "I don't believe it!"

"I do." Kanos replied with a smile. "I've come to realize something about these Starfleet types. All that nonsense about human rights, humanitarian principles, and conventions of war ... they actually *believe* it!"

"Well, either way, they're hitting the rebels pretty hard, and the rebels have turned their fire from the transports to the Fed ships." he studied the tactical displays. "Part of the rebel fleet is made up of Fed ships. They're refusing to fire on their comrades ... they're pulling out of formation ... they've turned against Ruk's fleet! This is working out *beautifully!*" he exclaimed excitedly.

"I wish I could say I planned that." Kanos said with a smile.

"The Fed ships are still outnumbered, sir. They can't win."

"They don't have to, Captain. They just have to last long enough for us to destroy

these fighters and get rid of those Romulans." As if to punctuate Kanos' words, a Romulan warbird rammed the Crimson Blade's shields about five kilometres ahead of the bridge. The bridge windows momentarily darkened to dim the bright but silent flash, and the two men knew they would feel the distant vibrations in the deckplates soon.

"We're hit amidship, sir!" one of the tactical officers reported. "Shields impacted but still holding."

Kanos noticed an increasing volume of fire being directed at the Romulan warbirds. "Tell those damned gunners to concentrate on the fighters!" he ordered angrily.

"Sir, we just lost another Star Destroyer. If we don't throw up enough volume of fire at them, the Romulans—" Daron began.

Kanos interrupted him in mid-sentence. "The Romulan capships are a diversion. They can't fly into the superstructure, but the fighters *can!* Stay the course, Captain. And tell me when the last fighter has been destroyed."

Aboard the Tanaka, Captain Picard had no way of knowing that a battle was raging behind his ship. The main viewer was blank, and with no external communications, he was effectively deaf and dumb. His primary concern was the ship's safety, and that was very much in doubt. He tapped his communicator. "Mister Laforge, are you making any progress?"

"Not really, sir. We've only come up with one idea, and you're not gonna like it. We could physically dismantle the computer modules one at a time. The system can only reroute to redundant modules for so long, and then it'll crash. When we reassemble everything, it should come up to defaults."

"How long will this take?"

"That's the part you won't like sir. About thirty hours."

"We have five minutes, Mister Laforge. Not thirty hours."

"I know, sir. I'm sorry. I wish there was some other way."

"So do I, Mister Laforge. Picard out." he said solemnly, tapping his communicator. "Computer, how many escape pods do we have?"

The computer responded immediately. "There are zero remaining escape pods."

"That's impossible. Run a level two diagnostic on the pod status sensors."

The computer beeped. "Diagnostic cycles can only be initiated by authorized

command personnel."

"Damned lockout." Picard grumbled. "Give me a visual on one of the escape pod hatchways."

The computer beeped again. "Internal visual sensor control is restricted to authorized command personnel."

"All right, give me an external visual on one of the escape pods."

The computer beeped yet again. "External visual sensor control is restricted to authorized command personnel."

Picard suppressed an urge to shout profanities at the machine, and tapped his communicator. "Mister Laforge, the computer reports that we have no escape pods. Can you verify this from main engineering?"

"I don't need to, Captain. All of the lifepods were used when the fleet was captured by the Empire. I thought you knew about that."

"Damn." Picard whispered to himself. He tapped his communicator. "I know *now*, Mister Laforge. So we can't abandon ship. Do we have any shuttles?"

"Just an Imperial shuttle in bay two. The one that belonged to that black-robed psychopath. But it's not very big, and it could be booby trapped for all we know."

"Thank you, mister Laforge. Keep working on that lockout. Picard out." he said, tapping his communicator. He turned to Commander Chang. The man's injuries were mostly repaired, and it was no longer quite so difficult to look directly at him. "Commander, I need you to take a security team and check out Jacen's shuttle for booby traps."

Chang snapped to attention. "Yes, sir."

Chang marched into the turbolift, and Picard tried to settle into the captain's chair. However, he was startled by the sudden appearance of Jaina in front of him. She seemed to be immaterial, floating above the ground and suffused with an ethereal glow.

"You must save our son, Jean-Luc."

Picard looked around the bridge, and it was obvious no one else could see or hear her. "Jaina ..." he whispered tentatively, wondering if he was losing his mind.

"It's me, Jean-Luc. I've come to say goodbye, and ask you to take my son away from here." she answered.

"Goodbye?" he whispered, and he realized. *She's dying!* "Peters, take the conn. I'll be

in sickbay." he barked, and he ran to the turbolift.

Her ghost appeared in the turbolift with him. "There's nothing you can do. I have to go now."

"No," Picard protested. "not yet!"

"I have to go, Jean-Luc. I just wanted to tell you how sorry I am, about everything ..."

"Jaina ..." he whispered in hushed tones, as if he were afraid someone were listening. "I love you."

"No, Jean-Luc. You don't. I made you *think* you loved me, so I could get what I wanted. I manipulated you, Jean-Luc." she said with a mournful expression on her face.

"But why?" he asked, feeling betrayed and yet still somehow smitten with her.

"I wanted your DNA, not your love. I'm so sorry, Jean-Luc. Please forgive me. Please save our son. He is the key. He is the key to everything. I have to go now, Jean-Luc. Farewell." she looked away from him, and faded away.

"Jaina! Jaina, come back!" he pleaded, but she was gone. The turbolift doors opened, and he raced to sickbay. He burst through the doors to see Doctor Crusher trying to resuscitate her.

"Doctor," he began.

"I'm busy, Captain." she answered, not even bothering to look up.

"Doctor, she's gone. Let her go."

"I don't tell you how to do your job, Captain. Don't tell me how to do mine!" she snapped, still not looking at him.

He opened his mouth as if to speak, and then he thought better of it. He collared one of her assistants. "The baby. What happened to the baby?"

"The fetus is alive and in stasis, Captain." she said, pointing at a small stasis chamber in the next room.

He looked at the stasis chamber. The fetus inside wasn't yet recognizable as human, but it was alive. *My son!* He seized the assistant by the arm. "Nurse, the Doctor is too busy to help me, but I need someone to transfer the fetus into a portable stasis chamber. Immediately."



Ruk gripped his armrests to steady himself, as another quantum torpedo exploded against his forward shields.

"Forward deflector shields are almost gone. A couple more hits, and we'll lose 'em." one of the shield operators reported.

"Helm, bring us around. Try to protect our forward quarter." Ruk ordered. "And somebody get rid of those damned fast attack ships. Especially the one with this Captain Sisko on it."

"Sir, they're in too close to the hull."

"And we sent all our fighters into the Death Star, so we have no cover." Ruk growled, as another blast rocked the bridge. "I should have known something like this would happen. Ever since that lunatic Chang tried to capture my ship." He gestured at one of the communications officers. "Get me the Jem'Hadar."

"Jem'Hadar fleet commander on audio, sir."

"This is Ruk. We need tactical support against the Federation ships. They're becoming a serious impediment to this mission, and they must be eliminated."

The smooth, cloying voice of a V'orta came back over the audio channel. "Of course, Admiral. It will be a *pleasure* to help destroy the last vestige of Starfleet."

Ruk shut off the transmission with a smile. "Excellent. And now that the Federation ships have turned against us, we should hunt down Commander Riker and his friends. They should be—" he was cut off by a series of alarms.

"The main computer is down, sir." Pollus reported. "The turret gunners are switching to independent targeting control."

"We haven't suffered any other damage. How did they take out the computer?" Ruk wondered aloud.

"Unknown, sir." At that moment, a series of explosions rocked the ship, triggering more alarms. "All of the shield generators are down, sir! Even the backups!"

"*All* of them at once? How could they take out all of the shield generators at the same ..." Ruk began, and then he realized. "Sabotage. It's *Riker!*"

"Are you sure, sir?"

"I'm sure. Security alert! I want him shot on sight!" Ruk raged.

"Too late, sir. Somebody just blasted his way out of docking bay three."

Ruk looked to his left, and saw an Imperial assault gunship accelerating rapidly away from his ship. Scattered turbolaser blasts tracked the ship, but with limited accuracy.

"Sorry, sir. Targeting accuracy isn't too good without the main computer. We lost him."

"And he's left us defenseless. I'll make him pay for this," he growled, but he knew he had more pressing matters to deal with. "Helm, get us out of here. The fleet will have to make do without us."

Picard walked into shuttle bay two, carrying a portable stasis chamber. He saw that Chang was waiting for him. "I left Peters in command. Have you checked it out?" he asked, pointing at Jacen's shuttle.

"She's clean, sir. Carrying a full load of fuel and a rack full of missiles, too."

"Good." Picard answered, activating the manual override to open the shuttle bay door. He showed Chang the stasis chamber. "We can't evacuate the entire ship, but I want you to take this stasis chamber onto that shuttle and get out of here." He paused, and then added, "This child is crucial to the future of humanity." although he wasn't entirely sure why.

"Sir, you're the only man on board who was trained on Imperial control systems. I barely know how to operate—"

"Commander, I'm the Captain of this ship. My place is on the bridge. Now get on board. That's an order!"

"Yes, sir." Chang answered reluctantly. The two men boarded the shuttle, and Picard gingerly belted the stasis chamber in place. He moved over to the control panel and slid into the command chair, his fingers flying easily over the controls.

"I'm punching in the co-ordinates to send you to Earth. It's all on automatic pilot. All you have to do is push this button, and the ship will start up an automatic sequence, closing all exterior hatches, checking all systems, and then flying to its destination." Picard explained. He started to get up. "Once you get there—"

Something crashed into the back of his head, and he slumped back down into the chair.

"Sorry, Captain. But if this stasis chamber is as important as you say, then this shuttle had better have a qualified pilot." Chang said to Picard's unconscious body. "You can court martial me later, if I survive." Chang said, punching the button.

The shuttle's engines whined and the startup sequence began. Chang rolled out of the

hatch as it closed, falling onto the hard metal deck. He lay on his side and watched the Imperial shuttle glide out of the shuttle bay, its wings gracefully extending and its engines flaring. It flew a short distance away from the ship and then abruptly accelerated away into hyperspace, disappearing in the blink of an eye.

He got up and ran to the nearest turbolift. "Helm, this is Chang. How much time do we have?"

"Two minutes, Commander."

"I'll be there in thirty seconds."


Thirty seconds later, he charged onto the bridge. "What's our situation?"

"Still no control, sir. One and a half minutes to go."

"I don't suppose Mister Laforge found a way around that command lockout yet."

"No, sir. But we're still getting hails from the Crimson Blade. They want to know why we're not responding."

"Come on, Kanos! Figure it out!" he hissed at the blank viewscreen.



Daron was pleased to deliver good news. "The rebel attack is falling apart, Admiral. The last attacking fighter has been destroyed, and the Romulan capships are withdrawing."

Kanos smiled broadly. "Excellent." He thumbed his communicator console. "Cruiser groups one and two, regroup and attack the rebels at the transport staging area. All Death Star fighter squadrons are to provide support." He turned to Daron with a broad grin. "It looks like we pulled this one out, Captain."

"I hope so, sir. But we have a problem."

Kanos' smile faded. "What problem?" he asked, warily.

"Jaina's ship, sir. She's *still* not responding to hails, and they're headed straight for the wormhole."

Kanos pointed at one of the communications officers. "You! Send a remote query immediately. Has the Imperial command override been used?"

"Yes, sir. Authorized by Jacen Solo, sir."

Kanos threw his datapad to the ground in disgust. "I *knew* it! That bastard must have

somehow killed Jaina and taken her ship. Send the remote destruct code!"

"Sending the code, sir."

Kanos watched the tactical display, waiting for the Tanaka to wink out of existence. But to his surprise and dismay, nothing happened. The Tanaka continued to cruise toward the wormhole at an inexplicably sedate pace, as if the remote destruct code had never been sent. He groaned inwardly. "Of course. Jacen's access overrides mine. All right, let's try it the old fashioned way. Captain, do we have any fighters close enough to take 'em out before they go in the wormhole?"

"No, sir. They'll be gone in about ten seconds, sir."

Kanos didn't bother replying. Instead, he watched the tactical display with an impassive expression on his face. The Tanaka and the transport both cruised slowly into the wormhole, and disappeared before his eyes.

"Damn that Jacen. What's the chance he'll make it home, Captain?"

"According to Ring Station, zero. He'll either be destroyed or thrown millions of light years out of location."

"Well, that's a small comfort, I suppose." Kanos slumped heavily into his chair, holding his head in his hands. "But that slime killed Jaina. All those years of protecting the Imperial family, and I was fighting a pack of Romulans while Jacen killed Jaina and took her ship, right under my nose."

"I ... apologize, sir." Daron said tentatively. "We should have tracked the Tanaka more closely, maybe realized that something was wrong."

"I don't blame you, Captain." Kanos said with a heavy sigh. "If you must cast blame, look at Sith arrogance. Jacen had a transport, and Jaina had a warship. She could have destroyed him easily, but she must have *allowed* him to board her ship. Probably thought she could kill him in one of those damned lightsabre duels." He stood up and walked toward the bridge windows, looking at the bright flashes of the distant battle.

"Um, the news isn't all bad, Admiral. The battle goes well." Daron reported. "Ruk disappeared, and the rebel ships aren't doing too well without his leadership. Now that our ships are reinforcing the Fed ships, we've got 'em on the run. Shall we pursue?"

"No, Captain. Let them go."

"Sir?"

"Let them go, Captain. Our number one priority is defending our position. Now, as for the Federation fleet ..." his voice trailed off, and his expression became contemplative.

"They certainly came in handy, sir. Shall I send the remote override? We could use every ship we can get our hands on."

Kanos waited an uncomfortably long time before answering. "No. If Jaina's gone, then I'm in charge. That means I'll do things *my* way. No more Jedi, no more Sith lords, no more holy wars and vendettas. Just ordinary human beings like you and me, trying to build an empire. It's time to set an example."

"I thought that was the plan. To use them as an example."

"We're not going to set *that* kind of example, Captain. I'm going to honour the deal."

"We're giving up control?" Daron asked incredulously. "But we've made all the preparations! And what about Earth? We have millions of troops down there, and the Earthers are easy prey! They've got no militias, no standing armies, no privately owned weapons. We can take the whole planet—"

"No, Captain. My Empire will be known as one that honours its agreements. In time, the people of Earth will come to see us as a valuable ally, especially now that they've sided with us in battle. They've made themselves a lot of enemies today. They *need* us, and with the manufacturing facilities on the Death Star and that World Devastator, we can rebuild faster than they can. Besides, I won't turn Earth into a battlefield."

"Why not?" Daron asked stubbornly.

"Earth is the birthplace of humanity, Captain. Call me a sentimentalist. And if I'm the supreme leader of the Empire now, then my whims are law."

"But Admiral, Coruscant is the birthplace of humanity. These Earthers are probably the descendants of refugees from our galaxy."

Kanos arched an eyebrow. "Are you sure, Captain? When we first arrived, I did some research into Federation records. They've got enough physical evidence to convince me that they evolved here. On Earth."

"What are you saying?" Daron asked warily.

"Once you eliminate the impossible, then whatever remains must be the truth, correct? We're genetically identical. They can't be our descendants. So that means we must be *their* descendants. After all, the origins of *our* civilization are so ancient that they've passed into myth. There are no records. No physical evidence."

"But sir, how could that possibly happen? You told me that as recently as five hundred years ago, the Earthers didn't even have *computers*! How could they have colonized Coruscant hundreds of thousands of years ago?"

"How the hell should I know? All I know is that it must have happened *somehow*, and

that's good enough for me. There will be no battles on Earth. The people of Earth will join us of their own volition, all in good time, because it will be the smart thing to do. And now, contact the head of Earth's provisional government. It's time we negotiated with our distant cousins, in good faith. It's time we came home."

Epilogue

Millions of light years away from home, Chang picked up debris from the remains of the Tanaka's bridge. He looked through a hole in the hull to see a barren landscape outside, and he noticed Geordi Laforge stepping inside. "How bad is it, Mister Laforge?"

"It's pretty bad, sir. We had to eject the warp core with the manual override on the way in, and we lost the main computer, the impulse engines, and the warp nacelles."

"So we're not going anywhere soon."

"We're not going anywhere *ever*, sir. If it weren't for the automatic crash-landing routines, we wouldn't even be standing here now."

"Did you find the transport?"

"Yes. It's also a wreck, but it soft-landed. Jacen left it without any pilots, but the children survived. The ship must have had an automatic crash-landing routine just like ours."

"Thank God. Set up a distress beacon."

"Um, that may not be useful, Commander. According to astrometrics, we're nowhere near our galaxy. And we're not picking up any subspace comm traffic at all. Wherever we are, there's no intelligent life for more than twenty light years in any direction."

"How about this planet? Have you found anything?"

"No signs of intelligent life, sir."

"How about plant and animal life? The replicator supplies won't last forever, so we've got to live off the land."

"Well, the planet obviously has a breathable atmosphere, and we've found some plant life. However, it's all toxic so far. We can't eat it, but the Tanaka's got a full botanical lab. We should be able to seed this planet with useful plant life. We also have some animal life on the transport. Jacen apparently picked up some livestock animals from Earth, including some horses."

"Sounds like we've got to become farmers."

"Yes, sir. I'm no farmer either sir, but it could have been worse. With the ship's crew and the children from the transport, we've got more than enough genetic diversity to start a viable colony. We can build something here."

"Yes, I suppose we can. It's too bad Picard didn't make it. He probably would have

enjoyed the idea of being an administrator. As for me, I'd rather be out there." Chang said, pointing up at the stars.

"It might be a few generations before we're exploring space again, but I *know* we'll do it sooner or later." Geordi said with an optimistic smile. "By the way, you never explained exactly what happened to Picard. Do you know where he went?"

Picard sat alone in his shuttle, holding the portable stasis chamber and looking out the cockpit window at Earth. The planet was as beautiful as ever, and it glowed brightly in front of him. He had a nasty lump on the back of his head and he rubbed it absentmindedly.

An unwanted visitor appeared in the shuttle with a flash of light. "Shouldn't you be in a better mood?"

Picard turned around slowly. "Q, I'm in no mood for this."

"Of course not, Jean-Luc! You're *never* in a good mood. I've begun to suspect that you take some sort of perverse pleasure in being a sourpuss. Am I right?"

"Just leave me alone."

"Jean-Luc, you should really learn to take advantage of your opportunities. You have an omnipotent, omniscient being in front of you, willing to help you and answer your questions. *Must* you be so rude? Come on, Jean-Luc. I know you're full of questions. Ask me anything."

"There are a lot of things I want to know, but I don't want to hear the answers from *you!*"

"All right, fine. Be that way. But just in case you're curious, Kanos *is* going to keep his word. And I know you don't want to raise that child."

Picard's expression became one of tightly controlled anger. "Stay out of my head, Q. This is none of your business."

Q looked hurt. "Au contraire, mon capitaine! It *is* my business. I'll let you in on a little secret, Jean-Luc. I've taken it upon myself to shepherd the human race. And I won't have all of my hard work go to waste."

"Hard work? You don't know the *meaning* of the concept! And if you're our shepherd, you haven't done a very good job."

"Oh, but I have. When I found you, you were an arrogant, prideful race. Complacent. Painfully overconfident. Unprepared for the future. So what did I do? I introduced you to

the Borg!"

"The Borg? You think you *helped* us? The Borg killed or assimilated millions!" Picard shouted.

"Yes, yes, they killed or assimilated millions." Q replied impatiently. "But they *did* help you. They gave you a much needed kick in the seat of the pants, didn't they? Thanks to them, you increased military spending. You increased military research. You started aggressive new recruiting programs."

"Necessary evils. Hardly something to be proud of."

"Wrong again, Jean-Luc. It prepared you for the Dominion War."

"But not for the Empire."

"What's wrong with the Empire? They're *human*, just like you. And thanks to them, humanity will eventually dominate this entire galaxy."

"You think we should be proud to conquer other civilizations? It's *barbaric*."

"You should be proud for each day that your species continues to survive." Q retorted. "War is nature's way. Survival of the fittest, and all that. But we've been over this ground before. The human race must either continue to evolve, or it will die. You can either accept this fact or you can bury your head in the sand."

"Why do you care whether I accept it?"

"You disappoint me, Jean-Luc. Haven't you ever wondered why I spent so many years following you around? Do you think it was the scintillating conversation? You are more important than you realize, Jean-Luc. You have a destiny. And that destiny is in that stasis chamber you're carrying. He represents the next step in human evolution, as long as you do your job."

"What's so special about this child?"

"You'll find out, Mon Capitaine. Or should I call you Daddy?" Q said with a wink and a smile. "You can't hide things from me, Jean-Luc. I know you've always secretly envied fathers, and you'll finally get to find out what it's like. And now, I'm afraid I must bid you adieu. Riker and Data will be here soon, and they brought their furry friend Worf with them. You know how I hate Klingon body odour." He disappeared in a flash of light.

"Q, wait!"

Q reappeared with another flash of light. "You called?"

"Q, I have to know. What happened to my ship?"

"Oh yes, your ship. Always fretting over your ship. I can't believe you obsess over such things. I just told you that you have the singular honour of helping humanity take the next step in its development. But do you thank me? Do you—"

"What happened to my ship, Q?" Picard asked again, raising his voice.

Q threw his hands up in mock despair. "All right, fine. You really must learn to lighten up, Captain. But if it will make you feel better, your little ship survived. It crash-landed."

"Where?"

Q smiled. "A better question might be where and *when*, Mon Capitaine."

"All right, where and when did they crash-land?"

Q leaned closer. "Let's just say they ended up in a time long ago. In a galaxy far, far away. On an uninhabited planet that will someday be known ... as Coruscant."

Fini

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