

Captain's log, stardate 9112.8:

The Arcturus has been assigned to patrol the Beta Rigel sector, a short distance from Orion-claimed space, where several civilian transport and cargo ships have reported falling under attack by vessels never before encountered but that Starfleet Command suspects are likely Orion pirates.

Johnson, commanding Arcturus, out.

In the *Arcturus'* main recreation room on Deck 7, sight of more than one raucous party during the ship's recent history, Starfleet Marine Corps Major A. Carey Copeland - head of the starship's embarked Starfleet Marine Company and Air Group Commander - carried two trays of food from one of the food processors near the entrance to a table halfway across the large open space, where the ship's First Officer, the Orion Commander Kira K'tal Tefellaran Smith, sat.

Placing one of the trays containing a salad made from various green plants found on Vulcan with a side of raspberry vinaigrette dressing on the table in front of Smith, the stocky Tamurilian then took a seat across from the First Officer and started cutting his steak with a large knife that could almost have been used for hand to hand combat.

"So, we're going to be operating close to Orion space," Copeland said matter-of-factly in between bites. "Any plans to visit home?"

The green-skinned Orion first officer looked at the Marine company commander with an expression that bordered on disbelief as she replied, "What makes you think I want to go anywhere in Orion space? I have no one there I would care to visit! The entire Orion Syndicate can go to hell and I wouldn't give a damn. My place is in the Federation. My home is here, aboard the *Arcturus*. Everyone I care about is here!"

"Relax, Kira," Copeland said around a grin. "I was just joking. I know there's no place in the galaxy you would rather be than with me!"

Smith gave the short Tamurilian a skeptical look, but knew in her heart that what he said was fairly close to the truth.

"When are you planning the next Deck 7 Party?" Copeland then asked before taking a sip from a glass of non-descript liquid on his tray. "It seems like so long since anyone took my call-sign literally!"

"Well, 'Major Trouble,' I haven't scheduled anything," Smith replied. "But I think we can get something planned for once this mission is finished. It does seem like too long since Eric called me into his ready room to scream at me for letting you steal a Wasp or turn Solak's quarters into an icebox or jam Petty Officer O'Brien's sonic shower door closed while he was using it."

A reflective look appeared on Copeland's face for a moment before he remarked, "Ah, yes. Good times... Good times..."

Smith returned her attention to the salad in front of her and stuck her fork into another clump of lettuce-like leaves just as the red alert klaxon began to sound throughout the starship.

"Aww, man!" Copeland said as he threw down his knife and fork. "I'm hungry!"

"That's what you get for talking instead of eating," Smith remarked with a grin as the pair got out of their seats and headed toward different turbolifts - the First Officer's alert station being on the bridge while the Marine commander's was down in the main shuttlebay where at least two Wasp-1 class star fighters were maintained on Alert-Five status.

Mere moments later, Kira K'tal Tefellaran Smith emerged from one of the turbolifts on the bridge and stepped over to the off-center seat - a chair located just behind and to the left of the commanding officer's regular seat and reserved specifically for the starship's first officer. The *Arcturus'* commander, Commodore Eric W. Johnson, seated in the actual center seat, was just ordering a change in the starship's course and speed.

"Helm, come left to course 020 mark 5. Increase speed to warp seven!"

"Coming to 020 mark 5. Ahead warp seven," Lieutenant Kalin Kale confirmed, and the *Arcturus* jumped to the higher warp factor.

"New course and speed changeth time to intercept to ten minutes, sixteen seconds, M'Lord," Navigator Galen DuLac reported.

“Very well,” Johnson acknowledged before turning partially to his left to look at his green-skinned first officer.

“What’s the story?” Smith inquired.

“We just received a distress call from a Federation cargo carrier stating they were under attack by a pair of pirate ships,” Johnson replied. “We happened to be close enough that I think we can finally catch these bastards in the act!”

Space, the Final Frontier...

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Star Trek: Arcturus

“Trojan Horse” By PJK

Based in part on the Star Trek: Arcturus story

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“Coming up on the coordinates of the distress calleth, M’Lord,” DuLac reported.

“Dropping out of warp,” Kale added.

On the main viewscreen, the stretched Doppler lines collapsed back into pinpricks of starlight. At the center of the viewscreen was a drifting cargo vessel, one of its engines leaking a trail of plasma in its wake. For a split second, a second ship was barely visible just beyond the cargo ship before it quickly jumped to warp.

“Dammit!” Johnson spat. “They must have detected our approach on sensors.” The Commodore turned to look at the white-haired and almost demonic-looking officer sitting at the science station and asked, “Bael, did we manage to get any sensor readings on the pirate ships?”

Commander Bael V’ahst o’hrne Dagon, the Efrosian warrior-priest and the starship’s chief science officer, looked back at Johnson with his pale blue eyes and replied, “The sensor readings were too brief to determine who the attackers were with any certainty.” His eyes then briefly shifted to look at the green-skinned first officer before looking back and adding, “However, the configuration most closely matches what Starfleet Intelligence has reported may be the Orion’s newest type of blockade runner.”

Johnson grumbled to himself, then turned in the opposite direction and addressed the man sitting at the communications console. “Mister Fil, hail the cargo ship. Find out their status and offer our assistance.”

“Aye, Commodore,” Penji Fil replied.

* * * *

Two hours later, Commodore Johnson was in the main briefing room with the cargo ship’s captain Mark Hafsalm, his own chief engineer Peter Timinar, and first officer Kira K’tal Tefellaran Smith.

“My staff just finished a preliminary survey of the *Histria Azure*’s systems,” Timinar was reporting. “It appears the pirate ships were lying in wait along the anticipated route, and as soon as the *Histria Azure* was in range they fired an ion pulse that caused the ship’s computer to believe they had entered an unanticipated ion storm and drop out of warp. As soon as they shifted to impulse power, the pirates disabled the cargo ship’s warp drive to prevent their escape.”

“Can you repair the damage, Peter?” Johnson asked.

Timinar nodded slowly as he said, “Since no other major systems were affected, I can get Lithir and T’Veer working on repairs right away. I estimate we can have the *Histria Azure* back underway in the next... oh... six to ten hours.”

“Fine. Get your engineers to work,” Johnson ordered. Then as Timinar left the briefing room, Johnson looked at Captain Hafsalm. “Sounds like it was fortunate for you we were as close as we were.”

“Believe me, Commodore, I appreciate your help. I really do,” Hafsalm remarked. “I just wish you could have arrived just a little sooner.”

“You mean before the two ships that attacked you warped away?” Johnson asked.

“No, before the pirates that boarded us got away with members of my crew.”

“Your crew? My boarding party reported only two cargo containers missing from your manifest.”

“Yes, the pirates took some of my cargo, mainly repair parts destined for the outposts along the Neutral Zone, and probably would have taken a lot more if they hadn’t detected your approach. But they actually seemed more interested in the female members of my crew. They got away with three of them before you arrived. Probably would have taken us all and sold us into slavery if you hadn’t shown up when you did!”

“Slavers?!” Johnson clarified, his blood beginning to boil. He then briefly glanced at his first officer before returning his attention on the civilian captain. “Any idea where they came from? Or where they warped away to?”

“None,” Hafsalm replied. “Like I said, we were traveling at warp three. Next thing I knew we dropped out of warp with alarms going off all over the pilothouse warning we had entered an ion storm. Before my crew could react or raise shields, our warp drive was taken out by one of the two ships laying in wait.”

Johnson nodded in understanding, then said, “I realize you want to deliver your remaining cargo as quickly as possible. My engineering staff will have your ship back up and running as quickly as they can. In the meantime, you and your crew will be allowed access to the recreation facilities here aboard the *Arcturus*.”

“Thank you, Commodore. I appreciate Starfleet’s help,” Hafsalm said as he got out of his seat and shook Johnson’s hand, nodding a greeting to Commander Smith as well.

“That’s what we’re here for,” Johnson replied as the cargo ship captain exited the briefing room, where security chief David Maddox waited to escort the man back to the rec room.

“What do you think?” Smith asked her commander.

“I think the Orions have built themselves a new and dangerous class of pirate ship and they’re testing out its capabilities against defenseless targets,” Johnson replied, his anger returning. “Slavers! And kidnapping Federation citizens with the intent of selling them into slavery! This has to be stopped!”

“What do you intend to do once the repairs to the *Histria Azure* are complete?”

As Johnson got out of his own seat and moved toward the double door, he replied, “I’m going to contact Starfleet Command and get permission to track these new Orion ships to their base. We either apprehend these pirates or we destroy their ships to bring these abductions to a stop!”

* * * *

A short time later, Commodore Johnson was sitting behind his desk in his ready room behind the bridge. On the monitor screen atop his desk was displayed the face of Admiral Andrea Donovan of *Starbase 22*, the starship’s current sector commander.

“I’m dispatching the *USS Concord* to your location,” Donovan stated. “Perhaps showing the flag more prominently throughout the sector will act as a deterrent to the Orions. Is there anything else you need in the meantime, Eric?”

“Yes,” Johnson replied. “Request permission to form a strike team of Starfleet Marines and track down where those new Orion ships are based. The best defense - when it comes to Orion slavers, in my opinion - is a good offense. And if we act fast, maybe we can locate the kidnapped members of the *Histria Azure*’s crew before they get transferred to the slave markets deep in Orion space...”

“Permission denied,” Donovan stated, much to Johnson’s shock. “Sending a strike team into Orion space would appear too provocative to the Orion central government. We cannot risk...”

“Too provocative?!?” Johnson asked incredulously. “Admiral, the Orions are attacking Federation-registered ships! Kidnapping Federation citizens! If anyone is being provocative...!”

“Eric, I understand how you feel,” Donovan assured. “But trust me when I say there are things going on behind the scenes, things someone in your position cannot currently see going on, that will change the power dynamic of the quadrant if it all works out. We cannot risk derailing the ongoing negotiations in an attempt to rescue only three women.”

“ONLY three...?! But Admiral...!”

“That’s an order, Commodore,” Donovan reiterated. “And as long as we’re on the subject of your Marines...” Johnson was surprised by the sudden change in topic. “There has been some debate in San Francisco recently on the value of troops being stationed aboard starships ostensibly assigned to missions of exploration.”

“What do you mean, Admiral?”

“To put it simply, Eric, the *Arcturus* is a ship of exploration and discovery. Not a warship. Starfleet Command feels the Marines aboard your ship can be put to better and more productive use elsewhere, like a starbase or deep space facility closer to the Klingon border.”

“I respectfully disagree, Admiral,” Johnson replied, taken aback. “In just the three years since I assumed command of the *Arcturus*, Copeland and his Marines have been a decisive factor in the success of several of our missions! In fact, during our mission to Visig VI six months ago, we would never have successfully negotiated our dilithium mining treaty with the native Visigians, who like the Klingons respect strength over all else. It was only Copeland’s demonstration of his Tamurilian physical abilities that persuaded the Emireer that the Federation was in fact strong enough to be an ally of his planet!”

“Be that as it may, I just thought you should know which direction Starfleet Command seems to be leaning in. Your recent mission to Orig has not exactly helped your side of the argument.”

“What mission to Orig?” Johnson feigned, knowing he was not allowed to discuss anything about a mission that - according to official records - never occurred. Donovan simply nodded subtly.

“You have your orders, Commodore. Continue your patrol of the sector. The *Concord* will arrive shortly to assist you. Donovan, out.”

Johnson’s monitor screen blanked as the transmission ended. Slowly shaking his head in frustration, the Commodore took in a deep, cleansing breath of recycled air before activating the intercom on his desktop.

“This is Commodore Johnson. I need all department heads to meet in the briefing room in one hour.”

* * * *

An hour later, the starship’s senior staff were all gathered in the briefing room.

“Any idea where the Orion ships went?” Johnson asked.

“Long range sensors show the two vessels that attacked the cargo ship heading away on course 085 mark 2,” Commander Bael reported.

“Based on the cargo ship’s position when we arrived, that course would send them toward the Romulan Neutral Zone,” Lt Kalin Kale added. “Are we sure those ships were Orion? The Neutral Zone is the exact opposite direction you would expect escaping Orion starships to head toward!”

“Just because our long-range sensors show them departing on that course doesn’t prove or disprove anything, Lieutenant,” Commodore Johnson remarked. He glanced toward his first officer to back up what he was about to say. “They could have continued on that course to just beyond our sensor range, then turned and skirted our sensors to head toward home at their leisure.”

“They would have to have a fairly good idea of the range possessed by Starfleet sensors, Eric,” Commander Timinar stated.

“Are we going after the missing crew members?” Dr. Athena Arcadian, the starship’s Centauri chief medical officer inquired. Out of the corner of his eye, Johnson noticed Copeland fidget, as if expecting to be called on next to assert readiness.

“Unfortunately, no,” the Commodore replied, causing confusion and consternation among the department heads. “We’re under orders to continue patrolling the sector in the hopes we can catch these pirates in the act. The starship *Concord* will be joining us soon.”

“Orders are sometimes made to be broken,” chief communications officer Penji Fil remarked, not meaning for the entire room to hear.

“Federation diplomats have already lodged a formal complaint with the Orion government,” Kira K’tal Tefellaran Smith stated. “The ambassador reports he was informed that a rogue faction of Orion slave traders have been operating in the vicinity of the Neutral Zone for several months and have no official affiliation with the Orion Syndicate.”

“Excuse the language, Kira, but that’s bullsh...,” Copeland started to say when the Marine was cut off by Commodore Johnson.

“I’m sure that the Syndicate laying the blame for these attacks on some rogue faction is only an excuse so the Orions themselves won’t be blamed if and when these pirates are caught, especially since it looks like they’re using the newest and most capable class of blockade runners in the sector. However, until we learn more about them; Where are they hiding? Are they operating out of the Neutral Zone or Orion space? What additional capabilities, if any, do these new ships have? ...We need to keep vigilant and be ready to act at a moment’s notice!” Johnson looked at each member of his crew in turn before adding, “They’re going to screw up at some point. And I intend to be there breathing down their necks when they do! Any more questions?” Johnson paused for several seconds, but only looks of frustration and anger were expressed. “Very well. Dismissed.”

* * * *

A short time later, Copeland and Smith were back in the rec room, this time playing one of the game tables along the side of the large lounge. Latest reports put the completion of repairs to the *Histria Azure* at just under three more hours, and then the *Arcturus* would continue her patrol.

“I’ve been thinking, Carey,” the green-skinned woman remarked.

“A dangerous past-time,” Copeland joked.

Smith glared at the stocky Marine before continuing. “There has to be some way to draw these pirates out before they attack another ship that can’t adequately defend itself.”

“Like how?” Copeland asked. “Put out some kind of bait-ship?”

“Nothing that might put the crew of a freighter in danger. And I doubt Starfleet or the merchant marine would be willing to risk sending a ship full of valuable cargo out on auto-pilot without any crew aboard.”

“Is there any way the *Arcturus*’ warp signature could be altered to look like a cargo ship on sensors?” Copeland asked, throwing out ideas.

“Sure, we could disguise our warp signature, at least for a short time,” Smith, a one-time science officer, remarked. “But unless they’re complete idiots, there’s no way anyone is going to mistake a ship the size and configuration of the *Arcturus* with a tramp freighter or cargo ship. The mass readings alone would give away the deception. And I know Orion pirates are NOT idiots. If they were, they wouldn’t be pirates for long. No, we would need something closer in size and appearance to a standard cargo ship to have any hope of fooling the Orions.”

Slowly, a smile began to spread on Copeland’s lips. He then looked at Kira’s face and said, “I think I have an idea!”

* * * *

Half an hour later, Kira K’tal Tefellaran Smith, Carey Copeland, Peter Timinar, and assistant chief science officer Idrisu of Delta IV were gathered in the cramped confines of Commodore Johnson’s ready room.

“You want to do WHAT?!?” Johnson asked, unsure if he had heard correctly.

“I want to create a Trojan Horse,” Copeland explained. “Launch a squadron of Wasps that will fly in close proximity to simulate the size, shape, and warp signature of a civilian ship on sensors. By the time the Orions know what they’re dealing with, we’ll be swarming around them like an angry nest of... well... wasps! While they’re busy with us, the *Arcturus* can warp in from just beyond sensor range and capture the Orion ships!”

“Is this even possible?” Johnson asked, looking at his chief engineer.

“Theoretically, if you can keep the formation tight enough, and with some minor modification to the warp fields and shield configurations of each fighter, it would look like a single mid-sized vessel on sensors,” Timinar confirmed. “It all depends on how good the pilots are.”

“Oh, believe me, Commodore. My pilots are good enough!” Copeland bragged.

“What are we talking about here? Three? Four fighters?” Johnson asked.

“Computer simulation shows there needs to be at least eight fighters working together to mimic a ship big enough to attract the Orion’s attention,” Idrisu stated. “And if any of the ships move out of formation by as much as 1.5 meters, it will either look like the ship is falling apart in warp, or the fact that there are eight individual small ships will be evident on sensors. Either way, they risk crashing into each other and all dying.”

Johnson looked at Major Copeland with a look bordering on incredulity as he asked, “And you think you and your pilots can pull this stunt off?!”

“Yes, sir, I do,” the Marine officer replied confidently. “The formation flying this plan requires isn’t much different than the flight demo maneuvers we practice all the time... just a little faster!” Copeland’s confidence assured the Commodore that maybe this Trojan Horse could actually be pulled off.

“Very well. It’s better than doing nothing,” Johnson said as he activated his intercom. “Johnson to bridge.”

“Bridge. Cala,” replied the vocorder-enhanced voice of the starship’s felinoid Cathen chief navigator.

“Lieutenant, once repairs to the *Histria Azure* are complete, bring us about and take us back toward the edge of the sector. We need to prepare a little surprise for the Orions and then look like we’re resuming our standard patrol.”

“Aye, Commodore,” Cala replied. “Repairs are estimated to be complete in the next ninety minutes. At that time, we will come around to course 260 mark 0. Any additional orders?”

Johnson looked at his chief engineer and asked, “Peter, how long will it take you to modify the warp drives aboard the Wasps?”

“It’s a relatively simple modification. Shouldn’t take more than two... three hours at most,” Timinar replied.

Once again addressing his intercom, Johnson said, “No faster than warp five, Lieutenant. We need time to make our modifications to the Wasps.” Then, after deactivating the intercom, Johnson addressed Timinar and Copeland, saying, “Gentlemen... What are you standing around for? You have work to do!”

“Sir, yes, sir!” Copeland replied as both he and Timinar disappeared into the turbolift.

* * * *

“Wasp Flight One, standing by for departure clearance.”

In the main hanger bay at the aft end of the secondary hull of the *Arcturus*, eight Wasp-1 class space superiority fighters were lined up in two columns of four, their thrusters on standby, impulse engines humming.

In the lead bird, ‘Major Trouble’ verified the last few indications - including deuterium fuel status and weapons load-out - as he awaited final departure clearance.

“Wasp Flight Leader,” said the voice of the deck officer from the control booth overlooking the landing bay. “You have clearance to launch from Shuttlebay One, departure vector 180 degrees relative. In accordance with filed flight plan, Wasp Flight One will rendezvous along the starboard beam of *USS Arcturus* and form up into required formation. You may launch when ready.”

“You heard him, Boys!” Copeland called out on the squadron frequency. “Sound off! One...!”

“Two...!” announced 1st Lt Sh’nesih in Wasp 2.

“Three...!” said 2nd Lt Vespasian Trent in Wasp 3.

“Four...!” said 1st Lt Tokv Lirr in Wasp 4.

“Five...!” said 1st Lt Branden Wyke in Wasp 5.

“Six...!” said 2nd Lt G’edd in Wasp 6.

“Seven...!” said Capt Geval th’Sirhc in Wasp 7.

“Eight...!” said Capt Carter Bancroft in Wasp 8.

“Engines ahead, one-quarter impulse!” Copeland ordered. As each Wasp increased its thrust, they struggled against the magnetic lock of the landing gear holding the fighters to the flight deck. “And away... we... Go!”

One by one, in numerical order, the Wasp fighters detached from the deck and shot out through the open hanger door. Continuing straight ahead, directly away from the *Arcturus* for several kilometers, Copeland waited until the final Wasp reported it was clear to navigate before ordering a banking turn to the left to come up on the starboard side of the larger starship.

“Form up, Boys! We want to look just like a freighter on sensors. Now just like we’ve practiced!”

Slowly, the eight fighters moved closer and closer together, forming up roughly in the shape of a class-VI freighter, with their warp fields overlapping in such a way that - with the modifications Commander Timinar had made to them - would simulate the warp signature of a civilian vessel.

Copeland let his pilots settle into position and get comfortable with how close they were flying to their squadron-mates. Each of the eight birds was flying within a meter and a half either in front of, behind, or beside another heavily armed space superiority fighter. Once everyone was comfortable with their position, the Major hailed the *Arcturus*.

“Cargo Carrier *Wasp* to *USS Arcturus*.”

On the bridge of the *Arcturus*, Johnson smirked at the name Copeland had given his 'ship' before responding, "Arcturus. Go ahead, Major."

"Captain, sir. You've gotta call me Captain!" Copeland scolded playfully. "We're as ready as we're going to be. Request permission to enter warp."

Johnson turned his attention to the two young officers sitting at the console in front of him. "DuLac, Kale, tie your stations into long range sensors. As the... *Wasp*... gets close to maximum sensor range, you have permission to follow - same course, same speed. We want the Orions to see Copeland's ships long before they detect our approach! Am I understood?"

"Understood clearly," Kale replied.

"Aye, M'Lord," DuLac acknowledged.

Speaking into the intercom on the arm of his command chair again, Johnson addressed Copeland as he said, "Maj... I mean, Captain, you have permission to proceed."

"Acknowledged. See you at *Station Epsilon XII* if this doesn't work. Cargo Carrier *Wasp*, out."

Johnson watched the main viewscreen closely as the eight fighters moved in unison ahead of the *Arcturus*, then with a bright flash entered warp.

"I want everyone on their toes," he said calmly to his bridge crew. "Let's not screw this up!"

* * * *

The 'Cargo Carrier *Wasp*' continued on course toward the Epsilon Outposts for several hours. As the journey continued, the Marine pilots grew more confident, helped in part by the fact that Timinar's modifications helped lock the eight ships together in their warp field. And since the ships were continuing on the same course and speed for several hours, they were able to briefly place their fighters into auto-pilot and eat quick meals.

"Now entering the outer reaches of the Beta Rigel star system," Major Copeland announced to his pilots on the secure encoded frequency. "In ten minutes we will need to perform a slight course correction, right five degrees, to avoid entering the system's asteroid field. All pilots, prepare to come right five degrees on my mark."

Each of the other seven Marine pilots acknowledged the order before Trent said over the dedicated communications frequency, "Wasp 3 to Wasp 1."

"Go ahead, Wasp 3," Copeland replied.

"Major, we've been on this course for almost six straight hours. We passed the coordinates where the *Histria Azure* was attacked ninety minutes ago. I need to stretch my legs. How much longer are we going to continue this attempted deception?"

"The plan was to continue on until we reach the vicinity of *Station Epsilon XII*, just as if we were a real cargo ship. But I have to admit, I'm beginning to wonder if we overlooked something that's giving us away as a flight of fighters instead of a real cargo ship. Maybe we don't look as much like a cargo ship on sensors as the Eng and I believed?"

"How are we going to know one way or the other if..."

Trent was cut off as the proximity alarm on each *Wasp*'s control panel activated, flashing with a soft audible buzzer.

"I'm detecting two larrrrge vessels drrrrropping out of warrrrp dead ahead just off ourrrr currrrrrent course," the Caitian Marine officer Sh'nesih stated.

"Stay alert, Boys! This looks like our stop!" Copeland announced. The major then stared directly at another indicator on his panel, currently dark. Another modification Timinar and his staff had made to the fighters was to harden them against ion pulses, detecting any such emission rather than causing the vessel to drop out of warp. Copeland seemed to be trying to illuminate the indicator by force of will alone. Then - a split second later - the white light appeared.

"Wasps, drop out of warp!" Copeland ordered. "Stand by for combat maneuvers!"

In unison, the eight fightercraft dropped out of warp. As expected, two identical vessels - each almost the length of a Federation Constitution-class starship - were waiting just a few hundred meters off the 'freighter's' course. Copeland could see one of the ships was armed and ready to fire phasers.

"Wasp flight - Break! Break! Break!"

In unison, all eight fighters spread apart, each on its own pre-determined course. Within seconds, they had obtained sensor lock on the unidentified ships and began to buzz around the two larger vessels like a swarm of flies.

“The *Arcturus* is about five minutes behind us!” Copeland announced. “Keep the Orions busy, don’t let them escape, and whatever you do, don’t get yourself killed! All Wasps, engage!”

The appearance of eight fully-armed fightercraft instead of a single unprepared freighter evidently took the Orions by surprise. The two crews froze briefly in indecision before beginning to fight their way out of their current circumstance. But soon, phaser beams and torpedoes were lashing out at the swarm of fighters in an attempt to force an opening that one or both blockade runners could exploit.

“Don’t give them any quarter!” Copeland shouted over his frequency, just as one of the Orion phasers anticipated the course of Wasp 5 and struck the small ship’s warp engine. The port engine went dark as a trail of sparking plasma erupted. Trent quickly completed his emergency procedures, shutting down circuits to the port systems to prevent his fighter from exploding, then turned away in an attempt to get clear of the battle. One of the Orion ships took note of the opening in the Wasp formation and attempted to take advantage of it, increasing their engines to full impulse power.

Copeland noticed the Orion ship making a run for the new opening, but was flying in the wrong direction to immediately do anything to prevent the maneuver. Pulling hard back on his control stick and shoving the thrust control as far forward as it would go, Wasp 1 flipped over on its back and simultaneously barrel-rolled to intercept the ship - a turn that pinned the pilot to his seat in a 46-G maneuver. Such a maneuver would normally cause a human pilot to black-out, but being Tamurilian - born and raised on a planet with twice Earth-normal gravity, Copeland simply shook it off and aimed his phasers right at the escaping ship. Several beams struck the Orion ship in the vicinity of its bridge and warp nacelle pylons, forcing the crew to fall back within the patterns being flown by the Starfleet Wasps alongside its sister-ship.

Meanwhile, the second Orion targeted another of the passing Wasps with its torpedoes. As the Wasp pulled up, intending to strafe the larger vessel’s dorsal side, the Orions fired a spread of torpedoes. With little time to react, the second of the three torpedoes struck the Wasp head-on, and it exploded in a brilliant flash of anti-matter annihilation. Seconds later, another Wasp was struck by phaser fire from the Orion ship that had initially attempted to escape, one of its impulse engines going dark and the reaction control thrusters misfiring and sending the fighter off on a random course until the pilot, Geval th’Sirhc, regained control of his bird and - like Wasp 5 before him - cleared the battlefield.

“Remaining units, tighten up the formation!” Copeland exclaimed. “The gaps are getting too big!”

Almost as if reading the Marine commander’s mind, the pair of Orion ship suddenly turned to starboard and began a run for the system’s asteroid field. Copeland sent a quick request for assistance to the *Arcturus* before ordering his Wasps to pursue.

The two Orions accelerated to full impulse in an attempt to outrun the nimble fighters, hoping to evade them amid the asteroids. However, the Wasps were just as fast, and more maneuverable, and continued to pound on the fleeing Orions in an attempt to disable them before the *Arcturus* arrived. One of the Orion ships, having perceived their flight would likely be hopeless unless something changed, suddenly and unexpectedly turned on its Z-axis one hundred and eighty degrees. The pursuing Wasps now found one of the Orion ships barreling straight toward them!

Four of the Wasps turned away, causing them to fall much further behind the ship still running for the asteroids. The only Wasp not to peel away was being piloted by Major Copeland. The Marine knew that if he broke away, it would provide the opportunity the Orions were seeking and allow them to escape. Copeland was determined to claim his prize!

The Major stared at the area of the Orion ship’s hull where he presumed the bridge was located and pressed the trigger on his control stick, sending beams of phased energy straight at the opposing hull. At the same time, the Orions fired their own weapons directly at the oncoming fighter, its head-on profile almost too small to lock weapons on to. The two ships were locked into an interstellar game of Chicken! Copeland began to reach with his other hand for the yellow and black striped handle beside his seat.

At that moment, several kilometers away, the *USS Arcturus* dropped out of warp. On the bridge of the starship, Commodore Johnson demanded a status report.

“Sensors are detecting two Orion vessels matching the configuration of what Starfleet Intelligence has named the Wanderer-class blockade runner and seven Wasp-1 class Starfleet fightercraft,” Lieutenant Idrisu reported from the science console. “One of the Orions is making a run for the nearby asteroid field. The other is... Oh no!”

“What is it?!” Johnson demanded, turning his eyes toward the main viewscreen where the second Orion ship and one of the Wasp fighters could be seen rapidly closing on each other. “My God! They’re on a collision course! Kale! Intercept course! Get us into tractor range of that Orion ship!”

As Kale quickly turned the *Arcturus* in the direction of the inevitable collision and increased speed, Johnson remarked, “Whoever that pilot is, he’s a madman if he thinks he can destroy an armored Orion starship like that singlehandedly!” The Commodore then activated the intercom on the arm of his chair. “Bridge to transporter room one. Lock onto the pilot of the Wasp directly ahead of us and beam him aboard! Now!”

“Attempting to lock on,” the transporter chief quickly replied. “But there’s a lot of interference from all the weapons fire in the vicinity! Maybe once we’re closer?”

“Keep trying!” Johnson implored just as the Orion ship launched a torpedo directly at the oncoming Wasp. “No!” Johnson shouted.

The bridge crew watched helplessly as the torpedo struck the Wasp, but too close for the weapon to have fully armed. Instead of vaporizing, the fighter exploded into several large pieces. Johnson watched as a large, cylindrical section of the fighter’s hull tumbled directly into the Orion vessel’s starboard warp nacelle, causing the Bussard collector to shatter and explode, in turn causing the entire ship to lurch, then start to spin.

The Commodore still could not believe what had just occurred. He silently admired the bravery of the pilot while simultaneously cursing his foolhardiness. Then he noticed, at the edge of the viewscreen, the second Orion ship had managed to clear the far side of the asteroid field and jump away into warp.

“Penji, recall all remaining Wasp fighters to the hanger bay,” Johnson ordered his communications officer. He then added, “Mister Kale, lock a tractor beam on that remaining Orion ship as soon as we’re within range. Kira...” He looked at his First Officer as he said, “Form a boarding party, heavily armed...”

Johnson’s order was interrupted by a bright flash on the viewscreen, one that momentarily overwhelmed the optics. When it finally cleared a few seconds later, the Orion ship was gone. Only traces of wreckage remained.

“Dammit!” Johnson cursed to himself as he watched the slowly expanding field of debris.

* * * *

Captain’s log, stardate 9119.2:

With the crew of the Orion Wanderer-class blockade runner having destroyed their own ship to prevent capture, the Orion Syndicate has denied any connection with the pirates operating in the Beta Rigel sector, but has promised the Federation diplomats that they will patrol the sector to prevent further attacks on civilian shipping passing through this area of space.

Meanwhile, the crew of the Arcturus must deal with the aftermath of this mission as best we can.

Johnson, commanding Arcturus, out.

Commodore Johnson and his fiancée, Dr. Athena Arcadian, watched from the hanger control booth as six Wasp-1 fighters, two of them badly damaged and limping back to the starship, the other four showing minor damage and phaser scorch marks to parts of their hulls, slowly entered the hanger bay and landed on the deck.

“Do we know who were the two pilots killed yet?” Arcadian asked.

“All I know for certain is Vespasian Trent and Geval th’Sirhc barely made it back. We may have to scrap their Wasps for spare parts.”

The main hanger bay door shut silently and indicators lit once the pressure in the hanger returned to normal. Both Johnson and Arcadian made their way down to the hanger, where the chief medical officer and several assistants that had been waiting went right to assisting the two most badly injured pilots. Meanwhile Johnson approached the other craft and started looking for a certain Marine officer.

“Lieutenant!” he said, calling out to Sh’nesih. “Where’s Major Copeland?”

1st Lieutenant Sh’nesih exchanged a look with Lirr before saying, “Srrrrr... The Major was in the Wasp that was playing Chicken with those Orrrrion bastarrrrds!”

The realization hit Johnson like someone had punched him in the gut. For all the problems the stocky Marine officer had caused over the years - having earned his call-sign several times over - for all the aggravation the Tamurilian had caused the Commodore personally, Johnson had still considered Copeland a vital and irreplaceable member of his crew. He also considered the Major a friend.

“We also lost 1st Lieutenant Wyke out therrrrr,” the Caitian Sh’nesih added. “Please tell me what we did out therrrrr today was worrrrrth the prrrrice, Commodore, sirrrr?”

“I’m hopeful this has put a stop to the attacks on civilian shipping,” was all Johnson could say, a string of expletives running through his head and almost making it past his lips. “Please, excuse me, Lieutenant.”

* * * *

A few hours later, the *Arcturus* crew gathered in the hanger bay for a brief memorial service. Pictures of Major Copeland and 1st Lieutenant Wyke were displayed beneath the control booth as several members of the crew and the embarked Marine Company spoke glowingly of their departed shipmates. Several members of the crew, particularly Commander Kira and Dr. Arcadian, were fighting back tears - some less successfully than others.

When it finally came time for Commodore Johnson to speak, he stepped in front of the gathering and looked out at his crew. He opened his mouth to speak and found his voice catching in his throat. He could think of nothing to say that would not sound like mere platitudes. Finally, he managed to say, “Thank you all for coming. Crew, dismissed.”

Johnson watched as almost half the crew departed the hanger bay. He then headed toward the corridor himself and was halfway to the nearest turbolift when the intercom whistled. “Bridge to Commodore Johnson.”

Johnson stepped over to the nearest intercom and activated it as he said, “Bridge, this is Johnson.”

“Commodore,” Ensign Setton To’Lock Arbelo said. “You have a subspace communicate coming in from *Starbase 22*.”

“Thank you, Ensign. Route it to my quarters. I’ll be there shortly.”

“Aye, sir,” Arbelo replied.

A short turbolift ride later, Commodore Johnson stepped into his quarters and sat down at the work desk at the far end and activated the monitor. The face of Admiral Andrea Donovan appeared.

“Hello, Eric,” the senior officer said. “My condolences to you and your crew on the loss of Major Copeland and Lieutenant Wyke.”

“Thank you, Admiral. We hope that today’s events have changed the situation in this sector and that both men have not died in vain,” Johnson replied.

“I was informed the Orion Syndicate is being very cooperative at present and is working on getting the three female crew members of the *Histria Azure* returned to Federation authorities as soon as possible. The Orions have also agreed to patrol the border of their space in an effort to prevent piracy from spreading any further. You might also be interested in knowing the *Concord* should be in the sector within the next six hours to take over your anti-piracy patrol.”

A look of confusion appeared on Johnson’s face as he said, “Take over...? What’s happening to the *Arcturus* if the *Concord* is assuming our mission?”

“You’re being recalled to Earth, Eric,” Donovan responded. Knowing it was quite unusual for starships on a mission of exploration to be recalled back to Earth, the admiral added, “Don’t worry. This doesn’t reflect badly on you or your command. Starfleet Command and the Commandant of the Starfleet Marine Corps have come to an agreement on the disposition of Marine units, and the company of Marines aboard your starship are being reassigned.” The expression on Donovan’s face appeared slightly harder as she continued, “Frankly, Eric, after what happened at Orig coupled with the fact that your mission in the Beta Rigel sector could easily have turned into a major interstellar incident, the reassignment of your Marines was inevitable. But do not worry. Lt Commander Maddox’s security department will be augmented with additional personnel to make up for the loss of manpower provided by your Marines.”

“And yet you tell me this doesn’t reflect badly on me or my command with a straight face, Admiral?” Johnson asked.

“Which brings me to the other matter I have contacted you for,” Donovan said. “You are being recalled to Earth for a second purpose as well. The *Arcturus* is being assigned to a special project being overseen by Fleet Admiral Cartwright, the Commander-Starfleet himself.”

Puzzled curiosity now replaced the feeling of dread that had filled Johnson chest as he asked, “What kind of special project?”

“I cannot give you the details over subspace, Eric. You and your crew will be briefed in full once you reach San Francisco. I can, however, tell you that the project involves warp propulsion and modification and that an Andorian warp specialist by the name of Rykan T’Kor will be assigned to your ship. Your orders are, as soon as you are relieved by the *Concord*, to set course for Sector 0-0-1. You should arrive in Spacedock no later than stardate 9164.7.”

“Understood, Admiral. The *Arcturus* will be on her way home soon. Johnson, out.” As the Commodore deactivated the monitor, he began to wonder what sort of special project involving warp propulsion modification would require an engineering specialist to be assigned to his ship. His musings were interrupted by the sound of the door chime. Turning in his chair to face the entry, Johnson said, “Come in.”

The stateroom door swished open to admit Commander Kira K’tal Tefellaran Smith. From the look on her face, Johnson could tell the first officer was taking Major Copeland’s death even worse than he himself was.

“What can I do for you, Commander? Is there something wrong, besides the obvious?”

“Commodore, I...,” the Orion woman started to say before she straightened her shoulders and brought herself up to her full height. “I realize this probably isn’t the best time, Eric, but I would like to request a temporary leave of absence.”

Again, Johnson was shocked by the events of the day. He took a moment to compose his thoughts before asking, “May I ask why?”

“I find I’m having a hard time accepting that Carey is gone for good,” she admitted.

“Kira, I don’t know a single member of the crew that is ready to fully say their good-byes to Copeland,” Johnson said. “But starships lose crew members to one cause or another all the time, either by routine transfer, serious injury, or occasionally even death. We can’t pause life just because something unexpected like this happens!”

“It’s a little different in this case,” Kira admitted. “I feel like Carey’s death is my fault.”

“Your fault?!” Johnson questioned, the feeling of confusion returning. “How could Copeland’s death at the hands of the Orions possibly be YOUR fault?!”

“When Carey first came up with his Trojan Horse idea down in the rec room, he thought his own idea was ridiculous. I helped convince him to propose his plan to you.”

“And his plan worked!” Johnson exclaimed. “He drew out the Orion pirates. Just because the rest of the events didn’t go completely according to plan doesn’t mean you have anything to feel guilty about!”

“I... know,” Kira replied. “I just need to convince my own heart of that. And to do that, I need some time away from the ship.”

“You’re putting me in a tight spot, Kira,” Johnson scolded. “I’ve just been informed the *Arcturus* is being placed on special assignment. We’re heading back toward Earth by the end of this watch shift. What am I going to do without a first officer?”

“I’ve already taken care of that, Eric,” the Orion woman replied. “A command-qualified officer I know has agreed to step in temporarily and cover my position for a few weeks.”

“Great. So I need to break in a new first officer right when I’m trying to oversee an important assignment from the Fleet Admiral too?” Johnson complained.

“Relax. I don’t think Bryan needs too much breaking in.”

“Bryan...?”

“Ackermann,” Kira confirmed.

Wait...! You talked an Admiral into serving as a starship first officer beneath a commodore?” Johnson asked with an amused tone of voice.

“Like I said, temporarily,” Kira replied.

“Starfleet’s Bureau of Personnel is going to love us!” Johnson remarked. He then added, “Fine. I’ll approve your Leave of Absence request for the period of our special assignment. But I’ll expect you back aboard and standing your watch the day we’re returned to normal duty!”

“Agreed,” the commander stated. “Thank you, Eric.”

“I hope you work everything out, Kira. Dismissed.”

Johnson watched as Kira nodded, then turned and left his quarters. A slight grin appeared on his face as he thought about the chain of command the situation had created and he turned back to his desk, opening a communications circuit with the VIP quarters. “Johnson to Ackermann. I hear you got yourself a new job?”

* * * *

Several months later...

Stardate 9365.7

Beta Rigel Asteroid Belt

A metallic cylinder-shaped object drifted silently among the chunks of rock and metal orbiting the distant star Beta Rigel. The object was scarred and scorched in places and pitted by micro-meteoroids across its surface. Several words and symbols were painted along the object, most unreadable due to the damage sustained by the craft. Among the few readable words were two painted alongside the now-recessed canopy; ‘Major Trouble.’

Within the device, a battered, bruised, and barely-alive pilot slumbered in dreamless stasis-induced sleep awaiting rescue that might never come. While the medical stasis system was working nominally on the ejection pod’s micro-fusion generator, the distress transceiver that would normally allow starships up to two sectors away to know an escape pod had been jettisoned and required rescue was barely functioning; the solar batteries that powered the system badly damaged in the collision with the Orion ship’s warp nacelle. The signal the beacon was broadcasting could barely reach the edge of the Beta Rigel system. The fact that the escape pod had found itself settling amid the asteroid belt only further hampered the distress call.

As the ejection pod passed out of the shadow of one of the larger asteroids in the field, several meters away a rift in the fabric of space slowly opened. After several seconds, a ray similar to a Starfleet tractor beam reached out of the rift and attached to the escape pod, slowly pulling the pod through the rift. A moment later, the rift gradually closed and disappeared.

The End