

The Academy cadets were spread out for almost a full kilometer of the surface of the uninhabited planet, centered around a clearing that bordered a wooded forest and a vast plain upon which a grain-like plant grew in abundance. Many were conducting surveys; collecting plant and soil samples and taking sensor readings of the geology, atmosphere, and climate. Others were acting as security, making sure nothing unexpected appeared and attacked anyone. Still others were near the middle of the clearing building the temporary shelters where the cadets and a select few officers from the *USS Sarek* would spend the night in a rare overnight away mission.

The six month training cruise aboard the *Sarek* within the Fifth Fleet Area of Responsibility was almost complete, and Captain Jo Ann Parker, who had personally accompanied the away team down to the surface instead of assigning her Capellan first officer Commander A-ZuRQuIL, wanted to make sure the cadets had experienced everything they needed to know before heading back to the Academy on Earth to begin their final year.

“The sky is very clear,” Lt Commander Kyler Saya, the starship’s assistant chief of security commented as she looked at the light blue sky growing gradually darker in color. “The surface temperature is comfortable now, but it’s going to get chilly overnight.”

“A little cold isn’t going to hurt the cadets, Commander,” Parker remarked with a smile. “They need to learn they have to operate efficiently in just about any environment.”

“I’m not worried about the cadets,” Kyler said. “I’m just thinking I should have brought down an extra blanket for myself.”

Parker looked at the petite, young-looking Bajoran/El-Aurian security officer with an amused expression.

“You could always take a watch guarding the camp perimeter,” she suggested. “Walking around would keep you warm.”

“Not as warm as a nice sleeping bag,” Kyler remarked. “And besides, if I do all the work, how are the cadets going to learn?”

Parker’s rebuttal was eclipsed by a voice from the captain’s combadge.

“*Sarek* to Captain Parker,” said A-ZuRQuIL.

Parker tapped her combadge with her fingers and responded, “Go ahead, Commander.”

“Captain, we just received a Pri-One message from *Home Plate*. We are to rendezvous with the *Dauntless* just beyond the unnamed nebula in sector 50111 within the next 48 hours.”

“Rendezvous with...? Commander, Admiral Raiajh does remember we have a boat-load of cadets that are nearing the end of their training cruise, doesn’t she? We were scheduled to set course for the starbase as soon as this survey mission is completed tomorrow.”

“Admiral Raiajh made clear she knows we have the cadets aboard, but some kind of emergency situation has come up and our presence is required,” A-ZuRQuIL explained.

Parker sighed before looking around at the myriad cadets performing their individual tasks and the rows of tents and temp shelters that had already been erected close to the center of the clearing.

“Understood, Commander. We’re going to pack up down here and start beaming the away team up as soon as possible. Prepare to get underway within the next sixty minutes.”

“Aye, Captain. *Sarek*, out.”

“Well, Commander,” Parker said to the security officer next to her. “Inform the cadets to pack out all their gear and get everything back aboard. Our mission here is as complete as it’s going to be.”

“Yes, Captain,” Kyler acknowledged before remarking, “So much for the little training cruise.”

Space, the Final Frontier...

Star Trek: Fifth Fleet

“So Much for the Little Training Cruise” By PJK

Captain's log, stardate 66428.3

The Sarek is now located on the edge of the unnamed blue nebula that straddles the line separating sectors 50111 and 50114, where we await the Fleet Flagship, USS Dauntless. I can't help but wonder what has happened to send two Federation starships this far out? Parker, out.

The *Sarek* had reached the rendezvous point three hours earlier, and Captain Parker decided to catch up on some neglected paperwork in her ready room. Her review of the latest officer fitness report was interrupted by her first officer's voice through the intercom.

"Captain, the *Dauntless* has arrived."

"Good," Parker said, getting up from behind her desk and heading toward the door to the bridge. "Maybe now we can get some answers about why we're here."

As Parker emerged on the bridge and moved up the three short steps to the command chair, she could see the Sovereign-class starship *Dauntless* maneuvering closer on the main viewscreen.

"The *Dauntless* is hailing," Lt T'Reth, the Andorian officer sitting at ops announced.

"On screen," the captain ordered. A moment later the image of the *Dauntless* was replaced by the image of her commanding officer, Fleet Captain Peter J. Koester. "Good morning, Fleet Captain. What's a nice starship like yours doing in a place like this?"

"Good morning, Captain Parker," Koester replied. "You and I aren't the only ones that have been tasked with a very important mission. The entire Fifth Fleet, including the *Proud Vengeance* and the *Vedrex*, will be meeting here with us in the next few days."

"The entire fleet?" Parker asked in shock. "What's going on?"

"Admiral Fil plans to hold a formal briefing once all the other ships have arrived, but this is the situation to the best of my understanding," Koester said. "About a week ago, the *Belle* happened across a ship full of refugees from somewhere core-ward of the AOR. They described a huge warship that invaded their home system, a ship about as large as *Starbase 719* itself. Several civilian ships managed to flee their system just before the unidentified ship literally blasted their entire planet to dust without provocation. It then proceeded to follow them, slowly, in the direction toward Federation space." Koester paused a moment to let the implication of what he had said sink in with Parker and her crew. He then continued, "Starfleet Command needs more information about this potential threat, since everything we know at present is second-hand information. The Fifth Fleet's mission is to intercept the unidentified warship as far from the Federation border as possible, attempt to make peaceful contact with whoever is in command of it, determine their objectives, and – if necessary – stop them."

"Stop them?!" Parker exclaimed. "How do a handful of starships stop something capable of destroying whole planets?"

"In whatever way is possible," Koester replied grimly.

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Over the course of the next twenty four hours, the Luna-class *USS Triton*, the Leviathan-class *USS Besiege*, the Odyssey-class *USS Sun Tzu* and Nebula-class *USS Lexington* – both recent additions to the Federation Fifth Fleet – and the former Romulan warbird *UFNS Vedrex* arrived at the rendezvous coordinates. The only Fifth Fleet ships not yet present were the Intrepid-class *USS Bellerophon*, the Prometheus-class *USS Arizona*, the Defiant-class *USS Corsair*, and the *IKV Proud Vengeance*, a powerful Klingon warship assigned to the Federation Fifth Fleet by Chancellor Martok and the High Council.

The transporter aboard the *Sarek* hummed to life and two men, Fleet Captain Peter Koester and Vice Admiral Penji Fil – the Catullan officer in charge of the Fifth Fleet – materialized on the platform. They were greeted by Cadet Gem Koester.

“Hi, Dad. Hi, Admiral Fil,” the nineteen year old cadet greeted. “I’m to escort you to the briefing lounge. All the other fleet commanders have already arrived aboard.”

Koester gave his daughter a quick hug, the two having not actually seen each other face to face in nearly two and a half years, before the cadet led the way out into the corridor and into a nearby turbolift.

“How has your training cruise gone?” Koester asked his daughter as the lift moved up through the starship’s hull.

“Different than when the *Dauntless* hosted the cruise when I was little,” Cadet Koester replied. “Most of the missions we’ve participated in have been fairly routine. A few have been out of the ordinary, like our encounter with the legendary Farfalla. And our first mission right after we got aboard, which turned out to be reality’s slap in the face to most of my classmates.”

“What do you mean, reality’s slap in the face, Cadet?” Admiral Fil asked.

“Most of my class had barely even traveled in space before they were accepted to the Academy. I had spent most of my life living aboard the *Dauntless*, so I had some idea what life in Starfleet was like. When we had our encounter with the Reapers, it finally hit a lot of the cadets for the first time... THIS is space exploration in Starfleet! And sometimes it can be very dangerous!”

The lift finally reached deck one and the trio emerged in the short hallway outside the conference lounge.

“I’ll leave you both here,” Cadet Koester said. She then looked at her father and said, “Look me up before you leave the *Sarek*. I’d like us to spend a little more time together while we have the chance, however brief. And I want to hear the latest gossip from the *Dauntless*.”

“I can’t make any guarantees, but I’ll try,” Koester assured before giving his daughter another quick hug. He then turned and joined Fil as they entered the conference lounge.

Inside the lounge, sitting in the seats around the table already, were Captain Parker of the *Sarek* in her customary place at the head of the table, Captain William MacLeod of the *Besiege*, Captain Amanda Tomkins of the *Triton*, the half-Klingon Captain K’Lith Baber of the *Sun Tzu*, Captain Raymond Salamone of the *Lexington*, and Commander T’Lees of the *Vedrex*. Both Koester and Fil took seats directly in front of the large aft windows, the admiral directly to the right of Captain Parker.

“According to Starfleet Command’s best estimates, the unidentified warship described by the refugees located by the *Bellerophon* should be in sensor range at any moment,” Fil said without preamble.

“Speaking of the *Belle*, where is she?” Captain Tomkins asked.

“Yes. And the *Vengeance*?” added MacLeod. “I thought all the Fifth Fleet ships were joining us on this fool’s errand?”

“The *Belle* should be joining us within the next few hours,” Fil replied. “Captain K’danz was fairly close to *Home Plate* when they discovered the refugee ship last week. And Admiral Raiajh has informed me she has decided to keep the *Corsair* and *Arizona* in port at *Starbase 719*, for sector protection in case our mission fails. As for the *Vengeance*...” Fil’s expression became one of frustration as he said, “I was contacted by General Ke’reth via hyper-space while the *Dauntless* was still en route to the rendezvous coordinates. He stated he cannot abandon his current mission, whatever he’s involved in, but promised the *Vengeance* will be there with us when it matters. I hope he keeps his word, since the *Vengeance* provides almost a third of our present fleet’s firepower by itself.”

“What do we know about this approaching warship?” Parker asked.

“Very little,” Fil replied. “The refugees described it as a large mobile battlestation, then described how it destroyed an entire planet with a single firing of its primary weapon.”

“Impossible!” MacLeod remarked.

“Impossible to us, perhaps,” T’Lees commented. “But who knows what technologies exist in the unexplored regions of the galaxy? Was not Earth almost destroyed a century ago by a single probe attempting to make contact with an extinct species?”

“The environment was pushed to the brink of collapse during that incident,” MacLeod pointed out. “All life on Earth could have been killed off, but the planet itself would have remained relatively unscathed, not blown to fragments like Admiral Fil describes.”

“Either way,” Koester cut in. “What do we do? Even if we have the *Vengeance* with us, what are nine relatively tiny starships going to do against the firepower described by the people on the ship *Carrie* and her crew found?”

“We at least have to try and make contact, learn their motivations,” Fil insisted. “Perhaps whoever controls that warship had no idea life existed on the planet they destroyed. Maybe to their own perspective they were simply mining for fuel or resources.”

“I find that hard to believe, Admiral,” MacLeod remarked just before the intercom signaled.

“Bridge to Captain Parker.”

“Go ahead,” Parker said after activating the intercom on the table pad in front of her.

“Captain, that ship we’re out here to intercept has just appeared on the edge of long range sensors,” A-ZuRQuIL reported. “Range: two light years. Speed: approximately warp 3. At current course and speed it will reach our present position in three days.”

“Are you sure this is the ship we were sent out here to look for, Commander?” Parker asked.

“Captain, this thing is almost 160 kilometers in diameter. It’s HUGE! If this isn’t what we’re looking for, then we’re in bigger trouble than I first believed.”

“Can you send visual in here?”

“Aye, Captain.”

A second later, the monitor on the bulkhead directly behind Parker activated. The image showed a star field with a bright round object near the center.

“Magnify, factor 10,” Parker ordered, having turned her chair around to look at the monitor. The monitor image blinked, and the object near the center now filled the middle portion of the screen. The object was definitely made by intelligent hands, a blue-grey in color with a dish-like indentation directly at the front, almost like a deflector dish the size of a small continent, nearly a quarter of the diameter of the entire vessel.

“My God!” Koester muttered.

“We’re going up against THAT?” Tomkins asked in disbelief.

“Let’s hope we’ll only be encountering it and not confronting it,” Fil remarked. “As soon as the *Belle* arrives here at the rendezvous coordinates, the fleet will warp at maximum speed to intercept that vessel as far from Federation space as possible, before it gets anywhere near Federation, Morain, Kairn, or any other allied territory.”

“And what happens if it simply swats us out of the way like annoying gnats?” MacLeod asked, still looking at the monitor screen.

“Starfleet is amassing a large armada on the Federation side of the Typhon Expanse,” Fil explained. “If our mission fails, if we can’t stop that thing, they will have to.”

* * * *

A short time later, Fleet Captain Koester found himself standing outside the door of the crew lounge the Academy cadets had unofficially taken over while aboard the *Sarek*. He took a deep breath, not wanting to let his worry over what he had learned during the Admiral’s brief a few minutes earlier show on his face, before stepping through the door.

“Attention on deck!” one of the cadets shouted, and everyone in the entire room jumped to their feet. Koester had not been expecting that particular reaction, and it took him a moment to say, “At ease!” He then asked the nearest cadet where his daughter was located, as the main computer indicated she was in the lounge. The cadet pointed across the room near the windows, and as he looked over Koester could see Gem already walking toward him. She hugged him once more, then grabbed his hand and led him to a couple of empty seats nearby.

“Before I say anything else,” Gem said. “I want to say thank you.”

“For what?” Koester asked, a little confused.

“For raising me the right way. For putting me into the Fleet Space Cadet Corps, which prepared me for what I would experience in the Academy. For just being there for me when I needed you,” the teenager replied, surprising her father and causing him to blush slightly.

“You’re welcome. I just tried to do the best job I could, given the circumstances,” Koester said. “By the way, Cassie says hello. She wanted to beam over with me to see you, but under the present circumstances I only wanted one person off the ship.”

“Send her my regards,” Gem replied. “And tell her I’m still going to get her back for that last prank in the cafeteria before she graduated. Maybe not today, maybe not next month, or even next year... but eventually!”

“I’ll warn her,” Koester said with a grin. “Speaking of the Academy and graduation, how were your classes? Have any interesting professors?”

“Classes were fine. Some of the teachers tend to drone on and on about a particular subject to the point of boredom. Otherwise, things were fine until the incident with the flight demo team,” Gem responded, a look of sadness on her face.

“I heard about that. It was upsetting, to say the least. I was proud to hear you stood up for your principals.” This made Gem smile slightly. “If only you could have convinced the rest of the demo team as well.”

“Fortunately, Boothby was a big help through it all,” Gem said.

“You know, I can’t imagine a time when Boothby wasn’t the Academy groundskeeper,” Koester started to say. “I can remember back when I was a cadet and preparing for the *Kobayashi*...”

“Bridge to Fleet Captain Koester.”

Koester held up one finger toward his daughter, pausing their conversation, then tapped his combadge.

“Koester here.”

“Fleet Captain, this is Lieutenant Commander Kyler. We’ve just been informed the *Bellerophon* will arrive within the hour.”

“That soon? Boy, Carrie must have really pushed her engines to get here this quickly.”

“Yes, sir. Admiral Fil wants the fleet to get underway the moment they arrive. He requests you return to the *Dauntless* immediately.”

“Understood. Thank you, Commander.” Koester again tapped his combadge to deactivate it, then looked at his daughter and sighed. “Such is the life of a Starfleet officer.”

“I know. But we’ll have time to spend together after this mission is over, right?”

Knowing what he knew of the mission ahead, Koester could not help but think this might be the last time he ever saw his daughter, but resisted the urge to say anything other than, “Of course. Take care. And follow your orders to the best of your ability.”

Both Koesters stood and hugged once more before the Fleet Captain headed out the door. Immediately Gem was surrounded by several of her classmates.

“What did he say?” one of them asked. “Did he tell you why our survey of Baxu V was called off so soon and the entire fleet has been assembled here?”

“I’m sure he knows why, but he didn’t tell me anything,” Gem replied. “However, I could sense his emotions. He was projecting them very strongly. He’s afraid.”

“Afraid of what?” another cadet asked as several others turned to look at the now-closed lounge door through which Koester had passed.

“I’m not sure exactly,” Gem said. “But I think it has mostly to do with the fact we’re all out here.”

* * * *

Two days later, the fleet of eight starships was nearing the projected point of interception. On the bridge of the *Dauntless*, Admiral Fil sat in the VIP seat to the captain’s left, discussing strategy with Koester and his first officer, Commander Setton To’Lock Arbelo.

“Admiral,” Lt Tom Riker said from ops. “We’ve received a response from General Ke’reth on the hyper-space channel. He promises he’ll have the *Vengeance* waiting at the anticipated intercept point before the rest of the fleet arrives and requests we keep him updated on any changes.”

“Thank you, Lieutenant,” Fil responded. “Estimated time of arrival at the intercept point?”

“Twenty two hours, sixteen minutes at present speed of warp 9.2,” the helmsman responded.

“And our target vessel’s course and speed? Any change?”

“The unidentified vessel is still on course 185 mark 0, moving just under warp 5,” Riker confirmed as the Scotsman standing at the science console picked up a padd and moved toward the captain’s chair.

“Latest sensor update, Cap’n,” Commander Alasdair Wallace said to Koester as he handed the padd to the commanding officer. “I don’t think you’re goin’ ta be happy with it,” he added.

* * * *

At that same moment, Cadet Koester and Commander Tredworth were making the same report to Captain Parker aboard the *Sarek*.

“Borg?!?”

“Yes, ma’am,” Cadet Koester replied with a nod. “I ran the sensor readings through the comparison filter three times just to be sure, and then had Commander Tredworth double check me. That vessel is definitely giving off a Borg energy signature.”

Parker looked at her chief science officer, who only nodded grimly.

“So you’re telling me we’re facing a powerful new Borg vessel of some kind?” Parker asked.

“The Borg. That’s a name I haven’t heard in some time,” A-ZuRQuIL said from the seat next to Parker. “I could have gone a while longer without hearing it.”

“If it is, it’s unlike any Borg vessel Starfleet has ever encountered before,” Cadet Koester remarked. “The Borg normally attack a planet’s civilization and start assimilating the population and technology into their Collective. But the refugees the crew of the *Bellerophon* encountered described the ship out there blowing up the planet without ever capturing a single member of the population. Plus there are other things I’ve detected.”

“What other things?” Parker asked.

“Sensor readings are not completely accurate due to the range to the ship in question, but I’m also receiving sensor readings that indicate other technologies incorporated into that ship as well. Technologies like Malon engines, Hirogen weapons arrays, even elements of Talaxian and Kazon technology, according to information the *Voyager* brought home with her from the Delta Quadrant.”

“Could the Borg have assimilated all those cultures into their Collective and built those technologies into their ships?” A-ZuRQuIL asked.

“What do you make of it, Commander?” Parker asked her chief science officer.

“According to all the reports I’ve read, the Borg Collective was left in a state of chaos after their last encounter with the *Voyager* a decade ago,” Tredworth said. “There was that brief incident with a Borg cube at *Copernicus Station* about seven or eight years ago, but that Borg ship was easily defeated and destroyed by a single starship, demonstrating their continued weakness.” Tredworth turned to look at the main viewer, where stars streaked by in long rainbow-colored Doppler lines, the vessel in question still too far away to see for the moment, and said, “No, I don’t think it is Borg. If anything, the design and apparent purpose of the ship remind me of an armored battlestation featured in a series of old celluloid films produced back in the late-20th century; the Death Sphere or Doom Star or Dread Cruiser or something like that. If anything, it has probably integrated technologies it has encountered while traversing the Delta Quadrant. Perhaps even destroyed those civilizations to get the technology, like the refugees say it did to Forma III?”

“Wonderful. So we have no clear idea what we may be up against?” Parker asked.

“I’m afraid not,” Tredworth replied. “At least not yet. We may get more answers as we get closer to the vessel.”

Parker grunted agreement, then asked, “Helm, ETA to the intercept point?”

“Twenty two hours, thirteen minutes,” Lt Commander Christopher Huff replied.

* * * *

Captain's log, stardate 66439.3:

The fleet has almost reached the interception coordinates. Sensors indicate another vessel already waiting there, one we're more than happy to see.

Parker, out.

The ships of the Fifth Fleet dropped out of warp around the immense Klingon warship *Hem bortaStaH*. The flagship was immediately hailed by its commander.

"Nice of you to finally get here," General Ke'reth epetai Makura remarked, half in jest. "I have been monitoring the steady approach of our potential adversary. There are a few details you neglected to tell me. Like the fact the approaching ship is of Borg origin!"

"We only determined the vessel had a Borg energy signature when it finally moved close enough to get adequate sensor readings less than a full day ago, General," Fleet Captain Koester said to his Klingon counterpart. "The vessel itself is not entirely Borg. It appears to have incorporated technology from several Delta Quadrant civilizations."

"That does not preclude the vessel being Borg," Ke'reth said irritably.

"Captain," announced Major April Mendez, Koester's Marine chief of security. "The target vessel has just entered visual range."

"On screen," Koester ordered.

Aboard the *Sarek*, the crew was already looking at the intruder vessel. It was the size of a small moon, almost completely round with a gunmetal grey exterior. The sphere's only prominent feature was the deflector-like circle directly in the middle of the vessel facing the Fifth Fleet ships.

"Great Teer, that's huge!" A-ZuRQuIL remarked.

"What is the fleet status?" Parker asked, itching to order red alert in the face of the oncoming threat.

"Fleet is maintaining yellow alert status, as we have since dropping out of warp," Kyler replied.

"I feel so vulnerable," Parker mentioned off-handedly.

"Admiral Fil feels displaying full shields and weapons might be considered provocative," her first officer explained.

"Captain, Admiral Fil is hailing the entire fleet," said T'Reth.

"Let's hear it."

"Fil to Fifth Fleet. Stand by on shields and weapons. I'm about to hail the approaching vessel. And keep this channel open for intercommunication and coordination. Fil, out."

Two of the other starships quickly acknowledged the admiral's order. Parker was the third, calling out, "*Sarek* acknowledges, Admiral."

As the rest of the ships likewise recognized the order, Fil's voice said, "Unidentified vessel, this is Admiral Penji Fil commanding the Federation Fifth Fleet. Please acknowledge."

Parker and her bridge crew, which included half a dozen cadets working alongside the regular crew, all watched the approaching ship on the screen for any reaction to Fil's hail. Nothing appeared to be happening as the ship continued to close at a steady speed. After several seconds, Fil spoke again.

"Unidentified vessel, please acknowledge. We wish to open a dialogue with you."

Again the crew waited. But not for very long.

"Captain, I'm detecting an energy build up in that deflector dish-like area at the center of the...," Kyler started to say, but she was quickly interrupted by the captain.

"Kyler, raise full shields now! Arm weapons!"

Lt Commander Kyler, who had been prepared for such a contingency, had the shields raised before Parker had even finished speaking. And as the starship's phasers and torpedo tubes armed, energy rays emerged from multiple points around the circle of the dish on the unidentified vessel's hull. Each separate beam enveloped one of

the Fifth Fleet ships, causing them to rock gently like a rowboat on a disturbed lake's surface. Less than a second later the beams abruptly ceased.

"Shields down by 50%!" Kyler announced. "All weapons systems have lost power! Attempting to restore systems."

Parker could hear similar reports from all the other ships, including the *Proud Vengeance* - which reported almost a full 70% loss of shield power!

Aboard the *Dauntless*, the reports to the Admiral were still coming in.

"Admiral! *Lexington* reports their warp core has gone off-line!" Lt Riker reported. "They're on batteries trying to maintain shields and starting to drift!"

"Have *Bellerophon* and *Vedrex* cover the *Lexington*," Fil ordered. "Tow them off the battlefield if Salamone can't get his engines back on line in short order!"

"Aye, Admiral," Riker replied before passing the word on to the *Belle* and *Vedrex*.

Meanwhile, back aboard the *Sarek*, Tredworth watched the two other ships move to provide cover for the *Lexington* as she said with awe in her voice, "They can pretty much destroy us at will! How can we stand up to something so powerful?"

"We have to at least try!" Parker exclaimed.

A-ZuRQuIL, who had rushed up to the tactical console to help Kyler as soon as the approaching warship opened fire, was now scanning the enemy vessel in detail.

"No wonder that ship was traveling so slowly to get here!" he said.

"What is it, Commander?" Kyler asked.

"That ship has no shields like our vessels do. Just a basic navigation deflector to protect it from debris while moving through normal space or low warp! That gives me an idea..." He then began scanning various sections of the warship.

"What are you doing?" Kyler asked as she tried to get the ship's weapons on-line.

"That thing is apparently built with Borg technology," the Capellan explained. "The Borg Cube that tried to attack Earth in 2373 was easily destroyed when Starfleet concentrated its firepower on a single seemingly insignificant area of the cube. I'm trying to see if perhaps this ship shares that trait... Ahh! Captain, I believe I have located a weak point in the structure of that ship. Request permission to transmit that information to the other fleet units?"

"Do it!" Parker commanded.

A-ZuRQuIL broadcast the information to the rest of the Fifth Fleet vessels at the same time as he locked the *Sarek*'s weapons on the target location.

"Warship appears to be reacting to your scan, Commander. They're powering up weapons again!" Kyler announced.

Aboard the *Dauntless*, Koester and Fil were discussing their options, one of which included disengaging the enemy and making a run for the starbase in the hopes more reinforcements could be gathered before the warship reached Federation space, but that would mean abandoning ally and enemy alike between their present location and *Home Plate* to potential attack and annihilation.

"Captain! We're receiving targeting coordinates from the *Sarek*," reported Major Mendez.

"Does Captain Parker know something we don't know?" Fil asked.

"Do we have a choice at this point?" Koester responded before ordering, "Major, lock weapons on the target indicated by the *Sarek*. Fire at will!"

Within seconds, all nine ships of the fleet opened fire on the enemy warship. In spite of its immense size in comparison to the relatively tiny starships, the warship suffered major damage to its outer hull, with secondary explosions occurring within the structure. Almost immediately, the vessel's engines lost power and the weapons, which had been charging for a second round against the fleet vessels, quickly cut off. Within seconds, the moon-sized starship was adrift.

"That was too easy," Captain Parker remarked, her mouth hanging open in shock.

"What do we do now?" Kyler asked.

“Admiral Fil, this is Captain Parker,” the captain said over the open communications channel connecting all nine ships.

“Yes, Captain?” Fil responded.

“What are your orders? It appears we have disabled the warship. Do we attempt to open communications with them again? Or do we take this opportunity to finish the job?”

“I say we destroy the ship!” Ke’reth said, the anger in his voice caused by the damage his ship had suffered so quickly at the weapons of the unidentified vessel quite evident. “We have seen what it is capable of, and they made no effort to respond to our attempts to open a pointless dialogue. Destroy the ship and let us be finished of this!”

“I agree with the General,” said Captain Baber aboard the *Sun Tzu*. “They proved themselves hostile. Who knows how long before they can get their systems repaired and destroy us all?”

“I’m not so sure,” Koester commented. “We have an opportunity here. Perhaps with their ship disabled, they would be more willing to respond to our overtures now.”

“I agree. It could be a misunderstanding of some sort that caused them to open fire on us,” added K’danz.

“I agree with the General,” Captain McLeod said. “Attack now, while we have the opportunity!”

“I’m afraid under the circumstances I too must agree with General Ke’reth for once,” Commander T’Lees opined. “It’s just too dangerous. They could be on the verge of repairing their weapons systems as we debate this, and who knows if we can survive another attack after the devastation of the first strike against us?”

“We must have hurt them badly,” suggested Captain Tomkins. “Perhaps if we offer our aid, helping with medical issues and restoring their basic systems, it would be a first step in opening a dialogue between us?”

“I can’t believe we’re even debating this!” Captain Salamone cut in. “My ship’s been completely disabled and we’re still considering offering a hand in friendship?! This is insane!”

As the debate continued, an indicator on the tactical console of KI’HQaS aboard the *Proud Vengeance* drew the Klingon tactical officer’s attention.

“General, we are being approached from behind by another vessel, approaching fast!”

“Type and designation?” Ke’reth demanded.

“It appears to be... a simple unarmed transport of some kind.”

On the *Sarek*’s viewscreen, the approaching vessel could now be seen. It looked like an old cargo ship, rusty and battered, moving toward both the fleet and the disabled warship beyond.

“That’s the refugee ship we came across last week!” Captain K’danz exclaimed.

“I thought they were on a heading toward *Starbase 719*? What’s it doing out here?” Fil wanted to know.

“I don’t know,” K’danz replied. “After they told us their story, we gave them the coordinates of *Home Plate* with the instructions to head there where they could find temporary shelter. They must have turned around and followed us out here.”

“But why?” Baber asked.

As they watched, the refugee ship moved quickly past the fleet of starships and continued on toward the disabled warship.

“What are they trying to do?” MacLeod asked. “Avenge their homeworld by running their ship into the vessel that destroyed it?”

“Kyler, lock a tractor beam on that ship!” Parker ordered. “We have to stop them!”

Before anyone could react, a large hatch the size of an island opened on the hull of the disabled warship to one side of the dish-like array and a tractor beam from within locked onto the refugee ship, drawing the much smaller vessel toward the opening.

“Major, lock tractors!” Koester ordered.

“Helm, move us between the refugee ship and the warship!” MacLeod ordered his own crew.

“Can we override their beam?” K’danz asked her husband and chief engineer.

“All of us acting in conjunction can rip the cargo ship from the warship’s grasp!” Ke’reth stated.

As the Fifth Fleet vessels all started to maneuver to protect or retrieve the refugee ship, the warship activated multiple tractor beams, bringing the entire fleet to a halt. No vessel could move, and the tractor beams almost immediately overloaded the shields and weapons systems of every starship.

"I knew we should have destroyed that ship while we had the chance!" Ke'reth grumbled.

"Admiral," Lt Riker aboard the *Dauntless* said. "We're being hailed by the refugee ship."

"Begging for help we can no longer provide?" Fil supposed before ordering, "On screen, Lieutenant."

The main viewscreen changed to the image of a humanoid man, his skin the color of burned copper, wearing what could almost be described as farmer's coveralls and a straw hat.

"We did not know people such as yourselves could exist," he said.

"What do you mean?" Fil asked, genuinely confused.

"You are generous, brave, self-sacrificing, willing to give your lives for the lives of strangers you have never met."

Koester suddenly had the feeling something more was going on than what he and his fellow Starfleet officers were originally seeing. He stood up and joined Fil near the center of the bridge.

"You aren't in danger of being captured, are you?" the Fleet Captain said. "You aren't... have never at any time been in any real danger?"

"You are perceptive, Fleet Captain Koester," the man on the screen said. "You have been tested, and to our surprise, you have been found more than worthy."

"Tested?" Fil asked, looking at Koester in confusion. "Tested how? By whom?"

"By them, Admiral," Koester said, pointing at the screen. The copper-skinned man there nodded with a solemn smile.

"As Fleet Captain Koester has already begun to suspect, the so-called warship belongs to us," the alien man on the screen explained. "Like your culture, we Formalians wish to learn as much from the universe around us as we can. We explore the galaxy much like your Starfleet. However, we prefer not to engage in any violence if avoidable. It is the purpose for building the *Vongi Traveler*, the so-called warship you have intercepted."

"For a people who purport not to engage in violence, your unprovoked attack on us was pretty aggressive," Fil commented angrily.

"We did no damage to your ships, injured none of your crew. We merely tested you in a manner that has proven efficient to us."

"How so?" Koester asked.

"We come from a planet in a system close to the galactic core in what you call the Delta Quadrant of the galaxy. We incorporated the technology of many of that quadrant's more powerful - some would say most feared - species into the construction of the *Vongi Traveler*."

"We noticed. Hirogen, Malon, Kazon... Borg!" Koester reiterated.

"Whenever we encounter a new space-going civilization, we first send a scout - the refugee ship your starship *Bellerophon* encountered. The Formalians aboard the scout tell a detailed story of immense destruction caused by a ship so powerful, none could resist. Most of the civilizations we have encountered have simply sent our scouts on their way, disinterested in either helping or hindering us. Others, like you, offer us help in the form of what you call humanitarian aid. Still fewer do what you did, which is to confront the possible threat first-hand."

"And that's the test? To see if we would offer you help?" Fil asked.

"That is but one aspect of it," the alien agreed. "While we observe from a distance, those that confront the *Vongi Traveler* are presented with what appears to be an unstoppable killing machine easily capable of rendering their vessels disabled. If they run after such an encounter, we consider them unworthy of notice or further contact. If however, they attempt to attack the *Vongi Traveler*, find as you did that it is easily disabled, and then continue to attack in an attempt to destroy it, on those we use the full force of the *Traveler*'s weaponry, destroying the attackers and leaving no eye-witnesses before changing course and avoiding the area of space those ships came from. But never before today have we encountered the situation we found ourselves in."

"And what situation was that?" Fil asked, his frustration decreasing slowly.

“In the few occasions where the *Vongi Traveler* was disabled but those we are testing have not moved to destroy the ship completely, we present ourselves and open a dialogue and eventually an exchange of knowledge and ideas. Never before have those we tested believed we were being attacked by our own vessel and actively tried to rescue us. You were willing to risk your lives for people you did not know. This makes you, your Federation and your allies, a truly rare item in this galaxy, Admiral Fil. A treasure it would be to our benefit to learn much more about.”

* * * *

Captain's log, stardate 66453.0:

After initial introductions were complete, the USS Dauntless and the IKV Hem bortaStaH remained with the Vongi Traveler and its disguised scout vessel to continue negotiations toward opening diplomatic relations with the Formalians. Meanwhile, the rest of the Fifth Fleet returned to our regularly assigned missions, which in the case of the Sarek means getting our class of Academy cadets back to Starbase 719 in time to meet the transports that will return them to Earth before the start of the fall semester in San Francisco.

Parker, out.

“Maintaining warp 9,” Huff, the officer at the helm reported.

“Commander Gomez is going to be quite upset with me for maintaining this speed all the way back to the Typhon Sector, but we don't have much choice,” Captain Parker remarked to her bridge crew. “Even at this speed, the cadets are only going to be getting back to Earth a week before the new year of classes begins.”

“So much for summer vacation and my trip to New Orleans,” Cadet Gem Koester mumbled from her position at Science I above the starboard bridge ramp.

“It will still be several days before we reach the starbase,” Mr. Karondar, the Romulan civilian mission specialist sitting at the console next to Koester remarked. “Perhaps you can just program a simulation on the holodeck?”

“It's not the same, Mister Karondar,” Gem complained. “I could program a simulation to slay dragons in Medieval Europe too, but it doesn't mean I was actually there doing it.”

As Karondar commiserated with Cadet Koester, Commander A-ZuRQuIL appeared out of the forward turbolift and approached the command seat.

“Almost 1200 hours, Captain. I've completed my tour of the decks. Ready to relieve you of the watch,” the Capellan warrior said.

“I'm ready to be relieved,” Parker acknowledged with a nod.

A short time later, Parker was making her own post-watch tour of the decks when she came upon the door to the lounge the Academy cadets had unofficially taken over as their own. She paused to consider for a moment before turning and entering the door.

“Attention on deck!” the first cadet who noticed the captain's presence shouted. Parker sighed as everyone in the room jumped to their feet.

“Do I really need to say ‘As you were’ every time I come in a room?” she asked.

“Yes, ma'am!” all the cadets responded in unison.

“As you were,” Parker said in a frustrated tone, then - as the cadets returned to what they had been doing - said, “I realize not all of your classmates are in here right now, so please pass on this message from me. We're currently on course back toward *Starbase 719*, the first leg of your trip back to San Francisco. Admiral Raiajh has arranged for several transports to be standing by on our arrival back at the base for immediate departure, but because

of the mission we just completed - even if everything goes smoothly from here on out - you won't be getting back to the Academy grounds prior to six or seven days before the start of the new semester."

A general groan filled the room as the cadets realized they would be missing out on their entire summer break and several of the pre-semester activities they normally participated in.

"I understand that's not how you planned on ending your training cruise, but given the circumstances, it could have been worse. Much worse!" Several of the cadets, especially those who had been posted on the bridge during the recent confrontation with the Formalians, nodded their heads in agreement. "However, we will instead be returning you to the Academy alive, in one piece, and hopefully better prepared and having a better understanding about what life in Starfleet is all about." There was a general murmur of agreement around the room. Parker started to turn back toward the door when she suddenly paused and turned to face the cadets again. "I would also like to add how proud of your performance aboard my ship I am. And that, after you graduate next year, I would be happy to have any of you report aboard the *Sarek* as a member of my crew."

"Thank you, Captain!" the entire group of cadets responded in unison.

Parker smiled, then turned and left the lounge.

The End