

The pair of Klingons both hunched over the small table in the equally small cabin they shared. The male was tall, muscular, long-haired and had an eye-patch covering where his right eye used to be. The female was shorter, yet equally muscled, her brow furrowed by her Klingon crest and her hair braided down her back more to keep it out of the woman's way than for style.

The pair were both studying a Federation padd containing information they managed to obtain through surreptitious means during their last stopover, the Federation space station in the Typhon Sector; *Starbase 719*. Their study of the information contained on the padd was interrupted by a knock on the door. With an annoyed glance of his single eye, the male deactivated the padd before saying, "Come in."

The door slid open and one of the crew members of the cargo carrier *Erstwhile* stepped in.

"Sorry to disturb you. The Captain wanted me to check and make sure you were settled in okay," the human man said.

"The accommodations are adequate," Vixares, the female Klingon replied. She hoped the answer would satisfy the human and he would leave them alone again.

"You know, it's not often we have passengers aboard, and most certainly not heading for Kos'Karii," the crew member said, either ignoring or oblivious to Vixares' intent. "What brings you two all the way out here beyond the Typhon Expanse?"

"Vengeance!" Vixares replied, her voice increasing greatly in volume. She then looked at her male companion with an expression that bordered on shock. His lone visible eye narrowed accusingly.

"That's one thing I've always liked about you Klingons," the crewman said. "Even when you don't want to say what you're doing, you like to come across as larger than life." The man started to turn around to leave the cabin as he muttered to himself, "I should have been born a Klingon." As the door slid shut once again, Vixares flipped a rocker switch on the edge of the table, locking the door shut before reactivating the padd.

"We did not spend almost a year after the collapse of the Romulan government trying to escape from that filthy prison on Mu Horologii IV and the last eighteen months trying to reach the Typhon Sector to simply be discovered and returned to custody mere days from realizing our task!" the male Klingon growled.

"My apologies. We are so close to our goal, it is all my mind can think about," the female replied.

"We will be in a position to exact our revenge soon enough, Vixares. Be patient. It has been seven long years, but he will not escape our grasp much longer."

Vixares smiled, then looked back down at the screen of the padd, which displayed a recent picture of Fleet Captain Peter J. Koester.

Space, the Final Frontier...

Star Trek: Fifth Fleet

"A Dish Best Served Cold" By PJK

The *Erstwhile*, a civilian operated cargo ship, docked with the orbiting transfer station high above the Klingon colony on the world they called Kos'Karii. As the *Erstwhile*'s crew started moving crates of cargo off the ship and into the transfer station to be examined by customs before it was beamed down to the surface, the two Klingon passengers disembarked and approached the checkpoint, where a government official and two armed security guards stood.

"Purpose for coming to Kos'Karii?" the official asked officiously.

"Displaced by the Empire's withdrawal from Romulan space. A relative of mine told me there was housing and work available here," the male replied. He presented the official with two sets of forged papers that he

had paid a lot of latinum for back on Narendra III. As an added enticement, two slips of latinum were hidden within the folds of the papers.

The Klingon official examined the paperwork, the latinum slips sliding unnoticed into his sleeve as many had done in the past. He then looked at the two armed guards and said, "These two are permitted to pass." The two guards stepped aside and Vixares and her companion passed through the checkpoint and into the station beyond.

"I haven't had fresh ga'gh since just before our mission began seven years ago," the Klingon woman said, sniffing at the air hungrily as the two passed into a small marketplace near the hub of the transfer station.

"I can smell the blood pies too, but we must keep our minds on the mission at hand, Vixares. There will be plenty of time for food after we have met with Kol'chary."

"Who is Kol'chary?" Vixares asked.

"An old family friend. He has connections here on Kos'Karii. He can get us meetings with the people we need to see in order to complete our ultimate mission." The male then pointed toward a side corridor where a sign written in Klingonese directed visitors to the personnel transporters. Several minutes and another two strips of latinum later, the pair were on the surface of Kos'Karii.

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Kol'chary, an older Klingon well past his prime, watched in amusement as his two guests devoured an entire table full of food.

"I take it the Romulans didn't feed you very well in that prison, Kelvop?" he asked during a brief moment when the one-eyed male paused to gulp at a mug of blood wine.

"The Romulans treated us like animals, from the crew of the warbird that first took custody of us to the lowliest guard at the prison camp," Kelvop replied. He then seemed to remember the reason he and his companion had come to Kos'Karii and asked, "Did you receive my message? And my list of requirements?"

"I did," Kol'chary replied. "I have a... friend ...gathering several people that may be of use to you. Later this evening we will walk to a meeting place on the edge of the colony. If all goes as planned, there should be at least two dozen or more waiting there who would be willing to aide you and Vixares in your quest."

"Good. The sooner we find a way of intercepting the *Dauntless*, the sooner Vixares and I can return to the lives we knew before we encountered Koester."

"The day will end soon. It will be safer to meet after most of the colony has gone to sleep for the night. Enjoy your meal in the meantime. You earned it."

Kelvop raised his mug of blood wine in Kol'chary's direction, then swallowed every last drop before stuffing his mouth with targ meat and pippius claw.

Several hours later, all three Klingons made their way through the darkened streets of the colony, the elder Kol'chary leading the way as he leaned heavily on the bone of a large creature he had slain in his younger days fashioned into a cane. Kol'chary paused his companions half a block from their designated meeting place and gazed around carefully. After assuring himself they were neither being observed nor pursued, he led Kelvop and Vixares toward what appeared to be a windowless warehouse. He knocked on the door in three groups of three, then waited nearly a quarter minute before following it up with two sets of two knocks. Almost immediately a heavy bolt could be heard sliding back on the opposite side of the door and it opened outward.

"Quickly, before someone sees us!" Kol'chary implored, gesturing into the door and prompting Kelvop and Vixares to rush in. Once inside the pair found themselves on the business end of half a dozen disruptor pistols.

"We have been betrayed!" Vixares growled to Kelvop.

"Wait a moment, Vixares," the male Klingon suggested. "Kol'chary would not betray me." Behind them they could hear the door close and the heavy bolt slide back into place.

"Were you observed?" a voice in the dim light asked.

"Not as far as I can tell," Kol'chary replied. A moment later all the disruptors were lowered and Kelvop was introduced to each of the other Klingons present. Several were young Klingons, barely of Age of Ascension, but eager to head out into the galaxy to experience adventure. Most of the others were adults, many of them kicked

out of the Imperial Klingon Defense Force for acts considered dishonorable, hoping to perform some action that would restore their honor while simply waiting for the day Fek'lh'r would eventually come to drag them to Gre'Thor. Among the leaders of the mercenaries was a male named Rodek, who had fallen out of favor within the Klingon fleet – for what reason even he himself did not understand – and was recently dismissed with dishonor.

Rodek and his companions led the entire group into a smaller room to one side of the warehouse. There they dunked mugs into a barrel of blood wine before gathering around a single round table and sat down.

“So,” Rodek said as he looked around at his companions before finally settling on the one-eyed Klingon across the table from him, sitting next to the only female in the room. “What is the job you want to hire us to do? Judging from our illustrious backgrounds, I would be willing to wager whatever it is isn't legal.”

“For now, I just need your help putting together a plan,” Kelvop replied.

“A plan?” one of the younger Klingons exclaimed. “That's not what I signed up for! I expected action!”

“You haven't signed up for anything yet, young whelp,” Kol'chary remarked with a look that could turn men to stone.

“What kind of plan are we putting together for you?” Rodek asked, more civilly than his young companion. “And do you really need close to two dozen of us to do it?”

“First I need information so we can plan adequately. Do the Federation starships visit this colony? If so, how often? What kind of resources are available to us here? How easy are they to obtain?”

“If you want to know what ships visit the colony on a regular basis, you should talk to Keleth, the port master,” Rodek said. “His office is close to the civil transport station on the surface. He knows every ship that comes and goes from Kos'Karii.”

“Then I shall find this Keleth in the morning...,” Kelvop started to say.

“Actually, this may be an errand for Vixares here,” Kol'chary remarked. “I am told Keleth has an eye for the ladies, especially the young and pretty ones.” This remark made Vixares unconsciously smile a snaggle-toothed grin. “She will probably be able to get him to talk easier than any of the rest of us.”

Kelvop nodded at the logic of what Kol'chary said, then turned his attention to the next question.

“What kind of resources are you looking for?” Durn, another of the dishonored adults asked.

“I need something that can go up against a Federation starship,” Kelvop replied, taking several of those gathered around the table by surprise. Two of the youths – including the one who had spoken earlier – exchanged excited looks. “Obviously a cargo shuttle isn't going to cut it this time.”

“You're looking to steal a warship?!?” a third youth asked in shock.

“It need not be anything like a cruiser or battleship,” Kelvop assured. “Something small that can attack with stealth and surprise should be good enough.”

“A Bird of Prey?” one of the other Klingons asked. “There are several B'rel-class vessels stationed here at a military base on the outskirts of the colony. They normally patrol the sector from time to time, but are often in port for maintenance and upkeep.”

“I may be able to use some of my old access codes in order to get near one,” Rodek remarked. “I have reason to believe not all of my codes have been deactivated.”

“What do we need a Bird of Prey for?” the third youth asked. “What Federation starship are you going after? And why?”

“It's what Starfleet calls a Sovereign-class starship...,” Kelvop started to say.

“A B'rel-class Bird of Prey against a Federation Sovereign-class vessel? You don't stand a chance!” Kro'tocQ said dismissively.

“We will stand more than simply a chance if we can hit them by surprise!” Kelvop explained. “Remember, the IKDF and Starfleet are allies! All I need do is get close enough without raising suspicion and I can take out their vessel's bridge – and my intended target – before anyone suspects.”

“And which ship specifically are we going after?”

“The *Dauntless*.”

There was stunned silence around the table for a moment until Durn remarked, “The Flagship of the Fifth Fleet? Impossible!”

“Why do you wish to attack that ship?” Dorow asked.

“Because we must take our vengeance upon its captain!” Vixares replied, slamming her gauntleted fist on the table and causing more than one wine mug to fall over and spill.

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The next day, Vixares made her way to the office of the port master in the center of the colony under the pretense of asking when the *Erstwhile* – the only ship she knew definitely called on Kos’Karii – would be in port.

“Nuq nech,” Keleth said as Vixares entered his office. The older Klingon looked Vixares up and down, appreciating what he was seeing. “What can this old Klingon do for such a young lovely today?”

“I wish to inquire when the cargo ship *Erstwhile* will return next to Kos’Karii,” Vixares said. “I am awaiting a shipment.”

“*Erstwhile* was in port just yesterday, my lovely,” Keleth said, half his teeth missing from his leering smile. “Perhaps your shipment has already arrived? What is the shipment number?” He turned to access his scheduling computer.

“I do not think so,” Vixares replied. “It takes several days for any ship to transit from the Federation starbase to here, and it has only been three days since I placed my order. I was just wondering when the next scheduled arrival of the *Erstwhile* might be?”

“The human captain of that ship likes to keep his own schedule, so it’s hard to say,” Keleth answered. “Anything else I can... uh... help you with today?” The elder Klingon wiggled his eyebrows in mock proposition. Vixares almost laughed at the way it made his forehead ridges look but managed to contain herself lest she insult him and lose any chance of learning the knowledge she actually sought.

“Perhaps you can address a curiosity of mine,” she said, moving closer to Keleth and sniffing deeply as if trying to take in his musk. “Speaking of Federation spacecraft, just how often do the Federation starships assigned to this region make port calls here at Kos’Karii? Does the flagship ever pay a visit?”

“The Federation pretty much leaves us to our own devices out here,” Keleth replied. “The *Hem bortaStaH* frequently makes port here, as you would expect, but aside from the two Federation warships none of the Federation fleet ever makes port here.”

“Warships?” Vixares asked.

“Yes. Two fine ships built for battle!” Keleth explained enthusiastically. “The *Besiege* and the *Corsair*. Both have been known to visit the colony from time to time, though it has been several months since either was here. I think the Federation sends them here just to remind us that Starfleet is not all a bunch of mewling targs.”

“Your information has been helpful,” Vixares said before leaning close and nibbling on the older Klingon’s ear. The man’s eyes rolled upward in pleasure as the woman embraced him further. He then grunted as she thrust the d’k’tagh between his shoulder blades and he slumped lifelessly to the floor beneath the desk. Vixares spit his foul taste from her mouth and then, making sure no one had observed her out in the street beyond the door, snuck her way out of the port master’s office.

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Vixares made her way back to the warehouse on the edge of the colony, just ahead of Kelvop and Rodek, who had spent the last several hours observing the military base several kellicams away where half a dozen Birds of Prey were landed, most of them for the purpose of maintenance.

“It will be near impossible to steal one of the ships. It appeared even the guards had guards,” Kelvop was saying as the two entered the warehouse and bolted the door behind them.

“One of the necessities when this is the only Klingon outpost in the region,” Rodek explained. “Particularly if you consider the Romulan colony not far from here.”

The two males entered the small room with the central table at which Vixares sat, looking at some of the information she and Kelvop had compiled on the Federation Fifth Fleet during their long journey to Kos’Karii. Both

acknowledged the female's presence as Kelvop continued, "It would take a fully armed and trained strike team to capture one of those ships, and we would probably lose at least half our mercenary force trying, and Kahless knows they aren't trained for this sort of assault."

"Not to mention the probability that at least half of the ships you saw there today are incapable of flight right now," Rodek added. "And no way to tell which of the ships is functional and which isn't. You need to come up with a better plan than this, Kelvop."

Vixares turned her attention on the second Klingon male and remarked, "I thought that was what we hired you and your mercenaries for, Rodek? To help plan this mission."

"Is this a mission, or a fool's errand?" Rodek asked with a sour expression as he dipped a mug into the now half-empty barrel of blood wine and sat heavily in one of the chairs opposite Vixares and put his booted feet on top of the table. "And what contribution to this 'mission' did YOU make today?"

"I met with the dearly departed Keleth a short time ago before he began his journey to Sto-Vo-Kor," Vixares explained with a demure smile.

"And what did you learn?" Kelvop asked with a hint of excitement in his voice. "Does the *Dauntless* ever make port here?"

"No," Vixares replied, quickly killing her companion's excitement. "Only two of the Starfleet ships ever visits the colony, and both are Federation warships."

"Warships?" Kelvop asked, moving closer to the woman. "What kind of warships?"

"I was looking that up when you came in," Vixares explained. She re-activated one of the padds and called up the information. "One of them is Starfleet-designation Leviathan-class. Phasers, pulse cannons, torpedo tubes. Crew of 125. The other is Starfleet-designation Defiant-class. Very similar weaponry to the larger ship but half the size and with a standard crew compliment of only 50. Both vessels have made multiple visits to the colony since it was established, though not on any regular schedule, and neither has visited in at least several weeks."

Kelvop studied the information displayed on the padd with his one good eye. Slowly a smile started spreading across his face.

"This could work out better than we hoped," he said to Vixares.

"How so?"

"We had planned to commandeer a Bird of Prey in the hopes the *Dauntless* would not suspect an allied vessel to attack. How much more trust would Koester give if it were one of his own ships approaching?"

"The trust would be implicit," Vixares said, a similar smile appearing on her lips.

"What are you two blathering about?" Rodek asked as he downed the last of the blood wine in his mug. Kelvop merely slid the padd across the table at Rodek, who picked it up with curiosity.

"The *Corsair*?" he finally asked, looking at the two across the table as if they had gone insane. "You're joking, right?"

"I believe Kol'chary is friendly with several members of the Governor's staff," Kelvop remarked to his companion. "Perhaps it will soon be time to pay a courtesy call on Governor Vagh?"

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Captain's log, stardate 66839.1:

USS Dauntless in orbit of Beta Arietis II in Sector 50113, where away teams are currently conducting an archeological dig on the surface. Recently discovered evidence supports the theory that Beta Arietis II once supported a star-faring civilization before a catastrophe destroyed their civilization. Commander Wallace is hoping to find evidence that Beta Arietis II may be the origin of the civilization that developed on Sagion II, a planet recently wiped out as well by a race of sentient machines.

Koester, commanding Dauntless, out.

Fleet Captain Peter J. Koester was standing at the window in his ready room, looking down on the surface of the planet Beta Arietis II. Even after thousands – perhaps hundreds of thousands – of years, kilometer-wide cracks across the surface of the planet that had been filled in with cooled black magma from the planet’s mantle were visible running across the continents, interspersed with forests and planes of long grass, and the planet had a resemblance to decorative cracked glass. It was hypothesized that the cracks in the planet’s crust were created by a doomsday weapon of some sort and the *Dauntless*’ crew hoped to find evidence that would either confirm or debunk that theory once and for all.

Abruptly, the intercom on the nearby desk whistled and the voice of Commander Setton To’Lock Arbelo – the starship’s first officer – was heard.

“Captain, we have a private communiqué coming in for you from Kos’Karii.”

“Kos’Karii?” Koester said to himself as he turned around. “Who do I know on Kos’Karii?” He then sat down in his chair and touched the intercom control as he said, “Pipe it in here, Exec.” A moment later the monitor screen rose out of the desktop and the image appeared, revealing a Klingon man Koester did not recognize.

“This is Fleet Captain Koester. What can I do for you?”

“Fleet Captain, my name is Commander Klim’tok. I served aboard the *qul’maS* several years ago as an officer under Captain Kargoth before he took his rightful place in Sto-Vo-Kor.”

“Greetings, Commander,” Koester said with a smile. “It has been too long since anyone spoke of Kargoth and the *IKV qul’maS*. To what do I owe the pleasure?”

“Fleet Captain, I am currently stationed at the IKDF base on the colony world of Kos’Karii. I recently overheard stories of two people here, a male and female named Kelvop and Vixares, who have been making numerous inquiries in regard to you and your starship. Based on what I have heard, I believe their intent is revenge against you. As an associate of Captain Kargoth, I felt honor-bound to warn you.”

“While I appreciate the warning, Commander,” Koester said, slightly confused, “I don’t understand why it’s necessary? Why would two Klingons be swearing revenge against me? I’ve always worked amicably with members of the IKDF – most recently with General Ke’reth of the *Hem bortaStaH*, and I don’t recall ever having encountered a pair of Klingons named Kelvop or Vixares.”

“Perhaps you do not know their names but you would recognize them if you saw them?” Klim’tok suggested. “Both worked as undercover agents for a member of the High Council many years ago until they were captured and incarcerated in a Romulan prison. The woman, Vixares, is quite memorable from what I have heard. As an agent she had been treated with a viral therapy to make her appear human. In that disguise, she used the name Sherman – after the planet our two governments share in the Donatu Sector – and apparently the only ‘human name’ she could come up with at the time.”

“Wait a second...,” Koester paused, the name striking a chord. “Sherman... And Kelvop...” Suddenly, like an old-fashioned light bulb turning on over the Fleet Captain’s head, he remembered. “That incident with Commander T’K’Lon and the *Volantis*! That must have been... hmmm... seven or eight years ago?” Suddenly Koester’s confusion returned. “But it was T’K’Lon who took custody of the pair and their ship, a small cargo shuttle with a cloaking device they used to try and attack the *Volantis*. Why would they be coming after me?”

“Apparently it was you who simply allowed the Romulan ship to take custody of them,” Klim’tok said.

“That’s because – legally – I had no claim on them. They didn’t attack my ship or any of my personnel. Only the Romulan ship we were escorting through Federation space at the time.”

“Be that as it may, Fleet Captain, it is you they have set their sights on for revenge,” Klim’tok explained. “My contacts have told me the pair plan on hijacking a Bird of Prey and attacking your vessel with it. Based on how Captain Kargoth regarded you, I know you to be an honorable man. I only wished to give you a fighting chance against those two petaQs.”

“I appreciate the warning and I thank you for your courtesy, Commander. I will do my best to make sure Kelvop and Vixares do not get the upper hand on me.”

“The honor is mine, Fleet Captain. Klim’tok, out.”

The monitor screen turned black, briefly flashing the emblem of the Klingon Empire before descending into the desk once again. Koester continued to sit in his chair, wondering what he should do with the information he had been given.

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Captain's log, stardate 66861.1:

After completing a routine patrol of the lower AOR, the Corsair is on approach to the Klingon colony of Kos'Karii in response to a message we received from the colony's governor, Vagh.

Pearson, out.

Captain Cathryn Elisabeth Pearson sat in the command chair of the Defiant-class *USS Corsair*. Her husband and first officer, Captain Konstantin Harkonnen was stationed at the helm console directly in front of her, and on the viewscreen in front of both could be seen the rapidly growing image of the planet Kos'Karii.

"Tell me again why we're making a stop at Kos'Karii?" Harkonnen asked his wife. "I was hoping to get back to the base and the girls before Hans and Val have spoiled them too much to bear."

"I was considering making a stop here anyway, since neither we nor the *Besiege* has visited in months, in order to maintain good relations with our neighbors, but we also received a message that Governor Vagh needs a message hand-delivered to Admiral Raiajh." Pearson then stood up and moved forward, placing a hand on Harkonnen's shoulder. "ETA to standard orbit?"

"Estimating fourteen minutes thirty-seven seconds to orbit," Harkonnen replied.

"Good. We should be in, out, and on our way home very soon." Pearson then looked over toward the officer manning the operations console, Ashari Pel. "Lieutenant, hail Governor Vagh's office and let them know we'll be in orbit over the colony shortly."

Pel acknowledged the order. Less than a minute later she turned to face Pearson and said, "Captain, Governor Vagh wishes to speak with you directly."

"On screen, Lieutenant."

The image of the rapidly growing planet was replaced with that of a middle-aged Klingon male. He was thin yet muscular, his hair pulled back in a short pony tail. For some reason he looked angry, though that may simply have been his normal expression. Pearson had heard this particular Klingon had quite a reputation, which is why he had been a Klingon governor – first at Krios and later here in the Fifth Fleet AOR – for most of his adult life.

"This is Captain Cathryn Pearson of the Federation starship *Corsair*. What can I do for you, Governor Vagh?"

"Welcome to Kos'Karii, Captain Pearson. I wanted to contact you personally and invite you and your senior officers to beam down to my residence for an official reception once your ship arrives in orbit."

Pearson felt a slight sense of frustration at the governor's invitation. She glanced down at Harkonnen, who had turned to look up at her with an 'I told you so' expression.

"My crew and I appreciate your generous offer, Governor," Pearson started to reply. "However, the *Corsair* is on a tight schedule and we need to get back to *Star...*"

"I insist, Captain," Vagh said, his voice taking on a more dangerous tone. "In fact, if you and your crew turn down my invitation, I will take it as a personal insult to my honor."

Pearson was slightly taken aback by the governor's pronouncement. It took her several seconds to find her voice again before she said, "My senior officers and I would be honored to accept your invitation, Governor. I'm sure we can spare a few hours out of our busy schedule to join you at your residence. We'll beam down within ten minutes of the *Corsair* entering orbit."

“Very good,” Vagh replied, looking slightly relieved. “I will await your arrival. Kos’Karii, out.”

As the screen on Vagh’s desk went blank, he looked over toward the side of his office.

“Starfleet is on their way,” he said. “Now release them!”

In the corner of the office, Kelvop and Rodek held disruptors on the governor, while nearby several of the other mercenaries were holding the governor’s wife and two children – a male nearing his Age of Ascension and a female only a decade old – with knives to their throats.

“You are without honor!” the governor’s wife growled at the man who was holding her captive as she glanced sidelong toward her daughter being held tightly by Vixares.

“And how do you think I got where I am today?” Kro’tocQ asked before moving the knife he was holding away from his hostage’s throat. Then without warning he plunged his knife into the Klingon woman’s back. Her eyes went wide with pain as she collapsed to the floor of the office.

“No! You said you would release them if I did as you demanded!” Vagh cried out as he started to get out of his chair, a murderous rage appearing in his eyes.

“We ARE releasing them,” Rodek said just as he pulled the trigger of his disruptor. Several blasts of energy from both his and Kelvop’s weapon struck the governor’s chest before he was even completely out of the chair, sending Vagh tumbling backward. Rodek then nodded at Vixares and the other male holding the governor’s son and they immediately slit the children’s throats from ear to ear and let them flop down on the floor next to their mother. “We are releasing them from this life. Can’t leave anyone behind to swear vengeance against us now, can we?” He then looked at his companions and said, “Get ready. The Starfleet crew will arrive here in minutes.”

“We are prepared for them,” Vixares said.

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As the *Corsair* settled into orbit over Kos’Karii, Pearson activated the intercom throughout the small vessel.

“Senior officers, muster in the transporter room in five minutes. Uniform of the day will be normal duty uniform. This is officially a diplomatic function, so no open weapons of any kind. I want everyone on their best behavior. Bridge, out.” She then got up from the captain’s chair and moved toward Harkonnen, who likewise got out of the helm chair and turned the duties over to a junior officer.

“I don’t plan on being long,” Pearson said to her husband.

“Aren’t I going too?” Harkonnen asked. “After all, you did say senior officers, and only you are more senior to the first officer.”

“I’m uncomfortable with both of us leaving the ship. I want you to stay aboard the *Corsair*,” Pearson remarked.

“If you don’t want both of us beaming down, then why don’t I go in your place and you stay aboard?”

“Because it would look bad if the captain of the ship skips out on a planetary governor’s invitation, particularly when said governor is Klingon and has already stated a refusal of his invitation would be a stain on his honor.” She leaned up against her husband and stroked his beard before giving him a brief kiss. “Watch the ship. I’ll be back soon and we can be on our way back home.”

“If you insist, Kitty Cat,” Harkonnen agreed with a smile before moving over and sitting down in the command chair. “Helm, maintain orbit.”

Pearson gave one last smile to her husband before leaving the bridge and making her way to the nearby transporter room. There, several members of the *Corsair*’s crew, including the chief operations officer, chief tactical officer, chief medical officer, and chief engineer waited.

“Governor Vagh insisted we join him for a reception at his residence,” Pearson explained to her crew. “We’ll stay long enough to be considered polite, but then I want to get underway again as soon as possible.” She mounted the transport platform with several of her officers – the senior staff would have to beam down in two groups due to the limited size of the Defiant-class vessel’s transporter – and nodded toward the transporter chief.

Seconds later the first group dematerialized in the sparkle of the transporter beam. The second group then stepped into the chamber and waited.

“Just waiting for the captain’s signal that the coordinates are clear to send the rest of you down,” the chief informed. Seconds ticked by. The chief kept glancing at his indicator panel but there was no change. When close to a minute had passed, the chief was about to try signaling Pearson to confirm the first half of the away team had arrived with no problem when the green indicator on his console lit up. “There’s the signal I’m waiting for. Stand by.”

The chief engineer, the most senior officer still aboard aside from Harkonnen, nodded.

“Energizing,” the chief stated as he moved his hand along the controls and the transporter hummed to life. The six officers dematerialized aboard the *Corsair* and re-materialized in the entry hall of the governor’s residence. The walls appeared to be made of metal – rust encrusting much of the surface – with four huge steel columns holding up the high ceiling, the only light in the room coming from braziers mounted on tall legs along each side wall between the columns. Commander Zan Dobrin expected the first half of the away team and the Klingon governor and his staff to be waiting for them as they materialized, but no one appeared to be present. Confused, Dobrin looked around.

“Captain Pearson?” he called out.

“Don’t be concerned,” a voice said from somewhere in the hall, the acoustics making it impossible to determine exactly where from. “You’ll be joining her soon.” Then, without warning, several disruptor beams struck the away team, knocking them unconscious.

* * * *

Harkonnen was still sitting in the command chair, drumming the fingers of one hand along the arm of the chair while the other hand propped up his head. It had been thirty minutes since Pearson and the senior staff had beamed down and so far no communication had been received from them and it was coming up on the standard check-in time.

“Commander,” the ensign sitting at ops said, turning his chair to face Harkonnen. “Captain Pearson is checking in. She wants to speak to you.”

Harkonnen suddenly straightened in the command chair before pushing the communications control. “This is Harkonnen,” he said.

“Commander, we’ve had a slight... incident. Lieutenant Pel ate some Klingon cuisine that didn’t agree with her, and Doctor Bartholomew would like to beam back aboard and treat her in sickbay,” Pearson explained.

Harkonnen’s brow furrowed in concern as he listened to his wife.

“Is there something wrong, Cathryn?” he asked. “Your voice sounds... unusual.”

“Probably from too much laughter and too much blood wine,” Pearson quickly replied. “Governor Vagh sets a very good table. Now beam Pel and Doctor Bartholomew back aboard, Commander, so I don’t need to hear her whining.”

“Aye... Captain,” Harkonnen replied, still slightly confused, just as the circuit closed. He then activated the intercom to the transporter and said, “Transporter room, this is Captain Harkonnen. Lock onto Lieutenant Pel and Doctor Bartholomew and beam them aboard.”

“Locking onto their communicator signal now,” the chief replied. “Ready to beam them aboard.”

“Proceed,” Harkonnen said. “Bridge out.” Harkonnen then went back to thinking about what his wife had just said, wondering why she would be drinking an excessive amount of Klingon blood wine when it was something she never quite developed the taste for in the first place?

Several minutes later, Harkonnen heard the port egress door open and turned to face it, figuring it would be Bartholomew with a report on Pel’s condition. He had only a fraction of a second to realize the barrel of a disruptor pistol was aimed at his head before the disruptor fired and everything went black.

Several more disruptor beams were fired in the following seconds, followed by the starboard egress door opening and Rodek stepping out onto the bridge. He looked at the half-dozen other Klingons as they spread out –

one dumping the body of the helmsman onto the deck before replacing him in the helm seat – another taking a closer look at the unconscious Harkonnen.

“The bridge is ours,” the Klingon that had shot Harkonnen told Rodek. “And with it, the entire ship.”

“I told you it would be easy,” Rodek stated. “Once we lulled them into a false sense of security by using Governor Vagh’s authority, it was child’s play to infiltrate their vessel and take over.”

“I still don’t see why we need to keep them all alive,” one of the younger Klingons remarked, his hand fidgeting with the handle of the d’k’tagh mounted on his belt.

“Do you know how to operate the engines of this vessel?” Rodek asked the youth pointedly. “Are you capable of accessing all the data we need in the memory banks? Can you even read the language the Federation uses to designate their equipment?”

“No,” the youth admitted.

“If we’re going to operate this vessel, we need at least some of the Starfleeters alive,” Rodek explained. “And Kelvop believes we can use them as bargaining tools should it become necessary.”

“I thought that was what Pearson and her senior officers were for down on the surface?” Dorow remarked.

“A lot of good they’ll do us when we’re light years from Kos’Karii and staring down either an IKDF patrol vessel or one of the other Starfleet ships.”

As Rodek was speaking, the starboard egress opened once again and Kelvop and Vixares entered the bridge behind Rodek.

“Half the crew has been beamed down to the surface to join the senior staff in captivity there,” Kelvop explained. “Most of the rest that remain aboard have been locked in their quarters. The ship is ours and we only needed to kill two of their security guards to do it!” Kelvop then looked at the unconscious Starfleet personnel lying on the deck and said, “Make sure we have those members of the crew we need in place to run this ship and get us where we need to go. But make sure the bridge and main engineering remain under heavy guard,” Kelvop ordered. “If any of them resist or refuse to cooperate, simply kill them.”

As Rodek moved to implement Kelvop’s orders, the other Klingon turned to find Vixares lifting Harkonnen’s head by his dark hair, looking almost approvingly at his unconscious face. Kelvop looked at her with his only good eye, the brow furrowing as he asked, “Is something wrong with this one?”

“No,” Vixares replied with a quick lick of her lips. “There’s just... something... about this human. Even unconscious, he possesses some kind of... animal magnetism.”

Kelvop was amused in spite of himself. “Do you find him attractive?” he asked.

“He is attractive. ...For a human,” the Klingon female replied.

A thin smile creased Kelvop’s lips as he said, “Then perhaps when our mission is done and Koester is dead, I will let you have your way with this one. He is unlikely to survive either way.” He then looked at Vixares more intently as he ordered, “Now find me the information we require!”

Vixares looked at Harkonnen one last time, her free hand starting to stroke down the side of his face before she turned her hand and scratched her nails down through his beard. She then let his head flop back to the side and headed toward the operations console, using skills she learned as a spy to quickly access encrypted LCARS files.

“We are in luck,” Vixares remarked as Kelvop leaned over the back of the chair in which she sat. “The *Dauntless* is only one sector away, conducting a survey of the Beta Arietis system.”

Kelvop smiled again, this one a wide, toothy smile, as he looked toward the Klingon sitting at the helm.

“Set course for the Beta Arietis system. As soon as the rest of our mercenaries are aboard, take us there at maximum speed!”

“Course being calculated... I think... I am having trouble deciphering some of these controls. I calculate we should be ready to break orbit in less than five minutes,” the helmsman replied.

“Finally. The moment I have waited seven long years for is almost at hand,” Kelvop said with a look of triumph at Vixares.

* * * *

A few days later, after the crew had regained consciousness and learned the situation they unwittingly had placed themselves in, Harkonnen found himself sitting at the tactical console on the bridge. Kelvop had determined that, as the senior surviving officer aboard the *Corsair*, he needed to keep Harkonnen close at hand should the ship encounter another Klingon or Federation vessel in order to keep the renegade Klingon's presence aboard a secret. Harkonnen was starting to feel fatigued from lack of sleep, as the Klingons rarely let those manning the bridge leave, only replacing the helmsman from time to time. From snippets of conversation he overheard, he knew something similar was occurring in engineering. Most of the functions at the console at which he sat had been locked-out or disabled – apparently one of the Klingons was skilled enough in Federation computer science to override the normal security measures – so there was little for the Russian to do except continue to scan the route ahead in hopes of locating another Federation starship and somehow alert them of the *Corsair*'s plight.

He glanced over toward the captain's chair, where the Klingon renegade the others called Kelvop currently sat. He also noticed the four other Klingons carrying rifles stationed in each corner of the bridge, outnumbering the Starfleet crew present five to three, with the *Corsair* crew completely unarmed.

"XO!" Harkonnen heard a voice nearby harshly whisper. He surreptitiously glanced over at the un-joined Trill male currently sitting at the helm. "How long are we going to let this continue, XO? We need to do something?"

"Do what?" Harkonnen whispered back, hoping none of the Klingons mercenaries would overhear. "They have orders to kill at the slightest provocation. I heard a few of them talking last night about how Ensign McGinley tried to organize a revolt in engineering. The guards there just shot everyone without compunction and left the bodies lying where they fell before dragging a new crew in there to operate the main power systems."

"We can't just let them keep control of this ship and do whatever it is they're planning on doing!" the Trill exclaimed. "What if they're going to attack the starbase?"

"We just have to hope an opportunity presents itself before whatever it is these Klingons are planning to do occurs, Lieutenant," Harkonnen implored.

"You!" Harkonnen looked over to where the voice had come from. One of the Klingon guards had moved closer to the tactical console, his weapon leveled at Harkonnen. "No talking!" he ordered. Harkonnen nodded and returned his attention to the sensor readouts, hoping opportunity would present itself very soon.

* * * *

Several days later, Fleet Captain Koester sat in his own command chair, reviewing the day's subspace message traffic. The survey of Beta Arietis II was almost complete and he wanted to verify if his ship would be heading to the Sagion system next as expected.

"Captain," said chief operations officer Lt Commander Thomas Riker. "Commander Wallace reports they're packing all their gear and should be back aboard the ship in thirty to forty-five minutes."

"Good. After this we're heading to the Sagion system for a brief visit," Koester said, seeing nothing among the messages diverting his starship elsewhere.

"Sagion, sir?" Lieutenant Hyland, the helmsman asked. "I thought that planet was now dead?"

"It is," Koester confirmed. "But Mister Wallace hopes that enough evidence still may remain amid the rubble and wreckage to confirm the relation between the ancient Arietisians and the more recent Sagions."

Riker started to ask, "Why not simply go to Woodron, where many of the surviving Sagions have settled, and take DNA and other samples from...?"

"Excuse me, Captain," Major April Mendez, the chief of security, cut in, "but sensors are detecting a small starship entering the system, bearing 160 mark 337. They're on a direct course toward this planet."

"Identity?" Koester asked with mild concern.

"Receiving a Starfleet transponder signal," Mendez stated. A moment later she added, "Confirmed. It's the *Corsair*."

Koester was now mildly confused. "What's Cathryn doing all the way out here? I would have thought she'd be done with her patrol route and be pretty close to *Home Plate* if not already docked by now." He glanced over his shoulder at Mendez and ordered, "Hail the *Corsair*, Major."

"Aye, Captain. Hailing frequencies open."

"*Corsair*, this is *Dauntless*. What brings you to our neck o' the woods today? Respond please."

It took a few seconds, but eventually the viewscreen changed to the image of the *Corsair's* bridge. Sitting in the captain's chair in the middle of the image, straightening his uniform jacket, was the last person Koester imagined would be there.

"Captain Harkonnen? I must admit I'm surprised to see you in the center seat. Where's Captain Pearson?"

"Captain Pearson is feeling a bit under the weather at the moment," Harkonnen replied. "Very similar, I understand, to how you felt after your visit to Capria IV. She left me in charge for the duration."

"I see," Koester said with a nod. "Please tell her I hope she's feeling much better soon."

"I hope so too, but it's too early to tell," Harkonnen remarked. He then appeared to change the subject as he said, "If I recall, you have never toured the *Corsair*. Perhaps, while we are in the vicinity, you would like to come aboard?"

"I appreciate the offer, Captain, but unfortunately we're just finishing off our survey here and must very soon get underway to the Sagion system. We're on a strict schedule and we really can't deviate. Can I take a rain check for the next time both ships are back in spacedock at the same time?"

"Of course," Harkonnen replied, carefully neutral. "I look forward to showing you around."

"Thanks again for the offer. Give my best wishes to your crew. *Dauntless*, out."

Aboard the *Corsair*, as soon as the viewscreen blinked back to the image of the Sovereign-class starship in orbit of the intricately cracked planet, a drop of sweat trickled down Harkonnen's brow.

"K'pekt! Humans NEVER make things easy!" Kelvop cursed as he moved back up closer to the man sitting in the captain's chair, his disruptor set to kill and still pointing at the Russian's head. Harkonnen was tempted for a split-second to attempt to either grab the weapon as Kelvop moved closer or bat it out of the distracted Klingon's hands, but the other Klingons standing on each side of the main viewer with rifles pointing at the Starfleet crew made such an attempt pointless.

"Vixares, arm weapons!" Kelvop ordered, grabbing Harkonnen by the scruff of his uniform and tossing him out of the chair and onto the deck before sitting down. "Take out that ship's bridge!"

"Unless they're completely incompetent, the *Dauntless* will detect such an arming of weapons and be able to raise their shields before we can fire," Vixares said from the tactical console.

"Is there a way we can arm weapons without the *Dauntless* detecting?" Kelvop asked, his frustration growing as he came so near to – yet so far from – his objective.

Vixares consulted power configurations on the console. After a moment she turned back toward Kelvop with a smile and said, "I can set up a trickle charge that should avoid detection by the *Dauntless*, but it will take some time."

"How much time?" Kelvop asked.

"Between ten and fifteen minutes before phasers are charged and ready to fire," the Klingon woman said.

"It will have to do," Kelvop said. "Start charging weapons as you suggest. Once we destroy the *Dauntless's* bridge, the rest of the ship will be completely vulnerable and we can fire at will!"

* * * *

"What's the matter, Skipper?" Chief Pono Kyman asked from the mission ops console as the viewscreen changed back to the image of the distant Defiant-class vessel approaching the planet. "We don't need to head for Sagion all that soon. And Captain Harkonnen never actually said why they are here at Beta Arietis."

"No. It was something Captain Harkonnen did say," Koester replied. "I'm pretty sure he was trying to tell me something."

"How do you know he was trying to tell you something?" Counselor Gera asked.

“First he called his own wife ‘Captain Pearson’ instead of Cathryn like he normally would, like I’ve heard him do countless times, even when on duty,” Koester explained. “Then he said she was under the weather, like I felt after my visit to Capria IV. I wasn’t sick after we visited Capria IV.”

“No,” Kyman said. “You were held hostage by terrorists.”

“Exactly!” Koester agreed, pointing a finger at the COB. “He was trying to tell us exactly where Captain Pearson is right now.”

“Why didn’t he just come out and say it?” Gera asked.

“I think he’s under duress,” Koester said. “I haven’t told anyone on the crew about this before, but I recently received a communiqué from a Klingon officer that used to serve under Captain Kargoth and is now stationed on Kos’Karii. He told me the two Klingons that tried to attack the *IRW Volantis* when we were escorting them to Zaqri seven years ago were out looking for revenge against me for their capture and were trying to steal a Bird of Prey in order to do it. What if they managed to hijack the *Corsair* instead.”

“A handful of Klingons commandeering a Federation starship?” Mendez said in disbelief.

“I know it sounds unlikely, but we have to consider the possibility. Especially after that conversation with Harkonnen. We need to know what we’re up against. Scan the *Corsair* and tell me if you register any Klingon life signs,” Koester ordered.

“If we scan that ship and there are Klingons aboard, they’re going to know we know,” Mendez pointed out. “And if there are Klingons over there, the only reason the crew is still alive is because they think they can fool us. If they realize they’ve been found out, the crew are immediately expendable.”

“How do we even know the crew is still alive?” Kyman asked. “The only one we actually saw was Commander Harkonnen. Everyone else may already be dead!”

“There’s only one way to find out,” Koester said. “Is there any way we can scan the *Corsair* without them realizing it?”

“I believe I have a solution, sir,” replied a disembodied voice coming from the captain’s combadge. Koester looked to his right at the seemingly unmanned science console where a small circle of red light was visible sitting atop the controls.

“What is it, Mister Spot?” the captain asked.

The non-corporeal Daminian, who was filling in on the bridge in place of Commander Wallace while the latter led the away team on the planet’s surface, replied, “I believe I can modify the main sensor/deflector to scan the *Corsair*. The emissions will be detected by them, but they should believe it is a normal continuous function of the *Dauntless* and not give it a second thought. The scans will not be as detailed as we’re used to, but we should be able to detect how many life-forms are aboard and what species they are. Perhaps even where they are located aboard the ship.”

“How long would such modifications take?”

“At least five minutes,” Spot replied.

“Time until *Corsair* reaches orbit?”

“Just under fifteen minutes,” Mendez replied.

“Mister Spot, make the modifications,” Koester ordered. “Inform me the second they’re complete.”

“Aye, sir,” Spot replied an instant before the circle of light disappeared from the bridge.

“What do we do now?” Counselor Gera asked.

“We wait and hope it’s all just a misunderstanding,” Koester replied.

* * * *

“Any sign the *Dauntless* suspects anything?” Kelvop asked.

“Negative,” Vixares replied. “Shields and deflectors are still inactive. Weapons systems off-line. She’s still a reclining targ.”

“Have they tried scanning us?”

“Negative. Only scan emission I am detecting is coming from the main deflector dish, a system that normally operates continuously.”

“Time remaining until weapons are charged and ready?”

“At least six more minutes.”

“Distance to target?”

“Twelve hundred kellicams.”

“Good...,” Kelvop revealed. “Good...”

* * * *

“Did it work?” Koester asked, leaning against the science console.

“I’m receiving data now, Captain,” Spot replied. “Currently detecting forty-three life-form readings aboard the *Corsair*.”

“That’s pretty close to normal crew compliment for a Defiant-class vessel, Captain,” Mendez said from the next console.

“A lot of them appear to be located mid-ships in the area of the crew’s quarters,” Spot added. “Whether by their own choice or not I cannot hazard to guess. Almost a dozen are in engineering. Another eight on the bridge.”

“Can you tell what species the life-form readings are, Commander?” Koester asked.

“Trying to resolve the feedback,” Spot said. “It’s proving more difficult than I expected.”

“Mendez, how fast can you raise shields?” the captain asked as he looked at the tactical officer.

“Half a second after you START giving the order, Captain,” Mendez said with pride.

“Be ready. We don’t know what to expect in the next few...”

“I believe I have it, Captain,” said the British-accented, slightly mechanical sounding voice from Koester’s combadge.

Koester returned his attention to the science console and asked, “What have we got?”

“Reading ten human life-signs, two Trill, one Andorian, one Vulcan, one Betazoid, one Bolian...” There was a pause for several seconds as Spot assured himself his readings were accurate. “...And twenty-seven Klingon life-signs!”

“Damn,” Koester hissed. “Though I can’t say it was entirely unexpected. Now we have to figure out what their plan is.”

“I believe I have detected another complication, Captain,” Spot reported.

“What is it?”

“According to these readings, the *Corsair*’s phaser banks are almost fully charged.”

“Impossible!” Mendez blurted out. “I would be able to detect if they were arming weapons!”

“The fault is not yours, Major,” Spot said. “They are not arming them in the normal manner. Whoever is manning their tactical system is a genius and figured out a way to gradually charge the phaser banks using low power over a great deal of time in a way that is undetectable by normal means. It’s likely they have been charging the phasers since Captain Harkonnen’s communication with you, Captain, if not longer.”

“Major, sound red alert, but don’t raise shields or arm weapons yet,” Koester ordered. “I don’t want to lose the element of surprise we have established.”

“Aye, sir,” Mendez acknowledged just before activating the red alert klaxon. Soon, crew members were rushing onto the bridge and manning their stations.

“What have we got, Skipper?” Commander Setton To’Lock Arbelo asked as he emerged on the bridge and took his seat to the right of the captain.

“The *USS Corsair* has been hijacked by Klingon renegades who have somehow managed to get the ship’s phasers armed without detection. I’m playing dumb and making it seem like we believe Pearson and her crew are still in charge over there and we’re just one big happy fleet.”

“What happens if they fire on us without shields raised?” Arbelo asked with concern.

“You needn’t worry. I have Mendez standing by to raise the shields at a moment’s notice.”

“*Corsair* is now 1,250 kilometers from orbit,” Mendez reported. “Entering weapons range.”

“They’re going to wait until they’re sure of a killing shot. That means taking out either the bridge or main engineering. The bridge is a more vulnerable target. We have maybe another minute,” Koester remarked. “Mendez, be ready with those shields. As soon as they’re raised, arm phasers and torpedo tubes.”

“At your command, sir,” Mendez remarked.

Koester intently watched the *Corsair* on the viewscreen. The small vessel continued on its direct course toward orbit, slowing further as it approached. Then came the moment Koester had been anticipating. The compact starship maneuvered so its weapons could be brought to bear on target as soon as it entered orbit with the *Dauntless*.

“Hyland, full impulse! Break orbit! Mendez, now!”

The Marine Major stabbed at the control on her console. Instantly the starship’s shields and deflectors activated, and just in time. Less than a second later, the *Corsair* let loose with its phaser beams aimed directly at the bridge of the larger starship, but due to both the raised defense screens and the sudden maneuver to leave the planet’s orbit, the beams struck the shields directly over the port impulse engine, inflicting no damage.

“Shield four took that hit. Shield down by 8%,” Mendez reported. She then looked at the captain and said, “If you hadn’t anticipated their actions, that beam would have struck the bridge module and disabled the entire ship!”

“Helm, come about. Let’s face them down and give them a taste of their own medicine. Mendez, are my weapons systems armed?” Koester inquired.

“Phasers fully charged. All torpedo tubes loaded and armed. We’re ready for battle,” Mendez confirmed.

“Good. I only want that ship disabled, not destroyed!” Koester made clear. “Fire at will!”

* * * *

“HOW?!? How did he know?!” Kelvop demanded as the *Corsair* shook under the return fire of the *Dauntless*. He stumbled out of the command chair toward the tactical console. “What did you do that gave us away?” he demanded to know from Vixares as he took a backhanded swing at her, knocking the Klingon woman out of the chair and onto the deck.

“I gave nothing away!” Vixares exclaimed back, looking up at Kelvop from the deck as she wiped blood from the corner of her mouth. “I warned you that Koester is not stupid!” She got back up and returned to the seat, resuming control of the starship’s weapons systems and bringing everything on-line. “Perhaps he was warned somehow? Perhaps...” She suddenly turned and looked at Harkonnen, who was still sitting on the deck but had moved toward the operations console, her eyes narrowing malevolently. She pointed at the Russian and said, “Perhaps he somehow warned Koester that the ship was no longer under his control!”

Kelvop removed his disruptor from its holster and pointed it at Harkonnen, who instinctively raised his hands in front of his face.

“You were the ones who wanted me to talk to Fleet Captain Koester,” the Starfleet officer protested. “You shoved me into that chair! You were standing right next to me when I spoke to him! Wouldn’t you know if I warned him somehow?”

Kelvop appeared ready to pull the trigger when he was unexpectedly knocked off balance by the shaking of the ship as it was hit yet again by a phaser beam from the *Dauntless*. Momentarily forgetting about Harkonnen, he staggered back into the captain’s chair.

“Helm, get us back out of orbit where we can maneuver freely. Vixares, return fire! This will not be as easy as we hoped, but Koester will still die before this day is over!”

* * * *

The two starships started maneuvering around, attempting to gain a superior firing advantage over each other. The *Corsair* had a bigger advantage in speed, maneuverability, and firepower – having been designed and built as a true warship – where the *Dauntless*’ advantage lay in her size and stronger shields. The Sovereign-class

starship's biggest disadvantage was the fact that its captain was actively trying not to destroy or seriously damage the opposing vessel, for fear that they might kill the Starfleet personnel aboard – people who had become friends since the formation of the Fifth Fleet three years earlier – a compunction the Klingons in control of the *Corsair* obviously did not share.

“*Corsair* is coming about again, making a strafing run on our starboard side,” Riker announced as the Defiant-class ship zoomed past on the right of the *Dauntless*, firing its pulse cannons the entire time.

“Shield two is down by 18%,” Mendez reported.

“Minor buckling on the starboard warp nacelle pylon,” Riker added.

“I hope they didn't break any of my bottles of ale I've got down in that area! I only have a few left!” Koester complained before ordering, “Helm, come left to 333 mark 9. Tactical, see if you can take out their impulse engines with a spread of photon torpedoes.”

“Locking on target,” Mendez confirmed. “Firing photon torpedoes.”

A spread of three photon torpedoes shot from the tubes beneath the main deflector, streaking across the vacuum of space and striking the *Corsair*'s fantail, where the impulse engines were located underneath the ablative armor shell of the hull. Several chunks of armor broke away from the hull of the *Corsair* and one of the torpedoes hit its mark, destroying one of the three impulse engines located there, but the warship was still far from disabled.

“Captain, I understand your concern for the crew of the *Corsair* that are still aboard,” Counselor Gera said. “However, given the circumstance, don't you think it would be better if we did not hold back?”

“I intend to give Pearson and Harkonnen and every member of that crew that is still alive every fighting chance I can!” Koester declared.

“Captain, sensors are detecting another ship entering the system,” announced Riker from the ops console.

“Can you identify?” Koester asked, concerned that perhaps Kelvop's mercenaries had managed to steal a Bird of Prey after all and that the *Dauntless* would be outnumbered and outgunned.

“IFF transponder identifies the ship as the *USS Besiege*,” Riker announced with a grin.

“Skipper, the *Besiege* is hailing us,” Chief Kyman stated.

“On screen.”

The viewscreen changed to the image of the *USS Besiege*'s bridge. Configured very much like the Defiant-class on which the ship's design was based, the human CO of the ship, Captain William McLeod, his long hair pulled back into a pony tail like the Klingon warriors he so admired, could be seen sitting in the command chair, but it was the brunette woman standing to his right that surprised Koester.

“Cathryn!” he said. “What are you doing aboard Bill's ship? I thought you were among those being held hostage by the Klingons aboard the *Corsair*?”

“The renegades captured me and most of my command staff by tricking us down to the surface on Kos'Karii. It's a good thing most of us carried type-1 phasers hidden in our uniforms when we beamed down. We were able to make use of them to escape our captors once we regained consciousness. We managed to reach the IKDF base on the outskirts of the colony and contacted both *Starbase 719* and the *Besiege* and informed them of what happened. What's your situation?”

“It appears at least sixteen of your crew are still alive aboard the *Corsair*, including your husband. At least, they were alive when this battle started. More than two dozen Klingons over there as well. We've been trying to disable the ship without seriously injuring those aboard. It hasn't been easy.”

“I know that ship well,” Pearson stated. “I know her strengths and weaknesses. I can take care of disabling the *Corsair*.”

The communication between the two starships ended and Pearson looked at the captain of the *Besiege*. “With your permission, Bill?”

“Go for it, Cathryn,” he replied.

“Helm, ahead full impulse. Come right to 270 mark 4. Tactical, stand by on pulse cannons.”

The *Besiege* literally passed over the *Dauntless*, then swooped down and moved into a firing position under the *Corsair* where it let loose with its own pulse cannons. The blasts quickly disabled the *Corsair*'s lower shields and gouged large craters in its ablative armor before striking the central shuttlebay. The shuttlebay door was blasted

off and a gust of atmosphere escaped the smaller vessel, dragging one shuttlecraft along with it. Aboard the *Corsair*, emergency procedures automatically initiated, each deck sealing itself off from the others, the turbolift network completely shutting down, and all bulkheads in the Jefferies tube network sealing shut. Another failsafe that was automatically initiated was the shield that surrounded each of the *Corsair*'s two warp cores and the emergency bulkhead that sealed each engine room off from the other. In the aft engine room, one Klingon guard found himself alone and outnumbered by the three members of the crew that were in there when the doors sealed shut. The three crew members looked at each other, then the mercenary. The young Klingon sensed what was about to happen and tried to raise his weapon just as the three crew members charged him, pushing him off balance and stumbling into the forcefield surrounding the aft core. He screamed as the energy sparked around his body before thrusting him into the air, almost up to the upper level of the room before he came crashing back down to the main deck burned and broken. The senior-most crew member scooped up the mercenary's weapon and said, "Come on, let's free some other members of the crew and see if we can re-take the ship!" He then used his access code to unseal the door to the corridor – something the Klingon mercenaries could not do – and all three abandoned the engine room.

* * * *

"Captain!" Mendez exclaimed. "I'm detecting power failures in several sections of the *Corsair*."

"The beating the *Besiege* is inflicting is starting to show some results," Koester remarked.

"I don't think so," the Marine replied. "The failures are occurring in sections of the ship neither we nor the *Besiege* has managed to hit yet. I think maybe some of the crew have managed to free themselves in all the chaos and they're trying to re-take the ship."

Koester grinned as he said, "Let's provide more distractions and give them a better chance. Helm, hard about. Stand by on port phasers!"

* * * *

The starboard egress door opened and Rodek stepped in walking backward, his disruptor drawn and aimed in the direction from which he had come.

"Kelvop, several of the crew have managed to escape the quarters where we confined them," he said as the door closed. "They've already disabled power systems to deck 2, sections 15, 16, and 17." He then walked over to where the un-joined Trill sat at the helm and shot the man without warning. With an interrupted scream, the Trill vaporized and Kelvop sat down at the controls. "We need to withdraw from this battle so we can deal with the crew and affect repairs.

"No!" Kelvop cried out, half standing from the command chair. "I'm too close! We'll never have another opportunity like this again! The *Dauntless* must not escape intact!"

"With the second Starfleet ship in this battle, there is no way you can now defeat the *Dauntless*!" Rodek explained, trying to make Kelvop see reason. "If we withdraw now and can regain full control of this ship, we can hire more men and hunt down your nemesis again in the future. Being defeated here and now will not exact your revenge!"

The ship shuddered again under another attack by the two Federation starships. Kelvop started to see the logic in what Rodek was saying. He looked at Vixares with his one remaining eye, a silent understanding between the two occurring. Finally Kelvop flopped back down in the center seat and said, "Fine! Get us out of here, Rodek. Back to Kos'Karii."

"They will be looking for us at Kos'Karii. But I know a place..."

Rodek's sentence was cut off when a huge blast struck the *Corsair*. Wires and optical cabling fell from a shattered panel in the overhead and several consoles erupted in sparks and flame, causing Harkonnen to duck underneath the nearby console and shield his head and face, as the computer voice started droning, "Warning: Life

support failure. Warning: Life support failure.” The lights went completely dark and it took over five seconds before the emergency lighting came on, illuminating the bridge in a deep red.

“What happened?” Kelvop asked.

“Both power cores have shut down!” Vixares said. “I’ve got no weapons, no shields.”

“Helm is not responding either,” Rodek added.

Before the Klingon renegades could do anything to restore power, a voice emerged from the speakers hidden around the bridge. “*Corsair*, this is Captain Cathryn E. Pearson. Your ship has been disabled. Prepare to be boarded. Do not resist, or you will be killed... without honor. I repeat, stand down and prepare to be boarded.”

Kelvop looked shocked at the sound of Pearson’s voice, wondering how she managed to escape from captivity on Kos’Karii. Then his expression turned to a frown as he noticed the wide grin on Harkonnen’s half-shadowed face. In a rage, he pulled out his disruptor and started to aim at the Russian when the bridge was filled with the sound of Federation transporters and three squads of Starfleet Marines from the *USS Besiege* and Captain Pearson materialized around the bridge perimeter, weapons at the ready.

Kelvop looked around at the Marines surrounding him, then growled as he tossed his weapon to the deck at Harkonnen’s feet and raised his hands in surrender.

Pearson looked around the red-lit space desperately for a moment before spotting her husband getting up off the deck across from her. With a smile she rushed over toward him, knocking Kelvop back down into the center seat as she passed.

“Konstantin!” she cried.

“Kitty Cat!” Harkonnen replied as he opened his arms and Pearson flew into them, embracing her husband tightly.

“Come on. Show’s over,” the Marine 1st Lieutenant in charge of the boarding party said as the Klingons were gathered and the Marines started escorting them to where they could be beamed over to the *Besiege*’s brig. Reluctantly, Kelvop, Vixares, Rodek and the others complied.

* * * *

Captain’s log, stardate 66880.1:

Repairs to the Dauntless, which received minor damage during our battle with the Corsair, are almost complete. The Besiege has taken the Corsair – which was disabled and rendered incapable of both warp and impulse speeds due to Captain Pearson’s intimate knowledge of the ship – under tow and will return with it back to Starbase 719. The renegade Klingons – twenty-four of which survived the battle – are now all in custody in the brig aboard the Besiege and will be returned to the starbase where Starfleet must decide if it will press charges against them first or allow them to be extradited back to Kos’Karii where they face capital charges in the deaths of Governor Vagh, his family, and several other civilian citizens of the colony.

In the meanwhile, the Dauntless is continuing on with our next assignment.

Koester, commanding Dauntless, out.

Aboard the Leviathan-class starship *USS Besiege*, the port bridge egress door opened and Captain Cathryn Elisabeth Pearson and Commander Konstantin Harkonnen entered, walking over to the starship’s commanding officer, Captain William McLeod.

“You know Val is going to scold you badly for losing your ship to a bunch of renegades, right?” McLeod asked mockingly. “She might even revoke your Lodge privileges for a while.”

"I know, Bill," Pearson replied. "But I'm sure I can explain to her how it all happened without making my crew and I look totally incompetent. After all, why would we have suspected the Governor of Kos'Karii of duplicity? In the meantime, your Marine contingent commander has finished processing the prisoners, and your doctor has examined them all."

"That's good. We can bring this whole incident to a successful conclusion and hope it hasn't negatively affected relations between the Federation and the Empire," McLeod said.

"I'm not so sure it's concluded," Harkonnen said. "Or that said relations are so secure."

"Why not?" McLeod asked. "These renegades were acting on their own, hiring criminals to do their dirty work. How can this reflect on either the government of Kos'Karii or the Empire?"

"Your doctor discovered a strange anomaly in one of the prisoners," Harkonnen said, presenting a padd to the captain. "Something strange came up as we were confirming each prisoner's identity. Specifically the prisoner we have tentatively identified as Rodek."

"Tentatively identified?" McLeod questioned.

"Yes. Apparently no records for this person existed prior to late 2372," Pearson remarked. "It's like he appeared out of nowhere."

McLeod looked at the file on the padd and asked, "What are the possible explanations for this?"

"Well," said Harkonnen. "If he were human and alive about four hundred years ago, I would suggest a participant in some form of witness protection program."

"But he's Klingon and alive today..." McLeod paused for a moment before asking, "He is Klingon, right? Please don't tell me this was all some plot engineered by one of the Romulan warlords?"

"Yes, he is Klingon," Harkonnen confirmed. "One hundred percent."

"Then why...?"

The conversation was interrupted by the appearance of the starship's chief medical officer. He walked right up to Harkonnen.

"I've gotten results back on that blood test you had me perform, Commander, and I have a DNA match."

"Already?" Harkonnen asked with surprise. "I didn't think the Klingons would be quite so accommodating in getting back to you with their data. Have you determined if he's related to someone of some importance? Perhaps a member of the High Council?"

"No. I haven't even submitted the sample to the Klingon Imperial database. Just to be thorough, I ran a comparison to what is contained in the Federation database, and to my surprise, I got a hit," the doctor stated.

"From where?" Pearson inquired.

"Starfleet records," the doctor said.

"Starfleet?" McLeod questioned. "How is that possible?"

"The DNA sample I obtained confirms that Rodek is closely related to a member of Starfleet. At the very least they share the same father. I need to run more tests to confirm a maternal match."

"I thought you said he was 100% Klingon," McLeod asked Harkonnen.

"Rodek is," the doctor confirmed. "The record matching his DNA pattern belongs to a Starfleet Commander by the name of Worf, who is a Federation citizen but of the Klingon species."

"Wait," Pearson said, trying to understand what the doctor was saying. "You're saying Rodek is Commander Worf's brother?"

"That is correct," the doctor confirmed, making Pearson, Harkonnen, and McLeod exchange looks of shock and contemplate the potential consequences.

To Be Continued...