

Station log, stardate 68612.2:

After being recalled to Earth for almost seven months following the incident between the Phantoms and the Kairn, Admiral Penji Fil finally returns to the command of the Federation Fifth Fleet today.

Vice Admiral Val'ri Raiajh stepped out of the door of her office and down the stair to the main level of Starbase Ops, where security chief Michelle Petersen and chief of operations B'Elanna Torres were monitoring vital station functions.

"The *Corsair* has just moored inside spacedock, Admiral," Torres reported to Raiajh as the admiral took her normal position next to the master systems display. "Captain Pearson says she will report to Ops and check in with you as soon as all systems aboard the *Corsair* are shut down."

"I'll be glad to have Cathryn back after her unexpected trip," Raiajh remarked. "She never told me any details on why she and Kalin needed to go back to San Francisco so suddenly."

"Captain Pearson informed me that Admiral Fil has returned to the AOR aboard the *Corsair* with her as well," Petersen remarked.

"Humans have a saying, Commander," Raiajh said with a subtle smile. "All good things come to an end."

"With the flagship out in sector 50115, it will be a while before Admiral Fil can return his flag to the *Dauntless*. Captain Pearson requested we arrange quarters and a temporary office for him aboard the station, as there is no way to know exactly how long he's going to be here with us."

"I'll have Marie take care of that," Raiajh acknowledged, tapping information into the console in front of her to be transmitted directly to her own aide up in her office. "Hopefully, after so much time spent at Starfleet Command, Penji will just want to take some time to relax and get his space legs back..."

One set of turbolift doors opened and two men stepped out. The first, a tall Russian man with a beard and mustache, simply looked at Raiajh with an expression of frustration mixed with anger before stepping onto the nearest platform lift without a word and heading up to his own office on the upper level. The second man, a shorter Catullan with almost pure white hair moved quickly over to the center of Ops where Raiajh stood.

"Val'ri, I'm home!" Vice Admiral Penji Fil remarked.

"Welcome back to the Typhon Sector, Penji," Raiajh greeted. "I trust your trip from Earth was pleasant? I have Marie arranging quarters for you as we speak. They should be ready soon if you would like to go and relax."

"Relax?" Fil questioned. "I just got here! I want status reports, updates, starship maintenance checklists, ship's logs, mission reports, a listing of any first contacts in the time I have been away from the AOR, battle damage and repair statuses!"

"Um... now?" Raiajh asked, feeling suddenly overwhelmed.

Fil had already started up the stairs directly in front of the door to Raiajh's office. He paused half-way up and looked back down toward those gathered around the master systems monitor. "ASAP!" he exclaimed. "And Val, I'll be using your office until your aide arranges one for me to use while I'm here." He then continued up the stairs and disappeared inside the door to Raiajh's office.

"How far away did you say the *Dauntless* was?" Raiajh asked Commander Petersen.

Space, the Final Frontier...

Star Trek: Starbase 719

"Under Foot" By PJK

The next morning, both Raiajh and Captain Cathryn Pearson emerged from the turbolift into Ops.

“...And then the girls got into a splash fight in the tub,” Pearson was telling Raiajh with a wide smile on her face. “And of course they splashed more water out of the tub and onto Konstantin than at each other. You should have seen how soaked he was! I had to replicate half a dozen new towels just to keep the water from flowing right down the hall and...”

“Excuse me, Admiral, Captain,” operations officer Ashari Pel interrupted. “Sorry to interrupt you, but Admiral Fil is waiting for the senior staff up in the briefing room.”

Raiajh glanced over her shoulder at the door to the main briefing room on the upper level, then said aloud, “Computer, what is the current time?”

“Station time is currently 0702 hours,” the computers feminine voice replied.

“Why is Admiral Fil waiting for the senior staff now?” Pearson wondered aloud. “The regular weekly staff briefing is not until 0800, and then only mid-week.” She looked at Raiajh with confusion and added, “I thought the next meeting was tomorrow?”

“It is,” Raiajh remarked with an expression of frustration. “I’ll take care of this.”

Raiajh boarded the nearby lift and rode it up to the upper level, quickly entering the closest door of the briefing lounge. Inside, at the far head of the table, Admiral Fil was looking at several padds displaying various pieces of information. The sound of the door swishing open caused him to look up.

“Ah, Val, you’re finally here. Where is everyone else?” he asked.

“You’re a little early for the weekly brief, Penji,” Raiajh remarked. “About twenty five hours early. We don’t hold the weekly station status brief until mid-week.”

“I know. Didn’t you get my memo? I want to change that to a daily brief,” Fil remarked, looking through his stack of padds and, finding the one he was looking for, handed it to Raiajh. “I’ve been out of the loop a bit too long. What’s this report about the *Bellerophon* encountering some sort of jamming device?”

“Penji,” Raiajh said sharply after briefly glancing at Fil’s memo announcing senior staff briefs were changed to 0700 every day. “I understand you are the Fifth Fleet commander, but station operations are still under my authority, and to a slightly lesser extent, Cathryn’s. I don’t appreciate you making changes to how we operate aboard MY starbase, especially when you don’t check with me first.”

“I didn’t think you would mind if I introduced some new methodology I learned while I was back on Earth to make things more efficient...”

“I do. Especially since having a greater number of meetings has been proven to me to be much less efficient, not more,” Raiajh said. “I understand how they operate back at the Admiralty. Trust me, I spent enough time there back during the war and after. That’s why I prefer to be posted out here in the Typhon Sector, about as far from Starfleet Command as I can get and still be a member of Starfleet.”

“I understand,” Fil said. “I just had several questions regarding...”

“Penji, any questions you have will be answered during the normally scheduled weekly briefing tomorrow morning,”

“But...”

“Tomorrow, Penji!” Raiajh reiterated as she deactivated the padd and tossed it onto the briefing table before turning and leaving the room.

* * * *

The next morning, the station’s senior staff: Raiajh; Pearson; Torres; Petersen; Chief Medical Officer Dr. Sylvan Xaran; Strategic Operations Officer Captain Konstantin Harkonnen; Chief Science Officer Makia Kyman; and commanding officer of the embarked Starfleet Marine Corps regiment aboard *Starbase 719* Colonel Sean Elliot McIntyre were gathered around the table in the main briefing lounge on the upper level of Ops. Pearson was about to start the briefing with a report on the farms and livestock being maintained on the large decks beneath the stations main botanical garden dome and supply shipments to the Rihannsu-occupied colony of Elehu when the door closest to the front of the room opened and Admiral Fil strode in.

“Val... I mean, Admiral Raiajh, why haven’t I received the latest status updates from the *Sarek*, *Bellerophon*, *Arizona*, and *Triton*?”

Raiajh resisted the urge to simply hide her face. Instead she said to Fil, “Admiral, we’re just starting our weekly senior staff briefing. You know, the one you were clamoring for yesterday morning! You’re welcome to sit in with us. Perhaps it would answer any questions you have?” She gestured toward the empty chair at the far end of the table that had quickly been vacated by McIntyre, who moved over one seat closer to Harkonnen. Fil, not looking pleased, moved to sit in the chair. Raiajh then looked back at Pearson and said, “Continue, Cathryn.”

“As I was saying,” Pearson resumed. “The number of livestock being raised on level 900 has reached an all-time low since the herd was first brought aboard due to the increased shipments the Romulan colony has requested we...”

“I still don’t understand why my reports from the *Sarek*, *Bellerophon*, *Arizona*, and *Triton* haven’t been forwarded to me,” Fil interrupted. “I need that information for the Fleet Status Report I have to transmit back to Earth in three weeks.”

Raiajh was about to respond to her fellow admiral’s rude outburst, but Pearson stepped up before she could.

“Admiral Fil, we haven’t received the latest status updates from the *Belle*, *Sarek*, *Arizona*, *Triton*, or even the *Dauntless* yet.”

“But when I’m aboard the *Dauntless* I always get the reports compiled together,” Fil replied defiantly.

“That’s because the reports from each ship assigned to the Fifth Fleet are transmitted here to *Starbase 719*, where they are edited and compiled before being sent as a subspace communiqué to you aboard the *Dauntless*. A copy of that communiqué is also transmitted to Starfleet Command, as your aide would tell you, were he here. I’m sure we’ll have the entire report amended for your approval by early next week, Admiral,” Pearson said.

“Very well then,” Fil said, getting up from the chair and moving toward the door.

“Admiral, aren’t you going to stay for the rest of the weekly brief?” Raiajh asked, a part of her hoping his response would be to say no. “After all, you said yourself you wanted to catch up on everything that happened during your absence when you wanted to have these meetings every morning.”

“I’ll read the log reports in the library computer,” Fil remarked, already halfway out the door. “Too busy to just be sitting around here all day.” A second later the door swished shut behind him.

Everyone in the briefing lounge stared in disbelief at the closed door. Finally, after several seconds, Raiajh cleared her throat and said, “My apologies, Cathryn. Please, continue.”

It took a moment for Pearson to recall where she had left off. Consulting her notes on one padd, she resumed, “Oh, yeah. Our shipments of livestock and produce to Elehu... As I was saying...”

* * * *

Several days later, just about every senior officer aboard *Starbase 719* had a story to tell about how Admiral Fil either interrupted meetings or important work to make seemingly unimportant demands, or tried changing rules and procedures that had been in place since before the Ournal-class starbase had been placed in commission nearly six years earlier. During this particular morning shift in Ops, four women were gathered around the master systems display, whispering conspiratorially, as Raiajh stepped over.

“Quiet discussion, ladies?” she asked. “What are you four whispering about?”

Torres, Petersen, Pearson, and Pel all looked like they had been caught committing a crime. “Just comparing Penji stories,” Pearson finally admitted.

“He HAS been making a bit of a nuisance of himself, hasn’t he?” Raiajh agreed.

“He tried to change the turnover procedures here in Ops to make it so the off-going duty officer had to get his permission before he could be relieved,” complained Ashari Pel. “The evening duty officer was relieved two hours late because the Admiral had gone to bed and wouldn’t respond to the request!”

“He wanted me to maintain a daily count of the auxiliary craft we have on-board, and report the results no later than 1300 hours each day,” Torres added.

“We already maintain an inventory of every secondary craft, from the smallest work bee to the largest Danube-class runabout, in the computer,” Raiajh remarked.

Torres looked at Raiajh with barely contained anger and added, “He wanted me to personally verify each ship visually... With my own eyes!”

“That’s ridiculous,” Raiajh agreed.

“No, what’s ridiculous is him issuing a new order to the businesses in the recreation area like Liberty Pointe and the Lodge telling them that business hours will not extend beyond 2030 hours,” Pearson said with a frown. “I had to have Colonel McIntyre’s Marines patrolling the recreation area half the night last night to prevent riots when word of that new order started spreading, not to mention one restaurant closing in protest and several other business owners threatening to sue for breach of contract!”

“Is there some way we can issue a call for the *Dauntless* to return to base early somehow, Admiral?” Petersen asked. “I don’t know how, but Peter somehow manages to deal with the Admiral and somehow maintain his sanity.”

“Or maybe one of the airlocks in the section of the base where Admiral Fil is being quartered could accidentally malfunction?” Torres suggested with a grin.

“What got him sent back to Earth in the first place?” Ashari Pel asked. “Is there any way we can get him to do it again?” she added hopefully.

“Penji is just bored. He has no real duties to attend to while he’s stuck here,” Raiajh remarked. “I’ll see what can be done to occupy his time more productively,” she promised.

* * * *

Captain’s log, stardate 68625.3; Captain Cathryn Pearson, recording:

The Corsair has been manned and is preparing to depart Starbase 719 for a routine patrol of the lower AOR, making stops at Vorte and Kos’Karii before swinging around to sweep the Kairn border for any unusual activity. If nothing unexpected occurs, I anticipate we will return to the station in just over a week. My own security and tactical officer has fallen ill with a bad case of Rigillian fever, so I have requested a replacement from Commander Petersen’s staff aboard the station. I just hope they send me someone competent.

Captain Cathryn Elisabeth Pearson was sitting in the center seat of the small Defiant-class escort vessel assigned to the Typhon Sector, finishing the last of the pre-underways before casting off the mooring tractors and heading out beyond the station’s space doors. She was looking forward to a return to a normal routine away from the station for a few days after what had been going on, hoping that Raiajh would have things back under control before the *Corsair* returned. She was just checking off a few more completed items from a check list displayed on the panel to the right of her seat when she heard one of the bridge egress doors swish open and one of the other *Corsair* crew announce, “Admiral on the bridge!”

Assuming it was Raiajh on board to see her off - or possibly beg to go with her - Pearson started to turn in her chair. She was almost shocked to recognize Vice Admiral Penji Fil standing next to her.

“Penji?! What are you doing here? The *Corsair* is going to be departing the station in the next twenty minutes,” she remarked.

“I know,” Fil responded. “I was told you need a tactical officer. Val suggested I join you on your patrol. Besides filling in for your sick crewman, it would give me a better idea of what function the sector defense ships serve in the fleet.” Fil began strolling casually around the bridge, wiping his finger across the surface of one console and checking it for dust.

“Oh...! That’s... um... wonderful,” Pearson replied, unable to think of anything else to say. She quickly got up from the command chair and added, “If you will excuse me, I have a few last-minute items to discuss with my engineer.”

“Of course,” Fil acknowledged, continuing his ‘tour’ of the bridge and pausing by the main viewscreen before casually adding, “You’re dismissed.”

Pearson rushed through the egress door opposite the one Fil had entered and quickly made her way to her ready room. She hit the control padd on the desk top before she had even swung around the desk, saying, “Connect me with starbase Ops.” As she sat down in her chair, the projected holographic image of Vice Admiral Raiajh appeared.

“I know what you’re going to say, Cathryn, and I apologize,” the image of Raiajh said.

“Why? Why send him to me? You know this patrol was originally scheduled for next week! The whole reason I’m doing it now was to get away from Penji!” Pearson said.

“You needed a security and tactical officer, and like it or not, Penji was among the best when he served in that position aboard both the *Sarek* and *Besiege*,” Raiajh said. “He taught YOU most of what you know on the subjects!”

“Well, yes, but...,” Pearson started to reply.

“And besides, this gives me some time to perform damage control here on the station,” Raiajh added. “We had two more retail outlets in the recreation area threaten to permanently close their doors last evening. Even Shifty threatened he was going to close the Lodge indefinitely until Penji was back aboard the *Dauntless* if I didn’t do something to reign him in.”

“But why MY ship?” Pearson asked.

“What other choice do I have? When I first suggested he go with you, he wanted to stay here aboard the station, saying he thought he could be ‘more helpful’ here than on the *Corsair*. It wasn’t until I told him you desperately needed a tactical officer and that the *Corsair* might rendezvous with the *Dauntless* sooner than the flagship could get back to *Home Plate* that he agreed to go with you.”

Pearson stared at the three-dimensional image of Raiajh’s head and shoulders floating above the surface of her desk for a moment before finally saying, “Val, you and I have been close friends for many, many years.”

“Yes we have,” Raiajh confirmed.

Pearson sighed before stating, “This may be the wedge that finally tears that long friendship apart.”

“I’ll make it up to you when you return. I promise,” Raiajh remarked.

“Oh, you owe me big time for this one,” Pearson replied with an evil looking half-smile. “And I intend to collect!”

“Have an uneventful mission, Cathryn. Starbase Ops, out.”

“Thanks. *Corsair*, out.” Pearson watched the holographic image of Raiajh fade away, then took a deep breath before standing back up and heading back out to the bridge. There she found Admiral Fil sitting in the center seat.

“Having trouble finding the tactical console, Penji?” she asked.

Fil awkwardly got out of the chair as he said, “Just keeping it warm for you.”

“I let my first officer do that for me,” Pearson remarked before resuming her seat and activating the intercom. “Attention all hands. Prepare to get the ship underway.” She watched with some small satisfaction as Fil took a seat at the tactical console.

* * * *

It was the morning of the second day of the *Corsair*’s patrol, and Pearson entered the bridge to assume the watch. She was surprised to find her husband and first officer, Captain Konstantin Harkonnen, sitting in the center seat, stifling a yawn.

“Konstantin, what are you doing here?” she asked.

“You didn’t hear?” Harkonnen replied with slight sarcasm creeping into his mild Russian accent. “There’s been a few changes to the patrol watch bill.”

Knowing that his position as the ship’s executive officer placed her husband in charge of approving the watch bill prior to the starship’s departure from port, she asked, “Why did you change your shift? I was wondering why I didn’t feel you in bed when I was getting up this morning.”

“I didn’t alter the watch bill,” Harkonnen stated. “ADMIRAL Fil took it upon himself to re-write the watch bill last evening. Apparently the Admiral is not a night-person and he did not agree with our choice of making him the night shift officer of the deck and switched himself out with me. Of course, I didn’t find out about that little change until I was heading to our cabin to go to bed myself. He switched around a few other watch personnel too, putting people he likes on the afternoon watch with himself.”

Before she could say anything, one of the ship’s yeomen walked up beside Pearson and offered her a padd to review.

“Daily morning status report, captain,” the young woman said.

“Status report? I generally don’t review these until after 0900, once I’ve had my morning cup of tea and the watch has settled in!”

Pearson noticed the smirk on her husband’s face out of the corner of her eye as the yeoman said, “Admiral Fil said he wanted the completed status report routed to him before 0730 each day we’re on patrol, Captain.”

“Apparently the Admiral IS a morning person, however,” Harkonnen remarked with another smirk.

Her frustration growing, Pearson remarked, “Penji isn’t even supposed to see the ship status report until it is combined with the rest of the fleet reports he receives! Are there any other changes to standard procedures I should be aware of?”

The yeoman looked meek as she said, “You should probably know that the Admiral also increased the incoming and outgoing position reports to every eight hours instead of once each 24 hour cycle.”

“That’s it! This has gone too far! This is MY ship, not Penji’s!” Pearson fumed. “He’s fired! I don’t care if I have no tactical officer for this patrol, I’m confining him to his quarters for the duration!”

“Can you do that, Kittykat?” Harkonnen asked, admiring his wife’s determination. “He is, after all, a Vice Admiral and commander of the fleet!”

“It’s MY ship! What I say goes!” She then tapped her combadge and said, “Bridge to Admiral Fil. Report to the bridge immediately!”

“On my way, Cathryn,” came the quick reply.

“Now, take a few deep breaths and calm down a little before he gets here,” Harkonnen advised. “I don’t want you saying anything in the heat of the moment we’ll both regret later.”

Pearson tried to follow her husband’s advice. She took several calming breaths prior to the port egress door sliding open and Penji Fil entering the bridge.

“You wanted to see me, Cathryn?” he asked.

“Yes, Penji. It has come to my attention that...”

Pearson’s sentence was cut off by the junior officer at the tactical console turning in his seat and saying, “Captain, we’re receiving a distress call on an open channel. It’s coming from the Morain transport ship *Glires*.”

Her frustration with Fil quickly evaporating, Pearson replaced her husband in the center seat and ordered, “On speakers, Lieutenant. Morain vessel, this is the *USS Corsair*. What is the nature of your emergency?”

The voice that responded sounded like a recording that had been sped up as the rodent-like captain of the Morain ship replied, “*Corsair*, we appear to have struck a gravitic mine left over from your war with the Kairn. Our hull is breached and propulsion is not functioning. My vessel is carrying passengers to the Woodron system and we have sustained numerous casualties. Additionally, my engineer reports life support is damaged and will likely fail within the next six to eight hours. Request your assistance, *Corsair*.”

Pearson momentarily muted the communications, then looked up at Harkonnen and asked, “Are there any closer ships that can help?”

Harkonnen, who had been consulting an electronic clipboard, looked back at his wife and said, “Thanks to Admiral Fil’s more frequent position reports, it is confirmed we are the only vessel in range to help.”

“Very well,” Pearson said, glancing quickly at Fil as she reactivated the comm channel. “Morain vessel, this is the *Corsair*. We are altering course to assist you. Please transmit your present coordinates.”

“Transmitting our position coordinates now, *Corsair*,” the Morain captain replied.

“We are receiving the coordinates,” the helm officer confirmed.

“Helmsman, come about to course 312 mark 2,” Pearson ordered. “Increase speed to warp seven.” Finally she activated the ship’s internal communications and announced, “All hands, this is the bridge. Yellow alert!”

* * * *

As the *Corsair* warped closer to the Kairn border and the damaged passenger transport, Fil - who had taken station at the tactical console when the yellow alert was ordered - appeared to be intently studying data he was pulling up from the library computer.

“Cathryn, there’s something strange going on here,” he finally said over his shoulder.

“What do you mean, Admiral?” Pearson asked.

“I’ve been checking information regarding the sector we’re entering going back as far as the construction of *Starbase 719*,” Fil said. “First off, I don’t understand how any vessel coming from Morain space and heading to the Woodron system would need to be passing through the Panmunjom sector. Secondly, how could any vessel passing through that region have struck a mine? I studied the tactical situation during our war with the Kairn extensively. None of the battles between Starfleet and the Kairn fleet occurred anywhere near there. There would have been no reason for the Kairn to mine this sector, and I know for a fact that Starfleet did not.”

“What about when the Phantoms were trying to provoke the Kairn into attacking us?” Harkonnen asked. “Could the mines have been laid then?”

“Between trying to stop the *Dauntless* from being taken into Kairn space and warning the Kairn government what was happening, that whole incident occurred in such a short span of time that neither side had the opportunity to lay mine fields, Captain Harkonnen.”

Pearson stood up and walked closer to the tactical console, looking at the star charts Fil had displayed on his monitors. It was true. One of the only reasons the joint security area known by the codename ‘Panmunjom’ had been created where it was - aside from being conveniently close to the recognized borders of the three major star-faring civilizations involved in the war at the time - was there was nothing strategically valuable about it.

“Something about this situation doesn’t pass the smell test,” Fil remarked.

Pearson looked over toward the officer at the console in the middle of the bridge and asked, “ETA to the Morain transport ship’s coordinates?”

“Estimated time to coordinates: forty five minutes, Captain,” the helmsman responded.

Pearson turned back to Fil’s console and said, “You have three-quarters of an hour to figure out what’s bugging you about this, Penji.”

“Understood,” Fil replied as Pearson returned to her chair, where she activated the intercom.

“Bridge to sickbay. We’re nearing the coordinates of the accident. Doctor Thavand, have sickbay ready to beam over casualties,” she ordered.

“Sickbay is ready and standing by,” Dr. Thavand responded. “I have my orderly setting up a triage unit on the mess deck just in case we need it.”

“Good work. Bridge, out.”

As Pearson returned her attention to the main viewscreen and in her imagination pictured what the crew of the *Corsair* would soon face, Fil had called up a recording of the distress call the ship had received from the Morain transport and started analyzing it. There was something about the transmission that left a nagging feeling in the Catulan’s gut. After running the recording through a signal processor and breaking it down between incoming and outgoing transmissions from the *Corsair*, computer analysis indicated the transmissions the Starfleet vessel had received had been a recording. That of course was impossible, since the transmission had directly answered questions posed by Captain Pearson, and no recording would ever be able to anticipate every possible request for information. But if the transmission was not a recording, what would account for the discrepancy the computer was

detecting? He checked the timing codes of both sets of transmissions, noting there seemed to be a momentary pause preceding every incoming transmission that did not exist in the outgoing. That was when he noticed the first dilemma.

“The transmission we received was not a live broadcast,” Fil said.

“What?” Pearson asked, her attention back on the man at tactical.

“The transmission we received from the Morain ship. It wasn’t live.”

“That’s impossible,” Harkonnen remarked. “Not even a computer could have responded so smoothly in normal conversation without being detectable.”

“The computer believes the transmission was a recording. I believe it was a live person answering your inquiries, Cathryn,” Fil explained. “But somehow the transmission was altered to shorten its duration, accounting for its artificial quality. The timing codes prove that!” He displayed visual representations of the subspace transmission on one of the monitors. Sure enough, the display showed a timing signal that should have taken thirty five seconds being transmitted in under twenty five.

“If the transmissions were artificially sped up by computer as they were transmitting...,” Pearson started to say.

“Then the voice responding would have sounded like the high-pitched voice of a Morain,” Fil confirmed. “Recording artists have been entertaining audiences for centuries using similar methods. For example, the artist known as David Seville used to...”

“Is there any way to play the transmissions we received at what should have been their normal speed?” Pearson asked, cutting off Fil’s extraneous explanation. “Maybe that way we can tell who or what sent them?”

“Should be easy enough,” Fil replied, entering a series of command into his console. On the monitor, the visual representation stretched out slightly to match the embedded timing codes. Fil then played the transmission over the speakers. While the voice was definitely deeper-sounding, and obviously being spoken slowly to allow for the compression it was to undergo through computer enhancement, there was nothing significant about it, no identifying accent that might identify its origin, other than the speaker was probably male.

“Definitely not Kairn, that’s for sure,” Harkonnen remarked. “There’s no way those lizards would be able to hide their prolonged hiss when they speak.”

“Well, if it’s not Morain, and it’s not Kairn, who sent the distress call?” Pearson asked.

“I think we should be prepared no matter who or what sent that transmission,” Fil suggested.

“You’re right, Penji,” Pearson agreed. “Sound red alert.”

* * * *

“One minutes to coordinates,” reported the helmsman.

“Still nothing registering on long range sensors,” the science officer added.

“Anything new, Penji?” Pearson asked.

“Negative,” the admiral reported. “Still analyzing the transmissions we received.”

“Now approaching designated coordinates,” the helm reported almost a minute later.

“Very well. Drop us out of warp,” Pearson ordered. “Everyone keep on your toes.”

With a flash of light, the *Corsair* dropped from warp speed and slowed as it came upon the coordinates where the disabled Morain transport had been reported.

“Anything?” Pearson asked.

“There is no vessel registering on either long or short range sensors,” the officer at the science console reported.

“Any evidence of any ships in the vicinity? If there WAS a ship here, did it explode?” she asked.

“Not detecting any sign of debris,” the science officer added.

“Could we be the victims of some elaborate prank?” Harkonnen asked.

“If so... Why?” Pearson asked.

“Cathryn,” Fil called over. “I’ve discovered something.”

“What is it?” Pearson asked, stepping closer to the tactical console.

“I don’t know why I didn’t think to look at this sooner,” Fil scolded himself. “The transmission we received! It was transmitted on an old Romulan carrier wave frequency. Since it had been transmitted in the open, I didn’t think to look at the frequency range until now.”

“An old Romulan frequency?” Harkonnen questioned. “How old?”

“According to library computer records, the Romulans last used this frequency during their attack on Narendra III half a century ago,” Fil replied. “They stopped using it due to fear the frequency had been compromised following the attack.”

“That doesn’t make sense,” Pearson remarked. “Why would the Romulans be using a fifty year old frequency? And why use it to pull us off our...?”

Pearson’s eyes suddenly widened in shock and she looked at her husband. He had evidently jumped to the same conclusion.

“The Rihannsu!” Harkonnen stated.

“Cathryn! I’m detecting a ship decloaking! Bearing 345 mark 9, range two hundred kilometers!” Fil exclaimed.

Before anyone could react, the bright green disruptor bolts of Rihannsu weapons fire struck the fortunately-raised shields of the Defiant-class starship.

“Thank God we were prepared and our shields raised!” Harkonnen remarked as Pearson struggled back to the command chair.

“They must have assumed that, responding to a distress call, we would have dropped out of warp with shields down ready to beam aboard casualties. Tactical,” she said. “Arm pulse phasers and photon torpedoes! Helm, get us moving!”

“Accelerating to full impulse,” the helmsman acknowledged.

“Weapons systems powering up. Shields down only a few percent,” Fil reported. “Thankfully we had them raised or that first shot would have likely disabled the ship.”

“Thanks to you,” Pearson remarked. “Helm, come about. Bring weapons to bear.”

The *Corsair* spun around, facing the now-visible Rihannsu warbird. It was an older model, single-hulled vessel type used by the Romulan Star Empire prior the launch of the first of the D’deridex-class warbirds in the early 2360’s, back when the Star Empire was still maintaining its isolation from the Federation.

The *Corsair* quickly closed range, too close for the Rihannsu ship to maintain a weapons lock, opening fire with its pulse phasers. The multiple phaser bursts strafed the old cruiser along the upper hull and port warp nacelle.

“Rihannsu shields down by twenty percent,” Fil reported. “That old warbird wasn’t made to go up against a modern Federation starship.”

“I’m sure they thought we would be distracted searching for the source of their distress call, allowing them to take us out with their initial sneak attack,” Harkonnen remarked.

“They figured wrong,” Pearson replied.

As the *Corsair* turned to face their adversary again, the old warbird was attempting to maintain their end of the fight, but it was obvious the ship was outmatched.

“Firing torpedoes,” Fil reported as four bright orange projectiles launched from the *Corsair*’s tubes. Three of the weapons struck the warbird, causing the shields protecting the starboard quarter to buckle.

“They’re losing their shields! Warbird is now cloaking,” Fil reported as the Rihannsu vessel on the screen completed a turn and faded from view.

“Lock sensors on him! Don’t let him get away!” Pearson ordered.

“Too late,” the science officer reported. “Interference from weapons discharge has garbled the sensor lock.”

“Damn!” Pearson spat, then added, “Place weapons to stand-by. Maintain shields and alert status, in case they try and come back.”

Harkonnen, who was still staring at the main viewscreen, remarked, "What purpose did that ambush serve? Even if they had caught us unawares, there is no way an old warbird like that would have been more than a match for the *Corsair*."

"You would think the Rihannsu would have sent a more modern warship to engage us if they're going to sneak all the way out here near the Kairn border," Pearson surmised. "Unless...?"

"What is it, Kittycat?" Harkonnen asked once he noticed the look of anxiety on his wife's face.

"Helm, bring us around to course 105 mark 355! Maximum warp!"

"What about the warbird?" Harkonnen asked his wife.

"Forget it! We're needed elsewhere!"

"Captain, that course will take us through the northern edge of the Typhon Expanse," the helmsman informed.

"I know. Just do it!" She then turned to Fil and said, "Admiral, get on subspace to the *Arizona* and *Besiege*! Have them set course for the Vorte sector! Now!"

As the *Corsair* turned and entered warp, the call went out to the other sector defense ships. Within moments, all three Federation warships were on course toward the distant Romulan colony world.

* * * *

Aboard the *USS Besiege*, which was already located close to the Vorte sector, Captain William MacLeod looked at the communiqué his ship had received from the *Corsair* with puzzlement.

"Did Admiral Fil say why we needed to shift our patrol closer to Vorte?" he asked his first officer, Commander Taras.

"No," Taras responded. "Only that he and Captain Pearson believe the attack against the *Corsair* was a diversion intended to clear the patrol route between Elehu, Vorte, and Romulan space."

"Penji thinks so-called Emperor T'K'Lon is trying to sneak a new invasion force into the AOR," MacLeod remarked, finally understanding. "What about anything approaching from Elehu?"

"The *Arizona* is already on station in that region," Taras replied. "Other nearby Fifth Fleet vessels are en route as well."

MacLeod ordered his helmsman to alter course to take position on what could be assumed the most direct route any Rihannsu vessels would take to reach Vorte. He then looked at Taras and said, "It's probably a good thing we and the Romulan colonists deployed those cloaked tachyon probes just after the Rihannsu invaded Elehu. The Rihannsu ships might be able to slip by us under cloak, but they can't slip past our tachyon net." MacLeod's lips creased in a slight smile as the anticipation of battle coursed through his bloodstream.

* * * *

"*Arizona* and *Besiege* report they are on-station and standing by," Fil reported as the *Corsair* warped closer to her destination. "*Sarek* and *Bellerophon* report they are warping toward Vorte at maximum speed."

"Good. Now we just wait and see if the new tachyon net picks up any indications of cloaked ships trying to sneak into the sector," Pearson remarked.

"What happens if we're wrong about this, Kittycat?" Harkonnen asked. "We've taken five starships off their normal patrols. What if some catastrophe was to occur elsewhere?"

Pearson looked up at her husband and replied, "I have a very strong premonition... a feeling... that we're right about this."

Harkonnen looked at his wife with a dubious expression and remarked, "May all your feelings be right."

A short time later, the *Corsair* dropped out of warp not far from where the *Besiege* continued to patrol. It had been agreed that Rihannsu forces on Elehu were thin enough - the Fifth Fleet's monitoring of the colony assuring a limited number of Rihannsu forces could be present at the colony at any time - that an attempt to invade

Vorte from Elehu would likely result in the oppressed populous of Elehu revolting against the few Rihannsu left remaining at the colony.

“Admiral, hail the *Besiege*,” Pearson ordered.

“Hailing frequency open,” Fil affirmed.

“*Besiege*, this is the *Corsair*. Please respond.

The image on the main viewscreen blinked to the interior of the similar-looking bridge with MacLeod sitting in his command chair at its center.

“Welcome, Cathryn. Glad to see you avoided any major damage from that Rihannsu sneak attack,” the opposing captain remarked.

Pearson glanced briefly at the Catullan man sitting at tactical before replying, “We might not be here at all were it not for Admiral Fil’s analysis of the false distress call we received. Any indication the Rihannsu are trying to move on Vorte?”

“None yet. The tachyon net has been quiet. Are you really sure the attack on your ship was meant to be a distraction and that the Rihannsu are on their way to Vorte and not simply some young Rihannsu commander trying to make a name and reputation for himself that backfired?”

Almost as if in defiance of MacLeod’s remark, an indicator started buzzing on Fil’s tactical console.

“Cathryn, the tachyon grid just detected a cloaked vessel passing through. The vessel has picked up a significant tachyon trace,” Fil reported.

“Location?” Pearson inquired.

“170 mark 1, range fifty-thousand kilometers,” Fil reported. He then looked directly at Pearson as he added, “...On a direct intercept course toward us!”

“Arm weapons, but keep them on stand-by!” Pearson ordered. “I suggest you do the same, Bill.”

On the viewscreen, Captain MacLeod was already ordering his weapons armed. In the background, one of MacLeod’s officers was reporting, “Captain, vessel de-cloaking off the port bow.”

Aboard her own ship, Pearson ordered, “On screen!”

The main viewer blinked to what appeared to be empty space, the distant stars shining brightly, until they were blocked by the emerging shape of a green-hulled warship.

“Cathryn, the Mogai-class warbird has taken position one hundred kilometers off our bow and remains stationary,” Fil reported. “Deflector screens are raised but their weapons are currently deactivated.”

“What are they up to?” Harkonnen wondered aloud.

The newly arrived vessel seemed to be staring down the pair of Federation warships for several tense seconds. “We are now being hailed,” Fil finally reported.

“On screen.”

The image blinked once again to reveal a familiar face framed by long, almost jet-black hair through which the tips of pointed ears could be seen.

“Commander T’Lees!” Pearson said with surprise, suddenly realizing she should have recognized the Romulan ship as it became visible. “What brings the *IRW Vedrex* back to the Fifth Fleet AOR?”

“We intercepted your subspace communiqué and came to assist,” the Romulan woman replied. “I doubt you are aware, but you are seriously outnumbered right now.”

“Outnumbered?” cut in MacLeod, his face appearing on the right half of the *Corsair*’s viewscreen. “By whom?”

“The Romulan government has long suspected Emperor T’K’Lon would attempt to establish a greater foothold outside of Rihannsu territory with the intention that once he had sufficient forces surrounding the Romulan Empire, he could press inward against us. We have been monitoring his ship movements and determined a convoy of fifteen warbirds departed the Alpha Pictoris system approximately ten of your days ago with the goal of occupying the Vorte colony. Your communiqué merely confirmed our supposition.”

“Any idea where this convoy is currently located?” Pearson asked.

“Negative,” T’Lees replied. “The Rihannsu fleet was traveling slower than normal cruising speeds to remain better hidden from sensors. As a result, the *Vedrex* was able to reach this sector ahead of the Rihannsu, but it is only a matter of time before they arrive.”

“Well, we appreciate the intel and the company,” Pearson remarked. “I suggest the *Besiege* and *Corsair* move into formation with the *Vedrex* as its center. That way, when the Rihannsu fleet does arrive, perhaps with you acting as our spokesperson it will carry more authority with the Rihannsu crews than Bill or I would.”

“A logical idea, to paraphrase our Vulcan cousins,” T’Lees remarked before ordering her vessel to maneuver into formation between the two Federation ships. As the *Vedrex* turned around, Fil was studying his console’s sensor readings.

“Cathryn,” the Catullan admiral said. “Sensors are detecting a gravimetric anomaly entering the sector.”

“What kind of anomaly?” Pearson asked, her attention back on her acting tactical officer.

“Normally I would write it off to a small temporary singularity passing through the region at near-warp speed, but given the present circumstances, I’m reluctant to simply ignore what I’m detecting.”

Both Pearson and Harkonnen stepped over to the tactical console, looking over Fil’s shoulder at the readings displayed on the monitor.

“Are you sure the dynoscanners are not in need of adjustment?” Harkonnen asked. “One sensor is detecting a minor gravity reading while another shows the quad is empty.”

“That’s my concern,” Fil said. “That quad is too empty.” At Harkonnen’s confused expression, the Catullan added, “Even the deepest parts of space have stray hydrogen atoms drifting about. That anomaly indicates nothing in the quad except an unexplained micro-gravity indication.”

“You think that’s a cloaking field you’re detecting!” Pearson exclaimed, catching on.

“SOMETHING is there,” Fil insisted. “But if it were individual vessels moving under cloak, we would not be seeing this detectable zone of nothingness, nor the gravity readings, no matter how small. I think T’K’Lon or his admirals have made a grave mistake.”

“Such as...?” Harkonnen asked.

“I’m theorizing that the Rihannsu invasion fleet is traveling so close together their cloaking field has merged into one large envelope. Even when cloaked, a space vessel has mass, which individually is virtually undetectable. But put enough ships together in one small area of space, maybe a dozen or so of them...”

“Like a fleet of fifteen warbirds?” Pearson suggested.

Fil nodded and continued, “...And I believe you would see a gravity reading something like what the sensors are detecting.”

“The Rihannsu fleet must be traveling very close together in order to communicate between vessels while still cloaked,” Harkonnen surmised. “Otherwise we would never have detected them at that range.”

“I’m still not entirely certain what the sensors are reading is the approaching Rihannsu fleet,” Fil cautioned. “However, I cannot think of anything else that would explain the readings we are getting, and the anomaly is moving toward us at low warp speed.”

Pearson quickly returned to the center seat as she ordered, “Inform the *Besiege* and *Vedrex* of your readings, Penji. And let me know as soon as the anomaly has entered weapons range.”

“What do you intend to do, Kittycat?” Harkonnen asked, taking his customary position at Pearson’s right elbow.

“Are you familiar with the old Earth sport of bowling?” Pearson asked with a wry smile. “We used to have a small bowling alley aboard the old *Arcturus*. It was a nice break from skatsball and for a while I got pretty good at the game.”

Again confused by his wife’s sudden change of subject, Harkonnen merely frowned.

“Estimate the anomaly will enter weapons range in one hour twenty-two minutes at present course and speed, Cathryn,” Fil announced.

“Very well. Let’s set up the lane,” Pearson remarked.

* * * *

Almost an hour and a half later, the three vessels were still station-keeping along the most-likely course of approach to the Vorte system. The three starship commanders had conversed over the course of time to determine exactly what they would do should the anomaly be determined to be the suspected Rihannsu fleet. It was finally decided that T'Lees, as the Romulan representative, would attempt to open a dialogue with the fleet commander and persuade them to return to Rihannsu space - as unlikely as that option sounded.

T'Lees, on the bridge of the *Vedrex*, turned to her son and first officer, Sub-Commander P'Tor. "Activate hailing frequency, Sub-Commander."

P'Tor pressed several controls on a nearby console, then looked at his mother and said, "Frequency activated, Commander."

"Approaching Rihannsu fleet, this is Commander T'Lees of the Romulan Imperial Navy. Halt your fleet and de-cloak your vessels and return to your home space immediately. You are entering space claimed by the Romulan Empire. Your presence is neither required nor desired."

T'Lees waited several seconds for some reaction, either a reply or one or more vessels dropping their cloak to confront her. When nothing occurred, she looked back at P'Tor.

"No response, Commander," the *Vedrex*'s first officer confirmed. "Perhaps Admiral Fil was incorrect in his assessment...?"

"No, P'Tor. They're out there. They're just hoping we cannot detect them and they can slip past us."

"Would not the fact that you just hailed their fleet let the Rihannsu know we have detected their presence?"

"P'Tor, whether they admit it or not, the Rihannsu are Romulans just like us. And if one word can describe the Romulan people, it is obstinate. They will continue to believe they have the advantage until it is proven to them that they do not." T'Lees then pressed a control on the arm of her chair and said, "Captain Pearson, we have received no response. Are you still detecting the gravitic anomaly as before?"

Aboard the *Corsair*, Pearson looked over at Fil, who was still concentrating on his readings.

"The gravimetric readings are starting to disperse," Fil explained, his eyes never leaving the monitor screen. "I think the Rihannsu fleet is beginning to move apart, probably in response to Commander T'Lees' attempt at communication. The anomaly is approaching the tachyon net and should pass through in approximately ten minutes."

"Either we can wait those ten minutes and assume the net will reveal their presence, or we can be a little more proactive about this," Pearson stated. "Commander T'Lees, be advised the *Corsair* is going to maneuver around and come alongside the *Vedrex*'s port beam."

"Very well, Captain," T'Lees replied.

"Helm, maneuvering thrusters," Pearson ordered. "Move us between the *Besiege* and *Vedrex*." As the helmsman acknowledged and maneuvered the *Corsair* between the two other starships, Pearson stepped back over to Fil's console and looked at the current readings. "Come about to 173 mark 1. Stand by on weapons systems."

Fil reached over and armed both pulse phasers and torpedo tubes. "Weapons armed and ready," the admiral announced.

A targeting reticule had appeared on the sensor monitor, aiming almost dead-center of the nothingness Fil had detected. Pearson then glanced at the main viewscreen, which displayed the distant stars in the direction of what had until recent years been the Neutral Zone, then ordered, "Fire one."

Fil touched a control on his panel and a single photon torpedo - bright orange against the blackness of space - launched from the tube and sped away on the viewscreen. It grew very small in the distance, barely visible, when it apparently struck a solid yet unseen object, deflecting slightly up and to the right before hitting another invisible object more directly and exploding. The first transparent object the torpedo had struck was now sparking green plasma flairs, while the second immediately lost its cloak and visibly appeared - a D'deridex-class warbird with a gaping hole in the lower hull spewing debris, gasses, and intermittent flame. The heavily damaged ship spun - apparently out of control for the moment - until it hit another invisible object a short distance away. Quickly, a second D'deridex-class warbird appeared, one of its warp nacelles ripped completely off the hull from its collision with the previous warbird, spewing plasma and debris in its wake. Both exposed ships immediately turned and began to withdraw back along the direction they had originated as the first vessel - nearly identical in design to the

Vedrex except for the color of its hull and some visible equipment, and which had been struck a glancing blow by the torpedo to one now-damaged wing – revealed itself where the first impact had taken place.

“Strike!” Pearson shouted in exhilaration.

“I think you have their attention, Kittycat,” Harkonnen remarked.

“Cathryn, the anomaly is dispersing,” Fil reported. “The Rihannsu fleet is breaking up, probably trying to avoid any more lucky shots by us and to give themselves maneuvering room and avoid any further collisions. Estimate several of the ships will pass through the tachyon net within seconds.”

“Captain, we’re being hailed by the visible Mogai-type warbird at bearing 173 mark 0,” the officer at operations conveyed.

“On screen,” Pearson ordered. A moment later the image of a Rihannsu warbird bridge appeared on the viewer. The warbird’s commander, wearing the ornate purple uniform of the Rihannsu military, appeared on the screen.

“I am Admiral J’tach in command of the *Rihannsu Imperial Warbird Talvath* and the Emperor’s Second Fleet. What gives you and your Romulan lap dog the right to fire upon my fleet?”

“Admiral, this is Captain Cathryn Pearson in command of the Federation starship *Corsair*. Your fleet is on the verge of entering the territorial space of the Romulan colony world of Vorte. Your presence here is not authorized.”

A sneering expression appeared on the Rihannsu officer’s lips as he replied, “That depends on whose authority you recognize.”

“Cathryn!” Fil hissed, catching Pearson’s attention. The captain gestured to her operations officer to cut the audio, then said to Fil, “What is it, Penji?”

“Three of the cloaked Rihannsu ships have just crossed through the tachyon net. I’m now tracking them as we speak.”

“Are the Rihannsu aware of the net?” Pearson asked.

“Analyzing their ship movements, I would have to say no. They have dropped to sublight, probably due to the admiral’s flagship coming to a stop to confront us, but otherwise are maneuvering as if they believe they remain undetected.”

“We can use that ignorance against Admiral J’tach,” Pearson remarked with a determined expression. “Maintain a loose weapons lock on every Rihannsu vessel that passes through the net, and pass that info on to the *Besiege* and *Vedrex*. Ops, resume audio.”

“You’re back on, Captain.”

“Admiral J’tach,” Pearson said, again addressing the enemy commander. “The Vorte sector falls under the territorial claim of the Romulan Empire. As allies of the Romulan government, I must defend this sector from any attempt at invasion. We’re not going to let what happened at Elehu happen to Vorte too.”

“The so-called ‘Romulan government’ is nothing more than a farce,” J’tach responded. “All territories once belonging to the former Romulan Star Empire or claimed in the years since the Hobus incident rightfully belong to the Empire’s legitimate successor, the Rihannsu Star Empire. Withdraw now and allow us free passage to our colony world and we will not fire upon you or your so-called allies, Captain.”

Pearson glanced over at Fil. He was now holding up six fingers. She assumed that meant six of the thirteen remaining Rihannsu warbirds had now passed through the tachyon net and were being tracked successfully, in spite of their cloaks.

“Admiral, perhaps you would be willing to share some of your scientific knowledge with me?” Pearson said, addressing J’tach. The Rihannsu officer immediately looked confused. “As I understand the principal, the cloaking device achieves its ability by literally bending light around the object being hidden, but such an ability comes at a great cost in terms of the power required?”

“That is true,” J’tach replied, certain he was not giving away anything that was not already common knowledge regarding cloaking devices. As the admiral spoke, Fil raised two more fingers, now totaling eight.

“It is also my understanding that ships under cloak expend so much energy that they are incapable of employing anything more protective than navigational deflectors, leaving their hulls vulnerable to modern weaponry?” Fil’s fingers increased to ten.

Now J’tach’s expression turned to one of suspicion mixed with disgust. “Even were I to consider that supposition to be common knowledge, I would never confirm it to the likes of you, Captain.” Ten and one... Eleven fingers.

“Not even if I told you I have the ability to track your warbirds, even when they are cloaked?” Pearson teased. “Perhaps BECAUSE of that great power usage.”

J’tach stifled a laugh as he said, “You may have detected my fleet’s approach based on the detectable gravity readings the mass of our ships produced as we traveled in such close proximity to one another, Captain... Yes, my science officer figured out how you detected our initial approach,” the Rihannsu added when he noticed the slight change in Pearson’s expression, her smug look disappearing momentarily. “But my fleet has dispersed in the time our conversation has taken place. You cannot detect any gravity readings from individual cloaked vessels, and you are now surrounded, Captain. I suggest you withdraw your ships immediately, or face destruction.” Ten and two... Twelve fingers! Then a thumbs-up from Fil.

“Well, Admiral, I guess I’ll just have to prove our ability to you,” Pearson remarked, then addressed both the *Besiege* and *Vedrex*. “All ships, fire!”

The *Vedrex*, *Besiege*, and *Corsair* each fired four torpedoes, all in divergent directions. To an uninformed observer, it would appear the two Federation warships and single Romulan warbird were firing blindly in almost every direction, yet within seconds each torpedo impacted a cloaked target. One by one, each ship in Admiral J’tach’s fleet emerged from cloak, damage to varying degrees apparent on each hull. One warbird went completely dark as its power distribution systems failed. A second, which had evidently been hit too close to the location of the singularity that powered Romulan and Rihannsu vessels, imploded as its core containment failed and the ship was literally sucked into its own black hole, which collapsed in upon itself a second later.

Admiral J’tach, who was still displayed on the *Corsair*’s main viewscreen, looked shocked, then outraged.

“Admiral J’tach,” Pearson said, looking directly at the Rihannsu commander on the screen. “On behalf of the Federation Starfleet and the Romulan Imperial Navy, I respectfully recommend you and your ships return to your home space at reasonable speed, remaining uncloaked until such time as you cross the Neutral Zone. If you fail to comply, you can consider your fleet forfeit. Remember, we can track you, whether your ships are invisible or not.” J’tach appeared like he was about to speak when Pearson added, “Screen off.” The main viewer returned to the image of deep space with J’tach’s damaged warbird at its center.

“You do realize of course,” Harkonnen said as he stepped back over to his wife’s side, “that the Rihannsu still outnumber us, and in all likelihood still outgun us as well.”

“But until they somehow become aware of our tachyon net, they will believe we have the ability to track their ships whether cloaked or not, and that has got to have them wondering and very concerned right now.” As Pearson spoke, one of the lesser-damaged warbirds moved alongside its sister ship that had lost all power and locked a tractor beam on it as all the Rihannsu ships turned to head back in the direction from which they had come, maneuvering to join the two damaged vessels that had earlier turned back toward home.

“They’re going to assign their top scientists to learn how we gained the ability to track them under cloak,” Harkonnen remarked. “It will only be a day, if not merely hours, before they realize their ships were exposed to a tachyon field which gave away their positions.”

“And in the meantime, they’re headed back to Alpha Pictoris instead of attempting to invade and conquer Vorte,” Pearson pointed out. “It may only be a delay to the inevitable, but it’s enough for the time being.” Pearson then moved back over to where Fil sat and, placing a hand on the Catullan man’s shoulder, said, “Good work, Penji. I can’t imagine how this whole incident would have turned out had you not been aboard the *Corsair*.”

“I’m happy I could help,” Fil replied with a smile. “Now, about the duty roster...”

“Don’t push it, Admiral,” Pearson remarked curtly as she returned to her seat. “Helm, plot a course to Vorte. I think we need to let off a little steam with some shore leave. I’m pretty sure the Romulan governor will be happy to provide some recreational opportunities.”

“Aye, aye, CAPTAIN!” the helmsman replied enthusiastically as he entered the new course into the console. “Course plotted and laid in.”

“Konstantin, inform Captain MacLeod and Commander T’Lees that the first round of Romulan Ale is on me when we arrive,” Pearson suggested. “Helm, ahead warp three.”

A moment later, three bright flashes of light announced the entry of the *Corsair*, *Besiege*, and *Vedrex* into warp.

* * * *

Stardate 68642.3

Sector 50108

The *Corsair* had rendezvoused with the Fifth Fleet flagship *USS Dauntless*, which had just completed a survey of several inhabitable star systems beyond the Federation colony of Persephone deep in the AOR, and Admiral Fil was preparing to transfer his flag once again.

“Petty Officer Messer reports everything aboard the *Dauntless* is ready for your return, Admiral,” Cathryn Pearson was saying. “Once you’re back aboard the *Dauntless* and settled in, Fleet Captain Koester reportedly wants to return to the sector beyond 50115. He said their automated probe may have discovered a planet which has evolved silane-based life-forms and he wants to get back there and investigate further.”

“Understandable,” Fil said as he grabbed a small satchel of belongings and Pearson lifted a larger duffle bag filled with the admiral’s uniforms and personnel effects and the pair departed the small stateroom to head toward the equally as small transporter room. “Such a discovery, if proven to be true, would be very exciting.” Fil then looked at Pearson as the pair slowly walked down the corridor and said, “I wish to apologize to you, Cathryn.”

“What for, Penji?” Pearson asked, though she suspected she knew.

“For the burden I have imposed the last few weeks. I realize I’ve been a pain in the neck...”

“Actually, Penji, at times my opinion of you was a little lower,” Pearson joked.

“I just felt completely out of place aboard the starbase and then again aboard your ship. I fear I may have... overcompensated... a little bit.”

“Just a little, huh?”

“Okay, perhaps more than a little. But after my temporary re-assignment back on Earth, I was excited to be back out here in the fleet. When I was first recalled to San Francisco I was sure I would never be coming back. I let my exhilaration get the better of me, and for that I apologize to you, Konstantin, and your entire crew.”

“Apology accepted, Penji. But if you try and take over my ship or starbase ever again, I’ll push you out the nearest airlock.”

“Speaking of the starbase, please pass on my apology to Val and her staff as well,” Fil remarked as the pair reached the *Corsair*’s transporter room and entered through the door.

“I’ll be sure to do that as soon as the *Corsair* returns to base,” Pearson assured as she placed Fil’s luggage on top of one transporter pad and Fil stepped up and positioned himself on an adjacent one.

“Drinks are on me next time we’re all in the Lodge,” Fil said with a smile.

“Just as long as business hours are not cut down so much that the place closes before I get off duty,” Pearson remarked with her own smile. She then looked at the transporter technician and asked, “Is the transporter synchronized?”

“*Dauntless* reports transporters are in synch,” the operator assured. “Standing by.”

Pearson looked back at Fil and said, “Until next time, Penji.”

“Until next time,” Fil agreed.

“Energize,” Pearson ordered. The technician ran his fingers down the console controls and the transporter pads lit up. Seconds later, Penji Fil and his luggage dematerialized. As the system hummed back down to stand-by, Pearson took a deep, cleansing breath, slowly releasing it.

“What now, Captain?” the transporter operator asked.

“Time to get back to work,” Pearson replied with a smile as she headed back out the door and into the corridor beyond.

The End