

Captain's log, stardate 69576.2:

After pausing at the rendezvous point for a brief memorial service in memory of the roughly seven hundred and eighty people lost in the destruction of Starbase 719, the rag-tag Federation Fifth Fleet has made its way to the Romulan colony of Vorte on the far side of the Typhon Expanse, where the senior officers and I are scheduled to meet with Admiral Kathryn Janeway and other Starfleet representatives, and where we hope to figure out in what direction the future of the Fifth Fleet is headed.

Koester, commanding Dauntless, out.

“Slowing to half-impulse,” Lieutenant William Hyland-Faggio reported from the helm. “We will be entering standard orbit over the Vorte colony in approximately twenty minutes.”

“Very well, Helm,” Fleet Captain Peter J. Koester, commanding officer of the Fifth Fleet flagship responded. “Mister Kyler, signal the fleet to maintain position here. No need to crowd the skies over Vorte with dozens of ships.”

“But what about our passengers, Skipper?” Chief Pono Kyman, the starship’s ‘Chief of the Boat’ inquired. “Everyone here has been cooped up for the last two weeks, and were hoping to have some time down on the planet’s surface for some fresh air and real sunshine. And I can only imagine the conditions are even worse on some of the smaller ships like the *Erstwhile!*”

“And I fully intend to let that happen, COB,” Koester replied. “But we can’t just show up and start unloading everyone we evacuated from *Starbase 719*. The Romulan government was gracious enough to allow Starfleet to meet us here. We need to go through diplomatic channels before we can start letting Starfleet personnel and Federation civilians down to Vorte’s surface.”

Kyman frowned slightly but nodded nonetheless before returning his attention to his console. Meanwhile, Commander Kyler Saya, the half-Bajoran/half-EI’Aurian chief of security reported, “Captain, the fleet has agreed to maintain position here, though Admiral Kale aboard the *Corsair* insists on accompanying us into orbit.”

“I would expect nothing less,” Koester agreed with a nod of his own.

“I’m also detecting the Federations starships *Challenger* and *Gallant* along with numerous Romulan warships already in orbit.

“We might as well get this over with,” Koester remarked. “The sooner we start talking, to both Kate and the Romulans, the sooner our passengers can breathe fresh air again. Helm, standard orbit.”

“Standard orbit, aye, sir,” Hyland-Faggio replied.

Space, the Final Frontier...

Star Trek: Fifth Fleet

“The Long Road Ahead” By PJK

Part 3 of the Typhon Sector Crisis

Not long after both the *Dauntless* and the Defiant-class escort *Corsair* entered orbit over the Romulan colony of Vorte, established shortly after the destruction of the Romulan homeworld by the Hobus supernova almost five years earlier, six transporter beams materialized into the forms of Fleet Captain Koester, his Ship's Counselor Tanzia Gera, COB Pono Kyman, Fifth Fleet Commander Vice Admiral Penji Fil, and – from the second starship – Captain Konstantin Harkonnen and Typhon Sector Coordinator Vice Admiral Kalin Kale. The group had beamed down to the plaza in front of the Romulan governor's office, where the Romulans had agreed to let the Fifth Fleet officers meet with the newly arrived Starfleet representatives.

Rear Admiral Kathryn Janeway, an old friend and mentor to Koester, quickly moved down the steps of the residence and greeted them, offering her condolences to Harkonnen and Koester – both of whom had lost their wives aboard the destroyed starbase – in particular.

"I am so sorry," Janeway assured Koester as she briefly hugged him. "Losing Michelle like this must have been terrible!"

"I'm dealing with the loss as best I can with the help of my crew," Koester responded with a quick subtle glance at Gera. "Where are we meeting?"

Janeway led the delegation into the governor's residence and down one hall to a modest-sized conference room. It looked much like any similar room you may find at Starfleet headquarters, except all the computer monitors and equipment were – obviously – Romulan in origin. Several people were already seated or standing around the large conference table – some of whom Koester recognized – but he was most surprised by the presence of a Romulan woman with shoulder-length straight black hair through which the tips of her pointed ears peeked. She moved directly toward Koester when she noticed him enter, her expression a mixture of sadness and relief.

"Peter!" Commander T'Lees of the *IRW Vedrex* exclaimed, grasping Koester's hands in a comforting gesture. "I was shocked when I heard what happened to *Starbase 719*, and terribly saddened to learn one of the casualties was your wife! Please accept my condolences."

"Thank you, T'Lees. I must admit, I'm surprised to see you here. I would have thought you would be back in Romulan home space?" Koester remarked.

"I worked closely with the Fifth Fleet and the crew of *Starbase 719* for quite some time after Hobus. My crew and I are still alive due to your kindness and understanding. I count many of you among my friends. I couldn't not be here for this!"

Koester nodded knowingly just as Janeway asked everyone to take their seats at the table. Each seat was marked with a name plate in both Federation standard and Romulan script. Koester found himself seated between Janeway on his left and Admiral Kale on his right, with Commander T'Lees and Romulan Governor Dekar seated across the table from him.

"First, I would like to thank Governor Dekar and the Romulan Imperial Government for hosting this meeting," Janeway said.

"Your Fifth Fleet's help in establishing and protecting Vorte will always be appreciated, Admiral," the Governor remarked.

"We are here to discuss the disposition and future of the Federation Fifth Fleet," Janeway continued. "When the fleet was re-established in 2386, it was Starfleet's first real attempt to return to our basic charter mission of exploration and diplomacy following the end of the devastating Dominion War. In order to open up new areas of space for exploration, Starfleet first established *Starbase 719* in the Typhon Sector to be a jumping-off point to the galaxy beyond. In the seven or so years since the fleet commenced its mission, we have explored hundreds of systems, made contact with dozens of new races, and established or assisted in establishing five colonies, including Persephone, the lone Klingon colony on Kos'Karii and the two Romulan colonies of Vorte and Elehu."

Koester noticed both T'Lees and Dekar bristle slightly at the mention of Elehu, which had been invaded and occupied by forces loyal to the Rihannsu Star Empire – an off-shoot of and now-enemy to the Romulan Empire, and assumed it was the memory of that invasion and occupation that was causing their reaction.

"In the wake of the destruction of *Starbase 719*, the Rihannsu have taken advantage of our momentary distraction," Janeway continued, causing Koester, Kale, Fil, and Harkonnen to look at her with surprise and apprehension.

“What do you mean, Kathryn?” Fil asked.

“Shortly after your starbase’s destruction, the Rihannsu fleet reinforced their garrison at Elehu,” Governor Dekar replied. “With the build-up of troops, warships, and materiel, it appears they are poised to invade our colony here on Vorte at any moment.”

“So your invitation here was not merely generosity?” Admiral Fil remarked. “You’re also hoping the appearance of the entire Federation Fifth Fleet within the Vorte system might... discourage... T’K’Lon’s forces from pursuing their goal of capturing the only remaining Romulan colony in the quadrant.”

“If your presence here keeps T’K’Lon from moving on my colony, who am I to complain?” the Governor replied.

“So how does that affect us, Kathryn?” Kale asked. “Does that mean we need to keep the fleet here at Vorte until we get a new starbase built in the AOR to replace 719?”

“IF we get a new starbase built,” Janeway responded.

“What do you mean, IF?” Fil asked apprehensively. “We cannot operate a fleet here in the AOR without a support base. Both Vorte and Kos’Karii – besides being foreign soil – are both outside of the fleet’s normally assigned operating area. Persephone is far too distant. The Morain, our only other real ally out here, doesn’t have the infrastructure to support a fleet of Federation starships. What are you suggesting? That after seven years, Starfleet will just pull out of the AOR? Abandon the colonists on Persephone? On Vorte?”

“No, of course I’m not suggesting the Federation abandon the colonies out here, OR cease exploration of the AOR and beyond!” Janeway assured. “However, the Federation Council is currently debating the ramifications of the loss of *Starbase 719* and what it would cost in time and credits to replace the base. We could be looking at several years – perhaps even as long as another decade – before a new starbase is operational in your AOR.”

It appeared Fil, Kale, and Koester were all going to protest Janeway’s proclamation when she listed her hands up in a gesture for them to calm down and be quiet.

“In the meantime,” she added, “I have arranged for a Buckingham-class starbase similar in design to *Starbase 375* to be towed into the AOR, positioned very close to where *719* had been located, and temporarily designated as *Starbase Typhon-Bravo*, at least until the Federation government and Starfleet figures out what they’re willing to do out here. Once in place, Admiral Kale will transfer his flag to the new station and resume his duties as Sector Coordinator.”

“Kate,” Koester spoke up. “My original *Dauntless* was assigned to *375* during the first year of the Dominion War, while *DS9* was in Dominion hands. That type of station is tiny compared to an Ournal-class spacedock. We have almost twenty-thousand people aboard dozens of ships that were evacuated from *719*. There’s no way all those people can be re-assigned to this new... *Typhon-Bravo*!”

And not all of them should expect to be,” Janeway assured. “Most of the Starfleet personnel and support staff will be reassigned. Some of the civilian populous may choose to head out to Persephone and augment that colony. In all likelihood, the vast majority will simply be returned to Federation space, or wherever it is they wish to go.”

* * * *

After receiving permission for almost twenty-thousand beings to set up what amounted to a refugee camp on the surface of the planet a reasonable distance from the Romulan colony and Admiral Fil agreeing to Governor Dekar’s proposal to assign the three fleet starships that had served as sector defense in the vicinity of the now-destroyed starbase to patrol the shipping lanes between Romulan home space, Vorte, and the Bharani system where the second colony of Elehu was located to discourage Rihannsu warships from approaching too close to Vorte in return, the time had come to find out in more detail what had happened in the final moments aboard *Starbase 719* from the only survivor that was there until almost the very end; Vice Admiral Kalin Kale.

“Commander Torres had beamed over to the *Bellerophon* a short time earlier to help them get their transporters back on line. Without the *Bellerophon*, there would still have been nearly two thousand people still aboard the station when it exploded instead of less than eight hundred. The operations officer, Lieutenant Jann,

seemed a little overwhelmed by her situation but appeared to be handling the emergency as best she could, as was everyone in Ops,” Kale told Janeway, Fil, Koester, and Harkonnen. “In fact, she was trying a few new measures that Torres hadn’t attempted, and a several of them appeared to have some effect on the power build-up, though only temporarily. Every time she implemented a new protocol to try and shut down the power flow, the system would revert back to the same condition about ten seconds later – almost as if someone or something was actively working against her and countermanding every procedure she attempted.”

“As the seconds ticked on, we knew we were running out of time,” Kale said, a look of fear returning to his brown eyes. “We considered evacuating Ops, but your wife Cathryn wanted to make sure she gave the people still remaining in the botanical garden every possible chance of survival,” he said directly to Harkonnen, causing a feeling of pride mixed with renewed sadness in the former Strategic Operations Officer.

“Can you recall the final moments before the *Corsair* beamed you aboard?” Janeway asked. “Captain Harkonnen’s transporter chief reported the transporter sensors were indicating nearly double the number of life-signs as were known to be in Ops and an unusually heavy amount of interference, which is why he had trouble locking onto anyone else. Were there any unusual alarms? Some unanticipated sensor reading?”

“To tell you the truth, Admiral Janeway, my concentration was on the status of the evacuation,” Kale replied. “I remember Commander Petersen was talking to you aboard the *Dauntless*,” he then said to Fleet Captain Koester. “Her communications were cut off just before she announced a strange reading coming from all four of the station’s fusion reactors. But before she could explain what the readings indicated, I was somehow knocked unconscious. The next thing I knew I was waking up in sickbay aboard the *Corsair*. Doctor T’Pannia explained to me I appeared to have been stunned, though I cannot explain how or by whom, and that I was the only person in Ops that the *Corsair* had managed to retrieve prior to the station exploding. I had hoped that maybe the others had managed to reach an escape pod and somehow survived, but Captain Harkonnen later told me no one was located during the Search and Rescue ops that followed.”

“Doctor T’Pannia confirmed you were stunned?” Janeway asked. “Not knocked unconscious somehow?”

“I can ask her again when I see her next, but I believe that is what she told me,” Kale confirmed.

“What is it, Kate?” Koester asked.

“Nothing,” Janeway assured. “Just... unusual.”

“Maybe Commander Petersen or Captain Pearson decided it would be more merciful to knock everyone unconscious instead of awake and aware when the station was consumed in a fireball of destruction?” Admiral Fil proposed.

“Perhaps,” Janeway remarked. “Like so many mysteries of the universe, I don’t think there is any way we will ever know for certain.”

“I wonder if the Admiral’s condition had anything to do with the rough beam-out he experienced?” Harkonnen asked. “My transporter chief said the transport was much rougher than usual, due to the interference being generated by what was happening aboard the station. Could that have caused something similar to a stun effect?”

“Ask Doctor T’Pannia when you have the opportunity,” Janeway recommended. “It may explain at least one mystery.”

“I just wish your transporter had managed to lock on any other member of the crew besides me,” Kale remarked, more to himself than anyone else in the room. “Perhaps one or both of your wives would be here today instead of me.”

“It’s not your fault, Admiral,” Harkonnen tried to reassure, though only half-heartedly.

“Is there anything more we need to discuss?” Koester asked, hoping to change the subject slightly or – better yet – end the meeting entirely.

“Several items,” Janeway confirmed. “Next on the agenda is establishing the timeline and logistics for setting up a temporary encampment for the former residents of *Starbase 719*...”

* * * *

Several hours later, after wrapping up the debriefing and discussion, Koester was back outside the Governor's Residence. Nearby, both Kathryn Janeway and T'Lees stood, waiting for the Fleet Captain to finish a conversation he was having with his starship.

"Governor Dekar has authorized us to allow our passengers to set up what amounts to a temporary refugee camp about ten kilometers south of the main Vorte colony," Koester was telling his first officer. "Contact the rest of the fleet and start organizing the ships in groups of no more than three in orbit at a time. It's going to take a few days to get everyone down to the surface and the encampment set up, but once it's done, Admirals Fil and Kale have authorized shore leave for all crews for at least a week."

"Good to hear, Skipper. I'll have *Sarek* and *Sun-Tzu* join us in orbit and start beaming down survival shelters and supplies along with their passengers," Commander Arbelo replied. "Are you, beaming back aboard soon?"

"I still have some business to attend to," Koester replied, glancing back toward where both Janeway and T'Lees were standing. "I'll signal you when I'm ready to beam back up."

"Aye, Skipper. Keep me informed," Arbelo remarked. "*Dauntless*, out."

After tapping his combadge to deactivate it, Koester turned around and stepped toward the two ladies apparently waiting for him. "What can I do for you two?" he inquired.

"I just wanted to inform you that Governor Dekar has invited all the fleet commanders and first officers – at least of the Starfleet vessels, as I understand it – to join him in his residence for dinner tonight," Janeway replied.

"I don't know if this is really a good time, Kate," Koester said hesitantly. "We have nearly twenty-thousand people we need to get down to the surface who are desperate to get off the cramped ships they've been stuck aboard for almost two weeks, and I can't say I blame them. That's going to take some time. Would it be possible for you or Admiral Fil to suggest to the Governor that we postpone his dinner invitation to after we have the encampment set up and running?"

"That's what I thought too, but I wanted to see if you and Carrie and the rest needed a night off, so to speak," Janeway remarked.

"Only one night off? I could use an entire week off. But now is not the time."

"Understood," Janeway said before turning to head back into the residence, glancing curiously at T'Lees as she passed.

Once they were relatively alone, T'Lees took a step closer to Koester and said, "Sub-Commander P'Tor sends his regards, and his condolences on this occasion."

"Pass my thanks on to him when you see him next," Koester replied.

"I shall. In the meantime, is..." T'Lees appeared to hesitate for a moment, as if trying to think exactly how to say what was on her mind. Finally she simply asked, "Is there anything I can do for you right now?"

Koester smiled wearily as he replied, "If possible, maybe you and your crew could help us set up the refugee encampment here on Vorte until we figure out where we go from here."

"Consider it done," T'Lees remarked, her demeanor changing suddenly simply by having something productive to do. She activated her own communicator and said, "T'Lees to *Vedrex*."

"This is *Vedrex*," responded a male voice sounding quite a bit like Fleet Captain Koester's own.

"Sub-Commander, we will be assisting the Federation fleet with setting up a refugee camp on the surface of Vorte, about fifteen killicks south of the main colony. Request volunteers willing to provide aid."

"Yes, Commander. Anything else?"

"Not at present. I will be beaming back shortly. Await my signal," T'Lees replied.

"Yes, Commander. *Vedrex*, out."

"Was that...?" Koester asked.

"Yes," T'Lees answered with a nod. "P'Tor has proven a more than adequate first officer. In fact, he has shown himself to be an outstanding officer, much like his father."

"I appreciate that," Koester remarked. "And I appreciate the help of your crew."

Koester gestured up the stair and back into the Governor's Residence, where some final arrangements were still being discussed. T'Lees nodded her thanks and the pair moved back inside the building.

* * * *

Captain's log, stardate 69598.1:

While some of the refugees from Starbase 719 have already departed the AOR aboard several of the civilian craft that helped evacuate the station before its destruction, the vast majority, over fifteen-thousand beings, are now settling into what is already being called Bastogne.

In the meantime, while we await the expected arrival of the new Starbase Typhon-Bravo, the starships of the Fifth Fleet – particularly the ones that had normally been assigned to sector defense: USS Besiege, USS Arizona, and USS Corsair to a somewhat lesser degree – have been temporarily assigned to patrol the trade routes between Romulan home space, the colony world of Vorte, and the route toward Elehu – still under occupation by Rihannsu forces.

Koester, commanding Dauntless, out.

Fleet Captain Koester exited his ready room, a steaming mug of coffee in one hand, and stepped across the bridge toward the closest turbolift. The bridge was relatively empty, only a skeleton crew manning the required stations, as the fleet had finally been granted some R&R following completion of the construction of Bastogne on the surface of Vorte. Ship's Counselor Tanzia Gera, who normally sat in the seat to the left of the command chair, was actually sitting in the center seat – having qualified as Duty Officer and volunteered to man the watch while the *Dauntless* orbited the planet. She called out to Koester as he stepped past the first officer's seat.

"Captain, any word from Starfleet on what's to become of us?" the joined-Trill woman asked.

Koester noticed the junior officers at the helm, operations, and tactical quickly turn their attention toward him, awaiting his answer. He smiled slightly as he replied, "Well, Kate... I mean, Admiral Janeway confirmed the new starbase is on its way to the Typhon sector – under tow by six starships. They expect it should arrive and be placed in position in the next four to five weeks. Until then, the Fifth Fleet starships are authorized extended shore leave and R&R for the next three weeks, then everyone except *USS Besiege* and *USS Arizona* will return to the Typhon Sector to help get the new base up and running. The civilian ships are already returning to their normal schedule; *Cassandra* and *Erstwhile* are planning to continue to ship goods and passengers around the AOR. The rest of them will come and go as they please, I suppose."

"But what about our mission? Will the fleet continue to explore the regions beyond the Typhon Sector?" Counselor Gera clarified.

"I believe that is the hope and the plan, Counselor," Koester replied. "Only time will tell."

"I guess that's as good an answer as any," Gera remarked with a nod. "Thank you, Captain. Have a relaxing afternoon."

"I'll try my best," Koester said after taking a sip of his coffee. "As I'm sure you know; my daughter Gem serves aboard the *Belle* as one of their science officers. She and I are planning on having dinner together here in 10-Forward this evening. It'll be the first time we've been able to get together as family in months!"

"Then definitely have a good time, Captain," Gera added before noticing the helmsman was paying more attention to her conversation with the captain than his job. "Mister Hyland-Faggio, mind your helm!"

"Yes, Ma'am," Lieutenant William Hyland-Faggio responded with embarrassment.

"You have things under control here?" Koester asked after an amused glance at the helmsman.

"Yes, sir," Gera replied. "And if they don't listen to me, I can always have Commander Wallace fill in as duty officer."

“Oh, I’m sure he’d enjoy that,” Koester remarked sarcastically with another glance at the three junior officers before resuming heading to the turbolift. “Have a quiet afternoon, Counselor. I’ll see you at the morning briefing.”

“Good afternoon, Captain,” Gera replied in response, then crossed her legs as she got more comfortable in the center seat.

To Be Continued...