

Captain's log, stardate 69685.9:

The starships of the Federation Fifth Fleet, with the exception of USS Besiege and USS Arizona, are back in the vicinity of where Starbase 719 was located in the Typhon Sector prior to suffering a catastrophic power surge that caused the station to explode almost two and a half months ago, taking almost eight hundred personnel with it.

We are awaiting the arrival of a new, smaller starbase similar in design to Starbase 375 – to which my original USS Dauntless was assigned during the opening months of the Dominion War – under tow by several Starfleet vessels. Once in position, not far from where Starbase 719 used to be, Vice Admiral Kalin Kale will transfer his flag and assume command of the new station, on top of his duties as Sector Coordinator.

My hope is that the Dauntless – and the rest of the Fifth Fleet – can resume our own mission of exploration, all the better to take my mind off the events of the past several weeks.

Koester, commanding Dauntless, out.

Fleet Captain Peter J. Koester walked into 10-Forward aboard his starship, the Sovereign-class *USS Dauntless NCC-75310*. He quickly noticed two men – one Centauri, the other Catullan, and both wearing admiral's uniforms – standing near one of the large forward-facing windows, looking out into the depths of space beyond.

"Anxious, Gentlemen?" Koester asked, walking up behind and startling both Admiral Kale and Admiral Fil.

"More curious on my part," Kale said after calming his racing heartbeat slightly. "I've seen starships towed at warp, particularly ones that were damaged during the war, but I've never seen anything as large as an entire starbase being towed at warp speed across several sectors of space."

"I have to admit a little anxiety," Fil remarked. "I just have this nagging feeling that the Federation Council is going to yank away everything we've done here for the past seven years simply for expediency's sake. I just hope I'm..."

Fil's sentence was cut off by the sound of the intercom activating and the voice of Lt Commander Thomas Riker saying, "Bridge to Admiral Kale. Sensors are detecting the approach of six distinct yet overlapping warp signatures on approach from bearing 185 mark 1. I believe the package you have been expecting has arrived."

"Thank you, bridge," Kale said after tapping his combadge. "Tell the delivery man I'll sign for it in 10-Forward."

"Yes, Admiral," the operations officer replied with a snicker. Moments later six large starships – three Excelsior-class and three Nebula-class – all dropped out of warp several dozen kilometers away from the bow of the *Dauntless*, their tractor beams enveloping an even larger structure, a fully built Buckingham-class starbase.

The starbase had evidently traveled through warp with four starships, the three Excelsiors and one of the Nebulas, pulling the station structure with their tractors while the other two Nebulas pushed with pressor beams from behind and acting as rudders for maneuvering the larger structure.

Now that the convoy had dropped out of warp, all six starships maneuvered around the starbase to equal positions around the circumference of the structure, gradually placing the new station in what would be its temporary 'permanent' position.

"That was impressive!" Koester remarked with a rapt look on his face. "I've never seen something that big being moved so fast!"

"How long before they have it in position and we can transfer aboard, Fleet Captain?" Kale asked, a touch of anxiety now detectable in the sound of his voice.

“I’m told it will be at least an hour before the transport crews will have the station systems on-line. Probably another hour or two after that before the interior is fully capable of supporting carbon-based life in a shirt-sleeve environment.”

Kale glanced out the window again, closely watching what was going on just a few dozen kilometers away. After several more seconds, he finally said, “If you gentlemen will excuse me, I must pack my meager few remaining possessions and get ready to beam over to the new base.” A moment later he turned toward the lounge door and disappeared through them.

Fleet Captain Koester looked at the doors as they slid closed, an expression of concern appearing on his face.

Space, the Final Frontier...

Star Trek: Fifth Fleet

“Roadblock” By PJK

Part 4 of the Typhon Sector Crisis

Almost six hours later, the silence aboard the new starbase was broken by the sound of the transporter platform in Operations activating and three people – Vice Admiral Kalin Kale, Captain Konstantin Harkonnen, and Lt Commander B’Elanna Torres – materializing on the pads.

All three officers looked around the half-lit space. It was less than half the size of Ops aboard *Starbase 719*. Only a single level, it reminded Kale a lot of his memories of Operations aboard *Starbase Deep Space 9* when the *Sarek* would occasionally make port in the Bajor sector under his command. A single turbolift door stood at the far end of the room opposite the three-man transporter. Along one bulkhead, on the new arrival’s right, were all the consoles for engineering, operations, sciences, and security, above which was located a viewscreen – currently displaying the depths of space outside the station, including a couple of the Fifth Fleet starships. Opposite the consoles was the entrance to a single small office built two steps higher than the rest of Ops, with a small ‘patio’ just big enough for a single person to stand on right outside the door, allowing that person to oversee the entire control room. At the center of the room was the master systems display – like the rest of Ops, only about half the size of what the crew was used to on their previous station. All consoles displayed screens showing station systems at stand-by.

“Well, it’s small, but... claustrophobic,” Torres remarked with a slight grin before grabbing her tool kit – the same one she had beamed over to the *Bellerophon* with weeks earlier – and headed toward the engineering console. As the two men stepped down off the transport platform and moved toward the master systems display, Torres activated several controls on the engineering console and the lights came up to full brightness, half the monitors blinking to status displays while the other half – mainly security and sciences – remained on stand-by.

Kale noticed the lights come on inside the small office as well, and stepped over to look through the door, a mixture of metal and transparent aluminum, not exactly liking what he was seeing. The room was cramped and sterile looking, containing only a simple metal desk and two chairs. No decorations of any kind could be seen.

“This place is going to take a little sprucing up before it starts feeling like home,” the admiral remarked.

“I wouldn’t get too comfortable, Admiral,” Harkonnen said. “We may not be here for very long. Either Starfleet is going to decide to build a new *Starbase 719*, or we’re going to find ourselves transferred out of this region. Either way, we’ll know in a few months at most.”

“I don’t know,” Torres commented, looking around. “I think I could eventually get used to living aboard a station like this.”

The three officers continued starting up systems that would allow additional crew members to beam aboard the new station as soon as possible. Kale had announced prior to beaming over that he hoped to have the base operational within the next three to five days, to allow the Fifth Fleet the opportunity to resume normal – or at least near-normal – operations as soon as possible. While Harkonnen was on one side of Ops, Torres moved closer to Admiral Kale and – after surreptitiously glancing at Harkonnen – asked, “Admiral, are you planning any sort of ceremony once the base is operational?”

“What do you mean, Commander?” Kale asked in return.

“Well, when Captain...” Torres quickly glanced at Harkonnen once again, assuring herself he was not listening to the conversation. “When *Starbase 719* was officially commissioned, Captain Pearson organized a huge celebration that encompassed the entire starbase.”

Kale now understood why Torres was acting secretive. He had noticed few of the *Corsair* crew willing to mention Cathryn Pearson around her husband Harkonnen in the weeks since the loss of *Starbase 719*. The same was happening aboard the *Dauntless* in regards to Fleet Captain Koester’s wife, Commander Michelle Petersen.

“No, I don’t think so,” Kale finally said with a shake of his head. “The commissioning of *Starbase 719* was a big deal when it happened. The opening of a brand new frontier! The return of Starfleet to its charter mission of exploration! But in our case, we’re just a small reminder that a massive Federation starbase was lost, we still don’t know the reason why, and almost eight hundred of our fellow Starfleet personnel died for no adequate reason. No, Commander, we will not be having a celebration marking the grand opening of *Starbase Typhon-Bravo*.”

While Kale and Torres had been talking, Harkonnen had verified several settings on the engineering console, then stepped over to the control panel of the small transport platform.

“I’m going to start beaming more of the crew aboard from the *Corsair*,” he said. “Once we have the docking levels functional, we can moor the *Corsair* directly to the station and have this place up and running pretty easy.”

“Make it so, Captain,” Kale agreed as Harkonnen activated the transporter. Seconds later, three more crewmen wearing the gold-yoked uniforms of engineering materialized and quickly reported to Torres for their assignments as Harkonnen repeated the process two more times.

In less than an hour, the majority of the new starbase was operational and *USS Corsair* had docked bow-in to the station’s small spacedock. Kale had retrieved his belongings from the escort ship – having beamed his most prized possessions aboard the small starship near the beginning of the evacuation – and was arranging several books on the shelf behind the small desk in his new quarters when the door chime rang.

“Come,” he said.

“Good day, M’Lord,” Lt Commander Galen DuLac, Kale’s Avalonian flag aide greeted. “I has’t just hath taken an inquiry from Admiral Fil requesting thee meeteth with that gent f’r a fleet status update at thy earliest convenience”

“Ahh, the famed Catullan impatience,” Kale remarked with a half-smile. “You know, Galen, were I to cite technicalities, I could postpone this briefing indefinitely – or at least for the next several weeks – considering it would be at least that long before I have the convenience of spare time.”

“Shalt I inf’rm Admiral Fil yond thee shall meeteth with that gent in four to five weeks then?” DuLac asked with a slight grin.

“No. Tell Admiral Fil I can meet him in my new office – if that’s what you want to call it – in two hours.”

“Aye, M’Lord,” DuLac replied, bowing slightly before exiting the quarters. As the door slid shut, Kale looked around his new quarters. His wife, Kathleen, would be very disappointed once she arrived. The room was barely larger than the quarters he shared with another junior officer when he was first assigned to the *USS Arcturus* over a century prior, much smaller than the quarters they had shared aboard *Outpost Sierra 1*, and positively cramped when compared to the luxury of *Starbase 719*.

“I’ll have to keep reminding her it’s only temporary... I hope,” he said to himself, both anticipating and dreading his wife’s impending arrival.

Two hours later, Kale was arriving in Ops by the lone turbolift. He had been right that his wife had both threatened divorce and to move aboard one of the Fifth Fleet starships prior to Kale managing to calm her down and

face the reality of their current situation. He was glad for once he had made his appointment with Admiral Fil just so he had an excuse to get away and let Kitty brood in private for a little while.

The admiral took a position halfway between the master systems display and the transporter platform and nodded at the young engineer manning the console to his left. She in turn nodded as she said, “System coordinated with *USS Dauntless*. Energizing.”

A second later, the blue-tinged sparkle of the transporter appeared above the platform and two men began to materialize. At first Kale believed the second man was Petty Officer Messer, Admiral Fil’s flag aide, but was surprised to realize it was in fact Fleet Captain Koester, commander of the *Dauntless*.

“Welcome aboard *Starbase Typhon-Bravo*, gentlemen,” Kale said, gesturing broadly around Ops. “If you would like a tour of the new base before we...?”

“No time, Kalin,” Fil said as he stepped off the platform and headed toward the door to the left. “Too much to discuss!” As the door slid open with a hydraulic sound, Fil paused on the threshold. He looked inside the office with a puzzled expression, then back at Kale. “Where’s your office?” he asked.

“You’re looking at it, Penji,” Kale replied.

“They stuck you in a closet?” Fil remarked as he entered the small space and took one of the two available seats. Kale and Koester shared a look before following the fleet commander into the office. Kale took his own seat behind the metal desk, while Koester looked around for a moment to find a spot where he could stand that would be outside of the sensor range and allow the door to close. Once the door slid shut and the background noise of Ops almost disappeared, Fil said, “As you know, the *Besiege* and *Arizona* have been assigned to patrol the so-called trade routes between Elehu, Vorte, and Romulan home space in case T’K’Lon and the Rihannsu Fleet try and make a move on Vorte.”

Kale nodded. He noted that Koester remained still as a statue, and figured it was likely the fleet captain had already been briefed on what was going on.

“Intelligence and sensor reports from the *Tango Outposts* indicate a strong possibility a fleet of Rihannsu warbirds has snuck through Romulan space under cloak and are en route to either reinforce Elehu or attempt to occupy Vorte. As a result, Starfleet has requested we reassign a few more of our ships to the patrol routes.”

“Captain Harkonnen won’t be happy about the *Corsair* being assigned all the way out to the far edge of the AOR,” Kale remarked. “At least being assigned back to the Typhon Sector, Val’ri would be able to bring his daughters here from Bel-Terra for visits from time to time.”

“The *Corsair* is not being reassigned,” Fil announced. “This starbase is in a vulnerable position. It’s not very well armed – only basic defensive weapons. And we still don’t know with certainty what happened aboard *719*. *Corsair* will remain here as sector defense just as she always did. No, the *Dauntless*, *Sarek*, and *Sun-Tzu* are being re-assigned to the Trade Route.”

Kale looked up at Koester in surprise. The fleet captain nodded subtly.

“But, Penji...,” Kale said, trying to form the words for all the thoughts going through his head. “With *Dauntless*, *Sun-Tzu*, and *Sarek* all protecting the Romulan colonies, we lose half our exploration fleet! Correct me if I’m wrong, but it already seems like Starfleet has made the decision to decommission the Fifth Fleet and reassign the assets!”

“Kalin, I’ve been assured by Admiral Janeway that Starfleet and the Federation Council are still debating what they want to do with our fleet,” Fil assured. “You could be right and they will decide to break up the fleet and reassign all the ships to new missions that eventually pull everyone out of the AOR, but the Admiral also told me several new ships are still scheduled to be assigned to the fleet. The current plan is to replace the ones we have patrolling the Trade Route, but I understand that eventually they will be permanently assigned to the Fifth Fleet.”

“What ships?” Kale asked. “Do you know?”

“Not exactly. I understand there is a new *Odyssey*-class starship under construction that will be assigned to us once she’s finished and commissioned. I’m hoping for a few *Defiant* or *Besiege*-class ships that can take the place of the explorers we have assigned to the Trade Route. Other than that, your guess is as good as mine.”

“I have to admit I’m not comfortable with the direction events appear to be heading in,” Kale said before looking back at Koester. “Are you ready to depart for your new assignment, Fleet Captain?”

“Yes, Admiral,” Koester assured. “*Dauntless* can depart within the hour. And subspace communiqués have been issued to both Captains Parker and Baber to rendezvous with *Dauntless* in sector Typhon-C so we can all arrive at Vorte again together. Captain McLeod will have our specific orders once we arrive. Request permission to depart?”

“Granted,” Kale replied, then looked at Fil, who continued to sit in the chair opposite the Centauri as Koester headed out the office door. “Aren’t you going back to the *Dauntless* too, Penji?”

“No, Kalin,” Fil replied. “I’m supposed to be commander of a fleet of exploration. I’m going to transfer my flag to the *Bellerophon* for the time being. I already signaled them from the *Dauntless*. Carrie should have her ship back here in the next day or so to pick me up.”

“In that case I’ll have Lieutenant T’Mir assign you some temporary quarters. But keep in mind, the accommodations here aren’t exactly the Four Seasons.” Kale then activated his intercom and arranged for Admiral Fil’s stay aboard his station.

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Stardate 69781.7

Halfway Point along the Trade Route

Between Romulan Home Space and the Vorte Colony

If there was one thing Fleet Captain Peter Koester could not stand during his Starfleet career, it was patrols. Going into battle – in spite of the risks – often held a strange sort of excitement as new tactics were developed and life or death hung in the balance. Exploration was the best, with the thrill of new discoveries and never knowing from day to day what one might encounter out in the depths of the final frontier. But from the time he had been a junior officer aboard the *Al’Batani* straight through to the present, a routine patrol – especially one lasting literally weeks at a time – was enough to make him start to contemplate retirement from Starfleet again and moving on to a new, more exciting career.

The *USS Dauntless* was finishing the third straight week patrolling the Trade Route. Every three days, almost like clockwork, the Sovereign-class starship would pass one of the other starships assigned to the same patrol heading in the opposite direction – either toward Romulan space or in the direction of the galactic core and the colony world of Vorte, which was still hosting an encampment of almost ten thousand former residents and crew of the Federation *Starbase 719*. Koester was frankly bored out of his skull, and almost wished the Rihannsu would appear just to break the monotony.

“Captain,” announced security chief Kyler Saya from tactical. “Sensors are detecting a vessel with a Romulan warp signature approaching from aft, bearing 340 mark 2, on an intercept course.”

Koester sat straighter in his chair, but before he could make any inquiries, Lt Commander Thomas Riker at ops added, “IFF transponder signal identifies the approaching vessel as the *IRW Vedrex*.”

A slight smile mixed with an expression of confusion appeared on the fleet captain’s face as he remarked, “What’s T’Lees’ warbird doing out here? I thought she was temporarily assigned to Vorte?”

“The *Vedrex* is hailing,” Riker announced.

“I guess you’ll get your answer, Skipper,” Chief Pono Kyman said from his seat at mission ops, the tone of his voice sounding slightly disapproving.

Koester looked over at his COB with an expression that said, ‘Drop it!’ before ordering, “On screen, Commander.” A second later the stars of deep space were replaced with the image of a female Romulan commander with long, straight black hair and emerald green eyes. “What brings the *Vedrex* out here, Commander? I thought you were overseeing the defense of Vorte?”

“The *Vedrex* and the warbird *Genorex* have been assigned to join your blockade,” Commander T’Lees replied. “Sensor emplacements along what used to be the Neutral Zone detected the passage of a large mass under cloak headed in this direction five days ago. We believe the Rihannsu invasion fleet heading to Vorte will pass close to this position very soon. Your starships *Besiege* and *Sun-Tzu* are also being routed here as we speak.”

Koester became angry at himself for deriving pleasure from the fact that his patrol was being interrupted by confrontation and possible conflict.

“As I’m sure you know, The *Dauntless* and the rest of the Starfleet ships patrolling the Trade Route are locked into a series of probes positioned strategically around this area of space emitting a tachyon net that should detect any vessel – cloaked or not – on approach to Vorte. If T’K’Lon’s ships are here, we’ll know about it.”

Almost as if on cue, an indicator on Commander Kyler’s console sounded. The half-Bajoran/half-El’Aurian woman looked at her readout, then looked toward Koester and reported, “Tachyon probes 1-Alpha, 1-Bravo, and 3-Foxtrot have detected one or more cloaked vessels entering the sector, Captain. Present course roughly parallels the Trade Route. Estimated time of arrival at our current position is six hours, thirty-nine minutes. If they remain on present course, we should be able to detect them again through tachyon probes 2-Alpha, 2-Charlie, and 3-Foxtrot in just over an hour.”

“All stop,” Koester ordered. As the helmsman acknowledged, the captain said to Commander T’Lees, “We’re holding our present position. No need to keep moving and make any intercept of Rehannsu forces sooner while it takes longer for the *Besiege* and *Sun-Tzu* to rendezvous with us.”

“Agreed,” T’Lees responded. “We should be at your position in approximately ten of your minutes. *Genorex* last reported they are en route and should likewise join us before the Rehannsu reach your current coordinates. However, one thing concerns me.”

“And that is?” Koester asked.

“If the Rihannsu detect us, they could simply change course and avoid us long before we intercept them.”

“True, but if that were to happen, other tachyon probes would detect the course change, hopefully with enough time for us to intercept. And besides, I have a feeling T’K’Lon is itching for a confrontation just to have the opportunity to show how superior he is to either Starfleet or the Romulan Imperial Navy,” Koester remarked, thinking back on his past encounters with his adversary.

“I hope you’re right, Peter,” T’Lees said. “Otherwise, if the Rihannsu manage to get past us, there is little standing between them and Vorte and Bastogne.”

“Captain, incoming communiqué from the *Besiege*,” Commander Riker announced. “Captain McLeod reports his ship and the *Sun-Tzu* should reach our coordinates in approximately three hours.”

“Inform Captain McLeod we’ll be waiting,” Koester replied.

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A little more than three hours later, the *USS Besiege*, the Odyssey-class *USS Sun-Tzu*, and unexpectedly the Prometheus-class *USS Arizona* – which had arrived at high warp shortly after the *Dauntless* broadcast its call – had arrived at the coordinates where the *Dauntless* and *IRW Vedrex* were station-keeping. T’Lees second warbird, the *Genorex*, still had not arrived – to the best of anyone’s knowledge – though T’Lees admitted the warbird’s commander might have chosen to remain cloaked in order to avoid detection by the approaching Rihannsu fleet, even though no tachyon probes in any direction had intercepted its approach.

As had been expected, the approaching fleet had been detected by the second tachyon field just over an hour after the initial detection, then again by a third field just ninety minutes later – both indications confirming the Rihannsu were continuing on a near direct course toward Vorte that ran almost parallel to the Trade Route, though well inside the Beta Quadrant by several hundred kilometers.

Fleet Captain Koester had considered inviting the other starship commanders – Captain William McLeod of the *Besiege*, Captain K’Lith Baber of the *Sun-Tzu*, Captain Jason Shown of the *Arizona*, and Commander T’Lees of the *Vedrex* – aboard the *Dauntless* for a conference to plan strategy. He was reminded by his first officer Setton To’Lock Arbelo that, if the Rihannsu managed to intercept the small task force unexpectedly early, it would leave the other ships without their commanding officers in the heat of potential battle, so Koester had instead arranged a holographic conference in the holosuite closest to the bridge.

Koester now stood inside the holosuite, which had been programmed to appear like a war room. A holographic tactical plot dominated the center of the room – displaying the tactical situation in the immediate

vicinity of the *Dauntless* and the task force around her – while screens around the perimeter of the room displayed the outcome of various battle simulations.

The tactical plot was surrounded by holographic representations of each of the ship commanders, making it appear the entire task force command were gathered in a single room.

“T’Lees tells me she thinks Commander Ramaec and his warbird *Genorex* are here – somewhere – but the commander has chosen not to reveal his presence,” Koester stated, gesturing to the area where four Starfleet deltas and a single Romulan Bird of Prey emblem were gathered near the center of the hologram. “I was thinking perhaps the *Vedrex* should cloak as well. That way the Rihannsu will believe they are only facing four Federation starships.” He looked at T’Lees, who appeared to be standing to his right and added, “That way, if the Rihannsu refuse to stand down and turn back, we can easily have them surrounded without their knowledge.”

“Unfortunately, that opens a whole new complication,” T’Lees responded.

“How so?” Captain McLeod of the *Besiege* asked.

“We have to assume the Rihannsu are approaching with a minimum of five to nine warbirds in order to successfully invade and occupy Vorte, much like they did with Elehu.” The other ship captains all nodded. “All of those ships will be approaching cloaked. Now add into that mix two more cloaked vessels, one of which hasn’t even verified its presence or location, and we may just be begging for a collision to occur.”

“What if the *Vedrex* and *Genorex* were to remain well clear of the task force location?” Captain K’Lith Baber, the half-Klingon commander of the *USS Sun-Tzu* suggested. “As long as you were to remain within sensor distance – whatever that may be when you are cloaked – and maintained a watchful eye on what occurs when the Rihannsu forces confront our task force, you can step in quickly and without detection should the need arise.”

“That sounds like a good idea,” Koester agreed. “No need to show T’K’Lon all the cards in our hand right away.”

T’Lees gave Koester a puzzled look as she said, “Why would we be challenging the Rihannsu forces to a card game at such a dire time?”

Captain Jason Shown of the *Arizona* guffawed slightly as Koester smiled and said, “It’s just a human expression. One I would have thought you’d have been aware of after having spent several years on Earth.”

T’Lees sneered back as she remarked, “I was too busy trying to groom contacts for the Tal’Shiar to be learning how to play children’s games during my time on Earth.”

Koester considered calling the former Tal’Shiar deep cover agent out on what really kept her from performing her job to the satisfaction of her superiors all those years before, but reconsidered as he looked back at the holographic tactical display. A new set of emblems – very similar to the Romulan Bird of Prey that denoted the *Vedrex* but much more severe-looking – had appeared at the edge of the display and slowly moved closer to the task force. It was the computer’s estimate for the position of the approaching cloaked Rihannsu fleet.

“Our task force is going to be in their sensor range very soon,” Koester remarked. “T’Lees, you better get the *Vedrex* under cloak and away from the rest of us before you’re spotted, or our surprise will be ruined.”

“I concur,” T’Lees said.

“Before you go, do you have ANY idea where the *Genorex* may be, or any way of contacting them while you’re cloaked?”

“I wish I did,” T’Lees replied. “I just hope Commander Ramaec doesn’t do anything that may jeopardize our plan.”

“You and me both. Good luck,” Koester said just before the Romulan woman’s holographic representation faded from existence.

Once T’Lees had ‘departed’ from the meeting, McLeod asked, “So how do we handle this? Do we let the Rihannsu know we know they are there?”

“I don’t see any other way of successfully concluding this encounter,” Koester replied. “Our task force will be in their sensor range at any moment. We’re currently positioned in such a way that the Rihannsu fleet will either have to stop and deal with us or they will pass through another tachyon net and we can intercept whatever move they make. Based on previous encounters with other Romulans, before the Hobus incident split the Empire and created the Rihannsu, their warbird commanders are arrogant enough to believe they cannot be detected until proven

otherwise. I recommend once the cloaked fleet is within weapons range, the *Besiege* fires a shot across their bow – as it were – to get their attention.” Koester looked at the other task force commanders around him as he added, “Let them wonder how we know they are there. But with luck, they will simply come to a stop and hail us. However, we must be prepared for any contingency. Captain Shown...”

“Yes, Fleet Captain?” Shown responded.

“I’m afraid I’m not completely familiar with Prometheus-class starships. How much effort does it take to initiate vector attack mode?” Koester asked.

“Almost no effort at all,” Shown replied proudly. “Easier than even a simple saucer separation aboard a Galaxy-class starship. Everything is coordinated by the computer. I can even drive everything from the main bridge!”

“Very well. I want you to be prepared to initiate vector attack mode on my command, should we need to.”

“Consider it done,” Shown remarked with a grin.

“Bridge to Koester,” interrupted the voice of Commander Arbelo over the intercom.

“Go ahead, Monster,” Koester responded after tapping his combadge.

“Skipper, the *Vedrex* just cloaked. And tactical is estimating the Rihannsu fleet will enter weapons range in twenty minutes.”

“Thanks, Exec. I will be up momentarily. In the meantime, place the task force at yellow alert.”

“Yellow alert, aye, Skipper,” Arbelo replied. A second later, indicator lights around the ‘war room’ shifted to yellow.

“Are there any other questions, comments, concerns?” Koester asked the remaining starship commanders.

“None at present,” McLeod responded after looking at each counterpart in turn, each shaking their head in the negative.

“Very well. Let’s hope the Rihannsu are willing to talk. But be prepared for anything, including them attempting to head around us and make a run toward Vorte once they realize we’re here. Good luck, gentlemen.”

One by one, each of the captains faded from view as their transmission ceased. Once the last, Captain McLeod, had disappeared, Koester said, “Computer, end program and exit.” The scenery of the war room likewise faded away, replaced by the grid-work of the holosuite, and the heavy door opened. Within moments, Koester was on his way to the bridge.

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The turbolift door opened and Fleet Captain Koester rushed out, moving quickly toward the center seat. Commander Arbelo was already moving toward his own seat to the right of the captain before Koester sat down and asked, “Status, Exec?”

“Ship is manned for yellow alert. *Besiege*, *Arizona*, and *Sun-Tzu* all report they too are on alert. No word from either the *Vedrex* or the *Genorex*,” Arbelo reported.

“I wouldn’t expect to hear from T’Lees. I’m sure she has her own alert procedure to follow,” Koester remarked, gazing at the main viewscreen and the stars visible there, as if by sheer force of will he could make the approaching Rihannsu ships visible. “My main concern is Commander Ramaec and his warbird. Even T’Lees hasn’t heard from him, and she’s the senior Romulan fleet commander.”

“Concerns you how?” Arbelo asked.

“The Romulan Empire is still experiencing growing pains,” Koester replied. “This situation out here by Vorte isn’t helping promote fleet unity.”

“You’re afraid that Commander Ramaec may have abandoned his post?” Arbelo inquired.

“The *Genorex* abandoning the sector would be the least of our concerns at present,” Koester remarked. “If you recall our visit to New Romulus, there was at least one warbird in orbit that shifted its allegiance to T’K’Lon.”

Before Arbelo could inquire further, security chief Kyler Saya announced, “Tachyon probes 3-Delta, 3-Echo, and 1-Golf have detected a large cloaked mass entering the immediate quad!”

“Right on time, Commander. Is the *Besiege* tracking the same indication?” Koester asked.

“They are,” Kyler replied after consulting her readings.

“Inform Captain McLeod he has permission to ring the doorbell, Commander.”

“Aye, Captain,” Kyler replied. A moment later, the *USS Besiege* moved forward, appearing on the edge of the *Dauntless*’ main viewer. The warship appeared to pause momentarily. Almost a minute passed before a single bright ball of zero-point energy was launched from one of the starship’s torpedo tubes.

“*Besiege* has launched a quantum torpedo,” Lt Commander Tom Riker reported. “Weapon does not appear to be targeting anything in particular.”

“Exactly as planned, Commander,” Koester assured.

The torpedo streaked off into the distance at a slight angle from straight ahead. At first it appeared the launch was simply a waste of ammunition, until a ripple in space not far from where the torpedo had passed resolved itself into first a single D’eridex-class warbird, then five additional warbirds of three distinct classes.

All six warships had the emblem of the Rihannsu Star Empire – a variation of the familiar Romulan bird of prey emblem – prominently displayed on their bows.

“Rihannsu fleet is coming to a stop,” Kyler reported.

“If they hold true to form, they’re sizing us up, wondering how we detected them and trying to determine if we actually present a threat to them,” Koester said. “Once they think they have the advantage; their commander will hail...”

“Lead Rihannsu ship is hailing, Captain,” Riker reported.

“At least we’re on the same page of the script,” Koester remarked off-handedly. “On screen, Commander.”

The viewscreen image changed from the six warbirds to the interior of the bridge of the lead ship, the first one to decloak. Sitting in the most prominent seat was a male Rihannsu, his hair styled in the familiar widow’s peak favored by the Rihannsu and their Romulan ‘cousins,’ wearing a majestic purple uniform with a sash of gold crossing his chest.

Koester stood up from his chair and took a step closer to the viewscreen before saying, “This is Fleet Captain Peter J. Koester of the Federation starship *Dauntless*. By the authority of Starfleet, the Governor of the Vorte colony, and the Romulan Imperial Government, I hereby inform you that you are trespassing within the territory of the Romulan Empire and request you turn about and return to your place of origin.”

The Rihannsu commander looked smug – perhaps too smug – as he crossed his legs in his chair and replied, “Fleet Captain Koester, I am Commander D’Patask of the Rihannsu Imperial Defense Force. Even were we to recognize the so-called Romulan government as legitimate, I doubt you have the authority to speak or act on their behalf. Not to mention my fleet outnumbers and outguns your pathetic collection of flotsam.”

“The Federation has signed a treaty with the Romulan Empire that includes a mutual defense clause in the area of the Fifth Fleet AOR, and I have the authority of both Governor Dekar of Vorte and the senior-most commander in the Imperial Navy to back me up, Commander D’Patask.”

Commander D’Patask made a show of looking around, as if seeking someone hiding on his bridge, before looking back at his viewscreen and Koester as he said, “Perhaps you should consider simply moving along? I see no representatives of the cowardly ‘Imperial Navy’ to back up your claims, Fleet Captain.”

“That sounds like a cue if ever I heard one,” Koester remarked, his own smile mirroring the Rihannsu commander’s. D’Patask appeared mildly puzzled for a second until a member of his crew spoke out.

“Commander, another vessel is de-cloaking to starboard!”

“Exterior view,” Koester ordered. The viewer changed back to the starfield and six Rihannsu warbirds, where a seventh warship – Mogai-class – appeared several hundred meters to the left of D’Patask’s D’eridex class vessel, its nose pointing directly at the forward section of the hull. Koester smiled a little more genuinely as Kyler reported the *Vedrex* had locked disruptors on D’Patask’s bridge.

“I believe that’s check, Commander,” Koester remarked as the viewer blinked back to the image of the Rihannsu bridge.

“I hardly think a single warbird is a game changer, to use your terms, Fleet Captain,” D’Patask remarked, his slightly-bored look reappearing on his face. “Particularly when I have an ace of my own up my sleeve.”

“What do you mean, Commander?”

“Have you not wondered where the *Genorex* has been?” D’Patask asked, his cruel-looking smile reappearing.

“The thought has crossed my mind on a couple of occasions,” Koester admitted.

“Commander Ramaec will not be here to assist you,” D’Patask stated.

“Are you claiming to have destroyed the *Genorex*?” Koester asked, slightly alarmed if such an event could have occurred without detection.

“More like Praetor Talik should better assure himself of the loyalties of his military leaders before dispatching them to protect his interests.”

Koester turned and exchanged a concerned look with his first officer before looking back at the viewscreen.

“Would you not agree that Romulans cannot be trusted,” D’Patask remarked with a sneer, the irony of his statement lost upon himself.

“In some cases – especially in the past, before the Dominion War – I would have agreed, Commander,” Koester stated.

“I believe, if I understand your Earth-game terminology correctly, this is check and mate, Fleet Captain.” D’Patask then spoke slightly louder as he ordered, “Commander Ramaec, you may de-cloak.”

A shimmer appeared in space not far from the *Dauntless*. D’Patask’s smirk indicated how deeply he believed he had prevailed, until another member of his crew spoke up and announced, “Commander, the *Genorex* is de-cloaking directly to port!”

To everyone’s surprise, another D’deridex-class warbird appeared on the opposite side of Commander D’Patask’s vessel from the *Vedrex*, its weapons pointed directly at the forward section of the Rihannsu ship.

“Captain,” Kyler reported. “The new warbird has locked weapons... on the bridge of Commander D’Patask’s ship!”

“Commander Ramaec!” D’Patask exclaimed, sounding indignant. “What are you doing?!”

A new voice sounded over the comm channel, a male voice with a slight accent belying his privileged upbringing on Romulus, responded to D’Patask’s outrage by replying, “Protecting MY people, as is my duty, Commander.”

“But you sided with the Emperor! You expressed your desire to me to defect to the Rihannsu! You joined my fleet of warbirds before we crossed into this sector of space!”

Koester could hear the smile in Commander Ramaec’s voice as replied, “But, Commander, you yourself just said you cannot trust Romulans!”

“Bah!” D’Patask exclaimed, gesturing wildly with his arm. “It is of little consequence! I still outgun you, six to five!”

Now it was Koester’s turn to smile. He looked at D’Patask on the viewscreen and said, “Commander, perhaps you are familiar with another Earth game we call Monopoly? ‘Do not pass Go, do not collect two hundred dollars.’”

“What are you blathering about, Koester?” D’Patask demanded to know, the confusion on his face evident.

“Captain Shown, initiate vector attack mode,” Koester ordered over the open channel.

Aboard the bridge of the *Arizona*, Captain Jason Shown smiled and said to his tactical officer, “You heard the Fleet Captain, Commander. Initiate vector attack mode.”

“Initiating vector attack mode,” the *Arizona*’s tactical officer responded, touching a control on his console. The lighting on the bridge shifted to blue and a mild alarm sounded throughout the ship as bulkheads sealed shut and power distribution conduits disengaged.

While normally performed while moving at impulse speeds, and on rare occasions while at warp, the fact that the *Arizona* was sitting idle in space did not affect what was occurring. A small warp nacelle extended above the top of the primary hull as the arrowhead-shaped forward section moved up and away from the rest of the ship, a second small nacelle extending in the niche below the hull where it had connected to the lower portion. Moments later, the engineering hull also split into upper and lower halves, each with a pair of warp nacelles to propel them. The three sections maneuvered around, each becoming its own separate warship, and formed a semi-circle around the Rihannsu warbirds.

While it was true the prototype *USS Prometheus* had been hijacked and briefly stolen by Romulan Tal'Shiar agents during the starship's shakedown cruise in 2374, those Romulans had been captured before word of the new ship's abilities could reach the Romulan Empire, so the sudden division of one Federation warship into three distinct yet fully capable warships – with an innate ability to operate in conjunction with one another – came as a complete and total surprise to Commander D'Patask and his fleet.

As the Federation task force slowly maneuvered into more tactically advantageous positions, Fleet Captain Koester again addressed his counterpart aboard the lead D'deridex-class warbird. "I think you need to learn to count better, Commander. By my reckoning, my task force outnumbers – and outguns – you seven to six. Now, as I see it, you have two choices: Either you turn around and return to Rihannsu space – visible the entire way – or Governor Dekar can send letters of condolence to the families of each member of your crew. The choice is up to you. You have thirty seconds to decide."

Commander D'Patask's eyes narrowed as he glared through the viewscreen at Koester. The fleet captain began to wonder if he had managed to inadvertently get his task force stuck in a Mexican standoff, but D'Patask finally replied, saying, "My fleet and I will return to our home space..." Koester was on the verge of making a remark about the wisdom of the Rihannsu commander's choice when D'Patask quickly added, "...Because I choose to."

"I understand," Koester replied diplomatically. He then added, "But you can inform your 'Emperor' T'K'Lon that Starfleet and the Federation will prevent reinforcements from ever reaching Elehu or invading Vorte, likewise because we choose to."

D'Patask continued to glare at Koester for a moment before stating, "I will pass on your message, Fleet Captain. Screen off!"

The main viewscreen aboard the *Dauntless* blinked back to the image of the six Rihannsu warbirds. Slowly, all six vessels turned back in the direction from which they had come and leisurely started to move off.

"*Dauntless* to Captain Shown. Please escort our visitors back toward the sector border," Koester ordered. "I will arrange for other Federation starships to intercept the Rihannsu fleet there and escort them home."

"Aye, Fleet Captain Koester," Shown's voice replied. On the viewscreen, the three sections of the *Arizona* could be seen moving off to flank the six warbirds.

"Well, that worked out better than I had expected," Koester remarked after taking a deep breath. "Stand down alert status for the task force. Thank Commanders T'Lees and Ramaec for their assistance, and be sure to tell Commander Ramaec that the next time he plans on becoming a double-agent he should let T'Lees know first so we're not having a heart attack when a Rihannsu commander claims he has defected to the other side." Koester turned and faced his first officer as he added, "The bridge is yours, Exec. I'll be in my ready room if you need me."

"Aye, Skipper," Arbelo replied, moving back into the center seat. As the Terran/Vulcan/Efrosian man crossed his legs and got comfortable, he addressed the helmsman, "Helm, resume our patrol along the Trade Route."

"Resume?" Lieutenant Hyland-Faggio questioned. He then turned to look back at Arbelo over his shoulder and said, "I thought once we had intercepted the Rihannsu fleet this mission would be over, Commander?"

"Lieutenant, the Rihannsu – like their Romulan cousins – can be very sneaky," Arbelo remarked. "Who's to say they won't try to send an invasion fleet to Vorte again very soon after we drop our guard? No, I think we're going to be here a while longer."

* * * *

In his ready room, Fleet Captain Koester sat down behind his desk and activated his desktop monitor screen. As the screen slowly rose up out of the surface of the desk, Koester said, "Computer, open a channel to Admiral Kale aboard *Starbase Seven*..." Koester caught himself, taking a deep breath and slowly releasing it – briefly holding back a wellspring of emotion – before saying, "Correction... aboard *Starbase Typhon-Bravo*."

"Opening communications channel to *Starbase Typhon-Bravo*," the computer's feminine voice responded. A moment later the screen lit up with the emblem of Starfleet Command before changing to that of the face of Vice Admiral Kalin Kale.

“Fleet Captain Koester. What’s your status?”

“My task force has successfully intercepted the Rihannsu fleet approaching Vorte, and with the assistance of the Romulan warbirds *Vedrex* and *Genorex*, we turned them back. But it was dicey for a few moments. Commander Ramaec’s warbird joined the Rihannsu fleet prior to crossing into the sector and made it appear that he and his crew had defected to T’K’Lon.”

“But you did turn the Rihannsu back, correct?” the Centauri admiral asked.

“Yes, Admiral. But I don’t think our small task force is going to be enough. We were lucky this time.”

“What do you mean?” Kale asked.

“It was only because we knew the Rihannsu were coming that we were able to intercept them this time. What if they snuck around another way and we didn’t have that early warning?”

“What do you suggest?” Kale asked.

“The Rihannsu seemed unaware of our tachyon nets in the sector,” Koester said. “I think we need to set up more of them, along every conceivable approach route the Rihannsu could use to reach Elehu and Vorte.” Koester paused for several seconds to let what he said sink in. “Thousands of lives may depend on those nets detecting cloaked spacecraft passing through the sector.”

Kale nodded, as if what Koester was saying had only confirmed his own thoughts.

“I will contact Starfleet Command and see if I can get them to agree. In the meantime, Fleet Captain, keep up the good work.”

“I’ll do my best, Admiral. *Dauntless*, out.”

As the monitor screen briefly flashed the Starfleet Command emblem again before slowly lowering into the desktop, Koester turned his chair to face the window alongside his desk, and silently stared out at the depths of space.

To Be Continued...