

Star Trek Exploration  
The Adventures of the USS Explorer

The Journey

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## Star Trek Exploration: The Journey

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The Star Trek Exploration, The Adventures of the USS Explorer, The Journey  
by P D Hutcheson

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# Table of Contents

Introduction .....	4
Chapter 1 .....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
Chapter 2 .....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
Chapter 3 .....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
Chapter 4 .....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
Chapter 5 .....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
Chapter 6 .....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
Chapter 7 .....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
Chapter 8 .....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
Chapter 9 .....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
Chapter 10 .....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
Chapter 11 .....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>

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## Introduction

The changes in the United Federation of Planets since the Dominion War, over the last ten years, may not seem very great to the normal Federation citizen; however, to the informed members of the Federation, especially those in Starfleet, there have been many.

The new President of the Federation Council, who came to the position just before the assassination of the Romulan Star Empire High Council, would heartily agree with them.

With the help of the Romulan Commander Donatra and Captain Picard, the Federation has avoided the destruction of Earth at the hands of the Romulan Praetor Shinzon.

Thought of as a traitor for helping Captain Picard, Commander Donatra was removed from command of her warbird and made commander of the Romulan Empire Diplomatic Liaison garrison on Earth. The council thought this was a good way to be rid of a perceived troublemaker.

However, as most of these things go, she excelled in the position and made a name for herself in the Romulan High Council as well as in the Federation council. She assisted and advised the Romulan Ambassador to the Federation Council and was instrumental in arranging the exchange program between Starfleet and the Romulan Fleet. Many officers on both sides were serving on each other's vessels; however, there is still tension and deep distrust between the members of both fleets.

During the recent visit by the new Praetor to the Federation Council, the Praetor had two private meetings. One with the Federation President, which was expected and one with Commander Donatra, which was very unexpected.

The exchange program with the Klingons has continued to this day. It had gotten to the point where, in some cases, it was difficult to identify the flag of a ship with its crew complement. Starfleet technicians replaced warriors on many Klingon war ships and released many Klingons to other duties, such as security. Starfleet Commander Worf had shown Starfleet the value of having Klingon Security officers.

Following the Dominion War, many of the border worlds of the Klingon Empire began seeking entrance into the Federation, especially those left to fend for themselves during the war. They had been supported by the Federation during the war. The forthcoming induction of the first of these worlds into the Federation was a very heated topic in the Empire and on the planet. Many Klingon warriors saw this as the beginning of the fall of the Klingon Empire.

Thus, on the planets themselves, riots have broken out against the Planetary Governors.

However, the Federation and Klingon Empire continued to work toward full diplomatic relations through the soon to be completed Klingon-Federation Accords.

Update:

Project Icarus is underway. The President is facing challenges in the Federation Council. The completion of the *USS Explorer* in route and the gathering of the right officers—in her estimation—was the key to success of the project. Trying something new in expanding the exploration of the Alpha Quadrant was not popular.

The acceptance of the first Klingon Empire world into the federation under the new Federation-Klingon accord will be followed closely by three more worlds seeking Federation membership.

The President could only ride the wave of time and look toward the future with the hope that sins of the past aren't visited on her future. She is convinced her future is in the tunnel with the *USS Explorer*.

## Chapter 1

“Welcome to the *USS Explorer*,” said Captain Alexander Hamilton Beck. They were transported directly to a conference room.

Worf looked around the room and noticed Captains David, Dar’Tok and Chakotay were not with them. His eyes completed the survey of the surroundings coming rest on Captain Beck. He asked, “Where are the other captains?”

“They were transported to their ships where they are currently being briefed by my Engineering Chiefs. Please have a seat so that we can get this briefing completed. Then we can have a meal and you can retire to your quarters. To orient you, you are currently in the main conference room.”

They moved around the conference table and took seats.

“Excuse me, Captain,” Donatra said before the captain could start the briefing, “I assume we are under way to the sub quadrant 01, sector grid 91. Is the crew aware of our mission?”

“No Admiral because I was not *fully* aware of it until the briefing. I only knew that it would be at least a year and the ship is provisioned for two years.”

“Don’t you think that the senior officer should brief the crew on the mission,” Ael asked.

“Ambassador Worf, would you like to brief the crews now or later?”

“Now, I think. Since we are headed out of Federation space at,” he stopped as a thought struck him and shortly asked, “How fast are we going?”

“Well let’s see, we were moving at full impulse when we entered the tunnel, and the tunnel amplifies our speed by a factor of just over fourteen; that would make it...” He touched his combadge and said, “Helm, what is our current speed?”

The Helm officer replied, “*The equivalent of warp twelve sir.*”

“Thank you helm.” He looked around the table as he said, “The tunnel generator, or just tunnel, creates a tunnel or stable worm hole between two points. The tunnel amplifies the current rate of speed the ship is going. It is not instantaneous. We have had the ship to the equivalent of warp sixteen so far, but that was for a short distance with the warp engines running at just over warp one. We are still testing the warp engines with the tunnel generator operating.”

Worf asked, “How long will it take to make the trip to the sector grid ninety-one at our current speed?”

“Approximately three months,” Alexander said.

“Why so long?” Worf asked, “If this ship is capable of much greater speed, why are we taking three months to get to sector grid ninety-one?”

“We are not going to take three months, Ambassador. We are running at the equivalent of warp twelve because two things have not happened yet. The warp drive has not been fully tested in the tunnel and I have not given the order to take us to warp,” the captain answered quietly.

“I will assume you are continuing the testing and, when done, we will be going to warp. I also assume this will be done before the three months are up,” the Admiral stated.

“Yes sir. A test is scheduled for one hour after departure. We will be bringing the Warp drive online at warp one for one hour. If the drive remains stable, we will slowly increase the speed to warp two.”

“Only warp two?”

“Yes, Ambassador. We are not sure if the Tunnel will remain stable beyond warp two. The theory behind the tunnel is not complete. I was advised by the engineers designing and building the generator, not to take the warp engines beyond warp two. They are hopeful they will have the time needed to test the warp/tunnel together at a higher warp during the testing of the *USS Deterrence*.”

The Admiral asked, “So, until the warp drive is fully tested, we are limited to about warp twenty-nine?”

“Why yes sir about that, maybe a wee bit more. However, *please* remember this ship is not my first command and if I must push the engines, they will be pushed, *but* only if we have to abuse them!”

“A mark of a good officer, Captain.” Worf felt very comfortable with this Captain driving! He continued, “But back to the question at hand. I would think we would want to inform the crew of our mission as soon as possible.”

Ael jumped in, “I would agree. It will stop any rumors.”

“Ambassador Worf would you like the honor,” the captain asked.

“Yes Captain, I think I should make the initial announcement.”

The captain touched his combadge and called “Communications, are the combadges for the Ambassador, Admiral and her aide ready yet?”

“*Yes sir. I will be right up.*” A few moments later an Ensign entered the room through the door near the front of the room next to the main view screen. The young Vulcan moved around the room giving out the combadges. She exited after the quick loop of the conference table.

“Ambassador, these are very special combadges. They work on any ship in the fleet rather than only on the ship you are on. That is why your personal

## Star Trek Exploration: The Journey

Starfleet combadges will not work here. To get the ship-wide address system, ask the computer for ship-wide. For all the ships in the fleet, request fleet-wide,” Alexander instructed.

Worf placed the new combadge on his chest and tapped it. ‘Computer, fleet-wide address,” Worf requested, and then continued, “Men and Women, Gentle beings of the *USS Explorer* fleet, and that is what these ships are now. Whither we are docked or separated, we are explorers of the *Explorer* fleet. We come from many planets but have one mission. I have the honor of delivering your fleet mission briefing.”

“The President of the Council of the Federation of Planets has charged this fleet with the mission of exploring the Alpha Quadrant, sub sector zero one, sector grid ninety-one. We are to continue the mission of exploration undertaken by many heroes of the Beta Quadrant; Captain’s Pike and Kirk, Commodore Jameson, Captain Picard, and the list goes on and on. We have been chosen to continue that old and glorious mission, but in a new way.”

“We have the resources they never had. The Federation representation is aboard at an unprecedented level. We can negotiate treaties without having to call the Federation Council for an Ambassador. This fleet is a Federation Embassy based in the stars.”

“We also have the capability to quickly assess a planetary system with a contingent of four vessels, 4 more runabouts and many shuttles. Separated and with diverse capabilities and missions the resources contained within this fleet are beyond anything our forebears had at their disposal for this mission.”

“There is also a historic tradition to uphold. As the President recently reminded me, *Galileo* was one of the first to study the stars, *Voyager* and *Pioneer* are the names of the first space probes to leave the Sol system. These were all explorers, and that is the basic mission of this fleet.”

“The *USS Explorer* is a new ship with new technologies. Those of you that have just joined the fleet, as I have, have some catching up to do. These orientations will take place while the engineers complete the testing of the main tunnel generator. The *Galileo*, *Voyager* and *Pioneer* have been modified and you must learn those modifications and their capabilities.”

“I will now leave you to your studies and your thoughts about our mission. Worf out.” He heard the audible click as the computer closed the connection.

Worf turned to the captain and said, “Thank you Captain. I guess our briefing can begin now.”

“Before you can go any further,” Alexander started, “one of the biggest changes and reason the ship is not three times its size is that a technology that mimics the gateway technology has been used to eliminate the need for hallways.”

“The ship has been divided into three large areas. The command area contains the bridge; this conference room; our ready rooms, offices, and quarters. The

engineering, life sciences and stellar cartography control centers are also located in the center of the ship. The second area is the crew quarters and work centers. The engineering section is the third of these areas and contains the actual engineering devices like the warp core, tunnel generators, excreta.”

“These areas have conventional doorways from one room to the next, like the one the ensign used. However, to get to the rest of the ship we use beam curtains like the one behind you on the far wall.”

It was then that they really noticed the small meter wide indentation in the wall with a shadowy green light. The captain rose and walked toward the alcove. He said, “quarters.” The alcove shimmered and then his quarters could be seen on the other side as if the alcove suddenly became a doorway to the captain’s quarters. Alexander walked through the alcove, and it shimmered back to its former state. A moment later the green light turned red. The alcove shimmered and formed the doorway. The captain returned and the doorway shimmered back to a green-lighted alcove.

“As you have seen the beam curtains eliminate the need for hallways in the ship. The ship still has Jeffery tubes that connect every room in the ship and give access to repair the equipment.” He turned toward the panel and said, “Computer shut down the beam curtain in this room and open the access portal.”

The alcove turned red and a panel near the floor slid aside revealing the Jeffery tube entrance. Alexander continued, “Computer, close the access portal and return the beam curtain to normal operation.”

The portal began to close, and the alcove turned green again.

“The Jeffery tubes are also used to get to the escape pods. If the beam curtains malfunction, you may still move through the ship in the tubes.”

“You may travel to your quarters now. If you need any help, you can ask the computer. I have scheduled the first briefing for one hour from now back in this room. I realize that this will keep you up late, but the briefing will not be long, and you will need this information to function in this new environment.”

Worf was the first to rise and take a chance. “Quarters,” he said. When nothing happened, he turned to the captain with a quizzical look on his face.

“Ambassador, you must walk toward the alcove calling out the destination.”

Worf turned and started walking toward the beam curtain. “Quarters,” he said. This time the alcove shimmered, and he could see his trunks in the middle of the next room. He boldly walked through and was in a medium sized set of quarters.

Worf turned to catch the end of the shimmer and the green alcove return.

## Star Trek Exploration: The Journey

As the alcove returned to its ready state, Admiral Donatra walked toward the alcove and requested her quarters. Aulee hesitated at the entrance to the alcove, not knowing if she should follow. Ael waved at her to come through.

With all his guests gone, the captain returned to the bridge.

• • •

Captain Chakotay was transported to his quarters aboard the *USS Voyager*.

“Bridge,” he said touching his combadge.

“*Tom here Captain,*” said Commander Thomas Paris.

“Tom, how is the ship?” Chakotay asked.

*“In very good shape Captain. The repairs were completed with the retrofit. The Phaser and shield arrays have been replaced and a cloaking device was installed. We have a new member of the engineering team, Sub-Lieutenant Mardorak. He is the cloaking device engineer assigned under the Romulan treaty that allows us to use the technology.”*

He continued, “*Captain, one of the Explorer Chief Engineers will be briefing the crew in cargo bay two in one hour on the features of the USS Explorer. He told me that we are not authorized aboard until the briefing is concluded for our own safety.*”

“Well, that was nice of him. Tom, I am going to catch a bite to eat and take in the briefing. I will come up to relieve you for the second briefing. I hope he will be having a second briefing?”

*“Two with a thirty-minute break to change out the crew. Each section has been split along the duty shift change-over times.”*

“Thank you, Tom, Chakotay out.”

Then over the ship wide address system came Worf’s mission briefing. He finished his meal request about the time Worf finished the mission briefing.

He had ordered a light meal and now sat down to consume it. He was consumed with a mountain of questions over what was going on. He went to the computer console and began scanning the changes to his ship. Ten minutes prior to the expiration of the hour, he rose and made his way to the cargo bay.

• • •

Captain David was transported to his bridge aboard the *USS Galileo*. As he finished materializing, there was the usual “Captain on the bridge” announcement.

“Jeffery were you planning to give my ship back or were you going to keep it,” Ryan said in jest.

“Sorry Captain, but I am going to keep it for a while longer,” he was not smiling.

Ryan stopped in his tracks on the way to his chair.

His second in command continued, “You are scheduled for an orientation briefing in cargo bay alpha in about an hour. I thought you might want to freshen up and eat first. I will attend the second briefing.”

“Sounds like a plan, Mister Fosse, keep the con.”

The captain turned and left the bridge. He took the turbolift to his quarters and had a shower. Worf’s mission briefing arrived while he was in the shower. He finished his shower, dressed, and had a light meal.

He tapped his combadge and asked, “Commander Borall, please report to the captains’ quarters.”

“Yes sir,” came the quick reply.

He cleaned up the dishes while he was waiting. The door signal finally arrived, and Commander Borall entered Ryans’ quarters and sat quickly in the indicated seat.

“Borall,” the captain started, “what have they done to my ship?”

“The Phaser arrays have been upgraded to almost twice their original strength. The emitters are now protected with a special force field array that is almost to the point it cannot be penetrated. The rest of the shields and emitters have been upgraded using Borg technology and are about three times stronger.”

“A cloaking device was installed in the shield generator area. That installation came with an addition to my staff, a Romulan Engineer.”

“I hope you will make him welcome.”

“I will integrate him into the engineering staff if I am allowed too. I am not sure how the rest of the engineers will receive him. He is arrogant beyond the normal Romulan soldier and lets you know it. I believe it will be difficult for the rest of the staff to work with him.”

“If you have any trouble with the soldier, please send him to me. I will speak with him and if I am not successful, the Admiral is next on my list.”

“What can an Admiral do you cannot, sir.”

“That’s right Borall, you have not been briefed on the fleet structure. You heard Ambassador Worf’s mission briefing,” he paused long enough for the Commander to nod, “What he did not tell the fleet was that the Admiral in charge of the fleet is Romulan, Admiral Donatra. She is the Commander that helped Captain Picard fight Praetor Shinzon.”

“I am familiar with the Admiral’s history Captain, up to the point where she became an Admiral, that is new information.”

## Star Trek Exploration: The Journey

“So, at the least bit of trouble with him and the crew, notify me. I am not trying to usurp your authority, but in this case, it will be much easier for the Admiral to deal with her own people.”

“Thank you, sir. I believe we have just enough time to make the fleet orientation briefing.”

They got up together and headed to the turbolift. Arriving at cargo bay alpha they walked past the line down the hall and into the bay.

• • •

Captain Dar<sup>7</sup>Tok was transported to his quarters aboard the *USS Pioneer*. Immediately upon arrival, he activated his combadge, “Bridge, status,” he called out.

“*Status normal Captain,*” said Commander Paul James, “*We are currently docked to the Explorer traveling at the equivalent of warp twelve, sir.*”

“Very good, Mister James,” he suddenly realized that Paul had said warp twelve. He was confused by this; no vessel could move above warp 9.9 and that was pushing the latest technology.

“Very strange, you say the briefing will explain these strange things?”

“*I hope so Captain, my briefing is scheduled just after yours.*”

“I will be in my quarters,” he said. He ordered a large meal. Worf’s announcement did not disturb his meal. He did not learn anything new. Upon completing his meal Dar<sup>7</sup>Tok told his engineer to report to his quarters.

“You wanted me Captain, I have work to do,” Commander Berroc said.

Dar<sup>7</sup>Tok liked having the Zaldan aboard since they loved conflict. It gave him someone to practice his warrior skills with. However, the adversarial psychology of the race could become irritating at times.

“I asked you here to brief me on the upgrades that have occurred to my ship.”

“We have new Phasers, Shields and a Cloaking device.”

“How enhanced are the weapons?”

“They are twice as powerful as before. And before you ask, the shields are about three times as strong. As for the cloaking device, it works and the Romulan won’t let us near it.”

“Please comply with his wishes. That is the treaty the Federation has with Romulus; they will provide an engineer and the secrets of the cloak remain with the Romulans.”

“Yes, I know. It would be a glorious victory to add a cloaking device to the larger Klingon war birds, not just the smaller ones. You are dismissed.”

The Zaldan appeared to stomp out of the captains’ quarters. But then, the captain thought, he seemed to stomp everywhere.

Dar'Tok got up from his chair and headed to the cargo bay for the briefing.

• • •

Worf spent the time remaining, till the next briefing, exploring his new quarters. They were smaller than his quarters on Kornos but larger than his quarters on the *USS Enterprise* or space station *Deep Space Nine*, let alone the *USS Defiant*. The fresher was medium size, and the showerhead was up high the way he liked it. The living room was separate from the bedroom with the fresher in between. There were single windows or portals that were about one meter tall and 3 meters wide in the living room and bedroom. He had a closet across from the fresher opening to the short hall between his two rooms.

He opened the first trunk and put its contents away. The second trunk held similar items he did not use often. He put his dress Starfleet uniform in the back of the closet with care. The third and fourth trunks held his awards and other decorations. The last trunk was the largest and held his weapons collection. He mounted his Bat'leth and Samuri Swords on the wall behind the small dining table.

He tapped his combadge and asked that the trunks be moved to storage. Two crewmembers opened a curtain and took the trunks on a cargo sled built to fit through a curtain opening.

He noticed a door next to the beam curtain alcove and walked toward it. The door opened to reveal a medium sized office with a non-descript desk and small seating area for about six people.

At the opposite end of the room was a door with another to his right. Behind the desk on the wall was the crest of the Federation of Planets. Worf assumed this would be his office. He walked to the far door. It opened onto a small reception office with a beam curtain on the far wall and a door to the left behind the desk. He approached the door, but it did not open.

He returned to his office and walked to the other door, which did not open. He could not discover how it functioned.

He returned to his quarters and turned to the alcove calling out "main conference room" and walked into the wall. Grumbling about new technology he stepped back, and the portal opened. *I guess it requires a few seconds to connect*, he thought as he walked into the main conference room.

• • •

Ael and Aulee began exploring the Admirals' quarters. The living room was connected to the closet and fresher and then to the bedroom. The door connected to an office like Worf's and decorated much the same with the exception the wall behind the desk was empty. The door to the reception area opened and they entered it. Aulee moved to sit behind her desk. She enjoyed having a space of her own.

## Star Trek Exploration: The Journey

The Uhlan rose and moved to the door, which opened for her, to reveal a small set of quarters. They both entered and looked around.

“These must be your quarters. Very convenient,” said Donatra.

The living room and bed area were divided only by a low partition that contained a dresser and desk. Her fresher and closet were located beyond the bed area, her baggage was on the bed.

“I will leave you to unpack,” Ael said. She turned and left the room. She retraced her steps back to her quarters trying the locked door in her office on the way.

Back in her quarters she took the opportunity to unpack the things that were precious to her. She continued to unpack her belongings, ending with the mounting of the Romulan Star Empire Military Crest behind her desk.

As she was finishing, Aulee entered her office and asked, “Are you sure they will like that?”

“I don’t really care. This is the office of a Romulan Admiral, I would rather they know that. Also, it is like a Romulan Embassy. This is the highest-ranking office of the Empire, the Romulan seat of power, it must say Romulan!”

“This is going to be a very exciting assignment,” Tyanala said.

“Yes, it looks to be a very challenging assignment also. But it’s time for the briefing.”

They walked to the outer office and the admiral said, “main conference room.” The door next to the alcove opened to show the main conference room and they both walked through.

## Chapter 2

Worf saw the Starfleet crewmember at the head of the table as he entered the room and took the same seat he had earlier at the far end of the table.

The Admiral and her aide arrived right behind him, and each took their seats, the Admiral on Worf's right, and the aide in the chair next to her.

The officer was examining a data pad. He put it down, requested a special conference and began to speak, "Ambassador, Admiral and personnel of the *Voyager*, *Pioneer*, and *Galileo*, I am John Cunningham, the Sub-Captain of Engineering for the *USS Explorer*. This, for a while, is the only ship of its kind in Starfleet and I would like to introduce her to you."



The captains entered their respective cargo bays to basically the same scene. About half the crew was sitting before a small podium with a large view screen behind and above it. Behind the podium was a Starfleet officer, they guessed was an engineer. As they moved to the front and took a seat the officer tapped a control on the podium.

Sub-Captain Cunningham continued, "Before you at the podium, are one of the Explorers' Chief Engineers. We have a Chief Engineer for each of the shifts, Alpha, Beta and Delta. They will be going over the actual workings of the Explorer to include the tunnel generator, beam curtains and for the command staff, the new combadge."

"It might interest you to know that our current speed is the equivalent of warp twelve. Notice that I said equivalent. While we are traveling through the tunnel, the tunnel is also moving us through space. Hence, we are moving inside a moving object. A real-life example is walking on a moving sidewalk or walking up the up escalator; you are moving faster than if you just rode it," explained the Sub-Captain.

John continued, "You also may not be familiar with the rank of Sub-Captain. As you can see, the fourth rank pip is an open ring rather than a closed pip for a Captain. The history of this rank is very recent. Late in the development of the Explorer it was realized that the captain and first officer could not run a ship of this size. Since the crew was already broken into departments, the rank of Sub-Captain was developed, and one was assigned to each major department. Much like having five first officers. This leaves the captain to command the ship and the Sub-Captains are left with the day-to-day business of running the departments."

## Star Trek Exploration: The Journey

“If you have any further questions about the rank structure or drive systems, please wait until the Chiefs have completed that portion of their briefing. Thank you for your attention. Chiefs, they are all yours,” the Sub-Captain concluded. A moment later the exterior view of the Explorer replaced his image on the view screen.

Sub-Captain Cunningham stepped forward and Worf rose as the Sub-Captain approached. They shook hands and John said, “Sir, it is an honor to have you aboard and to finally meet you. You have been my hero for many years, and now to finally meet you...” he paused as words momentarily escaped him. “Well, it is a very great honor, sir,” he finally concluded.

“Thank you, Sub-Captain Cunningham,” Worf said shaking hands with the officer again.

“John, Sir. Call me John.” He turned to the Admiral and said, “It is also a great honor to meet you, Admiral.”

The Admiral and her Aide had risen with the Ambassador.

“Thank you, John. This is my aide, Uhlan Aulee Tyanala.”

He smiled broadly as he said, “You are the Uhlan that likes to run over senior officers, I will try to keep my distance!”

He had never seen a Romulan blush before. But the Uhlan recovered quickly, “I was trying to impress the Admiral.”

They all had a good laugh. The Admiral noticed that John’s laugh was much like Admiral Saron’s.

John took the seat near the head of the table to Worf’s left. The exterior view of the Explorer appeared on the view screen.

“The crews of each of your ships are getting the same briefing as you are, except you have used some of the systems on the ship already, the beam curtains for example. This ship was built along the lines of a Borg cube, it has completely distributed systems,” he began.

• • •

“The computer core is scattered throughout the backbone of the ship following the centerline of the saucer section with a duplicate core distributed in the Engineering section,” Chief Engineer of the Alpha Shift, Commander Tommy Babcock, continued.

“The bridge was moved to the center of the ship just above the backbone. The bridge is much larger since it now contains the Life Sciences, Stellar Cartography, Engineering and Operations control sections.”

“The Engineering section has also been redesigned to house the tunnel generator as well as a warp drive and core.” The ship slowly turned on the screen to show the aft view. “The tunnel generation ring is the most massive

and strangest part of the Engineering section. I might mention at this point that the saucer section does detach from the Engineering section, however the tunnel generator cannot be used when the ship is separated.”

As Tommy paused, Ryan asked, “Do the docked ships have to un-dock for the separation?”

“No, however, docking, or undocking operations will not normally occur when the ship is separated. This is because we believe that the situation that would cause separation would also cause each of your ships to already be undock.”

Commander Babcock continued, “The small warp nacelles are mounted inside the ring so they can be used while the tunnel generator is in operation. We are still testing the capability to use the warp engines within the tunnel. The *Voyager* managed to use their engines in the Borg conduit, but these engines have not been tested together for more than a few seconds at warp two.”

“The *Explorer* design allows for many changes in configuration. Notice the ports between the impulse engines. The four small ports are hanger bays for the four larger shuttles or runabouts. The larger bay above is a standard shuttle bay for eight smaller shuttles and can handle a large shuttle if necessary. The runabouts are named for explorers and the shuttles are named for the mountains of Earth.”

“Most of the crew quarters are in two concentric rings starting with the inner hull and moving outward. The quarters for the crew are like the crew quarters on these docked ships. One of the largest changes is the fact that there are no corridors within the ship.”

That caused a murmur to begin within the, to this point, quiet crew.

The Commander raised his voice a little to get over the murmur, “They are not necessary.”

A crewmember near the back stood and asked, “how do you get around?”

• • •

“A very good question,” said the Chief Engineer of the Beta Shift, Commander Justin Avery. He answered with, “in two ways.”

“The first is the use of Jeffery tubes connecting each area of the ship. The second is with a new technology built on the gateway technology we call a beam curtain. You may have noticed that the docking port connects to a small room with six alcoves. The alcoves have a red cast. The red cast shows the curtain is either being accessed from another curtain or it is disabled. A working alcove has a green cast to it.”

The view screen overhead had been showing the red and then green alcove. A crewmember walked toward the curtain and said, “ten-forward,” and the curtain shimmered to reveal the lounge beyond. Another curtain next to the first turned momentarily red and then opened to reveal the sickbay.

## Star Trek Exploration: The Journey

“As you can see the curtains are easy to use. Call out your destination and the curtain directly in front of you or the next available curtain will open. However, if you are visiting a private or restricted area, you should use your combadge to call ahead and request the distant end authorize the visit. If it is not authorized the beam curtain will not open and like many of us have, you will walk into a blank alcove! The beam curtain—”

He was interrupted, by a crewmember in the back corner who yelled, “how do we know the bloody thing will work. I would hate to be in the middle of walking through the bloody thing and have it turn off. Could ruin my entire blooming day!”

The room erupted into a splattering of laughter.

“—will remain open as long as there is a person within one third meter of the alcove entrance.” He finished the thought before answering the question.

“Once a connection is opened the curtain contains the energy to complete the transfer. You will notice that the curtain will stay open, but the green light will turn red and begin flashing. That is your queue to exit or not enter the curtain. The captain would not want to ruin your day or lose a crewmember.”

Commander Avery continued with the briefing, “following the last briefing you will find that the alcoves are activated. I will also mention at this point that your combadges are now added to the *Explorer* fleet system. You can double touch to contact a person or section on another ship. You must say the ship, and then identify the person or place.”

Justin double touched his combadge and stated, “*Voyager*, Captain.”

This caused Chakotay’s combadge to beep. Chakotay touched his badge and said, “Chakotay out,” to close the connection.

“A demonstration, Captain,” the Chief Engineer said somewhat embarrassed. He continued his briefing, “some of the places that are automatically open to the crew are the lounge, sickbay, holodecks, and the shuttle bay. Restricted areas include the engineering areas, except to engineering personnel, the bridge, except for command personnel and crews’ quarters, except for invited guests.”

He continued quickly as several hands went up, “The area in which you work on this ship will be open to you on the *Explorer*.” Most of the hands went back down.

The Commander continued, “You may also ask for another ship, and you will be connected to the docking alcove for the ship. However, if the ship is not docked the alcoves will not be active and the curtain will not open.”

As an afterthought, Justin added, “The escape pods are connected to the Jeffery tubes. If you are on the *Explorer* during an emergency, you can either return to your ship or join the *Explorer* crew in the escape pods.”

• • •

“If there are no more questions about the beam curtains,” continued the Chief Engineer of the Delta Shift, Commander Douglas Cowartson. He continued, “The tunnel generator is next on the list.”

“Commander Cowartson will a beam curtain be installed on the *Pioneer*,” the *Pioneer*’s Chief Engineer asked.

“The simple answer is no. The connection must be ‘hard wired.’ If your ship disconnected during curtain activity, the contents of the beam would be lost. This is why the beam conduits are run along the backbone and the center of the distribution system. We don’t want any crew members lost. If a problem occurs, the effected curtains will be shut down immediately as soon as they are clear. When the curtains shutdown, the Jeffery tube portals will open automatically.”

The Chief sat back down, grumbling about technology being out of his control.

“The tunnel generator is used to create a tunnel between two points in space. The destination coordinates or the direction and distance must be known to create a tunnel to that destination. On the screen is the telemetry of our departure from the Sol system.”

The screen showed the buildup of the energies that slowly moved around the ring till they met in the middle, then in a flash of energy the *USS Explorer* disappeared.

“What you don’t see is that the ghost of the tunnel is still open. That is how we can still communicate with Starfleet,” Doug said. He continued, “The start of tunnel is fixed as is the distant end. The tunnel will dissolve once the generator is shutdown at the destination.”

“Remember the tunnel is like a moving sidewalk or escalator. While it moves at one speed the person can stand, walk, or run on it to speed up their trip. As Sub-Captain Cunningham stated we are traveling at the equivalent of warp twelve. The ship is traveling at full impulse. Tomorrow we will be testing the warp drive for continuous operation inside the tunnel at warp one.”

The view screen went blank.

“That concludes the briefing, are there any questions?”

What class of ship is the *Explorer*, I have never heard of the Federation having this technology?” Asked the Romulan Sub-Lieutenant off to the left of the room. The captain had not even noticed he was in the compliment.

“The *USS Explorer* is a Deterrence Class vessel. The President directed the first ship take the name of their mission, the endeavor of exploration. The second ship, which was being constructed below the *USS Explorer*, will be used as a ship of the line called the *USS Deterrence*. The third ship will be called the *USS Endeavor*.”

• • •

“Are there any more questions,” Sub-Captain Cunningham asked.

Worf asked about the locked door in his office, Donatra echoed the same question.

John explained that that was the direct connection to the bridge, and they would be unlocked once the captain had shown them his bridge. “He, as we all are very proud of the ship and the bridge is his pride-and-joy. He designed it and insisted it not be changed. The engineers objected many times to the use of holo-technology on a bridge, but he won the arguments when he would quietly ask, *who is going to work there!*”

When there was no more questions John touched the data pad and shortly the rear door to the conference room opened to admit Captain Beck.

“Well how do you like my ship?” He asked the newcomers.

The Admiral said, “it is over whelming, we have nothing like it in the Romulan fleet.”

“I can guarantee you the Klingons have nothing like it either,” said John.

Worf began, “Captain, Sub-Captain Cunningham—”

“John, Sir. Call me John.”

“—John said you have a bridge unlike any in the fleet. Would you give us the nickel tour?” Worf finished.

“It will cost you a dollar, Ambassador, it is that good!”

Aulee was lost in the conversation. She tried to figure out what they were talking about without the references. She would have to ask the Admiral later. She realized that the others had got up and she sprang out of her chair.

John stepped to the side, and everyone laughed.

“I was not going to run you down sir, I only run-down Admirals!” She said innocently, which caused more laughter.

They moved to the door the captain had entered through. It opened and they entered the bridge.

• • •

“Captain on the bridge,” someone called out.

Tom stood up from the captains’ chair and said, “that is the best thing I have heard in the last twenty hours!”

“You are relieved Tom, get to the briefing and then get some rest.”

“Thank you, Captain,” he said as the turbolift doors closed him in.

“Helm, do you have any idea where we are?”

“Yes, sir. The *Explorer* is feeding data to the helm and to other systems while we are docked.”

“Good, I will be in my quarters going over the changes to the ship, Helm, you have the conn,” Chakotay said as he left the bridge.

He went back to his quarters. “Computer, display the modifications made to the shields.”

He began studying the diagrams and specifications.

• • •

Worf was taken by surprise at the bridge that lay before him as Captain Beck moved aside and he entered the center of the catwalk above and to the rear of the bridge.

The Admiral gave him a nudge to move Worf out of the way and then, only made it one step onto the catwalk herself. The catwalk ran across the back of the bridge only far enough to connect the three doors that were connected to it, one of which they were standing in front of. Two ramps from the catwalk led down to a platform that was suspended halfway between the catwalk and the floor of the bridge one level below. The ramps left the catwalk between the center and two outer doors.

The Platform was large enough to comfortably contain two small consoles with chairs on either side of the center chair. The center chair was obviously the captains’ chair and had the usual displays built into the arms. The chairs arced to face the center of the bridge.

The ramp continued to a slightly larger platform on the bridge ‘floor’. The lower platform held four consoles with chairs. Worf assumed that one was the helm, one for ops and the third was weapons, but he was not sure what the last console was for.

But the most awe-inspiring part of the bridge and the thing that had stopped Worf and the Admiral in their tracks was the fact the bridge appeared to be in open space. It gave the impression you were traveling through open space, as if you were sitting or standing on the outer hull. Currently, the view showed they were traveling through a tunnel with sides that appeared to be elongated, fluffy clouds.

“Ambassador, Admiral, welcome to the bridge of the *Explorer*. Even after I had envisioned it and designed it, it had the same effect on me walking onto it for the first time after it became operational,” said the captain.

Alexander continued, “These other two doors connect to your offices. The Admiral is to the left and the Ambassador to the right. “Computer, release the locks on all the bridge doorways,” he said. He continued, “My ready room and, beyond that, my quarters; connect to the back of the conference room.” The captain began to walk down the catwalk, beckoning them to follow him, “Please join me.”

## Star Trek Exploration: The Journey

They arrived on the platform and the captain took his 'center seat' swinging around to face the other seats. "Admiral the console and chair to the left is yours and the one to the right is the Ambassador's." Each of them took their seats.

It was then that they noticed two things. The console had a low, wide screen across the top that could not be seen from any angle but directly behind it. And that platform was open at the back and there were three large areas to the back of the bridge under the conference room and their offices.

Admiral Donatra saw the screen before her showed the status of the fleet and the console would be used to direct a coordinated battle. She was impressed that the fleet was totally controlled from this spot.

Ambassador Worf took his seat and saw the screen also showed the fleet status and the console was used to direct fleet actions. However, the console also had a larger and more elaborate communications capability than most consoles he had seen or worked with.

"I hope you are satisfied with the consoles and displays," said the captain. "You will also see a privacy command on the console. That allows you personally or us, as a group, to speak privately with others. When in platform mode, we can converse without being overheard by the rest of the crew. When in personal mode, the rest of the bridge will not be able to hear you. This will allow you to make private/personal log entries and communications."

"This is all very overwhelming to have to take in at one time," Worf stated.

"We will be having drills as your time allows, so you will become proficient in the use and arrangement of the consoles. The arrangement maybe easily changed to your needs," Captain Beck told Worf.

"Shall we continue the tour? I would like you both to be completely familiar with the ship as soon as possible, so we can begin operating as a team," Alexander said as he slid out of his chair and covered the short distance to the ramp.

They walked down the ramp to the lower portion of the bridge. It was then that Worf identified the fourth console as belonging to the Sub-Captain of Operations. The Sub-Captain stood as the party arrived.

"Welcome to the bridge operations floor, Ambassador, Admiral, I am Sub-Captain Randal McLorn," Randy said.

Ael and Worf thanked him for the welcome and introduction. They asked about the other positions.

Randy showed them the Weapons console across from him and then the Ops and the Helm consoles that were out in front. They all resembled standard consoles with some minor differences.

“One of the major changes, I think the biggest improvement, over a standard bridge is the mobile console,” he said. Ael and Worf did not have a chance to look as confused as they felt since the Sub-Captain continued almost immediately, “Admiral, please sit at my console.”

As Ael sat down at the Sub-Captains’ console, it blurred momentarily and sharpened to show her bridge station console on the mid deck. The display screen above the console also changed to show the fleet positions. She looked up questioningly.

“As you have discovered, the bridge computer knows where everyone on the bridge is and can move their console settings and displays to any console they sit at. This works for every console unless you ask for another console. Ambassador, please take Weapons. As you do ask for Standard Weapons.”

The weapons officer rose, and Worf took the officer’s seat, asking for the Standard Weapons console as he did. The console blurred momentarily and sharpened to show a Standard Weapons console with which he was familiar plus a few additions.

He did not have time to examine it too closely before the captain said, “while Randy’s toys are nice to play with, the rest of the bridge awaits.”

Worf got up and the Weapons officer took their seat again as the console changed back to their configuration.

The captain led the way down a ramp, which ran straight back under the Command platform and up into a junction. Straight ahead was a smaller version of the bridge that was Stellar Cartography. To the left was the Engineering command section with Life Sciences on the right.

“We have all the functions necessary for exploration and monitoring the ship right here on the bridge.”

“Ambassador, Admiral, you know John,” Beck said.

The Sub-Captain’s from each section came forward. Sub-Captain John Cunningham, Engineering, said, “Good to see you again. Welcome to my home away from engineering.”

“This is Sub-Captain Varrec of Life Sciences, always best to have a Vulcan in that position.”

“Long life to you both,” he said.

“And Sub-Captain Marjorie Rawlins of Stellar Sciences. She likes to think she tells us where to go.”

“I do Captain since I am also the navigator! It’s nice to meet you both. If you ever want a good view, come see me,” she said smiling.

Worf and Donatra acknowledged the introductions. Aulee had been silent the entire time on the bridge soaking up the wonders of the area. She had only been on the bridge of a small cargo ship before, and this was difficult for her to

## Star Trek Exploration: The Journey

take in all at once. But now she asked Marjorie, “may I visit? I was in stellar cartography.”

Ael looked like Aulee had just appeared out of nothingness. “Oh, this is my aide, Uhlan Aulee Tyanala,” she said.

“Nice to meet a fellow stargazer. Of course dear, there’s not much outside to look at, especially in the tunnel, so we look at other systems and recordings, but we always like the company of ‘those in the know.’ It gives us something to brag about!”

“Thank you,” Aulee said. “I will try to get back here soon.”

Only the Life Sciences area was larger than on most ships. This was because of the *Explorers* mission. The vast amounts of information they could expect from the fleet ships all performing separate surveys caused the normal-sized bridge station to be enlarged by a factor of four.

It was Ael that noticed that there was not a large amount of activity in engineering. When asked about this, John said, “we have the monitoring equipment up here, but the actual components are distributed throughout the ship. We have about 90 engineers divided over the three shifts.”

A beam curtain next to the entrance of the engineering section opened onto an engineering area momentarily to allow a crewmember to enter the bridge. The crewmember turned into the engineering area.

“As you can see, we are still a beehive of activity!” His attempt at a joke went over the heads of most of those present.

Worf said, “Captain, thank you for the tour of a truly wondrous bridge. But, if we are done, I think it is time to get some sleep and then spend a few days with the library computer finding out about the other aspects of this ship.”

Ael agreed.

As Worf turned to leave, the captain said, “I would like to set dinner for the senior officers in the Captain’s Dining room at eighteen hundred hours this evening if that is convenient. It will give us a chance to meet and get to know the senior officers on each of the ships and they can get to know the *Explorer* senior officers. Will you be able to attend, Ambassador?”

“I will be there, Captain.”

“And you Admiral?”

“Yes, Captain. Thank you for your consideration.”

“You’re welcome, Admiral. Just tell the beam curtain ‘Captain’s Dining room.’ See you at eighteen hundred.”

Worf turned back to the alcove and said “Office.” The curtain opened as he stepped through. Ael and Aulee went to the Admiral’s office. The captain started back toward his Ops deck.

“Randy,” he said coming out from under the Command deck, “another group of overwhelmed customers!” They laughed as Randy said, “I hope they know what they are getting themselves into!”

The captain said, “I echo your hope.” He continued up the ramp and back to his chair. Walking passed the chair toward the back of the command desk he said, “Office.” A beam curtain alcove materialized and opened to his office as he stepped through. The alcove disappeared as the curtain closed.

• • •

Captain Dar Tok tried to sneak onto the bridge. It had become a game between him and the crew. It was an unspoken game between him and the crew. It kept them on their toes. If he could get to the railing before the crew call out, “Captain on the bridge,” he won. If not, they did. He did not win this time.

“Mister James, you are relieved, I have the watch.” The captain said.

“Thank you, Captain. I have a few minutes to freshen up before the next briefing,” he said as he walked swiftly off the bridge.

Dar Tok looked around the bridge and saw that everything was very quiet. He went over to the unoccupied engineering station and began examining the upgrades for himself. Commander Berroc was a good officer and knew his job, but he was a little closed mouth about the status and capabilities of the ship. And that was something a Captain could not delegate, “*I must know what I have to fight with,*” he thought.

He started with an examination of the new specifications for the Phaser banks.

• • •

When Captain David returned to the bridge, he received the usual, “Captain on the bridge,” as the turbolift doors were opening. “How do they know where I am and when I enter the bridge,” he wondered. It’s almost like they are Gypsy fortunetellers the way they always know when I enter the bridge.

“Commander Fossey how is it going,” he asked.

“It’s all quiet on the lower front! Captain”

“You are relieved, I have the bridge. Enjoy the briefing.”

“Anything new Captain?”

“You would not believe me if I told you and it would take longer for me to explain it than the Explorers’ Chief Engineer. Now, be gone and take your medicine like a man. Consider it punishment for absconding with *my* ship!”

With that dismissal, the first officer turned and left the bridge smiling.

Ryan took his chair and reviewed the logs over the last five days. He then moved to the engineering logs and the specifications for the modifications to his ship.

## Star Trek Exploration: The Journey

• • •

As he entered the living room, the communications panel on his desk began beeping. He touched the acknowledgement button, “Chakotay.”

Captain Beck appeared on the screen, “Captain, I would like you, your first officer and chief engineer to come to dinner in the Captain’s Dining room aboard the Explorer this evening about eighteen hundred.”

Chakotay looked at the time element on the screen and saw it was only eleven thirty-two hours ship time. “Thank you, Captain, we will make every effort to be there,” he said.

Alexander said, “Just ask for the Captain’s Dining room at the beam curtain. See you at eighteen hundred Captain. Beck out”

“Thank you, Captain,” he said as the connection closed.

He taped the communications panel and left messages for Commanders Paris and Ro.

• • •

As RAD finished reviewing the new specs for the phasers and called up the specs for the shields, Captain Beck called to invite him and his senior officers to dinner at 1800 hours. He contacted the other officers to have them prepare their finest.

• • •

Captain Dar’Tok got the idea he was not really wanted at the dinner, but as the captain of one of the fleet vessels he could not be left out of a fleet senior officer dinner. Beck asked him to bring his first officer. He showed a momentary hesitation in asking the Chief Engineer along also. Dar’Tok began to think that this was not the best idea he had heard of this day! But he still informed his officers to be in dress uniform for the affair. He had to insist Berroc attend.

## Chapter 3

Captain Beck and Sub-Captain McLorn entered the Captains' Dining room through the doorway from the captains' office. The area was set banquet style and reflected the outdoor terrace of an Italian Villa. From the Marble columns that lined the walls to the terracotta floor tiles, the room said ancient Italy. The front and back walls of the room were draped with grape vines whether real plants in large pots, painted plants, or both. The sidewalls had drapes.

Captain Beck had fallen in love with many areas of Italy during his academy days. He had toured the country every chance he had. Having been raised on a small Colony world, Earth had been frightening at first. But a friend, Italian by birth, from an Italian based colony had invited Alexander to go with him when he went in search of his ancestors.

The love affair had begun immediately. The architecture and people grabbed him first, then the language and writings. He became a historian of ancient Italy, its people, and lands. He still dictated his private log in Italian. His entire area of the ship had been modeled on an Italian villa, his quarters, office, and this dining room.

As he moved to the head of the table, examining the arrangements and layout, the staff continued to bustle around him. Setting out place cards, wine glasses, and antipasto trays, adjusting the dinnerware and the seating. As the hour approached the activity slowly ceased. Finally, only four crewmembers in historically accurate costumes remained to escort the guests to their place at the table. Captain Beck walked to the other end of the table to receive his guests.

Captain David with Commanders Paris and Ro arrived first. They were received with a few words and escorted to stand behind their chairs. Admiral Donatra followed them closely. The appointed hour brought Ambassador Worf and the rest of the attendees. When all the guests arrived, the captain walked at a quick march to stand behind his chair. He pulled out his chair and took his seat. His guests followed suit.

When all the attendees were seated, the captain stood and offered the first toast, "To the Mission."

The mess, as military members called the gathered members, rose and as a thunderous group, echoed his toast. They all sat back down except for Sub-Captain Randy McLorn who introduced himself as the President of the Mess. He then introduced the Ambassador, Admiral, the Captain, and his fellow Sub-Captains. Randy introduced Captain Chakotay who stood and introduced his

## Star Trek Exploration: The Journey

first officer and Chief Engineer. Captain David and Captain Dar'Tok were introduced and in turn introduced their officers.

Admiral Donatra rose as the introductions were complete and led a toast to the fleet, Starfleet, the Federation, Romulan and Klingon Empires.

The four servers began serving the first course from a table that never seemed to be empty. This fascinated Admiral Donatra who was facing the serving table. She watched closely to try to see how this was being done. No matter how closely she watched, she could not figure it out. She did not see a transporter beam or a replicator. It was like the server picked up a plate and left it behind at the same time!

She got more confused; the more she watched and tried to understand what was happening. She was so stupefied; she missed the plate being put before her. Then she was not sure she wanted to eat it!

Finally, the plates stopped replicating and she saw that everyone had been served. The captain requested a moment of silence before the meal. This tradition had changed from one of only religious tones to one of remembrances and rituals from all races and peoples. In Starfleet, as far as he was concerned, the moment of silence allowed the company to show respect for the personnel who had given their lives for the betterment of Starfleet and the Federation.

Finally, Alexander lifted his fork and began. Slowly the table talk began and even though it never rose above a murmur in volume, it seemed very pleasant until a difference of opinion broke out between Commander Berroc and Sub-Captain Varrec. The mess began to notice the quite disagreement when Berroc jumped to his feet and demanded an apology asking the Sub-Captain if violence was intended.

Captain Dar'Tok rose slowly when the Sub-Captain refused to take the bait. Dar'Tok made a quiet, private comment to the Commander in Klingon and Berroc sat down and remained mute. Captain Dar'Tok nodded an apology to the President of the Mess and sat down. Worf snickered, as did a few others at the table.

The Admiral leaned over and asked what the captain had said.

Worf said quietly, "He asked the Commander what the best oil temperature was for boiling Zaldans."

"Oh," said Ael smiling.

The murmur continued throughout the meal. Again, Donatra watched the serving sideboard, but this time pointed it out to Worf. No one else seemed interested or startled by this strange occurrence. Worf watched the main course being served and then gave the Admiral a shrug of his shoulders.

As desert was consumed, the curtains that hung on the left-hand wall parted to show a small quartet and Worf realized that the music had been softly playing for some time. "This is a very strange ship," he thought.

The captain sat back and listened to the table conversations. Randy asked Worf to tell the stories of some of his more colorful exploits.

Worf told of his trip to find his faith and finding Kayless instead. He then asked Captain Dar'Tok about his adventures. Slowly the two began to drink and tell stories back and forth, trying to outdo each other. This became very entertaining to the exclusion of all other table talk. Some of the other officers added their adventures here and there, but near the end, it was just Worf and Dar'Tok.

Finally, the Captain said, "I hope the adventures on this mission do not rival any of the adventures you have experienced to this day. Now, it is time to close this day. A good evening to you all."

Randy rose and stated, "the mess is ended."

With that, the music ended, the curtain closed, and the captain got up and ceremonially walked from the room through the aft doorway.

Worf asked Ael to come to his office for a quick experiment. He thought he had figured out what was causing the bountiful food and thus, had an answer to the mystery.

• • •

As they entered his office, Worf called out, "Computer, have all my programs been transferred to this ship?"

"Yes, Ambassador."

"Computer, execute Worf Office, Kronos Three."

The room around them melted and solidified into a duplicate of his office on Kronos.

"Computer, lock this program," Worf said to the computer. To Ael he said, "You have your answer. The whole center of this ship uses holo-deck technology. That is how the food was done."

"I ate a holo meal?" Ael was surprised that that could be done.

"No, the food was real, but the replicators were disguised as a serving table. The holo-emitters kept a continuous image where the plates were replicated. We never saw the plates being created because of the holo-image being displayed."

Donatra notices the beam curtain is gone. She walked toward where it was and stated, "Quarters." The curtain appeared and connected to her quarters. She turned and walked back to Worf. The curtain closed and disappeared.

"This ship is really going to take some getting used too!" she said mildly frustrated.

"I agree. At least this mystery is solved. I wonder how many more there will be?"

## Star Trek Exploration: The Journey

“Yes, not too many I hope...” She replied. Then said her good evenings and she activated the beam curtain for the return to her quarters.

Worf said, “Computer unlock program and adjust for the normal doors and other openings. Lock the final program and save under Worf Office, Explorer One.” The doorways returned and others went away. The beam curtain returned. He assumed the computer thought of it as a normal doorway on this strange ship.

Worf walked to his desk and sat in his chair as the curtain cycle back to green and disappeared. “Just like it was eleven years ago when I arrived on Kronos,” he thought, “now I will have to break it in all over again. Hopefully it won’t take eleven years!” He got up and retired to his quarters.

• • •

“*All hands, standby for warp field testing,*” came the announcement over the fleet wide system.

Worf finished his personal log entry and rose from his desk. He walked toward the beam curtain and said “Bridge-Command Deck.” The curtain appeared and he could see the back of the captains’ chair and the back of Beck’s head before him. He walked through as if it were an everyday occurrence and took his chair.

Worf said, “Good day, Captain,” as he entered the bridge.

“Good morning, Ambassador. Wanted a front row seat I see?” Beck said without flinching. Without waiting for an answer, he continued. “I see you have discovered our little-known secret.”

“Yes, Captain. If the secret is that most of this ship uses holo-technology? The Admiral noticed it first at dinner, the serving table that never ran out of food.”

“Not all the ship, sir, only the central core. This room is a lot smaller than it appears. The conference room doubles as my dining room. That is how we get so many people and systems onboard.”

“And if we lose power in a battle?”

“The walls surrounding the bridge contain standard, if not compact, bridge stations,” he stated. He then continued with a smile as if he was remembering a private joke, “However the seating is standing room only!”

The Sub-Captain for Engineering took the Weapons console, which switched immediately to an engineering console arrangement. “Helm, cut the impulse engines and take us to warp point-one.”

“Aye sir,” his fingers flashed over the console keys, and he reported, “warp point-one sir.”

After two minutes, John ordered, “Helm, slowly increase speed to warp one.”

“Aye sir, warp point-two...point-three...point-four...point-five...point-six...point-seven...point-eight...point-nine...and warp one sir.” As the warp engines increased in power the reflections changed and became kaleidoscopic.

John checked the readings on the console. As he surveyed the reading, he slowly began nodding his head. Finally satisfied, he stopped nodding and said, “Good, very good.” He rose from the console and walked to the Helm position.

“Helm, hold warp one for the next hour,” Sub-Captain John Cunningham ordered. He walked back under the command deck as the Weapons officer reclaimed her console.

• • •

“So, how did you like the show,” The Captain said getting out of his chair.

“Needs a better light show,” Worf said also getting up.

The captain replied laughing, “This is turning out to be a very interesting trip.”

“Yes,” Worf said. “Captain, would you please accompany me to my office?”

“Yes, Ambassador.”

“Office,” Worf said. The beam curtain behind the Captain’s Chair appeared and opened. They walked through.

“I like what you have done to the place, Ambassador,” Beck said looking around the Ambassadors office.

“It is my office on Kronos, or was my office on Kronos, Captain. But one of the things I would like to talk to you about is our formality. May I call you Alexander?”

“Yes, Ambassador.”

“Please call me Mister Worf in public and Worf in private. If we are to work closely together, I will need your input more than anyone other than Ael’s. I would rather that input came from an advisor, rather than a subordinate.”

“I can do that Worf, if it makes you more comfortable.”

“Yes, it would. Please remember I am also a Starfleet Commander. It is hard to fight that desire to slip into the role of subordinate.”

Alexander smiled a broad smile as he said, “Yes, I heard you had to be dragged kicking and screaming into the Ambassadorial service.”

Giving a mock, hurt look, Worf said, “Alexander, please, there was very little screaming, I am a warrior after all.”

They had a good laugh together.

Beck recovered and became serious. “I am concerned that this familiarity you have asked for will perpetuate the subordinate frame of mind. You are under the command of a fellow senior Captain for one month out of every year. You

## Star Trek Exploration: The Journey

could make decisions from your commander's or warrior's point of view and not from the ambassador's point of view."

"I am not overly concerned," he said.

"Very well, Worf. And the other thing?"

"The other thing I would like to talk about is the other hidden capabilities of this ship. I have been studying the ships' specification, which is how I discovered the beam curtain behind your chair. But this area in the front of the ship is a blank."

"Well, you have discovered the halo technology used in the central core. You have found the captains' beam curtain on the command deck. That is a placement of technology that very few of the ships' personnel know about. I would rather not have the crew arriving behind me. However, it provides very quick access to *the chair* from any point on the ship where there is a beam curtain close by."

He continued, "This area in the front of the ship holds the Disrupter bank. John will have to brief you on the technology, but I know it was created from the Borg technology brought back by Voyager. Basically, the disrupter melts away anything the beam encounters. It seems to slowly melt the target into nothingness."

Alexander concluded with, "I have seen it demonstrated only once and I hope I never have to order it used against anyone."

"Thank you for being honest with me Alexander, I think we are off to a good start."

"Yes, Worf. I agree."

The captains' combadge beeped as he was standing to leave. "Captain Beck."

"Yes, Captain," came the Admiral's voice, "may I borrow your conference room for a half an Earth hour?"

"Yes of course, Admiral. The room is yours."

The connection closed and he left through the bridge door.

• • •

"How are we running Helm?" Sub-Captain Cunningham said as he entered the bridge. He noticed the command deck was empty.

"The warp drive and tunnel generator are playing together quite nicely sir."

"Take us slowly to warp one-point-five."

"Warp one-point-one... one-point-two... one-point-three... one-point-four...and warp one-point-five sir."

The patterns did not change much but did get slightly brighter. John sat down at the weapons console and called for the bridge control center console. He

adjusted the brightness level down a bit. Locking the controls, he rose and walked the two steps to the Helm position.

“Hold us here for another hour, Helm,” John said as he walked back to Engineering at almost a run. He wanted to get back a watch the intermix ratios. He knew the Chief would be watching everything like a hawk, but the tunnel generator was his baby and he wanted to keep a close eye on how the intermix ratios affected the tunnel generator.

• • •

Admiral Donatra turned off the data screen and rose from her desk. She had been reviewing the records of each of the Romulans attached to the fleet. The records had confirmed her suspicions quickly. The files were thick with disciplinary letters. She knew she should not have been surprised at finding the files so thick. She had had the same thing at the garrison on Earth. She had turned the garrison on Earth around; she would do the same thing here.

The Admiral entered the conference room through her outer office door. The six soldiers at the conference table rose to attention and saluted, shouting, “To the Empire.” Aulee followed her into the room and took her place to the Admiral’s left.

Ael nodded her agreement, returned the salute quickly and said, “Please be seated.” As they took their seats, she continued, “We are the only Romulans aboard this fleet. As such, we need to set an example of cooperation for these humans. We need to let them know we can be counted upon to support their efforts in *any way* we can, short of compromising secrets of the empire. This is the *tone* I would like to set while I am in-charge of the fleet.”

“Are we not going to take this ship and its technologies for the empire,” an older soldier said.

She stared at him for a moment. “I am sorry to disappoint you, but we are part of this crew, this fleet and no, we will not be taking this ship back to Romulus,” she said smiling at the thought of seven Romulans overpowering a crew of close to seven thousand and taking the ship. “*How ridiculous is that*” she thought.

The Sub-Commander remained stolid, his look, challenging. Ael burst out laughing as she said, “Seven Romulans are going to overpower five thousand crewmembers on this ship, not to mention about eighteen hundred Starfleet personnel on the other three ships and take this ship home?” This bit of irony caused the others to laugh and the Sub-Commander to remain silent.

“By the way, I guess introductions are in order.”

They went around the table. The soldiers were strictly engineers assigned to the cloaking devices. The older soldier identified himself as Sub-Commander Kirill.

Ael jumped on the name, “Are you any relation to Commander Kirill of the Earth Garrison?”

## Star Trek Exploration: The Journey

“*Sub-Commander Kirill? He is my eldest Brother.*”

“He served me well. Upon his promotion to Commander, at my hand, he replaced me as Garrison Commander. I trust you will serve the Empire and me as well. You are the Fleet Garrison Commander?”

“Assistant, Admiral. You have that honor.”

“No more, Sub-Commander. You will command the Garrison, taking care of, and keeping me informed of, any problems.”

“Yes Admiral,” he let his pride show as he acknowledged her orders.

*One down, she thought, five more to go.*

She continued, “We are at a point in the Romulan and Federation relations where the smallest thing could ruin the trust and friendship building between our great powers. It is up to us to continue to work toward the day when the Federation and Romulus are great friends. The Vulcans and Romulans are reunited. I find glory in the peace and prosperity this is bringing to all our Citizens.”

She looked at Sub-Commander Kirill, “You asked if we were going to steal this ship for the Empire. Why steal what we already have?”

Looking around the table at the astonished faces, she said, “I am aware you were kept in seclusion at the Charon facility. You were not allowed to communicate with anyone outside the facility. Your seclusion was to protect the security of the project. To ensure the project would bring us to this point.”

She continued as the shocked expressions left their faces. “You have now been released from your forced seclusion with the thanks of the Federation and the Empires. Your communications will not be intercepted and monitored any longer. You are free to communicate with your families as I have.”

There was a murmur of objection from the end of the table. “I have sent messages to each of your families telling them of the confidential nature of the mission you are on. I have told them you were chosen above all others to complete this very important project for the empire. I have told them you are a valued member of *my* staff.”

She looked around the table to gauge the reaction and found she had won the rest of them over. “*Seven down,*” she thought. She took on a stern look as she warned, “Please, do not make a liar out of me!”

She continued, “Now, back to the question. Why steal what we already have?” She looked around the table. Aulee was smiling, the others were not! She said, “The day following our launch the Warbird *Victory* decloaked over the moon of Charon. Forty-two Romulan Engineers entered the facility and joined the staff. With our launch, the secrecy ended. The plans for the tunnel generator and the design for this ship have already been sent to Romulus and Kronos. The follow-

on series of this ship will be a combined effort of the Romulan, Klingon and Federation citizens.

“With our exchange programs being expanded, the militaries have concluded that we need one basic design for our vessels. The Charon mission will be to develop this ship. The Unity Class Enforcer will be the first ship of the line. I have seen only the concept of the class and it will be smaller than a Warbird and more powerful than this ship. The design specification stated it will have the capability to be anywhere in sector grid ninety-one within a standard day!”

She paused for affect, “So I ask you again, why steal what we already have?”

“Your orders will be carried out Admiral,” said Kirill.

“Thank you, please keep my aide apprised of day-to-day training and operations. Also, you will include us in the training sessions. Any more questions?”

There were none. She continued, “That is all, you are dismissed.” They rose with her and waited at attention until the Admiral had left the room.

Back in her office with Aulee, Ael said, “That, I hope, went a long way to normalize relations with the humans.”

“Your appointment of Sub-Commander Kirill to Garrison Commander did.”

“I just wanted to stem any trouble. Most of the soldiers that have been sent to the Federation have been troublemakers. These are no exception! They have been cast out of their duties for many reasons. You and I must integrate these soldiers into the fleet. And the best Romulan to do that is the biggest troublemaker of the group!”

They laughed as Aulee ordered two teas. “He is kind of cute,” Aulee said with a wink.

• • •

“We seem to be running ok at warp one-point-five. Is that what you show Helm?” Sub-Captain Cunningham said as he entered the bridge. He noticed only one person again manned the command deck.

“The warp drive and tunnel generator are still getting along sir.”

“Take us slowly to warp two.”

“Warp one-point-six...one-point-seven...one-point-eight...one-point-nine, getting some vibration sir...and warp *two* sir.”

“How is the vibration?”

“Minor sir.” The Helm officer said.

“Hold us here for another hour, Helm,” John said as he ran back to Engineering. He needed to get back and check on the vibration. He wanted to keep a close eye on how the Warp drive affected the generator.

## Star Trek Exploration: The Journey

He arrived at the primary engineering station and asked the Chief, “How is it behaving? The Helm officer reported vibration at warp one-point-nine.”

“The tunnel generator is showing some very minor fluctuations in the generator field coils. It could be caused by Warp field interference. My team is looking into the problem,” Justin told him.

John asked, “Do you think this is the problem preventing us from going to a higher warp?”

“Could be. I will be pushing the crew to find out,” Justin assured him.

“Thanks Justin. If you need help, ask Doug to call up his shift early,” John told him. He turned to leave when the ship jolted and went momentarily dark. The lights returned just ahead of the console configurations.

“What the heck! Justin?”

Justin turned to the controls as he said, “Sorry, sir. I am not sure what happened. Give me a moment—”

Looking over his shoulder, the Sub-Captain said, “What is up?” He knew the captain would be calling in the next few seconds wanting to know the status of his ship.

“The warp drive is still running but the tunnel generator is down. Otherwise, we are ship shape.”

John tapped his combadge and ordered, “Helm, full stop! Cunningham out.”

“Take the warp drive offline and see to restoring the tunnel generator,” John told him. He touched his badge again and said, “Captain.”

*“Beck here.”*

“Captain, something shut down the tunnel generator and I cut the warp drive and ordered a full stop while we assess the problem,” John reported, then asked belatedly, “Any orders Captain.”

*“None right now John. Please get us underway as soon as possible. I will be on the bridge. Beck out.”*

“Justin, call out Doug’s shift and let’s find the bug,” John ordered. He listened with only half an ear as Justin complied with his order, looking over the generator readings and calling up the log entries. “What now...what now,” he thought.

## Chapter 4

“*Madam President, Admiral Na’mur is on the line,*” Nicky said from the communications panel.

“She touched the panel and said, “Yes Admiral?” He appeared on the screen.

“Madam President, I must report that the USS Explorer has experienced a problem. The tunnel collapsed well before it was due to arrive in the sector grid ninety-one. The telemetry showed a problem in the tunnel generator just before the tunnel closed. We know they were testing the tunnel/warp combination at warp two and that might be the problem.”

“Thank you, Admiral. Do you think we should dispatch another ship to check on them?”

“It would take our closest ship almost three weeks at high warp to catch up with the Explorer. They will probably be back in the tunnel long before then. We are trying to generate a tunnelcom connection with them, Madam President.”

“Keep me informed.” She said as she cut the connection with a hammer like blow to the communications panel. *My project is going down the tubes,* she thought, *this is not good, this is not good at all.*

• • •

“Captain, on the deck,” said McLorn as the Captain walked down the ramp from the command deck. The area around the ship looked like thick clouds.

“Randy, where are we?” He asked.

“Helm shows us 72.5 light years from Sol, or about halfway to the sector grid ninety-one.”

“What is that outside?”

“Funny you should ask Captain; I was just asking Life Sciences the same question.” He turned to the console, “You were saying Lieutenant?”

The Life Sciences duty officer paused from his scans to say, “the immediate area around the ship as far as the sensors can see is just like what you see on the screen, soupy clouds. It looks like we transitioned to normal space within a nebula. The clouds are almost as dense as liquid but not quite, sir. If this weather were real, I would say the humidity is about 85%.”

“Thank you, keep scanning and trying to figure out why we are not in normal space. Also keep us informed of any changes,” said Beck. Then asked McLorn, “How is engineering doing on getting us going again?”

## Star Trek Exploration: The Journey

Randy closed the connection and returned his attention back to his captain.

“They have two shifts crawling all over the tunnel generator trying to figure out why it is not engaging. The field seems to start and then dampen out immediately. They have tested impulse and warp drives, both are functional.”

“So...” he said slowly, “we have more problems than answers?” The captain looked perturbed but did not let it show in his voice. He liked to be the calm influence when all else was going wrong.

“That about sizes it up sir!”

“I will be in Stellar Cartography, maybe they have a few answers.”

As he entered the Stellar Cartography, he could tell that they were as much in the dark, so to speak, as the Life Sciences section. Sub-Captain Marjorie Rawlins moved from station to station like a bee hunting for pollen. Her pollen, however, was information. The information she knew her Captain would be asking for shortly. The one question she could not answer right now was where they were.

“What do you have for me, Marge?”

She cringed but walked over to brief him. “Only that I am as baffled as Life Sciences. We should be in normal space, but we came out of the tunnel into a wet fog. Reminds me of London’s pea soup! We are light years beyond the charts that I have, so I can’t tell you how far it is to the edge or even if there is an edge to this nebula!”

“Margie, work with Varrec and find out where we are and what is outside, please.”

“We’re doing that, Captain. I hope to have your answers shortly. But, as to where we are I have the general coordinates, but not the specifics for you currently, sir.” She said as she turned back to her subordinates to continue her buzzing!

He shook his head, feeling sorry for the subordinate who did not have the answers for her, as he walked over to Engineering and stood at the entrance trying not to disturb the activity going on inside. It was amazing to watch the engineers working at different consoles and checking this pathway and that conduit. He could not figure out how they managed not to trip over each other.

Sub-Captain Cunningham stood up from the console and tapped his combadge and said, “Engineering fleet wide.”

“This is Sub-Captain Cunningham, all Chief Engineers of the fleet, please report to the *Explorer* Conference room for a status update briefing.”

Beck decided everything was being done that could be done and it would only hurt the flow of work to interrupt. He knew that John would brief him as soon as he had some answers. He returned to his chair to stay out of the way and let his crew do their jobs.

• • •

John Cunningham stood impatiently at the front of the conference room, which was now configured for an engineering briefing. The main engineering displays were displayed on the walls with schematics of the impulse engines, warp drive and tunnel generator also displayed. The main conference table had engineering consoles with the main engineering console in the center of the table.

Sub-Captain Cunningham was not a patient man and having to wait for a single engineer was just not his cup of tea. He touched his combadge, “Commander Berroc, please report to the *Explorer* Conference room.”

When he did not get an acknowledgement, he touched the badge twice, “Captain Dar”Tok?”

Captain Dar”Tok answered, “*What?*”

“Sir is your Chief Engineer available for the Engineering update briefing,” John asked.

“*Standby,*” Dar”Tok said. A few moments later he said, “*The Commander is on his way.*”

“Thank you, Captain, Cunningham out.”

The connection terminated, as the beam curtain turned red and shimmered to show the docking port entry area. Commander Berroc entered the room and the curtain closed behind him.

Without a word, he walked directly to the only open seat, sat, and waited as if nothing had occurred. Cunningham stared at Berroc who ignored him.

John started with a run-down of what had occurred, as they understood it. “As we took the warp drive up to warp two, a vibration began in the tunnel generator at warp one-point-nine and the vibration increased a little at warp two. The generator field went out of balance and shut down after approximately two minutes at warp two. The logs and instruments show instability between the drive and the generator was minimal and should not have caused a shut down.”

“The log also shows an energy burst destabilized the tunnel and shut the generator down,” Looking directly at Commander Berroc, Cunningham continued, “we have tracked the energy burst to the shield generators on the *Pioneer.*”

“The captain ordered the new generators to be tested. He did not want to arrive without testing them personally,” Commander Berroc stated, “If you have a problem with the testing, take it up with Captain Dar”Tok.”

## Star Trek Exploration: The Journey

“*We have,*” he snapped at Berroc. His outburst caused most of the engineers at the table to recoil.

“I have talked to the captain of each docked ship and have been asked them not to raise shields or test weapons while the tunnel generator is operating.” The Sub-Captain continued more calmly. “This was an unforeseen consequence. We now know not to use large fields or energy generators while the tunnel generator is in operation. I have logged this experience as a lesson learned.”

John hesitated a moment before concluding with the question. “So, looking at the bottom line, where do we stand?”

“Without an operational tunnel generator,” said Borall. He was the only one that did not burst out laughing, having the normal Vulcan lack of a sense of humor.

Commander Cowartson said, “the tunnel generator is working but the field energy outside the ship is causing enough interference to prevent a tunnel from forming.”

“Thanks Doug. I would like you all to concentrate on that problem. How do we negate the field energies surrounding the ship long enough to form a tunnel and continue our voyage.” John concluded, “I would like the four engineering sections of the fleet ships to work together on this problem. This will get all the engineers familiar with the tunnel generator and the *Explorer* engineering systems. If there is nothing else, you may return to your duties.”

“Commander Berroc, please stay,” the Sub-Captain caught him, as he was about to be the first to leave the room.

“I have my duties also, Sub-Captain.” Commander Berroc stated challengingly. He did not like to be singled out for anything.

“I would like to know why you kept us waiting.”

“I did not keep you waiting,” He stepped forward toward John.

“I asked all the chief engineers to meet in the conference room over the fleet wide engineering communications channel.”

“I did not get the call to the meeting until the captain told me you wanted to see me in the conference room.”

John glanced at the Commanders’ combadge and asked, “Have you gotten your new combadge yet?” He already knew the answer.

“No, sir,” Berroc stated, “I have not had the time to attend to it.”

“Please attend to it before you leave the ship. Contact the communications office. Dismissed.”

Berroc barely held his temper. Only his great respect for this human, generated by a commanding manor, held Berroc back. He managed to get out, “Yes Sir.”

He then turned and asked for the communications office. Stepping through the beam curtain and onto the bridge. The sight stopped him cold.

He walked slowly forward under the mid deck and stood mesmerized next to the communications console. He slowly surveyed the bridge. His eyes moved from console to console then to the mid bridge and the Captain's Chair. The Sight of Captain Beck watching him from his chair broke his trance.

He looked down at the communications officer and stated, "Sub-Captain Cunningham ordered me to get a new combadge."

The communications office simply stated, "Come with me."

He looked up at the captain who nodded an acknowledgement of his stare. He nodded back, still in awe of the bridge of the *Explorer*.

He returned his attention to the communications officer who was already under the mid deck. He hurried to catch up to her.

The communications station was just inside the Stellar Cartography area. He obtained a new combadge as instructed and returned to the *USS Pioneer* to assign his personnel to the *Explorer* engineering teams.

• • •

"How are the repairs going," John Cunningham asked. He had managed six hours of sleep and felt raring to go. Two cups of coffee and a hearty breakfast didn't hurt his mood either. It was good to be boss, especially when you had three of the best Chief Engineers in Starfleet.

Doug Cowartson, Chief Engineer of Delta Shift replied with a sour expression, "I wish there was something to repair! We would be on our way already."

The Sub-Captain remained quiet, waiting for the Commander to continue.

"Tommy is running simulations in the conference room. My engineers, Justin's engineers, as well as half of the *Galileo* engineers, are still checking all the tunnel field generation units for the fourth time. I have never seen this crate better tuned and operating than it is now. The warp drive and impulse engines work fine, except for a two percent continuous loss of energy. The tunnel generator just won't create a stable field!"

As if on cue, the tunnel generator was activated. They both looked at the read-outs on the main engineering console. The field began to build and then slowly faded as if the power was drained off. The generator shut down again. Doug turned his head to John and gave him a sour look.

John decided to change the subject. He asked, "When is shift change?"

"About now." His sour look waned a bit.

"Good, hand it over to Justin and get some rest. You look like you need it."

Doug smiled at what he thought was the best order he had received in a while and frowned at the latter comment.

## Star Trek Exploration: The Journey

As if on cue, Justin Avery walked through a curtain and entered the engineering section. “Make any progress?”

“Not a bit. But this bucket is running like a finely tuned Swiss watch,” joked Douglas. He continued in a slightly frustrated voice, “Maybe you can make it tunnel somewhere!”

“I will try.”

Doug chuckled a dry chuckle and said, “Well, it’s my bedtime, so you have the problem now.” Touching his combadge, and said, “Delta Shift, turn over your current projects to Beta shift and report back for duty in eight hours. Cowartson out.” Without a further word, he turned and requested his quarters.

Justin touched his combadge and order, “Beta shift you’re on! Avery out.”

As the curtain closed, John said, “Tommy is in the conference room trying to find a fix for the external energy problem with Varrec. I was just going to talk to them. Would you like to join me?” Not waiting for an answer, he turned and requested the conference room. Justin followed him through the curtain, and they found Tommy in the middle of a simulation. He was watching the reading to the exclusion of all else, thus he did not notice the two enter the area. Varrec was not in the conference room.

“How are they running?” Justin asked as he walked up to the console.

Tommy did not react to the question but continued to monitor the readings on the master engineering console before him. He made a few inputs on the console and continued to watch the readings. Finally, he looked up with a bedraggled expression on his face.

He asked in surprise, “John, what are you doing here?”

John said, “I was just asking how the simulations were going.”

Tommy responded, “I have been running different Sims for just over five hours and don’t have a clue of how to get the tunnel online. The field begins to form and seems to have the energy bleed off. I cannot figure out where the energy is going. Sub-Captain Varrec returned to the Life Sciences area to try and discover where the energy is going. Commander Borall is headed this way to help. Maybe he can provide a fresh perspective.”

“I think we should all work from here to find an answer,” The Sub-Captain said.

“If there is an answer...” Commander Borall stated coming through the beam curtain.

• • •

“*Captain, Varrec here,*” the Vulcan said.

“Yes, Mister Varrec?”

*“Captain, we are monitoring small energy fields moving around and about the Warp nacelles, sir. They are not showing up very well on sensors. It’s like they are fading in and out of our space,”* Varrec said with his normal calm demeanor.

“Are they hurting the ship in anyway?”

*“We are not sure currently, sir. We are monitoring a very minute energy loss in the nacelles, but the loss rises during the testing of the tunnel generator.”*

“Continue monitoring, Beck out.”

He tapped his combadge, “Cunningham?”

“*Yes captain,*” came Johns’ strong voice.

“Varrec is monitoring an energy pattern outside the ship near and around the nacelles, you might want to take a look.”

“*Yes, sir.*” John said. “*We have been monitoring a very small loss of power from the Warp core, but attributed it to—*”

“Red Alert...Red Alert...All hands to battle stations,” came over the ship-wide communications system.

• • •

Captain Beck asked, “Who is calling a red alert?”

Looking up from a scan of his console, Randy answered from the command deck; “The *Voyager* has gone to red alert following a hull breach in one of the nacelle pylons.”

“Varrec, scan the affected area on *Voyager* and report,” the captain ordered touching the Life Sciences intercom button on the command chair.

“*Sir, we are scanning and not seeing a thing—stand by Captain,*” Varrec said. The captain could hear others reporting in the background. Varrec continued, “*On your screen Captain.*”

The center of the cloud field directly before the command deck shimmered and showed an exterior view of the *Voyagers’* nacelle pylon.

Randy was the first to gasp out, “What the heck?”

Varrec stated, “*We are not sure. They only show up on visual scans. That is how they appeared without warning.*” Randy was sure Varrec was having a hard time keeping the surprise out of his voice.

The view slowly expanded as it moved in on the creature. Randy continued to stare at the shallow life form attached to the nacelle as the creature slowly grew to twice its initial size. He tried, without success, to compare it to a known creature. He thought initially that the creature resembled a fat boomerang, but as the view expanded, his initial impression did not become fact. As the creature became larger more detail was exposed. He saw it was a half round,

## Star Trek Exploration: The Journey

long, tubular creature that was more spread out than tall. It seemed to be pointed at the nacelle, almost touching but not attached as he first thought.

The view stopped expanding when the creature filled the screen suspended in midair before them.

Randy tapped his combadge and asked, "Varrec ... can you get some dimensions on the creature?"

*"Computer, examine creature on main bridge view screen. Extrapolate dimensions,"* Varrec said.

Randy heard the computer's reply as he thought, *I could have done that!*

"Approximately half a meter high, two point nine meters wide and twenty-one point seven meters long. The dimensions change with the creature's movement," the computer reported.

*"I am told twenty-three creatures have been observed on fleet ships,"* Varrec reported. *"Life Sciences are designating the creatures as 'worms' for want of a better term."*

John had entered the bridge from the conference room and observed the creature from the balcony. He finished examining the creature and walked down the ramp to the command deck. He met Randy coming up the ramp. They both joined the Captain as Worf and Donatra came through the beam curtain at the back of the bridge. The five of them stared at the very strange creature slowly lurching on the *Voyager*.

The main screen moved to the right and another screen opened to its left. The second screen changed to show the different parts of the fleet ships and all twenty-three creatures appeared at one-second intervals.

*"Captain Beck,"* came Chakotay's voice from the captain's combadge.

*"Captain Chakotay, I am viewing your problem right now."*

*"Any suggestions Captain? All my engineers are on your ship."*

John tapped his combadge, "Commander Ro, please report to your ship."

Commander Ro acknowledged the order.

"She is on her way, Captain," Beck told him, "Anything else?"

*"Not right now Captain. Chakotay out."* The connection closed.

## Chapter 5

Varrec pointed the viewer at the *Explorers'* nacelles and saw a cloud surrounding the left one. A closer examination of the right nacelle showed a cloud around it also. He was not going to get caught flat-footed again. "Was that the proper term the human's used," he asked himself. He quickly viewed the rest of the nacelles and found clouds around all but Galileo. He remembered Galileo had its drive down for maintenance.

He moved back to the Explorer's left nacelle and studied the cloud more closely.

He guided the viewer toward the cloud. As the view screen stabilized on a close visual of the cloud, he found the cloud was a group of cloud-colored creatures. His eyebrow rose to reflect his surprise at this revelation. Varrec turned and ordered two of the staff examining the worms to work on these with him.

The individual creature was geometrically shaped with a thin pencil like body and three wings protruding from the length of the pencil. It reminded him of a picture of a Tholian barricade vessel. But here is where the similarity ended. The protrusions were much thinner and seemed to undulate along their length. He remembered a visit to the Earth aquarium in Golden Gate Park just outside the Starfleet Headquarters Compound. He was reminded of a creature on display there. A cuttlefish. The protruding membranes reminded him of the fins of a cuttlefish only they moved much slower. The image of a pencil with three cuttlefish fins in the shape of a Tholian barricade vessel seemed bizarre to him, but it was as close to what he saw as he could come.

One of the staff reported that there was a buzzing sound coming from the creature's location near the nacelle.

They slowly determined that the 'energy bees', as one of the human's had described them, were feeding on the energy from the nacelles.

Varrec thought, "That explains the two percent loss."

They were also keeping the other creatures away. This struck him as very curious. His assistant on his right noticed his eyebrows rise and asked him what was so puzzling.

"It seems that the Worms are not going near the area where the Bees are. Why is that?" Commander Varrec asked.

He called in the next shift early and had them begin working on this observation. He assigned more personnel to monitor the bee activity around the nacelles. The last third of the next shift he assigned to monitoring the Worms to find out what they were and what they were after.



The Command staff entered the conference room, which was still configured for the engineering staff. However, briefing seats had been added.

“John, what do you have for us?” The captain asked as the command staff took seats before the three engineering monitor screens on the wall.

“Sir, we are monitoring a very slight, but constant energy drains from the warp nacelles. At the present rate of drain, the energy will be drained in fifteen months! We are not really worried about this. However, Varrec and his troops have determined the bees are producing the energy signature that is preventing the tunnel generator to operate.”

He continued after a pause for questions. “Varrec reports that the worms are after the primary component of the durasteel from which the hull is made. The creatures seem to eat to reproduce, and they seem to be multiplying at a rate of one new creature per two hundred thirty-three square meters of hull consumed. The worms are not eating anything beyond the skin of the hull. It will take them about fifteen days to completely eat the hulls off all the ships at their current rate of consumption and reproduction.”

Again, he paused for questions. “My staff believes that the energy in the ship is keeping them from eating farther into it. The fact that the worms are not going near the bees while they are draining the energy from the nacelles fosters this belief. The worms are also not going too near to the phaser and shield arrays or the deflector dish. They seem to have very different purposes; the bees are after the energy and the worms are after metallic ore.”

“So where do we stand?” he asked as he finished the briefing. “The bees are draining the energy from the nacelles and the worms are stripping the hulls from the ships. This is a slightly different problem than not forming a stable tunnel; but we are now aware of what is really happening. Now we can figure out what to do about it.”

“Suggestions,” asked Admiral Donatra. Captain Beck turned toward the Admiral but did not show any distress with the Admiral running the show. He realized that more than his ship was now involved, so it was a fleet issue.

“We are retiring one shift and would like to retire one shift from each of the ships. Then we suggest splitting the fleet engineering staff between the two problems. My staff will concentrate on the bees and the engineering staff of the three ships plus the SCE engineers from *Galileo* will concentrate on the worms under the lead of Captain David. The SCE folks have the most experience with this type of problem. Are you monitoring sir?”

Captain David laughed as he acknowledged over the speaker on the console in the center of the table. “*Yes, we have fallen into situations like this once or twice.*”

“Sounds like a firm plan, please make it so,” the Admiral ordered. “Are there any other comments or observations?”

Following a short pause she continued, “Excellent, Captain Beck will lead the effort on *Explorer* and Captain David will take care of the rest. We will update in six hours, dismissed.”

• • •

“Where do we stand people,” Ryan said as he entered Galileo’s crowded conference room and made his way to his seat. “We need some suggestions, and we need them fast. I want these things literally and figuratively off my back quickly!”

Many of the members snickered at his remark, but his stern glance around the room quickly stopped it.

The first officers and chief engineers from the *Voyager*, *Pioneer*, and *Galileo*; as well as the SCE senior engineers, were packed passed the point of standing room only. Two were in the doorway with one more engineer in the hallway.

“Using the data provided by the *Explorer* life sciences section, we think we might be able to use the ships phasers on low power to remove them. We are preparing to test that hypothesis now,” reported Borall.

“Are you sure you want to use the phasers that close to the exposed compartments of the ship?”

Commander Borall called up a visual of the damaged section of the hull behind a worm.

“As you can see the power conduits are still intact and only the underlying structure is exposed. The Phasers should not damage any of the sensitive systems on the hull. The worms don’t seem to like the areas that receive power.”

“How soon will the test be completed?” Ryan asked.

Commander Borall looked at the Weapons officer, who stated, “At your command sir.”

Borall then directed the view screen to the area of the test.

“You may fire at worm,” the captain stated with a very slight smile. Borall raised an eyebrow, but Ryan was not sure if he got the connection to the phrase, ‘Fire at Will.’

The phaser beam appeared on the screen for a brief second and then stopped. The effect on the creature could not be determined immediately since the creatures moved so slowly. Many of the crewmembers in the back of the room seemed to lean forward. Ryan smiled at the physiological aspects of this mob.

Over the next few minutes, the creature seemed to move away from the direction of the beam and slowly got visually smaller.

## Star Trek Exploration: The Journey

Borall requested another Phaser shot. The beam came and went, and the result was the same, only the pace of the size change hastened.

Ryan looked on with satisfaction until the creature dissolved into three smaller creatures that each moved in a separate direction. He said sarcastically, “Well, that went well.”

Ryan’s combadge bussed. He answered to find a very upset Admiral on the line. “*Captain, what are you doing?*” The Admiral asked heatedly.

“We were testing a theory, Admiral. Seeing if we could use the Phasers on low power to clean the bugs off our back.”

“*Next time, please let command know if you’re going to shoot yourself! This is a coordinated effort, and I would hate for one of the teams to do something to adversely affect another team. Standby, Captain,*” the Admiral told him.

While Ryan was waiting, one of the engineers in the room suggested that the ‘baby’ creatures be examined and compared to the ‘parent’ creature. Borell assigned him the task of retrieving one of the creatures.

“*We have received word that the bees began to move in the direction of the Phaser emitter when the Phasers were fired,*” Donatra relayed.

“Thank you for the information, Admiral. We are planning an away team mission to examine the creatures up close and personally. We hope to find out what happened to cause the creature to break into three creatures.”

“*I will inform the Explorers’ engineering team. Donatra out.*”

An away team was put together to examine the creatures closely since it seemed that the sensors were affected by the cloud that surrounded them.

• • •

Admiral Donatra closed the connection. She was not too sure that she wanted crewmembers crawling around outside with these creatures. Ael did not relish the thought of having anyone injured on her watch. She had vowed as a young centurion to do everything within her power to bring home her entire crew complement. She had done this only once.

She continued to review the continuous reports that were sent to her on fleet complement and status. Paperwork, the real war was against paperwork. She decided and touched her combadge saying, “Aulee, please come here.”

As Aulee entered she said, “Yes, Admiral?”

“I would like you to keep up with the ordinary reports and only send me reports that need my attention.”

“Yes, sir. Please mark the routine reports you want me to watch and file.”

They set to work on the pile of reports in her in basket on the desk console.

• • •

Chief Cowartson entered the conference room and found little changed except the boss pacing back and forth before the view screens showing the creatures and the ship status. He did not look happy. Doug had worked with and for John for many years and had approved of his promotion to Sub-Captain. It had also made room for him to become Chief of the Delta shift, and finally step out on his own.

They had become friends many years ago when they served together on the *USS Exeter*. Since the *Exeter* assignment, they had pretty much been paired together. It wasn't until this assignment he learned John had been making their joint assignment a condition of accepting any assignment. They had become a very infamous pair of engineers over the years and had a reputation for getting the job done. Both were assigned to the development staff and first voyage of the *USS Galaxy* and the *USS Sovereign*. So, it was no accident, they were both on the *USS Explorer*.

Doug approached his friend and boss matching his pace. He very quietly said, "John, are you alright?"

John stopped pacing and said, "This simply does not make sense, Doug. We have a fully operational Tunnel generator; Warp drive and Impulse engine and we can't go anywhere! It is like the bees are keeping us here to feed on our energy!"

"Doug stopped one pace beyond this boss and turned back toward him. He tried to calm down his friend. "John it's not your problem it's mine. When you had my job, you would not allow the captain to bother with a problem like this, you kept him isolated. It's time I do that for you. Get some rest and you can start again after the next briefing."

"Your right Doug, I can't take this as a slight against me. Take the con and I will see you in a few hours."

John headed toward the nearest Beam curtain and muttered, "Quarters."

Doug examined the displays and had Justin brief him on the status he could not see. He learned the last few update briefings had been very short – nothing new was reported. However, finding out that the Phasers were useless except to attract the bees, was very interesting. He tapped his combadge and said, "Delta shift assume your duties."

John had said the bees were keeping us here to feed on us. The thought stuck with him. Maybe there was merit to it. He sat down and began to study the data.

Justin released his crew and headed to his quarters.

• • •

"Captain, Borall here."

"Yes, Commander," Ryan said from his commander chair.

## Star Trek Exploration: The Journey

*“We have performed a sensor sweep and we are headed back in.”*

*“Borall!”* Shouted an away team member.

*“Medical emergency, Captain. One of the bee creatures landed on Ensign Davis and rendered her unconscious.”*

Ryan quickly touched a button on his console and commanded, “Transporter room, beam the away team to sickbay!”

*“No, Captain.”* Borall said.

“Transporter room, belay that order,” Ryan said.

*“We will walk in. The creature is still too close for us to transport. I don’t want that thing, or any piece of it, transported onto the ship,”* Borall said.

Ryan switched to the medical channel, “Sickbay, meet the away team at port six.”

After a hasty acknowledge, the captain switched to the fleet command channel and informed Captain Beck that one of his bees had disabled one of *Galileo’s* crewmembers.

• • •

Captain Beck received the *attack* information from Captain David and relayed it to Sub-Captain Varrec and then to Chief Cowartson.

*“Doug, have you made any headway?”* Alexander asked.

“We know the creatures are attracted by the energy they feed on it. This may have led to the attack, sir. The creature was attracted to the suit energy,” Doug reported, “Also the number of creatures is increasing, which is causing the power drain to go up.”

The Chief continued, “The attack is very interesting Captain. I am heading to *Galileo* sickbay to find out what precipitated the attack and take readings of the results. I will keep you informed. Cowartson out.” He turned to Chief Babcock.

“Tommy, have you noticed that the amount of energy drain changed when the phasers were used. I think this may be a clue as to how we can be rid of the little beasties.”

“I will check it out, Doug.”

Chief Cowartson opened a beam curtain to *Galileo’s* docking bay and was gone.

Tommy called over his assistant and they examined the readings together.

The view screens beyond them showed the worms slowly, methodically stripping the hull from the ship.

• • •

Ryan walked into sickbay and surveyed the scene. He noticed Chief Cowartson talking to Commander Borall. He walked up to them.

“Chief, we did not observe the creature until it was almost on him,” Borall said quickly, stopping the conversation with the Chief. “The creature contacted him, and he fell unconscious to the deck. Lieutenant Danway examined the suit he was wearing, and it seems to be drained of all power. We had to carefully avoid the creature getting back in. It seemed to be attracted by the suit’s energy and followed us to the lock. It seemed to move a little slower once it had touched the crewmen,” Borall continued.

Doug was very interested in this development; David could see it in his face.

Doug asked, “if he could have the suit.”

Borall nodded. He and Lieutenant Danway carried the suit out of sickbay.

“How is the Ensign,” David asked Borall.

“Better to ask the EMH.”

“Emmett, how is my troop?” Captain David asked the Holographic Doctor.

“He sustained no permanent damage, Captain. Superficial injuries only. He became unconscious because the energy was removed. You are aware that the body produces about eight volts? Well, his charge was drained along with the energy from the life support suit. He will be released for duty after a short rest,” reported the EMH.

“Thanks Emmett,” Ryan said turning back to Borall. He asked the Commander, “What is your next step?”

“I would like to study these readings and discuss the creature with life sciences, but it seems like an answer is forthcoming.”

“Keep me informed,” Ryan told him as Borall turned to leave. The captain went to his quarters to get some rest, the next fleet briefing was only a few hours away and he wanted to be rested before that briefing.

• • •

John walked onto the lower bridge and checked the status with Randy. He did not expect anything new and was not surprised to find that nothing had changed. Randy did tell him that a few tests had been run with Phaser shots and the shields had been raised to various levels and at varying frequencies, but the creatures were still there.

He walked up the ramp and noticed the Captain and Worf were conversing but could not hear anything. Noticing the haze at the entrance to the mid deck, he continued up the ramp. He got to the top of the ramp and crossed the catwalk to enter the conference room.

“Just a small piece Lieutenant,” the Chief said. John remained silent as he moved to stand behind Doug and watch the current operation. Tommy walked

## Star Trek Exploration: The Journey

up next to him and said, “we are trying to get a piece of the worm for study. Doug and Varrec think the worm creatures are allergic to energy. They ran a test using the shields and found the creatures turned away from the emitters.”

“Away team, watch for the bees. Be very careful not to attract them,” Doug continued. “Security keep watch over my team.”

They heard the normal acknowledgements and assurances.

Tommy continued, “the Phasers seemed to attract the bees, but they move very slowly. We ran up the drive for a moment to gorge them. They divided and became very sluggish. Which is what we intended.” He gave him a sly, Tommy look.

John was beginning to form a clearer picture and envisioned a hope of figuring this out. “So, are you saying that the bees will follow a Phaser beam shot into space.”

“No, they always head to the source. But we think they will follow a Phaser beam from a shuttle. We are prepping a shuttle now to test this theory.”

“Why are they trying to retrieve a piece of the creature?” John asked.

“If we get the bees far enough away to generate a tunnel, we will still have the worms on our back. We must figure out how to separate the worms from the hull while the bees are gone. Then we can generate a tunnel and get the heck out of Dodge,” Tommy said.

John smiled at the colloquialism as he watched the away team operation on the view screen. The team moved in slowly and attempted to remove a piece of the creature. They used an energy cutter. The small piece shrank as it fell to the hull and then began morphing into another worm. Two team members placed it into a stasis box before it started eating the hull. The team then backed away from the creature and returned to the lock.

They heard Sub-Captain Varrec tell the away team to take the sample to Life Sciences lab seven containment area.

As the show seemed to be over, Tommy took John aside to fully brief him. “We have determined that the creatures are diametrically opposed in their make-up. Bees like energy and collect it to reproduce. They stay away from the hull and have yet to touch it. The worms on the other hand, stay away from an energy source and use the ores in the durasteel to reproduce. This is the only thing the two have in common they both consume to reproduce. It also seems to be the only thing the creatures do is eat.”

During the pause, John asked, “Then they will both have to be dealt with differently?”

Tommy gave John a wiry look and said, “You have it!”

• • •

The Admiral leaned back in what appeared to be a hard stone chair but was really very comfortable. She looked across the stone table, which was Worf's desk, at the Ambassador seated in a high-backed chair behind.

"We need to settle the command structure for the fleet," Worf was saying. They had spent almost an hour on this subject and not much had come of it. The Admiral was adamant that Worf would handle the political duties and that the fleet was hers. Worf, on the other hand, wanted to share in the duties of managing the fleet since it would support his political duties, in that it was the power behind his position.

"I agree Ambassador, I will follow any valid order you give, provided it does not harm the fleet," she said.

"That is unacceptable!" Worf shouted for emphasis. He jumped up, leaned across his desk, and stared at her saying, "I may have to order personnel or even a ship to be lost and I have to know that my orders will be obeyed!"

She rose quickly and leaned across the desk, looking him straight in the eye. "Ambassador, I cannot order my personnel to die because your belt is too tight! I must know that the death of a soldier means something!" she shouted back.

*"This conversation is repeating itself for about the seven hundredth time,"* Worf thought angrily. He stood up and took a moment to calm down. He took his seat and tried to think clearly. He was an ambassador, a solver of problems, a peacemaker; this was not the way he needed to solve this conflict.

Worf touched his combadge, "Captain Beck, will you come to my office please," he said calmly.

Ael looked on with a curious look on her face as she took her seat again. Worf could see she was trying to figure out what he was up to.

The beam curtain cycled, and the captain entered from the bridge command deck. He could see the captain's chair for a moment behind the captain as he entered.

"Captain, please have a seat. The Admiral and I were discussing the command structure of the fleet and I would like your input—" Worf started.

The look on her face changed to understanding and then on to mild anger.

"—since you were in on the inception of project Icarus. You might be able to shed some light, so to speak, on the President's thinking."

"Mister Worf, the President did not confide in me at all," the captain told Worf.

The Admirals' face showed a flash of shock as the captain addressed the Ambassador by his name rather than his title.

He continued without seeing the Admirals' expression. "I only spoke to the Chief of Starfleet and most of those conversations were one way!"

## Star Trek Exploration: The Journey

Worf caught the look and explained, “Admiral, I asked the captain to refer to me by my name when he is advising me and when it would not cause a break in discipline. I hope it will not cause a problem.”

“It already has, he is one of my officers. This will be hard for the crew and myself to understand.”

“I am not trying to undermine your authority. We, the three of us, now represent the Federation. I will on occasion need both your opinions and I must ensure you are not intimidated by rank. I must ensure that the decisions made on behalf of the Federation reflect the spirit of the Federation. However, once a decision is made, it will be written in stone.”

Alexander spoke up, “that is not acceptable. You are the Federation representative. I will not run my ship and advise you on Federation matters. You must make those decisions for yourself because only you have the authority and responsibility to make them.”

He turned to the Admiral, “and where the fleet is concerned, it is up to you. I have a ship to direct in battle, you, Admiral, have a fleet. I will execute your valid orders without hesitation, that is my job.”

He looked back at Worf, “Ambassador, I will advise you in your office.” He turned to the Admiral, “and Admiral I will do the same in your office. I will further advise you both on the command deck while it is silenced, but not in front of the crew. This is not a democracy!”

Worf said, “Then advise us now. The Admiral is adamant that she commands the fleet and that I have no say in the decisions; I on the other hand, need to be in the loop and have some input to do my job. Are there any instructions or orders from Starfleet or the President?”

“None. You are a 3-Bar Federation Ambassador and have been one for many years. You don’t need my advice. You just need to do what an ambassador does.”

Alexander continued, “I don’t have to tell either of you that the captain is the chief authority aboard a vessel and the Admiral is sole authority of a fleet. However, both must respond to the civil authority, that is you, Ambassador. I will follow your orders, Ambassador and your orders, Admiral and where they conflict, I will make the best decision based on my experience and training. I suggest you both do the same.”

Worf sat up straight in his chair, “Thank you Captain, you may return to the bridge.”

Captain Beck got up and exited through the doorway to the catwalk without another word. He could tell that the lecture had not made him any friends with Worf or the Admiral for that matter! But, they have to understand how Starfleet worked.

The Admiral looked at a sullen Worf. “He is right you know.”

“That is the problem, he is right!”

“Then I will command the fleet and you will give the orders.”

“Yes, but I reserve the right to be a pain in the rump!” Worf joked.

“A given, Ambassador, a given!” she said with a broad grin.

“By the way, in here, please call me Mister Worf.”

“Yes, Ambassador...”

## Chapter 6

As the Chief watched the away team return to the ship with the piece of the worm creature, Senior Engineer Borall came into the conference room.

“Chief,” he said, “I would like to conduct an experiment against the worm creatures.”

“What are you planning?” the Chief asked.

“I would like to use a shuttle craft and the Phasers to remove the creatures from the ship. I am hopeful that the creatures can be destroyed.”

The Chief considers the idea for a moment, shaking his head slowly in the affirmative. “We will need the Admirals ok.”

He touched his combadge, “Admiral.”

*“Donatra here.”*

“Admiral, Chief Engineer Babcock here. We have an idea for an experiment and need your approval.”

*“I am on my way.”*

Within a minute, she and Worf entered from the catwalk.

“What do you want to do?” she asked.

“I would like to use a shuttle craft and the Phasers to remove the creatures from the ship and see if they can be destroyed. We would use low power at first and increase it as necessary.”

The Admiral called Captain Beck to advise him that his ship would be fired upon. She was obviously not in favor of the experiment. The captain entered the conference room and received the briefing.

“You have my permission provided you do not hit the ship!” the captain said.

The Admiral was not pleased, but this was ship business, so she kept quiet. She asked, “When would you like to test this idea?”

“The shuttle is ready to depart right now.” He called the shuttle and gave the order.

Ael made a fleet announcement detailing, with Borall’s assistance, what was going to happen. Then she nodded.

Borall relayed the order to the shuttle. The view screen was directed to follow the test. The shuttle departed Galileo hanger bay and turned to the stern of the *Explorer*.

He said, "Careful Ensign, you don't want to scratch Captain Beck's paint job."  
"Aye sir," came the reply over the open link.

The shuttle fired. The beam passed within a meter of the ship, touching four of the worms. The effect was not immediately apparent. One of the bee creatures came out to investigate. The creature moved quickly and attached itself to the shuttle's impulse engine. Slowly, over several minutes the shuttlecraft lost power. Eventually, the creature detached itself and moved back to the warp nacelle with the others.

"Ensign," Borall said. There was no answer.

"Ensign Hawley?" Borall said calmly.

Chief Babcock touched his badge, "Medical emergency in *Galileo* Shuttle One."

The captain called Captain David and asked if he needed any assistance retrieving his shuttlecraft as the Chief Medical Officer acknowledged the Chief Engineer.

Captain David advised he had the situation under control but thanked Beck for his consideration.

The Worm creatures slowly flattened to avoid the beam. Once the beam was removed, they returned slowly to their former appearance.

Chief Engineer Borall turned and headed to Sickbay.

The Admiral looked at Worf and then at the remaining Chief, "I guess that is an answer!" she said disappointedly.

• • •

John arrived in Life Sciences lab seven about the same time as the sample did. A force field was raised around the stasis box and the box was beamed out from around the creature.

The creature was almost fully formed by the time it was captured and it finished forming as they watched. As soon as it finished, it began moving to the center of the contained area and tried to start feeding. The creature was on a ceramic platform, and it could not seem to find anything to eat. It continued to move in circles trying to find something to eat.

After a few minutes of watching and recording the creature, Varrec had the containment field widened to allow the creature to move onto a durasteel panel mounted next to the ceramic plate. Once the creature was completely on the durasteel panel the field was moved to surround the steel plate only. The gravity was removed, as was the air. The creature had begun to feed as soon as it moved onto the durasteel panel, and it continued to feed oblivious of the environmental changes.

Finally, slowly the durasteel panel was charged. The creature began to react almost immediately, which surprised the observers. It moved at a rate that was

## Star Trek Exploration: The Journey

twice as fast as the rate previously observed. It tried to move back to the ceramic platform now blocked by the containment field.

Confused and hurt, it released from the durasteel panel and began to drift. The observers noticed that it slowed its movements until it became almost dormant.

Varrec became as excited as a Vulcan can, he raised both eyebrows!

• • •

Ryan David walked into Sickbay and surveyed the scene. He saw his Chief Engineer talking to the medical officer attending Ensign Hawley. He walked up to them.

“Emmett how is the Ensign,” Ryan said.

“She sustained no permanent damage, Captain. Superficial only. Like Ensign Davis, she became unconscious because the energy was removed from her life support system. They both will be released for duty after a short rest,” reported the EMH.

“Thanks Emmett,” Ryan said.

Turning to Borall, he asked the Commander, “What is your next step?”

“I would like to send out three teams to try hand Phasers. The creatures seem to respond badly to energy. I would like to find out just how badly they respond.”

“Are you also planning to get more of the crew admitted to Sickbay?” David asked snidely, he was not pleased with the results of the testing so far.

“I was not planning on it, Captain. I will have one security member on the team to watch for the bee creatures. They can cease operation if the creatures begin to take notice of the teams’ actions,” Borall explained.

“Coordinate with Captain Beck and let’s see if we can keep Emmett from getting *too* busy.” The captain ordered.

Commander Borall left to get the teams ready.

Ryan moved to stand next to Ensign Hawley, taking her hand in his. She felt cold to him. He bowed his head for a moment and remained still. Then he moved to Ensign Davis and took his hand. He also felt cold to him. He bowed his head for a moment and remained still. He then turned and left the sick bay stating, “Emmett, take good care of my people.”

• • •

“*Madam President, Admiral Na’mur is on the line,*” Nicky said from the communications panel.

She rose from the easy chair in the conversation area and walked to her desk. She touched the communications panel and said, “Yes Admiral?” She noticed the security light was lit as his image came on the screen.

“Madam President, I must report that we have not yet established a Tunnelcom connection with the region of space that the Explorer is in. The communications personnel at the Charon facility are working on the problem. They can only report that as the tunnel generator begins to establish a tunnel it just winks out, their words not mine.”

“They are working around the clock on two fronts. To establish a tunnel nearby and they are also preparing the prototype vessel for immediate launch,” the Admiral finishes.

“Thank you, Admiral. Do you think we should dispatch the prototype vessel to check on them?”

“It will take them three more days to modify a ship that was not built to be a rescue craft, into one. Then two days to catch up with the Explorer. We are still trying to generate a Tunnelcom connection with them to find out what help and resources they might need, Madam President.”

“Dispatch the ship as soon as they are ready and keep me informed,” she said. Things are looking up, she thought.

• • •

“*Chief Babcock,*” came the reply as Tommy acknowledged his combadge.

“We have a buildup of plasma in the conduits, sir. We need to flush the system, sir.”

“*Can it wait, we are a little busy up here.*”

Crewmen Anderson hesitated and then said, “I don’t think so sir. The drain these creatures are putting on the power system is causing the build up to occur much quicker than normal. In my opinion it should be done very soon.”

“*Thank you for your opinion crewmen, but I would think it is my opinion that counts!*” Tommy said being sarcastic.

The crewmen began stumbling and explaining, “yes sir, of course sir. I was just saying that—”

“*Not to worry crewmen. Please carry out the flushing and keep the engineering command center informed of your progress. Babcock out.*”

• • •

“All teams move into position and begin working,” Borall commanded from the conference room on the Galileo.

The view screen showed the three teams begin to move across the hull to separate creatures. Two members of each team began phasing the worm creatures with the laser rifles they carried. The other members watched for the bee creatures.

The creatures began to slowly move away from the energy beam as they visibly shrank in size. The creature on the left side of the view screen began to

## Star Trek Exploration: The Journey

dissolve. Borall noticed that each of the creatures' shank to a point and then dissolved.

The teams moved over the hull from the front of Galileo to the back.

While he did not show it, Borall was secretly pleased with the results.

The screen split to show the creatures dissolving before the teams when the teams spread too far apart for the view screen to show all of them.

The teams continued to slowly move across the hull to the far end dissolving the worms in their path.

As the teams walked to the underside of the ship, Borall surveyed the damage. A quarter of the hull was gone and only the structural integrity field was keeping the insides of the ship inside.

His combadge bussed and he answered, "Borall here."

*"Chief Borall, Sub-Captain Varrec in Life Sciences."* He used the Vulcan language rather than Federation Basic, which caused Borall a moment of confusion.

"Yes, Sub-Captain, how may I help you?" Borall asked quietly.

*"Chief, we are monitoring your operation with great interest. I have assigned two officers to analyze the sensor and visual data we are receiving from the area surrounding the Galileo."* Varrec informed Borall.

"Have you made any correlations yet?" Borall asked.

*"Yes, your teams are dissolving the creatures, but not with the consequences you desire. Please direct your view screen to the area of the hull where the teams began."*

Borall complied and saw that there were smaller worm creatures eating the hull now. Hundreds of them! Now he understood why Varrec was speaking Vulcan, so as not to embarrass Borall by informing the rest of the crew of the miscalculation.

Borall said, "Standby Sub-Captain."

Borall leaned forward and ordered the teams to cease operation and to return to the ship.

He then reopened the communications to the Sub-Captain and asked him how many creatures were now in the wake of his operation.

*"We estimate you have tripled the number of creatures on the Galileo hull,"* the Sub-Captain reported.

"Thank you for the information."

*"You're welcome. Varrec out."*

Borall contacted the captain and reported the results of the operation.

Understandably, Captain David was not pleased, but at least none of the team members ended up in Sickbay.

*“Chief, the next status briefing in a few minutes. I would like you to join me on the bridge before we attend the briefing.”*

• • •

The bridge was unusually quiet considering the operations that were on going. Randy had reduced the staff to one helmsman and himself. He had catnapped a few times over the last two days and only left the bridge to clean up and eat.

He felt almost useless. He was second in command of the most powerful ship in the fleet. Heck, it was a fleet! And he had nothing to do but sit and wait. He felt useless. He wondered how the captain was handling the boredom and realized the captain was in basically the same position—waiting for something to happen.

He bides his time by monitoring the engineering operations to rid the fleet of these creatures. But you can only watch a worm eating the ship for so long. He could only monitor the power drain for so long. Then he became bored and felt useless.

He worked on the duty schedules and the rest of the paperwork of the Operations department. He made two crew changes that were of little consequence and finished within an hour. He even completed the paperwork to promote one of his staff.

The operations crew changes came and went. He could tell that the helmsmen were beginning to be irritated by his sullen presence.

He had drifted off on another catnap when the console to the left began to chirp. Chirp? He got up and attended to the chirping. He found the console set to chirp for incoming signals. He touched the receive-audio control.

Instantly the console audio device came to life.

*“USS Explorer, this is Starfleet Station Charon, can you hear us. USS Explorer, this is Starfleet Station Charon, can you hear us.”* The communications panel began.

He touched the transmission control and said, “Charon Station, this is *Explorer*. Sub-Captain McLorn.”

The initial call continued for a few more repetitions before an answer came. Randy continued to reply.

*“Explorer, we have been trying to get a communication through to you for days. What is your status?”* He could hear a commotion in the background.

He figured a delay of four seconds.

“Charon. We are dead in space. The tunnel became unstable at warp one-point-nine and the generator shutdown. We returned to normal space if you could

## Star Trek Exploration: The Journey

call it that. A cloudy nebula currently surrounds us, and two types of creatures are having us for lunch.”

He called up and transmitted the telemetry and visual data on a separate channel while he was talking. He also signaled the helmsman to call the captain to the lower bridge.

“We have been trying to generate a Tunnel, but the bee creatures are emitting an energy pattern that is interfering with the generator. Our efforts are currently directed at removing the worm creatures from the hull and get the bees moved to a distance where we can generate a tunnel and get out of here.”

Beck entered the bridge by Life Sciences and walked quickly to stand beside Randy as he was finishing the transmission.

Randy rose and said in a low voice, “I have reported our situation and sent the telemetry we have, Captain.”

“Thank you, Randy,” the captain said as he sat down at the console Randy had vacated.

Randy moved to his console and reconfigured it for communications overview. He noticed that the communications channel was a normal channel and not a Tunnelcom or sub-space channel. He pulled up a direction finder to locate the source of the signal. The sensors did not help much, but he did notice that the signal was clearer at 165 degrees, which implied it was behind and to the starboard.

*“Explorer, we have received the telemetry and will be going over it. We have your position within a light-year. We must use a normal channel, which is why there is a delay in the transmissions. Is your Captain available?”*

“Charon, this is Captain Beck, how may I help you?” Beck asked.

“Randy, get the current Life Sciences data from Varrec, this data you sent is about an hour old,” Beck instructed softly.

Randy’s fingers flew over the console bringing up the Life Sciences logs and copying the relevant files and log entries to his console and transmitting them to Charon Station.

*“Captain Beck this is Admiral Na’mur. It is very nice to finally hear from you. Can you fill us in on your difficulty, status, and plans?”*

The captain replied, “Sub-Captain McLorn has briefed you on our status and difficulties. We are currently involved in ridding the fleet of the parasites that have attached themselves to the ships. Our efforts have failed so far, but we have gained valuable insight into the creatures with each effort.”

*“Captain, this is the President. How is the ship?”*

“As the telemetry shows, the hull is slowly being consumed and the energy is being drained.”

“Yes, we have seen that.” The Admiral asked, “What do you need?”

“Nothing Admiral, we must work this problem through. We have about a hundred of the best engineers in Starfleet working on the problems. If they cannot find an answer in the next two months, the energy will be consumed, and the hull will be gone shortly thereafter.”

“*Captain we are preparing the tunnel generator test sled for a rescue mission. It will be at your location within the next two days,*” relayed the Admiral.

“Admiral, please cancel the mission. The ship will arrive and be stuck here with us. However, you may put a large amount of hull plating onboard and have it standby to rendezvous with us when we get out of this fix and need to repair the ships.”

“*We will comply with your wishes. The orders have already been dispatched. You will have assistance within five days. We will be sending the ship to the coordinates of the current Tunnelcom point we are using for this channel.*”

“Thank you, Admiral. We will keep Charon Station advised of our status.”

“*As you say Captain. Starfleet out.*”

“Looks like you have some employment, Randy!” The captain said rising and turning to his Operations Sub-Captain.

“Oh, joy!” Randy said. “You are too good to me!” They both laughed as Randy sat down to begin working on the supply list.

The captain walked up the ramp to the command deck and asked for his ready room. A moment later he was gone.

• • •

“Ambassador Worf,” Captain Beck called from his combadge.

“Yes, Captain?” He said as he was sitting down before his meal.

“*I would like to have a Command update meeting in my ready room.*”

“I am on my way.” He wondered what the captain was up to now. He put down his fork and left his quarters.

• • •

“Admiral,” Captain Beck called from her combadge.

“Yes, Captain?”

“I would like to have a Command update meeting in my ready room.”

“*I am on my way.*” She put down the report she was reading and asked Aulee to put it back under seal. She rose and proceeded through the beam curtain to the Captain’s Ready Room.

Worf arrived just before her and was moving toward the far chair before the captain’s desk.

## Star Trek Exploration: The Journey

The captain began, “We have been contacted by Starfleet. Or more precisely Charon Station. They established a Tunnelcom nearby and are using conventional communications to contact us. There is about a four second delay.”

“They were sending a rescue ship, which I refused,” he continued. “I would not want them to end up in this nebula with us.”

“Sound decision, however, it should have been mine to make,” the Admiral stated coldly.

“While this is true, it was the only decision that could be made. I felt it did not need to be referred to you. As was the decision to change the contents of the rescue vessel to repair materials, mainly hull plating.”

“We will speak of this later,” again the Admiral was using a cold, measured voice.

Worf looked on knowing exactly how the Admiral was feeling. He had felt the same way this morning. They were going to have a hard time sorting out the Command structure in this fleet. He asked, “Is that all Captain?”

“Yes, Mister Worf, we advised Charon Station of our difficulty, status, and plans. We will have another update briefing in twenty or so minutes.”

Worf got up and returned to his dinner. He knew two things. The Admiral and Captain were about to have the same conversation he had had with the Admiral. He also knew he hated cold, dead Gagh!

When Worf had left, Ael said, “Captain, I thought we were very clear on the command structure. I have the fleet and you have the ship.”

“You are correct, and I notified Starfleet of the difficulty, status and plans I have for *my* vessel. The channel is still open and available to you to discuss the difficulty, status and plans for the fleet,” Alexander replied confidently.

“Captain, they are the same at this point.”

“That is the conclusion I came to after briefing Starfleet and sending them the telemetry. I left the bridge immediately to brief you and the Ambassador on what had transpired.”

Ael calmed visibly. “Thank you, Captain. In the future I would like to be present during all your communications with Starfleet. I am sure the Ambassador would also like to be present.”

The captain nodded but remained silent.

She rose and returned to her office. She picked up a cup and threw it across the room. It hit the wall and smashed into small pieces. This brought Aulee running. Ael worked to get her temper under control.

She calmed considerably as Aulee said, “Computer. Reset cup.”

The fragments of the cup dissolved, and the cup materialized in its original position.

It was then that the absurdness of her being upset struck her and she burst out laughing.

Aulee asked, "A bad meeting?"

"Not at all. The captain is making decisions for, and briefing Starfleet on the status of the fleet. I, on the other hand, am busy breaking the crockery!" She continued laughing.

Aulee asked, "Are you ready for dinner? I have a new rice dish to try."

The Admiral nodded and they walked through the outer office to Aulee's quarters for dinner.

They were beginning to form a strong friendship.

• • •

Varrec walked under the mid deck and onto the bridge. He stopped next to Sub-Captain McLorn.

"Mister McLorn, I would like to verify a finding made on the small creature we have in Life Sciences."

"Yes, Mister Varrec, what can I assist you with." *It is starting to get busy again,* he thought.

"I would like to raise the shields but keep them against the hull of the ship."

"That would not be advisable Mister Varrec since the emitters need a few inches to form a wave pattern."

"I have thought of that problem. You should be receiving the equations for the shield setting right now. Please have the Weapons officer use these settings."

Randy nodded at the Weapons officer, and he checked his console for this information. Finding it with a few touches of the panel, he set the shields appropriately and nodded back.

"The settings are for the engineering section only sir," the Weapons officer reported.

"This is only a small test, Mister McLorn, please proceed."

"Energize shields!" He ordered.

"Aft engineering section shields are up sir," came the reply.

The screen showing the bees now showed a fury of activity. The bees immediately moved away from the nacelles as if struck by a strong shock. They 'buzzed' around in confusion but stayed in the same general vicinity.

"That is what I suspected," Varrec said.

"And what was that?" Randy asked.

## Star Trek Exploration: The Journey

“The bee creatures are feeding on warp energy. The energy used by the shields is plasma based. My staff noticed that the bees did not seem to like plasma energy and were staying clear of the plasma conduits.”

“Sir—” said the Helmsmen.

They turned to see the worms floating free from the hull and the bees had moved to buzz around them.

“Cut the shields,” Randy ordered.

The bees began buzzing on the side of the worms away from the ship. They seemed to be herding or pushing the worms back toward the ship. The bees that were not herding the worms returned to the nacelles.

“Shields up, Weapons.”

The pattern repeated.

Varrec continued to observe. Finally, he said, “Thank you Mister McLorn, you may lower the shields.”

“But that is the first thing that has had a positive effect on removing the creatures from the hull and help us to get out of this nebula!”

“That is not the effect that Chief Avery is looking for. You may want to check your shield generator status,” Varrec suggested.

McLorn turned and nodded at the Weapons officer, who reported, “The shields are down to 90 percent sir.”

“He turned back to Varrec and asked, “Why are the shields using so much energy?”

“We’re not sure. We tried using the shields earlier and the energy drain was too much to sustain them for long. Thank you for your assistance.” He turned and left the bridge returning to Life Sciences.



The Chief Engineer of the Starfleet Corps of Engineers aboard the *USS Galileo* entered the bridge and walked to the captain’s chair where Captain Ryan David was seated.

Captain David watched him approach with a displeased look on his face.

“Chief, the last operation did not go too well.” Ryan made it a statement, not an inviting comment. “I hope your next operation will be tested and more thought out before you execute it.” Again, he made a statement. “What do you have planned for your next test?”

*Finally, a question*, Borall thought. “I am planning to contact Life Sciences after the upcoming engineering update briefing and examining their latest developments.” Before Ryan could comment he continued, “They have brought onboard a small piece of the worm creature and it has grown into a complete

creature. They are examining, experimenting, and testing the creatures to determine the next step in removing them. Current reports state they have found a way of using the shields to remove them from the hull.”

“Then you have the answer to your problem!” Ryan was a bit elated until he got a good look at the Chief.

“Not really since the bee creatures will just herd them back to the hull,” Borall said sourly.

“*Herd?*” Ryan said astonishingly, “Did you say *herd?*”

“Yes sir,” the Chief answered. “Mister Varrec called to say that he tested using the shields to separate the creatures from the hull and the results were astonishing. The bee creatures swarmed, and the worms detached from the hull and floated close by. When the shields were shutdown, the bees swarmed around the worms *herding* them back to the hull to continue feeding.”

Ryan saw Lieutenant Commander MacKeen, his Chief Engineer, enter the bridge.

“That is astonishing,” Ryan said as he got up. They walked to the turbolift where MacKeen was waiting. As they entered the turbolift, the captain continued trying to digest this new information. He had found out very quickly strange things happened when serving with the Starfleet Corps of Engineers.

• • •

The command staff entered the conference room, which was still configured for the engineering staff. Worf noticed the Captains and Chief Engineers from each of the fleet vessels were all in attendance. Chief Engineer Borall, the Chief Engineer of Galileo’s SCE Engineering Team, was also in attendance. He noticed that the Sub-Captain for Engineering and the *Explorer’s* three Chief Engineers were also here.

“Tommy, what do you have for us?” Captain Beck asked as they took chairs at the end of the table.

“Ambassador, Admiral, Captain’s, and fellow Engineer’s; we have a number of advances and theories, but obviously, we are still here,” he began, spreading his arms to show his frustration.

“There was a test to see if the bee creatures would flock after a power source and we learned that one would and at a speed we did not think they could move at. Side note, the injured Ensign piloting the shuttle has recovered and returned to duty. Then shooting the bloody beasties was tried and we got four-fold more out of that idea.”

He continued, “Finally, the shields were tried with amazing results. The worms detached from the hull as we expected them to. However, the bee creatures went literally crazy. They buzzed all around the ship and the energy drain

## Star Trek Exploration: The Journey

increased with the activity. Finally, when the shields were deactivated, they herded the worms back to feed on the hull.”

He noticed a few amazed looks on the faces of the assembled officers who, obviously, had not yet read the posted reports.

Sub-Captain Babcock continued with his conclusion. “So, in the final analysis, we can get a few bees away from the nacelles and the worms to detach from the hull, but the bees will not leave the area or stop generating the field that keeps us from generating a tunnel or even warping out of here.”

Ael opened her mouth to ask a question, but Beck beat her to it.

“So, where are you going from here,” the captain asked.

The Admiral and Worf nodded their approval of the captains’ question.

“Right now, the Alpha-shift is going off duty and Delta-shift is coming on. We have plans to see if we can use the shields to remove the creatures and the impulse engines to move far enough away to use the warp engines,” Tommy replied.

“Do you think we will be able to slide out from under the creatures and make a clean get away?” Beck asked.

“I have every hope and hope is about all the guarantee you will get out of me Captain.”

“Very good then, mission approved,” the Admiral stated. Her statement was followed by a short pause, which allowed her to change the subject.

She said, “We have contacted Starfleet Command and they are dispatching a ship, the test sled I believe they called it, with repair materials and hull plating. Captains, please have your engineers forward a copy of the materials they will need to repair their vessels. Ensure you plan enough materials since it will be a weeks’ round trip to get more.”

She turned to Captain David, “Do you have enough personnel to complete the repairs to all vessels within a week?”

Ryan thought for a moment and said, “I will consult my staff and see what the experts have to say, but I think they can do it with the help of the engineering crews from *Galileo*, *Pioneer* and *Voyager*.”

“Let me know as soon as possible. I will want to send a request for any needed repair personnel with the list of supplies before the ship departs in two hours.”

After a short pause, the captain said, “If that is all, let’s get back to work.”

He rose and walked to his Delta Shift Chief Engineer to discuss the Chief’s plans. The Admiral joined them.

The Ambassador returned to his office while the Captains and Chiefs returned to their ships.

Finally, Chief Borall had a chance to use the beam curtain and realized he had no idea where he was going. He said, "Computer, location of Sub-Captain Varrec."

The computer replied, "Sub-Captain Varrec is in Life Sciences."

He called out, "Life Sciences" and the beam curtain cycled for him.

As he stepped out of the curtain, he was amazed at the area he was in. His eyebrows raised and stayed that way as he stared around the room. Life Sciences section was to his left; the bubble of Stellar cartography was next with the Engineering command center on the far side. But the amazing part was to the right. He had effectively walked out into space. The mid deck was the only thing blocking the star field. He walked forward under the mid deck and out onto the bridge. The Communications officer rose and asked if she could assist him.

His eyebrows finally returned to their normal position as he refused her help. He turned and walked to the life science section. Sub-Captain Varrec was waiting just outside the section and, as Borall approached, he said, "It takes humans many minutes to recover from the first sight of *Explorer's* bridge."

Chief Borall showed a momentary flash of irritation and embarrassment over his display of amazement. He covered this up by asking the Sub-Captain for his help.

## Chapter 7

Crewmen First Class Shannon Anderson was very relieved when the connection closed. This was the second time in as many weeks that the boss had reminded her about her opinion. But her opinion was based on a correct, experienced analysis!

This Starfleet stuff was nothing like her family's civilian cargo ship she had served on just a few years ago. There, the Captain, and Chief Engineer depended on their engineers to bring problems to their attention. As an assistant engineer on the family's cargo ship, she had had responsibilities equal to her boss. Now she was just another engineer to be ignored!

Her hands hovered over the engineering console setting up the vents and power system for the flushing operation as she continued to vent to herself.

Her boss had told her "We do it differently than on the cargo ship," and "she needed to learn the Starfleet way of engineering." The problem was, she had learned all she could in her specialty aboard this ship. The problem was further compounded by the fact she was one of the newest engineers and the senior engineer for her section treated all junior engineers like they knew nothing. He would not acknowledge her previous experience except to consider it a problem.

She double-checked the grid sequencing to ensure there would not be a power outage in any part of the ship as the power conduits were systematically shutdown, flushed out and powered back up.

She initiated the flush by cycling open the exhaust vents.

She tried to calm down and concentrate on her job at hand, be it boring and routine.

The vents began their ponderous cycling to an open position of ten percent of maximum. This is the position she was taught to use in the Starfleet Engineering Academy. It had always served her well to follow the teaching of the academy to the letter no matter *how* boring the procedure. She had been listening to Chief Engineers tell her about the same thing for years. "There is a reason for every rule," they would say. "Follow the rules and stay out of trouble," they would say. She was afraid she would be saying the same thing to one of her engineers one day!

Shannon had done this procedure only once before on this ship, but many times before during her previous posting on the Nebula Class ship the *USS Endeavour* commanded by Captain Amos. It was her first Starfleet ship, and she still remembered the hull number, *NCC-71805*.

During the fight with the Borg, in near earth orbit, the ship had been badly damaged, and she had been injured. After her recovery, she wanted to return to her ship and was very sorry when the *USS Endeavor* was not repaired. However, she had been reposted to the *USS Explorer*. All in all, not a bad turn of events, at least, up to their departure.

She brought herself back to the moment to check the progress of the venting. The exhaust vents had cycled to an opening of five percent. She was halfway to the end of step one. The vents continued to open.

She was returning to her memories when she noticed a warning indication on vent thirty-two and switched the view screen to view the indicated vent. Shannon saw one of the blasted worms was eating the vent cover! However, as she watched the worm moved slowly away from the vent and the plasma below. The vent continued to cycle open.

She examined the board for the first of seven sequences that would flush the entire grid. It was properly set up and ready to go. Nine percent. She began to open the flushing jets. Ten percent and the jets came up fully open. A perfectly timed and sequenced flush once more!

The vent on the view screen began venting waste plasma.

The cloud expanded as it left the vent and seemed to drift over the hull like the fog rolling over San Francisco, which she had watched for years while growing up in the Bay Area. She had lived with her Grandparents like the rest of her siblings until she was fifteen and could join her parents on their cargo ship, the *Arrant Venture*. She had studied the cargo ships' engineering systems and had been to a sister ship in the Merchant Spaceship Museum many times while growing up. Her Grandparents felt it would bring the kids closer to their parents until they reached a safe age to join the family business.

As she widened the view on the screen before her, she saw the cloud expand and envelope one of the slow-moving worms. The worm creature lost interest in eating almost immediately and slowly turned away from the vent and moved in the direction of perceived safety.

One of the bees drifted quickly into view and moved toward the vents. It settled into the cloud of waste plasma particles and began hovering as if it was a hummingbird looking at a flower. She had watched the seagulls drift over the San Francisco Bay many times as they watched the water hunting for something to eat.

This action fascinated her so that she did not notice a second and third bee creature joining the first.

She came out of her amazed trance as a fourth creature crossed over the first to get at another vent. She expanded the view once more and saw that most of the vents had creatures floating in the cloud of exhaust plasma.

## Star Trek Exploration: The Journey

Many of the creatures were changing colors. The closer they were to the vents the more rapid the change although the change was still almost imperceptible. "This development could help us get out of here," she thought.

She tapped her combadge. "Life sciences, this is Crewman Anderson in engineering," she said.

"Yes, crewman, what is it?" Came the calm, level answer. She knew that voice without ever having met the owner.

"Sub-Captain Varrec!" She stumbled. She was very unnerved at the thought of talking to such a high-ranking individual. She had hoped one of the crewmen in life sciences would answer.

"Yes, Crewman, I know who I am." Again, in a calm, level voice.

She recovered as quickly as she could by remembering her training. She said, "Sir, are you monitoring the creatures on the hull?"

"Yes, crewman. We are monitoring all the creatures."

"I am performing a plasma flushing operation and the bee creatures are hovering in the exhaust and turning different colors. The worm creatures are moving away."

"We are monitoring the changes."

"I am sorry to bother you sir. I just thought it might be important to report."

"Yes, Crewman, thank you." The communication channel closed.

"Well," she thought, "I've done it again!"



Varrec closed the connection to the crewman and looked at the holo-image of the bee creature, which was next to the image of the worm creature that was hovering above the life sciences console in the center of the life sciences area.

He saw that more information was been added to the database. He noticed the information was concerning the color changes and the telemetry that they were receiving. The creature's color changes seemed to be linked to the amount of power absorption.

He looked back at the data collected from the observations of the bees around the nacelles. No color changes. But then the nacelles only have a residual power signature.

They knew the bee creatures were attracted to power sources, but that the creatures could absorb the power, that was a new revelation.

He walked over to the crewmembers that were monitoring the bee creatures and asked them to compute the rate and amount of absorption.

He moved to the area where crewmen were monitoring the worm creatures and asked about the correlation of speed and movement from the vents. He was

briefed that the worms moved much faster when they were escaping a direct power source.

Varrec knew that power attracted the bees and repulsed the worms. Now he knew the bees absorbed different types of power at different rates and their coloration reflected the rate. The holo-image of the bee displayed the new correlations beside the creature. “Yes,” he thought, “*the picture is beginning to form.*”

The Sub-Captain of Life Sciences tabbed the communication unit on the console and said, “Chief Borall.”

“Yes sir,” Borall answered as his image appeared on the console before Varrec.

“Chief, do you have the energy absorption rates for the bees when you exposed them to the phasers?” Varrec asked.

“Yes sir,” Chief Borall said as he began calling up the reading on his console. He transmitted them through the link to the distributed computer system on the *USS Explorer* and onto the life sciences node. “*The readings should be on your console now.*”

Varrec watched the console and when the information arrived, he said, “Thank you, Chief. Varrec out.”

He walked over to the ‘bee brigade’ and asked them to integrate the data into the model that was being built. As they worked on the model, he walked back to see the results on the display.

He studied the data closely and called the ‘chief beekeeper’ over. “Lieutenant, would you project the positive and negative absorption rates on the model. Also vary the type of energy used based on the current model,” Varrec asked.

The Lieutenant sat down and began working on the problem. The projected data began changing and graphs appeared and slowly the graphed data began to grow across the projected grid.

Varrec kept a steady eye on the data and graphs, integrating the information into his mental picture of the bees that were forming and building rapidly behind his eyes.

“Sub-Captain,” called one of the Worm keepers. “I am monitoring the reaction of the worms that are in the vicinity of the vents being flushed and you might want to see this.”

• • •

Crewman Anderson began cycling the third set of vents closed. Her hands moved deftly over the console, but her expression did not reflect her movements. She seemed in a daze, her mind not on her work.

## Star Trek Exploration: The Journey

However, she was very focused as she concentrated on powering up the third grid, switching the fourth set to use other grids before shutting the fourth set down.

She began cycling with the fourth set of vents open. She relaxed as the third set of vents showed they were fully closed. The flushing began as the fourth set of vents reached five percent.

If nothing else, she was getting very proficient at flushing the large ships' plasma power system. She moved her gaze to the view screen and watched the ballet like movements of the bee and worm creatures as the bees moved into the vented plasma cloud and the worms moved away from the vents.

She had also noticed that the coloration of the bees was becoming brighter the longer they spent within the plasma cloud.

She also noticed that the worms were not eating the hull where the venting cloud had touched the hull. The worms were eating around these areas.

She stopped the vent cycling at eight percent and reduced the vent angle back to five percent to spread more of the plasma cloud against the hull. While she knew this was not allowed, she wanted to see the reaction of the creatures.

The worms moved farther away, and the amount of hull consumed was visually much less. She noticed one worm changed direction and moved back over to the area it had already eaten. She smiled as she restarted the vent cycling to the required ten percent and continued the flushing.

She wondered if she should take a chance and contact life sciences again. She did not want to bother the Sub-Captain again, but she felt he might not have noticed her experiment.

She reached for her combadge and hesitated. *I don't want to get into any more trouble, she thought, but this seems very important.*

She made up her mind to take the chance and report the finding.

• • •

Sub-Captain Varrec watched the logged events that took place a moment ago as the ensign replayed the observation.

"This is another first. The crewman is running experiments for us."

"Yes, and she is performing them very well," Varrec replied with a slight Vulcan equivalent of admiration.

The Ensign flinched at the comment and then let his rebuttal die on their lips. The Vulcan would not care about explanations or excuses.

"I did not mean this was the first time a crewman had run our experiments for us, I meant that this is the first time a worm has crossed back over a consumed section of the hull," the Ensign corrected.

“So, the Worm was herded back over a consumed area by the revulsion to the plasma.

“Yes sir, that is our thinking.”

“Keep working on that track.”

The Ensign got up and returned to his console near the rest of the beekeepers.

He looked back at the bee data and saw that the bees were indeed attracted by plasma, positive plasma.

He touched his combadge and stated, “Crewman Anderson.”

• • •

Her hand moved to the combadge. Just as she was about to tap the badge it started beeping and she heard Varrec ask for her.

“Sub-Captain Varrec?” She was a little stunned that the chief of life sciences would be calling her.

“*Yes, crewman. Where are you?*”

“I am in engineering section twenty-five alpha, sir,” she said hesitantly.

“*Engineering section twenty-five alpha,*” she heard him repeat. The beam curtain behind her cast a red shadow on her console as it cycled open. She heard, “Varrec, out,” in stereo as the Sub-Captain entered the section and walked up to her console.

She turned and looked at him as he approached. He motioned her to keep her seat as he addressed her. “Crewman, I monitored your impromptu experiment and was amazed at the results.”

She noticed his left eyebrow rose a bit!

He continued quickly, “You managed to herd one of the worms back over the area it had already consumed.” He seemed almost excited as he continued, “We have not observed this before. The worms previously avoided any area they had consumed.”

When he finally stopped explaining, she said, “Did you also notice that the bees did not follow the cloud down to the deck level. They would get within a meter of the deck and stop.” She turned back to her view screen and pointed to one of the bees.

Varrec touched his combadge and said, “Computer, correlate the following. Bee creatures. Observation. Hull contact.”

“*Working. Negative correlation,*” replied the computer.

“Computer, how close to the hull have any of the bee creatures been approximately?” An exact distance was not needed right now.

## Star Trek Exploration: The Journey

*“Working. The bee creatures have been within approximately .9782 meters of the hull.”*

“Thank you, computer,” Varrec said to close the connection. He looked back down at the crewman and said, “Very astute observation. I will correlate your inputs into the creature’s behavioral analysis. Thank you, Miss Anderson.”

The Sub-Captain turned to leave the way he came in and then turned back to the crewman. “In the future, contact me anytime with your observations.” He turned back to the beam curtain and said, “Life Sciences section 2.”

She was feeling very good for herself as she watched him walk through the beam curtain. “An atta-boy for once,” she thought, “and from Sub-Captain Varrec, this has been a good day.”

She said quietly to herself, “Now just don’t screw up the rest of the day Anderson!”

Shannon turned back to the console and entered the next flush sequence into it. She continued to watch the creatures as she completed the fifth and sixth flushes.

She began the seventh flush sequence. The worm in front of one of the vents had no way to escape the plasma venting. She moved the view port closer to observe the worms’ reaction. The worm creature was blocked on one side by the pylon arm of the Tunnel generator going straight up and there was a worm creature on the other side blocking its escape. It could not go forward into the vent or back off the hull. I was slowing thrashing about in slow motion. The worm beside it was not affected by the venting and thus, was not moving out of the way.

She continued to watch the creature; it seemed to just sit in the cloud of plasma venting from the ship. The worms’ movements seemed to slow, and the color of the creature was slowly darkening in the front. As the creatures’ color deepened and moved further back along its body, the movement of the creature quieted as the color darkened.

She touched the comm. panel on her console without hesitation this time, “Sub-Captain Varrec.”

As his image came on the screen he said, “Yes crewman?”

“I am observing a worm creature by vent one eighty-seven and it seems to be dying, sir!” She reported her conclusion.

He turned away from her for a moment.

She could hear him order the view screen perspective moved to vent one eighty-seven.

He turned back to look at her. “I am observing the creature now, crewman. Please continue to report your findings,” Varrec said quietly.

“Sir, when the creature was initially caught in the cloud, it began a slow thrashing and tried to escape. As you can see it is trapped. The color began to change almost immediately, and the thrashing diminished as the color got darker. It looked to me like it is dying. Like it is solidifying to death.”

“Interesting, crewman, very interesting.” He said to her and then turned and ordered an away team to take a sample of the creature. Turning back, he said, “Thank you again for bringing this to our attention. Varrec out.”

She did not feel as good as she did the last time, but she was hopeful she had helped the effort. She turned back to the console and found the venting was almost completed. She began to close the vents. She looked back to the view screen and watched the vent begin to close and the creature become very still. The coloration continued to change until the creature had become almost a uniform golden brown. She smiled at the irony of the thought; “*I cooked it like a giant crinkle cut French fry!*”

• • •

The away team made a very quick out and back mission to the creature next to the Tunnel generator. They collected samples from three different spots down the length of the creatures’ body. The creature did not resist or show any activity at all. It was no longer attached to the hull but was drifting just slightly above it. The teams’ security members kept all eyes on the bees to ensure the team members were not attacked. They resembled a bunch of bank robbers more than a scientific research team!

The away team returned taking the samples to life sciences lab seven. The samples were examined. The resulting readings were integrated into the database and displayed next to the holo-image of the worm.

Varrec was becoming excited and had to perform a silent calming exercise. The forming pictures were becoming complete.

The analysis showed no activity at all in the samples. They were totally inert. For all intents and purposes, they were dead.

*If plasma kills the creatures, he thought, what would anti plasma do?*

He touched his combadge and said, “Engineering.”

“*Commander Babcock sir.*”

“Commander, I would like to run an experiment on the worm creature in life sciences lab seven. Would you obtain a liter of anti-plasma and bring it to the lab?” Varrec asked.

“Yes, *sir.*” The connection closed.

Varrec went to the lab to await the engineer.

Approximately five minutes later, the beam curtain activated and Tommy step through with an antigravity canister floating before him.

## Star Trek Exploration: The Journey

They went to work without a word. Tommy hooked the canister into the stasis box as Varrec set the release rate on the console. When they had both finished their work, Varrec shutdown the stasis field and initiated the release of anti-plasma into the area with the worm creature.

The creature reacted as if hit by a freezing spray. It stopped all movement, effectively frozen to the spot. As the vapor cloud continued, the creatures' color began to fade. As Varrec and Babcock watched, the creature slowly faded away, dissolving as if in a transporter beam.

Varrec quickly ran a tricorder over the stasis box. "There is no trace of the creature remaining," Varrec said.

"*Alright!*" Tommy shouted. This was the best news he had heard in what seemed like months. He suddenly sobered, "Now, how do we get rid of the creatures on the hull," he asked.

"Away teams could be used to spray the anti-plasma on the creatures," Varrec suggested.

"That would take too long, and the bee creatures will be attracted to the spray. It must be a method that does not give the bee creatures a chance to react. A way that targets all the creatures at once."

"Could the vents be set to release the anti-plasma?" Varrec asked.

"Yes, they could. But wouldn't the bee creatures just herd them away?" Tommy asked.

"That would be the pattern we have observed." Varrec said.

"Then we will have to keep the bees busy," Tommy said, "Ships phasers on low power should do the trick."

"Why do you wish to trick the bee creatures?" Varrec asked.

"No, No, No. Not trick them, accomplish the task."

Varrec let the idiom lay and asked, "Shall we test your theory before proceeding?"

"Sounds like a very good idea."

They turned and ordered a beam curtain to connect the engineering command section. They turned left on the other side and walked under the command deck onto the bridges' lower deck. Commander Brandon rose from his console and greeted them with, "May I help you sir?"

"Yes, Commander you can. We need you to fire the ships phasers, at low power, at the bee creatures. At the same time, I need you to fire a high energy beam between the nacelles out into the cloud." Varrec ordered.

"Sir, I have strict orders to not fire the phasers without the Admiral's permission," the Commander stated. The Benzite looked unduly pleased with himself, as she usually did when following orders to the letter.

Varrec looked at her like the Commander was forgetting something but said nothing.

Tommy thought it was time to wipe the pleased look off the Commander's face. He leaned forward a bit and whispered in the Commander's ear, "well, aren't you going to ask the Admiral for permission?"

The look left as Brandon turned to the console and tapped the communications panel saying, "Admiral Donatra?"

"Donatra here, Commander." She said as her image appeared on the screen above the console.

"Admiral, Sub-Captain Varrec and Commander Babcock would like me to fire the ships phasers," she told her.

Tommy moved forward into view of the screen. "Admiral, we need one more test firing before we can put our latest plan into action."

"Are you planning on briefing the command staff before you execute the plan?"

"Yes Admiral. We should be ready to brief in thirty minutes if all goes well," Tommy replied.

"Permission granted. Please do not put any more holes in Explorer! Donatra out."

The Commander and Sub-Captain backed away from the console. Commander Brandon gave the Weapons officer a quick nod of approval. She was not happy with being put down since it hurt the air of superiority she tried to maintain.

She turned to the communications console. The main view screen reoriented toward the nacelles and showed the low power phaser beam on the bee creatures. The creatures began to turn colors immediately. The creatures on the other nacelle began drifting toward the first.

A visibly stronger beam shot out between the nacelles. The bee creatures near the second nacelle flocked to the stronger beam and began changing color as they got within a meter of the beam. The creatures in the lower power beam did not move from their beam.

Varrec tapped his combadge, "Life sciences bee team, are you monitoring?"

"Yes, *Sub-Captain*," came the reply.

"I will expect the results integrated into the database by the time I return. Varrec out."

Tommy turned to the Commander and said, "you can cut the phasers, thank you Brandon." He turned back to Varrec and said, "we have our answer..."

Commander Brandon looked at the weapons officer and drew a finger across her throat in the universal cut sign. The thank you went a long way in restoring her hurt pride. Using the universal cut sign showed her superior command of federation idioms.

## Star Trek Exploration: The Journey

The screen showed the beams ending. The bees between the nacelles began to drift back as their color slowly changed back to normal.

Varrec and Babcock walked back under the command deck to the life sciences section where the bee creature model was rapidly updated to show the newly integrated data.

Varrec scanned the information, but it was the Commander who spoke first. “I think we have a plan sir.”

“It seems so.” He opened a connection to the captain, “Captain Beck.”

“*Beck here,*” Came the reply.

“Sir, we have a plan. We would like you to convene a command staff briefing for 30 minutes from now for final approval.”

“*Acknowledged, Beck out.*”

• • •

Her combadge beeped. She was dripping water as she ran the short distance to her bed where her discarded uniform lay. “Crewman Anderson,” she said tapped the device.

“*Anderson, Babcock here. Please come to the conference room as soon as you can.*”

“Yes sir,” she said, and the connection closed. She was very glad the combadge did not have a visual feature in it. She was not a prude; however, she did not feel right having her supervisor see her in the buff. She walked quickly back to the shower and finished bathing. She dried off, dressed, and opened a curtain to the conference room.

Tommy waved her over to join him as soon as she had arrived. He turned his attention back to Varrec.

Varrec was finishing a sentence as she walked into range of their conversation, “— want her as an integrator.”

Tommy seemed cross as he looked at Shannon and said, “The Sub-Captain has been briefing me on your observations, funny I was not informed before this.”

“Sorry, sir. But I thought life sciences would need the information as soon as possible.”

Varrec said, “I did. It led to the last piece of the puzzle needed to remove the creatures.”

Tommy said, “All well and good, however, *crewman Anderson*, we also need information of this sort.”

“Yes sir, *sorry sir.*” *Another ah-poo-poo*, she thought, *there goes my atta-boys.* She continued, “I entered the findings into my engineering log and marked it

for my supervisor, sir. I tried to follow the proper procedures, but I knew life sciences would also need the information and I was very surprised—”

“Yes, crewman,” Varrec said interrupting her explanation, then aside to Tommy, “Chief Engineer, you are informed now.” Looking back to Shannon, Varrec said, “Can you set the vents to flush over the hull where the creatures are?”

She moved to the console and began setting up the problem. She had the console produce an image of the fleet above the console. She located all the worm creatures on the holo-model in yellow. She colored the vents red and the vent stream blue. Then she set the model to begin venting. She began venting at five percent. She changed a few of the vent angles and fine-tuned the settings. The worms slowly turned green, all but one.

Finally, she said, “I can get all but one sir,” while still looking at the holo-model.

Varrec asked, “which one, where?”

She pointed to the holo-model creature that was still colored yellow.

Tommy watched the holo-model for a few ticks of the electronic clock on the console before quietly asking, “What would the holo-model be like in one hour?”

She looked down at the console. She added plotting for the worm creature’s previous movements and moved the projection time ahead one hour. She reran the simulation. All the creatures turned green.

“Thank you, Shannon,” Chief Babcock said, “please be prepared to execute the venting in one hour.”

She said, “Sir, I just cleaned the vents. There is nothing left to flush!”

“Varrec and I will have something in an hour.” The Chief said as he and Varrec headed for the beam curtain.

“Life sciences,” Varrec commanded and the two were gone.

She saved the settings and headed for a bite to eat. She knew she needed sleep more, but with only one hour off, she was sure it would only make her mind even more muddled. “Lounge,” she said finally. She too disappeared from the room.

## Chapter 8

“Captain Beck here.” He said in answer to the combadge beeping.

“*Sir, we need a Command Staff briefing as soon as possible to lay out our latest plan to get the worms off our back,*” Commander Babcock said.

“How is twenty minutes in the conference room?”

“*Fine sir, we will begin preparations. Commander Babcock out.*”

• • •

Worf’s eyes were starting to get bleary. He had been staring at diagrams and technical readouts for hours trying to learn every facet of this fleet, its ships, and the fleet’s capabilities. Only one food break had interrupted his study. He had not studied this hard for final exams at Starfleet Academy!

After hours of study, he still asked himself, “Why couldn’t this fleet be a Sovereign class with a Galaxy class on its back—or three Defiant Class ships? He knew those ships! He wouldn’t have hours of study. But, having looked at the ships comprising this fleet he understood why. The *Explorer* was designed for exploration and had horrible teeth. The Intrepid class vessels could employ their power with precision and leave the brute force to the *Explorer*.

While the Intrepid and Saber class vessels were similar in capabilities to his beloved *USS Defiant*, he still wanted to know their exact capabilities and the best way to deploy them. It was the Admiral’s job to employ the fleet, but he wanted to have the knowledge to override her, if necessary, without looking like a fool.

The Saber class, which he was not familiar with at all, surprised him with its design and capabilities. A lot was packed into that class of small ship. It reminded him of the compact design of the *Defiant* with a repair shop attached!

He still had half the systems on *Explorer* to review and after his discussion with her earlier, he was sure Admiral Donatra was also in her office pouring over the same diagrams and specifications.

This ship was a monster on the inside, which was not reflected on the outside except for the addition of an under saucer on the bottom of the saucer section. The Sovereign class ship, on which this design was loosely based, had a flat-bellied saucer, whereas the Deterrence class had an under belly like the rest of the larger ships. This allowed for five hundred plus more crew aboard. Not to mention the elimination of the hallways and crew quarters for each crewman saved about half the space on the ship. With crewmen having only a connected bedroom and bath facility for themselves, the saving of a lounge area for half

the crew was a very large savings. He was surprised this system worked so well. Once a sleeping crewman awoke, the crew module was 'docked' with the closest available lounge and this lounge was decorated via holo-technology for the crewman. When the crewman left their quarters or fell asleep, the module was moved back into the closest storage/sleeping position on the inter band of the ship around the core area. Worf was amazed by the fact that most of the interior band around his quarters was constantly moving and he could not feel it. It was almost like a turbo-lift system of moving rooms. The absence of a turbo-lift system within the ship also saved a lot of room. He shook his head at every new element of the design he discovered.

He was calling up the weapons system schematics on the Disrupter banks when the communications panel beeped. Worf leaned over and touched the receive switch still concentrating on the schematics.

*"Mister Worf, Captain Beck here."*

He turned away from the schematic diagrams of the *USS Explorer* on the screens above his desk. He was really getting to enjoy some of the features of this ship, and he was learning more every hour. He was now convinced the design of this ship was a total departure from any previous ship design. He looked at the communications panel and asked, "Yes, Captain, how may I assist you?"

*"Mister Worf, I am calling a Command Staff briefing for eighteen minutes from now in the conference room. Life sciences and engineering have worked out a plan they wish to brief us on."*

"Very well, Captain, seventeen minutes."

The connection closed.

• • •

Aulee got up and walked to the desk to answer the communication panel, which was beeping. "Admiral Donatra's office," she said.

Captain Beck asked, *"Is the Admiral there?"*

"Yes, Captain Beck I am here," the Admiral responded from the table across the room.

*"Admiral Donatra, I am calling a Command Staff briefing for fifteen minutes from now in the conference room. Life sciences and engineering have worked out a plan they wish to brief us on."*

"On my way, Captain."

The connection closed.

Aulee returned to the table, and they finished their meal.

Ael rose from the table and walked through the outer office to the conference room.

## Star Trek Exploration: The Journey

Aulee began to clear the table as the door slide shut.

• • •

Worf entered the conference room from the catwalk. Donatra was seated in her position at the table. Worf took his seat as Beck entered and took his seat at the head of the table. Sub-Captains McLorn, Varrec and Cunningham occupied the other seats. At another console the Chief Engineer of Delta Shift was just sitting down.

Tommy was in the briefing position and started talking as soon as the captain was seated.

“We have found a way to rid ourselves of the worm creatures. Though a combined effort of life sciences and engineering, we have found that anti-plasma will dissolve the worm creatures on the hull.”

“Will this cause any more damage to the ship,” the Admiral asked just ahead of the captain. Beck closed his mouth.

Tommy looked directly at the Admiral and stated, “Not this time Admiral.”

She nodded and Tommy continued, “We will be venting anti-plasma along the hull so that it will encompass and remove all the worm creatures. To keep the bees from interfering we will be using low power phaser beams to bathe the bee creatures with energy. This has been shown to keep them in place.”

“Have you tested your theory Commander,” Alexander Beck asked.

“Yes sir. Crewman Anderson noticed the fact that a creature was killed while she was flushing the plasma conduits.”

The view screen at the end of the table materialized and showed the log of the incident. Tommy continued, “The venting caught the creature and it hardened to the point of death.”

The view screen switched to the log off the lab test. “We then looked at what would happen if the worm creatures were exposed to anti-plasma. The creature faded to nothingness,” Tommy said.

He continued before anyone could ask any of the obvious questions. “We will be using two phaser beams to hold the bee creatures at a distance. Sub-Captain Varrec and I are confident we have found the answer.”

The Sub-Captain nodded towards the captain who asked, “What about the bee creatures?”

Varrec answered, “We are hoping the bee creatures will not like the anti-plasma and will move away to a distance where we can create a warp field and leave this nebula.”

The captain nodded and Tommy continued, “Crewman Anderson will be setting the vents and performing the flushing.”

He looked at Randy as he continued, "Sub-Captain McLorn we will need the phasers fired at each nacelle on low power. Just enough to hold the bee creatures in place."

Sub-Captain McLorn nodded his approval and acceptance of the assignment.

"Doug, would you brief the Chiefs of the other ships," Tommy asked.

The Chief Engineer of the Delta shift nodded his assent.

After a few moments of silence, the Admiral said, "Then we have a plan. How soon can the plan be executed?"

Tommy responded, "Execution is set for twenty minutes from now."

The Admiral looked at Tommy as if trying to figure out if there was something behind the short notice briefing. Were they trying to hide something from her? Had she asked all the necessary questions? Had she heard all the information necessary to make the only decision open to her? Finally satisfied, she said, "You have permission to execute the plan."

The captain said, "If there is nothing else?"

He hesitated before dismissing the meeting. Worf and Donatra followed him to the doorway to the bridge to monitor the execution of the plan as Chief Cowartson began asking the Chief Engineers of the fleet ships to report to the conference room.

• • •

Chief Borall was the last of the Chief Engineers to enter the conference room and sit down.

"About time!" Commander Berroc stated quietly.

Commander Borall did not acknowledge his comment, which, of course, made the Zaldan madder.

Chief Cowartson started the meeting with a few knuckle raps on the table. "We have found a way to destroy the worm creatures without interference from the bee creatures," Doug said.

"And how are you going to accomplish this feat of magic," said Commander Ro.

Avery, who was seated next to Doug, was startled at Ro's flippant attitude. He started to drop a foot on the uppity Bajorian, "Chief Laren—"

"That is Chief Ro, Laren is my given name."

Doug ignored the correction and calmed himself before he continued. "Chief Ro, we are going to exhaust anti-plasma from the vents of the explorer. The vapor will be vented to follow the hull and form a cloud of anti-plasma against the hulls of each ship."

He held up a hand to stop Laren's next question. "At the same time the phasers will be fired, on the lowest setting, to keep the bees in place."

## Star Trek Exploration: The Journey

Ro Laren sat back in her chair taking in the information and thinking about how she would set up the solution on *Voyager's* engineering console.

Commander Berroc remained silent but attentive, as did Commander Borall.

Once he thought they had enough time for the information to sink in, Justin dropped the other foot. "We will be commencing operations in fifteen minutes, so you need..."

Ro Laren was on her feet instantly, tapping her combadge, "Engineering, ensure all the hull vents and ports are securely shut. Clear any personnel from the hull. Standby for an anti-plasma flush over the hull, Ro out," she commanded. "*Voyager* Docking Port," she called out to the beam curtain. She tapped her combadge again, "Captain Chakotay, Chief Ro, Sir. We need to..." Her words were cut off as the curtain closed.

Commander Cowartson looked around the table and said, "I suggest you follow her example. Dismissed."

Commander Berroc requested a beam curtain to the *Pioneer* docking port.

Commander Borall called out "*Galileo* docking port," and watched an irritated Commander Berroc enter his beam curtain as it changed to the *Galileo* docking port. He began yelling his displeasure at Borall as the beam curtain closed behind him.

Justin Avery, Chief Engineer, Beta Shift, of the *USS Explorer* simply sat and shook his head laughing. "This has got to be someone's idea of a fleet, somewhere," he chuckled to Doug.

Doug touched his combadge and said, "Attention Delta shift, stand-down and get some rest. Cowartson out." He looked at Justin and said, "The nice thing about having three chief engineers is we can occasionally take a few moments off to eat and sleep."

He slowly got up as he was speaking, feeling the many years behind him. His shift done and headed to his quarters saying, "You have the duty, Justin." He called for a curtain, and he chuckled again as it closed behind him.

Justin watched his tired friend leave. As the curtain closed, he touched his combadge and said, "Beta shift, you're on. Let's get to work! Avery out."

He rose and headed for engineering.

• • •

She was in place five minutes before the stated time. Shannon had eaten a good meal quickly, since she had no idea when her next one would be. She was very tired but used her sense of duty to sustain her. She called up the simulation she had run in engineering and updated the Worm creature's positions. She then reran the simulation to ensure all the creatures would be caught within the stream of anti-plasma.

She sat back, assured in her mind that she was ready to perform her task.

She did not hear the beam curtain cycle or Sub-Captain Varrec and Commander Babcock enter the area. She only noticed them when she caught their reflection in the console.

*Remain cool*, she kept telling herself in her mind, *remain calm and stay awake!* Shannon continued to focus on the countdown timer on the console before her.

Tommy moved forward and touched the open button on the communications section of the console and said, "Engineering Conference One."

After a few seconds, all the conferees had acknowledged. Tommy started to relay the countdown over the conference line, "twenty ..., fifteen ..., ten, nine, eight, seven, six, fire phasers on low power, four, three, two, one, begin flushing."

The view screens above the console showed the entire fleet from top bottom and both sides. The view was from the front of the *Explorer*, but Varrec could clearly see all the ships. Varrec requested a view from the rear of the ship.

The phasers had begun firing on schedule.

On *Explorer*, the vents began to spray an anti-plasma cloud over the hulls. A cloud of anti-plasma slowly began to envelope the hull of the fleet ships. The cloud slowly grew to envelope the creatures. It again reminded Shannon of her early childhood in the hills above San Francisco. Her grandparents had driven them up to the top of Radio Road where the old television antennas had stood. The building's foundations can still be seen. It gave the scene the feeling of an ancient ruin. They would sit in the car and watch the fog come in off the ocean. She watched the cloud come down from the sky and roll over the city gobbling it up. She had been scared the first time as the cloud started up the mountain to get her. She had screamed as the vehicle was enveloped. Her grandparents had consoled her and told her there was nothing to be afraid of. She still remembered that experience. Her later trips up the road had been more exciting, including the trip with Trevor..."

Varrec, seemed impatient as he tapped his combadge, "Life sciences, any progress?" He asked.

She snapped back to reality and scanned the console quickly. Everything seemed to be going as planned. The clouds were expanding as expected. Half the vents were covering the hulls of the fleet ships. She estimated the coverage at just over forty percent.

*"Yes sir, total count of creatures is down one already and the rate is climbing,"* came the anticipated answer.

As the clouds continued to envelope the worm creatures, one of the bee creatures left the phaser stream to investigate the closest worm and cloud enveloping it.

## Star Trek Exploration: The Journey

The bee creature touched the anti-plasma cloud and reacted as if it had been burned, streaking back to the phaser beam.

A second later all the bee creatures left the phaser beams and started busing around the worms staying away from the anti-plasma cloud. They tried to herd the worm creatures that were not enveloped away from the cloud. They were not successful.

Varrec tapped his combadge and said, “McLorn.”

Randy acknowledged.

“Please increase the power of the beam and aim between the nacelles,” he requested. “We need the bees to move back out of the way.”

The beam shot out over the nacelles of the two intrepid ships and under the tunnel generation ring. Some of the bees moved toward the beam, while others stayed helplessly by the worms.

The worm creatures slowly fade and dissolve to nothing.

“*All the worm creatures are gone from the hull sir,*” came the call from life sciences.

Tommy orders, “Cease fire on the phasers. Cease venting.”

Crewman Anderson begins stopping the anti-plasma flow and shutting down the vents. She heard the two officers leave behind her and breathed a sigh of relief. “At least I did not get yelled at this time,” she thought, “now I can chalk up an *atta-boy!*” She raised the index finger of her left hand and drew a one in the air.

• • •

Commander Babcock, feeling quite pleased with himself, headed toward the lower bridge deck. Sub-Captain Varrec turned into life sciences area.

As he started to pass under the command deck, he saw the command staff on the deck above. He did not think anything of this since he figured they monitored the treatment operation from the bridge.

He heard his name called and his combadge beeped. Then the connection went dead. *Funny*, he thought as he rounded the first console and started up the ramp in the direction from which his name was called.

“Commander Babcock, very well done,” Captain Beck said. Worf and Donatra also congratulated him on his good work.

“Now, onto the next problem. Have you come up with a way to get the Tunnel generator back online?” Worf asked.

“*It is online sir!* That is the frustrating part. The Tunnel generator is working fine; it’s just being prevented from completely forming a field by the bee creatures. They are emitting an energy field that is preventing the tunnel from forming properly.

“Well then,” Worf said a little annoyed, “have you worked out a way to nullify the effects of the bees?”

“Yes and no sir. We think we have a way to get the bees away from the nacelles and the ship long enough to form a tunnel, but we have not tested the theory yet.”

Ael asked, “How are you planning to accomplish this?”

“We are going to use a shield bubble to insulate the generator and allow it to generate a tunnel. Just as the tunnel begins to form, we drop the bubble.”

“Is that feasible,” asks Captain Beck.

“That is the ‘no’ part sir. We have yet to test any of this. It is still very theoretical right now. We have been taking the problems one at a time. We have stopped the worms from eating the hull and now the bees are the number one problem.”

“Well, get to work on the theory and see if you can make it reality,” Beck orders.

Tommy turned and headed up the ramp to the conference room and the emergency engineering command center to brief Sub-Captain Cunningham.

Tommy entered the emergency engineering command center and found Sub-Captain Cunningham sitting at the head of the conference table running simulations on the engineering consoles. This was the primary reason for changing the conference room over to a copy of the engineering command center, so they could run simulations and brief the command staff while not disrupting the work of monitoring and repairing the ship. He walked up next to his boss and watched for a few minutes. He watched the simulation he was running, trying to figure out what he was simulating.

“It might just work, Tommy,” John states slowly. Still watching the simulation in front of him, he continued, “but it seems very chancy to me. A lot could go wrong.”

Tommy was not sure what the boss was talking about until he saw the simulation run completely. It was his idea that was being simulated.

“That is why I have not brought it up before—,” Tommy stated evenly.

“—you briefed the Captain and Command staff on the idea?” He finished for his second right hand man as he turned to look at him. The shock showed on Tommy’s face. He wondered, “How does he know I had mentioned his idea to the command staff?”

John seemed to take pity on Babcock and told him in a confidential tone of voice, “I was briefing the Staff on what to do next when they asked for your opinion. The communication line was still open.”

“Oh,” was all Tommy could get out. “That answered all the questions,” he thought.

## Star Trek Exploration: The Journey

John tapped his combadge and stated, "Captain."

"Yes, John?"

"We are going to give Tommy's idea a try. The simulation shows a fifty-fifty chance we can get out of here."

"*We will monitor from the Command deck, Beck out.*"

John rose from his chair and Tommy followed him out the door and down the ramp to the lower deck of the bridge. Tommy could feel the stares of the officers on the deck five feet above and behind him. He heard the Admiral make an announcement on the fleetcom channel.

John looked at Randy and asked, "Did you get the simulation I sent down?"

"Why yes, I did. I think you are out of you mind, but you're the engineer!" Randy said with a wink.

He turned to the Weapons officer and nodded. She executed the commands on her console.

"Sir the bees are slowly moving away from the nacelles," she reported.

Then her fingers lightly touched the console, and the bees began moving a bit faster away from the ships. They continued to move away at a faster rate as the Weapons officers' fingers danced some more. The bees moved farther back, and the screen showed the *Voyager*, *Pioneer* and *Galileo's* nacelles had also lost their bees.

Finally, the bee creatures were one hundred meters behind the fleet of ships. The Weapons officer initiated a shield bubble that formed around the tunnel generator ring and encompassed all the warp nacelles. The bee creatures began to buzz about frantically as their energy source was cut off.

McLorn ordered, "Helm, get us out of here."

The view screen changed to focus on the rear of the ship.

Tommy watched as the field began to form and spread across. He smiled. As he watched the energy field slowly travel across the ring from the outer edges of the oval to meet at the top and bottom in the center of the oval, Tommy's hopes climbed with the distance that the field traveled, his smile broadened.

He watched as the field grew larger and larger, the intensity of the field getting stronger. The gap grew smaller as the energy fields grew closer together. Finally, only seconds after initiation, as the fields were only a few meters apart and the intensity was almost too bright to view, energy began leaping from the field to the shield bubble.

Tommy likened the effect to that seen when he touched an ion globe. The energy feedback caused a brilliant light display around the tunnel generator that came close to the 1812<sup>th</sup> overture performed in lights without music. It was magnificent.

The engineering section behind him winked out of existence as the overloaded circuits shut down and the bridge rapidly changed to a small room with standard bridge consoles lining the walls.

Tommy slowly closed his mouth, which he had opened in the amazement of the moment. He had never seen the bridge with the holo-emitters power turned off and only emergency power available. The dimly lit room was a lot smaller than he could ever have imagined. In fact, it was smaller than a normal holo-deck. There was barely enough room for the Lower deck, which was the floor, the Command deck and catwalk.

As he slowly came out of this revelation, the crew, which were used to this drill, moved quickly to the wall consoles, and began assessing the damage to the ship. He heard the captains of the other ships calling in to find out what happened.

The main viewer in the front of the room, which was reminiscent of a main view on a standard bridge, but smaller; came to life and displayed a view of the tunnel generator. The energy fields had dissipated, and the generator seemed to have returned to a quiescent state. The bees were drifting back toward the nacelles. Tommy's anger began to show on his face as he stared at the screen watching them move back to sucking the life out of the fleet. He took it as a personal challenge to get rid of the pests.

"The shields are offline sir," reported the Weapons officer. She continued to assess the damages, reported "Weapons are online, Disrupter banks available and command is on the bridge."

An engineer had entered the area from the corridor under the bridge. He reported, "the tunnel generator is offline, warp drive and impulse engines are active."

Tommy could tell the warp drive was online since the bees were returning to it. Now he had to find out what had gone so wrong as to knock out half the systems on the ship.

Sub-Captain Cunningham stared at Tommy to let him know he was not pleased with the current conditions on the ship.

Tommy said, "I will get a crew on the tunnel generator sir," and hastily left the bridge headed for the engineering section.

John chuckled as he realized that Tommy had about 1500 feet of Jefferies tubes to traverse before getting to the area where the tunnel generators were.

He tapped his combadge and called Justin Avery. "Justin, please have your boys and girls restore power to essential systems first and then to the shields and other systems. I can see from where I am standing that the captain is not very pleased with a darkened bridge!"

Justin acknowledged his boss' instruction.

## Star Trek Exploration: The Journey

John was not sure the idea would work, but he had not thought that this would happen. So it was, in truth, his fault and responsibility. But he would get a lot of mileage out of this incident, at Tommy's expense, in the senior officers' mess!

He slowly followed Tommy as he walked beneath the command deck to the engineering control area to check on the progress.

• • •

As the bridge went dark the walls physically closed in around her and she cringed at her momentary claustrophobic reaction.

Ael recovered and looked at the captain and then at Worf. Neither of them had reacted to the change. Worf had moved to the console mounted to the railing next to the now visible beam curtain alcove. The captain said nothing as he examined the readouts on his command chair and listened to the reports from the lower deck.

Finally satisfied, he called down to Sub-Captain McLorn, gave him the conn and departed the bridge up the ramp and through the conference room door. Ael could see he was not pleased with the current condition of his ship, and he was helpless to do anything about it himself. She had been in the same position many times. She knew it would undermine his position with his senior officers if he started directing the repairs and began doing their jobs. It would seem to them like he lacked confidence in them if he did their jobs for them.

Ael slowly turned to the console on her side and discovered it provided her with almost the same information as her holo-console.

She examined the condition of the fleet and decided repairs were under way and there was nothing for her to do but return to her office and use the time constructively. More charts and diagrams, not to mention the emergency procedures for the bridge!

She rose and asked for the beam curtain for her office. She almost collided with the beam curtain, as it remained red. Ael asked again. When the curtain did not open, she turned to follow the captain up the ramp. She noticed Worf had turned away and was concentrating on his console. She crossed to the ramp and walked up it to her office. Along the way, she realized the captain did not even try for a beam curtain and made a note to herself to find out if the curtains worked during emergency power conditions.

Ael arrived at the door to her office as it cycled open for her. It closed with a normal swoosh behind her.

• • •

Worf turned to the console behind him as the console in front of him suddenly ceased to exist. He saw that Donatra was a bit stunned by the sudden change of scenery.

He was very glad, at this point; he had read about emergency procedures yesterday and had gone over the emergency power procedures in the manuals. It was obvious to him the Admiral had not gotten to the emergency procedures yet.

He assumed he was at least a day ahead of the Admiral in reading the technical manuals. He followed the captain's lead by not saying anything.

She finally caught on and turned to the panel behind her. She hesitantly examined the console.

He knew it was a little different from the one she was used to. She quickly figured out how to call up the information she wanted.

Worf, again one step ahead of her, knew that except for the tunnel generator and the central power grid, the fleet was fine.

When the Captain had left and he had determined there was nothing left to do, Worf decided to get back to his diagrams and technical manuals or maybe some rest.

However, he also wanted to see if Ael would need any help. So, he hesitated to leave.

When she got up and asked for a beam curtain, he snickered to himself. She was not aware the curtain system was shut down during emergency power situations. When she asked for a curtain again, he almost burst out laughing. He had to turn away. He recovered enough to turn back as she walked up the ramp.

He rose and followed her up the ramp heading to his office. "She must be *two* days behind me," he mused as his office door closed behind him.

## Chapter 9

*“Captain, this is Varrec,”* came the call as he entered his ready room. He had gotten a few moments to eat in his quarters and now wanted to catch up on the ‘paperwork’ that always went with command.

“Yes, Mister Varrec,” he said touching the communications panel receive button.

“Sir, we have noticed that the bees have not returned to the nacelles. We speculate that the anti-plasma cloud now surrounding the ship is keeping them away. I would like to try increasing the anti-matter cloud surrounding the ship and see if the bees dissolve the same way as the worms did or if they move to a distance where we can generate a warp field.”

“Permission granted. I will brief the staff. Beck out.”

He touched the open communications button and stated, “Command conference one.”

When they appeared on the split screen, “Ambassador, Admiral. Sub-Captain Varrec will be using an anti-matter cloud to try to rid us of the bee creatures.”

The Admiral asked, “When Captain?”

“Now,” Beck replied.

They both thanked him for the notice and all three returned to the bridge.

• • •

Randy sat at his console wondering what the next brilliant idea would be from engineering when the console next to him began chirping. He moved over to the console and found it set to chirp for incoming signals. He touched the receive-audio control.

Instantly the console audio device came to life, *“USS Explorer, this is Starfleet Station Charon, can you hear us. USS Explorer, this is Starfleet Station Charon, can you hear us.”*

He touched the transmission control and said, “Charon Station, this is *Explorer*. Sub-Captain McLorn, what can I do for you?”

The transmission continued for about 2 minutes until a new voice came on the line, *“Randy, this is Chief Engineer Allen Asley. I will be the captain commanding the USS Tunnel, we are preparing to launch from Charon station, and I wanted to let you know that we are on our way.”*

“The *USS Tunnel*? Did you get a new ship? I hadn’t heard Starfleet had a ship called the *USS Tunnel*. I thought you would be coming out in the test sled. Anyway, thanks for the word, Mister Allen. How long do you expect the trip to take?” Randal McLorn asked.

Following the delay, he heard Allen say, “*Had to have a catchy name for the test sled if it would be going on a rescue mission, Randy. It will take about twelve hours at warp one-point-eight to get into your area. We studied your telemetry and think that will be a sustainable and safe speed. Hope you can wait that long.*”

Randy said, “We will have too!”

The delay was longer this time. “*Can you provide a status update on your situation?*”

“Sure can, the worms are gone, and the bees are staying away for the moment. Life sciences and engineering are cooking up something to get rid of the bees. The tunnel generator was knocked out during their last try at getting out of here. They tell me it will be fixed shortly, only a few burned out couplings.”

The delay was much shorter. Randy figured they were using the delay to move the tunnelcom terminal position closer to the *Explorer*’s position.

“*Please tell your Captain that he had better enjoy the Explorer. The way he treats MY ships, I am not going to give him another one! Ashley out.*”

They both laughed as the connection closed.

• • •

As he entered, Beck noticed that the central power had been restored and his bridge had returned to full operation.

“Thank you for restoring my bridge, Randy,” Beck called to the Operations Sub-Captain on the deck below.

Randy looked up at this Captain, smiled broadly and said, “Glad to be of service, Captain.”

Then he continued, “Oh, Captain. Captain Asley of the *USS Tunnel* called to say the rescue mission is on its way and will be here in twelve hours.”

“*USS Tunnel*, I thought he was coming in the test sled? Where did he get a ship?”

Randy said, “The *USS Tunnel* is the test sled!”

The captain baulked at the idea that a test sled could be a ship. “You’re kidding,” he said.

“No, I am not! I asked him about the name, and he said the sled needed a catchy name if it was going on a rescue mission. *USS Tunnel* is kind of catchy,” Randy said without conviction.

## Star Trek Exploration: The Journey

“I will reserve my opinion until I see the ship!”

Randy smiled at his captain.

The main forward screen was oriented toward the stern of the ship and Beck could see the bee creatures were approximately a hundred and twenty meters behind the ship. The creatures seemed as if they were caught in an agitation field. They were very agitated but looked to be sluggish. He realized the sluggishness was a result of being cut off from their energy source.

He continued to watch the screen as Worf and Ael joined him on the command deck. He was beginning to get used to having them there.

“The rescue mission will be here in twelve hours,” the captain informed them. They nodded in response as they watched the main view screen.

The nacelles began to exhaust a cloud of particles. He assumed these were the anti-matter particles that Varrec said he would be releasing.

The ship was enveloped in an ever-expanding cloud of particles as the venting continued.

The bee creatures began moving away but the cloud soon caught them as they reached the boundary of the nebula cloud surrounding the ship. It seemed the bees could not enter the nebula cloud. The bees moved into pockets in the cloud to try to escape the anti-matter cloud expanding toward them. The anti-matter cloud finally overtook the bees and enveloped them one-by-one and in groups. The enveloped bees slowly faded as the worm creatures had.

Soon there was only the expanding cloud. It seemed to continue to expand into the nebula cloud.

With the broadest smile yet, Randy reported the creatures were gone.

Captain Beck touched his combadge and asked for Varrec.

“Yes, *Captain*,” said the Vulcan.

“The bees are gone, congratulations on a job well done. You can stop the venting now.”

Worf and Ael turned away from the main screen and left the bridge via the ramp.

“We would like to continue for a few more minutes Captain. We are trying to flood the area to ensure they will not return,” Justin said.

“Carry on then. Captain out,” Beck said as he also turned and called for a curtain to his office.

• • •

Captain Beck entered the conference room, which was back to being a conference room. John Cunningham, seated in the Admirals’ chair, looked fresh and ready to go. Justin Avery, seated in Worf’s chair, was on the other

side of the coin and looked like he had not eaten or slept in two days, which was probably true. The captain sat down at the head of the restored conference table.

“Okay Justin, have you fixed my ship?” Alexander asked.

“All of the problems on the inside of the ship have been repaired with the exception of the tunnel generator,” he said.

The scowl on Captain’s face relented a bit.

“We estimate the tunnel generator to be back on-line in less than twenty-two hours. Beta shift is concentrating on this repair. We are running twelve-hour shifts with half the personnel on and half off.” He continued. The scowl returned.

“The *USS Tunnel*—,” Justin started.

Alexander still had trouble with the name!

“—will be here in just under eleven hours. Our hull looks like Swiss cheese, but we are airtight. We have away teams from Delta shift, *Pioneer*, *Voyager*, *Galileo*, and the SCE on the hull of all four ships removing the damaged hull plating and checking the circuits and conduits beneath.”

“We are trying to reform the damaged plating using the large format replicator, but the job is using a lot of energy and time. However, Sub-Captain Cunningham feels that this is a good exercise to test this capability and allow us to better estimate hull repairs in the future,” Justin concluded.

John nodded as Justin finished his briefing. John said, “Captain, there are a lot of things that were left undone before we left the Charon facility—”

Alexander thought, “Yes, I know John and we have had this argument before.”

“—and I have been working to correct them. We are going to have to be self-sufficient out here. The test sled, sorry, *USS Tunnel*, will not be available to pull us out of every spot of difficulty that we get into. I hope you will support me on this Captain.”

“I can,” Beck said after a moment of thought.

“Good, then we will continue working on the hull repairs until we rendezvous with the sled. I have the teams concentrating on evening out the repairs on each ship. Most of the effort is being placed on Explorer since this is where most of the damage was done. I am confident the teams will have the damaged hull plating removed and the ships will be ready for their new skin by the time the sled arrives, barring unforeseen circumstances, Captain.”

“Anything else,” he said hopeful they were finished. He had had enough bad news for the day.

Only silence answered him.

## Star Trek Exploration: The Journey

“Good, carry on.” They all got up and left the conference room. Beck entering his ready room, walked over to the replicator and ordered the first meal he had had this shift.

• • •

His combadge beeped as he finished his dinner. “Captain Beck,” he said.

It had been almost an hour since they had rid the ship of the creatures.

“*Captain. Marjorie here. Have you looked outside lately?*” she asked.

“Sub-Captain Rawlins, there are no windows in the middle of this ship,” he said.

“*I am very aware that Captain.*” She said mildly irritated. “*I am taking about from the bridge?*”

“No Margie. I have not been on the bridge in over an hour.”

“*Then you are in for a surprise. The nebula is very slowly dissipating. We can detect approximately five stars at this time, and more are coming into view as time goes on.*”

“Can you determine our position yet?” He asked hopefully.

“*Not yet, but soon,*” she responded confidently.

“Good. Keep me advised. Captain out.”

He walked to his desk and called for a Command conference. He informed Ael and Worf of this new development and broke the connection.

Alexander cleaned up the meal dishes and left his ready room.

• • •

“Randy, show me some space,” he called out as he walked onto the command deck from the hidden beam curtain.

The exterior display of nebula spun around him so quickly he almost became nauseous. He suppressed the desire to yell out as Randy played this prank on him. In any other circumstances the exterior view would move slower so it would not cause any discomfort for the viewers. The nebula continued to move until a wispy hole in the nebula revealed a very few stars.

By this time, Margie had arrived on the lower deck from stellar cartography.

“Sir, the nebula rift is expanding slowly. We are seeing about one new star every few seconds, but remember there are billions of stars, so this rate is not very fast.”

“How long before you can get a fix on our position?” Captain Beck asked.

“At this rate, approximately fourteen hours. We need at least six identifiable star systems to draw vectors from. I can get a wag from four, since we have a rough idea of our position when we left the tunnel.”

Captain Beck thought for a moment and turned to Randy to ask, "Can we maneuver the ship?"

"I haven't tried Captain," he said as he turns to the Helm officer and orders, "Aft thrusters at one quarter. Come to a heading that will move us through that opening."

The exterior display did not move as the ship was maneuvering toward the rift in the nebula.

As the ship steadied on a course directly for the opening, McLorn orders, "Steady as you go Helm."

"Helm, try one quarter impulse."

John Cunningham ran under the command deck onto the lower deck and yelled, "*Belay that order!*" Then to Randy, "sorry Randy but life sciences is sure the use of energy is what attracted the creatures in the first place. And besides, we have away teams on the hull."

John touched his combadge and stated, "Doug. Remove the away teams from the hulls immediately. Prepare the ship for maneuvering."

The communications channel closed for a few seconds and then Doug said, "We are beaming the away teams back into the ship to save time. Standby..." John heard the transporter and then, "We are all aboard, sir."

"Thank you, Doug. Have your people stand down. Cunningham out."

"Helm, full thrusters." Randy said. "How long before we are clear of the cloud nebula."

"Estimate thirty-two minutes at full thrust sir," answered the Helm officer staring at the instrument panel before him.

"I will leave you boys to play with your toys and I hope to have a position for you within a half hour Captain." Margie said as she turned and walked under the command deck, back to stellar cartography.

Captain Beck silently agreed that there were other things to do, and said, "you have the conn Randy. Steady as you go." He turned and walked back up the ramp to the conference room and returned to his office to wait for the call back to the bridge.

"Computer, display the exterior view," he called out when he was seated at his desk. The room shimmered for a moment and then solidified. The view was as if he was floating slightly above the top of the saucer where his ready room would be on a standard ship. However, the view was also more spectacular. Without the window frames and walls in the way, the view gave him the impression he was sitting on the hull. It had taken a bit of getting used to the first time he had ordered an exterior view. Being plunged into open space was very disconcerting.

He leaned back in his chair and enjoyed the view.



The entire fleet command staff was convened for this briefing. The Ambassador, the Admiral and the four Captains sat in the front row and the Sub-Captains and Chief Engineers filled up the next three rows. This side of the conference room was reconfigured as a briefing theater with a large view screen on the forward wall. The podium was located to the left of the view screen. The conference table was over to the other side of the conference room.

The ship had cleared the nebula cloud boundary and stopped one hundred kilometers away from the cloud while stellar cartography worked out their precise location. This meeting was called to discuss their next move. They could wait near the cloud or, as the captain thought, move to the closest planetary system. They were pretty sure where the *USS Tunnel* would return to normal space and did not want to get too far away. However, the command staff was leaning toward getting as far away from the cloud as possible. The engineers had returned to the hull to continue working while the discussion ensued.

“Captain, we are four minutes from the closest system by tunnel. And about three days at warp three.” Margie said from the podium before the small group.

A surprised Commander Berroc spoke up at this point and asked, “Is that as fast as this new ship will go?”

Sub-Captain Cunningham answered him with, “Yes. The tunnel generator is the primary propulsion unit on this ship. The warp drive is only used in the tunnel and after what has happened, I think *Warp three* is fast enough!”

Smiles and a few small laughs were heard all around.

After the pause, he continued. “Besides, the Tunnel generator currently becomes unstable above warp two-point-one, so we don’t need more than warp three.”

“That is still awful slow, sir,” Commander Berroc stated. “*Pioneer* can make warp nine-point-nine.” Outwardly, he seemed very pleased with himself, as was the Starfleet tradition, un-written, but a tradition just the same. Every Chief Engineer was proud of *his* ship and when it performed beyond specifications or out classed another ship, they took pride in having the better performing ship.

“I remind you this is *not* the *Pioneer*, but the *Explorer* and we can only go warp three.” John told him arrogantly. He had a *Zaldan* in his class at the Academy and although he could not stand her, he had learned very quickly how to deal with her.

Having met his match, Berroc remained silent.

“Wait a moment, Sub-Captain Cunningham, I would not dismiss his statement outright,” Commander Borall said slowly with a measured intensesness.

“What are you all talking about?” Worf said, the irritation showing in his voice. He was here for a briefing and not an argument about whose ship was the fastest!

“I am talking about Commander Berroc’s comment that this ship is too slow on conventional warp drive,” Borall continued.

His Captain looked at his chief engineer questioningly. Then he caught the Vulcan’s look and asked, “Do you have an idea, Mister Borall?”

“Yes, Captain, I do. *Galileo* was designed as a workhorse, I believe the term is, and as such, can tow a much larger ship,” Borall began.

Captain David started to understand, “and could tow the fleet to the planet at what, warp eight?”

Borall answered, “not tow but docked. Towing would put too much strain on the tractor beam and then on the engines. However—”

“—creating a warp bubble around the fleet would work with less strain on the engines,” John Cunningham finished for him.

“Yes, that *is* correct,” Borall confirmed in a manner which reflected his belief it did not need confirmation.

Admiral Donatra asked, “How long will it take to get to the closest system?”

Borall concentrated for a moment, but it was Varrec that answered, “Approximately nine hours, sir.”

“Good, then let’s proceed to the closest system at warp eight and await the *USS Tunnel*’s arrival with the supplies.” Donatra ordered.

“One other thing,” John said, “we will have to pull the away teams back off the hull if we are going to warp.”

“And?” Ael said.

“That is going to delay the repairs to the ship. I would think moving the fleet at high warp with the superstructure exposed would not be high your list of things to do today, Captain.” John looked to Alexander for support.

“No, it would not. But the circumstances are such that I don’t want to stay too close to that cloud either. Recall your teams and prepare for warp.”

John tapped his combadge and ordered, “Engineering, pull all the away teams off the hull and prepare for high warp.”

“High Warp sir?” Asked the duty officer.

“Yes, Lieutenant, high warp.”

“Aye, sir. Engineering out.” The connection closed.

He looked back at the captain.

## Star Trek Exploration: The Journey

“Captain, we are going to have to repair the ship either here, in the system ahead or in sector grid ninety-one.”

Admiral Donatra said, “We will have to complete the repairs before entering the sector. I don’t want to have to fight with a fleet *full* of holes!”

“My ship is not *full* of holes, sir. Only a bit of the skin is missing,” John stated as he stared at the Admiral.

“I am sorry if your ship is not as nice as when it left the factory, but none of the other ships are any better. I will not place this fleet in danger unnecessarily. The repairs will be done prior to entering the sector,” the Admiral stated as fact.

Captain Beck put up a hand to stop the argument. He looked at John and said, “Thank you Admiral. John, please estimate the time it will take to repair the fleet once we reach the system. You can assign the engineers to work on the tunnel generator to cut down the repair time.”

“Aye, sir,” John said.

Alexander continued, “we still have about a day before we must think about the sector grid ninety-one. It will take that long to repair the tunnel generator and repair the hull. So, I suggest we use Galileo to move us to the system and then work on repairing the ship. Once we get the hull repaired, we will be in a better position to make decisions.”

“Agreed Captain.” Ael stated tiredly.

Worf realized they were all tired. “Captain’s, I suggest you rest your crews. It sounds like there will be a lot of work in about nine hours.”

“I agreed with the Ambassador, back to your ships and bed down the fleet. Captain Beck, coordinate with Captain David and get this fleet on the road. Sub-Captain McLorn—”

Captain Beck snap around to look at her as if he had been slapped.

“—please contact the *USS Tunnel* and update them with our current status.”

Captain Beck relaxed as the Admiral turned an order into a request.

“Yes sir,” Randy told her glancing at his Captain.

She stood and the rest of the personnel stood and left the room. She looked at Worf and said, “While I don’t think I needed your help, thank you for the backing.”

Worf nodded and silently left the room.

• • •

“Computer,” Worf called as he entered his restored office. “Library search, first missions, trouble. Correlate reply from latest to oldest.”

“*Working*,” the computer replied.

He walked over to his desk and sat in his new chair. He was still surprised to find it was as comfortable as his chair on Kronos.

“*Correlated,*” stated the computer.

“Begin,” Worf commanded.

The computer stated, “*USS Explorer experienced trouble—*”

“Computer,” Worf shouted, “skip to the next entry.”

The computer began relaying the stories of troubled first missions. The many troubled first missions, over the centuries, fascinated Worf.

While he was listening to the mission reports, he ordered a medium sized meal.

“Computer, summarize mission reports,” Worf commanded as he sat down to eat.

Finishing his meal, he cleared the dishes. He interrupted the computer to ask how many missions were on file. He was fascinated to realize he had already listened to over one hundred. The computer replied that there were seven hundred and twelve.

Worf thought for a second or so before asking “Computer, are there any missions for Admiral James T. Kirk?”

“*Working... Yes, one on the USS Enterprise,*” the computer replied.

Worf was surprised there was only one!

“Begin,” Worf commanded.

“*On the initial voyage of the refitted Enterprise, Admiral Kirk ordered the ship to warp one and an in-balance in the intermix ratio caused a wormhole to form. While within the wormhole, a meteor entered and threatened to destroy the ship. Finally, the warp drive was shut down. Mister Spock arrived and finally balanced the engines. Record ends.*”

Worf said, “thank you, computer,” to shut down the open computer connection. *Well at least we are not alone,* he thought.

• • •

When Sub-Captain Randal McLorn returned to the bridge, he walked down the ramp to the Lower deck and slid into the chair before the communication station.

He reached down to the communications panel and opened a channel to the *USS Tunnel*, he hoped! “*USS Tunnel this is the Explorer. Tunnel this is Explorer, Sub-Captain McLorn, can you hear me.*”

He listened for a few moments and repeated the call, “*USS Tunnel this is the Explorer. Tunnel this is Explorer, Sub-Captain McLorn, can you hear me.*”

## Star Trek Exploration: The Journey

When he heard nothing again, he set the call to repeat every minute. He then set the console to chirp if there was a reply. Then he thought it would be better if the console notified him directly. He reset the notification.

Randy tapped his combadge and said “Admiral Donatra.”

*“Yes, Mister McLorn?”*

“There is no answer from the *USS Tunnel*. I have set the communications system to repeat a hail every minute and to notify me if there is a reply.”

*“Thank you, Sub-Captain, please let me know when they arrive. Donatra out.”*

Randy got up and headed to his quarters. He gave command to the duty officer before he left the bridge.

He noticed his bedroom module was not attached when he arrived. As he walked to the replicator to order a meal, the module arrived. He sat and ate quickly, almost too quickly as he felt the heartburn begin. He disrobed and took a shower while the heartburn subsided.

He asked the computer to wake him in six hours and was asleep as his head touched the pillow. The room decorations faded as the module retracted and he joined over half the ship’s personnel in blissful slumber in the sleeping storage area.

## Chapter 10

“Engineering are you ready to get this fleet on the road,” Captain David said from the center seat of Galileo’s bridge. He had his doubts about using his engines to move the entire fleet, but his Chief Engineer had assured him there would not be any problems.

Ryan thought, *famous last words*.

“Yes, sir. We are prepared at your command.” Came the reply from the arm of his chair.

The captain said, “Standby,” and turned to the Communications officer and said, “put the Admiral on the screen,” pointing at the main view screen.

A moment later the Admiral appeared on the screen and asked, “Captain, are we ready to go?”

Ryan replied, “Yes Admiral, we are ready to move the fleet. Just awaiting your order.” How ironic that sounds. The smallest ship is pushing a fleet.

“Proceed, Captain,” Donatra said from the command deck of the *Explorer*.

He leaned forward slightly and told the Helm officer, “Take us slowly to warp one Helm.”

“Aye, sir. The warp engines are engaged. Warp point-one... point-two... point-three... point-four... point-five... point-six... point-seven... point-eight... point-nine... warp one, sir.” Reported the helm officer.

Ryan leaned toward the communications panel on the arm of his chair and asked, “How are we doing Mister Borall.”

“*The engines are operating at peak efficiency, Captain,*” Commander Borall stated flatly.

“Helm, take us up to warp eight.” David ordered.

As the ship slowly passed each warp level, he became even more pleased with the performance of this old ship of his. Many of the Saber class were gone now. With the wars and attrition, over their twenty-some years in service, you would expect a few losses, but not over half the fleet. There are rumors around Starfleet that the new super-saber class, a Nebula class variant, designed specifically for the SCE, was to be commissioned very soon. He hoped the rumors were true. He had hoped to be one of the first Captains to get one of the new ships, but now with this mission he knew he would be the last one.

The helmsman’s call of warp eight brought Ryan out of this daydream.

## Star Trek Exploration: The Journey

“Mister Borall, how are my engines now?”

“*The engines are still operating at peak efficiency, Captain,*” Commander Borall stated flatly.

“Very well, reduce your staff to minimum manning and get some rest, we have a busy day tomorrow. David out.”

He turned back to the Helm, “Helm, what is our estimated arrive time at the system?”

“Approximately eight and a half hours sir.”

Ryan looked up at the screen and said, “we are on our way Admiral.”

The Admiral gave him a slight bow of her head as she said, “Good job Captain, Donatra out.” The connection closed and the main view screen changed to show the stars.

He turned to his second in command at the engineering console and said, “You have the conn Mister Fossey. Bed down the crew except for essential personnel and split shift the rest of them. I want a very fresh crew to put our *girl* back together!” He rose from his chair and walked to the turbo-lift. “Oh, include yourself and the third officer in that rotation. I want the two of you on the ball also.”

He entered the turbo-lift. A short ride and he was at his quarters. A shower, dinner and bed were on the menu.

• • •

“A Captain can work from sun to sun, but an engineers’ work is never done!” John said by way of starting the engineering meeting eight hours later.

Seated around the main engineering console in the engineering command area were his chief engineers of each shift as well as the chief engineers of the fleet vessels.

“We need to work out a schedule for repairs to most efficiently use all our resources.” John continued.

“My *resources* will be repairing my ship!” exclaimed the Chief Engineer of the Pioneer. “I must follow the orders of my Captain,” he continued challengingly.

“Agreed, but how you follow them is up to you.” John shot back at the Zaldan engineer.

This caused Berroc to stop and think for a moment before sitting back in his chair providing silent agreement with the Sub-Captains’ statement.

John continued, “I propose that we divide the remaining engineering team from *Explorer* between the three fleet ships and get them repaired first. Then concentrate all our efforts on *Explorer*. Questions, suggestions, points missed?”

“You said the remaining team? Where are the other two?” Commander Ro asked.

“My team is repairing the tunnel generator and about to go off duty,” Commander Babcock said.

“And Justin’s team is going to pick up the ball and work through the night,” John completed.

“Why not just concentrate on one ship at a time?” Chief Borall asked. “We like to get one thing done before moving onto the next.”

“Because, with the two hundred plus engineers in the fleet, they will be tripping all over each other trying to do the same job!”

Chief Borall sat back and then remained silent.

“Each chief will be responsible for their vessel. Stripping the hull plating and installing the new plating as well as repairing your damaged systems. You will need to put your teams together and prioritize the repair projects, so no one is waiting on equipment or expertise from another team. Then you need to identify where you want to augment your teams with our personnel. I want you to keep me advised of the minutest progress. I will be moving personnel onto and off your teams as the projects move forward. The personnel movements will be few at first, but as the teams complete their projects, it is imperative that they be fed, rested, cleaned up and gotten back on the repairs as soon as possible.”

“How do we manage our teams if the compliment keeps changing?” Chief Engineer Ro asked.

“The *Explorer* engineers will supplement your teams. As the team completes their task, we will evaluate moving the augmenters. They will be moved only if necessary. Or you can release the team for reassignment as a whole,” John stated.

“That sounds acceptable,” Ro acknowledged.

The Sub-Captain continued, “We are not sure what resources are on the way other than the list of supplies we requested, and we don’t have confirmation on those supplies. So, we are going to need maximum effort here.”

“Have we looked to other sections for help?” Laren asked.

“No, we have not. But that is a good idea. I will bring it up to the captain.” John answered.

“As I will with mine.” Commander Ro said dryly.

“I suggest you all take this proposal up with your captain,” John said looking around the console at the other Chiefs, “Maximum effort is needed to get us to the sector. We have about 2 hours to get our folks ready. Let’s get to it people,” John concluded.



Worf awoke well rested for once. He ate quickly, showered, and dressed.

*Now what does an ambassador do when he has nothing to do?* he asked himself.

He went to his office and read the mission logs for the period he was resting. He found nothing new, only updates to the transit and repair times.

When that was done, he called up the modification diagrams for the *Voyager* and *Pioneer* to see if the same modifications were performed on each ship. He also wanted to see what was modified and how the capabilities of each system had been enhanced.

He poured over the phaser systems first, what else would a qualified Weapons officer tackle first! He noted the twenty percent increase in power and rate of fire. He was especially surprised to find the phaser upgrades gave the ship more punch than a Galaxy Class Starship and almost as much as the Sovereign Class Starship. He kept nodding at the screen as he read and compared the specifications with the specifications he had memorized while assigned to *Enterprise-D* and *Enterprise-E*.

He leaned back in his chair to think about how this power could be best employed. These thoughts brought him back to his last mission aboard *Enterprise-E*. It was nothing exciting, but it got him away from Kronos and recharged him enough for him to return to his Ambassadorial duties. The rescue mission to Min'dor Krandos, just inside the Klingon Empire where the Federation, Klingon and Romulan Empires merge was routine except for the fact they were watched by three Romulan warbirds and a Klingon scout.

He returned to reality as the memory came to an end. Refreshed, he leaned back to the console and called up the shield systems.

He then examined the shields and noted the enhancements there. The shield's strength and power had all but doubled. The frequency range of the shields had increased into a range outside most systems. He decided it would be difficult to break through these shields. If the *USS Voyager* had been equipped with these shields just one week ago—has it been less than a week—there would be one more Klingon officer on the *Agarth*. The *Agarth* would not have damaged the *Voyager* at all. He quickly called up the specifications on the Borg tractor beam and found the enhancements would prevent a lock on by the Borg tractor beam system. He also noticed that the new frequencies were outside the range of the tracker beam. He compared the Borg weapons and found the two ships could take quite a beating from a Borg vessel. He thought, *it would be a fair fight for once!*

He quickly checked the shield systems for all the ships in the fleet and found they were Borg proof! All the ships could go toe-to-toe with the Borg and come out with their skins intact. He continued to match the specifications of a Borg Cube against the Fleet now under his command. He remembered the horror he

felt when the Galaxy class *Enterprise-D* was carved up by the first Borg Cube the Federation encountered. The loss of life, the damage, the eventual capture of Captain Picard. He was convinced by the specifications that it would not happen again, provided of course, the Borg did not update their systems!

He continued looking over the Intrepid class starship specifications. One small enhancement did catch his eye, cloaking devices were now installed on the two ships. He checked and found cloaking devices on all the ships. This recalled many battle strategies he had used on the *USS Defiant* and just as many questions.

He called out “Computer,” and then asked, “Can the cloaking devices on these ships be used at warp?”

“Working... Yes.”

“Can the cloaking device on this ship be used within a tunnel?”

“Working... No.”

“Elaborate.”

*“The cloaking device field must encompass the entire ship. The tunnel and the tunnel generator are too close for the field to form around them. Also, forming a cloaking field will interfere with the tunnel generator and cause the tunnel to collapse.”*

“Could the cloaking device field be used to shut down the tunnel without damaging the tunnel generator?”

*“Only if the tunnel generator were set to standby at the same moment.”*

“Could it be computer controlled?”

“Yes.”

“Thank you, computer,” Worf said.

Finishing the Intrepid class, he called up the specifications for the Saber class starship. A quick review of the specifications showed a similar capability had been added to Galileo.

He continued working on the schematics and diagrams, correlating the data, capabilities, and other specifications into his memory. He only paused for a medium sized lunch of gagh and rokeg blood pie with a large mug of blood wine. He cleaned up and returned to his studies. They will be arriving in the sector soon and he must be ready for anything.

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She finished the Intrepid class specifications and leaned back in her chair to close and rest her tired eyes. Ael heard the door to her quarters open and close. She did not open her eyes since she recognized the footsteps. The smells that assailed her reminded her she was very hungry. She had been putting off

## Star Trek Exploration: The Journey

eating, telling herself she needed to finish studying the specifications and schematics for the fleet ships before she took time to eat.

“Computer, set the alcove for dining,” Aulee stated. The alcove shimmered and the sofa, chairs and coffee table were replaced with a table and two chairs.

Without opening her eyes, she said, “Your timing is perfect, Aulee.”

“I am aware of that,” Aulee said smugly. She was not about to elaborate and tell the Admiral she was monitoring her console to figure out when she would be ready to eat. She was beginning to understand how the Admiral worked and thru this understanding, perform her duties to the best of her ability. She was still learning the quarks her boss had, but she now knew most of them. She also knew how far she could push the working relationship. She was very proud of herself when she got it right.

“Aulee, why do I put up with you?” She asked. Ael was beginning to wonder. As her aide became more familiar with her, she was becoming convinced the question was no longer rhetorical!

She smiled and responded with, “Because we get along so well?”

Ael opened her eyes with a sigh and pushed her chair back as Aulee set their meal on the table. She rose and walked to the small dining table.

They both sat down and began eating. Aulee seemed troubled by something and Ael waited until she began talking. She was also getting to know her aide reasonably well. However, she felt starting the conversation was to hurry the process along. She held a spoon full of soup as she looked at Aulee questioningly.

Aulee managed to hold off for almost four minutes before giving in and stating, “I am not sure I should bring up the rumor I heard about Sub-Commander Kirill.”

Ael sipped the cold soup from the spoon causing a pause before asking, “What about Kirill?”

Aulee swallowed her soup quickly and said, “Rumor has it he was seen leaving the quarters of a human ensign aboard Voyager after visiting Sub-Lieutenant Mardorak.”

They both took another sip of the soup before Ael looked up. “It sounds like he is taking my desire to integrate the Romulans into the crew quite literally,” Ael said with a wink and a smile. She continued, “Why were you afraid to bring this fraternization to my attention?”

Now it was Aulee’s turn to pause for more soup. She swallowed slowly and said, “He is not the only one and I was under the impression you wanted us to remain professional in our relations with the Federation crewmembers. I though you would be mad.” Aulee seemed relieved as she quickly took another bite.

“Not to worry. I am aware of the needs of my officers and if they find solace with Federation members, then so be it. If it doesn’t affect the mission, I will not get involved.” She knew what the Sub-Commander felt, and, in her case, she could do nothing about it. She was alone with the command she had so much desired.

Ael noticed the flavor of the soup was better than she thought was normal. She said, “what have you done to the soup? It tastes better than normal.”

Aulee told her, “The chef aboard the Predator told me you liked his feast so much he gave me the replicator instructions for all his dishes. Then before leaving Earth, your secretary at the conclave also gave me your favorite replicator instructions for your favorite Earth dishes. I chose a dish you liked and found how the chef had enhanced it. It is now before you. I see you like it.”

She nodded and finished her soup in silence. Her thoughts returned to her last visit to the Spa at Sonsoulla. She closed her eyes and focused on the memories, retreating into the past. She revisited the soothing scene, watching the small ripples reaching the beach at her feet.

The clinking of china brought her back to the moment and she opened her eyes.

Aulee was clearing the dishes. She headed to her office with the two bowls without saying a word. As the door closed behind her the room changed to the beach. She leaned back into her chair that was now a chase lounge. She picked up the book and sunglasses from the table next to her lounge. She leaned back and opened the book. She was not surprised to see it was a summary of the specifications of the Saber class starship. She sighed as she began to read. As the reading became more in-depth, she called for a screen to display the ship schematic over the lounge above her. The beauty around her made the studying go much faster or at least it seemed that way.

She did not hear Aulee enter the room an hour later to cover her with a blanket. Aulee smiled as she left the office, please with herself for the idea of changing the office to the spa when the Admiral seemed to need to relax as she worked. She returned to her office and cleared up the reports on her desk.

She called for a beam curtain to the crew lounge, Fantis and Theonis was scheduled in thirty minutes. She really liked the play and wanted to get a seat near the front. Then there was the popcorn...

• • •

He jumped as the panel said, “*Ambassador Worf.*” He realized he had fallen asleep. He looked at the chronometer on the communications panel to his left. He found he had been asleep for about two hours. It was not like him napping, except, of course, in a combat zone where catnaps were the only way a warrior could avoid a permanent sleep.

## Star Trek Exploration: The Journey

“Yes?” He said, not wanting to say more. He was embarrassed by being startled and he did not want it to show in his voice.

*“Ambassador, Lieutenant Chong, Communication officer, I have been reviewing the communications that were received while we were in space before going to warp and I thought you might be interested in the signals. I have read of your exploits, and I know you are a history buff,”* she explained.

“Yes, Lieutenant, continue.”

*“The signals were very faint and have traveled for over four centuries, but I managed to clear them up and correlate them with the history library. They are identical to the NASA archived copies, Ambassador,”* she continued to explain.

“To the point Lieutenant, or don’t you have one.” Now he was being to be irritated by the Lieutenant taking a long time explaining before getting to the point!

*“Sorry, Ambassador, I did not know if I should have bothered you. Sorry for bothering you,”* she began to terminate the connection.

“Lieutenant,” Worf began, “please play the transmission.”

“Yes sir...”

EAGLE: 540 feet, down at 30 [feet per second]...down at 15...400 feet down at 9...forward...350 feet, down at 4...300 feet, down 3 1/2...47 forward...1 1/2 down...13 forward...11 forward? coming down nicely...200 feet, 4 1/2 down...5 1/2 down...5 percent...75 feet...6 forward...lights on...down 2 1/2...40 feet? down 2 1/2, kicking up some dust...30 feet, 2 1/2 down...faint shadow...4 forward...4 forward...drifting to right a little...O.K....

HOUSTON: 30 seconds [fuel remaining].

EAGLE: Contact light! O.K., engine stop...descent engine command overrides off...

HOUSTON: We copy you down, Eagle.

EAGLE: Houston, Tranquility Base here. The Eagle has landed!

HOUSTON: Roger, Tranquility. We copy you on the ground. You've got a bunch of guys about to turn blue. We're breathing again. Thanks a lot.

TRANQUILITY: Thank you...That may have seemed like a very long final phase. The auto targeting was taking us right into a football-field-sized crater, with a large number of big boulders and rocks for about one or two crater-diameters around it, and it required flying manually over the rock field to find a reasonably good area.

HOUSTON: Roger, we copy. It was beautiful from here, Tranquility. Over.

TRANQUILITY: We'll get to the details of what's around here, but it looks like a collection of just about every variety of shape, angularity, granularity, about every variety of rock you could find.

HOUSTON: Roger, Tranquility. Be advised there's lots of smiling faces in this room, and all over the world.

TRANQUILITY: There are two of them up here.

COLUMBIA: And don't forget one in the command module.

The transmissions continued as Worf leaned back in his chair smiling also. He thought of a simpler time, a time where true heroes were born. He drifted off waiting for the most famous line in the history of space travel...