

# Shot In The Dark

by Tail Kinker

Relations between the Federation and the Klingon Empire have been going downhill, but Federation diplomats still believe that there is a chance for peace. Unfortunately, the Klingons have other plans...

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## Prologue

*Captain's Log, Stardate 3144.9:*

*Our mission to resupply Deep Space Station K-3 has taken on additional responsibilities. The disappearance of the Hermes, NCC-585, in the area of the station has caused some concern in the Commodore's office, unsurprisingly, and we have been tasked to sweep the region for the ship upon receipt of our cargo canisters at K-3.*

*I have rather grave concerns about undertaking this task. The Kepler may be the most modern transport vessel in the Starfleet, but we are still, for all intents and purposes, a glorified tugboat.*

Lieutenant Commander Rider David released the record button on the ship's log recorder, and sighed. He resisted the urge to query his

communications officer, or his command intelligence officer, about the search for the *Hermes*. If they found anything, they'd tell him. Similarly, he avoided addressing his astrogator. The last thing the *Kepler* needed was for her Captain to be asking, 'Are we there yet?'

His exec set a cup of coffee down on the arm of the command chair. "Here, Dave. Figured you could use this."

"Thanks, Tom." The Captain reached for the coffee, but frowned. Vibrations were forming ripples in the surface of the black liquid, and the ship's inertial compensation was normally smooth enough that the bridge was vibration proof. "Helm, you note that?"

"Aye, Captain. I've got some ionized gas ahead, just some normal sub-space jetsam. I'm re-

tuning to compensate."

The vibrations calmed down, and the Captain sighed. "Bloody bad weather again. This sector is full of ion storms, gas clouds, you name it."

"That's why they sent the *Hermes* out here in the first place." Tom Weber was the ship's primary helmsman, as well as her exec, but for this simple 'milk run', as he called it, he had assigned a junior officer to the helm. "Chart out the bad weather, try to find safe corridors, make shipping safer for regular freighters."

"Then we can go back to serving as a tender for cruisers and destroyers." David picked up the cup and sipped the black brew. "When are we gonna get some decent coffee on this boat?"

"We've got five tonnes in the cans." Weber referred to the cargo containers, two of which were being towed beneath and behind the *Kepler*. "Of course, it's for the crews at K-3."

"Thanks so much for trying to cheer me up, Tom." David smiled grimly.

"Sixty seconds to nav point Charlie, Captain." The astrogator checked his computer, and punched in new data. "Cross-decking out-warp information to Helms."

"Noted. Mister Guin?"

The junior helmsman checked his console, and said, "Out-warp program ready for execution."

"Make it so."

"Aye sir. Sublight speed in five...mark!"

The *Kepler* shuddered slightly, and telltales lit up across the Captain's repeaters. Moments later, the muted thrum of the ship's impulse engines could be heard..

"Our distance from K-3 is sixteen light-minutes, and our acceleration is fifty percent impulse power. ETA is three hours."

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"Great." The Captain stood, and stretched. "Enough time to get some lunch, and then--"

"Contact, Captain." The communications officer frowned, one hand raised to his earpiece. "Faint contact, blind guard frequency...I'm working a cross-bearing now." His eyes narrowed, as he adjusted his commo board. "Narrowing...got it. Three twenty three mark fifteen."

"Distance?"

"Unknown. Can we work it a bit more?"

"Mister Guin, come to fifty-three mark three-forty-five, increase to full impulse."

"Aye, Captain."

"Mister Salazar?"

"Getting it..Okay. Distance is five hundred thousand kilometers. And I've got a make." He looked up. "Disaster beacon. It's the log buoy from the *Hermes*."

Weber sighed. "Guess that confirms it; she's lost."

"We assumed that when hails failed to raise her, Tom." David scowled. "Bring us within a kilometer, Mister Guin, and we'll tractor it on board."

"Aye, sir."

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"Give me a self-emissions test."

"At once, My Lord."

Koth leaned back in his chair, and stared at the approaching Federation vessel. So far, there was no indication that they had spotted his ship. The *Taj* was not the newest vessel in the Imperial Fleet, but her small size and extensive stealth systems had made her nearly invisible to the Federation corvette they had ambushed. So much the better that the ship had jettisoned a buoy.

"My Lord, our probes report emissions below the four thousand *kellicam* detection radius."

"Range to the Federation target?"

"Sixty thousand *kellicam*."

Koth snarled joyfully at the screen. "Any change on the target's course?"

"Not yet. He is sailing in dumb as a *targ*. Closest point of approach will be six thousand *kellicam*."

"Perfect." He glanced over at the weapons station. "Arm four nuclear missiles."

"My Lord, surely torpedoes--"

"Torpedoes will betray our presence with neutron radiation. Disruptors will give us away with their magnetic signature when charged. The missiles are silent until launch." Koth scowled at the warrior. "Do not make me repeat my command!"

"Yes, My Lord." Kreve armed the weapons. "Detonators are loaded, and the weapons are hot."

"Open the outer bay doors."

"Doors are open, and all weapons are tracking."

Koth glanced over at the sensor operator's station. "Grel. Status of the target's defensive systems?"

"Navigational deflectors only. Wait..." Grel scowled, and adjusted his sensors. "The target has charged defensive screens around the bridge."

"Kreve, re-target the weapons on their warp drive."

"Done."

Koth raised a fist. "Wait...wait..."

"Six thousand *kellicam*...now!"

"Fire!"

## Chapter One

"Captain! Missile launch, on bearing one fifteen mark three fifty!"

The shock nearly immobilized him, but instinct and training took over. "Hard to starboard. Shields up. Charge all weapon systems."

"Shields are still charging, Captain." The engineer's mate at the station was sweating. "I can give you counterfire now, but the main phasers are still cold."

Weber moved to the science station. "Mister Salazar, jamming, please. Captain, I have the missiles on sensors, and am cross-decking targeting to the weapons systems."

David nodded. "Mister Obrecki, you are clear to return fire." He scowled at the tactical plot; he'd been hoping to interpose the main navigational

deflector between the missiles and his ship. Had the *Kepler* been clean, he might have managed it. But his ship was towing sixty-four thousand tonnes of dead weight.

Ensign Salazar flooded space with the white noise of jamming, and the missiles promptly lost lock. However, their designers had anticipated this, and their backup guidance system switched on. The LIDAR systems could not be jammed, and locked onto the largest targets in their boresights. The starboard-side point defense LASER turrets opened up, hammering space around the missiles with beams of coherent ultraviolet radiation. First one, then a second, missile was struck by a beam of energy, intense enough to be effectively solid, and was promptly smashed to fragments. But the other two bored in, past the point defense systems, and struck their targets.

The first had locked onto the second cargo container being towed by the tug. The warhead was programmed to detonate within seven hundred meters of a target, but such was the missile's speed that it plowed into the container while its warhead was still undergoing detonation. The explosion, contained within the canister, blew it apart like a cherry bomb in a pop can. Grain, mail, water, and coffee beans were spilled in a massive cloud behind the transport, and automatic safeties jettisoned the canister before the stresses caused by its now-uneven load could cause damage to the rest of the ship.

The second missile passed just above the starboard warp nacelle, and detonated. The hull was hardened against electromagnetic pulse, but the designers had not anticipated a nuclear warhead; modern phasers and torpedoes had rendered such weapons obsolete. But obsolete or not, the damage it caused was substantial.

The fissionables carried in the impulse engines leaped towards critical, and the reactors automatically scrambled, shutting down all four drivers. The gravitic wake created by the drive failed, leaving the *Kepler* dead in space. The starboard warp engine lost containment, its matter/antimatter reactor assembly went into emergency shutdown, and the resulting backblast of parasitic energy shut down the main energizer and the antimatter feed as well. Luckily, the antimatter containment bottle was heavily shielded and independently powered; the antimatter remaining in the M/ARA was vented to space, creating a sparkling wake of plasma behind the crippled ship.

On the bridge, crewmembers were tossed about, the sudden blast disorienting the computer's control over the inertial compensation and artificial gravity. An EPS conduit beneath the environmental sub-systems monitor overheated and blew out, a plume of blue fire jetting out of the vent beneath the station. The main viewscreen dissolved into a snarl

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of static, the lights flickered erratically, and for a few long moment, it seemed that the only working system on the bridge was the howling klaxon of the alert status indicator.

"Damage report!"

"Main energizer offline, warp drive offline, impulse engines offline. No power to shields." Engineer's Mate Usher scowled at his readouts. "Sensors are offline, but short range scan should be available shortly."

"What is working? Would that be a shorter list?"

"Might be, Captain. I've got reaction thrusters, rear torpedo tubes - but no way to arm the torpedoes - and enough phaser power for six seconds sustained fire at most."

"Who the hell hit us?" David collapsed back into his seat. "Find the son of a bitch!"

"Short range scan still inoperable, Captain." Obrecki hammered at his instruments. "Trying passives...Got him. Bearing fifteen mark two. He's in our forward phaser arc. Range is opening, but I can't lock it down."

"Return fire!"

With short range scan unavailable, Obrecki was forced to take his best shot on manual control. He shifted the manual aiming toggle, lining up on the retreating ship, and dialled the phasers to burst mode. He triggered ten shots, rapidly opening the range, in the hopes of bracketing the ship.

His gamble paid off; the third and fourth bursts detonated close enough to cause the target's shields to flare brilliantly.

"He got his shields up, sir, but I think we handed him some burnout. He's running."

"Mister Weber, did you get a make on him?"

"Not yet, sir." Weber scowled at his console. "Got some good visuals, but the library computer is still chewing on them."

"What were they? Romulans?" The Captain stood and walked over to the science station. "They came out of nowhere, and used nukes. Wasn't that what the *Enterprise* reported, when she encountered Romulans?"

"No, sir." Weber pulled up a grainy visual, and did his best to enhance it. "The Romulans used plasma weapons, even while cloaked, though they apparently had to de-cloak to fire. If we'd been hit by a plasma weapon, we wouldn't still be here."

"Looks like a Klingon design." David shook his head. "But I'm not familiar with this layout."

"I'd be surprised if you were." Weber pulled up a three-view of the Klingon warship. "This is a Klingon D-3, Federation reporting name Raptor. They're very old, like over a hundred years."

"Over a hundred--"

"The Klingons never throw anything away, not if its guns still work." Weber tapped the screen. "This is the first time I've ever seen one, though. Maximum warp factor of four, impulse acceleration about twenty percent higher than our own, and about twice as high a top speed - nearly point eight cee. Ten photon torpedoes, two particle cannons, four point-defense lasers, and sixteen nuclear missiles - but this data is almost as old as that ship, so you can bet anything from credits to dilithium that they've upgraded it. Shields in the three-megajoule range, navigational deflectors, but no defensive screens. Crew of sixteen."

"That's it?"

"The Klingons rely heavily on automation on their smaller warships."

"Okay. Keep me posted if anything else turns up." He turned to the Engineering station. "Mister Usher. Give me some good news."

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"There's not a lot of that, sir." Usher pulled at his mustache. "Damage control parties have reported in from all sections except starboard warp reaction control. I think we can assume that the starboard M/ARA is down for the count. Portside M/ARA is still operational, but with the main energizer out, it can't accomplish much. Main energizer repair time is three hours; they have to decontaminate the chamber first, but the damage isn't too bad. Auxiliary power and impulse reaction will be restored in twenty more minutes. Torpedoes are forget it; antimatter feed system is completely compromised. Once auxiliary power is restored, it will take us sixty minutes to recharge the shields and phaser banks."

"So eighty minutes until we're at fighting trim."

"Aye, sir."

"What about the launch tubes themselves?"

"Linear accelerators are still clean, but they need power to operate."

"Okay. Keep me informed."

"Aye aye, sir."

Finally, he turned to the astrogator "Mister Obrecki. Show me the system."

"Long range sensors are still offline, sir. Best I can give you is fossil data."

"I'll cope."

"Aye, sir." The astrogator called up the system on the plot. The Captain stared at the display, then tapped one of the gas giants.

"What's the magnetic signature of this planet?"

"Pretty high, sir. About fifteen times Earth normal."

"Lay in a course for a hyperbolic orbit opposite the planet. Execute when mister Usher

gives you clearance to use impulse."

"Hide and seek, sir?"

"We need eighty minutes to get everything back online. If we can keep hidden that long, we might have a chance."

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Koth whirled on Grel. "The target's shields were down! What happened?"

Grel was busy staring at his instruments, and missed the expression on his commander's face. "This type appears to have four additional point defense weapons, mounted on the primary hull. Two each port and starboard. It is not a standard *Ptolemy*-class transport."

"Why did not you detect this?"

Grel looked up, finally noticing his commander's ire. "My Lord, the LASER weapons used for point defense by the Federation do not emit

radiation when charged. There was no way to detect them until they fired without an active scan, and an active scan would have revealed our position."

"Your incompetence has cost us a clean kill." Koth waved a hand in the general direction of his weapons officer. "If we had known of these point-defense weapons, our missiles could have been programmed to avoid them. Instead, the target survives, and we are forced to slink away!"

"It is not a matter of incompetence," snarled Grel. "The data on this ship is not complete; it is a new type, previously uncatalogued, that bears a resemblance to the *Ptolemy*-class. But there are obviously internal differences, and the point-defense arrays are different. If there is any failure, it is on the part of our intelligence officers for failing to acquire proper information on that ship!"

Koth opened his mouth to retort, but then realized that Grel's hand had fallen to his *dk' Taj*. He hesitated, then decided that he did not want to

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kill his sensory officer just yet. Instead, he turned on his engineering officer. "Damage report?"

"Shield number three failed, some burnout creepage on portside thrusters. Nothing major, and we can have thrusters restored in forty *tup*."

"At least someone here can do his job." Koth turned back to Grel. "Where is the target?"

"Moving away at fifteen gravities. Thrusters only." Grel tapped a control. "Their course will bring them near the outer gas giant of the system. We may lose track of them in its magnetic field."

"So noted." Koth scowled, then turned back to the engineer. "Vash! Can your damaged thrusters still give us twenty-five gravities?"

"Yes, My Lord."

"Helmsman, lay in an intercept course. Take us away from them initially, then bring us in to intercept them just inside the magnetic field of the gas giant."

"I will need observing time to refine our course before I can plot a countercourse."

"Take what you need." Koth scowled at the retreating ship. "But I want a silent approach. And this time, we will use the torpedoes." He looked over at the engineer again. "Make sure the loading crews know that this will be a rapid-fire situation."

"Yes, My Lord."

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"Number one impulse drive is still offline, and I had to leave number four offline to compensate for the thrust imbalance." Chief Darr looked tired. "But you have one-half impulse power and seventy-five percent auxiliary power available, and you'll have full in ten more minutes."

"Noted, Chief." The Captain glanced over at the astrogator. "Mister Obrecki, recompute course for one-half impulse power, and execute."

"Aye, sir."

The *Kepler* was still crippled, but it leaped ahead gamely. At a total of one hundred fifty-eight thousand tonnes deadweight, even half impulse power gave it decent acceleration. The impulse wave began to break against its own leading edge shortly, however, and the ship settled down at 0.3 C, just under a hundred thousand kilometers per second.

"Sir, at our current velocity, we will enter the planet's radiopause in thirty minutes."

"Noted." David glanced over at his exec. "Tom? Any other ideas?"

"You're the captain, Captain."

"Come off it, Tom." The Captain snorted. "We both know you're the senior officer on this boat."

"Oh, yeah, by a whole three weeks. But you're the Skipper."

David snorted again. The two went back a long way; they'd been in the same Academy class, had served on the same ships on their middy cruise. It had been Weber that had assigned Rider David his nickname, after an Academy instructor had assumed that David's name had been written down backwards.

David hailed from Alpha Canaris II, where patronymics were used even among the English-speaking population. Canaris was a poor planet, and many of her younger sons went into the Service. David's own father, David Samuel, had served with distinction aboard the *Bonaventure*, retiring before that ship's disappearance. He had encouraged his sons to join Starfleet, and David had found himself shoehorned into the Academy, on a fast track to starship command.

Weber was, on paper, the commanding officer of U.S.S. *Crockett*, but an engineering mishap had left the ship in spacedock for a Class One refit, and

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a proper Captain was about as useful to a yard queen as shoes to a snake. He'd been assigned to the *Kepler* to assist with her shakedown, and had stayed on while his own ship was under the torch.

His style as an XO was definitely unusual, however. David sighed, and said, "So I assume that you have nothing further to add to my plan?"

"It's as good as I can see, Captain." Weber shook his head. "We've been handed a raw deal, but you're making the best of it, as far as I can tell."

"I just don't understand why they'd attack us." David frowned. "I mean, the Klingons are aggressive, but they're not insane. And we're not at war, no matter how strained the diplomatic situation is."

"Not entirely true, Captain."

"I know, Number One." The Captain rotated his chair to face the communications officer. "Mister Salazar. Please note in the official logs. As of stardate 3145.1, a de facto state of war exists

between the Klingon Empire and the United Federation of Planets. Hostilities were initiated by the Empire, without warning or declaration of war, when an unidentified Raptor-class Klingon vessel fired into our ship, U.S.S. *Kepler*, NCC-3816."

"Logged, sir."

"Transmit to sector command."

"Transmitted."

"Next, I want a communications link to Deep Space Station K-3."

Salazar adjusted his communications rig. "I've got a lot of subspace jamming, sir. I can't burn through it with only one warp generator operating."

"Noted." The Captain tugged at an ear. "Jamming pods, maybe?"

"Or there's another ship out there somewhere."

"Possible." He thumbed his communications board. "Chief Darr, how long until long range scan

is available?"

"Long range? Couple of days, assuming we don't finish up with the impulse drives, warp drive, main energizer..."

"Okay, I get the picture. Sorry to bother you, Chief." He released the communications toggle, and turned to Obrecki. "Ready a Class Two probe, load into tube two."

"Aye, sir."

Weber leaned in a little closer to his captain. "What about a messenger drone? Use one of the bomb-pumped commo birds, get a burst message to K-3?"

"It's a good idea, but I have plans for those birds."

"Sir." Obrecki looked up from his board. "Three-meter room reports Class Two probe is loaded in tube two. I have a navigation plot for the probe, and the onboard computer reports ready."

"Fire two."

Obrecki tapped the firing stud. "Probe away."

The echoing report of the linear accelerators lacked the urgency of a torpedo launch, and the lights dimmed as they entered their recharge phase. On the screen, the plot showed the take from the probe, but analyzing it was the business of the command intelligence officer.

Lieutenant Connors was working the data already. "I've got three jamming points, Captain. All clustered along the most direct route from here to K-3. No way to burn through it, even if we had full power available."

"Thank you, Mr. Connors." The captain glanced down at the astrogator's board again. "Nothing we can do, then, until we get full power back." He looked back at Connors again, and asked, "What's our friend doing?"

"He's moving away, relative bearing of zero-eighty-five mark five. Looks like he--" The

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Lieutenant frowned. "He's just vanished, sir. Right off my trace."

"What?"

"I said, sir, he's vanished." Connors' voice betrayed his impatience. "Loss of all light-speed data within a second of loss of grav data, which suggests that whatever he's using for camouflage, it's specific to the ship, and not related to the jamming buoys."

"Okay, thank you." David glanced over at Weber. "They're gonna try to sneak up on us again."

"Probably."

"If they use impulse drive, what's the closest they can get before we detect them?"

"Gravitic waves are FTL phenomenon. But they disperse like any other. And our long-range sensors are still down, even the passives. Probably they could get within one hundred fifty thousand kilometers on full impulse before we detect them."

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"They've switched to impulse drive, but they're not producing full thrust. Currently, they are at one-third light-speed." Grel frowned at his instruments. "The best data we have on this type indicates a maximum sublight speed of one-half light-speed with one cargo canister, but--"

"Yes." Koth nodded. "Helm, will this affect your plot?"

"Yes, My Lord. But I have already compensated."

"Our speed?"

"Sixty percent light-speed. If we increase speed any further, we risk detection."

Koth scowled, and turned to the weapons officer. "Kreve! When we reach farthest point of approach to the Federation target, I want a self-emissions test with a charged torpedo."

"Understood, My Lord."

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The traditional pipe of the ship's internal communications network caught the Captain's attention, and he mashed the illuminated button on the arm of his chair.

"Bridge. Captain here."

"Captain." Chief Darr's high-pitched voice was normally grating on the nerves, but the smug satisfaction in his voice went a long way to mitigating that. "We've reactivated impulse reactor number one, and you should have full thrust available at your discretion."

"Noted, Chief. Five minutes early, even. You have a miracle up your sleeve for the main energizer?"

"Afraid not, Captain. But we got some work teams out to the starboard nacelle."

David gritted his teeth. "Give me the bad news."

"We had eleven crewmen in the nacelle, between engineering crews and damage control. They're all dead. Massive radiation exposure." Darr's voice was bitter. "The Klingons hit us with a very dirty nuke; that's why we lost all those systems, is parasitic radiation transferral. The reactor is down completely, the dilithium crystal is...well, it's so full of cracks that I'm amazed it didn't just shatter."

"We carry spare crystals--"

"Yes, sir, we do, but it would take four hours to move one to the nacelle, install it, and then tune the engines. And the tuning would have to be done at relative rest to the primary."

"Okay, I understand. Can you spare two men to work on a Class Two probe?"

"I suppose. What do you have in mind?"

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"We may have hurt them worse than I thought," said Grel. "They are still on two engines, still holding at one-third light-speed."

"Time to the radiopause?"

"Thirty *tup*. And our intercept will be complete five *tup* before then."

Koth grinned widely.

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"Probe is complete, and we are loading into tube two."

"Still no sign of the Raptor?"

"None, Captain."

"All right. I don't want to risk tipping our hand. Don't use the accelerators on the tube; swim it out on chemical thrusters only."

"Aye, sir."

"Fire two."

There was a dull thud as the torpedo tube's outer door opened, but no sound from the launch itself. The probe appeared on the tactical plot seconds later.

"It's clear of our screens, and program will activate in ten seconds." Obrecki glanced back at the Captain. "The onboard generators will only be good for forty minutes, Captain, maybe a bit less."

"Can you complete the transition in that time?"

"Yes. But it's going to be a bumpy ride." The tactical flared as the probe went active. "There it goes."

The tactical plot gave the complete story. With its onboard impulse engines carefully tuned, the probe was giving off the same gravitic emissions as the *Kepler*. Its navigational deflectors had also

been carefully tuned, as had its power supply. Overall, the probe was now giving a mirror image of the crippled *Kepler*.

The ship's computer noted the probe's activation, and activated the ship's side of the deception. The defensive screens and navigational deflectors went down, as did the impulse engines and short-range scan. *Kepler* became a hole in space.

"Starboard-side thrusters. Start our turn."

"Aye, sir."

Without the gravitic bow-wake caused by the impulse engines, the *Kepler* was capable of higher speeds. But without navigational deflectors, the ship began to shudder under the impact of space-borne particles. David winced; Chief Darr had opposed this idea, but he needed time. And he seriously doubted that the Klingon Captain would allow him that time, unless he was duped.

"Burn complete. Planetary standard orbit in sixty minutes, Captain."

"Mister Connors, you stay married to that scanner, and let me know if you see any hint of the Raptor."

"Aye, sir."

David settled back into his seat, and did the hardest thing he possibly could do.

He waited.

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"Target is still on a hyperbolic approach to the radiopause. Three *tup* to interception."

Koth nodded. "Stand by torpedo room for hot charge."

Grel blinked at the display. "Something odd about the target, My Lord. They haven't charged weapons. Their phasers are still cold." He looked

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up. "No matter how badly we damaged them, if they have impulse power, they would have managed to charge the guns."

"The Federation is made up of weaklings, Grel."

"It is not a matter of strength or weakness to ensure that you have the firepower to protect themselves. Why have they not charged their phasers?"

Koth stared at the tactical plot. "If their phasers are cold..."

"They cannot fire on us before we break contact."

"Torpedo room! Charge forward tube."

Kreve checked his status board. "Forward tube loaded and charged, and I have a firing solution."

"Fire!"

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"There!" Connors stabbed at the screen.

"Good eyes. Can you track him?"

"Not for long."

"Probe destroyed, Captain."

"Distance to radiopause?"

"Two minutes at maximum impulse."

"Execute plan Baker."

*Kepler* accelerated at maximum impulse speed, reaching 0.45 light-speed. The after torpedo tube belched out a proximity mine, set to self-destruct after thirty minutes so as not to become a navigation hazard.

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"Target destroyed. Explosion was not consistent with a starship."

"A decoy!" Koth glared at the sensory officer.  
"Find them! Now!"

"Contact on screen. They are under full power, and entering the radiopause."

"Run them down! Full power to impulse engines!"

The *Taj* came about, its engines glowing from exhaust heat, and dove down on its target, disruptor conduits glowing with power.

## Chapter Two

*Captain's Log, Stardate 3145.3:*

*Our plan to dupe the Klingons worked well enough, though it could have been better; apparently, the Klingon Captain lacks in patience. But he has realized his mistake, and has come about. He is making no secret of his presence, and is closing at his best speed; I doubt greatly that he intends anything but to blow us from the sky. I will be loading this report into the disaster log, in the event that we fail to escape the Raptor.*

David released the record button and eyed the tactical plot. "Range?"

"Ten million kilometers."

"What's their speed?"

"Point six eight cee, and still accelerating." Obrecki scowled, and added, "We've entered the

radiopause, but as long as we're still running at full power, we will be visible."

"I know that, Mister Obrecki."

"Sorry, sir."

"Don't be. You're paid to tell me these things." David grinned. "How long before we've crossed the radiopause?"

"One hundred seconds as of...now."

"Perfect. Range to the mine?"

"The Raptor is just under a million kilometers, but slightly off course. They won't hit it."

"Not a problem. What's their closest point of approach to it?"

"CPA to mine is ninety thousand kilometers, in one hundred sixty seconds."

"So we'll be across the radiopause by then. When they reach CPA, detonate the mine, then execute plan Charlie."

"Aye, sir."

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"The Federation vessel has launched a mine." Grel examined the tactical plot. "We will pass no closer than fifty thousand *kellicamey*, and will not be damaged if they detonate it."

"How long ago?"

"Unsure. The mine is coated with sensor-absorbent material, but judging from its trajectory and speed, and that of the Federation vessel, they most likely launched it shortly after we realized their deception."

"Ignore it. It is of no consequence. Torpedo room."

"Aye."

"Status of forward tube?"

"Loaded, and ready to charge."

"Excellent." He looked over at his weapons officer. "Kreve! Do you have a firing solution?"

"Not yet, My Lord. The Federation vessel is still outside the torpedo's range, and their vector is directly parallel to our own. Six more tup."

"Use the active sensors if you need to. They already know we're here."

"Aye, sir." Kreve toggled a switch, and fed more information into the battle computer. "Target has crossed the radiopause, but they're still using impulse drive. I have a firing solution. Torpedo range in five tup."

Grel looked up from his instruments. "Mine has reached closest point of approach."

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"Captain, the mine has reached closest point of approach, and I am executing plan Charlie."

The blast of the photon mine emitted large amounts of neutron radiation. Starships were well shielded against the radiation, and no harm could come of its systems. But the sensor arrays of both ships were unshielded, for the simple reason that they had to be.

At her extreme distance from the mine, *Kepler* suffered only a momentary flicker in her sensory, but that told the Helmsman everything he needed to know. Ensign Guin immediately cut the impulse drive, putting the *Kepler* back on chemical thrusters. Their initial burn pulled them deeper into the orbit, and deeper into the radiopause.

-----

"What happened!" Koth was livid. "Where did they go?"

"The mine blast has overridden our sensor lock. We lost the contact. Simultaneous with that, the Federation vessel cut its impulse drive and has altered course." Kreve smashed a fist down on his console. "My firing solution is invalid. Two *tup* to recompute, and we will need a clear sensor paint on the target--"

"Fire on your last bearing."

"It will likely have no effect."

"We may be able to illuminate them with the blast, and reacquire. Fire!"

-----

"Torpedo incoming. Unguided, and looks like it's going to miss us by several hundred kilometers."

"They may be trying the same trick that we just used." David's face was illuminated only by the

lights from his chair controls; the ship was running silent, and all non-essential powered systems had been shut down.

"Unlikely." Weber shook his head, and added, "We're not using our active sensors, so..."

"Then maybe they're using it like a flare. One second after the torpedo detonates, give us a minimum burn to alter course, just to be on the safe side."

"The Raptor is reducing speed. Looks like they're unwilling to enter the radiopause."

David grinned. "Fancy that."

- - - - -

"Negative contact on the blast. Wait...no. Ion activity in the radiopause is producing sensor ghosts."

Koth scowled. "We cannot enter the radiopause. Our shields will be degraded, our

sensors badly affected..."

"Their sensors must be equally degraded," observed Vash. "And we already know that their shields are not functional."

"What do you suggest?"

"As you have already indicated, entering the radiopause ourselves will likely tip the balance in favour of the Federation ship. I suggest that it is possible to attack across the layer, using sensor probes and torpedoes."

Koth scowled at him. "How would a probe communicate across the layer? Even if we program it to re-cross the radiopause, the Federation ship will undoubtedly change course and invalidate any firing solution. You have not convinced me."

"The probe need not transmit through the radiopause. It need merely transmit to a second probe, resting at the radiopause."

## Shot In The Dark

Koth considered him, then nodded. "You have convinced me. See to the programming of the probes yourself."

-----

David glanced down at the tactical plot. "So we've got about fifty more minutes before anything can happen, right?"

"Aye, sir."

"Okay. Mister Obrecki, you have the conn. I'll be on the mess deck if I'm needed."

"Yes, sir."

"Tom?"

Weber shrugged. "Why not?"

It was not goofing off; every officer knew that a Captain distracted by his own low blood sugar would be a liability. Weber joined his Captain in the turbolift, and David gripped the controls. "Mess

deck."

The lift dropped downward, and David began to curse. Loudly, slowly, and with great creativity. Cursing was an art form on Canaris. Weber remained silent, though David was certain that he was making notes mentally.

Finally, David ran down, and glanced over at his exec. "Well, Tom? What do you make of this mess?"

"I think you've already covered my opinion of it, Dave." Weber's expression didn't change, even when cracking a joke.

David indicated the man's shirt cuffs. "You're entitled to wear one and a half stripes, Tom." Given that he was his equal in rank, David found it odd that his exec chose to wear only the single stripe of a Lieutenant.

"Two Captains sink a ship, Captain."

"Come off it, Tom." David rubbed his forehead. "You're a Lieutenant Commander, not a Lieutenant. You're a Captain, even not of this boat. You're my Executive Officer, which means you're supposed to be helping me out with this sort of crap. But you've been...well, not unhelpful, but I know that you're a better officer than you've been pretending to be."

"Dave, the last thing I want to do is to undermine your authority on your own bridge," said Weber. "Lord knows I'd hate it if it happened to me. Right now, we're the focus of the first battle of a new war with the Klingons. So any tension I might cause that I can avoid, I must do so."

David nodded. "I can respect that. But the current situation--"

"You have the best handle you can on it, Captain. My only suggestion, you shot down." His mouth quirked, in the closest thing to a smile that David had yet seen from him. "With a better idea,

so I have no complaint coming."

The lift came to a halt, and the two officers stepped out.

The mess deck was fairly empty at this time. With the ship at general quarters, every crewman, including the mess specialists, was at battle stations. But Crewman Roberts was on the sick list, and was nursing a coffee in one corner. David punched a request for a coffee and a chicken sandwich into the mess computer. Without a cook on duty, his selection was very limited, but chicken salad was always available.

Weber selected a caesar salad, and joined his Captain at a mess table. "The Klingons might follow us in. They can be most dogged in their pursuit."

"Your tone makes it obvious that you think this unlikely," said David.

"Yes. However, it is a possibility that we should be ready for."

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"What do you suggest?"

"Well, we changed course as soon as we crossed the radiopause, so they have no idea where we are." Weber shrugged. "Unless you want to try another drone..."

"That might be worthwhile." David considered. "When we get closer to fully operational status, or if the Klingons try anything new. That would be the ideal time to use another drone. Set it up now."

Weber glanced down at his salad. "Can I finish lunch first?"

- - - - -

"Relay probe is fully programmed and loaded into the forward torpedo tube. Penetrator probe is programmed, and on the loading rails."

Koth nodded. "Any register on the target's position?"

"None, My Lord. They have crossed below a layer of ionic disruption, and I have completely lost their trace."

"Deploy the relay."

The linear accelerators whined, and the tactical plot showed the relay probe streaking towards the radiopause. It fell into orbit around the gas giant, its speed bleeding off into the gravity well, and it fell off the screen as it crossed the radiopause horizon.

"Time to re-acquisition of relay probe, fifteen *tup*."

"Noted." Koth nodded at Kreve. "Inform the torpedo room to load the penetration probe, but do not power it up until three *tup* before relay probe activation. Inform me when power-up starts."

"Yes, My Lord."

- - - - -

"Captain on the bridge."

David ran from the lift, still sealing his undress tunic. "As you were. Report."

"Deflectors restored, and phaser banks are now recharging, Captain." Chief Darr looked insufferably pleased with himself, and he had a right to be; the work had been finished fifteen minutes ahead of schedule. "Mains will be back online in twenty minutes, and we'll be able to use phaser power at full output at that time. Warp drive still disabled, and will be until we can put into port for refit."

"Good work, Chief. Tactical?"

"We have a probe breaching the radiopause, Captain." Weber touched a key, and the main display sprang to life, showing a tactical display. Nothing seemed to exist outside the radiopause; the interference at the boundary of the gas giant's magnetic field rendered sensors worthless at the edge of the Layer. But the small impulse drive

powering the probe shone on the screen.

"What's on his mind?" growled David. "Can a probe that small generate a signal strong enough to penetrate the radiopause?"

"Sir, our shipboard sensors cannot penetrate the radiopause reliably, so I doubt highly that this device can do so." Weber smirked. "They may be relying on the probe leaving the radiopause, so they can collect the data."

"What if we shoot it down?"

"Phaser fire will give away our position most effectively, and the probe will not pass within range of the LASERs."

"Damn. Mister Salazar." David sat down in the center seat. "I want a signal strength measurement on that probe."

"Already got it, Captain. Detection range is six thousand kilometers. This information is based on the measured strength of the probe's signal, and

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the distance to the probe as determined by triangulation. No active sensors."

"Good job, Mister Salazar." David considered the plot. "Looks like the probe will pass within its detection radius of us. Mister Guin, can you plot a burn, reaction drive only, to keep it out of reach?"

"Afraid not, Captain." Guin shook his head. "We'll need to use the impulse engines, or we risk falling out of orbit."

"Okay, best possible solution to avoid detection, and plot a second burn for after the probe leaves. We'll invalidate their sensor readings thoroughly by the time the probe leaves the radiopause."

-----

"Probe reports an impulse burn, My Lord." Grel grinned, baring his teeth. "I am transferring data to the weapons console."

"Excellent." Koth turned to the weapons officer. "Kreve, do you have a firing solution?"

"Impossible at this time, My Lord. I will have to fire on dead reckoning."

"Set torpedoes to boresight guidance." Koth mashed a communications stud. "Forward room. Load one torpedo, and charge."

"Torpedo charging, Captain."

"Aspect change on the target. They are turning."

"Perfect," snarled Kreve joyfully. "That locks it up. I have a firing solution, Captain."

"Torpedo is charged."

"Fire!"

The tiny fighter shuddered as its forward torpedo room launched the weapon. The linear accelerators boosted the torpedo to frightful speeds - the acceleration of the rails was clocked at fifty thousand Q'onos-standard gravities - and once the

torpedo cleared the fighter's impulse field, its tiny on-board warp drive generator spooled up, boosting its velocity to 0.98c. It passed through the radiopause, and activated its seeker head.

- - - - -

"Torpedo incoming!"

David's eyes widened with shock. "All ahead full, alter course to fifteen mark minus thirty! Give me max positive zed thrust on reaction drive as well."

"Impulse at maximum."

Salazar was firing up the jammers, and scowled. "Captain, the torpedo has acquired us and is in homing mode. Thirty seconds to detonation range."

"Cut the reaction drive, and stand by aft phasers."

"It's dropping below us...whoever programmed that torpedo knows our defensive systems. It's staying out of weapons arc."

"How the hell did they find us?" David shook his head. "Never mind that. Guns, acquire the Klingon probe and make it go away."

"Affirm." Obrecki haloed the probe, and fired a single needle-thin blast from the forward phaser array. "Probe destroyed."

"Torpedo still closing, fifteen seconds."

"Rear deflectors off."

"Sir?"

David grasped the arms of the command seat. "Cut rear deflectors. Mister Weber, stand by cargo sling controls."

"Yes, sir." Weber shifted over to the Engineering station.

"Impact in ten seconds."

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"Rear deflectors cut."

"Mister Obrecki, stand by for snapshot on rear phasers."

Weber looked over at his captain. "Deadbolts retracted on cargo sling; standing by with magnetics."

"Impact in five."

"Jettison cargo container."

Weber toggled a stud, and the cargo container was released. It slipped backwards, starting to tumble from the eddies of the impulse drive.

"Obrecki, fire on the cargo container."

Phaser fire from the rear bank lashed out, exploding the container and spilling foodstuffs and water behind the transport. The contents billowed outwards, and the torpedo, suddenly presented with a much larger target, became confused. It homed in on the closest item in its targeting cone: the remains of the cargo container.

"Detonation."

The shockwave of the torpedo shook the ship, but the defensive screens protecting the engines and bridge did their job. Sensors failed, but quickly restored themselves automatically.

"Cargo container completely destroyed." Salazar looked up. "Minor damage to defensive screens. No damage to any ship's systems."

"Alter course to three fifteen mark fifty, all ahead full, ten minutes. Mister Guin, plot us a parabolic around the gas giant. Treat the initial vector of the torpedo as extending through to the Klingon ship, take us out past the other side of the radiopause."

"We're leaving the radiopause?"

David scowled. "They're somehow communicating across the Layer. If we shoot down incoming probes, or maneuver away from them, we give away our position. In fifteen more minutes, we'll have the mains back online, and we can go toe

to toe with the bastards." He toggled a communications stud. "Chief Darr to the bridge."

-----

"My Lord, I have detonation."

"Stand by second probe." Koth snarled at the screen. "Can you scan the detonation area?"

"We're getting some secondaries," said Grel. "The computer is working on them...Got it. Damage pattern consistent with the destruction of a cargo container." He looked up. "It is possible that we struck the transport, but more probably all we hit was the cargo pod."

"We cannot risk that. If they get away, they will warn the Federation of our operation in this sector. Launch the next probe."

"Yes, My Lord."

"Vash."

"My Lord?"

"How badly would our shields be affected if we cross the radiopause?"

Vash considered, and answered carefully. "Defensive screens around the bridge and weapons modules would be unaffected; however, they are quite weak compared to the primary outer guard. The magnetic interference around the planet will de-tune our shields, perhaps halving their effective strength and causing a constant strain on the shield generators."

"So they will be weaker, and less able to recover." Koth nodded. "Understood."

"Probe away."

-----

"Incoming probe, Captain." Salazar tapped his controls, and looked up at the Captain. "Current vector carries it away from us, but our impulse

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engines will give away our position."

"Noted. Mister Guin, stop all impulse engines, and give us a burn on chemical thrusters away from the probe."

"Aye, sir."

"Probe has altered course, and is steering towards our position." Salazar eyed the instruments. "Okay, it's settled down on its new course...seems it's steered towards the point that we cut impulse drive."

"Will it detect us?" David leaned forward, staring at the tactical display.

"Unlikely."

"I'd prefer to hear 'impossible', but I'll take what I can get. Mister Guin, alter your course to put us on a normal to the probe's course."

"Already done, Captain. But we've got a lot of velocity from the impulse burn, and I'm having difficulty compensating for that."

David scowled, and opened his mouth to add a comment to this, but turned as the turbolift hatch hissed open.

"Chief Darr, reporting as ordered."

"Perfect." David stood and walked over to the command intelligence station. "If I recall correctly, Chief, we have four bomb-pumped communications drones."

"Yes, sir. But the emissions coil on one of the drones failed. We had it torn down to replace it when the excrement hit the rotary air impeller."

"Won't be needing to finish that." David pulled up a blueprint of the probes. "What's the output of these probes?"

"About fifty gigawatts."

David tapped a few more controls, and pulled up a different set of blueprints. "Think you can modify the birds to match this schematic?"

Darr frowned, and scratched his cheek. "I could do. We'd have to pull about twenty phaser pistols from the armoury. Plus, these drones were not very tactically effective. A simple photon torpedo--"

"Have you, in your copious spare time, managed to get the antimatter feed on our torpedo launchers working?"

"No." Darr sighed. "That was stupid of me. I'll need twenty minutes per drone to get these up and running."

"Crash priority. Pull as many people as you need."

"Twenty minutes total, then. We have the workspace to build all four simultaneously." Darr grinned wolfishly. "I'm looking forward to seeing what you do with these, sir."

"I'll record it for you. Get on it."

"Sir." Weber turned from his station. "I have the decoy drone programmed, and we're five minutes from the radiopause."

"Good." David turned as Darr headed back to the turbolift. "Load the drone into tube one, and stand by."

-----

"No contact from the probe at this time, My Lord."

Koth scowled at the tactical display. "Their last projected course would have them leaving the radiopause here." He tapped the screen. "Their captain has shown himself to be a shrewd tactician; he will realize by now that the radiopause no longer offers sufficient protection to him...lay in a course for this point. Half impulse point, parabolic course."

"A parabolic course will have us cutting through the radiopause."

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Koth nodded. "If we detect them as we pass through, we can fire on them, before they can fire on us."

## Chapter Three

*Captain's Log, Stardate 3145.8:*

*Full power has been restored to the ship, though the phasers are not yet completely recharged, and we are headed for the radiopause. It is our hope that by leaving on the far side of the planet from the Klingons, we will escape detection for a little longer. We will be dropping a second decoy as we cross the radiopause, in hopes of confusing the Klingon Captain. However, I doubt that this tactic will be successful; we have used it once already in this engagement, and the Klingons may be warlike, but they are not stupid.*

The *Taj's* bridge lights dimmed and the ship shuddered as it cut through the radiopause. Koth glanced over at his engineering officer.

"How long to restore full power to the shields once we clear the radiopause?"

"Three *tup*. Sensors are more badly degraded than I expected, but they should be clear one *tup* after getting out of this radiation."

"Stand by forward disruptors."

The *Taj* shuddered again, breaking free into non-ionized space. Grel stared fixedly into his scope, waiting for the screen to clear.

"Contact. Ahead at two mark negative fifteen. They're running at full speed from the radiopause, making no attempt to hide."

"Perfect! Target--"

"Wait. I have a second contact, skirting the radiopause. Moving slow and under stealth. Same ship, but...they have an impulse flutter, and their

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shields are down. The running target had its shields up."

"We damaged the target's shields." Koth frowned. "But they have had half a rep or more to repair them."

"They may be running with shields down to improve their stealth."

"The unit running free must be a decoy. The stealthy contact, with no shields and damaged impulse drive, must be the target." Koth indicated the screen. "Target the second contact. Arm forward torpedoes and disruptors."

"Online."

"Fire!"

Kreve stabbed the controls, and the paired disruptor cannons growled, shaking the entire ship. Parasitic blue energy illuminated the guide-paths of the gravitic weapons.

Kreve slammed a fist down angrily on his console. "Clean miss!"

"I told you to lock them up!"

"Disruptors were locked, targeting accuracy within a twentieth of radius."

"Reprogram the torpedo for proximity burst."

"Done."

"Fire!"

Again the ship shuddered, as the linear accelerators kicked the torpedo into flight. It spiraled towards the target, and exploded.

"Contact lost." Kreve snarled his rage. "It was another decoy!"

"Decoy destroyed, Captain."

David nodded. "I'm not really surprised. Are the Klingons coming about?"

"Yes, sir."

"Well, Mister Guin, there's no need to keep up the pretense anymore. Full impulse power, please."

"Aye, sir." Chief Darr's repairs allowed the ship to attain eighty percent maximum thrust, but only at the cost of extensive gravitic eddies that would reveal their position and status quite clearly. Ensign Guin ran the thrust to maximum, and the wounded ship shuddered as she leaped forwards.

"Our speed?"

"Point six lightspeed, sir."

"And the Raptor?"

"Point eight cee. Its current course is thirty degrees off ours, but it is closing up."

David nodded. "All set for Plan Echo?"

"Yes, sir."

"Mister Weber. Take the helm."

"Aye sir." Ensign Guin slid out of the helmsman's seat, making room for the exec, and moved updeck to the engineering station.

"Intercept in twenty-five *tup*, My Lord."

"Noted." Koth glanced over at the weapons station. "Kreve! Time to torpedo range?"

"Six *tup*, but torpedoes will be unpowered at that range. I suggest maximum blast radius."

"No." Koth shook his head. "We have only sixteen torpedoes remaining. We will close."

"I have a firing solution. Five *tup* to torpedo range."

-----

It was going to be a race, at least for the next fifteen minutes. Chief Darr's gang of geniuses needed those fifteen minutes to get the probes modified and ready to use, and every second after that time limit would improve their chances. David

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cursed silently, hands clenched on the arms of the command chair, trying desperately to will the ship to higher speeds.

"Klingon Raptor on a direct intercept course. Looks like he's maneuvering for optimal torpedo range." Weber examined his instruments. "He will be able to launch torpedoes in eight minutes, with a ninety-percent likelihood of a hit."

"Point defense?"

"At that range, his torpedoes will be at near lightspeed. LASERs will be unable to hit at that speed; the casemounts cannot traverse quickly enough."

David scowled, and glanced at the chronometer. "Fourteen minutes. For six of those, we will be under fire from the Klingons. What can we do to optimize our chances?"

"It is doubtful that the Klingon vessel will be rapid-firing their torpedoes," said Weber. "They will be down to fifteen or sixteen, unless they used some

up on Hermes. If they did, that just improves our chances." He tapped a few figures into his console. "Torpedo flight time will be three minutes, assuming he fires at optimal range."

"If I were in his position," mused David, "I would hold fire until I had confirmed a hit or miss on the first torpedo. Flight time for his second torpedo?"

"Two minutes, twenty seconds. Two minutes even for the third, one minute thirty seconds for the fourth."

"So we need to be able to avoid three."

Weber blinked, and glanced over at his captain. "Sir, unless you believe that Chief Darr can restore warp speed in fifteen minutes--"

"No." David shook his head. "We have another ace up our sleeve." He glanced down at the chronometer again. "And we need about another twelve minutes to spring it. Do your best, Mr. Weber."

"Aye, sir." Weber turned back to his console, and thumbed a control. With a high-pitched whine, the targeting hood unfolded from under its protective cover, and slid into place.

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"Three *tup* to torpedo range. I have one torpedo loaded and armed, tracking the Federation vessel now."

"Excellent." Koth glanced down at the gunner's instrumentation. "Recompute for launch at six million *kellicamey*."

"Yes, My Lord. Four *tup*, fifty *lup* to torpedo range."

"Increase torpedo acceleration to maximum sublight velocity." Koth reseated himself in the center seat. "Grel. Scan the Federation vessel, and determine its point of weakest defense."

"Acting." Grel adjusted his controls. "Scan indicates a reduction in rear deflector screening, possibly due to our earlier attack. One anticurve rider damaged, anticurve balance thereby ruined. Rear linear accelerators are--Wait." Grel raised a hand. "Their anticurve rider is damaged, but they are running towards the anticurve limit. Why?"

"They are Earthlings," sneered Koth. "Running is what they do."

"They could have evaded detection. I can think of a dozen ways to do so. And yet they are running like a frightened *targ* - stupidly, blindly, without reason." Kreve shook his head. "I cannot believe that this Federation captain is so stupid. He has proven far too cunning so far to run in such a manner."

Koth considered this. "You think that he is leading us into a trap?"

"It is possible. I would suggest a sensor sweep ahead of their path."

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"Two *tup* to torpedo range."

Koth scowled, then nodded. "Scan ahead of the target."

Kreve tapped his controls. "Passive scan out to five *tup* at light-speed reveals nothing ahead of the Federation vessel."

"That is only six *tup* at our current speed," snarled Koth. "Use the active sensors."

"I cannot, at our acceleration." Grel was unmoved by his commander's display of rage. "We must cut acceleration for at least thirty *lup* in order to use active scan."

"Half a *tup* will make no difference to the Federation ship," allowed Koth. "Helm! Cut the impulse drivers."

-----

"Klingon warship has cut power," reported Ensign Salazar. "They are losing velocity due to

gravitic distortion."

"Slowing down to scan," mused David. "Tom--"

"Yep." Weber was already punching instructions into the computer. "Shell game, round three."

-----

"My Lord!" Grel looked up, eyes wide. "Active sensor scan indicates approaching Federation heavy cruiser, hull number NCC-1701."

"Ignore it."

"But, my Lord! It is the *Enterprise!*"

"Does the bearing to *Enterprise* lead directly through the *Kepler*?"

"Yes, almost directly so."

"I shall not be fooled again. Ignore *Enterprise*. It is a phantom. Full impulse power;

resume pursuit of the *Kepler*."

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"Nice try, Tom." David grinned. "How long until torpedo range?"

"That little bobble cost them about two minutes." Weber checked his instruments. "They'll be in torpedo range in three more minutes."

"Then it worked out in our favour. How are you coming on the torpedo evasion?"

"I can deal with the first two. The third is going to be a problem."

"That is quite all right." David examined the tactical plot. "I think the third is just what we will need."

- - - - -

Chief Darr was getting his hands dirty, and loving every minute of it. With the crash priority that the Captain had placed on these little toys, every pair of hands was needed for the work. Gingerly, he lifted out the subspace transducer from the nose of the drone, and set it aside.

"Mister Gibbons. Is the warhead ready?"

"Yes, sir." Gibbons and McCone carefully slid the warhead over to the drone. Constructed from a cannibalized phaser rifle and a layer of shielding, it was completely without cooling systems. When it fired, it would overheat and melt into slag in about a millisecond.

This was twice the lifespan that Darr expected overall, and he had tweaked the rifle's output accordingly.

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"Klingon torpedo incoming," reported Ensign Salazar. "Range, two point eighty-eight million kilometers. Acceleration four hundred thousand meters per second squared. ETA two minutes."

"About time." David examined the torpedo track. "Tom, got your next dirty trick ready?"

"Yes, Sir."

"Ninety seconds."

"Mister Usher," said Weber. "Transfer reserve power to rear deflector shields. Charge the rear phasers."

"Aye, sir."

"Stand by rear tractor beams."

"Sixty seconds."

"Mine launcher loaded, but not yet primed."

David tapped the torpedo track. "It's dropping down. It will be outside our rear phaser cone before it comes in range."

"I expected that, sir." Weber nodded, his hand poised over the ship's attitude controls.

"Thirty seconds."

"Mister Salazar, allcall, please."

"You're live, sir."

"This is the Captain speaking." His voice echoed throughout the ship. "All hands, brace for evasive maneuvers."

"Ten seconds."

David sat down, and carefully closed the chair's roll bars over his lap.

"Five. Four. Three--"

"Execute plan Echo."

Weber's left hand traced down the theta attitude controls, and the *Kepler* pitched violently nose-up. The incoming torpedo noted its change in aspect, but had no chance to compensate for the maneuver. As the nose of the ship rose, it brought

the rear-mounted phaser banks into arc with the torpedo.

No human would have had reactions sufficient to take the shot, but the details had already been programmed into the library computer. All four phaser cannon opened up on the torpedo. Three of the four beams, fired simultaneously, impacted the torpedo. The coherent beams of nadions disrupted the strong and weak nuclear forces in the casing of the torpedo, and it crumpled under the stress of its own warp field. The magnaphoton containment system failed microseconds afterwards, and the antimatter stored in the warhead mixed freely with the monatomic hydrogen outside the field, resulting in a massive explosion.

But the explosion, as violent as it was, was contained on the far side of the *Kepler's* shields, and vented its fury against the layers of gravitic force. *Kepler* shook, and the shield generators whined as they sucked power from the capacitors, but the

shields held. *Kepler* was engulfed in a massive plasma field, but flew out of it, its screens spitting arcs of electricity and drawing a contrail of ionized gas, but intact.

-----

"*Kai Kassai, Kepler,*" breathed Grel.

Koth scowled down at the sensor operator. Grel was *Rumaiy*, and had a tendency to fall back into the old speech. "Keep that debased loser's tongue off my bridge, and speak only *tlhIngan Hol*. Try not to demonstrate the fact that you are inferior."

"Yes, My Lord."

"It was a good trick," admitted Kreve.

"Can we prevent them from doing it again?"

"I think so. A slightly different flight path should prevent it. In addition, we can set the torpedo for annular blast, so that if they do manage it again,

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we may pierce their shields."

"Make it so."

Kreve hurriedly punched buttons on his console. "Flight path reprogrammed. Torpedo room responds tube loaded."

Grel examined his instruments. "The Federation vessel's maneuver has altered its path of flight."

"I will need seventy-five *lup* to calculate a new firing solution," reported Kreve.

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"Course change has shortened the Klingon's intercept." Weber scowled at his instruments, and looked up at the Captain. "Sorry, sir. I tried to cut it as fine as I could."

"Not a problem, Tom." David waved it off. "Mister Obrecki, please deploy the mine."

"Mine is away."

Weber adjusted his controls. "I have it in tow."

"Any chance the Klingons will detect it?"

"Not a chance." Weber grinned crookedly. "I have the tractor emitter in needle-beam, and graviton emissions will be contained within our shields. Once they fire, we'll extend the mine past our shields, and they might be able to detect it then. But by then, it won't matter."

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"My Lord, I have a firing solution."

"Excellent. Status of torpedo?"

"Loaded, armed, tracking and programmed." Kreve bared his teeth. "This one shall not be fooled by last-minute evasions."

"Fire!"

The *Taj* shuddered as the torpedo launched, and the tactical display came alive, showing the torpedo's course. Kreve examined the plot, and nodded. "Torpedo is following its programmed path, and is running hot and true."

"Time to intercept?"

"Two *tup* from...now."

"Grel. Scan the Federation ship, and give me the status of its rear barrier system."

"Scanning. Rear barrier is weakened somewhat, but recharging. I believe that it will be at full strength by the time the torpedo reaches them."

"Will it be sufficient to stop the torpedo?"

"No." He shook his head. "The blast pattern that I have selected will pierce their shields, though the overall system damage will be low. However, given that their systems are already damaged..."

"Yes. The thinnest blade will still pierce a heart." Koth nodded.

Grel glanced down, and said, "My Lord. The Federation vessel's shields just flickered. I think..." He adjusted his instruments again. "They are employing a graviton tractor beam."

"Do they hope to snare the torpedo?"

"At final approach, the torpedo will be moving far too quickly to be stopped by a tractor beam. Wait..." He looked up. "They appear to be towing a mine."

Koth's eyes widened, and his mouth opened, but he could not bring himself to speak. Finally, he laughed. Kreve and Vash exchanged a look of relief.

"This Federation commander is a man of spirit. It is hard to remember that humans are weak, when faced with one like this." He looked over at Kreve. "I assume that there is nothing we can do?"

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"No. The torpedo is fully remote, and cannot be reprogrammed. Further, when they detonate the mine, we will lose sensor lock, so we cannot launch another torpedo until they do so."

Koth glanced over at Grel, and quietly said, "*Kai the Kepler.*"

Grel blinked.

The display fell apart as the Federation photon mine detonated, prematurely destroying the torpedo. Slowly it cleared, and Grel started running his plot again.

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"Damage report?"

"Rear shields depleted, down to thirty percent. Capacitors are recharging, but we lost two generators due to overload." Engineer's Mate Usher tapped the readout. "Number two tractor emitter is burned out. We won't be using that trick again."

"Not a problem." David tapped his communications controls. "Chief Darr. Progress?"

"Just buttoning up the last drone. We'll start moving them to the rear torpedo tubes in thirty seconds."

"Negative. Please take them to the hangar bay."

There was a pause. "Hangar bay, sir?"

"Yes. Do not secure them. Just arm them, lay them in the bay, and let me know when you're ready."

"Permission to use intraship beaming?"

Weber glanced over at his Captain, and shook his head.

"Negative. We don't want to tip out hand."

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"I have a firing solution."

"What is that saying that the Humans have? 'Third time is the victory?'" Koth nodded. "Fire!"

The torpedo streaked from the tube. Flight time was much shorter now, due to the reduced range. The Federation Captain was evidently out of tricks, as he immediately started throwing his ship out of the torpedo's path. But Kreve's programming held true, and the torpedo followed the dodging ship unerringly. At the last moment, the *Kepler* rolled ship. The torpedo detonated, its annular blast mostly missing the ship.

Mostly.

The *Kepler's* defensive barriers flared and died. Her screens absorbed a lot of energy, the overload causing the polarized plating to explode away from the ship. A trail of debris spewed from the rear of the ship; a shuttlecraft could be clearly seen tumbling away from the crippled transport.

And the bridge of the *Taj* rang with the howls of the Klingons, victorious.

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"Damage report!"

The bridge of the *Kepler* was thick with smoke. EPS overloads had blown out half the consoles on the bridge. The face of the astrogator console was cracked and sparking, the overhead lights were out, the command intelligence screen showed nothing but static. David staggered away from the center chair, his left hand burned from a melted circuit in the chair's arm. He made his way over to the engineering station, and asked again, "Mister Usher. Damage report!"

"Shuttlebay explosively decompressed. Aft emergency transporters are decompressed. Pattern buffer for all transporters aft of radial ninety is destroyed. Tractor control destroyed. Towpad solenoids offline."

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"I care more about the weather on Romulus than about damage to auxiliary systems. What about communications arrays? Impulse drive? And the main energizer."

"All communications still online, but we've got no channels to the aft array. Forward array only. Primary navigational array damaged, but operable. Max speed will be point one cee. Impulse drive completely unharmed. Warp drive no more broken than before. Main energizer overloaded and is in a restart cycle, but auxiliary power is up, and we still have the batteries."

"Okay, better than I expected. Nice work, Tom."

Weber nodded once.

"What's the Klingon doing?"

"He's slowing. Primary disruptors charging."

"All right. Power down the main sensors." He waited a moment, then, "Signal all stop on the

impulse drive."

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"Their impulse reactors have shut down." Grel studied the display. "Now their shields. Completely down, not even residual charge. Screens down. Matter/Antimatter reactor stopped. Sensors stopped." He looked up. "Their phaser emitters are cold, and the capacitor banks discharging. It looks like they are transferring all power to their life support."

Koth nodded. "They won't be needing that for long."

"Signal from the Federation ship," reported Wash. "We have incoming visual, if you want it."

"Visual?" Koth nodded. "Yes. I wish to see this cunning Human face to face, before I destroy him."

The screen flickered and cleared, revealing a human's face. Blood trickled from a cut on his forehead, and the air behind him was thick with smoke. The screen itself was somewhat fuzzy, due to damage to the *Kepler's* communication system.

"This is Lieutenant Commander Rider David, commanding officer of the *Kepler*, NCC-3816."

"This is Koth, Captain of the *Taj*. What do you want, Lieutenant Commander?"

"We surrender." David grimaced, as though the words had a bad taste to them. "We have lost shields and propulsion, our weapons are down. If you have any mercy, please, we surrender."

"Is it not a Human saying, that Klingons take no prisoners?" Koth sneered. "But here you are, begging for mercy from us."

"Half our crew is dead. Our ship is badly damaged, but still viable. Certainly, it would make a worthy prize. And you would need a crew to man it." David paused. "Our lives would be a small

enough price, in order to capture this ship."

"I like you, Human. You think like a Klingon." Koth paused. "Very well. I accept your terms. We will be coming into transporter range. Any attempts to deceive us will be detected; your weapons cannot be fired before we detect their power-up, and destroy your ship in retaliation. Do you understand me?"

"Our weapons are completely off-line. I don't think we could fire them ever again."

"Then stand by. Our prize crew will be aboard shortly." Koth waved, and Vash cut the channel.

"Grel."

"Yes, My Lord?"

"Scan the debris field. This Lieutenant Commander David is a crafty man, and I would not be surprised to find more mines in the debris."

Grel worked the controls, hunting through each piece of junk in the debris. "Four standard

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Federation communication drones. A crippled shuttlecraft. Various loose pieces of personal equipment. No mines."

"Could there be a mine in that shuttlecraft?"

"There *could* be, but I have already scanned it, and found none."

"Excellent. Bring us to transporter range. Keep us out of arc from their guns."

"Acting."

The *Taj* slipped closer to the wounded Federation vessel, until it came to rest a mere thousand kellicamey from the *Kepler*. Koth clicked on his intercom. "Force Leader Mablon. Are your Marines ready?"

"We are, My Lord."

"Excellent." Koth turned to Vash. "Lower the shields."

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Standard Federation communications drones have a number of features that make them difficult to detect or probe. This is for security purposes; the harder it is to detect the drone, the harder it is to intercept their messages. One such feature was the use of precession gyros, instead of maneuvering jets, for controlling the drone's attitude. Another feature was the presence of a very sensitive passive gravitic sensor array.

Four commo drones floated in the debris field around *Kepler*. Each was programmed with the signature of the Klingon Raptor's shield systems. Each had been tracking the enemy ship, keeping their noses pointed at it. While rotating on their precession gyros, their maneuvers were undetectable. When the Raptor dropped its shields, the drones triggered their programs; this was done closely enough that from a humanoid's limited

perspective, they activated simultaneously.

The physics of the bomb-pumped generator had not changed significantly since their introduction nearly three hundred years earlier. Five hundred pounds of chemical explosive detonated behind a linear coil. The explosion drove the coil forwards, through a stator, generating a massive surge of electrical power.

Darr and his team had removed the communications devices from the nose of these four drones, and replaced them with cannibalized phasers. Now, the power generated by the bombs was dumped into the phasers, firing them at the maximum possible output. Maximum *physically* possible; Darr had thoughtfully removed all limiters on the weapons themselves.

As he expected, the phasers melted to scrap within a millisecond. Not that it mattered; the blast wave of the explosive destroyed the guns a millisecond later. But in the half-millisecond that

they were intact and powered, each phaser produced a blast of energy of incredible proportion.

The first drone missed its target, the beam just missing the Raptor's wing. The second was only moderately more successful; though it struck the Klingon ship, the beam sliced through empty crew quarters and the food storage locker.

The third beam struck paydirt. It scythed across the top of the Raptor, tearing through the armour and ripping up the impulse drivers. The impulse drivers automatically SCRAMMed, preventing a runaway reaction, and leaving the Klingon ship in a crippled state.

The fourth beam cut across the neck of the Klingon fighter, explosively decompressing the primary crew gangway. It nicked the bridge, causing conduits to explode and shrapnel to fly, and then cut along the torpedo room, ruining the linear accelerators.

## Shot In The Dark

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"This is the *Kepler*. Surrender your ship and prepare to be boarded."

Koth dragged himself upright, and looked around the shattered bridge. Vash was dead, his face peppered with fragments of his own console. Kreve was either dead, or nearly there, face down on the floor in a pool of his own blood. Grel had a hand clutching his leg, a sizeable chunk of metal protruding from his thigh. Blood oozed out around his fingers. He looked up at his Captain, and bared his teeth.

"A Klingon in human form."

Koth nodded. "We cannot allow this ship to escape; secrecy is our prime objective, even above our own survival."

"Then I shall see you again, Captain, on my ship in the Black Fleet."

"Or I shall see you in *Sto-Vo-Kor*. One way or another, we shall learn which of us was right." Koth took his seat, and gave his last command.

"Best speed, physical intercept."

"Acting."

-----

"Captain, the Klingon ship has started accelerating."

"What?" David stood. The fake blood had already dried and flaked away from his forehead, and he brushed the last of the red dust from his brow.

"She's coming at us on thrusters, at five gees." Weber glanced down at his board. "Impulse engines are still restarting, phasers are cold, shields are cold...If she hits us, her antimatter containment goes down, and we go up."

"Point defense?"

"Active, but if we fire on them at this range, and disrupt their antimatter storage..."

"All power to the navigational deflectors." David grinned. "Turn it on the Raptor at full power. Mister Obrecki, please use the LASERs to burn out the Raptor's thrusters."

"Yes, sir."

The LASERs lashed out, destroying the chemical thrusters on the Klingon fighter, and the powerful main deflector, normally used to push meteoroids out of the path of a warp-speed starship, shoved the fighter back. It tumbled helplessly in space for long minutes, and then exploded. Something caused the antimatter storage to fail, and when uncontained, the volatile fuel blew the Klingon ship to fine particles. The blast caused the screen's compensation equipment to kick in, dimming the glare to tolerable levels.

David waited until the glare faded, then turned to his exec. "I don't suppose we need to send over the boarding party?"

The entire bridge crew turned to face the Commander as he dropped his head onto the console and roared with laughter.

## Epilogue

*Captain's Log, Stardate 3147.9:*

*Mister Darr has completed repairs to the warp drive, and we are currently on an intercept course to collect a reconnaissance drone. As soon as we pick it up, we will be leaving the system at warp six. The information we already have is far too important to the security of the Federation to delay; only the fact that we needed to make the repairs before we could depart allowed me to justify the launching of the probe.*

-----

The transporter whine faded, and the probe materialized on the cargo transporter stage. Salazar immediately began attaching leads to the probe, and downloaded its contents to his padd.

"Four Klingon cruisers. An old D6-type light cruiser, Federation reporting name Mirror-class. Three D7-type heavy cruisers, Federation reporting name Akif-class. Wait." He tapped the padd, enhanced one of the images. "This one is not quite consistent with the D7. Looks like a new type of some sort. Extra phaser emitters here and here. Forward spinal-mount disruptor is missing, and it has a torpedo tube there instead." He glanced over at the Captain. "My intelligence reports don't mention any new Klingon cruiser types."

"Not a problem, Mister Salazar." David nodded. "We don't expect you to know everything; just next to it." He punched the intercom button, waited for the familiar whistle. "Bridge."

"Weber here."

"Mister Weber, Deep Space Station K-3 is under Klingon control. We can't do them any more good here."

"Aye, sir. Warp speed at your discretion."

"Make it so." He closed the circuit. "Mister Salazar, I believe that we have bridge duty."

"Yes, sir." Salazar switched off his padd. "Sir...does this mean that there's going to be a war?"

"No." David shook his head. "There's already war. The instant that *Taj* fired into and destroyed *Hermes*, a state of war existed between the Federation and the Klingon Empire. When *Taj* fired into us, and we got away, the state of war was declared. All that is left now is for the Federation Council to make it official."

"So we are at war." Salazar sounded rather glum.

"Yes. We'll be back at Starfleet Headquarters in two weeks, and I don't doubt that we'll be sent

back out again almost immediately." David sighed. "With luck, the Federation Council can avoid hostilities, find some way of keeping the peace. But if not...Starfleet is, at least in theory, a military force. It may fall on us to *force* an end to hostilities."