

The Long Goodbye

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The Long Goodbye

by [Mick](#)

Summary

There are parts of this story that were originally written for Contact Point: Union of the Snake. When it was not able to be included, I held onto it. When I decided to revive the series, I gave it a quick rewrite tailoring it to the Excalibur. I almost posted that story as it was. However, in making long term plans for the series I felt this story needed to be a transition story, so that the things I had planned would not take you the reader by surprise. I decided to expand this story into multiple parts that I'll post once they are ready. I hope you enjoy The Long Goodbye, and thank you for reading.

JUNE 2321

Commander Talra Zha'Thaal sat in the command chair on the Bridge as the *Excalibur* orbited Salva II. Their most recent mission, conducting mapping surveys of nearby planetary systems had been considered mostly routine. There was not much for her to do since Stavek, and most of the Science department to conduct sensor scans from orbit. Although she had observed that the Vulcan preferred to do most of the work himself. Getting a little impatient she asked, "How much longer Stavek? The captain's going to want to head down to the planet soon."

"I will be done 56.3 minutes," replied the Vulcan.

"You're not able to get it done sooner than that. We've been here for the last three days," said the Andorian.

"To not complete these scans properly would cause insufficient data, and would also be further distracted," said Stavek as he kept working at his station.

Deciding to leave the Vulcan alone Talra focused her attention back on the viewscreen as the turbolift doors opened allowing Rebecca Stiles and Orson Winslow onto the Bridge. Winslow, the most junior officer passed by in front of the command chair on his way to the Navigation console. He let out a yawn as he relieved the officer from the previous watch. "Late night last night Ensign?" she asked.

"Yes Commander," he said with a slight smile as he turned his chair slightly to face her.

She smiled back at him briefly knowing full well what the Ensign, specifically who the Ensign was doing the night before.

"*Marshall to Zha'Thaal, please join me in the Ready Room,*" came the captain's voice over the intercom.

"I'm on my way," she replied. Looking around the Bridge she spotted the most senior officer to leave in command. "Zarv," said the Andorian zhen, "you have the conn."

"Why me?" said the engineer getting up from his station.

"Because you're the next in line for it," said Talra, "and besides nothing's going to happen."

"It had better not," said Zarv. He added, "I'll keep it warm for you."

Talra nodded, and made her way to the Ready Room just behind the Bridge, and activated the door chime. After hearing the captain reply to come in she entered the room, finding him sitting behind his desk, and then took a seat across from him.

"You wanted to see me?" asked Talra.

Alex nodded, "Yes." He took a deep breath, "I just had a conversation with Admiral Blackwell. He believes you are ready for the center seat, and my recommendation may have had something to do with it. The *Ahwahnee* is in need of a new captain, and senior staff. It's docked at Starbase 47, and it's yours if you want it."

"The *Ahwahnee*?" she asked with some surprise.

“It’s a Constitution-class ship. I know it’s not the newest ship in the fleet, but it is one of the last ships of that class that was built. It’s a good place to get started. It’s also a durable ship, and . . .”

Talra finished for him, “I want it. You had me at Constitution-class.”

Alex smiled, “I was hoping you’d say that.” He then took a more somber tone as he said, “You’ve been by my side for five years, and you’ve deserved a ship of your own long before now. I just hadn’t told you yet.”

“I’ll miss serving with you Alex, it’s been an honor,” said Talra.

“I’ll miss you too, and the honor was all mine,” said Alex, “I won’t outrank you anymore.”

“There was a time when I did outrank you,” she said with a slight smile.

“Yes, there was,” replied Marshall. He picked up a coffee cup sitting on the desktop, and took a small sip. He said, “I’m going to extend to you the same offer that Captain Urquhart made me when I took over for him. You can take any two officers with you.”

“In that case I’d like Ensign Winslow, and Lieutenant Stiles. In fact, she’s due for a promotion,” said Talra.

Alex nodded, “I’ll see to it. Stiles has done some good work here, but I know of her aspirations. I’ve had some conversations with her, and she wants the center seat. Rebecca’s had some night watches, and did fairly well.”

“That’s why I’d like to take her with me because she’ll need the experience,” said Talra, “I’d at least consider her for second officer.”

“It makes sense, I’ll go along with it if she’s willing to go,” said Alex, “but tell me this, why Winslow?”

“Well, he was a bit cocky, and arrogant when he first got on board, but he is showing some promise.”

“Yes, that’s true,” said Alex, “and I’m sure he’d like to keep up his studies in interspecies relations.”

“No comment there,” said Talra. She was not surprised the captain knew about that, the relationship she had with Orson Winslow was not exactly a secret, it was practically common knowledge on board the ship.

While the captain knew he probably should’ve said something about it, he had chosen not to given that there was a time when Alex would have been guilty of having a relationship with a senior officer. He took another sip of his coffee. Marshall chose not to add anything else to her prior statement.

“Who did Captain Urquhart let you transfer?” asked Talra out of curiosity.

“I didn’t transfer anyone,” said Alex, “I kept two officers. One of them was Zarv.”

“Zarv? You have got to be kidding me,” said Talra, “if it had been me I would’ve let him transfer to another ship.

“I’m not kidding,” he said, “my thinking at the time was that he was the most experienced engineer on the ship, and that I’d be a fool to replace him.”

“I can see that reasoning, but who was the other officer?” asked Talra.

“You,” said Alex.

“Me?”

“Yes you. I had to fight with Starfleet Command to make you my X.O., but it was the right decision. It was something Captain Urquhart urged me to take under advisement,” said Alex. He took another sip from his mug, “I guess I’ll have to replace you, Stiles, and Winslow now. Not to mention a new security chief since you’ve been filling that role as well.”

“That was a condition of me becoming your X.O.,” said Talra.

“I remember,” said Alex as he recalled the details of a conversation they had five years earlier.

“I have a friend on the *Arizona* who I would recommend to replace me as Security Chief. She’s tough, and I think you’ll like her. Erin Rothaker, she’s also a very skilled in hand to hand combat,” said Talra.

“I’ll take a look at her personnel file, and if everything checks out, I’ll consider her,” said Marshall.

“If you don’t, I’m snagging her,” said Talra.

“Well then we can’t let that happen now, can we?” asked Marshall with some sarcasm as they both laughed a little. He then said, “Once we’re done here, we’ll head back to Starbase 47.”

“That sounds good, and until then I’ll continue to perform my duties here,” said Talra.

“See that you do,” said Marshall, “your promotion isn’t official yet, but it will be.”

“*Bridge to Captain, I have finished the planetary survey of Salva II,*” said Lieutenant Commander Stavek over the comm system.

“We’re on our way,” replied the captain as he took one last sip of coffee, and got up from his chair. Talra was following close behind as they

walked out onto the Bridge. His presence was then announced by a junior officer. The captain walked across to the now vacant command chair, and ordered, "Put the planet on screen," before he sat down as Talra took her station.

Alex was now staring at the planet on the main viewscreen. Salva II had a bluish green tint to it that reminded him of Earth. The captain then turned his chair toward the Science station, "What do we now know about the planet now that the entire Science department has had three days to scan it?" he asked.

Stavek then rotated his chair to face the captain as he said, "Salva II is an M-class planet. The last planetary survey mission done by the *U.S.S. Budapest* five years ago states that it is rich with dilithium, and other minerals used in starship construction. I have been able to confirm the *Budapest's* findings. However, in order to be more thorough, I would need to take samples from the surface."

"Well, that does fulfill our first objective that Starfleet Command gave us for this system," said Marshall, "Our orders are to scout locations on the surface for a possible colony."

Stavek replied, "Based on the data that has been gathered, I have selected three sites for a colony. Also, the sensors are showing signs of animal life on the planet's surface as well."

"Let's try to steer clear of them," said Marshall.

"Steer clear Captain?" asked Stavek.

"It's a human expression that means to stay away from," said the captain. Alex then glanced around the Bridge as he decided who should go on the landing party. He called out, "Stavek, Stiles you're with me. Let's have a look down there." He then got up from his chair, and then turned to Talra as she got up from the weapons station. He said to her, "You'll be in command here until I get back. I'll check in every thirty minutes. Have a couple security officers meet us in the shuttlebay."

"Aye sir," replied the Andorian second-in-command as she took the center seat.

"Better that you leave her than me in command," Zarv as the captain walked past the Engineering station on his way to the turbolift.

"Would you like the center seat Zarv? I can always have Talra come with me on the landing party, and you can have it," said Marshall.

"Not on your life," said the Tellarite, "I'm content being in the engine room."

"If that's true then why are you up here on the Bridge right now?" asked the captain.

"Because," Zarv started to say, and then finished with, "oh never mind."

Alex chuckled slightly, and then walked over to the port side turbolift as Stavek, and Stiles began to follow behind him.

"Captain, I recommend using site to site transport instead of a shuttle. It would be far more secure sir," said Stavek.

"You're probably right," said Marshall.

"I am right sir," said the Vulcan.

The captain then cracked a smile, "But where would the fun be in that." He then said, "I suppose you want to some of your people along as well?"

"I do not require any assistance, Captain. One of my doctorates is from the Vulcan Science Academy is in Geology. Since I am the senior Science officer, I am the logical choice to go on the landing party. I will be bringing back several core samples for further analysis before I can make a recommendation to Starfleet. We will also require desert uniforms for the second site. It would make a very suitable site for a colony or a mine from the scans I have already taken," said Stavek.

"Maybe for a Vulcan colony," said Marshall noting the fact that Stavek said it was a desert, and cringed at the thought of having to wear a desert uniform because of how uncomfortable they are. He then said, "I'd like Lieutenant Stiles to work with you. She'll be piloting the shuttle, and could use the experience."

"Very well Captain," was all the Vulcan replied.

They entered the turbolift bound for the shuttlebay. No one said a word as the turbolift moved closer to their destination at the aft end of the secondary hull. Upon their arrival they began walking through the cavernous shuttlebay toward the type-3 shuttle *Merlin* which had been readied for their departure. There were two security officers, both of them ensigns, standing at the rear of the shuttle waiting to board.

Marshall walked up the ramp at the rear with the rest of the landing party following behind him. He then took the co-pilot's seat with Stiles taking the other chair. "Alright Lieutenant, it's your ship," he said.

"Aye sir," said the petite blonde Lieutenant. Stiles then looked back to make sure everyone else was seated. Once that was done, she activated the controls that closed the door at the rear of the shuttle. "Bridge, this is *Merlin*. Open shuttlebay doors," said Rebecca as she opened a comm channel.

"*Doors opening,*" replied Talra.

They watched as the clamshell like doors parted in the middle, and slowly opened allowing them to see out into space. A forcefield was all that was holding the atmosphere inside the ship.

“Take us out, but be careful,” said Marshall.

“Relax Captain, I’ve done this before,” replied Rebecca Stiles as she input the commands to lift the shuttle off the deck. It hovered for a moment as the thrusters engaged. She then activated the impulse engine as it cleared the shuttlebay bound for the planet below.

“I don’t know about the rest of you, but I’m glad to get off the ship for a while,” said Rebecca.

Marshall turned, and nodded, “I know I am. I’ve been cooped up on board far too long.”

“Me too,” replied Rebecca. She then looked over as she felt a hand touch her right shoulder. She looked up to see that Stavek came forward, and stood between the two pilot seats. “You scared me,” she said to him.

“I am sorry Lieutenant,” said the Vulcan, not intending to cause any harm. He showed her the tricorder he was carrying, and then said, “Please land the shuttle at these coordinates.”

Rebecca looked at it, input the coordinates into the console. “ETA four minutes,” she called out as Stavek returned to his seat across the two security guards in the aft compartment.

Captain Marshall stood at the edge of a lake staring down at the water at the first site they had been surveying for the last several hours on Salva II’s northern continent. He looked around, and saw the green grass as the sun was shining bright in the blue sky. For a moment it reminded him of his home in Virginia back on Earth. He could see Stiles approach him out of the corner of his right eye. “This is a great spot,” he said as she got closer. He then added, “It makes me wish I had brought my fishing pole.”

She looked around, and nodded in agreement. “Yes, it is pretty nice here,” she said. Rebecca then continued, “I didn’t know you fished.”

Alex nodded, “A doctor on one of my previous assignments got me into it. He said I needed a stress reliever other than what I had been doing at the time.”

“What were you doing?” she asked out of curiosity.

“Boxing,” said Alex with a slight smile, “I found fishing to be a lot more peaceful, and I got a lot of thinking done while I was at it. I haven’t been able to do it in a long time. There’s just not enough shore leave to be able to do everything I want to. Although Stavek tells me there’s no fish in this particular lake, at least ones that aren’t like any on Earth.” He then saw Stiles activate a tricorder, and changed the subject. He asked, “Anything showing up?”

Rebecca shook her head, “No, nothing except biologics, and they’re still some ways away that we’re in no danger of encountering them.” She then reminded him, “It’s almost time for you to check in with the ship.”

“Right,” said Marshall. He tapped his combadge, and said, “Marshall to *Excalibur*.”

“Excalibur here. Go ahead Captain,” said Talra.

Marshall said, “Commander, all is well. Stavek is hard at work. Nothing’s showing up on the tricorder with regards to any hostiles. How do things look up there?”

“Nothing new since you last checked in sir. It seems you’re having all the fun,” said the Executive Officer.

“Leading a landing party is not exactly my idea of fun, but if I didn’t get some fresh air, I was going to do something not very nice,” said Alex.

“I know it can’t be easy watching Stavek do all the work,” said Talra, *“but enjoy it while you can.”*

“Watching Stavek doing all the work is not my idea of having fun. I’ll check in again at the next interval. Marshall out,” he said. Alex then stared back out into the blue sky with a wide smile on his face.

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It was still quiet on the bridge of the *Excalibur*, other than the normal sounds the instrument panels made. Talra Zha’Thaal sat in the command chair with almost a blank look on her face as she considered many things, the mission, and her future among them. She looked around the circular bridge as she glanced at every station from where she was sitting. Most of them being manned by junior officers with some of exceptions at Communications, Navigation, and Engineering.

“Nothing ever happens when I’m on one of the upper decks,” observed Zarv as he sat at the Engineering console.

“That’s not true,” replied Talra, “remember the time that Klingon threw up on the captain?”

“I remember,” said the Tellarite, “claimed it was a bad case of gagh, and I was the one that had to clean it up. The captain wouldn’t stand for a junior officer doing it.”

“As I recall,” said Talra, “the captain was upset with you at the time.”

“Yeah, you’re right about that,” said Zarv almost having forgotten the incident.

“Wait, what happened?” asked Sloane Parker from her seat at Communications.

“It was before you were assigned here. We were transporting Ambassador Dax along with a Klingon delegation to a planet near the Klingon border. One of the Klingons brought an entire case of gagh on board,” said Talra.

“Tell her the best part,” said Zarv.

“The captain, and Ambassador Dax had a Juro Counterpunch match, and the ambassador won.”

“The captain let him win,” Zarv chimed in, “he said it was all in the name of good diplomacy.”

Talra continued, “We were sitting down to dinner in the Officer’s Mess when . . .”

“Commander,” said Ensign Orson Winslow cutting her off, “there are two ships now showing on long range sensors headed this way. They are still outside the system, but their course is definitely going to bring them here unless they deviate.”

Talra got up from the command chair, and walked forward to the Navigation station in front of the viewscreen. “Can you identify them?” she asked.

The navigator nodded, “Cardassian.”

Zha’Thaal asked for the sensor data to be put up on the viewscreen, so she could see it for herself. She then ordered, “Ensign, project their course, I want to know if where those ships are going.”

Orson Winslow touched a few controls on the navigation station. Once he had confirmed what he had suspected he turned his chair to address the superior officer as the data now showed on the main viewscreen. “If they do not deviate from their current course, the computer projects that they will arrive in this system in six point eight hours at their present speed of warp three.”

Zarv added, “We should alert the captain.”

“Keep an eye on them,” Talra said to Winslow. Turning to Zarv she said, “I’ll alert the captain if they get any closer. We don’t know what their intentions are.”

“If I were in the center seat I’d alert the captain,” said Zarv, “he’ll want to deal with the Cardassians himself knowing him.”

“Well, you’re not sitting in the center seat, I am. The captain trusts my judgement, and you should too. He offered to leave you in command, and let me go on the landing party,” said Talra.

“I’ll be in engineering,” replied Zarv as he started to get up from his seat.

“Keep your seat Zarv,” said Talra, “anything happens to me you’re next in line.” She then turned, and walked back to the command chair easing down into it. *‘I wish it was you sitting in this chair right now instead of me Alex,’* she thought to herself as she looked at the main viewscreen.

Captain Marshall shielded his eyes as he looked up on the horizon in the hot desert sun. He took a deep breath as he raised his right sleeve of his tan colored desert uniform to wipe a bead of sweat from his brow. Marshall then began to walk through the sand as he approached Stavek.

“This is a remarkable find here Captain,” said Stavek, “this location is lined with topaline.”

“Topaline is used in the life support systems of every Federation starship. It is indeed a very valuable resource,” said Stiles.

“I know what it does Lieutenant,” said the captain figuring she was trying to show off for Stavek.

“Also, there’s a good size deposit of dilithium here as well,” said Stavek.

“How good?” asked the captain.

“It is of sufficient quantity that the Federation should colonize this planet,” said the Vulcan, “I can be more precise if you wish.”

Marshall shook his head, “Starfleet Command should be pleased with that.” He wiped a bead of sweat from his brow now using his left sleeve.

Stavek then said, “Captain, I am now finished here. We should proceed to the last site.”

“Alright then,” said Marshall with Lieutenant Stiles now standing at the bottom of the *Merlin*’s ramp. He walked in.

The *Merlin* began to lift off the ground as Stiles input the course to take it across the planet to a more temperate area. “We should be there in about twenty minutes. It is on the southern continent,” she said.

“Twenty-three point six minutes,” said Stavek.

“Right, twenty-three point six minutes,” repeated Stiles.

The *Merlin* then shook violently for a moment. “Just a little turbulence,” said Stiles as she worked the controls trying to compensate for it.

“Do you need some help?” asked Captain Marshall. He trusted her to handle the situation, but he was ready to assist if she asked since he did come up through the ranks as a helmsman.

"I appreciate that Captain, but I think I got it," said Rebecca as the Merlin leveled off as the turbulence subsided. Breathing a sigh of relief she added, "It should be smooth sailing from here."

"We are not on water Lieutenant. Therefore, we are not sailing," said Stavek.

Stiles rolled her eyes, "It's an expression Stavek. It isn't meant to be taken literally."

"There are some human expressions I will never understand," was all the Vulcan replied.

"You've served on Federation starships for how long Stavek? You still don't understand that?" asked the captain.

"The time I have been a Starfleet officer is noted in my personnel file," said Stavek.

"Yes, it is," said Captain Marshall. He then turned his chair, and looked back at the viewport seeing the bright blue sky outside. At that moment Alex Marshall had decided that leading this landing party was the right thing to do.

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On the Bridge of the *Excalibur*, Talra Zha'Thaal realized Zarv might have been right. She didn't want to admit it out loud. She had just gotten a report from Winslow that the Cardassian ships were getting closer to the edge of the system. While she knew that the *Excalibur* could easily defeat the Cardassian ships in combat it was the fact that they had gotten closer to the system that had caused her to be more concerned. "Ensign Parker, hail the Cardassian ships. Let's see if we can find out what they're up to," said Zha'Thaal

Sloane Parker pushed a few controls on his station as she reached up to touch the earpiece held in her right ear. "I have them for you Commander. Audio only," she replied.

Talra eased back down into the command chair. She touched a button on the right armrest to open the channel. She said, "This is Commander Talra Zha'Thaal of the Federation Starship *Excalibur* to the incoming Cardassian vessels. Identify yourself, and state your intentions."

"*This is Gul Naket of the Cardassian Union. This system is Cardassian territory. You must leave immediately,*" came the response in a gruff voice.

Talra groaned internally as she decided what to do next. Leaning forward a little in her chair she said, "Gul Naket, this system has already been claimed by the Federation. We have a survey team on the planet at this time. I suggest you return to your known space immediately. If things escalate, I guarantee you would be at a severe disadvantage."

"They've closed the channel," said Parker with some concern.

"I guess they don't feel like talking anymore," stated Zarv.

Orson Winslow looked at his display, and then turned from his station to face Talra and said, "Commander, they've launched a probe toward Salva II, and they are sitting at half a million kilometers outside the system. I recommend destroying the probe."

"I don't think that's a good idea," said Sloane, "it could start an armed conflict."

"We can take them. They're antiquated compared to us," said Winslow.

"For once I agree with Ensign Winslow," said Zarv.

"You are all right," said Talra, "Yes, we certainly have an advantage over them, but even the most antiquated ship out there may find a way to hurt you. Right now, it's better to be cautious."

Just then the turbolift doors opened allowing Dr. Harriet Sullivan onto the Bridge. "What's going on up here?" she said, "It's too quiet down in Sickbay right now."

"I thought that would be a good thing," said Zarv.

"Oh it is," replied the doctor, "it just leaves me with very little to do, so I came up here." She looked around the Bridge, and came to the conclusion she might be getting in the way if she stuck around.

"Doctor, you just missed the standard warning from the Cardassians to stay away from this system," said Talra, "They think it's theirs."

"I think the captain would have something to say about that," said Sullivan.

"Yes, he would. Every Starfleet ship has been getting that for at least the couple of months if not longer. I wouldn't get too worried about it," said Talra.

"Oh, I don't intend to," said Sullivan, "I've got more important things to worry about."

"They're trying to assert themselves now that the Federation has a larger presence in the sector," offered Parker.

"They've really been making some noise ever since first contact with them. They've really stepped up their threats ever since that business with the *Reykjavik* eight months ago," said Talra.

"Sounds like I'd better get Sickbay prepped in case something happens," said the doctor.

"That's probably a good idea," said Talra. She watched as the older doctor walked back over to the turbolift.

Once the doors closed, Zarv said, "I don't know why she comes up here like that sometimes. That could've been handled over the comm."

"It's her way Zarv," said Talra. She then ordered Parker to raise the captain. Once that was done, she briefed him on the situation.

"Cardassians, you have to be kidding me," said Marshall into the communicator.

"I never joke about my work Captain, you know that," said Talra.

"You don't have to remind me of that. How long before the Cardassians arrive in orbit?" asked Marshall with some concern.

"Their probe should arrive in 2 hours 47 minutes. Their ship, on the other hand, are stopped half a million kilometers outside the system," said Winslow.

"If I had to guess they are probably waiting to see what data their probe sends back about what we're doing," said Captain Marshall. He weighed his options for a moment. He then leaned over to Stiles, and told her to change the *Merlin's* course so they could return to the ship. He then apologized to Stavek who said it was unfortunate that they would not get to finish their survey.

Thirty minutes later, the landing party arrived back on the bridge having changed out of their desert uniforms, and into regular duty uniforms. Captain Marshall had elected to wear the white undershirt, but instead of the red jacket selected a vest that was afforded to him because of his rank, and position. He approached the command chair, and asked Talra for an update.

"Starfleet has dispatched the *Taurus*, *Renown*, and *Vancouver* from the Solarion system. They were there conducting a colonial support operation."

'*Damn*,' thought Alex as he sat down in the center seat. While he was familiar with those ships, he had hoped that there was a Shangri La - class starship in the area. Those ships were known for their maneuverability, and firepower. One of them would've been a real asset at a time like this. Alex took a moment to mentally assess the ships that Starfleet was sending to the area. The *Vancouver*, a Merced-class starship commanded by Captain Elizabeth Foster, she had an almost totally spotless record. The *Renown*, a Miranda-class starship with a recently promoted captain named Gilbert Dawson, and then there was the *Taurus*. That ship was a Constellation-class starship commanded by Captain Charles Whitman, an officer with even more seniority than Marshall had. Part of him was concerned that he would have to give up command of the situation to a more senior officer. He had a reputation for being a stickler for details, and was quick to point out faults when he felt it was warranted.

"The Cardassians are still 500,000 kilometers outside the system, and there are now seven ships in addition to the two that we originally tracked. I've been monitoring their communications, and they have been requesting more ships," added Ensign Sloane Parker from her place at Communications.

"Captain, their probe is now in orbit of Salva II," added Ensign Winslow, "I think we should destroy it, sir."

"I agree," said Zarv.

"Captain," said Talra now sitting in her usual place at the Tactical station, "doing so may lead to an armed conflict. That maybe something we should avoid."

Marshall leaned back in the command chair as he weighed his options. He had two thoughts on this particular situation. He could either leave the probe alone, and allow the Cardassians to gather intelligence on a planetary system controlled by the Federation. He felt that the only other option available to him was to destroy the probe. Alex considered the situation for several more sections, and decided there was not a third option available, at least not at this point. Having decided on a course of action he said, "Commander Zha'Thaal, prepare a photon torpedo to destroy the Cardassian probe. We cannot allow the Cardassians to have eyes on Salva II."

"Aye sir," replied the *Excalibur's* second-in-command. After a brief moment she notified him that a photon torpedo was ready.

Captain Marshall then ordered Winslow, and Stiles to move the *Excalibur* into position to fire on the probe.

"We're now in weapons range of the probe," said Rebecca Stiles a few moments later.

"Target locked," said Talra.

With no hesitation, Captain Marshall said, "Fire."

Talra Zha'Thaal activated the photon torpedo launcher, sending a red ball toward the floating probe just as it was starting to enter the planet's atmosphere. Within a few seconds it was destroyed.

"Good work everyone," said Captain Marshall with a slight smile.

Stavek then offered, "I suggest that we leave several sensor drones around the planet that would warn us of any Cardassian activity in the system."

Marshall leaned forward in his chair as he rested his left hand on top of his knee. He considered the situation carefully. Deciding that the Science officer was right, he said, "Stavek, prepare enough sensor drones to go around the planet, and then launch them into equidistant positions."

"Aye sir," replied the Vulcan as he set about his task. A few moments later he reported that the drones were ready, after he had programmed them. Once the drones were launched, and online he reported, "Now picking up telemetry from the sensor drones. They are transmitting data

back to Starbase 47.”

“Very good,” said Captain Marshall. While it was not impossible for Starfleet to always have an active presence in the system, he felt better knowing that it was being monitored, even by just a few sensor drones given how aggressive the Cardassians had become over the last several months. He decided that some form of monitoring was better than none, and he was sure Starfleet Command would back him up on that.

“Captain,” said Stavek, “long range sensors are now picking up nine Cardassian ships entering the system. They are traveling at warp factor five, and should arrive in 56.3 minutes at their present speed.”

“They’re really making a nuisance of themselves,” added Zarv.

“That they are,” said Captain Marshall. He sighed, “Let’s try to scare them off. Helm, set a course to intercept the Cardassian ships. Best possible speed.”

Stiles then entered the course. “Going to full impulse. We should intercept them in about twelve minutes.”

“Twelve point six two minutes,” interjected Stavek.

The captain glared at Stavek, and then leaned back in his chair as he considered the next move. “Red alert,” he called out as the alert klaxon sounded throughout the ship. He then ordered for the sound to be muted on the Bridge, not wanting it to become a distraction.

Moments later, Talra said, “Cardassian ships now in weapons range.”

The captain ordered to have them put on the main viewscreen. There were now a dozen Cardassian ships approaching them. ‘*Must’ve joined them while they were on the way,*’ he thought to himself. Marshall considered his options, and then asked, “Commander Zha’Thaal, can you give me a tactical analysis of the Cardassian ships?”

Talra then glanced at her display as she quickly examined the sensor readings. She looked back up, and reported, “They’re equivalent to twenty-second century Earth technology. Eventually, they will be able to bring down our shields, and do some damage if they hit us in the right spot for any great length of time.”

“With ships that antiquated we should be able to take them on fairly easy,” said Ensign Winslow.

“I agree sir,” said Lieutenant Stiles.

“Captain, I don’t like the odds. Two or three of those ships we could take them on with no problem. It’s just too risky to take on that many when we’re the only ship in the system. Bear in mind given where their technology is, in time, they will eventually be able to do damage to us. Also we should consider the possibility that if we do fire on them it could end up starting an armed conflict,” said Talra.

“I don’t like those odds either,” said Alex. He trusted Talra, and everyone on the Bridge. He valued their input. It was time for him to be objective, and do what needed to be done. While the *Excalibur* had dealt with the Cardassians before, the ships that he was now looking at did match what he had read in the reports from Starfleet Intelligence. “Hail them,” he ordered.

“Channel open,” said Sloane Parker as she glanced over at the captain with a nod.

“Attention Cardassian vessels, this is Captain Alexander Marshall of the Federation Starship *Excalibur*. You are in violation of Federation territory, and you have been warned once already to leave. Withdraw immediately, or you will be fired upon. You have two minutes to change course.”

“They’re responding,” said Sloane.

“On screen,” ordered the captain. The image then changed from the Cardassian ship to what Marshall assumed to be one of their officers. A gray skinned man with black hair, and wearing what looked like a headset. He had seen Cardassians before, but this was appeared to be more imposing than the others he had seen.

“Captain Marshall, I am Gul Naket of the Cardassian Union. I do not recognize your authority over me, and the ships under my command. This system belongs to the Cardassian Union. Your destruction of our probe is an act of war. I suggest that it is you that withdraws from this system immediately, so that we can begin colonization. You are outnumbered Captain.”

Alex smirked. He was very tempted to tell Naket where he could shove his suggestion, but refrained from doing so in the interest of diplomacy. Instead, he chose his words carefully. “Gul Naket,” he said, “if you had not launched your probe into a system controlled by the United Federation of Planets, then I would not have had to destroy it.”

The Cardassian Gul smiled, *“You have just admitted your guilt, and if I ever am able to get you tried before a Cardassian court, I can assure you the punishment will be severe.”*

“You’re welcome to try, and I can assure you I will resist any attempt to capture me or any member of my crew for defending Federation interests. You are at a tactical disadvantage,” said Marshall with a smile just as the transmission ended.

“They’ve closed the channel,” said Parker.

“That Cardassian sure seemed angry,” offered Zarv.

“No argument there Zarv,” replied Alex.

“Sir, the *Vancouver*, *Renown*, and *Taurus* have entered the system. Captain Whitman is hailing,” said Ensign Parker.

“On screen,” said Captain Marshall as the face of the Taurus’ commanding officer appeared on the viewscreen.

“*Captain Marshall*,” said Charles Whitman.

“Captain Whitman, I wish you could’ve gotten here sooner. I just got done talking to the Cardassians, and they’re standard warning to stay out of this system,” said Alex.

“*They still think it’s theirs? They’re definitely wrong about that. Our sensors picked up you destroying their probe. Nicely done, but it didn’t scare them off*,” said Whitman.

“No it didn’t, but I’m running out of things to try on them,” replied Marshall.

“The *Excalibur* was the first ship in the system, so we’ll defer to your judgement. Unless I think it’s a bonehead move, and then I’ll let you know it,” said Whitman.

“I don’t think I’ll be doing anything that stupid, it’s not my day to do anything like that. However, I would appreciate any suggestions you might have,” said Alex.

“Keep our ships between the Cardassians, and the planet for starters,” offered Whitman.

“I’ll take that under advisement,” said Marshall.

“*See that you do. We should rendezvous with you in about fifteen minutes. Taurus out.*”

As the comm channel closed, Rebecca Stiles offered, “Captain, I think we should try to scare the Cardassians off.”

“Now we’re talking,” said Winslow, “I agree sir.”

“What do you suggest?” asked the captain.

Rebecca replied, “A warning shot on the lead ship.”

After considering the idea for a moment, Alex came to the conclusion that the junior officer’s suggestion was a good one. He smiled a little as an idea formed. “Commander,” he said turning his chair toward the Tactical station behind him, “Fire three, and only three photon torpedoes as close to the lead ship as possible without hitting it. I want to give them a good scare.”

“Aye sir,” said Talra. Her blue fingers flew over the controls, as she fired the three photon torpedoes as close to the lead Cardassian ship that they only missed the hull by mere meters.

Satisfied with what Talra had done, the captain ordered the comm channel back open. “Cardassian vessels, this is the *Excalibur*. That was a warning shot. The next ones won’t miss, and I can assure you, and have said before that I have the tactical advantage. Withdraw from this system immediately.”

After a moment Stavek said, “They are not retreating Captain.”

“Looks like we’ll have to take them on,” said Ensign Winslow.

“It should’ve worked,” added Stiles.

“Yeah, it should’ve,” said Marshall.

“Captain, the other ships have arrived,” added Ensign Parker.

Marshall nodded to acknowledge Parker’s statement. He had a feeling that if the Cardassians had not increased their numbers it would have. Alex thought for a moment, “Parker, inform the other ships that I want them to stay in between the planet and the Cardassians. I don’t want them to get anywhere near it.”

“Aye sir,” replied Sloane Parker.

Moments later, Stavek reported that the ships had all moved into formation beside the *Excalibur*, and mentioned how the Cardassian ships outnumbered the Starfleet ships. Marshall glared over at Stavek; in the past he had told him that he didn’t like knowing when the odds were stacked against them.

“Captain,” called out Commander Zha’Thaal, “the Cardassians weapons arrays are powering up. They’re preparing to fire.”

Marshall nodded, “Parker, inform the other ships to not fire until the Cardassian ships fire on us.” He watched as Parker acknowledged the order, and relayed the information. Alex then focused his attention back to the task at hand as he stared at the Cardassian ships on the viewscreen.

“The lead Cardassian ship is firing,” said Zha’Thaal as a photon torpedo impacted against the *Excalibur*’s shields rocking the ship for a moment.

“Shields are holding,” said Stavek.

“Talra open fire. Parker have the other ships to do the same,” said Marshall with some determination as the *Excalibur* fired back at the lead Cardassian ship.

Zha'Thaal then targeted another ship, and fired the phasers with precision destroying it. "Too easy," called out Talra as another ship was destroyed by the *Taurus* and *Vancouver*.

"Sir, three Cardassian ships are now bearing on the *Renown*," said Stavek in a leveled tone.

Marshall nodded, and then said, "Stiles, Winslow, move us into firing range of those ships. Let's see if we can take some of the heat off of the *Renown*."

Rebecca Stiles smiled a little as she got the course from Winslow as the *Excalibur* moved into position. Marshall didn't have to say anything as Talra then activated the phasers, and fired the photon torpedoes as two of the Cardassian ships were destroyed erupting in balls of fire.

"The last Cardassian ship is retreating," said Stavek.

"We did it!" said Winslow.

"Good job everyone," said Marshall.

"It was still too easy," said Talra.

"I won't dispute that Commander," said Alex. After getting a report from Zarv that the ship suffered no damage, he then got up, and walked over to the Science station. "Stavek, do you have everything you need to complete your recommendation to Starfleet?"

The Vulcan raised an eyebrow, "I do not have everything that I would need to be able to make a complete recommendation since we were not able to go to the third site. I would suggest that the *Taurus* could complete the mission at the third site for us, and forward the information to me, so that I may complete my analysis, and be able to make a recommendation to Starfleet Command."

"That is actually a good idea," said Marshall. He let out a slight smile as he walked away from Stavek, and back to the command chair easing down into it slowly.

"Sir," said Ensign Parker, "the *Taurus* is hailing us."

"Put them on screen," said Alex with a nod. He watched as the viewscreen changed from the view of space that had been displayed to the rugged face of Charles Whitman.

"Well, the Cardassians certainly made things interesting," said Whitman.

Marshall nodded, "Yes, they have the tendency to do that."

"At least we made quick work of them, but it looks like one of the ships that got away had Gul Naket on board," said Charlie.

"That is a shame," said Alex.

"The *Taurus* has been ordered to stay in the system along with the rest of the ships in the taskforce. That should allow you to proceed back to Starbase 47."

"Very good," said Captain Marshall as he felt a sense of relief. He thought for a moment, "Charlie, could you do me a favor?"

"Maybe," said Whitman, "what's that?"

Alex glanced over at Stavek before saying, "We didn't have time to investigate the third colony site before the Cardassians showed up. I thought maybe you, and your crew could finish that up for us."

Whitman nodded, "Once I'm confident things have calmed down with the Cardassians I'll see what I can do, and I'll send the *Renown*, and *Vancouver* back to the Solarion system."

"Thank you, Captain Whitman."

"Don't mention it, Captain Marshall," said Whitman. He smiled, and said, "And congratulations to Commander Zha'Thaal. The Ahwahnee is getting a fine captain."

"Thank you, sir," said Talra.

"*Taurus* out," said Whitman closing the comm channel as the Constellation-class starship was now displayed on the viewscreen.

Captain Marshall turned his chair toward the Tactical station. "Commander Talra, how would you feel about stopping by a starbase?" he asked.

She nodded in agreement, "I think we need that under the circumstances. Might I suggest Starbase 47?"

"Alright then," said Marshall as he turned the center seat back toward the viewscreen. "Helm, take us out of the system at best possible speed, and lay in a course for Starbase 47."

"Now on course to the starbase at warp six. We should arrive there in seventeen point six hours," said Lieutenant Stiles.

Captain Marshall smiled as he glanced around the Bridge. He was satisfied that the situation with the Cardassians was now dealt with, and they had taken the necessary precautions to alert Starfleet of any further incursions. "Commander Zha'Thaal, come with me. Commander Zarv, you have the conn."

“Why me?” asked the Tellarite as he got up from the Engineering station.

“Because nothing hardly ever happens when you’re in the center seat, and it’s time to make Talra’s promotion official.”

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