

## **Damn the Torpedoes! Part Three**

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## **Damn the Torpedoes! Part Three**

by [LordMcCoveyCove](#)

### Summary

#### **Season One, Episode Three of Star Trek: Full Speed Ahead (Series Premiere/Pilot)**

Stardate 43232.5: (continued from Part II) With the Farragut en route to the Tristnor facility, Captain Leone and her crew, along with the Kasui batallion aboard, meet heavy resistance in their attempt to steal the Alpha device and make it possible for them to return to Federation space. A fierce battle ensues and the know-how of the skeleton crew works to gain the upper hand in the struggle! Meanwhile, Wilson tries to come to terms with the knowledge that their return to the Federation means he must say goodbye to his friends aboard ship, and Greg weathers pressure from the captain to seek the promotion he's been avoiding for the past four years.

# Teaser

## Star Trek: Full Speed Ahead

By Lord McCovey Cove

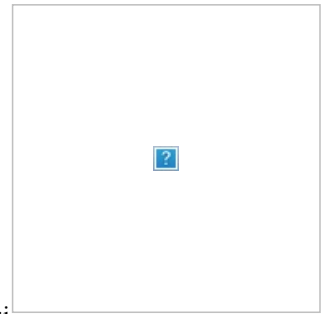
Episode Three: Damn the Torpedoes! Part III

NCC-60597 (USS *Farragut*)

En route to the Tristnor Research Facility

Stardate 43232.5

Main Bridge



The stars stretched long on the large main viewscreen on the bridge. Several hours at high warp from the Kasui fortress brought them to their waypoint, and the ship began to slow to sublight as it made the approach. Stars distorted by subspace returned to tiny points of light in the distance.

"Now entering the edge of sensor range of the facility, Captain," reported Lieutenant (jg) Gregory Aspinall. "We're approaching the position of the probe. Slowing to one-quarter impulse power."

Captain Krystine Leone accepted the information with a nod. "Wilson?"

Standing above her at the tactical station, Lieutenant Wilson Nieves reported, "I hold several contacts. The orbital facility, the minefield, and two vessels of similar design. I'd rate them as heavy cruisers in size."

"Tactical assessment?"

"Unless we find a way to manufacture more torpedoes, I'm afraid we will face extraordinary odds, sir."

"A cloaking device would've come in handy. Any thoughts on how we can approach the target, Mister Saleb?"

Saleb walked down the ramp from the engineering station and asked, "Is there any way to acquire more of your photon torpedoes, Captain? Perhaps your replicators?"

"Unfortunately, we're unable to replicate weapons, but we do have replacement warheads on board."

"I'm not sure I follow you, Captain."

She ignored him, instead ordering, "Tactical on main viewscreen."

Leone rose from her seat, eyeing the tactical display on the main viewscreen. "Wilson, collect the probe we launched and have it refitted for a warhead. In fact, start refitting all of our probes for warheads. How long?"

"Approximately three hours."

"That would give us...?"

Nieves paused as he checked the probe stores with a single command. "Eleven additional torpedoes."

"Very well, then," she said, placing her hands on her hips. "Greg, all stop."

Greg nodded. "Answering all stop, aye, aye, sir."

The captain's eyes never left the display. "People, we have to come up with a battle plan that'll require no more than twenty-five torpedoes."

Lieutenant Commander Ariel Elannis swiveled around from the operations console. "And here I thought you were going to ask us to do something difficult."

Leone smirked at her, but it didn't linger. In a stern tone, she addressed the bridge crew, "We need to be ready in less than three hours. Because by the time those probes are converted, we're going to take the fight to them."

## Act One

Lieutenant Wilson Nieves led the discussion in the observation lounge to the rear of the bridge, while the enlisted technicians worked on converting the probes. Although he had been designated as the chief of the tactical and security division aboard the ship, it was in an acting capacity until they returned to Federation territory. Under other circumstances, he might've found the situation a bit cruel considering that the position was one that he coveted greatly. For now, he put that aside to wrestle with the more important issues.

So far, the discussion was not going well.

"I don't see how a stand-up fight results in anything less than total destruction. Which, I don't need to remind you folks, is a bad thing."

Lieutenant (jg) Franklin Pinkerton complained, "If we could use the phaser arrays..."

"Even if we could," replied Wilson, "the modifications would likely take more time than we've got."

Ensign Yvonne Colby pointed out, "What if we didn't have to use the phasers to attack them?"

"You have a plan to attack them without using the phasers?"

Colby shrugged. "Maybe..."

Any other time, he might have given them room to grow into more confident officers. Unfortunately, that time was not now. His frustration with their hesitation wore his patience thin, and with a heavy sigh, he told them, "Out with it. This is no time to hide your light under a bush."

Colby and another ensign, Iris Wu, shared a glance. "Sir, Iris and I..."

"Sir, it's probably won't work," Wu said.

They weren't about to get away with that. Wilson narrowed his eyes at the pair and intoned, "I'm waiting, Ensigns."

"You tell him," said Colby, quietly.

Wu gave Colby the briefest of shocked looks before it eased and she accepted the responsibility. "Fine. Sir, I was just playing around with the notion that we could modify the navigational deflector to output a high-energy graviton pulse that might cause damage to a crystalline hull structure."

"After Lieutenant Bartlet finally finished repairing the deflector, you want her to go back and fuck it all up, again?" asked Wilson, though his heart wasn't in his tone. It was a good idea, one he had been considering, but the extent of the damage to the deflector prevented him from pursuing it. "What's your plan?"

Wu continued, "Yvonne, er... Ensign Colby and I, we feel that we can use the deflector as our new primary weapon. A directed pulse might give us the edge we'd need to use against them. In concert with the damage of our photon torpedoes..."

"How long?"

Wu looked at Colby briefly and asked, "Two?"

"Four, maybe," Colby replied, with a shake of her head.

"Two to four hours, if we cut corners."

Wilson slapped his combadge. "Nieves to Engineering."

"Engineering. Bartlet, here."

He smiled at the two ensigns. "Lieutenant, can you spare someone who knows the deflector dish like the back of his or her hand?"

Ariel picked up one of the holographic pieces off of the board and used it to knock away one of the captain's pawns. The white pawn formerly occupying the square skittered away until it "fell off" and disappeared. Shortly after, she returned her attention to the pass in her hand.

Leone frowned at the move, realizing that Ariel's knight was now in a position to attack part of the defensive strategy she worked hard to build at the beginning of the game. "I hate it when you do that," she muttered.

"Do what?" Ariel asked innocently.

"Knock the piece off, like that. It's damned unsportsmanlike."

"Stop making it so easy to take your pieces, then. Mate in six, by the way."

"What the hell?"

Ariel grinned. "If you can't see it, might as well resign, now." She never lifted her eyes from the padd.

It annoyed the hell out of Leone, but before the captain could even open her mouth, Ariel asked, "Come up with anything, yet?"

Leone shook her head. "Nothing worth mentioning. You?"

"A couple of ideas, but one requires more pilots than we have..."

"Using the shuttles as fighters? I thought about that, too, but we don't have a full crew aboard to really make that happen." Leone picked up another pawn and moved it one square up.

Ariel's rook came forth and knocked the pawn off in the same manner as before. "The other idea I had, which might be more plausible, is making modifications to the phaser array by way of the deflector dish."

The increased frustration over her friend's manner of capturing pieces dissolved instantly at the prospect of a good idea. "To do what?"

Ariel handed over the padd. "I think we might be able to do some beam damage to their ships, if we can tie in the deflector's graviton emitters to the tactical system. The phasers could be modified to carry a graviton pulse, but we'd only be able to fire one shot at a time."

"Shit, this actually has some promise," agreed Leone, her eyes scanning the padd quickly. "I like this. How long do you think?"

"That's the problem. I'd estimate five to six hours."

The intercom sounded before Leone's reply. Greg's voice called to her, "Bridge to Captain."

"Go ahead."

"Sir, we have movement by enemy contacts."

Without hesitation, both officers left the ready room and entered the bridge.

"Report."

Greg slipped out of the executive officer's seat and took over for the ensign at the helm. "Two more enemy contacts have appeared at the facility, and now one ship is moving on us at high speed, sir. We designated the contact as Sierra-Two."

"ETA?" asked Leone.

"Forty-five minutes."

Ariel did not relieve the lieutenant seated at ops, and moved to take the seat next to the center chair. "Think maybe they're a little afraid of us?"

"I would be," muttered Greg.

Leone ignored him. "How soon until they're in weapons' range?"

"Sierra-Two will be here in thirty minutes, if they maintain their present speed," replied the chief warrant officer at tactical. "Orders, sir?"

The captain settled into her seat. "Beat to quarters, Mister Reynolds. All hands to battle stations."

Chief Warrant Officer Andrew Reynolds chuckled at the use of the archaic naval term. "Aye, sir. Beating to quarters." His fingers tapped against the console and the ship responded accordingly with the wail of the red alert siren. Scarlet lighting sprang to life as the overhead illumination dimmed dramatically, allowing the consoles to light up the bridge.

The doors leading back to the observation lounge parted and Wilson arrived, along with the tactical officers and Lieutenant Bartlet. Wilson took over for Reynolds, while Petra took the engineering console.

"Engineering, transfer to bridge," she ordered the computer.

"Shields activated, all weapons systems are online," reported Wilson.

Ariel lifted her head to look at him. "Status on the probe conversions?"

There was a pause as he checked. "We're half-done, so far, Commander."

Leone tapped her fingers on the side of her chair, lost in thought. The viewscreen magnified their vantage of the incoming enemy ship; its angles seemingly menacing in the great distance between the ships.

"You're tapping again," whispered Ariel. "If you want to go fight them, let's go."

"You think that's a good idea?" asked Leone, matching the low tone of her friend's voice.

"We were counting on being outside their sensor range, and obviously, we're not. They were just waiting for backup to arrive so they could come get us."

"Maybe they want us to go after them."

"Maybe they want us to go away."

Leone glared at her. "Fine." In a louder voice, "Greg, move to intercept approaching enemy contact. Bring us into torpedo range."

"Aye, sir. Jumping to warp seven."

"Wilson, I want two of the torpedoes to be double-yield."

They heard the grin in his voice as he replied, "Double-yield, aye, sir. Two minutes to reload."

"I'll hold you to that," replied Leone.

Ariel snorted, folding her arms across her chest. "I guess we're about to show them that we're not fucking around."

Leone smiled, but said nothing in response.

Greg reported, "Captain, entering weapons range in sixty seconds."

"Looks like we're going to be about a minute late, then. Greg, evasive pattern beta."

"Aye, sir. Pattern beta executing in forty-seven seconds."

Wilson raised his voice, "They're firing. Two projectile contacts, bearing three-five-seven and zero-zero-one. Impact in twenty seconds."

Ariel breathed, "That was stupid of them. Helm, drop to impulse power."

"Captain?" asked Greg, turning his head.

Leone replied, "You heard her, Greg."

"Aye, sir." The viewscreen showed the drop from faster-than-light propulsion.

"Torpedoes have slowed to sublight. Impact in four years, seven month, eighteen days," reported Wilson. "I think we have time to prep those torpedoes."

Ariel shared a grin with Leone. "Just like the Cardassian border, eh?"

The captain nodded. "Distance to target?"

"Twenty-five million kilometers," reported Wilson. "They'll be on top of us in fifteen seconds."

"Are my torpedoes ready?"

"Ready and waiting."

"Good." Leone rose from her chair and walked to put a hand on Greg's shoulder. "I'm going to need a split-second warp jump from you on my mark. When I say go, I want you to take us to warp five, and put us as close as you can off their port bow."

Greg looked up at her, and made the necessary preparations. "Aye, sir."

"Wilson!"

"Sir?"

"Put a tactical display on screen, please."

The viewscreen blinked to show a top-down view of the local region of space. *Farragut* sat some distance away from the flashing red dot marked as Sierra-Two, which moved quickly toward them. The grid marked off the millions of kilometers until the range dropped considerably and closed in to mark off the half-millions. Finally, the range closed tightly, and:

"They're dropping to sublight, Captain. Seven hundred fifty thousand kilometers and closing at above full impulse," said Wilson quickly. "Looks like they have an advantage on us, there."

Leone's eyes never left the display, nor did she leave Greg's side. "Steady..."

"Five hundred thousand," counted off Wilson.

"Steady..."

"Four hundred thousand. They're firing torpedoes!"

"Steady..."

"Three hundred thousand. Impact in thirty seconds."

"Get ready, Greg."

Greg nodded. "Ready, sir."

"Two hundred thousand. Impact in twenty seconds."

"Now, Greg!"

He said nothing. The screen showed the sudden movement of the *Farragut* dot from one location to another. The torpedoes fired by the Tristnor ship lost track of them and it showed as they whirled around to locate their target again.

Leone turned. "Fire!"

"Torpedoes away, sir!"

"Switch to visual mode on main viewer."

Again, the viewscreen blinked and showed the torpedoes flying away. The close range of Sierra-Two made it nearly impossible to avoid the impacts. The first torpedo exploded against the hull of the ship, allowing the second torpedo to enter right behind it, just as they did with the first Tristnor vessel they encountered.

The captain quickly moved to her chair and tapped a finger on the console to her left to call up sensor data on the enemy ship. "Greg, relative course zero-nine-zero mark zero, warp nine. Engage!"

"Course laid in, sir. Jumping to warp nine."

Flaming debris from Sierra-Two swung out of view as *Farragut's* bow pointed away from the target. Without hesitation, the warp field generation distorted the sensor image slightly before the stars stretched long as soon as they stabilized their warp field.

"Sierra-Two is building up for detonation, sir. Looks like a self-destruct has been activated," reported Wilson calmly.

"As expected. Greg, alter course to take us to the facility. Let's get this thing over with, once and for all," ordered Leone.

"Altering course, aye, sir. ETA to the facility is now five minutes." The helmsman turned around after the ship's course changed. "If I might be permitted to ask, sir, where did you come up with a short warp hop like that?"

Before Leone could respond, Ariel chuckled. "That, Greg, was a little something called the 'Picard Manuever' and it was first pulled off at the Battle of Maxia about eleven years ago."

"That was a risky move," noted Wilson.

"How so?" asked Leone.

Wilson chuckled, "Well, didn't the Picard Manuever result in the loss of the *Stargazer*?"

"Y-Yes," stammered Leone, trying to sink into her chair a little bit to hide her blush as Ariel outed her tactic. She cleared her throat loudly. "Needless to say, the Nebula-class is of a far sturdier design than the aged Constellation-class. Also, I was relatively certain the Tristnor hadn't heard of that little trick, being all the way out here and all." With a bit more confidence, she told the bridge, "Let that be a lesson to you all to read up on your history a little more. You could learn a thing or two from the past."

Everyone seemed to find their own bit of amusement from the exchange as they turned their attention back to their respective duties.

Leone turned her head to look at Ariel with an arched eyebrow. "And you... why don't you inform Troopleader Bertas that his men should prepare for battle?"

## Act Two

Saleb caught up with Ariel as she made her way down to Cargo Bay Two. Captain Leone ordered the cargo bay converted to be used as a bunkhouse for the Kasui troops. Although they offered Troopleader Bertas use of the many staterooms available aboard the ship, he found them to be far too opulent for his men, and they required something more Spartan to promote the close-order infantry education he pursued with them.

"Good afternoon, Commander," he said as he fell into step with her. Saleb gave her a grin, and she replied in kind. "Off to see the Troopleader?"

Ariel suddenly skipped along the corridor and sang, "The Wonderful Troopleader of Kasui."

Taken aback, Saleb inquired, "Are you all right?"

"Sorry, just a little joke. Old Earth humor," she giggled. "Yes, I'm on my way to let him know we're ready to move into position for deployment."

"I see. I couldn't help but notice that you've managed to take a majority of the Kasui men in hand."

She smiled gamely. "In my somewhat limited experience, I've found that men are generally guided by universal constants. One of them is usually located somewhere around their genitalia."

"Obviously, you're right."

"Of course I am."

Saleb chuckled at her confidence. "I suppose with your experience, you've gained some wisdom. And a stellar sense of self."

"Oh, how so?"

"Well, for one, you seem to have little compunction for your captain prostituting you to further her own aims. One might assume that she cares little for her officers to abuse them in such a manner. Is that typical of Starfleet captains?"

He never saw it coming. One moment he was walking alongside her and the next, he felt the painful and loud slap of his back against the nearest bulkhead; Ariel's arm underneath his neck, threatening to choke him. Saleb didn't know what to find more surprising: her speed or her strength. The fury in her eyes drained all the self-assuredness he had prior to his verbal misstep, and the lack of air into his lungs prevented speech. He could only wheeze in pain, his arms reaching up to grab at hers.

She wouldn't budge.

With a humorless smirk on her face, she informed him through gritted teeth, "I might find you amusing at times, Mister Saleb, and I'm sure you think you're a charming little man, but you don't get to disparage Krystine without a little punishment."

He gasped out, "Sorry!"

Ariel relented, letting his feet touch the deck again. "I suppose I'll let you live, since you're new to this ship."

Saleb's hand rubbed at his throat. "I apologize profusely, Commander. I had no idea..."

She adjusted her uniform, as it had bunched up at the midsection with her arms raised up as they were before. With a quick tug on the jacket, it smoothed out with a snap. "You do, now. Keep it in mind."

With his eyes wide, he nodded. "Most certainly."

The lieutenant commander, for whom he now had elevated respect, continued her brisk stride down the corridor as though nothing had happened. Her demeanor appeared to hold no malice toward him or anyone else; she moved as though she had no care in the world. When she noticed he drifted behind her, she smiled at him. "Are you coming?"

Unsure of his footing with her, he asked meekly, "May I?"

"Sure," she said, confused by his sudden shyness. "Look, you apologized. As long as you don't fuck up, I'm not going to bite your head off."

Saleb pressed his lips together and approached her. "My neck and I will try to avoid... 'fucking up.'"

"Good. It's the aim of us all, wouldn't you say?"

"Agreed." He said, hesitantly, "I suppose you and Captain Leone have a more dynamic relationship than I've perceived."

They stopped moving just outside the entrance to the cargo bay, where her hands fluttered over the control panel. The door parted with a loud sliding noise, and Ariel turned to him. "You have no idea."

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*Farragut's* shields flared under the impact of the crystalline torpedoes. The explosive shards reflected off and away from the ship. Inside, however, the ship took the brunt of the impact as the inertia dampening systems lagged slightly. The three Tristnor ships moved to swarm up toward the Federation heavy cruiser, making sure to do whatever was necessary to deter them from their goal.

Leone's hands gripped the sides of her chair to steady her through the lurching of the hull. "Damage report."

Petra quickly replied, "Shields holding at ninety-three percent. No other damage to ship systems, sir."

"Evasive pattern omega," ordered Leone quickly. "Wilson, how close are we to the facility?"

"Close enough, but we'll have to time this right," he replied. "More torpedoes inbound, Captain. The facility does not appear to have any weapons that I can see, but that minefield's got to come down before we can start transporting the troops aboard."

"First things first," said the captain. "They seem to be following some sort of coordinated pattern of attack." She pointed to the tactical display on the screen. "Like a trio of insects, attacking from all sides at once." Another lurch of the deck as a torpedo collided with the shields brought her hand back down to brace her.

"Captain, the Second Battle of Keldan Prime," called Greg. "I remember it from my Starfleet Tactics class."

She searched inward for any memory of that battle. "Go on, Greg."

"Three-to-one odds. Three Klingon D-7s versus the *Excalibur* during the first Klingon war."

Wilson snapped his fingers. "Right! The tractor beam!"

Leone shook her head, having no clear memory of the tactic, but she placed her confidence in theirs. "Coordinate your efforts, gentlemen. Greg has the conn."

Greg's shock was written all over his face. "Sir?!"

"You heard me. You know it better than I do."

"A-Aye, sir. Uh, Lieutenant Nieves, sir? I'm going to bank us hard about in ten seconds. I should put the emitter within range of the first vessel, and then we'll jump out at full impulse power with the third."

Wilson grinned. "I'm looking forward to it, Lieutenant. At your command."

Greg began to count it off, and Leone noted the tremor in the young man's voice. When the countdown reached one, the ship rolled very suddenly, keeping the same side to each ship as they maneuvered around *Farragut*. "Now, Lieutenant!"

"Activating tractor beam," announced Wilson. The beam lanced out and grabbed hold of one of the ships.

"Reversing roll maneuver," said the helmsman as his hands flew across the console. The Tristnor vessel locked in their grip moved with them... and into the hull of the other Tristnor ship moving in the opposite direction.

"Releasing tractor beam."

"Moving to the direct us to the other ship."

"Activating the tractor. We've got him."

"Reversing course, full impulse," reported Greg. "This may get a little bumpy, folks."

On the screen, the two Tristnor ships seemed to scrape and vibrate against one another until it became too much. The hulls of both the ships gave way as both of them attempted to alter their course away from one another, but without the benefit of knowing which way the other would go, they made the wrong decision and intensified the collision with disastrous results. Both ships disintegrated as fragments flew in all directions, like two shattered mirrors colliding at high speed.

*Farragut* shuddered under the impact of two more torpedoes fired from the vessel they had a hold of. "Greg..." warned Leone.

"Aye, sir," replied Greg. He called back to Wilson, "Lieutenant, we should be able to dispatch this guy with a couple of torpedoes, now."

"With pleasure." She heard the near-glee in Wilson's tone as he spoke. "Torpedoes away!"

And away they were, as yet again the hulls of the enemy vessel proved ineffective against the antimatter warheads of their photon torpedoes. The tractor released them and the remaining Tristnor vessel drifted, powerless.

"Any sign of a power buildup in their core, Wilson?" asked Leone.

"No, sir. Not that I can see, so far. It's possible we might have disabled their command computer."

"Or killed their command crew," offered Greg.

Wilson leaned forward. "Should we finish them off, sir?"

Leone considered that thought, but Starfleet regulations were clear. "No. They're in no position to mount a defense, right now. But, it gives me an idea." She tapped the communications control on her chair. "Bridge to Elannis."

"Elannis, here. Go ahead, Captain."

"Commander, is Troopleader Bertas with you?"



"Yes, sir. Along with Mister Saleb."

"Good. Troopleader, we have a Tristnor vessel dead in space. Would you like to add a ship to your faction's collection?"

Bertas' gravelly voice seemed to bounce off the bulkheads. "It would be my pleasure to take such a prize off of your hands. I can have a platoon ready for transport shortly."

"Very good. Commander, take them to the nearest transporter room and stand by to beam them out." The captain ordered, "Wilson, as soon they're beamed aboard, we move to our primary objective."

"Yes, sir. Have you any thoughts as to how to dispatch the minefield?"

Leone tapped her fingers along the side of her chair, but Ariel was still coordinating the troops below decks. "Since the lot of us seem to be taking our cues from the past... Wilson, do you remember the Battle of Vorkado?"

Wilson grinned. "I'm on it, sir." He slapped his commbadge. "Mister Reynolds, I need another two torpedoes, double-yield."

The chief warrant officer replied in good humor. "Right away, Lieutenant. Give me sixty seconds and they'll be ready in the forward tubes."

As soon as the channel closed, Wilson chuckled. "Everyone should have a chief warrant like that."

"I'll make sure to put one in your Christmas stocking this year," Leone remarked out of the side of her mouth. "I have the conn," she added, realizing that she hadn't yet taken her back from Greg. "Well done, Greg."

"I follow in your fine example, Captain," oozed Greg.

Leone bristled, but Wilson managed to get in a choice phrase. "Little something on your nose, Lieutenant."

Greg reached up to brush at it, and then turned his head to fix Wilson with a glare when he realized the joke.

They didn't have to wait long when Reynolds contacted the bridge to let them know the torpedoes were ready for use.

"Fire when ready, Wilson," ordered Leone.

"Aye, sir. Firing torpedo number one." The torpedo advanced quickly and entered the minefield. Wilson said nothing. The phaser beam lanced out and hit the torpedo with deadly accuracy, causing the casing to breach and the warhead to explode with its double-yield warhead taking out a majority of the mines on the one side of the facility.

"Damage to our target?"

Wilson scanned the station quickly. "Minimal. No signs of fracturing."

"Very well. Continue."

"Aye, sir. Firing torpedo number two." The same phaser beam lanced out and impacted against the torpedo, causing another large chunk of the minefield to explode prematurely. The collective energy being released looked very impressive on the screen.

Leone smiled, rising up from her seat. As she was about to give the order to proceed, Wilson interrupted her.

"We have a new problem!"

"What?"

Wilson's tone was urgent. "The facility is building up a power overload. They're going to self-destruct!"

"Greg, full impulse. Get us within transporter range!" She whirled back around to face the viewscreen. If the facility destroyed itself, it would take the only way home with it.

## Act Three

News of the facility's impending destruction put Ariel and Saleb in with the first wave of troops. Ariel carried a menacing-looking rifle that she called a "Type-3." Saleb wielded a smaller "Type-2." He wondered how small the "Type-1" was, and Ariel shook her head at him.

"Trust me, you want people to know you're carrying," she said as she checked her weapon and stepped onto the transporter platform. "You ready to go?"

Saleb honestly wasn't. Like him, everyone wore a copy of the Starfleet insignia on their chest. Each one prepared to provide the starship's computer system with information on their general health, as well as a position within the facility in case of the need for emergency beamout. The likelihood of that increased exponentially unless he could find and disable the system controlling the power buildup in the facility's reactor core. "I suppose I am, yes," he said, after she fixed him with a glare.

He stepped up onto the transporter pad, grateful that the only Kasui fighting on the facility would be the ones on his side. The Tristnor did not trust the "lower" races with a research project of this magnitude. There would only be Tristnor security forces to deal with, and even then, they would rather rely on their technology than brute strength. Maybe they'd make it out of there in one piece, after all.

Ariel slapped the side of her rifle and let it rest underneath her bosom as the strap went taut over her shoulder. "Fine, stick to me, then. You get me to where we need to be and Bertas' guys will handle the rest."

There was no way in hell he would ever leave her side. "I'll try."

Just before the transporter beam carried them off, she shot him a look. "Don't try. *Do!*"

The transporter room disappeared and the familiar Tristnor design of the research facility came into view through the blue, shimmering light of the transporter beam. Ariel had her rifle out and ready in a crouch while Saleb felt the fear coursing through every part of his body.

He brought out his phaser, watching at the tip of it seemed to tremble as he pointed it in any direction. He realized it was his grip that caused the phaser's aim to waver so quickly and he tried to steady it as much as he could. It was one thing to talk and think about the situation; quite another to actually be there.

They watched as many of the facility's crew seemed to be panicking. The reptilian-looking humanoids ran to their destinations.

Saleb recognized the multi-colored strip of Tristnor security upon one of them. "W-We need to move quickly!" he shouted to Ariel. "Down that corridor then to the right."

Ariel nodded. She gestured to the platoon leader that transported with them. "Bitras! We're going to need you to clear the corridor from here to the first intersection. Saleb's going to need a lot of breathing room."

Bitras growled, "Understood. First squad, with me. Second squad, bring up the rear. Third squad, guard Mister Saleb." The Kasui troops moved accordingly and they were left with six burly men with huge weapons out of the nineteen that transported with them.

"Lead the way, Saleb!" shouted Ariel. "Can we disable the destruct?"

They ran down the corridor as the Kasui fired clear ahead of them. "I don't know until I can gain access to a terminal," replied Saleb. He pointed as they turned the corner. "Third hatch on the left hand side will be the main testing laboratory!"

"Bitras!" Ariel called.

"I heard! First squad, kick in the door!"

The door was kicked in, Kasui-style. Meaning there was little to no door left when they opened fire. Saleb moved inside after the first squad cleared the room.

Several dead Tristnor lay around, and he shivered at the sight. He worked with nearly all of them, and recognized the Alpha device sitting within the cradle. "They never even tried to save it," he muttered.

"Is that a little odd?" asked Ariel, keeping her weapon pointed toward the exit, along with the rest of the Kasui.

"I'm checking it out."

"How much time do we have?"

Saleb immediately jumped onto an active terminal. The facility's self-destruct sequence was activated on a countdown of nearly eleven minutes, of which close to six were left. He accessed the main computer and requested a complete shutdown of the system, to no avail. "The command processor is not accepting my requests. I think the head scientist might have locked out the processor to prevent anyone from doing what we're trying to do. Do you want me to see if I can kill the main system?"

Ariel shook her head. "Let's grab the device and get the fuck out of here!"

With a nod, he whipped out his Starfleet tricorder and scanned the Alpha device. "Wait," he said.

"Wait, what?" Ariel moved behind him, peering down at the tricorder over his shoulder.

"This is strange. The device shouldn't be giving me..." He looked up at it and then turned to Ariel with an expression of shock. "It's a fake!"

She didn't miss a beat, instead moving closer to him. "Where the hell is it?"

Saleb moved back to the terminal and checked the logs of the research team running the experiment. He had to do a regular expression search on all of the text-based logs before he found the transfer order. "You're not going to believe this..."

"What?" Ariel replied, annoyed. "Cut out the dramatics!"

"It's already installed on the test ship. The frigate I told you about," he explained. "They launched it earlier today, ahead of schedule. Probably before we got into sensor range."

"Don't care. Where is it?"

"I'm looking for it."

"Hurry up."

Saleb sighed. She was almost as bad as Belkis. "I have the transponder frequency." He entered in a few more commands. "I'm transmitting it to your ship."

Ariel slapped her commbadge. "Elannis to *Farragut*."

"*Farragut*, here. Go ahead, Commander," replied Leone over the channel.

"Captain, the frequency we just transmitted is the transponder of the frigate that presently has the Alpha device."

Like Ariel, she was all business. "Good to know. Status?"

"Do you want us to attempt to find the Beta device?"

"Only if you have time. Wilson says you have less than five minutes to get the hell out of there."

"Indeed, we do, sir."

"Mister Saleb?"

He perked up. "Yes, Captain?"

"How far away is the Beta device from your present location?"

Saleb looked around. "Ordinarily, it would be in the lab, Captain. However, it seems my former colleagues may have absconded with it or secured it in a new location." He turned his attention back to the screen. "I'm attempting to locate it, now."

"The clock is ticking, Mister Saleb."

He sighed, shaking his head as he entered in the necessary commands to scan the new directory. "No one is more aware of that than I, sir."

"Three minutes, and then we're beaming the whole lot of you back," ordered Leone quickly. "*Farragut*, out."

Saleb opened his mouth to say something derogatory about the captain's impatience, but remembered the altercation in the corridor with Ariel and thought better of it. He placed a finger on his lip, trying to pass it off as a thoughtful look, instead. The scan against the computer's information ran in the background as he starting locking down the communications subsystem access.

Then, the information appeared. "It's three levels down. Straight down."

"Is anyone down there?"

He ran a quick lifeform scan. "It looks like half of the garrison is down there. It's a smaller lab, though. Two points of entrance."

Ariel shook her head. "Not to worry. It's why I brought extras of these," she said, pulling out another commbadge. She tapped it and called to the transporter room on the *Farragut*. "I need a site-to-site for this signal. Stand by to transport."

"Standing by, Commander."

She walked over to the large platoon leader and pulled two grenades from his belt. "I need to borrow these for a minute."

The Kasui eyed her. "You're giving them back?"

Ariel smirked and walked away. "Chief, lock onto the commbadge. Transport one weapon three levels below us, one meter to port. The other, one meter to starboard."

"Understood."

She activated both grenades, then set the commbadge upon them. "Chief, fire in the hole."

"Energizing."

Both grenades disappeared in a shimmering light. Shortly after, the facility rocked from an internal explosion. She pointed to him. "Scan again."

"No lifeforms, but then you might've destroyed the Beta device."

Ariel shrugged. "Better that they should be deprived of it." She looked up at the ceiling, "Chief, you still with this?"

"Yes, sir."

"Site-to-site, everyone in this room to the lab three levels down. Energize, when ready."

"I have you locked on, already, sir. Energizing."

Saleb's seated position fell out from under him when he rematerialized in the smoky lab. The fire alarm sounded off as he fell to the floor with his balance gone. He got to his feet, coughing through the acrid taste of the burning circuits and scarred flesh that hung within the secondary lab. His watering eyes searched around for the housing of the Beta device.

He found the signage for the device. "It should be right over there, within the reinforced storage..." The lid that secured it appeared to have been torn from its housing completely and the contents, whatever they might have been, were melted into unrecognizable pieces. "It's gone."

Ariel sniffed at it, peering into the box. "'Gone' as in it was taken?"

"'Gone' as in it was destroyed by your grenades."

"Huh." She looked at him. "And it was housed in this? You're sure?"

"Absolutely."

"That's too bad."

"I can only hope that Captain Leone agrees with your assessment."

She smiled sweetly at him. "No sense crying over spilt milk. Let's get back to the ship before this place goes up."

## Act Four

Within her ready room, Leone heaved a sigh immediately after listening to Ariel's report of the away mission. *Farragut* moved well beyond the range of the detonation blast, in pursuit of the transponder signal. "Well, it would have been nice to have that device, certainly... but I'm pleased that the Tristnor were deprived of it, instead."

Ariel turned to look at Saleb, giving him a smirk. "Told you."

Saleb rolled his eyes.

Leone ignored them both. "What about the research? Is it in any danger of being attempted again?"

"The protocol for destruct sequences is all aboard must perish, preventing the research from falling into the wrong hands," explained Saleb quickly. "The frigate was outside the protocol, but it's not likely they were able to communicate the problem to them. The frigate and the facility would have been observing radio silence with one another."

"Any vessels go along for observation?" asked Ariel.

"Maybe one or two shuttles..."

The captain leaned back in her chair. "What I wouldn't give for a cloaking device right now..."

Ariel nodded sympathetically.

"Fine. We're already on course for the transponder signal. If we approach them at high warp, we're going to tip our hand," said Leone, placing her right palm atop the armrest of the chair. "Mister Saleb, how long before they activate the device?"

"Thirty hours, give or take ten minutes," he replied.

Ariel wrinkled her nose. "Give or take?"

"We don't mark time the same way the Federation does."

"Ah."

Leone leaned forward, placing her elbows upon the desk. "We have around ten hours to track them down and get what we need, then get the hell-"

"Bridge to Captain," interrupted Wilson. "Sir, incoming transmission from the Kasui aboard the cruiser."

She touched the panel on the desk. "Patch them through in here, please, Wilson. Thank you."

The desktop terminal's small screen blinked once and the stern visage of Troopleader Bertas appeared. "Captain."

"Troopleader. How can we help you?"

"It is we who can help you, Captain." Bertas swung the visual input wildly until it settled upon a device connected to some sort of massive system.

Saleb nearly squealed. "It's the Alpha device!"

"We thought so, based on the description you provided us," said Bertas. "The frigate must have been a decoy."

"They must've thought we would destroy the ship... or they would destroy us," reasoned Saleb, his tone lessening under the startled looks of Leone and Ariel. "Either way, we wouldn't get the device."

Bertas grunted, "It is foolish thing to underestimate your opponent."

Saleb grinned. "In this case, I think it's more like they had a rather inflated sense of their strength."

"Be that as it may," interrupted Leone pointedly. She addressed the screen once more, "Troopleader, might we trade a tow back to the fortress for that handy little device of yours?"

"Agreed, Captain. After all, you've provided us with a first-hand look at Tristnor ship construction," boomed Bertas with a toothy smile. "This will bolster our side of the war handily."

"Of course." Leone's eyes looked to Ariel.

Ariel nodded, lifting herself out of her seat. "I'll alter course, sir." With that, she disappeared behind the ready room doors to take the conn.

"Creepy, how you two do that," noted Saleb, under his breath.

Leone smirked. "Troopleader, we should be en route to you now."

"Excellent. We await your arrival. Out." The screen cleared to show the Starfleet insignia before shutting down completely. The stars

outside the deck-to-ceiling window moved as the ship made its turn back toward

Saleb asked, "Captain, now that you have the Alpha device, will you be returning to your Federation?"

"Of course."

"Might I appeal to you to delay your return?"

Leone tilted her head. "Why?"

He rose from his seat, placing his hands behind his back. "I know this isn't your war, Captain, but we could really use your assistance." She opened her mouth, but he raised a hand, "Now, please, let me finish."

Perturbed at being cut off, Leone pressed her lips together. "Very well."

"Thank you. As I said, your assistance would come during a time when our resources have run very low. Prior to the capture of the Tristnor vessel, the Kasui have been fending off the Tristnor advances through acts of sabotage and terrorism. Now that you're here, you've been able to provide them with the means of a frontal assault. You have successfully elevated the level of warfare against them. I'm sure that's beyond what your 'Prime Directive' entails, does it not?"

"The actions that I've taken, Mister Saleb, were in the best interests of my ship and crew. It was in our best interests to defend ourselves against an attacking ship," she replied, keeping her tone even. "It is not in the best interests to put this ship, with less than a quarter of its total crew, into a war we have nothing to do with."

Saleb's voice raised slowly with each word he spoke, "You have *everything* to do with it, Captain. Don't you see that, now? You're here. You've destroyed five of their ships! You're in the fight, with us."

"No," she said, shaking her head. "I've bent the Prime Directive enough... to last me more than a lifetime, I'm sure. I don't agree with your logic."

"Captain, I brought you here-"

"Against our will," interjected Leone, her tone making it clear that the conversation was beginning to wear her patience thin.

"Nevertheless-"

"Oh, look at that," she said, looking down at her wrist. "Time's up."

Saleb blinked. "I'm sorry?"

"No, I'm sorry. Look, I appreciate your... position. Under other circumstances, I might even agree with you. I have a duty to Starfleet and the Federation, but my first duty is to my ship," said the captain, rising to meet his gaze. "I realize that we might've blown a few doors open for you guys in the past few days, but at no time did I ever make an agreement that we would provide... *quid pro quo*."

"*Quid pro* what?"

"It's a Latin phrase; an old Earth language. It means, 'something-for-something.' In this case, the expectation that simply because we're here, doesn't mean we'll provide you with anything." Leone moved from behind her desk to look out her window. "Needless to say, if anything, I think you owe us for the inconvenience, but since we're going home, I think we'll call it even. You're dismissed."

Saleb approached her. In a pleading tone, he tried again, "But, Captain..."

She fixed him with an angry glare. "I've already extended you the courtesy of discussing my decision. Do not make me regret it."

Defeated, Saleb nodded silently. "I... apologize for pressing the matter without thinking."

Leone's expression softened slightly. "I appreciate that you had to try."

"Thank you, Captain."

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*Captain's Log*  
*Stardate 43233.1*

*We have completed towing the disabled Tristnor vessel back to the Kasui fortress, where it has been accepted with open arms by the Kasui Prime Barris. In exchange for the prize of war, Barris has gifted us with the Tristnor Alpha device we sought from the Tristnor facility. Additionally, Barris has declared a day-long celebration of this victory in their struggle against their oppressors.*

*Meanwhile, Lieutenant Bartlet is overseeing Mister Saleb's sanctioned installation of the Alpha device into our navigational deflector systems. I'm certain that she will be keeping a close eye on him, considering the last time he made such a dramatic alteration to our deflector dish without authorization. It is my sincere hope that we might be able to deliver this device intact following our return, for Starfleet to use as an alternate means of propulsion.*

*I've authorized the crew to utilize the fortress facilities for the day. I hope to get underway for home, tomorrow morning.*

"Half of me wishes we didn't have to go back," admitted Wilson. He sat at one of the tables closest to the viewport within the ship's lounge, sitting over a drink he barely touched. His right hand ran through his shaggy brown hair leaving the strands of his hair even more disheveled

than usual.

To his left, Ariel frowned and put a hand on his forearm. "You don't mean that."

He looked at her with one of his eyebrows cocked up. "Of course I don't."

"You don't want to have to leave the ship."

"Yeah."

She sighed, dropping her hand to the table gently. Wilson's intent to become a part of *Farragut's* senior staff was cut short by Krystine's inexplicable decision to go with another officer. "Do you want me to talk to her for you?"

Wilson shook his head. "No..."

"Okay-"

"Yes?" he said quickly. "I don't know."

Ariel half-smiled. "Make up your mind, Willie."

"I don't want you to talk to her, if you think she's going to think that I asked you to. The last thing I want to do is cause her trouble. On the other hand..."

She nodded. "I know. And I doubt it would be much trouble to her if I pulled her aside and slapped some sense into her. I still don't know what she was thinking when she passed you over."

Wilson waved her off. "She was thinking about the needs of the ship."

"She told me she didn't want you tied to her career."

"But you're here."

She threw her hands up in the air. "That's what I said!"

Neither of them said anything further for a moment, sharing nothing more than a grin as they fell back into their old conversational pattern on the *Potemkin*. Wilson broke the silence between them with a simple, "It's up to her."

"Yeah," she agreed.

"Don't get me wrong... I think she's a brilliant CO. Born to the captain's chair unlike any officer I've served with."

Ariel snorted, "In some ways, that's literally true."

Wilson gave her a sidelong glance. "I know she was born with a golden commbadge in her mouth, but she doesn't act like it. I've always liked her a great deal. All I wanted was to make sure I'd be there to see her make history."

"Me, too," she said quietly; her eyes drifted down to the table.

He reached out to cover her hand with his. He felt like a heel for having tread on sensitive territory. "You never told her?"

Ariel shook her head and gave him a slight shrug. "What's the point?"

Wilson squeezed her hand. "I've always admired your courage. But, at the same time, I wish you'd find your happiness."

"I will, Willie." When he doubted her with a look, she placed her other hand over his. "I promise you. Don't worry about me."

"I can't help it. You're a friend."

"And you're mine."

He smiled, unable to meet her gaze as she looked at him. "Thank you."

"And as my friend, I'll speak to Kryz about finding you a place, here. I think you've proven yourself more than enough these past few days." Ariel patted his hand, but released her gentle grip on him to reach for her drink.

"What about you?"

"What about me?"

"You should be the new XO. Not acting."

"Here, here," said a newcomer, standing over them.

Gregory Aspinall gave them a large grin as he had apparently overheard the last part of their conversation. Off their looks of surprise, he dropped his grin. "Sorry. Should I leave?"

Wilson deferred to Ariel with a glance. She smiled. "No... no, grab a chair."

The lounge was mostly empty, due to the celebration on the fortress at full throttle. With a majority of the crew enjoying themselves, the darkened lounge would have been party central, but not that night.

Greg slipped into a chair, placing his drink on the table. "Thank you, sirs."

"Hey," said Ariel sharply. "There's no rank in this room. You know the rules. You're lucky there's hardly anyone here or else we'd make you buy everyone a round."

"Right, right... sorry."

"I don't know," said Wilson, "I think we should make him buy us a round, at least."

Ariel chuckled. She gestured with her nearly full glass. "He can buy you one, but I'm still nursing this."

"I'll consider it a rain check, then," replied Greg. "Anyway, you guys were discussing permanent assignments?"

Wilson eyed Greg through the bottom of his glass as he tilted it back to drain the contents. "I was just mentioning that our captain should consider removing the word 'acting' from her title."

"I couldn't agree more."

"Aw, boys, you're making a girl blush over here, now," said Ariel, taking on a demure expression by bringing her chin in to her chest. Her raven hair fell over her cheeks to obscure her face, but not her eyes.

That drew a snort from Wilson. "Hah! I'm sure you could tell us stories that would make a Risian blush."

Greg could only nod slowly; his eyes never left the lieutenant commander as she worked her natural beauty before him.

Wilson shook quietly with laughter. "Greg?"

"Yeah?"

"Put your tongue back in your mouth, son."

"What?" Greg leaned back and looked down, while his hand moved up. "Oh... right. Sorry, Commander." He looked like he just committed an egregious sin against her.

Ariel smiled warmly at the young helmsman. "It's quite all right, Greg. Believe it or not, I'm flattered."

"No seducing the help, now," said Wilson, his voice also wavering a bit. For all the chastising he might've given Greg, he empathized with the lieutenant.

With a guilty look, she gritted her teeth. "My apologies, gentlemen, for inadvertently attacking your Academy-instilled sense of discipline. Perhaps I should take my leave you both, and let you drink in peace?"

"No!" said Greg quickly, and a bit louder than he intended. He cleared his throat. "I mean, no... don't let us chase you away from the table."

"Yeah, Ariel. You leave, now, and all I have to look at is his ugly mug," Wilson said, gesturing with his hand toward Greg.

The helmsman rolled his eyes. "You're no prize, yourself."

"All kidding aside," she told them, "I should probably see to the paperwork I've been letting go. We're heading back tomorrow, and no doubt, Starfleet's going to want all their reports in a nice tidy packet to transmit the minute we show up on their sensors."

"About that..." started Wilson.

Ariel tilted her head. "Yes?"

"Do you think... I mean, is it possible that Starfleet might relieve the captain for what she's done?"

She looked at Greg briefly, before giving Wilson a smile. "I doubt it. Too many people want her to succeed to let a little something like a three day trip to the Beta Quadrant stand in their way."

Wilson released a held breath and nodded. "Good to know."

"Even if they did send out someone from the Inspector General's office, I doubt they'd get too far the moment Admiral T'Cirya found out about it."

"If they do," said Wilson softly, "you have to keep that temper of yours in check."

Ariel drew her lips together sourly. "Do I have to?"

"I'm sure it would help her cause if you did. No telling what happens, if you try to shove an IG agent out the nearest airlock."

She pouted. "I guess you're right."

Wilson eyed her. "This is one of those times, Ariel, when I can't tell if you're joking or not."



Ariel showed off all her teeth in a large smile. "With any luck, neither will they. Good night, you two. Don't stay up too late."

Both officers watched her leave, and then shared a worried look.

Greg asked with a scoff, "She has a temper?"

Wilson grinned. "You think I'm joking?"

"Maybe."

"If you think I'm lying, I could arrange a demonstration for you."

"Really?"

"Of course. I've been looking for an excuse to make popcorn."

## Act Five

Ariel was right. She did spend more time in the ready room than she did in her own quarters, thought Captain Leone as she stared out toward the stars. She brought the cool glass of iced tea to her lips and took a long quaff from it. The heavy base of the glass felt good in her hand when she brought it back down to rest atop the smooth surface of her desk.

Iced tea first thing in the morning helped shake the cobwebs of a deep sleep, she had discovered during her time as a lieutenant serving aboard the starship *Victory*. The smell alone woke her up, like a strong brew of fresh coffee. Coffee might have been the first choice of many captains, including her own mother, but it often left Leone with a sour stomach. Tea became her best-tasting alternative.

By the time she finished with the one glass she allowed herself before starting her morning duty, she settled into the chair behind her desk and began to review the reports filed the previous night. Not all of them, of course, but the ones marked for her special attention by her acting executive officer. Every now and again, Leone's lips would curl up into a smile as she read some of the notations scribbled into the reports.

Ariel's wit laced the reports of the chief engineer, who made unofficial accusations of Petra's scrutiny of Mister Saleb's completed alterations to the ship's navigational deflector seem as though she really had the hots for him, rather than contempt for what he had done to her ship. Leone laughed out loud a few times before she closed the file and pushed herself away from the desk to stride out onto the nearly empty bridge.

"Good morning," said a too-cheery Greg, seated in the executive officer's seat.

"Good morning, Greg," replied Leone as she sat next to him. "You know, when you have the conn, you can feel free to use my chair. It's incredibly comfy."

Greg rose from the seat and stood to address her with his hands behind her back. "I'm sure it is, sir, but I wouldn't dare presume sit in your chair while you're on deck one."

"My, oh, my... you are getting very good at this conn-sitting, Greg."

"Sir?"

Leone divided her attention between the right-hand console of her chair and him. "I mean, you outmaneuver three enemy ships with a tractor beam and fancy flying, and then you're acting like a respectful XO keeping a watchful eye on the ship while the captain's amusing herself in her ready room."

"I guess so, sir."

"I meant it as a compliment. You've done really well for yourself since you got here."

"I appreciate that."

"I'm sure you do. So, let me ask you a question."

Greg tilted his head, but nodded. "Of course, sir."

She sighed. "You have four years' service in Starfleet since graduation... why haven't you put your name forth for consideration for promotion to full lieutenant?"

He reseated himself next to her, not wanting the conversation to drift to the operations station, where a chief petty officer sat watch. Lowering his voice, so as not to raise the ears of their comrades, he nearly hissed at her, "Kryssie, why're you bugging me about my career?"

Leone leaned over and smiled as he used her rather ancient nickname from when he was a child. "That's 'Captain Kryssie' to you, young sir." Off of his pained expression, she chuckled softly. "You don't think I'm not going to hear it from your mother?"

"God, leave her out of it."

"Tell her, that. It'll save me a lot of trouble."

Greg raised a hand to his forehead. "I'm not asking for any special treatment, now. I'm just doing my job."

"And doing it really well, Greg. I entrusted you with the ship, and you didn't let me down."

His cheeks warmed and colored red as she praised him. "Do me a favor, please... don't put that in your report. Next thing you know, I'm going to be expected to do that on a regular basis, and I don't think I could handle that kind of pressure."

Leone smirked. "Oh, Greg... if you didn't want that kind of pressure, you're in the wrong place, my friend."

"With all due respect, Captain Kryssie, I think we're all in the wrong place."

---

They said their goodbyes, in spite of their slight bitterness that they would leave them behind to take care of their own war. Prime Barris expressed his sadness to see Ariel leave there part of the Beta Quadrant behind, but she assured him that he would find someone in the future to see his considerable needs. That exchange drew an amused glance from Captain Leone.

When it came time for Saleb and Belkis to bid them farewell, they offered to provide *Farragut* with extra personnel to see them through the long journey home, but Leone refused. She saw through the obvious ploy to convey refugees safely into the Federation, but enough regulations had been mangled for one excursion.

Barris shook hands with Leone. "While I can't say this for certain, Captain, I sincerely hope this isn't the last time we'll meet."

"With all due respect, Prime," she replied, "we've got our own problems to handle back at home. But, thanks all the same, for your generous hospitality."

"If you should ever pass this way again..." start Saleb.

"We'll be sure to look you up," promised Leone.

---

Petra maintained a vigilant watch on the quantum field generator attached to the deflector. She personally reconfigured her engineering console to provide her with real-time data from the subsystems affected. By the time she finished, the engineering station looked nothing like a standard matter/anti-matter reaction chamber-driven propulsion monitor, as it would under normal operating conditions.

Captain Leone ordered the ship to a safe distance from the fortress, but not too far outside the defense perimeter, in case they should fall under attack by wayward members of the Tristnor Hegemony. In spite of Mister Saleb's constant assurances that the field wouldn't harm the fortress, she did not want to take any chances.

After a small period of system adjustment, Petra announced her satisfaction, "Ready, here, Captain."

"Thank you, Petra," replied Leone. "Wilson, take us to general quarters." She wanted everyone to be alert and ready, in case the worst happened. However, being that they would be inside a quantum field, she wasn't sure if a typical abandon ship order would be carried out while the ship was in a state of quantum flux.

Wilson nodded. "General quarters, aye, sir." The computer made the appropriate announcements and the klaxon wailed twice before silencing.

"Let's get this circus on the road," muttered Leone. "Petra, activate your new toy."

"It's not my-"

Leone raised a hand. "Don't care. Let's go home."

Petra called out, "Aye, sir. Engaging reinforcement of the structural integrity and inertia dampening fields, now. Stand by for quantum field generation."

"All stations secure for quantum field entry," ordered Ariel from the operations console. "Captain, the hatches have been battened down."

"Device online. Quantum field generating from the navigational deflector," reported Petra.

Wilson added, "Confirmed. Deflector dish outputting quantum field, slowly."

"Acknowledged," said Leone with a nod.

Ariel said, "Field stabilization rate at twenty-five percent and rising."

Leone flexed her fingers on the edges of her armrests. "What's our entry point?"

"Ninety-seven percent, Captain. Mister Saleb's instructions were quite clear."

"Call out the rates, Ariel."

"Aye, sir." Ariel's voice continued their count, "Thirty-six percent. Forty-seven."

When the field rose in stabilization to eighty percent, Leone called out, "Here we go, people. Hang on to your asses."

"Field entry in five seconds," said Petra.

*Farragut* entered the field, losing sensors as it did the first time. The viewscreen deactivated without any relevant data being fed to it, and the expert handling of the ship's systems made for a smoother ride within the field. Leone barely felt the vibrations through the deck of the ship, allowing her to maintain her composure. She waited patiently for the ship to either be destroyed or depart the field.

The field outside the ship dissipated, allowing the sensors to get clear reads on the local region of space. The viewscreen image returned to show stars once more. "Ariel?" she asked, quietly.

"One moment, Captain. I'm scanning," replied Ariel, her eyes moving over the display.

"I just got a Federation timebase beacon," announced Wilson happily.

Ariel nodded, "The computer has confirmed the present star positions as Federation territory. We're three million kilometers away from where we left." She whirled around in her chair, a large grin on her face.

Leone rose from her chair, unable to hide the joy from her face or her voice. "Wilson, all hands, please."

"Aye, sir." Wilson sounded the boatswain's whistle to call the attention of the crew.

"All hands, this is the captain." Captain Leone stepped forward and placed a hand on Ariel's shoulder. She squeezed her gently as she informed her crew, "We're home."

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