

A SHINING PLANET

By Alex Rosenzweig

Prologue

From the time that Humanity first went into deep space, and found that beings like themselves were scattered all over the known galaxy (in defiance of almost every scientific prediction up to that point), Humans have wondered at this unexpected revelation. As the great exploration vessels of first the United Earth Star Fleet, and later the United Federation of Planets Star Fleet, journeyed farther out, they began to discover an answer. More than anyone had ever expected, the shape of life in the galaxy was an artifact. From Sargon's people, a half a million years ago, to the enigmatic Preservers, who operated from some 25,000 years ago to as little as 2,000 years back, steps were taken to further the development of humanoid species.

Earth, it seemed, was of particular interest to the Preservers. Apparently perceiving Humanity as a kindred species, they relocated several groups of Humans to other worlds. Among the societies known to be the result of Preserver activities relating to Earth were the civilization on Alpha Centauri IV and the people of the planet designated Amerind.

Alpha Centauri IV, or Centaurus, was a particular shock to Humanity, it being a planet of the nearest star to Earth and the second civilization encountered, after the Vulcans. No one had anticipated to find the civilization of ancient Greece alive and well, but modern and technological. The Centaurians had been given strict instructions to preserve their original culture, and they did so carefully.

The Amerindians had retained not only their original culture, but had not progressed technologically, preferring a simpler lifestyle that kept them in tune with their environment. Still, they were a surprise when the crew of the *Enterprise* discovered them in 2268.

On other worlds, races were found that might have been offshoots of the Vulcans, Andorians, or others, but not as many of these also had artifacts that suggested Preserver involvement. In the case of several Vulcanoid civilizations, there was evidence that they were the legacy of those Vulcans who set out into deep space at the time of Surak, but didn't make it to Eison to found ch'Rihan and ch'Havran, the worlds best known in the Federation today as Romulus and Remus.

Unknown, though, to the civilizations of the Federation, the Preservers had taken one more group from Earth, a society that faced imminent destruction as their local environment had destabilized. Unlike their transplants of groups of Humans within a few light-years, or even a few hundred parsecs, this time, the Preservers relocated the Humans to a world far across the galaxy, beyond any point

where Humans or their allies had explored by the early 24th Century, and beyond all possibility of contact with Earth.

The planet proved hospitable, though, and these Humans—who referred to themselves as Anthros—thived, gradually building an advanced civilization. Carefully guided by the instructions of their alien benefactors, they avoided, for a long time, the sort of dark ages that slowed Earth's climb toward technological and social advance, and much sooner than did the Humans of Earth, their long-lost brethren achieved starflight.

Expanding outward from their adopted homeworld of Tokabol, they soon discovered 13 habitable worlds in a cluster of systems that were relatively nearby, some 15 light-years from Tokabol. It wasn't long before colonies were founded and steadily grew into thriving societies, themselves. Gradually, Tokabol itself was largely abandoned, as several natural disasters and declining population levels led its society to fade in comparison to the vibrant civilization of the 13 colonies.

Throughout the centuries, reinforced by monuments and information carefully left by the Preservers, the memory of the Anthros that they had come from somewhere else endured. Gradually, though, despite the best efforts to keep the knowledge "pure", it devolved into legend, and almost to myth. The details of their journey were gradually lost, and the nature of the Preservers, always somewhat mysterious to the primitive Humans, became perceived as almost godlike. The distinction between their original homeworld and Tokabol itself blurred somewhat, and the beings who had carried the early Humans across the stars came to be known, and worshipped, as the Lords of Tokabol.

At one point, though, some centuries ago, the people of one of the colonies made an historic decision. Following clues left behind by the Preservers, they decided to seek out the homeworld that the legends said had been left behind so long ago. Almost the entire colony's population packed themselves onto ships, and journeyed out into the deep. They took care to leave behind information about the direction in which they were going, and how long they expected the journey to take, but even so, contact was lost, and the 13th Colony itself and its quest gradually became the stuff of legend. Those few members of that colony that opted not to make the journey soon assimilated into the populations of the remaining 12 worlds, and only the artifacts and structures on their now empty planet left mute testimony to the fact that they'd been there at all.

The drive to explore is a fundamental one in Humans, and this far-flung offshoot of Humanity was no different. Over the centuries, the Anthros also explored outward

from their 12 colonies, and as their range expanded, they encountered a wide variety of alien life-forms, just as did the Humans native to the Sol System. Much like Earth Humans, the natives of the 12 Colonies found many species to be open and friendly, but some were not. One race, in particular, proved very unhappy with this aggressively expansionistic civilization.

The Kynol had once been a reptiloid species. Over hundreds of years, however, they had developed more and more physically-encompassing cybernetics, and less and less of their original bodies remained after the cybernetic nanotechnology was woven into them. The most similar species that Federation Humans knew was the Grigari. In addition to the changes they had wrought on their own physiologies, though, the Kynol also created advanced AIs, so much so that the AIs themselves became a part of Kynol society, living and working alongside their organic forebears. From construction workers to soldiers, the Kynol AIs became inextricably linked to the cohesive net of the civilization.

Both the organic and AI Kynol craved order and stability. The dynamic, rough-and-tumble, often chaotic approach that the Anthros brought to their existence was anathema to the Kynol. (Students of Federation history might recall that the Vulcans were disturbed by Earth Humans in a similar way, though for strikingly different core reasons.)

At first, while the two civilizations existed apart from one another, it was enough for the Kynol to simply avoid contact. But, gradually, the expansion of Anthros into more and more spaces the Kynol once thought of as calm and tranquil, and the Anthros' transformation of those areas into what the Kynol perceived as chaos, became more and more threatening to the Kynol. Rather than warning the Anthros off, though, they bided their time, stewing, as it were, in their own juices.

Finally, though, yet another Anthro settlement on yet another planet that the Kynol had been "reserving" for future resource utilization (without having told the Anthros, of course) proved to be too much. Declaring that the Anthros' expansionism was an affront to the Kynol civilization, they attacked and completely destroyed the settlement. Taken completely by surprise, and utterly unaware of the frustration of the Kynol, the Anthros viewed the Kynol action as one of unprovoked hostility, and vowed to respond. It took little time for the two civilizations to become embroiled in a war that swept through the sector.

The war dragged on for first years, then decades. It wasn't always a "hot" war, but neither did the two sides ever come to a true resolution of the conflict, and they each came to see the other as an implacable enemy. After several centuries of on-and-off conflict, both sides were war-weary, demoralized, and frustrated. Neither had been able to achieve its goal of ending the conflict on its own terms. It was thus with no small amount of astonishment that the Anthros greeted the Kynol's abrupt call for an armistice.

There was disagreement at first over how to respond. It was such an unprecedented action that the Anthros couldn't help but view the Kynol proposal with suspicion. Humans, though, whether from Earth or from the Anthro Colonies, are an optimistic species by nature, and in the end they agreed to a meeting. A formal peace negotiation was scheduled to take place in orbit of the largest of the Anthro worlds, Kaprensos. Amid great celebration, the Anthros prepared to meet the beings they hoped could soon be called their *erstwhile* enemies.

Unbeknownst to the peoples of the 12 Colonies, however, the Kynol had a far different outcome in mind. As the Anthros made preparations for peace, and then waited to greet the Kynol delegation, a vast Kynol attack fleet gathered in a dark gas nebula some light-years away. When the signal was given, the fleet swept across the gulfs of space, their movements cloaked in stealth, their countermeasure systems jamming the Colonies' early warning systems and a carefully orchestrated use of agents on the Colonies having placed them in position to disable the planetary defenses at the critical time.

The assault was devastating. Millions of Anthros were killed, and the surfaces of the planets shredded by fire from the skies. Within hours, almost every major Anthro settlement was in flames, from the great metropolis of Kaprensos City to the hamlets that nestled in the foothills of the mountain ranges on Taron. Additionally, whether through the actions of deep cover agents or just plain bad luck, the Colonies' military assets were also caught flat-footed. Some had been ordered into a non-aggressive posture in advance of the expected peace negotiations. Others had defenses mysteriously fail. Whatever the reasons, most of the Colonial Fleet was destroyed, including all but one of the great vessels that functioned as the flagships of each Colony's subfleet. (These vessels—referred to as Grand Cruisers—were much like what Star Fleet referred to as space control ships, but even larger, doubling as full carriers for smaller shuttles and multiple wings of fightercraft.)

The one surviving Grand Cruiser, the *Galakseeos*, survived only because its commander, Amada, had been deeply suspicious of the Kynol, and defied his orders. Instead of standing down, adopting a non-aggressive posture, and joining the most of the other Grand Cruisers at the staging point near Kaprensos, Amada kept the *Galakseeos* out at the edge of the star system, on the verge of interstellar space, monitoring. Indeed, the crew of the *Galakseeos* had seen the attack coming in time to transmit a warning, but the President of the Colonies, Darad, dismissed it as paranoia. By the time he realized his own mistake, it was too late.

When the smoke had cleared, the Kynol had secured beachheads on every one of the Anthro colonies, and were moving quickly to consolidate their holds. The scattered remnants of Anthro civilization were ignored, deemed unworthy of any greater attention than to be shot down if they approached any Kynol settlement too closely. Very quickly, they learned to avoid doing that.

Amada, meanwhile, took the initiative. With the support of his crew and any surviving Anthro vessels—military or otherwise—he gathered as many Anthro survivors as possible, both aboard the *Galakseeos* and on any other ships that were spaceworthy and able to support life. Many ships were crowded far past their rated maxima, and even then, some Anthros had to be left behind, despite everyone's best efforts. As their activities began to attract Kynol attention, though, Amada and his officers had to make the difficult decision to end their rescue attempts and, along with the 120 or so ships that could keep up, the *Galakseeos* fled the Anthro systems.

Escape from the Colonies was one thing, though, and a longer-term plan quite another. Amada knew that there had to be a goal that could give the defeated and demoralized people in his charge hope, for without hope, they would falter and die quickly. Amada, however, was aware of the legends of the lost "13th Tribe" of Anthros. The logical goal, he reasoned, was for the remaining Colonials to follow in the path of the 13th Tribe.

Researching as much as he could of all the ancient writings, Amada was fairly sure he understood the direction of the 13th Colony's journey. The old legends had suggested a very rough idea of how long the passage had been that brought the original Humans to Tokabol, but no one was sure how precise the numbers were, or how much might have been blurred by time. Nonetheless, Amada suggested that the potential for another homeworld, far across the galaxy and away from the Kynol, would be a worthy goal for their desperate quest. In the end, while the prospect of an open-ended space journey of indefinite length scared many of the surviving Colonials, Amada's charisma, and the realization that nothing remained for them in the systems they knew, carried the day, and they agreed to make the journey. With the *Galakseeos* in the lead, and a rag-tag fleet accompanying her, the refugees of the 12 Colonies set out into deep space, in the direction the legends said their ancestral homeworld lay.

Space, as they say, is big. The Kynol, on the other hand, were watchful, and once they realized that approximately 59,000 Anthros had survived their attack, they mounted a fleet and gave chase. The idea that any Anthros might survive and live to return and again disrupt their space was anathema to them, and they resolved to expend whatever resources were necessary to finish what they'd begun.

The pursuit continued across many light-years and down through several decades. Along the way, the Colonials encountered a variety of races, both more and less advanced than themselves. They formed few lasting relationships with the civilizations they met, however, because they were just passing through, as it were. They passed through several dense star clusters, and across the gulf between two of the galaxy's spiral arms. And throughout the journey, the Kynol remained in pursuit, though sometimes as much as several months might pass between encounters. Finally, after almost a quarter century, the *Galakseeos* and its fleet crossed back into the Orion Arm of the galaxy, within 100 light-years of the

Federation. It was, as the years are reckoned on the Terran calendar, 2313 CE.

Stardate 11304.27:

Federation Deep Space Monitoring Station Echo 5 was a small facility located on the Alpha Quadrant border of the Federation facing coreward and slightly to spinward. Based on the versatile R1 series configuration, Echo 5 and the other Echo stations were outfitted for deep space signal tracking and analysis. A lot of their time was spent involved in the 24th Century equivalent of radio astronomy, but they also paid close attention to message traffic from both known and unknown sources, often selecting which of the latter might be good candidates for First Contact missions.

Today, they were focusing attention on something unexpected. Detection had been reported by the analysis computers of a series of signals roughly 35 light-years beyond the reaches of the Federation, in an area believed devoid of not only civilizations, but habitable worlds at all. The fact of message traffic in that area was sufficiently unexpected that the computers called for the intervention of the sapient crew of the station. Moreover, as the signal source got closer, it began to resolve into multiple sources. Soon enough, the station's CO, Commander James Welling, was looking over the shoulders of the analysis staff.

"What do you think?" he asked the Arkenite senior Signal Analysis Officer.

Lt. Commander Lorkantha looked up, and in his sibilant voice, responded, "Clearly artificial, but in motion. It doesn't look planet-based at all. And there are multiple sources, so I'd have to guess that we're looking at a group of ships, all on the move."

"Can you identify who they are?"

Lorkantha looked over at Skovek, the linguist. The Vulcan lieutenant looked up. "This is...unexpected. The transmissions are apparently uncoded, but the language is unknown. However, preliminary analysis suggests that there are startling similarities to language forms that have been out of use on Terra for many centuries. One theory that I and my staff are exploring is that this language, and various Terran languages, share a root."

"But how could that be?" Welling wanted to know.

"That, I fear, is a question to which I do not yet have an answer," Skovek told him.

All too soon, additional sensor readings showed that, in addition to a lot of communications chatter, there were weapons signatures. They weren't terribly threatening by Federation, Klingon, or Romulan standards, but there was a pitched battle happening, nonetheless, with, apparently the main convoy of ships continuing to move toward the Federation and a hostile force harrying them as they went.

Welling turned to his communications officer. "Ms. Vasquez, get me Star Fleet Command, post-haste."

The starship *Avenger* was two days out from Starbase 45, having completed a brief layover for resupply and crew transfers. On most of these runs, there were often a few

people who came and went, though the *Avenger* had been fortunate that many of its crew were very long-time veterans, people who so enjoyed their service aboard the ship that they opted to stay, on occasion passing up significant promotions to do so. Ironically, the ship's CO, Captain Dave Lynch, wasn't one of those. He'd joined the *Avenger's* crew only about two years previously, after having come out of retirement to answer the still-strong call of the stars. Prior to that, though, he'd served aboard vessels such as the *Challenger*, *Arthur C. Clarke*, and *Transcendence*, including a tour as CO of the *Clarke*. Lynch was no stranger to the center seat, though he'd found the group gestalt aboard the *Avenger* a distinctly different one than he'd seen on previous vessels.

The *Avenger* was en route to conduct a mapping run of several sectors at the border of Federation space. It wasn't expected to be dangerous duty this time out, but as with many such missions, one could never be sure what one might find, so the crew were excited and looking forward to exploring a relatively new and unknown area.

As the ship moved steadily through the sector they were traversing, Lynch was enjoying the relative calm of this part of the journey, especially after the stress of recent missions. He was leaning back slightly in the command chair, watching the stars flit by on the main viewer, when the communications officer, Lieutenant Jaycee Nielsen, turned toward him.

"Captain, I'm receiving a transmission from Star Fleet Command."

Lynch looked at her. "Live or recorded?"

"Live, sir."

Lynch straightened up quickly. "On screen." He exchanged glances with Commander Setak, the Vulcan XO, as the screen blurred, then re-focused with an image of Rear Admiral Augustson, the commander of the 7th Fleet, to which the *Avenger* was nominally assigned. "*Avenger* reading you, sir," Lynch said.

"Hello, Dave. We've got a mission for you."

"Sir?"

"You'll take the *Avenger* to Sector 25493, where you'll rendezvous with the perimeter action ships *Ancylus*, *Eire*, and *Thrace*. You'll proceed to the monitor station Echo 5, which is also located in that sector. At the station, the command personnel of all four ships will be briefed, and then you'll lead the task force."

"May I ask what this task force's mission is, Admiral?"

Augustson smiled. "You're going to make a most unusual first contact, Captain: an unknown convoy of vessels heading toward Federation space, with lots of uncoded communications in a language that's unknown, but seems to share roots with several Earth languages. It also appears that that group of ships is being attacked, off-and-on, by another group of forces apparently hostile to them."

Lynch exchanged glances with his XO, Commander Setak. "Intriguing..." the Vulcan said softly.

"Definitely," Lynch replied.

Augustson continued, "Once you've made contact with both the convoy and the hostiles, your orders are to attempt to stop the immediate hostilities, and offer the services of the Federation in resolving the core disputes, if possible."

Lynch nodded in acknowledgement of the orders. "We'll get on our way, sir."

"Good luck," Augustson said. "I don't mind saying, I wish I were going with you. This one looks like a helluva party."

"I guess we'll see," Lynch said with a smile.

"Right," the 7th Fleet's commander agreed. "I'll look forward to reading your report when this is all over. Augustson out."

The viewer went dark for a moment, and then the starfield ahead reappeared. Lynch glanced over at the navigation specialist. "Ensign Moretti, lay in a course for Station Echo 5."

The young woman nodded, entering coordinates into her console's interface. "Course plotted...and laid in, sir."

"Mr. Dar-Cherok," Lynch continued, smoothly sliding his gaze to the helm specialist, "let's go, then. Warp factor seven."

"Warp seven, aye," the Tellarite helmsman responded.

Soon after the *Avenger* had set off on its new course, Lynch summoned the senior officers for a briefing. Sitting in the large briefing room on deck 2, he gazed at the ship's command staff. "We don't know much yet," he told them, "just that this convoy is very large, and the signal analysis team on Echo 5 found patterns to the aliens' language that were suggestive of at least a common root with Terran languages. Also, long-range sensors suggest that many of the ships in this convoy are unarmed. That also caught the particular attention of Echo 5's crew."

Lieutenant Karza Tyrune, the ship's Trill second officer, spoke up. "What I don't understand is why this has become so important to Star Fleet Command. We've seen, either close up or at a distance, conflicts among alien races before. Why get in a tizzy about this one?" Tyrune's forthrightness impressed Lynch. She had come aboard during the same crew shakeup that had moved him into the center seat and seen Rear Admiral Waidlich transfer to the Academy as an instructor/administrator. With her relatively low rank compared to many of the ship's other senior officers, he figured she'd have to be a strong personality just to hold her own, and she'd proved that she was just that.

"Perhaps," suggested Doctor Draxum, the chief medical officer, "it's as simple as how any vessels are in that group, and the extrapolated number of intelligent beings involved."

"I'm really not certain, myself," Lynch commented. He'd been wondering about the question as much as was Tyrune. "If I had to guess, though, I'd speculate that the similarity in languages to Terran roots might have something to do with the extra interest."

"Could that not be coincidental?" Setak asked. "After all, similar physiologies do result in some similar language forms."

"I suppose it could," Lynch said, "but that's why we need to find out, right?"

"Agreed," said the exec.

"So," Lynch continued, "whatever the reason, Star Fleet has put a lot of importance on dealing with this situation. And that's what we'll do. Ms. Elbrun, what's our ETA with the other ships?"

Commander Yaxara Elbrun, the Betazoid science officer, turned to the computer access terminal located where she sat at one end of the table. "At our present speed," she said, "about four hours."

Lynch paused for just a moment, then turned to Chief Engineer Rielly. "Matt, any chance you could get just a little more speed out of the engines?"

Rielly chuckled. Having a CO with a thorough engineering background was both a blessing and a curse, in its way. Lynch had a good idea, more than some others, of what he was asking for, when he requested such things. "I'll do what I can, Captain."

"Thank you, Matt." Lynch looked at the others sitting around the table. "Anything further?" No one spoke. "All right, then, let's get back to work. Dismissed." Everyone filed out.

Reaching Sector 25493, the *Avenger* quickly made contact with the perimeter action vessels of which Admiral Augustson had spoken. Lt. Commander Thompson turned from the Communications station. "Sir? We're being hailed by the *U.S.S. Eire*."

"On screen," Lynch told her. The main viewer lit with the image of Captain Nazmul Mujib, a male Human of Bangladeshi decent.

"Captain Lynch! It's good to see you. It's been a while, David."

"And you, Nazmul. Long time since our days on the *Transcendence*, eh?"

"Tell me about it. And I sure feel it after a long shift. But it looks like we've got more going on than just another routine border patrol. I gotta tell you, with the Romulans having withdrawn from galactic goings-on, the Neutral Zone seems positively placid."

Lynch snorted softly. "Let's just hope they're not waiting for us to get too relaxed."

"True, true. So, the orders I received suggest that we've got some pretty heavy-duty stuff to deal with this time. Three PAs and an FH? Pretty good firepower there."

"Right, though hopefully we'll be making friends, not trading weapons fire."

"Of course. Well, the *Ancylus* and the *Thrace* ought to be here any minute."

"Good," Lynch said. "Then we'll get to Echo 5 and assess matters."

"Or we could tell the other two to just meet us there," Mujib suggested.

"That's a good idea," Lynch said, after the barest of pauses. Turning to Thompson, he said, "Commander, see to it."

"Aye, Captain," Thompson replied. As she transmitted the updated instructions to the other two ships, Lynch turned back to Mujib.

"All right," he said, "let's make best speed to Echo 5. Then we'll all brief together."

"Right," said the *Eire's* commander. "We'll see you there."

It didn't take much time for all four ships to rendezvous at the Echo 5 station. Commander Welling invited the COs and XO's of the ships to meet in the facility's conference room, which was large enough for all to fit comfortably and also made accessing the station's readings more straightforward. The ships' officers agreed, and soon all were seated around the large table.

Following introductions, Captain Lynch took charge. "Ladies and gentlemen, as you know, our job is to meet this convoy of oncoming ships, and, hopefully, start by finding out why they're being attacked by a threat force and, if possible, getting their enemy to stop, at least long enough for us to find out what's going on."

"Then what?" asked Captain Shretar, the Andorian CO of the *Ancylus*.

"Perhaps we can help resolve their dispute," commented Captain Dewitt, the *Thrace's* CO.

"We can but hope," agreed Mujib.

"Much will depend on the mood of the combatants, I would submit," said Setak.

"Right," agreed Lynch. "All we can do is take the situation as it is, and see if we can help, or at least make sure that neither the Federation nor any of its allies get drawn into someone else's war."

"We've been monitoring the convoy and its antagonists from here," Welling told them. "Our scans show that they're now about a dozen light-years from here, heading roughly in our direction, and fighting a running battle with the hostiles." He shook his head. "I don't mind saying, gentlemen and ladies, that I'd much rather not have this station in the middle of a shooting war."

"I don't blame you," Lynch said.

"Allow me to suggest," Setak said, "that perhaps a brief reconnaissance flight in the vicinity of the unknown craft, done at high speed, might provide us with useful information. A series of scans could assess the combat capabilities of vessels on both sides, and might possibly provide additional information about what kinds of beings we may be encountering."

"I like that idea," Shretar said.

"I do, too," Lynch agreed.

"It should be one of the PAs," Mujib asserted. "Our ships are smaller and faster than either the *Avenger* or anything that Echo 5 has at its disposal at the moment. And if we do come under fire, we can hold our own."

"I think he's right," Welling said.

"As do I," said Lynch. He turned to Captain Dewitt. "Are you and your crew up to it?" he asked her.

Dewitt straightened. "Absolutely, Captain. We'll get it done."

"In the meantime," Lynch said, "let's make sure that we're ready for either a peaceful contact or a hostile one. Without knowing the situation, or who the people are, it's still too easy to think it could go either way."

"Be prepared, eh?" quipped Mujib.

"It is a logical course of action," Setak commented.

Mujib chuckled. "Yes, Commander, it is. Earth's Boy Scout organization knows the drill well."

"Speaking of preparation," Shretar commented, "is there anything else we need to do here? Or shall we return to our ships and get ready?"

"Commander," Lynch said to Welling, "please transmit your data and current assessments to our ships. We'll do our best to keep you and your people out of the lines of any fire."

"Will do, Captain, and thanks."

With that, Lynch dismissed the group. Just before they left, Dewitt and her XO stopped in the doorway to the conference room. "I doubt it will take too long, but if we do get delayed, we'll let you know," the captain said.

"Good luck, Belinda," Lynch told her.

"Thanks, David," Dewitt replied. Commander Danox, the *Thrace's* Edosian XO, nodded gravely. And then they were gone.

The *Thrace's* recon run took several hours, but was accomplished without undue fanfare. Although the recent Treaty of Algeron had put an end to further Federation development of cloaking devices, the ones that Star Fleet already had, and the advances in deflector-based stealth technology that had grown out of cloaking device research in the decades between Operation Purloin and the treaty signing, served the *Thrace* well, and she was able to get quite close to the various unknown vessels without being detected.

Some of the information the *Thrace* brought back was expected, some was reassuring, and some was downright startling. The two "sides" in the conflict were roughly at technological parity, not unlike the rough parity of the "great powers" in the known parts of the galaxy. In general, both groups were at a technological level comparable to Earth in the 2140s, though their propulsion technology was slightly better and their weapons technology not quite as effective as that of the early Earth Star Fleet. The sense that the *Thrace's* officers had was that neither side would be a major threat in combat, assuming that the Federation personnel didn't get cocky and do something stupid.

The *Thrace's* sensors also had little trouble analyzing the life readings of the beings that crewed the various ships they encountered. The hostiles that were harrying the convoy turned out to be operated by a roughly reptilian species, although they used AIs very liberally as operating crew for the ships. Strikingly, even the organic beings were woven through with cybernetic implants. While the beings weren't a hive-mind or anything comparable, they could

access datawebs and shared knowledge bases with relative ease.

After her description of the reptiloid species had concluded, the *Thrace's* science officer, Darcy Moore, paused for a moment. Then she spoke again, her lilting British accent carrying her news over the communication channels. "The real shocker is the nature of the people in the convoy. They're Human. Or, at least, close enough to Human that the differences aren't worth mentioning. They're at least as close to Terran Humans as Romulans are to Vulcans, and I speculate they may have a similar sort of origin."

The crews of the other ships, and of Echo 5, were stunned at first, and for long seconds there was silence over the subspace channels.

"Do you suggest," Captain Mujib said, speaking tentatively, "that an ancient Earth civilization might have achieved starflight, and chose to leave?"

"Well, perhaps not that exactly," Moore replied, "but we've already seen examples of Earth cultures that were transplanted by the Preservers, and several of those are from as recent as 2,000-3,000 years ago. Could these people have been another? It's possible, is it not?"

"Indeed," Setak said. "We will not know for sure until we have an opportunity to communicate directly with them, but if they have legends of having come from somewhere else, it would be a significant reinforcement of your hypothesis."

"Who'd have thought, though," Captain Rielly commented, "that there might be brothers of man still fighting to survive, somewhere beyond known space."

"Well, finding those brothers all the way out here certainly wasn't what I would have thought," quipped the *Eire's* XO, Jomo Abasi, who hailed from Kenya, on Earth.

"I wonder," Lynch added, "which 'lost population' gave rise to these people?"

"Now that," said Commander Welling, "is a very interesting question."

"There are a bunch of possibilities," Moore said, "and that's just counting populations we know, but the further back in time we go, and the more dispersed humanity was, and isolated in scattered communities, a substantial number of people could have vanished and no one would know unless they happened upon an abandoned population center."

"Is there any available evidence," asked Setak, "to suggest how far in the past the ancestors of these people might have been taken from Earth?"

"All we have so far is the linguistic evidence," Welling said, "which hints at a point approximately 2,500 years ago, but that's a very rough estimate."

"Well," Lynch said, "finding out the answers to all these questions won't happen if we're just sitting here, now will it?" He smiled at the others. "Shall we get underway and meet these people?"

"I think we should," answered Captain Shretar.

"Then let's do so," Lynch said. "*Avenger* will have point, and the PAs should follow at .05 of a light-year, just

so we don't look like we're bearing down on them in force. I don't want to scare them, but if they turn hostile, we'll need you close enough to provide reinforcement."

"We'll be there," Mujib told him.

"Thanks," Lynch said. He glanced from the screen to the navigation officer. "Lieutenant Benteen, lay in a course to meet those ships."

"Aye, Captain," Benteen replied. She focused on her controls, and a moment later, added, "Course laid in."

"Commander Ragin, ahead, warp factor four."

The ship's long-experienced senior helm officer nodded and said, "Yes, sir, warp four."

Lynch allowed himself a small smile as the *Avenger* accelerated, leaving Echo 5 Station behind. Just behind the heavy frigate, the three smaller ships also leapt into warp, pacing their larger lead vessel.

Several hours later, the squadron of Star Fleet vessels approached the large convoy of other vessels, as well as the group of attackers harrying the ships on the edges of the convoy. Only a few, including the large ship near the front of the convoy, even looked like they might be combat-capable. On all four Star Fleet bridges, crewmembers exchanged glances as they beheld a motley collection of vessels that looked like everything from tramp freighters to passenger vessels.

"Whatever happened to these people, it didn't leave them much time to organize, did it?" Commander Elbrun said softly.

Their attention was also captured by the flashes of light scattered among the various ships, mute evidence of the firefight going on at the time. As they drew closer, they realized that a lot of the fighting was being carried out by small fightercraft, which acted as both attackers and defenders of the larger ships.

"Mr. Sesay," Lynch said to the Assistant Chief of Communications, who was manning that station on the bridge, "send a hail to the attackers. Warn them off. Tie in the universal translator, and let's hope we can get the clarity we need."

"Aye, Captain," Sesay answered, turning back to his station. Speaking softly into his audio pickup, he tersely advised the attackers to halt their attack. There was no response. "Nothing, sir," Sesay said, glancing back at Lynch.

"Keep trying." Lynch's voice was tense. He was not fond of forcing combat, but like all experienced COs, he knew how if it came to it.

Several tries later, Sesay could only shrug helplessly. "Either they don't understand us, or they don't care," he said.

"Very well," Lynch said. He glanced to the helm station. "Ms. Ragin, fire a few warning shots. Please try not to hit any of the hostiles, at least not this time."

"Understood, Captain." Ragin's fingers danced across her console, and energy bolts lanced out from the *Avenger's* phaser banks and into the chaos of the combat they were approaching. True to her word, Ragin avoided any direct impacts, but the message Lynch had desired

seemed to hit home nonetheless. The alien vessels scattered, and there was a frantic gabble of chatter coming over various communication channels which Lieutenant Sesay had been monitoring.

A moment later, the alien chatter seemed to pause. The calm was followed by a hail from one of the large vessels in the attacking fleet, a transmission clearly directed at the *Avenger*. The language was decidedly different than that with which the *Avenger's* crew was familiar, but Sesay immediately began working with the universal translator, and after a few moments, the translator started kicking in, and a dialogue slowly got underway.

"Attacking vessel, hold your fire! We request contact and communication!"

After a nod from Sesay confirmed that the comm system would pick him up, Lynch leaned forward in the command chair and spoke.

"This is the larger of the vessels intercepting your fleets. Our vessel is called the *U.S.S. Avenger*, and my name is Captain David Lynch. We represent the United Federation of Planets, an organization of allied worlds, the border of which you are steadily approaching. We request that you stand down from combat, and offer ourselves as mediators, if it will help resolve your conflict."

"We are the Kynol," came the reply. "I am Subcommandant Lukrefor, of Baseship 463. We will hold our attack for now, but we are skeptical of a long-term solution. If one has not been found in hundreds of years thus far, what new do you offer to change the state of conflict?"

"We offer a fresh perspective, from uninvolved parties," Lynch said. "We know nothing of your conflict, how or why it was started, and why it continues. Perhaps we can be a neutral party."

"Even if that were true, what could you do? These beings, these 'Colonials', have been what they are, and done what they have done, for centuries. How do you expect to stop them?"

"Perhaps we will not need to stop them," Setak suggested, "but instead can encourage them to do it where it will not bother you and your people."

There was a snort from the Kynol. "You are an optimistic one, aren't you? Beings do not change their character so easily, I think. I do not believe it is in these Colonials to do so if we were to allow them back into our space."

"Perhaps," Lynch said, "You could start by explaining what these people have done."

"It all started out innocently enough. They lived on their colonies and allowed us to live in our space. But these creatures are aggressive and expansionistic. Their dozen worlds were not enough. They kept expanding, seizing world after world, even worlds within our space. These were worlds we had reserved for our own development, stolen from us."

"Did you tell them about it?" asked Tyrune.

"Not immediately," admitted Lukrefor. "We hoped initially that the infiltration would cease, but it did not, and we finally felt we could wait no longer."

"But how could you expect them to respond to your concerns," asked Setak, "when you did not make them aware of those concerns?"

"These beings were a **pestilence!**" exclaimed Lukrefor. "They showed not the slightest sign of slowing their expansion, and we eventually had to conclude that nothing would ever be enough for them. So we acted, for our own preservation and that of other civilizations, and sought to put a stop to the infestation." He paused for a long moment. "And we have almost done so."

The *Avenger's* officers looked at one another, trying to comprehend what could have happened to drive these Kynol to such conclusions. They also could only wonder how the Kynol would react upon learning that many of the people on the Star Fleet ships were of species very similar to their enemies.

Lynch took a deep breath. "Lukrefor, tell us, if you don't mind... Where is your space located? How far have you traveled to come here?"

"We have traveled for many salectars across this part of the galaxy," came the reply.

Unfortunately, no one was clear on what a salectar actually was, so Lynch asked Commanders Setak and Elbrun to help with some translation, and Lukrefor detailed a subordinate of his own to work with them. While they were working on that question, Sesay spoke up. "Captain, I think I've managed to tweak our systems enough to now receive and send visual signals with the Kynol."

"Lukrefor, do you consent to visual communication?" asked Lynch.

"I do," said the Kynol. "It will be a satisfaction to see the being with whom I am conversing."

"Go ahead, Hugh," Lynch told Sesay.

"Aye, sir," said the Assistant Communications Chief. A few minutes later, the view of the alien vessels faded and was replaced by an odd being, a humanoid composed of a combination of metal, plastic, and some identifiably organic elements, wearing a long robe made of a glittery fabric.

"I am Lukrefor," the being said, lights in what seemed to be his cranium flashing in counterpoint to his words. "And you... You are like the Anthros! What is this? Is this a trick?"

"Oh, crap," Benteen said softly from Navigation.

"I assure you, there is no trickery," Lynch said firmly, trying to reassure the obviously discomfited Kynol. "We had no idea that the...Anthros, as you call them, were anything like us until we encountered all of your ships, and we still have yet to speak to them directly, preferring to start by trying to get you to stop firing on them long enough for everyone to talk."

"All of your species are the same," Lukrefor said dismissively. "You all like so much to talk, while at the same time declining to take the actions necessary. We waited for far too long, ourselves."

"Please wait just a little longer. You're obviously far away from your homeworlds, and you have been pursuing these people for a very long time. It seems to me," and Lynch paused for just a moment, "that circumstances now are a lot different than what they were when you started this pursuit."

"That is partly true. But what has not changed is that these Anthros, as they refer to themselves, cannot be allowed ever again to sully our worlds."

"Captain," Sesay said into the pause that followed Lukrefor's pronouncement, "the PAs are hailing us."

"Ahh," said Lynch. "Let's add our friends to the conversation. Mr. Sesay, tie them all into our transmission to the Kynol, please."

"Aye, sir," said Sesay, and a moment later the viewer split into multiple images, including Sesay as well as all the perimeter action ship COs. Lynch took a moment to introduce all three of the other captains. Not unexpectedly, Lukrefor was quite fascinated by Captain Shretar.

"You are of a different species than the others," he said.

"Yes. My people are called Andorians."

"But you deal with the...Humans." There'd been the slightest pause as Lukrefor seemed to almost call the others Anthros, but avoided doing so.

"I do. In my experience, they are a wise and honorable species."

"Very different than the Anthros with whom we deal, it would seem."

"Perhaps so," Shretar said, nodding gravely. "Not knowing the Anthros as you do, it is not my place to judge. I can only speak regarding the beings with whom I deal directly. The Humans of the planet Earth are a leading species in our Federation, and they have treated other civilizations honestly and well."

"How many different species make up this Federation?" asked Lukrefor. "And are all of them like yourselves, physically?"

"Over 100," Captain Mujib replied.

"And, in fact, some are quite different," Captain Dewitt added with a smile. She gestured, and Commander Danox, stepped slightly closer to her command chair, so he could be seen in frame. "This is my executive officer."

"Hello, Lukrefor," Danox said. "I come from a planet called Edos."

"We have other species in the Federation that are even more different," Lynch added, "such as Sulamids, Mizarthu, and Horta. But one thing is the same for all: they are valued parts of our interstellar community."

As Lukrefor was digesting that bit of information, Setak stepped up to Lynch. "Captain, he said softly, "we have been able to approximate a translation for the Kynol's time and distance units."

"Oh?" Lynch said.

"It would appear that their home space is located at the far edge of the Alpha Quadrant, along its border with the Gamma Quadrant and toward the outer spiral arm of our galaxy. It also appears that they have been pursuing the

Human-like species they call the Anthros for nearly 24 Terran years.”

“24 years?” said Tyrune softly. “Talk about not letting something go...”

“It would seem,” Setak said thoughtfully, “that not only are the Kynol adept at holding grudges, but they have taken so long to even address the matter that the bad feelings have festered deeply into their collective psyche.”

“It just doesn’t make sense,” said Ragin. “Why wait that long, and then grab hold so tightly to their grievances that they cannot let go after over two decades?”

“On the surface, I agree with you,” Setak said, “but we must be cautious not to judge these beings by Human, or Vulcan, standards.”

Lynch, listened to the side conversation, but kept his attention focused on Lukrefor. “You have pursued the Anthros for a very long time, and across a great distance,” he said. “But how long, and far, are enough?”

“Our mandate has been to pursue until there is no possibility of the Anthros ever being a threat to us, or our civilization and its order, again.”

“And you believe they still may be a threat?” asked Captain Mujib.

“They still live, do they not?” was Lukrefor’s reply. “But, now, what do we find, after traveling so long and so far? **More** Anthros. And other races so like them that it doesn’t really make a difference.”

“We can’t change who and what we are,” Lynch replied calmly, “any more than the Kynol can. All we **can** do is promise that you will be treated fairly.”

“We shall see about that,” Lukrefor answered.

“If I may,” Setak interjected, “I do have a question.”

Lynch gestured at the viewer, and Lukrefor nodded. “You may,” the Kynol said. “Ask.”

“You have told us that you have pursued the Anthros for almost 24 Terran years, across a distance of several hundred light-years. You are all very far from your homes, and from what you have said, the homes of the Anthros no longer even exist, at least not in a form anything like they recall. Is this correct?”

“Our information tells us that this is true, yes,” said Lukrefor.

“So,” said Captain Shretar, his antenna curling forward slightly, “what you’re saying is that these Anthros have no homes to which they could return, anyway. Why would you imagine they’d even **want** to go back?”

“You underestimate the Anthros,” Lukrefor said. “They kept returning, no matter how often we removed them from our places. It was not until we brought total destruction upon their worlds and drove them into space that they stopped coming back, and even then, we’ve had to keep chasing them across the stars. Besides,” he said with a gesture, “they are very much like Kynol in this respect, and we know how much we would fight to return to our ancestral places.”

“On the other hand, assuming their lifespans are anything like ours, you have been chasing them for more than a fifth of a Hum—errr, Anthro lifetime. That’s a lot of

time to spend then going back, in hopes that they just might be able to wrest those planets from you, with no real sense that they even could, is it not?”

“Perhaps. But, then, perhaps not. The Kynol have underestimated Anthro tenacity before, and we will not do so again.”

“Well, in **this** part of space,” said Mujib, “Kynol territorial imperatives don’t count. This isn’t your part of the galaxy.”

“Captain Mujib is right,” said Lynch. “we recognize that you have grievances against the Anthros, and by your own admission, you’ve done things that will no doubt leave them with plenty of grievances against you. But we will **not** tolerate any further hostilities. We hope that we’ll be able to help you to talk to each other, but talk or not, you won’t be shooting at each other anymore. Is that understood?”

“We acknowledge this,” Lukrefor said, “but I hope that you will be as emphatic with the Anthros as you have been with me.”

“Let’s find out,” Lynch said. He turned to Lieutenant Sesay. “Hail the Anthros, please.”

“Yes, sir,” Sesay replied.

It took only a few minutes, in part because the similarities in language forms that had been identified even by the crew of the Echo 5 station had provided a much more complete basis for the universal translator to do its work. Soon enough, the screen split again, to show an older, Human-looking man in what clearly was a uniform, though even a quick glance showed that the uniform was worn around the edges, frayed and patched.

“We hear you, *U.S.S. Avenger*. This is the Grand Cruiser *Galakseeos*, leading a fleet of refugees trying to escape the Kynol, who I understand you have already met, at least by remote communication. I am Commander Amada, and I am in command of the *Galakseeos*.”

“I am Captain David Lynch, commanding the *Avenger*, and also senior officer of the group of spacecraft that have met both your fleet and the Kynol force. We represent the United Federation of Planets, the border of which is approximately 12 light-years from here.”

“I am pleased to make your acquaintance,” said Amada. “I do hope our relationship will be a fruitful one.”

“As do I,” Lynch replied. “With that in mind, let me tie you into our current discussion. All of the ships under my general command are linked in a conference, as is Subcommandant Lukrefor of Baseship 463.” He nodded to Sesay, who tapped several controls. “And now, you are, as well.”

“Hello, Commander Amada,” Lukrefor said.

“Lukrefor.” Amada’s voice was cold, and it was obvious the two had spoken before.

“Commander Amada,” Lynch went on, “just to get us all off on the right foot here, let me share with you a condition by which I have asked the Kynol to abide, and which I also request that you and the Anthros you lead abide, as well. I and my fellow starship captains will be happy to talk to both of you, but we ask that there be no further hostilities, no aggressive actions, while we try to

help you deal with your situation, and the fact that the space you are heading toward is held by the United Federation of Planets, which does not approve of groups of ships shooting at each other and endangering other vessels or worlds in its space. Are we all understood?"

Lukrefor nodded. Amada was more emphatic. "Of course. We were not the ones who started this war, and we have to come to this condition after we accepted what we thought was an armistice offered by the Kynol, and only too late discovered it was a trap. Our worlds lost, we've been fleeing ever since, all the while pursued by the Kynol." He lifted his chin slightly. "And while it's been a long, difficult road to travel, we have survived. Despite the best efforts of Lukrefor and those under **his** command."

"If your people had not invaded our space—" Lukrefor began.

"And if **your** people had bothered to tell us about your concerns **before** you started attacking **our** people—" Amada cut him off.

"All right," Lynch interjected, cutting both of them off. "I think we all understand that there are deep convictions on both sides about this. But you won't solve them by shooting at each other all the way out here."

"So what do suggest that we do?" Amada asked, and for the first time, the *Avenger's* bridge crew could see the worry that haunted that question. The Anthros were not the ones in control, no matter their bravado.

"Why don't we start simply?" Captain Dewitt put in. "Commander Amada, what is your goal here? What are you trying to accomplish?"

"Our homes are gone," Amada said. "Despite Subcommandant Lukrefor's fears, we have nothing to go back to. Believe me, if we thought there was something worth fighting for back there, we would have fought for as long as we could."

"Oh, you did, didn't you?" Lukrefor started, but at a glare from Lynch, he paused.

Amada continued. "We had only one choice, and that was to flee. Our ancient legends tell of one of our tribes having left their colony, the 13th of the Anthro worlds, in quest of the world our most ancient legends tell us was where our race originated. It is known in those legends as Gaia."

There was a long pause, as the various Star Fleet officers looked at each other. Finally, Setak spoke. "Coincidence, or confirmation?"

"What do you mean?" asked Lukrefor.

"Several ancient Human cultures referred to our world as Gaia, also," explained Lynch.

"Based on several factors," Science Officer Elbrun added, "we've been examining the potential that the Anthros who inhabited the worlds you attacked may be descended from the same ancestors as are the Humans who come from the world we know as Terra, or Earth."

"Could that really be true?" wondered Amada. "Does that mean that you—or some of you, at least—are from the world we have sought for all these years?"

"It's at least possible," Mujib said.

"I agree," Commander Abasi said. "I certainly wouldn't want to discount it."

"If further analysis confirms the level of physiological similarity," Setak added, "we will be able to confirm to a high level of confidence whether this is indeed the case."

"This is...just a bit overwhelming," Commander Amada said. He exchanged glances with Colonel Tyesol, the executive officer of the *Galakseeos*. "To think that, in all the immensity of this universe, we would meet vessels from the ancestral homeworld out in deep space. And that, against all odds, we have actually succeeded in our quest, and may be finally able to settle on the world from which all Anthro life descended."

Tyesol smiled at him. "And you, my friend, have led us through everything to get to this point."

Lynch glanced at his fellow starship captains. "Uh... I hate to put a damper on all this, but there might be a problem."

"Oh?" asked Lukrefor, his curiosity piqued.

"Earth is a pretty crowded planet, and its environment is fairly carefully regulated," Lynch explained. "It's not quite as simple as having 56,000 people just show up and stake a claim."

"Could we be denied?" asked Amada.

Lynch, realizing that Lukrefor was also hanging on every word, replied, "I'm sure that your case would get a lot of attention. After all, it's not every day that a distant offshoot of Humanity—as we call ourselves—turns up out of the blue...or black. And with our people spread out all over not just our system, but many others, as well, there are lots of places for Humans and our brothers and sisters to go."

Amada looked slightly reassured. "It's hard to imagine," he said wonderingly, "that while our people had been building up a civilization so far away, that other Anthros, entirely separate from us, had been doing the same thing."

Lukrefor managed to look both irritated and long-suffering. Rather pointedly addressing his comment to the non-Human members of the various starship crews, he asked, "Are Anthros—or Humans, I imagine, here—as intrusive, meddlesome, and chaotic as they have been in our part of this galaxy?"

Setak stepped forward, and by unspoken consent, the others allowed him to speak for all. "The dynamism of Humanity has been an important part of the history of our portion of the galaxy for several hundred years now. My people, for example, were very uncomfortable with Humans and their tendency to leap before looking. However, the Vulcan civilization, along with many others, came to appreciate the positive attributes which Humans bring to the interstellar community. This is not to say that there haven't been disagreements, or even conflicts, but we have been able to find peaceful resolutions much more often than not."

"One thing that the Humans have done very well in our part of the galaxy," Shretar noted, "is find ways to reach across gaps in understanding and build bridges that have

led to peace. My people, the Vulcans, and the Tellarites, for example, were all in the midst of various conflicts several generations ago, conflicts which ended largely due to the intervention of Humans."

"Lukrefor," said Amada, "if you'd told us what we were doing, maybe we could have stopped, and maybe we, too, could have been bridge-builders, like our apparent cousins."

"Maybe you would, and maybe you wouldn't," Lukrefor replied. "The fact is, we don't know what you **might have** done. We only know what you **did**."

Amada, as well as Tyesol, seemed to visibly sigh. "You see?" asked Tyesol, looking at the Star Fleet officers on his screen. "This is what brought us to the very brink. Except, of course, when they were godsdamned lying to us."

"If you settle within the Federation," Lynch said, "neither of you will have to worry about the other's lies, deceptions, or whatever else ever again. You can all go about your lives separated by several hundred parsecs of space."

"When we first encountered the Anthros," Lukrefor said, "they were far away from our space, too, or so we thought. So we just avoided them. But it wasn't so long before they encroached into our space, and kept coming, more and more. And now we have met you, by your own admission very Anthro-like. And, yes, you are far from our space...now. But what will you do in 10 years, or a hundred, or a thousand? What will the Anthros do if they are given safe harbor in your space, but decide eventually that they want to go back to the worlds they once knew?"

"What's to stop **you**, Lukrefor," retorted Amada, "from deciding that the tyranny of the Kynol needs to be carried out to the homes of the Humans and their friends? It goes both ways."

"The Kynol were not the expansionist ones."

"Oh? You were plenty quick to seize systems that had resources you wanted, even if you weren't ready to use them."

"We planned for the future," Lukrefor replied, "not just racing through space, grabbing as we went."

"In all fairness," said Captain Mujib, "we often do something similar, reserving certain worlds for future use, especially ones near planets which have civilizations that have not yet discovered faster-than-light travel, but may in the next few decades."

"There. You see?" Lukrefor said to Amada and Tyesol, his cranial lights flashing in counterpoint to his words. "Even your brother anthroids understand the need to prepare resources far in advance."

"We didn't know," Tyesol said, though a bit flintily, "that we were even competing with anyone for the resources until you attacked. If you'd just come by and said, 'Hey, y'know, these worlds are ours, can you leave them alone?', we could have avoided all this."

"Listen, both of you." Lynch found he had to raise his voice to get their attention, and he didn't want their old arguments to get in the way of dealing with the here-and-now. "You're arguing over events decades in the past and

hundreds of light-years from here. I understand that there's bad blood here, but we won't resolve the situation for any of you if you won't concentrate on the present."

"In the present," Amada said, "we don't even know if we'll get to reach the world we've been seeking for all of these years, let alone live on it."

"I'm sure you'll get to see it," Lynch said, hoping to reassure the increasingly agitated Anthros.

"And then what?" Amada asked. "Will we be relegated to some planet not already promised to someone more important?"

"Commander," Dewitt replied, "the reality is that there are a lot of planets, and many of them are habitable enough for beings like us. I don't think you need to concern yourself on that score."

"Maybe," said Amada. "It's still guesswork, though, since the only planet we know for sure would be able to support us is the one our most distant ancestors came from, Earth. And you tell us we might not be able to settle there."

"Maybe we should just go back, after all, and try again to fight for our worlds," Tyesol said.

"If you do that," Lukrefor said, "then you will face the full might of the Kynol!" He looked at the Star Fleet officers on his screens. "If you from this United Federation are a committed to peace and justice as you say, then we ask that you make certain that these Anthros never return to Kynol space. And if you cannot or will not do that, then please just get out of the way and let us deal with this pestilence in our own fashion."

"That might not be as easy as you seem to think," Amada retorted. "How long have we been outwitting your attempts to destroy us?"

"You've been running the whole time? What makes you think you could survive a head-to-head battle?" Lukrefor wanted to know.

The war of words continued for several minutes, until Lynch finally had had enough. He stood up and walked around to the front of the helm/navigation console. Gazing directly into the screen, where he knew the visual pickup would focus directly on him, he spoke sharply. "All right! That is enough!" Both Anthros and Kynol alike ignored him, and that did nothing for his temper. "Would you all kindly **shut up!**? Or do I **have to** put a torpedo up all your asses?"

That not only got the attention of the arguing beings on the viewer, it startled the entire *Avenger* bridge crew, who were not at all used to seeing their CO react that way. In fact, just about the only person who wasn't completely shocked was Mujib, who'd seen Lynch's potential for temper in years past, though he also knew it took a lot to get that level of response from his friend.

"Now listen, and listen well," Lynch went on, all but snarling his words. "First, no one aboard any of our four ships is in any position to set policy or make decisions for the Federation about where the Anthros will or will not be able to live. That will have to come before the Federation Council, or the United Earth government, or even both, so they can decide it. Worrying now about what they might

choose, before you've even **talked** to them, is just a waste of time. So knock it off."

"A possibility worth considering," Setak commented, "is that some, if not all, of the Anthros might even find the environment and culture of Earth not to be to their liking, especially if its reality proves to be quite unlike what they have imagined." Amada started to protest, but stopped when Setak continued. "Many myths become imbued over time with the perceptions of the culture retelling the myth, so it may be that your ideas about Earth are influenced by your own cultures. Moreover, consider, too, that Earth has been developing independently of your own societies for millennia, and it may be quite different from the worlds you fled."

"I have to admit that possibility," Amada said. "But I also very much wish to see Earth with my own eyes, so I—and my people—can make a decision about whether or not it is a place we might wish to live."

"And you did say there were other options, correct, Captain?" Tyesol asked.

"I did," Lynch replied. "There are many very beautiful planets out there." Lynch then turned to Lukrefor. "And as for you and your kind," he said, "what you need to understand is that humanoids—beings like us, and like the Anthros—are common in this part of the galaxy. Many of these races have been reaching outward steadily for a few hundred years, farther and farther. If you expect to prejudge another race simply because they resemble people you don't like, the fate of a few thousand refugees on barely spaceworthy ships might be the least of your worries, as opposed to the trillions of humanoid beings who live in this general area."

Softly, Mujib added, "I suggest you consider the concept in the Human adage of having half a loaf, and its superiority to nothing at all. Consider that, if you cease this chase, you can still rest easy in the knowledge that the Anthros will not be returning to their former colonies any time soon. Would this not be a victory for the Kynol?"

"Perhaps..." responded Lukrefor.

"One thing we **can** do," added Shretar, "is recommend very strongly that the sectors established as Kynol space be listed by the Federation and its allies as interdicted space, off-limits to visitation. That way, you would not be bothered, even as other spacefaring civilizations from our part of the galaxy expand in the direction of your systems."

"So, the long and short of it," added Dewitt, "is that you can get at least a fair deal, if not a perfect one. Perhaps you should take that half a loaf that Captain Mujib mentioned and just get on with your lives."

"And on that note, I think we should declare this conference done for now," Lynch said. "My suggestion is that both sides prepare for further discussions, but in person, so we can continue to discuss this situation."

Lukrefor again began to speak, but at a gesture from Lynch, Lieutenant Sesay cut the channel to the Kynol and the Anthros. "Well," Lynch said, "that was...interesting."

"On a certain level," Setak said, "it truly was. I believe that the dynamics of these cultures, both those of the

Anthros and of the Kynol, would make for a fascinating study."

"If only the latter," Tyrune interjected, "would let you do so."

"Indeed."

Captain Shretar spoke up. "The scientific interest is all well and good, but we still have to figure out what we're going to do here."

"I think a lot will depend on what the Kynol do next," Dewitt said. "After all, we know what the Anthros want. The only question there is whether United Earth and/or the Federation will let them have it."

"Agreed," Lynch said, "but we can cross that bridge when we come to it, when we've gotten them into Federation space."

"So what's our next move?" asked Mujib.

"I suggest," said Commander Danox, "that we go ahead with Captain Lynch's idea. Let's meet with each side in person, but let's keep them separate, at least until we can size up how they're likely to react to the situation as it stands right now."

"I agree," Setak said. "There will be sufficient uncertainty to begin with, without increasing it with the hostilities between the two parties here."

Lynch took a breath and let it out. "All right. Let's start with the Anthros. Mr. Sesay, open a channel to the *Galakseeos*, and if possible, try to keep the Kynol from listening in."

"Aye, Captain, just a moment," Sesay said. After a short time, he added, "I think I've got it. Go ahead, sir."

"Thank you." Lynch paused for a moment, then continued, "*U.S.S. Avenger* to the *Galakseeos*. Come in, please."

"This is the *Galakseeos*," replied Communications Officer Dalua.

"Are Commander Amada or Colonel Tyesol available? This is Captain Lynch."

"Please hold, sir."

A moment later, the screen lit again with the view of the *Galakseeos*'s command facility. Both Amada and Tyesol stood on a central platform, overlooking the activities going on around them. The camera angle shifted to a closer shot of the two of them, both obviously looking into a pickup near a display screen showing them the Star Fleet officers still on the communications link.

"We read you, *Avenger*," Amada said.

"It's just us now," Lynch told him. "We'll be speaking to you and to the Kynol separately."

"I understand," the *Galakseeos*'s commander responded.

"Good. Commander, I'd like to invite you and the other leaders of your people to join my officers, and the senior officers of the three ships that have accompanied mine, aboard the *Avenger* for a gathering and discussion about the next steps that we'll need to take to bring your convoy into the Federation, and eventually to Earth."

"I will speak to the civilian leaders of our people," Amada said, "but on behalf of the senior officers of the

Galakseeos, we would be honored to meet and speak to you face to face.”

“You aren’t in complete charge of your ships?” Shretar asked.

Amada shook his head. “Not entirely. I command for military and defense purposes, but once we realized that we were carrying all that we knew was left of our civilization, our people decided that a civilian voice was also necessary. The balance has sometimes proven to be a challenge, but we maintain it.”

Lynch chuckled. “Spoken like any military officer I’ve ever met who struggled with the priorities and perspectives of the civilian sector.”

“They don’t always see things the same way as do we who protect them, do they?” Amada replied, sensing a bond with the *Avenger’s* CO.

“No, indeed, they don’t, though since Star Fleet is also a scientific and exploratory organization, the contrasts aren’t quite as sharp most of the time.”

“It’s been a long time since we had the luxury of a truly exploratory force,” Amada said, a little wistfully.

“We’ve been fortunate, in many ways,” Dewitt noted.

“This seems like something we can discuss more when we meet,” Lynch said airily, trying to interject a lighter mood into the discussion.

“Agreed,” Mujib said, backing Lynch up. “I look forward to that discussion.”

“Let’s plan to meet aboard the *Avenger* in, say, six hours.” Lynch nodded and shot a smile in Setak’s direction, and the executive officer nodded. “Our people will need a little time to get things set up.”

“That sounds very nice,” Amada said. “I will detail an officer to help make arrangements.”

“Very good,” Lynch replied. “I’ll look forward to meeting you, Commander Amada, and seeing the rest of you again, lady and gentlemen.”

With that, all the other ships signed off, and Lynch sat back in his command chair with a sigh.

“Playing diplomat not your favorite way to spend your day, eh, Captain?” asked Tyrune.

“Nope, not at all. Give me a good scientific mystery, or even a straight-up border skirmish, any day.”

“That said, you comported yourself well,” Setak told him. “You made it clear that you were in control of this discussion, and you did not let anyone else shake that. That is most critical in a circumstance such as this.”

“Right,” Lynch said, nodding. “Now, if you’ll call down to Recreation and bring Ms. Courtesan up to speed on what we have in mind, I’d appreciate it.”

“Of course, sir,” Setak replied, moving off to one of the Mission Operations stations to contact the Chief of Recreation. A department of the Medical Division, Recreation was charged not only with keeping the crew occupied while off-duty, but also with monitoring ship’s morale and providing for ceremonial and social functions. Not unexpectedly, this occasionally brought the Rec staff into the role of unofficial diplomats. While some of the more fanciful computer programs from the tenures of

earlier Rec Chiefs had been removed in the years since they served aboard the ship, others remained, and for the simple reason that they worked, and worked very well.

Once Setak had discussed the plan with Courtesan, the Recreation staff swung into action. They hailed the *Galakseeos*, and soon afterward were in discussions with the Grand Cruiser’s medical staff to ensure that any foodstuffs created aboard the *Avenger* would not be harmful to their visitors. While the Anthros and Humans were, biologically, very similar, a couple of millennia of having developed a civilization on worlds very far from Earth had allowed for some subtle adaptations which would have to be taken into account.

Within a couple of hours, the details had been sorted, favored recipes had been shared, and even some limited exchanges of popular and traditional music had been shared. This was all done with an eye toward both introducing the Anthros to the Human cultures they’d soon be encountering, and helping the *Avenger’s* personnel to make them feel at home when they came to visit.

The conversations had also highlighted both the similarities and differences in the two civilizations, though the core mythologies were the same, since the ancestors of the Anthros had apparently been taken from Earth during the early era of Classical Greece. Certain similarities in names told a unique tale.

“It’s really fascinating,” Lieutenant Rush told Setak. “The more we talk to them, the more we can see the Anthros’ foundations in ancient Earth culture, but after a couple of thousand years, the societies went in strikingly different directions. We can also see the influence of the Preservers, too, in the tendency to preserve the ancient cultures.” Commander Elbrun had detailed Rush to serve as the point person in dealing with the Anthros, especially is analyzing their culture, since, as a Human, he’d be better positioned than a Betazoid to recognize ancient Terran cultures, and Rush dove into the task with gusto.

Rush’s report detailed a mix of the ancient and modern not hugely different from that of Centaurus. Although the civilization had advanced, its cultural roots held true, but the exposure to different worlds and different species in a spacefaring civilization had evolved the culture in ways that hadn’t happened on the planets known to have been Preserver-seeded but which had not developed space travel on their own. Rush speculated that, had they not run afoul of the Kynol and been forced into a centuries-long conflict, the Anthros might very likely have founded a Federation-like civilization in their part of the galaxy.

“I have to wonder,” Elbrun said, as she shared Rush’s report with Lynch and Setak, “if Earth won’t be the best answer for the Anthros. It might be a more suitable solution to find a planet for them to make their own, so they can preserve what makes their culture unique.”

“You may be correct,” Setak replied, “but they may not see it that way until they have had the chance to experience Earth firsthand.”

"I agree," Lynch said. "They've had Earth as an ideal for decades. It's mythic for them. It won't be until they face its reality that they may choose a different path."

"Right," said Elbrun. "They don't have a real context in which to judge, but they will eventually."

Elbrun and Rush shared their information with the other Star Fleet crews, and it wasn't surprising that many discussions were soon underway about the Anthros' fate. As it happened, very few members of the four starship crews believed that just dropping over 56,000 people on Earth was realistic, at least not all at once. Many felt that the idea of offering the Anthros a world to colonize made good sense. It wasn't long, though, before word of the discussions had reached the various ships' COs. All four quickly stepped in to remind their crews that such decisions would be made by the Federation Council or one of the assorted commissions or sub-councils with appropriate jurisdiction. They also urged all personnel to be watchful in what they said to the Anthro representatives who would be visiting the *Avenger*.

Finally, all was in readiness. A delegation from the *Galakseeos*, including Commander Amada; Colonel Tyesol; Amada's son, Captain Adono; Lieutenant Asterbuk, another of the *Galakseeos*'s pilots; and Ship's Doctor Salik traveled across to the *Avenger* in one of the *Galakseeos*'s shuttlecraft, having politely but firmly declined to use the transporter. They were met by Captain Lynch, Commander Setak, and a security honor guard in Hangar Bay 1. Commander rRham, the *Avenger*'s Tzen chief master-at-arms, towered over the group, which also included Lieutenant Karl Brandt, Lieutenant J.G. Anika Dekker, and Lieutenant J.G. Thandicar th'Doltar.

The shuttle's hatch slid open, and the five Anthros stepped out, looking around the bay. Given the sizes of various interior spaces on the *Galakseeos*, the bay itself didn't exactly overwhelm them. However, the variety of beings standing in front of them, all clad in Star Fleet uniforms, was daunting. They knew, of course, that the Federation was composed of many species, but the diversity standing 10 meters in front of them was, nonetheless, daunting.

Lynch stepped forward. "Welcome aboard the *Avenger*, Commander Amada and friends. We are pleased that you decided to visit us." He proceeded to introduce each member of the *Avenger*'s crew standing with him. "Now, if you'd like, let us give you a brief tour, and then we'll go up to the ship's recreation deck. Senior officers from our fellow starships will be meeting us there, and we look forward to a friendly gathering then."

"Thank you, Captain," Amada said. "I appreciate your hospitality, sir." He also provided introductions, and the group moved toward the hatchway on the forward portside wall.

As the Anthros passed the attentive honor guard, several of them looked nervously up at rRham. The Tzen gazed down at them and nodded gravely.

"Oh, don't worry about him," Brandt said with a wink. "As long as you don't drench yourself in barbecue sauce, you'll be fine."

rRham let out a soft *harrumph*. "Funny," he said.

"Where are you from?" asked Adono.

"I am a Tzen," rRham told him. "My world is a great distance from here. I reached Federation space during a time of war for my civilization, and I was unable to return, so I have made a life here."

"Like us, maybe," Asterbuk said.

"If so," rRham told him, bending slightly to approach something closer to eye level, "I hope that you find these people as welcoming as I have. They have become my friends and family in many ways, for all that I am quite different from them."

"A good thing to remember," th'Doltar said.

"Adono? Asterbuk? Please don't fall behind," came the soft call from Amada.

"Sorry, father," Adono said. The small group went to catch up with the others.

Not unexpectedly, a highlight of the tour was Main Engineering, which fascinated the Anthros, especially once they realized just how much power was coursing through the reactor and the intermix shafts. Captain Rielly was quite happy to explain the basics of the *Avenger*'s power and propulsion systems.

"Looks like there are similarities to our Maren Drive," Tyesol noted, "but the speed and power available to you..." He smiled. "I must admit, I am, quite frankly, envious."

"We've had our problems, too," Lynch assured him, "but we've been lucky enough to overcome them. And some of our good fortune came from outside, either deliberately, like our early contacts with the Vulcans," and he nodded at Setak, "or inadvertently, when one of the last missions of our early moon exploration program found a stasis box left behind by the Slaver Empire almost a billion years ago."

"Slavers?" asked Amada, curiously.

"We believe that their name for themselves was Thrintun," Setak explained. "We know that they ruled much of the known galaxy approximately one billion years ago, until they were finally overthrown in a great war that destroyed many of the civilizations in existence at the time. That destruction, however, cleared the way for a new wave of civilizations to develop. Few artifacts of the Thrintun remain, but among those that do are a series of 'stasis boxes', within which—when they are activated—time seems to stand still. Some have contained advanced technology, such as the one found on Earth's moon that contained a flying belt that paved the way to Humanity's understanding not only of gravity manipulation, but also of the Grand Unified Theory, linking all the known physical forces."

"With that technology," Rielly added, "we were able to jump ahead possibly hundreds of years in the span of a few decades."

"We found a box like that, too," Amada said, "but it didn't contain anything like that, and we never fully understood how it created its time-arresting field."

"That tells us one important thing, though," Lynch commented. At the questioning expressions on the others' faces, he went on, "The Thrintun's realm actually extended to some degree even as far out as the worlds occupied by the Anthros."

"Ahh," Setak said. "Yes, it does tell us that."

"You were fortunate to have found multiple such boxes," Amada said. "Obviously that influenced your civilization."

"But you had the influence of the Preservers," Lynch said, "and they obviously gave you guidelines strong enough to avoid setbacks and dark age periods such as those which Earth suffered during its development."

"It is likely," opined Setak, "that, culturally, the various influences largely balance out. Earth and its allies had some gains from advanced alien technologies, but the Anthros also benefited from the technological advances that often occur during periods of conflict."

"But at what cost?" asked Rielly.

"Too high a cost," Tyesol said gravely. "Far too high a cost."

"Especially considering how much we might have achieved if we could have worked with the Kynol, rather than fighting them all the time," Asterbuk added, just a trifle acerbically.

"Lieutenant..." cautioned Amada, and Asterbuk subsided. "Not that I don't agree," Amada added, with a small smile in the younger man's direction.

Finally, the group found themselves entering the *Avenger's* recreation deck. The large room was festively lit and tables well-laden with assorted foodstuffs were scattered about. Waiting for them were also the COs and XOs of the other three ships, Captain Shretar and his XO, the Tellarite Commander Belshar gan Brav, from the *Ancylus*, Captain Belinda Dewitt and Commander Danox from the *Thrace*, and Captain Nazmul Mujib from the *Eire*. By mutual consent, Mujib had left his XO, Commander Jomo Abasi, back on the *Eire*, just in case.

"We have other crewmembers who wish to meet you, too," Mujib said to Amada after they were all introduced, but we didn't want to overwhelm you."

"We appreciate that," Amada replied with a chuckle. We hope to see your fine ships, as well, and to allow you to visit our fleet, though I suspect you won't find it nearly as impressive as your vessels.

"Oh, I don't know," Mujib said cheerfully. "I think the fact that you survived all these years, in ships that weren't built or prepared for the journey you've undertaken, is pretty impressive."

"I have to agree with my friend Nazmul," Lynch said. "On our ships, we're out for a few years at a time, at most, and even then, we have a network of bases, supply facilities, and so on that we can rely on. Commander, all you and your people had was yourselves, your ships, and

whatever you could find along the way. I don't think we'd have it so much easier if we were in a similar situation."

"Okay, enough with the mutual admiration society," Mujib chimed back in. "I hear tell that you and your staff set a good table, David."

"I like to think so," Lynch replied, smiling.

"Well, then let's stop talking about it, and find out," Dewitt suggested.

The Anthros—except for Doctor Salik—were surprised to discover that, among the many delicacies from Federation worlds, there were also fairly passable renditions of a number of popular dishes from the 12 Colonies. "Oh, didn't I mention?" Salik told Amada innocently, while his expression belied anything but innocence. "The *Avenger's* recreation staff contacted us to make sure they knew how to produce foods that wouldn't, y'know, kill us, and we got into some long discussions about our relative culinary histories."

"We hope you enjoy them," Courtesan said with a smile. Her background in Star Fleet was unusual, to say the least. She'd gotten involved on a consulting basis, but couldn't join the crew of a starship without proper training, which she was at first reluctant to undergo. After a while, the staff on Starbase 1 developed an abbreviated field-training program that would allow Courtesan to qualify for starship service, an equivalent to basic Academy training which allowed her to gain a commission. Even so, Courtesan rarely referred to herself by rank, and she could be counted upon to dismiss the military-styled traditions on all but the most sensitive occasions.

"We appreciate the effort you've put into creating these dishes, without doubt," Amada said.

"Sure do," Tyesol added, holding a plate of something he'd told Courtesan was his favorite food as a kid. His dark-skinned visage had lit up when he found it among the offerings.

The Star Fleet officers also enjoyed trying out the Anthro foods, as well as sharing some of their own favorites. With all the varying planets and cultures involved, it turned out that there was something for everyone to enjoy.

With the edibles a hit, the next surprise was the music, a collection of pieces from both Federation planets and the Anthros' colonies, both modern and historical. The styles were widely varying, and presented a broad sonic picture of the diversity of both Federation and Anthros culture.

"Did they ask you about music, too?" Amada asked Salik.

"They did, Commander," the doctor replied. "They are an endlessly curious lot, aren't they?"

"Almost beyond imagining to have the time and resources to give that curiosity rein," the *Galakseos's* commander said. "But it offers hope for us if we can be finally beyond the reach of the Kynol."

"Did you know, by the way," Tyesol said, coming up to them, "that most of what we're listening to and eating, not counting what's from our own cultures, isn't even from Earth?"

"Really?" asked Amada, even while Salik nodded sagely.

"Yeah," Tyesol replied. "This pastry I'm holding? It's a vegetable dish from Vulcan, Commander Setak's homeworld. And that kebab that Asterbuk has is made from meats and vegetables from Captain Shretar's planet, Andor."

"There's a lot more to this Federation of theirs than just Earth," Adono added, also just joining them. "Maybe this colony idea that some of their people seem to like a lot could be a good choice."

"Perhaps," Amada said, though he was reluctant to fully embrace that idea too quickly. "But I'd like to see it first, at least."

Commander Elbrun, who had joined the group during the festivities, as had many members of the *Avenger's* crew, walked by in time to hear that. "Commander Amada, I may not be a native of Earth, but I'm sure they'd welcome visits from you and all of your people. Humans, both those from Earth and others, are a gregarious group."

"And where are you from, Commander?" asked Amada.

"I'm a Betazoid, and our people come from Betazed. But I was born, and grew up, on Vulcan," she explained.

"How did that come to pass?" asked Tyesol.

"My parents were diplomats in Betazed's embassy on Vulcan, but they died when I was very little. A Vulcan couple who were good friends of my parents adopted and raised me, even though I was of a totally different species. They told me that it was something they felt would be only appropriate, to honor their friendship with my parents."

"That's amazing," Salik said.

"But not uncommon in the Federation," Elbrun told them.

Far away from the conversations on the rec deck, though, feelings were less positive. The Kynol, for example, maintained communications silence, despite periodic attempts by Star Fleet personnel to reach out to them. Their ships held station relative to the colonial fleet and the Federation vessels, but no one aboard them would respond to any signals.

While most of the COs and XO's of the four starships, plus various other senior officers, were aboard the *Avenger* meeting with the Anthros, one officer had drawn the short straw, as it were, and was standing a watch to monitor what was happening among the many other ships. Commander Abasi stood on the bridge of the *Eire*, watching the main viewer. Abasi was a careful man, especially in tactical situations. Some of his crewmates had been known to call him "suspicious", although they'd hasten to point out that those suspicions had probably saved their lives more than once. And Abasi did not trust the Kynol.

After several hours of absolutely nothing of note happening, even Abasi was having a hard time keeping his guard at maximum all the time, and he'd begun to relax a little. *Perhaps*, he thought to himself, *I'm being too harsh on these people. Perhaps the Kynol really will play ball.*

He was continuing a circuit of the bridge, reviewing ship's status displays, when it happened. "Commander, look!" exclaimed Lieutenant Bartulis from the helm. Abasi spun around, and saw Bartulis pointing toward the main viewer. Following Bartulis's gesture, Abasi watched as one of the large, circular Kynol vessels moved abruptly toward the Anthro fleet. A moment later, two more of the larger Kynol ships accelerated after it, and only seconds later, an array of small craft were flying outward from hangars on the large ships. Energy bolts lanced out from the Kynol vessels, both large and small, striking Anthro vessels a moment later.

"Damnit," Abasi growled. "Red alert. Get me Captain Mujib on the *Avenger*."

Aboard *Avenger*, Lieutenant Tyrune had been standing the watch on the bridge. She hadn't been watching the screen very closely, but the ship's tactical sensors had everything under surveillance, and also responded quickly once the Kynol were moving. Tyrune also signaled a red alert.

On the rec deck, everyone stopped as the lighting turned crimson and klaxons rang through the chamber. Most of the crew just dropped what they were doing and ran for their alert stations, but Lynch, who was standing with Amada and Adono, as well as the three other COs, tapped his commbadge. "Bridge, what's going on?"

"Sir," said Tyrune, "the Kynol have engaged the Anthro fleet. Multiple large ships and a substantial number of small fighter-size craft have moved toward the fleet and opened fire."

"We've got to get back to the *Galakseos*," Adono said quickly.

"I'm sorry," Lynch said. "With our shields up, we can neither beam you back nor let your shuttlecraft depart." Amada looked upset, but Lynch added, "There is, however, plenty that we can do. We have three ships that are as powerful as anything in your fleet or the Kynol's, and we can and will use them." He turned to Mujib, Dewitt, and Shretar, saying, "I trust the officers you left in command are capable enough?" Mujib, however, was already speaking to Abasi. The other two nodded.

"Mr. Abasi says there was no hint given of the Kynol's intentions," Mujib said as he returned to the group. "He's angry that they caught him momentarily by surprise."

"Not his fault, I'm sure," said Amada. "This sort of behavior is all too typical of the Kynol."

"It's time for us to put a stop to it," Lynch said. "I'm getting tired of this crap." He turned to Setak. "Mr. Setak, please stay here with our guests. I'll call you if you're needed." Setak nodded. He knew that the bridge crew on duty were perfectly capable, as was Lynch, and he would be able to monitor the situation from the rec deck.

"Ms. Courtesan," the Vulcan said to the chief of recreation, "please tie the main viewer here in to the one on the bridge."

"Will do, Setak," Courtesan responded, moving off to a control panel.

It took only moments for the four Star Fleet vessels to synch their tactical operations, and they fell into battle formation and leaped into the fray.

"I have tactical solutions on all Kynol vessels," reported Commander Ragin from the helm.

"The *Eire* and *Ancylus* have fired warning shots," reported Commander Elbrun from Sciences.

"Response?" asked Lynch.

"None," the Betazoid science officer said. "The Kynol seem completely focused on pressing the attack."

"Maybe they know they won't get another chance," Tyrune said, with a mirthless smile.

"Could be," Lynch answered. "But in case there's any doubt, if they won't respond to a warning, perhaps what they need is an actual punch in the nose."

"Do we intend to be the puncher?" asked Tyrune.

"Sir," interjected Elbrun, "the Anthros have launched their own defensive fightercraft."

"That'll make our targeting a bit more complicated," said Lynch. He glanced forward to the helm/navigation console. "Commander Ragin, Lieutenant Benteen, let's keep the targeting, and the maneuvering, sharp."

"Aye, sir." "Yes, Captain," came the replies.

"Ms. Esparza," Lynch said to the communications officer on duty, "please tie me in to our three other ships."

"Aye, Captain," the lieutenant said. A moment later, she added, "You're on, sir."

"Squadron, this is Captain Lynch. We have attempted to communicate with the Kynol, to no avail. We have fired warning shots, and have been ignored. It is time to be more direct. Engage the Kynol. Perhaps a stronger response from us will convince them to stand down." He glanced toward Lieutenant Mayumi Katsukawa, who was manning the Tactical station. "Lieutenant, work with Commander Ragin and Lieutenant Benteen to isolate and engage Kynol targets, and please try to avoid the Anthro craft."

"Yes, of course, Captain," replied the soft-voiced Katsukawa, who turned to her station and began programming targeting solutions.

The four ships moved into the combat area, their smaller size relative to many of the vessels in the Anthro fleet, as well as the Kynol capital vessels, allowing them greater maneuverability. Phaser beams lanced outward from the Star Fleet ships.

Despite their best efforts to minimize outright destruction, though, there was little the Star Fleet gunners could do when even low-powered phasers struck the Kynol fightercraft. The fighters had essentially no shielding, and their systems were only resilient to a point, never having been made to resist weapons like phasers. Again and again, even a glancing hit from a phaser beam would reduce a Kynol fighter to shrapnel. Even one of the larger Kynol baseships wandered into a flurry of weapons fire from the *Thrace* and *Eire*, and moments later was adrift and crippled. Soon afterward, the Kynol finally broke off their attack, withdrawing to positions well away from the Anthro fleet.

The damage had been done, though. Although the *Galakseeos* remained largely undamaged from this attack, several of the vessels in the fleet were destroyed, with a few hundred lives lost, one of the largest casualty counts from a single battle in several years.

At Lynch's direction, the *Avenger* and her sister ships took up positions directly between the Kynol vessels and the Anthro fleet. They kept their weapons hot, waiting to see if the Kynol would try another attack or if the response they'd gotten had left them sufficiently cowed for the moment. As time passed and nothing happened, Lynch said, "Please invite Commander Amada and his people up to the bridge."

Soon afterward, the delegation from the *Galakseeos* arrived on the main bridge. A yeoman had secured several extra seats from storage, and set them up in the lower command well, near the navigation station.

"Please, have a seat," Lynch invited the Anthros. They complied, but they were at that moment a very unhappy group of people.

"It would seem," Amada said, without preamble, "that we were too quick to let our guard down."

"Get me Baseship 463," Lynch told Lieutenant Esparza. "And make it perfectly clear that if they don't respond, I might just have us take some more shots for fun and target practice." Esparza nodded, and soon afterward, the main viewer lit with an image of Lukrefor.

"So," said the Kynol, "you have allied with the Anthros after all?"

"Listen carefully," Lynch said, without preamble. "We haven't picked sides in your conflict, except that our 'side' is to see it end. But it seems that the concept of respecting a cease-fire is as alien to you as the Kynol are to us. So let me be clear. Any further acts of aggression will be met with the full force of our vessels' capabilities, not the limited response we've given up 'til now."

"Limited--?" Lukrefor started.

"Limited," Lynch repeated.

"Perhaps I should remind you," Lukrefor said, "that we agreed to no 'cease-fire'. Our initial attack was only halted to prevent any further loss of Kynol lives."

"Then I will remind **you**," Lynch responded, "that we expect that there will be no shooting at each other while we talk to all sides in turn. And if there's any more, we will stop it. Do you want to find out what our ships could do if we're not holding back?"

Lukrefor stared into his visual pickup for long moments. Finally, he said, "We will refrain from any further acts of violence, pending a resolution to this situation. But allow me to emphasize, on behalf of the leaders of the Kynol fleet, who have delegated the task of contact with you to me, that we do this strictly to preserve Kynol life."

"Understood," said Lynch. "We will be in touch with you again shortly. *Avenger* out." He nodded to Esparza, and

the viewer blanked, the image replaced a moment later with the exterior view. Lynch then added, "Secure from general quarters," and turned to Amada and his crew. "I'm sorry that we were taken by surprise."

"Apparently we were, as well," Amada said with a sigh.

"It looks like I'm going to have to have a little chat with our senior staff," Tyesol growled, "about continued military discipline and readiness."

The turbo-lift doors split, and the command personnel of the perimeter action ships entered the bridge, followed by Commander Setak. "I guess the party's over," said Captain Mujib.

"I fear so," Lynch said. "We should speak to the Kynol sooner rather than later, and somehow I doubt that dinner and drinks will be a way to go for them."

"Sadly, I must agree," Shretar answered.

"Mr. Setak," Lynch said, turning to the XO, "please escort our Anthro friends back to their shuttle."

"Aye, Captain," Setak replied crisply. "Commander Amada, if you would...?" Courteously, he led the Anthros back to the turbo-lift, and a moment later, they were gone.

Mujib turned to look at Lynch. "I can only hope, David," he said softly, "that we haven't lost the Anthros' trust."

"I think they do realize that we engaged the Kynol for them, even if we were caught by surprise. We won't be caught napping a second time, though."

"No, we sure won't," Dewitt added.

Soon afterward, the four Star Fleet captains, standing together on the *Avenger's* bridge, contacted the Kynol, and invited Lukrefor and any of the other vessel commanders he might wish to accompany him to meet with them on the *Avenger*. Lukrefor accepted, but noted that since he would be linked to the other Kynol, he had no need of a large delegation. He would be accompanied only by his protective guard of centurions, as he referred to them.

Like the Anthros before them, the Kynol declined to use the transporter. They, too, traveled in a small craft, though their shuttle, a wide ellipsoid with winglike structures allowing it to function atmospherically, was too large to fit into the *Avenger's* hangar bays. Instead, they made use of a type of universal docking adapter to link to the main gangway hatch on the rim of the primary hull. The same security team was detailed again to meet them, and escort them to the officers' lounge on Deck 2. The rich blue carpet, with *Avenger's* insignia woven in silver, would make a suitable environment, Lynch reasoned, for a more formal type of discussion than might occur on the rec deck.

Lukrefor and four centurions soon found themselves standing in the center of the room, with the various COs and XOs clustered around them. They declined several offers to sit, pronouncing themselves perfectly comfortable as they were.

"Well," said Mujib, "I choose to sit." Most of the Star Fleet personnel followed suit, and soon a ring of chairs surrounded the Kynol.

"Lukrefor," began Captain Lynch, "and of course those others to whom you are linked, we welcome you to this meeting, whether in person or by remote. We're sorry that we meet under the cloud of the recent attack on the Anthros, which has cost the loss of much life, and the response which cost the lives of many Kynol, as well."

"You must understand," Lukrefor said, "that we are still acting only in accordance with directives with which we were provided many of your years ago. It remains to be seen how, or if, the discovery of so many more beings like yourselves will change our overriding directives."

"We have a few directives, ourselves," said Dewitt, "and among them are not standing idly by while lives are destroyed."

"Let's be clear," said Lynch. "We can really offer you just one choice. Neither choice involves ignoring the reality that beings like us are here, and we will continue to be exploring the galaxy for the foreseeable future. The choice, though, is to either embrace that and welcome the many races of the Federation and the other powers, who continue to reach outward, or to return to your home systems, remain there, and the Federation, at least, will log those systems as interdicted, with no travel by our ships to those systems. But you must realize that even if the Federation agrees to this, other powers may not, and we can't do anything more than let those powers know of your wishes and hope that they will abide by them."

"I must admit," Lukrefor said, "we are not comfortable with either of these options, but at the same time, we also recognize that, short of spending vast amounts of resources, and possibly lives, to control much of the galaxy, there is no realistic or practical way to prevent Anthro-like races from developing, especially as we come to realize how many like them there are, including many of whom—like yourselves—that had no part of our conflict with the Anthros in our part of space. It may be a long time before we find ourselves comfortable with Anthro-like beings, but if our territories can be respected, there is something to consider in what you offer."

"We don't want to create more conflict," said Lynch. "Our goal is to eliminate it wherever possible. Sometimes that also means keeping warring parties separated."

"We understand," said Lukrefor. "May I request a short recess from this meeting, so that I may confer with the other leaders in our fleet?"

"Of course," said Lynch. "Do you need a private location?"

"I will not need to be isolated, but a less...central one might be beneficial. Perhaps that area under the stairs?"

"Of course," said Lynch. He gestured to the shadowed area under one of the stairways that led up to the lounge's high-bay.

"I thank you," Lukrefor said, and with a half-bow, he moved to the indicated location. For a few moments, he seemed to be whispering to himself, although the general assumption was that he was in contact with other Kynol back on the vessels of their fleet.

While they waited, the four captains looked at each other. "What do you think they'll do?" asked Shretar.

"No idea," Lynch answered.

"It would be in their best interests to give up this chase, of course," Mujib said, "but after being consumed by it for over 20 years, I wonder if anyone could find that a simple choice."

A few moments later, Lukrefor rejoined them. "I thank you for your forbearance," he said.

"You're welcome," Lynch replied.

"Did you reach a decision?" asked Shretar.

"We have," Lukrefor responded. "We will agree to accept your suggestion of an interdiction of our space from encroachment by your people, until such time as the Kynol feel that we are prepared to interact with being such as yourselves. We mean no offense by this, but with a long-time cultural hostility having developed, it will take time to overcome this, and we do not wish to be pressured or interrupted during that period."

"Of course," said Dewitt. "We understand."

"Just to remind you," Lynch added, "this can only apply with certainty to the member worlds of the Federation. We will encourage the other powers with whom we interact to also respect this, but they sometimes have different priorities, and may not always listen."

"We acknowledge this," Lukrefor said. "If you would, however, allow it, we have one further request."

"Go on," Lynch said, steeling himself.

"On behalf of the Kynol, our one final request in all of this is that the Anthros never again return to their erstwhile colonies. These worlds are ours, as they have been now for over 30 of your years, and they shall remain so."

"We'll have to ask them, of course," said Lynch, "but if I had to guess, I think that the Anthros understand that going back would be a dubious choice at best."

"I hope you are correct," Lukrefor said. "In any event, this is our answer, and we hope you will respect our wishes, just as we have chosen to respect your views, as well, despite the fact that you are outsiders to our conflict."

"We might be outsiders to your fight with the Anthros," Shretar replied, "but it's our territory you've come to, and that means our views are going to have to mean a little something."

"Of course," Lukrefor acknowledged, sketching a slight bow. "Still, I must say that this meeting has been a largely positive one, and I thank you for your willingness to listen."

"We would still very much be interested to learn more of your civilization," said Commander Setak. "Perhaps in that way, when the time does come for our peoples to meet again, we will be better equipped to make that encounter an equally positive experience."

"That would be welcome, at the proper time. I will arrange for you to receive historical information about the Kynol, but I'm afraid that I have been requested to return to our fleet, and I would also not wish to delay your meeting with the Anthros to bring our request to them. We will therefore leave you now. We thank you, however, for your hospitality."

"Thank you for meeting with us," Lynch said.

With that, the Kynol returned to their shuttle. As they watched the shuttle undock from the side of the *Avenger* and ease away, the four starship commanders traded glances.

"So, what's next?" asked Dewitt.

"Next we talk to Commander Amada again," Lynch replied, "and hope that 24 years of flight have allowed them to consider their former worlds just that...former."

"I submit that to be likely," Setak said from the group of XO's. "An entire generation of Anthros, for example, has grown up on their ships, and has never known the 12 colonies."

"That's a good point," Mujib commented. "For them, even the cultural perspective is different."

"Right," said Commander Brav. "But shouldn't we get on with asking them instead of standing around speculating?"

Lynch chuckled. "Trust a Tellarite to cut to the chase. Good point, Commander. Let's get back to the bridge."

The conversation with the Anthros was short and largely positive. After Lynch had explained the situation to Amada and Tyesol, the two stared into their visual pickup and responded succinctly.

"I doubt that by this time," Amada said, "there's much to go back to."

"I think that ahead, not back, is our only real choice," Tyesol added.

"There might," Amada said, "be a few die-hards in the fleet who'll disagree, but they will be a small number. Do you in your Federation have an adage about not being able to please everyone?"

Lynch smiled. "Several, actually. We understand fully."

"Then let the Kynol know that we agree to their request."

"What if we tie them in to this channel and you all can speak together?" said Shretar. "This way, there can be no accusation of misdirection or subterfuge."

"Yes, let's do that," Lynch said. "Lieutenant Esparza, please hail Baseship 463 once more."

"Aye, Captain." It took a few minutes, but finally Lukrefor appeared on one half of the viewer, with Amada and Tyesol, now joined by Captain Adono, on the other half. Esparza confirmed that the comm-link was split-screened for everyone involved.

"Thank you for joining this conversation, Subcommandant Lukrefor," Lynch said. "We've contacted you because decisions have been made, and we want there to be no doubt about what has been decided, and what is said."

"On behalf of the Kynol, that is appreciated," Lukrefor replied. He nodded to the other half of his screen. "Commander Amada."

"Lukrefor," Amada replied.

"As you all know," Lynch said, "the question of terms for a peaceful resolution to this conflict has been a high

priority. We believe we have reached a general agreement, and in order to settle things clearly, we wanted to bring all parties together, even if it must be by communication channel.”

“Thank you, Captain,” Amada said.

“Allow me to summarize,” Lynch went on. “The Kynol have agreed to end this pursuit, recognizing that the Anthros have reached space belonging to other interstellar civilizations, who are willing to take responsibility for peace and security within their territories. They will return to their own space, and accept a Federation interdiction of their systems until such time as they are ready and willing to interact with humanoid species on equal terms. In return, they have made a single request: that the Anthros never again return to the worlds they once inhabited.” Lukrefor nodded affirmatively at Lynch’s summary, and the *Avenger’s* commander glanced toward Amada. “Speaking for the Anthros, Commander Amada has agreed to this request, and wishes only that his people have an opportunity to complete their journey and make new lives within the United Federation of Planets.” Amada nodded agreement, as well.

“Speaking for the Federation Star Fleet representatives here, I can’t make guarantees about the political decisions that will be made at the civilian governmental level. I can, however, say that the history of both my homeworld, Earth, and the Federation as a whole has been one of resolving conflicts through solutions very much like this one, so I’m confident that the Federation Council will ratify this agreement.”

“We appreciate your efforts here, Captain,” Amada said. “And, Lukrefor, are you really sure that, once you get back to Kynol space, the agreement by you and your compatriots and superiors here will be affirmed by the Kynol government?”

“I do. Moreover, it will take us years to return to Kynol space, and even if our decisions here are completely overruled, years more to come back to this area, likely then to face Federation forces at least. As a matter of logistics, undertaking a further attack just to make some Kynol feel better would seem non-optimal.”

Amada chuckled. “Good point. Okay, we’ll accept that you’ll do what you say you’ll do.”

“And we, in turn, shall accept the assurances we have received about both Anthro and Federation intentions,” Lukrefor responded. He paused for a moment, adopting the expression that the Star Fleet officers had come to recognize was him listening to something being fed through the Kynol link. Then he refocused. “With that settled, we shall make preparations to depart and embark on our journey homeward.”

“We’d still welcome an opportunity to maintain communications, and some form of relations, with the Kynol,” Mujib said. Amada snapped a sharp look at him, but remained silent.

“We appreciate that,” Lukrefor said, “but we must insist that the state of affairs now agreed to be the one that will be followed. Please understand that we bear you of the

Federation no ill-will, but nonetheless, any change in our position will be far in the future, and it will be we of the Kynol who will make it known what, and when, that change may be. Goodbye.” And with no further ceremony, the Kynol transmission cut, with that window replaced by an exterior view.

“Captain,” Commander Elbrun reported, “I’m reading power increases in the propulsion systems of all of the Kynol vessels.”

“Are there any indications of weapon systems powering up?” Setak asked her.

“No, sir.”

“Looks like they’re being true to their word,” Lynch said.

“Indeed,” Setak agreed.

In a grand, stately formation, the Kynol fleet wheeled slowly around and moved away from the Anthro fleet and the four Federation starships. Steadily, they moved out into the darkness, their images on the viewer shrinking. After several minutes, they leaped into hyperspace and vanished.

“Thank you, Captain Lynch,” Amada said from his window on the viewer. “History has taught me to be cautious, but for the first time in many years, I begin to feel optimistic that we will be able to rest easier, without having to worry about a surprise attack.”

“If the Kynol aren’t preparing a pretty huge deception, it seems like you’ve entered a whole new phase of your history,” Lynch commented.

“It does feel like a momentous time,” Tyesol said, and Amada agreed.

“If you’ll stand by for a brief time, we expect new orders soon as to what will happen next,” Lynch said. “We’ll be in touch shortly.”

“We shall await your signal,” Amada replied.

It turned out not to be a long wait. A few hours later, Lynch was in his ready room when a signal came from the bridge. He reached out and tapped the control on his desk. “Lynch here.”

“Transmission from Star Fleet Command,” said Fleet Captain T’HoD, who was manning Communications on Beta Shift.

“Pipe it in here, would you?” Lynch told him.

“Sure.” Lynch’s viewer lit with an image of Admiral Rosenzweig sitting in his office in San Francisco.

“Well, Dave, seems like you’re on the cusp of making a little history,” Rosenzweig said with a smile. “It’s not every day that a large group of refugees from a civilization thought to be an offshoot of Humanity comes knocking at the door.”

“We just happened to be the ones in the area,” Lynch pointed out. “It could just as easily have been Will on the *Accord*, or Bob on the *Challenger*.”

“True, but it did end up being you,” Rosenzweig replied. “Star Fleet Command has been monitoring your updates with great interest, and we’ve been sharing them with President Laikan and the Federation Council, and the requests from the Anthros have been getting attention at

the highest levels. Right now, Dave, everybody knows who you and your fellow COs out there are.”

Lynch, who wasn't the type at all to glory-seek, wasn't sure how he felt about that. He said as much.

“Don't worry,” Rosenzweig said, ‘next month it'll be somebody else.”

“So, Admiral, what are your orders?” Lynch asked, eager to get away from the topic of his potential visibility.

“New orders will be following soon, but the key information right now is this: the Anthros will be welcome to visit Earth. They've fought long and hard to come here, and all agree that they should be allowed to do so. As for final settlement options, though, I'm afraid that's a harder problem. The United Earth government isn't comfortable with anything like a blanket immigration approval for over 56,000 people at once. I'm not privy to what the government plans to do, so I don't want to be authoritative here. It might be selective immigration; it might be immigration to an Earth colony world that has the room to accommodate all the Anthros together. For that matter, the Federation might offer them a colony world of their own, so they could settle as a planet independent from Earth entirely. It's going to take some time to sort all that out. You know how it is.”

“Aye, sir, I do,” Lynch said with a wry chuckle.

“We'll forward more details to you, and to the other COs, shortly, but in the short-term, please pass this information along to the Anthros. We want them to know what's happening as quickly as we can. They've waited, and fought, a long time for this.”

“They sure have,” Lynch said. “I'll let them know.”

“Thanks, Dave,” Rosenzweig said. “We'll be in touch soon. Star Fleet out.” The viewer image darkened to the Star Fleet Command insignia, and then blanked.

Lynch tapped his intercom control. “Mr. T'HoD, please open a channel to the *Galakseeos*.”

“Will do,” T'HoD responded.

Once the tie-in was established, Lynch explained the latest news to Amada and Tyesol. The Anthro leaders were disappointed that they couldn't proceed directly to Earth, and that settling might be a problem, but they were also understanding.

“Realistically,” Tyesol noted, “even our homeworlds would have been hard-pressed to suddenly take on 56,000 people all at once.”

“A couple of the less hospitable ones would probably not have been able to do it at all,” Amada added.

“Yeah, not all of them were as nice as Kaprensos,” Tyesol said with a wink. Lynch had the feeling that was an old tease between the two men, especially when Amada's response was a sigh and a shrug.

“I'm awaiting specific orders from my superiors,” Lynch told them, “but when I receive them, I'll be sure to let you know.”

“Thank you, Captain,” Amada said, “for everything.”

“You're very welcome,” Lynch replied.

It didn't take long for the expected orders to arrive. The *Avenger* and her sister ships were to escort the Anthro fleet to Starbase 68, which had sufficient facilities to help the Anthros make repairs to their ships and prepare them for their journey farther into the Federation. Once there, *Avenger* and the perimeter action ships would be reassigned, and others would take over shepherding the Anthros to Earth and to their eventual destiny as part of the Federation.

Standing in the *Galakseeos*'s core command facility, Amada and Tyesol were all smiles as Lynch passed along the instructions from Star Fleet. As soon as Amada had acknowledged the instructions and signed off, his first action was to send out a broad signal to the entire Anthro fleet, letting them know what had transpired and where they would be heading next. Amada could almost imagine that he heard the cheers ringing out aboard every ship they had. He didn't have to imagine the cheering that currently echoed through core command.

“Tyesol, we've done it. We've really done it,” he said softly to his XO and long-time friend.

“You did it, Amada, more than any one of us. You defied all the naysayers, and we're going to see a world we started out thinking was nothing more than a fantasy.”

“I couldn't have done it without you, and without so many of the crew of the *Galakseeos*,” Amada said modestly.

“Maybe true, father,” said Adono, coming up to the platform where Amada and Tyesol stood, “but without your steadfast leadership and commitment, we wouldn't have made it. It would have been all too easy to lose hope at various times along the way, but even when many of us came close to giving up, you never did. And now the Kynol are gone, and we have a new destiny.”

“Thank you, my son,” Amada said softly. And then he said nothing, just listening to the happy celebration all around them.

Aboard the Star Fleet ships, the crews were also excited. Lynch had tied in to all the perimeter action ships to pass along the orders from Star Fleet, and the other three captains were all too willing to do a little celebrating of their own.

“David, you must understand,” said Captain Mujib, “this could very well be an historic occasion. We've found a lost offshoot of Humanity. It's like, like...” He paused.

“It's like the *Excelsior*'s discovery of the descendants of the Vanguard colony from the 21st Century,” Dewitt filled in the gap, remembering what Captain Sulu and his crew had found during an unexpected trip to the Small Magellanic Cloud almost 15 years ago.

“Very much like that,” Shretar agreed.

“The next trick,” Dewitt added, “will be working backwards with the Anthros and with Terran researchers, and trying to figure out which society gone missing in the classical era might have been the Anthros' original ancestors.”

"Once we put those pieces together," Lynch said, "that'll be..." He paused for a moment.

"Profound," Mujib said simply.

"We also now have a hint of what to expect as we explore further out in that direction," Lynch said, "and we'll probably have more once the Anthros share the records of their journey with us."

"And let's not forget," Mujib said, a little more soberly, "that by our actions, we've been able to make a difference in the lives of a whole lot of people."

"That's absolutely true," Dewitt agreed. "Not a bad day's work, eh?"

"Not at all," Shretar said.

Over the next few days, engineers from all four Star Fleet ships spent time helping the Anthros ensure that all the vessels in their fleet, especially the ones damaged in the last battle with the Kynol, were spaceworthy and ready and able to make the trip into Federation space. While help was now not so far away if something happened, the hope was that such a need would never arise. Captain Rielly was tasked with coordinating that part of the mission, and he worked with all three of the perimeter action ships' chief engineers to ensure that there'd be staff personnel supporting the operation.

Fortunately, there wasn't anything wrong with the Anthro ships that the Star Fleet personnel couldn't help fix. After three decades in space, any ship that hadn't been pretty hardy to begin with hadn't survived, so the ones that were left were well able to take the rigors of spaceflight. Meeting with Commander Amada on the *Galakseeos*, Rielly was very pleased to be able to provide an upbeat report.

"Commander, I have to tell you, while your ships might not have a level of technology quite equal to ours, in terms of raw survivability, they're easily a match to most of Star Fleet's designs. You and your people should be proud of what you've accomplished."

"Thank you, Captain," Amada replied. "I do have a question, though. I've noticed several of your people working with our astrogation teams and adjusting our systems. Why is that?"

"It's because your drive systems work a little differently than ours," Rielly explained. "Whereas your systems work by establishing a set of destination coordinates and then focusing a wormhole to 'jump' to that point all at once, ours involve travel through a warped bubble of space-time, but still actually traversing the distance. The warp allows us to do it with an effective speed much greater than flight through normal space, though. So we've needed to create a sort of 'mapping' between your navigation systems and ours, so when we get underway, we'll all know where we're going."

"In other words," Colonel Tyesol said, joining the conversation, "you're making sure our systems can talk to each other so nobody gets lost."

"Exactly!" Rielly said with a big smile. "One thing that's helped, actually, is that in the past 20 years or so, the Federation has changed its navigational coordinate systems

from one that was based on the size and general shape of the Federation to a newer one oriented to the structure of the galaxy as a whole. We really needed to, because the Federation has been expanding considerably since that time, and its size and shape are a lot different."

"We use pulsars a lot in our astrogation," Amada noted.

"We do, too, and that's also been a huge help," Rielly told him.

Finally, the engineers gave the Anthro fleet a clean bill of health, and preparations to move onward to Starbase 68 began to be finalized in earnest. With less concern about a possible attack from outside, more Star Fleet personnel were shuttling back and forth to and from the Anthro fleet. The Anthros, almost paradoxically in their own minds, found themselves a bit put off by all these excited people who were alien to them, even the ones who, by all accounts, shared their genetic ancestry.

At one point, walking through the core command facility on the *Galakseeos*, Amada shared his observations of this phenomenon with Lynch and Setak, who had asked him about it. "Don't take it personally, Captain," said the older man. "This is all new for many of our people, and for the older folks, it's something they set aside many years ago. Running from the Kynol, expecting ambushes from every asteroid... Those are things we've understood for a long time. But all this, trusting others—even others who look just like us—that's a leap of faith, and one that all too often hasn't worked out well in the past. So trying it now, even if it looks like our journey might soon end, is still something that we're all just a little wary of, even at the same time that we're hoping that everything you and your friends have said is true."

"It's completely understandable," Lynch said. "It took Humanity a long time to get comfortable even with some of our closest allies of today. The Vulcans are a good example." And he winked at Setak. "Despite the fact that the Vulcans actually helped lift us out of a pretty serious mess in the wake of a global conflict, for many years Humans were either competitive or, in some cases, actually resentful of the Vulcans. And the Vulcans spent a lot of time thinking of Humans as upstarts who were just a little big for their britches. It took a long time, and some pretty big events, to start changing that."

"That is true," Setak added. "And it took intervention by the Humans to help resolve long-time conflicts between Vulcans and Andorians."

"But to look at us now, we're fast friends and staunch allies, so much that if one didn't know the history, one might never imagine how much distrust there once was."

"Of course, even now, our various species sometimes look at each other and wonder just how we get along," Setak said, with just a hint of lilt to his voice to let Lynch know he was teasing. "So, Commander, if it takes your people a little time to get comfortable in their new situation, I do not believe the Federation will begrudge you that time."

Discussions like this continued, off and on, throughout the preparation period. In the end, it was perhaps ironic that the strongest argument any of the Star Fleet personnel could use was the refusal to insist that everything would be perfect. There would be practical challenges, and beliefs and perceptions would be tested, and none of that was sugarcoated. And even for some of the warier, more skeptical Anthros, they could take heart in the belief that no one was trying to snow them.

Finally, all was ready. Lynch again ordered a tie-in between the four Star Fleet vessels and the *Galakseeos*, which in turn linked to many of the other ships in the Anthro fleet. With 50,000 people listening, he ordered the course laid in for Starbase 68. Just before he could give the order to go to warp, though, there was an incoming transmission from Star Fleet Command. Sensing the potential import of the message, he linked it into the open channel throughout the fleet.

“*Avenger*, this is Admiral Rosenzweig.”

“We’re receiving you, Admiral,” Lynch said. “You should know, sir, that you’re on an open channel to all of our ships as well as the Anthro fleet.”

“Well, I’ll not be one to turn down high theater,” Rosenzweig said with a chuckle. “To the Anthros hearing my voice, we welcome you to the United Federation of Planets, and to the first step in reconnecting with your long-separated brethren.”

“Thank you, Admiral,” Amada replied from the *Galakseeos*.

“I’m calling, really, to let you know that a group of other Star Fleet vessels will be meeting you all at Starbase 68, led by Captain Sulu aboard the *Excelsior*. They will take over the tasks of bringing the Anthros to Earth for their meetings with both the Terran and Federation leadership. We salute the crews of the *Avenger*, *Eire*, *Ancylus*, and *Thrace* for bringing this contact to a successful initial conclusion. Well done, all of you.”

All four Star Fleet captains replied with their thanks for Rosenzweig’s praise.

“I’ll look forward to seeing you all soon,” Rosenzweig said, by way of conclusion. “Good luck to all of you, and smooth sailing. Star Fleet out.”

Lynch took one more moment to look around his bridge and at the crew smiling back at him. “Good work, all of you. And now, where were we? Oh, yes. Helm officers? Warp speed.”

And, with that, four Federation starships and just over 100 Anthro vessels set off on the next stage of their journeys, and a new era in galactic history was set to begin.

-----THE END-----