

A faint green tint shimmered throughout the bridge of the Swen war cruiser Ragaan, signaling the start of the action conference. Vessel Master Rin fluttered at his perch and ceremoniously turned to each Board member: all, except the Master, referred to by their functional specialties. On this cruise there were only five supporting members, a result of Ragaan's advanced capabilities: Advisor and Sociology, the more senior members of the Board, flanked the Vessel Master with Tactics, Sensor, and Propulsion further down. Upon receiving a confirming nod from each, he turned and scanned the bridge, collecting his thoughts.

The soothing light pulsed off the dull gray bulkheads, bouncing off the perches and system scopes. The Board was aligned in a V with Rin, as Chairman, at the head. Directly in front of the V was another scope, unmanned, representing the ship's Master Command and Control System, M3.

Rin felt a tingle of anticipation and anxiety; action conferences weren't called unless they encountered an unexpected development, like detecting an alien craft. "M3, will you start our conference by giving us an update on the unknown vessel?"

A disembodied voice responded. "Our long range sensors have completed their initial evaluations and we are now proceeding to a distance of 35,000 kilometers to conduct a more thorough analysis. The object is an artificial construct and under power. It is shaped cylindrical, approximately 240 meters long, and fifty-five meters in diameter. We have detected helium propellant, so it is under an early fusion drive."

Propulsion reacted. "Fusion drive? Haven't our drone probes reported gravity drives in ships from that system?"

"Yes," M3 said. "Fusion drives haven't been detected for the past fifteen local years except for short intra-system trips."

“Maybe it’s not from the Blue Planet,” Sociology offered. “Some of the ore trampers from our own alliance still use fusion drive. Or it may even be a pirate vessel.”

Rin wanted to join the discussion, but protocol prevented him from doing so until they were close to making decisions. He reviewed the information received from their drones. Blue Planet periods, the time for one orbital revolution, were roughly one-fifth that of Swen. The inhabitants of this system had gone from fusion to operational gravity drives in less than three Swen periods: frightening. He turned to Advisor.

The elderly Swen took a long moment, nodding his head. Then he looked up. “Given the critical importance of our mission, Outworld Bureau would have alerted us to the presence of any merchant vessels on our route. It could be a rogue, but I doubt that probability; ore vessels haven’t been out this way for over fifty periods. Also, an ore vessel would have to be much larger than this craft to make such a long journey worthwhile. By the same logic, pirate vessels are going to follow the major trade routes.”

There was a long pause as the Board contemplated their next move.

Rin finally spoke. “The central issue we have to decide now is whether we engage this vessel or bypass it. We are close to the portal that will take us to the Blue Planet’s system.”

“I recommend that we bypass it,” Sociology said. “It is an inferior craft and no threat to the Ragaan.”

“Engaging this vessel would also delay our portal passage,” Propulsion said. “I would like to complete this distasteful task and return to Swen as soon as possible.”

Everyone nodded in agreement.

“I would like to quickly finish this mission too,” Tactics added. “But why is this vessel out here and have they detected us?” He paused a moment, then turned to the unmanned perch. “M3, is the unknown vessel in transit or on station?”

“It is on a circular course.”

“So it is on station and probably there to alert the Blue Planet of our approach.”

“But our drones have reported that the Blue Planet does not send vessels out to this portal side,” Sociology scoffed. “No vessels have ever been observed going through this portal and for good reason. This section is far from any star system, and the associated portal threads don’t lead to any inhabited systems. There is no reason for any vessel to be here.”

“Except we are here and that other vessel is here,” Sensor said.

Rin decided he needed to get the discussion back on track. “Are you suggesting that the Blue Planet knows of our purpose here?”

The other Board members tittered nervously.

Advisor shook his head. “How could they know our mission? There is no contact between these creatures and any races in our thread. And if they did know, don’t you think they would have every warship in their Fleet out here to oppose us? Our mission, after all, is to destroy their home planet.”

Everyone fluttered uncomfortably at being reminded of this gruesome task.

Sensor broke the silence. “M3, has the other craft detected us?”

“I have not picked up any focused emissions from them, although they may have detected our active transmissions on their passive scans.”

“Are they still on their circular course?”

“Yes, no change.”

“So they probably haven’t detected us yet.”

“Are we ready to decide?” Propulsion asked.

Everyone nodded agreement.

Rin was about to call for a roll when he was interrupted by M3's urgent tone. "Target vessel has changed course and speed. It's accelerating away from us and changing course at random intervals."

"So now it knows we are here," Tactics added dryly.

"Maybe, but it does not change anything," Sociology said. "We should still bypass it. Can we continue with our statements of position?"

The others looked to Rin uncertainly, but there was no more discussion, so he proceeded. "Touch your pad to record your standing. Advisor will abstain as his role is strictly consultant to the Master, although he is free to comment."

Sociology and Propulsion suggested bypass, Tactics and Sensor wanted to engage. Rin would have to decide. Everyone looked at him expectantly.

Rin paused and quickly reviewed all of the arguments. "The unknown vessel must be from the Blue Planet and has probably detected us, although it might not know who we are. Still, it will rightly assume where we are heading and may be able to alert the Blue Planet forces of our presence. We must quickly destroy this vessel."

"As a member of the senior Bureau aboard, I formally protest this act. Needlessly destroying alien life is not Swen policy if any other avenue is available." Sociology settled back on his perch, his position made for the record. He was immune from fault in any post-action review.

Tactics laughed. "We are on our way to destroy an entire planet. If that vessel is manned, we are not doing them any favor by leaving them stranded in space."

Sociology reacted angrily. "These creatures have colonies on other worlds. That crew could..."

"Stop," Rin interrupted. "Both of your positions have been noted and we must move along. Now, let us discuss our approach and tactics for this action."

This was Tactics expertise, so he spoke first. “We have two options: we can run in quickly, pull up within 10,000 kilometers, illuminate the target with our active-precision sensors, launch one of our self guided mass-destruct projectiles, and evaluate the results. Alternately, we could close to within 1,000 kilometers and utilize our energy guns until the ship is destroyed.”

“Energy guns would be cheaper,” Advisor offered.

“But that puts us close to the target vessel,” Propulsion said. “What if they retaliate?”

“Our drone probes have reported these animals have projectile-style weapons similar to our own.” Sensor said. “But we do not know its capabilities.”

“How could its capabilities be anywhere close to ours?” Sociology shook his head. “Our technology is far superior to these creatures. Needlessly wasting expensive weapons will invite censure in the after-action review.”

“Carelessly losing the Ragaan would also invite criticism back home. We will use one of our precision weapons and there will be no vote. As Master, I have been authorized by Outworld to make all final decisions.” Rin immediately regretted his harsh comment. “I still intend to incorporate your advice and council in all decisions.”

The Board shifted warily on their perches and Rin silently vowed to be careful in using his unprecedented authority.

“Should we engage the alien craft from farther out? Wouldn’t that be safer?” Propulsion asked meekly.

“That would lessen the probability of a strike,” Sensor said.

“And then we would be wasting even more expensive weapons,” Sociology added.

“Weapons we may need if we encounter any Blue Planet vessels on the other side of the portal,” Tactics added.

“We must protect the Ragaan.” Advisor started to say more, but stopped.

Rin was confused, both arguments made sense. Perhaps a compromise was in order. “We’ll alter our approach to fire from 5,000 kilometers further out, but will remain on station longer to evaluate the information from our detail sensors before launching. That should still give us a high probability of a successful first strike.”

All Board members looked doubtful, but no one wanted to argue their position any further. They are all uncertain too, Rin noted. None of them wants to be responsible for a mistake on our first action. He wished briefly for the presence of one of their mercenary leaders for advice, but knew that was impossible.

Rin turned to the empty perch. “M3 please alter our approach tactics as I expressed.”

“I suggest that we proceed with the standard approach. I evaluate this method as most effective.”

The Board was stunned at this response. Advisor said, “M3 is the most sophisticated Command and Control system we have ever developed. And Outworld did instruct us to incorporate it into Board discussions”

Rin blushed in anger. “This system has not yet been fully tested under way and has no more experience in combat operations than we do. Does anyone want to further argue M3’s position?”

That met with silence. Rin calmed down and continued, “M3, please alter the approach as I have instructed.”

“My position has been noted for the record,” M3 said. “Beginning the altered approach.”

The scopes danced with data as the Ragaan accelerated and the active sensors increase their scans. Rin watched his display and wondered about this new Command and Control System they had on board. He knew it was sophisticated and had let it run all routine functions for the transit. But did its programming include Swen political sensitivities? He shook the thought from his mind; he would have to consider the implications of that later.

Rin.” Propulsion fidgeted nervously. “Do you think this craft is manned?”

Rin paused, considering his response. He had described these creatures in only general terms to his Board, but even that had generated considerable anxiety. He didn't want to further alarm them. "Maybe, but it's not important since we will not be directly encountering any of these animals on this cruise. Once our mission is complete, no Swen will ever again encounter one of these creatures."

Rin turned back to his scope, hoping his words calmed his Board. Was the other vessel manned? They should know soon enough. And how would the aliens react when they came under attack? This was the first action that anyone on the Board had ever conducted. In fact, he couldn't remember any Swen ever striking another vessel. And how would I react if we came under assault, Rin wondered. He shivered at the thought and hoped he would not have to find out.

Morris looked at the ship's chronometer for the fifth time in the past half hour and tapped it lightly to make sure it was still running. Fifteen more minutes before I get relieved, he thought. Christ, time sure goes slow on these watches. At least Jenkins had seen fit not to come on the bridge and had left them pretty much alone. That was something. Morris had spent most of his watch on the horn with his engineering team, who were still looking for the problem in the auxiliary system. If he went to evening meal in the wardroom and there was still nothing to report, Jenkins would be all over him. Maybe he could use the auxiliary problem as an excuse to skip out. At any rate, he would be off in ten minutes and could go down to Main Control and see what was going on first hand. Thank God all of the primary engineering systems were working.

A jovial voice boomed out across the bridge. "Ready to relieve the watch." Raymond was smiling broadly. "So, what have you got?"

Morris noticed that Ensign Rahn had also come on the bridge and was following Ensign Wall around to all the displays, going through the watch turnover procedures for the Junior Officer of the Deck. Morris turned back to Raymond. "Oh, let's see. We're in the middle of nowhere, going around in circles. That's about it. Any questions?"

"I guess not. Any changes in the comm plan, station plan, or systems status in the last four hours?" Raymond began to scan the engineering panel, since those systems had been incurring the wrath of the Captain of late, and he expected Jenkins to call up periodically for updates.

"Nope. Aux number two is still down. I'm heading over there as soon as you relieve me to see how things are going. Thanks for coming up a little early."

"Well, I've just come from a motivational session from our illustrious Captain." Raymond shrugged. "I need something to occupy my mind and I actually like it up here on the bridge."

"Well if you got the bubble, I stand relieved." Morris turned to leave. "I'll be down in Main Control if anything comes up."

"Okay, sir, I've got it. Quartermaster, please log that I have relieved Mister Morris as Officer of the Deck." As he spoke these last words, Raymond noticed the two junior officers, Wall and Rahn, lingering over the Aptom display. As an afterthought he called after Morris. "Hey Joe, I forgot to ask, anything out there?"

Morris was almost out the hatchway but turned. "No, nothing...Well wait, there is a ghost on the screen that's been out there for the past three hours. I've done all the checks and it hasn't moved."

Raymond frowned. False contacts were not uncommon, but they never stayed on the scope that long unless there was a serious miscalibration to the sensor systems. "Did you call the Captain on that?"

"No. I didn't feel like getting my ass chewed any more for just doing my job. I also figured that Ensign Rahn could use a break from Jenkins's ire." The sensor systems were Rahn's responsibility, and he had been under constant criticism from the Captain for their numerous deficiencies, real or imagined.

"Okay, see ya, Joe." Raymond said in dismissal. Now he turned his attention to the other side of the bridge, where the two junior officers were still looking at the Aptom sensors and discussing something. "Hey, Doug. Are any of your sensors down? I didn't see any Casrepts on 'em, and I didn't see it listed in the OOD Status Log." Raymond wondered if Jenkins had held up sending out Casualty Reports, or Casrepts, on the Aptom. Service Command required these reports

as a means of tracking the capabilities of combat units and effectively directing re-supply efforts. But too many Casrepts reflected badly on the commanding officer.

"No, sir." There was no doubt in Rahn's response. "We just checked and calibrated those systems two days ago. They should be working at a hundred percent. Something may have just happened though. I'll have my technicians check it out this evening."

"Have them do it now, Doug." Raymond didn't like having bridge equipment on the blink while he was on watch, and false contacts made him nervous. He was starting to get nervous now, but told himself that he was overreacting. There couldn't possibly be anything else out here.

Rahn looked up, startled. "Ray, you know I can't do that. I've got other systems to get repaired or the Captain will write me up." For an enlisted man to be written up, or put on report, was no big deal. For a junior officer to get written up by the Captain was rare and very serious. It usually resulted in an early discharge.

"Yeah, all right, as soon as you can. Keep a close eye on it. I know it's nothing, but those things give me the jitters."

"Uh, Ray." Ensign Wall continued studying the Aptor display. "It looks like the image has firmed up. I can't tell for sure, I'm calling for a computer analysis now." The computers were supposed to alert the bridge team automatically if there were any significant changes in contact behavior, but there was sometimes a time delay with this older model. "It also looks as if it's changed position. Wait."

The console started rapidly scrolling out a series of technical words and figures. Ensign Rahn, who was most familiar with deciphering this data, shouted out the summary version of what the computer was flashing before them. "Contact reclassified as Alpha...confirmed...course, speed changed...speed increasing...she's making a run on us." Rahn looked up, eyes wide. "And she don't care if we see her."

Raymond's heart sank and he felt a sudden weakness in his bowels and bladder. "All propulsion units emergency flank. Engage the Iron Mike in emergency maneuver." The helmsmen immediately responded by double punching a series of controls on his console, and the low whine of the propulsion units began to spool up in intensity. "Boats, sound General Quarters. Bruce, get on the weapons console and get me a rough solution for that contact. Quartermaster, confirm that the Fox is not in the immediate vicinity and prime the communications link for a Flash message."

The loud whooping of the General Quarters alarm shrieked throughout the ship. Now that things were beginning to happen, Ray felt a little better and began to calm down. He picked up the phone to Main Control to apprise them of the situation and of the possible need for sustained maximum speed. This type of operation could damage the propulsion units, and Ray wanted the engineers to know firsthand what the situation was so they wouldn't entertain any ideas of babying the engines. As Morris answered, Ray noticed Ensign Wall frozen in place, a shocked expression on his face.

"Bruce, snap out of it. Get to the Attack console." That seemed to do the trick. Wall began to move and Ray turned back to his phone.

"Joe, your ghost is for real and is closing on us. We'll be firing off a weapon and doing emergency flank at the same time. Give me everything you've got and then some or we're in deep cum-shee."

"You got it, Ray." Morris was already shouting orders as he hung up.

Ensign Wall was now quickly working with the Attack console and shouted. "Ray, we can't possibly get a good solution this fast. The contact is too far out and we're going too fast and maneuvering too violently. We'll never hit him."

"I just want to give him something to think about. Ready to shoot in twenty seconds. Beginning the countdown." Ray turned to Master Chief Weapons Technician Riley, the senior petty

officer aboard and the man who ran the enlisted bridge team during General Quarters. "Shout out the Manned-and-Ready reports as they come in Chief. I'm especially interested in your division."

"They'll be the first to report in, sir." Chief Riley was a proud and competent professional coming up on thirty years of service, almost all of it in deep space commands. Men like him were the backbone of the space fleet. Almost as soon as he had replied to Raymond he checked his earpiece. "Weapons Division manned and ready, sir. All systems on standby. Request release." Only the Captain or, in his absence, the Officer of the Deck could authorize the arming of weapons in space.

Where was the Captain? Raymond wasn't waiting. "Granted."

Riley immediately relayed the order to the weapons stations.

A frantic Ensign Wall cried out. "I've got a solution. It's not for shit, but I got one."

Raymond nodded. "Good enough. Chief Riley, let's get those Lances running." Riley relayed the order that caused these long-range missiles to come under the control of the ship's weapons computers. It would continue to feed target information to the weapon and automatically fire it once the timing sequence wound down. Raymond started across the bridge. "Helmsman, interrupt the maneuvering disc, meet your heading and hold steady." A steady heading made them slightly more vulnerable to attack but gave their own targeting computers a better solution to shoot with.

Two seconds later the helmsman barked out. "Steady."

On cue, the quartermaster called out. "Weapons away in 5...4...3...2...1..."

* * *

Commander Jenkins had just dozed off in the chair inside his cabin when the General Quarters klaxon jarred him awake. For a few seconds, he slumped there and stared at the bulkhead trying to comprehend where he was, and what was that horrible sound? He finally came out of his

deep sleep and remembered that he was on the Higbee and that he was hearing the General Quarters alarm. He sat there for another few seconds searching his memory. Had he scheduled a battle drill for today? He couldn't remember doing that. The whine of the propulsion units was increasing; they were rapidly accelerating. Jenkins reached for the bridge phone and gave the handle a twist. Nothing. He waited a few seconds and gave it another twist, longer and harder this time.

Finally, a voice came on the line. "Bridge, Seaman Reidy."

The Officer of the Deck was supposed to answer the Captain's line, maybe the Junior Officer of the Deck in rare circumstances when the OOD was occupied in a very important matter, but a seaman, the lowest-rated enlisted man on board? "Seaman, get the Officer of the Deck on the horn....now!"

"Sorry, Captain, he's busy."

Jenkins was momentarily stunned by this effrontery. "Mister, you listen up and listen up good." Jenkins could hear multiple, excited voices in the background. "You put the Officer of the Deck on this phone in exactly two seconds or you are on report and on restriction for a month."

"You better come to the bridge, Captain." The line went dead before Jenkins could reply.

Jenkins grabbed his shirt off the back of the chair and cursed as he hurriedly put it on. He stepped outside his cabin and was nearly knocked over by two men hurrying off to their GQ stations. They didn't stop or even acknowledge him. Jenkins was halfway up the ladder to the bridge when the ship was jolted momentarily followed by a brief, high-pitched squeal that instantly faded away. Damn, he thought, someone has fired a weapon. What in the hell is going on here?

Jenkins burst onto the bridge to find men and women in a confusion of activity. Several were shouting out reports. Someone called out, "Captain's on the bridge," but no one stopped or even paused in what they were doing. Jenkins quickly scanned the bridge for the OOD.

"Captain," Jenkins turned to the voice of Raymond, who was surveying the Aptom sensor and glancing nervously at the weapons console. "Over here, sir."

Jenkins headed over and was about to say something when Ray started in. "We've identified a confirmed contact. No ghost. He's coming down our throat, and we've classified him as a hostile. We've fired one of our Lances to slow him down. I've also ordered emergency combat maneuvering. I need you to authorize a Flash message to the Fox and to Fleet Headquarters. We've..."

"Now wait just a damn minute, Raymond." Jenkins dismissively waved his hand. "First of all, we have not confirmed that this contact is hostile. Have you tried contacting him on the hailing frequencies? Has he fired on us yet?"

"No, sir, but..."

"Second, Morris can't keep our propulsion units going under ideal conditions. Emergency maneuvering will further cripple us. And you still haven't convinced me that this isn't a false contact. We are going to look pretty foolish getting everyone all excited by sending off a Flash message and shooting off a very expensive weapon into empty space because our sensor systems were a little bit out of calibration." Jenkins was warming up in his indignation. He glared at Raymond for a second.

Raymond began to speak when he was interrupted by his JOD's report. "Lance has completed its run. No contact." Their weapon had not hit anything and was now drifting aimlessly in space.

"All right, that's enough," Jenkins said. "Mr. Raymond, you are relieved of the conn."

An awkward pause hung in the air as Jenkins ordered the quartermaster to log his command.

"Captain," Raymond said urgently.

Jenkins reacted. "Helm, go to standard speed and steady your course." He turned to Raymond. "It's the systems. The contact is false. There can't be anyone out here. It's impossible. I can't run us up to speed yet until I have a full engineering report. If we damage the propulsion units it could mean a premature overhaul, and I'll have to explain it to Fleet." He spun around. "Rahn, get your technicians on that sensor system, or do I have to do everything around here?"

But Rahn had his full attention on the Aptor display. "Impact in thirty-five seconds. She is really moving now. Nothing in our fleet accelerates this fast."

Raymond spoke silently into the phone next to him. Then to the helm he shouted, "All propulsion units emergency flank. Head one-three-five. Don't worry about the angle."

The helmsman automatically went to comply when the voice of Jenkins screamed out. "Belay that. Maintain your station. I'm the Captain here and I still have the deck and conn."

Suddenly the ship lurched slightly and several alarms went off. Everything was chaos. Raymond shouted into his phones. "Weapons, release your Lances now."

Jenkins turned and everyone could see sheer panic in his eyes. "We're all right. I said belay..."

"Captain," Raymond was shouting. He had to try reasoning with Jenkins. "That was a ranging shot for a very precise and destructive weapon. Only the most advanced races we know have anything like this. We need to maneuver and accelerate now." He turned again to the helmsman. "Helm, emergency flank, one-three-five."

This time the helmsman responded without waiting for any contradictory orders from the Captain. Jenkins jerked his head nervously about as the action on the bridge now became frantic. He's losing control, Raymond thought. This is going too fast for him.

Now reports started coming from all over the bridge.

"Alpha has pulled up on a parallel track.."

"Engineering reports casualty on number four propulsion unit. Only seventy-five percent available on number four, ninety-five percent total..."

"Multiple tracking frequencies detected..."

"She's fired at us, weapon inbound..."

Raymond's voice boomed out. "Bearing to incoming weapon."

"Two-zero-eight, up seventy."

"Weapons, stand by to release all remaining Lances on two-zero-eight, up seventy. Then flux the gravity bank to the rear. Helm, steady as she goes."

The Higbee lurched slightly as it went immediately out of a steep turn to steady up. The ship's compensation system took a couple seconds to stabilize after such an abrupt maneuver.

"Stand by....on my mark....fire....helm up one-ten."

Raymond had fired all remaining Lances on the same bearing as the incoming weapon of unknown capability and had made a violent maneuver at the precise moment that he hoped the alien weapon would have to make a final course adjustment to hit its target. He had also distorted the ship's artificial gravity field to promote a premature detonation and maneuvered the ship so that the fusion shield would take most of the blast. He hoped that the combination of all that would save them. Of course they would have no more weapons to work with, and their engineering plant couldn't hold out much longer, but those were bridges he would have to cross later. He looked over to Jenkins. The CO was staring fixedly at the Aptom display, completely silent.

Rahn called out, "Weapons maneuvering to meet our new course. Man, those things are fast and nimble. Lances are starting to chase them. It's turning on us. I don't know if our Lances can catch 'em."

Raymond shouted over the din. "Stand by for weapon impact." Everyone instinctually grabbed on to something.

The detonation rocked the small ship and sent bodies and equipment flying, but the Higbee remained intact. Smoke began to fill the bridge space and alarms went off on all consoles. The damage reports began almost immediately.

"Number Two propulsion unit...off line... ' "

"Casualties in Weapons Control...Fire in the control panel and space...send up a damage party...."

"Hull breached in A-7 section...switching to backup life support..."

"Fire control systems down..."

The reports came in a cacophony of confusion and fear. Miraculously, the Aptom long-range sensor was still operational, and those close enough fearfully turned their attention to it. Raymond could see that the alien ship had again taken up a parallel course to their own, as if to evaluate the effects of their last shot. They didn't seem to be in any hurry to rush in for a kill.

Raymond scanned the bridge to assess damage and see what could be done. The Captain was slumped against one of the consoles and appeared to be in shock. Ray could see two other bodies crushed under a repeater that had ripped off its foundation. Others were either just shaken up or had minor injuries.

Over the phones, Ray received a quick appraisal of their status. It didn't look good. The ship's hull had been breached in three sections and the adjoining compartments had been automatically sealed off with the loss of twelve crewmembers. Two of the four propulsion units were completely down, a third was only capable of ten percent power and the fourth only capable of forty percent power. Main Control reported that damage was extensive and they would not be able to give them more than station-keeping speed until they got some assistance from another ship. The helm was a mess, with both the bridge and after helm units jammed. Weapons and fire control systems were destroyed, but there were no more weapons available anyway, except for their close in

guns. Ray doubted the Alien ship would get that close. And even if it did, those were visual aiming weapons, which made them useless against all but the slowest of targets. Including the two casualties on the bridge, there were fourteen dead: fourteen out of a crew complement of only fifty-nine. Various other fires and damage were reported throughout the ship, but Ray had heard enough. They were helpless: dead in the water. No way to protect themselves, no way to escape.

Raymond made one more call down to the Radio Shack and spoke briefly to the Communications Chief. He then turned and walked over to Commander Jenkins, kneeling down to speak to him. Jenkins was still slumped against the console and appeared catatonic.

"Captain." Ray's voice was low yet earnest. "We must send the Flash message now. Chief says that he can rig up a comm net to do this and we can get enough power from engineering to at least reach the Fox. She can relay it to Fleet Headquarters."

Jenkins stared up at Ray as if he didn't recognize him. "No, we need that power to maneuver..."

"Captain, listen to me. There is no time to lose. We must warn the Fox while we still can. The little power we have for propulsion won't do us any good against that ship. You and the Operations Officer are the only ones who have the Flash net codes. Wallis is dead and we don't have time to break into your safe. I need for you to give me the codes." Ray could see that he was not getting through. He turned and instructed Ensign Rahn to call down to Communications and tell them to begin transmitting at full power on the Flash net. It would not be much more than static to any Flash receiver, but maybe that would at least get someone's attention.

He turned back to Jenkins, who was now waving his head and beginning to babble. "This has been a bad exercise...Instructors were trying to get me on this problem...After the lights go off, I'll get the solution key and they won't get me again...Damn operators, they were supposed to give me the problem ahead of time...I'll take care of them later... "

What was he talking about? Ray tried again. "Captain, the Flash codes. We need them now. What are they? We--"

The Higbee was jolted again and Ray knew what was coming even as Rahn began to shout. "We got tagged again...Alpha changing course and speeding up...she's on a firing run....she's fired another weapon....same signature as the other one..." Rahn paused, his tone now sober. "Impact in nineteen seconds."

Everyone on the bridge stopped what they were doing and looked at Ray, silently pleading for any sign of reprieve. Ray could only turn towards Commander Jenkins. "Captain. Please. The Flash codes."

No hope. The remaining crew members on the bridge each turned away and made their own peace.

Only the voice of the Captain could be heard. "Drill will be over...Stop the simulation...After the lights go out, I'll deal with those operators...They won't flunk me out of command school...I'll be the youngest ship's Captain ever...The next drill, I'll ace..."

Chief warrant Officer Raymond Raymond stood and looked around the bridge of his ship, the NAS Higbee. No one moved and there was silence, save for the Helmsman, who was weeping openly, and two others, who had their heads bowed and were murmuring quietly. Yes, Captain, Raymond thought bitterly. This drill will soon be over.

Then the lights went out.