

Chapter 1

Mars, Stardate 4804.6

Two gleaming *Constitution*-class ships orbited Mars in convoy, pale against the background of the red planet. Having two of the Federation's heavy cruisers together was a rare sight. It was even rarer to have the *USS Enterprise*, the most famous vessel in Starfleet, in her home system.

It was standard Starfleet procedure to rotate crew members between vessels so they could gain experience working under different captains. The *Enterprise* and her sister ship, the *USS Woomera*, were transporting crew to and from each of the ships.

They had just completed that task when Lieutenant Uhura, the communications officer aboard the *Enterprise*, turned from her station to face the ship's commanding officer.

"Captain, we have received a communication from Starfleet command. The *USS Daedalus* at Irexia V is reporting that a Romulan Bird of Prey has just entered the system. We have been ordered to proceed to the Irexia system to provide support to the *Daedalus*."

Kirk looked over to his Vulcan science officer. Spock raised an eyebrow at the news. It had been a long time since the Romulans had violated the treaty with the Federation and encroached past the Neutral Zone between their two regions of space. The Romulans weren't as volatile as the Klingons, but more subtle.

“Has the Romulan ship approached the *Daedalus*, Lieutenant?” Spock asked the communications officer.

“Not as yet, sir,” she replied. “But the captain of the *Daedalus* is worried.”

Kirk slapped the armrest of his command chair. “And so they should be. I don’t trust the Romulans as far as I could throw them.” He turned back to face the ship’s pilot.

“Mr. Sulu, set course for Irexa V. Maximum warp.”

“Aye Captain,” the young Asian man replied. “Setting course for Irexa V.”

A moment later, the *Enterprise* veered away and disappeared in a bright flash as it entered warp speed, leaving the USS Woomera alone in orbit around Mars.

Chapter 2

Irexia V

Captain Lars aboard the *USS Daedalus* was more than worried. Several hours earlier, the Romulan Bird of Prey had arrived in the system, in violation of the Neutral Zone and the treaty between the Federation and the Romulan Empire.

The Bird of Prey hadn't been cloaked as it had exited Warp and had been sitting behind the next planet in the system, Irexia VI, ever since.

As much as Lars would have liked to jump to warp and escape, there was nothing she could do. The *Daedalus* was hosting a Vulcan Science Academy research team that was conducting surveys of the planet's unusual atmosphere on shuttlecraft fitted with sensitive instruments.

Unfortunately, the atmosphere of Irexia V was heavily ionized, which meant that they were unable to establish communications with the shuttle until it climbed into a higher orbit. To leave now would mean leaving the shuttle and her Vulcan science team completely undefended if the Romulans had less than honorable intentions.

Not that the *Daedalus* was any match for the Bird of Prey. She was an old vessel and not well-armed. The remaining ships of the *Daedalus*-class were now research vessels, working in regions that had little to no chance of needing to fire her limited weapons.

“Try hailing the Romulans again, Ensign,” she told her communications officer.

“Y-yes, Captain,” the young man replied. He turned towards his station but looked up a few moments later and shook his head. “Still no response.”

“Damn it,” Lars swore to herself. “What are those Romulans thinking?” She addressed the comms officer again. “Still no luck getting through to the shuttle?”

He shook his head again. “Sorry Captain, but the interference from the atmosphere is just too strong.”

The Captain nodded. “Let’s just hope that the Romulans don’t come any closer until we can recover them or until the *Enterprise* gets here.”

She had barely uttered the words when her science officer, a small Indian woman called out, “Captain. The Romulan vessel has just moved away from Irexa VI and is now approaching our position.”

“Shields up!” Lars called. “They’re not much, but hopefully they can buy us a little time. Let’s hope to God that they get here soon!”

Chapter 3

Aboard the USS Enterprise

“How long before we arrive in the Irexa system?” Kirk asked as he stalked across the bridge. He was impatient, eager to protect the crew of the *Daedalus* and drive off the Romulan Bird of Prey that was attacking her.

“Less than one minute, Captain,” Ensign Chekov replied in heavily accented English.

“I want to be ready for a fight as soon as we get there. Red Alert as soon as we arrive.”

“Aye, Captain.”

Uhura looked up from her terminal. “Captain, report from the *Daedalus*. Their shields are at twenty percent, weapons are down and they have just sustained damage to their left warp nacelle.”

Kirk’s face darkened. “Tell them we’ll be there momentarily.”

The *Enterprise* flashed out of warp approaching Irexa V.

“Shields up, put the *Daedalus* on screen. Let me see what’s happening.”

“Aye, Captain.”

The *Daedalus* remained in orbit over where its shuttle was still unreachable in the planet’s atmosphere. Not that it made much difference now. With the damaged warp nacelle, even if they had recovered the Vulcan science team, there was no way to escape.

The ship’s science officer looked up from her scanner, a smile creeping across his face. “Captain, the *Enterprise* has just entered the system. She’s coming this way at full impulse.”

“Oh thank God,” Lars said. “Have the damned Romulans seen her yet?”

“It doesn’t look like it,” she replied. Her expression changed to one of fear. “However, it looks like the Romulans have decided they’ve had enough. They’re targeting our shield emitters.”

Lars knew what that meant, too. The *Daedalus*-class shield emitters were attached to the main power array, and a direct hit could do more than just take down the shields. The whole ship might go up.

“Put as much power as you can to the shields and try to get us out of here. It’s up to the *Enterprise* now.”

Chapter 4

The captain of the Romulan Bird of Prey, the *Revenge*, was fixated on the *Daedalus*. He could see the damage his disruptors had inflicted on the shields and the warp nacelle. His orders were clear – take Vulcan hostages. The Empire’s intelligence had discovered that the Vulcan Science Academy was conducting research in this system, and with the *Daedalus*, it was a perfect opportunity.

He had originally believed the Vulcans were aboard the old Federation ship, but when it had not attempted to escape, he had realized that they must still be in the planet’s atmosphere. The *Daedalus* had just become superfluous to requirements. Once it was gone, he could easily pick up the shuttle once it emerged from Irexa V.

“Finish her off,” he barked at his tactical officer.

The *Revenge* swung around, the ship lining up for a perfect strafing run that would destroy the Federation ship. Just as her tactical officer was about to fire, his sensors flashed.

“Captain, there’s another Federation vessel. It’s the USS Enterprise!”

“Break off!” the Captain screamed as the shields were buffeted by the powerful phasers from the *Constitution*-class heavy cruiser. “Signal the *Hammer* that we require reinforcements!”

Undetected, a second Bird of Prey had remained cloaked just outside the Irex system.

The *Enterprise* and the *Hammer* exchanged weapons fire. The shields on each ship soaked up the damage, but they were weakening. It would be a war of attrition, but the *Enterprise* had the advantage.

“What are their shields at, Mr. Spock?” Kirk demanded.

“Forty-five percent, Captain, to our sixty percent.”

Kirk nodded. “Keep at it, they won’t risk being destroyed. Status on the *Daedalus*, Uhura?”

“They’re leaving orbit at one-quarter impulse,” the communications officer replied. “I’ve notified them that we will recover the Vulcan Science Academy research team once they emerge from the planet’s atmosphere.”

“Very good, Lieutenant.”

Chekov looked up sharply. “Captain, another vessel has exited warp. It appears to be another Bird of Prey. They are on an intercept course with us.”

Kirk sighed. “Well, that suddenly got more interesting. Signal Starfleet, request backup. And let’s get some more power to those damned shields!”

The two Romulan vessels, the *Hammer* and the *Revenge* had the *Enterprise* bracketed and both ships were pressing the advantage. Both the Romulan captains were eager to take down the *Enterprise*. Whoever managed the killing shot would be a hero of the Empire.

While the *Enterprise* was a tough ship, she was beginning to be worn down by the sustained attack.

“Captain, they are targeting our nacelles,” Spock told his captain calmly. “Shields on our port nacelle is down to ten percent.”

“Reroute any availa...” The sentence remained unfinished. The *Enterprise* shook violently as the Romulan weapons finally penetrated the shields and hit a power relay on the port nacelle. Coolant began leaking from the damaged engine.

“Report!” barked Kirk.

“Minor damage only,” Spock confirmed. We’ve rerouted power to the shield. However, our shield strength overall is down to

twenty percent. Logic dictates that we must try to end this conflict as quickly as we can.”

“Those damned Romulans have come to the same conclusion,” Kirk answered. Through the main view screen, the two Romulan ships had formed up beside one another for a final strafing run.

Chapter 5

“Put all remaining power to the forward shields,” Kirk ordered. The *Enterprise* and the two Romulan vessels faced off against one another.

Uhura whirled around in her chair. “Captain, communication from the *USS Woomera*,” she told Kirk. “She will be here any second.”

A moment later, there was a warp flash behind the *Enterprise*, and the second *Constitution*-class ship slotted into formation beside her sister ship.

“Fantastic timing,” Kirk said with obvious relief. “On screen.”

He turned to face the viewscreen where the captain of the *Woomera* sat on a bridge identical to the *Enterprise*.

“Captain Landy,” Kirk addressed the *Woomera*’s captain. “I can’t tell you how relieved we are to see you right about now.”

Seth Landy chuckled. “Good to see you too, Kirk. Intelligence reports had indicated that there were two Romulan Birds of Prey that had crossed the Neutral Zone, so we were dispatched to the Irexa system shortly after you were.”

“Now that you’re here, let’s see if we can do something to sort out this situation,” Kirk said. “The *Enterprise* has been a punching bag for long enough.”

Spock looked up from his sensors. “Captains, if I may. The first Romulan vessel to enter the system has sustained more damage to her shields than the other.” he said. “If we focus all our fire on her main power conduit, we should be able to break through her shields.”

Landy turned to face his tactical officer. “You get that, Hanson? Target the port vessel’s main power conduit.”

“Aye, sir.”

“Now let’s finish this,” Kirk said. “Make sure we are locked on to that conduit. When I give the order, fire.”

The four ships converged at full impulse, holding off on firing until the last second.

Kirk held up his fist. “Fire!”

Bright orange plasma danced from both the Federation ships, targeting the same spot on the port Bird of Prey. Their aim was true, and moments later the *Revenge* shattered under the fire.

The *Hammer* veered away to avoid the debris as her sister ship disintegrated. Now very heavily outgunned, she leaped away and escaped to warp.

Chapter 6

USS Woomera

The two *Constitution*-class ships were again holding formation, this time flanking the damaged *USS Daedalus* as she limped away from the surface of Irexa V.

The three Federation captains sat in the wardroom aboard the *Woomera*, the only ship not to have sustained any damage in the conflict with the two Romulan Birds of Prey.

“We were lucky that Starfleet intelligence had picked up on the second ship,” Kirk said to his counterparts, taking a sip of blue Andorian ale from his glass.

“What I want to know is what the Romulan Empire has to say about it,” Lars countered.

“They’re disavowing any knowledge,” Landy replied. “Not that we expected them to do anything else.”

“It might even be true,” Kirk said. “It looks like they were trying to take Vulcan hostages, for what reason, who knows?”

“There has been scuttlebutt that some zealots believe that the Romulans and Vulcans originally were one race and that they should reunify,” Landy answered.

“The physical similarities are obvious enough,” Lars said. “It could even be true.”

“Even if it is true,” Kirk said, “I doubt it would happen in my lifetime.”

“Probably not,” Landy agreed. “Nonetheless, the Vulcan Science Academy is extremely grateful for the Federation protecting their people. It’s a minor miracle that we didn’t have any casualties.”

Kirk nodded. “The damage to the *Enterprise* is minor, it will be repaired within the hour, if I know Mr. Scott.”

“The damage to the *Daedalus* is more extensive,” Lars said.

“The question is if they’ll repair her or just decommission her.”

“Given the pounding she took and can still fly, I think there’s some life in her yet,” Landy replied. “Once we get her to Starbase 4, we’ll know how much damage there is.”

“I wanted to thank you again, Seth,” Kirk said to him. “If you’d been a few minutes later, then it would have been a very different outcome.”

“It’s usually been the *Enterprise* that pulls off the miracles, Jim,” Landy smiled. “It was our turn this time.” He lifted his glass. “To the Federation. May we look after one another whenever we need it.”

“I’ll drink to that,” Kirk said.