

Carolyn's Story Part 3

Scales of Time and Space

Mission Day 1 - Calendar Date: 15 SEP 2395 Stardate: 72703.3 0000 hours SFHQ
Lead Mission Starship: U.S.S. de Baissac OSI-8672
Flyout: SD72703.8 0500 hours WPS Cool-down: 1722 hours Restart: 2009 hours
Range to Toroid: 79.06 lightyears Subspace Comm Lag: 3h31m Time Dilation Factor: 0.013

Carolyn awoke a little before midnight on Starbase *Nechayev* to a simple alarm tone. None of her favorite music played this morning; somehow it didn't feel appropriate with the events that she and her OSI team might experience in the coming days. Perhaps she would find time during the flight. She ran an abbreviated sonic shower, dressed and packed her personal kit in preparation for transfer over to the U.S.S. *de Baissac*. The ship, an *Intrepid* class variant newly outfitted for stealth operations and science research, had arrived from Mars and docked at the starbase an hour earlier. It was getting its warp reactants topped off and final gear and consumables loaded in while the crew conferred with Starfleet in general and OSI specifically on mission orders. Flyout to intercept the energy toroid would take place at 0500 hours.

Carolyn knew the *Nechayev* AI system would see her as being up and moving, heading for the lounge and a meeting with her team and Marjorie. Breakfast at midnight always seemed odd to her, but she'd been in similar situations before. Crews performed their shifts at all hours and the starbase facilities and ships were always active. Despite her serious state of mind Carolyn tried to delay putting on a totally professional face. Right now analyzing data and managing OSI assets and schedules would have to wait until after a croissant and coffee.

Marjorie, Deirdre, Jonas, and Azumi were already in the lounge when Carolyn arrived. "Good morning all," Carolyn offered, and they responded in kind.

"Did you sleep well?" Marjorie asked, half joking because of the hours they had all been working.

"Oh, well enough," Carolyn responded, "Even with the assist field on, I had dreams about our assignment. I suspect I'll feel better once we get moving."

"The settings can be a bit tricky," Deirdre said. "I can help you with those. Even if it's by comms," she added. Carolyn looked puzzled as Nora, Roberto, and Jeremy joined them.

"Split ship assignments," Marjorie explained. "Deirdre will be on the *Guyot*. Jonas, the *Ginesta*. Roberto and Nora, you'll be on the *Lindquist*. Jeremy and Azumi, you'll stay here with me on the *Nechayev* for a short time doing heavy shuttle systems prep and then we'll head out on the *Blakey*. The *LeBeau* will be following us as backup. Each ship has specialized gear and crew to help understand and counter the threat if necessary," she said.

Nora lightened the tone. "I get to play with new torpedoes and Type XII phasers, and Roberto can really push those plasma injectors," she quipped.

Jonas added, "And I'll make sure we can all talk together and pass around a few petaquads of data."

Carolyn would have been happier if Deirdre was on the *de Baissac*, but she understood the reason, the practice of not putting all vital mission personnel on a single vessel. She looked at all of her teammates – her friends – and nodded. "We'll make this work."

As they finished up their meal together, Marjorie told them "Okay, you have some time to get your personal and mission gear onto your respective ships, take care of cleared family comms, relax if you can, and we'll meet up in the lab at 0330." They headed out of the lounge and stopped briefly to look out into space around the starbase, ships and shuttles moving in and out, sunlight slowly making its way to San Francisco's longitude.

As they split up to a few different corridors Carolyn felt a hand on her arm. "You okay?" asked Deirdre, looking concerned. Carolyn, a little lost in thought, turned.

"Oh...yeah. I'm fine, really. A lot happening in a short time," she said.

Deirdre totally understood, and reminded Carolyn, “We’ll have some down time and we’ll have comms. And you did say we’ll make this work.” Carolyn nodded.

“Well, comms when they let us,” she offered. “But I hear you. Let’s pack up and check out our rides.” They shared a quick hand hold and headed for their rooms.

Carolyn took a surprisingly short time to get her personal pack and research computer gear together, load up the room’s small antigrav carrier, and head out to the turbolift. She acknowledged a few other *Nechayev* crew as they all boarded the cab, and she said, “U.S.S. *de Baissac* entry dock.” The turbo chimed and after a few minutes and one other stop, she stepped out into the transfer tunnel to her assigned vessel, the antigrav smoothly floating alongside. She straightened her comm badge.

The ship’s entry agent, a somewhat tall male Andorian, already knew who Carolyn was and spoke dryly to the dock system, “Hagey, Carolyn R., SFA 200, mission data entry initiate.” The system chimed. “Crew addition accepted,” it said. The Andorian nodded and said in a warmer tone, “Specialist Hagey, welcome aboard. Please follow your antigrav to your quarters. Flight crew introductions on the bridge are scheduled for 0440.”

“Thank you,” Carolyn replied, taking in all the mission prep activity around her and briefly reassuring herself that yes, there are friendly Andorians.

Carolyn walked close behind the antigrav as it negotiated a few corridors and a turbolift, and finally stopped at her quarters. The door label 0307119 indicated Deck 3, Room 7, port side in degrees from aft centerline. The room had a style typical of a new OSI vessel, smooth walls and structural beams, a bed, a desk and two chairs, display screen, warm lighting all around, lavatory, and replicator cove. All business, but a pleasant environment. She offloaded the antigrav, which then glided out the door, presumably heading to its original storage spot. She sat on the bed for a while, flicking through her PADD and checking the situation with the toroid. Carolyn hoped she would not need to do that multiple times in an hour, and told herself once more that there were so many other capable Starfleet crew members working this problem. She closed the high energy readings and ship readiness screens, did a quick med check, and freshened up before heading back into the starbase.

Deirdre, Azumi, and Jonas had arrived early and were comparing PADD notes about departures when Carolyn arrived. They had maybe ten minutes to spare.

“So, team leader, what color is your room on the *de Baissac*?” Jonas inquired with a slight grimace. “They gave me this dark gray thing with brown accents,” he announced. Deirdre chuckled and Azumi just glanced at the ceiling. Carolyn was taken out of her serious frame of mind a bit, but she knew this was something Jonas was particularly good at. And she was okay with it.

“Oh, a few shades of very warm gray. Kind of soothing, actually,” she admitted. “With any luck it’ll help me sleep,” she added.

Jonas replied, “I hear that. Here’s to us all getting some rest along the way. I suspect the next week will be like the early days of flight.” Carolyn caught the reference.

“Hours of boredom punctuated by moments of sheer terror,” she answered, “but hopefully together we’ll find out exactly what’s happening.” Her friends all agreed; they skimmed through a few more incoming PADD notes as the clock ticked toward 0330 hours.

The other team members gathered at the lab right on time and all took seats around the central conference table. The main display showed the current situation as determined by data from ships, probes, and relays sent with a subspace comm lag of as much as three and a half hours, as well as extrapolations of real time positions and energy readings. All ship computers and the team’s PADDs were continually updated. Marjorie entered the room and immediately launched into the full update.

“Okay, team. As you know, the energy toroid that we believe is heading for our antimatter facility completed a fourth subspace jump a short time ago, some 79 lightyears away from here, thankfully with no impact on our assets or anyone else’s that we know of,” she began. “We have five ships warping to positions along the suspected trajectory, each maintaining a distance of five lightyears along a ‘keep out’ cylinder. The *Giddings*, the *Aurora*, the *Mahafe*, the *Ferranti*, and the *Takayama* will provide operational data as we move to a preliminary intercept point 55 lightyears from here and 22 degrees off galactic

north. As we close the distance, the comm lag will shorten. A lot,” Marjorie said, pausing to look around the table as everyone studied the situation map.

Carolyn moved the time controls forward and back, getting a new understanding of the movements. She noticed Deirdre doing the same with energy readings over time and distance. She also noticed Azumi staring in deep thought at shuttle specs, her hands almost pressed together in prayer. Jonas flicked through comm data screens. Everyone accepted the enormous amounts of information that they needed to process mentally, luckily with the help of many computers, PADDs, and other devices.

Marjorie continued, “As you can see, we are also maintaining a watch on Romulan and Klingon players focused on the toroid. Starfleet and OSI are silently following both at a distance, and while Romulan forces appear less interested as the toroid heads away from their territory, we will continue to monitor all vessel movements. We’re moving out quickly, but quietly. We’re not using the MIDAS arrays for our comms. We don’t need to blast great holes in subspace alerting anyone to where we’re heading,” she cautioned. “It won’t be perfect, but it will be the best strategy that we can muster right now. There are others whose job it is to handle full fleet-sized actions, and some of them are occupied elsewhere. We have to make sure that no one is deliberately interfering with our work to support Starfleet. We’ve seen many phenomena that *could* have involved larger fleet groups, but fortunately those were met and understood with smaller, focused responses.”

Marjorie nodded and took a breath. “At least some of us in OSI have tried to prevent major blowups.” She glanced at her PADD. “I’ll be back in time for the first flyouts. Need to listen to some admirals and ambassadors talk.”

The team acknowledged Marjorie’s departure and continued to study the mission data. Carolyn would stay connected with her teammates individually and in full group comms when possible over the next six days. At the moment she was taking in what Jeremy and Azumi were discussing about the *Blakey*’s heavy shuttle *Barnard*, with Roberto and Nora peering over their shoulders.

“Hard to miss the five stasis pods,” Carolyn noted.

Azumi shrugged slightly and replied, “Yes. I wanted two more, but these are all that would fit. Plus all of us if it came down to a rescue.”

Jeremy added, “And I need to run a holo sim in the *Blakey*’s Sandbox to see how she’ll handle fully loaded.”

In the time remaining, Carolyn absorbed every issue that the team was studying separately, in groups of two or three, and all together, continuously comparing notes and syncing up every personal PADD and the data loads being sent to the ships soon to depart. She paused occasionally, silently reading lines of data to herself, mentally organizing ships, shuttles, propellant loads, impulse and warp system status, crew complements, supplies. Internal tasks at which she was very good. Solidly locked to that was knowing the capabilities of her team, and on up to how they would all work together with the OSI and Starfleet forces heading to the intercept point.

Marjorie called in to the lab. “Sorry for taking so long. Admirals talk a lot. We’re getting close to flyout, so meet me at the central dock hub and we’ll finish up there,” she said.

Carolyn tapped her comm badge and answered, “Understood. See you shortly.” And the team headed down into *Nechayev*’s core complex of cargo and personnel transfer tunnels. In a few minutes, they were all together.

With official orders and last minute updates done, Marjorie regarded the seven and said, “Good luck to us all. None of us knows if the toroid will remain on its present course, so we need to stay vigilant. If we could have some time without a major incident before intercept, I would certainly embrace that.

The team all agreed, and Deirdre seemed especially confident. “With the console duty shifts, we should see anything that’s coming,” she offered, “and at least we can yell back loudly if something does.” Jonas knew she meant that fast, high-powered warnings and data could be sent, even if it meant ditching their stealthy posture.

“Let’s hope it doesn’t come to that,” Marjorie replied. “Off you go, class,” she continued with a grin. “I’ll be right behind you.”

Final hugs, pats on the back, and firm handshakes were followed by the team separating, heading for their respective starships. Carolyn raised her hand in a quiet wave as her turbo closed. Deirdre smiled and waved back, and Marjorie looked as strong and determined as ever, Jeremy and Azumi at her side.

Carolyn reboarded the *de Baissac* at 0435 hours, in plenty of time to be escorted to the bridge by a security crewman and handed off to the ship's First Officer, Commander Aisha Jennings.

"Specialist Hagey – Carolyn – welcome to the *de Baissac*," she said. "Doctor Capello speaks very highly of you," Jennings added.

"Thank you," Carolyn responded, nodding. Jennings guided Carolyn over to the center seat to meet the captain.

"Sean Roberson. A pleasure to meet you, and here's hoping we can make this run in record time," he said. They shook hands, and he continued, "Aisha will introduce you to the crew and get you settled in at one of the comm stations."

Carolyn replied, "Thank you, sir. Hoping for the best on this mission." Roberson nodded in agreement and turned his attention to the viewscreen.

Carolyn followed Jennings across the central bridge well and then up to the outer ring of consoles, Jennings naming the crew members and Carolyn acknowledging each in turn. "Our Chief Engineer, Lieutenant Commander Carl Morelli. Navigator, Lieutenant Commander Anahera Waimarie. Ops, Lieutenant Matthew Ayers. Tactical, Lieutenant Frank Barrera. Communications, Lieutenant Aiden Foster. Chief Medical Officer, Lieutenant Commander, Doctor Courtney Levette. She'll be heading back to Sickbay following flyout. And I believe you know Sonja Laurila, our Science Officer," Jennings remarked as they arrived at an empty seat for Carolyn next to Sonja.

"I do, yes. Deirdre O'Connor introduced us a couple of years ago," Carolyn replied. "So good to see you again," she said to Sonja as she took her position at the console. Jennings pivoted a thumb over her shoulder.

"We'll be undocking and heading out the doors shortly," she said, and headed to her place next to the captain. Carolyn and Sonja verified that all toroid data was indeed updated, and that encrypted subspace links to the other ships and OSI were ready.

Just as 0500 hours ticked over, Roberson made the ship-wide call.

"This is the Captain. Initiate departure from starbase and prepare for full impulse. We will then go to warp in ten minutes," he said. With control presses at various consoles, the structural undocking and movement of the *de Baissac* away from Starbase *Nechayev* began with a smoothness that reminded Carolyn of a symphonic performance. Even with inertial dampeners active, she could sense familiar subtle waves and rhythmic pulses, and knew that each type of propulsion system had its own sound and feel, so much like musical instruments. She checked her console, looked up at the main viewer, gazed about the bridge, and repeated those actions a few times as the ship passed through the main door on RCS thrusters and aligned itself for impulse travel. Carolyn could tell with her eyes briefly shut when they had gone to impulse, reaching a quarter of the speed of light in moments. She knew that her teammates on four other ships would be experiencing the same things very soon. And she looked forward to speaking with them after they were under way.

And then the *de Baissac* went to warp. The sensation was also well known to Carolyn, mostly during training flights to get familiar with ships and general OSI assets. An audible whine built to a tolerable thump, with subdued light effects from FTL playing on the viewscreen. They passed through the known energy thresholds that came with each integer warp number, until Navigator Waimarie announced "Cruising at Warp 9.97, Captain."

Roberson replied, "Very good. Let's configure all comms and sensors to passive incoming, tight focus on the main deflector, and prepare for Zig-Zag 1." He turned to address Carolyn. "Hagey, we'll connect up with the OSI network at roughly 0935 so you'll be able to coordinate with your team. In the meantime, you'll work with Lieutenant Commander Laurila directly, and you may also call upon any crew member for assistance that you deem necessary." Carolyn nodded, as she had been doing a lot lately.

"Thank you, Captain. We'll keep an eye on what's out there in the meantime," she replied, not sure what else to say at the moment. All they really could do was trust the systems to stare out into the galaxy.

Sonja leaned over and whispered, "And if you need to, duck out to the conference room. It's usually pretty quiet." Carolyn smiled.

"Oh, count on it," she said.

As the *de Baissac* made her way along the intercept path, she would perform a few small random course changes at random times – the zig-zags. Nothing that would call attention to her movements, though it was assumed that the most capable adversary forces would always be watching for and dissecting the smallest clues about Starfleet and OSI operations in the quadrant. All sides practiced stealth techniques, and OSI did what it could to “confound and confuse” forces that posed strategic problems. The typical tool set in 2395 included the usual signal encryption and warp field overlays, as well as switching up ship names and registration numbers in the comm traffic and adding relay station isolation bounces. The old dream of cloaking OSI vessels at sublight was no longer an issue, since various adjustments to defensive shield and impulse emissions worked well enough to blur a Threat vessel’s sensor view. The forces that did employ cloaking technology were gradually losing their advantage as better resolution subspace ranging sensors and FTL computer processing were deployed within OSI. The energy toroid was deeply submerged in subspace and difficult to track, but not impossible with enough computer power. The real problem was time.

All of the complex tech, as Carolyn had accepted from the beginning, was well understood by her team, every other OSI crew member, and every Starfleet directorate involved in keeping the Federation safe. No pressure, she thought, slowly shaking her head. While waiting for the first comm window, she reviewed more incoming data with Sonja, especially ripples detected by the U.S.S. *Giddings*, closest to the start of the keep-out cylinder. Carolyn also skimmed periodic reports on general happenings around the galaxy, some filtered by the computer to closely match their activities, some not. She never knew what tiny bit would spark some useful idea, and admitted to herself once more that the whole spark idea came from Deirdre, with all the talk of high energy events.

For the next few hours, subspace along the toroid path rumbled steadily, but at a low level since the fourth visible burst. The frequency of the distortions rose and fell within a very narrow range, and Carolyn remained watchful, though surprisingly calm while the sensor data flowed across her screen. She studied the map full of updating vectors, icons, and labels, always aware that the images were more than three hours old. At least the upcoming comms with her teammates would be closer to realtime. She occasionally asked Sonja about the readings and what the toroid could possibly be, to get yet another take on the problem, adding to what Deirdre and the other ship science teams were thinking.

“From the energy curves we’ve recorded,” Sonja said, “it could be a few different types of objects, from something that’s self-contained, super massive like a planet, and generating its own energy to do what it’s doing. Well, mostly going in and out of subspace to different spots in the quadrant. Or it could be something smaller that’s using the continuum like a power cell. And maybe a few things in between.”

Carolyn replied, “Hopefully we’ll have more to look at soon. The initial movements of the toroid a few years back seem somewhat random in hindsight, but now Starfleet thinks it’s making a deliberate move toward the antimatter refinery.” She shook her head slightly, still trying to piece things together. “Some of us have wondered if this thing can smell antimatter,” she said.

They continued to watch incoming sensor readings and saw how the computer applied various data reduction routines to get to possible conclusions and recommendations. So far, they had very precise readings but all they really knew was that this thing spit out a lot of energy, could be very difficult to stop, and was on the move. Carolyn got up and walked about at regular intervals, visited the conference room for some small bits of replicator food and drink, and mentally slotted toroid information into what would become her official Threat file in the computer.

At 0930 hours, Captain Roberson announced, “We’re coming up on a thirty minute subspace comm opportunity with the other ships and Starbase *Nechayev*. Be advised that comm lag may be a few seconds within our outbound OSI group and up to five minutes with Earth.” He turned to his communications officer. “Lieutenant Foster, you’re up,” he said.

“Aye, Captain,” Foster answered. “We will focus on sensor data and computer analysis transmissions first, followed by live reports and OSI team interactions until the end of the window. We will continue to listen for limited comms from the keep-out monitors,” he said. Foster then activated comm handshaking across multiple channels according to a basic randomized schedule known only to Starfleet. Emergency transmissions were always possibilities, but all of the signal intelligence measures in place were definitely helpful.

Signals began arriving from the *Giddings* and the *Aurora*. Sensor data sent through relays across more than 70 lightyears reached all outbound OSI vessels and finally Earth. Computer data reduction showed no significant change in toroid energy output, just movement along the current track. Four Romulan and two Klingon vessels detected earlier on the far side of the keep-out zone were being watched.

In Carolyn's brief voice summary, she noted, "Those ships are maintaining their distance, and paralleling, but not really trying to match the toroid's speed."

Jonas added from the *Ginesta*, "And their comms seem pretty routine for now, at least the ones we're decrypting quickly. Nobody's panicking."

Deirdre worked her screens on the *Guyot* while she reported, "The toroid energy does look stable pushing through subspace, but I think we might be seeing a little more continuum drag. I'll keep on the incoming readings." She tapped a few more controls and added, "Sonja, during the next comm window you and I and Roberto should talk about what could be propelling this thing." At this early stage the rest of the team was polled and logged reports as best they could, passing on the live discussions, and near the end of the window, Marjorie's message to the team came in.

"My thanks to all of you for getting this mission underway, and for the data work so far," she began. "We will also study the readings here and connect again in about five hours. Jeremy and Azumi and I will be heading out on the *Blakey* in eleven hours, once the ship and heavy shuttle are fully prepped. In the meantime, Starfleet and OSI are discreetly moving a few groups of ships to within four hours of the intercept point if they have to move at high warp, presumably on science and supply missions, and away from Alpha Siolrahn Four. I will keep you updated on the progress." Marjorie paused and smiled. "Okay, get rest when you can, and we'll talk. Capello out."

All of the live comm windows winked off as Lt. Foster closed the connection. It had only been a handful of hours since Carolyn's flyout, but she was glad to see her friends. She checked her console to find the departure times of the other ships. The *Guyot* left at 0613, *Ginesta* at 0645, and *Lindquist* at 0709. All four vessels were now close enough for comm lags of no more than five to ten seconds, traveling in generally the same direction while making those subtle course changes.

Prior to the second comm window at 1427 hours, Carolyn managed to get a couple of hours sleep and freshened up in her quarters. As her head hit the pillow she tried valiantly to not think about the world of numbers swirling about her, even though they constituted her chosen profession. She was thankful that no emergency messages interrupted and that she could even listen to some music. She skimmed through a few pages on her PADD and rode the turbo up to the bridge.

Carolyn noticed Sonja wasn't there as she sat at her console station. In fact, three other bridge officers were absent, their stations taken over by deputy crew members, and shift changes would be SOP for the next four or five days.

As Carolyn caught herself up on the sensor data, Sonja arrived and the comm window opened. "Hi. Doing okay?" she asked.

"Rested up, thanks. Ready to go through all of this," Carolyn replied, wagging a finger at the screens.

"Good. Let's do it," Sonja replied. Carolyn detected a hint of Marjorie's strength in Sonja's voice, but that didn't surprise her, knowing the history of Marjorie's dedication to the OSI. The system chimed and the comm stream started. Marjorie had sent a message minutes earlier, partly to cover OSI ships and equipment being readied and moving into the general intercept area. She would also address the other members of her team separately.

"Carolyn, I'm sending ship lists and full manifests, including defensive systems and weapons. You know this stuff, so we don't need to go over it line by line. Deirdre, I'm also sending some possible procedures for energy projections through main deflectors as well as shield grid configurations. Jonas, we have nothing definitive on patterns from the toroid yet that would fall into your skillset. It's a long shot, but we should all keep looking. And in any case you have those green ships to worry about." Marjorie tapped a few controls and continued, "Roberto and Nora, you'll be getting a lot of the same files I'm sending to Carolyn concerning warp and impulse capabilities, plus updates on photon torpedoes and long range probes. As you all will see in the main update, we are continuing to sync up higher resolution toroid data from the *Giddings* and the *Aurora*, and as of two hours ago, the *Mahafe* was reporting on random

movements of three additional Romulan vessels thirty lightyears further along the toroid path. I'm off to some meetings, but I know you outbound teammates will talk, and we may be able to hook up again in about four hours. Azumi will monitor this channel until the window closes." And then her image was replaced by incoming data.

Carolyn knew her words and image would be delayed but responded anyway. "Acknowledged, Marjorie. We are due for a warp system cool-down soon but will continue our sensor sweeps and working through the data," she said. After a slight pause, she continued. "Azumi, we will connect again soon," she said to the screen section full of graphs and numbers. The faces of her outbound team filled the other windows and the team got down to business. Deirdre, Sonja, and Roberto did a short side discussion on different ideas about the toroid propulsion, and Carolyn listened, ticking off little markers on her PADD as the system transcribed the vocals. It was a technique that worked for her, an initial data burn-down to highlight points to discuss further. Three graphs full of lines and points and labels, one from each team member, plus one computer suggestion, winked on.

"From what the *Giddings* and the *Aurora* have recorded," Deirdre said to the team, "I'm wondering if we could be looking at something maybe 450 kilometers in size and burning through 15,000 metric tons of matter and antimatter with each major energy release." She bit her lip slightly in thought. "Now we should have been able to see a body the size of a small moon with the EM and subspace frequencies we're staring at," she added, "but it just doesn't show up."

Sonja nodded and summarized her results. "I'm figuring 780 kilometers and 18,000 metric tons. Any bigger and we hit theoretical limits on materials and temperatures," she said.

Roberto limited his conjecture to what possible hardware could be involved. "If we're talking about just a vessel with systems similar to our best reaction chambers and warp field coils, it could be a minimum of 28 kilometers and a total propulsion hardware mass of eight million metric tons." He shook his head as the others stared at the graphs. "None of this makes a lot of sense right now, and I'll be happier when we get more information. Which is pretty obvious," he said.

The computer prediction was only slightly higher than Deirdre's estimate, at 485 kilometers and 16,900 metric tons of reactants per burst. Deirdre and Sonja agreed that energy fluctuations in the data from the *Giddings* and the *Aurora* could skew the calculations up and down. Regardless, Nora estimated that for even the smallest toroid estimate, it would take at least 350 starships with full weapon and emitter loadouts to push back against the power that Starfleet and the Klingons had experienced.

On the *Ginesta*, Jonas mostly squinted at his displays and shook his head. "I've got nothing, sorry. Applying at least a hundred different filters on this data, and so far it sounds like everything from hissing gas lines to planetary tectonics. Will keep listening and graphing," he said.

Carolyn swept her gaze across the data on her console and her PADD, and addressed her teammates. "Thanks, everyone," she began. "This is a solid start to the mission, even with so many unknowns out there. Like you say, Jonas, let's keep listening." She rubbed her eyes briefly. "We should be okay with the staggered shifts on our four ships, and with all of these sensor and computer assets, we can follow the toroid and deal with whatever it does. At least at our current distance," Carolyn tried to assure them. "The keep-out ships are on high alert since they're so much closer, and we'll be crossing our fingers for them. It's been a long day. I think we can hit the mess hall and get some rest during the cool-down, and I'm taking another nap," she remarked. Sonja nodded in agreement, making sure the systems were all doing their jobs.

Azumi then briefly appeared some 26 minutes into the window with barely four minutes remaining, letting Carolyn know that her return message was received. "Understood. We're getting ready for flyout, and hopefully we'll see you soon," she said before she winked out. Deirdre, Jonas, Roberto, and Nora all signed off, and Carolyn indicated to Lt. Foster to switch back to comm silence.

Sonja got up and stretched, and asked Carolyn, "How about I buy you dinner?" And they both grinned, heading to the turbo. The *de Baissac* had a decent mess hall on Deck 4, a bit further down than in previous *Intrepid* class vessels, and more solidly protected for an OSI variant. Starfleet crews had been used to replicator meals for over a century, but Carolyn was always impressed with the way the devices took basic raw molecular stocks and assembled countless variations that actually tasted good. Like her broiled salmon and risotto and asparagus. And a synth white wine, Sauvignon Blanc. Sonja told the system, "Number 11, please," and the replicator created chicken piccata, butter lettuce salad, and green bean almondine. "One of my favorites. The machine knows me," she laughed. "And a synth Chard," she

added. Carolyn couldn't help thinking about how replicators, transporters, and other high-energy ship systems were so closely related, but it didn't stop her from enjoying this meal and the company. They talked about the mission, colleagues and friends they had in common, and missing their homes even when performing duties on Earth for OSI.

"When we all get back, you and Deirdre will have to come visit Reykjavik," Sonja suggested. "And then maybe we can stop by her place in Kilkenny," she continued.

Carolyn easily welcomed the idea and said, "And I'm just one more little shuttle hop to Hood River in Oregon." Imagining those sorts of relaxing trips felt good, even while traveling more than 3,000 times the speed of light.

Carolyn and Sonja finished up, chatted with a couple of other crew in the mess hall, and headed back to the bridge. They checked in on the current situation, looked at the relatively quiet sensor readings from the toroid, and awaited warp cool-down. Carolyn returned to her quarters for an hour's nap with an assist field, felt refreshed, and headed to the bridge once more. One of Sonja's deputies was in her place, and Sonja herself arrived after a few minutes, having also taken a short break. Still no big changes on sensors, but they knew the toroid was still moving along the subspace track.

At 1715 hours Captain Roberson emerged from his ready room and took his bridge seat. "Time to go to impulse, Anahera," he said to his navigator, who replied, "Aye sir. Dropping out of warp now. Setting one-quarter impulse." The low soft whine of FTL flight quickly dropped in pitch and faded away. The main viewer transitioned from Z-axis smears of light to a static view of the galaxy and maps of everything around them. Mostly for Carolyn's benefit, Roberson informed the bridge, "Chief Engineer Morelli will monitor the reactor core and nacelle cool-down, as well as coil alloy field dispersal." Carolyn nodded at him affirmatively, understanding that much like metals could have magnetic properties added and removed, multi-thousand-ton nacelle coils needed to have some of their atomic structures "reset" from the effects of super high-energy plasma and warp fields, mostly by running a small plasma stream through the nacelles at much lower frequencies, with no directional thrust through the continuum. Deirdre would label it "Idling the engine in neutral for three hours."

Roberson also informed them, "We will have a short comm window beginning at 1822 and warp restart at approximately 2000." He looked around the bridge and added, "We will likely do this ten more times before reaching the intercept point. Let's make sure everything gets logged and shared." All of the bridge crew acknowledged and kept watching their consoles.

If Carolyn was to allow herself any faint twinges of anxiety about the mission so far, it would center on this period of slow impulse crawling through the galaxy. Moving at a relaxed pace was fine for a vacation, but not out here. Of course, she knew that if they absolutely had to, they could make Warp 5 to get out of a bad situation, and there were the other ships in the group to help. Something to mention to Dr. Levette later if necessary. Right now, watching things happening in real time, reviewing sensor data, and discussing different aspects with the crew were her focus.

The comm window opened at 1822 with the usual multiple channels but with very little new data on the toroid. The *Giddings* and the *Aurora*, still closest to the action, transmitted what they had, even if the data was some three hours old due to their distance. How the many scattered ships, relays, and starbases coordinated the timekeeping of subspace comm traffic, particularly in dealing with varying velocities and transmission lags, was a complicated technological miracle that the team trusted. On the *Ginesta* Jonas kept watch on signal sources and destinations, making sure the systems processed the various packets and streams correctly and understood who needed to see which files first.

"I'll keep the incoming side open for the next hour," he informed the outbound group as they did their face-to-face conferencing. "And I'll be the first to report nothing new or concerning from the Romulans or the Klingons," he added.

Deirdre gave her quick summary. "Sonja and I are still adjusting our estimates of the toroid's size and power, and we're not seeing any real changes in its trajectory or subspace pulsing," she said.

Sonja added, "If anything, we may be seeing a minuscule amount of continuum drag. Okay, it might just be error bar fluctuations in the graphs, or this thing may not be pushing as hard as a day ago. We'll keep watching."

Carolyn returned to tapping important points on her PADD and reading through the incoming data reports. Roberto spoke briefly about impulse and warp flight regimes and automated helm commands

that could be programmed for future situations. "Our ships are small enough where I think we can out-manuever this object, given what we've seen so far," he stated.

Nora said, "We may also be able to tie specific shield grid commands into the helm routines. Like increasing EPS power to the usual shield sections, but a lot faster." She paused as Carolyn tapped a few PADD notes, and added, "I mean, it might be useful if we get close and that thing *really* doesn't like us. We should have time to run some sims by the other crews."

Carolyn was about to reply when a very short comm came in from Jeremy with the expected thirteen minute lag. "Just to let you know, Marjorie and Azumi are finishing up prep on the *Blakey* and I'll be joining them by the time you get this. We're scheduled to depart at 2035. The *LeBeau* will be trailing us by a few minutes, and we'll be back in touch soon." His image cut to more data streams.

Carolyn spoke again to Nora and the others. "Okay, agreed on seeing what we can put together on flight and shields. We'll all have the same data and can talk with the computers before the next comm window opens. Which should be sometime in the next five hours." With everyone ready for the upcoming tasks, they signed off. Carolyn once more skimmed through the current reports, satisfied that things seemed to be under control. She understood that the *de Baissac* would be going back to high warp in an hour or so, but she swiveled around to tell Sonja, "It's probably a lost cause, but I would love to get back to a day that starts at 0500. I'll be back in a couple of hours."

Sonja smiled and gave her a thumbs up. "I'm heading off in a little bit myself. We're OSI. We grab down time when we can," she replied. Carolyn grinned back and headed out.

Back in her quarters, Carolyn freshened up, told the AI to wake her at 2230, and was pleased that the replicator could make a decent chamomile tea. That and a few music tracks helped her relax. She managed to sleep for three hours and woke a bit more confident that she could get back into a normal cycle.

Back up on the bridge, the ship had returned to high warp. Sonja's deputy was at the science console and greeted Carolyn. "Lieutenant Ramona Hoffman. Hi," she said, extending her hand. "We almost ran into each other in the mess hall. Sonja's down in Engineering for a bit and will be back soon. Whatever you need, let me know."

Carolyn replied, "Thanks, I will. Looks like the *Blakey* headed out?"

They both scanned the consoles, and Ramona confirmed, "Yes. Departure was 2035, right on time. With the planned adjustments to our group high warp times, Anahera thinks they should be able to get close in about 46 hours." Carolyn nodded and looked over the latest sensor data. A few outbound ships made another jog in their headings some twenty minutes apart, dropped their velocities slightly, and then resumed high warp. With no alert beeps and only occasional discussions among the bridge crew, a new day began.

Mission Day 2 - Calendar Date: 16 SEP 2395 Stardate: 72706.0

Cool-down: 0805 hours Restart: 1115 hours Cool-down: 2305 hours

Range to Toroid: 66.23 lightyears Subspace Comm Lag: 2h48m Time Dilation Factor: 0.024

The new clock day was five hours shy of one day MET or mission elapsed time. Carolyn worked MET numbers as easily as she did the clock, since the two schemes served different purposes, though as a citizen of Earth, she occasionally needed visual reminders about time zones. Aside from the PADDs, most every habitable volume of the ship had a data screen showing the time in a few formats.

She didn't follow stardates too finely, though she accepted that all of Starfleet used the system to keep precise track of events in the galaxy, as well as adjustments for high impulse time dilation. The current Federation Stardate was 72706.0; 72 was the year, the next three digits were essentially 1000 increments per Standard Earth Year, 0.68 Stardate chunks equalled some six hours, and 2.73 chunks made a day. For some odd reason she remembered that one hour equalled 0.11375 chunks.

Sonja returned from Engineering and Ramona headed out. Carolyn and Sonja checked the sensor data and reviewed some of the *de Baissac*'s supply numbers, power generation capabilities, and a few other stats in preparation for an upcoming comm window at 0318 hours.

That comm window was unexpectedly preempted at 0226 by a long warble and flashing indicators, followed by a voice message. “This is the U.S.S. *Giddings* with an alert message,” it began. Carolyn and Sonja watched as data began streaming in and the message continued, “Ship time is 2312 hours. We are receiving a burst of gravimetric and subspace flows from the toroid. Hull vibrations canceled out by SIF and IDF systems. Small amount of visible spectrum EM accelerated to FTL. We calculate the burst took place at 2257 hours, with a 13 minute lag to reach us. We will monitor sensors and get back on comms as necessary. *Giddings* out.”

Captain Roberson entered the bridge and methodically checked with his crew, who all indicated things were stable, and remarked, “We’re still a good distance away from anything that can hurt us as far as we know, and the *Giddings* has made it through, so we’ll maintain a basic watch without going to Yellow Alert.”

As First Officer, Aisha Jennings replied, “Aye, sir. We’ll have a report on the event as soon as possible.”

Carolyn stared at the screen, found the event time numbers, and then closed her eyes for a moment. “Okay, that happened three hours ago with the lag to us here,” she said.

Sonja noted other comm windows winking on. “That was quick. The team is gathering,” she remarked. Carolyn saw that everyone within range was focused on the incoming data, so she just sat and watched with them. By the timer, she expected to hear from the *Blakey* within 12 minutes.

Jonas managed the outbound group networking, coordinating with each ship’s communications officer. “Everybody’s locked up,” he announced.

Lines, curves, tiny shapes, and labels built up on the screen graphs and occasionally fluctuated as the data flowed in. Deirdre called with a very short “Okay, we’re watching it.” Sounds were assigned to the energy levels, beginning with low rumbles, progressing into faster thumping and then a high-pitched banging. The *de Baissac* and the other ships definitely encountered incoming continuum waves. Multiple energy types and levels produced a jumble of sound that rose and fell a few times with the graph changes, extending to at least ten minutes.

Sonja nudged Carolyn and pointed at a graph curve that seemed to be sloping downhill. The sound also seemed to begin tailing off, and she said, “Inertial dampers are working nicely. Eight more minutes, maybe. Deirdre, are you seeing this?”

After a few seconds of lag, Deirdre was seen nodding while staring at the displays. “Oh, yeah,” she confirmed. “Even the *Giddings* won’t see any visible fireworks echos unless they move in really close, like a couple of AU But I’ll bet this thing is putting on a light show like it did near the Klingons,” she said.

Data continued to pour in through comms and the ship sensors even after the primary burst faded down to its previous background levels, and the team trusted the computers to stay vigilant while processing what they had just witnessed. Fifteen minutes after the fade-out, Marjorie’s comm came in from the *Blakey*. “We’ve seen the event and will await your analysis. The toroid appears to remain on its existing trajectory. No new directives at this time,” she said, and signed off.

Within an hour, the team and the different ship computers had run through the data and offered their human and AI conclusions. Carolyn polled the team as they quickly traded files, and the results were somewhat interesting. “For the moment,” Deirdre began, “it appears that the toroid is moving slightly slower through subspace than after the previous burst, and the new burst produced a slightly lower energy total. I’m not going to speculate on what that means. We need to watch it more.” Sonja wordlessly nodded in agreement, and the AI opinions were similar.

Jonas quipped, “*Ginesta*’s AI isn’t seeing any manipulated signal patterns in the burst, and neither am I. The racket we heard feels like physics basically doing its thing. And no new concerning signals from our neighbors.”

Roberto and Nora had nothing major to add, but they would try to fit the readings to propulsion and weapon capabilities. “We’ll keep on it,” Nora said.

“Thanks, everyone,” Carolyn said as she wrapped up the comm session. Even while the team continued to analyze the latest toroid burst data – Deirdre would informally call them “burps” – they got a chance to relax for a time. Carolyn glanced at her PADD, took note of the time, and set it to standby mode. Barely 24 hours had passed since the *de Baissac* left the starbase. To Carolyn it already felt like days, but she didn’t feel as stressed as she did earlier. She and Sonja worked out some overlapping bridge

duty times before they headed to the mess hall. Carolyn considered a meal and a few hours nap time before the upcoming cool-down – and more comms – at 0800 hours as a single step in trying to wrench her schedule back to normal. *Whatever that was*, she wondered.

Back in her quarters, Carolyn made a few PADD notes about upcoming activities that the team could benefit from, when events allowed, including simulation sessions in the holodeck. Deirdre wasn't the only one giving things names, as it was accepted within OSI that a ship holodeck was referred to as the Sandbox. The ships could share initial sim situations and the team could later compare results, since they were separated for now. Before this mission, Carolyn had been in a few Sandbox sessions with holos of people like Jonas and Nora, and while they didn't behave exactly like the real ones or have all the same personality traits or memories, they were definitely close enough for operational tasks.

One other thing that she did before drifting off was to switch her PADD back into verbal naming, which might be useful and even necessary as intercept time approached. Devices had been named for centuries, though most Starfleet and OSI ship AI systems were still addressed only as "Computer." Multiple devices with different names made a lot of sense on a mission. Carolyn picked "Roxie" for her PADD. She once thought about "Robby" after the classic AI mech but changed her mind and went with the name of a family dog.

The comm window opened up at 0800, the ship computers shared data and analyses, and the team discussed the situation as before. Deirdre and Sonja seemed to agree with the computer assessment of the toroid. "There's a bit of fuzziness in the readings," Deirdre said, "but we may be looking at a real change in subspace velocity from 0.54 lightyears per hour down to 0.50. The *Aurora* and the *Giddings* are both seeing some smaller rumbles, and no change in trajectory."

Anahera Waimarie, *de Baissac*'s navigator, added a bit of comparison. "We're making roughly 7 lightyears in 24 hours. Our fastest runs may be about 0.41 lightyears per hour, slowest 0.28, and it all averages out to 0.3. Even if the toroid slows, we're still looking at getting to the intercept point late on Day 7, even with the built-in heading jogs," she said. No other major updates were offered, and Marjorie thanked the team after a ten minute lag from the *Blakey*. Her written notes did recommend that the team get in some Sandbox time, and Carolyn would coordinate that.

For the next six hours, each ship in the outbound group ran a series of simulations based on the known properties and actions of the toroid. Most were twenty minutes long, with one or two taking an hour, depending on the complexity of the starting conditions. Not every session centered on a particular specialty, but everyone put themselves and the systems to work to practice vessel moves, weapons and shields, shuttle flight ops, and even the use of hand phasers and other personnel gear. The scenarios included being engulfed by exploding continuum rifts with no intelligent direction, multiple alien species bent on destroying the Federation with different methods, betrayals by OSI operatives, mind control by ancient alien artifacts, and even Borg incursions. A few Klingon and Romulan warship actions were added, because as remote as the possibilities might be, the OSI wanted to be ready for anything. The sims were recorded for later review and possible modification as they got closer to Day 7. They felt very, very real. Early on, Carolyn asked Sonja, "The safeties are on?"

Sonja grinned and replied, "Yes indeed. We only modify them for hand-to-hand combat for trained crew. You know about Hammer into Smoke, right?"

Carolyn answered, "Right. Dangerous bits don't actually hit us. Just making sure." Carolyn and Sonja worked together and separately on the sims, and occasionally ran into holo team members on the bridge and other environments. Carolyn interacted with them as normally as possible, and it worked for her. She and the other *de Baissac* crew who assisted took necessary rest breaks between scenarios, discussed their results, and finished their shift a bit bushed but with a sense of satisfaction in the work so far, and confidence in each other.

During the comm window at 1550 hours, the team traded their holodeck records, individual reports and ideas, and additional sensor data analyses. The toroid was still rumbling on its path, with a velocity still hovering between 0.50 and 0.51 lightyears per hour. Carolyn was thankful for no new emergency alerts.

Jonas spoke about seemingly standard reports from remote sensor arrays and comm relays. "We're hearing maybe five Warbirds on the very far side of the keep-out space, further along the toroid

path,” he reported. “Lag is maybe six hours. They’re behaving themselves and heading along different vectors. Two of them seem to be escorting a group of freighters to a colony system. They go a bit dark during warp, but the array folks peg them when they drop to impulse.”

Carolyn replied, “We’ve always been taught that if we can see them, they can see us, so we’ll keep things as quiet as possible.”

Jonas said, “Works for me.”

Carolyn noted that the *Blakey* was now closing to within three lightyears, so Marjorie’s lag was only eight minutes, and she appeared on screen while watching file lists building and preliminary results getting graded by the computers.

“This is all very encouraging. Well done,” she began. “I’m sending up a few more holo scenarios to test out, but you don’t have to get to them right away. Let’s think on today’s work and we’ll see if any sim changes are needed as we get closer to the intercept,” Marjorie added. As the team prepared to study the new material, Carolyn was buoyed by Marjorie’s words, and happy to see her mentor so positive.

“Hey, I saw you on the holo bridge,” Deirdre said to Carolyn. “Pretty smart move with the main deflector,” she said with a chuckle.

“Really? I’ll have to watch the replay,” Carolyn replied. “I saw you, too. You and Roberto were making manual corrections to the warp field,” she added.

Deirdre smiled, shook her head, and said, “Wait. I would never do that. Or...maybe I would. Well, it’s a good thing I wasn’t there to see me.”

Carolyn agreed. “I think one of each of us is plenty,” she said lightheartedly.

The team all signed off and resumed their respective shifts. Like them, Carolyn played through highlights of every holodeck session, with and without annotations, relying on the computer to point out events that worked out well down to those that did not, including those that had no survivable outcome. She understood that every practice run would be helpful, especially if they could boost their chances of success by even a few percent.

She and Sonja talked about the sims over dinner in the mess hall, PADDs at the ready for additional viewings. These were very informal replays between bites and sips. Sonja pointed at one crisis event with a lot of energy blasts and observed, “See? Here’s where you should have dived under the console.”

Carolyn gave her a fake pouty look and replied, “Oh, please. The computer gave me a 94 percent rating for today, and I think that’s pretty good. We still have time.” She let out a breath and added, “I hope.”

Sonja smiled and nodded in agreement. “Me too. Speaking of time, we should do the psych debrief in Sickbay. It’ll give us some time with the cortical monitors.” Sonja pointed at Carolyn’s strawberry crepe cake. “You going to finish that?” she asked.

Carolyn waved her hand at the plate and replied, “Be my guest. You know, you and Deirdre could be sisters.”

Sonja consumed one good forkful and said, “Yeah. I’ve heard that. I should head back up to the bridge and see what’s what.”

Carolyn checked with Roxie for a moment and suggested, “Good idea. And we can do the debrief around 1900.”

The situation on the bridge could be characterized as active, normal for a vessel at high warp, but still relatively calm given the intensity of the mission. Lt. Ayers had adjusted the *de Baissac*’s course for a small heading jog, Lt. Barrera at Tactical reviewed various weapon activation routines that the computer could perform, and First Officer Jennings was sitting in while Captain Roberson was elsewhere. For more than an hour, with small breaks, Carolyn listened to the toroid rumblings, scanned the incoming sensor data, and read over the familiar listings of ship group assets once more.

The debrief in Sickbay took a surprisingly short time, perhaps ten minutes, with the cortical monitor headsets and the computer system giving Carolyn and Sonja high marks in their abilities to process their holodeck experiences, information acquired through all of their senses, as well as dreams and thought processes during waking hours. Keeping all of these memories separate was deemed vitally important within Starfleet and OSI, to minimize any possible confusion between types. Dr. Levette said, “Humans are not the only beings unsure if something was just a dream, or caught up in the Mandela

Effect. You know, where a large group is convinced they all experienced the same thing. But didn't. Happens to a lot of races in the galaxy, and we're doing what we can to keep things real." She read through a few data screens. "Especially knowing what Threat forces can do to our brains," she added.

At 2140 hours, there was another short comm session, mostly additional discussion about the holodeck sims and the latest sensor data on the toroid. Deirdre reported, "Subspace is still rumbling, but the calculated center of the toroid has slowed to 0.48 lightyears per hour, and the energy output has decreased by maybe nine percent. We're updating the graphs."

Jonas added, "The neighbors are still running pretty quiet. They might be sneaking around, but nobody's in a panic, so I think we're okay for a while." Carolyn acknowledged the reports, and Azumi thanked the team for Marjorie after a six minute lag. Everyone signed off, and Carolyn cautiously hoped that she could get some unbroken downtime until 0500 came around again.

Back in her quarters, she showered, changed into a light sleep garment appropriate for potential emergency situations, like diving into an escape pod or EVA suit. She had practiced those moves a few times but hoped they wouldn't ever happen for real. She replicated some chamomile tea and sat up for a little while making notes for the next day with Roxie, gave into the temptation of replaying just a couple of the holodeck sim clips, and finally dimmed the lights. "Roxie, sleep field at 3, and the Volitare Somnia music list, please," she said as she settled her head onto the pillow.

Mission Day 3 - Calendar Date: 17 SEP 2395 Stardate: 72708.7

Restart: 0218 hours Cool-down: 1412 hours Restart: 1712 hours

Range to Toroid: 54.71 lightyears Subspace Comm Lag: 2h23m Time Dilation Factor: 0.06

Carolyn slept until Roxie woke her at 0500, having stirred only slightly during the warp cool-down and restart sequences. No alerts overnight. She did a few bends and stretches, finally running through her familiar morning prep, donned her uniform, and headed for the bridge. She nodded to Aisha Jennings in the command oval and took her console spot. She greeted Ramona Hoffman, as Sonja hadn't yet arrived. Carolyn scanned the sensor data, saw nothing alarming, but she did make note of the intermittent fractional decreases in the toroid's velocity. The team would talk about it all soon, with a comm window at 0650. With nothing demanding her immediate attention, she went to grab breakfast in the mess hall.

Sonja was finishing her own meal, but hung around as Carolyn retrieved the coffee and croissant that she knew would get her going. "Good morning," she greeted Carolyn, "ready to continue the chase?"

Carolyn rocked her head a little and shrugged. "I guess. Slept okay in any case. I'd like to think we've got a handle on the toroid's behavior, but based on the explosive events three years ago, we need to be ready for anything," she replied, and then adopting a more positive tone she continued, "Actually, yes. I'm good to tackle this. Even if it feels like it's taking forever to cover fifty lightyears."

Sonja grinned and said, "Yeah. Some people think we whoosh to our targets in fifteen minutes. Can you imagine how travel in the Milky Way would be turned on its head if that were true? And fleet combat?"

Carolyn totally understood, and answered, "Everyone would be jumping in, smashing things, and jumping back out. Again and again. That would...uh, certainly change my OSI workday." Sonja nodded, the two finished up, and settled back into their bridge stations.

The time before the comm window was spent looking over more general incoming sensor data and updated computer records, as well as setting a very tentative schedule for holodeck sims with some of the other bridge crew. Lt. Barrera from Tactical and Lt. Cdr. – and Chief Engineer – Carl Morelli would join Carolyn and Sonja on a recreation of the bridge for a few short imagined encounters with the toroid, with the distance trimmed down to a lightyear. This would help Carolyn with her assessment of Starfleet capabilities, though exactly what they would be up against still included hundreds of possible scenarios. The ship computer core, with half of its processors running FTL, would be vital in making quick decisions.

At 0650 hours the comm window brought the team together, with even more data to analyze, including some subspace readings from an uncrewed relay station near the toroid flight path. The *Aurora* transmitted the data in both raw and enhanced versions. Deirdre watched the graphs build and she read the

numbers. “Okay, the relay station was maybe half a lightyear off the centerline, and it got bounced around a bit, but the SIF and IDF systems worked great,” she said. “No visible EM poking through, and the toroid is still moving. A tiny bit slower like before. Maybe 0.46 lightyears per hour,” she added. The others acknowledged the present situation and would send detailed reports. Carolyn figured they’d be mostly guesses, but anything would be helpful.

Roberto said, “It sure looks like this thing is knocking back its forward thrust, or just hitting some additional drag, but it’s still powered up enough to stay in subspace. That’s very strange.”

Deirdre replied, “Agreed, it’s weird. Even if the rate of deceleration remains constant, it could still blow past the intercept point, but we will get there first.”

Marjorie winked on earlier than before, indicating that the *Blakey* was pulling closer to the rest of the group. “Hello, everyone. I have no specific directives, and will watch all of the data with you, as will Starfleet and OSI,” she said. “We will continue to coordinate warp and cool-down times as well as the heading jogs. You can read my status file, but I can tell you that the *Guyot* will be making rendezvous with the *de Baissac* at approximately 1430 hours. Carolyn, Deirdre will be joining you for the days leading up to intercept. Talk to you all soon.” Marjorie’s image winked off. The others except for Deirdre also signed off, leaving her and Carolyn to talk briefly. Carolyn was elated at the news, and cautiously optimistic that together they might be able to complete the mission more effectively.

“I’m glad you’re heading over,” she said, and then stopped for a moment. “I know we’re doing everything we can, but...” she trailed off.

Deirdre didn’t wait for the comm lag but replied, “And we’ll keep doing it. Hang on til I get there.” Carolyn nodded and smiled.

“Will do,” she said. They signed off and would wait for the ship crews to sync up on the rendezvous.

Carolyn and Sonja spent a short time going over the sensor data yet again. Like Deirdre, Sonja looked for clues about high energy production and movements through subspace, while Carolyn kept trying to quantify the capabilities of the toroid if there was a vessel at the heart of it. At some point soon, she knew, there would be a convergence of Starfleet and OSI assets, possibly other forces, and this moving anomaly.

Before an early lunch break, Carolyn joined Lt. Ayers from Ops and navigator Lt. Cdr. Waimarie in the conference lounge for a short meeting dealing with the rendezvous with the *Guyot*. Anahera said, “The plan is for our two ships to approach within 500 kilometers during the upcoming cool-down. This should happen at 1435, with the toroid roughly 48 lightyears away. Lieutenant Commander O’Connor – Deirdre – and her gear will transport over with the *de Baissac* aligned to act as a shield from the subspace tremors, and only after some test objects are received successfully.” They understood that while transport under the present conditions was safe, a surprise energy burst could be problematic without aligning the vessels.

And then another burst happened. The news reached the group at 1214. “This is the U.S.S. *Aurora* with an alert message,” sounded the comm system as it had before with the *Giddings*. “Ship time, 1031 hours. Receiving a burst of gravimetric and subspace energy calculated to have been emitted at 1012. All sensor data is being transmitted. *Aurora* out.” With that, the team and the ship crews watched and listened as the energy readings rose and fell with their familiar rumbles and bangs over nine minutes.

The displays filled with numbers and curves, and Deirdre observed, “Okay, compared to the previous burp, this one is about half the peak power, but isn’t settling down into background levels. The minimum rumbles are now higher by...” She tapped some controls and moved a few sliders, and continued, “maybe eight percent.”

Sonja worked her console, and even while points and curves continued to redraw themselves, she suggested, “I think we’re seeing the velocity dropping to 0.43 lightyears per hour.”

Deirdre concurred but noted, “Base energy is going up, velocity is coming down, but I’m not ready for the predictive algorithms to kick in just yet.” She rocked her head slightly and added, “Well, maybe we can play with that for the what-if value.”

Jonas added a bit to his existing sigint reporting. “Still nothing significant from the other forces, but I’m taking a closer look at some pulses right at the start of each burst, even the old ones,” he said. “The *Ginesta* computer and I are going to be talking.” Carolyn listened, flagging points on Roxie and

moving data around her console. The other team members added their takes on the previous burst and a few short comments about the new one. Marjorie thanked them all after a two minute lag, and assured them that the collected data was being majorly processed at other facilities. "And a slight change of flight plan," she said. "Rendezvous with *Guyot* will be at 1545. A little later than we thought, but it should all work," she added with a nod. The team then closed out the comm session and got back to studying the shared data. For the next couple of hours Carolyn and Sonja reviewed the readings on the bridge, experienced the drop to drift velocity, and witnessed the *Guyot* approaching the transporter coordinates.

Captain Roberson announced, "Anahera, take us to shield attitude and Chief, you can accept the test samples once *Guyot* is locked in." Waimarie on the bridge and Morelli in Transporter Room 2 both answered, "Aye, Captain."

Sonja looked at Carolyn and asked, "Shall we go welcome her on board?"

Carolyn hesitated for a moment, then replied, "Yes, let's do it." She turned to the command oval. "Captain, permission to head down and greet our team member?" she asked.

"Permission granted," Roberson said, and then added, "Specialist Hagey, you are Marjorie Capello's eyes and ears, and we are here to support you. Asking permission is a welcome formality, but get used to running the show." He smiled and motioned toward the turbo. "And the *Guyot* is just about in position."

Carolyn and Sonja headed down to the transporter room, where they stood behind Chief Morelli and another crewman monitoring the console. "*Guyot* to *de Baissac*, we're ready to send Test Article 1," came a voice over the comm.

"Acknowledged, *Guyot*," Morelli replied. "ACB and buffer are nominal. Ready to receive," he added. The *Guyot* called out, "Energize," the pads glowed to the familiar energy whine, and an inorganic sample cylinder a meter tall materialized. Morelli checked the display and announced, "Clean transport, no anomalies. Send the second one." The other object rebuilt itself, this time a biosample pack. The crewman removed the two test articles. Morelli looked at the display and called, "Transport successful. ACB held very tight. Ready to receive Lieutenant Commander O'Connor."

"Holding...performing an RCS vector adjustment," the *Guyot* officer reported. Carolyn then experienced the longest ten seconds of silence in her life, followed by the pads lighting up. Deirdre and her gear appeared, looking very, very normal, to Carolyn's relief.

Morelli called out, "Transport successful, *Guyot*. Thanks for that." He turned to Deirdre. "Welcome aboard the *de Baissac*. We'll send the gear to your quarters," he said.

Deirdre stepped off the pad with one personal kit and replied, "Thank you, Chief. We should be able to sync up on everything shortly."

The three women headed to the turbo for the ride up to the bridge, happy to see one another for real and not just by comms. Deirdre grinned and patted around her ribs and asked, "I'm all here, right?"

Carolyn looked her up and down and said, "Yeah, you look the same as three days ago." Sonja grinned and rolled her eyes. They exited the turbo onto the bridge and checked in.

Captain Roberson greeted Deirdre and said, "Good to have you with us, O'Connor. We and the *Guyot* are just doing our separation maneuver, and you have my attention for maybe another hour before we go back to warp."

"Understood, sir," she replied. "This won't take long. We can get deeper into different issues during the next comm window. Carolyn will continue to coordinate, and I'm just the messenger," she said. Deirdre tapped her PADD and synced a large number of data and visual directive files from Marjorie with Carolyn and each department on the *de Baissac*. "We're the lead vessel, and aside from increasing our science crew by one, Marjorie wanted to make sure that information from OSI back in Sol system and other bases did not get more widely transmitted. At least, not right now," she added.

Carolyn, skimming her own PADD, agreed with the move to hand carry files when possible. "We'll still send encrypted data over subspace, but this will help us keep some things quieter," she said. She gave Deirdre a knowing look. "I'm guessing that PADD of yours has visited a few ships lately."

Roberson and Jennings both listened as Carolyn gave a brief summary of the next day or two, most importantly covering ship defense, outbound group movements, holodeck sims, Threat force tracking, and signal intelligence. "Things appear to be changing with the toroid. Of course, we'll watch everything. All departments should review the new files and be ready for a poll around 2045 hours," she

suggested. "All ideas are welcome, and we should be able to make the comm window at 2130," she added.

Roberson said, "Very good. Looks like we all have some memos to read."

While the bridge crew prepared to go back to warp, Carolyn stepped into the conference lounge to absorb all the new material. Deirdre briefed Sonja at the science station, and the three eventually stopped by the mess hall when the activity level felt quiet enough. The discussion was anything but relaxing, but they would deal with it. Deirdre remarked, "Marjorie's included reports about Starfleet and OSI wanting to increase the number of tactical sims, focusing on shields, main deflector configurations, and photon torpedo patterns." She read her PADD some more, clearly a bit frustrated.

Carolyn replied, "Yeah. Looks like some admirals firmly hold the opinion that the toroid remains a threat to AS4 and a small vocal group believes that the toroid is heading somewhere else." Sonja was reading her own PADD and listening.

"We can agree it's slowing down, but since it reads like a big pulsing ball of fuzz I still can't peg a center of mass or exactly where it's going," Deirdre said.

Sonja nodded and suggested, "Since it changed major direction on Stardate 72701, every couple of hours the purely subspace movement wobbles by maybe a degree, but the last two bursts almost feel like course corrections. I know, I know, we're not talking intelligent direction, because it might just be following some galactic fields. We'll...just keep going."

They returned to the bridge and checked in with Lt. Foster for the departmental poll at 2045. The officers in charge of each operational section basically submitted readiness reports with no pressing questions. Some might have found the brevity of the poll odd, but to Carolyn it signaled the crew's understanding of the situation thus far, and their level of preparation for a variety of scenarios. "Thanks for your responses," she said and added, "Whether this is a natural phenomenon or a deliberate threat, we should know soon, and I believe you are ready to deal with it." Foster closed the shipwide channel and they awaited the comm window with the other ships.

The team gathered during the window at 2130, acknowledged the OSI push for more tactical sims and defensive systems preparation, and after a short delay to skim through new sensor data, gave their reports on the situation. Deirdre noted, "The toroid energy levels at high and low bursts are slowly increasing, while the velocity is dropping below 0.41 lightyears per hour. The computers are processing sixty different factors over time, but with only four significant extremes on the graph, they can't predict the next burst with any certainty. The system thinks we *might* be looking at another event in roughly nine hours. Around 0630."

Jonas had an observation on what he believed were pre-burst pulses. He said, "Going back to the older files and adding the new data, with a ton of filtering, it looks like the high energy bursts were preceded by one set of clicks and whines, and the low energy bursts by a different sequence. None of the pulses are identical, but they do seem to fall into two basic types. The timing is interesting, and maybe this falls into Deirdre's physics, but the gap between pulse and burst is always about 0.017 seconds. In signal talk, that's an eternity."

Carolyn tapped points into Roxie, Sonja took in all of the discussion from her station, and the other team members added brief comments. Roberto said, "Nora and I will see if this affects the propulsion and shield calculations and do a few more sims."

Jeremy replied, "And Azumi and I will plug that into some shuttle sims if we need to make changes before the intercept. I'll send the holodeck programs when I have them."

Marjorie came on after a two minute lag. "Okay, we'll do the tactical sims to please the folks back home," she began. "Actually, the practice won't hurt, and we'll keep working the sensor data. I've sent a very tight beam message to the *Mahafe* to watch for a burst, and hopefully one more point on the curve will help," she concluded, and winked off, as did the rest of the team.

Carolyn looked at Deirdre and Sonja and said, "It sounds like the *Mahafe* will have to brace for this one."

Deirdre replied, "They know."

Carolyn let that sink in, rubbed her eyes a little, and noted the hour. "I'm off to slip into my emergency jammies and get ready for the morning," she told them.

Sonja replied, "We're all pretty much on the same schedule now, so we'll be off in a few as well. After a couple of quantum and subspace bits." With exchanges of smiles and hands on shoulders, Carolyn headed back to her quarters for a few hours of sleep.

Mission Day 4 - Calendar Date: 18 SEP 2395 Stardate: 72711.5

Cool-down: 0502 hours Restart: 0830 hours Cool-down: 2013 hours Restart: 2318 hours

Range to Toroid: 43.16 lightyears Subspace Comm Lag: 1h51m Time Dilation Factor: 0.08

Roxie chimed at 0500, and Carolyn began her prep for the new day. No alarms had sounded and no critical comms had been received, for which she was grateful. As she replicated her usual breakfast in the cabin instead of stopping by the mess hall, the ship dropped to impulse. She ate while skimming through the data analysis and a tentative holodeck sim schedule. And anticipating the next burst.

Carolyn tidied up, grabbed Roxie, and headed to the bridge. Ramona was at the science station awaiting Sonja and Deirdre, and all seemed steady. "All good?" Carolyn asked.

"So far, yes," Ramona replied. Roxie continually updated, but Ramona pointed at the console anyway. "Data shows the background energy continuing to climb very slowly, and the toroid appears to be at 0.38 lightyears per hour and still dropping," she added.

"Thanks," Carolyn said, and concentrated on scrolling through the numbers and graphs. Deirdre and Sonja arrived after a while and Ramona headed off shift. "Morning. We've got maybe an hour to the predicted burst,"

Deirdre said, "And I'm thinking of watching from the lab so Sonja can have her station back. Join me?" Carolyn could do her work from most anywhere on the ship, so she agreed.

"Lab it is. Lead on," she said, and the two headed for Deck 6, where three lab modules were built around one of the computer cores, and each had display capabilities similar to the original *Intrepid* class Stellar Cartography room. They set up in the middle lab, along the ship's centerline. Carolyn called up to Sonja, "Okay, Bridge, we're watching."

Sonja replied, "Acknowledged. We'll see what happens first, the burst or the comm window at 0710."

The predicted time of 0630 came and went, and nothing happened by the time of the comm session. No eruption of activity in subspace and no alerts from the keep-out ships flashed onto their screens. The team reported on their activities as before, plotting the energy readings, toroid velocity, adversary force movements, and outbound group readiness. Jonas spoke of some additional processing of the toroid clicks and bangs, but no real progress.

He said, "We hear the rumbles and spikes, but all I can really do is slot them into intensities and durations. The computer still doesn't think they form any kind of communication."

Deirdre added, "And I'm trying to narrow the size range of this thing if and when it decides to drop out of subspace. Whatever's keeping it there is looking much bigger than we thought, with a bigger energy budget."

Carolyn almost never offered wild guesses, but she suggested, "Maybe our neighbors see that and that's why they're hanging back." To the others on the comm, it made a lot of sense. With the *Blakey* having moved closer, Marjorie's words came through after only a minute's lag.

"We've all got some new processed data to look over, and we'll continue with the readiness sims. I know the waiting and anticipation can be unnerving, but we'll see what the toroid does and deal with it soon," she said. With a small grin before signing off, she added, "And in the meantime, I'm transmitting another report to the admirals. Joy."

Carolyn and Deirdre spent the next hour or so examining the data and occasionally visiting the bridge to catch up with the officers there in person. They were scrolling and scaling the toroid energy graph to see small details when Carolyn asked, "Is this what Jonas was talking ab—" when she was suddenly cut off by the emergency tones and lights. The news was reaching the group at 0848. The outbound group had earlier gone back to high warp.

“This is U.S.S. *Mahafe* with an alert message. Ship time, 0716 hours. We are experiencing a burst emitted at 0702. Higher energy than the first one. Continuum vibrations are shaking us but SIF and IDF systems are holding well. All sensor data is being transmitted. Thanks for the warning, and *Mahafe* out.”

The ships felt the tremors that *Mahafe* reported, recorded the transmitted data and the realtime sensor readings, and within fifteen minutes the rumbles faded. The team was getting used to the steps they needed to take, and very quickly they had preliminary reports for an unscheduled comm session.

Deirdre took the lead on the energy topic and said, “This burst peaked fifteen percent higher than the first. I’m labeling that first one as 1H, next as 1L, and this new one as 2H. Background energy is up by maybe four percent but is relatively quiet again. The computers seem to think the next event to be near 0300 tomorrow.” She paused a moment, checking the screen, then continued, “And this is really interesting. The toroid has now dropped to 0.35 lightyears per hour,” she announced.

Jonas would continue to analyze the lead-in spikes, Roberto and Nora would add to their propulsion and defensive system files, and Carolyn would coordinate all of it. She was just immensely grateful that no one else had been hurt since the first encounter. Marjorie broached the subject that they had all thought about but not said out loud. “Do we need to reconsider the toroid’s destination?” she asked.

Carolyn spoke for the team, answering, “We may want to add that option, yes. The flight path remains basically the same, but we’ll have to incorporate the braking velocity.” Marjorie looked surprisingly calm, which Carolyn attributed to her experience.

“Very good, we’ll talk again in the next window,” Marjorie said, and signed off.

That next window occurred at 1610 during a welcome break from holodeck sims and data analysis. The sims included some adversary encounters as before, but most of the sessions focused on the interception of the toroid with a variety of locations, energy levels, and velocities. On the *de Baissac*, Carolyn and Deirdre practiced working on the holo bridge, the lab, large and small shuttlecraft, and Main Engineering. When Carolyn was in bridge situations in particular, she understood that she could direct some of the ship maneuvers and defensive system activations. With more practice, she felt she would eventually know when to call out moves, which might be more quick requests than orders, but she would discuss the best methods with Captain Roberson after he reviewed the sims. It was, ultimately, his command.

The very short discussion among the team continued to consider placement of their ships close to the toroid, possible shield configurations to deflect it, and a few extreme weapon scenarios. Roberto and Nora reported on their own sims, and everyone knew they had to include some last resort options.

Nora said, “Based on the energy readings, one of the more radical tactics we looked at was loading a heavy shuttle with thirty photon torpedo warheads and driving that at the toroid, even if it’s in subspace. And the biggest defense idea is to shield-lock five of our six ships and detonate their cores while at high warp.”

Roberto added, “If we’re lucky, we get everyone away on the *LeBeau*.” Nora looked especially tired. The work was starting to take a much more serious tone.

“We’re not sure these will work, but check the data and play through the holodeck recordings and see if there’s anything we’ve missed,” she suggested. Jeremy spoke for Marjorie, who was talking with Starfleet and OSI assets near the group heading. Somewhere, Carolyn thought.

“We’ll go through the data as usual, but I’m not a fan of blowing up one of my shuttles,” Jeremy said with a grin. Nora smiled back, trying to remain positive.

“Luckily it’s only a sim so far. Hope we don’t have to do it. Catch up soon,” she replied.

Everyone signed off, and in the lab Deirdre said to Carolyn, “I know we’ve danced around this before, and Marjorie hasn’t explicitly said anything, but if we can’t stop it, it really becomes Starfleet’s problem, doesn’t it.” Deirdre bit her lip. “Do we head back home to Sol?” she asked.

Carolyn held her friend’s arm and replied, “Honestly, I don’t know. We’ll work the problem.” She sighed slightly and said, “But I do know we have a few hours and I need a little food. And after that, do you want to take a walk?”

During the day’s second cool-down, and with the energy toroid submerged in subspace after its last burst some thirteen hours earlier, it was deemed safe enough for Carolyn and Deirdre to perform

some EVA practice with low level shields active. Though nothing was certain, another burst wasn't expected for at least four hours. The *de Baissac* was essentially "stationary" at galactic drift velocity, short range sensors ever watchful for dust and larger particles. They were getting in some needed time outside of a holodeck, preparing for intercepting the toroid, if conditions required emergency action. The survival concept ladder included the ship itself, shuttles, escape pods, and finally EVA suits.

In the suitup room, a crew tech supervised their gearing up with minimal assistance before they headed into the airlock. The suit thrusters were charged up, though their use wasn't planned. Carolyn opened the pouch holding the headset Marjorie gave her and regarded it for a few moments, imagining the places it had been used. She donned it, tucking her hair underneath and making certain that it fit snugly. It felt so comfortable as she connected to the comm network that she understood why Marjorie had kept it for so long. With their helmets locked and life support activated, the two OSI specialists proceeded outside with two more of the ship's crew, Lt. Teresa Gibbons and Ens. Stephen Lloyd. Their connection to the hull plating was nothing like the mag boots of past centuries, but employed a flexible tractor emitter layer in the soles, manipulating fields in a sort of timed hook-and-loop fashion. They soon got used to the foot movements and headed along under the hull from a ventral cargo bay toward the starboard primary docking port. Like all of her OSI team, Carolyn had stood on the surfaces of Luna, Mars, and even Saturn's moon Iapetus while being introduced to space operations, but any chance to quietly take in the view for a few moments was immensely satisfying.

Three-quarters of the way to the port, a call came from the bridge. "EVA crew, this is Ayers at Ops. We need you to do a hard stick to the hull. The *Mahafe* is reporting a toroid burst from 33 lightyears out, comm lag 1 hour 24 minutes. We're going to roll the ship 165 degrees."

Gibbons responded, "Acknowledged, Bridge. Hunkering down." The *de Baissac* reinforced her shields, and as an extra safety measure, rolled to put the ship's mass between the spacewalkers and the approaching wave. The four crouched down, their suits coupling tighter with the hull shields to ride out the wave. Disturbances in subspace had previously been seen to spill over into the "normal" continuum level, with different effects on biology and inanimate matter, and fortunately Starfleet could protect assets and life forms during those situations.

The big RCS jets finished the roll. "EVA crew, hold tight," Ayers called out. "Subspace EM levels rising slowly and gravimetric ripples following. We're switching your suit telemetry to high. Hopefully this will be over in a few minutes," he said. Carolyn saw faint linear sparkles and color changes, like afterimages from a bright light, and subtle visual field "wobbles" and wasn't sure if this simply was from the tension of being outside. When she saw Deirdre tilting her head up and down, they made eye contact, and she knew it was real. Low frequency vibrations passed through their suits and faded away.

Suddenly one of Carolyn's legs turned and her boot slipped off the plating, but Deirdre held her firmly and said, "I've got you." Carolyn held on, regained her footing, and took a breath. She nodded to her friend.

"I'm okay...thanks," she replied. Within two minutes, Ayers called them.

"EM and gravimetrics have dropped to near the previous low level, not quite original background, but you're cleared to come aboard," he said. "It's a few hours earlier than your prediction, so the timing wasn't great, but luckily this was much smaller than the last one." The four reentered the *de Baissac* through the docking port, doffed their suits, and reported to Sickbay for a post-event assessment. They dressed, and Dr. Levette cleared them quickly.

"The shield bubble did its job again, so nothing serious to report," she commented. The minor vision aberrations were more in the visual cortex, but there's no damage or changes that I can find." The four thanked her and departed Sickbay. Carolyn and Deirdre headed to the lab to join the unscheduled comm session.

While looking over the new data, the two related their experiences out on the hull to the team. While she wouldn't deliberately try it during a higher level event, Deirdre did count the EVA as a plus for their preparations, and Carolyn agreed. She labeled the burst as 2L from its smaller peak on the roller coaster graph curve. The computers had a new point to play with for energy and timing. Carolyn compiled what information they had from all ship departments for the past five hours and sent it out. Marjorie came on for a few moments and confirmed something that Deirdre had suspected.

"Based on the high burst earlier today plus the older intense events, the analysis folks seem to think that as close as one lightyear, planetary magnetospheres would stop any significant toroid damage,"

she said. "Even at 300 percent of what we've seen so far. I know this is a lot to absorb, but this is your territory, Deirdre. There is a handful of habitable worlds out in the operational area, but none have major life forms and none are along the toroid path," she added. Carolyn and Deirdre both watched the screens as Marjorie signed off with "We'll talk again at 0835."

On the turbolift, Carolyn and Deirdre knew that despite the toroid velocity dropping dramatically, the burst energy was rising and there were still days of work ahead. "I bet you never thought you'd hear this from me, but I don't need to press my nose to the screen every second. We're getting done what we need to right now, so I'm good with that," Deirdre said, showing just a touch of fatigue, but also glad to be with her friend.

Carolyn nodded, a bit distracted, and replied, "Um...same here. Well, you and Sonja can dive into it at your own pace. Listen, I'm going back to my quarters for a little bit. Meet up in the mess hall at 2230?" Deirdre agreed.

"See you there. We can watch the ship go back to warp over dessert," she quipped.

Back in her quarters, Carolyn changed into an off-duty outfit and sat on the bed, softly breathing and listening to a few soft tunes; Roxie knew what would help her relax. For the few hours left in their personal shipboard day, she and Deirdre would get their late dinner, and even take a quick look at the toroid readings with Sonja in the lab. All of the data would continue to be analyzed even as they slept. The team would press ahead, now more than halfway to the intercept point.

A final short stop back in Sickbay gave Carolyn another welcome lift after another very long day, reinforcing the already positive interactions with the ship's crew. Dr. Levette reassured her, "Sleep is one of those things we still haven't manipulated to our liking without bad side effects. Luckily the assist field is pretty effective." Carolyn agreed.

"Oh, it does work and I try not to overdo it," she said.

Levette remarked, "Good. Duty shifts on a mission like this are crazy, but don't be afraid to get sleep if you need it. Marjorie Capello knows all of us by our records, and she knows we've got each others' backs." Carolyn appreciated the chat.

"Thanks for that," she said. Levette walked her to the corridor and told her, "Go get your snooze time."

Mission Day 5 - Calendar Date: 19 SEP 2395 Stardate: 72714.2

Cool-down: 1104 hours Restart: 1423 hours

Range to Toroid: 32.73 lightyears Subspace Comm Lag: 1h41m Time Dilation Factor: 0.11

Carolyn's day began much as it had the previous morning, with Roxie chiming at 0500. Again, there were no burst events during her sleep hours to set off alarms, so she got ready for her day and headed for the bridge. She figured she would get breakfast after checking in. Sonja and Deirdre were already at the science station reviewing some sensor data.

"Good morning," Deirdre greeted her, adding, "We'll do the comms at 0835, but a few interesting bits are popping up in the meantime." She pointed at the display and said, "Passive readings say the toroid's slowing down to 0.32 lightyears per hour, and we'll know more from the keep-out ships soon. Looks like it's skimming past Romulan space, sticking to its path." Carolyn studied the velocity graph, but was really interested in five green icons on the stellar map.

"Are these... Warbirds?" she asked.

Deirdre replied, "Yeah, and they're cloaked. Locations and velocities are maybe two hours old, but I'm pretty certain we now have a good handle on spotting them, cloaked or not. They're shadowing the toroid on the far side of the keep-out, maybe two lightyears from the path."

Carolyn said, "Seems pretty risky getting that close, but I'm not surprised. They do that." She thought for a moment and then asked, "So how are you seeing them cloaked?"

Deirdre replied, "We might have the toroid to thank for that one. The background rumbles are reflecting off the Warbirds one way when visible and another when cloaked. Might be a temporary technique, but something to study for another time." Carolyn nodded, processing the idea.

Sonja added to Deirdre, "See? Told you she'd like that one. Why don't you two get breakfast, and we'll join up for the comms."

Carolyn and Deirdre stopped by the mess hall, PADDs in hand, looking over the latest numbers and graphs as they ate. At one point Deirdre posed the question, "You've got your eyes on everybody's assets, and nobody talks about AS4 over comms, but with the toroid slowing down, do you think anyone's actually going after the refinery?"

Carolyn finished her coffee and replied, "Based on where the toroid first appeared, I'm really beginning to think no. Those Warbirds may be following the toroid, but I don't believe the Romulans have any need to attack AS4."

Deirdre said, "Some of the admirals might argue they need antideuterium to power their singularity production and smaller vessels." Carolyn answered, "But they've got their own facilities. Would they attack AS4 to cut us off from our own reactants? Based on the bigger picture I still think no." As they got up to leave, she added, "Of course, Marjorie knows the bigger picture better than you and me."

After a couple of hours of lab work, Carolyn and Deirdre joined the team discussion. They took in new data from the *Mahafe*, the *Ferranti*, and the *Takayama* near the keep-out, as well as a handful of relay stations. Roberto and Nora added a few holodeck sim recordings centering on at least "distracting" the toroid if the need arose, and Deirdre reported on her efforts to spot Warbirds and other cloaked vessels. Jonas continued to break down toroid emissions into possible deliberate signals, and also reported on Warbird comms as being mostly low-key operational exchanges. Marjorie brought the team up to date on her OSI side of things.

"We do see Romulan and Klingon movements, with the Romulan vessel groups appearing the more focused in trailing the toroid. But still without hinting offensive intent toward it or us," she said. "We have now finally heard from the Klingon High Council. Some backchannel efforts have yielded the pronouncement that the Klingons do not blame Starfleet for the original incident, and that they offer whatever help is requested, though they will not converge on the toroid location." Marjorie let that news sink in. She continued with a not unexpected directive. "At approximately 1410, the outbound group will make a staggered heading change 11.25 degrees closer to the toroid path. Further midcourse corrections will be considered based on the toroid deceleration and energy output." As the team pondered the move, she finished by saying, "I know this has been a series of long days. The mission's not over yet, but all of you, all crews on each ship, have done tremendous work and I will do everything I can to support you."

Carolyn replied for the team, "Thank you, Marjorie. You know we're with you on this one." And the team signed off to study the new data, await warp cool-down, and change heading.

Over the next few hours, Carolyn and Deirdre watched a few recorded holodeck sims as silent background characters, studied the updated toroid numbers and graphs, checked in with the bridge officers, and managed to get lunch during the cool-down. The toroid speed was down to 0.30 lightyears per hour, causing the predicted intercept point to move further away from AS4, at least on the graph. Deirdre noted that if the fuzzy rate of deceleration continued, the toroid could stop well away from the refinery, but no one was counting on that. It could still reach AS4 after a longer time in flight. The toroid and the OSI ships were all approaching 22 lightyears to intercept, and the subspace signal lag was shrinking noticeably. After the new ship heading, any time the toroid shifted a fraction of a degree off its previous Z-axis travel, the OSI group would recompute and match the move.

Carolyn and Deirdre joined Sonja on the bridge as Captain Roberson prepared to give the command for the return to warp. Ayers at Ops reported, "All departments ready, Captain."

Roberson replied, "Very good. Anahera, if you've got the numbers from Sonja, take us to warp."

Anahera tapped her display and said, "Aye, sir. New vector locked in, and going to warp." RCS thrusters did one final close alignment, followed by the familiar blue-violet streaks flaring past the *de Baissac* to build in speed as the ship accelerated through the integer warp factors, finally settling in at 9.986. The other ships in the group would follow over the next twenty minutes.

At 1521, while Carolyn and Deirdre were in the lab, an alert message sounded, and the group was ready. Even as the outbound group began feeling the effects at a distance, they heard, "This is the U.S.S.

Ferranti. Burst incoming at ship time 1422 hours, source backtimed to 1409,” it began, from Chief Engineer Joubert. There was no image, and the audio signal was very slightly choppy. “EM and gravimetrics rising higher than previous burst 2H. We are closest to the event and are experiencing vibrational effects as before, and this time some plasma conduit instability. SIF and IDF systems are working hard but keeping up,” Joubert reported. And then Deirdre heard something she wasn’t expecting, but to her it actually made sense. “We are oriented bow-on to the burst and are emitting our best guess at canceling waveforms through the main deflector. It’s not perfect but we believe it’s helping. Sorry if this distorts the data you receive, but Captain Graham decided to try it.” Deirdre and Carolyn exchanged a look of cautious satisfaction with the tactic. Joubert finished up, “Will continue transmitting until we see a drop to background levels.”

That drop was seen within fourteen minutes, and everyone on the outbound ships began studying the new data and jumped into the unscheduled comms. Deirdre eyed the animating graphs and energy values writing onto the displays. The team winked on one by one.

“Okay, we definitely would not want to be out on the hull for this one,” she said, aiming her comment mostly at Carolyn, who was also taking it all in.

Carolyn replied, “Oh, agreed, if we believe that new energy spike. Glad we have shield grids.”

As she tapped a number of data points into Roxie, Deirdre said, “Okay, calling this one 3H, it’s another fifteen percent stronger than 2H, and the background rumbles are up by six percent. By the curve, it looks like we have alternating highs and lows so far. Anyone want to bet there’s going to be a 3L?”

Jonas said, “I’ll take that bet, and I’m going to guess that we see it around 0600 tomorrow.” He transmitted a few files for the team to study. “Sorry I still don’t have anything like actual communications. However, the computer is confirming a correlation between the pre-burst pulses and the bursts themselves. As I thought, the pulse durations and the burst energy are proportional.” Everyone studied the numbers, and Jonas explained, “The latest filtering says the pulses are subdivided into a single common snip of scratches, a really tiny 0.006 second gap, a longer mix of rumbles and cracks, that 0.017 second gap, and then the burst. Longer mix, higher spike.”

Deirdre tapped a few more controls, waited for the computer, then announced, “And it looks like the toroid is down to 0.28 lightyears per hour.” The other team members considered what that might signify, filed short departmental updates, and within a few minutes, Marjorie joined the discussion.

“I should have more news during the 2041 window, but it looks like we may be making an additional twelve degree heading change based on the toroid slowdown,” she said. “This may happen on Day 7 or sooner, depending on its behavior. And the admirals want to see the *Takayama* and the *Ferranti* start to move closer to our flight path, slowly, while maintaining the five lightyear distance to the toroid. The *Mahafe*, *Aurora*, and *Giddings* may also head in our direction, but for now they’ll be monitoring Romulan and Klingon movements,” she added. Marjorie signed off, the team traded a few more files, and everyone went back to studying the data.

While Carolyn and Deirdre did not assume that the computer had a perfect grasp on the situation, they increasingly trusted the system to process and plot the data accurately, and seriously considered a few predictions being offered about energy levels and timing. Five days in, the team was finding their rhythm. Each new burst told them more than they knew before, all of it in the subspace domain. Carolyn had to remind herself that there would be virtually nothing to see with her own eyes unless they warped to within a few lightdays of the toroid, and she was quite fine with not doing that for now.

She and Deirdre stopped by the bridge to check in with Sonja and the other crew concerning the energy readings and the second possible course change. Everyone was up to date and had no real questions. Still, the personal connections were welcome. Anahera Waimarie was getting off a short navigation shift, so Sonja suggested that the four of them get dinner in the mess hall, and they headed down. “We may not have too many more chances to do this,” Sonja said, realizing the remark was obvious, but her companions understood.

Carolyn replied, “Yeah. Let’s enjoy it while we’ve got a pretty good handle on the mission.”

Deirdre added, “And we should have plenty of warning before anything really bad happens. Like something tries to swat us out of the sky.” As they sat down, Anahera narrowed her eyes.

“You know I can fly this ship away from bad stuff, right?” she kidded. With three days remaining until the intercept, they still appreciated moments of decompression and friendship. Carolyn hoped that the crews so close to the toroid path were able to grab some similar moments.

With no comm alerts or pressing lab tasks, Carolyn stopped back in her quarters while Deirdre and Sonja returned to the bridge, and Anahera hung back in the mess hall to talk with other crew members. Carolyn skimmed through a few files on Roxie, sat and listened to some tunes, and reordered her thoughts. As much as she needed to be with her companions, she also valued small periods of introspection. She occasionally thought of the long road that humans took to achieve interstellar travel and her personal connection to it. A long time ago Carolyn talked with Deirdre, but not many others, about the events that went back nearly 270 years. In 2126, two early fusion-powered pre-warp starships, *Eagle Valley* and *Primal Sea*, set off for the star Denkir, twenty-eight lightyears from Sol. A distant relative, James Hagey, was a biologist on a landing mission to Denkir IV, flying months ahead of the colony ships to study whether the planet was a suitable target. While the three thousand crew members of the big ships eventually settled on the new world, the scouting expedition was struck by tragedy in its early days. Before an effective treatment could be formulated, and despite all biohazard precautions, a microbial pathogen killed eight of the nine lander explorers, including James Hagey and his wife Rachelle. The survivor, engineer Pete Bryce, became very ill but pulled through with help from the lander med systems and in part from a pancreatic growth that countered the pathogen. Four months after the ships made orbit, all discoverable biological dangers could be dealt with. Bryce had been a close friend of Rachelle and worked to preserve her memory and that of the others. The significance of Carolyn being given the middle name of Rachelle was not lost on her.

Carolyn returned to the bridge to check in with the crew and await the comms at 2041. Deirdre and Sonja were looking through the current sensor data, and Roxie chimed in unison with the science console. “Toroid’s down to 0.27 lightyears per hour. Still tapping the brakes,” Deirdre said.

Sonja added, “And subspace is adding a bit more drag in the area.” Carolyn glanced back and forth between Roxie and the console.

“And you can still see the Warbirds on the far side?” she asked.

Deirdre nodded and replied, “Yeah, they fade in and out a bit shadowing the toroid, but they’re still behaving themselves.” Carolyn searched the numbers and curves for anything new and unusual, found nothing, and just sat as the comm window opened.

Marjorie appeared with the others and spoke first, as new data files scrolled onto the displays. “To all navigators in the outbound group, we will perform a new ten degree course change while at warp toward the toroid trajectory at 2120,” she began. “This is a couple of days earlier than we planned, but is still based on the toroid’s current deceleration rate. We will continue to aim for a pre-intercept point four or five lightyears out as a safe distance, and will adjust things as necessary. *Takayama* and *Ferranti* will also head toward the intercept point as previously mentioned,” Marjorie said. She assumed a less official tone and added, “We should be prepared for an energy burst around 0600 if we believe the prediction, and just keep pulling in as much data as we can.”

Carolyn made notes on Roxie as the others offered short comments or simple pointers to file summaries. Deirdre noted, “It’s obvious that as we get closer, like with the keep-out ships, we will need to protect against the bursts. We know the highs and lows have both been heading upwards. I wouldn’t mind seeing us adjust shields, main deflector, and ship orientation like the *Ferranti* did.”

Carolyn agreed, and said, “Based on the computational sims alone, each ship should have enough EPS power to steer the bursts around the hull, if we get within one and a half lightyears. After that, we’ll have to see if and when we might need to veer off.”

Jonas kept eyes and ears on the Romulans following what Deirdre could discover about their cloaks and movements. “At most, we’re still catching snips of general comms from those five Warbirds. They’re occasionally as close as four lightyears to the toroid. And sometimes they approach within transporter range of each other, like we do.” The team thought about that, and Jonas added, “I don’t know if this is related to the bursts, but some of the Warbird comms seem to be emitted at reduced subspace power. I mean, even for ship to ship. Like they’re running semi-quiet. We’ll keep watching this, like the rest of it.”

Jeremy spoke for Azumi, Roberto, and Nora. "We've been running more ship and shuttle sims for the intercept, and I'm sending those to you all. I can't say that we'll need to land a ship, but we're checking the procedures with burst energy numbers."

Marjorie concluded, "Okay, this is all good. Keep on it. We'll aim for nominal comms at 1011 and as needed before that." She and the others signed off. Carolyn and Deirdre assumed the course change would take place, and both decided to head off to sleep.

Back in her quarters, Carolyn again relied on ethereal tunes to calm her mind, and this time, instead of skimming through mission data, she projected images of paintings from many times and cultures. One of her favorites was "Origins" by artist Lucy West, created some 384 years ago back on Earth. Carolyn's gaze followed figures traveling on a bridge of stellar matter and DNA spirals through a background of soft clouds and sunlight. It always made her think of her own life's journey so far, and where it might go in the future.

Mission Day 6 - Calendar Date: 20 SEP 2395 Stardate: 72716.9

**Cool-down: 0232 hours Restart: 0522 hours Cool-down: 1711 hours Restart: 2032 hours
Range to Toroid: 23.43 lightyears Subspace Comm Lag: 59m Time Dilation Factor: 0.09**

What sleep Carolyn managed to get, after a cup of tea and with the field assist, was restful and only vaguely punctuated by thoughts about the mission. Maybe a few new ideas about upcoming activities would bubble up. She didn't know for sure.

The field ramped down and she awoke to a message tone sounding at 0321, while the *de Baissac* was in cool-down. Carolyn knew that on the bridge the sound would be an actual alert, and she was grateful to hear fewer decibels. As she quickly dressed, she called out, "Roxie, play incoming comm."

With a negligible lag from realtime, the system responded, "This is Communications Officer Mansour on the U.S.S. *Takayama*. We're seeing a burst incoming at ship time 0233 hours, source backtimed to 0219. Wait one." Mansour paused, the comm signal still active, and Carolyn was already headed for the bridge. She tapped her comm badge.

"Hagey to O'Connor. Deirdre, are you hearing this?" she called out. Carolyn heard quick steps approaching along the corridor and turned.

"Right behind you. Let's go," Deirdre answered in person as they got on the turbolift and heard Mansour continue his report.

"Subspace energies rising but we do not believe the levels will be as high as the previous 3H event. We are oriented bow-on to the burst as standard procedure now along with deflector and shield grid canceling fields. Data streams ongoing for now. *Takayama* out."

Carolyn and Deirdre entered the bridge, met up with Ramona at the science station, and waited for the preliminary readings to be processed and the team to check in on screen. A little more than ten minutes after the alert, the computers had what they needed for a first look at the burst, and they were learning faster with each event. Carolyn appreciated that as the team appeared and they all studied the screens. Deirdre noted, "I'm labeling this one 3L as we suspected a lower output in the sequence. For a smaller burp, it's still thirteen percent stronger than 2L and the background is now rumbling another five percent stronger." She looked up and down the readouts and added, "The toroid's down to 0.25 lightyears per hour. Anyone mind if I offer a projection for where it might stop?"

Marjorie looked a bit weary like the others, but she was willing to hear the ideas. "Go for it. If I'm reading this graph correctly, we may have about twelve hours before the next burst to update our flight plan," she said.

Deirdre nodded and replied, "We'll have a better handle on a possible fourth high-power burst timeline soon, but yes, we have some time to work things out. Just based on the rate of deceleration, I'm going to guess it slows to a crawl within fifteen lightyears. I'll get you better numbers soon." She glanced at Carolyn for a moment and turned back to Marjorie, and added, "Whatever you need." Carolyn knew that the data was going to drive the actions of the both the outbound group and the keep-out ships. The situation was changing once more.

Jonas had no new insights into the toroid emissions and thankfully no troubling information on the Romulan Warbirds. Roberto and Nora had nothing new based on the 3L readings, though Roberto did

suggest, "When everyone has gotten sleep or coffee, we should probably continue with a few more intercept sims."

Jeremy and Azumi agreed, and Azumi mentioned, "I'll send over a few in-space and planetary scenarios to try out." With that, the team signed off to catch up on resting. Carolyn and Deirdre agreed to meet up again at 0700 in the lab to study the data and then run the suggested sims on the holodeck.

After a few hours of assisted sleep, Carolyn once again met up with Deirdre in the corridor, this time joined by Sonja, and the three headed down to Deck 6. They grabbed breakfast from the lab replicator while they looked at the 3L burst numbers and overnight sensor readings. Deirdre looked a little concerned about the computer projections for the next burst. She pointed at a stack of three tall curves on the screen and said, "There are three possible maximums that the system is plotting for around 1430 hours, right here. It thinks the most likely will be the highest energy, about 20 percent more than 3H."

Sonja noted, "The curving up of the 3L peak and background gravimetrics are certainly pointing that way, yeah. We should be able to coordinate with everyone else before a 4H happens."

Carolyn replied, "The others must be getting similar results, so we'll be able to compare calcs at 1011, and cross our fingers for the *Takayama*." She tapped more notes into Roxie and added, "I'm not terribly worried with the distances involved, but still." Deirdre and Sonja nodded in agreement, and the three continued to work the data.

At 0815 they were able to move on to some of Roberto's holodeck intercept sims, with the help of the real Frank Berrera at Tactical and Anahera Waimarie at the helm. Anahera plotted four stars in the vicinity of the possible toroid braking point, and they were able to perform basic maneuvers to approach the toroid as close as a lightyear. Deirdre programmed different levels of EM and gravimetric waves, the highest being a theoretical 8H. That setting really bounced the crew around, even secured at their stations, but amid shaking, thumps, and high frequency whines, Berrera observed, "This is about the same as getting hit with a volley of ten quantum torps. Well, with full shields and all SIF and IDF systems cranking at 120 percent."

Anahera said, "And I'm pretty certain that I can yaw us 180 and fly out, like riding the wave. Maybe not like the events three years ago, but we can play with those conditions in the time left."

Berrera added, "After the comm window, you've got us for the rest of the shift."

Carolyn replied, "Thanks. We'll get back to it after the window. I need to sit in a quiet chair for a bit."

Carolyn, Deirdre, and Sonja returned to the lab to run the latest sims through the computer to extract additional command trees, different scripts or sequences, to execute under various conditions. Carolyn really welcomed the time to relax briefly, while fully appreciating the job the ship crews were continually performing. They paused the analysis and connected with the others at 1011, in one of the shortest comm windows the team had yet experienced. New files generated by the ship computers, as well as sensor array data, were quickly traded and would be examined. Marjorie was the only one with anything to cover. "The keep-out group, especially the *Takayama*, are being told to prepare for a new strong burst, and we will connect after that occurs," she said. She tapped a few controls. "In the meantime, I'm going to transmit reports to Sol system and our colleagues downstream of the toroid. Catch up later," she added, and signed off.

Carolyn and her four holodeck companions returned to test out other sims as well as some mods to scenarios they had already tried, based on practice runs conducted on the other ships. They broke up the sessions with lunch and discussions about what actions seemed to work, especially related to protecting ships and crews from destructive effects close to the toroid. Even though the data all seemed to indicate that Alpha Siolrahn Four was likely never the target, Starfleet believed they still needed to find and stop the toroid if possible. Before they ended the holodeck sessions around 1430 to await the next burst, the five practiced a few planetary shuttle landings in full EVA suits and with weapons. Every sim was helpful, though Carolyn increasingly leaned on her training to help deal with not knowing the future.

At 1540 hours, when the outbound group was within 18 lightyears of the toroid, the burst pre-labeled as 4H pounded through subspace. The audio alert came in when Carolyn was up on the bridge with Deirdre. "This is Lieutenant Mansour on the U.S.S. *Takayama*. We're stable at galactic drift and bow-on to the incoming burst, recording at 1505 and backtimed to 1452. Building to a peak with

significant energy increase over 3H and background rumbles increasing as well. We will attempt to acquire EM data from uncrewed relay SCR-2651 at 1.12 lightdays from the toroid. We and the *Ferranti* will continue transmitting through the end of the event. *Takayama* out.” Mansour’s voice was replaced by numerous low chimes as the computers began filling up with new files for the team to study. Accentuating the process were low shudders hitting the group ship shields, minimized by the SIF/IDF emitters. After the rumbles dropped down about twenty minutes later, the AI systems had compiled their latest results and the team gathered on screen.

Deirdre went through the numbers on the display as before. She reported, “Okay, the system is telling us that 4H is up 19.2 percent over 3H, and the background energy is up 8.6 percent.” She looked at the updated data curves, which now had a bright new spike, plus some dimmer ones showing possible low and high bursts coming up on the timeline. “This predicted 5H for tomorrow looks disturbing,” she continued, “but maybe the good news is the toroid is down to 0.22 lightyears per hour. Yeah, pretty certain it isn’t going where we thought it was.” Carolyn made her notes on Roxie, concentrating on a 4L burst around 0300 and the 5H around 1730. That big one would see the group within 9 lightyears and everyone, especially the keep-out crews, would need to be ready for tougher conditions and changes of tactics.

Jonas gave them a look at some new Romulan movements. “We can still occasionally see their cloaked moves, and they seem to have also adopted the bow-on aspect. Smart,” he began, tapping some controls. He continued, “There are two Warbirds that have moved to within three lightyears of the toroid, but they’re staying aft of the burst points. I’m going to guess they’ve been shaken up but they’re getting through it. There may also be some comms being traded between those two and Imperial higher-ups. I’ll see about breaking those down, but the encryption is tricky.” He swiped across one of his displays and finished up by saying, “And I’m still not seeing anything that looks like intelligent information in the toroid.”

Roberto and Nora sent updated assessments of possible toroid motive power and offensive capability, but neither subject had changed much beyond a few possible decreases. Nora said only, “Obviously, what we’re seeing and what it could still do are two different things.”

Jeremy had a similar short update. “Azumi and I are sending a few more heavy shuttle sims for you to try out. We’re testing increased defensive shield power,” he said.

Marjorie wrapped up the comms with some notes from Starfleet. “The flight operations folks have confirmed that there are no Federation vessels or crewed stations in the volume of space where we believe the toroid may ultimately stop, and the nav database shows that the four nearby stars are orbited by no inhabited worlds. Three have rocky planets that are barely Class M,” she said. She paused, and added, “We’ll hook up again after 4L, whenever that happens. Check the files, play with any ideas you have, and get some rest.” With that, the team signed off.

Carolyn approached Anahera at the helm, making sure not to interrupt any critical nav work. “Got a moment?” Carolyn asked. Anahera replied, “Sure. Let me guess, want to go over the four target stars some more?” Carolyn chuckled and nodded. “Yes. Call the time and place,” she said. Anahera suggested, “I’m off at 1700 and we can meet up in the mess hall. That okay?” Carolyn glanced toward Deirdre, who gave a thumbs up, and told Anahera, “See you there.”

In the mess hall, Carolyn, Deirdre, Sonja, Anahera, and Matthew Ayers from Ops looked over the maps and data tables for the four star systems from the earlier sims. All were within 58 lightyears of Sol, spaced four or five lightyears apart, with a few different spectral types. Ocela M7, Mirion G8, Aldefet F5, and Usurso K2. Anahera said, “We know the toroid flight path has some jiggles in it, so we don’t know which of the four could be closest to a stopping point, but we’re good for approaching any of them if we need some solid bodies between us and it.”

Carolyn looked up from Roxie and half a turkey sandwich, noting, “And we should be getting more specific heading orders from Marjorie over the next twelve hours. There’s a lot of possible assigned vectors for our group ships, so we’ll wait and see.”

Ayers chuckled and said, “Aiden and I will be very happy if we can keep the comm lags down to like five seconds. You know, if we have to coordinate crazy different bits of action.”

Deirdre finished her synth Mule and quipped, “If we get within a couple thousand AU you’ll get your comms plenty fast.”

Ayers was about to say something, but just raised a finger in agreement. "Right," he said.

The five finished up, after which Deirdre and Carolyn stopped by the lab to check on whatever new sensor data was being processed. Nothing was critical or surprising, so they spent a couple of hours alternately reviewing files and just talking. As the *de Baissac* went back to high warp, they headed off to their respective quarters for some sleep.

Mission Day 7 - Calendar Date: 21 SEP 2395 Stardate: 72719.7

Cool-down: 0813 hours Restart: 1126 hours Cool-down: 2021 hours

Range to Toroid: 14.33 lightyears Subspace Comm Lag: 31m Time Dilation Factor: 0.02

A chime sounded at 0250, gently waking Carolyn before the possible 4L burst. She didn't get up, but waited for the event while playing some soft music. She thought about skimming through overnight sensor data on Roxie, but she didn't need numbers running through her head at this hour. That could wait. She dialed the assist field down and drifted back into a light natural sleep.

At 0447, nearly two hours later, the alert tone sounded. Carolyn got up and dressed as the audio message came in. "This is Lieutenant Mansour on the U.S.S. *Takayama*. We've dropped to impulse at four lightyears out, bow-on to the burst, recording at 0423 and backtimed to 0412. Following the current energy plot, lower than 4H but higher than 1H. We are expecting EM data from SCR-2651 to arrive at 1642. We and the *Ferranti* will continue transmitting until the drop to background levels. *Takayama* out."

Carolyn rubbed her eyes and thought, *Damn, we're getting close.*

She headed to the bridge and met up with Deirdre and Ramona and the science station. As before, data was streaming in from the other ships and the *de Baissac* sensors, and the computers were quickly adjusting points and curves on the maps and energy graphs. "Good morning. Pretty soon, we're going to be running into the *Takayama* and feeling what they're feeling," Deirdre noted, pushing and pulling on the display scales. She added, "From this map, a 5H burp report could come in all of two minutes before we see the rumbles for real."

Carolyn stared at the display and replied, "Yeah, we're quickly converging on an action area. Tomorrow could get very complicated."

Deirdre nodded in agreement. "It looks like we may have about eight hours, plus or minus two, until 5H hits. And by this time tomorrow, we'll be inside the keep-out zone," she said.

Carolyn looked back and forth between Roxie and the console screens and remarked, "I don't think Marjorie's going to send us that close with the energy readings rising, even if we can ride out the bounces."

Deirdre replied, "We ought to know soon. *Takayama* is done and I'll have the data summary in ten minutes."

The team gathered on screen shortly after Deirdre finished sending her report and received updates from the others. While everyone studied the readouts, Marjorie announced, "We will have an outbound group sync at 0930 involving all ship command personnel, followed by a move by all team members from their current ships to the *de Baissac*, by either shuttle or transporter, at 1445 hours. I will remain on the *Blakey* for the time being, and the rest of the group will hang back from the possible action area. Hold for a second." She paused, switching comm channels to speak with someone else. The team waited, and Marjorie soon returned. "Okay, watch for a few more updates. And Carolyn, you'll have the lead with your team in person very soon."

Carolyn took a long breath and said, "Understood. Thanks. By the time everyone transfers over we should be in the best readiness state for a 5H event."

Marjorie replied, "We'll cover flight headings in detail in the conference, but we'll be angling another five degrees toward the toroid. Deirdre, you're up."

Deirdre tapped a few controls and said, "Okay, 4L was up 20.3 percent over 3L, background subspace rumbles are up another 9.1 percent, and the toroid central region is slowing below 0.20 lightyears per hour, heading for the four stars. From an energy standpoint we'll be coordinating with all departments on approach strategies, depending on what the toroid does."

They all checked the numbers, and then Jonas reported, "I'm still reading those two Warbirds tailing the toroid at three lightyears, they're still turning bow-on during the bursts, and three other ships are a bit further away. The partially decrypted comms are all in the files now, and apparently they're orders from nearby Romulan base commanders to keep close to the toroid but not take offensive action. It sounds like they're being cautious with us in the mix. Still running the toroid emissions through all the filters and UT matrices, and the best I can tell you is that the signal snips before the bursts might only be noise from some kind of switch being turned on."

Roberto and Nora had no new procedures to test out or theories about toroid propulsion or energy applications, and turned things over to Jeremy and Azumi. Jeremy simply reported, "We're coming over with the big shuttle and enough supplies for two weeks. With any luck we won't need a fraction of that."

Carolyn waited a moment, made a few notes, and said, "Thanks, everybody. We'll hook up again at 0930." And the team signed off.

As the *de Baissac* headed for cool-down, Carolyn and Deirdre had short discussions with the bridge crew at that hour, some primary officers and some deputies on duty. Matthew Ayers at Ops would make certain that every crew member not active would be brought up to speed for the upcoming operations. Carolyn's brief exchange with Captain Roberson about the situation was straightforward and technical, but he ended with "Aisha and I are glad you're here and that the rest of your team is heading over. We'll do what we can for you, and see this through."

Carolyn replied, "Thank you, Captain. I appreciate you saying that." She couldn't think of anything more to tell him, and they nodded to each other in parting. As she and Deirdre headed out to the lab, Carolyn was filled with thoughts of just how many uncertainties they were still facing, but somehow she would move forward. She was distracted enough to miss Sonja joining them.

"Mind if I tag along?" Sonja asked as they boarded the turbolift. Carolyn turned, regaining her focus.

"Sure, why not? Breakfast in the lab isn't a whole lot different from the mess hall," she said.

In the few hours before the group comm, Carolyn, Deirdre, and Sonja reviewed the current data, joined occasionally by system techs who were prepping their lab and the two flanking modules for the other OSI team members. They looked at the nav database on the four star systems ahead and their planets, confident that Anahera could get them to necessary target points while protecting the ship from the bursts. Deirdre and Sonja talked about the energy graphs and the toroid trajectory. Off to one side, Carolyn made more notes on Roxie, then looked up and asked, "I know we've collected a lot of data and run the defensive sims, but can we back up a bit and just search for this thing if it stops, dives deeper into subspace and goes quiet, like three years ago? It'll essentially be in our back yard."

Deirdre replied, "Only to emerge somewhere like home or another populated system. Yeah, that could be troublesome if the rumbles fade out. With AS4 maybe out of the picture, Starfleet might have to pump a lot of loud yells into the continuum to find it. Our neighbors would love that."

Carolyn had to agree. She stared down at Roxie for a moment and said, "And that would sure change our mission."

The three headed up to the bridge just before the comm began on time at 0930 with the group ships at impulse. Marjorie appeared on the main viewscreen and addressed the group. "Good day. This is a general sync-up of all outbound crews as well as the keep-out ships closest to the toroid," she began. "I am transmitting updated order files for all departments. As you know, members of my team will be moving over to the *de Baissac* beginning at 1445. In sequence, each ship will maneuver to within 40,000 kilometers of the *de Baissac* while at impulse and personnel will transport over. I will accompany team members Reyes and Hamasaki aboard the heavy shuttle *Barnard*. They and the *Barnard* will remain on the *de Baissac* and I will return to the *Blakey* before close approach operation plans are drawn up." Marjorie tapped a control to show a slowly rotating map of space within an eight lightyear radius of the toroid. The group ships were still converging on the toroid near the four candidate stars, the keep-out ships were following along on one side of the trajectory, and Romulan and Klingon vessels were doing the same on the other side. She continued, "We believe that a 5H burst will hit later today, and we will wait for a possible 5L or other bursts as sensor data comes in. Lieutenant Commander O'Connor will send recommendations to all ships for velocity and aspect." Marjorie finished up by saying, "Review all of the

updates and convey any questions to your first officers, and they will get to me or to Specialist Hagey. We will be back after SCR-2651 transmits at 1642.”

The comm window remained open for a short time, but no one had any pressing questions or comments. Carolyn wasn’t surprised, since the crews seemed to be as ready as they could be. Of course, she didn’t discount someone having a brilliant idea, and she was always open to hearing those. She remained on the bridge for about an hour to review the data updates, awaiting the return to high warp, and occasionally surveyed the different stations. Deirdre had headed down to the lab, and Carolyn would join her soon. Satisfied that things were stable, Carolyn headed to Sickbay to check in with Dr. Levette.

“Hi. Are you doing okay?” Levette asked.

Carolyn replied, “Feel good, and Roxie hasn’t sounded any personal alarms. Just getting things organized for Marjorie before the transfer. I know we’re all supposed to get looked at before moving in close to the toroid, so maybe we can do that during the next full cool-down?” Levette skimmed through a schedule display.

“Sounds good, with things getting busy in the next seven hours. If we can work some exams into the time before the burst, that will be good, too,” she said.

Carolyn replied, “We’ll figure it out when the rest of the team arrives. And I assume that the reports from the keep-out med crews have been pretty helpful.”

Levette nodded in agreement. “They certainly have. We’ve all been lucky so far, after the first encounter.”

Carolyn said, “That’s for sure. See you a bit later.” Carolyn headed back to her quarters to freshen up and skim through upcoming events in a quiet environment. She accepted that so many complex things on a mission happened by the clock, and she continued to be grateful for the few moments in between. Regardless of the pace, those who stuck with Starfleet and OSI and could lead these operations were highly respected, like Marjorie. Since boarding the *de Baissac*, whenever Carolyn found herself hoping she could live up to Marjorie’s confidence in her, she thought of her own confidence in the team and every ship crew heading toward this unknown situation.

She sat and closed her eyes for a minute, then headed out to the lab. Deirdre and Sonja and two techs were there, checking some final setup routines for when the others arrived. Carolyn asked, “How’s the prep going?”

Deirdre answered, “Just about done, actually. And a couple of hours early in case we need to tweak file merging and so on. Any isolinear banks that the others bring over will slot in pretty easily. I suspect Jonas will have a metric ton of data he’s still working on.”

Carolyn glanced down at Roxie and responded, “Oh, I’m sure. Marjorie’s going to want us to sync up once we’re all here, probably in the conference lounge. Before the relay data arrives. And before 5H.”

A general announcement came in from the bridge. “This is the Captain. All outbound ships will drop to impulse beginning at 1445 as planned. We will rendezvous with the *Blakey* and commence incoming shuttle operations with the *Barnard*, and in sequence will accept transporter streams from the *Ginesta* and the *Lindquist*. The outbound group will then return to warp and will change velocity and aspect as subspace conditions dictate.”

Sonja looked up from a console and added, “Maybe we should get lunch first.”

The trio did get a quick lunch in the mess hall, and then stopped by the bridge to track pre-transfer activities. From the science station, Deirdre and Sonja communicated with Chief Engineer Morelli about shuttle stability and transporter readiness with the current background rumbles. Carolyn went over general Ops matters with Lt. Ayers, and then with Anahera discussed maneuvers to give *Barnard* a clean approach to the shuttlebay. She looked in on the unoccupied conference lounge briefly and then rejoined Deirdre, satisfied that everything seemed ready for the next few hours. While Deirdre kept her eyes on the current energy levels, she said, “Did you know they were originally going to name the *Barnard* as *Charon*? I just found that out.”

Carolyn replied with a slight chuckle. “The ferryman to Hades. Brilliant, just what we need. Jeremy would have raised a stink about that,” she said.

Deirdre agreed, saying, “Right. Especially since he’s our pilot if we’re going close.” Regardless of the name, Jeremy Reyes would shortly be piloting the shuttle at a somewhat leisurely 65 kilometers per second, traversing the gap between the *Blakey* and the *de Baissac* on impulse in ten minutes. He could

change velocity if necessary, while gathering flight data covering everything from propulsion to shields to comms, but 65 km/s seemed a good choice between bursts.

At 1445, with everyone on the bridge ready for the rendezvous, Roberson went group-wide. "This is the *de Baissac*. We will now drop to one-tenth impulse and coordinate maneuvers with the *Blakey*." The familiar droning of warp deepened in pitch and faded out, and the main display switched from streaks to the surrounding starfield. Navigation overlays pinpointed stars and ships and flight vectors. And the toroid was at top center, submerged in the continuum for now.

The bridge crew watched various displays at their stations as the *Barnard* smoothly exited the *Blakey* and headed for a Z-axis approach aft of the *de Baissac*. One cabin view showed Jeremy and Azumi at the forward console, with Marjorie at a station behind them. Azumi called in briefly, saying, "*Barnard* to *de Baissac* shuttlebay control. Shields and SIF/IDF handling minor vibrations, and turning tractor alignment over to you. See you in a few minutes."

Carolyn stopped for a moment at the center oval to tell the Captain and First Officer, "Deirdre and I are heading to the shuttlebay, and then whichever transporter room gets active for the others."

Aisha replied, "Mister Morelli will contact you. Go meet up with your team." As the shuttlebay door slid open and the *Barnard* lined up for landing, Carolyn and Deirdre arrived at the bay crew entryway, which was sealed in case the toroid rumbles disrupted the forcefield. The techs at the entry station monitored the *Barnard* while it glided through the field and settled onto the bay deck.

The big bay door then closed and Jeremy called out, "Okay, we're down and locked to the floor." A few confirming chimes sounded, the entry doors opened, and Carolyn and Deirdre quickly strode in, followed by five engineering crew members tasked with checking out the shuttle systems health, along with its science and defensive cargos.

The starboard cockpit hatch opened, a ramp extended, and Marjorie walked down with Jeremy and Azumi. Amid hugs and handholds, she said, "It is so good to see you two. I don't mean to cut this short, but we three are going to get settled before meeting in the conference lounge. Carolyn, you and Deirdre can go greet our transporting folks."

Carolyn, with Roxie in hand, nodded and replied, "Yes. Okay, we've got this." She and Deirdre waved back as they moved into the corridor, and their comm badges chimed.

"Morelli to Hagey. We're returning to Transporter Room 2 and the *Ginesta* in moving within range. See you there."

Carolyn tapped her badge and answered, "Thank you, Chief. On the way." They soon reached the transporter room and stood to one side as Chief Morelli coordinated with the *Ginesta*. Within a few minutes the chamber glowed and streams of light became Jonas carrying an isolinear data bank and his personal pack on the pad.

"Lieutenant Thorne, welcome to the *de Baissac*," Morelli said.

"Thanks, Chief," Jonas replied. He turned to Carolyn and Deirdre and said, "It's great to be back with you. I can't say I've got any breakthroughs to report, but I do have backups and a few bits of processing to look through."

Deirdre gave him a quick hug and replied, "Head up to the bridge. They'll get you squared away with quarters and then we'll meet up." Jonas gave a thumbs up, grabbed his pack, and headed for the turbo. A quick call came down from Anahera at the helm.

"Holding attitude for the *Lindquist* approach, Chief. Three minutes," she said.

For Carolyn those three minutes passed quickly, and soon Roberto and Nora materialized with their packs. As he did with Jonas, Morelli addressed the two new arrivals. "Chief Mendez, Specialist Moreno, welcome to the *de Baissac*," he said. They both thanked Morelli, and were accompanied out to the corridor by Carolyn and Deirdre.

Carolyn got a chime on Roxie, and said, "Looks like we've already got your quarters pegged. Nora, you're Deck 3, Room 9, and Roberto, you're Deck 3, Room 10."

Nora glanced at the PADD and noted, "Looks like we're all neighbors."

Roberto smiled. "And no late night parties until this is all over," he quipped.

Carolyn replied, "Yeah. You can offload your things and we'll all meet in the conference lounge as soon as you're ready."

Deirdre added, "Marjorie will want to see us all in one spot to start, and then we can look in at the lab, grab a bite, and wait for the relay imagery at 1642."

All eight team members eventually made it to the bridge by 1530, by which time the group ships had returned to high warp, heading for the toroid intercept. The newcomers met the *de Baissac* crew in person and then Marjorie started the status meeting in the conference lounge.

"I know I have said this a number of times since arriving," she began, "but I am very happy and grateful to see you all. The reasons for this mission appear to have changed over the past week, and what we originally perceived as an urgent threat may no longer be one, but we still need to identify whatever is at the heart of the phenomenon." Marjorie looked around the table, glanced at her PADD, and continued, "While we wait for the relay EM and the next burst, let's hear where we are in the prep. Carolyn?"

As the big wall display filled with maps and situation notes, Carolyn said, "Okay, we're all pretty much caught up on sensor data analysis and sim practice. We're closing on the general volume of space where the toroid may slow significantly, and shortly we will be about as near to the toroid as the *Takayama*. The outbound group computers all have flight scenarios programmed and all crews are ready for predicted bursts and maneuvers. And Doctor Levette wants to get everyone's med scan in the next eight hours or so, but that shouldn't take long. Deirdre?"

Deirdre commented, "The toroid continues to lose velocity in small fractions since 4L. It's currently around 0.165 lightyears per hour, and background subspace rumbles are still increasing slightly. We'll see if a 5H burst adds any approach limits. And the relay data could tell us if one of the four stars is a possible destination."

Jonas then reported, "No major updates on the toroid emissions. They still sound like noisy switches. The Romulans and Klingons continue to tail the toroid. The Warbirds are closer and look like they've moved a few shuttles back and forth between ships. Comms are still regular."

Roberto commented on propulsion data from the *Lindquist*. "The bursts and the background rumbles have had some small effects on warp field balance but we've been able to deal with it with updated plasma injector timings," he said. Carolyn made some quick notes. Roberto added, "Chief Morelli and the other engineers have added them to the flight software."

Nora briefly spoke of the outbound group defensive readiness. She said, "I'll coordinate with Barrera at Tactical. No changes on torpedo inventory and raw power for phasers and related systems. Six group ships with forty torps each, and the five keep-out ships also with forty each if we need them to form up with us."

Jeremy caught the team up on the *Barnard*. "The shuttle systems are running smooth, deuterium tanks are topped off, and the antimatter pods are safed. Flight software has been updated for burst conditions," he said.

Azumi finished up the individual reports by saying, "The *Barnard* is also ready to support a crew of seven if necessary. All life support gases and fluids are loaded, and replicator and environmental systems are cleared for extended flight. All science and med gear and supplies are being loaded, along with emergency tools and shelters and EVA suits." She pointed at the wall display of the shuttle and added, "Might be a little crowded, but it's ready."

Marjorie wrapped up the meeting. "All right, we've got about an hour until the relay EM readings come in. Carolyn, you've got this. I'm going to talk with the admirals again," she said, rising from her seat.

Carolyn nodded and replied, "Right. Let's head for the lab. The replicators down there do make a decent lunch."

The team crossed through the bridge, acknowledged the officers on duty, and took the turbo down to the lab modules. They started with the central module, looked in on the other two labs, and most took advantage of the replicator for a light meal. Carolyn told her teammates, "We've got the center and starboard modules pretty much full time, leaving the port side for the *de Baissac* crew, though we can also use that one if we absolutely need it." She took a sip of coffee and added, "Marjorie, Deirdre, Jonas and I can work out of this lab. Roberto, Nora, Jeremy, and Azumi, you can be right next door. And we can all meet up in here. Whatever works."

The lab consoles chimed with a shipwide announcement. "This is Science Officer Laurila on the bridge. We are expecting near-realtime EM data from SCR-2651 in approximately five minutes. We will be receiving streams from both the relay and backup from the *Takayama*. Bridge out." Deirdre tapped a

few controls for the central display and the team waited. Carolyn was always fascinated, with the centuries of FTL travel racked up, by the relative slowness of light and other “familiar” signals. The subspace effects of 4H were felt yesterday. What the relay was watching for in visible light and every other EM frequency, was taking over a day to reach it, but fortunately the relay’s data would cross some 9 lightyears in little more than 23 minutes.

When the relay stream began playing, technical header information appeared on the screen first, detailing the bands being studied, from low frequency, long wave RF all the way up to super high frequency gamma rays with wavelengths in fractions of a nanometer. The image then switched to a moving frame as the sensors tracked a target region of space, a fairly benign field of stars with a few distant nebular wisps. A softened elliptical area of intensely bright blues and violets suddenly erupted large in the frame, swirling and rotating. The central blaze, transiting against the stars, was then accompanied by at least a dozen short spears of bright yellow-white that fanned out ahead of the toroid’s direction of travel. The team watched in silence, eyes darting back and forth between the light show and the data numbers, until Deirdre spoke up. “Okay, this thing was speeding along at like Warp 8, so we’re seeing the energy hard-shifted down to the EM range,” she said. “The image is a little stretched from the sensor slewing, but this is going to be amazingly helpful.” She tapped a few controls and the computer overlaid map and trajectory lines. “Is it me, or are those spikes pushing into the line of flight?” she asked.

Carolyn watched like everyone else, and she couldn’t help but wonder if they really were seeing some kind of braking thrust, as they had theorized earlier. She turned to Jonas, trying to sound hopeful. “And maybe there’s something new to listen to in all of this,” she said.

Jonas replied, “Yeah, we’ll see. Once this finishes up, I’ll have the computers dive into the full spectral map.” After a few more minutes, as the toroid began to dim, they noticed that Marjorie and Sonja had joined them.

Marjorie watched the screen intently and said, “This certainly follows the basic look described in the first encounter.” She then addressed the team. “And it’s still slowing, so we’re going to keep being very careful about the bursts and where we fly. The admirals still consider the toroid a potential threat, and a lot will be happening in the next couple of hours. We’ll be dropping to impulse in a few minutes, and I’m transporting back to the *Blakey* to manage things from there. Deirdre, I know you and Sonja will have your hands full with this EM data and 5H when it happens. We’ll be on comms and pushing the computers to give us answers.” Marjorie took a breath and continued, “See what connections emerge in your specialties, and know that all ideas will be valuable.” She clasped Carolyn’s arm and said, “We’ll catch up soon.”

Carolyn replied, “Very soon, I’m guessing. But we’re in good shape.” Marjorie nodded and headed out of the lab, and the work continued.

The group ships returned to warp soon after Marjorie arrived back on the *Blakey*. Deirdre and Anahera pushed and pulled toroid data to refine its path, arriving at a toss-up between Aldefet and Mirion as a destination. Jonas “listened” to the EM in the relay data, once more applying filters, shifting frequencies up and down, and stretching the timing. While the others were processing the data, Carolyn stopped by Sickbay for the med scan, which was completed in just a few minutes, including an updated cortical analysis. Dr. Levette swiped through a few screens on her PADD and announced, “Looking good. Any minor effects from your EVA are not showing up, so this is quite an acceptable baseline record.”

Carolyn thought for a few seconds and asked, “And I assume the crew on the *Takayama* are okay as well?”

Levette replied, “They’re healthy at four lightyears. Jonas and the other ship comm officers haven’t heard any med reports from the Romulans at three lightyears, so we’ll see how things go after 5H.” She consulted her PADD again and continued, “It’s not just because I’m required to ask, but how are you feeling?”

Carolyn closed her eyes briefly and said, “For still not knowing what’s coming, I’m doing all right. And I know I don’t need to parrot lines from speeches, but this is what we signed up for.”

Levette added, “Et cetera. Okay, you’re fine. Let your team know they can come by any time.” Carolyn returned to the lab, conveyed the doctor’s message, and got back into watching the situation. Deirdre, Jonas, and Azumi headed to Sickbay, got their scans, and when they came back, Jeremy, Nora, and Roberto did the same. Not surprisingly, everything checked out.

When the 5H burst shook subspace, the group ships felt it starting to build at 1822, and no one was caught off guard. All of the ships dropped to impulse and performed the bow-on maneuver to ride out the rumbles, and since the group was now much closer than in days past, they actually felt the burst 72 seconds before the first report whistled across space from the *Takayama*. Carolyn watched as the maps updated and the energy scales climbed higher. The *de Baissac* shuddered at a tolerable level, much lower than the very shaky 8H sim on the holodeck, but the team in the lab was still tense in their seats. Deirdre stared at the displays, ready to act alongside Anahera's auto nav routines, to call out any anomalies that might hurt them.

The audio comm filled the lab. "This is Lieutenant Mansour on the *Takayama*, four lightyears out at impulse and bow-on to the burst, recording at 1808 and backtimed to 1757. We're seeing higher energy levels than 4H. We'll continue transmitting for a while into the return to background levels. *Takayama* out." Data continued to flow in for another twenty minutes, and the rumbles dropped to a new background strength.

Deirdre massaged the back of her neck and noted, "This was a strong one close in. The *Takayama* SIF/IDF fields needed to be cranked to 112 percent for about five minutes." Jonas appeared very involved with manipulating multiple frequency graphs in different directions and scales. Carolyn made notes on Roxie and studied the lab displays as the group ships returned to warp.

"The computer's getting much quicker with the analysis. Based on the numbers, I think we'll be on with Marjorie very shortly," she said. She made a few more notes, and added, "It's 1845 now, and we're due for a cool-down soon at 2021."

Roberto called over from the other lab and reminded her, "Whatever distance we can make is a good thing."

Carolyn replied, "Agreed. Just keeping the schedule straight in my head. Oh, and a course change at 1918."

"Yeah, more pieces and parts," Roberto said. "But from the timeline, we should still be able to catch our breath. Once in a while."

As soon as the group ship AI systems were done with their initial processing, and with every group bridge officer monitoring the comm, Marjorie called in. "How are we looking?" she asked. Carolyn skimmed through the lab displays and nodded at Deirdre.

Deirdre read the numbers from her console, saying, "Okay, the 5H burst was around 25 percent higher energy than 4H, and the background waves are up, but only by 6.9 percent. Based on what we saw from the relay EM, it looks like 5H involved additional energy firings along the toroid line of flight. And the toroid appears to be decelerating below 0.15 lightyears per hour. I believe we really are seeing braking thrust against the continuum."

Marjorie considered this for a moment, looked at her own display, and asked, "And do you have a better estimate of where it's heading?"

Deirdre replied, "After talking with Anahera, we think the destination is Aldefet."

Marjorie made notes on her own PADD and said, "Very good. I'll get back with you all about course changes after the one upcoming. We seem to have a star system to visit."

Carolyn nodded to Jonas, who reported, "It might be a function of us getting closer to the toroid, and I've been comparing notes with the *Takayama*, but I think I'm now seeing at least two and possibly more distinct signal origin points within the toroid. The timings are interesting. Not saying that there are conversations going on inside that beast, but there appear to be pulses from one area interspersed with pulses from another. By the time a 5L burst pops up, maybe we'll be close enough to get sharper readings."

Deirdre commented, "I don't know exactly where we'll be, but right now it looks like 5L could happen around 0900, plus or minus a couple of hours."

Jonas replied, "I'm assuming we'll be closer than three lightyears, which is about as close as the Romulans have gotten, on the far side of Aldefet. Their comms are still pretty unremarkable, and maybe they're just watching how things work out for us before taking any action."

No one else had any pressing updates to offer live, so Marjorie signed off to confer with Starfleet.

The team continued to look at the data, enter summaries and recommendations, and keep in sync with their counterparts up on the *de Baissac* bridge. Over the coming hours, the group ships would proceed with flight ops, mostly mirroring the *de Baissac* heading. While they did hang back at distances approaching 20 AU, about three billion kilometers, they remained close enough to rush in at low to medium warp if needed. The group did angle in closer toward Aldefet at 1918, and would await further readings on the toroid moves before programming more heading adjustments. The 2021 cool-down started off as a complete drop to impulse, with the team taking turns going off console in small groups to relax and eat, but within an hour the group returned to warp, gradually climbing through WF3, 4, and 5. It was decided that the nacelle coils could recover high WF capabilities even while moving at slower velocities. Roberto, Nora, Carolyn, and Deirdre occupied a table near the starboard lab replicator, and he explained, "We experimented with this some time ago. It's mainly playing games with which injectors fire and for how long. I'm not a big fan, but it can work in situations like this."

Deirdre understood, saying, "Yeah, you're not blasting hot plasma at every coil every second." Carolyn, enjoying her dinner as best she could, listened and got what they were talking about.

Roberto added, "At least at the lower warp factors, injector skipping doesn't shake the nacelles to bits."

Carolyn didn't need Roxie at her side to see the advantage, replying, "Like what you said about covering the distance. I'll be very happy getting near Aldefet quickly."

Carolyn and Deirdre finished up their meal and returned to the center lab to look over incoming data and study the map of space within a four lightyear radius of Aldefet. As the *de Baissac* approached the star, various energy readings suggested the toroid was still on a similar vector from some 25 degrees away. There were streams of scratches and tones at moderate volume in the air, coming from a few different spots in the room. Jonas was at one station, head in his hands on the console. "Not sleeping," he mumbled almost inaudibly. "Listening. I think I've separated three signals spatially. Not sure how realistic it is, but they sure seem to be sounding off in sequence. Well, the computer thinks maybe forty different sequences," he whispered.

Carolyn stood closely behind him and whispered back, "Let me know when they say hello. I'm off to the bridge and then catching a little snooze time." He raised a hand to give her a small but well-meaning wave. She softly stepped away and stood with Deirdre for a few moments. Deirdre said, "I'm going to hang out here for a while. Want to look over the deceleration data again. You all right?"

Carolyn chuckled and replied, "You keep asking me that. Yeah. Going to knock off early and get up early to watch the main shift coming on console." She looked around the lab and added, "Doctor Levette knows I feel uncertain about what we're facing. But we'll get through it." Deirdre nodded and once again reassured her friend. With a hand on Carolyn's shoulder, she said, "We will. Rest up. I'm reasonably certain 5L won't catch us by surprise."

On the bridge, she touched base briefly with Anahera, who was monitoring the approach. They checked out the map together, and Carolyn said, "You look all set on the course adjustments and velocity settings. Looks like Marjorie is off right now but I'll let her know and be back in maybe five hours. Probably less."

Anahera replied, "Have a good nap. I'm off for a while myself around 0300, but I'll be back on before the next burst." Carolyn nodded and stepped over to Sonja, who was finishing up her shift at the science station.

Sonja said, "I'm heading off in a bit myself. Ramona is up to speed on the approach and she'll stay on comms with Deirdre." Carolyn noticed that Captain Roberson was away, with First Officer Jennings in the center seat.

"Thanks. I suspect we'll all be jumping back into the chase by 0600," she answered. She tapped a few notes and composed some messages on Roxie. Carolyn then stood for a moment to take in the main viewer image of Aldefet, a small, bright white disk amid the local stellar neighborhood, the entire scene layered with cartographic grids, icons, and numeric data. And near the starboard edge of the screen, a violet ring marked the toroid.

Carolyn took a deep breath, feeling somewhat more positive than earlier in the day, and headed to her cabin. The sleep assist field would be helpful tonight.

Mission Day 8 - Calendar Date: 22 SEP 2395 Stardate: 72722.4

Restart + MCC: 0216 hours Aldefet/Toroid Study Area Slow Approach: 0950 hours

Range to Toroid: 5.91 lightyears Subspace Comm Lag: 13m Time Dilation Factor: 0.01

Carolyn awoke to a chime at 0400 and the assist field tailing off. The sleep had felt good, and while freshening up and dressing, she had Roxie display a status report and a few team messages. The numbers were constantly changing, but since the *de Baissac* was close to three lightyears out from Aldefet when 0000 hours ticked over, they had already covered nearly half that distance at high warp when Carolyn opened her eyes. In the past four hours, the distance to the toroid had also closed from nearly six lightyears to maybe three and a half. She had slept through two heading changes, one at 0100 and the other at 0216, homing in on Aldefet's general planetary orbital plane. The group ships were coping with the gravimetric rumbles, even at increasing levels. She needed a few minutes to process what she was seeing, and breakfast would certainly help, but she was confident that the group was as prepared as they could be. The days since flyout had taught them a great deal, practicing for so many contingencies. Her team and the primary bridge crew would soon take their positions, and deputies were ready to assist where needed. No less important were all of the engineering and medical crew members throughout the *de Baissac*, many of whom Carolyn still had not met personally, but she knew that they would do everything possible to maintain the ship's systems and keep the crew safe. She was especially grateful that Chief Engineer Morelli's people were keeping the inertial dampeners healthy as the subspace rumbles increased.

With Roxie in hand, Carolyn headed for the centerline lab, where she was greeted by a computer engineer, a lieutenant from his pips, one of those unfamiliar faces. He knew who she was from general briefings and said, "Ah. Specialist Hagey, good morning. Ekfen N'Thot." She guessed correctly that he was a Fal'Thoti, and placed her two closed hands together in greeting.

"Hello," she replied. "How is it going here?"

In a somewhat formal tone, he reported, "Quite well. We have been performing isolinear sub-core checkouts in all three labs, and confirming that backup science data is flowing to the *Blakey* intact."

"Very good. Thank you. I expect it is going to get very busy in here," Carolyn said.

As N'Thot headed out, he added, "And good luck to us all."

For the next hour, Carolyn was alone in the lab. The consoles occasionally chimed and the displays updated, and she appreciated this quiet time to once again look over what was known about the toroid, the energies involved, and the group ship assets and maneuvers. She played the recorded movements of the approaching Romulan vessels and trailing Klingons forwards and backwards, making connections between every little green icon and where they appeared on the map, cloaked or not, reminding herself of specs like tonnage, performance, and weapons. What she did best. She would let the information swirl around in her mind for now.

It wasn't that she desired solitude, but sometimes it lifted her ability to coordinate information and ideas, and get a better grasp on making smart decisions. She also believed that coffee helped, and was thankful that the replicator was just steps away in the room. As the fresh cup warmed her insides, she studied the screens and knew that her friends would arrive soon.

As Carolyn read through the 0500 updates coming in from the bridge and the other group ships, Roxie began illuminating the names of the team and bridge officers waking up. Deirdre, Jonas, Azumi, Jeremy, and Nora all exchanged short comms or texts with Carolyn while they prepared for the Aldefet approach and the predicted 5L burst.

Deirdre and Jonas were the first to arrive at the lab. "Well, you're up early," Deirdre said, heading straight to the replicator.

Carolyn snickered and replied, "And you stay out too late. But you know me. I have to read the data three times to get it to stick."

Deirdre looked over her shoulder and answered, "Right, and then you come up with brilliant analyses."

Jonas logged in to his console and said, "And I'm still listening for hisses and clicks and babysitting the Warbirds."

Deirdre brought him coffee and countered with “Poor baby. Maybe you’ll hear something new in a couple of hours. We’re very close now.” To Carolyn, Deirdre’s voice came across with equal parts excitement and nervousness. Jonas sounded slightly bored and frustrated, but they all knew that they had to keep at the work.

Jeremy and Nora stopped by the center lab before heading over to the starboard side. “Morning. Roberto should be with us around 0600. I’m going to play with shield auto-reaction timing. The fun stuff,” Nora said, feigning a sneer. Roxie and a few other PADDs then chimed.

Carolyn glanced at the timeline markers and noted, “And it appears we’ll be in an all-hands briefing with Marjorie at 0730. Looks like she’s up early.”

Jeremy checked his own PADD, grinned over toward Deirdre and replied, “If 5L does kick off first. You know where to find us in the meantime.” He pointed toward the other lab, and he and Nora headed over. As the team settled back into monitoring the situation, the group ships passed a key distance point. They were now within one lightyear of Aldefet.

A little after 0600 all of the team members and a few of the *de Baissac* primary bridge crew were up. Everyone would be awake and on console within the next hour, but Marjorie called in before that to coordinate with Carolyn and the team, gathered in the center lab for the call on screen. “Good morning. I’m sending an agenda file for the 0730 briefing and a few recommendations for heading and warp factor settings for the Aldefet approach,” Marjorie began. The team noted the incoming data and she continued, “Look over everything, talk with the bridge crew, and see if any mods are required. Obviously, a 5L burst could change these plans, so we will continue toward Aldefet in steps and reassess as necessary. The first step was the one lightyear marker, and that gets the exciting label of Point A. We will drop our velocity to Warp 9, *de Baissac* will stay in the lead, and the rest of the group will remain 20 AU behind. We’ll watch the progress every tenth of a lightyear.”

Carolyn replied, “Acknowledged. And good morning. As we get closer to a 5L, we’re syncing up with more of the primary bridge crew and some of the deputies. We’re ready now, but getting more eyes on the problem this close in should help a lot.”

She turned things over to Deirdre, who reported, “You can see that the toroid is a little less than two lightyears away, also still headed for Aldefet. The background gravimetric vibrations are still increasing slowly but we’re all okay so far, and projections still say we can ride out a 5L even if we and the toroid get within half a lightyear of each other. No matter when, as soon as 5L starts, we’ll go sublight and bow-on.”

Roberto added, “And counter waves from the deflector. But if we have to, we’ll execute the 180-degree yaw away and return to warp.” Deirdre nodded, and said, “The toroid position and velocity readings are getting a little sketchy but I should have a decent update at 0730.”

Jonas gave his quick update. “Still adding signal data from the toroid, and we may now be hearing emissions from five different spots. Nothing decoded from any of them,” he said. He tapped a control and continued, “The Warbirds are occasionally flirting with 2.2 lightyears from the toroid, likely from watching our moves. Their comms are including mentions of Aldefet but I don’t hear anything suggesting an approach, just taking passive readings. It’ll be good to have our other sigint folks keep on this.”

Nora briefly repeated her previous report. “Shields and main deflector still configured for countering the rumbles. Roberto and I will connect with Chief Morelli and Frank Barrera before 0730. Azumi confirmed the life support situation. “I’ll be talking with Chief Morelli also, but right now everything remains go with systems and supplies here on the *de Baissac* and the *Barnard*,” she said.

Jeremy just nodded and said, “*Barnard* is ready.”

The all-hands briefing began promptly at 0730, with Carolyn’s team in the *de Baissac* conference lounge. Marjorie began by essentially repeating in detail every point she covered with the team, but now everyone in the group ships was getting up to date in a live meeting. She continued, “All of the data files and maneuvering plans have been synced up in the last hour, including flight instructions for three of the keep-out ships. We are now closer to the toroid and Aldefet than the *Takayama*, the *Aurora*, and the *Mahafe*, though they are also converging on the star system. Those three will stay back and take data, continue to watch the Romulans and Klingons, and will be standing by to rush in if we require assistance. Or if the situation takes a particularly bad turn, head back toward Sol.” She paused a moment. “You will

note from your displays that the *Takayama* is presently some 1.8 lightyears from Aldefet, 1.5 lightyears from the toroid track, and two lightyears from the group,” Marjorie said. She addressed Deirdre concerning the predicted 5L burst. “Lieutenant Commander O’Connor, updates?”

Deirdre scanned her PADD briefly and responded, “With some sensor uncertainties due to the distortions, the toroid appears to be 0.6 lightyears from Aldefet and slowing below 0.14 lightyears per hour. It’s also some 1.2 lightyears from us, which is a decent safety margin right now, but as we converge on the star system, it’s shrinking by the hour.” She pushed a few graphs around on her screen and continued, “A 5L event may happen anytime in the next couple of hours. As we’ve reported, the gravimetric distortion levels continue to rise. We assume that if the next burst sticks to the pattern it will be less energetic than 5H was, but we still need to be careful at our close distance. With the decision tree updating, the nav system may react faster than us, and we’ll have to trust it. Lieutenant Commander Waimarie has been working on that with our Specialist Jeremy Reyes on velocities and headings. We’ve also been running additional sims dealing with what might happen if and when the toroid reaches Aldefet. We’re as prepared as we can be with the science.”

Marjorie said, “Okay. Thank you for that. We can get back to regular comms traffic and less formal interactions after this meeting. Specialist Hagey?”

Carolyn looked up from Roxie to the wall display and after a moment said, “My thanks to Captain Roberson and the entire *de Baissac* crew now on station and ready. My team will have some short discussions with the bridge officers and then take up our positions in the lab modules. Depending on comm lag times and transmission quality, we will remain in touch with you and the group as we make our approach.”

Marjorie replied, “Very good. That concludes this briefing. Carolyn, we will talk again soon.” And the display went back to maps and graphs.

As the team began moving into the bridge, Deirdre remarked to Carolyn, “You know, this is the first time I’ve heard you say ‘my team’ out loud like you mean it. Feels good, right? Wait. That wasn’t just for the admirals, was it?”

Carolyn rocked her head back and forth slightly and replied, “A week ago I might have thought so, but with everything everyone is doing to make this work, I’m accepting the job more each day. I believe in them. All of us. And I want to help.”

Deirdre smiled. “And Marjorie believes in you,” she said. Carolyn smiled back, nodding, and stood quietly just inside the bridge.

“I’m glad you’re here,” she said finally.

Deirdre said, “Me, too.” They regarded the activity happening around them, and Deirdre added, “Come on. Let’s talk with our bridge friends and settle in to the lab. I need some more breakfast.”

Carolyn tapped notes into Roxie while Deirdre worked with Sonja and Ramona at the science station. At the same time, Jonas and Lt. Foster compared notes on comm configurations, Nora and Roberto spoke briefly with Chief Morelli and Lt. Barrera at Tactical, Azumi spoke with Lt. Ayers at Ops, and Jeremy discussed a few piloting matters with Anahera at the nav console. As the mission clock passed 0830, all items had been worked through. Carolyn and Jonas made sure that the current prep records had been transmitted to Marjorie on the *Blakey*, eventually to be relayed to Starfleet and OSI.

Carolyn stepped to the center oval to speak to Captain Roberson and Cdr. Jennings. Before meeting Marjorie, she had always felt some small measure of unease in her official connections to those in command. It never became an issue with the routine psych evaluations, and she never brought it up. She told herself it wasn’t a fear of failing at her job one day, but more that she was in awe of the officers who ran missions with a team of a hundred or more crew members. *Well, if Marjorie could master the analytical skills and run her division, maybe I could get used to this*, she wondered.

“Captain. Commander,” Carolyn greeted the officers. “My team and I are heading to the lab. We’ll call up here as necessary.”

Roberson replied, “Sounds good. Less than half a lightyear out from the star, and I know that Anahera and Chief Morelli will make sure you’ve got sensor eyes on the toroid.”

Jennings added, “Thanks, Carolyn.” Carolyn nodded, grasped Roxie a bit tighter, and joined Deirdre, Jonas, and Azumi at the turbo. The others would head down shortly.

Down in the lab, the team quickly resumed monitoring the toroid and subspace, and updated comm connections with the group and keep-out ships. On top of that, they absorbed more of the available data on the Aldefet system as they approached. A few at a time, as their tasks allowed, they watched a short narrated AI recording covering the system. Reading screens full of astrophysical data was certainly one way to understand the material, but as most humanoid species had known for centuries, hearing the audio story of the star and its eleven planets reached a different part of the brain and reinforced the learning process. Long ago, Starfleet Medical stressed this for all crews, including OSI, whenever possible. Jonas, who understood both graphs and sounds, could certainly identify with the protocol.

"Aldefet itself seems to be pretty quiet right now for a variable star," he remarked. "That sort of stellar noise I can filter out. As long as we don't get close to any big CMEs," he added.

Deirdre looked over the screen, gave a bit of a laugh and replied, "Not a problem. We could take a quick dip into the photosphere and you'd still hear the toroid."

Roberto called in from next door. "Not the best thing to do to our nacelles, but yeah," he noted. At her console, Carolyn again scrolled through the tables and scaled the maps up and down to see all of the moving pieces of the situation. She noted that the *de Baissac* was approaching Aldefet at Warp 8.8, affording the coils a bit of relief from the more stressful power levels. That lower speed was also part of the plan to not reach the outskirts of the system until shortly after the toroid either stopped or passed by, in order to safely assess things. With the map widened out to half a lightyear, Aldefet was the bright apex of a shallow triangle, with the group ships at the base point to port and the toroid at the starboard point. Sometimes Carolyn had to take a moment to reset her sense of distance when studying the galaxy, particularly when ship and shuttle performance was involved, but she could keep up with the numbers. While Starfleet and the Federation embraced the native measurement systems of many worlds, most daily operations relied on multiples of kilometers, lightyears, and even the Earth-centric AU. Thankfully the computers knew all of the conversions.

A little before 0900, as readouts continued updating, a low warbling tone caught their attention, especially Deirdre and Jonas, who each leaned in toward their screens. Carolyn stood behind them as they tapped controls. As Deirdre stared, she said, "Okay, the background ripples are brightening on the map and the energy is going up on the graphs." She paused, shook her head slowly, and continued, "But the levels are rising at a crawl. Nowhere near as fast as the 5L prediction." She tapped her comm badge and called out, "Sonja, are you seeing this? I don't know what it is but we should probably get ready for the burst maneuvers soon."

From up on the bridge, Sonja replied, "It's fading a bit, but we see it. Captain will go group-wide in a second. We'll watch for the impulse and bow-on threshold."

Jonas kept watching his screen quietly and listening, adjusting the audio controls. He then reported, "Even this close we still don't have great processing of the toroid emissions, but I think I'm hearing at least twelve localized squeals that just popped up." Carolyn looked as he pointed at the violet shape dotted with brighter blue points. She also noted the display screen images of the others in the lab next door, just as focused on the new readings.

A comm alert chime sounded, announcing the group-wide message. "This is Captain Roberson on the *de Baissac*. We may experience the next gravimetric disturbance at any time now. It may not be as powerful as the previous event, however, we are now much closer to the toroid and are recording changes in its energy output. All personnel on all vessels are urged to secure equipment and supplies in preparation for maneuvers. *de Baissac* out."

The team continued to process incoming sensor readings and distributed updates to the group. Carolyn got up, grabbed her coffee container and breakfast remains, and motioned toward Deirdre's similar items. "Get those for you?" she asked.

Deirdre briefly glanced up from tapping controls and replied, "Oh. Sure, thanks." Carolyn added one more cup and plate to her handful and deposited them back into the replicator. Jonas, listening intently to the signals, had already converted his own cup and plate back into their component molecules. As Carolyn returned to her console, Deirdre reminded her, "And don't forget to grab-lock Roxie."

"Right. Usually do," Carolyn responded, affixing her PADD to the console with the tap on the screen. She returned to watching the images coming in from the other lab as well as a large overall view of the bridge, reasonably confident that everyone was prepared for 5L and the approach to Aldefet. And then she called over to the *Blakey* to give Marjorie a quick status report.

She tapped her comm badge. “Hagey to Capello. We’re prepped and standing by for 5L, running at Warp 8.7 and just inside 0.26 lightyears from Aldefet,” she said. A few seconds went by, and Marjorie appeared on screen.

“Good to hear, Carolyn. We are as well. We’re not much farther out than you, but we’ll be watching sensor data from all sources —” She stopped abruptly, looking around as rumbles from the toroid began ramping up. “Hopefully this will be done shortly. Will get back to you,” Marjorie said.

Carolyn, also feeling the vibrations building, answered, “Yes. Connect soon.” Marjorie’s image winked off as Lt. Foster called out from the bridge.

“We’re going sublight and bow-on to the toroid...now. Range is 0.44 lightyears. Report issues as necessary,” he said. The team watched and listened as the *de Baissac* dropped out of warp, and in quick succession yawed starboard to line up with the toroid, automatically activated the main deflector, and balanced the shields and SIF/IDF generator output. They assumed that the other ships were doing the same. Including the Romulans, with their own systems.

Jonas flipped through subspace filters as the vibrations flowed around the ship, particularly studying the bright blue points still scattered around the violet ring on the screen. They flickered every few seconds in time with the audio scratches and pops, but nothing like the bright spears from the 4H burst. “Will let you know if I have something after this one is done,” he said.

Deirdre seemed to be tapping her fingers on the console in time with the pops while she checked the energy curves. She said, “Looks like 5L is peaking. We should be on the downside in a few minutes.” She checked more numbers and reported, “And it looks like the toroid might be slowing to 0.12 lightyears per hour.” Carolyn watched the graphs and maps on her screens, as well as the images of the starboard lab team members, the bridge crew, and Main Engineering. Everyone was monitoring their own screens, hands hovering at the ready over the controls. She noticed only briefly that 5L was encountered starting at 0920, but unlike the original bursts this one was backtimed to barely 69 seconds earlier because they were now almost on top of the anomaly.

Deirdre watched as the energy level continued to drop and could only say, “Maybe one more minu —” before the familiar rumbles suddenly jumped into a rapid pounding that slammed through the ship and continued to build in intensity. Over just a few seconds, the red alert emergency klaxon blared, and the *de Baissac* defensive systems went automatic.

On the bridge, Chief Morelli yelled out “Shields and main deflector going to 120 percent!”

Carolyn’s eyes went wide as she grasped the arms of her seat and looked over at Deirdre and Jonas. The banging rose in pitch to a staccato clatter and whine that was hard to talk over, but Carolyn managed to shout a very obvious, “What the hell is *this*?” while she and her teammates, and presumably every crew nearby, took in every bit of data building on their screens and prepared to escape the vicinity if necessary.

Deirdre shouted back, “Don’t know yet, but it’s stronger than our worst holo sim!” Carolyn glanced down for a second as IDF emitter strips in the floor lit up with shaped fields, dampening some of the interior vibrations and pulling her into her seat, but still allowing her to breathe.

The computer gave a sharp tone and announced, “Warning. Antimatter containment critical. Failure possible in two minutes.” Captain Roberson called out to the group and said, “This is the *de Baissac*. We are preparing to yaw 180 and ride the wave out at high warp. Execute maneuver at your discretion or watch for our signal.” Amid the shaking, he switched comms and told his crew, “If it keeps up like this, I’m giving us thirty seconds and then we’re bolting. Anahera, get ready to hit it.

The navigator held the console firmly and answered, “Aye, sir. System is set to go.”

Roberson turned to the science console and quickly asked, “Sonja, you and O’Connor have anything?” As science officer, Sonja responded after Deirdre flashed her a thumbs-up on her screen about the incoming data.

She said, “Captain, we’ve reached 9H on the scale! Looks like go time.” Roberson nodded and was about to tell Anahera to do the jump when a single thunderclap echoed across the ship.

And in the next instant, the shaking completely stopped.

Everyone froze at the relative silence, looking all around at each other, looking at screens, trying to make sense of what just happened. As the ship environment began to sound strangely normal to their ears again, Roberson raised his hand and ordered, "Anahera, wait on the jump."

Anahera nodded, moved her hands away from the controls, and simply said, "Aye, Captain."

Roberson waited a moment, taking in what he could see on the bridge, and said, "Drop to yellow alert." He then turned to Morelli and asked, "How are we looking, Chief?"

Morelli checked the main items on his console and replied, "Shields back to cruise level and main deflector on counter field standby. Antimatter containment is 100 percent. Impulse and warp both nominal." Morelli regarded the numbers for a few more seconds, hoping nothing would change, and added, "A lot of subsystems are finishing resets, but we're still good to jump if we have to."

Roberson said, "Good. This damned anomaly is full of surprises, isn't it." Status reports continued streaming back and forth within the group, and from the rows of green indicators they all appeared to have recovered from the subspace pounding. No other ship had turned and bolted. Roberson called out to the *Blakey*, "Roberson to Capello. Everything okay over there? Your board probably shows that we survived the latest toroid behavior and remain prepared to warp to a safe distance."

Down in the lab, Carolyn watched as her team was completely engaged in assessing the event, as were the bridge officers and the crew down in Main Engineering. Marjorie appeared on the display and replied, "We're all right, Sean. That was quite a punch. Let's sit tight and keep bow-on for a little bit while the sensor data is run through." To Carolyn she looked surprisingly confident, and if she was at all rattled by what they had experienced, she didn't show it. Marjorie continued, "I'm going to get some comms off to the admirals, and we should try to do a quick group meet-up at 0950."

Roberson responded, "Acknowledged. We'll compare notes then." He winked off. Marjorie narrowed her comms to the *de Baissac* labs and asked, "Carolyn, how are you doing?"

Carolyn rubbed her forehead and replied, "We're pushing along on the data. You can see everyone's glued to the readouts and we should have something for 0950."

Marjorie asked again, "I mean you. How are you doing?"

Carolyn then understood and said, "I'm okay. I will be okay. Just a little bothered about not being able to see things coming. But then that's why we're out here." Marjorie nodded and replied with a grin, "Yeah, that's pretty obvious. We'll get back into it shortly."

Deirdre jumped in with a quick comment just before Marjorie winked off. "More soon, but that last bang says the toroid's still putting on the brakes. Near 0.1 lightyears per hour, like Warp 7.6. It's definitely headed for Aldefet."

Marjorie responded, "Very good. Back in a bit." Her image closed. Carolyn looked about the lab and the display feeds from the other locations, noting things happening around her on Roxie. The IDF fields had turned off. Yellow alert stopped. The bridge personnel were keeping watch over the ship. Her team kept at their displays during the very welcome quiet, each concentrating on their speciality and also absorbing related information. Their OSI training strongly recommended linking times and types and quantities where possible.

Deirdre and Sonja traded ideas about the energy data being compiled, gesturing at tables and graphs building by the minute. Jonas listened intently to numerous audio streams, tapping specific times, and running sequences with his filters at various speeds, all while watching visual readouts. Roberto and Nora conferred with Chief Morelli about the health of the propulsion and defensive systems on the *de Baissac* and the other ships, satisfied for the moment that there were no critical repair issues. Jeremy and Azumi worked with the shuttlebay and engineering teams to confirm that the *Barnard* was secure.

Marjorie came back on the lab display promptly at 0950 from the *Blakey*, along with the *de Baissac* bridge officers. The first officers of the other group ships listened in. She asked, "Carolyn, what have you got?"

Carolyn glanced at Roxie for a moment and said, "Everything's happening pretty fast, but Deirdre can give you the summary." Deirdre tapped a few controls and displayed a few graphs.

"The numbers keep changing, and the computer cores are learning more about the energy levels" she said. "Since the 9H burst, subspace is barely rumbling, more like a faint hum. It's slowed to 0.095 lightyears per hour, around Warp 7.45, and the trajectory still looks like it stops in the Aldefet system around 1300. Hopefully it doesn't actually impact the star itself. Right now I have no solid idea what the

toroid could do to it or the planets in the system. Maybe strip off a lot of a planet's atmosphere? Disrupt the star's magnetic field and circulation? All ships are receiving the full data updates, so stay close to your science officers." She paused, and added, "I'm going to tell the computer to announce things based on severity. Might give us a little extra time."

Carolyn then gestured over to Jonas, who had emerged from his studies and reported, "Still analyzing the last emissions. Again, no real intelligible signals that the computers can see, even if it feels like stimuli and responses, so forget the Universal Translator for now. At the peak of the bang, instead of a dozen distinct sources of clicks and whines, the sensors saw at least a thousand. Right now, it's down to five or six murmurs. It's easier to keep track of the Warbirds." He checked his console and added, "You can see that maybe two of the Warbird micro-singularities got a bit shaken up, but all of our tactical and comm crews agree, overall the Romulans seem to have made it through as well. The comms that we could decrypt indicate ongoing caution, like us, but they're still approaching."

Marjorie nodded and checked her screens. "Okay. All other departments still show ready. Carolyn, ideas on the next step?" she asked.

Carolyn looked at the maps on the big lab display, then back to Marjorie, and replied, "I would suggest 9H gets labeled Point B on our flight path, and let's call 0.1 lightyears out Point C. Captain, how are we looking for another leg inbound?" Roberson responded, "Every vessel status report says we're in good shape here. We all got bounced around hard. It's quiet now, but we will proceed very carefully."

Marjorie studied the maps again for a moment and said, "All right, Captain, let's make that our next leg." Roberson nodded at Anahera, who manipulated the velocity scales and suggested, "I can get us there by 1140 and maintain a safe distance as the toroid moves in." Roberson replied, "That works. Gives us some margins." Marjorie commented, "Agreed. And maybe a couple of hours to catch our breath. Carolyn, good plan. We'll talk as needed." Carolyn looked up from Roxie and answered, "We will."

As Marjorie's channel winked off, Roberson told Anahera, "Take us to warp."

As Carolyn had noted, events were now happening quickly. Fortunately, between those times where she felt like the universe was grabbing her by the shoulders and shaking her, there were welcome periods when she – and everyone else on the mission – could slow down, recharge mentally and physically, and make sure they understood the situation. To Carolyn, that meant sitting quietly for a few minutes, breathing slowly and methodically, and running through the next steps in her mind and on Roxie. Discussions with her teammates, touching base with the bridge crew, listening for alerts, and visiting Sickbay for a detailed scan were priorities. She paused tapping notes, thinking once more how grateful she was for Marjorie's presence, even by comms from another vessel. A few moments later she noticed that Deirdre and Jonas were standing next to her, and Carolyn's confidence in her team, and maybe herself, rose a notch.

"Up for a real breakfast?" Deirdre asked with a grin.

Carolyn stifled a small yawn that caught her by surprise and replied, "Feels like lunch, but yeah. More coffee, please."

Deirdre tapped her badge and called out, "Starboard clan, you all coming?"

Roberto answered, "On the way. Just done comparing notes with Chief Morelli." The team headed to the mess hall, knowing fully that they could continue to monitor the situation. With consoles and portable devices spread all over the ship, they wouldn't really be stepping away from their jobs, so they took advantage of the relative quiet in subspace to share a meal once more. Carolyn decided on another of her favorites, turkey on a crusty bun with tomato, mozzarella, and pesto. Vietnamese coffee was her drink choice, which she hoped would perk her up more than a little. While they spoke their orders into the replicators, they mingled with a few more of the *de Baissac* crew that they had briefly met before, including one of Dr. Levette's med techs, Ens. Phillip Garner, and deflector engineer Lt. Sen'ret Jhel.

As they occupied a few tables, Carolyn remarked, "Lieutenant, you and Chief Morelli get a big vote of thanks from me for standing up to 9H like that. Roberto told me about the last-minute changes you made to pulsing the main emitter."

Sen'ret, who was from Doateri, replied, "Thank you. I am *very* relieved that the entire group could apply those so quickly. Hopefully we won't see anything worse, but I'm reasonably sure we can keep everyone safe." He turned to Deirdre and added, "And your burst wave breakdown was a work of art."

Deirdre nodded and smiled, and replied, "Thanks. Jonas kicked in the analysis of the clicks and bangs."

Jonas finished a bite and responded with a chuckle, "Yes. Yes, I did. But I can't help wondering if the toroid thinks the counter booms were just us shouting at them to stop it."

There were nods and positive comments all around. Jeremy said, "Nora and I are grabbing those isolinear files for the *Barnard*."

Nora replied, "Already loaded. And we've got the shuttle set for realtime updates. Might try it out in the Sandbox. Azumi?"

Azumi glanced at her PADD for the current conditions and answered, "I'm up for it." She turned to Carolyn and asked, "Do we have time before Point C?"

Carolyn also glanced at Roxie and read off the time and distances. She said, "Okay, coming up on 1025. We're like 0.23 lightyears from Aldefet at Warp 7.3, and we've got a bit more than an hour. Let's finish up and sure, go for it." She then tuned to Ens. Garner and reassured him, "And I promise we will all stop by Sickbay to get real scans."

Garner responded, "The walk-around readings are surprisingly good for everyone on the ship so far, but I know Dr. Levette would like to take some quick detailed looks."

Carolyn said, "We'll see you there."

The team finished up, very happy that no alerts had cut their meal short, and the starboard lab members headed off to the holodeck. Carolyn, Deirdre, and Jonas briefly stopped by the bridge before returning to the center lab. Jonas talked comm updates with Lt. Foster, Deirdre and Sonja discussed the 9H burst readings, and Carolyn checked in with Anahera at Navigation. "We're a little over halfway," Anahera said, "and things seem to be stable. At least with the flight paths. Basically, we and the toroid are still converging on Aldefet." Carolyn gazed at the main display as the numbers continued to change. At 1050, while the toroid was 0.08 lightyears from Aldefet and still slowing at Warp 6.2, the *de Baissac* was 0.17 lightyears from the star and 0.24 lightyears from the toroid. The triangle they formed was getting much smaller. Anahera added, "You and Marjorie give me a spot and I'll plot the course."

Carolyn replied, "Or zip us away if necessary. I appreciate both options. We'll keep watching from the lab, and see about nailing a safe Point D on the map." She thought for a moment and added, "Oh, and it may be premature, but I think I need a refresher lesson in the planetary data. I can talk to the computer for a start, but maybe later with you and Sonja?" Anahera tried to sound upbeat.

"The latest astrophysics files are like thirty years old, but we can bring you up to speed pretty easily. We'll work something out," she said.

Carolyn replied, "Thanks," and turned to join her teammates.

After nodding to Captain Roberson and some of the other officers, Carolyn, Deirdre, and Jonas settled back into the lab. Carolyn checked to see if Marjorie was available for a brief comm, but Roxie showed that she was taking a short assist field nap. There would be time when the group dropped to impulse. While the starboard lab "clan" conducted a few short sims maneuvering the *Barnard* through various situations closer in to Aldefet, Carolyn watched the maps and data on the group ships and the toroid as they approached Point C.

Deirdre occasionally called out times, speeds, and distances. At 1110 she noted, "Okay, toroid to Aldefet is 0.07 lightyears, *de Baissac* to toroid is 0.2 lightyears, *de Baissac* to Aldefet is 0.14 lightyears, toroid's slowing through Warp 5.8." All of the shrinking values truly reinforced how close they were getting, but that didn't stop her from adding, "Back in a few. I'm stopping by Sickbay for the scan and then you two can do yours. Timing looks okay."

"I'll go when you get back. Jonas seems to be really listening to something," Carolyn said. Deirdre waved and strode out to the corridor. Jonas tapped a few controls and looked up.

"When am I not listening to this weirdness?" he commented. "Actually, the murmurs and clicks are still low and the Warbirds aren't saying anything provocative. I'll go after you."

"Sounds good," Carolyn replied, turning again to the displays and Roxie. The maps continued to update and the system would chime if anything major occurred. She skimmed the Aldefet data once more in preparation for talking with Anahera, focusing as best she could on the planetary numbers without

knowing where or even if they might eventually steer closer. They trained for many different scenarios, but the toroid was still the element driving their moves.

Deirdre soon returned, Carolyn and Jonas took their turns getting scanned, and by 1130 the sims with the *Barnard* were completed. Roberto, Nora, Azumi, and Jeremy all stopped by Sickbay and were cleared within a few minutes. Neither the 9H pounding nor the holodeck shuttle maneuvers at various SIF/IDF levels had caused any lasting problems.

Carolyn connected with Marjorie just before 1140, when the group went to impulse. The drop out of warp at Point C was uneventful, and their velocity toward Aldefet was a very slow 23 kilometers per second, essentially drifting a tenth of a lightyear out. The full team gathered in the center lab for the comm, where they continued to monitor tracking and what the computers made of the data. Deirdre and Jonas were each doing just that, manipulating tables and graphs, as all shared information streamed between all of the group ships on their encrypted subspace channels.

"Nice to quietly regroup after what happened just a few hours ago," Marjorie noted. "Anahera certainly got us all where she said she would, and now we need to think about the next step in. Carolyn?"

"We're all still watching the toroid, of course, and continuing to move in cautiously. Slower than the toroid. Essentially, we're hanging back from Aldefet to see what it will do," Carolyn said. She nodded to Deirdre, who gave the familiar quick recap.

"You can see that since 0950, the toroid's slowed from around Warp 8 down to Warp 1.9, and closed the distance to Aldefet from 0.21 to 0.02 lightyears. When and where it might go sublight, and what that could even look like, is still uncertain. Predictions with this thing haven't exactly been great so far. Maybe around 1400 and..." She checked her display and shrugged slightly. "...50 AU out from the star?"

"We're going to slide into talking mostly AU pretty soon," Carolyn added. "I'm thinking that our next step could be a Point D at 0.005 lightyears. About 316 AU, and we could get there by 1230 or so," she offered, her finger dancing in the air between the points of the shrinking triangle.

"More like 1245," announced Anahera, who had entered the lab to join them. She stood next to Carolyn and gave her a smile, saying, "Just taking a little shift break." She looked up at Marjorie on the display and continued, "Still gives us a good escape margin. Anyhow, the engineering chiefs will appreciate the cool-down time."

"That sounds very doable," Marjorie replied, looking at her own displays. "Keep the current formation, and keep the reports flowing. All departments are looking good. What else?"

"We're still working sigint and looking at the holo sim results," Carolyn said, "but it's all steady for now, and we'll catch up after we get moving."

"Good. The group will await nav instructions and timing," Marjorie replied, and her image winked off. As Anahera turned, heading for the corridor and ultimately the bridge, she called back to the team.

"I'll get us heading for Point D and then come back down to go over the Aldefet data," she said.

A few minutes later, Anahera had programmed the nav system and Captain Roberson gave her the go to proceed. The *de Baissac* and the group smoothly jumped back up to Warp 7.4 for the fifty minutes it would take to reach the new monitoring point, where they would drop back to impulse and update their tracking. Lt. Riley Maxwell, one of Anahera's deputies, then took over on console as she returned to the lab. As she walked in, she saw that Carolyn had the Aldefet system data and orbital map on the main display. "Okay, you've heard the little lecture on this neighborhood, so what can I do for you?" she inquired.

"I think I'm caught up on the system general specs," Carolyn said, "so I really won't keep you. I thought I'd have more questions, but it can wait." Carolyn rotated the map a few different ways, eyeing things like the planet orbital distances, where the planets were currently, and the approach vectors for the group and the toroid. She sighed and added, "A lot to take in, but it's an interesting collection, that's for sure."

"Like Sol system but bigger, with a brighter star," Anahera commented. "The closest rocky body is about a third of an AU out, then a few larger rocky worlds, a few gas giants, and the furthest iceball is 61 AU, so we're naturally seeing a wide range of temperatures and radiation environments. Baking and melting close in, and freezing on the outskirts. You can see we're still coming up from below the general

plane and the toroid is slightly above. We've got good clean tracking, so we'll pretty much avoid any large asteroidal or cometary bits in or out of the plane as we move in. If you come up with piloting questions and I'm not available, just ask Jeremy."

"Of course," Carolyn said, agreeing with that obvious option. She then gestured toward the map and said, "I assume it's premature to ask where in three-space you think the toroid will end up." Anahera shrugged.

"Right. At the moment the energy data is pointing generally to somewhere ahead of us," she said, looking over at Deirdre, who nodded in agreement. "We're getting so close, but still, it's too early to calculate exactly where it's going," Anahera added.

"Or why it's stopping. No idea if the toroid actually needs anything here," Deirdre said, wandering into Carolyn's domain.

"Yeah. I know we're in a much better place than the *Segouin* and the *Germain* were. The group has our backs, and we'll just have to see where this takes us," Carolyn replied.

"Like I said, I'll loop us out if I need to," Anahera said with a grin, and headed back to the bridge.

Deirdre and Jonas returned to monitoring the displays and made noises about getting lunch, Roberto and Nora split off to talk briefly with Chief Morelli and Lt. Barrera about some flight and defensive items. Jeremy and Azumi decided to stay in the center lab with their teammates, especially if lunch was happening. Jeremy turned to Carolyn and said, "I appreciate Anahera's confidence, and I understand the territory we're getting into, but we've seen her in the Sandbox. She's fast. And she makes smart moves."

"I know. But I like your flying, too," Carolyn said with a smile, looking up at the main display for a few seconds before turning her attention to some nourishment. The team took turns replicating their meals and drinks and sat around the big lab table. Though the situation was stable warping to Point D, Jonas and Carolyn drifted between the table and their work consoles. Amid bites of food and peeks at the data, they heard the computer sound a chime and make an announcement in a surprisingly low-key tone.

"A subspace event has occurred. Repeat, a subspace event has occurred. Backtime is 12.6 seconds. Check all sensor readings," it said. The team, and presumably everyone in the group on a similar break, was ready to safely ditch their food items and brace for another pounding. They all stared at the map, where a small orange circle pulsed over the toroid's location. Numbers began flowing on the map and the individual consoles. Jeremy and Azumi tapped notes into their PADDs. Jonas listened for signals, but looked up momentarily and told the team, "Nice to see the computer remembered to warn us." Deirdre manipulated a series of graphs, noting a short energy spike that was a very small fraction of what they had experienced previously.

"O'Connor to Waimarie and group, watch your long range sensors. Something's coming...but I can't see..." she called up to the bridge, and in the absence of a clear image continued reading off the numbers. "Time is 1156, distance from *de Baissac* 5,056 AU. Toroid distance to Aldefet, 120 AU. It's still moving around Warp 2 and slowing, in a shallower subspace layer."

"Deirdre, do we need to stop and go bow-on to watch this?" Anahera called back to the lab. Carolyn, pushing back against growing unease, looked at the readings, still ready for a rumbling burst.

"Don't...think so," Deirdre answered slowly, still studying the maps and graphs. "We seem to be good for right now. I'll know more in a minute. System's building something from all the passive scans."

"Copy that," Anahera replied. The comm activity lists were lighting up with the interactions of every department, not unexpected, but thankfully the system hadn't tripped a red alert.

Very soon the long range sensors, particular those coupled to the main dish, returned enough subspace dimensional points for the computers to try and correct for motion smear. They created a virtual model of something that was small, irregular, and showing as solid. Deirdre read off more numbers as the system sent the information out to the group.

"Major uncertainty in the waves but maybe it's five by four by three meters, plus or minus two meters in each axis. And it reads as very high density matter if we can trust the sensors. Like 1,400 grams per cubic centimeter," she reported.

"Wait. *This* is the thing we've been tracking?" Carolyn asked, trying hard to process what she was seeing. "This is the toroid?"

"No, this is something new," Deirdre responded, working the map display and watching the energy data scrolling. "Well, I'm pretty sure it's new." She continued adjusting various settings while incorporating inputs from the group ships. "We're still too far out for a clean reconstruction," she added, "but I'm seeing this object and the toroid as two separate items on similar trajectories."

"The nav system is following them both," Anahera called in. "And we're still on track to hit Point D at 1245," she said.

"Understood. As long as it's not an imminent threat, let's keep going," Carolyn replied, studying the timeline, the map, and the flight data for the new object. And all of the other moving parts of the mission. She looked over at Jonas, who was listening more intently than before, and asked, "Any new clicks and whistles?"

"Should have something soon. More filtering," he said, tapping different panel controls. Carolyn called up a low volume feed of what Jonas was working on, experienced the familiar mix of tones and warbles and bangs that she had heard from the beginning, and left it to him to try to make sense of it all. She closed off the channel and called out to Marjorie.

"Hagey to Capello. I'm sure you're seeing the newcomer," she said. Marjorie winked on to the lab display from the bridge of the *Blakey*.

"We certainly are. They seem to be sticking to the general vector toward Aldefet. No deviations that you can see?" she asked.

"Nothing yet," Deirdre replied. "This little solid nugget and the toroid are on parallel paths, they're both still slowing, though the nugget is pulling ahead slightly." She paused to check the data. "I'm not seeing any big fluctuations in subspace emissions like the ones that preceded the heavy bursts, but we know that none of this has been easy to predict," she added.

"True enough," Marjorie said. "We still have a healthy breakaway margin, so I'm going to run a couple of sims in *Blakey's* Sandbox to study our status. Jonas, are the toroid or this 'nugget' making new signals?"

"Maybe now a dozen of those low murmurs from earlier plus some clicking. Can't tell if only one or both are sources. Working on that," Jonas responded. "Also not hearing much from the Warbirds but they have definitely crept in about a lightyear from us on the other side of the star." The team didn't have anything else to report.

"Okay. We'll connect up at Point D." Marjorie said.

"Point D it is," Carolyn agreed. Marjorie then winked off.

Carolyn made some additional notes on Roxie and worked with the console display, and when she finally looked up, Jonas and Deirdre were sitting at the main table to finish their interrupted lunch. Jeremy and Azumi were already done recycling their dishes and cups. She joined them, prying her concentration away from Roxie and the displays for a short time and almost forgetting that the iced coffee and chicken curry udon were hers. From what they had been through so far, she trusted the crew and onboard systems to keep her safe at least while she ate. And traversing another 1,500 AU in the process, she thought, allowing the numbers to bubble up just a little.

Jonas finished up and returned to listening and watching little ticks on the subspace energy graphs while Jeremy and Azumi headed off to the starboard lab, where Roberto and Nora had already returned to their consoles. Carolyn and Deirdre cleared the table and sat for a few moments. Carolyn let out a long breath and stretched her neck.

"Mmm, for a chance to grab a quick nap," she said, totally aware that wasn't going to happen.

"With the assist field off-scale high for fifteen minutes?" Deirdre snickered. "Better to grab another mug of coffee," she added. Carolyn grinned. The pair returned to their console spots and watched the map. The toroid was once again a violet ring and the "nugget" became an orange dot. Distance and velocity numbers attached to them continued to diminish as the group approached Aldefet.

Something in the sound spectrum and in the graphs then made Jonas flinch slightly. He wiped a few control sliders to new positions and listened very closely. Deirdre noticed the graph ticks as well and adjusted her own screens. The SIF/IDF systems began to tamp down high frequency vibrations passing through the ship, but for the moment nothing like during the bursts. As the sound quickly rose, Jonas called up to the bridge.

“Thorne to Foster. This noise we’re getting is going to play havoc with external comms. Be ready for options.”

“Understood,” Foster replied. As Carolyn braced for a burst event, even Deirdre was surprised by certain energy curves showing more than others, and not in the ways she thought she understood.

“Oh, hell. Subspace is crackling!” she exclaimed to her teammates in both labs. She looked at Carolyn and said, “We need to stop.” The sound came across like entire forests of trees snapping and burning. As more data streamed into the labs, Carolyn nodded in agreement.

“Oh yeah. We’re stopping,” she said. Regardless of the potential comms interference, she still called out, at practically the same time as the system triggered a yellow alert. “Hagey to Waimarie and group. Recommend we go to impulse and bow-on for this one.” A few long seconds passed and Anahera called down.

“Okay, Captain agrees and going to impulse in three...two...one...” she said, and the drop from Warp 7.4 went surprisingly smoothly. Even if some of the group ships didn’t get the subspace radio call, they noticed the slowdown and dropped to impulse. Carolyn called back up.

“Thanks. The system’s grinding through the sensor inputs, and you’ll know if we need to bolt,” she said. She then turned to Deirdre, who was looking a little stressed as her eyes darted from one screen to another. Carolyn asked, “All right, it’s my turn. Are you okay?”

“I’m good. I just need time to look at the thing that’s exiting subspace,” Deirdre responded, pointing at the screen. “*That’s* the toroid.”

On her console screen the computers were modeling millions of points into what was happening some 1,200 AU away. Layers of subspace fields were expanding from the center of the toroid and fading, revealing an object as solid and dense as the nugget, with similar proportions.

But much, much bigger.

“The system thinks it’s over 80 kilometers long,” Deirdre reported as she watched the energy levels drop, though the object was still traveling at warp. Small kicks on the graphs seemed to correlate to one end of the object. She called up to the bridge.

“Sonja, keep an eye on this. I know it’s smaller than our earlier guesses, but it’s still reading like it’s packing a lot more power,” she said.

“On it,” Sonja answered.

At the same time, Jonas pointed at his own screen and reported, “Those little energy peaks are matching up to some clicks and tones from the toroid, and I’m actually isolating similar clicks from the nugget. And I guess we’re not calling the big one the toroid anymore.” Carolyn then saw that group comms were quickly coming back and was not surprised that Marjorie was calling in.

“Capello to Hagey and group,” she said, “Carolyn, we’re watching from here, and I’m not going to assume that this radically changes the mission unless I hear it from you.”

“Not yet. I still think we can make it to Point D for at least a short pause to gather more data,” Carolyn responded. “Give us a minute to put together what we just saw and we’ll go from there.” Marjorie stood by as the team looked for answers in their own specialties as well as crossover factors that might help them understand the speeding anomalies. Yellow alert ceased, and the space around the group quieted down. Deirdre soon stopped tapping controls, gathered her thoughts, and offered her short official assessment.

“At 1233, the anomaly we called the toroid exited deep subspace and is now showing as solid matter traveling at Warp 1.69 and decelerating,” she began. “It and the other object we’re calling the nugget for now continue to head toward Aldefet, about 66 AU to go. The densities of the objects are nowhere near compressed stellar levels, but are greater than all natural or synthesized elements. They’ve expended a lot of energy getting to this point, and we assume they’re storing a lot more.” She paused, checked her screen, and added, “Some of the propulsive flares from earlier are showing up again but in a different spectral range. Took me a minute to see that, but the system understands what to look for now.”

“Subspace shallows,” Jonas remarked. “The signals I’m seeing got shifted too, but they’re coming through. Still don’t have a clue if the two objects are communicating, but a lot of the clicks and whistles do match up with their actions.” He checked his own screen and said, “And the Warbirds seem as puzzled by the subspace event as we are, but no alarms yet.” As Carolyn made notes on Roxie, Marjorie ended the impromptu session.

“This was unexpected, like most of what we’ve seen. I don’t mean to cut the comm short, but let’s head to Point D and work out the next segment,” she said. “The next couple of hours may get even more complicated for all of us, so compile the new data and let’s talk at 1300. Or sooner if necessary.”

“Acknowledged,” Carolyn answered. “We’ll get everyone—” She was suddenly interrupted by tones from the computer. Everyone studied their screens and then the map display. Anahera soon called down from the bridge.

“Sorry, but this might have an effect on sooner,” she said. “Looks like the toroid body is changing course...it’s veering three degrees away from its trajectory, away from the star.” New lines, curves, and numbers appeared on the map, describing updated vectors. Changing coordinates and velocity values followed the objects. Anahera tapped some controls on her nav console. “Four degrees...five degrees...continued slowing. Okay, looks like it will go sublight and into drift near the orbit of Aldefet VI.” She paused and enlarged the map view to center on the orange dot and its path. “The system predicts the nugget will slow to sublight and could make planetfall on Aldefet V.”

“Carolyn, get your team ready to make a trip on the *Barnard*,” Marjorie said.

Stay tuned for the conclusion in Part 4...

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