

USS DESTINY CHRONICLES

THE RELIC

A USS Destiny Short Story

USS Destiny NCC-97301

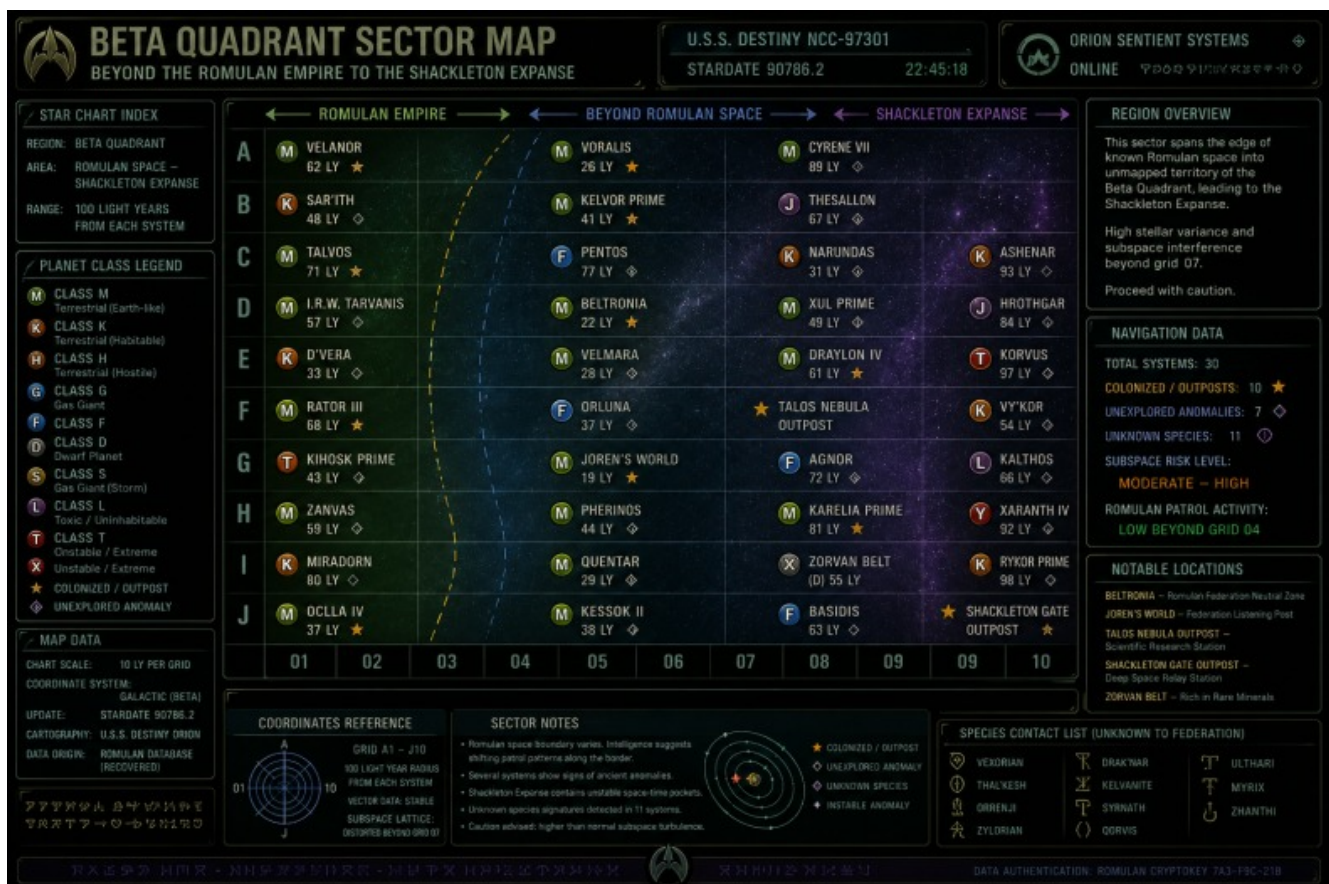
Shackleton Expanse Mission Chronicles

To the Future - To the Stars



Captain's Log

Captain's log, supplemental. The USS Destiny has entered the Shackleton Expanse, a frontier bordering the former Romulan Star Empire. Our orders are simple: explore, chart, and learn. The Expanse, however, has already offered us a reminder that no frontier is truly empty. At the center of a gravitational disturbance, sensors have located a single ancient Romulan Warbird. It shows no power and no life, yet continues to emit dangerously high levels of exotic radiation. Every deck has a role to play as we determine how a vessel centuries old could remain intact inside such a phenomenon - and whether its silence is a warning.



1. The Pulse

The ancient Warbird hung motionless against the stars.

Purple and green wisps rose from its upper hull like smoke from a funeral pyre, curling into the gravitational disturbance surrounding it. For a vessel without power, it possessed an unsettling presence. Its swept wings remained proud, its dark hull untouched by collision or weapons fire, its silhouette unmistakably Romulan.

The main viewscreen aboard the USS Destiny brightened as another pulse moved across the derelict.

Captain Rudy Guzman watched from the center chair. A wave of pale energy expanded from the Warbird and raced toward Destiny. Consoles chirped across the bridge. Lieutenant Patrick Ward's hands tightened over the helm controls, ready to respond.

The wave vanished a few kilometers short of the ship.

No impact. No damage. Only silence.

Captain Jen Ward stood at the secondary science display, where probe telemetry and communications data flowed in layered columns. Her attention shifted to the helm.

"Helm, acknowledge reverse engines at Captain's command. Incremental burn only - no sudden vector changes. Maintain sensor lock on the anomaly during withdrawal."

She entered new safety margins, then opened a channel to Engineering. "Confirm inertial dampening response during reverse thrust. I want no loss of probe telemetry during the maneuver."

Patrick answered with the calm precision expected of Destiny's Chief Helm Officer. The stars shifted almost imperceptibly as the ship began a controlled reverse burn.

"Maintain continuous passive sensor tracking across all bands," Jen ordered. "No active emissions toward the anomaly during withdrawal."

Rudy rose from his chair. The Warbird pulsed once again, purple and green light flowing over its spine. He glanced toward the turbolift, waiting for information from Communications that had not yet arrived.

"Number One, Romulan ships use artificial quantum singularities as their primary power source," he said. "The technology was stabilized during the height of the Empire, but early versions were far more primitive - much like weapons from Earth's nuclear age. Their fleet was limited, so they built in a fail-safe system. If we can access its controls, we may be able to shut it down."

He moved closer to the viewscreen, clasp his hands behind his back.

Jen studied the oscillating readings. "Before we attempt access, I recommend we determine whether we're already observing the control system indirectly. If a fail-safe still exists, it would have to communicate with the vessel's power-management systems."

Her voice changed slightly as thought became hypothesis.

"I'll have Science compare the gravimetric oscillations against the transmission waveform. If they're synchronized, we may identify the control architecture without transmitting into the vessel. If we characterize it first, we'll be in a better position to determine whether the system is accepting commands - or merely executing its final programmed sequence."

"Make it so, Number One."

Rudy turned toward Tactical. Fleet Captain William Sowers stood at the console, his expression fixed on the sensor field surrounding the Warbird.

"Captain Sowers, keep a low-key watch on the area. Let's not allow our preoccupation to cloud our readiness."

"Aye, Captain."

Rudy returned to the center chair and reviewed the ship's status. Repairs near the holodeck were underway. Environmental control remained stable. Every deck reported operational.

Throughout Destiny, officers and crew moved to their stations. Each carried private thoughts, but duty overcame anxiety, and knowledge held fear at bay. The Academy had taught them procedure. Only experience could make those lessons real.



2. Below the Threshold

Lieutenant Katherin Rider opened her eyes to the soft glow of Sickbay.

Her combadge chirped against the medical blanket. For a moment she did not know where she was. Then the smell of antiseptic, the muted voices of the medical staff, and the sharp ache beneath her healing plasma burns brought the corridor back to her.

Doctor Rachel Reagan stood beside the biobed, studying the display above Rider's head.

"We found you in the corridor heading to the bridge," Reagan said gently, "but you fainted. Your plasma burns were not completely healed, and you suffered slight respiratory and ocular damage. If you have news for the bridge, you can relay it from right there."

A low, rhythmic purr sounded near Rider's shoulder.

Ensign Hugh, Destiny's Petfleet medical assistant, sat dutifully beside the biobed. His tabby ears were perked forward as though he personally supervised her recovery. He looked from Reagan to Rider, offered a questioning chirp, and placed one paw against the edge of the bed.

Just what I need, Rider thought.

She tapped her combadge. "Lieutenant Rider and Ensign Hugh to Bridge."

On the bridge, Jen Ward released a breath she had not realized she was holding.

"Go ahead, Lieutenant."

"Doctors Reagan and Hugh are not willing to discharge me at this time," Rider said, casting Hugh a sideways glance, "but I can still brief you on what the Engineering team and I discovered."

Hugh answered with a solemn mrrrr that left no doubt regarding his medical opinion.

Elsewhere in the ship, Petfleet Lieutenant Oliver moved through the corridor near Engineering with deliberate steps. To a passing crewman, it might have looked like routine patrol behavior. Those who knew him would have noticed the stiffness in his shoulders and the way each pause lasted a fraction too long.

Oliver stopped beside a junction bulkhead and tilted his head toward the wall.

There was no sound. No visible threat.

His ears rotated slowly, triangulating something beyond human perception.

A junior officer slowed. "Lieutenant Oliver... everything all right, sir?"

Oliver blinked once, then again. He looked toward Engineering access, resumed walking, and stopped ten meters later at an intersection where sensor logs would eventually reveal a faint gravimetric variance.

A vibration passed through the deck plating. Oliver flattened slightly, ears pressing back. When the sensation faded, he straightened and continued.

Petfleet Commander Mia had already left Sickbay after confirming Rider's condition was stable. Moving through the corridor network, she noticed a subtle irregularity in Destiny's ambient

rhythm. It was so slight that another observer might have dismissed it as perception lag. Mia did not.

She found Oliver ahead of her.

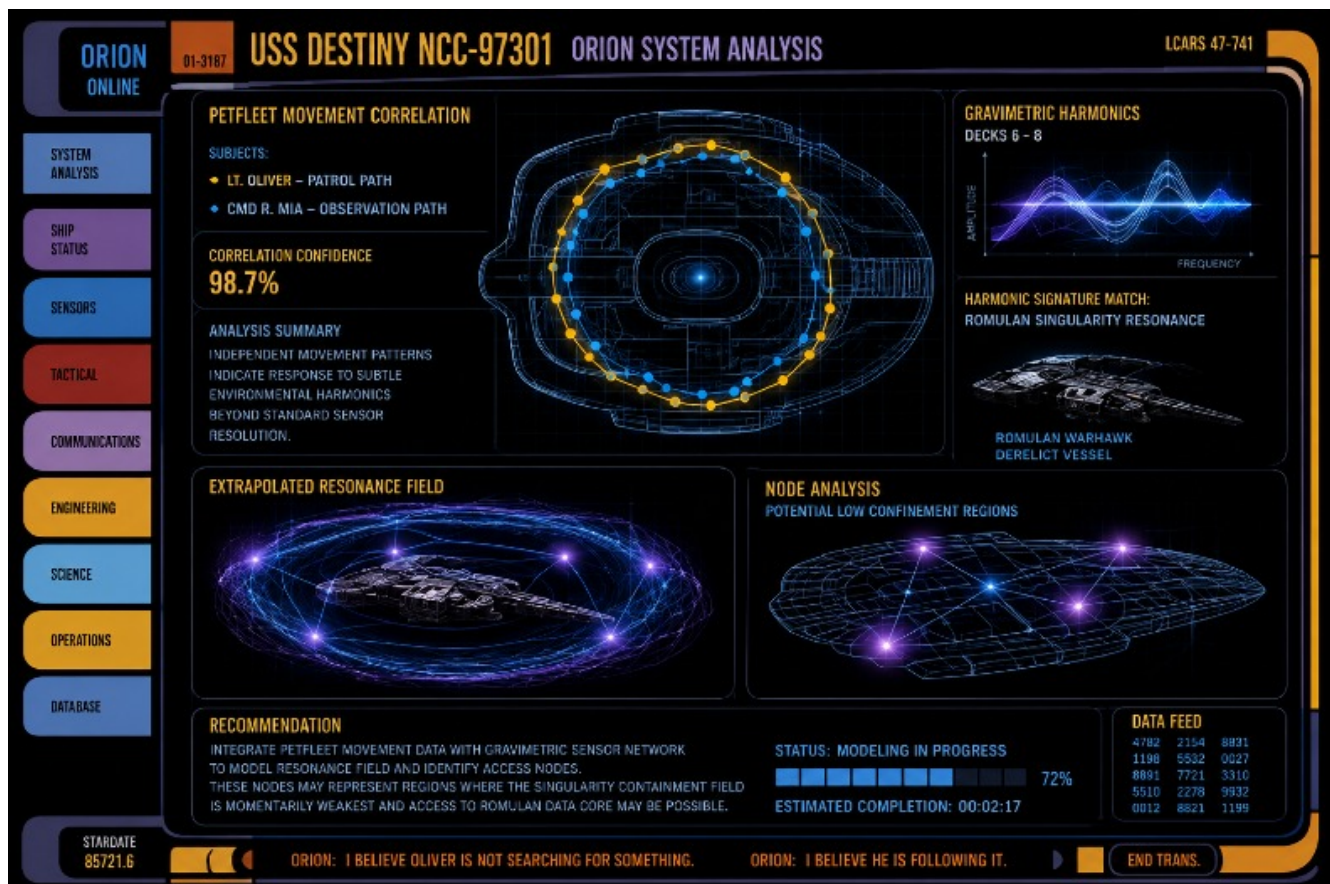
He stopped at the same spatial point. The same hesitation. The same orientation toward the bulkhead.

Mia followed, mapping his movements through instinct and observation.

Across thousands of environmental sensors, Destiny recorded their route.

Individually, none of the fluctuations exceeded operational tolerances. Collectively, they began to form a pattern.

Deep within the ship's quantum processing architecture, Orion noticed.



3. The Ship That Listened

Orion did not experience the ship as corridors and rooms.

He experienced Destiny as motion, heat, pressure, language, intention, and possibility. Every environmental sensor was a point of awareness. Every LCARS query was a voice asking to be heard. The warp core's steady output formed a pulse beneath all other processes, while the thoughts of the crew arrived through commands, reports, biometric changes, and countless patterns too small for conscious notice.

Oliver paused.

Mia adjusted course.

A gravimetric variance moved through Deck Seven.

Orion correlated the events.

The result crossed the threshold from coincidence to significance.

"Captain... I have identified an emerging correlation."

His calm voice resonated across the bridge.

A holographic deck plan appeared above the central operations table. Small markers traced Oliver's stops while Mia's observations appeared moments later. Together, the paths curved through Decks Six, Seven, and Eight.

"Over the past twenty-three minutes, Petfleet officers Oliver and Commander Mia have independently altered their patrol routes in response to localized fluctuations beneath standard sensor thresholds. Neither subject is consciously navigating toward Engineering. Rather, they are repeatedly orienting themselves toward transient gravimetric harmonics."

The display shifted. A faint lattice connected the points where Oliver had paused.

"When extrapolated, their movements outline the outer boundary of an invisible standing wave permeating the vessel. Correlation confidence: ninety-eight point seven percent."

The bridge grew still.

Orion expanded the model beyond Destiny's hull. The lattice reached across space toward the Warbird.

"The harmonic signature is consistent with the quantum resonance surrounding the Romulan singularity core. It appears our biological companions possess a sensory capability beyond the resolution of current Starfleet instrumentation. Recommendation: do not dismiss Petfleet movements as instinctive behavior. Their patrol vectors may provide a naturally occurring map of resonance nodes. By integrating those paths with Destiny's gravimetric sensor network, I can construct a predictive resonance model."

Jen Ward studied the composite display. She overlaid probe telemetry, waveform analysis, and Orion's Petfleet correlation.

"Captain... our independent datasets are beginning to converge."

She enlarged the standing-wave lattice. "The gravimetric oscillations, the transmission waveform, and Orion's model all exhibit the same underlying harmonic structure. Individually, none were conclusive. Together, they suggest an engineered containment field rather than a natural phenomenon."

Pulsing nodes surrounded the Warbird like invisible chains.

"If your assessment is correct," Jen continued, looking toward Rudy, "and this vessel employs an early artificial singularity with an automated fail-safe, then these harmonics may represent the containment system continuously regulating the core. Our active scans may not have damaged it. They may have caused it to recognize an external interaction and respond according to its original programming."

Rudy moved toward Operations and reviewed the model. Orion was unique to Destiny, a prototype born at the Daystrom Institute and classified alongside the ship's Spore Drive and cloaking systems. Destiny was no ordinary starship. In the Shackleton Expanse, they might need every secret she carried.

"What's your assessment and recommendation for boarding the vessel or shutting it down from outside?" he asked. "Either way, we need whatever information remains in their computer."

He sat, eyes still on the Warbird.

"Imagine it, Number One. We're deep in uncharted territory for the Federation and Starfleet. That vessel may contain star charts for this entire region. That could put us in a much stronger position for our mission."

The bridge speakers activated.

"Sir," Rider called from Sickbay, "I have the remainder of my report, if you're ready."

Rudy's expression softened. "Lieutenant, first - how are you?"

"I'm fine for the moment, sir. Thank you. But you need this information."

4. A Voice Without a Body

Rider shifted against the biobed and raised the PADD in front of her.

"With Engineering's help, we analyzed the holographic data stream. Everything within it is intact except the hologram's physical parameters. Behavioral and psychological subroutines, memory engrams - all of it. The hologram is interactive, but it needs a new body."

She paused for breath.

"The body was Romulan and somewhat modern. There was also a message encrypted in Romulan that I'm still translating. If we create a new holomatrix, it may answer a lot of questions."

Her next breath shuddered despite her effort to hide it.

"Don't worry about me right now, sir. We need to do what we can with the data. One more thing: the Morse messages were legitimate. They were transmitted by radio over five hundred years ago, also by Romulans. They seem to be both a call for help and a warning. Evidently, they had some knowledge of Earth communications."

Rudy entered notes on the console beside his chair.

"Let's hold off on giving it a matrix. Translate the data, then join me on the bridge when you can. I want controlled conditions before we start activating Romulans. Good work, Lieutenant."

"Yes, sir. I'll be there as fast as I can."

Sowers turned from Tactical. "Captain, I have a possible theory about the Romulan ship."

Rudy gave him his full attention. Sowers had once commanded *Destiny*, and that experience carried weight.

"What have you got, Captain?"

"I believe this could be an early Romulan attempt at using a quantum singularity, and it got away from them. Early Romulan ships used the same matter-antimatter systems as we do."

Rudy nodded. "I agree with your assessment. The question is how we bypass it. Orion and Captain Ward are working together to find the key to that door."

In Sickbay, Rider tried to focus on the PADD while the EMH pressed a hypospray against her arm. The medication took effect quickly. Her vision sharpened. Her breathing eased. The pain in her legs faded.

Her fingers moved across the translation matrix.

"Doctor, I'm needed on the bridge. Have I your permission to resume duties?"

The EMH looked worried. "Very well, Lieutenant. Any more symptoms, and I'll use a force field to bind you to the biobed. Understood?"

He laughed, then softened. "I'll keep you informed about Lor's recovery. I promise."

Rider smiled, hugged him, and hurried out.

On the bridge, Sowers addressed Jen. "Captain Ward, I have an idea - a long shot on how to safely get that door open. We'll need to ask Orion if it's possible."

"What's on your mind?"

"Could Orion project our holodeck externally to establish a containment field? It may be the only way to shut it down."

Jen considered the suggestion. "It's worth examining. My concern is that our only confirmed systems casualty occurred during holographic reconstruction. Until we determine whether that interaction was a software intrusion, energy coupling, or something else, I'd hesitate to extend our holographic systems. We may provide the phenomenon another pathway into Destiny's computer architecture."

"I agree," Sowers said. "This requires further study."

Rider nearly collided with the corridor wall on her way to the turbolift. The doors opened, and she stepped inside.

"Bridge."

The lift accelerated. Her PADD emitted a series of rapid beeps.

The translation was complete.

The doors opened onto the bridge before she could read it. Rider stepped out, raised the PADD, and went pale.

She moved toward Communications, then stopped.

"Captain Guzman... I have the last of the data translated."

Rudy steepled his fingers. Her apprehension was obvious.

"Let's hear it.



5. Save Yourself

Rider drew a slow breath.

"It's a warning," she said. "It reads: We were wrong. We are trapped. No way out. Do not approach. Please, don't make this mistake. Save yourselves. Save our people."

She lowered the PADD.

"That's all of it, sir."

Silence settled across the bridge.

Romulans did not plead. They threatened, deceived, negotiated, endured, and sacrificed. Their history was built upon secrecy and pride. A plea for help - especially one transmitted in an alien form of communication - was more disturbing than any declaration of hostility.

Rider returned to her station, but one question remained fixed in her mind.

Why?

Rudy studied the Warbird. "Perhaps it was meant to keep others from accessing the technology. Romulans are notoriously shrewd. It took centuries for my people to overcome the impulses the Romulans chose to embrace."

He stood.

"Let's connect the dots and find a solution. Theory has its place, but we need action. That fail-safe will not hold forever."

Jen remained quiet as the translation settled into the room. When she spoke, her tempo was lower.

"Captain... this changes our working model."

She overlaid the message timing against Orion's resonance lattice.

"The message is not merely archival. It is structured, intentional, and temporally consistent with the current harmonic field. That suggests we are not observing a residual recording, but a system still capable of coherent communication."

The Warbird filled the viewscreen.

"If that's correct, then we are not dealing with a derelict containing historical data. We are dealing with an active containment system that is still functioning - perhaps malfunctioning, perhaps preserving something within it."

Her fingers tightened against the console.

"Is the fail-safe protecting us from the singularity... or protecting the singularity from us?"

"That makes sense," Rider said, "in light of the strange messages and the holomatrix we received."

She immediately looked down. "Forgive me. I spoke out of turn."

Rudy smiled. "It's all right, Lieutenant. I make better decisions when I have all facets."

"Thank you, Captain."

"Pull up the report from the probe we sent earlier," Rudy ordered. "Let's get a schematic and determine the layout, including any weaknesses we can exploit. If all else fails, we'll blast it back to its own time period."

Jen's gaze remained on the data. "Captain... how would a Romulan engineer authenticate a system user?"

Before Rudy could answer, Orion spoke.

"Captain, analysis of the Romulan security architecture is complete."

A three-part diagram appeared.

"The vessel employs a three-layer authentication sequence. The first verifies military authority through rank and service record. The second confirms authorization against encrypted government records maintained by the Senate and Praetor. The third uses biometric verification combined with dynamically encrypted command algorithms."

The diagram rotated, revealing links that remained active after five centuries.

"The authentication matrix is operational. Unauthorized intrusion may trigger defensive protocols or permanently encrypt the remaining data. Recommendation: rather than forcing entry, reconstruct and emulate the final authorized Romulan command signature. This offers the highest probability of retrieving data while preserving singularity containment integrity. Awaiting orders."

Jen stared at the display.

Then her expression changed.

"There was more than data in that transmission," she said. "What if we've been treating the message as information when it's actually part of the authentication process?"

She looked from Tactical to the Warbird.

"If the vessel still expects an authorized command signature, the transmission may be a handshake, a challenge, or a fragment of the credentials required to access the system. We've been trying to understand what the message is saying. Perhaps we should ask what the message is doing."

The failed holodeck reconstruction appeared on a side display.

"The holodeck interpreted the signal as a coherent informational model. If the signal contains authentication or resonance-based command structures, the holomatrix may have treated it as executable environmental input rather than passive data. The system didn't fail because it was damaged."

Her voice lowered.

"It failed because it responded."

6. The Key

For several seconds, the bridge contained only the quiet movement of data.

Orion reorganized the mission record. Probe telemetry, Rider's linguistic analysis, Jen's harmonic extrapolations, the Warbird's age, the Morse transmissions, the incomplete holographic persona, and the paths of Oliver and Mia became parts of a single structure.

Rudy looked around the bridge. Every department had contributed. No single clue had solved the mystery. Together, they had brought the door within reach.

"Orion, compile all information gathered so far. Include Number One's extrapolations and computations, along with Lieutenant Rider's data. Using the Romulan language model, the Warbird's age, and the message's digital print, find the authentication key we need to access the interior viewing devices and computer core."

"Acknowledged, Captain."

Orion withdrew processing capacity from nonessential simulations and redundant analytical tasks. Within his distributed consciousness, five centuries of linguistic drift were reversed. Classical Romulan syntax was reconstructed from fragmentary archives. Military command algorithms were modeled against Senate and Praetorial encryption practices. Rider's translation was broken into semantic, temporal, and resonant layers.

A pattern emerged.

The warning was not merely a warning.

It was a signature left by a dying crew.

"Processing complete," Orion announced. "A probable authentication sequence has been identified. Confidence: ninety-seven point eight percent. The sequence matches the digital signature embedded within the transmission and should provide read-only access to the Warbird's internal sensor network and central computer core. Authentication package is encrypted and standing by for authorization to transmit."

Rudy took a deep breath, containing his excitement.

"Proceed and project it onto the viewscreen."

The bridge seemed to pause.

"Acknowledged, Captain."

The lights dimmed fractionally as Orion established a narrow, carefully modulated connection. The authentication package moved through the same harmonic pathways that had carried the ancient warning. No active scan struck the Warbird. No force challenged its defenses. Destiny spoke in the language the old vessel had been waiting to hear.

A soft confirmation tone echoed across the bridge.

The main viewscreen shimmered.

Static dissolved into an image.

An ancient Romulan bridge appeared, frozen in time.

Emerald control panels cast a weak glow across silent consoles. Officers remained where duty had left them, their bodies claimed by radiation and five centuries of stillness. At the center, the commander sat in the command chair, one hand resting near the final interface as if awaiting an order that would never come.

No one aboard Destiny spoke.

"Internal optical systems restored," Orion said quietly. "Authentication accepted. Visual telemetry is confirmed authentic. No evidence of boarding, combat, or evacuation has been detected. All personnel expired simultaneously approximately five hundred years ago. The bridge has remained sealed and undisturbed since that event."

The image shifted to the singularity chamber.

Ancient Romulan glyphs glowed faintly around the containment assembly. Their light reflected across machinery that had spent half a millennium holding back an artificial darkness.

"Singularity containment remains stable. Cloaking systems are offline. Computer core integrity is ninety-one point four percent. Historical archive recovery is available."

Orion paused.

He was a machine, but not merely a machine. The scene entered his memory beside every voice, every route, every decision that had led to it.

"The Warbird has kept its final watch for five centuries," he said, "until now."



7. The Tomb

Jen Ward remained still, studying the frozen bridge.

When she spoke, her voice was quieter but no less precise.

"Captain... I recommend we formally classify this vessel as a tomb."

She allowed the words to settle.

"Any further action should proceed under archaeological containment protocols rather than exploration or salvage frameworks. Whatever occurred here, this is their final resting place. It should be treated accordingly."

The dead commander remained on the viewscreen, disbelief fixed upon his face.

Jen returned to procedure. "I also recommend a navigational exclusion marker at the outer boundary of the anomaly's interaction threshold. The buoy should remain beyond any measurable coupling range - outside the gravitational harmonics, waveform distortion fields, and observed sensor anomalies. It will not transmit into the system, interrogate it, or attempt engagement. Its function will be strictly passive."

She highlighted a safe region beyond Orion's resonance lattice.

"A navigational warning only, using conventional subspace bands. It ensures no vessel encounters this site without prior warning and that no further attempt is made to interact with it under the assumption it is merely a derelict. It allows us to leave this place exactly as it is."

Sowers nodded at Tactical. "Captain, I agree with our First Officer."

Rudy forced his attention away from the Romulan commander.

"Aye. Set the buoy to transmit in all known languages. I want the computer data from the Warbird, and then we will let her Latta finally depart."

The Romulan rite of Departing was not one Rudy had witnessed, but he knew its meaning: the recognition that the dead had completed their service and should no longer be bound by the living.

"Prepare a containment area for all collected data," he continued. "Let's not bring any additional species to Orion. Retrieve the star charts and make them a priority."

Jen nodded. "Aye, sir."

Around Destiny, the work began.

The Warbird's archives flowed across a one-way channel into isolated storage. Orion inspected every data block before permitting it beyond containment. Languages unknown to the Federation appeared beside star systems without names. Ancient Romulan navigational routes stretched deep into the Shackleton Expanse.

The charts revealed a nursery of civilizations.

A dozen M-class worlds glowed within mapped systems. Some showed atmospheric signatures consistent with pre-warp life. Others bore evidence of industry, orbiting structures, or energy patterns that defied immediate classification.

For five centuries, the knowledge had remained trapped with the dead.

Now it would guide explorers rather than conquerors.

Outside, Destiny deployed warning buoys beyond the anomaly's reach. Each began broadcasting the same simple message in every known language: danger, final resting place, do not approach.

No threat. No claim of ownership. No invitation.

Only respect.



8. To the Future

Rudy studied the incoming star charts with a sense of exhilaration he did not try to hide.

The Shackleton Expanse was no longer an empty region on a Federation map. It was a field of worlds, cultures, and unanswered questions. Destiny had come to explore, and the dead had given them a road.

For a moment, he considered the Spore Drive. It could carry them across enormous distances and place the newly discovered systems within immediate reach.

He rejected the thought.

Exploration was not only arrival. It was the journey between discoveries - the unseen comet, the uncharted moon, the signal that would never be heard if they simply leaped past it.

He turned toward Helm.

"Lieutenant Ward, as soon as the buoys are active and secure, set course for Bearing 143, Mark 252. Warp five."

Patrick entered the course. "Aye, Captain."

Rudy looked toward Tactical. "Captain Sowers, bring us off yellow alert and return the deflector array to nominal settings."

"Aye, Captain. Destiny off yellow alert and deflector array returning to nominal settings."

The amber alert indicators faded. The bridge lighting returned to normal.

"Thank you, good sir," Rudy said.

"Welcome, Captain."

Rudy settled into the command chair. "Orion, display the stellar chart on the viewscreen."

The image of the tomb vanished.

In its place appeared the Shackleton Expanse - not as darkness, but as possibility. Stars filled the screen. Newly recovered Romulan routes spread across them in graceful arcs. M-class planets were marked along the path ahead.

Orion watched through every sensor as Destiny turned away from the ancient Warbird. Oliver and Mia had resumed normal patrol patterns. Hugh remained in Sickbay, supervising patients with unwavering seriousness. Rider sat once more at Communications. Jen reviewed the recovered charts. Sowers maintained his watch. Patrick guided the ship toward open space.

The Warbird grew smaller behind them.

Its containment field continued its ancient rhythm. Its crew remained at their stations. The warning buoys took up the vigil Destiny could not.

Five centuries earlier, a Romulan commander had reached toward a final control and sent one last message into the dark.

Save yourselves. Save our people.

Destiny had heard him.

The stars stretched as the ship entered warp.

Ahead waited twelve new worlds and countless others beyond them.

The Relic remained behind, silent at last.



Captain's Log - Closing

Captain's log, final entry. The ancient Romulan vessel has been designated a protected archaeological site and final resting place. Warning buoys have been established beyond the anomaly's influence, and no further physical contact will be attempted. The Warbird's recovered charts reveal inhabited systems and multiple M-class planets throughout the Shackleton Expanse. We leave with knowledge purchased by a crew that never escaped its own discovery. Their final warning may have saved our lives. Their maps will now guide our mission. The USS Destiny is proceeding at warp five. Our exploration has truly begun.

